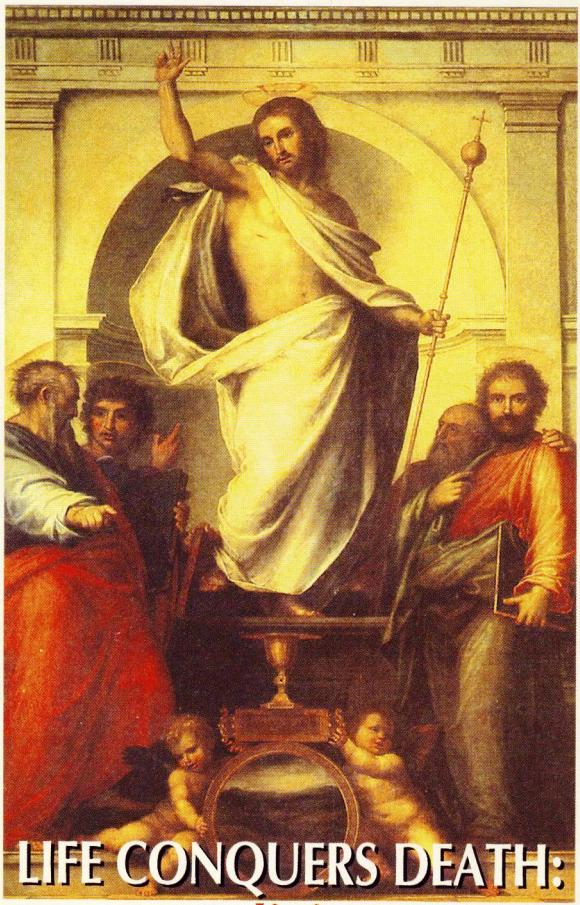

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"THE POWER AND REALITY OF CONSCIENCE": SIN AND REPENTANCE IN HAWTHORNE AND DOSTOYEVSKY

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Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.
For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill.
The Epistle of St. James, 2:10-11

Why should a wretched man - guilty, we will say, of murder -
prefer to keep the dead corpse buried in his own heart,
rather than fling it forth at once,
and let the universe take care of it!
- *The Scarlet Letter*

All the powers of nature call so earnestly for the confession of sin.
- *The Scarlet Letter*

Neither fame nor wealth.... nor any other human advantage can bring true happiness. This comes only from spiritual health and a clear conscience.
- St. John Chrysostom

In this paper we shall try to outline certain correspondences between N. Hawthorne and F. Dostoyevsky in their penetration into the reality of moral life, more specifically, into such phenomena as sin, remorse and spiritual regeneration. As a Russian _migr_ critic Vladimir Astrov wrote in 1942, "There are so many points of contact in the moral and psychological ideas of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Feodor M. Dostoyevski that it is astonishing that they have not attracted more attention and study."[1] Today, sixty years later, it is with even greater astonishment that one has to repeat these words: indeed very little attention has since been paid to the conspicuous kinship of the two classics. For our discussion we have chosen N. Hawthorne's The *Scarlet Letter* (1850) and F. Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1864). It goes without saying that along with similarities there exist certain differences in the two authors' treatment of their subject. These, too, will be within the scope of our attention.

It should be stated that in case of Hawthorne and Dostoyevsky we have no evidence of direct influence. Even though Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) was seventeen years younger than Hawthorne (1804-1864), he never mentioned the American author in any of his writings. Thus, correspondences between the two novels can be ascribed entirely to the authors' congenial Christian outlook. For even their personal backgrounds, with all their differences, had essential features in common. Both were influenced by French socialism, but found ultimate solu-

tions in Christianity. From ideas of radical social reform Hawthorne and Dostoyevsky turned to the inward mysteries of the human heart, for there, their own experience suggested, was the source of all human happiness and misery.

The plot of both novels consists in the inward development of the protagonists, Dimmesdale and Raskolnikov, from sin through alienation and suffering, to repentance and regeneration.

