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AP English

Mrs. Head

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Dostoevsky's "Ideal Man" In The Brothers Karamazov and The Idiot

"And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

(John 5:2-10, English Standard Version)

Fyodor Dostoevsky sought to portray these ideals using Prince Myshkin and

Alyosha in his great novels The Idiot and The Brothers Karamazov. However, because Prince Myshkin and Alyosha portray the same characteristics by no means makes them identical. Both characters were in isolation prior to the initial plot of the books, but for different reasons. Myshkin was in a sanatorium before his book's plot picks up, while Alyosha willingly leaves the chaos of the outside world to spiritually enrich himself. The main plot of both books hinge around different conflicts, and one may argue that The Idiot is less complex than The Brothers Karamazov, since its plot is centered around love, whereas the latter book's plot concerns a murder. Alyosha is more openly spiritual than Myshkin. Alyosha also understands the world better than Myshkin does; Myshkin tends to be more naïve, even though he probably had experienced the greed, vanity, lust, and general malice of society. The characters are similar in other ways, though. Like their creator, Dostoevsky, both Myshkin and Alyosha have epileptic fits in tense circumstances; Myshkin when Rogozhin tries to stab him, and Alyosha when under verbal abuse from his father. In both novels, Dostoevsky used the characters of Alyosha and Prince Myshkin to personify his ideal spiritual and Christlike man, so pure and good that they are pained by the evil they see in the world around them.

Morally, Alyosha and Myshkin are very similar. Alyosha comes from a monastery and has been trained by Zosima the holy man, so he is probably very well-versed in scripture and Christian Principles. He is more open about this Christianity than Myshkin, who seems to be inherently good without any prompting whatsoever. He is also more conscientious about what people will think about him than Myshkin is. However,

like Myshkin, he is more worried and embarrassed by other peoples' actions than by his own. Alyosha will forgive anyone of any offense and will gladly support anyone in need. He acts as a counselor and friend to his brothers and often bears messages that his brothers could not bear to deliver themselves (partially because of his innocence) and he accepts those unhappy missions even though it is not required of him.

Prince Myshkin is very similar to Alyosha in his moral stance. He is slightly less spiritual than Alyosha is, but he makes up for it by being, arguably, the more Christlike of the two. Of Myshkin, Nastassya Filipponova, a woman who is mildly enamored with Myshkin but in the end runs away with the dark, obsessed man Rogozhin to spite her former lover Totsky, proclaims to Aglia, the beautiful, uncorrupted girl whom Myshkin loves, but runs away when Myshkin hesitates when confronted by both women, proclaims, "I have never in my life met a man like him for noble simplicity, and boundless trustfulness. I understood from the way he talked that anyone who chose could deceive him, and that he would forgive anyone afterwards who had deceived him, and that was why I grew to love him" (Idiot 521). He is the epitome of innocence and naïveté, a trait which allows him to be harmed by many people throughout The Idiot, most of whom are seeking his money. Myshkin often laughs at the insults and derisive comments made about him, and prefers the company of children over that of adults because of their innocence and simple wisdom. He also despises the way adults treat them:

Nothing should be concealed from children on the pretext that they are little and that it is too early for them to understand.

What a miserable and unfortunate idea! And how readily the children detect that their fathers consider them too little to understand anything, though they understand everything.

Grown-up people do not know that a child can give exceedingly good advice even in the most difficult case. Oh, dear! When that pretty bird looks at you, happy and confiding, it's a shame for you to deceive it.

(The Idiot 62)

Myshkin is also very generous with his money, a trait that is not exhibited by Alyosha (although perhaps because Alyosha was never in a situation that required generosity and he is probably not as wealthy as Myshkin), even going so far as helping financially someone who had tried to dupe him out of his money by claiming to be the son of Myshkin's benefactor. Myshkin even agrees to marry the woman twisted by rage and vindictiveness, Nastassya Filipponova out of pity and to save her from Rogozhin even though he is in love with Aglia.

