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The Dialogic and Psychological Roles of Secondary Characters in Crime and Punishment

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Abstract: The secondary characters in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* play distinct roles in Raskolnikov's psychological and ethical development. Through dialogue, conflict, and contrast, Luzhin, Svidrigailov, Razumikhin, Sonya, and socially marginalized figures expose contradictions within his theory of the extraordinary individual and offer alternative ways of living. This article examines these encounters through two analytical categories: negative dialogue and affirmative dialogue. Luzhin and Svidrigailov reveal, respectively, the theory's affinity with vulgar self-interest and its destructive implications. Razumikhin's practical care, Sonya's religious ethics, and the voices of the suffering poor provide forms of support that challenge Raskolnikov's isolation. These dialogic forces interact across the stages of his crisis, gradually unsettling his theoretical self-justification and opening him to responsibility toward others. The analysis argues that secondary characters give concrete form to the novel's dialogism rather than merely support its plot. Their interactions with Raskolnikov make his emerging renewal intelligible and connect the novel's treatment of crime, freedom, and redemption with its polyphonic narrative structure.

Keywords: *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Secondary Characters, Psychological Interaction, Dialogism.

1. Introduction

Since its publication, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* has generated sustained discussion, with particular attention to Raskolnikov's theory of the extraordinary individual and the psychological changes that follow his crime [1]. Existing criticism addresses conflicts within his personality [2], comparative characterization [3], gendered characterization [4], and ethical choice [5]. These approaches also invite closer consideration of how his encounters with secondary characters organize the movement of his thought. Examining their conversations, disputes, and acts of care makes it possible to connect his internal crisis with the interpersonal relations through which it develops.

This article places Luzhin, Svidrigailov, Razumikhin, Sonya, and the novel's marginalized figures within their different dialogic relations to Raskolnikov. Drawing on Bakhtin's account of polyphony and dialogism [6], it distinguishes two functions of these encounters: negative dialogue and affirmative dialogue. Luzhin and Svidrigailov exemplify negative dialogue. The former exposes the theory's proximity to vulgar self-interest, while the latter embodies a more extreme possibility of transgression; both supply warnings and counterexamples [3, 7]. Razumikhin, Sonya, and the suffering poor offer affirmative forces through practical life, religious ethics, and the articulation of shared suffering. Together, these encounters contribute to the reorganization of Raskolnikov's psychological world.

Tracing how these voices alternate and intersect at different stages of his crisis shows that secondary characters have a constitutive role in the novel's dialogism. In exchanges with them, Raskolnikov is repeatedly drawn beyond the self-enclosed monologue of his theory and into relations that demand an ethical response. His movement toward renewal becomes intelligible through these interactions, which bring the claims of other people into conflict with his attempt to authorize himself through abstract reasoning.

2. The Warning Function of Negative Dialogue

Negative dialogue unsettles Raskolnikov's theoretical position by exposing its contradictions and possible consequences. Its force comes from the disturbing resemblance between his claims and the values embodied by other characters. Luzhin and Svidrigailov provoke doubt, disgust, and fear because each gives a recognizable but unwelcome form to an implication of his theory.

(1) Luzhin and the Vulgarization of Theory

a) A Discourse of Personal Advantage

Luzhin's rational egoism appears in his everyday calculations, his treatment of marriage as an arrangement of advantage, and his moral indifference. His preference for marrying a poor woman assumes that economic dependence will make her more grateful and easier to control. In his confrontation with Raskolnikov, he presents self-interest as a principle justified by science and economic progress [1, Part II, Chapter V]. Raskolnikov's revulsion therefore exceeds an objection to one man's hypocrisy or coldness. Luzhin makes audible a disquieting echo of his own reasoning: both subordinate the claims of particular people to a calculation of advantage and invoke rational justification to evade moral responsibility.

b) Private Interest and the Common Good

Their brief argument over self-interest exposes this connection. When Luzhin maintains that private advantage provides the foundation of collective prosperity, Raskolnikov asks whether such reasoning can ultimately justify murder. The exchange identifies a contradiction in treating self-interest as the sole criterion of action: harm to others may then be defended whenever it benefits the acting subject. For Raskolnikov, the importance of the argument lies in the similarity it discloses between Luzhin's calculations and his own exceptionalism. Even as he attacks Luzhin, he encounters a debased version of the logic by which he has tried to excuse himself. The conversation thus weakens his

ability to keep his theory distinct from ordinary selfishness.

