

Memoirs of a Muse (2006)

Already present in the novel's title, which it shares with Tanya's diary, the muse concept is the central motif that informs Tanya's narrative. It is the central idea upon which Tanya bases her own conception of identity. As this idea emanates from Tanya's at first romantic image of Suslova and Suslova's relationship with Dostoevsky, and her later insights into the patriarchal structures that underlie the muse concept, they become crucial for understanding how the novel renegotiates the discourse surrounding Suslova and Dostoevsky from a feminist perspective.

In the novel's initial scene, Suslova and Dostoevsky are seated at a table, a tray with cooling tea and untouched pastries between them. Suslova has just informed the writer that she is in love with another man, and Dostoevsky now sits in agony, holding his sweaty, balding head in his hands. His frustration, however, turns out to be, in part, due to his not knowing whether Suslova has slept with this new man or not. She knows that she can ease his pain, take him in her arms and comfort him, but chooses not to.¹ Tanya then intervenes in Suslova's story:

“Cruel, coldhearted, unkind,” people called her. [...]

So was it true? Was she cruel? Does a muse have to be able to induce a certain amount of pain? I want to know that.

I want to know why I failed.²

This initial scene establishes Suslova as muse and Dostoevsky as “a great Russian writer.”³ – the artist-genius. It also aligns the narratives of the two female characters; it emphasizes their identities as muses, and the muse role as shared female experience. Moreover, Tanya's insistence on understanding why she failed as a muse is central to the novel's feminist politics – to understand herself and Suslova by retracing how and why they became muses, and how this would affect, even determine, their lives.

Next, Tanya imagines a scene in which Suslova's fictive governess, made up by Tanya,⁴ tells the futures of Suslova and her sister Nadezhda Suslova, who later became Russia's first female physician. While her younger sister is destined to become “a heroine, a conqueror,” Polina “will conquer men's heart and inspire them. She will be a muse.”⁵

¹ Lara Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse* (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 3-4.

² Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 4.

³ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 3.

⁴ ON TANYA'S CONSTRUCTION OF SUSLOVA AND HER ADMISSION OF THE FICTIONALITY OF THIS IMAGE

⁵ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 5.

These scenes, with Tanya's admission that her own Suslova is "made up,"⁶ introduce both Suslova and the idea of the muse-artist relation. Already here, there are several important aspects of the muse concept present: the muse is a calling that is preordained; the artist receives his inspiration from the muse; the artist's view of the muse entails an erotic aspect that is also connected with suffering; and, finally, the muse snares the male artist and exerts a certain amount of control, amorously and sexually, and for this she is deemed "cruel, coldhearted, unkind."⁷

For Tanya, her destiny as a muse begins with a misconception in childhood, when she first believes that Anna Grigoryevna, Dostoevsky's second wife, was the artist's muse. A muse therefore initially for Tanya is the nurturing wife, a role played out by Tanya in her fantasies:

I imagined Dostoevsky sharing a dinner table with my dolls. I knew how to prepare kasha for dolls and serve them tea. I would've spread a napkin on his lap and fed him my kasha, then I would've put him to bed, tucked his blanket around him and taken his temperature with my toy thermometer, just in case.⁸

This image is a parody of the muse's role: the girl, emulating her imagined Anna Grigoryevna, nurses the writer; she feeds him and makes sure he stays healthy.

Dostoevsky is present in several different ways in Tanya's childhood. First, he replaces her absent father, who leaves the family when Tanya is three years old. Images of Dostoevsky and other Russian authors displace the photographs of Tanya's father. In contrast to the mean Santa Claus demeanor of Lev Tolstoy, the unnervingly all-seeing eyes of Anton Chekhov, and the superficial face of Alexander Pushkin, Dostoevsky's portrait makes a strong impression on Tanya:

Dostoevsky was the one whom I loved. He had strong hands and a large forehead, so large that it seemed to burst through his skin. He had serious eyes, and he looked straight at me, without hiding, without the fake playful expression of other adults.⁹

Tanya first receives her information on Dostoevsky through her grandmother, who was herself married to a Fyodor Mikhailovich, who shared his name and patronymic with the author. The grandmother insists that "Dostoevsky was crazy, but your grandfather ever more so!"¹⁰ This introduces for Tanya the essential dichotomy of the muse-artist relationship as consisting of a nurturing

⁶ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 5.

⁷ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 4.

⁸ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 7.

⁹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 6.

¹⁰ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 7.

wife-muse and an insane artist-genius. And while Anna Grigoryevna inspired Dostoevsky – or, as Tanya’s grandmother puts it, “[w]ithout her he wouldn’t have written shit” – the artist nevertheless abuses his muse: “How he tortured his poor wife! His muse!”¹¹ This view of the male artist-genius is then further demythologized as Tanya’s grandmother continues to read her own life and relationship with her dead husband into the lives of Anna Grigoryevna and Dostoevsky (later, Tanya finds her grandmother’s copy of Anna Grigoryevna’s memoirs¹²):

You never know how to please them. You think that you do. You keep track of the things that please them. But they are fickle, they change their likings on a whim. You serve them tea with sugar and cream – their favorite, and you had just gone out specially to buy that cream – and they tell you that they wanted coffee with lemon. You want to throw that tea into their red, ugly mugs and then break the cup against their head, but you don’t do that. You apologize. And then when they come home drunk and in soiled pants – yes, they do that, they soil their pants – you don’t throw them out! You take them in, you scrape the shit off them, and put them to bed. And after that you go to your communal bathroom, with all the neighbors watching and yelling at you because of the stench! But you do it for geniuses all the same.”¹³

This deromanticized version of the muse-artist relation shifts focus away from the male to the female perspective, from notions of male greatness to the everyday life of women, who are expected to cater to the artist-genius’s needs and wash his soiled clothes. It is also a mirroring of Tanya’s own Dostoevsky-as-doll-at-tea-party fantasy, but as seen through a distorting mirror. Furthermore, as Tanya’s grandfather appears to have been, in fact, a common communist and a drunk, her grandmother’s frequent use of the word genius becomes ironic, an empty signifier without reference. The male genius is thus reduced to a hollow aspect of male aggrandizing and ego, an empty patriarchal symbol. In referring to her husband as a genius, and herself as a muse, it appears that the grandmother seeks to justify her putting up with the husband and his drunkenness. Her grandmother’s condemnation of male geniuses with their soiled pants doesn’t register with Tanya, who simply concludes that

Dostoevsky, a writer with different eyes, was a bad man. Geniuses are bad, and you have to wash their shit off, and that is probably it. That is what it takes to be a muse. There is not much else to do.¹⁴

¹¹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 16.

¹² The book Tanya describes is probably not Anna Grigoryevna’s diary from her first year of marriage, *Dnevnik 1867 goda*, 1923, but rather her later, sanitized autobiography *Dostoevsky: Reminiscences (Vospominaniya)*, 1925).

¹³ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 17-18.

¹⁴ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 18.

Tanya eventually discards this passive role of the muse, as exemplified by Anna Grigoryevna and Tanya's grandmother. She is offended by what she perceives as Anna Grigoryevna's failure to recognize the insult underlying Dostoevsky's marriage proposal. Before proposing, Dostoevsky asks Anna Grigoryevna whether he should marry an intelligent or kind woman. Anna Grigoryevna replies that he ought to marry the former, but Dostoevsky insists on the latter, which, as Tanya interjects, is an insult to Anna Grigoryevna's intelligence. Ironically, Tanya, in her failure to sympathize with Anna Grigoryevna's flattered acceptance to marriage and a submissive role as wife, also fails to recognize that the muse is but another subjected, passivized, and objectified female gender role.

Later, Tanya, when reading Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*, realizes that it is not Anna Grigoryevna, but "another woman, a real woman who gave life to the character of Polina and to the novel itself." She then reads other Dostoevsky novels, tracing Suslova and what she perceives as her muse traits in his characters:

In *The Idiot* she even appeared twice – as the snobbish upper-class beauty Aglaya, and as the half-mad kept woman Nastasya Fillipovna. He could dress her in different clothes, but he couldn't fool me. All of them were Polina, with her maddening attractiveness, with her sick pride, with her openness to suffering and inclination to torture, with her crazy idealism.¹⁵

This is the moment in the novel where Tanya displaces Anna Grigoryevna as a muse model, which Tanya now views as the apathetic, docile role of the wife, with Suslova's impassioned muse, who has

the power to ignite him with the imprint of her foot, torture him, drive him mad, who had the power to make him want to grab the quill and write about her.

When I am a muse, I will be Polina I decided. Never, never will I become Anna Grigorievna.¹⁶

If Tanya is introduced to the idea of the muse through her grandmother, through the presence of the (male) canon and the canonical writers' portraits in their apartment, and through Dostoevsky's works, her decision to form her own identity in accordance with the Suslova muse model is suggested by the various men in her life.

As a child, Tanya is told that she has "hands," that is, that she is talented in the traditional female activities of "sewing, knitting, cooking". On the basis of her new-found talents, she is put in charge of caring for her grandmother, considering herself "a perfect nurse."¹⁷ Soon, however, Tanya realizes that her

¹⁵ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 54.

