



# An Existential Study of Isolation, Unrequited Love, and the Search for Meaning in *White Nights*

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**Abstract**— This paper examines *White Nights* by Fyodor Dostoevsky through an existentialist framework, focusing on isolation, meaninglessness, and the fragile construction of human connection. The unnamed Dreamer, who exists on the margins of social life, embodies a form of existential alienation shaped by his retreat into imagination and his inability to engage with reality. His brief but emotionally intense relationship with Nastenka becomes a crucial site for examining the possibility of meaning within an otherwise indifferent world. While the Dreamer interprets love as an idealized, self-contained experience, the novella exposes the limitations of such a perspective by revealing its roots in passivity and emotional detachment. In contrast, Nastenka's eventual movement toward a real and reciprocal relationship highlights the importance of action and lived experience in overcoming isolation. The paper argues that the text challenges the romanticization of unrequited love and presents meaning as ephemeral, contingent upon authentic engagement rather than fantasy. Ultimately, *White Nights* suggests that although moments of connection may be transient, they remain central to the human effort to create meaning in an uncertain existence.



**Keywords**— Alienation, existentialism, imagination and reality, *White Nights*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*White Nights* by Fyodor Dostoevsky offers a subtle yet profound exploration of human isolation and the longing for emotional connection within the modern urban environment. Set in St. Petersburg, the novella centers on an unnamed narrator, commonly referred to as the Dreamer, whose existence is defined by solitude, introspection, and an excessive reliance on imagination. His chance encounter with Nastenka initiates a brief but emotionally intense relationship that disrupts his habitual detachment from reality. However, this connection ultimately proves transient, returning him to a state of isolation that underscores the instability of human fulfillment.

The thematic concerns of the text align closely with existentialist thought, particularly in its treatment of alienation, meaninglessness, and the individual's struggle to construct purpose in an indifferent world. Existentialism, as articulated by thinkers such as Jean-Paul

Sartre and Albert Camus, emphasizes that meaning is not inherent but must be created through conscious action and engagement with reality. Within this framework, the Dreamer's withdrawal into fantasy represents a refusal to confront the uncertainties of existence, while his understanding of love reflects an idealized and ultimately unsustainable mode of being.

This paper argues that *White Nights* critiques the romanticization of unrequited love and exposes the limitations of imagination as a substitute for lived experience. Through the contrasting trajectories of the Dreamer and Nastenka, the novella demonstrates that while fleeting emotional connections may offer temporary meaning, lasting fulfillment depends on active participation in reality. By situating the narrative within an existentialist framework, this study highlights how Dostoevsky presents isolation not merely as a condition imposed by society, but as a consequence of individual choices that shape one's engagement with the world.

## II. THE DREAMER AS AN EXISTENTIAL FIGURE

The unnamed narrator of *White Nights*, commonly referred to as the Dreamer, embodies a distinctly existential condition marked by alienation, passivity, and a profound disconnection from lived reality. His lack of a personal name is significant, as it reflects not merely narrative anonymity but a deeper absence of stable identity. Rather than existing as a fully realized individual within a social framework, the Dreamer occupies a marginal position, defined more by his internal states than by meaningful external relationships. This detachment aligns closely with existential concerns regarding the individual's struggle to assert identity in a world that offers no inherent structure or meaning.

The Dreamer's self-identification as a "dreamer" further reinforces his existential predicament. He openly acknowledges his tendency to withdraw from reality into a self-constructed world of imagination, where experiences are idealized and controlled. In this imagined realm, he forms connections, experiences emotions, and constructs narratives that compensate for the deficiencies of his actual life. However, this reliance on fantasy ultimately reveals an evasion of existential responsibility. Rather than engaging with the uncertainties and risks inherent in real human interaction, he chooses the safety of illusion, thereby limiting his capacity for authentic existence.

This pattern of withdrawal reflects what existential thought identifies as inauthentic living. Although thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre emphasize the necessity of action in defining one's essence, the Dreamer resists such engagement. His life is characterized not by decisive action but by observation and reflection. He watches others from a distance, inventing stories about their lives, yet he rarely participates in the social world himself. This passive mode of existence prevents him from forming genuine relationships and reinforces his sense of isolation.

Moreover, the Dreamer's emotional life, while intense, lacks grounding in reality. His feelings are often directed toward imagined figures or idealized versions of real individuals, suggesting that his experiences are mediated by literary and aesthetic influences rather than direct interaction. This tendency becomes particularly evident in his relationship with Nastenka, where his rapid emotional investment reflects not a gradual development of mutual understanding but the projection of pre-existing fantasies onto a real person.

