



The Narrative Technique in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

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Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky is a novel that has been thought controversial, yet notable over the course of centuries. This novel is influenced by the time period and setting of 19th century St. Petersburg, Russia. The society depicted in it is transitioning from medieval traditions to Westernization, which has a large impact on civilians, specifically those who are in poverty. Dostoevsky writes this novel focusing on a poor man whose poverty drives him to test an ideology that results in his suffering. Although this is important, the plot is only part of what makes this novel significant. The thing that makes this novel memorable is Dostoevsky's use of narrative technique in it. His narrative technique consists in his use of the concept of time to progress the plot and establish information, his use of symbolism to communicate the message and meaning of the story and its characters, and his use of, unintentionally, different philosophies. The present paper attempts to analyze the narrative technique the novelist uses in the novel.

Fyodor Dostoevsky is perhaps the most controversial author of the nineteenth century. His best-known work is *Crime and Punishment*, a novel that explores the psychological depths of man. At the center is Raskolnikov, a character who inflicts and experiences a great deal of sufferings because he perceives himself to be superior to the average man. The novel takes place in St. Petersburg, Russia. The time is 1860, Alexander II holds reign, and consequently political skepticism is abundant. In addition to skepticism, the country's economic state has disproportionate effects on its citizens, as the increasing wealth gap parallels the increase of turmoil in the streets. The novel follows Rodion Raskolnikov, a man of lower class whose poverty leads him to forming an idea and testing its validity. This theory is that certain men are exempt from laws created by society, as their actions against these laws are done for the greater good. In order to test this theory, Raskolnikov forms a plan to murder Alyona Ivanovna, an old pawnbroker whom he has had many exchanges with. After killing Ivanovna, he ends up killing her sister Lizaveta as well, when her appearance at Ivanovna's apartment startles his original plan. In a frenzy, he leaves their bodies at the crime scene, and on his way out his mental state begins to spiral leading the readers to follow his psychological decline.

Around the world, philologists and psychologists alike have studied *Crime and Punishment* to understand what makes this work essential to literature. Through studies of



symbolism, philosophy, and psychology, it is recognized how Dostoevsky uses the concept of time to develop the story, how he uses symbolism to reflect underlying emotions and intentions of characters, and how different ideologies may be related to the meaning behind *Crime and Punishment*. In fine, Dostoevsky's use of the narrative technique makes his work notable for centuries.

Crime and Punishment is a novel symbolic of the drawbacks that society can have on individuals, specifically those who are at a disadvantage as a result of their class or mental state. When Dostoevsky penned this novel, the time was 1866. 19th century Russia was a transition period from medieval traditions to Westernization. During this transition, many people struggled to accommodate to the changing times. There was unrest in the streets, conflict amongst the classes, economic upheaval, and a lack of concern for those suffering by the government. Those who were of higher class were better able to navigate this complex transition, while those in poverty lacked the materials necessary to accommodate to the coming changes. Previously Westernized countries exhibited unrest from their populations while progressing in societal advancement. There was concern about this potentially translating into Russia's development. Russia was not exempt from these issues, and Dostoevsky was no help in assuring that peace would be maintained. Dostoevsky's work concerned peoples in power when he indirectly made an association between violence and societal progression, and how this may prompt the masses to revolt against their government. Localized current events, such as a rise in domestic violence and murder, also influenced this novel. Due to these real-life events that inspired Dostoevsky's work, it can be said that *Crime and Punishment* is an accurate representation of its time period^[1].

