

**The Hooker with a Heart of Gold:  
Dostoevsky's Complex Portrayal of Women**

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Few authors have such a rich background to mine for characters and true experiences as Feodor Dostoevsky. In the course of his life, Feodor Dostoevsky lived out almost every possible duality. He was a nobleman and a pauper, conservative and liberal, a pacifist Christian and a bloodthirsty imperialist. Dostoevsky was a skillful self-examiner whose biography was inexorably linked to the fictional lives of his characters. The glaring flaw in Dostoevsky's canon is his weak and oftentimes stereotypical portrayal of women. Women are never the protagonists of any of Dostoevsky's major novels and often act as throwaway, ancillary characters or plot devices to further the moral and spiritual development of the male protagonist. Dostoevsky was also fond of female stock characters that became cultural archetypes from their use in the Bible and other paternalistic texts. His work is fraught with saintly prostitutes who act as quietly suffering female redeemers and weak minded and histrionic damsels in distress. It would be easy to simply condemn Dostoevsky for his portrayal of women or apologize for his literary shortcomings with tired excuses that he was simply "a man of his time." But such an analysis fails to recognize the complex socio-economic, religious, and political viewpoints that Dostoevsky struggled to reconcile within his female characters. Herein lies the central paradox of Dostoevsky's portrayal of women: he intends to use them as didactic plot elements but his commitment to crafting believable characters imbues them with the same complexity as his male characters. Though he oftentimes reverted back to familiar biblical tropes for his women, Dostoevsky's fascinating struggle with the female psyche and his own complex beliefs defy any label and actually end up exercising agency.

Fame and ego may have prevented Dostoevsky's maturation as a writer, as the fervent admiration of his literary heroes may have led him to take fewer risks in the future. Dostoevsky's first novel *Poor Folk* is perhaps Dostoevsky's most troubling portrayal of women within his cannon, yet its stark portrayal of the suffering of the poor netted him the fervent adulation of the progressive intelligentsia. The novel's epistolary structure is also distinctive because it allowed the characters to speak directly about their experiences without the authorial intrusion of a narrator. Additionally, the novel's structure also allows feminist Dostoevsky scholars the chance to analyze the female Vavra Dabroselova in her own words without the intrusion of a male voice. Despite giving himself the freedom to craft a fully formed female voice, Dostoevsky fails to do so. Dabroselova is never allowed to flourish as a character because she functions as a didactic plot device rather than a fully formed character. In a practice that became commonplace in his later work, Dabroselova's name signifies her rhetorical role within the story. Dabroselova translates as "the good village," and makes it abundantly clear that Dostoevsky was attempting to craft his vision of the perfect country girl. Dabroselova thus conforms to stereotypes of women because she is a meek, oftentimes frivolous, utterly romantic, and a damsel in distress. In a letter to Makar Devushkin, Vavra Dabroselova excitedly asks Makar Devushkin for help:

"It distresses me greatly to have to trouble you now, when you are in such dire straits yourself, but you are the only hope I have! Goodbye, Makar Alekseyevich, think of me, and may God grant you success!" (Folk 82)

Dabroselova exhibits her meekness by admitting her reluctance to ask Devushkin for help, and then makes it clear that she is depending on him to act as God's champion and deliver her from distress. Dabroselova also undermines herself by spouting off stereotypes by

describing herself as overly emotional. “As for my crying, that was just nonsense; I myself do not know why I am forever crying. My emotions are painful and exasperating” (Folk 45). Even worse, Dabroselova allows the male protagonist Makar Devushkin to continually undermine her autonomy by allowing her to treat her like a child.

“Each time you frighten me in the same way. In each of my letters I tell you to look after yourself, to wrap yourself up, not to go out in bad weather, to observe caution in all things—but, my little angel, you do not listen to me! Oh, my little dove, you are like some child!” (Folk 13).

Devushkin chides her, frets over her, spoils her, and attempts to control her as he would a child. Yet despite her dependence on Makar Devushkin to save her from the elderly Bwikov, Dabroselova is the only autonomous character in the story. She walks away from Devushkin’s romantic advances and doesn’t accept the role that Devushkin has created for her. But her triumph over Devushkin can not be viewed as a triumph of female autonomy over the masculine urge for control.

