

RESEARCH PAPER

Tünde SZABÓ (University of Pécs)

sztunde1512@gmail.com

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THREE DOSTOEVSKY THEMES IN LYUDMILA ULITSKAYA'S OEUVRE

Received: 17 July 2021

UDK: 821.161.1.09Ulickaja, Lj. E.

821.161.1.09Dostoevskij, F. M.

821.161.1(091)

https://doi.org/10.22210/ur.2021.065.3_4/04

The study examines the transformations of certain ideas of Dostoevsky in the works of L. Ulitskaya. Three themes – daydreaming, accidental family, and demonism – can be identified in Ulitskaya's *Sonechka*, *Sincerely Yours*, *Shurik* and *The Big Green Tent* either directly or as mediated by certain authors or works of the Russian Silver Age. The transformation of these themes also constitutes the transmutation of a type of hero and the realisation of certain structural principles. The paper argues that, although Ulitskaya does not name Dostoevsky as her literary predecessor, she enters into a dialogue with Dostoevsky's ideas and poetics.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, Ulitskaya, daydreaming, “accidental family”, demonism

207

The works of F. M. Dostoevsky, one of the most influential authors in world literature, have been continuously present in the cultural sphere to this day, through quotes, adaptations, and sequels of the original plots, and they continue to have a significant effect on writers, film directors, and their works in a wide range of genres, both within and outside of certain schools. This effect is often explicit and considered, but many times it becomes only apparent through close reading.

The latter is typical of Lyudmila Ulitskaya's works. Dostoevsky is not among the writers whom she mentions as significant or who has played a defining role in her work; nevertheless, Dostoevsky's influence is detectable in her works either directly or as mediated by certain authors or works of the Silver Age. This influence is never exclusive; in most cases, it is only one of the many paradigms that Ulitskaya employs. The primary link is established

with specific Dostoevsky themes, which are transformed in an idiosyncratic way in some of Ulitskaya's works, and it also constitutes the transmutation of a type of hero and the realisation of certain structural principles. This paper will demonstrate how three of Dostoevsky's themes – daydreaming, the accidental family and demonism – are transformed in distinctly different ways in three of Ulitskaya's works.¹

Ulitskaya's novella, *Sonechka*, is connected to *White Nights*, one of Dostoevsky's early works, mediated by Marina Tsvetaeva's *The Tale of Sonechka*. The thematic-structural elements in *White Nights* which code sentimental love and are connected to the character of the daydreamer are transformed in both *Sonechka* novels, which further bear similarities with Dostoevsky's "sentimental novel" independently of each other. The novel entitled *Sincerely Yours*, *Shurik* is primarily connected both in terms of theme and structure to Anton Chekhov's *Platonov*, which originally survived without a title. The Dostoevsky theme which is activated and further advanced in this latter work, that is, the problem of the "accidental family", can only be identified in Ulitskaya's work indirectly through the problem of "fatherlessness" and the structural features connected to it, and not through its intertextual connection with a specific Dostoevsky novel. However, *The Big Green Tent* has a direct intertextual connection with Dostoevsky's *Demons*, and this nexus is present both in the theme and different aspects of the plot structure.

208

DAYDREAMING

One of the fundamental and partly autobiographical themes of Dostoevsky's early period is "daydreaming", which he "discovered" in his 1847 feuilleton, *Petersburg Chronicle*. The early "daydreamers" are characterised by a certain duality: a break with "life as lived"² and a base prosaicism on the one hand, and a quest for the highest ideals in the world of fantastic dreams that they

¹ The relationship between the artistic activities of the two authors has not yet been the subject of research. H. Goscilo mentions the genre similarity between *Discarded Relics* and *The Diary of a Writer* (Goscilo 2015: xxii).

² "The daydreamer is a peculiar character. But this peculiarity is not the full exquisiteness of individuality, but all that makes him strange, unwanted, uninteresting, invisible and therefore fatally lonely in relation to all other living humans." (Savinkov and Faustov 2010: 90). Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own (KH).

themselves create, on the other. "The daydreamer is the artist who creates and refashions himself at will hour by hour" (Bogdanova and Vodopyanova 2001: 92). The hero of *White Nights*, Dostoevsky's "sentimental novel", is one of the purest and most positive representatives of this type.

Ulitskaya, whose works are often categorised as neo-sentimental (Leiderman and Lipovecky 2001), establishes a clear connection with Dostoevsky's sentimental novel through her *Sonechka*. Marina Tsvetaeva's *The Tale of Sonechka* fulfils a specific mediating role between the two texts. The theme of love is the common factor that motivates and articulates the action in all three works: the inclusion of "the moment" of true love (life as lived) in the process of daydreaming/fiction, which defines the chronotope of the plot.

Dostoevsky's daydreamer meets Nastenka after living and daydreaming in Saint Petersburg for eight years. The story of their love lasts four nights; from the morning that follows the fourth night, the status quo is restored, which, according to the notes made fifteen years later, did not change afterwards. In other words, the story of the four nights is wedged within a constant state of daydreaming. Three important attributes identify the short "wedged in" period of love. First, the feeling develops extremely fast. Nastenka warns the daydreamer already on the very first night about the possibility of love, and he displays his love for the girl already on the third night. The second important attribute of love is interchangeability and the option of loving two people at the same time: "Oh, my God! If only I could love them both at the same time! Oh, if you were him!" (Dostoevsky 1988: 201), Nastenka says in her farewell note to the daydreamer. The third attribute of love which is depicted in the novel is self-sacrifice, the repression of one's own emotions in the interest of the happiness of the loved being.

The topographic features of daydreaming and love have a symbolic value. Dostoevsky's text draws a parallel between daydreaming and a limited and closed space, that is, the corner, while the love bond develops in an open space, in a street of Saint Petersburg. Topography also plays an important part in identifying the hero as a type, as Dostoevsky's hero is clearly a product of Saint Petersburg life, and the text is a central piece of the Petersburg texts.

