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Love and marriage in Dostoevsky's *Short Stories*

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ABSTRACT

The relation between love and marriage is shown in various ways in different cultures and time periods. Starting from courtly love to Romanticism, Western culture has experienced a gap between love and marriage, the first: vital experience subject to permanent fluctuations, the second: fixed and lasting social institution. According to this approach, these two realities are conflicting. Also in Dostoevsky's minor works, *Short Stories*, love and marriage do not merge. The author chooses characters that are often either wretches both from a social and a spiritual point of view or dreamers; in any case, they are unable to cultivate a true love. Actually, their marriages are only matters of convenience and interest, and married life is not fruitful in any of these affairs. The author seems to show, by contrast, the absolute need we have to give a true meaning to our acts, because loveless marriage is just an appearance of good that hides unhappiness.

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1. Love and marriage in romantic culture

The relation between love and marriage has taken on many forms throughout history, and between different cultures. At present, we are inclined to consider love and marriage more or less in these terms: marriage is born from love and dies with it. Certainly today, many people think that love does not need marriage, considering it only a legal and social convention, which does not add anything real to the relationship. In our culture, a sort of emptying of marriage has been carried out; marriage has been flattened by the idea of love, which perhaps foreshadows its disappearance, for many people assert – exactly in the name of love – for love to be alive, marriage must die¹.

This is clearly an extreme position, because we usually tend to identify love with marriage, considering that the commitment to a shared life would certainly be unbearable without mutual love. However, often this belief does not take into account that love, by giving birth to marriage, does not remain exactly the same as before the fateful 'yes'. Rather, it expands and includes other aspects of life that respond to other forces beyond love itself. First of all, spouses can become parents, giving birth and

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raising their children, and so take responsibility for people who will have a life of their own, different from the life of those who procreated them. Moreover, marriage entails the acquisition of new relationships with their respective relatives, of greater or lesser social relevance, which can take on a certain importance. Marriage implies managing economic assets that sometimes carry conflicting interests and require compliance with the principles of justice. Lastly, it also implies a way of working that takes into account family needs, and not just individual needs. These various aspects of life are generally forgotten when the erotic dimension of the relationship between man and woman becomes absolute, as if it exhausted the complex dynamics of love when embodied in matrimonial life.

If our society tends to solve in this way the link between subjective elements (interpersonal love) and objective elements (genealogy, assets, social ties) in marriage, various balancing attempts throughout history have produced partially different family structures; from those unbalanced on the side of objective contents, to those inclined to magnify the opposite side; what remains and allows us to compare them is what Donati (2013) calls the social and family genome: that peculiar interweaving of relationships that is the *proprium* of the family.

This brief study is concerned with the relationship between love and marriage as it stands out in Dostoevsky's *Short Stories*, an author who has been able to investigate the perennial depths of the human heart and also mirror the sensitivity of his time². To introduce this author's originality, let us briefly consider an evolution of the love–marriage duo in the Western world, in particular through the Romantic Movement³.

As far as the concept of love is concerned, Romanticism has a forerunner in the courtly love of medieval troubadours, which per definition was extramarital and chaste, and remained by the legitimate marriage without undermining it: a love whose reason to be was exactly its inability to be fulfilled, and found its nourishment in this never-ending longing. So, while marriage was often a matter of convenience and alliances that responded to social logic, love gained an ever stronger primacy. (De Rougemont 1958, 42–56) In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the clash between these two dimensions reached its climax, and death was the only possible solution. These are literary cases indicating the long lasting difficulty that love and marriage have in meeting and supporting each other in Western culture.

In Romanticism, defined as 'the ultimate transformation of Western conscience, at least in our time' (Berlin 2001, 49), the difficult relation continues: love gained a very great power over the institution itself. Indeed Romanticism maintained the primacy of ego on all human laws, and even on nature itself; it exalted the power of the creative will to make forms and structures which would not otherwise exist in reality; and declared, contrary to the Enlightenment, that reality should not be studied, understood, and imparted, but molded and invented by individual genius (192–208). Thus, love became the maker of marriage, not only its revivifying soul, and forced marriage out of its place of unmovable institution, transforming it into a poor substitute, and little by little into a puppet at its commands. As a matter of fact, love–marriage, which for Western sensibility seems to be the solution to the problem and the best possible marriage, marks the decline of marriage, first wounded to death by divorce, and then discarded and cynically replaced by 'de facto' unions.