Dostoevsky rhetorically undermines Dabroselova’s triumph over Devushkin’s paternalism by emphasizing Devushkin’s role as an atypical model of masculinity. Makar Devushkin’s surname actually translates into “the girl,” which helps explain his meekness and Willy Loman-esque brand of little-man complaining. Devushkin even emasculates himself to Dabroselova by admitting that he has been bested by another man. “It is shameful to tell what he did—you will ask why he did it. He did it because I am a meek little soul, because I am quiet, a good little soul!” (Folk 46). The plot is fueled by Devushkin ignoring rationality in order to romantically shower Dabroselova with gifts. Yet in a stark reversal of gender stereotypes, Dabroselova functions as the pragmatic and realistic

member of the couple while Devushkin cedes control to his romantic desires. “You should have rested content with your first good deed towards me, which were prompted by compassion and familial affection, and not squandered money on unnecessary things” (Folk 69). Though Dabroselova is telling Devushkin to stop being so emotional, the triumph of the female over the male is undermined by Devushkin’s surname. Because he is meant to signify femininity, Devushkin can’t be used as an example of Dostoevsky acting against gender stereotypes. He is merely enforcing them in a veiled way.

But despite the richness of his personal philosophy, many critics due to his complex literary and personal and personal antipathy to Nikolai Gavrilovich Cherneshevsky largely dismiss Dostoevsky as an antifeminist and misogynist. Both men were imprisoned as radicals by the draconian Tsar Nicholas I. But their similar suffering was the end of the two men’s common ground. Cherneshevsky’s ideas were everything that Dostoevsky’s were not: socialist, nakedly feminist, and atheistic. The female protagonist of Chernyshevsky’s seminal work *What is to be Done?* is the liberated superwoman Vera Pavlona. Pavlona is a modern and independent woman who is sexually autonomous as she exerts control over two men. Pavlona also works to free other women from their traditional roles as wives and mothers by encouraging them to join a dress-making co-op. *What is to be Done?* became a smash hit and was hugely influential to Russian feminists and made “The woman question” a subject of national debate. Publicly Dostoevsky slammed Cherneshevsky by lampooning his philosophy in some of his most enduring works, including *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from Underground*. Privately Dostoevsky revealed his views on women to a friend, V.P. Merchevsky. “A woman has only one main purpose in life: to be a wife and a mother. There is no, there was no, and there will not be, any ‘social purpose’ for a woman. This is all

stupidity, senseless talk, and gibberish” (Merchevsky 205). Some critics are quick to point to this pivotal and antithetical literary relationship as evidence of Dostoevsky’s misogyny.

Addressing the critical consensus on Dostoevsky, Nina Pelikan Straus says:

“Dostoevsky’s negative responses to Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s socialist heroinism in *What is to be Done?* and his specific support of Slavophiles, Russian Imperialism, and Czars indicate an anti-feminist stance” (Straus, 2).

Though he was certainly conservative regarding women’s role in society, Dostoevsky’s women in *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from Underground* are not flat reactionary responses to Vera Pavlona. Dostoevsky’s portrayal of women was the result of his continual tinkering with his own personal philosophy, an attempt to synthesize his new imperialistic conservatism with his overall humanism. Though Dostoevsky believed that women should remain in their established domain as wives and mothers, he only advocated this conservative path because he believed that women formed the backbone of a strong Russian society.

Dostoevsky’s conservatism about women’s roles in society is reflected as an almost total absence of women as central figures in his work. Except for a smattering of short stories, Dostoevsky never wrote a novel with a female protagonist or a strong female perspective. *Poor Folk* was dominated by the male speaker Makar Devushkin and both Sonia from *Crime and Punishment* and Liza from *Notes from Underground* are relatively voiceless. In a Bakhtinian analysis, they are seemingly monologic characters, i.e., they do not engage in direct discourse with the author and do not engage the author in full discourse because they are given so few opportunities to address the audience directly.

