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Themes of Self-Laceration Towards a Modicum of Control in Nineteenth Century Russia as  
Expressed by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Jonathan Ball  
May 2015

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Keywords: Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, self-laceration, agency, fatalism

## ABSTRACT

Themes of Self-Laceration Towards a Modicum of Control in Nineteenth Century Russia as

Expressed by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*

by

Jonathan Ball

The majority of the academic discourse surrounding Dostoevsky and his epic, *The Brothers Karamazov*, has been directed toward the philosophic and religious implications of his characters. Largely overlooked, however, is the theme of laceration. In the greater scope of laceration stands the topic of self-laceration. Self-laceration refers to the practice of causing harm to the self in a premeditated and specifically emotionally destructive fashion. The cause of this experience is varied and expressed in as many ways as there are individuals. The struggle in the Russian psyche between viewing the world as fatalistic or as more of an existential experience finds resolution through self-laceration. By consciously choosing actions that will lead to an abject state, the characters take fate into their own hands. This thesis will explore the themes of self-laceration in a number of characters' narratives and demonstrate that by utilizing emotional self-destruction they find a modicum of control.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: SELF-LACERATION, DOSTOEVSKY, AND THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is lauded by many as one of the greatest novels ever written. The novel has captured the imagination of millions and endures because of its sweeping scale, insightful personal psychology, and grand aesthetic. All of Dostoevsky's efforts towards defining a personal and national morality and experience reach their climax in this, his final work. In *Brothers*, Dostoevsky attempts to encapsulate the central tenants of his definition of what it means to be Russian, as well as all of the nuanced qualities that construction entails. As such, Dostoevsky's work has been carefully studied for many years.

The majority of the academic discourse surrounding Dostoevsky and his epic novel *The Brothers Karamazov* has been directed toward the philosophic and religious implications of Dostoevsky's characters. Much of the scholarship is concerned with the problematic exercise of struggling to determine the author's personal religion and philosophy as extrapolated from his fictional characters. Though Dostoevsky's biography is terribly interesting, including a mock execution and banishment to Siberia, the author wrote about his personal beliefs extensively, both in publication as well as in journals and personal papers, thereby diminishing the necessity of scholarship to shade the author's interior life through an examination of his fiction.

Dostoevsky saw himself as both a defender and definer of Russian experience. For Dostoevsky, the acclaim, as well as the weight of responsibility, was increased as Russia did not have a longstanding literary tradition as compared to the rest of Western Europe. Dostoevsky and his peers, Turgenev and Tolstoy, were still very much in the process of crafting a national literature, a process that began with the likes of Karamzin, Pushkin, and Gogol, as well as making the argument that the development of such a Russian literature could constitute a

meaningful addition to the greater world. For this reason, much of Dostoevsky's work is preoccupied with the discovery of what it means to be a true Russian in a time of great flux while simultaneously acknowledging heritage<sup>1</sup>. Russia had only relatively recently been opened up to the West, aggressively adapting European customs and culture including literature. This rapid cultural assimilation created a unique intellectual viewpoint that acknowledges the fluidity of human experience. The landscape of the literary scene is beautifully described by Gary Morson in the Preface to *A Writer's Diary*:

The result was a sense of the radical arbitrariness of cultural norms: customs and values evidently could be otherwise because they had just been so. Manners, political institutions, literary forms, and, for that matter, all moral norms, easily seemed to be nothing more than mere conventions, alterable at will. Those who thought this way sought opportunities to defy conventions, play with them, invert them, or seek ways of doing away with them altogether... And once the conventions of anarchism, nihilism, and extremism had been established, it became a point of national pride to extend them (xxii).

This propensity towards extremism and the embracing of the ever-changing and uncertain world allows Russian writers to create the compelling, believable characters that make the field so beloved.

Much has been made of Dostoevsky's evolving personal Christianity. Joseph Frank notes of Dostoevsky in his exhaustive biography that significantly before his return from banishment in Siberia, the author's religion "had been dedicated to the improvement of life on earth; now this aim, without being abandoned, became overshadowed by an awareness of the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance *A History of Russia, the Soviet Union, and Beyond* (497-506)

hope of eternity as a mainstay of moral existence” (xv). Ultimately, Dostoevsky strives to reconcile and ultimately celebrate individual agency and experience with an omnipotent and all-knowing Godhead. Dostoevsky argues, implicitly and explicitly, that negating human free will would necessarily diminish the mightiness or force of God. His conception of morality lies upon the ability of individuals to enact their will upon the world in a meaningful fashion. Frank writes, “His period of imprisonment also convinced him of the need for freedom, particularly the sense of being able to exercise one’s free will, was an ineradicable need of human personality and could express itself even in apparently self-destructive forms” (xv). One of the ways in which the characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* assert their agency is through the action of self-laceration.

Dostoevsky chose to name an entire book in his epic, *The Brother’s Karamozov*, “Lacerations” (Part 2, Book 4). In the greater scope of laceration there stands the topic of self-laceration. It is one thing to cause someone else a form of harm or laceration, but it seems to be quite another to willingly inflict a laceration upon the self, as Dostoevsky emphasizes. English language scholarship has largely overlooked this theme, or at best treated it to only a cursory study, as in Edith Clowes’ article “Self-Laceration and Resentment: The Terms of Moral Psychology in Dostoevsky and Nietzsche.” This is a theme, as are many of those addressed in *Brothers*, which had some significance to Dostoevsky in his continuing discussion of what it meant to have an authentic Russian identity. Self-laceration refers to the practice of causing intentional harm to the self in a premeditated and specifically emotionally destructive fashion. Edith Clowes defines the concept as “essentially a semiconscious conflict between cherished moral ‘ideals,’ for example, love, self-sacrifice, or honesty, and the way they are realized in the complex and contradictory human psyche of the ‘insulted and injured’” (123). The idea typically refers to the making of life choices that the person fully knows will result in misery for

themselves and by extension the people that make the mistake of being emotionally close to, and vulnerable with, them. This intentional self-harm stems from issues springing from a skewed perception of self-worth, especially as informed by societal expectation and conceptions of value. Clowes continues: “inherent in self-laceration is... a projection of one’s own sense of insufficiency onto a person perceived to be more powerful... and a desire to punish that person for one’s own suffering” (123). The function of society in discussing self-laceration relationally needs to be explored in depth as this demonstrates an intersection of the private, inner life with the public, outwardly visible world. Dostoevsky describes something uniquely Russian in this particular balancing of public and private spheres. Furthermore, the propensity towards self-laceration is rooted in a struggle for autonomy and self-direction in a uniquely Russian perception of the world. The struggle in the Russian psyche between viewing the world as fatalistic or as more of an individually determinable experience finds resolution through self-laceration. By consciously choosing actions that will lead to an abject state, these characters are taking fate into their own hands. Consciously choosing unhappiness creates an illusion of agency; they can look back over their lives and say to themselves, “Yes, I knew this was going to happen. I chose this. I have control.”

