

AP English Literature and Composition  
Introduction to *Crime and Punishment*

While it is really important to me that you just dive into a novel and splash around in the text, there are some facts and ideas you should know before and as you read.

First, Dostoyevsky. People like to say that while Tolstoy is a philosophical novelist, Dostoyevsky is a philosopher who expresses himself through novels. In ways, this is the perfect book to use as a transition back to literature from AP Lang, as it is in many ways a novel of ideas.

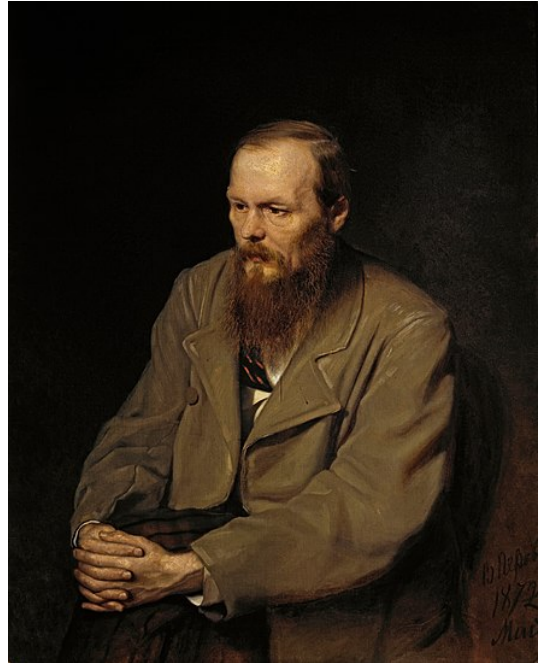
Dostoyevsky's dates are 1821–1881. There are many important happenings in the life of Dostoyevsky—it would be fun to read a good biography of him, such as the one by Joseph Frank (in one abridged or 5 unabridged volumes) in order to understand a little more about the Dostoyevsky's thought, anchored in his life and influences. One undeniably pivotal event, though, occurred in 1849, when Dostoyevsky, who had been convicted of political crimes, was brought before the firing squad to be shot when “he was reprieved, moments before the execution” (Ready, x). You may find moments in *Crime and Punishment* that show you that intensity of fear and the result of the reprieve and fairly literal enactment of the death-and-rebirth archetype.

You should know that the novel is set in 1865, and is written, like Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, serially in *The Russian Messenger*.

The translation we have chosen is widely acclaimed and is said to be rougher in ways than the others, more like Dostoyevsky wrote it in tone, speed, and feeling of stultification. It is more in touch, Ready says, with the repetition in the original (xxxv) and in the bridging of words and deeds (xxxvi).

My study questions about the introduction can help frame your reading of the novel (but you may choose to read the introduction last, as it contains spoilers). Here are some main threads:

- What are useful ways of classifying the novel? Consider these overlapping categories as ways you might approach the novel: murder mystery, Bildungsroman, conversion story, novel of class struggle, philosophical novel (and novel about the limits of philosophy), tragedy.
- Consider the way setting affects other aspects of the novel—this approach includes spatial aspects, such as Raskolnikov's room and later other interior spaces, along with the larger geography of the novel.



- Consider the ways characters act as foils and doubles of the main characters. What does the play of sameness and difference show us?

- Of course, you should note emerging themes as well as objects you think of as symbols. You should read for ways that the point of view establishes tone and influences your inferences about what the novel values. Mood—the emotional atmosphere of the text—is also especially important in this novel. Consider how the novel establishes and then uses these elements to further its ends.

The last aspect of the novel I should address before you start is how names work in Russian. Ready's note about this difficulty for English readers begins on p. xxxix. Please listen to my screencast explanation (on the class website) before you read.