Shakespeare's Iago And Dostoevsky's Stavrogin: A Comparative Study in the Nature of Evil and the Demonic

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Iago (***Othello***) and Stavrogin (***The Devils***) are among the greatest villains in literature. They have, as is to be expected, many characteristics in common; but they also differ in many important ways. It is the purpose of this article to offer a study of the nature of evil in both these characters and to attempt to throw some light on their enigmatic but different personalities.

One of the most important characteristics which they have in common is their common affiliation with the demonic. Both Iago and Stavrogin make declarations, display qualities, perform actions, and pursue activities and align them with the Prince of Darkness.

Iago is uncompromising, intransigent, and relentless evil. His demonic nature is completely and absolutely dedicated to evil. Hence all kinds of wickedness and moral aberrations can be attributed to him and he can accommodate them all. It is therefore possible to mythisize Iago or consider him an evil archetype and thus to describe an act of villainy as "Iagoesque," or "Iago-like."

Among the most prominent characteristics of the devil or demon is his jocularity. His mirth and cynical laughter at the expense of his writhing victims have the effect of intensifying the menace implied in his activities and the malignity revealed in his nature. His laughter disturbs the pervading harmony and replaces it with a dissonance that paves the way for evil to dominate. Thus, we find Iago laughing at the gullibility of his victims and enjoying himself the more he finds them perplexed and suffering. To give only two examples: He tells Brabantio: "You'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins and gennets for Germans" (I.i.12-14).(1) And he banters with and makes fun of his dupe, Roderigo:

Roderigo: Iago.

Iago: What say's thou, noble heart?

Roderigo: What will I do, thinkest thou?

Iago: Why, go to bed and sleep.

Roderigo: I will incontinently drown myself.

Iago: Well, if thou dost, I shall never love thee after it. (I.iii.301-6)

Laughter as we have seen in Iago's case, is another element that characterizes the demonic. Excessive laughter like the one we encounter in ***The Devils*** is indicative of the topsy-turvies that pervade the world of the novel as a result of the machinations of Peter Verkhovensky and the other devils — all of whom were inspired by Stavrogin. Excessive laughter shows that sneering, scoffing, and reviling have permeated the atmosphere of the novel and have become the means by which the demonic characters attempt to carry out their destructive iconoclasm and spread a feeling of uncertainty, fear, and doubt. Irreverence, non-conformity, and rebelliousness become the new norms which the demonic nihilists or devils want to replace traditional moral values and beliefs.

Stavrogin is seen several times laughing throughout the novel: " 'I'll see,' laughed Stavrogin. 'All right, let me go now'" (p. 276); "It's true that there were moments when he badly wanted to laugh, loudly and furiously" (p. 284); "Stavrogin burst out laughing" (p. 287); "I'm sorry; forgive my silly joke, I expect I must be picking up bad manners from them. Since last night, you know, I feel awfully like laughing—laughing all the time, without stopping, for hours and hours. I seem to be infected with laughter" (p. 299); "Stavrogin said with a laugh but his eyes flashed" (p. 413); "'So you've been seriously counting on me, have you?' Stavrogin asked, with a malicious laugh" (p. 423); "Stavrogin suddenly laughed. 'I'm laughing at my monkey,' he explained at once" (p. 527); "Stavrogin gave a strange laugh" (p. 530);

"'Surely, you couldn't possibly have imagined that it really was the devil, could you?' he asked, laughing and passing a little too abruptly into a derisive tone of voice" (p. 677); "You lowered your eyes just now', Stavrogin interjected with an irritable laugh" (p. 677); "'But can one believe in the devil without believing in God?' Stavrogin said with a laugh" (p. 678). He tells Tikhon: "I laughed so much and talked such a lot of nonsense with them" (p. 692); "You're right. You know,' he laughed suddenly, 'they may perhaps call me a Jesuit and a sanctimonious hypocrite after the document. Ha, ha, ha! Don't you think so?'" (p. 700); and, "He chuckled affectedly" (p. 703). (2)

