

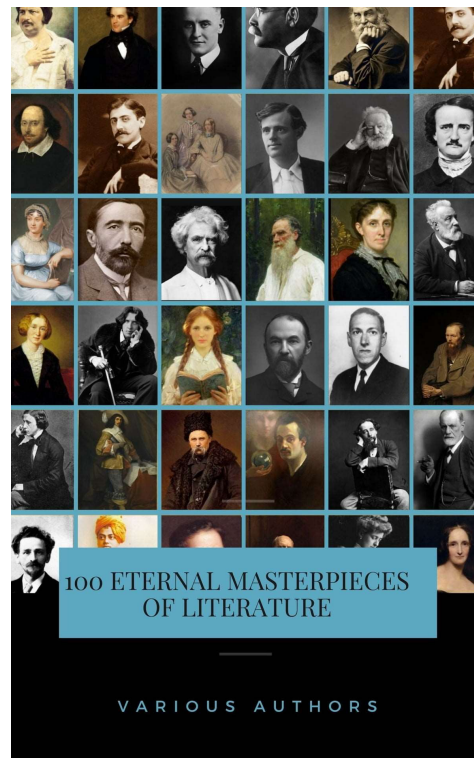
RUSSIA AND BLACK AMERICA

Lecture Five

Richard Wright's Underground Dialogue with Fedor Dostoevsky

Tuesday, March 26

What is a masterpiece of literature? And who decides?



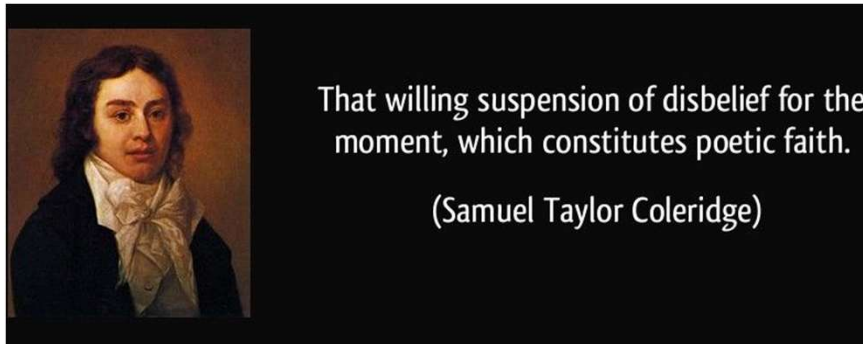
Literature is dangerous!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzgpPw_hHCY



Homicidal novelist Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) teaches San Francisco detective Nick Curran (Mike Douglas) and his partner Gus Moran (George Dzundza) about the magic of storytelling

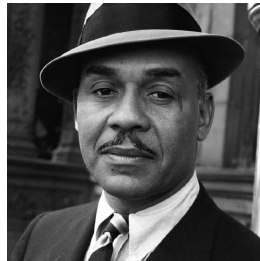
Our old friend, suspension of disbelief



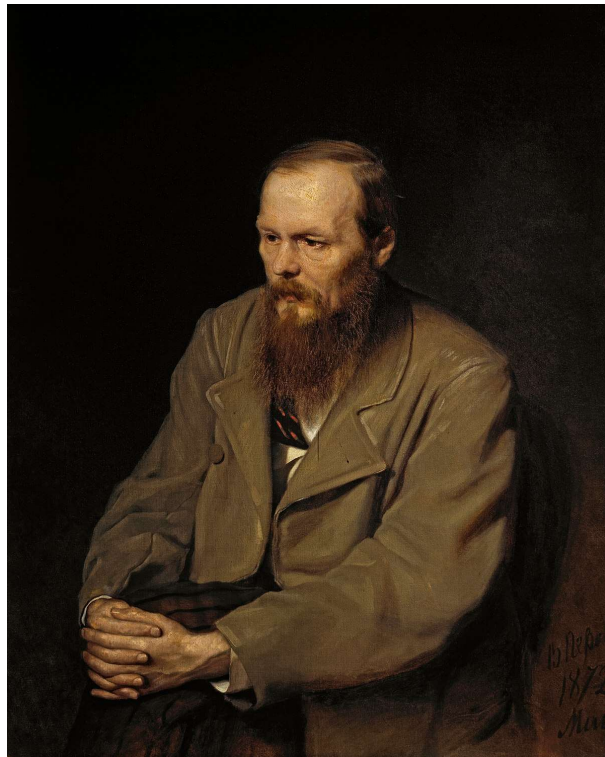
Writer and activist Langston Hughes (1901-1967) visiting the Soviet Union in 1932. For more about “The Great African American Escape to Soviet Russia,” see the article of that name by Zakiyyah Job at <https://www.messynessychic.com/2021/02/11/the-great-african-american-escape-to-soviet-russia/>



James Baldwin (1924-1987), Ralph Ellison (1913-1994), and Richard Wright (1908-1960) shared a cultural, political, and creative connection to Russia. They read and admired Fedor Dostoevsky, the author of *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)



