

Superman is dead! dostoyevsky's view of the ubermensch theory

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



“ The extraordinary...have the right to commit all kinds of crimes and to transgress the law in all kinds of ways, for the simple reason that they are extraordinary.” [1] Dostoyevsky's main characters are divided into two philosophical categories. The first group maintains that man is not equal, but divided into two groups—the ordinary and the extraordinary. Ordinary people are trapped within the laws and traditions of society, existing only to reproduce their own kind. The extraordinary, on the other hand, have the moral right to break the law if their transgression is for the betterment of humanity. The second group believes that all people are equal ~~and~~ there is no ubermensch, or superior man, who has the right to harm others for personal gain. Dostoyevsky opposed the ubermensch theory, revealing this in his portrayal of characters. Those who upheld the idea of a Superman appeared negative while opponents were regarded with admiration. Svidrigalov in Crime and Punishment, and Fyodor Karamazov in The Brothers Karamazov, were proponents of the Superman idea. Svidrigalov is the epitome of this philosophical outlook at an extreme. His sole objective was to satisfy his physical desires, no matter what means were necessary to achieve his goals. Rumors had circulated connecting him to the death of a servant as well as the suicide of a fourteen-year-old deaf-mute girl. “ One day the girl was found hanging in the garrett,” Peter Petrovich explained. “ The verdict was suicide...but a later report came to light that the child had been cruelly outraged by Svidrigalov.” [2] He was known to abuse his wife and was suspected of giving her a beating, which eventually led to her death. He insisted, however, that they enjoyed a good relationship, at least according to his definition. “ During our seven years together I used the switch only

twice in all (not counting a third time that was extremely ambiguous anyway)," he explained to Raskolnikov. [3] Svidrigalov stopped at nothing in his attempt to seduce Sonia, Raskolnikov's sister, and even tried to blackmail her, though unsuccessfully. Fyodor Karamazov indulged in irresponsible activities much like Svidrigalov. His life consisted of drinking, debauchery, and the mistreatment of his wives. " Primitive patriarch that he is, he begins by stealing them from their families or by raping them; he then soon abandons them in pursuit of yet other women." [4] He neglected his children when they were infants, leaving them to be brought up by relatives. Karamazov is insensitive and selfish, displaying this by ridiculing his second wife in the presence of their sons, and depriving his eldest son of his inheritance. The narrator describes him as " a despicable, vicious man and at the same time senseless." [5] Similar to Svidrigalov's involvement with the deaf-mute girl, Karamazov was rumored to have raped a mentally retarded woman who died after giving birth. All the town was talking...of Lizaveta's condition, and trying to find out who had wronged her. Then suddenly a terrible rumor was all over town that it was no other than Fyodor Karamazov. [6]Dostoyevsky paints a negative portrait of these two men as the representations of the ubermensch. Svidrigalov and Karamazov put no one before themselves and are concerned only in fulfilling their selfish aspirations. They are " dreadfully vital and vitalistically dreadful," writes Harold Bloom. [7] Machiavellian in their outlooks, they believe that any means are justified so long as they help to achieve a desired outcome. Dostoyevsky uses these characters to display the destruction that results from a single man believing he is higher than another and morally free to do

anything, even if it results in the death of an innocent person. On Dostoyevsky's use of Svidrigalov and Karamazov, Ernest Simmons writes, "Ideas...play the central role in his novels. His chief figures are often embodied ideas and he appears to be concerned not so much with the life of his characters as with the ideas they represent." [8] By portraying Svidrigalov and Karamazov as entirely negative characters, Dostoyevsky reveals his disapproval of the idea of the *ubermensch*. Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* acts as a foil to Karamazov and Svidrigalov. Instead of pursuing selfish desires, he dedicates himself to helping others. To Alyosha, no person is more important than another ~~and~~ everyone has equal worth, no matter what their social position is. He obtained much of his philosophy from Fr. Zosima, a saint-like monk who lived at the monastery. Fr. Zosima was once questioned about his views on equality. "Are we to make our servants sit down on the sofa and offer them tea?" he was asked. To the questioner, this scenario was absurd. Servants were considered to be below their employers and would never have had the opportunity to share tea with them. However, to everyone's surprise, Fr. Zosima replied, "Why not, sometimes at least." [9] Alyosha applied this way of thinking by accepting people for their quality of character rather than for their wealth or social class. He befriended Grushenka, who was shunned by many because of her reputation as a prostitute. "You should love people without a reason, as Alyosha does," she tells her cousin. [10] Alyosha also had a strong rapport with children. Kolya, a boy who idolized him, observed that "Alyosha treated him exactly like an equal and then he talked to him just as if he were grown up." [11] Alyosha even shows love and respect towards Karamazov, his