(2) Svidrigailov as a Destructive Double

Svidrigailov embodies a different and more disturbing possibility. Whereas Luzhin makes the theory appear calculating and petty, Svidrigailov reveals the destructive implications of a life that repeatedly crosses moral limits. His relation to Raskolnikov combines attraction with repulsion and recognition with rejection, giving him the function of a psychological double.

a) The Recognition of a Kindred Consciousness

Svidrigailov recognizes an affinity with Raskolnikov almost intuitively. His own history involves transgressions against the lives and dignity of others, and he appears to have pursued the strong individual's license further and more ruthlessly [3]. By suggesting that they belong to the same kind, he confronts Raskolnikov with a possible version of himself. Raskolnikov cannot dismiss him as easily as he dismisses Luzhin, because the resemblance reaches into a possibility that he fears acknowledging within his own consciousness.

b) Nihilism and the Image of Eternity

The discussion of eternity makes this affinity especially unsettling. Svidrigailov imagines eternity as a cramped, grimy bathhouse with spiders in its corners, replacing the Christian promise of consolation with an image of confinement and emptiness [1, Part IV, Chapter I]. His apparent indifference to moral limits invites Raskolnikov to consider what follows if transgression brings no meaning beyond the satisfaction of desire. Raskolnikov's anguish shows that he cannot inhabit this indifference. His continuing susceptibility to conscience both separates him from Svidrigailov and prevents nihilism from becoming the uncontested conclusion of his crime.

c) Suicide and the Failure of Exceptionalism

Svidrigailov's suicide gives negative dialogue its most extreme narrative expression. Raskolnikov's fascination with Napoleon sustains the possibility that decisive transgression might release him from suffering and establish his freedom. Svidrigailov's fate confronts that possibility with a destructive outcome. Having moved further beyond conventional restraints, he attains neither lasting freedom nor fulfillment. His death exposes the emptiness that may follow the attempt to make unrestricted personal will the measure of life. Read alongside Raskolnikov's crisis, the suicide becomes a counterexample to the promise of liberation attached to the extraordinary individual.

(3) The Complementary Effects of Negative Dialogue

Luzhin and Svidrigailov both unsettle Raskolnikov, but they do so in different ways. Luzhin reveals the theory's affinity with petty calculation; Svidrigailov reveals the possibility of moral exhaustion and self-destruction. The news of Svidrigailov's suicide shocks Raskolnikov and brings the problem of his own future into sharper focus. A life sustained by the refusal of guilt, repentance, and meaningful connection with others now carries a visible destructive possibility. Luzhin's alternative offers material calculation at the expense of ethical life. Together, the two figures make theoretical self-justification increasingly difficult to sustain and intensify a crisis that cannot be resolved by reasoning alone.

3. The Support Offered by Affirmative Dialogue

Affirmative dialogue gives Raskolnikov access to ways of living that his theory cannot adequately recognize. Practical example, personal appeal, and the voices of shared suffering show how responsibility can arise within concrete relationships. Razumikhin, Sonya, and the marginalized poor embody different forms of this possibility. Their encounters with Raskolnikov direct his attention toward everyday obligations and particular people whose value exceeds an abstract classification.

(1) Razumikhin and Everyday Care

a) Language and Practical Action

Razumikhin's language is concrete, direct, and oriented toward action. His conversations concern translation work, plans for publishing, rent, and his friend's health [1]. Such ordinary subjects provide Raskolnikov with a continuing connection to the practical world. They redirect attention from the exceptional status he wishes to prove toward the actions that his present circumstances require. Razumikhin's manner of speaking thus questions the extraordinary individual's self-absorption through the everyday demands of work and care.

