

## Thresholds and Double Spaces in *Crime and Punishment*

BRIAN SEITZ, *Babson College*  
seitzb@babson.edu

Received: June 9, 2017.

Accepted: September 5, 2017.

### ABSTRACT

Images of thresholds, doorways, passages, and double spaces constitute a prominent, recurring motif in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. These images undergird another metaphorical or possibly metaphysical threshold, providing a passage connecting doubled spaces, and transitions, which on a fundamental level is a way of characterizing the theme of the entire novel. The main focus here will be on the nexus of references to physical thresholds and passageways that pervade the novel. In particular, Dostoevsky frequently repeats the image of characters standing in thresholds, so the image was significantly lodged in the writer's head. Following this observation, I will offer a selective sampling of these references and, in the end, will indicate what, collectively, they might mean. Reinforced by the imagery of physical thresholds, what emerges in the course of a novel saturated with doubles and double spaces is the ambiguous threshold between sin and salvation, or between solitude and Sonya. The very title of *Crime and Punishment* succinctly captures this, and Siberia is the penultimate threshold for Raskolnikov, who would like to wait at the threshold of existence until life is shaped into the kind of state he approves of, while not directly or consciously acknowledging that he has already entered, as is evident from beginning to end.

**Keywords:** *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky, threshold, doubles, repetition.

### 1. *Double spaces*

Images of thresholds, doorways, passages, and double spaces pervade *Crime and Punishment*, collectively constituting a complex, recurring, emergent motif, a pattern of repetition I will identify and feature in what follows. As a manifestation of Russian sensitivity to doorways—possibly jinxed places, through which, for example, two characters or two people would never shake hands—these double spaces are charged with intrinsic significance. For Dostoevsky they also tend to function as problematic punctuation, sometimes serving to connect, other times serving to divide or, as in the case of a closed door, to contain or trap. On the other hand, they more broadly serve as metonymic representation of the general theme of the novel. While images of thresholds and passages are usually more or less in the background (if there is such a thing in a Dostoevsky novel), my intent here is to draw them into the foreground simply by taking advantage of their repetition.

What is conspicuous is that Dostoevsky frequently reiterates or revisits the image of characters standing on, in, or passing through the threshold. So, conscious or not, the image was somehow lodged in Fyodor's head, although since there is nothing innocent about a threshold, I would speculate and wager that it was a self-conscious reference to or reinforcement of the doubled theme of the novel as a whole, the theme represented by its title. Yet whether deliberate or not, this motif is there, distributed throughout the novel.

Insofar as it is possible, and with the assumption that anyone reading this essay will certainly have read *Crime and Punishment*, I will endeavor to detach from the narrative of the story and, too, will remark almost exclusively only on literal doorways or thresholds: I will make no effort to fabricate continuity in the references but will instead simply offer glimpses that in the aggregate cannot help but connect with each other. A more ambitious, fully

developed version of this would entail references to bridges, wooden walkways, indoors/outdoors, and other specific formations of double-edged space, e.g. Sennaya Ploschad itself, and it would probably also be obliged to extend to other stories written by Dostoevsky, many other stories.

In isolation, no single instance of thresholds or doorways is significant in the novel. But taken together, it is the repetition and entire concatenation of these references that illustrates or animates the dynamics of the double space occupied by Raskolnikov and perhaps serves as staging for the performance of other sorts of dialogical doubles, including double characters. For now, all I'm offering is philosophy by implication, just footwork: it might look like just a list, and a partial one at that, but it's the skeletal setup for a philosophical punchline about the passageway from punishment to conversion. But before that passage, why so much lingering and malingering about doorways?

## 2. *Doorways*

The opening page of the novel remarks that the landlady's kitchen door is always open, an opening that will be repeated since in heading out of the building Raskolnikov must always pass by this doorway: "Each time he passed by, [he] felt some painful and cowardly sensation, which made him wince with shame," shame because of his debt to her (Dostoevsky, 1993: 3).

730 steps from his building to the pawnbroker's. This is the passage leading to the stairway, the threshold between relative normalcy and absolute transgression (Dostoevsky, 1993: 5).

The first crossing of the literal threshold into Alyona Ivanovna's apartment is an utterly loaded gesture, a rehearsal representing the transition from an experimental idea to the future actual crime (Dostoevsky, 1993: 6). Raskolnikov notes that the doorway between the two rooms of her flat is masked by a curtain that blocks the view of the bedroom in which she keeps her money and pledges (Dostoevsky, 1993: 7-8).

