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**Degeneration of Masculinity in the Fictions of Franz Kafka and Fyodor
Dostoevsky**

by

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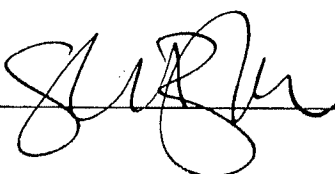
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THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Lynda Johnson entitled
Degeneration of Masculinity in the Fictions of Franz Kafka and Fyodor
Dostoevsky has been approved by the thesis committee as satisfactorily
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ABSTRACT

The portraiture of masculinity in Western literature has changed overtime. There has been a shift from traditional traits of masculinity, to atypical traits of maleness as seen in modern fictions. The typical attributes of masculinity such as achievement, virility and patriarchal hegemony with which male heroes in pre-Victorian and Victorian literatures were endowed, are notably absent in the major works of Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

This study is an analysis of the male characters' degenerated masculinity in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*, and Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* and *The Metamorphosis*. Using Victorian masculinity as an example of traditional masculinity, I identify the male characters' atypical traits of masculinity and interpret them as degenerated. The male characters' degenerated masculinity are identified and analyzed in terms of their deviations from familial and socially constructed gender roles that were prevalent in the Victorian literary tradition.

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Introduction

This study examines the shifts in masculine portraits of the central male characters in Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* and *The Metamorphosis*, and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*. Through an analysis of the male characters' masculine images and roles, I identify and interpret their manifested shortcomings as a form of response to their realities, and define their deviated masculine portraits, as a form of degeneration of masculinity.

In terms of character development, much has been written about Kafka and Dostoevsky's portrayal of atypical heroes in relation to their psychological and social realisms. However, scant attention has been paid to another development of character depiction that emerged and featured prominently in the fictions of these notable writers. It is the degeneration of the archetypal male character—an emergence of a masculine hero who lacked the famed elements of masculinity for which Victorian men were known. To hopefully add an enhanced understanding to the works of these great authors, and by extension, an understanding of literary character portraiture in the late nineteenth and twentieth century Western fiction, I will do a detailed study of the decline of masculine characteristics in the male characters of Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* and *The Metamorphosis*, and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Idiot*.

Kafka's perplexing novella, *The Metamorphosis* features the overnight decline of an erstwhile able young man, Gregor Samsa, who was the bread-winner

of the family. In a queer and symbolic twist of fate, Gregor awakes and realizes that he has metamorphosed into a “vermin,” an insect whose essence became utterly repulsive, so that it required his eventual demise to rid himself of the repulsion that his presence created around his family. Although the reader is told of Gregor’s initial excellent position in the family such as his sales job with which he supported his parents, his sister and himself; it is noteworthy that Kafka did not provide a portrait of Gregor in such excellent masculine position in the novella’s *present*,¹ instead, we only see Gregor in his degenerated state. The same is also true in the case of the starving male character in *A Hunger Artist*. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is in a cage as he performs the queer art of prolonged starving. While some may argue that starvation is a feat, the artist’s character lacked masculinity in its entirety. He was always in a cage, gaunt, and close to death. Also, he was a recreational spectacle for only a short time until he became metaphorically invisible to the spectators. Again, like Gregor, he degenerates in his cage, dies, and is discarded like a “vermin.” Clearly, both protagonists are heroes in the standards of fiction, but the valor and masculine strength of male characters that featured in the works of Leo Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling—all contemporaries of Kafka and Dostoevsky, were lacking in both works by Kafka.

¹ The present being the state in which the reader encounters Gregor and experiences him throughout the novel.

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* also feature the “new” male character type that is devoid of typical Victorian masculine traits. Raskolnikov, the central character in *Crime*, is portrayed as frail with hunger and illness throughout the novel, and even more reflective of his degeneration, is his ultimate downfall due to his commission of a crime that a valorous hero would have deemed repulsive. In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky's exploration of the futility of the concept of a perfect man is aptly captured as an idiocy which could only result in degeneration, and possibly, annihilation of the valorous and masculine character in the era's fiction. Prince Myshkin, the protagonist, was in fact a prince, but his circumstances were hardly princely—he was epileptic, frail and poor, and although he was from a supposed noble family lineage, his lineage was almost extinct—he was the last of the princes. This marked his degeneration and culminated in his eventual insanity at the end of the novel. In both novels by Dostoevsky, we see a sharp shift in the portraiture of masculinity, from valorous strength that marks the male characters in many works by Dostoevsky and Kafka's contemporaries, such as in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and Rudyard Kiplin's fictional works that celebrated British imperial power. A study of this shift from valorous masculinity, to weak and degenerated masculinity is the basis of my thesis.

My trajectory for defining the degenerated masculinity in the works of these authors is, first, an identification of the social and psychological realisms that surround the male characters and, an interpretation of the degenerated

masculine characters as their response to an equally degenerated society. The need for such interpretation is based on my hunger to understand the near extinction of traditional masculine portraiture from Western fiction through symbolic degeneration of the male heroes—in the case of these authors, their engagement of the human question through the depiction of frailty, repulsion and all around imperfection. In other words, I was attracted by the burning question: “what is masculine about a male who is perpetually sickly and is only portrayed as the undesirable in the *present*, irrespective of his supposed intelligence, or noble family lineage in the *past*?” I answer this question by examining the socially constructed codes of masculinity in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, and show that where the male characters come short of these codes of masculinity, their masculinity degenerated significantly.

In her book *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell provides a catalog of types of masculinity that existed from the Greco-Roman imperial era, to modern and post-modern era. Connell is arguably a leading voice in modern theories of masculinity, but the masculine tradition on which I base my study of the degeneration of the characters’ masculinity is what I term the traditional masculinity of Victorian period—an era in which Dostoevsky wrote, and Kafka’s works departs from, despite his proximity to the literary era.² Using Connell’s

² The official end of the Victorian period and literary tradition is tagged at 1901—the end of Queen Victoria’s reign. Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and *A Hunger Artist* were published in 1915.

catalog of masculinity as a main background, and the social constructions of image of masculinity in Victorian era, I examine the portraits of the male characters in these fictions and show their degeneration in comparison to the era's norm.

By way of literary criticism and scholarship, Dostoevsky and Kafka's works provide rich material for analysis of nineteenth and twentieth century fictional characters' psychology, philosophy and sociology. Such works as Ilya Kliger's 2010 research paper: "Shapes and the Enigmatic Hero in Dostoevsky: the Case of *Crime and Punishment*," and David Spurr's 2011 essay: "Paranoid Modernism in Joyce and Kafka," engage these fictions in critical studies which identify atypical characteristics in the male protagonists. Towing the path of historicism as a form of literary criticism, Kliger explored the historical and sociological position of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in a Russian state that was both in the throes of tradition and radical change. According to him, the novel is a "political allegory that stages and imaginatively resolves the socio-temporal conditions"³ of the Russian state. The protagonist, Raskolnikov, is "whimsical and capricious" because he reflects the fitful pattern of change that Russia was undergoing, and his dénouement was expected because his impulsive

³ Ilya Kliger. "Shapes of History and the Enigmatic Hero in Dostoevsky: The Case of *Crime and Punishment*." *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 228-245. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 4, 2012).

action in murdering the miserly old woman whom he adjudged “vile,” was certain to cause him troubles. By extension, Russia’s trajectory of change was a fitful one—it was fraught with catastrophic judgments, and Dostoevsky captures this through the character’s portrait in the form of an allegory. This is a great explication of course but, Kliger’s interpretation is somewhat subjective. The oddities that are inherent in the male characters of the novel hardly need allegorical interpretations in order to identify their inherent decadence. Raskolnikov’s frailty and ignoble act of murder, as well as Marmeladov’s failure in catering to his family and, his abominable habit of stealing from them are reflective of their degenerated masculinity. Of course different theories on what it means to be a man abound, but these male characters come short of the overriding idea of masculinity in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century society. My objective is to highlight the social culture of the period and draw a juxtaposition of the decadent male characters against their archetypes.

Spurr also provides enhanced understanding of the psychological symbolisms in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* through his critical interpretation of the character’s paranoia and anxiety. To Spurr, some authors’ works may be a reflection of themselves, and the paranoid anxieties which the central character, Gregor, displays, is a symbolic protest against old literary tradition. The atypical characteristics and the oddities Gregor displays are Kafka’s way of asserting a

modernist temper and rebelling against the antagonism of decorous literary style.⁴ Again, an interesting interpretation but, an extended explication could be a deeper assessment of Gregor's image in terms of his masculinity, and its shift from the traditional portraiture of maleness in Victorian period. Such explication which borders on masculinity would provide a rich material for studies in masculinity, and not just on styles of literature. My study fulfills this need through the explication of the general masculine images and their inherent trend of degeneration.

In examining Dostoevsky and Kafka's works with various lenses, Victor Terras, Curtis Gedney and Koelb Clayton hint at, but do not provide an in-depth analysis of, the masculine gender in the novelists' fictions. Terras' 1998 book, *Reading Dostoevsky* is an exemplary guide for understanding the place of psychology in Dostoevsky's works. He sees the characters as often "self-conscious, alienated and disintegrating" because they embody a form of "centrifugal psychology."⁵

The...hero's self-consciousness may lead to alienation, to doubling and to disintegration of his personality.⁶

⁴ David Spurr. 2011. "Paranoid Modernism in Joyce and Kafka." *Journal Of Modern Literature* 34, no. 2: 178-181

⁵ Victor Terras. 1998. *Reading Dostoevsky*. Madison: Wisconsin University Press. Page 39

⁶ Ibid.

Terras, further, interprets the character's (Raskolnikov) centrifugal psychology as "weak" in his relation to Sonya. According to him, in their encounters in the novel, Raskolnikov was often the weaker of the two. Gedney and Clayton also note the absence of masculine strength in some of the authors' works, but they both interpret them as a "remedy for a malaise," and "mythologized helplessness" respectively. Gedney believes that the epileptic fits in some Dostoevskian characters are symbolic *pharmakons*, while Clayton sees the childish traits that are present in Gregor as a form of mythical helplessness. In his essay: *Epilepsy as a Pharmakon in Dostoevsky's Fiction* which was published in 1992, Gedney interprets the characters' fits as symbolic cleansing from the malaise that afflict them. He does well in identifying the fits and frailties that pervade the male characters in the selected fictions, but he does not address the implication of these malaises on the male characters' masculinities. Also, Clayton pinpoints some shortcomings in Kafka's male characters—referring to Gregor in *The Metamorphosis*, he notes that:

Sometimes, Kafka contextualizes adult characters in such a way as to foreground their permanent status as children. This is notably true of Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* and George Bendemann in "*The Judgment*," grownups who still live with their parents and operate in the parental orbit.⁷

These grownups who display childish traits are inherently helpless, according to Clayton, and their portraiture is Kafka's way of mythologizing helplessness.

⁷ Clayton Koelb 2010. *Kafka a guide for the perplexed*. London: Continuum.
<http://public.eblib.com/EBLPublic/PublicView.do?ptiID=601821>.

Again, very insightful analysis, but, in contemplating Clayton and Gedney's analysis of the characters' oddities and shortcomings, a question does arise and that is: how do the identified shortcomings affect the masculine culture of the male characters? Can it be said that Gregor's metamorphosis into a vermin is a symbolic emasculation? In this study, I identify and interpret their shortcomings as both causative and resultant effects of masculine degeneration. I base my examination of the masculine traits in the male characters of these fictions on the documented theories and studies of masculinity in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*, the central male characters reflect atypical traits of masculinity as they respond to their social and psychological realities. Illness was a common factor that the men dealt with, and it affected their masculine identities adversely. The male hero in *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin suffered from a neurological malady, Sydenham Chorea. Known back then as St Vitus dance, the illness was somewhat emasculating, for the common opinion in the novel was that the Prince was mentally retarded. Ippolit is another character who was symbolically emasculated by consumption, or the disease known today as consumption. The characters: Gregor, and the unnamed artist in *The Metamorphosis* and *A Hunger Artist*, respectively, also suffer the degenerating effects of illness.

In identified instances, the codes of Victorian masculinity such as achievement, hegemony and patriarchy were absent in the characters of Ivolgin, Marmeledov, Raskolnikov and the artist, in *The Idiot*, *Crime and Punishment* and *A Hunger Artist*, respectively. I analyze these absences as the manifestations of their degeneration. I argue that these codes of masculinity produced physical and psychological anxieties in the male character, consequently effecting their degeneration. Also, juxtaposed with their female counterparts, I note the male character's subdued masculinity as an implication of the authors' portrayal of some of the women in excellent terms – For instance, Ivolgin's wife was the family's benefactor, as her drunken husband was often too drunk to live up to his role as the family's patriarch – Such departure from the expected codes of masculinity, is what I define as degeneration of masculinity.

Chapter One

Degeneration of Masculinity in *The Idiot*

The Idiot “exhibits a flight from masculinity,” writes Nina Strauss in her essay: “Flights from *The Idiot*’s Womanhood”⁸ as she analyzed Dostoevsky’s treatment of the novel’s male characters in relation to their female counterparts. Strauss interprets the author’s portrayal of a good person whose embodiment of a Christ-like character makes him highly improbable, but yet, realistic. Prince Myshkin, the novel’s protagonist, is Dostoevsky’s idealized depiction of not just the quintessential good person, but also a highly flawed person, in whose character we witness a shift from the traditional traits of a masculine hero. Strauss treats the marked deviation from expressions of typical Greco-Roman masculinity in *The Idiot* as Dostoevsky’s invention of a “Prince Christ,” who takes it upon himself to save and glorify an otherwise condemned and scorned woman—Nastaya Filippovna. To Strauss, Dostoevsky portrayed in Myshkin, a path to Christianity which invariably meant the shedding of typical masculinity traits, and the adoption of typical feminine traits that allow for the absorption and expression of Christ-like compassion.⁹ Although Strauss limits her analysis of masculinity to Myshkin’s character,

⁸ Nina Strauss. 1998. “*Flight from The Idiot’s Womanhood*.” Strauss’ interprets *The Idiot* as Dostoevsky’s attempt at reconciling the dichotomy of a gender culture that puts femininity at a disadvantage.

