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A Study of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

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ABSTRACT

Crime and Punishment is a story of salvation through suffering. Suffering for Dostoyevsky was an article of faith. The 'truth' is the realization of suffering. Dostoyevsky's life in Siberia as a prisoner threw open to him a world of suffering. When he suffered intensely, the teachings of Christ that salvation was possible through suffering, sustained him. His prison life provided him rich and ample material for the study of lowly and the lost, the insulted and injured. . Dostoyevsky writes about intellectuals, merchants, and the social outcasts of the urban areas. Dostoyevsky describes himself as, a realist in the highest sense because he has depicted the depths of the human soul. He is very much interested in abnormal and extreme characters and sensational situations, project through a torrent of impassioned dialogue. In this paper an attempt is made to understand the form of writing of Fyodor Dostoyevsky by focusing on the various techniques he used. Dostoyevsky's high emphasis on the use of psychological realism will be highlighted, as the novel mainly focuses on the various psychological observations. Also, how he tried to manipulate the three areas of literature, Sociology and Psychology in order to become master in literature, will also be discussed.

Keywords: Psychological, criminal, salvation, punishment, law, free will.

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky was a Russian novelist, essayist, short-story writer and a philosopher. During his 20s he started his career in the field of writing. *Poor Folk*, his very first novel, were published when he was just 25 years old, in the year 1846. His works include, *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), *Demons*(1872), *The Idiot* (1869). Fairy tales, legends, and multiple books by Russian authors, introduced Fyodor Dostoyevsky to the world of literature. The title of one of his major novels is *The Insulted and Injured*, the heroine of which is Natasha, who suffers and makes her beloved suffer. Dostoyevsky's novels center on the topic of man as a subject of his atmosphere. His novels can be seen as "a means of penetrating into the hidden depths of human psychology and tearing of all the different kinds of veils and masks which conceal the nature and content of man's inner world" (Frank, 1976). The "plot is exceedingly complex but this very complexity tends to emphasize a similar quality in the nineteenth century Russian life" (Welleck, 1962).

Raskolnikov, the hero of *Crime and Punishment* is a wonderful psychological study. It may even be described as a study in abnormal psychology. Not an ordinary criminal, Raskolnikov was essentially intellectual. Initially he was guided by intellect, but later the subconscious moral sense proved stronger. It is paradoxical

that Dostoyevsky was a psychologist before the birth of psychology as an accepted form of Science. In a sense Dostoyevsky is the fore-runner of Sigmund Freud. Raskolnikov was schizophrenic, judged from the psychological point of view.

Raskolnikov, a poor student, conceives of himself as an extraordinary young man and formulates a theory whereby the extraordinary young men of the world have a right to commit suicide. To prove his theory he murders an old pawnbroker and her step-sister. Immediately after committing the crime Raskolnikov falls ill and lies in his room in semi-consciousness for several days. When he recovers, he finds that a friend Razumihin, had looked for him, while he is recovering, he receives a visit from Luzhin, who is engaged to Raskolnikov's sister Dounia. Raskolnikov insults Luzhin, and sends him away because he resents Luzhin's domineering attitude towards Dounia. After his recovery, Raskolnikov goes out and reads about the crime in all the newspapers of the last few days. This speech was when Raskolnikov tried to make out why he committed the crime. He mentioned his wish to become a Napoleon as follows:

"I was ambitious to become a Napoleon; that was why I committed the murder. The fact is that one day I asked myself the following question supposing Napoleon to have been in my place. Supposing that to advance his career had neither Toulon nor Egypt nor the crossing of Mont Blanc, but in lieu of all these brilliant exploits was on the point of committing a murder with a view to secure his future would he have recoiled at act of killing an old woman and robbing her of three thousand Roubles? Would he have agreed that such a deed was too much wanting in prestige and much too a criminal one? I finally came to the conclusion that he not only would have but that he would not have understood the possibility of such a thing. Every other expedient being out of his reach he would not have flinched, he would have done so without the smallest scruple" (*Crime and Punishment*, 329 - 330).

