

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Characters in Dostoevsky

## **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.

**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.

**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.

### **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?