

## Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

In this episode, we will be discussing some of the themes within Fyodor Dostoevsky's legendary text, [Crime and Punishment](#). It deals with the suffocating guilt and uneasy journey towards redemption of impoverished ex-student, Raskolnikov, who commits a horrific murder of a pawnbroker and tries to justify it, unsuccessfully, with noble purposes. Not only is the novel a stellar thriller, its themes deal with the eternal struggle between good and evil that encapsulates the human condition.

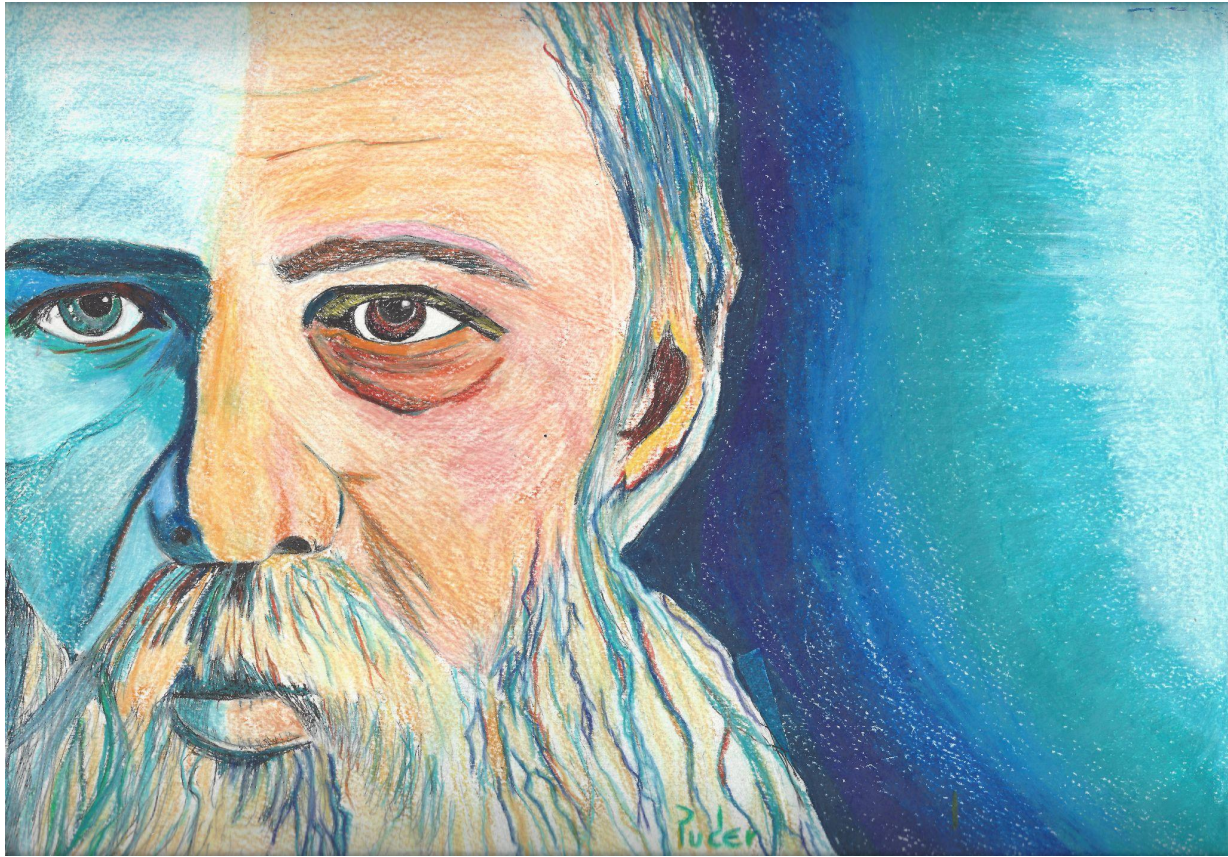
We hope that this podcast convinces you to not only pick up this groundbreaking work of Dostoevsky's, but to also delve deeper into his other classics, such as [The Brothers Karamazov](#), which continue to tackle the existential themes highlighted in *Crime and Punishment*.

