

The mystery of
family: human truths
and personal bonds
in 'the brothers
karamazov...



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Reading a Dostoevsky book doesn't give us any insight into the mind of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky almost never makes a blanket statement in his books, and, in general, very few opinions voiced by characters in his novels can be traced back to the author himself. As such, we still don't know what Dostoevsky thinks about family life, the father/son relationship and all its nuances, or even about the merits of Ivan's worldview versus Alyosha's worldview when we read *The Brothers Karamazov*. He doesn't ever tell us what to believe, but this massive work by Dostoevsky does put us in a very uncomfortable place as it pushes us to consider the messiness, the sheer earthiness of a son's relationship to his father, and of all the unspoken griefs and problems that, in this case at least, culminated in murder.

The relationship has Biblical connotations and connections. For example, to what extent is a son obligated to love a father? Must a father, in some way, "earn" his title to win the love of his children? Though the drunkenness and womanizing of Fyodor Pavlovich makes it easy to see in this book, what makes the father/son relationship naturally strained in all cases (i. e., what are the factors inherent in all father/son relationships)? These are all questions that we must face when we read this book, though we shouldn't expect a definitive, clear-cut answer to all our questions from Dostoevsky himself. Instead, on Dostoevsky rests the obligation to artistically present the narrative in the most provocative way possible, pulling on our instinctive feelings of sympathy, justice, and intrigue, and strategically raising these questions that cut the deepest and cause the maximum discomfort to the reader. The father/son relationship is perhaps the most mysterious of all familial bonds. The son knows he is born of the father and must share at

least some of his father's traits, but it often happens that those traits aren't ever fully known by the son (even if they are, they often reveal themselves in either our ugliest or finest moments). This fact is recognized in Scripture; Adam was created by God bearing His image and likeness, and Jesus Christ himself fully identified with God and man, whom he called his Father and his brothers. When your father is virtuous and generally good-natured, this isn't much of a problem, but if your father is Fyodor Pavlovich, who has virtually no good traits and has done almost nothing to raise children better than himself, you don't necessarily want to inherit many of your father's traits.

Dostoevsky recognizes this fact, and masterfully uses it to add depth and mystery to his novel. "Karamazovism" is a term that is never even fully defined (which was frustrating for the reader), but, as it's one quality, it's a term that's recognized as being possessed by Fyodor and all the brothers Karamazov. From the beginning of the book, the "Karamazovism" of Alyosha is established in the reader's mind by Rakitin: "I've been observing you for a long time. You are a Karamazov yourself, a full fledged Karamazov—so race and selection do mean something. You're a sensualist after your father, and after your mother—a holy fool." Alyosha doesn't deny it, although we are given very little evidence of his sensualism in the entire book; he is chaste, and though he often notices the beauty of Grushenka and Katerina Ivanovna, it can't be seen as more than the ordinary man would feel at the sight of a beautiful woman. Not only is the inherent "karamazovism" of Alyosha never questioned, but it's further confirmed by Kolya and his friends in the last words of the book: "Karamazov, we love you.... Hurrah for Karamazov!"

(776) By beginning the novel with the family descriptions and closing the

entire novel with these words from Kolya, Dostoevsky is telling the reader to see Alyosha as a Karamazov first and last, prompting us to recognize the inherent “karamazovism” in him despite the spectacle that that’s already been made of full fledged karamazovism. In the mind of the reader, this has the effect of clouding the novel. It clouds our judgment because it makes any action possible for Alyosha, Ivan, Smerdyakov, and Mitya, essentially because all these characters have the same Karamazov tendencies passed down from their father. It makes it impossible to remove suspicion from any of these characters, instead leaving a certain level of guilt and suspicion on all the characters.

Ivan may not have murdered Fyodor, but he is not altogether innocent, neither is Mitya, Smerdyakov, nor Alyosha. One of them has to be the murderer, of course, but this shared Karamazov sensuality gives a degree of guilt to them all, confusing the judgement of the reader and complicating the novel. This ties into another key idea of the book, the one that Zosima first voices, that “everyone is guilty for everyone”, an idea that’s hard to ignore throughout the novel. In this family setting, Ivan believes himself to be guilty of influencing Smerdyakov to murder his father, and Mitya is able to accept his fate only because he believes himself guilty (to a certain degree) of committing murder by wishing for his father’s death. This is consistent with what we believe about families; they exist as units, not shifting the blame from one member to another but rather accepting responsibility as a whole. There should be no faction in the ideal family nor harboring of resentment, but all grievances should be aired openly. The family is a microcosm of what we see in the history of human existence; that everyone is guilty for

