Analysis of raskolnikov’s intent to kill in crime and punishment

Law, Crime

The character of Raskolnikov is an interesting one in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment. A failed visualization of the Ubermensch initially, there is leagues more depth to the character, not only in a psychological way but in the context of his own creation and purpose in the narrative. By looking at how Raskolnikov’s psychosis develops in Crime and Punishment, the reader can see that he begins to betray his own Marxist ideals. This is important because Crime and Punishment is not just a riveting crime novel, it’s also a personal statement by author Fyodor Dostoevsky about the failure of Marxism itself and how religious redemption and reform is what Russia truly needs in order to see a prosperous future.

Raskolnikov is established as a character with many mental flaws even before he commits his crime. The novel begins with vivid descriptions of how much Raskolnikov suffers “ in isolation”, setting the stage for his character and actions and allows us to get inside his head immediately. The reader is assaulted with gross details about his surroundings and can infer that a disturbed individual like Raskolnikov is a product of his disturbed surroundings. In Dostoevsky’s vision of St. Petersburg, “ The heat in the street was terrible…the unbearable stench from the taverns…an expression of the deepest disgust gleamed…in the young man’s refined face” (Dostoevsky 6). Such a horrible place has caused Raskolnikov to come to hate life exponentially more. So was the mindset of the average Russian young adult at the time, swept away by the broad and poorly defined ideals of Karl Marx. It is here, so early in the exposition, that the reader finds that Raskolnikov is one of these individuals. As noted by Chijioke Uwasomba, “ There appears to be too much of uncertainty and indeterminacy in the

behavior of these characters” (Uwamsoba 15). Dostoevsky is saying that Raskolnikov is not the only victim of a flawed society. It’s also important to note that when Raskolnikov is forced out of this murky, dark, and oppressive city and put into a Siberian prison away from society, that is when he begins to recover. George Gibian says that this natural location “ reawakened in him the feelings of his youth, through which he came close to avoiding his crime and to finding regeneration without having to pass through the cycle of crime and punishment” because he is away from an oppressive society and is instead locked up in a chamber alone with his own thoughts. (Gibian 1)

This abhorrence of a ‘ flawed’ society sets Raskolnikov up to be a Marxist and a Nihilist. Marxism is the belief in a superior mass led government which includes the labor theory of value, dialectical materialism, the class struggle, and dictatorship of the proletariat until the establishment of a classless society while Nihilism is the belief that life has no purpose, that existence is suffering, and that to survive is to attempt to discover meaning in the suffering. As the reader has effectively entered the mind of this strange man, we learn of his beliefs. However, these views are seriously warped. Raskolnikov takes it upon himself to interpret being a nihilistic Marxist as believing to be superior among commoners. He asks, “ What if a man is not really a scoundrel…we make the rules. Ourselves, there’s no natural laws.” (Dostoevsky 24), he’s testing the waters for his thesis that he is excused of society’s laws because they’re inferior to him. Raskolnikov idolizes Napoleon Bonaparte. Thus, it’s easy to believe that because Napoleon killed to achieve greatness, it’s okay for Raskolnikov himself to do so. (Uwamsoba 143).

Raskolnikov endures a number of horrific nightmares, each one core to his character development. None are as important as his very first, a dream in which a mare is beaten to death. Raskolnikov’s dream about the mare signifies the shift of Raskolnikov from a schizoid mess to a maniac with potentially homicidal intentions. Could his killing truly be predestined or did this dream spark his inner violent intentions? Chijoke Uwamsoba believes that “ the savage beating of the mare in his dream foreshadows his own axe murder” (147). His axe murder is even more horrific than the mare’s death and is just as shaking to his psyche. The mare’s fictional death is what sets the stage, but the pawnbroker’s death is what finishes the show, casting Raskolnikov’s fate to become increasingly deranged and lost. It is important to note that Raskolnikov’s dreams “ are tied together by violence” (146). This first dream, in particular, affects him in a way that parallels his future guilt of his future killing. This is also the first act of violence in the novel, one that only exists inside of Raskolnikov’s subconscious. Now fueled with a passion for murder, Raskolnikov, justified or not, has set the stage for his psychosis.

Raskolnikov states that his intentions are strictly Marxist. Raskolnikov’s intent to murder is based on a warped sense of Marxism. He believes killing the pawnbroker is morally justified. simply because he is the ‘ Ubermensch’ (Dostoevsky 40). Raskolnikov sees the pawnbroker as “ a vermin who is part of a class sucking him and his like” (147). He was furious at her social status and hated her by association, believing that her elite status is killing all of his potentials. This is part of a Marxist ideology, for the Proletariat to go against

the Bourgeoisie. Raskolnikov gives 5 motives for his murder. “ First...because he was poor and needed money. This motive is the social justification from poverty. Then he argues that he wished to benefit society, that the old woman was useless and would have let her money rot. This motive is utilitarian. Gennaro Santangelo says that these first two are coupled because “ they exist on the level of the consciousness” (Santangelo 1). Santangelo also believes that Raskolnikov’s basis for his neurosis is due to incestuous desires, though this detracts from his overall purpose as a character. (Santangelo 1).

