

**IMPERIAL RUSSIA  
(1721-1917):  
DOSTOEVSKY: THE  
LITTLE ORPHAN**



# IMPERIAL RUSSIA (1721-1917): DOSTOEVSKY: THE LITTLE ORPHAN

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including a full reading of Dostoevsky's short story, *The Little Orphan*, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how Dostoevsky's works focused on the moral depravity he saw as inherent in the emerging industrial society of mid-late 19th century urban Russia, and specifically how his stories used strong religious and moral overtones to send a message warning the emerging urban middle class of its responsibilities to society's less fortunate members.

## 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 his short story *The Little Orphan*?
- What political and social messages did Dostoevsky try to convey through *The Little Orphan*?

## Academic Summary

### The Little Orphan (1887)

I

In a large city, on Christmas eve in the biting cold, I see a young child, still quite young, six years old, perhaps even less; yet too young to be sent on the street begging, but assuredly destined to be sent in a year or two.

This child awakes one morning in a damp and frosty cellar. He is wrapped in a kind of squalid dressing-gown and is shivering. His breath issues from between his lips in white vapor; he is seated on a trunk; to pass the time he blows the breath from his mouth, and amuses himself in seeing it escape. But he is very hungry. Several times since morning he has drawn near the bed covered with a straw mattress as thin as gauze, where his mother lies sick, her head resting on a bundle of rags instead of a pillow.

How did she come there? She came probably from a strange city and has fallen ill. The proprietress of the miserable lodging was arrested two days ago, and carried to the police station; it is a holiday to-day, and the other tenants have gone out. However, one of them has remained in bed for the last twenty-four hours, stupid with drink, not having waited for the holiday.

From another corner issue the complaints of an old woman of eighty years, laid up with rheumatism. This old woman was formerly a children's nurse somewhere; now she is dying all alone. She whines, moans, and growls at the little boy, who begins to be afraid to come near the corner where she lies with the death rattle in her throat. He has found something to drink in the hallway, but he has not been able to lay his hand on the smallest crust of bread, and for the tenth time he comes to wake his mother. He finishes by getting frightened in this darkness.

The evening is already late, and no one comes to kindle the fire. He finds, by feeling around, his mother's face, and is astonished that she no longer moves and that she has become as cold as the wall.

"It is so cold!" he thinks.

He remains some time without moving, his hand resting on the shoulder of the corpse. Then he begins to blow in his fingers to warm them, and, happening to find his little cap on the bed, he looks softly for the door, and issues forth from the underground lodging.

He would have gone out sooner had he not been afraid of the big dog that barks all the day up there on the landing before their neighbor's door.

Oh! what a city! never before had he seen anything like it. Down yonder from where he came, the nights are much darker. There is only one lamp for the whole street; little low wooden houses, closed with shutters; in the street from the time it grows dark, no one; every one shut up at home: only a crowd of dogs that howl, hundreds, thousands of dogs, that howl and bark all the night. But then, it used to be so warm there! And he got something to eat. Here, ah! how good it would be to have something to eat! What a noise here, what an uproar! What a great light, and what a crowd of people! What horses, and what

carriages! And the cold, the cold! The bodies of the tired horses smoke with frost and their burning nostrils puff white clouds; their shoes ring on the pavement through the soft snow. And how everybody hustles everybody else! "Ah! how I would like to eat a little piece of something. That is what makes my fingers ache so."

II

A policeman just passes by, and turns his head so as not to see the child. "Here is another street. Oh! how wide it is! I shall be crushed to death here, I know; how they all shout, how they run, how they roll along! And the light, and the light! And that, what is that? Oh! what a big window pane! And behind the pane, a room, and in the room a tree that goes up to the ceiling; it is the Christmas tree. And what lights under the tree! Such papers of gold, and such apples! And all around dolls and little hobby-horses. There are little children well-dressed, nice, and clean; they are laughing and playing, eating and drinking things. There is a little girl going to dance with the little boy. How pretty she is! And there is music. I can hear it through the glass."

The child looks, admires, and even laughs. He feels no longer any pain in his fingers or feet. The fingers of his hand have become all red, he cannot bend them anymore, and it hurts him to move them. But all at once, he feels that his fingers ache; he begins to cry, and goes away. He perceives through another window another room, and again trees and cakes of all sorts on the table, red almonds and yellow ones. Four beautiful ladies are sitting down, and when anybody comes he is given some cake: and the door opens every minute, and many gentlemen enter. The little fellow crept forward, opened the door of a sudden, and went in. Oh! what a noise was made when they saw him, what confusion! Immediately a lady arose, put a kopeck in his hand, and opened herself the street door for him. How frightened he was!

