

Originality, Decorum, and Fantastic Sight in
Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

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By
Richard A. Decker
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Liberty University
College of Arts and Sciences
Master of Arts in English

Student Name: Richard A. Decker

Thesis Chair, Carl C. Curtis, PhD

Date

First Reader, Marybeth Davis Baggett, PhD

Date

Second Reader, Karen Swallow Prior, PhD

Date

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Introduction: Dostoevsky's Understanding of Reality

Dostoevsky's works seek to provide readers with a better understanding of reality. In *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form: A Study of His Philosophy of Art*, Robert Louis Jackson, drawing from Dostoevsky, explains that sometimes it takes more than one perspective for a person to understand a particular idea (71-72). Dostoevsky reveals that well-crafted art is what provides the viewer (or reader) to see an idea, and specifically reality, through a new perspective (72). As opposed to someone who looks at reality with unrefined eyes, an artist can look at reality in a way that goes past what a non-artist can see (72). Thus, the artist can potentially reveal reality in a better light for the viewer.

Dostoevsky's own works exemplify his understanding that art has the potential to reveal reality in a better way to the viewer. In the twelfth chapter of *The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes*, Jackson analyzes two of Dostoevsky's short stories and provides a summary of what he sees as the baseline of Dostoevsky's poetic beliefs: "the highest art is revelation (prophecy); this revelation not only explores man's social reality but sees into, or reveals, the ultimate reality of the human spirit and destiny, the invisible world of [to quote Dostoevsky] 'ends and beginnings . . . [that] is still a realm of the fantastic for man'" (288; second set of bracketed words in original).¹ Jackson discusses this "ultimate reality" in *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form*, explaining how "ultimate reality" is "fantastic" and represents "the universal, Christian ideal." (89). Jackson explains that "fantastic facts" or "miracles" allow one to see into this ultimate reality (90). However, for Jackson, "We cannot . . . maintain a distinction between 'real' and 'unreal' facts; we can only distinguish between the *origins* (earthly or transcendental) of observable facts and phenomena" (90; emphasis in original). For Dostoevsky, artists can best

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all ellipses within direct quotes have been added.

reveal this ultimate reality and that which goes beyond “real and unreal” and beyond “the present”; artists must be “prophetic” (90-91). This then, is the “ultimate reality” that Jackson believes is a part of Dostoevsky’s aesthetics and what allows art to provide readers with a better perspective of reality.

Dostoevsky also believes the way in which the artist chooses to depict reality determines the effectiveness of its representation and allows art to have a more metaphysical significance. Jackson draws from Dostoevsky’s own words and opinions on V. I. Jacoby’s painting *Convicts at a Halting Point*. For Dostoevsky, works of art will not simply replicate their subjects point for point but provide the artist’s unique perspective of those works to the viewer, which for Dostoevsky is the major difference between photorealism and art (*Quest* 72-73). To use Dostoevsky’s words, merely replicating reality is rather vulgar (75) and lacks a “moral center”—an issue apparent in the Jacoby painting (76; emphasis in original). Therefore, for Dostoevsky, good art reveals to the viewer what the artist sees but also possesses a “moral center,” which allows art to have a greater significance to the viewer than simply replicating surface reality.

The theme of restoration is one way in which a work can have a “moral center.” In regard to *Notes from a Dead House*, Jackson says that Dostoevsky attempts to “restor[e] . . . the image of the ‘lost people’ [the convicts] . . .,” this restoration being the “moral center” of the work for Dostoevsky. Jackson is clear that Dostoevsky neither lies about the novel’s convicts nor ignores the harsh realities of their lives or life in prison, but these aspects are not central to the work (77). Instead, the restoration is central, and that which is harsh, is revealed to the reader as just that: “Reality, however chaotic and disfigured at first glance, yields to an inner, organizing idea—a moral idea” (77). Such honesty, as seen in the representation of the convicts in *Dead House*, is present in *The Idiot*’s representation of Russian society as seen in the novel. For Dostoevsky, art

must have a balance: it must reveal the deeper aspects of reality so that the viewer (or reader) can see reality's "moral center."

Dostoevsky's Reality and Fantastic Realism

Dostoevsky's emphasis on a "moral center" is key in what many critics have called "fantastic realism," which is a major part of Dostoevsky's poetics and worldview. In his fourth chapter of *Quest for Form*, Jackson explains how Dostoevsky believed much of what is read in the newspapers (the "facts of reality") seem fantastic in nature but are actually quite normal. However, that which seems fantastic is only fantastic to those who do not have artistic sight and cannot see a fact separate from their basic perspective—the "merely surface, photographic eyes" (82-83). Jackson sums up this concept quite nicely: "The ultimate test of verisimilitude of a fact, the test of 'realism,' then, is not in the identity of fact A to fact B to fact C and so forth; it is in the degree to which fact A, however isolated and exceptional, conducts us to the larger realities of society and the human spirit" (84). In other words, sometimes it takes another person's perspective to see reality more clearly.

In *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*, Donald Fanger states that Dostoevsky sought to go beyond causal observation. Dostoevsky believed that "the eye of the ordinary observer" and that of "realist" writers to be "insufficient" (216-17). Fanger clarifies his assertions by drawing from S. Balukhaty's work and explaining that for Dostoevsky realism is not about what is being replicated but how what is being replicated is seen: "if you don't have an eye, if you are blind—you won't find anything in any object" (qtd. in Fanger 217). Fanger argues that Dostoevsky's realism emphasizes that *how* one sees is more important than *what* one sees. Again, Dostoevsky's fantastic realism goes beyond simply identifying facts. He seeks the true meaning of the facts, the entire scope of the facts, what these facts mean in their context, and what these

facts mean for people both in the present and in the future.

Joseph Frank provides a stronger definition of Dostoevsky's "fantastic realism," demonstrating how this realism provides readers with an "eye" necessary to see reality more fully. In *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871*, Frank quotes Dostoevsky's own words to provide what Frank considers the "'aesthetic credo' of 'fantastic realism'": "My idealism—is more real than their realism. God! Just to narrate sensibly what we Russians have lived through in the last ten years of our spiritual development—yes, would not the realists shout that this is fantasy! And yet this is genuine, existing realism. . . . And with our realism, we have predicted facts" (308). Dostoevsky is seeking to understand *every* aspect of the "moral chaos" that his fellow citizens seem to find themselves in (308). For Dostoevsky, fantastic realism is fantastic due to its ability to sift through everyday life and identify "the moral-spiritual depths" within people as well as to construct "a more-than-pedestrian or commonplace moral ideal" (308-309). Frank seems to suggest that the "credo" of Dostoevsky's fantastic realism is to see beyond—to look past what might seem commonplace to demonstrate the truth hidden within and to see life as a living entity, not simply as a stationary fact.

Fantastic realism reveals the "moral center" of reality by transforming reality in such a way that the reader better sees and understands reality and its "moral center." Concerning *The Idiot*, Frank explains that the same "moral transfiguration" that happened in Dostoevsky's own life, after his mock execution, is exemplified in Myshkin and his values (312-13). Quite possibly the facts of Dostoevsky's reprieve, as presented through Myshkin's narratives on executions (312), allows for true transfiguration on the part not only of Dostoevsky but also of readers who experience the reprieve vicariously through Myshkin. Dostoevsky reveals these ideas to his readers through the use of his fantastic realism, and by doing so, transfigures not only the readers'

perspective of the world but also the readers themselves.

Fantastic Realism and Distortion

Though Jackson and Frank provide a strong understanding of Dostoevsky's fantastic realism, such understanding does not provide a more concrete grasp of its effect on the reader. In *Giving the Devil His Due: Demonic Authority in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor and Fyodor Dostoevsky*, Jessica Hooten Wilson demonstrates how fantastic realism, and its connection to what Flannery O'Connor would call "distortion," plays a role in the moral lives of readers. Wilson reveals how the realism of Dostoevsky, in its form and function, is similar to that of Flannery O'Connor. Wilson begins her work by explaining that "faith," and specifically the Christian faith, is what serves as the foundation of the writings of both Dostoevsky and O'Connor (2). And a major function of their works allows readers to see the lie "of the autonomous self" (2). The realism of both authors "brings meaning to the surface," and such realism, according to Wilson, leads to "incarnational or sacramental art" (12). The incarnational aspects of these writers' realism lies in three items: the desire of the writer "to imitate God" through his or her work; the ability for the piece to recognize that life is endowed "with spiritual significance"; and the capability that such pieces will have an impact on readers in the form of positive transformation or, as Wilson refers to it, a "changed vision from the revelation imparted by the artist" (12). Wilson suggests that the form of realism found in both Dostoevsky and O'Connor allows readers to see the truth that surrounds—or lies underneath—surface reality and that each writer seeks to transform—and most likely transfigure—readers by providing them with a better way to see the world, a way to look beyond surface reality.

Wilson explains that this realism must reveal how the universe is governed by the "choice between good and evil" (i.e., reality's "moral center")—as well as all of the world's "scandal"

and “doubt”—so that one can see that the model of Christ (as opposed to Satan) is best (14). The “aesthetic realism” of O’Connor and Dostoevsky allows for not only the characters in their stories but also the readers of their stories to make the choice between good and evil—the choice between having a proper vision of the world or to be “blin[d]”—the choice between following the model of Christ or the model of Satan (i.e., the autonomous self). A choice must be made—there is no middle way (15-16). Both authors also ascribe to the idea that the changes their characters undergo are the same changes they themselves have undergone (16). Such a personal connection of the writer to the work complements both Jackson’s and Frank’s theories about the writer’s spiritual involvement with his or her work.

Wilson also addresses the rather vulgar aspects of both O’Connor’s and Dostoevsky’s works and provides a reason for why such vulgarity must be present in them. “Vulgarity,” for the purposes of this discussion, is that which represents the immorality present on reality’s surface. However, if good art, for Dostoevsky, is to reveal the “moral center” of reality, it must first recognize the immorality that obscures it (i.e., the “vulgar” aspects of reality). Wilson makes this concept clear. The “mimetic realism” of both writers is comparable to that of the Bible (18). Wilson, drawing from Erich Auerbach’s analysis of the Old and New Testaments, explains how both Testaments deal with the harsh realities of life but nevertheless point toward truth (i.e., Christ), justifying the use of a “grotesque or higher realist style” in the writers’ works while still revealing truth, and ultimately, Christ (18-19). Here, Wilson equates the goals of both O’Connor’s grotesque and Dostoevsky’s higher realism. And though Wilson does not refer to “fantastic realism” specifically, it is fair to assume Dostoevsky’s fantastic realism could also incorporate elements of the grotesque in order to point people toward truth and beauty since such direction is part of its end goal. Fantastic realism must recognize the “vulgar” aspects of reality,

refute them, and then reveal the “moral center” that such “vulgarity” has obscured.

A way in which both writers’ techniques connect is through what O’Connor calls “distortion,” and this technique is similar to Dostoevsky’s fantastic realism. Wilson says, “O’Connor herself described her artistic process as drawing ‘large and startling figures’ to make the repugnancies of modern life ‘appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural’” (73). Therefore, by distorting what is already present in reality, O’Connor is able to help readers better see reality, much like Dostoevsky’s fantastic realism seeks to do the same by transfiguring reality. And O’Connor’s own explanation of distortion complements Dostoevsky’s fantastic realism. In *Mystery and Manners*, O’Connor advocates for a fiction that seeks to represent its subjects though unconventional means, which she makes clear during a discussion of Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis”: “[t]he truth is not distorted here [in Kafka’s work], but rather, a certain distortion is used to get at the truth. . . . The artist himself always has to remember that what he is rearranging *is* nature . . .” (97-98; emphasis in original). Like O’Connor, Dostoevsky also “distorts” his subjects through fantastic realism to reveal reality more accurately to readers. Dostoevsky’s fantastic realism provides readers with a perspective of reality that appears “distorted” but, in actuality, is transfiguring reality for readers to better see it and its moral center.

This transfiguration is not just for transfiguration’s sake: one might argue that the emphasis on transfiguring the reader in such a way that he or she is fully conscious of the necessary decision to serve God over Satan is the “moral center” of all of Dostoevsky’s works, and the ultimate goal of Dostoevsky’s poetics—particularly fantastic realism.

Chapter 1: Prince Myshkin and His Fantastic Sight

So far, we have seen how Dostoevsky's fantastic realism transfigures not only reality through art but also those who view such art. However, such transfiguration must lead to a change in viewers (or readers) that allows them to serve God. But how should one serve God? To answer this question, we must now turn to the character of Prince Myshkin and how he, and his embodying of fantastic realism, serves as a model for readers

In *Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator, and Reader*, Robin Fuller Miller demonstrates that Myshkin embodies fantastic realism, which in turn allows him to have what will be referred to in this discussion as “fantastic sight.”² Miller suggests that the narrator's different voices³ help create the “fantastic” world of *The Idiot* (136). Myshkin's role as storyteller in the first two parts of the novel seems to be another way in which Myshkin embodies fantastic realism for Miller. In her discussion of “inserted narratives,”⁴ Miller emphasizes that Myshkin's stories, at least in the first two parts of the novel, allow him to find favor with the people he comes in contact with—including the actual readers of *The Idiot* (171) and that Myshkin's stories show others what it means to live correctly (182).

However, the example that Myshkin sets in the first half of the novel, for Miller, is not the same in the second half. In the last two parts of the novel, Myshkin is unable to “offer a unified vision to the other characters”; he is not the same “narrator” he was in the first half of the novel (*Dostoevsky* 201). By the end of the novel, Myshkin cannot persuade any of the people

² “Fantastic sight,” in this discussion, is defined as a sight that, through transfiguration, can see beyond the surface of reality and instead what lies at its heart (present tense) and can determine what is in store for said reality if nothing changes (future tense).

³ Miller identifies four specific narrative voices within the novel (a comic voice, a Gothic voice, a sympathetic and omniscient voice, and an ironic voice) (*Dostoevsky* 8); however, the specifics of each of these voices is outside of the scope of this discussion.

⁴ Miller explains that “inserted narratives” serve as a vehicle with which the ideal author, though his or her characters, can have his or her say underneath the narrative that the narrator tells (*Dostoevsky* 165).

around him because his “parables” do not ultimately change these people (221-22). But Miller explains that the failures of each character makes an impression on the reader in a greater way than if the character had not failed (218). Thus, Myshkin seems to be serving as a storyteller in the first two parts of the novel, and as storyteller, he is able to take his own experiences and manipulate them into a particular form in order to convey meaning. The fact that Myshkin aligns with Dostoevsky’s own understanding of the representation of reality and fantastic realism demonstrates that Myshkin does in fact embody Dostoevsky’s fantastic realism.

However, Miller’s final analysis of the novel seems too broad. Miller suggests that, after engaging with the text, the multiple voices of the narrator, and with both the narrator’s reader and the implied reader, the real reader becomes “humbled and inspired,” discovers that he is both “good and evil,” and connects with Dostoevsky’s world (*Dostoevsky* 231). Miller makes similar claims in *Dostoevsky’s Unfinished Journey*, explaining that most of them are “unfinished, ready to be reread and reimagined anew” (174). Miller mentions how there are many examples in Dostoevsky’s works where characters will utilize not only what they have read but also that which they have remembered at important junctures of life. And Miller suggests that readers, too, do the same. Such a combination of “fact and fantasy” was what Dostoevsky considered “productive of a higher truth” (or what may be, for Miller, “an aesthetic truth”), and she wonders what aspects of Dostoevsky’s works readers will recall and will aid in a transformation within the reader (175).

Such a perspective of Dostoevsky’s works is, for the most part, accurate: Dostoevsky’s poetics, particularly his understanding of how an artist must portray reality in his or her works, certainly supports that idea that Dostoevsky’s works would be “transform[ative]” in nature—something that the reader can return to “at critical moments.” And, as with most literature, it is

safe to say that Dostoevsky's works do not simply provide the reader with the one true meaning and then end. However, what is lacking is a more specific way of understanding how readers are transformed, what this transformation looks like, and what readers should do once transformed.

Furthermore, Miller suggests that Myshkin, as storyteller, serves as a model for readers (something, arguably, Wilson would recognize too). But a more specific way in which Myshkin serves as a model—and what exactly he is modeling—needs to be addressed. Miller most certainly recognizes some of the truths that Myshkin communicates throughout the novel, and as seen earlier, Miller suggests that “transform[ation]” occurs—readers become “humbled and inspired”—but how exactly the reader is transformed—and specifically, transfigured—must be examined closer.

Myshkin as an Ethical Model

To demonstrate how *The Idiot* transfigures readers in a more specific way than Miller recognizes, one must understand how Myshkin serves as an ethical model for readers. Miller quotes Waisolek saying, “The prince cannot change the universe, but a universe of Myshkins might,” but instead of discussing how “a universe of Myshkins” is directed to all readers (i.e., a sort of call-to-action for readers to be more like Myshkin), Miller simply discusses Waisolek as reader and how there is a tension “between his aesthetic and moral response to the novel” (*Dostoevsky* 236). But Waisolek himself explains that Myshkin is able to influence others and produce change—even if this change is only a brief flicker of faith within them. Others must keep the flame of faith lit within themselves (Waisolek 109). Waisolek reveals how Myshkin shows readers that it is possible to invoke change in others. If readers become like Myshkin, then they may be able to provoke change within the world—even if it appears inconsequential.

Marshall Gregory's *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives*, considers how

such changes occur. Gregory explains how stories provide readers with an opportunity “to apply its representations to the world” so that the world makes more sense to them (51). The “representations” of the subjects in literature affect the way in which viewers see these subjects and how they react to them in real life. Furthermore, as readers “assent to a story’s demands” by viewing the world in the way the story does, then readers are also transformed (67), chiefly through “ethical *models*” (i.e., characters) within the stories that display their own choices to the reader (26; emphasis in original). In turn, these choices shape a character’s “[e]thical agency,” or, “*the concrete performance of moral and ethical choices within the everyday world of social relations*” (24; emphasis in original). As mentioned above, Miller reveals that the narrative structure of *The Idiot* is fantastic and embodied in Myshkin. Thus, Myshkin’s fantastic sight serves as a model for readers and affects readers ethically.

Gregory then explains how stories possess what he calls an “ethical vision,” which he defines as “*a particular configuration of rights and wrongs that any story puts in motion within a represented human context*” (37; emphasis in original). Writers reveal what that vision is by showing readers which characters’ actions the reader should approve or disapprove; Gregory is clear that readers, in the act of reading, do not have a choice in this regard: “readers *must* make these ethical judgments” (37; emphasis in original).⁵ Miller would most likely agree with Gregory in that Dostoevsky, too, seeks to influence the reader; for her, Dostoevsky does so through the varied narrative voices, though the idea of “ethics” may or may not be Miller’s aim. For Gregory, the ethical vision of a work is conveyed through its form, for if one does not understand its form, one cannot understand its ethical vision (37-38). Again, Miller would agree here, for it is in the form of *The Idiot* that she believes the reader is able to connect with the

⁵ I would like to thank my friend and colleague Matthew Fox who pointed out the importance of characters in Gregory’s argument.

author and thus obtain the novel's message. Now, stories do not force readers to think the way the story is asking, but stories still have an "influence" (39). Tony Kushner feels the same when he explains that art can only "suggest" how one can view the world differently, but if a person agrees with such a "suggestion," he or she can apply it to their own "action[s]" (qtd. in Gregory 39).

Reading *The Idiot* through Gregory's lens emphasizes the role of the novel's narrative structure and of Myshkin's embodying fantastic realism in shaping readers' views of the world and influencing their ethical agency, which in turn not only transforms them but also has the potential to transfigure them. Gregory, like Miller, recognizes a freedom within the reader: the reader is not *forced* to view the world the way the story does, but the reader is nonetheless influenced in some way when engaging with a text. Therefore, there is a more moral component to how the novel influences and transfigures the reader than Miller recognizes, particularly when one considers that Miller sees Dostoevsky's "mixing of fact and fancy" (which she aligns with his "higher truth") as more of an "aesthetic" truth than "a spiritual truth" (*Unfinished Journey* 175).

