

SPECIAL ARTICLE

'Is everyone mad?' The depiction of mental disturbance in the work of Dostoyevsky

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SUMMARY

This article examines how madness is depicted in the work of Dostoyevsky. It gives a brief account of Dostoyevsky's life before looking at the many ways in which he portrayed insanity. It suggests that he provided a sophisticated and complex picture of mental illness which has relevance for how contemporary clinicians conceive of psychiatric illness.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None.

Man is an enigma. This enigma must be solved, and if you spend all your life at it, don't say you have wasted your time. (Dostoyevsky, quoted in Frank 1977: pp. 90–91)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky is one of the greatest writers in world literature. Nietzsche declared, with characteristic modesty: 'Dostoyevsky was the only psychologist from whom I had anything to learn' (quoted in Gide 1967: title page). Albert Einstein claimed that Dostoyevsky gave him more than any other thinker by providing an inspirational glimpse into the relativism and instability of reality (Leatherbarrow 2002: p. 2). Freud (1928) asserted: 'Dostoyevsky's place is not far behind Shakespeare. *The Brothers Karamazov* is the most magnificent novel ever written'. In *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, Walter Kaufmann (1956) maintained that the Russian writer occupied a seminal role in the development of existential thought. Sartre was an admirer, while Camus drew on the insights of the Russian novelist in *The Rebel* (1951) and *The Possessed* (1959). R. D. Laing commented: 'After D[ostoyevsky] one wonders whether philosophy is possible anymore' (Laing 1952–53).

Dostoyevsky and his work should be of great interest to psychiatrists: he has, after all, been called 'the Shakespeare of the asylum' (Appignanesi 2008). Even a cursory acquaintance with his novels reveals that many, if not most, of his characters teeter on the brink of mental instability. 'Is everyone mad', asks the narrator of *A Raw Youth* (first published 1875; Dostoyevsky 1947 reprint: p. 65). Characters are afflicted by brain fever, they start to ramble and have a mad gleam in their eyes. They are offended by slights to

their dignity. They become feverish and announce their personal philosophy of life. They talk about God and beauty. They make disturbing confessions and create scandalous scenes.

As well as the countless portrayals of insanity, there are descriptions of alcoholism, epilepsy, idiocy, sexual abuse, suicide, pathological gambling and personality disorder. Dostoyevsky took an interest in psychology and read contemporary writers on the subject. Indeed, he specifically discusses theories of madness, most memorably in the court scene in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), where various experts pontificate on the sanity or otherwise of Dmitri Karamazov. Dostoyevsky was wary that the theories of psychology could be used to absolve an individual of responsibility for their actions, and he recurrently poked fun at what he called 'the psychologists'. Dostoyevsky was an avid reader of newspapers and was intrigued by the real-life stories of his fellow citizens. He sought out personal interviews with the subjects of news reports to find out more about their state of mind.

Little wonder that psychoanalysts and psychiatrists have been drawn to him. Freud conceded that he had not discovered the unconscious: the poets had discovered it long before him; and he singled Dostoyevsky out as the greatest writer of them all. Meredith Skura (1981) argued that the poets had not only discovered the unconscious, they had also discovered psychoanalysis. More recently, Louis Breger (1989) argued that it is more fruitful to regard Dostoyevsky as a psychoanalytic colleague than as a subject of analysis.

Dostoyevsky's life is, however, of great psychological interest (Wellek, 1962; Mochulsky, 1967; Frank 1977, 1983, 1986, 1995, 2002; Sirotkina 2002). His father, who was a doctor, died in mysterious circumstances and may even have been murdered by peasants. Freud made much of the alleged murder and maintained that Dostoyevsky's epilepsy was a hysterical manifestation of his supposed parricidal wishes. Dostoyevsky was arrested as a young man for being in a revolutionary political group, taken out to be executed, only to receive a last minute reprieve. He then spent several years in a labour camp. He was plagued with epilepsy throughout his adult life, and was

subject to depression, episodes of paranoia and occasional hallucinations. He was also given to ruinous bouts of gambling. This article will briefly examine Dostoyevsky's life story, and then consider the many ways he depicted madness in his work.

