Exploring *Crime and Punishment*

Robert C. Evans

This beginning entry is designed to briefly describe the essays that follow and guide readers in finding the best way to approach both the novel and the critical history of Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment.

This volume, like all the others in the Critical Insights series, is divided into several distinct sections. It opens, for instance, with an introductory essay by a major scholar in the field, then offers a series of four different kinds of contextual essays, and then presents a series of essays representing a variety of individual approaches to the subject at hand. It then concludes with a "Resources" section designed to put important biographical, literary, and bibliographical information at readers' fingertips.

The Introductory Survey Highlights Unusual Deaths in *Crime and Punishment*

In this volume on Fyodor Dostoevsky's great novel *Crime and Punishment*, the introductory essay comes from Michael R. Katz. It would be hard to find a more important Dostoevsky scholar than Professor Katz, who taught Russian for many years at Middlebury College (noted for its foreign language programs) and who has translated many great works of Russian literature, including a

significant new translation of *Crime and Punishment*. That novel, as his essay notes, includes one of the most famous incidents of homicide in world literature, and so Professor Katz devotes his article to a detailed survey of all the various kinds of "-cides," or deaths, depicted in Dostoevsky's entire body of novels. According to Katz, Dostoevsky is unusual among great Russian writers in his emphasis on different kinds of deliberate killings, as opposed to the more normal focus on "natural" deaths of various kinds found, for example, in the works of Tolstoy. The homicides described in *Crime and Punishment* are just two of the many kinds of unusual deaths that interested Dostoevsky, including suicides, parricides, matricides, and even the killings of various kinds of animals. Several of these kinds of deaths appear in *Crime and Punishment* alongside the murders that appear early in the book and that set its major plot in motion. Katz's essay is then followed by a deliberately brief biography of Dostoevsky by Lee Farrow, a historian of Russia who has published widely on Russian politics and culture.

CRITICAL CONTEXTS

Four Essays look at Psychological Aspects of the Book, Its Critical Reception, the Issue of Theory vs. Reality, and a New Play Based on *Crime and Punishment*

The four essays included in the "Critical Contexts" section examine *Crime and Punishment* in four distinct ways. The first essay, by Christopher Baker, adopts an historical approach in dealing with a significant theme of the novel—the theme of acedia, a r kind of physical and mental lethargy characterized by torpor or sloth. Baker traces this idea back to medieval monks and then shows its relevance to Raskolnikov's predicament. He notes that although Raskolnikov is "at various times obsessed with his own inner life," he is also often "overcome with ennui but then, surprisingly, with a frantic restlessness that drives him to murder" even as he remains "plagued with a kind of emotional inertia leading to a self-hatred he cannot shake off, unable to love until he can accept Sonya's affection. Raskolnikov," Baker observes, "is remarkable for his

The Many "-Cides" of Dostoevsky: Tolstoy's "Deaths" vs. Dostoevsky's "Murders"

Michael R. Katz

Exploring a major theme of Crime and Punishment*, Michael Katz focuses here on "the various kinds of '-cides,' or deaths, depicted in Dostoevsky's entire body of novels." The essay also references comparison to the works of another great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy.*

In his classic study *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), the literary theorist, scholar, and philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin included a brilliant "exercise" in literary "what-ifs." In the chapter entitled "The Hero in Dostoevsky's Art," as he is explaining the nature of the polyphonic novel, Bakhtin turns briefly to Leo Tolstoy's well-known short story "Three Deaths" (1858), which he analyzes as a characteristic example of the author's "monologic manner" (71). At the end of his brief commentary, he poses the following question: "How would 'Three Deaths' look if . . . Dostoevsky had written [the story], that is, if [it] had been structured in a polyphonic manner?" (72). Bakhtin then summarizes the events of Tolstoy's story as if they had been described by Dostoevsky, providing a splendid pedagogical tool for introducing students to the works of these two writers.

The critic goes on to make a more general point:

A Biography of Fyodor Dostoevsky

Lee A. Farrow

An in-depth discussion of Fyodor Dostoevsky's biography illuminates how events in the author's own life—Dostoevsky was sentenced to death and actually led before a firing squad before he received a last-minute reprieve and was sent to a Siberian labor camp instead—inform his work as a writer and contribute to the depth and realism of his characters as well as his approach to big-picture, universal themes.