*None of the authors and guests above have any conflicts of interest to report.*

This PDF is a supplement to the podcast "Psychiatry & Psychotherapy" **Episode 128** found on [iTunes](#), [Google Play](#), [Stitcher](#), [Overcast](#), [PlayerFM](#), [PodBean](#), [TuneIn](#), [Podtail](#), [Blubrry](#), [Podfanatic](#)

## Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.



"Dostoevsky" by David Puder, M.D. ©2021

### Summary of *Crime and Punishment*

Released by Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky in 1866, *Crime and Punishment* takes the reader through a psychological analysis of a young man, Rodion Raskolnikov, who believes he is this extraordinary person, able to transgress human and moral law without consequence. He murders a female pawnbroker and, later, another woman, using ideas of nihilism, utilitarianism and scientific rationalism to justify it. The plot develops around the fact that, instead, he finds himself racked with anxiety and torment over what he's done, additionally being bothered by the fact that he may not be exempt from the consequences of transgressing these laws (i.e., being a "superman") after all.

Fascinatingly, Raskolnikov's journey begins to reveal to him that the worst punishment is the extreme undesired mental and emotional torment and psychological suffering, and not the actual legal punishment of his subsequent exile to Siberia. He experiences delirium, punishing dreams, and physiologically reacts in a way he did not expect.

# Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

## The “Superman” Concept

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in 1883 (after Dostoevsky) about the “superman”, or *Übermensch*, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, being able to transgress morality (which was rooted in God and Christianity, and according to Nietzsche, superstitious beliefs), creating their own new values, without experiencing negative psychological ramifications. Nietzsche famously proclaimed that God is dead, and found the “superman as a path out of this.”

Later, Hitler took on some of these terminologies and ideas, twisting his attack on spirituality and morality to a racist-nationalistic agenda. Other German intellectuals like [Alfred Baeumler](#) used Nietzsche’s ideas to support Nazi ideology. Regardless, Nietzsche followed from Dostoevsky’s idea articulated in *Crime and Punishment*. If Hitler could have read *Crime and Punishment*, maybe he would have realized the internal torment that accompanies attempting to become an *Übermensch*. Hitler potentially staved off his own guilt using a cocktail of drugs like cocaine, opioids, and animal hormones ([Ohler, 2017](#)).

So we see that the “superman” idea is in Raskolnikov’s mind, and the novel plays out this superman theory and explores its merit and practical implications.

## Nihilism

What was Russian nihilist philosophy and what role did it play in the text? What was Dostoevsky’s critique of it?

[Nihilism](#) is a philosophy, developed in Russia in the early 19th century, that rejects traditional social constructs and authority, such as the state, family or church, and the accompanying accepted moral parameters. Nihilistic philosophy states that there is no higher power or god and that life’s meaning can only come from a bedrock of utilitarianism and scientific rationalism.

