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From Torment to Redemption: A Reading of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime And Punishment*

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Abstract

This paper probes into the inner recess of an individual who is forced to become a murderer by chance. The protagonist Raskolnikov is tormented by his deed and guilt bursts like a volcano. When he confesses his crime, he gains a new life. The descriptions of inner emotions are psychologically realistic and true. The guilt-ridden mind of the criminal, experiences mental torture. This deed drags him to the edge of madness. His tormented inner conscience forces him to confess his crime. Sonya appears as an angel in his life and offers him the cross. This provides him the strength to confess his crime and leads him to redemption. He becomes a new man with budding hopes and moves from one world to another.

Key words: Dostoevsky - *Crime And Punishment* - crime – punishment – psychology – inner emotions – schism – dualism – guilt – stress – anxiety – struggle – inner conflict– confession – new life

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* replaces the graceful style of Romanticism with fictional realism portraying individual behaviour and human development. Dostoevsky's pragmatic approach influences social and political realities. The Russia of Dostoevsky's time is almost perplexing. Sir Winston Churchill defines Russia as a "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" (qtd. in Cowell), which equally applies to the Russia of 1860s when Dostoevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment*.

Dostoevsky is well informed about the newest ideas and the most recent philosophical concepts of his time. His characters are driven by inner emotions. Sigmund Freud's investigations of the psychological state of one's mind were published only after Dostoevsky's studies of the mental forces that drive a person to commit certain acts. As a psychologist, Dostoevsky is well ahead to Sigmund Freud. His description of the inner emotion is psychologically realistic and true. Bakhtin adds the idea that "*Crime and Punishment* is a critique of any psychology of motives" (qtd.in Bloom vii).

The novel's main character Raskolnikov, a poverty - stricken young man is a former law student. He now lives in the dirty, cluttered and muddled city of St. Petersburg, Russia during the 1860s. The immense social problems that Russia faces at the time are wide spread poverty, ignorance and social agitation and these form the background of *Crime and Punishment.*

In choosing Raskolnikov's name, Dostoevsky has given an important clue to his character. The word "raskol" in Russian is defined as "schism" or "split" (qtd. in "Moral Relativism"). This is more appropriate because his personality has a cruel and thoughtless side as well as a caring, compassionate side. Regarding his character there is a conflict between the alienated intellectual and his hostile social environment, viewing his nature there is a struggle between his solitary mind and his own moral consciousness. "Dualism is key to Raskolnikov's character – he is torn between the desire of his mind to prove his theories through evil and the necessity to satisfy his conscience by doing good" (Nutall 160).

The manner in which the novel addresses, the crime and the punishment is not exactly what one would expect. The crime happens in part I and the punishment occurs hundreds of pages later in the Epilogue. The real focus of the novel is not on those two end points but on what lies between them, an in-depth exploration of the psychology of the criminal. The inner world of Raskolnikov, with all its doubts, deliria, second-guessing, fear and despair is the heart of the story.

Dostoevsky concerns himself not with the actual result of the murder but with the way the murder forces Raskolnikov to deal with tormenting guilt. Dostoevsky focuses so little on Raskolnikov's imprisonment, but seems to suggest that the actual punishment is much less terrible than the stress and anxiety of trying to avoid punishment. Porfiry Petrovich the detective emphasises the psychological angle of the novel. He sensibly realises that Raskolnikov is the killer and makes several speeches in which he narrates the workings of Raskolnikov's mind after killing. He understands that a guilt- ridden criminal must necessarily experience mental torture. Porfiry Petrovich is certain that Raskolnikov will eventually confess or go mad. The expert mind-game that he plays with Raskolnikov strengthens the sense that the novel's outcome is inevitable because of the nature of the human psyche.

Dostoevsky withholds information to create suspense. The novelist puts across the fact on the first page that the young man is contemplating some sort of desperate deed but he does not reveal what

this deed is. Instead many clues that something strange is going to take place are given. The protagonist himself engages in confusing thoughts, "Am I really capable of this? Is this a serious matter? Of course, it isn't. It's just a fantasy to amuse myself with: it's just pretty pictures! Yes, I do believe that's all it is – pretty pictures!" (6). Raskolnikov goes through serious struggles with himself that are often megalomaniacal and self-contradictory. He often seems to have a split personality.

The novel focuses on Raskolnikov's interior conflict, first over whether to kill Alyona the pawnbroker and later over whether to confess and rejoin humanity. Raskolnikov is ill throughout the novel, overwhelmed by his feelings of alienation and self-loathing ". . . he had been in a tense, irritable state of mind that verged upon hypochondria. So, absorbed in himself had he grown, so isolated from everyone else, that he was actually afraid of meeting anyone at all, not simply his landlady. He had been crushed by poverty, but even his reduced circumstances had of late ceased to be a burden to him" (5).