In correspondence with Dostoevsky's schema, the love relationship depicted in Tsvetaeva's novella is wedged into the life story of the heroine as a moment. Tsvetaeva's work also displays the Dostoevskian attributes of love, however, the fact that the emotions described here are between two women is a significant difference. Love is ignited between Tsvetaeva and Sonechka very quickly and at first sight. Interchangeability and the option of loving

two people at the same time become fundamental structural principles in the novella, inasmuch as the system of relationships between the characters is made up of interwoven love triangles.

Regarding its topographic features, Tsvetaeva's novella is clearly linked to Moscow. At the same time, Sophia Holliday is from Saint Petersburg, so her character is linked – and Tsvetaeva indeed links it – to Dostoevsky's source text: "Her mother probably stayed in Saint Petersburg, where Sonechka herself originally came from. It is not simply by chance that her Nights are White..." (Tsvetaeva 2010: 49).

Similarly to the two previous works, the three-part temporal structure is also preserved in Ulitskaya's novella, and Sonechka's "real" love and marriage is wedged within the permanent state of "literary narcosis". The period of wedged-in "real" life is the longest seventeen years, and it assumes a new feature as it is not exclusively about love, but also about marriage and the history of a family. The other important difference between this work and Dostoevsky's novella is that the roles are reversed in Ulitskaya's piece: the female character lives in the world of literary fiction, from which her encounter with her husband will lift her into the "reality" of family life.

210

The three attributes of love which can be identified in *White Nights* also appear in Ulitskaya's novella. At their first meeting Robert Victorovich comes to the sudden realisation that the rather plain librarian is his future wife – whom he indeed marries two weeks later. The attribute of "loving two" is also connected to Robert Victorovich, as he stays at Sonechka's side during his liaison with Yasya. Unlike Tsvetaeva, Ulitskaya preserves the third feature of the Dostoevskian depiction of love, that is, self-sacrifice, which is one of the central attributes of the heroine. Sonechka withdraws into the background without any resistance, so she does not interfere with her husband's happiness and she accepts the appearance of the young lover as a gift from fate: "how wisely life arranged this by giving him such a wonderful gift in his old age..." (Ulitskaya 2007: 129).

The spatially fixed nature of fiction and love is also fundamental in Ulitskaya's work. Sonechka's story is set in multiple locations, with Moscow being the dominant one. While closed spaces denote different phases of the relationship between the heroes (the room next to the boiler room, the hut in Bashkiria, the house in Moscow and the apartment in Likhobor), the transition between fiction and real life is denoted by two metaphorical locations: the library and the studio.

The other element which is transformed in the works of the two female authors is their narrative technique, the way they record the moment of

genuine love/life and formulate it in their respective texts. In *White Nights*, the moment of love/life as lived is related as a story told in first person singular. A relatively long time – fifteen years – passes between the related event and the time when the story is recorded, which makes it possible for the narrator-hero to establish an evaluative relationship with his former self. The hero himself is a fictitious character, whom the author intended to create as a specific type. As a result of this, the story related by the daydreamer and his relationship with it serves partly as an illustration of this type, while also recording a certain literary tradition. The famous ending of the novella, an explicit description of gratitude for the moment of love/life, is a reinterpretation of the sentimental conception of love. In the case of Dostoevsky's hero, the resignation and sympathy that generally accompany hopeless love are replaced by a gesture of thanksgiving (Kroó 2010): "Blessed be your name for the moment of happiness and pleasure you have granted this other forlorn and grateful heart! My God! A full moment of happiness! Could it be not enough – even for a whole lifetime?" (Dostoevsky 1988: 202).

Tsvetaeva literally takes over the closing of *White Nights* to end her own novella and by doing so reintroduces the biographical fact that Sophia Holliday, an actress of Studio Two of the Moscow Art Theatre plays the heroine of *White Nights* on the stage. In addition, the poet retrospectively identifies herself as the character of the daydreamer through this ending. She maintains the form of the first-person singular narrator, but as this is an autobiographical text, the narratorial *I* and the object of her love are "real".

The narrative technique of recording "real" life which is wedged into an existence rooted in literary fiction differs significantly in Ulitskaya's novella from the process that Dostoevsky and Tsvetaeva apply. Ulitskaya's narrator is in the third-person and undefined, and she is not separated in time from the narrated events. The closing of the work is also different from the other two; however, the gratitude felt for unrealised/past love appears here as well and is connected to the heroine, who survives her husband: "... what happiness that all that was for this" – Sonechka, left by both her husband and daughter, thinks (Ulitskaya 2007: 144).

When moving from the level of the plot to a higher level of abstraction, we can see that the stories recorded by the narrator-heroes raise the question of the relationship between reality and fiction in all three works, and this is also transformed in an idiosyncratic way in the Sonechka novellas.

In Dostoevsky, the world of the hero appears "real" and his type is visibly defined as a product of the real Saint Petersburg existence. At the same time,

this is a fictitious character, who, besides his “real” existence, lives in a self-constructed dreamland. This dreamland is the hero’s inner world, which is not recorded in the written text. Nevertheless, it is a text-like phenomenon, as the daydreamer speaks to Nastenka about himself and his inner world as if he was “reading a book”. Another important detail is that for the hero there is a sharp and consciously observed border between “reality” and the dreamland. The daydreamer accurately senses the difference between the two worlds: for example, when he talks about a visitor who disturbed his dreams, and he attaches clearly defined value categories to them, when he experiences and condemns life locked in the dreams as sin, or when he considers a single moment of real life to be of equal value with a whole life spent daydreaming.

The basis of Tsvetaeva’s novella is not fictional since it is an autobiographical text with real people as characters. At the same time, as the author-narrator is a poet, the border between life and literature is repeatedly blurred – not only in the novella, but in Tsvetaeva’s life as well. On the one hand, Tsvetaeva the narrator emphasises a real-life quality of her heroine, while on the other, she arranges the biographical facts into metaphorized lines by filtering them through her own earlier literary works, finally sublimating Sonechka into a literary character, the embodiment of love and her own emotions.