¹⁶ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 55.

¹⁷ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 9.

skills as a nurse are really not talents, but simply what any other child at her age could manage.

Later, after her grandmother's death, Tanya, freed from her responsibilities as a nurse, tries to imagine what the future holds for her. Sparked by her fear of dying, Tanya wonders if she can "fight [death] by living [her] life to the utmost degree":

What other options did I have? To become somebody accomplished, a luminary? That sounded nice, even ticklish, but a luminary in the field of what? Where could I display any extraordinary abilities?¹⁸

The problem, in part, is a gender issue:

"She is a gifted girl," people said about me, sending chills down my bones, because I knew that if I had been really gifted they wouldn't have called me "a gifted girl." They would have said "a gifted artist" or "a gifted musician."¹⁹

The division between the gender-coded designations of "talented girl" and "gifted artist" creates an identity vacuum for Tanya: If the latter model of artist is not available, what then are her "girl" talents? This leads the now pubertal Tanya to consider sex as a possible talent, a talent that she will later consider an essential function of the muse and an important component of the muse-artist relation.

After her high school-graduation, Tanya and her classmates go on a camping-trip with their history teacher, Vovik, who has been transferred from another school for, according to rumors, "lik[ing] schoolgirls."²⁰ Tanya belongs to the "good girls," who are ignored at prom and left to watch from the side. The only one who pays any attention to Tanya is Vovik, who asks her to dance. She interprets the older man's inappropriate attentions as sexual attraction, a chance to be one of the popular girls who disappear into the woods with the boys. For Tanya, the prospect of having sex with her older teacher represents a chance of escaping the tag of "potato-peeling Cinderella" and becoming "Princess/Bad Girl."²¹

In the evening, the students gather around the fireplace and Vovik tells them their futures, a scene that mirrors how Suslova had her future divined in coffee by her governess. Everyone is expectant and wants the teacher to tell them what they will be in the future. Fearing that the teacher will make fun of her, Tanya dreads that he will turn to her. And as he tells his students their future, it becomes clear how much import his words have:

¹⁸ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 27.

¹⁹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 27.

²⁰ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 40.

²¹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 44

Why wasn't he telling me my fortune? What was he waiting for? Was it because he didn't see anything good for me? What if he said, 'And you, Tanya, are good for nothing. What? Does that surprise you? Didn't you know?' And I would have to agree with him, because I knew that. I'd known for a long time... I wasn't very smart the way Lidia, for example, was smart. Hell! I couldn't even find Stalingrad! I wasn't sexy. If I were sexy, Vovik wouldn't have slept through half the day when he could've been with me. And worse than that – I was a 'good' girl who tried to fool herself by bringing contraception pills on a camping trip, but whose fate really was to peel potatoes and scrub pots.²²

For Tanya, who questions her own abilities and is unsure of her future, Vovik's words become even more important. But instead of proffering a vision of Tanya's future in which she has an occupation, a meaningful purpose, Vovik prophesizes:

"You should be the companion to a great man," he said. "You should be near him, you should support him, entertain him, make him happy and" – a squeeze on my shoulder that I barely felt – "you should inspire him for great man's deeds."²³

Upon hearing her future formulated thus, Tanya's soul "soared far, far up"; she understands that she "was good for something after all, for something special, for something much better than what was in store for my classmates". Although Tanya, on some level, understands that the teacher's words are pejorative – she can hear, in her mind, her mother's voice saying "'He said 'entertain,' didn't he? Are you happy to have entertaining a man as your destiny?'" – she nonetheless understands this as an acknowledgment from a grown-up male authority figure that she has talents and a future.

In the end, Tanya doesn't sleep with Vovik, though he invites her to have sex with him. But it is the male teacher's gendered view on her future, as a passive muse who inspires the male artist-genius by fulfilling his needs, that convinces her that this is where her talents lie. Rather than considering the role of muse as debasing, Tanya perceives an opportunity for self-realization, a foundation upon which she can structure her own identity. To put it simply, a chance to become someone:

I could live with being unpopular. I could live with being ignored by the majority. For there would be one man, the most desirable man, who would pick me out of the crowd. He would pick me because I was able to inspire!²⁴

²² Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 46.

²³ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 47.

²⁴ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 48.

Her perception of what a life as a muse would actually entail is idealized and romanticized:

[A muse] inspires, she influences the great man's work. In some very subtle and magical way – it's elusive, it's indescribable. He, the great man, would be sitting frozen in front of a blank sheet of paper, empty canvas, silent piano, and I would walk in. Five foot five, flat-chested, and skinny, but with a great fire in my eyes, or a strange remarkable gait or carriage, or speaking in an especially melodic or powerful voice, and he – the writer, composer or artist – would snap his fingers and say, "Yes!" and hit his piano, slab of marble, or creaky typewriter, and create with great fire in his eyes an enormous, magnificent work.²⁵

Still determined to act her role as muse, Tanya's own identity and sense of agency is further and further reduced. In fact, her identity, construed on the Suslova muse model, is expressed to such a degree through the male artist that it is only when he is present that life acquires meaning: "I longed for Mark to come home to give further reinforcement to my greatness."²⁶

Her dedication to the fulfillment of Mark's needs also includes the sexual role-playing which he dictates and directs according to his own preferences, a game that has his pleasure as its only goal:

He is wonderful, I'd think each time, overwhelmed with relief and gratitude. Mark must have guessed how inept I was, and he didn't express any annoyance or disappointment but instead instructed me thoroughly and kindly, like a teacher, or rather a like a movie director. I didn't have to try and guess how all those things were done and which way he liked them. I didn't have to be afraid to fail. The pressure was lifted, and I just did as told, patiently attuning my body to his needs and partialities, savoring Mark's praise, glowing in my success. "Look at him, look at him stare at me! I must be really good. I must be wonderful. Look at him rush to see me. Listen to him pant. He must feel great. I must be great!"

Yet again, Tanya fails to acknowledge her own absence as an individual that harbors its own needs and desires. Instead, she is, once again, a vehicle for his gratification, not her own. When she equates the fact that Mark "must feel great" with her being "great," Tanya fails to understand that such an "accomplishment" requires only her body and nothing else. As a matter of fact, her absence as a person, her lack of pronounced self and identity, is so tangible that Mark has "to remind himself that [she] was there."²⁷

Mark's day-to-day routines, the prosaic aspects of everyday life, further disrupts Tanya's perception of the male artist-genius:

²⁵ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 48.

²⁶ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 141.

²⁷ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 136.

A great writer was supposed to be self-destructive, wasn't he? I could hardly imagine Dostoevsky jogging, gulping down protein smoothies, or summoning the shrink to relieve him of sadness or agitation. Sadness and agitation made Dostoevsky grab his quill and write! Madness was the core of his writing! What would he have written if relieved of them? Gambling manuals? Engineering tracts?²⁸

Importantly, Tanya's for her disconcerting doubts concerning Mark's genius, his status as tormented writer, are further reinforced by her cousin Dena. When Dena visits Tanya in Mark's Manhattan penthouse apartment when he is out, she directs an angry tirade directed at men and their needs:

They will go and cry at their shrinks then. Not because they need help, no. They know perfectly well that nobody will help them. They just want the attention, the pampering. I can't afford to cry. I'm expected to pamper, not be pampered ... while they, yes, they cry at their shrinks, cry as much as they want, fuck up their lives and the lives of others, and then take their time crying about it.²⁹

Dena manages to decode Mark's behavior for Tanya, characterizing it not as the prerequisite *sine qua non* for an artist possessed of genius, but as the self-indulgent, self-involved behavior of men in general. Furthermore, she understands that this is a form of conduct which is unavailable to women, be they mothers and wives like Dena or muses like Tanya.

She discovers in Slonim's book that the part titled "Anna: The Happy Marriage," which was "the shabbiest in the book, motley with yellow highlights, prickled by little notes," is the part which attracted Mark the most. In the margins, next to a passage that characterize Anna Grigoryevna as "'simple and unpretentious,'" a "'rather young, none-to-well-developed average girl, not remarkable in any way'" and so on, Mark has scribbled Tanya's name, often not even bothering to spell out her name properly, "'Tania.' 'Tan.' 'Tan' a!!!"³⁰

The most demeaning and pejorative description of Anna Grigoryevna in Slonim's book that Mark ascribes to Tanya, is, however, the following passage:

And finally the gem of gems came: "He could do with her what he willed, he could train her as a companion in his erotic fantasies... According to her own expression she 'permitted' him a very great deal, and not only because she liked his 'tricks,' but also because in her great love for him she was ready to endure everything, to bear anything submissively." This was me. I couldn't argue with that.³¹

²⁸ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 150.

²⁹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 151.

³⁰ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 179.

³¹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 179.

