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Preston Sturges’ Sullivan’s Travels and Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment

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Preston Sturges’ Sullivan’s Travels:
A Comic Inversion of Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment.
Priscilla Meyer

Sullivan’s Travels has been called “episodic” and “unconnected,” lacking in “narrative cohesion.” But if viewed through the lens of Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment, the system underlying the scenes becomes clear. Sturges motivates the miniature parodies of Hollywood genres, as well as the very concept of his film, by infusing them with significance borrowed from Dostoevsky’s novel. Concerned with addressing the needs of a broad audience in a meaningful way, Sturges turns to the master of the philosophical thriller, and incorporates Crime and Punishment into the weave of his film. The characters, the plot, and the very motif structure of Crime and Punishment are concealed in Sullivan’s Travels in order to consider the moral role of the Hollywood film.

A central question sets the plot of Sullivan’s Travels in motion and is resolved in the final scene: what response should art make to human suffering? As a movie director with a conscience, the hero John L. Sullivan feels responsible to the masses of the unemployed to make a powerful social statement; he wants to film a novel called O Brother Where Art Thou. The pseudo-biblical tone of the title and Sully’s naïve arguments to his producers parody sentimental do-goodism. The simplistic allegorical interpretation of the two men wrestling on the speeding train in Sully’s pilot film as “capitalism struggling with socialism,” as well as Sully’s talk of “the potentialities of film as the sociological and artistic medium it is” and of “holding a mirror up to life” make fun of the (deeply Russian) idea of using art to change society. By having Sully exclaim “This film is an answer to Communism”, Sturges parodies the Socialist-Realist view of art as propaganda. Sturges rejects the Soviet view of art that was first endorsed by Chernyshevsky and his fellow utilitarian “radical” critics of the 1860s; instead he adopts the method of Dostoevsky, who polemicized with Chernyshevsky not only over socialism but over aesthetics, rejecting the very idea that art is a “mirror of life.”

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In *Sullivan’s Travels*, Sturges solves the dilemma of how to incorporate important social questions into popular forms without resorting to the cheap devices Sully’s producers insist on. *Sullivan’s Travels* has been called “a comedy, yet darkly tragic in its third act.” Actually, it is both comic and tragic throughout, an effective synthesis of the aesthetics of high culture, the issue of social conscience, and the forms of popular appeal. *Sullivan’s Travels* is conceived as a detailed comic inversion of Dostoevsky’s own “answer to Communism,” *Crime and Punishment*.

Sturges is known to have been interested in Russian literature. Gogol’s *Government Inspector* has been recognized as a subtext for *Hail the Conquering Hero*, and Sturges cited Tolstoy’s ideas about art in discussing *Sullivan’s Travels* “Art, Tolstoy said, is a medium for the transmission of emotions” (Curtis, p. 157). Dostoevsky’s work specifically addresses the dilemma Sturges faced: presenting serious problems in emotionally intense dramatized form accessible to all. In *Crime and Punishment* the nature of man and the problem of conscience are cloaked in the popular form of a crime thriller. In the same way, then, Sturges explores his own problem of conscience as a movie maker as well as the nature of man in the popular form of a Hollywood comedy. *Crime and Punishment* is about a murderer, a prostitute, an unemployed alcoholic, and a suicide, “but with a little sex,” as Sully’s producers insist. Scenes of tragic poverty and human wileness involve us dramatically in what turns out to be the tale of the hero Raskolnikov’s spiritual death and rebirth through Christian love and faith.

An analysis of the precise use Sturges makes of Dostoevsky’s novel reveals Sturges’ careful and deep reading of *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov kills an old lady, and incidentally her sister too, by hitting them over the head with an axe. He is confused about his motivation, but we come to understand that the materialist philosophy and the socialistic ideas current in Russian university circles in the 1860s make Raskolnikov test himself to see if he is a “Napoleon,” a superman capable of transcending the laws that bind “ordinary” people. “Social ideas” lead him away from his true, compassionate nature by playing on his pride in his intellectual powers to the exclusion of his essential humane impulses.

