
The Importance of Minor Characters in Crime and Punishment

Anyone who has had any exposure to theatre has at least once heard the colloquialism, "there are no small parts, only small actors." Some may mock this platitude, pointing out the fact that, of course there are small parts; most literary works contain several "bit parts." But the root of this statement is true: no matter how "small" a character's part may be, that character makes a contribution, large or small, to the story. And in Fyodor Dostoevsky's classic work, *Crime and Punishment*, a central character that provides a key turning point has only two brief appearances.

Alyona Ivanovna is a pawnbroker and moneylender. This acceptable existence, vaguely awkward for a woman, in the beginning of the novel leads one to first want to disregard her as a mere surface character. But as the story unfolds, it becomes quite clear that both Alyona Ivanovna and her despicable character are a vital part of Raskolnikov's plot to achieve extraordinary status.

To begin with, Alyona Ivanovna first presents a problem for Raskolnikov at her murder, albeit quite indirectly. While he is bludgeoning Alyona Ivanovna with the butt end of an axe, her sister Lizaveta returns from an errand and happens upon the horrifying scene. Startled by her arrival, Raskolnikov turns to her and murders her as well. This event equips Raskolnikov with two dilemmas: he has not only killed one woman, but two, the second of whom he had no intention of harming, and the fact that he murdered Lizaveta could spoil his theory of the Extraordinary Man, the *Urbemensch*. As a result of this possibility, Raskolnikov comes to more or less ignore his murder of Lizaveta.

Through the progression of Raskolnikov's experience, several holes in his theory lead the reader to believe that Raskolnikov is not, in fact, an Extraordinary Man. These can be tied directly to Alyona Ivanovna, or to her murder. It becomes apparent that perhaps Alyona Ivanovna was not quite the despicable and nasty character she first appeared to be to Raskolnikov, or at the very least not worth murdering. While in his mind she was a wicked miser withholding money from the destitute of St. Petersburg, she, too, was one of the destitute. She was not a mighty money collector robbing from the poor who needed to be destroyed. She was simply "a louse."

A second example of Raskolnikov's unworthiness of the title *Urbemensch* is he first sets out upon this crime intending to take the money Alyona Ivanovna has been hoarding from the

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impoverished masses and use it to save dozens of families and individuals from starvation, or perhaps to continue his own education, eventually bettering the lives of many others. But in his panic after the murders, he seizes nearly no money at all, and fails to even see how much he has taken or the value of the items he took. Instead, he hides them under a rock in a side alley. In this way he fails to achieve his original aim.

Finally, Raskolnikov destroys his possibility of being extraordinary at the very scene of Alyona Ivanovna's murder by directly violating one of the limitations he himself set upon the *Übermensch*: the Extraordinary Man should make no mistakings in the acting out of his mission. Unlike his *Übermensch*, Raskolnikov overlooks several things in the playing out of his "valiant" act. From the beginning, he is running late on his time span, arriving at Alyona Ivanovna's apartments long after he should have. Secondly, not only did he not lock the door, but he did not even shut it properly, practically asking Lizaveta to walk in on his dastardly deed. Also, he did not even achieve his original aim of aiding the suffering majority of St. Petersburg by retrieving nearly no money from Alyona Ivanovna's trunk. Lastly, his final escape from Alyona Ivanovna's building is less than grand, with his nearly escaping discovery of his crime twice. Slightly less than extraordinary.

In many ways, Alyona Ivanovna's brief appearance deeply affects the course of Raskolnikov's journey. Though mostly through her death, Alyona Ivanovna's character has great influence on Raskolnikov's conscience. This influence demonstrates to the reader that there are, in fact, no small parts.

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