

Superhumans: Raskolnikov, Meursault, Napoleon, and Beyond

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In the novel Crime and Punishment, by Fyodor Dostoevsky, there is a scene in which the main character, Raskolnikov, has a conversation with the policeman investigating the two murders he has committed. The policeman brings up a paper Raskolnikov has written and had published concerning the psychological impacts of crime on the criminal. Specifically, he mentions a small part of the paper where Raskolnikov seems to suggest that, for some “extraordinary” people, the laws of men are not adequate to restrain them from committing crimes (Dostoevsky 267). People believing that this intrinsic greatness- hereafter deemed “superhumanity”- appears in them, exist ubiquitously throughout literature. These characters come in all shapes and sizes, from authors of different ethnicities, who spoke different languages and lived in different times. Yet, despite these great disparities, these characters all have a few things in common. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian critic of Dostoevsky, asserts in 1973 that these superhumans have a “particular point of view in relation to the world” that separates them from other characters in literature. In these superhuman characters, this “point of view” can be seen as a unique belief structure, which can be broken down into three basic ideas: emotional detachment, allowance to commit crime, and freedom from retribution. Many characters from literature, such as Raskolnikov from Crime and Punishment, and Meursault from the novel The Stranger exemplify all three of these ideals. But what is especially striking about this is the fact that this belief structure is not simply just some Dostoevskyan idea only applicable to characters in fiction, but that people with these beliefs, such as Napoleon Bonaparte, do exist outside of literature, in the real world, and over time have made their mark on history.

In Crime and Punishment, written in 1866 in Russia, Raskolnikov murders a pawn shop owner and her sister mercilessly, claiming as his prize for the wicked deed only the sum of a few rubles. At first, he does not feel remorseful about this, unsympathetically justifying his crime with his assertion that his success in life is of the utmost importance. In other words, he believes the lives of these two women are insignificant when compared with the great things he has planned to do in the world. He is also very sly in conversing with the investigators of the crime,

and would most likely have gotten away with murder if not for actions he himself takes to prevent this from happening. Raskolnikov actually believes himself to be superhuman, the kind of person who “is fully entitled to commit all kinds of excesses and crimes, and the law does not apply to [him]” (Dostoevsky 267). In this regard, Raskolnikov is the perfect example of a superhuman belief structure: he not only feels it is alright for him to commit murder, he also lacks any emotion or remorse on the part of the women, and even truly believes he will not be facing consequences under the law.

Another obvious character in literature who believes in his own superhumanity is Meursault from The Stranger. This novel was written in 1942 in French by Albert Camus, an Algerian. In this story, Meursault is a man who does not even feel grief at his own mother’s funeral, and who a few days later goes on to kill a man he does not even know. He is every bit the picture of emotional detachment, never showing the slightest sign of real happiness, joy, grief, or anger at all in the novel. In fact, the only time Meursault ever seems the least bit flustered is when he kills the stranger, not out of rage but, as he puts it “it was because of the sun” (Abecassis 640). Meursault is even more the unemotional criminal than Raskolnikov, who at least shows genuine remorse for the negative impact the murders have on his own life. Meursault, on the other hand, is once again only slightly perturbed at the restrictions prison puts on him. He also realizes he is a criminal: “an idea [he] never [gets] used to” (Camus 70), yet does not really understand why everyone makes such a big fuss over him, and they just don’t let him go. Like Raskolnikov, Meursault exhibits the superhuman beliefs of allowance to commit crime and freedom from retribution as well.

Outside of literature, however, people who believe themselves to be superhuman are even more real examples of this belief structure than Dostoevsky or Camus portrayed. In positions of power, they are the people who gain worldwide notoriety as the most infamous men in history. This list includes, among many other conquerors throughout time, Napoleon, who lived between 1769 and 1821 (Byman and Pollack 126). Napoleon Bonaparte, legendary general from Corsica

and eventual Emperor of France, is yet another vivid example of superhuman beliefs. Like his fictitious counterparts, Napoleon shows no remorse for his many wars, his ravaging of Europe, or his merciless slaughter of human life. In fact, he even feels vindicated by it. As Raskolnikov puts it in his discussion with a policeman, Napoleon (whom Raskolnikov actually mentions in the discussion), felt he had the right to “step over certain obstacles in those instances where the execution of his plan demand[ed] it” (Dostoevsky 268). Napoleon not only felt total emotional detachment from the scores of deaths on his hands, he felt it was justifiable on his path to greatness. Since he ruled over a large portion of the civilized world at the time, he also fulfills the third superhuman belief of freedom from retribution by the law, since he controlled the law.

Somewhat surprisingly, Raskolnikov, who creates the whole concept of a person who believes him or herself to be superhuman, is perhaps the worst example of this belief structure. Initially, he does not show any particular remorse for the killing of the pawn shop owner, but he is saddened by having to inadvertently kill her sister as well. His emotional state degrades further through the course of the novel, as it becomes apparent that Raskolnikov is not equipped with the kind of criminal mind that allows him to move on emotionally after the crime. He also is struck throughout the story by the realization that every action he takes affects someone else, and he has no right to go on ruining other people’s lives, thus eliminating from his mind the second superhuman belief that he was allowed to commit murder. Finally, he falls in love, and this love makes him not only repent his crimes, but also confess them to the police, seemingly destroying his other superhuman beliefs that he should not feel sorry for his crime, and that he should not be punished for them under the law. From this perspective, it would seem as though Raskolnikov actually embodies the exact opposite of the superhuman beliefs he tries so hard at first to exemplify.

