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Epilepsy in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*: Language, Stigma, and Mythology

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This article explores the medical and non-medical discourses that shaped the representation of epilepsy and contributed to the cultural mythology surrounding epilepsy in the nineteenth century. The article will attempt to trace the terminology and its negative connotations that have historically been associated with the disorder in medical and cultural contexts.

*The article will specifically focus on Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, in which the reader sees the author's personal view of epilepsy, cleverly accommodated into the character of Prince Myshkin. The Prince has evaded understanding by critics for centuries, and readers have often noted that because of the way the narrative is structured, the Prince's personality often seems to change. This article will explore how Dostoevsky utilises tropes associated with epilepsy to create the mysterious figure of Myshkin. Finally, it will elaborate on Robert Lord's view of Prince Myshkin as a sinister character.*

The term epilepsy appears earliest in Ibn Sina's (often known as 'Avicenna', 980-1037) works. The condition has been known by several names since then, but epilepsy is the term that survived. William Gordon Lennox rightly notes that the names given to an illness by the common people most clearly represent the general attitudes and social biases toward it. Lennox was a renowned nineteenth-century neurologist, and a pioneer in the field of epileptology. He writes that the term 'epilepsy' originated as a Greek word *epilambanein* which means "a condition of being overcome or seized or attacked".¹ It is a passive verb, indicating that some force foreign to the body does the seizing.² However, its usage was only popularized in English after 1578, when Henry Lyte, a famous British Botanist, translated *Cruydeboeck*, by Rembert Dodoens, a Flemish botanist.

Other terms commonly associated with the disease were the *morbis sacer* ("the sacred disease"), *morbis daemonicus* ("the demonic disease"), *morbis insputatus* ("the disease which is spat at"), and *morbis comitialis* ("the *comitia* disease", so called if someone were to

¹ Quoted in Lennox, William G. *Epilepsy and Related Disorders*. London: J. & A. Churchill Ltd., Vol. 1, 1960, p. 40

² Lennox here calls to attention a picture used by Owsei Temkin in his book *The Falling Sickness*. The picture depicts pilgrims approaching St. Valentine, patron of the epileptics, as a man and a woman lay on the floor, and a pig looks on. The pig, here, is a symbol of the devil.

have a convulsion in the Roman *comitia* (assembly), the assembly would be immediately suspended). In the history of epilepsy, only one of the popular names associated with the disease has had a positive connotation: *mal de Corazon* (“sickness of courage”, or “benevolence”), a little-known Spanish term. However, the prevailing sentiments provoked by most terms used for the disease have been fear, disgust, and pity.

In this paper, I will trace the pathways of negative signification that epilepsy has taken through history up to the nineteenth century. The paper will focus on Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, and the major tropes linked with epilepsy that the author utilises to his advantage to create a character that has intrigued his readers for more than a century. This will be preceded by a short account of how the negative connotations around epilepsy arose and have persisted. Finally, I will explore how the reappropriation of the metaphorical language of epilepsy can be still be seen in the responses to Dostoevsky’s protagonist, Prince Myshkin. Critics like Robert Lord have interpreted Myshkin’s character as cunning, sinister, and monstrous. However, in my opinion, such an interpretation of the character is rooted in the deeply ingrained prejudice and stigma against people with epilepsy.

The aim of this paper to bring into focus some of the prominent metaphors and terminology that have been associated with the disease for centuries, and continue to alienate the patient from society even today. Patients of epilepsy have typically been seen as the “other”, an outsider, with lines between the healer and the healed, the diseased and the clean, the holy and the unholy, the normal and the abnormal, clearly demarcated. However, the project of de-stigmatising epilepsy started by the Hippocratic physicians failed time and time again. Despite repeated attempts by several physicians after Hippocrates, the same economy of metaphors continued to be associated with the disorder. My aim is to examine the evolving medical terminology, and then to try and establish its effect on popular, widely circulated cultural texts such as the Bible, Shakespeare’s plays, Dostoevsky’s works, etc. Dostoevsky is one the most important figures linked with the representation of epilepsy, and this is why I have chosen to limit my study to the nineteenth century.

This is by no means a comprehensive view of the journey of epilepsy, neither pre-, nor post-nineteenth century. Medical science has of course come a long way in the treatment of the disorder and management of seizures, but unfortunately lack of awareness and stigma still persist. Additionally, I would like to point out that this article is based on a study of western thought only. I have linked traditional western medical narrative to western literature, and while

I am aware that there are several prominent theories and treatments for epilepsy across cultures and belief systems, it would be beyond the scope of this article to discuss.

