

THE IDIOT

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Overview

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was a Russian novelist, journalist, short story writer and philosopher, who is particularly known for such novels as *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *Notes from Underground* (1864), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). His insight spiritual themes like forgiveness, grace, and dread magnetized Western readers and writers, in the century after his death; Nietzsche and Sartre brought Dostoevsky's understandings to the center of Existentialism, while playwrights like Chekhov translated Dostoevsky into deep and brooding theatrical themes. His *Notes from Underground* inspired Kierkegaard and Niebuhr to critical rethinkings of Christian theology.

Story

Prince Myshkin, a young man in his late twenties, and a scion of one of the oldest Russian families, arrives by train in St. Petersburg, after a four year stay in Switzerland, where he has been treated for epilepsy.

Myshkin has only one connection in Petersburg, the very distant relative, Mme. Yepanchin, who is married to a prominent General in his fifties. The entry of Myshkin into the nexus of this family is the trademark Dostoyevskyan introduction, of complex tribal networks blended with intricate moral interrelations; Myshkin is in the middle of the social soup, from the time he steps inside the Yepanchin door. There he meets three daughters—of whom the youngest and most beautiful, Aglaya, will play an important role in the text; the General's vain assistant, Ganya, who is in love with Aglaya, but is concurrently fielding an offer to marry another and in this case 'fallen' woman, Anastasya. Myshkin rents a room in an apartment building also occupied by Ganya and his family, who have refused to accept Anastasya as a wife for Ganya. Anastasya quickly arrives—see how quickly the plot thickens—to insult Ganya's family, berating them for their concern with her 'fallen' state. From this point on, the novel branches out into interwoven desires and passions, with Myshkin at the center.

A twenty seven year old man around town, Rogozhin, has fallen desperately in love with the same 'fallen' Anastasya whom Ganya has been courting. Concurrently, however, Myshkin has fallen for the same popular fallen woman, Anastasya, who however rejects him—but on the fascinating basis that she is not worthy of him, is worthy only of Rogozhin. For an extended time, Anastasya vacillates between the two men who are seeking her; all the while Myshkin's inheritance, which has emboldened him to vie with Rogozhin, is shrinking, and in a mood of distress and self-examination Myshkin pays a visit to Rogozhin. The two men discuss politics and religion—which temporarily trump romantic considerations, as will often happen in Dostoyevsky—and in the end Rogozhin stabs Myshkin, provoking an epileptic fit and perhaps saving his life.

In the semi-final panels of this tale, Myshkin moves to a resort town near Petersburg, where many of the fore-encountered characters—the Yepanchins, Anastasya—take the waters during the summer time. The social interactions of this period largely involve what turns out to be the growing love of Myshkin and Aglaya for one another. In the midst of a high society dinner party, Myshkin knocks over and breaks a valuable Chinese vase, and subsequently subsides into a mild epileptic fit. In subsequent scenes, during which the Yepanchin family grows dubious about the suitability of Myshkin, as a mate for Aglaya, a new stormcloud of conflict arises; Aglaya and Anastasya decide to force Myshkin to decide between them. In the end, it is the women, not Myshkin, who slash the Gordian knot, and leave their princely lover to figure out his own fate.

The next day, the Prince follows the two women to Petersburg, where he finds that Rogozhin has stabbed Anastasya during the night. The two men hold vigil over Anastasya's body, which Rogozhin has laid out in his study.

In the end, we learn that Rogozhin has been sentenced to fifteen years of hard labor in Siberia, while Prince Myshkin returns to his Swiss sanatorium.

Themes

Illness. The shadow of epilepsy hangs over Prince Myshkin, and though we see little of the actual ravages of epilepsy, we experience the illness as a threat dogging all the Prince's actions.

Rivalry. The rivalry between Myshkin and Rogozhin, for the affections of Anastasya, provides the kind of instance, in which we find Myshkin's weaknesses coming to the fore. From his illness, to his weakening finances, this young prince is only as macho as his highly sophisticated social setting permits.

Family. Family relations, power struggles, marital competitions—these are the stuff of high Russian society in the Tsarist period. Families like the Yepanchins are familiar to us—say in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*—as breeding grounds of influential economic and political power.

Characters

Prince Myshkin. Prince Myshkin is a young romantic, naïve in his personal relations and in the estimation of his personal strength. He is, however, good natured and generous, ready (credulously) to help out the young man Burdovsky, who is only too eager to render Myshkin a victim of fraud.

