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Honors 481: Dostoevsky Colloquium

15 April 2014

Dostoevsky's Women: Finding a Voice

In Dostoevsky's novels, his female characters often offer a contrast to his male protagonists. Three of the most striking female characters in Dostoevsky's works are Lisa, Sofya Semyonovna Marmeladov (Sonya), and Nastasya Filippovna Barashkova. Lisa and Sonya, who are portrayed as prostitutes in separate novels, can both be viewed as fonts of potential redemption for their male protagonists. While Sonya can be viewed as succeeding in serving as the redemptive aid for her paired male protagonist Raskolnikov, Lisa can be seen as failing to serve as the confidant necessary for the overly conscious Underground Man's redemption. Traditional female virtues such as caretaking, compassion, and innocence, among others, are represented in Dostoevsky's major female characters. In a certain fashion, their femininity is that which allows them to serve in these roles in a way that a male character could not; nevertheless, Lisa and Sonya ultimately seem flat to the reader. More than simply serving as another similarity between the two women, their status as virtuous prostitutes seems to reflect the social status of women in 19th century Russia. In contrast, Nastasya Filippovna does not appear as a saintly, childlike, self-sacrificing figure; rather, she herself is the one to which the male protagonist attempts to offer salvation. While she chooses a self-destructive path, her choices can be seen as more complex and more intricately involved in the imperfection of human choice than that of the seemingly infallible good prostitute embodied by Sonya and Lisa. Dostoevsky is known for his attention to the social problems of his day, one of which being the status of women. Despite his

awareness of and attention to this social issue, the author often portrays women as dependent upon men and thus incapable of their own autonomous action. Although Dostoevsky often relegates women to supporting roles, keeping them mired in stagnation while the protagonist attempts to improve himself, the author offers the character of Nastasya Filippovna to illustrate that the existence of a female identity completely distinct from the male narrative is possible. Through his creation of Nastasya Filippovna, Dostoevsky proves he is capable of capturing a unique, independent, and unpredictable female character. Nonetheless, even his most memorable female character ultimately cannot properly function in the novel since her independence is incongruous with 19th century Russian society.

While it is not surprising that 19th century male-authored literature does not feature women as the primary protagonists, female characters are nonetheless integral to Dostoevsky's works. Before analyzing specific characters featured in Dostoevsky's works, it is important to establish what general roles females play in the plot development of the author's novels. First of all, none of Dostoevsky's major works are titled for female characters (Straus 2). Additionally, Dostoevsky often portrays men acting violently or dishonorably toward women. In fact, "Dostoevsky's compulsions to depict men's cruelties to women and their variable reactions to these cruelties is more than an element in his work; it is a constitutive part of his vision and his metaphysics" (Straus 6). A consideration of Dostoevsky's own personal view of women, or "the woman question," gives context for the state of mind in which he created and developed his female characters (Blake 268). Nina Straus argues that Dostoevsky's "comments on women ... [and] his confession of being 'haunted' since childhood by the crime of rape, evidences a psychological tremor concerning women and sex that runs through his work as a whole" (5). In *The Diary of a Writer*, which was written about a decade after the author had completed *Notes*

from *Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky tackles the woman question, affirming that “‘barbaric’ Russia will show what place she will allot to the ‘little mother,’ ‘little sister,’ of the Russian soldier, that self-renouncing martyr for the Russian man” (846). Clearly the author, whose work evidences a preoccupation with social issues, believes the position of women in Russian society is on the precipice of change. Interestingly, the unhesitatingly self-sacrificing individuals in Dostoevsky’s works are overwhelmingly female. As such, the author declares that it “would be shameful and unreasonable ... to deny this woman, who has so visibly revealed her valor, full equality of rights with the male ...” (*Diary* 846). The fact that Dostoevsky grapples with social issues of his time, such as the woman question and other social ills that affect women such as poverty, is clear. What still must be determined is whether Dostoevsky values these female issues enough to make them central to his works.