(Murraw 45) All three women suffer from stifling narratives dominated by a wildly complex male protagonist. *Notes from the Underground* and *Crime and Punishment* are Dostoevsky's most insular and masculine novels. *Notes* takes place entirely in the mind of its titular protagonist, and *Crime and Punishment* delves into Raskolnikov's psyche with an unflinching gaze. Robert Payne remarked that *Crime and Punishment's* focus on a single character in some ways lessen the development of other characters. "Dostoevsky's technique was a dangerous one, for sometimes the characters give the impression of living in a vacuum" (196). This inward gaze in both novels and the stifling voice of Makar Devushkin in *Poor Folk* serve as evidence of the central masculinity in his works. Since Dostoevsky was a nakedly autobiographical writer, it makes sense that his male characters are the most fully formed and relatable. Feminist Dostoevsky scholar Elizabeth Blake adds that the intense psychological focus of the novel mutes the female voice within the text.

Nevertheless, as a result of the predominance of men's voices in *Crime and Punishment*, particularly those of Raskolnikov and the narrator, the women characters have few opportunities to tell their own stories." (Blake 254)

Because both characters are found in insular novels with little narrative variety, a pure female perspective is never seen in either novel. Yet despite the narrative shortcomings of the texts, the female influence on both texts is palpable. Nina Pelikan Straus recognizes that despite their relatively small speaking parts, women in Dostoevsky's works are still among his richest characters. "Dostoevsky's women carry what is the least representable, least vocalized, most marginal, but also most modernist in his fiction" (Straus, 2). The women of Dostoevsky's work never get the opportunity to define themselves on their own

terms, yet they nevertheless assert dominance over male characters and are used to espouse Dostoevsky's most revered personal beliefs.

The female characters of Dostoevsky's canon are underrepresented and muted in his work because they are not complete characters on their own. They are inexorably linked to the protagonist, and in many ways they function as mirror images of the male. The females are psychological shards of the male protagonist whose role is torment the male protagonist into moral behavior. Dostoevsky was a deeply psychological writer whose work expressed knowledge of the inner workings of the psyche. Dostoevsky had previously experimented with the living psychological manifestations and doppelgängers in his ill-received second novel *The Double*, but little criticism has been focused on Dostoevsky's pairings of characters in his other work. In *Poor Folk* Dostoevsky establishes the similarities between Dabroselova and Devushkin by establishing both as female sufferers of male domination. The two characters are in a co-dependent relationship where both alternately play the victim and the savior confirms that they are mirror images of one another. In a passage that indicates the true nature of their relationship, Dabroselova says:

“...so imagine what I feel like when I see even now, after all the calamities which have befallen you, and of which I have been the involuntary cause, you are still living through me: my joys, my griefs, my emotions!” (*Folk* 85).

With this passage Dostoevsky makes it clear that Dabroselova and Devushkin are kindred characters who live through the other's experiences. However, the equality of their relationship is undermined by Devushkin's role as a feminine character in the story. In his other work Dostoevsky affirms the centrality of the male character by portraying them as the originals from which the women were created. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's

mother, Pulkheria Alexandrovna, offers up unusual insight into Dostoevsky's intended rhetorical role of Raskolnikov's sister Dunya in the story. Alexandrovna compares her daughter Dunya to Raskolnikov and in the process affirms Raskolnikov's role as the protagonist of the story.

“You know, Dunya, I looked at the two of you, and you are the absolute image of him, not so much in face as in mind; you are both of a melancholic temper, both moody and hasty, both arrogant, both generous...” (Crime 203).

Raskolnikov's mother reveals that Dunya is simply a fragment of Raskolnikov's twisted psyche, which is appropriate given that the surname Raskolnikov means schism in Russian. Raskolnikov is the central force of the novel and every other character are manifestations of his own inner turmoil. Raskolnikov's friend Razumhikin furthers this idea with a throw away insult leveled against Dunya earlier in the story. “You know Avodotya Romanova, you are terribly like your brother in every way!” (Crime 183). Dostoevsky make it clear that Dunya should not be regarded as a fully autonomous character but merely a portion of Raskolnikov's mind. On many levels Sonia, Raskolnikov, and Dunya are the same.

