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The Meek One and Her Icon: Hodegetria's Presence in Dostoevsky's "Krotkaia"

Guilt, pride, despair, and fatigue have been identified as chief motives for a heroine's suicide in Dostoevsky's story "The Meek One" ("Кроткая," 1876). Joseph Frank suggests that the reason for the heroine's guilt is her "*incapacity to respond, except with profound pity*" to her husband's pleas to start a new life with him.¹ Willem G. Weststeijn, on the other hand, believes that the heroine is convinced that she "*just does not deserve a new life*" with the husband who wishes to worship her after all her trespasses against him.² According to O.Iu. Iur'eva, the heroine's extreme egotism equals that of the protagonist himself, preventing both of them from finding common ground.³ A.V. Denisova points out that this egotism ultimately leads the heroine to despair as she realizes her inability to overcome her own pride in the face of inevitable self-sacrifice.⁴ Finally, E.A. Garicheva cites Dostoevsky's own drafts for "The Meek One" in which he repeats six times that the heroine was simply tired ("*устала*").⁵

While Dostoevsky's masterful and at times deliberately ambiguous narrative certainly lends itself to such a wide variety of interpretations, I contend that it is meekness, the trait that the author himself identifies for us in the title of the story, that underlies all of the heroine's other feelings and that ultimately drives her to take her final step. To illustrate this point, I will

¹ Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2002), 5:350.

² Willem G. Weststeijn, "The Motivation of the Suicide in Dostoevskij's 'Krotkaja,'" *Sagner*, No. 30 (2008): 142. Robert Louis Jackson also identified guilt as the reason for the heroine's physical breakdown, drawing a parallel between the temptations of the meek one and those of Gretchen in *Faust*. See Robert Louis Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1981.

³ O.Iu. Iur'eva, "Bunt protiv tiranii i tiranii bunta v rasskaze Dostoevskogo 'Krotkaia,'" *Dostoevskii i mirovaia kul'tura*, No. 21 (2006): 95, 99.

⁴ A.B. Denisova, "'Stradanie tut ochevidnoe...'" ('Krotkaia' F.M. Dostoevskogo v kontekste 'Dnevnik pisatel'ia' za 1876 god)," *Rossiiskii gumanitarnyi zhurnal*, No.3 (2014): 391.

⁵ See E.A. Garicheva, "*Mir stanet krasota Khristova*": *Kategoriia preobrazheniia v russkoi slovesnosti XVI-XX vekov*. (Velikii Novgorod: MOU "Institut obrazovatel'nogo marketinga i kadrovyykh resursov," 2008): 107-112. Fyodor Dostoevsky and V. G. Bazanov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972), 24:324-5.

examine the role of religious iconography in the narrative, specifically using the *Hodegetria* icon of Vilnius as a tool for understanding the heroine's worldview.⁶

Although Dostoevsky is known first and foremost as a verbal artist, his regard for visual images is palpable both in his essays and in his fiction.⁷ George Steiner notes that Dostoevsky's interest in the visual aspect of human communication makes him "an example of a novelist who must be read with a constant commitment of our visual imagination."⁸ Aleksei Lidov takes it a step further asserting that Dostoevsky is an example of a writer whose way of perceiving the world is not merely visual, but iconic.⁹ This "iconic worldview" (*иконическое восприятие мира*) is a way of seeing and relating to the world that presupposes the existence of another world. The person who perceives the world iconically assumes that "what is seen is only an icon of what is invisible and a mediator that allows one to cross into another reality."¹⁰ Although Dostoevsky does not refer to iconicity directly in his writing, in the October 1876 issue of *A Writer's Diary* (*Дневник писателя*) he laments the frequent human propensity to focus only on that which is visible on the surface and the inability to penetrate the depth of ordinary events: "For some observers all the facts of life pass by in the most touchingly simple manner and are so plain that it's not worthwhile to think about them or even to look at them. [...] But of course we can never exhaust a whole phenomenon and never reach its end, or its beginning."¹¹

This observation is followed by a recount of the story that appeared in the newspaper *New Time* (*Новое время*) earlier that month, which spoke of a suicide committed by a young seamstress, Maria Borisova, who had moved to St. Petersburg from Moscow a few months earlier in search of work. As time went by, Borisova was running out of both money and any hope of finding respectable employment, so she ended her life by jumping out of a sixth-story window holding an icon of the Virgin Mary in her hands. Disturbed by this account, Dostoevsky observes: "This icon in the hands is a strange and unprecedented feature in suicides! This, now, is a meek and a humble suicide. Here, apparently, there was no grumbling or reproach: it was simply a matter of being unable to live any longer—"God did not wish it"—and so she died having said her

⁶ For a general discussion of the role of icons in Dostoevsky's writing, see, for example, James Townsend, "Dostoevsky and His Theology," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 10, No. 19 (1997). Also see George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson, eds., *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁷ For a thorough study of Dostoevsky's aesthetics, see Robert Louis Jackson, *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form: A Study of His Philosophy of Art* (New Haven: Yale U Press, 1966).

