



Fyodor Dostoevsky and his *falling sickness*: A critical analysis of seizure semiology

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ABSTRACT

Fyodor Dostoevsky is a great Russian writer who had epilepsy. As a consequence, there are many references to seizure-related phenomena in his work. His epilepsy syndrome has been a focus of debate. The goal of this article is to delineate his epilepsy syndrome based on a semiological description of seizures, which could be considered one of the most reliable pieces of circumstantial evidence available. It was hypothesized that seizure-related descriptions in his books were based on his own personal experience. The semiology of seizures and related phenomena was compiled from Dostoevsky's own work, his letters to family and friends, and reminiscences of his wife and friend. Those descriptions were analyzed in detail to elicit localizing and lateralizing features of seizures. On the basis of this evidence, it was postulated that Dostoevsky had a partial epilepsy syndrome most probably arising from the dominant temporal lobe.

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1. Introduction

Fyodor Dostoevsky is a towering figure in 19th-century Russian literature. His work does not simply reflect the contemporary Russian society, but cuts across cultural and time barriers to portray the complex nature of the human mind at large. Hence, not surprisingly, his writings have influenced generations of writers into the 20th century and continue to draw the attention of literary critics. Interestingly, Dostoevsky and his literary work have been a focus of intense attention in the medical profession. His ability to penetrate into the dark deep corners of the human mind and expose the complex human psyche has come under the close scrutiny of psychiatrists and psychologists. However, the greatest interest has been generated by neurologists and epileptologists. It is well known that Dostoevsky had epilepsy. Most probably as a result of his personal experience, he created several characters with epilepsy in his stories. Dostoevsky has provided vivid descriptions of epileptic seizures, opening a window to his epilepsy. Several medical authors have attempted to postulate his epilepsy syndrome based on circumstantial evidence. This article reviews the history of medical literature on Dostoevsky's epilepsy and formulates a syndromic diagnosis based on a critical analysis of semiological descriptions.

2. Methods

To obtain a background understanding of Dostoevsky and his epilepsy, Dostoevsky's biography and medical literature on his epilepsy were studied. Semiological descriptions of seizures were acquired from Dostoevsky's own literary work, his letters to family and friends, and reminiscences of his wife and friends (see [Appendix A](#)). It was hypothesized that characters with epilepsy and semiological descriptions of seizures in his work were based on his own personal experiences of seizure phenomena. All semiological details were critically analyzed to extract localizing and lateralizing features. Dostoevsky's epilepsy syndrome was reconstructed on the basis of that evidence.

3. Results

3.1. Biography [1–3]

Dostoevsky was born in 1821 at the Hospital for the Poor in Moscow to a family of aristocratic heritage. His father, Dr. Mikhail Dostoevsky, was the director of the hospital and had previously served as a military surgeon. He was a strict disciplinarian who wanted his children to achieve noble status. On the contrary, Dostoevsky's mother was a gentle and religious lady who introduced him to the Bible. In 1837 his mother died of tuberculosis. The next year he entered the military academy of engineering. In 1839 his father, who had been suffering from alcoholism and depression, died.

In 1843, having graduated from the military academy, Dostoevsky joined the Engineering Corps. However, the very next year he left the ranks to pursue his long-cherished dream of becoming a professional

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writer. In 1845, he published his first original work *Poor Folk*, which was an immediate success. In 1847 Dostoevsky joined a revolutionary group known as the Petrashevsky Circle, which upheld the views of utopian socialism and was involved in anti-tsarist activities. He was arrested 2 years later and was condemned to death. While waiting on death row he received a pardon at the last moment and was sentenced to penal servitude in Siberia.

The period of exile in Siberia marks a watershed in his life. Dostoevsky shed his revolutionary views and transformed himself into a religious prophet. He probably had his first major epileptic seizure while being incarcerated.

Ten years later in 1859 he returned to St. Petersburg. While struggling with epileptic seizures and emphysema, as well as addiction to gambling, he produced several literary masterpieces. His 3-year-old son Alyosha died from status epilepticus in 1878, causing him immense grief. Dostoevsky published his last novel *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1879 and 1880. His health had been gradually deteriorating, and in January 1881 he died of a pulmonary hemorrhage.

3.2. Medical literature on Dostoevsky's epilepsy

Even though there is no debate over the fact that Dostoevsky had epilepsy, there has been ongoing contention about the type of epilepsy he had. The medical literature published to date reflects this controversy.

