



On **Dostoevsky's**

The Brothers Karamazov

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THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

NOTES

including

- *Life and Background*
- *General Plot Summary*
- *List of Characters*
- *Summaries and Commentaries*
- *Character Analyses*
- *Chronological Chart*
- *Review Questions*
- *Selected Bibliography*

by

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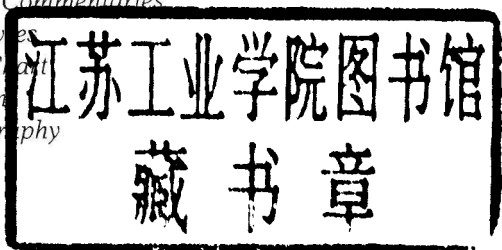
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The Brothers Karamazov Notes

LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born of lower-middle-class parents in 1821, the second of seven children, and lived until 1881. His father, an army doctor attached to the staff of a public hospital, was a stern and righteous man while his mother was the opposite—passive, kindly, and generous—and this fact accounts perhaps for Dostoevsky's often filling his novels with characters who seem to possess opposite extremes of character.

Dostoevsky's early education was in an army engineering school, where he was apparently bored with the dull routine and the unimaginative student life. He spent most of his time, therefore, dabbling in literary matters and reading the latest authors; the penchant for literature was obsessive. And, almost as obsessive was Dostoevsky's interest in death, for while the young student was away at school, his father was killed by the serfs on his estate. This sudden and savage murder smouldered within the young Dostoevsky and, when he began to write, the subject of crime, and murder in particular, was present in every new publication; Dostoevsky was never free of the horrors of homicide and even at the end of his life, he chose to write of a violent death—the death of a father—as the basis for his masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

After spending two years in the army, Dostoevsky launched his literary career with *Poor Folk*, a novel which was an immediate and popular success and one highly acclaimed by the critics. Never before had a Russian author so thoroughly examined the psychological complexity of man's inner feelings and the intricate workings of the mind.

Following *Poor Folk*, Dostoevsky's only important novel for many years was *The Double*, a short work dealing with a split personality and containing the genesis of a later masterpiece, *Crime and Punishment*.

Perhaps the most crucial years of Dostoevsky's melodramatic life occurred soon after the publication of *Poor Folk*. These years included some of the most active, changing phases in all of Russian history and Dostoevsky had an unusually active role in this era of change. Using influences acquired with his literary achievements, he became involved

in political intrigues of quite questionable natures. He was, for example, deeply influenced by new and radical ideas entering Russia from the West and soon became affiliated with those who hoped to revolutionize Russia with all sorts of Western reforms. The many articles Dostoevsky wrote, concerning the various political questions, he published knowing full well that they were illegal and that all printing was to be controlled and censored by the government.

The rebel-writer and his friends were, of course, soon deemed treasonous revolutionaries and placed in prison and, after nine months, a number of them, including Dostoevsky, were tried, found guilty, and condemned to be shot by a firing squad.

The entire group was accordingly assembled, all preparations were completed, and the victims were tied and blindfolded. Then, seconds before the shots were to be fired, a messenger from the Tsar arrived. A reprieve had been granted. Actually the Tsar had never intended that the men were to be shot; he merely used this sadistic method to teach Dostoevsky and his friends a lesson. This soul-shaking, harrowing encounter with death, however, created a never-to-be forgotten impression on Dostoevsky; it haunted him for the rest of his life.

After the commutation of the death sentence, Dostoevsky was sent to Siberia and during the years there, he changed his entire outlook on life. During this time, amidst horrible living conditions—stench, ugliness, hardened criminals, and filth—he began to re-examine his values. There was total change within the man. He experienced his first epileptic seizure and he began to reject a heretofore blind acceptance of new ideas which Russia was absorbing. He underwent a spiritual regeneration so profound that he emerged with a prophetic belief in the sacred mission of the Russian people. He believed that the salvation of the world was in the hands of the Russian folk and that eventually Russia would rise to dominate the world. It was also in prison that Dostoevsky formulated his well-known theories about the necessity of suffering. Suffering became the means by which man's soul is purified; it expiated sin; it became man's sole means of salvation.

