

Rodion raskolnikov, or, how i learned to stop worrying and love god

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



Written in a time of emerging new philosophies and ideals, Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* exemplifies the author's strongly held viewpoints on religion, morality, society, and philosophy, while offering insight into the innermost workings of the criminal mind. Told almost entirely through the eyes of the main character, Rodion Raskolnikov, the novel examines the miserable young man's downfall from his own egotistical ideals, and traces the way through the protagonist's resulting psychological hell. In essence, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* moralizes about the forces of good and evil vying for supremacy over the human soul, and warns of the degradation of morals in favor of "rational" thinking. The rejection of the philosophies of existentialism and nihilism, and the support of organized religion, is one of the foremost themes in the novel. Dostoyevsky vehemently abdicates the new philosophies, which stress the material world, the absence of any Supreme Being or moral code, and the individual, total freedom of choice. The author conveys his beliefs in universal and inalienable morals throughout the novel, describing the internal torment an elitist would go through if he dared to violate commonly held ethics. Ideas that individualize or raise some men over others are demonstrated to produce total moral upheaval, with no logic ever infallible enough to justify them. The novel begins by introducing the protagonist, Raskolnikov, an impoverished student with a severe superiority complex. Frustrated and alone, the young man ponders the capacity of his own greatness, while simultaneously loathing an old, withered pawnbroker, whom he considers to be a "louse" upon humanity. The intellectual considers himself to be better than any ordinary man, and so decides to test his theory of greatness with a

“terrible, violent, and fantastic question”; to breach the bindings of “common” morality, and murder, without a troubled conscience, the old woman. He does indeed murder her, but must also take another “innocent” life by accident. This consequence he had not foreseen, and he is horrified to realize that his inward feelings of aversion plague him night and day. His theory fails, leaving him in an utter state of emotional upheaval and physical sickness, his life no greater than a common man’s, and the only obstacle left in his path to approbation is himself. The Christian, religious idea of the constant and timeless battle of good and evil fighting over the soul is another central idea, as illustrated later in the novel with the metaphorical struggle waging within the mind of the protagonist. The author makes a point of showing that the natural human impulse is to do good, as when Raskolnikov gives away almost all of his money to the needy, but also that the rationalization of good is, ironically, evil. The young man is able to rationalize the killing of the old woman with the logical thoughts that he desperately wants to believe, that he will be doing the world a great service by getting rid of such a nasty creature, when in reality his justification is based only on his own self-interest. Dostoyevsky makes the nightmare of moral chaos, or punishment, that Raskolnikov undergoes especially pointed to the reader by describing in extreme detail what happens when a human submits to the temptation of evil. At the heart of Raskolnikov’s skewed logic lies the notion of the “extraordinary man,” the man he steadfastly believes himself to be. Raskolnikov wishes to be more than human, more than ordinary; the demands of daily life are “trifles” to him. He concludes that if there is no God, no universal moral code, then he is free to make his own

moral laws, and the average man, controlled by what society deems “right,” lies beneath him. The ordinary man, if he were to commit some heinous deed in pursuit of a great goal, would be overwhelmed by a guilty conscience, while the extraordinary man would not give a second thought to even the most terrible crime. Yet ultimately, he learns that he is no better and no cleverer than other men. His inability to quell his guilt and loathing for himself proves he is no superman. He sees his failure, but is nevertheless unwilling to accept the deconstruction of this personality. He continues to resist his lowered status by constantly justifying the murder in his mind. This alienation from society is at first a product of Raskolnikov’s superiority complex and pride. Being so superior, he cannot relate to anyone; rather, he sees people as tools to be used for his own purposes. This feeling of isolation takes on a new twist following the murders, when in his guilt-driven delirium he pushes the people who want to help him, such as his mother, sister, and even the police, further away. In the end, he realizes that this self-induced alienation is unendurable, and he must confess his crimes or go mad.

Although the story is mainly told through the thoughts of Raskolnikov, other major characters also influence the plot and the protagonist’s own development. The student’s roommate, Razumikhin, serves as a sort of foil to Raskolnikov’s character, showing the reader that although under the same stressful conditions as his roommate, he is still a kind, cheerful person, and does not have to turn to any crimes to prove himself. Svidrigailov, often touted as the villain of the novel, serves as an example of what an immoral life can bring, a waste of a human being, unloved and driven to suicide. Svidrigailov had also once rationalized his crimes, but over the many years

of sinning he can no longer rationalize what he has done and becomes completely empty. He represents what Raskolnikov would become if he had not finally confessed his crimes: wandering, tormented, through a life filled with vice and ending with gruesome death. Through the character of Sonya, a figure symbolizing total good and love throughout the novel, Raskolnikov eventually finds his redemption. To save her dying family, the young woman must prostitute herself, but does so with total humility. Raskolnikov erroneously seeks her out as a fellow trespasser, but he soon realizes that they are nothing alike. While they both have committed sins, only Raskolnikov attempts to justify what he has done as “for the greater good.” Sonya, on the other hand, realizes that what she does is a sin, and does not try to contest this, but the reader realizes that she is the perfect Christian in the novel, sacrificing herself so that others might live. Her eventual love for Raskolnikov is his salvation; mentally, spiritually, and physically. She convinces him to confess to the police and end his suffering; she is not horrified by his crimes but rather only wishes him to repent and be saved. Symbolically, she hands him a cross for strength to go to confession. Like Jesus, she offers utter forgiveness for his sins. By the end of the novel, when she visits him where he had been incarcerated, her love allows Raskolnikov to completely repent his earlier ideas that he was beyond God, and saves him from eternal damnation and the forces of evil completely possessing his soul. The masterpiece of world literature, *Crime and Punishment*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, serves an allegorical purpose to preach the author’s concerns with morality, and convince the reader that ideas that fly in the face of Christianity, such as existentialism and nihilism, result in anarchy and

rampant moral chaos. Dostoyevsky's concern with elitism also branches from his deeply held Christian beliefs, that no earthly, human morals are beyond God's morals, no matter how justified they seem. Concerned with a rash of murders, and the westernization of his beloved country, Dostoyevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment* to illustrate the consequences of elitism, atheism, and immorality, which he believed to be integrally connected. The internal punishment Raskolnikov goes through serves as the ultimate example, to warn the people of the aftereffects of total individual freedom, at the high cost of morality.