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Suicide in Classic Russian Literature: Examining Dostoevsky's, Chekhov's, and Nabokov's Use
of the Tragic Plot Element

Russian literature is widely considered to be particularly depressing and tragic, since it deals with many dark themes and issues. Perhaps the strongest example of the prevalence of such themes is the frequency with which suicide is mentioned or depicted in classic works of Russian literature. Suicides, whether merely contemplated and later averted or in fact tragically carried out, feature in many of the famous works of Russian literature, especially those from the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Appearing in numerous works by preeminent authors such as Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Nabokov and Tolstoy, among others, suicide is a drastic action considered by desperate characters for myriad reasons, and its inclusion in the plot fulfills varying literary functions depending on the needs and preferences of the author. This paper will examine various authors' treatment of the issue of suicide as well as the role that suicide plays in several well-known Russian literary works, using as examples some of the most famous works of Russian literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – specifically *Crime and Punishment*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Defense*. In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, suicide is used to vividly illustrate both the difference between two major characters and the essential but elusive nature of redemption. An averted suicide in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* shows the literary power of a nonevent. Finally, in Nabokov's *The Defense* suicide serves as a final escape from a world which cannot accept the hero as he is, because it can never conform to the type of world which he hopes for and needs it to be.

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1866 novel *Crime and Punishment* is a long and incredibly complex tale focusing not on solving a crime but on understanding the psychological and moral reasons behind it and on the impact which it has on the perpetrator. The novel's main character is Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, a young Russian law student who has for some reason developed a theory that he is an 'extraordinary man' both capable of and justified in committing murders or other acts that are against the laws of human society. He chooses to test this theory by murdering an old pawnbroker and her sister in order to steal their money and put it to better use while ridding the world of the parasitic presence of the women, whose worth he views as "no more than the life of a louse... less in fact since the old woman is doing harm [and] wearing out the lives of others." (Dostoevsky et al.). He believes that if he can get away with this double murder without feeling remorse afterwards, he will have proven both the validity of his theory and that he deserves to be considered one of the rare 'extraordinary men'. After committing the murders, however, he is almost immediately plagued with remorse to so great an extent that he becomes physically ill and feverish, and remains so throughout much of the novel. Raskolnikov later meets, and is for a brief time under threat of blackmail by, Arkady Ivanovich Svidrigailov, a thoroughly despicable but at times strangely magnanimous man who has committed numerous crimes and other atrocities for no other reason than the fulfillment of his own selfish desires. The remainder of the novel chronicles Raskolnikov's struggle with his conscience and sense of guilt in the aftermath of his crime.

In the novel, there are at least two suicides to examine – one contemplated but never attempted, and the other, tragically, carried out. Svidrigailov kills himself with a gunshot to the head near the end of the novel, while Raskolnikov considers committing suicide but does not ultimately proceed to do so. Suicide, or more accurately Raskolnikov's choice to reject suicide as an option, is used in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* to illustrate the redeeming power of suffering, love, and human connection. Svidrigailov serves as a sort of foil or "double" for Raskolnikov, reflecting all of his negative traits at an even greater intensity and possessing few of his positive attributes (Tucker). Had Raskolnikov fully embraced the "extraordinary man" theory and proceeded to live his life entirely according to its tenets, placing the need to satisfy his own every desire above and beyond the judgment of any overarching moral code, Svidrigailov's fate could easily have become his as well.

A life philosophy that set them apart from others as "extraordinary men", unconstrained by the norms of human morality and justice, was Svidrigailov's undoing and came very near to being Raskolnikov's as well. Svidrigailov finally realizes that he cannot live his life in complete isolation from human relationships, but this revelation came too late in his life of evil deeds and moral depravity. He commits suicide upon realizing that there is no way for him to earn the love of Raskolnikov's sister Dunya, the object of his obsessive affection. Dunya's love may have redeemed him from his past evils, had he been proven worthy of it, but he was unable to earn this love because he was unwilling to reject his nihilistic "extraordinary man" theory as a guiding life philosophy.

Instead, through the loving Christian influence of Sonya Marmeladova, whom Raskolnikov meets at the beginning of the novel and who remains kind and supportive to him throughout, Raskolnikov eventually repents and finds true redemption, literally on the very last

page of the novel. Sonya's presence and clear concern for him gives Raskolnikov the courage to finally return to the police station and confess, by which action he is finally able to atone for his crime and begin the process of earning his redemption. Sonya prays for him and comes to visit him regularly during his time in prison. Through her efforts, Raskolnikov comes to feel genuine remorse, and is able to feel the joy of love for another person when he realizes that he has fallen in love with Sonya, who is in a very real sense his savior. Literary critics often consider Sonya a "Christ figure" within the novel because it is only through her actions and enduring love that the sinner Raskolnikov finds redemption – taking his strength from her love and the copy of the New Testament that she brings him – while in prison during the novel's epilogue (Rossow). In this way, Dostoevsky's novel follows a classic Russian pattern of suffering being necessary in order to achieve inner peace and redemption.

