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Setting as Character in Dickens and Dostoevsky

Charles Dickens, an author who enjoyed nation-wide popularity in England, was something of a sensation in Russia during what is considered to be its “Golden Age”—a period of literary prominence in which authors such as Leo Tolstoy, Alexander Pushkin, and Nikolai Gogol were creating their universally-renowned works. Various scholars of the Golden Age have explored Dickensian authority in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, focusing on how the guilt of Dickens’s villains was magnified through the contrasting innocence of his child characters. I extend this argument by exploring the parallels between Dickens’s and Dostoevsky’s use of setting to highlight and better expose the conscience of their main characters. I will first examine Dickens’s influence in Russia as the basis for his impact on Dostoevsky. Then, I will further discuss this connection through the analysis of setting in Dickens’s *Great Expectations* and Dostoevsky’s short novella *Notes from Underground*.

I

Biographically, both Charles Dickens and Fyodor Dostoevsky share an early upbringing within nineteenth-century working class society. Having been born the son of a clerk in 1812, Dickens moved with his family a number of times around England according to his father’s varying posts. While in Kent and later London after his father was imprisoned for debt, a young Dickens gathered much of the inspiration he would later use in his novels. Once he began writing, fame was achieved almost instantly following the installment publications of his first successful fictional work, *The Pickwick Papers*, in 1836-37 (Borowitz).

Not only was Dickens popular in England, but he was also popular in many other countries, including Russia, where his reception was overwhelmingly positive. Dostoevsky himself stated that Russians “understand Dickens just as well as the English, and love his work as well as his compatriots, because the Russian has a special gift for learning European languages and penetrating into the soul of

European peoples” (Amoia 247). It seems that despite the nationality barrier, Russians found the novels of Dickens and other English novelists of the time to be particularly relevant to their own culture and individual/societal tribulations. Avid Russian readers would line up just the same as English readers in the United States and England upon the release of the newest Dickens installment, and by the time of his death, he was considered “virtually an honorary Russian” (Gervais 49). Russians “from the Neva to Siberia,” as once described by a translator, loved the novels of Dickens so much that countless Russian households today still possess complete collections of his works (Amoia 246).

One work that had a particularly considerable impact in Russia was *David Copperfield*, Dickens’s own admitted favorite novel. Due to the novel’s seamless dramatic execution and deliberately gradual hero development, Dickens created a novel that is universal to all audiences regardless of language barriers. The Russian “gift” of worldliness (as Dostoevsky stated), combined with Dickens’s accessibility and universal themes about humanity, contributed to the mass success of Dickens’s novels in Russia.

Among the Russian readers who were drawn to Dickens was the famed writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, born a decade later in 1821. Like Dickens, Dostoevsky also drew much of his artistic motivation from growing up in a working class world. Dostoevsky’s early life was spent with his parents and seven siblings in an apartment situated next to a criminals’ cemetery, an insane asylum and an orphanage—a setting that understandably manifests itself in various ways within his later writings. At the age of sixteen, Dostoevsky moved to St. Petersburg for school following the death of both his parents (Amoia 22). He excelled in literary studies and, much like Dickens, quickly gained substantial fame through his early writings, but was later exiled to a Siberian prison colony in 1849 by Tsar Nicholas I on the suspicion that Dostoevsky and various other young writers he associated with were dispersing ideas of Western revolution (Amoia 28). It was during his time in the penal colony that Dostoevsky became familiar with the various works of Dickens that would later have effect on his own writing. Besides the Bible, Dostoevsky read *David Copperfield* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* while in the colony, and

it is believed that the characters from these novels were the inspiration for many of Dostoevsky's own incredibly intricate characters—particularly those found in *Crime and Punishment*—a novel that deals with evil on a deeper basis than anything Dickens wrote but has noticeable thematic similarities to his English counterparts. Because of this, David Gervais argues that “there is a sense in which the Russian novel developed from the English... At its greatest, the novel is an international rather than a simply national form” (49). This claim supports the widely accepted suggestion that Russian Golden Age literature was essentially initiated by earlier nineteenth-century writings of English authors.

