

Evil as a Parasite: An Analysis of Stavrogin's Suicidal Path in Fyodor Dostoevsky's Novel *Devils* / O mal como parasita: uma análise da trajetória suicida de Stavróguin no romance Os demônios, de Fiódor Dostoiévski

Anderson Souza Cantanhede*
Douglas de Sousa**

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to understand the suicidal trajectory of the character Stavrogin in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *Devils*, based on the concept of "parasitic evil" developed by Luigi Pareyson. The aim is to analyze how evil dissolves the anti-hero's personality and drives him to suicide. To this end, the research is based on bibliographical contributions that focus on literary criticism of the Russian novelist's work, with the aim of examining the manifestation of parasitic evil, which exerts its negative force by feeding on the character's moral and existential deterioration. As a result, the research shows that evil acts infiltrating the being through nihilistic ideas, splitting Stavrogin's personality, which leads him to arbitrary freedom, indifference and, consequently, suicide.

KEYWORDS: Dostoevsky; Freedom; Parasitic Evil; Nihilism; Suicide

RESUMO

O presente trabalho tem como objetivo compreender a trajetória suicida do personagem Stavróguin, no romance Os demônios, de Fiódor Dostoiévski, a partir do conceito de "mal parasitário", desenvolvido por Luigi Pareyson. Busca-se analisar como o mal dissolve a personalidade do anti-herói e o conduz ao suicídio. Para isso, a pesquisa está fundamentada em contribuições bibliográficas que têm como foco o tema do mal na obra do escritor, com a finalidade de examinar a manifestação do mal parasitário, o qual exerce a sua força negativa alimentando-se da deterioração moral e existencial do personagem. Como resultado, a pesquisa demonstra que o mal age infiltrado no ser por meio de ideias niilistas, cindindo, assim, a personalidade de Stavróguin, o que o conduz a uma liberdade arbitrária, à indiferença e, conseqüentemente, ao suicídio.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dostoiévski; Liberdade; Mal parasitário; Niilismo; Suicídio

* Universidade Estadual do Maranhão – UEMA, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, Departamento de Letras, Campus Paulo VI, São Luís, Maranhão, Brazil; Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa e ao Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico do Maranhão – FAPEMA; <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7572-4996>; andersonsouza21.c@gmail.com

** Universidade Estadual do Maranhão – UEMA, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, Departamento de Letras, Campus Presidente Dutra, Presidente Dutra, Maranhão, Brazil; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3109-8074>; doug.rsousa@gmail.com

Introduction

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's artistic background doesn't know death that happens for natural reasons because "in Dostoevsky's world there are only murders, suicides, and insanity, that is, there are only death-acts, responsively conscious." (1984, p. 300).¹ In the author's fiction, the theme that worried him the most and questioned his imaginative sense were the final hours of life before suicide, what may have been influenced by the great amount of representations of such a thing in all of his work.

In his stories, characters live and personify the "nihilist ideas" and as a result they suffer psychic and moral deformations that lead them to auto flagellation and voluntary death. One of the works in which there is a greater frequency of this act is the novel *Devils* (1872), a tragic "poem" about moral and spiritual evil that affected Russian culture. In the novel, the main character is Nikolay Vsevolodovich Stavrogin, moral and intellectually educated by Stiepan Trofimovitch, a liberal idealist that belongs to the first generation of the Russian *Intelligentsia*.²

Although he had no direct role in the action, Stavrogin is considered as the intellectual leader of the main members of a revolutionary clandestine group, that was organized and driven by Piotr Verkhovensky, Stiepan's nihilist son. However, the ideas that were defended give no enthusiasm to Stavrogin. So, his way of life, in which good and evil don't have a clear definition, makes his suicide act a singular literary fact to be investigated.

That being said, this paper tries to understand the suicide trajectory of the character Stavrogin in the novel *Devils* (2008),³ written by Fyodor Dostoevsky, based on the concept of "parasite evil", that was developed by Luigi Parieyson and showed how evil, which was infiltrated by nihilist ideas, doesn't only corrupt freedom but they also give the desegregation of his personality, leading it to a state of inertia and dissolution, which ends in suicide.

¹ BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. 8th printing. Translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

² Russian political class of the 19th century, "which defined itself as a movement for social reform. Its members, the intelligentsia, were critical thinkers who deplored the primitive political state of their country under tsarism" (Chamberlain, 2022, p. 21).

³ DOSTOEVSKY, Fyodor. *Devils*. Translated by Michael R. Katz. Oxford: OUP, 2008.

For that, this research is based on the books *Dostoiévski: filosofia, romance e experiência religiosa* [Dostoevsky: Philosophy, Novels and Religious Experience] (2012) by Luigi Pareyson and *O espírito de Dostoiévski* [The Spirit of Dostoevsky] (2021) by Nikolay Berdiaev, besides other paper contributions, that are focused on the literary critic about the Russian novelist's work. Among them, we can mention the study of Nikolay Chirkov (2022) about Dostoevsky's stylistic evolution and his extensive biographical, historical and cultural research of Joseph Frank, which was presented in *Dostoevsky: A Writer in his Time* (2010).⁴ The articulation of these works will be very useful for examining the way that the parasite evil, while a negative force, remains in existential deterioration of the protagonist of the novel *Devils*.

We divide this work in three main parts: in the first one, we will discuss the relationship between evil and freedom, highlighting how evil comes from men's responsibility, as well as their power of choice; later, we will analyze how Dostoevsky reflects, in his works, the influence of western ideas in his characters; in the end, we will talk about Stavrogin's suicide story in the lights of the concept of the parasite evil, showing how his education in the modern ideas will take him to an arbitrary freedom to indifference, a consequence that happened through the evil that leads his personality and takes him to nothing in voluntary death.