212

In Ulitskaya’s *Sonechka*, similarly to Dostoevsky’s novella, the heroine and her world as well as a certain period and locations of the Soviet era are presented as reality. Nevertheless, the heroine is a fictional one, who is identified by the diminutive form of a first name, similarly to Dostoevsky’s Nastenka. However, Sonechka is in a position which is parallel with that of the daydreamer as a consequence of her role. Yet, in contrast to the daydreamer, for Sonechka fiction and the “real” world are not clearly separated, for her “invented heroes coexisted with living people, the ones close to them” (Ulitskaya 2007: 9). Another important difference between the two characters is that the daydreamer, although he starts out from literary works, creates his own inner world. In contrast, the fictional world that Sonechka lives in is external, a creation of others, the world of literary works that the heroine reads. At the same time, an art form is associated with each of the three other heroes of the novella: painting with Robert Victorovich, music with Tania and theatre with Yasya. In this way, the problem of art and creation is also included in the broader question of fiction and reality.

We can therefore observe that some of the fundamental structural-thematic features and types of heroes of Dostoevsky’s sentimental novel are transformed in Ulitskaya’s *Sonechka* via a mediating text. In Ulitskaya’s novella

the “daydreamer” is the female character, who does not create her fantasy world herself, but rather she is immersed in the world of literature written by others. In comparison to Dostoevsky’s hero, her encounter with “living life” is delayed for a longer period of time – a life from which she voluntarily withdraws for the sake of the other’s happiness, similarly to the daydreamer, and for which she feels gratitude like Dostoevsky’s hero. Beyond the heroine’s competence, one of Dostoevsky’s principal sources, i.e., Schiller’s concept of the human rift, the separation of nature and ideal, can also be observed (Szabó 2015: 93–107). However, while it is exactly this rift that receives special emphasis in the character of the daydreamer in *White Nights*, in Ulitskaya’s work the rift can be transcended and human completeness can be restored, primarily as a result of the heroes’ artistic and creative activity.

ACCIDENTAL FAMILY

Dostoevsky’s novel *The Adolescent* was published in 1875 – the author’s first attempt to present his idea about “accidental families” in an artistic form. When Arkadiy’s former tutor reads the young man’s notes, he connects the idea of turmoil and chaos and the difficulty of writing a novel on the subject to the concept of “accidental families”: “To be honest, I do not want to create a hero who comes from an accidental family. It is a thankless endeavour that lacks any form of beauty ...” (Dostoevsky 1990b: 691).

A little later, in *The Diary of a Writer* Dostoevsky returns to the subject and gives a detailed explanation of his interpretation of the term “accidental family”:

People are asking me what this “accidental” is and what I mean by it. My response is that the accidental nature of the contemporary Russian family lies in the fact that today’s fathers have lost all common ideas about their families – ideas that all fathers would share, ideas that would connect the fathers themselves, ideas that they themselves would believe in and would teach their children to believe in and to whom they would pass on a faith in life (Dostoevsky 1995: 209).

In Dostoevsky’s view, either total denial of everything past, or independent positive endeavours of some fathers, or a languid, lazy and selfish attitude replace the idea that connects fathers, the last of which dominates Russian society.

A. P. Chekhov's play known as *Platonov* or *Fatherlessness* in literary history was written over a decade after the publication of the novel. The connection between Chekhov and Dostoevsky's oeuvre is not among the principal subjects of academic research on either author.³ One of the researchers on the topic, R. Nazirov, states that "Chekhov did not only parody and stylize Dostoevsky, but he also learnt from him, especially in his early drama, *Untitled Play*, in which he borrowed considerably from Dostoevsky (primarily from *Demons*)..." (Nazirov 2005: 167). The drama contains a direct reference to Dostoevsky and the theme of accidental families, and so in Ulitskaya's novel *Sincerely yours, Shurik*, which is in direct connection with Chekhov's play, we can also see a further transformation of Dostoevsky's theme, but without establishing a concrete intertextual connection with any of Dostoevsky's works.

Apart from the theme of "fatherlessness", there is also a structural feature that creates a parallel between Chekhov's play and Ulitskaya's novel: the circular structure, the centre of which is characterised by a void/emptiness that different equivalences between the characters produce.

214

The linear story of a young man in Moscow becoming an adult and maturing as a man provides the foundation of the plot of Ulitskaya's novel. Shurik grows up under his mother and grandmother's protective wings without a father, and the two women believe that the lack of a father causes no problems in the child's development: "The shadow of fatherlessness, which both women had feared so much, did not even emerge" (Ulitskaya 2010: 39). However, the hero as a grown man experiences side-effects of this situation: when Shurik looks into the mirror on his thirtieth birthday, he does not recognise himself.

Through the character of twenty-seven-year-old Platonov, Chekhov only presents the end-point, the fully developed character, whose defining feature is his dissociation from his recently deceased father and his generation. "I do not believe, friends of my father, in all honesty I do not believe your simple talk about not so simple things, or anything that you yourselves have ever thought of. [...] I am not talking about old people in general; I am talking about my father's friends" (Chekhov 1878).

While *Platonov* is predominantly characterised by the lack of a father, he himself is a father and some of the secondary characters are also arranged in pairs of fathers and sons: two Glagolyevs, two Vengeroviches and two Triletskiys belong to Voynitseva's "court". Voynitseva constitutes a specific

³ "... the fact that Chekhov's world view was moulded in opposition to Dostoevsky's has not received ample attention to this day" (Kibalnik 2015: 57).

centre in relation to the male heroes. Platonov is the opposite pole of this centre, as he is in an intimate relationship with the female characters who assume different female roles: mother and wife (Sasha), lover (Sophia), enlightened widow (Voynitseva) and emancipated girl who works in the field of science (Grekova). In this way, a double circular structure is created with two centres at the beginning of the Chekhov play, which is reinforced by a dual spatial structure, created by Voynitseva's estate and Platonov's school.

