CHAPTER IV

FAME AND DESPAIR
A knowledge of cultural history and social conditions is indispensable to the study of any literature. It is of particular significance in the study of Russian literature which, without an established literary tradition, produced in one single century "a literature which in artistic worth, in widespread influence, in everything except bulk, equals the glorious output of England and France, although their production of permanent masterpieces had begun so much earlier." 1

All along, due to the severe censorship exercised by the government on all discussion on social and political issues, such problems could be broached only in literature or literary criticism. Therefore the Russian novel became as much a literary creation as an organ of public opinion and public expression. Joseph Frank sums up the situation thus:

Owing to the difficulty of expressing controversial ideas directly in public print. .. literature served more or less as a safety valve through forbidden subjects could be presented or at least suggested. Hence the notorious ideological density of the best Russian literature- a trait that still continues to distinguish its writers... from

1 Vladimir Nabokov.
their freer confreres in the West, who sometimes envy the intensity of the Russian response to literature without fully understanding the reason for such fervour. It is, quite simply, that literature is not an adornment or accessory of everyday existence; it is the only form in which Russians can see discussed the true problems by which they are preoccupied, and of which their rulers have always thought it preferable to keep them ignorant.2

So the Russian writer took his job much more seriously than his counterpart in the West. His creative energy flowed within the boundaries established by censors and towards the most demanding social issues.

Of the two forces that checked and modelled the writers work, the government was the dominant one. Being fully aware that any creativity and originality posed a threat to the established order, the government was ever vigilant. The institution of censorship was perfected under Tsar Nicolas I who sadistically thought of the mock execution of Dostoevsky and other intellectuals who belonged to the Petrashevsky circle. Nabokov ironically describes how the entire society worked against the writer.

...meddlesome officials, heads of police who thought that Byron was an Italian revolutionary, smug old censors, certain journalists in the governments pay, the quiet but touchy and wary church, this combination of monarchism, bigotry and cringing administration hampered the author to a considerable degree but also afforded him the keen pleasure of pin-pricking and deriding the government in a thousand subtle, delightfully subversive ways with which governmental stupidity was quite unable to cope.3

In spite of the ironical tone that Nabakov uses, life for writers under the government's eye was not easy. Since the Tsar was all powerful, he could make life unbearable for those who aroused his ire. In extreme cases the writers who refused to tow the official line were treated as criminals and banished to Siberia.

The second force that sought to shape the creative energy of the artist was the radical thinkers of the times. These thinkers were anti-government and were socially-minded utilitarians. They were honest and cultured intellectuals and, were concerned solely with the welfare of the masses. They regarded the arts and sciences as tools to improve the social and economic condition of the people and to change the political structure of the country. These men wanted to create a new social order on the lines of French social thinkers

3 Lectures on Russian Literature, pp.3-4.
and German materialists. On the one hand, the radical thinkers fought despotism, but on the other they evolved their own brand of despotism. They demanded a social message from the writer and from their point of view a book's value was only as much as it was of practical use to the people. While the Tsars wanted the writers to be the servants of the state, the radical thinkers wanted the writers to be servants of the masses.

One of the best examples of a writer caught in the inexorable two-fold grip of the government and the radical thinkers is the case of Pushkin. He irritated the government by composing "extremely arrogant and extremely independent and extremely wicked verse," instead of singing the praises of the state and the Tsar. The church was not amused by his levity. One the other hand, the radical critics condemned him because he was not a good servant of the people. His work was considered to be an aristocratic ornament and his aloofness was considered to be a cro, e/ Coming into this stifling intellectual atmosphere were new ideas from the West. While the radical thinkers were inclined to view them favourable, the slavophils pointed out that the excessive rationalism of western culture had destroyed
the integrity of the self, and led to a profound split in the personality which could be healed only by faith. One of the great themes of nineteenth century Russian literature is the dramatization of this split, and the struggle to regain "integrity". When viewed against this background, Dostoevsky's works assume an added significance, and the reader marvels at the achievement of the writer.

Fyodor Dostoevsky was born on 30th October 1821 at the Mariinsky Hospital for the poor in Moscow. His father was a doctor and the family resided in the right wing of the hospital. Dostoevsky spent his childhood years there, surrounded by the hospital's poor and consumptive patients, and not off from the world. The neighbourhood had once been the site of a morgue and nearby was a way station for prisoners being transported to Siberia. Just outside the family's parlour windows, prisoners trudged along on their way to sentences at hard labour. Thus, from a very young age, Dostoevsky witnessed a bleak spectacle of suffering, poverty and death. The family grew rapidly and soon the rather spacious quarters became too small for them. The Dostoevsky children had few playmates of their own age.
A girl of nine years who was one of Fyodor's closest friends, was one day found raped in the hospital yard. She died shortly afterwards. This terrible event made an enormous impression on Dostoevsky, and he would return to it again and again in his writing.