Epilepsy and Stigma: The Context

Epilepsy had always been associated with the mythological. Because people didn't know the reason behind it, they feared its dramatic effect and associated it with gods and devils. Around 400 BC, Hippocrates, often known as 'The Father of Medicine', was the first to argue that epilepsy was just like any other disease of the body, and that it was hereditary in nature.³ In doing so, he rejected the idea that epilepsy was divine or demonic, visited on mortals by some supernatural force. The Hippocratic physicians performed autopsies on goats and sheep, to establish the theory that epilepsy was caused by a disturbance in humours and vapours. Their scientific explanation for the disease was a softening of the brain, as Jeanette Stirling puts it: "cold phlegm was thought to be the primary culprit in the genesis of the disorder, depriving the veins of air as it passes into warm blood, where it then 'congeals and stops the blood'." (Stirling, 3)

However, even though Hippocrates was the first to reason that epilepsy was a physiological ailment, not a paranormal one, this project failed, and epilepsy continued to be stigmatised and associated with the same metaphors for centuries after Hippocrates. This was because, the Hippocratic physicians, despite their intentions, continued to subscribe to the same lexicon that had been used to describe the disorder for centuries, and therefore fell back into the same pattern from which they were trying to break. By using the term "sacred" to describe the disease, Hippocrates placed epilepsy back into the cycle of negative representation from which they were trying to extrapolate it. Stirling (4) argues that the Hippocratic philosophers fell prey to "the demon of analogy and desire for symmetry:

Although the Hippocratic physicians were attempting to move beyond these ways of describing various manifestations of epilepsy and to bring it out of the realms of the gods and into the natural world, the web of animalistic and abject associations

³ See, Stirling, Jeannette. *Representing Epilepsy: Myth and Matter*, Chapter 1. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010.

continued to haunt epilepsy narratives well into the nineteenth century. The language used by the Hippocratic physicians to rebut the disorder's 'sacred' origins provided the foundations for a later interdependent economy of metaphors, bestial imagery and mythic potential that continued to frame articulations of what seizures looked like for medical and non-medical observers alike.

Several of the myths surrounding epilepsy that Stirling talks about stem from the superstitions of ancient times, as well as the legends that came up with the cultural transformations since. For example, epilepsy has often been called 'the Herculean disease' (*Herculeus Morbus*) owing to the legend that Hercules killed his wife and children in an epileptic rage. Seneca's *Hercules Furens* provides a dramatic account of the furore in which Hercules murders his wife Mergara, and their sons. In 1971, Owsei Temkin chronicled a comprehensive and detailed study of epilepsy in 1971. His work is still regarded as one of the most meticulous accounts of the condition's medical and cultural history. Even though Temkin maintains that this link between maddening rage and seizures remains debatable, the idea has exercised a powerful grip on cultural imagination. Shakespeare utilised this trope too, in Othello's murder of Desdemona. Shakespeare used epilepsy in his works in various ways. In *King Lear*, it is hurled at Oswald as a curse, when he is seen as too ambitious for his class. In *Othello* and in *Julius Caesar*, epilepsy marks the protagonists' fall from grace.

While Caesar's epilepsy functions as a dramatic device in plot development, Othello's epilepsy is used as a device that transforms the play from a melodrama to a tragedy. Caesar's seizure at the moment he is offered the crown of the Empire, irrevocably sets the course towards his downfall. The influences of Hippocratic imagery are clearly evident in *Othello*, in the way the character's epilepsy is associated with the animalistic and the natural. Othello's murder of Desdemona is preceded by fugue states associated with epilepsy. Several critics, such as Charles Knight and Robert Lawson, have suggested that Othello killed Desdemona in an epileptic furore, overcome by rage and jealousy. Stirling proposes that Othello becomes epileptic the moment he succumbs to Iago's manipulation. These theories, although somewhat debatable, are reflected in Desdemona's plea for her life: "And yet I fear for you, for you're fatal then when your eyes roll so" (Shakespeare. 5. 2. 44-45).

