

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE IN DOSTOEVSKY'S AND DICKENS'S CHARACTER PORTRAYAL

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Abstract. The paper dwells on the parallels and convergence points in portraying the characters of Steerforth and Stavrogin in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*. The present analysis relies on the English language criticism (Loralee McPike, George Katkov, and Nikita Lary) that interprets the mutual influence of the two writers. George Katkov points out the similarity in imaging and plot development in the both novels, whereas Nikita Lary analyzes the parallels of Dostoevsky's and Dickens's developmental paths, as well as the dependence of each author on the system of national literature. Loralee McPike presents a new stage in the English language comparative literary studies and states the issue of 'reverse influence' and the psychological modeling of the both characters.

Keywords: literary comparison, linguo-poetic analysis, reverse influence, aesthetic reception and reminiscences, Charles Dickens, Dostoyevskian artistic framework.

Introduction

Dickens's work was important to Dostoevsky due to the latter's immense interest in society reformation. He sought to understand the whole of reality and to provide a perspective on it. His rich diversity of types was the necessary complement of this undertaking. He was a great creator of 'typical, distinctive, and national' characters. Dostoevsky's own search for types was an essential part of his attempt to understand Russia; hence it is not surprising that many of the characters influenced by Dickens were presented as distinctively Russian. According to N.M. Lary, 'both authors were subversives whose radicalism was based neither on faith in institutions nor on revolution. Because they wished to change society, they were particularly aware of all who were opposed to it. Dickens was a 'national' writer in a way few contemporary Russians managed to be, for either they were describing the old forms of society, instead of the new emerging one, or they tended to identify with the liberal or radical denigration of their country, or they were too uncommitted to anything' [1: 160-161]. Dostoevsky's assertion holds good in its application to his own use of Dickens: 'Every European poet or innovator, everybody who goes through over there with a new thought and a new force, cannot fail to become at once a Russian poet as well, cannot fail to change Russian thought, and become an almost Russian force' [2: 42].

Methods

While analysing the Dickensian motifs and observing their reflection in the Russian classic novelism, we resorted to a number of methodological techniques employed in our previous work [3], namely:

- a descriptive method;
- a comparative method which is necessary to reveal the common features of the two literary frameworks;
- a linguo-poetic method aimed at the analysis of literary form (in contrast to linguo-stylistic method aimed at the analysis of language units functioning within a literary work) [4];
- a component analysis method that implies revealing the main structural parts of literary form (i.e., motif, image, plot, composition, character portrayal, etc.).

Research and Results

We aim to examine the points of convergence in character portrayal by means of comparing the imagery parallels, namely, those of Steerforth of *David Copperfield* and Stavrogin of *The Possessed* (Rus. «Бесъ»).

Both Steerforth and Stavrogin are characterized by Bayronic pride, as well as egotism, superiority, assertiveness, and artistic tendencies. Steerforth's image is constantly embraced with mystery; his inborn attractiveness appears to be inexplicable. He is portrayed as a snobbish person, a gifted amateur not capable of making a serious effort to focus on a distinctive thought or idea: "...all this was a brilliant game, played for the excitement of the moment, for the employment of high spirits, in thoughtless love of superiority, in a mere wasteful careless course of winning what was worthless to him, and next minute thrown away" [5: 251-252]. Sincerity in speech and thought lost its meaning for Stavrogin as well; he is assuming a new role every single day. Dostoevsky portrays Stavrogin as a personality not capable of a true faith, ambiguous, and indifferent to the limit ('neither cold nor hot' [6: 34]). The romantic longing of Steerforth transforms into a Bayronic sorrow of Stavrogin. It is appropriate to remark that Bayronic air of Stavrogin's character is surrounded by an 'evil-doing aura'. In Dostoevsky's *Notes*, it is repeatedly argued that Stavrogin is 'extraordinarily talented for crime.' Stavrogin's behavior washes off the boundaries between good and evil. In *The Possessed*, he transmits the idea of God's inexistence. It is only natural that his instinctive strife for evil-doing is expressed more vividly and explicitly compared to the Dickens' character, although both characters display emotional inertness concealed by the charismatic appearance. It is typical that both characters are doomed for vain struggle inside their ambiguous souls that emit the forces of good and evil of a metaphysical nature.