In this sense, the Dreamer's condition illustrates the limitations of an existence dominated by imagination. While his inner world provides temporary solace, it ultimately functions as a barrier that separates him from

authentic experience. His inability to reconcile his imaginative life with the demands of reality results in a persistent state of alienation, highlighting the existential tension between the desire for meaning and the reluctance to pursue it through concrete action.

## III. ISOLATION AND ALIENATION

The Isolation constitutes a central condition shaping both the psychological and existential realities of the characters in *White Nights*. For the Dreamer, isolation is not merely circumstantial but deeply internalized, reflecting a sustained disengagement from social life. Despite having lived in St. Petersburg for several years, he remains entirely without meaningful relationships, a condition that underscores his inability to integrate into the social fabric of the city. His solitude is thus not accidental but indicative of a broader existential alienation, wherein the individual exists in proximity to others yet remains fundamentally disconnected from them.

This form of alienation is intensified by the Dreamer's habitual retreat into imagination. Rather than seeking to alleviate his loneliness through interaction, he constructs an internal world that substitutes for real experience. Over time, this withdrawal becomes self-reinforcing: the more he relies on fantasy, the less capable he becomes of navigating the complexities of actual human relationships. His isolation, therefore, is both a cause and a consequence of his psychological disposition. In existential terms, this reflects a failure to engage with the world in a manner that allows for the creation of meaning through lived experience.

The Dreamer's encounter with Nastenka briefly disrupts this condition. Their conversations, marked by emotional openness and mutual vulnerability, offer him an experience of connection that he has long lacked. For a short period, he is able to step outside the confines of his solitary existence and participate in a shared emotional reality. This interaction suggests the possibility of overcoming alienation through human connection, aligning with existential thought that emphasizes relational engagement as a means of constructing meaning.

However, the fragility of this connection reveals the persistence of the Dreamer's isolation. Even within his relationship with Nastenka, his tendency to idealize and project limits the authenticity of their interaction. He interprets her kindness as a deeper emotional commitment, thereby imposing his own expectations onto the relationship. This misalignment highlights the extent to which his isolation has shaped his perception, rendering him unable to fully apprehend the reality of the other person.

In contrast, Nastenka's isolation, though equally pronounced, arises from external constraints rather than internal withdrawal. Her grandmother's strict control confines her physically and socially, restricting her opportunities for interaction. Yet, unlike the Dreamer, Nastenka actively seeks to overcome her isolation. Her decision to wait for the lodger, to communicate with him, and eventually to commit to a relationship demonstrates a willingness to engage with reality despite uncertainty and risk.

The juxtaposition of these two forms of isolation underscores a key thematic concern of the novella: the distinction between imposed and self-sustained alienation. While both characters experience loneliness, their responses diverge significantly. Nastenka moves toward connection through action, whereas the Dreamer retreats further into himself. This contrast highlights the existential implication that isolation, while often unavoidable, can be either confronted or perpetuated through individual choice.

#### IV. UNREQUITED LOVE AND EMOTIONAL ILLUSION

One of the most significant aspects of the Dreamer's existential condition in *White Nights* is his identification with the figure of the unrequited lover. Traditionally, unreciprocated love has often been represented in literature as ennobling, capable of refining the individual through emotional devotion and self-sacrifice. However, the novella resists this romanticized notion by presenting unrequited love not as a source of growth, but as a mechanism that reinforces isolation and emotional stagnation. In doing so, it offers a critical re-evaluation of a well-established literary trope.

The Dreamer's understanding of love is deeply shaped by literary conventions rather than lived experience. He recounts how he has previously "fallen in love" with distant, idealized women whom he has never truly known. These imagined attachments are characterized by their lack of reciprocity and their dependence on fantasy. For the Dreamer, the mere act of expressing his feelings—and receiving even minimal acknowledgment—appears sufficient to produce a sense of fulfillment. This conception of love is fundamentally one-sided, transforming it into a self-contained emotional performance rather than a mutual relationship grounded in reality.

His relationship with Nastenka initially appears to challenge this pattern, as it involves direct interaction and emotional exchange. Yet, the underlying structure of his attachment remains unchanged. Despite Nastenka's explicit admission that her affection belongs to another

man, the Dreamer allows himself to develop deep feelings for her. His emotional investment is less a response to the actual dynamics of their relationship than a projection of his pre-existing ideals. As a result, his love for Nastenka becomes another instance of unrequited longing, shaped more by imagination than by reciprocity.

