

Comparative Themes in Chekhov and Dostoyevsky's Russian Fiction

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The two literary texts to be analyzed are *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Anton Chekhov's *Misery*. Russian literature is enriched with diverse themes such as murder, mystery, morality, crime, and sexual enthrallment. However, the literary texts written by the 18th and 19th-century writers focused mainly on the theme of corruption, which was prevalent in Russia during that time. The class division in Russia had driven people towards committing horrendous crimes.

The aristocracy had been at its peak, and the [emancipation of the serfs](#) led people to overthrow the aristocratic class. The crime rate reached its peak due to the social injustices that were prevalent in Russian society. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* highlights the social issues that were on the rise during the time the novel was written. The book centers on a guy named Raskolnikov, who is broke and unable to continue his education. He feels depressed about his family losing its status, and his situation drives him towards committing murder, which he later feels guilty about when he spends time in prison. For Raskolnikov, it has become difficult to pursue his dreams as he doesn't have any means of earning for himself. The second text that has been selected for analysis is part of Anton Chekhov's short story collection and is based on the grief of a man who has lost his son and has no one to talk to him. Iono is unaware of the reason behind his son's death and only wishes to have someone speak to him and share his sorrows, but everyone is too busy with their lives. A thematic analysis and character sketch will be carried out in this paper to identify the similarities between Chekhov's works and those of Dostoyevsky. Chekhov and Dostoyevsky are among the most influential fiction writers in the Russian literary canon, as their work touches upon the social issues that were prevalent in Russia before the aristocratic class was overthrown.

About Anton Chekhov:

To get a better understanding of the works of the selected writers, a brief introduction will be given. Chekhov was born in Russia to a low-income family, and his father was a grocer and was always troubled. However, his mother was a good storyteller and loved telling stories to Chekhov and his siblings. After his father moved away to Moscow due to the failure of the business, Chekhov stayed behind to finish his studies. Once he had graduated, Chekhov worked different jobs to support his family. Chekhov published comic pieces in a local magazine. He has also written theater pieces, including a few works that had themes of comedy and tragedy. His most famous was written in the year 1860 and continued till the last stages of his life. His stories are mostly based on human nature rather than on the plot. The short stories collection is specific in its context and depicts the situation of Russia before the revolution took place and overthrew the Aristocratic class. Chekhov mainly

focused on the mood and character to give readers a better look into the human psyche. His most remarkable work includes *The Cherry Orchard*, primarily focused on Russia's situation before the serfs overthrew the aristocracy.

About Fyodor Dostoevsky:

Fyodor Dostoevsky, born in Russia, is a renowned writer known for his unique style of writing. Dostoevsky published some short stories and novels during his time, and most of them penetrated into the human psyche to show the way humans behave under different circumstances. His works have had a significant influence on 20th-century fiction. Dostoevsky has left a profound impact on different schools of thought, such as psychology, modernism, existentialism, theology, and literary criticism. Most intellectuals term Dostoevsky's works as prophetic as Dostoevsky was able to predict how the Russian revolutionaries would behave if they were left in charge of power. His best-known work is a novella titled *Notes from the Underground*, along with two novels, which are *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky's work is mostly structured on the psychological aspect, which has earned him the title of the most celebrated psychologist in the history of literature. Dostoevsky equipped himself with the knowledge of the human mind to examine the different psychological states, such as insanity, which leads one to commit murder or to attempt suicide. His works also touch on philosophical and political issues while highlighting timelessness.

Analysis of *Crime and Punishment* and Misery:

While analyzing *Crime and Punishment*, it can be seen that Dostoevsky's focus was on the deteriorating situation of Russian society during the time the novel was written. The theme of misery is prevalent in the book as the characters suffer due to financial issues. The author spent some time in prison, and it made him reflect on the things that he had done. The book is a result of Dostoevsky's life experiences and the things he did, which are depicted as the protagonist. The following lines from the text can be linked to the author's experiences,

"Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart. The great men must, I think, have great sadness on earth." (Dostoevsky)

The protagonist, Raskolnikov, should be noted as not evil of heart and did not have evil intentions. Society is to be blamed for driving him to the point that he plans out a murder to prove himself unique. He is depressed about his financial situation and has no means of paying for his tuition fee. He is troubled by the way his society has been divided due to class division and the treatment of poor people. The murder that Raskolnikov commits drives him into isolation as he cuts off all ties with his

friends and family and accepts a life of solitude. He pushes away the people who love him and care for him so that he can be lonely in his suffering because he believes that no one can understand his pain.