He meets an official from the police station and confesses his crime. He does go far enough in his ravings that the official becomes suspicious. Later he witnesses the death of Marmeladov, a minor government official, who is struck by a carriage, as he staggers across the street in a drunken stupor. Raskolnikov helps the man as he leaves all money to his widow. On his return home he finds his mother and sister who have just arrived to prepare for the wedding with Luzhin and asks his sister not to marry with Luzhin. Just then Svidrigailov had tried to seduce Dounia and when Raskolnikov hears about it, he forms a violent dislike for the man. Raskolnikov hears that the police inspector Porfiry is interviewing all those people who ever have some business with the old pawn broker. Therefore he goes for an interview and leaves the police thinking and he is suspected. Since he had met Sonia, the daughter of the dead man that Raskolnikov had helped, he goes to her and asks her to read the Bible to him. He feels sympathy with Sonia who was forced into prostitution in order to support her, while her father drank. He promises her to tell who murdered the old pawnbroker.

After his second interview with the police inspector Porfiry, Raskolnikov confesses to Sonia. He returns to her and during the confession, Svidrigailov is listening through the door. He uses this information to try to force Dounia to sleep with him. She refuses and he kills himself in the night.

Crime and Punishment, first published in *The Russian Messenger*, a literary journal in the year 1866. In *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov, a rationalistic nihilist, once proud and haughtily, learnt humility and compassion through suffering and the love of Sonia. Never proud and haughtily like Raskolnikov, Sonia belonged to the 'meek type' of character, and was the symbol of crushed and suffering humanity.

Raskolnikov imagined himself to be an extraordinary man, not to be governed by conventional rules of society and morality. According to Dostoyevsky, "there is no reason, but only reasoners; behind every rational formula there is a formulator; behind every generalization there is generalizer" (Dostoyevsky, quoted in *The Encyclopedia Philosophy*, 1972).

He was a Nietzschean Superman, beyond good and evil. That very man who had no regard for emotion or remorse, the man who murdered two women to prove his theory, felt infinite pity for Marmeladov, a helpless and hopeless drunkard. He watched with grave concern an elderly lecherous man following a fifteen year old girl to satisfy his carnal appetite. He encountered the man and saved the girl. Not in Raskolnikov alone, in quite a few other characters of Dostoyevsky as well do we come across schizophrenic behaviour. In his *Doubles* we meet a hero of the split-personality type. This ambivalence is noticeable in Opiskin of *The Village of Stepanchikova*. Dostoyevsky was feeling increasingly drawn to the criminal characters. He

peered into their souls to discover what they thought, why he committed the crimes, and how they reacted to their punishment. His *Notes From the Underground* may be described as prologue to the subsequent five great novels, which aptly and amply illustrated his concentrated powers of psychological analysis. No novelist of the nineteenth century was as profound an analyst of the feelings of the characters as Dostoyevsky. He sincerely believed that everyone experienced a fundamental opposition of will and reason. Dostoyevsky was interested in the psychology of crime. Quite a few of his characters are studies in abnormal psychology. He, therefore, analysed the psychological disorders of Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov with supremely artistic skill. Rahv provides us with details of how Dostoyevsky came about his style and technique:

“One cannot ignore Dostoyevsky’s literary association with the traditions and influences of the European novel. He was influenced by Balzac, Dickens, Hugo and E. T. A. Hoffman. Nor can his ideology be detached from the western tradition of Christian and nationalist thought. There appear in Dostoyevsky, versions of romantic historicism and folk worship that came to Russia with the great vogue of Shelling and Hegel in the question immediately preceding Dostoyevsky’s. Even Dostoyevsky’s Psychological depth with its interest in the life of dreams and the splitting of personality is heavily indebted to the theories of romantic writers and doctors such as Reil and Carus” (Rahv, 1978).

Raskolnikov suffered from ambivalence and confusion of thought. An inspection of Raskolnikov’s role models will expose that his course is a result of several influences:

“...further on my article, I remember insisting on the idea that all legislators and rulers of men commencing with the earliest, down to Lycurgus, Solon, Mahomet, Napoleon, etc. have one and all been criminals for whilst giving laws, they have naturally broken through older ones which had been faithfully observed by society and transmitted by its progenitors. These men most certainly never hesitated to shed blood as soon as they saw the advantages of doing so” (*Crime and Punishment*, 193 - 194).”