However, it is possible he uses the broad blanket of Marxism to hide his own intentions. According to Thomas Fiddick, it is entirely reasonable that “ Raskolnikov might also be seen as an intellectually motivated psychopath” and he simply couldn’t face the fact that a man whom he regarded as so utilitarian superior could actually be a lowly petty criminal basket case (Fiddick 1). Though he calls himself so many names, he doesn’t quite follow through with his own ideals. Stated by Kieran James, Raskolnikov’s ideals mirror Luzhin and Svidrigailov’s yet he denounces them, showing that he never was truly subscribes to his preachings (James 4). In his climatic confession to Sonia, Raskolnikov tells her “ that low ceilings and small poky little rooms warp mind and soul.” (Dostoevsky 403).

Raskolnikov blames his killing of the pawnbroker on the fact that he was psychologically compelled to do so, once again blaming his own surroundings and home for bringing him up disturbed. This disturbed psyche has also made him envious; not only is he envious of the pawnbroker’s

wealth, but because of the fact that Raskolnikov felt he “ could not place himself in the mystic structure of man’s internal relationships and some entity outside self–hence his personality was split.” (Santangelo 1). Even his name “ Raskol”, means “ split” in Russian. Because of the fact that Raskolnikov is a hypocrite, he becomes increasingly distraught, paranoid, and mad. The justification for his killing was not one he subscribed to. He did not think of his own clear mind, but rather his actions were “ performed in a masterly and most cunning way, while the direction…is deranged…like a dream” (Dostoevsky 197). This leads to Raskolnikov effectively destroying himself. The “ Punishment” in the title is not his eventual arrest, but rather his self-suffering and pitying. Raskolnikov was never a sensible man as many critics have mistaken. He is “ severely wounded psychologically exposing himself to extreme individualism and consequent dementia” (Uwamsoba 146).

During the time period Crime and Punishment was written, Marxism was spreading across Russian, becoming adopted and misunderstood by many susceptible individuals believing that Marx’s ideal society was actually a cry to destroy the upper class in order to redeem their lowly selves. Thus, Raskolnikov’s actions are those of twisted interpretations of Marxism, twisted by his own psychosis. Raskolnikov admits to Sonia that the guilt is killing him, along with the paranoia of Svidrigailov and Porphyrius suspecting him. (Uwamsoba 144). Despite this, “ Even in prison…Raskolnikov still holds inflexibly to the idea that the murder is justifiable. And yet his whole being, according to Alfred Bem, his entire moral nature is shaken precisely by the

moral aspect of the murder” (Bem 1). He’s gone so far into the rabbit hole that he absolutely refuses to escape. This echoes and even mirrors the fate of Russia. Russia was going through an almost existential crisis similar to Raskolnikov’s, and it seemed that Marxism was the answer. In reality, the twisted minds of Communist leaders we know such as Stalin sparked Russian’s downfall. Dostoevsky knew what he was writing about when he wrote Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment. He isn’t just some crazy coot, he’s a personification of Dostoevsky’s fears of Russia.

Raskolnikov is still a fascinating character to dive into, and he is so much more complex than just an author stand-in. As clarified by Diane Telgen, Raskolnikov “ is schizophrenic…socially withdrawn, reclusive, alone, and appears to be unable to…form…social relationships” (Telgen 1). The only two characters he truly has a relationship with are his sister and Sonia, both of the opposite sex. It can be inferred that he cannot connect with his own gender. Not even around his supposed best friend Razumikhin does he seem at ease. Razumikhin is the foil to Raskolnikov, being outgoing and friendly while Raskolnikov is reclusive and hateful. He ends up winning the love of Raskolnikov’s sister while she fades out of his narrative as he leans towards Sonia. Sonia also acts as a foil to Raskolnikov, being kind and religious. Raskolnikov becomes so desperate for belonging following his crime that he throws off the façade of Marxism and Nihilism to be accepted by her, and more importantly God. Raskolnikov giving to the irrational customs of religion contradicts the fact that he spent the majority of the novel attempting to make a point about how rational of a being he is (Gibian 1). A

victim of underdeveloped mentality and sense of belonging, Raskolnikov finally ends his childish temper tantrum and finds a place in this world he hated so.