Dr. Dostoevsky was har-pressed financially. His yearly salary of a few hundred rubles was barely enough to maintain a household private practice in his spare time. But he was continually haunted by fear of poverty. Striving for social mobility and bourgeoils respectability was always foremost in his mind. In 1828, he regained for himself and his sons the noble rank that his ancestors lost when they refused to convert to Catholicism. Thus, like most nineteen century writers, Dostoevsky was a nobleman. However, it is important to understand that the service nobility was of a significantly lower rank than the old landed aristocracy to which Tolstoy and Turgenev belonged. Awareness of such class distinctions was painful to Dostoevsky, and the struggle for social status in his home sharpened his empathy for human suffering and the pain of humiliation of being of lower social rank than the rich and powerful in society.
The Dostoevsky children began their studies at the age of four. Their mother taught them to read and write. Since it was a religious household, the Bible was the most important text taught to the children. The children also studied a book translated from German: One hundred and four sacred stories from the Old and New Testaments selected for children. This huge book was supposed to be learned by heart, and at the rate of one story per week it could be mastered in two years. In these pages, Dostoevsky first discovered the essential principles of Christianity that would later take on such great meaning in his works.

A tutor began coming to the house when the children were still young. They were specially well schooled in French, and Dr. Dostoevsky could not contain his pride and joy when the children honoured him with tributes in French on his name day. He firmly believed that book-learning was essential to get ahead in the world, and he continually drilled into his children the importance of hard work and self-discipline. Dostoevsky remembered with special joy the evenings his family spent reading out loud to one another. He was introduced to the novel through the era's thrillers. He loved the
heroic works of Homer and the novels of chivalry by Cervantes and Walter Scott.

The restoration of nobility had given the family the right to own property with serfs, and in 1831. Dr. Dostoevsky bought the tiny village of Darovoye. The property was a little more than five hundred acres and had seventy six male serfs. He then mortgaged Darovoye and purchased the neighbouring village of Cheremoshnya, a property of two hundred and sixty acres and sixty seven serfs. Both the properties took a heavy toll on the family, both in terms of health and money. Nevertheless, for the children the purchase of these villages was a great event, and they were able to spend their summer vacations in the country.

Two very significant events took place at Darovoye which shaped Dostoevsky's later works. A year after the acquisition of Darovoye, the village was devastated by fire. One of the servants in the household, Alyona Frolovna, came forward and offered the family her entire savings saying that since she did not need money, they could have it all. Dostoevsky never forgot this incident, and later he would cite Alyona as a
luminous example of the Russian peoples' ability to live by Christian ideals.

The other incident is the one involving the peasant Marey, and is seen by Joseph Frank as the pivotal experience that transformed Dostoevsky's view of life. As a child of nine, while playing near the Brykovo wood, Dostoevsky thought he heard someone call "wolf!" and ran for comfort to a serf who was ploughing a field nearby. The peasant, Marey, soothed and comforted the frightened boy and the incident left a profound impression on Dostoevsky. We shall see the importance of this incident when Dostoevsky's imprisonment in Siberia is discussed. Suffice it to say, at this juncture, that Marey became for Dostoevsky a symbol of comfort, the embodiment of the humble and unselfish Russian people.

After their carefree weeks, the children returned to school and homework with heavy hearts. On completion of their education at home, Fyodor and Mikhail were enrolled in a private school. Then in 1834, they were transferred to a boarding school run by Leonty Chermak which was attended by the children of aristocrats and
other distinguished intellectuals. The painful feeling of inferiority and social insecurity that Dostoevsky felt is reflected in A Raw Youth where the protagonist complains that he cannot sit with the children of nobles because he comes from a common family, and is no better than a lackey. Dr. Dostoevsky worked long hours and even accepted humiliating loans from his relatives so that his children could have a respectable education. His wife, exhausted by the back-breaking work of managing the estates, was worn out by her husband's abnormal jealousy and brooding depressions. After her eighth childbirth, she contacted tuberculosis and died in 1837.

For Fyodor, his mother became a martyr figure who recurred in his works as a gentle and sacrificing character.