The famous portrait of Fedor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) by Vasily Perov (1872)



Mikhail and Maria Dostoevsky, the parents of the Russian novelist. Mikhail was an authoritarian and even cruel figure, while Maria was a loving, gentle soul



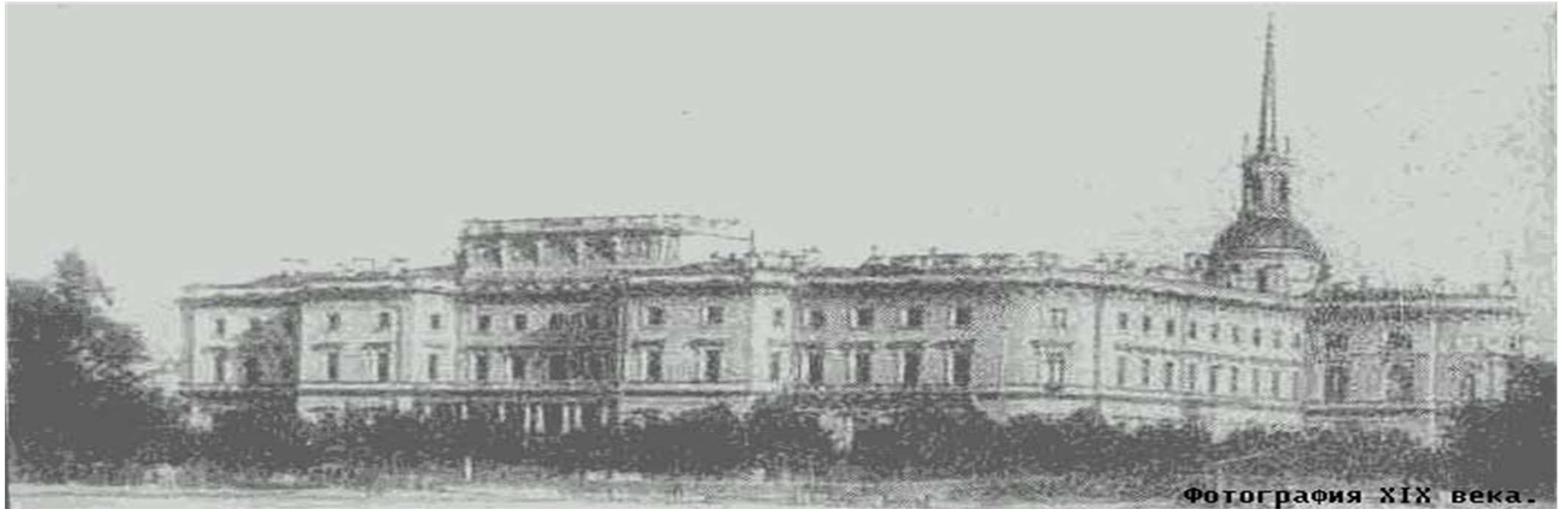
The Mariinsky Hospital for the Poor, where Dostoevsky was born



A surviving section of the house at Darovoye, Moscow Province, the family estate where Dostoevsky grew up and where he had his first encounter with unspeakable and unpunished evil. Despite his fame as a writer, the Darovoye property is *not* a Russian national space



The Nikolaev Military Engineering Institute, where Dostoevsky was a student



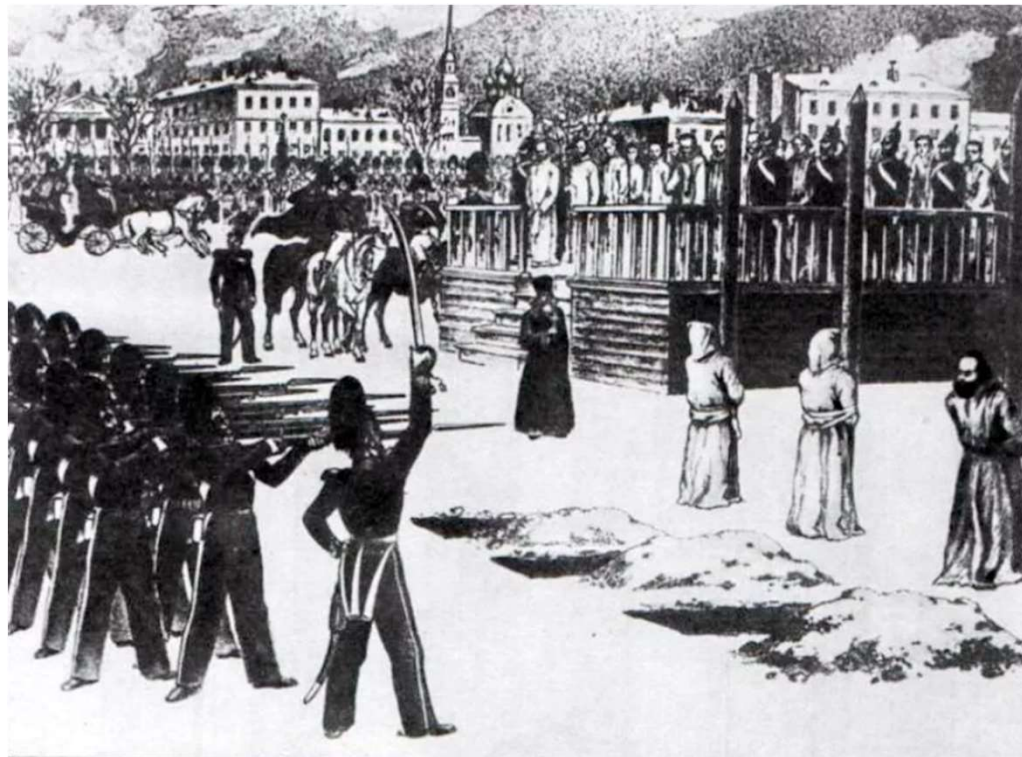
The Fortress of Peter and Paul in Saint Petersburg, where Dostoevsky was incarcerated



