

The brothers karamazov: a psychoanalytic approach



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When reading a book as brilliant as *The Brother's Karamazov*, one wonders where Dostoevsky's inspiration came from. According to Sigmund Freud, the novel must not be studied as a fiction but as a science, that being psychology. It seems that the innermost thoughts of Dostoevsky were manifested in his characters. Dostoevsky, just like every other boy, experienced the Oedipal complex during his childhood. Freud says that at this stage in a boy's life, he has the desire to kill his father in order to obtain his mother, but at the same time he admires and loves his father. Due to his father's harsh disposition and his eventual murder, Dostoevsky was never able to get over his conflicting feelings of guilt. The protagonists in *The Brothers Karamazov* represent warring aspects of Dostoevsky's psyche. It is an allegory in which Dostoevsky's harshly sadistic superego, which inflicts all the feelings of guilt he felt about his father's murder, is represented by Fyodor Pavlovich, his pleasure-driven id, which is his impulsive desire to kill his father, is represented by Smerdyakov, and his guilt-ridden ego is represented by the other three brothers, Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha.

Sigmund Freud identifies three major parts that make up the human psyche: the id, the ego, and the superego. In a healthy individual these three parts work in tandem with each other, creating a well functioning human being. The id, the most primal part of the psyche, strives only to satisfy immediate urges based on impulse. As an individual grows up and his brain develops, the ego forms. In his essay "The Ego and the Id," Freud states that the ego is "the part of the id that has been modified by the direct influence of the external world" (630). It performs the vital function of controlling the id's actions. If you imagine the id to be a free-flowing river, the ego acts as a

dam that can open and close, allowing the river to flow or not to flow, depending on the greater needs of the individual in the circumstances that he finds himself in. A person for example may have the desire to kill someone, but because the ego identifies that a punishment may ensue as a result of this action, the ego stops the id from acting on its impulse. Last to develop, the superego operates as a psychological force examining, interpreting, and judging the thoughts and feelings of the ego. Like a parent towards his child, the superego praises or censures the ego's actions. This represents Freud's Perception System and its inner workings. When a person's superego is perverted however, the other parts of the psyche become perverted as well. Freud explains the reason for these perversions in his essay "Dostoevsky and Parricide": the Superego is the inheritor of the parental influence. If the father was hard, violent, or cruel, the superego takes over those attributes from him and forms abnormal relations between the ego and superego. The superego has become sadistic, and the ego becomes masochistic. A great need for punishment develops in the ego, and in part finds satisfaction in ill treatment by the superego. (104) Dostoevsky's father was always very harsh on him, and since the superego inherits the characteristics of the parent, his superego became equally harsh on his ego. His father was "rather ill-tempered and distrustful, and brought up his children in the old orthodox fashion, in an atmosphere of fear and obedience" (Bondarenko). This severe, strict environment that Dostoevsky grew up being chastised in came to feel normal to him, and his psyche was not satiated unless he felt that his superego was castigating his ego.

Dostoevsky's masochistic desire was so great that he eventually came to the conclusion that the only path to inner peace is through suffering.

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In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the brothers' biological father, Fyodor Pavlovich, personifies Dostoevsky's superego. In the court case it is brought up that Dmitri "as a child in his father's house, might not such a man well have remembered for twenty-three years how he ran in his father's back-yard, without boots on his feet and with his little trousers hanging by one button" (Dostoevsky 742). Fyodor Pavlovich is a brutally cruel character that distorts and perverts his children, representing the perversion of the ego. Just as the superego does to the ego, Fyodor becomes both the source of condemnation toward his children's innate desires, including any of their lust-filled, murderous and Oedipal impulses, as well as the inspiration for their guilt. Growing up next to an orphanage for abandoned infants, Dostoevsky must have been exposed early on to harsh truths about his life, perverting his superego's moral even further. While Dostoevsky's superego was morphed based on this orphanage and the rest of his unfortunate surrounding world, Fyodor abandoned his children, bestowing upon them only his own warped morals. Fyodor and Dostoevsky share many qualities in their lifestyle. Dostoevsky had serious gambling problems, and was married twice, while Fyodor acts as a spendthrift, practically shoving his money at Grushenka and having two unsuccessful marriages. Both of them exhibit a corrupted moral code shown in their similar life choices. Dostoevsky parallels Smerdyakov's life with his own. In terms of Dostoevsky's psyche, Smerdyakov takes the role of our author's id. The id is the part of the psyche that works to satisfy basic urges, and demands the immediate gratification of desires. Dostoevsky wanted to kill his father, but aspects about reality such as fear and guilt held him back from doing this. Smerdyakov murders his father, satisfying the impulses of Dostoevsky's id. In Dostoevsky's life, the murder of his father by <https://assignbuster.com/the-brothers-karamazov-a-psychoanalytic-approach/>

an unknown man drove him to become epileptic. “ It is a dangerous thing when one’s wishes actually come true” (Freud 105), and when Dostoevsky got what he wished for, he immediately blamed himself.