⁸ George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 159.

⁹ Aleksei Lidov, *Ikona: Mir sviatykh obrazov v Vizantii i Drevnei Rusi* (Moskva: Feoriiia, 2013), 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ Dostoevsky, 651. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Dostoevsky's texts are taken from Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

prayers.”¹² Dostoevsky confesses, “*This meek soul who destroyed herself torments one’s mind despite oneself,*”¹³ and the story “The Meek One” comes a result of this torment.

While the brief prehistory provided by the author himself makes “The Meek One” a little less fictional and therefore perhaps a little more believable, “*a journalistic aesthetic of shock*” is not Dostoevsky’s sole purpose.¹⁴ Irina Paperno rightly notes that what “The Meek One” conveys is that one can get only a limited access to another person’s motives through interpretive efforts; however, the narrative allows the readers of the text to see much more than the narrator, the newly-widowed pawnbroker, is himself capable of noticing.¹⁵

Shocked by his wife’s suicide that took place only a few hours earlier, the narrator of “The Meek One” is trying to comprehend her motives by reconstructing all the events that have lead up to the tragedy. It quickly becomes apparent that he married her, an orphan living with two abusive aunts, in order to console his own wounded ego. Following a dishonorable discharge from a military regiment, the narrator spends three years in abject poverty until he unexpectedly receives an inheritance. He then opens a pawnshop and devises a plan: “*I decided on a pawnshop, offering apologies to no one: money, then a cozy home and, at last, a new life far removed from my old memories.*”¹⁶ Soon afterwards he decides to marry the meek one and formulates the strategy that will allow him to break her spirit and increase her esteem for him: “*Severe, proud, needing no one’s moral consolation, suffering in silence.*”¹⁷ Yet his deliberate attempts to incite a genuine respect for his sorrows ultimately lead the heroine to take her final step out of the window of their fourth floor apartment, holding in front of her chest an icon of the Virgin Mary and the Child.

As early drafts indicate, one of the possible titles of the story in the early planning stages was “A Girl with an Icon” (“Девушка с образом”).¹⁸ The word “образ” has a double meaning. In the first place, it refers to the icons of the Virgin that both Borisova and the meek one hold in their hands at the time of their suicides. In the liturgical sense, an icon is a “*visible image of an invisible Prototype*” that dwells in the Kingdom of Heaven, which could be a Christian saint, Jesus

¹² Ibid., 653.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jefferson J. A. Gatrall, “The Icon in the Picture: Reframing the Question of Dostoevsky’s Modernist Iconography,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* Vol. 48, No. 1 (2004.): 11.

¹⁵ Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 183.

¹⁶ Dostoevsky, 703.

¹⁷ Ibid., 692.

¹⁸ Dostoevsky, *PSS* 23: 381.

Christ, or the Virgin Mary.¹⁹ However, the word “о́браз” can also refer to a living person, especially to the one who strives to emulate a holy prototype. Konstantin Barsht explains that for Dostoevsky specifically “*a person’s face [is] the true expression of the spiritual significance of its owner, a genuine reflection of the image and likeness of the Creator of the universe.*”²⁰ Although the heroine’s appearance is otherwise unremarkable, the narrator repeatedly refers to her eyes, which are “*big, blue, wistful,*” evoking an image often seen in a religious icon.²¹ Naturally, her pensive look reflects the state of her mind, burdened both by the difficulty of the present situation and by concerns for the future; however, her big and wistful eyes are also the trait that she shares with another female character whose presence in the story is significant, albeit inconspicuous—the Virgin Mary.²²

Pavel Florensky teaches that the purpose of an icon is “*to take one’s conscience into a spiritual world*” and thus facilitate spiritual communication with the personage it depicts, for when one looks at an icon, he sees “*a complete, real existence of personages themselves.*”²³ While the early title “A Girl with an Icon” draws together the heroine and the icon and suggests that the heroine is a priori endowed with spiritual qualities, I suggest that we consider not a girl *with* an icon as the original title suggests but a girl *as* an icon because this is what she ultimately becomes.

