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Honors Colloquium: Dostoevsky
Dr. Hogan
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The Plight of Prostitution: A Study of Sonia Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment*

Fyodor Dostoevsky's celebrated novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866) exposes complex moral issues testing the urban population of nineteenth century St. Petersburg. Murder, prostitution, and poverty rattle the story with scandal and drive the plot forward. The protagonist, Rodion Raskolnikov, is a deeply troubled intellectual who takes justice into his own hands. He murders an elderly pawnbroker and her daughter and spends the remainder of the novel in torment. In the aftermath of his heinous deed, Raskolnikov meets the saintly Sonia Marmeladov. Sonia is an intriguing figure because she is simultaneously a prostitute and an emblem of virtue. She is impacted by societal expectations, family needs, and personal values. Laden with social and ethical conundrums, *Crime and Punishment* challenges readers to consider the external forces surrounding characters' behavior. Instead of clear villains and heroes, each character is a conglomeration of vice and virtue in varying degrees.

Dostoevsky's awareness of the harsh realities of St. Petersburg is evident in his presentation of controversial issues in *Crime and Punishment*. Prostitution is one theme that complicates the novel, and Dostoevsky invites readers to consider the prostitute's point of view. Sonia Marmeladov exposes the common plight of destitute women living in urban centers. Women were subordinate to men in Russia during the 1860s. A struggling prostitute had no opportunity to voice the woes of her predicament. "Mercy houses" were philanthropic ventures aimed to relieve penitent women and help them return to the path of honest labor; however, three quarters of women who spent time at these homes were soon back on the streets (Bernstein 200).

Dostoevsky accurately depicts the social and legal implications of Sonia's profession. Instead of admonishing the prostitute as morally weak, Dostoevsky suggests that she is a victim. "There is no stigma in Dostoevsky's eyes," (Fisher 80) and he assigns Sonia with admirable qualities. The intrinsic immorality of Sonia's profession is excusable because she works out of desperation. Dostoevsky reverses the accepted Russian perception of prostitution in the nineteenth century. His presentation of Sonia implies that he is sympathetic to the prostitute but critical of Russia's legal system which regulated the practice and protected prostitution on the principle that it is a "necessary evil."

To fully grasp the gravity of Sonia's troubles, it is critical to understand the cultural context of commercialized sex in Russia during Dostoevsky's lifetime. Sonia's socio-economic status fits the profile of a woman likely to resort to prostitution. *Crime and Punishment* was published in 1866, twenty-three years after a nation-wide movement to regulate procedures surrounding prostitution. Since the government struggled to completely oust the profession from the streets, it stopped treating commercialized sex as a serious crime and conceded to its supposed inevitability. In 1843, the tsarist Ministry of Internal Affairs appointed "medical-police committees" to regulate prostitution in Russia. Lev Perovskii, Tsar Nicholas I's minister of internal affairs, championed the cause as part of his efforts at medical and police reform. "Public women" were considered dangerous because they were likely to contract and spread venereal disease. The installation of medical-police committees was expected to stem disease and monitor the sex industry. (Bernstein 16)

St. Petersburg experienced the committee's first trial in 1843. Prostitutes were required to register with the committee. Women were issued a "yellow ticket," which certified their trade and revealed their medical condition. These medical licenses contained information typically

available on an identification card: name, age, and address. However, it also included a blank space for physicians to indicate the state of the woman's health. Yellow tickets were a symbol of a new social class of "public women." Upon registration, prostitutes were held responsible for adhering to specific medical standards and rules of behavior. Registered prostitutes were on file and completely at the mercy of the committee.

The initial rules released to St. Petersburg in 1844 sternly state: "A public woman is obliged with all conscientiousness to carry out the rules that have been enacted and shall hereafter be enacted by the committee." Independent prostitutes were required to undergo a medical examination once per week. If doctors detected any sign of disease, the woman in question was expected to report to the hospital immediately. The committee monitored medical visits and punished noncompliant women with work house sentences. Personal disease prevention methods and hygiene recommendations proved difficult to regulate. One rule encouraged prostitutes to use cold water only to wash "certain parts" of their body as often as possible. Another stated that "after relations with a man," a woman must wash herself and replace the bed linens before seeing another client. Less medically grounded rules warned against unnecessary use of makeup and perfume. (Bernstein 21-22)