To evaluate Dostoevsky’s female characters, one must ask whether their value is dependent upon the actual completed act of redemption for their male counterpart, or whether it can be affirmed simply by the genuine offer of self-sacrifice in the name of redemption for the suffering, self-loathing protagonist. Additionally, one must determine whether the women in Dostoevsky’s works are truly unique and with various dimensions or whether they are merely two-dimensional props utilized by the author to better evidence his male protagonist’s progress, or lack thereof, towards the good life. The most significant question which must be posed in the analysis of Dostoevsky’s female characters is whether they “‘author’ themselves in any significant way or are ... ‘inscribed’ in the story, specifically in the confession, of the male hero” (Blake 253). In other words, one must ask whether the female characters take any initiative of their own and affect their own destiny, or are they fundamentally flat characters incapable of authentic action and hopelessly relegated to the background.

To understand the role that women play in Dostoevsky's novels, one must unpack the ways in which these three characters' femininity both sets them apart from male characters and allows them to serve in roles limited to the female gender. Women are often associated with nurturing and compassion. Traditionally, the female gender has dominated the essential role of caregiver. Following this traditional view of femininity, it therefore makes sense that women are the ones to attempt to rehabilitate the struggling male protagonist. With regards to the role of women as this reformer of the corrupted male protagonist, Straus argues that "women's potential to transform men emerges from the difference women's sexually vulnerable bodies makes as a conscious part of male sensitization" (8). Physical differences themselves rather than differences that are merely socially constructed also impact the way in which men and women interact.

One can argue that, just as the Underground Man can be seen as a more immature formation of Dostoevsky's fallen protagonist searching for redemption, so Lisa can be seen as a prototype of the redeemer. In *Notes from Underground*, the prostitute Lisa appears as the potential font of redemption for the seemingly hopelessly tortured Underground Man. After a disastrous dinner with his acquaintances, the heavily intoxicated Underground Man, sleeps with Lisa. Accordingly, their first encounter is of a sexual nature. Still in the brothel, he experiences a "peevish thought" which "seemed to pass all over [his] body like some vile sensation" (*Notes* 339). He consequently interrogates Lisa, seeming to play a mind game on her without her knowledge. As Joseph Frank points out, the protagonist desires to "[triumph] over her not only physically but spiritually as well" (232). Lisa is not only vulnerable physically and sexually but also emotionally. Although Lisa feigns indifference to her unfortunate situation, through his aggressive questioning the Underground Man reveals her hidden shame and vulnerability. The protagonist sadistically degrades her, affirming that he "couldn't help feeling disgusted at being

with you here!” and throws her potential life, if her social circumstances had been different, in her face, “[b]ut ... if you lived as all good, decent people live, I should not only have taken a fancy to you, but fallen head over ears in love with you” (*Notes* 349). He concludes by torturing Lisa with a vivid description of her impending pathetic death from consumption, ending by reminding her that “[o]ther women have children to visit their graves, fathers, husbands, but there will be neither tears, nor sighs, nor any remembrance for you ... Your name will vanish from the face of the earth as though you had never been born!” (353). The Underground Man’s deprecating attitude towards her hopeless position is finally more than Lisa can withstand.

At face value, one can see Dostoevsky satirically revealing his social preoccupation through the Underground Man’s cruel diatribe. In analyzing Lisa’s character, her reaction to the protagonist’s cruelty is telling. She collapses into hysterics, even biting her own arm until she draws blood (*Notes* 353). Dostoevsky’s choice to depict her reaction as violent demonstrates his view that Lisa as a woman can have a powerful reaction to such cruelty; however, the violence of her reaction occurs in a typically female fashion by the fit of hysterics, and also in a self-harming manner rather than in violence directed at others. Lisa’s guilelessness serves to endear her to the reader, as one cannot help feeling compassion for an innocent mind genuinely searching for a way out of a desperate situation; however, it is this very innocence and inability to selfishly protect herself which serves to make Lisa a rather flat character.

