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Holy Fools, Liminality and the Visual  
in Dostoevsky and Dickens

By

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of the Requirements for the Master of Arts

in

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## Introduction

In Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, Mikhail Bakhtin wrote extensively on the multi-voicedness of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels. For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's strength lay in creating a text that features "a *plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world.*" Dostoevskian heroes are "*not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse*" (Italics Bakhtin's 6-7). This is true; in such novels as The Idiot, we see a textual layering of many distinct, powerful voices, such as those of Rogozhin, Nastasya Filippovna, Aglaia and Madame Epanchin and Prince Lyov Myshkin. Even secondary characters, such as Ippolit in The Idiot and Sonya Marmeladov in Crime and Punishment, possess strong individual voices and contribute meaningful discourse to their respective novel. It seems apparent, however, after reading Dostoevsky, that there are other textual voices at work beyond those of his characters.

Nothing extraordinary happens in Dostoevsky's novels. There are no great voyages or adventures. There are no cataclysmic events with far reaching effects. Often, action takes place among a relatively small group of people, with most major scenes involving as few as two to perhaps ten. Townspeople do not mob and crowd the scenes. Authoritarian figures (with the notable exception of Porfiry Petrovich, the police inspector, in Crime and Punishment) rarely interfere with characters. Time stands still in Dostoevsky. Although brief references to time passing are made, the reader is often unsure of the chronology of events or the precise lapse of time. Many Dostoevskian characters are unlikable; some are despicable. His works tend to focus either on the underbelly of society or on the lower-to-wealthy middle class. Yet there is something about his novels that draw the reader into a place distinctively different than their own reality. It is easy to become absorbed in a Dostoevsky novel; the work permeates the reader's

consciousness and places the reader on a threshold of realities: the reader's own reality and that created by Dostoevsky. Bakhtin pinpointed the absorbing nature of the Russian's novels to the fact they are polyphonic. There is a series of voices within each novel; the author, the implied author, the narrator,<sup>1</sup> and the various characters within the novel, many of whom have strong, distinctive and independent voices of their own. The poignancy of Dostoevsky's novels lay in the many levels of discourse presented through narrators, characters and even spaces. In addition to a multiplicity of voices within his novels, some characters themselves possess more than one voice: how they are perceived by others is based on what voice they decide to use. Instead of seeing setting as a mere backdrop for action, one can see it as a participating character with a distinctive voice within Dostoevsky's works. Likewise, artwork, portraiture and faces can bear more meaning than first meets the eye. Multi-voicedness, therefore, can refer not only to human voices, but also to cities and places and the objects within them.

Religion in Dostoevsky's novels is a theme frequently discussed by critics. Much has been written about the religious views of the author and of various characters in his novels, and also of the overall religious "message" of a particular novel. There are characters within his novels that embody a religious personality (specifically that of the holy fool) juxtaposed against a contemporary personality with real-life concerns, and often with a physical or mental impediment. Historian Orlando Figes discusses the role of the holy fool in Russian culture and history in Natasha's Dance: a Cultural History of Russia. Figes describes the holy fool as usually "dressed in bizarre clothes," wandering "as a poor man round the countryside" and as often "given food and lodgings in the households of the provincial aristocracy" (372). These characters are ridiculous in the name of Christ, and they make known their beliefs without fear of repercussions. The holy fool is a well-discussed motif in Dostoevsky criticism, yet it seems that

little attention has been given to how holy fool characters contribute to the multi-voicedness of Dostoevsky's novels. In addition to adding multiple voices to the text (that of the fool, the savior, and the seer), holy fools are often culturally and psychologically ostracized. They are "driven to the margins of society", and thus their messages often fall on deaf ears (Figes 374). Yet sometimes, despite societal expectations and the rules of interaction within social circles placed upon these characters, holy fools prevail, to different extents, in communicating their ideological messages, and thus in influencing the world around them.

However, this world inhabited by Dostoevsky's characters sometimes has other plans for its residents. Most of Dostoevsky's later novels take place in and around St. Petersburg. Before Dostoevsky set his great novels there, Petersburg already had a reputation in Russian literature for being full of "illusions and deceit" (Figes 160). The capitol of Russia during Dostoevsky's time, Petersburg presents a multitude of voices: the voice of the nihilist, of the Orthodox, of the beggar, of the prostitute, of the student, of the murderer, of the Westerner. The co-existence of these voices (not to be confused with their cooperation; more that they exist side by side) creates a multi-voiced, multi-discoursed backdrop for Dostoevsky's novels. Being such an oppressive and controversial city, as well as housing the richest of the rich next to the poorest of the poor, Petersburg delivers its own discourse. As Figes observes, Dostoevsky's Petersburg "is full of dreamers, a fact which he explained by the city's cramped conditions, by the frequent mists and fog which came in from sea, by the icy rain and drizzle which made people sick" (161). The atmosphere of the city subjects its residents to being physically and psychologically stifled; lines are blurred and morals are forgotten, and any act of heinousness or debauchery is possible. Likewise, the smaller nooks of the city can be sites of great crimes or great discoveries.

A specific location, such as a staircase, may have a physical function (that of being an

access point between two locations), as well as metaphorical import; stairs, as a type of threshold, can be a place of transition, questioning and decision-making (J. Alfred Prufrock's deliberating monologue on a staircase comes to mind). Similarly, critic Richard Gill discusses the bridge motif in Crime and Punishment; these bridges have practical purposes as well as signifying psychological journeys. Dostoevsky chose threshold places, such as staircases, bridges, doorways, hallways and maze-like houses, in which to have meaningful action take place. His chosen locations are multi-functional, in that they both realistically and metaphorically accomplish separate but complementary functions: they reveal a state of psychological liminality experienced by a character while situating that character in a space of physical liminality. The dualistic nature of these spaces adds even more voices to the Bakhtinian concept of the multi-voiced text, and makes the setting of Dostoevsky's novels a dynamic, participative character. Of course, it is not just interactions with their environments that shape characters' perspectives: visual interactions with others and even with works of art and pictures can influence characters' outlooks, as well.

Visual glimpses of faces, art and portraits have multiple meanings within Dostoevsky's novels. Like a double, a look at someone else's face can illuminate hidden truths. References to art, portraits, and especially faces abound in Dostoevsky's novels, and most of these references have critical textual meaning. Much of Dostoevsky's fiction is about self-definition, self-discovery and the shattering of pre-conceived notions. For example, visual impressions are crucial in The Idiot, especially to Prince Myshkin. He has an almost uncanny gift of reading people's faces, yet he cannot always immediately pinpoint the significance of his impressions. Myshkin also has important visual interactions with multiple pieces of art and portraiture, references to which are frequently made and dwelled upon by him. Determining the meaning

behind a face or piece of artwork may enable a character to realize a hidden subtext in his or her existence, and this realization often precedes a change in outlook on life.

This paper seeks to provide an overview of these three themes within several of Dostoevsky's texts, with a primary focus on The Idiot. This novel contains all of the previously discussed motifs and has a broader spectrum of themes than some of his other novels. Attention will also be given to The Devils (aka The Possessed) and Crime and Punishment to supplement and extend certain arguments. In this paper I hope to show the importance of alternative ways of thinking about multi-voicedness; the multiple ways a place can operate within a text; the duality of the insane or fallen and the divine existing side by side within one character; the importance of recognizing aspects of oneself through gazing at others, and how all of these dimensions enrich and deepen the meaning of Dostoevsky's novels.

The other important goal of this paper is to connect Russian literature to Western literature. In an academic age where post-colonial studies are growing in popularity, I believe it is important to find a niche for the Russian novel. While to categorize Russian people as marginalized would be misleading, Russia's geographical distance from the West, its religion and divergence from Rome during the Great Schism, its role in world politics, its closed society and its absence from the European Union all contribute to the difficulty of categorizing Russia as either non-Western or Western. I believe that Russian literature is relevant to the West, yet the works of Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Pushkin are underrepresented in courses in American English departments. Voltaire, Homer and Dante are no strangers to anthologies taught to Western literature students but those same anthologies may only have a couple of short stories representing Russia. I believe it is the ambiguous placement of the Russians on the worldwide scale which determines their lack of presence in both the Western classroom and emerging

literary-critical trends. Nevertheless, Russian literature has relevance to the West and American students, and deserves a place in English programs across the country. By linking Dostoevsky, a favorite in the Russian canon, to a favorite in the British canon, namely Charles Dickens, the Western student may find universality and relevance in the Russian's works. An in-depth study of Dickens's Bleak House, focusing on the above themes, alongside analysis of several of Dostoevsky's great novels, will show that the two men had similar concerns: poverty, depravity, religious and governmental hypocrisy, dissatisfaction with the status quo, the psychological influences of places, and the importance of the visual.



## Chapter 1: The Holy Fool in Dostoevsky's and Dickens's Texts

Most readers immediately notice the presence of religion in Dostoevsky's novels. His characters often struggle with maintaining a balance between their beliefs and their environments and ambitions. Often it is difficult for the reader to identify the precise "religious message" of the work; instead the reader is sometimes left with an ambiguous ending that does not seem to glorify Christianity. One aspect of this interest in religion in Dostoevsky's novels that is particularly compelling and complicated is the role of the holy fool. A Russian literary tradition since medieval hagiographic texts, the historical holy fool is based on old Russian saints and holy men. A holy fool is a character who behaves outlandishly in the name of God, often to the point where others may define him as mad. It is his role to "imitate Christ" and to accept "suffering and humiliation, which he deliberately provokes by his (seeming) acts of folly" (Murav 2). In Dostoevsky's novels there are many examples of holy fools, and these characters have special functions in the action of the novel. In some cases, they are sources of redemption and self-realization for another character. Other times, they are virtually unheeded and ultimately ineffectual. The successes or failures of these interesting figures contribute significantly to the impression the reader is left with at the end of the novel.

First, a brief look at Dostoevsky's own religious leanings is important. He was born into an extremely devout Russian Orthodox family, and brought up with a traditional reverence for Christ and an active church life. However, Dostoevsky started to change his perception of religion upon his arrival in St. Petersburg. Petersburg was the hub of Western thought and practices in Russia at the time, having been designed by Peter the Great to emulate a great western European city. Dostoevsky began to participate in church services on a merely surface level, but his admiration for Jesus and his teachings did not wane. A. Boyce Gibson remarks in

his lengthy study on the role of religion in Dostoevsky's life and works that the Russian "never saw Christian theology as the condition of Christian action: the most it could be would be a hobbling attempt to give an account of it" (14). Dostoevsky could separate the demands of church-going Orthodoxy and his own beliefs; he was able also to integrate his beliefs into some of the new ways of thinking which were rapidly spreading among the Russian intelligentsia of the time. Still, as Gibson discusses, Dostoevsky sometimes had doubts about the strength of his own faith, trying to reconcile his upbringing and the powerful revolutionary ideas prevalent in his society.

Many of his doubts dissipated after Dostoevsky spent ten years in penal servitude in Siberia for involvement with a revolutionary group. The daily exposure to criminals who had committed worse crimes than his own, and his interactions with common people<sup>2</sup> refocused his belief towards a true following of Christ and his teachings (Gibson 14-25). His own salvation was echoed in his later great novels, such as Crime and Punishment, and his concerns about the contemporary religious and political atmosphere in Russia are voiced in The Idiot and The Devils. As Gibson summarizes, after Dostoevsky's return from prison, he wrote heatedly against "rational self-interest, mathematics, Utopia, determinism and other evils" (30). Forsaking utilitarianism, Dostoevsky saw power in the beliefs and practices of the common people, who already had standing festivals and rituals that involved community and group action, and who had not yet been influenced by Western individualists (31). Dostoevsky reworked his experiences and his opinions of Russian Orthodoxy into his last novels, often creating characters who represent some aspect of humanity's sin or folly and others who represent Christ-like humility and who serve (or at least try to serve) as a source of reification and redemption for the more ego-driven sinful characters. The holier, gentler characters are often portrayed as holy

fools, who may serve as mirror and savior within the novels.

