

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Russian Language and Literature Papers

Modern Languages and Literatures, Department
of

2012

Stories of Ambition and Guilt: Five Character Types in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Dickens's *Great Expectations*

Kelsey McIntyre

University of Nebraska--Lincoln, kelsey.n.mcintyre@gmail.com

Radha Balasubramanian

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, rbalasub@unlnotes.unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangrussian>

McIntyre, Kelsey and Balasubramanian, Radha, "Stories of Ambition and Guilt: Five Character Types in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Dickens's *Great Expectations*" (2012). *Russian Language and Literature Papers*. 10.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangrussian/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Language and Literature Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Stories of Ambition and Guilt: Five Character Types in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Dickens's *Great Expectations*

At first glance, *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens do not appear to have much in common. Put in extremely simplified terms, *Crime and Punishment* is about a young man, Raskolnikov, who has an ambition to become a “Napoleon”¹—a person who is above moral laws—and chronicles how that ambition overrides his conscience. *Great Expectations*, surprisingly, can be summarized in much the same way. Here a young man, Pip, has an ambition to become a wealthy and respectable gentleman, but again, the story deals with how that ambition overrides his conscience. So, in general, *Crime and Punishment* and *Great Expectations* are both novels about ambition and guilt.

Many books have been written about Dickens's influence on Dostoevsky's themes, plots, and characters. Previous scholars such as Lorelee MacPike, N.M. Lary, Donald Fanger, and David Gervais² have examined individual characters in Dostoevsky's work in order to trace them back to Dickens's characters. We argue, however, that Dostoevsky developed not only similar *individual* characters but also similar *casts* of characters to convey like ideas about ambition and guilt. Moreover, we suggest that, while Dostoevsky uses this same cast of characters in *Crime and Punishment* as Dickens does in *Great Expectations*, by making small but significant changes he is able to approach these same themes but from a different narrative frame. The five character types we will discuss are, in brief, the parent, the best friend, the love interest, the lawyer, and the frightening yet fascinating figure. After comparing Dickens's and Dostoevsky's versions of each type, we will analyze the key difference between the pair and suggest the effect that that difference has on the narrative frame of the novels.

The Parent

The first of the five types to consider is the doting parent. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's parent figure is his mother, Pulkheria Alexandrovna, while in *Great Expectations* Pip, an orphan, has his stepfather, Joe Gargery. Both of these characters show love and devotion to the protagonists to the point that they often appear silly or overly sentimental, and are portrayed as being simple-minded and unable to understand the goals and desires that motivate their children. It is interesting to notice that, despite these similarities, Pulkheria Alexandrovna and Joe meet very different ends in the novels, one dying of grief and the other marrying a second time and living happily ever after. These contrasting endings most likely result from a subtle difference in the way the two parents deal with their instinctive sense of foreboding when they realize that their son's choices are separating him from the family.

Pulkheria Alexandrovna begins to develop this sense the first time she physically enters the novel and visits Raskolnikov, who has just committed murder. She doesn't know about the crime and is overjoyed at the prospect of seeing her son, but almost as soon as he walks into the room (and faints), she becomes uneasy and "preoccupied with anxiety."³ On the surface, this is merely because of his strange illness—but the illness really only gives Pulkheria Alexandrovna an excuse, something to attribute Raskolnikov's strange behavior to in the first moments she sees him. Raskolnikov tells her to leave and moans, "I can't stand this...don't torture me!"⁴ But Pulkheria Alexandrovna mistakes her sense that his words mean something bigger is wrong for just concern over his delirious raving. This is the pattern that she will follow throughout the story: terrified at the conclusion her instincts would force her to draw about Raskolnikov's character, she tries to convince herself that she is only worried about trifles and that she suspects nothing deeper or more serious. She lies to herself and acts accordingly, pretending to everyone,

including Raskolnikov, that nothing has changed between them. This practice, and the tension between her lack of honesty on the surface and her deep-down knowledge that Raskolnikov has committed a crime, eventually cause her to lose her mind.