Mark, then, has never looked for a muse such as the Suslova model that Tanya envisioned – impassioned, with an ability to spark inspiration in the male artist-genius – but a submissive, passive, caring woman to care for him. Moreover, Tanya now understands that Mark’s other women, his previous lovers, whose names also trace the margins of *Three Loves of Dostoevsky*, had been “[f]ailed Anna Grigorievnas. Too beautiful, too smart, too difficult for the role.”³² Tanya, on the other hand, had been the “most obedient, the most devoted, the most ordinary of them all. The ‘authentic’ Anna Grigorievna.” For Mark, Tanya had never been a muse; never “mysterious, poetic, erotic, inspiring” but “ordinary, naïve, obedient in bed.”³³

But in recognizing Mark’s casting her as Anna Grigoryevna, the submissive wife, rather than Suslova, the passionate, infuriating lover, Tanya now understands her own complicity in this reduction of her own self:

How could I have been so blind? So deluded? I couldn’t even blame Mark. Didn’t I behave like that from the very beginning, rushing to bring him food, crying with gratitude when he came inside me, pretending to be somebody I was not? But maybe I didn’t have to pretend. Maybe that was precisely what I was? That was probably why I hated Anna Grigorievna so much – I saw myself in her, and I wouldn’t admit it.³⁴

Of course, Vapnyar juxtaposes this scene where Tanya fully understands how Mark has seen her as an Anna Grigoryevna all along with an anecdote from Anna Grigoryevna’s diary:

A scene from the abandoned but never forgotten Anna Grigorievna’s diary flashed in my mind:

“Whom do you think I should marry, Anechka [Anna Grigoryevna], a smart woman or a kind woman?” Dostoevsky asked her after one of their stenography sessions.

“A smart woman, Fedor Mikhailovich. Of course, a smart woman. Why, you’re such a great writer!”

“No, Anechka, I better marry a kind one.”

Soon after that, he proposed to her, and Anna Grigorievna was so overcome with happiness that she didn’t get the insult.

Dostoevsky was looking for dumb and kind. So was Mark. Only Mark had made a mistake. I might have been dumb, but I wasn’t kind.

Not to him, not anymore.³⁵

³² Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 179.

³³ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 180.

³⁴ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 180.

³⁵ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 180f.

Although Tanya at this point in the novel discovers how Mark perceives her, and how they both have been complicit in molding her into a patriarchal fantasy modelled on Anna Grigoryevna and Dostoevsky, she nevertheless fails to see how the muse role would have been equally belittling. In effect, neither the Anna Grigoryevna house-wife model nor the eroticized Suslova muse model may at this turn provide Tanya with a foundation upon which she may construct her own identity. As both models hinge on gender roles which equate masculinity with activity and creativity (the male artist-genius) and femininity with passivity (Anna Grigoryevna) or objectified sexuality (Suslova), Tanya cannot accommodate herself in either to find what she seeks – an identity that allows for independence and self-agency.

Tanya's recognition of how Mark has objectified her in the above manner, and the indignation that follows this realization, is reminiscent of Suslova's reaction toward Dostoevsky when she understands that she functions for him primarily as a sexualized body, a "tool to get off," as Tanya puts it.³⁶ Tanya, afraid that her relationship with Mark renders her an empty vessel, a vehicle for his fulfillment and enjoyment, is reminded of a paragraph from the draft of a letter which she once read in Suslova's diary:

"You behaved," she wrote, "like a serious, busy man who pays due attention to his work, but at the same time doesn't forget to enjoy himself. On the contrary. He considers enjoying himself a duty too, the way one great medicine man or a philosopher claimed that it was necessary to get drunk once a month."³⁷

According to Joseph Frank, Suslova found that she "occup[ied] a distinctly secondary place in Dostoevsky's life – of having become part of a routine that included the physical release provided by their liaison."³⁸ Although Tanya clearly didn't consider the significance of Suslova's letter above, as she still chose to model herself on Suslova in becoming a muse, she too fears that she's become "part of a routine," a vessel for "physical release":

Was Mark like that too? "You don't know what sex is for me," he said to me once, after one time that was particularly good (for him). "Sex is like... um. It both charges and discharges me. I don't drink, like some people. I don't do drugs. I don't play sports. I don't even smoke. Sex for me is the only way to get off." And then he kind of patted my neck... so I would take his words as a compliment? So I would take as a compliment that I was his tool to get off, like a whiskey on the rocks for some people, or a soccer ball, or a few grains of cocaine?³⁹

³⁶ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 167.

³⁷ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 167.

³⁸ Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 387.

³⁹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 167.

Still, in her new-found understanding of the gender dynamics of her and Mark's relationship, Tanya refrains from hurting Mark. She does so not because of their differences, but due to what she perceives as their similarities:

I wondered if Mark was aware of how bad his books were. He must have suspected it, but he probably comforted himself with the thought that all writers doubted themselves, even the best ones. His obsession with writers' biographies must have sprung from that. He was looking for proof that they were just like him, and he came to the reassuring but mistaken conclusion that he was just like them. I went through the delusion when reading about Polina. Mark and I were very much alike, if you thought about it. Two people with immense aspirations, and limited abilities, except for our one great gift – the belief that we were what we wanted to be and the stubborn insistence on that belief.⁴⁰

This insight leads to Tanya to further speculate, “if we had had a chance at love, if back then, when we met, we had seen each other for what we were, and if Mark hadn't reduced me to Anna Grigoryevna, and if I hadn't elevated him to Dostoevsky. I wondered if he would have been able to see with time that I needed his kindness, the warm pressure of his hand too.”⁴¹

The two above quotes emphasize to what extent these conceptions of men and women, cast as geniuses and muses respectively, are constructions whose underpinnings must be consistently patrolled and guarded in order to hide their artificial nature. Furthermore, Tanya's new insights into her and Mark's relationship also indicates the larger issue at hand, namely how Dostoevsky was elevated to genius while the women in his life were reduced to static, stereotypically female gendered roles – wife or mistress – which have denied them of an identity and agency their own.

While it is possible that their relationship might have developed along a different path than their own version of the Dostoevskys' marriage, their roles would still have been gendered and politicized, just as Dostoevsky and Anna Grigoryevna's relationship was, or Dostoevsky and Suslova's. What Tanya fails to recognize at this point is the wider implications of the politicized and gendered discourse which underlies the roles of men and women, of husbands and wives, of male geniuses-artists and muses.

This important realization, when Tanya uncovers the ways through which her and Mark's respective roles had been shaped, serves as a turning point. Tanya reflects on the acrimonious breakdown of Dostoevsky and Suslova's affair. She sets off by quoting Dostoevsky's final letter to Suslova, written on April 23, 1867. In this letter, Dostoevsky writes to Suslova of his marriage to Anna Grigoryevna, highlighting her virtues and their happiness. Tanya reads

⁴⁰ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 201.

⁴¹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 202.

into it “some gloating notes,” and speculates that Dostoevsky, in this “messy battle of love,” sees himself as the victor.⁴²

Importantly, Tanya draws new parallels between her relationship with Mark and Suslova’s relationship with Dostoevsky and Suslova’s affair. Just as Tanya, Polina had deceived herself with a romantic and idealized notion of the muse and the creative genius, and then been equally disillusioned with the banality and matter-of-fact aspect of a sexual relationship with an older man. For this reason, Tanya reasons, Polina rejected Dostoevsky’s marriage proposal after the death of his first wife Maria Isaeveva in 1864:

There was no difference for her in confinement of being a mistress or being a wife to somebody like Dostoevsky. Polina then embarked on a series of ill-fated attempts to make something out of her life, suffering through the humiliation of yet another failed project, yet another disappointing love affair. Fairly or not, she blamed Dostoevsky for the latter.⁴³

Suslova then went on to what Tanya deems [t]he last of Polina’s humiliations” – the marriage to the much younger philosopher and Dostoevsky scholar Vasily Rozanov, whom she later left. Tanya then makes the following conclusion:

She [Polina] lost. Except for one thing. She left that “torturous imprint of her foot” on the pages of some of the greatest novels of all time. Whether she wanted it or not, the fact remains: She became a muse. Yes, immortality doesn’t do you any good. But how many people don’t wish for it?⁴⁴

Suslova’s muse role, as we have seen, is a political construct of Dostoevsky biographies which has served a dual purpose. First, it has cemented a biographical narrative of Dostoevsky in which men can remain geniuses while women are confined to the roles of either docile wife or passionate muse. Second, it intimately weds biographical fact with literary creation, casting Suslova as the heroine of Dostoevsky’s works while disregarding the pitfalls of such biographical fallacy. But for Tanya and Suslova, it also denies women an identity beyond that of a narrowly defined female gender role. As *Memoirs of a Muse* suggests, this political process, whereby patriarchal norms and values are reified and reinscribed, is especially problematic when it comes to Suslova as it has relied primarily on male voices and texts which in turn serve their own ideological needs. The alternative, the novel appears to suggest, is for women to take control of their own narratives.

⁴² Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 204.

⁴³ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 204.

⁴⁴ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 205.

After emigrating to New York, where Tanya is first disillusioned by the difficult conditions her uncle and his family live in as immigrants, she eventually encounters Mark at one of his readings. His stature as author can be surmised from the poster for the reading, where he is compared with prominent male writers such as Marcel Proust and Philip Roth. In fact, as has been pointed out, Mark appears to be, in part, modelled on the latter.⁴⁵ The reference to these authors – which makes little sense as a comparison and hardly gives a clear understanding of what kind of writer Mark is – yet again highlights how men can be considered geniuses not primarily due to talent, but because they are men and artists. This also becomes apparent in how Tanya perceives Mark’s reading:

It was just a book. It was a stack of white pages covered with black letters, one of the many copies of exactly the same book. But for Mark Schneider it was alive, unpredictable, difficult, so difficult, that even he, the book’s creator, wasn’t sure how to handle it.

