Surprised by Shame
Martinsen, Deborah A.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Martinsen, Deborah A.
Surprised by Shame: Dostoevsky's Liars and Narrative Explorers.
The Ohio State University Press, 2003.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/33144.
chapter five

Confessional Moments

My friend, I’ve been lying [lgal] all my life. Even when I spoke the truth [pravda], I never spoke for truth’s sake [dlia istiny], but only for my own, I knew that before, but only now do I see. . . . Oh where are those friends whom I have insulted with my friendship all my life? And everyone, everyone! Savez-vous, I, perhaps, am lying [lgal] even now; certainly I am lying [lgal] even now. The main thing is that I believe myself when I lie [lgal]. The hardest thing in life is to live and not lie [ne lgat’] . . . and . . . and not to believe one’s own lies [lzh’], yes, yes, that’s precisely it! (10:497;652)

— STEPAN TROFIMOVICH VERKHOVENSKY, Demons

“Blessed man! Let me kiss your hand,” Fedor Pavlovich rushed up and quickly smacked the elder on his thin hand. “Just so, just so, it feels pleasurable to be offended. You put it so well, I’ve never heard it before. Just so, just so, I’ve been getting offended all my life to the point of pleasure; I’ve been getting offended for the aesthetics, because it’s not only pleasurable, it’s sometimes even beautiful to be offended:—that’s what you’ve forgotten, great elder: it’s beautiful! I’m going to jot that down! And I’ve been lying [lgal], lying [lgal], decidedly my whole life, every day and every hour. In truth, I’m a lie [lozh’] and a father of lies [otets lzh’]!” (14:41;44)

— FEDOR PAVLOVICH KARAMAZOV, The Brothers Karamazov

Dostoevsky’s experiments in confession not only manifest his lifelong polemic with Rousseau, they also express his lifelong interest in narrative form. Both lying and confession are rhetorics of identity; they are vehicles for self-presentation. For those who lie and those who confess, audience response matters greatly. If their audiences listen generously, liars experience a bolstering of self-esteem and confessees experience a healing of shame. On the other hand, if their audiences listen skeptically, liars and confessees experience heightened shame—provided, however, that they are not shameless. This chapter, like chapter 3, pairs the shameless Fedor Karamazov with a shamed character, here Stepan Verkhovensky.

The chapter epigraphs represent two histrionic confessions that admit to the same sin, occur during a moment of insight, use biblical language, and
Confessional Moments

hyperbolize. But one is an Augustinian, repentant confession; the other is unrepentant. The liars who pronounce them differ radically. Stepan Verkhovensky defends aesthetics and Raphael’s Sistine Madonna. Fedor Karamazov revels in scandal and desecrates icons. Stepan Verkhovensky observes social etiquette and defends it ethically. Fedor Karamazov violates social etiquette and exposes it as hypocrisy. This incongruous pair of hyperbolic liars also receives very different coverage from Dostoevsky’s narrators. The narrator of Demons casts doubt on Stepan Verkhovensky’s sincerity by presenting his confession as yet one more example of his self-deceiving friend’s self-devised humiliations. By contrast, the narrator of Brothers Karamazov highlights Fedor Karamazov’s continuous posturing but also suggests that sincerity coexists with falsity in Fedor’s soul. The interchange in the monastery that leads to Fedor Karamazov’s histrionic confession, however, reveals a surprising similarity between the two: both Karamazov and Verkhovensky senior derive pleasure from self-fabricated humiliations. In what follows I discuss this deep and unexpected similarity, the generic differences between the two confessions, and the narrative dynamics of shame in both novels.

Shameful Pleasures

After identifying shame as the source of Fedor’s shameless buffoonery, Zosima explicates the shameful pleasure Fedor receives from exaggerating offenses:

A man who lies to himself [gushii sebe samomu] is often the first to take offense. It sometimes feels very good to take offense, doesn’t it? And surely he knows that no one has offended him, and that he himself has invented the offense and told lies [nalgal] just for the beauty of it, that he has exaggerated to create a picture, that he has grabbed onto a word and made a mountain out of a molehill—he knows all of that, and still he is the first to take offense, takes offense to the point of pleasure, to the feeling of great satisfaction, and thus he gets to the point of true hostility. . . . Do get up from your knees and sit down, I beg you, these posturings are also false. . . . (14:41:44)

