

Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment and the exploration of public spaces as a representation of the psyche behind Raskolnikov.

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Abstract

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is a psychological novel on the journey of Raskolnikov, a poor university student who commits two murders in hopes of increasing his economic status but is left ridden with guilt and psychological torment. Set in St Petersburg, public spaces act as a mirror towards the psyche behind the main protagonist, Raskolnikov; where his ego and morals are displayed symbolically for the readers. *Crime and Punishment* discusses the philosophical and psychological implications that come with committing such a horrific crime and how such an egotistical man can succumb to such guilt. This article will focus on Dostoevsky's portrayal of St Petersburg as an entity that controls the main protagonist as he battles his inner battles in order to come to terms with his crimes and ultimately turn himself in.

Keywords:

St Petersburg, Raskolnikov, Ego, Psychological, Ideology, Morality.

The novel *Crime and Punishment* bases itself on the streets of St Petersburg, the home of many significant literary figures such as Nabokov, Pushkin but arguably the most notable, Fyodor Dostoevsky. The city of St Petersburg proudly dedicates itself in preserving their rich literary history, with their large number of museums and holidays dedicated to literary figures such as Dostoevsky which is held on the first Saturday of July to commemorate his life and novels such as '*Crime and Punishment*'.¹

¹ Dostoevsky 200 Years Anniversary, 2021, 'Celebration of Dostoevsky Day in Saint-Petersburg - Marking the Bicentenary of Dostoevsky's Birth in 2021, in Denmark', (Marking the Bicentenary of Dostoevsky's Birth, 2021).

However, underneath this profound beauty and rich history there lies this dark secret filled with suffocating misery. During the 1960's, St Petersburg had experienced a large increase in crime that left its citizens feeling extremely uneasy as the number of arrests by the police had increased from 69000 in 1861 to 121000 in 1864.² Nikitenko describes how the “crime in the capital had become a problem of enormous and unprecedented magnitude.”³

Dostoevsky looks at both conflict (psychological) and control (St Petersburg) in terms of the impact it has on the character and his surroundings as he falls into despair and eventually works his way up to redemption. This article aims to showcase the psychological mindset behind Raskolnikov with its relation to public spaces as he pursued this endeavour of hideous murders which correlates to his downward spiral where he battles his own moral compass and collapses into madness.

St Petersburg as an entity of control

Dostoevsky exemplifies St Petersburg in a certain yet realistic manner in which the public spaces presented reflect Raskolnikov as a character in terms of his physical and mental state.

“The heat in the street was terrible: and the airlessness, the bustle and the plaster, scaffolding, bricks, and dust all about him, and that special Petersburg stench... The insufferable stench from the pot-houses, which are particularly numerous in that part of the town.”⁴

Dostoevsky uses the city of St Petersburg as a metaphor for the mental struggles that Raskolnikov experiences, this is due to the city being built on a swamp, which is significant as the unstable and unnatural foundation of its grounds reflect Raskolnikov's internal suffering. This idea of the city of St Petersburg not only acting as a background for the story demonstrates the inescapability of Raskolnikov's situation as not only is he trapped due to his social status but also his geological one. This is reinforced by Bagwell as he states:

² Robert J Abbott, ‘Crime, Police, and Society in St. Petersburg, Russia, 1866-1878,’ *The Historian*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1977, pp. 70–84.

³ Robert J Abbott, ‘Crime, Police, and Society in St. Petersburg, Russia, 1866-1878,’ *The Historian*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1977, pp. 70–84.

⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, (Signet Classics), p. 14.

“Dostoevsky never delineates a specific incident or time when Raskolnikov’s mind became chaotic and confused, but from the beginning of the novel, he describes St. Petersburg negatively and, as seen in the quotation, he attributes it as a significant factor enhancing madness within the protagonist... the isolation he endures produces a negative internal dialogue that propels him to criminal activity. “The streets and squares, alleyways and canals not only serve as a background to the action, but enter with their outlines into the thoughts and actions of the heroes. The city constantly dominates the people and hangs over their fates.””⁵

His surroundings of the street act as a corrosive force that is a catalyst for his crimes and keeps him stuck in his undesirable situation. Dostoevsky uses public spaces to exemplify his mental state that is not only showcased through the individual but utilises external forces as a factor.

