

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

by **Fyodor Dostoevsky**



THE AUTHOR

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was born into a lower middle class family in Moscow, the son of a former army surgeon, and experienced a strict religious upbringing. His education was poor, and at age seventeen he entered a military engineering school that he found insufferably boring. He read voraciously in his spare time, and resigned from the military shortly after graduation to pursue a career as a writer.

His first literary effort, *Poor Folk*, was published in 1845 to widespread critical acclaim. His succeeding efforts received little public attention, though through them he continued to polish his craft. In 1847, he joined one of the many secret societies that abounded in Russia during the repressive reign of Nicholas I. He found it exciting and thought its activities somewhat innocuous, but the czar did not agree. In 1849, Dostoevsky was arrested and, with several others of his circle, sentenced to be shot for sedition. The czar allowed preparations for the execution to continue to the very last moment before commuting the sentence. Dostoevsky was then exiled to Siberia for four years of hard labor, followed by six years as a common soldier in the army. In Siberia, the intense suffering he experienced made a deep impression that was later reflected in his most famous works; in addition, the relationships he developed with his fellow prisoners, most of whom were poor and uneducated, gave him a lifelong appreciation for the downtrodden of society. It was also during his years in Siberia that he was converted to the Christian faith.

He left the army in 1859, and entered the period of his greatest literary productivity. He edited a series of literary magazines, using them as vehicles to publish his novels in serial form. These novels included *The House of the Dead* (1862), *Notes from the Underground* (1864), and his great classics, *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). He died at the height of his fame in 1881, and was given a massive public funeral by a grateful public.

His personal life was filled with struggles. His first marriage, to a tubercular widow in 1857, was an unhappy one, though after she died in 1864, he married his young stenographer (1867), and she not only bore his children and sustained his home life, but also very ably managed his literary career. He struggled throughout his adult life with epileptic seizures and compulsive gambling.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with the protagonist, Raskolnikov, leaving his shabby apartment for a practice run for an act he has been contemplating - the murder of a vicious old hag of a pawnbroker. He visits her apartment, suffers her insults, and observes the layout and the place where she hides her money. Before, during, and after the visit, he continues to debate whether or not he should go through with his plan. After leaving the pawnbroker's apartment, he goes to a tavern, where he engages in a long philosophical discussion with a drunken buffoon named Marmeladov, who then invites him home to his squalid apartment. Here he meets his wife and children. The family is ordered to leave the apartment for non-payment of rent, but Raskolnikov gives them money, though he despises them, especially for prostituting their young daughter Sonia to bring in money that Marmeladov immediately drinks away.

The next day, Raskolnikov receives a letter from his mother informing him that he is about to lose his apartment for non-payment of rent, and that his sister Dounia, who had been working as a governess to support him, had lost her job when her employer had made improper advances to her. She had then become engaged to a wealthy young man who wanted her because she would submit to him abjectly, but she had agreed because he promised to help her struggling family. Raskolnikov is infuriated, and determines that the marriage will never take place. Later that day, he inadvertently hears Lizaveta, the pawnbroker's sister, mention that she will be out of the apartment at seven o'clock the next day, so he decides that he should carry out his plan at that time.

The next night, Raskolnikov prepares for the crime, stealing a hatchet and fashioning a sling to conceal it under his coat. He goes to the home of the pawnbroker, kills her, and plunders her hiding place, though he finds no more than a few trinkets. Lizaveta then walks in, and he murders her also. He then hides in a nearby apartment until the coast is clear, then walks home by a circuitous route.

As he takes steps to conceal the crime, he wonders whether he might not have forgotten some incriminating piece of evidence. When he is summoned to the police station, he is sure he is a suspect in the murder, but he has only been called because of his debt to his landlady. When he hears detectives discussing the murder, however, he faints, and remains in bed in a weakened state for several days thereafter. As time progresses, he becomes increasingly paranoid as his internal conflict over the crime deepens, and twice he nearly confesses - once in a conversation with a detective, and once when he revisits the scene of the crime, arousing the suspicions of the police in the process.

