Devil Take It…
A Dostoyevskian Analysis
(for what it's worth)

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A Dedicated Follower of Fashion

Fyodor Dostoyevsky was a great thinker, a manipulator if you will, of deep philosophical questions concerning the existence of man and/or God. Some would argue that his preoccupation with finding answers to the unanswerable bordered on the neurotic. Yet with all of the looming doubts and agonizing theses that constitute the bulk of his writing there is one underlying question that Dostoyevsky could never seem to eradicate from his ever racing quest to define the essence of man. "What is he wearing?" It seems that the narrator (yes, it has been established that Fyodor himself was indeed not the narrator, but let's face it, he is the author, creator and ultimately what he says goes) fixates on the fashions of the day, and makes it a point to interject his own whimsical opinions as to what is "in" and more importantly, what is "out."

The Brothers Karamazov, though primarily a novel of dialogue, is also richly embellished with commentary from the ever omniscient narrator as to descriptions of characters, their surroundings, whether up to date with style of furnishings, or God forbid "in the fashion of the twenties." How necessary is it that the reader know that Trifon's daughters, "on feast days or when going visiting, would put on light blue or green dresses of fashionable cut, tight fitting behind and with three feet of train" (p. 413), while Trifon himself, "went about dressed in the Russian style, in a peasant blouse and a long, full skirted coat" (p. 413)? We barely meet this Trifon, and the daughters are about as significant as Smerdyakov's twitching left eye. Although the optical twitch could be constituted as merely a rumor or a neurotic observation on the part of the narrator deliberately put there to confuse the reader into thinking that the eye is indeed of major significance, but I digress.

The narrator's sense of style is not wasted on mere minor characters. Although the vicious little snip at the *pan's* "quite wretched wig, made in Siberia" (p. 419) does not go unnoticed. Ivan's diabolical visit is perhaps the most blatant of the narrator's fetish that clothes definitely do make the man (or the devil incarnate). This description certainly fits into Dostoyevsky's "Black List" of fashion no-nos to the highest degree:

Trinity Papers '02-'03 7/24/02 12:21 PM Page 24

> "He was wearing a sort of brown jacket, evidently from the best of tailors, but already shabby, made approximately three years ago and already completely out of fashion, such as no well-to-do man of society had been seen in for at least two years. His linen, his long, scarf-like necktie, all was just what every stylish gentleman would wear, but, on closer inspection, the linen was a bit dirty and the wide scarf was quite threadbare. The visitor's checkered trousers fitted perfectly, but again they were too light and somehow too narrow, of a style no one wore any longer, as was the soft, downy white hat the visitor had brought with him, though it was entirely the wrong season" (p. 635).

And I thought that wearing white after Labor Day was bad!

The Tasty Tid-Bit Herself and the Convenience of Hysterics

Dostoyevskian women, while not the most comical of characterizations, nonetheless seem to possess two rather obvious (and myopic) female traits that permeate this epic of the importance of family values. On the one hand, we have Grushenka, the infamous woman of ill repute who single handedly seduces both father and son on the grounds of the fickleness that we of the weaker sex just can't seem to overcome. Chalk it up to our natures. Our narrator is quite taken with the physical attributes of this devious creature. In fact, he just can't seem to get her out of his mind. Her physical description far surpasses that of any other in the story. Being a connoisseur of Russian female beauty, he must (as any red blooded man would) make mention of "her broad, full shoulders, her high, still quite youthful bosom. This body perhaps promised the forms of the Venus de Milo, one could sense that—though the proportions must have been and indeed already were somewhat exaggerated" (p. 149). He seems fairly certain that her beauty will pass rather quickly into blobular oblivion. Her cat-like manner of walking soundlessly, the way she speaks (drawn out and sugary), her "childlike, impatient, and trusting curiosity" all come together to finish the picture of the woman that any man with a libido (except Alyosha, of course) would want to bed down with.

On the other hand, there is Katerina Ivanovna, society woman extraordinaire. Although a stunning beauty in her own right, she reserves this quality for the occasional extortion of money through sexual depravity, and relies heavily on a more proper means of domination. The tragic Katerina, with her insatiable desire to exercise ultimate control over all that surrounds her, is more than willing to sacrifice her life and any future happiness on a spiteful whim. After all, how could the Russian spirit function without spite?

> "I will be his god, to whom he shall pray—that, at least, he owes me for his betrayal and for what I suffered yesterday because of

Trinity Papers '02-'03 7/24/02 12:21 PM Page 25

> him. And let him see throughout his whole life, that all my life I will be faithful to him and to the word I once gave, despite the fact that he was faithless and betrayed me. I shall…I shall become the means of his happiness (or how should I say it?), the instrument, the mechanism of his happiness, and that for my whole life" (p. 189).

