

An Introduction to Fyodor Dostoevsky

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club

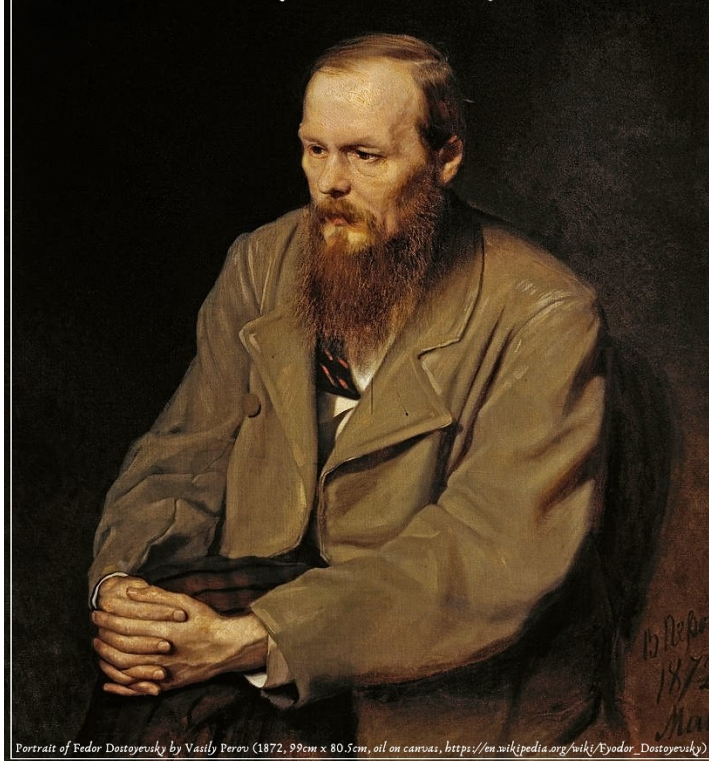


Who was Fyodor Dostoevsky?

How much do you know about Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky? With a name like that, if you guess he was Russian, you'd be right. Born in Moscow in November 1821, Dostoevsky (sometimes spelt Dostoyevsky) was introduced to literature at an early age through fairy tales and legends and books by Russian and foreign authors. His mother died in 1837 of tuberculosis when he was 15, and around the same time, he left school to enter the **Nikolayev Military Engineering Institute**.

"The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for."

Fyodor Dostoyevsky ~ "The Brothers Karamazov", 1880



Portrait of Fedor Dostoyevsky by Vasily Perov (1872, 99cm x 80.5cm, oil on canvas, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor_Dostoyevsky)

After graduating, he worked as an engineer and briefly enjoyed a lavish lifestyle, translating books to earn extra money. In the mid-1840s, he wrote his first novel, *Poor Folk*, which gained him entry into Saint Petersburg's literary circles. Then things went from bad to worse. He was arrested in 1849 for belonging to a literary group that discussed banned books critical of Tsarist Russia. He was sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted at the last moment. He spent four years in a Siberian prison camp, followed by six years of compulsory military service in exile. In the following years, Dostoevsky worked as a journalist, publishing and editing several magazines of his own and later *A Writer's Diary*, a collection of his writings. He began to travel around western Europe and developed a gambling addiction, which led to financial hardship.

Dostoevsky's literary works explore the **human condition** in the troubled political, social, and spiritual atmospheres of **19th-century Russia**, and engage with various philosophical and religious themes. His most acclaimed novels include *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *Demons* (1872), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

Dostoevsky's **body of works** consists of 12 novels

and four novellas¹, 16 short stories, and numerous other works. Many literary critics rate him as one of the greatest novelists in all of **world literature**, as multiple of his works are considered highly influential masterpieces. His 1864 novella *Notes from Underground* is considered to be one of the first works of **existentialist** literature; this has resulted in Dostoevsky being looked upon as both a **philosopher** and **theologian** as well.

Dostoevsky was influenced by a wide variety of philosophers and authors, including **Pushkin, Gogol, Augustine, Shakespeare, Scott, Dickens, Balzac, Lermontov, Hugo, Poe, Plato, Cervantes, Herzen, Kant, Belinsky, Byron, Hegel, Schiller, Solovyov, Bakunin, Sand, Hoffmann, and Mickiewicz**. His writings were widely read both within and beyond his native Russia and influenced an equally significant number of later writers, including Russians such as **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** and **Anton Chekhov**, philosophers **Friedrich Nietzsche** and **Jean-Paul Sartre**, and the emergence of **Existentialism** and **Freudianism**. His books have been translated into more than 170 languages, and have served as the basis for many films.

¹ See Bibliography on page 5.

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Despite strong competition, Fyodor Dostoevsky remains one of the most widely read and highly regarded Russian novelists of all time. His acclaimed novels, from *The Brothers Karamazov* to *Crime and Punishment* to *Notes from Underground*, carved out a unique niche at the corner of psychological realism and existential philosophy.