Raskolnikov is extremely proud, scornful and emotionally detached from the rest of humanity, and he is in a complex, semi delirious mental state. Even from the beginning of the novel, the struggle is mostly between Raskolnikov's desire to commit the crime and his disgust at the thought of doing so, '"I plan to attempt a thing like this, yet I allow that kind of rubbish to scare me!' he thought with a strange smile. 'Hm . . . yes . . . Everything lies in a man's hand, and if he lets it all slip past his nose it's purely out of cowardice . . . that's an axiom'" (6).

Raskolnikov overhears the discussion about killing the pawnbroker from a young officer and a student, solidifies his resolve to commit the murder. He overhears the student saying:

> If one were to kill her and take her money, in order with its help to devote oneself to the service of all mankind and the common cause: what do you think- wouldn't one petty little crime like that be atoned for by all those thousands of good deeds? Instead of one life – thousands of lives rescued from corruption and decay. One death to hundred lives – I mean, there's arithmetic for you. (80)

This is crucial to Raskolnikov's psychology. Although he is extremely reluctant to kill Alyona before he overhears the conversation, he truly desires to kill her. He is simply waiting for a sign that he is fated to do so. Again, he overhears that Alyona will be alone at home the next evening. So, he senses that circumstances support his decision to commit the murder.

The protagonist commits the crime of premeditated murder. Only one of his two murders is actually premeditated, that is the one committed against Alyona. Lizaveta, Alyona's tortured sister faces an inadvertent death – he is forced to kill her when he fails to shut the door and she enters. In the act of committing the crime, Raskolnikov fluctuates between a cold-blooded murderer and an awkward criminal. He has the presence of mind to clean the axe and his boots, "he kicked off his boots: 'yes

there are marks! The whole toe of the sock is saturated in blood'" (112). But he fails to close the door before murdering the old woman. His reason and will fail him at certain points in the murders. Although Raskolnikov successfully commits the crime, he is unable to live with himself as his inner conscience torments him.

The criminal undergoes many struggles and conflicts within his inner mind. The thought of his deed even drags him to the edge of madness. In his panic, Raskolnikov is physically agitated and mentally confused. He fears that he will lose his reason and seems to be suffering it quite clearly. His confusion after his crime is accompanied by physical illness. He falls in and out of fitful sleep, shivering and faints in the police station at the mention of the crime. This incident makes Ilya Petrovich to pepper him with suspicious questions. The struggling psyche of Raskolnikov now asks question such as how he can stop the guilt. This is illustrated best in this inner dialogue:

> This much he (Raskolnikov) knew: he had to put an end to all that, today, right away, once and for all because he did not want to live like that. Put an end to it- but how? By what means put an end to it? About this he had no conception. He did not even want to think of it. He drove away thoughts painfully, thought tracked him down. He only felt, he only knew, one way or another; everything had to be change. (159)

With respect to Raskolnikov's crime, he convinces himself that he killed Alyona because she is a blood sucking leech on the body of the poor. Raskolnikov believes that he is doing good service to mankind by removing the dishonest and unjust pawnbroker. He comments on the old woman as, ". . . a nasty, stupid, worthless, meaningless sick old women who's no use to anyone and is indeed, actually harmful to people, . . . A hundred, a thousand good deeds and undertakings that could be arranged and expedited with that old woman's money, which is doomed to go to monastery!" (80). He finally admits to Sonya that he killed Alyona just to see if he could do it. He says, "I didn't kill in order to help my mother - that's rubbish! I didn't kill in order to get money and power and thus be able to become a benefactor of mankind. That's rubbish too! I simply killed; I killed for my own sake, for no one but myself . . . it was something else that was forcing my hand" (500).

Raskolnikov wants to know whether he is a Napoleon, "I'd spent so many days agonizing over the question whether I was a Napoleon" (500), and whether he will be able to commit an evil act and walk away with no remorse. His Napoleon-like plan impels him toward a well-calculated murder. When he finally realises himself, he says, "I really felt horribly ashamed of myself" (495).

Raskolnikov engages in sporadic acts of kindness. He gives money to the Marmeladov family, he attempts to aid Marmeladov when he dies and he tries to get a drunken girl home away from her pursuer. All of these deeds are done without premeditation. He simply feels that at that time, it is the right thing to do. After a short period of time, his outlook dramatically reverses. He starts to analyse rationally what he has done, and then feels that his actions are stupid. This transition marks the return of his cold side. It occurs after every kind thing that Raskolnikov does. The shift between two distinct

personalities gives Raskolnikov two separate points of view. “Raskolnikov’s generous and evil actions are essential to his character because they allow the reader to identify with these two points of view and two facets of his personality” (Sachdeva 158). Raskolnikov’s wish to remove all traces of the crime and all physical evidence is a sign of his inner desire to clean his soul and his conscience of the crime.