The medical committee outlined more stringent regulations following the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. To counteract the serfs' new freedoms, women who registered with the medical police were forced to relinquish all other forms of identification. Yellow tickets now replaced a prostitute's internal passport. Thus, prostitutes were scorned by potential employers and landlords. Since prostitutes would be passed over in favor of pure women, it was extremely difficult to leave the profession in order to pursue an honest and respectable position. The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 also brought on specific social regulations. In public, they

were to conduct themselves "as modestly and decently as possible, not displaying themselves from windows in an unseemly state, not touching passers-by in the street, and not calling them over" (Bernstein 25). Perhaps the most unfortunate measure of the yellow card system, a registrant was required to abandon her family, children, and former work (39). Thus, prostitution was not merely a temporary fix during economic hardship. It was a marked way of life that held women captive in their desperation. Laurie Bernstein explains the harsh disadvantages of the yellow card system: "Any hopes to maintain a semblance of respectability had to be abandoned when a woman entered her name on police lists. Once registered, she became a public woman, the property of the state. Not only did clients have access to her body, so did policemen, committee agents, and physicians" (49). A prostitute's life was completely controlled by her degrading profession.

The massive government effort to systematize commercial sex was based on the accepted societal assumption that "a certain percentage of women have to be prostitutes to satisfy men's desire for sex, so that other women can remain virgins until marriage and stay faithful to their husbands" (Fisher 80). Male desires were deemed irresistible. Since women were subordinate to men, it was necessary for them to meet the biological needs of the male population. Dostoevsky voices his opposition to this philosophy by characterizing Sonia as the sacrificial victim of the Marmeladov family and the entire novel. He convinces his audience of the tragic plight of the prostitute by simply observing Sonia and her interactions. Sonia is silent during her first active scene in the novel. Her pitiful appearance is a reflection of the daily torment and distress she endures. Though Sonia's virtue and religious faith far exceed that of the average person, her character is representative of the voiceless, faceless woman who resorts to prostitution because she is desperate to escape poverty. Dostoevsky's social commentary of the holy prostitute

defends the dignity of the marginalized woman and condemns society for condoning the industry as an unavoidable practice. The history of prostitution in St. Petersburg helps shed light on the stigmas of the profession in Dostoevsky's time.

Poor young women living in Russia's urban centers were the primary demographic that resorted to prostitution in the mid-nineteenth century. Barbara Alpern Engel's studies pay close attention to the personal profiles of prostitutes. Extreme poverty caused parents to rely on the young women of the family for income. Brothel recruiters and men capitalized on this fact. Engel notes, "Whether or not women of the laboring poor wound up becoming prostitutes, the option of exchanging sex for money or favors was ever present in their lives, especially if they were young and unattached" (Engel 22). Sonia was tragically familiar with this reality. Sonia had been raised by her stepmother, and her biological father Marmeladov eventually dies. Similarly, a majority of prostitutes in St. Petersburg came from broken families, often with one deceased parent.

Laurie Bernstein and Barbara Engel's studies confirm that the trajectory of Sonia's life follows that of the average female prostitute in St. Petersburg. The daughter of a low class alcoholic whose family is living in destitution, Sonia is burdened with an unfair responsibility. While her father squanders money on his addiction, she is physically, mentally, and spiritually degraded to earn money. Sonia has no formal education and attempts to earn an honest living with needlework. By 1890, the second largest percentage of prostitutes, 12.2%, was women who had formerly worked in the needle trade. Needle work was a precarious and overcrowded profession due to seasonal employment and unreliable payment (Engel 30). Sonia is unsuccessful in the trade. The State Councillor fails to "pay her for the half-dozen holland shirts she sewed…And so the little ones go hungry" (Dostoevsky 15). In addition to taking advantage

of her labor, the Councillor "drove her off with an insult, stamped his feet and shouted obscenities at her" (Dostoevsky 15). Sonia's work efforts are futile, and her dysfunctional parental figures are not satisfied.

