



Between Dream and Inherited Trauma: A Post-memory Reading of Dostoevsky's White Nights

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Abstract

This article explores Fyodor Dostoevsky's *White Nights* through the lens of Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory, revealing how inherited trauma and societal alienation shape the novella's protagonist. Set in 19th-century St. Petersburg, a city emblematic of Russia's conflicting forces of modernization and tradition, *White Nights* presents a narrator isolated both by his introspective nature and by broader social conditions. Through a post-memory perspective, this analysis investigates the protagonist's emotional detachment, romantic idealization, and eventual disillusionment, linking them to generational trauma and the archetype of the Russian "superfluous man." The protagonist's unrequited love for Nastenka is not merely a romantic fixation but a symptom of his inherited emotional burdens, reflecting how individuals inherit unresolved traumas and memories from previous generations, which shape their identities and interactions. The article further examines Dostoevsky's critical portrayal of the Romantic "dreamer," contrasting idealism with the grim realities of the city's alienated inhabitants. Ultimately, this reading of *White Nights* highlights the novella's enduring relevance, as Dostoevsky probes the complexities of memory, trauma, and the individual's place within society, resonating with modern themes of inherited psychological and social dislocation.

Keywords: *Post-memory, Dostoevsky, White Nights, trauma, dreams, memory, inheritance*

Introduction

"You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending." — C.S. Lewis. The impact of traumatic events is never been cared for couple of decades as not many people understand how significant the wound is. Even after one or two generation shifts, the influence of traumatic memory from the past still last and has transformed in such depth that the transmission is also suppressed.

Marianne Hirsch introduced the concept of post-memory referring to the relationship between the second generation and the trauma experienced by the first generation, particularly affected by atrocities such as war, displacement, or other forms of intense violence. Post-memory suggests that past traumas are indirectly remembered and relived by those who inherit them (Anastiadis, 2012). The next generation receives trauma through various ways either persona, familial, or collective transmissions.

Framework of post-memory is particularly resonant when applied to literature, where characters often navigate personal and collective histories through subconscious channels like dreams and fantasies. In *White Nights* (1848), Dostoevsky presents a narrator whose dreamlike existence and failed attempts at real connection speak to more than individual loneliness. Through a post-memory reading of the story, reveals layers of inherited emotional trauma, reflecting the broader societal context in which Dostoevsky was writing. This paper analyses the narrator's internal struggles as symptomatic of unresolved historical memory, shaped by his own experience and the lingering impact of collective trauma.

Literature Review

Dostoevsky's *White Nights* has often been analysed through various lenses, including existentialism, romanticism, and psychological realism. Scholars such as Frank (2010) emphasizes the exploration of human isolation and yearning for connection at individual level. The disconnected self generally struggles to open and to establish links toward the collective or cultural. On the other hand, some individuals might drown into closing the possibility of engagement with the environment causing the more complex suffering of the secluded personal. However, few studies have approached the text through the framework of post-memory and inherited trauma.

The notion of trauma inheritance has primarily been discussed in the context of Holocaust literature (Hirsch, 2012) and post-colonial studies (Craps, 2013). Applying this theoretical framework to 19th century Russian literature, and specifically to Dostoevsky's earlier work, offers new insights into how dreams and memories shape characters' lives and identities (Mortimer, 1956). While studies like Aho (2016) focus on Dostoevsky's later works such as *The Brothers Karamazov*, a post-memory perspective on *White Nights* allows an investigation into the latent emotional scars transmitted across generations.

White Nights was selected as the focus of this post-memory analysis due to its distinctive narrative structure and thematic exploration of emotional intimacy, soliloquy, and unfulfilled dreams, which resonate profoundly with the concept of inherited trauma. Unlike Dostoevsky's more widely analysed works, such as *Crime and Punishment* or *The Brothers Karamazov*, *White Nights* operates on a smaller,

more personal scale, offering a unique lens through which to examine the transmission of memory and emotion across generations. Its protagonist's poignant reflections and yearning for connection create a fertile ground for analysing how personal and collective histories intertwine, especially in the context of post-memory theory. Furthermore, the melancholic yet hopeful tone allows for a nuanced exploration of the interplay between inherited emotional burdens and the individual's search for identity and meaning. This focus makes *White Nights* particularly suitable for illuminating the subtle, often overlooked dimensions of post-memory.