III

The kopeck has fallen from his hands, and rings on the steps of the stairs. He was not able to tighten his little fingers enough to hold the coin. The child went out running, and walked fast, fast. Where was he going? He did not know. And he runs, runs, and blows in his hands. He is troubled. He feels so lonely, so frightened! And suddenly, what is that again! A crowd of people stand there and admire.

"A window! behind the pane, three pretty dolls attired in wee red and yellow dresses, and just exactly as though they were alive! And that little old man sitting down, who seems to play the fiddle. There are two others, too, standing up, who play on tiny violins, keeping time with their heads to the music. They look at each other and their lips move. And they really speak? Only they cannot be heard through the glass."

And the child first thinks that they are living, and when he comprehends that they are only dolls, he begins to laugh. Never had he seen such dolls before, and he didn't know that there were any like that! He would like to cry, but those dolls are just too funny!

IV

Suddenly he feels himself seized by the coat. A big rough boy stands near him, who gives him a blow of his fist on the head, snatches his cap, and trips him up. The child falls. At the same time there is a shout; he remains a moment paralyzed with fear. Then he springs up with a bound and runs, runs, darts under a gateway somewhere and hides himself in a court-yard behind a pile of wood. He cowers and shivers in his fright; he can hardly breathe. And suddenly he feels quite comfortable. His little hands and feet don't hurt anymore; he is warm, warm as though near a stove, and all his body trembles. "Ah! I am going asleep! how nice it is to have a sleep! I shall stay a little while and then I will go and see the dolls again," thought the little fellow, and he smiled at the recollection of the dolls. "They looked just as though they were alive!"

Then he hears his mother's song. "Mamma, I am going to sleep. Ah! how nice it is here for sleeping!"

"Come to my house, little boy, to see the Christmas tree," said a soft voice. He thought at first it was his mother; but no, it was not she.

Then who is calling him? He does not see. But some one stoops over him, and folds him in his arms in the darkness: and he stretches out his hand and--all at once--oh! what light! Oh! what a Christmas tree! No, it is not a Christmas tree; he has never seen the like of it!

Where is he now? All is resplendent, all is radiant, and dolls all around; but no, not dolls, little boys, little girls; only they are very bright. All of them circle round him; they fly. They hug him, they take him and carry him away, and he is flying too. And he sees his mother looking at him and laughing joyfully.

"Mamma! mamma! ah! how nice it is here!" cries her little boy to her. And again he embraces the children, and would like very much to tell them about the dolls behind the window pane. "Who are you, little girls?" he asks, laughing and fondling them.

It is the Christmas tree at Jesus's. At Jesus's, that day, there is always a Christmas tree for little children that have none themselves.

And he learned that all these little boys and girls were children like himself, who had died like him. Some had died of cold in the baskets abandoned at the doors of the public functionaries of St. Petersburg; others had died out at nurse in the foul hovels of the Tchauhknas; others of hunger at the dry breasts of their mothers during the famine. All were here now, all little angels now, all with Jesus, and He Himself among them, spreading his hands over them, blessing them and their sinful mothers.

And the mothers of these children are there too, apart, weeping; each recognizes her son or her daughter, and the children fly towards them, embrace them, wipe away the tears with their little hands, and beg them not to weep.

And below on the earth, the concierge in the morning found the wee corpse of the child, who had taken refuge in the courtyard. Stiff and frozen behind the pile of wood it lay.

The mother was found too. She died before him; both are reunited in Heaven in the Lord's house.

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 of 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 the most is one of his shortest works, The Little Orphan.

The Little Orphan, written in the last years of his life but not published until six years after the writer’s death, tells the story of poverty, depravity and death through the eyes of a six-year-old child. The tale begins on Christmas Eve morning, when the destitute young boy awakens to find his mother dead. Hungry and cold, the child wanders into the street, where he finds wealthy Russians caught up in the frivolity of the Christmas season, so much so that they barely take notice of such a wee lad. When he is noticed, it is only by adults and teens who want to get rid of him in what has obviously become a cruel and brutal world. Over the course of the day, the young boy’s hands go numb from the cold until he can no longer even hold a small coin he has been given. Eventually, the scared child hides behind a woodpile, where he falls asleep. He never wakes and dies that night, only to be found the next morning, orphaned no more, simply a cold statistic to be thrown away like a piece of trash destined for the dump. Perhaps appropriately, readers never learn the boy’s name, and yet as the story progresses, little details do come out that make the child endearing in a chilling way. In some ways, it is like reading an intensified Dickens.