Biographical sketch

Early years

Dostoyevsky was born in Moscow on 3 October 1821 in the Marinsky Hospital for the Poor, where his father worked as a doctor. Medicine was an honourable but not very lucrative occupation in 19th-century Russia and the family lived in cramped conditions in an apartment in the hospital grounds. Of all the great 19th-century Russian writers, Dostoyevsky was the only one not to come from the landed gentry. This is of crucial importance as it influenced how he viewed his position as a writer: he maintained that his knowledge of Russian society was much wider than that possessed by his upper-class peers (Frank 1977).

Dostoyevsky's mother Marya was warm, loving and affectionate. She was also cultured and very religious. His father Mikhail was a hard-working doctor devoted to his wife and family. Dostoyevsky's biographer Joseph Frank maintains that, contrary to some reports, Mikhail never beat his children. He was, however, irritable, irascible, exacting and prone to melancholia. He had bouts of unfounded suspicions of his wife's infidelity, and he watched over his servants 'with a cranky surveillance characteristic of his attitude toward the world in general' (Frank 1977: p. 17).

Parental loss and military education

Dostoyevsky was the second oldest of eight children. He spent the first 13 years of his life at home, going to boarding school in Moscow in 1834. When he was 16 his mother died. The following year, at the command of their father, he and his elder brother Mikhail enrolled in the St Petersburg Academy of Military Engineering. Neither of them wanted to be military engineers; instead literature was their abiding passion. Dostoyevsky's life in the Academy was grim, and he always looked back at the decision to send him there as a woeful mistake: it was a milieu dominated by physical violence, military harshness and iron discipline (Frank 1977).

In June 1839 Dostoyevsky's father died in mysterious circumstances on his estate at Darovoe, near Moscow. Some accounts suggest that he was murdered by his own peasants but biographers have not been able to confirm this. Certainly Freud was convinced that the father's death was murder and

maintained that Dostoyevsky felt guilty because his unconscious Oedipal wishes were being made real. Frank (1977) agrees that he may well have felt guilty but suggests that there were other factors. First, Dostoyevsky had recently failed his examinations at the Academy and when his father received the news he suffered a minor stroke. Second, despite his father's straitened circumstances, Dostoyevsky repeatedly sent him letters asking for money. His father always gave him the money and, in fact, his last letter with cash enclosed arrived around the same time that Dostoyevsky would have heard that his father had died. Contrary to Freud's assertion that Dostoyevsky had his first epileptic fit shortly after hearing about the death of his father, he did not develop epilepsy until 7 years later. And as James Rice (1985) has shown in a careful study of the writer's medical condition, Dostoyevsky's epilepsy was organic in origin, not hysterical.

Dostoyevsky graduated from the Military Academy in 1843 but resigned his commission the following year to devote himself to literature. In 1846 he published his first book, *Poor Folk*, to widespread acclaim. A second book, *The Double*, published in the same year, was not so well-received.

The consequences of political involvement

Dostoyevsky became involved with a radical political faction known as the Petrashevsky circle. As a result of this involvement, he was arrested in 1849 and imprisoned in St Petersburg's Peter and Paul Fortress, which prevented him from completing his novel, *Netochka Nezvanova*. Dostoyevsky was sentenced to death and a mock-execution was carried out. Awaiting his own execution, he said: 'We shall be with Christ'. His companion, the atheist Speshnev retorted: '[We shall be] specks of dust' (Jones 2002). This conflict between belief and unbelief was to deeply concern Dostoyevsky for the rest of his life.