The thematic influence that Dickens had on Dostoevsky in particular is one that several scholars have already analyzed. For instance, one scholar, Laurie Langbauer, has focused on the influence Dickens most likely had on Dostoevsky in focusing on tormented children to illuminate the horrors of adult malevolence. There is perhaps no clearer depiction of suffering presented to a reader when it is written to accompany the innocence of a child. Langbauer chose Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* to illustrate this point. The idea that adult blindness to children and consequent inability to recognize them as something more than just “some shadow of ourselves” is what Dickens believed led to the ruin of man. According to Langbauer, this idea can be seen in *A Christmas Carol*, when the Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge a shadow of himself as a child and says “This boy is Ignorance...Most of all beware this boy.” Langbauer claims that a similar idea of the mental and spiritual removal that adults have from children is then reflected in Dostoevsky's 1880 novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, through its assertion that one of the most morbid horrors committed by mankind is the delusion of trust adults force upon children. In her view, both authors exploit the universal acceptance of child innocence to explore why the sadistic side of human nature exists. While the implementation of this approach differed greatly between the two authors, with Dickens describing the way in which we disregard the reality and extent of corruption and Dostoevsky trying more directly

to bring to light the glaring nature of human wickedness, both authors found the concept of childhood purity to be one of the best conveyors of their “moral universes” (Langbauer 97).

Another major component of theme Dostoevsky derived from Dickens is the way in which guilt materializes within criminals. Jeremy Tambling, in his journal article “Criminals From a Sense of Guilt: Dickens and Dostoevsky,” explores this and the melancholy construction of this guilt through what he defines as Dickens’s “great criminal” in *Great Expectations* and Dostoevsky’s “extraordinary man” in *Crime and Punishment* (Tambling 334). Tambling argues that Dickens transmits a kind of sympathy for criminals, writing the ultimate ruin of these characters as a result of the emotions of revenge rather than just some tactless desire for violence. In Tambling’s view, this passion is the manifestation of guilt once the aspiration for revenge is realized by the criminal, and, it is because of this fanaticism that these characters are then classified as “great criminals,” because Dickens has consequently fashioned new grounds for emotion to motivate aggression. In *Great Expectations*, revenge is the driving force of every criminal figure within the narrative, each “relat[ing] to a different sense of the passions, where Mrs. Joe’s weapon against Joe is not a sword but a candlestick, and Orlick’s weapon against Mrs. Joe a hammer and the convict’s leg-iron. Between Mrs. Joe’s violence and Orlick’s, comes another weapon which shows the passion in Mrs. Joe that Orlick incites and which his revenge destroys” (Tambling 337). Dickens’ portrayal of violence moves literature away from the classic heroic/epic ideals of revenge by sword—it is the mental decay caused by guilt that creates a criminal far more troubled than any motivated by crude anger. Tambling states that the main reason these emotions are raised by Dickens’s criminals in the first place is because they “fight against bourgeois society which are anti-danger, or anti-risk,” and it is this same psychological battle Dostoevsky has his “extraordinary men” face (Tambling 334).

While Tambling does not use much detail from the text of *Crime and Punishment*, focusing the article more on the passions that carry through *Great Expectations*, he does, however, link Dostoevsky’s

criminal action to Nietzsche's definition of resentment as a cause of revenge that not only motivates criminals to act violently, but also stirs up the inclination to act lawfully and therefore encourage punishment (Tambling 338). Whereas revenge on others was the main focus of Dickens, the personally-harmful idea of resentment is what motivates the confession of innocent Nikolay Mikolka, who claims to have killed two women although he has not. The examining magistrate who hears the case is conflicted by this confession to a crime that does not exist, and must battle with the ensuing prospect of punishing Mikolka because of his Freudian criminality—that he is a criminal simply “out of a sense of guilt” (Tambling 340). This upset of the black and white logic that constitutes the action of punishment as a consequence of crime characterizes the conflict that both the “great man” and “extraordinary man” must ultimately face. It is clear where Dostoevsky got this idea of “self-punishment from guilt” and its reversal, as this idea of motivational guilt to manifest as violence can be seen in the Dickensian criminals, who, although provoked to harm others, fall to the weight of their mental torment.

