

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

BY ROB TOCALINO

“ABOVE ALL, DO NOT LIE TO YOURSELF. A MAN WHO LIES TO HIMSELF AND LISTENS TO HIS OWN LIE COMES TO A POINT WHERE HE DOES NOT DISCERN ANY TRUTH EITHER IN HIMSELF OR ANYWHERE AROUND HIM, AND THUS FALLS INTO DISRESPECT TOWARDS HIMSELF AND OTHERS.”

THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

FYODOR MIKHAILOVICH DOSTOEVSKY STOOD PREPARED TO DIE. Sentenced to death in 1849 for his participation in the liberal socialist Petrashevsky circle, the 28-year-old writer had risen from near poverty to literary acclaim, only to stand blindfolded in the bitter cold, attended by a firing squad. Tsar Nikolai I sadistically cut the execution short at the last moment and shipped the paper revolutionaries off to a Siberian labor camp. It is said that at least two of the prisoners went mad on the spot. Nervous fits would plague Dostoevsky (1821–1881) for the remainder of his days.

Dostoevsky's writing can have a similar shocking effect on his readers. His novels and short stories are a collision of grand moral and philosophical questions and petty impulses. Here self-absorption meets Christian giving; family loyalties confront social order; the gold-hearted Magdalene absolves the bitter misanthrope. From the perspective of the early 21st century, it is impossible to understand the scope and depth of Dostoevsky's

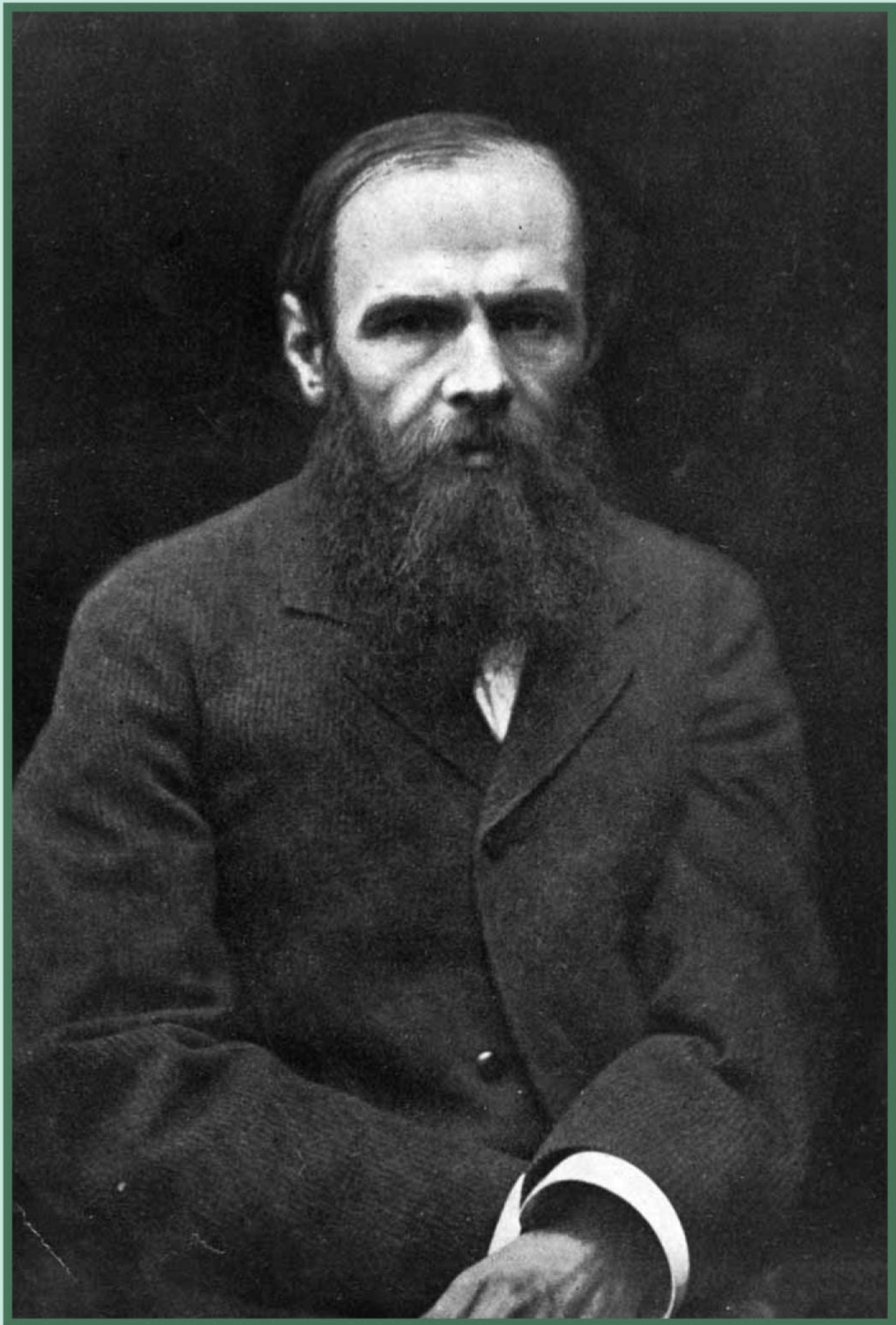
influence without experiencing his texts firsthand. His novels, from *Notes from Underground* (1864) to *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), remain some of the most emotionally confrontational works in literature.

