Morality Of Crime And Punishment

Author Fyodor Dostoevksy once stated, “What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.” In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s psychological drama, Crime and Punishment, protagonist Rodion Raskolnikov’s theorizes that there are certain extraordinary individuals in society to whom mundane laws do not apply as they are “supermen” whose primary objective is the betterment of society through any means necessary. The influences of others on the protagonist, as well as dreams, symbols, and themes function to depict Raskolnikov’s psychological progression and moral redemption through his failed pursuit of becoming a superman. Through his transformative journey, Dostoevsky shows how Raskolnikov’s fragmented stages of confession, explanation, education, and transformation help him learn that he can achieve fulfilment in life without setting himself apart from society and becoming an extraordinary individual, as well as help in clarifying the nature of Raskolnikov's regeneration (Dauner).

A crucial component of his character, Raskolnikov’s superman theory influences much of his psychological experiences throughout the book, as they are all associated with the idea of him testing his postulation. Prior to committing the murders, Raskolnikov believes that he is an extraordinary man, thus takes the stance that he is exempt from abiding by the statutes of society and can break laws as he pleases. He suggests that “extraordinary men” including Napoleon, Lycurgus, Mahomet, and Solon:

...were criminals, from the fact alone that in giving a new law they thereby violated the old one, held sacred by society and passed down from their fathers, and they certainly did not stop at shedding blood either, if it happened...that blood could help them (260).

Using this self-absorbed and egotistical mentality, he decides to commit the heinous crime of murdering Alonya, with the belief that it is merely a test to determine if he is indeed an extraordinary man who is able to transcend the obligations of morality. From the beginning, Raskolnikov tends to compare himself to other individuals; he feels that in order to amount to something meaningful during his lifetime, he must achieve the status of being an extraordinary man such as those aforementioned, thus showing how he is motivated by his societal image. Raskolnikov experiences a deluge of emotions as he debates whether or not he should kill the old crone, ultimately justifying his formulation of the crime by claiming that he is relieving society of evil. He rationalizes:

Kill her and take her money, so that afterwards with its help, you can devote yourself to the service of all of mankind and the common cause: what do you think, wouldn’t thousands of good deeds make up for one tiny little crime? For one ‘ife, thousands of lives saved from decay and corruption. One death for hundreds of lives—it’s simple arithmetic! (65)

Renowned scholar of Russian literature, Edward Wasiolek suggests that Raskolnikov’s overt motivations are “...to be a benefactor of family and humanity or to be a superman exempt from the normal constraints of law…” through which “Raskolnikov seems to be saying: I did the murder because I am a special and heroic personality” (Wasiolek). Raskolnikov’s pompous mentality exhorts him to test the boundaries of morality while his belief in extraordinary men and

his cognitive dissonance leads him to truly believe that what he is doing is not wrong.

In spite of his cruel intentions, Raskolnikov’s subconscious thoughts revealed within his dreams manifest his intrinsic capacity for morality. In his first dream, Raskolnikov is a young boy accompanying his father to visit the countryside. The two pass by an atrocious scene in which a drunken man, Mikolka, brutally beats his horse to the point of death. Young Raskolnikov cannot bear to see this sight and rushes in to stop Mikolka. Scholar Ruth Mortimer suggests that this dream parallels Raskolnikov’s reality, as she divulges that “Behind Mikolka's act of violence lies the larger design of Raskolnikov's intended murder of the old woman” (p.110) On the surface, Mikolka’s killing of the horse symbolizes an aspect of Raskolnikov’s murder plan, however delving deeper into the meaning of this dream, the main individuals, Mikolka, the horse, and young Raskolnikov, all represent certain attributes of Raskolnikov’s persona. Just like Mikolka kills his horse because he believes that it is his property, Raskolnikov seeks to assert control and power over others through his irrational crime. The horse represents Raskolnikov’s inner strife as he feels helplessly trapped and suffocated upon committing the crime. Finally, young Raskolnikov symbolizes the compassion that Raskolnikov gains towards the end of the novel, insinuating his redemption. Raskolnikov’s empathy towards the mare indicates that he possesses the capacity for emotion, despite his murderous objective. Even prior to the crime, these manifestations of Raskolnikov in his dream foreshadow the journey towards moral redemption that he will undergo as a result of his actions.