Raskolnikov, Sonia, and Dunya all seek to transcend Christian morality in order to protect others. Raskolnikov murders the two women in a misguided attempt to save Dunya from a bad marriage. Ironically, Dunya commits herself to the same bad marriage in order to save Raskolnikov from financial ruin, which is a symbolic act of prostitution. Sonia also sells her body in order to provide for her family. Elizabeth Blake observed that both Raskolnikov and Sonia commit crimes out of a sense of familial responsibility. She goes on to say:

She, like the novel's protagonist Rodion Raskolnikov, transgresses a Christian moral precept in the belief that she is acting in the name of a

higher justice, one that protects families from impoverishment and loved ones from sexual predators. (252-3)

Raskolnikov sins in a foolish attempt to save his family, yet he ultimately fails in his quest to save his sister. She and Sonia exhibit moral dominance over Raskolnikov and his dangerous ideas by acting as steadfast examples of Christian sacrifice and Christian love.

Similarly, the Underground Man and Liza are both lost souls looking for a kind of Christian redemption, and both are denied. Liza thought she had found redemption at the hands of the Underground Man, only to have her delusions stripped away from her in a painful and violent fashion. The Underground Man is a character who desperately wants to save himself by acting as a messiah to another, but his base instincts betray him in the end. He realizes that his messianic impulses were merely illusions. Though the female characters exhibit a high degree of agency, they cannot be examined as characters that are truly independent of the males within Dostoevsky's work. They represent the feminine messianic principles that temper male atheism and violence, yet they do not exist on their own. The female characters are simply aspects of the male characters, the hidden feminine side that acts as a balm to quell the male unrest.

Dostoevsky silences the female component of the male psyche within his work and the result is startling acts of violence. The violence against these marginalized women is self-mutilation as the male characters viciously attack the agents of their own salvation. Janine Langan noticed this duality that mixes Christian symbolism and self-mutilation:

The human propensity for more or less angelic pornography haunts Dostoevsky's novels. He has a unique, lurid talent for arousing in his reader the peculiar thrill linked to sado-masochist fantasies... (65)

This misogynistic reading of Dostoevsky is reinforced by Raskolnikov's callous disregard for his two female victims who he dubs "louses" and "vermin." The women of *Crime and Punishment* are likened to animals throughout the text. The ignominious end of Katerina Ivanova reinforces this idea. As she lies on her deathbed, Dostoevsky affords Katerina no glory as she simply slumps over from exhaustion like a dead farm animal.

"Enough!... This time has come! Good bye poor wretch!... This poor beast has been driven to death!... Her bloodless yellow, wasted face dropped back, her mouth opened, her legs straightened convulsively. She drew a deep heavy sigh and died." (Crime 367)

This language is strangely reminiscent of a scene found earlier in the story where Raskolnikov dreams of a horse being beaten to death in the town square. "The wretched animal stretched out her muzzle, drew a deep, laboring death, and died" (Crime 50). Dostoevsky highlights the tragedy of Katerina's life by making her fall into disgrace in a misguided attempt to provide for her family. Both the horse and Katerina were cursed to a life of thankless servitude and openly mocked because they dared to fight back. "Suddenly there was a great explosion of laughter that drowned everything else: the old mare had rebelled against the hail of blows and was lashing out feebly with her hoofs" (Crime 49). In a similar scene of hopeless struggle and desperation, a frantic Katerina performs with her children in the street in front of a gawking crowd. "Some of the crowd were laughing, others were shaking their heads, but they all looked anxiously at the madwoman with her terrified children" (357). Neither animal is allowed to die with any meaning or dignity. This bleak and empty ending for Katerina Ivanovna is hard for the reader to understand. Did Dostoevsky regard women as subhuman creatures prone to the violent whims of fortune?

Katerina's death would suggest so. But further examination reveals that female suffering within his work did have a purpose. Though she died, she was not vanquished.

Langan's lurid account of violence within Dostoevsky's work fails to recognize its profound role as social critique. Rather than a base expression of misogyny, the violence against women is Dostoyevsky's highest compliment because they too suffer the passions of Christ. The women embody a Christian ideal and they have the fortitude to suffer for their beliefs. With Katerina's death Dostoevsky offers up a damning indictment of the failures of Russian economics. Her death had meaning. Because Katerina, like Sonia, Dunya, and Liza, acts as a Christian warrior who battles against the prevailing societal precepts of masculine violence. They are fighting for the souls of Russia's men. V.I. Ivanov describes this struggle as "the eternally feminine principle in the Russian soul has to suffer violence and oppression at the hands of those Daemons who contend against Christ for the mastery of the masculine principle in people's consciousness" (60).