Most of Dostoevsky's great novels feature crime, especially murder, as a central plot element. The settings are often squalid, and very few characters strike the reader as wholly sympathetic. But despite the spectral hue of his fictional world, it is difficult to call Dostoevsky a pessimist. The genius of his work was its psychological refinement. Not only did Dostoevsky revolutionize characterization by forcing

the reader's sympathies toward outright criminals—recall Raskolnikov's motives in *Crime and Punishment* (1866)—but he did so in the service of larger ideas. Dostoevsky's works are literature in the grand tradition of Dante and Shakespeare, where questions of what it *means* to live and die often supersede questions of mere life and death. His fictional world reflects a Russian society astir with revolutionary impulses and deep

WHERE TO START

Though three of his works (**NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND**, **CRIME AND PUNISHMENT**, and **THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV**) remain essential, as with everything Dostoevsky, there are manifold ways to enjoy his fiction. The philosophically inclined should start with **UNDERGROUND**, a cracked curtain into the author's intellectual development. For the reader who prefers plot to philosophy, **THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV** wraps all of Dostoevsky's important themes in a more traditional family saga. For those ready to stare into the eye of the hurricane, **CRIME AND PUNISHMENT** serves as a harrowing first glance into Dostoevsky's oeuvre.



social inequality; but opposed to the Victorian panorama, Dostoevsky presented his view of Russia from the level of the soul.

Dostoevsky was born in 1821, the second son of a middle-class Muscovite family. His father was a drunken and demanding retired military doctor who, following his wife's death from tuberculosis in 1837, sent Fyodor away to the Military Engineering School in St. Petersburg.

Dostoevsky filled his free time at the school reading Pushkin, Gogol, Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, and Schiller. In 1839 his father died, reputedly the victim of a brutal murder by the serfs on his country estate. Fyodor finished his schooling but continued his literary work, publishing a translation of Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet*, which he followed with his first novel *Poor Folk* (1846). The book was an immediate success, and St. Petersburg's literary community embraced the young writer. He published other works on the heels of *Poor Folk*, but none of them received the same acclaim as his debut. Soon his social alliances led him to the Petrashevsky circle and revolutionary activities against Tsar Nikolai I, and to his subsequent mock execution and exile.

Though his five years in Siberia and his following few years stationed as a Siberian Regiment corporal in Kazakhstan represented only one of many tragic periods of Dostoevsky's life, it forced a seismic shift in his artistic development and his intellectual beliefs.



A monument to Dostoevsky in Omsk, Siberia—his place of exile.

When he returned to St. Petersburg in 1859, Dostoevsky was a married man (he had wedded Marya Isaeva in 1857) with limited financial prospects. He published two novels, *Memoirs of the House of the Dead* (1861), a fictional account of prison life, and *The Insulted and the Injured* (1862), a bildungsroman which rejects utopianism. They received little critical acclaim but reinvigorated the public appetite for his work. He also made his first voyage to Western Europe and found in the liberal social order of the great capital cities more justification for his embrace of a deeply held conservatism. (After his return from Siberia, Dostoevsky had become increasingly sympathetic to imperialist ideas and the Russian Orthodox Church.)

