



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Une femme douce

Between Dostoevsky wrote *A Gentle Creature* in 1876 (five years before his death) and included it in his *Writer's Journal*. He had heard of three suicides, young women who had died within a matter of months. One of them was Herzen's daughter, but the one that most haunted him (and led to this story of about 16,000 words) was a Petersburg seamstress who had killed herself because she could not find work. The mystery was that the girl had jumped out of a window holding an icon in her hands – 'a strange and unheard of trait in a suicide! This now was some kind of *meek*, humble suicide. Here, apparently, there was not even grumbling or reproach: simply it became impossible to live. "God did not wish it" – and she died, having said her prayers.'

Dostoevsky reshaped this mystery without in any way diminishing its effect. The girl dies, not because of unemployment or poverty, but because of – well, how you see her motives depends on how you read the tale. Bresson also leaves the question open (though he has different intimations about her motives) and in doing so adds another portrait to that succession of baffling and self-destructive women which has dominated so many recent films. But the original story equivocates less than Bresson's interpretation and was probably created out of a greater self-awareness. Dostoevsky has here learnt how to deal with the distractions of prejudice. He immerses himself in the character of his narrator, a pawnbroker married to his gentle creature, and manages to hold on to the painful insight at the heart of his tale.

The result is one of the first, if not the first case in literature of a sustained piece of writing set in the inner consciousness (hence its secondary title, *A Fantastic Story*). The pawnbroker feels compelled to understand why the girl died. Shortly the undertakers will come to remove the corpse. So long as she is with him he feels protected against the experience of loss; but as soon as she has been taken away he knows that only some established awareness of the truth will carry him through the impending state of despair. But the man is a hopeless liar. He is a typically Dostoevskian voice from the underground, spiteful, full of excuses, either boasting or grovelling. He continually contradicts himself, continually misses the point. A comic delinquency informs his tragedy; and yet, without doubt, his fate has to be seen as tragic. Dostoevsky so arranges his material that we learn, in spite of the narrator, that the girl was a good person and immeasurably precious to her husband. Clearly, too, the pawnbroker's coldness of heart has crushed the girl and brought about her death. By the end of the story he has been forced to recognise this situation. He stops bargaining with fate, forgets his animosities. 'No, seriously, when they take her away tomorrow, what will become of me?'

Why does Dostoevsky show his gentle creature through the flawed glass of this narrator? John Bayley, in his book on *Tolstoy and the Novel*, writes that for Dostoevsky 'only the nature divided by the unspeakable secret of its inner lust and irrationality can convey an image of the good: those who are good in themselves and in each other merely embody it, and are thus undramatic, unresonant, null.' But there is another, equally telling reason for this method. Dostoevsky's creative powers needed, it would seem, to operate in a hum of

rumour. As a precondition for generating huge characters and mobilising large energies he needed to begin with the swirl of numerous possibilities: debatable reports ('it was said that ... '), speculations, an intellectual whirr. People have to be approached from every kind of angle, and information about them solicited from every kind of witness, reliable and unreliable, before they can take on depth. Like a much-scored manuscript, this method is exhaustive and exhausting. It is the fruit of an excessive imagination: it creates solidity out of an accretion of superfluities.

No method could be further from Bresson's pared-away style. What, then, does he make of this story? We shall be dismayed if we trust in a statement he gave to *Cinema Canada* (January 1969): 'My theme is the impossibility of communication. I do not mean that it is impossible for a couple to get on together, but that it is impossible under the conditions I am imposing. I believe that once a couple understand each other they can no longer stand each other. During the war, Americans married French women, because they did not talk the same language. As soon as they learnt to understand each other, they got divorced.'

These sad remarks do the film an injustice. In fact Bresson follows the content, if not the method of the story closely. It is as though he had listed all its main points, then filmed them with as much clarity as possible so that no one should misunderstand their meaning. A spareness surrounds almost every phrase and gesture, a spareness emphasised by the familiar Bressonian device of using low-tensioned interludes: people walking up and down stairs, opening and closing doors. In the four opening shots he establishes the suicide in an authoritative way: a hand presses down on a door handle; an elderly maid, Anna, watches a table fall on a balcony; a white shawl falls slowly through the air; the girl lies dead on the pavement. The husband then begins his confession in a flat voice – by the body lying on the marriage bed. This liturgy, restrained and minimal, takes us in and out of flashbacks. The elderly maid, in an attitude of prayer, listens to him with a sceptical, almost blank look on her face. At most she speaks two or three times throughout the film.

In several ways Bresson's sharpening of Dostoevsky's narrative also deepens it. The ritualised handling of the scenes in the pawnbroker's shop brings out the compulsive element in this work: pawnbroking is like picking pockets. And by a single-minded focus on this act, the monotonous exchange of money for cherished objects becomes momentous. Bresson improves on Dostoevsky's icon. The girl hands over a crucifix: the pawnbroker keeps its gold cross and hands back the ivory Christ (which the girl does not accept). Just before her death we see her look into a drawer containing the crucifix, once more made whole. At other times, perhaps, Bresson is overemphatic – as when his miserable couple go to the movies, and Bresson pans slowly over the name of the cinema, Palladium-Elysées. (In the story an offhand remark tells us that they saw plays with titles like *The Hunt after Happiness* and *Singing Birds*.)

