



Narrative Tempo, Linguistic Patterns and Materiality: A Close Reading of the Crime Scene in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

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Abstract: *Crime and Punishment*, written by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and published in 1866, is one of the most remarkable books ever written on Crime Fiction and the psychology of crime. While this masterpiece has many critically acclaimed sections, one of the standout scenes is the scene of the crime where Rodion Raskolnikov, a destitute and desperate former student goes on to murder Alyona Ivanovna, an old moneylender woman and then, Lizaveta Ivanovna, her sister. This paper intends to show through a close reading of the scene of crime that there are many attributes to this scene, from the varying pace of narration and distinct syntactical and grammatical patterns, to the fascinating range of material objects that come into view during the scene. The scene is full of uncanny thoughts that Raskolnikov has, which pave the way for a constant shift between the demon and the human inside Raskolnikov, and we have been taken along with him on a journey and consequently, have been implicated in the act. The murder of Lizaveta upsets the entire idea of the murder as it was unpremeditated and it takes the already graphic depiction of violence to another new level. The absolute vulnerability of Lizaveta during the murder could not be missed by Raskolnikov and it drives him crazy. He starts questioning his deed frantically and wants to run away from the scene. This paper shall attempt a detailed close reading of the scene of crime while paying special attention to these aspects.

Keywords: Crime, Psychology, Morality, Dilemma, Guilt, Remorse.

In the shadowed alleys of St. Petersburg, where the line between morality and transgression blurs, lies the heart of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. This psychological thriller unfolds with Rodion Raskolnikov, a destitute student tormented by his own philosophical justifications, who orchestrates a chilling murder. The crime scene – a cramped, oppressive pawnbroker's apartment—becomes a crucible for Raskolnikov's spiraling guilt and existential dread, setting the stage for a harrowing exploration of the human psyche and the consequences of a theory taken too far. Dostoevsky masterfully crafts a narrative that is not only a study of criminality but an introspective journey through the labyrinth of conscience.

“As on the previous occasion, the door opened the merest slit, and again two sharp, suspicious eyes fastened him with their gaze out of blindness. At that point Raskolnikov lost his head and almost made a fatal blunder.” (*Crime and Punishment* 92). The scene starts with the reminder of the previous instance when Raskolnikov was there, and the sharp eyes of Alyona Ivanovna almost made him commit a blunder. He had planned everything to perfection for this very moment, but when it manifested into reality, Raskolnikov panicked. He was apprehensive and lacked confidence and pulled the door towards himself, almost dragging Alyona with the door. “He began as familiarly as he could, though his voice would not obey him and kept breaking and trembling” (92). He tried to speak, but jittered and all the planning that he made for so long seemed to falter at the moment of execution. “I’ve ... brought you something ... but look, we’d better go over there ... where it’s light” (92). He was speaking this with much difficulty and walked straight into the room without her permission. At this moment, Alyona too, after the initial moment of shock, was able to speak. “Good Lord! What do you want? ... Who are you? What’s your business?” (93). The pauses of both Raskolnikov and Alyona are worth noting here. Raskolnikov’s mind seems to be in a terrible mess at this moment and his ability to think rationally, it seems, has been cut off in the heat of the moment. “For heaven’s sake, Alyona Ivanovna ... You know me ... Raskolnikov ... Look, I’ve brought something to pawn, the thing I said I’d bring the other day ...” (93), and he held out the pledge to her. Rather than introducing himself with a calm head, Raskolnikov, due to the present condition of his mind, was only able to speak and justify his presence there in this manner. Throughout the scene, whenever Raskolnikov speaks, he stutters.