Lisa cannot consider her own interests above those of the Underground Man, which prevents her from developing as a complex character. “Lisa possesses an indigenous and intellectualized sympathy for others which allows her remarkable insight into complex personalities,” comments Richard Weisberg (199). The idea of saving Lisa is planted in the Underground Man’s head, and he wishes to become the hero who rescues her and to make her

into the heroine subordinate to him. Ultimately, the Underground Man cannot save Lisa due to his own failings. Konstantin Mochulsky argues that “[t]he story of Liza is a parody on the romantic theme of the corrupted woman’s salvation through love” (260). One must then ask whether Lisa’s failings prevent the salvation of the Underground Man, or whether the protagonist himself is to blame for this failure as well. Frank describes how Lisa thinks “not of herself but of him, ... illustrat[ing] that ‘something else’ which his egoism will never allow him to attain—the ideal of the voluntary self-sacrifice of the personality out of love” (235). Lisa is therefore admirable because she possesses this “something else” that eludes the male protagonist. Through Lisa, “the Underground Man had met this ideal in the flesh, and his inability to respond ... dooms him irrevocably for the future” (Frank 235). Accordingly, Dostoevsky presents Lisa as the corporeal manifestation of this deliberate self-sacrifice. As the physical embodiment of an abstract ideal, Lisa necessarily must remain a static character. Her development or her processing of an internal conflict would only detract from this ideal. However, such internal conflicts are one of the factors which make literary characters approach the plane of genuine humanity. These moments of doubt and confusion, of the struggle to make the correct choice, are fundamentally human elements that define believable characters. Even the tortured protagonist cannot believe such an altruistic being exists (*Notes* 375). After Lisa’s final act of generosity of leaving the five-rouble note, the Underground Man is compelled to chase after her. In the end, however, the protagonist still decides he could only bring Lisa pain and bring a life of conflict for both of them, and thus he is better off alone.

At the end of the novella, the Underground Man’s unfortunate fate seems clear. However, the same cannot be said for Lisa. Mochulsky argues that Lisa “has left the ‘bawdy house’ for good; love has transformed her” (259). However, this interpretation seems slightly

oversimplified. She continues to have few options for her future; the social constraints placed on her by her status as a woman without good family who has already worked in the sex trade limit her future opportunities. On the other hand, the Underground Man is doomed to continued stagnation in his cesspool of angst and overly-critical consciousness; like a “[f]allen Adam,” he “is cursed and condemned, and it is impossible to save him through human powers” (Mochulsky 260). Rather, Mochulsky argues, this salvation is only made possible through faith in the Christian God. In this interpretation, the ill-fated protagonist never had a chance for redemption since he could not genuinely accept faith; accordingly, Lisa never had a chance to fulfill her role as redeemer.

In contrast to the flat nature of Lisa’s character, Dostoevsky’s pure-hearted character of Sonya, who appears in *Crime and Punishment*, shows herself to be somewhat more complex. While Lisa can be considered “Dostoevsky’s prime example of a brothel girl,” Sonya is portrayed as quite different from the average prostitute (Moravceovich 56). In fact, Dostoevsky depicts her as “unspoiled” and “utterly contrary to what ordinarily might be expected in a portrait of a common streetwalker” (Moravceovich 58). In his notes about *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky wrote that ““there is not a word of love between [Sonya and Raskolnikov],” illustrating his desire to present their relationship as “sentimentally chaste [and] ascetic” (Moravceovich 59). Consequently, Sonya appears to the reader to possess a more moral character than Lisa; she is never “shown in a degrading soliciting situation” (Moravceovich 58). Rather than depict a “prostitute with a heart of gold” as did his literary predecessors, in *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky goes a step further by presenting “the prostitute sanctified” (Moravceovich 60). Additionally, the initial presentation of Sonya as the long-suffering daughter

of the drunkard Marmeladov gives the reader a deeper backstory about Sonya than he receives about Lisa, allowing him to sympathize even further with Sonya's plight.

Despite these moral differences, Sonya remains a fundamentally superfluous character since she is best understood with respect to Raskolnikov. Like Lisa, Sonya "remains ... silent in the first parts of the novel"; consequently, her "struggle to reconcile the injustices she witnesses in the *here and now* with a belief in divine providence remains hidden from the reader until ... the fourth part of the novel" (Blake 253). In other words, her story is hidden due to its subordination to Raskolnikov's narrative. Additionally, Sonya's lack of complexity makes her somehow less real. Avrahm Yarmolinsky argues that although other characters are credible, Sonya is not. Rather, "[s]he is one of the Dostoevskian characters [who] 'leave the ground so far below them that we can no longer accept their reality in any of the senses of that ambiguous word'" (Yarmolinsky 220). Since the reader cannot truly envision her as belonging to his world, he cannot truly identify with her. Like Lisa, Sonya can be seen as fundamentally two-dimensional in her overwhelming goodness and tendency towards self-sacrifice. In this interpretation, Sonya appears to be simply "inscribed" in Raskolnikov's story of redemption rather than creating a unique path for herself.

