

Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*

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Research Question:

Why do Myshkin's contemporaries perceive him as an idiot in the novel *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky?

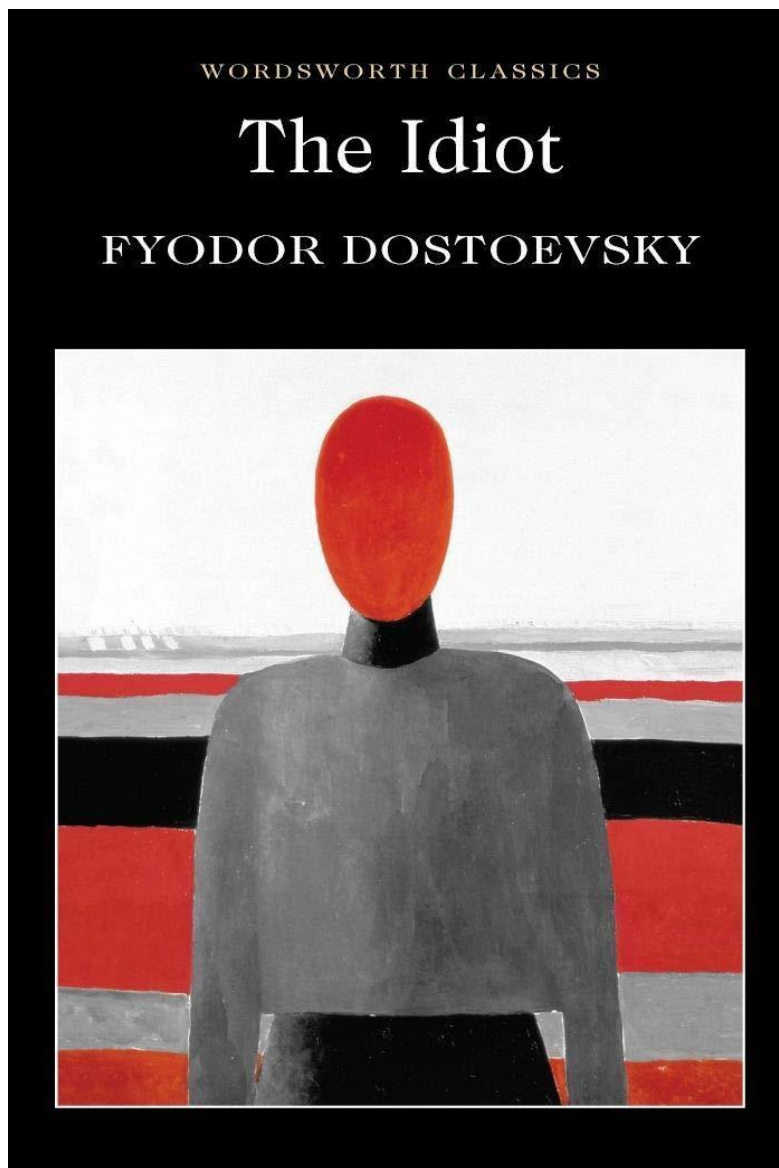


Figure 1 Cover of "The Idiot" by Fyodor Dostoevsky (Mathias 2010)

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Introduction

In this analytical essay, I will be investigating why Prince Myshkin's contemporaries perceive him as an idiot in the novel *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky¹, written in 1869. With the story being set in late 19th century Russia amongst the upper class, I will explore what expectations were present in such an environment. I will discuss the moral implications of Myshkin's character compared to others and the connotation of religion within this. Finally, I will explore the ending of the book and if Myshkin were at fault for the story ending the way it did.

Because of the popularity of Dostoevsky, there are a plethora of possible sources to pick from when writing my essay. I chose to base my writings on the more well-known and established critics of Dostoevsky's work rather than more modern and obscure ones.

I selected (Woodworth 2007) for a view on the 19. century Russian society. When I wrote the biography on Fyodor Dostoevsky, I chose to utilize two sources. Frank Joseph (Frank 1979) (1918-2013), which was a leading American expert on the life and work of Dostoevsky², and the Encyclopedia Britannica (Carr 2014).