b) Friendship and the Responsibilities of Daily Life

Raskolnikov's responses to Razumikhin alternate between recognition of his devotion and irritated dismissal of his apparent simplicity. Razumikhin, for his part, continues to seek contact despite repeated rejection. Responsibility and friendship recur in his words and conduct [2]. He challenges Raskolnikov's withdrawal into his room and resists his effort to sever ties with others. For Razumikhin, hunger calls for food, poverty for work, and a friend's illness for attentive care. This practical ethics gives Raskolnikov an example of moral action that does not depend on an elaborate theory. Through repeated conversation, an attitude toward living enters his consciousness in the form of ordinary obligations.

c) Everyday Kindness as Psychological Support

Razumikhin's assistance takes the form of sustained, everyday attention. He offers work and cares for Raskolnikov during his illness without making repayment or obedience a condition of help. Amid Luzhin's calculations and Svidrigailov's nihilistic possibilities, this generosity becomes a valuable psychological resource. Razumikhin's persistence prevents Raskolnikov from fully severing his relationship with ordinary social life and preserves a practical route back to it.

(2) Sonya and the Appeal of Religious Ethics

a) An Ethical Response beyond Theory

Forced into prostitution to help support her stepmother's children, Sonya nevertheless retains compassion and moral dignity. Raskolnikov initially approaches her with a painful fascination, treating her as someone who, like himself, has crossed a social boundary. He tests her by proposing a choice between Luzhin's survival and the death of Katerina Ivanovna and the children. Sonya refuses the authority to decide who should live and who should die [1, Part V, Chapter IV]. Her tears, silences, and direct refusals expose the limits of his attempt to turn ethical judgment into a calculation. Her response to his confession returns attention to the suffering he has inflicted on himself as well as on others. Where he can dissemble before Porfiry and conceal matters from his mother, Sonya's compassion draws him toward acknowledgment. Her appeal embodies a Christian ethics of sympathy, sacrifice, and

forgiveness that reaches him through personal encounter [8].

b) Changing Attitudes toward Faith

Raskolnikov's relation to Sonya's faith gradually moves from mockery and resistance toward the possibility of receptiveness. At first, he cannot see how belief in God can answer her suffering. In the Siberian epilogue, however, he keeps her New Testament beneath his pillow and begins to consider whether her convictions might become his own. The book remains unopened at that moment, making this an initial opening toward faith rather than an accomplished conversion [1, Epilogue, Chapter II]. The change develops through continued contact with Sonya [2]. What affects him most immediately is her way of living: her capacity to maintain kindness under extreme suffering and to preserve her dignity amid humiliation.

c) Love and the Beginning of Spiritual Renewal

Sonya's importance lies in the support she offers for a life that does not depend on exceptional status. As Svidrigailov's path reveals its destructive end and Luzhin's exposes its moral impoverishment, her religious ethics provides a further possibility beyond the practical stability represented by Razumikhin. It does not require an immediate profession of belief. It asks Raskolnikov to recognize the value of love and sacrifice alongside the demands of reason, self-interest, and power. Her companionship in Siberia enables an emotional response through which his theoretical defenses begin to lose their authority and spiritual renewal becomes possible.

(3) The Collective Voices of the Marginalized

Other socially marginalized figures also contribute to Raskolnikov's psychological reorientation. Their influence does not depend on sustained theoretical debate. Through testimony, protest, and visible suffering, they make demands that his theory cannot contain.

In the tavern, Marmeladov recounts his degradation, his daughter's sacrifice, and his family's misery with an almost self-punishing acknowledgment of guilt. His account presents a distinctive understanding of suffering: degradation need not signify abandonment by God, and divine mercy may extend even to the dissolute and the despised [9]. This vision stands against Raskolnikov's effort to prove his distinction through transgression. Marmeladov imagines acceptance through the acknowledgment of human weakness, giving Raskolnikov access to a conception of suffering and redemption outside his own theoretical system.

Katerina Ivanovna's desperate protests after her husband's death, followed by the spectacle of her taking the children into the street to perform and beg, expose the cruelty of social inequality [10]. Her pride in her education and respectable family background intensifies the contrast with her destitution. Raskolnikov witnesses suffering that he cannot remedy, and the scene makes social injustice immediate and particular. It also unsettles the claim that killing can be justified in the name of the many. The people whose happiness supposedly licenses such violence remain individuals whose consent and experience his theory has not taken into account.