I was in awe

[...] I closed my eyes and listened to the graceful foreign sounds joining and supplanting one another as they swelled into complex, fully alive sentences. It was so beautiful that my eyes filled with tears.⁴⁶

Ironically, Tanya’s limited grasp of the English language prevents her from actually understanding the content. What she experiences during the reading is her own image of an idealized male artist-genius that she projects onto Mark. Nevertheless, she tries to understand the foreign sounds by closing her eyes and listening intently. The beautiful “complex, fully alive sentences”⁴⁷ bring tears to her eyes, and it is because of this that Mark notices her. In a sense, as Tanya is literally unable to understand Mark’s literature, which has elevated him to the level of Proust and Roth, the artist becomes an empty symbol bereft of his artistic creations. The idea of the male artist as an empty signifier, where the man is elevated to the status of genius via his gender, connects with the above deconstruction of the male artist-genius in relation to Tanya’s grandmother. Here, he is a writer without literature, without coherent language, whereas Tanya’s grandfather was simply a communist, not an artist, who needed his wife to clean his soiled pants and put him to bed.

Later, it becomes clear that what makes Mark take notice of Tanya is what he mistakes for admiration, a reverence of his literary genius. Tanya’s reaction, however, is ironically due to her inability to decipher his language, turning his literary product into pure phonetics, sounds bereft of semantics.

⁴⁵ Margarita Levantovskaya, “From Anxiety to Disidentification: Lara Vapnyar’s *Memoirs of a Muse*, Irina Reyn’s *What Happened to Anna K.*, and Anya Ulinich’s *Lena Finkle’s Magic Barrell*,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 46, no. 3 (2016): 319.

⁴⁶ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 92.

⁴⁷ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 92.

Similarly to how she met Mark, Tanya imagines Suslova's first meeting Dostoevsky at a reading of his novel *Notes from House of the Dead*. Suslova too has a distinctly idealized image of Dostoevsky, considering him "[t]he true master of the world of thought." And just as Tanya is spell-bound by Mark's reading, Suslova is equally moved by Dostoevsky's:

Slowly his voice was gaining strength, and the words that he read seemed to bounce off the pages of the book, empowered by the double dose of emotion (the first given during the process of creation and the second breathed into them by his reading), and explode in the students' minds. Polina had read *The Notes from the House of the Dead* before, but she hadn't been moved like this before, not by any book. He, a short, unimpressive man, was so powerful that he made the whole auditorium full of students groan in a unison of emotion.⁴⁸

The parallels between the two reading sessions are apparent. Both authors are characterized as ordinary, unimpressive, aging men. But it is foremost their respective readings that invite comparison. The "groan in a unison of emotion" emitted by the student audience at Dostoevsky's reading reads as ironic, a hyperbolic reaction not to the "unimpressive" man, but to the concept of the artist-genius and his exalted novel. The reaction of the audience, just as the positioning of Mark in the larger canon of male writers, is clearly affected not by the "short, unimpressive" man, but by the elevation of him to the status of artist-genius. His power comes not from inside, but is bestowed upon him.

In the initial phase of their relationship, Mark's development as a writer is laid out in detail. Because of his ineptitude at sports, Mark discovers "the enormous power of fiction"; he reads *Crime and Punishment* and writes a short story inspired by Dostoevsky's novel. His interest in literature is awoken by Mr. Donner, who "made fun of the boys, mocked the boys, humiliated the boys, and introduced them to truly great books, introduced them in such a way that if a boy managed to get through the book at all, it stayed with him forever." Mark's mother asks Mr. Donner to comment on her son's story. But when Mr. Donner, who has become Mark's literary authority figure, criticizes his effort, Mark ceases to write. The anecdote is delivered in distinctly ironic tones:

"Am I a man or a louse" Raskolnikov wanted to find out. Mark needed to know that too. He pondered briefly if he should commit murder or write a novel as great as *Crime and Punishment*. He chose the latter.⁴⁹

Only twenty years later, when he has "become a successful magazine editor, an admired author of witty and acerbic columns, a professor of English, and a man with substantial life experience," Mark finally writes his first novel to

⁴⁸ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 32.

⁴⁹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 115

“great acclaim,” in his own words. His ability to resume his writing has clear Oedipal causes: it is not “until his mother died and Donner’s long face had faded from his mind” that Mark finally embarks on his career as a fiction writer. In Tanya’s retelling of Mark’s becoming an author, it is clear how important cultural and symbolic capital is, perhaps even rivaling the act of writing itself. To write and be published is not enough; the author has to be revered and renowned, like Dostoevsky and Mark at their readings.

The need for veneration is partly satisfied by Mark’s women, preserved as photographs that he shows Tanya. First, she reacts negatively by getting hurt when he says about a particular woman that she is more beautiful than Tanya. But when he insists that Tanya “has something that none of them had,” she understands this as an acknowledgment of her still unknown, undiscovered muse skills:

Yes, yes. I was a woman whose value only a brilliant, perceptive, mature man could understand. I was indescribable. I was unique. Plus, I had that mysterious Eastern European gloom. I would get to stay in Mark’s bed, while the other women went back into the darkness of the old leather bag. I defeated them all.⁵⁰

Yet again, Tanya uses male assessments, male mythologization, of women to define and mold herself as a muse. While he is “brilliant, perceptive,” Tanya, in her own mind, is “indescribable,” without contours, but endowed with what Mark prejudicedly refers to as “Eastern European gloom.” Also, she situates herself not in his life but, in her capacity as a muse that must satisfy the male artist, in his bed. Later, when they have sex for the first time, after several failed attempts due to Tanya’s fear of failure – “Enjoy it? I’d never thought of that. All I wanted was not to fail” – she is overjoyed at having been able to satisfy him: “I overwhelmed him! I overwhelmed him!” The muse role, as imagined by Tanya and played out by her and Mark, has a very distinct sexual character: For her, the task is to please; for him, the aim is to be pleased. In fact, sex, for Tanya, is understood as the catalyst, the *sine qua non*, that sets the male artist-genius in creative motion:

I decided that the great and mysterious work of a muse start with that little shudder of a genius’s body, a minor explosion, the quiet spurt of his sperm inside her. Technically, this wonder sperm didn’t even enter my body; it poured into a tiny rubber bag that was swiftly withdrawn from me, along with the genius himself. But that was how a muse’s influence on the work of her lover started. With this little act, otherwise so simple and trivial, if not for the genius of one of the parties involved.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 117.

⁵¹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 122.

For Tanya, the muse's talent is, partly, of a sexual nature; the muse incites the genius within the artist with her body through sexual intercourse.

The last sentence in the block quote above is, however, ambiguous. Does it allude to the talent of the muse, who ignites the artist's creativity? Or is it the artist's genius that makes the otherwise trivial sexual act something more? Moreover, the sexual aspect of their relationship evolves into a highly gendered role-playing, where he, the artist, is active and in charge, dictating the course of action, while she, the muse, is passive and obedient:

Mark must have guessed how inept I was, and he didn't express any annoyance or disappointment but instead instructed me thoroughly and kindly, like a teacher, or rather like a movie director. I didn't have to try and guess how all those things were done and which way he liked them. I didn't have to be afraid to fail. The pressure was lifted, and I just did as told, patiently attuning my body to his needs and partialities, savoring Mark's praise, glowing in my success.

The female body of the muse, then, is the passive receptacle that receives the male artist; she becomes an empty vessel that can fulfill his every need, and through which he canalizes his energies. This relationship is, however, not reciprocal but always coded along gender lines; the muse's own, female needs are never acknowledged:

I failed at just one small aspect of the whole deal. And that was my own pleasure. I didn't know where it had wandered, but it was never present in Mark's bedroom. Or possibly all my energy went into doing my best to carry out his commands, making sure that I'd do it exactly the way he wanted.

Here Tanya implies that their muse-artist relationship negates her own self; their relation is based on the premise of her endowing him with her energy, but without him reciprocating. Ultimately, the muse is doubly empty: on the one hand, she empties herself and is emptied out of her energies. On the other hand, her own self, with its emotions and needs, is never acknowledged and affirmed, neither by herself nor by the artist-genius.

In contrast to Tanya, Suslova cannot force herself to fully submit sexually to Dostoevsky. Instead, sex shakes the foundation of Suslova and Dostoevsky's affair, and permits her to partially decode the politically gendered nature of their liaison.

Soon after she has moved in with Mark, Tanya begins to notice the lack of literature in the literary man's life. Though they frequent his literary, social circles, Tanya, still unsure of her English, can only surmise that the conversation is literary, as she still can't "follow the conversation."⁵² In fact, she learns that there is very little culture in general in Mark's life, as he never goes "to

⁵² Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 130.

any exhibitions or concerts”, nor does he “spend too much time reading.” Interestingly, the literature he does de facto read is authors’ biographies:

He liked to highlight his favorite passages with multicolored markers. Sometimes he would write his name next to a highlighted passage, at other times some other name, or “Mother.” He must have looked for things that made those writers’ lives feel close to his.

