

THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV :
THE THEME OF RECONCILIATION

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The representation of the social panorama of late nineteenth-century Russia under the czarist regime seems to be a central theme of **The Brothers Karamazov**. The book presents the story of a landowner's family: a corrupt father and three sons who individually possess some different characteristics which the father lacks. Through the members of this family we are introduced to the various representatives of the Russian social classes and to their ideas.

The purpose of this paper is to examine this complex situation represented through the insights of the landowner's family in an attempt to better understand the writer's intention in writing this book.

The reader gains an insight into the social order of the Russian society through a series of experiential perspectives of the three sons, such experiences being central to a comprehension of their father's worldview and lifestyle. Each of the sons sets out on a journey and undertakes various roles which unfold for the reader a view of a social order. A father image (priest) is used in an attempt to reconcile the eventual conflicts of points of view regarding the social order which arise between the father and the sons. Though it is not this father image's role to develop an understanding among members of the Karamazov family, it is central to the overall development of the plot; his views are expressive of Dostoyevsky's own purpose. This priest outlines a way of life beneficial to the souls of individuals, and to the maintenance of social order. By outlining this way of life, Father Zossima functions as the figure through whom the author effects communication between his own ideas and of the reader.

The father is thoroughly corrupt and «senseless». He is a careless

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«bufoon», and yet capable of concentrating upon his own worldly interests. He is such a degraded man that he begins to ignore his children as soon as they are born, and he stages orgies with other women in front of his wife. After thus depicting Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, the book informs the reader that the father is a «national type» that can often be seen among the Russian people of the same status. The author says that he

was a strange type, yet one pretty frequently to be met with, a type abject and vicious and at the same time senseless. But he was one of those senseless persons who are very well capable of looking after their worldly affairs, and, apparently after nothing else... At the same time, he was all his life one of the most senseless, fantastical fellows in the whole district. I repeat, it was not stupidity--the majority of these fantastical fellows are shrewd and intelligent enough--but just senseless, and a peculiar national form of it.¹

Although Fyodor Pavlovich seems to be only the biological father, and although the sons possess what he lacks, they still inherit some of his characteristics. Their lives have been indirectly influenced by this biological father who had abandoned them, when they were children, to an unjust world in which they are required to pay for his sins. Once the boys become men and reunite, Ivan vividly outlines this position in his «rebellion» speech to Alyosha. He is not concerned with speaking of grown-ups because «besides being disgusting and unworthy of love, they have a compensation», and he reminds us of the original sin when he mentions «the apple»: «--they have eaten of the apple and know good and evil... But the children haven't eaten anything and are so far innocent» (p. 282).

It is Ivan's «rebellion» speech which illuminates the situation at stake at the time. He does not separate his own suffering from that of the peoples of Russia. And, he does not hesitate to make a generalization. Through Ivan, Dostoyevsky states that this suffering of the nation has become a «national» characteristic of the people. Consequently, a sense of «crime and punishment» becomes an existent feature and we are told that «it is peculiarly Russian», and has become so common that it is «an everyday domestic event» (pp. 285, 286). As the father's bufoonery is

1) Fyodor Dostoyevsky, **The Brothers Karamazov**, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Random House, n. d.), p. 3.

frequent, the torment of Russian children is also frequent because either directly or indirectly the children are made to suffer and they are shamelessly tortured by those parents who ate the apple. Ivan insists that in his description of the situation he is defining what is general and frequent. After each given example he says that it is either a national picture or the peculiar characteristic of many people. This empathic approach is seen through the eyes of Ivan, the brother who has always been conscious of his childhood and his suffering:

Of the elder Ivan, I will only say that he grew into a somewhat morose and reserved, though far from timid boy. At ten years old he had realized that they were living not in their own home but on other people's charity, and that their father was a man of whom it was disgraceful to speak. This boy began very early, almost in his infancy, to show a brilliant and unusual aptitude for learning. I don't know precisely why, but he left the family ...when he was hardly thirteen. ... Ivan, who struggled with poverty for his first two years in the university, maintained himself by his own efforts, and had from childhood been bitterly conscious of living at the expense of his benefactor (pp. 13, 19).