Upon murdering the old woman, Raskolnikov launches his descent to insanity, his mind completely bereft of any purity or practicality. Fully overwhelmed by emotions following his actions, Raskolnikov is unable to cope with his mental state after the fact. He questions why he actually killed the old crone, wondering to himself “...how is it that so far you...do not know what you’ve actually gained, or for what you’ve accepted all these torments and started out on such mean, nasty, vile business?”(110), as he struggles to explain what impact he actually made by killing Alonya. After he commits the murder, Raskolnikov mentally and physically cannot bear his asphyxiating guilt and isolation from those he loves, and as a result Svidrigailov's imperviousness to moral responsibility attracts Raskolnikov, whose emotional turmoil in this clouded state of mind constantly consumes him. Tortured by the mental ostracization from his family and friends, Raskolnikov observes the painless and emotionless lifestyle that Svidrigailov lives, and almost wishes that he could live in the same manner, detached from humanity, and free from feeling guilty. Although Svidrigailov’s abhorrent description of the beating of his wife depicts his utter moral debility and depravity, as he perversely declares that “...man in general finds it extremely pleasant to be insulted...but it’s especially so with women” (283), Svidrigailov ironically declares that his “conscience is quite at rest” (282), indicating his oblivion to decency and values, and showing how Svidrigailov symbolizes the sin of living without a conscience. Raskolnikov acknowledges Svidrigailov’s lack of humanity, yet rather than condemning him, Raskolnikov envies Svidrigailov’s superman-like ability to disregard his emotions. He laughs scathingly, knowing that he can never dismiss his actions in the same egregious and self-willed way that Svidrigailov is able to. Not only does this coincide with Raskolnikov’s superman theory, as Svidrigailov appears to be an extraordinary man who is able to is unable to handle what he has done, but it also reveals how Raskolnikov realizes that he has begun to fail at becoming like one of these extraordinary men.

Raskolnikov’s dreams following the murder function to depict how he feels immediately after committing the crime and entail the long term psychological torment that he experiences for a mojority of the remainder of the novel. The second dream of the police official beating the

landlady, in particular, is “imaginatively closer to his emotional experience of the crime than is the actual murder scene” (Mortimer, 112). This is because the 'Dostoevskij's alienated hero spontaneously reaches back into the human inventory of unconscious thought, images, and actions to create his own special meaning and sense of purpose' (Anderson, p.2)

An intolerable, pressing need to confess and lift a burden off of Raskolnikov’s chest relentlessly torments him until his confession of the crime to Sonya, whose love enables him to achieve redemption and once again join society. As Raskolnikov regains his aptitude for emotion and ability to love, he is drawn to Sonya’s innocence and compassion as the modest character that reflects how spirituality overcomes the intellectual aspects of Raskolnikov’s beliefs. A beacon of piety, Sonya tells Raskolnikov that he must “Accept suffering and redeem yourself [himself] by it, that’s what you [he] must do” (420). Raskolnikov is inspired by Sonya’s goodness and finally accepts that suffering will be a part of his redemption; he “pursues the punishment of society so that he can feel victimized, and thus justified; and on a deeper level, so that by the punishment he may be...forced back into the fold of humanity” (Wasiolek, 257). He acknowledges that “all this ceaseless anxiety and all this horror of the soul could not go without consequences” (426) thus, his need to seek out suffering motivates his final confession, and his true cognizance of himself and also reflect his sense of spirit. Marking the initiation of how the Raskolnikov realizes what must be done to redeem himself in society, he abandons his objective of becoming a superman and stops trying to prove his theory. This ultimately allows his spiritual side to prevail, because his affliction and disillusionment teach him how to feel again. Raskolnikov endures the suffering that all ordinary people, whom he formerly abhorred experience, and this ordeal humbles him, as he reconncts with humanity which gives him a reason to live.

In the epilogue, Dostoevsky includes one last dream that is essentially an allegory that represents Raskolnikov’s newly acquired attitude towards society. The dream is in a way ironic as Raskolnikov describes how a disease has plagued the nation, infecting people until “each thought the truth was contained in himself alone”(547). Chaos ensues, frustration builds up, tensions rise and eventually people start to kill each other. It is rumoured that those few who are not infected can save the world however, these individuals are never present, thus insinuating that their existence is a myth altogether. This echoes the very sentiment that Raskolnikov believed in at the start of the novel and once again explores a major theme in the novel - the superman theory and idea of separation between an elite class of people and the rest of the world. Mortimer points out that “Dostoevski writes of Raskolnikov: ‘It was his conviction that [an] eclipse of reason and failure of will power attacked a man like a disease’” (114) In this dream, his idea is reversed so that will and intelligence are in fact the ailment of humanity. Raskolnikov understands that his theory mirrored the chaotic nature of this illness,

Throughout the course of the novel, Raskolnikov experiences constant fluctuations in his mental state as a result of his crime and pursuit of becoming an extraordinary man; however, influenced by attributes of other characters like Svidrigailov and Sonya, Raskolnikov finally realizes that there is more to life than just being outstanding within the population. He discovers that having the ability to feel and love is more fulfilling in life than devoting oneself to becoming extraordinary, hence disproving his initial belief that satisfaction is only attainable by becoming a superman. Dauner suggest that “the novel may also be read as a psychic Odyssey: as the apprehension of that Criminal who is always the unwhole, and unholy, and disintegrated self, and his redemption into an integrated and morally effective personality” (p.199) encompassing a prevalent theme of morality and redemption throughout the novel, more specifically that of Raskolnikov. Not only does Crime and Punishment tell the story of an individual’s realization of

true fulfilment in life, but through his work, Dostoevsky represents the human need for love, morality, and relationships in order to obtain fulfilment and functionality in life.