In his story, Dostoevsky takes the disturbing nature of Borisova’s act to a new level of complexity. From the newspaper account, Dostoevsky keeps references to the young girl, the fact that the icon of the Virgin Mary is given to her by her parents as a blessing, and the fall from an upper-story window. In “The Meek One,” he replaces the original icon with that of the Virgin and the Child, moves the window to the fourth floor from the sixth, and changes the timing of the suicide from September 30 to the middle of April. For the most part, chronology within the narrative is fairly vague, but the timing of events becomes more significant toward the end. In the text, the pawnbroker states three times that “the shroud fell” from his eyes on a Tuesday and

¹⁹ Valerii Lepakhin, “Ikona i slovo: vidy, urovni i formy vzaimosviasi,” *Dikoe pole*, #7, 2005, http://www.dikoepole.org/numbers_journal.php?id_txt=303 (Accessed January 21, 2016).

²⁰ Konstantin Barsht, “Defining the Face: Observations on Dostoevskii’s Creative Processes,” in *Russian Literature, Modernism, and the Visual Arts*, ed. Catriona Kelly and Stephen Lovell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 46.

²¹ Dostoevsky, 679.

²² Although Weststeijn states that the text of “The Meek One” lacks “any religious motifs, apart from the mentioning of the icon in the beginning of the story, when Krotkaia pawns it” (142), it must be noted that the presence of the icon in the background is significant and it forcefully comes to the fore in the climax scene.

²³ P.A. Florensky, *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. Andronik and M.S. Trubacheva. (Moskva: Izd-vo “Mysl’,” 1994), 2: 444, 447.

twice that this took place in the middle of April, which also happens to be the time when the Orthodox Church celebrates the feast of the *Hodegetria* icon of Vilnius—on April 14, according to the Julian calendar.

The Russian Orthodox iconographic tradition knows several types of icons of the Virgin Mary. All of these icons, regardless of their type, location or specific purpose, share one common feature, which is a touch of sadness in the expression of Mary's face.²⁴ The *Hodegetria* kind of icons in particular depicts the Virgin Mary as pensive and pointing to the Christ Child seated on her lap indicating that He is the only true way to salvation for the fallen world.²⁵ At the same time, she intercedes before Him on the world's behalf.²⁶ The first *Hodegetria* icon bears its name from the monastery that was built in the fifth century next to a miracle-working spring in Constantinople.²⁷ The spring was known for its healing qualities, so the Hodegon Monastery (from ὁδηγῶν, "of guides, conductors") itself most likely gained its name from the monks who helped blind visitors to find their way to the spring where they would bathe and gain their sight.²⁸ The name *Hodegetria* (Ὁδηγήτρια) literally means "She who shows the Way" and is customarily rendered in Russian as "*putevoditel'nitsa*."²⁹ According to a Byzantine tradition, this icon was sent to Constantinople from Jerusalem in the fifth century as a major Christian relic to be housed in the Hodegon Monastery.³⁰ According to the same tradition, this was the portrait that St. Luke himself painted and that subsequently became the standard for all icons of the Virgin Mary.

Aside from its location next to a sight-giving spring, the icon itself was considered miraculous. Every Tuesday, it was removed from the church and carried through the streets of Constantinople, followed by a large procession of believers who hoped to receive cures of various kinds.³¹ While the people of Constantinople observed several rituals with miracle-working icons, the Tuesday rite of the *Hodegetria* was "*the most important and the best known*."³²

²⁴ Some, like "Umilenie" (Ἐλεούσα, tenderness or showing mercy) are less solemn than others, but each evokes a sense of grief that comes from knowing that the Son will be crucified for the sins of the world.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Léonide Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 87.

²⁷ Robert Lee Wolff, "Footnote to an Incident of the Latin Occupation of Constantinople: The Church and the Icon of the *Hodegetria*," *Traditio* 6 (1948): 322.

²⁸ Ibid. Also see Alice-Mary Talbot, "Hodegon Monastery," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Alexander P. Kazhdan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²⁹ See "Ὁδηγήτρια" in *Polnyi Pravoslavnyi Bogoslovskii Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar'*, ed. D.A. Bulatova (Moskva: Vozrozhdenie, 1992), 2:1690 and Ouspensky and Lossky, 81.

³⁰ Wolff, 322. Also see Shevchenko. The *Hodegetria* icon of Constantinople played a role of a palladium of the empire, and it was perceived as a pattern-image of the Virgin for the entire Christian world (Lidov, "The Flying *Hodegetria*" 274).

³¹ See Talbot, "Hodegon Monastery."

³² Lidov, "The Flying *Hodegetria*" 274.

