



WRONGDOING

IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

AND BEYOND

TUES/THURS 1:00-2:30

HMCS 294 (SAME AS RUSS 294) – PROF. JULIA CHADAGA

HUM 212

The Russian word for crime literally means “overstepping,” in the sense of crossing a boundary. What happens, however, when that boundary shifts, as it did in the twentieth century with the Bolshevik Revolution? Or what if the society that defines the criminal is itself “wrong”? Throughout its history, Russian literature has returned almost obsessively to the theme of transgression. We will take a cross-cultural approach as we juxtapose Russian texts with those from other literary traditions, bringing out similar and contrasting views of wrongdoing in Russian culture and that of “the West” against which Russia has traditionally defined itself.

Readings will introduce seminar participants to an intellectual axe murderer, a malicious barber, a female serial killer, demonic hooligans, men pushed over the edge by classical music, and others on the wrong side of the law. Central to the seminar will be the question of how fiction writers present crime and how their artistic choices influence the way readers think of such seemingly self-evident oppositions as good and evil, right and wrong.

Class discussion will primarily on the treatment of crime in the text and on developing a shared conceptual framework in which to debate the ethical and moral issues raised in the text. We will address such themes as: the motives for and the moment of crossing over into crime; the detective as close reader/the criminal act as a work of art; gender and violence; crimes of writing; the (in)justice of punishment and the spectacle of state power. We will explore St. Paul’s “underworld” history and how it has been reinvented as a tourist attraction. Students will be encouraged to apply ideas arising from our readings to current events, studying the means by which contemporary instances of wrongdoing (and the trials intended to make things right) are represented in the mass media, and analyzing how true-life stories are turned into allegory and myth.

Primary readings will include Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Gogol’s “The Nose,” Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*, and Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Secondary readings (from literary and critical theory to KGB case files) will provide context and introduce provocative ways of thinking about crime and punishment.

All readings will be in English.