

We take up this evening our second chance at understanding—not simply Dostoevsky’s enigmatic prince—but his intention in the novel *The Idiot*. For to ascertain the inner purpose of the work is one’s first task in doing any serious reading—and we have to remind ourselves over and over again that comprehending the “action” of the work is of primary importance. Shakespeare did not write *Hamlet* just to give us a portrait of the much-discussed prince of Denmark. He wrote it because it embodied an action: as C. S. Lewis wrote, *Hamlet* finds himself in a situation that analogically we all face at different times in our lives—and that is what gives power to the play—and it’s what we mean at UD when we defend the “universal” aspect of literature. It shows us by analogy something about ourselves and the world we live in. In the serious literary works we confront something in ourselves that we hadn’t seen before.

So there is something about the mysterious and timely arrival of Myshkin (and his double Rogozhin) in Petersburg, with their loquacious shadow Lebedev (who is like our media coverage---words, words, words)—that speaks of a crisis: a *chairos*, an auspicious time that can go one way or another. And by the time we finish the novel, we see that it has gone downward. Or has it? Has something been purged after all? What is the meaning of the strange marriage at the end? As we shall see in his other novels, particularly the *Brothers Karamazov*, marriage is Dostoevsky’s chief theological image: as Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is his bride, so analogically, on earth the fullness of being is accomplished in marriage.

At the very beginning, it is the search for the proper bridegroom for Nastasya that initiates the action. She is to be “sold” to Ganya to get her out of Totsky’s way (who wants, himself, now to make a respectable marriage.) Myshkin idealistically and Rogozhin passionately present themselves as contenders for the prize. Then there is the smaller version of Nastasya, Aglaya, the daughter figure (think of how important the daughter is in literature: Iphigenia, Antigone, Cassandra, Ophelia, Cordelia, Perdita, Miranda, Jane Austen’s heroines, James’ figure of the American girl, Linda Snopes) There is the ostensibly amiable but corrupt aristocracy, the ruffians, — the guilty fathers, and the heartbreakingly vulnerable boy figures Ippolit and Kolya, one of them disillusioned and dying, the other loving and loyal, carrying on despite the shameful and painful circumstances of his life. There are the “ordinary people” that Dostoevsky speaks of in Part IV, p. 447-8 ff.

And then there is the strange, “original” person—of Part III, pp.315 ff, a discussion which centers, finally, on Lizaveta Prokofyevna Epanchin. Read about her.

Russia will carry on, we are made to see, with its jaded and corrupt aristocracy, its ordinary people, its strange originals, its guardians, its loving and hard-working boy. (p. 595) But its chance for greatness, for that magnificent *aristeia* that would have come had the *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage been able to take place, will not occur. We have a sad parody of it at the end. Russia’s europeanized intellectual and spiritual life (Myshkin) and Russia’s great earthy masculine strength (Rogozhin) cannot be put back together: and only that strength would have been sufficient to make the bridegroom for the heavenly beauty that is Nastasya. (Read the description of her dead body, [p.589 ff] Whatever Helen is to Greece, Beatrice is to Dante’s Florence, Nastasya is to Russia. And both she and her daughter-figure Aglaya are lost to that great country whose capital is St. Petersburg.

Dostoevsky's ikonic imagination, which can give us images that have the force of ikons, shows us the tragic outcome of this failure in the bridal scene at the end. On her way to be married to Myshkin, Nastasy had cried out "Save me!" to Rogozhin, who spirited her away, took her to his apartment in Moscow and there, with his knife that he had attempted to use on Myshkin, put her to death without spilling a drop of blood (why is this detail significant?) Read p. 588 ff.

This is the anti-hieros gamos, the sacred marriage with death as the bridegroom, an immolation that removes from the Russian scene all its chance at greatness. We could call it a purging. It is a tragic scene, surely; and yet the form of the entire novel has been comic. There is laughter throughout the book; people burst into risibility at strange occasions. There are all the marks of comedy:

1. Numerous scenes, a general busy-ness; 2. An intermixture of characters, 3. Carnavalesque scenes, 4. all centered on a marriage; 5. An emphasis on the feminine; 6. Hereroglossia; 7. Devices, revelations, intrigues . . . the atmosphere is definitely comedic, lacking the stark simplicity and dignity of tragedy. And yet we have what seems a powerfully tragic ikon at the end. What do we make of this?

So we have two other questions with which we must concern ourselves:

1. Is what happened in St Petersburg as it is detailed in this novel a comic or a tragic purging?

2. Is the central figure, Prince Myshkin, a comic or a tragic figure? Is he good or bad? What, in particular, is his mission? Does his failure at that mission have anything significant to do with the destiny of the society into which he came, as one dropped from the sky, as Mme. Epanchin said.

So—we are back to asking: what happens in the *Idiot*? There is a sense of expectation, of a city in waiting, of what Prospero in the *Tempest* calls "the auspicious moment."—some important action is set to occur. And how is the mysterious Prince an agent of that action? We can start off by saying that the novel is a picture of something failing: a city, a marriage, an upward movement that everyone in the novel stands in need of. Natasya does not find her proper bridegroom, nor does Aglaya; Ippolit dies apparently in despair, "much sooner than expected." Gen. Ivolgin, who had come to the prince for help, dies also in despair and shame; the Prince sinks into an irremediable idiocy, Rogozhin is sentenced to fifteen years hard labor; St. Petersburg's corrupt aristocracy goes on as before; Ganya and his kind of person will still seek above all else for money—but what about Kolya, Vera, Varvara, and Burdovsky? What about Mme. Epanchin? She is a distant relative of Prince Myshkin. (What does it mean "there are no more Myshkins nowadays?") We might be tempted to think that this means a kind of ancient Russian spirituality—a Holy Fool figure

We need to hold these questions in our minds as we go through the rest of this brilliant and puzzling novel this evening. Let's center on the enigma, the Prince,
336 reverie on the green seat. *The prince is given to drowsiness, to drifting off into unconsciousness.* Look back at the waterfall image, p. look at his *morbidity* in

thinking of whether the executed man's head continues to think;
353 Rogozhin's hatred; Myshkin does not care. He speaks of "my new life" 355
375-6 Prince says *he has always been a materialist*
377 Ippolit's dream
395 the dead Christ
401 Ippolit's indictment of Christian consolation
404 the guardians – *Myshkin not among them*

413 Aglaia: *you see only truth*
483 Gen. Ivolgin's tale about Napoleon; *Myshkin does not stop him*
488 Ivolgin takes his leave; *Myshkin laughs*
490 The General's raving and death
507 *Pass us by and forgive us our happiness*
527-8 Myshkin becomes *fanatical* at the engagement party; *breaks the vase*
554-56 the terrible choice between women; his *hesitation*
577 Radomsky's analysis

But this is the sensible analysis of a rationalist. There's more to the issue than this. We are made to feel, through knowing Nastasya, that Myshkin should have chosen her wholeheartedly, should not have led Agalya on.

Let's look at some critical opinion:

After we've looked at a few more of his actions, let's see what critics have to say about him:

epileptic: Robin Feuer Miller
"angelic" Mochulsky: 377
"angel of the people" Ivanov
"fantastic": Slattery
"apolyptic" Cox

Compare Russian Orthodox ideals with those of Myshkin