



**THE THEME OF THE POOR IN SERBIAN AND RUSSIAN
LITERATURE:**

**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE WORKS OF FYODOR
DOSTOEVSKY AND BORISAV STANKOVIĆ**

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Abstract

This work explores the theme of the poor in Serbian and Russian literature through a comparative approach to the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Borisav Stanković. The author considers the generic conventions and traditional, religious, ethical, and social elements of the literary picture of the world of the poor in Dostoevsky and mendicants in Stanković, and examines their intertextual relation.

Key words: *poor folk, beggars, Dostoevsky, Stanković, tradition, intertextuality*

The critical approach towards the social problems and understanding of the “little man” is traditional to classical Russian literature. The fate of the wretched, the destiny of the man whose soul is weighed heavily by unfortunate circumstance, leading him to poverty or casting him down even further to hit rock bottom, was of interest to Pushkin (*The Stationmaster*), Gogol (*The Overcoat*), and Dostoevsky (*Poor Folk, Humiliated and Insulted, Crime and Punishment*). Trapped in poverty, injured, humiliated, and forgotten, but endowed with sensitive souls and deep, dramatic emotions – these are Dostoevsky’s wretched, poor.

Through the themes of the humiliated and insulted unfortunate, which are developed in Dostoevsky’s works from the first, epistolary, novel *Poor Folk*, through *Humiliated and Insulted*, to *Crime and Punishment*, as the most significant, Dostoevsky penetrated ever deeper into the mystery of man’s being.¹ Dostoevsky’s first critic, Belinsky, recognized and praised the writer who in choosing a

¹ Dostoevsky described the moment of the origin of his first literary ideas, so his ideas for *Poor Folk* in the feuilleton “Petersburg Visions” (“Vreme”, 1861):



“little man” as the hero of *Poor Folk* through the character of Makar Devushkin showed all that was wonderful, noble, and brilliant to be found in him. In a later literary critique, the most important facet of Dostoevsky’s talent was deemed to be his power to penetrate the depth of the human psyche and motivation of human behavior. Dostoevsky’s protagonists, particularly the “people driven to the brink of life”, or “people with psychic deviations”, were cited as psychological revelations with a value on par with that of scientific discoveries (Babović 2007: 34). According to such interpretations, Dostoevsky had already in *Poor Folk* discovered and described several major psychological phenomena the primary cause of which was related to the protagonists’ misfortunes. These were: inferiority complexes that cause alienation, in other words, shame and fear of the world (particularly manifest in the behavior of Devushkin, but also in Varvara and Pokrovsky), a wish for compensation and a quest for the affirmation of the personality on a moral plane (prompting, for example, Varvara’s marriage to Bykov, which can be connected to the motif of the seduced girl returning to the seducer, Devushkin’s gratitude to the general for having taken his “unworthy hand in his, and [shaking] it ... as though I had been his equal”, and Gorshkov’s joy at the court ruling that saved his honor).²

And I began to look around and suddenly I saw some strange faces. They were all strange, queer, totally prosaic figures, in no way a Don Carlos or a Posa, nothing more than titular counselors, but at the same time they somehow seemed to be fantastic titular counselors. Someone *grimaced* in front of me, hiding behind that *fantastic crowd*, and *jerked at some strings and springs*, and these *puppets* moved, and he guffawed, how he guffawed! And then another story occurred to me, in some dark corners, some titular heart, honest and pure, moral and loyal to the authorities, and alongside it some little girl, mistreated and melancholy, and this whole story rent my heart deeply. And if one could gather together that whole crowd which I dreamed of then, it would make a wonderful *masquerade* (Bakhtin 1967: 231).