II

Although scholars such as Langbauer and Tambling have shown the similarities shared from key Dickensian thematic aspects in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, little has been done to explore the parallel between the two author's frequent descriptions of drab, working-class city life and the effects these settings have on main characters. Both Dickens and Dostoevsky go to great lengths describing these scenes, conveying what seems to be every last detail about the seemingly tedious lives of commonplace people. Perhaps one of the best examples of this in Dickens' writing comes from *Great Expectations*, a novel in which setting matches and follows the plot throughout, acting as a visual and parallel display of the dramatic scene Dickens wishes to create. This in turn not only expands the depth of the novel from an author-reader perspective, but also intentionally influences the characters, conceivably giving the setting the distinction of a character itself.

In *Great Expectations*, the setting is telling of central events unknown to the characters that dwell within it on the brink of significant occurrence. This can be seen from the start of the novel, where setting plays an important role as Pip meets Magwitch on the misty marshes near his home. Young Pip describes the mist as being “so thick, that the wooden finger on the wooden post directing people to our village... seemed to my oppressed conscience like a phantom devoting me to the Hulks” (Dickens 116). Pip’s (supposed) near-death experience with the other criminal on the marsh and second meeting with Magwitch take place while shrouded in this mist, because just as his vision is made unclear by these mists, so is his naive outlook on the world. Pip first begins to lose his innocence as a result of this incident, and this will continue by a series of disappointments and confusions throughout the rest of the novel until it is resolved in a mature acceptance of the inevitable collapse of most expectations.

Dickens then goes on to chronicle the second half of Pip’s narrative in London, describing the city as essentially an urbanized extension of the marshes. The theme of dreariness begun in the marshes never leaves Pip although he goes into the city to achieve his goal of becoming a gentleman in order to impress Estella. One of the first observations Pip makes is about the “dismal trees and the most dismal sparrows, and the most dismal cats, and the most dismal houses that I had ever seen” (173). The same marshes from Pip’s childhood reoccur much later in the novel as the place of Pip’s next brush with fate as he combats mad Orlick. This time, Pip describes the place as “very dismal... so oppressive that I hesitated, half inclined to go back” (Dickens 421). By this point in the narrative, Pip has tied many of the loose ends that remained mysterious from early on in the novel. This event, however, is where Pip officially loses his childlike purity as he learns Orlick had been working for many years trying to ruin Pip’s life. It is in these marshes, surrounded in mist lit by a red moon, that Pip worries he will now die a disappointment in the eyes of those he truly loved, having never asked them “for their compassion on my miserable errors” (Dickens 426). With this, Pip comes into an enlightened understanding of his

situation and place in life, finally accepting of life and relations over money and its disappointments, finally coming into clarity “as the morning mists had risen long ago” (Dickens 484).

As can be seen in the novella *Notes from Underground*, there is little doubt that Dostoevsky, upon reading Dickens, picked up on this use of setting as character influence and employed it in his own storytelling. In his journal article “Dostoevsky and the English Novel: Dickens, John Cowper Powys and D. H. Lawrence,” David Gervais observes that “there is no grandly tragic backdrop to Dostoevsky's novels but, instead, the mute signs of poverty in a city flat or the slow pace of time in some provincial backwater. They may sometimes seem strident or portentous but, if so, it is against a background of almost eerie normality” (51). These meticulous descriptions of city life can be seen in *Notes from Underground*, where the Underground Man spends the better part of three pages describing a restaurant. As a recluse who spends his time attacking St. Petersburg social society and reveling in embarrassments of his past, the narrator writes “notes” that recount his debilitating indecisions. Amid the philosophical digressions into the reasons for his self-loathing and alienation, descriptions of setting remain constant.