Katerina Ivanovna's refusal to submit and Sonya's persistence in self-sacrifice reveal different forms of agency within conditions of severe constraint. Their conduct requires Raskolnikov to reconsider the meaning of weakness. People he might classify as ordinary or expendable display a moral courage that his own claim to exceptional status cannot supply. The collective presence of marginalized characters thus challenges his hierarchical view of human worth [11]. Emotional and intuitive recognition confronts him with their dignity as particular people, making it harder to reduce them to social categories or material for another person's project.

4. Dialogue and Spiritual Transformation

(1) The Structure of Dialogic Encounters

The encounters central to Raskolnikov's development repeatedly bring distinct voices into direct contact with him. Luzhin, Svidrigailov, Razumikhin, and Sonya address him from different positions, and their competing claims continue to resonate within his consciousness. He must respond, attempt to reconcile them, or reject what they demand. This structure gives dialogue an inward as well as an interpersonal dimension [6, 12]. His effort at isolation is repeatedly interrupted by people who seek him out with questions, accusations, or concern. The psychological crisis unfolds through his inability to remain untouched by these encounters.

(2) Multiple Dialogues as Catalysts

a) From Theoretical Confidence to Fear

The first movement toward change emerges as negative dialogue undermines confidence in the theory [2]. Luzhin provokes disgust by making its logic appear vulgar, while Svidrigailov's destructive fate gives rise to fear. These responses loosen Raskolnikov's attachment to the identity that the theory promises. Fear becomes a catalyst because it directs him toward a question he has tried to evade: if exceptional status cannot justify his actions or resolve his suffering, what grounds for living remain available?

b) Alternative Paths toward Renewal

Razumikhin demonstrates the possibility of a life sustained by honest work and care for others. Sonya embodies an ethics through which kindness can survive extreme suffering and love can give experience a meaning beyond self-assertion. Raskolnikov resists these possibilities for much of the novel. As the apparent authority of his theory weakens, however, practices he previously dismissed become alternatives he can begin to consider. Affirmative dialogue therefore acquires force within the crisis that negative dialogue has intensified.

(3) Dialogism and the Reconstruction of the Self

The emerging transformation involves recognition that another person's voice can possess validity beyond the terms of his own theory. Sonya's faith and Razumikhin's practical ethics confront Raskolnikov with values that remain meaningful even when they differ from his convictions. The possibility of listening requires him to suspend the impulse to subordinate every response to his own reasoning. His movement away from a closed, monologic consciousness consequently takes the form of an increasing openness to dialogue.

This change also opens the possibility of relinquishing the burden of extraordinary status. Raskolnikov can begin to recognize value in a human condition shared with Sonya, Razumikhin, and Marmeladov, rather than establish his worth by crossing moral boundaries. The epilogue locates his renewal at the beginning of another, still-unfolding story [1, Epilogue, Chapter II]. His movement toward ordinary life thus takes shape as the capacity to love particular people and to participate in relationships whose claims he can no longer treat as merely theoretical.

5. Conclusion

The secondary characters in *Crime and Punishment* coexist with Raskolnikov as distinct voices within a polyphonic

network of relations. Negative dialogue exposes the theory of the extraordinary individual through its affinity with vulgar calculation and its destructive extremes. Affirmative dialogue offers practical care, religious appeal, and the testimony of shared suffering as resources for another way of living. These forces alternate and intersect across Raskolnikov's crisis, creating the conditions for his movement from theoretical self-enclosure toward ethical relation and from exceptionalism toward a shared human identity.

Dostoevsky's polyphonic art is consequently expressed both in the competing voices within the protagonist's consciousness and in the differentiated encounters that connect him with secondary characters. Dialogue makes the novel's psychological development inseparable from recognition of others. Its treatment of crime and redemption depends on the possibility that a person may come to understand himself through voices he cannot fully absorb into his own account of the world. Raskolnikov's emerging receptiveness gives this possibility a concrete narrative form, making renewal a process that begins within relations of care, responsibility, and acknowledgment.

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