

# Suffering in crime and punishment

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



Fyodor Dostoevsky once stated, “ Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience. But nothing is a greater cause of suffering” (Eiermann). Existentialism insists that human life is understood in terms of one’s unique experience. Thus, being nothing or accomplishing nothing in life suggests failure and is a source of suffering. A particular example is Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, where a young Russian student, Raskolnikov, murders an old pawnbroker to prove his Extraordinary Man theory, which suggests that the extraordinary may transgress the law of ordinary or inferior men. Immediately following his crime, Rodya experiences severe illness and emotional conflicts as he confronts issues with his family, the Marmeladov family, and the police during his gradual steps to confession. The motif of the need of suffering is used throughout the novel to produce the book’s theme: great suffering leads to salvation and the expiation of man’s sins. In *Crime and Punishment*, several characters undergo much pain and personal anguish, binding the apparent motif of suffering to the theme, and providing a strong unifying element throughout the story. Though many readers often conceive Raskolnikov’s suffering as having a direct relationship with his guilt over his crime, the actual controlling idea behind his punishment is an indirect result of his dual personality and his obsession to prove his theory. He is best represented as being either cold, intellectual and isolated from society, or as being warm and compassionate. The murder is the result of his intellectual side’s need to determine whether or not he fits his Extraordinary Man theory. It was this aspect of his personality that developed the crime and executed his plan, thus, forcing the humane side to suffer for his actions. It is important to note

that Raskolnikov becomes ill and unconscious immediately following the murder, signifying his ability to suffer greatly as, “ The conviction that all his faculties, even memory, and the simplest power of reflection were failing him began to be an insufferable torture” (Dostoevsky 81). This scene is also important to the development of Dostoevsky’s theme as Raskolnikov’s theory requires the extraordinary man to suffer greatly. Earlier, Rodya had written an article about crime in which he expressed his belief that “ pain and suffering are inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart. The really great man – must have sadness on earth” (230). However, Raskolnikov’s suffering is also due to his recognition of his failure to meet his theory as he eventually confesses and also comes close to confessing when his theory or intellect is insulted or questioned by Porfiry and Zamitov. This point of view is best described by Svidrigailov when he tells Dounia that Raskolnikov “ has suffered a great deal and is still suffering from the idea that he could make a theory, but was incapable of boldly overstepping the law, and so is not a genius. And that’s humiliating for a young man of any pride” (403). Though Rodya had grown much from through suffering and recognizing his error in his theory, his intellect still prevents him from admitting he committed a crime as he believes he had made a mistake in killing the old pawnbroker whom he continues to see as a louse. Additionally, this internal conflict between his two opposing personalities is a constant source of confusion and frustration for the main character. Throughout the novel, Raskolnikov will usually refer to his compassionate side first in a given situation and perform an act of kindness or generosity, but, immediately afterwards, he will regret his action. For example, Rodya gives the

Marmeladovs the last of his money after seeing the family's poor living conditions, then shortly " afterwards, on the stairs he changed his mind and would have gone back. 'What a stupid thing I've done,' he thought to himself" (23). The charitable side of him is a sign of self-submissiveness and weakness that displeases him greatly due to his expectations of his own theory. In addition, Dostoevsky uses other characters as redemptive figures in the novel. Raskolnikov sees Sonia as a Christ figure, suffering for all of humanity as she willingly prostitutes in order to support a family, even though her father, Marmeladov, spends the money to quench his alcoholism:" He will come in that day and He will ask: Where is the daughter who gave herself for her cross, consumptive step-mother and for the little children of another? Where is the daughter who had pity upon the filthy drunkard, her earthly father, undismayed by his beastliness?' And He will say, ' Come to Me'. Thy sins which are many are forgiven thee, for thou has loved much - .'" (20)Because of the silent submissiveness in her suffering and her ability to love, Raskolnikov turns to her to confess and agrees to wear her cypress cross as " symbol of my taking up the cross! - as though I have not suffered much till now!" resembling Jesus' carrying of the cross as he suffered for mankind (450). Moreover, Porfiry Petrovitch is another redemptive figure, urging Rodya to confess while representing Raskolnikov's intellectual equivalent, " I am convinced that you will decide to take your suffering - For suffering, Rodion Romnavitch, is a great thing - there's an idea in suffering'" (397). Porfiry sees in Rodion a brilliant mind which he feels has the potential of being a great man after much rehabilitation; therefore, the police investigator does not arrest him immediately, letting Raskolnikov

suffer longer and eventually realize his errors in his theory, thus, allowing him to become a useful member of society. Furthermore, salvation from great suffering is best captured in one of the book's later scenes where Katerina Ivanovna dies after roaming the streets for days. She had lived a life of poverty while raising a family under a prostitute's minute income and an alcoholic husband. In Sonia's arms she exclaims to the world " What, the priest? I don't want him. I have no sins. God must forgive me without that. He knows I have suffered – and if He won't forgive me, I don't care" (423). Her dying words are a statement of the novel's theme in which great suffering has resulted in the expiation of one's sins. Life is often filled with times of immense joy, but it is equally permeated with moments that mankind would prefer to forget. In Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky fills the pages with the cries of men and women suffering from the pains of guilt, death, and daily tribulations. As several characters suffer greatly, the novel is unified as each of them find a sense of salvation from their pain. This theme, in which great suffering is often correlated to such redemption and salvation, is also prevalent in the stories of the Bible such as Job and Jesus' Crucifixion. Through such literature, mankind has been able to live life without fear and in hopes of someday being forgiven.