At the end of the story, after the boy has died, he finds himself in “Jesus’s house” frolicking around a Christmas tree and meeting up with his mother. Dostoevsky’s message is clear. The poor young man and his mother were pure of heart and received their reward in heaven. The wealthy citizens who didn’t “see” him in their city (probably St. Petersburg, but it could be anywhere) got their rewards on earth. One is left to wonder what will happen to them after they die. In his last work, Dostoevsky sought to become the spiritual soul for a nation he saw slipping into darkness. It is somewhat ironic that the author’s most famous quotation (from his novel The Brothers Karamazov -- 1880), “If God does not exist, then everything is permitted,” is often taken by many to

mean that Dostoevsky didn't believe in God, but with *The Little Orphan*, he seems to be saying that because God exists, some things (such as greed, debauchery and depravity) are not permitted.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including a full reading of Dostoevsky's short story, *The Little Orphan*, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how Dostoevsky's works focused on the moral depravity he saw as inherent in the emerging industrial society of mid-late 19th century urban Russia, and specifically how his stories used strong religious and moral overtones to send a message warning the emerging urban middle class of its responsibilities to society's less fortunate members.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the story and characters of Dostoevsky's short story *The Little Orphan* send a warning to what he saw as a moral depravity inherent in the emerging industrial society of mid-late 19th century Russia.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Dostoevsky's short story *The Little Orphan* uses strong religious and moral overtones to send a warning to the urban middle class of its responsibilities to society's less fortunate members.
3. Students will theorize as to what impact Dostoevsky's literary works might have had on underground seditions movements that would come to a head in Russia in the generations after his death.

## 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 – Dostoevsky and his Writings (20 min)
- Video – Why Dostoevsky is Important (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Dostoevsky taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: All students should read the *Little Orphan* full text.
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/ photographs to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: *Little Orphan* (20 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay/DBQ: Explain in detail how Dostoevsky's works focused on the moral depravity he saw as inherent in the emerging industrial society of mid-late 19th century urban Russia, and specifically how his stories used strong religious and moral overtones to send a message warning the emerging urban middle class of its responsibilities to society's less fortunate members.

## 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 in which 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.online-literature.com/dostoevsky/3369/](http://www.online-literature.com/dostoevsky/3369/)  
The Little Orphan (full text)
- [community.middlebury.edu/~beyer/courses/previous/ru351/studentpapers/Children.shtml](http://community.middlebury.edu/~beyer/courses/previous/ru351/studentpapers/Children.shtml)  
Dostoevsky and the Theme of Children (academic paper) – by Caroline Tiller at Middlebury College
- [www.thomasaquinas.edu/a-liberating-education/way-health-and-hope-and-love](http://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)
- [www.eckerd.edu/academics/qfm/qfm%20files/Foltz%20-%20Dostoevsky%20Study%20Guide.pdf](http://www.eckerd.edu/academics/qfm/qfm%20files/Foltz%20-%20Dostoevsky%20Study%20Guide.pdf)  
Dostoevsky Reading and Study Guide (PDF study guide) – from Bruce V Foltz, Professor of Philosophy at Eckerd College (FL)
- [nvr.mvnu.edu/faculty/trearick/english/rearick/World\\_Lit\\_II/Fyodor%20Dostoevsky.ppt](http://nvr.mvnu.edu/faculty/trearick/english/rearick/World_Lit_II/Fyodor%20Dostoevsky.ppt)  
Dostoevsky (PowerPoint) – from Tad Rearick, Professor of English at Mount Vernon Nazarene University OH
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://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 Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYmUUT8Xfl4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYmUUT8Xfl4)  
Why Dostoevsky is Important (video) – great video that discusses Dostoevsky
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEzEmYPzS2w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEzEmYPzS2w)  
The Little Orphan by Fyodor Dostoevsky (audio recording)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayh-ehvFVfU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayh-ehvFVfU)  
Irwin Weil on Dostoevsky (video). This 70-minute video, an interview on Dostoevsky with Irwin Weil, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literature at Northwestern University, is probably too long for in-class showings, but it is well worth watching. Professor Weil does a great job of explaining Dostoevsky's works and his place in society. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.

### Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor\\_Dostoyevsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor_Dostoyevsky)  
Fyodor Dostoevsky – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Themes\\_in\\_Fyodor\\_Dostoyevsky%27s\\_writings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Themes_in_Fyodor_Dostoyevsky%27s_writings)  
Themes in Fyodor Dostoevsky's Writings – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary\\_naturalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_naturalism)  
Naturalism (literature) – Wikipedia article

## **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/crimean-war-1853-to-1856](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/dostoevsky-little-orphan)  
Imperial Russia – Dostoevsky: The Little Orphan
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/imperial-russia-panslavism](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/imperial-russia-panslavism)  
Imperial Russia – Pan Slavism

## **Key Terms**

- Dostoevsky
- Industrialization
- Literary
- Naturalism
- Socialism
- Revolution