1 Evil and Freedom

In a text written in 1957 called 'Dostoevsky' the French Algerian novelist and philosopher Albert Camus (2023, pp. 288-289) comments: "I have admired Dostoevsky mostly because of what he revealed to me. Revealing is the word. Because he only teaches us what we know but we refuse to recognize it."⁵ In these words, Camus mentions the ability that the Russian writer expresses fictionally fundamentals truths of the human condition in which the problem of evil is highlighted. Although this is factual, we tend to deny it because, as his characters, we feel uncomfortable in recognizing that evil is part of us, of our free will and so that the individual will constantly be in an internal conflict

⁴ FRANK, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: A Writer in his Time*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010.

⁵ In Portuguese: "admirei Dostoiévski antes de mais nada pelo que ele me revelava. Revelar é bem a palavra. Pois ele só nos ensina o que sabemos, mas nos recusamos a reconhecer."

of opposite diametrical forces. The pain of the soul that this conflict causes is expressed in the dramatic confidence of the anti hero, the unnamed protagonist of the *Notes from Underground*.

The more aware I was of beauty and of ‘the highest and the best’, the deeper I sank into my slime, and the more capable I became of immersing myself completely in it. But the chief feature of all this was that it was not accidental, but as if it had to be so. It was as if this was my normal condition, not a disease or a festering sore in me, so that finally I lost even the desire to struggle against the spell. I ended by almost believing (or perhaps fully believing) that this was really my normal state. But before that, in the beginning, how much I suffered in the struggle! (Dostoevsky, 2014, p. 16).⁶

By turning his characters into the ugliest sides of evil, Dostoevsky knew how to explore, deeply, the idea that evil isn’t a simple product of the environment, of social structure or a simple violation of law. Yet, in his literary universe, he represents it as a metaphysical and internal source (Berdiaev, 2021).

We must highlight that the problem of evil that is founded in Dostoevsky’s work is deeply related to the dimension of freedom. According to Nikolay Berdiaev (2021, p. 75), “evil is unexplained without freedom. He appears in the ways of freedom. Without this call, there wouldn’t be the responsibility of evil: without freedom, only God would be the responsible for him.”⁷ There is an antithesis that characterizes the tragedy of the free man in Dostoevsky, being good as a son of freedom, which is irrational. So, imposing good or denying freedom represents itself the manifestation of evil. So, freedom is seen as the power of choice given to human beings, that is, the free will by which each individual becomes responsible.

This enigmatic outline that the Russian writer presents to us can be seen in mythical form in his last novel, *The Karamazov Brothers* (1992),⁸ the first volume of which was published in 1880. In the emblematic chapter V of the novel, the character Ivan Karamázov recites a poem called “The Grand Inquisitor” to his brother, Aliócha

⁶ DOSTOEVSKY, Fyodor. *Notes from the Underground*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Voohonsky. New York: Bearfort Books, 2014.

⁷ In Portuguese: “o mal é inexplicável sem a liberdade. Ele aparece nos caminhos da liberdade. Sem este liame não existiria a responsabilidade do mal: sem a liberdade só Deus seria o responsável por ele.”

⁸ DOSTOEVSKY, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated from the Russian by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Bearfort Books, 1992.

Karamázov, in a tavern located in the town where the action and drama of the novel take place.

The poem tells the story of Christ's return to Earth in 16th century Spain, more precisely in the city of Seville, where the people living there were going through "in the most horrible time of the Inquisition, when fires blazed every day to the glory of God" (Dostoevsky, 1992, p. 210).⁹ During this, Christ appears in silence, with serenity and passion and without much noise. Even so, people notice him and follow him. And after doing healing and resuscitating a girl in the edge of the cathedral of Seville, the Great Inquisitor, that noticed this last thing, orders his prison.

After putting him in jail, the Great Inquisitor goes to prison to interrogate him and accuse him of conceding to men the insupportable burden of freedom. Near Christ, he says that:

There is nothing more seductive for man than the freedom of his conscience, but there is nothing more tormenting either. And so, instead of a firm foundation for appeasing human conscience once and for all, you chose everything that was unusual, enigmatic, and indefinite, you chose everything that was beyond men's strength, and thereby acted as if you did not love them at all---and who did this? He who came to give his life for them! Instead of taking over men's freedom, you increased it and forever burdened the kingdom of the human soul with its torments (Dostoevsky 1992, p. 216).¹⁰

This statement emphasizes the difficulty of human beings to deal with their own choice, preferring to give up on their freedom and submitting themselves to all subjugation, either for an inquisitor, an idol or an idea, with the goal to avoiding the doubt and the anguish. Luiz Felipe Pondé, in his book *Crítica e Profecia: a filosofia da religião em Dostoiévski* [Critic and Prophecy: the philosophy of religion in Dostoevsky] (2013, p. 218) call this attitude "heteronym" when an individual gives his power of decision to someone else. According to him, "what heteronomy does with freedom is to give away men of their lives while being free and, while being free, in doubt, in uncertainty". For this reason, Berdiaev (2021, p. 63) says that Dostoevsky:

⁹ See footnote 8.

¹⁰ See footnote 8.

[...] he was dominated by the idea that universal harmony can't be conceived without freedom of evil and sin, without the probation of freedom. He gets up against all the freedom of men whose base would be awkwardness, whether it was theocratic or socialist. Men's freedom can't be conceived as an obligatory gift of the order of something that was given. She must proceed this order of things.¹¹

Another type of freedom that deserves to be mentioned in Dostoevsky is the arbitrary freedom that doesn't moral limits to act as there are, then, a positive will for evil. The individual "forgets the distinction between good and evil to the point of becoming able to do everything, exalting his own free will in order to invert it in deliberate will of a crime [...]" he doesn't know how to live other than in an atmosphere with homicide and blood" (Parayeson, 2012, p. 56).¹² For this reason, the characters of the novel – in his vast majority males¹³ – are emphasized by their rebellion which culminate in crimes of every order and in violent acts, overtaking every and any norm or even the demon indifference of bodies that evil in his potency dissolves in apathy of emptiness:

[...] empty and without an object, there is the freedom the freedom of Stavrogin and Versilov and Svidragov and Fyodor Pavlovitch Karazamov segregates the personality, the freedom of Raskolntvo and Piotr Verkhovenski leads to crime, the freedom of Kirilov and Ivan Karazamov kills the man (Berdiaev, 2021, p. 63).¹⁴

The characters of Dostoevsky are mentioned as those that their freedoms disappear when they are tormented by ideas that seduce and enslave (Berdiaev, 2021). But which ideas are those? In the next topic, we will do a contextual approach of the novel

¹¹ In Portuguese: "Foi dominado pela ideia de que a harmonia universal não podia ser concebida sem a liberdade do mal e do pecado, sem a provação da liberdade. Ele se ergue contra toda harmonia cuja base seria o constrangimento, fosse ela teocrática ou socialista. A liberdade do homem não pode ser concebida como presente obrigatório de uma ordem de coisas dada. Ela deve preceder esta ordem de coisas."