Raskolnikov begins walking, and the intensity and immensity of his internal discourse carries him along as if in a delirium, until he recalls that he is going to visit Razumikhin, "To find a solution for everything...?" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 52). The lengthy walk is a passageway from his cabinet via bridge to Vasilievsky Island and another bridge to Petrovsky, and then—crossing the threshold from consciousness to the other side—mutates into the dream, which is a conduit to his own childhood and to a cemetery and a church, which could be viewed as a disjunction that then turns into a dream about beating the mare to death, a foreshadowing of and thus passage to the actual murder and by extension the second, unexpected murder.

Later, and for the second time, Raskolnikov dreams, and the dream transports him to an Egyptian oasis, something like the opposite or *other side* of where he is. A clock wakes him, and then he quietly cracks the door to listen downstairs—he cannot escape the door—and he starts his preparation for the deed (Dostoevsky, 1993: 67-68).

He constructs the pledge from a scrap of wood and a strip of iron: this would seem to have nothing to do with physical thresholds, but it is a passage to both the murder—two crosses around the old woman's neck, one cypress, one brass (Dostoevsky, 1993: 78)—and to Sonya (Dostoevsky, 1993: 422).

Nastasya, the landlady's servant always leaves the kitchen door open (the same door

mentioned on the first page of the story), which is where and how he'd planned to "borrow" the axe. To his surprise, Nastaya is home and she watches him through the doorway as he passes by (Dostoevsky, 1993: 70-71). Ergo: no axe! Once outside, "standing aimlessly in the gateway," he sees through the doorway of the caretaker's closet—"the door is wide open"—and there is the axe that becomes the murder weapon (Dostoevsky, 1993: 72).

At the pawnbroker's, a wagon drives through the gates to the courtyard, concealing Raskolnikov's entry (Dostoevsky, 1993: 73). Once in the building, climbing the stairs, all of the doors are shut, except for the empty apartment on the *second* floor, but the painters working there do not see him. Standing outside the pawnbroker's closed door, he senses her presence on the other side, senses her listening to him the way that he is trying to listen to her. He rings, the door opens a crack, Raskolnikov pulls the door and she stands in the threshold and tries to block his entry (Dostoevsky, 1993: 74-75).

Having murdered both Alyona Ivánovna and her sister, Lizaveta, Raskolnikov notices that the door had been unlatched during the commission of the crime, indication of a lack of both security and self-control, early intimations of where things are heading (Dostoevsky, 1993: 80-81). An uninvited visitor makes his way up the stairs, and he and Raskolnikov stand on either side of the now latched door, echoing or seconding the earlier scene with the pawnbroker. Having repeatedly rung the doorbell, the newcomer pulls the door and figures out that it is only latched and not locked, which indicates that someone is inside (Dostoevsky, 1993: 83).

Raskolnikov slips through the door of the apartment that is being painted, avoiding detection by people coming up the stairs. Then he's out the gate and onto the street. When he gets back into his own courtyard, the caretaker's door is closed, but he simply opens it without knocking in order to replace the axe, a risky, possibly simply sloppy, significant maneuver because it's another sign that he is becoming unhinged (Dostoevsky, 1993: 85).

In the police station, Raskolnikov hears the policemen discussing the fact that the door to the murder scene was locked and then a few minutes later was unlocked and that the murderer must therefore have first been inside and then, in the interval, have left (Dostoevsky, 1993: 105).

Later, having been sequestered in his cabinet and visited by various characters, Raskolnikov awakens, and Razumíkhin is standing in the threshold, uncertain whether to enter, a loaded hesitation (Dostoevsky, 1993: 128). Then Luzhin stands in the doorway, not advancing into Raskolnikov's space, as if "Where on earth have I come to?" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 142). Two pages later, Razumíkhin ask him, "Listen, why do you go on standing in the doorway?" All characters, in this case Luzhin, have to duck in entering and exiting Raskolnikov's cabinet (Dostoevsky, 1993: 153).

The fact that Nastasya's kitchen door is always open and that Raskolnikov has to pass it in order to leave the building reflects the sense in which he is or feels as if he is being monitored; in this case, her back is to him and he slips out unnoticed (Dostoevsky, 1993: 154). Which doors are open, and which are closed?

Leaving a tavern, Raskolnikov is going out and Razumíkhin coming in when they bump into each other. This type of coincidental encounter in a doorway happens at various points in the story (Dostoevsky, 1993: 166).

Returning to the scene of the crime, Raskolnikov discovers that the door to the

pawnbroker's flat is wide open and that there are people inside, workers already redecorating that place. (Dostoevsky, 1993: 171)

Regarding Raskolnikov's new acquaintance, Marmeladov, "'Run over in the street! Drunk!' someone shouted from the entryway" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 178). Curious neighbors pour through the doorway into Marmeladov's apartment, then squeeze back out through it (Dostoevsky, 1993: 179-80). As Marmeladov is dying, "Sonya stood in the entryway, just at the threshold but not crossing it... " Finally, "She looked down, took a step over the threshold, and stood in the room, though still just by the door" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 183).