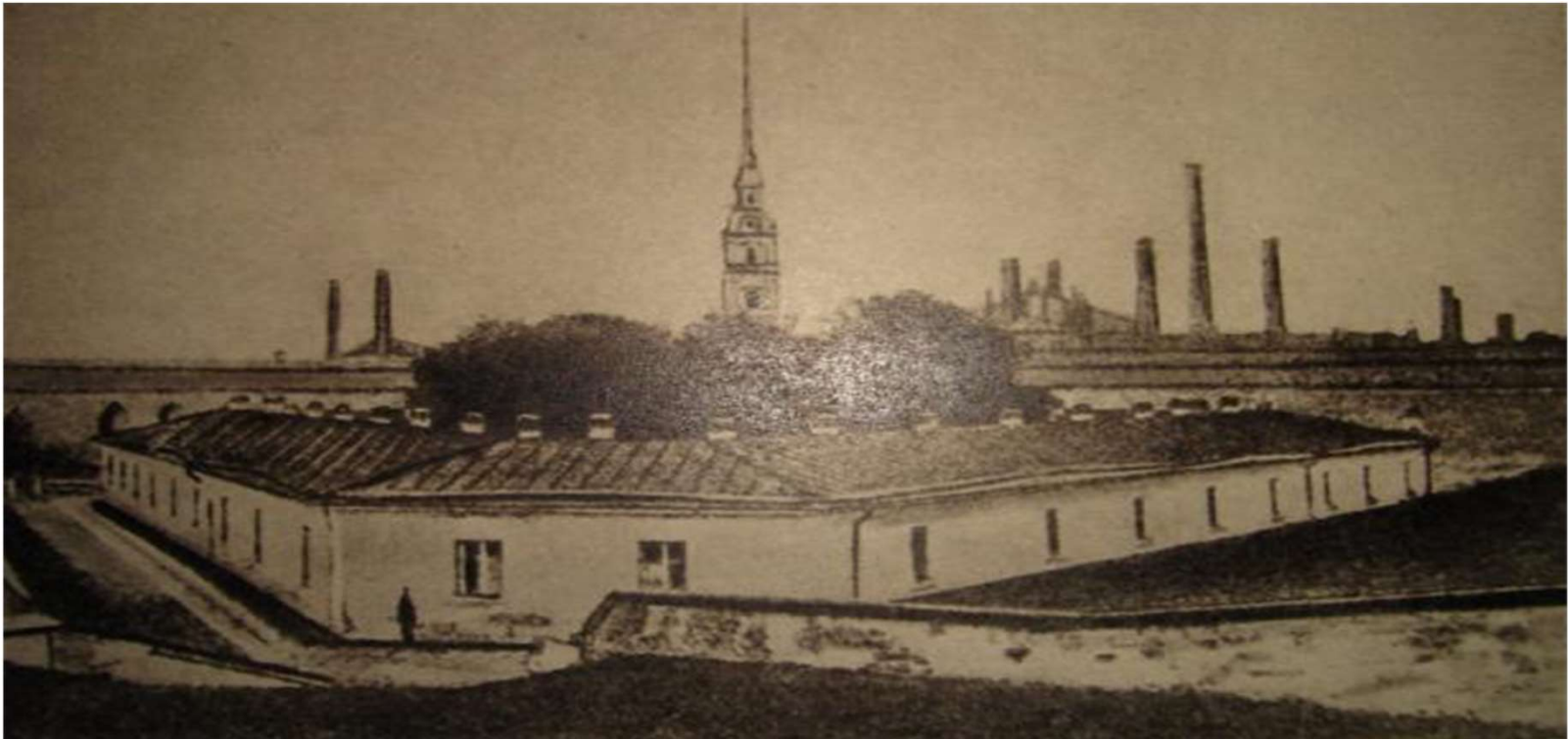
Emperor Nicholas I, whom we have already met (1835 portrait). Think Putin, but tougher, taller, and with a mustache