Alyona Ivanovna glanced at the pledge briefly, but immediately fastened her eyes on Raskolnikov with a “nasty, attentive and suspicious” look. “About a minute passed: he even thought he could see in her eyes something akin to a mocking smile, as though she had already guessed everything. He felt he was losing his head, that he was almost on the point of terror, terror such that were she to have gone on looking at him like that without saying a word for another thirty seconds he would have run away from her.” (93). Silence speaks for itself, and Raskolnikov felt it strongly during this moment. The nasty stare of the old woman scared him to such an extent that he felt like running away. This is a glimpse inside Raskolnikov’s mind which is still not ready to murder the old woman and in a dilemma. And this moment of silence and fright made him say something he did not intend to, which “had suddenly escaped from him, somehow of its own accord” (93). He said, “What are you staring at me like that for, as if you didn’t recognize me? If you want it, take it, and if not – I’ll go to someone else. I haven’t the time for this.” (93). Although unintended, this moment acted as an ice-breaker and the old woman came back to herself. Stretching out her hand, she took the silver cigarette-case from Raskolnikov and asked him why he was so pale. “It’s fever,” he replied abruptly, “One can’t help looking pale ... if one doesn’t get anything to eat.” (93). At this point, he was barely able to get the words out and his strength was failing him again. As the old woman attempted to untie the ribbon on the case, she turned towards the window in search of more light. It is worth mentioning that the narrator tells us here that all the windows in her apartment are closed, despite the stifling heat. This worked in favor of Raskolnikov. He undid his coat and freed the axe from its loop, but “held it in place with his right hand under the garment.” (94). During the whole scene, there is an obsession with objects and details. Every single detail, even the minutest one, has been given to us with a vivid description of it. Raskolnikov’s hands were “horribly weak,” and with

each passing moment he felt more “numb and wooden”. He was scared that he would lose his grip on the axe and drop it. His head started to go round. Right from the moment the door was opened, to this moment, Raskolnikov’s strength seems to diminish with each passing moment. But, as the old woman struggled to unwrap the case and exclaimed in annoyance, a sudden surge of strength flashed into him and he brought the axe down on the old woman. “There was not another second to be lost. He took the axe right out, swung it up in both hands, barely conscious of what he was doing, and almost without effort, almost mechanically, brought the butt of it down on the old woman’s head. At that moment he had practically no strength left. But as soon as he brought the axe down, new strength was born within him.” (94). It is interesting to note that while committing the murder, he was “barely conscious” and “mechanical”. Right after Raskolnikov hits the old woman with the axe, there is a detailed description of her hairs - bareheaded, scanty, light-colored, graying hair smeared thickly with oil, “plaited into a rat’s tail and gathered together under the remains of a horn comb which jutted out at the nape of her neck” (94). The blow landed smack on the crown of her head, something made easy by her smallness. She cried out faintly, and fell to the floor, but managed to raise both arms to her head. It is interesting to note that she was still holding the pledge in one hand. At that point, it felt as if the beast inside Raskolnikov woke up and with all its might, and he landed her another blow, and another, each time with the butt and on the crown of the head. “The blood gushed out as from an upturned glass, and her body collapsed backwards.” (94). This graphic description of the scene makes the readers feel a sense of detachment from Raskolnikov at this point, which will change by the end of the scene. Raskolnikov stepped back, allowed her to fall and at once bent down over her face, only to find that she was dead. “Her eyes were goggling out of her head as though they might burst from it, while her forehead and all the rest of her features were crumpled and distorted in a convulsive spasm.” (95). This extremely graphic imagery of the scene of violence disgusts the reader and the feeling of hatred towards this mad man continues to grow. He put the axe beside the old woman and began to search her right pocket, while being extremely careful not to get the welling blood on his hand. This shows us that he was now in full possession of his faculties, had no blackouts or dizziness now, but his hands were still shaking. There is an interesting pattern of Raskolnikov gaining and losing strength, getting barely conscious to being in full possession of his faculties. Till the point he brings the axe down on Alyona, he is constantly losing strength, and suddenly, as soon as we start getting apprehensive of Raskolnikov’s ability to commit the murder, he brings down the axe on the old lady. Although he is barely conscious while he brings the axe down, a new strength is born into him as soon as he brought the axe down. This pattern of gaining and losing consciousness and strength continues throughout the scene.

It is also intriguing to note that the Raskolnikov doing the act is not the same as the one who recalling the act. Later, he remembered that he was “very careful and thorough, doing his utmost not to get any blood on himself” (95), while we know that it was far cry from what really happened. It seems as if the Raskolnikov here and the Raskolnikov from the future are two different persons. The narrative strategy of Raskolnikov recalling things later has been repeated a couple of times during the scene and several times in the novel. This is perhaps because the novel is based on the idea of simultaneity, which means that the same temporal moment is inhabited by multiple levels of consciousness. Raskolnikov is experiencing the moment as well as reflecting on the moment from the future, both at the same time. He took the keys and ran into the bedroom at once.

