

# ALYOSHA

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## **Alyosha (in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)** [open](#)

**Overview** The *Brothers Karamazov* (published 1880) is Dostoyevsky's last novel; it had been long in the process, and even after formally initiating this work it took Dostoyevsky two years of intense work to complete the book, which is widely considered his greatest achievement. The text concerns the strong minded Karamazov family; an irascible and much hated father, and three sons in their twenties, all living in a mid sized village. The core of the plot is the murder of Father Karamazov, and the trial to determine guilt, which is finally (mistakenly) pinned on his son Dmitri. In the course of working through this complex tale, Dostoyevsky and his characters present and experience the major themes of human existence: does a God exist, and if so what can we do about it? Can human love save us from death? What kind of moral obligation must we feel toward one another?

**Character** Alyosha is a gentle, loving young brother, whose inclinations toward the monastic life, and toward the inspiring teachings of his superior, Father Zossima, is part of a kind of transcendent humanism. Throughout the tale, Alyosha is there for his brothers Ivan and Dmitri, even when they are in conflict with one another, and he is the most tolerant of the three toward his dad. Women like Katya and Grushenka love Alyosha for his gentleness, and yet we see, as in his response to the stone thrown at him by the little boy, Ilusha, that he can be firm; he is always honest.

**Parallels** Fromentin's *Dominique* (1862) studies a sensitive and intelligent young man who falls in love with a friend's married sister, a love which can lead nowhere. In reconciling himself, and marrying another, the young man works corners of spiritual discipline central to Alyosha. One might say that Holden Caulfield in the *Catcher in the Rye* (1950) manages while rebelling—in teen age fashion—to channel his loving emotions into useable discipline, making himself as magnetic as Alyosha. Albert Camus' faceless and transcendent presence, the stranger—in the novel *The Stranger*, 1941—is open to the world like Alyosha, and shares his freedom from the need to judge.

## **Illustrative moments**

**Monk** When we first meet Alyosha he is a twenty-year old cloistered monk in the monastery on the outskirts of the town where this novel transpires. He seems willing to be 'cloistered there for the rest of his life,' though he will in fact soon leave the monastery; he remains of saintly but robust and engaged temperament throughout the book. Alyosha is socially healthy and participant, but far from wanting serious relations with women. Father Zossima, superior of the monastery, represents for Alyosha the most compelling image of saintliness. According to the novel's narrator, 'this young man was not a fanatic...but simply an early lover of humanity, ' whose soul found in the monastery 'the ideal' escape for the struggles of young manhood.

**Interrupted** In the midst of a walk through town Alyosha meets a schoolboy who is walking along the road isolated from his schoolmates, who have been throwing stones at him on the way home. The gang caution Alyosha to be careful, lest the isolated kid throw a stone at him. As Alyosha approaches the seeming loser he gets just what the gang predicted, a stone thrown at his own back, then another at his face. Alyosha simply asks the kid why he did this, without provocation. Alyosha' non-violent response to childish violence bears fruit; he will enjoy a painful but growing relationship with the loser boy.

**Insightful** Lise, a perky, ultimately self-destructive but fascinating girl is the only female able to bring out Alexey's intimate thoughts. To her he confides that he worries about the whole fate of the Karamazov family, father and two brothers. 'My brothers are destroying themselves, my father too. And they are destroying others with them.' He repeats the comment he has himself heard, that the

problem is the 'primitive force of the Karamazovs.' Moved by his own revelations, Alyosha achieves the thought that he wants to spend the rest of his life with Lise—for she opens him, as we might say.

**Peaceful** Alyosha returns to the monastery after the death of Father Zossima, whose coffin is lying exposed in the main hall. Though a fellow monk is also present, reading from scripture, Alyosha pays no attention to him, but throws himself down beside the coffin and is absorbed in deep prayer, at peace beside his Father-inspiration. That morning Alyosha had been pained, as had the other monks, by the discovery that Father Zossima's body was stinking and corrupt, unlike the expectation that he would be saintly and without odor. Alyosha is at peace with that corruption now, and takes it in into his prayer, as part of the cosmic wisdom of acceptance.

