



**OF SIN AND SALVATION:
THE CINEMA OF ROBERT BRESSON**

Une Femme Douce

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

OF SIN AND SALVATION: THE CINEMA OF ROBERT BRESSON

Diary of a Country Priest (Journal d'un curé de campagne)

Mon 20 Jun 18:10

Les Anges du péché (Angels of Sin)

Fri 3 Jun 14:20; Sun 12 Jun 12:30

Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne

Fri 3 Jun 18:30; Mon 13 Jun 20:40

Mouchette

Fri 3 Jun 20:30; Fri 10 Jun 18:30; Wed 15 Jun 18:20; Wed 22 Jun 20:45

A Man Escaped (Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé)

Sat 4 Jun 15:40; Sat 18 Jun 18:10 (+ intro by independent filmmaker and critic Alex Barrett); Thu 23 Jun 20:45

Au hasard Balthazar

Sat 4 Jun 18:20; Tue 7 Jun 20:45; Fri 17 Jun 18:30

L'Argent (Money)

Sun 5 Jun 16:00; Thu 16 Jun 20:30

The Trial of Joan of Arc (Procès de Jeanne d'Arc)

Sun 5 Jun 18:40; Wed 29 Jun 20:50

Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)

Thu 9 Jun 20:40; Sat 18 Jun 13:30

Lancelot du Lac (Lancelot of the Lake)

Thu 16 Jun 18:30; Mon 20 Jun 20:45

The Devil, Probably (Le Diable probablement)

Sun 19 Jun 18:10; Mon 27 Jun 20:30

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup