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On **Dostoevsky's**

# **Crime and Punishment**

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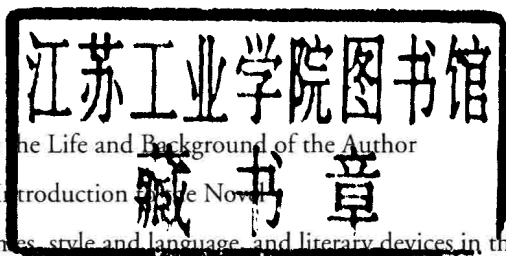
# CliffsNotes™

## Crime and Punishment

By James L. Roberts, Ph.D.

### IN THIS BOOK

- Learn about the Life and Background of the Author
- Preview an Introduction to the Novel
- Explore themes, style and language, and literary devices in the Critical Commentaries
- Delve into in-depth Character Analyses
- Gain an understanding of the novel with Critical Essays
- Reinforce what you learn with CliffsNotes Review
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## How to Use This Book

This CliffsNotes study guide on Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* supplements the original literary work, giving you background information about the author, an introduction to the work, a graphical character map, critical commentaries, expanded glossaries, and a comprehensive index, all for you to use as an educational tool that will allow you to better understand *Crime and Punishment*. This study guide was written with the assumption that you have read *Crime and Punishment*. Reading a literary work doesn't mean that you immediately grasp the major themes and devices used by the author; this study guide will help supplement your reading to be sure you get all you can from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. CliffsNotes Review tests your comprehension of the original text and reinforces learning with questions and answers, practice projects, and more. For further information on Dostoevsky and *Crime and Punishment*, check out the CliffsNotes Resource Center.

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# LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

**Personal Background .....2**

**Career Highlights .....3**

The following abbreviated biography of Dostoevsky is provided so that you might become more familiar with his life and the historical times that possibly influenced his writing. Read this Life and Background of the Author section and recall it when reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, thinking of any thematic relationship between Dostoevsky's novel and his life.

## Personal Background

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born in 1821, the second of seven children, and lived until 1881. His father, an army doctor attached to the staff of a public hospital, was a stern and self-righteous man while his mother was the opposite—passive, kind, and generous—and perhaps this fact accounts for Dostoevsky's filling his novels with characters who seem to possess opposite extremes of temperament.

Dostoevsky's early education was in an army engineering school, where he was apparently bored with the dull routine and the unimaginative student life. He spent most of his time, therefore, dabbling in literary matters and in reading the latest authors; his penchant for literature was obsessive. And almost as obsessive was Dostoevsky's preoccupation with death, for while the young student was away at school, his father was killed by the serfs on his estate. This sudden and savage murder smoldered within the young Dostoevsky, and when he began to write, the subject of crime, and murder in particular, was present in every new publication. It is, of course, the central concern of *Crime and Punishment*. Dostoevsky was never free of the horrors of homicide and even at the end of his life, he chose to write of another violent death—the death of a father—as the basis for *The Brothers Karamazov*.

After spending two years in the army, Dostoevsky launched his literary career with *Poor Folk*, a novel that was an immediate and popular success and one highly acclaimed by the critics. Never before had a Russian author so thoroughly examined the psychological complexities of man's inner feelings and the intricate workings of the mind. Following *Poor Folk*, Dostoevsky's only important novel for many years was *The Double*, a short work dealing with a split personality and containing the genesis of *Crime and Punishment*.

Perhaps the most crucial years of Dostoevsky's melodramatic life occurred soon after the publication of *Poor Folk*. These years included some of the most active, changing phases in all of Russian history, and Dostoevsky had an unusually active role in this era of change. Using influences acquired with his literary achievements, he became involved in political intrigues of a questionable nature. He was, for example, deeply influenced by new and radical ideas that were entering Russia from the West, and he soon became affiliated with those who hoped to

revolutionize Russia with all sorts of Western reforms. Dostoevsky published many articles concerning various political questions knowing full well that they were illegal and that all printing was controlled and censored by the government.

The rebellious writer and his friends were, of course, soon deemed treasonous revolutionaries and placed in prison. After nine months, a number of them, including Dostoevsky, were tried, found guilty, and condemned to be shot by a firing squad.

