

Idealised Love and Emotional Fragility in *White Nights*: A Study of Romantic Illusion

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Received: 13/05/2026

Accepted: 26/06/2026

Published: 09/07/2026

Abstract: Fyodor Dostoevsky's novella *White Nights* (1848) presents a profound exploration of romantic idealism and the inherent fragility of human emotions through the lens of a transient encounter in St. Petersburg. This paper examines the central protagonist, the Dreamer, whose idealised vision of love serves as both a refuge from his isolated existence and a catalyst for emotional vulnerability. By juxtaposing the Dreamer's fantastical aspirations with the grounded reality embodied by Nastenka, Dostoevsky illustrates the tension between romantic illusion and the sobering demands of genuine human connection. The study delves into how the novella portrays emotional fragility not merely as a personal failing but as an intrinsic component of the romantic temperament. Through detailed textual analysis, this research highlights Dostoevsky's early philosophical concerns with isolation, the redemptive potential of love, and the psychological costs of retreating into an imagined world. The findings suggest that *White Nights* functions as a critical commentary on the perils of romantic escapism, offering insights into the emotional architecture of characters trapped between desire and disillusionment. Ultimately, the paper argues that Dostoevsky's depiction of idealised love reveals profound truths about the human condition, where the fragility of emotions both enables profound connection and precipitates inevitable heartbreak. This analysis contributes to broader discussions in literary studies concerning the representation of psychological interiority in nineteenth-century Russian prose and the enduring relevance of Dostoevsky's insights into the nature of romantic longing.

Keywords: Romantic idealism, emotional fragility, romantic illusion, psychological realism.

Cite this article: Gayathri, V. (2026). AI-Assisted Multimodal Transformation Of Selected E-books For Reading Comprehension. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 3(7),1-4.

Introduction

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *White Nights* stands as one of the most poignant and introspective works in nineteenth-century Russian literature. Published in 1848, the novella captures the essence of romantic longing through the experiences of an unnamed protagonist known simply as the Dreamer. Set against the luminous backdrop of St. Petersburg's white nights, the narrative unfolds as a deeply personal meditation on love, isolation, and the human propensity for idealisation. The story's deceptively simple plot—a four-night conversation between the Dreamer and a young woman named Nastenka—betrays its profound psychological depth. Through this encounter, Dostoevsky explores the intricate interplay between idealised love and emotional fragility, revealing how romantic illusions can both sustain and undermine the human spirit.

The Dreamer embodies the quintessential romantic idealist. Living a life of profound solitude, he constructs elaborate fantasies that shield him from the harsh realities of social alienation. His chance meeting with Nastenka momentarily disrupts this pattern of withdrawal, offering a glimpse of genuine connection. Yet this encounter also exposes the fragility of his emotional world. When Nastenka ultimately chooses her absent lover over the Dreamer's fervent declarations, the Dreamer is left to confront the painful disparity between his romantic visions and the unyielding logic of lived experience. This paper contends that *White Nights* functions as a sophisticated study of romantic illusion, demonstrating how

idealised love functions as both a protective mechanism and a source of profound vulnerability.

The significance of this analysis extends beyond the specific text to encompass broader questions about the representation of emotion in literature. Dostoevsky's early work anticipates the psychological realism that would characterise his later masterpieces, such as *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. By focusing on the internal life of the Dreamer, *White Nights* anticipates modern literary explorations of consciousness and desire. The novella's treatment of emotional fragility resonates with contemporary understandings of attachment theory and the psychological consequences of idealisation. Through close reading and contextual analysis, this study illuminates how Dostoevsky uses the white nights of St. Petersburg as both setting and metaphor for the liminal space between illusion and reality.

The Dreamer and the Architecture of Idealised Love

The protagonist of *White Nights* remains nameless throughout the narrative, a deliberate choice that underscores his representative status as a particular type of romantic personality. Known only as the Dreamer, he inhabits a world constructed almost entirely from his own imaginings. His daily existence consists of solitary walks through the streets of St. Petersburg, during which he populates the city with invented companions and dramatic scenarios. This practice of imaginative projection reveals

the depth of his isolation while simultaneously demonstrating his creative capacity to transform solitude into a form of companionship. The Dreamer's idealisation of love emerges directly from this habit of mind. When he encounters Nastenka, he immediately invests the meeting with transcendent significance, viewing her as the fulfilment of all his romantic yearnings.

Dostoevsky carefully constructs the Dreamer's character through a series of revelations that expose both his charm and his limitations. The Dreamer possesses a poetic sensibility and genuine emotional depth, qualities that make him capable of profound feeling. Yet these same qualities render him unprepared for the complexities of actual romantic relationships. His declarations of love to Nastenka overflow with literary allusions and elevated rhetoric, suggesting that his understanding of love derives primarily from books rather than lived experience. This literary inheritance positions the Dreamer within a long tradition of romantic heroes who mistake textual representations of love for the thing itself. The idealised love he offers Nastenka is therefore less a response to her particular qualities than a projection of his own needs and fantasies.