The appearance of *Notes from Underground* (1864) heralded a new psychological complexity to Dostoevsky's work. Its main character, the unnamed Underground Man, became a key figure in the development of existentialist philosophy (see sidebar). The novel also introduced a new technique of point of view, akin to interior monologue. In place of omniscient narration, or that of the gentle first-person narrator, the reader is plunged into the elliptical, self-negating mind of the narrator. It is his compelling voice, more than any plot developments, which holds this short but powerful book together. It was the first of many important books that Dostoevsky published over the ensuing seven years.

THIS STRING OF SUCCESSES is even more remarkable when one considers Dostoevsky's chaotic personal life. Plagued by gambling debts, depression, and the failure of his literary magazine, as well as burdened by the grief of losing both his brother Mikhail and his first wife Marya in the same year, Dostoevsky committed to writing a novel for a St. Petersburg bookseller. The conditions of their contract were exceedingly harsh: if the manuscript wasn't completed on time, the author would forfeit the rights to all of his works. In 1866, as Dostoevsky completed *Crime and Punishment*, which was published in installments in the *Russian Messenger* (which would also serialize *The Possessed* [1872] and *The Brothers Karamazov* [1880]), he realized he had neglected his other assignment: the due date was only a month away. He hired a young stenographer, Anna Snitkina, to help him transcribe, in fewer than 30 days, what would become his novel *The Gambler* (1867).

Anna soon became his second wife. Still on the run from his creditors, the two escaped to Europe in 1867, where they lived for four years while Dostoevsky completed *The Idiot* (1868), and *The Eternal Husband* (1870), and began work on *The Possessed*.

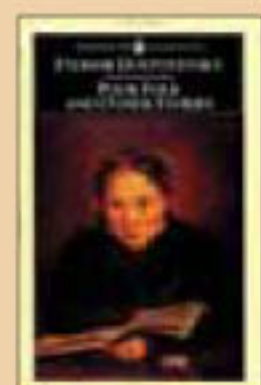
Perpetually broke and plagued by epileptic fits, Dostoevsky felt unable to continue writing. He and Anna returned to Russia in 1871, not much better than they had left it. But his return marked a dramatic turn in his fortunes. The trials of social revolutionary Sergai Nechayev rekindled his interest in *The Possessed*, which he completed in 1872 to great acclaim. He began to write a popular column, *Diary of a Writer*, for the conservative journal *The Citizen*. Public readings of his work cemented his impor-

tance and popularity. His eulogy for Pushkin is remembered as a monumental success.

When Dostoevsky died in 1881, the largest public crowd in 19th-century Russia witnessed the funeral for this former convict. Translations of his work were just appearing in English to great acclaim, setting the stage for his later universal acceptance as one of the 20th century's most influential and enduring voices.

MAJOR WORKS

Poor Folk (1846)



Two years after his translation of Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet* (1844), the young engineering graduate published his first novel to great acclaim. His most important ally was literary critic Vissarion Belinsky, who, upon the publication of *Poor Folk*, ranked Dostoevsky as Gogol's literary heir and thrust 23-year-old Fyodor into the heart of St. Petersburg's literary world.

THE STORY: Makar Devushkin Alexievitch, an elderly clerk, struggles to maintain a living. He's also smitten with his neighbor, Barbara Alexievna, a fact he conceals with paternal affection in his many letters to the young orphaned seamstress. Their correspondence reveals their disenchantment with their economic lives, the incompatibility of their emotional interests, and the disinterested society that turned a blind eye to their plight.

"His talent belongs with those which are not immediately understood and recognized. In the course of his literary life there will appear many talented writers who will be compared with him, but it will end with their being forgotten at the very time when he reaches the height of his fame." VISSARION BELINSKI, 1846

"Very few will put down *Poor Folk* without the irrepressible thought that, if one half of what is here set forth is true—if poor burdened humanity is staggering this secretly at our side under anything like these loads—one ought truly to spend one's life in some great, and definite labor or helpfulness."

JOHN LOMAS, MACMILLAN'S MAGAZINE, 1886–67

"The most elaborate attempt to depict squalid, hopeless poverty; the patient endurance of a wronged, ailing girl; the kind heart, weak will, and magnificent unselfishness of a broken-down, witless old Government clerk, would be hopeless beside the power of this narrative contained in a series of letters so full of true art that their inherent artificiality never once occurs to the enthralled reader." THE

NATION, 1894

THE BOTTOM LINE: A heralded, harrowing debut that bears the penetrating psychological insight that would become a hallmark of Dostoevsky's greatest works.