Through the dual connections of the secondary characters and the mutual accessibility of the two spaces, as the plot progresses and the conflicts around the liaisons develop, the two centres practically overlap, and with Platonov's death and the loss of the estate the centre becomes the embodiment of the absolute void.

The failure of the Ulitskaya hero becoming an adult is explained by the cyclical dynamics of the plot of the novel. Yuri Lotman identifies the principal feature of a cyclical type of plot as the cyclical repetition of periods of different lengths, the isomorphism of spaces and the practically identical heroes or doubles (Lotman 1992). All three phenomena play a defining role in the plot of Ulitskaya's novel. In Shurik's childhood, the nativity plays that his grandmother, Yelizaveta Ivanovna, organises each New Year's keep repeating. As part of these ceremonies, which always follow an identical choreography, Shurik plays all the possible parts as he grows up. Then, the life of the hero as he becomes a young adult is organised according to an identically repeated weekly schedule, which is defined by his relationship with different women.

Topographically, the plot can be divided into two fundamental spheres: home and all the rest of the spaces where Shurik goes and from where he always returns. The external spaces are isomorphic in relation to the function of the hero as he transgresses the boundaries: the spaces of women, where Shurik fulfils his sexual and other duties. Home constitutes a contrary parallel in relation to the external spaces. As regards the function of the service, it is partly isomorph with them, because first and foremost, Shurik serves his mother. However, it is also significantly different from them, because this service is not rendered in the form of physical love.

The characters connected to the isomorph spaces share many similar traces. First, several secondary characters who are not connected through the plot share the same name. Second, among Shurik's partners there are several girls who have similar sounding names: Lilya, Alya, Alla and Lena. Besides the identical and similar sounding names, the repetition of situations also further identifies the characters; for example, the wanderings and walks

with the French humanities student, which are connected to his love for Lilya, are repeated and the childish romping with Maria reminds us of his bantering with Lilya.

While the female characters around Shurik are shown to be identical in different ways and to differing degrees, he is shown to be identical with members of his family. He is not only his mother's son, but also plays the role of father and husband for his mother. Shurik's adopted daughter, Maria, awakes motherly feelings in Vera, who feels older and more grown up as a result. After a short while, Vera "thought herself to be Maria's mother and Shurik to be her father" (Ulitskaya 2010: 79).

We can observe that the cyclical dynamics that overlays the linear structure in the development of the hero in Ulitskaya's novel makes the male role relative by moving the hero between different family roles which are still presented as equivalent, and by fixing him in the single role of serving women in the external sphere. This role of the principal hero can be described with a structure that conforms to the cyclical movements: a circle with a centre where Shurik is in the middle and surrounded by women. It is the same in the home sphere: "From his early childhood, an unconscious feeling had developed in Shurik that goodness itself is originally female and it is outside of him and surrounds him as he stands in the centre" (Ulitskaya 2010: 31); and in his external relationships: "Why is it that all the women around him always want the same: continuous sexual service? [...] And he saw them in front of him as they surrounded him..." (Ulitskaya 2010: 330). This centre, the hero's character, is defined by the sum of the layered absences of the death of the grandmother, who had filled the absence of the dead father (and grandfather) and the absence which is equivalent with this: the remoteness of Lilya, the true love. It is by no means a coincidence that the hero's effect on the fate of the women around him is, just like Platonov's in Chekhov's play, after all, negative; Alya is involved in an accident, Valeria and Svetlana die, and Stovba and Maria disappear without a trace.

Platonov, who embodied the negative centre in the Chekhov drama, was not always a negative figure. The idealism of the university students and Platonic love are connected to Platonov before the time of the plot: emphasis is placed on the change in the hero and the loss of ideals, which also occur before the story-now of the plot.

The loss of ideals also has connections with Dostoevsky's ideas about accidental families. In the first act, before the main character enters the stage, Glagoyev the elder characterises Platonov as an "embodiment of hesitancy"

(or literally: "indeterminateness") of contemporary society, saying that he "could be the ideal hero of a contemporary novel, which, unfortunately, has not been written yet. By hesitancy I mean the current state of our society: the Russian author can keenly sense this hesitancy..." (Chekhov 1878). M. P. Gromov unequivocally identifies the aforementioned author as Dostoevsky (Gromov 1989). Apart from the reference, another important detail is that in spite of claiming the opposite before his death, Platonov is also unable to fulfil his role as a father. This detail and the loss of an ideal, which characterises the hero, clearly underscore the connection with Dostoevsky's idea. The source of fatherlessness as it appears in Chekhov's play is the lack of ideas and ideals, which, according to Dostoevsky, is a fundamental factor in most "accidental families".

The question of the lack of ideas and ideals is also worth considering in connection with Ulitskaya's hero, as apparently, Shurik lives his life without any higher ideals and serving the women is limited to the material and physical aspects of life. Nevertheless, it is exactly as part of this question that the aforementioned conflict between home and the external spaces, i.e., two, partially isomorph spaces of the plot, becomes visible. Specifically, Shurik's relationship with his mother is founded on a higher ideal, i.e., "Platonic" love, as opposed to "inferior" love: "Somehow it seemed self-evident that in their exceptional family, where all felt an elevated and self-sacrificing love for one another, Platonic love was the norm. And at that point it becomes frighteningly clear to Shurik how he has betrayed 'elevated' love for 'base' love" (Ulitskaya 2010: 124). Later, when it becomes clear to Vera that there is a physical connection between Shurik and Stovba, she reproaches her son, saying that he does not understand the difference between physical and spiritual love. At the same time, she displays an accepting attitude towards a member of a "poor generation, dispossessed of all high ideals" (Ulitskaya 2010: 393).

On the level of the hero's competence, there is almost a direct reference to the generation without an ideal as described in Chekhov's play. However, the narrator displays palpable irony towards Vera's standpoint in both text locations, because he unequivocally describes Shurik as the victim of the two women's, and especially the grandmother's, pedagogical principles: a "good boy", who does not even put up the most basic psychological defence against the ideals of his mother and grandmother. Consequently, on the level of the narration, the unconditional and uncontrolled acceptance of an ill-defined "Platonic love" and its designation as a life principle appears as the main cause, besides fatherlessness, of the failed development of the main hero's personality.

