The Idiot – Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Synopsis:

*The Idiot* is primarily a tale about a wholly good, “positively beautiful person” (as Dostoyevsky himself says) and how such a character could never survive in such a morally degraded and corrupted modernity.

Main Themes:

*Goodness*

Prince Myshkin represents the perfect ideal of the good. He is naively innocent and totally compassionate. Despite Myshkin’s perfect inner beauty, his life ends up completely ruined and he is frequently unhappy or distraught throughout the novel.

* The primary reason for this unhappiness is Nastassya Filippovna, whom Myshkin is drawn towards not out of love but out of pity. He sees unbearable suffering in her eyes and desires to help her so much that, because of her unstableness, his life is constantly turned upside-down. Ultimately, he gives up the woman he probably actually loved to marry Filippovna (just to try and save her).
* Other characters constantly refer to Myshkin as an ‘idiot’ or simple and often make fun of him for this betraying another way such perfect innocence cannot survive in the modern world (pp. 263-264 when Aglaya makes fun of him comparing him to the “poor knight” – noble and moral but mocked and scorned by the girls).
* Dostoyevsky shows Myshkin’s unhappiness by having Myshkin constantly berate and find fault with himself for some imagined failing, when, to the reader, it seems he acted perfectly kindly and honestly (p. 294 when the prince blames himself for sending the money to Burdovsky).
* He also reveals Myshkin’s unhappiness by having him become increasingly suspicious as the novel wears on. This can be seen as a consequence of such a character living in such a depraved world.
* Other characters occasionally question Myshkin’s intentions as if he was only pretending at kindness but was actually cunning (p.294 where Lebedev’s nephew accuses Myshkin of being either “a bit too innocent or a bit too clever” in offering the money to Burdovsky in such a way that no self-respecting man could accept it).
* Myshkin is too trusting and easy to be taken advantage of, as happens as soon as he comes into his inheritance and becomes ‘famous’ for giving away money to all those who suddenly surface and claim to be owed something.

*Society/People*

Dostoyevsky has a very low opinion of the modern day, bureaucratic Russia which; 1) places too much importance on outward appearance, money, and family connections, and all too little value on substance, and 2) lacks any moral depth.

He also bemoans the fact that modern-day Russians are “ordinary” and there are no longer any “original” people. By, “original”, Dostoyevsky means people who can’t think for themselves and only follow ‘proper’ norms as dictated by society. Despite this, Dostoyevsky thinks that there is something pure and noble deep down in the Russian heart.

* Dostoyevsky paints Lebedev as the epitome of a completely worthless type of person found “at a certain level of society”. He is a morally-bankrupt, busybody, deceitful, dishonest, gossiping, official type who greases up to the wealthy without any shame at all (p. 6 where Lebedev is described as one of those “all-knowing gentlemen” where ‘all-knowing’ means nothing more than details about individuals in society (where so-and-so works, whom he is married to, how much dowry was given, etc.) because he lacks “more important and more vital interests and opinions”; pp. 8-10 where once Lebedev discovers the man across from him is a wealthy Rogozhin promptly fawns all over him without any measure of dignity at all).
* Dostoyevsky shows people caring more about their external appearance than anything of actual substance (p. 24 where Ganya appears looking a little “too refined”; also pp. 556-560 where Dostoyevsky is critical of the upper class individuals who appear at the Yepanchin’s party to introduce them to Myshkin, as lacking substance).
* Modern Russia has lost its moral compass (pp. 295-296 where Yevgeny Pavlovitch recounts a lawyer who justifies his client’s murdering and robbing six people because of his poverty saying, “It is natural… who wouldn’t have had the same idea in his place”; also p. 354 where Myshkin says he has seen hardened criminals who have done terrible things but, even though they are not repentant, they still know they have done something wrong. The youth of today act in the same way but “refuse even to consider themselves criminals and they think they are in the right and – that they have even acted well”).
* Dostoyevsky says there are no “practical people” (seems to be a synonym for “original people”) in Russia anymore by which he means no competent, capable people with initiative (pp. 339-340 where he talks of “no adequate service personnel” on certain railroad lines and “hundreds of tons of merchandise lying rotting for two and three months before being dispatched” for want of an effective manager; He lambasts those in the civil service for bring “the most impractical” and mentions how those actually *lacking* practical knowledge, instead having an “abstract turn of mind”, are considered ideal for the post; He also struggles with the fact that “overcaution and a complete lack of initiative have always been regarded in our country as the hallmarks of a practical man”).
* Dostoyevsky has Yevgeny Pavlovitch say that Russian liberals actually hate Russia (p. 350) and is not merely an “attack on the existing order of things… but on Russia herself”. He also claims that all Russian liberals come from the “now abolished” landowning class and the seminaries.
* On pp. 482-484 Dostoyevsky remarks on a whole ‘type’ of people he calls “commonplace” and “ordinary” meaning those who want to be “original” or talented but can’t and only think they are. He holds there are two categories of such “ordinary” people; those who are “mentally limited” (and therefore happier because they think they are “original” and lack the mental acuity to see that they really aren’t) and those who are “much cleverer” (these are often unhappy because while putting on airs of being “original”, deep down they realise they aren’t, a state which causes some internal dissonance)).
* On pp. 340-341 Dostoyevsky bemoans the fact that there aren’t any “original” people (such as inventors and geniuses) anymore. Everyone follows the well-trodden path of conformity eventually becoming a wealthy general. This is considered proper, respectable, and practical, with even mothers thinking “better to be happy and live in comfort without originality” as they rock their children to sleep. And again on p. 49 Yevgeny Pavlovitch values anyone “able to say something that was really *theirs*” as immediately becoming national.
* Regarding the good Dostoyevsky sees in Russians, Myshkin says on p. 231 that religion can be found in the Russian heart; again on p. 239 that he was “beginning to believe passionately in the Russian soul”; and finally on pp. 569-570 where Myshkin notes the “spiritual agony, spiritual thirst, an anguished longing for something higher” that makes the Russian so passionate in their embracing of atheism or Catholicism.