Time period is not the only element that has an influence on his work, but Dostoevsky would manipulate the concept of time itself to convey the meaning behind his stories. In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky writes Raskolnikov as a character continuously in a fever of thoughts. His mind is constantly running rampant, unrelenting even in slumber. Before significant events Raskolnikov would either flashback or dream of memories foreshadowing future moments. An example of this is before committing to murder Alyona Ivanovna, his subconscious takes him and the reader back to a moment where he and his father witnessed the cruel killing of a mule at the hands of a crowd for being too weak to pull a wagon. From a third person perspective, young Raskolnikov's reaction to this moment is described hither, "But by now the poor boy is beside himself. With a shout he plunges through the crowd into the sorrel, embraces her dead, bloodstained muzzle, and he kisses her, kisses her on the eyes, on the mouth..." (Dostoevsky, 1866, pg. 57). By preceding Raskolnikov's murderous intentions with



his younger self's mournful reaction to the mule's death shows the audience how Raskolnikov has developed over time, and the degeneration resulting from his experiences in life. Time also seems to slow down when Raskolnikov is in moments of heightened emotion, because as he loses the ability to conceptualize, the more feverish his mind becomes. Towards the end of the novel, Raskolnikov reflects on the events that have occurred, saying "after a long time had passed, he thought his consciousness must have kept flashing on and off, with several dim, dark intervals, right up to the final catastrophe. He was absolutely convinced he had been mistaken about many things at the time; the duration of time of certain events, for example." (Dostoevsky, 1866, pg. 417).

This feverish mindset also manifests into physiological symptoms, giving Raskolnikov the appearance of being sick. "He was not completely unconscious all the time he was sick, but rather delirious, in a feverish state of half consciousness. He could recall a good deal later. Once in his room seemed full of people... They had all gone out. They were afraid of him." (Dostoevsky, 1866, pg. 112). Dostoevsky uses syntax and diction to write these occurrences in a way that mimics Raskolnikov's thinking. The transitions between events are frenetic, reflecting the tumultuous thoughts that plague Raskolnikov as a result of his actions. Choosing to modify the chronology of the novel in this way, he emphasizes the severity of situations by making the readers feel like they are experiencing the event as well.

In addition to this, *Crime and Punishment* contains levels of symbolism to enhance the mental conditions of characters. George Gibian explored traditional symbolism^[21] within *Crime and Punishment*, and came to find that many motifs have religious roots. Ranging from Christianity to Paganism to Russian Orthodoxy, Dostoevsky's implementation of images such as water, vegetation, air, and earth come together to express the mental state of the characters immersed in a particular setting. For example, Gibian described how water is used as a symbol of rebirth or regeneration. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov would aimlessly walk about the setting in moments where his mind and thoughts were chaotic. He would end up in symbolically important nature scenes, for instance beside a river that ran through his town, or on the ground surrounded by bushes and trees. When near the water, he would feel the weight of guilt coming from the crimes he has committed. "He stared at the darkening water of the canal. He seemed to be scrutinizing this water. At last red circles danced before his eyes, the buildings swayed, the passersby, the embankments, the carriages- everything around him began to swirl and dance. All of a sudden he shuddered. A wild and grotesque scene saved him, perhaps, from another fainting spell." (Dostoevsky, 1866, pg. 163). In this scene, Raskolnikov's physiological symptoms begin to arise as his consciousness fights for contrition.



This is important because Raskolnikov's proximity to water when these feelings arise is representative of the good side of his conscience, trying to push him in the direction of what is right.

While water and vegetation are symbols that typically have a positive connotation, their presence can be used to emphasize the degeneration of one's mental state. An example would be Svidrigailov, a character whose presence is nothing short of problematic. He strives to satisfy his erotic desires regardless of who may be harmed in the process, solidifying his position as one of the antagonists in *Crime and Punishment*. Svidrigailov also possesses a dislike for nature. This is shown when he visits St. Petersburg, and in his final night of life he ends up spiraling in his hotel room. During this downward spiral, he hears the sound of trees rustling outside of his window combined with rain. Instead of comforting him, they drive him further towards insanity. "The trees are sighing. I must admit I don't care for the sighing of trees on a dark, stormy night- it gives me the creeps!" He takes time to contemplate his life, saying, "I never in my life liked water... You'd think now, of all times, I'd be indifferent to these fine points of esthetics and comfort, whereas actually I'm fussier," (Dostoevsky, 1866, pg. 480). He resents the sound of vegetation when having a mental breakdown, and he ends up committing suicide in the midst of a fog that has emerged after a thunderstorm- showing his opposition to growing as a person. The use of nature as a way to reflect internal torments and emotions of different characters shows Dostoevsky's proficiency in storytelling. Having the character's surroundings speak the unspoken about what they may be feeling adds a level of meaning to the novel.