Before the mother's death, a decision had been taken about the future education of Fyodor and Mikhail. While a university education was desired by all, the parents knew that it would not provide their children with a career. To secure their children's futures and guarantee them good jobs with the State, the Dostoevskys withdrew both the sons from chermak's school and enrolled them in the Academy of Engineers in St.
Petersburg. The decision of the parents shocked both Fyodor and Mikhail. They wanted to become writers, and not officers. The journey from the city of churches and monastries, Moscow, to the city of palaces and parades, St. Petersburg, was not without incident. Along the road, Dr. Dostoevsky stopped at a posting station so that they could refresh themselves. Suddenly a red-faced government courier rushed in and downed a couple of glasses of vodka. He rushed out to his brand new Troika and without a word, fell upon the peasant driver, beating him with fists. The driver responded immediately. Blinded by fury and humiliation, he whipped the horses and they set off at a gallop. This vision of meaningless cruelty and innocent suffering stayed with Dostoevsky, and is re-enacted in Raskolnikov's nightmare of the old horse that is brutally whipped to death by the owner.

After leaving his sons in St. Petersburg, Dr. Dostoevsky returned to Moscow. To get over the memory of his wife he moved to Darovoye from Moscow. The move only further aggravated his health and spirits. For some time he found comfort in the servant girl, katya, who bore him a son. After the child died, he took to drink
to forget his sorrows. His already poor health became worse, and he suffered frequent attacks of apoplexy. It was such an attack that finally killed him on 6th June 1839, while he was out inspecting the serfs. There is an extensive body of literature concerning the death. The best known version has it that Dr. Dostoevsky was murdered by his serfs. Believers of this theory point out to the description of Dr. Dostoevsky's death by his son Andrei and grand-daughter, Lyubov. From this legend, Sigmund Freud created another; that Dostoevsky had his first epileptic attack on hearing the news of his father's death. According to Freud, Dostoevsky desired the death of his miserly and brutal father, and when he learnt that his father was finally dead, he was overcome with joy and was punished by his first epileptic attack. The outbreak of epilepsy stemmed from a Oedipal complex. His father's violent death gave rise to conflicting emotions within him. On the one hand were feelings of intense guilt. Archival material has proved beyond doubt that Dr. Dostoevsky died because of an attack of apoplexy, and that Dostoevsky first had an epileptic attack in Siberia where he was imprisoned for four years. Joseph Frank conclusively proves Freud's analysis wrong in an
After his father's death, Dostoevsky completed his military education and graduated from the Academy of Engineers in 1843. A brilliant military career was indicated, but when he was supposed to be transferred to a distant army camp, he resigned and embarked on a literary career. As a developing writer, he was influenced by German metaphysical Romanticism, a trend that was in vogue in Russia in the 1830's. He was particularly fascinated by E.T.A. Hoffman's representation of the demonic and mystical side of life, and by his depiction of man's relation to the transcendental world of supernatural powers. His philosophical and aesthetic orientation was strongly influenced by F.W.J. Von Schelling, whose forceful views of the heart, and not the mind, being the true means for reaching the highest understanding, were the rage during that time.

During the 1840's, Russian writers moved away from German Romanticism towards French social Romanticism.

They modelled their works after Balzac, Hugo and George Sand. In practice, it meant that this movement led towards literary realism. Critical awareness of the society became more widespread and writers began to concern themselves with social issues. Behind the pleas of compassion for the oppressed was a growing criticism of contemporary society. With his groundbreaking story, *The Overcoat*, Gogol started a new school in Russian literature. The interest in the fantastic and the extraordinary, induced by German Romanticism, stayed with Dostoevsky to the end, together with the humane appeal and the criticism of society he picked up from the French Romantics.

Inspired by Balzac's visit to St. Petersburg in 1843, Dostoevsky started translating his *Eugenie Grandet* into Russian. From this exercise, he learned to penetrate human emotions, and to show the power money had over people. In Balzac, he also found the meek and all suffering woman whom he portrayed so often in his own writing. Significantly it was around this time that he began his first published work, *Poor Folk*.

The idea for his first novel came to him while he
was walking along the Neva on his way home from town. While he was gazing over the river, the freezing mist suddenly turned a violet red as it reflected a setting sun. It was so cold that people bounced up and down to keep themselves warm. The columns of smoke rising from housetops seemed like new structures over the old ones. And before Dostoevsky's mind's eye, life began to stir within this lofty, illusory city. He imagined that in some cramped rooms lived a young girl and civil servant of modest means. Their dull lives could not smother their noble and bright hearts, and they were so helplessly sad that Dostoevsky was moved by his dream characters.

The Central theme of *poor Folk* is poverty. It is the story of Varenka's and Devushkin's miserable battle to keep themselves afloat. While experiencing poverty as a cruel, personal tragedy, Devushkin analyzes its peculiar psychology. It robs decent people of their self-respect, turns them into "rats" and "good-for nothings," and leads to bitterness and suspicion. "Poor people are unpredictable", Devushkin writes to Varenka. With his pointed questions — why are some people rich and happy, while others are poor and sad? — he is Raskolnikov's
precursor. Trembling in fear he mumbles the ideas that Raskolnikov will later proclaim with pride.