After the unintentional murder of Lizaveta, an innocent woman, he felt as if he had become mad. He even thought that he should not have committed the crime. He felt that he was fast losing his memory and even common sense. He was on the border of insanity. He decided to confess to the police, for the burden of conscience appeared unbearable. But a series of coincidences prevented him from confession at an early stage. He can be said to be suffering from a character disorder. This can be experienced from the explanation he is given in the story: “He wondered at himself. Razoumikhin was one of his most intimate friends at the University, although, it must be observed, Raskolnikov had very few. He shunned everybody, went about with no one, and studiously kept aloof from all, and soon he became equally avoided” (*Crime and Punishment*, 41).

Raskolnikov represents the conflict between two-truths that of the Man-God and that of the God-man, the conflict between the pride of the intellect and humility of the heart. His humility came at last, when he could kiss the earth and bow down to everybody. He did not confess to the police first, but to Sonia, and that is also a psychological study. Psychoanalysis is “A form of literary criticism, which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in its interpretation of literature. Psychoanalysis itself is a form of therapy, which aims to cure mental disorder by investigating the interactions between the conscious and unconscious elements in the mind” (Barry, 1995).

The characters in the novels, atleast most of them, are the symbols of Raskolnikov himself, Alyona, SvidoiGaylov and Luzhin, for example, are aggressive and extraordinary. There is another set of characters, Marmaladov, Elizaveta, Sonia and Dunya, who are tame, submissives soft and docile, born to suffer. And we know that Raskolnikov has, in him, that trait as well. Alyona has been murdered. And Raskolnikov says, he has murdered himself. He has murdered his aggressive, the brutal self, which is a part of his personality. When he kills Liza, he kills his submissive and humble self. Hence Liza is the symbol of oneself of Raskolnikov, as Alyona symbolizes the aggressive half. The justification of the murder of Alyona is a justification of his long-cherished theory of superman and free will.

Dostoyevsky has posed a problem; Is man's destiny predetermined? Can he exercise Free Will? Or, are there laws of nature, which determine life? One has to choose one way or the other. The doctrine of necessity or fate and the doctrine of Free Will have been conflicting forces ever since the dawn of civilization. *The Underground Man*, exactly like Raskolnikov, cannot pin his faith in 'the laws of nature'. He has full faith in free will, his indomitable will, and there is none to dispute it. He is guided not by head but by heart, not by reason but by impulse and feeling. He defies man's knowledge of science and philosophy, of history and economics, and accepts no man's authority. He considers himself to be an undisputed monarch. His will is of paramount importance, and God and all ethical codes have no place there. Yet the Underground Man cannot always exercise his free will. The force of reason often makes him acutely conscious of his limitations. It is then that he becomes angry with the whole universe, the human society, his fellow-men. He wants to be free, and to breathe under the free sky. But the laws of nature, of reason, of science make him all the more spiteful, revengeful and aggressive. He is a sadist and a masochist all at once. He is a tyrant, and wants to be tyrannized. He is bully and welcomes to be bullied. He chooses to walk along the dark alleys of life.

Free will is the major theme of *Notes From the Underground*. It is also the major theme of all other novels of Dostoyevsky. This theme is further emphasized and elaborated in *Crime and Punishment*. The seed of the earlier novel fully germinates in the later. The idea of crime is closely associated with the idea of free will. A man who asserts his free will defies the laws of nature and the light of reasons, whether he likes it or not, becomes a criminal. A good citizen is one, who abides by the rules of the society. If on the other hand, a man defies the laws of nature and rules of the society, he becomes a denizen of the dark pit of the underworld. There is an invisible wall between the permitted and the unpermitted. At times the existing rules and codes appear arbitrary, for they are prejudicial to our interests, but we cannot have the guts to defy them, for we know, as peace-loving citizens, that we will be, the dubbed as anti-social elements, or, at the worst, even criminals. Hence the conclusion is irresistible that all of us have criminal propensity, but social rigour, public opinion, tradition and convention stand in the way. A criminal, therefore, is not an object to be pitted or condemned. He deserves extravagant praise for he is a man of contradictions and seeks to tear off all bondage.