Critic Harriet Murav distinguishes three popular types of holy fools found in Russian hagiographic texts. They are “ascetics masquerading as fools and madmen, madmen allegedly venerated as holy men and madmen treated as madmen” (4). These definitions seem to capture the essence of many of Dostoevsky’s foolish and mad characters. Murav notes the difficulty that modern readers can have in recognizing aspects of holy foolishness, because many of these foolish actions may resemble madness. Murav observes, “what for the hagiographer was the stuff from which holiness could be constructed now becomes the evidence of illness” (31). In some Dostoevskian characters this rift is internal; for example, Myshkin, according to Dostoevsky, is an attempt at a “perfectly beautiful man” (the only other in history being Christ) (as qtd. by Frank, *The Idiot* xix). Yet, there are scenes where Myshkin, due to his nervousness and anxiety in social situations, exhibits extremely foolish behavior. The line between “foolishness for Christ” and madness is a thin one, and these occasions of duality exemplify the Bakhtinian concept of multi-voicedness.

Tracing the history of Dostoevsky’s epilepsy and the textual epilepsy of Prince Myshkin, Murav creates an argument that focuses on characters’ perceptions of Myshkin as well as his perception of himself. Because Myshkin is called an “idiot” and other such terms numerous times throughout the novel, pigeonholing him into one of Murav’s three categories of holy fool can be problematic. Instead what is said about him by the narrator reflects, generally, how others view him: hard to read, idiotic and generally off-putting. Murav points out that what the narrator reveals is incomplete and in a sense, unreliable. Instead, according to Murav, Myshkin perfectly enacts moments of hysteria, pontification and over-excitement exactly the way historical holy fools had acted. This assertion would make Myshkin’s behavior purposeful and perhaps even

premeditated. Murav also claims rightly that “the question of looking and recognizing is thematized as a central problem in The Idiot” (87). However, it is precisely this distinction that Murav fails to connect to Myshkin’s behavior; whether Myshkin’s behavior is a conscious reaction to his surroundings or an inherent instinct to play the part of the holy fool becomes a question of his identity. His own sense of self is blurred throughout the entire novel. He has no personal interests, friends or lovers to help mirror himself. He has little life experience from which to grow and he, although constantly surrounded by people throughout the work, is ultimately alone. His main purpose seems to lie in rescuing Nastasya and thus perhaps proving that humanity has some saving grace left. His own lack of self-recognition or at least his slowness at recognizing becomes his fatal flaw.

There are, however, moments of clarity. During Myshkin’s ill-timed rant at the party in Part Four, he seems to understand that his role is to bring some sort of higher truth to the sinners surrounding him, and this understanding has everything to do with self-knowledge,

One can’t understand everything at once, we can’t begin by perfection all at once! In order to reach perfection one must begin by being ignorant of a great deal. And if we understand things too quickly, perhaps we shan’t understand them thoroughly...I’m afraid for you, for all of you, for all of us together...Let us be servants in order to be leaders. (506-07)

Here, even if too frenzied to be considered anything other than mad, Myshkin is epitomizing the holy fool. Bearing his manifesto in such a crowd makes his foolishness matter, because they are unable to recognize the sense of his preaching. Although Myshkin uses the word “we” throughout his ranting, it is clear just how distant he is ideologically from those present. Perhaps he is being purposefully ironic, pointing out their vast differences by even daring to put himself

on the same level as them. Yet this interpretation is problematic, for Myshkin's opinion of his fellow party-goers was initially optimistic and loving, in fact "'bubbling over' with happiness" (Idiot 496). When his above statement about understanding slowly is remembered, however, it seems to reveal Myshkin's main problem. Despite his self-recognition and awareness, he is, in his own words, too slow at recognizing others. He finds out far too late that not many people are capable of being the beautiful beings he first sees them as. This not only makes Myshkin foolish, but also makes him quite child-like.

Of course people fail to recognize Myshkin, as well. They see him as a fool, as a foreigner, as someone with little understanding about the real world and practical matters. These opinions are sometimes mixed with awe or fear, but rarely with reverence. A notable exception to this rule is Madame Epanchin's behavior towards Myshkin. Throughout the novel, she is the only character that sees that Myshkin is much more intelligent and aware than people give him credit for. Her recognition of him is almost immediate upon their meeting. At the end of Myshkin's first encounter with Madame Epanchin and her three daughters, the hostess comments that she and the Prince are more alike than she ever would have thought. She likens their personalities to "two drops of water," and maintains that their only difference besides their gender is the fact that he had traveled abroad, and adds that he is "shrewder maybe than all three" of her daughters (71).

Besides genealogy (Myshkin is a distant cousin of Madame Epanchin) Madame Epanchin and Myshkin have other important similarities. Both are judged by others; Madame Epanchin is often seen as silly or child-like. Both have the ability to read other people; both understand faces and their hidden meanings.<sup>3</sup> In the epilogue of the novel, Madame Lizaveta Prokofyevna Epanchin visits Myshkin. After enduring scandals in society- those regarding that last fateful

dinner party during which Myshkin ranted and finally had a seizure as well as her daughter's marriage to a faux count- Lizaveta begins to preach against the evils of the West. Here, she picks up where Myshkin left off. If Myshkin is a holy fool preaching the word of God and exposing non-believers to their faulty thinking, then Lizaveta is Myshkin's disciple, in charge of continuing his message. At the party, Myshkin spoke of the corrupting West and its nihilistic tendencies. He warned that Western Europe was in danger of losing any possibility of their salvation, "Over there, in Europe, a terrible mass of people themselves are beginning to lose their faith- at first from darkness and lying, and now from fanaticism and hatred of the church and Christianity" (498). Later, while visiting Myshkin after his final breakdown, Madame Epanchin speaks the last words of the novel, expanding on the previous quote, "And all of this, all this life abroad, and this Europe of yours is all a fantasy, and all of us abroad are only a fantasy...remember my words, you'll see it for yourself" (564). Myshkin can no longer warn of the day of reckoning and the dangers of all things Western; he has already been wasted by the cruelties of society, humanity's unstoppable sin, and his own physiological frailty. Now Madame Epanchin draws attention to these same issues and also sets up the crux of what Dostoevsky's next novel, The Devils, explores in much more depth.

If Myshkin is supposed to be a Christ figure, it should be no surprise that he is unable to prevent the murder of Nastasya. Though his sensitivity alerts him that danger is afoot, and warnings in his heart caution him against Rogozhin, he can do no more than to make him a brother, and hope to inspire by example. Likewise, he cannot actively drag Nastasya away from Rogozhin but he must watch the events unfold, while at the same time verbally offering her an option for salvation. His inaction may be seen as "failure" by modern critics, but his unwillingness or inability to change the course of events is just another facet of emulating Christ.

Gibson sees Myshkin as a “failed Christian” and the novel as a “Christian tragedy” (115). He believes the psychological breakdown of Myshkin anticipates his failure as a savior and that despite being the author, Dostoevsky “cannot interfere, and the story runs to its predestined conclusion” (115). For Gibson, Dostoevsky’s best effort to paint the perfectly beautiful man is a force that cannot be controlled, and Myshkin’s failure is the inevitable result. Why is it not possible that Dostoevsky did indeed succeed in creating a “perfectly beautiful man,” whose life does parallel Christ’s in that salvation comes after his physical or mental death? Christ did not stop sin from existing, but it is through his example of kindness in life and sacrificial death that others can be redeemed.

Gibson does not entertain the possibility that Myshkin was created to resemble a holy fool, and that seen in this light, his actions are not merely hysterics. He says Myshkin is “insufficiently incarnate” (114) and thus he is unable to save Nastasya from death and Aglaia from humiliation. Gibson continues,

Had he been both sacrificially and passionately in love with Nastasya, as Sonya was with Raskolnikov, he could have swept her from the mercenary clutches of Rogozhin. Being sacrificial and not passionate, except in his sacrifice, he failed and the result is a Christian tragedy. (115)

Following this argument, however, would completely negate any sort of control Nastasya had over her own destiny. She does lack love and emotional support, but she does not lack the ability to make decisions, good or bad. This view also ignores the roles of suffering and foolishness as necessary factors in emulating Christ, themes which are prevalent in The Idiot as well as other Dostoevsky novels.

Gibson is accurate when he describes the importance of the Holbein portrait of Christ in

The Idiot. The composition is simply Jesus' just-dead body, bruised from marks of abuse. The picture lacks any reference to a resurrection and Gibson recalls the fearful reaction the work causes Myshkin and Ippolit. However, the strength of the portrait, which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Three of this thesis, is that it requires faith to accept that what is in the frame is just one moment of Christ's sacrifice. Faith supplies the next moments, where Christ is resurrected and eventually influential to much of the world. Dostoevsky, in turn, closes the novel with a freeze-framed portrait of Myshkin marked and weathered from his psychological sacrificial death. Here, the hope for resurrection and hope for Christ/Myshkin's message is echoed in the sentiments uttered by Madame Epanchin at the close of the novel. Seeing beyond the suffering of Christ or of Myshkin takes faith in the unknown, the demand of all religions. As Myshkin and even Dostoevsky himself remarked, the Holbein portrait "could cause one to lose one's faith" (as qtd. by Gatrell 214); a frightening prospect for the author, but not necessarily inevitable.

The Devils, also known as The Possessed, was published three years after The Idiot. Through use of an unsympathetic narrator and a cast of mostly unlikable characters, Dostoevsky creates one of his more pessimistic environments. This novel sees a female holy fool who, although psychologically damaged, beaten, ridiculed and finally murdered, makes some of the most poignant observations in the entire novel. However, because she and other women of the novel die, some critics feel that Dostoevsky did not value women. Critic Nina Pelikan Straus seeks to establish a counter-argument against those critics who view Dostoevsky's treatment of women and his representations of masculinity as anti-feminine or, as Freud argued, as a mirror of his own deviant desires. Instead, she sees a certain Dostoevskian type of feminist critique of Russian society, where the corrupting forces of the masculine can reside in both sexes. She



asserts that the author “explores the feminine subject, not as feminism does for the purposes of liberating women, but for the different purposes of representing the evils of the soul/body schism he associates with a westernized Cartesian metaphysics” (Straus 273). Thus, a female holy fool calls attention specifically to man’s evil. For instance, the crippled woman Mary Lebyatkin is constantly beaten by her brother, a drunk and a scoundrel. Secretly married to Stavrogin, she bears his evils and faces an untimely death. However she does so because, as Straus points out, she is able to rile up Stavrogin like no other can. Most people judge her similarly to Myshkin; they believe she is a fool, completely mad and senseless. Like Myshkin, she is deeply attuned to the events happening around her and can see through the guises of other people. She often makes astute comments and has a talent for gleaning future events. Myshkin and Mary have similar physical traits, both being fair, with thin faces, light, expressive eyes and auras of gentleness and kindness. After leaving her convent, Mary goes to live in squalor with her abusive brother. Interestingly, though her door is always kept unlocked, Mary does not run away from her brother. She endures Lebyatkin’s abuse day by day, as well as the humiliation Stavrogin brings to her. Her acceptance of these humiliations and her “bearing the marks [of abuse] on her body” are perfect examples of foolishness for Christ (Straus 281).

Mary Lebyatkin, by playing the fool through physical affectations and habits like giggling, gets away with speaking harshly about those in her society, namely the revolutionaries. Straus notes the climactic confrontation between Mary and her psychotic husband, Stavrogin. During this conversation, Stavrogin tries to convince Mary to come away and live with him in seclusion, in “a very gloomy place- all our lives” (Devils 282). Stavrogin is surprised and angered when he realizes that Mary is not as pliable as he thought. Finally understanding that Stavrogin is not the falcon-like Prince she has been dreaming of, but merely an “owl and a

shopkeeper,” Mary dismisses him with a laugh, saying, “Why, what are you that I should go with you? Sit on top of a mountain with you for forty years- what an idea!” (283). Unlike most of the other characters in the novel, Stavrogin has no power over Mary. Citing the recent social exposure she has endured through the “generosities” of Vera Stavrogin, Mary makes clear her distaste for that kind of company. She recognizes their failure, “I had a good look at all of you then: you were all angry, you had all quarreled with one another; you meet and you don’t know how to have a good laugh together. So rich and so little gaiety-it seems all so revolting to me” (280). She *knows* Stavrogin is a “pretender” and this moment of recognition frees her and frightens him. The only way he can control her now is by killing her, thus making her death sacrificial and Christ-like. However, the holy fool’s journey does not need to end in physical or emotion death: Crime and Punishment sees the success of Sonya as a holy fool, although she too must endure much suffering to achieve her goal of reestablishing Raskolnikov’s faith.