The clever and kind Razumikhin enters the novel more definitively as Raskolnikov’s saviour. He restores order, cleanliness, meals and probably indirectly Raskolnikov’s physical health too. Despite Raskolnikov’s rudeness and ingratitude, he persists in helping him. Razumikhin is on an eternal search to understand the truth. Razumikhin and Zosimov, the doctor are a foil to Raskolnikov. Razumikhin quite aptly deduces the correct sequence of events in the crime and says that the murderer is inexperienced. Zosimov observes Raskolnikov’s agitation over the murderer and seems to be putting it together and tells Razumikhin, “We’ll see how he is tomorrow, but today at any rate he doesn’t seem too bad at all: a remarkable change from earlier on. One lives and learns. . .” (228).

Raskolnikov has a strong urge to confess about the murders, but at the same time he is defiant of being caught like a common criminal. Because of his consuming inner struggle, he faints when he overhears the police officials discussing the murders. Raskolnikov begins to suffer psychologically from the guilt of his conscience. He struggles between an urge to confess and an urge to ‘live’. In front of Zamyotov, the head clerk, Raskolnikov talks recklessly and is almost on a verge to confess the murders.

Porfiry makes a careful study of the psychological makeup of his suspects. His psychological analysis provides him with an explanation of Nikolai’s confession as well as Raskolnikov’s erratic behaviour. Porfiry even admits the usage of psychological games to disturb Raskolnikov’s egotistical mind. When that is successful, Porfiry finally confronts Raskolnikov about his guilt. He believes that a young, megalomaniacal person like Raskolnikov can be rehabilitated through the criminal justice system.

Porfiry suspects Raskolnikov but he wants to get into the mind of the criminal. Raskolnikov mentions that in this world, there is a continual battle between ordinary and extraordinary men until the second coming of Christ. He hopes that Sonya can help him to be free from the torture of his conscience. She reads to him the passage from the New Testament about the raising of Lazarus. Attracted by the story of Lazarus, Raskolnikov believes in the resurrection of the dead. When Porfiry asks him “. . . do you believe in God?” and “. . . do you believe in the resurrection of Lazarus?” Raskolnikov answers as “Yes, I do” (311). His faith in God makes him confess the crime. Just when Raskolnikov thinks he is close to being arrested Nikolai intervenes and confesses that he committed the murders. Porfiry is taken aback by the sudden turn of events. At least for a short term, Raskolnikov feels that he is safe from the police. Nikolai’s confession gives Raskolnikov a renewed sense of life and freedom.

Raskolnikov bursts like a volcano anguished by his guilt and struggle and he confesses his crime to Sonya, "If I know . . . then I must be a close acquaintance of his, Raskolnikov went on, He didn't mean . . . to kill Lizaveta . . . he . . . killed her . . . by accident. He meant to kill the old woman . . . when she was alone . . . and he went there . . . but then Lizaveta came in . .. So, he killed her . . . too" (489-90). Since his life outside prison is not free, he eventually decides atleast to set his mind free, by seeking punishment through confession.

After confession, Raskolnikov asks what he should do. Sonya pleads with him saying "Go immediately, this very moment, go an stand at the cross roads, bow down first kiss the ground that you're desecrated, and then bow to the whole world, to all four points of the compass and tell everyone, out loud: 'I have killed!' then God will send you life again" (501). Sonya feels that Raskolnikov can be freed from the guilt of his conscience and let justice work on changing him.

Raskolnikov moves from a state of Russian nihilism and his theory and finally admits to himself that he has committed a crime. He has blinded not only the eyes of law, but also his own eyes according to his moral code. For Sonya, the process of healing and regeneration is not unlike the resurrection symbolised by the cross. Sonya inspires him both literally and figuratively so that Raskolnikov can have the strength to make his confession.

Raskolnikov is in Siberia for nine months. Following his confession, he has a fairly smooth trial and seven years of imprisonment. Raskolnikov suffers sufficiently both physically and mentally. His journey to redemption brings him to the point where he begins to revive his spiritual well-being. Dostoevsky's objective is now complete. He obviously believes in religion deeply as an excellent and beneficial force of existence. The scene of Raskolnikov falling at the feet of Sonya and hugging her makes the readers to see a changed man, a man for whom there is hope. At the end of the novel there is a new story, "the story of a man's gradual renewal, his gradual rebirth, his gradual transition from one world to another, of his growing acquaintance with a new, hitherto completely unknown reality" (656).

Dostoevsky has a testament that, in spite of one's past, one can be renewed by God's love. *Crime and Punishment* expresses the idea that though the schism between God and man may be great, God's grace is still greater to change a man and give him a new life.

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