For the analysis, I used (Bakhtin 1984), (Hesse 1919), and once again (Frank 1979). Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, and the first person to describe polyphony³, a style of writing associated with Dostoevsky's works. Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) was a German-born Swiss Nobel Prize-winning poet and author. Hesse's work, "In Sight of Chaos," on Dostoevsky, whom he considered his closest fellow-traveler into the abyss of the human soul, features his elaborate writings on "The Brothers Karamazov" and "The Idiot."

¹ See Appendix A – Biography of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

² Frank's five-volume biography of Dostoevsky is frequently cited among the major literary biographies of the 20th century.

³ The concept of polyphony (multiple voices) is central to Bakhtin's analysis. He reads Dostoevsky's work as containing many different voices, unmerged into a single perspective, and not subordinated to the voice of the author. Each of these voices has its own perspective, its own validity, and its own narrative weight within the novel.

Myshkin's Character

Myshkin's character is repeatedly described as naïve and gullible; however, in reality, his character is difficult to analyze any further because it lacks typical character traits and is utilized, not unlike a symbolic character⁴, as a piece to convey a message throughout the novel. In addition, Myshkin lacks a real backstory other than a few flashbacks and that he was in Switzerland at a sanatorium. There is no accurate indication for why Myshkin acts the way he does, only that he feels it is the right thing to do. While the characters around him develop, show emotion, and express desires, good or bad, Myshkin barely changes. Dostoevsky uses Myshkin as a tool to comment on the world in which he inhabits.

"The hero interests Dostoevsky not as some manifestation of reality that possesses fixed and specific socially typical or individually characteristic traits, nor as a specific profile assembled out of unambiguous and objective features which, taken together, answer the question "Who is he?" No, the hero interests Dostoevsky as a particular point of view of the world and oneself, as the position enabling a person to interpret and evaluate his own self and his surrounding reality." (Bakhtin, 47)

To highlight and point out the falsehood and injustice of the upper echelons of Russian society, Dostoevsky created Myshkin. Throughout his life, Dostoevsky was a supporter of governmental westernization in Russia (Frank 1979), and the character of Myshkin serves as a counterpoint to the established regime. Thereby, he reinforced the many negative facets concerning the system of power present at the time. Consequently, Dostoevsky exhibits the upper class as a contrast to Myshkin's qualities of goodness, honesty, and openness.

Myshkin in Aristocratic Russia

Though in steady decline, the Russian aristocracy still held potent positions in matters, socially, politically, and economically in the late 19th century. Unlike in most western cultures at the time, the upper echelon of society was not something solely hereditary. It was possible for a not-nobleman to climb the ranks of society, to one day retire as a nobleman. Likewise, it was possible for a person born into a noble family to lose their status entirely. Therefore, the upkeep of one's image became a necessity for the upper class in Russia. Correspondingly, it became ordinary to tarnish the reputations of your adversaries⁵. (Woodworth 2007)

The husband of Prince Myshkin's relatives, the Epachins, rose to a position of power through means not associated with family or hereditary claims, and he is still seen as an important member of the upper class.

"In certain positions he knew to make himself indispensable; for instance, in his own department of the government. Yet it was known that Ivan Fyodorovitch Epachin was a man of no education and the son of a simple soldier." (The Idiot, 13)

Myshkin enters this society with a complete disregard for the upkeep of his image. He speaks out of turn; he is outwardly compassionate, and he does not try to present himself in a manner, which protects his social status. Therefore, the people around him are quick to label him an idiot. The first time this is introduced is in the first chapter when Myshkin and Rogozhin meet for the first time. Rogozhin, being a bully, pokes fun at Prince Myshkin for being poor, amongst other things, but the prince gleefully laughs with him at his own disbenefit.

⁴ A symbolic character represents a concept or theme larger than themselves.

⁵ To this day, personal image, and the protection thereof, is still a substantial part of Russian culture.

