



Lethbridge
Undergraduate
Research Journal

ISSN 1718-8482

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Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482

The 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor': Moral Transformation in *The Brothers Karamazov*

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Citation:

Nicholas Rourke Miller: The 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor':Moral Transformation in The Brothers Karamazov . *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*. 2008. Volume 3 Number 2.

Abstract

The major plot lines of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* follow the moral development of the Karamazov brothers, Dmitri, Ivan, Alyosha, and Smerdyakov. All of the brothers are, to some extent, portrayed as torn between reason and faith, a divide that echoes throughout Dostoevsky's later work. The chapters "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor" elaborate a challenge against a belief in religious faith and morality which Dostoevsky attempts to answer through the beliefs of his characters and the effects of their beliefs on their lives. *The Brothers Karamazov* as a whole can thus be read as an indirect response to the challenge of the 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.'

Sigmund Freud aptly noted that three of the greatest literary masterpieces of all time are concerned with the topic of parricide – *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.¹ All three works are more so related by a common apparent motive for the deed: sexual rivalry for a woman.² Parricide in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, however, transcends the love triangle between Grushenka, and her suitors Dmitri Karamazov and his father Fyodor Pavlovich; not only as the murderer is committed by the fourth, illegitimate brother, Smerdyakov, but because of its metaphorical relationship to questions of God the father. Concisely, "rebellion" of the Karamazov brothers towards their father Fyodor Pavlovich and God the father concerns the question: "is an unworthy and uncaring father still entitled to the love and respect of his sons?"³

The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor follows from Ivan Karamazov's "rebellion" against God's world, a world in which innocent children, as the extreme example, suffer for no evident reason. Dostoevsky himself thought the argument was unassailable; in a letter to the editor publishing *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky wrote, "My heroes take up the theme that I think irrefutable – the senselessness of the suffering of children – and derive from it the absurdity of all historical reality."⁴ Reason and rationality cannot cope with such senselessness, and only through faith can Dostoevsky respond. Indeed, the ideas Dostoevsky opposed are contested by portraying their effects on the lives of his characters, not by appeal to their lack of rational coherence. Employing this strategy, the struggle between reason and faith, and its bearing on the moral psychology of the four brothers are at the heart of Dostoevsky's greatest novel.

Part V of *The Brothers Karamazov* is the centerpiece of Ivan Karamazov's inner struggle between reason and faith; between the "Euclidean" and the "non-Euclidean." In their first extended conversation with one another, Ivan tells his younger brother Alyosha, "It's not God that I do not accept, you understand, it is this world of God's, created by God, that I do not accept and cannot agree to accept," all the while pleading ignorance in the question of God's existence by appealing to the limitations of his "Euclidean mind, an earthly mind." For Ivan, "it is not for us to resolve things that are not of this world"; where human reason cannot apply, conclusions cannot be made.⁵

Yet before his "rebellion" against God's world, Ivan exclaims to Alyosha, "you are trying to save me, but perhaps I am not lost," and appeals to the Karamazov "thirst for life regardless of everything," or regardless of what logic might conclude. Ivan invokes Dostoevsky's "Ridiculous Man"; he speaks of his capacity for irrational love, "loving with one's insides, with one's guts," and proclaims,

"Even if I didn't believe in life, if I lost faith in the order of things, were convinced in fact that everything is a disorderly, damnable and perhaps devil-ridden chaos, if I were struck by every horror of man's disillusionment – still I would want to live, and, having

once tasted the cup, I would not turn away from it till I had drained it." ⁶

At the end of his poem (Legend), however, Ivan determines to "escape the cup" once aged past his youth, appealing to the other, darker, "bug-like" side of the "thirst for life" – the "Karamazov baseness." ⁷ Thus, the Karamazov "thirst for life" can be seen to correlate to the contrasting forces within Ivan; he is a "point with two ends," as Father Iosif refers to his article on ecclesiastical courts.

