

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and
Punishment* and 19th Century
Russia

Dr. Alan Haffa

Biography (1821-1881)

- Son of an army doctor, Moscow
- Sent to Army Engineering College in Petersburg
- Abandoned engineering for literature; published *Poor Folk*, 1846
- 1849: Jailed as a Socialist; 4 years in Siberia and 4 in Army
- *Notes from the Underground*, 1864
- *Crime and Punishment*, 1866
- Debt and Gambling and "Slave Contract" *The Gambler*
- *Idiot*, 1868
- *The Possessed*, 1872
- *Brother's Karamazov*, 1879-80



Nihilism

- From Latin: Nihil, "Nothing"
- Popularized by Ivan Turgenev in *Father's and Sons*, 1862; Character of Bazarov; Popular social movement in Russia in 60s and 70s. Associated with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, 1881 (Anarchists)
- Negated all authority embodied in State, Church, and Family Structures
- Materialistic: No Mind or Soul outside of Physical World
- Unsentimental: Social Bonds should be rational, not emotional; against Charity and Social Welfare
- Utilitarianism: greatest happiness for greatest number
- Faith in Science: a neo-rationalistic philosophy; all social evils derive from ignorance; a situation that only science can solve.
- Raskolnikov, the main character in *Crime and Punishment*, is a Nihilist

Russian Serfdom



- Serfs were bound to the land
- Serfs could not own property
- Serfs could be bought and sold, individually or as a family
- Serfs could not file legal complaints against their Lords
- Serfs owed their Lord either produce from the land they worked or work upon the Lord's own land.
- Serfdom in Russia began later than European Feudalism and didn't end officially until 1861. Serfs were owned by private aristocrats, the Church, and the State (Tsar)

Freeing of Serfs in 1861

- Alexander II freed the Serfs for two reasons: 1) Russia could not industrialize with so much of its manpower tied to the land and the Crimean War had made clear the need to industrialize; 2) Over 500 serf revolts made it clear that the change would happen forcibly in time if it was not done voluntarily.
- In 1861, there were 74 million Russians, of whom, 52 million were serfs; these serfs were owned by perhaps 100,000 aristocrats. The emancipation plan left neither aristocrats nor serfs satisfied. Problems for Serfs continued, as did revolts, until the Russian Revolution of 1917.



Story Summary: The Crime

- Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, a former student, poor, sickly, starving has a plot to commit a crime that will allow him to begin his career and help his mother and sister; Handsome, Proud, Intelligent; Egoist and Antisocial
- Plot to murder a pawnbroker: mean, cruel, greedy, and beats her mentally disabled step-sister, Lizaveta

Story Summary: the Parallel

- Meets an out of work bureaucrat, Marmeladov; Drunkard; Drinks families income; Katerina Ivanova is his proud, hard working wife, who beats him but loves him; Sonya is his daughter who prostitutes herself to save the family.
- Raskolnikov shows charity; gives the family his last money.
- R's own mother and sister are not much better off and this implies what may lie in store if R. does not succeed.

Fantasy of "Will to Power"

Raskolnikov thinking to himself: "I want to attempt a thing like that and am frightened by these trifles," he thought, with an odd smile. "Hm... yes, all is in a man's hands and he lets it all slip from cowardice, that's an axiom. It would be interesting to know what it is men are most afraid of. Taking a new step, uttering a new word is what they fear most.... But I am talking too much. It's because I chatter that I do nothing. Or perhaps it is that I chatter because I do nothing. I've learned to chatter this last month, lying for days together in my den thinking... of Jack the Giant-killer. Why am I going there now? Am I capable of that? Is that serious? It is not serious at all. It's simply a fantasy to amuse myself; a plaything! Yes, maybe it is a plaything."

Lead up to Murder

- Letter from mother: sister, Dounia, is marrying a man, Luzhin, who wants a wife with “a good reputation, without dowry, and above all, one who had experienced poverty, because...it is better for a wife to look upon her husband as her benefactor.”
- Sacrifice of Sonia parallels the sacrifice of Dounia: prostitution and marriage for money are equated. Nihilists are opposed to institution of marriage.
- In a bar overhears a conversation: “it would be better if the pawnbroker were dead...” From a pure utilitarian point of view, killing her appears justified.

Pawnbroker Described Before the Murder

Overheard Conversation Between Students: "And he began describing how spiteful and uncertain she was, how if you were only a day late with your interest the pledge was lost; how she gave a quarter of the value of an article and took five and even seven percent a month on it and so on. The student chattered on, saying that she had a sister Lizaveta, whom the wretched little creature was continually beating, and kept in complete bondage like a small child, though Lizaveta was at least six feet high."

