

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

(1821-1881)

Works (major novels)

The Double, 1846

Poor Folks, 1846

The house of the dead, 1861

Notes from Underground, 1864

Crime and Punishment, 1866

The Gambler, 1867

The Idiot, 1869

The Possessed, 1872

The Brothers Karamazov, 1880

Biography

Dostoevsky was the second of six children. His father was an alcoholic, and a retired military surgeon. Dostoevsky was brought up in one of the poorest and most socially wretched sections of Moscow—near to where his father practiced—and despite his parents' protests spent as much time as he could wandering the hospital grounds, and talking with the patients, as they sat in the sun.

After Fyodor's mother died of TB, in 1837, Dostoevsky and his brother were sent to the Military Engineering Academy in St. Petersburg. Fyodor's father died in 1839, murdered by his serfs, according to one (quite questionable) rumor. By the age of nine, Fyodor showed symptoms of epilepsy, which would plague him throughout his life.

At the Military Engineering Academy, Dostoevsky particularly delighted in studies of literature, admiring the works of Shakespeare, Pascal, and Hugo, and writing two plays in Romantic style—with an eye to the manner of the German dramatist Schiller. In retrospect, Dostoevsky describes himself as having been a 'dreamer' in those years.

In 1842, after having left the Academy, Dostoevsky was made a lieutenant, and worked, on the side, at a translation of Balzac into Russian. He began to write fiction of his own in 1844. In 1845 he enjoyed his first literary success, with the publication of an epistolary novel, *Poor Folk*; with the book publication of the work, in the following year, Dostoevsky became a twenty-four year old literary celebrity.

In 1849 Dostoevsky was arrested on charges of belonging to the liberal political group called the Petrashevsky Circle, and he paid the price for Tsar Nicholas I's crackdown on anything like dissent in Russia. Fyodor and other members of the Circle were sentenced to death, and made to live through a mock execution before being sent off to Siberia (Omsk) on a four-year sentence of exile.

Dostoevsky was released from prison in 1854, having suffered the intolerable rigors of four Siberian winters under filthy confinement. Upon release Dostoevsky was obliged to enlist in the Siberian Regiment, where he served for five years (in present day Kazakhstan), marrying in 1857.

In 1860 Dostoevsky returned to St. Petersburg, where he started, then had to abandon a couple of literary magazines. At this period he lost his wife and brother to death, accumulated heavy debts at the gambling table, and fell into a terrible depression. His debts drove him to feats of dreadful creativity, like completing the master novel *Crime and Punishment* at lightning speed, in order to earn quick cash.

Deep in the hole, sunk in depression, Dostoevsky decided to travel to Europe—to escape his creditors in Russia, and to visit the western casinos. After some unsuccessful romantic efforts, he married again, in 1867, and scored; with the love and help of his second wife, he worked his way through the two major fictional achievements of his life, *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. He also founded and edited an extremely successful literary journal, *The Writer's Diary*.

In his last years, Dostoevsky gave occasional public addresses. He lived at the resort of Staraya Russa, near St. Petersburg, and died on February 9, 1881. He was buried in the Tikhvin Cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery, in St. Petersburg.

Achievements

Existential. Dostoevsky's work is frequently associated with the development of the philosophy of Existentialism, which flourished in the thinking of Sartre and Heidegger. *Notes from Underground* (1864) is an inquiry into the anxieties and dreads of the little man faced with the perplexity of the modern urban condition, and without guidance in the conduct of daily life; pure existentialism.

Polyphonic. Dostoevsky's fictional narratives move the reader vigorously from one area to another of the fictional landscape. In *The Brothers Karamazov* we experience this vertiginous technique, as we rapidly move from one to another of the mindscapes of the major characters. This narrative kinetics was to play out boldly in twentieth century fiction.

Neurosis. In *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky takes us into the mind of a psychopath for whom, at a certain stage in his development, another person cannot seem to deserve life. Raskolnikov's murder of the old lady, which launches the narrative, is an expression of gratuitous contempt, which passes through horror and terror, to emerge in psychological salvation. Dostoevsky picks up on a rare narrative daring, perhaps heralded for him in the mindsets of ancient Greek characters like Clytemnestra or Orestes.

Theological. In prolonged discourse, like Ivan Karamazov's *Grand Inquisitor* poem, for his brother Alyosha, Dostoevsky makes clear and dramatic the issues involved in serious thought about the principles of orthodox Christianity. Would Jesus Christ be put to death, if he returned today, as he was when he 'walked the earth?' Would the church ever be able to serve as an adequate representative of Christ on earth?

Themes

Suicide. As an analyst of extreme psychological conditions, and a fan of Gothic fictions and mind sets, Dostoevsky is naturally drawn to consider the meanings of suicide. From Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, to Prince Myshkin, in the *Idiot*, the issue of self-annihilation is present just behind the scenes. Dostoevsky's omnipresent querying of the value of life, his Existentialism, is part and parcel of his concern with suicide.

Holy innocence. Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, typifies the Dostoevskyan 'hero' who is cruelly indifferent to another's existence, who will murder that existence, yet who will at the same time have potential as a 'loving child of god.' (He is ultimately 'redeemed.') Alexei and Father Zosima, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, both burn with holy simplicity, and yet place themselves where they can understand all the evil in the world.

Poverty. From the time of his own early writing, in *Poor Folks*, 1846, Dostoevsky is deeply compassionate toward poverty. (His exposure to the dark street sides of Moscow, as a youngster, haunted his entire life; *Notes from Underground* is searing testimony to this writer's human openness.) His personal awareness of filth and degradation, as they swarm over poverty, is at its keenest in his commentaries on his personal prison exile in Siberia.

Humanism. The human is the central theme of all Dostoevsky's writing. Nature and society are of course the settings, but the sufferings, anxieties, dreams, and longings of the characters are the heart of the work. The kind of immense historical canvas, that Tolstoy painted in *War and Peace*, is alien to the existential turn in Dostoevsky.

Characters

In two massive novels, Dostoyevsky mirrors back against himself his staggering understandings of human passion, nastiness, and redeeming love. Nowhere does he go farther than in *The Brothers Karamazov*, to deepen himself through his own creation. In that novel, three brothers represent what (in a loose way) could be taken to represent three faces of the author himself: the humble man of faith (**Alyosha**); the unstable but brilliant religious visionary (**Ivan**); and the passionate, earthly **Dmitri**, capable equally of love and murder. Any such mirror-back listing would particularly need the inclusion of **Father Zosima**, the saintly priest who presides over the spirituality of the Karamazov family. **Grushenka**, the femme fatale who both seduces the family by her beauty and brilliance, and herself sees the brilliant baseness of the males, simply reinforces our awe at Dostoyevsky's sensitivity to the whole human situation.

In his other great novel, *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky counterposes two characters able to go to the ultimate levels of their love, though it took a brutal act of hatred to generate their discovery of one another and of their spiritual potential. **Raskolnikov** kills an old lady because she is scum, is sent to Siberia in exile, and is followed there by the saintly woman, **Sonya**, who will stick with him to the end and redeem him through love. As in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky blends, in *Crime and Punishment*, a deep understanding both of hatred and of the love that hatred gains its meaning from.

Dostoyevsky learned from himself, in creating characters of a sensitive gentleness: one could include, in this group, such figures as the narrator in *The Christmas Tree and the Wedding*, who watches with amazement the financial greed of **Julian Mastakovitch**, or **Prince Myshkin** in *The Idiot*, whose almost unworldly kindness of spirit raised people around him, and taught them love.