¹² In Portuguese: "esquece a distinção entre bem e mal a ponto de tornar-se capaz de tudo, exalta o próprio arbítrio a fim de invertê-lo em deliberada vontade de crime [...], não sabe viver senão numa atmosfera de homicídio e de sangue."

¹³ It's interesting to note how the male and female characters play quite different and complex roles. While the male characters are usually individuals tormented by deep moral ideas and questions, the female characters, as well as the children, often stand out as figures of devotion and compassion. A striking example is the character Sonia, from *Crime and Punishment*, who becomes fundamental to the redemption of the protagonist Raskólnikov. However, in both cases, there are exceptions that deserve more detailed attention in later studies.

¹⁴ In Portuguese: "Vazia e sem objeto, aparece a liberdade de Stavróguin e de Versílov; a de Svidrigailov e Fiodor Pavlovitch Karamázov desagrega a personalidade; a liberdade de Raskólnikov e de Piotr Verkhovenski conduz ao crime; a liberdade de Kiríllov e de Ivan Karamázov mata o homem."

Devils (2008)¹⁵ highlighting how Dostoevsky painted his characters tormented by the nihilist western ideas in Russian in the 19th century.

2 The Tragedy Novel and Western Ideas

As Joseph Frank says (2010, p. 315),¹⁶ in his work *Insulted and Injured*, published in 1861, after his Siberian exile,¹⁷ Dostoevsky expresses his “first artistic reaction to the radical doctrines of the 1860s”¹⁸ that had gotten clearer forms four years later in *Notes from Underground* and especially to his great novels among *Devils* that according to Nikolay Chirkov (2022, p. 164) is about:

[...] an inquisitor novel, a political leaflet against the social and revolutionary movement of the decades of 1860 and 1870, means at the same time a great satire of the superior circles and the sociopolitical regime of Czarist Russia at the time. The satire of the writer is transformed impetuously in a narration about the tragic destinies of parents and their people. The social reasons of the novel are unexpectedly related to their philosophical conceptions.¹⁹

It is interesting to mention that this tragic novel, as Chirkov (2022) says, is born out of a real event: the murder of a young student called Ivanov, perpetrated by members of a radical revolutionary group. The crime happened thanks to opposition of Ivanov to a spearheaded conspiracy by Nietchaiev²⁰ (Frank, 2010).²¹

¹⁵ See footnote 3.

¹⁶ See footnote 4.

¹⁷ In 1849, at the age of 28, Dostoevsky was sentenced to death “for his involvement in the so-called Pietrachévsky Circle, a brotherhood of progressives [...], a sentence which, on the day of execution, was commuted by order of Tsar Nicholas I himself to four years of forced labor [...] in Siberia” (Bezerra, 2020, p. 8). This sentence was followed by another four years of service as a private in the city of Semipalátinsk.

¹⁸ See footnote 4.

¹⁹ In Portuguese: “um romance acusador, um panfleto político contra o momento social e revolucionário das décadas de 1860 e 1870, implica ao mesmo tempo uma sátira aguda dos círculos superiores e do regime sociopolítico da Rússia tsarista daquele tempo. A sátira do escritor transforma-se impetuosamente numa narração sobre os destinos trágicos do país e de seu povo. Os motivos sociais do romance se entrelaçam de forma inesperável com suas concepções filosóficas.”

²⁰ Serguei Nietcháiev was a well-known Russian revolutionary in the 19th century, described by Joseph Frank (2018, p. 17) as a “totally unscrupulous agitator with an iron will, drafted a revolutionary’s Catechism, whose utilitarian adherence to the use of any means to obtain supposedly beneficial social ends makes Machiavelli look like a choirboy.”

²¹ See footnote 4.

This event happened to catch out Dostoevsky's interest, who studied the case by diverse information that were shared by then news at the time. It is important to highlight that this historical case is only about an inspiration that has worked as a nucleus for the plot of the political critic that is common in the novel because, as Ednilson Pedroso (2021, p. 72) mentions, "every gallery of characters that may be associated to the main political, social, religious and philosophical voices of Russian culture in the early 20th century is intrinsically related to the ideal of the artist."²² Still about artistic enthusiasm that represents facts, Joseph Frank (2010, p. 600)²³ says that:

Dostoevsky always found his inspiration in the most immediate and sensational events of the day—events that were often commonplace and even sordid—and then raised such material in his best work to the level of the genuinely tragic. This union of the contemporary and the tragic was the true secret of his genius [...].

As the murder of the young Ivanov mentions, the time in which this novel was produced, as well as Dostoevsky's post Siberian production, which happens historically in a scenario of great tension. According to Erich Auerbach (2003, p. 523),²⁴ there is an absence of reconciliation with the messed reality of the 19th century in Russia, that is defined by the "the infiltration of modern European and especially of German and French forms of life and thought." In this environment there is the problem of the Russian nihilism whose main characteristic, according to Franco Volpi (1999), was the fight between the ideas of the generation linked to the Russian orthodoxy from the decade of 1940 (slavophile) with the ideas that come from the modern West, that tend to influence the "new Russian generation" of the 1860s (Westernist). According to historical studies of philosophy in Russia, of Frederick Copleston (1986, p. 102) the nihilist term:

[...] referred to those who claimed to accept nothing on authority or faith, neither religious beliefs nor moral ideas nor social and political theories, unless they could be proved by reason or verified in terms of social utility. In other words, Nihilism was a negative attitude to tradition, to

²² In Portuguese: "toda a galeria de personagens que podem ser associadas às principais vozes políticas, sociais, filosóficas e religiosas da cultura russa da primeira metade do século XIX está intrinsecamente vinculada ao ideário do artista."