Cited in the text are coordinates of the world that will be developed later. These are: a carnivalesque vision of life, the typical requisites of which are laughter and tragedy, play (the clown, the tent) and disguise; 2. the artistic mood and social milieu of the story (the city surroundings, Petersburg with its harsh social contrasts and slums, Fontanka which “is a saddening spot for a walk”, as the protagonist of *Poor Folk* Makar Devushkin writes) 3. the literary type and psychological character of the protagonists (the clerk, the titular counselor Devushkin; the moral and devoted supervisor, with an honest and honorable heart; the seduced girl, “injured and insulted”); 4. the main thread, the type of plot (a love plot). On the fate of this work in a letter to his brother Mikhail, Dostoevsky writes: “I am just finishing a novel, about the length of *Eugénie Grandet*. It is most original.” (Miloslav Babić 2007: 25). But he revises the novel several times, so on 4 May 1845 he writes to his brother: “My novel, which I simply can’t break loose from, keeps me endlessly at work ... Now I’m ready with it once more, and this revision is really the last. I have given myself my word not to touch it again” (Babović 2007: 25). *Poor Folk* was published the following year, in 1846.

² Interpreting Dostoevsky’s thought and deep psychological analysis, Adler, among others, emphasized: “It is thus that Dostoevsky has endeared himself as a great teacher” in the most diverse of fields (Adler 1937: 385). At the end of his creative career, Dostoevsky accounted for this aspect of his writing in different terms: “With utter realism *to find the man in man* ... They call me a *psychologist*; *this is not true*. I am merely a realist *in the higher sense*, that is, I portray all the *depths of the human soul*” (Bakhtin 1967: 118). Dostoevsky took a restrained stance towards the psychology in the scientific and artistic literature and court practice of his time, being of the opinion that psychology reifies man’s soul, that it discounts its freedom, its unfinalizability and indeterminacy, which he, as a writer, portrayed.



Although the theme of the “little man” in Russian literature is not new³, in Dostoevsky’s method of creating the character of the poor clerk Devushkin in *Poor Folk* he pursued a path that diverged from many influences, especially that of Gogol’s *The Overcoat*, which is why, together with the aphorism, “We all came out of Gogol’s *Overcoat*”, Dostoevsky’s polemic with the type of hero in Gogol’s work is emphasized in critical literature (Babović 2007: 29). But only Bakhtin, writing of the problem of Dostoevsky’s poetics, emphasized the greatest characteristic of this writer: the especial singularity of the treatment of the hero. Because the protagonist interests Dostoevsky not as a figure that possesses specific social-typological and individual-characterological traits but as a distinctive point of view on the world and on the reflexive self, “as the position enabling a person to interpret and evaluate his own self and his surrounding reality” (Bakhtin 1967: 102). As it is of foremost importance to Dostoevsky to discover what the world represents to his hero and what his hero represents to himself, this specificity in the treatment of the hero requires special methods of artistic characterization in which the elements out of which the character is composed categorically differ from the commonplace. Bakhtin asserts that already in the first “Gogolian period” of his creative work, Dostoevsky was not portraying a poor clerk through the character of Devushkin but his self-consciousness “as a reality of the second order” (Bakhtin 1967: 104). So that which was presented in Gogol’s field of vision as an aggregate of objective features shaping the social-characterological profile of the hero became in Dostoevsky the subject of the hero’s painful self-awareness. What is more, the author forces the hero to regard his own poor appearance in a mirror: on his way to the general, Devushkin sees himself in the mirror and becomes so confused that his teeth chatter and knees knock together, so ashamed is he, as if he were to be driven out of his mind by what he sees there! So in the mirror the hero himself sees that which Gogol in *The Overcoat* described as Akaky Akakievich’s appearance, which the latter did not see and was not aware of. As the artistic visualization does not occur before the hero’s reality but before the fiction of his awareness of that reality, all the fixed features of the hero, remaining the same in terms of content, obtain a new artistic significance. Thus the Gogolian hero becomes Dostoevsky’s hero.⁴ The theme of this work is undoubtedly the fact that as a writer Dostoevsky already in his first work suggested a radically new stance towards the hero, the “little man”, the humiliated clerk, and in that sense also towards the existing model of the world, in other words, towards the genre of wretched/poor folk and certain ideas

³ Viktor Vinogradov asserts that the fate of the petty clerk was the most common theme in Russian literature in the forties (Vinogradov 1929).