Just as she imagines the muse as belonging to a shared class, a social role to inhabit, Tanya supposes male writers as a common group whose members are connected.

Tanya interprets Mark’s reading habits as a part of his genius, creative life:

I decided that his lack of interest in other books was caused by the fact that he was a writer himself. His mind was constantly busy with producing and digesting its own images, so there wasn’t place or time for absorbing somebody else’s. Geniuses created art, while struggling and suffering. And ordinary people simply consumed it, feeding off the genius’s mind, like parasites off their host’s body.⁵³

Her explanation comes from her still naive view of the male artist. She offers a similar interpretation of the fact that Mark the author does not write: “Only an idiot would think that a writer must write all the time, like a machine.”⁵⁴ Instead, she discovers, their mutual life consists of mundane, day-to-day activities, with literature playing a peripheral role. Tanya’s idealized, gendered conceptualization of the female muse and male artist dyad is increasingly disturbed by the mundanity and domesticity of her shared life with Mark.

Still, Tanya clings to her perception of her and Mark’s relationship as premised on the muse-artist binary. In order to understand him better, to “understand his work” and “make [their] relationship stronger,” she decides to learn English properly. First, she attempts to read one of Mark’s novels with the aid of a dictionary. When her neighbor, an elder middle-class intellectual woman, sees Mark’s book, she throws Mark’s genius into further doubt: “‘Oh, that,’ she said with a faint trace of disappointment in her voice. ‘So, how do you find it?’”⁵⁵

For Tanya, learning English is not first and foremost for her sake, for aiding her in assimilating to American culture and society, but for becoming a better muse, for becoming closer to her male genius. Upon learning the fate of a mysterious woman resident whom she has seen on several occasions, a lonely woman named Vera, Tanya makes the following observation:

⁵³ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 131.

⁵⁴ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 131.

⁵⁵ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 158.

I couldn't stop thinking about Vera as I lay in bed that night. Old, sick, and alone. Horrible, horrible fate. Like my grandmother. Like my mother, now that I was gone. I was so lucky to have a man in my life. To lie in bed next to somebody warm, breathing, responsive. A man. And a wonderful man at that. A writer. I will be reading Mark's books in no time, I thought before falling asleep. And wouldn't it be wonderful if he started working on his new book just as I learned to understand his writing?⁵⁶

For Tanya, being alone is the worst fate possible for a woman. It carries with it intrinsically negative connotations which can only be countered by a male presence. This implies that female identity is inferred through the man and, in Tanya's case, through his activities as a artist-genius.

Mark's commencing to write a new novel, however, doesn't infuse Tanya's muse-artist myth with new energy. On the contrary, it destabilizes it even more. Her initial excitement on hearing Mark writing, the sound of the typewriter keys clicking and clacking – "Today I woke up to the sound of typewriter's keys!" – wanes exponentially as the writing process turns out to be as mundane and banal as anything else in their lives.

As Mark begins to write his new novel, Tanya takes it upon her to chronicle the process in her journal. Clearly still determined to be a Suslova type of muse to her Dostoevsky type of genius, she asserts:

I planned to beat Anna Grigoryevna by being not only the perfect companion to a great writer, but also an excellent biographer. Unlike her, I wouldn't devote my diary to the description of minor purchases or petty domestic battles, but instead I would document the writing process, something entirely missing from Anna Grigoryevna's notes. Dostoevsky wrote his greatest works while married to her – *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot*, and *The Possessed* – and she didn't seem to have noticed! Not me. I would register and preserve every detail about Mark's writing, and do it in a clever and engaging way. It would be a wonderful gift from me to generations to come.⁵⁷

But as her initial observations in her diary show, her exclusion from the writing process itself, the cognitive side of creativity, makes her unable to register anything but the mechanics of the creative act, such as Mark's physical habits when seated at his desk, such as: "Today Mark sent me to get some hard green pears, which he needed for inspiration"; or "He sometimes sits, perched on a chair, with one leg bent and serving as a prop for his elbow, and the other folded under his butt."⁵⁸ Then, "bored with [her] new job" as muse proper, Tanya's diary remarks become increasingly lackadaisical and laconic: "M. finished ch. 6" or "'Typed for an h-r and a half.'"

⁵⁶ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 161.

⁵⁷ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 174f.

⁵⁸ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 175.

The humdrum mechanics of Mark's writing now threatens to wholly upend Tanya's romantic conception of the muse-artist relation. She finds in Mark's creative process little to distinguish it from and elevate it beyond any other activity of his daily life: "Mark's work didn't look like a thrilling dramatic process anymore, but rather like another daily activity effortlessly incorporated into his schedule. Two hours squeezed between jogging and lunch. One more hour before the evening news."⁵⁹

Although Mark asks Tanya for advice on his writing, it clearly isn't because he relies on her literary knowledge, as he "never wait[s] for [her] answer." And from the plot of the novel – the last part of a trilogy about a Jewish boy which ends when the protagonist is "Sixteen, tops" – Tanya understands that "there would be no place in his novel for the 'maddening imprint' of [her] foot." What is more, she begins to see that her role as inspiring muse is, in fact, not the role Mark has cast her in:

He seemed please that I was documenting his writing in my diary. "So, how's our hardworking chronicler doing today? I wish I could read Russian," he said from time to time. He liked me to watch him write. "Your presence is soothing," he said. My presence was soothing, that was good, if only I hadn't spent my whole life hoping to be inspiring rather than soothing.⁶⁰

Her disillusion with the repetitive minutiae of Mark's writing, its distinctly uneventful nature, leads to her discontent with their relationship. In boredom, she turn to the writers' biographies which Mark usually reads. Among them, she finds Mark Slonim's *Three Loves of Dostoevsky*, a biography of the writer which focuses on his first wife Maria Dmitriyevna Isaeeva, Anna Grigoryevna, and Polina Suslova. It is in reading Mark's comments in the margins that Tanya finally realizes the role both she and Mark has molded her into, and the implications this has had for her own identity.

Upon finishing his novel, Mark resumes his ordinary life of mundane activities, such as reading a Henry James biography. His main task, however, is to scan the book reviews in order to determine the competition for his new novel. Negative remarks warrant an "Exactly!", positive reviews an "Unbelievable!" To ascertain the quality of the most highly praised titles, Mark sends Tanya to purchase the novels in question.

After finishing the first positively reviewed book, Mark, relieved, says "with a sigh of relief": "Whew, I thought that he really did it this time."⁶¹ As important as his own achievements are, just as important are the failures of his competitors. Although never explicitly stated here, as the only authors featured in the novel are male, and, in all probability, so are likely the writers of the novels with which Mark compares his own work. Moreover, the fact that

⁵⁹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 175.

⁶⁰ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 176f.

⁶¹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 190.

creativity and art in the novel are considered prerogatives of the male gender role by the characters would also support this assumption.

The most interesting response comes, however, when Mark reads a novel which threatens his own sense of self-worth as male artist-genius. His reaction is both visceral and psychological:

He proceeded to read the book just as swiftly and silently as he always did, the only difference being that he sucked sharp intakes of air from time to time, as if he had stomach cramps. [...]

On the terrace, he roamed slowly and sadly among the folding chairs and empty pots. His head hung so low that his beard touched the collar of his T-shirt. The book must have been very good, and Mark was suffering.⁶²

As might have been expected from her in her role as “pampering” house-wife, Tanya sees that she ought to comfort and console Mark. Instead, as a result of her still being upset over being cast as Anna Grigoryevna, Tanya instead observes Mark’s response to the novel of his presumably male competitor:

I knew that I should go to him and say something comforting, or simply touch him in a warm, affectionate way. I tried to come up with some gesture of kindness, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t take my eyes off him, so I just stood and watched him suffer. There he was, usually so cool and confident, exposed to the pains of envy.

In order to come to terms with the competitor, Mark asserts himself by carrying out his aggressiveness toward Tanya:

Silent, fidgety, faintly hostile. I didn’t understand what was happening then, but now I knew. This was his dialogue with the author of the “soaring” book. By pushing and tugging and squeezing *me*, he was trying to prove his strength and power to *him*. I didn’t matter at all, and my body was just a vessel for his frustration. I felt a wave of repulsion so strong that I thought I was going to be sick right there in Mark’s bed.⁶³

In the above paragraph, Mark’s nemesis is clearly identified as male, which gives further credence to the argument that literature in the novel is a male field of battle, where each author strives to assert himself and stake his claim to recognition and status. Women, on the other hand, are to serve and affirm the genius of the male author, to be an empty signifier which can be shaped and formed to reflect exactly that which the author might need at any given time. They are to be, as Tanya notes, “a vessel for his frustration.” To do so, they have to empty out themselves of content, to model themselves on previous generations of women, like Anna Grigoryevna and Suslova, who have all

⁶² Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 190f.