Crime and Punishment presents a psychological battle of wills for Raskolnikov. Crushed by the realization that he is not the untouchable man he thought he could be, he must face both the emotions and punishment experienced by ordinary men. His journey takes an extreme toll on him physically and psychologically. The tone of the novel offers little hope for his salvation until the introduction of Sonya Marmeladov into his life. At first repulsed by her simple-hearted innocence and her unseemly willingness to sacrifice herself for others, Raskolnikov eventually grows to care for her. One can hardly call his love for Sonya one dominated by sexual impulses; rather, it is a love that spurs Raskolnikov’s admission of his crime and eventually enables his spiritual resurrection.

In Dostoevsky’s oeuvre, Sonya stands practically alone as a successful holy fool. Although Raskolnikov may not completely repent of his crime in the epilogue of the novel, it is

clear that Sonya has at least inspired him to begin on the path to spiritual and social rehabilitation. Sonya follows a different pattern than Myshkin and Mary. At first glance, the term “fool” does not seem to describe Sonya’s behavior accurately. She is rarely depicted in a social context, so nothing is known of her interactions with society at large, although the reader is aware that because she is a prostitute she is a *persona non grata* to her fellow Russians. Unlike Myshkin and Mary Lebyatkin, Sonya has no mental or physical infirmity. She does not have a mysterious or complicated past. In fact her story is simple and perhaps miserably common for women in similar situations. Forced into prostitution by her overbearing, ill and poverty-stricken step-mother, Sonya selflessly abandons any chance of being socially acceptable and puts herself in great physical danger to help support her family. Sonya’s physical, monetary and spiritual sacrifices and her humility highlight her as a true Christian in a world full of murderers, pedophiles, rapists and drunkards.

Sonya’s enthusiasm for religion, displayed in her conversations with Raskolnikov, and her acceptance of humiliation for the sake of others classify her as a holy fool. Even the way she dresses helps define her as such, according to an article by Janet Tucker. Tucker writes that, “clothing [...] symbolized a character’s spiritual state, specifically his/her acceptance or rejection of Christ” (253). Although little is actually described on Sonya’s clothing, except for her “very simple house dress” (Crime and Punishment 280), her contrast with other people’s fashions underscore her humility and goodness.

Beyond bearing society’s criticisms, Sonya must also bear Raskolnikov’s. Merciless to Sonya from their first meeting, Raskolnikov constantly tests Sonya’s loyalty to God, but her faith never wavers. In Part Four of Crime and Punishment, Sonya and Raskolnikov meet alone for the first time. Raskolnikov interrogates Sonya, first criticizing her mother, then forcing her to face

the possibility that, because of her profession, she could at any time fall ill and leave her family even more destitute. Sonya gets frustrated to the point where she screams and shrieks; her face distorts “with a terrible panic” (381). After Raskolnikov sadistically mentions that Sonya’s beloved siblings may die if Sonya falls ill, she reaches her breaking point and hollers, “No!...God won’t let it happen!” (381). With “malicious satisfaction,” Raskolnikov questions the existence of God, which pushes Sonya into further despair (382). Raskolnikov continues to torture Sonya, and she continues to repel him with her faith in God and salvation. Realizing that he cannot break her spirit, he says to himself, “Yes, I was right, I was right...She’s a holy fool! A holy fool!” (386). As critical as Raskolnikov is of Sonya, he now realizes that her strength, and her willingness to withstand humiliation and abuse, make her exactly what he needs to find his own salvation. From this point on, the two have an unbreakable, if often strained, bond.

Helping draw Raskolnikov to Sonya is his knowledge that Sonya and the murdered pawnbroker’s sister, Lizaveta, were friends who used to read the bible together. Raskolnikov encourages Sonya to read the story of Lazarus to him from her dead friend’s bible, and thinks, “I’ll be turning into a holy fool myself soon, it’s catching!” (387). This never happens: even though Raskolnikov admits to his crime and accepts the punishment due to him, he does not entertain the possibility of being a faithful Christian until the very end of the Epilogue. This acceptance of a power greater than himself and of man’s will comes after a disturbing dream. The dream describes all the people of the world being infected by a plague of the mind, causing them “instantly” to become “rabid and insane” (652). Everyone starts to believe “unswervingly in the correctness of their judgments, their scientific deductions (and in) their moral convictions and beliefs” (652). This world full of people ruled by the intellectual has forsaken the spiritual, and “everyone and everything perished” (652). Only the “pure” survive, but they cannot be

found (652). In this dream-world populated by Napoleons, by people exactly opposite to Sonya, nothing works. Raskolnikov now realizes that balance is needed and, even without feeling complete remorse for his crime, he sees the danger of many people who think like him existing. This dream opens Raskolnikov up to receiving Sonya in a different light and asking himself, “What if her convictions can now be mine, too? Her feelings, her strivings, at least...” (656). The narrator concludes the novel with a promise of Raskolnikov’s “gradual renewal, his gradual rebirth, (and) his gradual transition from one world to another (into) a new, hitherto completely unknown reality” (656). Sonya’s success as a holy fool transforms Raskolnikov, although not immediately, into becoming a more morally and spiritually conscious person, a success that Myshkin was never able to realize.

While Dostoevsky’s novels are often dominated by religious or moral themes, Dickens’ novels feature more social commentary and satire aimed at many institutions of contemporary London life, such as the Courts of London, lawyers, law enforcement and, to a lesser extent, the church. Through characters such as Reverend Chadband, Dickens pokes fun at the hypocrisy of organized religion which can breed money and power hungry clergy, while homelessness and poverty (encapsulated by Jo) thrive under their noses. Identifying a holy fool within Bleak House becomes problematic when one realizes that Dickens did not see kindness and humility as necessitating religiousness. Esther’s patience and goodness are never overshadowed by foolish acts or preaching, and although she faces her own personal crises, Esther never has to sacrifice too much for another’s gain. The notable exception to this is when she risks her health and beauty to nurse her friend Charley through her chicken-pox. Esther is undoubtedly a good Christian, but does not fully embody the traits of a holy fool.

Miss Flite, however, does embody some of those traits. First of all, she certainly has a

reputation of acting foolish, especially in public. She also speaks in Biblical terms, likening her suit in Chancery to a great battle between good and evil which will be decided on Judgment day. Miss Flite, first introduced as “the old lady”, has been waiting the better part of her life for a decision from Chancery, and it is clear that she will continue to wait until death or a decision stops her (62). Upon her first meeting of Esther, Ada and Richard, Miss Flite speaks of Chancery’s summer break and their reopening of the courts in November as if it is the apocalypse, “When the leaves are falling from the trees, and there are no more flowers in bloom to make up into nosegays for the Lord Chancellor’s court, the vacation is fulfilled; and the sixth seal, mentioned in the revelations, again prevails” (62). Miss Flite is superstitious and she lives her life according to what she sees as good or evil omens. She has invested any money she has ever had into her Chancery case, and is forced to live in near poverty. There is no doubt that Miss Flite is mad, yet in her rants, she offers some sage advice throughout the novel.

Immediately taking a liking to the young wards of Chancery, Miss Flite occasionally shows up in different sections of the novel. Miss Flite’s observations, although seemingly small, help to foreshadow future events. Following the discovery of Captain Nemo Hawdon’s death, Miss Flite comments accurately that Mr. Woodcourt, the surgeon, is “the kindest physician in the college” (202). He humors Miss Flite, a kindness which Esther notices, and surely appreciates. During this point in the novel, Esther starts commenting on Mr. Woodcourt more and more, until it is finally revealed that she is in love with him near the close of the novel. Later, after Esther’s illness, Miss Flite pays her a visit. Here, she informs Esther of Mr. Woodcourt’s return to London. She also recounts her personal history with the Court of Chancery, and the misery it has brought to her life,

First, our father was drawn-slowly. Home was drawn with him. In a few years, he was a

fierce, sour, angry, bankrupt, without a kind word or a kind look for any one. He had been so different, Fitz-Jarndyce. He was drawn to a debtors' prison. There he died. Then our brother was drawn-swiftly-to drunkenness. And rags. And death. Then my sister was drawn. Hush! Never ask to what! Then I was ill, and in misery; and heard, as I had often heard before, that this was all the work of Chancery. When I got better, I went to look at the Monster. And then I found out how it was, and I was drawn to stay there. (474)

Miss Flite has an uncontrollable urge to continue fighting in the case that ruined her entire family and her own life. Like a fool, she must see it out until the end; like a holy fool, she sees it as a quest of good against evil and as an opportunity to slay the "monster" of Chancery for the benefit of humankind. She ends her quest prematurely when Richard dies. She frees her birds, symbols of her own caged existence, thus ending her life-long plight with the Courts of Chancery.

## Chapter Two: Spaces as Thresholds between States of Being and the Liminality of Cities

As great a part of Dostoevsky's novels as his ability to create characters whose actions reveal their deepest fears and desires is the undeniable presence of the city in his fiction. St Petersburg, in particular- featured in Crime and Punishment and The Idiot- often acts as a catalyst, constantly driving the action of the plot. In some cases, the city and its dark recesses aid and abet murders and other crimes. In turn the city's putrefaction and oppressive atmosphere can wreak havoc on a character's mind, stifling and smothering his reason and infecting him with an intense sense of despair. St. Petersburg is an ideal choice of setting in Dostoevsky's psychological novels because it is a city, much like Dostoevsky's heroes, which betrays a muddled sense of identity. Neither fully Russian nor fully Western, home to the most decrepit slums and also to the mansions and gardens of the nobility, St. Petersburg represents, geographically, a split in the Russian psyche. Like Dickens, Dostoevsky's fiction capitalizes on the especially seedy side of city life, and uses scenes from the slums, alleys, bars and brothels to underscore his characters' states of mind. Of course, this is not always done in a negative way, as Richard Gill points out in his article about the motif of bridges in Dostoevsky's Petersburg novels, but it is usually the case that the city haunts the character and in turn the character perceives the city to be as dark as his thoughts. A brief history of the purpose and construction of the city will reveal why it was a perfect choice of locale for Dostoevsky and other Russian realists.

St. Petersburg, established during the reign of Peter the Great, was built as the Tsar's attempt to connect Russia with the West; as one critic, Rolf Hellebust, says, it was "a dream sprung from Peter's head and built hanging in the air" (501). Modeled after great European cities, Petersburg was built atop swamp land on the western-most edge of Russia. The original



wooden buildings were painted “to resemble stone,” according to Peter’s wishes (503). Whereas most cities evolve around a center of trade or industry and gradually build population, St. Petersburg was an overnight capital. In less than ten years after Peter ordered serfs and slaves to build the city, it was hailed as the nation’s new capital, relegating Moscow to second in rank. Essentially a fabricated, inorganic city, it symbolized an ideological rift between the Russian people. Those who identified with Mother Russia, the nation of Orthodoxy and a deeply traditional view of life identified more with Moscow, the nation’s capital during the previous 400 years. Those who tended towards Western influences and those who were educated abroad, spoke French, and began to stray from the Church, gravitated towards Petersburg. Hellebust is succinct when he notes that the city “not only represents one side in a larger duality, but also as a result of the splitting poles characteristic of Russian cultural dualities in general, itself contains both sides” (502). He further explains the feelings of traditional Russians regarding their new capital city:

The pre-Petrine mindset is crucial in explaining the duality of Petersburg, which was created not only on the spatial boundary between east and West, but also on the temporal border of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries...For the pre-Petrine mindset, the capital is evil not only because it is new, but because it is *artificial*-- created by the force of human will, and not by God or nature (the counterexample being Moscow). (505)

Dostoevsky took issue with this struggle and his attitude about the city in which he lived parts of his life is reflected in his works. In 1847, while a journalist in St. Petersburg, Dostoevsky published several personal reflections on city life, in the style of *feuilletons*.<sup>4</sup> These passages address the same themes that are explored in Dostoevsky’s later novels, such as the city’s stifling nature, its poverty and depression, its “foolish spoiled wives, (its) lazy oafs of children, (its)

advisers, slanderers, and various other informers...(and its) huge damp walls...” (Dostoevsky as qtd. in Fanger 141). Donald Fanger explores the relationship Dostoevsky had with St. Petersburg, and the way in which he made the city come to life in his novels. Fanger goes so far to assert that Dostoevsky “makes the city the hero of his work” (131). However, it seems more accurate to say that Dostoevsky makes the city a distinct voice within his heroes’ psyches, using the city’s own corners and crevices as hiding places for their darker thoughts and using its streets and staircases as thresholds between two psychological and physical states of being. Fanger is accurate, however, when he distinguishes Dostoevsky’s curious use of the city as unique because it lacks “period quaintness” or specific descriptions of culture, art and society significant to his time (130). This type of cultural description was not as important to Dostoevsky as making the city a functioning, miserable character in his novels.

