

Title: The Thematic Significance of Epilepsy in Dostoevsky's *Demons*.

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In Dostoevsky's *Demons*, in contrast to other novels wherein epilepsy plays a role, the disease creates no narrative spectacle. Dostoevsky reduces the presence of the sacred disease to a passing reference, to a possible explanation for Kirillov's inexplicable experience of eternal harmony. Given the pervasive cultural and biblical motifs of the demonic in *Demons* (Leatherbarrow, Weiner), the deeply encoded demonic connotations of epilepsy make even this muted presence significant. This presentation will briefly review the evidence in favor of establishing Kirillov as a genuine epileptic, one whose experience of eternal harmony arises directly from his latent epilepsy (Rice, Catteau). Next the presentation will argue that in *Demons* the motif of epilepsy serves as a locus of both the demonic and the sacred. It is my contention that Kirillov's epilepsy, despite its demonic connotations, paradoxically segregates him from other demonic figures in the novel because he is the only character afflicted and because of epilepsy's underlying sacred connotations. Furthermore, I contend that Kirillov's epilepsy serves as the answer to his quest to annihilate God through the annihilation of the self insofar as the experience of eternal harmony caused by his epilepsy *is* an experience of the annihilation of the self. Ultimately, Kirillov's epilepsy offers him the spiritual experience he seeks, but his atheism precludes his acceptance of it.

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Leatherbarrow, W. J. *A Devil's Vaudeville: The Demonic in Dostoevsky's Major Fiction*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2005.

Rice, James L. *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985.

Weiner, Adam. *By Authors Possessed: The Demonic Novel in Russia*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998.