The novella critiques this mode of loving by exposing its limitations. When Nastenka ultimately returns to the lodger, the Dreamer attempts to frame his experience as meaningful, asserting that even a brief moment of happiness justifies his emotional suffering. However, this interpretation is implicitly undermined by the narrative. Rather than presenting his devotion as admirable, the text invites a reading of it as misguided and self-defeating. His willingness to accept emotional fulfillment in such minimal and fleeting terms reveals a diminished expectation of what love can and should be.

Nastenka's perspective further reinforces this critique. She does not perceive the Dreamer as inherently unworthy of love; instead, she encourages him to seek genuine, reciprocal relationships. Her actions suggest that fulfillment lies not in passive longing but in active engagement with reality. By choosing to reunite with the lodger and pursue a concrete future, she embodies a more pragmatic and grounded approach to love.

Through this contrast, the novella dismantles the ideal of unrequited love as an ennobling force. Instead, it presents such love as symptomatic of a deeper existential failure—the inability or unwillingness to pursue meaningful connection in the real world. The Dreamer's emotional illusion, sustained by literary fantasy, ultimately leaves him more isolated, reinforcing the text's broader critique of escapism and passive existence.

#### V. IMAGINATION AND REALITY

The tension between imagination and reality constitutes a central thematic concern in *White Nights*, functioning as a key lens through which the existential condition of the Dreamer is revealed. Imagination, in the novella, is presented both as a source of comfort and as a mechanism of self-deception. While it allows the individual to escape the limitations of lived experience, it simultaneously prevents meaningful engagement with reality, thereby reinforcing isolation and existential dissatisfaction.

For the Dreamer, imagination is not merely an occasional retreat but a dominant mode of existence. He constructs elaborate internal narratives that replace direct experience, enabling him to inhabit a world shaped entirely by his desires and ideals. Within this imagined realm, relationships are harmonious, emotions are intensified, and

disappointments can be controlled or avoided. However, this idealization comes at a significant cost. By privileging fantasy over reality, the Dreamer relinquishes the unpredictability and complexity that define authentic human interaction.

This reliance on imagination reflects an existential evasion. Rather than confronting the inherent uncertainty and potential pain of real-life relationships, the Dreamer chooses a safer, self-contained alternative. Yet, this choice ultimately undermines his capacity to experience genuine fulfillment. His imagined experiences, however vivid, lack the reciprocity and grounding necessary for sustained meaning. As a result, his existence remains marked by a persistent sense of incompleteness.

The relationship with Nastenka momentarily disrupts this pattern by introducing an element of reality into the Dreamer's life. Their conversations, shared confidences, and emotional exchanges provide him with an opportunity to move beyond the confines of his imagination. For a brief period, he participates in a form of connection that is not entirely self-generated. However, his tendency to interpret this interaction through the lens of fantasy limits its transformative potential. He quickly assimilates the experience into his pre-existing framework of idealized love, thereby diminishing its grounding in reality.

Nastenka's relationship with imagination, while present, differs significantly in its function and implications. Her fantasies serve as a temporary means of coping with the restrictions imposed by her grandmother, rather than as a permanent substitute for reality. She engages with literature and entertains imaginative scenarios, yet she does not allow these to replace her desire for a tangible, lived future. When the opportunity arises, she chooses to act, pursuing a relationship that offers the possibility of real change in her circumstances.

This contrast highlights the novella's critical stance on the role of imagination in human life. While it acknowledges the aesthetic and emotional value of fantasy, it ultimately underscores its limitations as a foundation for existence. Imagination, when detached from action, becomes a form of self-imposed confinement. The Dreamer's failure lies in his inability to transition from imagining life to living it, whereas Nastenka's relative success stems from her willingness to engage with reality despite its inherent uncertainties.

In existential terms, the opposition between imagination and reality reflects the broader tension between avoidance and engagement. The novella suggests that meaning cannot be sustained within the confines of fantasy alone; it must be grounded in lived experience, shaped by choices that carry both risk and consequence. By illustrating the

consequences of excessive reliance on imagination, *White Nights* ultimately affirms the necessity of confronting reality as the basis for authentic existence.

## VI. NASTENKA AS EXISTENTIAL CONTRAST: ACTION AND ENGAGEMENT

Within *White Nights*, Nastenka functions as a crucial counterpoint to the Dreamer, embodying an alternative mode of existence grounded in action and engagement with reality. While both characters experience isolation and emotional vulnerability, their responses to these conditions diverge significantly. This contrast allows the novella to explore the existential implications of choice, responsibility, and the possibility of overcoming alienation.

