

The Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival
presents a Study Guide for

Crime and Punishment

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From the novel by Fyodor Dostoevsk

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Characters in *Crime and Punishment*

Raskolnikov is the play's protagonist. A former student, Raskolnikov now lives in poverty and "thinks" instead of works. Raskolnikov committed the crime of the play's title by murdering an old pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanova and her sister, Lizaveta. His punishment during the action of the play is not trial or imprisonment, but the inner torment he endures while struggling to justify the murder. His rationalization stems from an article he published in which he suggests that certain "extraordinary" men should be exempt from punishment for crimes that are committed for and result in a higher good. Raskolnikov believes himself to be "extraordinary" and his journey within the play is towards the realization that he is not.

Porfiry is a police inspector who is investigating the murders of Alyona Ivanova and her sister, Lizaveta. Throughout the action of the play, Porfiry interrogates Raskolnikov about his relationship with the victims, and also debates the above-mentioned argument in Raskolnikov's article with him.

Sonia is a devout young woman who has become a prostitute in order to support her family, including her alcoholic father. Raskolnikov brings Sonia's dying father to her family's home and pays for the funeral with his entire savings. Raskolnikov falls in love with Sonia, whom he sees as a kindred spirit because they have both transgressed societal laws. Sonia's compassion and concern for his soul surprise Raskolnikov when he confesses his crime to her.

Other characters portrayed by the actors playing Porfiry and Sonia:

Alyona Ivanova—the old pawnbroker whom Raskolnikov kills.

Lizaveta—Alyona Ivanova's sweet, but simple-minded, sister, whom Raskolnikov also kills.

Marmeladov—Sonia's alcoholic father, who is aware that his drinking is ruining his family, but is unable to stop.

Pulcheria Alexandrovna—Raskolnikov's mother.

Koch—the man who discovers the bodies of Alyona Ivanova and Lizaveta.

Plot Summary

At the start of *Crime and Punishment*, Porfiry, a police investigator, questions Raskolnikov about his whereabouts in the days prior to the murder of an old pawnbroker to whom Raskolnikov had pawned his family's jewelry. Porfiry tells Raskolnikov that although he is not being charged with any crimes, he hopes that Raskolnikov's testimony will aid the investigation. During the interrogation, we learn that Raskolnikov is a former student who "thinks" rather than works and, therefore, lives in poverty. Porfiry brings up an article that Raskolnikov published in which he argues that men are either "ordinary" or "extraordinary," and that the latter should be exempt from punishment for crimes when their actions are performed in order to "benefit the whole of humanity."

The action of the play shifts from the present to the past as Raskolnikov relives the events of the previous days during the interrogation. In the first of these flashbacks, Sonia, a devout young woman, visits Raskolnikov to thank him for bringing her dying alcoholic father, Marmeladov, to her family's house rather than leave him on the street to die. Knowing that she has been forced to prostitute herself in order to support the family and her father's drinking habit, Raskolnikov asks what she will do now that her father has died. When Sonia says that she must continue selling her body for her family's sake, Raskolnikov questions how she can continue to make such sacrifices and yet still trust in God. Sonia notices Raskolnikov's poverty—which are apparent in his living conditions—and wonders why Raskolnikov gave up his entire savings to pay for Marmeladov's funeral.

In other flashbacks, a self-loathing Marmeladov tells Raskolnikov how Sonia provided him with money and how he suffers from the fact that she gave it to him without reproach.

Also in flashbacks, Raskolnikov, in desperation, pawns his father's watch to Alyona Ivanova, a heartless and unfair old pawnbroker, for much less than it is worth. She also charges him an exorbitant interest. Her good-natured, simpleton sister Lizaveta confesses to Raskolnikov that she will sneak out of the house to visit a friend (who turns out to be Sonia), and Raskolnikov takes her absence as his opportunity to murder Alyona Ivanova. Raskolnikov believes that he is an "extraordinary" man and that the murder is justifiable because he will use her money to help the poor. Unfortunately, Lizaveta returns home during the brutal axing of her sister, and in the heat of the moment, Raskolnikov murders her as well.

