

0. TRAGEDIES in DOSTOEVSKY'S LIFE - Story Preface

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The city of St. Petersburg, and its main river—the Neva—were important places to Dostoevsky during his life as a writer. When his first wife was dying, he returned to St. Petersburg from Germany so he could be near her. This image depicts an illustration of the Neva Embankment which the Russian artist Ilya Glazunov created as a set design for Tchaikovsky's opera "The Queen of Spades" (in 1981). Copyright, Estate of Ilya Glazunov; image online via "Moscow State Art Gallery of the People's Artist of the USSR Ilya Glazunov" and provided here as fair use for educational purposes. Click on the image for a better view.

Only a catastrophe could pull Dostoevsky away from the roulette table. Even losing the advance (for his unwritten novel) to the [Bad Homburg](#) casino was not enough to make him go home. But when he learned that Maria was dying, he returned to Russia.

During the winter of 1863-1864, Dostoevsky worked on *Notes from the Underground*. In the background, he heard Maria's pitiful, hacking cough. No one could help her. And although Dostoevsky was never really happy with his first wife, he loved her. When she hemorrhaged to death on 15 April 1864, the writer was distraught. He later wrote to his friend, Baron Wrangel:

*Oh, dear friend, she loved me boundlessly and I loved her infinitely, and still we were unable to live happily together...We could not stop loving each other; the more unhappy we were, the more tied we felt to each other. It may seem strange, but that was the case. She was the most honest, noble, and magnanimous woman I have ever known. Even though I suffered terrible agonies as I watched her slow death, even though I fully appreciated her worth and knew what I took to the grave, I still had not imagined how empty and painful it would be when the grave was covered with earth. And now it has been a year, and I still have this feeling; it has not diminished in the least.*

(Dostoevsky's letter, translated and quoted in *A Writer's Life*, by Geir Kjetsaa, page 170.)

Dostoevsky's pain was dramatically worsened when his beloved brother Mikhail died three months after Maria's death. The brothers' successful journal, *Vremya* ("Time"), had ended because of a misunderstanding with the censor. Their plan to start *Pravda* ("Truth"), another journal, never passed muster with the authorities.

When Mikhail finally got permission to publish a journal called *Epoch*, it was on condition that the new magazine would effectively serve as a government mouthpiece. But antiquated equipment, a lack of subscribers, creditor battles and the very real threat of debtor's prison took their toll on Mikhail. He died of liver infection on the 10th of July.

In a letter to his brother Andrei, Dostoevsky reveals his utter despair:

*That man loved me more than anything in the whole world - even more than his wife and children, whom he adored...now what lies ahead of me is epilepsy and cold, lonely old age.* (Translated and quoted in *A Writer's Life*, page 172.)

But what was in store for Dostoevsky was much more than life alone as a sick, lonely man. Short of money, he couldn't get a loan big-enough to help him flee the country, one step ahead of his creditors. He agreed to sell a new three-volume edition of his finished works to an unscrupulous man called [Fyodor Stellovsky](#) for three thousand rubles.

Never mind that the speculator made-back all his money in days. Lurking in the agreement was an untenable

provision: Dostoevsky had to produce a new novel within one year (by November 1, 1866) or Stellovsky had the rights to publish *all* his works for nearly a decade. By the time he paid expenses, the writer barely had enough money to travel to Wiesbaden. When he arrived, he lost the rest of his advance at the roulette table.

Discouraged, and with little food to sustain him, Dostoevsky began to write Crime and Punishment in his deplorable Wiesbaden room. When he returned to St. Petersburg, he sold the serialized rights for the unfinished novel (which featured a murder story about the death of an old pawnbroker at the hands of Raskolnikov) to The Russian Messenger (Russkii Vestnik).

Publication began in January of 1866 to generally good reviews. But as the year progressed, and he was still working on Crime and Punishment (with its themes of alienation, suffering, forgiveness and redemption), the looming date of November 1st constantly reminded him of the one bet he absolutely could not lose.

And then ... he met someone who would help him "beat the odds."

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/TRAGEDIES-in-DOSTOEVSKY-S-LIFE-Dostoevsky>

## Media Stream



### Bad Homburg

Image online, courtesy the booking.com website.

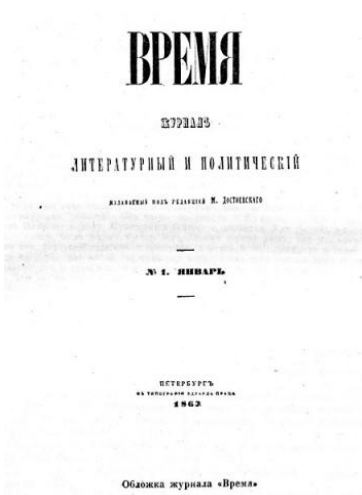
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### Mikhail Dostoevsky

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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### Vremya

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## Epoch - Mikhail Dostoevsky's Journal

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## Dostoevsky - Great Writer of the Modern World

From the British television series, "The Modern World: Ten Great Writers."

This video clip is from the episode, "Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment," which originally aired on 24 January 1988. Online, courtesy [BFI](#) and YouTube.

### **Director:**

David Hinton

### **Writer:**

David Hinton

### **Commentator:**

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Merton College, Oxford

### **Dostoevsky:**

Ian McDiarmid

### **Sonya:**

Katy Behean

### **Mrs. Marmeladov:**

Mair Coleman

### **Marmeladov:**

Charlie Drake

### **Raskolnikov:**

Douglas Hodge

### **Porfiry:**

Timothy Spall

### **Old Woman (Alyona Ivanovna):**

Ann Way

### **Underground Man:**

Patrick Malahide

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## Crime and Punishment - The Murder Scene

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## Crime and Punishment - Death of the Pawnbroker

From the British television series, "The Modern World: Ten Great Writers."

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## Crime and Punishment - Raskolnikov

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## Crime and Punishment - Alienation

From the British television series, "The Modern World: Ten Great Writers."

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**Old Woman (Alyona Ivanovna) :**

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## Crime and Punishment - Suffering

From the British television series, "The Modern World: Ten Great Writers."

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Douglas Hodge

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**Old Woman (Alyona Ivanovna):**

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## Dostoevsky - The Underground Man

From the British television series, "[The Modern World: Ten Great Writers.](#)"

This video clip is from the episode, "[Fyodor Dostoyevsky's \*Crime and Punishment\*,](#)" which originally aired on 24 January 1988. Online, courtesy [BFI](#) and YouTube.

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