Out of the theme of poverty came another theme to which Dostoevsky returned again and again: man's perpetual battle for self-respect. Without it a man cannot be truly human and his life goes to pieces. The timid Devushkin regains his self-esteem because he meets a girl who respects him as much as she respects hereself. This convinces him that class differences are essentially meaningless. A poor person like Varenka is as worthy as a countess, he philosophizes. This same idea recurs in The Brothers Karamazov. When the drunken, suffering Maksimov says that he is no longer of any use, Grushenka answers him, "Everyone is of use, and how can we know who is more useful than others." A central concern in Dostoevsky is that man is endowed with an essential worth, and though he may be easily degraded, it is wrong to degrade him.

Varenka and Devushkin are defeated in their struggle to maintain personal dignity. Their's is a deeply felt, unselfish love that is bruised and crushed by circumstances over which they have no control.
Varenka enters an unhappy marriage with one who had earlier seduced her, while Devushkin's plight becomes worse and he lives in his landlady's kitchen. This hopeless ending awakens in the reader a deep compassion for those who suffer, and it provides the initial glimpse of the profused empathy that Dostoevsky felt, and would write about again and again.

Dostoevsky could not have imagined in his wildest dreams the reception that his first novel got. The feared Critic, Belinsky, hailed it as Russian literature's first attempt at a social novel. In his long battle against the false Romanticism of the era, he had waited for such a work, and he thought that no praise was too great for the young author. Intoxicated by the praise lavished by the famous critic, Dostoevsky found himself propelled to the centre of the literary stage in St. Petersburg. For years, he had suffered from an inferiority complex in relation to his rich and famous schoolmates and acquaintances. Now it was they who came to visit him. The sudden spotlight incited his vanity and soon his pride and arrogance became unbearable. In a circle of young ambitious writers, all of whom were struggling to achieve recognition, such
behaviour has distrous consequences. Even Turgenev, who was initially swept away by Dostoevsky, could not tolerate him and started openly ridiculing him. It got to such a stage that Dostoevsky stopped going to the meeting of the Panayev circle. There is no doubt that envy of the less successful writers contributed to the circle's harsh criticism of Dostoevsky.

In Belinski's view, the primary task of the writer was to portray the problems of society and exert a moral influence on it. He developed into a champion of the Natural School's literary criticism, and since *Poor Folk* dealt with issues close to his heart, he praised Dostoevsky. But Dostoevsky remained an idealistic romantic, and insisted on employing fantastic events and utopian visions in his works. He refused to allow the current political and social issues to divert his creativity. It soon became clear that the revolutionary critic and the utopian writer were heading in different directions. The break came with Belinsky's scathing criticism of Dostoevsky after *The Double* appeared.

When Dostoevsky first came to know Belinsky, the latter was still under the influence of French Utopian
Socialists. Like them, he was primarily interested in the moral content of the Gospels. Following his mentors, he saw Christ as a divine figure who preached the message of love and brotherhood, and made it his goal to free Christ's teaching from the distortions of the Church. The utopians believed in a Christian socialism which said that God had chosen humanity to participate in the completion of creation. For them socialism did not mean revolution; but a benign brotherhood, in a time marked by universal struggle for money and power. By the mid-1840's, Belinsky gradually moved away from the utopian socialists and found himself increasingly sympathetic to the critique of religion and the materialistic view of divinity. The end result was that Belinsky's ideas which were once bound to Christianity, were now linked to atheism. Dostoevsky's discussions with Belinsky were central to his development, and the doubts, raised by Belinsky, about the fundamental premises of Christianity had a fruitful effect on Dostoevsky's enquiry into existential problems. The Grand Inquisitor and Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* are the products of this association.
Following his break with Belinsky, Dostoevsky for a while became member of the Beketov circle, a group formed by Alwkawi Beketov who was his classmate at the Academy of Engineers. Like him, the members of the group were utopian socialists and railed against the oppression and injustice in society. The circle was disbanded when the Beketov brothers moved to kazan and Dostoevsky drifted into the Petrashevsky circle.

Petrashevsky was employed as a translator in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Like Dostoevsky, he was enamoured by the utopian socialism of Fourier. He later abandoned his Christian faith and during discussions condemned religion as a hindrance to progress. Even though Dostoevsky shared Petrashevsky's view of the instructive role of the intelligentsia, he found it difficult to tolerate his blasphemous remarks about religion. He never felt at home in this atheistic circle of salon radicals, and would often miss the regular gatherings for months at a time. These meetings were generally attended by ten to twenty, mostly young people of varied backgrounds, where current issues were debated. Gradually, the discussions began to take on a more radical character as the number of guests
increased. Dangerous topics such as emancipation of the serfs, reform of the judiciary, the yawning class differences, and the struggle against censorship were taken up for discussion under the leadership of some specialists.

