

Title: From the "Ideal of the Madonna" to the "Ideal of Sodom": Dostoevsky and the Courtly Love Tradition

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The idea of the existence of two types of beauty verbalized by Dmitry Karamazov – the ideal of the Madonna and the ideal of Sodom – is generally interpreted from two perspectives, one focusing on the ambiguity of the object (beauty as such) and another on the duality of the subject (human heart).

What I see as most significant in this famous passage is that these polar ideals enter into a dynamic relationship. Mitya claims, "I can't bear it that some man should start from the ideal of the Madonna and end with the ideal of Sodom."

My paper examines the dynamics of this seemingly paradoxical process within a larger context: the representation of beauty in art. I distinguish between two medieval aesthetic canons – the Western ideal of beauty, known from the French courtly love tradition, where the image of the Lady-Fair is created according to the archetype of the Madonna (which later became dominant in European literature and the visual arts) and the Old Russian ideal of the Mother of God (*Bogoroditsa*), borrowed from Byzantine iconography. The former emphasizes the Virgin's chastity and her physical beauty; the latter – the idea of motherhood and asceticism.

Physically attractive and slightly sensual images of the Madonna in European poetry and the visual arts have been admired by the Russian artistic elite since the 18th century. Dostoevsky also admired them, but sensed their ambiguity. In his works, where all contrasts are intensified, the Madonna-type beauty produces a dual effect on characters, ranging from spiritual inspiration to the stimulation of lust.

At the turn of the 20th century, polemics about the ideal of the Madonna were continued by Russian writers and thinkers such as Leo Tolstoy and Sergei Bulgakov, who found the element of sensuality in the Madonna's images problematic.