

The Theme of Demons

By Bob Morley

Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *Demons* is a piece that observes Russian ideals during the 1870's. A background of Dostoevsky is necessary to comprehend the plot of the story. Dostoevsky was influenced by a murder in Moscow in 1869 in which a student was killed by four assailants. The student, Ivan Ivanov, wished to leave a secret society but was killed out of fear of him becoming an informer. The leader of the group, Sergei Nechaev, was an ambitious nihilist. Nechaev was an extremist who had visions of a revolution. (Chisholm). Written with Mikhail Bakunin, a Russian anarchist, (Mikhail), the document *Catechism of a Revolutionist* stated:

“The Revolutionist is a Doomed Man. He has no private interests, no affairs, sentiments, ties, property nor even a name of his own. His entire being is devoured by one purpose, one thought, one passion - the revolution.”

Catechism of a Revolutionist was written to help overthrow the current Russian government. This new movement compelled Dostoevsky to write a novel. The story of *Demons* is identical to the actions by Nechaev, but Dostoevsky uses the story line to discuss his own ideals. Dostoevsky fought against the liberal movement at the time of *Demons* and objected to the adoption of western culture through his novel. (Gordin).

Dostoevsky's view on religion had a major influence on his writing. Although his religious views are not verified, it is likely that Dostoevsky followed the Orthodox faith. At the age of eighteen, Dostoevsky's father was murdered by his own serfs. This loss most likely affected his writing. Especially in the creation of *The Brothers Karamazov*. If he was strongly orthodox, it is not strange that most of the major atheists in his novels are either murdered, or they commit suicide. Dostoevsky had even noted his plans for writing a book about the life of Christ. (Townsend).

Throughout his life, Dostoevsky involved himself in political and social issues. At one time, he joined a group called the “Petrashevsky circle.” This group was planning to spread anti-government propaganda and was therefore apprehended by the officials. After being thrown into prison, Dostoevsky was given a death sentence. On the day of his planned execution, the Czar ordered his sentence to be lifted. Dostoevsky then spent four years in a Siberian camp. A new light had been lifted on his psyche after being spared from death. (“Fyodor Dostoevsky”).

In *Demons*, the leader of “our people”, that is, the small circle of men constituting a secret society, is Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky. Pyotr is the son of Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, one of the most important characters in the novel. Stepan will be discussed later in much detail. Pyotr is a nihilist who uses a small town and five residents to test his capabilities of disrupting society and order. He openly calls himself a nihilist to Nikolai Stavrogin, (Dostoevsky 419), and the narrator states that Pyotr belonged to the Internationale. This is the International Workingmen's Association, which was founded partly by Karl Marx himself in 1864. Pyotr gained control over the five men and others through “sentimentality.” (Dostoevsky 385).

The murdered man in *Demons* named Shatov is in direct correlation to Ivan Ivanov. Shatov used to belong to the same society as Verkhovensky, but chose to leave. Pyotr chooses to murder Shatov not necessarily because he was afraid Shatov would denounce them, but

because he wanted to strengthen the “knot” of the five men. (Dostoevsky 386). Pyotr had frequently told, (and lied), to the five members that there were thousands of groups like them throughout Russia. Once all of these “knots” were strong enough, society could be taken down. Nechaev had also spoken of tightening a knot of men through murder. The men would become dependant on each other and not dare speak of it to anyone else. (Dostoevsky 726).

One of the concepts brought up in *Demons* is called “Shigalyovism.” This is brought up in the novel through the character Shigalyov who is in the process of creating a new social system. Pevear and Volokhonsky note that the word “shigalyovism entered the Russian language; it denotes a form of socio-political demagogy and posturing with a tendency to propose extreme measures and total solution.” (Dostoevsky 727). While pleading with Stavrogin to act as his “Ivan Tsarevich”, Pyotr attempts to explain Shigalyovism. (Ivan Tsarevich is a Russian fairy tale character who competes with his two eldest brothers for their father’s throne. Ivan eventually takes the throne). (Stonebarger). Verkhovensky throws himself into a rapturous state Declaring “I’m for Shigalyov!” (Dostoevsky 417). In his description of Shigalyovism, Pyotr mentions enlightening a tenth of the population and rendering the remaining populace worthless. In Dostoevsky’s *Diary of a Writer* he disagrees with and attacks these actions. (Hanak). Pyotr is obviously a representation of the radical youth that Dostoevsky despised.