everyone, and that only by accepting this fact can we, as Father Zosima puts it, “ gain the whole world by love and wash away the world’s sins with [our] tears” (164). The passing along of certain traits from father to son is mysterious and impossible to quantify, but Dostoevsky still doesn’t shy away from the more uncomfortable questions concerning fathers and sons, the ones that we can see play out in front of us with our eyes. Yet these are the problems that are blamed for murder, not the intangible genetics discussed above. In particular, Mitya’s defense attorney Mr. Fetyukovich openly voices several issues in his speech, including these in Book 12, chapter 13: “ But, gentlemen of the jury, one must treat words honestly, and I shall allow myself to name a thing by the proper word, the proper appellation: such a father as the murdered old Karamazov cannot and does not deserve to be called a father. Love for a father that is not justified by the father is an absurdity, and impossibility. Love cannot be created out of nothing; only God creates out of nothing.” (744). I consider this to be the most shocking statement in the entire book. In this statement, the instinctive repulsion we feel at the thought of a son murdering his father is being naturalized. The very brotherhood after which the book is named is called into question. After all, if Fyodor Pavlovich wasn’t a father to his three sons, is the entire family delegitimized?

In a book centered on the the relationship between a father and his three sons and the communication between them, the idea that the murder of this father is no more damnable than the murder of some ordinary peasant is startling. As the reader reads this statement, he feels as though the entire world of *The Brothers Karamazov* has been deconstructed, that one of the

central pieces of information that we believed in—namely, that this book is as much about familial affairs as it is about murder—is being called into question. If Fyodor Pavlovich wasn't ever a father to his sons and needn't be treated otherwise, what makes this book different from any other murder mystery? Here again, Dostoevsky strategically uses this question—saving it to the last part of the book when the fatherhood of Fyodor hadn't been called into question the previous 700 pages—to captivate our attention, pointing us to the significance of the question. It is significant exactly because, if we strip Fyodor Pavlovich of his fatherhood, it changes the entire lens through which we see all fathers; namely, that fathers are no longer on an intrinsically higher standing than their children, but rather must earn their respect and love. Based on this first hypothesis, the chain reaction sure to follow is catastrophic; children will no longer view themselves as subservient to their fathers but as judges over their them, capable of determining their fate and, if Fetykovich is to be believed, somewhat justified in punishing them if the evaluation should be negative. Fetyokovich himself claims: “Fathers, provoke not your children!’ Let us first fulfill Christ’s commandment ourselves, and only then let us expect the same of our children. Otherwise we are not fathers but enemies of our children, and they are not our children but our enemies, and we ourselves have made them our enemies!” (744). The relationship between father and son will be defined by hostility, not merely ambivalence. As Ivan said, “ If there is no God, anything is permissible”. Once the first hypothesis is proven, an entire belief system collapses. Here is a very real instance of the same logic used by Ivan; that if there is no father, anything is permissible. It is worth noting, also, that this hostility between father and son is in fact a Biblical concept—but only in the <https://assignbuster.com/the-mystery-of-family-human-truths-and-personal-bonds-in-the-brothers-karamazov/>

context of the heavenly kingdom and eternal punishment. Speaking of the judgement to come, Jesus says: “ For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. 53They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (Luke 12: 52-53). Biblically, it is only in a world with God that there will be real division between father and son, not the other way around.

There is another question raised by the defense attorney that we must address. This problem is best illustrated by the life of Smerdyakov; as we know, Smerdyakov was long rumored and believed to be the illegitimate son of Fyodor Pavlovich and “ Stinking Lizaveta”, a town beggar woman. The very details of Smerdyakov’s birth disgust the reader: Fyodor Pavlovich was one night seen around Lizaveta, Lizaveta is soon thereafter impregnated, and a child is born in the garden outside of the Karamazov’s house. In such a situation, when the father is nowhere to be seen at the birth of the child, what do we define to be the moment of fatherhood? Where is the love for the child at the moment of conception? The defense attorney Fetyokovich puts it the most poignantly: “ The young man involuntarily begins thinking: ‘ But did he love me when he was begetting me,’ he asks, wondering more and more. ‘ Did he beget me for my own sake? He did not know me, not even my sex at that moment, the moment of passion, probably heated up with wine, and probably all he did for me was pass on to me an inclination to drink’” (745). Here is another moment when we are forced “ involuntarily” to stare look stone-faced at the reality of fatherhood; that it is born out of passion. We’re

forced to face the possibility that we, “innocent” children, may have been born out of impurity, sensuality, merely an unexpected causality of such sensuality, all from two people who we can’t even choose. This begs the question: how can a child be born innocent if he’s born out of such passion, even drunkenness? The incarnate Christ, born of the virgin, is the only man who is exempt from this natural bent towards debauchery in us all. Knowing the innate guilt in all men, even newborn children, it was essential to Christ’s mission that he be born free of passion and sensuality, requiring that he instead be born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin. By the Biblical narrative, then, it would seem probable that children aren’t quite as innocent as Ivan is making them out to be.