Although choosing misery in life seems horrible, consider the alternative situation. Struggling for happiness only to fail would either mean that despite one’s best intentions and contrary to all efforts and despite the force of one’s will and intentionality, one was unable to positively affect one’s life. Or the world is actually pre-deterministic and the great force in the world, the prime, God, has determined at the outset that one will be unhappy no matter any desperate struggles toward the reverse. This conflict speaks to the religious doubt and anxiety spreading in the late nineteenth century in Russia. The Orthodox Church had never been weaker



in the lives and minds of the common Russian than at the time of Dostoyevsky's writing; the novel's creation also coincides with a period of great political flux. Though the reformist Tsar, Nicholas II, is attempting to correct some of the wrongdoings of his predecessors, for many of the Russian people these corrections are coming too late to ameliorate the ill will that has festered for so long. The Russian people of Dostoevsky's time have lost faith in the great stabilizing institutions of their forebears, namely the Church and the State<sup>2</sup>. The people are then left to face the major questions of life and responsibility on their own. For many of Dostoevsky's characters, self-laceration seems to offer a modicum of control in an increasingly turbulent and unpredictable world. Such is the case of the two women at the heart of the novel.

The primary women involved in the core plotline of *The Brothers Karamazov* both suffer at the cold hand of a society whose estimation of women is preoccupied by the worship of the image or idea of the perfect, pure, virginal woman whose value only extends to the role of wife and mother, ignoring feminine reality and agency. This societal paradigm negatively effects the self-valuation of both Katerina Ivanovna and Grushenka, who are ruined in the eyes of society at the hands of men. Both Katerina Ivanovna and Grushenka suffer from becoming involved at a vulnerable time with men unworthy of their esteem. Katerina's moment of disintegration is when she must play the supplicant and beg for charity from the sensualist Dmitri Karamazov, in a very real way offering herself to his whim. He cruelly creates a situation which forces her to beg him on her hands and knees for a sum of money in order to save her family's honor. The situation in which her honor is vulnerable comes about in part because of Dmitri's meddling. In order to protect her family, Katerina is forced into a situation in which her own security is jeopardized.

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<sup>2</sup> For more historical information see Jullian W. Connely's *Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov* and Joseph Frank's *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*.

Similar to Katerina's early disintegration, Grushenka suffers at the hands of an unworthy male at a fragile, vulnerable point in her life. When she becomes involved at the age of seventeen with the Polish cavalryman, he seduces her, convinces her to pledge her life to him, and then, without explanation, abandons her. The fact that she gave up one of her only assets as an unprotected lower class woman, her virginity, to the Polish rogue depreciates her worth in a society that values purity. Because she no longer has her virginity, her already desperate situation is made more desperate because she is no longer marriageable, and is forced to seek the protection of the elderly businessman, Samsanov. Fortunately, Grushenka proves to be resilient and capable in the world of business, and becomes independently wealthy, attaining a socially stable existence despite the unenviable position of consort to Samsanov. She trades in the expected female role for the typically male dominated realm of business and is therefore able to express her independence in a societally unexpected way after the loss of her virginity. Instead of taking on the mantle of "ruined woman" and living a life of imposed isolation, Grushenka creates a positive space for herself in defiance of social expectation.

As a cripple and a young woman, Lise is in an extremely disadvantaged position in society. She is an important component of the conversation surrounding self-laceration in that she inhabits a number of positions typically associated with the societal limitations of freewill. Lise is a youth still under the ministrations of her mother, a power relationship that necessarily constricts agency. She is also physically crippled, a condition which limits her physical experience as it does her social. Finally, she is still subject to the force of the patriarchal society that restricts her opportunities as a woman.

As Chapter Two of this thesis will show, their experiences of "ruin" lead these two powerful women to lash out both at each other as well as society in harmful ways. Both women

display a propensity for self-punishment. Both women come to a diminished position, but their struggle to reestablish themselves afterwards result in self-lacerative tendencies that harm themselves as much as the society that has marginalized them.

Social prescription plays heavily into the dynamic of the brothers from *Brothers*. A greater understanding of the complex battle that Dostoevsky is waging between sensualism and intellect can only be achieved in a study devoted to Dmitri and Ivan, the eldest two of Fyodor's sons. These two fit well together, especially following a chapter in which Katerina and Grushenka's unique forms of self-laceration have been dissected. As laceration is so dependent upon relationships, and the relationships between the ladies and the two eldest brothers are in the end some of the most significant in the novel, no study of self-laceration would be complete without examining these two enigmatic forces.

Firstly, Dmitri Karamazov, the ruin of Katerina, lover of Grushenka, and embracer of *Karamazoschina*, the sensualistic appreciation of life, is truly Fyodor Pavlovich's son: entitled, boorish, headstrong, but deep in feeling and wracked with passion. His desire to be recognized as more than the first son of a wretched money lender and his belief that he deserves more than his unfortunate birth has allotted him is a recognizable refrain to any human born to disappointing parents. While Dmitri finds solace in the empty promises of a bottle or up the skirts of a gullible farm girl (though Dostoevsky's own moral sensibilities paired with the tireless censor's efforts would never allow such an explicit suggestion into print) he is longing for something greater. He longs for a heritage which he has already embraced more than his other brothers with whom he does not share a mother. Dmitri's self-laceration lies in the willing refusal to see himself for what he truly is: his father's son. Dmitri's refusal to accept the qualities of his father result directly in the events leading to his father's murder.

Fyodor's second son, Ivan, is an intellectual, absorbed in the world of the mind. There is nothing beyond his capacity for understanding. To Ivan, there certainly is no imperturbable God devising plans for mortals, knowing their fates in advance of their births, knowing which one of the children would in the end be damned to an eternity in hell. Outwardly Ivan believes that the world lies within the realm of human understanding, that misfortune may befall any mortal no matter fate nor destiny. However, Ivan is clearly preoccupied with the eternal. Some part of his nature (maybe he gathered it from his pious mother?) refuses to accept a world lacking the ultimately benevolent God of the Orthodox Church. His constant challenges to the Church and against the Christian faith belie an epic internal struggle in Ivan's psyche that culminates in his lengthy interview with the Devil himself. Ivan's self-laceration, and what ultimately drives him into the deepest throes of sensuality and *Karamazovschina*, is the refusal of his inner belief that there is indeed a God and he does resemble the one worshipped by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The struggle of Dostoevsky's central self-lacerative characters can be understood in terms of Rene Girard's concepts of "mimetic desire." Peter Nichols notes of Girard's work: "the practice of imitation... lay[s] at the heart of that restructuring of social relations which would ultimately generate the aesthetics of modernism" (13). Girard conceptualizes a three pronged model of motivation, "a relation structure centered around subject, model, and object" (14). In mimetic desire, the goal is not the acquisition of the object, but rather the subject's attempt to imitate the model. Mimetic desire can be seen in multiple relationships in *Brothers* such as the relationship between Katerina and Dmitri or in the case of Dmitri, Fyodor, and Grushenka.

Finally, the youngest legitimate Karamazov brother, Alyosha. Although Alyosha is set to be the moralistic protagonist of *Brothers*, his transformation through the novel from saintly monk

to taking on some of the skeptic qualities of his brother Ivan shows a diminishment of religious purity over time. This development paired with Alyosha's perpetual denial of his Karamazov proclivity toward sensuality shade his experience. Conceptualizing Alyosha in a mono-dimensional fashion robs him of piquancy. Dostoevsky carefully crafts nuance in his novels and celebrates ambiguity, saying in *A Writer's Diary*, "Set forth any paradox you please, but do not bring it to a conclusion" (xvi). Avoiding the terminus of an idea, putting complication into seemingly simple situations and characters, is a strength of Dostoevsky's art. Alyosha becomes a living character because of his struggle and imperfections, such as when he forgets to visit Dmitri and in his indifferent treatment of Smerdyakov. The concept of redemption through suffering is core to Dostoevsky's religious views: the fact of Alyosha's mental distress in the climax of the novel does not necessarily equate to a rejection of his religious experiences, but in fact strengthens them through trial which culminates in his serenity in the Epilogue. Alyosha's eschewal of self-laceration reveals further the qualities necessary for the experience in contrast and Dostoevsky simultaneously avoids didacticism.