The Grand Inquisitor himself, as Ivan's creation, embodies this same inner struggle; he too was once a genuine believer in the Christian faith. "I too have been in the wilderness, I too lived on roots and locusts, I too prized the freedom with which Thou hast blessed us, I too was striving to stand among Thy elect, among the strong and powerful...But I awakened and would not serve madness." ⁸ The Grand Inquisitor has also rejected God's world; he is a reflection of Ivan's own wishes to reconstruct the world in a manner devoid of the misery and suffering at the source of his rejection.

The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor finds Christ on the steps of the Seville Cathedral during the Spanish Inquisition, restoring sight to an old man and bringing a little girl back from the dead. Discovered by the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor, he is arrested and sentenced to be burned at the stake. The Grand Inquisitor views Christ's presence as a step backwards in his own work; in Christ's rejection of the Devil's three temptations, he sees a rejection of happiness for mankind for the sake of freedom. The Grand Inquisitor, noting Christ's error, asks, "Didst Thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering." ⁹ The Grand Inquisitor and his church have "corrected Thy work, and founded it upon miracle, mystery, and authority" – corresponding to the three temptations of the Devil – under the false guise of Christ himself. ¹⁰ Humanity can never be free, for it is "weak, vicious, worthless, and rebellious." ¹¹ Thus, members of the church – the few "wise men" – sacrifice themselves for the happiness of others, while depriving of the very freedom Christ wished to provide them.

Ivan, during a conversation preceding his poem, remarks to Alyosha, "I think that if the Devil does not exist, and has therefore been created by man, then man has created him in his own likeness and image," implying that "a beast lurks in every man" (especially in the Karamazov men, with their double-edged thirst for life). ¹² Even Alyosha, the most devoutly religious and wholesome of his brothers, exhibits traces of "the little devil that sits in (his) heart." ¹³ Ivan's rebellion seems to place self-doubt in Alyosha, though it was present prior to their conversation, and will persist through his own crisis stemming from Father Zosima's death and subsequent putrefaction. In a conversation with Lise, to whom he is briefly engaged, he laments:

"My brothers are destroying themselves, my father, too. And they're destroying others with them. This is the 'earthly force of the Karamazovs' as Father Paisiy put it the other day – earthly and violent, raw...Whether the spirit of God is moving over that force, even I do not know. I only know that I myself am a Karamazov...I am a monk, a monk?...And look, maybe I don't even believe in God." ¹⁴

Nonetheless, Dostoevsky's chapter on the Grand Inquisitor leads the reader to draw distinct parallels between Alyosha and Jesus, and Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor. Alyosha stays silent as Christ does, compared with Ivan's frenzied storytelling channeling the Grand Inquisitor. Alyosha's mimic of Christ's kissing the Grand Inquisitor seems to be "sowing in Ivan the seed of his own redemption," and the act serves as an illuminating example of Alyosha's gift – "his ability to give back to others what they have given him – what they, unknowingly, already possess." ¹⁵

The moral implications of The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor are foreshadowed by the earlier debate over Ivan's article on ecclesiastical courts; particularly by the notion of the Church turned into State. Father Paisiy's observation that "This is Rome and its dream...It is the Devil's third temptation of Christ" is echoed in the Grand Inquisitor's conversation with Christ:

"It is exactly eight centuries ago that we took from him, that which you had angrily refused; that last gift which he offered you, showing you all the kingdoms of the earth. We took from him Rome and the sword of Caesar, and proclaimed ourselves merely kings of the earth." ¹⁶

Ivan's "rebellion" is against divine justice, a refutation of Zosima's ideal punishment through real-life examples of punishment. In his poem, furthermore, the dispenser of punishment is the Grand Inquisitor, "the dispenser of terrible punishment and crude mechanical justice," he who burns heretics at the stake. ¹⁷ If we are to follow Ivan's conclusions at both the end of the debate on his article and the end of the discussion of his poem with Alyosha, "everything is permitted"; "there is no virtue if there is no immortality." ¹⁸