Integral to understanding the character of Sonya are the emotionally charged scene in part four of *Crime and Punishment* in which she reads the biblical story of Lazarus to Raskolnikov and the scene in which Luzhin falsely accuses her of stealing a hundred roubles. Interestingly, evidence in Dostoevsky's notebooks and in correspondence with and comments by the editors of *The Russian Messenger* suggests that Dostoevsky was forced to delete the exegesis to the Lazarus story that he had previously included. These erasures included Sonya's interpretation and explanation of the narrative (Blake, 260). Sonya's deleted speech would have showed that

she reads the Lazarus story to Raskolnikov “as part of a conversation reviewing the wisdom of her decision to become a prostitute” (Blake 261). Such an addition would perhaps add a layer of Sonya’s own repentance to her character development. In this scene Sonya appears more submissive than she does later in the novel, since her altercation with Luzhin “teaches [her] that she will not bring about the triumph of higher justice on earth by meekly submitting ... and waiting for a miraculous intervention in her life” (Blake 266). Elizabeth Blake argues that this confrontation changes Sonya and prepares her to better help Raskolnikov (266). In this reading of Sonya, the female character does indeed exhibit some change, which is essential in the determination of whether she is truly a multidimensional character. In her continued role as spiritual advisor to the protagonist grappling with a moral question, Sonya encourages him to confess his crime so that he can move forward on the path toward redemption. During the rest of *Crime and Punishment*, Sonya no longer “meekly submit[s] to male sexual or verbal aggression” (Blake 267). It is in the epilogue to his novel, Blake argues, that Dostoevsky features Sonya as “play[ing] an active role in authoring both her own and Raskolnikov’s stories” (267). It is true that Sonya does exhibit some change during the course of the novel and that her life seems to have improved. However, her story remains fundamentally dependent upon that of Raskolnikov; she ultimately uproots her life and moves to Siberia to better aid the male protagonist. In a way, the fulfillment she finds in her life is the ability to help Raskolnikov, and therefore is a fundamentally dependent self-actualization.

When understanding the role of Lisa and Sonya as redeemer in these two novels, one must acknowledge that while the Underground Man does not desire redemption, Raskolnikov spends the course of *Crime and Punishment* coming to terms with his need for redemption. Accordingly, it is difficult to compare the worth of these two female prostitutes by their ability or

inability to redeem their male counterparts. In *Notes from Underground*, it is primarily the Underground Man's, not Lisa's, limitations which prevent him from accepting love and, consequently, from achieving redemption. Perhaps the most significant point of departure between Lisa and Sonya is their male counterparts' limitations and fallacies. If this is true, then Lisa's and Sonya's failings or successes can be interpreted as simply functions of their male protagonists' ability to develop and grow; they are auxiliary characters. As Blake argues, Sonya has "no chance to define her own moral dilemma before her father, Raskolnikov, and Luzhin each take turns shaping their own images of her in order to fit her into their own stories" (253). She cannot develop the complexity of character necessary for true human growth because male presences in her life will not allow her to develop. The dominance of the stories of male characters in the novel limits the voice of the female characters (Blake 254). Blake concludes that "Sonya's silencing treatment is part of a greater tendency in *Crime and Punishment* to portray women characters through the eyes of their male counterparts" (254). Female characters in Dostoevsky's works do not get their own voice; they do not have the opportunity to tell their own authentic story. Just as Lisa exists solely in the memory of the Underground Man, so too Sonya only appears in *Crime and Punishment* when she is with Raskolnikov (Moravcevic 59). In contrast, David McGruff offers a rebuttal, arguing that "[t]o reduce Sonya to a peripheral character in the way several Western critics have done, usually on philosophical or extra-literary grounds, is to deprive the novel of its central meaning" (*Crime and Punishment* xxiv). While it is true that Sonya occupies a significant role in *Crime and Punishment*, her role is to a certain extent defined by her gender and she is not able to achieve her own personal development. She is not allowed to author her own story since she is too involved in Raskolnikov's.

