

DICKENSIAN MOTIFS IN TOLSTOY'S AND DOSTOYEVSKY'S AESTHETIC FRAMEWORK

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Abstract. The paper dwells on the attempt to highlight the moral and spiritual aspects in Dickens's writing and their reflectance in Tolstoy's and Dostoyevsky's prose. The creative development of both novelists had been marked by acute interest in both the personality of Charles Dickens and his creative legacy. The Dickensian works were the source of inspiration for both writers being coordinated with their moral and spiritual grounds. The paper contains a sketch of the chief motifs that are common for all the three classics based on comparative analysis of texts, as well as on archive materials. The chief motifs under description are fear; crime and redemption; tragic beauty entwined with false pride.

Keywords: literary comparison; linguo-poetic analysis; Christian motifs; aesthetic reception and reminiscences; Charles Dickens; Tolstovian and Dostoyevskian artistic framework.

Introduction

According to Vladimir Nabokov's vision of Russian literary legacy (which is famous for its poignant and precise observations [1]), "Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky represent the two poles of Russian literary framework; whereas the former is the light incarnated and the latter seems more like a gloomy sufferer who repeatedly placed Jesus Christ the Saviour into every work of his. Yet, both of them are centered around one stem by name of Christianity – the great spiritually and emotionally charged tradition that granted and is still granting hope to the mankind" [Ibid.: 433]. The present paper dwells on an attempt at sketching the chief Christian motifs of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the two literary geniuses of Russia, and establishes their links to the similar motifs in the English novelism, namely, in the one by Charles Dickens. This very choice is stipulated by the fact that becoming aware of the latest English literary novelties was a remarkable trait of Russian nobility and high-class social circles. Thus, Dostoyevsky's words serve as a vivid and persuasive proof of the aforementioned lofty habit:

"We understand Dickens in Russia, I am convinced, almost as well as the English, and maybe even all the subtleties; maybe even we love him no less than his own countrymen..." [2: 69].

A yet more expressive evidence lies in the words of an anonymous critic:

“The Russians can be proud of the fact that it is we who know Dickens more and better than other nationalities – and it is we who have managed to be the best translators of his works” [2: 319].

I.F. Hapgood, a famous translator of *Childhood, Adolescence, Youth* and other Tolstoy’s works, who visited Yasnaya Poliana in 1898, confirms Tolstoy’s high appreciation of Dickens. She noted that the Russian writer was “very critical of all English and American writers”. According to Hapgood, it was only Dickens who appealed to Tolstoy. The great Russian writer even told her that there were three conditions to becoming a good novelist: “There should be a subject to talk about, original skill of writing, and honesty. Dickens is a combination of all these three factors” [3: 576]. The great influence of Dickens on Tolstoy’s life and work is proved by the fact that, at the end of Tolstoy’s life, in response to “comment on writers in a new foreign edition of *Writers about Writers*, Tolstoy said:

“If I... had had time I would have written about Dickens, as he made me happy and influenced my state of mind” [4: 324-325].

The interpretation of the Christian teaching of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ by Dickens and the literary realization of evangelic morality were of great value to Tolstoy. The relentless interest of young Tolstoy in Dickens was inspired by similar moral principles, depth of outlook, and power of psychological analysis.

Methods

While analysing the Dickensian motifs and observing their reflection in the Russian classic novelism, we resorted to a number of methodological techniques, namely:

- a descriptive method;
- a comparative method which is necessary to reveal the common features of the two literary frameworks;
- a linguo-poetic method aimed at the analysis of literary form (in contrast to linguo-stylistic method aimed at the analysis of language units functioning within a literary work) [5: 19-53];
- a component analysis method that implies revealing the main structural parts of literary form (i.e., motif, image, plot, composition, character portrayal, etc.).

Research and Results

Christianity and Fear. Among the other spiritual traditions, Christianity stands out as the one focused on suffering rather than bliss as distinct from oriental religions [6: 232]. An exemplification of suffering can be found in the notion of fear. Both Dickens and Tolstoy opposed the ‘forced

education' concept that was based on the fear of punishment. The Dickensian tones and motifs enrich the episodes depicting Princess Marya's lessons with her father, as well as Seriozha Karenin's lessons. We believe that these two motifs were borrowed from David Copperfield lessons with Mr. Murdstone, his stepfather, – which were vividly received and praised by Russian readers and later reflected in Russian aesthetic endeavour. "A study of the drafts of Tolstoy's novels confirms the suspicion that problems of structure and composition were often in the forefront of his thoughts <...> There is no doubt that he [Tolstoy] seized avidly at any confirmation of his ideas in other people's work and even borrowed their examples" [7: 37].

