



Fyodor Dostoevsky's Epilepsy: In Connection with His Novels

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Abstract

Fyodor Dostoevsky, aside from his intelligent structure use of epilepsy by combining it into his novels, essential idea "a moment of happiness is worth a lifetime" was perhaps stimulated by his epileptic aura. As mentioned in the article, he presented the first signs of epilepsy in early adulthood, but he was only diagnosed a decade later. For diagnosis, even Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, theorized and wrote a book precisely for Fyodor's condition. Later, in the modern era with the new prognosis for epileptic types, so many neurologists with constant referral on his books and novels realized Fyodor had suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy. The most influential for this comprehension was *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-1880). Freud defined *The Brothers Karamazov* as the most powerful novel and story ever written.

Keywords: Fyodor Dostoevsky, Epilepsy, Sigmund Freud, Neurologist, The Brothers Karamazov

Introduction

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (Moscow 1821, St. Petersburg 1881), one of the greatest authors and novelists in the world, suffered from epileptic seizures and gambling addiction throughout his tragic and literacy life. However, beyond good and evil, he presented interacting characters with contrasting views about freedom of choice, religion, socialism, and atheism. Some of his characters suffered, like Fyodor, from epilepsy. In accordance

with the spirit of that time (relate to Hegel's book-The Phenomenology of Spirit), Dostoevsky's epileptic characters were interpreted in a psychiatric-psychological manner.

Many authors, philosophers, and psychologists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, Anton Chekhov, Friedrich Nietzsche, Erich Fromm etc., who interpreted his novels praised him for his exceptional work. However, one of his books (*Notes from Underground*-1864-The only philosophical book by Dostoevsky) suggests lots of interpretations because it is very complex and contradictory. Friedrich Nietzsche refers to Dostoevsky as "the only person who has ever taught me anything about psychology (Janko Lavrin, 1964)."

However, the illness was very hard for him; although he used it to his own advantage by creating the characters, stories, and ideas along with his life.

Based on an enormous concept of Dostoevsky's literature about epilepsy, there were multiple references to the disease from the texts and descriptions. Therefore, it is possible to pursue his historical life condition and invent vision in the modern medical literature. However, Dostoevsky's wisdom and knowledge were extraordinary and fantastic. In addition, his great power for writing and creating was never reduced by his epilepsy episode attack. Incidentally, he used this opportunity to forge some characters. For this reason, the medical scientists with the novels characteristics (protagonist) could diagnose the epileptic type of Dostoevsky.

1. The Type of Dostoevsky Epilepsy

Many scientific reporters dealt with the problem of the kind of epilepsy Dostoevsky might have suffered. The few attitudes of Fyodor himself (diary), from his close friends, first and second wife, as well as the narrative of epileptic characters in his novels should be considered when dealing with this problem. In his childhood, he once stated: "I have all kinds of seizures". Therefore, plenty of authors who dealt with this problem discussed the classification and type of Dostoevsky's epilepsy.

The first assessment at a retrospective diagnosis of Dostoevsky's status was made by Sigmund Freud in 1926 in a scientific article in response to the perceptions published by his countryman, Stefan Zweig, in 1920 (Zweig, 2001).

Freud considered his previous theories regarding the unconscious mind. Oedipus complex declared that Dostoevsky had not suffered in a long time from his epileptic attack, and this is contrary to an emotional disorder built by his relationship with his father (Parricide, influenced by the conspiracy of *The Brothers Karamazov* novel). Oedipus complex is the attachment of the child to the parent of the opposite sex, which is accompanied

by envious and aggressive feelings toward the parent of the same sex. Dostoevsky experienced his first seizure in 1846 at once after the death of his father. Secondly, his epilepsy was interpreted according to the psychoanalytic theory as a consequence of an Oedipus complex towards his father.

This disturbance was differentiated by psychogenic seizures (non-epileptic), which is a mood or disorder known as hysterical epilepsy (grand hysterical attacks). As reported by Freud, "Dostoevsky called himself an epileptic and was regarded as such by other people, on the description of his severe attacks, which were accompanied by loss of consciousness, muscular convulsions, and subsequent depression. Now it is highly expected that this so called epilepsy was only a symptom of his neurosis (Freud, 1961)." Freud was perhaps misguided by Smerdyakov's factitious seizures in the Brothers Karamazov novel, and by his psychoanalytic theories, which may be reasonable under some prospects.

In respect to Freud, like the other expert witnesses in the Fyodor Pavlovich murder trial in the final part of "The Brothers Karamazov novel", the diagnosed Dostoevsky's seizure was incorrect. Moreover, Freud's interesting essay (Dostoevsky & Parricide, 1928) provides an explicit example of the problems that arise in diagnosing epilepsy, even if it is prospectively or retrospectively.