A very pious martyrdom indeed. But let us not forget that this conclusion was drawn after her hysterical fit at the failure to procure Grushenka's blind devotion. Hysterics on the part of Dostoyevskian women seem to walk hand in hand with the mysterious brain fever that never fails to grip his most tormented men at the most crucial times of their lives. In fact, both ailments (hysterics and brain fever) are accepted without question, and furthermore are anticipated by most readers with base knowledge of Dostoyevsky's stories. The dichotomy of the two ultimately has a yin-yang consequence. Women get hysterical because in the grand scheme of the Dostoyevskian drama, they are of less significance than their male counterparts. Hysteria is something that passes, the woman has a biological weakness and therefore a need to get it out of her system, whereas the brain fever, that is serious. That could even drive a man to madness or better still, murder.

Kids Say the Darndest Things

The children featured in *The Brothers Karamazov* are not exempt from the torturous infliction of dire thoughts or deep philosophical reasoning of their adult counterparts. This budding psychological conflict and ability to think dark thoughts will assure the reader that although we will never see these precious darlings mature to their full potential, their characters would most certainly be filled to the brim with all of the paranoid and self-conscious qualities that lovers of Dostoyevsky have endeared for generations. Take for example the case of young Lize, daughter of the eavesdropping and always righteous Madame Khokhlakov. We find her at one point pondering her passionately adolescent love for Alyosha—a seemingly normal emotional state that for any other teenage girl would constitute the bulk of her daydreaming thoughts. This is an impossibility in Dostoyevskian logic; therefore, the lustfully innocent pondering must dramatically take a turn for the worse. Virtually overnight, she transforms into a novice pyromaniac entertaining morbid thoughts of child crucifixion. "Sometimes I imagine it was I who crucified him. He hangs there moaning, and I sit down facing him, eating pineapple compote. I like pineapple compote very much. Do you?" (p. 584). So cute and innocent those last two sentences. So much for teenage anguish of the heart, better to focus on whether Jews steal children at Passover and kill them. Of course, the scenario wouldn't be complete with out a bit of self-mutilation. "As soon as Alyosha was gone, [she] put her finger into the chink,

Trinity Papers '02-'03 7/24/02 12:21 PM Page 26

and, slamming the door, crushed it with all her might. Ten seconds later, having released her hand, she went quietly and slowly to her chair…and began looking intently at her blackened finger and the blood oozing from under the nail" (p. 585). What could be more charming than a future masochist? One can't help but wonder if this action was done out of spite.

Kolya is another potentially tortured intellectual, but his focus isn't on morbidly derived scenes of human bondage. He is more concerned with all consuming power over other individuals and the existence of God. Kolya is a child devoid of the boyish dreams of becoming a soldier. His one hint at normalcy is the dog, Perezvon, but the circumstances of how he acquired this pup are a glimpse into the inner workings of a mind fixated on control. His discussion with Alyosha concerning Ilyusha illustrates the point:

> "I used to put forward various ideas sometimes: it wasn't that he disagreed with the ideas, I could see that he was simply rebelling against me personally, because I responded coldly to his sentimentalities. And so, the more sentimental he became, the colder I was, in order to season him; I did it on purpose, because it's my conviction. I had in mind to discipline his character, to shape him up, to create a person" (p. 534).

It isn't enough for this boy to simply make friends with another; he has to "season" him into his own human creation. The story of the dog, and the bread with the pin inside, shows us that even the young Ilyusha isn't so innocent (although it isn't uncommon for young boys to be cruel to animals). The story does imply, however, that Kolya's conditioning of Ilyusha's mind, convincing him to believe that he had killed the dog, led to the untimely death of the latter. How profoundly deep must the guilt of Ilyusha have been to kill him? These are children who take nothing lightly.

The existence of God is another question that young master Kolya attempts to tackle. In his most scientifically logical way, he proclaims to Alyosha, "I have nothing against God. Of course God is only a hypothesis…but…I admit, he is necessary for the sake of order" (p. 553). Who talks that way? The phrase brings to mind the analytical workings of an aged theologian, not a boy of fourteen.

There are other peculiar idiosyncrasies employed by Dostoyevsky throughout this work, such as his need to focus dinner conversations on physically torturing both children and heretics, the bringing together of various conflicting personalities for the sake of posing religious and moral questions that have little to do with the logical reasoning for bringing said people together, and his preoccupation with noses. These are just a few of the Dostoyevskian quirks that hook the reader instantaneously, and then leave the reader wondering why.

Trinity Papers '02-'03 7/24/02 12:21 PM Page 27

TEXT SITED

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