Raskolnikov is Dostoevsky’s foil to the radical movements that plagued Russia. During this time period, every aspect of Russian society was called into question by rationalists, Marxists, and nihilists revolutionaries. Fyodor Dostoevsky “ intended to show how destructive [these political ideals] was… for mankind” by creating a basket case textbook definition of how these ideals manifested in a fragile and broken mind lead to nothing but self-suffering and pitying. Raskolnikov’s proclaimed motive in the exposition is to prove “ he is beyond good and evil, a ‘ superman’ whose ‘ will to power’ was on part with that ‘ Anti-Christ” ” (Fiddick 1). This mirrors the ideas of nihilism, specifically those spoke by famed philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. The idea of the “ Ubermensch”, the “ superman”, the supreme human, is meant to be seen as an ultimate and benevolent teacher for mankind, but Raskolnikov interprets it as being a self-imposed title of superiority. What Dostoevsky is trying to say is that “ following the ‘ superman’ theory…leads to death, destruction, chaos, and misery’ (Telgen 78). While Raskolnikov does not physically die, his soul and spirit are slain by his own tormented psyche, causing him to destroy others while spiraling down in a state of chaos and self-imposed misery. “ Raskolnikov…reacts in horror at his own crime” showing that these psuedo-Marxists and Nihilists aren’t even prepared to face their own philosophies (Telgen 78). He does not have the guts to see the effect of his cause, his own ideologies preached so hard by himself

realized in flesh and blood. When Raskolnikov turns himself in to Petrovitch, Petrovitch commends the fact Raskolnikov sees “ all the attraction of life” as nothing and says he is “ an ascetic, a monk, a hermit!” with “ a book, a pen behind [his] ear, a learned research”, going on to say there is “ a great many Nihilists about nowadays...and indeed it is not to be wondered at”, finally straight up asking Raskolnikov if he is a Nihilist (Dostoevsky, 538). Raskolnikov responds with a muttered “ N-no...”, he has realized that his definition of Nihilism is incorrect, that all of his previous beliefs he held so strongly were null and void, that he will never become the great Napoleon-esque figure he sought so strongly to be. (Dostoevsky, 538). Raskolnikov is also asked by Petrovitch if he believed in New Jerusalem. Raskolnikov’s positive answer is significant because of the fact that “ New Jerusalem which he means is the Utopian perversion of it, to be built upon foundations of crime and individual self-assertion and transgression (Gibian 1).

Dostoevsky wasn’t a pessimist, however, and he ends the plight of Raskolnikov on a happy (and sappy) note. As said by Diane Telgen, Raskolnikov believed that Christianity was “ the true vision of the human place in the world” so it’s fitting Raskolnikov gets his redemption (Telgen 78). Locked in prison, forced inside his own psyche, he eventually matures out of his adult angst and with the help of Sonia becomes redeemed by Christianity. Just as Raskolnikov forced Sonia to read to him the story of Lazarus, he has undergone his own “ resurrection...new life” under God. Raskolnikov kisses the ground as Sonia pleads him to do (Dostoevsky 520). This is a classic Russian and pre-Christian idea that the Earth is the mother

of man (Gibian 1). At the novel’s conclusion, “ the river which Raskolnikov sees...is no longer a means for committing suicide...it is the river of life”; he has finally found true beauty in life, and he goes into his bed with a Bible under his pillow, for the first time in the entire novel, happy. ” (Gibian 1). What Dostoevsky is trying to say is that Russia’s psuedo-philosophers should accept Christian Communism into their hearts instead of this abhorrent false interpretation of Communism. When Raskolnikov does so, he stops suffering from guilt, shame, and madness. James Townsend has said “ Dostoevsky almost seemed to embrace an in-this-life purgatory,” where people suffer while alive leading to their ultimate salvation (Townsend 1). This is true for Raskolnikov and the novel concludes with a very hopeful insight on the changed man.

Raskolnikov is a fascinating character full of ego, mystique, meaning, and development. He is elevated beyond being a one dimensional political and religious statement, and his fundamentally broken mind is what allows these political meanings to become all the more tangible. It is like Raskolnikov is a fly on the wall case study; the reader does nothing but endlessly pursue him. The novel itself is a character study, a meticulous craft for Fyodor Dostoevsky to allow a narrative to speak his beliefs to the public.

Through this ceaseless pursuit the reader not only learns of what he represents, but why these ideals are so important to accept. The reader learns to understand that Raskolnikov is Fyodor Dostoevsky’s way of putting his opposing view on Marxism and Nihilism, or rather their corrupted versions he was forced to experience living in mid to late 1800’s Russia. This

is important because it elevates Crime and Punishment from not simply being an intriguing crime novel. The reader can pick up on Dostoevsky’s true intentions and ideals to understand that Crime and Punishment is also a deeply personal letter to Russia, a warning of sorts illustrating what happens when an individual chases this corrupted Communism too far into the rabbit hole, while also delivering a hopeful message, a window into a possible future of Russia through spiritual redemption and reform.

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