

Consequences of escaping punishment in dostoevsky's roman

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



Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Feodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* share a common theme – the consequences of escaping punishment. This paper explores the authors' views about psychological punishment as a much worse sentence than any given by the law. It focuses particularly on the personal tortures of the main characters in these novels: Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester Prynne, Raskolnikov, and Sonya. It also explores the dynamic between the female characters and their male partners.

The type of punishment seen in these novels is not what is typically implied by the word, defined as “ the imposition of a penalty for a fault, offense, or violation.” Dimmesdale and Raskolnikov try to run from punishment and endure immense mental suffering and psychological torment before their crimes are revealed to the public. Hester's punishment is given early in the book, while Sonya receives none from the law. However, both these characters, like their male counterparts, also suffer a mental punishment that can be seen as a much greater punishment than public shame and incarceration.

The Scarlet Letter takes place in a Puritan settlement in New England. Hester Prynne's husband, Roger Chillingworth, sent her off to America and promised to meet her there later. However, he never arrived, and was assumed to be dead. Hester Prynne has an affair with Arthur Dimmesdale, one of the town ministers, and becomes pregnant. The town learns of this and is abuzz with gossip about who the father is. Hester refuses to reveal his identity and is deemed an adulterer. Her sentence is to wear an embroidered, scarlet letter “ A” on her chest forever. Dimmesdale sees all this happening, but does not

confess his secret to the town. Chillingworth has now arrived at the town and is also present to witness Hester's punishment.

As the story progresses, Dimmesdale's guilt and worry make him very ill: "His form grew emaciated; his voice, though still rich and sweet, had a certain melancholy prophecy of decay in it; he was often observed...to put his hand over his heart, with a first flush, and then a paleness, indicative of pain (Hawthorne 225)." Another physical mark also appears on Dimmesdale in the form of a letter "A" on his chest, a "visible manifestation of 'the ever-active tooth of remorse, gnawing from the inmost heart outwardly'" as critic David Stocking puts it.

Chillingworth, now a doctor in the town, moves in with Dimmesdale under the pretense of curing him. However, all Chillingworth really wants is to discover Dimmesdale's secret, and Dimmesdale's condition only worsens under his care. When asked by Chillingworth why some men never reveal their heart's secrets in life, Dimmesdale answers, "Guilty as they may be... they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men... So, to their own unutterable torment, they go about among their fellow-creatures, looking pure... while their hearts are all speckled and spotted with iniquity of which they cannot rid themselves" (Hawthorne 236). Dimmesdale is indirectly referring to himself, and reveals the extent to which his secret tortures him. We also see his reasoning for keeping the secret; he holds a high position and does not wish to lose his stature. The Puritans believed that sin was shameful and ostracized those, like Hester, who sinned.

Dimmesdale believes that the disappointment and the anger of the people may be worse than carrying the secret, but Hawthorne gives much evidence to show otherwise. Dimmesdale knows what a “ remorseful hypocrite” he is but lacks the courage to reveal his crime and begins to “ loathe his miserable self” (Hawthorne 247, 248). His self-hatred leads to more suffering and he begins to practice ancient rituals such as fasting, holding vigils throughout the night, and even whipping himself “ until his knees trembled beneath him” (Hawthorne 248). In the end Dimmesdale does confess that he is the father of Hester’s child, and dies immediately thereafter.

Dimmesdale’s illness is like the one that befalls Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov murders a wretched money lender named Alena Ivanova and her innocent sister, Lizaveta. After committing the murders, he quickly becomes ill and increasingly paranoid; He starts to worry constantly about others suspecting him. When he receives a summons from the police, he immediately thinks the worst. He says to himself: “ I have never had anything to do with the police! And why should it happen just to-day...If I’m done for, I’m done for! ...This is a trap. They want to entice me into a trap and then spring it,” (79). The summons turns out to be for a simple matter of rent, which is completely unrelated to what Raskolnikov fears.

Raskolnikov’s illness is apparent throughout most of the book as well. After the murder, he goes home and falls asleep. When he wakes up, “ he was seized with such a violent fit of shivering that his teeth chattered uncontrollably, and every limb shook (75). He faints at the police station after they are done discussing his rent situation, and his condition worsens

as the days go by. He becomes distant, speaks of things that do not make sense, and often smiles for no reason, and his friends and family begin to fear for his sanity.

Another negative effect of Raskolnikov's crime, and perhaps his greatest punishment, is alienation from his friends and family. Raskolnikov decides that it's best to part with his sister, Dunya, and their mother for a while. He tells them, " I wanted to say ...as I was coming here...I wanted to tell you... that it would be better if we parted for a short time. I don't feel well, I am not easy...Whatever happens to me, whether I perish or not, I want to be alone" (264). Raskolnikov feels the need to distance himself. When his best friend, Razumikhin, chases after him and inquires the reason for his sudden departure, " something strange [passes] between them," and Razumikhin understands what Raskolnikov has done (265). At the end, Dunya also finds out about the murder. As she is saying her final goodbye, " he impatiently, even irritably, waved her on... ' I am cruel, I know,' he thought, beginning to be ashamed of his irritated gesture. ' But why should they love me so much, when I am not worthy of it? Oh, if only I were alone and nobody loved me... All this would never have happened!'" (440). Again, we see how strongly Raskolnikov believes he should be alone. Dostoevsky uses this last goodbye between a brother and sister to exhibit the magnitude of the crime's mental consequences.