Matters came to a head with the revolutionary activity in Western Europe in 1848. The Tsar's regime became even more oppressive. Plans to emancipate the serfs were tabled, and simultaneously the authorities clamped down on intellectuals. The Ministry of Internal affairs planted a spy P.D.Antonelli, in the Petrashevsky circle, whose job it was to gather incriminating evidence against the members. Once sufficient evidence was available, the leading members of the circle, including Dostoevsky, were arrested in the early hours of 23rd April 1889. They were held in solitary confinement at the Peter and Paul fortress. A Commission of Inquiry was set up to get to the bottom of the affair. The arrested members were questioned individually on the basis of material supplied by the spy. They were required to write down their replies and all other pertinent information. When there were contradictions or ambiguities in the statements of two
persons, further clarification were sought. Sometime the differing individuals were brought face to face to resolve the different viewpoints. The most serious charge against Dostoevsky was that he had read aloud and circulated the correspondence between Gogol and Belinsky. Inspite of the "explanation" given by Dostoevsky, he was found guilty for having read aloud Belinsky's letter, for having failed to expose other subversive activities, and for having "taken part in deliberations about printing and distributing works against the government by means of a home lithograph."

Though the interrogation of the members of the Petrashevsky circle was completed in October, the outcome of the proceedings was not known to the prisoners for another couple of months. Then on the morning of 22nd December 1849, the prisoners are bundled into carriages and taken to Semenovsky square, where a macabre scene was enacted on the specific orders of the sadistic Tsar. A mock execution was arranged, and at the very last moment, the lives of the prisoners were spared by the Tsar. One of the prisoners found the experience so devastating that he went mad. What Dostoevsky felt in those supposedly last moments of his life is described in The Idiot:
It seemed to him that, in those five minutes, he was going to lead such a great number of lives that there was no place to think of the last moment. So that he divided up the time that still remained for him to live: two minutes to say good-bye to his companions; two minutes for inward meditation one last time; and the remainder to look around him one final time. He remembered perfectly having fulfilled these dispositions just as he had calculated. He was going to die at twenty-seven full of health and vigour. He recalled that, at the moment of saying good-bye, he asked one of his companions a rather indifferent question, and took a keen interest in the reply. After saying good-bye, he began the period of two minutes reserved for inward meditation. He knew in advance what he would think about: he wished to focus his attention firmly, and as rapidly and clearly as possible, on what was going to happen: right now, he was existing and living; in three minutes, something would occur; someone or something, but who, where? He thought to resolve these uncertainties during these two final minutes. Nearby rose a church, whose golden cupola sparkled under a brilliant sun. He recalled having looked at that cupola and the rays it reflected with a terrible obstinacy; he could not take his eyes away; those rays seemed to him to be that new nature that was to be his own, and he imagined that in three minutes he would become part of the ....

The prisoners were sentenced to varying terms of hard labour in Siberia. Petrashevsky was despatched immediately, while the others were taken back to the fortress. Dostoevsky immediately started writing a detailed letter to his brother, Mikhail, which is a

valuable source for "comprehending the moral-spiritual consequences" of the ordeal he had just undergone. Joseph Frank says that during those last moments Dostoevsky felt the intense need to forgive and be forgiven. He quotes a poignant part of the letter

If anyone remembers me as nasty, or if I quarreled with anybody, if I produced an unpleasant impression on anyone - ask them to forget, if you happen to meet them. There is no gall and rancor in my soul; I should so much like at this moment to love and to embrace just someone from among those I knew.

As the two quotations clearly indicate, the confrontation with death tremendously enhanced his grasp of existence. Earlier, Dostoevsky had been a secular writer, but this experience led him to ask those fundamental questions which can be answered by religious faith alone. Thus Dostoevsky's later novels contained a remarkable fusion of "uncommon social sensitivity" and "agonized religious probings and questionings".

Dostoevsky began the journey to Siberia on 24th December 1849. On arriving in Omsk, Dostoevsky first
set his eyes on Major Krivtsov who was hated by all the prisoners. After ordering the heads of the newly arrived prisoners shaved, he ominously warned them that if there was the slightest misbehaviour, he would have them flogged. Kristov was a despicable petty tyrant who took pleasure in torturing the prisoners. In these days, when one's rights are zealously guarded by constitutions and international agreements; and the ever-vigilant human rights activists take the offending institutions to task, it is difficult to imagine the humiliating pain of flogging that Dostoevsky describes in *The House Of The Dead*. The prisoners were beaten with rods or canes till they were practically dead and the officers who supervised the beating cannot be called human by any stretch of imagination.

