

BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

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? However in the course of this existential scene-setting, Dostoyevsky passes the Karamazov family characters through the gauntlet of sexual charm, and of all it can do to sidetrack human endeavor. Grushenka, the embodiment of Eve, seems sent to exercise those charms on each of the family members, particularly on Father Karamazov, around whom the ultimate events of the novel turn.

Story

Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* opens as three brothers return to their hometown, after having been raised away from home by relatives. Dmitri has returned to settle a matter of inheritance, with his father, Fyodor Karamazov. Alyosha is a novice in a local monastery, as well as present to help his brother, Dmitri. Ivan, the third brother, has ostensibly returned to help his father. The bad feelings between Dmitri and his father are driven, from the start, by the fact that both men are drawn to the same sexy female—and despite the fact that Dmitri is already engaged to another woman. The opening scene, before the monastery elder, Zosima, introduces the major players, above, and the tangles of emotions which will join them and construct the novel, a tale primarily of three sharply related brothers, and dad prone to scandal.

The complexity of the novel plays out along the lines that immediately follow the scene in the monastery. Dmitri tells Alyosha the details of his love for Grushenka, and that he has stolen money from his fiancée in order to live it up with Grushenka. Alyosha leaves this conversation to go to his father's house, where he finds heated theological conversation underway. Suddenly Dmitri—the rival of his father for Grushenka-- breaks in, and starts beating up his father. A sequel of complex narrative events then follows, which gives the characteristically dramatic texture of Dostoyevsky's writing. After the attack on his father, Alyosha goes out to see Katerina, the fiancée of Dmitri, and finds her entertaining Grushenka, the rival. At the end of the episode Alyosha receives a message from Lisa, who as it turns out is seriously love with him, the novice monk. Intensely intersecting family events, like the above, sustain the ongoing, and increasingly complex, inter-relations of the members of the Karamazov family, whose personal saga is the entire novel. The ultimate development of the novel turns around the trial of Dmitri, whose bitter rivalry with his father, over the love of Grushenka, makes him naturally suspect when his father comes up mysteriously murdered. The fact is, as we only slowly come to realize, that Dmitri is not guilty of this crime, but the issues involved in the trial become of nationwide interest, for the attention they bring, to the alleged deterioration of family life in the Russia of the day.

The self-enrichment of the complex novel, which wraps itself up in philosophical speculation, had by its conclusion, in which Alyosha attends the wake of a beloved young friend, taken twists of philosophical consideration which remain with us as the jewels of this literary experience. The Grand Inquisitor Scene, in which Ivan instructs Alyosha on his own skeptical philosophy of the dreadful freedom of the individual,

remains in western intellectual history as one of the milestones of the Existential perspective—Heidegger, Sartre—which was to ripen and mature throughout the nineteenth century. A number of scenes with Father Zosima, the Prior of Alyosha's monastery, emerge from the text as master documents of Dostoyevsky's own potent but tortured religious faith. In the end, from a tale of jealousy, violence, rivalry, and sex emerges one of the modern novel's most daring explorations of the nature of freedom, the presence of a personal god, and the undying energy of evil.

Themes

Jealousy. Fyodor Karamazov, the father of the family, is jealous of his son, Dimitri, who reciprocates the emotion: the center of their rivalry, which leads to the murder charge against Dimitri, is the seducer Grushenka. In the end she is not interested in either of them.

Freedom. In the Grand Inquisitor speech, which Dimitri gives to his younger brother Alyosha, Dimitri develops a modern philosophy of dreadful freedom and of faith without a god, which is complex, powerful, and links Dostoyevsky's thinking to the most forward looking currents of his time.

Grace. As in *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky is religiously haunted, in the present novel, by evidences of grace which open up love and freedom. Father Zosima instructs Alyosha in the miraculous workings of love, and Alyosha himself, in his fascination with the youngest of god's creatures, bears traits of saintly graciousness.

Characters

Ivan. Ivan stands out, among the brothers, for his philosophical sophistication, and capacity for seeing the whole picture of the human condition.

Father Zosima. Zosima, the head of the monastery at which Alyosha is a novice, is a saintly proponent, of orthodox Christian belief, who confesses openly to a youthful life as a spoiled sower of wild oats.

Grushenka. Grushenka is the femme fatale of *The Brothers Karamazov*, a major turn on for all the men, and yet ultimately a sensitive and deeply understanding individual.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ivan (conscientious)

Character Ivan is from the outset, during the long family discussion with Father Zossima, an agent for reason and planning. (It is a tragic note that he should turn up losing his mind, at least temporarily, in the middle of the novel, under the pressures of the upcoming trial of his brother Dimitri, for whose fate Ivan is terribly worried). His agency for reason is most fully spelled out in the extraordinary text called The Grand Inquisitor, in which he expounds to his brother Alyosha, at a meeting in a tavern, his theory of the origins of the church and the spread of its power. His theories—that Jesus Christ and his followers were made hostage to the church as power, that the church was simply a way of muzzling thought and inventions--were and are explosive, and set Alyosha's mind to thrashing conscientiously over the essentials of his own life.

Parallels Young, brilliant, trapped in ferocious existential difficulties, Ivan evolves a complex oral philosophy, which involves deep thought about God and includes a critique of God's occasional cruelty and disregard. Conscientious men of thought, of Ivan's caliber, are hard to find. Examples: Herman Hesse's 'wolf of the steppes,' in *Steppenwolf* (1927), takes us into the world of loser loners who formulate great visions of the world and then step off into them and experience face-on, with rough consequences; Andre Gide's Michel, in *L'immoraliste* (1902), is convinced to overturn social norms by giving open rein to his pedophilia—North African Arab boys—and to the social frameworks behind the repression of morals; Albert Camus' *Stranger* (1942) takes us into the mind of an anti-personality, whose life is a questioning of

all the social norms handed down to us, which in his mind seem without meaning or authority, but which he conscientiously reduces to nothing.

