Fyodor Dostoevsky
(1821 – 1881)

Biography:

Fyodor Dostoevsky was well known in his country during his life and has since been praised around the world as a writer. He is best known for writing novels that had a great understanding of psychology (the study of how the human mind works), especially the psychology of people who, losing their reason, would become insane or commit murder.

The young man Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in Moscow, Russia, on November 11, 1821, the son of a doctor. His family was very religious, and Dostoevsky was deeply religious all his life. He began reading widely when he was a youth. He was first educated by his mother, father, and tutors, but at thirteen years old he was sent to a private school. Two years later his mother died. His father, a cruel man, was murdered in 1839, when Dostoevsky was eighteen and attending school in St. Petersburg, Russia. Dostoevsky was trained to be a military engineer, but he disliked school and loved literature. When he finished school, he turned from the career he was trained for and devoted himself to writing. His earliest letters show him to be a young man of passion and energy, as well as somewhat mentally unstable.

Early writings: Dostoevsky began his career writing fiction about poor people in harsh situations. In 1843, he finished his first novel, Poor Folk, a social tale about a down-and-out government worker. The novel was praised by a respected critic. Dostoevsky's second novel, The Double (1846), was received less warmly; his later works in the 1840s were received coldly.
The Double, however, has come to be known as his best early work, and in many ways, it was ahead of its time.

The lack of success of The Double troubled Dostoevsky. From 1846 to 1849 his life and work were characterized by aimlessness and confusion. The short stories and novels he wrote during this period are for the most part experiments in different forms and different subject matters.

Dostoevsky's life showed some of the same pattern of uncertain experimenting. In 1847 he joined a somewhat subversive (anti-government) group called the Petrashevsky Circle. In 1849 the members were arrested. After eight months in prison, Dostoevsky was "sentenced" to death. In reality, though, this sentence was only a joke. At one point, however, Dostoevsky believed he had only moments to live, and he never forgot the feelings of that experience. He was sentenced to four years in prison and four years of forced service in the army in Siberia, Russia.

Dostoevsky returned to St. Petersburg in 1859 with an unhealthy wife, Maria Issaeva, whom he had married in Siberia. Their marriage was not happy. To support himself, Dostoevsky edited the journal *Time* with his brother Mikhail and wrote a number of fictional works. In 1861 he published *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, a work of fiction based on his experiences in prison. By and large his writings during this period showed no great artistic advance over his early work and gave no hint of the greatness that came forth in 1864 with his *Notes from the Underground*.

Dostoevsky's life during this period was characterized by poor health, poverty, and complicated emotional situations. He fell in love with the young student Polina Šuslova and carried on a frustrating affair with her for several years. He traveled outside the country in 1862 and 1863 to get away from the people to whom he owed money, to improve his health, and to gamble. *Notes from the Underground* is a short novel. In this work Dostoevsky attempts to justify the existence of individual freedom as a necessary part of humankind. He argues against the view that man is a creature of reason and that society can be organized in a way that guarantees the happiness of humans. He insists that humans desire freedom more than happiness, but he also sees that unchecked freedom is a destructive force, since there is no guarantee that humans will use freedom in a constructive way. Indeed, the evidence of history suggests that humans seek the destruction of others and of themselves.

Dostoevsky's first wife died in 1864, and in the following year he married Anna Grigorievna Snitkina. She was practical and even-tempered, and therefore she was the very opposite of his first wife and his lover. There is very little doubt that she was largely responsible for introducing better conditions for his work by taking over many of the practical tasks that he hated and handled badly.

In 1866 Dostoevsky published *Crime and Punishment*, which is the most popular of his great novels, perhaps because it is appealing on different levels. It can be read as a serious and complex work of art, but it can also be enjoyed as a gripping detective story. The novel is concerned with the murder of an old woman by a student, Raskolnikov, while he is committing robbery in an attempt to help his family and his own career. The murder occurs at the very
beginning of the novel, and the rest of the book has to do with the pursuit of Raskolnikov by the detective Porfiry and by his own conscience. In the end he gives himself up and decides to accept the punishment for his act.

The Dostoevskys traveled in 1867 and remained away from Russia for more than four years. Their economic condition was very difficult, and Dostoevsky repeatedly lost what little money they had while gambling. The Idiot was written between 1867 and 1869, and Dostoevsky stated that in this work he intended to portray "the wholly beautiful man." The hero of the novel is a good man who attempts to live in a society gone wrong, and it is uncertain whether he succeeds.

Dostoevsky began writing The Possessed (also translated as The Devils) in 1870 and published it in 1871–1872. The novel began as a political pamphlet and was based on a political murder that took place in Moscow on November 21, 1869. In the Possessed Dostoevsky raises a minor event to great importance. Many readers see The Possessed not only as an accurate account of the politics of the time, but also as a visionary statement on the future of politics in Russia and elsewhere.

The Brothers Karamazov (1879–1880) is the greatest of Dostoevsky's novels. The psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) ranked it as one of the greatest artistic achievements of all time. The novel is about four sons and their guilt in the murder of their father, Fyodor. Each of the sons may be characterized by a major trait: Dmitri by passion, Ivan by reason, Alyosha by spirit, and Smerdyakov by everything that is ugly in human nature. Smerdyakov kills his father, but to a degree the other three brothers are guilty in thought and desire.

Dostoevsky sent the last part of The Brothers Karamazov to his publisher on November 8, 1880, and he died soon afterward, on January 28, 1881. At the time of his death he was at the height of his career in Russia, and many Russians mourned his death. He had begun to win praise in Europe as well, and interest in him has continued to increase. 1

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