...... the drum thunders the first rods are raised .... "Let him have it!" yells Zherebyatnikov at the top of his voice." Scorch him! Lay on, Lay on! Play him!

Again, again! Give it him hot, the orphan, the sneak-thief! cut him down; beat him down!" And the soldiers lay on for all they are worth, sparks flash before the eyes of the poor wretch, he begins to cry out, and Zherebyatnikov runs after him along the column, laughing, laughing, helpless with laughter, holding both his sides, so doubled up with laughter that in the end one must be sorry for the kind-hearted creature. He is full of
glee and finds it all very funny, and one hears again: "Lay on, lay on! Flay him, the thief, flay the orphan". \(^6\)

It is no wonder that after such brutes like Krivtsov and Zherebyatnikov, Major Smekalov is liked by the prisoners, though he too takes great pleasure in inventing "little tricks" while having the prisoners flogged.

The violence is not confined to the prison wardens alone. The prisoners themselves are very violent and the scene of the boisterous drunks being calmed is equally repulsive.

"About ten of the other prisoners rush him and knock him about terribly, until he's quite unconscious, that's to say they beat him half to death. Then they put him on his planks and cover him up with a sheepskin coat". \(^7\)

What happens in the prison is the complete dehumanization of the prisoners. Dostoevsky recounts how the favourite occupation of one convict, in his spare time, was counting the stakes of the stockade. The convict knew the fifteen hundred stakes by their position and


\(^7\) Ibid., p.42.
characteristics, but still counted them everyday. He was counting the days he had yet to spend in the prison. The time spent in the prison makes no difference to the convicts, they emerge from the prison only older. The system is a total failure in that the convicts do not feel any remorse for their crimes, especially if they have been committed against the gentry.

Before he was sent to Omsk, Dostoevsky's image of the people was shaped by the philanthropic and humanitarian ideas that came to Russia from Western Europe. His reading of the French Social novels of the 1830's convinced him that the masses were good and moral, better in every respect than the wealthy. What he encountered in prison was the contempt and hatred of the peasants. The conversation with the Polish prisoner, Miretsky, shows the gulf between the peasant convicts and the gentlemen political prisoners.

'Please tell me one thing,' I went on with my questioning. 'Look, they are eating their own food, too, and I am drinking tea. But all the same, they look as if they resented my having the tea. What does that mean?' 'It's not because of the tea,' answered the Pole. 'You irritate them because you are a gentleman and not like them. Many of them
would like to pick a quarrel with you. They are itching to insult and humiliate you. You will see a great deal more unpleasantness here. '9,'

These words prove prophetic. As Dostoevsky and Durov are drinking tea in the kitchen, the drunk Gazin storms in. He tries to provoke them with insulting barbs, and when they do not respond, he picks up a huge bread tray and holds it menacingly over their heads. No one intercedes or comes to their aid. They are saved in the nick of time only because some convict comes running and informs Gazin that his stock of vodka has been stolen. '

To fully appreciate the harrowing time, that Dostoevsky had in prison, we have to first understand what kind of a person he was before he was sent to Siberia. In the literary circles in St. Petersburg he had gained notoriety as a person of "extreme nervous susceptibility and a pathological sensitivity". In the second volume of his illuminating and well-researched biography, Dostoevsky's most acclaimed biographer, Joseph Frank says that while in Petersburg, Dostoevsky was

Ibid., p.42.
Unable to control himself in face of the slightest suggestion of opposition or hostility. His relations with the other young writers of the Belinsky circle, at first friendly and even cordial, were quickly poisoned by his unhappy proclivity to take offense at every passing remark; and by the end of the 1840's, he had acquired an unenviable reputation as being socially intolerable and morbidly suspicious. 9

His experience with Gazin will not be an isolated one. During his entire stay in prison, he was never allowed to forget that he was a noble man, and hence separate from the others.

The first time that Dostoevsky was sent out to do manual work with other convicts was to break up a barge.

He later recalled the humiliation he suffered at the hands of the convicts:

The lowest ragamuffin of all, who was himself a very bad workman, and who did not dare to open his mouth in front of the other cleverer, more efficient, prisoners, thought he had the right to shout at me and drive me away, if I stopped near him, on the pretext that I was hindering him. Finally one of the brisk ones said with crude directness "'Where do you think you think you are pushing to? Clear out! Why push in where you're not wanted?' 'You're out of your depth,' immediately chimed in another. 'You ought to go and pass round the hat,' said a third, 'To build a church, or start a tobacco -fund for us, you're no good here'.

I had to stand aside, but it feels shameful to stand aside while everyone else is working. But when I really did move away from them to the other end of the barge, they immediately began to cry out:

'Look what sort of workmen we got sent to us! What can you do with them? Nothing at all!'

