

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's The House of the Dead

Fyodor Mikhaylovich Dostoyevsky was born in Moscow on Nov. 11, 1825. As his father was a former military surgeon, Dostoyevsky grew up in the noble class. He entered the military engineering school at St. Petersburg at age 16. Shortly after graduating, he resigned his commission and devoted all his time to writing. However, he soon became caught up in the movement for political and social reform during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I. He began to participate in weekly discussions about the ideas of French utopian Socialists. This Petrashevsky Circle was arrested in April 1849. After a long investigation, Dostoyevsky, along with 20 other members of the Circle, were condemned to be shot. Literally moments before his execution was to occur, his sentence was commuted to four years hard labor in Omsk, Siberia. He accepted his punishment and began to regard many of the simple convicts as extraordinary people. During his sentence, he became devoted to Orthodox Christianity.

The House of the Dead was initially published in Russia, 1860. Upon initial examination of the work, it appears to be a stream of consciousness account of Dostoyevsky's four years in a Siberian prison camp. But, upon further review, it seems to be more an account of Dostoyevsky's personality and attitudes through these years. In his first year in prison, Dostoyevsky "found myself hating these fellow-sufferers of mine." (305) His first day in prison, several convicts approached him, a member of the noble class and no doubt very wealthy in the convicts' eyes, and asked him for money four times each; and each refusal seemed to bring more convicts. He quickly grew to spite these people, for they thought him to be an idiot, unable to remember that the very same convict had approached him for money not fifteen minutes earlier. (67-8) But, Dostoyevsky makes a startling realization at the end of this first year, a discovery which allows him to drastically alter his personality: "...the convicts lived here not as if this were their home, but as some wayside inn, en route somewhere." (303) this concept is followed by Dostoyevsky's realization that he wanted, unlike many other convicts in the camp, to live as he did before his imprisonment. He believed that "Physical, no less moral strength is required for penal servitude if one is to survive all the materiel deprivations of that accursed existence. And I wanted to go on living after I had left prison...." (277). The remaining twenty pages are anti-climatic; they simply deal with the change of a Major stationed at the prison and Dostoyevsky's release from the camp.

Dostoyevsky's The House of the Dead is a beneficial source of historical information. First of all, it presents life inside of a Siberian prison camp. For years, Russians feared the concept of a Siberian prison camp, a place where convicts,

troublemakers and dissenters were to be sent. But, Dostoyevsky presents a camp that does not fulfill such horrid expectations. While many of the sections of the work deal with flogging and punishment, these stories are outweighed by stories of the freedoms that most of the prisoners enjoyed: money, vodka, harlots, special clothing, and special prison meals. While prisoners enjoyed such benefits, these were, however, few and far between. Dostoyevsky recounts how prisoners had to have shaved heads, lie on mattresses infested with bed bugs and eat soup containing cockroaches. Summer days were consumed by eighteen hours of manual labor. And their sentences included up to five-thousand lashes with a birch cane. Finally, it deals with human nature, and the lengths to which man may go to avoid his fate. Dostoyevsky provides the tale of one prisoner, sentenced to thirty years in an especially arduous camp, the "special" camp, would offer to trade names (and, therefore, sentences) with a more gullible prisoner, who believed that a "special" camp provided exemption from manual labor. This name change would often include a small bit of vodka for the gullible prisoner. Also, he told of prisoners who, as they were being taken to their sentencing, would kill an officer simply to delay their sentencing, even though the convict was fully aware that such actions would bring two or three times as much punishment upon them. the reader has no reason to not believe Dostoyevsky and his tales: what could possibly come from lying about prison experiences? Also, Dostoyevsky is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, Russian authors; I would hope he can be trusted.

I would recommend this book, as well as other Dostoyevsky novels, to others. Dostoyevsky is a very interesting author, whose works often deal with human nature and are rarely boring.

