

**IMPERIAL RUSSIA
(1721-1917):
DOSTOEVSKY: THE
GRAND INQUISITOR**



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Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including a full reading of the parable of the Grand Inquisitor from Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story and character development found in the parable, how Dostoevsky's last work focuses on the moral contradictions he saw as inherent in organized Christianity, and yet how the ending passages also show the author's undeniable hope he has for humanity through its reliance on faith and beliefs.

Subjects

English / Language Arts, European History, World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Dostoevsky Museum, St. Petersburg
- Dostoevsky Monument, St. Petersburg
- Dostoevsky Station, St. Petersburg
- Nevsky Monastery, St. Petersburg
- Dostoevsky Monument, Moscow

Essential Questions

- Who was Fyodor Dostoevsky?
- What is the plot/story behind the parable of the Grand Inquisitor in his 1880 story *The Brothers Karamazov*?
- What political and social messages did Dostoevsky try to convey through the parable of the Grand Inquisitor in his 1880 story *The Brothers Karamazov*?

Academic Summary

Excerpts: The Brothers Karamazov, Book 5, Chapter 5: “Parable of the Grand Inquisitor” (1880) by Dostoevsky

... It is Christ who appears on the scene. True, He says nothing, but only appears and passes out of sight. Fifteen centuries have elapsed since He left the world with the distinct promise to return 'with power and great glory'; fifteen long centuries since His prophet cried, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord!' since He Himself had foretold, while yet on earth, 'Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven but my Father only.' But Christendom expects Him still. ...

... True, again, we have all heard of miracles being wrought ever since the 'age of miracles' passed away to return no more. We had, and still have, our saints credited with performing the most miraculous cures; and, if we can believe their biographers, there have been those among them who have been personally visited by the Queen of Heaven. But Satan slept not, and the first germs of doubt, and ever-increasing unbelief in such wonders, already had begun to sprout in Christendom as early as the sixteenth century. It was just at that time that a new and terrible heresy first made its appearance in the north of Germany.* [*Luther's reform] A great star 'shining as it were a lamp... fell upon the fountains waters'... and 'they were made bitter.' This 'heresy' blasphemously denied 'miracles.' But those who had remained faithful believed all the more ardently, the tears of mankind ascended to Him as heretofore, and the Christian world was expecting Him as confidently as ever; they loved Him and hoped in Him, thirsted and hungered to suffer and die for Him just as many of them had done before.... So many centuries had weak, trusting humanity implored Him, crying with ardent faith and fervor: 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, does Thou not come?' So many long centuries hath it vainly appealed to Him, that at last, in His inexhaustible compassion, He consented to answer the prayer ... He decided that once more, if it were but for one short hour, the people—His long-suffering, tortured, fatally sinful, his loving and child-like, trusting people—shall behold Him again. The scene of action is placed by me in Spain, at Seville, during that terrible period of the Inquisition, when, for the greater glory of God, stakes were flaming all over the country.

... This particular visit has, of course, nothing to do with the promised Advent, when, according to the program, 'after the tribulation of those days,' He will appear 'coming in the clouds of heaven.' For, that 'coming of the Son of Man,' as we are informed, will take place as suddenly 'as the lightning cometh out of the east and shine even unto the west.' No; this once, He desired to come unknown, and appear among His children, just when the bones of the heretics, sentenced to be burnt alive, had commenced crackling at the flaming stakes. Owing to His limitless mercy, He mixes once more with mortals and in the same form in which He was wont to appear fifteen centuries ago. He descends, just at the very moment when before king, courtiers, knights, cardinals, and the fairest dames of court, before the whole population of Seville, upwards of a