However, despite Miller's understanding of his works, Dostoevsky is addressing "a spiritual truth," which is evidenced in his own understanding of Russian society during his lifetime and warrants a more Christian interpretation of Myshkin's character. In *The Idiot: An Interpretation*, Victor Terras discusses Russian society from Dostoevsky's perspective, and specifically the relevance of what are referred to as "the men of the 60s" to this perspective. Terras explains that the novel deals with the young people of the latter half of the 1860s and how this decade was a time when Russia was becoming more socially liberal and "materialis[ti]c" (1-2). Dostoevsky, however, was against such change as he would have been considered more of a

conservative. Dostoevsky believed Western ideals were tainting the progress of Russia and its people and that these “concerns” are dealt with in *The Idiot* (2). Dostoevsky also believed a return to a Christian faith would help remedy the issues found within the West (3). Terras points out that the young people of Russia during Dostoevsky’s time really were consumed by certain ideologies that caused them to drift away from more conservative values, including the values of Christianity.⁶ Terras continues, stating, “Progressives saw the people [of Russia] as basically materialist, irreverent, and areligious. Dostoevsky saw them as devoutly religious, gifted with a deep spirituality, and inclined to respect authority” and that it was from such people that the progressives should look up to (3). It is rather interesting that Terras chooses the word authority. Concerning Myshkin, he serves as an example of the authority and spirituality that Dostoevsky believes people should follow (as will be seen later in this discussion).

The Nouwenian Minister

If Myshkin embodies fantastic realism, allowing him to see the world through his fantastic sight, and the reader should assent to his view of the world, then what a reader should do once they assent to Myshkin’s actions must be determined. In a society plagued by immorality, Dostoevsky created art that worked against this immorality. And in order to instill change within society, Dostoevsky created characters that readers can learn from—and in some cases emulate. When one views Myshkin through the lens of Henri J. M. Nouwen’s *The Wounded Healer*, one sees how Myshkin serves as a character that readers can emulate.⁷ In

⁶ This discussion does not suggest that which is “liberal” is not or cannot be Christian. This discussion focuses strictly on Dostoevsky’s understanding of liberalism in his time and how this specific liberalism led to a decline in conservative and Christian values and connects to the overall framework of *The Idiot* as presented by Terras. This discussion also does not suggest that which is “conservative” is or must be Christian. It just so happens that, from Terras’ perspective, both conservatism and Christianity coincided in Dostoevsky’s thought, which plays a major role in the framework of the novel.

⁷ The “wounded healer” is, essentially, a literary archetype found in many works of literature. Myshkin, as will be seen in this discussion, serves as such an archetype—but only in part. Though Myshkin has some traits of a wounded healer, he lacks others, which is why he is referred to as a “Nouwenian minister” as opposed to a

particular, one sees that Myshkin possesses enough traits to qualify as what will be referred to throughout the rest of this discussion as “a Nouwenian minister.”

In Nouwen’s second chapter, he discusses the three conditions of modern people that ministers must be aware of—two are of importance here. One condition is that of fatherlessness. Nouwen explains that the modern generation questions authority, including the authority of the father figure (34-35). And since their father figures have failed, the modern generation relies not on any form of authority but the peer (36). Nouwen says that rejection by one’s peers is “an unbearable experience”; this rejection creates a feeling of “shame,” as opposed to the rejection of the father which creates a feeling of “guilt,” and such a “shift” results in “the death of a future-oriented culture or—to use a theological term—the end of eschatology,” which in turn means that the modern generation is not anticipating Heaven (37). Therefore, even though the peer provides the modern generation with a viable substitute for the father, turning toward the peer for refuge, ultimately, leads one to worse consequences. In the world of *The Idiot*, Russian society’s immorality has also infected many father figures, causing them to fail their children and lead them astray. As a result, these children turn to their peers as a substitute for the authority they do not see in their fathers, which leads to their demise.

Another condition of the modern generation is “convulsive[ness].” Modern people are not hopeful and believe the world is in a less than ideal state, which leads many to “undirected, purposeless violence, or in suicidal withdrawal from the world . . .” (38). However, Nouwen is clear that modern people are looking for answers, but those in authority tend to “misunderst[and]” this, and thus, no answers are given (40). Russian society within the context of *The Idiot* lacks a proper authority figure to guide it. Many of the characters in the novel are

“wounded healer” in this discussion. I would like to thank Dr. Karen Swallow Prior for introducing me to the concept of the “wounded healer” as literary archetype and helping me see traits of this archetype within Myshkin.

what Nouwen might call “fatherless.” Michael Holquist recognizes this fatherlessness within *The Idiot*, revealing how characters lack a father figure entirely (Myshkin, Rogozhin, and Nastasya) or are wrestling with how to deal with their fathers (or parents/guardians) who are failures or less than good (Burdovsky, Ganya, Aglaya, and Kolya) (141). Holquist believes money, as seen in the novel, symbolically represents the inability fathers have had to leave their children with an inheritance that provides them with an understanding of the worth of things (143-44). Hence, many of the characters in the novel, including the fatherless, cannot determine the link between their future and their past and cannot determine who they are as people (144). Holquist concludes that Christ has failed in repairing the fracture between past and present and is the reason for the inadequacies of the fathers, which has resulted in the characters of the novel having to “find [their] own way, [and] seek [their] own identity without the aid of preexisting models” (144). But, viewing the novel, and specifically Myshkin, through a Nouwenian lens reveals that Christ has not failed and that there is a “preexisting model” for the characters (and the readers) to follow—that model being Myshkin as a Nouwenian minister.

As mentioned in the introduction, fantastic realism reveals reality not only in a present tense but also in a future tense. Thus, the lack of a future-oriented people (i.e., the modern generation as Nouwen sees them) appears to be an audience that fantastic realism hopes to reach, for it seeks to reveal that though there may be a lack of authority here on earth (as Holquist clearly recognizes), there is an authority in Heaven: God. In order to remedy these conditions, Nouwen believes that ministers need to be able to articulate “the complexities of [their] own inner lives” in an effort not only to identify that which keeps them from serving others but also to expel such a barrier. Ministers who practice articulation understand the struggles of the community, which ultimately “leads humans to confession” and allows ministers to become

“servants of servants” (42-44).

Nouwen suggests that compassion becomes an authority for modern people (45) because it allows people to see their own faults within others, which leads to forgiveness and rejects “the pressures of the in-group” (46). Nouwen encourages ministers to be present in the lives of those they are ministering to while being careful to not allow “pity” or “sympathy” to take over and create “distance” or “exclusiveness” respectively (45). And finally, ministers need to be “contemplative critic[s]” (47) by being careful in their observations of the world, not rash (48-50). Ministers must possess courage, even in the face of death and are not concerned if they appear “to be foolish, mad, [or] a danger to society and a threat to the human race” (49-50). Instead, contemplative ministers must be people who go against the status-quo in an attempt to fulfill their mission—their “vision.” And such ministers reveal how underneath one’s struggles is a being who is created in God’s image (48-49). Myshkin exemplifies the traits of a Nouwenian minister to various degrees. He holds firm to his vision of the world: a vision that utilizes Dostoevsky’s fantastic realism to invoke change in those around him—regardless of what anyone thinks. Furthermore, as the reader experiences the novel, specifically Myshkin’s efforts to minister to his peers (particularly Nastasya, the young nihilists, Ippolit, Rogozhin, and Aglaya), he or she assents to not only Myshkin’s vision of the world but also his desire to minister to others in the manner of a Nouwenian minister, thus transfigured.

However, there is another type of person that Nouwen addresses in his third chapter important to this discussion: the person who is facing death. Nouwen explains that ministers must make sure they present their full selves to the one facing death—Nouwen calls this “[a] personal response” (68-69). Ministers must also be “[w]aiting” both in life and death with those facing death. According to Nouwen, to wait in life means that ministers make it clear that they

will be present and will serve as the soundboard for the one facing death to share his or her story with them when those facing death make it through their trial(s). By doing so, ministers can take away the loneliness of the one facing death (70-71). In fact, Nouwen even says that it is this lack of presence that leads many to “commit suicide”; therefore, ministers must “become . . . [the other’s] tomorrow” (72). But ministers must also “wai[t] in death,” which means that ministers allow those facing death to recognize that both parties face death—it is just a matter of time; however, time becomes irrelevant if “two people have discovered each other as fellow human beings” (72, 74). Myshkin’s interactions with Ippolit, Rogozhin, and Nastasya demonstrate that he has the ability to wait with them both in life and in death, staying by their side as best he can with as much compassion as he can give.

Ministers must also “participat[e]” in the death experience,” for doing so allows them to say to those facing death, “[we] will be waiting for you . . .” (74). Nouwen says, “Humans protest against death, for we are not content with a mere postponement of the execution,” but by waiting in death, Nouwen seems to suggest that such protest can be used for good: the other can “recove[r] and . . . break through the wall of his [or her] fear, making death an entry into a life where he [or she] is awaited,” and ministers must be able to immerse themselves in this “paralyzing condition” that all people face (75). Such actions are infused with Christ Himself, because such actions make it clear that people, as “human beings,” have the ability to make a difference in the lives of others because Christ, too, was human (76). Also it is a minister’s “eyes,” and not his or her attempts to “announce a new idea and . . . convince others of its worth,” that allow the minister to “take away the veil that covers its [the “world[‘s]”] hidden potential” (80). Dostoevsky’s fantastic realism, which Myshkin embodies, seeks to also reveal the hidden potential of the world by providing readers with an “eye” that is about to see the

moral center of reality.

Myshkin is one who waits in life and death with those who are facing death, including Ippolit, Rogozhin, and Nastasya. By waiting both in life and death, Myshkin, through his authority, granted to him by his compassion and his fantastic sight, reveals his “new idea” to others—that idea being Christ. And in turn, readers, by participating in the narrative, are encouraged to assent to Myshkin and his service as a Nouwenian minister, and are thus transfigured, becoming better, more compassionate people. Myshkin’s Nouwenian ministry is the *how* and Christ is the *why*.

A Necessary Digression: Myshkin, His Critics, and His Supporters

The idea that Myshkin is a Nouwenian minister may seem misguided to some. Not all critics see him in such a positive light. Karen Stepanian, for example, sees Myshkin as a negative example for readers. Stepanian discusses how Myshkin is not what is called a holy fool but simply mad. For Stepanian, the holy fool (“*iurodivyi*”) (166) is one who shares the Gospel truth in a manner that appears foolish but pleases God (165). Such a character is a liminal person who situates him- or herself in the middle of “the church and the secular world . . . being and non-being” (166). On the other hand, those who are considered “insan[e]” (“*bezumnyi*”) inhabit “the side of the darkness of eternal death and non-being”; the insane, in this sense, are those who are removed from God (166). Stepanian makes the case that the word “*iurodivui*” is only found in the first part of the novel in only three instances, and that from the end of the first part onward (from Nastasya’s birthday party to the last chapter), Myshkin’s holy foolishness fades and is instead dominated by madness (167-68).

However, though Stepanian provides some detailed analysis of Myshkin and holy foolishness throughout her essay, aspects of her understanding of Myshkin and his holy

foolishness are occasionally misguided. According to Harriet Murav in her work *Holy Foolishness* (which Stepanian references but does not analyze in-depth), Myshkin appears to display enough traits of a holy fool to be classified as one—at least to a greater extent than Stepanian admits. The word “*iurodivyi*” is identified by Murav as a form of the word “idiot” that “contains its own history of conflicting meanings and associations . . .” (90). Murav says, “*Iurodoivyi* has no fixed meaning: it can encompass the roles of eccentric, madman, fool, and holy fool.” Murav defends her position on the definition of *iurodoivyi* with Dostoevsky’s notes on *The Idiot* in which he appears constantly to refer to Myshkin as “*iurodivyi*” (90-91).

Instead, Murav uses A. M. Panchenko’s understanding of the holy fool as a framework, and through Panchenko, Murav recognizes that the holy fool is like a character on a stage (particularly the stage of “medieval street theater”) engaging in theatrics. The fool’s audience also has a part in said theatrics “by abusing the saint [i.e., holy fool]” (24). Ultimately, the holy fool and all he or she does is shrouded in “paradox” and “subject to conflicting interpretations” (24). Therefore, Murav identifies confusion and indefiniteness as major traits of the holy fool, which Myshkin possesses, deeming Stepanian’s assessment of Myshkin as simply mad misguided.

Murav also explains that, according to Panchenko, a holy fool acts as the catalyst not only for his or her viewers to sin but also as the one who works toward “undo[ing] the consequences” of such sin (25). Holy fools, in a sense, bring out the sin of others so that they can in turn forgive them of their sin (25). Again, confusion is at the core of the life of the holy fool. Just as Christ’s crucifixion creates a paradox in which the image of the cross is both “a ‘stumbling block and a folly’ [to some]” as well as how Christ “is at once approachable and unapproachable,” so too is the holy fool by being both holy and foolish (28).

However, Murav's discussion of the shift in perspective of madness in the 1800s demonstrates how the holy fool was seen by society as more of a violator of decorum than a person who seeks to bring people closer to God. In the 1800s, "the authority of science," as opposed to "the authority of the sacred" dominated, establishing the foundation for how people should be perceived as normal. Now, "[t]he medical profession" determined what is and is not normal (33). Moreover, the concept of "[m]oral treatment" also came into vogue during this time, and such a treatment reveals that "the relationship between the 'spiritual father' and his 'spiritual children' is replaced, at least within the confines of the hospital, by the doctor and his patient" (43). F. I. Gertsog, a proponent of such "moral education," believed that such education would bring about what he referred to as "decorousness" and "order" (Murav 43-44). The definition of madness in the modern world, for Murav, comes down "to medical evaluation," which is heavily influenced by "decorum" (44). Murav supports her claim by examining Daniel Hack-Tuke's *Dictionary of Psychological Medicine*. In Hack-Tuke's *Dictionary*, Murav finds that a person who appears to stray away from the normal ways of living or what may be deemed normal by society will undergo an "evaluation." Such an evaluation will seek to find "[a]bnormalities" within the subject. These abnormalities, according to Murav, could also be found in a holy fool (44-45). Hence why the holy fool was no longer revered but instead considered mad. One can also see how Stepanian's assessment of Myshkin appears to be grounded in a medical understanding of madness, which Murav shows is an incorrect way of assessing holy fools.

For Murav, Dostoevsky, in an effort to counteract medicine's tendency to simply reduce people to labels and analysis, believes it is a novelist's job to bring about meaning by not only placing different perspectives of reality into one narrative but also writing narratives that have

yet to be told. Murav believes this originality “is . . . the essence of Dostoevsky’s formulation about the ‘gaze,’ or ‘vision’ (*glaz*), of the novelist . . .” (49). Murav’s understanding of Dostoevsky’s poetics suggests that his fantastic realism has a direct connection to the holy fool, for it is the holy fool that allows reality (governed by medicine) to be transformed and reveal his spiritual “vision.” Thus, if Myshkin embodies this fantastic realism—which he does—then he may very well be a holy fool.

Murav defends Myshkin as holy fool. However, some critics—such as Holquist—still see Myshkin as a failed Christ figure (Murav 74), whether Myshkin be a holy fool or not. Other critics see him as unable “to transform the world around him” (75). However, Murav believes that what many see as failures are really “[a] part of a deliberate narrative strategy in which holy foolishness plays a central part” (75). By viewing Myshkin and his actions “as part of the tradition of holy foolishness,” one sees the work as “polyphon[ic]”—but not by viewing Myshkin’s interactions with “the characters . . . but rather the author’s position with regard to the narrator” (94-95). It is ultimately up to the reader to interpret the actions of a holy fool, as made clear by “the hagiographer’s description of the holy fool” (95).

Murav’s understanding of a holy fool, as an enigmatic person, allows Myshkin to be seen as a holy fool. Stepanian seems to be like the spectators of the holy fool (Myshkin): deeming him mad as opposed to divine. For Murav, the holy fool illustrates “a fallen man” in an effort to uphold Christ (26), which arguably accounts for the various wrongdoings that Stepanian holds against Myshkin. Therefore, it appears that Stepanian lies in the spectator/medical camp, deeming Myshkin simply a madman as opposed to a holy fool, but using Murav’s definitions suggests Stepanian, with all due respect, is misguided in her perception of Myshkin.

Other critics distrust Myshkin because of his namesake. T. A. Kasatkina discusses this

historical, non-fictional Myshkin, who was one of the key figures in constructing “The Church of the Mother of God,” as seen in the *History of Karamzin* (145). The historical Myshkin (along with Ivaskha Krivtsov) was tasked with rebuilding the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God, and they were determined that the new church be “even bigger” than the previous one (149). However, the new church eventually collapsed due to poor construction and, according to Zabelin, the inability of one of the church’s walls to support a staircase (150). Kasatkina associates this fallen church with Rogozhin’s own house (152), and she suggests that the Myshkin of the novel, like the historical Myshkin, once again will destroy the Church of the Dormition. Kasatkina mentions that as Myshkin enters Rogozhin’s home for the first time, with its unusual stairwell, it is as if Myshkin is ascending the stairwell of the original, historical structure, though this stairwell “lead[s] nowhere” (152). Rogozhin’s home represents the fallen Church of the Dormition and (a murdered) Nastasya serves as “the main icon of his church” (152).

Kasatkina continues to demonstrate how the Myshkin of the novel brings about ruin to all he encounters. Myshkin, as he attempts to ask that he and other princes “become leaders and elders” during his speech at the Epanchin’s in the fourth part of the novel, represents a folly of a prince seeking to “usurp the primacy of the clergy.” Such usurpation is discussed in Russian history as something negative, and revealed in two stories (156). The one story, told by Nastasya, is about a prince who “take[s] revenge” on a pope for “dethrone[ing]” him by “depriving [the pope] of his papal throne.” And the other tells the story of the Church of the Dormition, where a prince scolded (but eventually asks for forgiveness from) a metropolitan whom he believed blessed the church inappropriately (156-57). For Kasatkina, these stories reveal the deficiency of Myshkin’s “theocratic utopia” (157-58).

Myshkin also fails as a Christ figure for Kasatkina in the case of Nastasya, when she runs from him during their wedding in part four. Nastasya is, in essence, running from one who “represents [or rather at that moment he *replaces*] Christ” (158; bracketed material in original) because through Myshkin, “she [will not be] granted the Dormition” because he is not Christ but man (158). The novel is also dominated by Holbein’s Christ (a very naturalistic painting of Christ in the tomb, which hangs in Rogozhin’s home), meaning the novel itself “seems devoid of hope in its quest for transfiguration . . .” (155). Stepanian, too, criticizes Myshkin as Christ figure, using examples from the novel to show that Myshkin is merely a person and not Christ. Myshkin appears to serve as a person who acts as a “substitution” for Christ, which “leads to a doubling of reality . . . [that] sometimes takes the form of *parody*” (176; emphasis in original). For Stepanian, *The Idiot* is a work that demonstrates “what the world would be like without Christ, or what it would be like with someone else instead, *a mere man* or a pretender” (182; emphasis in original). The novel works to reveal that when one serves as a *substitution* for Christ, as Myshkin does, all that can be left is simply “a ‘higher idea’” but no Christ (183).

Therefore, Kasatkina’s assessment of Myshkin is one which sees him as a figure who displaces Christ and is, essentially, a non-Christ and thus a poor role model for readers. Similarly, Stepanian’s evaluation of Myshkin suggests that he, as simply a man, can in no way be a Christ-figure and only serves as a replacement for Christ, which shows that there can be no replacement for Christ. Myshkin is certainly not perfect, and he is most certainly just a man. Many critics recognize his failures. But his failures and his humanity do not outweigh his successes, nor do they negate the fact that Myshkin does possess Christ-like traits, particularly his compassion toward others throughout the novel, his efforts to help others see who they truly are, and his attempts at lessening himself in order to elevate others, which helps him accomplish

his role as a Nouwenian minister. Myshkin is, ultimately, a positive role model for readers.