⁴ Bakhtin considers that, “Dostoevsky carried out, as it were, a small-scale Copernican revolution”. In *Poor Folk* the author, as he asserts, “made his first attempt to show – although still incompletely and unclearly – that internally unfinalizable something in man, the thing that Gogol and the other authors of ‘tales about poor government clerks’ could not show from their monologic positions” (Bakhtin 1967: 115). According to this interpretation, Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel becomes a powerful gnoseological instrument through which the intangible side of the human being is penetrated, plunged into self-awareness.



of being to which he was drawn. Finally, the author used the voice of Devushkin in the novel so that he could engage in polemics with Gogol, which he parodied through Devushkin reading Gogol's *Overcoat* and taking the story of Akaky Akakievich to be a personal insult.

In modern Serbian literature the life of the poor, beggars and the sick was addressed largely by Stanković. According to research (Babović 1961: 14), the first mention of Dostoevsky among Serbs dates from 1847, when *Podunavka* in the "Smesica" column, along with several short news items on the Russian literature of the day, also printed the news that among the most recent examples of Russian fiction, considerable attention had been garnered by the novel *Poor Folk* by Dostoevsky. This was a year after *Poor Folk* had been published as a contribution to the *St. Petersburg Collection*, and significantly predated 1888 when the novel was published in Serbian in Pančevo. In literature it remains documented that Stanković read Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* and *The House of the Dead*. Apart from an interest in the unusual, bizarre fates of people at the margins of life, legitimate subject matter for poets, who are drawn to that which is poor, miserable, aggrieved and homeless, Stanković showed an interest in exactly these works by Dostoevsky because of the characters of the protagonists and the humanity they exhibited. It is also known that these works left a unique impression on him.⁵

Stanković depicted the world of the poor and aggrieved in the narrative cycle of short stories on related themes and genres under the title *Božji ljudi (God's People)*. Assembled around mendicant themes ("božjačke teme"), which as the integrative center of the cycle are emphasized in its title, are stories of God's people, beggars and fools for Christ, who live in Vranje before the liberation from the Turks, in the time marked by the syntagm "beginning of freedom" and "before the war". The people of Vranje feel awe before these people, who are believed to be holy.

God's People was self-published in 1902, and the second revised edition of this book appeared in 1913. From the lyrical world of youth, enthusiasm and exuberance (*Iz starog jevandjelja, Stari dani: From an Old Gospel, The Old Days*) Stanković turned towards the unattractive world of Vranje beggars, healers and mendicants. Along with these aggrieved characters, some of whom are crazy from birth, the artistic world of *God's People* is penetrated by illness, madness and death.

Stanković's mendicants conform to the character type of eccentrics and beggars. Their world is devoid of many of the contents of life, among which the lack of a house and family hearth is

⁵ In the book *Deset pisaca – deset razgovora (Ten Writers – Ten Conversations)* (Belgrade 1931) by Branimir Ćosić, Stanković's remarks as to what he read and which books he liked are recorded:

My principal reading material comprised the work of Russian writers of the forties and fifties, Poles, and of the French Daudet and Maupassant. I especially liked Turgenev. Reading Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* left upon me a most strong impression. It has also remained one of my favorite books. Of other works by Dostoevsky I also like *The House of the Dead*. What types, what characters, what humanity in those books (emphasis Lj. B.).



particularly emphasized. Rather than in the warmth and security of a home, they usually reside in cavities in the earth and musty huts, some of them in graves. Their homelessness is made manifest in the form of the biological, social and psychological motifs of cold, hunger, reclusion, possessive urges, a desire for dominancy and illness. For example, the mendicant often feels an instinctive need to protect his body from cold, so wraps and excessively bundles himself in clothes, rags and miscellaneous tatters. This mania, which stems from the physiological feeling of cold, is triggered by the social conditions of their beggarly and impoverished life, so is psychologically related to the deprivation of a pleasant and secure life, of which the initial trigger of cold approximates the dominant trigger of the existential imperilment of the mendicant. For some, like those in the story “Taja”, physical needs are portrayed as insatiable, as they are accompanied by boundless and outlandish forms of gratification: the portrayal of Taja is particularly vivid because he is bundled in several sets of clothes and that which he cannot wear he hides in the corners of the hut or buries in the ground. When the mendicants are in mobs, like in the story “Zadušnica” (“All Souls’ Day”), their numbers make of their appearance a monolith. Emphasized in the description are details of things – large saddlebags, sacks and jugs for drinks – as the materialized shape of their lives, reduced to elementary, physiological needs.