Dostoevsky’s *feuilletons* explored both sides of St. Petersburg. In his daytime walks he would roam the bridges and streets of the city, especially in the poorer sections of town, and would fall into a state of dream-like reverie (Fanger 132). Fanger believes that Dostoevsky’s literary Petersburg, “the physical place with all its spectral inhabitants, its buildings, canals, bridges, and streetlamps, seems so perpetually on the point of evanescence” (132). This dreamy quality also lends the city a feeling of spatial liminality, or existence on more than one plane. This facet of spatial liminality and a Bakhtinian multi-voicedness, or polyphony of location, is crucial to understanding the psychological and physical importance of Petersburg and its contents within Dostoevsky’s works.

Ian K. Lilly, in his article discussing literary suicide in St. Petersburg, states that the city’s “impossible historical destiny as the successor to Moscow (and its adoption of Western modes) all serve to mark it as un-Russian, the very antithesis of earlier Russian cities, and

therefore as unnatural, illusory, even unfit for human habitation” (403). Petersburg represented what Dostoevsky saw as fundamentally wrong with the ideals of the West. However, Lilly contests that due to Dostoevsky’s “literary pre-eminence,” he did not see St. Petersburg as an important factor in characters’ psychological tendencies, especially in The Idiot. In other words, Lilly argues that Dostoevsky’s writings are more concerned with internal forces rather than external, such as environment. Although Lilly assigns to St. Petersburg some small role in Crime and Punishment for Raskolnikov’s deteriorating mental state, he disagrees with S.V. Belov’s assertion that the city was an actual “participant in Raskol’nikov’s crime” (as qtd. in Lilly 412). Yet one cannot ignore Dostoevsky’s general distaste for the ideological and revolutionary Western ideas that were growing in favor during his time. When one considers that not only did Dostoevsky have an intimate journalistic relationship with the city but that the city itself represented a shift of values dear to Dostoevsky, it seems clear that Lilly underestimates the presence and importance of that city in Dostoevsky’s novels.

St. Petersburg, at the very least in the context of Dostoevsky’s novels, may be seen as a liminal city. It has two identities: it is inherently Russian, technically being a part of the Russian nation, yet it is Western in custom and thought, and there is constant flux and tension between these two sides, neither of which “wins” the identity of Petersburg. The city has a large lower class populace, a condition of any large city, yet its construction is a façade of luxury and culture, with many squares, museums and monuments. Dostoevsky was more concerned with the seedy side of Petersburg, namely “the middle- and lower-class sections, such as the area around the Voznesensky Prospect, full of lodging houses, narrow streets and alleys, (and) Haymarket Square” (Fanger 132). The city’s dualistic character turns it into one giant liminal space within Dostoevsky’s novels. Dostoevskian characters within the city fight psychological battles between

action and inaction, belief and heresy, love and obsession, and sin and redemption. Much of the time, these opposite poles are not described in detail. In Crime and Punishment, Raskolnikov's double murder is described in merely two pages of the entire novel. The Idiot's Nastasya Filippovna, whose troubled existence drives Myshkin's every act, is finally murdered, but "off stage" and Myshkin's actual encounter with her dead body is extraordinarily brief. What is important in the novels is the hazy, often manic state of what is between reality *now* and what *will be* reality, and this liminal journey is constantly underscored by liminal places. The psychological haziness, the characters' constant doubting and questioning of themselves, the world, God and society are perfectly mirrored in the overlooked everyday spaces of life: staircases, hallways, alleys and streets, gateways and bridges. A study of the functioning of these spaces within Dostoevsky's novels will also illuminate an extension of Bakhtin's theory of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel to include what could be called a multi-voicedness of spaces.

Liminal spaces are a natural part of any structure, but they are also necessitated within the novels by the simple fact that characters are often entering and exiting scenes. Everything from brief conversations, note-delivering and secret sharing to assault, murder and suicide take place in these in-between spaces. Dostoevsky's novels are full of movement and, even during scenes of extended gatherings, the multiple characters entering into and out of the action are traversing through liminality. In The Idiot, important scenes take place in a variety of contexts, usually involving a group of at least three or four people, so threshold spaces are a necessity to communicate in private. In Crime and Punishment, Raskolnikov spends much of his time pacing the streets of Petersburg, or involved in conversations with others- his exposure to liminal spaces has much to do with the constant battle taking place in his mind.

Most of the action in the first half of The Idiot takes place in St. Petersburg. Myshkin's

arrival in the city corresponds with his declining mental health, which continues deteriorating until his final breakdown at the end of the novel. Russia is somewhat foreign to him, as he has spent years abroad in Switzerland under a doctor's care. The opening chapter of Part I describes Myshkin's journey through fog and shadows, imagery that reflects his state of mind throughout much of the novel. Rarely does Myshkin have moments of clarity, and these come mostly at the onset of an epileptic seizure. The city and, more specifically the buildings in which Myshkin spends the greater part of his time, are full of transitional spaces. A study of the role of the city and its liminal spaces can illuminate the importance of space, physically and psychologically, within Dostoevsky's novels.

Doorways are thresholds between two states of being. One who stands at a doorway has not yet departed, nor arrived. There may still be time to reverse course and retreat back into the first space, but not without having been exposed to the world across the threshold. Myshkin is at such a place when he first feverishly tells Nastasya Filippovna his feelings for her, "Everything is perfection in you...even your being thin and pale...One would not like to imagine you different...I had such a longing to come to you...I...forgive me!" (*Idiot* 129). From this moment, as Myshkin enters Nastasya's drawing room, he physically and emotionally crosses a boundary, over which he is never able to re-trace his steps. He is committed to the unfolding drama without any chance of escape. Bakhtin notes that Dostoevsky's dialogue is "organized as an *unclosed whole* of life itself, life poised *on the threshold*" (Italics Bakhtin's 63). Certainly, this moment at the doorway is Myshkin's first important transition.

The commotion that follows Nastasya Filippovna's birthday party in Part I results in two important transitions for Nastasya and Myshkin. Nastasya prepares to run away with Rogozhin and is questioned by her maids. Nastasya replies that she is going "to the gutter, Katya- you

heard that's my proper place..." (Idiot 161). Her self-effacing remark is only one of many such remarks that are made by or about Nastasya throughout the novel regarding her rightful "place." This same scene thrusts Myshkin into the relentless and ultimately unsuccessful pursuit of Nastasya. On the staircase, General Epanchin tries to restrain Myshkin from this fruitless endeavor, but cannot. Myshkin literally crosses the threshold into the street to follow Nastasya, fixing his course for the rest of the novel, constantly chasing and tracing her, but never truly apprehending her.

Unlike Crime and Punishment, which features almost exclusively the poverty-stricken locales of St. Petersburg, two different sides of society are represented in The Idiot. Major passages take place at the comparatively wealthy Epanchin's home. Although their residence is described as "modest" (Idiot 17), it still poses a stark contrast to the home of Rogozhin and various other locales. The actual streets of the city are not depicted as often in The Idiot as they are in Crime and Punishment, as many of the scenes take place in drawing rooms and the countryside; however there are still passages illustrating the city as a depressed and oppressive environment:

They reached Liteyny Street at last. It was still thawing. A warm, muggy, rotten wind whistled up and down the streets; carriages splashed through the mud. The horses' hoofs struck the pavement with a metallic ring. Crowds of wet and dejected people slouched among the sidewalks, here and there a drunken man among them. (Idiot 118)

More specifically, the interiors of places depicted in The Idiot lend a miserable air to the city at large.

Rogozhin's house epitomizes the theme of darkness that runs throughout the novel. Similar to Krook's house in Dickens's Bleak House, it holds secrets and "seems to be keeping

something dark and hidden” (188). As the epicenter of Myshkin’s eventual breakdown, Rogozhin’s house is the most transitional space in the novel. It is the site of Myshkin’s and Rogozhin’s exchange of crosses and initiation into “brotherhood,” Myshkin’s sighting of an important painting of Christ, and of Nastasya’s murder. Walking towards Rogozhin’s house for the first time fills Myshkin with dread and presentiment about the dangers it keeps. More importantly, the description of the antiquated house reflects the outdated thinking of Rogozhin. He is an Old Believer, one who cannot adjust to change or new ideas. His house, like his personality, is conspicuous in a city that prides itself as breaking away from tradition. Myshkin enters the house and is confronted with a “roughly made” staircase sided by red walls. The way to Rogozhin’s quarters is complicated and disorienting. Myshkin must first walk down a long hall, then through “some tiny rooms” of indefinite number, “winding and turning” and “mounting two or three steps and going down as many” until he reaches Rogozhin’s apartment (188). As Myshkin penetrates deeper into the heart of the house, he is immersed fully into Rogozhin’s dark mind, as made known by their following conversation.

Dostoevsky stresses the darkness of Rogozhin’s house. The oil paintings on the walls are “dark and grimy,” Rogozhin’s room is “lofty and dark,” and Myshkin exclaims that Rogozhin is “living in darkness” (*Idiot* 190). In the depths of Rogozhin’s quarters, Myshkin learns of Rogozhin’s dark intentions for Nastasya. Rogozhin’s obsession with his elusive lover has already reached a point of violence, and Myshkin is well aware that Rogozhin intends to further harm Nastasya. Rogozhin reveals that he also hides in darkness, spying on Nastasya sometimes “almost until daybreak” (193). As a liminal space, this house functions as a haven for the living and the dead. One would hardly say it is full of life, although it is inhabited by Rogozhin’s family, and other tenants. The old fashioned and dead styles, the dark, almost foggy, atmosphere

the place exudes and the haunting paintings of dead family, as well as the stunning Holbein painting, "Portrait of the Dead Christ," give the place the impression of a morgue. In the end it is the site of Nastasya Filippovna's death and the final blow to Myshkin's sanity. He is finally deadened and wasted here, having not been able to transition past the darkness he was introduced to by Rogozhin.

Myshkin's hotel, necessitated by the lack of alternative lodging in St. Petersburg, is another liminal space and is described as darkly as Rogozhin's house. On the night of the previously mentioned encounter with Rogozhin, Myshkin returns to his dismal hotel, which he hates immediately. He dreads "those corridors (and) all that house," and for good reason (Idiot 215). Myshkin hesitates at the gate of the hotel when he feels something holding him back from entering. Again he is on the threshold of a crucial event in his life and, sensing danger, he lingers at the doorway. His fear paralyzes him and holds him "rooted to the spot just outside the gate" (215). This passage is dominated by darkness, and is described as being even darker than usual. Dostoevsky stresses Myshkin's transition through the gate by mentioning the word "gate" five times in two paragraphs. When Myshkin decides to enter through the gate and take the plunge into the dark unknown, he is immediately confronted with a "stone, dark and narrow" staircase (215). Gripped by a sense of impending doom, Myshkin is suddenly attacked by Rogozhin, and escapes being stabbed only because he immediately has a seizure and falls down the stairs; "struggling in violent convulsions, the sick man slipped down the steps, of which there were about fifteen, to the bottom of the staircase" (217).

Myshkin's quest to save Nastasya, and therefore his own sanity, takes another turn in Part II, which sees the migration of most of the major characters in the novel to a summering town, Pavlovsk, just outside St. Petersburg. In Petersburg, many of the driving motives of the novel are



set up and revealed. They are further built upon and made suspenseful in Pavlovsk. This city of immense wealth and summer villas is, like its neighboring capitol, full of fabricated spaces, such as grandly-landscaped royal parks and outdoor verandahs. Interestingly, action almost completely ceases to take place indoors, as it did in the first part of the novel at the homes of the Epanchins, the Lebedevs and Rogozhin. In Pavlovsk, the action takes place almost exclusively outside, but only in these half-natural/half-artificial environments.