### **Discussion questions**

What is the significance of the odor of Father Zossima's cadaver, and why is it of such importance to Alyosha?

How does Father Zossima respond to the many spiritual seekers who come to him with urgent prayer requests?

As a theologian, Zossima seems to come down heavily on the importance of active love for others. Why does he see love a principle of salvation? Is he himself subject to carnal temptations?

Alyosha and Lise talk about getting married to one another. Is Alyosha serious in this relation to her? How does he deal with her growing vindictiveness and instability?

Alyosha is privy to two great 'testimonies of spirit,' the Grand Inquisitor argument, from Ivan, and the tale of the spiritual development of Father Zossima, from youth on. Why do people turn naturally to Alyosha, to express what is deepest in their hearts?

Why does Alyosha quickly dismiss the supposed importance of the stench from the decomposing body of Father Zossima?

**Father Zossima (in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*) open**

### **Overview**

**Father Zossima features prominently from the beginning of the novel, when the Karamazov clan gathers for a discussion of personal family matters, to the Father's death, which lives on in the memories of many and in the reports of his life assembled by Alyosha., in the form of a fictive documentation, that throws vivid light on the cleric's personal history. Zossima is a potent element in the lives of the Karamazov family, as well as in the identity-sense of the whole community. The older and more traditional members of the community value the historical richness of Zossima's liturgy, while for the young novice Alyosha, Father Zossima is the foundation of his own thinking and values.**

### **Character**

**After the death of Father Zossima we are given a text written by Alyosha, the youngest son of the Karamazov family, In that text the ardent disciple of Father Zossima writes a penetrating biography of the spirituality eventually created in this child of privilege and wealth, who, like the Buddha, has to retire into himself before he can find a version of The Way. Faith such as Father Zossima's is rarely joined with such practical good sense, as he counsels the flock of believers who gather regularly at the Monastery, in order to ask him their deepest questions. For brilliant followers like Alyosha, Father Zossima is a model of religious care seeing the human world through the lens of our practical being in the world.**

### **Parallels**

Chaucer's Friar, to begin with, is almost an anti type to the humane and faithful Zossima. His recklessness with women is at the opposite end of the scale from the particular sensitivity of Father Zossima to all the women he meets. One might have to outreach to mediaeval saintly literary persons, like Meister Eckhard (1260-1328) or Sor Juana de la Cruz (1651-1695); both were profoundly passionate believers and masters of the imagination, like Father Zossima, as Dostoyevsky creates

him. For that mystic shudder brought to us in the eery presence of seers, of whom Father Zossima is one, we might have to turn to a figures like Teiresias, in ancient Greek imagination, a bisexual prophet, who has forekown all and foredone all, and in whose presence one feels the sharp limits of one's own understanding of the human situation.

### **Illustrative moments**

#### **Confessor**

On several occasions we see Father Zossima, superior of the local monastery, in interactions with his adoring parishioners, who come great distances for his advice and blessing. An instance will illustrate the way he deals with such matters. A lady comes to him whose husband, who has passed away three years prior, had been guilty of beating and otherwise abusing her for many years. She whispers in Father's ear the sin she would like him to absolve, clearly a mortal sin of helping the old guy to die, in the course of illness. Zossima's response to her: 'there is no sin, and there can be no sin on all the earth, which the Lord will not forgive for the truly repentant.'

#### **Discerning**

On the threshold of his own death, Father Zossima welcomes Alyosha to him, and conveys his love. Then he turns to the issue of Alyosha's brother, Dmitri, whom Father Zossima had met the previous day at the monastery, in the presence of the Karamazov family. 'I was instantly horror-stricken at what that man is preparing for himself,' says Zossima, characterizing his first meeting with Dimitri, and accurately predicting the wild dangers into which this unbalanced brother in heading. The reader will note, in Father Zossima, a wide ranging intelligence, and surpassing love, but no mysticism.