At the beginning of *Othello* Iago tells Roderigo that he only follows what his reason and his will dictate (I.iii.319-32). The extreme utilitarianism and rationalism advocated in his lengthy speech show that Iago has no use for love, virtue, or morality. Love to him, is "merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" (I.iii.333-34). He asserts his independence and exclusive reliance on himself and thereby implies a rejection of God's grace and blessing. Just as Satan's sin was pride, which made him flout God's authority and power, Iago is likewise proud of his intellect and its power: power to corrupt, dissemble, deceive, and destroy. He will therefore follow only the dictates of his own will.

He declares his credo to Roderigo whom he despises so much that he does not even try to conceal his real nature from him. He reveals to him that he is a hypocrite and a self-serving manipulator of others, (1.i.42-55).

Iago is therefore the supreme egoist and dissembler who holds a view of life that is no less destructive than the one upheld by Stavrogin and the nihilists in ***The Devils*.**

Allegiance, faithfulness, and magnanimity are all trampled upon in favour of a self-seeking materialism and utilitarianism that derive from a hellish or demonic disposition that entertains no moral scruples, compassion, or a feeling of human relatedness.

Stavrogin also enjoys the exercise of his powerful will. In spite of his superhuman strength and his satanic pride, he manages to control himself when Shatov slaps him on the face in his mother's house and in the presence of the guests. Like Iago, he believes in the supremacy of reason as opposed to faith and charity (p. 213).

Like Iago he revels in the power of his will and in the fact that he can always be master of himself (p. 685). He dismisses faith, loyalty, and morality as irrelevant or as obstacles that stand in the way of his achieving absolute uniqueness, freedom, and independence. However, in doing so, he unwittingly sacrifices his possibilities for growth and happiness and reduces his life to an arid desert. As Leatherbarrow has written:

> The foregrounding of human reason over divine wisdom has the 'demonic' effects of allowing man to prioritize his own conceptions over those of God and reducing evil to the outcome of human political and social references. (3)

Unlike Iago, however, who does not believe in good but only in evil to which he is entirely dedicated, Stavrogin does not believe in either good or evil. His theory is the child of his overweening pride and gargantuan ego:

> I formulated … what appeared to be the rule of my life, namely, that I neither know nor feel good or evil and that I have not only lost any sense of it, but that there is neither good nor evil (which pleased me), and that it is just a prejudice. (p. 692)

Good and evil are validated by the existence of moral values which emanate from God and failure or refusal to acknowledge their existence or to distinguish between them implies a rejection of God and moral values and a surrender to demonism. As a result of such absolute freedom, an individual like Stavrogin will find himself in uncharted territory where he will lose himself.

In seeking to achieve absolute freedom from the boundaries of good and evil, Stavrogin surrenders himself to a demonic relativism that is willing to sacrifice everything to his sense of superiority and to his unattached individualism. Stavrogin cuts himself off from mutually sustaining human relationships and condemns himself to desiccation and sterility. He is even unable to distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly. Because of his moral and aesthetic myopia, he could see, as Shatov tells him, "no distinction in beauty between some voluptuous and brutish act and any heroic exploit, even the sacrifice of life for the good of humanity" (p. 260).

Iago, on the other hand, discriminates between beauty and ugliness and is aware of the moral beauty that others may have. This beauty is his torment because he cannot achieve it even if he tries to.

Iago is a man who, because of his demonic nature, is unable to follow a different course and has to accept what he is. His intelligence and penetration make him keenly aware of his deficiencies and the great moral qualities that others have and because he cannot have these qualities he tries to destroy those people who have them (II.i.282-5; II.iii.328-31; and V.i.19-20).