Sully is a comic combination of similar problems: “social” ideas divert him from his true gift as a comic director through his naïve arrogance; first he thinks he understands suffering enough to make a film about it, and later he believes he has experienced suffering by sleeping in box cars and going hungry for a few days (“The greatest sacrifice ever made by man!” as his PR man says). Sully also fails to see the condescension and futility of handing out one thousand five-dollar bills to random victims of hopeless poverty. It is a failure of understanding of social problems as well as a failure of compas-sion—an arrogance born of naïveté. But just as Raskolnikov’s crime sets him on the path to redemption by “taking suffering upon himself;” by setting out in his bum’s disguise Sully eventually can experience a figurative death and rebirth.

Raskolnikov’s eventual resurrection is made possible by Sonya whose name comes from the Greek for “divine wisdom.” Although circumstances have forced her into prostitution, the purity of her spirit is untouched by her physical degradation. Raskolnikov meets her through her father whom he encounters in a tavern. Sturges abbreviates this; Sully meets The Girl (her namelessness gives her a symbolic dimension) in a diner. She is an aspiring actress, and there is a suggestion that she may have been forced to prostitute herself to directors while trying for a part. Like Sonya, she is pale, thin, blond—almost ethereal. The Girl’s origins—family, home town—remain mysterious; she barely exists in the real world.

In Sonya Dostoevsky concentrates the redemptive spiritual values of his novel: the compassion for suffering humanity represented by Christian faith. The Girl similarly represents the values of *Sullivan’s Travels*, as is made clear in the sports car scene when she stubbornly endorses comedy despite Sully’s insistence on social significance:

**HE:** Don’t you think that people are allergic to comedies with death snarling at you from every corner?

**SHE:** No.

Like Sonya who is impervious to Raskolnikov’s rationalizations for his murder, The Girl rejects Sully’s arguments unhesitatingly. Her love of him and of comedy are the forces that win out and create the happy ending; that she represents the film’s ideals is underscored in the box car scene when he refuses to turn back. She says, “Gee I like that about you, you’re like the knights of old who used to ride around looking for trouble.” Like Sonya who follows Raskolnikov to Siberia, The Girl goes with Sully on his odyssey.

Both women maintain their strength and optimism in the face of their
men's sullen uncommunicativeness. Thus the spiritual power of the women is countered to the earthly power of the men; Raskolnikov murders to assert his power; Sully invokes his money and status. The Girl's power through her compassion is comically contrasted to Sully's influence in the film world when they meet and she buys him bacon and eggs; when he pities her failure to land a film role, she is indignant: "say, who's being sorry for who?" she exclaims. In both works, the women, though potentially sexually attractive, are explicitly desexualized to emphasize their spiritual aspect. Sonya's frail childlikeness contrasts painfully with the trappings of her trade, and Veronica Lake, understood ordinarily as a vamp, is turned into a boy in her bum's disguise which highlights her transparent skin and wispy other-world quality. The Girl is "not allowed even one passionate embrace with her handsome co-star" (Curtis, 157); Sully calls her "kid" and "sister." Just as the journey of Crime and Punishment is the gradual process of Raskolnikov's acceptance of Sonya's faith, Sullivan travels toward agreement with The Girl's love of comedy.

Sturges completes the analogy with a seemingly trivial sub-plot: Sully's wife is interested only in money, and victimizes him just as the pawnbroker takes advantage of Raskolnikov. When she thinks Sully dead, she marries his accountant on whose advice she'd been blackmailing him. But when the accountant tells her Sully is actually alive, she hits him over the head with a vase. Raskolnikov hit the pawnbroker over the head with an axe; the money-equals-power equation at the end of the novel is presented comically in this vignette in Sullivan's Travels. It is an important moment because with the first wife's remarriage, it becomes possible for Sully to marry The Girl. He can then exchange his black-haired, unloving, blackmailing ex-wife for the blonde Girl and her ideals at the end of the film, just as Raskolnikov renounces the idea of power through his crime and accepts Sonya's faith in the Epilogue of Crime and Punishment.

