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21L.472 Major European Novels
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FINAL PAPER (Due at last class session)

Figuring 350 words per page, you should produce no less than ten pages on one of the following topics or one entirely of your own devising. You must focus your essay on either Crime and Punishment or Anna Karenina, but you may institute a direct comparison between one of these two texts and any other, in which case attention may be evenly divided.

Themes and Topics

1. Compare Julien Sorel's moods of doubt, where he wonders whether he is worthy of his destiny, with Raskolnikov's humiliation at the thought that he, too, is just a "louse". After being offered a cushy partnership with Foqué (his friend, the wood-dealer) Julien worries that putting off his career in order to get the money to pay for his seminary training would be an expression of weakness, then worries if his worries about being weak aren't themselves an expression of weakness. You might compare this with Raskolnikov's explanation to Dounia (Part VI, ch. 7) about why he didn't kill himself or his remark to Sonia that the most humiliating thing of all was that he knew in advance that anyone who had to test himself for greatness had already flunked the self-proposed test.
2. The Sense of Duty in _____.
3. The theme of Mediocrity as treated in _____.
4. One might say of Madame Bovary that it is a book in which nothing happens. (Up to a point, that is the complaint of the heroine.) One might say of Crime and Punishment that it is a book in which dramatic crises occur on virtually every page. Comment.
5. The Voice of Immoralism: Vautrin and Svigdrigailov. (Note: "Immoralism" is not "immorality"; it implies making some sort of immorality a principle of behavior, a cause to be recommended or forwarded.)
6. The Country and the Town
7. The theme of humiliation in Père Goriot and Crime and Punishment. You might compare Eugène's readiness to take insult from the sneer of a footman and Raskolnikov's readiness to take insult from the gift of charity or a sacrifice for his sake by another; or you might contrast the bravery of Mme de Beauséant in enduring the gaze of all in high society at her ball after being jilted by d'Ajuda Pinto with the meekness of Sonia, who does not respond with anger to humiliation by another, no matter how severe.
8. Anna and Levin as counterparts.
9. I repeat some remarks from an earlier assignment. Characters in novels cannot be immediately related to readers in point of some notion of potential for acting in an admirable way (admirable in any sense, not just in an ethical sense). The reader cannot always say, "How inferior--I'm more clever or more honest or more brave than that!" The introductory paragraphs of Père Goriot might be taken as warning the reader not to assume his or her superiority to the characters. The implication here is that the reader doesn't know as much as the author about the depths of life or is already too jaded by the pressures of success to appreciate these depths; the novel, however, knows better and the reader should not suppose that because one character is a fool with regard to his children another learns to get the better of his conscience. the

reader is entitled to believe himself or herself superior to them. Or, to take a more complicated instance, Stendhal sketches a world at the outset of The Red and the Black in which knowing what you want--which in our own lives is usually taken as a mark of good sense--is not a sign of superiority but of weakness or meanness or narrowness of character. Discuss in any way that seems suitable the implied strength or weakness of the characters of a novel relative to the reader.

10. The distinction between primary and secondary characters: what makes for the difference (not entirely a matter of the number of pages on which they appear--Svigdrigailov is arguably a major figure, but fewer pages are devoted to him than to Razumihin) in relation to the major concerns of the text, to the plot (the drama of events), to the way in which the narrative voice of the text deals with them. The issue is particularly acute in Anna Karenina--is Karenin, is Vronsky, is Stepan Oblonsky a primary or a secondary character?

11. One distinction often drawn between primary and secondary characters in novels is that primary characters can "see around themselves"—that is, they can view themselves as others see them, have a critical awareness of their own failings, place some distance between themselves and their social roles whereas secondary characters seem to be "all of a piece", so closely are their concerns, their actions and even their self-awareness defined by their social position or their economic interests. The contrast between, say, Julien Sorel and M. de Renal turns upon drawing the distinction in this way; and it serves as well in many books that we haven't read—the novels of Jane Austen or Charles Dickens, for example. But in both Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, the distinction doesn't seem to work. Consider for example, the following passage describing Luzhin's thoughts, in his final quarrel with Dounia: "In bitterly reminding Dounia just now that he had decided to take her in spite of the bad rumors about her, he had spoken quite sincerely and even felt deeply indignant at such 'black ingratitude' and yet he had already been fully convinced of the absurdity of this gossip and knew that she had been vindicated in the eyes of the village." Anna Karenina is full of characters who have flashes of insight rivaling that of the narrative's voice into their character. M. de Renal is not presented as capable of something like this. Comment.

12. Psychology, observes Porfiry, the criminal investigator, is a double-edged sword (or, as our translation says, it is "double-ended"); it cuts both ways. With Raskolnikov, Porfiry plays a curious cat-and-mouse game, by putting himself in the place of the criminal, who will try double-bluffs. (If I were guilty, I'd say this; a single bluff would be not to say it; but I'll do a double-bluff and say it openly.) What is the point of the double-bluff? How does Porfiry respond to it? Examine this notion closely in relation to any passages in the novel that you choose and try to say something about how this notion of "cutting both ways" ties in with the doubleness of the Dostoyevskian characters mentioned in the previous question.

13. The motive for murder in Crime and Punishment. (There are at least three, but you needn't discuss all of them, although comparing them and deciding how to relate them to each other would be a good topic.)

14. A version of the latter: Raskolnikov's "theory of the great man" (or the student's theory of murder, offered in the conversation that Raskolnikov overhears between a student and an officer in a café) and Eugène's mandarin. Is Raskolnikov's theory (or the student's) simply another version of the dilemma that Eugène found in Rousseau?

