

Title: So...What Is To Be Done About Poor Nastasya in Dostoevsky's The Idiot?

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Abstract:

Nastasya Filippovna's rejection of Myshkin's compassion in *The Idiot* is among the greatest dilemmas in Dostoevsky scholarship. Some have interpreted her refusal to conform to the image of the remorseful Marie as evidence of deep-seated immorality. Others have excused it as childhood trauma due to sexual abuse. Still others have proclaimed her lack of contrition to be a declaration of sexual liberation. In the recent years, such psychologizing of Nastasya Filippovna has subsided. There has emerged a realization that the heroine is radically absent from the novel, which makes her unavailable to psychological scrutiny. Indeed, essentially everything we learn about Nastasya Filippovna comes to us in the form of unreliable mediated accounts, most of which are outright gossip and slander. Furthermore, not only does she directly encourage the spread of these slanderous rumors, deliberately reinforcing in everyone's mind the image of herself as a brazen courtesan, but she even invites her own murder. Are we able to see Nastasya Filippovna's self-defamation and ultimate self-destruction as more than spiteful vindictiveness in search of a pathetic moral statement?

I argue in this article that the hermeneutical impasse where all ethical/psychological readings of the novel inevitably end up, is part of a negative authorial strategy designed to make the reader reject "the fallen woman" motif as a flawed narrative of salvation. For all of its kindness, Myshkin's compassion towards Nastasya Filippovna (and Marie) re-enforces the validity of innocence, a moral category unacceptable for Dostoevsky because it conceives of salvation in strictly secular terms as moral progress (repentance) and not in religious terms as miracle (resurrection). Building on the difference between the Eastern and Western theological legacies of Magdalene, I show how Nastasya Filippovna's refusal of remorse evokes the memory of Magdalene as the first witness of Christ's resurrection.