According to Stirling, throughout the history of Western theatre, dramatic physical manifestations of disease, disability, and disorder have presented the less desirable and unattractive realities of life, and therefore added excitement, fear, tragedy, and sometimes

even comedy on stage. Epilepsy had established its metaphorical value in denoting breaches across the boundaries of social and moral propriety, part of the reason for which was the failure of the Hippocratic tradition in trying to locate epilepsy in the natural rather than the supernatural.

One of the results of this failure was the persistent common belief that epilepsy is contagious, and can spread through any contact with patients. This view of the epileptic body as a site of contagion has been prevalent since Biblical times. Referring to an episode in the Bible in Luke 9:38, where a distraught father brings his ailing son to Jesus to have him “purified”, Stirling (9) writes:

Within this powerful cultural text, the lines of demarcation between the afflicted, unclean (fallen) and the healed, clean (upright) body are unequivocally drawn and the disciples instructed to deliver the afflicted from their impurities... This image of the diseased, afflicted or fallen body delivered from the corruption of epileptic disorder has enormous symbolic resonance within western medical culture. The physician’s authority over the patient is founded on the belief that medical knowledge will provide keys to health and longevity. Failure to curtail the machinations of convulsion in these symbolic and narrative economies constitutes not only lack of knowledge but also lack of faith.

Belief in the contagiousness of epilepsy continued throughout the nineteenth century, as can be seen in an editorial that appeared in the medical journal *Lancet* in January 1884, entitled ‘Bite of an Epileptic’. The article tells the story of a young man who died three days after having been bitten by a woman who was, in the midst of a seizure, “convulsively biting everything within reach”. Even though the author assures the readers that there is no poison in the bite of an epileptic, unlike the bite of a “rabid dog”, he manages to create a vivid image of an out-of-control, feral epileptic body. Stirling notes, “At first glance, the hyperbolic style of the item suggests its function is as a curiosity or colour piece: of some interest because of its reliance on more ancient superstitions, but of spurious medical value” (21). However, a week later the author was forced to defend his claim, that the bite of an epileptic is not poisonous. Ironically, the language the writer chose the end the piece with further reinforces the bestiality of the epileptic personality that it aimed to deny:

There is neither rage or rabies [in the bite of an epileptic]. The bite of a bestial man in a paroxysm of rage may be as bad as that of an infuriated rat; but, as we have said, that

is a different matter, and we would certainly advise that such persons should be kept at a safe distance. (Stirling, 21)

As we move closer to the nineteenth century, with a growing knowledge of the workings of the disease and the reasons behind it, we find medical professionals increasingly determined to ‘modernise’ epilepsy by creating a formalised and technical system of representation. Physicians were increasingly encouraged amongst the medical community to use standardised terms to record the symptoms of epileptic seizures, such as auras, ictal and post-ictal states, recovery times, etc. However, despite numerous efforts, the project to medicalise epilepsy within a neurological framework continued to carry with it the burden of centuries of negative significations.

Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*

The writing of *The Idiot* was difficult for Dostoevsky. He wrote the book early in his career, amidst severe financial hardship, worsening health, and several relapses of a gambling addiction. His pregnant second wife Anna Grigorievna had to sell most of their belongings and loan money to survive. Amidst all this, Dostoevsky was aware that this novel was his only way out of his current circumstances.

Within Dostoevsky’s oeuvre, there are several characters that have experiences with the epileptic disorder. However, I have chosen *The Idiot* as my focus for this paper, because in my opinion, the Prince’s experience with epilepsy comes closest to Dostoevsky’s own. Prince Myshkin is the novel’s protagonist who suffers from a seizure disorder for which he has been treated in Switzerland. Myshkin often comes across as naïve and socially inexperienced. However, he has a highly keen sense of empathy, morality, and spirituality. Brian Johnson argues that questions of identity and diagnosis are inextricably bound together within the novel. He writes that Prince Myshkin’s “stable diagnosis as an ‘idiot’ serves as the fundamental characteristic of his unstable identity, which in turn cannot be divorced from his diagnosis no matter how his identity is perceived” (Johnson, 1). Johnson argues that the fundamental difficulty in decoding the character of the Prince is posed by the narrative technique of the novel. The narrative provides little information and absolutely no definitive answers. The Prince’s epilepsy is therefore ultimately key to his enigmatic and mysterious character. Ippolit, a consumptive nihilist intellectual, whose personality reflects certain aspects of Myshkin’s own, captures the ambiguity within the Prince’s character perfectly when he says, “He is either

a doctor or indeed of an extraordinary intelligence and able to guess many things. (But that he is ultimately an ‘idiot’ there can be no doubt at all.)” (Dostoevsky, 389). Ippolit craves recognition and acceptance from others and as he nears death, he gives an elaborate speech regarding his life, his ambitions, and his principles, which ends in an attempt at suicide.