⁹The male character that Strauss focused on in her analysis was Prince Myshkin and she linked her interpretation to Dostoevsky’s orthodox beliefs. She posits that Prince Myshkin was the author’s favorite hero. Myshkin was a sort of Prince-Christ, as his “goodness” was reflective of Christ’s goodness and meekness.

her observation of the shift in masculinity is astute. Without making an overt summation of the novel as a propagator and defender of the “Woman Question,”¹⁰ she spotlights a development in Dostoevskian heroes, and that is the fact that they are categorically atypical.

The atypical traits of the male characters in *The Idiot* manifest as shifts from the traditional culture of masculinity. While these shifts cannot be definitively termed “effeminate” in general, they provide a portraiture that quarrels with the traditional culture of masculinity. As R.W. Connell said in her *Masculinities*, masculinity “is an achievement” – it is the collection of codes and obligation by which the male gender is expected to adhere.¹¹ Where a man falls short of these codes and obligations, popular opinion may be that he is less of a man. The major descriptor of masculinity is therefore not mainly the possession of a phallus, but the demonstration of certain codes and expectations. The men in *The Idiot* fall short of these codes and masculine obligations, and this is reflected in their appearance, interaction with women, social and domestic stations and their overall ambience.

In this chapter, I will examine Dostoevsky’s portrayal of the masculine culture in *The Idiot* as reflected in the male characters’ appearances, interaction with women, mannerisms and stations. The shifts from, and degeneration of, masculinity amongst the

¹⁰ “The Woman Question” was a 19th century debate about women’s rights in Europe, and Dostoevsky makes several mention of it in *The Idiot*. It’s not hard to understand his stance on the issue, and that is: women ought to be treated better.

¹¹ R.W. Connell. 2005. *Masculinities*, 2nd edition.

male characters in *The Idiot*, will be identified and analyzed in reference to the effects that illness has on the characters' masculinity. The novel's epileptic hero, Prince Myshkin, whose unflattering diagnosis of idiocy and epilepsy elicit the mixed emotions of endearment and repulsion, and the consumptive Ippolit whose tuberculosis reduced him to a nihilist, provide good examples of the emasculating effects that illness has on masculinity. I'll also examine Ivolgin's degeneration on the basis of his drunkenness, and stroke as an emasculating illness. Connell's definition of masculinity as an "achievement" will be applied in the examination of the men's familial and social status. In the process, I will establish their deviation from the norm. I shall also interpret the extended effect that the men's unimpressive status has on their relationships with the women, by paying particular attention to gender dynamics in the novel. Feminine dominance features throughout the novel, and while Dostoevsky may have been making a sociopolitical statement with his frequent references to the Woman Question, his portrayal of the female characters as essentially more impressive¹² produced a somewhat domino effect—the women were more dominant while the men seemed submissive. Attention will also be paid to Dostoevsky's copious treatment of emotions and how their expressions by the males underpin the shift from masculinity to what I categorize as degeneration.

¹² Character portraiture of Dostoevsky's female character would reveal his impressive opinion about women, hence his stance on the Woman Question. In *Crime and Punishment*, Sonia, a woman scorned for her prostitution, is portrayed by Dostoevsky as angelic, beneath the filth that society took her to be.

Masculinity and Illness: Portraits of the Consumptive, the Epileptic and the Idiotic

Sickness is in itself a form of decadence. If, as James Adams posits in his *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* that the most cherished masculine virtues are “genuine virility, vigorous intelligence and a cold austerity of mind,”¹³ some male characters in *The Idiot* fell short of the cherished masculine culture in the nineteenth century Europe. While it may be superfluous to insist that a sick man is not a “man”, the absence of virility in modernist fictional heroes gives a sickly hero a weak mien when compared to typical Victorian men who were known for their hegemonic masculinity.

As the title of the novel suggests, the protagonist is an idiot. While Dostoevsky’s intention was to depict an all-around good man, his interpretation of a good man is as symbolic as it is deprecating. The religious undertones that he employs in portraying Myshkin’s character produce a Christ-like person, but the hero’s embrace of his idiocy and epilepsy makes him not just a highly flawed Christ-like hero, but a weak one. We first encounter Myshkin in the novel when he was returning from Switzerland where he had been in a treatment facility for his idiocy. If one wondered how idiocy could be an illness, his manner of speech as we immediately see in his interaction with Rogozhin and Lebedev on the train to Russia, revealed that he was a man with poor thinking faculty and a high dose of naivety—in fact, an idiot:

¹³ James Eli Adams. 1995. *Dandies and Desert Saints : Styles of Victorian Maculinity* p. 149-150

They got to talking. The readiness of the blond young man in the Swiss cloak to answer all of his swarthy companion's questions was astonishing and betrayed no suspicion of the utter carelessness, idleness and impropriety of some of the questions. In answering them, he said among other things that, he had indeed been away from Russia for a long time, more than four years, that he had been sent abroad on account of illness, some strange nervous illness like the falling sickness or St. Vitus's dance...Listening to him, the swarthy man grinned several times; he laughed particularly when, to his question "And did they cure you?" the blond man answered: "No, they didn't."¹⁴

The blond man was of course, Myshkin, and his willingness to speak glowingly about his illness betrays any reservations he might have about his sickness. St. Vitus' dance is slang for a neurological disease called Sydenham's chorea; it affects the sufferer's speech and balance, so that he often appears to be dancing while he walks. Without a doubt, it is a debilitating disease, and Myshkin's revelation to Rogozhin that he was not cured confirms that in terms of masculinity, he lacked virility. Also, his innocent naivety is akin to stupidity. This is seen in the account he gives about the attempts he made at establishing contact with Mrs. Epanchin, the wife of an aristocrat. Myshkin's assumption that he may be a distant relative of the general's wife prompted him to make the trip from Switzerland with barely enough money to support himself. He later tells Rogozhin that he had written a number of letters to Mrs. Epanchin introducing himself, and hoping for some kinship, but never got a response. That Myshkin expected the Epanchins to believe his claim of kinship without an iota of proof, is a kind of naivety that, although far-fetched, is attributive to a trusting innocence, and hence, forgivable. But his decision to embark on the journey despite not having received an acknowledgement from his supposed kin brings his persona as an idiot to the fore.

¹⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky. 2003. *The Idiot*, page 7.

While it is quite easy to brush off the meaning of idiocy as light stupidity, the word is in fact a clinical descriptor for severe mental retardation, and as the prince revealed earlier, he suffers from a neurological disease which potentially affects his reasoning faculties. This impediment invariably affects his masculinity to the point of degeneration. As Connell argued, gender roles are constructed and realized in social contexts, and where Myshkin's idiocy hampers his virility and soundness of mind, his ability to construct and sustain social relationships invariably suffers. To put it squarely, Myshkin lacked the ability to enact his masculinity in the primary context where gender roles are typically rooted—the social context.

The effect that illness has on a sufferer is that it tends to envelop the sufferer and hijack his identity. Where a man in good health would have to be exceptionally outstanding, for instance, in speech and character in order to make the least impression in a social situation, a sickly man with mangled speech and poor reasoning skills would make a greater impression on an observer. This is because any form of decay attracts as much attention on the sufferer as it creates repulsion in the observer. Although an observer may, for the sake of modesty, hide his or her distaste at the sight of decadence, however, the impression that a sickly person creates tends to be long-lasting. What obtains in such a case is that the ailment almost always seems to go ahead of the sufferer—this is what happens with Myshkin – those who came to know him as an idiot tended to expect less of him, and generally treated him as one. We saw this when he got acquainted with the Epanchins, and Mrs. Epanchin assumed he had to have a napkin tied around his neck while eating to keep him from soiling himself. It turns out that the prince

was not that incapacitated. His idiocy, however, did manifest when in response to Mrs. Epachin's question: "Do they tie a napkin around your neck, when you eat Prince?" and he replied: "Before when I was about seven, I think they did, but now I usually put my napkin on my knee when I eat."¹⁵ In the prince's innocent response, one immediately sees a kind of a child in him, albeit, stupid.

The consumptive Ippolit also reflects the degenerating effect that illness has on a man's masculinity. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis and told he had only about three weeks or at most, one month to live. Expectedly, his illness eventually enveloped and defined him, so that when one contemplates Ippolit's character, what immediately comes to mind is the image of decadence and bleakness. His interaction with the prince and other characters in the novel often included nihilistic outbursts that were constantly interrupted by coughing fits with blood-laced phlegm. If one overlooks his endless chesty hacks, what may be hard to overlook is his illness-induced nihilism. In his "Explanation," a tedious exposé he wrote in preparation of his botched suicide, he speculated on the quandary he would create if he wantonly killed a number of people—how hard it would be for the state to prosecute him because in a way he had already been handed a death sentence in the form of tuberculosis. That his "Explanation" produced irritation amongst his listeners is hardly surprising, for as he read his diary and recounted his private deliberation to commit suicide, except for the prince and a few others who were too

¹⁵Ibid. Page 54.

drunk to understand his tedious “explanation,” his audience could not contain their disgust at what they supposed was Ippolit’s disgrace:

In himself ... [Ippolit], exhausted by illness, seemed as weak as a trembling leaf torn from a tree; but he no sooner looked around at his listeners—for the first time during the last hour—than the same haughty, almost contemptuous and offensive revulsion showed at once in his eyes and smile . He hurried with his defiance. But his listeners were also totally indignant. They were all getting up from the table with noise and vexation.¹⁶

Ippolit did not hide his contempt at those who were not sickly as he was, and his listeners saw this in the details that he read to them from his diary. Indeed, like a condemned man, his diary detailed his misery and frustrations which manifest in him in the form of negativity and attention-seeking behaviors. He constantly hankered after pity, and when he got none, he proved insufferable and would try even harder to infuriate the situation. Clearly, such behaviors are not flattering. If anything, they are behaviors that are reflective of emasculation. Keeping in mind that masculinity is more about social constructions and less about the phallus, Ippolit’s persona creates an image of a contemptuous, sickly and nihilistic person, and the idea of strength and virility is far-fetched, irrespective of Ippolit’s gender. We can say categorically that Ippolit’s illness emasculated him, for in considering tuberculosis as a disease, it bore the old name “consumption” because it did just that to its sufferer—it consumed the person’s health, and left in its wake, a carcass at death. The symbolism of Ippolit’s sickness must therefore, not be overlooked—Dostoevsky portrayed a dying man who personified a sort of degeneration. Of course a fatal illness is a disheartening reality, and so, any form of

¹⁶ Ibid. Page 415

empathy toward the sufferer is very much deserved, and in fact, a tad honorable when solicited with civility. But choosing to bare his nihilistic outlook on life and contempt on others to elicit empathy erodes any respect for the individual—we see this in Ferdyschenko's curt comment after he read his "Explanation:" "Well, devil knows, a man shouldn't unbutton himself like that".¹⁷ Of course Ferdyschenko spoke in respect of gender expectations: respectable men do not disgrace themselves publicly, and he chose the metaphor to point out, perhaps inadvertently, that Ippolit had been emasculated.

In terms of symbolic emasculation, perhaps the character that most embodies it is the retired general, Ivolgin. He is the drunkard whose addictions included not just alcohol, but also telling lies. Before we encountered Ivolgin in the novel, his name had already been mentioned to the Prince who was taking board at the Ivolgins'—warning him not to give his rent directly to Ivolgin as he was sure to squander it on alcohol. And that indeed turned out to be the case, Ivolgin reeked of alcohol when he met his new tenant, and almost immediately, his other pathological addiction becomes evident. He tells Myshkin that he had known his father in the military and mentions a name that the prince did not recognize. Myshkin tries to tell him that he may not have known his father after all, but Ivolgin insists, and extends the tale to include Myshkin's mother as well. It becomes evident then, that perhaps due to his drinking habits, or failures in life, Ivolgin had developed a habit of inventing glorious tales in which he portrays himself as exceptional and impressive. His habit of telling lies on a whim comes through during a

¹⁷Ibid. Page 415

visit with the infamous Nastasya Filippovna. He tells her a story of a supposed incident that took place on the train on which he was traveling, and how his reaction to the actions of two perplexing women drew so a lot of attention. It turns out to be a story he had read in a newspaper, and he told the story as if it happened years ago, like he had been in it. We shall examine the ramifications and symbolisms of Ivolgin's pathological lying in another section, but without a doubt, his drinking habit was interwoven with his failures and tall tales, and even more fatally, to the stroke that he suffered later in the novel.

As an illness, a stroke is a destructive disease. And where masculine virility is concerned, the illness is even more physically emasculating. That Ivolgin's sad existence ended the way it did may hardly be surprising, but a question does come to mind and that is, was Dostoevsky trying to portray a flawed man whose failures could only be manifested through marked emasculation? Ivolgin was struck by the disease while he, in a drunken fury, left his family when his older son, Ganya, having had enough of his tales and shame, dared him to leave. He was in the streets recounting bogus tales to his sixteen-year-old son of how he stayed the hands of the great Napoleon from destroying Russia. Of course he had never met Napoleon and his son knew this. When young Koyla's pleas that he return home fell on deaf ears, the kid knew that his father's thinking faculties may be failing him. The significance of Ivolgin's stroke is not far-fetched—he was a degenerating man, and the height of his degeneration was in his eventual stroke. That he had a stroke on the street, so that some onlookers witnessed his paralysis, makes it even more symbolic, for as he kept predicting in his drunken outburst, his only legacy was invariably that of disgrace: “Disgrace pursues me”! Indeed, Ivolgin had failed

himself and his family, and the occurrence of the stroke added the cap on his symbolic degeneration. He knew that in his drunken state, he was in truth, a decayed man, and this is seen in his instruction to Koyla about a possible epithet for his tombstone: “When you bury me, write on my tombstone: Here lies a dead soul!”¹⁸

It is noteworthy that Ivolgin never recovered from his stroke. As if in a climatic end to an already flawed and weakened man, the illness turned him into a mute, and about a week after his stroke, he died. Without a doubt, his stroke was a symbolic emasculation, and his illness was reminiscent of the degeneration of Ippolit’s and Myshkin’s masculinity in the sense that, just as both men’s illness hampered their successful enactment of their masculine gender roles, Ivolgin’s ailments manifested in his failures and, by extension made him a nuisance. The shortcomings that affect a man’s masculinity would be better analyzed in terms of masculine expectations and achievements, and I will discuss this in the next section.