The novel closes where it begins, in the dark alleys and corners of St. Petersburg. After Myshkin drives Aglaia Epanchin away by revealing his undying loyalty to her rival, Nastasya, he returns to his hotel room. His desperation and sadness in the final pages of the novel underscore the misery of the streets he walks through, “In unutterable dejection he walked to his hotel. The dusty, stifling atmosphere of Petersburg weighed on him like a press; he was jostled by morose or drunken people, stared aimlessly at the faces” (552). Returning to the same hotel in which he was almost murdered by Rogozhin, Myshkin feels that they will meet. He eyes the place thinking that he might meet Rogozhin in the dark corridor but instead Rogozhin finds him in the street. In the dim twilight of the hot night, Myshkin enters Rogozhin’s house for the last time and is asked by Rogozhin to enter into his curtained bed area, a cordoned off space, even darker than the rest of the room. As Myshkin finally understands that he is looking at the corpse of the woman he could not save, he feels that “the room became more and more still and death-like” (557). Nastasya is now in the ultimate physical liminal state; still a part of the living world, still resembling her living self, yet unmistakably dead and rotting in Rogozhin’s dark, hot and closed up apartment. Here Myshkin also reaches his final transition, suffering complete mental deterioration, and after “many hours” of his vigil over Nastasya’s corpse and Rogozhin’s feverish state, he becomes virtually wasted (561). Petersburg’s liminal points help underscore

Myshkin's psychological oscillations. In other Dostoevsky novels the city does more, actually facilitating crimes as well as worsening the feelings of depression, confusion, and isolation.

In Crime and Punishment, St. Petersburg contributes to Raskolnikov's mania and aids him initially in getting away with his crime. The shadows, the banks of the Neva and the filthy streets packed with the underbelly of society mask and abet the double murder Raskolnikov commits. The motif of staircases is introduced immediately in the novel. Most notable is the staircase in Raskolnikov's building which causes him constant anxiety. Raskolnikov must sneak by the landlady's apartment and up the stairs to get to his own attic room. He dreads meeting his landlady, not out of fear, but out of an unwillingness to participate in what he feels is an inane conversation, "to have to stop on the stairs and listen to all that mediocre rubbish that had nothing whatsoever to do with him, all those pestering demands for payment (...) no, it was better to slink down the stairs like a cat and steal away unseen by anyone" (Crime and Punishment 6). In fact, this staircase proves to be a pivotal and frequently mentioned location in the novel: it and everything it signifies to Raskolnikov make it a point of departure for the crimes he commits.

In Part I of the novel, Raskolnikov and Marmeladov meet for the first time in a tavern. After Marmeladov's lengthy drunken tirade, Raskolnikov escorts him home. As a perfect parallel to the miseries just disclosed by Marmeladov, including his wife's sickness, his poverty, his alcoholism, his violence, and his role in the prostitution of his own daughter, his home is full of darkness and despair. This is immediately evident by their journey up the stairs to the apartment: "the further up the staircase they climbed, the darker it grew....A small, soot-grimed door at the point where the staircase ended, at its very summit, stood open" (31). Hence we see Raskolnikov's initiation into the world of the Marmeladovs, a contact which is pivotal to his own

future and salvation. Raskolnikov is thrust into another sweltering environment. His own apartment, the streets of the city, the tavern and now the Marmeladovs apartment are stiflingly hot, and to make matters worse, “a foul odour drifted up from the staircase, but the door that gave on to it was not closed” (32). The heat and rotten odor of the room highlight Katerina Ivanovna’s “flushed,” feverish and frenzied manner, as well as the fact that she is not willing to protect her family, having induced her daughter to become a prostitute and constantly abusing her all the while (31-33). This scene also sees Marmeladov literally “kneeling on the threshold,” petrified of entering his apartment and encountering his wife (33). When the scene escalates, Raskolnikov makes his escape, but first leaves a couple of coins for the destitute family. On the staircase, he has a moment of doubt and almost turns back to reclaim the money. Instead, he descends and leaves the building proving that, if nothing else, he has a charitable urge, most likely inspired by Sonya Marmeladov. Several times, Raskolnikov gives somebody a donation of money; besides the gift to Sonya, he also pays a policeman to stop Svidrigailov from raping a young girl. Every time Raskolnikov follows his instinct, which is to right a wrong, he rapidly switches from a charitable mood to one of apathy and anger. He is maddened by his fundamentally sympathetic nature, perhaps because he is overwhelmed by the evil of the world, and resorts to a nihilistic way of thinking. The constant battle between mentalities causes Raskolnikov anguish because he is always on the brink of two different personalities, which traps him in a liminal state.

In his article concerning Crime and Punishment, Richard Gill cites Gaston Bachelard’s Poetics of Space as he discusses the importance of bridges in Petersburg as thresholds between two worlds or states of being. In addition to the spaces discussed above such as staircases and corridors, Crime and Punishment features multiple outdoor liminal spaces such as bridges, alleys

and the streets of St. Petersburg. Gill links Bachelard's phenomenology of spaces to a discussion of bridges, which proves to have psychological import in Crime and Punishment. Also cited by Gill, the novel opens with an oppressive image of the capital city- that of a hot, stifling atmosphere made worse for the hero Raskolnikov by his tiny garret apartment. The heat is so invasive that it, with the help of the general misery of the area and the "slaked lime" and "distinctive aroma," has a "shattering effect on (Raskolnikov's) already jangled nerves" (Crime and Punishment 6). Clearly, Dostoevsky meant Raskolnikov to be mentally affected by his dismal surroundings, and in turn his surroundings are made worse by his own dark thoughts.

Significantly, Raskolnikov has mapped every step of his planned crime, familiarizing himself with the filth that surrounds him, and even blending in with that filth. During a trial visit to Alyona Ivanovna's apartment Raskolnikov notes and appreciates the "dark and narrow" staircase, and he chooses to literally and mentally step "over the threshold" to get one step closer to killing the pawnbroker (Crime and Punishment 9). Gill points out that Raskolnikov must cross a bridge from his apartment to the landlady's apartment, and Gill sees this as an opportunity "for looking backward or forward (and for) localizing the uneasiness of indecision or the finality of commitment" (Gill 146). Raskolnikov is drawn to bridges at several points in the novel and, like staircases, they offer him either a means of escape or a cause of mental anguish. Raskolnikov initially decides to abandon his murderous plans on the Tuchkov Bridge, of course only later to physically and psychologically re-cross that bridge to kill the landlady (148). Gill cites a later passage featuring Raskolnikov deep in thought, "standing Hamlet-like in the middle of the bridge, (facing) the choice between life and death" (149). Bridges, for Raskolnikov, are thresholds between life and death, his own as well as his murder victims. Likewise a bridge acts as a threshold to death for Svidrigailov, who commits suicide on the same bridge Raskolnikov

contemplated his own murderous actions. Gill observes that Raskolnikov is finally relieved of the weight of his crime by re-crossing the same bridge he walked along to kill the pawnbroker which he must also walk across to access Sonya's house. Gill writes, "By crossing this same bridge twice, Raskolnikov turns, literally and metaphorically, from his crime to his punishment" (Gill 152).

Liminal spaces, particularly staircases and doorways, consistently mirror Raskolnikov's psychological doubts. Unsure of his own professed philosophy of the untouchable man, Raskolnikov faces numerous moments of self-doubt and hesitation. He vacillates between being sure of his decision to murder the pawnbroker to sinking into despair and illness. Often, liminal spaces are the sites of these vacillations. The aforementioned staircase in Raskolnikov's apartment figures prominently in his state of mind at the beginning of the novel and that same staircase continues to be a main feature within his environment as the novel progresses. On the day of the double murder, Raskolnikov drifts in and out of consciousness: sleeping, then abruptly waking, then falling into "waking fantasies," in which he dreams of drinking from an oasis that never materializes in reality (Crime and Punishment 83). Upon awaking in a feverish, alert state, Raskolnikov goes to his door to "listen on the stairs" for any movement in the rest of the apartment (83). He begins his plan after determining that "the staircase was all quiet, as if everyone were asleep" (83). After making some preparations, Raskolnikov again listens on and to the stairs before he begins "to descend his thirteen steps, cautiously, inaudibly, like a cat" (85). This scene also finds him pausing in a door to "reflect" on what his next step should be (88). Symbolically, Raskolnikov questions the feasibility of his plan within a literal threshold. Although he feels "shorn of purpose, in the entrance-way," he does not turn back (89). Instead, he steps forward, out of his front door and walks towards the pawnbroker's house with the

footsteps of a determined murderer. Although he is encouraged by the silence on his own staircase, he is almost thwarted in the stairwell of his victim's apartment.

Enduring a moment of doubt on the pawnbroker's stairs, Raskolnikov continues his ascent to her floor. The long climb up the stairs leaves Raskolnikov "panting" and again questioning his resolve (91). The pawnbroker senses something is amiss and listens on her side of the door, hesitating to open it to Raskolnikov. Finally she does, and Raskolnikov effectively blocks the threshold of her apartment with his presence and his purpose, so that she cannot close the door to him. Soon after, she and her sister are axed to death. The aftermath of the crime puts Raskolnikov's secret and sanity in jeopardy. The following scene's hesitations, second-guessings and close calls are indicative of the mental anguish Raskolnikov feels for most of the rest of the novel. As he tries to leave the scene of his crime, Raskolnikov hears footsteps on the stairs which he foresees are meant for the pawnbroker's floor. He is forced to remain in this space of crime and for the first time feels real terror. He stands on the inside of the doorway, listening for the approaching steps to climb the stairs and pause at the door, "just as earlier he and the old woman had stood, when the door had separated them, and he had listened" (101). Raskolnikov begins to doubt reality, thinking his situation is "like a dream" (101). This illustrates a duality in Raskolnikov's mind between surety and doubt, between which he struggles until his final admission of guilt. Part One ends with Raskolnikov settling into a state of "oblivion" as he tries to regain his strength for the challenges that lay before him (106).

In Part Two, Raskolnikov's state of mind is marked by alternating swings from self-assuredness and an instinct to protect himself to paralyzing states of reverie during which he is careless about concealing the details of his crime. Having to respond to a summons to the police department, Raskolnikov departs his room for the first time since his crime and after spending an

indeterminate amount of time in a fever-induced sleep. Upon descending his staircase, Raskolnikov doubts that he hid his stolen goods well enough, but is “suddenly overcome by such despair and by such cynicism with regard to his own downfall” that he does not bother to address his worries (115). Raskolnikov’s first venture to the police station is similar to Myshkin’s first viewing of Rogozhin’s house in The Idiot. Like Myshkin, Raskolnikov has a moment upon seeing the building when he *feels*, rather than knows, that he is in front of his destination. Myshkin is led to Rogozhin’s rooms through halls, a series of large and small rooms and multiple ascents and descents of stairs; likewise Raskolnikov faces a similar voyage to the heart of the police bureau. Unlike Myshkin, he begins his journey alone, climbing a staircase that is “small, narrow, steep and awash with dirty water” (116). He must continue through suffocating heat, passing by “yardkeepers...police clerks and various tradespeople of both sexes”; the types of people he also encounters on the streets of St. Petersburg, but to whom he has no real connection to (116). These people are not a part of Raskolnikov’s reality, which is currently completely absorbed in himself and his vacillating conscience, and he pays little attention to them. He passes through multiple stenches and more heat, which gives the scene a sense of severe claustrophobia. He must journey to “the very furthest room,” which is “overflowing with members of the public” (117). Like Myshkin, Raskolnikov has now reached the innermost depths of a place that has the potential of being detrimental to his survival and sanity. For both men, these inner, hidden places leave them vulnerable to their own greatest fears. It is the liminal state between life and death that dictates Raskolnikov’s every action after his crime. He is simply incapable of either being fully alive or of completely giving up on his survival, and this indecision is a fundamental reason for his internal struggles. Only at the end of the novel is Raskolnikov able to escape psychological liminality, by admitting his guilt and accepting

physical and societal rehabilitation (through Siberia) and spiritual renewal (through Sonya).