Ancestry

Dostoevsky's paternal ancestors were part of a noble family of **Russian Orthodox** Christians. Like almost everyone in Tsarist Russia, his parents were devout Orthodox Christians – and Dostoevsky's own religious faith got deeper and stronger all his life. The family traced its roots back to **Danilo Irtishch**, who was granted lands in the **Pinsk** Region (for centuries part of the **Grand Duchy of Lithuania**, now in modern-day **Belarus**) in 1509 for his services under a local prince, his progeny then taking the name "Dostoevsky" based on a village there called Dostoievo (derived from **Old Polish** *dostojnik* – dignitary). So far as I have determined, my maternal grandparents came from that region.

Dostoevsky's immediate ancestors on his mother's side were merchants, while the male line on his father's side were priests.

In 1819, Dostoevsky's father, who was a medical doctor, married Maria Nechayeva. By 1828, they had two sons, Mikhail and Fyodor and subsequently went on to have six more children: Varvara (1822–1892), Andrei (1825–1897), Lyubov (born and died 1829), Vera (1829–1896), Nikolai (1831–1883) and Aleksandra (1835–1889).

Childhood

Fyodor Dostoevsky was the second child of Dr Mikhail Dostoevsky and Maria Dostoevskaya. He was raised in the family home (which was in the grounds of the Mariinsky Hospital for the Poor - a district on the edges of Moscow). When playing in the hospital gardens, Dostoevsky encountered and conversed with the patients, who were at the lower end of the Russian social scale.

Dostoevsky was read heroic sagas, fairy tales and legends by his nanny, Alena Frolovna, an especially influential figure in his upbringing and love for fictional stories. When he was four, his mother used the Bible to teach him to read and write. His parents introduced him to a wide range of literature, including Russian writers **Karamzin**, **Pushkin** and **Derzhavin**; **Gothic fiction** such as the works from writer **Ann Radcliffe**; romantic works by **Schiller** and **Goethe**; heroic tales by **Miguel de Cervantes** and **Walter Scott**; and **Homer's epics**. Dostoevsky was greatly influenced by the work of **Nikolai Gogol**.² Although his father's approach to education has been described as strict and harsh, Dostoevsky himself reported that his imagination was brought alive by nightly readings by his parents. Some of his childhood experiences found their way into his writings. When a nine-year-old girl had been raped by a drunk, he was asked to fetch his father to attend to her. The incident haunted him, and the theme of the desire of a mature man for a young girl appears in *The Devils*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, and other writings. An incident involving a family servant, or serf, in the estate in Darovoye, is described in *The Peasant Marey* - when the young Dostoevsky imagines hearing a wolf in the forest, Marey, who is working nearby, comforts him.

Although Dostoevsky had a delicate physical constitution, his parents described him as hot-headed, stubborn, and cheeky. In 1833, Dostoevsky's father, who was profoundly religious, sent him to a French boarding school and then to the Chermak boarding school.

He was described as a pale, introverted dreamer and an over-excitabile romantic. His father borrowed money and extended his private medical practice to pay the school fees. Dostoevsky felt out of place among his aristocratic classmates at the Moscow school, and the experience was later reflected in some of his works, notably *The Adolescent*. Dostoevsky disliked the academy, primarily because of his lack of interest in science, mathematics and military engineering and his preference for drawing and architecture. As his friend, **Konstantin Trutovsky**, once said, "There was no student in the entire institution with less of a military bearing than F.M. Dostoevsky. He moved clumsily and jerkily; his uniform hung awkwardly on him; and his knapsack, shako and rifle all looked like some sort of fetter he had been forced to wear for a time and which lay heavily on him."

² Source: "*Natural School (Натуральная школа)*". *Brief Literary Encyclopedia in 9 Volumes*. Moscow. 1968. **IMDB**, says: Nikolai (Mykola) Gogol was a Russian humorist, dramatist, and novelist of Ukrainian origin. His ancestors bore the name of Gogol-Janovsky and claimed belonging to the upper class Polish Szlachta.

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Dostoevsky's character and interests made him an outsider among his 120 classmates: he showed bravery and a strong sense of justice, protected newcomers, aligned himself with teachers, criticised corruption among officers and helped poor farmers. Although he was solitary and inhabited his own literary world, he was respected by his classmates. His reclusiveness and interest in religion earned him the nickname "Monk Photius".³

Signs of Dostoevsky's epilepsy may have first appeared on learning of the mysterious death of his father on 16th June 1839, although the reports of a **seizure** originated from accounts written by his daughter (later expanded by **Sigmund Freud**), which are now considered to be unreliable. His father's official cause of death was an **apoplectic** stroke, but a neighbour, Pavel Khotiaintsev, accused the father's serfs of murder. Had the serfs been found guilty and sent to **Siberia**, Khotiaintsev would have been able to buy the vacated land. The serfs were acquitted in a trial in **Tula**, but Dostoevsky's brother Andrei perpetuated the story.

