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Dialecticism Foreshadows Existentialism in *The Idiot*

In *The Idiot*, Fyodor Dostoevsky uses the metaphor of the naïve hero's epileptic attacks to investigate mind storms caused by moral conflict in society. Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* is an impacting biblical allegory alluding to George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's "Dialectic" published in *The Science of Logic* in 1929 juxtaposed to Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling a dialectical lyric* published in 1843. Kierkegaard wrote *Fear and Trembling* under the pseudonymous - johannes de silentio - twenty-five years prior to the publication of *The Idiot* in 1868. Soren Kierkegaard is the father of existentialism who disagreed with Hegel's philosophical and religious viewpoints. Wilhelm Hegel is the father of the dialectical argument.

The question of the absurdity of atheism is investigated in *The Idiot*. Dostoevsky incorporates three basic allusions from *Fear and Trembling*: the aesthetic realm, the ethical realm and the religious realm. This essay will deconstruct a Hegelian dialectic argument present in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* that creates a dualistic synthesis that will spawn an existential polemic that will transcend and empower a biblical allegory.

Dostoevsky alludes to *Fear and Trembling* in a key allegorical passage. Lebedev exasperates about Nastasya Filippovna Barashkova disposition about her disgruntle suitor: "She thinks no more of him than she would of an orange-peel, well more than that, seeing as she's in fear and trembling" (Dostoevsky, 210). She is grateful to have Parfion Semyonovich Rogozhin out of her life.

*Fear and Trembling* is a dialectical lyric. This is an allusion that foreshadows a dialectical argument that will evolve into an existential argument. Dostoevsky referenced Hegel's work and incorporated the nature of the dialectical argument in *The Idiot*. Hegel explains the nature of the dialectical argument: "It is in this dialectical (as here understood) and in the comprehension of the unity of opposites, or of the positive in the negative, that speculative knowledge consists" (Beardsley Ed., 636). This is not the dialectic that was used in ancient Greece by Plato which was a form of reasoning that was based on an exchange of ideas through questions and answers. Hegel's dialectic consists of a thesis, antithesis and a synthesis. The antithesis collides into the thesis and creates a synthesis. Only polarized arguments that pertain to the masses are dialectic. The dialectical argument present in *The Idiot* contains the thesis "spiritual darkness" (Dostoevsky, 238). The antithesis is the Christ figure Prince Myshkin who is the "light" of the world (479) and "'beauty and prayer' is really 'the supreme synthesis of life'" (Dostoevsky, 237). At the core of the synthesis of this dialectical argument is an existential polemic that creates dualism for beauty: the aesthetic beauty of the flesh or the religious beauty of Christ's compassion. Dostoevsky writes about the beauty of the flesh:

"Such Power!' cried Adelaida suddenly, gazing avidly at the picture over her sisters shoulder.

'Where? What power?' Lizaveta Prokofievna asked sharply.

'Beauty like that is power,' said Adelaida warmly. 'With beauty like that one could turn the world upside down' (Dostoevsky, 86). Thus, the issue of

contrasting physical beauty with religious beauty is introduced. The absurdity of ignoring biblical concepts of beauty and morality, in reaction to physical beauty is pivotal in *The Idiot*. Women often use their beauty as a source of ascendancy and domination. Feminine beauty is a source of universal power. Wisdom comes from God, knowledge comes from erudition, coercion comes from tyranny, passive resistance seeks peace through civil disobedience, capital is either earned or bequeathed and they all buckle under to the prowess of a beautiful and seductive femme-fatale like Nastasya Filippovna.

Prince Lev Nikoltayevich Myshkin is a Christ figure in the novel. Many of the characters mistake Prince Myshkin's compassion for his fellow human being for being an idiot. The Prince is not an idiot. He is a caring and loving individual. Dostoevsky uses an image of Christ to symbolize the ethical and religious realms. Dostoevsky writes about the image of Christ: "The picture shows Christ, just taken down from the cross. I believe artists usually depict Christ, whether on the cross or taken down from it, as still retaining a trace of extraordinary beauty in the face; they seek to preserve this beauty in him, during the most terrible agonies" (Dostoevsky, 430). Christ's beauty is the spiritual beauty of the universe. Christ's beauty promises eternal life with God.