⁶³ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 191.

fulfilled the same gestures of emptying out their selves and their identities for the benefaction and needs of men.

Instead she reads the manuscript of his new novel, and discovers that the artist-genius whom she has adored and revered is a falsehood, a construction of male genius perpetuated and upheld by men and women alike which is ultimately contingent on an age-old gendering of societal norms and practices which does not hold up to scrutiny. She proceeds to read his other books and comes to the following conclusion:

Mark's command of English was excellent and he did know how to weave a long, intricate sentence, but that somehow failed to bring his characters or descriptions to life. Dead dummies wandered around in a dead landscape that looked more like a stage set, exchanging words that were supposed to be clever but were in fact empty and boring. [...] This was a bad book. Completely, hopelessly bad. [...] The first one was a little more inspired than the rest, but the glimpses of life were stifled with Mark's desire to impress. Every sentence seemed to cry out for attention: "Look at me, look! Look how clever I am, how elegant I am!" There was something pathetic, something sickening with those pleas.⁶⁴

Male literary genius and literature is here revealed here as a male domain of anxiety and fear of rejection. To be recognized as a genius is to be seen, to be acknowledged, and from that particular, privileged vantage point the male artist-genius can maintain and assert his power and authority over his social relations, especially over women. But as became clear earlier, the artist's power is frail and vulnerable when challenged; it hinges, furthermore, on the complicit capitulation of women and their acceptance of the narrow roles which they are expected to reenact.

For Tanya, her own mother's life, however, is not a valid option for herself. While her mother is "a famous professor, a celebrated author of textbooks," a confident and independent woman, Tanya mostly sees "her other persona": a "small and miserable" woman, who cries from loneliness while "waiting and waiting and waiting for a call from her boring, unattractive, married male colleague."⁶⁵ Just as she was appalled by what she regards as submissive in Anna Grigoryevna's choice of domesticity in becoming Dostoevsky's wife and not his muse, Tanya views her mother's life as equally void of agency and suffused with mundanity.

One important aspect of Tanya's narration, one which ultimately helps her move beyond her role as a muse, is what she perceives as the antithesis of the muse – the mundanity of ordinary-life woman. Key to her decision to pursue her identity as a muse is how she reads her mother's life and life choices.

⁶⁴ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 200f.

⁶⁵ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 48.

Her mother is on the surface a successful, independent Soviet woman, “a famous professor, a celebrated author of textbooks” who “finished college while working full time,” who “wrote her dissertation while working *and* changing [Tanya’s] diapers.”⁶⁶ Professionally, her mother is an imposing authority figure occupying a status position in academia. But behind this façade, Tanya discerns a decidedly more disconcerting “persona,” one who is

small and vulnerable. Plagued with constant colds. [...] Sobbing into her pillow at night. Giving dirty looks to couples. [...] And then waiting and waiting and waiting for a call from her boring, unattractive, married male colleague, who might or might not be interested in her. That was the role model she wanted me to follow? That?⁶⁷

It is in contrast to her mother’s lonely, bitter, and middle-aged life that Tanya considers the projected glory of the muse. The prototypical polarities of this binary of female identity, as expressed here by Tanya, are Anna Grigoryevna and Suslova. In this model of two antithetical binarities we discern on one side the idealized and eroticized image of the muse who propels the male artist-genius to new heights; on the other is the role of everyday women and the ordinariness of their lives. For Tanya, in girlhood and later in adolescence, the advantages of the former over the latter, is clear-cut and undisputable.

As argued earlier regarding the representations of Anna Grigoryevna and Suslova in Dostoevsky biographies, how their lives have been politicized, the above binary is as much a patriarchal construct, not simply an objective lifestyle choice. For Tanya’s mother, her own private struggles are due to her inability to claim for her private life the same agency and authority that she possesses in her work life. In her domestic life, her success is dependent on factors outside her own control. The contrast of her work-life persona and her domestic self as described by Tanya is striking. Whereas in the academy her mother is awarded for her independence and agency, in her private life she is subjected to “waiting and waiting and waiting” for the approval of men, for men to alleviate her loneliness.

What Tanya assumes is passivity from her mother in her private life is, more plausibly, passivization; her mother is not passive by nature, as exemplified by the ambition and work ethics of her public persona, but is rendered passive by social norms and expectations. This is further supported by how Tanya’s mother reacts when she understands that Tanya lives with Mark and is supported by him economically. In a phone call with her daughter, she asks, “You’re dependent on him? He keeps you?” Tanya’s mother is proud of her independence, but unable to see how conditional it is, extending only as far as

⁶⁶ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 47.

⁶⁷ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 48.

her work place. Tanya, too, fails to recognize this gender aspect of her mother's life.

The two roles – muse and domestic woman – are as equally constructed by patriarchal politics: be it in their professional life or in the home, women's actions are determined and suffused by norms and values which are essentially patriarchal. When Tanya counters her mother's sad life with the "magical way" of the muse, she still defines the muse not on the muse's own female terms, but as an appendage to the male artist, a passive inspirer to great deeds, a mythical being "with a great fire in [her] eyes."⁶⁸

Tanya's fear of mundanity and domesticity is further deepened in college when her friends begin to marry and have children. To Tanya, these women's personal lives represent the crassest aspects of everyday life, described in vivid terms of physical deterioration and fraught social relations with mothers-in-law, absent fathers, and nerve-wrecking children:

Every fall, a few more of my classmates came to school endowed with shiny wedding rings, hard round bellies, and a whole new set of problems that seemed to have emerged overnight [...] [N]ow it was more like: "I set out to make some meatballs yesterday, but the butter had this funny smell, so I sent him to the store, but he said..." "And then the bitch told me, 'You might have taken my son, but never will you get my apartment!'" Even their bodies seemed to change their functions dramatically. "My nipples are all cracked." "I have a pain in my lower back like you won't believe." [...] Then after the cracked nipples, constipation, and pus, the children came, the ones who were supposed to be great fun and the reward for all the suffering, but I never heard them described as such. In the words of their young mothers, children were portrayed as sickly, annoying little beings whose sole purpose was to get on their parents' nerves and never let them go anywhere.⁶⁹

Tanya's slightly older next-door neighbor, a young woman whose romantic encounters on the staircase Tanya used to witness through the key-hole of their apartment door, has also become one of these, in Tanya's eyes, entrapped and disillusioned women, apparently raising her child alone: "By the time I graduated, the neighbors' girl had a six-year-old, her face perpetually covered with crusty snot. 'Shut up, you little shit!' the girl now yelled."⁷⁰ And even though Tanya herself intuits that this highly physical, if horrifyingly so, material reality of her female friends is still considerably more real than her muse fantasies, the latter nevertheless exerts a greater pull on her imagination: "There was no place for beets, crusted snot, or yelling in my fantasies of marriage. In fact, there wasn't a single concrete image in them."⁷¹

⁶⁸ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 48.

⁶⁹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 66f.

⁷⁰ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 67.

⁷¹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 67.

But as her imagined great artist fails to materialize and turn her into a muse, Tanya in earnest begins to consider that a life similar to that of her friends is in fact what lies before her, too. It is, however, not only the status quo of her own life that gives rise to this suspicion, but she senses also that her friends might actually be satisfied with their mundane existences:

[T]hey thought of marriage as an achievement. They all had smug expressions as though they'd earned the right to have all those maladies. There must be something good about it, I thought, something they didn't disclose. Could it be the pleasure of having all those constant little pains that proved that you were a woman, and were alive?

This hidden meaning of her friends' lives, which she gleans but cannot comprehend fully, might reside in motherhood:

*This is life, I thought, when one or another of my friends gave me her warm, heavy, sleepy baby to hold. The baby fussed in my arms, the baby pulled on my hair, the baby smelled of sour milk and freshly pressed overalls. The baby was real the way my marriage fantasies and aspirations to become a muse were not. What if the life I dreamt of simply didn't exist?*⁷²

But just as she begins to accept the thought that she might have to lead a life similar to her friends', a life of domesticity and parenthood, as opposed to her romanticized notion of becoming a Suslova-type muse, she receives her letter from the U. S. Immigration. Thus she is granted a new opportunity of fulfilling her muse fantasy.

The tension between these two competing views of female identity is thus evident already at this early point in the novel. But rather than presenting itself as a valid alternative, domestic life for Tanya represents personal failure at finding love (as for her mother), or a displacement of love as an ideal with the physical crassness of childbearing and childrearing (as for her friends). If the former, conceptualized as idealized love between woman-muse and male artist-genius modelled on Dostoevsky and Suslova, suggests something wholly positive, then the latter stands for a loss of ideals, a loss of one's dreams and hopes.

While Tanya in her fantasies about love decries the domestic and mundane, she is still drawn to it another way, one which will play an important part in her ultimate disillusionment with the muse ideal. In college, she majors in history. Although she professes that she chose history as subject because she "felt irresistibly drawn to matters of the past,"⁷³ it appears as if it were primarily the minutiae of everyday life that attracts her: "I didn't shun the exploration of canalization plans or personal hygiene habits. It was the knowledge of those

⁷² Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 68.