While recuperating, he meets Luzhin, his sister Dounia's fiancée. The two despise one another at first sight, and Raskolnikov insults the young dandy, who stalks out of the apartment in a rage. Later, Raskolnikov goes out and sees a crowd gathering around Marmeladov, who has been run over by a carriage. He takes the dying man home to his family, where he dies in Sonia's arms amid the curses of his wife. He returns home to find his mother and sister waiting for him, then collapses in another spell of illness. His friend Razumihin takes charge of the situation, earning Dounia's gratitude and respect in the process, while at the same time kindling in him a love for her. Meanwhile, Raskolnikov commands his sister not to marry Luzhin, and she agrees to test Luzhin's love by defying his desire never to see Raskolnikov again. During their visit, Sonia arrives to thank Raskolnikov for the money he had given her family, and to invite him to her father's funeral.

The next day, Raskolnikov and Razumihin visit the police station in order to get the former's possessions back from the pawnbroker's effects. While there, they discuss the case with Porfiry, the detective, and Raskolnikov becomes convinced that he is under suspicion, especially when the detective asks him about an article he had written attempting to argue that some men were above the common level of humanity, and thus had the right to do as they pleased, including committing murder. Later, Svidrigailov arrives and offers money if Raskolnikov will help him win back Dounia. The latter refuses. At the meeting with Luzhin, Dounia's fiancée responds angrily to the presence of Raskolnikov and Razumihin, and again stalks out of the room. Raskolnikov then leaves, telling the others that they will not see him for a long time, and leaving the women in Razumihin's care. They now suspect that he is indeed the murderer.

Raskolnikov then goes to Sonia's home, where, thinking her a kindred spirit who has destroyed her life by transgressing the moral law, invites her to run away with him. He also promises to tell her who killed her friend Lizaveta. Svidrigailov is eavesdropping through the thin walls of the apartment. The next day, Raskolnikov again visits the police station and engages in a long conversation with Porfiry. He finally loses his temper and exclaims that the detective should either charge him or leave him alone. While they are speaking, another man runs into the room and confesses to murdering the pawnbroker, though Porfiry doesn't believe him.

The funeral dinner for Marmeladov is a disaster, with the widow insulting the few guests who actually show up, and eventually fighting with her landlady, which only serves to get the family evicted. Raskolnikov goes to Sonia's room to comfort her, and there confesses the murders to her. She promises to stand by him, and encourages him to turn himself in to the police and confess his crime to God and beg forgiveness. When Sonia is told that her stepmother has gone mad and is acting like an organ grinder in the streets and using the younger children as monkeys, she rushes out to find them. Katerina is found in the middle of a crowd, raving and coughing up blood. They take her home, where she soon dies. Svidrigailov offers to pay to send the children to an orphanage, and also tells Raskolnikov that he overheard his confession of the murders. Later, Porfiry visits Raskolnikov and tells him that he knows he committed the murder, but lacks the evidence to prove it. He encourages him to confess, and promises to put in a good word for him if he does.

Meanwhile, Svidrigailov has encountered Dounia in the street and enticed her back to his apartment with the claim that he knew all about what her brother had done. There, he tells her of the confession he overheard, but promises to keep quiet if Dounia will marry him. She refuses, and he threatens to rape her. She pulls a gun on him, but cannot shoot him. The next day, he wanders about, tells any who will listen that he is going to America, then shoots himself in the head. That same day, Raskolnikov says goodbye to his mother and sister, receives moral support from Sonia, then goes to the police station and confesses his crime.