Consequently, the mutual loss of ideals in the background of “accidental families”, a problem which Dostoevsky also describes on a theoretical level and which is manifested in Chekhov’s early play in Platonov’s character, who rejects his father, is unable to function as a father and has lost his ideals, is transformed in a peculiar way in Ulitskaya’s novel with the mediation of Chekhov’s work; paradoxically, it is exactly the limitless internalisation of ideals and the foundation of everyday life upon them that causes the failures in the lives of the younger generation which grows up fatherless.

DEMONISM

218

Dostoevsky’s novel *Demons*, published in 1872, was inspired by the Nechayev trial, a social event that caused a major scandal. On the basis of the case, Dostoevsky intended to describe the Nechayev phenomenon, that is, the precursors and the consequences of the radical revolutionary ideology, which was gaining momentum at the end of the 1860s. He was looking for an answer to the question as to “how it is possible in our transient and astounding present-day society for not only one Nechayev, but several *Nechayevs* to appear, and how it is possible that these Nechayevs eventually also manage to gather Nechayevists around them” (qtd. in Saraskina 1996: 438). Stavrogin, at the centre of the novel that was significantly transformed during the writing process in comparison with the author’s original ideas, “is not only one of Dostoevsky’s most mysterious figures, but that of world literature”.⁴

The theme, the system of characters and metaphorical load of *Demons* are transformed in Ulitskaya’s *The Big Green Tent* without an intermediary text. There is a direct reference to Dostoevsky’s novel in Ulitskaya’s work: when Ilya initiates Miha into the operations of the samizdat, “the little devils of the Russian revolution – the same ones, Dostoevsky’s ones – were lurking in the dark corners of the garden” (Ulitskaya 2015: 482).

The social processes of one of Russia’s specific historical periods are at the centre of both novels – two generations which in some way oppose the ruling system and attempt to achieve fundamental changes in the oppressive social

⁴ At the same time, in *Demons* “Stavrogin is extinguished, exhausted and dead, and they have torn off the dead man’s mask. Within the overall evil in the novel, only this dead, gruesome and mysterious mask remains. Stavrogin no longer exists in *Demons*, and there is no one and nothing in *Demons* except for Stavrogin” (Berdyayev 1996: 519).

system. In *The Big Green Tent* this is the generation of the Soviet "Sixtiers" (*sbestidesiatniki*), the designation of which originates in the generation of the 1860s,⁵ which Dostoevsky describes in *Demons*. Ulitskaya holds the opposition activities of the Sixtiers in high regard:

In Russia, this opposition was the first generation which overcame the fear of power and which started an admirable fight to be allowed to have its own opinion and not to be forced to think in the "spirit of the newspapers"; this was an education in breaking out from total fear. The opposition paid an extremely high price for these attempts at breaking free, some of which were successful and others weren't. [...] They were the first to say out loud what they were thinking. Today, it is no longer important whether I agreed with their ideas at the time. They established a school of courage and independence (Gostyeva 2010).

To some extent, the idealisation of the writer's own youth clearly plays some part in this highly positive assessment. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, paints an extremely negative picture of the 1860s generation, also describing the ideals of his own youth, which were typical in the 1840s, with biting satire. Notes he made in connection with the novel and his letters written at the time bear witness to the fact that he considered the nihilism and destructive activities of the revolutionaries to be a direct consequence of the western orientation of the liberal generation of the 1840s:

The Granovskis and the Belinskis, that is, the western-oriented thinkers of the 1840s (also, evidently, including Turgenev) are the direct forebears of the Nechayevs. This statement of Dostoevsky's makes reference to Turgenev's novel (the problem of "fathers and sons" is at the centre of *Demons*) and the polemic with this representative of the 1840s generation can be observed (Budanova 1990: 689).

Dostoevsky does not only travesty Turgenev's hero, Bazarov, in his *Demons*, but also pillories the ideals of his own youth and presents Stavrogin as "his own antithesis" (Saraskina 2013: 551).

⁵ "The term became widely accepted following the publication of an article by S. B. Rassadin in the December 1960 issue of the journal *Yunost*, in which the author draws a parallel between the authors of the late 1950s and the democratic intellectuals of the 1960s, which were actively fighting against the autocratic system, inertia and intellectual decline" (Belyaeva 2015: 66).

While the author's connection with the portrayed generations is contradictory in the two novels, certain features of the structures of the plot and the systems of characters are very similar. The plot of both novels is fragmented and made up of loosely connected episodes:

There are certain chapters in *Demons* in which the action is practically outside the chronicler's field of vision; the chapters devoted to Stepan Trofimovich open and close the novel, a cycle of chapters is about Stavrogin in its totality, and there are chapters about Piotr Stepanovich Verkhovenski and Shatov as well. Many of the characters are described in great detail in the different sub-chapters... [...] The plot, in Dostoevsky's words, unfolds in "scenes and not a narrative", and most of those are crowd scenes... (Zakharov 1985: 165, 168).

The plot of Ulitskaya's novel is similarly articulated. In this work, there are over one hundred and fifty characters with their own names, most of them also with their own life story, which often take up full chapters or cycles of chapters. Some critics designate the fragmentation of the plot as "drivel" (Ivanova 2011), which in terms of its composition is more like a collection of short stories than a novel (Tischenko 2014).

220

This level of fragmentation of the plot in *The Big Green Tent* is counterbalanced by the system of characters, which can be described as a model of a real social network (Szabó 2020). At the centre of this network, there are three childhood friends and schoolmates, who, as adults, represent three typical/possible mentalities and life stories in the generation of the Soviet Sixtiers. The construction made up of three central heroes and the female characters connected to them is a typical system of characters in 19th-century Russian novels. Among others, this has a fundamental role in the system of characters in *Demons*: Stavrogin's three "disciples" represent three different ideologies and mentalities typical of the generation described in the novel. Stavrogin himself is "a terrible 'black hole', which infects everyone around it: it plants pagan ideas in Shatov, it suggests the ideal of the chelovekobog ('man-god') to Kirillov, and bloody ideas to Petrusha" (Stepanyan 2014).