The mock execution in 1850 was a turning point in Dostoevsky's life



The prison at Omsk, where the writer was incarcerated in 1850-1854



This is what the jail's interior looked like



Apollinaria (Polina) Suslova (1839-1918) was a real-life femme fatale. She met Dostoevsky in 1861, when he was 40 and she was 21. The characters of Polina (*The Gambler*), Nastasya Filipovna (*The Idiot*), and Katerina Ivanovna Marmeladova (*Crime and Punishment*) were inspired by her



Anna Dostoevskaya, née Snitkina (1846-1918), the writer's wife, who made him happy and bore him two children while creating the safe and comforting work environment he had always craved. Dostoevsky married her in 1867. On left Anna as she was around the time of the wedding; on right with their children Fedor and Lyubov (1883)



Entrance to the Dostoevsky Museum in Saint Petersburg



Inside the Dostoevsky home



Compare w/the interior of the Lincoln Home in Springfield



Dostoevsky's study



The Sistine Madonna by Raphael (ca. 1513-14)



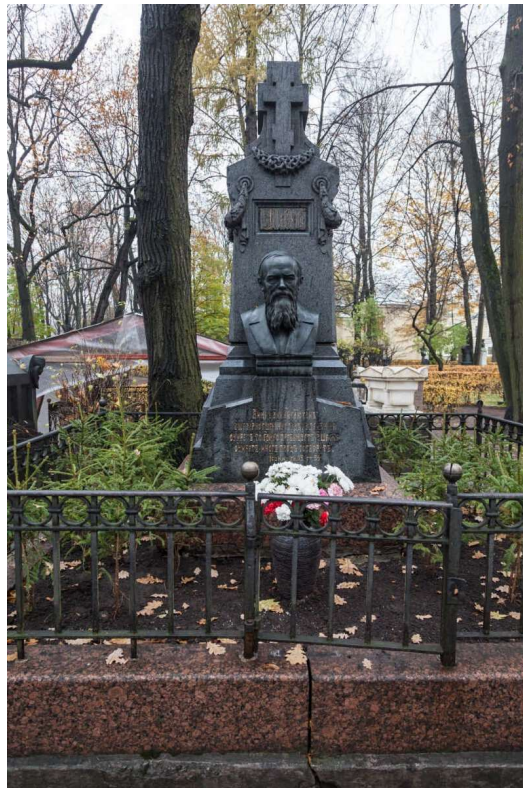
Mai Dantsig, *And the Rescued World Remembers* (1985)



Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in His Tomb* (1520-22). This work made an indelible impression on Dostoevsky, who encountered it in the Basel Museum of the Arts in 1867: he had fled to Switzerland to hide from his Russian creditors. Anna Dostoevsky recalled that while she was unable to look at the painting and preferred to walk over to another room in the museum, her husband was mesmerized by it. When she returned twenty minutes later, he was still standing in front of the canvas wearing an expression that he often had before experiencing one of his epileptic fits. In *The Idiot*, the main character, Prince Myshkin, cries out, "This painting may make some people lose their faith!"



The writer's grave at the Tikhvin Cemetery in St. Petersburg *is* a Russian national site



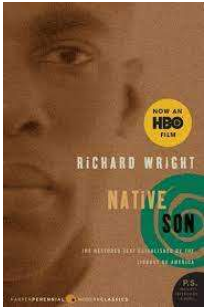
Dostoevsky's chief works

- *Poor Folk* (1846)
- *The Double* (1846)
- *The House of the Dead* (1864)
- *Notes from the Underground* (1864)
- *Crime and Punishment* (1866)
- *The Gambler* (1867)
- *The Idiot* (1869)
- *The Possessed*, a. k. a. *The Devils* or *Demons* (1872)
- *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)

What are our points of comparison?