While Raskolnikov's axe murder of the pawnbroker is burlesqued and inverted by the blackmailer and the accountant, Sully's very different crime is suggested by clothing it in the circumstances of Raskolnikov's. The scene of Sully's first job as a bum begins with his chopping wood with an axe at the home of two sisters. As in Crime and Punishment in which the miserly widow dominates her unmarried sister, the lustful widow dominates her spinster sister. After Raskolnikov's murder, he has trouble sneaking out of the upstairs apartment, watching in horror as the latch he's bolted on the inside jumps up and down and the doorbell rings insistently. Sully, trying to sneak out of his upstairs room, rattles the key in the lock unsuccessfully as the clock chimes.

But Sully's crime is not committed against the sisters, it is instead alluded to when they take him to the movies. The depressing scene is in clear opposition to the later climactic one of the prisoners laughing at the Pluto cartoon in church. Here the camera scans the audience's turgid response to a tearjerker, showing its universal lack of appeal—the young and the old and the lustful are all otherwise engaged. The titles of the triple bill, as we learn on exiting, are Beyond These Tears, The Buzzard of Berlin, and Valley of the Shadow. This last title's biblical allusion evokes O Brother Where art Thou; Sully's producers had protested "You want to make an epic about misery?" and, judging from the murky soundtrack which consists mainly of weeping, the film Sully and the sisters see is just that. Sully's crime then would be to throw away his gift for comedy that delighted The Girl in "Hey hey in the Hayloft" ("Of course it was stupid, but wonderful") to commit an atrocity like The Valley of the Shadow. The connection is established when Sully's PR man dictates in the land yacht: "Thus begins the journey into the valley of adversity," and the phrase that makes this connection is underlined when he explains "it's what you might call a parenthesis." The journey Sully intended and the film he might have made are parodied by the dreadful film he sees with the sisters.

Crime and Punishment is knit together by a web of motifs which function as a system of paired opposite meanings that mirror the oscillation in Raskolnikov between destructive and redemptive forces, Sturges picks out three of Dostoevsky's most central motifs—hay and horses, water, and wallpaper. In Raskolnikov's famous dream of the peasant beating the mare to death, Dostoevsky shows Raskolnikov's innate Christian compassion, his ability to reject the powerful role and sympathize with the victim. The analogous redemptive force in Sully is contained in his gift for comedy and is also linked to hay and horses. In Sully's successful film "Hey hey in the Hayloft" the hero "sneezes at a horse," and the horse sneezes at him. When Sully tries to escape the land yacht in the whipperet tank, he is helped by a horse pulling a cart load of hay which gets between him and his pursuers. When Raskolnikov approaches the scene of his impending crime, he is shielded by a passing hay cart:

just then, as though on purpose, a huge load of hay was passing through the gate, hiding him completely (80).

Hay also appears on the floor of the first box car Sully travels in. By fateful coincidence it is there he first encounters the bum who later steals his shoes and finally steals his money. A similar fateful coincidence pushes
Raskolnikov to commit his crime: he chances to find out when the pawnbroker will be home alone, and this happens in Haymarket Square. Thus Sturges links hay both to Sully's saving and his self-destructive impulses (represented by the comedy he has made and by his desire to abandon comedy), just as Dostoevsky shows Raskolnikov's alternation between compassionate (for the mare) and murderous (for the pawnbroker) impulses through hay and horses.