Notes from Underground (1864)



Dostoevsky returned from a tour of Europe's capitals to dark, dark times in Russia. His literary journal, *Time*, was suppressed for political reasons. His wife was dying from tuberculosis. And money was quickly running out. A stroke of luck helped him revive the magazine under the name *Epoch*. His first contribution was *Notes from Underground*, a sharp criticism of the socialist radicals and socialist utopianism as well as a revolutionary novel that influenced thinkers and writers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Ralph Ellison.

THE STORY: The unnamed antihero of *Notes from Underground* is, in the modern parlance, conflicted. Alienated from society, he struggles to reconcile the opposing forces of will and reason and assaults theories of rationalism. His actions are no more consistent than his philosophy: he makes

THE ORTHODOX EXISTENTIALIST

Walter Kaufmann, in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (1975), said of the Russian writer:

"I can see no reason for calling Dostoevsky an existentialist, but I do think Part One of *Notes from Underground* is the best overture for existentialism ever written."

Though existentialist authors from Albert Camus to Richard Wright borrowed liberally from Dostoevsky's work, specifically from *Notes from Underground*, why does Kaufmann place the author outside this philosophical framework? And why does Dostoevsky continue to be a figurehead for existentialist thought?

In this age of the memoir, it is natural to conflate authors' works and their biographies, especially when the authors' plots mirror events in their lives. Dostoevsky's case is particularly confounding since his characters' psyches are so authentic and organic that it is simpler to believe they are manifestations of his ideas rather than fictional creations. In fact, Dostoevsky relished philosophical debate on the page, testing his ideas by giving voice to the beliefs of others. The Underground Man is a stunning example.

"What we perceive is an unheard-of song of song on individuality: not classical, not Biblical, and not at all romantic," Kaufmann wrote. "No, individuality is not retouched, idealized, or holy; it is wretched and revolting, and yet, for all its misery, the highest good."

So while Dostoevsky's characters might embody many of the tenets of existentialist theory, their creator, a conservative follower of the Russian Orthodox Church and a defender of imperialism, hardly shared those beliefs. It is another sign of his greatness that Dostoevsky could present those tenets in such a full, vibrant voice.

a drunken fool of himself at a dinner with university friends (a dinner to which he has invited himself) and then dresses down a prostitute for her immoral ways. “[A]nguish kept boiling up; a hysterical thirst for contradictions.” Although, in the end his alienation is self-imposed, there is much to pity in the underground man’s predicament.

“The imaginary writer in [Notes from Underground] is a man of thought, and not of action. He does not live at all, but thinks, and his thought has paralysed his being, until he can only sit down and contemplate the world that is, which he abhors yet can by no means escape. Evil and pain, they tell him, are the visible working of the iron laws of Nature: the things that are must be.” J. MIDDLETON MURRY, FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY: A CRITICAL STUDY, 1916

“[It] clarifies nothing, does not exalt the positive in life, but, dwelling on the negative aspects only, fixes them in the mind of man, always depicts him as helpless amid a chaos of dark forces, and this can lead him to pessimism, mysticism, etc.”

MAXIM GORKY, A HISTORY OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE, 1939

THE BOTTOM LINE: This fictional memoir is the bridge to the grand themes of the great novels that followed it.

Crime and Punishment (1866)



In 1865, running from debts and losing at gambling throughout Europe, Dostoevsky proposed a novel to the editor of the *Russian Messenger*, M. N. Katkov. It was to be an examination of a crime—a murder—undertaken “under the influence of strange, ‘incomplete’ ideas that go floating about.” *Crime and Punishment* is a thrilling, exhausting examination of moral justice and ranks, along with Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, as the best-known Russian novel.

THE STORY: A detective story only on the surface, *Crime and Punishment* presents a psychological study of the criminal, a Portrait of the Killer as a Young Man, in czarist, prerevolutionary Russia. Destitute and paranoid ex-student Raskolnikov plots to kill an old pawnbroker and steal her riches. His complex justification for the act is his belief that he is a superior being who will right the wrong by using the money only for greater ends. This idealist moral equation crumbles as he falls under the redemptive spell of the prostitute Sofya Semyonovna.