The rhetoric of this passage mimics its content. Zosima links lying and taking offense, a point he elaborates with a question—“It sometimes feels very good to take offense, doesn’t it?” The subsequent sentence describes the process of self-laceration, repeating forms of the word “offense” four times just as the person who is exaggerating the offense repeats to himself with heightening emotion the self-fabricated offense, until Zosima as narrator describes the climactic emotion felt by his hypothetical person—hostility.
The passage mimics the hyperbolized, repetitious build-up of offense that then seeks release. In concluding that Fedor Pavlovich’s exhibitionist gestures “are also false,” Zosima compares them to the buffoon’s hyperbolically self-amplified shame, and thus describes how Fedor enacts his abasement.

While elders as a group are considered particularly canny, one is nonetheless struck by the felt experience in Zosima’s rhetoric. Hundreds of pages later, in Zosima’s autobiographical teachings, readers find the source of Zosima’s wisdom. As a young officer, Zosima is offended that the young woman with whom he had been flirting marries while he is away. When he learns that she had been engaged, he is even more offended: “‘[H]ow was it possible that almost everyone knew, and I alone knew nothing?’” His shame finds release in anger. He recalls, “‘I remember with astonishment that this revenge and wrath were extremely burdensome and loathsome for me, because, having an easy character, I could not stay angry with anyone for long, and therefore had to incite myself artificially, as it were, and in the end became ugly [bezobrazen] and absurd’” (14:269;297). With the analytical skill of a behavioral therapist, Zosima details the process of artificially inciting himself to hatred. He observes that his vanity blinded him to everything but his own merits. His rage, however, originates in shame. He may have been oblivious to her fiancé, but others were not: “‘And that was what offended me most of all.’” Shame leads to anger and desire for revenge, but he cannot sustain either without fabricating a supporting fiction—that she had been laughing at him. “‘Later, of course, I realized and remembered that she had not been laughing in the least, but, on the contrary, had jokingly broken off such conversations with a jest and turned to other topics instead—but at the time I could not realize that and began to burn with vengeance.’” Here Zosima describes the reactive process of turning passive to active; his shame leads him to strike out and harm someone. By pretending his love was scorned, he fans the flames of his hate and precipitates his fateful duel.

Like Zosima, Stepan Verkhovensky goads himself artificially, exaggerating imagined offenses. Like Fedor Karamazov, Stepan has made a habit of this. As the narrator of Demons observes, Stepan Verkhovensky’s first deathbed confession (he makes three) follows a pattern that he has repeated for twenty years with Varvara Stavrogina (10:496;650): after encounters with Varvara, Stepan would rage (a typical response to shame) and slander her, then he would feel ashamed and confess—either orally to the narrator or in writing to Varvara. For example, he would send for the narrator or run to him solely to announce “that Varvara Petrovna was ‘an angel of delicacy,’ while he was just the opposite” (10:13;14). Likewise, Stepan also “described more than once to her in the most eloquent letters, and confessed, over his full signature, that no more than a day ago, for instance, he had been telling some outsider that she
kept him out of vanity, that she envied his learning and talents, that she hated him and was only afraid to show her hatred openly for fear he would leave her and thereby damage her literary reputation; that he despised himself on account of that and had resolved to die a violent death, and was only waiting for a last word from her that would decide it all, and so on, and so on, in the same vein” (10: 13;14). After the narrator reads one of these letters once, he begs his friend not to send it, but Stepan histrionically replies, “Impossible . . . honor . . . duty . . . I shall die if I do not confess everything to her, everything” (10:13;14–15). Unlike Zosima, who breaks out of this cycle, and unlike Fedor Karamazov, who responds aggressively, Stepan Verkhovensky internalizes the shame and wallows in it. He creates a scenario of self-vilification with Varvara cast as his savior, another shame script.

The process that Zosima describes and that all three enact involves social transgression. By insulting his rival, Zosima transgresses social decorum; he shames his rival in public, albeit in a ritual and therefore socially acceptable manner. By following the rules of ritual insult, Zosima gives his rival the opportunity to challenge him to a duel, the social ritual for restoring honor. He thus ensures the comfort of his audience and of Dostoevsky’s readers, who are also positioned as witnesses.