In the Epilogue of the novel, Raskolnikov is sent to Siberia, having been given a relatively light sentence of eight years hard labor. Sonia accompanies him. Back home, his mother dies after having learned of her son's fate, and Razumihin and Dounia marry. Raskolnikov, however, continues to adhere stubbornly to his pride in prison. Finally an illness, combined with the constancy of Sonia's love break through to him and he is converted to Christianity, thus beginning a new life from the dead.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov - The protagonist, an intelligent but impoverished young man who has been expelled from school. He kills a pawnbroker, and the remainder of the novel details his inner struggles with his crime. He finally confesses and expiates his sin by taking his punishment gratefully. He is exiled to Siberia, where he is converted to Christianity.
- Avdotya Romanovna Raskolnikov (Dounia) - Raskolnikov's sister, a lovely girl who works as a governess to support her family.
- Dmitri Prokovich Razumihin - Raskolnikov's friend from the university; outgoing, friendly, he marries Dounia.
- Alena Ivanovna - Miserly, distrustful pawnbroker murdered by Raskolnikov.
- Lizaveta - The pawnbroker's young sister, killed by Raskolnikov because she caught him in the act; also a friend of Sonia's.
- Sophia Semenovna Marmeladov (Sonia) - A meek and pious girl who is forced into prostitution to support her family. She falls in love with Raskolnikov, he confesses his crime to her, and she convinces him to turn himself in and accept his punishment. She accompanies him to Siberia.
- Marmeladov - Sonia's father, a drunkard who is aware of his shortcomings, but unable to deal with them. He launches into a lengthy philosophical discourse with Raskolnikov in a tavern.
- Katerina Ivanovna Marmeladov - Sonia's mother, a pathetic, tubercular woman who blames all her problems on society and those around her.
- Porfiry Petrovich - The magistrate in charge of investigating the pawnbroker's murder, he suspects Raskolnikov, but is unable to prove his case until the latter confesses.
- Arkady Ivanovich Svidrigailov - Dounia's employer who makes improper advances to her and nearly ruins her reputation. He keeps trying to win her love, at one point attempts to rape her, gives her a large amount of money to show his repentance, and finally commits suicide. He is a caricature of the "will to power" and its failure.
- Peter Petrovich Luzhin - Dounia's fiancée, he is totally materialistic and self-centered. He, along with Svidrigailov, caricatures the popular philosophies against which Dostoevsky is arguing.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“And how could such an atrocious thing come into my head? What filthy things my heart is capable of.” (Raskolnikov, p.7)

“Crucify me, oh judge, crucify me but pity me! And then I will go of myself to be crucified, for it’s not merry-making I seek but tears and tribulation!” (Marmeladov, p.20)

“‘And what if I am wrong,’ he cried suddenly after a moment’s thought. ‘What if man is not really a scoundrel, man in general, I mean, the whole race of mankind - then all the rest is prejudice, simply artificial terrors and there are no barriers and it’s all as it should be!’” (Raskolnikov, p.25)

“It was remarkable that Raskolnikov had hardly any friends at the university; he kept himself aloof from every one, went to see no one, and did not welcome any one who came to see him, and indeed every one soon gave him up. He took no part in the students’ gatherings, amusements or conversations. He worked with great intensity without sparing himself, and he was respected for this, but no one liked him. He was very poor, and there was a sort of haughty pride and reserve about him, as though he were keeping something to himself. He seemed to some of his comrades to look down upon them all as children, as though he were superior in development, knowledge and convictions, as though their beliefs and interests were beneath him.” (referring to Raskolnikov, p.47)

“In spite of all his agonizing inward struggle, he never for a single instant all that time could believe in the carrying out of his plans.” (referring to Raskolnikov, p.64)

“Science now tells us, love yourself before all men, for everything in the world rests on self-interest. You love yourself and manage your own affairs properly and your coat remains whole. Economic truth adds that the better private affairs are organized in society - the more whole coats, so to say - the firmer are its foundations and the better is the common welfare organized too. Therefore, in acquiring wealth solely and exclusively for myself, I am acquiring so to speak, for all, and helping to bring to pass my neighbor’s getting a little more than a torn coat; and that not from private, personal liberality, but as a consequence of the general advance.” (Luzhin, p.135)

“It was a strange question he felt at the very time not only that he could not help telling her, but also that he could not put off the telling. He did not yet know why it must be so, he only felt it, and the agonizing sense of his impotence before the inevitable almost crushed him.” (referring to Raskolnikov, p.365)

“But I can’t know the Divine Providence.... And why do you ask what can’t be answered? What’s the use of such foolish questions? How could it happen that it should depend on my decision - who has made me a judge to decide who should live and who is not to live?” (Sonia, p.367)