The death sentence was commuted to labour in a Siberian camp and exile. He was later to write about his experiences in *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1862). It was a significant time for Dostoyevsky: he obtained first-hand experience of living with the peasant class, and he rediscovered his Christian faith. In 1854 hard labour ended and he was posted to Semipalatinsk as a common soldier. In 1857 he married Maria Isaeva, but she died 7 years later, in 1864. The same year also saw the death of his brother Mikhail, with whom he had been involved in literary publishing. Despite these bereavements, Dostoyevsky resumed his writing and published *Notes from the Underground* (1864), a key book in his oeuvre (Box 1).

BOX 1 Dostoyevsky: key publications

1846	<i>Poor Folk</i> (<i>Bednye lyudi</i>)
1846	<i>The Double</i> (<i>Dvoynik</i>)
1849	<i>Netochka Nezvanova</i>
1862	<i>Notes from the House of the Dead</i> (<i>Zapiski iz mertvogo doma</i>)
1864	<i>Notes from the Underground</i> (<i>Zapiski iz podpolya</i>)
1866	<i>Crime and Punishment</i> (<i>Prestuplenie i nakazanie</i>)
1866	<i>The Gambler</i> (<i>Igrok</i>)
1868	<i>The Idiot</i> (<i>Idiot</i>)
1871	<i>The Devils</i> (<i>Besy</i>)
1873–81	<i>The Diary of a Writer</i> (<i>Dnevnik pisatelya</i>)
1875	<i>A Raw Youth</i> (<i>Podrostok</i>)
1880	<i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> (<i>Brat'ya Karamazovy</i>)

In 1866 he published *Crime and Punishment* and later that year, *The Gambler*, which was based on his experiences at the roulette table. In 1867, he married his second wife Anna Grigorevna Snitkina, who had been working for him as his stenographer. Shortly after this the Dostoyevskys fled abroad to escape creditors. Despite this dramatic beginning, it was to prove to be a successful marriage and Anna brought order and stability to Dostoyevsky's chaotic existence. The year 1868 saw the publication of *The Idiot*, and in 1871 Dostoyevsky returned to St Petersburg and published *The Devils*. In 1873 he began *The Diary of a Writer*, in which he expounded his views and entered into a dialogue with the Russian public. *A Raw Youth*, in which he again tackled the theme of the double, was published in 1875, and in 1880 he completed *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoyevsky died in January 1881 from a haemorrhage of the lungs.

Dostoyevsky's attitude to science and religion

Before looking at Dostoyevsky's portrayal of madness, it is important to consider his philosophical outlook, particularly his attitude to science and religion (Scanlan 2002). Dostoyevsky rejected the prevailing view of many of his contemporaries that science would solve all the questions of humanity. As the narrator of *Notes from the Underground* comments:

Science itself will teach man ... that he really has neither free will nor caprice and never did, and that he himself is nothing more than a kind of piano key or organ peg ... everything he does, he does not at all according to his wanting, but according to the laws of Nature. Consequently, one only has to discover these laws of Nature and then man will not answer for his acts ... All human actions, of course, will then be

calculated by these laws, mathematically, like a table of logarithms. (quoted in Thompson 2002)

Dostoyevsky felt that such theories were reductive and deprived human beings of free will. He rejected materialist, biological psychology. Scientific explanations of human behaviour were contrary, or inimical, to the idea of a person as a free moral agent. Moral decisions depended on free choice, and if, according to science, there was no free will, then there could be no morality (Thompson 2002).

Dostoyevsky objected to the idea that human beings are rational creatures, who only need to be shown their true interests to follow them. In fact, if ever a perfect rational society were created, Dostoyevsky maintained, people would conspire to bring it tumbling down (Jones 2002). As Thompson (2002) has observed:

The Underground Man opposes the reductive rationalist view of the person ... He inveighs against the reduction of the person to things, to inanimate abstractions that can be manipulated by impersonal agents. He rails against ... those views that deny the 'most important and most precious thing', a person's 'individuality', his or her unique 'personality' ... The insistence on the primacy of 'personality', 'caprice', 'independent wanting' and free will is not a plea for unbridled licence. Rather his objection to the finite, deterministic view of human beings goes to the heart of a fundamental ideal: the absolute, irreducible value of a person.