Recognising the Disorder

The passages in the novel that provide the reader with information regarding the Prince’s medical background are all included within the first five chapters. Therefore, the importance of the diagnosis of ‘idiocy’ is foregrounded very early on in the novel. The Prince’s reputation as an “idiot” must precede him in every consequent scene, determining beforehand the impression that he makes on strangers. According to Johnson, recognition of the epileptic character is one major motif in the novel. In fact, at the very beginning of the novel, as the reader is introduced to Myshkin, they are told that there is something inherently peculiar about his looks, such that would enable a stranger to recognise the Prince as an epileptic: “[his] eyes were big, blue and intent; their gaze had something quiet but heavy about it and was filled with that strange expression by which some are able to guess at first sight that the subject has the falling sickness” (Dostoevsky, 6).

Temkin mentions this belief that epileptics can be recognised by their features, specifically their eyes, in *The Falling Sickness*:

A particular look of epileptics had been noted by the ancient physiognomists, and in 1843 Billod had written that their "look has a characteristic expression which, no doubt, it owes to a dilatation often unequal, of the pupil, which is somewhat more than physiological and has become habitual." Maudsley spoke of "the heavy, lost look so often seen in confirmed epileptics."⁴

Even though it is unlikely that Dostoevsky would have read Temkin’s work, this was an enduring belief about the illness, that Temkin went on to chronicle in his work. It shows that Dostoevsky not only had great awareness about his disease, but also used it in a skilfull manner in his work. The dilation of the pupils which Temkin refers to, has a striking similarity to the big, blue eyes of Myshkin in the novel, while the “heavy, lost

⁴ Quote taken from Brian Johnson’s “Diagnosing Prince Myshkin” Vol. 56, No. 3 (2012), p. 379

look” can be traced in Myshkin’s gaze which has something heavy about it and is filled with a strange expression.

The motif is first introduced to the reader in the scene on the train from Warsaw to St. Petersburg, when the narrator first notes that both Myshkin and Rogozhin have “remarkable physiognomies”. Rogozhin is Myshkin’s alter-ego, his dark double, in the novel. He has just inherited a huge fortune from his father and has fallen in love with Nastasya Filippovna. Here, the possibility is introduced for the first time that just like Rogozhin can sense that Myshkin might be an epileptic, Myshkin too can sense a disorder within Rogozhin. This indeed turns out to be true as the novel proceeds, since it is revealed that the Prince is, in fact, unusually perceptive of other peoples’ character traits. This motif of recognition of disorder is later furthered in the novel when Myshkin feels Rogozhin’s eyes on him as he wanders through the city of St. Petersburg in a pre-epileptic state, and when he recognises Rogozhin’s house by its appearance of darkness and disorder. It is also evident when Myshkin recognises Nastasya simply by looking at her portrait. Nastasya Filippovna is one of the novel’s two female protagonists. She is of noble birth and after she was orphaned at a young age she was taken as a sexual servant by her guardian Totsky. Dostoevsky portrays her as deeply intelligent and intuitive. Both Myshkin and Rogozhin are deeply in love with her, and she remains torn between the two. Just as is the case with Rogozhin, Myshkin can sense a disorder within Nastasya too, and he notes that her eyes betray her suffering.

In describing his own condition while in a state of stupor, Myshkin uses the term “idiot”. However, his use of this term is not meant to be self-deprecatory or derogatory. In fact, he is using a term that was very much a part of the medical vocabulary of the nineteenth century. Johnson (10) writes:

At the time European physicians used the terms idiot and idiotism to refer to a mental disorder, one that implies not only simple-mindedness, but a degree of unresponsiveness that borders on stupor. Dostoevsky himself uses this term in this manner in a letter of 1867 to Dr. Yanovsky: "this epilepsy [paduchaia] will end up carrying me off! [...] My memory has grown completely dim (completely!). I don't recognize people any more; I forget what I read the day before. I'm afraid of going mad or falling into idiocy.

