

The historical context of crime and punishment by fyodor dostoevsky

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



Every great piece of literature is influenced or inspired by the time period in which it was written. Whether the author consciously or unconsciously intended to write about a specific milieu, it will always be evident in the text. This is because the author is always influenced by the point in history in which he occupies. The text is defined and characterized by the events and ideologies prevalent in an era. Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky is no exception. The book is a testament to the times in which Dostoevsky lived, discussing the problems and issues that dominated Russia during his time.

That age was marked by nihilism, and this was manifested throughout the story. This research paper aims to illustrate the historical context in which the novel was written. This paper will focus on the age of nihilism, but will also discuss other concepts which from Friedrich Nietzsche, such as will to power and superman. Russia, during the time of the author Fyodor Dostoevsky, was rather different from its neighbors in Europe (“Russia”).

The difference is in part due to its isolation. Significant historical events like the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Reformation was responsible for the development of several Western European countries.

Those nations left behind the system of feudalism in favor for modernity. However, the transformation of the said countries did not affect Russia. The lack of cultural and social change in Russia was exacerbated by the invasions and attacks from the likes of the Mongols. This prompted the nation to be extremely skeptical of other countries (“Russia”). In Russia, political power was concentrated on a single figure: an emperor called the tsar (“Russia”). It

was Tsar Ivan IV, or better known as Ivan the Terrible, who created what was supposed to be epitome of Russian government in the middle of the 16th century.

Those rulers who succeeded him, including Tsar Peter the Great and Tsarina Catherine the Great, encouraged what was called “ westernization” (“ Russia”). These rulers wanted to bring to Russia Western European culture and technology. Between the 1830s and 1860s, Dostoevsky was attending school, and was trying to make a name for himself as a writer. At that same period, Russia was engaged in an intellectual struggle. A group of individuals called the Westernizers consisted of educated people who believed that a major transformation was necessary for Russia to solve its social dilemmas and catch up with the rest of the world.

These people were primarily driven by German philosophy, as well as other social ideals derived from the Industrial revolution. The Westernizers were divided in their objectives and means. While some wanted reforms of a democratic nature, others felt the necessity to overthrow the tsarist regime in favor of a socialist government (“ Russia”). Dostoevsky used to agree with the Westernizers (“ Russia”). He participated in socialist discussions and has challenged the tsarist government of Nicholas I. As a result, he was arrested, and his incarceration caused a political and spiritual metanoia (“ Russia”).

The novel is indeed a critique of his old beliefs. Dostoevsky lived in a time when nihilism was beginning to spread in Russia (Rode). In the novel, he was extremely critical of nihilism that had become prevalent in his country. In fact, it was through the protagonist Raskolnikov in which Dostoevsky

demonstrated his opposition to nihilism. Nihilism is derived from the Latin word “ nihil” which means nothing (Pratt). It conveys that which does not exist. The word “ nihil” is found in “ annihilate,” which means to destroy (Pratt). Its definition is characterized by a strong sense of skepticism and pessimism with regards to existence.

It upholds that values have no basis; thus, one should not believe in anything. It was German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who was most identified with nihilism. According to Nietzsche in *Will to Power*, “ there is simply no true world”; the world has no order until we give it order (qtd. in Pratt). Nietzschean nihilism promotes the destruction of all established truths in Western thought. He writes that nihilism is “ not only the belief that everything deserves to perish; but one actually puts one’s shoulder to the plough; one destroys” (qtd. in Pratt).

What is destroyed in nihilism is the meaning and importance of life, as well as the values in which it was founded (Pratt). That is why Nietzsche believes that “ the highest values devalue themselves” (qtd. in Pratt). Russia soon became preoccupied with nihilism, prompting the widespread disregard for figures of authority, such as family, state and most specially, the church (Pratt). Nihilism presented God and religions as those which hinder freedom, and thus rejects it completely. As a result, freedom of the individual became the highest priority. The individual was deemed as the only source of real knowledge.

