



Life and Death in Russian Literature (Part 1)

Global Focus on Knowledge / 2009 Summer No.7

1 June

Mitsuyoshi Numano

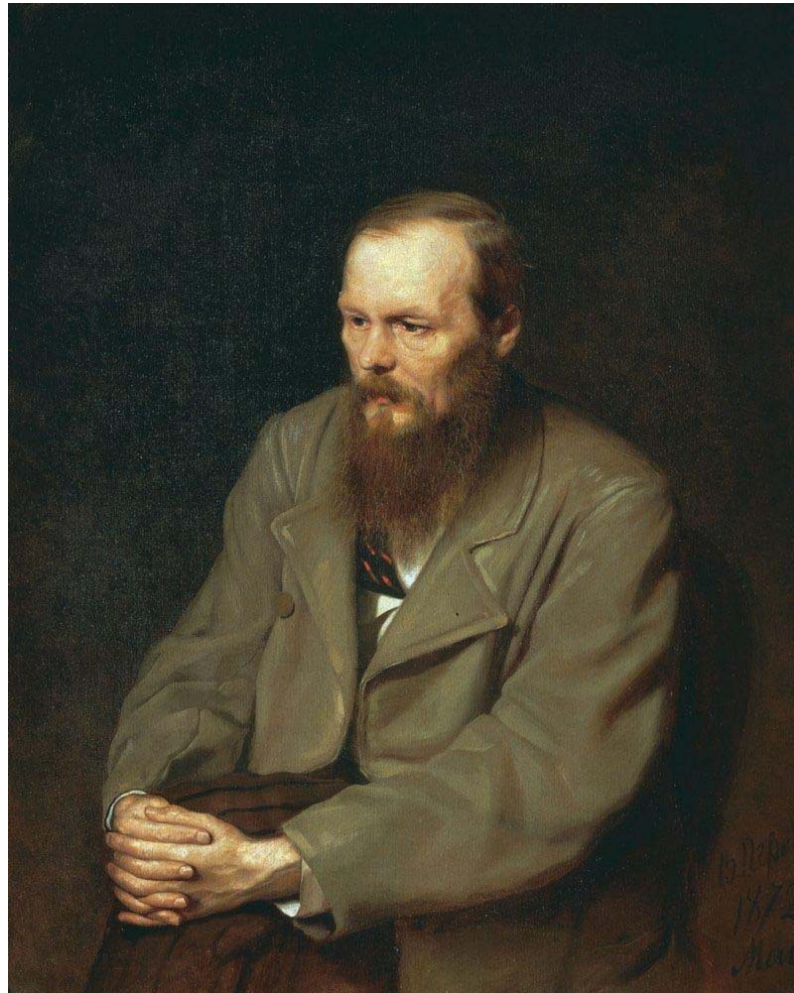
(The Department of Contemporary Literary Studies / Slavic Literature,
Faculty of Letters)



Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky

- Ф е д о р М и х а й л о в и ч
Д о с т о е в с к и й
Fyodor(Fedor) Mikhailovich Dosto(y)evsky
30 October 1821 (Bunsei 4) ~
- 28 January 1881 (Meiji 14)

Portrait by Vasiliy Perov (1872)
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow





Dostoevsky's Life and Career (1)

- 1821 Dostoevsky is born in Moscow, as the second son of a staff doctor at the Hospital for the Poor.
- 1838 Dostoevsky is admitted to St. Petersburg Academy of Military Engineers.
- 1839 Dostoevsky's father is murdered by his own serfs.
- 1846 Publication of Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk*, which is considered a most striking literary debut.



Dostoevsky's Life and Career (2)

- 1849 Dostoevsky is arrested together with other members of the socialist “Petrashevsky Circle” and sentenced to penal servitude in Omsk, in Siberia.
- 1854 Dostoevsky is released from prison.
- 1859 Dostoevsky resigns from the army. He receives permission to return to St. Petersburg after 10 years in exile and resumes his literary career.
- 1861 Publication of *The House of the Dead*.
- 1864 Publication of *Notes from Underground*.



Dostoevsky's Life and Career (3)

- Dostoevsky's five (four) mature novels
- *Crime and Punishment* 1866
- *The Idiot* 1870
- *The Possessed* 1872
- (*The Raw Youth* 1875)
- *The Brothers Karamazov* 1879~1880
- January 28, 1881 Dostoevsky dies.



The Shattering Experiences with Death (1)

- Father was murdered by serfs on the family estate (June 1839). (The facts of the murder are still not known for certain.)
- → Freud's famous essay "Dostoevsky and Parricide" (1928)
- The hypothesis that the epileptic seizure is a self-punishment for his unconscious death-wish against Father (Oedipus complex). (Pathological studies have been carried out since then, but it is still hypothetical and often criticized.)