And yet, as always with this director, clarity of statement does not presume an absence of ambiguity. His plot may have the schematic feel of a French neo-classical tragedy: but what does this schema represent? The authority of his filming, the deliberate progression of each shot, may suggest that he knows where he is taking us to: but where, in fact, is his destination? Like Dostoevsky, he has intuitions about a genuine mystery at the centre of life; but whereas Dostoevsky has to stir up a murky confusion before he can induce

the state of mind which allows for religious awe, Bresson has only to scrutinise life under the bright light of reason to break down rationalist assumptions about experience. Like certain theologians, Bresson uses reason to lead us to perceptions, and destinations, that resist being put into words.

Or so it seemed, until a few years ago. Formerly, Bresson used to provide a background of religious allegory to reassure us as he led us through the perplexities of his foreground narrative: his protagonists trod the path to Grace. But at least since *Mouchette* he has given up this guideline. The superficial resemblance of his films to neo-classical tragedy soon reveals itself as deceptive. They are much more like symbolist poems: either their images and rhythms call up an illuminating train of associations and feelings in you, or they don't.

Eric Rhode, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1970

UNE FEMME DOUCE (A GENTLE CREATURE)

Director: Robert Bresson
Production Companies: Parc Film, Marianne Productions S.A.
Producer: Mag Bodard
Production Associates: Michel Romanoff, Michel Choquet
Production Manager: Philippe Dussart
Assistant Director: Jacques Kébadian
2nd Assistant Director: Mylène van der Mersch
Script Supervisor: Geneviève Cortier
Screenplay: Robert Bresson
Based on a story by: Fyodor Dostoevsky
Director of Photography: Ghislain Cloquet
Camera Operator: Louis Stein
Assistant Camera: Paul Bonis, Emmanuel Machuel
Stills Photography: Michel Lavoir
Editor: Raymond Lamy
Assistant Editors: Geneviève Billo, Christiane Gratton
Art Director: Pierre Charbonnier
Set Decorator: Éric Simon
Wardrobe: Renée Miguel
Make-up: Alexandre Marcus

Music: Jean Wiener
Sound Recording: Jacques Maumont
Sound Re-recording: Guy Lebreton
Sound Editor: Urbain Loiseau

Cast

Dominique Sanda (*the wife*)
Guy Frangin (*the husband*)
Jane Lobre (*Anna*)
Claude Ollier (*doctor*)
Dorothee Blanck
Jacques Kébadian

France 1969
88 mins

The screening on Wed 13 Apr will be introduced by independent filmmaker and critic Alex Barrett

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Léon Morin, prêtre (Léon Morin, Priest)

Mon 28 Mar 17:50; Thu 7 Apr 20:40; Sun 24 Apr 12:00

Lourdes

Tue 29 Mar 20:50; Thu 7 Apr 18:10; Wed 20 Apr 20:50

Ordet (The Word)

Wed 30 Mar 17:45 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);
Sun 10 Apr 15:30; Fri 15 Apr 18:10; Sat 23 Apr 11:50

Black Narcissus

Thu 31 Mar 21:00; Tue 12 Apr 20:45; Tue 19 Apr 18:10; Sat 30 Apr 15:00

Babette's Feast (Babettes Gaestebud)

Fri 1 Apr 18:10; Sun 10 Apr 12:10; Sat 16 Apr 12:20; Tue 26 Apr 20:50

Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Sat 2 Apr 20:40; Fri 8 Apr 18:15; Tue 19 Apr 20:50; Mon 25 Apr 18:10

The Seventh Seal (Det Sjunde Inseglet)

Sun 3 Apr 15:20; Mon 18 Apr 15:20; Fri 22 Apr 20:50

The Miracle Woman

Mon 4 Apr 18:20; Fri 15 Apr 20:50; Thu 28 Apr 18:10; Fri 29 Apr 18:10

Stalker

Tue 5 Apr 20:00; Sat 9 Apr 17:30; Thu 21 Apr 20:00; Sat 23 Apr 20:00

My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)

Wed 6 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);
Thu 14 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 17:50; Mon 25 Apr 20:45

Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)

Wed 6 Apr 21:00; Wed 13 Apr 18:20 (+ intro by independent filmmaker and critic Alex Barrett); Mon 18 Apr 13:10

The New World

Sun 10 Apr 17:30; Sat 30 Apr 19:50

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Mon 11 Apr 18:00; Sun 17 Apr 14:40

The Last Temptation of Christ

Fri 15 Apr 14:15; Sun 24 Apr 17:40

Sebastiane

Sat 16 Apr 14:50; Tue 19 Apr 20:30; Wed 27 Apr 17:45 (+ intro by BFI curator Simon McCallum)

I Confess

Sun 17 Apr 12:00; Wed 20 Apr 18:00 (+ intro tbc)

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