In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky unravels a much more complex and multi-dimensional female character, the passionate and enticing Nastasya Filippovna. Straus argues that this novel serves as an “experiment in terms of ‘the feminine’” which distinguishes it from Dostoevsky’s other works (53). The stunningly beautiful Nastasya Filippovna appears to wholly embrace her status as a fallen woman but almost contradictorily feels a deep sense of shame which prevents her from accepting love and what would be considered by most of Russian society as a better life. In a way, Nastasya Filippovna has been a victim of her beauty; she has been relegated to the category of mistress due to her physical attributes and Afansy Ivanovich Totsky’s lechery. Nonetheless, as General Yepanchin’s middle daughter Adelaida argues, “Beauty like that is power...With beauty like that one could turn the world upside down” (*The Idiot* 86). Nastasya Filippovna’s beauty and desirability is also the attribute which grants her freedom and immense power to cause chaos. Indeed, Nastasya Filippovna’s beauty “unleashes only destructive passions” (*The Idiot* xxi). With just her beauty alone, Nastasya Filippovna would have possessed a significant amount of power over men.

However, simply reducing her to a physically beautiful shell that wields power due to its attractiveness would not be fair to the complexity of Dostoevsky’s character. Nastasya Filippovna’s individuality and passion prevent her from being simply another meek female. While she has been relegated to a socially negligible position, much like Sonya and Lisa had to resort to prostitution due to a variety of social pressures, Nastasya Filippovna instead finds independence in a seemingly delayed adolescent rebellion. Nastasya Filippovna’s magnetism draws others to her; her passion and volatility enthrall those around her. Both Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin and Parfion Semyonovich Rogozhin, admittedly for vastly different reasons, are enchanted with her. Even Totsky, despite his desire to ride himself of his mistress in

order to secure a respectable marriage, expresses regret at what he considers to be her madness. Referring to Nastasya Filippovna as “an uncut diamond,” Totsky argues, “who wouldn’t have been so captivated sometimes by that woman that he would go against all reason...?” (*The Idiot* 186). These male reactions to Nastasya Filippovna are essential to an understanding of her psyche; it is this very trait of irresistibility which truly makes her so powerful. By creating such an unpredictable character, Dostoevsky ensures that even the reader is drawn in by this newly independent woman. Her capriciousness contrasts with her prior victimization and makes her stand apart as a female character; she does not fit neatly into an archetype. She is manipulative and cruel, but also has endured suffering; she sadistically enjoys others’ pain but also masochistically seeks her own destruction. Dostoevsky makes the reader feel sympathy for Nastasya Filippovna’s helpless victimization at a young age at the hands of Totsky. Consequently, her long awaited emancipation from his control is endearing in its youthful tenor. Drunkenly, Nastasya Filippovna exclaims, “I want to have a good time! Today is my day, my high day and holiday, the one I’ve been waiting for long enough” (*The Idiot* 172). Due to her victimization, the fallen woman’s erratic behavior is almost understandable. Her desire to create a spectacle and embarrass Totsky seems a type of justifiable vengeance. However, despite the fact that she is no longer being victimized, Nastasya Filippovna does not attempt to reform her scandalous behavior. Accordingly, her seemingly irresponsible and rash decision to run off with Rogozhin rather than accept Prince Myshkin’s offer cannot be read solely as a simple reaction to her sexual victimization as a young woman. Such a limited reading of this choice would make Nastasya Filippovna seem a simple reactionary creature, incapable of making rational choices.

While it appears that Dostoevsky performs a type of role-reversal in *The Idiot*, with the almost Christ-like character of Prince Myshkin attempting to save Nastasya Filippovna from

herself rather than the saintly prostitute trying to redeem the tortured male protagonist, she nevertheless manages to have an effect on the characters with whom she interacts. The complexity of Nastasya Filippovna's psyche, in conjunction with her pursuit of self-destruction, "discloses the inadequacy of Myshkin's hopelessly naïve view of human nature," thus revealing more about the protagonist (*The Idiot* xxi). The reader is confronted with Nastasya Filippovna's self-destructive tendencies when she rejects Prince Myshkin's generous offer of marriage. This action can be interpreted as Nastasya Filippovna's shame about her sexual past and her belief that Prince Myshkin is too pure for her and, consequently, that he will only end up hating her later (*The Idiot* 181). In this view, Nastasya Filippovna's reasoning behind refusing such an offer is rather reminiscent of the logic that the Underground Man employs in his conclusion at the end of the novella. Just as the Underground Man knows that the next day he "should have bespattered [Lisa's] soul with mud," so too Nastasya Filippovna is "afraid of shaming and destroying" Prince Myshkin (*Notes* 375, *The Idiot* 226). Both of these characters allow this fear of inadequacy to prevent them from pursuing an authentic connection.