Masculinity and Achievement

In tracing the history of the development of masculinity in Western culture, R.W. Connell identified the phenomenon of hegemony as the driving factor behind masculinity. Although he identified different types of masculinities based on the economic culture of the era, he defined hegemony as the possession of dominant influence in a social context:

¹⁸Ibid. Page 505

Hegemony refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the...legitimacy of patriarchy.¹⁹

The “legitimacy of patriarchy” being the acceptance, recognition and we might add, expectations of dominance that have come to be accorded the masculine gender. Until the modern period, definitions of masculinity were based on the culture of achievements, both social and familial. To Connell, the culture of hegemony was most exemplified in the concept of empire such as in the old Roman and British empires among whom the measure of men became definitively linked to imperial conquests and economic control. Owing to the harsh measures that were typically involved in imperial conquests, the chores of imperial expansion were expectedly left to the male gender, and this, according to Connell, led to economic, political and social advantages that men held over women for generations:

The men who applied force at the colonial frontier, the ‘conquistadors’ as they were called in the Spanish case, were perhaps the first group to become defined as a masculine cultural type in the modern sense.²⁰

It therefore, came to be expected of men to adhere to the culture of achievement, and to translate the expectations that a hegemonic masculine culture had of him, to his home, and generally live up to his patriarchal status. This was hardly the case among the men in *The Idiot*. From Prince Myshkin, whose identity as an idiot belied any expectations of achievements from him, to General Epanchin whose patriarchal role in his home is non-existent, and Lebedev, the drunken lecher, whose caricatured persona is only a mild

¹⁹R. W. Connell. *Masculinities*, page 77.

²⁰*Ibid.* Page 187

reflection of Ivolgin, these men's masculinity seemed decadent when measured in terms of social expectations of patriarchal achievements.

In his examination of the characters in *The Idiot*, Edward Wasiolek notes the remarkable feature amongst the men, which is that they all fell short of social expectations. He describes Lebedev as a “drunkard and lecher;”²¹ whose uninspiring character is a reflection of the caricature of the follies and foibles that Dostoevsky tries to capture in *The Idiot*. In terms of achievement, Ivolgin is a failure—he described himself as a despot in his own house, of course he knew he had failed his family in one of the patriarchal roles that was expected of him, and that is, to truly be the head of his household and provide for them. His oldest son pointed out his father's failures to him when he had had enough, telling him to desist from speaking of honor as he had failed in his role as a patriarch. Whether Ivolgin was always in full recognition of his failures as the father of his family is questionable, but the fact that he fell short in his familial obligation was evident to his family and even to his youngest son. To make ends meet, his wife decided to sublet their family home to such tenants as Prince Myshkin and Ferdyschenko. And Ganya's warning to Myshkin that he refrain from giving the rent money directly to his father who was bound to squander it at the liquor bar, shows that not only had he failed in providing for his family, but that he was also in danger of causing more hardship, so that they had to be on constant guard. We saw this in his dealings with Marfa Borisovna, a widow with children, to whom he owes money which

²¹Edward Wasiolek. *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction*. Page 101.

he apparently spent on alcohol. Her outburst gives us a picture of her impression of

Ivolgin:

“Aren’t you ashamed, aren’t you ashamed of yourself, barbarian and tyrant of my family, barbarian and fiend! He’s robbed me clean, sucked me dry, he’s still not content! How long will I put up with you, you shameless and worthless man!”²²

Her characterization of Ivolgin as a thief is undeniably an indictment of his failed obligation—an underachievement. His son, Ganya summed up this indictment when he used the word “robber” in the same breath as “father of my family” while berating his father.

The ramifications and symbolisms of Ivolgin’s habit of inventing glorious tales that include and show him in the best light are that he is in a way imaginatively “achieving” those masculine expectations that he had failed in accomplishing in his reality. His tales often include him performing some glorious acts in the military, being in the company of excellent men who are known for their achievements. In a tale he invented, he told of how, at ten years old, he had the acquaintance of Napoleon who noticed his intelligent mind and took him into his counsel. According to Wasiolek, Ivolgin’s exclusion from the aristocratic clique was too much for him to bear, and lying was a way he could attempt to re-establish his social masculine achievements:

The exclusion had been more than he [Ivolgin] could bear and he had retreated to a fantasy world where he gives advice to Napoleon and holds council with the great men of his era. During the siege of Sevastopol, for example, a truce is called to permit a famous physician to come to him in the name of science to examine the thirteen bullets that are lodged in his chest.²³

²²Fyodor Dostoevsky. 2003. *The Idiot* Ist Vintage Classic Edition, page 131.

²³Ibid. Page 101.

The melodramatic scenes that Ivolgin creates are deliberate. In Ivolgin's era, masculine valor was typically enacted in military conquests, and his imaginary enactments of masculine achievements had to include the dramatic. Indeed, through his tall tales, Ivolgin creates his own caricature, and as if in affirmation of his degenerated masculinity, he continually projected this caricature of masculinity in his stories.

Prince Myshkin is a "knight without armor,"²⁴ according to Wasiolek. His known achievement is a speculation of his extant noble lineage. When we first met him on the train, he was in bad shape. His entire possession included a little bundle of clothing that his travelling companions found laughable, and owing to his illness, they had found it impossible to educate him. But it was in his relationship with Aglaya, a love interest that he failed in achieving, that his degenerated masculinity is reflected. Being from an aristocratic family, Aglaya found the prince's social status inadequate as her future husband. But when the prince's endearing simplicity won Aglaya's heart so that she placed love over social status, the prince fails woefully in sustaining their relationship. We know of course that until the post-modern era, men typically pursued women, so that the prince's failure in following Aglaya whom he loved, and instead staying with the insane Filippovna whom he feared, is a form of failure on his part in achieving a masculine role in gender relationship.

It seems that in order to portray his perfect man in Russian society that encouraged patriarchy and the connotations that came with it, Dostoevsky had to sacrifice

²⁴Ibid. Page 103

Myshkin's masculinity, and rid him of the rough edges that men typically possess. The novelist's reference to the Woman Question, and his hero's preoccupation with saving Nastasya Filippovna at the expense of his own love is a reflection of Dostoevsky's sympathy toward the feminine gender, and in keeping with that, he stripped his hero of the attributes that typically defined masculinity, one of them being the social obligations of achievements. According to Nina Strauss in her essay "Flights from Womanhood in *The Idiot*," Dostoevsky created a type of Christ who identifies with degraded femininity, and in making him a salve for such injured souls as Nastasya Filippovna, aspects of the gender identity which seemed to be the root of Filippovna and Maria's miseries had to be disembodied in the women's hero—Prince Myshkin:

Myshkin is offered as a solution for the second sex's problems in Russian society, as an alternative model for masculinity, as an anti-type to male violence toward women personified by Rogozhin, and as an antidote to Western patriarchal rationality and secularism.²⁵

Of course "violence to women" is not a descriptor of masculinity, but it is part of a gender culture that has good, bad and ugly sides. That Myshkin failed in living up to a masculine obligation that Aglaya expected of him—which is the fabled act of sweeping her off her feet, and galloping into the sunset, is a reflection of the continuum that Dostoevsky established in tackling a social issue, that is, the woman question. We will see this continuum of weak heroes in Dostoevsky's other work, *Crime and Punishment*.

²⁵Nina Strauss. "Flights from The Idiot's Womanhood" in *Dostoevsky's The Idiot: a Critical Companion* edited by Liza Knapp, 1998. Page 105-106.

Another aspect of masculinity through which masculine achievement was sometimes measured is dueling. The number of times that the male characters made reference to it in the novel is what prompts its consideration in my analysis of masculinity. In her review of George Moss' *The Image of Man: the Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Joanna Bourke highlights the attributes of masculinity that were prevalent before the modern era, and dueling was one of them. She notes that before emphasis on the body became the parameter for defining manliness, that the achievement of honor through dueling was a descriptor of masculinity amongst the aristocrats of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is not surprising then that in his bid to reclaim his masculinity, Ivolgin included some duels in his false tales. He told the prince of how he had supposedly been in a love triangle with the prince's father, and that the woman in question was the prince's mother. To settle the quandary in a traditional masculine fashion, a duel was scheduled to occur, but with both men's pistols drawn, their brotherly compassion for each other saved the day.²⁶ Of course this tale was invented by Ivolgin in order to imaginatively experience the thrill of masculine conflict—a level of conflict that he could not attain in reality.

In terms of honor, the slap that Myshkin received from Ganya who, in a fit of anger had intended to strike his sister, and being stopped by the prince, slapped the prince, was, according to Koyla, a lifetime of dishonor. And just as some masculine honor was achieved through dueling, when lost, it took a masculine challenge such as

²⁶Fyodor Dostoevsky. *The Idiot*, page 95.

dueling to regain it. But the prince was a “good man,” and dueling was something he considered barbaric and unnecessary. Post-modern readers would certainly agree with the prince on that, and for good reason. But we also see an important aspect of masculinity increasingly disappear in Dostoevsky’s era. The prince’s shunning of masculine glory through dueling, and his embrace of a low profile is also seen when he told Ippolit he planned to avoid a duel that was to be brought before him, owing to his interference in a conflict that involved Nastasya Filippovna. He responded to Ippolit’s taunts about avoiding a duel out of weakness, by affirming that he was indeed too weak to engage in a duel. Indeed, the prince embodied weakness as much as he embodied the Christ-like characteristics such as compassion and forgiveness, the virtue of choosing to suffer dishonor, as in the slaps he received for Varya’s sake, and taking up Filippovna’s suffering by offering to marry her. Something does come to mind when one examines the prince’s suffering and that is, as Strauss stressed, he saw himself as some sort of savior for the injured feminine gender. And perhaps to project his convictions about the Woman Question, Dostoevsky portrays the women in *The Idiot* in more impressive lights than he did the men.

Feminine Dominance

Dostoevsky appeared to deliberately place the feminine and masculine genders in juxtaposition with each other so that it tended to magnify the degenerating masculinity of the males. Where the men failed miserably in enacting their masculinity, the women seemed to excel in feminine dominance. When *The Idiot* was written, the Woman

Question, which was a debate about women's roles in the society was gaining steam.²⁷

Put squarely, the question about how much rights should be allowed the feminine gender who were essentially seen as weak and inferior to men, was the crux of the Woman Question, and as if to rubbish the culture of patriarchy on which opponents of women's rights based their argument, Dostoevsky made caricatures of men, and in effect, depicted a degeneration that featured prominently in modern literature.

We first see this feminine dominance, albeit subtle, when we encounter the Epanchin women at the beginning of the novel. Mrs. Epanchin and her three daughters seem to have such an overbearing presence, and between Mrs Epanchin and her husband, she is portrayed as although brash and talkative, more in charge of the Epanchin household. When the general brought the prince to meet his wife, he immediately retreated to the background, and his wife led the visit with the prince. Such a picture is at odds with the traditions of a typical Victorian family in which hegemonic masculinity was often emphasized—the man saw it as his familial obligation to head the family in all things.

But perhaps the woman who best represents the power shift that seemed to occur in the novel is Nastasya Filippovna. Dostoevsky portrayed her as a hurt woman—hurt by the society whose discrimination against women produced an urge in her to want to hurt and dominate the men in her life. She had been the ward of an aristocrat who later started taking sexual advantage of her when she was fifteen. He moved her to a comfortable

²⁷ The Woman Question was a popular discourse in late nineteenth century – precisely around 1870.

home in a secluded village where he could have uninterrupted access to her, and with less gossip. But gossip was inevitable and she came to be known as a “kept woman” – a man’s prostitute. In a society that was still essentially patriarchal, the image of a woman who had lost her maidenhood was reprehensible, and such a woman was not fit to be the wife of a gentleman. Her resolve to deter Totsky from marrying a more respected high profile woman instead of her was, more or less, her only way of reacting to her hurt. And to show what he considered was a wrong gender-dynamic in a patriarchal culture that overlooked erring men like Totsky, and punished the hurt women as Filippovna, Dostoevsky portrayed a complex character in Nastasya, whose complexity is reflected in her constant desire to dominate the men around her with her hurt.

Nastasya’s rejection by society was a continuation of the hurt that began when Totsky made her his concubine, and her response to society was to dominate the few men who tried to get a piece of her on the side. Rogozhin loved her immensely, but he was a miscreant, a social outcast, and the only way he knew how to get a piece of Nastasya was to buy her off of Ganya, whom Totsky had arranged to marry her in order to protect himself. It is in how Nastasya treats Rogozhin and the prince that we see the shift in power dynamic. She despises Rogozhin for loving her, and punishes him for it by constantly humiliating him. As a way to spite him, she kept company with other men, used them for their money and kicked them out. And when the prince in his holy foolishness, decides to save her from herself by offering to marry her, she hopped between him and Rogozhin, abandoning both men on their wedding days, until Rogozhin killed her.

In analyzing Nastasya's complexity, Wasiolek posits that as payment for her hurt, Nastasya wanted to be hurt again. And to be hurt, she set out in hurting others such as Rogozhin, Ganya and the prince. The condescending way in which she treated both men, reflects a somewhat twisted power shift—she relegates Rogozhin to the background, while temporarily accepting the prince's offer of marriage. And then she abandons the prince because she felt herself unsuitable for the prince. Her reason for rejecting Rogozhin is not far-fetched. Apart from her distaste for his callous ways, Nastasya saw Rogozhin as less of a man, and she treated him as such. She threw the one hundred thousand roubles that Rogozhin offered Ganya for her purchase in to the fire and ordered Ganya to fetch the money from the burning flames if he wanted the money. It must be noted that Ganya never loved her; he was only marrying her because Totsky offered to pay him to marry Nastasya and get her off his back. But the strange occurrences thereafter showed the men at Nastasya's mercy and, as Wasiolek points out, she humiliates the men while embracing her hurt:

What is Nastasya seeking? She sweeps like a storm through the lives of almost all the characters in the novel. She is a dominating force in almost everyone's consciousness: Rogozhin sends his life swirling in unknown destruction for her; Totsky bows in fear and trembling before her caprices; and the prince is mysteriously and fatefully attracted to her...she is conscious of her effect on others.²⁸

And one might add that she utilizes that effect in humiliating the men. What becomes apparent in the situation is that Dostoevsky gives the hurt woman a sort of platform, which typically may not have been allowed a shunned concubine in reality. Nastasya was

²⁸Edward Wasiolek. *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction*, page 87.

the big threatening fiend to all and sundry and even Totsky, in all his masculine presence feared Nastasya because of the scandal that she was capable of causing him. She tortured Rogozhin by abandoning him many times, and returning to him at will, so that his love for her inevitably grew into burning hate. Her eventual rejection of the prince was for her, an inability to “destroy a good man.” But, in terms of power dynamics, one can say that although Nastasya met her expected demise, she did temporarily reject masculine dominance by dominating the men around her.

