

The Heavenly Christmas Tree

F Y O D O R D O S T O Y E V S K I

Fyodor Dostoyevski (1821–1881), the great Russian novelist, is known for his examination of the human soul through the technique of psychological realism, a narrative perspective that has had a profound influence on writers throughout the world. Dostoyevski portrays the tragic economic and social conditions of the common people and the moral responsibility of human beings to respond to others' needs by relating his stories through the thoughts and feelings of his characters. He is best known for "Notes From the Underground" (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), "A Gentle Creature" (1876), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), which is considered his greatest novel.

Dostoyevski was born in Moscow, Russia. He was the son of an army doctor whose temperament was so harsh that he was murdered by the family's serfs. Because Dostoyevski preferred the career of a writer to his father's choice of army engineer, he resigned his army commission in 1844 in order to write full-time. In 1849, at the age of twenty-eight, he was arrested for participating in a discussion group that criticized the government. After eight months of imprisonment in St. Petersburg, he was sentenced to death. Just as he was about to be shot, he was told that his death sentence had been commuted to imprisonment in Siberia; he was released four years later. During most of his adult life, Dostoyevski suffered from great poverty. He also suffered from epilepsy. Through it all, he continued to write, and he used his varied experiences to enhance his creativity.

Dostoyevski was always aware of the plight of the common people in Russian society, and he was gifted in his ability to observe and describe their lives. His first novel, *Poor Folk* (1845), brought him immediate fame. Years later, in 1862, he found conditions in London so disturbing that his visit affected the content and focus of his later writing. He was appalled that industrialization had created a society in which the wealthy few had no interest in the great masses of the poor, who endured great hardship and suffering.

"The Heavenly Christmas Tree" evolved from Dostoyevski's observa-

tion of a poor child during that London visit. It is characteristic of his writing in that it reflects his compassion for the poor and his interest in portraying the tragic conditions of their lives through the technique of psychological realism. Thus, he tells the story through the thoughts and feelings of a child.

I AM A NOVELIST, AND I SUPPOSE I HAVE MADE UP THIS STORY. I WRITE "I suppose," though I know for a fact that I have made it up, but yet I keep fancying that it must have happened on Christmas Eve in some great town in a time of terrible frost.

I have a vision of a boy, a little boy, six years old or even younger. This boy woke up that morning in a cold damp cellar. He was dressed in a sort of little dressing-gown and was shivering with cold. There was a cloud of white steam from his breath, and sitting on a box in the corner, he blew the steam out of his mouth and amused himself in his dullness watching it float away. But he was terribly hungry. Several times that morning he went up to the plank bed where his sick mother was lying on a mattress as thin as a pancake, with some sort of bundle under her head for a pillow. How had she come here? She must have come with her boy from some other town and suddenly fallen ill. The landlady who let the "corners"¹ had been taken two days before to the police station, the lodgers were out and about as the holiday was so near, and the only one left had been lying for the last twenty-four hours dead drunk, not having waited for Christmas. In another corner of the room a wretched old woman of eighty, who had once been a children's nurse but was now left to die friendless, was moaning and groaning with rheumatism, scolding and grumbling at the boy so that he was afraid to go near her corner. He had got a drink of water in the outer room, but could not find a crust anywhere, and had been on the point of waking his mother a dozen times. He felt frightened at last in the darkness: it had long been dusk, but no light was kindled. Touching his mother's face, he was surprised that she did not move at all, and that she was as cold as the wall. "It is very cold here," he thought. He stood a little, unconsciously letting his hands rest on the dead woman's shoulders, then he breathed on his fingers to warm them, and then quietly fumbling for his cap on the bed, he went out of the cellar.

¹ "corners": Living space less than a whole room.

He would have gone earlier, but was afraid of the big dog which had been howling all day at the neighbour's door at the top of the stairs. But the dog was not there now, and he went out into the street.

