

Tips on Russian Names and 19th-century Russian Culture

To facilitate reading and discussion, it is helpful to require the class to create and maintain character charts in which they record key information and major impressions in the process of reading the novel. It is also useful to explain traditional Russian nomenclature. Point out especially the use of a patronym as a middle name and women's names almost always ending in an "a." Note that people often answer to a variety of forms of their names. (For example, someone named William Scott, Jr. might respond to being called Will, Bill, Willy, Billy, Junior, Scott, Scotty, and a variety of other nicknames.) It is not so surprising, then, in this novel Avdotya and Dounia are the same person. It is helpful to keep in mind that the first name and patronymic used together (as in "Rodion Romanovich") is the most formal way of addressing someone. The first name by itself is often shortened: so, for example, Dounia often calls her brother "Rodya," not Rodion. Lastly, there is also an affectionate diminutive form, often involving suffixes *-echka* or *-enka*. So, when Raskolnikov's mother calls him "Rodenka," she's being very affectionate – but also talking to him the way one might to a child.

Another helpful thing to remind students of is that in 19th-century Russia, money and social class were two different things. Although Raskolnikov and his family are extremely poor, they are still members of the nobility by birth. That gives them social privileges that peasants and servants can never have, even if they have more money.