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Introductory Lecture



The aim of this course is to read several of Dostoevsky's best-known works and in this way to introduce the main literary and ideological elements of his work.

Dostoevsky is not a writer to struggle through or with, but one who tries to make his work as interesting and exciting—and as readable—as possible. His works raise some of the deepest moral and philosophical issues of Western culture, but he also wanted to keep his readers interested.

For one thing, it was necessary for him to do so. He was the only important Russian writer of his time who wrote for a living, and his income was dependent on his popularity. As a result, he used devices like mystery and suspense, techniques ordinarily associated with types of narrative written for a mass audience, for serious themes that rivaled what can be found in poetic tragedy. Actually, in doing so he was following in the footsteps of non-Russians like Hugo, Balzac, and Dickens, who also dealt with serious moral and social issues and used such mystery-story or adventure-story techniques.

The gap between the two kinds of literature was much wider in Russia than in Europe, probably because there was no real mass audience in Russia—most of the population was illiterate—and books circulated largely only among the upper classes. This situation changed, of course, as time went on. But this is one reason Dostoevsky remains one of the most widely read of the Russian classic writers throughout the world, and the list of screen and stage adaptations based on his works grows every

year. Among the great writers of the nineteenth century, Dostoevsky seems the most contemporary to present-day readers. It is as if his works do not deal with issues of the past but are directly relevant to those of the present day.

We certainly don't have this feeling of contemporaneity when reading someone like Tolstoy. We can easily identify with what may be called the universal problems of civilized life as they appear in Tolstoy's novels, but the world in which Tolstoy's main characters live is totally different from Dostoevsky's. It is the world of the Russian past.

The world of Dostoevsky, on the other hand, is a world in constant flux and change, in which the stability of the past, anchored by a belief in God, has begun to be seriously questioned. It is a world in which new ideas and ideologies have begun to influence the minds and hearts of a new group called the *intelligentsia*, that is, educated people who no longer felt a part of the old socioreligious structures and wanted to change them in fundamental ways. Dostoevsky attacked this group in his major novels, but he understood them from the inside at the same time. One of our aims will be to understand how he could both oppose them but also depict them with so much sympathy, inner comprehension, and even pity.

The world of Dostoevsky is thus inwardly much closer to our own, which may be said to have begun after the end of the First World War in 1918. It was then that the self-confidence of Western European civilization collapsed, and the problems raised in Dostoevsky's novels, which earlier had seemed to be only peculiarly *Russian*, became those of our Western culture as a whole.

Another aim is to study Dostoevsky's works in relation to their literary and ideological contexts, so as to bring out what he was trying to express or convey in relation to his own times. Like all great writers, his works go far beyond their historical context, and

I shall try to give you a sense of these larger issues as well, as they appeared to him in his own period.

Russian Culture

Early Russian literature was mostly theological, controlled by religious and Christian ideas and values derived from Byzantine Christianity. It remained under this influence to a great extent until the arrival of Peter the Great in the late seventeenth century. Peter the Great insisted that the literate class, roughly the nobility who governed the country, reeducate itself according to the Western and European norms of the time. This led to all kinds of changes in customs, but what is most important for us is that it meant adopting the ideas of rationalism that had begun to predominate in European thought.

In Europe, the conflict between science and religion had reached some sort of compromise over the previous several centuries, but the change occurred much more quickly and despotically in Russia. For one thing, it only affected the small, literate ruling class, not the vast majority of the people, who were illiterate peasants. This created a split in Russian culture between the ruling class and the people, who lived in different moral and spiritual worlds. Everyone was aware of this split, but Dostoevsky experienced it deeply and personally in a unique way. When he was arrested in 1849 and sent to a prison camp to live with peasant convicts, he became aware of how wide this gap was. He and the few other educated prisoners were completely alienated from the peasant-convicts and were regarded almost as foreigners. They were also looked on with a hatred that could never have been openly expressed in ordinary social life. After this, Dostoevsky felt that the most important issue in Russian life was to bridge this gap; and to do so the educated

class would have to come to respect the religious beliefs and values of the peasantry. He was not alone in this, and we can find the same theme emerging in Tolstoy.

During the nineteenth century, as a result of their European education, the ruling class began to have contempt for their own culture and the Russian language. It was the sign of a good education to speak French rather than Russian. One can see this in the beginning of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, in which the aristocratic characters talk in French about the Napoleonic invasion. This level of Westernization within the ruling class itself led to an opposition between the so-called *Westernizers* and the *Slavophiles*.