We wonder then whether the love–marriage duo may have a future, since it does not seem to have had a great past, apart from in the precious synthesis of Christian marriage (see, e.g. Maritain 1990). The answer depends on what we mean by love⁴; in today’s culture it is considered the feeling that makes life beautiful, the source of emotions that pushes away tedious living, the only thing that makes life worth living. For this reason, we are certain that everyone, at some point, has the right to experience love, whether outside or within marriage; but actually.

If romance triumphs over many obstacles, it will almost always break against one of them: duration. Marriage is an institution made to last, or it makes no sense. (...) Romance lives on obstacles, brief adventures and departures; marriage instead is made of daily habits and closeness. (De Rougemont 1958, 307)

Their incompatibility cannot be more obvious.

The juxtaposition of love and marriage still nourishes Western culture, which continues to put love outside of time and space and give it a spiritual claim, as we can see from the trivialization of carnal union, thought as outside time and space, in a kind of ecstasy that we would like devoid of procreative and if possible also sentimental consequences, therefore uncontaminated with prosaic questions and commitments that may hinder its freedom⁵.

Perhaps the ecological sensitivity grown in recent decades can express a new reading of nature and corporeality that will help overcome the spiritualism in which we are immersed, and will launch a daily dimension of love, placing it finally in space and time. This is suggested by the French philosopher Fabrice Hadjadj, when he emphasizes the importance of the relationship between marital love and the environment in which we live, pointing out that it was Romanticism that released love from life context, raising it above all human circumstances; which is true but only in an absolute sense, that is for an instant that does not last. Basically, he claims that Romanticism has taken one part for the whole, identifying love with the ecstasy of the embrace, which does not take into consideration the fact that love does not want to go out of time, but it wants to last over time; therefore it needs a house to live in, sharing projects, and it also feeds on making efforts together:

Romanticism presents the loving relationship between man and woman as cut off from the outside world. It’s a ‘you and I,’ ‘me and you,’ and it does not matter whether in town or countryside, in a palace or on a raft. (...) However, our love remains that of creatures depending on our environment. To believe in human love above any material condition would be falling into a serious spiritualistic heresy. Even living on love and fresh water needs at least fresh and drinkable water, that becomes increasingly rare and must be purified and sold by private companies. In much polluted air, it is impossible to say: ‘I love you’. (Hadjadj, 2016)

Now, let us find out in Dostoevsky’s *Short Stories* evidence of how the writer sees the relationship between love and marriage in XIX century Russia⁶.

2. Love and marriage in Dostoevsky’s *Short Stories*

Dostoevsky wrote his *Short Stories* throughout his literary production, from 1845 until 1877, when he started his last work, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Although the *Short Stories* are not even a tenth part of what he has written, they nonetheless show his

genius, his extraordinary ability to describe the human soul without stopping in front of the unspeakable, that we do not dare to confess even to ourselves⁷. They are about 20 stories, some of a few dozen pages and simple plot, others longer and more complex, which can be considered short novels. In his *Short Stories* the author describes the drama of the human life and soul, leading us to overcome appearances and to enter people's hearts, bringing to the surface their petty and vile sides, of which his pen highlights its grotesque and ridiculous nature. In this gloomy and miserable human overview, that does not spare marital relationships, there is occasionally a flash of light, a pure feeling, a noble behavior, as if to remind us that all is not lost.

I will analyze nine of his *Short Stories*, in which the theme of love and marriage is more evident. I will briefly recount their plots, in the chronological order in which they were written.

The first is *The Landlady* (1847): it is the story of a young woman who has a relationship with a man much older than herself, a highly ambiguous relationship, since the man had been her mother's lover and so, perhaps, he might be her father. In this relationship, where you perceive the woman's suffering and the man's dominance, there comes a student, who after having seen the girl in the street, falls desperately in love with her. He deludes himself that he can separate his beloved from that odd marriage, but the power of the elderly man is too great and he remains alone with his broken love dream.

The short story *A Christmas tree and a marriage* (1848) immediately elicits indignation in contemporary readers: it is the story of a young man who courts a little girl of noble family because of the rich dowry he would grab if he only waited five years and married her when she turned 16. Her parents think the young man is a great catch, and the story ends with the girl's sad look and eyes full of tears, dressed as a bride at 16, heading towards the church where her wedding with her greedy suitor will be celebrated. There is no trace of love: everything is interest, flattery, and behind this mask, hardness.