*God/Religion*

The Prince is the compassionate Christ figure in *The Idiot* embodying perfect goodness that Dostoyevsky saw in Christianity. Throughout the novel, it is always on the tip of Dostoyevsky’s tongue that modern Russia has moved away from Christianity (he speaks disparagingly about atheism, treating it almost as a synonym for nihilism, and other religions (specifically Roman Catholicism)) and has lost its so-called, ‘Christian morality’.

* Myshkin talks about 4 encounters (pp. 229-231) related to this. 1) An atheist who, it seems to Myshkin, is not actually talking about God, although on the surface he seems to be. 2) A murderer who prays for his soul before killing his friend. 3) A drunk who sells his cross. 4) A peasant woman taking joy in her baby’s smile, “just as God rejoices when from heaven he sees a sinner praying to Him with his whole heart.” The conclusion Myshkin makes from all of these is that, “the essence of religious feeling doesn’t depend on reasoning, and it has nothing to do with wrongdoing or crime or with atheism.” Religious feeling comes from and can be found in the heart. Religion transcends rational thinking.
* On p. 393, Lebedev complains that “Mankind has grown too noisy and industrial, there is little spiritual peace.”
* On the same page (p. 393) Lebedev also says that even if our technology and progress helps humanity, if it does so “without a moral basis”, then those positive effects can become tainted (e.g. by “excluding a considerable part of humanity from the enjoyment”). Lebedev points out Malthus, a “friend of humanity” but one who will “set fire to the four corners of the earth to satisfy a petty revenge”. A moral basis would anchor and ‘guarantee’ the good of the act.
* Lebedev tells a story (p. 397) in which a criminal confesses, knowing full well that terrible punishments await him. The only thing that can explain such an action is that there was something more important, something stronger and bigger, than what awaited him on earth. That something was an “idea binding men together and guiding their hearts”, i.e. Christianity. Nowadays we have more wealth, more health, faster communication, etc. but we have lost this binding idea which is more important than all of these things.
* Hippolite admits (pp. 432-433) an eternal life and Providence but asserts that they are beyond human comprehension and therefore something we can’t be blamed for not understanding.
* At the dinner party held in his honour, Myshkin (pp. 567-570) slams Roman Catholicism as “worse than atheism” because while, “Atheism only preaches nullity” Catholicism “preaches a distorted Christ”. The Church is a political, military entity concerned only with money and earthly power and as such is nothing more than the continuation of the Holy Roman Empire. He is extremely critical of Roman Catholicism saying that atheism came from it because “how could they believe themselves?” Unbelief started with them because they were the opposite of what Christianity is supposed to be. He even says it preaches the Antichrist.

*Death*

Dostoyevsky makes a number of observations and comments on death in *The Idiot*. Most of his commentary comes from two characters only, the Prince (mainly discussing the moments before an execution) and Hippolite (who discusses the remaining weeks before an imminent death). A lot of Dostoyevsky’s focus in *The Idiot* is regards how life and our perspective changes when death is certain and imminent.

* When Myshkin is telling Ivan Fyodorovitch’s attendant about executions in France (p. 22-23), he remarks that the most terrible thing about dying would not be the physical pain leading up to it, as in being tortured, but “the worst thing is that it [death] is *certain*”. He notes that this certainty is so terrible because it comes about with the complete loss of hope, “…all final hope… is removed *for certain*… and there is no suffering on earth greater than this.”
* When the Prince is talking to the Yepanchin women about a man sentenced to death (pp. 61-63), he notes how in the five minutes before his execution “those five minutes seemed an eternity stretching before him”. Perhaps an event like impending death alters the way we perceive time making the intervening time seem somehow ‘fuller’ than normal.

There was another thing; the thought occurred to the man, “What if I was not to die!... What an eternity!... I would reckon each passing minute and waste nothing!” Myshkin says that “this thought finally filled him with such rage that he wanted to be shot as soon as possible.” Two thoughts: 1) It is odd that such a thought would make him angry. Perhaps it is because if an individual sentenced to death had this sentence commuted at the last minute he would have to go through this build-up to death all again later. Perhaps also because with his current perception of time it seems too long – like if you were told you had to live for a thousand years, and 2) Death seemed to reveal how precious life is and not even a minute should be wasted, however on the next page Myshkin reveals the man was pardoned but he “didn’t live that way at all and wasted many, many minutes.” Perhaps life just cannot be lived as if each moment is precious and we are all doomed to waste too many of them (although Myshkin seems to waver on this point holding on to some ideal of a completely and thoroughly well-lived life).

