



## FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY: A Short Biography

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Post the East-Slavic Epics and Chronicles from the Middle Ages, literature of major note to flourish in Russia was during the 1830s, during the Age of Enlightenment. Poetry, prose and drama flourished, ushering in a Golden Age of Russian literature. Romanticism saw the birth of Vasily Zhukovsky, and Alexander Pushkin, the greatest poet of all times. Prose too flourished. Nikolai Gogol paved the way with his novels. Then came Ivan Turgenev who mastered both novels and short stories. The second half of the century witnessed the rise of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. Both earned international reputation very soon. Anton Chekhov established himself as a short story writer and a dramatist in the second half of the century.

In November, 1821, Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in Moscow. He entered the world of literature through fairy tales and legends from early childhood. At about 15 he entered the Nikolayev Engineering Institute from where he graduated and began his professional life. Simultaneously he earned quite some extra bucks by translating books. In the mid-1840s he penned his first novel, *Poor Folk*. This gained him an early entry into the Saint Petersburg literary circles. One of these groups he belonged to was critical of the then Tsarist regime. He was sentenced to captured and sentenced to death, but was finally commuted. He spent four years in a Siberian prison camp, and then was exiled for six years of compulsory military service.

Dostoyevsky was influenced by leading European writers and philosophers; primarily he was influenced by Plato, Pushkin, Gogol, Augustine, Shakespeare, Dickens, Balzac, Lermontov, Hugo, Poe, Cervantes, Herzen, Kant, Belinsky, Hegel, Schiller, Solovyov,



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Bakunin, Sand, Hoffman, and Mickiewicz. Dostoevsky, in his turn, influenced figures like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Anton Chekov, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sartre. His writings became fountainheads whence emerged philosophies like Existentialism, and Freudianism.

Dostoevsky remains one of the most translated novelists of Russia. He grew up in an atmosphere of heavily charged literature. Beginning with the Bible, he read Karamzin, Pushkin, Ann Radcliffe, Schiller, Goethe, Cervantes, Scott and also Homer. He had much to kindle his imagination.

May 1845 saw the completion of Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk*. The book was commercially successful and has been described as Russia's first "social novel". In 1846, he published his second novel, *The Double*. This was the time when Dostoevsky began reading Fourier, Cabet, Proudhon, and Saint-Simon and developed his leanings towards Socialism. His nearness with Belinsky expanded his knowledge of the philosophy of Socialism. The sense of justice, and its concern for the poor, the destitute, the have-nots of society appealed to him. However, Dostoevsky failed to accept the atheism of his fellows, being the Orthodox Russian Christian he was, deeply steeped in his faith.

Unlike his first novel, *The Double* was a failure and received hordes of negative criticism. Dostoevsky couldn't accept the failure; his epileptic seizures multiplied. Anyway he struggled to write and between 1848 – '48 published many short stories. These too failed leaving the author economically destitute. Now he joined the socialist Betekov circle, a community that helped him survive. By 1846 this society dissolved and Dostoevsky joined the Petrashevsky Circle, another socialist group. The founder, Mikhail Petrashevsky,



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proposed social reforms in Russia. Dostoevsky used the Circle's library on weekends, and also participated in discussions on Freedom from censorship, and the abolition of serfdom.

Dostoevsky began publishing *Netochka Nezhanova* in *Annals of the Fatherland*, in 1849. The project remained incomplete due to his banishment, and later Dostoevsky never attempted to complete it. The author served four years of exile with hard labour in a Siberian prison camp. He was classified as a dangerous convict and had his hands and feet shackled till his release four years later. His health deteriorated and he had to be hospitalized several times during this period.

1861 saw the publication of *The House of the Dead*, a novel based on his experiences in prison; it was the first book on Russian prison life. After this he was forced to serve in the Serbian Army Cops. In 1859 he was released from military service for health reasons and permitted to return to European Russia. In prison, Dostoevsky completed "A Little Hero". This was the only work he completed in prison; it was published in a journal. "Uncle's Dream" and "The Village of Stepanchikovo" were published in 1860. *Notes from the House of the Dead* was first published in 1860 in *Russky Mir*. "The Insulted and the Injured" was published in the same year in a newly-founded magazine funded by his brother.

