

Layman 1

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An Analysis of Selected Dream Sequences in Fyodor Dostoevsky's

Crime and Punishment

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, the theme of dreams plays an important role, because dreams reveal aspects of the subconscious, providing insight into the characters' behavior. There are multiple types of dreams in the novel; the most useful are the obvious waking and sleeping dreams. Though the word *dream* also has a figurative interpretation in the novel, as in Raskolnikov's "dream" that he embodies the "extraordinary," this paper explores only the significance of Raskolnikov's and Svidrigailov's most obvious, literal, waking or sleeping dreams. Dostoevsky's use of an omniscient narrator allows the reader to view the subconscious minds of Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov through dream sequences. In the novel, both waking and sleeping dreams have a psychological relevance, "since the dream allows portrayal of the unconscious of a character" (Mortimer 107). Thus, in a sense, dreams and the subconscious are closely related. These dreams primarily serve to provide insight into a character. Kerry McSweeney agrees that "in Crime and Punishment the principal use of dreams is to help reveal the psychological depths of characters" (par. 21). A character's dreams show relevance not only of past events, but also signify an interpretation of the future, as well. Ruth Mortimer contends that, "the 'literary' dream, as a foreshadowing or prophetic inspiration, often serves in Dostoevsky to enlighten the reader or the character himself"

(107). For Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov, dreams have an evident kinship to reality, expressing aspects of their respective personalities that neither can consciously recognize. Dostoevsky's narrator asserts that "[i]n pathological states, dreams are often distinguished by an uncommon vividness and sharpness of focus and by an extraordinary conjunction with reality. The . . . dreamer himself . . . could never have invented them awake" (52). Raskolnikov's dreams ultimately come to represent his salvation, while Svidrigailov's dreams signify his doom.

An examination of Raskolnikov's dream about the horse reveals his subconscious fears and reinforces his conscious feelings of helplessness or impotence. In this dream, a juvenile Raskolnikov and his father encounter Mikolka brutally beating an old horse to death to the delight of a crowd of peasants. The dream's country setting is oppressive and foreboding: "[i]t was getting on toward the evening after a dull and sultry day...a small wood darkened the rim of the sky" (Dostoevsky 2). Raskolnikov, in an attempt to seek out security, subconsciously returns to his childhood, but "the unconscious attempt to relive a moment of that innocent happiness fails" (Mortimer 109). The sight of the horse being brutalized fills the young Raskolnikov with conflicting feelings: "the child's . . . emotions are torn between pity and a furious need to avenge the mare's murder" (Rowe 109).

The three main characters in the horse dream all reflect aspects of Raskolnikov's personality. Raymond J. Wilson III suggests that Mikolka represents Raskolnikov's ability to brutally murder, the image of Raskolnikov as a child symbolizes a compassion for others, and the character of the father embodies a detached Raskolnikov (par. 4). This detachment could also be characterized as Raskolnikov's narcissism. Contradictory to

the image of Raskolnikov as a child, the imagery of the horse being beaten to death represents the death of Raskolnikov's compassion for others. Raskolnikov is, at the time, a wholly self-absorbed person. He is even unable to truly feel sympathy for his own family's hardships; he feels badly not for them, but rather for himself, due to his own shortcomings; thus, he is the center of all of his own thoughts. Though the father is shown to be kind to his son in the dream, he is completely unable to mitigate his son's sadness and fear at seeing the horse killed. Ruth Mortimer states that "the childhood experience in the dream evolves as one of intense fear and suffering, from which even his father cannot shield him" (109). This concept of impotence is transferred into Raskolnikov's waking life too. Raskolnikov wants to effect change in his life, but seems powerless to do so; this powerlessness seems to be both self-imposed and forced upon him by circumstance. Ironically, in spite of his own beliefs, the decision to murder actually affirms Raskolnikov's lack of power.

