Iconic Transformations in Dostoevsky’s Post-Siberian Works

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Dostoevsky’s articulation of iconic beauty in his post-Siberian fiction stems from the well established association between image and word in the Orthodox tradition. His use of descriptive language, symbolism and metaphors evokes spiritual transformation in the same way that icons use colour, symbolism and visual expression to depict transfiguration. The representation of icons in Dostoevsky’s post-Siberian fiction and the manifestation of inner or moral beauty through his characterisation are vital to our understanding and appreciation of the writer’s works and religious philosophy. Iconic beauty as the term is used here parallels the Orthodox belief that beauty is a spiritual or internal quality made manifest in icons through external features.

This paper compares and contrasts the iconic characters that come to embody for Dostoevsky the novelist the ideals of inner or moral beauty. Each character chosen as a representative of transformational beauty is the primary symbol of the spiritual ideal in the narrative. Primarily, one can distinguish between those characters able to create transformation in the world by evoking a spiritual response to their unconditional love from those who cannot. While the inner beauty represented by the iconic characters
remains the same, its effectiveness and end result is expressed with significant differences in the individual works.

In examining the parallels between Dostoevsky’s narrative and the iconic image, particular emphasis is placed on the way both the plot and characters of the major novels embody the ideal of the iconic archetype which characterises Orthodox theology and artistic representation, highlighting the importance of the religious-aesthetic dimension of Dostoevsky’s fiction to our understanding of his conception of art, religion and literature. This research builds on the works of other scholars, particularly Robert Louis Jackson, Sophie Ollivier and Tatyana Kasatkina by examining how iconic beauty functions in the selected works.

The methodology used to compare Dostoevsky’s textual devices and characterisation with the visual symbols of iconic representations parallels the traditional Orthodox reading of icons in that it facilitates the examination of those theological elements which link the tradition of beauty as expressed through icons with Dostoevsky’s own understanding of iconic beauty articulated through characters and narrative.

Chronologically, the first of Dostoevsky’s incarnations of iconic beauty in the post-Siberian period is the character of Sonia Marmeladova in Crime and Punishment who represents the full
embodiment of the transforming power of iconic beauty, as she is able to plant the seed of spiritual regeneration in Raskolnikov. Her steady compassion, purity and mercy represent Dostoevsky’s notion of the Christian virtues which alone bring Raskolnikov to the realisation of God. Along with Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*, she demonstrates the effectiveness of iconic beauty as an agent of change in the world. Her active love, compassion and sacrificial humility foster transformation, the effect of which is evident in the novel’s epilogue, where Raskolnikov at least arguably comes to realise the spiritual potential of his selfhood through theosis or transformation.

Though Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* is the quintessential manifestation of iconic beauty in Dostoevsky’s post-Siberian works, his brief sojourn among the sinful characters of contemporary St. Petersburg seemingly ends in failure in a way that parallels that of Christ on earth. Yet, one might argue, in the same way that Jesus’ spiritual beauty remains untarnished by his crucifixion, Myshkin’s embodiment of iconic beauty successfully symbolises the moral ideal, regardless of his ineffectualness and eventual madness, by ‘holding up to other characters an image of the best in themselves and a hint of a higher reality in which time shall be no more’ (Jones 2002, 165). Both Christ and Myshkin plant the seeds of transformation in the world and take upon themselves human
suffering. Like Sonia, Myshkin is a literary depiction of unambiguous beauty and purity, in a world of pride, self-interest and vengeance, a world he is ultimately unable to overcome or transform.

Similarly, Dasha in *The Devils* represents the failure of spiritual beauty when it evokes no response. Her steady devotion to and love for Stavrogin cannot arrest his disintegration and self-destruction, though he is aware of her potential to transform his life and is attracted to her kind gentle nature. However, unlike Raskolnikov, he turns away from her pure beauty and chooses instead the path of implosion, as Father Tikhon observes in *The Notebooks for the Possessed*: ‘you lack a sense of the beautiful. This lack of beauty is going to kill you; you won’t be able to stand it’ (qtd. in Wasiolek 1968, 344). Interestingly, this pivotal statement appears only in Dostoevsky’s notebooks, and not the novel itself. The crippled Maria Lebyadkina, another iconic figure in her meekness and religiosity, encounters abuse, neglect, suffering and ultimately murder, though her iconic beauty remains un tarnished even in death.