As Malcolm Jones (2002) has observed, Dostoyevsky lived in 'an age, like our own, in which Christianity, at least amongst the educated classes, was liable to go by default, to be seen as a curious survival of pre-scientific folk-lore, or as evidence of mental derangement'. His great novels, most notably *The Brothers Karamazov*, depict the argument between atheists and believers. Many observers, such as Albert Camus, have been struck by how Dostoyevsky appears to give the atheists the most convincing argument.

Does this mean that Dostoyevsky was really an atheist at heart and unconvinced by the arguments in favour of belief in God? One has to be careful about attributing the views of fictional characters to the author. This is especially so in the case of Dostoyevsky, who was guided by artistic rather than polemical factors. In addition, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), the distinguished Russian literary critic, has stressed, Dostoyevsky's novels contain multiple voices and no one voice should be seen as representing that of the author. There is, however, a letter in which Dostoyevsky described his own feelings ('To Natalie Fonvizna', January 1854, quoted in Jones 2002):

As for myself, I confess that I am a child of my age, a child of unbelief and doubt up to this very

moment and (I am certain of it) to the grave. What terrible torments this thirst to believe has cost me and continues to cost me, burning more strongly in my soul the more contrary arguments there are. Nevertheless God sometimes sends me moments of complete tranquillity... Even if someone were to prove to me that the truth lay outside Christ, I should remain with Christ than with the truth.

This passage conveys Dostoyevsky’s struggles with faith, and many of his characters were to echo these sentiments in his novels.

The presentation of madness in the novels of Dostoyevsky

Madness as a moral, spiritual crisis

Madness is presented in a wide variety of ways in Dostoyevsky’s novels. The core to Dostoyevsky’s depiction of madness is his view that it is a manifestation of a moral, spiritual crisis – his characters struggle with profound moral and spiritual questions and, in the process, lose their reason. The Russian critic and doctor Nikolai Osipov maintained that madness in Dostoyevsky’s characters results from the battle between good and evil in the human heart (Sirotkina 2002).

Ivan Karamazov is one such Dostoyevskian hero driven to madness by a moral–spiritual crisis. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan is the brilliant young intellectual who is tormented by the issue of belief in God. He presents the case for non-belief, stating that, even if God did exist, the suffering of children was enough to persuade him to refuse the entry ticket to paradise (Dostoyevsky 1992 reprint: p. 245). And yet, Ivan is also tormented by the implications of a Godless universe. If God does not exist, then, Ivan reasons, ‘Everything is permitted’ (p. 263): there would be no moral sanctions.

Ivan feels responsible for the murder of his father. Although he did not strike the blow, was he complicit in the crime by suggesting the act to another? By the close of the book, when his brother Dmitri is on trial for the murder of their father, Ivan is becoming progressively more unstable. He consults a doctor because he is ‘on the verge of brain fever’ and is experiencing hallucinations. But he fails to take the doctor’s advice and finally succumbs to madness in a scene in which the devil appears in his room. Ivan tries to convince himself that the satanic figure is not real. He says: ‘I’m delirious ... It is I, I myself who am talking and not you ... They won’t take me to the madhouse’. He adds: ‘You are the embodiment of myself, but of just one side of me... of my thoughts and feelings, but only the most loathsome and stupid of them’ (p. 637). He talks incessantly and then loses consciousness. Ivan’s battles with belief and unbelief, with good and evil, are re-enacted in his

delirium, and the symptoms of his illness reflect his moral preoccupations.

In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov, a poor student, murders an old pawn-broker and her daughter with an axe. He is intoxicated with proto-Nietzschean ideas that he is a superior being who does not need to obey the laws of ordinary society. He set out to commit murder to test himself: to see whether he is capable of performing such an act. From the outset of the novel, Raskolnikov’s mental equilibrium is disturbed. He has an horrific dream of a horse being beaten to death – a dream that seems to echo his own homicidal impulses. After he commits the murders, Raskolnikov becomes even more disturbed, reflecting the profound moral and spiritual crisis into which he has plunged.

