

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Characters in Dostoevsky

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.

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.

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.

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?