

Svidrigailov's nightmares

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



In his novel *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky uses nightmares to develop the story of Arkady Ivanovich Svidrigailov, the depraved sensualist, to its denouement, in which he fully accepts his dire situation and its inevitable outcome. Svidrigailov is used as a foil to Raskolnikov and represents what the young student could become should he continue to transgress the moral line. Dostoevsky develops this theme through the use of Svidrigailov's three nightmares, each of which shows that no one can continually ignore moral law without suffering grave consequences. These three nightmares directly follow an encounter between Svidrigailov and Dounia, the only woman Svidrigailov has ever truly loved. Svidrigailov locks Dounia in a room and fixes her with a lecherous look. In self-defense, Dounia pulls out a revolver and fires three times. She is an able shot but purposefully misses him with each bullet. Dounia's show of mercy, her unwillingness to cross the moral line, has a profound effect on Svidrigailov, who feels "a weight . . . rolled from his heart, . . . the deliverance from another feeling, darker and more bitter" (458-459). Svidrigailov is so moved by Dounia's example that he temporarily suppresses his inclination to immorality, giving her the key to the room and urging her to make haste away from him. To Dounia, "there seemed a terrible significance in the tone of that 'make haste,'" for she could not be sure for how long morality, manifested in his desire to be genuinely loved by her, would triumph over his other impulses – such as his desire to force his way on her – which are contending in "the terrible, dumb struggle in his heart" (459). Svidrigailov, in this rare state of morality when he leaves Dounia, walks through the stormy night of St. Petersburg, and eventually settles down for the night in

the unwelcoming hotel room where he will have his three nightmares. The hotel room is cramped, filthy, scantily furnished, and unpleasant. The room can easily be described by the same words used to describe Raskolnikov's garret, " more like a cupboard than a room" (1). This similarity, coupled with the fact that "[Svidrigailov begins] to feel feverish" shortly after his arrival in his room, serves to emphasize further the similarity between the situations of Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov (465). In the first dream, Svidrigailov is roused from sleep by a little mouse scurrying on his bed, under his sheets, and inside his bedclothes. Svidrigailov struggles to catch the mouse, but he can only do so temporarily before it once again eludes his grasp. Svidrigailov finally awakens, muttering, " How disgusting" (467). The rodent, which revolts Svidrigailov with its tiny, dirty feet crawling all over his skin, symbolizes Svidrigailov's equally revolting lasciviousness, which is enough to make someone's skin crawl. Though, due to Dounia, Svidrigailov has temporarily suppressed his lewdness, he is well aware that in this vice " there is something permanent, founded indeed upon nature and not on fantasy, something present in the blood like an ever-burning ember" (434). This dream reminds Svidrigailov that no matter how hard he may struggle, he will inevitably return to his old ways. Svidrigailov's second dream stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the novel in terms of the imagery which Dostoevsky employs. Until this point and after it, Dostoevsky uses only drab grays and sickly yellows to describe the squalor of St. Petersburg's Hay Market. However, in Svidrigailov's second dream, Dostoevsky writes of an idyllic country cottage, overgrown with fragrant flowers, on a warm, beautiful Trinity Day. Svidrigailov finds himself inside this cottage, standing next to "