Back in his building and surprised by the sight of his mother and sister in his room, Raskolnikov "stood rooted in the threshold," then Razumikhin was "standing on the threshold" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 192).

The door to Raskolnikov's coffin "... opened quietly and a girl came into the room... Sofya Semyonovna Marmeladov" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 236). Dostoevsky's description here is simple and yet what could be more loaded than Sonya entering the space of a man she does not know?

Razumikhin asks Raskolnikov, "Don't you lock the door?" and Raskolnikov responds that he's been meaning to buy a lock for two years (Dostoevsky, 1993: 242-43). This question will be repeated later.

Svidrigailov follows Sonya and then Dostoevsky writes that their "two doors were about six paces apart" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 245).

Raskolnikov and Razumikhin enter Porfiry Petrovich's apartment. The ensuing conversation entails a lingering over Raskolnikov's theory (Dostoevsky, 1993: 248). Destiny. Porfiry asks Raskolnikov if he had seen the painters in the open apartment. This is a ploy, a gesture toward setting a trap (Dostoevsky, 1993: 266). Porfiry walks them to the door and they both passed "out on to the street gloomy and sullen" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 267).

Raskolnikov enters his room, puts the door on the hook so that he remains secure while he gropes around for the evidence he's hidden (Dostoevsky, 1993: 270). Razumikhin visits, opens the door, and once again stands in the threshold as if hesitating (Dostoevsky, 1993: 273).

Raskolnikov emerges from a dream to see a stranger standing in the threshold to his room: the man crosses the threshold and shuts the door. It is Svidrigailov, a massive turning point in the literal center of the book (Dostoevsky, 1993: 278). Raskolnikov thinks, "Can this be a continuation of my dream?" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 281), dreams embodying a different sort of threshold, a different species of the double. So too is Svidrigailov a different species of the double.

Svidrigailov's dead wife, Marfa Petrovna, has visited him three times, "She comes, talks for a moment, and leaves by the door, always by the door" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 286-87). Dreams are doubles and so are ghosts, in this case a ghost who exits by the door, which both makes sense and yet is also a peculiar detail. "As he was leaving, Svidrigailov ran into Razumikhin in the doorway" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 294).

Visiting his sister and mother, Raskolnikov and Razumikhin run into Luzhin: The young men went in first, while Luzhin, for propriety's sake, lingered a little in the entryway... Pulcheria Alexandrovna went at once to meet him at the threshold" (Dostoevsky, 1993: 296).

Luzhin says, "If I walk out that door now, with such parting words... I shall never come

back” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 305). Raskolnikov leaves, Razumikhin stays, not just an event but an exchange and substitution since “In short, from that evening on Razumikhin became their son and brother” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 313-14), a different sort of double.

So too is the double at work in the scene in which Raskolnikov asks Sonya to read “the part about Lazarus” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 324-28). “Jesus said unto her, *I am the resurrection, and the life...*” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 325), and then, just a few pages later, Sonya thought that the room next to hers was uninhabited, but “Svidrigailov had been in the empty room standing by the door and stealthily listening” to the entire conversation. After Raskolnikov left, Svidrigailov retrieved a chair from his own room and put it next to the door leading to Sonya’s room so that he’d be able “to settle more comfortably” the next time he eavesdropped (Dostoevsky, 1993: 330-31).

In the corner of the back wall of Porfiry Petrovich’s office is a closed door in the empty room (Dostoevsky, 1993: 332). Porfiry tells Raskolnikov that there’s a surprise behind the door, which is locked (Dostoevsky, 1993: 349). There’s a noise from behind the door, then it opens and a voice says “We’ve brought the prisoner Nikolai,” and a man enters the room (Dostoevsky, 1993: 350). Porfiry responds “It’s too soon! Wait till you’re called!” and Nikolai goes down on his knees and says “I’m guilty. The sin is mine! I am the murderer!” Others watch through the doorway until Porfiry waves them away. This bit of theater is a ruse. Porfiry shows Raskolnikov the door and then “They were standing in the doorway,” Porfiry impatiently waiting for Raskolnikov to leave.

Home again, Raskolnikov is late for Marmeladov’s funeral but wants to attend the memorial meal and to see Sonya. “He was just about to open the door, when it suddenly began to open itself.” It was the man who had previously called him a murderer on the street (Dostoevsky, 1993: 356). The man tells him that he’d been sitting behind a partition in Porfiry’s office and had heard the entire, protracted conversation. The man leaves, and Raskolnikov repeats to himself, “Everything’s double-ended, now everything’s double-ended...” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 357).