²³ See footnote 4.

²⁴ AUERBACH, Erich. *Mimesis*. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

authority, whether ecclesiastical or political, and to uncriticized custom, coupled with a belief in the power and utility of scientific knowledge.²⁵

In the first trip he made to the old continent, that culminated to the work *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (2008)²⁶ of 1863, Dostoevsky has tried to explore this new social moral order that came from, to understand both relationships of influence that were made in Russian culture as the destiny of society, that welcomes these ideas. In the end of this excursion, he concludes that everything was nothing but a utopia that led Europe to a moral brutalization. In this context, the “what was found to exist instead was the principle of individuality, the principle of isolation, of intensified self-preservation, of self-seeking, of self determination within one’s own personality or self” (Dostoevsky, 2008, p. 60),²⁷ what took this culture of losing the sacred spiritual ties she had been based on.

Based on this reason, Dostoevsky “tries to anchor his work in a movement of defense of the Russian soil as the only space that is still able to articulate the opposition to the dismissal of sacred that was promoted by modernity” (Fernandes, 2017, p. 12),²⁸ positioning himself as an antithesis to European influences. Among these influences, there is “the utilitarianism reason,” that was created by young writer and philosopher Nicolai Chernyshevsky (1828 – 1889) whose rational and materialistic philosophy believed that men is a slave of the laws of nature. Based on this conclusion,

The problem of freedom was indeed one that Chernyshevsky attempted to eradicate, since he did not hesitate to proclaim that nothing such as free will exists, or can exist, as an objective datum. The notion of will or “wanting,” he writes, “is only the subjective impression which accompanies in our minds the rise of thoughts and actions from preceding thoughts, actions or external facts.” As for ethics and morality, Chernyshevsky adopted a form of Benthamite Utilitarianism that rejects all appeal to any kind of traditional (Christian) moral values. Good and evil are defined in terms of “utility,” and man seeks primarily what gives him pleasure and satisfies his egoistic self-interest [...] (Frank, 2010, p. 283).²⁹

²⁵ COPLESTON, Frederick C. *Philosophy in Russia: From Herzen to Lenin and Berdyaev*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Search Press, 1986.

²⁶ DOSTOEVSKY, Fyodor. *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*. Surrey: Alma Books Limited, 2008.

²⁷ See footnote 26.

²⁸ In Portuguese: “passa a ancorar sua obra em um movimento de defesa do solo russo enquanto único espaço ainda capaz de articular uma oposição à destituição do sagrado promovida pela modernidade.”

²⁹ See footnote 4.

These ideas spread out quickly in Russia, what was based on the parameters of the new radical that was getting strong. That has caused a great fear in Dostoevsky as this credo conflicted with both of their truths that he had acquired during his experience in forced labor in Siberia.

One was that the human psyche would never, under any conditions, surrender its desire to assert its freedom; the other was that a Christian morality of love and self-sacrifice was a supreme necessity for both the individual and society. (Frank, 2010, p. 283).³⁰

The destruction of these values by nihilist ideas and western utopias, Dostoevsky predicts an apocalyptic future that he tries to personify in his own tragic characters, as a protest and a defense of freedom and moral autonomy of man. And Nikolay Stavroguin is not different. This character was created to show potentially the risks of nihilist ideas, dramatizing the “the possible consequences of putting into practice the logic of an egoism unrestrained by moral inhibitions” (Frank, 2010, p. 325).³¹

The nihilist that we see in the novel the *Devils* becomes a satire and questioning of the moral pillars of modern ideas in which reason and promises of emancipation, happiness and social transformation lead to a radical change in the moral and psychological dynamics of inhabitants in the great metropolis of Europe, particularly Saint Petersburg, in capitalist Russia – denominated by Marshall Berman (1986) of “modernism and underdevelopment.”

As we may see later, the character Stavrogin is one of Dostoevsky’s literary creations that better represents this modern being that was educated in new ideas and can’t find solid bases of meaning for forming his personality, unsolved inside by evil that, as a parasite, will be given a negative reality in his human nature, leading, then, an internal seizure that will culminate to his suicide.

³⁰ See footnote 4.

³¹ See footnote 4.

3 Parasitic Evil: From the Split of Personality to Suicide

The novel *the Devils* (2008),³² that was published in 1857, was narrated by an observer that maintains a certain distance of his provincial life where the story takes place, acting as a sort of essayist to describe the events in an ironic and critical tone. This narrator starts what he calls an “essay” detailing some of Stepan Trofimovich’s biographical information which seems to be his confidential friend but he warns that “the actual history I intend to relate will follow later” (Dostoevsky, 2008, p. 1).³³ Based on that, we notice a clear difference between the first chapter without great actions, a slow narration, conspiracy and violence in comparison with the next chapters, highlighted by the dramatic tension, as if these pages would transmit:

an impression of a calm stability and of a tranquilizing routine to the models of life that will be disturbed by the incursion of “devils” that, little by little, will infiltrate in the small town [...] and shake it down until their origins (Frank, 2010, p. 621).³⁴

In the first chapter, in which we have established the historical context in which the action will take place, they have shown to us Stepan Trofimovich, of a liberal and idealist character, as the symbol of the first generation of the Russian Intelligentsia of “unnecessary men”³⁵ “but which lacked the will to fight for radical change” (Berman, 1982, p. 208),³⁶ as we exemplify in the following text:

At one time it used to be said in town that our circle was a hotbed of free-thinking, depravity, and atheism; this rumour circulated for some time. And yet, all that we did was indulge in the most innocent, pleasant, typically Russian, cheerful liberal banter. ‘Higher liberalism’ and the ‘higher liberal’, that is, a liberal without goals, are possible only in Russia. Stepan Trofimovich, like every witty man, needed an audience; besides that, he needed the sense that he was fulfilling some higher obligation in propagating ideas. Finally, he needed someone to drink

³² See footnote 3.

