

**Salvation for the Underground and Eden:
Christian and Utopian Language in Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*
and Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac***

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Tucked away in his underground, brooding for the past forty years over his discontentment with nineteenth century Russian society and his desire to enlighten others, is Dostoevsky's Underground Man. Nearly one hundred years later on the other side of the earth, on his secluded farm in Sand County, Wisconsin, writing over a period of forty years of his desire "to save" the land is Aldo Leopold. Though written in different times and for different audiences, Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* and Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* share significant use of spiritual and religious language. Whether it is the whole of society as in the case of Dostoevsky, or the whole of the land and its inhabitants in the case of Leopold, both authors write with an intense desire to enlighten others in order "to save" that which is precious to them. Dostoevsky emphasizes the redemptive language of Christianity while Leopold reveals a religious sensibility in his use of both biblical and utopian language. As a result, a definite messianic message can be found in both works.

The recurring themes "to save" and "to protect" reflect Dostoevsky and Leopold's purpose in creating these works. This purpose is to enlighten the reader and increase awareness of the erosion threatening Russian society and the land, respectively. Dostoevsky's Underground Man views himself as "an enlightened and cultured man" due to proper education and encourages others to become the same in order to preserve Russian culture (20). "Always [having] to adjust the urge to embrace all humanity..." the Underground Man feels compelled to enlighten, or "to save," those in society who seem in need of direction (Dostoevsky 41). A prostitute named Liza and the

Underground Man's former schoolmates are examples of such "lost souls" (84). Having failed miserably at "enlightening" the group of schoolmates, perhaps because of the group's lack of concern for culture and education, the Underground Man assumes the role of an evangelist when preaching to Liza, hoping to achieve his messianic goal through individual spiritual enlightenment. Throughout the work, Dostoevsky includes symbols of confession, forgiveness, salvation, and redemption expressed by the presence of water, embrace, light, and references to sin. In the scenes involving the Underground Man and Liza, a lighted candle symbolizes enlightenment and salvation, Liza's embrace represents forgiveness, and water represents cleansing and redemption. Dostoevsky directly refers to Christian concepts when he writes, "it is in that kind of love (unconditional love) that a woman finds her resurrection, all her salvation in whatever kind of ruin, and her rebirth, as it can't appear in any other form" (88). Likewise, Leopold refers to the same Christian concepts when he writes about the "salvation of cultural value" regarding the way in which humans treat, or mistreat, the land (Leopold 184). The Underground Man likely would have approved of Leopold's concept of "enlightened self-interest" found in "The Land Ethic," a section of his *Almanac* in which he stresses the importance of "more conservation education" to bring about "harmony between men and land" (Leopold 207-208). Textual evidence shows then, that Dostoevsky and Leopold write with a revelatory purpose regarding issues that are of deep concern to them. Although both authors incorporate Christian language into these works, Leopold describes the land in utopian language, alluding to biblical passages.

Leopold does not hesitate, even "in the beginning..." (215) to use biblical allusion to express the way in which humans view the land. In the foreword, he explains that

humans have an “Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (viii). Rejecting Abraham’s view of the land as “a permanent possession,” (Holy Bible: New Living Translation, 17), Leopold stresses that the land should be considered a living, evolving ecosystem deserving of ethical treatment and respect for all it provides. Throughout *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold describes these concepts and his surroundings through use of biblical allusion. From his farm perched on a “hill, which serves, in Noah’s absence, for an ark” (24), Leopold describes “a migrating goose, staking two hundred miles of black night on the chance of finding a hole in the lake...” as “[carrying] the conviction of a prophet who has burned his bridges” (18), and compares the “chorus of the quail” to that of a “daybreak hymn” (53-54). When expressing his love for the woods, namely pine trees, Leopold “[wishes] that Noah, when he loaded up the Ark, had left the tree diseases behind” (73), and expresses his frustration with “a plague of rabbits in [his] woods” (74). This parallels the many plagues inflicted upon the Egyptians and their land during the time of Moses, as described in the book of Exodus (perhaps it is not a coincidence that Leopold uses the word “exodus” at least three times in his *Almanac*). References to Moses and the Ten Commandments occur in other chapters as well. The chickadees in Leopold’s “November” entry bring to mind the Israelites in the Promised Land, in that “for them, every ant-tunneled heartwood bulges with milk and honey” (76). Another allusion to the Israelites occurs when Leopold writes, “we shared their [the quail and deer’s] evident delight in this milk-and-honey wilderness” (146). The words linking these passages to the Bible are found in Exodus 4:17: “I will lead you to...a land flowing with milk and