There is a fascinating, vivid description of all the objects present in the room at that time. It was a very small room, which contained “an enormous case full of icons”. Against the second wall was “a large clean bed, with a quilted silk coverlet made up of patchwork”. Against the third wall, there was “a chest of drawers”. Another strange thing happened to Raskolnikov at this point: while fitting the keys in the locks, “a convulsive shiver seemed to run through him, once again he suddenly felt like abandoning the whole undertaking and going away” (95). Moments like these redeem Raskolnikov in our eyes, and make us wonder if this person is, in reality, as horrible as it seems. But this feeling inside Raskolnikov only lasted for a moment: it was too late for him to go. He even “smiled an ironic smile at himself” (95), but then suddenly another, anxious thought hit him hard – that the old woman might still be alive. Abandoning the keys and the chest of drawers, he ran back to the body, grabbed the axe and swung it up again on the old woman, but did not bring it down. There was no doubt that she was dead. He bent down, examined her again to see that her “skull had been smashed, and was even dislocated slightly to one side” (95). He wanted to touch it, but withdrew his hand quickly – “he did not need to do that in order to see what was what” (95). At this point, we, as readers, feel that Raskolnikov has completely lost it. In the meantime, a whole puddle of blood had come welling out. He noticed a thin piece of cord around her neck, soaked in blood – and he tried to pull it straight off her body, but was unable to do so. In his impatience he again swung the axe up in order to bring it down and cut the cord right there and then, on her body, but had not the courage to do it, and with difficulty, after fiddling about for about two minutes, was able to sever the cord without using the axe – but got blood on both his hands in the process. He pulled the cord out – it was her purse. Another elaborate description of the cord and the purse follows – “On the cord there were two crucifixes, one made of cypress and the other of copper, with, in addition, a small enamel icon; and right there together with them hung a small, grease-stained chamois-leather purse with a steel rim and ring. The purse was filled very tightly; without examining it, Raskolnikov stuffed it in his pocket, flung the crucifixes on the old woman’s breast and, grabbing the axe this time, rushed back into the bedroom.” (96). Apart from the obsession with objects and details, another thing that stands out is the behavior of Raskolnikov during the entire scene. At one moment, he is human, thinking of the futility of his actions and planning of abandoning the whole enterprise. But, the very next moment, he becomes the devil, smashing Alyona’s head frantically and smiling ironically at himself.

Raskolnikov was in a frantic hurry and this made him take wrong decisions. He grabbed the keys and began to fuss with them. None would fit in any of the locks. He would see that a key was the wrong one, yet in his frenzy, he kept thrusting it in. Suddenly he remembered that “this large key with serrated bit” (96) could not possibly belong to the chest of drawers, as this same thought came to him during his last visit. He abandoned the chest and got down under the bed, as “he was aware that in old women’s dwellings that is the place where such boxes are usually kept” (96). He was right – he found a chest which was “nearly a yard in length, with a bulging lid, upholstered in red morocco and inlaid with steel studs” (96). The serrated key fitted perfectly and opened it. He found a “white sheet, a hare-skin coat covered with red packing material, a silk dress, a shawl and rags” (96) stacked layer by layer. Seeing all this, the first thing he did was to start to rub his hands on the red-silk packing material and think, “It’s red, so it won’t show the blood so much” (97). This was the moment when he was literally living the insanity. He immediately realized, “Good God! Am I going