During the weekly Tuesday rites, the icon was carried around town high in the air, as if floating above the crowd.³³ The bearer of the icon, along with clerics and lay worshipers, would stretch out their hands “in a gesture of supplication to the icon of the Virgin,”³⁴ and the crucial moment of this procession was “the effect of the icon ‘flying’ in the air.”³⁵ If the followers were to fix their eyes on the icon, it would appear to them “raised high above the ground and completely transfigured.”³⁶ Most importantly, the *Hodegetria* was perceived not as a painted representation, but “as a living being, an animated icon,” and the women who followed her in the procession, dressed in their best clothing and singing hymns, walked “behind the icon of the Mother of God as though they were servants following their mistress.”³⁷

In 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Turks, the icon was destroyed as a group of Turks “quarreled over which should have it, and tore it into four pieces.”³⁸ Nevertheless, several churches in Southern Italy, as well as in Eastern Europe, claim that their icon of the Virgin Mary is the original *Hodegetria*.³⁹ Among them is the *Hodegetria* Icon of Vilnius, and it is this icon that is celebrated by the Russian Orthodox Church on April 14.⁴⁰ According to the belief held by the Russian Orthodox Christians, this icon was a family heirloom of Byzantine emperors, and in 1472 it traveled with Sofia Paleolog to Moscow, where the Greek Princess was to marry the Russian Prince Ivan III.⁴¹ A few years later, in 1495 the daughter of Sofia and Ivan, Elena, was given the icon as a parents’ blessing when she left home in order to marry a Lithuanian Prince.⁴² Following Elena’s death, the icon was placed over her sepulcher in Vilnius. Although there is no historical proof that any one of the *Hodegetria* icons either in Southern Italy or Eastern Europe is unmistakably the one that was housed in the Hodegon monastery before the fall of

³³ The icon bearing the name “The Praise of the Virgin with the Akathistos cycle,” housed in the Moscow Kremlin, contains a pictorial reference to the Tuesday rite (see Lidov 2004: 275). Although the Tuesday rite of the *Hodegetria* icon was not celebrated by the Russian Orthodox church, some attempts were made to institute the rite after the icon left Constantinople (Ibid. 292-3).

³⁴ Aleksei Lidov, “The Flying Hodegetria: The Miraculous Icon as Bearer of Sacred Space.” In *The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance. Papers from a Conference Held at the Accademia di Danimarca in Collaboration with the Bibliotheca Hertziana (Max-Planck Institut für Kunstgeschichte)*, ed. Erik Thunø and Gerhard Wolf (Rome: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider, 2004). 277.

³⁵ Ibid., 285.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 289-90.

³⁸ Wolff, 327. See also Nancy Patterson Shevchenko, “Virgin Hodegetria,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*.

³⁹ Wolff, 327.

⁴⁰ Iu.A. Piskun, “Vilenskaia Odigitriia ikona Bozhiei Materi,” in *Pravoslavnaia Entsiklopediia* (Moskva: Tserkovno-nauchnyi tsentr “Pravoslavnaia Entsiklopediia,” 2010), 475.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Constantinople, the legend that is associated with the *Hodegetria* icon of Constantinople and later of Vilnius is echoed throughout Dostoevsky's narrative.

One of the first facts that we learn about the icon that the meek one brings to the pawnshop is that it is a family heirloom. The pawnbroker quickly identifies it as “*household, family icon*” (*образ домашний, семейный*),⁴³ just as the *Hodegetria* icon of Vilnius was. Yet this is a minor point compared to the fact that later, right before the suicide, the servant Lukerya calls it “*образ ее*” (her icon).⁴⁴ It is significant that Dostoevsky never uses the word *икона* (an icon) in this text, and Lukerya's words “*образ ее*” thus have a double meaning. They refer both to the painted icon as a physical object and to the image of the Virgin Mary that is reflected in the meek one's countenance. The heroine's large, wistful eyes, her pale complexion, and her apparent frailty after a prolonged illness become more and more reminiscent of an iconic representation of a saint. However, setting these parallels aside, what is more significant is the effect that the heroine's presence produces on the narrator and what the narrator fails to see.

Sophie Ollivier observes that in Dostoevsky's works only female characters pray before icons and that when they contemplate the icons of the Virgin Mary, “*they become very much like its divine archetype. Women do not act, do not change the world. They represent the iconic image of redemption in a world threatened by idols.*”⁴⁵ In the context of the Russian culture, it is difficult to underestimate the saving power that is assigned to the Mother of God. She was considered almost equal in power to the Trinity, and the Russian people often appealed to her as an intercessor rather than to Christ: “*Богородица идет впереди Троицы и почти отождествляется с Троицей. Народ более чувствовал близость Богородицы-Заступницы, чем Христа. Хрисос—Царь Небесный [...] И русский народ хочет укрыться от страшного Бога [...] за Богородицей.*”⁴⁶ The narrator's mistake is that he turns to his wife as a source of validation and mercy instead of turning to the Virgin Mary whose icon he has accepted as a pawn. He lacks the iconic worldview that Lidov speaks of while at the same time he hopes that the heroine will be able to see his inner world behind the stern façade that he puts up right after the marriage takes place. By his own admission, he “*spoke almost silently,*”⁴⁷ for he “*wanted her to stand before [him] in ardent*

⁴³ Dostoevsky, *PSS* 24: 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 24: 32.