A Weak Heart (1848) is the dramatic story of a young employee who falls in love with a simple and good girl, who reciprocates his love; their story could be happy, but he cannot stand the thought that he has done nothing to deserve such happiness and falls into madness; love remains in the sad looking eyes of the girl, forced by life to a different marriage.

In *Another man's wife and a husband under the bed* (1848) the style changes, and the tone is ironic and light. The subject of the story is a woman who has two lovers besides her husband, but the main character is her betrayed and ridiculed husband. Telling this story, the author laughs at men who consider marriage as possession of a woman and a source of social recognition.

In *White Nights* (1848) the main character is a figure that often recurs in Dostoevsky's *Short Stories*: the dreamer, a man who lives in a world without real contacts, but who, thanks to a sudden love, starts conceiving the possibility of a true existence. In the end his love will be disappointed, but unlike all other stories, *White Nights* characters really experience love: a happy love that finds its fulfillment in marriage, that of the female character, and an unhappy love that nevertheless gives life, that of the male character. Actually she does not marry the dreamer, but another man whom she had previously fallen in love with.

A Little Hero (1854) is a delicate story on the sentimental initiation of an 11-year-old boy who falls in love with a young, unhappily married lady and helps her keep the secret of her love for another man.

The Uncle's Dream (1859) is a grotesque story in which the author describes with great skill the petty feelings of a greedy and careerist society; the main character is a woman who conceives a disgraceful plan to marry her daughter to an elderly and rich prince; but although she can convince the girl with false reasons, her plan eventually fails. After that, the girl marries well, to a general that the author does not care to describe, as to suggest the lack of a really personal relationship between the two spouses.

A Nasty Story (1862) is a grotesque story taking place at a wedding celebration of a mere employee who is ruined by the arrogance of his boss, but also by petty feelings of the bride and groom themselves and of their relatives.

A Gentle creature (1876) is a fantastic story, as stated by the author's subtitle, in the form of an interior monologue. This is the story of a marriage where there is a great age difference between the spouses. The husband behaves extremely harshly; he is not physically violent, but arrogant and taciturn. He is one of Dostoevsky's 'dreamers', and shows his inability to be in touch with reality by closing all communication channels with his wife, and imagining their relationship in a totally unrealistic way, leading her to despair and suicide. Only in that moment he opens his eyes, at least partly, and realizes his arrogance and madness, and that in his idealism he has lost his life's true love.

3. Love and marriage can still go together?

From what we have seen, the relation between love and marriage in Dostoevsky's *Short Stories* is clearly surprising, since most of the times, the problem is not that love and marriage take different paths, but that love seems unfulfilled even outside marriage: it is a great absentee. This spiritual climate not only goes against the mentality of readers in the twenty-first century (which was briefly discussed at the beginning of this paper), but also against the common sentiment of the nineteenth century – the century of Romanticism – and of the triumph of passionate love over the institution of matrimony. Actually, even in Dostoevsky (Dostoevskij 1994, 9–17), there is a 'romantic period' that ends with the story *White Nights*, and shows a typical character, the dreamer whose passion is not erotic but heroic, lived in wishful thinking, and fueled by dream as by a drug that allows you to estrange reality (Dostoevskij 1981, 64–66).

Therefore, in Dostoevsky's *Short Stories* marriage is rarely enlivened by love. By making this narrative choice, the author seems to want to show that if what prevails is not sincerity in intention and feeling, but any type of interest, the worst consequence is lack of freedom; because whether a person has chosen a situation or he has endured it, his life is subjected to empty connections that conflict with his dignity. As for extra-marital affairs, they are ruthlessly shown in their superficiality and flimsiness, and ridiculed. By these narrative choices, Dostoevsky shows himself already as the investigator of human heart and above all of its freedom, that he will fully develop in his novels.

In the *Short Stories* the relationship between man and woman is much exaggerated: the man is often arrogant (as the groom in *A Gentle Creature*), or careerist and interested (as the groom in *A Christmas tree and a marriage*, and the one in *A Nasty Story*), or stupid (like male characters in *The Uncle's Dream* and in *Another man's wife and a husband under the bed*). As we said, the only good, but weak, men are the 'dreamers': the student in *The Landlady*, the boyfriend in *A Weak heart* and the dreamer in *White nights*. Women are almost always miserable, because whether they belong to the aristocracy or to low social class, they are completely at the mercy of man, and often make use of cunning and seduction to rise or to survive, as in *The Uncle's dream*. In some cases their beauty keeps the man tied, as in *The Landlady*, but it is a limited power; this game succeeds better with the bride in *Another man's wife and a husband under the bed*, who however is a frivolous and false character. The bride in *A Nasty story* puts together spiritual, social and economic misery. Seldom do women have traits of elegance, as M.me M. in *A Little Hero*, nor traits of nobility of soul, like Natasha in *White nights*; also Zina, in *The Uncle's dream*, tries to follow her heart but she does not have the strength to go against her mother's pressures. Particularly sad for their helplessness in front of social pressures are female characters in *A Christmas tree and a marriage*, the young girl who marries a man who does not love her, the tragic figure in *A Gentle creature*, and the abandoned girlfriend in *A Weak heart*.

