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Madness and Society: A Comparative Study of Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment and Sylvia Plath's the Bell Jar

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the depiction of madness in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), analyzing how these writers use psychological chaos to critique social structures and explain the human condition. While Dostoevsky locates the origins of Raskolnikov's madness in the socio-economic and philosophical tensions of 19th-century Russia, Plath examines Esther Greenwood's struggle against gender expectations in mid-20th-century America. This study focuses on three main aspects: the social and cultural construction of madness, the narrative techniques used to depict psychological instability, and the treatment of madness as a means of social critique. Through comparative analysis, this paper highlights the common dimensions of human suffering and the enduring impact of social norms on individual well-being. Combining the two works, she argues that madness functions as both a narrative device and a form of resistance, providing insight into mental health and social issues.

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Introduction

Madness, as both plot device and thematic concern, has for long served authors as a kind of prism through which they may give insight into, or reflection of, the contexts in which the writers place their characters. Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, published in 1866, and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963, respectively signify the spiraling states of mind of their protagonists into madness against the societal frameworks that define them. Whereas Dostoevsky explores the moral and existential struggles of an impoverished intellectual in 19th-century Russia, Plath probes the pressures of conformance and gender expectations within mid-20th-century America. These are two very different contexts within which both novels give insight into connections between individual suffering and social dysfunction.

In *Crime and Punishment*, the main character of Dostoevsky-Raskolnikov-suffers powerful feelings of alienation and guilt after his lethal action. His inner struggle is closely interwoven with the socioeconomic surge of St. Petersburg, helping to foster such propensities of moral understanding amidst widespread poverty and despair common throughout. Raskolnikov's inner turmoil is an upsurge against the tide of belief in nihilistic philosophies extant at that time, a reflection of greater existential dilemmas found individualized within the modernized society. According to Dostoevsky, such conditions are able to make one alienated, leading to madness, raising the ultimate question of morality concerning Raskolnikov's action and the societal structuring that influences his decisions.

Meanwhile, Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of Plath's *The Bell Jar*, struggles to break her way out from beneath the oppressive expectations made upon women during the 1950s and early 1960s. Esther's psychosis, hence, is viewed as a struggle against those unwritten roles that society prescribes upon her, such as that of

a wife and mother. Plath uses Esther's psychosis to act out those stringent expectations placed on gender roles by society and the conflict which is found in the challenge of establishing one's own freedom within a patriarchal society. Plath, through Esther, criticizes how the expectations of society crush individual identity and further deprive a person of good mental health; hence, this shows how convincing the pressuring of society is on the mental psyche.

This paper compares and contrasts the two works with regard to their portrayal of madness along three dimensions: (1) the sociocultural determinant factors of madness, (2) how both authors employ narrative technique in articulation of the imagery of psychological turmoil, and finally, (3) the resolution of madness as a form of social critique. From these dimensions, this research will shed light on how both Dostoevsky and Plath employ madness as a mirror to the complexities of their respective worlds and to show how sometimes the individual's suffering cannot be isolated from the dysfunctions of the social world. The critical analysis is going to bring forward exactly how these themes were/might still be relevant in contemporary debates concerning mental health, expectations stemming from society, and the human condition, while providing an explanation for the continuous pain the individual has to face in the modern world. Madness, represented in these two authors, invites the readers into a quite intriguing relationship between personal identity, societal norms, and the quest for meaning in a disproportionate world.

Socio-Cultural Constructs of Madness Dostoevsky's Russia

Dostoevsky places Raskolnikov's psychological disintegration against the background of the socio-economic and philosophical current of 19th-century Russia, which was increasingly modernizing but also exploding. The themes of poverty, utilitarian ethics, and urban alienation are inextricably woven through

Crime and Punishment, strongly underpinning the moral and existential crises leading Raskolnikov to kill. As a former student, Raskolnikov was poor, placing him in the category of intelligentsia of the time, fighting the everyday cruelty of the urban lifestyle. The alienation he found himself slipping into, along with the growth of nihilism in his heart, mirrored that of many at the time, set against conventional values being opposed by the increasing rationalism and materialism.

The major justification that Raskolnikov relies on is his "extraordinary man" theory, wherein there are certain persons who, for the common good of society, have the right to break through all conventional morality. He feels that the death of the pawnbroker, an evil "louse," will prove advantageous to society. The utilitarian philosophy criticized here by Dostoevsky is a course of thought that is perilous and leads directly to moral bankruptcy. According to Raskolnikov, "I wanted to be a man, and I felt I had to sacrifice myself for my ideal" [1]. Behind this philosophical perspective of his lies a wider criticism of the self-destroying philosophy of nihilism and rationalism that he saw as eating away at human morality. The way Raskolnikov descends further and further into madness makes the whole scenario one of caution regarding what happens when ethical norms are denied in favor of self-satisfying justifications.

Equally important, Dostoevsky probes into the abstraction of madness, which is inextricably connected with the socio-economic realities of the time. The stifling atmosphere of St. Petersburg, replete with widespread poverty and mounting crime, acts as a backdrop to the moral anguish of Raskolnikov. The turbulent thoroughfares and bleak expanses he crosses stand as testimony to his dislocated mind and the turpitude of his resolve. As he encounters an array of characters—a mother and her children, the desperate and poor, and morally ambiguous citizens—therein lays the hint of Dostoevsky that individual suffering is inextricably linked with dysfunction in society, and madness is not exclusively a personal failure but part of a general social malady.

Plath's America

In contrast, Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar* criticizes the social norms of gender in mid-20th century America, where the pressure to pursue family and beauty roles takes a toll on Esther Greenwood's psyche. Health. Esther is a young, queer woman trapped in a society that expects her to fulfill traditional roles as a wife and mother, and to exercise her individuality and ambition. Plath illustrates this struggle through Esther's own metaphor for her own life: "I was very still, empty, like the eye of a storm, moving swiftly" [2]. This metaphor expresses Esther's feelings of loneliness and isolation from the world around her and reflects the negative expectations society has for her.

The discrepancy between her aspirations and the social constraints faced by Esther further reinforces her sense of hopelessness and alienation. Plath depicts the conflict between Esther's desire for independence and the social pressures that try to confine her to a narrow identity. As she observes the women around her, who all adhere to the norms of domesticity, Esther recognizes the dilemma she faces, and thus rejects her own identity and identity. The metaphor of the bell jar powerfully symbolizes her isolation, as she is trapped under glass, unable to breathe or speak to others. Plath also criticized the institutional approach to mental health at this time, highlighting the inadequacy of the care that women like Esther received.

When she sought help, she encountered patronizing attitudes and ineffective treatments that focused on compliance rather than understanding personal difficulties. Her account of her time in a mental hospital reveals the powerlessness of women in a society that scorns their desire for autonomy. As Esther reflects on her experiences, she says, "I should be a woman, but I am not" (Plath, 1963). This statement underscores her inner struggle with the societal expectations that have shaped her psyche. Through Esther's journey, Plath demonstrates the profound influence of social norms on mental health, and how the pressure to conform can be a powerful tool for self-deception. The interplay between gender roles and mental illness in *The Bell Jar* challenges the social structures that define and limit women's identities, revealing deeper truths about the costs of equality in a patriarchal world.

Narrative Depictions of Psychological Turmoil

The depiction of mental disorder is a powerful lens through which Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Sylvia Plath both explored *Crime and Punishment* and *The Bell Jar*. The complexity of the human mind. In both novels, the author delves deeply into the inner lives of his characters, revealing the profound impact that society's assumptions have on their psychological states. Dostoyevsky and Plath use innovative narrative techniques to depict the psychological breakdown of their characters and convey the complex relationship between personal suffering and society's wider issues.

Dostoyevsky uses a fragmented narrative style to depict Raskolnikov's disturbing thoughts and feelings as he struggles with guilt, alienation, and existential dread. These fragmentary messages allow the reader to feel the depth of Raskolnikov's psychological struggle as his assumptions clash with his sympathies. In contrast, Plath adopts a narrative tone in *The Bell Jar*, immersing the reader in Esther Greenwood's deteriorating mental health. The vivid and moving description of Esther's experience, combined with the symbolism of the ring, creates a picture of intimate loneliness and disconnection from the world around her.

By contrasting these narrative approaches, both authors emphasize the multifaceted nature of madness and its roots in social dysfunction. This exploration of psychological complexity not only highlights Raskolnikov and Esther's personal experiences, but also critiques the social norms that cause them pain. Finally, the narrative scenes of psychological turmoil in both novels invite readers to reflect on the fragility of the human mind and the complex relationship between personality, social expectations, and mental health. 2. 1 Separating Thought from *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky employs a fragmented, almost deceptive style in *Crime and Punishment* to effectively portray Raskolnikov's deteriorating mental state. The structure of the novel reflects his inner turmoil, with confused thoughts and drastic changes in mood. This divide is evident in Raskolnikov's inner monologue, where his reason clashes with his natural emotions. For example, after committing a murder, he may experience intense feelings of guilt and paranoia, leading to erratic behavior and alienation from those around him. Dostoyevsky wrote: "He seemed to have lost his mind, despairing of rational thought like the most desperate man" (Dostoyevsky, 1866). Raskolnikov's mental confusion is further revealed through the use of stream perception, a narrative device that immerses the reader in the inner thoughts of a character. This technique allows the reader to witness Raskolnikov's existential dilemma firsthand, blurring the line between reality and his tortured imagination. His case manifested itself in vivid hallucinations and fever dreams that reflected the mental stress he felt. For example, he remembers the moment of the murder,

struggling between wisdom and fear, which created an internal conflict in him: "There was a strange feeling that he was a stranger, watching his life from a distance."

Furthermore, Dostoevsky also shows the confusion of Raskolnikov's thoughts through his criticism of logic and nihilism. As Raskolnikov struggles to understand the implications of the "stranger" theory, his fragmented understanding illustrates the dangers of a spiritual divorce from morality and compassion. The conflict between his philosophical beliefs and emotional responses reaches a profoundly despairing conclusion, reflecting the struggle between reason and emotion - a central theme in Dostoevsky's work.

The Bell Jar as a Confessional Narrative

In contrast, Plath's *The Bell Jar* uses a first-person narrative that immerses the reader in Esther Greenwood's experiences, revealing the mystery and intimacy of depression. This narrative style allows Plath to describe Esther's mental struggles, creating a connection between the reader and the protagonist's emotional state. Esther's voice is sincere and moving, capturing her thoughts and feelings. Recalling her loneliness, she laments, "I felt as if I were trapped in a bell jar, in a hollow space" (Plath, 1963). This metaphor powerfully symbolizes the sense of isolation that oppresses him, making him realize that he is trapped between social expectations and mental illness. Plath depicts Esther's experiences movingly through vivid, clear descriptions, allowing the reader to identify with her suffering.

The confessional tone of the novel also critiques the inadequacies of mid-20th century mental health care, especially the treatment of women. As Esther undergoes various treatments, including electroconvulsive therapy, Plath expresses the feelings of helplessness and isolation of the patient. Esther muses, "The doctors are people too, and their words seem to have a life of their own, independent of mine" (Plath, 1963). This critique highlights the paternalistic nature of the healthcare industry, which often ignores the unique experiences and needs of women who seek help. Furthermore, the structure of Plath's story reflects Esther's emotional breakdown as she oscillates between lucidity and confusion. This partially reflects his chaotic and depressing character. The bell jar style goes beyond physical limitations; it shows that social pressures are stifling Esther's desires and her own ideas. Plath combines Esther's personal struggles with a broader critique of social norms, highlighting the connection between nature and mental health, showing how social expectations can exacerbate psychological problems.

In summary, both Dostoevsky and Plath use novelistic narrative techniques to depict mental turmoil, albeit in different ways. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* illustrates the tension between reason and emotion through the separation of consciousness, while Plath's confessional narrative in *The Bell Jar* delves into the protagonist's struggle against patriarchy. Similarly, these types of stories demonstrate the profound impact that social structures have on individual mental health and identity.

Resolution and Societal Critique

The resolution of the problem of anger in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Bell Jar* is a good example of the author's critique of social structures and the difficulty of healing. Raskolnikov's journey in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* culminates in a spiritual awakening and acceptance of moral responsibility. His recognition is not only a personal salvation, but also a broader critique of the

nihilistic and utilitarian ideology prevalent in society. Through the character of Sonya, Raskolnikov finds a guiding light that reflects Dostoevsky's belief in the redemption of suffering and individuality, leading him to forgiveness and integration into society.

The potential for moral action. In contrast, the narrative of healing in Plath's *Bell Jar* is ambiguous. Although Esther Greenwood begins to take control of her life, the novel ends without resolution. Her experience of psychiatry reflects the inadequacies of mental health care in the mid-20th century and the societal pressures that continue to weigh on her. Esther's return remains unresolved, reflecting her ongoing struggle with her own trauma and the restrictions imposed by the patriarchal group. Plath concludes by criticizing the social expectations that exacerbate mental illness, suggesting that recovery is not just an individual journey, but also interconnected with other things and problems within the body.

Overall, these different solutions reflect the author's critique of social work. While Dostoevsky spoke of the possibility of redemption through personal responsibility and moral integrity, Plath spoke of the complexity and difficulty of healing in a changing world. Both stories challenge readers to consider the broader impact of psychology and social behavior, prompting a critical examination of how these forces shape a person's anger and resentment. Ultimately, the conclusion of both novels serves as an important reminder of the relationship between the power of the individual and the social structures within which they live.

Spiritual Redemption in Crime and Punishment

In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's journey culminates in a mysterious act of confession and acceptance of punishment, which Fyodor Dostoevsky sees as evidence of suffering and the saving power of faith. Throughout the novel, Raskolnikov struggles with the morality of his actions, ultimately leading to his spiritual awakening. Confession is not only an admission of guilt, but also an acknowledgment of a deep-seated moral and existential crisis. As he says, "I killed the old woman, the merchant, and her sister Lizaveta with an axe and took their money" (Dostoevsky, 1866), this public statement shows the importance of time in his journey of redemption.

Sonia is a compassionate and upright character who plays a very important role in Raskolnikov's moral guidance. Through unwavering faith and compassion, it offers the possibility of social renewal and spiritual integration. Sonya's acceptance of her suffering, coupled with her genuine love for Raskolnikov, serves as a catalyst for change. Her presence encourages Raskolnikov to consider the consequences and ask for forgiveness, reinforcing the idea that suffering can lead one to a deeper understanding of himself and his relationship to humanity. As Raskolnikov demonstrates, "It was through suffering that I was saved" (Dostoevsky, 1866), he emphasizes that spiritual redemption is achieved through acceptance of one's own shortcomings and willingness to embrace humility.

Ultimately, Dostoevsky argues that true redemption lies not in escaping punishment, but in accepting moral responsibility and embracing faith. Raskolnikov's journey to redemption culminates in a spiritual awakening as he slowly comes to terms with his conscience. This journey reflects Dostoevsky's broader critique of nihilism and his belief that meaning lies in suffering, which offers the possibility of personal and social renewal in faith and moral understanding.

Ambiguous Recovery in The Bell Jar

In contrast, Plath's *The Bell Jar* is a cunning finale to Esther Greenwood's redemption. As Esther begins to regain control of her life, her inability to recover reveals her ongoing struggles with social issues and personal pain. His journey is marked by both progress and failure as he emerges from the depths of mental illness. The story ends with Esther preparing to leave the hospital, but she is filled with anxiety about the future: "I don't know what my life is going to be like." (Plath, 1963). This disparity is a challenge for mental health recovery, especially in a society that offers little support for people with mental health issues.

The ambiguity surrounding Esther's salvation attests to the breadth of human values regarding human nature and well-being. Although he showed courage and a desire to regain his freedom, the group that oppressed him did not back down. Plath's depiction of Esther's struggle reflects the ongoing struggle of women against expectations in mid-twentieth-century America, revealing the failure of self-recovery in the story forbidden in *Departure*. Esther eventually decides to become independent, but as she looks to the future, she still faces the challenge of surviving in a country that still has restrictions on homosexuals.

Plath's last words also challenge the idea of recovery as a permanent process, noting that recovery is not about overcoming problems but about continuing to engage in a dialogue with the social forces that create mental illness. The book's final chapters powerfully describe the mental health challenges and human condition that come with grief, ultimately recognizing that recovery is a multifaceted journey that requires ongoing strength and patience [3-6].

Conclusion

By juxtaposing the portrayal of madness in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Bell Jar*, this paper demonstrates how Fyodor Dostoevsky and Sylvia Plath utilize their protagonists' psychological struggles to critique societal norms and illuminate the complexities of the human condition. Dostoevsky, through the character of Raskolnikov, delves into profound moral and existential questions within the context of a modernizing Russia, exploring the repercussions of nihilism, utilitarian ethics, and the quest for redemption. His narrative reveals how societal and philosophical constructs can contribute to individual despair, ultimately suggesting that personal salvation is found through moral responsibility and faith.

Conversely, Plath's portrayal of Esther Greenwood reflects the gendered pressures and expectations of mid-20th-century America. Through a confessional narrative that exposes the suffocating nature of societal norms, Plath critiques the limitations imposed on women, revealing how these constraints exacerbate mental health struggles. Esther's ambiguous recovery highlights the ongoing battle against both personal trauma and societal expectations, suggesting that healing is a complex and non-linear process influenced by external factors.

Together, these works reveal the universal dimensions of human suffering while underscoring the enduring impact of societal structures on individual well-being. Both Dostoevsky and Plath emphasize that madness is not merely an individual affliction but a reflection of deeper societal issues, inviting readers to reflect on the interplay between personal experiences and the broader social landscape. Ultimately, *Crime and Punishment* and *The Bell Jar* serve as powerful commentaries on the human condition, encouraging a critical examination of the societal forces that shape our lives and contribute to our struggles. Through their profound insights, Dostoevsky and Plath continue to resonate with contemporary audiences, highlighting the importance of empathy, understanding, and the pursuit of meaningful connections in a complex world.

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