Stepan Verkhovensky slanders Varvara Stavrogeina behind her back, causing discomfort to himself, to Demons’ narrator, Mr. G-v, and to Dostoevsky’s readers. By acting dishonorably, Stepan intensifies his shame and turns to writing letters of self-condemnation for release. Given Varvara’s unforgiving nature, that release never comes and the cycle repeats itself for years. Shamed by Stepan Verkhovensky’s self-abasement, the narrator begs his friend not to send his effusively self-condemnatory letter to Varvara. Stepan persists. The narrator expresses his discomfort at witnessing such shame by exposing his friend’s weakness.

Like Stepan Verkhovensky, Fedor Karamazov violates social decorum. Unlike Stepan Trofimovich, who does so in a cowardly fashion and who consequently suffers intense shame, Fedor Pavlovich shamelessly violates social decorum and religious space; even his ritual gestures are sacrilegious. He responds hyperbolically to Zosima’s gentle rebuke by confessing his pleasure in self-abasement and kissing the elder’s hand after the ritual moment for hand-kissing has passed. Thus, in contrast to Zosima, who respected decorum even when ritually violating it, Fedor Pavlovich shames his character audience by forcing them to witness sacrilege. The unexpectedness of Fedor Pavlovich’s response heightens the shame. Shame is highly contagious. The more witnesses, the more shame. As witnesses to scandal, individuals unexpectedly grapple with both the shame of witnessing and the shame of being in company where others may witness their response. Our armchair privacy
protects us as readers from the gaze of others but not from the shame of witnessing.

Stepan Verkhovensky and Fedor Karamazov both derive a pleasure from self-abasement that can be partially explained by shame dynamics. Their grandiosity and exhibitionism mask their narcissism and sense of injury. Stepan Verkhovensky has been living for twenty years as Varvara Stavrogina’s dependent. Fedor Pavlovich was “a former sponger and therefore touchy and easily offended” (14:18;19). Both experience ongoing social humiliation—Stepan Trofimovich at Varvara’s hands, Fedor Pavlovich at his cousin-in-law Miusov’s hands. Their social aggression can thus be seen as a defense. In my reading, their pleasure in humiliation derives from multiple sources: exhibitionism; confirmation of negative self-image; aggressive sharing of shame; and engagement in a creative process. The process that Zosima describes as the fabrication of an offense and then its exaggeration turns the passive victim of humiliation into an active humiliator. He may be humiliated, but he is not passive. He finds pleasure in controlling the experience.

In controlling the shame experience, the shamed person eliminates shame’s surprise, and thus much of its pain. Shame’s pain has three essential sources: disruption, disorientation, and self-consciousness. The person who fabricates or exaggerates an offense guarantees that shame does not come upon him unawares; nor does shame disorient him, making him question the world and his place in it; finally, shame does not engender self-consciousness vis-à-vis actual others. In fabricating offense and offender alike, the shamed person defines himself, his world, and his place in it. In this scenario, the pleasure of creation offsets the pain of shame.

Pleasure may derive from another related source. In fabricating an offense against himself, the fabricator places himself at the center of attention. In his scenario, he becomes a worthy object of a significant other’s contempt. The pleasure derived from the self’s sense of expansion offsets the pain of the negative attention. Hyperbole, the rhetorical device used to achieve this self-amplification, may also contribute to the pleasure. The self experiences the pleasure of narcissistic grandiosity as well as the exhilaration of exaggeration.

Stepan Verkhovensky and Fedor Karamazov both exemplify hyperbolic humiliation. By fabricating or exaggerating offenses, they cut themselves off from others. Having deprived themselves of meaningful social interaction, they seek an alternative source of pleasure. Their engagement in self-amplified shame provides pleasure that derives from imagined interaction. In *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky demonstrates that self-amplified shame destroys the possibility of a true relationship. Zosima exposes the rhetorical strategy whereby many self-lacerating Dostoevsky characters control their shame by creating roles that define others. They thus act like
Dostoevsky’s underground man: by creating the world in their own image, they deprive themselves of the means of self-understanding. Shamed persons who fabricate offenses isolate themselves. As Zosima observes, fictional scenarios gain a life of their own; fabricated offenses lead to actual enmity; creating scenes of discord divides. Lies thereby replace life.