George Katkov outlines the basic similarities between the two men:

‘They are both handsome, powerfully built, and of great physical prowess. The dominating feature of their character is pride and lust for domination, together with a somber determination to use ruthlessly the privileged position in which they are placed... They are both born leaders of men who attract weaker characters... Insults, betrayal, perfidy, and the injuries inflicted by them on those who look up to them for inspiration, are forgiven them by their followers and ‘friends.’ Under the mask of magnanimity they conceal total egoism, under that of charm, an emotional and moral coldness... The final victory of the destructive forces in their soul is treated not as the exposure of the villain, but as the tragic issue of a struggle between equally real parts of their split personality.’ [7: 135].

Katkov also noticed a convergence in the names of Steerforth and Stavrogin. The number of letters in both names is identical taking into account the traditional Russian spelling. The initial sounds ‘st’ intensified by alliteration convinced a reader of a similarity between the two names. Certain scholars state that Stavrogin’s name traces back to a Greek word *σταυρός* meaning ‘cross’, thus making Stavrogin crucified on his limitless passion for the Absolute and the attendant impossibility to reach it.

There are more exemplifications of the fact that *David Copperfield* had its influence on the selection of names in *The Possessed*. It is known that the early drafts of the novel mentioned a foster child Marya Alekseevna who later transfigured into Varvara Petrovna. The desire to alter the name at the late stages of novel-making can be easily explained by Dostoevsky’s wish to avoid the coinage of identical names (cf. Mariya Lebyadkina and Mariya Shatova). Exchanging ‘M’ for ‘D’ can be alluded to Miss Dartle’s name being a phonetic reference to the name of Darya, according to Katkov.

Stavrogin’s estate *Skvoreshniki* (‘Starlingcotes’) implies a place inhabited by a flock of starlings, which is analogous to ‘Rookery’, the Copperfield’s estate, as the Russian language contains no word signifying a place inhabited by the rooks.

According to Lorelee McPike, the major plot similarity is between the scene in Varvara Petrovna’s drawing room when Stavrogin denies his marriage to Marya Timofeevna and the one in Mrs Steerforth’s when Peggotty confronts her. Katkov shows both mothers facing what they view as the source of their sons’ degradation. Both are in their drawing rooms accompanied by the wards whom their sons have ruined. Both women stiffly resist hearing the unpalatable truths about their sons, and both petitioners fail to press their moral rights ‘out of real or faked magnanimity.’ Nothing is accomplished by either visit, and both petitioners are humiliated. This is a superb instance of Dickens’ direct scenic influence on Dostoevsky [8: 140].

Both Steerforth and Stavrogin seem to gain a sense of identity through their relationships to women. Their peculiar sort of attractiveness to women

is compounded of extreme courtesy and unquenchable attraction. One could say of Stavrogin as David says of Steerforth:

There was an ease in his manner - a gay and light manner it was, but not swaggering - which I still believe to have borne a kind of enchantment with it. I still believe him, in virtue of this carriage, his animal spirits, his delightful voice, his handsome face and figure, and, for aught I know, of some inborn power of attraction besides (which I think a few people possess), to have carried a spell with him to which it was a natural weakness to yield, and which not many persons could withstand [5: 104].

Stavrogin's relationship to Darya Pavlovna Shatova is similar to Steerforth's with Rosa, although there are significant differences. As Katkov carefully details, both Rosa and Darya have been marked by aggressive acts by Steerforth and Stavrogin respectively. Rosa's scar can safely be regarded as a conventional symbol for some kind of sexual aggression committed by Steerforth in the past, which causes Rosa's intense fixation on him both physically and morally. There is little doubt that sexual contact took place between Stavrogin and Darya Pavlovna in Switzerland. Both events occur in times prior to the novels themselves and are pre-existing conditions rather than continuing actions. Like Rosa, Darya Pavlovna grew up in the family of her aggressor. Her initial nature was 'quiet and gentle, and capable of great sacrifice,' as Rosa's must have been, to hear Mrs Steerforth speak of it. She is well educated, talented, and pretty; Rosa, even with her scar, is deemed handsome by David, and her harp-playing attests to her talent. Darya has loved Stavrogin since childhood and has sacrificed her life for him. She waits for his eventual return to her, counting on the fact that at the end everyone else will forsake him. Although Rosa never says so, one suspects that she too is waiting for Steerforth's eventual return.