⁴⁵ Sophie Ollivier, “Icons in Dostoevsky's Works,” in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, ed. George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 64.

⁴⁶ Nikolai Berdiaev, *Russkaia ideia* (Sankt-Peterburg: Azbuka-Klassika, 2008), 34. Also see N.O. Lossky, *Dostoevskii i ego khristianskoe miroponimanie* (Niu-Iork: Izd-vo im. Chekhova, 1953), 167-172.

⁴⁷ Dostoevsky, *PSS* 24: 14.

homage because of [his] sufferings, and [he] deserved that."⁴⁸ Initially surprised by his behavior, after a lengthy period of silence the heroine nevertheless resigns herself to a state of mute co-existence with her husband. Her physical health begins to decline, but she manages to carve out a space in their relationship where she can retain her emotional independence. This arrangement works until one evening in the middle April when the pawnbroker hears her singing. He realizes that his plan for her to stand before him in "*ardent homage*" is completely reversed and that a "*poor, cracked, broken note began to ring in [his] soul once more.*"⁴⁹

The effect that the meek one produces on the pawnbroker is to some extent similar to the one the *Hodegetria* icon produced on believers. According to Stephen of Novgorod, a fourteenth-century traveller to Constantinople, during the Tuesday rite the *Hodegetria* icon was placed on the shoulders of one man, who was then required to walk blindfolded and without any help from others. Struggling under the weight of the icon, the carrier walks erratically around the churchyard and "*does not understand where the icon is taking him.*"⁵⁰ In a similar way, the narrator, overfilled with "*восторг*" (ecstasy)⁵¹ upon hearing his wife's singing, feels disoriented. He aimlessly runs outside, jumps into a carriage, rides off, then returns home, and struggles to understand what is happening to him. At the same time, he feels that something miraculous is taking place in his soul right at that moment.

Miracles were always expected to take place during the Tuesday rites. Aside from the icon carrier's claims that he could not feel the icon's weight, the believers who followed the icon in a procession would hope to be healed from their physical infirmities. Such miracles took place in addition to the healing that was received from sight-giving streams near the Hodegon monastery. The pawnbroker also experiences a miracle when the figurative "*terrible, fateful shroud*"⁵² that has been blocking his sight and clouding his judgment suddenly falls. He realizes that he has been selfish and unfair towards his wife. He also notices that the meek one has become "*thin and gaunt [...] her face was pale, her lips white,*"⁵³ and he realizes that these might be symptoms of a serious illness.

⁴⁸ Dostoevsky, 689.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 707.

⁵⁰ George P. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984), 36.

⁵¹ Dostoevsky, *PSS* 24: 27.

⁵² Dostoevsky, 705.

⁵³ Ibid., 706.

The narrator's feeling of disorientation and a brief moment of discernment are followed by a fit of frenzy on the pawnbroker's part that frightens the meek one. Upon seeing his wife in a new light, the pawnbroker throws himself to her feet muttering, "*let me kiss the hem of your dress [...] Let me worship you [на тебя молиться] this way for the rest of my life.*"⁵⁴ Shocked by a sudden change in his attitude from domination to servitude, she suffers a nervous breakdown. He, however, cannot control himself. While the transformation in his treatment of her appears sudden to the heroine, it is not entirely unforeseen because he has been treating his wife as an idol all along. Examining the development of their relationship in retrospect, the narrator turns in his mind to the day when he made an offer of marriage to the meek one and asks rhetorically: "*Did I not love her already, even then?*"⁵⁵ The implied answer is yes, he did, when in fact what he feels is more akin to idol worship than to love.

As he recounts the silent duel that took place between him and his wife one morning when the meek one pointed a gun at him while he was asleep (or so she thought), he poses another rhetorical question: "*how could I keep on living after the revolver that was pointed at me by the creature adored by me?*" (*обожаемым мною существом*).⁵⁶ Adoration of a creature is quite different from love for a human being. Vladimir Dal', a contemporary of Dostoevsky's, defines the word "*обожать*" in his *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo velikoruskogo iazyka* as "*обоготворять, почитать богом, божеством*" (*to deify, to honor as god or deity*).⁵⁷ Adoration is the kind of affection that is excessive, passionate, and blind.⁵⁸ By calling his wife "*the creature adored by me,*" the pawnbroker reveals to the readers that he cannot look at her as his equal. As a typical underground man, he longs for validation and approval yet resents those who either try and/or fail to give it to him. In effect, the pawnbroker turns his wife into an idol, which is, as Valerii Lepakhin explains, a "*god himself, a little god, behind [which] stands no Prototype.*"⁵⁹ Whereas in the Orthodox Christian traditions a believer reveres an icon as a physical object and worships a personage depicted in the icon, an idolater worships the physical object itself. In the pawnbroker's mind, the meek one is such an object, which puts her in a very precarious position. Early in their marriage, he seeks to foster true benevolence in her, but when she fails to comply,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 708.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 689.

