Surprised by Shame
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Ever the explorer of the heart's deep core, Dostoevsky has created work that has been mined by psychologists, philosophers, social scientists, theologians, and literary critics for over a century and a half. In choosing his liars as subjects, I have plunged most deeply into the fields of narrative and shame studies. Following Dostoevsky, who identifies shame at one's identity as a fundamental source of lying, and using the narrative insights of Slavists and narratologists alike, I came to realize that Dostoevsky uses the dynamics of shame as a narrative strategy, collapsing the intersubjective distance between characters and readers by having us witness scenes of shame. This is the starting point of my study. For psychologists and other shame researchers, I provide a discussion of varieties of shame and shamelessness that can be seen as a series of Dostoevskian case studies. For literary critics and other students of narrative, I explain how Dostoevsky takes shame from the realm of character analysis and plot motive and embeds it into the narrative dynamic of three great novels—*The Idiot*, *Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. For Dostoevsky scholars and the general reader, I group characters who are not customarily studied together, thereby recontextualizing Dostoevskian theatics in a way that yields new insights about the author's narrative goals. For all readers, I show how Dostoevsky uses lying (*vran'yo*) as an indicator of subconscious processes that motivate characters, thereby illuminating his sense of what drives much social discourse not only in nineteenth-century Russia, but also in the world at large.

The main title of this book, *Surprised by Shame*, explains in shorthand Dostoevsky's enterprise. Dostoevsky transforms universal shame dynamics—which hinge on unexpectedness, contagiousness, and paradoxicality—into...
narrative dynamics. By positioning readers as witnesses to exposed shame, Dostoevsky makes us experience our post-lapsarian heritage, thereby dramatizing his social, political, and metaphysical message of human interconnection. By creating and exposing his liars, whose narcissistic stories manifest their shame, Dostoevsky reveals fiction's function not only to expose but possibly also to save readers as he affords us ethical awareness and thus the impetus to change.

So why was Dostoevsky interested in shame? Shame lies on the boundary between self and other and is thus intimately linked to the question of identity. Its boundary status also explains shame's great importance for forming and policing personal and social identity and thus its importance for psychological and social studies. But to see shame is to feel shame, and so early psychologists avoided its study. The last decades of the twentieth century, however, have witnessed an interest in all varieties of affect. Shame is back.

Shame researchers come from many fields. Four shame study pioneers illustrate this variety: Gerhart Piers, an anthropologist; Milton Singer, a psychoanalyst; Helen Merrill Lynd, a sociologist; and Helen Block Lewis, a psychoanalyst. Lewis's clinical experience led her to study shame. Troubled by some of her patients' recidivism, Lewis determined that while they had worked through guilt issues in their analysis, shame issues remained unresolved. Her account of shame's role as a motive force, along with her insights into the shamefulness of shame itself, inspired many psychoanalysts and psychologists to investigate shame issues further. She and other shame theorists have helped psychoanalysis move away from drive theory by complicating and broadening the picture, allowing for a greater range of motives than the classic sex and death drives.¹ They are not alone in this work; theorists who do not directly discuss shame issues have also introduced a broader range of emotions into analysis. Heinz Kohut is an example. Although Kohut does not use the word "shame" often, he clearly views it as an essential element of narcissistic personality disorders. Andrew Morrison, whose work I cite, has an essentially Kohutian approach and views shame as the central affect in narcissistic rage. Finally, most shame researchers have developed some variant of Kohut's call for empathic healing of narcissistic injury as part of the return from shame.

Another landmark figure for shame studies is Silvan Tomkins, the founder of contemporary affect theory. Tomkins identifies nine innate biological affects as the moving forces of human behavior: the positive affects—interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy; the negative affects—fear-terror, distress-anguish, anger-rage, shame-humiliation, dissmell and disgust; and the neutral affect of surprise-startle. (The hyphenation indicates a range of intensity from mild to extreme.) Tomkins explains complex psychodynamics
as the result of conflicts caused when shame, one of the negative affects, binds with other affects and drives.²

Shame studies have much to offer literary studies. Narratologists will find Tomkins’s script theory particularly interesting. Tomkins and some of the psychotherapists influenced by him, such as Gershen Kaufman and Donald Nathanson, examine the way that individuals manage painful affect by constructing scripts out of scenes and images stored by their memory. As Adamson and Clark point out in the introduction to their edited volume, shame theory’s examination of the affective sources and consequences of social injustice can illuminate current discussions of race, class, and gender. They also show how Lacanian concepts such as désir or his discussion of the scopic drive and the complex interplay of the eye and the gaze can be understood better when discussed in terms of affect.³

Philosophers have also contributed importantly to shame studies. My favorite is David Velleman, who sees shame as anxiety about exclusion from the social realm where individuals act as self-presenting agents. He introduces the ideas of free will and privacy into his discussion of shame, arguing that an agent’s capacity to resist desires (i.e., to exercise his free will) enables him to choose which desires his behavior will express. Thus, when an agent shows something private, he fails to manage his self-image, which becomes an occasion for shame. This differs from standard analyses of shame, which focus on negative self-assessment or the thought of being an object of an observer’s regard, or both.⁴ Sartre most clearly states the idea that shame involves a reflected assessment of the self.⁵ The necessary corrective for his negative view of intersubjective awareness, however, can be found in the work of philosophers such as Vladimir Solovev, who sees the positive functions of shame as protection of privacy and indication of moral awareness,⁶ and Emmanuel Levinas, whose focus on the ethics of the face offers valuable insights for shame studies.⁷