Shame and Hostility

Shame need not be self-created or self-amplified to spawn hostility, however, as the narrator of *The Brothers Karamazov* illustrates in the following show-and-tell passage. As Fedor Pavlovich prepares to leave the monastery, he remembers a moment of self-exposure, when he had admitted that his clownish behavior correlates with others’ expectations. Instead of responding to shame in a standard, acceptably way by flight or denial, Fedor Pavlovich chooses retaliatory aggression:

He wanted to revenge himself on them all for his own dirty tricks. He suddenly remembered then that some time once before he had been asked: “Why do you hate so-and-so so much?” And he had replied then in a fit of buffoonish shamelessness [*besystdistva*]: “Here’s why: he never did anything to me, it’s true, but I once played a most unconscionable [*besovestneishnu*] dirty trick on him, and the moment I did it, I immediately hated him for it.” Remembering it now, he sniggered softly and maliciously in a moment’s hesitation. His eyes gleamed, and his lips even trembled. “Since I’ve started, I may as well finish,” he decided suddenly. His innermost feeling at that moment might well be expressed in the following words: “There is no way to rehabilitate myself now, so I’ll go ahead and spit all over them to the point of shamelessness [*do besystdistva*]; I’ll tell them, ‘I won’t be ashamed, and that’s that!’” (14:80;86)

Dostoevsky’s narrator here explains how shame leads to hostility and shamelessness. Fedor Karamazov first remembers a moment of self-exposure and then decides to revenge himself on the witnesses. His hostility, in turn, reminds him of an earlier event of the same ilk: he had exposed himself by playing a dirty trick and then revenged himself upon his victim by openly hating him. The dynamic is clear: shame leads to hostility which leads to aggression. The memory of shame causes more shame, hostility, and aggression. Shame spirals: the greater the shame, the more aggressive the response. The level of aggression corresponds to the level of pain.

By exposing Fedor Karamazov’s thoughts, the narrator collapses the distance between his readers and Fedor Pavlovich. By depicting Fedor Karamazov’s
shameless behavior, he shocks us. By explaining that Fedor Pavlovich’s shamelessness originates in shame, he reinforces Zosima’s diagnosis and identifies the old buffoon as our post-lapsarian brother. Dostoevsky uses the dueling incident in Zosima’s biography later in the novel to remind readers that aggression is a common response to shame. By locating shame and desire for revenge in the preconversion Zosima, Dostoevsky not only demonstrates their universality but also models an alternative response. Although Zosima channels hatred for his social equal into a socially acceptable form by challenging him to a duel, he hits his social inferior, his servant Afanasy, in the face, a morally unacceptable action that shames him and changes his life. Once he confronts his own shame, Zosima sees the deep connections among all human beings. Dostoevsky structures his novel so that he reveals the source of Zosima’s wisdom four books after Zosima first counsels Fedor Karamazov to stop exacerbating his sense of shame. The story of Zosima’s duel illustrates the potentially fatal consequences of self-amplified shame: he was in danger of killing a man to relieve his injured pride. Fedor Karamazov aggressively shames others; Zosima shamed and physically harmed one man, shamed and almost killed another. Once the two behaviors are juxtaposed, which is more shocking?

Shame and Confession

Zosima’s conversion tale illustrates shame’s paradox. Initially Zosima experiences shame as a prison that exacerbates his narcissism and alienates him from those around him. But the shame he feels before his servant Afanasy proves a powerful instrument of change. Shame experienced as conscience, as a moral connection to others, has the power to liberate. Once Zosima acknowledges his shame, he can beg Afanasy’s forgiveness and resolve not to hurt his dueling opponent. After allowing his opponent to fire, he throws his pistol into the air and begs his forgiveness as well. Zosima thus uses confession to banish shame. As Michael Lewis observes, confession permits the shamed person to distance himself from the emotional experience of shame by providing him with the opportunity to join others in viewing himself. While laughter can also provide such distance, confession requires a confessor who possesses the ability to forgive and love. Zosima endows others with the power to forgive him and thus restore his sense of connection with others. He thereby renounces self-affirmation and violence and embraces humility and love.