⁵⁶ Dostoevsky, *PSS* 24: 21 (my emphasis).

⁵⁷ V.I. Dal', *Tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka* (Moskva: Eksmo, 2005), 7: 242.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Valerii Lepakhin, "Slovo i tekst v ikone: problema transfera i intermedial'nosti," *Russian Literature* Vol. LXIX, No. 1 (2011): 58-9.

he, by his own admission, increases the intensity of his silence and becomes even sterner. In other words, he treats her like an idol, because, as Lepakin explains, “*if an idol does not fulfill a request, one can ‘punish’ it,*” and an inanimate idol can be “*chopped with an axe, cut with a knife, whipped with a lash, set on fire and so on.*”⁶⁰ To the pawnbroker’s credit, he is never physically abusive towards his wife, but when he feels that silence alone is not enough, he dissolves their marriage as it were by buying a separate—cheap, narrow, and hard—bed for her and putting it in a separate room.

The meek one is prepared to endure neither the coldness nor the frenzied adoration of the pawnbroker. Whereas her coming into his life takes place in stages—first, she brings trinkets, then she pawns the treasured icon of the Virgin Mary, then she herself comes as his wife—her exit is much more dramatic and abrupt. The moment of her suicide is a culmination of both the heroine’s life and of the pawnbroker’s narrative, although he is absent at the moment when it happens. Antony Johae suggest that if “*we are fully to appreciate the significance of [an event], it will need to be visualized in more detail than has been directly represented,*”⁶¹ and this condition applies not only to Dostoevsky’s readers, but also, and perhaps even more so, to the pawnbroker within his own narrative.

The heroine’s meekness becomes manifest in the moments immediately preceding her suicide. By the time the narrator arrives on the scene, his wife’s body is already lying on the ground with a crowd gathering around it. His servant Lukerya later tells him that a few minutes before the suicide she saw that the meek one’s icon was taken out of the icon case and placed on the table, and that the mistress looked as if she had just been praying in front of it. By taking the icon out of the case and placing it on the table, the meek one reduces the physical distance between her own face and the face of the Virgin Mary, which creates an even more intimate bond between the two women. The meek one then turns to the window and pauses for a moment, leaning against the wall. She takes the icon in her hands and, proceeding in an upward motion, steps onto the windowsill. Then Lukerya sees that her mistress has “*climbed up on the windowsill and [is] standing upright in the open window, her back to [Lukerya], holding the icon.*”⁶² Lukerya shouts, “*Ma’am, ma’am!*”⁶³ The meek one hears Lukerya and makes a move as if to turn

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Antony, Johae, “Towards an Iconography of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*,” in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, ed. George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson (Cambridge: University Press, 2001), 74.

⁶² Dostoevsky, 713.

⁶³ Ibid.

toward her, but instead she takes a step (“шагнула”) as she presses the icon to her chest.⁶⁴ When the heroine takes this step, she acts similarly to the women who followed the *Hodegetria* icon during the Tuesday rite, walking behind it “as though they were servants following their mistress.”⁶⁵ To the people gathering in the courtyard, however, the meek one *looks* like an icon. When they suddenly hear a window open and look up, they see that up above them, on the fourth floor,⁶⁶ a young woman is standing framed by the window casement, with an icon of the Virgin Mary and the Child in her hands.⁶⁷ Windows, doorframes, and mirrors are commonly used as an ekphrastic device that is used to set what is located inside apart from the outside world. When the meek one stands in the window with the icon in her hands, she herself is transfigured in a similar way that the icon of the Virgin Mary was transfigured as it was raised high above the ground during the Tuesday rites.

Pavel Florensky explains the connection between an iconic depiction and a saint’s presence in the following way:

*Вот, я смотрю на икону и говорю в себе: “Се—С а м а О н а”—не изображение Ее, а Она Сама, через посредство, при помощи иконописного искусства созерцаемая. Как чрез окно, вижу я Богоматерь, Самую Богоматерь, и Ей Самой молюсь, лицом к лицу, но никак не изображению. Да в моем сознании и нет никакого изображения: есть доска с красками, и есть Сама Матерь Господа. Окно есть окно, и доска иконы—доска, краски, олифа. А за окном созерцается Сама Божия Матерь; а за окном—видение Пречистой. Иконописец ... отверз завесу, а Та, Кто за завесой,—предстоит объективную реальностью не только мне, но равно – и ему, им обретается, но не сочиняется им.”*⁶⁸

When contemplating the icon, with her spiritual vision the meek one clearly perceives the Virgin Mary who dwells “behind we veil.”⁶⁹ Thus, when she steps off the window pressing the icon to her chest, the meek one doesn’t simply leave the confines of the pawnbroker’s apartment,

⁶⁴ Dostoevsky, *PSS* 24: 33.

