

Potential goodness of the antagonist character

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



In Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* he shows through Svidrigailov that there is potential goodness in even the most vicious men. Svidrigailov's redeeming quality in the novel (similar to Raskolnikov with Sonya) is the pure female character that he does have some element of love for; Dunya, and even though he is a vicious man, he is able to demonstrate an indication of this love. Svidrigailov's potential goodness is seen in surprisingly his love, seen again and again as he pursues his lust on Dunya but then quickly backs away at the last minute right when all seems lost. This love or potential love can be proven throughout the story: in Svidrigailov's attempts to obtain Dunya's affection or rather more often than not; force his affections, by his other relationships, and lastly by his dreams and shortly after suicide. Svidrigailov proves at the end that he did care about something other than his passions and then unfortunately kills himself. Dostoyevsky is in no way defending Svidrigailov's actions but rather showing that this bad person does have a conscience and in a way is saying he is more culpable for these faults in that he does see them as evil.

In Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Svidrigailov is first presented in a past narrative, a letter written by Pulcheria Alexandrovna to her son. The letter conveys true past events in which Pulcheria Alexandrovna informs her son of what has happened to his sister, Dunya. This is when the reader meets Svidrigailov who right away gets a good sense of his impious character. The mother writes about how Svidrigailov had made advances towards Dunya while she was working for him, this in turn ruins Dunya's reputation even after her refusal of Svidrigailov's embraces. Dostoyevsky though, is not simply going to give us a 'bad guy' in which he is completely

evil in every respect but rather he actually describes a real person who even when far away from the good, is still struggling with his conscious. This is Svidrigailov's case in which even Pulcheria Alexandrovna recognized writing in her letter " However, by the mercy of God, our torments were cut short: Mr. Svidrigailov thought the better of it and repented; probably having taken pity on Dunya." [1] This shows that even after what Svidrigailov did to her daughter she recognized his confession. Probably done so because of the way he treated Dunya in the preceding time he worked with her, Richardson comments on this in his essay on " Performing Self" saying " Svidrigailov exhibited no undue aggression in her presence." [2] This shows he treated her well until his lust got the best of him which is obviously unacceptable but with his penance it shows he at least recognized his mistake. This recognition is important showing he does have the ability to change and though while putting very little effort into this still has this capability.

Svidrigailov is seen in more than one inappropriate circumstance in the following books but towards the end we see the climax of his impurities. Near the end of the book Svidrigailov finally pursues Dunya and tries to force himself on the poor girl. This surprising scene shows Svidrigailov try to blackmail and then force embraces upon Dunya. While this could have been the major break for him—he stops, finally controlling his lust and refuses; in that Dunya ensures him that she will never love him. This is the most shocking aspect of Svidrigailov's character, he who constantly seems as though only listens to his passions actually listens to the little conscious he has left. Also in Richardson, " Performing self" the author even analysis him as: " He is a man who arouses fear in those he comes in contact with, but in

fact he is a man who is controlled by those who fear him. He leads a double life, seeming to exude evil, debauchery, and self-gratification, but in fact performing the only genuinely effective acts of charity and good will in the novel.”[3] This is a character of tremendous turmoil and while Svidrigailov tries to let on that he is heartless proves that even the ‘ Svidrigailovs’ of the world do have hearts.

Svidrigailov’s actual compassion/ love for Dunia is proven throughout his other relationships in the novel. The first of which is Marfa, his wife at the beginning of the novel. This poor woman is the victim of a horribly unfaithful marriage as her husband Svidrigailov cheats on her with the servants on a regular basis and then pursues Dunya. On top of which Svidrigailov openly admits to his abuse of her along with the heavy rumors that he himself was responsible for her death. This relationship is clearly perverted and this crime is only a background flaw in the wretched antagonist, Svidrigailov. This villain even among his most despicable scenes in the novel is seen to notice his sins as seen when he addresses the abuses he had laid upon his late wife Martha; “ But I will tell you straight out that I sincerely regret the innumerable unhappiness’s of which I was the cause.”[4] Even if this was simply a line fed to fuel his argument with Raskolnikov, it is still recognition of his sin. This is important in that Svidrigailov recognizes his fault and that is the first step in repenting, and even though he never gets to that point completely, Dostoyevsky still shows that he was capable and therefore culpable. In addition to Martha and Dunya, Svidrigailov pursues a third girl, an innocent 15 year old which in his description of their relationship is far from disturbing and at one point says “ everyone must look out for himself,