It is not just Dostoevsky who gives the city a larger-than-life role in his novels. Charles Dickens's works are synonymous with London and for good reason. Like Petersburg, Dickens's London was a city full of contradictions. Home to the royal family of England as well as numerous wealthy families, the courts of law, great museums and historic sites, the city also had a dark side. The streets, slums, poor and insane of Dostoevsky's fictions could easily transfer to Dickens's London. The novel Bleak House makes an excellent case for the liminality of London and of particular places within the city. Like Crime and Punishment and The Idiot, staircases, doorways and other thresholds represent characters' inner conflicts and these spaces underscore the effects of characters' choices. However, Bleak House not only represents the possible liminality of a location, it also invites the analysis of physiological liminality. With Raskolnikov and Myshkin, we see courage or fear translated through the ways in which they move within their spaces. They face decisions which, once made, cannot be reversed; knowing this leaves the characters constantly in a state of friction-filled liminality, sometimes unable to decide in which existence they should be part of. There are also some who defy strict definition; their physiological state of being is liminal and difficult to capture. An exploration of this alternative view of liminality can reveal meaning-rich layers to peel from the surface of the text.

The background of Bleak House consists of a case in the court of Chancery called "Jarndyce and Jarndyce." The case has been in the courts for decades. It has seen people involved in the suit age and die, commit suicide, go insane, and lose all their wealth. The case is kept in a virtual limbo so the courts can collect as much money as possible from those involved, i.e. John Jarndyce and his wards. The living victims of Chancery are, to quote the narrator of Crime and Punishment, "more dead than alive," existing merely in a state of anticipation of a



decision from the courts (Crime and Punishment 105). In the case of first Miss Flite, and later Richard Carstone, this anticipation becomes an obsession. Chancery is “the most pestilent of hoary sinners” (Bleak House 18).

Dickens portrays London as a cesspool of filth. The young heroine of Bleak House, Esther Summerson, is awestruck by the sight of the city on her first voyage, and asks why the air is “filled with brown smoke.” In response, her carriage driver says that “it is a London particular” (Bleak House 42). Here it seems that Esther is about to enter a realm entirely different from the life she has left. The “fog” of “the dirtiest and darkest streets that ever were seen in the world” muddles the depravity and poverty of the city, yet does not fully obscure it (42). Later in the novel, Esther will have even a clearer vision of the city’s underbelly when she visits Mr. Krook’s house and the slum-dwelling of the brick makers. In such a foggy atmosphere, one can become easily confused and may not be able to believe everything he or she sees. Esther’s own journey through self-doubt and illness, John Jarndyce and Miss Flite’s struggles against Chancery and Lady Dedlock’s great secret all are explored and unveiled within the city. The fog may add confusion, yet it cannot fully withhold reality.

Mr. Krook’s house is a liminal area in and of itself. Krook stockpiles relics from the past, including Chancery paraphernalia, junk, various documents and the like. Stuck in another time, Krook is obsessed with and overcome by his possessions. Esther likens Krook’s store to a graveyard: “One had only to fancy...that yonder bones in a corner, piled together and picked very clean, were the bones of clients” (64). In fact, this building sees the death of two characters, including Krook.

There is one space, perhaps the only one in the four novels discussed, that contains a positive liminality. In other words, this space is used for positive psychological journeys and

transformations. This place is the ironically titled “Bleak House,” and it fosters the bonds of Esther’s new-found family. Interestingly, however, the house is described very similarly to Rogozhin’s house in The Idiot:

It was one of those delightfully irregular houses where you go up and down steps out of one room into another, and where you come upon more rooms when you think you have seen all there are and where there is a bountiful provision of little halls and passages, and where you find still older cottage-rooms in unexpected places... (77-78).

In the case of Bleak House, the labyrinth-like layout is “pleasantly irregular” (79). The non-linear nature of the house enchants Esther and Ada and their exploration of the house and its charms enrich their lives. John Jarndyce and his wards fortunately have a safe haven in Bleak House, unlike characters in other texts. Unfortunately, most of the action happens in the truly bleak areas of London and its surroundings; Tom-all-Alone’s, Chesney Wold, Krook’s house, Chancery, graveyards, the dwellings of the brick makers, and Jo’s streets in London. Within these places, psychological and physical liminality are common, however, as one critic discusses, physiological liminality is also present.

Robert E. Lougy writes about liminality in Bleak House, specifically the liminality of filth within the text. Lougy first connects the orphan Jo’s neighborhood to filth, which reminds one of the suffocating heat and smells within Crime and Punishment’s Petersburg. The focus of Lougy’s essay is the “instability of the boundaries between the named and unnamed,” in other words, the *liminality* of the text (Lougy 474). While mainly focusing on the presence of the dead corpses, refuse, slime and excrement which invade the living world, Lougy keeps his argument mainly sensory. Of course, these invasions *psychologically* affect the characters within the novel and, added to the liminality of existence in a city like London or Petersburg, it is clear to see that

everyday places, objects and even smells can infiltrate a person's psyche and affect his or her well-being. Lougy specifically references Chesney Wold, home of the honorable Dedlocks. The grounds are described as a graveyard and the house itself a crypt: cold, unforgiving and just waiting for the demise of its inhabitants. Here, Lady and Sir Leicester Dedlock exist in a state of liminality, Sir Leicester in a perpetual state of ill-health and Lady Dedlock resigned to awaiting her ruinous secret to be revealed.

Lougy analyzes the potential liminality of corpses, specifically that of Nemo Hawdon, Esther's biological father from an affair with Lady Dedlock. He cites the physiological liminality of Nemo's freshly dead body, stating correctly that "Captain Hawdon enters the novel as neither dead nor alive, but rather as an intermediary figure, situated in a transitional state between the two, still in the process of crossing the threshold between these two worlds" (Lougy 480). This observation can extend to other characters within Bleak House. Lady Dedlock, although still technically alive during most of the novel, does not really *live*, so much as she merely *exists*. Lougy also discusses the street boy, Jo, who exists on the threshold of human and animal, covered and living in filth, and shooed about like a pest. Jo exists within Lougy's "realm of taboo" and as such the child belongs to no one and nowhere (482). He passes through thresholds of increasing despair, grime and illness and finally into the ultimate realm of death, which seems to be the fitting end for such a lost soul. As Lougy says, "while the text mourns Jo's death and condemns those various forces that have conspired to bring it about, it also kills him off, finding no way of accommodating him or keeping him alive" (484).

Yet, evident from the social commentary of the novel, Jo is only one of many who exist on this threshold between barely living and dead. His neighborhood, referred to as Tom-all-Alone's, is a threshold within the city that once entered, is nearly impossible to escape. The

polluting effects of the city are described,

There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. Verily, what with tainting, plundering, and spoiling, Tom has his revenge. (Bleak House 590)

Clearly, although no "ordinary" citizen dare enter Tom-all-Alone's, the filth of the place is unstoppable and will escape. Many people forced into poverty live here but in an obvious state of nebulosity. Jo's clothing is described as looking "like a bundle of rank leaves of swampy growth, that rotted long ago" (593). This description likens Jo to a mere substance, already decomposing into the earth. And in fact he is close to death, suffering from measles, and beyond the stage for successful treatment. Like Nemo's slowly rotting corpse and Lady Dedlock's marble-cold look, Jo is neither fully of this world, nor has he yet departed it. Jo "creeps," "shuffles," "gnaws," and "shivers": words that mark his non-human status within his society and which add to his physiological liminality (597-98). Jo crosses the final threshold towards death and describes the transformation from light to dark as a groping, frenzied rush like a "cart shaken all to pieces" thundering down a "rugged road" (609). Unlike many liminal characters' transitions to death or madness, such as Prince Myshkin, Nastasya Filippovna, Captain Nemo Hawdon and Lady Dedlock, Jo's escape from liminality is witnessed by the reader.

### Chapter Three: The Importance of the Visual in Dostoevsky and Dickens

Instances of characters' reading of portraits and faces abound in Dostoevsky's fiction and in Dickens's Bleak House. Both Dostoevsky and Dickens often describe the faces, eyes and facial expressions of their characters from another character's standpoint. A character looks at another's face to read him or her, to find out how he or she feels, to try to intuit what the peculiar flashing or sparkle in his or her eyes means. However, both faces and artistic representations of them can be deceiving. In her article concerning art in Bleak House, Regina Oost discusses some of the ways portraits are unreliable. Because paintings are an artist's rendering of a subject, they may be too "stylized and flattering" or they may "subordinate painters' personalities to fashions of the age and myths of family glory" (or dispel myths of family glory, as well) (Oost 152). With many variables, paintings and other artistic renderings must be analyzed thoughtfully and carefully.

However, for an observant, intuitive subject, a portrait or other piece of art may inspire insight and recognition. Citing a portrait of the obnoxious character Guppy in Bleak House, Oost remarks that Esther's reading of the portrait realistically describes Guppy's essential personality. Oost believes that "the portrait allows Esther to learn in a moment what an acquaintance of Guppy's who hasn't seen the picture might require a much longer period to discern" (154). Likewise, Esther finds meaning in Lady Dedlock's portrait before she even knows the woman is her mother. Lady Dedlock even seems to find significance in her own portrait, as she contemplates her future. One's gaze, be it directed towards one's own or another's created image or face illuminates possibilities about oneself and the surrounding world.

Early in The Idiot, Prince Myshkin reads the faces of Madame Epanchin and her three daughters. He has known them for merely a conversation over lunch and tea, yet by looking at

their faces he is able to tell each and every one of them a truth about herself. Myshkin is constantly haunted by faces; the eyes of Rogozhin follow him all over Petersburg, the portrait of Nastasya Filippovna astonishes him at first glance, and numerous other references to faces, eyes and portraits are made throughout The Idiot with much significance. Interestingly, Myshkin often struggles with his own sense of identity. He can recognize other people for who they are by looking at their faces, yet his own glimpses into himself are full of confusion. As he says, the only times he has clear insight and knowledge is during the few moments just before a seizure. He lacks a true mirror; he has few friends and many people try to manipulate him for their own gain. Gradually, through glimpses of others and through artwork, he is able to piece his identity together like a puzzle. Examining the motif of internal and external viewing and recognitions within the novel is crucial for readers to have insight into the characters.

Myshkin has a tendency to be clairvoyant in certain situations, especially involving the complicated love quadrangle among himself, Rogozhin, Aglaia Epanchin and Nastasya Filippovna. After spending just a few hours with Rogozhin on the Petersburg-bound train, Myshkin is able to predict Nastasya's murder. Soon after Myshkin's arrival to St. Petersburg, in General Epanchin's office, he studies a portrait of Nastasya and recalls his first impression of Rogozhin. He links the two together immediately,

It's a wonderful face ... and I feel sure her story is not an ordinary one. The face is cheerful, but she has passed through terrible suffering, hasn't she? Her eyes tell one that, the cheek bones, those points under her eyes. It's a proud face, awfully proud, but I don't know whether she is kindhearted. Ah, if she were! That would redeem it all! (34)

Upon Ganya asking Myshkin if he thought that Rogozhin would marry Nastasya, Myshkin replies, "Marry her! He might tomorrow; I dare say he'd marry her and in a week perhaps

murder her” (34). Uncannily, Myshkin exactly predicts the outcome of the novel, and causes those around him to shudder with fear. Recalling Rogozhin’s “coarse and insolent smile and the hard and conceited look in his eyes” Myshkin sees potential danger in the man and connects this feeling with Nastasya’s portrait (Idiot 5).

