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A Raw Youth

Fyodor Dostoevsky · *1875 · Constance Garnett translation (1916)*

Arkady Dolgoruky, a twenty-year-old, writes the history of his first steps in life. Legally the son of a former serf, he is in fact the illegitimate son of a nobleman, Versilov, whom he has hardly known. He comes to Petersburg with a private 'idea' of becoming a Rothschild, and is drawn into the family's quarrels, a stolen document, gambling, and blackmail. It is the least read of Dostoevsky's great novels.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How does a young man with a fierce private idea find a place in a family, a society, and a faith that he does not yet understand?

Arkady wants independence and power, and the book lets him try them. He meets his father's charm and mockery, the schemers who want a document, and a wandering pilgrim, Makar Ivanovitch, whose quiet goodness he cannot easily fit into his plans. The novel suggests that what Arkady is seeking is 'seemliness,' a way of living that has form and meaning, and that he finds a trace of it in the old man.

KEY CHARACTERS

Arkady Dolgoruky
The narrator, a twenty-year-old with a private idea.

Versilov
Arkady's father, a charming and divided nobleman.

Sofia Andreyevna
His mother.

Makar Ivanovitch
The wandering pilgrim, Arkady's legal father.

Lambert
A schoolfellow and schemer.

Anna Andreyevna
Versilov's daughter, a plotter.

Tatyana Pavlovna
An aunt who watches the family.

Kraft
A friend who has the document.

Grades 11–12

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01

Arrival in Petersburg

PART I, FIRST CHAPTERS

Arkady arrives to meet his father Versilov and his family. He tells of his idea of becoming a Rothschild, learns of the 'document' from his friend Kraft, and finds that Kraft has shot himself.

- The idea is both grand and childish.
- The document is a secret that many want.
- Kraft's death is the first shock.

02

Scandal and Suicide

PART I, LATER CHAPTERS

Arkady hears the story of Lidya Ahmakov, who is said to have poisoned herself. He meets the blackmailer Stebelkov and the schoolfellow Lambert, and sees a young girl found hanged in a lodging-house.

- Lidya's story ties into the family's secrets.
- Stebelkov and Lambert are figures of the underworld.
- Death surrounds the young hero.

03

Gaming and the Household

PART II

Arkady is hurt by his mother's household and by Versilov's mockery. He takes to playing roulette and becomes entangled with the prince's family and the scheming Anna Andreyevna.

- Versilov's charm and cruelty are hard to separate.
- Roulette is a test of his idea.
- Schemes gather around the old prince.

04

Makar Ivanovitch

PART III, FIRST CHAPTERS

The old pilgrim Makar Ivanovitch, Arkady's legal father, is ill in the house. Arkady finds in him the 'seemliness' he has sought, and the old man forgives the wrong done to him and dies.

- Makar's calm is the book's moral center.
- He forgives the wrong done to him.
- His death changes the house.

05

The Breaking

PART III, MIDDLE CHAPTERS

Versilov, in a fit, breaks an ikon in two and falls ill. The old prince is terrified, and Anna Andreyevna and Lambert press their schemes.

- The broken ikon is a sign of Versilov's division.
- The prince is a frightened old man.
- The plots tighten toward a close.

06

The Letter

PART III, LAST CHAPTER

The book closes with a letter from an older friend who has read Arkady's manuscript.

- The letter is an outside view of Arkady.
- It judges the story as a story.
- The ending leaves him at the start of his life.

Fathers and Sons | Money and Power | Faith | Searching for Form

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Notice how Arkady's 'idea' changes during the book.
2. Versilov is charming and cruel. Watch how Arkady's feelings shift.
3. Makar Ivanovitch speaks of seemliness. Ask what that means.
4. The book is Arkady's own memoir. Ask how reliable he is.

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