

Fyodor Dostoevsky - his life

The Russian writer Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born in the Hospital for the poor in Moscow on October 30, 1821. He was to be the second of seven children. His childhood has been described by himself as happy and peaceful where he held particular warm feelings towards his two older siblings Misya and Varenka. Other sources put weight on the despotic father. It is said that the father, a physicist who had retired to his estate in the province of Tula, was murdered by his own serfs in 1839 because of his hot temperedness and irritable state of mind. The mother, on the other hand, is described as tender and sensitive with a literary and musical talent. She died in 1837 when young Fyodor was only fifteen years old.

In 1831 Fyodor and his brother Mikhail (1820-1864) were sent to boarding schools in Moscow. After the death of their mother in 1837 they started preparatory school in St. Petersburg. Then, in 1838, Fyodor was admitted to St. Petersburg's Academy of Military Engineers, leaving Misya behind. Our hero graduated in 1843 from the Academy as lieutenant, and was assigned to a military department in St. Petersburg where he worked for a year.

Dostoevsky soon realized that working in a department gave no creative satisfaction. He wanted to write and work as an author. His new career started by translating Honore de Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet* in 1843 and George Sand's *La derniere Aldini* in 1844. Now he also started on his first novel, *Poor Folk*, which was published in 1846. Up to the point of his arrest in 1849, Dostoevsky published amongst other works, *The Double*, *A Strange Wife*, *A Faint Heart* and *The Jealous Husband*. At this time he was also acquainted with the utopian socialist M. V. Butashevich-Petrashevsky and Dostoevsky seems to have been one of the strongmen in the Petrashevsky group. This association got him four years in Siberian prison.

By 1857 things started to look better. February 6 Dostoevsky married the widow Maria Dmitrievna Isaeva and two months later regained his rights of a nobleman. In August *The Small Hero* was published, he was released from army service in March 1858 and was allowed to return to St. Petersburg in December. In 1862 he made his first trip abroad to Germany, England, Switzerland, and Italy. He started an affair with the young student Apollinaria Suslova which he regarded as his intellectual equal - apart from being a good looking woman who followed her passions... Dostoevsky also started the review *Time* which published *The Insulted and the Injured* and *A Silly Story* in 1861.

The period of relative prosperity and happiness stopped abruptly in 1864 when first Dostoevsky's wife Maria Dmitrievna, and then brother Mikhail, died. A further blow was when Apollinaria Suslova declined his marriage proposal in 1865. Dostoevsky was all alone, left with his brother's debts. He now resorted to gambling as a way out from his economical difficulties, but to no avail of course. He also signed a slave contract with a publisher for a new novel. As time went by, and running out, he had to hire a stenographer in order to get the novel ready in time. That stenographer was the nineteen year old Anna Grigorievna Snitkina. Together they worked hard for a month and the same day the contract expired out Dostoevsky delivered the manuscript for *The Gambler* to the publisher. Had he not done so, the

publisher would have gained the rights to Dostoevsky's work. Intense work then transformed into intense love and Fyodor asked Anna to marry him. She accepted and the wedding took place on February 15, 1867.

Except for the last ten years, the Dostoevsky family suffered from economical difficulties caused by brother Mikhail's debts, the always begging step-son Pavel (from the marriage with Isaeva) and Fyodor's gambling spree. But they always seemed to manage and things got better after the publishing of *The Devils* in 1871-1872. They also were extremely unlucky regarding their three children. Sofia was born in Geneva in 1868, but lived for only three months. The next year, in Dresden, the daughter Lyubov was born. She had a nervous breakdown when her father died and never recovered. The relation between her and Anna was thereafter tense. In 1875 Aleksey was born, but met death three years later in fever. Dostoevsky was supposedly a good father, a modern husband for his time; a house rule was that at dinner they never talked about things that the children wouldn't understand.

The last years of his life, Dostoevsky finally saw both artistic and economical success coming his way. In 1879 he began publishing *The Brothers Karamazov* in *The Russian Messenger* which received great reviews, and Anna started to sell books in the countryside. Dostoevsky also gained reputation as a speaker and gave lectures which the listeners enjoyed greatly. But his health was never good and deteriorated even further in 1880. Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky died in the evening of January 28, 1881. He was buried in the cemetery of Alexander Nevsky Monastery.

Crime and Punishment

by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

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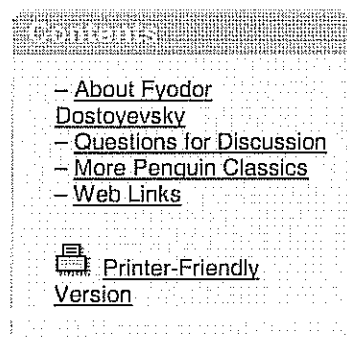
INTRODUCTION

When Dostoyevsky started work on *Crime and Punishment* in the summer of 1865 he was depressed and in serious financial straits. A recent gambling spree had depleted his savings, and he owed money for personal expenses as well as bills for *Epokha*, the journal he founded and had been forced to discontinue. Threatened with debtors' prison, he was approached by an unscrupulous publisher who offered a ridiculously exploitative contract under which Dostoyevsky signed over the copyrights to all his existing works and agreed to write a work of fiction by the end of the following year. For all this he was paid the sum of three thousand rubles, most of which was quickly swallowed up by promissory notes; what little remained was squandered at the gaming tables. Destitute once again, Dostoyevsky forced himself to concentrate on his writing, and by that fall had conceived of the idea for a novel-length work about a family ruined by alcohol.