³³ In Portuguese: “a própria história que pretendo descrever ainda está por vir.”

³⁴ See footnote 4.

³⁵ A term popularized by the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev (1818 - 1883), in his 1850 work *Diary of a Superfluous Man*, to portray the intellectuals who lived under the regime of Tsar Nicholas I and who were bearers and propagandists of ideas, but incapable of action, a characteristic that condemned them to melancholic social isolation.

³⁶ BERMAN, Marshall. *All that Is Solid Melts in the Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.

champagne with and someone with whom, over a glass of wine, he could exchange pleasant ideas of a certain kind about Russia and the ‘Rus-sian spirit’, about God in general and the ‘Russian God’ in particular; to repeat for the hundredth time the same scandalous little anecdotes known to everyone and repeated over and over again. (Dostoevsky, 2008, p. 33).³⁷

Despite his characteristic that is apparently inoffensive, will be the intellectual Stepan, representing the “liberal generation,” the portator that will transmit the bad energies that will spread through the city. His pedagogical action will produce individuals who have a radically subversive action and as his natural child, Piotr Verkhoyansk, the adoptive son Stavrogin, and the other devils of the revolutionary group.

Then, we have only reserved to Stepan the role of educating morally and intellectually Nikolay Vsyevolodovich in the invitation of his mother, Varvara Pietrovna Stavrogina. Since the age of eight, Stavrogin starts to have a sophisticated education that gives him the required knowledge about modern ideas and a critical view about the bad time he was living. Stepan transmitted all the superficial and unstable characteristic morally to Stavrogin what lead, in the learner, an emptiness that will stay until his end.

It must be assumed that the tutor upset his pupil’s nerves to some extent. When at the age of sixteen he was enrolled in a lycée, he was pale and fragile, unusually quiet and pensive. (Later on he was distinguished by remarkable physical strength.) One must also suppose that the two friends’ nocturnal weeping in each other’s arms was not solely a consequence of domestic difficulties. Stepan Trofimovich had succeeded in touching his young friend’s deepest heartstrings and evoking in him an initial intimation, as yet undefined, of that eternal, sacred yearning which some chosen souls, once they’ve tasted and known it, never ever exchange for any cheap pleasure (Dostoevsky, 2008, p. 40-41).³⁸

We notice that the own education that was given by Stepan is incomplete, doesn’t give his student deep knowledge, what leads his personality to wander and spreading “in an absolute indifference to everything and in an impetuous precipitation. [Stavrogin]. He has an extraordinary force but in his existence he dies for not having been able to apply his force” (Sakamoto, 2007, p. 123).³⁹

³⁷ See footnote 3.

³⁸ See footnote 3.

³⁹ In Portuguese: “numa indiferença absoluta a tudo e numa precipitação impetuosa. [Stavróguin] Possui uma força extraordinária, mas sua existência perece por não saber onde aplicar sua força.”

As Luigi Pareyson (2012, p. 67) says, evil acts in individuals dissolving and breaking personalities so that “no matter how strong it is, his force is being used in titanic aspirations without moderation or in actions that are inadequate and disperse.”⁴⁰

In this time, it comes out the use of freedom and the first manifestations of evil, what was mentioned before. After finishing the first part of studies with Stepan Trofimovich, Stavrogin, at the age of sixteen, was sent to high school to improve his education. Later, after the offer of his mother, he joined the military service. However, after a long time without any news, there were rumours that the young man had been taken to an “unbridled debauchery,” revealing his arbitrary and cruel instincts.

[...] there were just reports of wild recklessness, running down people in the street with his horses, bestial behaviour towards a woman of high society with whom he was having an affair, and whom he publicly insulted afterwards. There was something even a bit too obviously sordid about the whole business. It was said, moreover, that he’d become a bully who went around pestering people and offending them for the sheer pleasure of it (Dostoevsky, 2008, p. 42).⁴¹

During this period there is the sexual abuse of the girl Matryocha, which is a case we only knew about in his confession of the priest Tikhon.⁴² Some violence that ends in the lady’s suicide and becomes a shadow that will follow Stavrogin during his path in the novel, with a cruel and demoniac alter ego he could never escape of.

Besides that, when coming back home, Stavrogin goes through different scandals such as the kiss of a married woman in front of her husband (Liputin) and the bite in Ivan Osipovich’s ear, the city’s governor, a crazy act that made him, temporarily, to go arrested.

In these violent actions, we see Stavrogin use his freedom to assert himself over the moral law, as if he felt pleasure in the violation. According to Pareyson (2012, p. 59):

[...] real perversion is born here so that there is evil not only in the deliberate will to break the law but also for the pleasure of this

⁴⁰ In Portuguese: “por mais vigorosa e robusta que seja, a sua força vai sendo empregada em aspirações imoderadas e titânicas ou em ações inadequadas e dispersas.”

⁴¹ See footnote 3.

⁴² Chapter “With Tikhon,” which Dostoevsky wanted to be Chapter IX of the second part of *The Devils*, but was censored at the time of its publication. The text appears in the appendix of the Brazilian edition by Editora 34, translated by Paulo Bezerra.

conscious and voluntary transgression: doing evil for evil “offending for the sake of it,” “being happy without committing crimes.”⁴³

After these events happened, the narrator tells us that Stavrogin “travelled for over three years and was almost completely forgotten in our town. [...] had been all over Europe. It was also reported that he spent a winter attending lectures at some German university” (Dostoevsky, 2008, p. 55).⁴⁴ This trip to the West doesn’t really happen by accident in the novel because according to Lesley Chamberlain (2004, p. 72), “when Dostoevsky’s characters acquired – either in America either elsewhere abroad either when reading foreign literature – the ideas of reason became suddenly without any moral orientation.”⁴⁵

When he goes back to his hometown, Stavrogin transmits the image of a total enigmatic person whose presence inspires admiration and fear. In Russia, the character always feels like a foreigner and without any ties of belonging. When he gets the visit of Stavrogin, Shatov tells him: “You’ve lost the distinction between good and evil because you no longer know your own people” (Dostoevsky, 2008, p. 270).⁴⁶ In this meeting, it is often said that indifference, extreme individualism and the character’s lack of clear purpose in his life are related to his divorce and his hometown.