Although clearly not a 'good man' by typical storybook hero standards – he had, after all, committed murder simply because he believed he was above human concepts of morality and was therefore justified in doing as he wished – Raskolnikov is clearly the sympathetic character and protagonist of Dostoevsky's classic masterpiece. Readers can derive a number of potential moral lessons from his story. He was disgusted and horrified upon witnessing the apparent suicide of a young woman by jumping from a bridge, and despite the similarities between his past and that of Svidrigailov, he is able to avoid the temptation to commit suicide as the latter had done. Combined with Raskolnikov's touching, if not exactly happy, ending this is sufficient evidence to draw a conclusion regarding the comment the novel wishes to make on suicide. While some truly desperate individuals may tragically view it as the only choice available to them, those who are willing to reach out and fully accept the help they are given and embrace a

true change of heart in repentance for their sins can hopefully find other options and find a second chance at redemption.

Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*

Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, published in 1897, is unique from the other works discussed in this paper in that it is a play, rather than a traditional novel. The play follows the story of Ivan Petrovich Voynitsky ("Vanya") and his niece Sofya Alexandrovna ("Sonya") who are living quiet, simple lives on their country estate until the arrival of Vanya's brother-in-law Alexandr Vladimirovich Serebryakov and his second wife, Yelena Andreevna throws the household into chaos. The arrival of country doctor Mikhail Lvovich Astrov, Sonya's unrequited love interest who instead appears interested in pursuing an affair with Yelena, and several other characters further increases the level of drama and strength of emotions running rampant on the estate. The play provides an intimate look inside the workings of a Russian country estate and the lives of those who reside within it.

In Act III, when the two gunshots are heard offstage, readers may initially assume that Vanya has committed suicide, but the dramatic and potentially tragic moment is broken when it is revealed that the shots were instead a failed attempt by Vanya to murder Serebryakov. Readers and audiences experience a sense of both relief and comic resignation. The murder attempt has failed, so there is not yet any tragedy:

"HELEN. [Yeliena] [Trying to take the revolver from him.] Give it to me. Give it to me, I tell you!

VOYNITSKY. [Vanya] Let me go. Let go of me. [Frees himself, runs in and looks around for SEREBRYAKOV.] Where is he? Ah, there he is. [Fires at him.] Bang!

[Pause.] Missed him, did I? Missed him again, eh? [Angrily.] Oh, hell, hell! Hell and damnation! [Bangs the revolver on the floor and sinks exhausted in a chair.

SEREBRYAKOV looks stunned” (Chekhov).

The fact that Vanya failed to successfully carry out what should have been a relatively easy murder is reminiscent of all of the other failures and missed opportunities he has had throughout his life. The immediate relief at the averted murder causes the heightened sense of drama that had previously been present to dissipate in favor of a humorous view of the situation – Vanya’s incompetence, rather than leading to tragedy, has created a comic moment (Borny). This feeling of comedy is enhanced by the manner in which the action occurs. Rather than seeming tense and dramatic, Chekhov has written the scene such that it feels almost farcical.

Vanya’s preparations for an actual suicide attempt are discovered and averted in Act IV, when Astrov demands that Vanya return the poison that he has stolen with the intent of using it to commit suicide. The doctor claims not to act out of a desire to preserve Vanya’s life, but rather wishes merely to prevent himself from being implicated in the death if it is achieved by means of poison. Astrov and Sonya eventually persuade Vanya to return the poison, and to forget the idea of suicide, with Sonya counseling him to be patient and endure the suffering and bleak monotonous future that appears to be his lot in life. Enduring suffering, facing reality, and moving on with one’s life are common themes in Chekhov’s writing, and this is exactly the message conveyed by this scene in the play where Vanya rejects the notion of suicide and resigns himself to persevere in an existence filled with banality and the oppressive weight of boredom and futility (Borny).