Rationalism also became the major ideology (Pratt). Russian nihilism followed the basic notions of Nietzschean nihilism, but with a slight

difference. Russian nihilism was also influenced by utilitarianism, which characterized action as that which should be beneficial to society (Rode). The character of Raskolnikov was a combination of both nihilism and utilitarianism; he is a man with a destructive potential who also chose to act for what he thinks would benefit society. There is another element to his character which is influenced by yet another Nietzschean concept: the superman.

However, before the concept of superman can be discussed, it is first important to delve into Nietzsche's idea of will to power. Nietzsche's will to power is often misinterpreted and misunderstood to have a negative connotation (Wahl). While this idea does promote the dominance of one over another, it is not the only thing that the idea implies. Will to power is Nietzsche's way of describing how it is natural for all life forms search for power that gives them the capacity to maintain and grow. This power is also that which destroys life.

According to Nietzsche, it is this search for power and dominance is merely natural for the sustenance of life (Wahl). Will to power also entails an individual's need to be free and to create (Wahl). In his book *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche states that every individual seeks to find an environment in which one's creative power is best enhanced. The individual's desire to be the best is a crucial characteristic of the Nietzschean will to power. In the long run, however, the will to power will render the individual weak in order to encourage another individual's will.

The will to power which initially sought to strengthen itself will seek to find that which is beyond itself (Wahl). This is best exemplified by the character of Raskolnikov and Russian nihilism, which will be expounded on later. The superman of Nietzsche is best understood in light of nihilism and will to power. Nietzsche believes that the Christian dichotomy between good and evil and the values that come with it only obstructs man's capacity for freedom and growth (Bradley). Besides, he asserts that these values are not founded on human experience.

As a result, Nietzsche presents his idea of superman; he is a person who makes his own system of values according to his needs and the world he occupies. He merely relies on what he thinks is good or evil, and succeeds in life in the process. Through the efforts of the superman, mankind and society will improve (Bradley). The sole source of values and knowledge for the superman is himself (Bradley). He defines what is good and evil. That which brings out the best in him is good, while that which hinders him from reaching his full potential is evil.

Because Nietzsche upholds that all is transitory, even the notion of what is good or evil continually changes. Due to these changes, the superman must continue to improve himself into a better version of himself (Bradley). With the existence of a superman, Nietzsche promotes a society which encourages the stronger individuals to succeed (Bradley). The superman is the means in which society is encouraged to break boundaries. Every person is important because it can enhance society's potential to new heights. As a result, there is a much stronger society.

This is all due to a superman which disregards the baseless unworldly values and instead relies on his own strength (Bradley). In *Crime and Punishment*, the character of Raskolnikov is created as a result of Russian nihilism and the Nietzschean concept of will to power and superman (Rode). In the novel, his character states: An extraordinary man has a right—not officially, be it understood, but from and by his very individuality—to permit his conscience to overstep certain bounds, only so far as the realization of one of his ideas may require it. (Such an idea may from time to time be of advantage to humanity.

) (Dostoyevsky 193). In the above passage, Raskolnikov insinuates a reference to the Nietzschean superman that which defies convention according to what he thinks is right. Raskolnikov considers Napoleon as a superman; the former believes that the latter is a man of undeniable strength who rejects both human and moral laws. In the novel, Raskolnikov thought that he belonged to that remarkable group of “supermen” who defied rules of morality. This is the reason why he decided to kill the pawnbroker Alyona Ivanovna. Russian nihilism plays a part in Raskolnikov’s decision to kill Alyona.

Aside from his belief that is derived from the notion of superman, Raskolnikov was also inspired to act by a will to power. While will to power seeks to enhance its own power, it also seeks that which is beyond itself. Both the will to power and the idea of superman promote the development of the individual which eventually leads to a stronger society. The sense of utilitarianism inherent in Russian nihilism was manifested in Raskolnikov’s

intention of murder. He decided to kill the pawnbroker Alyona when he heard two students talking about her. One of the students said: “ Her oddness interests me but I tell you what I would do.