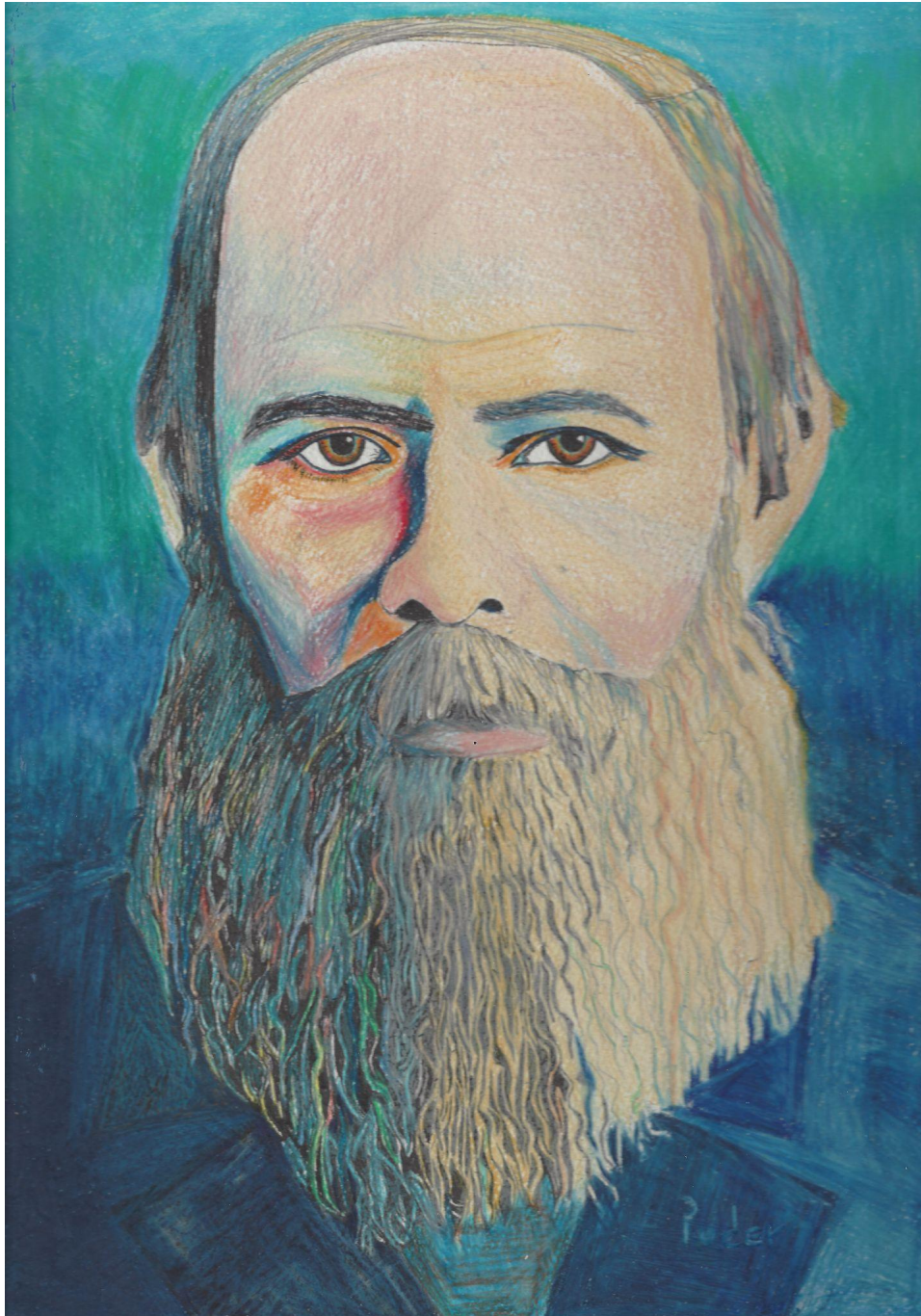
In the text, Dostoevsky displays the abject poverty, serfdom, minimal literacy, and hellish conditions that pervaded Russia at the time.

Raskolnikov’s nihilism, similar to Dostoevsky’s own early experience of nihilism, is an antagonism against the institutions that reinforce hierarchy. With minimal literacy and large numbers of the population living in a pre-industrialized, agrarian world, nihilism was a response to the hellish conditions, a rebellion against the ruling class and the societal hierarchy that were seen as keeping people in an ignorant yet controllable place.

## Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

However, in the end, Dostoevsky confers that nihilism isn't the way to go and that there are greater, more virtuous ideologies. He uses Raskolnikov's story to display a nihilism at work and what consequences and outcomes this philosophy creates, ultimately indicating the failure of Raskolnikov's nihilistic ideology, mirroring his own personal transformation.



# Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

“Dostoevsky Portrait” by David Puder, M.D. ©2021

## Dostoevsky Biography

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was born in Moscow in the early 19th century to an aristocratic, Russian Orthodox family of the Russian Empire. At a young age, he initially had a promising career as a military engineer, but abandoned this to pursue writing. He completed his first novel, *Poor Folk*, in 1845, which was a critical and commercial success. However, his next works were not as successful, causing him to face financial difficulties.

As a youth, he had a formative experience where his father tended to a 9-year-old girl whom Dostoevsky had witnessed being sexually assaulted. This experience haunted him and influenced many of his writings, as we see the theme of the desire of a mature man for a young girl appearing in *The Devils*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, and other writings.