Stanković himself had a special regard for *God’s People*. But although they occupy a special place in the author’s creative opus, literary critics wrote of them less frequently than of Stanković’s other works. The reception of *God’s People* is unusual not only because of the fact that the motif of beggars was a tradition in European literature long before the author⁶ but also because the motif of beggars can be found in some of Stanković’s other works.⁷

⁶ See: Stojnić 1982: M. Stojnić, “Jurodivi F. M. Dostoevsky i Kočićeve bene” (“F. M. Dostoevsky’s Fools for Christ and [P.] Kočić’s lunacy”), in *Zbornik za slavstiku*, vol. 23, Belgrade, 75-82, and Ellermeyer-Životić 2000: O. Ellermeyer-Životić, “Pandemonijski karneval jurodiva ili Stankovićeve Božji ljudi kao ciklus” (“The Pandemonic Carnival of Fools for Christ or Stanković’s *God’s People* as a cycle”), in: *Zbornik MSC*, vol. 29/2, Belgrade, 223-235.

⁷ In that respect, of particular interest are the stories “Prva suza” (“First Tears”) and “Stanoja”, which suggest that Stanković even before *God’s People* had been interested in the fate of mendicants, the poor, beggars. On the other hand, in a significant number of Stanković’s stories, in the stories of God’s people from the eponymous collection and from the collection *Iz mog kraja* (*From my province*) (1928) and *Moj znanci* (*My Acquaintances*) (1928), Stanković wrote of the disease and passions of thwarted and ruined people. Instead of love and the poetic flight of the soul towards the past and beauty, in stories like “Naza”, “Jovča”, “Baba Stana” (“Grandma Stana”), “Rista bojadžija” (“Rista the Dyer”), “Stevan Čuklja”, “Stara Vasilje” (“Old Vasilje”), and those about mendicants, he depicted the bizarre fates of the protagonists, noting the ambivalent impulses and dark rifts in their nature, as such, clearly shifting artistic motivation from psychological, social and ethical planes and linking it to the biological and pathological causes of familial, psychic and bodily deterioration. By relating disorders in the protagonists and their fates to earlier or later tragic and traumatic experiences, marked by repression in the domains of romantic, sexual and social relations and by pathological or psychological factors, Stanković significantly broadened the thematic framework of his prose.



Doubtless, mendicants as a culturological phenomenon are contextually linked to social criticism, just as they are typologically related to the tradition of fools for Christ in Russian literature, particularly Dostoevsky's. The author himself explained his preoccupation with the world of mendicants in terms suggesting that a broader connection may be made between the motif of mendicants and the aforementioned tradition.⁸ But the inspiration of the tradition, its contents and influence on *God's People* has yet to be elaborated in further detail in academic literature. When it comes to Stanković's relationship to Dostoevsky, all that can be discussed is his adoption of the latter's basic conception of the poor, because beyond that *God's People* is linked to the great influence folklore had on Stanković, according to which the mendicant, i.e. beggar, represents a mythical ancestor.