Liza Knapp, in her essay “Myshkin Through a Murky Glass, Guessingly,” recognizes how critics believe that Myshkin fails in his mission, which, in turn, causes some to believe that Christ, too, is also a failure (191). However, Knapp emphasizes the “like” in “Christ-like” (191), and, drawing from Miller’s own understanding of Myshkin, believes he is emulating Christ by revealing parts of himself to others (191-92). This view is grounded in Dostoevsky’s concept of “the fantastic” and recognizes that complete and whole communication pertaining to “matters bridging life and death” cannot be done (192). Again, one sees that Myshkin as a positive role model for readers and Dostoevsky’s fantastic realism go hand-in-hand. Knapp, like the apostle Paul, says, “we see ‘through a murky glass, guessingly’ rather than ‘face to face,’”⁸ which for Knapp, is exemplified in how Christ is revealed through “a *Christlike* hero” within a novel—in other words, indirectly (192). Readers must view Myshkin through such “a glass” in order to see how Myshkin is a Christ-like character (particularly in how enigmatic he is) and “not . . . judge whether Myshkin is an effective savior” (192). Here Knapp demonstrates that even Myshkin’s flaws do not take away from his Christ-likeness. His mistakes—his “contradictions”—do not outweigh his successes. But Knapp, drawing from Miller, explains that it is up to the reader “to choose sides” (205). Though Myshkin may be merely a man, he still possesses traits that allow him to be like Christ—despite the fact that he is not Christ.

Knapp also argues that the lack of a definitive ending to *The Idiot*, as well as its incorporation of “different accounts, and with various tendencies and contradictions” in the scenes of the novel, is much “like the narratives of Jesus’s life” (“Myshkin” 204). Such an idea is grounded in Dostoevsky’s concept of “the accidental family,” which, to be represented in the

⁸ Knapp takes this quote from Paul’s letter from a Russian translation of 1 Cor. 13.12. See fourth footnote on p. 210 of Knapp’s essay.

novel, needs “its own poetics”—a poetics that seems to focus on how people can form a family unit through love and allows for “compassion and forgiveness” to be its center (203-05). The deterioration of the “genetic family” and the progression toward the “accidental family” brings to mind Nouwen’s understanding of how the modern generation’s authority figures have failed. Moreover, a Nouwenian minister who works to show love and compassion toward the modern generation and establishes a new authority for the modern generation through Christ can remedy such failure.

Other scholars have also recognized Myshkin’s shortcomings while also advocating for him as a positive role model. Terras, in *Reading Dostoevsky*, explains how Myshkin is, of course, not “a Christ figure in any supernatural sense” (77). However, Myshkin’s actions have still been able to affect the lives of others in a positive, spiritual sense (78). And Terras, like Knapp, confirms that many critics see Myshkin as a complete “failure” but explains that even Christ did not have a high conversion rate when He walked the earth (*The Idiot* 77-78). In “Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*, A Symbol of Christ,” Romano Guardini recognizes the good in Myshkin, noting that he is, ultimately, a “Man-God,” and how if one searches deep within the impossibility of this “Man-God,” one is able to see “the image of Christ” (378). Guardini, like Knapp, argues that it is up to readers to decide if Myshkin truly is a “symbo[l]” of Christ (379). Therefore, Myshkin is not a replacement of Christ—nor is he a negative example of Christ, as Kasatkina and Stepanian believe.

Now some may find the idea of readers having the final decision as to whether or not Myshkin is a Christ figure—or even a Christ-like figure (which is enough for our purposes)—problematic because it seems to suggest that readers who say Myshkin is such a figure are as right as readers who say Myshkin is not; however, this is not the case here. As mentioned above,

some of those who push for Myshkin as Christ-like leave the decision up to the readers, and, ultimately, no matter the situation, readers must be the ones to decide. Miller says the following in regard to *The Idiot*:

Yet any reader, even one whose cast of mind permits him to love and understand the meaning of the novel, must be led to grasp that meaning—or rather, made to come to it himself. For although Dostoevsky manipulated his readers unsparingly, he left them, at the end of his novels, free to make their own decisions about the import of what had occurred. (*Dostoevsky* 1)⁹

Readers have the freedom—and should have the freedom—to decide what the novel truly means. Even Murav, as explained above, reveals that no matter how close to God a holy fool may be, those who observe his or her actions must decide whether or not her or she is a holy fool or simply mad. Wilson also implies readers have to make the final decision when she demonstrates that they must decide to emulate either Christ’s model or Satan’s.

The same decision must be made in regard to Christ Himself. No matter how much evidence readers encounter, it is ultimately up to them to choose to believe in Christ as Son of God or simply a man. For as Knapp explains above, Christ is an enigmatic figure—a living paradox—just like the holy fool. And just like the holy fool’s audience, Christ’s audience must decide who they believe Christ really is.

However, this freedom of choice—this free will—that readers possess does not mean that what one reader chooses to believe about Myshkin is just as right as what another chooses to believe about him. Readers have the freedom to choose to see Myshkin as a Christ-like figure or not. However, this discussion argues that choosing not to see Myshkin as a Christ-like figure has

⁹ For Miller, this “manipulation” refers to the way in which Dostoevsky employed the “narrator-chronicler” in *The Idiot* to communicate to his readers (*Dostoevsky* 1-2).

its consequences. For instance, not seeing Myshkin as a Christ-like figure, as seen above, may lead many to disregard Myshkin as a role model completely. And not seeing Myshkin as role model also means that readers will not want to emulate him or his actions, including those of a Nouwenian minister. Also, Myshkin's Christ-likeness allows him to exemplify the traits of a Nouwenian minister. Therefore, readers must make the final decision as to whether or not Myshkin is a Christ-like figure, but deciding that he is not a Christ-like figure leads them further away from discovering the moral center of reality that Dostoevsky's works attempt to reveal and from being transfigured as Dostoevsky's fantastic realism hopes to accomplish.

Now, in *Dostoevsky's The Idiot and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative*, Sarah J. Young is clear that seeing Myshkin through the lens of Christ is valid (2), but what stands in the way "of interpreting Myshkin as a Christ figure" is the Holbein painting, for it is through this painting that "many of its [*The Idiot's*] themes are refracted [if one is to view the painting as a "prism"]" (3). The painting reveals that Myshkin is "a humanized Christ," which in turn causes the image of Christ to lose its divinity, thus affecting peoples' faith and "negat[ing] the possibility of the ideal" (3). And drawing from Børtnes, Young says that viewing Myshkin as a holy fool works to "deconstruc[t] the analogy of the hero with Christ and expos[e] the difference between the two figures, rather than their similarity" (3).

Young makes a strong and convincing argument, but, again, what must be emphasized is that Myshkin is a polarizing and enigmatic figure, and that, ultimately, it is up to the reader to determine that Myshkin truly is a Christ-like figure. Young believes that seeing Myshkin as a holy fool only separates him from Christ, but as Murav has demonstrated above, this is simply not the case. Furthermore, Young argues that Holbein's Christ serves as the lens through which to view the novel. It is most certainly true that Holbein's Christ is the lens through which many

characters in the novel view the world, but this does not mean that it is the lens that the novel advocates readers viewing the novel through. And Murav is clear that Holbein's Christ should not be used as a lens in which to evaluate the novel, as seen above, for it serves as "a negative model of how *The Idiot* should be read . . ." (83-84).

However, Myshkin as Christ-like figure does not resolve the issue of Myshkin's influence on others from Young's perspective. For Young, Myshkin influence wanes toward the end of the novel, and she uses her own concept of "scripting" to defend her point. This "scripting," for Young, allows the narrative to have an ethical dimension because it recognizes that characters are not "isolated entities" but instead are figures whose interactions with other characters in the work influence "the narrative" as a whole (18). However, Young explains that in order for one's script to dominate, it must be able influence others enough to where they "participat[e] in its realization," which leads characters to attempt to provoke others to take part in their script (18). Such scripting reveals how "narrative" is a major aspect of "basic human impulse" and demonstrates a "desire for meaning and context." Michael Edwards, in *Towards a Christian Poetics*, explains that due to the Biblical Fall, a disconnect between God and mankind has led to not only the inability for mankind to communicate accurately with God and His creation but has also instilled within mankind "the desire to re-create . . . [and] the urge to glimpse [at] the world that has been lost . . . ," and such an idea is emphasized in the novel through its heavy allusions to the apocalypse (Young 22). Furthermore, narrative serves as a means in which mankind seeks to return to the harmony between "words and meanings" and "a higher plane of existence," which was a reality in a prelapsarian state (23). Part one reveals such a concept when Myshkin tells his stories to the different characters he encounters and is evident in the different allusions to Christian themes throughout the novel (23).

Young's second chapter reveals how Myshkin's scripting slowly loses its effect as the novel progresses. Myshkin, as a Christ-like figure, reveals how art and its ability to present the world in a new way influences those who observe it, which is demonstrated in Myshkin's story of a man on death row in part one (80). This story also reveals that a main aspect of scripting is to transform what one sees in such a way that a greater truth is revealed—in this case what “a death sentence” can do to a person. For Young, Myshkin's story reveals that he is entering into a society in which people lack “spiritual[ity]” in part because they are unable to “se[e]” in a manner that transforms reality (80), or what O'Connor might consider “rearranging” reality.

Such a view of Myshkin also demonstrates that he embodies fantastic realism, providing him with a better perspective of reality. Young explains Myshkin's stories, and the perspectives they advocate for, allow for such hope in God by providing people with a different way to connect with the universe. Furthermore, Young addresses Knapp's understanding of “Dostoevsky's ‘fantastic realism’” and how such a technique stemmed from his experience of his own mock execution, which for Young, serves as a way in which Dostoevsky's fantastic realism and the “narrative[s]” of Myshkin both wrestle with “ultimate questions of life and death” and are thus “‘realism in a higher sense’” (85-86). Myshkin provides the form necessary to transform the reality of Dostoevsky's experience, thus allowing the latter's experience to be seen more completely, and in particular, “the possibility of rebirth to new life” (86).

Myshkin performs “true scripting” by seeking to influence his audience to see the world more as he does by enacting his vision of reality in his day-to-day life (Young 89). Myshkin seeks not to “judge and condemn [others]” but instead act with “love and compassion toward them” (90-91), and he has the ability to communicate to others his ideas aesthetically while also not ignoring the fact that people suffer and why such suffering is important (93). Therefore,

Myshkin's sight transforms his own experiences in such a way that others are able to glean from the narratives that Myshkin creates based his experiences—just like Dostoevsky's fantastic realism, which Myshkin embodies.

Young also defines what she calls “Compassionate Realism” in this second chapter as Myshkin's ability to “not only access . . . a higher reality, but also . . . [his] practical compassion that arises as a result of this understanding of this-worldly suffering . . . ,” and such compassion is similar to that of Christ's—a “compassion” that was able to redeem mankind of his sin (106). “Compassionate Realism” is an “ethical counterpart” to “Fantastic Realism,” for Young believes the latter, too, “originates in the direct apprehension of death” (106). Since a major aspect of being a Nouwenian minister rests in acting compassionately toward others, Young's perspective accommodates the idea that being a Nouwenian minister is also a part of fantastic realism.

At first glance, it would seem that, after examining Young's introduction and her chapter on Myshkin, the present discussion can come to a close. Not only does Young demonstrate that characters like Myshkin influence other characters they encounter but also readers. She also acknowledges the ethical aspects of narrative (much like Marshall Gregory—though she does not reference him). Engaging in narrative allows characters and readers to discover their place in the world, particularly in how narrative reestablishes a connection or communication between God and mankind.

However, later in Young's second chapter, she discusses how Myshkin's actions start to contradict those seen in the earlier parts of the novel. Young provides many examples of how Myshkin begins to lose his dominance in the narrative. For example, Myshkin begins to lose his communication skills, which is evident when, after telling Rogozhin the story of his encounter with the three people as a response to Rogozhin asking if Myshkin believes in God, Rogozhin's

response is not one that Myshkin seeks (113). Myshkin is also unable to complete his ultimate task as he creates a distance between himself and Nastasya, which he believes will save face but ultimately causes suffering and leads him to ignoring reality (119), and he also appears to lose his narrative abilities, which is in part caused by the fact that Myshkin discovers that some people will not receive his stories in a positive way (120). Myshkin's compassionate realism, by the end of the novel, also erodes: he fails to influence Rogozhin, who will not "accept the prince's forgiveness for the murder attempt"; he fails to influence Aglaya and Nastasya, who "will [not] accept the non-exclusive love he is offering"; and he is judged harshly by Radomsky and "misunderstood" by the other characters of the novel, and Young argues that these negative outcomes are a result of Myshkin's loss of "compassion" (132). In the novel's end, Myshkin regresses into an "idiot," which is apparent in his "incoherent babble" and demonstrates that he, and Rogozhin, can no longer live meaningfully. The two characters lose their identity due to Nastasya's script, which sought to attain her freedom and selfhood (133-34). And finally, by the end of the novel, no one is saved, which further reveals that Myshkin's "saintly scripting" has failed, with only minor changes for the better in Radomsky and Mrs. Epanchin (134).

Young appears to make the same mistake that many other critics who are skeptical of Myshkin make: she bases Myshkin's effectiveness of influencing others on quantitative results, which is exactly the kind of error that Murav, Knapp, and Terras see as detrimental to a proper understanding of Myshkin. Yes, Myshkin is flawed, and Young is right about many of his shortcomings and failures, but Myshkin's success rate do not negate the fact that, ultimately, Myshkin is a positive, Christ-like role model, which in turn allow his Nouwenian traits to hold more weight. By viewing Myshkin as a Nouwenian minister (alongside the critics who are apologetic toward Myshkin), one can see not only how Myshkin's successes are not negated by

his failures but also how the positive aspects of Myshkin can be emulated by readers. Myshkin, when viewed as a Nouwenian minister, demonstrates how a reader, after engaging with the text, can go out into the world and minister to those around him or her in spite of any flaws, shortcomings, or failures he or she may have. Young's scripting is a novel and intriguing idea, but it fails to provide a complete picture of Myshkin.

Arguably, Young's concept of scripting is detrimental not only to the understanding of the novel but also the Christian faith as a whole. For, as Terras explains above, many critics forget that Christ, too, failed from an earthly perspective. Many did not follow Christ's script, so to speak, and even in contemporary society, the script of Christianity is not dominant. One could argue that Young's concept of scripting suggests that Christ and His mission are failures. In a strange sort of way, such a perspective is rather Biblical, for it is true that another script has dominated and has had a stronger influence on others: the script of Satan. However, as seen in Wilson, it is Satan's script, so to speak, that must be rejected in favor of the Heavenly Father's. According to Young's logic, it would appear as though people should abide by Satan's script, but this is obviously not correct—and Young would likely agree.

Chapter 2: Why Be a Nouwenian Minister?

By embodying fantastic realism, Myshkin views the world with the “fantastic sight” defined above. Such a view of the world allows Myshkin to live in a way that appears as madness and leads to failure—at least at first glance. But a keen interpreter of Myshkin and his actions recognizes that Myshkin is a Christ-like holy fool, and through such foolishness, Myshkin possesses the ability to serve others as a Nouwenian minister. By serving in this capacity, Myshkin, in turn, transfigures readers—influencing their own perspectives of reality and modeling how they can serve others as Nouwenian ministers.

As Nouwenian ministers, readers can see that those who have been wronged by earthly authorities are not necessarily aware that abiding by the peer group will lead to their spiritual demise. Readers can also understand that the modern generation are not to blame for their fathers’ failures. Their fathers (or earthly authorities) failed to model God’s authority and love. Nouwen is clear that the modern generation seeks to right the wrongs of their earthly authorities (38-40), but it is up to Nouwenian ministers to show them how to do so properly.

In Myshkin’s case, the peer group is Russian society as represented in *The Idiot*, and “feigned decorum” keeps those within Russian society from rejecting the peer group in favor of Heavenly authority. “Feigned decorum” is, in essence, “immorality” that is normalized and practiced by those in Russian society as seen in *The Idiot*. As opposed to true “decorum,” which here is defined as the practices and manners that work to allow people to treat others properly and live a moral life, “feigned decorum” is the practice of immorality—including “vulgar” acts as discussed above—which leads to dehumanizing others. Such dehumanization suppresses people’s identities, preventing people from leading authentic lives. Such authenticity, however, reveals itself when people practice true decorum, and when this authenticity reveals itself in

people, they then have the ability to express their unique, “original” beings in a proper and moral way. However, Russian society, as seen in the novel, condemns those who seek to lead moral lives and prevents people from living lives that honor authenticity and originality through the practice of true decorum. Myshkin, through his fantastic sight, disrupts the feigned decorum within Russian society by serving others as a Nouwenian minister.

The Feigned Decorum of Russian Society as Seen in *The Idiot*

The Russian society of *The Idiot* is rooted in many corrupted value systems that lead to immorality (i.e., feigned decorum). And the continuous practice of feigned decorum justifies such systems—a vicious cycle. In other words, Russian society’s value systems serve as a worldview that dictates their immoral manners (the actions that they deem “decorous” or “proper”). And because this society has practiced feigned decorum for so long, society no longer recognizes the immorality of feigned decorum—or they do but are too set in their ways to seek change.

The idea of a feigned decorum within *The Idiot* is complemented by Edward Wasiolek in his *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction*. In his discussion of Lebedev, Wasiolek demonstrates how Lebedev serves as a “caricature” of Russian society’s immorality as he “mirror[s] . . . their [corrupt Russian society’s] souls” and condemns them by serving as “society’s conscience” (101-02). Wasiolek affirms that Russian society within the novel practices feigned decorum. And it is such decorum that Myshkin, as a Nouwenian minister, disrupts.

To understand the novel’s criticisms of the feigned decorum of Russian society as seen in the novel, one must consider the narrator’s discussion of practical and impractical people in part three of the novel. In the first section of the fourth chapter of *Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator, and Reader*, Miller claims the narrator of the novel suggests that “generals” are

impractical, yet by the end of his digression, he demonstrates that generals are in fact practical, which Miller says is contradictory and causes him to “cance[l] out his original hypothesis [about generals being impractical]” (127, 130).¹⁰ Miller also does not emphasize decorum as the narrator sees it in this section of the novel (131).

The narrator of the novel, despite Miller’s claims, is reliable in the beginning of part three, and he demonstrates that those who believe they are practical, and look down on those they believe are impractical, are blinded by feigned decorum. The narrator suggests that there have been some who have claimed that practical people are not present within Russia and that “the most impractical” people would include “civil servants” (Dostoevsky 325), which Miller also recognizes, though she believes the narrator is being “sarcasti[c]” (*Dostoevsky* 129) and that the “ironic voice” the narrator uses to describe Epanchin and Totsky earlier in the novel is now fragmented and causes inaccuracies in his communication (130). However, Miller suggests this is a negative aspect of the narrator whereas from the text it appears to be a positive aspect since it actually helps reveal the hypocrisy of Russian society as seen in the novel. The narrator also says that Russian society gives an unbelievable “explanation” for how impractical people become civil servants, claiming “that abstractness and lack of practical knowledge” are traits of those who serve (Dostoevsky 325).

The narrator, using the unbelievable explanation as a starting point, transitions into addressing practical and impractical people. He, arguably, uses the following explanation to trace how such impractical people have become civil servants: the narrator begins by explaining how

¹⁰ Here, “generals” refers to the equivalent of the rank of “Actual Privy Councillor” in Russian civil service during the time of Dostoevsky “General” would have been acceptable to use to address an “Actual Privy Councillor” (Pevear and Volokhonsky 343). See the second footnote for “A Nasty Anecdote” for more information on the ranks of civil servants and their military equivalents on p. 343 of the following: Pevear, Richard, and Larissa Volokhonsky, translators and annotators. *The Eternal Husband and Other Stories*. By Fyodor Dostoevsky, Bantam Dell, 2008.

Russian society defines practical people as those who possess “timidity and a total lack of initiative” and a “[l]ack of originality,” which the narrator is quick to explain “has always been considered the foremost quality” of practical people since the beginning of history, and only “one out of a hundred people” disagree (326). Miller, too, recognizes this definition provided by the narrator (*Dostoevsky* 129). Impractical people, according to the narrator, are defined as “troublesome” (*Dostoevsky* 326). The narrator explains how “[i]nventors and geniuses” would also fall into the impractical camp because they are typically considered “fools” among the Russian people (326).