In 1847, he joined the “Petrashevsky Circle”, a utopian socialist circle that believed in freedom of speech and an end to serfdom. It would also delve into literary works that had been banned by the Czarist government.

In 1849, due to concerns for revolutionary activity, the group was seized and taken to a maximum security prison. They were held under horrible conditions and questioned for eight months. The members were then sentenced to death by firing squad.

On December 22, 1849, they were taken to Semyonovsky Square and lined up to be shot. At the last moment, a messenger from the Czar arrived with an official pardon. He was instead sent to a Siberian labor camp for four years. Much of these negative experiences would repeat themselves in Dostoevsky’s later work, such as *Notes from Underground* and *Crime and Punishment*.

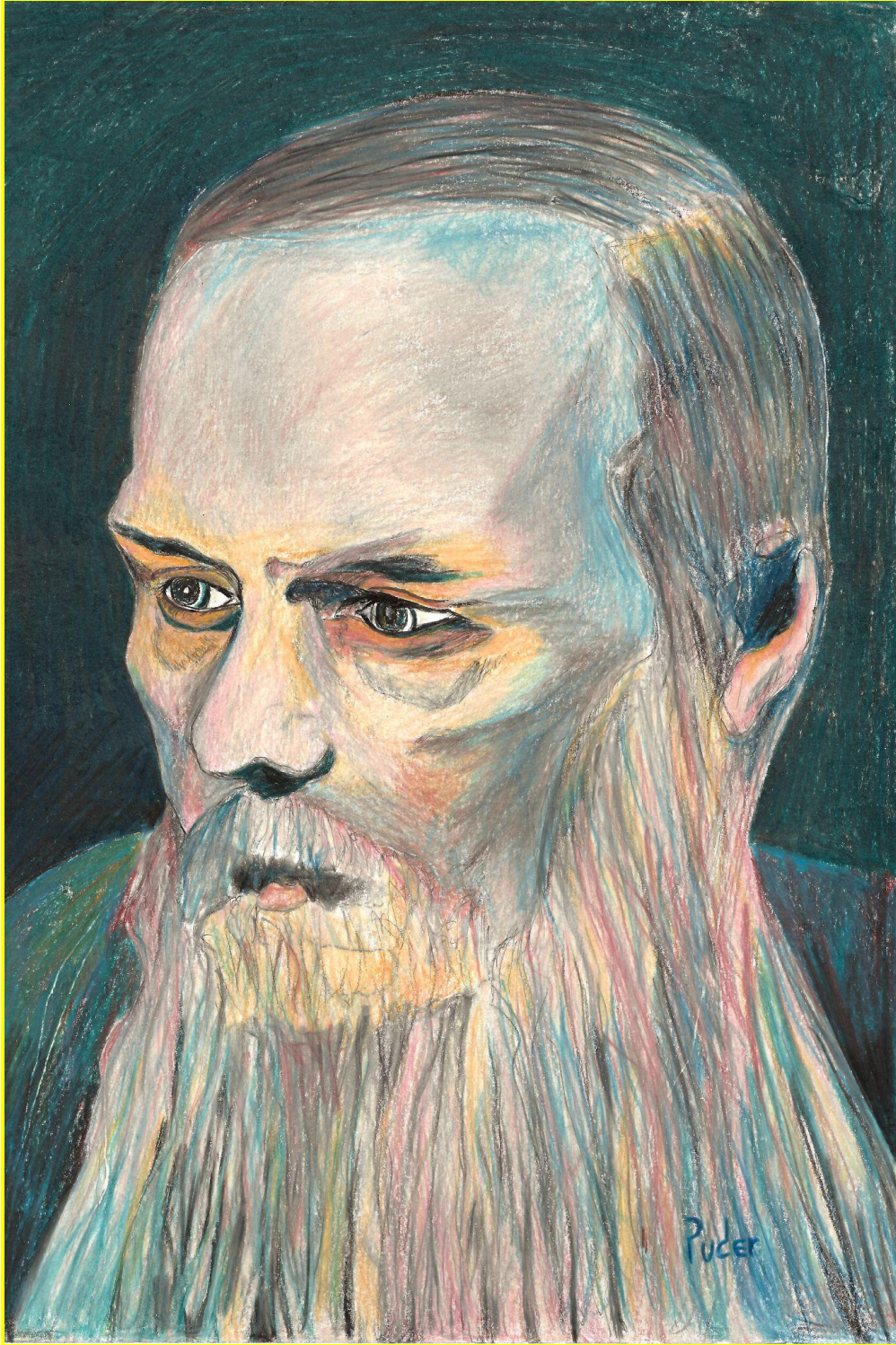
Eventually, he became disillusioned with utopian philosophy, finding it to be a breeding ground for atheistic, materialistic, and nihilistic attitudes.

