

# Fyodor dostoyevsky's the idiot. fantastic realism and the ordinary.

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## **The Ordinary in Fyodor Dostoevsky's The Idiot**

Realism represents the life without embellishment and unflatteringly reveals the dirty and ugly aspects while Fantastic Realism combines the realist ideal with the surreal and extraordinary. Mainly set in Russian high society, Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* manages to dilute even the most distinguished and extraordinary characters by ordinariness and where routine life and the quotidian continue to haunt them although they seek to break away from the common place.

In the first section of part four of *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky articulates some interesting reflections on the problems that "ordinary" characters present to the novelist. One is aware of Dostoevsky's "fantastic realism" in which he defends his penchant for highly original characters acting outrageously as creating a higher realism, ultimately more revealing about the true nature of things (than Flaubert's brand of realist), which is closer to what most people think of as realism.

The everyday conversation, errors, pursuits and expectations pervade Dostoevsky's novel, however there is a well-balanced mixture with the extraordinary, original and outrageous. Even the common folk in *The Idiot* appear more absurd and trite - to emphasize the ordinariness Dostoevsky comments that "common people are, at every moment and by majority the essential link in the chain of human affairs" (500) and incorporates in the novel characters such as Lebedev, Ganya and Gen. Ivolgin, Ippolit, Varya among others who speak of platitudes such as rumours, politics and old ideas. In spite of all the "extraordinary efforts of these characters to escape

at all costs the rut of ordinariness and routine they end nonetheless by remaining invariably and forever nothing but routine" (500). The Epanchins family does not escape the commonness of their own background, consequence and existence.

" There is, for instance, nothing easier for a limited, " ordinary" person than to imagine himself as an exceptional and original person and to revel in that without the slightest hesitation" (501). Many characters imagine themselves as superior and put on vain airs which ironically only serves to emphasize their ordinariness such as Lebedev who professes that he is a scholar in decoding apocalyptic material while he attempts to rub shoulders with those in the upper crust of old Russian aristocracy and benefit by association but who goes on frequent drinking binges and socializes with men of questionable integrity. Every ordinary person who fails at achieving distinction often resorts to fraternizing with those above his league to indirectly attain to greatness and Lebedev and Ganya both follow this course. Nastasya, Aglaia, and the Epanchins fall into the ordinary category of characters who are self-important and carry about themselves in such a way that give others an inflated perception of their dignity.

Nastasya is the epitome of Fantastic Realism for she was the most " extraordinary and surprising creature" (44). A lot of attention is fixated on Nastasya and the novel almost revolves around her womanly power, whimsical outbursts, caprices, scandals, background, wealth and love affairs. Nastasya rebels against all attempts to subdue her and precipitates to her own ruin when she throws herself into the arms of her lover and murderer.

Nastasya leads an extraordinary life and in the prelude to her marriage with Prince Myshkin, “ the filth and ruffraff of the common sort in the town, houses, assemblies, dachas, bandstand, and taverns (were) all but talking and shouting of the coming event” (653). After Nastasya’s tragic death, “ many other persons in the story go on living as before have changed little and there is practically nothing for us to report about them” (664). Hence one sees the resumption of the commonplace life after her passing. Although the circumstances surrounding her death was far from ordinary, her life does not flee commonplace details such as rivalry over a lover, marriage refusals, choleric fits, and the peevish and truculent attitudes of a spoilt child.

Aglaiia was special and set apart for glory and greatness in her family and society. Her parents intended that “ Aglaiia’s fate was not to be an ordinary fate, but the highest possible ideal of earthy bliss. Aglaiia’s future husband was to be a paragon of all perfections and achievements, not to mention the possessor of vast wealth” (41). However, Aglaiia’s husband turned out to be an émigré – a commoner who hit upon hard times and had to travel as a measure of escape and he was not who he pretended to be. He had “ a dark and dubious history. He had captured Aglaiia by “ the extraordinary nobility of his soul...his colossal fortune turned out to be completely non existent” (666). Thus as a duped woman, Aglais’s life sinks to the mundane and does not meet lofty expectations. Aglais’s original streak lies in her inclination to be as dark, cruel and provocative. One clear instance is where she publicly humiliates Prince Myshkin in her recital of “ The Poor Knight” ( ...), her lapse to destructive sickness and seclusion when Prince Myshkin chooses to marry

her rival, Nastasya (...), and her outright rebellion in her elopement, severance of family ties and socio-economic ruin (...).

“ In every newspaper, you find reports of facts which are facts which are at the same time totally real and quite extraordinary” (Jones 2). In *The Idiot*, the title of the outrageous news report is “ Proletariats and scions, an episode of daily and everyday robbery!” (283). Here one sees the mixture of an ordinary reality and the fantastic. Burdovsky, the author of the fallacious article, sensationalized the news to produce an extraordinary work informing the Russian public of Prince Myshkin's fortune and slandering his name and his plain and simple past become outrageous to the casual reader because of the style in which the editorial column was written. Because of the decadence of corrupt Russian society, robbery becomes “ daily and everyday” - almost an expected feature.

Prince Myshkin is by no means an exceptional character himself for he embodies a typified Christ however, “ it seemed that the prince's conversation was quite ordinary” (20). The Prince is frequently called an “ idiot” - not only because of his illness but also because of his naïveté. Contrary to other characters around him, he assumes no superior air and does not aim to excel others, and in this trait alone is he distinguished from all others. In spite of his resplendent personal qualities such as his humanity, humility, and compassion, like everyone else he encounters financial hardship, is poorly dressed and for a while has to depend on the kindness of others.

The very perceptive and frank Prince Myshkin analyzed Ganya's character neither as a fiend, nor for an overly rotten person ... but he is " simply the most ordinary man that could possibly be, if only perhaps very weak and not at all original" (132). Because of Ganya's pride, vanity and selfish ambition, he displays common characteristics of an average, self-seeking Russian. His acquaintances are all unscrupulous and money-hungry. Ganya even attempts to seduce the key women of the novel, Nastasya and Aglaia, not because of love, but because of the rich dowry and expected benefits in ascending the rungs of the social ladder where marriage is degraded to a regular financial transaction. However, what is exceptional about Ganya is his calculating capacity to underhandedly accomplish whatsoever he chooses

In sum, the pretensions to the fantastic reveal the human nature's basic need to feel extraordinary and better than the rest. " In Russia, truth almost assumes an entirely fantastic character. In fact, people have finally succeeded in converting all that the human mind may lie and belie into a more comprehensible truth" (Jones 2). " Lack of originality has always and everywhere, all the world over, from time immemorial, been considered to be a quality, and the best recommendation, of an active, business-like and practical man, and at least ninety-nine percent of mankind ...have always held that opinion" (354). Dostoevsky succeeds in painting Russia in such a realist manner that the events which transpire are highly credible and although there are a few irregularities and idiosyncrasies, the reader gets a plain view of normal existence.