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## DOSTOEVSKY'S CONCEPT OF HOLY BODY IN THE STRUCTURE OF "THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV" (RELIGIOUS AND AESTHETIC ASPECTS)



## O CONCEITO DE CORPO SANTO DE DOSTOIEVSKI NA ESTRUTURA DE "OS IRMÃOS KARAMAZOV" (ASPECTOS RELIGIOSOS E ESTÉTICOS)

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### Abstract

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The problem of the aesthetic and philosophical significance of the body in Dostoevsky's creative writing is intimately connected with the structure of his formally intricate novels. The inner structure of Dostoevsky's novels illuminates the representation of the body in his opus as an innate part of Dostoevsky's poetics. The concept of the body includes an aesthetic as well as philosophical spectrum of problems, to which the interest in the topic from both literary critics and philosophers attests.

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## Resumo

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O problema do significado estético e filosófico do corpo na escrita criativa de Dostoiévski está intimamente ligado com a estrutura de seus romances formalmente intrincados. A estrutura interna dos romances de Dostoiévski ilumina a representação do corpo em sua obra como uma parte inata da poética de Dostoiévski. O conceito de corpo inclui uma estética bem como um espectro filosófico de problemas, como atesta o interesse de vários os críticos literários e filósofos pelo tema.

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## Entradas para indexação

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**KEYWORDS:** Holy Body. Dostoiévski. The Karamazov Brothers.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Corpo santo. *Dostoiévski. Os irmãos Karamazov*

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## Texto integral

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The problem of the aesthetic and philosophical significance of the body in Dostoevsky's creative writing is intimately connected with the structure of his formally intricate novels. The inner structure of Dostoevsky's novels illuminates the representation of the body in his opus as an innate part of Dostoevsky's poetics. The concept of the body includes an aesthetic as well as philosophical spectrum of problems, to which the interest in the topic from both literary critics and philosophers attests<sup>1</sup>.

F.M. Dostoevsky's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, is well known for its complex structure, which combines topical philosophical problems with the richness of the depiction of "living life" or "life alive" ("zhivaja zhizn").

The correlation between two semantic levels – that of philosophy and of real life – is evident in Dostoevsky's genre constructions, such as the theodicy (N.O. Lossky, 1939), the philosophical, religious, theological, Christian, Christological, and Paschal (G. Ukrainsky and others) novel. The two semantic levels are also

combined in the negative –"mystic and ascetic" - novel. The failure to distinguish the function of these two semantic levels has had negative consequences for the reception of Dostoevsky's works. It has led, amongst other things, to the libelous designation of his last novel as a "model" for a point of view on the world which Maxim Gorky chose to call "karamazovshchina" or "karamazovizm".

However, the concept of the body represented in *The Brothers Karamazov* reflects in a hidden form, the transposition of external events into a deep semantic structure which is revealed in specifically significant moments of the plot or in the hyper-semantic episodes of the destiny of the hero.

The concept of a holy body becomes the emblem of transfiguration of the novel as a whole, which is achieved through Dostoevsky's specific artistic form of "question" and "answer", in a hidden dialogue between a human being and his Absolute Other, God.

The problems of Creation, the relationship between Creator and His Creation, the sense of Evil and the reason why Evil does exist, both in the human soul and in earthly life, in spite of the Almighty, Omniscient and Merciful God, constitute the "heart" of the plot of Dostoevsky's last novel. They construct the topics of numerous dialogues between the main characters. The human body as a subject of philosophical investigation is a "silent" but meaningful subtext in all these discussions: it grounds the idea of transgression, the phenomenon of death and of the resurrection from the dead.

In fact, the concept of the "body" is "moveable" in Dostoevsky's creative writing<sup>2</sup>. Paraphrasing M.M. Bakhtin, it is possible to say that "the history of Dostoevsky's novel plot is the history of the human body" as a key to the meaning of life and death. The last novel represents real human bodies on a large scale. The image of the body is constitutive of the individuality of a hero. As part of Dostoevsky's philosophical anthropology, the images of the body represent different existential positions of the heroes and construct entire concepts of life. In building the "story" of the novel, these images of the body construct "adventures of the body" and are "productive" for a dynamic development of plot events.