In the narrative cycle *God's People*, Stanković as a depicter of Vranje elaborated on its religious environment. In particular he focused on mendicants, on those people believed to be holy, for whom the Vranje people felt awe. Depicting the relationship between the patriarchal milieu and beggars, the author thematized the archaic view of the collective world in which the ancestor cult is traditionally conserved and fostered. In it, mendicants were held as mythical ancestors.⁹

Through the motif of mendicants in his work the author introduced elements of the collective memory. Contact with tradition enabled him to reconstruct the glossary of folk culture, in which beliefs and collective manifestations of naïve consciousness were expressed. The subject matter of

⁸ In a letter to Milan Savić, the editor of "Letopis Matice srpske", Stanković declared:

I have a collection, so-called *God's People*. In it I have assembled and presented a particular people, the generation that was in Vranje before the liberation. All of them lived on alms. Because it was believed that: whatever is given to them, whatever they eat for the repose of souls, is like giving to the very dead and as if they were the dead eating it. Among them were some considered saints, God's people. And when they would die, they would, by the most prominent (old women), be bathed, buried...

Altogether like Russian fools for Christ...

Except to a greater, stronger degree (Stanković 1979: 340-341).

⁹ Veselin Čajkanović interprets mendicants through primitive man's belief – which remains preserved in the artwork of modern nations – that the divinity, disguised as an inconspicuous person, traveler or beggar, travels the world, enters people's homes, tests human virtue, rewards or punishes. Considering the significance that the ancestor cult has in the religion of the Slavs, Čajkanović is not surprised that ancestors were considered first-rate gods and that beggars, who were supposed to be divinities in disguise, were regarded as "incarnated ancestors". He considers that the Serbian word "poor" ("ubog") or "mendicant" ("božjak") for "beggar" best demonstrates the belief that the beggar is either an exponent of divinity ("bog", "božanstvenost") or divinity itself. Because of this, according to the people's understanding, something absolutely must be apportioned to the beggar. Special attention was paid to this especially at the services commemorating deceased ancestors on the patron saint's day, Christmas, All Souls' Day. Because it was once supposed that if a beggar were to appear, this was in fact a visit from the very divinity (theophany), Čajkanović concluded that the people's conduct in their dealings with them had a religious and not an ethical character (Čajkanović 1973: 128-153).



God's People was greatly influenced by tradition, in which the function of the mendicants in the ancestor cult determined the relation of the social environment towards them.¹⁰

The mendicant world has a special place in the life of Vranje. The role of the mendicant as the embodiment of ancestors, inherent to a social environment that respects the cult of the dead, is seen in many of the depictions of the ritual acts that involve them particularly around All Saints' Day (viz. the giving of food, the giving of alms for the soul of the deceased). The mentally disordered and homeless are given the material goods that those who "the earth seized from the sun" left behind or that people have a surplus of. The insane and harbingers of ill omen are kept quiet in the effort to please them. Women ritually prepare the body of the beggar, while men bring it to church and bury it... As the appearance of a beggar was once seen to be a visit from the divinity, the relation of the social environment to mendicants can overwhelmingly be explained by religious and not social or ethical motivation. But piety and pity towards beggars had to have been the result of the moral development of the spirit of the patriarchal collective because it cannot be ascertained when people's acts towards the mendicants were driven by superstition, or when what inspired them was the Christian codex, according to which good is rewarded and evil is expiated and punished. A folk saying advises: "Do not summon evil because it can come of its own accord". By way of proverb the people apprise: "Do good and have no remorse; do bad and you had better have hope". Also imprinted in the collective behavior is the gravity of the moral and emotional belief that it is propitious to do good unto neighbors. When bad fortune strikes, the mendicant is a reminder that the patriarchal world that everyone is fated to hardship and suffering in life.¹¹ On the other hand, the modern analytical, psychological perspectives and methods that Stanković developed through the mendicant subject make it possible to read *God's People* as literary prose that presents an intersection of different layers of man's being (biological, social, psychological), of life and human soulfulness. These aspects of the

¹⁰ The enormous significance of the ancestor cult is a chief characteristic of the ancient Serbian religion. All of the annual holidays are grouped around this cult, and by far the largest number of offerings was dedicated to ancestors. On the basis of extensive research into the ancient Serbian religion, Čajkanović concluded how it could be said without exaggeration "that the entire Serbian religion comes down to an ancestor cult". According to his interpretation, particularly connected to this religion are: panspermia, a combination of offerings of all natural produce offered at the same time and at the same cult location; ancestral epiphanies; fasting; the use of walnuts in the wedding ritual – "wedding walnuts" and watching over the dead – "vigils for the deceased" (Čajkanović 1973: 258-306). Elements of the ancestor cult in *God's People* can be found in the themes of the mendicants, All Souls' Day and vigils for the deceased. Some other motifs associated with imagery of the pagan imagination may also serve in support of the interpretation of the influence of tradition on *God's People* such as: graveyards, the dead of night, the moon/moonlight.