At the same time, it cannot be disregarded that Stavrogin and in part the rest of the central heroes, Liza, Dasha, Shatov, are also disciples of Stepan Trofimovich (and Piotr is his son), who embodies the very liberal intelligentsia of the 1840s in the novel, whose principles Dostoevsky is polemising. With the character of Stepan Trofimovich the problem of the influence of the older generation and the role of the educator in the emotional and spiritual

development of his disciples receive increased emphasis in *Demons*. This problem also plays a very important role in Ulitskaya's novel. In *The Big Green Tent* there is no equivalent of Stavrogin, which can be explained with the tendency prevalent in Ulitskaya's works which relativises the roles of the principal heroes (Szabó 2017). The first six chapters of the novel focus on the school years of the three central heroes and their growing up. Two characters play an important part in this process: Sanya's grandmother, Anna Alexandrovna, a descendant of Decembrists and Victor Yulyevich Shengeli, a literature teacher, who is a representative of the generation that has fought on the front.

In spite of the difference in their historical-cultural backgrounds, Shengeli and Stepan Trofimovich share several character features. In their youth, both heroes had the utmost respect of their male and female students. At the same time, a certain weakness of character can be observed in both of them: they are easily moved to tears and both enjoy and regularly consume alcohol. A dominant female character plays a defining role in both heroes' lives: Varvara Petrovna, who even chooses clothes for Stepan Trofimovich, and Xenia Nikolayevna, who has no sympathy for strange women by Victor Yulyevich's side. Varvara Petrovna wants to marry Stepan Trofimovich and his student, Dasha, and Victor Yulyevich indeed marries Katya, his student who has just left school. The "genius loser" is a fitting epitome for both heroes – an expression that Ilya uses to summarise Shengeli's life story.⁶

Both heroes are characterised by a scientific and literary career lined with failures. Stepan Trofimovich "stopped working almost the very minute he had started". In his youth, he was appointed a university lecturer, but "he gave no more than one or two lectures", he wrote a treatise "about the exceptional nobility of some knights in some bygone era..." (Dostoevsky 1990a: 9). While he is living on Stavrogina's land, he keeps preparing to write a substantial work, but does not write anything in the end. After completing his university studies, Victor Yulyevich prepares to commence his doctoral studies, but as circumstances change, he becomes a literature teacher first in the countryside and then in Moscow. The book he plans to write about childhood and the

⁶ At the same time, there is an important difference in the development of the two characters since Stepan Trofimovich's personal responsibility for his inability to act receives greater emphasis, and he is the only hero in the novel who is granted the chance to "awaken" at the end of his life. "Even if it is Stepan Trofimovich who creates the novel's space which is bereft of god, it is he who reintroduces God to the novel and the icon that closes the novel is created around his person" (Kasatkina 1996: 242).

ethical initiation during the process of becoming an adult is left unwritten, in spite of the fact that he conducts serious research on the topic: "However, Victor Yulyevich never finished the book. Perhaps they had talked too much about it and the whole thing disappeared in thin air" (Ulitskaya 2015: 328). The basis of his idea is a parallel between the process of a child becoming an adult and the metamorphosis of insects, which the hero believes he has discovered: "as he was thinking about adolescent boys, he suddenly came to the realisation how similar the processes that played out in them were to the metamorphosis characteristic of insects" (Ulitskaya 2015: 86).

This parallel, which is one of the fundamental metaphors of Ulitskaya's novel and also results in the "imago", has a connection with *Demons* as well. In a draft for the novel, the "Prince" says during a conversation with Shatov:

Undoubtedly, we are transient beings and our existence on earth is clearly an unbroken process, *the existence of the chrysalis that metamorphoses into a butterfly* [...] Earthly life is the process of metamorphosis. Who is responsible for your metamorphosis into devils...". (Dostoevsky 1972–1990 Vol. 11: 184, emphasis mine)

222

The dyadic metaphor – i.e., the transformation into a butterfly or the devil – is preserved in Ulitskaya's novel. In its first meaning, the metaphor is connected to the most important moments of the heroes growing up, for example, the two final stages of Miha's life story: Anna Alexandrovna's death and the hero's suicide. "Miha, like an insect, passed the last stage of his metamorphosis. Anna Alexandrovna's death gave him the final push to become an adult" (Ulitskaya 2015: 561). Miha considers the first truly adult act in his life when he quits his hopeless situation. As he throws himself out of the window, he is mumbling the word "imago", and the narrator's text describes his landing on the ground as a metaphor of transformation: "The winged creature flies off and leaves its chitin shell, the empty coffin of the flying creature, here on the ground, and the new lungs of the flying creature are filled with new air..." (Ulitskaya 2015: 584).

The second meaning of the metaphor, the transformation into the devil, is connected to Miha's father-in-law, one of the principal leaders of the opposition. Chernopyatov does not only betray several of his comrades, but he also broadcasts a public session of penance on television. The theme of public penance is, on the one hand, a reference to Stavrogin: that certain confession which Stavrogin does not make public in the end. On the other hand, it is this episode where the second explicit reference to *Demons* appears in the work:

The whole thing had a whiff of Demons. People with practical minds feared the widespread repression of all dissidents, while those with more philosophical minds posed more abstract questions: did Dostoevsky reveal the characteristics of the Russian revolutionary turbulence, or created them, unknowingly, together with his literary heroes, Stavrogin and Petyenka Verkhovensky. This is exactly what Miha and Ilya were discussing all through the evening". (Ulitskaya 2015: 556)

The fact that evil appears in the novel in connection with opposition figures, adds, to a certain degree, a nuance to the entirely positive picture of them, the idealisation of the Sixtiers' generation, as earlier mentioned. Moreover, the "abstract" question that the heroes discuss is a manifestation of one of the crucial socio-political dilemmas of Dostoevsky's novel's reception: that is, whether the work prophetically shows ("reveals") the social roots of the 20-century cataclysm in Russian history as, for example, Berdyaev claims, or whether it lashes at the majority of the Sixtiers' generation who were actively seeking social change in the period, as contemporary Russian liberal leaders believe, without a good reason.⁷

However, the question raised in Ulitskaya's novel does not only concern the social problem portrayed by Dostoevsky, but also the relationship between reality and literature. This problem is clearly unavoidable in the case of fiction the asserted aim of which is to give an artistic representation of contemporary historical and social reality of a given generation. In this respect, there is a clear parallel between the two works.

