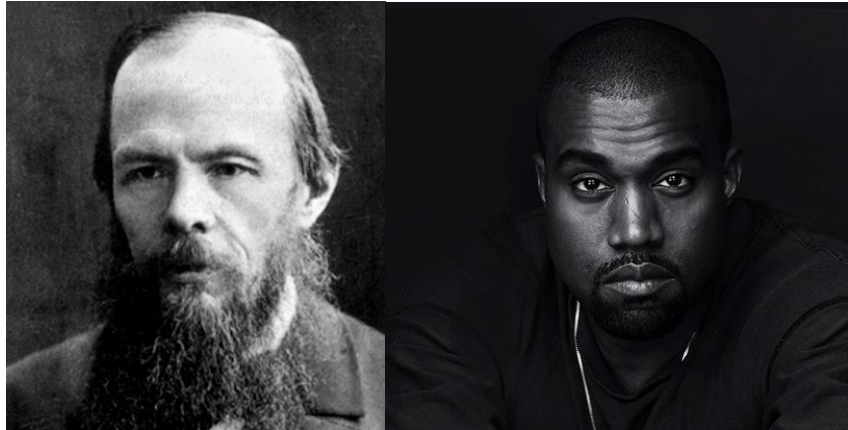


Fall 2021
Class: CL 114
O/H: T/Th 11-12

Prof. Thomas Dyne (thd29@pitt.edu)
Wednesdays 6:00-8:30
Office: CL 1235

Crime & Punishment & Kanye West

RUSS 0670 – Department of Russian & Slavic Languages & Literatures – U. of Pittsburgh



“Now suppose that there is no God or immortality of the soul. Now tell me, why should I live righteously and do good deeds, if I die entirely on earth?”

— Fyodor Dostoevsky,
1878

*“Human beings in a mob...
What’s a mob to a king?
What’s a king to a god?
What’s a god to a non-believer?”*

— Kanye West, 2011

What does it mean to sin? What does it mean to believe in God? What does it mean to love? What is injustice? Is violence *always* wrong? And can literature and music answer questions posed by philosophy, religion, sex, and politics?

The Russian novelist **Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky** (1821-1881) explored these questions of the human mind and soul through some of the most vivid and tenacious characters in world literature: murderers, madmen, children, terrorists, atheists, and prostitutes, brothers and sisters, gamblers and saints. Many of his eerily modern ethical, psychological, and political insights stemmed from his fear of a world without God, a condition that he rejected on moral grounds, but which he compellingly represented in his fiction.

This class will trace the major themes and ideas of Dostoevsky’s career as a literary celebrity, prisoner, traveler, journalist, religious and nationalist thinker, and especially, as a novelist who pushed the genre its outermost formal and philosophical bounds, by putting him into conversation with contemporary American rap artist and producer **Kanye West** (b. 1977), as well as the context of his media presence and celebrity status.

Each week we will read several short stories, articles and novellas by Fyodor Dostoevsky, including the centerpiece of the class, his masterpiece novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866), which we will read slowly alongside its many famous critical analyses. We will put our works into literary, social, and philosophical contexts by pairing them with focus tracks drawn from the career of Kanye West, specifically charting how the themes Dostoevsky develops in his fiction are mirrored, explored, or challenged.

We will discuss Dostoevsky's depiction of a murderer's psychology in light of his conservative nationalism, his devout Christianity, his acute sense of social injustice, his sexual politics, his relationship to mental illness and medicine, and his radical narrative innovations. At the same time, we will ask: Is there something specifically Dostoevskian about Kanye's depiction of the American criminal justice system? What about his struggle with mental illness? Can we find traces of Dostoevsky's prostitutes in Kanye's porn stars? In addition to major themes, we will discuss the specific literary devices employed by each writer, and their philosophical and ethical consequences. Can rhyme, rhythm, voice, and irony represent a certain experience of time and space? Can they represent racism? Can they dismantle it?