hundred wicked heretics are being roasted, in a magnificent auto-da-fe ad majorem Dei gloriam, by the order of the powerful Cardinal Grand Inquisitor. ... Silently, and with a smile of boundless compassion upon His lips, He crosses the dense crowd, and moves softly on. The Sun of Love burns in His heart, and warm rays of Light, Wisdom and Power beam forth from His eyes, and pour down their waves upon the swarming multitudes of the rabble assembled around, making their hearts vibrate with returning love. He extends His hands over their heads, blesses them, and from mere contact with Him, aye, even with His garments, a healing power goes forth. An old man, blind from his birth, cries, 'Lord, heal me, that I may see Thee!' and the scales falling off the closed eyes, the blind man beholds Him... The crowd weeps for joy, and kisses the ground upon which He treads. Children strew flowers along His path and sing to Him, 'Hosanna!' It is He, it is Himself, they say to each other, it must be He, it can be none other but He! He pauses at the portal of the old cathedral, just as a wee white coffin is carried in, with tears and great lamentations. The lid is off, and in the coffin lies the body of a fair-child, seven years old, the only child of an eminent citizen of the city. The little corpse lies buried in flowers. 'He will raise the child to life!' confidently shouts the crowd to the weeping mother. The officiating priest who had come to meet the funeral procession, looks perplexed, and frowns. A loud cry is suddenly heard, and the bereaved mother prostrates herself at His feet. 'If it be Thou, then bring back my child to life!' she cries beseechingly. The procession halts, and the little coffin is gently lowered at his feet. Divine compassion beams forth from His eyes, and as He looks at the child, His lips are heard to whisper once more, 'Talitha Cumi'—and 'straightway the damsel arose.' The child rises in her coffin. Her little hands still hold the nosegay of white roses which after death was placed in them, and, looking round with large astonished eyes she smiles sweetly The crowd is violently excited. A terrible commotion rages among them, the populace shouts and loudly weeps, when suddenly, before the cathedral door, appears the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor himself.... He is tall, gaunt-looking old man of nearly four-score years and ten, with a stern, withered face, and deeply sunken eyes, from the cavity of which glitter two fiery sparks. He has laid aside his gorgeous cardinal's robes in which he had appeared before the people at the auto da-fe of the enemies of the Romish Church, and is now clad in his old, rough, monkish cassock. His sullen assistants and slaves of the 'holy guard' are following at a distance. He pauses before the crowd and observes. He has seen all. He has witnessed the placing of the little coffin at His feet, the calling back to life. And now, his dark, grim face has grown still darker; his bushy grey eyebrows nearly meet, and his sunken eye flashes with sinister light. Slowly raising his finger, he commands his minions to arrest Him...

Fyodor Dostoevsky has been called the social conscious of 19th century Imperial Russia. Born in Moscow in 1821 to a lower middle class family, he and his brother were orphaned by their teens. Over the course of his life, Dostoevsky wandered from city to city and job to job searching for a personal and financial stability he would never really

find. He was married twice, fathered four children (two of which died very young), and even spent five years in a Siberian prison camp, sentenced to hard labor with many other “radical thinkers.” Most were there because they had somehow crossed Tsar Nicholas I, who feared the authors’ writings might serve underground interests in the wake of the Revolutions of 1848 that had swept across the continent. Throughout his adult life, Dostoevsky turned to reading and writing as a way to get away from reality, and yet his novels and short stories often explored the depths of the human condition in the context of the troubled social and religious atmosphere he saw in Imperial Russia. Dostoevsky’s writings have sometimes been compared to those of Charles Dickens, and yet their styles and content were certainly different. Dostoevsky wrote with a sense of “naturalism”, a 19th century literary movement opposed to Romanticism. This movement sought to depict the reality of its characters through an examination of their pessimism, poverty, prejudice and filth, a description which seems to fit the characters in most, if not all, of Dostoevsky’s works. Known best for his novels (such as *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from Underground*), many of which are read today in dozens of languages and across the globe, perhaps the tale that epitomizes Dostoevsky’s writing is his last and greatest novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Published just before the author died in 1880, the novel tells the story of three adult brothers in their struggle to understand their individual and collective relationships with their estranged father. In the novel, Dostoyevsky also explores such topics as the nature of God and man’s place in society. As in many of the author’s other works, many of the characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* exhibit critical psychological flaws that help insulate their true feelings from a cruel world built on suffering and despair. The most famous chapter of the novel, and the one most often read by students, is Chapter 5, Book 5: *The Grand Inquisitor*.