The roots of *Crime and Punishment* can be found in various episodes in Dostoyevsky's life. His original idea, a murderer's first-person confession, came to him during his prison term in Siberia – an experience that profoundly changed his political views and instilled in him a lifelong respect for order and authority. There is also evidence that he conceived of the Marmeladov family as the basis for a novel to be titled "The Drunkards," but which was never published. Finally, Dostoyevsky was reacting to the political climate in St. Petersburg, where the impulses of the revolution could be found in the nihilist and radical movements, which Dostoyevsky abhorred. Regardless of its origins, Dostoyevsky meant the novel to be as close to perfect as possible. He took extensive – now famous – notes regarding its structure, toying with different points of view, character, structure, plot, and a variety of thematic strains.

The efforts paid off. *Crime and Punishment* is a superbly plotted, brilliant character study of a man who is at once an everyman and as remarkable as any character ever written. It poses a simple question, "Can evil means justify honorable ends?" and answers it convincingly without didacticism or naiveté. Dostoyevsky intimates himself so closely with Roskolnikov's consciousness, and describes his turmoil and angst so precisely and exhaustively, that it is easy to forget that the events take place over the course of a mere two weeks. He encourages us to identify with Roskolnikov: the painstaking descriptions of the student's cramped, dingy quarters; the overpowering sights and sounds of a stifling afternoon on the streets of St. Petersburg; the excruciating tension of Porfiry's interrogation – all serve to place the reader at the heart of the action: Roskolnikov's fevered, tormented mind.

The murder itself is almost incidental to the novel; Dostoyevsky devotes no more than a few pages to describing its execution, although he details the painful vacillations that precede the incident and, of course, exposes every aspect of its aftermath. Similarly, Roskolnikov's punishment, in the literal sense, is put off until the epilogue, with his sentence – reduced to seven years due to the accused's apparent temporary insanity – to a Siberian labor camp. Thus Dostoyevsky brilliantly invites readers to put forth their own notions of *Crime and Punishment*, and engages us in an irresistible debate: Who is the real criminal? Marmeladov, for abandoning his family? Luzhin for exploiting Dunya? Svidrigailov for murdering his wife? Sonya for prostituting herself? The greedy pawnbroker whom Roskolnikov murdered? Or, to turn the question around: Who among us is not a criminal? Who among us has not attempted to impose his or her will on



the natural order? Furthermore, we are made to understand that Roskolnikov's true punishment is not the sentence imposed on him by the court of law, but that imposed on him by his own actions: the psychological and spiritual hell he has created for himself; the necessary sentence of isolation from his friends and family; the extreme wavering between wanting to confess his crime, and desperately hoping to get away with it. Compelled, ultimately, to confess his crime – and the confession scene is the only incident in which Roskolnikov actually admits to the crime – we feel that Roskolnikov has suffered sufficiently. Indeed, the epilogue with its abbreviated pace and narrative distance feels like a reprieve for the reader as well as for the criminal. Finally, in Siberia, Roskolnikov has found space.

The public reception of *Crime and Punishment* was enthusiastic – if a little stunned. There was much discussion about the novel's overwhelming power and rumors of people unable to finish it. Readers were shocked by Dostoyevsky's gruesome descriptions and enthralled by his use of dramatic tension. Perhaps the most virulent, and unexpected, criticism came from readers who felt that Dostoyevsky's portrait of the nihilist movement was an indictment of Russian youth and that its premise was inconceivable. For more than a century, critics have argued about the book's message: Is it a political novel? A tale of morality? A psychological study? A religious epic? As Peter McDuff points out in his Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition, interpretations may be more revealing of the critic than of the text. Whatever Dostoyevsky's purpose – political, moral, psychological, or religious (and most likely he meant to touch on each of these themes) – one thing is certain. In *Roskolnikov*, Dostoyevsky has created a man who is singular yet universal. He is someone with whom we can sympathize, empathize, and pity, even if we cannot relate to his actions. He is a character we will remember forever, and whose story will echo throughout history.

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ABOUT FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky was born in 1821 at a Moscow hospital where his father was employed as a doctor. The family was poor, but their descent from 17th-century nobility entitled them to own land and serfs. Dostoyevsky's mother, Maria, was loving and religious; his father, Mikhail, tended toward alcoholism and violence, and his cruel behavior toward the peasants on their small estate resulted in his murder when Fyodor was eighteen years old.