Method

Post-memory: Key Concepts and Framework

Literary scholar Marianne Hirsch first introduced the concept of post-memory to describe generational relationship towards traumatic experiences of the previous generations; parents or grandparents. Although these individuals did not directly experience the traumatic events themselves, there have been obvious traces of a profound connection through stories, images, monuments, and behaviours inherited from the earlier generations. Post-memory focuses on how trauma is passed down through generations, not as an explicit memory but as an emotional and psychological inheritance.

In *the Generation of Post-memory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, Hirsch defines post-memory as a form of memory "characterized by generational distance and mediated by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch, 2012). The experience of post-memory differs from direct memory for it is transmitted indirectly, often through familial and cultural narratives, rather than through personal experience.

Trauma and Transmission

The central idea in Hirsch's work is that the trauma experienced by survivors of historical atrocities such as the Holocaust, war, displacement, and genocide does not vanish with time. Instead, it is passed on to future generations in complex and often unconscious ways. This transmission of trauma is not straightforward or literal but occurs through emotional, psychological, and cultural means. The second generation is often haunted by the unspoken or fragmented stories of the first generation as they try to make sense of a past that they did not live but that shapes their identity nonetheless.

Hirsch explains that post-memory is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (2012). While historians or outside observers might analyse traumatic events as distant occurrences, those experiencing post-memory engage with these events on a more visceral and emotional level. They internalize their ancestors' suffering, even if they

do not fully understand it or have direct access to the memories themselves. This internalization can manifest as dreams, emotional disconnection, or unconscious behaviours shaped by the past.

Imaginative and Affective Engagement

Since the second generation does not have direct access to the events that caused the trauma, they often use imagination and creative expression to fill in the gaps left by fragmented family stories and silences. Hirsch emphasizes the role of cultural and artistic practices in this process, stating that post-memory "is not an exact reproduction of the past but a reinvention and reconstruction of it" (2012). This reinvention can take many forms, including literature, visual art, film, and other forms of representation that help the second generation make sense of the inherited trauma.

A critical function of this imaginative engagement is allowing those experiencing post-memory to cope with the emotions and experiences that are otherwise difficult to process. Through creative acts, they can symbolically work through the unresolved grief, loss, and pain passed down to them (Mendez-Negrete, 2013). Hirsch suggests that post-memory operates through "imaginative investment and creation" and that this allows the second generation to "inhabit the past while distancing themselves from it" (2012). This balance between immersion in the past and necessary distance is crucial for psychological survival, as it allows the second generation to engage with the trauma without being completely overwhelmed by it.

Post-memory and Collective Identity

In addition to affecting individuals, post-memory also has implications for collective identity. Hirsch argues that post-memory shapes personal experiences and how communities and societies remember and deal with their traumatic pasts. Post-memory, in this sense, becomes a cultural phenomenon as well as a familial one. For example, the children of Holocaust survivors often inherit a collective sense of trauma that extends beyond their family histories to encompass the shared experiences of their community. This broader sense of post-memory "transforms familial and cultural transmission into a dynamic process of memory production" (Hirsch, 2012).

Through this dynamic process, the second generation contributes to the ongoing creation of memory. They are not passive recipients of their ancestors' stories but active participants in reconstructing and reshaping how they are told and understood. By engaging with their inherited trauma, individuals and communities can find ways to memorialize the past while also forging new paths forward (Wezer, 2010). In this way, post-memory plays a critical role in both

personal and collective healing processes, allowing the trauma of the past to be acknowledged and worked through, even if it cannot be fully resolved.

The Unconscious Transmission of Trauma

Hirsch also highlights how trauma can be passed down unconsciously, affecting individuals in ways they may not fully understand. This unconscious transmission often occurs in the form of emotional patterns, behaviours, or dreams, where the second generation re-experiences the trauma of their ancestors without knowing their origins. Hirsch notes that post-memory is "haunting," as it "comes to inhabit the minds and lives of those who have not directly lived through the trauma" (2012). This haunting quality often leaves the second generation feeling disconnected from the present as they grapple with the weight of a past they did not directly witness.