All this, of course, was done deliberately, because it amused them. 10

It was no consolation to Dostoevsky that such ill feeling was not particularly directed against him but included the other nobles in prison also. The House Of The Dead is full of instances which bring out the relentless hatred of the peasant convicts for their old masters.

The most humiliating and insulting incident which shows that the ordinary convicts did not want to have anything to do with the noblemen convicts is described by Dostoevsky in the chapter titled "The Grievance". One day he saw most of the convicts gathered in the prison courtyard at an unusual time. Thinking that it was a roll call, he fell in line. To his amazement, he was jeered and told to leave the group. When he hesitated, he was taken by the arm and led to the camp kitchen. There he was told that the convicts had

10 House Of The Dead, p.110-111.
organised a complaint against the major because of the quality of the food. The complaint was promptly crushed by brute force. What hurt Dostoevsky was that "never before had he so much desired to be accepted by others. ..... and never before had he been so roughly repulsed". Contrary to his expectations, the convicts did not harbour any resentment towards those who did not join them. Baffled by this, he spoke to Петров:

'Tell me Петров, I asked him, 'your felows are angry with us, are they?'
'Who's angry?' he asked, as though jerked back to reality.
'The prisoners with us,..... the gentlemen'.
'Why should anyone be angry with you?'
'Well, because we didn't join in the grievance'.
'What was there for you to make a grievance about?' he asked, as though trying to understand me. 'After all, you have your own food'.
'Oh, good God! Some of you have your own food as well, but they joined in. Well, so ought we. ..... out of comeradeship'.
'But ..... but how can you be our comerades?' he asked puzzled. 11

Dostoevsky was sent to prison for propagating liberal ideas while in the Petrashevsky circle. He had probably assumed that the peasants would accept to

11 The House Of The Dead, pp.321-322.
meekly and blindly follow the gentlemen in the struggle against an unjust social order. The incident of the grievance shattered his delusion and was therefore all the more painful. It is no wonder that Dostoevsky, shunned by all, lavished affection on the prison dog, Sharik, who used to greet him joyously whenever he returned from work. Of all the prisoners, it was only Dostoevsky who caressed him. The same feeling of rejection and isolation drove him to fondle the horse, Sorrel. It is very difficult to understand, how a person who was so totally rejected by his fellow-countrymen, would one day believe that, the salvation of Russia lay in the hands of these same peasants.

Joseph Frank attempts to explain this sea-change, amounting to a conversation, by drawing on D's article, "The Peasant Marey," The House Of The Dead, and Willam James' Varities Of Religious Experience. The incident took place on the second day of the Easter week while he was in prison. It was a holiday and the scene in the barracks is described in detail by Dostoevsky. Many of the prisoners were drunk and quarrels broke out quite frequently. Some were singing obscene songs, while others were gambling. The place became intolerable
when six peasants started beating the drunken Tartar, Gazin, mercilessly. The ferocity of the beating was so sickening that Dostoevsky rushed out. Just at that instant, he met the Polish prisoner, Miretsky, who had also come out of the barracks. 'Je hais ces brigands!' (I hate these bandits!) Miretsky muttered through clenched teeth and passed by. Hearing these words, Dostoevsky abruptly turned around and went into the barracks he had just fled. He was shocked that the Pole had voiced his own "poisonous thoughts", and could not believe that he was aligned with the Poles against his fellow Russians. Unable to withstand the commotion in the barracks, he lay down on his plank and pretended to be asleep, knowing that he would not be disturbed by others if they thought that he was asleep. Dostoevsky had used this technique in the past to cut himself off from the surrounding chaos.

This time however, closing his eyes did not bring any relief. He could hear Miretsky's words, "I hate these bandit" ringing in his ears. Due to the severity of the mental agony, he found it difficult to blot out the present, and allow his mind to wander freely in the past, What emerged out of this sub-conscious search was
the long-forgotten incident of his childhood in Darovoye. Playing in the woods called Brykovo, the nine-year-old Dostoevsky thought that someone had shouted, "Wolf!" His mother had warned him about venturing too far in the past because sometime wolves did appear in the woods. The frightened boy run out of the wood towards a peasant called Marey who was ploughing a nearby field.

The surprised Marey halted work to southe the terrified child, white-faced and trembling and assured him that no one had shouted and no wolf was near. Dostoevsky recalled marey smiling at him gently "like a mother," blessing him with the sign of the cross and crossing herself, and then sending him home with the reassurance that he would be kept in sight.