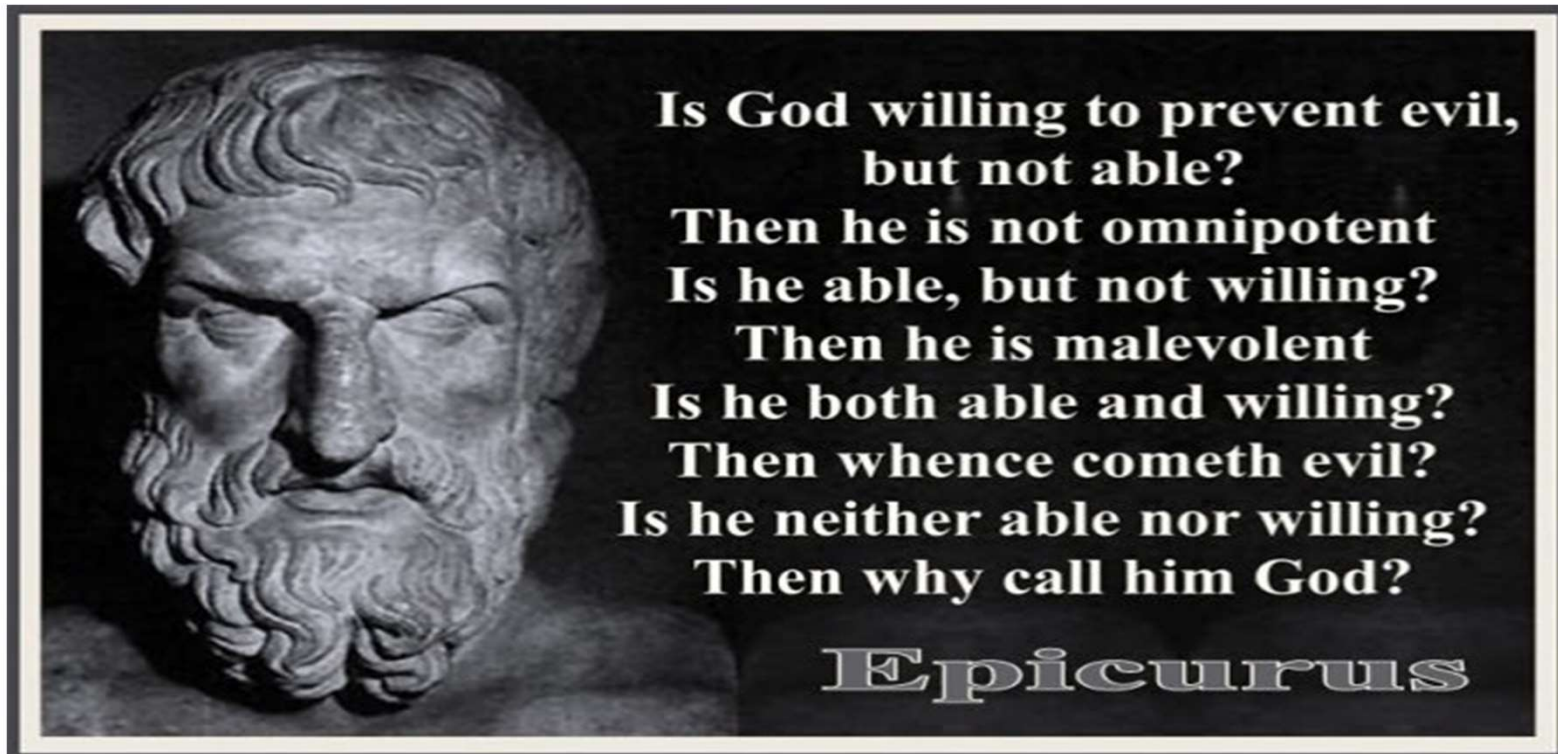
VS



We are “fixed” by our minds, bodies, and social circumstances, yet we long to be free



Epicurus (341-270 BCE)



Theodicy

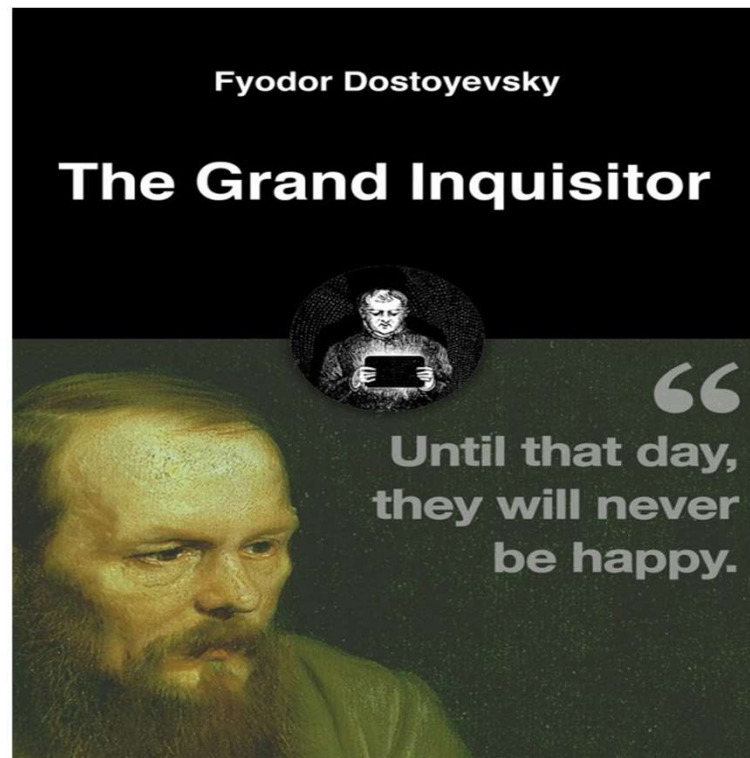


St. Augustine's theodicy constituted a point of departure for Dostoevsky, as it did for many other Christian writers. True, Dostoevsky was more than just a Christian writer, which is, I submit, where his greatness as an artist lies

Augustinian Theodicy – Freewill Defence

- St Augustine of Hippo (354-430)
- 2 assumptions
 1. Evil is not from God (Gen 3 – The Fall)
 2. Evil is a privation – examples
 - God made perfect world
 - The Fall ruined it all
 - We have a “fallen nature”
 - God would be justified to punish us
 - BUT he provides a way out – Sacrifice of Jesus
- Natural evil – Effects of Fall on nature
- Moral evil – misuse of Freewill