At night he imagines that he hears his landlady being beaten outside his room and then sinks into unconsciousness. He is irascible and suspicious. His behaviour is erratic and he is seen in the streets talking to himself. At times he raves and appears to be delirious. He also contemplates suicide. At its core, Raskolnikov’s crisis is a spiritual one, as the following passage indicates:

Of course, he could not and did not want to concern himself with his ill condition. But all this ceaseless anxiety and all this horror of the soul could not go without consequences. And if he was not yet lying in real delirium, it was perhaps precisely because this ceaseless inner anxiety still kept him on his feet and conscious, but somehow artificially, for a time.

He wandered aimlessly. The sun was going down. Some particular anguish had begun telling in him lately. There was nothing particularly acute or burning in it; but there came from it a breath of something, permanent, eternal, a presentiment of unending years of this cold, deadening anguish, a presentiment of some eternity on ‘a square foot of space’. (Dostoyevsky 1993 reprint: p. 426)

By the end of the novel Raskolnikov achieves a partial resolution of his personal crisis by confessing to the crime and accepting his punishment. His mental breakdown contains the seeds of the resolution of his spiritual crisis, although, as Frank (1995) points out, Raskolnikov has not entirely given up on the idea that the murders were actually justified.

In *The Idiot*, there is a young man called Ippolit, who is dying of tuberculosis. It is important to Ippolit, like many Dostoyevskian characters, to give voice to his spiritual yearnings. At various stages in the last days of his life he is considered to be mad or delirious. Ippolit describes his struggles with the conflicting desires of wanting to live and wanting to die. He goes on to give an account of how he has wrestled with belief and unbelief. How can God have created man only to let him die? He tells his audience, who are assembled to hear him read his ‘Explanation’:

Oh, you may be sure that Columbus was happy not when he had discovered America, but when he was discovering it; you may be sure that the highest moment of his happiness was, perhaps, exactly three days before his discovery of the New World, when, in despair, his mutinous crew all but turned their ship back to Europe... It is life, life that matters, life alone – the continuous and everlasting process of discovering it – and not the discovery itself! (Dostoyevsky 1955 reprint: p. 378)

For Ippolit his delirious journey has brought him to the conclusion that life is worth living.

Madness as understood in terms of depth psychology

Dostoyevsky had written: 'I am a realist in a higher sense: that is, I depict all the depths of the human soul' (Leatherbarrow 2002: p. 4).

In Dostoyevsky's work, madness is understood in terms of depth psychology: unresolved and unacknowledged personal conflicts resurface as symptoms of mental illness. As we have seen, Ivan Karamazov has a hallucination of the devil which he sees as representing the dark, negative side of himself. Raskolnikov's dream enacts his murder-urges.

There are other examples of Dostoyevsky using this type of depth psychology in his portrayal of disturbed states. In an early novel *The Double* (1846), the central character Golyadkin is plagued by his own double – a bolder, more assertive version of himself, a figure who upsets social convention. Dostoyevsky returned to the theme of the double in one of his last books, *A Raw Youth*, with the character of Versilov. Freud, in his essay 'The "Uncanny"', postulated that the double is a projection of an unpleasant part of the hidden self (Freud 1919).

In *The Devils*, Nicholas Stavrogin, who is all too aware of his lack of moral bearings or purpose, experiences hallucinations. At night he 'felt beside him the presence of some kind of malignant creature, mocking and "rational", in all sorts of guises and in different characters ... It's myself, different aspects of myself' (Dostoyevsky 1979 reprint: pp. 676–677).

Madness as a dynamic state subject to the judgement of others

In the novels of Dostoyevsky, it is often unclear whether a character is insane or not. Their sanity is debated by others, who often fail to reach a consensus. Dostoyevsky is demonstrating that madness is, to some extent, socially constructed: it rests on people's opinion, rather than being a value-free, unambiguous state. Dostoyevsky also demonstrates that these social judgements are provisional and subject to change. It was this aspect of Dostoyevsky's work that attracted Einstein.