The definitions the narrator provides of these two types of people seem quite strange at first, but as mentioned above, these definitions are not the narrator’s own but are what some in Russian society have given to these two types of people. In fact, the narrator, arguably, is speaking tongue-in-cheek.¹¹ Miller recognizes that the narrator is speaking for society

¹¹ It would be best to devote a brief moment to the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin in relation to Dostoevsky, his works, and devotees to his works. Regretfully, this discussion will not cover the significant and intricate ideas of Bakhtin. However, the following attempts to make up for that: In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin suggests that Dostoevsky’s characters are not “finalized” (i.e., reduced to a specific category within a particular context) but instead are “autonomous subjects” with their own “consciousnesses” that interact with other consciousnesses, thus creating a non-traditional plot structure (7). Since these “autonomous consciousnesses” encounter one another within the novel, the novel is thus “polyphonic,” justifying the inclusion of “incompatible [or contradictory] elements” in the novel (16). Bakhtin also suggests that even the “viewer” (or reader) is another consciousness that partakes in the novel’s “dialogic” structure (18). Miller grounds her understanding of the narrator’s different voices in Bakhtin’s understanding of what he calls Dostoevsky’s “polyphonic novel.” According to Miller, viewing Dostoevsky’s work through this lens allows figures within his work to have “voices . . . [with] equal, contrapuntal value” (*Dostoevsky* 8-9). As demonstrated in her discussion of part three of *The Idiot*, Miller’s understanding of Bakhtin’s polyphonic novel allows her the argue for not only a wide range of voices within the narrator but also how a fluctuation of these voices causes the novel to have “a polyphonic texture” (*Dostoevsky* 133). Moreover, Sarah J. Young’s concept of “scripting,” as discussed above, considers Bakhtin’s understanding of how Dostoevsky’s characters are both autonomous and void of “authorial finalization” (18). Scripting, for Young, recognizes that “characters shape these plots [in Dostoevsky’s fiction] and this world according to their own designs” (18).

Alan Jacobs discusses Bakhtin’s philosophies, and he reveals how they complement a Christian reading of texts, and by extension, people. In *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*, Jacobs notes how Bakhtin’s “open unity” warrants a view of people and the world that takes into account their “irreducibly complex wholeness” (53). This “open unity,” for Jacobs, allows for what Bakhtin calls “faithfulness,” which Jacobs says aids people in being “attentiv[e]” to the whole of another person in a manner “that is both loving and constant” (63). This attentiveness, from a Christian perspective, is what Jacobs says allows one to see another as broken by sin while also an “image of God” who “(one hopes) [is] in the process of being restored” (63).

(*Dostoevsky* 129-130), but as mentioned above, she suggests that this is a negative aspect of the narrator and does not appear to recognize the benefits of the narrator's strategy here in this section of the novel.¹²

The narrator then provides an example of what feigned decorum looks like within the society of the novel. He creates a hypothetical situation in which people, after they have been given full dominion over their wealth, will have it stolen from them, and that such stealing is required of "decency and decorum" (*Dostoevsky* 326) and links "timidity," which is a trait of the practical man, to "decorum" and "decorum" to the thievery mentioned above (326). Therefore, the narrator suggests that practical people are those who are decorous, and it is such decorum that allows for thievery and debauchery. However, keeping in mind the tongue-in-cheek nature of what the narrator is saying, this decorum is not actually decorous—it is a feigned decorum that society has deemed decorous. Furthermore, the narrator suggests that a change should be made, which, arguably, is referring to those who have begun to abide by such feigned decorum. This change, however, must come about slowly because changing too quickly would be "unrespectable and even indecent" (326). Miller wonders if the narrator is "advocating" for "practical men" or "original men" (130). It appears he is "advocating" for originality. The narrator's assessment of Russian society as seen in the novel demonstrates how important it is for people to possess the fantastic sight that Myshkin possesses. For, such sight allows people to

With these different understandings of Bakhtin in mind, I argue that in the particular scene currently being discussed, the narrator's voice is trustworthy (as opposed to untrustworthy as Miller sees it). I, too, recognize a fluctuation of narrative voices, but I believe the fluctuation is different in this scene than what Miller claims it to be. And I might add that I also believe that Jacobs' understanding of how Bakhtin's philosophies connect to a Christian worldview warrant an interpretation of Myshkin that, in spite of his aura of contradiction, deems him Christ-like and reveals within him traits of a Nouwenian minister (hence why I do not see Myshkin in the same light as Young). However, the connection between Bakhtin's ideas and the concept of a Nouwenian minister warrants a separate discussion entirely.

¹² Miller, however, is correct in other assessments of the narrator throughout her work, particularly about how he eventually begins to see Myshkin in a negative light in the final chapters of the novel. See *Dostoevsky and The Idiot*, pp. 149-64.

see themselves for who they truly are, which in turn might provoke a change in society's perception of reality and what truly classifies as originality and decorum.

Myshkin and Nastasya: An Affirmation of True Originality

There appears to be, within Dostoevsky studies, a consensus that Myshkin is least affected by the sins of his peers in the first part of the novel, contributing to his (limited) success in these pages. Therefore, one must look closely at Myshkin's Nouwenian traits alongside his fantastic sight in these opening pages of the novel in order to see how such traits allow him to affirm Nastasya's originality.

Totsky raised Nastasya in the realm of feigned decorum, and in the eyes of society, Totsky is considered decorous, described as "a man of high society, with high connections and extraordinary wealth . . . [and] of elegant character and . . . refinement of taste" (Dostoevsky 39). During Nastasya's birthday party, Totsky is described as balding and wearing "false teeth" and "loose and elegant clothes" and "[o]n . . . his right hand there was an expensive diamond ring" (150). The contrast between these two descriptions is telling because the narrator presents the reader with a decorous man of wealth, yet his clothing is loose and his teeth are false. Totsky is presented as a decorous man here, but shabbiness and decay lie underneath. Totsky, in actuality, only possesses a feigned decorum.

Totsky, and all his feigned decorum, is at odds with Nastasya, who is truly original. The text suggests that Totsky has sought to seduce Nastasya by showering her in comfort and luxury; however, even though Nastasya was quite pleased with the blessing, she "never succumbed to it, as if she could always do without it; she even tried several times to declare as much . . ." (135). The text reveals that Nastasya is a person who has undergone a "higher upbringing" (41)—a finer and more decorous ways of living. However, this upbringing does not provide Nastasya

with her originality. Nastasya possesses an innate originality—a true originality that feigned decorum cannot produce. After her formal education, Nastasya became something far beyond the “timid” person that might emerge from such an education (42). Here timidity appears again in regard to decorum, and right away, the reader can see that, in Nouwenian terms, Nastasya’s father figure (Totsky), has failed her by abusing her and preventing her from being her true self.

Therefore, Nastasya is caught between the feigned decorum of society (as represented by Totsky) and originality, which causes tension within her being. Wasiolek recognizes this tension, albeit in a slightly different way. During Nastasya’s birthday party, Nastasya defies this society by attempting to destroy the money that is given to her by Rogozhin, which works to reveal how dependent this society is on money (Wasiolek 86). However, the attempted destruction of this money also represents Nastasya’s way of rejecting Totsky’s seduction of her (88). Nastasya seeks a strange form of revenge: to get back at Totsky by being violated once more (88). Nastasya believes she is guilty for what has happened to her, and believes she must punish herself to obtain resolution (88-89). Such revenge produces the tension found within Nastasya. By seeking her rights, Nastasya attempts to separate herself from Totsky by emulating her peers’ actions, which only leads to more trouble within her soul. Ultimately, Nastasya represents how feigned decorum (in this case Totsky and all he represents) has stained the moral fabric of Russian society, allowing an innocent girl to be seduced and leading her to seek self-punishment.

Michael Holquist’s analysis of Nastasya reveals that another contributor to Nastasya’s tension is her fall from an “Edenic” past. Nastasya, according to Holquist, seeks to return to an “Edenic” past—one in which her childhood innocence dominates. However, Totsky, as seducer, removes her from this past, and Nastasya is forever stuck in a state of longing for a way to return to innocence (137-39). Thus, decorum, if one considers the narrator’s understanding of it, has

stolen Nastasya's innocence, and the tension within her, in part, is due to her desire to become innocent once again.

To revert to a state of innocence and break free of Totsky and his feigned decorum, Nastasya attempts to expose the immorality of Totsky and her society's manners. Nastasya insists that the attendees of her birthday party play a parlor game that Ferdyschenko initiates. Although those who are present seem to find the idea of the game appalling, Nastasya believes it is a wonderful idea, particularly because of how it may expose Totsky. The text reveals that the game, for Nastasya, can cause pain to those who play, which would include Totsky and the decorous who attend the party. The reaction the attendees have toward the game "inflamm[s] her [Nastasya's] mocking desire" (Dostoevsky 143) because she believes the game will finally provide her with a chance to see Totsky and the decorous admit their wrongs. In fact, Ferdyschenko says, "But that's what's so enticing, to see how the person's going to lie" (143). Ferdyschenko reveals that the game is not so much about truth as it is about seeing how people manipulate and mask the truth. Therefore, for Nastasya, this game will hopefully reveal the craft of the decorous: lying and manipulation.

However, the game does not reveal the side of decorum that Nastasya wants it to. Terras mentions how Totsky, instead of confessing how he seduced Nastasya, tells an unrelated story in an effort to "mak[e] him[self] look quite good" (*Dostoevsky* 76). Totsky's story has nothing to do with Nastasya—the narrator even labels it "one of his 'charming stories'" (Dostoevsky 150). Totsky recounts how he stole another man's opportunity to woo a married woman with flowers, which he believes led to this man "being killed in the Crimea" (150-53). Wasiolek notes how Totsky's story is about "some silly joke" as opposed to a story of confession (88). Though the game does not end the way Nastasya desired, it still reveals the immorality of Totsky and feigned

decorum and how the latter masks the former with manners and silly games. Even if the attendees do not see through this mask, the scene certainly allows the readers to. Ultimately, readers see how the narrator is correct in saying that a change in society must occur, and Myshkin's actions as a Nouwenian minister are an attempt to bring about such change.

Nastasya's birthday party sets the foundation for how the novel criticizes feigned decorum and how the novel reveals feigned decorum's immorality to the reader, particularly in exposing how this feigned decorum has affected Nastasya. However, the scene also sets the tone for how Myshkin, as a Nouwenian minister, attempts to restore Nastasya's originality. Myshkin understands that Nastasya is not guilty for the wrongs that have been done to her: "He sees her as unspoiled, uncorrupted, pure, and innocent—as she wanted to be" (Waisolek 89). Myshkin's fantastic sight is acute and reveals not only to Nastasya but also to those who hear Myshkin's words (e.g., the reader), Nastasya's true self, allowing Myshkin to be what Nouwen would call a "contemplative critic" of those at the party by "bring[ing] to the fore the real beauty of the world and humanity."¹³ Nastasya's goal, as explained above, is to separate herself from decorum in order to become her true, original self. However, Myshkin understands that Nastasya has already separated herself from the decorous. Myshkin, as he is going to the party, says that his goal is to explain to Nastasya that she should not marry Ganya because Ganya is only in it for the monetary gain and not because he truly cares for her (Dostoevsky 134-35). Myshkin is looking to aid Nastasya in avoiding a choice that would affect her negatively. Myshkin cares for Nastasya's well-being because he sees in her true originality. Myshkin serves as an "articulator of inner events" by not only sharing his own perspective of Nastasya but also sharing this perspective in the hopes of providing her with clarification and to use his experiences as a means to explain to

¹³ The quoted words are Nouwen's. See *The Wounded Healer* p. 48

her that he understands her condition.¹⁴

After he arrives at the birthday party, Myshkin articulates his perspective of Nastasya. Myshkin says, “Everything in you is perfection . . . even the fact that you’re so thin and pale . . .” (139; ellipses in original). Here, Myshkin acknowledges Nastasya’s perfection even though she seems ill (“thin and pale”). Myshkin understands that she has been affected by Totsky and the decorous—but even still, her true, original self is intact. As a Nouwenian minister should, Myshkin attempts to help Nastasya see that he recognizes and understands her condition as a young woman who has been wronged by her earthly authority.

Furthermore, Myshkin recognizes that Nastasya is perfect but that this perfection does not come from her decorous side. Towards the end of the party, after Myshkin has proposed to Nastasya, he says he will marry her for who she is, even though she believes no one will accept her if she has nothing (163). Her perfection, in Myshkin’s eyes, comes from nothing but herself. As Waisolek says, in order to keep Nastasya from punishing herself for Totsky’s wrongdoings because of the guilt she feels (88-89), Myshkin takes this pain onto himself and “*breaks the vicious circle of hurting and being hurt, and by breaking the circle, he effects changes in others*” (104; emphasis in original). Myshkin seeks to give himself and all he has to help Nastasya see her true, original self and allow her to find forgiveness and return to innocence. By giving himself to her, Myshkin shows Nastasya compassion by recognizing her humanity and by presenting her with a new form of authority in the form of forgiveness, which is ultimately rooted in Christ.¹⁵

Nastasya appears to agree with Myshkin about her originality and to embrace Myshkin’s compassion, but ultimately, she succumbs to her peer group. Nastasya rejects Ganya for

¹⁴ To see the connections made here to Nouwen’s concept of ministry, see *The Wounded Healer* pp. 43-44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

Myshkin, which troubles Totsky greatly, and she states to the guests, “The prince is this for me, that I believe in him as the first truly devoted man in my whole life. He believed in me from the first glance, and I trust him” (Dostoevsky 154). Nastasya even returns the pearl necklace to general Epanchin (155), a symbolic gesture of her freeing herself from decorum and from those who have treated her wrongly. However, when Rogozhin arrives later during the party, Nastasya announces that “this is the denouement” (155), and the narrator explains that what she does next was certainly preplanned (156). Nastasya shames Ganya and runs off with Rogozhin, rejecting Myshkin’s compassion in the process. Her attempts to separate herself from Totsky, her earthly authority, result in her seeking, to use Wasiolek’s word, her “rights,” which reveals how similar she is to the very peer group she seeks to reject, and by extension, how she has turned to that peer group (and their standards) in order to find freedom.

Nastasya’s connection to the peer group is rather vague in this scene but nonetheless apparent, especially when one considers what the narrator says about ordinary people in part four of the novel. The narrator explains that there are “limited” ordinary people and “much cleverer” ordinary people (463). Limited ordinary people are those who become “original” simply by abiding by the latest intellectual fashions (463). Then there are “much cleverer” ordinary people who do the same as limited people and seek to “be[come] . . . m[en and women] of genius and originality, [but] nevertheless preserv[e] in [their] heart a little worm of doubt, which drives [them] so far that . . . [they] en[d] up in complete despair; if [they] submi[t], then [they are] already poisoned by vanity turned in upon itself” (464). Such a person (and for the narrator, it is Ganya) eventually fixates on committing “base deeds” in order to achieve originality, but typically does not act on such fixations (465). The originality discussed here is not the same as the originality in part three (and could possibly be the “originality” that Miller refers to). This

originality is closer to what Waisolek says about “seeking rights” above: feigned originality that comes from people trying to become something that they are not. By giving in to feigned originality, Nastasya also gives in to her peer group (e.g., Ganya and those like him), which prevents her from accepting Myshkin’s compassion.

Nastasya believes that by punishing herself—by downgrading herself to the level of a “concubine”—she will finally be able to become an original person free from guilt. In doing so, she commits a “base deed” against herself by rejecting Myshkin’s compassion and running off with Rogozhin, which also prevents her from embracing the true, original self Myshkin sees within her. As said above, Myshkin recognizes Nastasya’s perfection, but at the beginning of the birthday party, after Myshkin tells Nastasya that she is “perfect,” she says the following: “Though you’re a master at guessing, you’re nevertheless mistaken. I’ll remind you of it tonight . . .” (139; ellipsis in original). Nastasya is not willing to accept that she has no reason to be guilty—that she is already an original and needs not turn toward the peer group.

Such a statement is two-fold in meaning: on the one hand, Nastasya admits how keen of an eye Myshkin has to recognize that behind the decorum, she is perfect. On the other hand, Nastasya still cannot accept such a view of herself. She must “remind” Myshkin how wrong he is, which implies that Nastasya believes that she must intentionally prove to Myshkin that she is a foul creature in order to obtain what she believes is originality. When Nastasya rejects Myshkin initially, she says to him, “You just called me perfection; a fine perfection, if just for the sake of boasting that I’ve trampled on a million [Myshkin’s million] and a princely title, I go off to a thieves’ den!” (169), and further down she says, “I sat in prison for ten years, now comes happiness!” (169-70). Although Nastasya reveals and rejects the lies of feigned decorum, she commits a base deed against herself by turning toward the peer group (i.e., running off with

Rogozhin), keeping her from embracing the true, original person that Myshkin sees in her. But Nastasya's flight does not diminish Myshkin's attempts at serving as a Nouwenian minister.

Chapter 3: A Fatherless Generation

As seen above, critics note that after the first part of *The Idiot*, Myskin tends to sway in his mission to save Nastasya as well as others he encounters. It is as though Myshkin's convictions wane and his influence on others fades. It is true that Myshkin, throughout the rest of the novel, has many failures and, ultimately, fails to save Nastasya. And his influence on others does wane. However, Myshkin, through his fantastic sight and his ability to minister to others in a Nouwenian sense, deserves more credit than some critics give him. In part two, for example, Myshkin succeeds in serving the young nihilists as a Nouwenian minister, in spite of how his actions are perceived by others.

The young nihilists have put on the mask of nihilism in order to align with a higher authority. As Nouwen discusses in the second chapter of *The Wounded Healer*, modern people turn toward their peers instead of a parental figure for authority. And Wilson explains how Dostoevsky believes that "a poor father-child relationship" not only affects the family but also society (54). Wilson notices a turn away from the father-figure in *The Brothers Karamazov* when Smerdyakov, an assumed illegitimate son of Fyodor and brother of Ivan, emulates the teachings of Ivan (56). Eventually, Smerdyakov murders Fyodor, but Wilson, quoting Neil Bruss, reveals how this murder causes problems for both Ivan and Smerdyakov. If God does not exist, which for Bruss also suggests that there is no father figure, then people can do whatever they please. However, "parricide" and the recognition of parricide suggests that there is such a thing as a father, which in turn means that people *cannot* do whatever they please (58). Parricide causes trouble for both Ivan and Smerdyakov. For Ivan, he appears to be unable to understand who he truly is, and Smerdyakov attempts to revert "to his adopted father Gregory's faith" but eventually kills himself (58).

Wilson reveals how *The Brothers Karamazov* shows the consequences of the lack of a father figure, and *The Idiot* also shows these consequences. Even though the fatherless may resort to the acceptance of their peers and, either figuratively or literally, rid themselves of their earthly fathers, there still exists a guilt before and a tension between them and their spiritual father. Nouwen, too, recognizes such a tension, which is why he says that “compassion” must become the new authority for the fatherless, for it is through compassion that redemption can be achieved.

The Fatherless Young Nihilists

In part two of *The Idiot*, Myshkin is confronted by a group of nihilists who accuse him of unfairly taking the inheritance of one of their comrades. Among the nihilists are Antip Burdovsky (so called “Pavlishchev’s son”), Vladimir Doktorenko (Lebedev’s nephew), Keller, and Ippolit Terentyev (Dostoevsky 259). Most of these nihilists lack a proper father figure (i.e., authority figure), including Burdovsky and Ippolit, as Holquist confirms above. Lebedev’s nephew, when the reader first encounters him, lives with Lebedev. Lebedev serves as an authority figure of sorts by providing his nephew with funds while he is in school. However, Doktorenko still seems to have issues with his uncle because he will not provide him with the funds needed to buy work clothes (195). Doktorenko is the son of Lebedev’s late sister Anisya who was widowed, and according to Lebedev, he himself “swaddled him [Doktorenko], washed him in a tub, sat up with them [Doktorenko and Anisya] for whole nights without sleeping, when both of them were sick, stole firewood from the caretaker downstairs, sang him songs . . . nursed him . . .” (197).

There is an apparent lack of a male role model within Doktorenko’s life, and Lebedev, who is more or less a buffoon, is the only male figure in Doktorenko’s immediate family.

According to Doktorenko, Lebedev is a drunkard (193), a fool who defends “the moneylender who took five hundred roubles from [a defendant]” in court on the assumption that Lebedev would receive “fifty roubles” for doing so (194). Although he recognizes Lebedev’s buffoonery, Doktorenko also says, “Granted he [Lebedev] loves the children, he respected my deceased aunt . . . He even loves me, by God, and has left me something in his will . . .” (198; ellipses in original). Thus, just like Ivan and Smerdyakov, there is contempt towards the father figure, yet Doktorenko still acknowledges Lebedev’s fatherly role.