As we have already noted about Ivolgin’s failure in his role as the patriarchal head of his family, the leadership of his home naturally defaulted to his wife, Nina, and his daughter Varya. The women took care of the home, and to avoid scandals, kept and tended to Ivolgin despite his drinking habits. In terms of masculinity, if we overlooked Ivolgin’s failures, it is worthy to note that despite not having any pressing problems, Ganya, the oldest son of Ivolgin was quite insignificant, and played no leadership role in the family. He did find his father’s failures irritating, and although he had a wish to raise himself out the squalid situation brought on him by his father, he seemed to lack the ability to do so. His involvement in the botched arranged marriage with Nastasya was a financial venture, but, having been rejected, he suffers a nervous breakdown and ends up living with his sister, Varya. When young Koyla bemoaned his father’s shortcomings and noted that only his mother and sister demonstrated any form of responsibility around him, the prince pointed out that all was not bleakness after all, that there were strong people, and they were women:

“You see, you say there are no...strong people...but then strong people turn up, your mother, and [sister] Varya. Isn't it a moral strength to help here and in such circumstance?”²⁹

The prince was clearly pointing out the shift in power dynamics that had occurred.

Perhaps the male characters were oblivious of this shift, but juxtaposed against the women whose portraiture is more impressive than the men's, the men's masculinity in terms of patriarchal control was in decline.

The degeneration of masculinity among the men is also sometimes reflected in their mannerisms, appearance and overall mien. As Strauss states in her work, Dostoevsky portrayed Myshkin as an alternative to the masculinity represented by Rogozhin—in other words, where Rogozhin embodied the callous and rough edges that are found amongst the males, Myshkin embodied softness in mannerism that is akin to femininity. To Strauss, Myshkin's character is a sort of symbolic demonstration of feminine rhythm – he is sensitive to people's hurts and he reacts in the expressive ways that women might typically react:

Part of the tragicomedy of Myshkin's failed (sexual) masculinity is that he imitates the various stereotypically coded feminine rhythms – hysteria, indecision, marginality...and self degradation...What binds him to women is the physical experience of being pierced or stabbed by excess of feeling.³⁰

And these feelings often manifest in the prince's interaction with people. When Ganya slapped him, he went to a corner and sobbed, so that young Koyla came to him and kissed him to console him. He suffered perpetually from anxiety, blushed at intense

²⁹Fyodor Dostoevsky. *The Idiot*, page 134

³⁰Nina Struass. “Flights from The Idiot's Womanhood” in *Dostoevsky's The Idiot: a Critical Companion* edited by Liza Knapp, 1998 page 116.

conversations, and took to Nastasya and Aglaya's humiliation with painful mildness.

Such mannerisms differ significantly from typical masculine mannerisms, and, again, are reflective of the degenerated traditional masculine traits in Dostoevsky's novels.

The comical character, Lebedev is another male whose degenerated masculinity is magnified when he interacts with women. He is an unimpressive character, as Wasiolek points out, a caricature of the degenerated gentry that he worships:

Lebedev is nothing, as he himself exclaims on several occasions...he embodies with almost caricaturing frankness all the corruption of the society he lives in. He is the mirror of their souls, acting out without decorum, or measure, or concealment the codes by which they live...he is Dostoevsky's great clown...³¹

And as a clown, his mannerisms were more annoying than comical. Indeed, Lebedev's annoying habit earned him the scorn of the Epanchin women. He is often subservient to the ladies, and just about anybody that he wants to usurp. He grovels at Mrs. Epanchin's feet when he tries to deliver a letter to her, and tells the prince of how the old lady almost gave him a beating. Lebedev was indeed a far cry from the gentry masculinity that existed in the Russia of his time and like the rest of the male characters in the novel, he manifests this shift in masculinity through his mannerisms among other aspects.

At the end of Dostoevsky's novel, a question does arise and that is: with regards to the author's intent to depict a good man, did he succeed at that artistic assignment through Myshkin's character? Considering how hard he believed the fictional creation of a perfect man was, does he succeed in creating a good person? Answers to this may vary because it is hard to find perfection in idiocy, but one can say that through the cloak of

³¹Edward Wasiolek. 1964. *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction* page 101.

idiocy and holy foolishness, Dostoevsky does succeed in portraying goodness. However, the success came at a cost, and it is the stifling of the traditional masculine culture which by itself was antiquated in comparison with a new era. By giving such concepts as illness and femininity a higher platform, and portraying the failures of men in juxtaposition to women's impressive characters, Dostoevsky demotes traditional traits of masculinity.

Chapter Two

Degeneration of Masculinity in Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* and *The Metamorphosis*

The Kafkaesque mien of the artist and Gregor in *A Hunger Artist* and *The Metamorphosis*, respectively, stems from their state of abject hopelessness and their subsequent response to these circumstances. Gregor's mysterious transformation into an insect makes his character equally mysterious, for while he appears to think in a human voice, his physique and manner of speech are both similar to that of an insect. The nameless artist's transformation through starvation, into a gaunt repulsive being in a cage is also perturbing, because the illogicality of his self-flagellation in the name of an art persisted to the point of his death. This absurd composition is a deliberate technique employed by Kafka to depict a world that he considered harsh and incomprehensible, and which, in effect produced absurd and incomprehensible characters. These absurdities are often reflected in the characters' transformed persona as they grappled with their strange realities.

It is worthy to note that Kafka's characters, who face these troubles and are eventually destroyed, are males. In *The Trial*, Josef K. was the unfortunate character who was being tried for a nameless crime. The short story, *In the Penal Colony* also features a condemned man whose sole reality was wrapped around a torture device that was invented to punish men like him. Such sad reality of gloom and woe is also seen in *The Judgment*, in which the central character,

Georg Bendemann struggles against his father and himself, and in classic Kafkaian pattern, he loses the struggle. Clearly, there is a trend in Kafka's characters, and his depiction of males as suffering and helpless characters speaks of the emergent twentieth century fiction which reflects a new dawn of disturbance in traditionalism.

The depiction of the male protagonists in *A Hunger Artist* and *The Metamorphosis* as abject, hopeless and insignificant in the face of mysterious travails exemplify this disturbance because both stories reflect a marked shift in masculinity portraiture as seen in the previous literary tradition of the nineteenth century. While Gregor's transformation into a giant insect remains a puzzle to Kafka's readers, his sad realities are as symbolic as they are literal. His overnight decline from a productive man to a repulsive vermin is shocking, and the effect that such strange decline has on his masculinity is glaring. The absurd nature of a vermin with a human thought-pattern opens Gregor's character to many interpretations. The common pattern has been a symbolic reading and analysis as in the case of Edith Krause's essay, "Wisdom and the Tightrope of Being" in which she interprets Gregor Samsa's transformation as the symbolic representation of Zarathustra's three metamorphoses of the spirit.³² The artist's strange activity of living in a cage and starving to no end in *A Hunger Artist* has

³² Edith Krause. "Wisdom and the Tightrope of Being: Aspects of Nietzsche in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*." *Dialogue and Universalism*, 2005. pp 21-34

also garnered interpretations that treat the character and his strange art as symbolic. Nathan Cervo calls the story a parable that draws on Dionysian essence in the comic satire of “Christian Nativity and Epiphany.”³³ This is indeed, thought-provoking interpretation, but a point of attention for understanding the decline of these characters however symbolic they may seem is their psychology, and in line with my discourse, an examination of how the characters’ psychological manifestations affect their masculinity and reflect their degeneration will be done.

In this chapter, I will analyze Gregor’s transformation on the basis of his emotional state as shown in his thought process during his strange ordeal, by drawing from Sigmund Freud’s thesis of anxiety as a psychological complex that manifests in men in terms of their phallic or masculine development and preservation. In particular, I will apply the theory of castration anxiety in interpreting the characters’ anxieties as symbolic fear of the loss of their manhood, where they became wanting in performing their masculine roles. Although Gregor lost his speaking ability and was only able to produce shrill unpleasant sounds, the reader is privy to his inner thoughts which show that he was riddled with anxiety about his masculine duties as encoded in the gender culture of his time. These anxieties gradually metamorphosed into guilt as he perceived himself as underperforming in these roles. The hunger artist also

³³ Nathan Cervo. Kafka’s *A Hunger Artist*. *Explicator* [serial online] 1992, p99

presents a similar anxiety, albeit subtly, as seen in his overt persistence to outdo his fasting feat. With both characters' psyches laden with anxiety, what ensues is a psychological regression that is expressed in their physical and psychological makeup, thereby leading to a marked deviation from any traditional masculine image. I will also highlight the phenomenon of animalization as the effect of the characters' psychological regression, and self cancellation as both causative and resultant factors of emasculation anxiety that ultimately lead to the degeneration of the characters' masculinity. Besides the internal conflict of anxiety that manifests as both physical and psychological regression in the characters, their alienation by family, as in the case of Gregor, and the spectators in the case of the artist, will be highlighted to show them as partly contributive to the characters' demise, and in effect, degeneration of their masculinity.

Psychological Regression in Gregor and the Artist

In his case histories, Sigmund Freud listed regression as one of the defense mechanisms in psychodynamics whereby a patient reverses to an earlier or less perfect stage as a result of stressful events. The return to an earlier stage is in fact degeneration because the often involuntary decision to return to the less perfect but "comfort" stage is born from the patient's inability to cope with some stressful phenomena, so that rattled beyond its baseline, the person's psyche shifts to what it perceives as less complicated. Freud formulated this theory in one of his cases that he termed the "Rat Man" where his patient presented with emotional symptoms of obsessive fears, delusion and dangerous impulses. In typical

Freudian pattern, the psychologist pointed at psychosexual development in infancy as the cause of the man's anxiety and subsequent regression, but without veering off with Freud, what should be kept in mind is that Freud's patient regressed to a less developed stage as a result of anxiety. The pattern of the man's regression was a display of impulsive and dangerous actions, and the failure to act maturely or make important decisions as a result of his obsession. We see an uncanny similarity between the "Rat Man's" symptoms and the behaviors displayed by the hunger artist whose preoccupation with fasting was clearly an unhealthy obsession. In Gregor, his obsession was a lot more innate, but it does come through in his anxieties about working and performing to his family and employer's overt expectations. While both characters manifest their obsession differently, the cause itself is similar in both cases – they both encounter stressors that ultimately trigger their regression, or in the context of my study, what is invariably, degeneration with regards to their masculinity. I will discuss these stressors or causes of anxiety in Gregor and the artist's character under the following subtopics: achievement anxiety, male body anxiety and castration anxiety or symbolic emasculation.

I. Achievement Anxiety

As noted in chapter one, R.W. Connell identified the concept of achievement as the unspoken code of expectation that defined masculinity in European societies up until the late nineteenth century. As the breadwinner of his

family, Gregor was aware of these codes and expectations, and up to his unfortunate degeneration, he was covertly anxious about these expectations. We see this in what he said to his manager when he came looking for him after he failed to show up to work. While pleading with his manager for benevolence, he spoke of his presentiment about his illness, and although he didn't feel as well as he thought, he believed he would get over the illness:

I'm not quite as well as I thought ... I did have a slight presentiment ... I must have showed some sign of it ... Why didn't I report it at the office!³⁴

His presentiment about his illness, or what was to his family and other observers a strange transformation into a repulsive being, was partly born from his preoccupation with work and the pressure to perform up to par. His job as a travelling sales man, although lucrative, was a miserable occupation that exposed him to the unpleasant nuisances of public travels which were often marked with inadequate rest and sleep. While it was clearly an unpleasant occupation for Gregor, his gender obligation, as his parents' male child put the brunt of paying their debt on him, so that he was invariably impressed into the sales job as placation for his parents on one hand, and satisfaction of his parents' debt to his employer on the other hand.

Gregor's sister's exemption from working and contributing in paying the family's debt was a decision born of a gender culture that codified femininity as

³⁴ Franz Kafka. *The Complete Stories*. Page 97

inferior and incapable, and masculinity as superior and very capable. While Gregor seemingly adhered to these expectations and bore the responsibility of providing for his parents and sibling gallantly, the cultural reality that subjected one gender based on perceived inferiority, and suffocated another gender with implied and overt expectations did, with time, affect Gregor adversely—to the point of anxiety. This anxiety was heightened in the wake of his transformation and his subsequent inability to perform his masculine duties of earning money for the family. Despite his strange affliction, he worried ceaselessly about his family and how they would cope, for his father, although reportedly hale, had quit working and lain around while Gregor worked and tended to the family. While such action by his father seems shocking, its justification is not far-fetched—to Gregor's father, he had already performed his masculine role as the provider of the family when he was in his prime. While he remained the patriarchal leader of the family, the duty of income-earning and family upkeep had been passed on to Gregor and he was expected to live up to the family and gender expectations. To Gregor and his family, failure to perform his masculine roles as expected was an indictment against his manhood and a disappointment to his family—and this caused him great anxiety.

Whenever the need for earning money was mentioned, Gregor let go his hold on the door and threw himself down on the cool leather sofa beside it, he felt so hot with shame and grief.³⁵

³⁵ Ibid. Page 112

Gregor's perception of himself as an overall failure because of his inability to continue in his masculine role as a provider is better understood when Giorgio Agamben's proposition that every man "initiates a trial against himself"³⁶ in light of a code of conduct that does not necessarily indict him for committing any crime, but rather, a man indicts himself and invariably questions his own guilt. In Gregor's case, the feeling of "shame and grief" that he experiences causes the reader to question the unfair indictment against his manhood. However, it does not change the reality of declining masculinity that exists in the character, if anything; it reflects his weakness and continued degeneration.