When Dostoevsky left Siberia, he resumed his literary career and soon became one of the great spokesmen of Russia. Then, in 1866, he published his first masterpiece, *Crime and Punishment*. The novel is the story of Raskolnikov, a university student who commits a senseless murder to test his moral and metaphysical theories concerning the freedom of the will. The novel exhibits all the brilliant psychological

analyses of character for which Dostoevsky was to become famous and incorporates the theme of redemption through suffering.

Most of Dostoevsky's adult life was plagued with marital problems, epileptic seizures and, most of all, by creditors. Often he had to compose novels at top speed in order to pay his many mounting debts, but by the end of his life, he was sufficiently free of worry so that he was able to devote all his energy to the composition of *The Brothers Karamazov* and at his death, only a year after the publication of this masterwork, he was universally acknowledged to be one of Russia's greatest writers.

GENERAL PLOT SUMMARY

By his first wife, Fyodor Karamazov sired one son—Dmitri—and by his second wife, two sons—Ivan and Alyosha. None of the Karamazov boys, however, was reared in the family home. Their mothers dead and their father a drunken fornicator, they were parceled out to various relatives. Fyodor could not have been more grateful; he could devote all energy and time to his notorious orgies. Those were the early years.

Dmitri comes of age, as the novel opens, and asks his father for an inheritance which, he has long been told, his mother left him. His request is scoffed at. Old Karamazov feigns ignorance of any mythical monies or properties that are rightfully Dmitri's. The matter is far from ended, though, for Dmitri and his father find themselves instinctive enemies and besides quarreling over the inheritance, they vie for Grushenka, a woman of questionable reputation. Finally it is suggested that if there is to be peace in the Karamazov household that the family must go together to the monastery and allow Alyosha's elder, Father Zossima, to arbitrate and resolve the quarrels. Ivan, Karamazov's intellectual son, accompanies them to the meeting.

At the monastery there seems to be little hope for a successful reconciliation. Fyodor parades his usual disgusting vulgarities, makes a dreadful scene, and when Dmitri arrives late, he accuses his son of all sorts of degeneracy. Dmitri then retorts that his father has tried to lure Grushenka into a liaison by promising her 3,000 rubles, and in the midst of their shouting, Father Zossima bows and kisses Dmitri's feet. This act ends the interview. All are shocked into silence. Later, old Karamazov recovers from his astonishment and once again he makes a disgraceful

scene in the dining room of the Father Superior. He then leaves the monastery and commands Alyosha to leave also.

It is now that Dostoevsky reveals that Karamazov perhaps has fathered another son. Years ago, a raggle-taggle moron girl who roamed the town was seduced and bore a child; everyone, naturally, assumed that the satyr-like Karamazov was responsible. The child grew up to be an epileptic and now cooks for Karamazov. He is a strange sort, this Smerdyakov, and lately his epileptic seizures have become more frequent. Curiously, he enjoys talking philosophy with Ivan.

The day after the explosive scene in the monastery, Alyosha comes to visit his father and is stopped midway by Dmitri. The emotional, impulsive Karamazov son explains to Alyosha that he is sick with grief—that some time ago, he became engaged to a girl named Katerina, and has recently borrowed 3,000 rubles from her to finance an orgy with Grushenka. He pleads for Alyosha to speak to Katerina, to break the engagement, and to help him find some way to repay the squandered money so that he can feel free to elope with Grushenka. Alyosha promises to help if he is able.