Throughout *Crime and Punishment*, there is constant debate as to the sanity of Raskolnikov. His friend Razumikhin asks him, 'Are you cracked?' (1993 reprint: p. 111). Razumikhin changes his mind back and forth about Raskolnikov's sanity, at one point telling him he is not mad. Raskolnikov's mother believes her son is sane and states, 'They dared to think you were mad' (p. 513). Sonia, the prostitute, wonders whether Raskolnikov is insane, as do other characters such as Svidrigailov. The police detective Porfiry is suspicious of the label of madness, whereas the doctors conclude that Raskolnikov suffers from 'monomania' (p. 536). Raskolnikov himself asks: 'I'm supposed to be mad, perhaps I am?' (p. 246). Dostoyevsky deliberately presents multiple and conflicting opinions about Raskolnikov's sanity.

Another character whose sanity is the subject of debate by others is Nastasya Filipovna in *The Idiot*. In this extract, Nastasya Filipovna, who is the novel's femme-fatale, says to Ganya, one of her would-be suitors, that she is going to put 100 000 roubles on the fire. The money will be his if he reaches in for it.

'Very well, then! Stand back, all of you! I do as I like! Ferdyschchenko, make up the fire!'

'Nastasya Filipovna', replied Ferdyschchenko, looking stunned, 'I can't do it!'

'Oh-h-h!' cried Nastasya Filipovna, and, seizing the tongs, she raked two smouldering logs together, and as soon as the fire blazed up she threw the bundle of notes on it.

They all gasped loudly; many even crossed themselves.

'She's gone mad – she's gone mad!' they shouted.

'Don't you think we'd – er – we'd better tie her up?' the general whispered to Ptitsyn. 'Or shall we send for — She's mad. Isn't she? Isn't she?'

'N-no, I don't think so,' whispered Ptitsyn, trembling and as white as a sheet, unable to take his eyes off the smouldering bundle of notes. 'Perhaps, she's not as mad as all that.'

'She is mad, isn't she?' the general appealed to Totsky.

'I told you she was a *colourful* woman', murmured Totsky, who had also gone somewhat pale.

'But, man alive, it's a hundred thousand!'

'Good gracious – good gracious!' people cried on all sides. (Dostoyevsky 1955 reprint: p. 167)

In *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bahktin (1984) maintained that Dostoyevsky offers a distinctive approach to narrative, based on an awareness of the relativity of a given situation. Instead of a one-sided view-point, he offers a multidimensional perspective. He creates what Bahktin called a polyphonic novel, where many independent voices are heard and interact. None is afforded priority. In *Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky*, George Steiner (1960) argued that Dostoyevsky was more appropriately compared with dramatists than novelists because of the interplay of many

voices. The doctor is often faced with multiple perspectives on a patient's story and has to construct a meaningful clinical narrative out of these diverse opinions (Beveridge 1996).

Dostoyevsky also portrays madness as a fluid and changeable state, which can flit between sanity and insanity. Bracken & Thomas have contended that this temporal aspect of mental experience has often been ignored by psychopathologists, who have provided a static model. Dostoyevsky held that there is often no clear demarcation between the sane and insane (Bracken 2006). Dr Zossimov in *Crime and Punishment* remarks: 'We're all rather often almost like mad people, only with the slight difference that the "sick" are somewhat madder than we are, so it's necessary to draw a line here. And the harmonious man, it's true almost doesn't exist' (Dostoyevsky 1993 reprint: p. 226).