It should be noted that expectations of masculine achievements are not necessarily brought on an individual by external figures, but can also be driven by the innate habit of measuring one's own worth. Based on the prevailing gender culture, a man could bear down hard on himself with unnecessary expectations as in the case of the hunger artist. As strange as the art of starvation was, the artist's absurd aim to beat his fasting record even at the risk of losing his life was hard to comprehend. But in light of a gender culture that defined masculinity as achievement, his unreasonable persistence in fasting endlessly was clearly born from his push for self-validation and the anxiety that emanated from that. We see this in his disapproval of the men who were appointed to keep watch over him at night to ensure he didn't break his fast by eating some food in stealth. Perhaps

³⁶ Giorgio Agamben. *Nudities*. age 21

bored with the monotony of watching a man starve, the night watchers would often ignore the artist in the cage, opting instead to make merry as they whiled the night away. This infuriated the artist immensely, and the reason for his fury is deducible – he saw starvation as a challenge that provided him with the platform for achievement. We see this in how he reacts when he reached the scheduled end of the fast—the fortieth day and he was asked to stop fasting, but he insisted on continuing:

Why stop fasting at this particular moment, after forty days of it? He had held out for a long time, an illimitably long time; why stop fasting now, when he was in his best fasting form, or rather, not yet quite in his best fasting form? Why should he be cheated of the fame he would get for fasting longer, for being ... the record hunger artist of all time...?³⁷

Clearly, the artist was anxious about proving his capabilities and by extension, his masculine prowess, and he needed the accolades that accompanied his achievement to establish his identity. The destructive effect that this anxiety had over him did culminate in his regression. In effect, achievement anxiety was part of a systemic decline of the will-power that he sought to establish, and as one of the major descriptors of nineteenth century masculinity, the anxiety that emanates from it also destroys the essence of maleness that the individual builds. This is seen in both characters' cases whose bodily decline was a culmination of the anxieties of achievement among other factors. In terms of the male's physical body, emphasis on its importance in traditional masculine context was a constant

³⁷ Kafka. *The Complete Stories*. Page 271

feature in the definitions of masculinity, and anxiety over physical appearance ties in with that of achievement— both contributing to the characters’ decline.

II. Male Body Anxiety

In James Eli’s exposition on Victorian masculinity, he notes the role the masculine body plays on the overall psyche of the male. According to him, the Greco-Roman definition of masculinity laid emphasis on the aesthetics of the male body because it served as the physical manifestation of strength and virility.³⁸ To ancient Greeks and Romans, the great gymnast’s body attested to his discipline, endurance and strength which culminated in successful performance in gymnastics. This perception became the pattern for the artistic representation of the ideal male body in paintings and sculptures. Myron’s “Disc Thrower” remains one of the classic examples of the glorified aesthetics of masculine body. Replete with impressive muscle definition, this sort of artistic representation of the ideal male body was absorbed in the Victorian male’s psyche who, like the ancient Greeks, saw it as the result of “moral and psychological achievement.”

The body as represented by the Greek sculptor is not only the triumph of sensuous form, but a consummate moral and psychological achievement.³⁹

³⁸ James Eli Adams. *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity*. Page 157

³⁹ Ibid

And although the Victorians were a lot more conservative about exposing the muscular aesthetics as the Greeks did, it was an inherent definition of masculinity which found expression in imperial conquests and control. There existed then, among Victorian men, an overriding consciousness about the appearance of manliness, albeit in a form that was mostly unique to the age. The exalted form of masculinity was gentry masculinity, and as Connell established, the gentry embodied the strength of imperial conquest and expansion as well the aristocratic tradition, so that the overall mien of agility and virility was reflected in the sharp style of military uniforms, and dapper outfits. And such impressive appearance reflected achievement.

In Gregor and the artist, anxiety over the appearance of their bodies manifests differently. What obtains in the artist is a bizarre obsession to subject his body to gruesome torture through starvation so that it would reflect his will power and starving feat. The contradiction that his body becomes, in comparison to the exalted look of the Victorian gentry, is a reflection of the strange degeneration in masculinity which he was experiencing. The aesthetic pleasure that dapper looks and sharp outfits produced was clearly lacking in the artist's appearance throughout the story. The fact that he was always caged, lying in a sack of straws, is of course aesthetically displeasing, but what had the most shocking effect, at least on the ladies who witnessed his self-flagellation with starvation, was the emaciated look of his body. He was gaunt, sickly and very weak, and onlookers were repulsed by his appearance. His insistence to continue

fasting was clearly reflective of his anxiety to modify his body in order to prove his will power and in essence, his masculine prowess.

Leslie Heywood, in her book *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* describes the artist's obsession with hunger as "self cancellation"⁴⁰ which results from the artist's desire to carve a niche for himself. Her proposition stems from her contemporaries' interpretation of the hunger artist's character as a symbolic representative of modern artists whose preference for absurd art is reflective of an emergent modern culture that propounded a "continual extinction of personality." We may say in literal terms that in the case of the hunger artist, it was an extinction of his body in order to prove his mettle, and in effect, establish his masculine identity. This is reflected in his constant habit of often stretching his hands out through the cage so that onlookers could touch them and feel how thin they had become. His anxiety to alter his body so that it would reflect his strange will power was clearly debilitating. The combination of the anxiety to achieve in order to be validated, and the anxiety to have his achievement reflected, contributed to his eventual demise.

Perhaps an argument could be made about the artist's starving feat as a reflection of a kind of manly strength, because it does indeed take very strong discipline and dedication to achieve what the artist achieved. But where hitherto,

⁴⁰ Leslie Heywood. *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture*. PP 71-84

the portraiture of masculinity had been of exuberance, strength and virility, the artist's feat is hardly applicable where masculinity is concerned. If anything, Kafka sought to depict a man whose very repulsion stemmed from his overall essence, and he succeeds in the character of the artist and Gregor.

While Gregor seemed not to have any control in his physical transformation, he also exhibited some innate anxiety over his body's appearance. When he woke up in the morning and discovered his metamorphosis, the first things he noticed were his "numerous little legs," which perplexingly could not help hoist his now "uncommonly broad" frame off the bed. It is interesting that as shocking as his transformation was to the reader, the absence of panic in Gregor seemed to show that he was not shocked, instead, he worried about what had happened to segments of his body such as his little legs and his broad trunk. Also, when his erstwhile "normal" voice came out in a strange squeak, it was one of the main shocks that registered with him:

Gregor had a shock as he heard his own voice answering [his mother's], unmistakably, his own voice, it was true, but with a persistent horrible twittering squeak behind it for the first moment and then rose up reverberating around them to destroy their sense, so that one could not be sure one had heard them rightly.⁴¹

And his shock over the strange sound of his voice was certainly founded, for the power of speech and vocal projection ties in significantly with definitions of masculinity. I shall examine the extended effect that the loss of speech has on

⁴¹ Kafka. *The Complete Stories*. Page 91

Gregor in a later section, but undoubtedly, Gregor displayed anxiety about the look and functionality of segments of his body because appearance was a major part of his maleness. “Numerous little legs” with little functionality could be likened to partial paralysis, an impediment that is in itself symbolically emasculating. Also, a squeaky shrilling voice that was unintelligible to listeners was a justifiable source of anxiety for Gregor, because it tended toward a degeneration of an aspect of his masculinity. As noted earlier, vocal projection has long been a definitive descriptor of masculinity—men were known to sound masculine—with significant depth in vocal vibration—like men. And without describing the typical sound of a woman’s voice, the squeaky tone of the transformed Gregor was a reflection of his degeneration, so that its reality gave rise to an overall emasculation anxiety.

III. Castration Anxiety

Freud’s theory of castration anxiety has a two-fold meaning: an anxiety that emanates from the physical loss of the phallus, and a generalized anxiety about loss of masculine essence in the form of respect and worthiness. This anxiety, whether rational or irrational, often exists in men who are afraid of being dominated or made insignificant. To counter what they perceive as emasculation, men who have castration anxiety often push hard against being remotely judged weak or underachieving. In the artist, his castration anxiety presents as his paranoia over not being validated despite his starving feats. In Gregor, his anxiety

over symbolic emasculation is reflected in the pangs of guilt he suffered when he was no longer able to work and provide for his family. Per the role of achievement in the definition of masculinity, Gregor's role as the breadwinner of his family was to him a part of his masculine identity, and his failure to live up to it was bound to be emasculating. We see this anxiety envelop him when he thought of his family and rationalized their unemployed state. His father was retired, and although quite "hale," he had, in keeping with the gender culture of manhood expectations, shifted his responsibility to Gregor; his mother was sickly and so should not work, his sister was a young woman, and little was expected of her:

Now his father was still hale enough but an old man, and he had done no work for the past five years, the first years of leisure ... he had grown rather fat and become sluggish. And [his mother], how was she to earn a living with her asthma ...? And was his sister to earn her bread, she who was still a child of seventeen and whose life had hitherto been so pleasant, consisting as it did in dressing herself nicely, sleeping long ... going out to a few modest entertainments, and above all playing the violin?⁴²

To a twenty-first century reader, such rationalization is certainly baffling. The idea of placing an entire family's responsibility on just one member of the family based on the rationale that he is a man is mind-boggling, at least to this reader. Gregor and his family saw the proof of his manhood as dependent on his continued acceptance and performance of such responsibilities. And so

⁴² Ibid. Page 271

expectedly, he worried about not living up to expectation so that the anxiety of being emasculated did become part of his symbolic regression.

Gregor and the artist's anxiety of being emasculated was certainly founded, because their systemic decline followed a trajectory of physical and psychological regression and the feeling of insignificance from the absence of validation, so that the overriding feeling of nothingness, and in reality emasculation, became a constant feature of their reality. That they became eventually emasculated is a fact that is unlikely debatable, but it is interesting to note that the factors that contributed to their emasculation were both external and internal. Internal factors were the characters' acceptance and inculcation of a culture that insisted on measuring their worth based on achievement. In the artist, it was the gnawing dissatisfaction with his performance:

[The artist] was... bound to be the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast. Yet for other reasons he was never satisfied; it was not perhaps mere fasting that brought him to such skeleton thinness that many people had regretfully to keep away from his exhibitions, because the sight of him was too much for them, perhaps it was the dissatisfaction with himself that had worn him down.⁴³

This dissatisfaction can be seen as castration anxiety, and it indeed contributed to his emasculation, for the sight of a gaunt and frightfully thin being in a cage speaks of anything but virile strength for which masculinity was known in Kafka's society. In Gregor, the internal factor of his emasculation was his passive

⁴³ Ibid. Page 270

acceptance and crippling fear of failing in his masculine duty. However, external factors played significant roles in the characters literal and symbolic emasculation. In the next section, I will examine the concepts of insignificance and nothingness and their manifestations as the effects of the characters' alienation, and show their contribution to the degeneration of the characters' masculinity.

Insignificance and Nothingness as Manifestations of Emasculation

For Gregor, the feeling of insignificance took immediate hold of him as soon he opened his door and was seen by his family and manager on the morning that he discovered he had become a giant vermin. If Gregor's transformation into an insect were to be read strictly in symbolic terms (which appears to be the only plausible reading of this strange text, anyway), the singular fact that Kafka chose an insect as the animal into which Gregor transformed is worthy to note. The question does arise: why an insect, a repulsive vermin? Kafka was obviously preoccupied with the idea of the reduction of humans to nothingness, but could he have depicted Gregor's travails and his eventual demise in a less dismal manner? The metaphor of an insect provides the essence of repulsion to Gregor's persona, so that his alienation and marginalization by his family seemed justified.

In the artist, his insignificance also stemmed from his repulsive persona, in that his gaunt skeleton thinness and his obsession with the art that made him appear thus were far from attractive to the spectators. A sight that was

aesthetically displeasing was bound to be pushed aside or avoided completely, and this was the case with the artist whom spectators alienated completely; choosing instead to watch majestic animals in cages at the exhibit. This was seen in the final stretch of his fast when the artist hired himself without charge, to a large circus owner who gave exhibits of large exotic animals for the entertainment of paying spectators. In a strange development that reportedly occurred overnight, the spectators lost complete interest in the artist, preferring to give their viewing attention to the animals in the cage:

Change in public interest had set in; it seemed to happen overnight; there may have been some profound causes for it, but who was going to bother about that; at any rate the pampered hunger artist suddenly found himself deserted one fine day by amusement-seekers, who went streaming past him to other more favored attractions.⁴⁴

If the reason for his desertion by “amusement-seekers” was a puzzle to the artist, the fact that he had been rendered insignificant by their lack of attention was at least clear to the reader. But an art which lacked aesthetic pleasure and instead bespoke of an abject state and weakness was bound to become displeasing to the viewers, and so it seems expected that they would lose interest in the strange artist—to the point of preferring animals who were seen as more aesthetically pleasing than the caged man in a heap of straws.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Page 237

The curious parallels that exist between animals and both characters, is remarkable. Animal metaphors in the case of Gregor give him a symbolic persona of an animal—an insect. But even more curious is the physical manifestation of animalistic tendencies in him. We saw it when he lost complete taste for healthy foods, and developed a taste for rotten vegetables, left-over meals and things that are essentially garbage to humans:

To find out what he liked, she brought him a whole selection of food, all set out on old newspaper. There were old, half-decayed vegetables, bones from last night's supper covered with a white sauce that had thickened; some raisins and almonds; a piece of cheese that Gregor would have called uneatable two days ago; a dry roll of bread, a buttered roll, and a roll both buttered and salted. Besides all that, she set down the same basin, into which she had poured some water, and which was apparently to be reserved for his exclusive use... One after the other and with tears of satisfaction in his eyes, he quickly devoured the cheese, vegetables, and the sauce; the fresh foods on the other hand, had no charms for him, he could not even stand the smell of it and actually dragged to some little distance, the things he could eat.⁴⁵

Such taste for garbage is a significant marker of the animal that Gregor had become. It was both a symbolic and literal indicator that the productive, respectable and virile young man had degenerated, and in his place had emerged an animal that was essentially useless to his family. Typically, household animals would eat left-over bones and meals, but the taste for half decayed vegetable may, by a stretch, attract cockroaches. Gregor had become a cockroach, and in typical human dislike for pests, his family completely alienated him. This is exemplified

⁴⁵ Ibid. Page 108

in the fact that he remained locked in the room, the containers with which he was fed became reserved for his exclusive use, and clearly ashamed of him, his family kept him hidden from lodgers and visitors to their home.