Throughout his speech to Alyosha, Ivan tells his observations on an intellectual level, and supports his speech with examples. Then, in a more complicated and unusual manner, with his analogy of «The Grand Inquisitor», he questions the world made by God and tells us more about the people in terms of their hunger and humiliation: «Feed men, and then ask of them virtue!... Feed us, for those who have promised fire from heaven haven't given it!... Make us your slaves, but feed us» (p. 300).

Ivan's function is both to embody in himself that part of society which is aware that humankind is the victim of terrible cruelties, and to seek, or, rather, to make the reader seek the truth which can be born of such suffering. Yet, Ivan feels that such truth will be overshadowed. To acquire some grasp of this truth, he reasons, men must agree on what they will «worship» as a common aim. But he says: «This craving for **community** of worship is the chief misery of every man individually and of all humanity from the beginning of time. For the sake of common worship they have slain each other with the sword» (p. 301). The factor which moves man to such action is freewill. But again «nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, ...nothing is a greater cause of suffering» (p. 302). What he wants to say is that God gave man freewill but left him without alternatives. Hence, man will always be overwhelmed with doubts and will never find the truth.

According to the book, because of his severe intellectualism and his spiteful judgement of his past and consciousness, and above all because of his loss of belief and therefore lack of religious insight, Ivan is only able to observe to learn. But he does not understand; as we are told, he is a troubled intellectual mind. In **The Brothers Karamazov**, as a rootless intellectual, he stands between two opposing forces: one is the ideal and religious which finds its expression in Father Zossima and Alyosha; the other is the utmost sensual expressed in the person of the father. In his formation of plot, Dostoyevsky gives each character a task to accomplish. He uses them to show the reader the crucial state of the Russian society, and his own ideas concerning these affairs.

Although Dimitri's function in the novel is not far from that of Ivan and his father, and though he has much more of the father compared to the other sons, he appears as the victim of the sins of the father. He puts emphasis on the question asked by Ivan with his own life story, but in a different way. And, he helps the reader to see more clearly the situation at stake.

The sin of which Dimitri is a victim is considered to be committed in general by those Russians that parallel the father as a «national type». Being a sensualist like his father, Dimitri cannot fully understand the sufferings of others who are victims of the same sin. Through Dimitri, the book implies that the society will drive itself to destruction unless a solution is found. Dimitri unconsciously feels that the solution can come about if he kills his father, but this unconscious feeling is forestalled by someone else who carries out the act. In turn, Dimitri is made the scapegoat by the society. He must therefore seek his salvation by way of a dream. Because he is not an intellectual like his brother Ivan, the dream affords him the opportunity to interpret his suffering apart from the world which seeks to feed on him as a victim of his father's sin. In his nervous breakdown and cry for help he reveals more of the truth and shouts: «I'm not guilty! I'm not guilty of that blood! I am not guilty of my father's blood... I meant to kill him. But I'm not guilty. Not I» (p. 555).

Dimitri's dream brings about various questions and impressions unconsciously raised. With the image of the «dried-up woman and the babe», the dream symbolizes the failing society, its political system, and the people's demand to survive. It is because of these «burnt-out» people with «no bread» that Dimitri feels «a passion of pity, such as had never been felt before» (p. 616). With all his might and power he craves «to do something for them all» to stop the cry of the baby and of the mother «regardless of all obstacles» (p. 616).