Similarly, Joe first notices that something is wrong with Pip when he goes to visit him after Pip has become a gentleman. Pip treats Joe coldly, embarrassed to have to entertain a person of so little culture, and in reaction Joe unconsciously begins to call Pip “sir.”⁵ Joe, a poor blacksmith, no longer has a place in Pip’s extravagant, appearance-oriented world, and is disturbed by Pip’s transformation from a kind, innocent boy to a snobbish stranger. But instead of pretending that he is worried over nothing or that what he perceives doesn’t mean the end of his and Pip’s old relationship, like Pulkheria Alexandrovna, Joe accepts the facts. He assures Pip when they end their visit that “you and me is not two figures to be together in London,”⁶ demonstrating that he understands he and Pip can no longer be the pals they used to be. He doesn’t try to *ignore* his fear that Pip’s decisions will lead him astray, but, rather, continues to love him *in spite* of his failings, saying he will be waiting at the forge if Pip should ever want to come home. Pulkheria Alexandrovna, on the other hand, tries to overlook Raskolnikov’s failings rather than accept them, which causes her to focus on an imaginary version of her son. Joe looks at reality and is able to move forward; in contrast, Pulkheria Alexandrovna looks at her *alternate* reality and becomes lost inside herself.

The Best Friend

Just as the parent figures in the two novels have much in common, so do the protagonists’ best friends. Throughout their struggles, both Raskolnikov and Pip have a companion who keeps them on track, acting almost as a “sidekick.” Raskolnikov’s friend, Razumikhin, defends Raskolnikov’s innocence—not realizing he is actually guilty—and takes it upon himself to care

for Raskolnikov when Raskolnikov is sick. Pip's friend, Herbert, undertakes very similar duties in *Great Expectations*. He stands by Pip's decisions, even though Pip's need to establish himself as a gentleman pressures them both to spend more on luxuries than they can afford. He also takes care of Pip when Pip burns his own arm rescuing someone from a fire. Razumikhin's and Herbert's actions appear almost identical in many ways; the difference, which makes these similarities all the more strange, is in their personalities—specifically in Razumikhin's hot temper and Herbert's mildness.

Razumikhin is described as “subject to violent fits of rage, [with] a reputation for great physical strength.”⁷ He argues with Raskolnikov's fevered reasoning and, when Raskolnikov tries to escape a confrontation, shouts questions and insults after him. In fact, whenever Razumikhin gives Raskolnikov advice or tries to help him with his troubles in the novel, he is blunt, brief, and often loud.

Contrastingly, Herbert is diplomatic and tactful, never raising his voice or criticizing Pip harshly. He is “wonderfully hopeful”⁸ but lacking in “natural strength”⁹ and unlikely to be “very successful or rich”¹⁰—nearly the opposite of Razumikhin, who knows “a thousand and one ways of making money”¹¹ even if he is currently poor. When Pip needs correction, Herbert treats his advice like improvement of something already good, while Razumikhin usually emphasizes Raskolnikov's faults, at least at first, to get him to change.

The question is, what do these opposite but equally successful methods of encouragement tell us about the kind of support Raskolnikov and Pip need? Though they are in similar positions, torn by ambition and guilt, Raskolnikov values Razumikhin's fierce, berating manner while Pip responds well to Herbert's gentle coaxing. One explanation for the success of such different tactics hinges on whether the protagonists, following their flawed goals, are primarily running

away from something good or *toward* something bad. Raskolnikov turns away from his loving family, gives up teaching, and withdraws from society, but only because he is so focused on grasping his idea of a Napoleon who is above morality—he is pulled *forward* by something essentially bad. Razumikhin, therefore, must be harsh and combative in order to stand between Raskolnikov and his goal and drive him off. Pip, on the other hand, wants to acquire wealth and education only because it *distances* him from his poor relations at the blacksmith forge—out of shame he strives to escape something that is, for the most part, good. Thus, Herbert must be warm and inviting in order to draw Pip back to the life he should never have rejected.

