Crime and Punishment Paper

Option A

Topic 1

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The Spectrum of Crime in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment

Dostoevsky explores the title word crime in a broad sense, including crimes defined under the law such as murder, social crimes such as poverty, and crimes against humanity—bringing needless suffering upon oneself and others.

Two types of crime intersect in the character of Raskolnikov. He commits murder, a legal crime. He has a theory that extraordinary men can commit crimes, or violate moral boundaries, on their way to greatness without penalty. However, once he puts his theory into action, he finds that either it or he is flawed. His conscience tortures him. The murders he commits force him to recognize the suffering he has caused himself and others, beyond the murders themselves. Raskolnikov is often cruel to people who love him. He claims on numerous occasions to loathe all humankind, but his actions undermine his words while consistently demonstrating a hatred for himself. This is his psychological crime and punishment.

Svidrigaïlov has also committed illegal acts, including rape and murder. He has spent time in prison for debts. But overall, he suffers few external consequences for his actions. Like Raskolnikov, some of his crimes do not fall under the rule of law. His careless manipulation of others, such as his seduction of a married woman with children, is often very damaging to them. Still his conscience catches up with him, too, and is a major factor in his suicide.

Sonia's criminality is debatable. Prostitution fell in a gray area in mid-19th-century Russia. Previously considered a serious crime, it began to be viewed with greater tolerance once prostitution became regulated in 1843 via the "yellow ticket." This licensing system for prostitutes provided governmental oversight of prostitutes' health to curb the spread of venereal disease. However, an unregistered or infected prostitute could be arrested and detained. Regardless of whether it was a crime legally, it carried heavy societal consequences, demonstrated by Sonia's suffering.

Technically Luzhin is an upright citizen, a lawyer even, but his criminality can hardly be denied. He chooses Dounia to be his wife through her situation as Marfa Petrovna's governess. She is thus doubly "blessed" in his eyes: her reputation has been compromised by Svidrigaïlov's advances, and Marfa Petrovna has given sworn assurances of her purity. As a triple benefit, Dounia is poor. For all of these reasons, she is the perfect subject of his fantasies, a beautiful, righteous woman he can grind underneath his heel. The tortures he intends for her are only hinted at in the accusations of robbery he makes against Sonia.

As you might have guessed from the title, Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment is obsessed with crime, criminality, and vice. Like many of the best books, it asks more questions than it answers. As the novel unfolds, we are faced with a repulsive array of crimes, including murder and all kinds of child abuse. Some of the crimes are more subtle crimes of power and privilege, crimes against the poor, crimes of meanness, pettiness, and apathy, many of which, legally speaking, might not even be considered crimes. The novel's ending suggests that maybe even murderers can free themselves from criminal impulses and learn to truly love.

The crime Raskolnikov commits and the ramifications it has on his soul and community serve as the primary theme explored throughout the novel. It is revealed that Raskolnikov wrote a paper claiming how “extraordinary” people may operate outside the confines of morality to achieve greatness.

Raskolnikov's murdering the pawnbroker represents an attempt to test this theory and better society by removing a corrupt, greedy element. However, the remainder of the novel concerns philosophical and spiritual discussions on the possibility of moral rehabilitation in a world of crime and temptation.

The theme of suffering and punishment is predominant in the book. The book advances the idea that only commensurate punishment and suffering can put the condemned and guilty on the path to redemption. Repentance is not enough and must be backed by a genuine willingness to pay for one's sins. After Raskolnikov murders the old pawnbroker, his punishment begins almost immediately after. He suffers from crushing guilt, illness, and self-loathing. He cannot master his conscience, and in the end, he succumbs to it. His guilt and the triumph of his conscience mean he cannot get away with his crime. He betrays himself and therefore leads himself to be suspected by the authorities. This punishment however can only be expatiated by further punishment. Raskolnikov can only get reprieve and redemption if he confesses publicly to the police and suffers the embarrassment of being thought a fool with crazy ideas and a weak constitution, as well as suffer the disappointment of his family and friends, as well as the loss of his freedom.

Undoubtedly, Dostoevsky is a master artist when it comes to depicting the vast gamut of human suffering, from the physical torture of the human being to the terrifying anguish of the human soul. The scenes of physical punishment, such as Svidrigailov's whipping of his wife, the flogging of a horse to death by its drunken owner, or the violent scene of the dual murder, affect any sensitive reader of the novel. However, such incidents of purely corporal punishment pale in comparison with the scenes of psychological degradation, such as Sonia's humiliation when she turns to prostitution at the age of seventeen to support her drunken father's family, or Luzhin's false accusations against Sonia.

Poverty is ubiquitous in the St. Petersburg of Dostoevsky's novel. Almost every character in the novel—except Luzhin, Svidrigailov, and the police officials—is desperately poor, including the

Marmeladovs, the Raskolnikovs, Razumikhin, and various lesser characters. While poverty inherently forces families to bond together, Raskolnikov often attempts to distance himself from Pulcheria Alexandrovna and Dunya. He scolds his sister when he thinks that she is marrying to help him out financially; he also rejects Razumikhin's offer of a job. Dostoevsky's descriptions of poverty allow him to address important social issues and to create rich, problematic situations in which the only way to survive is through self-sacrifice. As a result, poverty enables characters such as Sonya and Dunya to demonstrate their strength and compassion.