COURSE EXPECTATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS

This course aims to help you develop your interpretive and critical writing skills. We will be reading closely and writing critically every day in class. You will be asked to write short interpretive essays on individual passages and verses ("close readings"), and a longer comparative and argumentative paper. In addition to these essays, you will also spend a substantial amount of time working on revisions. Revising an essay is an opportunity to re-see, re-think, and re-write. You may have approached revision in the past as a form of "tidying up" your paper – changing a sentence here and there, correcting spelling and punctuation, adding or deleting a line or two. We will call that procedure *editing*. We will reserve the term *revision* for much more extensive work on an initial draft, which will involve changing the paper in such a way that the new text affects its readers differently. Serious revision means re-writing.

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- recognize and articulate common themes and key differences in the representations of crime, justice, poverty, and religion across cultures and media;
- bring cross-cultural social and political insights to bear on their analysis of literary works and pieces of media;
- view writing as a creative and rigorous method of inquiry, position their own views among established views, write with an awareness of formal and academic convention, and revise their written work by rethinking the assumptions and aims of their earlier essays and drafts;
- and critically read and analyze complex literary and pop-cultural texts, focusing on literary style and social critique.

Required Texts

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Poor People*. Translated by Hugh Aplin, London: Hesperus, 2002. ISBN: 978-1847493125.

---. *Notes from Underground*. Edited & translated by Michael R. Katz. 2nd edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 2000. ISBN: 978-0393976120

---. *Crime and Punishment*. Translated by Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky. NY: Vintage, 1993. ISBN: 978-0679734505

---. *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*. Translated by Jessie Coulson. NY: Oxford University Press, 2001. ISBN: 0192838687

[Other works will be provided as PDFs on the class Canvas site]

Kanye West, songs from: *The College Dropout* (2004), *Late Registration* (2005), *Graduation* (2007), *808s & Heartbreak* (2008), *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010), *Watch the Throne* (2011), *Yeezus* (2013), *The Life of Pablo* (2016), *ye* (2018) [linked on Canvas]

Participation and Attendance

Active and engaged participation in class discussion is the foundation of this course. Complete the reading and listening assignments for each class and come to class on time, prepared to take part in conversation about the materials under study. Since your class discussion is crucial parts of this class, attendance is mandatory. Students who miss a class meeting are responsible for covering materials on their own and for obtaining all relevant handouts and notes from their fellow students. More than three unexcused absences will result in the maximum possible final grade being lowered by one-third of a letter grade (e.g. from A- to B+), and a significant number of unexcused absences risks a failure of the course.

Readings

As we meet only once a week, there will be about 70-100 pages of reading for each class, and most classes will also involve listening assignments. You are required to complete all the reading & listening assignments before the class meeting, and to come to class prepared to discuss them intelligently. The readings that are not in the required books will be available as PDFs through Canvas.

Papers and how to submit them

This writing-intensive class will involve 4 shorter (~1200 word) papers and one longer final paper (including a first draft). Individual paper assignments will be introduced and discussed in class, and assigned ahead of time, usually with a selection of possible responses. The fourth essay will be a revision of essays 1, 2, or 3. Essays should be submitted by midnight the night they are due on Canvas.

Presentation

In the last week of class, students will present the topics of their final papers in a conference-style roundtable format. The goal of this final presentation is not to throw an extra requirement at you, but rather to afford you a chance to get substantive feedback on your paper ideas before finishing them. Full presentation guidelines will be distributed along with the final paper prompts.

GRADING

Participation	20%
4 Essays	20%
In-class writing	10%
Presentation	10%
Draft of final paper	20%
Final paper	20%

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Academic Integrity

Students in this course will be expected to comply with the University of Pittsburgh's Policy on Academic Integrity. Any student suspected of violating this obligation for any reason during the semester will be required to participate in the procedural process, initiated at the instructor level, as outlined in the University Guidelines on Academic Integrity. This may include, but is not limited to, the confiscation of the examination of any individual suspected of violating University Policy. Furthermore, no student may bring any unauthorized materials to an exam, including dictionaries and programmable calculators.

Disability Services

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890 or 412-383-7355 (TTY) as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

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SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND MEETINGS

The following schedule is subject to change; see the class Canvas site for the most up-to-date list of readings, links to songs, and assignment submission pages.

I: Self-promotion and Self-destruction

Week 1: Wednesday, September 1

Introduction: overview of class aims, syllabus; introductory lecture.

