

Assignment Discovery Online Curriculum

Dostoevsky's *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*

Lesson Title:

“Split” Character Studies in *Crime and Punishment*

Grade Level:

11-12 (A.P. English)

Subject Area:

Literature

Duration: Two 90-minute block periods.

Objectives:

Students will:

1. understand that a close study of the characters in a literary classic will yield important clues to an understanding of the work as a whole;
2. understand that an effective analysis of stylistic devices depends upon selection and interpretation of evidence from the text itself; and
3. understand that successful readers will learn to recognize ambiguity and to develop an appreciation for the rich implications it offers.

Materials

For this lesson you will need:

- A copy of *Crime and Punishment*, preferred translation by Pevear and Volokhonsky, published by Vintage Classics, 1993.
- Copies of the Classroom Activity Sheet: Examples of “Split” Character Traits
- Copies of the Take-Home Activity Sheet: “Split” Character Continuum Lines

Introduction

There is a mystery at the heart of this novel of crime and punishment and it is not who committed the crime (that's evident very early in the novel); it's not even whether the criminal will be punished. He punishes himself from the moment he commits the murder, and even dares others to do the same to him. The mystery revolves around the character of Raskolnikov himself. Dostoevsky alerts us to the character-as-mystery focus by naming his main character as he does. The root of his name, *raskol-*, means “schism” or “split” in Russian. The procedures below are designed to investigate the significance of Raskolnikov's split nature and to consider how this significance shapes our understanding of other characters and of *Crime and Punishment* as a whole.

Procedures

1. Begin the lesson by making an analogy between living human beings and fine character creations in a novel. Just as real people cannot be put into labeled boxes, good or bad, neither can complex fictional characters be so simply categorized. Discuss Raskolnikov as the novel's principal "split" character and offer quotes that demonstrate his conflicting impulses from the outset. You may want to begin with the two quotes below.

Example: In this episode (in Part One, Chapter IV), Raskolnikov protects the defenseless girl on the bench who's attracted the attention of a lecherous onlooker. Almost immediately, he changes his mind and scorns his recently expressed concern:

"I saw myself how he was watching her and following her, only I hindered him, and now he's waiting until I go away. How can we keep him from her? How can we get her home?" Then, a moment later, taking some money out of his pocket to hand to the policemen, he says: ". . . here, hire a coachman and tell him to take her to her address. If only we could find out her address!" (p. 48)

"He [*the policeman*] kept my twenty kopecks," Raskolnikov said spitefully when he found himself alone. "Well, let him; he'll take something from that one, too, and let the girl go with him, and that will be the end of it. . . . Why did I go meddling in all that! Who am I to help anyone? Do I have any right to help? Let them all gobble each other alive—what is it to me?" (p. 50)

2. Have students form groups of four. Ask them to brainstorm what other characters in the novel exhibit conflicting tendencies like those noted in Raskolnikov and illustrated in the pair of quotes above. Have them consider why their suggested characters qualify as "split" characters.

Character possibilities:

- Porfiry Petrovich (rational/spiritual)
- Dunya (highly principled/capable of compromise)
- Svidrigailov (hedonistic/altruistic)
- Katerina Ivanovna (self-pitying/self-sacrificing)
- Sonya (saint/sinner; spiritually secure/personally insecure)

3. Instruct each student to choose a character from among those the group has identified as having "split" natures. Give each student a copy of the Classroom Worksheet: Examples of "Split" Character Traits. On the worksheet, students will be presented with sets of conflicting personality traits. Ask students to find examples from the book that show how their characters exhibited each of these opposing character traits. For each trait, they should provide one relevant textual citation. These references should include page numbers and words marking the beginning and end of the supporting quote, for example: "He kept tormenting and taunting himself . . . to do something without fail, at once, quickly." (p. 45) Two sets of opposing character traits have been provided; students should provide two more sets of traits that reflect tensions specific to their character. New lines might include such opposites as "practical" and "idealistic" or "self-controlled" and "prone to violence."
4. Hand out the Take-Home Worksheet: "Split" Character Continuum Lines as an assignment. In this activity, students will use the character traits and specific textual citations to consider

their character's true nature. Students are presented with a continuum for each set of conflicting character traits. Students will need to investigate their character's personality and decide where the character falls on the continuum. For each line defining personality extremes, students should write a paragraph explaining the reasons for their choice of character placement along the continuum line. For example, if they felt that the character was strongly "prone to violence," they should describe incidents from the novel that illustrate this tendency.

5. Begin the next class period by placing the students into new groups, based on the character they are studying. For example, all those who have investigated Porfiry Petrovich should work together. Have students share the textual citations that they recorded with their groups. Students should find each passage within the novel and follow along as the presenting student reads and explains its importance. Group members should question, endorse, challenge, or extend the ideas raised in the quote discussion. They may add new ideas to their own worksheet as they participate in the group discussion.
6. Ask them to compare their views on the tensions evident in the character's personality and actions. Did they place the character similarly on the continuum? Did they create new lines illustrating additional oppositions within the character?
7. After each group has discussed their character studies, have students come together as a whole class. The groups will take turns reporting on their character, offering a sampling of quotes and interpretations that illuminate the divided personality they investigated. They should note areas of agreement and disagreement within their group, and invite the class to comment on the ideas presented. Encourage students to take notes of the conclusions other group members have made about characters in the novel.
8. Have students consider how this character study contributed to their overall understanding of *Crime and Punishment*. There is only one Raskolnikov in this novel, but many characters are similarly "split." What themes might Dostoevsky be reinforcing by populating his novel with those driven by conflicting impulses? What more do we learn about his central character by considering the supporting cast?

