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The Robbers

Friedrich Schiller · *1781 · anonymous eighteenth-century translation*

Karl von Moor, a generous and hot-headed student at Leipzig, falls into debt. His younger brother Franz, jealous and cold, forges a letter to turn their father against him. Karl, thinking he has been cast off, becomes the captain of a band of robbers. Schiller wrote this play at twenty-two as a military surgeon, and it made him famous.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What happens when a good man tries to right the world's wrongs by crime, and when a cold man tries to take everything by cunning?

Karl's robber band is meant to punish the unjust, and it ends in murder and burned towns. Franz's plots succeed for a while and end in his own ruin. The play shows two ways of living outside the law, one from passion and one from calculation, and both are shown to fail. Karl ends by giving himself up to the law, which is Schiller's answer to the question of whether one can mend the world by breaking it.

KEY CHARACTERS

Karl von Moor
The elder brother, who becomes a robber captain.

Franz von Moor
The younger brother, jealous and cold.

Count Maximilian von Moor
Their father.

Amalia von Edelreich
Karl's love, the Count's niece.

Spiegelberg
A cynical robber.

Schweizer and Roller
Loyal members of Karl's band.

Grades 11–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Forged Letter

ACT I

Franz deceives his father about Karl, and Karl, hearing his father has cut him off, agrees to be the robbers' captain.

- Franz's letter is a deliberate lie.
- Karl's anger leads him to the robbers.
- His oath to the band is made in haste.

02

Franz's Plots

ACT II

Franz tries to secure the inheritance and to win Amalia. Karl and his band begin their career.

- Franz's ambition is open.
- Amalia is faithful to Karl.
- The band's first deeds are bold.

03

The Band

ACT III

Karl returns to his home in disguise and sees Amalia. The robbers burn a town to rescue a comrade.

- Karl's disguise lets him see his old home.
- The burning of the town costs innocent lives.
- The band's cause begins to look different.

04

The Tower

ACT IV

Karl discovers that his father is alive in a tower and frees him. Franz, tormented by a dream of judgment, takes his own life.

- Franz's dream of judgment is the play's great nightmare.
- The old Count's rescue is a shock.
- Franz's death ends his plots.

05

The Atonement

ACT V

The old Count dies on learning who the robber chief is. Karl kills Amalia at her request and resolves to give himself up to the law.

- The father's death is the cost of the truth.
- Amalia's request is a tragic end.
- Karl turns himself in.

Brothers | Justice and Crime | Ambition | Conscience

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Compare the two brothers' ways of using force.
2. Karl wants to punish the unjust. Ask whether he succeeds.
3. Franz's dream is a famous scene. Notice what it reveals.
4. The ending is Karl's surrender. Ask why Schiller chose it.

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