Despite his purposeless life, Stavrogin joins the revolutionary group by Peter Verkhovensky but he shows himself unable to have any active role. It is important to notice that all the members of the revolutionary group seem to have suffered some sort of influence by Stavrogin so that “they are all, somehow, an indisputable consequence of Stavrogin’s soul and of his issues” (Tchirkóv, 2022, p. 188).⁴⁷ Consequently, he seems to feel quite disconnected when he noticed how far he is from the convictions he had had before, mostly when he heard about his own opinions that were defended fiercely by his comrades.

⁴³ In Portuguese: “nasce aqui a perversão propriamente dita, pela qual se faz mal não só pela deliberada vontade de infringir a lei, mas também pelo prazer desta consciente e voluntária transgressão: fazer mal pelo mal, ‘ofender pelo gosto de ofender’, ‘ser feliz por cometer crimes’.”

⁴⁴ See footnote 3.

⁴⁵ CHAMBERLAIN, Lesley. *Motherland: A Philosophical History of Russia*. New York: The Overlook Books, 2004.

⁴⁶ See footnote 3.

⁴⁷ In Portuguese: “todos eles são, em certa medida, um fruto indiscutível do espírito de Stavróguin, de suas emanções.”

This influence that was made by Stavrogin brings harsh consequences about the consciences and the discourses that were taken by each of them, either when murdering Verkhovensky, in the death of Shatov and in the philosophical suicide of Kirillov. When mentioning these two characters, we can notice how they seem to be doubles of Stavrogin but they are not recognised because he “planted in Shatov the humanity of God and suggested Kirillov the Godness of men but he himself isn’t able to do a synthesis of humans and of the divine by faith of the human God” (Sakamoto, 2007, pp. 123-124).⁴⁸ A paragraph that confirms the division of Stavrogin’s personality happens when he is faced by Shatov when demonstrating his double behavior when concentrating, at the same time, by the ones who are morally against him:

In America I lay on a straw mat for three months next to... a poor wretch, and I found out from him that at the same time as you were sowing the seeds of God and motherland in my heart—at the same time, perhaps even the same day, you were poisoning the heart of that wretch, that maniac Kirillov... You were confirming lies and slander in him and you led his reason to the verge of insanity... Go have a look at him now; he’s your creation... But you’ve already seen him.’
‘Are you an atheist? Are you an atheist now?’
‘What about then?’
‘The same as I was then.’
‘But wasn’t it you who told me that if mathematicians could demonstrate that truth lay outside Christ, you’d still prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth? Didn’t you say that? Didn’t you?’ (Dostoevsky, 2008, pp. 262-263).⁴⁹

Other facts that point this dubiousness, highlighted by Joseph Frank (2003) and Chirkov (2022) are related to the apparent attempt of Stavrogin to reject and transcend his evil past: when aiming for forgiveness and humiliating himself in public when recognizing his matrimonial alliance with Maria Lebyadkina; when not reacting to a suggestive slap by Shatov; or even when confessing to the priest Tikhon having violated Matryocha. However, her attempts of self control to dominate her selfishness has no practical result because:

All the springs of human feeling have dried up in Stavrogin; his demonism is that of a total rationalism, which, once having emptied life

⁴⁸ In Portuguese: “ele plantou em Chátov a humanidade de Deus e sugeriu a Kiríllov a divindade do homem, mas ele mesmo é incapaz de realizar uma síntese do humano e do divino pela fé no Deus-homem.”

⁴⁹ See footnote 3.

of all significance and value, can no longer make any direct, instinctive response even to its most primitive solicitations. (Frank, 2010, p. 262).⁵⁰

That being said, Stavrogin's strong personality seems to be divided between their desire of redemption and their demoniac personality, that was brought since early childhood. That's why Pareyson (2012) will tell us that the first effect of evil in a man is cision inside when the personality is divided in two. If in one side there is the agreeable, good and honest part, in which the own self recognizes himself or would like to do so: in the other side, there is the alter ego that is not accepted for having bad and perverse of its own self.

Given this situation of internal conflict, that tells apart his condition as a lost person without salvation, Pareyson (2012, p. 180) describes Stavrogin as a "mild and amoral having canceled his freedom and has no more conditions to tell apart good from bad."⁵¹ Therefore, it is often seen that the character gives clear signs of an internal split with a dissociated personality and divided by evil so that it operates his second effect in a way that:

[...] the double takes the lead and there clearly is the negative aspect, personified in a more pressing and threatening experience than a simple double because it accepts the figure of the demon; one watches, therefore, the force of evil that, in its power of denial, wants to take office of his personality and take it to dissolution (Pareyson, 2012, p. 70).⁵²

The epigraph of the gospel of Luke 8, 32-36, that is available in the novel, mentioning the expulsion of a man's devils by Jesus, which, when leaving their body, enter a herd of pigs, that falls in a cliff gives us signs of the nature of the evil that Dostoevsky aims to represent. An evil that "doesn't have its own existence but a

⁵⁰ See footnote 4.

⁵¹ In Portuguese: "tíbio, isto é, amoral, tendo de tal modo anulado sua liberdade que não está mais em condições de distinguir entre bem e mal."