Smerdyakov, the illegitimate brother and son of Stinking Lizaveta, embraces Ivan's conception of moral responsibility perhaps more so than Ivan. Ivan never appears to fully adopt his ideas; upon receiving an emotional reaction from Alyosha at the end of his poem, for example, he simply exclaims, "But it's nonsense Alyosha, it's just the muddled poem of a muddled student who never wrote two lines of verse. Why are you taking it so seriously?" ¹⁹ Smerdyakov, however, sees himself as Ivan's disciple and accordingly adopts, vulgarizes, and acts consistently with Ivan's amoral nihilist ideology. Commenting on Smerdyakov's mockery of a refusal to renounce faith, Fyodor Pavlovich remarks to Ivan, "He's got this all up for your benefit. He wants you to praise him." Ivan's eventual disgust towards Smerdyakov can thus be seen as his recognizing himself in his bastard stepbrother. Smerdyakov's parting words to Ivan upon his heading off to Moscow – "it's always worthwhile speaking to a clever man" – imply a bond between the two, reminiscent of the "clever (or wise) people" the Grand Inquisitor joins after his rejection of Christ. Ivan, however, does not realize the extent of the connection between the two and their views, and his own complicity in the murder of his father, until his visits to Smerdyakov before his suicide and Dmitri's trial.

Dmitri, the oldest of the Karamazov brothers, experiences a moral-spiritual transformation seemingly through his accusation and trial for the murder of his father. Superficially, such would appear to be true; one could view Dmitri as following the path of Raskolnikov of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, condemned to hard labor, followed by Grushenka, who seems to have undergone enough of a conversion herself to *comparatively resemble* Sonya of *Crime and Punishment*. Yet it is before his sentencing, in a dream, that he finds "the path of love and Christian faith."

After being questioned about his father's murder, Dmitri dreams of driving somewhere in the steppes during a storm. He meets a line of emaciated women on the side of the road, and asks the driver why a baby belonging to one of the women is crying. The driver answers: "They're poor people burned out. They have no bread."²⁰ Yet, "Dmitri is really asking the same question that had been posed so vehemently by Ivan and led to his attack on God. 'Why are the people poor? Why is the babe poor?...Why don't they sing songs of joy?'"²¹ Dmitri feels within himself a deep-seeded emotional response:

"And he felt that a passion of pity, such as he had never known before, was rising in his heart, and he wanted to cry that he wanted to do something for them all...that no one should shed tears from that moment, and he wanted to do it at once, regardless of the obstacles, with all the Karamazov recklessness."²²

Dmitri wakes up accepting his moral guilt "because I meant to kill him and perhaps I might have killed him," while simultaneously proclaiming his intention to fight his legal guilt; the two are differentiated, and thus the existence of inherent moral laws is acknowledged.

Ivan's own transformation, in contrast, culminates in a delirious, hallucinatory dream. The realization that his philosophy enabled Smerdyakov to kill Fyodor Pavlovich finally illuminates the extent to which people are involved in one another's lives; a far cry from his own intellectual isolation. His first show of human solidarity, taking a peasant to the police station and effectively saving his life, comes after his final meeting with Smerdyakov and at the height of his moral guilt. Ivan is so morally conflicted, however, that he decides not to report the police concerning his meeting with Smerdyakov (and his confession to the murder). A meeting with "the Devil," both Ivan's hallucination and symbol of the "non-Euclidean," is necessary to illuminate the inconsistency between his moral conscience and amoral rational philosophy.