The Love Interest

One of the most important character types in both novels is the protagonist's love interest. It is commonly said that we become like what we love, and, fittingly, Sonya from *Crime and Punishment* and Estella from *Great Expectations* both inspire change in the protagonists. Raskolnikov and Pip both fall in love, to different degrees and at different points in their stories, and both, consciously or subconsciously, try to change themselves to be like their beloved. Though this same dynamic is at work in both stories, Raskolnikov is a better person at the conclusion of his novel than he was at the beginning, while Pip is worse, though on the mend. The reason the stories end so differently depends on the nature of the women they want to please, as well as on whether Raskolnikov and Pip were *objectively* or *subjectively* bad when they felt the need to change themselves.

Raskolnikov encounters Sonya after he has been seized by his ambition to test if he is an extraordinary man who can commit any crime without needing to serve a punishment. He has already embarked on this mission by killing two people with an ax and disposing of the evidence. Therefore, when he meets Sonya he can be viewed as being objectively bad. Sonya is

gentle, self-sacrificing, and kind, forced to become a prostitute to support her poverty-stricken family. Generous and loving even in the face of hardships, she often seems almost saintly in her virtue. Raskolnikov, in changing to be like his beloved, is therefore changing from cold and calculating to kind and selfless, a definite improvement, and this pattern of change makes it possible for *Crime and Punishment* to be a story of redemption.

In contrast, before Pip meets Estella, when he is very young, he is reasonably happy to live with a poor family in the marsh country, learning simple reading and writing and waiting for the day when he will be old enough to apprentice as a blacksmith to his stepfather. In other words, before Estella Pip can be considered objectively a good person. Estella herself is also no Sonya—she is haughty and rich, and laughs at Pip’s “coarse hands” and “thick boots,”¹² taunting him continuously about being lower class. Stung by this and in awe of Estella’s beauty, Pip decides he must improve himself until he wins her love and respect. The problem is that, in his hurt and humiliation at being teased by someone he so admires, Pip begins to think of his old life as bad and Estella’s life as good, although these judgments are only subjectively true. On top of that, in his attempt to become more like the cold, rude Estella, Pip must abandon simple virtue in favor of snobbishness, a pattern which—though he realizes and begins to fix his error by the conclusion—makes *Great Expectations* primarily a story of corruption and loss.

The Lawyer

The most striking similarity between the lawyer figures in the novels, aside from their professions, is their personalities and mannerisms. Porfiry Petrovich in *Crime and Punishment* and Mr. Jaggers in *Great Expectations* are, in the most basic sense, two characters whom readers might easily connect in their minds as being “the same kind of person.” Movie versions of the novels even cast the same actor as both Porfiry and Jaggers.¹³ Both men are in positions to

exercise a significant amount of control over the protagonists: Porfiry Petrovich decides whether Raskolnikov will escape without punishment or go to prison in Siberia and Mr. Jaggers serves as Pip's guardian in London and keeps track of Pip's money, giving him portions of it at a time as if he were handing out an allowance. Porfiry's role, however, is crucial to the outcome of *Crime and Punishment*, while Jaggers's duties are, for the most part, unnecessary—there is no plot-based reason that Pip must have a guardian or receive his fortune in chunks at all.

To explain this difference, we must first note that both books can be considered mystery stories, just mysteries with different stakes and told from different angles. In *Crime and Punishment*, the mystery surrounds a murder, the twist being that we know the murderer from the beginning. We also suspect that Porfiry knows the murderer. The central question, then, is “Will Raskolnikov get caught?” and since the answer to this depends largely on Porfiry, who doesn't reveal his intentions either to let Raskolnikov go free or to arrest him until near the end of the story, there is great suspense surrounding his character. Similarly, *Great Expectations* is a mystery concerning who Pip's anonymous benefactor is, but this time we, like Pip, have no definite idea of who the person could be. We know that Jaggers knows the benefactor's identity, but the question is not “Will Jaggers reveal the benefactor?” because he is working for the benefactor and has been instructed not to do so. The question then becomes simply “Who is the benefactor?” but because Mr. Jaggers will not provide any more information on that subject, he generates little or no suspense.