After his father's death, Dostoevsky continued his studies, passed his exams and obtained the rank of engineer cadet, entitling him to live away from the academy. He visited Mikhail in Reval and frequently attended concerts, operas, plays and ballets. During this time, two of his friends introduced him to gambling.

The Dostoevsky family estate at the village of Darovoye

The Dostoevsky family estate at the village of Darovoye, where Fyodor Dostoevsky spent several childhood summers in the 1830s, was modest in size and style. It did, however, play a significant role in the formation of the great writer's character and creativity. The village is located in a rural setting about 90 miles southeast of Moscow near the town of Zarsk in the Kolomna Region. Darovoye and the neighbouring village of Monogarovo were among a cluster of outposts that belonged to the prominent Khotyaintsev family⁴.

Vasily Khotyaintsev's grandson, Peter, was the last of the family to own the Darovoye - Monogarovo estate. In 1830, the property came to the attention of Mikhail Andreevich Dostoevsky (Fyodor's father), who was engaged in quarantine enforcement during the cholera epidemic sweeping through the Moscow region that year. Dostoevsky and his wife Maria wished to acquire a place in the country for the family. The purchase was completed in 1831, and the family spent its first summer in Darovoye shortly afterwards, when Fyodor was nine years old.

The Dostoevsky family continued to live in an apartment at the Moscow Marinsky Pauper's Hospital, where Fyodor's father served on the medical staff, but each summer, the whole family set off for Darovoye. The Darovoye property consisted of over 300 hectares, and Fyodor's mother proved an adept manager of the limited resources available to the family. In 1833, Mikhail Dostoevsky acquired the neighbouring village of Cheremoshnya with its 100 peasants (serfs).

Years later, Fyodor Dostoevsky would fondly remember the summers at Darovoye as a time of games with his brothers among the large linden trees and hollows on the estate. This imaginative play was stimulated by a reading of works such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and the novels of Walter Scott. On warm summer days, the children swam in Mama's Pond, which Maria Dostoevsky had created from a nearby spring.

In February 1837, Fyodor's mother Maria died in Moscow from tuberculosis. It proved a devastating blow to his father, who retired from service and sent his sons Mikhail and Fyodor to school in St. Petersburg. The rest of the family, including two younger sons and three daughters, moved to Darovoye.

Life on the Darovoye estate soon became very difficult, culminating in Fyodor's father's mysterious death. In September 1993, a monument to Fyodor Dostoevsky was unveiled near a linden grove. Created by the sculptor Yury Ivanov, the seated bronze figure of Dostoevsky serves as a gathering point each year for events dedicated to the great writer.⁵

³ Photius is a highly regarded saint within the Eastern Orthodox Church.

⁴ In 1763, Vasily Khotyaintsev erected the brick Church of the Holy Spirit on the Monogarovo estate. With a single cupola and a refectory and bell tower at the west end, the church combines traditional features with neoclassical elements of the early reign of Catherine the Great.

⁵ This section is derived from *Russia Beyond*, [HERE](#).

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Career

Dostoevsky's first completed literary work, a translation of **Honoré de Balzac's** novel *Eugénie Grandet*, was published in June and July 1843 in the 6th and 7th volumes of the journal *Repertoire and Pantheon*⁶, followed by several other translations. None were successful, and his financial difficulties led him to write a novel.

Dostoevsky completed his first novel, *Poor Folk*, in May 1845. The literary critic, **Vissarion Belinsky**, described it as Russia's first "**social novel**". *Poor Folk* was released on 15 January 1846 in the *St Petersburg Collection almanac* and became a commercial success. Dostoevsky felt that his military career would endanger his now flourishing literary career, so he wrote a letter asking to resign his post. Shortly afterwards, he wrote his second novel, *The Double*, which appeared in the journal *Notes of the Fatherland* on 30 January 1846, before being published in February 1846. Around the same time, Dostoevsky discovered and was influenced by socialism through the writings of French thinkers **Fourier**, **Cabet**, **Proudhon** and **Saint-Simon**.

After *The Double* received negative reviews, Dostoevsky's health declined, and he had more frequent seizures, but he continued writing. From 1846 to 1848, he released several short stories in the magazine *Annals of the Fatherland*,

including *Mr Prokharichin*, *The Landlady*, *A Weak Heart*, and *White Nights*. These stories were unsuccessful, leaving Dostoevsky once more in financial trouble, so he joined the **utopian socialist** Betekov circle, a tightly knit community that helped him to survive.