The Shattering Experiences with Death (2)

- 1849 Dostoevsky was arrested in the Petrashevsky Affair. In December, he was sentenced to death with 20 others.
- On December 22, Dostoevsky was lead out for execution by firing-squad in the Semenovskiy Square, but at the last moment the sentence was commuted to four years' hard labor on the express instructions of the Tsar himself.



The Death-Obsessed Author (1)

- Dostoevsky's works are filled with “unusual deaths” (murder, suicide).
- Take his four mature novels for example :
- *Crime and Punishment*
- The murder of an elderly moneylender committed by a former student.
- *The Idiot*
- Nastasya Filippovna, the heroine, is murdered at the end of the novel. The young man Ippolit is suffering from terminal consumption. Prince Myshkin talks about a condemned man prior to his execution.



The Death-Obsessed Author (2)

- *The Possessed*
- A murder by the socialist revolutionary group, the man obsessed with his philosophy of man-godhood, the suicide of a girl who has been raped.
- *The Brothers Karamazov*
- The murder of the father of the brothers Karamazov. (in the unwritten sequel, an attempt on life of Tsar[=Father of the State]?)



The Death-Obsessed Author (3)

- Three “Heaven and Hell” short stories of his mature period
- *Bobok*
A Fantastic conversation among the dead in a cemetery.
- *A Gentle Creature*
The Thoughts of a husband whose wife has committed suicide.
- *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*
A man who has decided to kill himself visits an utopian land in his dream.



Reading *Crime and Punishment* (1)

- **【Plot】**The novel is set in St.Petersburg in the 1860s, where Dostoevsky lived during the same period. The main character is a destitute student, Raskolnikov.
- This man believes himself to be “an extraordinary man”, similar to Napoleon, and believes that the murder of useless people is permissible. Obsessed with the idea, he kills an elderly moneylender.
- However, after the murder, he suffers mental agonies unexpectedly and eventually confesses his crime to the police. He is sentenced to penal servitude in Siberia. He undergoes a process of spiritual regeneration under the guidance of Sonia, a morally pure and innocent ex-prostitute who loves him.



Reading *Crime and Punishment* (2)

***Crime and Punishment* as a crime fiction**

- It is obvious from the plot that *Crime and Punishment* can be read in the context of “crime fiction”. The main character, who commits a serious crime, murder, is hunted down by a detective and guided towards confession. It is not an abit can be regarded as “crime fiction”, which describes the seedy side of life in the city.stract philosophical novel, but in fact,



Reading *Crime and Punishment* (3)

***Crime and Punishment* is also an “urban novel”.**

- It is also a modern “urban novel”, in which the city, St. Petersburg, itself plays an inherent part of the novel. At the time of the novel, St. Petersburg (formally Sankt-Petersburg) was the capital of the Russian empire and known to be as big a city as Moscow. In describing the St. Petersburg background, Dostoevsky did not hesitate to get acquainted with the seedy part of life in the city, where the drunks and prostitutes congregated.



Reading *Crime and Punishment* (4)

“Overstepping” and resurrection

- After the murder, Raskolnikov goes to Sonia’s house and has her read “the raising of Lazarus” from the New Testament, chapter 11 of the Gospel according to St. John. In this episode, Jesus miraculously raises a man, Lazarus, from the dead and says “I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in Me though he were dead, yet shall he live.”
- Sonia, the heroine, sacrificed her body and resorted to prostitution in order to support her impoverished family, but this is nothing other than corrupting herself.
- Both Raskolnikov and Sonia committed crimes by destroying someone. Therefore, the way to spiritual resurrection can be regarded as one of the most important themes of this novel.



Reading *Crime and Punishment* (5)

- **The meaning of the original title in Russian**
- П р е с т у п л е н и е и
н а к а з а н и е (Prestupleniye i Nakazaniye)
English: “Crime and Punishment”
- The literal meaning of the word “Prestupleniye”, which translates as “罪”, is “overstepping”. It usually means “犯罪” (not “罪” sin).
- Should the title be translated as “犯罪と刑罰”?

Soviet movie *Crime and Punishment* (1970)
Directed by Lev Kulidzhanov
Played by Georgi Taratorkin as Raskolnikov

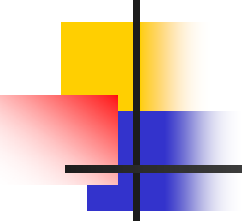


Figure removed due to
copyright restrictions



Reading *The Brothers Karamazov* (1)

- **【Plot】** (This and next slide)
- Fyodor Karamazov, a lecherous rural landowner, has three sons. The oldest brother, Dmitri is passionate, Ivan is a rationalist and atheist, and Aleksey (Alyosha) is a good-hearted soul and religious novice.
- Ivan narrates to Alyosha his poem entitled “The Grand Inquisitor”. In the monastery, after the death of Zosima, Alyosha’s teacher, no miracle occurs but his body decays, exuding a putrid odor.
- The father, Fyodor, and eldest son, Dmitri, are in conflict over an inheritance and a woman. When Fyodor is murdered, Dmitri becomes the immediate suspect.