It is Iago's punishment that he sees and appreciates Othello's, Desdemona's, and Cassio's moral beauty and realizes at the same time how ugly and repulsive his evil nature is in comparison with their unblemished natures. The more he suffers, the more furious he becomes with his victims who are causing him so much pain and self-shame. Iago's feeling is not mere envy or jealousy, but goes far beyond them. It is a feeling that only Shakespeare could fathom the depths of with his unique insight into human nature and the nature of evil. Iago's feeling is a mixture of envy, pride, a sense of superiority, a desire for power, and cynicism, as well as self-pity, a sense of inferiority, and even despair - all of which Satan feels when he is expelled from heaven.

However, his success with Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio fills him with pride and renders him inhumanly sadistic. He exults in the power he wields over his victims. If Stavrogin's evil lies in his proud self-alienation from and contempt for his companions, Iago's evil lies in his assuming the scary role of the puppeteer who manipulates people as if they were marionettes and who has come to enjoy his new role and the power he seems to possess.

Iago's ability to appreciate beauty and differentiate between it and ugliness makes him a greater and much more complex character than Stavrogin whose quest in life is mainly to achieve absolute freedom. Stavrogin is a walking death symbolized by his face which is like a lifeless mask. Iago, on the other hand, is very much alive.

He has an inexhaustible reservoir of energy which he uses unceasingly to encompass his evil designs. His mission, we can be sure, is not an easy one because he plots against what he also admires and forces himself to despise and hate. The magnitude of the effort thus needed to carry out his wicked purposes adds to the greatness of his character for there is no limit to his destructive energy and therefore no limit to his evil. Stavrogin's indifference and complete inertia reduce his stature and simplify the nature of the evil he represents. Thus, while Stavrogin as a devil, never transcends the stature of the small devils of Russian folk tradition (4), Iago is more of a Mephistophelian kind of devil who can aspire to the complexity of Milton's Satan without, of course, his sublime grandeur.

When in the presence of Iago, Othello expresses his unbounded love for Desdemona and declares that when he stops loving her, his life will lose its meaning and become mere chaos (III.iii.91-93). "Chaos" can also refer to the condition of the universe before God arranged it into its present order and crowned love as the supreme value that generates beauty, harmony, sympathy, and compassion. Since Iago eventually succeeds in turning Othello against Desdemona, he becomes the agent of primordial chaos that would come again when love is no more. This is in keeping with his satanic nature and mission in the world.

Iago exults when he sees Othello lying prostrate at his feet (IV.i.44-47) and Desdemona going down on her knees imploring him to help her in her predicament with the much-changed Moor (IV.ii.152-65). In other words, he exults in what he makes his victims do. Stavrogin, on the other hand, takes pleasure in any act of baseness or villainy he himself commits because by so doing he is asserting not only his immorality but also his difference, his apartness, and, ultimately, his absolute freedom and superiority (p. 684). By these heinous acts he disregards the moral norms, which he has always held in contumely, and launches into an unknown terrain of evil in which he eventually loses himself. Iago, however, does not need to reach any terrain of evil: he is already there, and he never loses himself, for he is quite at home in all of them.

Iago's actions, however, are not actuated by any theory or quest. They are the translation of his evil into a peculiar kind of relationship with those unfortunates who come in touch with him. There is therefore no development, deterioration, or degradation in his character. He is self-sufficient, self-contained, and self-reflexive. His awareness of his victims' superior moral beauty never induces him to pause, waver, or falter. Until the end, therefore, he remains intransigently hostile and inaccessible to any noble feeling.

Just as Iago is trusted by everybody in the play, Stavrogin has a tremendous influence on the group of young people around him because of his sense of humour and strong personality, his great intelligence and originality, and his comparative affluence and social standing. They consider him their idol. Shatov, Peter Verkhovensky, and Kirilov think he can lead a revolution and save humanity. However, his demonic nature renders him unfit for any positive action or human feeling.

