

The Covert Design of *The Brothers Karamazov*: Alesha's Pathology and Dialectic

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ABSTRACT

Alesha Karamazov is “*the main albeit future hero*” of Dostoevsky’s last novel (1879-80). A future revolutionary, Alesha is at twenty an inexperienced boy who lives in a monastery, obscurely “strange from the cradle on.” His author endows him with hysteria – then a serious psychopathology with convulsions, clinically seen as “analogous to epilepsy,” the *morbus sacer* from which Dostoevsky himself suffered. Hysteria was also recognized as an epidemic problem. It is elaborately deployed in this novel as a symbol of Russia’s social ills, and the underlying cause of far-reaching personality changes in Alesha (for better or worse), preparing him for a heroic destiny. Hysteria was soon altered and later eliminated as a clinical syndrome. This article enables us to read the novel for the first time in the light of documented medical history.