¹¹ Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz asserts that religion is never only metaphysical. For all peoples, religious symbols, forms, and the medium of worship are clothed in an aura of profound moral seriousness. In this context, everywhere the holy not only encourages devotion but requires it: "it not only induces intellectual assent, it enforces emotional commitment" (Geertz 1998: 175).



work make Stanković's *God's People* comparable with Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk*. They are the subject of the analysis that follows.

It should be emphasized that some of the similarities between poor and God's people stem from the typological similarities of the subject matter – poverty, maniacal subject matter, passions that border on insanity, illness, on the one hand, as well as from the humanistic stand towards understanding and sympathy for the people presented, on the other.

The poor person, beggar or luckless, clerk, betrayed man, who is connected to life by misfortune, feels pain and suffers because he is overcome by adversity, urges, mania or illness. Devushkin writes to Varvara:

I myself live in the kitchen – or, rather, in a small room which forms part of the kitchen. The latter is a very large, bright, clean, cheerful apartment with three windows in it, and a partition-wall which, running outwards from the front wall, makes a sort of little den, a sort of extra room, for myself. Everything in this den is comfortable and convenient, and I have, as I say, a window to myself ... True, better rooms *may* exist in the world than this – much better rooms; yet *comfort* is the chief thing. In fact I have made all my arrangements for comfort's sake alone; so do not for a moment imagine that I had any other end in view (Dostoevsky 1977: 426).

Almost every word of Devushkin's letter is attentive to the feelings of the interlocutor to whom it is directed. Devushkin's relationship with the girl is complicated due to the fact that he, like the girl, is poor, that he loves her, but because of their age difference and her delicate situation he expresses concern and pronounced devotion. That is why in the letter he is afraid lest she think he is complaining and tries not to sadden his correspondent by his account of life in his kitchen. But this attitude is not only characteristic of his relationship with Varvara. It is at the core of the hero's perspective of the world, a part of his character that worries only so that others might torment him, admonish him with threats and unpleasant looks and whose pride and social self-consciousness does not tolerate the pity of others. That is why when Devushkin, as it is stressed, reads Gogol's *Overcoat*, he understands the work to be a pasquinade at his expense, an insult directed at all clerks. His shrinking from and fear of the world is motivated by his social status (the stench of poverty that oppresses him) and biological and psychological reasons (the experience of ageing, love for the considerably younger Varvara). Describing the house in which he lives, he presents a bleak picture of squalid districts and the details of his life:

In the first place, on entering this house, one passes into a very bare hall, and thence along a passage to a mean staircase. The reception-room, however, is bright,



clean, and spacious, and is lined with redwood and metal-work. But the scullery you would not care to see; it is greasy, dirty, and odoriferous, while the stairs are in rags, and the walls so covered with filth that the hand sticks fast wherever it touches them. Also, on each landing there is a medley of boxes, chairs, and dilapidated wardrobes; while the windows have had most of their panes shattered, and everywhere stand washtubs filled with dirt, litter, eggshells, and fish-bladders. The smell is abominable. In short, the house is not a nice one (Dostoevsky 1977: 434).