The aforementioned scene involving Myshkin and the Epanchin ladies contains a fascinating and lengthy discussion in which Myshkin recounts his adventures abroad. A discussion about art and seeing ensues, and Adelaida Epanchin, the painter of the family, decides that Myshkin learned how to figuratively “see” clearly while in Switzerland. This observation is true, as Myshkin was at his strongest and healthiest while abroad, and thus was able to lift the “wonder and uneasiness” from his head for the first time (51). Later in the conversation, Myshkin becomes preoccupied thinking about an execution by guillotine he witnessed in France and its connections to a painting he saw that featured the face of a man just before death. The women are fascinated by Myshkin’s macabre tales and demand more details about both impressions. Myshkin explains that as soon as he saw the French convict’s face before death, he “understood it all (58).” He seems to know everything the man was thinking and feeling and was completely overpowered by this intimate view into another’s soul. This instance lets the reader know that Myshkin is intuitive to a point where he can virtually read other people’s minds and it foreshadows his future readings of Nastasya, the Epanchin ladies, Rogozhin, Ippolit, and finally, himself. Inspired by his recollection, Myshkin tells Adelaida that the perfect painting would be of a face, like the one he saw and “knew,” just before death. He tells her to

Paint the scaffold so that only the last step can be distinctly seen in the foreground (...) his head, his face as white as paper; the priest holding up the cross, the man greedily putting forward his blue lips and looking- and aware of everything. The cross and the

head- that's the picture. (60)

This passage not only reveals that seeing, faces and facial recognition are extremely important to Myshkin, but also echoes Dostoevsky's own artistic sensibilities. Myshkin guides Adelaida to depict a scene that exposes a man's raw emotions. The face of a man before death is a true face, one whose veil has been lifted, one that is naked to all who view it. Dostoevsky gave Myshkin a similar face. He is not able to hide his emotions or censor his feelings. Myshkin is "naked" in the sense that he does not try to mystify or fool anyone. The entire novel could be seen as depicting a man's face before death; at least it depicts Myshkin before his intellectual death. Dostoevsky, in this as in his other novels, is constantly pushing the reader to come face to face with death, doubt, revenge, pride and contempt. Stripped of their protective social mask, depicting these fundamental human emotions and experiences is the only worthwhile artistic endeavor.

Nearing the end of this first visit to the Epanchin home, Myshkin reveals his impressions of the ladies who are to figure prominently in his life for some time to come. In Adelaida, he sees warmth and kindness; likewise in Alexandra, although he also notes some trouble. In Madame Epanchin he sees that she is "a perfect child in everything, everything, good and bad alike" (Idiot 70). He softens that opinion by reminding the women how much he loves children. Aglaia's beauty strikes Myshkin, and he immediately compares her to Nastasya Filippovna. The latter's face, Myshkin feels, contains

unbounded pride and contempt, almost hatred (...) and at the same time something confiding, something wonderfully simple-hearted. (...) Her dazzling beauty was positively unbearable-the beauty of a pale face, almost sunken cheeks and glowing eyes- a strange beauty! (73)



Throughout the novel, Myshkin's opinion of Nastasya's portrait changes as his own health declines. Initially enthralled by her beauty, yet acknowledging it to be a "strange" beauty, Myshkin eventually begins to fear the image. During Nastasya's birthday party, a pivotal scene in the novel, Myshkin offers Nastasya a way out of life with Ganya and Rogozhin by asking her to marry him. Myshkin tells Nastasya that he had seen her portrait that morning, and that he "recognized" it at first glance (156). Her portrait "called" to him, instilling him with an instinct to seek her out and finally, to try to rescue her (156). Her portrait takes on more meaning now, surpassing mere depiction of her face, to sending Myshkin a message of familiarity and urgency. Unfortunately, even Myshkin's recognition of Nastasya and her need for help does little to dissuade her from running off with Rogozhin.

Part Three of The Idiot sees the return of Nastasya to society, after having gone with Rogozhin to Moscow. Nastasya interrupts Myshkin's party at an outside musical performance in Pavlovsk, a town near St. Petersburg, where the Epanchins summer. Upon seeing Nastasya for the first time in "more than three months," Myshkin is flooded with memories and impressions of her face, which are now stronger and more painful than ever before,

Several times during those six months he had recalled the first impression made on him by that woman's face, when he had only seen it in the photograph. But even the impression made by the photograph was, he remembered, extremely painful. (...) There was something which always tortured him in the very face of this woman. (...) That face, even in the photograph, had roused in him a perfect agony of pity: the feeling of compassion and even of suffering over this woman never left his heart and it had not left it now. Oh, no, it was stronger than ever! (321)

This description of Myshkin's agony seems a far cry from his initial opinion of her face as a

“strange beauty.” The increasingly negative memory of her picture stems from two notable reasons. First, Myshkin is finally drawing the opinion that Nastasya is insane. He understands, from witnessing her behavior with Rogozhin, that she has little sense of self-preservation. He knows, and has always known, that Rogozhin means to kill Nastasya, but now he realizes that Nastasya knows her fate as well. Despite her knowledge, she cannot stop herself from continuing down a road to certain destruction. Another reason for Myshkin’s changing opinion may be that his *own* sanity is starting to suffer. Emotionally fragile to begin with, Myshkin is now experiencing great emotional turmoil due to the Nastasya and Rogozhin situation, as well as his own situation with the Epanchin family and his attempted murder by Rogozhin. During this outdoor concert scene, Aglaia begins to notice that Myshkin is losing touch with reality. She catches him staring at her for a lengthy time, which startles her and prompts her to call him an idiot. However, Myshkin is really looking through her, “as at an object a mile away, or as at her portrait, not herself” (319). Viewing Aglaia as one would view a portrait abstracts her and takes away her voice and presence. Foreshadowing future events, Aglaia’s real, palpable existence is eclipsed by the fantasy of Nastasya.

Before the climactic scene featuring Myshkin, Rogozhin and Nastasya’s corpse, Myshkin again discusses Nastasya’s portrait. He reveals to Yevgeny Pavlovich that he had an aversion for the *femme fatale’s* face from the beginning,

I’ve never said this to anyone, not even to Aglaia, but I can’t bear Nastasya Filippovna’s face. ....It was true what you said just now about that evening at Nastasya Filippovna’s; there is one thing you left out because you don’t know it. I looked at *her face!* That morning, in her portrait, I couldn’t bear the sight of it (...) I’m afraid of her face! (534)

Swirling in a mass of confusion, Myshkin is near his breaking point. He has offended Aglaia

Epanchin to an extreme degree through his obsession with Nastasya. He has scared her away permanently, and now can only recall visions of her face and her expression when she ran away from him. Yevgeny Pavlovich comments that Aglaia loves Myshkin “like a woman, like a human being, not like an abstract spirit” (535). Perhaps Myshkin can only feel abstract, lofty love. He does not have the ability to verbalize his emotions, and many times is not even sure of what he feels. He follows emotional instinct, even if it is indefinable, instead of following logic. Besides abstracting Aglaia, he also abstracts Nastasya into someone who desperately needs his help, excusing her rashness, destructiveness and other behavior to his belief in her innocence.

Rogozhin’s face is another that haunts Myshkin throughout the novel. Unlike Nastasya’s image, which is frozen into Myshkin’s mind after only one viewing, Rogozhin’s is a reality, constantly searching out Myshkin and even attempting to kill him at one point. Their first meeting leaves Myshkin with a strong enough impression of Rogozhin to deem him a murderer, and their final scene together sees Myshkin cradling Rogozhin in his arms after he has killed Nastasya. Rogozhin and Myshkin are bound to each other throughout the novel because of their common cause: Nastasya. But they are also symbolically brothers, having exchanged crosses, and each recognizes something in the other that is powerful and frightening. However, as Myshkin trails Nastasya through several cities, Rogozhin must also keep on Myshkin’s trail. In Part Two, Myshkin notices “strange glowing eyes” staring at him in the train station when he returns to St. Petersburg. Interestingly, Rogozhin’s eyes are his most prominent feature, described in the beginning of the novel as “small, grey, but fiery eyes” which are “hard and conceited” (5). They continue to follow Myshkin, who realizes whose eyes they are when he goes to visit Rogozhin at his house. They share a moment of intense eye contact, and Myshkin tells Rogozhin that he saw “two eyes that looked at me just as you did just now from behind”

(189). Here, Myshkin is literally feeling eyes boring through the back of his head. Rogozhin's gaze seems to be as powerful and as important as Myshkin's. They both see to the heart of each other and even when they are apart, they cannot escape each other's gaze.

Myshkin's clairvoyance is active in Part Two of the novel. As noted in Chapter Two of this thesis, Myshkin recognizes Rogozhin's house from a distance, responding to a gut feeling that the house must belong to him. He tells Rogozhin, "your house has the look of your whole family and your Rogozhin manner of life; but if you ask me how I know that, I can't explain it. I had an idea before that you lived in such a house, but, as soon as I saw it, I thought at once, 'That's just the sort of house he ought to have.'" (190) Feeling a great foreboding about the place, Myshkin senses (even if he cannot yet verbalize) that this house is the place where Nastasya will be murdered. The images of the dark house with red furniture give the reader the impression of death and blood which aids the impression that this house is an important locale in the novel. Myshkin also sees the knife Rogozhin will later use to kill Nastasya, and knows its purpose almost immediately. At this point, he is becoming more and more confused, knowing that strange and horrible things are happening, but he is very slow to put all the pieces together. Here, in Rogozhin's house, he understands that he is up against a power that might destroy him. He realizes that he's known the dire situation since he first voyaged to Russia from Switzerland, "I feel as though I had known when I was coming to Petersburg as though I had foreseen it. I didn't want to come here; I wanted to forget everything here, to root it out of my heart!" (199).

Nastasya, as the other main participant in the action of the novel, is also given a sort of talent at reading people's faces and eyes. Upon first meeting Myshkin, she recognizes his face, although she does not admit to it immediately. After Ganya slaps Myshkin (because he was trying to defend Varya, Ganya's sister), Nastasya comments that she "certainly has seen his face

somewhere” (108). Nastasya knows that Rogozhin will murder her, and vacillates between resigning herself to a fate which she thinks she deserves and listening to Myshkin’s appeals to save herself through marrying him. Nastasya and Myshkin also have similar visions of Rogozhin. Upon looking at a portrait of Rogozhin’s father, Myshkin comments that if Rogozhin were not so obsessed and miserable over Nastasya, that he would probably end up like his father, “doing nothing but heap up money in dreary silence” (196). Rogozhin reveals that Nastasya had a similar impression when viewing the portrait. She thought that he would have “begun saving money” and perhaps would have “heaped up not two but ten million perhaps, and have died of hunger on [his] bags of money” (197). Myshkin’s and Nastasya’s similar readings of Rogozhin and his father’s portrait show that they are mentally in tune with each other.

Until this point in the novel, Nastasya’s portrait is the only one which garners much attention. Myshkin’s original impression of her portrait changes as he becomes more and more involved in her life. It seems that Nastasya’s portrait affects Myshkin more than her actual face. He is constantly haunted by the memory of his first vision of her picture, although he sees her in the flesh numerous times throughout the novel. Myshkin abstracts this portrait to suit his own frame of mind, as he abstracts other people, like Aglaia. As noted earlier, portraits lend themselves to abstraction easily. They are not concrete in origin and are merely artistic renderings of faces. They are moments in time, and most likely artistically modified moments. Myshkin further alters portraits by projecting his own thoughts and forebodings onto them. However, I believe that the reader is asked to do the same, especially when “viewing” the Holbein portrait “The Body of the Dead Christ.” Echoing Myshkin and the Epanchin ladies’ early conversation about the face of a criminal directly before death as well as Myshkin’s own impression of artistically depicted faces just after death, the Holbein features a beaten and

bruised Christ lying in a tomb, with no other people or ornamentation in the painting. What the Holbein presents to the viewer is the face of a *man* directly after he is executed, soon enough after that there are still traces of life's agony on his face; his body is not quite cold. If Myshkin is a Christ-like figure, who suffers through the actions of fellow men and women, and "dies" intellectually, then judging from how he reads the painting, one may think Myshkin will never recover, he will never be resurrected- he has been permanently destroyed. Perhaps what Myshkin sees in Christ's blank stare -his eyes are open- is his own future nullification staring back at him. Regardless of this knowledge, Myshkin continues on the road to self-destruction and intellectual death. Like Christ, he can only warn others of their behavior and try to lead by example. He does not interfere with the path that seems chosen for him.