The young man reaches his father's house and finds more confusion: Smerdyakov is loudly arguing with another servant about religion, spouting many of Ivan's ideas. Later, when the servants are ordered away, Karamazov taunts Ivan and Alyosha about God and immortality, and Ivan answers that he believes in neither. Alyosha quietly affirms the existence of both. Dmitri then bursts into the room crying for Grushenka and when he cannot find her, attacks his father and threatens to kill him.

Alyosha tends his father's wounds, then goes back to the monastery for the night. The next day he goes to see Katerina, as he promised Dmitri, and tries to convince her that she and Ivan love each other and that she should not concern herself with Dmitri and his problems. He is unsuccessful.

Later that same day, Alyosha comes upon Ivan in a restaurant, and they continue the conversation about God and immortality that they began at their father's house. Ivan says that he cannot accept a world in which God allows so many innocent people to suffer and Alyosha says that, although Ivan cannot comprehend the logic of God, there is One who can comprehend all: Jesus. Ivan then explains, with his poem "The Grand Inquisitor," that Jesus is neither a ready nor an easy answer-all

for his questionings—that He placed an intolerable burden on man by giving him total freedom of choice.

When Alyosha returns to the monastery, he finds Father Zossima near death. The elder rallies a bit and lives long enough to expound his religious beliefs to his small audience, stressing, above all, a life of simplicity, a life in which every man shall love all people and all things, and shall refrain from condemning others. This is Zossima's final wisdom and when he finishes, he dies.

Next day many people gather to view the holy man's corpse, for popular rumor has whispered for years that upon Zossima's death, a miracle would occur. No miracle occurs, however. Instead, a foul and putrid odor fills the room and all of the mourners are horrified. Even Alyosha questions God's justice and, momentarily yielding to temptation, he flees to Grushenka's house. But after he has talked with the girl, he discovers that she is not the sinful woman he sought; she is remarkably sensitive and quite understanding and compassionate. Alyosha's faith is restored and, later, in a dream of Jesus' coming to the wedding of Cana, he realizes that life is meant to be joyously shared. Now he is absolutely certain of his faith in God and in immortality.

Dmitri has meanwhile been frantically searching for a way to raise the money to repay Katerina. He has even gone to a neighboring town to try and borrow the sum, but even there he fails. Returning, he discovers that Grushenka is no longer at home and panics, sure that she has succumbed to Fyodor's rubles. He goes first to his father's house; then, after discovering that she is not there, he tries to escape but is cornered by an old servant. He strikes him aside, leaving him bloody and unconscious, and returns to Grushenka's house. He demands to know her whereabouts and at last he is told that she has gone to join a former lover, one who deserted her five years before.

Dmitri makes a final decision: he will see Grushenka once more, for the last time, then kill himself. He travels to the couple's rendezvous, finds Grushenka celebrating with her lover, and joins them. There is resentment and arguing, and finally Grushenka is convinced that her former lover is a scoundrel and that it is Dmitri whom she really loves. The two lovers are not to be reunited, however, for the police arrive and accuse Dmitri of murdering his father. Both are stunned by the circumstantial evidence, for the accusation is weighty. Dmitri indeed seems guilty and is indicted to stand trial.

Alyosha, in the meantime, has made friends with a young schoolboy, the son of a man brutally beaten by Dmitri in a rage of passion and gradually the youth has proven his sincere desire to help the frightened, avenging boy. Now that the youngster is dying, Alyosha remains at his bedside, where he hopes to help the family and also to reconcile the young boy with many of his schoolmates.

Ivan, the intellectual, has neither the romantic passion of Dmitri nor the wide, spiritual interests of Alyosha, and when he learns of his father's murder, he broods, then decides to discuss his theories with Smerdyakov. He is astonished at the bastard servant's open confession that he is responsible for the murder. But Smerdyakov is clever; he disavows total responsibility and maintains that Ivan gave him the intellectual and moral justification for the murder and, furthermore, that he actually permitted the act by leaving town so that Smerdyakov would be free to accomplish the deed. Ivan is slow to accept the argument but after he does, he is absolutely convinced of Smerdyakov's logic. The transition is disastrous. His newfound guilt makes him a madman and the night before Dmitri's trial, he is devoured with burning brain fever. That same night Smerdyakov commits suicide. Dmitri's situation becomes increasingly perilous.

