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The Redemption of Vice: The Role of the Virtuous Prostitute in Dostoevsky's Russia

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In reading Fyodor Dostoevsky's novella *Notes from Underground* and novel *Crime and Punishment* the modern reader is struck by the repeated appearance of the virtuous prostitute in Dostoevsky's cast of characters. In most twenty-first century societies prostitution is not a pressing concern and is rarely addressed by the media or social reformers. Today prostitution is a criminal offense and unequivocally denounced both socially and morally. However, in nineteenth century Russia the issue of prostitution was prevalent and complicated. Russian imperial policy regarding prostitution created legal and social ambiguities. The socio-economic implications of prostitution became a hotly debated issue among reformers. Due to the role of prostitutes in Russian daily life, the figure of the redeemed prostitute became an archetypal character in Russian literature. Dostoevsky's symbolic use of the saintly prostitute through Liza and Sonya is best understood in the context of the historical circumstances and prevailing literary trends of Russia in the 1860s. The possibility of redemption offered by these prostitutes illumines Dostoevsky's unique Christian theology that emphasizes the saving power of love through suffering and self-sacrifice.

Liza and Sonya embody the historical condition of Russian prostitutes that would have been recognizable to Dostoevsky's contemporary audience. Prostitution was a part of the urban experience in nineteenth century Europe that took on increased socio-economic relevance in Russia beginning in the 1840s. The rapid industrialization and urbanization of Russia in the early to mid-nineteenth century created conditions that

facilitated a significant growth in the instances of prostitution. As more lower class women and families relocated from rural areas to cities, the economic need for women to supplement family income coupled with the limited job opportunities available to them increasingly led women into prostitution. To highlight the impact of social class considerations, historian Richard Stites argued that the majority of prostitutes in nineteenth century Russia were women from peasant, solider, or lower middle class families who sold their bodies in response to severe economic need.[1] Keeping with this trend, in *Notes from the Underground* Liza's family sells her into because they cannot afford to support her. Additionally, in *Crime and Punishment* Sonya sells herself in order to provide for her stepmother and siblings. Stites also revealed, "the trade in flesh was so lucrative that it became an industry through the entrepreneurial skills and the business ethos of pimps, procuresses, madams, and recruiting agents."[2] Emphasizing the fact that prostitution was both an occupation and a way of life, Stites contended that the economic necessity of impoverished women and the commercialization of sex trafficking resulted in "the sheer growth in the numbers and visibility of prostitutes."[3] The increase in the prevalence of prostitution heightened concerns about the spread of venereal diseases, particularly among Russian soldiers who had been known to solicit the services of prostitutes.

The experiences of Dostoevsky's virtuous prostitutes reflect the impact of the social perception of prostitution. In reaction to moral and medical concerns the Russian imperial government took measures to control prostitution. The motivations behind these

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[1] Richard Stites, "Prostitute and Society in Pre-Revolutionary Russia," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 31, 1983, 351
[2] Stites, 348.
[3] Ibid, 349.

regulatory measures revealed the social and political implications of prostitution in Russia. Building upon the French model of the "State Regulation of Vice" instituted during the Napoleonic era, Emperor Nicholas I created a system to regulate prostitution throughout Russia in 1843.[4] This system coupled medical and police regulations primarily in order to limit the spread of venereal diseases among Russian soldiers. Historian Laurie Bernstein contended that in addition to curbing diseases these regulations aimed to "police the behavior of lower class women."[5] To attain these ends the system proposed to establish precise hygienic and sanitary regulations, including mandating prostitutes to take weekly baths and change bed linens after each sexual encounter. In addition, historian Barbara Engel explained that prostitutes were required to register with a committee of police officials and medical personnel as well as submit to regular medical examinations. These women traded their passports and other forms of identification for a "yellow ticket," which officially linked them to the sex trade. The yellow ticket encompassed the social, economic, and psychological impact of prostitution. This ticket limited the woman's freedom of movement within and outside of Russia and hindered the woman's ability to secure another type of employment, which created a pattern of female economic dependency on prostitution. The yellow card also created barriers between prostitutes and other members of the lower-class community. Through Liza's life in the brothel Dostoevsky communicates the isolating effect of prostitution. Dostoevsky also revealed the fact that women carrying the yellow card were required to live in designated apartment buildings when Sonya was forced to live

[4] Ibid.
[5] Laurie Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughter's: Prostitutes and Their Regulation in Imperial Russia*, (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 3.

separately from her family. In practice these systematized regulations proved difficult to implement due to limited personnel and the largely secretive nature of prostitution.