In summary, Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory provides a framework for understanding how trauma is passed from one generation to the next, shaping both personal identities and collective histories. Post-memory is not merely about remembering past events but about reliving and reimagining them, often through creative engagement. Through this lens, post-memory allows us to examine how trauma is inherited and how individuals can work through these emotional legacies, even when they cannot entirely escape their shadow. However, this framework is not without limitation in exploring the notion of memory and trauma. Post-memory is always on the indirectness of trauma transmission through long term process which familial, collective or cultural mode take place. The immersion of trauma passed down to next generation might not be clear and hard to interpret for its nature of changing and merging into one's personality.

Thematic-Symbolic Analysis

Analysis in this paper mainly employs combination of thematic and symbolic. First, a thematic analysis identified recurring motifs of displacement, seclusion, and unfulfilled desire, linking these to the broader dynamics of inherited memory presented in the text. All findings were recorded accordingly. Next, a symbolic analysis explored and paid attention to key symbols, such as the cityscape of St. Petersburg, the streets, the houses, the interplay of light and darkness, and other considerably significant symbols to uncover how they encapsulate intergenerational emotions and unresolved historical narratives.

In *White Nights*, the protagonist lives in a world of dreams, where his encounters with others, particularly with Nastenka, are suffused with fantasy and illusion. His inability to maintain a stable sense of reality reflects not only his exclusiveness by limiting contacts to people but also a more profound sense of inherited trauma. His repeated attempts to connect with Nastenka, only to be left in emotional turmoil, mirror the experience of post-memory: the unresolved pain

of the past constantly intrudes upon the present, making it difficult for the narrator to establish authentic relationships. The circumstances around the main character match the framework of post-memory on the ground of familial transmission by the grandmother figure. Fragments of memory about time when nurturing process occurred becomes valid and executable.

One key aspect of this post-memory reading is the function of dreams in the text. The narrator's dreams serve as a metaphor for his disconnection from the present, representing an emotional inheritance he cannot fully articulate. Just as the trauma experienced by previous generations remains unspoken yet ever-present, the narrator's dreamlike state reflects his unconscious absorption of past sorrows. In many ways, the narrator is trapped in a cycle of emotional inheritance, one in which the unprocessed traumas of the past manifest as fantasies of unattainable love and happiness.

The flow of the analysis in this research follows simple chart starting from the identification of words or expressions identical to emotions, specifically related to feeling of loss, suffering, or distress. Phrases and other descriptions either about self or environment which support and connect to significant traumatic events in the past. Next, identification is on the possible mode of transmissions to pass down memory and trauma. The last is identification and analysis on the current mode of living by the generation in influence of the memory from the past in completion of the concept of post-memory.

The setting further reinforces this thematic approach on post-memory. The city, St. Petersburg, often depicted in Dostoevsky's works as a city of duality, represents both a dream and a nightmare for the narrator. The nocturnal habit of wanderings through the city streets mirrors internal conflict between longing for connection and an ingrained sense of marginalisation of the main character. Like the narrator's memories, the city is a space of unresolved tension between past and present. The city is one of the most significant loci of traumatic past as the historical documentation kept the record on how the place become the witness of such totalitarian enforcement by the authorities. To consider, refer how Auschwitz is the iconic link to mediate memory of the Holocaust during violent years of Germany.

Historical and Cultural Context of White Nights

1. *Dostoevsky and 19th-Century Russian Society*

Published in 1848, *White Nights* was written during a period of significant political and social change in Russia. Fyodor Dostoevsky's early works, including *White Nights*, were deeply influenced by the turbulent socio-political atmosphere of 19th-century Russia, where class divisions, rapid urbanization, and the stirrings of revolutionary thought were beginning to challenge traditional structures. This period in Russian history was marked by the decline

of serfdom (officially abolished in 1861) and a growing tension between the intelligentsia and the ruling autocracy. Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg, where the novella is set, reflects these socio-economic tensions. The city symbolized Russia's modernization under Peter the Great but was infamous for its poverty, squalor, and hostility. As Dostoevsky describes it, the city is a place of sharp contrasts: the wealthy, modern facades of the aristocracy are juxtaposed with the shadowy, rundown corners inhabited by the poor and forgotten.