During the trial, the circumstantial evidence is presented in so thorough a manner that Dmitri is logically convicted as Fyodor's murderer. He has the motive, the passion, and was at the scene of the crime. Perhaps the most damning bit of evidence, however, is presented by Katerina. She shows the court a letter of Dmitri's in which he says that he fears that he might be driven to murder his father.

After the conviction, Dmitri agrees to certain plans for his escape but says that it will be great torture and suffering for him to flee from Mother Russia, from Russian soil, and to live in exile.

As for Alyosha, his future holds the promise of hope and goodness (qualities that were once never associated with the Karamazovs), for after young Ilusha dies and all his schoolmates attend the funeral, Alyosha gathers them together and deeply impresses them with his explanation of love and of friendship. Spontaneously, the boys rise and cheer Alyosha and his wisdom.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

KARAMAZOV FAMILY

Fyodor Pavlovitch Karamazov

The father, who is a cynical, immoral, and depraved sensualist dedicated only to the fulfillment of his carnal desires.

Dmitri (Mitya)

His oldest son, who develops an intense hatred for his father and who is convicted of murdering him.

Ivan

The second son, who develops into the extreme intellectual and who questions all values of life.

Alyosha (Alexey)

The youngest son, who is deeply religious and who functions as the central figure in the novel.

Smerdyakov (Pavel Fyodorovitch Smerdyakov)

Old Karamazov's illegitimate son, whose last name was assigned to him by Fyodor and whose first names were merely adopted. He grows up in the Karamazov house as a servant.

Adelaida

Karamazov's first wife and the mother of Dmitri.

Sofya

Karamazov's second wife and the mother of Ivan and Alyosha.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Andrey

The driver who takes Dmitri to his meeting with Grushenka in Mokroe.

Trifon Borissovitch

The innkeeper at Mokroe who testifies that Dmitri spent all of the three thousand rubles during his orgy.

Fenya

Grushenka's maid, who lies to Dmitri about Grushenka's whereabouts.

Father Ferapont

The acetic and deranged monk who is a bitter opponent to Father Zossima.

Fetyukovitch

The brilliant defense attorney brought in from Moscow to defend Dmitri.

Gorstkin (also known as *Lyagavy*)

The merchant who is interested in buying some property belonging to Karamazov.

Grigory Vassilyevitch

The old Karamazov servant who takes care of the children and who adopts Smerdyakov.

Grushenka (*Agrafena Alexandrovna*)

The lady of so-called loose morals who attracts the attentions and consequent jealousies of Dmitri and Fyodor.

Herzenstube

The old town doctor who gives favorable testimony in Dmitri's behalf.

Madame Hohlakov

The wealthy widow at whose house many of the scenes of the novel take place.

Lise

Madame Hohlakov's young daughter, who becomes engaged to Alyosha and then capriciously breaks the engagement.

Ilusha

The young boy whose illness brings all of his friends together with Alyosha.

Father Iosif (Joseph)

The librarian at the monastery.

Kalganov (Pyotr Fomitch Kalganov)

A casual friend who is present at Dmitri's party in Mokroe.

Katerina (Katya) Ivanovna

Dmitri's fiancée, whom he deserts upon falling in love with Gru-shenka.

Ippolit Kirillovitch

The public prosecutor who conducts the trial against Dmitri.

Kolya (Nikolay Ivanovitch Krassotkin)

The young boy who influences the other boys and becomes Alyosha's disciple.

Madame Krassotkin (Anna Fyodorovna)

Kolya's doting and widowed mother.

Lizaveta Smerdyastchaya

The town's deformed idiot, who is seduced by Karamazov and then gives birth to Smerdyakov.