“The power of [Crime and Punishment] lies in its marvelous dissection of mental characteristics,—in its unaffected intensity of realism,—in a verisimilitude so extraordinary that the reader is compelled to believe himself the criminal, to feel the fascination of the crime, to endure the excitement of it, to enjoy the perpetration of it, to vibrate with the terror of it, to suffer all the nightmares, all the horrors, all the degradation, all the punishment of it.” LAFCADIO HEARN, THE TIMES-DEMOCRAT, 1885

“Can such a book, dealing with material so revolting, be of any possible service? We think it can—to those who read it aright and understand fully the underlying principles of the art that brought it into being. In its microscopic fidelity it leaves no aspect of social degradation untouched, but it touches all with the unerring yet kindly skill of the trained physician who applies the knife and cautery to heal.” THE LITERARY WORLD, 1886

THE BOTTOM LINE: A masterpiece of psychological literature that always ranks among the greatest novels of all time.

SELECTED MOVIES: 2002, starring Crispin Glover, Vanessa Redgrave, and John Hurt and directed by Menahem Golan; 1998, TV, starring Patrick Dempsey, Ben Kingsley, and Julie Delpy and directed by Joseph Sargent.

The Possessed (1872)



In *The Possessed* Dostoevsky transformed the details of a contemporary revolutionary group to examine the allure and limitations of political and metaphysical radicalism. Increasingly conservative after his time in the military, Dostoevsky used *The Possessed* to ridicule the revolutionary struggle and ask deeper questions about the end uses of faith. [Also published as *Devils*.]

THE STORY: Peter Stepanovich Verkhovensky leads a group of incompetent students in a plan to overthrow the government; his cohort, Nikolai Stavrogin, cheats on his wife and habitually insults local officials. Following a duel provoked by his ill-mannered behavior, Stavrogin reassesses his behavior. Verkhovensky, in the meantime, attempts to frame

OTHER SELECTED WORKS

MEMOIRS FROM THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD (1861)

Published upon Dostoevsky’s return from Siberia, this novel presents an exhaustive view of prison life from the perspective of nobleman Alexander Petrovich. Tolstoy claimed it was Dostoevsky’s greatest work.

THE INSULTED AND THE INJURED (1862)

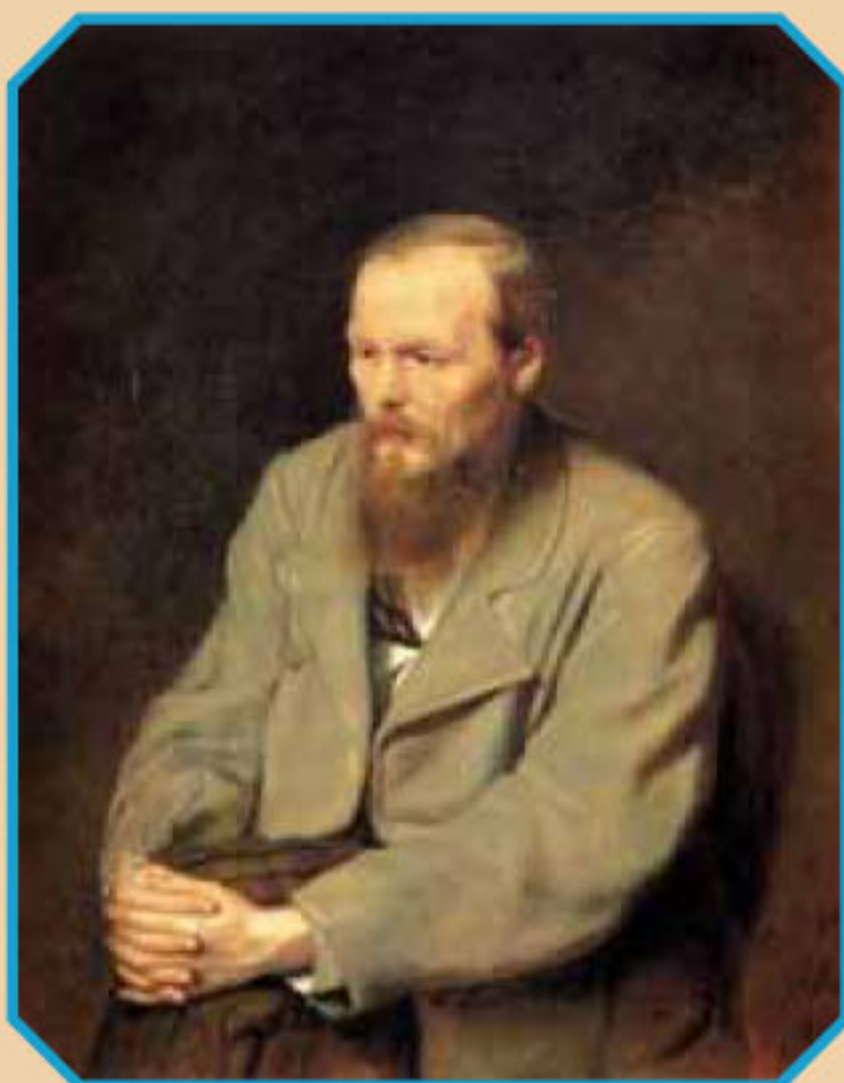
Dostoevsky’s most autobiographical novel is a bildungsroman of a young writer in 19th-century St. Petersburg, in which the protagonist rejects utopianism.