“He did not know that the new life would not be given him for nothing, that he would have to pay dearly for it, that it would cost him great striving, great suffering. 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.” (referring to Raskolnikov, p.492)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. While preparing to write *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky told his publisher that one of the themes of the work would be that “the legal punishment inflicted for a crime intimidates a criminal infinitely less than lawmakers think, partly because he himself morally demands it.” How does the novel work out this theme, and what does the theme communicate about human nature?
2. Throughout his literary career, Fyodor Dostoevsky was fascinated with the idea of the split personality. Discuss how this fascination appears in *Crime and Punishment*. Make sure to include in your discussion specific characters and incidents from the novel.
3. Dostoevsky himself spent four years in a prison camp in Siberia, during which he was converted to Christianity. How is his personal experience reflected in the Epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*?
4. One of the great themes of Dostoevsky’s fiction is the need for suffering in order to attain salvation. Based on your reading of *Crime and Punishment*, discuss the role of suffering in spiritual growth. What kind of suffering does the author have in mind?
5. Many critics, even in his own day, considered Dostoevsky to be a psychological novelist. He rejected the term, preferring to describe himself as a writer who brought out “inner realism.” How does his treatment of the inner life of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* justify his claim? Why did he insist that his treatment of the soul of man went far beyond mere psychology?
6. Raskolnikov’s rationalization of his murder of the old pawnbroker in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* contains foreshadowings of Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the Superman, though the latter’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* was not published until 1883, two years after Dostoevsky’s death. In what way does the novel demonstrate the fallacy of Nietzsche’s thinking?
7. In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov gives several reasons for why he commits the murder of the pawnbroker. What do you think his real reason was? Justify your answer with specific information from the novel.

8. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov turns himself in to the authorities after months of successfully evading capture. Why does he do this? What does his action tell us about the author's view of the consequences of sin in a person's life?
9. Compare and contrast the consequences of sin portrayed in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Which portrayal is more realistic? Which is more Christian? Why do you think so?
10. As is the case in his other writings, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* makes effective use of the character of the "holy fool," most notably in the person of Marmeladov. Such a person brings suffering upon himself through foolish choices, thus putting himself in the way of God's redeeming grace. As Marmeladov says, "He will say, 'This is why I receive them, oh ye wise, this is why I receive them, oh ye of understanding, that not one of them believed himself to be worthy of this.'" Is this concept biblical? Why or why not?
11. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov believes that his "project" will solve all his problems. Why does he think so? What does this tell us about his inner condition?
12. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's tiny, cramped apartment carries considerable symbolic significance. What is the importance of this location in some of the important incidents that occur in the novel? What does it symbolize?
13. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Marmeladov's wife blames her misfortunes on society and circumstances beyond her control. Such ideas were popular in Dostoevsky's day among utilitarians and behavioral psychologists. Based on specific incidents and ideas in the novel, discuss what Dostoevsky thinks about such a philosophy.
14. Nihilism is the philosophy that denies absolutes of meaning, truth, and morality, and seeks to build society on purely scientific principles, often at the cost of destroying the system currently in existence. This philosophy was popular in certain circles in nineteenth-century Russia, and plays a significant part in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. How does the analysis of the inner workings of the human mind and heart in the novel provide the author's answer to the claims of the nihilists?
15. Some critics have argued that the characters of Svidrigailov and Sonia in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* symbolize the two sides of Raskolnikov's personality, and that, as the novel progresses, the two struggle for his soul. Discuss the validity of this analysis of the novel. What personality traits does Raskolnikov have in common with Svidrigailov? with Sonia?

16. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the author indicates through the mental torment of Raskolnikov the fate of those who, by choosing to distance themselves from the standards of society, alienate themselves from that society. Some have seen this humanistic affirmation of our need for one another as the great truth underlying the novel. Do you believe that this is Dostoevsky's point? Why or why not?
17. The great sin that led to the ejection of Lucifer from heaven was pride. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, pride is also central to the narrative. Discuss the role of pride in the lives of three different characters in the novel, and show how the ending illustrates the author's view of the consequences and cure for human arrogance.
18. Fyodor Dostoevsky summarized the fundamental problem of nihilism in *The Brothers Karamazov* when he said, through the mouth of one of the protagonists, "If God is dead, then all is permitted." How does the narrative of *Crime and Punishment* illustrate the other side of the coin - that because God is *not* dead, one cannot sin with impunity?
19. Some critics have asserted that Razumihin serves as a foil for Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. How do the contrasts in their characters help to bring out the salient personality traits of each?
20. When Raskolnikov visits Sonia's apartment in one scene of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, he asks her to read to him the story of the resurrection of Lazarus from the Gospel of John. Why is this passage so meaningful to both of these characters, and how does it reflect the direction of the narrative?