

Prince Myshkin (in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*) **Closed**

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.

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 re enters 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?