“The Grand Inquisitor” (1880) by Fedor Dostoevsky (1821-1881)



Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008)

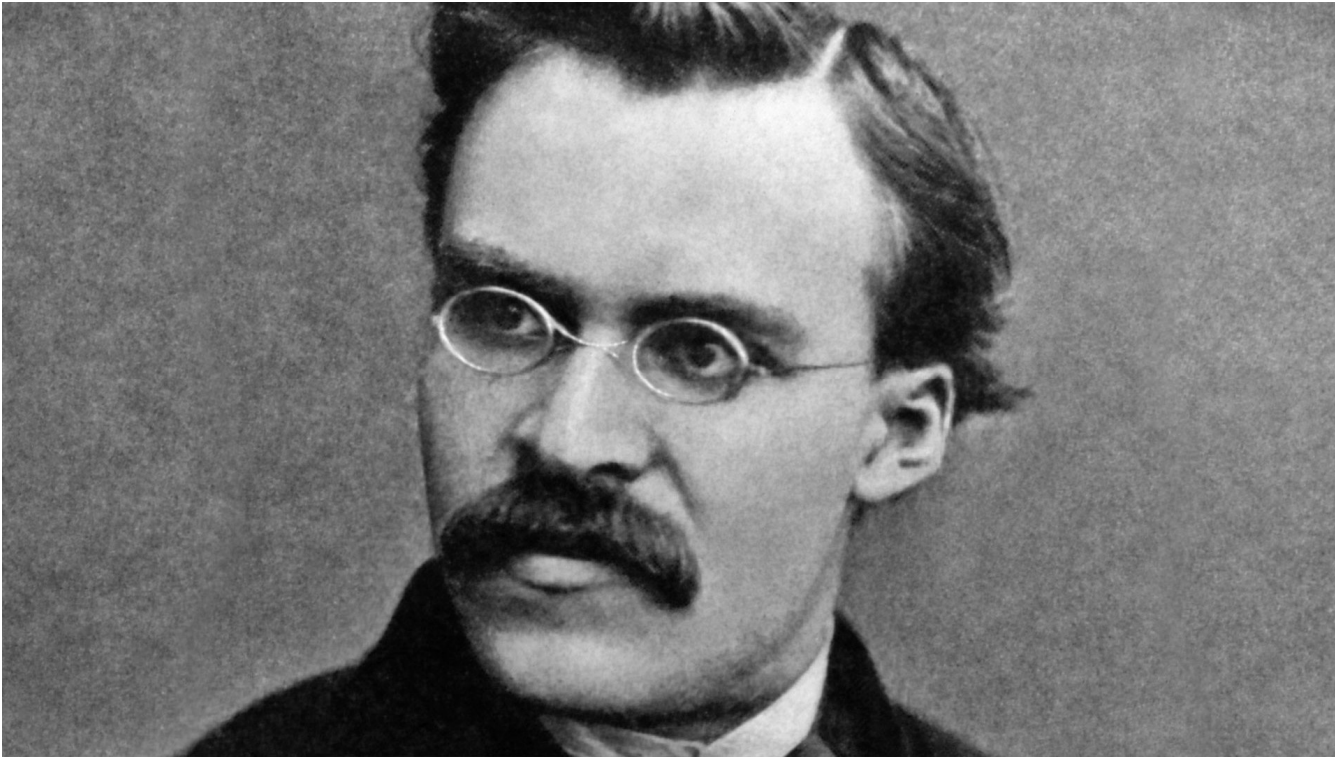


If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

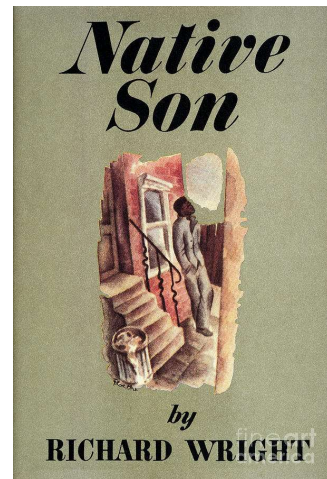
(Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn)

izquotes.com

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who popularized the notion of the “underground”



Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) are novels that depict an angry, alienated character dwelling in the urban underworld. One protagonist is extremely violent, the other one is extremely furtive. Both want to be free.



Alex DeLarge (*A Clockwork Orange*, 1971), Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*, 1976), Tony Montana (*Scarface*, 1981), and Lisbeth Salander (*The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, 2011) are urban, extreme antiheroes. These cinematic productions make them visually arresting



You may want to check out this recent screen version of *Native Son* (2019), updated for the twenty-first century, in which Bigger Thomas is played by Ashton Sanders. A “compare and contrast” with the original novel may give rise to some intriguing and even shocking conclusions!