The Dostoevsky's epilepsy symptom complex was a partial and secondarily generalized subtype seizure. It therefore means that he had suffered with both subtypes of seizures. A seizure is a period when cells in the neurons (synapses) are synchronously active or active at a constant time. Complex partial seizures (CPSs) with secondarily generalized subtype demonstrate nocturnal seizures (or repeated seizure activity) and ecstatic auras. However, there is scientific evidence that Dostoevsky suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) (Gastaut, 1970).

Temporal lobe epilepsy is the most frequent form of focal epilepsy and presents almost 2/3 of cases of intractable epilepsy managed surgically. A history of febrile seizures (exclusively complex febrile seizures) is usual in TLE and is often related to mesial temporal sclerosis (Labate et al., 2006). Researchers at the Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI) presented the psychic phenomena as experiential illusions or hallucinations based on clinical investigations and intra-operative stimulation surveys and studies.

Auras are simple partial seizures and may happen in isolation but arise in the majority of patients at the onset of a CPS. They may last from a few seconds to 1-3 minutes before losing consciousness (Ajmone-Marsan, 1987; Ajmone-Marsan, 1987; French et al., 1993).

The symptoms consist of viscerosensory signs which Dostoevsky has experienced, such as a rising epigastric sensation and experiential phenomena

such as visceral and auditory illusions, and complex auditory or visual hallucinations, fear, and déjà vu (Gloor, 1986; Gloor et al., 1982).

CPSs are correlated with amnesia and altered consciousness for an incident, behavioral arrest, and it starts with the duration of 25-30 seconds to 1 or 2 minutes. Healthily, consciousness has multiple features which consist of perception, cognition, voluntary motility, affect, and memory (Rodriguez et al., 2007).

Dostoevsky with a CPSs attack was unaware that he could have a seizure minutes earlier. He may also be unable to recall events that occurred before seizure onset as retrograde and anterograde amnesia is variable.

Temporal lobe seizures consists of three parts namely; simple partial, complex partial, and secondarily generalized. Several features of TLE semiology demonstrated how Dostoevsky struggled with those symptoms (see Table 1).

Table 1. Semiological Features (TLE) - Localizing Value

Aspects	Location
Unilateral limb automatism	Ipsilateral focus
Postictal cough	Temporal lobe
Postictal nose-wiping	Ipsilateral temporal lobe
Non-forced head turn	Ipsilateral focus
Clonic ending	Ipsilateral focus
Dystonic limb posturing	Contralateral focus
Postictal aphasia	Temporal lobe (dominant hemisphere)

Patients with temporal lobe epilepsy have these kinds of symptoms listed below: emotional alteration, hyperreligiosity, hypergraphia, euphoria, depression, hypo- or hypermoralism, altered sexual behavior, paranoia, and consciousness of guilt.

2. Epileptic Characters in Dostoevsky's Novels

In this section, three novels by Dostoevsky describe the protagonists' characters of those who have epilepsy.

1. ***The Idiot (1868)***: The most illustrious epileptic character in Dostoevsky's stories is Prince Lew Nikolaevich Myshkin (protagonist or the main character). Myshkin is a sample of virtue influenced by Victor Hugo and Jesus Christ. Myshkin, who has the same disease as his author, believes epilepsy to be a relief or gift and a means of reaching redemption in return for his ordeals (Dostoevsky Fyodor, 2004). He experienced epileptic auras as well as generalized epileptic attacks. When his love competitor, Rogoshin, wanted to kill him, he suffered from a generalized attack, fell down the stairs, and was not killed.

2. ***The Brothers Karamazov (1879-1880):*** *The Brothers Karamazov* narrates the story of the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov at the hands of his valet and illegitimate son, Smerdyakov. Smerdyakov committed suicide after committing a spotless crime and framing his abominable half-brother, Dimitri Karamazov. Smerdyakov has always use his epilepsy as an alibi (a claim or piece of evidence that one was elsewhere when an act) since an early age. He pretends a series of seizures on the night of the murder and manages to deceive doctors in the forensic investigation. Outside the courtroom, Smerdyakov recklessly boasts of confessing to murder in various conversations with his other half-brother, Ivan Karamazov.

The third brother, Alexei, is the main character in the novel, a good-hearted man inspired by Prince Myshkin. *The Brothers Karamazov* includes all of the author's contradictions; the truth of love and hate, suicide, salvation through suffering, conflicts of beliefs, the matter of a single moment and recollection of that moment, and free will.

