
The Questions Raised In The Novel Crime And Punishment

Why would someone murder another? What goes through someone's mind after committing murder? And how are murderers created? Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky tackled these questions in 1866, precisely 154 years ago, in what would become one of the most renowned books of Russian literature: 'Crime and Punishment.'

Overview of the text

Analysis: This novel follows the story of Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, a young law student in Saint Petersburg. At the start of the story, we read that he ran out of funds to continue his university studies because he lived in abject poverty. A message from his mother, Pulcheria, only adds to his misery because he realises how much his family sacrificed for his studies. After selling all that he had to a greedy, elderly lady, he became desperate to get out of his poverty, so he resolved on a plan to murder and rob her. But the impact of carrying out this act proves to be more monstrous than he thought it would have been.

Context

Analysis: This bleak portrait of Russian society at that time reflects the Dostoevsky's life experiences and evolving ideas. As a writer who abandoned a promising military career, Dostoevsky focused on socialism and reform. He joined a group of intellectuals known as the Petrashevsky Circle to discuss revolutionary texts which were forbidden by the government. Upon being caught, Dostoyevsky and other members of this group were arrested. He was sentenced to death. Fortunately, it was only a mock execution. The next four years of his life was in a Siberian labour camp where he experience where he became pessimistic of the notions of social reform, while being interested towards religious and spiritual concerns.

Why this is a relevant choice for the course

Analysis: Crime and Punishment should be a text studied in the English ATAR course because there is a myriad of themes, issues, ideas and concepts which the author has either challenged or reinforced. When reading Crime and Punishment, I had to examine the different interpretations and perspectives of each character. I was able to do this because each character was given their own unique voice. Dostoevsky was influenced by and has influenced great thinkers of his time and of the times ahead. Because of his influence, we can easily compare his works with other prolific authors even if the work is a whole different genre. After reading the novel, I was contemplating and challenging the perspectives, values and attitudes of some characters within the text, which is what Unit 4 of the English ATAR course aims us to do. Through Raskolnikov, I had the opportunity to further learn about certain aspects of human experiences; in this case, the thoughts of a criminal. I was engaged in the ethical dilemmas that Raskolnikov faced, considered the reasons for his actions and the implications of his decisions. I have never read Russian literature before, so reading Crime and Punishment allowed me to make connections between the experiences of the characters in the novel. In the end, I was able to appreciate and empathise with the cultural beliefs, attitudes and values presented in

Intertextual links: Connections to other texts

The works by other contemporary European authors influenced Dostoevsky's writings when he became an author. During his exile in Siberia, the only book he had access to was the Bible, which he practically dissected during his time in the prison camp. Unsurprisingly, the Bible turned out to be profoundly influential on not only Crime and Punishment but many other of his famous works in later years. Through the novella 'Notes from Underground,' he put forward his conviction that utopian Western philosophies (such as those of William Godwin, who's Mary Shelley's father) could never satisfy the contradictory yearnings of the human soul. So basically, he challenged the philosophies of William Godwin which is what Mary Shelley did through her novel, 'Frankenstein'. Going back to 'Notes from Underground', 'Crime and Punishment' picked up on many of the same themes in 'Notes from Underground'. In many ways, the novel follows a familiar storyline where a promising youth is seduced and corrupted by the dangers of urban life. But its social critique cuts far more profoundly than that. Before he committed the murder, Raskolnikov rationalises that the woman's death would be a net benefit to society not only him.

Ideas/Issues

In doing so, he reverberates the doctrines of utilitarianism socialism and egoism. He believed that his intelligence allowed him to transcend moral boundaries and commit acts such as murder. This, in turn, made Raskolnikov cut himself off from humanity.

Perspectives offered - Who is given a voice in the text? Who is privileged/marginalised? What values and attitudes are reinforced or challenged?

Conclusion

Analysis: One of the most remarkable things about 'Crime and Punishment' is its ability to thrill despite the shocking details of the murder being revealed in the first act. Raskolnikov's crime is apparent, but it is through Dostoyevsky's thrilling account of the foreboding psychological, social and physical turmoil that we learn the true nature of his crime and punishment – and the possibility of his redemption.