

Title: Trigger Warnings and Beethoven: A Case for The Kreutzer Sonata  
Author: Anna Barker, The University of Iowa  
Email: [anna-barker@uiowa.edu](mailto:anna-barker@uiowa.edu)

When describing his state of agitation after hearing the Kreutzer Sonata, Pozdnyshev declares: "Music makes me forget myself, my true situation, it transports me to some other situation not my own; under the influence of music it seems to me that I feel what, in fact, I do not feel, that I understand what I do not understand, that I can do what I cannot do." The possibility of loss of control prompts Pozdnyshev to demand the presence and protection of police in drawing rooms filled with ladies in d'ÉcolletÈ. Yet, strangely, audiences have been welcoming this state of loss of free will for centuries. In his Confession, Saint Augustine states that theater audiences are "not called upon to offer help but only feel sorrow, and the more they are pained the more they applaud the author." Paradoxically, the more the audience is made to feel pain, the more eager it is to "stay to the end watching happily." In his jealous fury Pozdnyshev threatens to murder his wife before he hears the Kreutzer Sonata, but he understands that he has the capacity to control his emotions and actions. His wife's performance serves as a trigger that allows him to abandon his restraint. This loss of self control comes without a warning and Pozdnyshev succumbs to a state he likens to possession. His realization that he has the capacity to resist the loss of self control that is triggered by external artistic stimulants comes, as his name suggest, too late. The danger of such loss of control under external influences was underscored at the time of the novella's American publication by a ban imposed on it by the US Attorney General. Just as Pozdnyshev could not trust himself to be exposed to external artistic stimulants, the reading audience was protected from making a free will decision about the aesthetic and ethical implications of the novella. Syllabus trigger warnings are attempting to yet again bring a barrier between art and audience and deny us the chance to come to our own timely conclusions, no matter how misguided and insufficient they may be.