

Title: Learning How To Look: Nastasia Filippovna In *The Idiot*
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In her influential book on the representation of women by Russian writers, Barbara Heldt claims that “the violence of the ending and the ultimate silence of both the unredeemable soul and the ineffectual redeemer” show that Dostoevsky was incapable of transcending the misogyny he absorbed from his culture (37). In contrast, I argue that his representation of violence’s effects and his reliance on a visually oriented poetics reflect a strongly and self-consciously femino-centric vision. He creates in Nastasia Filippovna an icon of infectious tragic beauty that guides readers into an exploration of post-lapsarian darkness, an awareness of deep hurts and the temptations of anguish, and a recurring mimesis of compassion. Far from subverting the redemptive ideal as has sometimes been argued, Dostoevsky’s presentation of his heroine paradoxically imbues this ideal with vitality. To provide a more obviously redemptive ending would be to elide the confrontation with reality. And to renounce the poetics of silence would be to pretend that evil and trauma never overwhelm words. My discussion builds on and at times directly engages with other scholars’ discussions of Nastasia Filippovna’s role (including those by Burgin, Matich, and Straus).

Works Cited

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