Reading *The Brothers Karamazov* (2)

- However, it was the Karamazovs' servant, Smerdyakov, who killed Fyodor (he is rumored to be the illegitimate son of Fyodor). He tells Ivan that he acted under the inspiration of Ivan's idea, "If there is no God or immortality, everything is permitted", and that Ivan is the murderer.
- Smerdyakov hangs himself. Since Ivan goes insane, his testimony to the court is disregarded. Dmitri ends up convicted and sentenced to twenty years of hard labor.
- Alyosha explains a plan developed for his escape to Dmitri and then leaves him to go to the funeral of Ilyusha, a young boy who died of illness. Ilyusha's friends chant "Hurrah for Karamazov!", deeply affected by Alyosha's speech.



Reading *The Brothers Karamazov* (3)

The problem of “parricide”

- It has its origin in Dostoevsky’s own experience. In *The House of the Dead*, there is also a prisoner of noble origin who murdered his father in order to get his hands on an inheritance.
- Treating *The Brothers Karamazov* as a microcosm of the Russian situation, “father” could possibly be regarded as father-Tsar, “Father of the State”.



Reading *The Brothers Karamazov* (4)

Reconstructing the sequel to *The Brothers Karamazov*?

- As Dostoevsky says in the preface, he intended to write “the second novel” (a sequel), which would take place 13 years later and detail Alyosha’s life, but died before he could write it.
- What kind of sequel would Dostoevsky have written if he had lived several more years?
- Grossman, the Soviet specialist on Dostoevsky, suggests that “Alyosha would attempt to assassinate Alexander II and would be executed.”
- Referring to Grossman, Ikuo Kameyama scientifically imagines the sequel through close research in the book below.

Ikuo Kameyama. *Imagining the Sequel to The Brothers Karamazov*. Kobunsha



Reading *The Brothers Karamazov* (5)

- **Ivan's *The Grand Inquisitor***
- The questions posed by the atheist Ivan: “It’s not that I don’t accept God, it’s the world created by Him I don’t and cannot accept.” “If there is no God, everything is permitted.”
- The poem *The Grand Inquisitor*. Some time in the 16th century in Spain, Jesus returns to Earth during the Spanish inquisition and encounters the Grand Inquisitor. The Grand Inquisitor states “The vast majority of humanity cannot handle the freedom which Jesus has given them. Jesus should have turned stones into bread, as men will always follow those who will feed their bellies.” (→It is a terrifying prophecy of the problems of human freedom and the totalitarianism in 20th century.)
- “Parricide” in *The Brothers Karamazov* — Could it be about the three fathers — the personal father, Father of the State (father-Tsar), Our Father (God)?