Burdovsky, another one of the fatherless, claims to be the son of Myshkin’s surrogate father Pavlishchev, though this is a lie. Burdovsky’s actual father, as Ganya reveals, was “a totally impractical man, having received fifteen thousand as [Burdovsky’s] mother’s dowry, abandoned his job . . . began to drink . . . and finally died prematurely, in the eighth year of his marriage to [Burdovsky’s] mother” (279). Burdovsky’s real father lived a life of debauchery and filth and was certainly far from what one would consider a strong father figure and role model. Finally, Ippolit and Keller also lack father figures.¹⁶ The four nihilists lack an appropriate father figure in their lives, and by turning toward their peer group, they turn toward that which their peers see as a more dominant and effective authority: nihilism.

The Young Nihilists and Originality

Such nihilism justifies the selfish desires of these fatherless figures. It also allows them to appear original, and serves as a form of feigned decorum. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the narrator of the novel discusses two types of ordinary people: “one limited, the other ‘much cleverer’” (463). Since the distinction between the two have already been discussed, it will suffice to say that the young nihilists fall into the second category of ordinary people, as

¹⁶ Ippolit’s fatherlessness is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Keller’s fatherlessness is implied, as there is no mention of a father figure in his life in the text.

they end up committing base deeds (i.e., attempting to defame Myshkin) in an effort to satisfy their selfish desires and become original—similar to what Nastasya sought to do at her birthday party.

However, Myshkin, as a Nouwenian minister, helps expose the true identity of the nihilists hidden underneath the mask of their manners by consoling them. In the second part of her introduction to *The Idiot*, Knapp explains that the encounter between Myshkin and the nihilists “highlights the question of paternity (or relatedness in general) and what it means” (“Introduction” 29). For Knapp, the answer to this question is money: since Burdovsky claims he is the son of Pavlishchev, he believes he has the right to Myshkin’s inheritance. For the nihilists, family values are a vehicle for making money (“Introduction” 29). Knapp is correct, but it appears as though the question of paternity in this scene also suggests a lack of authority in the lives of the nihilists. Myshkin, however, accepts who he is and the lack of a father figure in his life. Terras explains how Myshkin is comfortable with being himself, allowing him to not only recognize his own shortcomings but also forgive himself for them. But “others [within the novel] live a lie and conceal their true selves” and even act contrary to who they truly are (*The Idiot* 70). Hence, the idea of being something one is not is prevalent within the novel, and nihilism, as it propagates feigned decorum, not only serves to mask true originality and one’s true self but also deems what is truly wrong as truly good and vice versa. Myshkin, by forgiving himself, can forgive others, and specifically the young nihilists, which encourages them to let go of their feigned originality and embrace their true selves.

The Fathers of the Young Nihilists

The fatherless nihilists seek originality and in order to obtain it, they turn toward nihilism and those who abide by it (i.e., their peer group). However, this turn leads them to committing a

base deed: slandering Myshkin and father figures. As Waisolek makes clear in his analysis of Lebedev, all in Russian society are seeking their rights, which the majority of the more questionable characters find in money, including Ippolit (85-86) who is a part of the nihilist band. Therefore, by extension, the young nihilists as a group are also seeking their rights by seeking to obtain Myshkin's inheritance (i.e., money). The young nihilists come to Myshkin's dacha (on his birthday) to slander him with an article entitled "*Proletarians and Scions, an Episode from Daily and Everyday Robberies! Progress! Reform! Justice!*" (261; emphasis and formatting in original) that they have contributed to in one way or another. Throughout the article are many attacks on what can be considered *the father figure* (that father figure being Pavlishchev, who is referred to as "P."). The article is associated with nihilism, suggesting that there is a connection between the article's contents and the nihilists themselves.

The beginning of the article subtly criticizes the fathers—or the authorities—of the past. The article's claims Myshkin had "grandfathers [that] . . . lost everything definitively at roulette," "fathers [that] were forced to serve as junkers and lieutenants and usually died under investigation for some innocent error to do with state funds," and "children [of these fathers] . . . [who] either gr[ew] up idiots or even g[ot] caught in criminal dealings . . ." (261). The article paints a dark picture of fatherhood, and by extension, earthly authority figures. The article also describe Myshkin's biological father as one "who died under investigation for the unexpected disappearance of all the company funds during a card game, or perhaps for administering an overdose of birching to a subordinate . . ." (262). The article describes the father figure as abusive. The article then claims that Pavlishchev (Myshkin's surrogate father and caretaker) was "the owner of four thousand bonded souls" and irresponsible for trying to rid Myshkin of his illness ("idio[cy]") by sending him to a sanatorium (i.e., curing Myshkin with "money") (262).

Pavlishchev also allegedly “seduced in his youth a poor, honest girl [Burdovsky’s mother],” eventually “gav[e] her in marriage to a certain man, something of a dealer and even . . . of noble character,” and then “forg[ot] [about] the girl and the son he had had by her . . .” (264). Furthermore, the article claims the husband of “noble character” eventually died, leaving Burdovsky’s mother with no one but Burdovsky to provide for the family (264). The article represents father figures as adulterers who forget their biological children, and eventually leave (either willingly or by death).

The article, under the title of “nihilism,” appears to criticize the powers that be, and in this case, those powers are the fathers of the current generation who provide no truth, no love, and no guidance for their children. As Nouwen says, this lack of provision leads to the perception of fathers “who have already failed right before their [the children’s] eyes” (36). And such an analysis of this scene complements Holquist’s, which reveals how both Burdovsky and Ippolit struggle to find their identity in the midst of their fatherlessness (141). Granted, Nouwen says that the modern generation does not feel “proud or contemptuous of the fathers” when they decide to forsake them and go their own way (36), which, admittedly, is not the case for most of the fatherless in the novel, include the nihilists. Regardless, the authorities of the nihilists have failed them, which explains why they attempt to find a better authority under nihilism.

Myshkin as a Nouwenian Minister toward Burdovsky and the Young Nihilists

Myshkin sees past the anger, resentment, and feigned decorum of the young nihilists and instead serves them as a Nouwenian minister. The young nihilists use the declaration of rights, granted to them by the authority of nihilism, as an excuse to slander Myshkin. But Myshkin sees beyond this slander and into the humanity of the nihilists, and in turn (even if unintentionally at times), addresses their fatherlessness. When working with Burdovsky, Myshkin shows signs of a

contemplative critic. Myshkin is clear that he “decided to satisfy Mr. Burdovsky,” despite what the article says (Dostoevsky 270-71) and believes that a man named Chebarov “[look] advantage” of Burdovsky (271). Myshkin addresses Burdovsky and suggests that his “simpl[e]” nature lead to him being manipulated, which enrages the nihilists. However, Myshkin says he is only trying to be “completely sincere,” as he feels that transparency is most important in this situation (271). Furthermore, Myshkin understands that helping Burdovsky by giving him money is motivated by “a debt and not . . . charity” (274). Myshkin understands his obligation—his “duty”—to help Burdovsky “as ‘Pavlishchev’s son,’” despite how he may feel about Burdovsky or the situation at hand. Here Myshkin displays traits of a contemplative critic by looking past trivialities and speaking directly and openly. Myshkin has no concern for the feigned decorum of nihilism—he seeks to get to the heart of the issue, which is Burdovsky’s situation. However, the nihilists take offence to Myshkin’s bluntness, suggesting that that they see his actions as foolish. Myshkin, nevertheless, stands his ground.

Myshkin also articulates inner events and shows compassion toward the young nihilists. Myshkin is clear that he would “make up for it all later by [his] friendship, [his] active participation in the fate of the unfortunate Mr. Burdovsky, who had obviously been deceived . . .” (274) and he looks beyond the situation by attempting to see the human side of Burdovsky, stating that Burdovsky “[is] an innocent man, but whom everyone is deceiving” and that he is “[a] defenseless man . . . and therefore . . . must spare him” (274; 1st ellipsis in original). Myshkin also sees the humanity of the rest of the nihilists and affirms they were attempting to do good in their own minds (275), and in turn, Myshkin recognizes within the young nihilists what Nouwen would consider a desire for “an ideal to dedicate themselves to” (40). And Myshkin sees himself within Burdovsky when he says, “I, too, was in such a condition [of “simplicity”] before

I left for Switzerland; I, too, babbled incoherent words—you want to express yourself and can't . . . I understand it; I can sympathize very much, because I'm almost like that myself . . .”

(Dostoevsky 275).

Here, Myshkin displays traits of one who can articulate his own inner struggles as well as compassion. Myshkin continues to be direct and honest, further revealing his contemplative nature. However, Myshkin eventually shifts over to Burdovsky in particular and reveals that both he and Burdovsky are alike in that they have experienced a similar sickness. Myshkin attempts to articulate his own inner conflict to better connect with Burdovsky, allowing Burdovsky to recognize and turn from the deception of the other nihilists. Myshkin displays compassion by placing himself in Burdovsky's shoes (as well as the shoes of the nihilists), explaining that he understands Burdovsky's situation and why the nihilists are seeking to help their friend. And Myshkin's declaration that he will befriend Burdovsky and continue to be an “active participan[t]” in Burdovsky's situation allows him to bridge the gap between himself and Burdovsky.

Myshkin's Nouwenian traits are rather apparent here, and Frank's analysis of this scene helps reveal these traits more clearly. According to Frank, the scene reveals how the nihilists' attempts at “social justice” (which uncovers the hypocrisy of the nihilists themselves) is in “contrast” to Myshkin's “true selflessness . . . based on Christian love” (330). Myshkin serves as one who acts in a loving manner towards the nihilists. Myshkin acknowledges that the nihilists believe they are combating “social injustice,” and he also takes into real consideration Burdovsky's less than ideal situation, which he uses as a means to “forgiv[e]” Burdovsky for being against him in this scene (330). Myshkin attempts to see everything from the nihilists' perspective in an effort to better love them, allowing him to forgive Burdovsky and minister to

him and the other young nihilists as a Nouwenian minister.

Myshkin serves Burdovsky as a Nouwenian minister, but he also serves the rest of the nihilists in the same manner, in spite of the perceived scandal. Before the nihilists come into Myshkin's dacha, Aglaya, his friend, reads aloud a poem by Pushkin entitled "The Poor Knight." According to Frank, Aglaya believes that "Myshkin is the Poor Knight of Pushkin's poem . . ." (334). However, Frank also argues that while parts of the poem apply to Myshkin (particularly the references to the poor knight and how his sight is comprehensible and "graven on his heart"), other parts of the poem do not (as when the poem alludes to the violent acts of "the Crusades") (334). Aglaya wants Myshkin to fight for himself as the nihilists attempt to defame him; however, Myshkin instead "reacts to insult and provocation with a docility and passivity that drive Aglaya into a towering rage" (335). Frank notes that there is a difference between how Myshkin responds to the nihilists and how his peers respond. The difference in responses reveals how Myshkin is a true poor knight, on a crusade to love the fatherless nihilists in the manner of a Nouwenian minister, even if he may be considered a fool, which is what Nouwen expects of true ministers.

And Myshkin's efforts are not in vain, as seen in the actions of Keller and Burdovsky. After the article scene, Keller comes to Myshkin "full of outpourings and confessions," and the narrator even says that Keller "had come to tell the prince his whole life's story and that he had stayed in Pavlovsk just for that" (Dostoevsky 307). Keller explains how stealing is the only way one can advance in the world at times, and after Myshkin asks a rather naïve question about Keller possessing emeralds, Keller says, "Oh, Prince, your view of life is still so bright and innocent, and even, one might say, pastoral" (307-08). Here, Keller reveals that he can see an element of purity and naiveté in Myshkin as well as the traits of a (pastoral) minister.

However, the narrator reveals that Myshkin does not seem to believe he is the right person for Keller to confess such misdeeds. Myshkin thinks to himself, “Wouldn’t it be possible to make something of this man under someone’s good influence?” and the narrator then says, “His [Myshkin’s] own influence . . . he considered quite unsuitable—not out of self-belittlement, but owing to a certain special view of things” (308). Here it would seem as though Myshkin is denying that he is the one who can serve as a confessor for Keller, which at first glance may make one think that Myshkin is not the minister this discussion has claimed he is. However, the narrator is clear that Myshkin thinks these thoughts not to tear himself down but because of “a certain special view of things” (308). His view is one of a Nouwenian minister, for as Nouwen says, one must be able to articulate his or her inner struggles. Myshkin does just that: he recognizes his fallibility and how he is no better than Keller. Myshkin also recognizes that there is a chance that a person could “make something” of Keller, but Myshkin is not sure who can do this. By being humble and admitting his shortcomings, Myshkin reveals that he possesses traits of a Nouwenian minister.

However, despite Myshkin’s thoughts, the two speak to each other cordially. The narrator says, “They gradually warmed to the conversation, so much so that they did not want to part” (308). Eventually, Keller would “positively insist that he was repentant and inwardly ‘filled with tears,’” but also still “proud” of the crime he committed (308). To this Myshkin says, “Above all, there is some childlike trustfulness and extraordinary honesty in you . . . You know, that by itself already redeems you greatly” (308). Eventually, Myshkin comes to find that Keller came to confess to him simply to borrow money, and Keller is amazed that Myshkin can see right through him (308-09). However, Myshkin explains that he is not “indignant,” and even suggests to Keller that his desire for confession and his desire for money are not the same but separate:

“the one simply coincided with the other. The two thoughts coincided, it happens very often. With me, constantly” (309). Myshkin places himself in Keller’s shoes, revealing to Keller that he is guilty of the same thoughts as Keller. Myshkin does not act as Keller’s judge, for only God can be the final judge. Myshkin does, however, articulate his own inner struggles in an effort to welcome Keller into a state of forgiveness where Keller can decide to listen to his “conscience” or not (310). By being open and honest with Keller, Myshkin provides him with an authority quite different from the nihilism that Keller associated himself with in the previous scene: an authority that demonstrates that all people are the same and must help each other become the best people possible.

Another apparent success in Myshkin’s ministry reveals itself in a letter from Burdovsky read during the final scene of part two. During this scene, Mrs. Epanchin mentions Burdovsky to Myshkin, saying, “Everyone considers you a fool and deceives you! You went to town yesterday; I’ll bet you got on your knees and begged that scoundrel [Burdovsky] to accept the ten thousand!” To which Myshkin says, “Not at all, I never thought of it. I didn’t even see him, and, besides, he’s not a scoundrel. I received a letter from him” (319). Myshkin reads the letter in which Burdovsky states that he believes that Myshkin is “better than the others [the young nihilists]” and that he “owe[s] [Myshkin] gratitude.” Burdovsky also admits that he “disagree[s] with Doktorenko and part[s] ways with him . . .” (319).

Burdovsky, a fatherless young man who turned toward nihilism to find solace, makes peace with Myshkin. Burdovsky’s admission to seeing Myshkin in a different and better way than others, and his separation from Doktorenko, exemplifies this desire for forgiveness. Burdovsky’s words also reveal that Myshkin’s actions helped him see that there may be an authority greater than nihilism. Myshkin’s crusade as a poor knight—as a Nouwenian minister—

is not in vain.

Myshkin's Critics and His Fantastic Sight

Two of Myshkin's peers, Ganya and Mrs. Epanchin, respond differently toward the Burdovsky and the nihilists. When Ganya enters, he confirms that Burdovsky is not Pavlishchev's son through letters that "prove mathematically" that this is the case (277). Moreover, Ganya denies Burdovsky forgiveness. Burdovsky, during this scene, eventually shows signs of the forgiveness that Myshkin's Nouwenian side would hope for and embrace. Even Terras mentions how the lack of forgiveness toward a "society . . . [in which] they are nonentities and poor" is present in the nihilists (*The Idiot* 69), so leading the nihilists to forgiveness is significant. However, Ganya denies Burdovsky such forgiveness. Burdovsky says to the company after Ganya presents his proof, "[. . .] I renounce . . . no need for the then thousand . . . good-bye . . .," and he attempts to leave, but Ganya, "softly and sweetly," asks him to stay (*Dostoevsky* 277). Burdovsky attempts to apologize (in his own way) and leave, but Ganya would rather him stay. Ganya's "sof[t]" and "swee[t]" voice possesses a tinge of malice, which those who are present feel, at least in part. The narrator explains, after Ganya speaks, that the men who were present were all perplexed and troubled (278). In fact, Ippolit suggests that Ganya presses the issue out of pride and is unfair toward Burdovsky (278-79). Nevertheless, Ganya proceeds to go into much detail about Burdovsky's plight (279-80) and subtly mocks Burdovsky's fatherlessness. As Ganya finishes his speech, he "venomously prepar[es] to set forth his conclusion," which begins, "First, Mr. Burdovsky can now be fully certain that Mr. Pavlishchev loved him out of magnanimity and not as a son" (280)—words which only serve to humiliate Burdovsky. Myshkin, on the other hand, says he seeks to help Burdovsky "as 'Pavlishchev's son'" (273; emphasis added). Whereas Ganya attempts to humiliate Burdovsky

for his fatherlessness, Myshkin seeks to love and encourage Burdovsky.

Granted, Myshkin is wrong about whole affair: Burdovksy was not deceived, and Ganya is not “of the same opinion about the thievery and crookedness in this unfortunate affair” (280). In all respects, Ganya has more of the facts that Myshkin does. But, as Waisolek says, “Dostoevsky’s right and wrong are not determined by the facts in some objective sense. People are right when their hearts are right, no matter the facts . . .” (100). Therefore, what separates Ganya’s words from Myshkin’s words is that though the former may be factually true, the latter are spiritually true. Ganya seeks to reveal all the facts of the matter, which only serves his own selfish purposes. Myshkin, however, though he may not have all the facts, recognizes Burdovsky’s humanity.

Ultimately, Myshkin helps reveal Burdovsky’s humanity, in all its fatherlessness, and serves Burdovsky by supporting him the way a Nouwenian minister should. Myshkin apologizes to Burdovsky for what he considers an error in his judgment, particularly for providing Burdovsky with monetary aid (i.e., charity) and comparing Burdovsky to himself (Dostoevsky 281). Myshkin articulates his own issues (in this case, his wrong doings), allowing for the possibility of forgiveness. Myshkin also denies that he and Burdovsky are similar (281) (even if they actually are), which appears to be an attempt to uplift and praise Burdovsky for the good in him that Myshkin failed to recognize earlier. By admitting his error in judgment and asking for Burdovsky’s forgiveness, Myshkin serves as a positive role model and authority figure, and in turn further serves as a “poor knight” ministering to the fatherless Burdovsky.

Mrs. Epanchin, too, interacts differently with the nihilists. Granted, Mrs. Epanchin most certainly shows signs of compassion towards the nihilists, and Ippolit in particular, but this compassion is coupled with indignation not present in Myshkin. After Ganya’s speech, all eyes

turn toward Ippolit, who is suffering from consumption. After Myshkin gives his apology, Mrs. Epanchin “crie[s] out . . . ‘This is a madhouse’” (281). Mrs. Epanchin displays here annoyance at the whole situation, and in particular, at Myshkin’s attempt at asking one of the nihilists for forgiveness. Aglaya responds to her mother, saying, “Of course, a house full of madmen” while “los[ing] [her] patience” (281). It appears that Aglaya, by losing her patience, is tired of waiting on Myshkin to take a stand and defend his dignity. As Frank explains above, Myshkin is not the crusader that Aglaya wishes him to be.