Alyosha's unwavering faith in Christ and the Russian Orthodox Church frees him from the bondage of seeking a demonstration of agency and free will expressed through self-laceration. He has forsaken his claim to freedom expressed through choice and instead feels as though he has found freedom in faith. Furthermore, his faith is all consuming. Alyosha is described as self-less. Where there is no self, self-laceration cannot occur. While Alyosha finds freedom in the teachings of the Church, his parricidal, illegitimate brother, Smerdyakov, finds freedom in the complete and earnest disavowal of its teachings. Smerdyakov stands as an unevolved egoist in that he has yet to attach his own self-service with the needs of others. Smerdyakov can be seen as stunted in his moral development. His actions are presented as the

logical conclusion of the ideas espoused by Ivan. Smerdyakov is not driven by self-laceration, because his pure egoism in action does not contain the capacity for the emotionality that a self-laceration necessitates.

An experience of self-laceration not only provides a sense of agency in a world that seeks to restrict, but it also necessarily increases the level of a character's worldly suffering. In "Pointless Suffering in *The Brothers Karamazov*" Luigi Pareyson declares, "Suffering is the center of Dostoevski's art, the recurrent theme... Suffering is [according to Dostoevsky] the destiny of mankind and the expiation of a common guilt" (271). Therefore self-laceration serves Dostoevsky's authorial goal, the portrayal of genuine Russian experience moving towards faith-based redemption and expiation through suffering. A study of the self-lacerative tendencies of Dostoevsky's characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* is beneficial to understanding the complicated philosophical problems that the author and his readers are grappling with in their time. The theme of self-laceration touches on a few of the core issues facing nineteenth-century Russia: faith, the role of the Church, State, and society in interior life, as well as free will and agency.

## CHAPTER 2

### ABJECTION OF SELF: WOMEN IN *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*

Russian society in the nineteenth century was largely arranged, like many contemporary Western civilizations, as a patriarchy. In such a restrictive world, feminine agency takes a backseat to concepts such as marriageability and social propriety, both of which have almost always been tied to virginity in Western culture. In this system a woman is denied the same avenues for advancement--education, social opportunity, expectation--as her male peers and is therefore subjected to the whims of a societal construct of femininity preoccupied with denying individuality or agency as these expressions would be deemed rebellious to the norm and therefore dangerous. For the women enmeshed in this construction of oppression, finding a means of expressing their individuality in this stifling environment is problematic. In order to achieve a socially acceptable level of security, these women must conform to society's expectations, which do not allow for any latitude. Susan Bordo writes that the ideal nineteenth-century lady had the qualities of "delicacy and dreaminess, sexual passivity, and a charmingly liable and capricious emotionality" (2243). She suggests that the compunction towards hysteria in the Victorian era can be viewed as, "an exaggeration of stereotypically feminine traits" (Bordo 2243). By emphasizing through dramatic expression these feminine traits, which have been forced upon these women by the same social constructions as have long been used to subjugate, Dostoevsky's female characters reclaim a space of female power. Although this space is arguably not one of positive power, these women assert themselves by managing the degree of feminine expression, those qualities that are the very tools of their bondage. By managing the expression of expected qualities of the ideal lady of their time, by subverting the expectations of the society in Skotoprigonyevsk, Katerina Ivanovna, Lise Hohlakov and Grushenka fashion a

position of positive power from the precarious social environment that they find themselves in. With limited options available to them, these women exercise their agency by carefully managing the small space that the patriarchy has allowed, chiefly some choice in relationships and their interior, emotional life.

Dostoevsky is unique in the way he treats the women in his novel. Frank Seeley observes that, “For Dostoyevsky sex is not sin (but only the abuse of sex); falling in love is not a lyrical flight into the empyrean nor, in the great novels, a major theme of his art” (299). As the critic suggests, the women in Dostoevsky’s works in general and in *The Brothers Karamazov* in particular do not view relationships through rose-colored glasses. Relationships instead represent one of the very few places in which they are afforded a level of agency. Relationships are sublimated to the greater imperative of asserting control in a society which affords women few other means of action.

The naming conventions utilized by Dostoevsky throughout *The Brothers Karamazov* instruct the reader immediately as to the women’s relative standing in society. Katerina Ivanovna is regularly referred to rather properly using both her first and patronymic names by the majority of her acquaintances. The unidentified narrator uses this naming convention as well. The formal manner of address belies a certain level of respect for this well-born and virginal woman. Conversely, Agrafena Alexandrovna Svetlov is chiefly referred to in the novel by a diminutive of the familiar form of her first name, Grushenka. This indicates an elevated level of familiarity as well as a level of disrespect when utilized by those that only know her superficially or through another. The narrator falls into this category and so do most of the other characters in the novel. Grushenka is also regularly referred to as a “beast” or “creature” (*Brothers* 127, 132, 163) and as a “shameless hussy” (*Brothers* 126) even by those that admire and desire her. The man that she



runs to in the climax of the novel, her first lover and the cause of so many of her problems, cannot even pronounce her name correctly. Being fundamentally unable or unwilling to say her name correctly demonstrates a lack of respect for her that lies at the very root of her disintegration. Finally, Lise Hohlakov is referred to by first name by the majority of the characters in the novel. Lise is unique because she is quite a bit younger than the other two women in the novel, and society diminishes her to first name familiarity because as a paraplegic young woman, society is triply disinclined to acknowledge her as a worthwhile individual, hence the familiar address. She is not to be taken seriously. The difference between the relative respectability of these three women in the eyes of society stems from the disparity of social capital that the women are born into. All of these women come to inhabit a diminished position, but their struggle to reestablish or assert themselves results in self-lacerative tendencies that expresses a degree of agency as well as wreaking harm on themselves as much as upon the society that has marginalized them. The three women come from different social classes and therefore their societally driven disintegrations come from different sources and their self-lacerations manifest in various ways.

Katerina Ivanovna is the wealthiest and most socially secure of Dostoevsky's self-lacerative ladies. Her moment of disintegration occurs when she must play the supplicant and beg for charity from the sensualist Dmitri Karamazov, in a very real way offering herself to his whim. He creates a situation which forces her to beg him on her hands and knees for a sum of money in order to save her family's honor. The situation in which her honor is vulnerable and therefore open to question comes about in part because of Dmitri's meddling. In order to protect her family, Katerina is forced into a situation in which her own security is jeopardized. Dmitri orchestrates the scene as a mode of retaliation against Katerina, who held herself aloof from him,

failing only to give off the appearance of invitation or warmth in his presence. That this small supposed slight is met with so much open hostility speaks to the power of male perception and expectation as a negative force in the female experience of the time. The eldest Karamazov brother's weakness of character leads him to take revenge for his perceived slight. This small act of petty vengeance in effect alters Katerina's life dramatically and subsequently sets in motion the murder which shapes the core plot in *Brothers*. Because of the immoral bond that is forged at this moment, Dmitri comes to such an agitated state that he contemplates, and then is ultimately framed for, the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich.