Paradoxically, the governmental attempt to regulate prostitution in Russia ultimately increased its prevalence and effects. According to statistics gathered by Stites, prostitution in St. Petersburg grew 20% between 1853 and 1867, while the entire population had comparatively grown by only 6%.[6] Additionally, about a quarter of the prostitutes accounted for in these records were infected with a sexually transmitted disease. At that time syphilis was the most prevalent disease treated by doctors in local area hospitals.[7] A consideration of this data reveals that the government inspection system was insufficient to control prostitution or prevent the spread of venereal disease. Bernstein argued that government regulation was ineffective because it paradoxically marked a compromise between the prohibition of prostitution and its decriminalization.[8] Russian imperial measures were enacted to prevent further growth of the institution as opposed to eliminate it entirely. In accord with Bernstein, Stites argued, "after 1843, the government, though morally opposed to prostitution on religious grounds and legally hostile to it, became the sole licensing bureau, inspector, and protector of sexual traffic in cities."[9] Due to governmental ambiguity prostitution was eventually viewed as a "necessary evil" and by the end of the nineteenth century moralists referred to prostitution as the "master problem" of European society.[10] The failure of the Russian

[6] Stites, 350.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Bernstein, 3.
[9] Stites, 349.
[10] Ibid.

imperial power to combat the negative social effects of prostitution, including disease and female economic dependency, resulted in rampant social criticism.

Following nearly two decades of attempted imperial regulation, prostitution became a widely discussed issue in Russia during the 1860s. This animated discourse on prostitution reflected the general push by reformers and intellectuals to expose Russia's social ills following the emancipation of the serfs.[11] The public reaction to the persistence of prostitution can be classified into three categories, including the response of public officials, feminists, and the intelligentsia. Russian officials identified prostitution as a primarily administrative problem that posed a threat to public health, military efficiency, and social order. These officials advocated a more aggressive approach to quelling prostitution and its detrimental social repercussions.[12] Dostoevsky largely rejected this unsympathetic approach. In contrast to officials, Russian feminists, who became active in the ferment of society in the 1860s, urged a more individualistic and personal approach to the institution in which prostitutes were seen as the victims of vice.[13] These feminists advocated philanthropic campaigns and the abolition of state regulation. They began to go out into poor neighborhoods in order to care for "fallen women." Wealthy feminists and Catholic charitable organizations created "mercy houses" in an effort to provide spiritual strength and occupational training to women attempting to leave their lives of prostitution. For example, Princess Lambert, the daughter of a former financial minister, founded the St. Mary Magdalene Shelter in 1865 to address the medical, social, and spiritual demands of prostitute rehabilitation. Despite their more humanitarian focus

[11] Ibid, 357.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

Dostoevsky criticized the feminist movement and rejected the notion of social and political roles for women. Lastly, the Russian intelligentsia considered the question of prostitution as part of the general need for sweeping social reform, which they confronted with "raging indignation" directed at the imperial authority. [14] The intelligentsia connected the gender and socio-economic issues encompassed in the institution of prostitution to the general need for emancipation and increased social equality. This more universalized approach to social ills best reflected Dostoevsky's own ideals.

Social activism in the 1860s led to the proliferation of the theme of the reformed prostitute in Russian literature. Historian Laurie Bernstein argued that prostitutes were fixtures on the main roads of Russia's cities as well as in Russian journalism and fiction.[15] Joseph Frank, a Dostoevsky biographer, further contended, "the redemption of the prostitute theme had indeed become a commonplace by the 1860s."[16] Scholars largely point to Nikolai Chernyshevsky's novel *What is to Be Done?* as the first instance of the saintly prostitute. Frank argued that Chernyshevsky's book, published in 1863, represented "a tale of women's emancipation and of a new socialist utopia" through the experience of the heroine Vera. Through the character of Julie, who is characterized as a prostitute with a heart of gold, Chernyshevsky "addressed prostitution in a way that became standard for socialists throughout the pre-revolutionary era."[17] Chernyshevsky attempted to breakdown the negative stigmatization of prostitutes who were socially ostracized by the yellow ticket system and condemned as morally degraded, "fallen"

[14] Ibid.
[15] Bernstein, 3.
[16] Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in his Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 429.
[17] Frank, 358.

women. In an approach that Richard Stites classified as humanistic egoism, which combines rational self-interest with the humanitarian capacity of compassion for humanity, Chernyshevsky distinguished the economic necessity of prostitution from the perceived social and moral destruction of the women involved.[18] He linked prostitution to all other social evils, which he believed could only be rectified through the creation of a new socialist society.[19] In this way prostitution was not seen as evidence of the corruption of individual women, but rather as a symptom of sweeping social inequality. Ultimately, Dostoevsky rejected Chernyshevsky's notion of redemption through utopian or utilitarian systems, and adopted the female archetype of the benevolent prostitute in order to offer a different possibility for regeneration.