nosegays of tender, white, heavily fragrant narcissus bending over their bright, green, thick long stalks" (468). Svidrigailov is "reluctant to move away from [the narcissuses]," the flowers named after a man who met his death due to his extreme self-absorption. Svidrigailov eventually forces himself up the stairs and into a flower and hay-strewn room with a small coffin in the middle. Dostoevsky mentions the coffin "was covered with white silk and edged with a thick white frill; wreaths of flowers surrounded it on all sides," using the color white and the floral imagery to symbolize the purity stolen from the girl who, in a white muslin dress, lies among the flowers in the coffin (468). This girl, in sharp contrast to the innocence her surroundings imply she should have had, wears a "smile on pale lips of unchildish misery . . . She [is] only fourteen, but her heart . . . [had been] crushed by an insult that had smirched that angel purity with unmerited disgrace" (468). Svidrigailov, looking upon the girl whom he had caused to drown herself, is sharply aware of his role in this tragedy. Unwilling to dwell in misery and guilt any longer, Svidrigailov throws open a window, allowing the wind to lash furiously against his face and chest, rousing himself and, he hopes, precluding any more painful nightmares. Svidrigailov is determined to leave the hotel, go to the park, and "choose a great bush there drenched with rain" under which he will kill himself (469). However, he is stopped from making his exit by "a little girl, not more than five-years old, shivering and crying, with her clothes as wet as a soaking house-flannel" (469). Moved to pity by such a pathetic sight, Svidrigailov takes the girl into his room, removes her drenched clothing, and tucks her into his bed. However, after she is in bed, the girl undergoes a strange transformation. The flush of her

cheeks “[seems] coarser and brighter than rosy cheeks of childhood, . . . like the flush from drinking . . . Her crimson lips [become] hot and glowing” (470). Dostoevsky’s use of red imagery suggests that the girl possesses a sexuality which would more appropriately be found in a prostitute, to which the girl bears a resemblance that Svidrigailov begins to see after noticing something “ shameless, provocative in that quite unchildish face. It was depravity, it was the face of a harlot . . . Both eyes opened wide, laughed, inviting him” (470). Svidrigailov is disgusted by the depravity he sees in this girl; though usually “ the monstrous difference in age and development excites [his] sensuality,” seeing a girl as young as five in such a state inspires revulsion even in Svidrigailov (444). He is moved to anger by the girl and attempts to hit her, even though the anger he feels is directed at himself for being so depraved; this episode, which is a nightmare from which he wakes up just as he tries to hit the girl, forces Svidrigailov to face the consequences of his actions, that every young life he touches is stripped of its innocence and thrust into depravity. Svidrigailov, now fully awake, sits in his hotel room, unsuccessfully trying to grab at the flies hovering around his veal. However, “ realizing that he [is] engaged in this interesting pursuit, he [starts],” since life [is] bearing a strange resemblance to the first of his dreams, in which he unsuccessfully grabbed at a mouse trying to nibble at his veal. Realizing the truth in his dreams, he is filled with horror at his own depravity. Svidrigailov, who had once said, “ Everyone thinks of himself, and he lives most gaily who knows best how to deceive himself,” is no longer able to deceive himself nor live gaily after dreams such as these (444). Svidrigailov leaves the hotel in order to find a suitable place at which to kill

himself. Svidrigailov, having lived so long in vice, knows it is too late for him to turn back. If he continues to live, he will only continue to transgress the moral line and wade further into depravity, something which he will not allow; ironically, he has nothing else for which to live: "If I hadn't this [vice], I might have to shoot myself" (435). Svidrigailov, still under the control of morality due to the influence of Dounia and the horror of the three nightmares, shoots himself before "the terrible, dumb struggle in his heart" between his morality and immorality has a chance to resolve itself, since there is no question in his mind which side will eventually triumph (459). Svidrigailov's death emphasizes one of the main themes of the novel, that no one can continue to transgress the moral line without suffering. Svidrigailov knows that his sinful actions will one day lead him somewhere fatal, but he delays his fate through his extreme self-absorption and unwillingness to notice the consequences his actions had on the world around him. Ironically, it is his own dreams which bring Svidrigailov back to reality. Dostoevsky also uses the nightmares, along with several other parallels, to show the similarity between the situations of Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov. On several occasions, Svidrigailov warns of the grave consequence should Raskolnikov continue to overstep the moral line: a choice between life in Siberia or a bullet in the head. Svidrigailov is speaking from first-hand knowledge when he urges the transgressor to seek redemption because he knows before long Raskolnikov will have sunk so far into depravity there will be no choice left for him to make.