During the discussion between Pyotr and Nikolai, Pyotr observes:

“...nowadays nobody’s mind is his own. Nowadays there are terribly few distinct minds...Liputin is a crook, but I know one point in him. There’s no crook who doesn’t have his point...” (Dostoevsky 417).

Eventually, Pyotr mentions that he is a nihilist... but still loves beauty. (Dostoevsky 419). He then proceeds to later to call himself a crook and not a socialist. (Dostoevsky 420). Crook in this case is most likely a deceiving or dishonest person. Verkhovensky uses lies to assimilate his power over individuals but it is because of his goal of rebuilding society that he feels justified for his actions. His success is his one point.

The character Kirillov is also a member of the society who claims to have spent three months in America lying on the ground. During this time he formulated a bizarre idea of committing suicide to become God. (Dostoevsky 115). Kirillov had promised his society that he would kill himself whenever an excuse was needed. That is, if the society were to murder someone, Kirillov would shoot himself and take blame for the murder. It is through this character that Dostoevsky introduces a philosophical concept. Pyotr’s words to Kirillov are: “I also know that it was not you who ate the idea, but the idea that ate you...” (Dostoevsky 558). This applies to Kirillov’s absurd vision and also to the people connected with the social movement. This novel is a satire and it is intended specifically to insult the radicals. It seems that the reformers actions were ahead of an idea that had not been fully “digested.”

Pyotr’s father Stepan is, as I mentioned before, one of the most important characters in the novel. Stepan has a great epiphany regarding life near the end of his life. It is through this character that Dostoevsky narrates many of his own opinions and ideas. Stepan completely opposes the nihilist movement and the changing Russian society. He leaves his house on foot to go on a journey after losing his respect in town. (He lost his respect by denouncing Russian nihilists and citizens in a speech during a literary gathering). After traveling with a new friend who sells gospels, Stepan decided he wants to re-read the gospel. Stepan quickly falls ill and observes God on his death bed. He says, “God is necessary for me if only because he is the one

being who can be loved eternally...” (Dostoevsky 663). He considers himself immortal because his love for God will never die. Stepan justifies this by saying God would have no reason to extinguish his love and negate his existence. It is also during these last thoughts that Stepan brings up the meaning of the novel. His new friend Sofya Mateevna read a gospel story about swine at his request:

“Now a large herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside; and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them leave. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. When the herdsman saw what had happened, they fled, and told in the city and in the country... those who had seen it told them how he who had been possessed with demons was healed.’ Terribly many thoughts occur to me now: you see, it’s exactly like our Russia. These demons who come out of a sick man and enter into the swine-it’s all the sores, all the miasmas, all the uncleanness, all the big and little demons accumulated in our great and dear sick man, in our Russia, for centuries, for centuries! [Yes, this is Russia which I have always loved.] But a great will and a great thought will descend to her from on high, as upon that insane demoniac, and out will come all these demons, all the uncleanness, all the abomination that is festering on the surface... and they will beg of themselves to enter into swine. And perhaps they already have! It is us, us and them, and Petrusha... [and the others with him,] and I, perhaps, first, at the head, and we will rush insane and raging, from the cliff down into the sea, and all be drowned, and good riddance to us, because that’s the most we’re fit for. But the sick man will be healed and ‘sit at the foot of Jesus’... and everyone will look in amazement... Dear, [you will understand...] but it excites me very much now... [you will understand... we will understand together.]” (Dostoevsky 654).

The demons in Stepan’s scenario are all of the new western influences and ideas. (Pevear). Stepan says that Pyotr, (Petrusha), and his followers are possessed. It is not so much the men that are the demons, but the ideas inside of them. The ideas of western culture, nihilism, socialism, anything corrupting Russian society had eaten the Russian citizens. They did not eat the ideas. Although the Russians are striving for a better society, Dostoevsky thinks they are turning to the wrong actions.

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