Dostoevsky's social ideals, religious beliefs, and personal experiences influenced his use of the character of the reformed prostitute. Frank highlighted the impact of French social Romanticism, referred to as naturalism or realism in Russia, on Dostoevsky's ideals beginning in the 1830s. Frank noted that Dostoevsky was particularly inspired by the works of Victor Hugo, who Dostoevsky saw as subscribing to a 'Christian and highly moral' idea.[20] Dostoevsky was struck by Hugo's philosophy of social humanitarianism, which Hugo explained as "I have taken up the cause of the weak and those in misery; pleading with the happy and the pitiless; I have raised up the clown, the comedian, all human begins who are damned, Triboulet, Marion, the lackey, the convict, and the

[18] Stites, 358.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Frank, 54.

prostitute."[21] Dostoevsky adopted Hugo's emphasis on confronting the nature and effects of human suffering through many of his characters, including Liza and Sonya.

Dostoevsky was heavily influenced by his Christianity, which by the 1840s was strongly altruistic, social-humanitarian, and pitted against rationalism and amoral egoism.[22] Frank argued that as a reflection of his Christian beliefs and realism, "Dostoevsky emphasizes the personal sense of identification with the victim or sufferer-a compassion springing not from any theoretical doctrine of social pity, with its implied sense of distance and hierarchy, but out of a frame of mind and heart placing the forgiver on exactly the same moral-human level as the forgiven."[23] Though Liza and Sonya were regarded as morally degraded women due to their sexual deviance, they also exhibited a strong sense of compassion, love, and self-sacrifice. Through the character of the virtuous female prostitute Dostoevsky challenged the traditional conception of sin and promoted the idea of moral equality between all people. Dostoevsky's portrayal of the female prostitute was also shaped by his aversion to Catholic charity. In 1862 Dostoevsky traveled throughout Europe making stops in Germany, France, and England. While in London he "strolled among the thousands of prostitutes plying their trade in the Haymarket."[24] Frank related that Dostoevsky was "accosted not only by the prostitutes but also by the women engaged in the charitable labor of trying to redeem these lost souls."[25] These women that Dostoevsky described in his memoir were likely early

[21] Ibid, 59.
[22] Ibid, 127.
[23] Ibid, 271.
[24] Ibid, 353.
[25] Ibid.

volunteers of the Salvation Army, a Catholic charitable organization.[26] Dostoevsky perceived this charity as "well-thought-out propaganda" in which Catholic priests used economic assistance to induce conversions.[27] Dostoevsky argued that Catholics saw themselves as morally superior to sinners and the unconverted. He also believed that their so-called charitable acts were motivated by egoism and economic self-interest. This criticism of Catholicism reinforces Dostoevsky's rejection of a moral hierarchy and his belief concerning the nature of true compassion through selflessness.

To a certain degree, Liza and Sonya reflect the historical realities of Russian prostitution and reveal Dostoevsky's effort to engage with the literary contributions of his contemporaries. In this context, these two characters also provide insight into Dostoevsky's morality on suffering and redemption. As economically depressed women, morally debased sinners, and socially ostracized individuals, Liza and Sonya are examples of severe human suffering. However, through their interactions with other suffering individuals, Dostoevsky endeavors to reveal their capacity to redeem others through love. Several scholars, including Frank and Stites, have interpreted Liza as a response to Chernyshevsky's portrayal of the saintly prostitute. Frank argued that Liza was an ironic parody that inverted the socialist Romantic clichés found in Chernyshevsky's *What is to Be Done?* [28] Dostoevsky presents salvation to the Underground Man through Liza's selfless offer of forgiveness and love. Ultimately, the Underground Man rejects this possibility of regeneration because of his inability to divorce himself from the rationalist system he so vehemently rejects. It was not until later

[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, 354
[28] Ibid, 414.