Katherine Ivanovna, Sonia's stepmother, bullies her into prostitution. The family is starving and the wages of a prostitute will alleviate their suffering. Though Marmeladov is endearing for his friendliness and conversational skills, his failure as a parent is deplorable. If Marmeladov were a responsible father, he would have worked and used his wages to feed his family and not his addiction. He is willing to give up his daughter to prostitution despite knowledge of the restricted lifestyle and inevitable shame that will torment her. His practical yet harsh rhetorical question reflects a common understanding of the time: "Do you think a poor but honorable girl can earn much by honest labor?" (Dostoevsky 15). Dostoevsky does not fault Sonia's silent obedience. Marmeladov and Katherine Ivanovna are to blame for shaming Sonia into the trade and accepting her wages to fund their livelihood. Sonia brings home thirty rubles from her first customer. She spends the night trembling in her bed while her father lies drunk.

Immediately following her first evening of work, Sonia is reported to the authorities by Daria Frantsovna, a "wicked woman" and brothel recruiter. Thus, Sonia "had to register as a prostitute and carry the yellow ticket" (Dostoevsky 16). Supplementing her meager needlework with sporadic prostitution based on extreme need is no longer an option. Sonia is in the fold of professional prostitutes and at the mercy of the law. In accordance with the regulations established after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, Sonia moves out of her family's home. At night she sneaks away from her rundown, rented apartment room to visit her family. Sonia's wages pay for the Marmeladov's food and rent expenses.

Dostoevsky does not describe the intimate details of Sonia's profession. Readers can make assumptions about her daily routine based on the historical context of her position. Sonia is already under the scrutiny of the medical police for hiring herself out without a license. Therefore, it is likely that she attends her mandatory examinations to avoid further trouble. With her yellow ticket, she suffers public humiliation regularly. Though the purpose of the committee was to end the spread of venereal disease, Sonia probably contracted sicknesses from either her clients or the unsterilized instruments doctors used for their patients. St. Petersburg hospitals were busy, so doctors hastily saw between 50-100 women every hour in filthy examination rooms (Engel 57). A. Dubrovskii conducted an empire wide census of Russian prostitution in 1889. His statistics estimate that 58 percent of registered prostitutes had contracted a venereal disease during their first year in the profession. It is likely that Sonia was one of these infected women.

Although prostitution was part of a formal and organized government program, the profession remained odious. In *Crime and Punishment*, the narrator's description of Sonia at her father's death bed is charged with disgust and negative assumptions. Her profession is obvious based on her dress. The narrator observes, "Strange indeed was her sudden appearance in that room, in the middle of beggary, rags, death, and desperation. She, too, was in rags. She was cheaply dressed, but tricked out gutter-fashion, according to the rules and taste of that special world whose shameful purpose was all too apparent" (Dostoevsky 177). The physical signs of Sonia's prostitution warrant condescension from strangers. Her "gaudy silk dress with its long absurd train and the immense crinoline that filled the entire doorway" was "so inappropriate" in the somber, gray setting. Sonia's appearance is most critically analyzed in the scene where she never speaks. She cannot verbally defend her own dignity. Her silence is symbolic of the

suppressed voice of women in St. Petersburg in the 1860s. At the whim of men, prostitutes were left to endure their circumstances until they managed to lift themselves from the vicious system.

The Marmeladov's family attempts to get ahead through Sonia's profession, but their efforts are in vain. The family is still impoverished, and Sonia is now subject to general contempt, mental anguish, and physical disease. Yet Sonia retains her virtue. She is brave and patient enough to keep her father company on his death bed. During his final moments, he is tormented by guilt. Marmeladov did not relish in Sonia's status as a prostitute, but he was certainly happy to accept her wages. Once, he selfishly took Sonia's final thirty kopecks to buy a half pitcher. Marmeladov treated her pitifully, but Sonia's Christian morals inspire her forgiving nature. She cradles and comforts Marmeladov at his moment of death. Sonia's modest actions pay homage to her pure spirit.

Sonia's "humiliated, crushed, and defeated" demeanor is frequently evident. Her eyes reveal the torment of prostitution. Sonia is horribly ashamed of her profession but continues working without complaint. The livelihood of her stepmother and siblings depends on her. As the novel develops, her role as a sacrificial victim is increasingly apparent. When Sonia visits Raskolnikov's apartment, he does not recognize her because she is dressed in common clothing. The "tricked out gutter-fashion" of her work uniform masks the respectability of her soul. In her simple housedress, Sonia is not immediately labeled as a woman "of notorious conduct" (Dostoevsky 227). Even though her poverty is evident, Sonia is deemed worthy of respect. Her gentleness moves Raskolnikov, a man guilty of violent murder. Raskolnikov looks upon her and realizes "that this downtrodden creature was downtrodden to such a degree that he felt sorry for her" (Dostoevsky 227). When Sonia is considered outside the context of her profession, she generates the compassion of her company.