The Brothers Karamazov and *Notes from Underground* focus on scientific determinism, which is the brainchild of the great empirical physiologist Claude Bernard (1813-1878).

“Imagine, inside, in the nerves, in the head—that is, these nerves are there in the brain, there is sort of little tails, the little tails of those nerves, and as soon as they begin trembling “[...]” then an image appears “[...]” That's why I see and then think, because of those tails, not at all because I've got a soul, and that I am some sort of image and likeness. All that is nonsense (Dostoevsky Fyodor, 2004).”

Dostoevsky had criticized medical science and in the 20th century, Michel Foucault, sociologist and philosopher who was the author of *The Birth of The Clinic*, have criticized the same thing. Dostoevsky's skepticism can be summed up by a comment in *The Brothers Karamazov* on the differing criteria and therapeutic inability which once dominated our practice. These include; “I've tried all the medical faculty they can diagnose beautifully, they have the whole of your disease at their finger-tips, but they've no idea how to cure you.” Thereafter, he describes the contemptuous view of excessive expertise in medicine: “I don't cure the left nostril, that's not my specialty, but go to Vienna where there's a specialist who will cure your left nostril (Dostoevsky Fyodor, 2004).”

3. ***Notes from Underground (1864):*** In this novel, there is no any signs or symbols of epilepsy, but the contradictions and paradoxes are presented in the story. The narrator is forty years old when he starts writing the story. He writes his book in a corner of the underground, which can be considered a symbol of loneliness and isolation. He is

relatively aware of other people in the community and has started a revolt against the ignorance and misery of the people. The narrator complains about most things or complains about human behaviors and herd intellectuals. The author speaks of torment and pain. The pain and torment that arise from awareness and knowledge are enormous. The novel begins with the sentence “I am a sick person...” and the narrator calls himself vindictive and vicious. He talks about his physical pain but doesn't believe in the doctor. The narrator refers to a society that, no matter how literate and knowledgeable it is, does not give up its superstitious behavior and thought.

The narrator is a specific personality, powerless and full of contradictions, and an isolated person in society. The narrator subconsciously travels inside to find himself again by narrating his psychological complexities. Fyodor Dostoevsky portrays a man who seeks to deny everything. He describes a man who belongs to nothing and has reached conscious absurdity. He went further in describing a man in the underground who rises rapidly in hope and falls at the same speed. It is confused between predestination and will.

“Man is a frivolous and incongruous creature, and perhaps, like a chess player, he loves the process of the game and not the end of it.” “Why I would sell the whole world for a single kopek so that nobody would bother me? Should the world go to hell? or should I go without my tea now? I'll say, let the world go to hell as long as I can have my tea whenever I want it (Dostoevsky Fyodor, 2009).”

Conclusion

This paper shows that Dostoevsky, one of the world's prominent novelists, suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy. The thoughts and ideas of this great writer have not been underestimated. He withstood epilepsy and also struggled with gambling, yet wrote long interesting and influential novels. The symptoms of epilepsy were addressed, as was the connection, in some of his novels.

Biography

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born on October 30th, 1821, in Moscow. He was the second son of Mikhail Andreevich Dostoevsky. His father was a medical doctor. The patriarchal and greedy character of his father was primitive for the artistic development of Fyodor. When he lost his mother in 1837, Fyodor was sent to St. Petersburg where he registered for the Army Engineering College. In 1839, Fyodor's tyrannical father died, probably of apoplexy. Fyodor graduated as a military engineer and started to work at the

War Ministration. With the relief of a small earning from the estate and also because of his boredom by this work, he resigned in 1844 from his commission to assign himself to write (“Poor Folk”-1846, “The Double”-1846) small novels which were considered a defeat. Due to his addiction to gambling, Fyodor was always pushed for money. He was apprehended and condemned to death in 1849 within a reading of a radical letter. He experienced mockery while he was expecting death during execution on December 22nd, 1849.

During that time, Fyodor's health was dramatically ruined and he suffered from his first generalized epileptic attacks. He got married to Maria Dmitrievna Isaeva during his military career. He was dismissed because of his bad health in 1859 (“The Insulted and Injured”-1859, “The House of the Dead-1861”, “Winter Notes on Summer Impression”-1862).

At the bedside of his sick wife he wrote “Notes from Underground”-1864, a psychological study of an outsider (“Crime and Punishment”-1866, “The Gambler-1866”, “The Idiot”-1868, “The Devils”-1872), and the great and final novel “The Karamazov Brothers” (1879–1880).

On the evening of January 28th, 1881, Dostoevsky pass away in St. Petersburg from his lung disorder. It is unclear whether it was emphysema or tuberculosis.

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