Both Philippe Pinel, a physician, and Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol, a renowned psychiatrist, wrote extensively on the subject of epilepsy accompanied by

idiotism. Esquirol asserted that epilepsy sooner or later leads to insanity, because of damage to the brain due to repeated seizures. Esquirol's work established idiocy as a by-product of the seizure disorder. In fact, Myshkin's state of stupor has a lot in common with Esquirol's definition of idiocy, justifying the title of the book. Myshkin himself tells General Epanchin while explaining his condition to him, that his disease made "an idiot" of him. At the end of the novel, when Myshkin has relapsed into the stupor, the narrator observes that Dr Schneider, Myshkin's former physician, would wave his hand and exclaim, "An Idiot!".

Esquirol writes: "Idiocy is not a disease, but a condition in which the intellectual faculties are never manifested." Esquirol not only defined idiotism clearly but also established it as a set of conditions that may result from a seizure disorder. Under his categorisation, Myshkin's condition would fall under the category of dementia, not idiocy, since his symptoms seem to have stopped at the beginning of the novel, even though he relapses back into a stupor at the end of the novel;. However, here it is important to note that while prior to Esquirol, epilepsy was considered synonymous with idiocy, Esquirol separated the two conditions, and established that idiocy was only a result of epilepsy, and the two conditions need not always co-exist. However, it is clear in the novel that the popular belief was still that people with epilepsy are "idiots", as Myshkin is repeatedly referred to as an idiot, a rogue, and a fool.⁵

Diagnosing the Disorder

Prince Myshkin's medical history is first revealed to the reader in a conversation with Rogozhin:

...He [Myshkin] said, among other things, that he had indeed been away from Russia for a long time, more than four years, that he had been sent abroad on account of illness, some strange nervous illness like the falling sickness or St. Vitus's dance some sort of trembling and convulsions. (Dostoevsky, 6)

Here, the unreliable narrator seems uncertain about the Prince's diagnosis – is it St. Vitus' Dance, the falling sickness, or just "trembling and convulsion"? After having spent

⁵ For a more detailed analysis of idiotism and its link with epilepsy, see Brian Johnson's "Diagnosing Prince Myshkin". Vol. 56, No. 3 (2012): 377-393.

the past few months at Dr. Schneider's clinic in Switzerland, it seems unlikely that the Prince would still be unsure exactly what he is suffering from. The symptoms of epilepsy and St. Vitus' Dance are in fact quite similar, and at the time, it was not uncommon to confuse the two. Chorea (St. Vitus' Dance) is mainly a childhood neurological disorder, characterised by irregular, involuntary and purposeless movements in various muscle groups of the body. This could point to a potential confusion in the diagnosis of Myshkin's epilepsy by his physician. It is not until the Prince has his first seizure that any doubt regarding the nature of the disease is dispelled. Myshkin initially describes his symptoms as "trembling and convulsions". As Johnson points out, especially given the fact that Myshkin's disease began in his childhood, it is possible that Myshkin was initially diagnosed with St. Vitus's Dance, and not epilepsy.

All the three terms used to describe epilepsy here have their own connotations. The term "epilepsy" is mostly associated with the European medicine. It is detached from metaphysical associations, and therefore carries with it a sense of the disease being a physical neurological ailment. The term "falling sickness" (*paduchaia* in Russian), on the other hand, is much more related to the Russian cultural context, as it evokes the images of gods and demons, possessing the mortal human body and causing convulsions. It is a culturally loaded term, weighed down by centuries of negative stereotyping. Even though in Dostoevsky's time, and for Dostoevsky himself, the two terms are synonymous and often interchangeable, they actually have two very different cultural backgrounds and connotations: the term "epilepsy" is based a lot more in scientific thought than the term "falling sickness". The term St. Vitus's Dance on the other hand, links epilepsy to the realm of the supernatural.

Chorea was termed St. Vitus' Dance in the medieval period after those who suffered from this disorder started visiting the Chapel of St. Vitus in Prague, as he was believed to have curative powers for this disease. Its symptoms were mistaken for ecstatic dancing and hence it was known as a 'Dance'. Brian Johnson (6) writes:

This term evokes a context of ecstasy and mysticism not present in the term "falling sickness," and it also bridges the European and Russian traditions, as St. Vitus is a saint in both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions. Whereas a holy fool may be chosen of God and speak for God, those afflicted with St. Vitus's dance are possessed by God. It is the holy appellation in the term St. Vitus's Dance which segregates it from the other two terms...