In the summer of 1862 Dostoevsky travelled extensively around Europe. Impressions of the trips are recorded in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*. This volume was a severe criticism of capitalism, social modernisation, Catholicism and Protestantism. In autumn the following year, he travelled a second time to Europe. But the death of his wife and brother in 1864 left him financially constrained; he was now the sole supporter of his step-son and his



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brother's family. The magazine *Vremya* that he founded with his brother was suppressed. Next the brothers founded *Epoch*. The death of his brother, coupled with the failure of *Epoch* sent him spiralling down the financial ladder. The continuous help from relatives and friends saved him from financial bankruptcy.

The periodical, *The Russian Messenger*, began publishing *Crime and Punishment* in February 1866. In between he finished a novella, *The Gambler*, as he had promised his publisher. He married a second time and embarked upon a delayed honeymoon in 1867. The couple toured Germany extensively. In September 1867, Dostoyevsky began working on *The Idiot*, the serialisation of which began in *The Russian Messenger*, in January 1868.

Dostoyevsky was struck by personal tragedy when his three month old daughter died of pneumonia. In 1869 *The Idiot* was completed.

In November 1869, the socialist revolutionary group "People's Vengeance" murdered one of their own members. On hearing about it Dostoyevsky began writing *Demons*. The writer was back in Russia in February 1871. Dostoyevsky revived old friendships and made new ones that influenced Dostoyevsky's political progression to conservatism. By this time, *Demons* was finished and released in January 1863. It was published by the "Dostoyevsky Publishing Company" founded by the author and his wife. Next, he published *A Writer's Diary*, his collection of essays, in a periodical, *The Citizen*. Later that year, he began to write his next novel *The Adolescent*. This book was finished at the end of 1875, but parts of it had already been serialised in *Notes of the Fatherland*. The book's central concern was the father-son relationship, a theme becoming frequent in Dostoyevsky's subsequent works. He returned



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to *The Diary* again in early 1876. It included a number of essays and short stories about society, religion, politics, and ethics. The Tsar, impressed by *The Diary* asked Dostoevsky to present it to him, and also asked him to become the royal tutor. The writer's fortune was on the rise. In March 1877, the writer's health declined further. Even then he embarked on lecture tours that were hugely successful. In 1879, he was appointed an honorary member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In the summer of the same year he was elected to the honorary committee of the Association Litteraire et Artistique Internationale. In February 1880 he was elected vice-president of the Slavic Benevolent Society. He delivered a speech at the unveiling of the Pushkin memorial in Moscow on February 3, 1880. The speech made a deep impact and was received with thunderous applause.

Dostoevsky was always true to ideas of Russian independence and conservatism; he never believed in any republican government in Russia. Dostoevsky wished that there should be an understanding between the Tsar and his people; he believed that the power was not external individual but a consolidation of the power of the people. He was against serfdom, but also not welcome to the creation of a constitution, which according to him was against the history of Russia. He was rather all for a social change that would remove the feudal system and weaken the divisions between the privileged and the peasant classes. He dreamed of an utopian Christian Russia. He had no faith in democracy or oligarchy. His incomplete article entitled "Socialism and Christianity" blamed social degradation on loss of faith and called for a revival of traditional Christianity. Decline in religious and moral faith brought about decline



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in social values as a result of the clash between the communal and individual interests.

Dostoevsky is considered to be one of the most influential figures of Russian Literature. He is considered to be the forerunner of all major literary movements of the times --- Russian Symbolism; Existentialism; Expressionism; and Psychoanalysis. Leaving behind a legacy of 15 novels and novellas, 17 short-stories, and 5 translations, besides numerous essays and articles, Dostoevsky breathed his last in January 1881.