Everyone in the novel is struggling for money and the pressing need of it serves as a constant reminder of unhappiness. Most striking are the poverty of Raskolnikov and that of Marmeladov and his family. Raskolnikov's poverty becomes part of his motivation for killing the pawnbroker, since he perceives of her death as a chance to get enough money to resume his education and make progress toward a better life. His poverty also, at least in his own mind, becomes a motivation for Dunya to marry Luzhin, though, of course, Dunya is motivated by her own poverty as well. The Marmeladovs' situation is obviously more severe. Marmeladov's drunkenness, Katerina Ivanovna's illness, and Sonya's turning to prostitution all vividly demonstrate the vicious cycle in which the economically and socially downtrodden are caught. Over the course of the novel, the causes, and consequences of this kind of poverty are made increasingly clear, as various characters make sacrifices and important decisions based on their desperate need for money. At the end of the novel, Svidrigailov's generosity changes the tone. Suddenly, and almost miraculously, everyone has enough money to do what he or she needs to do. One can interpret this sudden change either as an unrealistic deus ex machina—an obvious contrivance on the part of the author to salvage a hopeless situation for his or her characters—or as hopeful evidence of the power of faith, or at least good luck, to make the most important things in life possible.

We dare you to find a chapter in Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment without some form of the word "suffer" in it or without some person (or animal) suffering terrible physical and/or

psychological pain. Suffering, often strongly associated with poverty in this novel, is definitely a condition from which to escape. However, it is also proof of a person's goodness, and even a way to become "good." In Crime and Punishment, if a character is not suffering, they are making somebody else suffer. Sound depressing? It is. Luckily, this classic is not all gloom and doom—occasional patches of brightness and hope are there to be found, though you might have to look hard to see them.

Sufferings redeem as well as destroy an individual. Raskolnikov suffers from mental torture after killing two women. Even Sonya suffers materially because of her father's alcoholic addiction. The sufferings destroy Raskolnikov's mental capability. On the contrary, it redeems Sonya when she helps him. Sonya is a source of redemption for Raskolnikov. Moreover, suffering also means to suffer from financial and physical hardships. Marmeladov's addiction leads his family to suffer from poverty. Sonya is forced into prostitution for the same reason.

Dostoevsky sees suffering as a double-edged sword—it can destroy or redeem depending on the circumstances. Suffering springs from a number of sources throughout the novel: crime, illness and disease, poverty, cruelty, self-hatred, alienation, rejection, and failure. These different types of suffering often overlap. For Dostoevsky, the way characters respond to their own suffering, or the suffering of others often defines them.

Suffering in the novel often has religious connotations. Marmeladov "tortures" himself with alcohol in the hope of being forgiven by God in the afterlife, and Nikolay seeks the punishment for murder to atone for lesser sins. Sonia, like Christ, takes on the suffering of others through compassion. She is instrumental in Raskolnikov's redemption in prison. It is only when Raskolnikov confesses and submits himself to the suffering of punishment that his mental healing can begin. His cycle of sin, struggle, confession, and redemption is at the core of Christianity.

Every character in Crime and Punishment suffers from some degree of poverty, often with physical and moral consequences. Marmeladov suffers from uncontrollable alcoholism, forcing his family to suffer starvation, disease, and homelessness. Sonia is forced to work as a prostitute to support them and suffers the loss of her reputation. Raskolnikov barely has enough money to survive throughout the novel, but he frequently shares what he has with others who have even less.

In Crime and Punishment suffering is often psychological in nature: many characters face inner conflicts, particularly Raskolnikov and Svidrigaïlov, who struggle painfully with their consciences. Raskolnikov's suffering manifests itself in many ways. His crime and its desperate aftermath are a map of his pain. His dreams, such as the dream of the horse being beaten to death, reveal his terrible struggles within himself. In his interior monologues readers hear every detail as he obsesses in his own mind about how to cover up his crime or whether he should confess. Other characters suffer mental breakdowns or opt to attempt suicide when their suffering overwhelms them. Katerina's suffering eventually drives her mental breakdown and death.

Svidrigaylov is another despicable character who enjoys taking advantage of children's innocence and vulnerability. Despite his fifty years, he finds a sixteen-year-old to marry. He is attracted to her “childish eyes" and “modesty and tearful shyness" seems to think of the situation as a big joke. He also tells the story of a young thirteen-year-old girl whom he saw dancing with an expert while the public mocked her; her mother had thought that these were dancing lessons. "The little girl was confused and blushing and began to cry". These humiliating incidents become a great source of entertainment for him and the public; it is this humiliation, however, which ultimately crushes the child.

Svidrigaylov also has a couple dreams which reveal incidents involving young girls which he seems to have violated. His first dream is about a young girl lying in a coffin, with wet hair, and hands folded across her breast; she had drowned herself.

She was no more than fourteen, but that heart had been broken, and had destroyed itself, savagely wounded by the outrage that had amazed and horrified her young childish conscience, overwhelmed her soul, pure as an angel's, with unmerited shame, and torn from her a last cry of despair.

This passage embodies the suffering that these abused children must face. The innocent conscience is not prepared for such corruption and atrocity; children are able to endure some cruelty but when it destroys their self-worth, there are no longer any reasons for living. Svidrigaylov's second dream seems to be another indication that his conscience is bothering him. In this dream, he finds a wet girl crouching in a corner and decides to take care of her. This "neglected child" changes into a mocking "French harlot" and laughs a "monstrous and infinitely offensive" laugh. This change from purity to corruption is like the child's revenge on Svidrigaylov's conscience. In all these instances, the children had once been simple, innocent, and forgiving creatures, but the abuse and cruelty around them destroys their fragile beings and in some cases leads them to suicide.