I would kill that damnable old hag, and take all she is possessed of, without any qualm of conscience” (Dostoyevsky 52). Upon hearing these words, Raskolnikov is overcome with the nihilistic thought of killing her on the basis of the students’ conversation. He soon assumes that her death would benefit society, concluding that indeed it was the right thing to do (Rode). However, after he has done the deed, he realized that he was not an extraordinary man who could challenge moral standards. He was soon consumed by guilt, so he had to resort to convincing himself that what he did was justified (Rode).

It was then proven that Raskolnikov could not sustain his nihilism, and neither was he a superman (Rode). Raskolnikov is not the only character in the novel which demonstrates the prevalent historical milieu of Dostoevsky’s time. Svidrigailov, the former employer of Raskolnikov’s sister Dnuya, also is an example of a Russian nihilist. In the novel, he said: “ In vice at least there is something permanent, founded indeed upon nature and not dependent on fantasy” (qtd. in Rode). This implies that Svidrigailov also disregards religion in favor of human nature.

Yet another character which reveals the historical development during the age of nihilism was Luzhin. He was Dunya’s fiance. As a result of westernization in Russia during the time of Dostoevsky, foreign investors were invited into the country as part of an economic expansion in Russia.

Hence, industrialization and urbanization are part of the age of nihilism. Personally, Dostoevsky disagreed with this kind of development, as he saw industrialization in particular as threatening to humanity. However, he did not hesitate to include a character with a standpoint different from his.

Luzhin represented the Westernizers ideology, those who were in favor of industrialization. He is a person who strongly believed that Russia can achieve progress by means of scientific and economic improvements. Luzhin said: But science says, " Love thyself above all because everything in the world is founded on self-interest. Follow this, and thou maintainest thy garment intact. " Economic truth adds that the more society is organized on this theory - the theory of whole coats - the more solid and permanent are its foundations, and the more established are its personal affairs.

By following this principle, I find I attain everything; and, as for the naked, I see that they ultimately receive more than the half-coat, not as the outcome of charity and exceptional liberality, but of the effects of common progress. (Dostoyevsky 110). Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky is a result of the historical milieu in which it was included. The author belonged in a society wherein Russian nihilism was prevalent. Nihilism was generally destructive, as it sought to abolish all established truths. This resulted in the disregard for all authority figures, including the church, government and even the family.

Nihilism questioned all existing values, that which is without tangible foundation. This greatly undermined the power of religion and the belief in God. Then, there is Russian nihilism, which also incorporates a sense of

utilitarianism in its doctrine. Nihilism is associated with Friedrich Nietzsche, whose philosophies also dominated the period in which Dostoevsky lived. He contributed two key concepts which influenced the novel, such as will to power and the superman. The protagonist of the novel was a manifestation of all these concepts.

Raskolnikov demonstrated Russian nihilism through the murder he committed which he did under the belief that his action was for the welfare of society. He exhibited the Nietzschean will to power and superman concepts through the act of killing itself, as he sought to test himself whether or not he was an extraordinary man. In the end, he proved that he was not, as he found that he cannot escape his conscience. In addition, there were also other characters in the novel that demonstrated nihilism. One of which was Svidrigailov. The age of nihilism which was the context of the novel also included industrialization and urbanization.

It was the character of Luzhin which demonstrated this element in the story. Indeed, *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky is defined by the historical milieu in which it was written. Dostoevsky is a product of that certain period in Russia which was marked by utter disregard for religious and political structures. He lived in an age of nihilism, and this period was captured in his text. Not only does the novel tell a great story, but it also conveys a period in time which made history. Works Cited Bradley, Derek. Nietzsche's Superman. Michigan State University. 3 June 2008 .