The psychological mechanism underlying the Dreamer's idealisation merits careful examination. His emotional fragility stems in part from his complete identification with his romantic self-image. When Nastenka appears to reciprocate his feelings, even momentarily, the Dreamer experiences an ecstasy that borders on dissolution of self. This response indicates that his sense of identity has become dependent upon the romantic narrative he has constructed. The fragility of this construction becomes apparent when the narrative shifts and Nastenka withdraws her affection. The Dreamer's subsequent collapse into despair reveals the extent to which his emotional stability has been predicated upon the maintenance of his romantic illusion. In this regard, Dostoevsky presents idealised love not as a benign form of escapism but as a dangerous form of emotional investment that leaves the idealist vulnerable to devastating disappointment.

Nastenka and the Embodiment of Emotional Fragility

While the Dreamer represents the active agent of idealisation, Nastenka embodies the emotional consequences of being the object of such idealisation. Her character is rendered with remarkable psychological nuance for a work of Dostoevsky's early period. Nastenka is neither a passive recipient of the Dreamer's affections nor a simple symbol of romantic fulfilment. Instead, she emerges as a young woman navigating her own emotional vulnerabilities within the constraints of her social position. Her story of waiting for a lover who promised to return after a year exposes her own capacity for idealisation. The parallel between Nastenka's situation and the Dreamer's romantic hopes creates a layered exploration of how individuals of different temperaments respond to the gap between expectation and reality.

Nastenka's emotional fragility manifests in her oscillation between hope and despair regarding her absent lover. Her decision to confide in the Dreamer indicates a genuine need for connection that transcends the specific romantic attachment she maintains. Yet her ultimate rejection of the Dreamer's love reveals the limits of her emotional availability. Nastenka's fragility lies not in weakness of character but in the divided nature of her affections. She cannot fully commit to the Dreamer because her heart remains partially engaged with the memory of her first love. This division creates a form of emotional paralysis that Dostoevsky presents with great

sensitivity. The novella suggests that emotional fragility often arises from the human capacity to feel multiple, sometimes contradictory, attachments simultaneously.

The relationship between Nastenka and the Dreamer illustrates how idealised love can place unfair pressure on its object. The Dreamer's intense emotional investment demands a reciprocal intensity that Nastenka cannot provide without betraying her own history and feelings. Her decision to leave with her returning lover represents not a rejection of the Dreamer's worth but an acknowledgment of her own emotional limitations. Dostoevsky refuses to cast either character as villain or victim. Instead, he presents both as participants in a tragic mismatch of emotional capacities. Nastenka's fragility is thus shown to be protective rather than merely destructive—a recognition that genuine emotional health requires acknowledging the boundaries of one's feelings rather than forcing them into a predetermined romantic script.

Romantic Illusion as Narrative and Psychological Construct

The white nights of St. Petersburg function throughout the novella as both literal setting and symbolic framework for the exploration of romantic illusion. These nights of perpetual twilight create a liminal temporal space in which ordinary distinctions between day and night, waking and dreaming, become blurred. Dostoevsky exploits this atmospheric condition to suggest that the romantic imagination operates most powerfully in moments when reality itself appears suspended. The Dreamer's conversations with Nastenka occur during these white nights, reinforcing the sense that their relationship exists outside ordinary temporal constraints. Yet the return of normal daylight coincides with the collapse of the romantic possibility they have entertained, underscoring the ephemeral nature of the emotional space they briefly inhabit.

Dostoevsky's narrative technique reinforces the theme of romantic illusion through the structure of the novella itself. The first-person narration grants the reader privileged access to the Dreamer's consciousness while simultaneously revealing the distortions of that consciousness. The Dreamer's tendency to interpret every gesture and word from Nastenka as confirmation of his romantic hopes becomes increasingly apparent to the reader, even as it remains invisible to the protagonist himself. This ironic distance creates a complex reading experience in which sympathy for the Dreamer's emotional intensity coexists with recognition of his self-deception. The narrative thus enacts the very process of idealisation it describes, drawing readers into the emotional logic of romantic illusion before exposing its limitations.

The philosophical implications of this narrative strategy are significant. Dostoevsky suggests that romantic illusion is not merely a personal psychological trait but a fundamental aspect of human consciousness. The capacity to project meaning and significance onto the world, to transform chance encounters into narratives of destiny, represents both the glory and the danger of the human imagination. *White Nights* presents this capacity without moralising, allowing the reader to experience both the beauty of the Dreamer's vision and the pain of its inevitable collision with reality. The novella's refusal to resolve this tension in favour of either romanticism or realism constitutes one of its most enduring contributions to literary thought.

Emotional Fragility in the Context of Dostoevsky's Early Oeuvre

White Nights occupies a crucial position in Dostoevsky's literary development. Written during the period immediately preceding his arrest and exile, the novella displays the psychological acuity that would characterise his mature work while retaining the sentimental elements of his earliest fiction. The treatment of emotional fragility in *White Nights* anticipates the more extreme psychological states explored in later novels. The Dreamer's despair after Nastenka's departure prefigures the existential crises of Raskolnikov and the Underground Man, though in a more muted register. By focusing on the relatively ordinary disappointment of unrequited love, Dostoevsky demonstrates that emotional fragility is not limited to dramatic or pathological cases but constitutes a universal human condition.