and the best time is had by those who're best able to deceive themselves." [5] This phrase is horrifying showing that Svidrigailov is actually attempting to push himself as far as he can from the good in order to pursue whatever passions he pleases. This alarming relationship between a fifty year old pedophile and an innocent 15 year old girl is by far the most disturbing and Svidrigailov does not recognize this until he is rejected by Dunya. The uniqueness of his love for Dunya is proven throughout these relationships and Richard Curle comments on this in *Characters of Dostoevsky*, saying; " And yet there is something in this particular attraction he has never experienced before, and though he would have gone to any lengths to achieve his end, though her hatred only amuses and titivates him as long as she is armed, when she drops the pistol—as so often happens with women, her weakness is her strength—he lets her go." [6] (Curle 39). This shows that Svidrigailov in his realization that Dunya is this pure he knows he cannot force himself on her. This causes him to try and attempt to make up for all of his mistakes. After this rejection he tries to make up for his pedophilic lust by paying off the girl before his suicide. These relationships are all beyond awful but for Dunya and his fiancé, Svidrigailov attempts to repent for his actions, though only seeking their forgiveness and not Gods. This shows his slightly real love for Dunya by his attempt to change when she refuses him, though it is nothing more than money in his last hours it is still an attempt for change. The conclusion of Svidrigailov is a sad one especially because of the appearance of a possible repentance but Dostoyevsky used his death to show the alternative choice of the protagonist, Raskolnikov. If Raskolnikov refused to confess, his end might

have been similar. After Svidrigailov's acceptance of Dunya's rejection of him he retreats and has 3 horrifying nightmares. The final one deals with this similar theme of lust. The dream is of a young girl who he helps and puts to bed but when she gives him a seductive face he is horrified and is prepared to strike before awaking. This is an interesting dream at this point because it seems to go into his character, while throughout the whole story he appears ready to do any evil especially having to do with lust, but it seems more often than not he cannot bring himself to do it. Jesse Menefee comments on this in her journal article, "Bad Dreams," saying; "Svidrigailov strives to prove his capability for compassion by rushing to the aid of a helpless child. This gesture Svidrigailov makes in his dream mirrors his attempts in real life to embrace virtue- such as the financial assistance he grants to Sonya and her orphaned siblings. However, the abandoned child Svidrigailov seeks to help in his dream turns to him with a lascivious smile and opens her arms in an erotic invitation. Svidrigailov's predatory nature resists his attempt to even conceptualize compassion, let alone integrate it into his actual life." [7] (Menefee 204). This dream is showing the he cannot escape his lust or at least does not think he can. This nightmare similarly compares to his relationship with Dunya; after his first pursuit of her he tried to make things right but then he let his lust get the best of him and pursues her again. Because Svidrigailov realized he had ruined too much to fix he shoots himself. The dream had shown him that he destroys innocence and because in his quick attempt to fix it all he did not seek out help from God, he thought it was not possible to fix the innocence destroyed, leading him to kill himself.

Dostoyevsky proves in his novel, *Crime and Punishment* that even the most vicious men have the opportunity to come around and change. He does this through the protagonist and antagonist showing each man attempt repentance and while Raskolnikov seeks out God and succeeds in this Svidrigailov comes shy in trying to right his wrongs without God. A Judas like character who while only trying to right his material wrongs does not seek spiritual forgiveness, both committing suicide in effect. The miserable end of Svidrigailov is simply the result in thinking he could not be forgiven of his earthly mistakes.

Works Cited

Curle, Richard. *Characters of Dostoyevsky*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1950. Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. London: Penguin Classics, 1991. Menefee, Jesse. "GHOSTS OF DOSTOEVSKIAN GUILT IN SOLOGUB'S "BAD DREAMS"." *JSTOR*, 2012: 204. Richardson, R E. "Performing Self." *JSTOR*, 1987: 544-552.

[1] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 41.

[2] R. E. Richardson, "Svidrigailov and the 'Performing Self,'" *slavic review* vol. 46, n. 3/4 (1987): 544. *JSTOR* [accessed (04/02/17)]

[3] Richardson 552

[4] Dostoyevsky 564.

[5] Dostoyevsky 574.

[6] Richard Curle, *Characters of Dostoyevsky* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1950), 38-39

[7] Jesse Menefee, Ghost of Dostoevskian Guilt in Sologub's "Bad Dreams" *The Slavic and East European Journal*, v56 n2 (2012): 204. JSTOR (Accessed [04/03/17])