Dimmesdale, a Puritan clergyman, and Raskolnikov, a poor St.-Petersburg student, have much in common in their character and even in appearance. Both are well-educated young men, endowed with high intellectual gifts, a noble character, a kind heart and zeal to serve others.

However, a dismal similarity is also observable in their aspect. Dimmesdale's "large dark eyes" reveal "a world of pain in their troubled and melancholy depth." [104][2] Raskolnikov's pale face reveals "some trouble of mind." The cause of those morbid symptoms is crime. In what follows we shall examine crime, punishment, and spiritual rebirth as they are depicted in the two novels.

CRIME

Dimmesdale's crime - a transgression against the Seventh Commandment - had been "a sin of passion, not of principle, nor even purpose." [183] Dimmesdale is "a true priest, a true religionist," [113] he knows that his sin requires confession. But he has no courage to confess, and his life fades away in external honour and anguish of conscience.

Raskolnikov's crime is different in nature. Infected by "the new epidemic of unbelief" characteristic of the age, he invents a theory about two sorts of people: an inferior category, "the common herd", as he calls them, who obey the law and serve as a "material" for the few men of genius. The latter, Raskolnikov believes, can conscientiously overstep bounds of morality.

Now, Raskolnikov wants to make sure that he himself belongs to the superior category. So he carefully plans and executes murder and robbery of an old woman pawnbroker in order to prove that he is another Napoleon and to start his career of "good service" to mankind. But behind this lurks a less seemly motive, that of self-empowerment. As he later explains, "All I wanted was to do some daring thing... I longed to know if I was vermin, like the majority - or a Man, in the full acceptance of the word." [307][3] Raskolnikov's ultimate aspiration is "Liberty and power! But above all - power!" [235]

Dimmesdale in The *Scarlet Letter* already has this power, afforded him by his social position "on the very proudest eminence of superiority." Obviously, it is partly out of fear to lose this position that this truth-loving minister lingers in his "false show" of sanctity.

Significantly, in the aftermath of his fall, Dimmesdale, too, invents a humanitarian "theory" to justify his lack of confession. He suggests that revelation of his sin would hinder his effective ministry. Only much later the bankrupt pastor admits that the good which he appears to do "must needs be a delusion." [175]

Raskolnikov, too, finds himself unable to become the benefactor of humanity after his crime. However, he does not abandon his theory. It takes long both him and Dimmesdale to turn to God and truly repent.

Such are the crimes depicted in the two novels. The punishment both protagonists undergo is exclusively psychological, for both Dimmesdale and Raskolnikov escape official detection.

PUNISHMENT

Perhaps the most striking common effect of crime in the two novels is alienation. Both culprits experience "everlasting solitude and remoteness"; they are "cut off from all unconstrained intercourse with anyone else". Even other people's love becomes a source of torment for them and they develop hatred towards other people.

Another common result of sin is a fear of exposure alternated with periods of complete apathy. In addition to this, both Dimmesdale and Raskolnikov are tormented by nightmares and visions. Such are some effects of crime in the depth of the human soul which both Hawthorne and Dostoyevsky depict with a matching insight and skill.

But there is another aspect to the punishment in the novels. Both culprits experience intrusion of a discerning observer - the wronged husband Chillingworth in one case and the police detective Porfiry in another. In absence of direct evidence, supreme psychological acuteness of both Chillingworth and Porfiry allows them to detect the two criminals and each in his own way promote their final self-disclosure.

After Roger Chillingworth discovers his offender by a kind of intuition, he engages in malicious revenge by means of continuous irritation of Dimmesdale's sore conscience. Dimmesdale, in his turn, develops unconscious horror of his physician. However, at his dying hour Dimmesdale recognises that this suffering has contributed to his repentance. Thus, in Hawthorne, Providence was "using the avenger and his victim for its own purposes, and pardoning, where it seemed most to punish." [128]

The magistrate Porfiry in Dostoyevsky's novel has a purpose similar to that of Chillingworth: to discover the criminal. In his lengthy conversations with Raskolnikov he employs all his psychological skill to study out his character, at times driving Raskolnikov almost into hysterics. Like Dimmesdale, Raskolnikov thoroughly detests his investigator.