Dmitri initially treats Katerina in a callous fashion. He forces her into a submissive role and exalts himself into a position of dominance through his underhanded ploy. He even contemplates raping her, but attempts to excuse his horrible thought by declaring, "My first idea was a- Karamazov one... At that moment she was beautiful because she was noble, and I was a scoundrel... Understand, I should have gone to her the next day to ask for her hand, so that it might end honorably, so to speak" (*Brothers* 99-100) Dmitri is striving towards a sense of superiority. The drive is fueled by a fear of inadequacy. His self-perception of inadequacy is well founded in his social immobility, his incapability of obtaining financial stability, his fundamental lack of appreciation for the value of money, and his shiftless sense of purpose. However, a marital match with Katerina would bequeath an elevated social standing for Dmitri as she comes from a relatively respectable and wealthy family, especially in comparison with his own. In Katerina's eyes, being forced to petition charity from such a base man constitutes a fundamental failure of self and furnishes ample evidence that the world must be unjust and is inherently cruel. As the daughter of a colonel, Katerina could have expected a relatively comfortable life replete with social options and a level of comfort and mobility. This seemingly secure future is the

foundation upon which Katerina develops her self-identity. Dmitri literally robs her of her future by abasing her. In turn, she becomes intimately involved with his future in an unhealthy way.

Katerina Ivanovna is described as a proud, confident woman before meeting Dmitri. Juxtaposed with the Katerina of late in the action of *The Brothers Karamazov*, early Katya comes off as haughty and too proud to be terribly relatable or to evoke very much sympathy from the reader. Early Katerina is self-assured and in control, “a person of character, proud and really high-principled; above all, she had education and intellect” (97). An understanding of her early demeanor must be tempered by the knowledge that we get this perspective from Dmitri, who conversely, possesses none of Katerina’s positive qualities. The moment that she relinquishes her own agency by putting herself at the mercy of Dmitri she suffers a fundamental shift in personality. Her independence is a core pillar upon which the rest of her identity has been constructed. The strong and independent Katya gives way to a Katya wholly constructed upon the shifting sands of Karamazov happiness. She offers herself to the eldest brother Karamazov saying, “I will be your chattel... Allow me to be your carpet” (102). The jarring divide between Katerina’s initial indifference, her righteous anger at the situation into which he places her, and then this complete adulation is alarming and suggestive of a complicated mental process. Clowes writes in regards Katerina’s state: “she wants in equal parts to sacrifice herself for Dmitri’s salvation and to hurt him. In this inner moral contradiction, the genuine desire to enact high moral values and the equally strong urge to use them to do harm embody the essence of the moral dilemma in self-laceration” (123).

Katya recognizes Dmitri’s capacity for self-destructive behavior and chooses to enable him towards his own disintegration. Retroactive and self-inflicted revenge would be poetic as it mirrors the circumstances of her father’s death. Both her father and Dmitri suffer from

circumstances involving money and its easy and unlawful gain. If she is the orchestrator of an elaborate scheme of revenge it is important to determine if she is cognizant of her role or if she is driven by a subconscious desire to position herself in a fashion such that she may enable Dmitri to cause himself irreparable harm. The maintenance of a romantic relationship entails a close physical proximity, allowing her to observe and drive Dmitri's inevitable destruction. Furthermore, this is an example of self-laceration as she has conceptualized much of her adult life as revolving around Dmitri. She has declared, after all, that he is her master and in a unique position to dispose of her as he will. If Katya successfully removes Dmitri from the picture, then she deprives herself of the very framework on which her identity and sense of purpose has been constructed. Dmitri undermines any possibility of an idyllic existence by creating a situation in which her father's good name is threatened, resulting in the father's attempted suicide and untimely passing due to the stress and anxiety of his fiduciary indiscretion. Dmitri is also the one who apparently delivers her from this dire situation, and though she detects his base nature, she throws her life into his hands.

Many people see the senselessness of her actions. Madame Hohlakov declares "They are ruining their lives for no reason that anyone can see. They both recognize and revel in it" (163). In this instance she is referring to Katerina as well as Ivan Karamazov, who are truly in love with each other. This indicates that the self-lacerative compunction exists in masculine experience as well, which will be addressed later in the chapter concerning Ivan. However Ivan has many Byronic qualities, one of which aides him in his astute observation of Katerina that "She revenged with me and on me all of the insults which she has been continually receiving from Dmitri... believe me Katerina Ivanovna, you really love him. And the more he insults you, the more you love him- that's your 'laceration.' ... But you need him so as to contemplate

continually you heroic fidelity and to reproach him for infidelity” (173). Ivan’s declaration belies the true nature of Katerina Ivanovna’s relationship with Dmitri. It is actually a destructive expression of her own ego. In a discussion on moral ambiguity in Dostoevsky’s work, R.M. Davison makes the assertion that the writer, “makes an assault on the view that reason can somehow explain or elucidate necessary values. According to him, the only values there are, are those that the individual decision-maker creates by exercising his free will” (314-5). Katerina is not a flippant woman, so her seemingly nonsensical behavior bears more scrutiny. By throwing herself at the whim of Dmitri Karamazov, she is choosing emotional destruction. She is exercising her will, demonstrating her agency in a society that is aligned against it and simultaneously managing to punish herself in the process for her perceived lack. Katerina’s chosen method of self-laceration is triply effective in that it satisfies her desire for suffering, demonstrates her agency in defiance of fatalistic patriarchy, and enacts a unique manifestation of vengeance on her tormentor. Furthermore, one may find in her eschewal of Ivan a continuation of her self-lacerative behavior. Katerina loves Ivan, he is a good match for her, and the fact is apparent to even the somewhat oblivious Madame Hohlakov, who cries out, “it’s lacerating; it’s like some incredible tale of horror. They are ruining their lives for some reason that no one can see. They both recognize it and revel in it” (163). Ivan’s brother Alyosha, ever sensitive to the emotional, intuitively, “Katerina Ivanovna was in love with Ivan, and only deceived herself through some sort of pose, from ‘self-laceration,’ and tortured herself by her pretended love for Dmitri from some fancied duty of gratitude” (168). Finally, Katerina’s actions at the trial, such as initially withholding damning evidence and then coming forward with it, as well as her actions after, refusing to visit Dmitri in jail and then deciding to reconcile with him and plot his escape, continue to demonstrate a self-lacerative tendency towards emotional harm. This self-

involvement at the expense of another, and aggression in the manipulation of society towards self-destruction, is mirrored in Grushenka's relations.

Grushenka creates a positive space for herself in defiance of social expectation. She does this through a mastery of the world of business and finance, which is doubly compelling as these spheres are typically relegated to the masculine world. Grushenka subverts society by not simply disappearing into obscurity in the wake of losing her virginity, which would conveniently keep her out of the social eye and in a state of self/society imposed penance, but she also subsumes the role of upwardly mobile socialite by producing some social capital that she was not ever expected to have, that is monetary wealth. By the accident of birth into a lower social order, she was allotted only her virginity as social capital. When she loses this, according to society, she should have been out of the game; however, she generates capital that society is unable to ignore or deny. Her business acumen, fertilized by her association with the shrewd Samsanov, enables her to accumulate enough actual capital that society is forced to deal with her. The possession of wealth is more important than any social rules or systems of othering. Furthermore, her implied sensuality and the self-awareness of her diminished place leads her to the exhibition of a transgressive demeanor which is received with a mix of repulsion and attraction by polite society. However, though she does have a level of new and hard-earned power in society, she is not free from its effects on her own conception of self-worth.