Soviet movie *The Brothers Karamazov* (1968)
Directed by Ivan Pyriev

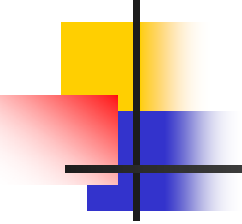


Figure removed due to
copyright restrictions

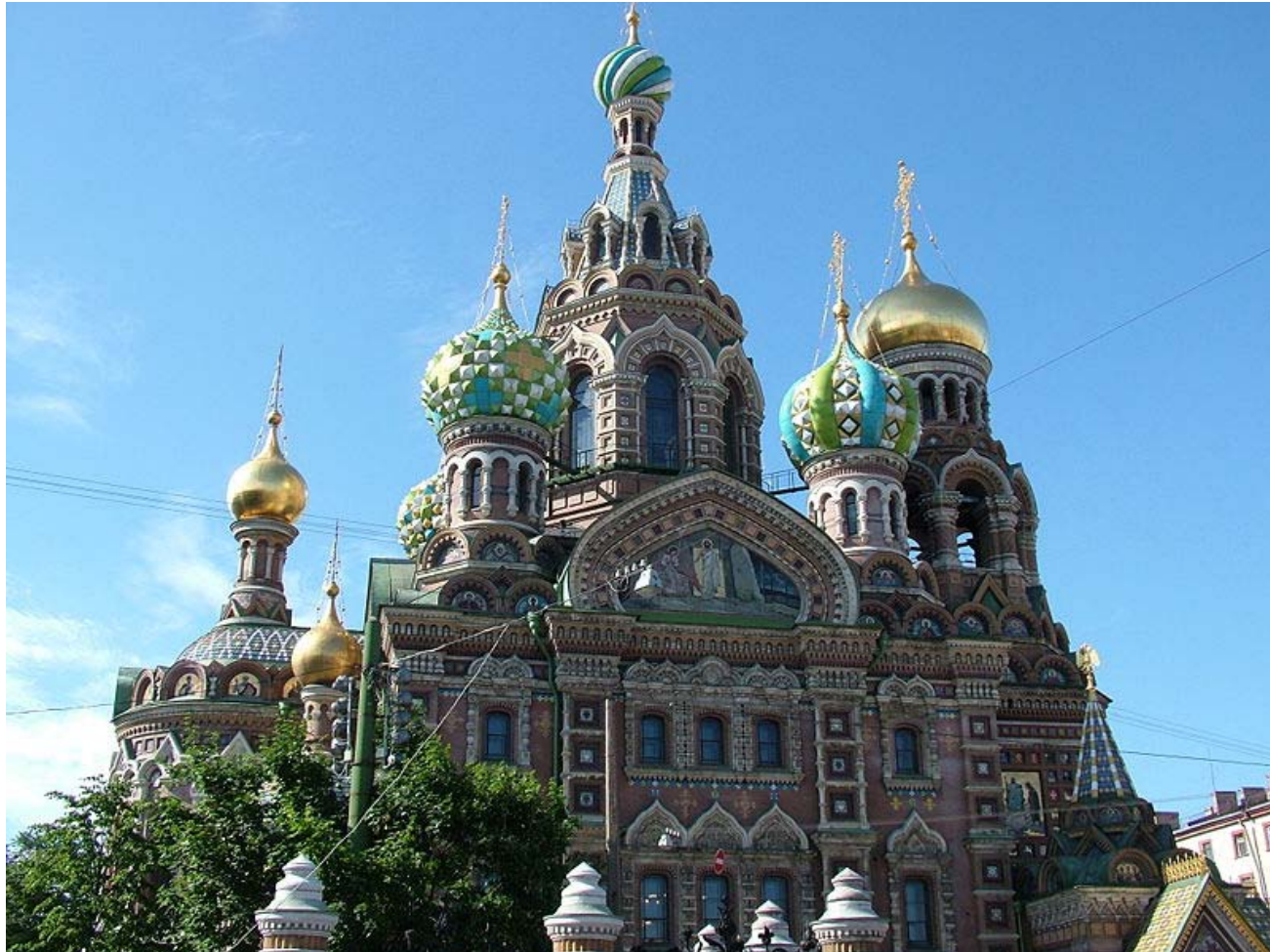


The Death of the Author

The “mystery” of Dostoevsky’s death

- On 1 March 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by members of a revolutionary group.
- Dostoevsky died of illness one month before the assassination. It is said that a small cell of terrorists of the “People’s Will” group, who were making attempts on the Tsar’s life, lived in the apartment which adjoined the apartment of Dostoevsky.
- Edvard Radzinsky, a modern Russian writer of historical fiction, raises questions about the connections between the death of Dostoevsky and the terrorists in his book, *Alexander II: The Last Great Tsar*. (Though it is possibly his fanciful creation...)

“The Church of the Savior on Blood” С п а с н а к р о в и
(Erected on the spot where Alexander II was assassinated)



Dostoevsky's tomb at the Alexander Nevsky Monastery, St. Petersburg





Dostoevsky — Still Powerful Today

New translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* (translated by Ikuo Kameyama) was an exceptional bestseller. This shows that Dostoevsky is still an influential writer today, though it was during the Meiji era in Japan that his novels were written. What makes Dostoevsky's work so timeless?

- The masterpiece of literature: *The Brothers Karamazov* is the greatest of Dostoevsky's novels, and one of the world's greatest masterpieces ever written, as is *War and Peace* by Tolstoy.
- There are all the problems of human culture: He puts all the deep questions which are topical and fresh though long time has passed — love and hate, lechery and purity, love triangle, lust for money and murder, evil and contempt, atheism and devout belief and so on.
- The ultimate questions: This novel directly raises **the ultimate questions about life and death**, and once it captures the reader's mind and imagination, it will not let go. Readers will acutely feel the powerful force of literature, which became weakened in the refined literature of the 20th century. They will realize again that literature originally possessed this potency.



Dostoevsky's influence on Japanese writers

- Yutaka Haniya (*Death Spirits*)
- Otohiko Kaga (*The Verdict*)
- Kaoru Takamura (*Terigaki*)
- Kenzaburo Oe (*Farewell, My Books!*)
- Haruki Murakami

As “the three books that have meant the most to him”, he selected *The Great Gatsby*, *The Long Goodbye*, both of which he had translated, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

- Masahiko Shimada
- Maki Kashimada (*The Idiot* greatly influenced her novel *Zero no Okoku*)
- Huminori Nakamura