Crime and Punishment

2004 (Form B): The most important themes in literature are sometimes developed in scenes in which a death or deaths take place. Choose a novel or play and write a well-organized essay in which you show how a specific death scene helps to illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole. Avoid mere plot summary.

Student response:

Throughout Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov constantly struggles between two ideologies: utilitarianism and instinct. Persuaded by the intellectual scene of his time and motivated by utilitarian profit and logic, Raskolnikov concludes himself entitled to kill an old pawnbroker, a "louse" of society. However, during the murder itself, Raskolnikov's convulsive, hysteric disposition exhibits Dostoevsky's idea that cold, utilitarian, nihilistic logic is incompatible with human nature.

Throughout Raskolnikov's education and even his disillusioned meanderings through St. Petersburg, Raskolnikov is immersed in the fad of utilitarianism; this very ideology is what enables him to conclude that the murder is a justifiable, even righteous act. When Raskolnikov walks into a bar, he overhears a couple of men complaining about the old pawnbroker, calling her a "louse" and claiming that society would be better off without her. By overhearing this conversation, Raskolnikov is pushed in the direction of concluding likewise. Furthermore, the lack of empathy in the men's conversation influences Raskolnikov to disregard empathy when he receives a letter from his mother stating that his sister Dunya has essentially made herself Luzhin's "concubine" in the hopes of landing Raskolnikov a job. Raskolnikov is outraged. Applying the utilitarianism gathered from what was happening in St. Petersburg at the time, Raskolnikov concludes that his sister's suffering would outweigh the pawnbroker's if he didn't kill the pawnbroker. Lastly, as a student immersed in the intellectual facade of the city, Raskolnikov's utilitarian leanings are enabled by his study at the university. Raskolnikov exhibits his commitment to the new order of thinking in his psychological paper, which justifies murder on the grounds of social empowerment. Immersed in utilitarianism and nihilism, Raskolnikov concludes that killing the pawnbroker is not only tolerable and inconsequential, but also righteous and profitable.

However, once Raskolnikov commences his murder, his very nature as a human being betrays the course of logic, and he instead panics with guilt and fear at the prospect of killing. From the moment of his knocking on the woman's door, Raskolnikov cannot help but show his discontent nature, despite the logical coherence of the deed. His entry into the pawnbroker's apartment and his painfully awkward banter with her exemplify just how uneasy he is. This uneasiness shows how difficult the application of nihilistic principles really is. Later on, once the murder is done, Raskolnikov runs about the flat for several minutes in a frenzy, indecisive over what to do next. When he finally snags the woman's purse, he does not even bother to open it. Theoretically, a worthy nihilist should have been able to pocket the profit of the murder and been on his way, but Raskolnikov shows that when such a philosophy is actually applied to a person's actions, his very nature disrupts it: Raskolnikov simply couldn't execute the murder and pillage in a calm way because such acts are simply impossible for a human to do, despite their logical appeal.
Raskolnikov's struggle between nihilism and common empathy symbolizes the broader philosophical struggle occurring across Russia during Dostoevsky's time. Although initially convinced that, as an intelligent man, he ought to take up the logic and sense of nihilistic action, Raskolnikov practically unravels as soon as he starts to. Through Raskolnikov's tragic estrangement and internal turmoil, Dostoevsky casts a somber prophecy of what will happen if Russia itself adopts principles of nihilism, as poor Raskolnikov did.