Water too carries the duality of Raskolnikov's conflict. It is linked to baptism, life and redemption on the one hand and to suicide on the other. At one point when Raskolnikov stops by the Neva,

the water was almost blue... the dome of the cathedral glittered marvelously... The marvelous view always left him with an unexplained chill; the extravagant panorama seemed to have a soul that was dead and dumb... (119)

Here Raskolnikov senses the potential of the divine. But in another scene by the Neva, Raskolnikov witnesses (from Resurrection Bridge) a woman's attempted suicide. She jumps into the Neva, and he thinks, "No, it's foul... the water... not worth it... I couldn't" (174). The alternation between these extremes of suicide and resurrection, of death of the flesh or life of the spirit, is resolved at the end of Crime and Punishment when Raskolnikov begins to accept Sonya's faith while gazing out across a river. In Sullivan's Travels, Sully's progress toward accepting his own comic gifts with The Girl's aid is also linked to water. When The Girl first comes to Sully's Hollywood home and realizes he's only been masquerading as a bum, she pushes him into the swimming pool, beginning a process which reaches its climax in the swamp waters where Sully works on the chain gang. Between the comic and the tragic water scenes is a neutral lyrical one when Sully and The Girl pause on their wanderings by a lake, a scene that has no plot function but provides the Sully-Girl-water-redemption association emblematically.

In Crime and Punishment, the dirty water of the Petersburg canals is linked to suicide; and as we have seen, Raskolnikov himself contemplates suicide. But with Sonya's aid he is able to choose the path to resurrection. His "evil double" Svidrigailov, however, takes the alternate path. Having no faith or love, he commits suicide. He first considers the same method Raskolnikov has rejected:

Svidrigailov crossed the Tuchkov Bridge... For a moment with a kind of special, questioning curiosity he looked at the dark waters of the Little Neva (484)

But he walks on and comes to a wooden hotel where he rents a room "with worn out wallpaper, the yellowish color of which could still be distinguished, but so dusty and shredded the pattern had disappeared" (485). There is no pattern or meaning in Svidrigailov's life; he goes out into the rain and shoots himself in the temple. But Raskolnikov ultimately makes another choice, rejecting the murder of the pawnbroker for the divine wisdom of Sonya. Dostoevsky underscores this meaningful pattern through the motif of wallpaper. Like Svidrigailov's hotel room, Raskolnikov's room (which his mother calls a "coffin") has "dusty yellow wallpaper" (37), and the two women representing the way of death and the way of life are also connected by the motif of wallpaper: the pawnbroker's room has yellow wallpaper (17) and Sonya's room has "yellowish, stained, shabby wallpaper" (309).

Sturges alludes to this entire complex of ideas in a brilliant quick comic exchange between Sully and The Girl. They are driving in his sportscar and she still thinks he's a "washed up" director:

"A man that had the room ahead of me, he was always going to make a come-back. Then one day he shot himself instead. They had to repaper the room. You would never do a thing like that, would you?"

"Not on your wallpaper."

The director who shot himself lived in the same room as the Girl: Svidrigailov lived in the rented room next to Sonya's. The movie director, Sully's "double," gives up in despair like Svidrigailov, while Sully, like Raskolnikov, perseveres in his suffering and gains new purpose. And just as Dostoevsky uses wallpaper to link the nature of the characters' rooms to their spiritual states, Sturges uses it as the point of contrast between the suicide and Sully. The conflict and guilt in Raskolnikov cause him to be feverish and delirious throughout the novel as he oscillates between opposing impulses. Sully echoes this oscillation as he keeps returning unwittingly to Hollywood or to the land yacht, finally in a feverish and delirious state. In bed he rants about "universal law," Raskolnikov's idée fixe.

"Maybe there's a universal law that says 'stay put!' As you are so shall you remain... / tramps violate the law of nature..."