Fyodor was the second of eight children. He was particularly close to his younger sister, Varvara, whose unfortunate marriage may have inspired Dostoyevsky's portraits of both Dunya and Sonya. His older brother, Mikhail, shared Dostoyevsky's literary and journalistic interests as well as his early social ideals. Together they attended secondary schools in Moscow, then the military academy in St. Petersburg, followed by service in the Russian army.

Dostoyevsky broadened his education by reading extensively in an attempt to sharpen his literary skills. As a youth he read and admired writers of all nationalities, including Dickens, Hugo, and Zola, and imitated some of Russia's literary geniuses, particularly Gogol. He also began a tortured acquaintance with Turgenev, which was to continue throughout his life.

His first novel, *Poor Folk*, was published in 1846. This tale of a young clerk who falls haplessly in love with a woman he cannot possess led the literary lion Victor Belinsky to proclaim Dostoyevsky as the next Gogol. Dostoyevsky's entrance into St. Petersburg literary society had begun – but his celebrity status was quickly overshadowed by his somewhat obnoxious behavior. Eventually, Dostoyevsky found another group to join, this time a circle of intellectual socialists run by Mikhail Petrashevsky. Given the reactionary climate of the time, the Petrashevsky group's revolutionary ideas were both exciting and dangerous, and, although Dostoyevsky was far from being a revolutionary, his alignment with the faction brought him to the attention of the police. In 1849, he

and the rest of the Petrashevsky group were arrested for subversion. Dostoyevsky was imprisoned at the Peter and Paul Fortress where he and others were subject to a mock execution – an understandably traumatic experience which seems to have triggered an epileptic condition that would plague Dostoyevsky throughout his life. He spent the next five years at hard labor in Siberia, where his acquaintance with the criminal community would provide him with the themes, plots, and characters that distinguish many of his greatest works, including *Crime and Punishment*.

Dostoyevsky returned to St. Petersburg in 1859. The next decade was filled with emotional and physical turmoil. In 1864, the deaths of his wife, Maria, and his beloved brother, Mikhail, deepened his debt and drove him to gambling. He embarked on a doomed affair with Apollinaria Suslova, who vacillated between admiring and despising him. He also witnessed the dissolution of his literary journal and formed a disadvantageous relationship with an unscrupulous publisher. Yet the 1860s were also a period of great literary fervor, and in 1865, the publication of *Crime and Punishment* paved the way for a series of novels – including *The Idiot*, *The Devils*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* – that both reclaimed his position in Russia's pantheon of great living writers, and brought stability to his personal and financial affairs. He married his stenographer, Anna Grigorievna Snitkin, with whom he fathered four children, and established himself as a leading conservative who often spoke out against revolutionary activity. In June of 1880, Dostoyevsky attended a celebration of the great novelist, Pushkin, during which he delivered a speech in praise of the writer. His words were met with great adulation, and the event marked what was perhaps the highest point of public approbation Dostoyevsky would ever attain. Little more than six months later, on January 28, 1881, Dostoyevsky died of a lung hemorrhage. His funeral, attended by nearly thirty thousand mourners, was a national event.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) How does Dostoyevsky achieve and sustain the suspense in his novel? Which scenes strike you as being particularly suspenseful? How does he use description to enhance the turmoil in Roskolnikov's mind?
- 2) What role does chance play in the development of the novel? In which scenes does coincidence figure heavily in the outcome? Is Dostoyevsky interfering too much with the natural course of events in order to move his story along, or is he making a point about the randomness of life, free will, and divine intervention?
- 3) Compare the characters of Roskolnikov, Luzhin, and Svidrigailov. How is each of these men a "villain," and to what extent are they guilty? How does each man face his guilt, and how does each suffer for it?
- 4) Compare the major female characters: Sonya, Dunya, Katerina Ivanovna. Do you think they are well-rounded characters or stereotypes? How does each figure in Roskolnikov's actions?
- 5) Discuss the scene in which Roskolnikov meets Sonya in her room and he asks her to read the story of Lazarus. What makes this scene so effective? What does Roskolnikov mean when he tells Sonya she is "necessary" to him? (p. 388)
- 6) Later, in confessing the murder to Sonya, Roskolnikov claims, "Did I really kill the old woman? No, it was myself I killed... And as for the old woman, it was the Devil who killed her, not I." (p. 488) What does he mean by this? What motive does Roskolnikov give for his murder? Why does he confess to Sonya? Why doesn't the confession ease him of his inner torment?

7) Discuss Roskolnikov's theory of the ordinary versus the extraordinary man. What is Dostoyevsky's attitude toward this theory? Can you think of modern-day examples of this theory put into practice?

8) Does the fact that Roskolnikov never uses the money he stole from the pawnbroker make him less – or more – guilty? Why do you think he never recovers the stolen items or cash?

9) Why does Roskolnikov reject his family's and Razumikhin's attempts at solace and comfort? Why, when they are at their most loving, does he have feelings of hatred for them? What is Dostoyevsky saying about guilt and conscience?

10) Roskolnikov emerges as a dual character, capable of cruelty and compassion, deliberation and recklessness, and alternating between a desire for solitude and companionship. Why has Dostoyevsky created such a complex psychological portrait?