⁶⁵ Lidov, “The Flying *Hodegetria*” 289-90.

⁶⁶ Dostoevsky’s decision to move the window from the sixth floor to the fourth is significant, but the symbolism of it cannot be fully examined in this paper. Tatiana Kasatkina notes that the number four is important in Dostoevsky’s writing because it corresponds to the four cardinal points (north, south, east, and west) and four elements (fire, water, earth, air), representing the world in its entirety (see Tatiana Kasatkina, “Avtorskaia pozitsiia v proizvedeniakh Dostoevskogo,” *Voprosy Literatury* 1 (2008).

⁶⁷ Dostoevsky uses the word “*obraz*,” not a diminutive “*obrazok*,” suggesting that the size of the icon is considerable, and we may suppose that the icon is visible to the people in the courtyard.

⁶⁸ Florensky, 2: 447.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

but she thrusts herself into the presence of the Mother of God. Regardless of what she feels towards the pawnbroker or what she thinks about their marriage (guilt, pride or any other emotion), it is her profound meekness that drives her towards the Virgin Mary and allows her to trust herself into the Virgin's care. "*All my hope I place in Thee, Mother of God, keep me under Thy shroud*" is the prayer that little Fedya Dostoevsky learned as a child and carried with him throughout adulthood and that is echoed in the climax scene of the "The Meek One."⁷⁰ Both Borisova's meek suicide in real life and the heroine's suicide in Dostoevsky's both "*highly realistic*" and simultaneously "*fantastic*" story are guided by the same kind trust in a higher power and a hope of deliverance.⁷¹

When considered from a different angle, the image of the meek one standing in the window frame becomes iconic for observers located on a lower plane in the courtyard. Just as the *Hodegetria* icon appeared floating high in the air during the weekly Tuesday rites, so is the meek one floats above the crowd, albeit for a brief moment. The main purpose of a church icon is to facilitate prayer, and anyone standing in front of an icon becomes not merely an idle looker-on, but "*a beholder*" of a spiritual realm and "*a worshipper*."⁷² Pavel Florensky writes that "*all icons are miracle working, that is they can be windows into eternity*."⁷³ As soon as the heroine appears in the window with the icon of the Virgin in her hands, the chance observers in the courtyard find themselves in the position of worshippers praying in front of an icon in an icon case.⁷⁴ What intensifies the effect of the meek one's transfiguration is the fact that, as Pavel Floresky explains, "*icons on many occasions were not only a window through which one could see personages depicted in them, but also a door, through which these personages entered into the perceptible world*."⁷⁵ Moreover, "*[i]t is precisely from icons that saints most often came down when they appeared to worshippers*."⁷⁶ Here two important events take place simultaneously: the heroine becomes one with her icon and, together with the Virgin Mary, she leaves the confines of the pawnbroker's apartment.

⁷⁰ Lossky, 168. The exact words of the prayer are "*Все упование мое на Тя возлагаю, Мати Божия, сохрани мя под кровом Своим!*"

⁷¹ Dostoevsky, PSS 24: 5.

⁷² Lepakhin, "Slovo i tekst" 72.

⁷³ Ibid., 450.

⁷⁴ For a discussion on hierotopy, see Aleksei Lidov's "Creating the Sacred Space. Hierotopy as a New Field of Cultural History," in *Spazi e percorsi sacri. I santuari, le vie, i corpi*, ed. Laura Carnevale and Chiara Cremonesi (libreriauniversitaria.it, 2014), 61-89.

⁷⁵ Florensky, 2: 449.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

The narrator does not see the moment when the meek one crosses the iconic threshold. He laments being five minutes too late, convinced that had he returned earlier, he could have prevented the tragedy. Yet the real tragedy lies in the fact that he misses the moment when his wife assumes an ultimately iconic state as she stands framed by the window with the icon in her hands. The blindness from which he thought he has been cured now sets in again as he experiences disbelief, denial, defiance, and despair in the ensuing hours. Sophie Ollivier observes that following his wife's suicide, the pawnbroker "*realizes that he loved her,*" although it is hard to determine whether he understands that it is he who "*wanted to destroy the divine principle in her.*"⁷⁷ All that he sees now is a dead body on the ground. As he reflects on the last few moments of his wife's life, he is gradually, and this time permanently overcome by blindness. His attention is absorbed by her blood on his finger: "*I believe I touched the blood with my finger, got the finger dirty, I'm looking at the finger (I remember that).*"⁷⁸ He notices that when the meek one fell, she "*didn't break anything, she wasn't disfigured!*" and even wonders if it is possible to not bury her. The solemnity of this moment is dampened by the narrator's irritation at the tradesman (*мещанин*) who stands next to him, repeating as he looks at the small amount of blood on the meek one's face: "*A handful, a handful!*"⁷⁹

