Introduction

Crime and Punishment is a psychological detective novel whose mystery lies not in the whodunit but in the whydunit—a question that perplexes protagonist and readers alike. The central character is a young man, who has succumbed to “certain strange ‘unfinished’ ideas floating in the air” (September 1865, letter to Katkov, 28/2:136). His last name—Raskolnikov—signifies “schism” and marks him as a modern, divided self. He belongs to a generation of young people coming of age in a rapidly expanding media environment, where social justice issues such as extreme income inequality, court reforms, and the plight of women and children were discussed obsessively. Like other aspiring students-turned-journalists, Raskolnikov is seeking his own “new word.” The discussion of his article “On Crime” shows that, like other reformers of his time, Raskolnikov is attracted to nihilism—a term designating an ideological amalgam of atheism, materialism, utilitarianism, feminism, and scientism that challenged existing beliefs, norms, and social institutions. After committing two murders—one ideological, one accidental—his punishment begins. As Dostoevsky wrote to Mikhail Katkov, the editor of Russian Herald, “Unresolved questions confront the murderer, unforeseen and unexpected feelings torment his heart” (September 1865, letter to Katkov, 28/2:136). Suffering from both intellectual doubts and feelings of alienation, he vacillates between the desires to confess and to escape.

This study of Crime and Punishment offers a reading of the novel that considers narrative strategy, psychology, and ideology. While written for the general reader of all levels, it also provides some suggestions for teaching. The focus on narrative strategy demonstrates how Dostoevsky first plunges readers into Raskolnikov’s fevered brain, creating reader sympathy for him and explaining

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1 All citations from Dostoevsky’s works come from Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevskii, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh, 30 vols. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–90). Because there are so many excellent translations of the novel, citations are noted by part and chapter (for example, part 1, chapter 2). Citations from his correspondence are noted by date, volume, and page number from the collected works (ex.: 28/2:136). All translations are mine, except when noted otherwise.
why most readers root for him to get away from the scene of the crime. By subsequently providing outsider perspectives on Raskolnikov’s thinking, Dostoevsky effects a conversion in reader sympathy. The focus on psychology encourages readers to consider the difference between Raskolnikov’s unconscious dreams (sny) and his conscious daydreams (mechty), thereby showing the deep conflict between his heart and his intellect. By examining the multiple justifications for murder Raskolnikov gives as he confesses to Sonya, this study highlights ideology and the novel’s debunking of rationality-based theories. Finally, by considering the question of why Raskolnikov and most of the novel’s male characters focus on the deliberate murder of the pawnbroker and forget the unintended murder of her half-sister Lizaveta, this study reveals a narrative strategy that focuses on shame and guilt. Because Raskolnikov has committed murder, readers expect him to feel guilt, which follows a defined script—remorse, repentance, expiation. Yet the novel portrays a man suffering from shame because he is not the extraordinary man he hoped to be. The novel thus keeps readers off-balance until the last pages of the Epilogue when it finally offers the guilt script and the resolution readers have been expecting all along.

While set in 1860s Russia, Dostoevsky’s novel tackles many issues that resonate with contemporary audiences, including the alienation of modern man and the perils of ideology. Crime and Punishment demonstrates how individuals who are isolated tend to live inside their own heads, making them particularly vulnerable to the dangers of radical ideology. By espousing radical ideologies with absolute certainty, their adherents divide people. Moreover, such ideologies can blind us to facts and consequences, thereby blunting our essential human capacity to choose good over evil. The novel finally demonstrates both that love can close the gap between alienated individuals and that everyone is connected—concepts that may reverberate with today’s internet-connected readers. Ultimately, as Crime and Punishment polemicizes with radical ideologies, it illustrates what can happen when ideas “floating in the air” lead an individual to commit and justify murderous acts—an issue as alive in today’s world as it was in 1860s Russia. This study shows how ideology that promotes egoism can lead to crime, self-destruction, and misery. The study’s five chapters thereby explain the enduring power of Dostoevsky’s great novel.