Together with absence of love we find absence of freedom, on which marriage should be founded. This is not only due to lack of authenticity in relationships, but also because of dominance of man over woman: he dominates her both for his advanced age, as in *The Landlady*, *A Gentle creature* and *A Christmas tree and a marriage*, and for his intellectual abilities and social position, as in the first two above-mentioned stories, and also in *A Little Hero*. In *A Nasty Story*, the bride's father is a despotic and wicked man, who dominates his whole family. Only in two stories women prevail, *The Uncle's Dream* and *Another man's wife and a husband under the bed*, but as we already noted they are women the author does not really consider a model of moral virtues.

Love appears in few characters in the *Short Stories*, and in no case finds its fulfillment in marriage. *White Nights* is an emblematic case, it is the only story where the relationship between man and woman is human and even poetic, because both characters, although weaklings, have sensitive and sincere feelings. There is not selfish interest but a genuine relationship; even so they will not marry in the end, but she will marry another man, who is also sincere in his intentions and certainly more capable than the dreamer to secure her future.

One striking aspect in reviewing these wedding stories is that in no case couples have children; as if absence of love could only result in absence of fertility. However, as we have seen above, we can also infer that in these stories the author was focused on showing the motions of the human heart, in love, and in marital relations.

In conclusion, Dostoevsky in his *Short Stories* portrays the relationship between man and woman and its limit, which is scarcity or even absence of love. For this reason it always has a certain inhumanity and is destined for failure, which consists in unhappiness. The author delves into the misery of soul of his characters, which is partly due to material poverty, but mainly featured by greed and pride. He thus

denounces the rhetoric of marriage and the appearance of happiness, highlighting that the human heart cannot be happy with love surrogates.

Notes

1. On the origins and development of the conflict between love and marriage cf. De Rougemont, (1958, 306–309). With various topics maintain the end of marriage Brake, (2012). D'Agostino thinks differently (2016). Cf. also Malo, (2017).
2. In this article I have left out his major works, his novels, where further and more mature developments take place.
3. On changes in the family over the last few centuries, I recommend among many studies: Campanini, (2008); Vazquez de Prada Tiffe, (2008); Donati, (2012). Regarding how women are seen, I find very useful the essay by Milano, (1992).
4. This matter has arisen an infinite number of reflections, beginning with Plato's *Symposium* (1991, 481–534).
5. On the fear of relationship, I refer to the acute analysis by Bauman, (2006).
6. I used the following edition of the *Short Stories*: Dostoevskij (1997).
7. Cf. Postface by Thomas Mann to, ed. cit.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Carla Rossi Espagnet holds a degree in Literature and Philosophy from the University of Bologna with a dissertation on Dante as well as a Master degree in Theology from John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, Rome, with a dissertation on the ordinary Magisterium in moral subjects. Consequently, she taught at the same Institute for a few years, being responsible for the course 'Marriage and the Family in the documents of the Magisterium', theme on which she edited the book of R. Garcia de Haro, *Marriage and the Family in the documents of the Magisterium* (Milano 1992) as well as its English translation. She has also published a number of articles on the topic in some specialized magazines. Since 2003, she has been engaged in the course 'Love, Family, Education' at the Higher Institute of Religious Studies 'all'Apollinare' of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. In 2007, Ares Edition published her paper 'Famiglia e libertà', (Family and Freedom). Since 2012, she has been teaching Theology on the Sacrament of Matrimony at the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.

More recently, she has extended her research to the area of Mariology, from which she has examined the anthropological approach concerning the female reality in God's plan. She has contributed to some collective works writing a number of articles on the dignity and human rights of the women. In addition to her anthropological and theological scientific research concerning the woman and the family, she is currently teaching Mariology both at the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross and at the Higher Institute of Religious Studies 'all'Apollinare'.

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