

Title: Stavrogin as Syphilitic in Dostoevsky's Demons

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Abstract:

In Dostoevsky's *Demons*, Stavrogin displays symptoms of insanity through his outrageous behavior. In his explanations for his behavior, he insists he is "unwell." Yet he only appears to be unwell on these occasions. Is Stavrogin dissembling when he excuses his behavior as the result of illness? Is he cultivating the image of a madman? Or of a nihilist trampling the conventions of society? Could there be an organic cause for his symptoms?

This paper argues that Stavrogin suffers from syphilis, and that his fits of madness are a consequence of the disease. To support this argument the paper will compare the depiction of Stavrogin with material drawn from medical journals of Dostoevsky's time. If Stavrogin can be established as syphilitic, it has numerous implications for the novel. Thematically, as an infectious disease that causes insanity, syphilis directly intersects with the motifs of demonic possession and madness. Dostoevsky makes these motifs prominent through his choice of epigraph, the *Miracle of the Gadarene Swine*. If Stavrogin is syphilitic, he is then the source of an infectious disease as well as infectious ideas and ideologies, all of which lead to madness. As the source of syphilis, Stavrogin has potentially infected other characters with the disease through sexual contact. In addition to discussing the thematic implications of Stavrogin as syphilitic, the paper will examine whether any of Stavrogin's women have the disease, including his legal wife Marya Lebyadkina, and address the question of why Dostoevsky did not overtly identify any of the characters in the novel as syphilitic.