Grushenka's self-laceration expresses her underlying lack of perceived social value in the wake of the loss of her virginity and abandonment by the seemingly worthy cavalryman. Grushenka has been informed by society for her entire life that her virginal purity is her most valuable asset as she is of low birth and therefore trapped in her social class. In a flight of youthful fancy, she gives up this asset and is left without the beneficial marriage she hoped for.

This leaves her bitter and angry, ready to lash out against the society that has damaged her so personally. Part of her reaction and punishment of society is the sowing of discord amongst the men of Skotopritonvyesk, especially between Fyodor Pavlovich and his son Dmirti Fyodoryvich. Her capricious toying with the emotions of these two men plays into the situation in which the main event of *Brothers*, the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich, may take place. Because Russian society has attempted to push her into a submissive role it can understand, Grushenka pushes back with her feminine wiles, placing the Karamazov men into the submissive role of groveling amour. However, neither Karamazov man is actually a sound decision for Grushenka as the eldest is a boor and his son is little better, but infinitely more impoverished. Grushenka's constant flirtation with unworthy men is the primary expression of her self-laceration.

The clearest illustration of Grushenka's willful self-laceration is in her decision to rush to the Polish cavalryman that disappointed her expectations five years prior, setting into motion her spiral of self-destruction that extends to destroy the lives of many others. This man has already proven to be unworthy of her attention, but on some level she believes that she deserves to be unhappy with the scoundrel she already knows. This is tied to her losing her virginity to him and a deep seated impression gleaned from society that her sexuality should be wrapped up in systems of property and ownership within the confines of marriage, the ultimate expression of social blessing for a woman of lower birth. Grushenka appears to accept these social values and attempts to diminish herself, a self-lacerative endeavor, to conform to these expectations when she meets the cavalryman in Mokroye. Grushenka is saved from this situation by an unusually gallant Dmitri, who addresses her on her own terms and does not desire for her to diminish or change herself to suit his whims.

The scene of Katerina and Grushenka's initial meeting in the former's house is full of tension as these two similar women, vying for the attentions of the same man for very different reasons, engage in a coquettish duel. Grushenka walks away from this meeting as the victor largely because she is the most withholding of her intentions. She refuses to reveal her motivations, as opposed to Katerina who plainly states her desires, for Grushenka to relinquish her grip on Dmitri and accept the Polish officer. Displaying her hand to Grushenka allows the "bestial" woman to sow more disorder in polite society by impolitely refusing to reciprocate Katerina's affectionate kiss upon her hand. She also rejects Katerina's proposal in a way that parallels Dmitri's base desire to refuse Katerina the use of the money to save her family. The difference between these two situations is that Grushenka acts upon this impulse and Dmitri overcomes his lower compulsion. Both of these rejections, the real and the imagined, are predicated upon forcing the rejectee into an inferior position of their own creation. Dmitri fantasizes saying, "*You've* been counting your chickens too easily" (100, my emphasis) and Grushenka states plainly, "I didn't give you my word to do that. It was *you* kept talking about that" (134, my emphasis). Putting the fault for the fabricated miscommunication squarely on Katerina lowers her position in the encounter by suggesting that she has been foolishly hasty and assumptive.

Katerina has a comparatively plain manner of communication as well, but this depends on whom she is speaking with at any given time. For instance, with the initial encounter with Dmitri in which she must ask him for the money to save her family, she plainly asks for it outright without any posturing or insinuation, which mirrors her plain speaking with Grushenka. Both instances of Katerina's plain dealing are met with derision or dismissal. This seems to suggest that the most effective way for Katerina to communicate with the other members of her



society is in the double-dealing, convoluted way that she deals with Ivan. Grushenka frequently has an ulterior motive behind her words, though this can be forgiven as a survival tactic developed through a lifetime of marginalization. Alyosha is immediately perturbed by her manner of speech; “he wondered with an unpleasant sensation... why she drawled in that way and could not speak naturally.” He goes on to note that her “manner of speaking [was] almost incredibly incongruous with the childishly simple and happy expression of her face” (133). Her look of simplicity is an affectation, more armor against the society that is determined to diminish her identity as a strong, independent woman. She is able to gain entry into people’s inner spheres through this charade and then can wreak havoc on polite society with her cunning and manipulation. Katerina, as a respectable woman, does not have to resort to this extended charade in order to perform her lacerative functions upon society. Her determination to wallow in her own romantic martyrdom is effectively punitive for her satisfaction and in effect localizes the damage done upon society. Because of this, Grushenka’s laceration is more broad, but no less personal, and Katerina’s is more focused but no less intense. Both women suffer abjection at the hands of society, and both find a way to bring their inner turmoil to bear on the outer world.

The next time that both of the women are in the same room with one another is at the trial when Katerina extracts her terrible revenge on the newly reconciled couple of Grushenka and Dmitri. Katerina produces a damning letter of Dmitri’s that plainly states his intention to murder his father. Though she doesn’t believe Dmitri’s guilt herself, her letter suggests his guilt and helps condemn him to Siberia. She produces this evidence only after Dmitri’s brother, Ivan, has testified that he should be taken into custody and not the eldest brother, doing so in a dramatic fashion, essentially nailing closed the coffin of the prosecutor’s case. In one outburst she protects

her true love, Ivan, and completes her vengeance on his brother Dmitri and by extension repays Grushenka for her earlier slight.

At the end of the novel, Alyosha convinces Katerina to pay Dmitri a visit. She acquiesces in yet another example of self-laceration. She goes to Dmitri and they reminisce about the past in a blatantly painful fashion. At the end of their interview, Katya plainly states “I have forgotten that I came here to punish myself” (709). The importance of this moment to Katerina’s development is signaled in a passage by Frank Seeley:

If the martyr and sinner seek to defile and destroy themselves unconsciously in order to punish the first, forgotten betrayer of their love, the proud (at least, the aggressively proud) torment others in order, superficially, to relieve but, at a deeper level, to intensify their own inner torments. They are at odds with themselves, torn between conflicting 'selves'; and as in a country racked by factions and dissensions rulers may sometimes seek to achieve a kind of unity by conjuring up an external enemy to be hated or even attacked, so Aglaya and the other 'proud pagans' seek to still their self-doubt, self-contempt or self-hate by their caprices, mockeries and rages. (302-3)

In this passage, Seeley is not discussing Katerina or Grushenka specifically, but a type of woman that Dostoevsky is prone to create and is key to the final understanding of the two women. Using the work of Gizetti, Seeley notes that Dostoevsky creates “proud pagans” and “meek martyrs,” but complicates the classification by noting fluidity between the two groups and further dividing the author’s heroines into those of stable personality construction and those that are moving towards or are already in a state of fragmentation. “Proud pagans” are conscious of their sins and do not diminish them in their mind and will not do so for the sake of propriety. As a pair of “proud pagans” that Seeley identifies as suffering from a schism of personality, an identification

that neither woman chose for herself but had foisted upon her by uncaring, patriarchal society, both Katerina and Grushenka through various means intensify their own suffering as well as society's (301-3).

When the two women have their final accidental encounter in the jail as they pass one another, Katya pleads to Grushenka to forgive her for such terrible vindictiveness saying, "Forgive me!" Grushenka's reply places both women firmly within the sisterhood of self-laceration, saying "in a vindictive, venomous voice... 'We are full of hatred, my girl, you and I! We are both full of hatred! As though we could forgive one another,'" (709-10). There is a palpable amount of hatred between the two women. This hatred extends beyond that of two rival lovers of the same man. At the end of the novel it is debatable if either of the women have actually loved Dmitri, though the suggestion is that Grushenka has finally come around to committing her life to the convict. Their unique and intense hatred smacks of a deep-seated hatred of the self. There is a recognition between the two women of their self-lacerating qualities, and both women in the end are horrified by who they see staring back at them in the mirror of the other.