father. The fact that he doesn't judge the amoral man who tormented his mother and abandoned him and his brothers reveals his strength as a character. Alyosha brought with him something his father had never known before: a complete absence of contempt for him and a constant kindness, a perfectly natural, unaffected devotion to the old man who deserved it so little. [12] Alyosha treated everyone with equality and generosity & he is Dostoyevsky's ideal character. Dostoyevsky has shown two extremes with Karamazov and Svidrigalov, and Alyosha. Because Karamazov and Svidrigalov live as Supermen & making their first priority fulfillment of selfish desires & they are portrayed negatively by the author. Alyosha, who is the exact opposite, is displayed a moral hero. But although these characters help to reveal Dostoyevsky's feelings on the Ubermensch idea, his views are better displayed with Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment, a character who believes strongly in the idea of a superior man, but later changes his opinions. Raskolnikov is a former student in a largely uneducated St. Petersburg. He is intelligent and clearly knows this. Raskolnikov begins to believe that because he is intellectually superior to the common person, he has the right to break the law if he decides his unlawful act would improve society. " He divides man into two main groups & the trembling multitude of common men and the daring minority of exceptional individuals who have the right to transgress the conventional rules of social law and custom." [13] However, although Raskolnikov's idea had been analyzed and thought out intellectually, he soon came to question its validity. To test his theory, Raskolnikov murdered an old pawnbroker who he deemed a useless " louse." " The old woman was only a disease I wanted to step over as quick as I

could," he said. " I didn't kill a person, I killed a principle!" [14] However, after the murder, Raskolnikov began to feel guilty. He thought obsessively about the consequences of his action and even developed a psychosomatic illness due to his endless worrying. He turned away from friends and family, desiring only to be left alone. Although his guilt caused him to become completely dysfunctional, he still refused to admit that his actions were wrong. Finally, Raskolnikov confessed in order to relieve himself of guilt, and only after spending time in prison did he realize that his idea of a superior man was wrong. Although the woman he killed was neither educated nor rich, she was a fellow human being ~~as~~ as worthy of life as he was. With Raskolnikov, Dostoyevsky demonstrates his views. While Raskolnikov believed in the existence of a superior man with the moral right to transgress the law, he appeared to be treading the same path as Svidrigalov and Karamazov. Just as they used any means to meet an end, Raskolnikov had murdered for the purpose of testing a theory. After the murder, his breakdown caused him to become totally dependent on his friends. He cut off contact with his mother and sister, and became absorbed in guilt. His life was ruined. However, after he realized his error, Dostoyevsky allowed him to have hope of an agreeable future. Dostoyevsky clearly believed that everyone is equal. Alyosha, his ideal character, was able to make friends even with a woman shunned by society and a group of children who were otherwise ignored in an adult world. Through his use of characters, Dostoyevsky reveals the negative effects caused by those who transgress the law because they consider themselves intellectually or socially superior. The opposites of Svidrigalov and Karamazov ~~as~~ people like Alyosha ~~as~~ benefit

society by fostering equality. They are morally superior. At the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha explains to a group of boys the importance of being kind to everyone. Let us remember how good it was once here, when we were all together, united by a good and kind feeling which made us, for the time we were loving that poor boy, better perhaps than we are. —”

[15]The last line of the book is Dostoyevsky's voice as well as the children's: " Hurrah for Alyosha!" [16]Endnotes[1] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Sidney Monas (New York: New American Library, 1968) 256.[2] *Ibid.*, p. 293.[3] *Ibid.*, p. 279.[4] Michael Holquist " How Sons Become Fathers" Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ed. Harold Bloom (New Haven: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988) 41.[5] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1958) 19.[6] *Ibid.*, p. 104.[7] Harold Bloom, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (New Haven: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988) 1.[8] Ernest J. Simmons, *Russian Realism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965) 117.[9] Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 308.[10] *Ibid.*, p. 340.[11] *Ibid.*, p. 510.[12] *Ibid.*, p. 99.[13] Marc Slonim, *An Outline of Russian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958) 135.[14] Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 271.[15] Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 728.[16] *Ibid.*, p. 729.