honey” (72). Leopold refers to the “Mosaic Decalogue” to expound upon his Land Ethic in the last chapter, and he cleverly uses the Ten Commandments to explain Chickadee behavior. He “[suspects] that in the chickadee Sunday School two mortal sins are taught: thou shalt not venture into windy places in winter, thou shalt not get wet before a blizzard...I suspect there is a third commandment in chickdom: thou shalt investigate every loud noise” (90-91). While this biblical allusion humorously illustrates the behavior of chickadees, it also shows Leopold’s familiarity with Biblical concepts. To emphasize man’s lack of respect for the land and “the divine functions of creating and destroying plants,” Leopold states: “The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, but He is no longer the one to do so” (67). He adds later, “To plant a pine, for example, one need be neither god nor poet; one need only own a shovel...any clodhopper may say: Let there be a tree – and there will be one...And in the seventh year he may lean upon his shovel, and look upon his trees, and find them good” (81). This process of creation bears a striking resemblance to the biblical account of creation found in chapter one of Genesis. Additionally, while he is hunting, Leopold compares his own mortality to that of a buck by using the biblical phrase “dust to dust” (151). The name of the biblical book “Song of songs” appears when Leopold is describing the problem of “the rush” of scientific progress (153). Perhaps the evidence of Leopold’s spiritual sensibility and connection with nature is most apparent when he writes, “‘He leadeth me by still waters’ was to us only a phrase in a book until we had nosed our canoe through the green lagoons. If David had not written the psalm, we should have felt constrained to write our own” (142). He also refers to the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus asks parents if they would give their children a stone when asked for bread: “When the logic of history

hungers for bread and we hand out a stone, we are at pains to explain how much the stone resembles bread” (210). Biblical names such as Ezekiel and Isaiah as well as words such as “faith” and “paradise” are also present in Leopold’s writing. These Biblical allusions and quotations are only some of the many that can be found in *A Sand County Almanac*. They serve as effective illustrations of crucial concepts and observations discussed by Leopold and provide insights into his intimate, spiritual relationship with nature.

Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* may not have experienced the peace of “Paradise Ranch” and its “verdant meadows” or “singing trout stream” (Leopold 128), but he certainly experienced the catharsis of confession and salvation – two Christian concepts found in both *Notes From Underground* and *A Sand County Almanac*. Along with these shared concepts are two narrators who both strive to bring about realization of human error regarding their beloved entities. Dostoevsky, speaking through the character of the *Underground Man*, and Leopold, speaking on behalf of the land, encourage readers to confess these errors in order to bring about positive change in how they live their lives. Enlightening his readers concerning the deterioration of Russian cultural society is Dostoevsky’s mission. In his letters to his brother, Mikhail, Dostoevsky expresses his disgust and frustration with the Russian censors, calling them “swine” for leaving untouched his writing of mockery and blasphemy while, at the same time, deleting his writing dealing with the “necessity of faith and Christ” (96). For Leopold, spreading awareness of nature’s suffering is achieved not only by his references to fundamental Christian doctrine, but also through his accounts of personal spiritual epiphany. In the allegorical wolf episode in the essay entitled “Thinking like a Mountain,” Leopold writes that, after shooting a wolf and witnessing “a fierce green fire dying in her eyes,” he

realized that “there was something new to [him] in those eyes – something known only to [the wolf] and to the mountain” (130). Perhaps that “something” refers to the lack of respect humans tend to have for nature and the need for a change in the way they treat the land and its inhabitants – a change that Leopold, like Dostoevsky with Russian culture, is so passionately attempting to bring about.

Both authors effectively and, in terms of language, similarly convey their passion and desire for others to follow in their footsteps; however, Dostoevsky’s Christian symbolism lacks the direct biblical, utopian language that is so prominent in Leopold’s text. Despite this difference in spiritual language, however, the underlying entreaty of Dostoevsky and Leopold’s works, respectively, is to recognize the impact of human action on society and to change human actions to bring about renewal of society and the land. Both writers strive to ensure that the future holds “lands of opportunity” (Leopold 219) for all people.

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