Both pictures of Nastasya Filippovna and Christ are abstract. The reader is looking at an image of Nastasya Filippovna and Christ in a two dimensional picture. Everyone processes images differently. Both the images of Nastasya and of Christ turn into symbols. Nastasya Filippovna is the symbol for the aesthetic realm. Christ's picture is the symbol for the ethical and religious realms.

Dostoevsky has a picture of the crucifixion to symbolize the religious realm. Kierkegaard states it takes “a great leap of faith” in order to reach the religious realm. The reason that both Nastasya Filippovna and Christ are portrayed in pictures is to explain how perceptions can be abstractions. To have ambiguity and not clearly understand Nastasya Filippovna or Christ is highly possible.

The carpe diem life style, which is in the aesthetic realm, ignores the promise of eternity with God in exchange for immediate gratification. Dostoevsky writes, “Russians don’t just become atheists, they positively believe it. As if it were some new faith, oblivious of the fact they are believing in a negation” (Dostoevsky, 577). “Believing in a negation” is the birth of secular humanism in Russia. Atheism is an end within itself. Dostoevsky’s writing is an attempt to restore Russia. The Prince represents a savior for Russia. He is calling all of the hardened hearts of Russians to reconcile with God. The biblical phrase “Fear and Trembling” appears in Jeremiah 33:9 A Glorious return promised to the captives: “And it shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and an honor before all the nations of the earth, which shall hear all the good that I do unto them: and they shall fear and tremble for all the goodness and for all the prosperity that I procure unto it.” Dostoevsky questions why Russia is so spiritually divided. The aesthetic realm represents selfishness and self-centeredness. The ethical realm moves toward selflessness and serving other people. It takes “a great leap of faith” to transcend to the religious realm.

Nastasya Filippovna transcends from the aesthetic realm to the ethical and religious realms. She out grows her selfish worldly desires and becomes

more concerned with others. Nastasya writes in her letter:

I have heard that your sister, Adelaide, said once of my portrait, that with beauty like that one could turn the world upside down. But I have renounced the world; does that amuse you, coming from me with my diamonds and lace, in the company of drunkards and rogues? Pay no attention to that, I have almost ceased to exist and I know it; heaven only knows what is living within me instead (480).

Nastasya matures throughout the story.. The material world is no longer satisfying to Nastasya Filippovna, she is now more concerned with others and spiritual affairs. Nastasya sheds her image in the picture for a more loving and altruistic person. Prince Myshkin influenced Nastasya Filippovna by his beautiful example; she traded her self-absorbed attitude and became a kind outgoing person.

Nastasya did not clearly see Rogozhin's foul intentions. The biblical phrase "Fear and Trembling" appears again in KJV Psalm 55:5 A cry against deceitful friends: "Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me." The true horror for Nastasya Filippovna is that Rogozhin is her fatal attraction. Nastasya Filippovna is sickened by Rogozhin's rude and inappropriate behavior; it is obvious he knows little of propriety or decorum. Nastasya Filippovna's intuition spoke to her, but it could not stop her dismal fate. Rogozhin has a Machiavellian philosophy; he is willing to go to any means to reach his end. Rogozhin's pernicious act of stabbing the woman he could not buy or woo brings a grievous ending and tragedy to this novel.

Throughout *The Idiot*, Hegel's dialectical argument enhances Soren Kierkegaard's existentialism which flows through this apocalyptic allegory.

Dostoevsky questions the absurdity of atheism. The synthesis of the dialectic argument creates the dualism for beauty: the beauty of the flesh or the beauty of Christ's compassion. These two choices for beauty represent freewill for humankind; but according to existential ideologies, both options are satisfactory ways to live life. It is a paradox that freewill and predestination coexist, but God is omnipotent. What is predestined in *The Idiot* is the content of the allegory, *The Book of Revelation*. Prince Myshkin lives in a world full of hate and discontent; but despite the obstacles in his life, he remains untouched by his adversary's negativity. He is a beautiful human being. Dostoevsky rejects any argument that atheism can foster a healthy society which will nurture beauty. Nastasya is brutally murdered because she has the fatal flaw of natural beauty and kindness. Dostoevsky's genius acknowledges the power of the new philosophies while celebrating and reverencing the biblical allegory.

#### Works Cited

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