Anastasya. The classic literary femme fatale and fallen woman, Anastasya is both a seeker and sought out, in the high class desire market in which Myshkin finds himself.

Aglaya. Aglaya is the Yepanchins' youngest and most beautiful daughter. She passes in and out of the romantic lives of all the young males in the novel—Ganya, Myshkin, Rogozhin—and by and large settles for a flirtatious and playful attitude toward the guys.

Prince Myshkin (Closed)

Character Prince Myshkin, the 24 year old descendant of a distinguished Russian family, is first seen returning to Russia after four years in Switzerland. He has been in a clinic there, to treat his severe case of epilepsy; he represents Dostoevsky's vision of the positively good man, simple and open minded, and he returns to a Russian social environment in which he is soon to find himself immersed in social and marital conflicts—other people's—and to be seen as a rallying point for different alliances. He finds himself wound into the romantic threads of the novel, become a major love player in the romances of two beautiful women, and ultimately, once again, become a victim of the epileptic insanity which had taken him to Europe. He finally returns to the clinic in Switzerland, from which he was departing when we first met him.

Parallels The innocent, sometimes even the holy innocent, is a common figure in modern western literature: from Cervantes' *Don Quijote* () to J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) we encounter many examples of the individual who is out of it, cruising at his or her own altitude, hoping for a salvation from inside events. The gallery of examples might include: Leskov (1831-95), in "Deathless Golovan," portrays a saint despite himself, who clumsily pleases God; in the *Red Badge of Courage*, 1895) Stephen Crane minutely analyses the cowardice of a young man who has wandered innocently into a war he thought would make him a hero; In *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) J. D. Salinger takes us along with Holden Caulfield, a young man discovering life with a restless set of epiphanies; James Purdy, in *Malcolm* (1959), takes us to a 'strange' and susceptible young man who lets the world exploit him with extravagant adventures.

Illustrative moments

Openness We first meet Myshkin on the train from Switzerland, from which he is returning after four years in a clinic for treatment of his epilepsy. He is sitting in his compartment with a dark haired man, who eventually takes an interest in the fact that the Prince is returning from abroad. He is struck by the Prince's openness: 'the readiness of the fair young man in the Swiss cloak to answer all his companion's inquiries was remarkable.' A third gentleman, Rogozhin, enters the conversation, and a voluble discussion ensues, in which Myshkin reveals that he is on his way to visit a distant relative, and to transact business with her and her family. Rogozhin, who has just inherited a fortune, is on his way to propose marriage to the beauty, Nastasya.

Upretentious When Myshkin arrives in St. Petersburg he heads for the house of Lizaveta Yepanchina, his distant relative who is the wife of a distinguished General. While he is waiting to be received—the lackeys are all suspicious of him—he falls into conversation with one of the servants, to whom he describes the procedures, and horrors, of capital punishment in the West. We are startled by his volubility and detail, revelations of his human attitudes but even more of his readiness to talk openly and freely with anyone. 'Murder by legal sentence is immeasurably more terrible than murder by brigands.'

Empathetic Myshkin is quickly familiarized with the marital plans of a certain pretentious Ganya, suitor to a 'wonderfully beautiful woman,' with a mind of her own. Myshkin studies the photo of the woman with interest, for she is the beauty of whom he was hearing in his train compartment, from the dark haired man who was sitting across from him, and who had just inherited a vast sum of money with which he intended to woo this very Nastasya Filippovna whom Ganya covets. In such ways, Myshkin is from the start destined to involvement with social settings that await him.

Innocent Myshkin's unconventional charms—his readiness to chat, to share what he knows, to listen attentively to others—draw the attention of the three daughters of Lizaveta Yepanchina, who have never been exposed to this type of person. He tells the girls stories of his sojourn in Switzerland. One of them concerns his sudden freeing from a dreadful depression, at its worst in his feeling that everything was *strange*, not part of his own world. 'I was finally roused from this gloomy state...by the bray of an ass in the marketplace...suddenly everything seemed to clear up in my head.'

Discussion questions

Does Myshkin seem naïve (or simply friendly?) when we first meet him returning from Europe to Russia? Or is he sharply assessing his environment as he reenters Russian social life?

Lizaveta's daughters are surprised by the openness of Myshkin's conversation with them. Is Dostoyevsky consciously stressing here a difference between Russian and Western cultures? Or is it simply a question of portraying Myshkin's free spirited personality?

What do you make of the word 'idiot' to describe Myshkin? Does his epilepsy do something to define him?