The general atmosphere of David's father lessons to a certain extent resembles the Tolstoy's description of relations between Princess Marya and her father, old Prince Bolkonsky. David reminisces the malicious moments when he began "to feel the words I have been at infinite pains to get into my head, all sliding away. <...> I hand the first book to my mother. Perhaps it is a grammar, perhaps a history or geography. I take a last drowning look at the page as I give it into her hand... I trip over a word. Mr. Murdstone looks up. I trip over another word. <...> but I am not successful with the second, for I am very stupid. I tumble down before I get to the old place, at a point where I was all right before, and stop to think" [8: 380].

This remarkable interior monologue filled with abundance of emotions and subtle analysis of fear growth can serve as a direct parallel to self-conscious behavioral patterns of Princess Marya:

"Deeply terrified, Princess looked at the closely set sparkling eyes of her father; red spots travelled throughout her face, and it was obvious that she did not understand a single word being so scared that fear would never allow her to comprehend the further broodings of her father, as filled with clarity as they might be. Be it the teacher to blame, be it the student's overall guilt, yet, every day it was one and the same again: Marya's eyes fainted, and she could not either see or hear..." [9: 68-69].

Crime and Redemption. Another characteristic trait of Christianity is the intention to act out. Christian ideology is not contemplative but interactive, and both the root and target of every action we take lies the in ultimate salvation attained through the pathway of redemption [6: 97]. The redemption of sin (namely, the crime / murder as a direct violation of the New Testament commitments) is brightly depicted by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his all-times famous *Crime and Punishment*, which, in turn, is paralleled with Dickensian *Our Mutual Friend*. Nikolay Strakhov, Russian literary scholar, compares the feelings of Rodion Raskolnikov with those of Bradley Headstone: "...in Raskolnikov's soul, amongst fear and pain, lives yet another beast – the reminiscence of crime. The imagination and memory of the evil-doer seem to haunt the crime scene every single moment" [10: 520]. Com-

menting on his thought, Strakhov indicates the similar description of crime in Dickensian *Our Mutual Friend*:

“the evil-doer... cannot escape from the slower torture of incessantly doing the evil deed again and doing it more efficiently. <...> If I had done it as alleged, it is conceivable that I would have made this and this mistake?..” [11: 221].

Comparing Headstone and Raskolnikov in terms of their reflexivity over sin and redemption issues, Strakhov concludes that Raskolnikov reminisces only twice – though powerfully and distinctly – coming to the crime scene unconsciously driven by a mirky irresistible force and, repeatedly, envisioning the murder episode in his sleep. The crime results in double torment: “The torment of fear. Despite all the hidden clues, the suspicion is always there. The mere glimpse of danger immerses him into the ocean of fear” [10: 521]. The second chain of torments, in Strakhov’s opinion, lies in the feeling sensed by murderer while trying to get close to other people who remain filled with innocence, cordiality, and warmth of life [11: 223].

The feeling of alienation from people is common for Raskolnikov and Bradley who was forced to conceal his true feelings giving them way only in the darkness of the night: “He broke loose at night like an ill-tamed wild animal” [12: 532]. For Raskolnikov, “the Divine Truth prevails ending in the necessity to squeal on himself” being unable to bear the isolation and alienation from humanity, universe, and the Divine.

Though Raskolnikov could not comprehend and brood upon the inner spiritual waves rising up and filling him with torture, his attempt at introspection became a testing ground for the forthcoming spiritual enlightenment. As for Headstone, he only tries to analyze the failed attempt at committing the crime and regrets the failure.

Strakhov points out that Raskolnikov, as well as Headstone, “teases himself and throws himself into the evil deed, trying to dive into it until the self-alienation overcomes”. According to the critic, Headstone’s concept of crime, as well as the one of Raskolnikov’s, was based on egotism and malice. Drawing a parallel line between Headstone and Raskolnikov, Strakhov calls the latter a truly Russian man, for he terminated what he started and accepted the infinity of the world evil powers and the inevitability of suffering:

“It is evidently clear and understandable that evil hides in the human spirit even deeper than socialist ‘healers’ presume; and no model of social construction can escape the evil; and human soul stays unchanged since abnormality and sin dwell in it; that, finally, the laws of human spirit still remain undiscovered, still remain indefinite and mysterious; hence, no healers can arrive, and no terminal judges, but only those who proclaim: “The wrath of Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” [13: 201; 14: 1010].