"Your bundle has some value, anyways,' the petty official went on, when they had laughed to their heart's content (strange to say, the owner of the bundle began to laugh too, looking at them, and that increased their mirth)" (The Idiot, 5)

Myshkin continuously refrains from taking notice and action against the people who berate him, to the point where they believe him to be naïve, gullible, or simply stupid.

"Ach, you're a simpleton, a simpleton! Everyone deceives you like a ... like a ... And aren't you ashamed to trust him? Surely you must see that he's cheating you all round?' 'I know very well he does deceive me sometimes,' Myshkin brought out in a reluctantly low voice, 'and he knows that I know it ...' and he broke off" (The Idiot, 289)

Myshkin knowingly lets people mislead him and is ashamed by it but makes no attempts to rectify this pattern of beguilement, further suggesting his innocence.

Passion and Compassion

Myshkin purposefully takes the blame and constantly turns the other cheek. In one of the story's most heated moments, Myshkin makes the sacrifice to stand between three arguing sides and takes the blame singlehandedly.

"It ends with Myshkin, despite the small mistakes he makes during the excitement, behaving exactly according to his kind, gentle, childlike nature, accepting smilingly the unbearable, answering selflessly the most shameless speeches, willing to assume every fault and to search for every fault in himself – and his complete failure in this with the result that he is despised, not by one side or the other, not by the young against the old or the reverse, but by both, by both! All turn against him, he has stepped on everyone's toes; for an instant the most extreme social opposites in age and point of view are completely wiped out, all are united and at one in turning their backs with indignation and rage on the single one among them who is pure!" (Hesse 1919)

Such a sacrifice is a product of ultimate compassion. Throughout the novel, Myshkin is, quite literally, controlled by his unparalleled compassion for others, while most around him act out of passion. This contrast of passion vs. compassion is a prominent theme in the book and is one of the central ideas Dostoevsky strives to convey; how sympathy and kindness are seen as a weakness.

For example, in chapter 16, when the characters first learned of Myshkin's inherited fortune, and he for the first time proposed to Nastashya Fillipovna, Rogozhin interjected and began to shout. While everyone in the room was acting off impulses and were busy making backhanded comments and trying not to laugh, Myshkin took a moment to reconsider, stating that Rogozhin was just drunk and in love. The Prince clearly shows a level of compassion not present within the rest of the characters. (The Idiot, 152)

The quote, *"Myshkin is different from others because as idiot and epileptic, and at the same time a very clever person, he has much closer and more direct relations with the unconscious than they do."* (Hesse 1919), also explains how and why Myshkin's character is so different to everyone else.

With Dostoevsky being a devoted Christian, he, in his quest to create the epitome of what a good person could be, shaped Myshkin's character to be almost Christ-like. A man void of any impurities or evil. Much like Jesus, Myshkin acts as a savior of the people, especially regarding his relationship with Nastashya Fillipovna.

"yes, for her[Nastashya Fillipovna] sake,' Myshkin answered softly, looking down mournfully and dreamily, not suspecting with what burning eyes Aglaia glared at him. 'For her sake, to find out ... I don't believe in her being happy with Rogozhin though ... in short. I don't know what I could do for her here, or how I could help her, but I came.'"
(The Idiot, 392)

In effect, Myshkin gives up his chance of love with another woman, Aglaia, to help and nurture Nastashya Fillipovna, who is in a spot of deep unhappiness. Once again, he makes the ultimate sacrifice for what he believes is right.

An Idiot?

As the book nears its ending, Myshkin's surroundings begin to fall apart, as the world around him cannot embrace the consequences of his approach to life, which is so full of compassion and forgiveness. As a result, he loses the love of his life, mind, and eventually himself and ends up back in the sanatorium in Switzerland. In the end, his complete compassion for his contemporaries ends up resulting in his doom.

So, was Myshkin the idiot all along? Though the story had a tragic resolution, perhaps, had Myshkin not been only good, he would have had a better rectification; maybe he was sabotaged by the flawed world around him to the point where he was doomed; or possibly, he was simply always destined to fail.