Lyagavy

See *Gorstkin*.

Makarov (Mihail Makarovitch Makarov)

The district police inspector who questions Dmitri about the murder.

Marfa Ignatyevna

Grigory's wife and another of the Karamazov servants.

Marya Kondratyevna

The daughter of Dmitri's landlady who is in love with Smerdyakov.

Maximov

An old destitute landowner who lives off the generosity of others, especially Grushenka, in the closing chapters of the novel.

Miusov (Pyotr Alexandrovitch Miusov)

A cousin of Karamazov's first wife, who was instrumental in having Dmitri taken away from Fyodor.

Mussyalovitch

Grushenka's ex-lover, whose return precipitated Dmitri's strange behavior on the night of the murder.

Father Paissy

The learned theologian and devoted friend of Father Zossima who tries to console Alyosha.

Pyotr Ilyitch Perhotin

The young civil servant from whom Dmitri borrowed money on the night of the murder.

Mihail Ospovitch Rakitin

A young seminarian who professes to have very liberal and advanced ideas and who betrays his friendship with Alyosha.

Samsonov (Kuzma Samsonov)

A wealthy landowner who befriended Grushenka.

Captain Snegiryov

Ilusha's father, who is destitute and broken by misfortunes. He was attacked by Dmitri one night because he earned money from Fyodor.

Varvinsky

A district doctor who testifies as to Dmitri's mental condition.

Vrublevsky

Mussyalovitch's companion on the night of the orgy in Mokroe.

Father Zossima

The revered elder at the monastery and the spiritual guardian for Alyosha, whose teachings become central to all the ideas in the novel.

SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES

PART ONE

BOOK I

Summary

Karamazov: the name is well-known in Russia; it carries a taste of violence and dark Slavic passion. And there is much truth in the rumors and whispered tales told of Fyodor Karamazov. In his youth he was a

loud profligate. His drinking and high living were notorious; he seemed insatiate. And marriage did not tame him. His marriage, true to form, was scandalous. But initially it was not scandalous because of its melodramatic elements—that was to be expected; life with Karamozov could not be otherwise. Initially, Karamazov's marriage was scandalous because it was romantic: he was penniless yet he wooed and married an heiress.

Adelaida Ivanovna believed in her young rebel-husband. Perhaps his spirit was bold and irrepressible, but he was the new breed of liberal Russian manhood. She believed it firmly. She tried to believe it for a long time. Then she was forced to face the ugly reality that instead of a rich-blooded idealist she had married an opportunist who was physically cruel and usually drunk. She also was forced to face another unpleasant truth: she was pregnant. She bore the baby, a son—Dmitri, or Mitya as she often called him—and when she could no longer endure her husband's viciousness, she abandoned both her son and husband and eloped with a young student.

Karamazov, ostensibly, was staggered by her rejection and, still the overly dramatic sort, like a loud tragedian he spent many of his days driving through the country, lamenting over his wife's desertion. But even that pose grew wearisome and soon he returned to his life of debauchery. When he received the news of Adelaida's death he was in the midst of a drunken orgy.

Young Dmitri was neglected and finally taken in by a cousin and when the cousin tired of him the child was given to other relatives; thus the baby grew up with a variety of families. But he was always told about his real father, that the man still lived, and that he held a rather large piece of Adelaida's property that was rightfully Dmitri's. The boy never forgot these tales of land and money and when he reached maturity, he visited his father and asked about the inheritance. He was unable, of course, to get any information from the old man but he began receiving small sums of money and, convinced that the property did exist, he revisited his father. Again the old man evaded his son's questions.

But if Karamazov was able to evade Dmitri, he could not evade other matters so successfully—the problems of his other sons, for example. For after the four-year-old Dmitri was taken away, Karamazov married a second time. This wife, Sofya Ivanovna, was remarkably beautiful and her loveliness and her innocence attracted the lustful Karamazov. He convinced her to elope with him against her guardian's