

## Chronic Suicide and Parasuicide in Dostoevsky's *Idiot*

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Fyodor Dostoevsky created many characters in his novels who commit suicide, even in his *Diary* he mentioned several instances of suicide. Besides the suicidal characters in his novel there are some references of chronic suicide and parasuicide—some characters fail to commit suicide but try to negate their existence or display mannerisms which may be called parasuicidal behavior or chronic suicidal behaviour.

David Lester defined chronic suicide as the self-destructive behavior whose impact shortens the lifespan of the person, such as alcohol or drug abuse, and parasuicide as a 'self-destructive behavior in which the person intends to survive and, in fact, does so.' ("Suicide." *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*) Karl A. Menninger was the first to define and formulate the idea of chronic suicide. In his *Man against Himself*, Menninger defined,

In contrary to the sudden, acute manifestations of self-destruction represented by the act of suicide, those forms of self-destruction in which the individual commits slow suicide—suicide by inches as it were—could, I think, be called chronic suicide, or chronic self-destruction. (87)

All these forms of suicide are actually driven by death-instinct or *Thanatos* that was earlier elaborated by Freud in many of his works and papers, especially in his *Beyond Pleasure Principle* and *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*.

In this paper, I shall limit myself to a study of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*. *Idiot*, published in 1869, is a novel of all-fall-downs. The main characters either die or call on disaster. Nastasya Phillipovna is murdered, Rogozhin is sentenced to fifteen years, Aglaya is supposed to marry a wealthy count who is later discovered to be neither a count nor a wealthy person, the titular idiot has to go back to the sanitarium in Switzerland, and Ippolit dies. Some of them even have forebodings of their ruin, some downfalls are deliberate to some extent. Whoever remain are only but minor characters or a little bit above insignificance. The destructive force of thanatos is at work throughout the novel. Accordingly, in the novel, death-instinct wins over life-instinct.

Nastasya Filipovna represents the spirit of thanatos. She imbibes the black desire of the human mind that is set for death and destruction. In the draft for the novel from March, 1868 to July, 1868, Dostoevsky planned a suicidal or death plot for Nastasya Filipovna. The sequence moved on in the following way:

“Nastasya Filipovna marries the prince.

Puzzling disappearance, tracked down in a brothel.

Wants to kill herself.

Rehabilitation.

She dies or else kills herself.” (Dostoevsky *The Notebook* 161)

In the final version, Dostoevsky did not arrange any suicidal plot for her. But all through the novel he is followed by destruction and death. Her throwing a bundle of money into fire, her rejection to marry the Prince only for he is good enough, perhaps the Christ of the time, and running away with Rogozhin—who associates with all the darkness of the novel, all these establish that she does not want to correct herself and save herself, but to yield to the corruption and depravity of the world and ruin herself. In the penultimate time of the novel, when the marriage between the Prince and her has been arranged, she escapes with Rogozhin. This is a suicidal act, precisely, an act of Chronic suicide, as Menninger observed several cases of neurotic individualism among his patients who did not want to be cured or to meet doctor. N. N. Shneidman points out, “Intuition tells her that Rogozhin’s passion is murderous, yet she follows him blindly after her escape from Myshkin. Nastasyia Filippovna is attracted by the spiritual purity of the Prince, but she cannot accept his forgiveness and feels unworthy of him.” (50) Earlier she refuses to marry Prince Myshkin because she doesn’t want to ruin him. Is this the reason enough to refuse someone? Actually, she wants someone who’ll die for her and whom she will die for. When Parfyon’s father begged her to return the earrings he presented her, she realized how Parfyon Semyonovitch Rogozhin managed the money from his father to buy the ornament and she said, “...they [the earrings] are ten times more precious to me now since Parfyon faced such a storm to get them for me.” (13)

She knew well that marrying the *Knyaz* (Prince) means redemption from all the corruption and earlier exploitation done to her. She might have been saved as Jesus Christ saved Mary Magdalene (Luke 7:36-50). But it can’t happen because the destructive force of self-inflicted torture is so strong in her that she can’t even ask for salvation—so, she does not want the Christ who will redeem her. The thanatos drive here defeats her life-instinct or eros. It is her own instinctive choice to continue her journey to damnation. Shneidman has found it symbolic that before her death Nastasya Filipovna reads Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. Again, it is a case of neurotic individualism –fantasy of suicide. (Menninger) Perhaps he identifies herself with Emma, who poisons herself. Though in the end she does not commit suicide, it is her own choice to yield to her disaster. So her acts may be termed as ‘Chronic Suicide.’ She knows that she is disgraced with no fault of her own. She cannot change herself to a new woman nor can she go with her present disgrace. So she must die—either murder or suicide is her lot. Unless Rogozhin murders her, she must kill herself. Shneidman rightly opines, “She is torn apart by internal contradictions. This inner dichotomy prevents her from adapting to changing life conditions and obscures her vision in a world full of evil and corruption, leading to her downfall and ultimate destruction.” (51)