The author's portrayal of Raskolnikov's character shows that the people during the nineteenth century were tired of the class divide that kept them from getting their lives back on track, as there weren't any opportunities for people belonging to the lower classes. The families that had lost their titles and status were drowning in the financial crisis, and the protagonist was one of them. He was unable to make his life better and do something about his circumstances. Raskolnikov felt helpless about the way society treated the poor and how it manipulated them into submission. The author portrays the impact of social evils that make people miserable and drive them away from religion, Raskolnikov despite being miserable, rejects the existence of a God and believes that people need to have control over their lives (Pattison and Thompson). He was of the view that the only way people can make their lives better is by grabbing any opportunity that comes their way. Raskolnikov believed that killing the pawnbroker was an opportunity to try what power felt like.

"I did not bow down to you; I bowed down to all the suffering of humanity." (Dostoevsky)

Aside from his miserable state, a character by the name of Luzhin proposes to the protagonist's sister while knowing quite well that the family would not refuse the offer since they were poor. This further drives Raskolnikov into a miserable state. Raskolnikov begins to question the meaning of life and openly rejects the existence of God. He puts himself to the test and hypothesizes that Napoleon Bonaparte was unique because he grabbed power when the opportunity presented itself to him. Therefore, Raskolnikov murdered a pawnbroker and then her sister, not for the sake of money but to test whether he was superhuman or not. His misery has led him to think that to make a change, he needs to do the unfathomable and take the life of another (Frank). It should be noted that the pawnbroker had not done any harm to the protagonist. However, Raskolnikov believes that he has done the world a favor by killing off the old woman. The following lines from the text show the sufferings of the protagonist,

"And the more I drink, the more I feel it. That's why I drink too. I try to find sympathy and feeling in the drink... I drink so that I may suffer twice as much." (Dostoevsky)

Raskolnikov finds solace in drinking, but the more he drinks, the more his sorrows surface, and he ends up suffering more. His sufferings relate to the author's experiences as Dostoyevsky himself underwent a similar situation in which he took to heavy drinking and gambling. Both gambling and drinking led the author towards a financial crisis, and he had to take to writing as a means of earning for himself. The society that the author shows reflects his community as the generation of

Dostoyevsky had lost its way and was on the path towards social evil, which the author mentions in the novel. Raskolnikov understands the sufferings of his fellow human beings, but instead of doing something to make his life better, he plunges into committing a crime, one which means taking the life of another. His initial plan was to kill the pawnbroker only to see if taking her life would make him any different from the rest of the people. In the process of killing off the pawnbroker, the sister of the old woman, walked in, and without thinking for a second, the protagonist killed her off as well.

It should be noted that Dostoyevsky does not explicitly discuss the impact of the murder that the protagonist committed till he spends time in jail, where he is alone and has time to think over his actions. Raskolnikov did not think much of the murder; instead believed that the old woman deserved to die anyway, as she was getting money out of poor people and being unfair to them. Her death, however, did not get Raskolnikov what he wanted, as he did not feel any different from the rest of the people. The time he spent being imprisoned made him guilty of the crime he had committed. The author's purpose for adding the guilt later in the novel is to show the psyche of humans and how they behave when they are left in solitude.

Similarly, in the short story Misery, the main character, Iona Potapov, is shown to be miserable from the onset of the story. He is a sled driver, and both he and his mare are shown to be tired and worn out, covered in the snow, and neglected by the world like two insignificant objects. Iona's son dies at the hospital, and the grief of it drives him towards depression. At the beginning of the story, Iona gets himself a passenger who is least interested in what Iona has to say and more interested in getting home. The people on the road verbally abuse Iona while he tries to share the news of his son's death with the officer. The verbal abuse that Iona has to bear is genuinely heartrending as he has been suffering from the loss of a loved one, but everyone around him seems to ignore his sufferings. The following lines show that the officer cares not for what Iona has to say but only wishes to get to his destination,

"Drive on! Drive on... says the officer. 'We shan't get there till to-morrow going on like this. Hurry up!'" (Chekhov)

Even though Chekhov wrote the story many years ago, the officer stands to reflect the modern society that does not have time to stop for a moment and listen to someone else's troubles (Malcolm). Iona's next passengers also are shown to be abusive like the pedestrians who get in the way of Iona and his sledge and then end up abusing him. The following lines show the ruthlessness of people,

"'Turn round, you devil!' comes out of the darkness. 'Have you gone cracked, you old dog? Look where you are going!'" (Chekhov)

The following lines perfectly portray the mean human nature that has become a necessary part of every individual and without which society is hard to imagine. Chekhov uses artistic style to paint the

human psyche, and in the selected story it can be seen that Iona's sufferings mean nothing to anyone around him, all he has got is a mare who listens to his commands and goes where she is told. The protagonist desperately tries to talk to his passengers about his son's death, but no one is willing to let him speak for a second as they quickly interrupt him whenever he brings up the subject of his son's sudden death. The three passengers that come after the officer are shown to be far worse than the previous passenger. All of them express selfishness towards Iona when he tries to strike up a conversation with the three. The hunchback threatens to hit him on the neck if Iona does not pay attention to the road.