However, Mrs. Epanchin displays disdain for the nihilists, which is in contrast to how Myshkin responds to them earlier in the scene. Eventually, she has an outburst: “. . . So you, my dearest, are asking their forgiveness,’ she picked up again, turning to the prince. “‘I’m sorry,’ you say, ‘that I dared to offer you capital’ [. . .] tomorrow this idiot [Myshkin] will again drag himself to them offering his friendship and capital. Will you go? Will you go or not?” (283-84). And Myshkin responds, “I will” (284). Granted, Mrs. Epanchin does not criticize Myshkin’s response directly, but after he answers her questions, she proceeds to lash out at the nihilists, criticizing them in the harshest way. Mrs. Epanchin references a court case where “six people [were murdered] out of poverty” during which the defense attorney used poverty as a means of justifying the murderer’s crime. Mrs. Epanchin compares the murderer to Burdovsky, saying, “‘Wouldn’t this tongue-tied one here put a knife in somebody?’ (She pointed to Burdovsky, who was looking at her in extreme perplexity.) ‘I bet he would!’” (284). Mrs. Epanchin says of the entire group of nihilists that though “[t]hey seek truth” such a pursuit is contradicted by the fact that they are willing to “slander [Myshkin]” (285). And Mrs. Epanchin says that the young nihilists are atheists and that they seek justice, but in order to obtain justice, they do so through injustice: “You acknowledge that society is savage and inhuman because it disgraces a seduced

girl. . . . But if she's been hurt, why, then, do you yourselves bring her out in front of that same society in your newspapers and demand that it not hurt her? Mad! Vainglorious!" (285).

However, with Myshkin, the faith of the nihilists is not mentioned because he understands that criticizing their lack of faith will not help them see differently—it will only lead them further astray. When Mrs. Epanchin asks Myshkin if he will “go to them tomorrow,” he responds, “I will,” to which she replies, “Then I don't want to know you!” (285).

Mrs. Epanchin speaks truth in this situation. The nihilists are in fact atheists, for as has been discussed, they seek the authority of their peers and not their fathers' (and certainly not a Heavenly Father's). The authority their peers provide is the ideology of nihilism, which Mrs. Epanchin reveals leads to a feigned decorum that encourages the young nihilists to seek their own selfish desires. Mrs. Epanchin also reveals how foolish it is to ask forgiveness from such people who, in actuality, are the ones that should be asking forgiveness. When Mrs. Epanchin turns to Myshkin and asks him if he will go to the nihilists, he says he will. She rebukes him for such an answer, but his answer is grounded in a perspective that sees past all of the sins of the nihilists and instead sees them as people who are misguided and who truly are trying to do good. While Mrs. Epanchin rebukes the group, Myshkin seeks to show them compassion in an effort to point them to his authority, which is that of Christ. Mrs. Epanchin is like that of Aglaya's crusaders: she fights violently against the nihilists with her words. Myshkin's weapon, however, is his love.

And how Myshkin responds to Burdovsky and the nihilists matters. According to Frank, the article scene “continues Dostoevsky's polemic with the ideology of the radicals of the mid-1860s” and says, “The Young Nihilists themselves are nothing but insolent little schoolboys, whose pathetic innocence and insecurity are strongly stressed as an implicit apologia for their

aggressiveness” (330) But, Frank explains how the scene also demonstrates the difference between “the true selflessness of the Prince, based on Christian love, with a doctrine of social justice blind to its own egotistic roots” (330). The scene possesses a “merciless caricature of the Young Nihilists,” revealing “the susceptibilities of the radicals.” However, Frank notes the scene’s ability to demonstrate the group’s motives, which are commendable (330). Dostoevsky, according to Frank, seeks not to criticize the change in which the young nihilists hope to achieve in society but rather the methods by which they attempt to do so. Their methods are not fair and reveal an “inner contradiction in their position” (330). They demand that Myshkin act as ““a man of conscience and honor”” while they “reject all old-fashioned ideas of ‘morality’” (330). The nihilists only believe that others must act “moral[ly]” but not they themselves (330).

As mentioned in the previous section, the nihilists don the title of “nihilism,” which appears to provide them with a sense of originality and a sense that they have a right, to use Wasiolek’s term, to do what they do to Myshkin. However, the young nihilists’ actions are simply an attempt to discover an authority that they believe does not exist within their fathers. Myshkin, recognizing the humanity behind the feigned decorum of their nihilism, treats the young nihilists as people and understands that their ideologies are misleading them. Terras explains how, for Dostoevsky, the progressives of the 60s, including the nihilists, ignored Russian reality because they were so consumed by their own secondhand ideas, (*The Idiot* 2-3). And those adhering to such an ideology resorted to violence when they discovered how “the reforms of the early 1860s had not produced a better society . . .” (2).

What Terras reveals above ties into Myshkin’s Nouwenian traits as well as feigned decorum. Here one sees that the progressives, from a more conservative perspective, were blinded by their ideologies, which, according to Dostoevsky, kept them from seeing Russia as it

truly was. The same holds true for the young nihilists of the novel. Myshkin possesses the fantastic sight required to serve the fatherless young nihilists, blinded by their own ideology and feigned decorum, as a Nouwenian minister. Myshkin possesses the fantastic sight required to serve in this capacity. As laid out in the introduction, Dostoevsky's fantastic realism goes beyond simply identifying facts as it seeks to understand what that fact means for the people it affects—both positively and negatively—in the present and in the future.

For example, there appears to be a loose connection Myshkin recognizes between the nihilists and two murders. After Lebedev discusses the young nihilists and compares them to murderers before they enter the dacha, Myshkin says, “[Mrs. Epanchin,] Don’t believe him. I assure you that the Gorskys and Danilovs are merely accidents, and these men [the young nihilists] are merely . . . mistaken . . . Only I wouldn’t like it to be here, in front of everybody” (257; ellipses in original). According to Pevear and Volokhonsky, Gorsky was “an eighteen-year-old high school student” who “killed six [people]” (623) and Danilov “was tried for the murder and robbery of [a “pawnbroker” as well as “his maidservant”]. Danilov was seeking betrothal and “had been advised by his father to stop at nothing, not even crime, to achieve his ends” (621). Both incidences were included in newspapers that Dostoevsky read (621, 623).

In the above discussion, Myshkin pluralizes the two names, suggesting that he is referring to not only those two particular murderers but all murderers like them and proceeds to say that their actions were “accidents” and that the nihilists are “mistaken.” It is not entirely clear here what Myshkin means or why he pluralizes the names. However, what Terras says of a later scene in part three may provide some insight. Radomsky, as Terras notes, reveals the hypocrisy of the Russian liberals when he explains that they, while trying to better the country, also attack it. Furthermore, Radomsky explains how liberalism allows for those tried for murder to have their

actions defended because they are destitute. Myshkin explains that “criminals” of “the past” would at least understand that “they ha[ve] committed a crime,” but the criminal of the day “believes that his actions are right” (The Idiot 48). Here Terras reveals that Myshkin does in fact understand that the current generation is misguided and have turned to an authority that not only makes them appear original but also makes them believe that what is considered wrong is actually right.

However, there is still the question of making the names plural. If one is to look back at the scene referenced by Terras, one will find that Radomsky believes that Danilov’s attorney’s defense on the grounds of “destitut[ion]” reflects not only what the attorney considers a “most humane and progressive [defense]” but is also a “perversion of notions and convictions” (Dostoevsky 337). From there, Radomsky asks the prince if this is simply “a particular case or a general one” (337). Myshkin believes it is a general case, to the present company’s surprise, stating “that the distortion of ideas and notions . . . occurs very often . . .” and if “this distortion were not such a general case, there might not be such impossible crimes as these . . .” (338; last ellipsis in original). Myshkin explains that the difference between the criminals he has met and the criminals that Radomsky speaks of is that the latter “do not even consider themselves criminals and think to themselves that they had the right and . . . even did a good thing, or almost” (339), just as Terras explains.

But Myshkin’s statement is not hypothetical. It is grounded in experience, for he says to Radomsky, “[He] was in some prisons not long ago and managed to become acquainted with certain criminals and accused men” (339). This experience has colored Myshkin’s perception of modern criminals and reveals that he has actually spent time with criminals. If viewed from a Nouwenian lens, Myshkin has shown compassion by lessening the proximity between him and

the criminals he has encountered. Furthermore, this encounter has allowed Myshkin's understanding of the criminals of the day (and those that defend them) as suffering from a condition that affects all of them, not just one in a particular case. And Myshkin is clear that it is the idea that these latter criminals have of rights that allows them to believe that they are not acting immorally. Thus they do not seek forgiveness. The criminals of the day are consumed by a liberal authority (which would include the ideology of nihilism) of their peer group, which tells them that they have these rights and that what is truly wrong is actually good and leads them to practicing a feigned decorum. Hence, the plurality that Myshkin mentions in part two seems to be referencing this "general" case that Myshkin explains above. Ultimately, the young nihilists and their actions, when filtered through Myshkin's eyes, are the actions of fatherless children. Myshkin's sight enables him to minister to them in a manner that reflects a Nouwenian minister.

Chapter 4: Myshkin Continues His Ministry

Myshkin, as a Nouwenian minister, utilizes his fantastic sight in an attempt to help Nastasya see her true self, and he also attempts to turn the young nihilists away from the feigned decorum that stems from nihilism. In both instances, the reader sees how, in spite of everything, Myshkin does not stop attempting to minister to those around him. And when he makes mistakes, Myshkin admits to them and seeks to make up for them. The rest of this discussion will reveal how Myshkin serves as a Nouwenian minister to Ippolit, Rogozhin, Aglaya, and Nastasya.

Ippolit as a Fatherless Young Man

After the nihilists leave, Ippolit remains to have tea with Myshkin and Mrs. Epanchin, and during this scene, Ippolit reveals that he is a part of what Nouwen calls the “rootless generation.” Ippolit says, “I wanted to be an activist [. . .]. Now I don’t want anything [. . .]. Yes, nature is given to mockery! [. . .] Didn’t she make it so that the single being on earth who has been acknowledged as perfect . . . didn’t she make it so that, having shown him to people, she destined him to say things that have caused so much blood to be shed [. . .]” (296). And later on he says, “At home” [. . .] “at home I have a brother and sisters, children, little, poor, innocent . . . *She* will corrupt them! You [Mrs. Epanchin]—you’re a saint, you’re . . . a child yourself—save them! Tear them away from that . . . she . . . shame . . . Oh, help them, help them, God will reward you for it a hundredfold, for God’s sake, for Christ’s sake! . . .” (297; emphasis in original).

In these pieces of dialogue, Ippolit reveals he is fatherless. Nouwen mentions how the fatherless generation is one that “withdraw[s] into the self” (31). This generation believes “there is nothing ‘out there’ or ‘up there’ on which they can get a solid grasp, which can pull them out of their uncertainly and confusion. No authority, no institution, no outer concrete reality has the

power to relieve them of their anxiety and loneliness and make them free” (32). Ippolit also believes that there is nothing “out there” or “up there.” He mentions how “nature is given to mockery” and is inconsistent—even when it comes to the most “perfect” of “being[s],” which Pevear and Volokhonsky note is a reference to Christ (626). Nature makes a mockery of Christ, and it is He that causes “much blood to be shed.” Ippolit cannot trust the powers that be “up there” (Nature and Christ). Ippolit also cannot trust those who are “out there,” for he says that he sought to be with people—to “convinc[e]” them—but “[n]othing” came of it, and the people “despise” him. All Ippolit has is himself.

However, Ippolit also seeks justice, which Nouwen recognizes as another trait of the fatherless. According to Nouwen, “[t]hey [the fatherless] share a fundamental unhappiness with their world and a strong desire to work for change . . .” (39). Ippolit is clear that he seeks justice by attempting to make change in the world through activism. Concerning Kolya, Ippolit says, “I have only him to leave . . . I wanted to have them all, all of them—but there was no one, no one . . .” (Dostoevsky 296; ellipses in original). It is as if Ippolit wants to say he wished to “leav[e]” Kolya and “all of th[ose]” like him something of himself. Ippolit appears to want to leave the young and impressionable an example—an authority—through himself, which may save them. Ippolit also has this same concern for his own siblings, saying to Mrs. Epanchin that she must “save them.” He says that “she” (referring to either his sister or his mother) will corrupt the others. He, on the other hand, will not.

Ippolit continues to demonstrate traits of the rootless generation as he begins to recite his “Necessary Explanation,” which serves as his denouncement of Nature itself and his reasoning for wanting to end his life, but the “Explanation” also demonstrates how spiritually troubled

Ippolit is.¹⁷ Terras explains how Ippolit's suicide attempt serves as his rebellion against nature, though for him it "will be an act of despair more than an act of revolt" (*The Idiot* 74). Ippolit explains that he once had a dream in which a vile, terrible animal like that of a scorpion comes into his room (Dostoevsky 389). Given its description—that of a "trident" or upside-down cross—Robert Hollander associates the animal with the "Antichrist" and says its purpose is to "torment" Ippolit (135). During this dream, Ippolit's "mother and an acquaintance" come in to help Ippolit rid himself of the animal, but as Ippolit says, though the two did not seem scared of the animal, "they understood nothing" (Dostoevsky 390). Hollander speaks to this description by explaining that though they may not be afraid of the animal, their lack of understanding of the spiritual or metaphysical aspects of the attack keep them from being able to help Ippolit (135). Ippolit is not only mocked by nature but also by the demons of a metaphysical realm, and he believes he has no one who can help him, not even his own mother.

This ignorance and inability to help on the part of Ippolit's mother and her friend calls to mind Nouwen's insistence that the rootless generations do not have faith in the authorities of the world—particularly their parents. Nouwen says, "We are facing generations that have parents but no fathers, generations in which everyone who claims authority—because they are older, more mature, more intelligent, or more powerful—is suspect from the very beginning" (34). It can be argued that the dream, and the mother's inability to help her son, illustrates a rejection and lack of faith in the parental figure (notice the absence of a specific father figure in this dream).

Before Ippolit continues giving his "Explanation," he pauses to address his audience, who serve as a representation of what Nouwen would call the peer group. Among the listeners are those who mock Ippolit and his "Explanation," including Ganya, Radomsky and Rogozhin, and

¹⁷ "Necessary Explanation" and "Explanation" here and throughout the rest of this discussion refer to the full title of Ippolit's writing entitled "My Necessary Explanation."

those who are sympathetic toward Ippolit, including Kolya, Vera Lebedev (Lebedev's daughter), Keller, and Myshkin. Waisolek acknowledges that there is a stark contrast between the actions on the parts of both groups. The former group, though they understand that Ippolit's words are laced with selfishness, do not show him compassion (99). However, the latter group, including Myshkin, though they may not notice such selfishness in Ippolit, act compassionately toward him, which ultimately places them in the right (99-100). For, as Waisolek says, "Dostoevsky's right and wrong are not determined by the facts in some objective sense. People are right when their hearts are right, no matter what the facts . . ." (99-100).

Thus, during this pause, Ippolit addresses his peer group—and specifically the former group—and reveals how much shame the peer group can cause. Ippolit seems to be regretful that what he has read to the group contains so "much of the personal" within it, and says, "almost shamefacedly, '[. . .] it seems I indeed wrote a lot that's superfluous'" (Dostoevsky 391). Ippolit eventually says to them all, "You don't love me at all," to which the narrator says, "was laughter" but not much, and soon this shame subsides (391). Here Ippolit exemplifies a symptom of the rootless generations: shame. As Nouwen explains above, once the rootless generations turn toward the peer group, there is a shift from guilt to shame, and there is no longer a sense of posterity in the rootless generations—no longer a sense of eschatology (37). In Ippolit's case, he appears to want desperately to be accepted and loved by his peer group. But instead, the peer group mocks him. Ippolit cannot conform to the authority of the peer group, and the result, even if it eventually subsides, is shame.

Ippolit continues with his "Explanation," which eventually reveals in Ippolit two other symptoms of the rootless generations: inwardness and convulsiveness. According to Nouwen, the rootless generations, as they discover that they cannot find guidance within their world, and

specifically within the authorities of their world, instead find such guidance within themselves. A result of such inwardness can result in “a form of privatism . . . [that is] very self-centered, highly interested in material comfort and the immediate gratification of existing needs and desires” (33). Convulsiveness, as Nouwen explains, represents the rootless generation’s understanding that the world is plagued with problems. However, this generation is unable to find any way of solving such problems, causing “frustration, which often expresses itself in undirected, purposeless violence, or in suicidal withdrawal from the world, both of which are signs of protest than of the results of a new-found ideal” (38).

Ippolit appears caught in the middle of these two tendencies. Ippolit becomes inward as he is suffering from his consumption. Ippolit states that not only did he begin to separate himself from his friends, but also that he began separating himself from his family: “My situation at home . . . was also solitary. Some five months before, I had locked myself in once and for all and separated myself completely from the family rooms (Dostoevsky 395). Eventually, however, Ippolit began to “fe[el] much better for some reason” (396) and seeks to do good within his world, specifically to help an unnamed, poverty-stricken doctor find work. Through his friend Bakhmutov, Ippolit eventually does help the doctor (396-403). Eventually, however, Bakhmutov asks if Ippolit is thinking about jumping into the Neva. Ippolit denies such an idea when with Bakhmutov, but he says to his audience, “Perhaps he had read my thought in my face” (405). Ippolit struggles with the thought of suicide, which, as seen above, is a symptom of the compulsive, rootless generations. Furthermore, Ippolit appears to place much emphasis on time when it comes to performing good deeds. Bakhmutov laments the fact that his friend, who speaks such wise words, must soon die of consumption. Ippolit’s response to this statement is that it is because he is so close to death that his good deeds must not be great but small (405).

Ippolit, due to his emphasis on time, appears to be falling into the mindset of the convulsive generations: he is troubled by the fact that he may not be able to find a way to make the change he wishes he could make because he is unable to find the time to do so. In Nouwen's words, he "see[s] no workable alternative" (38) except to perform smaller deeds, causing within Ippolit a "suicidal withdrawal from the world" (38).

Furthermore, any progress that Ippolit appears to make here is halted when he meets with Rogozhin. Ippolit says soon after this discussion with Bakhmutov that "the first seed of [his] 'ultimate conviction' was sown" (Dostoevsky 405). This "ultimate conviction," as the reader soon finds out, is not only his rejection of Nature but also his attempts at going against Nature by taking his own life. After this seed is sown, Ippolit meets with Rogozhin, and during this meeting, Ippolit comes across Holbein's Christ (Pevear and Volokhonsky identify the painting as Holbein's *Christ's Body in the Tomb* (624)). Ippolit states that the painting depicts rather realistically what Christ must have looked like in His tomb (408). Ippolit wonders if even Christ's followers would have still "believed in him" if they had seen Christ's body in such a condition, which leads Ippolit to further wonder how any person, even Christ Himself, can "defeat nature" (408).

Thus, Ippolit begins to determine that no one can defeat nature. As Hollander mentions, Ippolit suggests that even Christ Himself could not conquer Nature (137). This defeat of the greatest of fatherly authorities—God and his Son—further demonstrates for Ippolit that the powers that be have failed and cannot help the rootless generations, including himself. Waisolek, too, acknowledges that the artwork leads to Ippolit's rejection of nature (94). And as Nouwen says, all the rootless generation can see is an "adult, fatherly world [that] stands helpless before the threat of atomic war, eroding poverty, and the starvation of millions . . . [and] no father has

anything to teach them simply because he has lived longer [i.e., appears to have wisdom]" (35). Nature, like the horrors of the world, cannot be defeated, and for Ippolit, suicide is the only positive answer.

Therefore, Ippolit succumbs to his own view of the world—a world in which all authorities have failed him. For Hollander, “. . . Ippolit turns his own life into an Apocalypse. He becomes Dostoevsky’s exemplar of the failed younger generation of political liberals . . .” (134). Hollander clearly shows how Ippolit is part of the very generation that, in Nouwenian terms, is plagued with “the treat of atomic war” (in a metaphorical sense). The end has come for both the rootless generation as well as “eschatology” (Nouwen 35, 37). Ippolit is consumed by the modern world that is no longer governed by a conscience and instead tells him that it is proper and decorous to attempt to become a hero—to become an original—through selfish acts.