One aspect of the relationship between reality and fiction which is characteristic of both novels is the use of prototypes. A high number of obvious or easily identifiable prototypes is clearly connected to the autobiographical aspect of the two novels as both authors write about a generation that they themselves were members of.⁸

⁷ "The democratic press aimed to insinuate that *Demons* was malevolently pointless because Nechayev and the condition of being a Nechayev was only an episodic and local malady and Dostoevsky had no grounds to believe that the whole of society suffered from this illness" (Saraskina 2013: 594).

⁸ It is a well-known fact that Dostoevsky remoulded S. G. Nechayev in Piotr Verkhovensky's character and that the figure of the elder Verkhovensky was based on T. N. Granovsky. "Turgenev's personality, ideology and art were not only reflected in the parodic character of Karmazinov, but also in the extensive debate between Dostoevsky and Turgenev..." (Dostoevsky 1990a: 689). Ulitskaya, too, does not hide the fact that her characters are based on concrete artists and public personalities. Liza's character is, for example, partly based on the life of the

Another aspect of the relationship between reality and fiction is the heroes' literary/artistic activities in both novels. As the elaboration of Stavrogin's character "enthralled him", Dostoevsky gradually diverged from his original plan for a socio-political theme towards pure fiction; so much so that at a certain point he recommenced writing the novel. Writing, the heroes' literary activities and the influence of their works on the plot are a perpetually present problem in the plot of the new work as it is being created. As Saraskina has pointed out "two-thirds (20 people) of the characters in the work are literary scholars or 'people interested in literature' (10 people). [...] It is in this work that literature and the literary cause assume a new status, they gain new significance on a higher scale." This is why *Demons* can be considered to be Dostoevsky's "most literary" work:

...the passions surrounding literature in a rural town and the heroes' amateurish attempts at writing are connected to three periods of high literature. The 1840s, 50s and the end of the 60s, three decades of Russian social and ideological development and literary fighting becomes part of the novel, lending it profundity and perspective". (Saraskina 1990: 115–116)

224

In addition, not only is the literary life of a period reflected in the literary activities of the heroes of *Demons*, but also the problem of the correlation between reality and literature, which interested Dostoevsky from an early stage of his creative period, as earlier mentioned in the context of the topic of "daydreaming".

Literary life and heroes' literary, or more broadly speaking, artistic activities play an important part in Ulitskaya's novel. The events described in the second part of the plot, which includes most of the episodes in Ilya and Miha's lives, are connected to the banned 1960s–1980s literature, samizdat and its distribution. Apart from their connection with samizdat, the activities of the three central heroes are connected to a different art form. Ilya is a photographer, whose photos are published in American magazines and his archive "is the professional work of a historian and an archivist" (Ulitskaya 2015: 309). Sanya is a musician, who, due to a hand injury, does not become a pianist but a specialist in music theory. Miha, who is "extremely sensitive to literature" (Ulitskaya 2015: 479), writes poems. There is a constant oscillation

currently active concert pianist, Elisabeth Leonskaya, while one of the principal opposition figures of the sixties, the civil rights activist and poet Ilya Gabay, served as Miha's prototype (Latynina 2011).

in Ulitskaya's novel between reality as described in the novel and the fictional space of the works of art through the artistic activities of the heroes and the description of the works that they create and distribute.

As a consequence, literature and art play a fundamental role in Ulitskaya's novel as well. Working with banned literature and artistic activities in general are, on the one hand, instruments of resistance against the political system. As E. A. Skomp and B. M. Sutcliffe claim, "Real concern for culture, the novel implies, is expressed through opposition to the state" (Skomp and Sutcliffe 2015: 128). On the other hand, it is also a way to restore the literary continuity, which was broken in the 1920s Soviet Union. The novel is a custodian of literary continuity, and its intertextual connection with *Demons* only strengthens it.

Overall, therefore, we see that certain characteristic Dostoevsky themes are actively present in Ulitskaya's works, whether they are short novels or longer works of fiction and belong to the early or more recent stages of her oeuvre. These themes are transformed in connection with a type of a hero who appears in a contemporary environment, and also through the structural features of the plot. This may be based on a direct intertextual connection between specific works (see *The Big Green Tent and Devils*) or through an intermediary work of art (see *Sonechka and White Nights*), but it may also be limited to the creation of a more contemporary version of a theme which has already undergone literary transformation (see *Sincerely Yours, Shurik*). As a result of the transformations, Ulitskaya's works enter a polemic relationship with the problems expounded in Dostoevsky's novels on a thematic level, giving them a predominantly positive tone.

With regard to the three themes examined in the study, ideals and, closely connected to this, the relationship between fiction and reality in the life of the individual and in part the whole of society, are common attributes. This question is central to both Dostoevsky's and Ulitskaya's oeuvre. Exploring and systematically describing the relationship between the two requires further research, which extends to other works by Ulitskaya. In this paper, our sole objective was to reveal the fact that although she does not consider Dostoevsky to be one of the authors who have had a decisive influence on her art, Ulitskaya is still engaged in an active dialogue with Dostoevsky's legacy.