The body as "flesh" - the "flesh of the lecher" in particular - constructs the events for the criminal plot lines of the first eight Books of The Brothers Karamazov. When the philosophical questioning focuses on the topic of freedom, the body of the hero-sinners paradoxically demonstrates a lack of freedom. This lack is not cognized by the hero-sinners, who realize their "wills" in the stream of destiny's "chain of changes".

The concept of the "holy body" is active in the inner form which shapes the "inner plot" in the architectonics of The Brothers Karamazov. The "holy body" is closely connected with the epigraph to the novel in which the Eucharistic meaning of the body is hidden but which as the metaphorical "kernel of wheat" which "produces much grain" in the development of the plot of The Brothers Karamazov.

The death of Zosima is intimately bound up with the destinies of the other heroes. It problematizes or tests the "measure of freedom" for every represented character. The polemical edge of the plot situation is heightened after the death of the holy Elder (from a common point of view). After death, Zosima's body is corruptible. The semantics of the situation is directed at Zosima's true holiness in the context of his earthly life and his death.

Dostoevsky's concept of the body helps solve a wide spectrum of epistemological questions posed in the last novel. A naive apologia for the body of a sinner ("lecherous insect"- "сладострастное насекомое") as having been "created" by God's Will is delivered by Dmitry, while Grushenka's variation on Dmitry's abject acceptance of sin as a fact of life is her synthesis of the "sinful and good"- "грешные и хорошие". The ultimate word on the relation of the body to sin is in Alyosha's theomancy, delivered in his "Wedding in Cana" dream, which represents a vision of transfiguration of corporeality into mystic eternal life.

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Dostoevsky's radical revaluation of a traditional system of religious concepts emerges due to the "adventures of the body" (a parallel to Gyula Kiraly's "adventures of consciousness") in The Brothers Karamazov. Two functions of the

"concept of the body" will illustrate this thesis: the destiny of a beautiful body in relation to possible sanctity and the body of a holy person – Zosima.

One may recall Dostoevsky's pronouncements about Beauty which have subsequently been adopted widely as Russian sayings. The first is Dostoevsky's idea of beauty and the beautiful body in his aesthetic works.

The most prominent of these aphorisms on Beauty and the beautiful body occurs in *The Idiot* in which it is attributed to the main character, Prince Myshkin: Beauty will save the world. This is the idea of future redemption of the world through the concept of beauty or aesthetics. This aphorism is connected with another famous pronouncement made by Dostoevsky in connection with the writing of his novel *The Idiot*. Dostoevsky stated that in this novel he wanted to represent the idea of a Christ-like figure as a "positively beautiful man" (from his prominent "symbol of faith" of 1854). It is well-known that for Dostoevsky the image of Christ was the highest degree of the embodiment of spiritual beauty and a model of ethical life which the writer looked up to.

The consequences of creating a "Christ-like" hero in *The Idiot* (1868-69) were uncertain for Dostoevsky.

From the first proposition on Beauty, Dostoevsky arrives at a second one in the same novel: Beauty is a riddle (красота - загадка).

A third proposition on Beauty occurs in Dostoevsky's last novel - *The Brothers Karamazov* – couched in the words of Dmitry, who proclaims:

Beauty is a frightful and terrible thing: Devil and God fight here and the space of the battlefield is the human heart.

A frightful and terrible thing – but why? Firstly, because of its impenetrable - irreducible - meaning; secondly, because of its own (beauty's) freedom which constitutes the restricted freedom of the body (my brother the donkey); and, thirdly, as a corporeal space which is subject to contamination (it can be possessed) by the Devil. The possession means a totally uncontrolled process of

losing one's will and the power of one's intellect with the resulting total submission (abjection) and loss of dignity (from a common atheistic point of view).

All these three aspects of beauty are intimately connected and come into interplay in Dostoevsky's anthropology.