Many people have accused Dostoevsky of not being a real epileptic; among them was Sigmund Freud, who stated in his essay “ Dostoevsky and Parricide”: “ Dostoevsky referred to himself as an epileptic, but it is highly probable that this so-called epilepsy was only a symptom of his neurosis and must accordingly be classified as hystero-epilepsy- that is, a severe hysteria” (101). Freud believed that Dostoevsky’s epilepsy was actually a psychological problem, working hand in hand with his neurosis, due to the repression of his id’s desires. Similarly, Smerdyakov faked an epilepsy to be able to get away with the murder he committed. Smerdyakov has now become a clear way of Dostoevsky finally fulfilling his id’s wishes, even if it is in story form. It is almost as if Dostoevsky had an elaborate plan in mind for murdering his father, and reenacted it in Smerdyakov. He must have given Smerdyakov his own trait of epilepsy in order to further associate himself with the character, more fully realizing his own id through the character’s actions. When Dostoevsky’s father was murdered, it was rumored to be by one of his own serfs, just as Smerdyakov acts almost as a serf to his own father. Making their relationship even more strained, Smerdyakov is the illegitimate son of Fyodor, and must service his other three sons. Ultimately, Smerdyakov’s death represents Dostoevsky’s own ongoing fear of death, for according to Freud he went through a process where: “ One has wished another person dead and now one is this other person and is dead oneself” (102). Even though Smerdyakov isn’t shown as the hero in the book,

Dostoevsky greatly sympathizes with the villain. The reason for this can be seen as Smerdyakov represents Dostoevsky's impulse to murder, or id, and he is justifying his own thoughts of committing parricide through illustrating the substantial amount that Fyodor Pavlovich, or in reality Dostoevsky's Father, mistreats his children. Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* culminates his lifelong obsession with parricide, which created a strong impact on the author's psyche. In "Dostoevsky and Parricide," Sigmund Freud explains parricide as "the principal and primal crime of humanity as well as of the individual. It is in any case the main source of guilt" (103). He believes that every human being will inevitably share continuous guilt for society's primal crime, even if they are not directly responsible. As a group, society will then try to disavow its guilt. Dostoevsky is taking society's guilt for murdering his father all on himself. Just like the primal brothers found redemption in obeying their dead father by avoiding the women in their tribe, Dostoevsky tried to find redemption in suffering with epilepsy. Since his father punished him so often, punishing himself seemed like the best way to obey his father's wishes.

In 1849, Dostoevsky wrote a letter to his brother stating "to be a human being among human beings, and remain one forever, no matter what misfortunes befall, not to become depressed and not to falter – this is what life is, herein lies its task" (Toutonghi). This letter illustrates how Dostoevsky battled with the ability to be happy through all his guilt. *The Brothers Karamazov* oozes with evidence of Dostoevsky's personal struggle, particularly seen in the court trial. The prestigious Fetyukovich, defending Dmitri's innocence in the trial, defined the lines of what it really means to be

a father: Gentleman of the jury, what is a father, a real father, what does this great word mean, what terribly great idea is contained in this appellation? We have just indicated something of what a true father ought to be. In the present case the father, the late Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, in no way fitted the idea of a father that has just spoken to our hearts. That is calamity. Yes indeed, some fathers are calamity. (Dostoevsky 742) Fetyukovich is claiming that in no way can this case be investigating a parricide, for Fyodor does not fit the social standards of what a father should be. Based on Fetyukovich's speech, Dostoevsky must agree that an unfit father should not be deemed a father at all, however, based on Dmitri's guilty sentence at the end of the novel, he also recognizes that society thinks in a more simplistic manner; if a man is biologically you're father, you do not have the right to have contempt for him.

In the tract *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud claims that "society is the source of all guilt and suffering" (735). Society creates values and moral upon which to "civilize" its people, and along with these comes shame, disgust, and "unpleasure". This is certainly true in Dmitri's case, and Dostoevsky's. It's a very nauseating feeling to hate your own parent, but when they haven't treated you as their child, why should you fulfill the responsibility of being a loving one? After the murder of Dostoevsky's father, these issues left him hopelessly sick. His own father was never kind or caring towards him, so when his death occurred, Dostoevsky lashed out at himself for never being a loving son. But the most twisted part of all of this is that Dostoevsky sincerely enjoyed it, he found pleasure in making his ego feel guilt. His life became an enigma in which he had to make himself suffer to be

happy, while this took away his rights at being a morally righteous human being. This is when the writers own deep-seated masochism really kicked in.

Completing Freud's psychological triumvirate is the ego, represented by the other three brothers, Ivan, Dmitri, and Alyosha. The guilty part of the conscience is always found in the ego, so Dostoevsky's ego is represented in the guilty characters. These brothers all have in common that their father was inhumane to them all their lives, causing them to desire suffering. They had virtually no respect left for Fyodor Pavlovich, and at times even wanted him dead. Although none of them actually acted upon it, Ivan and Dmitri both held themselves morally responsible for what happened. Dmitri, having feelings of abhorrence for his father fueled by the rivalry over a woman, Grushenka, screamed to the heavens just days before the murder: "If I haven't killed him I'll come again and kill him. You can't protect him" (Dostoevsky 139). Dmitri's lust to kill his father over his love for a woman shows a classic case of Freud's Oedipal Complex. Ivan feels equally at fault because he knowingly ran away from his responsibilities of stopping the parricide, or even looking after his family when he could sense something was wrong. After his father's death, Ivan soon falls very sick from an overly guilty conscience, just as what happened to Dostoevsky. These two brothers represent Dostoevsky's terribly guilty ego in both of those aspects, wanting the parricide due to the Oedipal Complex, and not doing anything to stop it. The masochistic part of Dostoevsky's ego is shown specifically in the character of Dmitri. He is the only one of the brothers who actually ends up being condemned, in court, for the murder. His punishment is to be sent off to Siberia. This can be compared back to Dostoevsky because he was sent to

