**Themes**

**Alienation from Society**

Alienation is the primary theme of *Crime and Punishment*. At first, Raskolnikov’s pride separates him from society. He sees himself as superior to all other people and so cannot relate to anyone. Within his personal philosophy, he sees other people as tools and uses them for his own ends. After committing the murders, his isolation grows because of his intense guilt and the half-delirium into which his guilt throws him. Over and over again, Raskolnikov pushes away the people who are trying to help him, including Sonya, Dunya, Pulcheria Alexandrovna, Razumikhin, and even Porfiry Petrovich, and then suffers the consequences. In the end, he finds the total alienation that he has brought upon himself intolerable. Only in the Epilogue, when he finally realizes that he loves Sonya, does Raskolnikov break through the wall of pride and self-centeredness that has separated him from society.

**The Psychology of Crime and Punishment**

The manner in which the novel addresses crime and punishment is not exactly what one would expect. The crime is committed in Part I and the punishment comes hundreds of pages later, in the Epilogue. The real focus of the novel is not on those two endpoints but on what lies between them—an in-depth exploration of the psychology of a criminal. The inner world of Raskolnikov, with all of its doubts, deliria, second-guessing, fear, and despair, is the heart of the story. Dostoevsky concerns himself not with the actual repercussions of the murder but with the way the murder forces Raskolnikov to deal with tormenting guilt. Indeed, by focusing so little on Raskolnikov’s imprisonment, Dostoevsky seems to suggest that actual punishment is much less terrible than the stress and anxiety of trying to avoid punishment. Porfiry Petrovich emphasizes the psychological angle of the novel, as he shrewdly realizes that Raskolnikov is the killer and makes several speeches in which he details the workings of Raskolnikov’s mind after the killing. Because he understands that a guilt-ridden criminal must necessarily experience mental torture, he is certain that Raskolnikov will eventually confess or go mad. The expert mind games that he plays with Raskolnikov strengthen the sense that the novel’s outcome is inevitable because of the nature of the human psyche.

**The Idea of the Superman**

At the beginning of the novel, Raskolnikov sees himself as a “superman,” a person who is extraordinary and thus above the moral rules that govern the rest of humanity. His vaunted estimation of himself compels him to separate himself from society. His murder of the pawnbroker is, in part, a consequence of his belief that he is above the law and an attempt to establish the truth of his superiority. Raskolnikov’s inability to quell his subsequent feelings of guilt, however, proves to him that he is not a “superman.” Although he realizes his failure to live up to what he has envisioned for himself, he is nevertheless unwilling to accept the total deconstruction of this identity. He continues to resist the idea that he is as mediocre as the rest of humanity by maintaining to himself that the murder was justified. It is only in his final surrender to his love for Sonya, and his realization of the joys in such surrender, that he can finally escape his conception of himself as a superman and the terrible isolation such a belief brought upon him.

**Nihilism**

Nihilism was a philosophical position developed in Russia in the 1850s and 1860s, known for “negating more,” in the words of Lebezyatnikov. It rejected family and societal bonds and emotional and aesthetic concerns in favor of a strict materialism, or the idea that there is no “mind” or “soul” outside of the physical world. Linked to nihilism is utilitarianism, or the idea that moral decisions should be based on the rule of the greatest happiness for the largest number of people. Raskolnikov originally justifies the murder of Alyona on utilitarian grounds, claiming that a “louse” has been removed from society. Whether or not the murder is actually a utilitarian act, Raskolnikov is certainly a nihilist; completely unsentimental for most of the novel, he cares nothing about the emotions of others. Similarly, he utterly disregards social conventions that run counter to the austere interactions that he desires with the world. However, at the end of the novel, as Raskolnikov discovers love, he throws off his nihilism. Through this action, the novel condemns nihilism as empty.

**Motifs**

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.*

**Poverty**

Poverty is ubiquitous in the St. Petersburg of Dostoevsky’s novel. Almost every character in the novel—except Luzhin, Svidrigailov, and the police officials—is desperately poor, including the Marmeladovs, the Raskolnikovs, Razumikhin, and various lesser characters. While poverty inherently forces families to bond together, Raskolnikov often attempts to distance himself from Pulcheria Alexandrovna and Dunya. He scolds his sister when he thinks that she is marrying to help him out financially; he also rejects Razumikhin’s offer of a job. Dostoevsky’s descriptions of poverty allow him to address important social issues and to create rich, problematic situations in which the only way to survive is through self-sacrifice. As a result, poverty enables characters such as Sonya and Dunya to demonstrate their strength and compassion.

**Symbols**

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

**The City**

The city of St. Petersburg as represented in Dostoevsky’s novel is dirty and crowded. Drunks are sprawled on the street in broad daylight, consumptive women beat their children and beg for money, and everyone is crowded into tiny, noisy apartments. The clutter and chaos of St. Petersburg is a twofold symbol. It represents the state of society, with all of its inequalities, prejudices, and deficits. But it also represents Raskolnikov’s delirious, agitated state as he spirals through the novel toward the point of his confession and redemption. He can escape neither the city nor his warped mind. From the very beginning, the narrator describes the heat and “the odor” coming off the city, the crowds, and the disorder, and says they “all contributed to irritate the young man’s already excited nerves.” Indeed, it is only when Raskolnikov is forcefully removed from the city to a prison in a small town in Siberia that he is able to regain compassion and balance.

**The Cross**

The cross that Sonya gives to Raskolnikov before he goes to the police station to confess is an important symbol of redemption for him. Throughout Christendom, of course, the cross symbolizes Jesus’ self-sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Raskolnikov denies any feeling of sin or devoutness even after he receives the cross; the cross symbolizes not that he has achieved redemption or even understood what Sonya believes religion can offer him, but that he has begun on the path toward recognition of the sins that he has committed. That Sonya is the one who gives him the cross has special significance: she gives of herself to bring him back to humanity, and her love and concern for him, like that of Jesus, according to Christianity, will ultimately save and renew him.