The horse itself also has relevance in the dream, symbolizing "the struggling mare can . . . be read as a transmogrification of the situations of the sacrificial women to whom Raskolnikov has been exposed--the prostitute Sonya, her mother Katerina Ivanovna, his sister Dunya, and the drunken girl on the street" (McSweeney, par. 20). Also present in the horse dream are uncaring and unfeeling peasants, who laugh and goad Mikolka as he beats the horse to death. Reminiscent of the bar patrons who laughed at Marmeladov, these crowds reappear in other dreams and could be representative of Raskolnikov's feelings of isolation. This isolation, though, is a self-imposed isolation, and seems to perpetuate feelings of distinction from the rest of humanity. From this isolation, a theory of the "extraordinary" is born. Raskolnikov recognizes the importance

of this dream: “[s]uch dreams, pathological dreams, make a powerful impression on a man’s disordered, already aroused organism, and are always remembered for a long time”(Dostoevsky 52).

In examination of Svidrigailov’s dreams, his depravity becomes further evident, and one is able to know that he has subconscious feelings of guilt. The dreams come on the eve of his suicide and ultimately cause his suicide. Ruth Mortimer concurs that “[t]he psychological value of the dream is evident, since the dream allows the portrayal of the unconscious of a character” (107). Svidrigailov’s memorable dream comes in three parts and reveals his varying states of consciousness. In the first part, semi-conscious, he discovers a mouse crawling through his bed clothes; the second, a type of day-dream, features a coffin in a flower-filled room containing the body of a fourteen-year-old female suicide victim; and in the third part, the subconscious dream, he attempts to help a lost five-year-old girl. The dream sequence “reveals the loathsome depths of Svidrigailov’s being, as well as a powerful degree of repressed self-revulsion” (McSweeney n3).

In the first part of Svidrigailov’s dream sequence, the “slithering” mouse could be seen as a foreshadowing tool. The presence of the mouse portends the confrontation between Svidrigailov and his inner self, which leads to his suicide, and indicates to the reader a bearing of Svidrigailov’s soul. Svidrigailov is the rodent, thus his disgust of the mouse is not only ironic, but also indicative of his self-hatred.

The next dream tells of a girl who “was only fourteen, but her life had been broken..., outraged by an offense that had horrified . . . her childlike sensibility and infused that soul of angelic purity with a sense of undeserved shame” (Dostoevsky 483).

This dream “substantiates the rumor . . . that a girl of [14] had drowned herself after having been brutally raped by [Svidrigailov]” (McSweeney n3). Svidrigailov’s subconscious mind forces him to view the destruction of an innocent girl. This dream reveals the beginning of Svidrigailov’s subconscious guilt. Water is used in this sequence as a symbol for his impending doom. Svidrigailov must share the suicidal fate of the fourteen year old girl. Though it normally has a positive connotation throughout the novel, “[w]ater holds the terror of death for the corrupt Svidrigailov” (Gibian, par. 9). After awaking from the dream, Svidrigailov states, “Ah . . . the signal! The water is rising” (Dostoevsky 483). Svidrigailov seems to welcome his imminent death, realizing it is deserved.

Svidrigailov’s dream about the five-year-old girl in the hotel reveals a duality in his character. His initial response to finding a shivering young girl is to want to help her. However, the true nature of Svidrigailov’s disease, his constitutional evil, pedophilia, is exposed in the young girl’s expressions, which bore the look of “a harlot’s face, the brazen face of a venal French whore” (Dostoevsky 485). In some ways, Svidrigailov’s dreams bring about a sense of redemption for him, because now he accepts his fate; he attempts to redeem himself by ridding the world of his presence. Prior to experiencing his dreams, the reader knows Svidrigailov to be an utter nihilist, who offers no apologies for his criminal behavior and, in fact, delights in reliving it in his mind. In his dreams, though, more so than anywhere else, his subconscious guilt is evident. For this reason, Svidrigailov is a complex villain: while capable of committing humanity’s worst crimes, he at least shows an awareness of his inherent depravity. Thus, his dreams, which reveal the guilty subconscious mind of Svidrigailov, necessitate his suicide and thereby offer a

sense of his redemption. This is the only cure for his life's afflictions, for his pedophilia and his nihilism.