reflection that the Underground Man admitted "I did not even guess that she had come not to listen to my pathetic speeches at all, but to love me, for it is only in love that a woman can find her true resurrection, her true salvation from any calamity, and her moral regeneration, and she cannot possibly find it in anything else."[29] In the voice of the Underground Man Dostoevsky relates the redemptive power of compassion, which he had failed to recognize and embrace. Of his own possibility of redemption the Underground Man says, "I repeat, to me love meant to tyrannize and to be morally superior. I have never in my life been able to imagine any other sort of love, and I have reached the point that sometimes I cannot help thinking that love only consists in the right to tyrannize over the woman you love, who grants you this right of her own free will."[30] The Underground Man rejects Liza's offer of redemption because of his belief in his own rational and moral superiority. While Liza sought redemption in selfless love, the Underground Man sought power through the exercise of his own free will. Liza reflects Dostoevsky's ideal concerning the limitations of believing in a moral hierarchy and the inherent conflict between egocentric rationalism and a humanitarian vision of morality.

Sonya Marmeladov is an increasingly idealized version of the virtuous prostitute who further reveals Dostoevsky's Christian ideals concerning self-sacrifice, suffering, and redemption from sin. According to Frank during the process of writing *Crime and Punishment,* Dostoevsky made weekly visits to Moscow in order to consult with his editors who forced him to correct parts of his text because of censorship practices.[31] Notably the editors insisted that he rewrite the now famous scene in which Sonya reads

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[29] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground,* 373.
[30] Dostoevsky, 373.
[31] Frank, 469.

the Lazarus resurrection passage to Raskolnikov. Although the original version of that scene had been lost remarks from the editors and Dostoevsky's own notebooks help to create a picture of Dostoevsky's intention of the scene. In Dostoevsky's notebooks Sonya is presented as the mouthpiece of Dostoevsky's particular morality. In 1889 one of the Dostoevsky's editors wrote that it was "not easy for him to give up his intentionally exaggerated idealization of Sonya as a woman who carried self-sacrifice to the point of sacrificing her body."[32] In the Lazarus scene from Dostoevsky's notes Sonya explains to Raskolnikov "in comfort, in wealth you would perhaps have seen nothing of human happiness. The person God loves, the person on whom He really counts, is the one whom He sends much suffering, so that he better sees and recognizes through himself why in unhappiness the suffering of people is more visible than in happiness."[33] Emerging from her previous pattern of silence, Sonya's words reflect Dostoevsky's emphasis on the power of suffering. The editors in Moscow had an issue with the morality of presenting a prostitute as the interpreter of the Gospel and of divine will. Although Dostoevsky had to alter this scene, he used the archetype of the saintly prostitute to communicate the redemptive power of suffering and the possibility of regeneration through the love and forgiveness of others.

The ultimate purpose of Liza and Sonya's characters is their role in the redemption of the protagonist. The Underground Man rejects Liza's offer of regeneration, but also withdraws from his previous life to suffer in isolation. Although he rejected love, the Underground Man does embrace the role of suffering. Sonya represented the physical embodiment of Raskolnikov's consciousness who continually directed him on the path of

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[32] Ibid, 470.
[33] Ibid.

repentance and spiritual resurrection.[34] However, in the end Dostoevsky leaves the question of Raskolnikov's redemption ambiguous. Literary scholar Susanne Fusso argued that Dostoevsky did not attempt to "construct a master narrative for human desire" but rather devoted himself to the exploration of the "endless diversity" of human passion and choice.[35] In consideration of this objective to reflect the authentic scope of human decisions, Dostoevsky does not provide a simplistic happy ending for Lisa and the Underground Man or Sonya and Raskolnikov. Suffering and self-sacrifice heightens one's capacity to love others. The faculty of loving compassion endows one with the potential power to redeem others who suffer. However, the ultimate determinant of salvation is the free choice to either accept or reject the redemption offered through another person. Dostoevsky uses his compassionate prostitutes to push the bounds of human suffering and forgiveness.

The characters of Liza and Sonya may be understood as the combined products of historical circumstance, literary trends, and Dostoevsky's humanitarian social morality. Nineteenth century Russian writers redeemed the "fallen woman" by presenting her moral corruption as a product of her economic circumstances. Dostoevsky adopted the theme of the redeemed prostitute emphasizing the capacity to love and save others through selfless suffering. The question of redemption in Dostoevsky's novels is often debated. Offers of spiritual resurrection through Liza and Sonya marked Dostoevsky's rejection of a simplistic pattern of transgression and forgiveness and embraced the diversity of human passions and choices in regards to salvation.

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[34] Ibid, 107.
[35] Susanne Fusso, *Discovering Sexuality in Dostoevsky* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 16.