Furthermore, Dostoevsky’s depiction of Raskolnikov's room also acts as a symbol of his mental state. The novel describes how Raskolnikov’s room was a “tiny cupboard of a room about six paces in length. It had a poverty stricken appearance with its dusty yellow paper peeling off the walls.”⁶ The description of his room resembles that of a coffin, this anger that is stated as he “looked at his room with hatred”⁷ is due to his discontentment of his social situation, he believes that he is trapped in this degrading situation and deserves more due to his superiority over others, which leads to him committing the murders. It should be further noticed that his room reflects the isolating structure of his ego. The metaphor of “tiny cupboard of a room” indicates that it feels like a cage where he walks in circles trapped in between the four walls within his own mental ideologies. Therefore, the room acts as a physical manifestation of his mental state, where he is cut away from the rest of society. Bhanot highlights that through Raskolnikov's room, he is a “stereotypical individual living not only in penury but also one suffering from a mental disorder. Self isolation through social withdrawal and self-negligence are often seen in depressive states.”⁸

⁵ Laura Claire Bagwell, ‘Environment, Behavior, and Internal Consciousness: A Study of Space and Time in Dostoevsky,’ (2007).

⁶ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 47.

⁷ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 47.

⁸ Raj Bhanot, ‘The Enigmatic Behavior of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*: A Unifying Hypothesis,’ *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*.

Therefore, the novel portrays the territorial aspects of St Petersburg as a metaphor to depict the state of Raskolnikov. The protagonist is left in despair of entrapment in fear of himself and the actions that he is about to commit. Thus, public spaces act as an oppressive and chaotic force upon Raskolnikov of which controls him and his nature, making him a product of his environment where he has to go through the battles of daily life while he is left with the constant reminder of all his misfortunes in his life.

Inner conflict and space

Raskolnikov's inner conflict begins due to his ideology where he believes that he is greater than others. This complex leads him to believe that “men like this come to be by exercising their free will in ways that defy the common laws of life, thus killing Alyona Ivanovna, the malicious pawnbroker in the neighbourhood that preys on the vulnerable such as Raskolnikov to expand her wealth. He does this as a way to test if he’s one of these people.”⁹ However, this complex is short-lived as he comes to the realisation that he is not this superior being but in fact regular just like everyone else.

It is evident throughout the beginning of the novel Raskolnikov truly believes that he is superior to everyone else. This is especially showcased before he kills both the Ivanovna sisters where it states in his inner monologue that it would be best he could “kill her, take her money and with the help of it devote oneself to the service of humanity and the good of all.”¹⁰ Dostoevsky depicts Raskolnikov as this arrogant and egotistical character who believes that his moral compass is above others as he believes that murder is a justifiable act for the greater good.

This idea of Raskolnikov's Napoleon complex is reinforced by Wang who argues that “Raskolnikov is a true reflection of the nihilistic Russian university students of that time with the addition of these factors of environmental and social background.”¹¹ Wang’s argument suggests that the nihilistic view that people should not indulge in excessive wealth and

⁹ Paris Whitney, ‘An Analysis of Crime and Punishment,’ The Classic Journal <<https://theclassicjournal.org/an-analysis-of-crime-and-punishment/>>[Accessed 20 November 2025].

¹⁰ Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, p. 98.

¹¹ Zuoze Kai Wang, Exploring Parallel Themes: Comparing Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment with Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s ‘In A Grove’ and ‘Rashōmon,’ Trinity College Digital Repository (2023), Trinity Student Scholarship, Trinity College Digital Repository.

luxurious living as they reject aristocratic culture. Therefore, due to his Napoleon complex, Raskolnikov believes that it is his responsibility to kill the pawnbroker and save society.

This statement really exposes Raskolnikov as a character and his philosophy on life, he feels that these actions are what is best for society but fails to consider the repercussions of such a heinous act. However, due to Raskolnikov's character these actions are in fact just firewood to fuel his ego as he believes that he will be viewed as a hero that helps those less fortunate. This is the start of his demise where he will begin to fall into this journey of inner conflict and internal suffering.

Raskolnikov would often be described as evil in nature due to his motivations towards his murders. This idea is explained by Maurice who talks about three motivators for Raskolnikov to commit these murders. One of the explanations that he mentions is Raskolnikov's aggressive lust. Maurice states that he believes that Raskolnikov has “committed murder for the thrill of it, because of his fascination with the horror of the very idea; and the murder is, in part, an act of aggressive lust”¹² This is shown in the text when he states how “knowing myself, knowing how I should be, take up an axe and shed blood! I ought to have known beforehand. . . Ah, but I did know!” Raskolnikov is shown to be fully aware of his reaction towards the murder, yet he commits them anyways, he is shown to be endorsing his actions purely to fulfil his intrigue.

This is symbolically reinforced in the novel through Raskolnikov's dream of the horse being beaten by the peasants. In this dream a young Raskolnikov is on the streets of St Petersburg where he witnesses a brutal beating of a mare as it was “gasping and shrinking from the blows of the three whips which were showed upon her like hail”¹³ while Raskolnikov could do nothing but stand there as a child and watch the horse “being whipped across the eyes.”¹⁴ The utilisation of public spaces in this description of the barbarism displayed exemplifies and mirrors his inner thoughts and emotions as the horse is representative of Alyona Ivanovich and his true intentions behind the way in which he feels towards her. This dream dives into his

¹² Maurice Beebe, ‘The three motives of Raskolnikov: A reinterpretation of Crime and Punishment,’ *College English* (1955), 17.3, pp. 151-158.