In the present, Raskolnikov visits Porfiry who is still trying to solve the murders. Porfiry questions Raskolnikov about his article in more depth, especially the idea that "extraordinary" men, such as Napoleon, whom Raskolnikov cites as an example, literally get away with murder and are justified in doing so. Porfiry inquires as to whether these men have consciences and suffer for their crimes and Raskolnikov replies, "Pain and suffering are inevitable for a person with intellect and heart."

Raskolnikov then visits Sonia at her home and asks how she can still trust in God when it is obvious to him that God neither cares about her sacrifices nor will ease her or her family's suffering. Obsessed with the idea of forgiveness and redemption, Raskolnikov asks Sonia to read the story of Lazarus to him from the Bible. She does so, from a copy given to her by Lizaveta, which incites Raskolnikov's guilt. He proposes that as he and Sonia have both transgressed social laws and are, therefore, outcasts, they should run away together in order to forget their crimes. Sonia replies that there is no true escape since "other people will always remind you." He leaves, promising, if he is able, to return and tell her who murdered Lizaveta.

Porfiry comes to Raskolnikov's room to confront him about the crime. A painter named Nikolai has confessed to the murders, but Porfiry knows that Nikolai is innocent. Porfiry is convinced of Raskolnikov's guilt, but still admires his inherently noble character and considers him to be a redeemable human being. He gives Raskolnikov an ultimatum: Raskolnikov must either turn himself in or Porfiry will arrest him by force. Porfiry points out that in turning himself in and thereby saving Nikolai, Raskolnikov will lessen his own sentence. Porfiry also stresses that Raskolnikov is too young to throw his life away for a failed theory, and that the suffering of imprisonment will make Raskolnikov a better person.

After Porfiry exits, Raskolnikov writes to his mother to warn her of his impending incarceration and to ask that she forgive him for having given the money she sent him to Sonia's family, noting that she might have done the same if she had seen their poverty. Raskolnikov then tries once more to justify the murders to himself: "wouldn't one tiny crime be wiped out by thousands of good deeds?"

Raskolnikov revisits Sonia who asks him if he believes the story of Lazarus. She finally understands that Raskolnikov brought her father to the house as he was dying so that Marmeladov could ask her forgiveness. Raskolnikov replies that, in coming to her today, he, himself, did not intend to ask for her forgiveness, however he feels like he has. He then forces her to guess that he was Lizaveta's murderer. Instead of being horrified by the news, Sonia kisses and comforts Raskolnikov, thinking that he committed the crime out of desperation for Alyona's money. Her reaction torments Raskolnikov, who finally admits that he did not kill out of hunger, to pay off his loans, or even to better humanity. Instead, he committed the crime because of an internal power struggle: "I needed to know that I was something more than an insect in the web of life...like everyone else." Raskolnikov realizes that prior to the murders he was just an "ordinary" man, not "extraordinary," as he had thought. Raskolnikov believes that he has condemned himself because of his actions and wonders if he may be redeemed. Sonia urges him to confess his sins so that he can be forgiven.

Raskolnikov, beaten by his own failure and questioning his own candidacy for redemption, goes to Porfiry and confesses to the crime.

Discussion Questions

Standards: LA.C.1.4; LA.C.3.4; LA.E.2.4

1. One of the central themes of *Crime and Punishment* is that of redemption/salvation via suffering, especially in relation to Christian teachings. In what way is the biblical story of Lazarus relevant to the personal journeys of Raskolnikov and Marmeladov?
2. Do you think that Porfiry is aware of Raskolnikov's guilt from the start of the play? If so, in what ways is Porfiry playing a game of psychological "cat and mouse" in order to trap Raskolnikov? And, why do you think that Raskolnikov cannot seem to resist discussing the crime with Porfiry, the very person he should avoid?
3. In Raskolnikov's article, he argues that "extraordinary" men, who are often the world's leaders, have a right to commit crimes when they must do so for the benefit of humanity. Are you for or against this argument? Provide examples from history or current world politics, if possible, to support your argument.

