

# The Madonna, the Harlot, and the Modern Woman

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Beauty! I can't bear the thought that man of lofty mind and heart begins with the ideal of Madonna and ends with the ideal of Sodom. What's still more awful is that man with the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not renounce the ideal of the Madonna, and his heart may be on fire with the ideal, genuinely on fire, just as in his days of youth and innocence. Yes, man is broad, too broad. I'd have him narrower. The devil knows what to make of it! What to the mind is shameful is beauty and nothing else to the heart. Is there beauty in Sodom? Believe me, that for the immense mass of mankind, beauty is found in Sodom. Did you know that secret? The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man.

These words belong to Dmitri Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. We have been reading this book for the greater part of the semester in my Introduction to Ethics class. There is nothing quite like a novel by Dostoyevsky to quicken the level of discussion in an undergraduate class, or any class for that matter. If you have ever read Dostoyevsky, you will have a difficult time being captivated by other modern literature as the characters never reach the point of thinking beyond the level of a child. The latest novels I have read, *Plainsong*, *A Man in Full*, *Angela's Ashes*, and *The Shipping News*, read more like case studies than novels. The characters are never to blame for their faults, given that they are from "dysfunctional" families. The reader is subjected to pages of characters mistakenly trying to find themselves in a meaningless world where nobody ever rises beyond being a victim of circumstances. There is never a mention of God or a soul, which severely limits self-reflection and the pangs of conscience and renders the characters incapable of any judgment beyond the level of strong sentiment. Unlike Dmitri you will not find a character in these novels able to speak twelve sentences from the depths of his soul.

Which is not to say that in Dostoyevsky's novel there aren't characters from "dysfunctional families." His characters are from broken families. Dostoyevsky would never call his families "dysfunctional" because this word is a biological term, denoting a disordered or impaired functioning of a bodily system or organ, and the human being is beyond being an organ whose life is

determined by the larger system. To use a biological term denies free will, reducing the individual to being a product of his environment who simply reacts to circumstances. Such characters are not creatures worthy of creation; they even fail at being pathetic characters because they do not grow by their sufferings to overcome the victimization of environment. They lack, in the common expression, “blood and guts” and are so squeamish that such books read like newspapers, never to be read twice.

Dostoyevsky’s characters rise out of broken homes. They are fallen creatures who are or are not involved in their own transformation before God. Dmitri’s father, Fyodor, for example, has four children by two wives and the rape of Stinking Lisaveta, the village idiot. Fyodor is all a father should not be; he does not abandon his children but simply forgets them in the back yard. If it were not for his servant Grigory, his children would have starved to death. He is a lecherous buffoon who proudly tells his grown sons,

I never thought a woman ugly in my life—that’s my rule! You’ve milk in your veins, not blood. You’re not out of your shells yet. My rule has been that you can always find something interesting in every woman that you wouldn’t find in any other.

A few pages later he tells Alyosha that the “wenches” won’t come to him in his old age, so he is saving all his money for prostitutes,

For sin is sweet. All abuse it but all men live in it. The only difference is that others do it on the sly and I do it openly.

With this in mind, Dmitri’s words at the beginning of this essay are addressed to his nineteen-year-old brother Alyosha. Dmitri tells Alyosha he is battling with two contrary ideas of woman, the Madonna and the harlot, and the battlefield is in his heart. He is not the author of the image of the Madonna, nor of the harlot; these are not natural images of woman, though they appear in the world. The world, God’s creation, is the battleground where God and the devil are fighting, and Dmitri recognizes the battle rages within him in his desire for Beauty, set in the contrary images of the sacred Madonna and the sensual harlot.

Dmitri, an ex-army officer, is twenty-four years old and currently engaged to Katerina, his former commander’s daughter, but he is presently captivated by the vamp Grushenka. Grushenka flirted with Dmitri enough to fuel his lust to the pitch of a fever-heat and then turned a cold shoulder his way. Dmitri, at the beginning of the novel, is in the grips of a fury. To add fuel to the fire, Fyodor Karamazov is also pursuing Grushenka (“whose figure suggests the line of Venus de Milo”) and is willing to pay 3,000 rubles for her attention. Katerina, who knows of Dmitri’s passion for Grushenka, swears she will always remain faithful to Dmitri. Grushenka, meanwhile, is not interested in Dmitri, Fyodor, nor anyone in particular. Thus, we have Katerina’s faithful love for Dmitri who in turn desires, along with his father, Grushenka, who does not want either one of them.

Dmitri sees that no one is going to understand man unless he realizes that “for the immense mass of mankind, beauty is found in Sodom.”

