

Dostoevsky's novel, which was once known in English as "The Possessed," is more aptly titled "Demons" or "Devils." The difficulty in title selection stems from confusion in translating *Besy* (the transliterated title from the original Russian, as depicted in this image).

This story - one of Dostoevsky's most-violent - is based on a real case. Sergei Nechayev was a young Russian revolutionary who believed that violence, when used to change society, is a reasonable method to employ. Among other things, he thought the Tsar should be assassinated.

Nechayev was also suspicious of his followers. One of them, a young man named I. I. Ivanov, disagreed with Nechayev about how to distribute propaganda and left the group. Nechayev was not pleased with his comrade's decision to leave.

On the 21st of November, 1869, Nechayev and several of his friends beat, strangled and shot Ivanov. Then they hid the body by slipping it through an ice hole in a frozen lake. Three years later, Dostoevsky published *Besy* (*Demons*). Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky, Dostoevsky's character, is based on Nechayev.

Disapproving not only of Nechayev's methods but also his philosophy, Dostoevsky (whose manuscript still exists) puts interesting words into his character's mouth. Verkhovensky, the young revolutionary, believes he knows much about life and how society should run. So do his like-minded colleagues. Here are some observations voiced by Shigalov (the revolutionary theorist from *Demons*, Part II, Chapter 7):

Having devoted my energy to studying the question of the social organization of the future society which is to replace the present one, I have come to the conclusion that all creators of social systems from ancient times to our year have been dreamers, tale-tellers, fools who contradicted themselves and understood precisely nothing of natural science or of that strange animal known as man.

Plato, Rousseau, Fourier, aluminum columns—this is fit perhaps for sparrows, but not for human society. But since the future social form is necessary precisely now, when we are finally going to act, so as to stop any further thinking about it, I am suggesting my own system of world organization. Here it is!

I wanted to explain my book to the gathering in the briefest possible way; but I see that I will have to add a great deal of verbal clarification, and therefore the whole explanation will take at least ten evenings, according to the number of chapters in my book. Besides that, I announce ahead of time that my system is not finished. I got entangled in my own data, and my conclusion directly contradicts the original idea from which I start.

Starting from unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that apart from my solution of the social formula, there can be no other.

In real life, Nechayev came to a bad end. In Dostoevsky's story, so do his lead characters.

Demons may have first come to life, in Dostoevsky's mind, when he wrote the end to *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov, the young murderer who killed the "old pawnbroker" and her sister, is serving time in Siberia. While he has confessed, he hasn't really repented. Discussing this situation, Joyce Carol Oates makes the following observation:

...the demonic excesses of *The Possessed* seem to have sprung from the "plague" of which Raskolnikov dreams at the very conclusion of *Crime and Punishment*, when he is imprisoned in Siberia, a confessed but not truly repentant murderer. In a delirium Raskolnikov dreams that the world is condemned to a new plague from Asia, and that everyone is to be destroyed except a very few.

The disease attacks men by way of their sanity: though mad, each believes that he alone has the truth and is estranged from his fellows. They cannot decide what is "evil," they do not know whom to blame, and they kill one another out of senseless spite, as the infection spreads.

"Only a few men could be saved," Raskolnikov dreams. "They were a pure chosen people, destined to found a new race and a new life, to renew and purify the earth, but no one had seen these men, no one had heard their words and their voices." (Quotes from the 1962 Constance Garnett translation of *Crime and Punishment*, at pages 469-70.)

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

Dostoevsky's novel, *Demons*, is based on an actual case. Many other novels, by various authors, are also based on real-life events. Can you think of any? How does your selected novel differ from the real-life story on which it is based?

Describe the book-cover image, depicted above. Do cover images, like this one, make you more or less likely to read the book? Why (or why not)?

In Raskolnikov's dream, people cannot decide what is "evil." In real life, how do we determine what is evil?

Although he has confessed to killing two people—the pawnbroker and her sister—Raskolnikov has not repented. That means the murderer shows no remorse—and isn't sorry—for taking the lives of his victims. Why is this a problem for the killer? Is it also a problem for the society to which he will return after he completes his sentence? Why (or why not)?

Credits:

Book-cover image online, courtesy Barnes and Noble.

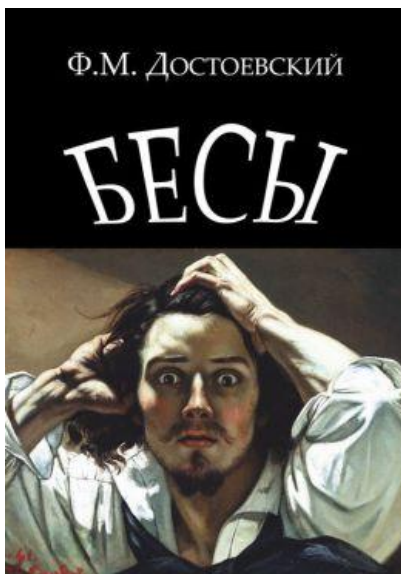
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