* And later when Myshkin is telling Adelaida how to paint the man about to be executed (pp. 66-67) he mentions again how the few moments before death seem like such a long time. He also talks here about how “the brain is terribly alive and active; it must be racing, racing like a machine at full speed”, full of unfinished thoughts, “some of them… irrelevant and absurd”.
* Lebedev also tells an execution story, of a certain Countess du Barry, (p. 206) who screamed aloud asking for just “one more moment” before her execution. This again shows how the value of life is realised only at the moment of death.
* From Hippolite’s confession (pp. 410-412) several points are made; 1) “The idea that it’s not worthwhile living for only a few weeks”, i.e. since he can’t finish a book, why start? This is a practical observation – there isn’t enough time to actually accomplish anything. 2) The closer Hippolite came to death the more he “wanted to live” and “clutched at life”. This seems to reflect how imminent death makes the value of life apparent. Related to this Hippolite later says, “everyone but him [me, Hippolite] fails to value life enough, but rather expends it too cheaply”. This echoes the point made by Myshkin earlier about wasting life. 3) The feeling gripped Hippolite that with life anything is possible. He found he couldn’t understand gloomy and anxious people because they had “sixty years of life before them”. He also couldn’t understand “how people with so much life before them did not become rich”. Hippolite captures this thought in a great line, “Since he is alive, everything is within his power!” Of course it isn’t actually like this, but it must seem that way to someone denied the one thing without which nothing is possible. Later, he reinforces this saying that, “Life is what matters, life alone – the continuous, eternal process of discovering life – and not the discovery itself at all!” I.e. what we do in life isn’t important, it’s having the life to do it in that is the most important thing.
* When Hippolite is reflecting on Holdein’s “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb” (pp. 426-427) he says it made him wonder, “if death is so terrible and the laws of nature so powerful, then how can they be overcome?” Death is unavoidable and final.
* Hippolite talks (p. 431) about how knowing he is dying makes him feel like an outcast excluded from some grand festival, when even the smallest gnat is flying around “taking part in all this banquet and chorus”. This is the alienating nature of impending death.
* Hippolite again, this time talking about how powerless he feels in the face of his death… and even his life (p. 433). Here he remarks that “If I could have never been born, I certainly would never have chosen existence on such ludicrous terms.”

*Suicide*

* Hippolite argues (on p. 431) that no one has the right to decide how a man spends his last few weeks on earth. Morality can’t be at play (as in the case of him taking his life “in the flower of health and strength… which ‘might [have] be[en] of use to my fellow men’”) since his death has already been decided on against his will. Even arguing that he should enjoy the time remaining to him falls on deaf ears because the time remaining only serves to deepen his sense of isolation and exclusion from the festival of life.
* Hippolite gives two arguments for allowing suicide (p. 433); 1) it is probably the only act a dying man, ‘I’, “still have time to begin and bring to a conclusion of my own free will”. 2) Although he didn’t choose his life, he still has the power to die, though, “It is no great power, and it is no great revolt.”

Additional Ideas Touched On:

* The beauty and innocence of children (pp. 69-78 Myshkin recounting his time in Switzerland)
* Doublethoughts – when two opposite thoughts (typically one good/one bad) arise in the mind at the same time (pp. 323-324 where Keller had the idea to confess all his sins to the Prince (to promote his own improvement) and immediately the idea to ask to borrow money from him right after confessing (making his confession a way of ‘greasing the wheels’) also popped up). Two things to note; 1) We don’t know where these thoughts come from, “Heaven only knows how they come into being” and 2) Are we responsible for them? Myshkin says not really, it can’t “simply be called meanness”, there were somehow two equal motives (moral improvement and getting money) for the one action (confessing).
* The feeling of being “a stranger to all things and an outcast” although Myshkin was recollecting his earliest time in Switzerland when he couldn’t even speak properly (p. 442).
* Reality. On pp. 236-237 Myshkin reflects on the ecstatic sense of self awareness that comes at the beginning of an epileptic fit, “The sense of life, the consciousness of self were multiplied tenfold in these moments” and “His mind and heart were flooded with extraordinary light”; “an extreme consciousness of existence”. He expresses concern that these moments aren’t actually real but only another part of the sickness so that “the highest state of being… had to be reckoned as the lowest”. He decides that even if it is nothing real at all and only another part of the sickness, it is still a “higher moment” for him because it happened. This seems like valuing the subjective phenomenal above the objective reality.
* On writing. Authors must include “ordinary” types in their stories (if for no other reason than they are the majority in society) but must give them interesting touches to avoid boring the reader. Other “vividly and artistically social types” are necessarily exaggerated for literary effect but are still based on real-life types the reader should be able to recognise.