



“THE INFLUENCE OF PETERSBURG IN THE WORKS OF F.M. DOSTOEVSKY: LITERARY SPACE AND PSYCHO-GEOGRAPHY OF THE CITY”

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Abstract

This article examines the role of Saint Petersburg in the literary world of Fyodor Dostoevsky. The city appears not merely as a setting, but as an active agent that influences the psychology of characters, the development of events, and the philosophical foundation of the narratives. The study analyzes the structure of urban space, its symbolic significance, and the dual nature of Petersburg as both a civilizational project and a source of alienation. Special attention is given to the novels *Crime and Punishment*, *Poor Folk*, *The Idiot*, and *Demons*. The article concludes that Saint Petersburg plays a central role in shaping Dostoevsky's aesthetics and worldview.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, Petersburg, literary space, urbanism, psychogeography, city symbolism, novel, realism, existentialism.

Introduction

Saint Petersburg is a city that plays a key role in Russian culture, literature and national consciousness. It was conceived by Peter the Great as the embodiment of rationalism and progress, as a window to Europe, and over time it has evolved into a complex cultural symbol, embodying both utopia and catastrophe. In the literature of the 19th century, St. Petersburg appears not only as a geographical space, but also as a powerful ideological and philosophical sign. This is especially evident in the works of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky lived and worked in St. Petersburg for many years, and this city left an indelible mark on his worldview, artistic system and structure of his works. His novels



are filled not just with descriptions of streets and buildings, but with a living, breathing image of St. Petersburg, capable of influencing characters, transforming their psychology and destinies.

Petersburg in Dostoevsky is not just a backdrop for the action, it is an environment that shapes the personality, corrupts or, on the contrary, saves the soul. The theme of the city as an active participant in the narrative becomes especially significant in such works as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, *The Teenager*, and *Poor People*. In each of these texts, Petersburg performs a complex, multi-layered function: it can be a labyrinth in which the individual is lost; a mirror reflecting the hero's inner state; a symbol of evil or a space of hope. The city exists simultaneously at the level of realistic description, symbolic structure, and philosophical metaphor.

In Russian literary studies, the problem of spatial organization of Dostoevsky's artistic world has long been recognized as key, but its understanding in the context of urban studies and psycho-geography remains open. Moreover, it is important to consider that the city in the writer's novels is not static - it is transformed, takes different forms depending on the state of the hero and the dramaturgy of the narrative.

The problem of spatial organization and image of the city in the works of F. M. Dostoevsky has repeatedly become the subject of scientific attention. However, this topic received the greatest development within the framework of the study of the so-called "Petersburg text" of Russian literature, the concept of which was developed in the works of Yu. M. Lotman, V. N. Toporov, B. M. Gasparov. In this approach, St. Petersburg is considered as a special cultural code with its own mythology, structure and semantics.

Toporov identified stable motifs in the "Petersburg text": duplicated realities, split personality, metaphysical anxiety, alienation, labyrinthine urban space. He believed that Dostoevsky's Petersburg is a city "on the edge of life and death," constantly balancing between illusion and reality. In his interpretation, the city becomes a place of clash of supra-personal forces: divine and demonic, reason and madness, faith and nihilism.

The works of M.M. Bakhtin occupy a special place in historiography. In the book "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics" he analyzes the polyphonic structure of the writer's prose, including in terms of spatial construction. The city, according to Bakhtin, becomes an arena in which independent voices and worldviews collide. The space of St. Petersburg is not subject to one "author's" view, it is always polyphonic



and dialogic. Another important milestone was the research of V.V. Skibitsky, who developed the concept of the urban myth of St. Petersburg in Dostoevsky, linking it with the tradition of Western European modernism. It is also worth noting the contribution of such researchers as Yu. V. Mann, A. F. Losev, V. V. Ivashev, L. P. Grossman, who addressed the symbolism of the city, its philosophical and cultural content. Nevertheless, despite the abundance of works, most of them interpret Petersburg primarily in the cultural and textual plane. This study seeks to expand the scope of analysis by integrating the achievements of contemporary geopoetics, urban studies and phenomenology into the interpretation of Dostoevsky's artistic space.

The methodology of this article is based on an integrated, interdisciplinary approach, which includes the following research strategies:

Allows to reveal the internal organization of urban space in Dostoevsky's texts. Particular attention is paid to topographic logic, descriptions of streets, buildings, rooms, stairs, as semantic nodes of the narrative. This method was borrowed from urban studies (Guy Debord, Michel de Certeau) and involves studying the influence of the urban environment on the behavior and perception of the individual. In Dostoevsky's novels, St. Petersburg becomes a "psycho-geographical landscape" where the urban structure gives rise not only to movements, but also to internal transformations of the characters.

