



JUXTAPOSITION OF THE RELIGIOUS AND ANTI-RELIGIOUS IN CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

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ABSTRACT

Fyodor Dostoevsky's magnum opus, *Crime and Punishment* sucks the readers into the consciousness of the protagonist, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov where a battle, the eternal struggle between the good and evil and reason and sentiment is going on. Considered one of the wonders of European literature, the novel portrays a young man, expelled from the university due to financial deprivation, becoming ensnared in the intricacies of certain abstract theories. To break the impasse, he resolves to murder a lousy, old pawnbroker. After the heinous crime, the protagonist, in order to rejoin the stream of humanity, embraces suffering as an act of expiation.

Key words: Existentialism, Nihilism, Superman Theory, paranoia, schizophrenia, suffering, redemption

Jean Paul Sartre's famous dictum, 'Existence precedes essence' is considered the basic tenet of Existentialism. Existentialists believe that existence is inherently meaningless and that man, by the exercise of his volition can create his own set of values. Existence contains a hidden meaning and man is capable of exploring it with the resources that he is endowed with.

Raskolnikov, the intellectual fails to extricate himself from the meshes of his obscure ideas only to find the eccentric theories which he has been upholding, eventually replacing his life and thus enjoys the unparalleled bliss that the paranoid in him has been craving for. The protagonist's motive or the ultimate goal of his ambition is beyond his own ken. The haze and bewilderment that characterize his disturbed mind have their culmination in the double murder that causes reverberations in his tormented psyche.

The fatigue, exhaustion and barrenness that reign over Raskolnikov are the reflection of the dejection and disillusionment that characterize the

Russian youth of the day. Prostitution is rampant in society and young women, loitering about the streets are nothing new to the dwellers of St.Petersburg. Owing to unemployment, the youth are reduced to a life of penury and most of them end up as sheer rationalists and atheists, incapable of tumbling to the rationale behind the sufferings of the just.

"From the moment of its conception", as Mochulsky observes," the novella was divided into two distinct parts: the crime and its causes and the effects of the crime upon the criminal's soul" (Mochulsky, 273). Dostoevsky is "the first novelist to have fully accepted and dramatised the principle of uncertainty or indeterminacy in the presentation of character" (Rahv, Norton, 549). The horrific murder that he is about to commit makes Raskolnikov plunge into a state of inexplicable intricacy. "Good God!" he cried, "can it be, can it be, that I shall really take an axe split her skull that I shall tread in the sticky warm blood ... good God, can it be?" (*Crime and Punishment*, 53)

Rodion falls a prey to his own fantasies, originating from the intellectual pursuits which prove disastrous for himself. Like Doctor Faustus, his superior intellect in which he revels, turns out to be his hamartia that makes him commit the brutal murders. He is divided in himself and lets himself be carried away by the Superman Theory which takes his heart by storm. He considers himself a superman who can transgress the bounds of morality to redeem society. He justifies the murder of Alyona on grounds of Utilitarianism, claiming that in uprooting her, he has removed a blood – sucking louse from society. He proves himself a nihilist, callous and unsentimental and throws off the shackles of conventions.

After the dual murder, the aftermath of his desire to coronate himself an emperor who is above the commonplace, Raskolnikov permits himself to be ripped up perennially. The deed of atrocity makes him lose his mental equilibrium and plunge into a world of frenzied fantasies. “Did I murder the old woman? I murdered myself, not her!” (*Crime and Punishment*, 353) He, eventually, is filled with an abominable feeling of self - hatred that stems from his Napoleonic theories. His delirious, semi - oblivious wanderings invite the readers to partake in his agony and terrible despair. Typical of a schizophrenic, he is haunted by hallucinations and occasionally overcome with an urge to confess.

However, despite his intense desire to get rid of his poverty and wretchedness, he fails to gratify his desires even as he deprives the old pawnbroker and her stepsister, Lizaveta of their lives and possessions. Delirious, the protagonist sees and hears someone calling him, “murderer” but desperately clings to his conviction, “I didn’t kill a human being but a principle” (*Crime and Punishment*, 234). Guilt torments him and he dreams of the old woman who does not die at the repeated blowing of the axe but goes on chuckling scornfully.

The battle in the soul of Raskolnikov is presented through three figures who contend for his soul. Dostoevsky writes in his *Notebooks*: “Svidrigailov is despair, the most cynical. Sonia is hope, the most unrealizable... he (Raskolnikov) became passionately attached to both (244). Porfiry

Petrovitch, the intelligent sleuth is really concerned about the young culprit but is the archangel of justice and order. Svidrigailov, the lascivious old man, steeped in sensuality is not wholly evil. By rendering help to his young fiancée and the poverty-stricken Sonia, he proves that he is capable of a few acts of generosity.

Like Raskolnikov, Svidrigailov considers himself a superman and believes in the Machiavellian theory that ends justify means. The resolute sensualist, however remains an enigma and the reason for his suicide is not known. Sonia, the incarnation of unconditional love, goodness and humility, stemming from her religiosity is the one who emerges triumphant, in the end.

Rodion is an existentialist and craves for power or intellectual supremacy which evades him even when he accomplishes his task. It is to be borne in mind that Dostoevsky had unshakeable faith in the inherent goodness of man. Sonia is the mouthpiece of the novelist who believed that suffering is the only way to salvation. The convictions of his which form the crux of his philosophy were seared by his experiences as a convict. According to Dostoevsky love is the panacea for the ills of humanity as is exemplified through the Passion of Christ. Sufferings open up the way for the believer to attain salvation.

The different characters of the novel empty themselves, not for self – glorification but as a way of emulating Christ and thus come to terms with the excruciating reality. Nikolai, the painter makes a false confession while Sonia proclaims the love for her family through self – sacrifice. The rendering of Christ’s most touching miracle, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, marks the dawn of spiritual reformation, “a resurrection into a new life” (*Crime and Punishment*, 461). Even the grotesque character, Semyon Zaharovitch Marmeladov, often inebriated, aspires to attain salvation through his sufferings. His loquacious wife, Katerina Ivanovna even as she dies a vagabond, dreams of redemption as she believes that her sufferings have already cleansed her soul.

In Part Two, Chapter Five of the novel, Luzhin, a man of progressive ideas stresses the superiority of utilitarian thinking over the preaching

of Christ: "Love thy neighbour"; "science now tells us, love yourself before all men, for everything in the world rests on self – interest" (*Crime and Punishment*, 129).

Focusing on the blemishes and weaknesses of *Crime and Punishment* will be too petty. The novel is not devoid of dramatic scenes. The epilogue which portrays the regeneration of the protagonist is not so convincing for the rationalistic critics who argue that it also violates the structural unity of the voluminous work. The atheistic readers who are at loggerheads with Dostoevsky as regards his theological insights respect the dexterity with which he handles the psyche. He believed that the mind is the citadel of mysterious thoughts and unconscious struggles as exemplified through the characters, Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov. Fyodor Dostoevsky stands unsurpassed in his astounding ability to lead the readers into the labyrinthine recesses of the human mind.

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