⁵² In Portuguese: "O sócia toma a dianteira e, nitidamente, prevalece o aspecto negativo, personificado numa presença bem mais premente e ameaçadora que a do simples sócia, porque assume a figura do demônio; assisti-se, desse modo, à força do mal que, em toda sua potência de negação, quer tomar posse da sua personalidade e levá-la a dissolução."

necessarily parasitary evil because it can't exist other than relying on a reality that already exists, that means, men's reality" (Pareyson, 2012, p. 39).⁵³

In Stavrogin, the evil parasite didn't only join its existence but it "being part of the finite being, performed its function refusing the presence of absolutes in the finite being" (Pareyson, 2012, p. 80).⁵⁴ This evil "denies everything that can be destroyed and later destroys itself; that being said, it recognizes as a negation, destruction, not being, in a word; as an evil" (Pareyson, 2012, p. 83).⁵⁵

In the final part of the novel, in a letter written to Daria Pavlovna, Stavrogin mentions his almost necessary desire of taking his own life when he said that "I know that I ought to kill myself, wipe myself off the face of the earth like an insect. But I'm afraid of suicide because I'm afraid to show any magnanimity" (Dostoevsky, 2008, p. 754).⁵⁶

Scared by the dark announcement she had just read, Daria takes the letter to the anti hero's mother, Varvara Pietrovna. Being perplexed, they both took off in a rush to the house where he said he would be, in the city of Uri, in Switzerland. The tragic end is revealed to us right after when his body, being suspended by the hanging is found in the attic:

The citizen of the canton of Uri was hanging behind the door. On the little table lay a scrap of paper with some words scribbled on it in pencil: 'No one is to blame, I did it myself.' Also on the table lay a hammer, a piece of soap, - and a large nail, obviously a spare in case it was needed. The strong silk cord from which Nikolai Vsevolodovich hung, evidently put by and selected well in advance, had been amply smeared with soap. Everything indicated premeditation and consciousness up to the very last minute. (Dostoevsky, 2008, p. 756).⁵⁷

Dostoevsky's great heroes, such as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (2008)⁵⁸ traverse the path of freedom, face the hellish flames of polyphony and malignity,

⁵³ In Portuguese: "não tem uma existência própria, mas uma existência necessariamente parasitária, porque não pode subsistir a não ser apoiando-se na realidade existente, isto é, na realidade do homem."

⁵⁴ In Portuguese: "sediando-se no ser finito, exercia a sua negação, refutando a presença do absoluto no ser finito."

⁵⁵ In Portuguese: "nega tudo o que consegue destruir, depois destrói a si mesmo; isto é, reconhece-se como negação, destruição, não ser, numa palavra: como mal."

⁵⁶ See footnote 3.

⁵⁷ See footnote 3.

⁵⁸ DOSTOEVSKY, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Oxford: OUP, 2008.

as these were embers of suffering that lead to heaven of redemption. In Stavrogin, evil leads not only to an internal split but also to an emptiness of every and any sense, so that the search for divine forgiveness seems motivated by selfishness. Being based in the finite being a stretching of negation and destruction, evil, in its extreme manifestation, takes the character to the moment of final disappearing, in the annihilation of the corrupted existence with the return to its origin: non being.

Final Remarks

The analysis that was made in this work reveals the complexity and the depth of evil in Dostoevsky's work, especially highlighting the book *Devils* (2018). In this paper, we have tried to understand the suicide story of Stavrogin by the concept "parasitic evil" developed by Luigi Pareyson. We have noticed that the effects of western modern ideas, called nihilist by Dostoevsky, chosen by the character during his studies with Stepan and being deepened in his experience in the European continent, infiltrated in the character in his interior reality as a destruction agent. This process has killed his identity changing his personality in a double "self" in which the alter ego in deprivation has taken control, leading his life to a state of complete moral and existential deterioration.

Through his trajectory, Stavrogin illustrates how evil, in its parasitic form, isn't only an external or circumstantial concept, but a force that operates inside of humans, corrupting their freedom and defacing their essence. Freedom, that was so praised as an ideal, becomes, in Stavrogin, a caricature, that was reduced to an arbitrary emptiness, that feeds their own indifference and incapacity of finding meaning or direction. As a result, he is swallowed by the spirit of non being, the "devils" that symbolize the internal fragmentation of modern men and lead to suicide as the final act that seals his self destruction.

This ending, as it was told by Pareyson (2012, p. 143), reflects essentially the nihilism in Dostoevsky: "suicide prints the seal of nothing and a life that only had nothing as badge."⁵⁹ In Stavrogin, Dostoevsky doesn't only dramatize the influence of nihilist ideas about the individual but he also warns to the dangers that these ideas represent to

⁵⁹ In Portuguese: "o suicídio imprime o selo do nada a uma vida que só teve o nada por insígnia."

society as a whole. This tragic figure is, at the same time, a mirror of the tensions of the 19th century and an unsettling prophecy about the moral and spiritual dilemmas that keep scaring us in today's world.

In summary, this paper reasserts the importance of *Devils* as a work to transcend its time, questioning deep reflections about evil, freedom and the dilemmas that exist in human beings. The suicide story of Stavrogin, that is at the same time singular and paradigmatic, remains a powerful testimony of Dostoevsky's genius and his capacity to explore the darkest and most complex layers of the human soul.

REFERENCES

- AUERBACH, Erich. *Mimesis: a representação da realidade na literatura ocidental*. Tradução de George Bernard Sperber. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1971.
- BAKHTIN, Mikhail M. *Problemas da poética de Dostoiévski*. Tradução direta do russo, notas e prefácio de Paulo Bezerra. 5 ed. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 2018.
- BERDIAEV, Nikolai. *O espírito de Dostoiévski*. Tradução de Otto Schneider. Rio de Janeiro: Eleia Editora, 2021.
- BERMAN, Marshall. *Tudo que é sólido desmancha do ar: a aventura da Modernidade*. Tradução de Carlos Felipe Moisés e Ana Maria L. Ioriatti. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1986.
- BEZERRA, Paulo. A casa morta: o laboratório do gênio (texto de apresentação). In: DOSTOIÉVSKI, Fiódor. *Escritos da casa morta*; tradução, apresentação e notas de Paulo Bezerra; posfácio de Konstantin Motchulki. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2020.
- CAMUS, Albert. *Conferências e discursos: 1937 – 1958*. Tradução Clóvis Marques. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2023.
- CHAMBERLAIN, Lesley. *Mãe Rússia: uma história filosófica da Rússia*. Tradução de Renato Aguiar. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2022.
- CHAVES, Thaís Figueiredo. *Tanatografia n'Os demônios de Dostoiévski: arena discursiva e suicídio literário de Stavróguin*. 2015. 112 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literatura) — Universidade de Brasília, Brasília, 2015.
- COPLESTON, Frederick C. *Philosophy in Russia: From Herzen to Lenin and Berdyaev*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Search Press, 1986.
- DOSTOIÉVSKI, Fiódor. *Crime e castigo*. Tradução, apresentação, notas e posfácio de Paulo Bezerra. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2016.
- DOSTOIÉVSKI, Fiódor. *Memórias do subsolo*. Tradução, prefácio e notas de Boris Schnaiderman. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2009.
- DOSTOIÉVSKI, Fiódor. *O crocodilo e Notas de inverno sobre impressões de verão*. Tradução de Boris Schnaiderman. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2011.