"All this came back to me suddenly, I do not know why," Dostoevsky writes, "with surprising clarity and in full detail. I suddenly opened my eyes, straighted up on the plank bed and, I recall, my face still retained its gentle smile of recollection." 12

12 Dostoevsky: The Years Of Ordeal, 1850-1859., p.123.
This comforting memory magically transformed his attitude towards his fellow prisoners. He felt that all hatred and rancour had vanished from his heart. That same evening he met Miretsky again, and in place of the earlier agitation, felt that because the Poles did not have peasants like Marey, they had to undergo more suffering than the Russians. The common people henceforth became for Dostoevsky the human image of Christ. Each Russian peasant was a potential Marey, someone who had preserved in his soul the sublime purity of Christ's teachings inspite of the grim social conditions. The previous philanthropic sentiments he had towards the masses as a result of reading Fourier and other French Utopian Socialist, were replaced by a faith that these simple peasants alone possessed the inner strength to lead Russia to the forefront of the society of nations. Joseph Frank says:

...if the Russian people did possess the extraordinary moral capacities that Dostoevsky now finds them, these had become visible to him as a result of the purifying influences of the religious emotions of his childhood; they were intimately and indissolubly linked with the Orthodox faith that he and the peasants shared. Hence his recovery of faith in the people was also a rediscovery of Orthodoxy, or at least an estrangement from his previous "progressive" Christianity, whose doctrines he
could will castigate as the fatal source of all his old illusions. 13

In January 1854, Dostoevsky completed the four year prison term. But the authorities had not forgotten the obstinate writer and issued orders that he was to serve in the Siberian Seventh Line Battalion then based in Semipalatinsk. While the prison term had been set for four years, no limit was set on his military service. Though he was pensive and laconic on the outside, his term in prison had left deep scars on his psyche. Even in his soldier's cap, he was a prisoner because he was languishing in Siberia against his will.

In 1854, he found a new friend, Baron Alexander Wrangel, who had witnessed the mock execution in Semenovsky Square. Wrangel was a great admirer of Dostoevsky and became a devoted friend. He was public prosecutor and introduced Dostoevsky to the town's leading citizens. He also helped to bring Dostoevsky's new found reverence for the monarchy to the attention of the powers that be. The "warn, patriotic feelings" were soon rewarded and Dostoevsky became an "unterofitser" (under officer) a year later. He still did not have the

13 Ibid., p.126.
right to publish, or his freedom. He was very keen for the latter because he was planning to get married.

Shortly after his arrival in Semipalatinsk, he had become acquainted with one Alexander Isayev, a drunken former customs officer. Isayev was a vain and proud man with no selfdiscipline whatsoever. With his cloying sentimentality, he became the prototype for the character of Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment*. To begin with Dostoevsky felt only sympathy for Isayev's wife, Maria Dimitrievna, a thin, pale, sickly woman. But gradually this feeling was transformed into passionate love, a love which brought him joy and sorrow. She was flattered by the attentions of a once famous writer but was not prepared to make a commitment.

Her husband died shortly after the family moved to Kuznetsk. She was tormented by loneliness and penury. Gradually she fell in love with a local school master, while at the same time professing to be in love with Dostoevsky. Maria tortured her suitors and tortured herself because of them. In this "sadomasochistic" relationship, she discovered a pleasure. With her
"passionate, fickle, intense and hysterical" nature she was the model for the characters of Natasya Fillippovana in *The Idiot* and katerian Ivanovna in *Crime and Punishment*, two of the "infernal" woman in Dostoevsky's works. Finally in 1857, Maria and Dostoevsky were married after he was promoted as an officer. The wedding was a tense affair:

...the bride standing before the altar with her groom and her lover on either side. Dostoevsky was uneasy and harassed by doubts. What if she changed her mind at the last minute and fled the church with his rival in close pursuit? Or what if his rival murdered her in a fit of jealousy, or if he himself should lose his mind. In these agonising minutes the writer may have experienced what he later portrayed in *The Idiot*, when Natasya Fillippovana runs off with Ragozin just before her wedding to Prince Myshkin.14

The relationship was founded from the very beginning on a misunderstanding. Mutual pity could not

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take the place of love. Maria regretted her decision almost immediately. Already on epileptic, his health deteriorated due to the harrowing life with the fickle and jealous Maria. Finally in 1859, Dostoevsky was allowed to leave for European Russia. An entire decade of suffering was over. When in later life, an acquaintance expressed dismay at all the suffering he had to endure, Dostoevsky is supposed to have said:

You are mistaken. I have no complaint at all. It was a good school. It strengthened my faith and awakened my love for those who bear all their suffering with patience. It also strengthened my love for Russia and opened my eyes to the great qualities of the Russian people. 15

This is the life that gave the world its classics, Crime and Punishment and The Brothers Karamazov, which are discussed in the next chapter.

15 Ibid., p.127.