What specifically separates the two novels is that the question “Will Raskolnikov get caught?” is closely linked to Raskolnikov's driving ambition to test his theory—the main plot of the book—while “Who is the benefactor?” is only a minor point in Pip's story. Pip's driving ambition to become a gentleman is much more closely linked to a question like “Will Estella

ever return Pip's love?" and this depends on Estella, who keeps us guessing and becomes therefore a more important, suspenseful character than Jagers. The fact that Porfiry Petrovich and Mr. Jagers play such similar roles and yet rank at different levels of importance in their novels shows that, by increasing the lawyer figure's prominence, Dostoevsky was able to shift the focus of his ambition and guilt story.

The Frightening Yet Fascinating Figure

Perhaps the most perplexing of the types that appear in both novels is that of the frightening yet fascinating figure, a term which both sums up and fails to adequately describe the eerie and repulsive quality these characters display. Svidrigaylov, from *Crime and Punishment*, has "cold, watchful" blue eyes, "very red" lips, and a "spade-shaped beard,"¹⁴ to match his cruel, greedy personality. Miss Havisham, *Great Expectations*' creepy character, looks like a cross between a "ghastly wax-work" and "a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress" with "dark eyes that moved and looked."¹⁵ Even more surprising than the appearance or nature of these characters themselves is how the protagonists feel about them. Both Raskolnikov and Pip move from their initial aversion to an addictive fascination with Svidrigaylov and Miss Havisham, before finally regarding them with disgust.

These attitudes with which the protagonists view the creepy character type and the attitudes with which they view their main goal within the story are also strangely parallel. Both Raskolnikov's and Pip's goals, of course, are flawed—almost good, but twisted, like Svidrigaylov and Miss Havisham. Raskolnikov and Pip believe, nevertheless, that these goals hold the key to their happiness, just as, on some level, they believe that the creepy characters can help them.

For example, in the earliest stages of forming his plan to kill the old woman, Raskolnikov is horrified by his own idea. His first impression of Svidrigaylov is also one of horrified anger. By the time Raskolnikov visits the pawnbroker to rehearse the murder, however, the crime “both repel[s] and fascinate[s] him,”¹⁶ exactly like Svidrigaylov will later do. As Raskolnikov deals with the consequences of his ambition—illness, mental turmoil, difficult relations with those he loves, and guilt—he becomes disillusioned with his goal, and, consequently, disillusioned with Svidrigaylov. Pip, likewise, is repulsed and afraid the first time he meets Miss Havisham, but develops an indefinable curiosity about her the more he visits her. Later, Miss Havisham becomes connected—in Pip’s mind—with Pip’s main goal to better his social position, because he thinks she is paying for his opportunity to rise in society. Only when he learns otherwise and realizes what he has lost in achieving the position he longed for, does he start to see Miss Havisham as “dreadful” and “witch-like” again.¹⁷ In the end of both *Crime and Punishment* and *Great Expectations*, the protagonist realizes that his ambition has led him to disaster, and resolves to change his ways. Fittingly, the creepy characters both die at the end of the novels as well, Svidrigaylov from suicide and Miss Havisham from the burns she receives when her dress catches on fire.

Even between these two very similar characters, however, there is one key difference. While both Svidrigaylov and Miss Havisham symbolize the protagonist’s main ambition, Svidrigaylov acts as a *warning*, a reminder for the reader of what Raskolnikov could become, while Miss Havisham actively participates in the plot, instigating Pip’s early dissatisfaction with himself and thus making herself the *reason* he becomes what he does. Svidrigaylov embodies the cold, almost inhuman reason that Raskolnikov tries to achieve by committing the murder. A man virtually without a conscience, he interests Raskolnikov because he has already succeeded in

achieving the moral state that Raskolnikov seeks. Throughout *Crime and Punishment* Svidrigaylov's primary purpose is to represent this moral state, to display the alarming consequences of Raskolnikov's ambition played out. To put it simply, he is a cautionary figure.