15. The dreams in Crime and Punishment and their relation to the larger concerns of the text. (You can fasten on any number and you can pose any issue about them. We dealt with three in class—how does "the dream of the mare" function in relation to the scheme that Raskolnikov have in mind at the time the dream comes to him, a time at which he has no intention of killing Lisaveta? How does the dream of killing the old pawnbroker, who laughs at him while he kills her, fit in with Raskolnikov's feelings at that point in the novel? And finally, the set of Svigdrigailov's dreams, which culminate in the dream of the child-prostitute.)

16. The world in this text is one in which it makes arguable sense to say (as Raskolnikov says to Sonya), "it makes no difference whether you sacrifice yourself or another; the act is still wanton and criminal". Many different characters argue for the view that the sense of right and wrong possessed by most people is merely the expression of prejudice, the effects of environment, the results of circumstance and conditioning. (Raskolnikov's article is an extreme version of this point of view.) It is in connection with this view that Raskolnikov wants to convince Sonia that her sacrifice for her family is just the same as a crime. Judgments of good and bad are not always the expression of prejudice, but they are usually; the real character of goodness derives from the capacity of an action to serve the cause of enlightened self-interest. (Enlightened self-interest might suggest obeying the law or helping others to become enlightened, so that they would be less likely to harm you, either directly or indirectly, by contributing to general disorder.) It follows that by sacrificing her chances in life for the sake of people who will not be helped by her actions, Sonia has *wantonly* wasted her life--clearly a bad thing. Comment on the place of such arguments in the book. Why is Raskolnikov so eager to taunt Sonia in this way?

17. Much of Crime and Punishment turns on questions of humiliating others by humiliating oneself. (It is in this context that Raskolnikov regards Dounia's attempt to sacrifice her life for his benefit--by marrying Luzhin--as an insult. He feels no particular gratitude or guilt, unlike Eugène in Père Goriot. Rather, his thought is that she has humiliated him by not seeing that he is a "great man" and doesn't need her help. "These delicate creatures," he thinks. "They love as though they hate.") Comment on this facet of the novel.

18. The point of Tolstoy's epigraph in relation to the text: "Vengeance is mine saith the Lord; I will repay." Does this mean that Anna deserves what happens to her? That she deserves the fate that overtakes her and is justly to be condemned (in Tolstoy's view) by God's retributive justice? Or that it is not for human beings to imagine that they can understand the viewpoint of God and that it is beyond our power to endorse Anna's suffering as fit punishment for her actions?

19. Suicide (or the sacrifice of one's life) as emblematic of the themes of the book any text read during the second half of the term.

20. Levin and Charles Bovary: the man who knows how to love.

21. Compare and contrast any two texts read this term in respect of one of the following themes: Books and Life; Vocation (especially good in comparing Levin, who discovers his vocation, and the dilettante aristocrats, like Vronsky, who are still looking for one at the end of the book); Duty to oneself and duty to others; Ambition; Boredom; Outsiders; The Decisive Event and its Consequences; The Historical Moment; Hypocrisy; Playing the Game; The Importance of Family.

22. Take at least three passages from any novel and analyze them, showing why they are symptomatic of the concerns of the text as a whole. (The paper length should be calculated without including the space occupied by extensive quotation of passages from the novel.)

23. Most novels of any length make use of contrasting passages in depicting characters or reinforcing the narrative's view of their lives and fortunes. Anna Karenina is particularly rich in such passages, which invite (one might argue) comparison by way of contrast with other passages much earlier or later in the book. We might mention three pairs, each member of which is separated from its "mate" by a good stretch of the book--Vronsky losing the race, Levin mowing with the peasants; Levin's night of happiness, just after Kitty has accepted him, and Anna's final journey, in which everyone she sees looks odious in one way or another; Vronsky's "lessive" and the rules he follows in drawing up his ethical accounts and Levin's final meditation on the rules that will guide him, as he supposes, during the remainder of his life. Discuss how these or any other such contrasts illuminate the presiding themes of the book.

24. The novelist as moralist. Does a particular text represent an ethical view from which perspective the conduct and character of its protagonists can be judged? Or does it assume or imply such a view? Is this view exhibited in the novel's assignment of fates or outcomes or fortunes to its major figures? Or is it more subtly indicated by the ways in which the narrative reveals their inner lives?

25. The protagonist as tragic figures. (Please--no mechanical--i.e., unargued--definitions of "tragic figure". Do not cite any dictionary definition and forget about Aristotle's definition [if you know it] unless you can defend it.)

26. We distinguished (roughly) three aspects of the notion of "point of view" in a novel. (1) A character may serve at a particular moment or even for the whole book as a focus of information, so that the narrative voice knows only what he or she is capable of knowing or observing. (2) A character may serve as a register of judgment or interpretation of the significance of particular events, so that the text is bound (perhaps for the moment only) to the character's viewpoint of what something means in respect of its general importance to the interests and fortune's of anyone or everyone in the story, including the character in question, or expresses a momentary judgment on the character's situation in life. It is in this regard that the novel's narrative admits exclamation points, when appropriate, as when Emma Bovary contemplates the passage of time: "How long ago it seemed!" (This function has recently entered ordinary conversational styles, as we observed, with the introduction of the phrase, ". . . and I was like . . .".) (3) Finally, there are both momentary and large-scale judgments of an ethical kind, which characters may or may not share with the narrative voice (and we may or may not as well). Closely examine two or three passages in either Crime and Punishment or Anna Karenina to show how "point of view" operates and how it relates to the general concerns of the text. (To illustrate with a minor example: When Vronsky leaves the Scherbatsky household just after Levin's failed proposal of marriage, he thinks of Kitty's purity and freshness and the text says that his feelings about this arose "partly from the fact that he had not been smoking for a whole evening." This is clearly not Vronsky's point of view.)

27. Anna and Emma as tragic heroines.