

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Reversible vs. Irreversible: Pacification of Psycho-Ethical Disorder and Refurbishment of Order in *Crime and Punishment*

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Abstract

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* incorporates the sequence of crime, disorder, correction, and restoration of order. The novel starts with the protagonist's psychological turmoil leading to committing two consecutive murders, then his inner conflict and psychological punishment, and his correction refurbishing the order. Raskolnikov's desire to be extraordinary paralleling the desire to defy God destabilises the ethical and religious norm besides being psychologically impatient. His agitation finds a concrete and physical outcome through his fever and delirium and affects the outer worlds as well. However, Raskolnikov's confession and thus being corrected restores the order along with the abolishment of the debaucher Svidrigailov.

Keywords: Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky, irreversible, order, disorder, restoration.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1886) is a novel with a sequence beginning with a physical crime, followed by psychological punishment and ending with a religious salvation. However, the journey from the crime to punishment occupies the most of the portion of the novel. The protagonist, Raskolnikov is presented as a character imbibing different psychological aspects revealing step by step throughout the novel. Committing a murder, the protagonist Raskolnikov destabilises the order of his psyche only but also of moral and religious world. Unlike *Notes from Underground*, the mental turmoil does not continue in this novel. The psychological and moral order is restored through the processes of correction. Again, apart from Raskolnikov, there is another character who also perturbs the moral world. But he is not corrected but abolition seems to the novelist a better option for him. This paper poses the problem of the novelist's choice of correction and abolition. Obviously, Dostoevsky had in his mind restoring the order on the level of ethical and the psychological level. But why does he choose correction for Raskolnikov and abolition of Svidrigailov, not vice versa?

Crime and Punishment begins with the inner turmoil and anxiety in Raskolnikov suggesting impending disorder and chaos. The "extremely hot spell" (*Crime* 3) in the opening description is symbolic of anomaly reinforced by the later description of Petersburg: "It was terrible hot out, and moreover it was close, crowded; lime, scaffolding, bricks, dust everywhere..." (4). The descriptions of the disorder by the narrator correlate the protagonist's fever and delirium. However, the force of destruction or *Thanatos* and the force of defying God work together in him. Raskolnikov's desire to rise above the ordinary human beings is, in fact, an act of defying God. This is a transgression beyond the given limit to human being. After reading Raskolnikov's essay, the investigating official, Porfiry Petrovitch observes the protagonist's view:

The ordinary must live in obedience and have no right to transgress the law, because they are, after all, ordinary. While the extraordinary have the right to

commit all sorts of crimes and in various ways to transgress the law, because in point of fact they are revolutionary. (*Crime* 259)

Raskolnikov clarifies that the transgression is not a compulsion for the extraordinary people. However, if it is required a superhuman must be allowed to “step over a dead body, over blood, then within himself to step over blood...” He says:

The first category [ordinary] is the master of the present; the second [extraordinary]—master of future. The first preserves the world and increases it numerically; the second moves the world and leads it towards a goal. (*Crime* 261)

Raskolnikov wants to be extraordinary but fails to move the world. He can only regenerate himself. Thus, Raskolnikov’s act of murdering the pawnbroker and her sister destabilises the ethical order of the universe without moving the world forward. So, his desire for being extraordinary creates the extreme agitation in him which is physically expressed by the fever. Secondly, the way Raskolnikov takes for being extraordinary is murder which is again against the Commandments of God¹. Thus he creates a disorder deviating from the religious norm along with the psychological and ethical disorder.

The mediate part of the novel deals with the effect of that chaos though apparently the destructive force seems to be very active here. It is rather de facto the psychological punishment of Raskolnikov and his desire to be superhuman. However, since the planning of the novel, Dostoevsky was preoccupied with the idea of Raskolnikov committing suicide. There are many references in his notebooks of Raskolnikov putting a bullet through his head. In the *Notebooks*, we find that Svidrigailov was supposed to ask Raskolnikov, “You’ll shoot yourself; with your character you won’t stay alive. You have two paths: either confess or shoot yourself” (243).

¹ Ten Commandments which appear in Exodus (20:2-17) and Deuteronomy (5:6-21) are the basic biblical principles in Christianity and Judaism. Raskolnikov disregards the 7th and 9th Commandments of God—“Thou shalt not kill” and “Thou shalt not steal” (Exodus 20:13, 15).

