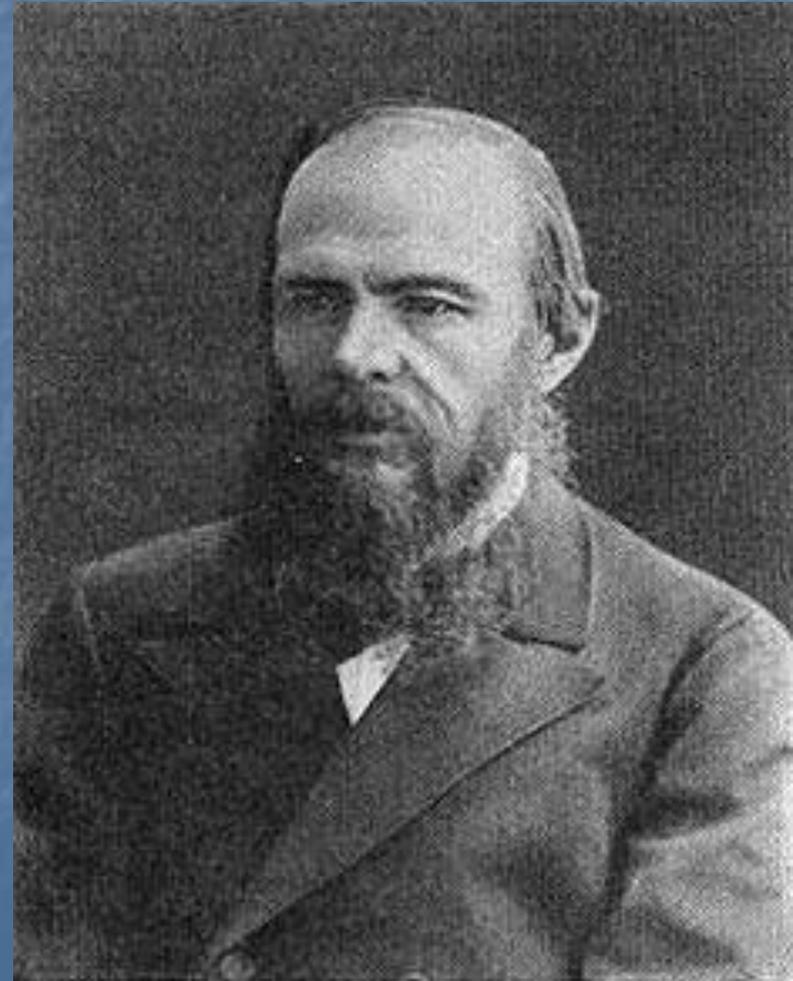


Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and
Punishment* and 19th Century
Russia

Dr. Alan Haffa

Biography (1821-1881)

- *Poor Folk*, 1846
- 1849: Jailed as a Socialist; 4 years in Siberia and 4 in Army
- While in prison he converts from Socialism to traditional values
- *Notes from the Underground*, 1864
- *Crime and Punishment*, 1866
- *Idiot*, 1868
- *The Possessed*, 1872
- *Brother's Karamazov*, 1879-80



Nihilism

- From Latin: Nihil, “Nothing”
- Popular social movement in Russia in 60s and 70s. Associated with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, 1881 (Anarchists)
- Negated all authority embodied in State, Church, and Family Structures
- Materialistic: No Mind or Soul outside of Physical World
- Unsentimental: Social Bonds should be rational, not emotional; against Charity and Social Welfare
- Utilitarianism: greatest happiness for greatest number
- Faith in Science: a neo-rationalistic philosophy; all social evils derive from ignorance; a situation that only science can solve.
- Raskolnikov, the main character in *Crime and Punishment*, is a Nihilist

Russian Serfdom

- Opposition to serfdom moved Dostoyevsky to get involved in Socialist politics
- Serfs were bound to the land
- Serfs could not own property
- Serfs could be bought and sold, individually or as a family
- Serfs could not file legal complaints against their Lords
- Serfs owed their Lord either produce from the land they worked or work upon the Lord's own land.
- Serfdom in Russia began later than European Feudalism and didn't end officially until 1861. Serfs were owned by private aristocrats, the Church, and the State (Tsar)

Story Summary: The Crime

- Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, a former student, poor, sickly, starving has a plot to commit a crime that will allow him to begin his career and help his mother and sister; Handsome, Proud, Intelligent; Egoist and Antisocial
- Plot to murder a pawnbroker: mean, cruel, greedy, and beats her mentally disabled step-sister, Lizaveta

Story Summary: the Parallel

- Meets an out of work bureaucrat, Marmeladov; Drunkard; Drinks families income; Katerina Ivanova is his proud, hard working wife, who beats him but loves him; Sonya is his daughter who prostitutes herself to save the family.
- Raskolnikov shows charity; gives the family his last money.
- R's own mother and sister are not much better off and this implies what may lie in store if R. does not succeed.

Lead up to Murder

- Letter from mother: sister, Dounia, is marrying a man, Luzhin, who wants a wife with “a good reputation, without dowry, and above all, one who had experienced poverty, because...it is better for a wife to look upon her husband as her benefactor.”
- Sacrifice of Sonia parallels the sacrifice of Dounia: prostitution and marriage for money are equated. Nihilists are opposed to institution of marriage.
- In a bar overhears a conversation: “it would be better if the pawnbroker were dead...” From a pure utilitarian point of view, killing her appears justified.