The Grand Inquisitor is a parable told by Ivan, the middle brother, to his younger sibling, Alexei. Ivan is an atheist. Alexei is a novice in the local Russian Orthodox monastery. The parable is set in 16th century Seville, Spain during the now-famous inquisition, a time when the Catholic Church in Spain conducted a series of religious trials against heretics. Torture was often used to extract confessions and those who confessed were often put to death by burning (best estimates put the number executed during the Inquisition at over 150,000). Ivan’s parable begins with this setting, one that by the 19th century would have been well known to his readers as part of their collective consciousness. In the parable, Jesus has decided to come to Seville for a visit. He arrives just as ten Heretics are being burned in the square. Although he wants to move quietly in the crowd, he is immediately recognized by the people, many of whom begin to praise him. Jesus then performs a couple of miracles. A blind man miraculously regains his sight and a little girl is brought back to life. All seems right until the Grand Inquisitor arrives. He has Jesus arrested as a heretic and sentences him to be executed by burning the next day.

The rest of the story focuses on a one-sided conversation between the Inquisitor and Jesus in which the 90-year-old Catholic cardinal accuses Jesus of abandoning the people fifteen centuries earlier. Over the centuries, the people, who are brutish, ignorant and self-centered, found that their greatest need wasn’t love or mercy, but rather food, stability and order. Jesus then, in refusing to use his powers for the good of

humanity, abandoned the people to their own devices. In effect, in giving humanity the free will to follow him, Jesus in fact had condemned the masses to misery and despair. That's where the Church stepped in. According to the Cardinal, the Church is in league with the Devil, but is controlling the people by giving them hope through the name of Jesus and the promise of heaven. It really is just a ruse designed to subjugate millions who need to be controlled like animals. The Cardinal will be able to show his power the next day at Jesus' execution, when the crowds who so lovingly supported Jesus only a few hours earlier will follow the old man's instructions and will turn on the prisoner. At the end, the Inquisitor waits for Jesus to speak, but he says nothing. The Inquisitor gets angry, thinking that it would be better to have Jesus yelling at him than to endure the awkward silence. Suddenly, the prisoner rises and kisses the old man on the cheek. The Inquisitor is stunned, and instead of putting his prisoner to death, he sends Jesus away, telling him to never return. The prisoner then vanishes.

It would be a theme repeated in many of Dostoevsky's works throughout his career. He was an existentialist, adhering to a 19th century philosophy where one looks at society with confusion and despair in the face of what he or she perceives as an apparently meaningless and absurd world, where individuals wander through life always standing on the precipice of tragedy and suicide. Yet, as a firm believer in Russian Orthodox Christianity until the day he died, Dostoevsky himself struggled throughout his life with the role of God in society and with human redemption through beliefs in the almighty. In many ways, *The Grand Inquisitor* is the quintessential example of this inner struggle. Perhaps that is the novel's true purpose. Perhaps that is why it is one of Dostoevsky's most well-known literary works, read by countless high school and college students each year.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including a full reading of the parable of the Grand Inquisitor from Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story and character development found in the parable, how Dostoevsky's last work focuses on the moral contradictions he saw as inherent in organized Christianity, yet how the ending passages also show the author's undeniable hope he has for humanity through its reliance on faith and beliefs.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the story and character development from Book 5, Chapter 5, *The Grand Inquisitor*, of Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Dostoevsky's last published work focuses on the moral contradictions he saw as inherent in organized Christianity, yet how the ending passages also show the author's undeniable hope he has for humanity through its reliance on faith and beliefs.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* fits into the larger genre of 19th century existential philosophy.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Can literary works (novels, short stories, etc.) change society? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – The Grand Inquisitor (20 min)
- Video – The Grand Inquisitor (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Dostoevsky and The Grand Inquisitor taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Students should read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussions.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/ photographs to each group.
- Suggestion: All students should read the entire story before starting this lesson in-class.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: Dostoevsky and *The Grand Inquisitor* (20 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Using information from the secondary sources and Dostoevsky's parable of the Grand Inquisitor from his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, explain in detail the story and character development found in the parable, how Dostoevsky's last work focuses on the moral contradictions he saw as inherent in organized Christianity, and yet how the ending passages also show the author's undeniable hope he has for humanity through its reliance on faith and beliefs.
- Alternate Assessment – Using the format of the parable, students write and direct a modern version of the story. How might the world react if Jesus came back in the 21st century? If Dostoevsky were alive today, how might he have written the story?