When Myshkin gazes upon Christ's dead body he feels instantly connected to the painting. While viewing the Holbein, Myshkin is confronted with a reality about Christ; in the end, before resurrection and rebirth is death and isolation. The painting captures one moment in time; away from the crowds of mourners and women catching his blood in goblets, Christ lay dead in a cold tomb, alone and with no signs of past or future glories. This image is an exact parallel to Myshkin's end after Nastasya's murder, with one notable exception. Though he sits emotionally battered and beaten and intellectually and emotionally dead, there is one follower who remains with him to carry on his memory. Madame Epanchin, as noted above, warns Christendom "almost wrathfully" to awake from the fantasy that has pervaded it for so long. She, now speaking for Myshkin, extends warnings he has made previously.

Early in the novel, Nastasya meets her suitor Ganya's family for the first time. Myshkin is in attendance as well, and Rogozhin bursts into the scene to confront Nastasya and Ganya. As the first "auction" for Nastasya begins, tempers flare, and Myshkin is put in the position of

defending Ganya's sister, Vera, from her brother's anger. Ganya deals Myshkin a "violent slap" which shocks the entire party (108). As Myshkin hides his face in a corner he says, almost like a warning, "Oh, how ashamed you will be of what you've done!" (108) Echoing this warning, Rogozhin adds, "And he will regret it. You will be ashamed, Ganya, that you have insulted such a... sheep" (108). Here, the imagery invoked by Myshkin's tearful reprimand and Rogozhin's description of Myshkin as a sheep support Myshkin as a Christ figure.

Visual recognition is very important in a novel like Bleak House, which is partially narrated in first person by the heroine, Esther, and partly by an omniscient, participative third person narrator. References to and descriptions of faces, gazes and portraiture abound within the novel, many of which center around Esther and aid in her journey of self-discovery. Esther's heritage is shrouded in secrecy because she was brought up by her cold, distant godmother. Early in the novel, she recalls, "I had never heard my mama spoken of. I had never heard of my papa either...I had never been shown my mama's grave. I had never been told where it was" (Bleak House 31). She is only told that her life is one dominated by a "shadow" and that both she and her mother are "disgraces" (32). Esther is transferred through the Chancery case from her cold, unloving godmother to the caring and hospitable home of John Jarndyce. Surrounded by love, which she had never experienced before, Esther can begin to investigate her own desires and questions about her childhood. The visual is extremely important to Esther, who remembers her godmother's "immovable...unsoftened" face in every detail, who is overcome by sensory stimulation upon seeing London for the first time, and who ends the novel with newfound knowledge about her parentage, romantic love and the power that her image has on others, despite her changed appearance (34).

Esther's story is punctuated by instances of recognition between herself and Lady

Dedlock, the wealthy, admired, and even feared mistress of Chesney Wold. Each scene featuring interaction between her and Esther (although rare) is full of descriptions of faces, looking and recognizing and indentifying the other. In the first third of the novel, Esther is graced by her Lady's presence at a church service. The passage is dominated by Esther's first impression of Lady Dedlock,

Shall I ever forget the manner in which those handsome proud eyes seemed to spring out of their languor, and to hold mine! It was only a moment before I cast mine down-released again, if I may say so- on my book; but I knew the beautiful face quite well, in that short space of time. And, very strangely, there was something quickened in me, associated with the lonely days at my godmother's [...] and this, although I had never seen this lady's face before in all my life-I was quite sure of it- absolutely certain. (250)

Immediately, Esther is confronted with a *familiar* image, one that she connects with looking at herself in a mirror when she was a child. Esther questions herself (as she is prone to do), humbly reconciling her instinctual recognition with a sense of resurrection,

I, little Esther Summerson, the child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday there was no rejoicing-seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady, whom I not only entertained no fancy that I had ever seen, but whom I perfectly well knew I had never seen until that hour. (250)

Here perhaps, besides any physical resemblance, Esther recognizes that Lady Dedlock also lives "a life apart," which is betrayed by her "handsome proud eyes" (250). Esther seems to put the incident out of her thoughts until the next encounter with Lady Dedlock the following week. During Lady Dedlock's and Mr. Jarndyce's conversation about remembrances and recognizing each other, Esther has a chance to observe her mysterious look-alike up close. This time Esther's



gaze of recognition is repelled by Lady Dedlock's haughty demeanor but the two do experience a moment in which what Esther categorizes as a look of disgust may in fact be a look of frightened recognition on Lady Dedlock's behalf.

Lady Dedlock's mystery is solved in part by the dreadful Mr. Guppy, who discovers the resemblance between Esther and the lady, and gradually figures out their situation. Guppy's gaze is problematic for whomever he fixes it upon. Early in the novel, he gazes upon Esther and falls in love with her. She rejects his ridiculous marriage proposal and devastates him. While both are at a performance of a play, Esther feels Guppy's stare without looking at him,

I felt, all through the performance, that he never looked at the actors, but constantly looked at me, and always with a carefully prepared expression of the deepest misery and the profoundest dejection (...) I was certain to encounter his languishing eyes when I least expected it, and, from that time, to be quite sure that they were fixed upon me all evening. (174)

Guppy's gaze is desperate and invasive. When he realizes the similarity between Esther and Lady Dedlock, he visits the latter to confront her with his discoveries. Lady Dedlock's gaze is immensely more powerful than Guppy's. As she meets him, she "looks imperiously at her visitor (...) casting her eyes over him from head to foot" (388). Guppy senses the power imbalance and immediately becomes embarrassed. Still, he proceeds with his business of making Lady Dedlock aware that he sees a resemblance between her and Esther. Despite her discomfort, Lady Dedlock "never falters in her steady gaze" while listening to Guppy's itemized account of circumstances connecting her to Esther (392). By the end of their conversation, there has been a role reversal in which Guppy finally gains the upper hand. Lady Dedlock realizes that he knows the truth about Esther's parentage (and that her daughter is still alive), but she cannot decipher if he wants this

information known for his own benefit (to win over Esther) or if he intends to blackmail the wealthy woman. His intentions are masked by his “witness-box face,” which she is unable to read (394). Whatever his intentions may be, they fall flat when the letters he sought from Mr. Krook’s shop are among the objects destroyed during Mr. Krook’s spontaneous combustion. He visits Lady Dedlock once again to inform her of this sudden snag in proceedings, and is met by her unswerving gaze. It is now Guppy who cannot read Lady Dedlock’s reaction to the matter, “If he could see the least sparkle of relief in her face now? No, he could see no such thing, even if that brave outside did not utterly put him away, and he were not looking beyond it and about it” (448).

Esther’s gaze permeates the entirety of Bleak House. Many chapters are narrated directly by her, and highlight what she specifically thinks is important, namely other people’s experiences. She often deemphasizes her own feelings, hardships and desires because she is extraordinarily humble. But her gaze is powerful: all who meet her (with the exception of Guppy) remain loyal to her and value her friendship. When she recognizes Lady Dedlock as her mother, she is able to fully recognize herself and finally steer some of her insight towards others to herself.

## Conclusion

The study of liminality within Dostoevsky's works alone would be an endeavor; trying to decipher the many different levels of polyphonic discourse in those same texts might be a life's work. I have attempted to discuss three types of "voices" that I find add to the multi-voicedness of Dostoevsky's novels. Many characters in Dostoevsky's works have a dualistic nature; he rarely used flat characters. Holy fools are particularly interesting. Like the fool in Shakespeare's drama, they illuminate the absurdities around them by acting absurd themselves. The role of the city is problematic, as well. Petersburg, and other cities like it, acts as both home and jail to its residents. For Dostoevsky, Petersburg was the result of forsaking tradition and national identity for empty illusions, and it exemplified all that was wrong with the progressive west. The effect of this disillusionment was evident not just in the streets and corners of the city, but also in the faces of passerby's on the street. T.S Eliot's poem is again recalled when one reads Dostoevsky and realizes that no character of his has time to "prepare a face to meet the faces that [they] meet." The hardships of life are evident on one's face: whether the sadness of Nastasya's or Myshkin's face, Rogozhin's flashing eyes and hard smile or Sonya's thin and determined look, every face tells a significant story, thus adding more voices to Dostoevsky's sometimes inharmonious chorus.

That being said, there are other related topics worth pursuing that are well beyond the scope of this paper. For example, it becomes apparent after studying the role of the holy fool in Dostoevsky's texts that the author often created his holy characters as females or males bearing feminine qualities. The concept of the divine feminine applies to Myshkin who, as already noted, personifies many stereotypical feminine traits: he connects with children, he is passive, intuitive and virgin-like. "Mother" Russia is feminine as well, and the mistreatment of Myshkin may be

seen as mistreatment of native soil and the abandonment of traditional ideas, such as the ones Dostoevsky may have held dear. However, Myshkin is also virtually a foreigner. His clothes, language and mannerisms are glaringly different than those of the average Russian. Rogozhin, albeit violent and cruel, actually seems to embody more of the ideal Russian's traits. Is Rogozhin a mere psychopath or is he the end result of Western encroachment on traditional Russian beliefs? Living in a city like Petersburg must have presented its own challenges for Rogozhin, but his fierce struggle to control Russia (via Nastasya) ended in her death and his own destruction. Dostoevsky's sometimes complicated relationships between Russia and the west, feminine and masculine and hero and villain deserve much more attention than is possible here.

In his study concerning the influence of Dickens on Dostoevsky, Michel H. Futrell asserts that an important link exists between the two men. Futrell quotes Dostoevsky, "Briefly, in my opinion, everything characteristic, everything that is ours, pre-eminently national...is unintelligible to Europe." However Dickens was an exception to this rule, "we, however, understand Dickens in Russian, I am sure, almost as well as the English-perhaps, even with all nuances..." (Dostoevsky as qtd. in Futrell 88). Dostoevsky read Dickens in either French or Russian translation, yet Dickens's "holily simple-minded and downtrodden" characters were recognized and appreciated by the Russian author (Dostoevsky as qtd. In Futrell 89). Dostoevsky's comments prove that he was aware of the common threads between himself and his English counterpart. The few references to Charles Dickens in the Russian's letters at least demonstrate that Dostoevsky was an avid reader of Dickens, and that his work was thought of fondly in the Dostoevsky household. There are critics who argue that Dickens was not capable of creating a work that could compare, psychologically at least, to Dostoevsky's. Yet, Bleak House presents the reader with a complex narrative setting a precedent for the serious themes of

Dostoevsky's later novels.

Reading the above novels while paying attention to the previously discussed themes illuminates the possibilities of polyphonic discourse, previously unnoticed. Seeing multiple meanings in characters, such as holy fools and Christ like figures, adds another layer of voices and meanings in a text. These characters give focus to religious and moral concerns within the novel, while also critiquing the norms and habits of their respective societies. Likewise, the liminality of a space or a city adds textual richness and gives a voice to location. Both Dostoevsky and Dickens were able to comment about their country, society and social problems by giving places and cities such strong presences. Bakhtin observed that "what unfolds before Dostoevsky is not a world of objects, illuminated and ordered by his monologic thought, but a world of consciousnesses mutually illuminating one another, a world of yoked-together semantic human orientations" (Bakhtin 97). To expand this thought, one can view artwork and portraiture and liminal spaces and locales as contributing to the many consciousnesses in both Dostoevsky's and Dickens's works. Although thousands of miles apart, in very different societies, the two authors had similar concerns: the criticism of Western ideas and society, the suffering and mad, the danger of extreme ideological thinking and the exploration of the self are all prominent themes in their works. Both men closed the gap between the Western and the non-Western by giving voices to troubled souls, spiritual fools, confused youth and to the environments in which they call home.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Much criticism has been written on the multi-voicedness of the narrator in *The Idiot*. Malcolm V. Jones discusses Robin Feuer Miller's analysis of *The Idiot*'s narrator, and Jones expands on her discussion of how these different voices interact with the reader. See Jones, *Dostoevsky After Bakhtin* pp. 113-145.

<sup>2</sup> Gibson explains that Dostoevsky considered himself of the noble class, and this fact did not always help his relations with "the (common) people" he was incarcerated with.

<sup>3</sup> The theme of face-reading and visual art as related to self-realization is a very important theme found in both Dostoevsky's and Dickens's novels, and is discussed in depth in Chapter Three of this thesis.

<sup>4</sup> Fanger discusses Dostoevsky's career as a feuilleton writer in his book *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*. His focus is on the author's changing relationship with the city throughout his life, as well as establishing connections between Dostoevsky's journalistic descriptions of the city and the descriptions in his later Petersburg novels.

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