⁷³ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 60.

minor details that made the past breathe behind all the dusty books and artifacts, that made people who'd been dead for hundreds of years spring to life."⁷⁴

She discovers, however, that her interest in the small details of historical life is considered trivial by her teachers. And vice versa, Tanya has no interest in that which is in general considered to be the important events of history, such as wars and explorations. Without realizing it, Tanya's interest in history, in the mundanity of whale teeth corsages, Victorian dress, and birth control, is an interest in areas of social life that have been considered female domains. And her indifference concerns primarily the larger events of history in which men generally partook. Traditionally, just as literature and literary creation have been considered male prerogatives,⁷⁵ politics, wars, and governing have been male-dominated spheres of interest. That is, whereas men have enjoyed the privilege to make discursive traces in history by exercising control and authority, women, who have been excluded from the dominant discourses, have remained invisible. And as becomes clear for Tanya, later male historiography continues to privilege male discourses and practices. This gendered demarcation of history is nevertheless sensed by Tanya:

If an alien were to look at our history books, he would be sure that humans were busy killing one another ninety-nine percent of the time. I thought sometimes that maybe if historians didn't find wars so fascination, there would be less incentive for the tsars and kings to start them.⁷⁶

And later, when she writes her thesis:

"Makeup? History of makeup in nineteenth-century Russia? You should be ashamed," my thesis adviser said after studying my proposal. "Look at the things happening all around you. The Soviet empire is about to collapse. Look out the window! We live in a period of greatest change. It's a dream of any historian. And you! You, writing your thesis about creams and pomades that went rancid more than a hundred years ago!"⁷⁷

This division of history into male and female areas, into important and trivial events, mirrors to a large extent the historical casting of men and women into the roles of artist-genius and muse, respectively. Both rely on patriarchal notions of female passivity and male activity, of female domesticity and male public life. Therefore, Tanya's decision to become a muse does not imply that she is altogether unmindful of the politicized and patriarchal aspects of gender roles; it suggests that it is yet only an intuition rather than knowledge.

⁷⁴ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 60.

⁷⁵ MADWOMAN?

⁷⁶ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 62.

⁷⁷ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 62f.

Her fascination for day-to-day life is further emphasized by her attraction to American commercials. This habit is taken up by Tanya when she is alone in Mark's apartments on Tuesdays, when Mark is teaching and she "fe[els] the most comfortable." It is during these days, in contrast to when Mark is present and she is "too intimidated to eat,"⁷⁸ that she feels as if " [she] really lived in this apartment, that everything belonged to me and I could do whatever I wanted. Happy energy would fill me as soon as I heard the low drone of the elevator taking Mark down and away."⁷⁹

But if her romanticized, gendered casting of her and Mark into their respective muse and artist-genius roles in a "fairy-tale hierarchy" which is localized in "an enchanted forest surrounded by fairy-tale castles,"⁸⁰ the commercials serve to anchor Tanya to everyday life. Although the commercials, which are "all about the magic in ordinary life," are a commodified, capitalist fantasy of their own, they are nonetheless materially grounded, pulling Tanya away from the fantasy in which she has situated, and has been situated by, Mark. Even though the tone of this passage is ironic, citing advertisements for cars ascending to the heavens and women having orgasms from eating a particular brand of chocolate, commercials still remind Tanya that "[p]eople performed the most ordinary actions and achieved the most miraculous results."⁸¹ At this point, however, Tanya does not connect her craving for the mundanity and ordinariness of the commercials, or her interest in the ordinary lives of history and its subjects, with the environment in which they reside – in the domestic life of ordinary people such as Tanya's cousin Dena.

Dena emigrated to the United States before Tanya and is married and has a five-year old son. At first, Dena makes the same impression on Tanya as had her college friends done:

No, Dena hasn't changed, I thought, mentally replacing her hip hairdo with pigtails. She's only gotten older. Much older. But it's been only ten years since I saw her. She must be no more than thirty-one? Why is her complexion so sallow, what are these two deep lines doing around her mouth, why does she have those shadows under her eyes? How come she looks so hard, and bored, and exhausted?⁸²

It soon becomes apparent that Dena's premature aging is brought on by domestic life, by leading a life filled with the ennui of everyday life:

The women at Dena's gatherings were jittery and ferocious like a pack of seagulls; they sat perched on the sofas' armrests, shouting stories at one another.

⁷⁸ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 139.

⁷⁹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 137.

⁸⁰ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 141

⁸¹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 139.

⁸² Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 75.

Men, who sank deep into the plush and leather, were mum and gloomy next to their wives. [...] Everybody seemed miserable to me and at the same time bored with his misery.

I watched it all from the corner of the couch, where I sat with a sagging paper plate in my lap, sinking into the cold leather even deeper than the men, full of fear that eventually I'd get sucked into this life. The trap would close [...].

The sense of dread which home and family life imbue in Tanya is, as the above citations illustrate, palpable.

As became clear from my earlier discussion of how Tanya strives to become a muse, the muse identity as construed by her is supposed to offer a way out of the "trap" of domestic life. But even before she understands the politicized and gendered aspects of the muse role, and the consequences of modeling one's identity upon it, she notices how Mark has little interest in knowing her. In part, this is due to Tanya's effacing of her own personality, displacing it with the Suslova muse ideal that she has created. By so doing, she becomes a blank surface that reflects whatever Mark desires it to reflect. But it is also a result of Mark's inability, or reluctance, to ascribe any importance to exactly those aspects of everyday life which Tanya initially fears so deeply. One clear example is when she has already begun to sense that there is something askew with their relationship, and the respective roles they enact within it:

One thing that bothered me immensely was how little Mark seemed to want to know me. He either assumed that he had a very good idea of me already, or he didn't care to know me at all as long as I suited him. He never asked how I liked my coffee or whether I preferred a tuna or a chicken sandwich. He never expressed any wish to know about my childhood, my life in Russia, my former studies, or my friends. He never asked about my relatives. "If you plan to be calling your parents in Russia, I'll have to switch to a better long-distance plan," he said once. My parents! I thought, taken aback. I had told Mark that my mother lived alone. I had told him that my father was dead! It was one of the very few things that I'd told him about myself.⁸³

Mark is as interested in the small details of Tanya's life as her professors were interested in the small matters of historical life. In an effort to rationalize Mark's stance toward her, Tanya proffers the following explanation when Marks finally begins to write his next novel, and thereby rekindling her hope of becoming the Suslova to his Dostoevsky:

The lack of intimacy wouldn't be a flaw. A writer could be truly intimate only with his work. If he wasted his innermost thoughts on his partner, what would be left for his novels? Mark's egoism wouldn't be a flaw either. A writer had to

⁸³ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 168.

be so perfectly receptive to his own feelings that he couldn't possibly understand the feelings of others.

Of course, Tanya's justification ultimately leads to the last phase of her emptying herself in order to become a muse. But this time she attempts to overcome her already ambiguous feelings toward the gendering of their relationship. If their relationship is void of intimacy and understanding, at least she will be able to perform her function as a muse by inspiring him to genius. However, as I showed above, Mark's genius is a sham, an illusion of male genius upheld by carefully bordered and patrolled gender demarcations.

Clearly, Tanya's justification of Mark's lack of interest in her private life, the minutiae of her history as it were, is a male prerogative. By laying claims to the domains of activity and creativity, by his participation in creating their gendered roles of female muse and male artist-genius, Mark is relieved of and released from the sphere of domesticity and mundanity, from the milieu which women have traditionally been confined to. Notwithstanding his very material needs, his attention to personal hygiene and his domineering sexual control of their intimate life, Mark can remain aloof from the trivialities of everyday life thanks to the gendering process that turns him into an artist-genius.

Tanya juxtaposes Mark's for her unsettling indifference toward her private self, her own feelings of being reduced to a muse, with similar feelings of resentment expressed by Suslova.

This point is put forth by Dena, too, who ascribes Mark's disinterest in Tanya and in her emotional life both to gender issues and Mark's exoticization of Tanya's Russianness:

"Intimacy is the last thing they need. The lack of intimacy is what they strive for. You're a foreigner for him, you're exotic, you're different. Don't fool yourself with that 'intimacy' shit. You're different, and that's exactly why he wants you. Some of them believe that we're these wildly exotic creatures, but that's only because out of stupidity we let them do to us what no other woman in her right mind would let them. Or else they think that we're those complacent little fools ready to take shit at any time."⁸⁴

Dena clearly understands that Mark's dominant status and position, which unbalances their relationship, hinge on discursive practices which allow white, male, Western men to control and regulate even the most intimate social relations. Mark doesn't need to persuade Tanya to subjugate herself to him and his needs and demands; she does so by her own accord by accommodating and therefore eradicating herself within the male fantasy of the muse.

This lack of intimacy, men's insistence on having strictly sexual relationships which they can detach themselves from, was of course more pronounced

⁸⁴ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 165.

in Suslova's nineteenth-century Russia than in Tanya's twentieth-century Soviet Union and United States.