Tragic Beauty & False Pride. Christianity is a spiritual view that involves the perception of lifeline in terms of tragedy and martyrdom, or suffering for righteous purposes. The notion of tragic beauty entwined with false pride (i.e., the amalgam of sin and virtue) encompasses both Dickensian and Tolstovian poetic frameworks. The spiritual nature of Nastasya Filippovna's tragedy in *Idiot* could be explained by the ambiguity of her soul. "The continuous awareness of her shame carries with it certain weird pleasure slightly resembling wrath" [15: 56-60]. Nastasya Filippovna is overwhelmed with thunderstorm of feeling and ambiguous thoughts – being angry, unjust, and proud to the extreme. The similarity in plot collision concerning Nastasya and Lizzie Hexam (*Our Mutual Friend*) is remarkable: it is easy to note the features in the portrayal of the former that manifest the influence of the latter. Pride, the refusal to contemplate, the strife for heroic action, honesty in self-judgements are common for both characters. E.g., both heroines suppress their passions and hide their location from the beloved ones.

As an artist whose perception of the world was almost exclusively tragic, Dostoyevsky concentrated on the issues of 'moral ideal' and 'spiritual beauty', both of which he felt must be realized in order to rescue the world from its steadily moving downward to an Apocalypse. However, Dostoyevsky grasped the 'idea of female beauty' in its manifold forms; for instance, the beauty Nastasya Filippovna seems 'tragic' to him. We should appreciate here the originality of such a female character in *Our Mutual Friend* as Lizzie Hexam, because there is 'something quite refined in her beauty... a shade of sadness upon her that is quite touching'. One can see something striking and tragic in Lizzie's and Nastasya's beauty. Lizzie's face seems tragic to Eugene:

There was a kind of flicker on her face which at first he took to be fitful firelight; but on the second look, he saw that she was weeping. A sad and solitary spectacle, as shown him by the rising and the falling of the fire... A deep rich piece of colour, with the brown flash on her cheek and the shining luster of her hair, though sad and solitary [12: 158-159].

The moment arouses the reader's compassion, and introduces the reader to the emotions from the Platonic realm of the 'perfectly beautiful'. The reader sees much in common between the two, not merely in their beauty, but also in their 'false pride' or masochistic arrogance and self-loathing. Nastasya Filippovna's behaviour demonstrates excessive or inflexible pride and self-love; Prince Myshkin sees something masochistic in her beauty when he studies her photograph: "This face, unusual for its beauty, as well as for something else, now struck him even more strongly. It was as though there was boundless pride and contempt, almost hatred, in this face..." [16: 286].

Conclusion

The system of Dickensian motifs in Tolstoy's and Dostoyevsky's framework can be better understood via Jacob's ladder metaphor. As the spirituality, subtlety, and transition from animalistic to humane / Divine increases from the bottom to the top, such are the Christian motifs that unite all the three classics: the fear is replaced by crime ending up in redemption and remorse, whereas the tragic beauty crowns it all and reigns over the realm of Dickensian images.

Dostoyevsky's – as well as Tolstoy's – response to Dickens was a broad one: consciously or not, the Russian novelists refracted through their creative prism the overall power of Dickens's imaginative structures [17: 13-14]. Close comparison of some texts (*The Idiot*, *Crime and Punishment*, *War and Peace*, *David Copperfield*, and *Our Mutual Friend*) has revealed certain parallels. Comparing Dickens's and Dostoyevsky's works, we should bear in mind the distinguishing features of the Tolstovian and Dostoyevskian creative process, eliminating the possibility of simple imitation but including the operation of imagination and of subconscious deliberation; the Russian novelists are drawing creative energy from the potent influence of an artist whom he recognized as 'typologically close' to his own interests in fiction. Both writers had grasped the importance of Dickens's motifs, themes, and the Dickens's use of symbolic action and dialogue in isolation for examining psychological truths.

What a novelist thinks of another novelist is best deduced not from what he says critically but what he says creatively; in the use he makes of the other's art.

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