Although in the end, Myshkin's character is primarily associated only with epilepsy, all three diseases, with their multiple connotations, are evoked by Dostoevsky, because Myshkin's character shows traits from all three diseases. It also shows Dostoevsky's own varied knowledge on the subject. The various forms of the disorder that Myshkin is associated with at the beginning of the novel help to maintain an enigma around his character, and in keeping it shrouded in mystery. Dostoevsky uses these diseases as a device of obfuscation.

Sexuality in *The Idiot*

Throughout history, epilepsy has been linked with sexual deviancy of some kind, especially so in women. Freud, in his essay "Dostoevsky and Parricide", reminds the reader that the earliest physicians – referring to Hippocrates and Galen – describe coition as minor epilepsy. Several physicians well into the nineteenth century compare the epileptic attack to the sexual act. It was believed that while excessive sexual activity was harmful for people with epilepsy, absolute restraint from it might also prove detrimental.

Myshkin comes across as either asexual or hyposexual. He never expresses any libidinal inclinations. After their meeting on the train, Rogozhin asks Myshkin if he is a great fancier of women after inviting him to stay at his house. Myshkin replies that due to his illness, he is in effect celibate, to which Rogozhin replies "you come out as a holy fool Prince, and God loves your kind!" (Dostoevsky, 15). In another instance, when Ganya, an ambitious and often vain official in General Epanchin's service, asks the Prince if he would marry Nastasya Filippovna, he replies that he cannot marry anyone, since he is unwell. These instances surround the Prince's character in an aura of sexual chastity, which is an integral part of his Christ-like personality and his enigma. Johnson (13) argues that the Prince's sexuality brings out a charitable side to his character and the pureness of his affections:

Given the prince's moral sensibilities, he would surely not be intimate with women outside the bounds of matrimony, so his virginity is not necessarily the result of a defect he associates epilepsy. But the manner in which Rogozhin responds to him, that he comes "out as a holy fool" because of his virginity, portrays him as somehow different in his sexuality, emphasizing the *caritas* of his love over the *eros*.

This view of the Prince's sexuality can also be observed in the scene where he kisses Marie, even though he insists that he had no erotic feelings for her, but simply because he felt sorry for her. Marie is a consumptive, downtrodden Swiss girl. After she eloped with a man who subsequently abandoned her, she was unjustly persecuted and ostracised by the people of her village.

The Prince portrays himself as unfit for marriage because of his illness, which was a common view at the time. Dostoevsky himself wrote in a letter to his brother that he would never have married had he known that he had "genuine falling sickness".⁶ However, as the novel unfolds, the reader finds out that even though he is seen as an unsuitable match for either Nastasya Filippovna or Aglaya, General Epanchin and Lizaveta Prokofievna's beautiful, intelligent, and witty youngest daughter, he is in fact, quite willing to marry either one of them. His refusal to do so therefore, must go beyond his reasons of illness. It could be taken to indicate his incapacity to fulfil one of central the duties of matrimony: the consummation of the marriage.

An explanation for this unwillingness or incapacity to consummate the marriage can be found in the medical literature of the time. The primary reason why epileptics were advised not to marry or have kids, was because epilepsy was thought to have been hereditary. It was to avoid this that medical practitioners in the nineteenth century preferred treatments for epilepsy that did not just control the seizures, but also controlled the sexuality of the epileptic. Bromide of potassium was used as a treatment for epilepsy, and had a side effect of impotence. This could be one explanation for Myshkin's unwillingness to marry. Johnson (14) refers to Temkin to provide further details regarding some of the medical treatments as he writes:

The impotence itself was deliberately induced to prevent epileptic seizures in a specific form of epilepsy that doctors believed was caused by masturbation, a notion that persisted throughout the nineteenth century. Abstinence and castration had been offered as treatment since antiquity: "most authorities [of that time] thought coitus harmful for epileptics, and advised abstinence from it, some even

⁶ For an insightful view of nineteenth century trends regarding epilepsy and marriage, see Jeannette Stirling's *Representing Epilepsy: Myth and Matter*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010, especially Chapters 1 and 2.

going as far as to recommend castration as a treatment". In the Middle Ages, castration was used as a treatment for epilepsy as well...