In 1963, Alajouanine expressed the view that Dostoevsky had temporal lobe epilepsy [4]. Henri Gastaut, in 1977, postulated that Dostoevsky had idiopathic generalized epilepsy [5]; however, several years later he revisited the subject and, having gone through the literature, concluded that it was likely to be temporal lobe epilepsy [6]. In one of the most comprehensive reviews published on the topic, Voskuil hypothesized that Dostoevsky had “partial complex epilepsy with secondarily generalized nocturnal seizures rather than primary generalized epilepsy” [7]. DeToledo added a new dimension to this debate by hinting that Dostoevsky may have had nonepileptic seizures [8]. This conclusion was based on Dostoevsky's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which the illegitimate son Smerdyakov, who has epilepsy, kills his tyrannical father and simulates a prolonged seizure to provide an alibi for him with a view to framing his eldest brother for the murder. This could be considered a rekindling of Sigmund Freud's age-old argument that Dostoevsky had “hystero-epilepsy” [9]. In a more recent article, Hughes formed the view that “Dostoevsky likely had idiopathic generalized epilepsy but probably with a minor focal component that quickly became secondarily generalized” [10]. In a well-referenced article, Baumann and colleagues went one step further in localization and concluded that “the famous writer might have suffered from mesial temporal lobe epilepsy” [11].

In the medical literature on Dostoevsky's epilepsy, probably three areas of controversy are apparent. The age at onset of his epilepsy is uncertain. Even more uncertain is the epilepsy syndrome. Finally there is debate as to what he meant by “I have many types of seizures” [2]. In a complex cold case-type analysis it is easy to cross the boundary from scientific facts to fictional fantasy. Semiological descriptions are probably the most reliable evidence available today to reconstruct his epilepsy syndrome, and these are used in this article.

3.3. Descriptions of seizure semiology in Dostoevsky's work

In Dostoevsky's work the references to seizures range from very subtle and covert citations to quite dramatic and vivid descriptions. Some accounts are direct descriptions of seizures, whereas others are indirect connotations influenced by seizure phenomena. One has to read his books carefully to elude particularly the subtle references. Given below is a summary of these descriptions extracted from his work in chronological order.

3.3.1. *The Double* (1846) [12]

The Double is Dostoevsky's second book published a month after his first book, *Poor Folk*. The protagonist, Yakov Golyadkin, is a petty government official. On a rainy, snowy, winter night while walking along a street in St. Petersburg, something happens that would change his life forever. He suddenly sees a duplicate of himself who then disappears into the darkness. His double gradually invades Golyadkin's world and completely destroys him finally. As Dostoevsky describes elegantly, “his nocturnal friend was none other than he himself ... another Mr. Golyadkin, but absolutely the same as he himself. In short in all respects what is known as his double.”

Even though there are no frank seizures described in this book, a close scrutiny reveals its relevance to epilepsy. The entire story is built on the phenomenon of autoscopy, which has been reported to occur in several conditions including epilepsy [13–15]. Given the history of underlying epilepsy it is possible that Dostoevsky experienced ictal autoscopy which inspired him to create the character, Golyadkin.

3.3.2. *Mr. Prokharchin* (1846) [16]

Mr. Prokharchin is a short story about a lonely old man living in a boarding house. One time he was brought back to the boarding house in a confused state by a cab driver. His blank stare was associated with some twitching and he was unable to move his tongue. “He uttered a shriek at the top of his voice, sat up almost in a squatting position and trembling and quivering all over.” Here Dostoevsky probably is referring to a generalized seizure. The clever cabby provides a differential diagnosis as well: “He isn't drunk ... he has probably fainted or been hit by something or maybe he had a stroke ... or maybe he had been taken with some fit or other.” The observation that he was unable to move his tongue could be a reference to ictal aphasia.

3.3.3. *The Landlady* (1847) [17]

The Landlady is a gothic-type short story about Katrina, an enigmatic young woman; Murin, a possessive old man; and Ordynov, a dreamer who rents a room from them. Ordynov is attracted to Katrina but is unable to understand the relationship between her and Murin. Finally it is revealed that Murin is the ringleader of a smuggling gang and Katrina is his wife.

Dostoevsky describes a generalized seizure at a crucial stage of the story. Murin shoots at Ordynov but misses his target as he has an epileptic seizure. As Dostoevsky describes, “a shot ran out, followed by a wild almost inhuman shriek ... Murin lay on the floor; he was being racked by convulsions, his face was distorted with agony and foam was visible on his twisted lips.”

3.3.4. *The Insulted and Injured* (1861) [18]

This story is woven around Ivan Petrovich, a writer, and a poor girl, Nellie, who has epilepsy. Her mother has been abandoned by her father, Prince Valkovsky. She becomes unwell following an epileptic seizure and dies later in pride without forgiving her estranged father.

Nellie has several generalized tonic-clonic seizures and Dostoevsky provides an elegant description: “and suddenly a fearful unearthly shriek broke from her bosom, her face worked convulsively and she fell on the floor in a terrible fit.” He also describes postictal confusion and dysphasia: “After a violent epileptic fit she was usually for some time unable to collect her thoughts or to articulate distinctly.”

3.3.5. *A Disgraceful Affair* (1862) [19]

In this satirical short story, Dostoevsky exposes the gaping disparity between human ideals and actions. Ivan Ilyitch, a high-ranking government official, decides to attend the wedding of one of his poor subordinates, as a magnanimous gesture. Things go horribly wrong, however, and his arrival results in havoc and causes more misery to the poor clerk. With the unfolding tragicomedy, Ivan Ilyitch realizes his failure in living up to the ideals he has set for himself.

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