In Demons, Stepan Verkhovensky uses confession as a means of reducing his shame. He becomes addicted to confession, however, because as long as he
confesses to Varvara Stavrogina, who refuses to forgive him, he can never heal. Yet, at novel’s end, Stepan Trofimovich breaks the cycle. After experiencing extreme shame at the fête, Stepan Trofimovich responds in typical fashion: he flees. But this time he flees his habitual milieu as well as the scene of shame. Thus liberated, he takes his first steps outside himself: he meets Liza Tushina and worries about her. Stepan Trofimovich then confesses on his deathbed to Sophia Ultina, a woman who can freely love and forgive him. Liberated from a cycle of confession without forgiveness, Stepan Trofimovich sees how he fits into the larger social and metaphysical picture. He does what Zosima does and what Kaufman has called “refocusing attention” back outside self, a critical step for escaping cycles of shame. He repents his past actions and asks for others’ forgiveness. As he lies dying, he engages in an Augustinian confession, which, in Belknap’s words, takes the form: “I did (or do, or am) this, and it is wrong.” By repenting his actions and reaching out to others, Stepan Verkhovensky escapes the prison-house of shame.

At the very moment that Stepan Trofimovich confronts and transcends his shame, however, Mr. G-v, the narrator, finds himself mired in shame. After the fête, Stepan Verkhovensky literally and figuratively locks the narrator out. Once he sets out on his final journey, he leaves his down-to-earth narrator-confidant behind. As I discuss in the next chapter, the narrator attempts to conceal his shame at being abandoned by adopting an ironic distance from Stepan Trofimovich and exposing his friend’s weaknesses. Dostoevsky, however, undercuts his narrator’s strategy by imitating it. He creates a similar distance between his readers and the narrator by revealing the realist narrator’s spiritual limitations as well as his physical abandonment. Dostoevsky thus exposes the narrator’s shame and explains the source of his narrative irony. Although the narrator distances himself from Stepan Verkhovensky and encourages his readers to do likewise, Stepan collapses that distance as he acknowledges and then transcends his shame. He moves beyond his narcissistic injury and sees himself as an integral part of a community bound by love. In exposing the narrator’s shame as well as his inability to comprehend Stepan Trofimovich’s metaphysical dimension, Dostoevsky splits the narrative and authorial audiences. Readers must choose whether to believe the narrator and view Stepan Trofimovich’s confession as insincere or to believe in his repentance and take a metaphysical leap. Dostoevsky thus offers readers a choice of vision: shame bound (remaining with the narrator) or shame free (joining Stepan Verkhovensky).

Shamelessness and Nonrepentance

In his last novel, Fedor Dostoevsky uses Fedor Karamazov as a focal point for shame issues and shame strategies. Zosima diagnoses shame as the
source of Fedor Pavlovich's shameless behavior and identifies the consequences of self-amplified shame as loss of love and thus loss of connection to others. By elucidating shame dynamics and Fedor Karamazov's behavior, Zosima forestalls condemnation and offers acceptance. In like manner, the narrator of *The Brothers Karamazov* works against any facile understanding of Fedor Karamazov. He creates a distance between Fedor Pavlovich and readers by reporting the old buffoon's shameless behavior, but he also collapses that distance by explaining its source.

In the monastery scene, Fedor Karamazov flaunts his shame, forcing his character witnesses and Dostoevsky's readers to face scandal. Old Fedor repeatedly violates social, moral, and religious conventions. But Fedor Dostoevsky also uses his namesake to shock readers' literary sensibilities. Fedor Karamazov violates every convention in the book—including the generic conventions regulating literary confessions. Fedor buffoonishly confesses to being “a lie and a father of lies, or rather . . . a son of lies.” As Belknap notes, Fedor Karamazov's is an “unrepentant confession” which “is inherently far more aggressive and defiant than a love lyric or any of the other self-expressing genres. The genre of confession presupposes that the person confessed to has some sort of authority over the one confessing. In literary confession, the reader assumes this authority, and these unrepentant confessions unmitigated by any 'but' withdraw this authority from the reader in a dramatically provocative way. The power of these passages comes from the breaking of moral and social taboos, but most powerfully from breaking these literary rules which govern our reading of more normal confessions.” By indulging in an unrepentant confession, which takes the form: “I did it, and it's wrong, but I don't give a damn,” Fedor Karamazov deprives his audience of its privileged, superior position as dispenser of acceptance and forgiveness. He provides a more difficult challenge—to accept him in all his shamelessness. Fedor Dostoevsky thus uses his namesake to surprise, disorient, and make readers painfully self-conscious. He challenges us to respond to shamelessness, something that defies all standard response.