The unnamed narrator of *White Nights* is part of this urban landscape, representing the growing sense of confined space experienced by individuals in modern cities. His sense of disaffection is compounded by his dreamer-like existence, which distances him from his time's social realities and political movements. The sense of not being in the large group or the commons recurring in the *White Nights* represents notable importance of such psychology or internal mind of a person. Emotional disconnection from the world around the main character reflects the broader estrangement of the individual in an increasingly industrialized and impersonal society.

In her exploration of Dostoevsky's early work, Frank (2002) notes that *White Nights* is "imbued with the social concerns and existential questions that would come to define Dostoevsky's later works," particularly his concern with the plight of the individual in a rapidly changing world (p. 45). The narrator's physical and emotional separation mirrors the same feeling of being placed in limitation of interaction with the outer world, where many feels in Russia's growing urban centres.

2. *The 'Dreamer' Archetype in Russian Literature*

The "dreamer" was a familiar archetype in 19th-century Russian literature, particularly within the fantastical or novel of consciousness genre. These dreamer characters, often young men, are disconnected from reality and prone to retreating into their imaginations or fantasies. They are typically passive and introspective, unable or unwilling to engage meaningfully with the world around them. Dostoevsky's narrator in *White Nights* is a quintessential example of this archetype. His nocturnal wanderings through St. Petersburg and his unrequited love for Nastenka reflect the internal world of the dreamer, who is more at home in his fantasies than in reality. This literary tradition of the dreamer has roots in the works of earlier Russian writers like Nikolai Gogol. However, Dostoevsky gives it a psychological depth that would define his later, more famous works.

The novella's title, *White Nights*, refers to a natural phenomenon experienced in St. Petersburg during the summer, when the sun barely sets, creating long, dreamlike twilights. This setting reinforces the narrator's sense of disconnection from reality, as his world becomes perpetual twilight, neither

fully day nor night. As Jackson (1993) points out, "The white nights are not just a backdrop, but a metaphor for the narrator's ambiguous existence, caught between the real world and the world of dreams" (p. 62).

3. *The Role of St. Petersburg in Russian Literature*

St. Petersburg plays a pivotal role in *White Nights*, functioning almost as a character. The city symbolized Russia's push toward Westernization and modernization under Peter the Great. However, by the 19th century, it had become a site of profound contradictions: it was both the centre of political power and a place of great poverty and inequality. Dostoevsky's portrayal of the city reflects this duality as his narrator navigates its streets with a sense of detachment and melancholy.

In Russian literature, St. Petersburg has often been portrayed as cold and alienating. As Bethea (1994) notes, "For many Russian writers, St. Petersburg was a city of contradictions: it was both the gateway to the West and a symbol of Russia's own internal struggles" (p. 39). This duality is apparent in *White Nights*, where the city's geography mirrors the narrator's internal state. The deserted streets and mysterious shadows reflect his personal realm, while the fleeting moments of light symbolize his brief encounters with hope and connection.

Dostoevsky's use of the city as a setting also highlights the broader social and psychological dislocation experienced by many in urban environments. As the narrator wanders through the city at night, he encounters figures who are as lost and disconnected as he is, reinforcing the theme of seclusion that pervades the novella. Like the narrator's mind, the city is a labyrinth of memories and dreams leading nowhere.

4. *Romanticism and the Influence of European Literature*

Dostoevsky's *White Nights* is also heavily influenced by the Romantic tradition, particularly in its exploration of unrequited love and the inner emotional life of the protagonist. The novella shares similarities with European Romantic works, especially those of Goethe and Byron, which emphasize individual emotion, the sublime, and the experience of being overwhelmed by powerful feelings.