Translated from Hungarian by Kristóf Hegedűs

WORKS CITED

- Belyaeva, K. S. 2015. "Fenomen rossian-„shestidesyatnikov": popytka identifikacii". In: *Vestnik MGUKI, Teoriya i istoria kultury* 3, 65: 66–71.
- Berdyayev, N. 1996. "Stavrogin". In: *F. M. Dostoevsky: Besy. Besy: Antologiya russkoy kritiki*. Compiled and prepared by L. Saraskina. Moscow: Soglasie: 518–525.
- Bogdanova, O. and G. A. Vodopyanova 2001. "Evoluciya obraza mechtatelya v rannem tvorchestve F. M. Dostoevskogo". In: *Vestnik TGU* 5. Web. 16. June 2021.
- Budanova, N. F. 1990. "Primechania". In: *Dostoevsky F. M. Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomab*, Vol 7. Compiled by T. I. Ornatchkaya and G. M. Fridlender. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Chekhov, A. P. 1878. *Platonov (Bezotsovschina)*. V biblioteke Maksima Moshkova. Web. 20 June 2021.
- Goscilo, H. 2015. "Foreword: Indivisibility and The Threads That Bind". In *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance*. Eds. E. A. Skomp and B. M. Sutcliffe B. M. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press: ix–xxiv.
- Gosteva, A. *Lichinki, deti lichinok*. Intervyu s Ludmiloi Ulickoi. 21. Dec.2010. Web. 15 June 2021.
- Gromov, M. P. 1989. *Kniga o Chekhove*. Moscow: Sovremennik. Web. 21. June 2021.
- Dostoevsky, F. M. 1972–1989. *Polnoe sobraniye sochinenii v 30 tomab*, Vol. 11. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Dostoevsky, F. M. 1988. "Belye nochi". In: *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomab*, Vol. 2. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Dostoevsky, F. M. 1990a. "Besy". In: *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomab*, Vol. 7. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Dostoevsky, F. M. 1990b. "Podrostok". In: *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomab*, Vol. 8. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Dostoevsky, F. M. 1995. "Dnevnik pisatelya. 1877 iyul-avgust" In: *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomab*, Vol. 14. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Zaharov, V. N. 1985. *Sistema zhanrov Dostoevskogo*. Leningrad: Izd. Leningradskogo Universiteta.
- Ivanova, N. 2011. "Samodonos intelligentsii' i vremya kavychek". In: *Znanya* 7. Web. 7 July 2021.
- Kasatkina, T. 1996. *Kharakterologiya Dostoevskogo. Tipologiya emocionalno-cennostnyh orientacii*. Moscow: Nasledie.
- Kibalnik, S. A. 2015. *Chekhov i russkaya klassika: problemy interteksta*. Sankt-Peterburg: Metropolis.
- Kroó, K. 2010. "‘Árkádiá’-tól ‘Elysium’-ig a műfaji gondolkodás útján. A szentimentális idill művészi átváltozása Dosztojevskij ‘Fehér éjszakák’ című regényében". In: *Utópiák és ellenutópiák*. Eds. K. Kroó and T. Bényei. Budapest: L'Harmattan: 133–161.
- Latynina, A. 2011. "‘Vseh sovetskaya vlast’ ubila...’. Zelyony shatyor Ludmily Ulitskoi". In: *Novy Mir* 6. Web. 10. June 2021.
- Leiderman, N. L. and M. N. Lipovetsky 2001. *Sovremennaya russkaya literatura 1–3*. Book 3. Moscow: URSS.

- Lotman, Ju. 1992. “Proishozhdenie syuzheta v tipologicheskom osveschenii”. In: *Statyi po semiotike i topologii kultury. Izbrannyye statyi v tryob tomab.* Vol. 1. Tallin: Aleksandra: 224–242.
- Nazirov, R. 2005. *Russkaya klassicheskaya literature: sravnitelno-istoricheskii podhod.* Issledovania raznykh let: Sbornik statyei. Ufa: RIO BashGU: 159–168.
- Szabó, T. 2015. *Rodoslovnaya “Sonecbki”. Genetichesky fon povesti L. Ulitskoi.* Szombathely: SZTFT.
- Szabó, T. 2017. “‘Kto on, moi glavnyi geroi?’ Principy konstruirovaniya glavnogo geroya v romanakh L. Ulitskoi”. In: *LITERATURA* 59, 2: 122–137.
- Szabó, T. 2020. “Egy nemzedék szociológiai megközelítése L. Ulitskaja Imágó című regényében”. In: *Nemzedékek.* Eds. T. Szabó and S. Szili. Szombathely: SZTFT: 119–135.
- Savinkov, S. V. and A. A. Faustov 2010. *Aspekty russkoi literaturnoi kharakterologii.* Moscow: Intrada.
- Saraskina, L. I. 1990. *Besy: roman preduprezhdenie.* Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’.
- Saraskina, L. I. 1996. “‘Besy’, ili russkaya tragediya”. In: F. M. Dostoevsky: *Besy.* Besy: Antologiya russkoy kritiki. Moscow: Soglasie: 435–460.
- Saraskina, L. I. 2013. *Dostoevsky.* ZhZL, Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya.
- Skomp, E. A. and B. M. Sutcliffe 2015. *Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance.* Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Stepanyan, K. 2014. “Kto vinovat, chto vy pererodites’ v chorta”. In: *Literaturnaya Gazeta* 22. Web. 9. June 2021.
- Tischenko, D. E. 2014. “Roman L. Ulitskoi ‘Zelyonyi shatyor’: problematika, poetika”. In: *Filologicheskie nauki Amurskogo GPGU.* Web. 2 June 2021.
- Ulitskaya, L. 2007. *Sonecbka.* Moscow: Eksmo.
- Ulitskaya, L. 2010. *Iskrenne vash Shurik.* Moscow: Eksmo.
- Ulitskaya, L. 2015. *Zelyonyi Shatyor.* Moscow: AST.
- Tsvetaeva, M. 2010. *Povest’ o Sonecbke.* SPb.: Azbuka klassika.