Murder

- Ambivalent about plan: Dream of Horse being beaten; wakes up in shock that he could plan to beat the pawnbroker to death (p.84); self-loathing, doubt.
- He hears about how the pawnbroker will be alone the next morning and is driven to do it for complex reasons.
- In a feverish daze, he grabs an axe from the porter's shed, hides it in his coat, and kills the pawnbroker.
- Interrupted by Lizaveta
- Barely takes anything
- Escapes only through luck
- Hides the money and collapses in bed, sick
- Nursed for several days by friend, Razumihin

Dream of Horse Beating: Part I, V

“Thank God, that was only a dream,” he said, sitting down under a tree and drawing deep breaths. “But what is it? Is it some fever coming on? Such a hideous dream!”

He felt utterly broken: darkness and confusion were in his soul. He rested his elbows on his knees and leaned his head on his hands.

“Good God!” he cried, “can it be, can it be, that I shall really take an axe, that I shall strike her on the head, split her skull open... that I shall tread in the sticky warm blood, break the lock, steal and tremble; hide, all spattered in the blood... with the axe.... Good God, can it be?”

He was shaking like a leaf as he said this.

Doubt and Hesitation Shows He Has a Conscience

“But why am I going on like this?” he continued, sitting up again, as it were in profound amazement. “I knew that I could never bring myself to it, so what have I been torturing myself for till now? Yesterday, yesterday, when I went to make that... experiment, yesterday I realised completely that I could never bear to do it.... Why am I going over it again, then? Why am I hesitating? As I came down the stairs yesterday, I said myself that it was base, loathsome, vile, vile... the very thought of it made me feel sick and filled me with horror.

The Murder: Objectively Described

“The old woman was as always bareheaded. Her thin, light hair, streaked with grey, thickly smeared with grease, was plaited in a rat’s tail and fastened by a broken horn comb which stood out on the nape of her neck. As she was so short, the blow fell on the very top of her skull. She cried out, but very faintly, and suddenly sank all of a heap on the floor, raising her hands to her head. In one hand she still held “the pledge.” Then he dealt her another and another blow with the blunt side and on the same spot. The blood gushed as from an overturned glass, the body fell back. He stepped back, let it fall, and at once bent over her face; she was dead. Her eyes seemed to be starting out of their sockets, the brow and the whole face were drawn and contorted convulsively.”

Unconscious Guilt Gives Raskolnikov away

- Summoned to Police Station for Debt: faints when he hears the officers discussing the murder
- Physical Illness throughout is a symbol of his inner turmoil and suffering
- In a bar, he speaks carelessly with an officer whom he knows, implying that he is the murderer (187-8)
- In a delirium, he goes to the murder site
- Confesses to the prostitute, Sonia.
- Eventually, will confess to the police at the exact moment when another man has confessed; there is no hard evidence against him.

Theory of "Superman"

- Raskolnikov, wrote a legal treatise arguing that there are two classes of people: Ordinary and Extraordinary

- Ordinary People must obey the Law

- Extraordinary people are not limited by any moral or civil law; People like Napoleon are cited as examples; In order to accomplish some greater good they are permitted freedom to do anything, even commit crime.

- Raskolnikov will commit his crime to confirm this theory, to prove that he is 'extraordinary.' His moral suffering throughout the book is evidence that he is merely ordinary.

- The text never resolves whether Raskolnikov is simply "weak" or whether the whole notion is a false one, but that seems the most likely interpretation.

Theory of Superman

A special little theory came in too—a theory of a sort—dividing mankind, you see, into material and superior persons, that is persons to whom the law does not apply owing to their superiority, who make laws for the rest of mankind, the material, that is. It's all right as a theory, *une théorie comme une autre*. Napoleon attracted him tremendously, that is, what affected him was that a great many men of genius have not hesitated at wrongdoing, but have overstepped the law without thinking about it. He seems to have fancied that he was a genius too—that is, he was convinced of it for a time. He has suffered a great deal and is still suffering from the idea that he could make a theory, but was incapable of boldly overstepping the law, and so he is not a man of genius. And that's humiliating for a young man of any pride, in our day especially...."

Remorse, Punishment, Redemption

Under his pillow lay the New Testament. He took it up mechanically. The book belonged to Sonia; it was the one from which she had read the raising of Lazarus to him...He had asked her for it himself not long before his illness and she brought him the book without a word. Till now he had not opened it.

He did not open it now, but one thought passed through his mind: "Can her convictions not be mine now? Her feelings, her aspirations at least...."...

But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life. That might be the subject of a new story, but our present story is ended.

Conclusions

- The failure of Raskolnikov represents the failure of Nihilism: without a moral base and without traditional social relations, man is lost, confused, and miserable.
- Notion of Superman, later made famous by Nietzsche, is questioned though no definitive answer is given by the story.
- Suffering is both a symbol of Christian Faith and the means of attaining atonement for sin and crime.
- Everyone needs someone to have faith in them and to love them unconditionally: Raskolnikov needs the prostitute Sonya, or he would most likely have committed suicide. They are both outcasts and sinners.
- Dostoyevsky's contribution to literature is the Psychological novel. Freud considers him, along with Shakespeare, to be one of the greatest writers of all time.