Gregor's animalization by his family is also seen in the intolerance they developed for him. His deplorable state was certainly unpleasant to his family, but more puzzling was that their action seemed to suggest that Gregor was responsible for his transformation. We see this in how his father reacted when he first saw him in his metamorphosed state. Thoroughly displeased at Gregor for "upsetting" his mother and the manager with his appearance, he snatched a large newspaper, waving it and shooing Gregor back in the room like a savage, while stamping his foot loudly. His father's action in a way, animalized him, and added to his alienation and insignificance.

With the artist, his animalization seemed propelled by him. While one tries to understand the queer art of starvation, living in a cage in a heap of straws is hard to comprehend. The image of the artist in this state reflects a caged animal, only that he was worse than the animals, because compared to the younger panther that replaced him in the display case at his death, the artist was very much less than an animal. And like a worthless animal, at his death, the artist was swept up and buried, "straw and all."

Gregor's loss of speech also contributes to his descent into insignificance. When he tried to communicate with his family and the sound that came through

was unintelligible to his family, they assumed that since he could only utter unintelligible sounds, that he had also lost the power to understand them. But as the reader did find out, that was not the case. This development effectively alienated him from any hope of relating or connecting with his family. Indeed the power of communication cannot be overemphasized. One of the major differences between animals and humans is the lack of language ability in animals—at least to humans, animals cannot speak, and this perception is applied to Gregor by his parents. This certainly contributes to his overall decline, and in particular, the degeneration of his masculinity.

Following the loss of his speaking ability was the gradual decline of Gregor's eye sight. This was also a symbolic development and significance of his decline. With his alienation and seclusion in the room, objects started to appear dimmer, and as noted, this robbed him of the sense of freedom which he often felt when he could look out his window and see images that were far off. This undoubtedly had a psychological implication, because not only was his sense of freedom eroded, the ability to see and interpret things based on his own vision was slowly slipping away from him. Again, this adds to his insignificance, and overall degeneration.

Examined in the context of gender relation, Gregor's alienation by the women, as seen in his sister's waning tolerance of him, as well as his mother's inability to bear his presence, reflect a positional shift that produce a two-pronged

effect of stripping him of his masculinity and projecting the women in a dominant position. The fact that at his transformation, only his sister had access to him placed him in a subdued position where she was concerned. He was aware that the sight of him repulsed her, and he would often go under the sofa to keep from offending her with his appearance. His mother collapsed in fits of asthmatic cough when she beheld him, and after a single look that she took of her son, she never saw him again because she could not stand him.

Grete's decision to remove the furniture in Gregor's room also marked her role in alienating him. The chest in which he stored his tools was dragged off, as were his reading desk and other items that held any iota of independence and masculinity for him. The feeble attempt he made at saving a picture of a woman that he admired, and which he had hanging on the wall, was met with strong disapproval by his sister who saw his action as malicious for he had allowed himself to be seen by his mother. Also, when Grete told her parents to get rid of the creature that was to her no longer her brother, but a pest that appeared to be bent on causing the family major difficulty, her suggestion was met with approval by her father. Although Gregor eventually dies overnight, his parents' reaction reflect a positional shift in their perception of Gregor and Grete's worth. Gregor had become a worthless vermin—a sad story of degeneration, while Grete reflected health and life that was full of promise. At the end of the story, the narrator notes how she stretched her young body and her parents noticed that she had bloomed into a beautiful woman with good figure, prompting them to

immediately think of finding a good husband for her. This final scene not only marked a complete erasure of Gregor from the picture, but also placed a symbolic seal on his degenerated masculinity which began with his inability to keep working and tending to his family. To his parents, Grete held a new promise—a future breadwinner of the family.

This positional shift in which an ailing man is subjugated and vivacious and robust women are put forward is also seen in the case of the artist. At the end of his forty-day fast, women were the ones chosen to help him onto his feet because he was too exhausted to stand on his own. This scene was unique because standing beside the healthy women highlighted his horrible appearance greatly. When at one point, only one of the women held him, the irony of the situation becomes even greater, because typically, men were seen as the “stronger sex.” And in terms of physical strength, the picture that Kafka created in the scene reflected a shift in that perception—the woman was the strong one, and the man, a repulsive sack of bones—reflecting a degenerated masculinity.

Because Kafka employs a combination of symbolisms and connotations while depicting a human condition in both symbolic and realistic terms, providing a single interpretation of his work is not quite possible. But his atypical depiction of the male characters in *A Hunger Artist* and *The Metamorphosis* shows a shift in the traditional image of masculinity. Both characters reflect a form of psychological and symbolic regression that was brought about by the anxiety to

achieve, and the generalized fear of emasculation. External and internal factors worked together in pushing the male protagonists into insignificance, and their animalization in the course of their decline significantly highlighted their degenerated masculinity.

Chapter Three

Degeneration of Masculinity in *Crime and Punishment*

Dostoevsky's deeply psychological novel provides an insight to human nature with his depiction of Raskolnikov's struggles in contemplating and committing a hideous crime. The emotional consequence of guilt, and the nervous breakdown that he suffers, embody a marked degeneration of his masculinity. As far as socially constructed gender identity and role go in nineteenth century Russia, the male central characters reflect traits that are markedly dissimilar to traditional masculine culture. The point of comparison that I have used in my entire study has been that of Victorian masculinity, and as noted earlier, Western civilization registered tremendous success in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in terms of imperial expansion and exploits—owing to the famed hegemonic masculinity which was characterized of bravery, control and dominance. The British put a symbolic facial expression on Victorian masculinity with their characteristic “stiff upper lip” as a show of gall and strength.

In Raskolnikov, these famed attributes of nineteenth masculinity are absent. Instead, he reflects behaviors and physical manifestations that were sometimes akin to femininity, or in some cases, a reflection of degenerating masculinity. These significant deviations from traditional masculinity were not only present in Raskolnikov, but also, the male characters: Luzhin, Marmeledov and Profiry reflect character traits that were not typical of nineteenth century

masculine culture. In this chapter, I will discuss these male characters' degenerated masculinity in terms of their deviations from traditional masculine behavior and habits, and some of the characters' inculcation of feminine habits in response to their social and psychological reality.

Raskolnikov particularly displays emotional behaviors that were typically feminine, such as hysteria—in the wake of his killing of the pawn broker, Alyona Ivanovna. Also, his endless fainting spells and trembling lips are reflective of traditional feminine response to stressful situations. His perpetual gaunt and sickly appearance is to a major extent, emasculating in relation to cultural perceptions of masculinity. I will trace Raskolnikov's degenerated masculinity by first examining his attempted adaptation of what Nina Straus terms "Napoleonic masculinity" in her book *Dostoevsky and the Woman Question: Readings at the End of a Century*,⁴⁶ and his subsequent failure in upholding what he assumed was the excellent type of masculinity—the manhood of extraordinary men of which Napoleon was one. To Raskolnikov, there were two distinct types of men: the ordinary men, who grapple with the overwhelming realities of life and fail continuously in subduing their challenges and, the extraordinary men who take on their challenges with bravery, doing what they must, irrespective of conventions and law, and overcome them. The latter kind is exemplified by Napoleon and

⁴⁶ Nina Strauss. *Dostoevsky and The Woman Question: Readings at The End of A Century*. Page 29.

other men in history who were known for their conquests and exploits. They were men whose exceptional drive to subdue and prevail over what they considered weak ideologies and groups of people, demonstrate a kind of hegemony which to Raskolnikov, was the main definer of excellent masculine prowess. It was this determination to display the exceptional prowess of Napoleonic masculinity that drove him to adjudge the pawn broker a “louse” that deserved to be exterminated, and he saw his decision to kill her as demonstrative of the brave manhood that although exclusive to the extraordinary caliber, ought to be emulated by those who sought to differentiate themselves from the “louse” in the society.

I will not go in depth to the phenomenon of Russian nihilism on which Raskolnikov based his judgment of the strong and relevant, and weak and irrelevant in the Russia of his time, but I will show that in his quest to demonstrate a hegemonic type of masculinity, namely, Napoleonic masculinity, that he not only fails at it, but also deviates significantly in typical masculine traits in his time period. These shifts in masculine characteristics are seen in his overall behavior and mien as he responds to the emotional consequence of his crime. In particular, I will analyze the significance of his nervous expressions, habits and generalized weakness that stemmed from his commission of the murder, and show that while hypochondria and hysteria may not be natural expressions of guilt, their inherent repercussions on culturally constructed masculine identity are debilitating, so that, instead of the extraordinary male that he hoped to become, Raskolnikov degenerates into a nervous wreck, and in reality, a very weak man—

a sad reality from the traditional males in Victorian fictions who were often depicted as virile and hegemonic.

The two male characters, Luzhin and Porfiry, although not crippled and emasculated by guilt, do reflect traits that were not traditionally masculine, such as the curious androgynous physiognomy of Porfiry, and Luzhin's knack for gossip and vain dispositions. Marmeladov's pathetic failure in providing for his family due to his addiction to alcohol also reduced him to a pathetic weakling. And so, examined with an eye for traditional constructions of masculinity, these four male characters reflect a degeneration of masculinity as seen in the three works analyzed in the previous chapters. My trajectory for identifying the degeneration of masculinity in these male characters is first an analysis of Raskolnikov's nervous breakdown following his failed attempt at Napoleonic masculinity, then, an examination of Marmeladov's emasculation in view of his ignoble behaviors and failure in living up to his masculine role as benefactor to his family. I will also explicate Marmeladov's ignobility and weakness as symbolic traits of a "new" weaker sex which emerges in Dostoevskian males. An analysis of the feminine traits that are reflected in the character portraiture of Luzhin and Porfiry will be done so as to show that, in displaying some typical feminine traits, both men unconsciously subdue their masculinity, thereby reflecting a deviation from the culturally constructed masculinity of their time period.

Napoleonic Masculinity and its Degeneration in Raskolnikov

In his book *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*, Mark Breitenberg examines the inherent anxiety in traditional English masculinity, and argues that the culture of masculine achievement and patriarchy provides an inevitable anxiety in the men whose identity is enveloped by a constant push to achieve and live up to certain codes and expectations. The men's drive for achievement is based more on cultural continuity, than on vain-glory, as it may seem to the modern reader. To English men and by extension, European men of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the codes and privileges of masculinity were part of their identity, and there were implied expectations of all men to live up to this privileged identity:

Masculinity is inherently anxious ... Anxiety and masculinity: the terms must be wed if only for the obvious reason that any social system whose premise is the unequal distribution of power and authority always ... sustains itself in constant defense of the privileges of some of its members ... even though historically and culturally specific patriarchal models function with considerable variety, they are by definition forms of social organization that produce distress and disequilibrium. From this premise, it follows that those individuals whose identities are formed by their assumption of their own privilege must also have ... varying degrees about the preservation and potential loss of that privilege.⁴⁷

The "privilege," were the cultural codes that ascribed strength and superiority to men over women. Men's validation was therefore, based on their constant enactment of the masculine codes of conduct. Without going into an overt

⁴⁷ Mark Breitenberg. *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*, page 3.

analysis of the idea of masculine expectations as a form of social privilege, one can easily identify the patriarchal undertone of societies in general, and so expectedly, the group whose identities are majorly dependent on social expectation of achievement on one hand, and their fulfillment of these expectation on the other, is constantly anxious about sustaining their patriarchal identity. Raskolnikov's motive to commit murder was driven by the anxiety to, not only perpetuate a patriarchal culture of achievement, but also to mark himself as an extraordinary "type" in the masculine culture. Of course the commission of murder is not categorically masculine, but in Raskolnikov's reasoning, only the brave could make the decision to exterminate the lice in the society—the Alyona Ivanovnas who are miserly, useless and weak—so that the brilliant and strong—a group that he believed he represented, could be projected and preserved. That he contemplated the decision was to him an indication of his mettle. His success at killing Alyona Ivanovna and bettering his lot would have been a confirmation that he was of the extraordinary caliber.

But what drove Raskolnikov to perceive himself thus? If one had an inkling that Raskolnikov was teetering on the edge of narcissism with such self-aggrandizement, an argument by Sigmund Freud on the ego and libido and how their connective operation can lead to narcissism, may confirm that Raskolnikov was narcissistic. In *Civilization and Discontent*, Freud posits that the libido acts as an emotional salve to the ego and it does so by directing itself to objects that may feed the ego in compensation for other instances where it was reigned in:

Narcissism ... the idea that libido cathects the ego itself ... its first dwelling-place [is] in the ego ... the latter remains to some extent its permanent headquarters. The narcissistic libido turns in the direction of objects, thus becoming object-libido, and can transform itself back into narcissistic libido.⁴⁸

On the premise of Freud's proposition, one can argue that having had his ego injured due to his dropping out from the university, his poverty and how it forced him to dwell among people who were, in reality, not a match to him in terms of intelligence, Raskolnikov became spiteful of his situation. Therefore, his libido, in an attempt to salvage the ego, latches itself on an idea—the idea that the *extraordinary* existed; that they were an exclusive kind whose exclusivity excused them from the norms of society, and in fact gave them a license to break the law. A questionable concept of course, but Raskolnikov needed the idea in order to preserve his self-worth, and I will go further and say that, Raskolnikov's intelligence was to him, a measure of his masculinity. Creating the idea that he was of the extraordinary kind of men was a means of projecting his masculinity, validating it, and hopefully standing out. To Raskolnikov, Alyona Ivanovna's weakness was an antithesis to his kind whom he considered strong and intelligent. Of course Raskolnikov was not physically strong, and Dostoevsky depicted him as always sickly with the intention of showing the reader how utterly narcissistic he was. The image of a delirious and hypochondriac man who always bore a deathly pallor and was riddled with anxiety, hardly speak of strength. Instead, it bespeaks weakness. I shall examine, in a later section, Raskolnikov's delirium and

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and Discontent*, page 55.

hypochondria as possible outcomes of neurosis, in line with Freud's thesis that neurosis may occur as a result of a struggle between the ego and libido,⁴⁹ subsequently causing degeneration of the self. However, further explication of Raskolnikov's narcissistic philosophy is needed.