The first believed that Russia should follow the same social and political course as Europe. The second group thought that Russia had its own national particularities that should be developed and cultivated and not given up for the European model. As for Dostoevsky, we can say roughly that he began as a Westernizer but developed into a Slavophile. But although he sympathized with many Slavophile ideas, he never accepted all their doctrines.

An important reason is that the Slavophiles tended to glorify and idealize the Russian past, which included serfdom.¹ He always retained some of the Westernizer aims of his early years, but he believed they could be realized without any political changes such as the weakening of tsarism. He did not think that any kind of constitutional democracy in the Western sense, or any other

1. Russian serfdom has its origins in the eleventh century, but landowners gained almost unlimited ownership over Russian serfs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Serfs were given to estates, and fleeing the estate was a criminal offense. Landowners were allowed to transfer and sell their serfs to other landowners, separating family members and keeping the serfs' property for themselves. Serfdom was abolished in 1861 under Tsar Alexander II.

kind of democratic system, was suitable for Russia, but he was always in favor of more freedom of speech and press. What he wanted most of all, once serfdom had been abolished in 1861, was that more land should be distributed to the peasantry. This was the cause of most of the social unrest, and Dostoevsky continued to believe until his death that the tsarist government would ultimately take the necessary steps to avoid disaster.

Biography

Before a discussion of Dostoevsky's first important book, *Poor Folk*, a few words must be said about his early life. My approach will be primarily cultural and ideological, but some events of his life are indeed of crucial importance.

He was born in 1821, to a family that had acquired the education necessary for status in Russian society. His father was an army doctor, and his mother came from a well-educated merchant family. Dostoevsky's father attained the status of a nobleman, but this was a civil service ranking in Russia, which did not give him the status of landowning families, in which the rank of nobility was inherited. This may help to explain why Dostoevsky was so sensitive to the theme of social humiliation, especially in his early works.

Another important aspect of these early years is his religious education. Dostoevsky's father came from a family of Russian Orthodox priests and was very devout. His mother was also religious, and Dostoevsky himself later referred to this background as important for him. A tutor came to the house to teach him and his brother French, but so did a priest, to instruct them in the Orthodox faith. This was quite different from the usual pattern of the inherited nobility, whose Western education, primarily French, had made them more or less indifferent to

religion. Late in his life Dostoevsky wrote of the importance of the religious education he had received from his parents and of the religious pilgrimages on which he was taken by his mother. Dostoevsky and his brother were sent to very good private schools, and the parents also read to them every night from both the Russian classics and European works translated into Russian.

His father decided that Dostoevsky should become a military engineer, and he was sent to study in St. Petersburg for such a career. But he had already made up his mind that he wanted to become a writer, and while he passed his courses in technical subjects, he was more interested in the literary ones that were also given in the school.

An important event in 1839 was the death of his father, who was rumored to have been murdered by the peasant serfs on their small estate in the country. Officially, it was specified that he died of an apoplectic fit. A good deal has been made of this rumored murder, and it was very important for Freud, who wrote a famous article, “Dostoevsky and Parricide,” analyzing its presumed importance on Dostoevsky’s character and his work, especially *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Dostoevsky graduated from the academy and served as an army engineer, but he was apparently not very good at the job. He resigned his commission when he inherited a small amount of money. His first novel was a success and made him famous overnight. After that he lived on advances and payment for his work; he called himself “a literary proletarian.”²

2. In a letter to N. N. Strakhov dated September 30, 1863, from Rome, Dostoevsky wrote, “I am a literary proletarian, and whoever wants my work must provide payment upfront.”

The success of his first novel brought Dostoevsky into contact with the important critic Vissarion Belinsky³ and introduced him to a group of young writers influenced by radical and socialist ideas. Two years later he quarreled with Belinsky both for literary reasons and because of atheism. Dostoevsky refused Belinsky's acceptance of a totally atheistic position under the influence of the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, who had declared that, instead of God having created humanity, it was humanity that had created the idea of God.⁴

Dostoevsky then began to attend meetings of the Petrashevsky Circle, a gathering of young men who met once a week to discuss advanced European ideas. Most of them were disciples of the French socialist Charles Fourier, who did not believe in revolutionary violence but wanted to create a brave new world by example.⁵ Dostoevsky did not accept any of these socialist programs because he thought they interfered with the freedom of the individual personality. But he stood out within the group by his violent hatred of serfdom.

That hatred helps to explain why he joined with eight others to form a secret society within this group, whose aim was to stir up a revolution against serfdom. But the plans of the secret society were stopped when all of the Petrashevsky Circle were arrested following the revolutions in Europe in 1848. The existence of the revolutionary secret society was not discovered at the time and only came to light in 1922, long after

3. Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848), a Russian literary critic and editor.

4. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), a German philosopher and the author of *The Essence of Christianity* (1842).

5. The Petrashevsky Circle was named for its organizer, Mikhail Petrashevsky (1821–1866), a follower of François Marie Charles Fourier (1772–1837), a French utopian socialist philosopher.

Dostoevsky's death. But Dostoevsky lived all his life with the knowledge that he, too, had once consented to unleashing murder through a revolution, and his deep understanding of the psychology of such characters in his novels can surely be attributed to this cause.

Dostoevsky spent about a year in solitary confinement after his arrest. As a nobleman he was well treated but then taken out to face a firing squad, only to have his life spared in the last minute.⁶ He was then sentenced to a four-year prison term at hard labor, after which he served in the Russian army as a soldier and then became an officer again. His years in the prison camp, following the mock execution, were of decisive importance in reshaping his spiritual and ideological views. These years also were the inspiration for one of his least-read but most important works, a sort of novelistic autobiography, *House of the Dead*, which Tolstoy later called one of the greatest masterpieces of Russian literature.

Literary Background

Dostoevsky became a writer at a particular period of Russian literature, and it's important to locate him in this context if we wish to understand his work. Speaking very broadly, we can say that, along with the change in Russian culture as a whole initiated by the reforms of Peter the Great, Russian literature more or less followed suit, adapting European literary styles to Rus-

6. Dostoevsky was imprisoned in Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, established by Peter the Great in 1703. From around 1720, the fort served as a prison for high-ranking or political prisoners.

sian material. During Dostoevsky's boyhood, the great writer A. S. Pushkin took Byron and Shakespeare as his models and showed how original masterpieces could be created out of the transformation of these models to express typically Russian themes.⁷

Popular novels also were written in this high Romantic style, and there are parodistic references to this in *Poor Folk*. But in the early 1840s, the critic Belinsky began to argue that Russian writers should follow the example of European writers like Balzac, George Sand, and Dickens. They focused on the social problems of their own times and society, and thus helped, as we say these days, to raise the consciousness of their readers about such problems.

Belinsky made this point most forcefully in writing about Nikolay Gogol, whose novel *Dead Souls* and whose short story *The Overcoat* he held up as an example for Russian writers to follow.⁸ Dostoevsky was already an admirer of Balzac; his first published work was a translation of that French novelist's *Eugenie Grandet* (1833). He was also a great admirer of Gogol, and the main character of *Poor Folk* is of the same social type as that of Gogol's *The Overcoat*. But in the case of Dostoevsky, one can say that he not only wore the overcoat but turned it inside out.

7. Alexander Sergeyeovich Pushkin (1799–1837), a poet, playwright, and novelist widely considered to be the founder of modern literature in Russia.

8. Nikolay Vasilyevich Gogol (1809–1852), one of the preeminent figures of Russian literary realism. His later writing openly satirizes political and spiritual corruption in the Russian Empire, which eventually prompted him to leave Russia and live in Italy from 1836 to 1848.

Other Literary Influences

Two other writers important for understanding the first work we are going to discuss are Nikolay Karamzin and Pushkin.⁹ Both are related to *Poor Folk*, and this fact tells us something important about Dostoevsky, namely that he is a writer who creates out of his own personal experience and who recasts such experience in terms furnished by the culture and ideas of his time. He invariably provides cultural clues, as it were, to help us to understand the meaning of his works. He wishes us to grasp them not only in terms of the individual psychology or conflicts of his characters but also in relation to the wider meaning they convey in the Russian cultural environment.

Karamzin is little known outside Russia, but he was an important writer who exercised a wide influence. He wrote not only stories but an important travel book, *Letters of a Russian Traveler*, and a history of Russia in an accessible modern style that celebrated tsarism as the only reasonable kind of government for a country as large as Russia. Dostoevsky said late in life that he had grown up on Karamzin, and the same is true for most of the generation of the 1840s. Karamzin is linked to *Poor Folk* because one of his most famous stories is called *Poor Liza*, and it also deals compassionately with the fate of the humble and oppressed lower class in Russia.

In *Poor Liza*, a highly idealized peasant girl who sells flowers in the streets, the epitome of all the graces and virtues, falls in love with a young aristocrat who courts her but then makes a wealthy marriage to a member of his own class. Poor Liza then drowns herself in the lake of a monastery garden in which they

9. Nikolay Karamzin (1765–1826), a Russian writer, poet, historian, and critic, best known for his twelve-volume *History of the Russian State*.

used to meet. Apparently this garden then became a favorite place for romantic meetings and family picnics because of the popularity of the story. Dostoevsky's title reminded his readers of this story. His style and treatment are totally different, and the details are much harsher and cruder, but Dostoevsky's story essentially makes the same point in its own way.