Rogozhin links Myshkin's lack of sexuality and his high morality in the idea of him as the "holy fool". According to Jeannette Stirling (46), "Dostoevsky's Prince is the end result of the writer's desire to depict a positively beautiful man". The Prince seems to obtain the status of an 'angelic eunuch' because of this. The Prince, therefore, impersonates what Dostoevsky thought was the highest ideal of love amongst men. In a journal entry from 1864, meditating upon the death of his first wife, he wrote that the Christian ideal will only come true once "man has by the laws of nature been definitively reborn as another nature that does not marry and is not given in marriage" (Johnson, 391). Dostoevsky saw this as the ultimate and the purest form of humanity, as indicated in the Bible: "For in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven" (New King James Version, Matthew 22.30). At the end of time, when the nature of man has been radically transformed into that of an asexual, seraphic being, that is when the total realization of the Christian ideal of love will become possible. Dostoevsky however, portrays this ideal ironically in Prince Myshkin as he resorts to a defect of the flesh – his epilepsy – in order to give the status of an angelic eunuch. Even though Dostoevsky seems to raise his epileptic to the heights of a Christ-like figure, he is only able to achieve that status because of his flaws as a human being.

Epilepsy in *The Idiot*: Innocence or evil?

Even though *The Idiot* has traditionally been read as a record of Dostoevsky's more innocent, stable, and pure self, with Myshkin being the personification of a Christ-like ideal, some critics like Robert Lord have suggested that Myshkin has an inherent evil side to him – that he is of the same blood as Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment*, and Stavrogin from *Demons*. Both Raskolnikov and Stavrogin, walk a tight rope between good and evil through their actions. Their deeds are either outright evil, or are somewhere in the moral grey area. In a letter to his niece Sonya, Dostoevsky writes:

The main idea of the novel is to portray the man of real excellence and beauty . . . All those writers – and not only ours, but even these in Europe – who have taken upon themselves (this task) . . . have simply succumbed. The reason why is that this undertaking is gigantic. The beautiful is an ideal, but neither ours nor its European

version is yet fully worked out. In the whole world there has been only one truly beautiful person, and that was Christ, for the very reason that the appearance of this immeasurably beautiful person is of course a fathomless wonder... (Lord, 32)

In his essay entitled 'A Reconsideration of *The Idiot*', Lord writes, "The Idiot speaks, looks and feels an overlord... 'The chief characteristic of the idiot. Self-possession through pride (and not through any ethical motive) and rabid self-licence in everything ... He could easily have been a monster but love saves him from this.'" (Lord, 3)

While Myshkin is infatuated with both Nastasya and Aglaya, none of them seem to return his sentiments as they see through the façade of his feelings. Lord argues that Myshkin often comes across as so calm on the outside that his presence often feels overwhelming or overbearing. He is morbidly proud of himself to the extent that he regards himself in a god-like stature. Lord further argues that Myshkin perceives himself as above every other human being, and therefore bears their insults with fortitude. He even tries to captivate others with his child-like naiveté. Lord further argues that the Prince is essentially proud of his "special infirmity", since he believes that it raises him above ordinary people⁷.

Lord decisively views Myshkin's epilepsy as the thing that "limits and holds in check". In another essay, 'An Epileptic Mode of Being', he writes,

If these moments (*seizure*) were to endure for more than a second of time, the epileptic would be transformed into a god, or into a superhuman monster (Kirillov), or simply annihilated. An epileptic, then, is pre-eminently one who flounders and miscarries, one who is compelled to stop short of a goal, which will remain unattainable for the very reason that his personality is 'structured' ... in a particular way" (Lord, 94).

However, in my opinion, Lord's view of Myshkin's character harks back to the failure of the Hippocratic physicians. Such a reading of the Prince's character reinforces the traditional view of epilepsy as reprehensible and despicable. Even though it is true that Myshkin is rarely likeable, and does not seem to exhibit many redeemable qualities, he also does not seem to be a wholly sinister character as Lord implies. While it is true there are certain ambiguities in the character of Prince Myshkin, and several questions that go

⁷ Lord gives a unique insight into Myshkin's character in "A Reconsideration of Dostoevsky's Novel, "The Idiot"". *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 45, No. 104, January 1967,

unanswered, it would be irresponsible, to assume that the Prince is any more evil than Totsky, who forced Nastasya into living with him when she was just sixteen years old, or Rogozhin, who murdered Nastasya when he realised that she does not love him. Lord reads Myshkin's character and the fundamental totality of his disorder as metaphysical. This however, in my opinion, is not true, as we have seen that Dostoevsky borrows from popular medical texts of his time and does not often subscribe to mythology and superstition in his writing.

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NOTE

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