- “Two Suicides”; beginning of *A Gentle Creature* [handout]
- Kanye West focus track: “Runaway” (*My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, 2011)

Week 2: Wednesday, September 8 [t/w: suicide]

- Complete *A Gentle Creature* [PDF on Canvas]
- KW: “Power” & “Runaway” (*My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, 2011)
- In-class close-reading exercise.

Sunday, September 12: first essay due by midnight on Canvas

II: Pseudo-Autobiography and True-Crime

Week 3: Wednesday, September 15 [t/w: violence]

- Required excerpts from *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, Part I: “Introduction” & “The House of the Dead,” (pp. 1-23), “Isaiah Fomich. The Bath. Baklushin’s Story,” “The Feast of Christmas,” “Theatricals,” (pp. 136-98) + Part II: “Akulka’s Husband (A Story)” (pp. 254-66), “Prison Animals” (pp. 287-301), “I Leave the Prison” (pp. 356-362)
- KW: “Spaceship” (*The College Dropout*, 2004)

Week 4: Wednesday, September 22

- *Notes from Underground*. Read entire novella, Parts I & II (pp. 3-91)
- KW: “Heartless” (from *808s and Heartbreak*, 2008) & “All Falls Down” (*The College Dropout*, 2004)

III. Class, Poverty, and Sampling

Week 5: Wednesday, September 29 [t/w: violence]

- First half of *Poor People* (pp. 3-73, through the letter of 28th July)
- KW: “Gorgeous” (*My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, 2010)
 - + 2 versions of “You Showed Me” (cover by Enoch Light and the Glittering Guitars; original recording by the Turtles)
- Eminem, “Stan” (*The Marshall Mathers LP*, 2000)
 - + Dido, “Thank You” (*Sliding Doors*, 1998)

Sunday, October 3 - essay two due on Canvas by midnight

Week 6: Wednesday, October 6

- Complete *Poor People* (pp. 74-130)
- KW: “Gold Digger” (*Late Registration*, 2005) + “Homecoming” (*Graduation*, 2007)

IV. Crime, Punishment, and the Superman

Week 7: Wednesday, October 13 [t/w: violence]

- *Crime and Punishment*: Part One, Chapters I-VII (pp. 1-86)
- KW: “I thought about killing you” (*ye*, 2018)

Week 8: Wednesday, October 20

- *Crime and Punishment*: Part Two, Ch. I-VII (pp. 89-193)
- KW: “Blood on the Leaves” (*Yeezus*, 2013)

Week 9: Wednesday, October 27

- *Crime and Punishment*: Part Three, Ch. I-VI (pp. 198-278)
- KW: “Stronger” (*Graduation*, 2007)

Sunday, October 31: essay three due by midnight on Canvas

V. Religion and Reinvention

Week 10: Wednesday, November 3

- *Crime and Punishment*: Part Four, Ch. I-VI (pp. 281-358)
- KW: “No Church in the Wild” (*Watch the Throne*, 2011)

Week 11: Wednesday, November 10

- *Crime and Punishment*: Part Five, Ch. I-V (pp. 361-436) + Part Six, Ch. I-IV (pp. 439-483)
- KW: “Ultralight Beam” (*The Life of Pablo*, 2016)

Week 12: Wednesday, November 17

- Complete *Crime and Punishment*: Part Six, Ch. V-VIII (pp. 483-531) + Epilogue, Ch. I-II (pp. 535-551)
- KW: “Jesus Walks” (*The College Dropout*, 2004)

Friday, November 19: essay four (revision of essay 1, 2, or 3) due by midnight

November 21-29: *No class: Thanksgiving recess!*

VI. Conclusions: Late Dostoevsky and Late Kanye

Week 13: Wednesday, December 1

- “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man” (pp. 263-286); “The Peasant Marey” (pp. 89-94) [PDFs on Canvas]; additional readings TBA
- KW: “Ghost Town” (*ye*, 2018); “FML” (*The Life of Pablo*, 2016)

Sunday, December 5: first draft of final paper due by midnight on Canvas

Week 14: Wednesday, December 8

Course conclusions. Conference-style roundtable discussion of final papers.

Tuesday, December 14 – final drafts of final papers due