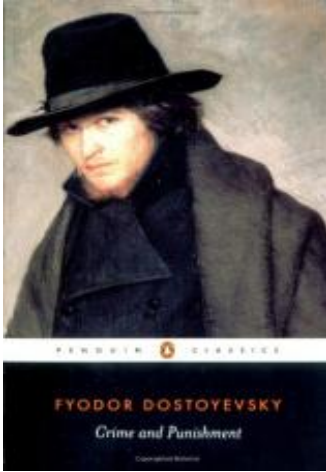


# Crime and Punishment

by Fyodor Dostoyevsky



## About the Book

Supreme masterpiece recounts in feverish, compelling tones the story of Raskolnikov, an impoverished student tormented by his own thoughts after he brutally murders an old woman. Overwhelmed afterwards by guilt and terror, Raskolnikov confesses and goes to prison. There he realizes that happiness and redemption can only be achieved through suffering.

## Discussion Guide

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?

## Author Bio

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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