crazy, or what?” (97). As soon as he moved the pile of rags, he came upon a plethora of things – a gold watch, bracelets, chains, earrings, hatpins and the like. They were undoubtedly all the pledges, both “redeemed and unredeemed” (97). He tried to stuff all of them without investigating too much, but he did not manage to take many.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of footsteps and “he stopped what he was doing, and went as still as a corpse” (97). There was a “barely audible cry” (97) followed by a dead silence. Raskolnikov grabbed the axe and ran from the bedroom only to find Lizaveta there. She had a large bundle in her hands and was “staring in rigid horror at her murdered sister” (97). Her face was white as a handkerchief and she was apparently unable to utter a sound. Seeing Raskolnikov, she began to quiver like a leaf, and her features worked spasmodically: she raised one arm, began to open her mouth, but still could not scream. She backed away in a corner, short of breath, still unable to utter a word. As Raskolnikov rushed towards her, her lips grew contorted like children when they are frightened. There was an absolute resignation from Lizaveta, to an extent that she did not even raise her hands properly to protect herself – she merely raised her left arm to stop the axe away from her face, just as children do to ward off something which they are frightened of. There was no self-defense from Lizaveta – there was only the absolute vulnerability of the victim, as if there was not the least glimmer of hope left. Following that, there is another graphic depiction of violence – “The blow landed right on her skull, blade-first, and instantly split open the whole upper part of her forehead, almost to the crown of her head. She fairly crashed to the floor.” (98). This unplanned murder of Lizaveta is significant, as it upsets Raskolnikov’s entire planning of the murder. The crucial difference between the two murders is that Raskolnikov sees Lizaveta and her expressions. There is a vivid description of Lizaveta’s face in the scene and the word “face” is repeated often. There is something about her face - a childlike, innocent quality which would bring tremendous guilt with it for Raskolnikov in the times to come. There is a certain vulnerability about her face which Raskolnikov could not miss. The absolute resignation from her side would make Raskolnikov feel guilty and haunt him for long. The act of murder exposed him to the vulnerability in Lizaveta’s face, and by not resisting the murder, Lizaveta brought the full weight of the guilt onto Raskolnikov, which weighs up very heavily on him later. With Lizaveta comes guilt, and with guilt comes repentance. The moment you kill someone, you kill yourself. This moment of rupture changes you entirely, and you cannot be your old self again. Some part of you dies permanently. The rational cause was gone with the murder of Lizaveta and Raskolnikov now had to deal with something unpremeditated. He could justify Alyona’s murder to his mind as much as he wanted, but he could not justify this second, unplanned murder of Lizaveta. Even for us as readers, this murder seems to be the more unforgiveable one.

The pace of narration, which has been slow and focused on every single detail until this point picks up a bit of steam from here on. Quite evidently, terror was gaining an increasing hold over Raskolnikov. He felt a sudden urge to escape the place, after the murder of Lizaveta. The simple feeling of horror and revulsion at what he had done made him ponder over the worth of his act and he felt that he would have given up the whole undertaking had he known the “difficulties of the situation and the monstrous absurdity of it” (98). He was no longer thinking of the chest or the other rooms of the apartment. It is worth noting that at this point

too, he is willing to throw the game away. There is a strange conflict in him, yet again, which also keeps coming in his mind throughout the course of the novel. Again, for us, as readers, moments like these redeem Raskolnikov in our eyes. Little by little, however, he had begun to fall into a kind of absent-minded condition and seemed even to forget himself. Despite all this, he was very conscious when he went into the kitchen and gave his hands and the axe a good and thorough wash. He examined himself too, washed his boots, but was aware that he was not examining everything properly so he might leave something obvious which did not catch his eye. "He stood in the middle of the room, reflecting. A dark, tormenting thought was rising up inside him – the thought that he was behaving like a madman and that he was not at the moment in a position either to think properly or to protect himself, that what he was doing now was not at all what he ought to be doing..." (99). This line of thought shows that he was fully in control of his faculties; it was just that he was too perplexed now and therefore, could not think properly. He rushed into the entrance-hall only to find "the shock of horror he had never once yet experienced" (99). The door was open, and at this point, it seems like Raskolnikov completely loses his mind once again. The thought that he could not see the door open when he murdered Lizaveta drives him in a state of delirium. Despite all his calculations and foresight in planning, he made this incredibly stupid mistake of leaving the door open. It is important to note that, during the course of the crime, the sheer logic of the event took over and all premeditation got left behind. He ran and closed the door only to think that he must go instead the very next moment. It is at this point that the stroke of good fortune of Raskolnikov takes the center stage. Everything falls into place miraculously, and somehow, he manages to escape without a single soul seeing him.

Raskolnikov listened to the sounds of the footsteps on the stairs and thrice, he was ready to go but was stopped by some sound which came from the stairs. The third time though it was different. It was doubling – like a repetition of some earlier incident. Here, once again, the Raskolnikov who recalls the incident later is not the same as the one living the incident. "These footsteps were very far away, right at the bottom of the stairs, but he later recalled distinctly that right from the very first sound of them he began to suspect that for some reason whoever it was, was coming *here*, to the fourth floor, to the woman's apartment." (100). But, in real time, he was "numb and stiff" and managed to come back into the apartment and close the door only at the last moment. When the visitor was at the door, the narrator tells us, "They were standing opposite to each other, just as earlier he and the old woman had stood, when the door had separated them, and he had listened." (101). This comparison with the previous incident shows us the mind of Raskolnikov at that moment – he was contemplating another murder if the visitor came in his way. Raskolnikov made guesses about their age and physique from inside by hearing their voices while simultaneously clutching his axe, thinking it was all like a "dream". It is ironical that he is the same person who is haunted by a dream of a horse being tortured. As the visitor was tugging at the door handle, his head was going round, yet again. It is interesting to note here how the visitor calls the old woman and her sister – "Hey, Alyona Ivanovna, you old witch! Lizaveta Ivanovna, my fabled beauty!" (101). This reasserts the fact that Lizaveta's murder is something that Raskolnikov will regret. She was innocent and was killed only because of the situation, with no planning or fault of her own. The visitors were clever enough to understand that something fishy was going on there and one of them went to call the yard keeper. The other followed suit as he waited impatiently and Raskolnikov