Fyodor (often also spelled Fedor) Dostoevsky was born in Moscow in 1821, only a few years after the French invasion of Russia and the final defeat and exile of Napoleon Bonaparte. The son of a doctor and a woman of the merchant class, he experienced a modest and religious upbringing, and his father worked hard to earn noble status for his family. When Dostoevsky was only four years old, Russian intellectual and social life was traumatized by the failed Decembrist Uprising of 1825 and the subsequent crackdown under Tsar Nicholas I. Thus, Dostoevsky grew up in an atmosphere of intellectual suppression, where authors used literature to critique society and engage in philosophical debates. Among the debates that would dominate Russian intellectual life was that of Russia's place between east and west, as well as the positive and negative consequences of Peter the Great's westernizing reforms. Peter the Great

Raskolnikov and Acedia

Christopher Baker

This essay adopts an historical approach to deal with the significant theme of acedia—a kind of physical and mental lethargy characterized by torpor or sloth. Christopher Baker traces this idea back to ideas of certain medieval monks and to some of the earliest Christian sources and then shows its relevance to Raskolnikov's predicament, including his complex personality. Raskolnikov is at times "overcome with ennui but then, surprisingly, with a frantic restlessness that drives him to murder yet plagued with a kind of emotional inertia leading to a self-hatred he cannot shake off."

In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky offers us an acutely detailed account of Raskolnikov's personality, an overdetermined frame of mind to which depression, self-hate, doubt, confusion, and a paradoxical mixture of nervously pointless activity plus a lethargic resentment of life itself, all make their contributions. As a literary creation, he is, thus, both representative of human flaws and yet he remains unique. There is an unmistakable monkishness about Raskolnikov. Dostoevsky describes his small room as a "closet" and a "cupboard" (3), words that suggest an anchorite's cell, and at the end of the novel when Raskolnikov meets Porfiry Petrovich at the police station, the magistrate calls him an "ascetic, monk, hermit" (557). Dostoevsky biographer Konstantin Mochulsky observes that

Raskolnikov's room is "an ascetic monk's cell" (291) and that "he must pass through *ascesis* [the rigorous self-discipline of ascetic monks]" (292). Such comments suggest not that Raskolnikov actually is a monk but rather that his life has the intense inwardness and frequent isolation that is typical of monastic life, including a disturbance of mind, body, and spirit known to monks as *acedia*. Richard Curle, for example, sees in him a certain "absolute, if delusionary, fanaticism": "[O]ne feels that if he had not taken to extremism in one direction, he would have taken to it in another—perhaps become a monk in some rigorous brotherhood—but . . . sooner or later . . . he would have repented of his action" because he is a "vacillator" (Curle 24).[1]

For most of the novel the reclusive Raskolnikov seems anything but the placid contemplative. He is instead at various times obsessed with his own inner life, overcome with ennui but then, surprisingly, with a frantic restlessness that drives him to murder yet plagued with a kind of emotional inertia leading to a self-hatred he cannot shake off, unable to love until he can accept Sonya's affection. Raskolnikov is remarkable for his persistent periods of diffidence punctuated by rebellious outbursts, his meticulous psychological self-examination, and his bitter disappointment at various features of his own identity that he discovers and then reproaches himself for. These vacillating behaviors span his whole story. At the start of the novel we learn that

> for some time he had been in an irritable and tense state, resembling hypochondria. He was so immersed in himself and had isolated himself so much from everyone that he was afraid not only of meeting his landlady but of meeting anyone at all. . . . He had entirely given up attending to his daily affairs and did not want to attend to them. . . . [He thought to himself,] 'I babble too much, however. That's why I don't do anything, because I babble. However, maybe it's like this: I babble because I don't do anything. I've learned to babble over this past month, lying in a cor-

Fig. 2. "View of Sennaya [i.e., Haymarket] Square," 1841, by Ferdinand Perrot.

For Lindenmeyer, Dostoevsky is able to show how mistaken and misleading Western European ideas are in a Russian context through his portrayal of Raskolnikov as a Napoleonic character. As St. Petersburg itself—in both its sordid reality and its idealization as an analogue of Paris—is key to this portrayal of Raskolnikov's thoughts and feelings, the city plays an essential role in Dostoevsky's novelistic technique.