The Devil serves to exhibit both Ivan's desire for faith and the impossibility of attaining it through strict belief in a Euclidean world. While carefully balancing Ivan's belief and disbelief in his ontological reality, the Devil sows in Ivan "only a tiny grain of faith and it will grow into an oak tree – and such an oak tree that, sitting on it, you will try to enter into the ranks of 'the hermit monks and chaste women' for that is what you are secretly longing for. You'll dine on locusts, you'll wander in the wilderness to save your soul."²³ Ivan's final acceptance of all that he has told himself through the devil – "that reason cannot eradicate the torments of moral conscience" – is represented by his throwing a glass at his own hallucination, and thus accepting the reality of its argument. "He remembers Luther's inkstand! He takes me for a dream and throws a glass at a dream!"²⁴

Alyosha himself finds his short-lived doubts erased by a dream of his Father Zosima, and symbolically echoes Zosima's final act before dying in his embrace of the earth. All the brothers, then, culminate their Christian transformation in dreams. The one exception, Smerdyakov, commits suicide; with him dies the Napoleonic, rational, and amoral ideology in the lives of the Brothers Karamazov.

"But what is great is that here is a mystery – that the transient face of the earth and eternal truth have here come into contact together; the process of eternal justice fulfills itself before earthly justice. Here the Creator, as in the first days of creation, bringing every day to its culmination with words of praise: 'that which I have created is good,' looks at Job, and is again proud of his creation. And Job praising God serves not only Him, but will serve the whole of His creation from generation unto generation and for all eternity. For he was preordained for this."²⁵

The problem of suffering, inexorably linked to God's wager with the devil in the Book of Job and elaborated in Ivan's poem, is addressed in an account of Father Zosima's life directly following *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*. Yet, as Dostoevsky knows Ivan's concerns are irrefutable (see above), Zosima's answer takes the form not of logical argument, but of a change in attitude; "an attitude of serene acceptance of human destiny, with all its sufferings and misfortunes – an acceptance deriving from an unalterable conviction in the all-forgiving mercy of a loving and compassionate God."²⁶ Regardless of whether "The Russian Monk" is considered a satisfactory answer to Ivan's poem, the reader must always remember that Dostoevsky's ultimate response lies not in explicit argumentation, but in *the novel as a whole*. In this respect, Dostoevsky employs the lives of the four brothers as tools of demonstration in favor of the Christian ideal of moral interconnection, both in action and guilt.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Dr. Jennifer Baines at the University of Oxford for her comments, suggestions, and endless knowledge of the political and cultural influences on 19th century Russian literature.

About the Author

Nicholas Rourke Miller is a third year studying philosophy and psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His paper was prepared while he was a visiting student at Hertford College, University of Oxford.

Endnotes

1. Freud, Sigmund. "Dostoevsky and Parricide." Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays. Pg. 107. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the three works.
2. It can be argued that each brother has a complicit part in the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich, despite the act having been carried out by Smerdyakov. One of the many motives, then, would be Dmitri's spite towards his father stemming from their competition for Grushenka.
3. Terras, Victor. F.M. Dostoevsky: Life, Work, and Criticism. Pg. 22.
4. Frank, Joseph. Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet. Pg. 428.
5. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Pg. 235.
6. *ibid.* Pg. 231.

7. *ibid.* Pg. 263.
8. *ibid.* Book V, Chapter 5.
9. *ibid.* Pg. 254.
10. *ibid.* Pg. 257
11. *ibid.* Pg. 251.
12. *ibid.* Pg. 239 and: Peace, Richard. Dostoevsky. Pg. 271.
13. *ibid.* Pg. 243.
14. *ibid.* Pg. 220.
15. Miller, Robin Feuer. *The Brother's Karamazov: Worlds of the Novel.* Pg. 70.
16. Secondarily quoted from: Peace. Dostoevsky. Pg. 269. I owe this connection between Paisiy and Ivan's poem to Peace as well.
17. Peace. Dostoevsky. Pg. 269
18. Dostoevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov.* Pgs. 70, 263.
19. *ibid.* Pg. 262.
20. *ibid.* Pgs. 455-6.
21. Frank, Joseph. Dostoevsky: *The Mantle of the Prophet.* Pg. 660.
22. Dostoevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov.* Pg. 456.
23. *ibid.* Pg. 645.
24. *ibid.* Pg. 649.
25. *ibid.* Pg. 292.
26. Frank, Joseph. Dostoevsky: *The Mantle of the Prophet.* Pg. 622-3.

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