

THE SUPEREGO AND MORAL CONFLICT: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF RODION RASKOLNIKOV'S CONSCIENCE IN CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of moral consciousness and internal psychic conflict in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, with a particular focus on the protagonist, Rodion Raskolnikov, through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. The analysis centres on the role of the superego as defined by Sigmund Freud and its function as a moral regulator, internalised authority, and source of guilt and anxiety (Freud states that the superego "aims for moral perfection" and punishes failures with guilt). According to one study, Dostoevsky "captured the workings of the superego in *Crime and Punishment* ... Raskolnikov's guilt after murder" testifies to the internal tribunal of conscience. The article argues that Raskolnikov's crime is not simply a social or economic act, but an uprising of his id-driven grandiosity against the constraints of his superego, producing a profound moral conflict. The analysis shows how his eventual breakdown and confession signify not merely legal or social penance, but the superego's triumph in forcing reconciliation between transgression and conscience. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that Raskolnikov's psychological ordeal exemplifies the dynamics of an over-active internal moral agency, and by tracing this psycho-moral architecture, enriches our reading of the novel's ethical dimension.

Keywords: Superego, Moral conflict, Psychoanalysis, Rodion Raskolnikov, Crime and Punishment

INTRODUCTION

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) remains one of the most profound psychological studies of guilt, morality, and human conscience in world literature. Through Rodion Raskolnikov, a destitute yet intellectually ambitious student who commits a double murder, Dostoevsky stages an inner moral drama that exposes the fractured architecture of the human psyche. Raskolnikov's oscillation between pride and remorse, rebellion and repentance, has long invited psychoanalytic readings. Within the Freudian framework, this conflict mirrors the structural tension between the id, ego, and superego, the psychic agencies that govern human behaviour.

Sigmund Freud defines the superego as the "moral agency of the mind," formed through the internalisation of parental and social prohibitions (*The Ego and the Id*, 1923). It functions as an internal judge that measures the ego's actions against moral ideals, punishing transgressions through guilt and anxiety. Freud notes that "the superego retains the character of the father" and "watches over the ego, threatening it with punishment" (Freud 35). In Raskolnikov's case, this internal tribunal manifests as an incessant voice of judgment that undermines his rational justifications for murder.

Raskolnikov's intellectual theory that certain "extraordinary men" may transcend moral law, represents an assertion of the id's desire for freedom and dominance. Yet, as soon as the act is committed, the superego imposes unbearable guilt, exposing the inadequacy of his rationalised morality. As it is observed, "Raskolnikov's torment is not external but psychic; he stands accused by his own conscience rather than by society". This study thus interprets Raskolnikov's moral suffering as a psychological struggle between the anarchic drives of the id and the punitive force of the superego, revealing Dostoevsky's remarkable anticipation of Freudian concepts decades before Freud articulated them.

By situating Raskolnikov's conscience within the Freudian model, this paper aims to illustrate how Dostoevsky's portrayal of guilt and self-punishment dramatises the operations of the superego. The following analysis explores the narrative as an extended conflict between inner law and instinctual rebellion, ultimately showing that Raskolnikov's confession marks the restoration of psychic balance through the moral ascendancy of the superego.

Analysis

Raskolnikov's moral conflict in *Crime and Punishment* begins not after the murder, but long before it, within the recesses of a divided conscience. Dostoevsky constructs Raskolnikov's mind as a battlefield between two opposing psychic forces: the id, which urges transgression, and the superego, which condemns it. His essay on "extraordinary men" serves as an intellectual disguise for the id's desire to assert dominance: "Extraordinary

people have the right to commit any crime if it is in pursuit of a higher purpose” (Dostoevsky 259). This self-justifying philosophy externalises the id’s drive for gratification without moral restraint. Yet, Freud warns that such rebellion against authority is never free from psychic consequence, since the superego “sets itself up as a judge over the ego, and may become just as cruel as the father whose place it has taken” (The Ego and the Id 34). After the murder, Raskolnikov’s psyche collapses under this cruel judgment. His physical illness, delirium, and detachment represent the onset of **superego-induced guilt**, or what Freud calls the “sense of guilt [that] expresses itself as a need for punishment” (Freud 50). This is evident when Raskolnikov experiences relief only through suffering: “He was crushed by the sense of his own baseness... he longed to suffer and to be cleansed by pain” (Dostoevsky 321). The wish for punishment becomes a symbolic mechanism of reconciliation between the ego and superego, an unconscious attempt to restore inner harmony through atonement.

Sonya Marmeladova’s role deepens this psychoanalytic dynamic. Acting as the external embodiment of Raskolnikov’s superego, she repeatedly invokes divine and moral law, urging him to confess: “Go at once, this very minute, stand at the crossroads, bow down and say aloud, ‘I have killed!’” (Dostoevsky 420). Her command externalises the superego’s punitive voice, transforming moral guilt into conscious recognition. Freud notes that the superego’s demands often manifest through substitute figures that “take over the function of conscience” (Freud 43). Sonya thus becomes the moral mirror through which Raskolnikov’s suppressed guilt finds articulation. The tension between pride and penitence dominates the middle section of the novel. Each time Raskolnikov attempts to assert his superiority, the superego retaliates with intensified guilt and anxiety. This cyclical torment culminates in the scene of confession, where the moral law finally overcomes intellectual arrogance. When Raskolnikov bows before the people and kisses the earth, Dostoevsky stages what Freud describes as the ego’s “submission to the superego as a form of moral purification” (Freud 48). The act symbolises the complete surrender of pride to conscience, the psychic restoration that allows moral reformation to begin.

In the epilogue, Dostoevsky writes that Raskolnikov “felt something shaking within him; a new thought, a new feeling, a new life seemed to be beginning” (547). This rebirth signifies not religious salvation alone, but the reintegration of the ego under the guidance of a reconciled superego. The novel thus traces a complete psycho-moral arc: from rebellion and denial to guilt, punishment, and moral regeneration.

Through Raskolnikov’s inner struggle, Dostoevsky not only anticipates Freudian psychoanalysis but also dramatises the universal human conflict between moral law and instinctual transgression. The narrative affirms that crime does not merely violate social codes; it fractures the internal moral order governed by the superego. Raskolnikov’s suffering, therefore, is not the price of sin imposed by the world but the inevitable consequence of an awakened conscience.

CONCLUSION

Raskolnikov’s journey in *Crime and Punishment* reveals that Dostoevsky’s exploration of guilt and redemption operates on a deeply psychological plane, anticipating the Freudian structure of the mind. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, his conflict embodies the struggle between the id’s assertion of autonomy and the superego’s imposition of moral restraint. Freud’s concept that the superego “observes, criticises, and punishes the ego” (The Ego and the Id 36) is vividly enacted in Raskolnikov’s oscillation between pride and remorse. His physical illness, hallucinations, and ultimate confession represent the ego’s capitulation before an overbearing moral authority. Dostoevsky thus transforms psychological guilt into the central axis of moral experience.

The novel concludes not with the hero’s outward punishment but with the inward reawakening of conscience, the moment when Raskolnikov accepts the moral law he had tried to transcend. His confession signifies the reconciliation of divided psychic forces and the restoration of inner order. By foregrounding this interplay between instinct and morality, Dostoevsky dramatises the superego’s role as both tormentor and redeemer. The Freudian reading therefore, illuminates *Crime and Punishment* as a study of the mind’s own tribunal, where crime invites not only social judgment but, more profoundly, the judgment of the self.

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