Another writer mentioned in *Poor Folk* is Pushkin. The young Dostoevsky adored him, and when Pushkin was killed in a duel, in the same year as Dostoevsky's mother's death, Dostoevsky said he would have worn mourning for Pushkin if he were not already doing so for his mother. In the very last year of Dostoevsky's life, he made a famous speech declaring that Pushkin was as great a writer as Shakespeare, Cervantes, or Goethe, and in some ways even greater.¹⁰

Pushkin's short story "The Stationmaster" is one of the inspirations for *Poor Folk*. The initial story again shows the influence of sentimentalism and can be seen as a continuation of the theme of *Poor Liza*, that is, the helplessness of the lower classes in the face of the power and authority of those above them. It has the same aim of eliciting sympathy for what Dostoevsky later called *the insulted and injured*. Here once again a lower-class girl, the daughter of a stationmaster whose job is to look after the changing of horses in the carriages of travelers, is seduced by a passing nobleman. In this case, he takes her away from her father, sets her up as his mistress, and treats her very well. But the old father is heartbroken by what he considers to be the debasement of his daughter. Repulsed when he tries to persuade her to return, he takes to drink and dies of grief. Later, she comes back to weep on his grave. Again, attention is directed to the sad plight of the

10. Dostoyevsky delivered the Pushkin Speech in 1880 at the unveiling of the Pushkin monument in Moscow.

lower classes, their equal capacity with their social superiors for deep feeling, and their helplessness.

Another writer referred to explicitly in *Poor Folk* is Gogol, and the background here requires a little more detail. The mid-1840s began what has been called the Gogol period of Russian literature. Dostoevsky was following very closely the new literary trends.

One of the types of writing that the literary critic Belinsky praised was “physiological sketches.” These are descriptions of ordinary city life and of the lives of very ordinary people who carry out the daily tasks that make existence possible for their superiors—such as a house porter sweeping away the snow or an organ grinder walking through the streets and playing his music. No one had thought such insignificant people worthy of literary attention in the past. Or if they appeared, they were inevitably comic types at whom the reader was supposed to laugh.

The critic Belinsky had urged younger Russian writers to follow Gogol’s example, whose main character in “The Overcoat,” the clerk Akakii, is someone existing on the very lowest rung of the Russian social ladder. He is a member of the army of clerks who worked for the Russian bureaucracy in Petersburg and kept the empire going. The narrator who tells his story is quite superior and ironic about him and makes the reader feel the same way. The copyist is perfectly happy in his job and even continues to copy at home because he enjoys it so much. But when he is asked to summarize the ideas in one of the documents he is copying, he finds it too difficult to do.

Gogol is writing about the lower classes, but he hardly portrays his character in any sort of favorable light. Other young clerks in the bureau make fun of him, tease and torment him, and from time to time he protests and asks: “What have I done to you?” A new young clerk is so moved by this complaint that “in

these penetrating words he heard the echo of other words: “I am your brother.” This note of Christian compassion is introduced very briefly and on the side, as it were, but we are told that it left a permanent impression on the younger man.

What happens is that Akakii needs to have a new overcoat made because his old one is so worn out that it doesn’t protect him against the Russian winter. This new coat costs so much that he has to cut down on meals to save for it, and when it’s finally made he is so proud of it that it changes his life. His officemates begin to treat him with a little more respect because he no longer looks so ragged, and he is on the point of becoming human when the coat is stolen one night. He complains to the local commissioner of police, but nobody pays any attention to him. He is finally thrown out, falls ill, and soon dies. But there is a kind of semisupernatural ending, quite typical for Gogol, because from that time on the district where Akakii lost his coat is haunted by presumed phantoms who steal the coats of everybody passing that way. This only ends when the coat of the commissioner of police who had thrown Akakii out of his office is stolen, though phantoms now continue to appear in other districts. Just who and what they are is never very clear, but a reader of the time probably took all this as a satirical reference to the inefficiency and corruption of the police.

Dostoevsky follows in this tradition by writing about characters on the same social level, thus following Belinsky’s advice. But he transforms these characters by combining the social pathos of Pushkin with the bureaucratic world of Gogol. Most important of all, he abandons the upper-class narrator who appears in both stories and adopts a form that allows the reader to enter into this lower-class world from the inside. We’ll talk about that in the next lecture.

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