Devushkin's situation is complicated by the fact that he is also bothered by the impoverished situation of the other lodgers, particularly his neighbor Gorshkov, as well as the poor on the city streets. Fearful of people, wishing to hide his own poverty from others' eyes, Devushkin compassionately notes that the Gorshkov family also lives poorly, solitarily and quietly, like people "set apart" by themselves. He notices details about Gorshkov (he is grey-headed and small), but also that Gorshkov's clothes are worse than his own. Apart from the fact that his neighbor is frail and that his hands, head and knees quiver with some disease, Devushkin also notes that he is fearful: he is frightened of everyone, "and distrusts everybody that he always walks alone" (Dostoevsky 1977: 436). It is interesting that plainly projected in the words about Gorshkov is Devushkin's very own situation. In a letter to Varvara, expounding the lamentable penury he lives in and the landlady's and others' mockery, he writes of himself similarly: he must hide from everyone and when he goes to the office he sidles in so that no one will notice him. Comparing himself to his neighbor, he reasons: "Reserved though I myself am, he is even worse" (Dostoevsky 1977: 436). Compassion for the suffering, with whom he shares life experience, brings Devushkin closer to Gorshkov but also to the hero of Pushkin's story *The Stationmaster*, Samson Vyrin.

In the comparative, gradational relation between Devushkin and Gorshkov, the elder Pokrovsky can also be included. Pokrovsky is "the strangest" of men, a little, grey-headed and short old man who is poorly dressed and awkward. "At first glance it might have been thought that he was perpetually ashamed of something – that he had on his conscience something which always made him ... shrink into himself" (Dostoevsky 1977: 448). He is distinguished by a mysterious marriage and fatherhood, is fearful and often drunk. Humiliated and rejected, he is in awe of and slavishly deferential to his son, a poor student, although the latter does not respect him.

The story of the father and son is resolved in death and madness. Moments that are filled with symbolism are tragically intoned. Above all because the dying wish of the young Pokrovsky to see the daylight and the sun, the symbolic light of God, before he leaves this world, is not realized on the overcast day, which figuratively is as dark and difficult as the dying man's life that was extinguished. On the other hand, the unhappy old man spent three days, as if crazy and out of his wits, by his son's



deathbed. Many details evoke his demented state that borders on craziness: the pain and fear caused by his son's death drive him to run after the dray carrying the coffin and to cry loudly, while his head gets wet and sleet keeps smarting and lashing his face. It is as if the passers-by behold this inwardly, so, feeling the full depth of his pain, they remove their hats and cross themselves before the unsettling sight.

Conversely, in Stanković, the protagonists were driven crazy or began to act strangely due to a huge burden they could not lift from their shoulders. Biljarica died with the wish to find the mystical raskovnik,¹² and Bekče was consumed with wandering after the sinister moonlight. At the furthest extreme of that fate, Menko and Vejka became flustered and lost their minds in the face of Turkish violence, and Marko went mad because he found buried treasure in the ground.

The world of the afflicted is measured in arshins of suffering and agony but, even in pain and illness, its humaneness is discovered, showing that the unfortunate remain people even in their fall. Humanism, which has at its core love and compassion for the wretched, understanding for their psychic agitation and defeats, comes to the fore in many of the stories of God's people by Stanković ("Mitka", "Bekče", "Biljarica", "Ča'Mihailo"...) as well as in the novel about poor unfortunate people by Dostoevsky.

Stanković's complex motifs are particularly evident in the stories about "Mitka" and "Bekče". In the first story, they are related to a fatal illness (obsession with drink, alcoholism) that destroyed the volitional aspect of the protagonist's personality and caused a family tragedy. When he does not drink, Mitka is a personable, orderly, hardworking and, it could be said, considerate man. But that is seldom and does not last for long. When he gets drunk, his actions expose disordered, neurotic behavior: insatiable somatic cravings drive him to "fall to drink", so later they often find him asleep among the graves. Mitka's illness is most apparent in his physical bearing: "Except when he walks, he walks spasmodically, slinking along the walls, and blinking and sniffing in equal measure as if crying". A significant detail about the protagonist is also found at the end of the story:

Only when he had grown was he noticed by the boss himself. Because of nothing else but his strange handsomeness. Especially handsome were his eyes. Large, black but somehow also strangely soft, soft – even as soft as sadness (Stanković 1979: 291).

