

Chen Zhang, Ohio State University

“Can’t You Cut Pages with a Garden Knife?”: Rogozhin’s Destruction that Derives from  
His Pursuit of Enlightenment

Many critics of Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot* (1869) interpret Myshkin’s pure, compassionate, Christian love in contrast to Rogozhin’s erotic, dark, destructive love (Leslie Johnson, Dennis Slattery, John Givens). Nevertheless, this opposition is not always convincing, given that Rogozhin is capable of occasional compassion (N. L. Gatina, Tat’iana Kasatkina). This paper aims to reexamine the character of Rogozhin by focusing on the coexistence of his dark nature and his spiritual side.

I will demonstrate that Rogozhin’s relationship with Nastasya Filippovna is not only a tragedy of passionate courtship, as it is usually interpreted, but also a description of his potential spiritual enlightenment. Dostoevsky portrays Rogozhin in his pursuit of Nastasya Filippovna with the same motifs (whiteness of facial color, deathly pallor, difficulty walking and breathing, etc.) that he uses to describe the condemned men in Myshkin’s execution accounts. Rogozhin worships her as a symbol of spiritual regeneration rather than as an object of sexual desire. Significantly, while Rogozhin is associated with darkness, gloom, and incivility, Nastasya Filippovna is characterized with motifs of light, fire, and enlightenment.

However, Rogozhin’s attempt at his spiritual regeneration ultimately reveals pessimism on Dostoevsky’s part, because Rogozhin never overcomes his lack of faith in this process of enlightenment. Despite Nastasya Filippovna’s intention to civilize him, the same garden knife he uses to cut pages while reading becomes a vengeful tool of Nastasya Filippovna’s murder and the attempted murder of Myshkin. His doubts and violence still dominate him even in the process of enlightenment. Since Rogozhin’s murder resembles the procedure of castration (Irene Masing-Delic, William J. Comer), his tragedy also reveals Dostoevsky’s dim view that the Castrates’ fanatic desire for spirituality will only lead to obsession with physical evidence, and destruction of the chance of resurrection.