Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Ho Yan Kiu Antares

Name of School : St. Paul'S Convent School

Book Title : Netochka Nezvanova

Author : Fyodor Doestoevsky

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To Netochka:

You are not the most brilliant novel I have ever stumbled upon. In fact, you are far from adequate. But there are reasons why I love you in spite of that. There are reasons.

—A dear friend

Netochka Nezvanova—translating to 'Nameless Nobody'—

is a tragedy, for lack of a better word. Perhaps the reason why Dostoevsky never bothered to finish writing it was because he feared for his characters' dissipating sanities. The book has no date, no peculiar setting, no nothing—it is nameless, abandoned, a disfigured sort of beauty, carrying the weight of three characters and the wretched lives they lead.

Extraordinary, Netochka calls her step-father. It is not the same sort of 'extraordinary' you would see in a dictionary; nor the one Dostoevsky uses, in Crime and Punishment, to describe a madman's distorted conscience. The man in question, Efimov, is a caricature of self-destruction.

Efimov, proud violinist of a wealthy landowner's orchestra, also had his halcyon days.

What became of him, however—a sad, parasitic glutton—begins with him refusing to sell his prized violin to the Count, rebelling against the social hierarchy of power. The violin, expressed throughout the novel both physically and

metaphorically, is Efimov's dream, and it is logical that he refuses to give it up. However, in a subsequent play of petty revenge, the superior Count accuses Efimov of murdering his own friend (who suffered an untimely death), resulting in him getting arrested. This drives Efimov to flee elsewhere with his violin, filled with self-pity and a boiling destestation for the world.

Ironically, Efimov, with a name meaning 'pious and holy', begins to act like a parasite.

Without funds or the motivation to get a job, Efimov spends all his time drowning his sorrows in alcohol. After months of leeching off a good friend, squandering all the money he borrowed without guilt or remorse, Efimov marries a single mother for a thousand rubles, and spends it all on more alcohol. The alcohol numbs the pain—temporarily so, but as one constantly submerges himself in a fictional reality, day and night, he is no longer able to tell inebriation from sobriety. Drunk, disillusioned and constantly frenetic, Efimov never touches his

violin again—he keeps it shut in a case, like how he shuts his dream away in the depths of his fissured, disbelieving heart. But ruining himself was not enough for Efimov. Instead of acknowledging the crisis he put his family and himself in, Efimov blames his penury on his marriage, contending that his wife and their daughter, Annette, ‘destroyed his talent’ and took away his muse. Efimov then proceeds to take all of his wife’s hard-earned money and watches his family starve with a crazed indifference.

We begin to see the story from Annette’s perspective, who harbours a strange love for her stepfather despite his irrationality—one might call it a sham similar to the renowned ‘Stockholm Syndrome’. At the beginning, Annette’s mother (who is simply referred to as ‘mother’ throughout the novel) still calls Annette by her name. However, a few chapters onwards, as Efimov’s abusive behaviour elongates, the nickname ‘Netochka’ is introduced, which roughly translates to ‘Nameless’. This insinuates the loss of identity Efimov’s exploitation has brought

for both women, that they are rather treated as ‘tools’ than human beings. Netochka, torn between her fervent obsession with Efimov and the desire to return her mother’s love, is slowly steered to the edges of insanity as Efimov begins to take advantage of her devotion to him, requesting her cooperation in purloining her mother’s savings.

There is, however, no good ending for the extraordinary man. He dies a miserable death after having lost everything he never deserved—his dream, his wife, Netochka. He dies unknown, buried in the remains of his psychosis, in the outskirts of an unknown town.

Netochka is the lone survivor of the tragedy, as her mother falls to an inexorable stress-induced illness. The impotent orphan is then taken in by a prince to a mansion, where she finds love and spends most of her childhood in fortune—yet her new family continues to call her ‘Netochka’, as though the nightmare never truly ended; as though the trauma continues to surreptitiously eat

away at her sanity. The story abruptly ends when Netochka reaches a certain age of adolescence as Dostoevsky is taken captive in Siberia.

A good book has no ending—its legacy lives on. Despite being an unfinished work, Netochka Nezvanova effectively delves into the themes of good and evil; revenge and redemption, its story forever living on in soul and heart.

The discussion of villainy in the novel is bound to be a topic of controversy. Taking into account all his misdeeds, to name Efimov a ‘villain’ is justifiable. Be that as it may, evil is not born—it is made. Efimov is a victim in more ways than one—oppressed by the social hierarchy, crushed by his unachievable dream, and pushed to a sudden state of destitution. Indeed, these are not reasons to enslave and exploit your family, but the most disingenuous evil here, I believe, is the fragility of the human mind. There is only a certain point you can reach before it begins to indelibly break. The factors are manifold and unforeseeable: it

could be the cause of damaged pride, despondency, or even the loss of a loved one. Efimov embodies this, and he is, indisputably, an extremely well-written character.

Another essential idea explored in the novel is the concept of revenge. Punished by the Count's cruel slander (which is also an act of revenge), Efimov seeks to abreact his fury on his family by depriving them of love and security. What kills him in the end is divine judgement—nature's revenge—and the fee he pays for his impetuous actions is losing his morality, the one thing that makes us all human. Decidedly, revenge, or more literally, 'believing that you have the right in making other people suffer simply because you have suffered', is a fleeting sort of joy. It might be satisfying at first, but in the end, Efimov dies knowing that he has succeeded in nothing but hurting everyone who truly loved him. Dostoevsky's novel then leads us to question: Is it really worth it?

In spite of such a tragedy, however, Dostoevsky leaves much

room for optimism. In the second half of the book, despite Netochka continuing to be plagued by her trauma, constantly being in a state of timidity, shows her trying to break through the bounds of her past by pursuing love and true happiness. As she grows older, she learns to differentiate between the infatuation she had for Efimov and pure, reciprocal love; the former is a deranged hope of a tremulous child that Efimov, a saviour she could be dependent on, may be able to save her from the dregs of poverty, and the latter is an unconditional promise to cherish and protect. Netochka is a prime example of how it is possible to overcome the past, no matter how dark and gritty it may be, and instead of allowing yourself to dwell on how you have been tainted by the scars left behind, you learn from them and move on, towards a better future, a brighter sunrise.

Netochka Nezvanova is a book as flawed as its characters are, but its story has moved mountains within me. To me, it is a message to the world—to the disturbed and the afraid: you are not

alone, to those who are suffering: *the storm will pass, and to the ones who have survived the trauma: I am proud of you.*