

SYMMETRY, DISSYMMETRY, AND ANTISYMMETRY IN DOSTOEVSKY'S *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*

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Abstract: *Some Dostoevsky's works have been earlier analysed in terms of duality. The paper concentrates on the novel Crime and Punishment. The author demonstrates that (dis)symmetry and antisymmetry are the major structural elements in the novel which are manifested at the levels of characters, important objects and ideas, composition and text structure.*

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of (dis)symmetry and antisymmetry deeply penetrates the art of the West and the Orient (Nagy, 1996). In the analysis of literature, symmetry studies have been mostly confined to poetry (e.g., Shubnikov and Koptsik, 1974), whereas it can be helpful to extend them to other genres, such as prose (e.g., Lyons, 1996). Dostoevsky's works have never been a subject of a specific symmetry study, yet the theme of duality in his art is so powerful that it even became the title of one of his stories (*The Double*) and has repeatedly attracted the attention of literary critics (Chizhevsky, 1962; Rahv, 1962; Monfort, 1963; Jones, 1990). Dostoevsky himself is often described as an antisymmetrical figure, i.e. composed of contradictions (Bursov, 1974). In *Crime and Punishment* the theme of duality is not expressed explicitly at the surface level, and therefore the novel is not usually considered in relation to this theme. However, as this

paper tries to show, duality, and wider notions of (dis)symmetry and antisymmetry are the leading structural elements manifested on all the levels of the novel.

2 (DIS)SYMMETRIES IN *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*

2.1 (DIS)SYMMETRIES OF CHARACTERS

The complex relations between the characters of the novel were earlier described by Bakhtin as the 'poliphony of the characters and their voices' (1929). Characters of the novel fall into groups showing a clear case of distorted symmetry (or dissymmetry) and antisymmetry. In fact, Dostoevsky stops very short of creating antinomies (two antisymmetrical sides of the phenomenon). The main character of the novel (Raskol'nikov) is transposed in his utmost 'good' features to the character of Razumihin, his friend, and in his utmost 'bad' extension -- to the character of Svidrigailov, his enemy. Razumihin and Svidrigailov perform the function of the 'guardian angel' and 'devil' who according to Orthodox mythology accompany every person throughout his/her life and metaphysically represent the Godly and the Beastly parts of a human being. Raskol'nikov appears as if between two mirrors both of which show his potential alter ego. Svidrigailov and Razumihin are in love with Raskol'nikov's sister Dunya, who has yet one more admirer-- her fiancé Luzhin. Linked via Dunya, these men form another symmetry group whereby the qualities dissymmetrically reflected are 'villain (romantic or unromantic) vs honest person and successful vs failing (socially and in business)'. Svidrigailov is initially a successful romantic honest villain, Luzhin is an unromantic successful villain pretending to be honest, and Razumihin is an unromantic unsuccessful honest person. These qualities, however are not exactly stable and change along the novel contributing to its dynamism. Another symmetry group with Raskol'nikov as its axis is composed by the main female characters of Sonya (Raskol'nikov's prostitute girl-friend), his sister Dunya and his mother. All the three women love Raskol'nikov and are willing to do anything for him. Raskol'nikov loves his mother and sister and passively accepts Sonya's love. Proud Dunya is contrasted with the virtuous prostitute Sonya. Many other minor symmetry groups can be found in the novel. In her life as well as in death, the intended victim, the vicious pawnbroker, is accompanied by her double, the unintended victim, her meek sister Lizaveta. The Raskol'nikov family (who survive and stand firm despite any pressure) find their antipodes in the Marmeladov couple who break down and die unable to support each other and resist the pressure of the hostile society.

2.2 (DIS)SYMMETRIES IN THE COMPOSITION

The main dissymmetry in the novel's composition is between the reader's knowledge of who the criminal is and the line of police investigation. The characteristic feature of the composition is the doubling of the novel into the world of thought and the world of feverish dreams and hallucinations. The border between them gets washed away, they rotate in a yin-yang symmetry pattern not only in the tormented mind of Raskol'nikov, but in the mind of the reader as well. The initial concept of 'murder' appears to emanate ripples all over the surface of the novel. A dream of a murdered horse and a 'mind murder' precede the 'real-life' murder of the pawn-broker and result in what Raskol'nikov calls 'murdering himself'. The murder as a solution appears again in the relations between Dunya and Svidrigailov, and re-echoes in the suicide of Svidrigailov and the tragic deaths of both elder Marmeladovs. We can see how in these dissymmetrical transformations the murder appears in different aspects: murder for achieving personal or 'pseudo-altruistic' goals, murder for defence, murder as an accident, a murder of an individual by society, murdering oneself. The real criminal Raskol'nikov doubles with the 'false' criminal. The suicide of Svidrigailov, who is Raskol'nikov's 'Beastly' Alter Ego, prepares Raskol'nikov's spiritual re-birth. Even the objects in the novel bifurcate, like the axe, the murder weapon, which appears in reality from the same place as in the dream. Raskol'nikov's coffin-like room is an extension of his gloomy thoughts and self-inflicted limitations as well as psychological and mental barriers. At the same time the room is a shrunk copy of the suffocating Russian society. The circles of Raskol'nikov's thoughts intertwine with the spiral development of the novel's discourse and plot.

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A solution to the question why such complex dissymmetrical and antisymmetrical structures were necessary for the novel can be found firstly, in the association of dissymmetry with dynamic change (Nagy, 1996). Raskol'nikov's confused mind runs in circles, it is a perfect assymetry (or negative symmetry). The external forces affect his mind and he searches for symmetry (harmony) first in a disoriented way (reflected in the dissymmetries of the surrounding characters and the plot development). His mind is like a coil pressed too hard which uncurls in a riot of destruction, and then after many leaps comes to the position of equilibrium. Finally harmony approaches when in the epilogue Raskol'nikov comes to peace with himself and the world, which is significantly represented in the content line as a unification with his 'ying' counterpart Sonya. If we follow understanding of symmetry as harmony and agreement (Ilgen, 1996), than from a strongly dissymmetrical state, Raskol'nikov gets into a stage with a higher degree of symmetry. Secondly, dissymmetries help to "recover process-history" (Leyton, 1992), i.e. dissymmetries of Raskol'nikov's mind allow to reconstruct the forces which lead him to

this state, and the changes in the symmetry groups of the main characters indicate the flow of time. One more function of dissymmetries in the novel is in making the reader think, since the latter process is born of the “relation, combination and mutual exclusiveness among concepts” (Tsukamoto, 1996, p. 329). Strictly speaking, symmetry is a mathematical concept, and it is not directly applicable to works of literature in the same way as to geometrical figures. It is obvious, however, that some literature, like the novel *Crime and Punishment* analysed here, exhibits a high degree of (dis)symmetry. It appears useful to consider the ways of describing and measuring the degree and type of symmetry in prosaic literary works.

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