Nastasya Filippovna's refusal of Prince Myshkin's proposal can also be viewed in a different manner, as her recognition that his offer is overly idealized. In other words, Prince Myshkin does not fully recognize her and accept her as she is, with all her flaws and her disreputable history. Nonetheless, it becomes clear that Nastasya Filippovna loves Prince Myshkin (*The Idiot* 226). Straus argues that this emotion is not a healthy expression of affection, claiming that "Nastasya's attraction to Myshkin represents a feminist delusion that she could escape into the nonpatriarchal, nonviolent shelter of presexual innocence" (Straus 56). In this reading of their relationship, although she refuses Prince Myshkin for fear of dishonoring him, Nastasya Filippovna desires Prince Myshkin solely for the safety and innocence he represents.

However, she does not initially choose this innocence but rather elects to pursue the opposite path. Essential to an understanding of Nastasya Filippovna is an evaluation of her possible motives. As Yarmolinsky questions, “[i]s she loath to bury her past because that would mean to forgive the unforgivable offense she had suffered?” (265). Her actions do appear vindictive; she sadistically manipulates those around her and orchestrates ludicrous games so that she can enjoy the chaos and pain she is engendering. Perhaps the causation of chaos and pain is what truly drives her; she feels a sense of power, for example, when Lukyan Timofeyevich Lebedev begs her on his hands and knees to allow him to retrieve the hundred thousand roubles from the fireplace (*The Idiot* 183).

One attribute which sets Nastasya Filippovna apart from Lisa and Sonya is her tendency towards action. Straus proclaims that “Nastasya’s identity is marked by her compulsion to keep moving” (61). This more action-centered character ultimately appears as an overall stronger female character than Lisa and Sonya; she does not evidence feminine “weaknesses” or “vulnerabilities” as can be found in the psychological composition of the two virtuous prostitutes. In a way, Lisa and Sonya can be seen as serving in a similar role as children in Dostoevsky’s works since they seem to be full of infinite goodness and, despite their fallen nature, maintain an aura of innocence. However, their almost childlike nature serves as another way to keep them from true complexity as individuals. One such “weakness” found in these two women is compassion. It is Sonya’s profound and seemingly bottomless compassion for the tortured Raskolnikov which ultimately defines the rest of her life by linking her to the soon-to-be imprisoned man so tightly that she follows him to Siberia. When Raskolnikov visits Sonya, Dostoevsky describes how “[a] kind of voracious compassion, ... was suddenly displayed in every feature of her face’ (*Crime and Punishment* 378). In a similar fashion, Lisa’s compassion

for the Underground Man leads to her continued attempts to comfort and save him, attempts which ultimately fail and result in her psychological damage. In contrast, Nastasya Filippovna can be viewed as pursuing her own self-interest rather than putting the needs of the other ahead of her own.

While the idea of self-sacrifice is a noble one, the fact that Nastasya Filippovna chooses to what she believes is best for herself marks her as a character with significantly more agency. As Straus describes, “[w]hile Raskolnikov can at least control Sonya to the extent that she is addicted to bringing him to God, Myshkin has no control over ... Nastasya ... as the novel draws to its close” (66). Nonetheless, there are some critics who still read Nastasya as simply a product of the needs of the two male leads’ stories. “In *The Idiot* two of Dostoevsky’s favorite personas, the idiot-saint and the sexist criminal, cannot help looking for Nastasya,” argues Straus, and consequently she “is ‘reduced to a search for herself and for her own undivided voice beneath the two voices that have made their home in her’” (70). In other words, the stories of Prince Myshkin and of Rogozhin leave no space for Nastasya Filippovna to author her own story. In this reading, despite Nastasya Filippovna’s more action-centered nature and her fervent declarations of her freedom and independence, this fallen woman is still oppressed by the male leads and, indeed, cannot even have her own authentic identity (Straus 70). The question then becomes whether Nastasya Filippovna, for all her apparent freedom, is truly any more of an individual and less of a prop than Lisa and Sonya. The fact remains that Nastasya Filippovna, Dostoevsky’s most memorable and strong female character, is killed by one of the two men whose stories overwhelm her own voice. Indeed, even her final choice to flee with Rogozhin instead of settle with Prince Myshkin, who she does not believe truly loves her, can be read as Nastasya Filippovna’s desire to save Prince Myshkin from sacrificing his own needs to better her

