Crime and Punishment: Delusions

Fyodor Dostoyevsky has written a very interesting book about psychology, morality, and the way that the justice system works in *Crime and Punishment*. The character of Raskolnikov is twisted with real psychological disorders that compel him to commit an appalling crime. These disorders are a direct effect of the society, times, and circumstances of his life. His actions are not those of a man in control of himself, and any attempts at justification are applied as an attempt to retain his intellectual integrity.

Raskolnikov is a sick man. He is afflicted clearly with schizophrenia and also has some traits of grandiose delusional disorder. According to the DSM-IV, he can be easily diagnosed as a full schizophrenic. He fulfills three of the main requirements for the *characteristic symptoms* in criterion A: delusions, grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior, and negative symptoms (affective flattening.) He also meets criteria B: *social/occupational dysfunction* and criteria C: *duration* (exhibits traits for at least six months with at least one month of active symptoms.) (DSM-IV, 285). Now, having been diagnosed thusly, it follows that he was quite incapable of being in control over his actions. Schizophrenia is a birth defect that may or may not manifest in a person who has it. It usually manifests before the age of 25 (as in this case) and it may be triggered by some trauma or living conditions. The death of his fiancé may have been an igniter, as could his poor health and environment. People who are afflicted by this disorder are not able to make responsible decisions or take care of themselves and, in modern society, quickly lose their jobs or homes. It is not at all uncommon for them to commit crimes in
the height of their delusions, and murder does occasionally occur in a delusional episode. This being the case, it is also clear that Raskolnikov is a product of circumstances quite out of his control.

His story is a sad one of a man who has slipped through the cracks and wasted his potential. He is clearly intelligent and insightful, but he is unable to control the thoughts that consume him. He could be said to be product of social injustice in the sense that he cannot (or will not) keep a job, and his condition continues to deteriorate with no hope for salvation. This in turn causes his appearance, mental condition, and physical health to decline, making employment even less possible. This cycle repeats itself in a wicked downward spiral which is both cause and effect of his particular insanity. In his fantasy, the world is oppressive, crushing, and unjust. He thinks that he could be an arbiter of justice by killing the old pawnbroker, which is a clear grandiose delusion. When he sits in a bar in the first part of the book, he overhears two people discussing the idea of murdering the old woman and using her wealth to help the needy, they say “For one life thousands would be saved from destruction and decay.” (Dostoyevsky, 54). He may have had this idea before he heard them say that, but at this point he decides that he really is the one to do it. This idea comes to drive every action in the period leading up to the murder. He even feels out of control and swept away by it, as shown in his occasional revulsion in the things that he is doing to prepare for the murder. When he is making his final preparations he is quite beside himself with the conflict, “In spite of all his agonizing inward struggle, he never for a single instant all that time could believe in the
carrying out of his plans.” (Dostoyevsky, 57). He may have planned everything out, but he did it under the influence of his disorder.

As an intellectual - a scholar - Raskolnikov feels that he has to justify or explain his actions. He fancies himself as an enlightened or somehow special person (another trait of grandiose delusional disorder.) Before he can murder the woman, he has to convince himself that there is some lofty goal for doing it, so he makes her into a representation of the forces who would exploit the poor and underprivileged. He develops a philosophy that would enable him to commit the murder morally; that he could use her money to help other people. After the crime has been committed, he still retains the idea that a person who was particularly special could murder someone for a greater cause. He compares himself to great men at times as justification for murder, as in this passage: “what if Napoleon, for instance, had happened to be in my place, and if he has not had Toulon nor Egypt nor the passage of Mont Blanc to begin his career with, but instead of all those picturesque and monumental things, there had simply been some ridiculous old hag, a pawnbroker, who had to be murdered to get money from her trunk (for his career, you understand).” (Dostoyevsky, 326). At times, he also sees himself as a small man. He thinks that he is a nobody who is proven to be unlike those great men by his inability to pull off the murder properly. He goes through a period swinging wildly back and forth from self-doubt to callous apathy. In the end, he decides that the idea of crime is a social construct, and he doesn’t feel any remorse for having killed the two women. The fact is that all this comes after the crime has already been committed and wasn’t a factor in
deciding whether or not to do it in the first place. It’s all justification that he uses to mask his disorder.

Throughout the book, it’s clear that Raskolnikov is to be at once pitied, analyzed, and listened to. His character is clearly insane, but in a way that is very interesting for us to read about. It is my belief that his character was made insane to highlight the extremes that certain philosophical ideas can be taken to. If one concedes that morality is a relative and malleable subject, you can make a solid logical argument for murder. He is also someone who has been cast into the waves of his times, and is unable to swim or tread water. He is swept under the surface in his insanity, and it is because of this that he does the things that he does. He is trying to convince himself that he is making a conscious effort, but it’s clear that he’s being worked over by his illness. We feel sorry for him, despite his crime. It’s also apparent that we are supposed to look at and learn from him; his motivations and methods. He goes to great lengths to describe in detail his thoughts, his idle musings, and his insights. It is quite clear to me that his condition, overall, is the reason for him committing the murder, and that he was quite unable to stop it once it had been put in motion. The book ends with him being reconnected to the world, which is surely the only way for him to be helped, because he is not capable of helping himself.
Works Cited