The entire group was accordingly assembled, all preparations were completed, and the victims were tied and blindfolded. Then, seconds before the shots were to be fired, a messenger from the Tsar arrived. A reprieve had been granted. Actually the Tsar had never intended that the men were to be shot; he merely used this cruel method to teach Dostoevsky and his friends a lesson. This harrowing encounter with death, however, haunted him for the rest of his life.

After the commutation of the death sentence, Dostoevsky was sent to Siberia and during the four years in prison there, he changed his entire outlook on life. During this time, in horrible living conditions, he began to re-examine his values. A total change occurred within the man. He experienced his first epileptic seizure and began to reject a heretofore blind acceptance of the new ideas that Russia was absorbing. He underwent a spiritual regeneration so profound that he emerged with a prophetic belief in the sacred mission of the Russian people. He believed that the salvation of the world was in the hands of the Russian people and that eventually Russia would rise to dominate the world. It was also in prison that Dostoevsky formulated his well-known theories about the necessity of suffering. Suffering became man's chief means of salvation.

## Career Highlights

Dostoevsky married a young widow while still in exile. After his exile, he served four more years as an army private, was pardoned, and left Siberia to resume his literary career. He soon became one of the great spokesmen of Russia. Then in 1866, he published his first great masterpiece, *Crime and Punishment*.

After finishing *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky married again and went abroad, hoping to find peace from numerous creditors and also hoping to begin a new novel. The peace of mind Dostoevsky longed for he never found; instead, he accumulated even more guilt in addition to his ever-mounting debts from gambling. The novel Dostoevsky composed abroad was *The Idiot*, the story of a wholly good and beautiful soul. In his notes, Dostoevsky sometimes called his hero "Prince Christ"; he hoped to create a man who could not hate and who was incapable of base sensuality. The novel is another of his masterpieces, a fascinating, intense study of the destructive power of good.

Dostoevsky's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, was his great masterpiece and is today considered a masterpiece of Western literature. Only a year after its publication, Dostoevsky was dead, but already he was acknowledged to be one of Russia's greatest writers.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

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The following Introduction section is provided solely as an educational tool and is not meant to replace the experience of your reading the novel. Read the Introduction and A Brief Synopsis to enhance your understanding of the novel and to prepare yourself for the critical thinking that should take place whenever you read any work of fiction or nonfiction. Keep the List of Characters and Character Map at hand so that as you read the original literary work, if you encounter a character about whom you're uncertain, you can refer to the List of Characters and Character Map to refresh your memory.

## Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the western world moved away from the romanticism found in the works of Pushkin in Russia, Goethe in Germany, Hawthorne and Poe in America, and Wordsworth in England and moved in toward a modern realistic approach to literature. While the world was still reading popular romantic novels and love poems, Russia was leading a movement into the new realistic approach to literature. Dostoevsky was one of the forerunners of this movement, along with Gustave Flaubert in France and Mark Twain in America.

This movement can be seen in many ways, some from a very philosophical way and some in the most simple way. For example, in the romantic writings, the writer was concerned with the mysterious, the strange, and the bizarre. Edgar Allan Poe's famous short stories, such as "The Fall of the House of Usher" could be located in New England, Scotland, or many other places, and the story would be the same. Romantic literature seldom had any distinct landmarks and no reference to any external matters. In contrast, Dostoevsky is very careful to ground his novels in actual places. In *Crime and Punishment*, he is very exact in identifying the names of the streets, the bridge where Raskolnikov sees a woman attempting suicide, and so on. Students and editors have measured the number of feet between Raskolnikov's tiny room and the old pawnbroker's apartment and have discovered that Raskolnikov had made an accurate account of the distance—that is, he walked 730 paces in order to reach the old pawnbroker's apartment to commit the murder.