For example, the narrator's idealization of Nastenka echoes the Romantic trope of the unattainable love object. This figure exists more as a projection of the dreamer's desires than a natural person. His emotional suffering when Nastenka reunites with her lover is similarly Romantic, underscoring the tragic, unfulfilled love theme. This theme is prevalent in much European Romantic literature, from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* to Byron's *Childe*

Harold's Pilgrimage.

However, while *White Nights* draws on these Romantic themes, Dostoevsky's treatment of them is more critical than celebratory. The narrator's inability to act or engage with the world around him is portrayed as a weakness rather than a strength, and his retreat into fantasy is ultimately shown to be futile (Florovski, 1996). This critique of Romantic idealism anticipates Dostoevsky's later, more mature works, where he explores the dangers of living in a world of abstraction disconnected from reality.

5. *Social Class and the 'Superfluous Man'*

One of the underlying themes in *White Nights* is the concept of the 'superfluous man,' a figure that emerged in Russian literature during the 19th century. This figure, usually an educated and intelligent man, feels out of place in society and cannot find a meaningful role or purpose. The 'superfluous man' is often marked by his passivity, cynicism, and disillusionment, traits evident in *White Nights*'s narrator.

The narrator's inability to engage meaningfully with society or form lasting relationships is a hallmark of this archetype. His introspection and emotional paralysis render him 'superfluous' because he cannot contribute to the social or political life around him. As Leatherbarrow (2005) observes, "The superfluous man is a product of his historical moment, shaped by a society in transition yet unable to find a place within it" (p. 55). In *White Nights*, Dostoevsky presents the narrator as a man adrift, unable to reconcile his internal world with the external demands of society.

White Nights is a product of its time, reflecting the historical and cultural tensions of mid-19th century Russia. The novella's exploration of urban distancing, romantic idealism, and the 'superfluous man' archetype provides insight into individuals' psychological and social challenges in a rapidly changing world (Beveridge, 2009). By situating Dostoevsky's work within its historical context, we can better understand the themes of separation, memory, and emotional dislocation that pervade the narrative.

Discussion

Dostoevsky's *White Nights* provides fertile ground for post-memory reading, primarily by exploring the protagonist's dreamlike existence and difficulty forming meaningful connections with others. This section examines how the narrator's remoteness, idealization of Nastenka, and his relationship with the city of St. Petersburg encapsulate the unresolved traumas passed down to him. This analysis will focus on how the narrator's experiences can be understood as manifestations of inherited emotional and psychological burdens, highlighting how post-memory shapes his interactions with the world around him.

Dreams and Emotional Displacement

The dream element is significant as the narration contains more than forty times using the base word and the derivatives. The narrator's descriptions of his life indicate a deep sense of emotional dislocation and unreality. He refers to himself as a "dreamer," much of the novella is suffused with a sense of unreality as the boundaries between dream and waking life blur. The narrator says, "*I am a dreamer; I have so little real life that I look upon such moments as this now, as so rare, that I cannot help going over such moments again in my dreams. I shall be dreaming of you all night, a whole week, a whole year.*" (p. 12).

This statement introduces the reader to his fragmented identity and suggests that his inability to engage with the present moment entirely is symptomatic of deeper psychological scars. The intensity of dreaming as daily routine indicates the problematic individual. In the earlier page, the narrator mentions, "And *I do nothing but dream every day ... I make up regular romances in my dreams*" (p. 10). In common understanding, dream is something special, however when dream becomes a regular, the specialty is challenged. Such depiction strongly led to the displacement of meaning.

The narrator's dreams are not simply individual fantasies but can be read as a form of collective memory passed down through unspoken traumas. Post-memory theory suggests that the traumas of past generations can become ingrained in the psyche of subsequent generations, often without direct knowledge of the original events. As Hirsch (2012) argues, "post-memory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (p. 22).

In *White Nights*, the narrator's emotional detachment can be interpreted as a manifestation of post-memory, as he is burdened by inherited emotional pain that he cannot fully comprehend or articulate. The strong expression supports this idea by reading "*Let me tell you that in these corners live strange people—dreamers. The dreamer—if you want an exact definition—is not a human being, but a creature of an intermediate sort.*" (p. 16). He pictures the self as uncommon and even further of being not a human. It is general truth that people do dreaming, yet he meant something else saying that a dreamer is not human.