History and Influences

Crime and Punishment—the Book

The Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival production of *Crime and Punishment* is based on the book of the same name by Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky. The story first appeared serially in a Russian magazine in 1866 before being published as a book a year later. Scholars generally regard *Crime and Punishment* as Dostoevsky's masterpiece.

Fyodor Dostoevsky—the Author

Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in 1821 in Moscow to a middle-class family. Although educated in engineering at a military academy, Dostoevsky chose to embark upon a career in literature. His early efforts were greeted with critical acclaim but were cut short when he and his elder brother were arrested in April 1849 for association with a political discussion group. As he stood in front of the firing squad waiting to die, a last minute pardon arrived from the Tsar and Dostoevsky spent the next four years in exile at a prison in Siberia, followed by four years of compulsory military service. The time spent among criminals certainly influenced the remainder of his life's work, including *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky's life was characterized by a long struggle with poverty (in large part due to his gambling addiction), and with grief over the loss of family members. By the latter part of his life, Dostoevsky's published works had granted him a place in the hearts of the Russian people and in the history of great literature. At the time of his death in 1881, Dostoevsky was hailed as a great literary hero and his funeral attracted thousands of mourners.

A Brief History of Nineteenth-Century Russia

During Dostoevsky's lifetime, Russia underwent a period of major upheaval characterized by political uncertainty and war. The country suffered from a poor economy, a growing and unsustainable population, a lack of industry, and the constant threat of foreign invasion and domestic revolutions. Shortly before Dostoevsky's birth in 1821, the Napoleonic Wars and the resulting influx of Western ideas into Russia gave rise to the beginning of a political revolution that continued well into the next century.

Challenged by a revolt early in his reign, Tsar Nicholas I became suspicious of the Russian people's loyalty, and so instituted a system of rigorous censorship as well as a secret police with a wide network of spies and informers. No one was to question the authority of the Tsar or the Orthodox Church. The forced nationalism increased the already present division within the people as to what direction Russia should take: the advancement of Western civilization or a return to their traditional Slavic past. In spite of the political climate (or, perhaps, because of it), literature and the arts, especially music and ballet, flourished during this period. However, during the reign of Nicholas I, Russia continued to lose power on a global scale due to industrial setbacks, a poor economy and conflicts in the Crimean.

After Nicholas I's death in 1855, the new Tsar, Alexander II, established a series of political, economic and social reforms that radically changed Russia, though not immediately for the better, as he had hoped. In 1861 Alexander II freed more than 20 million serfs in a failed attempt to improve the economy and strengthen the country's military; the resulting increase in poverty of the newly freed serfs eventually led to more uprisings. In addition to domestic challenges, Alexander II also faced foreign disputes, primarily a clash with the Ottoman Empire that increased tensions with European nations and, once again, lessened Russia's status as a major player in world politics. During this time of upheaval, a group of social revolutionaries, the Nihilists, emerged on the scene and challenged the Russian establishment and its values, including the autocracy of the Tsar. The Narodnik Movement, as it came to be called, resulted in the assassinations of several government officials, most notably Tsar Alexander II, himself, who was killed in 1881, the same year as Dostoevsky's death.

Complete Lesson Plans for Grades 9-12

1. **Objective:** Students critically analyze a theatrical performance and communicate their opinions about it in a clear and concise manner.

Standards: LA.B.1.4; LA.B.2.4; LA.E.2.4; TH.D.1.4

Materials Needed: Paper and a writing instrument, or a computer

Assignment: Students write a mock newspaper article reviewing the performance of *Crime and Punishment*. Students should include the following topics in their article: a critical analysis of the actors' performances and directorial choices, and the effectiveness of the set, lighting, and costumes in enhancing the performance.

2. **Objective:** Students utilize research and writing techniques to explore a historical and dramatic topic.

Standards: LA.A.2.4; LA.B.1.4; LA.B.2.4; TH.C.1.4

Materials Needed: Access to research materials (the internet, books); paper and a writing instrument, or a computer

Assignment: The personal life experiences of authors often influence their writing. Students research the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky and write an essay about how his life affected his work, using specific examples relevant to *Crime and Punishment*.