Dostoevsky’s work on shame has much to offer researchers in many fields. Part of his appeal may derive from the way that nineteenth-century Russian experience models trends in the twentieth century generally. A patriarchy, Russia marginalized, disempowered, or ostracized large segments of its population, men and women alike. The humiliated rage experienced by a wide range of Russians often turned inward, as seen in the soaring suicide rate, but when it turned outward, as seen in political terrorism, it rocked the entire country. From his earliest to his most mature work, Dostoevsky provides countless case studies of shame—shame turned inward, as in the case of the underground man, or shame directed outward, as in the case of Peter Verkhovensky. He portrays the shame of poverty, of social class, of terminal illness, of deformity, of mediocrity; the shame of fallen women, superfluous
men, political intriguers, liars, criminals, gamblers, eccentrics, and misfits; and the hidden shame of respectable people. Dostoevsky also reveals the personal and social dynamics behind shame’s many faces: shame at self and shame as a failure of self-presentation. In short, Dostoevsky documents shame’s part in the universal search for personal, social, national, and metaphysical identity.

This book examines a class of Dostoevskian characters, his liars, who are at the center of Dostoevsky’s shame dynamics. As his liars lie and are exposed as liars, Dostoevsky surprises them and readers with shame, engages readers with paradox, and delights us with metaliterary play. The stories his liars tell to conceal the shame of their actual identity reveal their desire to be other. Dostoevsky portrays their identity crises in painful, mimetic detail. He places these identity crises in thematic and social contexts that reveal their political and metaphysical implications. Finally, he celebrates the similarities between lying and fiction with metaliterary play that affords aesthetic pleasure to his readers. And he does all this by constantly exposing shame’s paradox—its ability to both isolate and relate. For shame makes us self-conscious of how we differ from others at the same time that it makes us feel our common postlapsarian heritage. Dostoevsky’s power as a writer derives, in part, from his playing on the boundary between self and other—the edge of shame’s paradox. Dostoevsky willingly embraces and portrays paradox, exposes readers to shame, and risks losing us to save us.

The structure of this book requires some explanation. It begins and ends with Fedor Karamazov; it also juxtaposes Fedor Karamazov with each of Dostoevsky’s major liars. Instead of moving from novel to novel chronologically, my chapters move from shamed liars (General Ivolgin and Stepan Verkhovensky) to shameless liars (Lukian Lebedev and Captain Lebiadkin). Before each chapter devoted to these characters is a minichapter that juxtaposes one of Fedor Karamazov’s outrageous stories or statements with one of theirs. I have woven these discussions of Fedor Karamazov throughout my book because he is a shameless liar who defends against his shame with an aggressive shamelessness that marks him as Dostoevsky’s greatest violator of social norms and decorum. He is linked to recurrent Dostoevskian thematics. And he is the site of his creator’s greatest metaliterary play. It is no accident that he is Fedor Dostoevsky’s namesake. As I show, Dostoevsky inscribes his awareness of the difference between lying and fiction in all of his liars’ shocking stories and statements, thereby relieving some reader discomfort at their scandalousness by providing comic relief. By juxtaposing each liar with Fedor Karamazov, I
reveal his roots in earlier liars, show the continuity of certain Dostoevskian thematics, and demonstrate how Dostoevsky inscribes serious messages in his liars' buffoonish performances.

Chapter 1 locates Fedor Karamazov at the center of Dostoevsky's exposition of shame. Chapter 2 examines Dostoevsky's discussion of lying as a response to shame at one's identity and desire to be other but also as the rhetoric of shame, a rhetoric that reveals as much as it conceals. Starting with chapter 3, I then offer four pairs of chapters that consist of one minichapter, juxtaposing Fedor Karamazov with General Ivolgin, Stepan Verkhovensky, Lukian Lebedev, and Captain Lebiadkin, followed by a larger chapter devoted to each of these characters. In the minichapters, I respectively examine how General Ivolgin and Fedor Karamazov present themselves as sons rather than fathers; how Stepan Verkhovensky and Fedor Karamazov use confession as a rhetorical strategy of self-presentation; how Lebedev and Fedor represent themselves as divided selves; and how Lebiadkin and Fedor share a delight in wordplay, which contributes to their deaths. These juxtapositions culminate in chapter 11 with Ivan Karamazov's devil and the Karamazov patriarch. Here Dostoevsky returns to the rhetoric of confession—Ivan's devil tells the story of a confession that recapitulates one of Fedor Karamazov's stories—with a difference that identifies Ivan's devil with Ivan's father as liars and Ivan as a writer. Throughout the book I show how Dostoevsky uses his mimetic, thematic, and metaliterary savvy to show readers how to escape shame's legacy.

Readers can follow this exposition of how Dostoevsky uses shame as a narrative strategy by reading cover to cover. I also recommend a beginning-to-end reading for those who want to look at Dostoevsky's many liars as case studies in shame. On the other hand, readers can glimpse Fedor Karamazov's developmental history by reading the minichapters. Or readers can choose those chapters pertaining to the novel of their interest—The Idiot, Demons, or The Brothers Karamazov. To all I recommend the first two chapters, which first show how Dostoevsky turns shame into a narrative strategy and then explain why.