Living apart from her family, degrading her body, and enduring the social consequences of professional prostitution, Sonia grows accustomed to constant disrespect. She is ashamed and accepts society's opinion that she belongs to the lowest class of people in St. Petersburg. Her self-consciousness is clear among the company gathered at Raskolnikov's apartment. Sonia cannot control her nerves when offered a seat beside Dunia and Pulcheria Alexandrovna. The narrator describes, "She practically trembled from fright, and glanced timidly at both ladies. She obviously did not herself understand how it came about that she was allowed to sit beside them. As she thought about it she became so appalled she suddenly stood up again" (Dostoevsky 228). Sonia is rattled. Her awkwardly abrupt movement makes her gracious host uncomfortable. Sonia only returns to her chair when Raskolnikov moves it out for her a second time.

Prostitution has caused Sonia great disgrace, and her basic socialization skills have altered accordingly. She does not expect the luxury of simple human decency. The previous day, Raskolnikov gave the Marmeladov family everything he had to pay for her father's doctor. Upon entering Raskolnikov's apartment, Sonia realizes that he too is impoverished. She is even more amazed at his great act of unexpected charity considering his own desperate situation. The combination of Raskolnikov's honorable deed is too much for Sonia to process. Elizabeth Blake examines her as a victim and concludes, "Sonia's behavior shows that she never ceases to regard the sacrifice of her body as a constant source of humiliation" (Blake 258). She does not even raise her eyes when Raskolnikov introduces her as Marmeladov's daughter. Sonia is completely embarrassed by her recent actions and by the reputation of her name. Sonia may have exhibited more confidence if her origins had not been revealed.

Dunia's "full and courteous bow" (230) upon departure has a tremendous effect on Sonia. Sonia does not believe she is worthy of Dunia's kind gesture. Sonia's self-esteem is negligible

and her shame is overwhelming. The narrator notices, “a pained expression passed across her face, as if Dunia’s courtesy and attention were difficult and painful for her to accept” (230). Sonia has grown accustomed to alienation, so signs of respect are shocking. Sonia is committed to her Orthodox Christian faith and recognizes prostitution as a grave sin. Thus, she does not begrudge people who treat her with disdain. In fact, she seems to expect it. Dunia’s small sign of respect is a monumental moment of humanity in Sonia’s life. Years pass and at the end of the novel, the significance of the encounter is recalled: “The beautiful look on Dunia’s face when she had bowed to her with such consideration and respect at the time they had first met at Raskolnikov’s, had remained in her mind ever since as one of the most beautiful and most unattainable visions of her life” (Dostoevsky 496). Sonia’s genuine shock at Dunia’s kindness shows how terribly other people must have treated her. Her tragic existence is wrought with ridicule because many do not understand her selfless sacrifice.

Dunia’s bow suggests a form of feminine fellowship. Dunia perceives Sonia’s grim interior conflict and makes a point to show respect for Sonia’s struggle. The yellow card system authorized the Russian belief that prostitutes were necessary to satisfy a man’s supposedly insatiable desire for sex. Dunia herself could be threatened by a similar fate if she lost all financial security. She goes beyond a simple bow and pursues an intimate friendship with Sonia, “regarding her with a kind of awe” (496). Sonia is the human presence Raskolnikov seeks for consolation. Dunia is thankful that her brother has a virtuous person to confide in. Dostoevsky’s framing of Dunia’s kindness shows his sympathy for Sonia’s tribulations. He defends Sonia’s honor by focusing on her victimization.

Dostoevsky acknowledges an understandable critique of prostitution through a conversation between Raskolnikov and Sonia. Raskolnikov questions Sonia about her

profession. He is frustrated and cannot understand why she continues to live in "this muck that you hate" (307). Raskolnikov harshly accuses her of mortifying and selling herself in vain. The Marmeladov family wastes away in poverty while Sonia suffers the social humiliation of the yellow card system. They have established no financial stability since Sonia became a prostitute. The vicious prostitution system holds no promise of eventual reward, and this has proven true for Sonia. It seems that if Sonia were truly steeped in the morals of Orthodox Christianity, she would abandon her profession out of principle. Sonia no longer attends mass because of her deplorable reputation, yet her faith grows stronger perhaps out of necessity.