Mercy on us, what a town! He had never seen anything like it before. In the town from which he had come, it was always such black darkness at night. There was one lamp for the whole street, the little, low-pitched, wooden houses were closed up with shutters, there was no one to be seen in the street after dusk, all the people shut themselves up in their houses, and there was nothing but the howling of packs of dogs, hundreds and thousands of them barking and howling all night. But there it was so warm and he was given food, while here—oh, dear, if he only had something to eat! And what a noise and rattle here, what light and what people, horses and carriages, and what a frost! The frozen steam hung in clouds over the horses, over their warmly breathing mouths; their hoofs clanged against the stones through the powdery snow, and everyone pushed so, and—oh, dear, how he longed for some morsel to eat, and how wretched he suddenly felt. A policeman walked by and turned away to avoid seeing the boy.

There was another street—oh, what a wide one, here he would be run over for certain; how everyone was shouting, racing and driving along, and the light, the light! And what was this? A huge glass window, and through the window a tree reaching up to the ceiling; it was a fir tree, and on it were ever so many lights, gold papers and apples and little dolls and horses; and there were children clean and dressed in their best running about the room, laughing and playing and eating and drinking something. And then a little girl began dancing with one of the boys, what a pretty little girl! And he could hear the music through the window. The boy looked and wondered and laughed, though his toes were aching with the cold and his fingers were red and stiff so that it hurt him to move them. And all at once the boy remembered how his toes and fingers hurt him, and began crying, and ran on; and again through another window-pane he saw another Christmas tree, and on a table cakes of all sorts—almond cakes, red cakes and yellow cakes, and three grand young ladies were sitting there, and they gave the cakes to any one who went up to them, and the door kept opening, lots of gentlemen and ladies went in from the street. The boy crept up, suddenly opened the door and went in. Oh, how they shouted at him and waved him back! One lady went up to him hurriedly and slipped a kopeck² in his hand, and with her own hands opened the door into the street for him! How frightened he was. And the kopeck rolled away and clinked upon the steps; he could not bend his red fingers to hold it right. The boy ran away and went on, where he did not know. He was ready to cry

²*kopeck*: Russian coin; 1/100 of a ruble.

again but he was afraid, and ran on and on and blew his fingers. And he was miserable because he felt suddenly so lonely and terrified, and all at once, mercy on us! What was this again? People were standing in a crowd admiring. Behind a glass window there were three little dolls, dressed in red and green dresses, and exactly, exactly as though they were alive. One was a little old man sitting and playing a big violin, the two others were standing close by and playing little violins, and nodding in time, and looking at one another, and their lips moved, they were speaking, actually speaking, only one couldn't hear through the glass. And at first the boy thought they were alive, and when he grasped that they were dolls he laughed. He had never seen such dolls before, and had no idea there were such dolls! And he wanted to cry, but he felt amused, amused by the dolls. All at once he fancied that some one caught at his smock behind: a wicked big boy was standing beside him and suddenly hit him on the head, snatched off his cap and tripped him up. The boy fell down on the ground, at once there was a shout, he was numb with fright, he jumped up and ran away. He ran, and not knowing where he was going, ran in at the gate of some one's courtyard, and sat down behind a stack of wood: "They won't find me here, besides it's dark!"

He sat huddled up and was breathless from fright, and all at once, quite suddenly, he felt so happy: his hands and feet suddenly left off aching and grew so warm, as warm as though he were on a stove; then he shivered all over, then he gave a start, why, he must have been asleep. How nice to have a sleep here! "I'll sit here a little and go and look at the dolls again," said the boy, and smiled thinking of them. "Just as though they were alive! . . ." And suddenly he heard his mother singing over him. "Mammy, I am asleep; how nice it is to sleep here!"

"Come to my Christmas tree, little one," a soft voice suddenly whispered over his head.