Dostoevsky continued to write until his death, but was fraught with many personal difficulties, both financial (he struggled with gambling) and marital problems, and also suffering from epilepsy, a condition he dealt with throughout his life. He died of a pulmonary hemorrhage at the age of 59.

He is now lauded as one of the masters of the Russian literary tradition.

## Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.



"Fyodor Dostoevsky" by David Puder, M.D. ©2021

Copyright: David Puder, M.D., 2021, Please share this without changing any of the content.

## Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

### Dostoevsky's Historical Framework for the Book

Imagine 90% slavery in Russia (by comparison, the U.S. was at about 10% slavery at the time), and a correlating literacy rate. Dostoevsky joined groups (Petrashevsky Circle, Speshnev's Secret Revolutionary Society) that read and discussed literature about getting out of the serfdom. When he was caught, he was put in a maximum security jail.

Jail at that time was not like jails are today—today we have rights. Jails during that time were horrible and boasted inhumane living conditions. Prisoners were tortured and lashed. Dostoevsky discusses how evil the jailers were. Many prisoners paid off the jailers to go easy on them with their lashings, but even then, no matter what, the jailer would make the first lash as brutal as he possibly could, potentially simply to remind the prisoner that it was in his power to do so.

Dostoevsky's time in Siberia found him experiencing poverty firsthand in a way that he had only previously witnessed as a bystander. In the book, Raskolnikov suffers the same fate of Siberia and has a similar transformation to Dostoevsky.

### *The Idiot*

In 1869, twenty years after his arrest and imprisonment, he documents his previously mentioned near death experience with the firing squad, that turned out to be a ruse, in his book, *The Idiot*. A character, Prince Myshkin, has a similar story to Dostoevsky's staged execution, and is likely where Dostoevsky talked about his own personal transformation.

The below is a quote from *The Idiot* as Prince Myshkin is awaiting his death in the firing squad lineup.

*What if I didn't have to die! If life was returned to me—what an eternity it would be! And it would be all mine! I would turn every minute into an age, nothing would be wasted, every minute would be accounted for, nothing would be frittered away!*

### Katerina and Sonya

Dostoevsky uses Katerina as a physical representation of Raskolnikov's justification of his horrible actions. The readers see through her psychological defenses that keep her from seeing

## **Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment**

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

her bad choices, abusive nature and moral failings in prostituting her daughter. She takes pride in being from an aristocratic family but ends up dying in the streets. In her pride, she refuses the priest brought to her, saying, "A priest? I am not in need of one. My conscience is free from sin! And, even were it not, God must forgive me. He knows how I have suffered!" Raskolnikov is still struggling with his pride at this point.

Her stepdaughter, Sonya, was prostituted to fund her father's alcoholism. She ends up becoming a redemptive savior/angel to Raskolnikov. While she has undoubtedly suffered more than Raskolnikov, she continues to portray selflessness, innocence and the ability to still truly see the good in others; she hasn't been broken down by a world that has beaten her and her family down. This is why she is such a powerful character and the one who is truly able to change Raskolnikov for the better.

## **The Role of Women in the 19th Century**

Society at that time treated women horribly. There was no redemption; one mistake and your reputation was ruined for the rest of your life. Dostoevsky seemed sympathetic to the plight of women. He was repulsed by child sexual abuse and the devaluation of women. Sonya and Dunya, Raskolnikov's sister, are both seen as strong and admirable characters. He seems to feel for these young women. We see this in the way he portrays Sonya and Dunya with such redemptive qualities, especially Sonya, since her actions could have easily led to a more crude characterization.