#### **Existential**

A sizeable text is devoted to what, the narrator purports, is Alyosha' writing down of what Father Zossima has directly told him about his, Father's, own life. We thus learn, circuitously, that Father stemmed from an upper class life of privilege, and had taken a long path to religious humility. Of particular interest is Father Zossima's interest, expressed already in childhood, in the responsibility of each of us for all men. In the same spirit the man remarked that 'one day is enough for a man to know all happiness.' He was forever concerned with the absolute incumbency of global meaning in every moment we live.

#### **Irony**

Father Zossima was destined to suffer the ironic fate of many who are 'saintly.' (Saintly he was, we learn, but more through love than through miracles.) The irony of his death involves the rapid decomposition of his body, which was taken, by those (largely monks) who were jealous to be a sign that his saintliness was fake. 'Many people were extremely delighted at the smell of decomposition which came so quickly, for not a day had passed since his death.' It is thus of importance, as we remark elsewhere, that Alyosha came to deep peace in the presence of the purely human smell of the Father.

### **Discussion questions**

## **Dmitri (in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*) (emotional)**

### **Overview**

### **Character**

### **Parallels**

### **Illustrative moments**

#### **Appearance**

Dostoyevsky describes Dmitri full face and directly, upon first introducing him. 'Of medium height and agreeable countenance,' 'yet there was something not healthy in his face.' His eyes were prominent and dark, and yet there was a vague look in them; he often burst out in sudden laughter. All in all, on first impression, we meet a normal guy with abnormal (and as we shall come to see dangerous) traits. 'Of an unstable and unbalanced mind,' we are later to be told, though at our time of first meeting him, on a visit to the monastery, his stylish dress and careful comportment throw us off.

#### **Hectic**

Caught in a frantic love affair and constantly bugged by his conflictual relation to his father, Dmitri greets his brother Alyosha with great passion. Dmitri needs some one—Alyosha becomes it—who can serve as a sounding board for Dmitri's anguish. 'You may be in love with a woman and yet hate her,' he explains to his brother, describing his own situation. 'Because it's only to you I can tell everything,' he says to Alyosha, revealing both his own self-enclosedness and his desperate need for attention and companionship. At the tale's end, while we follow Dmitri's trial for murder, we easily go back to such scenes as the present, to see how he can bring terminal crises down on himself.

#### **Delirium**

Flush with cash, desperately jealous, Dmitri tracks Grushenka—and one of her new boyfriends—to a hotel in another town. He intrudes brusquely and uninvited onto what turns out a multi-person party, and he makes it an orgy for the town, hoping to win Grushenka back by his munificence and high-spending, but in fact displaying chiefly his own hysterical insecurity. The chaos in Dmitri's mind is deepened by the arrival, onto the party for Grushenka, of policemen from Dmitri's town, wanting to interrogate him for the murder of his father. Dmitri is a living hell of tensions, at this point.

'Wisdom'

Essentially anxious, insecure and potentially violent, Dimitri nonetheless acquires his own shrewdness of personal observation, and not infrequently shares it with Alyosha, especially concerning women. Confiding in Alyosha, about his recent love struggles with Grushenka, Dimitri points out that you should never ask pardon of a woman. 'Nothing will make her forgive you simply and directly, she'll humble you to the dust...then she'll scrape up all the scrapings and load them on your head.' Wise, though Dimitri is, the effect of his strategy is blunted by Grushenka's voracity for adulation, of which Dimitri short suits her, to his own eventual pain.

## **Discussion questions**

**Ivan (in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*) conscientious**

**Overview**

**Character**

**Parallels**

## **Illustrative moments**

### **Friend**

Ivan and Alyosha meet in a tavern, and Ivan expresses his delight at having some quality time with his brother. He immediately begins to reminisce. 'You remember how you used to love cherry jam when you were little?', he asks, ordering a favorite food lunch for the two of them. 'I remember you til you were eleven,' he goes on, 'I was nearly fifteen.' And he goes on to lay the ground for his own departure the next day for Moscow, the kind of event before which, he explains, you want to solidify all your own deep loves. In this same schmooze mood, Ivan expatiates on his world view, a doubter about the order of the cosmos, but a lover of the green buds in spring.