Adaptations, for same grade level

- Ask students to find a partner who has studied a different character in *Crime and Punishment*. Have pairs compare and contrast the tensions that marked their respective characters. Ask them to consider whether any common denominator traits characterize split personalities or whether each displays his/her own unique set of inner tensions. Finally, ask students to discuss whether or not their characters were able to resolve any of the internal conflicts that tormented them. If not, how do the unresolved oppositions within a character affect their reading of the novel?
- Have students probe the issue of complex characters in other novels or plays that they have read in class. They can use their investigations of characters in *Crime and Punishment* as a model for similar studies of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the*

Artist as a Young Man. Do great classic authors share any common techniques in their portrayals of intriguing human personalities?

Discussion Questions

1. Competing with the novel's many realistic scenes are sequences shaped by dreams, hallucinations, and uncanny coincidences. Discuss the influence these scenes have on the characters' thoughts and actions.
2. Discuss the role of suffering in the lives of Dostoevsky's characters. What, if anything, do tormented souls like Katerina Ivanovna and Sonya gain by enduring their pain? Apply the question to other characters you've studied in the novel.
3. Debate the effectiveness of inspector Porfiry Petrovich's cat-and-mouse game with his prime suspect, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov. If you were the investigator, how would you close in on such a complicated murder suspect?
4. Compare Raskolnikov's "extraordinary man" theory to the actual events he sets in motion with the murder of Alyona Ivanovna, the old pawnbroker.
5. Reconcile Svidrigailov's charitable gestures at the end of the novel with his violent confrontation of Dunya during the same time frame. Does his eventual suicide affect your response? If so, how?
6. Analyze the effect of the novel's two major settings—the streets of Petersburg and the meager lodgings of the city's poor—on the characters' inner conflicts.

Evaluation

After this unit of study, have students respond to the following timed essay prompt for 45 minutes (either in a follow-up class session or for homework):

Raskolnikov's "split" nature, suggested by his very name, serves as a prototype for many of the conflicted characters in *Crime and Punishment*. Draw conclusions about Dostoevsky's emphasis on such characters. What are the implications for the ways in which these characters interact and evolve and for the novel's larger themes?

Base your response on references to Raskolnikov and two other characters, the one you chose for group study and one other presented by a classmate in class discussion. You may refer to the notes you took in discussion and to your own handout with quote citations. Be sure that the conclusions you advance are rooted in specific textual evidence from the novel.

Evaluation Three-Point Rubric

Evaluate the essay according to the following rubric:

Three points: Essay makes a well-reasoned argument for ways that Dostoevsky's distinctive character creations influence/reinforce the novel's themes; writer uses the three characters specified in the prompt to develop main points; writer presents a convincing selection of textual supports to back up main argument

Two points: Essay presents ideas about the impact of Dostoevsky's characters on the novel's themes, but writer does not connect the ideas to make a convincing argument; writer uses two or three character references specified in the prompt; writer's chosen textual supports are not always relevant or sufficient to back up ideas

One point: Essay fails to focus on the issues highlighted in the prompt; writer substitutes plot summary or general character description for called-for analysis; writer uses little or no textual citations as supports

Extension

Raskolnikov in Modern Dress?

Truth may or may not be stranger than fiction, but reality often does resemble fiction in uncanny ways. Dostoevsky created a character who killed for an idea—a theoretician murderer—unlike many murderers who are driven by uncontrolled passions. Essayist Cynthia Ozick recognized Raskolnikov's intellectual motive for murder in the portrait of the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, which gradually emerged in press accounts after he was identified. In her article, "Dostoevsky's Unabomber" (*The New Yorker*, February 24, March 3, 1997), Ozick says of both Kaczynski and his fictional antecedent: "The philosopher is one with the murderer."

Ask students to locate Ozick's article using the Internet. After they have read the article, lead a class discussion on the points of comparison Ozick raises between Dostoevsky's murderer and the Unabomber. Ask them to react to the conclusions she draws in her essay. Then put the students into small groups to continue the discussion. Have them brainstorm recent news reports detailing murders that may have been committed for the sake of an idea. Kaczynski's anti-technology mania drove him to target computer scientists, among others, as his victims. Would today's terrorists qualify as "theoretician murderers," for example? Why or why not? Finally, ask students to consider the issue of punishment for such crimes. What, in fact, is Raskolnikov's punishment? Does the fictional punishment fit the crime? Would it be appropriate for a real-world theoretician murderer?

Suggested Readings:

Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871.
Joseph Frank, Princeton University Press, 1995.