Dostoevsky has now thoroughly bewildered the reader at this point; he has presented convincing evidence for the inherent innocence of children through the words of Ivan and Ilyusha’s story, yet he is now giving a seemingly irrefutable argument against the innocence of children. This is, once again, consistent with an overarching pattern of this novel; that the dichotomy between the father and the son has profound implications for any belief system, and that we cannot be allowed to plod through this novel without recognizing and examining these implications. Finally, to conclude his speech, Fetyukovich generalizes the entire defense, developing a simple method by which we can determine the legitimacy of a father. He says this: “How decide it, then? Here is how: let the son stand before his father and ask him reasonably: ‘Father, tell me, why should I love you? Father, prove to me that I should love you’—and if the father can, if he is able to answer and him him proof, then we have a real, normal, family, established not just on

mystical prejudice, but on reasonable, self-accountable, and strictly human foundations. In the opposite case, if the father can give no proof—the family is finished then and there: he is not a father to his son, and the son is free and has right henceforth to look upon his father as a stranger and even as his enemy.” (745). As has been mentioned before, this novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky is chiefly concerned with the communication of the characters; the communication between brothers, between father and son, between man and woman, and between man and God. Communication, as we see in the novel, is inherently messy and broken, leading to excessive anger, strife, and in this case eventually murder. Nevertheless, Dostoevsky is still not in the business of giving his readers lessons to live by. We do not gain any insight into how to relate to our fathers by reading this novel. Fetyukovich’s conclusions are an oversimplification, and to believe in them as the central message of the book is to reject the familial bond that undergirds the entire book and (literally) binds it front and back.

Still, the book does have practical value; but through a kind of screen; we can see that there is objective right and wrong in the behavior of the family, a good and a bad, but it is never openly stated and is primarily seen through the messiness of the family affairs. The ideals are set from the beginning of the book and all play out consistently; Alyosha’s belief system is not separated from his communication, and Ivan and Mitya are also consistent with theirs. Some of the essential questions that pop up in the novel—on everyone being guilty for everyone, on everything being permissible without God, and on the inherent innocence of children—are all littered throughout the novel, making it impossible for the reader not to continually stumble over

them as they read. These are the questions that we face every day in our own communication but are unwilling to acknowledge. Here, Dostoevsky has so cleverly juxtaposed and contrasted the belief systems, presenting some first and withholding others until the opportune moment, that the reader can't simply pass over them absent-mindedly. If, on the other hand, we think we're given an idea we can hold onto and believe in (such as Ivan's belief on the inherent innocence of children), Dostoevsky is sure to eventually slap it out of our hands. Dostoevsky would not, and did not, provide the reader with the clean conclusion to the dilemma that Fetykovich provides. Still, when we are done with Dostoevsky and if we don't believe in Fetykovich's conclusion, the next most logical question is this: what do we actually believe about the novel? The reader believes in the power of family. The family is more than just our "tribe", or the environment in which we are raised; it's our uncensored versions, the space where we're faced with more questions that cut to the core of our humanity than any ordinary friendship provides.

As this novel shows, the questions of man's innate sin (vs. sin from example), of our responsibility for sin, and of our obligation to love each other are all seen most clearly in the family setting, whatever the overall consensus might be. Our worldview comes to a head in that context; we can be anything we want away from family, but it all gets called out and amplified inside the family. The family is its own sphere with its own language and dynamic, and the members of the family are independent human beings with completely separate identities being, at the same time, invariably similar in a mysterious way. Family is the most important tie in this novel, and the apparent incoherence yet depth of the novel inescapably

parallels the incoherence and depth of family. This novel is not a murder mystery, but it is still a mystery. The mystery of the family, the great drama of human interaction, bubbles to the top of the book, captivating the imagination of the reader and drowning out all other mysteries in our minds.

Works Cited

Fyodor, Dostoevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990. Print.