Here the disorder of alcoholism is linked to the protagonist's melancholic and sensitive soul, inclined to depression, which is revealed through the motif of sad eyes as an omen of fate.

¹² A Slavic mythical herb that has the magical property to unlock or uncover anything that is locked or closed – trans.



In another story by the title of “Bečke”, the protagonist is ascribed with the impulsive drive to stand out in the mendicant and peasant world and narcissistic behavior. The wish for affirmation and success is usually motivated as a natural need. But that which is usual is manifested in Bečke as eccentric and odd. Here too it is manifest during intoxication:

And so from one house to another, he gets drunk. But he does not go like others then, he does not retire amidst fences and barns to sleep, snore, roll around there that drunk in the dust, but belts out song, trespassing like some “ergen”¹³, he passes the houses of the wealthiest and prettiest girls and goes to the best taverns to sing and dance there. And that dancing of his – an intense shaking, stomping, striking of knees into the floor, ground – is so over the top that if another person were to do the same, they would not be able to rise from bed for a week, while he does not even break a sweat. So when dark night falls, not even then does he tire or quiet down. He goes from the towns then to the periphery, empty roads, into the fields, vineyards and there, alone, he sings, wanders... (Stanković 1979: 293-294).

Bekče’s restlessness is motivated by his passion for wandering. It is specifically related in the story to the appearance of moonlight. But the motif of moonlight in the story is not a poetic symbol of ecstasy, reverie, spiritual ascent. In Bečke’s confused and disturbed soul there is no psychological stability for enjoyment of the moonlight, because the obsession with it appears as a type of psychic illness. Because of the way in which it is explained, the mission to the moon induces anxiety and the thought that by wandering the mendicant will one night lose himself completely.

Night, particularly the dead of night, sets the atmosphere in the best story about God’s people. The attribution of folkloric symbols to the night also serves the function of suggesting death. Even Bekče’s passion for wandering in the story is related to the moon and the obsession with its appearance. The sinister power of the moon in the story is expressed through the portrayal of the protagonist as a sleepwalker when his obsession with demons is alluded to. The connection between the misfortune and portended death of the mendicant and the brightness of the sky has its parallel in the folk notions of a moon that “drinks man’s life” and the harmfulness of the moonlight. In the folk imagination, the moon waxes, wanes, disappears, devoured by monsters, or is itself a monster with a huge throat that drinks blood spilled on the earth, so it is thus ascribed a sinister power. The ruinous influence of the moon and the lunar catastrophe that it generates are represented as the cause of death

¹³ Turkish word for adolescent – trans.



of Stanković's mendicant. So in the story, like in wider literature and folklore, the moon is the epiphany of death.¹⁴

Stanković *God's People* and Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* put forward an intersection of life and human spirituality. They show the causes of affliction and suffering in human life. Hardship, pain and loss are not connected only to the motives of the conscious human being nor with the social conditions in which man lives but with people's imperfections and irrational drives in the impulsive, subconscious and pathological layers of personality. Both in Dostoevsky and in Stanković ease and happiness retreat before tribulation, pain, misfortune, defeat. But even among poor folk on the margins of life, there is a need for higher values: for love, order, beauty and the joys of life. They are inherent in all people. They live in the poor, the afflicted, and the suffering. They are reminders that in spiritual suffering and defeat in life there is good and light there where human dreams and striving are preserved.

Stanković's stories about humanism and humaneness, which he had found in Dostoevsky, are similar to stories about poor people. Whether his point of departure is in a critical stand towards the world or a humanistic and Christian engagement, the ethics of understanding the unfortunate as well as neighbors is connected through them to the fact that the drives of the protagonists, even craziness and eccentric urges, are the aggrieved and darkened faces of one more or less familiar but unfortunate human world.

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¹⁴ For more on this role of the moon, see: Gilbert Durand, *Antropološke structure imaginarnog: uvod u opću arhetipologiju (Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary: An Introduction to General Archetypology)*, Zagreb, 1991.



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