With every act of villainy, Stavrogin challenges society and asserts his freedom and indifference to its norms, values, and every other kind of restrictions. His acts of villainy and defiance are a tribute to his sense of superiority. If Iago experiments with his victims to see how far he can hoodwink them and bamboozle them into believing him or doing what he wants them to do, Stavrogin experiments with himself. He wants to see how far he can go in breaking the rules and defying society.

He shocks public opinion by marrying the mad cripple Marya Timofeyevna Lebyatkin. She was a poor servant in Petersburg and fell in love with Stavrogin (p. 194). He kept toying with her and treating her as if she were a lady, which made her go completely mad and then married her to satisfy, as Shatov tells him, his "passion for cruelty" and his "moral turpitude" (p. 261). Although he cruelly taunts her brother, Captain Lebyatkin, and tells him "I married your sister when I wanted to, after a drunken dinner, or a bet, for a bottle of wine, and now I will announce it publicly. Why shouldn't I, if it amuses me?" (p. 273), later on, however, he tells Tikhon he married her to punish himself for what he had done to the 11-year old Matryosha (p. 692).

Nevertheless, in view of his previous actions, we tend to believe that he also married her to amuse himself and defy public opinion. He always tries to do the unconventional, the

unexpected, and the outrageously shocking in order to proclaim his freedom and incomparability.

Stavrogin's one-night affair with Liza is a big fiasco; for, as George Steiner has written: "it has revealed to Liza Stavrogin's crippling inhumanity. Dostoevsky does not communicate the precise nature of the sexual failure, but the impact of utter sterility is drastically conveyed." (5) Liza has found Stavrogin empty and a fraud, (p. 521).

Thus both Stavrogin and Iago use people as objects to amuse themselves with or as victims whom they can subdue with the power of their will and when they have served their purpose, they are to be discarded or destroyed. Stavrogin's toying with Marya Timofeyevna, however, is not equal to the challenge Iago sets for himself. Marya is a poor, helpless, and handicapped girl who is hungry for love and affection (her brother beats her up) and therefore falls an easy prey to Stavrogin's blandishments. Othello and Desdemona, on the other hand, are two characters drawn on the heroic level and their relationship is as near perfection as the relationship between two human beings who love each other can ever attain. Destroying these two exceptional human beings requires a great deal of effort, cunning, dissimulation, and skill but the prize justifies the trouble taken by hell's emissary, and when they are destroyed, we find ourselves exclaiming like Macduff: "Confusion now hath made his masterpiece". The men and women Stavrogin destroys either directly or indirectly such as Liza, Mary Shatov, Matryosha, Shatov, Kirilov, and many others, belong to ordinary humanity and are not of the stature of the Shakespearean Titans and their deaths do not have the same impact on their society as the death of the two tragic heroes, Othello and Desdemona, and that is why his acts of villainy are more numerous than Iago's.

His ego needs a multitudinous variety of victims to devour in order to grow into the monster he finally becomes. Moreover, the arduous, relentless efforts required to encompass the ruin of Othello and Desdemona and the unappeasable passion and hatred which impel Iago in pursuing his Satanic mission against his victims are beyond Stavrogin who is without desire or passion.

Stavrogin realizes too late that by freeing himself of all values, norms, and principles, and by becoming inaccessible to such feelings as love (the fiasco of his last night with Liza which was due to his inability to respond to her love), compassion (for Marya Timofeyevna whom he had married and Matryosha whom he had seduced and raped), and remorse (about the people he killed or humiliated), he has killed his own soul. Life, for him, becomes an arid desert for he has starved to death any feeling of hope about the future, for to hope would be a sign of weakness and dependence on contingency which his demonic nature would never permit or tolerate.

The contradiction in Stavrogin's way of thinking becomes obvious: if life is meaningless and hope and expectations are also meaningless, then challenging society and violating principles and values also become meaningless endeavours and futile targets; for, as Lear said: "Nothing will come of nothing." And as he has severed all ties with humanity, he cannot count on humanity to help or support him when he needs its help and support, and

even if society was willing to help, nurse or support him, he deems himself unworthy of its help and solicitude.