For instance, in Tanya's reimagining of Suslova's affair with the Spanish medical student Salvador in Paris in 1863, which Suslova herself chronicled in her diary, it becomes clear that Suslova neither understands nor accepts this inequality. When Salvador proclaims in French "I love you!" he, Tanya suggests, means "I find you attractive enough to sleep with you, and I won't spare any passionate words or gestures to make the most of it." But Polina doesn't understand Salvador's instrumental interest not in her, but in her body. His words thus translate to "I'm yours forever. I can't go on living unless we reach the perfect union of minds and bodies."⁸⁵

Unsurprisingly, their relation deteriorates quickly:

But while Polina is enjoying the view from the top of her dream castle, the real Salvador is already slipping away from her. She isn't as good a lover as he'd expected. Her ineptness and shyness (the very things that fed Dostoevsky's fantasies and made his passion for her stronger) are just a nuisance for Salvador. Even the enticement her beauty becomes questionable after a while. [...]

Within a couple of weeks, Salvador starts making gentle but obvious hints that it is time to split. Polina's vehement refusal to understand and accept those hints comes as a big surprise to him.⁸⁶

Tanya ascribes Suslova's failure to understand Salvador's ulterior motives, his male sexual politics as it were, to Suslova's amorous and sexual inexperience, which is arguably due to the fact that women at the time had little freedom to define their sexual identities and express them in their own terms:

[Salvador] wants her in a simple and sincere way, devoid of an older man's agenda to prove himself on her account, to grasp for his fading life in her, to affirm his virility. Salvador doesn't have to prove anything. His virility is right there, breathing through every pore of his beautiful body. There isn't, of course, much else to him, beyond his virility, but how is Polina to know that? In spite of the fact that she was considered a woman of "free behavior" by the standards of her time, at the age of twenty-four, her experience was limited to only one lover, Dostoevsky.⁸⁷

Finally, however, after Salvador has been avoiding her and not answering her more insistent letters, Suslova realizes she has been taken advantage of:

She can't help but see things in their true light now. Her happy blindness is at once broken, crushed, annihilated. Salvador doesn't love her. Never loved her. And with this illusion gone, everything else crumbles. What she took for Sal-

⁸⁵ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 99

⁸⁶ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 100f.

⁸⁷ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 99.

vador's noble simplicity turns into emptiness. His striking honesty into an inability to come up with credible lies. His "meaningful" silences into stupidity. His immense love for her turns into simple interest in her body, and not too great interest, making the whole affair even more banal than her relationship with Dostoevsky, making her sink even lower.

And with this realization comes also the insight that she, in contrast to Salvador who remains in control, is powerless; "she finds that she is simply unable to cause Salvador pain. She can make him annoyed, she can make him angry, she can even make him scared, but she can't make him suffer."

The gist of Suslova's sober hindsight into her and Salvador's affair is the ways in which men allow themselves, and are allowed, the privilege of extracting the pleasures they crave from a woman while refraining from committing themselves emotionally. As we have seen, this is also true, Tanya argues, for Dostoevsky's interest in Suslova. Already in the novel's first pages, recounting the meeting between Dostoevsky and Suslova shortly after the affair with Salvador had ended and Dostoevsky had finally arrived to Paris, Dostoevsky wants to know if she has "given [herself] to [Salvador]." Dostoevsky's main concern isn't for her wellbeing; instead he wants to know if she's slept with another man, a competitor, a sexual rival. But after her experiences with both Dostoevsky and Salvador, she now understands how she's been objectified in sexual terms by the two men: "His voice is thin, hysterical. She recoils. Even no, now! That is all he could think about."⁸⁸

But even prior to the events with Salvador and later with Dostoevsky, Suslova, much like Tanya, senses that Dostoevsky's interest in her, much like Mark's in Tanya, extends only so far as his own needs and desires. A relationship with a woman, the men in the novel implies, is only for acknowledging and satisfying the man. The woman remains a vessel, an outlet. This becomes clear in the first scene where Dostoevsky and Suslova have sex. For Suslova, this being her first time, the experience is harrowing and almost traumatic. But Dostoevsky, in contrast, becomes "calm and cheerful, if a little tired. There was none of the crazy desperation in his eye, none of the strained force of his body, none of the coarseness in his voice."⁸⁹

After they've made love, Dostoevsky turns to the subject of his journal and an offer he has made to fellow novelist Ivan Turgenev. In disbelief, Suslova tries to make sense of Dostoevsky's businesslike turn from the private act of sex to his public sphere of literature and journalism in which she can only participate as far as he allows her:

⁸⁸ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 4.

⁸⁹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 35.

Turgenev? He wants to talk about his magazine now? Now? She had dreamed of having literary conversations with him, so that was probably it. They were having one right now.⁹⁰

And after they leave Paris, following the Salvador romance, this indictment of Dostoevsky, the charge from Suslova that he craves nothing but her body for his own release, is emphasized yet again. This confrontation between the two former lovers occurs when they have reached Rome. Their arrangement after Paris was that they should travel as “brother and sister.” But as Suslova noted in her diary, which Tanya quotes, Dostoevsky continued to “badger[...] [her],” demanding that they become lovers once again:

I [Tanya] see them walking around the bed in circles. Watching each other, glowering, mouths shut tight.

He takes a few firm steps around the bed toward her side. She takes a few steps too, keeping the distance the same.

“Why Polina, why?”

She shrugs.

He takes some steps. She does too.

“Why are you being so serious about this?”

She shrugs again.

“We used to do it before, remember?”

Oh, yes, she remembers.

“You used to love it.”

She just stares at him.

“You used to want it. You keep wanting it your want it just as badly as I. I saw signs of it.”

He takes a few very big steps in her direction. She takes a few very big steps away.

“Why do you give such importance to this entirely common act, anyway? These are simple bodily needs, one has to satisfy them.

Back in Petersburg, I used to go to the ‘houses of fun’ on a regular basis.”

She winces.

“What is it? You’ve suddenly become prudish? Prudishness doesn’t suit you.”

A step.

A step away.

“I am not prudish.”

“What then?”

She shakes her head. She isn’t enjoying torturing him anymore.

“Are you trying to tease me? You can’t refuse a man for a long time, you know. He might stop insisting at the end.”

She smiles. She as evidence to the contrary.

“I might have to force you, Polina, because we Russian soldiers never retreat.”

A step in her direction.

⁹⁰ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 36.

A step away.

“Oh, I know. I know why. You’re hoping, You still cherish hopes that your charming Sothern prince will come?”

She shudders.

“That’s it then! You are hoping. Can’t you see what you were for him? Nothing more than a convenient mistress!”

Wasn’t I just that for you too, she thinks, closing her eyes. Her eyelashes are wet.⁹¹

From the above citation, it is evident that for Suslova there are no longer any delusions as to the real nature of her and Dostoevsky’s relation. Although the two men in her life up until this point – Dostoevsky and Salvador – appear to be different in many aspects, their view of her, of their respective relationship with her, is the male gendered reduction of a woman to a sexual object to be utilized in order to satisfy their needs.

Tanya now begins reading the books of Mark’s competitors, an act of defiance and, as she perceives it, betrayal: “It was the first real book I’d managed to read (and to enjoy!) in English. It was the book Mark hated. I felt as if I’d just cheated on him.”⁹² The sensuality of cheating on Mark by reading other male authors’ works is soon transformed into a more concrete sexual desires: “Images of sex now haunted me everywhere, regardless of what I was doing [...]”⁹³

This act of literary treason is then turned into a real betrayal when Tanya sleeps with another man, an act that further confronts Tanya with the problematic aspects of her role as Mark’s muse. When the stranger with whom she sleeps shows consideration for *her* desires and wishes, Tanya is want of an answer: “I had no idea which way I liked it best. I had been a muse, I had been used to serving not being served.”⁹⁴ The muse’s passivity, as in Tanya’s case, renders her incapable of knowing her own self, its needs and desires.

Her betrayal, however, shows her how the power dynamics in her and Mark’s relationship might be subverted. Whereas Mark’s control over Tanya presupposes that they both assume the gendered roles of artist-genius and muse with its adhering implications of power and submission, Tanya now realizes that her power resides in sex and sexuality. By cheating on Mark with another man, by making him hurt, Tanya can do exactly that which the muse is supposed to do – to make the artist suffer:

The pain I caused would finally make me his muse. The real one. It was not Polina’s love but her betrayal that made her Dostoevsky’s muse. It wasn’t the

⁹¹ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 182f.

⁹² Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 192.

⁹³ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 193.

⁹⁴ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 197.

sexual satisfaction of their Petersburg days, but the agony and frustration of their Italian journey that had made him write about her. How, how had I not thought of this before! Mark, too, would write his greatest work now. Fuck the troubled, gifted boy from New Jersey! Mark would write about a grown man who had a habit of falling in love with beautiful, difficult women, who in turn had a habit of torturing him and driving him crazy. [...] And then he met a woman who was perfectly unique, unlike any other he'd ever met. Not as beautiful, not as sophisticated, but so kind and loving, so awed with him, so fascinated by everything he said or did, ready to do anything to please him, grateful for the smallest attention he would pay to her. He allowed that woman to love him, he allowed himself to love her back. For the first time in his life he felt happy and safe, only to be viciously betrayed by her.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Vapnyar, *Memoirs of a Muse*, 199f.