Dostoyevsky felt that madness could not be put into categories. The narrator of *The House of the Dead* observes:

I am trying to classify all the prisoners into categories; that, however, is not really possible. Reality is infinitely various when compared to the deductions of abstract thought... and it will not tolerate rigid, hard-and-fast distinctions. Reality strives for diversification. We, too, had our special form of life; even if it did not amount to much, it was ours none the less, and it was not merely some official existence but our own, inner, private life. (Dostoyevsky 1985 reprint: p. 305)

Madness as evidence of brain dysfunction

When characters in Dostoyevsky's novels go mad, it is frequently accompanied by signs of brain dysfunction. They develop 'brain fever', 'delirium' or 'apoplexy'. They become confused and sink into unconsciousness. Alcohol features repeatedly. It tips characters over into loquacious ramblings and extravagant and ostentatious behaviour. Several characters, like Dostoyevsky himself, suffer from epilepsy, most notably Prince Myshkin, the central character in *The Idiot*. Dostoyevsky drew on his own experience to describe the epileptic aura. He experienced a mystical feeling during the pre-epileptic stage and Myshkin describes this phenomenon in detail.

General Ivolgin, another character in *The Idiot*, has a brain disease that brings about mental disorder. He becomes progressively more irascible, grandiose and garrulous before succumbing to a stroke:

he seemed to be quite extraordinarily irritable. He was loquacious and restless, talked heatedly with everyone he met, taking them by assault, as it were, on subjects so diverse and unexpected that it was quite impossible to find out what he was really worrying about. At moments he was very cheerful, but more often he fell into thought, without knowing

himself, however, what he was thinking about. He would suddenly start talking about something... and suddenly stopped short and ceased talking altogether, answering all further questions with a vacant smile, without being aware that he had been asked a question or that he was smiling. He had spent the previous night moaning and groaning and had exhausted his poor wife... It was also noticed that during those three days he was continually subject to violent attacks of self-glorification and was consequently extraordinarily quick to take offence. (Dostoyevsky 1955 reprint: pp. 462–463)

Madness as a reaction to overwhelming events

Dostoyevsky also portrays madness as a reaction to overwhelming events. In *The Devils*, a provincial governor called von Lembke has a series of painful experiences, which undermine his sanity. He suspects his wife of infidelity, his manuscript of a novel is ridiculed and the citizens of the province become restive. A mouse is deliberately placed in one of the holy icons in the town and this provokes a 'most gloomy impression' (1979 reprint: p. 328) in him. As society breaks down further, von Lembke becomes 'more uncommunicative every day and ... more secretive' (p. 346). He thinks that Peter Verkhovensky, the arch-villain of the novel, has made a fool of him and that he is having an affair with his wife. He confronts her thus:

'I want you to know, you fatuous but poisonous woman', he cried, snapping his bonds all at once, 'I want you to know that I shall arrest your unworthy lover at once, put him in chains and take him to a fortress or – I shall jump out of the window this minute before your very eyes!' In reply to this tirade Mrs Lembke, turning green with rage, at once burst into prolonged and ringing laughter... Von Lembke was about to rush to the window, but suddenly stopped dead and, folding his hands on his chest and pale as a corpse, looked at his laughing spouse with baleful eyes. 'Do you know, do you know, Julia,' he said in a breathless and imploring voice, 'do you know that I, too, can do something.' But at the renewed outburst of even louder laughter which followed his last words, he clenched his teeth, groaned and rushed, not to the window, but at his wife with his raised fist! He did not bring it down ... but it was the end. Oblivious of everything, he rushed to his study and, dressed as he was, flung himself face downwards on the bed, wrapped himself convulsively in a sheet, pulling it over his head, and lay like that for two hours – without falling asleep, without thinking of anything, with a heavy load on his heart and blank, stark despair in his soul. (Dostoyevsky 1979 reprint: pp. 440–441)

The book's narrator concludes that von Lembke had been 'in a delirious condition' owing to 'sudden shock' (p. 510).