Look around! Dmitri states the obvious. The young woman exercising on the stair-stepper next to me at the university gym this morning knows what interests Dmitri. She did not come right out and say it, but the title of the lead article on the magazine cover propped on her exercise machine said it for her, “Want the Perfect Body?” Can anyone say “no” to such an offer? I wanted to point to the article and say, “I do,” but, in these times, when words are easily misunderstood, she might think I was trying to work myself into that shape. I am years beyond wanting to have a perfect body in that sense. However, to look at perfect bodies, heavenly bodies, well that is another matter.

Anyway, the sirens on the cover of the magazine “strutting their stuff,” in their push-up-bras and short dresses, torment young girls and modern women with the image of the “perfect body.” I did not have the heart to tell the young woman that Cher was older than I; that she used to have a nose (a regular honker, way larger than her current cookie-cutter nose), that her breasts are silicone, and that one more face lift would probably draw her face so tight she would not be able to close her mouth or shut her eyes when she slept. In all of this, a woman must remember there is nothing complete in the perfect body Dmitri desires that will hold his attention any longer than a workout on a stair-stepper. In his own words,

Today it would be a lady; tomorrow a wench out of the streets. I entertained them both. I threw away money by the handful on ladies, too, for they’ll take it easily, that must be admitted, and be pleased and thankful for it. Ladies used to be fond of me; not all of them, but it happened, it happened. But I always liked the side paths, little dark back alleys behind the main road—in the dirt . . . I love vice. I love the dishonor of vice. I love cruelty.”

He loves vice; he loves to dishonor women. Dmitri’s dishonoring of woman is possible only because of his contrary ideas of woman. He cannot dishonor a woman without also being able to honor a woman. Without the Madonna, the image of the complete woman as a sacred being honored by God, there is not an image of the dishonorable woman, a way to defile the perfect body meant to house a child of God.

Imagine a young man in 2000 using the words beauty, riddles, soul, ideal, Madonna, Sodom, devil, God, and battlefield all in one paragraph, concluding that God and the devil were fighting for his heart. If a modern young man spoke this way, he would undoubtedly be committed to a variety of therapists for observation and diagnosed as suffering from a chemical imbalance, the product of a dysfunctional family, or of abusive, cult-oriented parents, or some equally traumatizing activity, like too many hours of playing video games resulting in the hallucinations of spirits fighting in his heart, of all places. In short: a victim.

Imagine a modern young man being tormented like Dmitri, battling

between the image of woman as Madonna and the image of woman as harlot. The only Madonna most young men and young women know of is the siren who wears her underwear in public for “shock effect.” The harlot’s perfect body bombards man at every turn, from his multi-channeled, pay-for-view television to thousands of pornographic web sites; from the racks of air-brushed babes on the magazine covers at convenience stores and supermarkets, to the packets of condoms in men’s rooms; from coquettes wrapped around tequila bottles in liquor stores and advertising manual shavers, to young beauty queens too pretty to be taken seriously in the television roles of doctor, detective, and lawyer.

The images of woman being sold to women at check-out counters range from *Cosmopolitans*, which advertises “Land that man, ace your job, and look your sexiest ever,” to *Glamour*’s recent discovery of a “new technique for satisfying your lover while not feeling guilty having an affair.” Tom Wolfe, in his previously mentioned novel, *A Man In Full*, characterizes the image of modern woman as a “boy with tits,” a fitting result of the current push for equality between the sexes; women now are treated as men. Equality means sacrificing womanhood to be recreated in the image of man.

Dmitri’s lust for “dark back alleys” is modern man’s desire for the procreative act without creation. Make women equal to men and the love between them will be no higher than man’s desire for man, a woman created in a man’s image, a narcissistic love. It is the desire for a sexual union which, though fertile by nature, denies the reproductive act. The end of the procreative act becomes the gratification of sexual desires freed from the responsibility of children. It is the image of woman as a sterile object, unproductive and clouded by the desire for self-gratification.

The back alleys Dmitri loves to frequent in the nineteenth century have become our super highways in the twenty-first century. What was once a toll-road has become a freeway littered with unwanted children.

Back to the stair-stepper and the next article in the women’s magazine, “Are You Sexually Normal?” Who would ever float such a question through a young woman’s mind? Would her parents or grandparents ever trouble her with such a concern? Dmitri at least has the sense to know that this question is a temptation meant to dishonor and defile woman. This question is older than the author who wrote the article. It is a question that existed in the darker side of Dmitri’s soul, floating through his mind and our minds as well. How is such a question to be answered? With a survey? A test? Once the norm is established, obviously the Madonna will be a deviant. And who wants to deviate from the norm?

In all of this, the question before the reader remains the same, “Who is winning the battle for my soul?”

And so it goes.   Ω