Stavrogin has all his life monomaniacally focused on his own ego and striven to establish its apartness, freedom, and independence, while at the same time ignoring and even spurning any human relationship based on love or the candor of mutual friendship. As a result, his ego develops into a monster which like the ***Frankenstein*** monster he cannot control but has to submit to its will. Stavrogin's madness (at one point even his mother thinks he is mad, p. 109) and unaccountable acts are the result of his monstrous ego gaining control of his life and running amok. It looks as if Stavrogin's ego has surrendered to the id and as such, his relation to outside reality has lost the organizational and rational mediations of the normal ego and has become subjected to the instinctive and irrational drives of the id. In his book, ***Freud and Christianity,*** R.S. Lee has written:

> Here too is found the explanation of Original Sin.….The sense of sin comes….from the personalization of the Super-ego at the resolution of the Oedipus Complex, by which the wish to destroy the father and possess the mother re mastered in the developing infant. If these wishes had not existed there would have been no need to form the Super-ego and so develop a moral conscience. Thus the precondition of getting knowledge of good and evil at all is that we have sinned psychologically. A sense of guilt is inherent in our make-up. (6)

Accordingly, in light of Freudian psychology, we can say that in the case of Stavrogin there was no resolution of the Oedipus Complex because he never experienced it: he had no feelings towards his parents. His father was "lackadaisical" and lived "apart from his mother, the boy growing up entirely under her supervision." As for the mother, the "boy knew that his mother was very fond of him, but he was hardly ever fond of her" (p. 53). He therefore never suffered from a sense of guilt induced by a super-ego since the latter was never formed in his psychological make-up. Stavrogin thus never developed a moral conscience and never got a knowledge of good and evil since in his infancy he never sinned psychologically. He will, as a result, be at the mercy of his id-dominated ego, or the demon which controls him. Hence just as both Frankenstein and the monster he has created have to die, Stavrogin has to die for as long as he lives he will have no peace or happiness for his id-dominated or demon-controlled ego will continue to cause havoc.

Unlike Stavrogin, the Mephistophelian Iago is satisfied with his work: he has by the end of the play accomplished his difficult mission and succeeded in bringing about the destruction of both Othello and Desdemona.

Both Iago and Stavrogin are demonized characters. Their devilish pride and arrogance make them repudiate any kind of allegiance except to reason and their inflexible, intransigent, and relentless wills. Iago's evil, however, is of an absolute nature, and does not depend, like Stavrogin's, on acts of challenge to society or public opinion in order to assert or prove itself: it is self-dependent, self-generating, constant, and consistent. Iago would never

commit suicide because he does not follow a theory or a particular quest the failure of which would fill him with fear, anguish, and despair.

His evil, like Mephistopheles', seeks difficult challenges: the more formidable the obstacles, the more welcome the challenge. Iago is also evil because his fiendish nature simply hates or despises everybody and tries to destroy whatever is beautiful, virtuous and harmonious. Stavrogin, on his part, is evil because he harms others out of boredom and out of a demonic urge to prove his superiority to and difference from the rest of mankind. Because of his egotism and pride he alienates himself from everybody, spurning human relationships and ruining anybody who is unwise or unlucky enough to cross his path. He refuses to acknowledge the existence of good and evil and to distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly and therefore condemns himself to a life of meaningless gestures and empty defiance. Unlike Iago, however, who is satisfied with the completion of his destructive mission, Stavrogin realizes that his quest for absolute moral freedom and independence has failed.

Life for him becomes an empty desert which reflects the emptiness and bleakness of his soul which is completely devoid of love and any other kind of allegiance or attachment. The prospect of going on living in this condition scares him and he commits suicide. If Kirilov committed suicide to prove he is not afraid of death, Stavrogin commits suicide because he has become afraid of life.

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