Fourth of a planned five-volume biography that covers the time period during which Dostoevsky wrote Crime and Punishment. Also noteworthy is a full commentary of the novel entitled "A Reading of Crime and Punishment"

Russia of the Tsars

James E. Strickler, Lucent Books, 1998.

Using illustrations and photographs, excerpts from original documents, and an explanatory text, this book follows the changes in Russian government and society from the establishment of Tsarist rule to the Russian Revolution.

Web Links:

Christiaan Stange's Dostoevsky Research Station

This Prague-based, comprehensive Dostoevsky site contains major links to Dostoevsky web sites, some study guides, and biographical information.

<http://www.kiosek.com/dostoevsky/>

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky 1821-1881

This site of a Brandeis professor is heavily oriented toward biographical information, but contains many links to Dostoevski's world and works.

<http://www.unet.brandeis.edu/~teuber/dostoevskybio.html>

The Internet Public Library-Dostoevsky

The IPL Collection contains critical and biographical web sites about authors and their works that can be browsed by author, title, or nationality and literary period.

<http://www.ipl.org/ref/litcrit/>

World of Dostoevsky

Posted in both English and Russian, this site offers links to mainly college academics' writings about Dostoevsky and notes for courses on the author and CRIME AND PUNISHMENT.

<http://www.und.edu/instruct/rkopric/dost/>

Britannica.com-Dostoevsky

This initial site for Dostoevsky is an excellent gateway into Britannica articles about the author and the novel. It offers links which address all aspects of CRIME AND PUNISHMENT.

<http://search.britannica.com/search?query=dostoevsky>

Vocabulary

depravity

Definition: Moral corruption.

Context: Raskolnikov cynically asserted that if Sonya refrained from committing suicide, she would certainly sink into depravity as a result of her degrading condition.

dissemble

Definition: To disguise the real nature of; to make a false show.

Context: Rather than dissemble, Raskolnikov was more likely to risk taunting his adversaries with some version of the truth.

incriminate

Definition: To charge with or involve in a crime or other wrongful act.

Context: Porfiry Petrovich had such penetrating insight into human behavior that he was confident he'd found the murderer before Raskolnikov had done anything to incriminate himself.

libertine

Definition: One who acts without moral restraint; a dissolute person.

Context: The libertine Svidrigailov assumed he could have his way with Dunya as he had with countless other women in his past.

nihilism

Definition: A denial of all authority in favor of extreme individualism; the belief that existing social and political institutions must be destroyed to ensure progress.

Context: Raskolnikov's belief that certain extraordinary men could overstep the law in pursuit of their goals reflected a nihilism Dostoevsky warned against in his novel.

schism

Definition: A separation or division into contending opposites.

Context: The violent schism in Raskolnikov's nature pulls him between compassion and hard-hearted disregard of others.

self-abnegation

Definition: The setting aside of self-interest for the sake of others or for a belief.

Context: Sonya's most painful act of self-abnegation comes when she takes up the yellow pass to work as a prostitute.

self-reproach

Definition: The act of charging oneself with a fault or mistake.

Context: Despite Marmeladov's constant self-reproach, he lacks the courage to change his irresponsible treatment of his family.

Academic Standards

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject area: Language Arts

Standard:

Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the reading process.

Benchmark:

Recognizes the effectiveness of writing techniques in accomplishing the author's purpose.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: Language Arts

Standard:

Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Benchmark:

Writes in response to literature (e.g., suggests an interpretation; recognizes possible ambiguities and complexities in a text; interprets passages in a novel in terms of their significance to the novel as a whole; focuses on the theme of a literary work).

Grade Level: 9-12**Subject area:** Language Arts**Standard:**

Demonstrates competences in speaking and listening as tools for learning.

Benchmark:

Responds to questions and feedback about own presentations (e.g., defends ideas; expands on a topic; uses logical arguments).

Credit

Mary O'Brien, teacher, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, Alexandria, Virginia.

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Examples of “Split” Character Traits

Name of Character: _____

Directions: Below are a few opposing character traits that war within many of the characters in *Crime and Punishment*. Find examples from the book that show how your character exhibited each of these opposing character traits. For each trait, provide one relevant textual citation (page number, beginning and end of the highlighted passage). Two sets of opposing character traits have been provided for you. Please provide two more sets of traits that reflect tensions specific to your character.

1. self-absorbed
Textual citation:

cares about others
Textual citation:

2. threatened self-image
Textual citation:

positive self-regard
Textual citation:

3. _____
Textual citation:

Textual citation:

4. _____
Textual citation:

Textual citation:

“Split” Character Continuum Lines

Name of Character: _____

Directions: In class, you provided examples of opposing character traits exhibited by your character in *Crime and Punishment*. Now, for each set of opposing character traits, decide which trait best describes your character's true nature. The continuum below display these opposing character traits. Place an “x” on each line to graphically illustrate where your character falls in terms of the opposing descriptors. (You may decide that your character has an equal combination of the two traits, in which case your “x” may fall in the middle of the continuum line.) Under each continuum line, defend your decision in a well-supported paragraph.

1. self-absorbed

cares about others

2. threatened self-image

positive self-regard

3. _____

4. _____

