

The long way to confession in fyodor dostoevsky's crime and punishment research p...

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



One of the greatest psychologists in the world literature, the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky employed his literary talent in order to explore the most obscure and intricate nooks of human nature.

Delving unprecedentedly deep in the mysteries of human soul, he created his novels that present outstanding examples of psychological analysis of the most morbid issues and ideas. Dostoyevsky's famous *Crime and Punishment* features a poor ex-student Raskolnikov who commits a premeditated murder of an old prosperous pawnbroker excusing his actions by the demands of the greater good and the general justice.

However, despite those exalted aims, Raskolnikov suffers pangs of conscience and mental anguish for a prolonged time before he finally ventures to confess his crime. The act of confession is one of the central themes in *Crime and Punishment*, since it is the climax point of the novel signifying crucial changes in Raskolnikov's mental and physical state.

As such, the genre of confession was not new for literature: started as early as 400 AD by the Confessions of St. Augustine, the genre of intimate avowals of one's secret sin enjoyed a growing popularity in European literature of the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century Jean-Jacques Rousseau widely applied this genre in his autobiographical writings.

Remarkably enough, Dostoyevsky repeatedly referred to Rousseau's confessions, polemicizing with the latter's interpretation of the genre.

Traditionally, confessional genre was viewed as “ a narrative in which the confessor recounted some secret crime or scene and then depicted the

gradual reform and rebirth that resulted from pangs of conscience and expiation through suffering” (Lantz 364).

But while Rousseau’s confessor’s were represented as inherently virtuous beings, Dostoyevsky rejected such interpretation of the penitent and viewed the nature of man as not virtuous but “ innately stupid and limited” (Lantz 365). This latter approach is by large reflected in *Crime and Punishment* which was supposedly conceived as a novel titled “ Confession” (Frank 60; Lantz 71).

Committing murder under a fanatical belief that his unlawful and inhumane action could be justified by a higher purpose of liberating the world from an evil parasite, Raskolnikov represents a supercilious figure lost in lofty and overweening ideals which contrast his miserable daily existence. The crime he commits is provoked not so much by financial need as by his desire for self-assertion as a unique and heroic personality. As Svidrigailov states in his dialogue with Dounia,

“ Napoleon attracted him tremendously, that is, what affected him was that a great many men of genius have not hesitated at wrongdoing, but have overstepped the law without thinking about it. He seems to have fancied that he was a genius too — that is, he was convinced of it for a time. He 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 he is not a man of genius.” (Dostoyevsky 507)

Having forced himself into a presumably heroic action and thus demonstrated his non-conformity with the social standards, Raskolnikov soon finds himself overcome by a mental disorder that necessitates him to seek a way out of the emotional instability and physical indisposition he experiences.

Inherent in every psychological situation, there are obvious choices before Raskolnikov: either to relieve his suffering rapidly by committing suicide or to go through the pangs of conscience and confess his crime to the world. The idea of suicide comes to Raskolnikov not once; he repeatedly faces suicide committed by others, and those incidents trigger decisive changes in his life attitudes and policies.

On one occasion, having witnessed a woman drown herself in the Neva River, he gives up his initial intentions of putting an end to his life and resolves to resume an active life attitude: “ Enough! ... Life is real! ... My life has not yet died with that old woman!” (Dostoyevsky 176–178, 197–198). On another occasion, learning of Svidrigailov’s suicide he finally decides to confess his crime to the police.

With regard to Svidrigailov there emerges another significant connection in the novel. Svidrigailov symbolizes the cynicism of life, and Raskolnikov falls into deep despair at such attitude of nihilism. In Svidrigailov’s suicide he sees the defeat of disbelieving attitude and therefore turns to faith in search of salvation. A demonstrative scene in this respect is the episode when Sonia

is apprehensive of Raskolnikov's suicide for "his lack of faith" and he suddenly turns up asking her for a cross (Dostoyevsky 537-538).

This act symbolizes that Raskolnikov's inner struggle between suicide and confession, between disbelief and faith, has ended in the victory of the latter and in acceptance of God as the only judge to the world's injustice (Peace 73). By saying "I have come for your cross, Sonia", Raskolnikov admits his improper act and states his intention to confess his crime publicly and accept all the consequences of his misdeed (Dostoyevsky 538).

Sonya is another key character of the novel: she assists Raskolnikov with his arrival at the necessity for confession and reunion with the moral world. She is the first person to whom the murderer comes with his confession, and the way she reacts to his revelations is decisive for the future development of events.

Her understanding and empathic reaction to his words — "But aren't you suffering, too?" "It's better I should know, far better!" "Only speak, speak, I shall understand, I shall understand in myself!" (Dostoyevsky 430), — and her encouragement of confession and letting the sin off his soul by bowing down and kissing the earth he has defied open a promise of forgiveness and regaining harmony with the world of morality.

Before talking to Sonia, Raskolnikov's "guilt and the wish to confess were as strong as his rage" (Breger 34). After it, the rage was gone and only the guilt and the urge of confession were left, since he realized that confession would be the only way to shed off his guilt and cease the remorse.

In the figure of Raskolnikov, Dostoyevsky demonstrates an example of a personality split between two extremes: on the one hand, Raskolnikov aims at restoring the world justice; on the other hand, he realizes the wrongfulness of his crime. Since Raskolnikov by large grants his first extreme on an arrogant idea of uniqueness and superiority rather than pure justice restitution, he is punished by moral suffering, as well as physical illness.

The only way-out envisioned by Dostoyevsky in this case is in faith and grace that provide ultimate redemption. Raskolnikov achieves faith through a long struggle between his nihilism, disbelief, and despair on the one hand, and Sonia's call to repentance and public confession, on the other hand. The resulting love Raskolnikov acquires in the end can be thus seen as a sign of heavenly grace and rewards for his resignation and righteousness.

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