Myshkin as a Nouwenian Minister toward Ippolit

Ippolit is a rootless young man who has lost all faith in both earthly and Heavenly authorities, but Myshkin attempts to minister to Ippolit in an effort to help him see his true, original self and break from the false authorities of the modern world that advocate for a feigned decorum. Myshkin, given his fantastic sight, can see through the feigned decorum that infects Ippolit. From the moment that Ippolit begins to give his “Explanation,” Myshkin senses that there is something wrong, insists that Ippolit not “drink,” and “move[s] the glass away from him” (Dostoevsky 382). Myshkin also keeps suggesting that Ippolit not read the “Explanation” and that the two of them can talk in the morning: “‘I wrote it [the “Explanation”] myself yesterday right after I gave you my word that I would come and live with you, Prince,’ Ippolit says, but Myshkin asks, ‘Wouldn’t be better tomorrow’” (383). A short while later, Myshkin, along with Radomsky, says that Ippolit should not read the “Explanation”: “‘Don’t read it!’ the

prince, too [along with Radomsky], cried, putting his hand on the envelope [in which the “Explanation” is contained]” (384). And again, when Ippolit pauses to acknowledge that many of those present do not “love” him, Myshkin uses the opportunity to offer Ippolit a chance to open up to him—and him alone—both that very night and the next day: “‘Ippolit,’ said the prince, ‘close your manuscript and give it to me, and go to bed here in my room. We can talk before we sleep and tomorrow; but on that condition you never open these pages again. Do you want that?’” (391).

Myshkin, arguably, attempts to provide Ippolit a space in which he can articulate his inner struggles for Myshkin, and in turn, Myshkin can articulate his inner struggles for Ippolit. Ippolit expresses such attempts on Myshkin’s part in his expression. As Ippolit says, at the beginning of his “Explanation,” it was Myshkin who came to him and “talked [him] into moving to his [Myshkin’s] dacha” (387). Ippolit also says how he thought Myshkin would tell him that “it would be ‘easier for [him] to die among the trees,’ as he [Myshkin] puts it. But this time he did not say *to die*, but he said ‘it would be easier to live’ . . .” (387; emphasis in original). Ippolit explains how Myshkin was motivated to make the offer due to Ippolit’s own desire to see the trees.

Myshkin also displays traits of a physician in this scene, and these traits show how Myshkin seeks to minister to Ippolit. Ippolit compares Myshkin to “a doctor or . . . [one] of extraordinary intelligence” (389), and in Ippolit’s “Explanation,” he discusses the doctor Oxigenov. According to Ippolit, Oxigenov is “a materialist, an atheist, and a nihilist,” and simply tells Ippolit he will die within thirty days or so. Ippolit explains that he was seeking a blunt answer as this (388-89). Ippolit’s doctor simply treats Ippolit as another patient—there is no identity acknowledged in Ippolit—only death and illness. Even Bakhmutov, after Ippolit

explains that he would rather not have the former visit him, “shrug[s] his shoulders . . . [and] agree[s] with [Ippolit]” (405). One would think that the former would at least insist on seeing Ippolit before giving in—but, no, Bakhmutov simply walks away. However, Myshkin, being “either a doctor or indeed of extraordinary intelligence” (389), seeks to be present in Ippolit’s life and minister to him by acknowledging his humanity. Ippolit even mentions that right after his nightmare Myshkin arrives and offers him to come to his dacha (391). By offering Ippolit a place in his dacha, Myshkin shows Ippolit that he seeks to be present both in life and in death, as Nouwen says a minister should. Myshkin seeks to bring Ippolit to a place of comfort (the Pavlovsk trees) so that Ippolit may have a chance to pass away naturally. This is also why Myshkin is adamant on trying to keep Ippolit from reading the “Explanation,” for he knows that Ippolit’s attempt at being recognized as a hero—as an individual and as an original—will not come from such a reading. Instead, originality will come through Myshkin as the two of them talk in private.

After Ippolit finishes his “Explanation,” Myshkin continues to minister to Ippolit by recognizing his humanity—even when he makes the mistake of not stopping him from pulling the trigger in time. Ippolit’s “Explanation” ends with a declaration that Ippolit will shoot himself when the sun rises. Half of Ippolit’s peers, including Myshkin, take him seriously and recognize his humanity; however, the other half do not (415-16). However, it is at this moment in the novel that some critics question Myshkin and his actions, for they are, at first glance, not ideal. In short, Myshkin fails to come alongside Ippolit in time, and he shoots himself, though the pistol he uses misfires (419-20). But, if one looks into the scene a little deeper, one will find that Myshkin, though he has made a mistake, is not as despicable as some critics make him out to be in this scene.

As has been discussed above, Myshkin has been insisting from the start that Ippolit not read the letter and instead talk with him in private, but Ippolit continuously ignores Myshkin. For example, right before Ippolit takes out the pistol, he comes alongside Myshkin. Myshkin notices that “his teeth were chattering as if in a most violent chill,” and after Ippolit acknowledges that many of those who are present are “scoundrels” (419). Myshkin attempts to persuade Ippolit to calm down and come to bed, knowing that he is not well (419). But Ippolit persists in cutting Myshkin off and avoiding him. And, as soon as Myshkin attempts to go after Ippolit, Radomsky interrupts him: “The Prince was about to run after him [Ippolit], but it so happened that, as if on purpose, at that same moment Evgeny Pavlovich [Radomsky] held out his hand to say good-bye” (419). Myshkin’s motives are pure—it is not as if he did not intend to not help Ippolit at all; an external force kept Myshkin from getting to Ippolit in time, and this was beyond Myshkin’s control.

Myshkin does make a mistake: he does not get to Ippolit in time. However, just as a Nouwenian minister must examine him or herself in order to articulate that he or she undergoes the same struggles as others, so too does Myshkin take the time to consider how he acted in this situation and seeks forgiveness for it. Right after his pistol misfires, Ippolit’s peers (who are against him) mocked him (420). Shame overcomes Ippolit, embarrassed that the pistol misfired. Ippolit sobs; he assures his peers that the pistol was not meant to misfire. And Ippolit makes it a point to let them know that he truly meant to kill himself and did not leave the cap out of the pistol (420). Yet, those who are against Ippolit see not his humanity but simply his folly, as Waisolek makes clear above. Myshkin, however, appears to feel guilt immediately after the incident—so much so that Radomsky even asks if he will “g[o] to the sufferer [Ippolit] now [who has been taken to Myshkin’s “study”],” to which Myshkin replies, “Yes . . . I’m afraid”

(420-21; ellipsis in original). Myshkin's fear is not out of reluctance but guilt, for after Radomsky tells the prince that he should not have fear, Myshkin says, "Maybe I really forced his hand by . . . not saying anything; maybe he thought that I, too, doubted that he would shoot himself" (421; ellipsis in original). Myshkin, by feeling this guilt toward Ippolit, reveals that he sees Ippolit as a person—as a person toward whom Myshkin is accountable.

Myshkin further recognizes Ippolit's humanity when he begins to see himself within Ippolit. According to the narrator, after Ippolit has been taken care of and is put in a safe place, Myshkin goes on a walk. While watching a bird, "he [Myshkin] recalled the 'little fly' in a 'hot ray of sunlight,' of which Ippolit had written that even this fly 'knows its place and participates in the general chorus, and he alone is a castaway'" (423). Myshkin then recalls his time in Switzerland when he could not even talk and how he felt as though he was all alone. Myshkin thinks that it was Ippolit who somehow "had taken the words about the 'little fly' from him [Myshkin], from his own words and tears of that time" (423). When Myshkin speaks to Aglaya about the event the next day, she notices that he appears to describe both Ippolit's struggles and his own at the same time (426-27). Myshkin demonstrates that he sees Ippolit as completely human, for he sees in Ippolit himself.

In time, Myshkin asks Ippolit for forgiveness. Myshkin tells Ippolit that although there were some elements of "ridiculous[ness]" in the "Explanation," he is aware that it is Ippolit's "suffering" that makes up for these elements "because to admit to them was also suffering and . . . perhaps took great courage. The thought that moved [Ippolit] certainly had a noble basis The further it goes, the more clearly [Myshkin] see[s] it," and Myshkin promises that he is "not judging [Ippolit]" and that "[he is] sorry [he] was silent then" (521-22). At first, Ippolit questions Myshkin's words, but eventually "he could not help believing in his [Myshkin's] sincerity; his

face brightened” (522).

Myshkin shows Ippolit that he has an identity, for to ask for forgiveness from someone is to acknowledge that he or she is a person. And Myshkin even asks Ippolit to forgive all who have life. When Ippolit asks Myshkin how he should die, Myshkin responds, “Pass us by and forgive us our happiness” (523). Frank explains that in this scene, Ippolit understands that his passing will not be a “purifying experience,” which is why Myshkin’s response here is considered, by Frank, to be “moving and beautiful” (333). Myshkin understands that Ippolit has malice toward those who still live, and it is this living for which Myshkin asks forgiveness (333). Myshkin shows compassion toward Ippolit by modeling forgiveness. Nevertheless, as Terras makes clear, Ippolit, though he seeks “the absolute,” cannot “fin[d]” it because he “looks for it for and within himself” (*The Idiot* 80).

Myshkin is not perfect. Later in the text, the narrator is clear that during future visits, Ippolit mocks Myshkin, which causes the latter to “finally lose his temper . . . [and] sto[p] visiting him,” but eventually Ippolit does seek to “make peace” with Myshkin (Dostoevsky 588). Myshkin possesses imperfections, and it would be wrong to ignore them, but Myshkin’s positive traits outweigh his flaws—especially when he is viewed from the perspective of a Nouwenian minister.

Myshkin as a Nouwenian Minister toward Rogozhin

Not only does Myshkin serve Ippolit as a Nouwenian minister; he also serves Rogozhin in a similar way. By doing so, Myshkin breaks through the lies of false decorum and attempts to show Rogozhin his true, original self. Myshkin’s strongest attempt at ministering to Rogozhin is in the second part of the novel when Myshkin visits Rogozhin at his home. Myshkin enters Rogozhin’s home and realizes that the house is rather unappealing—“inhospitable and dry,

everything seems to hide and conceal itself,” and the first floor is “a moneychanger’s shop” (Dostoevsky 204). The building that Rogozhin calls his home grounds itself in feigned decorum: it “conceal[s],” and its first floor is devoted to material things—the home is the physical representation of the values of feigned decorum.

In his introduction to *The Idiot*, Richard Pevear explains the connections between the Myshkin of the novel and the historical Myshkin, which aid in better understanding the current scene. Pevear mentions how the Myshkin of the novel’s connection to the historical Myshkin—as well as the fact that the Myshkin of the novel possesses a name that means both “lion” (Leo) and “mouse”—“suggests a more ambiguous reading [than both Guardini and Kasatkina provide: the former being that Myshkin represents Christ and the latter being that he supplants Christ while still possessing aspects of Christ]” (xiv). The translators of the novel also note the connection between the Myshkin of the novel and the historical Myshkin of Karamzin’s *History*: “after two years of work [on “the Cathedral of the Dormition of the Mother of God”] . . . the cathedral collapsed, owing to poor-quality mortar and architectural misjudgment. . . . Dostoevsky may have wanted to point readers to this fact” (617). There is a strong connection between the Myshkin of the novel and the historical Myshkin who was unable to build the church successfully. Moreover, as mentioned above, Kasatkina believes that the two parallel one another and demonstrate how, like the historical Myshkin, the Myshkin of the novel also fails.

However, if one conducts a more “ambiguous” reading, as Pevear suggests, one could argue that the Myshkin of the novel is not one who commits the same error as the historical Myshkin but one who corrects such an error. Arguably, Rogozhin’s home is physical representation of feigned decorum, and the Myshkin of the novel appears to notice it as such. In this case, Myshkin’s connection to the historical Myshkin suggests that he will seek to destroy

such a home—or materialist church—but not due to “poor-quality mortar and architectural misjudgment” on the part of the Myshkin of the novel but instead out of his love for Rogozhin. The Myshkin of the novel attempts to destroy the church or temple of feigned decorum to help Rogozhin see past the mask of such manners and instead see his own true, original self.

In an attempt to help Rogozhin see his true self, Myshkin serves Rogozhin as a Nouwenian minister. Once the two meet each other in the home, the narrator says, “They address[s] each other as familiars. In Moscow they had often happened to spend long hours together, and there had even been several moments during their meetings that had left an all too memorable imprint on both their hearts” (Dostoevsky 205). The narrator confirms that Myshkin, even before this meeting, was serving Rogozhin by spending time with him, which appears to be Myshkin’s way of providing Rogozhin with what Nouwen would call “hospitality” (98). Myshkin attempts to provide Rogozhin with a “space” in which he can “come with [his] loneliness.”¹⁸ In this case, Myshkin himself is the space.

Myshkin also attempts to establish an accidental family as Knapp would define it (see chapter 1 for details) through his service as a Nouwenian minister. Myshkin refers to Rogozhin in this scene as “brother Parfyon” (Dostoevsky 206) and says to Rogozhin, “We haven’t seen each other for a long time. I’ve heard such things about you, it’s as if it were not you” (206). Myshkin is attempting to get past what feigned decorum seems to be hiding: Rogozhin’s true self. And concerning Rogozhin’s father, Myshkin says, “When I’m with you, you trust me, and when I’m gone, you immediately stop trusting me and suspect me [of stealing away Nastasya] again. You’re like your father” (209). Here, Myshkin appears to address the dominion that Rogozhin’s father has over Rogozhin himself. Holquist, too, suggests as much when he explains

¹⁸ The quoted words are Nouwen’s. See *The Wounded Healer* p. 98.

how Rogozhin possesses his late father's "greed" (142). It is this very father who has failed Rogozhin.

There is also a connection between Rogozhin's late father and Holbein's Christ, further demonstrating the hold his late father has on him. Rogozhin tells Myshkin that it was Rogozhin's father who bought the painting, believing that "[it was not] trash" and would never part with it (Dostoevsky 218). In this instance, the painting serves as a symbol of a failed authority figure—a failed father—who brought such a failure-Christ into Rogozhin's life. This Christ, which Murav refers to as a "negative model of how *The Idiot* should be read . . ." (83-84), not only represents the feigned decorum of Russia but also represents Rogozhin's authority figure/father. Myshkin seeks to help Rogozhin understand the negative influence that his father has had on his son when he suggests that if Nastasya had not come into Rogozhin's life, Rogozhin most certainly would have become his father in every way (Dostoevsky 213). Rogozhin reveals that Nastasya, too, feels the same. Nastasya, like Myshkin, points out that Rogozhin has been influenced by his father, and if not for her, he would most certainly become his father (214), which Holquist also recognizes (142).

However, it is in Nastasya that Rogozhin believes he may be able to break from his father. After beating Nastasya, Rogozhin insists that he will not leave her home until she forgives him for his wrongdoing (Dostoevsky 210-12). There is a connection between Rogozhin and the story of the emperor and the pope as told by Kasatkina above (who believes that the emperor in the story is Myshkin). Rogozhin who, like the emperor, believes his father has wronged him (symbolically represented by the pope) seeks revenge, which Rogozhin seems to satisfy temporarily by beating Nastasya. However, Rogozhin knows he is wrong. Nastasya can potentially be a source of love, but sin ensnares Rogozhin. Instead of seeking forgiveness

properly, Rogozhin demands it from Nastasya. Through Nastasya, Rogozhin appears to seek a forgiveness that could potentially make up for the failures of his father and of all the authorities who have wronged him.

And Myshkin recognizes this aspect of Nastasya. Rogozhin tells Myshkin how Nastasya appears to accept Rogozhin for who he is and warns him about his father, yet she says to not “change anything here [at Rogozhin’s home],” and to this Rogozhin says, “[N]ever, never before did she talk to me like that, so that she even surprised me; for the first time I breathed like a living person” (214-15). For one moment, Rogozhin seems to tap into the true reason why he desires Nastasya: she is able to see him as a “living person.” Myshkin, following this comment, says, “I’m very glad of it, Parfyon . . . very glad. Who knows, maybe God will make things right for you together,’ but Rogozhin quickly replies, ‘That will never be’” (215). Rogozhin is back to square one. It appears Myshkin desires Rogozhin to be seen as a living person, which may explain the strange desire that Myshkin has for wanting Rogozhin to pursue Nastasya. However, Myshkin is torn, for he also understands that Rogozhin’s sinful nature dominates his being and that he must protect Nastasya from Rogozhin while also allowing Rogozhin to make his own choices. Myshkin keeps unconsciously taking “the . . . knife from the table” in Rogozhin’s house, but Rogozhin keeps taking it back (217). But, after this, Myshkin asks for “[f]orgive[ness]” for implying that Rogozhin would harm Nastasya, because he still wants to maintain his “brother[ly]” connection with Rogozhin (217).

Following this encounter, the two discuss Holbein’s Christ, and here Myshkin discusses the traits of the true Christ. Rogozhin asks if Myshkin “believe[s] in God” (218). Myshkin is torn: he desires to leave, but as he is leaving, he “turn[s]” around and addresses Rogozhin’s question with a “smil[e],” for as the narrator says, Myshkin is “evidently unwilling to leave

Rogozhin like that” (218-19). Myshkin’s flesh makes him want to flee, but it is Myshkin’s spirit that urges him to stay, and the latter triumphs. Myshkin, again, serves as a Nouwenian minister, for he is showing Rogozhin compassion by treating Rogozhin like a human being. Myshkin opens up to Rogozhin about an experience that he himself had in an attempt to help Rogozhin find forgiveness through Christ. At the end of his response about his belief in God, Myshkin says, “The woman said that to me . . . a thought that all at once expressed the whole essence of Christianity, that is, the whole idea of God as our own father, and that God rejoices over a man as a father over his own child—the main thought of Christ” (221). Here Myshkin subtly demonstrates to Rogozhin that the true authority is in Christ, and by compassionately sharing his story with Rogozhin, Myshkin hopes that Rogozhin can find the forgiveness he is looking for in Christ—a Christ who reveals to all a God who rejoices over his own children like a good father should.

Following this discussion, Myshkin attempts to demonstrate to Rogozhin that he sees the latter as the same as himself when the two exchange crosses. The two “exchange crosses” at Rogozhin’s own insistence, and Myshkin asks, “You want to exchange crosses? Very well, Parfyon, if so, I’m glad; we’ll be brothers” (221). Myshkin attempts to show how the two are equals, just as a Nouwenian minister should. Myshkin also attempts to establish an “accidental family” with Rogozhin, for the narrator reveals that Myshkin, after the exchange, considers Rogozhin his “adopted brother” (222). Myshkin, as a Nouwenian minister, seeks to undermine the authorities that have led Rogozhin down such a sinful path by taking the place of that authority (in an earthly sense) as Rogozhin’s spiritual brother, which will hopefully allow Rogozhin to discover the true authority that rests in Christ. But, right after the exchange, Myshkin notices that Rogozhin still possesses “the former bitter and almost derisive smile” as

before (221-22). And, before Myshkin leaves, Rogozhin resists Myshkin's "embrace" at first, but when he eventually does embrace Myshkin, he says, "Take her, then, if it's fate! She's yours! I give her up to you! . . . Remember Rogozhin" (223; ellipsis in original). Rogozhin still does not accept Myshkin's brotherhood, consumed as he is by his jealousy over Myshkin.

Myshkin is torn still, which leads him to committing the sin of checking on Nastasya in the next chapter and thus breaking his trust with Rogozhin. However, even though he wrongs Rogozhin here, Myshkin is fully aware of this fact. But regardless, Myshkin must attempt to protect Nastasya. Afterward, when he sees Rogozhin at the top of his staircase, Myshkin "rush[es] after him" and says, "[n]ow everything will be resolved" (234). Prior to this, Myshkin believed that he should "go right then to Rogozhin's, to wait for him, to embrace him with shame, with tears, to tell him everything and be done with it all at once" (233). Myshkin fails to do so, but upon seeing Rogozhin on the staircase, he immediately sees his chance to "tell him everything." However, Rogozhin, instead, attempts to murder Myshkin, but fails due to Myshkin experiencing an epileptic fit (234).