Edward Wasiolek, "Crime and Punishment"

Many of the elements of Dostoevsky's earlier works reappear in *Crime and Punishment,* notes Edward Wasiolek, but these elements are redefined in the later novel due to the contradictions evidenced by the characters and the situations they experience. The familiar character of the gothic villain becomes a victim of murder when Dostoevsky reuses it in *Crime and Punishment*, and the sentimental storylines used in early works are complicated by characters who seem to seek out and perversely enjoy misery instead of being victims of tragic circumstances.

Wasiolek argues that the theme of crime is new to *Crime and Punishment*, chosen by the author because it allowed him to explore the

Important Editions of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

Lee A. Farrow

Lee Farrow, author of the brief biography of Dostoevsky printed earlier in this volume, now returns with a survey of some recent important editions of Crime and Punishment*, especially those likely to be used in high school and college classrooms. She notes that this novel "has confounded readers for over a century and a half, and has elicited a rich tapestry of commentary from literary critics and others fascinated by its exploration of the human psyche, the tension between good and evil, and the competing notions of humanity and rational self-interest."*

Fedor Dostoevsky's complex novel, *Crime and Punishment*, has confounded readers for over a century and a half, and has elicited a rich tapestry of commentary from literary critics and others fascinated by its exploration of the human psyche, the tension between good and evil, and the competing notions of humanity and rational self-interest. In most of these analyses, some common themes emerge: the duality and "doubling" in the novel, expressed most immediately in the protagonist's very name, Raskolnikov (from a Russian word implying schism); the role of Dostoevsky's personal, professional, and philosophical struggles in the articulation of the novel's elusive meaning; the intricate role of the city of St.

Nikolai Karazin Depicts the Meeting of Raskolnikov and Zamyotov

Fig. 2, also in color and also by Karazin, depicts Raskolnikov's chance encounter with Alexander Grigorievich Zamyotov, a police officer who is interested in discovering the killer of the old pawnbroker. In this drawing, Raskolnikov looks better dressed than in the drawing showing him between murders. By this point in the book, his good friend Dmitry Prokofyich Razumikhin has outfitted him in a new set of clothes. Raskolnikov also looks a bit younger here, as well: his hair and beard seem darker and less gray than in the previous drawing. In the present drawing he is sitting, in a relaxed position, rather than standing with a huge axe in his hand, as in the preceding illustration (fig. 1). The darkness of his suit is highlighted by the very clean white tablecloth on which he rests his left elbow. Indeed, Raskolnikov is here literally "framed" by the color white as the waiter standing behind him is also wearing a very clean white apron and a clean white shirt and is even holding what looks like a clean white towel. Everything in this drawing seems normal and appropriate: all three men are dressed as one might expect, and nothing seems out of order.

Fig. 2. Illustration for Crime and Punishment *by Nikolai Karazin, 1893.*

Chronology of Fyodor Dostoevsky's Life

1821	Dostoevsky is born on October 30 to physician Michaeil Andreyevitch Dostoevsky and his wife Maria Fyodorovna Dostoevsky.
1825	The important "Decembrist Uprising" occurs during the same year that Tsar Nicholas I succeeds Tsar Alexander I.
1831	Dostoevsky's parents purchase a country house near Moscow where the family henceforth spends the summer.
1834	Dostoevsky and his brother Mikhail enter Moscow's best-known boarding school.
1837	Their mother dies. The brothers begin attending a preparatory school and, in the fall, Dostoevsky is admitted to a college of military engineering in St. Petersburg.
1837–43	He studies engineering at the college.
1838	He expresses enthusiasm for the writings of Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, and E. T. A. Hoffman. In the fall he fails his examinations and must repeat his second year of studies. Shows interest in the writings of Friedrich Schiller.
1839	Dostoevsky's father dies; his death is sometimes attributed (probably incorrectly) to murder by his serfs.
1840	In the fall, Dostoevsky is first promoted to the rank of a non-commissioned officer and then to the rank of ensign.
1841	He works on plays that have not survived. In the late summer he is examined for promotion to a commissioned rank and is promoted to be a Field-Engineer's Ensign.
1842	He is promoted to the rank of Second Lieutenant.