

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Characters in Dostoevsky

## 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.

**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.

**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.

## Discussion questions

What is the significance of the odor of Father Zossima' 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?