

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

RASKOLNIKOV*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Raskolnikov** (in Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*) **Introvert**

Overview Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was a Russian novelist, journalist, short story writer and philosopher, who is particularly known for such novels as *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *Notes from Underground* (1864), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). His insight spiritual themes like forgiveness, grace, and dread magnetized Western readers and writers, in the century after his death; Nietzsche and Sartre brought Dostoevsky's understandings to the center of Existentialism, while playwrights like Chekhov translated Dostoevsky into deep and brooding theatrical themes; his *Notes from Underground* inspired Kierkegaard and Niebuhr to critical rethinkings of Christian theology.

Character Raskolnikov, the dominant character in *Crime and Punishment*, is a student who has dropped out of University, and who is living in a small and squalid upstairs apartment in a busy and noisy part of St. Petersburg. He is driven--by the time we first meet him, trying to avoid his landlady to whom he is behind in the rent—by a broad idea of the 'great man'—Napoleon is his model—who is above ordinary human morality, and has the right to exceptional breaches of action, like the murdering of 'worthless' human beings. This becomes Raskolnikov's own plan, with fatal results. In the guilt he incurs, for this murder, Raskolnikov is forced to deal with himself profoundly, to seek grace, and to repent. He must recognize his own guilt.

Parallels Raskolnikov is a unique blend of superman theorist and guilty penitent, and intersects parts of any number of tortured modern souls. One thinks of Julien Sorel in Stendahl's *The Red and the Black* (1830), a subterranean and subversive survivor; of Balzac characters like Vautrin and Rastignac, in *The Human Comedy* (1799-1850), figures who move darkly and even criminally through the urban environment of 19th century Paris; of Alyosha in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880); or of Harry Haller, in Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1927), who embodies the modern tone of isolation and aggression. One might even say that Raskolnikov has a trace of Hamlet in him, an isolated downer, with a metaphysical chip on his shoulder.

Illustrative moments

Unsure Shortly after returning to his room, and lying down exhausted, Raskolnikov begins to doubt his sanity. He feels he can no longer recall in any detail the scene he has just come from, or the pieces of evidence he has left behind him. 'Now a strange idea entered his head: perhaps all his clothes were soaked and stained with blood, and he could not see it because his mental powers were failing and crumbling away...' He then began the agonizing effort to get rid of all the things that were stained or compromised by the recent violence.

Anxious The 'punishment' for Raskolnikov thus sets in slowly. There was a knock on his door, and the building porter, along with his housemaid, presented a 'grey paper folded in two and sealed with wax.' 'A summons, from the office, he said, as he handed over the paper.' 'What office?' 'I mean the police want to see you....everyone knows what office.' The summons, as we shortly learn, concerns overdue rent, and not the recent murder, but Raskolnikov hereby begins a nightmare of anxieties which will ultimately lead him to prison in Siberia---but not until he has suffered every torture of anticipation.

Restless Raskolnikov's effort to secure confidence and peace, after the turmoil of murder and fear, leads him into vast efforts to assure himself—he never can—that he has disposed of all the evidence of his crime. 'He walked along the Voznesensky Prospect towards the Neva, but another idea came to him along the way. "Why in the Neva? Why in the water at all? Would it not

be better to go somewhere a long way off...?' And so his mind rips him from one solution to another, never resting content with any of the answers he gives himself.

Unbalanced By this stage Raskolnikov has rendered himself incapable of sustaining normal human relations. He finds this out when he visits his closest University student friend, Razumikhin, who tries to welcome him cordially but finds his old friend ill and shockingly transformed. Raskolnikov is shocked to be faced with this view of himself; he realized 'that he was less inclined than ever to enter into personal relations with anyone on the face of the earth.' With each such discovery, Raskolnikov becomes more aware of the fall-out of his violence, and of his inability to restore normalcy on the far side of that violence.

Discussion questions

Does Raskolnikov kill the old lady because he is downtrodden and poor, or because of his theory that some people are not worth living? Why does he pick her? Does he feel any immediate remorse for the killing?

What is Raskolnikov's relation to the police inspector, Zamyotov? Is he attracted to him, even while knowing that the inspector is tracking him?

Does Raskolnikov repent? Is he, in doing so, cleared of his guilt, or does his guilt remain, a fact in time, which he can do nothing about?