Murmurs of Revolution: Mythical Subversion in Dostoevsky

Connor Guetersloh
Chapman University, guete100@mail.chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cusrd_abstracts

Part of the Linguistics Commons, Political Theory Commons, and the Social Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cusrd_abstracts/300

This Poster is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Undergraduate Excellence at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Scholar Symposium Abstracts and Posters by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.
Murmurs of Revolution: Mythical Subversion in Dostoevsky

Connor Guetersloh

The Myth discussed here is not concerned with legend. Mythology is a linguistic system explained extensively by Roland Barthes. Through Myth, we understand meaning as defined by our greater culture, but not necessarily in a direct conveyance. Myth is primarily “a system of communication,” a message, and not an “object, concept, or idea” (Barthes 3). Furthermore, Myth is “a part of both semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas in form” (Barthes 3). In short, Myth is a subconscious truth, understood by the collective consciousness during social interaction.

But of course, it is impossible for us to agree on the same “truths” all of the time. That is why there are two classifications of myth: the Dominant Myth and the submissive myth. There can be many submissive, but only one dominant, which is the myth understood by the majority of the culture in a region. However, there are times when the Dominant Myth is questioned, and a submissive myth attempts to replace it. It is not always noticeable until after the dethronement, but there is the rare occasion when such is not the case, and can even be predicted before the fact.

This is the “Subversive Myth,” shown at work on the left. My purpose here is to track its pattern through three of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novels, Notes from the Underground, The Idiot, and Demons. These are three novels from the Silver age of Russian Literature, following Marxism and directly before the Russian Revolution, and were actually published in the same order as they function in our mythical system. Transferring from literature to reality, it might be possible to use this precedent to predict the rise of the Subversive Myth, specifically how it transfers from the subconscious to an shared idea, and then from shared idea to action. With such a pattern established, we can see in real time the change of meanings, and consequently catch how, when, and why social upheaval occurs, without the use of hindsight.

Overview of the System

Myth is the way in which we understand interpretations of language on common ground.

1. Notes From the Underground: Resentment
   - Subversive Myth is represented through the “Underground Man,” who hates society and the people who inhabit it.
   - Threatens Dominant Myth with radical action, but remains convinced in singularity.
   - He laments “that to be overly conscious is a sickness, a real, thorough sickness” (Notes 8). In other words, he is conscious of the Dominant Myth, and despises both it and society’s willing adherence to it.
   - One such person might at first appear to be a societal recluse, shunning his neighbor as no more than “an insect,” but he secretly “wanted many times to become an insect” (Notes 8).
   - Without this rejection of the “insect” paired with the desire to become an “insect,” the Subversive Myth cannot happen.
   - The “Underground Man” wishes to be part of society, but can’t, and so actively seeks to remake society to accept him.

2. The Idiot: Rejection
   - Experienced by Prince Myshkin, a man considered an idiot for his epileptic seizures, though he is not by any terms an idiot.
   - Prince Myshkin’s optimistically Christian view of the world is repeatedly ridiculed in favor of the Subversive Myth; that human beings are selfish, manipulative, and only worthy of respect with wealth or titles.
   - Myshkin fights against this myth, and his neighbors and benefactors realize through his goodness that their myth might be wrong. They double down, though, until he “understood nothing of what they were asking him and he did not recognize the people who had come in and were standing around him” (The Idiot 628). They made him what they considered him.
   - A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices, “drowns out the neutral and the individual (Bakhtin 27-28). Myshkin is a threat to the myth, and deemed an “invalid” voice through the label of “idiot.”
   - A forced binary was created, in which one is either idiot or not depending on their adherence to the subversive (slowly becoming dominant) myth.

3. Demons: Revolution
   - A story of the emptiness of Nobility and the nihilistic self-destruction of socialism, Demons is partially concerned with Pyotr Stepanovich. Pyotr is the leader of a group of political terrorists, who believe they are a larger network in favor of liberating the working man and displacing the lazy noble.
   - Before setting the city ablaze, Pyotr addresses the myth directly by calling his father, once of high class, a “spoon, meaning a voluntary lackey” because he leeches off those of higher class than he (Demons 309).
   - Those were not mere fighting words, or simply stating an idea. “Pyotr Stepanovich indeed had certain designs on his parent…to bring the old man to despair and then push him into some outright scandal” (Demons 307).
   - The Subversive Myth is finally becoming action.

Having formed their new perception of reality into idea, Pyotr gathers dissenters of the Dominant Myth together to force Subversive Myth into power and the Dominant Myth into disgrace.

- The Dominant Myth is challenged by making the public aware of the false reality reflected in the second signification. This can be done through threats (the fire and political murders) or propaganda (their multitude of pamphlets).
- It is a full transition from the personal to the public. The Subversive Myth gained reason as an idea, but is back to its emotionally charged roots when being translated to action.

Voila! An unintentional prediction of the Russian Revolution, based solely on a transition in meaning.

References