Throughout the novella, the narrator's experiences seem to exist in a liminal space between reality and fantasy. In the space of living of a house, somebody generally feels comfort, yet the narration expresses differently "*why I felt so uncomfortable in it. And in perplexity I scanned my grimy green walls, my ceiling covered with a spider's web, ... I looked over all my furniture, examined every chair, wondering whether the trouble lay there. I looked at the window, but it was all in vain ...*" (p.6). The stress or the traumatic sense is really intense through the diction.

His wanderings in St. Petersburg mirror his internal state of displacement: *"I took long walks, succeeding, as I usually did, in quite forgetting where I was. —so strong was the effect of nature upon a half-sick townsman like me, almost stifling between city walls."* (p.7). The city, for the narrator, is a repository of unprocessed memories that resurface during his wanderings, reinforcing the notion that his emotional state is shaped by inherited trauma. Dreaming or imagination is blended with the reality of space as seen in *"I know the houses too."*

As I walk along, they seem to run forward in the streets to look out at me from every window, and almost to say: "Good-morning! How do you do? I am quite well, thank God, and I am to have a new story in May," or, "How are you? I am being redecorated to-morrow;" or, "I was almost burnt down and had such a fright," and so on." (p. 5). Normally, people do not talk to buildings which likely may happen in dreams.

Nastenka as a Projection of Longing and Loss

Nastenka, the young woman with whom the narrator becomes infatuated, represents more than just an object of romantic desire. She embodies the narrator's yearning for connection but also serves as a mirror that reflects his inability to move beyond the traumas of the past. Nastenka's story of unfulfilled love resonates with the narrator's deep sense of loss and longing, which he may not fully understand. The narrator's idealization of Nastenka can be read as a defence mechanism, a way of protecting himself from the emotional pain that he has inherited.

He projects his fantasies of happiness and fulfilment onto her, as evidenced by his description of her: *"Now that I sit beside you and talk to you it is strange for me to think of the future, for in the future—there is loneliness again, again this musty, useless life; and what shall I have to dream of when I have been so happy in reality beside you!"* (p.22). This idealization suggests that Nastenka is not a fully realized person in the narrator's eyes but a symbol of his unattainable desires. His inability to see her as a natural person underscores his disconnection from reality, which is symptomatic of his inherited emotional trauma.

"Oh, Nastenka! you know it will be sad to be left alone, utterly alone, and to have not even anything to regret—nothing, absolutely nothing ... for all that you have lost, all that, all was nothing, stupid, simple nullity, there has been nothing but dreams!" (p.24)

Furthermore, the narrator's relationship with Nastenka reflects the cyclical nature of post-memory. Just as the traumas of past generations are passed down and relived by subsequent generations, the narrator's emotional patterns are repetitive and self-destructive. His initial hope for connection with Nastenka quickly turns to despair when he realizes she loves another man. This moment of

realization mirrors the experience of post-memory, in which the individual is forced to confront the unprocessed pain of the past: "*Do you know how far you have reconciled me to myself? Do you know now that I shall not think so ill of myself, as I have at some moments? Do you know that, maybe, I shall leave off grieving over the crime and sin of my life?*" (p.23).

Time is another significant element to observe, between the past and present and the trajectory using the character of Nastenka as the person he can talk much, "*Do you know that I am forced now to celebrate the anniversary of my own sensations, the anniversary of that which was once so sweet, which never existed in reality—for this anniversary is kept in memory of those same foolish, shadowy dreams—and to do this because those foolish dreams are no more, because I have nothing to earn them with; you know even dreams do not come for nothing!*" (p.23).

Nastenka becomes the field of expression for him to clearly project feeling of loss and longing which are the dominant part of the trauma. See the statement "*I was once happy in my own way? I love to build up my present in harmony with the irrevocable past, [...] What memories they are! To remember [...] Some more years will pass, and after them will come gloomy solitude; then will come old age trembling on its crutch, and after it misery and desolation*" (p. 24). The interplay between the characters is a showcase of fragmented and scattered traumatic symptoms.