The presence of the tradesman, although a minor detail, is yet another parallel between Dostoevsky's narrative and the *Hodegetria* legend. Tafur, a fifteenth-century Spanish traveler, mentions in his notes that the *Hodegetria* rite and miracle took place on a market day in the city square when people from all walks of life and especially tradesmen and merchants were present. Their presence underscores the all-encompassing effect of the miraculous icon. Similarly, in "The Meek One" the motley crowd that is gathered in the courtyard gets a chance to witness the heroine's transformation while the narrator himself is absent. It is also the tradesman in "The Meek One" who repeatedly notes how small the amount of blood is, as if expecting that a fall from the fourth floor should produce a gorier result. Michel Quenot explains that customarily very little blood is painted on Russian icons, and when it comes to depicting deceased persons in an icon, "[t]he characteristic absence of realism [or naturalism] serves to emphasize the spiritualization which is taking place."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ollivier, 63.

⁷⁸ Dostoevsky, *PSS* 24: 33.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Michel Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), 87.

When the narrator begins his tale, in an occasional moment of insight he turns his attention away from himself and sees his wife as an independent human being that lives outside of his system; yet as he proceeds with his account, his capacity for empathy or any kind of meaningful human interaction shrinks. Accusing his dead wife of unoriginality and at the same time experiencing terror at the prospect of having to live in isolation again, the pawnbroker concludes his narrative with a series of rhetorical questions:

*What do I care for your laws now? What do I care for your customs and your manners, your life, your state, your religion? Let your judge judge me, let them bring me to court, to your public court, and I will say that I don't acknowledge any of it. The judge will shout, "Be silent, sir!" And I will shout in reply: "What force do you have that can compel me now to obey?"*⁸¹

In a fit of defiance, the narrator willingly separates himself from everyone around him and rejects any judgment that can possibly be lodged against him. As a complete opposite, the meek one seeks unity with the power that is greater than she. She turns herself over to the care of the Virgin Mary even if the laws of this material world cannot be overcome. Tatiana Kasatkina states that in order for a suicide to take place, one at least for a moment must find him- or herself completely cut off from the rest of humanity, and such isolation must be not metaphorical, but quite real.⁸² Dostoevsky's narrator knows that the meek one is already an orphan when he marries her, and by subjecting her to his silence after their marriage he only further intensifies her sense of isolation. He does everything he can "to reduce [her] to a voiceless object," which in itself is "a kind of murder,"⁸³ but she overcomes this form of psychological abuse not by rebelling against her immediate tormentor, but by turning away from him and towards the Virgin Mary.

While it is true that the Russian Orthodox Christian church condemns those who commit suicide for intentionally cutting themselves off from the body of the church, the meek one makes her final step precisely because she is seeking a communion with the Mother of God. Lossky explains that in Dostoevsky's world death is never the end, because "телесная смерть членов

⁸¹ Dostoevsky, 716.

⁸² See Tatiana Kasatkina, "O samoubiistve," in *Novyi mir* 10 (2009): 129-141.

⁸³ Diane Oenning Thompson, "Problems of the biblical word in Dostoevsky's poetics," *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition* (2001): 85.

*Царства Божия невозможна.*⁸⁴ Lossky argues that only those who are convinced that the Kingdom of God does not exist commit suicide, having nothing to live for, which is why the meek one's final step out of the window can hardly be considered a deliberate suicide in a strict sense. Unlike other suicides in Dostoevsky's works, the meek one's goal (if she at all is cognizant of one) is not to destroy her flesh, but to follow her mistress, the Virgin Mary, out of the stifling environment of the pawnbroker's apartment and into the realm where the Virgin dwells.

The meek one kills her body, but not her spirit. The pawnbroker, however, continues to live in the body while being spiritually dead. In the words of Kasatkina, Dostoevsky never imposes his point of view on his audience because he allows them to see "*exactly as much as they are ready to see.*"⁸⁵ The heroine meekly submits herself to the Virgin's mercy making possible the transfiguration that takes place as she makes her final step. The pawnbroker, however, not only disregards the connection between his wife, her icon, and the Virgin Mary, but he fails to see any spiritual significance in the meek one's final step.

⁸⁴ Lossky, 160.

⁸⁵ See Tatiana Kasatkina, "Avtorskaia pozitsiia v proizvedeniiakh Dostoevskogo."