Like the mists that follow Pip throughout his life, wet snow is a motif of *Notes from Underground* that the Underground Man takes frequent note of, as it symbolizes the dreariness that remains over a man despite his best efforts to keep up a hopeful composure. Wet snow seems to cover every inch of landscape the Underground Man describes and it reminds him of the letdowns in life, saying at the end of Part I “snow is falling today, yellow and dingy. It fell yesterday, too, and a few days ago. I fancy it is the wet snow that has reminded me of that incident which I cannot shake off now” (Dostoevsky 33). The snow follows the narrator throughout the life he so effortlessly damns because, like the London of *Great Expectations*, The Underground Man holds St. Petersburg responsible as the epicenter of disappointment. Because he lives in the city, the Underground Man believes the setting, which is commonly covered in the depressive snow, forces him to eternally recollect his failures as a

social citizen. When he leaves his home, the Underground Man combats this and continues his arrogant habit of obsessively placing himself in a higher intellectual state by labeling St. Petersburg as an unnatural place (given that the city was built by Peter the Great in order to bring Russia closer to the West, this doesn't seem so implausible); however, the narrator goes further into this design by suggesting that even the citizens are superficial and possess "no understanding of essential things...they understand nothing, they had no idea of real life" (Dostoevsky 56). By placing the blame on the city and all of its citizens rather than upon his debilitating social awkwardness, the Underground Man is able to temporarily lift himself up.

It seems, nevertheless, that the only place the Underground Man can truly get away from the wet snow and artificiality of St. Petersburg is by retreating to his underground domicile. This setting is used in the title, suggesting that the alienation of the narrator is the central focus of the narrative. Here, in an undisclosed location somewhere beneath St. Petersburg, the Underground Man is granted the individuality he believes is not present on the streets. Although he comes to accept this eccentricity by contemplating the "sublime and beautiful" in solitude, he recognizes that "all the traits for an anti-hero are expressly gathered together here" (Dostoevsky 109). The city and the Underground Man do not change in *Notes from Underground*, and the snow does not lift as the mists did in *Great Expectations*. It is in this way that the Underground Man differs from Pip: While the characters in Dickens generally advance positively out of their defeats, Dostoevsky's Underground Man is frustratingly static, content to wallow in his failure and continue detesting the wet snow because it is something he has no control over, therefore perpetuating his outlet of despair. This failure to recover from misery is what sets Dostoevsky's protagonists apart from Dickens's heroes, and what gives Dostoevsky his distinct thematic underpinnings of unreserved desolation.

The translation of Charles Dickens novels into Russian is arguably the beginning of the transition into the Golden Age of literature on an international level. Not only did Dickens breach the Western/Eastern divide by successfully engaging Russian audiences, but he also shaped the thematic structures later utilized by Fyodor Dostoevsky—one of the greatest Russian authors. Moreover, Dickens's unique application of setting also found its way into Dostoevsky's moral structures; and in return, Dostoevsky works were known influences on subsequent English novelists, including famed early twentieth-century writers such as Ernest Hemingway and D.H. Lawrence. Further, both Dickens and Dostoevsky continue to influence modern literature and are once again considered fresh in a post-World War society plagued by meaninglessness and the empty remains of postmodernism's self-implosion. Contemporary literature makes it easy to slip into a disconnect with reality. By reading Dickens and Dostoevsky, modern readers are brought back to an authentic world that brings awareness of the surrounding environment, and what critic Gary Saul Morson calls the everyday meaningfulness "hidden in plain view."

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- Tambling, Jeremy. "Criminals from a Sense of Guilt: Dickens and Dostoevsky." *Cahiers, Victoriens, & Edouardiens* 55 (2002): 333-48. Web.

