

Title: The Nameless Female Other in “The Kreutzer Sonata” and “The Meek One”: Personhood and Otherness in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky

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“The Kreutzer Sonata” and “The Meek One” share several similarities in plot and narrative techniques. Both works tell a story of psychological and physical violence against women, the wives of the male heroes, that results in the heroines’ death. Both tales contain first person narratives that depict the emotional abuse of the female heroine, who remains nameless and has no palpable voice in the story. Both narrators are ostensibly merciless in their post-crime self-condemnation, indulging in what Dostoevsky calls “a special kind of boasting,” yet, both slip into self-justification at various points of the narrative. This paper will examine the symmetrical plot developments in “The Kreutzer Sonata” and “The Meek One” and the confessional strategies of these two ideologically motivated wife-killers, tracing the revelation of “truth” that emerges in the course of narration. In both cases, the most crucial revelation experienced by the heroes consists in acknowledging the personal autonomy of the now deceased wife, who had remained merely an extension of the husband’s self and sphere of interests while alive and is recognized as a “neighbor,” a truly sovereign, personal “I” only in death. However, the hero’s grasp of this seminal truth differs dramatically in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and this difference, I argue, has to do with the role of otherness in each author’s ontology. I will use Mikhail Bakhtin’s and Max Scheler’s theories of personhood as well as Nikolai Berdyaev’s observations on Tolstoy’s moral thought to define crucial differences in Tolstoy’s and Dostoevsky’s concepts of individuality and their ideal vision of human togetherness.