Nabokov's *The Defense*

Vladimir Nabokov's 1930 novel *The Defense*, originally published in Nabokov's native Russian as *Zashchita Luzhina*, or Luzhin's Defense, is the story of title character Aleksandr Ivanovich Luzhin, a chess prodigy. A rather awkward and shy boy, Luzhin, who is only referred to by his surname until the very end of the book when his full name is finally revealed, discovers chess during his childhood and quickly develops both a talent and a passion for the quintessentially Russian sport. He devotes his life to chess, to the near exclusion of all else including forging meaningful human relationships and developing a more well-rounded personality and variety of interests. While he does eventually get married, his relationship with Mrs. Luzhin was never a particularly warm or successful one. At the end of the novel, when he is only a few moves away from winning an extremely important and prestigious chess tournament, he suffers a mental breakdown that ultimately leads to his committing suicide by jumping out of a window. Even at the moment of his death his chess obsession still grips him; he believes that the ground several stories below the window out of which he will soon jump is set up in the pattern of a chess board. Chillingly, the reader is forced to come to the realization of Luzhin's suicide at the same time as his wife and friends, who had tried in vain to gain entry to the room in which he had been standing in order to prevent his tragic death. The final lines of Nabokov's work read, "... at the instant when Luzhin unclenched his hand, at the instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, he saw exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him. The door was burst in, 'Aleksandr Ivanovich, Aleksandr Ivanovich,' roared several voices. But there was no Aleksandr Ivanovich." (Nabokov and Scammell).

Luzhin seeks refuge from life in art but eventually is unable to tell the difference between the two. His 'art' – chess – consumes his time and energy to such a degree that it is virtually all

he thinks about, and it becomes the only thing to which he feels a true connection unmarred by the awkwardness and anxiety that characterizes his attempts at meaningful interaction with the world (Boyd). In effect, the world of chess has become his 'real world' and the sport is his life. Chess is logical and strategic, while everyday life can be quite messy and chaotic. Unfortunately, having spent so much of his time and energy since childhood developing his aptitude for the orderly sport of chess, and being the prodigy that he is largely due to his strong tendency to think in terms of patterns and symmetry, Luzhin's mind is unprepared to accept the conditions of real life outside of chess. Unable to reconcile the difference between the spontaneous unpredictability in real life and the orderly patterns of chess which have consumed him since adolescence and for his entire adult life, Luzhin commits suicide as a final escape from the terror of a chaotic world with which his mind is unable to cope.

In *The Defense*, the suicide of the main character is used to illustrate the tragedy of extraordinary genius in an ordinary world. The very same thought processes, thinking style, and mental abilities that enabled Luzhin to become a renowned chess prodigy betrayed him when it came time to function outside his area of expertise, leading him down the path to mental illness and his eventual suicide. Luzhin's suicide can therefore also be considered to reveal the "self-destructive tendency of those who blur the boundary between art and life" (Gleason 209). In addition to literary figures, history offers numerous examples of a similar tragic fate befalling other creative geniuses and prodigies. Among the tormented individuals eventually driven to suicide when their unique way of looking at the world or approaching its problems became incompatible with mundane reality were authors Sylvia Plath and Virginia Wolfe, the latter of whom was a contemporary of Nabokov, artist Vincent van Gogh, physicist Ludwig Boltzmann, and mathematician and logician Kurt Gödel. The validity of the connection between genius,

madness, and eventual suicide is illustrated through these and many other examples. Readers who have come to know and sympathize with Luzhin over the course of the novel vividly experience the ill-fated collision between genius and the world through his suicide at the story's end.

The three literary works examined in this paper represent some of the best-known and most celebrated works of Russian literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The works are quite different in terms of plot, theme, and writing style but one thing that they have in common is that they, like many other Russian literary classics from the same time period involve the issue of suicide in some way within their plot. Suicide was a prominent theme in Russian literature for many years, from the mid-to-late 1800s to the early decades of the twentieth century (Cornwell and Christian). Each author utilized the plot element of suicide in a different manner, to different literary effect, and in order to develop his own thematic conclusion or comment on both suicide and life in general. Dostoevsky utilized Svidrigailov's suicide and Raskolnikov's consideration of suicide in *Crime and Punishment* to present the thematic possibility of redemption through suffering and true repentance, achieved with the aid of close human companionship. The titular character's averted suicide in *Uncle Vanya* illustrated the virtues of patience and perseverance despite the suffering or banal character of one's life. Nabokov's Luzhin used suicide as an escape from a world that would never be structured the way he needed it to be and that would never come to accept him the way he was. Despite its tragic and depressing nature, suicide is a classic element in literature because of the myriad ways in which it can be utilized to further a plot or develop a theme and because of the emotional response and connection to the characters that its use inevitably elicits from readers.

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