The eponymous heroine of *The Gentle Creature* is a young orphan girl who is forced into marriage with an opportunist. The narrative outlines her moral disintegration as she gradually loses the will to live. Her purity and innocence are evident throughout the narrative and she represents the iconic ideals of meekness and
kindness. Her youth and idealism combined with her unfortunate family circumstances prompt the narrator (her husband) to take advantage of her, resulting in her suicide with an actual icon in her arms.

Though she fails to renew or transform her life or that of the narrator, she remains a symbol of the hope of transcendence and transformation beyond death. Whether her tragic death proves to be a catalyst for the narrator’s subsequent transformation is unknown, in keeping with the Bakhtinian concept of unfinalizability; but the icon that accompanies her on her final journey seems to symbolise spiritual liberation, or the Gentle Creature’s transcendence of pain and suffering as she becomes ‘finalized’ by embracing love.

In his final work, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky transfused what he considered to be the essential ingredients of iconic beauty into Alyosha Karamazov, creating a powerful figure that not only plants the seeds of transformation in others but meets with a response. Though the planned sequels to *The Brothers Karamazov* might have depicted a different hero changed by encountering spiritual challenges, in the novel as it stands, Alyosha is capable of great goodness which he is able to translate into active love in and for the world. As Wasiolek (1971) suggests, he is the
embodiment and continuation of Father Zosima’s spiritual teachings, his character based on the saintly prototype that characterises Dostoevsky’s icon-like characters.

Dostoevsky’s conceptualisation and articulation of iconic beauty has fundamental similarities as well as major differences in each iconic character, as these protagonists may be distinguished by their ability to create and facilitate transformation in the lives of others. Perhaps contrary to expectations, gender is not a differentiating factor in establishing the effectualness of the icon-like characters. Male and female characters are equally portrayed as being successful or unsuccessful in creating transformation. Rather, it is the response they receive to their offer of spiritual love that determines their effectualness.

A further distinguishing factor is the degree to which each iconic character actively pursues and facilitates moral transformation. For instance while the Gentle Creature, Dasha and Myshkin carry the seeds of transformational love, they do not actively seek to create change and transformation in the lives of other characters. Their role is to symbolise ideal or moral beauty without actively creating change. Consequently, the Gentle Creature takes her own life as she is unable to endure further domination, Stavrogin kills himself despite Dasha’s steady faith and love for him.
while the lives of those whom Myshkin loves, particularly Nastasya and Rogozhin, end in self-destruction. Myshkin, the portrait of ideal goodness and beauty, facilitates self-reflection and moral questioning, but he is unable to arrest evil.

By contrast, Sonia from *Crime and Punishment* and Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* are facilitators of change and moral agents of transformation. They project perfect confidence in their moral beauty and the transforming power of faith. Thereby Raskolnikov becomes transformed through Sonia’s healing love, while Alyosha’s encounter with Grushenka and his brother Dmitry facilitates their moral development and the unfolding of ideal beauty.

From his notebooks, it is clear that Dostoevsky conducted a great deal of mental experimenting until the final versions of his characters emerged. For example, in earlier drafts, Sonia’s character has more moral ambiguity and is less clearly defined as a symbol of absolute purity. It also took several drafts before the idea of Myshkin as the symbol of a ‘perfectly good man’ emerged. This suggests that Dostoevsky’s conception of iconic beauty also developed as he matured as a writer, corresponding with the refinement of his religious philosophy. The culmination of his artistic and spiritual growth is *The Brothers Karamazov*, his final work in which the character of Alyosha Karamazov, the symbol of the positive social
ideal, captures the author’s mature understanding of the active compassion and transformation that is necessary for iconic beauty to create lasting change in the world.

This paper provides the basis for a deeper understanding of the function of transformative beauty in Dostoevsky’s works during an important period of his creative output and contributes to a reviving interest in the conceptualisation of beauty in a theological framework as well as highlighting the importance of the association between image and word in a literary context.
**Selected Bibliography**