The City as a Space of Memory and Trauma

St. Petersburg, as portrayed in *White Nights*, is more than just a backdrop for the narrator's wanderings. The city becomes a character in the story, representing the weight of memory and trauma that the narrator cannot escape. His descriptions of the city are suffused with melancholy and dislocation, reflecting his internal struggles. He says, "*I have already two or three such places in Petersburg. I once shed tears over memories ... like you.... Who knows, perhaps you were weeping ten minutes ago over some memory.... But, forgive me, I have forgotten myself again.*" (p.12). This description aligns with Hirsch's (2012) concept of post-memory, in which the individual is haunted by memories that are not directly their own but are profoundly felt.

The narrator's nighttime walks through the city can be interpreted as an attempt to navigate the landscape of his psyche, which is filled with unresolved emotional traumas. The city's dark and labyrinthine streets serve as a metaphor for the complexities of post-memory, in which the individual is trapped in a cycle of reliving the past. As Craps (2013) notes in his discussion of postcolonial trauma, "the experience of trauma is not confined to the individual; it permeates the social and cultural fabric, shaping the collective memory of a people" (p. 45).

In *White Nights*, the city of St. Petersburg becomes a symbol of this collective memory, embodying the emotional scars of the narrator and the society in which he lives, “*And we parted. I walked about all night; I could not make up my mind to go home.*” (p.13). It is unique to have explicit narration of such deep feeling of trauma unless the self cannot bear the pain therefore no reason to hold it. *Why is it that whole sleepless nights pass like a flash in inexhaustible gladness and happiness, and when the dawn gleams rosy at the window and daybreak floods the gloomy room with uncertain, fantastic light, as in Petersburg, our dreamer, worn out and exhausted, flings himself on his bed and drops asleep with thrills of delight in his morbidly overwrought spirit, and with a weary sweet ache in his heart?* (p.21).

Furthermore, the city's duality—the contrast between its bright, bustling days and quiet, eerie nights—mirrors the narrator's internal conflict between his conscious and unconscious mind. During the day, the city seems distant and impersonal, much like the narrator's attempts to engage with the present. However, at night, the city transforms into a space of dreams and memories, where the past intrudes upon the present. The narrator's inability to escape this cycle reflects the persistence of post-memory: “*What made me?... But you were alone; that gentleman was too insolent; it's night. You must admit that it was a duty....*” or the other statement, “*And yet my night was better than my day! This was how it happened.*” (p.7).

Inherited Trauma and the Cycle of Isolation

The narrator's ultimate fate in *White Nights*, his return to self-exclusive space after his brief encounter with Nastenka, reinforces the idea that unresolved trauma perpetuates cycles of emotional disconnection. His brief hope for a future with Nastenka is shattered when she reunites with her former lover, leaving the narrator to retreat again into his world of dreams and fantasies. This outcome reflects the inescapable nature of post-memory, in which the emotional burdens of the past are continually relived in the present.

Consider the statement “*Thank you, yes, thank you for that love! For it will live in my memory like a sweet dream which lingers long after awakening’ [...] the memory of you will be exalted by a feeling of everlasting gratitude which will never be effaced from my soul.... I will treasure that memory: I will be true to it, I will not betray it, I will not betray my heart: it is too constant*” (p.50).

The narrator's final reflections on his experience reveal a deep sense of resignation and acceptance of his detached circumstance: “*It has grown dark in the room; his soul is sad and empty; the whole kingdom of fancies drops to pieces about him, drops to pieces without a trace, without a sound, floats away like a dream, and he cannot himself remember what he was dreaming.*” (p. 19) and other expression “*Such fondness at certain moments makes the heart cold and the soul heavy.*” (p.36). This passage encapsulates the central theme of post-memory: the idea that the

trauma of the past is not only remembered but internalized and perpetuated by future generations. *You see, I am alone.... I don't even know how to talk to them.* (p.9).