The novella also reveals Dostoevsky's evolving understanding of the relationship between isolation and romantic longing. The Dreamer's solitude is not merely circumstantial but existential; he lacks the social connections that might provide alternative sources of meaning and support. This isolation makes him particularly susceptible to the appeal of idealised love, which promises to remedy his loneliness through a single transformative relationship. Dostoevsky's insight lies in recognising that such a promise is illusory precisely because it places impossible demands upon human connection. The emotional fragility of the Dreamer stems from his expectation that love can serve as a complete solution to the problem of existence rather than one limited, though significant, aspect of human life.

Critics have often noted the autobiographical resonances in *White Nights*. Dostoevsky's own experiences of isolation during his early years in St. Petersburg undoubtedly inform the portrait of the Dreamer. Yet the novella transcends personal confession through its universalisation of the romantic dilemma. The Dreamer's story becomes representative of a particular modern sensibility characterised by heightened self-consciousness and diminished capacity for ordinary social integration. This modern condition, Dostoevsky suggests, creates ideal circumstances for the flourishing of romantic illusions while simultaneously guaranteeing their eventual collapse. The emotional fragility depicted in *White Nights* is thus historically specific even as it touches upon timeless aspects of human nature.

The Dialectic of Illusion and Reality

The central philosophical tension in *White Nights* revolves around the relationship between romantic illusion and the demands of reality. Dostoevsky refuses to present this relationship as a simple opposition between falsehood and truth. Instead, the novella suggests that romantic illusion serves important psychological functions even as it distorts perception. The Dreamer's idealised love provides him with a sense of purpose and emotional richness that his ordinary life lacks. Without this capacity for idealisation, he might succumb entirely to despair or apathy. The fragility of his emotional world is therefore double-edged: it exposes him to profound suffering when his illusions are shattered, but it also enables moments of genuine beauty and connection.

Nastenka's perspective offers a necessary counterpoint to the Dreamer's romantic absolutism. Her willingness to accept the return of her imperfect lover rather than pursue the ideal offered by the Dreamer represents a form of emotional pragmatism. This pragmatism is not presented as superior to romantic idealism but as

an alternative mode of navigating emotional life. The novella's conclusion, in which the Dreamer returns to his solitary existence with only the memory of the white nights, suggests that the value of romantic experience may lie as much in its memory as in its realisation. The emotional fragility that prevents the Dreamer from easily recovering from his disappointment also preserves the intensity of his experience, ensuring that the encounter with Nastenka will remain a permanent source of meaning.

This dialectic between illusion and reality finds expression in the novella's treatment of time. The *White Nights* represent a suspension of ordinary temporal progression, a period in which past and future collapse into an eternal present of romantic possibility. When normal time resumes, the romantic moment is revealed as having been always already past. The Dreamer's final recognition that he must continue his solitary life, enriched but not transformed by his brief encounter with love, encapsulates the novella's bittersweet wisdom. Emotional fragility, in this reading, is the price paid for the capacity to experience moments of transcendent connection. Dostoevsky offers no easy consolation, but he affirms the value of the emotional intensity that makes such fragility inevitable.

Conclusion

White Nights emerges from this analysis as a remarkably sophisticated exploration of the relationship between idealised love and emotional fragility. Through the figure of the Dreamer, Dostoevsky examines how romantic illusion functions as both a response to isolation and a source of psychological vulnerability. The novella's portrayal of Nastenka demonstrates that emotional fragility affects not only the idealist but also the object of idealisation, creating complex ethical and emotional dynamics. The atmospheric and narrative strategies of the text reinforce its thematic concerns, using the white nights of St. Petersburg to create a space in which the tension between illusion and reality can be fully explored.

The significance of *White Nights* within Dostoevsky's oeuvre and within the broader tradition of romantic literature lies in its refusal to resolve the contradictions it presents. The novella neither condemns romantic idealisation as mere escapism nor celebrates it as the highest form of human experience. Instead, it presents idealised love as an essential but dangerous capacity of the human imagination, one that both sustains and threatens emotional equilibrium. This nuanced perspective anticipates the psychological complexity of Dostoevsky's later works while establishing the thematic foundations for his lifelong exploration of desire, suffering, and redemption.

The emotional fragility depicted in *White Nights* continues to resonate with contemporary readers because it speaks to universal aspects of human experience. The desire to transform ordinary encounters into narratives of destiny, the vulnerability that accompanies profound emotional investment, and the pain of reconciling romantic hopes with the limitations of actual relationships remain central concerns of modern consciousness. Dostoevsky's achievement in *White Nights* lies in rendering these experiences with a combination of poetic intensity and psychological acuity that makes the novella an enduring contribution to our understanding of the emotional life. The study of romantic illusion in this text thus offers not only literary insight but also a form of emotional knowledge that continues to illuminate the complexities of human longing.

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