



## Punishment and Redemption in the Novel Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

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### ABSTRACT

Crime and punishment plunges head first into the feverish mental chatter of Raskolnikov. An intelligent, isolated and penniless student in St Petersburg, he envision himself as a Napoleonic figure- above the conventional morality of society- and is thus able to justify cold- blooded murder on intellectual grounds. The contemplation of murder is clear, and while the act is rehearsed in meticulous detail, the motive is left vague and arbitrary. What follows is a crime, committed in an utterly matter- of- fact manner, and the events that follow. However, his sense of pride is quickly negated as his guilt spirals into self- contempt and delirium. Dostoyevsky tells a gripping tale, weaving a range of characters from the slum- ridden squalor of Russia in the nineteenth century. Above all, he emphatically proves that action and consequence cannot be separated, and good and bad are never mutually exclusive.

**Keywords:** *Katkov, Sonia, Lebeziatnikov*

### PUNISHMENT AND REDEMPTION:

Dostoyevsky wrote crime and punishment in 1866. By then, he had written notes from the underground (1864) and was to yet to write *The Idiot* (1869), *Demons* (1872), *The Adolescent* (1875) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Dostoyevsky wrote to Mikhail Katkov, the editor of *The Russian Messenger*. He told katkov that he would finish the work in another fortnight but, during the course of writing, the narrative had sprawled into numerous volumes and achieved great depth and intensity. Dostoyevsky felt that this work could potentially, be his best to date.

Initially, he had conceived of the work as a first- person narrative in which the action would unfold through the unravelling of Raskolnikov's memory. He dropped this idea, however, and toyed with the structure of a third- person narrative which would play out alongside a diary kept by the murder. Dostoyevsky set fire to drafts based on both ideas by November 1865. He ultimately decided to write the novel as a story told by an omniscient narrator.

The first instalment of the novel was published in January 1866 in *The Russian Messenger*. Subsequent episodes appeared regularly throughout the year. The author each episode even though, at the time, he was battling poverty, epilepsy, debt- and the fear of arrest due to debt- cold, and isolation from humanity. He was even forced to pawn his clothes and sell his books to keep boys and soul together. Dostoyevsky was terrified that were he to be arrested for outstanding debts, his writing would cease.

In the letter which he wrote to Katkov in the middle of September 1865, Dostoyevsky talked about the novel as 'a psychological account of a crime', and mentioned, much to katkov's pleasure, that the novel's theme was in keeping with the conservative ideology of the magazine. He presented an outline of the novel in that letter. Raskolnikov, a beggarly student, is thrown out of university because he is unable to pay his fees. Raskolnikov then murders and loots an old pawnbroker. To prevent the crime from being discovered, he also kills the pawnbroker's innocent stepsister.

Put simply, the novel is about this crime and the resulting punishment. Raskolnikov kills the old

pawnbroker and escapes the needle of suspicion by pure luck. The moral burden of killing another human being in cold blood sits lightly on him. However, when his beloved, the pious and chaste prostitute Sonia, exerts pressure on him, he confesses the crime before police Inspector Zametov and is punished by being exiled to Siberia.

By itself, this outline could have made a fairly successful psychological drama or crime thriller. However, Dostoyevsky builds 'an artifice of eternity' upon it. He achieves this not by writing a narrative based on criminal psychology but by locating in this psychology the problems of nineteenth-century Europe which was then in the throes of intellectual, spiritual and emotional turmoil. Raskolnikov's motive for the crime and his impulse towards it are very much the product of the nineteenth-century milieu, but the author, by building into the crime and its philosophy the variegated pulses of human nature, elevates it to a universal narrative of crime, guilt, punishment and redemption through the mercy of God.

Dostoyevsky introduces the philosophical contexts of the novel early, in the second chapter, when he puts the following words in the mouth of Marmeladov, the alcoholic clerk:

'from compassion? But Mr. Lebeziatnikov who keeps up with modern ideas explained the other day that day that compassion is forbidden nowadays by science itself, and that that's what is done now in England, where there is political economy'.

European modernity, and its philosophy of Enlightenment which extolled the supremacy of reason and rejected institutional religion, feudalism and monarchy, was transforming the greater part of the social fabric of Europe and tempting many young men into its fold. Its philosophy of social equality and rejection of all kinds of hierarchy and oppression led to the formation of various socio-political organizations and groups.

Raskolnikov is a young man looking for a utopia; compassionate, full of generosity, and with a natural tendency to alleviate human suffering wherever he meets it. His philanthropic zeal makes him exquisitely attractive. It is this philanthropy which, coupled with his cold, calculated theory of murder, produces the central paradox of his character.

Raskolnikov's theory of the crime he is going to commit is well thought out. His object poverty, as well as that of many in the society, can be alleviated by the murder of the old hag, the pawnbroker. She possesses great wealth, most of which she has earned by charging inordinate interest on pawned items and by showing little compassion in collecting her due. The lady is of advanced age, too, and close to death.