The fictive world of *Native Son*
(the novel, not the film)



Crime and Punishment: A tale of two St. Petersburgs



A polyphony of distinct, disparate, conflicting voices belonging to characters who may be in the right or in the wrong — or both (as in Dostoevsky) . For some evil characters may speak the truth and some good characters may tell lies. Also, consider Wright's set pieces such as the dinner scene in Part One and Bigger's trial in Part Three



Bigger's arrest and trial: society's power structure on ritual and discursive display presented in the form of a set piece. Below: still from the 1951 film version of the novel (*Argentina*), in which Bigger Thomas was played by Richard Wright himself



Suggestively coded poster advertising the 1951 film version of Wright's novel



Bigger Thomas: Underground Rebel? Seeking agency? Is there anything about him that is 1) relatable, 2) sympathetic?

Poor, uneducated, introverted, enraged

Forcibly *othered*

Lacks self-control

Lacks self-awareness

A victim of *systemic* and *individualized* racism, but also a depraved, dangerously violent man

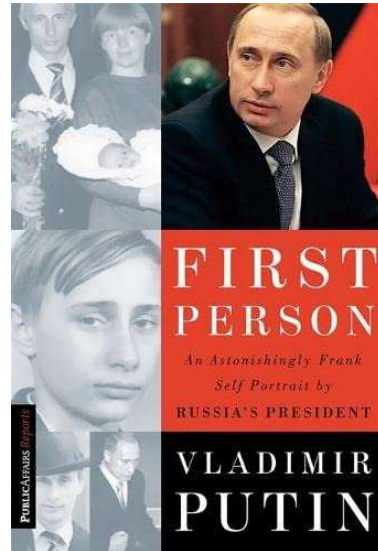
Does the novel assign blame for Bigger's crimes to anyone or anything other than the protagonist?

What about white privilege?

The killing of the rat: a proleptic murder



First Person (2000)



Mary Thomas

Bigger's mother

Accepts the social and racial order

Devoted to her family

Worried about Bigger



Buddy and Vera Thomas

Buddy (younger brother) admires Bigger

Vera (younger sister) may grow up to be socially submissive like their mother



Mary Dalton

Well-meaning, liberal

Wants to help black people

Boyfriend, Jan Erlone, is a communist: Is this *her* way of rebelling against a) parents, b) society, c) Western civilization?



Mr. and Mrs. Dalton

Are they hypocritical? Think about those donations to the NAACP but also Mr. Dalton's refusal to rent to Black people outside the ghetto)

What is the significance of Mrs. Dalton's disability, other than its role as a plot device?



Jan Erlone

Mary's boyfriend

Communist. Think significant myth!

Seeks to befriend Bigger and remains sympathetic to him even after the trial

Bessie Mears

Bigger's girlfriend

Alcoholic

Victim?

Sexualized?



GH, Gus, Jack

Members of Bigger's gang. In the text, they are "ranked"

GH is junior member

Gus comes next. Shares Bigger's anxiety over whites

Jack the closest Bigger has to a friend

Mr. Britten

As private investigator, represents power structure
Anticommunist, racist, closed-minded



Peggy

The Dalton's Irish-American housekeeper

Loyal to her employers

Wants to help Bigger but is patronizing

Doc

Black owner of South Side pool hall. Member of African American bourgeoisie. Testifies against Bigger



Boris Max (is his name an aptronym?)

Bigger's Jewish lawyer and Communist party associate

Like Rev. Hammond (see next slide), recognizes Bigger's humanity

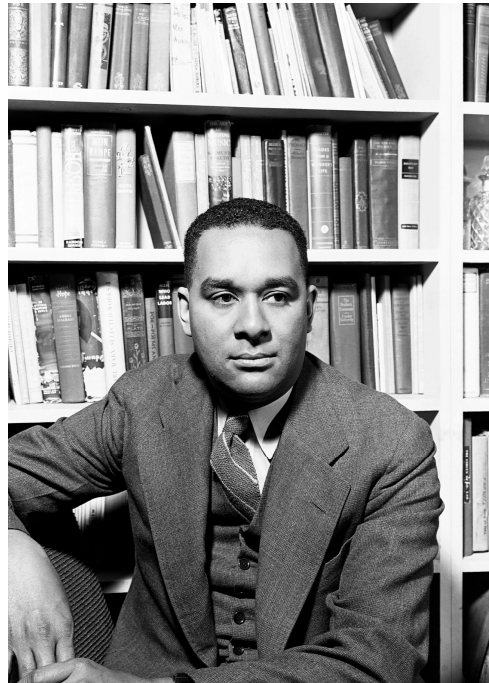
Believes Bigger is product of American society and therefore its native son

Reverend Hammond, a Catholic priest who tries to connect to Bigger
Like Dostoevsky, Wright explores the workings of the irreligious mind

Both Hammond and Max understand Bigger's humanity, though
they define it in different terms

Christianity vs. Marxism, the faith of centuries vs. the significant
myth of revolutionary liberation. Neither can redeem Wright's
antihero