Lise Hohlakov, while not as central to the driving murder plot as her fellow lacerative ladies, Grushenka and Katerina, allows Dostoevsky to accomplish more thematically by expanding his exploration into troubled youth. Dostoevsky's preoccupation with the experience of the very young has often been noted; for example, as Seeley observes, the portrayal of children is much richer in Dostoevsky's work than of his contemporaries (294). As a paraplegic, the already abject young Lise is further diminished by her handicap. The fragility of her station in society is enhanced by her complete reliance upon her mother. Her reduced ability to engage in an exterior life also creates within her an advanced interior life. The reader is treated to her

hopes and dreams in her own words. Katharine Briggs argues that, “This links her to Dostoevsky’s other female characters who dream, and also to modern girls who find emotional release through self-inflicted physical pain. This gives her character a contemporary application” (250). Lise demonstrates her capacity for self-harm dramatically in her final appearance in the novel. After a conversation with Alyosha which underscores her internal conflict, an irresistible attraction towards darkness and evil with a simultaneous love of life and purity, Lise crushes her finger in a doorjamb while muttering under her breath, “I am a wretch, wretch, wretch, wretch!” (*Brothers* 543) which are her final words in the novel. Interestingly, throughout the final chapter in which she appears, “A Little Devil” she makes many declarative statements such as “I want to do evil... I want to destroy myself” and sympathizes with a criminal who crucifies a child to watch it die. Speaking of her destructive desires, she fantasizes, “I would go up and they would censure me and I would burst out laughing in their faces” (539-43). Lise relates this fantasy after asking Alyosha about God and the afterlife, so it is striking that she sees those that would censure her and receive in turn her mocking laughter as plural, “they” and not singular, the Godhead. Her use of the plural indicates that it is not God which is the sole target of her derision, but in fact society at large. By choosing self-harm and declaring her love for “disorder” (539) she is reacting against society that holds her in bondage by the fact of her gender, youth, and disability. Crushing her finger is one component of this rebellion to the social order which holds her abject. Her declaration, “I should like some one to torture me, marry me, and then torture me, deceive me and go away. I don’t want to be happy” (539), indicates additionally the capacity for emotional destruction, that is, emotional self-laceration.

The fact that Lise imagines her emotional self-laceration coming of fruition by way of marriage continues the theme in *Brothers Karamazov* of women achieving a degree of harm

through purposefully poor decisions in regards romantic connections with men. Grushenka and Katerina Ivanovna achieve a degree of self-punishment through the seemingly flippant creation and dissolution of ties to men. Lise continues this pattern of self-laceration in the renunciation of her betrothal to Alyosha, whom she has loved since a very young child, in favor of the more worldly and skeptical older brother Ivan. Her innocence makes her naturally drawn to the youngest and most spiritual of the brothers, Alyosha, whom she loves and later hates with the tumultuous passions of youth. These same rapidly shifting passions are reflected in her draw towards the intellectual Ivan. Her selection of Ivan is troubling because Lise's intense feelings are not returned in the least by Ivan who "despises" the young girl (540) and rips up the note that she gave Alyosha to deliver to him (557). Her preferment of an unsuitable and unreciprocating romantic interest over one who inspires mutual affection is a pattern echoed in Grushenka's temporary selection of the Pole and Katerina's devotion to Dmitri.

The pattern of selecting a partner as a form of self-laceration manifests because through the distribution of affection these women find one of their only opportunities to assert agency in their lives. Society has stripped them of many of the opportunities that it has afforded their male interests, but one of the last places in which their will may be exercised is in the selection of a man. As a tool of rebellion against a pre-deterministic life and a society which only views these women as potential partners for men, the purposeful selection of volatile or unsuitable men stands as a defiant expression of feminine power. By denying the socially prescribed ideal of female experience in the foundational subversion of partner selection, these women find a way to express their dissatisfaction with the system.

Katerina, Grushenka, and Lise express their dissatisfaction with their lot in life in a way that is emotionally destructive. The harm that they cause themselves is great, but as destruction is

a prerequisite for creation, the redemption and renewal of two of these women suggest that self-laceration can lead to a positive place in the wake of suffering and abjection. The end of the novel finds Katerina taking care of the enfeebled Ivan and reconciling with the imprisoned Dmitri. She is able to care for the one she loves, and as an expression of that love has even agreed to oversee the escape of the man she helped put into prison. Furthermore, Grushenka is saved by the final acceptance of Dmitri's love and is even prepared to follow him to Siberia to help ease his time and take up his mission of spreading the love and goodness of Christ. These women have suffered greatly, but by the end of the novel have been transformed by their self-laceration and are able to find a level of security and peace. Only Lise is left out of this cycle of redemption. As she is still a youth, perhaps her self-laceration does not reach the tipping point towards redemption within the confines of the novel, or perhaps an experience of self-laceration does not always necessarily culminate in expiation. By leaving Lise's narrative unresolved, Dostoevsky makes the plight of self-lacerative women ambiguous, affording readers the agency to draw their own conclusions.

### CHAPTER 3

#### “AM I MY BROTHER’S KEEPER?” DMITRI AND IVAN’S SELF-LACERATION IN *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*

Self-laceration involves a high degree of emotionality. It is necessarily personal and internal, but the effects of self-laceration ripple outward and touch the lives of others as human beings are social creatures and one life touches many. Dostoevsky’s awareness of the interconnected nature of human experience shines through in much of his work. The question of degree of responsibility for fellow man pervades *The Brothers Karamazov* with several different characters in several different situations posing throughout the novel various iterations of the same question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” It is significant that all of these characters pose this question about Dmitri. Pyotr Illyich, a friend of Dmitri’s who first suspects that Dmitri may have murdered his father, asks his conscience multiple times, “Am I his nurse?” (458) but the two characters that use the word “brother” specifically in the phrase are first Smerdyakov and then Ivan and both in reference to Dmitri. This biblical question, Cain’s response to God after an inquiry into his brother, Abel’s, whereabouts, draws together the themes of brotherhood, betrayal, and responsibility for others. Dmitri is set up throughout the entire novel to take the fall for his father’s death. He does himself no favors in this regard, as he declares his intention to commit parricide multiple times and physically assaults his father. Dmitri is set up throughout the novel to be Cain. The jury decides he is the murderer of a close family member and is marked, othered, in the eyes of society much like Cain is cast away from God’s presence. This is not, however, Dmitri’s fate. Dmitri does not finally commit the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich and manages to attain redemption and an elevation from his diminished state through his experience with self-laceration and the expiating suffering that the experience entails.

