

A TROUBLED MIND—THE ROLE OF MENTAL ILLNESS  
IN DOSTOEVSKY’S LIFE AND WORK  
(excerpt)\*

By

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Epilepsy has existed as long as humanity has itself, and it was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that it was perceived as a brain disorder (“Epilepsy: An Historical Overview”). Similarly, bipolar affective disorder was only recognized as a mental illness linking mania and melancholia (“manico-melancolius”) in 1621, by Robert Burton, an English scholar, writer, and Anglican clergyman (“Through the Ages, It’s Been There”). Those afflicted with these and other mental illnesses have endured physical abuse and social ostracization throughout the centuries, borne from a fear that sufferers were somehow demonically possessed. It has been said that Fyodor Dostoevsky was, perhaps, the most famous epileptic in history, but it may be surprising to note that Sigmund Freud—one of history’s most celebrated early psychologists—made an attempt to diagnose Dostoevsky’s condition forty-seven years after the author’s death, and he discounted epilepsy as the source, since he believed the disorder to be incompatible with great intellect (Costandi). In Freud’s 1928 essay, “Dostoevsky and Parricide,” he suggested that the onset of the author’s condition was connected with his father’s death. Therefore, rather than recognizing an organic basis, Dostoevsky’s illness was a physical manifestation of the guilt he experienced, a “hystero-epilepsy,” a hysterical condition conforming to Freud’s Oedipus Complex theory (Costandi). Fortunately, thanks to the benefit of advanced brain imaging technology, extended medical research and long-term case studies, and first-hand observation from Dostoevsky’s family, friends, and his own personal journals, it is possible to completely discount Freud’s conclusions and establish with relative certainty that Dostoevsky did, in fact, have an organic basis for the illness with which the author struggled all his life to understand, and so routinely created similarly affected characters in his prolific body of work. From what is now known about epilepsy, bipolar affective disorder, and impulse control disorders, it is easier to understand Dostoevsky’s illness and troubled personal life, and therefore gain insight into his afflicted characters, such as the Underground Man in his 1864 novel, *Notes From Underground*.

**\*A full, unedited copy of this work is available for purchase! Please click on [Store](#).**

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