Here we find Raskolnikov going to shoot himself. Shneidman observes that in the final version of the novel, “the idea of Raskolnikov shooting himself alternates with the notion of his taking his life by drowning himself in the Neva river” (36). Svidrigailov, on the contrary, is a later insertion by the writer. In the draft of his novel, Svidrigailov does not contribute to the basic embodiment of the plot. But in the final version, he becomes an essential part of the novel. And as for the alter ego of Raskolnikov, Svidrigailov cannot be separated from the main structure of *Crime and Punishment*. As the alter ego, Svidrigailov dies, the other ego must live to keep up the psycho-ethical order. So Raskolnikov ponders:

...where was it that I read about a man condemned to death saying or thinking, an hour before death, that if he had to live somewhere high up on a cliffside, on a ledge so narrow that there was room only for his two feet—and with the abyss, the ocean, eternal darkness, eternal solitude, eternal storm all around him—and had to stay like that, on a square foot of space, an entire lifetime, a thousand years, an eternity—it would be better to live so than to die right now! Only to live, to live, to live! To live, no matter how—only to live!” (*Crime* 158)

But the vacillation continues. He cannot be certain how he will correct the disorder committed by the crime—whether he will continue living or commit suicide. Committing the crime Raskolnikov perturbs the ethical world which is further reinforced by the appearance of Svidrigailov who happens to be the alter ego of Raskolnikov playing the opposite role and desiring the contrary. Whereas Raskolnikov represents Thanatos, Svidrigailov is a satyriasis representing eros. Raskolnikov murders and Svidrigailov involves in sexual exploitation. Both of them destabilise the moral and religious equilibrium. The protagonist commits a sin by murdering and his alter ego by committing adultery. Yet Svidrigailov never suffers from a moral dilemma. He always does what he desires. He exploits whomever he wishes and gets chances to exploit. Interestingly, Svidrigailov is set on action after the middle of the novel. Beforehand,

we heard of him only. Svidrigailov appears as the alter ego when Raskolnikov is terribly suffering from mental dilemma. Really he plays the role of the alter ego by upholding problems in the protagonist's life. Edward Wasiolek observes that Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov consist of two sides of human life; they represent two parts of the same human being. In the introduction of *The Notebooks for Crime and Punishment* Wasiolek opines that,

[Svidrigailov] is for the most part as he appears in the novel: an embodiment of one side of Raskolnikov, an ironic expression of that bronze man that Raskolnikov admired. We never feel—as we will later in the portraiture of Stavrogin—the terror that Dostoevsky wanted us to feel in the presence of someone beyond good and evil. Yet, there is no doubt that this was his intention, and those who have attempted to see some redemptive traits in Svidrigailov because he takes care of the Marmeladov children and the five-year-old girl in his dream, simply have not understood the logic of Dostoevsky's morality. The character who does only “evil” must sense the distinction between evil and good, but Svidrigailov is meant to express indifference to any moral distinction, and one way of showing this indifference is to have him do what we conventionally call “good” acts as well as evil acts. (*Notebooks* 8)

When he finally thinks of his action as a crime, he commits suicide. But his suicide is not an act of escape from punishment. The punishment he chooses is self-inflicted. Shneidman is of the opinion that Svidrigailov does not want to escape the legal punishment, nor does he need to. But he has anxiety to escape reality which “haunts him from the very first appearance on the pages of the novel” (*Notebooks* 41). He finds Svidrigailov's arrival in Petersburg as an escape from the ghost of his dead wife. But it should be remembered that Svidrigailov is a debaucher, a person ‘beyond good and evil,’ cause of the suffering of many, must not care to escape reality. These two characters needs to be either corrected or abolished to maintain the

world order. Raskolnikov finds a better option in correcting himself by confession. He has Sonya as the saviour. In the *Notes from Underground* (1864), the Underground man continues to suffer from the *ennui* of life because he finds no saviour, nor does he strongly desire one. The Underground Man's encounter with the prostitute might have been a well episode of his resurrection and salvation. But unlike Raskolnikov, he tries to dominate over Liza. He cannot surrender to Liza. Rather he preaches to the prostitute with a long moralizing speech about the hatefulness of her profession. The lecture, at first, arouses emotion in her. But afterwards, Liza, the prostitute, does not care about all that lecture and preaching. Though he protests against the Crystal Palace, in the deep of his heart he follows the rule of society. That is why he thinks the profession of prostitution is a nasty one. It must be noted that the man who has always said against the Crystal Palace, reason, the social rules, morality and, all those conventions that human beings adopt and try to adopt in society, is now trying to teach morality and all those. Raskolnikov, contrarily, surrenders himself to Sonya and in the end of the novel, he feels love for her. His love for her gives way to his love for humanity and God. Shneidman opines that Raskolnikov cannot commit suicide for the structural requirement of the novel. He says,

Had Raskolnikov committed suicide, the ideological message expressed in his regeneration would not have been possible; that is, the principle of atonement for one's sins through suffering could not have been illustrated. (40)

Thus his correction is justified for maintaining the psycho-ethical order. Rather suicide or abolition might have disturb the moral and religious world of faith.