Extension

On tour: Dostoevsky Literary and Memorial Museum, St. Petersburg

While on tour in St. Petersburg, students can visit the Dostoevsky Literary and Memorial Museum where they can see for themselves the apartment where he lived twice during his lifetime, including the last few years of his life. The museum contains memorabilia from the author as well. On Sundays, the museum also shows a Dostoevsky-inspired film and a discussion on his impact on Russian society. Of special note in the museum is Dostoevsky's study, where late in life he wrote *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Little Orphan*.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.gutenberg.org/files/8578/8578-h/8578-h.htm
The Grand Inquisitor (primary source) – full text of the parable from the Gutenberg Project
- <https://librivox.org/the-brothers-karamazov-by-fyodor-dostoyevsky/>
The Brothers Karamazov (primary source) – audio reading of each chapter
- www.thomasaquinas.edu/a-liberating-education/way-health-and-hope-and-love
Why We Study Dostoevsky (website) – from Brian Kelley, Dean and Tutor at Thomas Aquinas College (CA)
- http://academics.eckerd.edu/instructor/grove/QM410-007/Faith/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20The_Grand_Inquisitor.pdf
The Grand Inquisitor Reading and Study Guide (PDF study guide) – from Eckerd College (FL)
- www.dartmouth.edu/~karamazov/resources/?page_id=400
The Brothers Karamazov (study guide) — from Dartmouth College
- <http://web.pdx.edu/~tothm/religion/Summary%20of%20The%20Grand%20Inquisitor.pdf>
A Summary of the Grand Inquisitor (PDF study guide) – from Michael Toth, Professor of Sociology at Portland State University (OR)
- http://nzm.vnu.edu/faculty/trearick/english/rearick/readings/resource/Brothers%20K%20Study%20Guide/book_v_b_grand_inquisitor.htm
Book V, Chapter 5: The Grand Inquisitor (study guide) — from Tad Rearick, Professor of English at Mount Vernon Nazarene University (OH). This study guide does a great job of breaking down the story and putting it into manageable chunks that students can understand. See the link below for a PowerPoint produced by the same professor. Highly recommended for all students.
- <http://todaypdf.org/the-grand-inquisitor.ppt-id3405172>
The Grand Inquisitor (PowerPoint) — from Tad Rearick, Professor of English at Mount Vernon Nazarene University (OH). This PowerPoint does a great job of breaking down the story and putting it into manageable chunks that students can understand. See the link above for a study guide produced by the same professor. Highly recommended for all students. This version is in PDF form.
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYmUUT8XfI4
Why Dostoevsky is Important (video) – great video that discusses Dostoevsky
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=om6HcUUa8DI
The Grand Inquisitor (video) — from the Open University, this 25-minute film is of a one-act play that tells the story of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. It is a bit long for many classes, but is highly recommended, especially for AP/Advanced students. Students should read the story first and then see this film before

discussing it.

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lbbZq-oxeU
Existentialism: Fyodor Dostoevsky “The Grand Inquisitor” (video) — a 1-hour lecture by Gregory B. Sadler, instructor at Marist College (NY). Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.

Background Information

- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor_Dostoyevsky
Fyodor Dostoevsky – Wikipedia article
- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Brothers_Karamazov
The Brothers Karamazov – Wikipedia article
- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Grand_Inquisitor
The Grand Inquisitor – Wikipedia article

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/crimean-war-1853-to-1856
The Crimean War 1853-56
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/dostoevsky-notes-from-underground
Imperial Russia – Dostoevsky: Notes from Underground
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/dostoevsky-grand-inquisitor
Imperial Russia – Dostoevsky: Brothers Karamazov - The Grand Inquisitor
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/dostoevsky-little-orphan
Imperial Russia – Dostoevsky: The Little Orphan
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/imperial-russia-panslavism
Imperial Russia – Pan Slavism

Key Terms

- *The Brothers Karamazov*
- Dostoevsky
- Existentialism
- Inquisition
- Literary
- Naturalism
- St. Petersburg