Madness as an inability to fit into society

There are a variety of ways in which Dostoyevsky's characters fail to fit into society. For example in *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin is unable to cope with

a cynical world. Dostoyevsky wanted to create a character who was a good man and to see what happened to him when faced with a materialist society of rogues and self-seekers. Prince Myshkin's simple-hearted honesty wrong-foots people, who initially regard him as an 'idiot' but come to see in him a man of integrity. However, Myshkin cannot cope with the rapacious, aggressive and sexual demands of others, and ends up in an asylum.

The narrator of *Notes from the Underground* simply refuses to participate in society. Willfully he asserts that he does not accept that $2+2=4$. In *The Devils*, Nicholas Stavrogin upsets the rules of social decorum by behaving outrageously. For example, he leads a gentleman by the nose and, on another occasion, he bites a man's ear. In *The Idiot*, Nastasya Filipovna provokes people by her contrary and profligate behaviour.

Madness as a manifestation of the breakdown of the family and of society

As well as portraying the mental breakdown of individuals, Dostoyevsky also examines how families and even whole societies can fall apart. In *Crime and Punishment*, the Marmeladov family disintegrates: the father is an alcoholic and the mother has a very public breakdown which culminates in her death. In the same novel, which is set in St Petersburg, the city is depicted as teetering on the brink of insanity. One character, Svidrigailov, observes: 'Petersburg. This is a city of half-crazy people ... one seldom finds a place where there are so many gloomy, sharp, and strange influences on the soul of man as in Petersburg' (Dostoyevsky 1993 reprint).

In *The Devils*, Dostoyevsky paints a picture of a whole society falling apart as its citizens 'lose their reason' and descend into murderous mayhem. Dostoyevsky was deeply worried that the rise of secular, materialist ideas would lead to moral chaos in Russian society. Some critics have seen *The Devils* as anticipating the mass murders of the Soviet years.

Madness as an excuse for criminal behaviour

Dostoyevsky took a great interest in criminal trials and was concerned that psychological theories were being used to absolve individuals of responsibility for their actions. In *Crime and Punishment*, the detective Porfiry tells Raskolnikov, whom he suspects of murder: 'Illness, delirium ... melancholy ... all these psychological means of defence, these excuses and dodges, are quite untenable' (p. 348). At his trial, Raskolnikov is diagnosed as suffering from 'some sort of temporary insanity ... a morbid monomania of murder and robbery' (p. 536).

The narrator sceptically observes: 'This fell in opportunely with the latest fashionable theory of temporary insanity, which in our time they so often try to apply to certain criminals' (Dostoyevsky 1993 reprint: p. 536).

In the trial of Dmitri Karamazov, Dostoyevsky has fun presenting the opinions of the various experts as they deliberate on his sanity and offer conflicting opinions. As one character observes, 'Psychology ... is like a stick with two ends' (p. 727). Dostoyevsky is saying that psychological theories can be used to exonerate or condemn.

Crazed logic and Romantic egoism

Dostoyevsky also portrays madness as a type of crazed logic. For example, Kirillov in *The Devils* sees it as his quasi-messianic mission to sacrifice himself in order to demonstrate that, if God does not exist, then everything is a matter of the self-will of the individual, who can conquer pain and fear in the most significant way possible: by taking his own life (Jones 2002).

Finally, Dostoyevsky depicts madness as a result of Romantic aesthetic egoism, as for example in the character of Yefimov in *Netochka Nezvanova*. Yefimov believes he is the greatest violinist in Russia, if not the world. He believes he is an artist and that this sets him apart from others: he is not constrained by family responsibilities. Unable to face the contrast between his exalted views of himself and the humiliations of everyday life, he takes refuge in the belief that he is persecuted. When he faces the reality that he is not a great talent, he breaks down completely.

Conclusions

Dostoyevsky provides a sophisticated and multifaceted depiction of madness. His work demonstrates that individuals cannot be reduced to a simple formula.

It is fitting to leave the last words to Dostoyevsky. He has the narrator of *The Idiot* observe: 'the motives of human actions are usually infinitely more complex and varied than we are apt to explain them afterwards, and can rarely be defined with certainty' (Dostoyevsky 1955 reprint: p. 463).

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