He thought that this was still his mother, but no, it was not she. Who it was calling him, he could not see, but someone bent over and embraced him in the darkness; and he stretched out his hands to him, and . . . and all at once—oh, what a bright light! Oh, what a Christmas tree! And yet it was not a fir tree, he had never seen a tree like that! Where was he now? Everything was bright and shining, and all round him were dolls; but no, they were not dolls, they were little boys and girls, only so bright and shining. They all came flying round him, they all kissed him, took him and carried him along with them, and he was flying himself, and he saw that his mother was looking at him and laughing joyfully. "Mammy, Mammy; oh, how nice it is here, Mammy!" And again he kissed the children and wanted to tell them at once of those dolls in the shop window.

"Who are you, boys? Who are you, girls?" he asked, laughing and admiring them.

“This is Christ’s Christmas tree,” they answered. “Christ always has a Christmas tree on this day, for the little children who have no tree of their own . . .” And he found out that all these little boys and girls were children just like himself; that some had been frozen in the baskets in which they had as babies been laid on the doorsteps of well-to-do Petersburg³ people, others had been boarded out with Finnish women by the Foundling⁴ and had been suffocated, others had died at their starved mother’s breasts (in the Samara famine⁵), others had died in the third-class railway carriages from the foul air; and yet they were all here, they were all like angels about Christ, and He was in the midst of them and held out His hands to them and blessed them and their sinful mothers. . . . And the mothers of these children stood on one side weeping; each one knew her boy or girl, and the children flew up to them and kissed them and wiped away their tears with their little hands, and begged them not to weep because they were so happy.

And down below in the morning the porter found the little dead body of the frozen child on the woodstack; they sought out his mother too. . . . She had died before him. They met before the Lord God in heaven.

Why have I made up such a story, so out of keeping with an ordinary diary, and a writer’s above all? And I promised two stories dealing with real events! But that is just it, I keep fancying that all this may have happened really—that is, what took place in the cellar and on the woodstack; but as for Christ’s Christmas tree, I cannot tell you whether that could have happened or not.

Understanding the Story

1. What is Dostoyevski’s purpose in writing this tale?
2. What does the boy’s treatment reveal about society?
3. What effect do the Christmas festivities have on the boy? To what extent would he have been better off without having seen them?
4. How does Dostoyevski’s final comment about Christ’s Christmas tree affect the meaning of the story?

³*Petersburg*: Former capital of Russia.

⁴*Foundling*: Organization for the care of abandoned children.

⁵*Samara famine*: Samara was a Russian city, now known as Kuibyshev.

Analyzing Literary Technique

1. Why does Dostoyevski make the protagonist a six-year-old child?
2. Why does he set the story at Christmastime?
3. How does Dostoyevski reveal what human traits are important?
4. What elements of Dostoyevski's style are reminiscent of a folktale? What do they contribute to the story? What keeps the story from being a fairy tale?
5. Find two examples of psychological realism, the technique of presenting the thought processes and language of a particular character. Explain how Dostoyevski's use of psychological realism contributes to the total effect of the story.
6. What is the function of irony (the incongruity between appearance and reality) in this story?
7. What is the tone of this story, and how does Dostoyevski achieve it?

Writing About Literature

1. Realism and naturalism were two important movements in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European fiction. Realist writers attempted to present characters and situations that their readers could readily identify, as if reporting them from real life. Naturalist writers also attempted to depict characters and situations realistically, but they wrote from a particular philosophical perspective. Naturalist authors portrayed characters whose lives were determined by natural forces—heredity, the environment, basic drives such as hunger or fear—over which the characters had no control and which they did not fully understand.

Write an essay explaining whether this story is a realist or a naturalist piece of fiction. Use direct quotations from the story to support your point of view.

2. Analyze how Dostoyevski uses psychological realism in this story. Choose at least three examples of psychological realism from the story, and explain what each contributes to the story as a whole. In your conclusion, evaluate what Dostoyevski achieves by using this technique.
3. Tell this story from the point of view of the policeman, or of one of the people at the Christmas party that the boy interrupts. Consider the following questions: How would the policeman or party-goer feel about the boy? How would the other character explain the boy's behavior? To what extent, if any, would the other character feel guilty? Whom would the character hold responsible for the situation?