It would be the height of foolishness to call Dostoyevsky an advocate of crimes and criminals. But there is no denying the fact that he is a warm supporter of free will. He has felt asphyxiated because of deadening influence of laws and ethical conduct. Dostoyevsky is a Protestant in a wide sense of the term. The heroes of the novels of Dostoyevsky have supported free will. They have acted upon their ideals. And for that they have suffered intensely. It is the punishment for convictions, for the assertion of the freedom of will, for breathing freely under the free sky.

Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov had many things in common. It has been suggested that Raskolnikov had not come in contact with Sonia, God's good angel, and learnt the lessons of humility and compassion and purification through suffering, he would have certainly put an end to himself like Svidrigailov. In a sense, therefore, Svidrigailov was a foil to Raskolnikov. Sutherland says, "Criminal behaviour is learned and it is learned in inter-action with others who have already incorporated criminal values and illegitimate opportunities including conditions favorable to the learning of such a role" (Sutherland, 1937). Both Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov were poisoned by the charisma of life. Svidrigailov was first introduced in the novel as a lecherous person, who had attempted to seduce Dounia. When the innocent girl was being denounced by Marfa, the wife of Svidrigailov. Svidrigailov had at least the decency to speak the truth.

Svidrigailov wasn't altogether devoid of the spark of goodness, although he had not the Christian ideal of salvation. He told Raskolnikov that he was at times haunted by the ghosts of his wife and his maid servant. That is a clear indication of his spiritual despair with nothing to look forward. He was too sensual to have a spiritual insight. And that sensual nature was also the inevitable outcome of his boredom and ennui, life's sad satiety. He had turned his back upon life. So did Raskolnikov's change. Dounia was there to exert any moral influence upon Svidrigailov. Both Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov were equally cynical, and yet both, in their own way, conformed to the Romantic tradition of Schiller. Like Raskolnikov, Svidrigailov had a conviction that he too was an extraordinary man, beyond good and evil. Allowing for the exaggerated tales of his misdeeds, the fact remains that he had committed lots of abominable crimes, but had no remorse, and no look-back.

Dounia's rejection came as a rude shock. He felt that he was alone in this wide world, lost beyond recovery. Like a mad man, Svidrigailov wandered about from place to place. At last he went to Sonia and informed her that he had substantially provided for her step brothers and sisters. He also gave her several thousand roubles without any strings attached to the gift. He was benefactor but without any showing off. He advised her to proceed to Siberia along with Raskolnikov. He knew that Raskolnikov had a new base of life, of which he was himself deprived. The tragedy of Svidrigailov is the tragedy of loneliness. He woke up from his dream and left his lodgings. He met an utter stranger and told him that he was leaving for America. Svidrigailov was stylish, and his final exit from the world showed his fondness for style. He put the revolver to his right temple and pulled the trigger.

To conclude we can say that, there is a hint in the story of the idea that the punishment the law prescribes for a crime holds for fewer terrors for the criminal than the law-givers suppose, partly because his own moral sense demands it. It is abundantly clear that Dostoyevsky was intent on laying bare the soul of a peculiar type of criminal, who imagined himself to be a descendent of Napoleon. It is wrong to suppose that Raskolnikov, the hero of *Crime and Punishment* is a superman, capable of acting solely according to the dictates of his reason and paramount will. But in reality he has a dualistic nature, a theme Dostoyevsky was never tired of reiterating. *Crime and Punishment* represents the test of a civilization. It is a criticism of the unkindness of man to man innate in the then Russian civilization and mirrors the populace who have been disadvantaged of any and all prospects of an enhanced upcoming in life. *Crime and Punishment* is a combination of the philosophical novel, the novel of finding , the novel of temperament, the psychological novel, etc. The novelist appears to be saying that the the human race is worthless and futile as it is full of prejudice, intolerance misuse, and other forms of inequities.

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