While Ivan suffers arguably the greatest degree of disintegration from his guilt driven self-laceration, the eldest brother Karamazov appears by the end of the novel to have turned towards a more spiritual outlook. Dmitri turns from the deepest throes of sensualism to being willing, eager even, to suffer banishment to Siberia for a crime he did not commit. Thereby he hopes to attain a state of expiation for the entire world through the selflessness of his action. The selfless, willing sacrifice of innocent blood, in this case Dmitri's vital essence, is necessary for the absolution of the world's sins. Luigi Pareyson notes the ambiguity central to personal suffering, which specifically "in the case of Dmitri, can be a longing for atonement, a longing which is part of the Russian experience of Christianity or of its direct opposite, a spurious and unwholesome masochism" (271). I believe that by mentioning masochism specifically Pareyson is referencing the self-lacerative path that Dmitri has embarked upon that culminates in a situation where Dmitri can be saved by the release of those destructive tendencies. From the ashes of self-lacerative emotional destruction may spring a new Dmitri who has been metamorphosed from base Karamazovian sensuality into a man who is eager to sacrifice himself for the chance to save even one starving babe. After Dmitri has been convicted of murdering his father, a crime for which he is completely innocent, he dreams of a child starving and freezing to death in Siberia. When he awakes, he is convinced that to go to Siberia and willingly suffer punishment for a crime he did not commit will result in good. Pareyson writes, "The suffering of the child in Dmitri's dream embodies the pointless suffering of the whole world" and later, "Our solidarity in guilt and suffering is the only road by means of which we can redeem the suffering of others" (280). In Dmitri's love-fuelled transformation away from a self-lacerative life experience, the positive power of a seemingly categorically negative experience emerges.



Dmitri's late concern with the redemption of the world's sin through his own suffering stands in marked contrast with the Dmitri of early in the novel. Though Dmitri has the largest open conflict with his father of the brothers, he is the most alike to Fyodor Pavlovich. Both the father and Dmitri are relentless womanizers and sensualists. The biggest difference between the two in the beginning of the novel is that the former's miserly money sense has appeared in the latter as a sense of entitlement. Their similarities extend to the desire for the same woman, Grushenka, the attainment of whom frames the most repeated, and for Dmitri the most immediate, opportunities for hostility. Seeley notes: "We see him capable of devoted, even chivalrous love... Admittedly, there is in Mitya's sensuality a streak of excess and a streak of obsession; but, from his infancy up, he had been starved of affection, and such starvation is apt to engender such avidity: in a happy marriage Mitya has every chance of achieving a more normal emotional range and balance" (123).

Dmitri's self-laceration is expressed in much the same way as the women's, which is in the purposeful selection of an unsuitable romantic mate. Also, much like the female's experience of self-laceration, his reason for self-laceration is fueled by deeply held feelings of inadequacy that finds its genesis in Fyodor Pavlovich's rejection of his son at an early age. The calloused abandonment of his son is only the first transgression of the father against Dmitri. The second is the father's allowing Dmitri to believe that one day he would come into a great sum of money and achieve a level of financial security. Maintaining Dmitri's "vague and exaggerated idea of his property" and taking advantage of the fact that Dmitri is "frivolous, unruly, of violent passions, impatient and dissipated" (7), Fyodor Pavlovich strings his eldest son along for as long as possible until Dmitri is forced, in aggravation, to come to Skotoprigonyevsk to collect the

large inheritance he believes he is due. In a sense, this homecoming makes possible all of the other central plot developments.

As discussed in the chapter concerning the women of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dmitri has an incredible opportunity for a level of upward social mobility and financial stability from his involvement with Katerina Ivanovna. No matter the abjection he visits upon her in order to secure her unwavering idolatry, his best bet for a secure future lies in accepting her gift of love. Ever the self-lacerator, Dmitri instead casts all of his romantic endeavors in with the volatile Grushenka who can offer him none of the pecuniary or social security that Katerina can. His longing for and monomaniacal pursuit of Grushenka is a major expression of Dmitri's laceration.

In his romantic pursuit of Grushenka, Dmitri also finds a place of immediate conflict with his father, Fyodor Pavlovich, that doesn't directly involve money. Paul Friedrich extrapolates that the struggle for Grushenka's attentions "is the immediate, or if you will, the efficient cause of incest- father and son competing for and potentially sharing one woman, and from that, of murder, parricidal murder" (51). In Dmitri's mind, the imagined contest for Grushenka's affection is a battle that he has the chance of winning, thereby finally establishing once and for all his supremacy over his father who he blames for his many failings. It is an imaginary contest because it only exists in the minds of the two combatants. At no point is Grushenka really torn between the Karamazov men as Friedrich notes that her relationship with Fyodor is as a "mistress of deceit" (50). Grushenka's affections are hers to give and will not be forced into materialization such as in Dmitri's prior experience with Katerina Ivanovna. This only serves to increase the value of her esteem in Dmitri's mind. Her unattainability, despite her depiction by many of the citizens of Skotoprigonyevsk as barely above the level of street prostitute, fuels the fires of desire in Dmitri and exponentially increases his jealousy towards his father's so called

courtship. Dmitri becomes further distressed with the realization that his father is able to speak in the language of money, a powerful tongue that he does not have ready access to. Grushenka has already demonstrated a predilection for money over devotion in her suspect relationship with Kuzma Samsonov. As devotion is the only way that Dmitri can show her the sincerity of his affection, his agitation reaches new heights until he is able to “borrow” a sum of money from Katerina Ivanovna and influence Grushenka to love “him for almost a whole hour” in the town of Mokroye (*Brothers* 134). This is the moment when Dmitri discovers Grushenka’s preferred symbol of adulation.

In the end, Dmitri suffers a considerable blow to his self-conception of honor by using the last of the money he received from Katerina Ivanovna to throw a fete for Grushenka without any ready way to pay it back. In his mind, this makes Dmitri a low thief and therefore completely devoid of honor. He wants to spend one last night with Grushenka in Mokroye after which he contemplates taking his own life as the sun rises instead of facing the dishonor of the thief and returning to Katerina completely empty handed. His seemingly nonsensical actions can be understood with an understanding of Dostoevsky’s unique psychology of passionate crime as elucidated by Morson. Tracking Dostoevsky’s crime reporting in *A Writer’s Diary*, Morson suggests that with passionate crime in the author’s work “the intention is never complete or wholly present; there is no single moment of decision we can locate... Instead, such intentions may be *genuinely processual* and always incomplete” (XLII). Dmitri’s self-laceration has him constantly living in the very edge of action, disinclined towards reflection and incognizant of consequence. He is trapped in the present by the depth of his feelings, incapable of learning from and constantly hounded by the past. He is equally unwilling to reasonably look into the future.

Dmitri inhabits the untenable precipice of presence and for the majority of the novel it appears that the tipping point into complete disintegration will be the murder of his father.

He is saved from this tragic end by the final reciprocation of Grushenka's love. Dmitri's self-inflicted suffering has reached an untenable fever-pitch by the time he follows her to Mokroye and is finally relieved and absolved of his self-laceration by the reciprocal love of Grushenka. Friedrich acknowledges Grushenka's powerful position: "She can cause homicidal and suicidal despair, but also ecstatic joy and hope, the only character whose redemption is unambiguous but who also redeems: just as Alyosha says, 'You have restored my soul,' so Dmitri says much later on: 'I took all her soul into my soul and through her became a human being (chelovek)'" (51). Dmitri's suffering through the self-laceration of pursuit is finally abated in the moment he has most surrendered any hope of redemption. He forsakes his own self and in doing so leaves room for Grushenka in the possibility of a relationship. Prior to this moment, Dmitri is too consumed with his own self-laceration for there to be any emotional equality between the two passionate persons. By sacrificing his deeply held conceptions of self and approaching an experience of abnegation he is purified of the self-laceration and finally deemed worth of Grushenka's whole-hearted romantic attention. Finally he becomes willing to take on the additional suffering he is facing in the form of a lifetime of forced labor in a Siberian mine and relishes the opportunity to raise a cheerful song from within the bowls of the earth.