THE GAMBLER (1867)

The inspiration for today’s National Novel Writing Month, this novella, written in just 30 days, pays off with a tale set in Europe of a profligate roulette player and his luck, both good and bad.

THE IDIOT (1868)

The Christlike figure Prince Myshkin returns from four years in a mental institution to find that, in the real world, Christian giving is not returned in kind.



Portrait by Vasily Perov, 1872

his absentee father, Stepan Trofimovich, as the leader of the revolutionaries. A fire at the river that kills two people interrupts the large ball thrown by Stavrogin's mother. Fearing exposure, Verkhovensky plots to kill Shatov, a renegade member of his crew, and asks Kirilov to take the blame. An intricate web of social

relationships unravels

as the novel marches towards its tragic end.

"Stepan Trofimovitch is a nineteenth-century Quixote—a complex creature of modern civilization, in whom the noblest aspirations are intertwined with the pettiest personal vanities, in whom cowardice and heroism, folly and wisdom are inextricably mixed. So consummate is the portraiture that one seems to the whole nature of the man spread out before one like a piece of shot silk, shifting every moment from silliness to saintliness, from meanness to dignity, from egoism to abnegation. This marvelous synthesis is the work of humour, but of humour which has almost transcended itself—a smile felt so profoundly that it is only shown in the eyes." LYTTON STRACHEY, *THE SPECTATOR*, 1914

THE BOTTOM LINE: A book in which Dostoevsky makes the political personal, and the personal political.

The Brothers Karamazov (1880)



By the end of his life, Dostoevsky was beloved throughout Russia, a feeling reinforced by the appearance of *The Brothers Karamazov* in the *Russian Messenger*. Though Dostoevsky's death curtailed his plans to continue the story, the novel stands as one of his, and literature's, greatest achievements. It asks deeply spiritual and moral questions about belief and doubt, free will and rationality.

THE STORY: Fyodor Karamazov is classically despicable, a miserable father and a miser—except when feeding his sensual demands. So his murder, laid out on the first page of the novel, comes as no surprise. The middle Karamazov brother, Dmitri, is soon arrested for the crime. But as his trial approaches, his brothers Ivan and Alyosha find their strongest beliefs (intellectualism for the former and faith for the latter) greatly tested and are forced to acknowledge their own guilt in the matter. After all, "there is no virtue if there is no immortality."

"The two volumes he lived to write of *The Brothers Karamozov* show a sad falling off, and add nothing to his reputation."

TEMPLE BAR, 1891

"These pages are unique, they reach the highest and most terrible pathos that the novelist's art has ever reached. And if an author's reputation among people of taste depended solely on his success with single scenes Dostoevsky would outrank all other novelists, if not poets." ARNOLD BENNETT, *NEW AGE*, 1910

"Dostoevsky's place is not far behind Shakespeare. *The Brothers Karamozov* is the most magnificent novel ever written; the episode of the Grand Inquisitor, one of the peaks in the literature of the world, can hardly be valued too highly. Before the problem of the creative artist analysis must, alas, lay down its arms." SIGMUND FREUD, "DOSTOEVSKY AND PARRICIDE," 1928

THE BOTTOM LINE: In this masterpiece—the culmination of Dostoevsky's career—a deceptively simple plot blossoms into a grand examination of family, faith, and politics.

SELECTED MOVIE: 1958, starring Yul Brynner, Maria Schell, and Claire Bloom and directed by Richard Brooks. ■



The Brothers Karamazov Soviet film poster (1968).