

Literary Analysis



Level 12

Tell a Lie to Show the Truth

Through the pages of *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky builds an argument which at last reaches the astonishing conclusion that a certain type of lying is necessary to the discovery of truth. This may seem a stark, startling idea, but its underlying principle is remarkably sound. Via the concept of lying in order to find truth, Dostoevsky is demanding of theorists that they fit practice to principle, and try their ideas in the crucible of concrete reality.

Note the clear thesis in the introductory paragraph.

Dostoevsky argues that when theory is tested, when one's own ideas are sincerely tested, and when they are tested with humility, then the experiment will bear that harvest of truth which ought to be the aim of intellectual inquiry. Yet, although this truth is the aim of the intellect, Dostoevsky finally hints that "truth" is something quite different from the achievement of knowledge, something of a different, and ultimately a spiritual, nature.

The writer here provides three criteria for the lie that will lead to the truth; these are the points that will be developed in the rest of the paper.

The concept of lying in order to attain truth, of the need to apply theory, appears quite early in *Crime and Punishment*. Razumihin, a sympathetic character, asserts that, "... one can always forgive lying—lying is a delightful thing, for it leads to truth..."¹ This is a surprising enough statement at the first hearing, but we find it repeated by Razumihin later, when he says, "You think I am attacking them for talking nonsense? Not a bit! I like them to talk nonsense. That's man's one privilege over all creation. Through error you come to the truth!"²

The reader knows, as Razumihin does not in this scene, that Dostoevsky's protagonist, Raskolnikov, is in fact testing a theory: the theory that an exceptional man is justified in doing murder. That

Raskolnikov should live out this lie is Dostoevsky's whole purpose for the novel, because Dostoevsky

1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Translated by Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam Classic, 2003) 137.

2 Ibid., 202-203.



himself is telling a lie in order to show truth. As Joseph Frank reminds us,

Crime and Punishment . . . arose from Dostoevsky's efforts to dramatize the moral dangers that he sensed lurking in the ideology of Russian Nihilism—dangers not so much for society as a whole, though these certainly existed—but those primarily threatening the young Nihilists themselves.³

How does an author expose a dangerous theory? If Nihilism is telling a lie by saying that its methods will bring about good and peace and plenty, when in fact they will only produce the opposite, how can the lie be discovered? Dostoevsky's answer is to clothe the falsehood in a flesh and blood reality, wind it up, and set it ticking. It is an elaborate experiment; a verisimilitude set up in order to test Nihilism. Razumihin says that lying will lead to truth, but it is Dostoevsky who, through Raskolnikov, is actually expounding a lie.

Indeed, Dostoevsky *must* expound the lie, in order to show what terrible results will follow from Nihilistic theory, not just for society, but for the theorists themselves. As Razumihin says, "... what is offensive is that they lie and worship their own lying..."⁴ What was offensive in Nihilism was that these students and theorists worshipped their own ideas, but did not trouble to bring them down from abstract intellectualism and weigh them in the scales of reality to test their truth or usefulness. A lie which can lead to truth is one that is willing to put its weight on the platform that it has built.

But Dostoevsky does not merely reproach theorists for their unapplied abstractions. He lays a special scorn on those who, rather than formulating and testing their own ideas, rely upon the concepts and conclusions of others. As Razumihin put it,

"I am a man because I err! You never reach any truth without making fourteen mistakes and very likely a hundred and fourteen. And a fine thing, too, in its way; but we can't even make mistakes on our own account! Talk nonsense, but talk your own nonsense, and I'll kiss you for it. To go wrong in one's own way is better than to go right in some-

³ Frank, xviii.

⁴ Dostoevsky, 137.



one else's... We prefer to live on other people's ideas, it's what we are used to!"⁵

What is argued for here bears a close resemblance to our first point, that theories must be tested.

However, there is a subtle emphasis on personal responsibility. It is not enough that another man says, "This is so." Dostoevsky insists on a higher standard. He urges theorists to "talk your own nonsense," to make mistakes on their own account, to make a personal test of personally-held suppositions. He demands that they take risks themselves, that truth is not to be had for nothing.

This is a fine distinction, but an important one, for it is one of the few things that may dispose a reader to admire Raskolnikov. He is a young man with the courage to make Nihilistic principles his own, not relying simply upon the judgment of others. In this he escapes the special scorn that Dostoevsky reserves for secondhand speakers of "nonsense." Raskolnikov, however, also meets the first criterion of the useful liar, for he is willing to apply his adopted theory.

These first two points are in some sense preliminary, for they merely require that an experiment be made, and that it be made on a level of personal responsibility. Results—and what the liar will do with those results—are not touched upon in the first two points. Results belong to the third criteria of the useful lie, namely, that the liar must have humility enough to admit the truth when it becomes apparent. Dostoevsky spends most of his novel on this third issue, and we will devote proportional consideration to it.

As Porfiry tells Raskolnikov during one of those taut, suspenseful conversations for which Dostoevsky is so justly celebrated, "[A criminal] will lie—that is the man who is a *special case*, the incognito, and he will lie well, in the cleverest fashion; you might think that he would triumph and enjoy the

The transition, "These first two points" helps the reader to keep track of what has been said so far and to be prepared to follow an additional argument.

5 Dostoevsky, 202-203.



fruits of his wit, but at the most interesting, the most flagrant moment he will faint.”⁶

In saying this Porfiry is predicting Raskolnikov’s own failure, and they both know it. Raskolnikov has lied brilliantly; he has applied the theory and stood the strain of it up until now, but the theory is not sound, and this fact—this truth—is being made more apparent every day. Raskolnikov *cannot* succeed. He must faint.

If Raskolnikov were able to uphold a faulty theory, then there would be no use in trying to apply it, for there would be no assurance of truth’s eventual revelation and falsehood’s eventual exposure. But, as Dostoevsky promises, living a lie does lead to truth. The only question is whether or not the liar has humility enough to admit his error and profit by the truth uncovered.

Throughout the book, we are kept wondering whether Raskolnikov has this necessary humility. After all, as Svidrigailov explains to Dounia, it was, “Above all, vanity, pride and vanity”⁷ which led her brother to commit his crime. Raskolnikov believed that his theory was correct, or else he certainly would not have tried to apply it. Is it possible, Dostoevsky asks, for this young intellectual to acknowledge his own failure, the wrongness of his theory?

Porfiry points out to Raskolnikov:

“You made up a theory and then were ashamed that it broke down and turned out to be not at all original! It turned out something base... At least you didn’t deceive yourself for long, you went straight to the furthest point at one bound. How do I regard you? I regard you as one of those men who would stand and smile at their torturer while he cuts their entrails out, if only they have found faith or God. Find it and you will live.”⁸

In this speech, Porfiry recognizes Raskolnikov’s courage, but insists on humility. Raskolnikov has not been deceived for long, but now he must find faith, or rather, God. He is a brave young man,

⁶ Dostoevsky, 340-341.

⁷ Ibid., 486.

⁸ Ibid., 454.



the sort who can stand and smile at a torturer, but now that he has the truth in hand, now that he knows the baseness of his theory, he must have humility enough to own himself in the wrong and find another path.

If Raskolnikov can find faith, then he will live. If he cannot accept the truth so dearly—and inadvertently—bought, then he will have nothing left to live for. The one certain thing is that he *cannot* return to his Nihilistic theories. By the end of the book, he has been undeceived ... or has he? Joseph Frank argues that Raskolnikov does not really accept the error of his theories until after the novel itself has ended. He writes,

[Raskolnikov's] surrender, however, is more an admission of personal weakness than an abandonment of his ideas. But these also finally give way when, in the ... Epilogue, he suddenly dreams of a world in which everyone becomes infected with the virus of believing themselves to be "extraordinary people" whose remarkable intelligence allows them absolute, uncontrolled authority; the result is unending mutual slaughter and social chaos... Only when Raskolnikov imaginatively "finishes" his own convictions in this way does he allow himself to envisage also accepting Sonia's beliefs..."⁹

Raskolnikov's pride, especially the pride which he has in his theories, is such that he can more quickly and easily admit his own lack of "extraordinary" qualities than contemplate the possibility that his ideology itself is flawed. Therefore Dostoevsky at last gives him his own "lie," a lie within a lie, a dream within a fiction, wherein Raskolnikov can simulate the fully-realized implications of his Nihilistic principles, just as Dostoevsky has been simulating these principles for his readers through the lie of Raskolnikov himself.

Thus the young intellectual's experiment is finally concluded. He is humbled and forced to acknowledge his error. What is the result of this humiliation? As Raskolnikov acquires humility, he also acquires the ability to "envisage ... accepting Sonia's beliefs."¹⁰ Each human being has a worldview;

⁹ Frank, xxi.

¹⁰ Frank, xxi.



indeed, no one could exist without a worldview. In the vacuum created by Raskolnikov's disproved lie, truth must take root. A lie reveals truth by contrast, just as darkening a room will cause the previously unnoticed candle to shine tenfold brighter. Yet we find this curious principle at work: even as shadows make clear the source of light, that very light is already dispelling them and moving into their spaces.

Here the writer makes a transition to the final aspect of the thesis: the nature of the truth that Dostoevsky is revealing.

It is this way with Raskolnikov. But what is the nature of this truth? Dostoevsky hints to us that it is not a thing necessarily compatible with the sovereignty of the intellect or the theoretical realm. The truth that Raskolnikov has come to know through Sonia is one which acts upon him strangely. Its first effect is that he falls in love with the very girl whom he has spent the book tormenting, and the result of this new affection has a still more serious consequence.

After making his declaration of love to Sonia, Dostoevsky tells us that Raskolnikov, "... could not think for long together of anything that evening, and he could not have analysed [sic] anything consciously; he was simply feeling. Life had stepped into the place of theory and something quite different would work itself out in his mind."¹¹

Dostoevsky is making a profound statement when he writes that, "Life had stepped into the place of theory." He is arguing that theory and "life" are incompatible, that one must give way to the other, and that the two cannot co-rule a human being. Heretofore Raskolnikov has been almost exclusively governed by his intellect and his pride. But the fruits of his intellect and his pride have been a colossal "lie" which Dostoevsky spends the entire book discrediting. Is "life," then, the fruit of this truth which has been revealed by the darkening of the room, and which has subsequently abolished shadow?

11 Dostoevsky, 542.



It would seem so. This leads us back, however, to Porfiry's statement about how Raskolnikov will find life. He said, "I regard you as one of those men who would stand and smile at their torturer while he cuts their entrails out, if only they have found faith or God. Find it and you will live."¹² This would lead us to suppose that life is the product of a spiritual truth synonymous with faith and God. In other words, God is truth, and the result of finding God is life.

This is a conclusion which seems well-supported by Dostoevsky's ending paragraph, for he writes,

Under [Raskolnikov's] ... pillow lay the New Testament. He took it up mechanically. The book belonged to Sonia ... one thought passed through his mind: "Can her convictions not be mine now?["] ... But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life.¹³

How are we to understand these words other than as referring to Raskolnikov's conversion to Christianity, his "regeneration" and "passing from one world into another"? Yet this truth is not, ultimately, a sort of intellectual achievement. Rather it is spiritual, requiring faith and crowned with love. It is possible to conjecture, given Dostoevsky's statement, that all "theory," if properly exposed, will eventually give way to "life" and the source of life, God.

In his excellent book on the Natural Law, J. Budziszewski tells us that, "Even a liar's speech expresses something true; it may not tell us the state of the world, but it tells us the state of his heart."¹⁴

This statement neatly summarizes the approach to human depravity which Dostoevsky chooses for his lie, his shadows, his *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov's beliefs *are* a lie. They do not harmonize with "real life"; they cannot be applied to concrete reality. In short, they do not tell us the state of the world. In Raskolnikov's mouth, however, they do express the state of the liar's heart. Again,

¹² Dostoevsky, 454.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 542.

¹⁴ J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know* (Dallas, Texas: Spence Publishing Company, 2003), 32.



This conclusion is strong because it reaffirms what has been argued throughout the paper and also adds an interesting twist.

Svidrigailov expressed this state best when he called it "... vanity, pride and vanity."¹⁵

In closing, let us note a similarity between Dostoevsky and Raskolnikov which we have been skirting throughout this discussion. Is it not curious that both the author and the central character are liars? The only obvious difference between them is that Dostoevsky sets out to tell a lie in order to have it disproved by truth, whereas Raskolnikov, the carrier of that lie, begins to live it out in the firm belief that it *is* the truth. At journey's end, author and protagonist both arrive at the same conclusion. For Dostoevsky at least, it would seem that the truth revealed by theories put to the test, and principles put into practice, is immutable. Truth is faith in God, and its fruit is life.

15 Dostoevsky, 486.



Works Cited

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Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Translated by Constance Garnett. New York: Bantam Classic, 2003.