As with Ippolit and with the young nihilists, here Myshkin does not act in an ideal manner. But as has been seen time and time again, Myshkin immediately recognizes his failures, as an "articulator of inner events" should, and seeks to ask for the very forgiveness from those that he so willingly forgives. Myshkin, to use Nouwen's words, attempts to "lead others to confession" (43) by confessing his own wrongdoings to those others. Myshkin's compassion allows him to reveal to others that he knows that he can "kill" just as Rogozhin can kill, and he attempts to make this clear when he seeks forgiveness from Rogozhin.¹⁹

By the end of the novel, when Myshkin finds Rogozhin with Nastasya's corpse, Myshkin

¹⁹ The quoted word is Nouwen's. See *The Wounded Healer* p. 45.

stays with Rogozhin until the very end, and thus waits with Rogozhin in life. According to Terras, Rogozhin's act of murdering Nastasya is a result of him being "wiser than his father" and that his father was "obsess[ed] with the accumulation of money," which for Rogozhin translates into "his passion for her [Nastasya]" (The Idiot 81). Therefore, this tragic scene reveals that Rogozhin's lack of a proper authority figure contributes to such a vile crime. However, Myshkin still seeks to provide Rogozhin with the authority of Christ by serving Rogozhin as a Nouwenian minister. As the narrator says, when the authorities finally discovered the two, "[t]he Prince was sitting motionless on the bed beside him [Rogozhin], and each time the sick man had a burst of shouting or raving, he quietly hastened to pass his trembling hand over his hair and cheeks, as if caressing and soothing him" (Dostoevsky 611). In this moment, Rogozhin is static—he is full of fear—one could even say a fear of living and a fear of dying. Yet, Myshkin waits for him in life by not leaving his side, as a Nouwenian minister should, even if, due to his idiocy, he does so with no understanding of his own self or his own environment. It is as if it is in Myshkin's nature always to serve as a Nouwenian minister, despite his illness.

Myshkin as a Nouwenian Minister toward Aglaya and Nastasya

Myshkin also serves Aglaya and Nastasya as a Nouwenian minister by attempting to lead them to their true, original selves. According to Knapp, Myshkin serves as a Christ-like figure in how he represents a form of freedom for both Nastasya and Aglaya: for Nastasya, Myshkin is freedom from those who wish to trap her, and for Aglaya, Myshkin is freedom from her family who wishes "to marry her off" ("Myshkin" 195). The narrator (after he discusses the difference between practical and original people as well as decorous people in part three), addresses Aglaya's family (the Epanchins) and how they appear to be under the influence of feigned decorum as they seek to find originality within society and not within themselves: the Epanchins

are “the direct opposite of those virtues [of practicality] we have discussed above” (Dostoevsky 327). The narrator also says the Epanchins seek “that decorous social timidity” (discussed in chapter one), and they, from the perspective of society, “constantly went off the rails” and any “originality” that they seemed to possess was not of their own doing (keep in mind that from the perspective of Russian society this “originality” is deemed disgraceful) (327).

Throughout the first chapter of part three, the narrator mentions how Mrs. Epanchin is concerned about her daughters getting married, which also shows how Aglaya is dominated by feigned decorum. The narrator mentions how “[o]n the occasion of Adelaida’s impending wedding there was also talk in society about Aglaya . . .” (331). Waisolek notes how Lebedev points out the hypocrisy in the Epanchin’s thinking and states that “the Epanchin daughters are offered for sale, but in a more decorous manner” (101). And Knapp acknowledges how Aglaya seeks freedom from her parent’s and society’s expectations (“Myshkin” 195). However, Myshkin attempts to provide Aglaya freedom by, ultimately, being her friend. In the beginning of part two, Myshkin sends a letter to Aglaya that says that he wants her to be “happy” and signs it as her “brother” (Dostoevsky 189). Myshkin never intended to marry Aglaya, for in part three, when he meets with the Epanchins, he says, “[. . .] I never had any intention . . . to have the honor of asking for her hand [. . .]. I never meant to, it never entered my mind and never will . . .” (343). Myshkin seeks not to marry Aglaya, something the rest of society wants. Myshkin seeks to become Aglaya’s brother and friend.

Aglaya appears to have a similar desire for friendship. In part three, Aglaya says to Myshkin how she “want[s] to propose that [Myshkin] be [her] friend” (427). Myshkin serves her as a Nouwenian minister by being someone that Aglaya can confide in. Myshkin also articulates inner events, for Aglaya says that she sees Myshkin as “a most honest and truthful man . . . the

main mind in [him] is better than in any of them . . ." (428). Later, Aglaya says, "I want to talk about everything with you [, Myshkin], everything, even the main thing, whenever I like; and you, for your part, must hide nothing from me" (429). Aglaya sees in Myshkin a transparency that is welcoming and allows her to understand that he articulates his inner events.

However, as some critics have mentioned, there are traces of a carnal love between Myshkin and Aglaya. This carnal love hinders both Myshkin's attempts at loving Aglaya in a brotherly manner and Aglaya's attempts at freeing herself from the feigned decorum of Russian society (and her parents), for a wedding proposal is in fact made. However, before such a wedding can occur, Myshkin, as decorum dictates, must be evaluated by those of high Russian society—particularly Old Belokonsky, whose "protection indeed meant much in society and since it was hoped that she would look favorably on the prince . . ." (524). The get-together at the Epanchins' keeps up with society—with the feigned decorum of Russia as seen in the novel. However, Myshkin, as a Nouwenian minister and as a truly original man, cannot abide by such feigned decorum. Murav addresses Myshkin's speech at the Epanchin's get-together and believes it can be viewed "as holy foolishness" because it creates "scandal" through its "violations of decorum" and its "inappropriate[ness]," leading to those around him to believe "he [is] mad" and serving as a representation of "the spectacle reportedly staged by the medieval holy fools, and of the response they provoked in their spectators" (95). Murav also believes that the breaking of the Chinese vase is linked to Dostoevsky's desire for "the renewal of Russian culture" as well as Dostoevsky's correspondence with Maikov, where he suggests that his realism can address that which has yet to come to fruition (98).

Such an interpretation from Murav seems to hold true, for Aglaya understands the feigned decorum that surrounds this gathering. During a discussion with Myshkin prior to the

gathering, Aglaya seems to scold Myshkin, wondering if he will act in a manner that will appease the guests, to which he says he will try his best to do—missing Aglaya’s ironic tone (Dostoevsky 525-26). Myshkin, in an effort to make Aglaya happy, is confused by her requests, frustrating her even more (526). At one point, Aglaya says (ironically), “At least break the Chinese vase in the drawing room! It’s expensive: please break it; it was a gift, mama will lose her mind and cry in front of everybody—it’s so precious to her” (526). Myshkin adamantly tells Aglaya that he will do his best to not break the vase or act in such a manner, but says to Aglaya that her mentioning of his making this error will most certainly cause him to break it (526). And Myshkin does break the vase, though he does so accidentally (548). However, as Murav points out above, the breaking of the vase is a sign of breaking through decorum in order to demonstrate his holy foolishness. And even though Myshkin unintentionally breaks the vase, he still breaks it. As he tells Aglaya above, the very fact that she told him to not break the vase (i.e., to not break feigned decorum) will cause him to break it. It is as though he was predestined to break the vase; it is in his very nature to break the vase, whether he wants to or not.

After breaking the vase, Myshkin continues to serve as an articulator of events by expressing what about Russian society troubles him. The narrator says of Myshkin that “his gaze . . . seemed to be asking: may I speak to you? His gaze fell on Belokonsky” (549). Myshkin says much following this “gaze,” but what stands out in particular is his admission that all people “are ridiculous, light-minded, with bad habits, we’re bored, we don’t know how to look, how to understand, we’re all like that, all, you, and I, and they,” and Myshkin calls all who are present to “become servants, in order to be elders” (553). Myshkin reveals that he is a “ridiculous” man in an attempt to reveal to the feigned decorous that they, too, are ridiculous. He seeks to demonstrate that he is no different—that all are the same and a part of an “accidental family”

under God. And, once such ridiculousness is accepted, all can begin to throw away such feigned decorum and become servants—ministers—toward others. Such service will allow true decorum and true originality, in all its ridiculousness, to be preserved—or, as Myshkin says, “keep our estate from vanishing for nothing” (553). But after Myshkin speaks these words, a fit overcomes him, and he falls into Aglaya’s “arms” (553-54). Myshkin’s service as a Nouwenian minister may have failed to influence those present (and may have been impulsive), but he nonetheless serves them.

However, before the novel’s end, he serves as an example for Aglaya again when she and Nastasya clash—with Myshkin in the middle. According to Terras, both Nastasya and Aglaya neglect and ignore their own beings, putting on facades of “fallen woman” and “false sentiments” respectively, but Myshkin can “se[e]” who they truly are (*The Idiot* 70). Terras says, “The verbal duel between Nastasya Filippovna and Aglaya is an exercise in strident dissonances. Both women refuse to put forward their real and better selves” (*The Idiot* 71). Terras suggests that it is Myshkin who is able to see these “better selves” and seeks to bring them out. During this clash, Myshkin is forced to choose between Nastasya and Aglaya; Frank makes clear that Myshkin must attend “to the need that is most immediate and most acute” (336), which means choosing Nastasya over Aglaya. In this sense, Myshkin is doing his best to minister to both woman: he is trying to show Aglaya what it means to love another, and he is trying to also be there for Nastasya in her suffering (or what Nouwen would call, “waiting in life” with her), which Frank recognizes when he says that Myshkin “reproach[es] Aglaya” when she speaks viciously of Nastasya (336). Once Myshkin chooses Nastasya over Aglaya, he looks at Aglaya imploringly, and says, while “pointing to Nastasya,” “It’s not possible! She’s . . . so unhappy” (*Dostoevsky* 571; ellipsis in original). The narrator says that in Aglaya, Myshkin sees “so much

suffering, and at the same time such boundless hatred, that he clasped his hands, cried out, and rushed to her . . .” (572). However, the moment he seeks to do so, Nastasya “seize[s] him on the threshold” (572).

Some critics see what Myshkin does here as an error in judgement. However, the narrator says that “an hour after Aglaya Ivanovna ran out of Nastasya Filippovna’s house, and perhaps earlier, the prince was already at the Epanchins’ . . .” (576). It is implied that Myshkin ran over to the Epanchin’s home to explain himself, but of course, he is denied this by those present, who “treat [him] extremely harshly, inimically, and right then refus[e] him . . .” (576). Frank says, “[T]he Prince still tries to visit Aglaya as if nothing had changed, and he cannot comprehend why the impending marriage should affect his relation to her” (337). Myshkin, as he works to be with Nastasya, also recognizes the wrong that he has done to Aglaya, and he seeks to ask forgiveness from her to no avail. Ultimately, Myshkin’s motives are in the right place.

After Aglaya leaves, Myshkin, as a Nouwenian minister, waits in life with Nastasya. The narrator says that “the prince was sitting beside Nastasya Filippovna [who had entered into “hysteric[s]”], gazing at her without tearing his eyes away, and stroking her dear head and face with both hands, like a little child” (Dostoevsky 572). In a rather fantastic, and what O’Connor might call “distorted” way, Myshkin waits in life with Nastasya. Just as with Rogozhin, Myshkin stays by Nastasya’s side, as she is immobile in this moment—unable to accept life or death. And Myshkin also waits in death with Nastasya. After he discovers her corpse in Rogozhin’s home in the penultimate chapter, Myshkin stays with both her corpse and Rogozhin until the authorities arrive. Terras explains how Myshkin “is more than a passive observer” here, saying that Myshkin “vicariously experiences each death [, including Nastasya’s murder,] as though it were his own, each execution as though he were the victim—and the executioner” (The Idiot 83-84).

Myshkin, in a fantastic and distorted way, demonstrates to both Rogozhin and Nastasya—and ultimately the reader—that he is a Nouwenian minister by revealing that his sins are no different from theirs.

Conclusion: The Point of It All

Myshkin possesses traits that allow him to see the world with fantastic sight—a sight that breaks through the surface of reality in order to identify what truly lies underneath. By seeing reality in such a way, Myshkin understands that the Russian society he finds himself in is governed by many different corrupt value systems, including materialism and pride (as experienced by Nastasya), nihilism and self-centeredness (as experienced by the young nihilists and Ippolit), and jealousy (as experienced by Rogozhin and Aglaya). Such value systems lead those within society to adhere to a feigned decorum that justifies immoral acts and/or hides their true, original selves. However, Myshkin, with his ability to see past this feigned decorum, ministers to this society as a Nouwenian minister in an attempt to reveal to others their true selves. In doing so, Myshkin reveals his Christ-like qualities and helps others realize that though the authorities of the world have failed society, a greater authority exists in Christ.

If readers assent to Myshkin's actions, they will be able to not only view reality in a much clearer way but also minister to others in a manner that helps them see their true selves. In turn, readers are transfigured: they become better people—people who understand that their value is not determined by society's superficial standards or by how well they build themselves up but in how well they attempt to build others up. Readers will see that they have a purpose beyond themselves, bringing them one-step closer to understanding that their purpose is not self-centered and earthly but selfless, compassionate, and divine.

Can a Novel Truly Reveal the Divine to Readers?

For many, especially those outside of the academy, to read a novel like *The Idiot* is certainly beneficial in that it allows people to develop reading skills and even teaches them moral lessons. However, to say that reading a novel is more than that—that reading a novel has

ethical/spiritual implications for readers—is, for many, rather ridiculous.

However, it may be that novels like *The Idiot*, which on the surface may seem nothing more than mere entertainment, are actually endowed with the ability to influence readers in a divine way. Consider Alberto Pérez-Gómez’s statement on architecture: “This recognition of wholeness [in architecture] . . . occurs in experience, and, like a poem, its meaning is inseparable from the experience of the poem itself When successful, architecture allows for participation in meaningful action, conveying to the participant an understanding of his or her place in the world” (52).²⁰ Architecture functions in the same manner as a well-written novel: its form communicates, to use Pérez-Gómez’s words, “a particular meaning” (52). An observer of the structure must “participa[te]” in the structure itself not only to grasp the “meaning” of its architecture (or work of art) but to also understand where he or she belongs “in the world,” just like a well-written novel’s form and content produces a meaning that must be “experience[d]” in order to be grasped.

Furthermore, Gregory’s understanding of stories accommodates Pérez-Gómez’s statement. Gregory says that all works of art possess “a unity of parts” that reveal to the viewer that such “parts” “*fi[t]*” together within a whole, which is a concept that is absent in the viewer’s reality (58; emphasis in original). The key is that each of the parts “fit”; thus, good art must be properly constructed by the artist. Viewers examine art carefully because they hope to find out how the aspects of their reality “fit” together just like “[t]he parts” in art (59). Viewers are captivated by art because it provides them with a “unity” that they do not see within their reality (59). As mentioned in the introduction, Dostoevsky is intentional in how he constructs his

²⁰ The following discussion on Pérez-Gómez comes from a previous work of mine. See Decker, Richard A. “The Importance of Good Literature.” Southwest Conference on Christianity and Literature, 14 Sept. 2019, session 7, U of Dallas, Texas, p. 8. Oral presentation.

novels. Content and form, as seen in his and other's statements on fantastic realism, is of utmost priority for Dostoevsky, and the same holds true for *The Idiot*, which can thus be classified as a well-written novel in that regard. By being able to make sense of such a world as seen in *The Idiot*—and how one can still attempt to make a difference in such a world (like Myshkin does)—a reader can begin to make sense of his or her own world (which, frankly, is far more fantastic) by attempting to make a difference in a similar manner.

Such an idea of transfiguring readers brings us back to Nouwen, but an aspect of Nouwen that has yet to be discussed.²¹ In the first chapter of *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen draws on Robert Jay Lifton's work, and specifically his three "terms" (12) in which Nouwen identifies the three "quandaries" (11) of what he and Lifton call modern people (12). The first and third quandaries are of most importance here because, unlike the other aspects of Nouwen that have been discussed thus far, the following applies to *readers specifically*. The first quandary is "[h]istorical dislocation," in which people who see being a part of a timeline governed by a Christian God as ridiculous believe that they cannot have any impact on the "future" because there is no timeline. Thus, these people believe that the present is all that matters because the "non-history" they are in warrants such a belief (12-13). The second quandary is "[a] search for new immortality," in which people no longer want to "create" because there is no longer a "source [for] . . . their creativity" (17). Modern people have no desire for posterity if all that could be remembered will simply fade away due to what Nouwen calls an "atomic blitz" (i.e., a mad and corrupted world) (18). Therefore, Modern people are disconnected from that which would allow for creativity (e.g., good literature and art) to be valuable and relevant.

²¹ The following discussion on Nouwen comes from a previous work of mine. See Decker, Richard A. "The Importance of Good Literature." Southwest Conference on Christianity and Literature, 14 Sept. 2019, session 7, U of Dallas, Texas, pp.8-11. Oral presentation.

For Nouwen there are two ways modern people try to remedy their symptoms. First, there is “[t]he mystical way,” in which individuals utilize more spiritual methods to remove themselves from their finite existences, allowing individuals to tap into “what is real” and see themselves inside of a one-of-a-kind section of a narrative where no start or finish is visible (20-21). The second is “[t]he revolutionary way,” where individuals, instead of succumbing to the inevitable end of all beings, decide to utilize “a total radical upheaval of the existing order” through intense battles with social norms. Such actions will lead to a completely new type of people where “love” and “new ways of interpersonal communication” are the alternative to non-existence (22-23). However, Nouwen proposes a better remedy, which he calls “[t]he Christian way.” This remedy involves recognizing how the mystical and the revolutionary ways must work in tandem. This coupling is evidenced in Christ and His unique ability use the “relationship” between him and his Father to engage with the issues of the day and his own being, as opposed to “ideology,” to spark change and allow Christ to be the source of “liberation and freedom” (24-25).

Nouwen’s example, even though he is not discussing literature, touches on issues that are reminiscent of the purpose and function of well-written novels. As Nouwen explains, modern people have lost their sense of place in history—in fact, in a discussion on Nouwen, it was suggested by one of the attendees that those in which Nouwen is ministering to have developed a lack of desire to continue their narrative.²² A well-written novel reveals to its readers how to understand their own narratives, which includes understanding their place in the narrative. Modern people, according to Nouwen, struggle to find a single perspective that has the ability to accommodate for all the contradictions that they encounter within their experiences. However, a

²²This attendee may have been Cale Baker, who helped me see that all people have their own narrative.

well-written novel, through its content and form, demonstrates how that which seems unrelated can fit into one single narrative. The modern person, as Nouwen says, has “los[t] . . . [his or her] desire to create” (17). By revealing what lies underneath the surface of reality, a well-written novel reveals the beauty that also lies within reality, which instills in readers, as Elaine Scarry says of beauty’s effects, an “impulse toward begetting” (9). Nouwen’s solution—Christ—reveals that the “mystic” and “revolutionary” solutions (25), through Him, work in tandem to bring about “freedom.”

Well-written novels create meaning through the interdependency of content and form, thus allowing readers to understand the absurdity of reality and how its different parts fit within a cohesive narrative, which in turn provides readers with a lens that brings understanding to their own narratives. In this very particular sense, well-written novels, like Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, transfigures readers by providing them with an understanding of God’s ultimate narrative—in which all subjects and readers are a part. If a novel like *The Idiot* can have such a profound and religious effect on its readers, then many other well-written novels, in all their impracticality and make-believe, might have such an effect as well.

Admitting One’s Shortcomings, as a Nouwenian Minister Should

As much as I stand by the arguments made in this discussion, I must admit that this discussion only scratches the surface of Dostoevsky studies in general and the critical history of *The Idiot* in particular. Much more can be said about the events found within the novel, Russian history, Myshkin as Christ-like figure, the critics who support and deny Myshkin as a positive role model, and Dostoevsky’s poetics, but due to lack of space, they cannot be discussed here. I admit defeat in this regard. However, my hope is that what has been covered allows readers to see that *The Idiot*, through its fantastic realism, provides readers with an ethical—and

Christian—transfiguration, particularly through Myshkin's Christ-like Nouwenian traits, the latter of which has not been covered by any critics I have come across.

In that regard, there is much more that can be said not only about Myshkin's Nouwenian traits but also Nouwen himself. A brief survey of *The Wounded Healer* has been addressed in this discussion, but a much more thorough analysis of his work (and his other writings) is most certainly called for. There are also many more aspects in which Myshkin serves as a Nouwenian minister that simply could not be addressed in this discussion due to lack of space. However, I believe that this discussion has demonstrated how *The Idiot* (and well-written novels in general) help readers see the world in a better way, and in turn, help readers serve others in a better way. As Miller mentions, we must wonder in what ways Dostoevsky's works will influence readers and aid in their "transform[ation]" (*Unfinished Journey* 175). In the spirit of Waisolek, we must not only hope that a world filled with Myshkins might "change the universe" (109) but also hope a world full of Nouwenian ministers might, too.

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