The Compassionate Prostitute: A Response Paper to Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s Notes from Underground

By Colleen R. Callahan

Assignment Description: A short response paper comprised of the student’s observations on assigned reading materials.

Perhaps one would never equate a prostitute with having compassion. Perhaps we see her as a tainted, cold, and bitter shell of a woman whose only desire is the dollar. Certainly, in the period that Dostoyevsky wrote Notes from Underground (Russia in 1864), the prostitute was treated worse than a flea-bitten cur. And yet this prostitute, Liza, becomes the compassionate and noble heroine in the story. The unnamed and unknown narrator finds something within Liza that reminds him of his “good” self. She is familiar to him in an unfamiliar way. He is uncomfortably comfortable with her as they lay next to each other in the dark. It’s at this point in the reading that we see a man with compassion. He opens up to the prostitute as he has never opened up before. It’s a fleeting moment for the manic narrator, one that we as the reader want to hang on to. We silently cheer him on in his kindness towards Liza. We are given hope that this spiteful, diseased, and unpleasant man has actually found a cure. The cure is Liza.

The Underground Man woke up in a strange bed, suffering with what must have been a horridious hangover as he realized he was in “that place,” a place where men stumble in after a night of over-drinking, stumbling into the arms of the prostitute. As he came to his senses, the memory of the night flooded into his being, and suddenly he realized he was not alone. He was one of two strangers lying side by side in an unsympathetic bed. The room is dark, a lonely candle providing a flicker of minimal light. The Underground Man initially refers to the prostitute as a “creature,” a creature that he had not spoken one word to as she performed her duty. She is staring at him, making him “uneasy,” he finally engages in conversation. He asks her name, she replies, “Liza.”

The Underground Man, lying in the dark, starts to talk, and talk, and talk. He goes into a dissertation on the evils of prostitution. He paints a picture for Liza of what her future might be if she does not leave this godforsaken profession. He tells her, “you’ll lose everything here, everything, without exception - your health, youth, beauty, and hope” (691). Liza listens but does not speak. The man starts to feel something in his heart, this man who has such disdain for all humans, and life itself. In his attempt to save the prostitute named Liza, will Liza actually save him? Don’t hold your breath.

Just when the reader thinks this man, this unknown man undeserving of a name, has perhaps taken the baby steps to engage in the social world, the reader is then thrown back into the dark underground with the no hopes of ever seeing the light again. To bear witness to his plunge into the sublime is heart breaking, as we know he will never come back. Liza was his only hope. She disappears into the “wet snow,” as he disappears into the darkest and deepest hole with no possible return. She showed
empathy for him, and in the end his hatred of himself becomes the victor. He has proven once again that he is right. He cannot be loved. And just as he warned Liza about becoming a slave to prostitution, he has become a slave to the dark.

One of the most honest quotes in his notes is, "I grew up without a family; that must be why I turned out the way I did-so unfeeling" (687). I, like Liza, have compassion for this man. I have empathy. In the billions of cells in his body, there is that one little cell that screams for help, in the dark where nobody will ever hear him again. The compassionate prostitute touched him like no other, but deep inside his soul he knew he would destroy her not-so-innocent innocence. And not even this wretch of a man could do that to the prostitute with compassion.

Works Cited