**Crime and Punishment: Introduction**

When the first installment of *Crime and Punishment* appeared in the journal *Russian Messenger* in January of 1866, its debt-ridden author, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky, had not yet finished writing the novel. However, even before the entire work had appeared in serial form, the novel was a public success. Early Russian readers and critics recognized that, artistically and socially, *Crime and Punishment* was one of the most important novels of its time, and it was widely discussed.

On the surface, *Crime and Punishment* is the story of a murder, set in the city of St. Petersburg, then the Russian capital. It is not, however, a murder mystery: we know the murderer's identity from the very beginning. Moreover, although Dostoyevsky depicts the crime and the environment in which it takes place with great realism, he is more interested in the psychology of the murderer than in the external specifics of the crime.

Like many of the great nineteenth-century novelists, Dostoyevsky often uses a series of incredible coincidences to move the plot forward. Nonetheless, the story takes on a compelling life of its own. Dostoyevsky's use of parable and of dream sequences is also original and remarkable. Furthermore, Dostoyevsky creates a gallery of memorable characters, including the proud and tormented ex-student Raskolnikov and his two murder victims; the drunken civil servant Marmeladov and his daughter, the meek prostitute Sonya, whose love helps to redeem Raskolnikov; Raskolnikov's devoted sister, mother, and best friend (Dunya, Pulkheria Aleksandrovna, and Razhumikhin); Dunya's scheming suitor Luzhin and the sinister Svidrigailov; and the canny police investigator. Porfiry Petrovich. Finally, beyond its powerful plot and colorful characters, *Crime and Punishment* is marked by its insightful treatment of several major themes. Among other things, the book is an expose of social conditions in nineteenth-century Russia, a satirical analysis of liberal and radical politics, and a religious call for redemption through suffering. As an intensely dramatic study of the nature of good and evil, it is commonly considered the quintessential Russian novel.

**Crime and Punishment: Fyodor Dostoevsky Biography**

When Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment* in the mid-1860s, he was already a well-known author. Nonetheless, he lived in near-poverty and was plagued by gambling debts. Born in Moscow in 1821, he was the second child in a family that eventually consisted of seven children. The family's life was unhappy: Dostoyevsky's father, a doctor, ruled the family with an iron hand; his mother, a meek woman, died when the boy was sixteen. Young Dostoyevsky developed a love of books and enthusiastically read Russian, French, and German novels. However, his father insisted that Dostoyevsky study engineering, and from 1838 to 1843 Dostoyevsky trained in this subject at the military engineering academy in St. Petersburg. During this time the elder Dostoyevsky was murdered by one of his serfs, an incident that had a profound impact on Fyodor.

In the mid-1840s Dostoyevsky embarked on a literary career, writing several short stories and novellas,

including "The Double" (1846). The concept of the "double" — the notion that a person may have a divided personality, symbolized by a good or evil "twin" — surfaced in several of his later works, including *Crime and Punishment*. His early published works brought Dostoyevsky some recognition. In 1848 Dostoyevsky joined a group of radical intellectuals (known as the "Petrashevsky Circle" after their leader Mikhail Petrashevsky). The group discussed literary and political ideas and advocated reforming the autocratic tsarist government. Dostoyevsky and several of his friends were arrested for treason, tried, and sentenced to death. Just as they were lined up in front of the firing squad, a messenger arrived with news that the tsar had commuted the death sentence to a term of hard labor in Siberia. Dostoyevsky later alluded to this event in *Crime and Punishment* and in other books. (It is believed that the authorities intended a mock execution all along.) During his five years in prison, Dostoyevsky came to know many of the prisoners, the great majority of whom were ordinary criminals rather than political prisoners. Through his dealings with them, the writer developed an understanding of the criminal mentality and the Russian soul. His political views also changed. He rejected his earlier pro-Western liberal-socialist ideas and instead embraced a specifically Russian brand of Christianity. His prison experiences provided the material for his later book *The House of the Dead* (1861).

After his release from prison camp in 1854, Dostoyevsky had to spend several more years in Siberia as an army private. He returned to St. Petersburg in 1859 and resumed his literary career. In the early 1860s he traveled extensively in Western Europe. However, he was troubled by personal misfortune, including the death of his wife and his brother, with whom he edited a literary journal. He also was afflicted by epilepsy, a condition little understood at the lime. Moreover, he was unable to control his compulsive gambling habit, and he found himself on the brink of poverty. His writing during this period was stimulated not only by an intense desire to express important ideas but also by a need to earn money. In 1864 he wrote *Notes from Underground*, whose narrator is a self-confessed "sick ... spiteful ... unattractive man," an embittered character who resents society. Immediately after this book, Dostoyevsky started work on *Crime and Punishment* (1865-66), regarded as his first true masterpiece. Important Russian critics hailed the work, and Dostoyevsky was acclaimed as one of Russia's most significant writers and thinkers. However, he still faced financial ruin, and the next year he wrote, in just one month, a novella called *The Gambler* in order to pay his debts. He subsequently married the stenographer to whom he had dictated the work, Anna Snitkina. She helped reform his life and they lived abroad for several years. Foremost among his later novels are *The Idiot* (1869), *The Possessed* (also translated as *The Devils*, 1871), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). With *Crime and Punishment*, these books express the essence of Dostoyevsky's social and moral philosophy and his insight into human character. In the last decade of his life, Dostoyevsky finally gained critical acclaim, social prestige, and financial security. He died in St. Petersburg in 1881.

Dostoyevsky's reputation and his influence remain strong to the present day. Virtually all his books have been translated into English and are in print. His insights into the complexities of human psychology anticipated the theories of Sigmund Freud and other early psychologists. (Indeed, Freud acknowledged Dostoyevsky's importance in this field.) Later novelists as diverse as Robert Louis Stevenson, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, and Iris Murdoch all drew inspiration from Dostoyevsky's themes and characters, while Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn carries on with Dostoyevsky's unique brand of Russian nationalism and Christianity. Filmmakers Ingmar Bergman and Woody Allen have also acknowledged a debt to Dostoyevsky in their views of human nature. Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that Dostoyevsky's view of the Russian character and politics prophesied the Russian Revolution and the terrible deprivations that Russia suffered under Soviet Communist rule in the twentieth century. With his contemporary Leo Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky is today regarded as one of the two greatest nineteenth-century Russian novelists and indeed as one of the most important novelists of any nation or period.