The same is true for Rogozhin. A single sentence is enough to prove his death instinct. At the very first meeting with Myshkin, Rogozhin says, “I went to her [Nastasya Filipovna] because I thought I shouldn’t come back alive.” (12) After the murder, he does not escape. He waits; he waits for Myshkin to come. And when they meet, he confesses. Even after the confession, he does not escape. Though he can use the chance to expose the Prince as the murderer, as the Prince is in epileptic fit after watching the dead body of Nastasya Filipovna. But he remains indoors. He is caught up as the murderer but never put any blame on the Prince. In fact, his crime and punishment are his deliberate actions. With his punishment he completes his destructive motif. Rogozhin knows well that what he is doing will call on ruin for him. This destructive force was at work since he took money from his father, bought nice earrings and presented Nastasya, and the force ends with the murder. In-between there lie his marriage (apparently a life-instinct) and his separation from Prince Myshkin. His antisocial behavior, or more precisely, Passive Neurotic Aggression (a term coined by Karl A. Menninger), embodies chronic suicidal behavior and culminates to his ruin.

Many scholars have seen the character of Ippolit Terent'ev as the most important philosophical exponent of the novel. He attracted our attention since we come to know him. Dostoevsky as well regarded him as "the main axis of the novel." (Dostoevsky *The Notebooks* 236) But he appears much later in the plot of the novel and we do not meet him as frequently as Knyaz Myshkin, the titular idiot. Edward Wasiolek wonders, "Ipolit is one of the major characters in the novel; he dominates its middle sections. How does one account for so important a character coming so late into the conceptions of the author? It would seem to follow that Ipolit is brought into being by the central situation and does not bring it into being." (Dostoevsky *The Notebooks* 164) Wasiolek continues, "In the most serious and sophisticated sense, Ipolit is an afterthought, an elaboration or refinement of the core situation. In many respects, but in a different mode, he repeats aspects of Nastasia Filipovna's role." (Dostoevsky *The Notebooks* 64) Both of them embody destructive force of human nature. Whereas Nastasia embodies the motif of chronic suicide, Ipolit embodies parasuicide.

The confession of Ipolit's consumptive endeavours gives a rational explanation to his view of life and seeks justification of his intended suicide. The first thought of suicide came to this 18 year-old young man when he was standing with his schoolmate Bakhmutov on the Neva Bridge, leaning with his elbows on the railing. But he could not commit suicide then because he lacked proper determination and cause to fulfil such a decisive step. Later he resolves to commit suicide resulting from his incurable disease for which he has only fortnight timespan to live and several other incidents in his life. He finds no hope for his life because he will soon die of consumption. Suicide is the only action he still has "time to begin and end" (Dostoevsky *Idiot* 467) by his own will. He asserts, "I want to take advantage of the last possibility of *action*. A protest is sometimes no small action...." (Dostoevsky *Idiot* 467) The point Ipolit tries to establish through his argument of his "Explanation," is later established by the materialist of the imaginative suicide note, written in Dostoevsky's *The Diary of a Writer*, October, 1876. (470-73)

Ipolit claims that suicide for him is not a sin, so he should not ask for any kind of forgiveness. He asserts, "I don't want to go away without leaving some word of defence—a free defence, not forced out of me, not to justify myself—oh, no! I have no one's forgiveness to ask, and nothing to ask forgiveness for—it's simply because I want to." (Dostoevsky *Idiot* 464) He queries, "[B]y what right, with what motive could anyone presume to dispute my right to dispose of my last fortnight? Whose business is it to judge? What is it to anyone that I should not only be condemned, but should conscientiously endure my sentence to the end?" (Dostoevsky *Idiot* 464)

Shneidman observes,

"On the metaphysical plane Ippolit is a rebel who refuses to accept the established order of things. In ordinary daily life, however, Ippolit is a sick man who refuses to accept the unavoidable and who questions the justice of his impending death. Ippolit wants very much to live and his revolt is, in a sense, a rebellion against the destructive potentialities of nature which chooses at random whom and when to strike." (49)

It is true that Ippolit "wants to live much more than he wants to die." (Shneidman 50) Dostoevsky was always in confusion whether he should allow him to live or die. Throughout his "Notebooks for *The Idiot*" we find several references to his death. But they vary in time and cause of death. Some may be mentioned here:

"Ipolit is distraught: to live or not to live?" (236)

"Ipolit wants to cut his throat. Ipolit is judged." (238)

“The death of Ipolit.” (239)

“...the Prince remained with Ipolit, who dies that night.” (244)

Dostoevsky created Ipolit with the parasuicidal motif. Whether his failure to commit suicide may be intentional or unintentional, it has nothing to do with parasuicide. However, before beginning his “Explanation,” Ippolit says, “I wanted to live for the happiness of all men, to discover and proclaim the truth...” (Dostoevsky *Idiot* 334) in the middle of his *explanation* he repeats his desire to live on the earth, “I knew for a fact that I had consumption and it was incurable. I didn’t deceive myself, and understood the case clearly. But the more clearly I understood it, the more feverishly I longed to live: I clutched at life, I wanted to live, whatever happened.” (Dostoevsky *Idiot* 441-2) Ippolit suffers from a conflict between ‘to be’ or ‘not to be’. And the stronger the conflict is, the more he fulfills the motif of parasuicide.

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