life. Instead, she chooses a self-destructive path that will allow Prince Myshkin the greatest possible freedom with his life. In this interpretation, she unarguably acts autonomously, yet even her vocal independence is ultimately silenced by Rogozhin's momentary desire. The male character still maintains his power over the female, and thus, despite her independence, her story is still defined by a male lead. At the same time, one can also interpret this choice as another instance in which Nastasya Filippovna chooses to exercise her free will. Just as Rogozhin knew when he killed Nastasya Filippovna that murder results in imprisonment, she also knew due to their past confrontations that she was choosing a violent man. In the end, the most essential point underlying both of these interpretations of Nastasya Filippovna's fate is that she makes a choice. This choice proves her to be an autonomous character and gives her the power of agency, which is necessary for true independence; she is capable of choosing her own fate. However, Nastasya Filippovna clearly chooses self-destruction, which seems to be an entirely irrational and dysfunctional choice. The fact that she cannot choose a constructive fate illustrates the incompatibility of her independence and agency, exemplified in her wildly free will, with the society in which she lives.

In a comparison of Nastasya Filippovna with Sonya, these characters' credibility must be considered. Nicholas Moravcevic argues that Dostoevsky was capable of creating such memorable and "larger than life" characters due to his aptitude for portraying detailed psychological relationships between characters and for depicting the internal conflicts afflicting characters (60). Such vivid characters must nonetheless remain grounded in reality. While his unique abilities for character creation "greatly buttressed both the psychological and social authenticity of the portraiture" or Dostoevsky's "best examples of the kept woman, Nastasya Filippovna and Grusenka, ... with his best examples of the prostitute, Liza and Sonia

Marmeladova, it frequently strained the social veracity of the resultant portraits” (Moravcevic 60). In other words, Dostoevsky’s attempt to portray Lisa and Sonya as extraordinary characters makes them exactly that: out-of-the-ordinary characters. One must then question whether their lack of credibility, in comparison with the actuality and believability of Nastasya Filippovna, necessarily makes the prostitutes less successful as characters.

In conclusion, Dostoevsky’s female characters do not headline in his works, but perform memorably in supporting roles that are essential to both the successful unfolding of Dostoevsky’s novels’ plots and the development of the male lead. Perhaps the fundamental difference between Lisa and Sonya is not their ability to provide salvation for their male counterparts, but rather is simply the extent to which the protagonist of their respective novels is able to accept their offer of redemption. After all, both these women do accomplish the establishment of an authentic relationship that leads to genuine interpersonal communication with the other. If this is true, then the prostitutes’ individual worth is, in essence, simply a function of their male counterparts’ ability to grow and develop. Thus Lisa and Sonya, both of whom are already dependent on men for a living, can be seen as not just partly but wholly dependent upon the male protagonist. In contrast, Nastasya Filippovna goes to great extremes to assert her independence and her freedom. Moreover, she actively seeks to maintain this independence by refusing to marry Prince Myshkin and consequently be forced to behave in such a way that would not dishonor him. Unlike Lisa, who looks to the Underground Man desperately for an escape from a life of shame and who would most likely change for her male counterpart, Nastasya Filippovna refuses to accept the so-called better life that would force her to adapt to society’s standards. Despite the fact that the two male leads of *The Idiot* attempt to define her, Nastasya Filippovna ultimately appears as her own woman, thus demonstrating that Dostoevsky

can indeed create a well-rounded female character who exists outside the bounds of the male protagonist's story. However, since even his most autonomous and successful female character chooses only destruction and ultimately is destroyed by her own choice, Dostoevsky fails to offer a valid example of how a woman can exist as her own person independent of male characters in a normal fashion without causing chaos and ruining her life and that of others.

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