Raskolnikov arrives for the memorial meal “at almost the same moment they returned from the cemetery” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 382). In the midst of a row between Katerina Ivanovna and her landlady, Amalia Ivanovna, “... The door opened, and Pyotr Petrovich Luzhin appeared on the threshold of the room” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 391). “A minute later, Lebezyatnikov also appeared on the threshold... it seemed for a long time there was something he could not understand” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 392). Then Luzhin accused Sonya of stealing one hundred rubles. Lebezyatnikov says, “What vileness,” takes a step into the room—as if walking onto a stage—and says to Luzhin, “And you dare hold me up as a witness?” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 398), and then observes to all assembled that he had witnessed Luzhin slip “a piece of paper into her pocket on the sly” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 399).

At Sonya’s, standing outside the door to Kapernaumov’s apartment, Raskolnikov has a “strange question: ‘Need I tell her who killed Lizaveta?’... In order not to reason and suffer any longer, he quickly opened the door and looked at Sonya from the threshold... She hurriedly rose and went to meet him, as if she had been waiting for him (Dostoevsky, 1993: 406). ‘What would have happened to me without you!’” He is her salvation, as she is to become his. He confesses to her.

Sonya produces her two crosses, cypress and, Lizaveta’s, brass—wood and metal the

elements of his fake pledge, a delirious double—at which point there’s a knock on her door, and it is Lebezyatnikov (Dostoevsky, 1993: 422).

At Raskolnikov’s room, “suddenly the door opened and Avdotya Romanovna came in. She stopped first and looked at him from the threshold, as he had done earlier at Sonya’s” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 425). Dunya and Sonya are not the same yet nevertheless have become equivalences or doubles, substitutes for each other.

In an ominous way, Svidrigailov insinuates that he’s been eavesdropping through the door connecting Sonya’s room to the adjacent one and so has overheard Raskolnikov’s murder confession (Dostoevsky, 1993: 436).

Following a priest into Sonya’s apartment, Raskolnikov stops in the doorway, and a service for Katerina Ivanovna begins; he stands in the doorway through the entire service, as if he must witness from a non-committal distance (Dostoevsky, 1993: 441).

Having decided to “finish with Svidrigailov,” he is about to leave his room, “But no sooner had he opened the door to the entryway when he ran into Porfiry himself... The denouement perhaps!” says Raskolnikov (Dostoevsky, 1993: 448).

Porfiry mentions that he’d been by to see Raskolnikov two evenings before. “I came up, the door was wide open; I looked around, waited, and didn’t even tell the maid—just went away. You don’t lock your place?” a question that points directly to the sense in which Raskolnikov has left himself wide open to the talents of Porfiry Petrovich (Dostoevsky, 1993: 449).

“Well so much for being delicate!” says Svidrigailov, to which Raskolnikov responds, “And eavesdropping at doors!” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 484). Svidrigailov says, “But if you’re convinced that one cannot eavesdrop at doors, but can go around whacking old crones with whatever comes to hand, at your heart’s content, then leave quickly for America somewhere!” The two arrive at Sonya’s door, but she is not home (Dostoevsky, 1993: 485). Svidrigailov shows Dunya the door through which he had eavesdropped on Sonya and Raskolnikov (Dostoevsky, 1993: 488), and when Dunya tries to leave the room, she discovers that Svidrigailov has locked the door, exit blocked (Dostoevsky, 1993: 492). She implores him to unlock it. Trapped, she pulls Marfa Petovna’s pistol on him. She misses, he pulls out the key, she unlocks the door and flees (Dostoevsky, 1993: 494).

Having visited his mother, Raskolnikov walks out the door, perhaps never to see her again (Dostoevsky, 1993: 516). Opening the door to his own room, he finds Dunya sitting there. He stops in the threshold, and sees that she knows everything.

Finally, Raskolnikov tells Sonya, “I’ve come for your crosses... You’re the one who was sending me to the crossroads.” She hangs the cypress cross around his neck, and he remarks, “So this is a symbol of my taking a cross upon myself... !” (Dostoevsky, 1993: 522). This is the transition to and condition of his confession, and thus by extension the prospect of a new life.

### 3. *An other threshold*

The set of thresholds, doorways, and passageways I have marked or isolated constitutes a complex metonymic formation and helps to support a *second*, even more openly metaphorical and ultimately ambiguous threshold or passageway, the one the entire novel is “about” or

ambiguously displays, the possibility of crossing from sin to salvation, from death to life, and from solitude to Sonya. The very title of *Crime and Punishment* succinctly captures the inevitability and necessity of this more open, raw, “existential” type of threshold, and Siberia is the penultimate passageway for Raskolnikov, who until the epilogue would like to wait at the threshold of existence until life is finally shaped such that he is able to pass beyond, into “a new story,” the story possibly passing beyond itself, which is to say that Dostoevsky’s novel might have what appears to be a conclusion but that it does not really end.

## REFERENCES

Dostoevsky, F. (1993). *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Vintage.