(A) Beauty is a riddle. The enigmatic nature of beauty is well-known as Dostoevsky's "special idea". He penetrates into the nature of the phenomenon, connecting the sense of it with the idea of universality as forming the ground of the Universe and the initial idea of Creation. Thus Man is a semblance of the "Face of God", the most Perfect Being, who was created on the Sixth Day, who is a Creature of the Sixth Day, and as such, ought to be "the crown of Creation". Dostoevsky here follows voluntarily or involuntarily the Fathers of the Church of the 4th Century. A religious thinker, such as Saint Vassily the Great, in his book devoted to the Sixth Day of Creation (Shestodnev), names God the Creator an Arkhitekton – an Architect - for whom an aesthetic result is a sign of Eternal Truth and the real embodiment of the idea of the Universe. Aesthetics thus becomes a Criterion of Truthfulness. Hence, a beautiful body, according to Dostoevsky, loses its qualities as a mere "earthly phenomenon". Beauty becomes not "impersonal" but "transpersonal". By adding the prefix "trans", we define Beauty as a transcendental idea and transparent as the Icon of the Higher World: the higher senses are translucent in it.

Transpersonal – transparent – translucent– all of these are qualities and characteristics in contradiction with the human "bodily" attributes which can be characterized as silent (animal-like), solid, or earthly. They are already absent in that part of the body which is committed to earth as the human remains in the religious injunction of "dust to dust" - which refers to the body's loss of the quality of spirituality.

This transcendent body with its "trans-" permutations creates a semantically significant movement of the plot motifs. Due to the increased tension between the characters' "common life" (drinking, eating, conversations, flirtations – the level of

Smerdiakov) and the potential but impossible realization of the higher purpose of human existence, the plot has a life-like being.

A human being marked with the "seal" of beauty inevitably transforms into a kind of sufferer in Dostoevsky's world: "he" or (more often) "she" is not only a doer or a subject of his/ her own will, but is subjected to some unknown power. Their role in life is unclear to these characters themselves. We can find many examples of such beauty in Dostoevsky's novels; two instances are the beauty of Nastasya and Aglaya in *The Idiot*, and the charismatic appearance of Nicolay Stavrogin in *The Possessed*. But the realization of the meaning of Beauty is never the task of the characters – it is transpersonal and belongs to a spiritual power that could be guessed but very seldom by the heroes and, paradoxically, never by the narrator.

(B) Beauty is a frightful and terrible thing: Devil and God fight here and the battlefield is the human heart. Here Dostoevsky transforms the famous beginning of Goethe's *Faust* referring to the main idea of *The Book of Job* about the rivalry over the soul of the human being between God and the Devil. Dostoevsky transposes this conflict into a specifically human inner spiritual struggle, the specific inevitable choice that made Dostoevsky a "primer of existentialism" and affirmed the dignity of freedom in the human universe.

We can construct now a kind of semantic scale: *The Idiot* – enigmatic beauty, submissive body; *The Possessed* – charismatic beauty, submissive body, irrelevant to the semantic structure of the plot; and, finally, *The Brothers Karamazov* – seductive bodily beauty of Grushen'ka, tightly connected with such qualities as solid, heavy (typical "Russian beauty"), curvy ("infernal curve"), which is transformed into full freedom from the body's life at the end of the plot. Here Mitya and Grushen'ka step into a mutual future which transcends the earth-bound body of a man and a woman.

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(C) The body of a Holy Person. The semantics of the "corrupting corpse of Zosima" is connected with the future "transfiguration" of the body in the chapter "The Wedding in Cana" as well as the antinomical image of the lowest degree of aesthetical de-valuation of the body. We can find this antinomical image in the manuscripts of the novel *The Raw Youth* (Adolescent). There Dostoevsky wrote: "meat, flesh, horror" ("мясо, плоть, ужас"). What are the ontological circumstances (or conditions) of this semantic transformation of the body into this "solid flesh of meat" (to use a "Hamletian" expression)?

The answer is: when that "vertical link" with God the Creator is weak and the darkened and, complementarily, the horizontal links – between human beings – are intensified (the thought of Versilov in his dream about "Jesus Christ on the Baltic Sea").

But there is another side of the problem.