Ivan's approach to the situation is that the sufferings inflicted upon the people are inherited as a result of the fathers' sins. Dimitri feels that it is necessary to kill the father to solve the problem; it seems to him that they will never find a way to ease their souls from being heirs of a sin they have not committed but for which they are suffering. Each is thoroughly obsessed with his abandoned childhood, and it becomes difficult for them to talk with their father to come to an understanding of their situation in the social order. It is at this point that the author presents a second father image, Father Zossima, through whom the theme of sin and justification can be comprehended. A solution to the problem seems to rest in the views expressed by the religious Elder. He says:

Fear nothing and never be afraid; and don't fret. If only your penitence fail not, God will forgive all. There is no sin, and there can be no sin on all the earth, which the Lord cannot forgive to the truly repentant! Man cannot commit a sin so great as to exhaust the infinite love of God... Think only of repentance ...but dismiss fear altogether. Believe that God loves you as you cannot conceive; that He loves you with your sin... Be not bitter against men. Be not angry if you are wronged. Forgive the man in your heart what wrong he did you. Be reconciled with him in truth. If you are penitent, you love. And if you love you are of God. All things are atoned for, all things are saved by love... Love is such a priceless treasure that you can redeem the whole world by it, and expiate not only your own sins but the sins of others (p. 57-8).

The words of Father Zossima cannot make an impression on Ivan, who is somewhat of an atheist, nor on Dimitri. Dimitri does not know how to intellectualize that sin can be atoned for with love. It rests upon Alyosha, then, to understand this doctrine of atonement through love and acceptance of God's forgiveness for the sins that man inherits on earth. Alyosha says of himself that he is «ready to suffer». He is full of love, wise, and so strong in his faith that he is able to overcome temptations.

Father Zossima sees in Alyosha the power to carry out the task of showing man that sins can be forgiven on earth and sends the young man out of the monastery:

You will go forth from these walls, but will live like a monk in the world. You will have enemies, but even your foes will love you. Life will bring you misfortunes, but you will find your happiness in them, and will bless life and will make others bless it which is what matters most. Well, that is your character (p. 339).

The Elder does not want Alyosha to live as a monk in the usual sense of the word, but as an ordinary man who will bless life and help people to purify themselves from their sins.

The powers of Alyosha are put to a test when he goes to visit Grushenka. The harlot girl tries to seduce him but does not succeed because of his acceptance of her out of pure innocent love. She confesses her wicked intent, and Alyosha forgives her without hesitation. Rakitin, who has accompanied the boy to the girl's house, becomes upset. Grushenka advises him to be quiet because for the first time in her life she is confronted with words which give rest to her weary soul. When asked what is so special about these words she replies:

I can't say, I don't know. I don't know what he said to me, it went straight to my heart; he has wrung my heart. . . . He is the first, the only one who has pitied me, that's what it is. Why did you not come before, you angel? ... I've been waiting all my life for some one like you, I knew that some one like you would come and forgive me. I believed that nasty as I am, some one would really love me, only with a shameful love! (p. 429).

When Alyosha returns to the monastery from his visit to Grushenka, he re-enters the cell in which Father Zossima's coffin is found. Kneeling before the body of his friend, he goes to sleep. Just as his brother Dimitri had once learned how to feel pity for the people by way of his dream, Alyosha is also carried by a dream which links his soul to «all those innumerable worlds of God». Dimitri's dream of mothers and babies is symbolic of the falling society and its political system and the people's demand to survive. Alyosha, on the other hand, dreams of a wedding feast where water is changed to wine. Though it seems that his hour has not yet come, he realizes when he awakens that he has performed a great feat like Christ. Out of pure and innocent love he has given Grushenka a feeling of being forgiven. He has stepped outside the monastery to make himself a practical force accomplishing a task he is ready to accomplish. He not only enables Grushenka to free her soul but he frees his own soul as well:

Oh! in his rapture he was weeping even over those stars, which were shining to him from the abyss of space, and 'he was not ashamed of that ecstasy'. There seemed to be threads from all those innumerable worlds of God, linking his soul to them, and it was trembling all over 'in contact with other worlds'. He longed to forgive everyone and for everything, and to beg forgiveness. Oh,

not for himself, but for all men, for all and for everything (pp. 436-37).

Alyosha's understanding of life is the thread which Dostoyevsky feels overcomes the differences among innumerable worlds. Through him the author wants to say that whatever conflicts may arise among men and their social order, individual souls can find salvation by begging forgiveness of each other here on earth.