Annotated Bibliography

Amoia, Alba. *Feodor Dostoevsky*. New York: Continuum, 1993. Print

This book contained information about the life and writing of Dostoevsky. It was useful in finding biographical information and background for the influence Dickens had over Dostoevsky.

Borowitz, Albert. "Charles (John Huffam) Dickens." *British Mystery Writers, 1860-1919*. Ed. Bernard Benstock and Thomas F. Staley. Detroit: Gale Research, 1988. Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 70. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 26 Sept. 2013.

This article was also a biographical source that gave me information about Charles Dickens's life. I used it to fill in gaps the Gervais article left.

Capuano, Peter J. "Handling the Perceptual Politics of Identity in "Great Expectations"" *Dickens Quarterly* 27.3 (2010): 185-208. *EBSCO*. Web.

This is a literary criticism and analysis of *Great Expectations*. I used it to make sure my own thoughts on the novel were grounded enough to expound upon. This article goes into detail of the significance characters' physical hands play in their identity and this helped form my ideas on how the setting could do the same.

Gervais, David. "Dostoevsky and the English Novel: Dickens, John Cowper Powys and D. H. Lawrence." *The Cambridge Quarterly* 35.1 (2006): 49-71. Web.

This article was useful for both information on Dickens's reception in Russia and Dostoevsky's use of setting in regard to the city. Gervais discusses the influences Dickens had on Dostoevsky's fiction writing, specifically elaborating on the idea that Russian literature of the period may have been a direct product of English literature.

Langbauer, Laurie. "Ethics and Theory: Suffering Children in Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Le Guin." *ELH* 75.1 (2008): 89-108. Web.

The main focus of Langbauer's writing is to bring to focus how the inclusion of a child's suffering in narrative supports the poststructuralist idea that ethics are merely a set response in the face of uncertainty. However, similarities between characters from Dickens and Dostoevsky are brought to light and were used to highlight this idea of thematic-similarities

Lunt, Dennis. "World Spirit as Baal: Marx, Adorno, and Dostoyevsky on Alienation." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26.2 (2012): 485-95. *EBSCO*. Web.

While this source is heavily concerned with the Marxist ideals found in Dostoevsky's writing, it does focus briefly on alienation—a theme I discussed within my paper. An interesting point brought up by this article was that alienation may be a manifestation of deep guilt, bridging the ideas of Tambling with my own.

Needham, Gwendolyn B. "The Undisciplined Heart of David Copperfield." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 9.2 (1954): 81-107. *University of California Press*. Web.

I consulted this article briefly to find support and confirm my own opinions on the reasons why *David Copperfield* was so successful in Russia. The article focuses on the reasons why this happened, as well as the overall significance of the novel.

Roberts, Peter. "Education and the Limits of Reason: Reading Dostoevsky." *Educational Therapy* 6.2 (2012): 203-23. *EBSCO*. Web.

This source is an academic interpretation of *Notes from Underground* by Dostoevsky. While it is primarily focused with the analyzation of egoism (a topic I did not use in my paper), it did give insight into the Underground Man's mind and various possible psychological reasons for his hostility.

Tambling, Jeremy. "Criminals from a Sense of Guilt: Dickens and Dostoevsky." *Cahiers, Victoriens, & Edouardiens* 55 (2002): 333-48. Web.

This heavier than expected article compares the similarities between the criminals of Dickens and Dostoevsky, elaborating on how the former influenced the latter. I used it to expand on the thematic motivations of criminals.

Wyman, Alina. "The Specter of Freedom: Ressentiment and Dostoevskij's Notes from Underground." *Studies in East European Thought* 59.1/2 (2007): 119-40. *EBSCO*. Web.

This was another source that gave insight into *Notes from Underground*. I used it chiefly to make sure I had a good understanding of the novella itself. It also gave insight into values of resentment brought up by Nietzsche that I briefly mentioned in the essay.