

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Crime and Punishment

Major Themes

I. Raskolnikov as a Double Character

A. Detail of Raskolnikov's mental state / Some of the most dramatic conflicts take place inside his head

B. Raskolnikov as a study in contradictions: one moment he is outgoing, the next he is withdrawn; he is both a compassionate champion for the poor and a murderer.

C. One way of reconciling his actions is to view him as a double character.

1. Razumihin's description: "He is morose, gloomy, haughty, and proud. Lately he's been feeling touchy and depressed. Maybe he has been feeling that way a long time. He's magnanimous and kind. He doesn't like expressing his feelings and would rather perpetrate some cruelty than express in words what's in his heart. There are times when he doesn't seem to be suffering from depression at all, and he's just cold and unfeeling to the point of inhumanity, as though he had two contradictory characters that keep changing places." ()

2. Sonya and Svidrigailov reflect the two sides of Raskolnikov's character. Sonya is humane and gentle, while Svidrigailov embodies self-will and arrogance. It is inevitable that Raskolnikov is drawn to both these characters.

II. Raskolnikov's Theory on Extraordinary Men

A. Ordinary

Most men are ordinary and must obey the laws of society simply because they are not exceptional, and therefore, have no right or reason to step beyond the law.

B. Extraordinary

Some people are above any criminal or moral law. They are guided only by their consciences, and have the right to transcend any obstacle if it is necessary for the achievement of a goal which might benefit mankind.

Raskolnikov's examples: Cæsar, Napoléon: overstepped the laws and were thus responsible for the deaths of thousands, yet they were still applauded for achieving their goals.

◆ for extraordinary men, the ends justify the means, even if the means involves shedding blood.

III. Alienation

A. Interpretation:

The streets of St. Petersburg are crowded with people who seem to have nowhere to run, and no one who cares about the. Even in a city of strangers, Raskolnikov seems unusually alien and alone. It is easy to imagine him going for days without speaking.

1. Academic: He has dropped out of the university and severed all ties with his former classmates.

2. Professional: He has no job.

3. Family: He is far from his family.

4. Others: The only person he sees on a regular basis is the chambermaid when she comes to clean his room.

B. Results:

Perhaps it is his isolation from other people that enables Raskolnikov to plan a murder as if it were only an exercise in abstract logic. After the murders, Raskolnikov's estrangement from society increases, as if the act of taking a life excommunicated him from all other humanity.

C. Parallel:

Raskolnikov's sense of alienation is echoed by Marmeladov and in fact, it is one of the things that draws them together. When they first meet, Marmeladov is at the tail end of a five day drinking binge. He has squandered all of his family's money and cannot return home. The two men share a future of bleak prospects.

--Masterpiece Theater,
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