## **The Standoff between Svidrigailov and Dunya**

Svidrigailov is this very vulgar person who, at one point, blackmails Dunya with rape at the threat of exposing her brother's crimes. After two failed attempts at shooting him during their standoff, Svidrigailov not only lets her reload the gun, but allows her to escape.

As someone manipulating, stealing and conning his way into sexual relationships, he came to a precipice decision point of raping Dunya or letting her go. Something about her goodness halted his decision to utilize his strength and overpower her. Later on, giving away his money and killing himself ends up being his version of personal atonement.



# Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

Dunya and Sonya allow for some sort of redemption for the two characters, Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov.

In Dostoevsky's own life, the theme of having a redemptive experience through a relationship with a woman can be seen.

## Redemption

Throughout the text, Resnikov is racked with guilt, attempting to consciously justify his violence while his body seemingly contradicts this with his numerous delirious episodes and haunting nightmares. It's once he realizes his action had no true moral base that his road to redemption begins. His "angel", Sonya, guides him through this path to his eventual confession at the end of the text and religious awakening in the epilogue. Much of his redemption is layered in Christian themes.

## Concepts

- As you read the text, consider if one can go above the moral law.
  - Is there actual evil? What constitutes evil? Is evil innate/the nature of the human experience?
  - What is the cause of it and how do we mitigate its effects?
  - Is it laws or greater forces like God that we are transgressing?
- As you read the text, consider what we base our moral code upon.
  - The idea of guilt and inner torment pointing to an idea of a "moral law"
  - Dostoevsky writes at a time that alternative utopian ideas were being presented. One book in particular, *What is to be Done?* (1863), describes a contrasting Utopian society coming out of nihilism, utilitarianism and scientific rationalism. He describes this utopia as an "eternal joy" of an earthly kind where all needs are met, all people are equal, all people will be good. As you read Dostoevsky's work, you yourself can consider if utopia is possible.
- The psychology of the murder
  - Dostoevsky addresses the nihilistic question, "Is there a moral code/law?"
  - His argument is existential: Look what happens when this person thinks there is no moral code.

# Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

- The torment is not because of the law, but because the murder changes him. His inner guilt is his punishment, not Siberia. Siberia doesn't even seem as torturous because he was used to suffering internally; external suffering was almost a relief.

## Themes

### Spirituality

The spirituality of characters, such as Sonya, plays a major role in the text. Dostoevsky's spirituality is a mixture of Russian Orthodox Christian, existentialism and likely some cognitive dissonance with modern secular ideology.

Dostoevsky pushed two groups of people in his society: the nihilist and the religious. He pushed those leaning more towards nihilism to consider that there might be moral laws which can't be bypassed without consequences. In regards to the rationalist who might argue with logic and reason, Dostoevsky said in a letter, "If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth."

He challenged the religious person who followed all the laws and might have some sort of rigidity about it and pride, with the concept of redemption by way of a prostitute, Sonya.

If you were Sonya's therapist, you would not want to deconstruct her spirituality, but rather use logotherapy approaches to see how her unique meanings might be a strength in times of crisis.

### Suffering

The suffering of all the characters is emblematic of the Russian experience for most of the population at the time. However, it's the characters' responses to suffering that matter immensely. Some, through suffering, go through a transformative process or are able to process their troubles with spirituality, meaning or purpose, while others fall deeper into their states of depravity and delusions.

# Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

- A Christian concept, Jesus, through his suffering and death, resulted in the redemption of all humanity; Raskolnikov's suffering leads to his redemption and freedom.
- There are references to suffering in the Quran, as well. Muslims don't believe in the crucifixion, that Jesus is God, and the significance of Jesus' suffering isn't a part of their beliefs, but more in Mohammad's suffering.
- Psychiatrists can sometimes suffer because we sit with people in their torment. It can be hard to not become jaded. We need to pursue our own help.
- Struggle and suffering can be valuable/essential to bring about a better person.
  - Stoics believed that suffering is part/inevitability of being human and we should be prepared for it. As doctors, we are all about minimizing suffering.
- Some suffering can be minimized, but some cannot.
  - Would you (the psychiatrist) go back and protect the person from the trauma? Would you (the trauma survivor) go back in time to not experience that? Sometimes they would say no, because they are on the other side and can see that it made them stronger. They are grateful for it in the end ("I wouldn't be the same person if I hadn't experienced that."), but not during the act of suffering.
- Examples:
  - Middle life crisis- the person made choices that led them there (narcissism perhaps, nihilism leading to depression). If we, as psychiatrists, just medicate and not look at what led them to it, it could be harmful or extend the length of time until they come to their point of transformation. Don't waste a midlife crisis.
  - As psychiatrists, we must ask the question, "What can we do to make this process transformative?" Suffering is inevitable, so how can we come out of the moment better than when we walked in? But we don't outright ask these questions because that is not an empathic response. Instead, we must first jump in and experience it with them.
    - Successful therapy leads the person to look inward/within themselves and to move through the issue. This is the first order of change, not just giving them a coping skill.

## Spirituality in Therapy

We don't discuss spirituality often in therapy, but spirituality is often important to many people. [Dr. Pargament](#) spoke to this, discussing how spirituality is often so meaningful to people

# Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

because it carries them through horrible things. I use this as a strength to help people get through their hard things.

There is an aspect in ritual, such as religion, that is very powerful. Even in medicine there is power in ritual—you go to the doctor, get the pill, take the pill.

Everyone “worships” something: how do you spend your time, talent, treasures? What do you give your fear and attention? This can give a glimpse into what you worship.

People desire miracle, mystery and authority. Freedom is a much harder road. There is a freedom Dostoevsky talks about that is very different. He describes it as being able to see reality in a sobering way and being able to embrace it despite some of the darkest aspects of it.

## Conclusion

The epilogue of the text continues to be controversial. It could be interpreted that Dostoevsky wraps the book up in too much of a neat little bow. It could come across as cloying and a fetisization of suffering leading to redemption. After behaving like a sociopath for decades, Svidrigailov suddenly has an interaction with Dunya that quickly tips him into a redemptive state. However, he was tormented before that time with nightmares, indicating a certain level of subconscious understanding that he did have some sort of internal moral code he was breaking.

And so we are beset with a man of amazing intellect, Raskolnikov and Dostoevsky, who suffered. He started off believing in Utopia and came through his hardships with the knowledge of how dark humanity can get when more and more power, without restraint, is given to him. He went into the hero's journey with a naive desire to free the serfs, but came out wrestling with ideas and thoughts that would thus create characters to come up against the harshest realities, wrestle with the strongest versions of ideas he could manifest, and in the same token, believe in the ability of humanity to experience redemption.

Questions you might want to discuss in a group if you read this book:

1. What is a brief summary of the text?

## Dostoevsky - Crime and Punishment

Waqar Zuberi, M.D., Serena M Weber, M.D., George Gianakakos, M.D., David Puder, M.D.

2. What was Russian nihilist philosophy and what role did it play in the text? What was Dostoevsky's critique of it?
3. What was the role of women in the text and the role of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century at large as seen by Dostoevsky? Namely characters like Dunya and Sonya.
4. Seemingly medical conditions are seen throughout the text, what role did delirium and TB play?
5. What role did Dostoevsky's personal experience play in the text?
6. What is the nature of evil? How did Dostoevsky view evil?
7. The epilogue of the text continues to be controversial. Did it serve its purpose or was it something that was unnecessary?
8. What were Resnikov's justifications for his actions? What led to his redemption? What did instances such as the Lazarus play thematically?
9. Is suffering necessary for redemption? What role does an Abrahamic understanding of redemption factor into this? What about psychiatric patients? Does suffering lead to something transformative if tackled properly in a clinical context?
10. What role does spirituality play in psychiatric care? How can it be utilized?
11. Many violent criminals suffered from addictions to escape reality. Can one transgress commonly seen morality without having a physiologic reaction? What's the role of addiction?

*Acknowledgments:*

*This article was supported by "[Mental Health Education & Research](#)".*