got an opportunity to flee. In between, a bizarre moment happened – “Raskolnikov stood there clutching the axe. He was in a kind of delirium. He had even been preparing to fight them when they came in. While they were knocking and discussing what they ought to do, he had several times had a sudden urge to get it all over with and shout to them from his side of the door. At times he had felt like cursing and taunting them, until they forced the door open. ‘Hurry up!’ flashed across his mind.” (101). This bizarre moment is a mixture of impatience, guilt, remorse, horror and revulsion that Raskolnikov feels. It seems as if he was standing there to taunt himself. He had this desire to self-destruct as he could not take it anymore. This was a strange moment where he had the opportunity to escape as well as unravel himself.

The moment Koch went away, the first words uttered from Raskolnikov’s mouth were: “O Lord, what shall I do?” (102). It is indeed interesting that a man like Raskolnikov, who had a rational explanation of everything, even of a murder, a man who was an atheist, remembered God at the time of distress. Nevertheless, he had gone three floors when he found out that the visitors were coming back and would have been caught if they had seen him, but, once again, out of sheer good luck, he was able to find an empty apartment only a few steps away from him. Miraculously, the workmen who were working there earlier had abandoned the apartment. When the visitors went upstairs, he ran downstairs, and found no one either on the staircase or the entrance. He knew that the people who went upstairs must have guessed the situation, but strangely, he did not dare to quicken his step once he was on the street. He also contemplated on waiting until it was all clear, throwing the axe somewhere and hiring a cab, but shrugged all these thoughts off thinking of them as disastrous. By the time he was at the side-street, he was “more dead than alive” and “scarcely able to move” (105). But he was so scared that he made a detour and went back to his lodgings by an entirely different route, even when he was at a point of collapse. While climbing the staircase of his lodging, he remembered to put the axe back to its place. He was not capable of realizing that he could put the axe back stealthily sometime later, but, once again, the yard keeper was absent, and he managed to put the axe back into its place. No one, not even a single soul, did he meet after that on his way to his room. It was almost too much of good fortune and coincidence that Raskolnikov was not caught in the act. “Entering his quarters, he threw himself on the sofa, without taking his coat off, just as he was. He did not sleep, but lay in a kind of oblivion. The rags and tatters of vague thoughts swarmed in his head; but he could not seize hold of a single one of them, even though he tried to force himself to...” (106). By this time, it is established that Raskolnikov is not just a cold-blooded murderer. He is only someone who is not fully in possession of his own senses. These moments of contemplation, dilemma and remorse are the ones which redeem him in our eyes. We are ourselves implicated and are with Raskolnikov at this point.

Once the act is done, Raskolnikov finds himself racked with confusion, paranoia, guilt, horror and disgust for what he has done. What makes Raskolnikov noble is that he is able to deal with the full weight of what he has done. He wallows and soaks in the psychological implications of what he has done. Throughout the scene of the crime, there are various techniques that have been employed, a fascinating range of material objects that come into our view – through the obsession of the narrator with details and objects. The scene of crime has a lot to it, from mere contemplation of a murder to turning it into reality, from declining strength to

regaining it, from being barely conscious to being in full possession of one's faculties, from killing Alyona to killing Lizaveta, from thinking about taking more and more to not taking anything at all and running away from the scene, from becoming a demon to becoming a human, from almost getting caught red-handed to getting safely at home just due to sheer good fortune; the scene has everything and it takes us on a strange journey and consequently, we are implicated in the act. It reasserts that Raskolnikov is not just a cold-blooded murderer, but he too is a human and has, at some level, a sense of morality attached to him.

Works Cited:

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