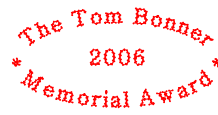
Raskolnikov's epilogue dream is symbolic of his redemption and his ultimate acceptance of faith. Raskolnikov dreams of a plague: a world of nihilists, the faithless. His dream shows "people obsessed by reason and will losing contact with the soil . . ." (Gibian, par. 23). A handful of people chosen to live were the believers, people like Sonya. Shaw relates, "The dream is Apocalyptic in the strict sense: it is a vision of the general destruction of evil, to be followed by an age in which only the good remain alive" (par. 25). People afflicted by the plague "did not know whom to condemn or whom to acquit" (Dostoyevsky 519). Interestingly, in this dream, Raskolnikov is not a participant: "[the dream] is experientially much less vivid than any other of Raskolnikov's dreams" (Shaw, par. 26). The lack of vividness in the dream connotes a change in Raskolnikov's mental health, his outlook on life. Dostoevsky's narrator asserts that "[i]n pathological states, dreams are often distinguished by an uncommon vividness . . ." (Dostoevsky 52). Thus, the reader has witnessed Raskolnikov's unconscious transformation; his transformation foreshadows his redemption. Ruth Mortimer agrees that "Raskolnikov has begun, unconsciously, to fit himself into society once more, to think again in terms of humanity" (113).

This dream is ironic for Raskolnikov, for it is the "extraordinary men" who are unable to make it in society. If all men were extraordinary, and therefore had the right to make their own laws, then a functioning society could not exist. "According to Raskolnikov's theory, sickness for the nonextraordinary man, the criminal, should simply pass off," but this does not happen (Shaw, par. 29). Thus, Raskolnikov has disproved his

own theory of the “extraordinary” or at least proven himself to be nonextraordinary.

The concept of the extraordinary is undermined by being carried out to its absurd extreme and thus, invalidated. This is perhaps the novel’s most important dream because it reveals much about Raskolnikov. In fact, this dream dispels much of what the reader has learned of Raskolnikov thus far. Raskolnikov proves that he is not a nihilist: that the ends do not justify the means and that humans are obligated to one another if society is to function. A man whose only duty is to himself will meet an end similar to Svidrigailov’s. No longer do we see a self-absorbed and unrepentant recluse, but rather a man who now embraces compassion, one who is capable of empathy. However, if the story’s ending is to be accepted, one must believe that Raskolnikov was never the devout nihilist that Svidrigailov was, or else he would have shared Svidrigailov’s fate.

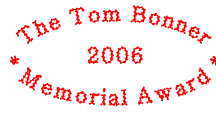
The interpretation of dreams in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s is useful because it provides insight into a character by allowing the reader to analyze the character’s subconscious thoughts. Dreams and the subconscious share a close relationship, as one is able to view a character’s subconscious in his dreams. In Ruth Mortimer’s words, “[t]he psychological value of the dream is evident . . . *unconscious* motivation, much more significant than *conscious*, may be illustrated rather than stated . . .” (107). Through this use of dreams as a literary technique, Dostoevsky is able to convey a character’s true nature; and from an analysis of dreams, the reader is able to better understand the impetus for a character’s actions. Thus, it is clear that “[t]he technique of the dream may be found extraordinarily relevant to . . . the psychological . . . problems with which Dostoevsky is involved” (Mortimer 107). Essentially, the novel’s allegory is expressed in the dreams of its characters: for Raskolnikov, dreams symbolize man’s ability to find



Layman 8

salvation after embracing humanity's evils, but for Svidrigailov, an unrepentant nihilist whose view of eternity is a bathhouse full of spiders, dreams symbolize a depth of human depravity for which no form of salvation can exist.





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