In the height of his frenzy, Raskolnikov exclaims, "you won't help anybody this way, you won't save anybody from anything! How can you abide such shame and degradation inside you up against their opposite – such holy feelings?" (307). In contrast to Dunia's sympathy toward Sonia's hopeless struggle, Raskolnikov is afflicted with frustration. He takes an aggressive position and challenges her to be bold and begin treating herself with the dignity she believes in. Sonia is likely shaken by his candid confrontation because Raskolnikov asserts a problem she constantly considers. She aches to escape prostitution but does not know how else she will survive. Sonia's reaction is a testament to her pure intentions and selfless sacrifices. She is driven by unfailing love for "those poor little orphan children and that pathetic, half-crazy Katherine Ivanovna, with her consumptive cough, beating her head against the wall" (308). Their livelihood and hope for a better future outweigh the revulsion of her profession. Sonia is confident that God will save Polia from the clutches of commercialized sex. Even though her father and step-mother subjected her to the horrors of prostitution, Sonia is forgiving. She sacrifices everything for the welfare of her dysfunctional family without expecting anything in return.

In the midst of their discussion, Raskolnikov grasps Sonia by the shoulders and looks into her eyes with a piercing stare. Suddenly, "he stooped all the way down, fell to the floor, and kissed her foot" (307). Sonia is startled and offended. Raskolnikov seems to be making a mockery of her. Men would not even bow to a prostitute, and here Raskolnikov is groveling at her feet. Raskolnikov's exaggerated politeness is humiliating. With great pain, Sonia mutters, "What are you doing that for, to me of all people?!" (307). He responds, "It wasn't you I bowed down to. I bowed down to all of suffering humanity" (307). Raskolnikov is empathetic toward her hardship but annoyed by her inability to pull herself out of the futile enterprise of prostitution. He wants to see her live according to the virtues she prizes. Whereas Dunia is sympathetic toward the terrible fate of a prostitute in St. Petersburg, Raskolnikov is more sensitive to her general suffering. He challenges Sonia to solve her own problem and refuses to passively feel sorry for her.

Tangled in the complexities of the yellow card system, Sonia can only escape if another person takes responsibility for her through marriage, employment, or financial support (Engel 41). Sonia does not have the luxury of any of these options. She endures her circumstances out of desperation, not laziness or immorality. Dostoevsky is empathetic to her self-sacrifice. The constructs of society in St. Petersburg are harsh and even a prostitute with the most upright intentions finds it difficult to escape. Marmeladov's rhetorical question posed at the beginning of the novel holds true: "Do you think a poor but honorable girl can earn much by honest labor?" Raskolnikov comes to pity her as an emblem "of suffering humanity." Prostitutes in nineteenth century St. Petersburg may not have been so strictly grounded in Orthodox morals like Sonia; however, their plights are equally disturbing. Marginalized women from broken families often relied on themselves for survival. Engel notes, "unprotected, they became vulnerable to rape or

sexual harassment" (Engel 44). Poor women were easy targets for prostitution because their options for income were limited. Nathan Rosen investigates the trauma that afflicts Dostoevsky's female characters. He concludes that Sonia's role as a prostitute was necessary because "the pain of Russia was so enormous that it could not be ignored by Dostoevsky or his contemporaries" (Rosen 260). Dostoevsky presents the prostitute not as a seducer, but as a victim of hardship in St. Petersburg.

Crime and Punishment is a powerful novel that raises moral questions about the nature of the human condition. Fyodor Dostoevsky explores themes of Christianity, redemption, and hopeless sacrifice. Though he wrote about contemporary issues, the problems of the plot pertain to modern concerns. Considering the historical context of prostitution in nineteenth century St. Petersburg allows for a well-rounded understanding of Sonia Marmeladov. Traditionally interpreted as a symbol of Christian morality, Sonia is marked by her selfless sacrifices. Dostoevsky carefully recognizes the pain of her victimization and draws readers to sympathize with her tragic plight. Sonia's deep religious faith is a stark contrast to her despicable profession. However, the beauty of her soul is perhaps most evident when she agrees to prostitution, in theory and in practice completely horrifying to her, for the sake of her family's survival. Dostoevsky's compassion for the desperate prostitute is evident in his characterization of Sonia and his critical suggestions about governmental regulation of commercialized sex in Russia.

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