Aided with this interpretative lens, the violence against women takes on a noble quality in Dostoevsky's work. In *Crime and Punishment*, even the villain Svidrigaylov recognizes the Dunya as a messiah. He asserts that she would relish any violence visited upon her: "She would have doubtless been one who had suffered martyrdom, and she would, of course, have smiled when they burnt her breast with red hot pincers" (Crime 401). This portrait of Dunya affirms her role as a Christ like figure to Raskolnikov, and gives her moral superiority over the male protagonist. But more importantly, it also confirms Dostoevsky's earlier ideas about the preservation of chastity within the female savior. Sonia figuratively denies her role as mother and thus affirms her virginity by submitting to violence against her femininity. Svidrigaylov confirms this suspicion by

emphasizing Dunya's chastity a few lines later. "Avodotyia Romanova is terribly chaste, to a positively unheard of degree" (Crime 402). Like the saints, Dunya achieves her salvation by denying her own sexuality and by willingly submitting herself to violence.

But how does Liza function as a Christian martyr for the Underground Man if she never bore any violence? Robert Jackson offers a satisfying explanation by linking her suffering to Sonia's. He states:

"For the second time the Underground Man takes out his humiliation on Liza. Indeed, in a moral-spiritual plane, he murders Liza. After his cruel tirade, in which he savagely exposes the motives of his behavior towards her, the Underground Man remarks: 'She turned white as a handkerchief, wanted to say something, her lips working painfully, collapsed in the chair as if felled by an ax.'" (Jackson 73).

Therefore, Liza too can be regarded as a messianic figure because she martyrs herself for the spiritual awakening of a male character. Even though the Underground Man does not ultimately choose the virtuous Christian path, her sacrifice was still praise-worthy. Liza's role as a saint-like figure in the text is diluted by the Underground Man's decision to remain unhappy and unsaved, but she is still a messenger of Dostoevsky's deep seated Christian convictions.

Many critics see Dostoevsky's messianic view of women as troubling in its own right, because the author almost fetishizes women instead of creating realistic and achievable portraits. Rina Lapidus describes the women within *Crime and Punishment* in black and white terms:

The women in Raskolnikov's—and probably the author's—worldview are divided

into those who are 'good': that is, attractive, and feminine—and those who are 'bad,' meaning asexual, masculine, and thus repulsive. (Lapidus 28)

Lapidus asserts that Dostoevsky demeans women by emphasizing their sexuality and that this view is born out in his personal life as well as the literature. Dostoevsky's use of prostitutes in his work might confirm this view, but Lapidus is still quite mistaken. Contrary to expectations, even the prostitutes within Dostoevsky's work are completely asexual. Sonia and Liza never exhibit sexual autonomy by doing their jobs. Like the withered "masculine" pawnbroker that Lapidus refers to, all the women of Dostoevsky's world are surprisingly virginal. Both the Underground Man and Raskolnikov use the sexual history of the women in their lives to undermine their potential saviors, yet neither are sexually attracted to these women of the night. Indeed, the men are also asexual as they emphasize the child-like quality of their female foils, just like Vavara Dabroselova in Dostoevsky's first novel. Raskolnikov describes Sonia as a quaking child because he refuses to recognize what she has to offer.

"Her face and her whole person had moreover one characteristic feature: in spite of her eighteen years she seemed almost a little girl still, much younger than her age, little more than a child, indeed, and something was almost comically youthful about her movements" (202).

