

DREAMS AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED UNCONSCIOUS IN RASKOLNIKOV'S PSYCHE: CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

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Abstract

This article explores the manifestation of Freud's concept of the return of the repressed within Raskolnikov's psyche in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Through a psychoanalytic reading of the protagonist's dreams, the study examines how suppressed guilt, moral anxiety, and unconscious desires resurface symbolically in his dream life. Each dream, particularly the horse-beating dream, the encounter with the old woman, and the feverish hallucinations, serves as a projection of Raskolnikov's repressed moral consciousness. The analysis argues that these dream sequences are not mere psychological episodes but structural devices through which Dostoevsky externalises Raskolnikov's divided self and the haunting persistence of his suppressed conscience. By aligning Dostoevsky's narrative with Freudian dream theory, the paper reveals how the unconscious compels confession and reintegrates the fractured self through the cyclical return of repressed guilt.

Keywords

Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov, Freud, dreams, unconscious, repression, guilt, psychoanalysis, morality

INTRODUCTION

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) is not merely a psychological novel but a profound exploration of the unconscious forces that govern human behaviour. The text anticipates many of Freud's later insights on repression, guilt, and the dream as a disguised fulfilment of repressed impulses. Freud's theory of the unconscious, particularly the notion of the "return of the repressed," posits that thoughts or emotions pushed out of conscious awareness inevitably resurface through dreams, slips, or neuroses (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900). Raskolnikov's dreams perform precisely this function: they become sites where the moral and emotional material he strives to repress finds distorted expression.

Dostoevsky constructs Raskolnikov's psyche as a battleground between his intellectual rationalisations and his buried conscience. His theory of the "extraordinary man," who can transgress moral laws for a higher purpose, conflicts with his innate moral sensitivity. As Frank notes, "Raskolnikov's dreams reveal the irrepressible vitality of his moral self, which his reason strives to suppress" (Frank 105). These dream sequences, emerging at pivotal narrative moments, mirror Freud's observation that "the dream is the disguised fulfilment of a repressed wish" (Freud 160).

Thus, Dostoevsky's psychological realism operates through a proto-Freudian mechanism: the unconscious intrudes upon the conscious mind through dream imagery. This interplay between repression and return becomes the structural and thematic axis of Raskolnikov's moral journey, from denial and intellectual pride toward confession and spiritual awakening.

Analysis

Raskolnikov's dreams in *Crime and Punishment* serve as involuntary revelations of his moral conflict. They translate what his waking mind suppresses, the guilt and revulsion toward violence, into vivid symbolic imagery. Freud's principle that "repressed wishes always return, though often in distorted or symbolic form" (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 245) is embodied throughout these episodes.

Raskolnikov's first dream, the Horse-Beating Dream, set in his childhood, is one of the most striking representations of unconscious trauma. He dreams of a peasant, Mikolka, mercilessly beating a mare to death while the child Raskolnikov cries out helplessly: "Father, why do they beat the poor horse?" (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Part I, Ch. 5). The horror of this scene mirrors his latent revulsion toward cruelty and anticipates his future act of murder. As R.L. Jackson observes, "The horse-beating dream discloses the emotional core of Raskolnikov's psyche—the pity and moral horror his intellect seeks to deny" (Jackson 212).

Freud's notion of the primal scene is relevant here: early traumatic impressions, repressed due to their emotional intensity, later resurface in symbolic repetition. The murdered horse becomes a projection of Raskolnikov's moral innocence, and Mikolka's brutality embodies the sadistic impulse he unconsciously fears in himself. Thus, the dream externalises his divided psyche: the victimised child and the aggressor coexist within him.

After the murder of the pawnbroker, Raskolnikov's second dream replays the crime with nightmarish distortion. He dreams of returning to the scene, striking the old woman again, only to find that "she laughs soundlessly,

shaking her head” (Part II, Ch. 1). The dream exposes the collapse of repression; what he believed he had mastered resurfaces as grotesque repetition. Freud writes, “The compulsion to repeat... replaces the impulse to remember” (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 20).

Here, the dream stages of compulsion: Raskolnikov’s psyche re-enacts the murder as a way to confront the guilt he cannot consciously acknowledge. Critics like Robert Louis Jackson interpret this as “a psychological confession forced out by the return of repressed moral feeling” (Jackson 215). The laughter of the old woman functions as the mocking voice of conscience, the repressed superego that refuses to be silenced.

In the later stages of the novel, Raskolnikov’s delirium and feverish visions demonstrate the complete disintegration of repression. When he dreams of the plague that makes people believe their own ideas as absolute truth (Part VI, Epilogue), the imagery dramatises his recognition that his theory of the “extraordinary man” was itself a delusion born of repression. As Dostoevsky writes, “Each thought was considered infallible; they killed each other in rage” (Epilogue). Freud’s later concept of the death drive, the unconscious tendency toward self-destruction, resonates here. The dream expresses the psyche’s final attempt to purge itself of the destructive illusion that isolated Raskolnikov from moral and social order.

Across these dreams, Dostoevsky illustrates how the unconscious undermines repression through repetition, symbolism, and distortion. The repressed guilt of murder does not vanish; it resurfaces through dream imagery until it finds release in confession.

CONCLUSION

Raskolnikov’s dreams in *Crime and Punishment* serve as psychic documents of repression and return. Each dream externalises the tension between his intellectual defiance and his moral conscience, revealing what his waking mind cannot articulate. Through these dreams, Dostoevsky dramatises a process strikingly similar to Freud’s later model of the unconscious: repression gives way to symbolic return until the repressed content is integrated into conscious awareness. The recurring dream imagery, of cruelty, guilt, and contagion, maps Raskolnikov’s psychological descent and gradual moral reawakening.

In this sense, the novel anticipates psychoanalytic insight decades before Freud. Raskolnikov’s dreams function as narrative mechanisms through which Dostoevsky exposes the hidden operations of guilt and the inevitable resurgence of conscience. The unconscious, as Freud observes, “cannot be silenced; it finds expression through distortion” (The Interpretation of Dreams 238). In Dostoevsky’s moral universe, that distortion takes the form of dreams that guide the sinner toward recognition, repentance, and ultimately, redemption.

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