Richard Wright's essay "I Tried to Be a Communist," published in the August 1944 issue of *The Atlantic*, is an absorbing account of the defining episode in his political journey:
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1944/08/richard-wright-communist/618821/>.
Alternative link: <https://genius.com/Richard-wright-author-i-tried-to-be-a-communist-annotated>

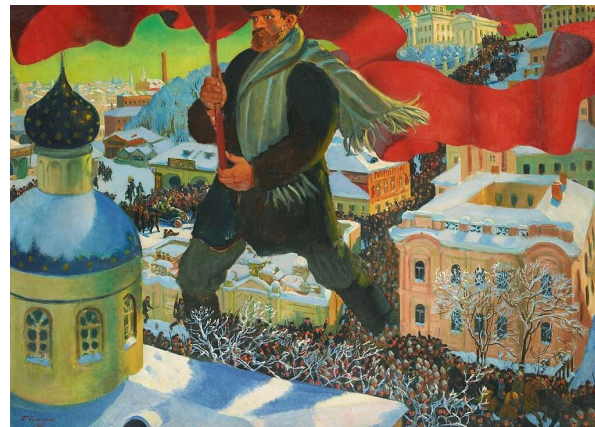


Wright recounts the initial impact of the significant myth of communism upon him

It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role. Out of the magazines I read came a passionate call for the experiences of the disinherited, and there were none of the lame lispings of the missionary in it. It did not say: "Be like us and we like you, maybe." It said: "If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find that you are not alone." It urged life to believe in life.

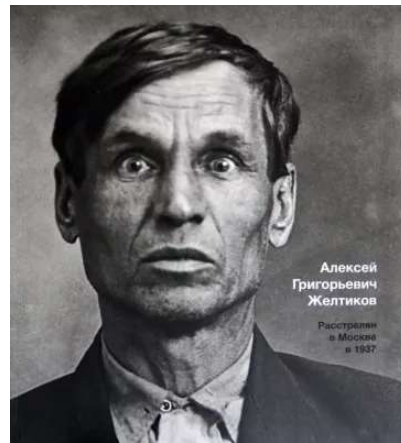
Rage. Modernism. Significant myth

Boris Kustodiev, *The Bolshevik* (1917)



With my mother standing at my side, lending me her eyes, I stared at a cartoon drawn by a Communist artist; it was the figure of a worker clad in ragged overalls and holding aloft a red banner. The man's eyes bulged; his mouth gaped as wide as his face; his teeth showed; the muscles of his neck were like ropes. Following the man was a horde of nondescript men, women, and children, waving clubs, stones, and pitchforks.

The Great Terror or Great Purge



Wright witnesses, and is appalled by, a purge of the communist cell undertaken by a “Comrade Young of Detroit.” Later he learns that the fanatical Stalinist harbors a secret...

Dear Sir:

In reply to your letter, we beg to inform you that Mr. Young, who was a patient in our institution and who escaped from our custody a few months ago, had been apprehended and returned to this institution for mental treatment.

A class divide, not a racial one

During the following days I learned through discreet questioning that I had seemed a fantastic element to the black Communists. I was shocked to hear that I, who had been only to grammar school, had been classified as an intellectual. What was an intellectual? I had never heard the word used in the sense in which it was applied to me. I had thought that they might refuse me on the ground that I was not politically advanced; I had thought they might say I would have to be investigated. But they had simply laughed.

I learned, to my dismay, that the black Communists in my unit had commented upon my shined shoes, my clean shirt, and the tie I had worn. Above all, my manner of speech had seemed an alien thing to them.

“He talks like a book,” one of the Negro comrades had said. And that was enough to condemn me forever as bourgeois.

Why didn't they (and he) fit in?

“Intellectuals don't fit well into the party, Wright,” he said solemnly.

“But I'm not an intellectual,” I protested. “I sweep the streets for a living.” I had just been assigned by the relief system to sweep the streets for thirteen dollars a week.

“That doesn't make any difference,” he said. “We've kept records of the trouble we've had with intellectuals in the past. It's estimated that only 13 per cent of them remain in the party.”

Leon Trotsky (Bronstein)
(1879-1940)

The inspiration for Emmanuel Goldstein in George Orwell's *1984*



Bigger begins to take form,
while Wright concludes that the discourse of communism is simply inadequate in
social or artistic terms

But there was relief from these shadowy political bouts. I found my work in the South Side Boys' Club deeply engrossing. Each day black boys between the ages of eight and twenty-five came to swim, draw, and read. They were a wild and homeless lot, culturally lost, spiritually disinherited, candidates for the clinics, morgues, prisons, reformatories, and the electric chair of the state's death house. For hours I listened to their talk of planes, women, guns, politics, and crime. Their figures of speech were as forceful and colorful as any ever use by English-speaking people. I kept pencil and paper in my pocket to jot down their word-rhythms and reactions. These boys did not fear people to the extent that every man looked like a spy. The Communists who doubted my motives did not know these boys, their twisted dreams, their all to clear destinies; and I doubted if I should ever be able to convey to them the tragedy I saw here.