

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

IVAN

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

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

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? The personality of the son Ivan fits him perfectly for raising and answering these fundamental questions of the novel.

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 foods 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 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?