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's lunch for the two of them. 'I remember you till 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 as may be 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 also with a ruthless institution, the Church, which 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 temporarily 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

Has Ivan's Grand Inquisitor speech something in common with the thinking of Goethe's Mephisto, in *Faust*? Do both 'thinkers' appreciate the idea that the good and the bad are closely interrelated?

What are Ivan's hallucinations? Are they signs of clinical madness, or situational despair at the impending trial of Dimitri?

Is Ivan romantically susceptible? To Grushenka, who takes all in her path, or Katerina? Or is he "too young and headstrong?"

Of what importance is it, to the thinking of Ivan, that he considers 'the death of a single small child' unacceptable cruelty on God's part?

Alyosha (open)

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 Dimitri, 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's 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?

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?

Dmitri (Emotional)

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 Dimitri. 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? Deep questions are also raised—whether or not Dimitri is guilty of parricide—about the mental stability of this young man, who seems unable to ward off fervent and destructive threats like women and alcohol.

Character Dimitri comes on attractive and balanced, as the tale opens, and it is not until the disastrous dénouement, and especially his hysterical jealousy over Grushenka, that we discover he is an incendiary bomb. Unlike his brothers Alyosha, who is a lover of the human condition, or Ivan, a severe critic and intellectual, Dimitri is a powderkeg of physical passion, strong and volatile emotions, and mood swings. He is not a great religious soul, nor is he a closet theologian of strange power, like his brother Ivan. Hatred of his father perhaps most sharply characterizes him, that competitive hatred, based on sexual jealousy—for the hand of Grushenka is the driving force in that early dream of his life which is exploding before us at the end of the novel.

Parallels Though Dimitri is a multifaceted character, we can say that highly emotional jealousy is his trademark. This is not delusional jealousy—Dimitri has plenty of evidence for Grushenka's infidelity to him—but territorial and possessive. Shakespeare's *Othello* provides the case study for jealousy which can lead to murder—as his opponents claimed was the case with Dimitri. Clytemnestra and Medea, openly enraged by the scorn directed at them by their husbands, as those men carry on boldly with other women, delight in the refined jealous vengeance they are able to take, against Agamemnon and Jason. Finally there stands Dido, doing herself in as a way of acting out, against the insensitive man who fell in love with his world mission instead of with her.

Illustrative moments

Appearance Dostoyevsky describes Dimitri 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, Dimitri greets his brother Alyosha with great passion. Dimitri needs some one—Alyosha becomes it—who can serve as a sounding board for Dimitri'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 Dimitri'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, Dimitri tracks Grushenka—and one of her new boyfriends—to a hotel in another town. He intrudes brusquely and uninvited onto what turns out to be 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

Dimitri's mind is deepened by the arrival, onto the party for Grushenka, of policemen from Dimitri's town, wanting to interrogate him for the murder of his father. Dimitri 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

Does Dostoyevsky intend for us to remain in doubt about the guilt of Dimitri, in the murder of his father?

Why does Dimitri lose his head so disastrously when he realizes that Grushenka has left town with her lover? Is his jealousy without bounds, so that he feels justified in overturning the whole world?

How does Dimitri deal with the prospect of being sent to Siberia, after the guilty verdict against him? Can he make any rational assessment of the meaning of this future incarceration?

Grushenka (Extravert)

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? However in the course of this existential scene-setting, Dostoyevsky passes the Karamazov family characters through the gauntlet of sexual charm, and of all it can do to sidetrack human endeavor. Grushenka, the embodiment of Eve, seems sent to exercise those charms on each of the family members, particularly on Father Karamazov, around whom the ultimate events of the novel turn.

Character Grushenka is a temptress—beautiful in a childlike way, eager to be spoiled and beheld with admiration—but at the same time she wants her space, will turn moody on the suitor of the moment, and will snap back that she is being taken for granted. She does in fact confine herself to life with an elderly business type to whom she remains faithfully uninterested most of the novel. (She is certainly not looking for a husband—she and the Karamazov family, except for the Dad, are little over twenty—but rather wishes to play with guys, as she does with the military man to whom she has declared fealty, then forgotten, in the scenes revolving around Dimitri's chaotic last days before imprisonment.

Parallels The femme fatale has many incarnations: we see aspects of her, of the woman for whom men will sacrifice anything or whom she will trick for pleasure, in Babylonian, Sumerian, and Hebrew literatures, best known to us under the name Lilith. (A demon, from dark cult, and very dangerous.) She reappears in, say, the Medea of legend, who won Jason away from Colchis with her 'dark arts,' sexual but demonic, or in the Circe who by magic (sexual, demonic) holds Odysseus' men captive. Helen of Troy is a femme fatale plus, taking a whole army to war to 'defend her honor.' Before the walls of Troy the old toothless men, seeing Helen appear on the battlements, declare that the whole damned war was worth it.

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 end 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 she 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

Grushenka has an intellectual side to her—for example she too is drawn to Father Zossima, not to mention the intellectual brother, Ivan. Is this the aspect of her that makes her fascinating to her various lovers?

Does Grushenka arouse sexual passion in Alyosha? Does she wish to, and not quite succeed?

What is in Grushenka's mind during her near marriage in the nearby town, when she seems to have thrown all her passion onto an old military lover? Is she playing with Dimitri? Is she above all flirting?

Father Zossima (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 is 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's 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

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?