However, Svidrigailov's crime and sin are marked by radical violence to world order. Though he seems to be trying to restore the order, he fails until he is annihilated. We find, before committing suicide, Svidrigailov gives money to the family of his fiancée, to Katerina Ivanova and her children, and Dunya. Svidrigailov's frustration that leads him to commit suicide is not a very simple one. He seems to have no belief in God nor humanity. Throughout

he is presented as a harmful character. He tries to exploit whomever he finds in contact with—his wife, Raskolnikov and his sister. Even he is responsible for the suicide of a young girl. Although he is a violent and sneaky individual, Svidrigailov cannot accept the challenge to face the reality of his desired thing. Besides, he is a contrast to Raskolnikov. Whereas Raskolnikov faces the punishment and gradually renews himself as a man, Svidrigailov declines to accept any moral and psychological dilemma which may have led him to correction and salvation. So, he must commit suicide. The suicide is the only confession for him of the guilt he had done to Dunya and others. It is an act driven by his dreams that haunts his inner conscience. Here, the motif of committal suicide may also be a correction—a correction to the ethical status quo. Svidrigailov considers himself a social nuisance. So to restore the moral status quo Svidrigailov must kill himself. That is why immediately before his suicide, Svidrigailov experiences an earthly hell. Edward Wasiolek finds a parallel of hell with his life in a hotel room,

All of Svidrigailov's actions, after Raskolnikov visits him in the inn near Haymarket Square, are a preparation for death, culminating in the grim ritual in the small hotel on the end of his suicide. The hotel and its small empty room, cold veal, mice, and the Charon-like lackey are like a foretaste of the dismal hell that Svidrigailov's fancy had accurately divined for itself. It is at this point, while Svidrigailov prepares for death and Raskolnikov struggles with his dilemma, that Dostoevsky shows most vividly the ties and differences between the two men. (*Notebooks* 82)

Svidrigailov's suicide is the logical consequence of his life that is corrupted—the suicide is, in one sense, “an absolute surrender to the law of corruption and decay” as Liza Knapp observes (135). In another sense, it amounts to admitting the moralistic necessity of the

world. So Svidrigailov's suicide marks the victory of that moralistic world—that he wants—over the world of corruption. Henry Russel opines:

Svidrigailov's suicide is not best understood as a final bored choice of nothingness. It is the choice of nothingness over an honest recognition of his own humiliation. Throughout a long career of negation he was able to look at his shameful actions, see their evil, understand the obloquy they earned in others' eyes, and refuse to be shamed by them. Only when he has been brought to respect and love someone, as he does with Dunya, must he sense his own unworthiness before her. Then he must choose whether to see his actions as they are and seek grace, following her example, or to kill himself and deny his knowledge. (236)

After the suicide of Svidrigailov, necessarily, all the confusions are gone from Raskolnikov. He must fix the world now, so he is determined to confess. The narrative shows the clarity and determination of his confession and anterior acceptance of the legal punishment:

The criminal [Raskolnikov] firmly, precisely, and clearly supported his statement, without confusing the circumstances, without softening them in his favour, without distorting the facts, without forgetting the slightest detail. (*Crime* 535)

The pacification is also echoed in the account of the outside world as well, the description of the extremely hot weather has been replaced by the “clear, warm day” (*Crime* 548). The psychological trauma is over; it has been so pacified that the legal punishment of seven years seems bearable to Raskolnikov. He identifies himself with Lazarus. In the end of the novel, Dostoevsky suggests Raskolnikov's a transformation from damnation to salvation. The destabilisation of ethical status quo that he caused by the act of murder must be corrected. We find him, in the novel, taking the Gospel from Sonya. Though Raskolnikov ‘had not even

opened it yet,' the reading of the Gospels about 'the raising of Lazarus' may be a hint of his resurrection (*Crime* 550). The narrative, as well, suggests Raskolnikov's change to a new life,

But here begins a new account, the account of a man's gradual renewal, the account of his gradual regeneration, his gradual transition from one world to another, his acquaintance with a new, hitherto completely unknown reality. It might make the subject of a new story—but our present story is ended. (*Crime* 551)

The novel has an end in itself with a suggestion of regeneration, which is again a suggestion of the restoration of psychological and ethical order. Sonya's insistence upon Raskolnikov's confession and going through the seven years' punishment and his acceptance of this punishment happily in search of a happy future, may well be an instance of man's desire to live and the search for an order. So, at the end of the novel, the turmoil and disorder are over and a path to consolation, salvation, and religious and ethical order is evoked. On the contrary to Raskolnikov, Svidrigailov has nothing to reveal and confess. His guilt is well-known. For him, confession does not mean any correction—it is only to approve his guilt. He is well aware that he cannot regenerate himself as he cannot surrender. Moreover, there is nobody to save him, nor can be because he can exploit anybody. So, his condition is irreversible and thus he must be abolished from the disordered universe.

If Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov together are seen to be a unified entity representing two different (rather opposing) parts of human psyche, the unified entity is pacified in the end of the novel—one irreversible part being abolished and the other being corrected. Thus the ethical status quo of that psychological entity is restored.

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