Shows Rather than Tells us about Poverty

- It was a tiny cupboard of a room about six paces in length. It had a poverty stricken appearance with its dusty yellow paper peeling off the walls, and it was so low-pitched that a man of more than average height was ill at ease in it and felt every moment that he would knock his head against the ceiling. The furniture...there were three old chairs, rather rickety; a painted table in the corner on which lay a few manuscripts and books; the dust that lay thick upon them showed that they had been long untouched. A big clumsy sofa occupied almost the whole of one wall and half the floor space of the room; it was once covered with chintz, but was now in rags and served Raskolnikov as a bed. (50)

Murder

- Ambivalent about plan: Dream of Horse being beaten; wakes up in shock that he could plan to beat the pawnbroker to death (p.84); self-loathing, doubt.
- “Good God! He cried, “can it be, can it be, that I shall really take an axe, that I shall strike her on the head, split her skull open...that I shall tread in the sticky warm blood, break the lock, steal and tremble; hide, all splattered in the blood...with the axe... God God, can it be?”
- Interrupted by Lizaveta
- Barely takes anything
- Escapes only through luck
- Hides the money and collapses in bed, sick
- Nursed for several days by friend, Razumihin

False Sense of Utilitarianism

- “Listen, I want to ask you a serious question,” the student said hotly. “I was joking of course, but look here; on one side we have a stupid, senseless, worthless, spiteful, ailing, horrid old woman, not simply useless but doing actual mischief, who has not an idea what she is living for herself, and who will die in a day or two in any case...
- On the other side, fresh, young lives thrown away for want of help and by thousands, on every side! A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped, on that old woman’s money which will be buried in a monastery!...Kill her, take her money and with the help of it devote oneself to the service of humanity and the good of all. What do you think, would not one tiny crime be wiped out by thousands of good deeds?” (90)

Murder of Lizaveta Proves Raskolnikov's Principles False

- Lizavetta is the mentally challenged half sister of Alyona
- “In the middle of the room stood Lizaveta with a bundle in her arms. She was gazing in stupefaction at her murdered sister, white as a sheet and not seeming to have the strength to cry out...And this hapless Lizaveta was so simple and had been so thoroughly crushed and scared that she did not even raise a hand to guard her face, though that was the most necessary and natural action at the moment, for the axe was raised over her face. She only put up her empty hand, not to her face, slowly holding it out before her as though motioning him away. The axe fell with the sharp edge just on the skull and split at one blow all the top of the head...” (105)

Unconscious Guilt Gives Raskolnikov away

- Summoned to Police Station for Debt: faints when he hears the officers discussing the murder
- Physical Illness throughout is a symbol of his inner turmoil and suffering
- In a bar, he speaks carelessly with an officer whom he knows, implying that he is the murderer (187-8)
- In a delirium, he goes to the murder site
- Confesses to the prostitute, Sonia.
- Eventually, will confess to the police at the exact moment when another man has confessed; there is no hard evidence against him.

Alienation

- “It was not that he understood, but he felt clearly with all the intensity of sensation that he could never more appeal to these people in the police office with sentimental effusions like his recent outburst, or with anything whatever; and that if they had been his own brothers and sisters and not police officers, it would have been utterly out of the question to appeal to them in any circumstance of life. He had ever experienced such a strange and awful sensation. And was most agonizing—it was more a sensation than a conception or idea, a direct sensation, the most agonizing of all sensations he had known in his life.”
(128)

Theory of "Superman"

- Raskolnikov, wrote a legal treatise arguing that there are two classes of people: Ordinary and Extraordinary
- Ordinary People must obey the Law
- Extraordinary people are not limited by any moral or civil law; People like Napoleon are cited as examples; In order to accomplish some greater good they are permitted freedom to do anything, even commit crime.
- Raskolnikov will commit his crime to confirm this theory, to prove that he is 'extraordinary.' His moral suffering throughout the book is evidence that he is merely ordinary.
- The text never resolves whether Raskolnikov is simply "weak" or whether the whole notion is a false one, but that seems the most likely interpretation.

Napoleon as Superman

- Razkolnikov after confessing to Sonia
- “I wanted to become a Napoleon, that is why I killed her...Do you understand now?”
- “N-no,” Sonia whispered naively and timidly. Only speak, speak, I shall understand...”
- “It was like this: I asked myself one day this question—what if Napoleon had happened to be in my place, and if he had not had Toulon nor Egypt...but instead of all those picturesque and monumental things, there had simply been some ridiculous old hag, a pawnbroker, who had to be murdered too to get money from her trunk (for his career, you understand). Well would he have brought himself to that, if there had been no other means? Would he have felt a pang of its being so far from monumental...and sinful, too? (440-1)

Conclusions

- The failure of Raskolnikov represents the failure of Nihilism: without a moral base and without traditional social relations, man is lost, confused, and miserable.
- Notion of Superman, later made famous by Nietzsche, is questioned though no definitive answer is given by the story.
- Suffering is both a symbol of Christian Faith and the means of attaining atonement for sin and crime.
- Everyone needs someone to have faith in them and to love them unconditionally: Raskolnikov needs the prostitute Sonya, or he would most likely have committed suicide. They are both outcasts and sinners.
- Dostoyevsky's contribution to literature is the Psychological novel. Freud considers him, along with Shakespeare, to be one of the greatest writers of all time.