However, unlike Chillingworth, Porfiry consciously employs his insight into Raskolnikov's soul for a good purpose. What he discovers in his character makes him confident about Raskolnikov's inevitable final confession. In a sympathetic tone Porfiry encourages Raskolnikov to confess in order both to relieve his soul and mitigate his punishment.

Thus, we see that punishment depicted in both novels has two sides: it is first of all destructive effects of evil in the souls of the two men, and also tormenting

intrusion from the outside. This double suffering forces the culprits to confess, but it does not bring them repentance. Moral regeneration requires something more than suffering. We have examined crime and punishment in the two novels, let us now proceed to the final part of our discussion, and witness the struggles of spiritual rebirth depicted by Hawthorne and Dostoyevsky.

RESURRECTION

God never abandons the two culprits, and the struggle of good and evil never ceases in their souls. His violated sense of truth makes Dimmesdale pronounce vague confessions from the pulpit and even resort to self-torture. Raskolnikov's conscience, too, constantly protests against the schemes of his mind. Sometimes he is horrified by his thoughts and actions, and even prays to be delivered from them. Like Dimmesdale, he all the time longs to confess his crime, but prior to his final confession, he, too, performs acts of illusory mock-confessions and half-confessions. Finally, he reveals his secret to Sonya Marmeladova. Following her advice, he goes to a square and, in a scene reminiscent of Dimmesdale's confession, bows down to the people. But all these external acts become but a mockery of penitence which bring no relief to either of the criminals. However, such acts signify that their souls all the while remain alive and struggling.

It seems important that in the two novels the protagonists are not just sinners, but are also criminals. This allows Hawthorne and Dostoyevsky to look into the relationship between the moral and the legal codes. Both novels show that external law based on Biblical principles is vitally important for the wavering human conscience. However, law alone is powerless to work an inward change. Psychological constraint can force to confess, but only love and grace can yield inner regeneration. In this respect the situation in the two novels is somewhat different.

Dimmesdale, a Christian, recognises the righteousness of the Puritan criminal code based on the Bible. Confession for him is thus a duty both to the society and to God. On the contrary, Raskolnikov, a professed atheist, refuses to recognise the transcendental moral dimension of his act. He views it only as a violation of an arbitrary human code. Consequently, he does not repent of his crime and hopes to redeem it by external submission to the law.

But Christian conscience requires not only such submission but also repentance, a change of one's soul and mind, the restoration of love for God and for one's neighbour. In order to achieve this, a higher principle than law, is necessary. One needs to experience a loving influence of another being.

In fact, both protagonists do experience such influence of a female confidante (who is in one case also an accomplice). But the nature of this influence is somewhat different in Hawthorne and Dostoyevsky.

Hester Prynne alone carries the burden of public shame which her pastor should have shared with her. Nevertheless, she continues to love Dimmesdale and at one point decides to rescue him from his miserable state. However,

Hester's own punishment does not lead her to repentance. (In this respect Hester is similar to Raskolnikov.) As a result, Hester's loving but erring influence directs Dimmesdale's away from confession. She proposes him to flee to Europe and begin life "anew". Dimmesdale, driven to despair by his long misery, agrees, and is thereby reduced to a state close to diabolical possession or insanity. However, invigorated by Hester's support, he writes and delivers a brilliant election sermon. After this, walking in the festal procession of magistrates and clergy, he suddenly ascends the scaffold, confesses his sin and dies. His confession is utterly unexpected and can be regarded as a work of God's grace in the human soul.

However, the two protagonists of *The Scarlet Letter* become ultimately separated by Dimmesdale's confession. Hester's role in this is merely external. Her love gives Dimmesdale energy, but obeying her will, Dimmesdale reaches the very bottom of the sinful pit, and out of this depth he cries unto his Lord. Hester's values are different from those of Dimmesdale; her ultimate aspiration is a union with her lover, in the afterlife if not on earth. However, such union is possible only in God, and the question of its feasibility remains open in the novel.