Siberia on the basis of something he did not do. Dostoevsky firmly accepted his punishment, “ as a substitute for the punishment he deserved for his sin against his real father” (Freud 106). Dmitri was prepared to suffer in Siberia as well for similar reasons, claiming, “ It’s for that babe I am going to Siberia now. I am not a murderer, but I must go to Siberia” (Dostoevsky 612). The “ babe” that Dmitri is referring to is the whole of the innocent children in Russia who have suffered for the sins of mankind. Dmitri is therefore going to Siberia as a means of taking up the burden of society’s guilt, just as Dostoevsky did. Dostoevsky’s ego stopped him from acting out the murder of his father, as it made him realize, according to Freud’s Oedipal complex, that he cannot commit parricide because his father is stronger than him, and he would be castrated for trying. Similarly, Dmitri’s ego stopped him from murdering his father as he stood below his window with a weapon. Dmitri described that he wanted to kill his father, but some transient force held him back. This was obviously not the heaven’s saving him, but the ego doing its job.

Even the hero in this novel, Alyosha, feels guilt for not allowing himself to be more aware of his family’s fatal situation. He deals with his guilt in a more spiritual and religious way, as he has all his life. Alyosha suffers from an unresolved Oedipal complex just like Dostoevsky. The power of the Oedipal complex, and the importance of the relationship between mother and son come into play when Fyodor tells Alyosha about the demeaning things that he did to his mother. As Fyodor was in the midst of telling Alyosha about how she was a severe ‘ shrieker’, Alyosha fell on the floor in a seizure like form, crying in hysterics. Since Alyosha never got to properly go through the whole

process of the Oedipal Complex, he is stuck in a stage of anxiety. Hearing these things about his mother, who he never got the chance to love, made him feel unbearably sad and guilty, and caused him to react with shrieks similar to hers. There is an apparent significance in the way Dostoevsky portrays Alyosha as a character angelic beyond what is plausible for a human being; he had a son named Alyosha, who died at the age of three from what seemed to be epilepsy. Alyosha is now even more so Dostoevsky's ego because his character is a representation of Dostoevsky's guilt over his son dying from an illness that he allegedly inherited from him, as well as his grief over the death. Making Alyosha this heavenly character is a statement that his son is living on in the heavens, as well as letting a bit of his grief spill out onto the pages of *The Brothers Karamazov*, using his novel as "writing therapy". It is a convoluted situation to develop moral masochism. When you're displeasure induces pleasure, as it did for Dostoevsky and the brothers in the novel, a perversion has very obviously surfaced. A quote from Dostoevsky's novel draws straight back to masochism: " See, I've grown terribly fond of my own misery these past five years" (349). Dostoevsky's sadness had led him to almost feel safe, just being sad. It gives him a sense that he's back home again. The real truth in the *Brother's Karamazov* does not lie in its plot line, but in the underlying psychology and it's connection to Dostoevsky's life. The situations that Fyodor, Smerdyakov, and the other three brothers are put into fit snugly into our author's life, and each of their personalities corresponds with a different aspect of our author's psyche.

Dostoevsky was a man who unfortunately never recovered from the original struggles of the Oedipal Complex, due to the early perversions of his mind caused by his father's death, and harshness during the time in which he was alive. His father perverted his superego making it sadistic, which then also perverted his ego, making it masochistic. His superego is conclusively represented by the fatherly figure Fyodor, the id by the murderer Smerdyakov, and his ego by the guilt-ridden sons Ivan, Alyosha, and Dmitri. It is only reasonable to assume that Dostoevsky chose to put his characters so close in relation to himself because he needed to confess all the warring feelings that he internalized in himself for years, and that he wanted to create a fantasy in which his darkest wishes were fulfilled. The internalized feelings consist of an obsession over parricide, which has stayed with Dostoevsky since the murder of his father. This obsession stands out clearly in the pages of the book, as a large part of it is filled with the characters struggling with their strained relationship with their father and their guilt over his murder. Dostoevsky mirrors these strains to his personal struggles with his own guilt and responsibility for his father's murder, and identifying what a father even is. Dostoevsky feels that a father has to be loving in order to be considered a father, but his moral codes obviously contradict those of society's laws. The taboo of hating ones parents in addition to society having guilt over its primal crime all the more fuel Dostoevsky's pangs of conscience. Perhaps the honesty of this book, in which Dostoevsky represents himself as he is instead of idealizing himself, is why it draws so many people in and changes the way they think after reading it.

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