The term "comically youthful" carries rich connotations because it represents Raskolnikov's desire to diminish Sonia's value and Dostoevsky's effort to paint her as a holy fool. This passage also represents a stark suppression of female sexuality, which is made glaringly obvious by Sonia's job as a prostitute. On some level, the Underground Man also seeks to desexualize the prostitute Liza by likening her to a child. He reveals his deep seated desires

to keep women sexless by telling her an imaginary story about a father who won't let his daughter marry. "I'd be jealous so help me God. Why would she kiss someone else? How could she love a stranger more than her own father? It's even painful to think about" (Underground 1307). Both men de-sex their potential female saviors in an effort to block out their attempts to save them and in an effort to assert masculine control over them. Devushkin in *Poor Folk* also tried to conquer Vavra Dabroselova by keeping her dependent and childlike, but that didn't work for him either. All three men attempt to assert their dominance over adult women by attempting to take these women back to a state of sexual latency found in childhood. This losing battle to suppress femininity within the text hints that Dostoevsky had a belief that both male and female sexuality should be respected. Because the continual suppression of the feminine will only lead to explosions of masculine violence.

This suppression of female sexuality manifests itself later in *Crime and Punishment* as a disturbing vision of the grotesque as Svidrigaylov is haunted by a dream late in the story. Svidrigaylov dreams about a drowning victim who suddenly morphs from adulthood back to adolescence in a shocking grotesque transformation.

"Yes it was true; her lips parted in a smile; the corners of her mouth quivered, as if she was still restraining herself. But now she had ceased to control herself at all, it was a laugh, a downright laugh; an impudent invitation gleaned from that unchildlike face; it was corruption, it was the face of a courtesan, the brazen face of a mercenary French harlot" (Crime 431).

Svidrigaylov's nightmare is significant because it reverses Dostoevsky's attempts to craft adult female characters as childlike and virginal, with disturbing results. The detail that the child turns into a grotesque *French* harlot should be emphasized because it serves as evidence that this passage is critical of the foreign socialist and Utopian ideas that flooded Russia from France and Germany. Indeed, earlier in the story Dostoevsky subtly illustrates the negative influence of French ideas on women as Katerina Ivanovna and her children are forced to dance in the streets for sustenance.

“... There was a *cancan* of an unheard of kind, such as there never was in my day. Yes, sir, there has been progress there. Suddenly I looked and saw a little girl of about thirteen, very nicely dressed, dancing with an expert, and with another *vis-à-vis*.” (Crime 407)

Dostoevsky peppers the description of Katerina Ivaonovna's lowest moment with French words to illustrate the damaging effects of foreign ideas on Dostoevsky's native Russia. The child wearing a sensual and flowing *cancan* outfit is further evidence that Dostoevsky viewed foreign thoughts as a corrupting influence on the chastity of women. To Dostoevsky, foreign ideas resulted in a breakdown of the traditional roles of women as mothers and keepers of the faith, which results in this vision of horror.

Even though Dostoevsky sets up the women in his novels to function as messiahs for the male characters, he nevertheless exhibits a strong distaste for men trying to act as saviors for women. This idea even manifests itself in *Poor Folk* as Makar Devushkin is unable to act as a savior figure to Vavara Dabroselova but instead loses to the wealthy Mr. Bykov. But Devushkin's final push to prevent Dabroselova from marrying is perhaps the most interesting because he clings to the idea that Bykov could follow his alternate plan

and marry a merchant's daughter from Moscow.

“It's true, little mother, it's perfectly true that you're an educated woman, virtuous and sensitive—it's just that he would do better to marry the merchant's daughter!” (Poor Folk 121)

Devushkin wants Bykov to marry the merchant's daughter so he can have Vavra Dabroselova for himself, but also because he implies that she would be a better fit. The juxtaposition between Devushkin's descriptions glowing review of the aristocratic Dabroselova with the solidly middle class merchant's daughter implies a sharp class distinction. Devushkin implies that merchant's daughter will be a better fit because she is poorer and might be more appreciative. This sentiment is expressed overtly in *Crime and Punishment* as Raskolnikov accuses Luzhin of trying to act as a god and savior to his impoverished sister. Dostoevsky exhibits a profound distaste for males acting as salvific figures for the fallen women in his work, which seems contradictory, but also reinforces Dostoevsky's role of women as the moral saviors of male characters. Raskolnikov questions Luzhin's motives and says: “And how will you protect them from the Svidrigaylovs or from Anfasy Ivanovich Vakhrushin, you future millionaire, disposing of their fates as though you were Zeus himself?” (Crime 38). Ironically, Raskolnikov mocks Petrovich's God complex over women after murdering two women in an effort to save his sister from marrying him. Raskolnikov had also previously tried his hand at being a messianic figure, and he too was doomed to failure. In a short reminiscence, Raskolnikov talks about a former lover:

“She was... very plain. I don't really know what attracted me to her; I think it may have been that she was always ill...If she had been lame as well, or humpbacked, I might have loved her even more...” (Crime 195)

Raskolnikov is recounting his own failed experience to act as a messiah for the woman in his life with a sense of detachment because it wasn't supposed to be his role to save her. As a male he was doomed to failure. Even the Underground Man fails in his attempt to save Liza from a life of prostitution. Though the Underground Man would attribute his failure to save Liza as a conscious decision, his pathetic attempt to apologize to her indicates that he would have saved her if he had the capacity to. But as a male, the role of being a true Christian role model went against his masculine identity. The role of acting as living Christs is exclusively female.

Even though the women in Dostoevsky's work suffer intense violence and humiliation, they ultimately get the last laugh. As the beacons of true Christian virtue, they win. Raskolnikov's salvation by Sonia's goodness is obvious to all readers as a triumph of her brand of Christian humility over Raskolnikov's godless rationalism. Sonia tames Raskolnikov because she is both a messianic figure in his life as well as a symbol of the agrarian Russian proletariat triumphing over the forces of foreign Western atheism and socialism. Her demand that Raskolnikov kiss the earth represents his penance to agrarian Mother Russia and the peasant women that he killed. M.G. Morris says:

The earth is a symbol of basic goodness and the mystical unity of mankind, that to which a sinner turns for salvation. Hence, Sonia directs Raskolnikov to kiss the earth and various characters fall to the earth to venerate suffering (39).

But the triumph of the agrarian over outside forces is nothing new in Dostoevsky's canon. We saw the triumph of the agrarian Dabroselova, whose last name indicates her role as a symbol of the Russian agrarian peasantry, triumph over Makar Devushkin. Though Dostoevsky would rail against socialists, feminists, and other radical thinkers, his overall

empathy for his characters is rooted in his ideas of *pochvennichestvo* which means “concept of the soil.” Pochvennichestvo was a nativist agrarian movement that imbued Dostoevsky with a respect for the common person that manifested itself in all of his work. It is only fitting that he would utilize women to once again espouse his most cherished beliefs. Both Devushkin and Sonia win over foreign ideas that disturb the natural order and are used as propaganda tools for Dostoevsky’s political beliefs.

But what about the Underground Man? His story ends with an anticlimactic and abrupt ending. “However, the ‘notes’ of this paradoxicalist don’t end here. He could resist and keep on writing. But it also seems to us that he might as well stop here” (Underground 1327). How are they saved by the women they love? The answer for the Underground Man actually lies outside the text. When *Notes from Underground* was originally published, the original manuscript had passages that revealed the Underground Man’s yearning for the salvific love of Christ. Acting against the intentions of the author, government censors removed key phrases and scrubbed all Christian elements from the text which wholly changed the overall tone and message of the story. Dostoevsky railed against these changes saying:

“The swinish censors, where I mocked everything and sometimes blasphemed for *the sake of effect*—it was permitted, and all where I deduced from all of that the need for faith in Christ—it was prohibited.” (Letters 100)

Liza’s gentle Christian love was actually supposed to save the Underground Man, but because of Russian censors the public was left with a more ambiguous and existential version of the story. Liza does assert her independence in the text by leaving a five rouble

note with the Underground Man that he had given her earlier in the brothel. This symbolically means that Liza had moved on from her past lifestyle even though the text leaves her fate ambiguous. Though Dostoevsky's profound Christian spirituality is subtle enough to elude casual readers, Dostoevsky's belief in personal transformation and salvation, usually accomplished by women, is a familiar trope in his work