The most intensive links on this lower level in Dostoevsky's last novel belong to the "lechers", in particular Fyodor Pavlovich. For him there were no "ugly women", he could recognize some degree of attractiveness in every "old virgin" ("вьельфилька") or plain looking woman ("мовешка"). In this idea developed to the semantic end point or dead-end ("deaf end" - which is close to the absurd), it is possible to see Fyodor Pavlovich's evaluation of bodily attractiveness as the metaphoric embodiment of the higher quality of "all who breath" (vsiakoe dykhanie). This "breathing" (dykhaie) is in opposition to "breathless" nature: the hyper-semantic aspect of "the sixth day" is present here in a hidden form.

Thus, the level of bodily life represents the lowest way of "reachable" sanctity, and the lecher's behavior is justified, as is well known, in Mitya's confessions to Aliosha, in the Mephistophelian metaphor of human beings as insects. In Mitya's interpretation, the human being as insect is transformed into the idea of innocence and is almost "close" to the idea of the sacred fool.

The corrupting corpse of Zosima is a sign of humiliation in front of the inevitable "laws of nature". At the same time, it possesses the ability to transform



human souls through intensifying the process of self-reflection, thinking about a hidden connection between human life and the future destiny of the body after earthly life.

But body as a kind of metonymic metaphor of life is indirectly connected (or interrelated) with Dostoevsky's concept of the human being. This connection is made through numerous semantic links that create a sort of contradiction in relation to the common concepts of religious consciousness. As Pavel Florensky shows in his investigation of the semantic significance of human names (tender flesh of a name – нежная плоть имени – to use Florensky's expression), this kind of discrepancy between the semantics of the name and the human destiny is part of the Russian religious consciousness. It seems relevant to recall that this direct and strict dependence of the hero's destiny on his name exists in folklore and is its most characteristic feature. In the case of the body as a metaphor for the value of life, we can find in Dostoevsky's artistic space this paradoxical "non-difference" between high and low axiological levels or a fusion of the sacred and profane (in their traditional anthropological sense).

Man on the threshold of death always actualizes the problem of the body. Flesh is usually analyzed as coordinated with the moral scale of values: fallen flesh and flesh that will be justified and resurrected. Death ought to be a problem that makes possible concentration of people around mutual danger in order to solve the problem of immortality or to create a suitable ritual to socialize the phenomenon of dying. But instead of this, the problem of the decaying of "my own" body arises and the problem of death becomes embodied in two different ways. The episode with the corrupting corpse of Zosima misleads the monks and Alyosha, but the reader (here in the position of metaphysical confusion) experiences the sense of the episode as a puzzle and hence problematizes it on the hyper-semantic level. The question of the dignity of a human being arises: here a kind of abjection (humiliation) of the body and thus of the transcendent personality of the Elder takes place, which calls into question, amongst the populace of Skotoprigonevsk, the "real" sanctity of the Elder.

But the problem is more complicated.

The corrupting corpse of Zosima is closely connected with the corrupting corpse of Christ – which is referenced in the copy of Hans Holbein's picture of "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb" in the plot of *The Idiot*. Dostoevsky reinforces the sense of confusion: "A man could even lose his faith thanks to this painting" – these are the words of the Christ-like hero, Prince Myshkin.

The simple-hearted monks of the local monastery in *The Brothers Karamazov* lose their confidence because there is another (or, in some sense, similar) reason: a childish need for miracles. This desire for miracles is so powerful that being deprived of a miraculous event may kill them .

The semantic links between the corpse of Zosima and the corpse of Christ of the Gospel reinforces the problem of a corrupting body through the interrelation with the suffering body, and, especially, in this case, the suffering body of Christ. The profanation of Zosima by the monks is like the profanation of Jesus Christ by the Roman soldiers (Mathew. 27; 27-31):

27."Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the palace and gathered the whole troop of soldiers around Him. 28. They took off His clothes and put a scarlet robe on him.29. They twisted some thorns into a crown, placed it on His head, and put a stick in His right hand. Then they knelt before Him and made fun of Him by saying: "Hail, King of the Jews. 30. After having spat on Him, they took the stick and began to beat Him on the head. 31. After they had made fun of him, they took off the robe and put His own clothes on Him. Then they took Him away to crucify Him".