Raskolnikov expounded his questionable philosophy on the idea of "extraordinary men" in an article he wrote, titled: "on crime." In it he posits that men such as Napoleon and Mohammed were criminals who had a right to be so, because they took old and decadent ways "by the tails and smashed them"—making way for "new" ways. Therefore, such men had the explicit right to commit crimes in order to do away with "old" ways. When he considered his abject poverty and how it had forced him to withdraw from the university, potentially stifling his potential as a male, he saw within him, a difficult task that he had to undertake in order to live up to the expectations of masculinity such as taking care of his mother and sister, and providing for the family's upkeep. Accepting poverty and losing his education were, to him, failures that could not be condoned, and so, to him, his decision to murder the pawn broker steal her money was justified. It was to him, a brave means of saving his placement at the university. Of course things did not go as he had contemplated, for not only did he give in and confess his crime, he also suffered emotionally from the guilt of his crime – displaying symptoms of a nervous breakdown such as chronic delirium

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and Discontent*, page 54

and fainting spells, as well as, intense anxiety which symbolically crippled and emasculated him. In depicting the effects of crime on a supposed good person—as that was Dostoevsky’s intent, the novelist depicts the degeneration of a man whose masculine portraiture became a far cry from traditional masculine fervor that was often replete with strength and virility as seen in fiction.

The suspicion that Raskolnikov may have become neurotic emerges when one sees him presenting with signs of a nervous breakdown such chronic delirium. After he killed the pawn broker, he temporarily loses his, jumping out of troubled sleep in the heat of an afternoon and going to the scene of the murder. In delirium, he asked some painters who were refurbishing the apartment about blood and wondered why it had been cleaned up. Of course it sparked some suspicion in the painters who thought his question was suggestive of a possible knowledge about the murderer. Raskolnikov was not pining to be arrested, but his unwise behavior made it seem so. It thus becomes clear that he may have become neurotic. The manifestations of anxiety-neurosis are typically, delirium, hysteria, mental confusion and so on,⁵⁰ and by presenting with these debilitating symptoms, Raskolnikov’s masculinity was in the throes of degeneration.

The gaunt sickly image that characterized Raskolnikov’s identity throughout the novel was hardly masculine as far as fictional depictions of

⁵⁰ <http://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/guide/mental-health-anxiety-disorders>

traditional masculinity goes. When we first encountered him in the novel, he was described as irritable and in a “tense state resembling hypochondria,”⁵¹ and this was because he had been contemplating the murder of Alyona Ivanovna. The thought was obviously a difficult one, for it disturbed the normalcy of his existence, albeit wretched. The narrator notes that he had isolated himself from people and also, developed a strange habit of always muttering to himself. These were clear indicators of psychological disturbance, and they characterized his decline thenceforth.

The physical weakness that characterized Raskolnikov’s unsettled nerves is reflective of the degeneration of virility—a major component and descriptor of traditional masculinity. At the start of the novel, when we encounter him, he is described as weak, as he had not eaten for a few days, and that he had “stopped attending to his daily affairs” because he was burdened by the troubling thought and decision to kill the pawn broker. The image that this description creates is that of highly stressed character who was in the throes of decline, and indeed, Raskolnikov’s decline began right from the beginning of the novel, even before he had committed the crime. After he killed Alyona Ivanovna, his nervous jitters intensified, and for four days, he was delirious, lying on his sofa for all those days and completely oblivious of what was happening around. While in his comatose sleep, he was tormented by nightmare, and would often cry out in his sleep,

⁵¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky. *Crime and Punishment*, page 1.

muttering words that were related to his crime. Again these symptoms increasingly made him suspicion to observer, but in the context of my study, they also made him an invalid—a reflection of a degenerated man.

I considered how far-fetched the idea is that commission of a crime could be used as a barometer for measuring one's manhood—men do not typically try to test their mettle by hacking down the weak amongst them, because that would be outright barbarism, but as Breighenberg showed, the consciousness of European men in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was often laced with anxiety and a desire to constantly project their masculinity in order to preserve the patriarchal cultures. Therefore, Raskolnikov's decision to commit murder, although not a conventional measure that he would typically use to project his masculinity, it was a covert measure to preserve himself, and in effect, his manhood. This line of thought finds support in Gary Cox's argument that Raskolnikov's crime may be seen as a symbolic rite of passage—a kind of coming-of-age act. In his book: *Crime and Punishment: A Mind to Murder*, Cox posits that in line with the tradition of embarking on difficult adventures as proof of manhood, as depicted in such novels as *Toms Jones* and *Huckleberry Finn*, Raskolnikov may have been trying to prove his manhood to himself:

Given Raskolnikov's youth, it is quite possible to think of the murder as an initiation rite. Even the [Russian] term used for "punishment" ... in the title has the alternative meaning of "instruction" or even "initiation." Such initiation rites of passage are often the stuff of novels ... and films... Making the proof of manhood an experimental murder, Raskolnikov fuses questions of personal

identity and ethics in a way that has been a seminal influence on the existentialist thinkers of the twentieth century.⁵²

Raskolnikov's identity was undoubtedly tied to his masculinity, in that his desire to be his family's benefactor was a reflection of his masculine identity. As seen in R.W. Connell's exposition on masculinity, the crux of hegemonic masculinity is achievement. To Raskolnikov, the proof of his masculinity was in his ability to live up to his role as a benefactor, and where he perceived himself failing at such masculine role, he grew spiteful and so, fashioned a "solution.

But was he successful at proving his manhood, albeit in a very questionable manner? The dénouement of the novel shows that Raskolnikov failed at this attempt. What resulted was an intense decline in his mental and physical health. His anxiety about preserving his identity and living up to his gender role led him to make a questionable decision that drove him into neurosis, and effected the degeneration of his masculinity. His degeneration was systematic. As noted earlier, he began suffering fevers and emotional irritation as soon as he conceived the thought; he became isolated and mentally stressed, and after he committed the murder, the fevers increased his delirium so that he continuously muttered to himself, made a trip to the murder scene in a half-conscious state and spoke like a mad-man while searching for the blood he spilled. The pathetic impression he made of himself while talking to the detective

⁵² Gary Cox. *Crime and Punishment: A mind to Murder*, page 43.

Porfiry showed him to be psychologically deteriorating. While Porfiry played on his psychology by assuring him with a tinge of sarcasm that there was no way he (Raskolnikov) could commit such a crime despite having written an article that permitted crime in exceptional cases, Raskolnikov lost his composure and became very erratic, he began trembling all over: “it wasn’t me” he whispered just as little children do when they are caught red-handed.” He all but cried when Porfiry tittered at him, screaming that he would no longer be friends with Porfiry and insisted that he did not commit the crime. If Raskolnikov’s behavior seemed illogical and shocking, Dostoevsky would have the reader remember that Porfiry’s tactic was a psychological one. He laid out the preambles of his accusations, and waited for Raskolnikov to apply them to himself. And Raskolnikov did, for his mental confusion and generalized weakness made him give in. When he tried to convince himself after he left Porfiry, that his crime was justified because the “old crone” he killed was a louse, he suddenly came to the realization that he was himself, a louse, and perhaps, more vile than Alayona Ivanovna. In other words, a weakling:

“An aesthetic louse is what I am, and nothing more,” he added, suddenly bursting into laughter like a man. “Yes I really a louse,” ... I chose the most useless louse of all and, having killed her, decided to take as much as I needed ... And ultimately, ultimately, I am a louse,” he added, grinding his teeth, “because I myself am perhaps even more vile and nasty than the louse I killed...”⁵³

⁵³ Fyodor Dostoevsky. *Crime and Punishment*, pp 274-275

Raskolnikov's ultimate realization that he was a degenerated man occurred when he told Sonya of his crime, and lamented that in killing Alyona Ivanovna, he had in truth killed himself. His summation was obviously an apt one, for as his chronic illness, mental disturbance and overall weakness showed that he failed at becoming a Napoleon. The obvious affinity that Napoleonic tendency has with nineteenth century masculinity was clearly jabbed at by Dostoevsky, and whether he was aware of it or not, in depicting the Napoleonic tendencies in Raskolnikov, he subdued the general perception of masculinity while satirizing the ideology of extreme progressivism. This subdued masculinity was not only present in Raskolnikov, but also in the characters of Luzhin and Porfiry, and I shall examine them in a later section. In the mean time, a look at the character of Marmeledov, the drunkard will be taken, for his drunkenness and shameful acts of stealing from his wife, made him an epitome of emasculation in the novel.

Marmeledov: Portrait of a "New Weaker Sex"

Zakharovich Marmeledov was the typical Dostoevskian male through whom the author captures the follies and foibles of the society. His persona typified the ordinary Russian male who, confronted with the harsh realities of life, cracks under the pressure and resorts to injurious vices as a way to cope with their realities. Drunkenness was the vice that Marmeledov succumbed to, owing to his inability to live up to his responsibility as a man and the head of the family. Another typical feature of Dostoevskian males that he embodies is that of a

wasted man, who has had some great days in the past in which he had outstanding progress and respect, either in the work place, or in social contexts. Like the retired General Ivolgin in *The Idiot* who once was an outstanding and respected man of the ranks in his hay days, but turned into a drunken bum as a result of his weakness, Marmeledov was once a respected and responsible man. However, he degenerated through drunkenness into an irresponsible pathetic man who became a liability to his family instead of a benefactor.

The portrait of Marmeledov that was presented by the narrator when we first encountered him showed a man that was on a locomotive of decline. The fact that he was at a drinking tavern immediately rang an alarm of decadence, and fore-shadows the sad conclusion of his life—which is, that he was bound to be destroyed by his weakness and addiction to alcohol. While his unkempt appearance reflected his addiction, some subtle elements about him suggested that he may have been a respectable man at one point, and his awareness of his past glory had produced a sort of uppity mien in him:

[Marmeledov] was a man already past fifty, of average height and solid build, with some grey in his hair and a large bald spot, with a yellow, even greenish, face, swollen from constant drinking, and with puffy eyelids behind which his reddish eyes shone, tiny as slits, but lively. Yet there was something very strange in him; his eyes seemed even to be lit with rapture—perhaps there were sense and reason as well, but at the same time there seemed also to be a flicker of madness. He was dressed in old, completely ragged black coat, which had shed all its buttons. Only one still somehow hung on, and this one he kept buttoned, obviously not wishing to shirk conventions. From under his nankeen waistcoat, a

shirtfront stuck out, all crumpled, soiled, and stained. His face had been shaved in official style ... And there was indeed something solidly official in his ways.⁵⁴

He had indeed been a respectable service man in the past, and he had been incredibly proud of himself because he lived up to his role as a family patriarch—he had married Katerina Ivanovna, a lady of respectable background, who ordinarily would have been above him in social class, but she had the misfortune of losing her first husband, and so chose him under duress. Widowed at a young age with three little kids, Katerina married Marmeledov with the hope that he would provide for her and the kids. To Katerina, her marriage to Marmeledov was a stoop because she considered herself to be of a more respectable and elevated social class. Indeed she had been in the company of notable leaders in the society, but as was the case of women in her time, she needed and depended on a man for her upkeep. Her expectations of Marmeledov were in the manner of traditional constructions of gender roles—as a man, Marmeledov’s primary responsibility was to be a benefactor to her and the children. But he failed in this primary responsibility, and expectedly, she grew very spiteful of him. As he recounted to Raskolnikov, whose initial acquaintance he made at a drinking tavern, he bore the vice of destitution which was solely of his own making. He admitted that his drunken habit was no virtue, for it had not only cost him his wife’s respect, but more importantly, his habit had driven his family to abject poverty. His children had only one set of clothes which had to be washed overnight while the kids slept

⁵⁴ Ibid, page 12.

naked so that they could wear them clean the following day. His wife Katerina was severely consumptive, and could not work. With such hopeless situation, the family's need for a true benefactor was dire, but Marmeldov's weakness for alcohol had a strong hold on him, so that his image of a drunken nonentity reflected his declining masculinity.

People who struggle with addictions are often aware of their failures, and in most cases, always see the connection between their failures and their weaknesses. But the eternal struggle for them is that of confronting and subduing their weakness, and so what obtains with them is a vicious cycle of failures as perpetuated by weakness. Marmeledov was very much aware of the pains he caused his family and the shame that he brought upon himself with his failures in playing his masculine role as provider. It was clearly this awareness of his failure that led him to make a self-deprecating report about himself in his conversation with Raskolnikov at the drinking tavern. He called himself a scoundrel and swine, and insisted that because he was the cause of his destitution, he ought to be the first to insult himself. To him, other people were justified in insulting him, for he, clearly, was a failure.

The magnitude of his failure and shame was shown when he recounted how he "drank up" his wife's stockings, angora kerchief and gifts. He also described the ensuing repercussions of his drunken vice on his family such as the fact their house was not heated because they could not afford to pay for heat.

Some of his wife's property which she could have sold in order to raise some money for their upkeep, he stole and sold, and then used the money to purchase alcohol. This classic case of a drunkard indeed, for he does not limit his measures for feeding his addiction to himself, but instead, he injures those around him, in this case, his family, as he feeds his addiction. Such behavior is clearly reflective of a degenerated man, and in terms of masculinity, Marmeledov did not only fail his family by failing to provide for them, but he also failed himself in preserving his masculine identity.

If one wondered whether Marmeledov was consciously aware of the adverse effects of his failures on his masculinity, his self-deprecating narrative to Raskolnikov confirmed that he was quite aware that his failures had emasculated him. He told Raskolnikov of how his wife would drag him by the hair and beat him whenever he had gone out on a drinking binge, and how his humiliation by her could never atone for the pain he caused the family due to his failure. An equally shocking emasculating occurrence that he recounted was about how Mr. Lebezyatnikov gave his wife "a beating ... with his own hands"⁵⁵ while he was lying drunk in their home. Lebezyatnikov was a creditor, whom the Marmeledovs had borrowed money from countless times and never paid back. The fact that he lay in a drunken stupor while someone physically violated his wife, showed that

⁵⁵ Ibid, page 14.

his masculinity had degenerated, for in the parlance of traditional masculinity, nothing was as emasculating to a man as to have his wife violated.