While symbolism is important to developing the meaning behind *Crime and Punishment*, what makes this novel so notable are the philosophies it both challenges and embraces unintentionally. Existentialism^[4] is a philosophy maintaining the belief that as individuals, there is a right within everyone to determine quality of life through acts of free will. It is easy to see how *Crime and Punishment* can be regarded by many existentialists as representative of this philosophy, but overall Dostoevsky is not one many would like to consider an archetype for existentialism. And, in retrospect, he is not. Dostoevsky's main character in *Crime and Punishment* spends a lot of his time soliloquizing his belief that certain men are greater than others. Raskolnikov thinks men like this come to be by exercising their free will in ways that defy the common laws of life, but with the intention that what they are doing will better the world in the end. This idea is the reason behind Raskolnikov's eventual murder of Alyona Ivanovna, a pawnbroker, and her half-sister Lizaveta. He kills Ivanovna as a way to test if he can be one of these people, but quickly discovers in the throes of his crime that he is not. This



misconstrued idea of free will presented in *Crime and Punishment* can be where many begin to wonder if Dostoevsky was an existentialist. But a conclusion can be made that Dostoevsky's free will is psychologically based and pushes the boundaries between what is right and what is wrong. Existentialism, on the other hand, is a philosophy centered around creativity and authenticity of the self.

On a small level, while Dostoevsky was not an existentialist, his work shows his agreement with the philosophical concept of ego transcendence ^[5]. Transcendence of the ego is described as an advancement of the "authentic self" through experiences that result in a greater awareness. Once this awareness is achieved, this person usually begins to see themselves as greater than the average human. This is easily relatable to Raskolnikov's philosophy that he reiterates often throughout the novel. The way that Dostoevsky sets his characters up for transcendence is through suffering. Raskolnikov suffers as a result of recognition of transgression, which is his guilt overpowering him after killing two women. It is even more stressful because in this guilt he realizes that he is not the monumental person he thought he was. In turn, he suffers because of involvement in the torments and suffering of others, as a result of brutally murdering his victims, followed by greed and ambition. Once failing to follow through with his entire plan beyond murdering Ivanovna, the weight of his ambition becomes heavy as it never had a chance at being attained. This dissatisfaction with himself contributes more to his depression than the fact that he is a murderer.

In retrospect, Dostoevsky's use of time, symbolism, and philosophical aspects in *Crime and Punishment* each provide different levels of meaning to the story. When incorporating the concept of time in terms of context and story progression, it allows the reader to grasp the importance of the events being foreshadowed, in addition to understanding the influences on decisions of characters. His attention to detail using motifs to communicate underlying emotions and intentions of his characters creates another layer of meaning for this novel, as the interpretation of these motifs make *Crime and Punishment* different for every reader. And lastly, Dostoevsky's novel embraces different philosophies, while simultaneously maintaining its individuality from any one ideology. He writes this novel in a way where it applies to different ideals, wherein itself it is exclusive from being categorized, due to its unique central message. This message is one that can be applied to many time periods in history, including the 21st century. The inevitable progression of societies tends to commonly leave those who are underprivileged to fend for themselves. When this isolation persists, is it unexpected to have people who attempt to create a life for themselves trying to prove that they are worth something, when their government treats them like nothing? *Crime and Punishment* provides a



variety of perspectives for the audience's consideration. Despite the many ways that this novel can be read and interpreted, one thing is clear, *Crime and Punishment* is illustrious.

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