"Well, you give him a little encouragement... one in the neck!"

'Do you hear, you old plague? I'll make you smart. If one stands on ceremony with fellows like you, one may as well walk. Do you hear, you old dragon? Or don't you care a hang what we say?.'"
(Chekhov)

From the above-mentioned lines, the readers can see that the three passengers felt that the use of violence would get the driver to be more active in his surroundings and get them to their destination faster than they were going. However, what these three characters do not realize is that Iona is feeling lonely and wants someone to ask him about his son's death. In spite of Iona's constant attempts at striking up a conversation, no one seems to have time on their hands to let Iona speak and lessen his burden. Chekhov has masterfully described the sufferings of humans in a world that was divided based on class differences and where the rich had no time for the poor. Russia underwent a financial crisis in which the aristocratic class that once held its high status was faced with a deteriorating situation and was soon overthrown. However, before the revolution took place, the serfs and the lower classes had to face the cruelty of the elite. Iona being a man of inferior background suffers because he is a sledge driver and no one considers him an equal. Furthermore, Iona's loneliness increases manifold when the three passengers leave him without allowing him to speak about the things that had been upsetting him.

The death of his son had left Iona with a shattered psyche and a weak body that could not handle the cruelty of people. Belonging to the inferior part of society, Iona's sufferings are of no significance to his passengers. On the contrary, the people who get to ride Iona's sled focus more on getting to their destination. Iona desperately tries to find one soul among a crowd of so many to talk to and ease out his sufferings. However, not a single soul steps forward, willing to take the pain away and provide relief to Iona. The moment Iona's passengers get off at their destination, Iona feels lonely once again.

“Again he is alone, and again there is silence for him... The misery which has been for a brief space eased comes back again and tears his heart more cruelly than ever.” (Chekhov)

The lines mentioned show the miserable state of Iona and his desperation for getting someone who would ask him about his son. Iona remembers everything from the time his son got sick and was admitted to the hospital to his dying moment. The protagonist remembers his son's final words and the funeral session in detail and wishes to lessen his pain by having someone talk to him. It is crucial to note here that the purpose of putting Iona in such a miserable state was to show that the society had become hard-hearted and cruel towards other people's sufferings. Chekhov has done the story justice by painting an accurate picture of his community that had lost the meaning of sympathy and moved on to the harsher aspect of life. Near the end of the selected story, Iona returns home to find everyone already asleep, which adds more to Iona's misery as he has spent all day looking for a friendly face, but everywhere he looks, he sees empathetic figures sweeping past him in search of their destinations.

“May it do you good...But my son is dead, mate...Do you hear? This week in the hospital...It's a strange business...Just as the young man had been thirsty for water, he thirsts for speech...” (Chekhov)

The above-mentioned lines highlight the importance of communicative action for people to lessen their burdens and breathe easily once all those burdens have been lifted. However, Iona is an unfortunate soul as not a single soul has time for him except for his mare, who listens to him while munching away the hay. Iona, being old, believes that it is his time to die and not his son's, and it bothers him to his core that death would come for his son, who was so full of life.

Conclusion

From the discussion so far, it is evident that Russia was undergoing a financial crisis, which led people from the lower class to commit serious crimes such as murder. The character of Raskolnikov is an accurate depiction of what Dostoyevsky had to go through when he was young. The social issues that were prevalent during his time drove him towards the wastefulness of his funds in gambling and drinking. It is important to note that most of Russian crime fiction is based on the conditions of 18th and 19th-century Russian society as there was an ongoing turmoil caused by the division in the social strata. The emancipation of the serfs also marks the worst event in the history of Russia.

Also, the character of Iona shows the social deterioration of Russia, which has made people into pitiless beings. Chekhov brought to attention the way humans had turned themselves cold towards the problems of others. People had averted their gaze from the sufferings of other people and had

become self-centered. The class divide had made them stone-cold towards people with misfortunes, such as Iona, who only wishes to have someone talk to him and share his worries with. However, no one has the time to step back from their busy routine and listen to him. The short story *Misery* is based on a father's grief, especially when he has been left alone in the world. Iona's son was the only thing that brought him happiness, and having a child taken away at such an early age can utterly destroy any person. Iona is one such example of a miserable human being who was looked down upon because of his profession, which made him a lowly driver and, therefore, let people treat him like he meant nothing.

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