Dostoevsky wrote his most important works after his time in Siberia, including *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Gambler* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. With the help of his brother Mikhail, Dostoevsky opened two magazines—*Vremya* and *Epoch*—in which some of his stories appeared. Following their closures, most of his works were issued in the conservative *The Russian Messenger* until the introduction of *A Writer's Diary*, which comprised most of his works—including essays and articles. Several drafts and plans, especially those begun during his honeymoon, were unfinished at his death. In 1849, the first parts of *Netochka Nezvanova*, a novel Dostoevsky had been planning since 1846, were published in *Annals of the Fatherland*, but his banishment ended the project. Dostoevsky never tried to complete it.

Dostoevsky's novels are populated by characters full of angst and misery. The workings of the human mind intrigued Dostoevsky throughout his entire life. Each of his masterpiece novels, including *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons* and *The Gambler*, is basically an introductory psychology course.⁷ His psychological penetration into the darkest recesses of the human heart, together with his unsurpassed moments of illumination, had an immense influence on 20th-century fiction.⁸

Marriages

After six years of a childless marriage, Dostoevsky's first wife died in 1864, and he adopted her son from her previous marriage. Dostoevsky said about his first marriage to Maria Isaeva, "*She loved me without limit, and I loved her also without measure, but she and I did not live happily.*" In reality, his first marriage, which lasted seven years, was unhappy almost from the very beginning. Both he and his wife had somewhat odd and unusual personalities, and in essence, they did not live together.⁹

After writing *The Gambler* (1867), the 47-year-old Dostoevsky married his loyal friend and literary secretary, 20-year-old Anna Snitkina. They had four children. His first baby died at three months of age, causing him to sink further into depression and triggering more epileptic seizures.¹⁰

⁶ (Repertoire and Pantheon), a Russian theatrical journal that appeared monthly in St. Petersburg between 1844 and 1846.

⁷ Source: Russia Beyond. [HERE](#).

⁸ Source: Britannica.com, [HERE](#).

⁹ Source: <https://bloggerskaramazov.com/2017/02/27/anna-grigorievna-3/>

¹⁰ Source: IMDb, [HERE](#).

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- The House of the Dead, 1862
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- Crime and Punishment, 1866
- The Gambler, 1867
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- The Eternal Husband, 1870
- Demons, 1872
- The Adolescent, 1875
- The Brothers Karamazov, 1880

Films based on Dostoevsky Novels, Novellas and Short Stories

Over 120 films have been made that were at least loosely based upon novels, novellas and short stories written by Dostoevsky. Apart from his native Russia and other major film industries like France, India and the US, his classics have been adapted in countries that don't have so rich a cinema history.¹¹

Death

An epileptic all his life, Dostoevsky died at his home in St. Petersburg on 9th February 1881. Death was due to pulmonary emphysema associated with epilepsy. His funeral was attended by celebrities and politicians from all over Europe, as well as the most prominent Russian literary personalities of the time. He was buried in the Aleksandr Nevsky monastery, St. Petersburg.

Long after his death, Dostoevsky continues to be highly praised. Classic writers such as James Joyce, Herman Melville, Franz Kafka, and Ernest Hemingway all declared Dostoevsky was either a strong literary influence or simply a great read. Sigmund Freud even went on to say that Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* was "the most magnificent novel ever written".¹²

Selection of Quotations by Dostoevsky

"It was a sad and dismal day today, rainy, without a ray of hope, just like the long days of my old age, which I know will be as sad and dismal.

"Russia needs to be reformed, by learning the new ideas that are developing in Europe.

"The degree of civilisation in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.

"If you want to be respected by others, the great thing is to respect yourself. Only by that, only by self-respect, will you compel others to respect you.

"What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.

"It takes something more than intelligence to act intelligently.

"Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart. The really great men must, I think, have great sadness on earth.

"My friend, the truth is always implausible, did you know that? To make the truth more plausible, it's absolutely necessary to mix a bit of falsehood with it. People have always done so.

"The best way to keep a prisoner from escaping is to make sure he never knows he's in prison.

"The cleverest of all, in my opinion, is the man who calls himself a fool at least once a month.

"Man is fond of counting his troubles, but he does not count his joys. If he counted them up as he ought to, he would see that every lot has enough happiness provided for it.

"In most cases, people, even wicked people, are far more naive and simple-hearted than one generally assumes. And so are we.

¹¹ Source: <http://dostoevsky-bts.com/blog/124-dostoyevsky-film-adaptations/> See also wikipedia at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Films_based_on_works_by_Fyodor_Dostoyevsky

¹² Source: <https://www.factinate.com/people/literary-facts-dostoevsky/>

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“Man only likes to count his troubles; he doesn't calculate his happiness.

“Neither man nor nation can exist without a sublime idea.

“The second half of a man's life is made up of nothing but the habits he has acquired during the first half.

“There is nothing easier than lopping off heads and nothing harder than developing ideas.

Sources and Further Reading

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