What then to do with Fedor Karamazov's recalcitrant nonrepentance? It confounds all witnesses, except Zosima. Fedor Pavlovich's buffoonery does not surprise, disorient, or render Zosima self-conscious because he sees the shame behind the shamelessness. Zosima is the ideal confessor, a man capable of forgiving and loving. He responds to Fedor Pavlovich's shame, not to his shamelessness. He offers him acceptance as a fallen creature, but he also asks Fedor to take responsibility for himself, to give up lying, sensuality, usury. Dostoevsky thus uses Zosima hagiographically to model an ideal response—a response that places all persons in right relationship to one another. Zosima proposes a world without disgrace-shame.
Alesha models another response. Although he experiences shame in the monastery, Alesha never ceases to love his father. His nonjudgmental acceptance touches his father, awakening his dormant capacity to love. This is not to say that Dostoevsky creates an expectation that Fedor Karamazov will reform. Nonetheless, he demonstrates that Zosima’s understanding and Alesha’s love affect the old buffoon. After all, Fedor Karamazov initially prepares to leave the monastery, sensing that it would be improper (неprilichno) to remain. Although shame propels him to return with vengeance in his heart, he does not return to Zosima’s cell. Nor is Alesha present as he creates the scandal in the Father Superior’s rooms.

Finally, Dostoevsky provides another response to Fedor Karamazov’s shame: humor. Fedor Karamazov may be shameless, but he is also funny. The unrepentant confession discussed here, for instance, may violate literary rules and deprive us of a standard response, but it also makes us laugh. By evoking a familiar biblical passage, Dostoevsky plays parodically but writes seriously. He thus engages our cognitive faculties while flooding us with shame affect. He asks us to recall the passage in John’s gospel (8:44), in which Christ divides those who are with him and truth from those who choose the devil and falsity. Given the passage’s metaphysical seriousness, Fedor Pavlovich’s choice is most unexpected. It surprises and disorients witnesses. While those in Zosima’s cell are offended by his choice, Dostoevsky’s readers laugh. Who would consciously choose to side with the devil? We understand that he is clowning. Fedor Pavlovich’s addition, that he is a son of lies, is even funnier. Yet it also enlarges the literary context of his buffoonery, for it evokes not only the biblical passage but also the fathers and children thematics of the Russian literary tradition. Fedor Dostoevsky uses Fedor Pavlovich’s shameless avowals to provoke readers’ laughter, which provides us with the aesthetic distance necessary to alleviate, but not eradicate, the shame affect unleashed by his shameless buffoonery.

Fedor Dostoevsky scandalizes his readers by creating a character who creates scandals. We cannot regard Fedor Karamazov impassively. He surprises us with shame, disorienting and making us almost as self-conscious as his character audience. Dostoevsky attenuates the shame affect roused by Fedor Pavlovich by making us laugh. But in the end, he leaves Fedor Pavlovich a paradox: a man who unrepentantly revels in post-lapsarian vice but who craves salvation: “How is it with us generally? With us, once a thing falls, it lies there. With us, if a thing once falls, it can lie there forever. I won’t have it, sirs! I want to rise!” (14:82;88). Fedor Karamazov here affirms that he desires salvation, but Fedor Dostoevsky cannily shows how ambivalent that desire is. Dostoevsky also describes the scene itself. Fedor Pavlovich has just staged a humiliating scandal. He is a fallen man. Yet the old buffoon counters one inertial
pattern with another: defiantly refusing to be paralyzed by humiliation, he triumphant rises, glorying in his humiliation, and humiliates others. By staging Fedor Karamazov’s fall and rise in a monastery, Fedor Dostoevsky emphasizes the contrast between secular humiliation and monastic humility. Fedor Karamazov may crave salvation, but he embraces his fallen state.