In post-memory theory, the narrator's failure to establish a lasting connection with Nastenka can be understood as a reflection of his inability to break free from the emotional patterns inherited from previous generations. His dreamlike existence, his idealization of Nastenka, and his disaffection from the city all point to a more profound sense of inherited trauma that he cannot fully comprehend or escape. *"I felt afraid of being left alone, and for three whole days I wandered about the town in profound dejection, not knowing what to do with myself."* (p.4) The ultimate expression of loneliness express despair- *"Absolutely without any history! I have lived, as they say, keeping myself to myself, that is, utterly alone—alone, entirely alone. Do you know what it means to be alone?"* (p.14). *My heart was full: I tried to speak, but I could not.* (p.42)

Dostoevsky critiques the rigid societal structures of 19th century Russia through the protagonist's inability to connect meaningfully with others, framing this limited interaction as both a personal struggle and a reflection of collective separation. The novella's dreamlike narrative serves as a metaphor for the disconnection between individual aspirations and societal expectations, illustrating how inherited trauma can arise not only from familial but also from cultural memory. This critique sets *White Nights* apart where the focus shifts to moral dilemmas and theological inquiries of personal existence.

In comparison to other literary works, such as Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* or Camus's *The Stranger*, which also address themes of alienation, Dostoevsky's approach is distinct in its empathetic portrayal of the protagonist's longing for connection. While Kafka and Camus often depict alienation as an existential inevitability, Dostoevsky intertwines it with societal critique, suggesting that solitude is a symptom of broader systemic failures.

Additionally, the symbolic interplay of light and darkness and its fragmented narrative structure uniquely encapsulate the disruption of memory and identity inherent in post-memory theory. This layered analysis highlights the distinctive ability of *White Nights* to illuminate the personal and societal dimensions of inherited trauma, making it a compelling choice for this framework.

Conclusion

In *White Nights*, Dostoevsky crafts a poignant narrative that bridges the ethereal and the historical, examining how individuals grapple with dreams and unfulfilled desires while burdened by inherited traumas and societal seclusion. By applying Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory, this analysis has illuminated the psychological depths of Dostoevsky's protagonist, whose emotional

disconnection and fixation on unrequited love reflect more than personal romanticism; they mirror the estrangement and cultural shifts of 19th-century Russian society. The protagonist's experiences reveal an inherited burden of disillusionment—he is shaped by an environment that oscillates between grandeur and despair, progress and decay. This environment influences his identity and hinders his ability to engage meaningfully with others, exemplifying the traits of the Russian 'superfluous man' whose inner world is marked by separation of individuals and introspection.

Through his nocturnal wandering in St. Petersburg, the protagonist embodies the dreamer archetype typical in Russian Romantic literature, yet Dostoevsky's treatment of the dreamer's escapism is critical. The protagonist's failure to act meaningfully, in reality, is presented not as a consequence of personal failing alone but as a reflection of societal conditions that perpetuate disconnection. His unrequited love for Nastenka and his inevitable return to his personal realm underscore the cycle of idealization and disillusionment that shapes his experience, a recurring theme in Romanticism.

However, this article has shown that Dostoevsky transcends Romantic idealism by questioning the dangers of living detached from reality and foreshadowing themes of trauma and inherited suffering that would define modern psychological and literary studies. Ultimately, *White Nights* invites readers to explore the liminal spaces between dreams and reality, individual and society, memory and post-memory. Dostoevsky's portrayal of love, introverted self, and societal estrangement continues to resonate, encouraging reflection on how personal and collective pasts shape present identities and emotional landscapes.

Reflecting on the contemporary relevance of these themes, the analysis of *White Nights* resonates deeply with modern post-trauma literature, which frequently grapples with questions of inherited memory, displacement, and the enduring effects of societal estrangement. In an era marked by increasing awareness of generational trauma, whether stemming from war, displacement, or systemic injustice, offers timeless insights into the interplay between individual and collective memory. Dostoevsky's empathetic narrative reminds readers that the longing for connection and meaning transcends historical and cultural boundaries, underscoring the enduring human struggle to reconcile the weight of the past with the possibilities of the present.

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