On the subject of morality, both Myshkin and Alyosha are probably as Christlike as any human other than Christ (who obviously is perfect in every way) can possibly be. Wesley would probably cite these people as examples to confirm his teaching of entire sanctification or "Christian Perfection" if they had been real people and had existed at his time. The only major difference between them is Myshkin's trust in everyone around him.

This almost blind trust of everyone he meets was not caused by a lack of experience in the “real world,” however; Myshkin probably endured as much hardship as, if not more than, Alyosha in his earlier years. Myshkin simply did not allow his bad experiences to ruin his innocence.

On a more foundational level, the religious beliefs of Myshkin and Alyosha are very similar, although there are fewer clues as to the extent of the religious beliefs held by Myshkin. Alyosha is so religious that he becomes a monk, partly to escape the evil he sees in society, and partly to further his faith. Alyosha ardently believes in the God of the Bible, and is quick to defend his faith when his beliefs are questioned. Ivan, Alyosha's brother, is sometimes an atheist, sometimes an agnostic who believes that if there is a god, he is angry and mean. He, therefore, takes every opportunity to attack Alyosha's beliefs. Alyosha does not seem to be put off by these arguments, but he does not seem prepared to give an answer that is as “intellectually sound” as Ivan's. Faith comes easily for Alyosha, who is usually able to see the good in every situation, or at the very least is not unduly upset by the bad.

Prince Myshkin, however, is never as vocal about his faith because he is never in theological debates. He still shows the Christlike behavior that leads one to believe that he has deep religious faith. For instance, he is willing to sacrifice his own personal happiness for the well-being of Nastassya, and he is eager to help anyone who needs to be helped, regardless of the personal cost to him, which certainly is what Christ has called all Christians to do. Since no one brings up the subject of religion beyond using the word

“Rosary” or “minister,” all one can do is speculate.

Based on both of the characters' behavior throughout The Idiot and The Brothers Karamazov, it is clear that they both have a strong faith in Christianity and are devout enough to cause people to notice that they are different from the world. In Alyosha's case that is a good thing, but in Myshkin's case it causes people to believe that he is simple-minded and unable to understand the events which are taking place since he does not act the way people are “supposed to.”

In the end, these two saintly characters have different things happen to them, but are not extremely different. At the end of The Brothers Karamazov, Alyosha is left with one less brother and one less friend after the imprisonment of Dmitri (though Dmitri plans to escape to America) and the death of Ilyusha, after which Alyosha gives a moving speech about cherishing memories to the school children, who all cheer afterwards. At the end of The Idiot, Rogozhin stabs Nastassya to death and is sent to a labor camp, and Aglia runs off with a man who pretends to be a Count from Poland, who abandons her after a short period of time. As a result of these traumatic events, in Prince Myshkin goes insane and is sent back to the sanatorium in Switzerland. The main difference between the outcomes of these two novels is that Alyosha retains his sanity while Myshkin loses it. This difference may be because Myshkin is more pure than Alyosha, and faced with similar circumstances, Myshkin cannot bear to see the people he loves, everybody, hurt and finally goes insane.

The Idiot and The Brothers Karamazov both contain a Christlike figure that

portrays Dostoevsky's idea of what the perfect man should be, but even though they portray approximately the same person, Dostoevsky's views must have changed, albeit minutely, in the twelve years between writing The Idiot and The Brothers Karamazov, because the characters would have been virtually identical had they not. Also, Prince Myshkin and Alyosha underwent different hardships and good times, and different circumstances surrounded them in their daily lives. Dostoevsky used Alyosha to show more of a religious perfection. For example, Alyosha was a novice in a monastery, and his apologetic conversations with Ivan were enough to take some of the smugness out of Ivan's tone. Prince Myshkin was more of a Christlike figure than a religious one, and he let his actions do the talking. One reason people thought he was an idiot was that he acted so strangely compared to those around him and did not feel it necessary to explain himself. To him, his actions are perfectly natural. Even though the difference between a "religious" perfection and a "Christlike" perfection is extremely small and theoretically should not exist, in the culture of Russia in the mid- to late-1800s, there was a difference. Both Myshkin and Alyosha are outstandingly good, and Wesley would have been proud.