Another evidence of Marmeledov's emasculation was in his contribution in forcing his oldest daughter, Sonya, into prostitution. Sonya was his daughter from an earlier marriage who resorted to prostitution when pressure from her step-mother forced her to apply for a "yellow card"—a license for prostitution. Sonya was only fifteen years old, and so she was very much a child, but it did not deter Marmeledov's wife from describing her as an added liability, and condemning her for living with them without bringing any form of monetary support. We see this in Marmeledov's narrative to Raskolnikov about how he failed to protect his daughter from prostitution:

The children were hungry ... And Katerina Ivanovna was pacing the room, wringing her hands, and flushed spots came out on her cheeks—as always happens with this illness [consumption]: 'You live with us,' she says [to Sonya], 'you good-for-nothing, you eat and drink and use up warmth' ... I was lying there in my cups sir, and I heard Sonya say ... 'What Katerina Ivanovna, must I really go and do such a thin?' ... 'And what,' Katerina Ivanovna answered mockingly, 'what is there to save? Some treasure!'⁵⁶

The "such things" that Sonya asked whether Ekaterina expected of her was prostitution, and she did do them because in Katerina's mockery, as the child of a wretched man who lived in a wretched situation, she was not worth much.

Therefore, there was nothing to protect about her body. As Marmeledov

⁵⁶ Ibid, page 18.

confirmed, he failed to intervene and stop Katerina's demand of Sonya, instead he lay in his cups while his daughter went out, and returned with some money. Evidently, her step-mother had prostituted her while her father laid in his drunken stupor, completely mute and weak. He told Raskolnikov then that the shame of his failure drove him to continuously drink, and that in reality, he fed his addiction more so that he could suffer more. Indeed, alcohol may serve as a temporary salve to emotional hurt, but it has the potential to cause more pain than it takes away. Marmeledov's pain was the realization that his emasculation had inadvertently caused his daughter her dignity.

When Marmeledov met Raskolnikov at the drinking tavern he (Marmeledov) had been away from home for five days. He spoke of how he had managed to get a job and how, for one day, he made his wife proud because he had brought home his first income after having not done so in a long time. The atmosphere in his home became relatively calm because there was prospect for ending their abject poverty, or so it seemed. But he did the abominable act of stealing the money he had given to his wife to feed the kids and went on a drinking binge. He slept in hay stacks and bemoaned his actions, terrified to go home, for he was afraid of his wife's wrath. He begged Raskolnikov to escort him home. The commotion that occurred when he got home confirmed his fears. His wife pulled him by the hair and he scurried after her like a child, whimpering submissively, and accepting the beatings she gave him:

She seized him by the hair and dragged him into the room. Marmeledov made her efforts easier by meekly crawling after her on his knees... “And it’s a delight to me! It’s not painful, it’s a delight, my dear sir,” he kept crying out, being pulled by his hair all the while and once even bumping his forehead on the floor.”⁵⁷

The sight was clearly pathetic, and it highlighted Marmeledov’s degeneration.

A recollection of the masculine portraiture of male characters in such fictions as *The Drums of the Fore and Aft* and *Captains Courageous* by Rudyard Kipling shows the major shift in masculinity that was reflected in Marmeledov’s pathetic character. Male characters were portrayed in excellent terms in Kipling’s works. They held respectable positions and the pattern of events in his fictions always saw the men demonstrating their bravery, and emerging victorious at the end. This was not the case with Marmeledov, he did not emerge victorious because he was too weak to subdue his challenges. Eventually, he died in a terribly wretched manner when he was trampled by a horse because he was too drunk to get out of the way of a cart-horse.

It can be said that Dostoevsky created a “new weaker sex” in his depiction of the character-type of Marmeledov—the type of men who become very weak in the face of troubles, and careen to their demise because of their weakness. Clearly, Dostoevsky was making a social commentary through his depiction of Marmeledov and Ivolgin of *The Idiot*. Both characters’ similarities are striking

⁵⁷ Ibid, page 26.

and they certainly epitomize what I term a new Dostoevskian “weaker sex.” They are ignoble, weakened by vice, and they exemplify the phenomenon of degeneration in masculinity in early modern literature.

Dostoevsky’s depiction of the two male characters: Luzhin and Porfiry also show a marked shift from the portraiture in traditional masculinity. While both men do not manifest the sort of weakness that Marmeladov does, elements of their characters and physiognomy reflect subdued masculinity while manifesting some typically feminine habits.

Femininity and Subdued Masculinity in Luzhin and Porfiry

Some social habits are typically ascribed to the feminine gender based on the culturally constructed gender codes in a society. While the adoption of certain habits may not be biologically specific to a particular gender, the culture of a group may over time, use some habits as metaphorical identifiers of genders, and equally differentiate the genders based on certain habits they display. For instance, women are typically known, and therefore expected to take longer time to get ready for a ceremonious occasion. While it is a subjective generalization, its commonality amongst women has made it one of the identifiers of feminine gender culture, and an unconscious identifier of femininity. So also are such descriptors as soft skin, curvy body shape, and the age old, maternal attitudes. The detective, Petrovich Porfiry, had an androgynous physical stature with a remarkable feminine physiognomy. His androgynous look compromised the

typical masculine stature that a reader usually expects in male characters. I shall discuss Porfiry's androgynous character and its significance in the succeeding section, but first, a look at Petrovich Luzhin.

Luzhin was for a brief period in the novel, suitor to Dunya Raskolnikov, the sister of the central character, Rodion Raskolnikov. In fact he was temporarily affianced to Dunya, but the engagement was short-lived owing to her exasperation by his pettiness and vanity. He was described as a self-made man who, although born in a poor family, raised himself out of poverty through dedication. While he conformed to some traditions of masculinity such as achievement, he developed some non-masculine social habits that doused his masculinity in terms of gender cultural habits. He was an unrelenting gossip, a vice that made his fiancé term him a “worthless gossip.”

While gossip may not necessarily be negative in all instances, it is usually considered annoying from certain points of view, and where a man engages in an annoying habit that is typically exclusive to the feminine group, the respect that often comes from his display of masculine habits such as a positive assertion of manly strength which women find pleasant, declines. In the case of Porfiry, his knack for gossip and annoying pettiness dulled the respect that he would typically have been accorded for doing well for himself financially. Raskolnikov took an immediate dislike of Luzhin when he read in a letter from his mother that Luzhin had made a passing but disturbing comment about the imperativeness of taking a

wife who was poor. Luzhin's rationale was that a poor wife was bound to be more submissive, so a man would not need to over-assert himself in order to get the wife under his control. Raskolnikov found this rationale quite disgusting and saw it as an insult to his sister. It became clear to him that a man of such thoughts could not possibly be compatible with his sister. And, that, his sister may be marrying him for the single purpose of helping her family (which comprised him and their aging mother). This brought his family's poverty into greater perspective for him, and actually helped him to make a definitive decision on the murder, but it also made him very spiteful of Luzhin so that he was very inhospitable toward him when they met. Luzhin's pettiness and vanity came to the fore when he wrote a form of gossip letter to Dunya and her mother, apparently with the aim of tarnishing Raskolnikov's name. He told the family that Raskolnikov had been patronizing prostitutes and that the money that his mother had so painstakingly gathered and sent to him for his upkeep, he had given away to Sonya Marmeladov, a prostitute. Of course Raskolnikov was not patronizing a prostitute, in fact, he had given the money to Katerina Marmeladov to help with her husband's funeral after he was trampled to death by a horse. His gesture had been directed at the new widow because he genuinely wanted to alleviate her suffering. Luzhin never saw him spend money on prostitution. The malicious letter that he wrote about Raskolnikov was a petty tirade that Luzhin hoped would get his fiancé in an altercation with her brother. Of course Dunya found Luzhin's found his behavior disgraceful after she found out that the reports were not true,

and prompted her to call him a “worthless gossip.” This was clearly not flattering on Luzhin, for he was reportedly proud and egotistic. Dunya’s opinion about him was certainly demeaning to him. To some extent, it reduced the respect that she would typically have been accorded him, and in effect, his masculinity.

However, it was shameful pettiness which Luzhin displayed while the family was visiting together that significantly highlighted his degenerating masculinity. He had requested that Raskolnikov be excluded from the family visit because he disliked him, but Dunya had hoped to broker peace between the two men, and she encouraged Raskolnikov to visit with them. Luzhin greatly disagreed with this, and his sulking turned to an outright denunciation of his fiancé, insisting that she had to make a choice between him and his brother. This shocking and ridiculous behavior on Luzhin’s part may not be definitively termed emasculating, but from the view of the opposite gender, Luzhin’s behavior was not exactly flattering to his manhood. One of the effects of Dostoevsky’s technique in depicting very psychological characters is that where he makes the men overly self-conscious and conceited, their identity tilts more on behavior, and less on the physicality. I will push this further by saying that a man whose behavior borders on ignobility and vanity, as in the case of Luzhin, reflects a shift from the traditional portraiture of masculinity which was a lot more preoccupied with strength and virility, and less with unflattering pettiness and vanity.

Of Porfiry's androgynous stature and mannerisms, Nina Straus notes their significance in getting Raskolnikov to confess his crime. Porfiry had a maternal way about him such as the way he cajoled and placated with a soft, but insistent tone even though he was in reality, interrogating Raskolnikov. Also his somewhat feminine stature was striking, as seen in the narrator's description of him:

Porfiry Petrovich was casually dressed, in a house jacket, a rather clean shirt, and down-at the heel slippers. He was a man of about thirty-five, of less than average height, stout ... clean-shaven, with no moustache or side-whiskers ... His eyes, which had a sort of liquid, watery gleam, were covered by nearly white lashes that blinked as though winking at someone. The look of these eyes was strangely out of harmony with his whole figure, which had something womanish about it.⁵⁸

It is not particularly emasculating to be described as having a "womanish" look, but it does damper the masculine air that Porfiry presented. He did not reflect the traditional masculine look in terms of stature. Nina Straus posits that Porfiry's stature, as described by the narrator, gave him the look of a "peasant woman,"⁵⁹ and that his "bodily attributes signify gender confusion." Strauss wrote from the point of view of Dostoevsky's treatment of femininity and the "woman question," but she confirms my proposition that Porfiry embodied some external feminine traits, and such embodiment subdued his masculinity.

Dostoevsky's main intent in *Crime and Punishment* was clearly a depiction of human nature and its struggle between good and evil. In doing so, he

⁵⁸ Ibid, page 251.

⁵⁹ Nina Straus. Dostoevsky and The Woman Question... page 34.

exposed the gender culture of his time, which, in the context of a modern reading, showed marked shifts in the traditional portraiture of masculinity. The culture of masculine achievement, although part of the social climate in *Crime and Punishment*, was the backdrop on which Dostoevsky reflected the degeneration of the central male characters. Raskolnikov sought a form of masculine validation by killing the pawn-broker, and his nervous breakdown marked his masculine decline. Marmeledov was a very weak man, and he died as a weakling. The habits and physiognomy of Luzhin and Porfiry reflect their subdued masculinity in light of their femininity.

Conclusion

My thesis on the degeneration of masculinity in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka was born from my exasperation at the central characters in Kafka's *Hunger Artist* and *The Metamorphosis*. I tried to understand the logic in the artist's chronic starvation, but of course, in typical modernist literary tradition, there was no logic at all—at least not in the logical pattern of Victorian literature. I realized that Kafka's depiction of the absurdity of his male characters was deliberate—they represented a shift illogical, from traditionalism to what some scholars have termed modernist. Understanding the absurdist mien of modernism requires serious study in this area, and scholars continue to give it the analyses that the literary tradition deserves. Also, in my discovery of the deliberate aim by Kafka and Dostoevsky to depict a “change,” it became clear that male characters who embodied this “change” reflected a shift in identity—particularly, masculine identity.

The shift in masculine portraiture was essentially degenerative, and in the works I examined in this study, certain factors contributed to the symbolic emasculation of the male characters. In Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, illness was an emasculating element that the central character, Myshkin and the nihilist, Ippolit both faced. Myshkin's history of slight mental retardation was a part of his identity throughout at the novel, so that people generally perceived him as weak—which he was. In fact, he degenerated into an invalid, and a mute at the end of the novel. Also, Ippolit was racked by tuberculosis, a disease that epitomized degeneration, and his decadence was both psychological and physical—he became nihilistic, even making an attempt on his life, and eventually dies—affirming his

degeneration. The image of both men was a stark difference from traditional masculinity which was usually fraught with strength and virility as depicted in old literatures.

As one of the major descriptors of masculinity, the concept of achievement was a cultural concept that the male characters seemed to be aware of, but as a measure of their masculinity, it marred such characters as the artist in and Gregor whose desire or failure to attain achievement led to heightened anxiety, thereby placing them further on the path of decadence. Anxiety, which was born from the expectations and desires for achievement were internal factors that ultimately led to both Gregor and the artist's degeneration—Gregor suffered from anxiety over living up to his father's expectations, and the artist was anxious about modifying his body in order to prove his mettle. This anxiety of achievement and validation led to Raskolnikov's construction and pursuit of a type of masculinity—Napoleonic masculinity and the dangerous absurdity of it led to his decadence.

The modernist literary features of insignificance and nothingness were invariably, manifestations of the degeneration of the male characters' masculinity, for as the characters appeared insignificant to those around them, their identity as far as traditional masculinity goes, declined. The artist and Gregor in Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* and *The Metamorphosis*, respectively, are typical modernist characters, whose identities are marked by insignificance and nothingness. The fact that the artist has no name is symbolic. It is both reflective of his insignificance amongst the people—his audience, and the feeling of nothingness which became the measure of his worth in light of his alienation. He constantly sought to be validated by his audience and, constantly, their

validation eluded him. Near the time of his death, he became utterly disillusioned about proving his will power to an audience that didn't notice him and, as if in affirmation of his insignificance and emasculation, the artist fasted and died, unnoticed. The same issues also befell Gregor. He was alienated into insignificance by his family, his metamorphosis into nothingness began with his strange transformation into a cockroach and in reflection of his insignificance he died in solitude.

The idea of Dostoevsky's "new weaker sex" arises when one contemplates the characters of Marmeladov and Ivolgin, whose weaknesses rendered them pathetic and complete aversions of the portraiture of traditional masculinity.

I have based my argument on the identified shifts in the traits of masculinity that were depicted by Dostoevsky and Kafka on Connell's thesis on *Masculinities*. Connell has championed some interesting arguments in masculinity, positing that masculinity has involved into types. An interesting improvement on my study could be an examination of the development and decline of types of masculinity that are depicted in Western fiction.

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