### **Philosopher**

In their luncheon conversation Ivan goes on to explain his view of the world, as Alyosha reports it. 'I don't accept this world of God's, and although I know it exists, I don't accept it at all. It's not that I don't accept God...it's the world created by him.' In the following sequence, which we call the Tale of the Grand Inquisitor, Ivan goes on to tell Alyosha how he sees the world working. Basically the truth of the universe, he says, lies with the simple humble meaning Christ brought into existence, but a ruthless institution, the Church, has stolen all the power latent in Christ's mission, and put mankind under the self-serving rules of secular authority.

### **Cynic**

Ivan develops a societal perspective, from his Grand Inquisitor thinking. God knows that 'man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil.' Therefore man is

prone to follow 'miracle, mystery, and authority' wherever he can, and to free himself from the burden of that freedom. Ivan presses this perspective on his brother, but does so with that kind of holy fury that presages the 'brain fever' which will finally destroy this oldest of the three brothers. Upon leaving the tavern, in which he has expounded his world view to Alyosha, Ivan is overwhelmed by depression!

### **Breakdown**

Ivan falls increasingly prey to mental instability, until the narrator, while proclaiming himself no doctor, confirms the likelihood of hallucinations. Having been told to rest, Ivan refuses to comply, and is painfully rewarded by the first of his hallucinations. A gentleman in his fifties—previously unseen by Ivan, in an armchair in his sitting room—begins to interact with him; it is not long before we realize that this intruder is the devil, eager to promote Ivan's steady decline. The devil insists on a particular conundrum; that he, like Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, tries to do only evil but ends up doing good. He ends up demystifying all the fake pretences of the good-doers in the world.

### **Discussion questions**

**Grushenka (in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*) extraverted**

### **Overview**

### **Character**

### **Illustrative moments**

#### **Beautiful**

When Alyosha first meets Grushenka, he realizes the full power of this 'beast,' who has been exercising such an influence on both his father and on his brother Dimitri. 'She was very very good looking...she had a full figure with soft, as it were noiseless movements, softened to a peculiar over-sweetness, like her voice.' For all her vamp like behaviors, which thread through the whole tale and motivate murders and loves, 'what struck Alyosha most in that face was its expression of childlike good nature.' It will in the prove out that Grushenka is of good faith, and that her beauty has for the most part caused her nothing but pain, though at times she revels in the power it gives her.

#### **Careful**

As both ward and (pretend) wife, to an elderly gentleman, Grushenka grew up chaste and careful, though her growing beauty became the source of attraction—the guys trying in vain to get access to her—and rumors swirling, such as that 'she had been at seventeen betrayed by someone, some sort of officer, and immediately afterwards been abandoned by him.' Whatever the case, her prudence had by her early twenties become legendary in the town; she had in fact become 'given to what is

called speculation,' in which she had become skilled, prompting the commentary that she had become 'no better than a Jew.'

### **Complex**

Alyosha, the most spiritual of the three Karamazov brothers, exercises a unique fascination over Grushenka—who is visibly interested in conquering him. She is anxious for him to know that she too has in her time been considered a favored child of God; in this regard she tells him a story illustrating the fact that only people who are willing to save other human beings will be considered worthy of saving by God. She wins from Alyosha the praise that 'I have found a treasure, a loving heart. ..You've raised my soul from the depths.' This same Grushenka, who has dangled two men—Karamazov Senior and Dmitri—at the ends of her fingers, can find within herself resources of giving which inspire the most spiritual of men with new hope.

### **Passionate**

Not surprisingly, Grushenka is drawn to Alyosha—his 'holy aura' and his (interested) unavailability make the perfect combination, for the attraction she feels—and on a revealing occasion pushes away a would-be lover, for the sake of keeping Alyosha around to talk with her. She fell on her knees before him: 'I've been waiting all my life for someone like you. I knew that someone like you would come and forgive me.' Unlike the shameful love which others want to bring her, Grushenka thinks, Alyosha brings her the true soul-love which can enable her to realize her personality. Hers is the dilemma of the sexy babe torn between the desire to attract guys, and the desire to give expression to the deep person inside her.

### **Discussion questions**