¹³ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 86.

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 88.

subconsciousness, revealing to the readers as well as Raskolnikov himself on his savagery towards this premeditated murder.

Through this dream there is a collapse between public and private evil. Dostoevsky showcases how the murder committed by Raskolnikov may have been done in private but the moral and psychological consequences are public. The dream represents how moral atrocities cannot be suppressed and that they will contain witnesses as crime is never private due to the affect on your morality and thus your surroundings.

Ego transcendence and the transfiguration of public spaces

Public spaces remain a concurrent theme throughout *Crime and Punishment*, especially in relation to the main protagonist, Raskolnikov. As the novel progresses, the description of St Petersburg changes as Raskolnikov does as he comes to terms with his actions.

Raskolnikov falls under the theory of ego transcendence¹⁵ as Raskolnikov experiences the guilt from murdering these two women, thus acknowledging the realisation that he is not this monumental person that he believed himself to be. Richard Chapple discusses the progress of ego transcendence through the prism of the divine. This includes six reasons that people suffer. Raskolnikov suffers due to “recognition of transgression” which is apparent moments before his near confession at the police station where he is shown to be in anguish and filled with regret about his actions. It is stated how Raskolnikov “would not go on living like that... He drove away the thought that tortured him.”¹⁶ It is evident of the psychological conflict that the protagonist experiences as he comes to terms with his dire fate of despair and accepts the consequences of his actions that have been detrimental to himself and society, contrasting his original ideology surrounding his self importance.

Public spaces therefore become a domain of which the perception of the city transfigures as Raskolnikov develops as a character. This is evident through Dostoevsky's description of stairs in the novel which represents the path that Raskolnikov is on. The novel highlights how “he turned down it more dead than alive... He was only dimly conscious of

¹⁵ Lonny Harrison, ‘The Numinous Experience of Ego Transcendence in Dostoevsky,’ *The Slavic and East European Journal* (2013), vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 388–402.

¹⁶ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 216.

himself now.”¹⁷ This occurs following the murder of the sisters where he is seen in pure distress due to his actions. The staircase represents his fall from the heights of his self perceived ego, the once familiar staircase becomes unrecognisable as the descent pulls him further into collapse, the events of the murder cause an instant change into his character and surroundings as he is filled with guilt. Thus, Dostoevsky explores the use of public spaces to showcase the psychological descent into the abyss filled with anxiety.

Furthermore, Dostoevsky frames the stairs as a descent into the police office but not filled with despair but with acceptance and vulnerability through the path of atonement. He goes down knowing that Sonya will always be with him and follow him through the depths of the Earth. “He suddenly recalled Sonia’s words, ‘Go to the crossroads, bow down to the people, kiss the earth’... He went down to the police station.”¹⁸ Through the representation of stairs Raskolnikov goes through the motions of development in his identity. He develops in a manner where he is no longer self reliant fueled by his ego but transforms into a new person where he has come to terms with his fate while having Sonya by his side. Dauner develops this idea:

“The stairs carry several symbolic values and associations. First, it is a climb, an effort, and even a struggle... the ascent or descent becomes involved with the question of identity, “Who am I?; from which all attitudes and actions take their mortal quality... So Raskolnikov’s ascents and descents are developmental, a kind of psychic ritual, by each act of which he partially defines, for good or evil, his psychic and moral structure.”¹⁹

Through this idea, Dostoevsky proposes the idea that public spaces remain as a constant, concurrent entity throughout the novel that aligns with the psyche of the character. In this case the stairs act as a symbolic feature of Raskolnikov and his journey of redemption. The juxtaposing ideas of the different types of ascension of the stairs showcases the complexity of Raskolnikov's character and the development needed to reach the point of acceptance towards the end of the novel, thus utilising public spaces as a representation of his change in both character and circumstances.

¹⁷ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 126.

¹⁸ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 690.

¹⁹ Louise Dauner, ‘Raskolnikov in Search of a Soul,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* (1958), vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 199-210.

Conclusion

Overall, *Crime and Punishment* utilises the city of St Petersburg as a mirror of Raskolnikov's state of mind. Through public spaces, aspects such as the streets act as a direct representation of the psyche behind Raskolnikov. It showcases the inner conflict that the main protagonist has to endure due to the suffocating environment of the city, there is a sense of a constant presence showcased through the city as it acts as an entity to the main protagonist. However, the city does not only confine Raskolnikov as it is dependent on his state of mind as his environment does begin to change once he develops morally as he comes to accept his fate. Therefore, St Petersburg is represented as a mirror of the psyche behind Raskolnikov, acting as an ever-changing entity that reflects his moral compass.

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