A document in support of this theory is penned by Raskolnikov himself. In one of the discussions between police Inspector Zametov and Raskolnikov, the latter's article, 'On Crime' is brought up. In it, Raskolnikov argues that while ordinary human beings are bound to obey laws, extraordinary characters have the freedom to transgress them. Raskolnikov posits that unless these superhuman beings break existing laws, they cannot create new laws for the new set of ordinary human beings to obey. Raskolnikov, in his article, cites the example of Napoleon Bonaparte. He asks if Napoleon, unless he had murdered many innocents, could become the man he eventually became.

Thus the question at the heart of the novel, which is asked by Raskolnikov's beloved Sonia, can be expressed thus; Is the old pawnbroker's murder or, for that matter, the killing of a human being sanctioned by God and religion? This conflict between science and religion, reason and faith, is played out both inside Raskolnikov's mind and in the novel's plot. The two paradigms of the philosophical systems of the nineteenth century are represented by Raskolnikov (reason) and Sonia (religion).

This philosophical, religious and socio-political crisis that drives the narrative, apart from the general milieu of the nineteenth century, also stemmed from Dostoyevsky's personal experience. The author himself lived through the breakdown of a social order that was based on emotion, compassion, human feeling and the love of God. When Thomas Paine declared in his *Age of Reason* (1793-94) that 'my own mind is my own church,' he represented the rationalist struggle with the very idea of the Christian God. Like his hero Raskolnikov, Dostoyevsky was much taken by the idea of the liberation of man from theology and metaphysics. He became a follower of the critics Vissarion Belinsky and his atheistic creed. He extolled utopian socialism and became part of the poet Sergei Durov's secret revolutionary group. From a Christian humanist, Dostoyevsky turned into an atheistic communist. He was sentenced, along with

other members of group, to capital punishment in 1849 and his execution was commuted to a four-year exile in Siberia by Tsar Nicholas I. In Siberia, however, Dostoyevsky regained his faith in the benevolence and mercy of the God.

The central motif of the principal plot in the novel is the redemptive transformation of Raskolnikov; from scientism and nihilism to religious and spiritual faith, and love for fellow human beings. Apart from the principal plot of Raskolnikov's crime and punishment, there are two subplots in the novel: one is centred around the Marmeladov family and the other involves Raskolnikov's mother and sister.

The Marmeladov subplot develops in tandem with the main plot. It gears around Raskolnikov, his impulses, dreams and thoughts, and gives the main plot pace. It is in this subplot that Raskolnikov walks the poor streets of Petersburg; steps into a tavern to drink vodka on his return from the old pawnbroker; overhears the conversation between a young student and an army officer about the meanness of the old woman, and how if somebody murders her and distributes her wealth among the needy, the severity of the crime would be offset by the philanthropy of the gesture, Marmeladov, an old clerk fired from second wife, who is consumptive, vomits blood, and the children remain hungry. It is during Raskolnikov's two encounters with Marmeladov, first in the tavern and then on the street, where Marmeladov lies, dying, that Dostoyevsky presents Petersburg as representative of the degraded, sickly, morally reprehensible contemporary urban civilization. These encounters, the dirty, greasy garret in which Raskolnikov lives, as well the filthy streets in which poor drunks die provokes in Raskolnikov the desire to find a panacea for the decay in urban civilization. Like Hamlet, Raskolnikov thinks too much, continually brooding upon the crisis in his poverty-stricken life as well as that of the people he sees in the street, including Marmeladov's family. It is in his compassionate gestures towards the Marmeladov family, to the extent of giving them the money sent to him by his mother, that the split in Raskolnikov's psyche becomes evident. Raskolnikov's tragic flaw is his error of judgement, his conviction that there is a quick, sure-fire way to wealth; easy solutions to his personal problems; and an easy way to bring about equality in society.

Raskolnikov's opposite in the novel is his devoted friend Razumihin, a sensitive, simple and life-

affirming character, who believes that with hard work, one can slowly but surely improve one's life. Razumihin figures more prominently in the second subplot of the novel after he falls in love with Raskolnikov's sister, Dunya, and takes care of the family, including his friend, after Raskolnikov becomes physically and mentally emaciated in the aftermath of the crime. Like the Marmeladov subplot, the second subplot also intensifies the meaning of the main plot even as it pushes it forward. Under the care and love of his friend Razumikhin, Sonia and his mother sister, Dunya, Raskolnikov finally finds himself able to deal with the hallucination that haunts him. After emerging from the gloom, he concludes that the theory which forms the core of his being is wrong.

For Dostoyevsky, Raskolnikov's theory was the extreme that the idea of nihilism could achieve in the men and women of the nineteenth century. She first influences him to confess the crime and, in Siberia, under the her love and care, he is slowly transformed so that he comes to accept the mercy of God. It is in the epilogue that the novel comes full circle. Raskolnikov sees an ecstatic dream, in which the world crumbles and faith is needed to keep the world together; reason is just not enough.