On the other hand, Raskolnikov can also be seen as the perfect superhuman, an example of eternal superhumanity. As Zhongwen (who is of Chinese heritage) points out in his paper in 1997, ultimately Raskolnikov is freed from both his emotional punishment and the internment he

serves in Siberia as punishment by the Russian Government (787). With this in mind, Raskolnikov seems to be a lasting testament to superhumanity. He does *temporarily* feel remorse, but that passes over time as his love for Sonya grows. Similarly, it seems at first that it was certainly not allowable for him to commit the crime, but in the end no one really does care about the two women he kills, and his love affair with Sonya seems to have even made the crime a means justifying a better end. Finally, even though he is punished for some time by the law, even this is not so bad to him, and he can still look forward to many years of freedom to come. So, overall, all the superhuman beliefs Raskolnikov holds do turn out to be true for him, as he seems blessed with happiness.

Meursault, conversely, is a better example of superhumanity in the immediate, rather than the everlasting. In the words of American writer Jack Abecassis in 1997, “for Meursault there is no pathos, solidarity with kin, hatred for others, horror of death, violence, eroticism” (630). Meursault, unlike Raskolnikov, is unwavering in his emotional detachment from his crime. He also seems to have been somewhat vindicated, or allowed to do as he did, since his killing most likely saved the eventual murder of his friend Raymond, and the first shot he fires- the shot that actually kills the man- could be construed as self defense. The only aspect of superhumanity Meursault lacks greatly is that he should be free from punishment under the law, since he is sentenced to death. However, even the Chaplain, who Meursault turns in a single conversation from a calm, loving figure into a fearful, agitated man who’s “eyes were full of tears” (Camus 122) asserts that Meursault would most likely be found not guilty in a retrial if he would just request an appeal. In the end, Meursault manages to turn his punishment so completely around that he is punishing himself; others are not doing it to him. Since his punishment becomes such that *Meursault*, not the law, is doling out Meursault’s punishment, he also stands as an example of superhumanity.

Perhaps what is most disturbing about these characters, however, is that they are poor examples of superhumanity when compared to Napoleon, a real man who actually existed and

exacted his beliefs upon the world. His popularity and military genius at first concealed his hunger for power, and he was heralded as the savior of France from its own Revolution, the man who could promote the Revolutionary ideals of “freedom, equality, and fraternity” throughout France and beyond (Byman and Pollack 126). However, as time progressed, Napoleon’s true motive: greed, began to show, as he continued with his military campaigns, even after public opinion swung against him. He even made himself Emperor in a country that had just fought a horribly long and bloody revolution to free itself from autocratic rule. Napoleon never lamented the dead from his battles, and the casualties of his conquests most likely totaled in the millions, whereas Meursault and Raskolnikov only kill once and twice, respectively. He also seems to have had the power to commit such high crimes as he pleased, if he felt it was necessary in his “megalomaniacal pursuit of glory” (Byman and Pollack 126). Napoleon was also in power, and in fact probably the most powerful man in the world, for the good part of his adult life. By the time of his last defeat at Waterloo, he was well past his prime, and his exile in Saint Helena, a subtropical, Atlantic island, could hardly be considered a harsh punishment considering the standard for only the smallest offence in Napoleon’s country of France only a decade or so earlier was the guillotine. His total emotional detachment from the deaths of his enemies and even his constituents in his many pointless battles, his belief that all the death and destruction was justified because it got and kept him in power, and his ridiculously insubstantial punishment make Napoleon every bit a believer in his own superhumanity. Overall, Napoleon is even a far more dramatic case of superhuman beliefs left unchecked than similar characters in literature, one that resounds even more frightfully because he was actually a real human being, not a character in a novel.

Clearly, the belief in individual superhumanity is something that has been examined by authors around the world, over the course of many centuries. This superhuman belief structure is not found solely in Dostoevsky’s works; the authors and people examined here, either from, or writing from Russia, Algeria, France, Corsica, America, and China, run the gamut of ethnicities,

and all lived or are living during very different times. What all these authors capture is something universal, and at the same time static in humanity: the fact that inherently at least some people seem to believe themselves to be “extraordinary.” These people all believe not only that they would be completely emotionally detached from the consequences of committing their crime, but that they actually have the right to do so, and the law should have no governance over them should they choose to exercise this self-proclaimed right. In the case of literature, the result is usually murder, or some other high crime committed on a small scale, as with Raskolnikov and his double homicide in Crime and Punishment, or Meursault’s singular killing in The Stranger. Yet, as Dostoevsky has noted, this is not solely some figment of an author’s imagination, it is a condition that has existed in real people throughout history. In cases where these people gain power, as with Napoleon, the result can be seemingly endless war, widespread fatalities, and tyrannical dominance. Superhuman beliefs can, in fact, be very real.

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