The theoretical question; was Myshkin an idiot, cannot be answered (or at least it has never been). Instead, Dostoevsky intended Myshkin's character to instill a hint of uncertainty into what he intended to be the readers of the novel. A breath of fresh air, blowing from the west, symbolizing another reality, where, perhaps, the Russian regime had already fallen, and how the idealization of this concept is idiotized by the masses.

Conclusion

I conclude that Myshkin is seen as an idiot by his contemporaries because of his innate innocence and kindness, which contradicts the extraordinarily competitive social setting in Russia at the time. His reluctance to put up a façade to protect his image baffles the people around him to the point that they believe him to be insane. Furthermore, his naivety and trueness are seen as weaknesses because it makes him easier to deceive.

Whenever Myshkin acts, he does it out of compassion for the people around him, in opposition to most other characters in the story, who act out of passion, thereby solidifying his status as an easy target for ridicule.

This, along with him acting as a savior for Nastashya Fillipovna, makes him a pinnacle of what a Christian man should strive to be in Dostoevsky's eyes, hence why he is created this way.

Finally, the meaning behind Myshkin's character, which was to create the perfect person and put them into an imperfect world, only to design the story in a way where this person symbolizes the views Dostoevsky deems righteous and good, and the rest of the world symbolizes everything he deems unfit and unjust in his society.

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Appendix A – Biography of Fyodor Dostoevsky

Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in 1821 in Moscow city. His parents, Maria Nechayeva and Mikhail Dostoyevsky, worked at a large hospital for the common people, and the family had taken residence in a wing of the hospital. However, Fyodor's parents were overly strict about leaving the hospital grounds; hence his brother and he were forced to socialize with only the patients residing at the hospital. Growing up at a hospital, Fyodor experienced many things not suitable for a child. For example, a night when a drunk man had raped a young girl, and she had been taken to the hospital, Fyodor had been the person to fetch his father. This, and other experiences in his youth became the catalysts for some of his writings in books such as *"The Brothers Karamazov"* and *"Crime and Punishment"*. (Frank 1979)



Figure 2 Portrait of Fyodor Dostoevsky (Perov 1887)

"Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little tormented breast with her tiny fist in that vile place, in the dark and the cold, and weep her sanguine meek, unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her?" (The Brothers Karamazov 1880/1976).

In 1836, Dostoevsky and his brother were sent to the free institute, Nikolayev Military Engineering in St. Petersburg, to pursue a military career. Though his brother had been declined, Fyodor spent the next couple of years at the academy, during which both of his parents died. After he had graduated with a degree in engineering, he took a job as a lieutenant engineer. This allowed him more freedom, and he decided to live in an apartment with a couple of his close friends. Since his parents had died, Dostoevsky's mental health had been in a steady decline. He suffered from epileptic seizures, and his cohabitants later told he had frequent mood swings to the point of abusiveness (Frank 1979).

In 1845, Dostoevsky finished his first complete novel, *Poor Folk*, which readers positively received. Naively, Dostoevsky resigned from his position on the military in favor of a literary career, only to have his next flurry of novels negatively received by the public. Before a potential breakthrough, though, Fyodor was arrested for reading works from Belinsky, a criticist of the government. He was sentenced to execution by firing squad but was pardoned at the last second. Dostoevsky references what he thought to be his last moments of life in *The Idiot* (Frank 1979).

"There were crowds of people, there was noise and shouting; ten thousand faces, ten thousand eyes – and that had to be the worst of all, the thought," They are ten thousand, but not one of them is being executed, and I am to be executed" (The Idiot, 57).

After serving his 9-year sentence in the harsh climate of Siberia, Dostoevsky went on to become an immensely successful writer. He went on to get married twice and father four children. Before his eventual death in 1881, Fyodor Dostoevsky published over 30 works of literature, most famous of which being *"Crime and Punishment," "Notes from Underground," "Demons,"* and *"Brothers Karamazov."* (Carr 2014)