Miss Havisham, it may be argued, is also a cautionary figure—but to her adopted daughter Estella, not to Pip. After being abandoned on her wedding day, Miss Havisham resolves to hate all men, and spends most of her life trying to instill this same hatred in Estella. In her relationship with Pip, however, Miss Havisham is an active, corrupting force rather than the passive foil that Svidrigaylov is to Raskolnikov. Near the beginning of the story, she singles Pip out, invites him to her house, and purposefully leads him to believe that she wants to arrange a marriage between him and Estella, even though she later admits that she never had any such intention. Unlike Svidrigaylov, a man who lurks in the background to *demonstrate* the results of ambition like Raskolnikov's, Miss Havisham manipulates Pip in order to *produce* the results she desires in him.

Conclusion

With each of these five types that *Crime and Punishment* and *Great Expectations* have in common, it is the subtle differences between the characters that allowed Dostoevsky to approach the themes from another perspective. Thus, while Dickens's novel points out the effects of twisted ambition by showing Pip's downfall, Dostoevsky's emphasizes the potential value of guilt by showing Raskolnikov's confession and forgiveness. Both novels address the same themes with essentially the same cast of characters, but because of slight variations in the use of those characters, Dickens and Dostoevsky frame their stories in quite different ways. The startling parallels between the casts of these two novels go beyond the five main character types that we have discussed here as well. Other possible pairings are Dunya and Biddy (the sister

figures), Marmeladov and Magwitch (old sinners who attract the protagonist's sympathy and repulsion), Luzhin and Orlick (nasty suitors who target the sister figures and of whom the protagonists disapprove), and Alëna Ivanovna and Mrs. Joe (both victims of attacks to the head with heavy, blunt objects). We picked the five that seem to exert the most influence on the overall narrative frames of the novels, but a closer study of any of these types would surely yield further insights into Dostoevsky's and Dickens's techniques.

Notes

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (Trans. Jessie Coulson. Ed. George Gibian. 3rd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1989), 350.

² Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol*; David Gervais, “Dostoevsky and the English Novel: Dickens, John Cowper Powys and D. H. Lawrence”; N.M. Lary, *Dostoevsky and Dickens: A Study of Literary Influence*; Lorelee MacPike, *Dostoevsky’s Dickens: A Study of Literary Influence*.

³ Dostoevsky, 168.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1868. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), 212.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁷ Dostoevsky, 44.

⁸ Dickens, 169.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹¹ Dostoevsky, 44.

¹² Dickens, 58.

¹³ Ian McDiarmid plays both Jaggers in Masterpiece Theater’s 1999 film, *Great Expectations*, and Porfiry in BBC’s 2002 miniseries, *Crime and Punishment*.

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, 207.

¹⁵ Dickens, 56.

¹⁶ Dostoevsky, 3.

¹⁷ Dickens, 293.

Select Bibliography

Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. 1868. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005. Print.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Trans. Jessie Coulson. Ed. George Gibian. 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1989. Print.

Fanger, Donald. *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965. Print.

Gervais, David. "Dostoevsky and the English Novel: Dickens, John Cowper Powys and D.H. Lawrence." *Cambridge Quarterly*. 35.1 (2006): 49-71. *Project Muse*. Web. 6 April 2012.

Klotz, Kenneth. *Comedy and the Grotesque in Dickens and Dostoevsky*. Diss. Yale University, 1973. Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1973. Print.

Lary, N.M. *Dostoevsky and Dickens: A Study of Literary Influence*. London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1973. Print.

MacPike, Lorelee. *Dostoevsky's Dickens: A Study of Literary Influence*. Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981. Print.

Tambling, Jeremy. "Criminals from a Sense of Guilt: Dickens and Dostoyevsky." *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens*. 55. (2002): 333-348. Print.