Nastenka's isolation, unlike that of the Dreamer, is largely imposed by external circumstances. Her grandmother's strict supervision restricts her movements and limits her social interactions, creating a form of confinement that is both physical and psychological. However, despite these constraints, Nastenka does not internalize her isolation in the same manner as the Dreamer. Instead, she actively seeks avenues of escape and connection, demonstrating a willingness to confront and alter her circumstances.

Her relationship with the lodger exemplifies this orientation toward action. Rather than retreating into fantasy, she invests in a real, albeit uncertain, relationship that offers the possibility of change. Even during the period of waiting, when the lodger's absence creates doubt and emotional distress, Nastenka continues to act—writing letters, seeking reassurance, and maintaining hope. Her actions reflect an engagement with reality that contrasts sharply with the Dreamer's passivity.

This distinction becomes particularly evident in her interaction with the Dreamer. Although she forms an emotional bond with him and briefly considers the possibility of a future together, her decision-making ultimately aligns with her commitment to the lodger. When he reappears, she responds immediately, prioritizing a tangible and reciprocal relationship over the more ambiguous and emotionally mediated connection she shares with the Dreamer. While this shift may appear abrupt, it underscores her orientation toward concrete action rather than prolonged indecision or emotional abstraction.

At the same time, Nastenka's behavior is not without complexity. Her reliance on the Dreamer during moments of uncertainty reveals a degree of emotional inconsistency, as she seeks comfort without fully acknowledging the implications of his growing attachment. In this sense, she

participates, albeit inadvertently, in the dynamics that lead to his suffering. However, unlike the Dreamer, she does not remain immobilized by her emotions. Her actions, even when flawed, are directed toward shaping her future within the real world.

From an existential perspective, Nastenka represents the possibility of authentic engagement. Her choices illustrate the principle that meaning is constructed through action, even when such action involves risk, uncertainty, or potential harm. In contrast, the Dreamer's reluctance to move beyond imagination results in a static existence, defined more by reflection than by transformation.

The juxtaposition of these two characters thus reinforces the central argument of the novella. While both are initially situated within conditions of isolation, their differing responses determine their outcomes. Nastenka's willingness to engage with reality enables her to move toward a more stable and fulfilling existence, whereas the Dreamer's continued reliance on fantasy leaves him trapped in a cycle of longing and solitude.

Through this contrast, *White Nights* underscores the existential imperative of action. It suggests that while emotional experience and imagination have value, they must be accompanied by a readiness to confront reality and assume responsibility for one's choices. In the absence of such engagement, the search for meaning remains incomplete, confined within the boundaries of illusion rather than realized within the world.

## VII. CONCLUSION

*White Nights* offers a nuanced exploration of existential concerns, particularly the tension between isolation and the human desire for meaningful connection. Through the figure of the Dreamer, Fyodor Dostoevsky presents an individual who is acutely aware of his loneliness yet remains unable to transcend it due to his reliance on imagination and passive modes of existence. His retreat into fantasy, while providing temporary emotional solace, ultimately reinforces his alienation by preventing genuine engagement with reality.

The novella challenges the romanticization of unrequited love by exposing its limitations as a source of fulfillment. The Dreamer's understanding of love, shaped by literary ideals rather than lived experience, confines him to a cycle of longing that lacks reciprocity and permanence. His brief relationship with Nastenka momentarily disrupts this pattern, offering a glimpse of connection and purpose. However, his inability to sustain or act upon this experience results in a return to isolation, underscoring the fragility of meaning when it is not grounded in concrete

action.

In contrast, Nastenka's trajectory illustrates a more engaged and pragmatic approach to existence. Despite her own constraints and emotional uncertainties, she demonstrates a willingness to act, to make decisions, and to pursue a future within the real world. Her choices, though imperfect, enable her to move beyond the limitations of her circumstances, highlighting the existential principle that meaning emerges through action and commitment.

Ultimately, *White Nights* suggests that while moments of emotional intimacy may be fleeting, they are nonetheless significant in the human search for meaning. However, such moments cannot substitute for sustained engagement with reality. The Dreamer's tragedy lies not simply in his loneliness, but in his failure to transform experience into action. By presenting this contrast, the novella affirms that authentic existence requires the courage to confront uncertainty, to accept the risks inherent in human relationships, and to participate actively in the shaping of one's own life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An acknowledgement section may be presented after the conclusion, if desired.

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