The monks make fun of Zosima, which represents a kind of crucifixion for Alyosha: he experiences spiritual torment at the death and decay of the body of his Elder. Dostoevsky uses the signs of a simple world, plain "material details", which are related to the phenomenon of corporeality, to demonstrate Alyosha's disappointed expectation of a miracle: "sweets and cherry jam" as a sign of Zosima's putrefying body, "sausage" (колбаса) and, possibly, "vodka", all of which

Alyosha wants to ingest in protest, as a kind of consolation for his grief and as a profane substitution for the sacred Host - the Body of Christ.

Neither sweets nor sausage are significant, according to Dostoevsky; the material world of nature is innocent or irrelevant to the sinful nature of man.

The naivety of the crowd around Zosima depends on its belonging to the lowest level of life: semantically (and only here) they are "nearby" or "side by side" with the lechers. Thus, the scene of Zosima's rotting corpse which should have been a scene of mystical transformation of the word - Logos - and its embodiment (one of the main dogmas of Christianity according to the New Testament), fails to materialize for the crowd: it is unknown to them or forgotten by them (the semantic links with Ivan's poem "The Legend of the Great Inquisitor" come to light here as well).

The words of Zosima to his friend, Father Anfim, clarify the problem of the holy body in its connection with the embodiment of Christ and transform it into a symbol of love:

"look at animals (horse, ox),- Zosima says,- look at their faces ("liki ikh"): what a serenity, friendliness to a human being, what trust and what beauty, they are sinless, all is perfect, all, besides the human being, and Christ is with them earlier than with us...because the word is for everything, and the whole Creation, every creature and every little leaf are infused with the Word and are singing the Glory of God..."(Russian Monk , book #6).

Beauty is a phenomenon existing in a set of perfect, serene creatures ("faces of animals"), in whom the aesthetic criteria seem to be leveled down to earth. Thus beauty is placed in the same level playing field of value with other parts of Creation, which "sing of the Glory of God" even though they belong to the "corporeal" world of Creation.

In the final analysis, beauty is endowed with a superior aesthetic perfection, which brings the perfect creature nearer to the initial idea of Creation. The transpersonal sense of beauty (both of a feminine body and the soul of a Saint)

does not limit human freedom according to Dostoevsky's fictional world but increases the level of human responsibility.

#### Notas

<sup>1</sup>For example, Peter A. Angeles points to a "mind/body dichotomy" through which he depicts "the differences between statements about mental states (events, qualities) and statements about physical states". From his point of view, there is a list "of the fundamental ways in which the characteristics attributed to mind are different from those attributed to body". Some of these are: "1. mind is private; body is publicly observable. ... 3. mind is intentional; body has no intentionality. ... 6. things said about states of mind are incorrigible; things said about states of a body are not incorrigible and can be denied without contradiction". Peter A. Angeles. *HarperCollins Dictionary of Philosophy*. Second edition. NY: HarperPerennial. A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers, 1992. pp.191-192. The author's intentionality in an artistic work transforms these characteristics into something new which to some extent is in contradiction with these initial philosophical statements. This will become evident in the process of our analysis of Dostoevsky's concept of the mind-body correlation.

2 In her investigation of "an allegory of body and mind" in Dostoevsky's first novel, Carol A. Flath symbolically transforms the problem of the body: "*Poor Folk* is about the body's encounter with the book. It is curious to note how closely the two are related". An interesting analysis follows this premise: "For example, the only difference between the Chinese characters (in the Japanese usage) for 'book' and 'body' is the addition of 'human being' to the character for book". – In: *Dostoevsky Studies, New Series*, vol.2, #2. P.49. The problem here is in the semantic boundary between the corporeal and the spiritual: Dostoevsky wrote later about "a thought" as a "body" (*мысль — это тело*) and about the flesh of an idea (*плоть идеи*). In this paper only religious aspects of the earthly "body" are studied.

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## Referências

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VIDE NOTAS

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