Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov: on the brink of suicide.

In Dostoyevsky’s novel “Crime and Punishment”, the main character, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov goes through a long series of events, which compare and contrast him with the people around him. One of the most significant characters crucial to understanding Raskolnikov’s personality is Arkady Ivanovich Svidrigailov.

Overall, the enigma of Rodion’s persona is expanded and illuminated by two characters: Svidrigailov as the dark, calculative, and repulsive side; and Sonya Marmeladova as the compassionate, humane, and spiritual half of Raskolnikov. What makes Svidrigailov such an important element in the novel is the fact that by his lack of morals and superiors, he becomes the epitome of Raskolnikov’ theory of the Ubermensch, a thought Rodion conceived out of desperation and mental fatigue.

It is the comparison of Svidrigailov and Raskolnikov that eventually reveals each of them stands on the theory of the Super-human. Despite all hopes of being among history’s great people such as Napoleon, Julius Caesar et al, Raskolnikov fails the self-test of belongingness to the superior class. Perhaps, Raskolnikov even hoped that the murder, if committed without remorse or doubt, would *propel* him into superiority. He definitely had the reasons to believe in his greatness because it is evident that Raskolnikov clearly displays some of the qualities of a Super-human, based on his own standards: he is intelligent, quite arrogant, and his pride is very vividly apparent in his behavior with his only friend, Razumikhin, and several occasions, on which he had refused to accept other people’s assistance or support. But unfortunately, contrary to what Rodion had anticipated, the murder delivers crippling inward blow to his conscience and self-image, and Raskolnikov finally realizes that he is, in fact, nothing but a “trembling creature.”

Svidrigailov, however, fits the qualifications of an Ubermensch perfectly. There is nothing sacred in the world for Arkady Ivanovich. The sole purpose of his life is the hedonistic pursuit of his own selfish goals and practice of his self-made rights. The list of examples that attest to Svidrigailov’s inhumanity is quite long, ranging from lies and debt evasion to rape and, possibly, murder. For instance, when he learns about the suicide of a fifteen-year old girl, whom he raped, Svidrigailov shrugs without any remorse. The sadistic torment, which led his servant Philip to suicide, also seems to have not given Arkady Ivanovich any feelings of guilt. Svidrigailov is fully aware of his own vicious nature. Shortly after his marriage to Marfa Petrovna, he announces to her that “he will not be able to be a fully loyal husband.” Clearly, Svidrigailov is a person of great vice and malice.

With such a clear distinction between the characters, a distinction that decisively favors Svidrigailov as a superior being, why does it so happen that Raskolnikov, a failed theorist, a confirmed “louse”, finds a new life at the end of the novel, while Arkady Ivanovich finally resorts to suicide? Is it not strange that Svidrigailov, having become completely free from his marital duties (which he never honored, anyway), endowed with substantial income from his deceased wife’s estate, not burdened by any family obligations, would take his own life, while Raskolnikov, a man who has betrayed himself and many people around him, with a murder on his hands, and severe prosecution impending, would embrace his misery instead of liberating himself in the waters of Neva?

Raskolnikov contemplates suicide on many occasions throughout the novel. His first encounter with this thought occurs at a canal bridge, where an ostensibly drunken woman jumps into the dirty water in a suicidal attempt, but is rescued by the passersby. At this point, Raskolnikov dismisses the idea of self-violence because it seems to be too unsightly a spectacle. At several other times, it seems that the author is repeatedly discussing suicide, calling it “going to America”, which is suggested as an escape promising to remove an individual from all his/her present difficulties. This notion becomes clearer near the end of the novel, when Svidrigailov finally “goes to America” by a bullet to his right temple. The last time when Raskolnikov returns to thought of suicide is on the night before his final visit to the police station. After parting with Svidrigailov, he walks to the middle of a bridge to contemplate suicide once again. However, this time Rodion’s decision evolves from factors that are drastically different from those he had before. There is an alternative. There is a hope of regeneration and a normal life.

As portrayed by the biblical figure of Lazarus, who rose from the dead after Jesus called to God and prayed for Lazarus’ resurrection, Raskolnikov’s process of coming back to life begins when he experiences a touch of divine intervention – love. Indeed, when a person as ascetic and nihilistic as Raskolnikov experiences love, it *does* seem like an impossibility whose occurrence may not be explained by anything other than an act of God. Sonya Marmeladova is the object of Raskolnikov’s love and a catalyst for his ultimate transformation. As Svidrigailov’s antagonist, Sonya embodies the split Raskolnikov’s humane, compassionate side and leads him to recognition and a new life.

Svidrigailov and Sonya are the sides between which Raskolnikov vacillates throughout most of the novel. Having read Rodion’s article about crime, Arkady Ivanovich finds it appropriate to attempt to befriend Raskolnikov despite the latter’s explicit hostility. But aside from Svidrigailov’s ambitions regarding Dunya and the discovery of kinship between him and Raskolnikov, Arkady Ivanovich’s innermost reason to search for someone who might help him escape the boredom, which he brought upon himself by consistently committing various antisocial acts that alienated him from everyone and left him utterly alone. The last straw for Svidrigailov is the rejection he receives from Dunya, whom he desperately craved.

To further illustrate Svidrigailov’s hopelessness, Dostoyevsky includes the story about Arkady Ivanovich’s sixteen-year-old fiancée. Although it seems that a man as perverse as Svidrigailov would not hesitate to take advantage of that innocent child (after all, he has done it before!), Arkady Ivanovich pays his last visit to that family and leaves a gift of fifteen thousand rubles. Later that night, Svidrigailov has a dream, in which he morbidly contemplates the corpse of a young girl who drowned herself after being raped. In the second dream he has that night, he sees a five-year-old girl whose innocent countenance of a child morphs into the expression of a veteran prostitute as Svidrigailov watches, terrified. In the preceding days, Svidrigailov has been becoming increasingly convinced of his own worthlessness, and these dreams finally allow him to see who he is in perspective. No longer able to tolerate his own self, with no place to go, and no one to help him find peace, Svidrigailov uses the last bullet left in Sonya’s revolver to take his own life. Svidrigailov commits suicide in front of a stranger whom the author identifies as Jewish, a people Dostoyevsky regards with disdain, which further shows the desperate loneliness that tormented Arkady Petrovich.

At the time of Svidrigailov’s suicide, Raskolnikov’s story was also nearing its cathartic finale. Dostoyevsky completes the picture of the novel’s denouement by creating an interesting inconsistency in weather. It is stated that on the morning of Svidrigailov’s suicide, the weather was a disgusting mixture of rain, fog, and stinging cold. However, when narration turns to Raskolnikov and his walk to the police station, the day is said to have been warm, sunny, and pleasant since that morning. This is a deliberate artistic motion used by the author to contrast the two characters who, at one point, stand somewhat close, but eventually succumb to the separate fates they bring about by their predicaments.

This is the ultimate question of this analysis: why did Svidrigailov, the real Ubermensch, commit suicide, while Raskolnikov, the confirmed louse, was able to attain peace and a chance to be happy? Well, it is, in fact, quite simple: it was Raskolnikov’s mistake to think that he ever was a super-human, and it was his fortune that he did not prove himself right. If Raskolnikov was a character parallel to Svidrigailov, he, too, would have acted in these malicious, self-centered ways that would have eventually brought about his tragic demise alongside Arkady Petrovich. Perhaps it was Rodion’s youthful exuberance, the unrestrained flexing of his intellectual muscle that provoked him to take on the principles of the world, but it was his extraordinary luck to have near him the people who gave him back his mind and his heart.