

**Sonya** (in Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*) **Conscientious**

**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 into 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 rethinking of Christian theology.

**Character** Sonya, daughter of the drunkard Marmeladov, is the girlfriend and spiritual protectress of Raskolnikov, whose murder of the old pawnbroker is the centerpiece action of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Although poverty, and her stepmother's rough treatment of her, have forced Sonya to a career in prostitution—for which she carries an official 'yellow ID card'—she is arguably the one pure soul in this novel of crime and punishment. She remains with Raskolnikov through his stages of confession and ultimate imprisonment in Siberia, and embodies, if anyone in the novel does, the virtues of forgiveness, good conscience, and above all caring.

**Parallels** In *Gilgamesh* Enkidu, a beast of the wilds, formed by saliva and clay by the God, is sent to tame and humble the hero Gilgamesh. But in order to be civilized enough to become Gilgamesh's buddy, he must first be sexually sated by the prostitute Shamhat, who releases Enkidu from his bondage to mere nature. Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus' closest followers, and the one most faithful at the time of his Crucifixion—as recounted in the Christian New Testament—features extensively in Christian literature and art. (An instance would be Dan Brown's bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code*, 2003.) Nathaniel Hawthorne has created one of literature's most loveable 'fallen women' in Hester Prynne, the 'adulteress' of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). In *Notes from Underground* (1863) Dostoyevsky (once again) probes the mysterious collusion between sin and sanctity, creating in his Liza a fallen woman rich in spirit who offers much needed love to the Underground Man.

**Illustrative moments**

**Compassionate** Eventually, and before anyone else, Sonya hears Raskolnikov's murder confession. "O God," burst in a terrible wail from her breast," as she realized what Raskolnikov was telling her, and while she knew precisely what he was thinking, about advancing on the pregnant Lizaveta with an axe. Her secondary reaction, however, is the distinctive one: "What have you done, what have you done to yourself," she said despairingly, and, starting up, threw herself on his neck, embraced him, and held him tight." She broke into hysterical sobbing, thinking of what a death in life he had created for himself.

**Worried** Sonya responds to Raskolnikov's confession by saying that 'I will follow you wherever you go...Why, why didn't I know you before? Why did you not come before? Oh God!' We understand that the deeper is Raskolnikov's pain of evil, the more inseparably Sonya is drawn to him. Yet she is soon forced against her own limits, as Raskolnikov expounds, to her, his 'great man' theory, fascination with Napoleon, and his sense that some humans are not worth living. When he calls the pawnbroker a 'useless, vile, pernicious louse' it is far too much for Sonya, who senses he may be on the brink of madness.

**Fierce** When Raskolnikov asks Sonya what he should do, now that he has made his confession to her, and is ready to go public with it, she is brisk with her response: 'Go at once, this instant, stand at the crossroads, first bow down and kiss the earth you have desecrated, then bow to the whole world, the four corners of the earth, and say aloud to all the world: I have done murder!' When Raskolnikov replies that he can never broadcast his sin, Sonya replies that he will then no longer be a human being. Raskolnikov asks if she means prison for him, to which Sonya replies yes, assuring him she will be with him in prison too.

**Probing** When Raskolnikov asks Sonya if she should not abandon him, and forget the idea of visiting him in prison, she asks him whether he 'wears a cross'? She gives one of her two crosses to him, a true pledge, and keeps for herself the cross she received from Lizabeta, the victim of Raskolnikov's axe. Nothing less than this union in their mutual savior, it seems, could suffice to move the atonement to a new level. Nothing less than the cross of the murdered woman could serve as Sonya's offering to the cause of reconciliation. 'When you accept your suffering, you shall put it on,' says Sonya, seeing far into the future forming around Raskolnikov.

### **Discussion questions**

What drives Sonya's determination to stick with Raskolnikov and to care for him in his exile? Does the story have a happy ending?

Does Sonya manage to make Raskolnikov repent? What is the evidence for that?

Is Sonya's career in prostitution a rich and valuable foundation for her spirituality? Was prostitution a rough life in 19th century St. Petersburg? If so, how did Sonya convert her career into a foundation for her spirituality?