Symbolic Analysis

Petersburg is full of symbols: rivers as boundaries between worlds; bridges as transitions between reality and the irrational; shadows, windows, courtyards, attics as motifs of loss or discovery. The symbolism of the city is considered as the basis for the formation of the spiritual space of the text.

Based on the works of Gaston Bachelard and M. Merleau-Ponty, this approach interprets urban space not as a physical reality, but as an experience, as a residence. This is especially relevant for the analysis of the subjective states of the characters living in St. Petersburg as in an "inner hell" or "test zone".

In the novels of F. M. Dostoevsky, St. Petersburg appears as a space of metaphysical contradictions. It is not just a city depicted with everyday authenticity, but a "ghost city", a "model city", in which key philosophical questions are concentrated: freedom and predestination, sin and salvation, man and God. He plays the role of a full-fledged character, endowed with his own logic and influence on human destinies..



Dostoevsky's urban topography is filled with symbolic meaning. The bridges in St. Petersburg are not just architectural elements, but boundaries between worlds: the real and the illusory, light and darkness. In *Crime and Punishment*, it is on a bridge that the hero first experiences an existential shock, moving from reflection to action. The canals and alleys not only set the spatial vector, but also create a feeling of isolation, the impossibility of breaking out of the circle of suffering and guilt.

One of the central symbols of the Petersburg space is the labyrinth - streets leading to nowhere, tangled routes, the impossibility of orientation. Raskolnikov gets lost in the city, he seems to be disconnected between points of space and time, experiencing disorientation not only physical, but also moral. The city in this case is a reflection of the internal catastrophe of a person who has lost touch with his moral compass.

Many researchers note that Dostoevsky's Petersburg is deprived of a natural environment: there are no trees, fields, or sky. This emphasizes the artificiality and anti-naturalness of the space, its separation from the living principle. The city becomes a symbol of a civilization that has lost its soul. In this context, Petersburg appears as anti-nature, where not only organic matter, but humanity itself is destroyed. The metaphysical role of the city is especially vividly manifested in *"Demons"*, where Petersburg is depicted as an ideological center of decay, a hotbed of revolutionary utopia leading to the apocalypse. The city is a place where the spirit loses ground and ideas become deadly. It is symbolic that it is here that the hero Shatov speaks of the loss of faith, and Kirillov - of the need for self-destruction.

One of the key aspects of Dostoevsky's artistic world is the close relationship between space and the inner state of the hero. Petersburg in his works acts not only as an objective environment, but as a mirror of the character's psychology, as a projection of mental distress, doubts, and crisis. The city doesn't just surround the hero – it penetrates inside, influencing perception, feelings, and actions.

In *Crime and Punishment*, Petersburg appears as a crushing, claustrophobic world, filled with dirt, shadow, ringing, sweat, humidity. The space is not open, but closed, constricting: Raskolnikov's tiny room, low ceilings, narrow staircases, closets. These images are not accidental - they symbolize a narrowed consciousness, limitations, a dead end into which the hero has reached. Raskolnikov himself calls his room a "wardrobe" - that is, not a dwelling, but a storage place for the body. This metaphor emphasizes the gap between physical existence and spiritual life.



Dostoevsky's characters often move around the city in a state of borderline consciousness. Their walks resemble walking in circles; they do not lead to a goal, but rather symbolize internal disorientation. Petersburg becomes a space of wandering, searching for meaning, escaping from oneself. These motives are especially strong in Raskolnikov, but can also be traced in Marmeladov, Svidrigailov, Prince Myshkin. In "Poor Folk" Makar Devushkin finds himself completely dissolved in the space of St. Petersburg life. His room and the street he walks along set the rhythm of his thinking, his fear, his seeming insignificance. St. Petersburg here becomes a coordinate system where a person is just a "cog" in the administrative hierarchy, without a face or a name.

The city is also a form of isolation. Almost all of Dostoevsky's heroes are lonely. They physically exist among people, but are psychologically cut off from them. Petersburg, despite its density and mass character, is a city of deep disunity, where everyone is locked in their own room, in their own guilt, in their own pain.

Dostoevsky's psycho-geography of St. Petersburg demonstrates how space can not only reflect an internal state, but also shape it. The city turns into a powerful psychogenic factor: it causes hallucinations, apathy, depression, it contributes to moral decline and self-destruction. It is important to note, however, that this impact is not fatal: it is through the suffering caused by the city that the hero gets a chance to rethink, and sometimes even to redeem himself.