This charm is exercised without apparent effort on Steerforth's part whenever he encounters someone who might be worth charming, such as Emily. His charm seems to work upon almost any woman. Stavrogin has his Emily, too. However, here Dostoevsky has split Dickens' character into two people, for Emily is represented in Stavrogin's life by both Lizaveta Nikolaevna and Marya Timofeevna. Over the latter, his insane wife, Stavrogin exercises the same sort of charm as Steerforth exercises over Emily. And over Liza he has the same influence for action as Steerforth has over Emily.

Dostoevsky's choice of Steerforth as a model for Stavrogin's psyche (as opposed to his politics, for which Dostoevsky properly chose other models) provides the illumination of reverse influence. Dostoevsky must have seen decomposite doubling possibilities in Steerforth, especially as Steerforth's behavior is tacitly a model for David's major character development. Even the light of the possibilities Steerforth offers as a double of David [9, 10].

Conclusion

Concluding on the comparative analysis of Steerforth and Stavrogin's characters, we can summarize the essence of the three major works devoted to this issue. The works by George Katkov, Nikita Lary, and Lorelee McPike demonstrate the convergence between plot twists and imagery in both *David Copperfield* and *The Possessed*. According to the mentioned scholars, the influence of Dickens upon Dostoevsky can be traced in common themes and in character and plot borrowings.

However, the Katkov's work sometimes neglected that fact that Dostoevsky - though relying on Dickens in character portrayal - generally surrenders to the logic of realism. Perhaps, Katkov did not always manage to interpret the Dickens' influence in an appropriate way; his works do not provide the details about the inner forces of receptive literature, which hinders the proper evaluation of the reception process. The scholar paid way too much attention to the parallels found not going too deep into the essence of Stavrogin's image and thus not establishing how this influence was transformed in the new national context, how it affected the change in the image structure.

Nikita Lary pays more attention to analyzing the convergence points in the developmental paths concerning Dostoevsky's and Dickens' creative endeavor. Lary figures out the correlation between the national literary process and each author's creative path. The sixth chapter of Lary's monograph [1: 282] is devoted to *The Possessed* and consists of four subsections. This particular chapter gives thought to the historical and social issues of the novel. Nikita Lary attempts to investigate the Russian society of 1860s and the way they are reflected in the structure, plot, and composition of *The Possessed*. The presence of features bringing together the images of Steerforth and Stavrogin is discussed in Lary's debates with George Katkov with frequent references to the works of the latter. Lary assumes that Katkov is 'too much focused on details and insignificant parallels' and 'got stuck into the labyrinth of delusional explications' [Ibid: 283]. For instance, if Steerforth is the Stavrogin's prototype, therefore, the image of the former could cast some light on the understanding of the latter. However, Katkov's assumption that Stavrogin's 'evil inclinations' are more explicitly expressed, leads us to the idea that Steerforth is a more enigmatic figure than Stavrogin. Thus, agreeing with Katkov upon Stavrogin image being a borrowing of Dickensian origin, Lary indicates a certain degree of inaccuracy in Katkov's literary analysis.

Finally, Lorelee McPike's analysis is a new step in the English comparative literary studies: her work states the abovementioned problem of a 'reverse influence', that is, the fact of literary influence / allusion echoes in the work of the writer who served as the source of influence. Comparing

David Copperfield with *The Possessed*, McPike makes interesting observations revealing the psychological links between the characters. Her analysis of a typological convergence in Stavrogin and Steerforth helps to confirm her conclusion on how Dostoevsky employed Steerforth's portrayal to model and to construct the Stavrogin's psyche. Her concept of reverse influence implying the projection of Dostoevsky's characters back onto those of Dickens, helps to reveal certain features of the literary work that had not been investigated in the previous works.

All the three works (despite the limitations mentioned) hold a significant interest and relevance for the further comparative literary studies.

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