DOSTOIÉVSKI, Fiódor. *Os demônios*. Tradução, posfácio e notas de Paulo Bezerra. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2018.

DOSTOIÉVSKI, Fiódor. *Os irmãos Karamázov*. Tradução, posfácio e notas de Paulo Bezerra. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2012.

FERNANDES, Arlene Aparecida. *O solo sagrado: crítica da modernidade em Dostoiévski*. 2017. 105 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Ciência da Religião). Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Juiz de Fora, 2017.

FRANK, Joseph. *Dostoiévski: um escritor em seu tempo*. Tradução de Pedro Maia Soares. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2018.

FRANK, Joseph. *Dostoiévski: os anos de provação, 1865-1871*. Tradução de Geraldo Gerson de Souza. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 2003.

LÚKACS, George. *Ensaio sobre literatura*. Tradução, coordenação e prefácio de Leandro Konder. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira S.A., 1965.

PAREYSON, Luigi. *Dostoiévski: filosofia, romance e experiência religiosa*. Tradução de Maria Helena Nery Garcez e Sylvia Mendes Carneiro. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 2012.

PEDROSO, Ednilson Rodrigo. O solipsismo memorial de Anton Lavriéntievich G-v em *Os demônios*, de Dostoiévski. *RUS* (São Paulo), São Paulo, Brasil, v. 12, n. 20, pp. 66–88, 23 dez. 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2317-4765.rus.2021.189457>. Acesso em: 06 fev. 2025.

PONDÉ, Luiz Felipe. *Crítica e profecia: a filosofia da religião em Dostoiévski*. São Paulo: Leya, 2013.

SAKAMOTO, Jacqueline Izumi. *Religião e niilismo: paidéia crítica em Os demônios de Dostoiévski*. 2007. 144 f. Dissertação (Programa de Estudos Pós-Graduados em Ciência da Religião) - Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2007.

TCHIRKOV, Nikolai. *O estilo de Dostoiévski: problemas, ideias, imagens*. Tradução, posfácio e notas de Paulo Bezerra. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2022.

VOLPI, Franco. *O niilismo*. Tradução de Aldo Vannucchi. 2 ed. São Paulo: Loyola, 2012.

Translated by Pedro Rezende Simões – pedrorezsim@gmail.com

Received February 17, 2025

Accepted October 13, 2025

Statement of Author's Contribution

We declare that the authors Anderson Souza Cantanhede and Douglas de Sousa divided the tasks involved in the preparation of the article as follows: author Anderson Souza Cantanhede was responsible for the conception of the project and the development of the

Bakhtiniana, São Paulo, 20 (4): e70272e, Oct./Dec. 2025

All content of *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution-type CC-BY 4.0

theoretical discussion. Author Douglas de Sousa was responsible for the critical review of the intellectual content, as well as for supervising the theoretical discussion. Both were responsible for writing the article, for the final approval of the version to be published, and assume responsibility for all aspects of the work, ensuring the accuracy and integrity of any part of the work.

Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana. Revista de Estudos do Discurso* [*Bakhtiniana. Journal of Discourse Studies*] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

Review I

The work is clearly developed and consistent with the proposed objective, relates well to the references, and demonstrates knowledge of the Russian context, contributing to the dialogues surrounding issues inherent to the work analyzed here. In line with the complexity presented throughout the work, I would consider elaborating a little more on the following summary, especially since it is at the beginning: “analyzing how evil, infiltrated into the being through nihilistic ideas, corrupts his freedom and leads him to suicide.” Perhaps point out here the disintegration of personality that will be discussed later. I suggest a dialogue with Pareyson (from the references on p. 67) with regard to Stavrogin: and that personality that “degenerates into dissipation”; or that which “leads to inertia.” This “very strong personality of Stavrogin... dissociates and dissolves,” as we read in Pareyson, “to the point where the final suicide is nothing more than the last act in a process [...] of dismantling and destruction.” (In the final paragraphs, this synthesis returns with further developments, but, as I said, it may be interesting to problematize it the first time it appears). And when referring to Stavrogin in relation to there being no distinction between good and evil: It may be interesting to highlight further what Pareyson says about indifference and lukewarmness (see p. 179): “Stavrogin is lukewarm, that is, amoral, having in this way nullified his freedom...” In addition, some suggestions for adjustments in typing/punctuation: “to portray the intellectuals who lived under the regime of Tsar Nicolai I, who were carriers...”; “to portray the intellectuals who lived under the regime of Tsar Nicholas I and who were carriers.” Nicolai appears twice as Nicolai, please check. Please check: Ivan Óssipovith. APPROVED WITH SUGGESTIONS [Revised]

Susana Carneiro Fuentes – Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro – UERJ, Instituto de Letras, Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5529-6900>; fuentes.susana@gmail.com

Reviewed on March 4, 2025.

Editors in Charge

Adriana Pucci Penteado Faria e Silva

Beth Brait

Maria Helena Cruz Pistori

Paulo Rogério Stella

Regina Godinho de Alcântara