In contrast to this possible ultimate separation of Dimmesdale and Hester, in the Russian novel the two protagonists achieve spiritual union. The assassin Raskolnikov confides his secret to Sonya Marmeladova, a girl from the low class, who sacrificed her chastity in order to provide for her stepmother's starving children. Sonya's position in society is somewhat similar to that of Hester Prynne: she receives general contempt because of her disreputable profession. However, unlike Hester, Sonya is depicted as having genuine Christian values, and therefore her love for Raskolnikov is not only psychologically, but also spiritually beneficial for the latter.

Sonya's Christian faith allows her to give a definite response to Raskolnikov's situation: "You turned away from God, and God has punished you, by giving you up to Satan!" [307] Their interview reminds Dimmesdale's conversation with Hester in the forest. Like Hester, Sonya promises never to forsake the man, - not in his flight from justice, however, but rather in his submission to it. "I will go with you to the galleys!" she tells him, urging him to confess. Unlike Hester, Sonya does not promise earthly happiness to the criminal, but exhorts him to pursue suffering in order to expiate his sin.

Induced by Sonya, Raskolnikov goes to the police office and confesses, and Sonya follows him to Siberia. But even in the galleys unrepentant Raskolnikov remains completely isolated from others and treats devoted and meek Sonya as a stranger. He still loves no one.

Love and repentance came to Raskolnikov unexpectedly, as they did also to Dimmesdale in his confession. After an interval caused by illness, Sonya comes again to see him. "How it happened he knew not, but a strong impulse came upon him, and he threw himself at her knees..." [401] Raskolnikov's heart, softened by suffering, is finally melted by Sonya's compassionate love. His newly

awakened love for Sonya brings Raskolnikov complete inward regeneration, which he immediately feels in his heart.

It is important that in Dostoyevsky faith and repentance come to the criminal as a result of the sacrificial love of another human being. "The heart of one held within it an eternal store of light and love for the heart of the other." [401] Salvation, according to Dostoyevsky, is not achieved by each person separately, but only in communion with others.

In Hawthorne, however, the relationship between the two protagonists is different. Death that ultimately separates Dimmesdale and Hester is a symbol of the spiritual gulf between them. Dimmesdale, Hester's professed pastor, proves unable to bring her to faith and repentance, for, engrossed in his own guilt, he can not give her the same sacrificial love that Sonya is capable of. In fact, nobody in the novel loves Hester, and therefore nothing can elevate her above the earthly sphere where she naturally belongs.

Therefore, as Elizabeth Hanscom wrote, "In *The Scarlet Letter* the characters, in complete spiritual isolation, work out whatever of salvation they achieve."[4] Hawthorne's Puritan community is bound by formal ties of the law and lacks in love and mercy. That is why Hester, once she had erred, becomes a lonely outcast, and Dimmesdale, after he had confessed, dies: the law promises no forgiveness, and Dimmesdale has nothing left to do on earth.

In contrast, only after he could share Sonya's love and Sonya's faith, true life begins for Raskolnikov. According to Dostoyevsky, only faith and love impart meaning to earthly life and allow it to continue.

Such are some of the parallels, as well as differences, in Hawthorne's and Dostoyevsky's treatment of their rather similar subjects.

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[1] Astrov, Vladimir. Hawthorne and Dostoyevsky as Explorers of the Human Conscience//The New England Quarterly. Vol. XV, #1 (March 1942), p.296.

[2] All quotations from Hawthorne are made according to the following edition: Hawthorne N. The Scarlet Letter //Four Great American Classics. Bantam Classics Edition, 1986.

[3] All quotations from Dostoyevsky are made according to the following edition: Fyodor Dostoevsky. Crime and Punishment. Wordsworth Classics, 1993, with page numbers indicated in brackets.

[4] Hanscom, Elizabeth D. "Introduction" to *The Scarlet Letter* (1927), Cit.: Scharnhorst, Gary, Edited by. The Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. -- Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, 01/1992.