Raskolnikov, who is mistaken for a tramp because of his ragged clothes, wants to prove that he is a "Napoleon," repeatedly asserting that "some law of nature" (260; 271) determines when extraordinary men are born. Sully inverts this quest, seeking to lose his worldly power.
Sully finally succeeds in his quest when the bum knocks him out, steals his money and shoves him into a box car. His "powerful" identity dies figuratively in the form of the bum, who has his identification cards hidden in the soles of the boots he stole in an earlier scene. The bum is killed by a train while scrambling to pick up his stolen booty from the tracks. In this way Sully is carried off unconscious in the box car finally stripped of all he sought to discard, and only then begins to experience true suffering. He becomes "Richard Roe," a legal name for Everyman which incidentally shares initials with Rodion Raskolnikov, after he is sentenced for assassinating a train yard watchman. Like Raskolnikov, Sully is judged to have committed his crime in a state of "temporary insanity," and sentenced to hard labor in prison.

Raskolnikov is unrepentant in prison, keeping aloof from the other prisoners who dislike him. He maintains the "Napoleonic" attitude that allowed him to take human life, cutting himself off from his fellow sufferers. Sully acts similarly, insisting "but I'm a movie director! They don't put movie directors in prison for six years! Don't I look like a movie director?" to which his warden answers, "we had a guy here thought he was Lindberg—he'd fly away every night but he was always back in the morning." Sturges uses flying in a comic parallel to Raskolnikov's attempt to "rise above" the ordinary.

Sully at last discovers his community with ordinary folk in the famous scene of the prisoners laughing at the cartoons. When Sully joins in the laughter he realizes what simple human essence he shares with these "lowest of the low." Though laughter he becomes capable of resurrection; it is important that the cartoons are shown in church. Dostoevsky understood the essence of Christianity as brotherly compassion; Sturges emphasizes the black "brothers' and sisters'" pity for the chain gang through their pastor's admonition. Raskolnikov's catharsis also takes place in prison when he is finally able to accept Sonya's Christian compassion. Sturges suggests by analogy that laughter is part of our higher nature and is therefore an important part of what unites the movie maker with his audience.

Raskolnikov becomes capable of redemption when he finally accepts man's divine nature, thereby renouncing his theory of the extraordinary man. Only then can he believe that he was morally wrong to kill the pawnbroker and begin to expiate his crime. Though earlier troubled by conscience, he had continued to view her with contempt. "I killed a louse," he insists, forgetting that life was not created by man and is not his to dispose of. Raskolnikov says to Sonya, "It wasn't the old lady I killed, I killed myself!"

Sully undergoes a mock death when the bum's corpse is mistaken for his. Sully rises from the dead when he accepts guilt for the murder of "himself." Sully realizes how to get himself out of prison, how to resurrect himself from the dead. Wading through the swamp waters where his chain gang is working, he yells "My conscience has got me! I want to confess! I'm a murderer! I killed!" Raskolnikov's epiphany occurs while he is at hard labor near the bank of a river in Siberia; in keeping with the redemptive water images throughout the novel, his true admission of guilt necessitates accepting the existence of man's immortal soul, symbolically represented in Crime and Punishment by the biblical tale of the raising of Lazarus.

The happy ending of Sullivan's Travels takes place in the sky—on a plane back to California—a comic allusion to Raskolnikov's new faith in God. Both heroes have yet to perform the great deeds that will redeem them from the sin of pride that cut them off from their fellow man. Dostoevsky, who in his Diary of a Writer suggests that he committed a similar sin of pride while he himself was in prison in Siberia, perhaps redeems himself through his novels which he made so accessible to a wide readership through the devices of melodrama. In Sullivan's Travels, Sturges represents his own moral dilemma in Sully's how can he come to terms with what seems a frivolous activity—making comedies in Hollywood—at a time of crisis? Sturges addresses his own conscience through his clearly autobiographical hero, considering what the appropriate response of film to human suffering should be. He concludes that his art can help man to transcend suffering best through laughter, and so writes a comic inversion of Crime and Punishment. But while emphasizing popular comedy, Sturges preserves Dostoevsky's spiritual concerns and the potential of a deeper reading contained in the popular form; he gives his comedy spiritual and artistic depth. Sturges answers his own parodied question—O Brother where Art Thou?—in Sullivan's Travels by showing us that he is not merely the Toscanini of the pratfall but its Dostoevsky.

NOTES