Dostoevsky was not only a chronicler of the exact physical surrounding, he was also writing subjects of modern concern. During the time that Dostoevsky was writing and publishing, the American public was reading about the romantic adventures of Hiawatha and Evangeline by Longfellow, stories that were set in some unrealistic and romantic distant past, or else the bizarre stories of Edgar Allen Poe. Dostoevsky established one of the precepts of modern realism was to present life as it actually was lived. This is exactly what Dostoevsky did from his earliest novels to his final masterpiece *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Dostoevsky was a prodigious reader and was well informed about the newest ideas and the most recent philosophical concepts of his time. His characters are driven by inner emotions that were just being investigated towards the end of his life. Sigmund Freud's investigations of

the psychological states of one's mind were being published only after Dostoevsky had written many of his studies of the mental forces that drive a person to commit certain acts. Porfiry's investigations into the motives behind a crime and of the mental state of the criminal would not become an acceptable manner of investigation until sometime in the twentieth century. As a psychologist, Dostoevsky was well ahead of Freud. His descriptions of the inner emotions are psychologically realistic and true. Some are based on fact: for example, due to his involvement with writing and printing censored material, and subsequently, being condemned to death (see "Life and Background of the Author" above), Dostoevsky would often write about man's absolute despair.

Just prior to the publication of *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky had published his short masterpiece *Notes from Underground*. A knowledge and understanding of this short novel is central to understanding most of Dostoevsky's novels. The Underground man (he is never named) begins his story by saying: "I am a sick man. . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." This dirty, spiteful, human "louse" is still a human being, and it is Dostoevsky's first introduction to a human as a louse—such a one as Raskolnikov kills in *Crime and Punishment*.

The ideas expressed in *Notes from Underground* become central to all of Dostoevsky's later novels. As expressed in the Commentaries, Dostoevsky was writing partly about man's sense of freedom, the freedom to choose, to be able to have the right to step over obstacles. The right of man to have freedom and to be able to reject security in favor of the freedom to choose has its greatest expression in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the scene where the Grand inquisitor confronts Jesus and says to Jesus that man prefers security to the freedom to choose that Jesus offers man, we have the greatest culmination of Dostoevsky's ideas upon freedom versus security.

At one point the Underground Man says that twice two makes four, this is a scientific fact, but man does not always function merely by scientific fact. For Dostoevsky, the rational part of a man's being is only one part of his makeup. That is, man is composed both of the rational (two times two does make four) and the irrational—"it would be nice to think sometimes that twice two makes five." This would be, in Dostoevsky's words, "a very charming idea also." The point is that if man functions solely as a rational being, then man's actions are always predictable. Thus,



Dostoevsky's point is that man's actions are *NOT* predictable. Raskolnikov will rationally stop a young dandy from having his way with a young girl and then suddenly decide it is none of his business, or he will tell his sister that he forbids her marriage and then contradict himself by saying "Marry whom you please." Likewise, there are men who are only happy when they suffer; thus, the man who falsely confesses to the murder of the old pawnbroker wants to suffer, particularly to suffer at the hands of authority.

One of the great ideas throughout all of Dostoevsky's fiction is that through suffering man can expiate all his sins and become more closely attuned with the basic elements of humanity. Thus in *Crime and Punishment*, we have Dostoevsky bowing down to Sonya because she represents the *sufferings of all humanity*. Both Sonya and his sister Dunya feel that when Raskolnikov takes up his suffering, he will be purified. Also, a person of great conscience will suffer from his transgressions, and as soon as the crime is committed, Raskolnikov suffers so greatly that he does become physically ill and is in a semi-coma for days.

Raskolnikov, both in his published article about crime and in his own actions, was involved in determining the mental states that affect the criminal. The concepts of psychology and even some of its later terminology were used by Raskolnikov and Porfiry. Examples abound as to Dostoevsky's use of modern psychological concepts. Porfiry's entire investigative technique involves his use of psychology to trap his victim, and Raskolnikov recognizes this and refers to it as a *cat and mouse* game.

In terms of world literature, Dostoevsky stands out as the greatest master of the realistic psychological novel and has yet to be equaled by any modern masters.

## **A Brief Synopsis**

Raskolnikov, an impoverished student, conceives of himself as being an extraordinary young man and then formulates a theory whereby the extraordinary men of the world have a right to commit any crime if they have something of worth to offer humanity. To prove his theory, he murders an old, despicable pawnbroker and her half-sister who happened to come upon him suddenly. Immediately after the crime, he becomes ill and lies in his room semi-conscious for several days. When he recovers, he finds that a friend, Razumihkin, had looked for him. While he is