Crime and Punishment

2011: In a novel by William Styron, a father tells his son that life "is a search for justice." Choose a character from a novel or play who responds in some significant way to justice or injustice. Then write a well-developed essay in which you analyze the character's understanding of justice, the degree to which the character's search for justice is successful, and the significance of this search for the work as a whole. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Student response:

Throughout Crime and Punishment, by Fyodor Dostoevsky, the main character Raskolnikov attempts to understand justice in his own terms. In order to prove his theories on justice, Raskolnikov commits murder, the consequences of which evolve his philosophies throughout the rest of the novel. Using Raskolnikov's "search for justice," Dostoevsky suggests that one can experience the effects of all levels of justice, but in the end God is the supreme judge of one's actions.

When the novel begins, Raskolnikov is a former university student (too poor to continue his studies), placed in a situation that he considers unjust. He has barely enough money to survive in the city of St. Petersburg and has begun to think of a way to solve this problem. Prior to the novel's opening, he had written an article about the "extraordinary" being exempt from society's laws in order to achieve "greater aims." Raskolnikov uses this notion to justify the idea of killing an old pawnbroker and stealing her money for himself, labeling her "a louse" and considering himself "the greater good." Using his own concept of justice, Raskolnikov commits the murder (which ends up being a double murder). His theory is immediately discredited when he feels an overwhelming sense of guilt that manifests itself both mentally and physically. His experiment with self-determination of justice ultimately fails.

The next embodiment of justice that Raskolnikov encounters is that of the law, which he originally considered himself above. Porfiry personifies lawful justice as he toys with Raskolnikov throughout the novel, trying to prove him guilty of murder. After reading Raskolnikov's article, Porfiry claims that "no man is above the law," and that Raskolnikov is definitely no "Napoleon." Porfiry uses Raskolnikov's mental instability against him, driving the criminal even closer to insanity once he knows he's been discovered. Finally, when Raskolnikov gives himself up to the legal system, the court punishes him with an eight-year prison sentence, proving that law is an inescapable system of justice. However, this justice does nothing to urge Raskolnikov to repent for his crime.

The most gradual source of justice Raskolnikov encounters is the justice of God. From the beginning, Raskolnikov claims to not be religious. He even scoffs at people who are, such as his mother and Sonya. Once he commits his murder, a symbol of his disregard for God is his throwing down of the cross on his victim's chest; he forsakes the one source of justice that can offer redemption. However, later in the novel he becomes inspired by Sonya's piety. He chooses to confess his crime to her, and since she is the most religious character in the novel, this is symbolic of him confessing his sins to God. She convinces Raskolnikov to turn himself in, and when he is sent to prison, she doesn't forsake him. Sonya follows him and is constantly present, just as are the eyes and love of God. When Raskolnikov has his epiphany about Sonya's love in
prison, he decides to put forth effort into pursuing her religious habits. He is one step closer to accepting the ultimate justice of God that does punish but also forgives.

Raskolnikov's search for justice involves three main stages. The first represents failure because he realizes his own sense of justice cannot be used as an excuse for what society deems unacceptable. The second stage with legal justice deals out the punishment that Raskolnikov deserves but has zero respect for. Raskolnikov embarks on the third stage by being willing to accept God and learn about the Christian sense of justice. This final step symbolizes ultimate justice because real justice should not only punish but also redeem the criminal.