He finds solace in Sonya, a girl forced into prostitution to support her family. In the end, Raskolnikov – with Sonya's help – realizes what he has become, and that the only way to end his suffering is to confess to the police. He does

so, and is sentenced to eight years in Siberia. However, it is evident from the end of the book that his imprisonment is far less painful than the period where he was running from the law: “ His attitude to his new life was very direct and simple; he had a clear understanding of his position, did not expect any immediate improvement in it, cherished none of the frivolous hopes so natural in his situation, and showed almost no surprise at anything in his new surroundings” (Dostoevsky 457). He appears much calmer than when he was hiding his secret. In the end he even comes to terms with his crime, realizes that he is in love, and looks forward to life after Siberia.

The women in these books also go through a sort of personal punishment. Although they are not running from the law, as Dimmesdale and Raskolnikov are, Hester and Sonya also suffer in their own way. Hester has already been judged and deemed guilty in the crime of adultery. Her material punishment is to wear the scarlet letter, but she must also deal with the townspeople and their vicious looks and comments. She does not flee from the Puritan settlement because she feels that “ had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment...and so...the torture of her daily daily shame would at length purge her soul,” (189). Hester puts this punishment upon herself because she feels she deserves it. Hester lives in the woods with no one but her daughter, Pearl. She subjects her life to one of hard work as a seamstress and even when she shows penance, she is not accepted

The mental torment that Hester experiences is a greater punishment than her isolation sentence. “ One day, as her mother stooped over the cradle,

[Pearl's] eyes had been caught by the glimmering... letter; and, putting up her little hand, she grasped at it... then, gasping for breath, did Hester Prynne clutch the fatal token, instinctively endeavouring to tear it away; so infinite was the torture inflicted" (203). Hester's almost physical pain shows the extremity of her mental torture, so great that it almost feels real. Toward the end of the book Hester takes the letter off briefly and "heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit... her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past... and a happiness before unknown" also returned (301). The letter has been sucking the life out of Hester; without it, not only her beauty but also her happiness return momentarily.

Sonya, in *Crime and Punishment*, faces a punishment that exceeds any the community police could have given her. Sonya's punishment arises not externally, from a community or court of law, but from within her.

Prostitution is the cause of her torment. Its effects are very apparent – she is very poor and unhappy, and everyone in town looks down on her. A letter written by Dunya's fiancé states that Sonya is "a girl of 'notorious' conduct" (200). Also, a woman and her daughter refuse to come to a funeral party for Sonya's father because the woman did not want her daughter to associate with the likes of Sonya.

We can see the effects of Sonya's "punishment" in the way she interacts with others. She often responds to people in a surprised and frightened manner. When she goes into Raskolnikov's room and finds his family in there, she is described as "timid" and "embarrassed." This may stem from

the townspeople's constant, harsh scrutiny. We can also see the conditions of her life; Raskolnikov notices a " simply and even poorly dressed girl" (199). All of the money she earns immediately goes to her stepmother and siblings; she is left with almost nothing, but must continue her shameful occupation for the good of her family.

Despite the fact that Hester and Sonya are also tormented characters, they are portrayed by Hawthorne and Dostoevsky as stronger characters – more mentally and emotionally stable – than their male partners. Hester and Sonya are sources of comfort for Dimmesdale and Raskolnikov, respectively; they both try to help and save the men. For example, when Dimmesdale tells Hester he wants to give up because he feels like a " man devoid of conscience" (290), she tries to encourage him: " You wrong yourself in this. You have deeply and sorely repented. Your sin is left behind you, in the days long past" (291). Although all four characters face some form of mental punishment, the ones who are escaping the law (the men) suffer a worse fate than those who are not (the women).

Hawthorne portrays Dimmesdale as a weak and sickly man who only reveals his crime just before death, even as Hester – known to be guilty and with the immense pressure of the town's scrutiny upon her – remains strong throughout the book. Likewise, Sonya is the stronger character in her relationship with Raskolnikov. At first it appears that she is timid, but we see later on that she becomes a moral compass for Raskolnikov. She tells him about the Bible and about how religion plays a large role in her life. She is also the one who convinces him to turn himself into the police. Raskolnikov,

like Dimmesdale, is a paranoid and sick man. Sonya, even though she has to endure a very harsh life, still find a way to remain strong and even help Raskolnikov. In the end, she makes him see the error of his ways and helps him find love.

It is evident from the books described here that Hawthorne and Dostoevsky believed that the consequences of escaping punishment lead to a far worse fate than facing the punishment itself. Because they try to hide their crimes, Dimmesdale and Raskolnikov become very ill and alienate themselves. In the end, they meet their punishment and alleviate much of their suffering. Hester and Sonya are also “punished” and suffer for what they do, but they remain strong and try to help their male counterparts. When Dimmesdale and Raskolnikov finally confess to their crimes, they release not only themselves but also the women from mental torture; all, in the end, are able to move on.