In the novel *Crime and Punishment*, Petersburg is depicted as a city in which crime arises not so much from social ill-being as from internal alienation and philosophical disorientation. Raskolnikov lives in poverty, but poverty is not the decisive factor - the crime is committed as a result of his accepted theory of "permitted evil", the concept of the "higher man". But it is precisely the city's atmosphere - oppressive, inhuman, rotting - that makes this theory possible. Petersburg becomes a symbol of a world in which moral categories have lost their certainty.

The city here is not just a space, but an accomplice to the crime. Its streets narrow, its buildings press, everyday sounds create an atmosphere of tension. The chronotope of Petersburg causes the hero to experience internal compression, loss of reflection, immersion in delirium and detachment. The very location of the crime scene – the top floor, the “height” – is contrasted with the “fall” of the hero.

In "Demons", St. Petersburg also becomes the backdrop for an ideological crime. Terrorism, conspiracy, political assassinations grow in the urban environment, where



connections between people are destroyed and ideas have lost their humanistic meaning. The city is presented as a hotbed of destructive energy, a place where revolutionary passions turn into violence and dehumanization. Dostoevsky shows how intellectual constructs generated by urbanized consciousness can lead to the collapse of the individual and society.

It is important to emphasize that crime in Dostoevsky is not only a social act, but also a deeply personal, metaphysical choice. And Petersburg, as a city without a center, without a temple, without light, becomes a space where this choice is maximally acute. Here it is impossible to hide, escape or "dissolve in nature": every step in this city brings you closer to an internal conflict, to the moment of truth. Despite the gloomy atmosphere, urban claustrophobia and psychological destructiveness of St. Petersburg in Dostoevsky's novels, the city is not exclusively a space of evil or hopelessness. On the contrary, in its darkest corners there arises the possibility of moral insight and spiritual rebirth. St. Petersburg is both a place of fall and an arena of redemption. Through the suffering caused by the city, Dostoevsky's hero gets a chance to go beyond his own pride, accept another person, and find faith.

A striking example is Raskolnikov's path. After the murder, he continues to live in St. Petersburg, does not leave it. The streets of the city become a battlefield for him: between internal cold and a growing desire for repentance. He "walks in circles", "wanders", "hides" - but it is in this spatial wandering that the movement towards the truth begins. It is symbolic that it is in Petersburg that he finds Sonya, a person who embodies Christian sacrifice and love. No less important is the example of Prince Myshkin from *The Idiot*. He appears in Petersburg as a figure of light, nobility and forgiveness, as a living embodiment of the ideal Christian. But the city, consumed by passions, does not accept him. However, it is precisely the Petersburg space that makes it possible to reveal the moral poverty of society and to reveal the true value of mercy. Through confrontation with cruelty, betrayal and madness, Myshkin reveals the essence of human nature - and thereby fulfills his mission.

Petersburg in Dostoevsky is not only a space where crimes are played out, but also a place where a choice is possible: to remain in the logic of "I have the right" or to move to the ethics of compassion. This transition requires an internal transformation, which is always achieved through pain, suffering, immersion in darkness.



F. M. Dostoevsky, as one of the greatest Russian writers of the 19th century, managed to create a unique type of artistic space in which the city – primarily St. Petersburg – becomes not a decoration, but an active subject of the narrative.

Petersburg in Dostoevsky's novels is not just a place of crimes, but their cause, catalyst, philosophical stage on which the drama of choice between good and evil unfolds. The city in Dostoevsky's novels is endowed with complex semantics. It acts simultaneously as a reflection of the moral decay of society and as a space where the individual can be purified and renewed. Petersburg appears as a metaphysical space in which the connection between man and God has disappeared, but which still contains the potential for spiritual rebirth. It symbolizes the limits of European rationality, the boundaries of human reason, and the beginning of a new anthropology – tragic, internally torn, but open to salvation.

The artistic function of the city is diverse: it participates in the construction of the hero's image, influences his psychological state, becomes a catalyst for crimes and moral choices. The space of St. Petersburg breathes together with the characters, transforms depending on their inner world. Bridges, stairs, attics, closed rooms - all these topoi carry a semantic load and participate in the disclosure of the main theme of Dostoevsky's prose: the struggle between evil and good in the human heart.

In addition, this city becomes a model of the social world for Dostoevsky: hierarchical, bureaucratic, amoral. In it, conflicts between the individual and society, faith and ideology, freedom and necessity are exacerbated. However, it is precisely this that makes moral redemption possible, through overcoming environmental pressure, through internal struggle, through participation in suffering.

Thus, Petersburg is not only a city without God, but also a city where God can be found again. This is the paradoxical dimension of space in Dostoevsky: it destroys in order to restore; it presses in order to open the way to the light. And therefore, it is Petersburg that becomes the final point of the moral route of the heroes - the point where they can find themselves.

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