Though Dostoevsky viewed women as special messianic figures for male excess, his work also mixed in a heavy dose of paternalism. Dostoevsky's overriding goal for *Crime and Punishment* is to offer a rebuttal of Cherneshevsky's godless rationalism, but he also wrote *Crime and Punishment* as a temperance novel. Dostoevsky zealously took up the mantle of a traditionally female dominated temperance movement, despite his proclivity for drinking in his personal life. Close examination of the text reveals that alcohol is a behind the scenes agent of the downfall of every major character. Dostoevsky begins the novel in a tavern and takes pains to paint it as a place suffused with alcohol that hangs in the air like an omnipresent and evil cloud. "The atmosphere was unbearably stuffy and so saturated with alcohol that it seemed that five minutes in it would be enough to make one drunk" (Crime 8). Raskolnikov then listens with detachment as his drinking buddy Marmelov talks about all the articles of clothing he has pawned to continue his drinking habit.

"I have even drunk her stockings sir! And I have drunk her mohair shall as well, and it was her own, a gift made to her in the old days, not mine; and the room that we live in is cold, and this winter she caught a chill and even began to cough blood" (Crime 12)

Marmelov admits that his weakness for drinking has caused his family's shameful poverty and forced his daughter into the life of a prostitute. Marmelov's drinking directly hurts all

the women in his life as he fritters away their resources. Marmelov also introduces the idea of rational based murder to Raskolnikov during the bar scene. Marmelov drunkenly makes an offhand statement in the tavern that first introduces the idea of a world without barrier, i.e., a world where a great man can transcend normal morality in order to achieve greatness. “If men are not really scoundrels, men in general, the whole human race, I mean---then all the rest is just prejudice, imaginary fears, and there are no real barriers, and that is as it should be!” (Crime 23). Raskolnikov later espouses these same ideas when he justifies the killing of the decrepit pawnbroker Alena Ivanovna. Though he wrote a paper on the subject in his youth, hearing Marmelov drunkenly mention his thesis planted the idea back in his head. As a result, Alena and her sister Lizaveta are murdered. Leo Tolstoy commented on the evil effects of alcohol within *Crime and Punishment* by asserting that Raskolnikov was not acting as himself when he murdered the two sisters.

“It is at these times that ones needs the greatest clearness to decide the questions that have arisen, and it is just then that one glass of beer, or one cigarette, may prevent the solution of the question, may postpone the decision, stifle the conscience, and prompt a decision of the question in favor of the lower, animal nature—as was the case with Raskolnikov.”

(Tolstoy 102)

Though Tolstoy’s reading of *Crime and Punishment* never became popular, his argument is predicated on the fact that alcohol plays a major role within the text of *Crime and Punishment*. All the women in the novel are victimized by alcohol. Sonia and Katerina were brought down by Marmelov’s drunken irresponsibility and Dunya was hounded by the villainous Svidrigaylov who was also “under the influence of Bacchus” (Crime 26). Though

the women eventually save themselves and the men they care about from alcohol's evil corrupting influence, just like all the other masculine problems of his novels. The women act as quiet moral agents who correct the sins of the male populace. They are once again the catalysts for achieving Dostoevsky's utopia.

The women of Dostoevsky embody all of the paradoxes that made his writing so dynamic and enduring. They were chaste prostitutes, they were silent yet nevertheless used as mouthpieces for Dostoevsky's deepest held personal beliefs, and they were autonomous yet inexorably linked to the fate of the male protagonist. And even though the women are sometimes muffled by the strong voices of the male characters, Dostoevsky does imbue them with a life all their own. They act as chaste and meek archetypes yet they dominate the violent and irrational men in their lives with surprising ease. Their victories over the forces of socialistic atheism and masculine aggression indicate that Dostoevsky was a fierce conservative who nevertheless saw women as a vital component of a healthy society. They had the special role as mothers and true Christians that would keep Russia strong through the turbulent changes that Dostoevsky witnessed through his short lifetime. Women are the gatekeepers of a strong Russia built around agrarian Slavophilic nationalism and a strong faith in God. Only women have the strength to check the forces of masculine atheism and idiocy, which is perhaps Dostoevsky's highest compliment. As wardens of the Russian church that he held so dearly, the women in Dostoevsky's work sacrifice their own agency for the greater good of the Church. Dostoevsky crafts his women with a sense of affection because they keep society balanced, they keep society whole, and they keep God.

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