Dmitri's final redemption is left unexpressed within *The Brothers Karamazov*. By the close of the novel, Dmitri has been convinced by his persuasive brother Ivan to reject resignation to suffering innocently in Siberia and instead to entertain ideas of escape. Dmitri's saintly brother Alyosha, whom he comes to resemble in thought and expression after his redemptive experience in Mokroye, appreciates Dmitri's willingness to suffer for the world, but not without

a level of trepidation, saying “I would not tell you a lie. Listen: you are not ready, and such a cross is not for you. What’s more, you don’t need such a martyr’s cross when you are not ready for it” (*Brothers* 706). However, as Alyosha goes on to express, it is not in this case Dmitri’s actual suffering that has generated this new, spiritual Ivan, but the recognition of its power and willingness to take it on that will provide the model for the “new man” that Dmitri is striving to become. Through self-laceration and the acceptance of suffering, Dmitri can finally be transformed. His soul is free to soar to new heights and his experience of self-laceration has an unequivocally positive outcome that is contrasted by Ivan’s largely negative experience.

Ivan suffers arguably the highest degree of abjection from the expression of his self-lacerative tendencies. By the end of the novel he is indeed left without resolution or redemption. The reader’s last experience of Ivan is as he is under the diligent administrations of Katerina Ivanovna, which creates a stir of scandal in the town of Skotoprigonyevsk as she is an unwed woman. He is a complete invalid, entirely in her care due to the fragmentation and disintegration of his mind from being wracked with guilt. However, Ivan’s self-laceration begins in his childhood. His laceration has always had very much to do with guilt and anger with the father that abandons him and his brothers. The source of his self-laceration differs from others in the novel. His problems are familial and not overtly social in the grander sense. Instead of seeking vengeance against an unjust society, Ivan struggles on a deeply personal level with his relationship to his father.

Late in the novel, Ivan is wrestling with self-imposed guilt involving his complicity in the murder of his father, Fyodor Pavlovich. However, Ivan’s struggle with a different kind of guilt is the force that brings him into his father’s town once more, a town that he has not visited since leaving as a young boy. Ivan is the final brother Karamazov to return to Skotoprigonyevsk and

he only does so at the behest of his eldest brother, Dmitri, in order, or so the narrator posits, to aid him in his ongoing monetary dispute with his father. A relationship with his father is virtually non-existent prior to his return to the town, as Ivan was removed from his father's care and Skotoprigonyevsk at a tender age and raised by an interested benefactor connected to his dead mother.

Frank Seeley paints an exhaustive portrait of the troubled intellectual in "Ivan Karamazov." He notes that for the impressionable young Ivan, "The seeds of his hatred of his father and of all cruelty, and of his revolt against an order of things which gave such fathers unlimited power to inflict such cruelty – were certainly sown in those years" (Seeley 127). After being taken from his father's house, Ivan quickly discovers (he has always been extremely perceptive) that both he and his younger brother Alyosha are being cared for and educated from charity and his father is lecherous, dishonorable, and disinterested in their joint future. Dostoevsky writes of Ivan, "At ten years old he had realized that they were not living in their own home but on other people's charity, and that their father was a man of whom it was disgraceful to speak" (10). The fact that Ivan sees himself as a charitable "burden" seems to lead the young man to abandon the house of his benefactor, Yefim Petrovich, at the age of thirteen and then to secure his own livelihood during his time at university. Ivan's actions indicate an internalization of his father's inadequacy that mutates into the guilt driven compunction to remove himself from the home of the kindly Petrovich and then to provide entirely for himself at an age and in a circumstance that society would not have expected of him. Ivan's reconciliation of the complicated and negative relationship with the father who has impacted so much of his young life is yet another motivating factor in returning to his birthplace in Skotoprigonyevsk.

The narrator documents that Ivan's arrival into his father's house has a dramatic effect on the eldest Karamazov. He records that Ivan doesn't care for drunkenness and debauchery, but that his father can barely exist without it (*Brothers* 12). His presence in the house has a calming effect on the old lecher. Ivan and his father, though very different, appear to get along amicably and in peace. In this way, Ivan is demonstrated to be a long-absent force of calm and goodness in the household. However, he is simultaneously present in his father's house surreptitiously in order to influence Fyodor Pavlovich towards a greater amiability in regards to Dmitri and his never-ending quest for money. The fact that Ivan and his father do not have a relationship to speak of, let alone a positive or healthy one, until Ivan returns to aid Dmitri, someone that Fyodor would regard, and not without justification, as the most mortal of enemies, casts Ivan and Fyodor's relationship as fundamentally founded upon disingenuousness.

In truth Ivan is horrified by his father. Frank Seeley writes that though Dmitri is often foreshadowed as the parricide, "Ivan's loathing and rejection of his father is much more intense than Mitya's, in proportion as the Karamazov elements occupy a greater part of his psyche: Ivan wants his father dead, whereas Mitya only wants to neutralize his rival with Grushenka" (124). Seeley arrives at this conclusion by carefully outlining the diametrically opposed nature of his parents that find expression through his being, that is the "Karamazov earthy passion against Sofya's otherworldliness and passivity, and Sofya's muted rebelliousness against Karamazov licence [sic] and foulness... and aims to transcend both" (125). Ivan is then a complicated cocktail comprised of subverted parental qualities. Ivan's mother is not alive to experience her son's atheism in reaction to her devoutness, but his father will experience his reserved response condemnation to for his Karamazovian licentiousness.

Ivan's visit to his father's house, the first since being taken for his own well-being, also allows him to meet his eldest brother in person for the first time. Dmitri, to the aid of whom Ivan flies, is attempting to extract a sum of three thousand rubles from his selfishly miserly father. To this end, the two eldest Karamazov brothers have been corresponding via post. Dmitri has had a very different life than the one afforded to Ivan and Alyosha. Dmitri was the only brother to grow up believing that he would eventually come into financial security upon reaching the age of independence (*Brothers* 7). Dmitri's gross sense of entitlement, paired with his "irregular boyhood," the perpetual switching of homes and caretakers, as well as his early abandonment by his disinterested father, all work together to place Dmitri in a state of insecurity and emotionally stunted being. Ivan is very perceptive and sensitive to his brother's greatly diminished place and chooses to assist him in acquiring from their father the means of Dmitri's comfort and security. Ivan's decision to assist his brother in secret defiance of his father shows a level of privilege to the concept of brotherly love as superior to paternal devotion. This concept is explored extensively in Anna Berman's "Siblings in *The Brothers Karamazov*."

In her article, Berman makes the compelling argument that one of the central subjects of *The Brothers Karamazov* is the supremacy of fraternal love over paternal love. The former is revealed in a horizontal flow of respect and equal, shared power. The latter is predominantly disposed towards the creation of vertical power paradigms in which power is constantly coalescing at the top. Berman writes, "As the vertical relations between fathers and sons fail, lateral, nonhierarchical sibling bonds offer an alternative model of love, support, and understanding" (263). By making this a central theme of his novel, Dostoevsky acknowledges the vertical system of power that is present in the rule of the tsars and offers an alternative model of power dynamics. Berman discusses "the ideological center of the novel", that is "The Grand



Inquisitor” chapter, as Dostoevsky’s most compelling demonstration of the power of fraternal love (264). The Inquisitor condemns Christ for allowing fallible Man the capacity of free-will as it is too indulgent and too great of a burden. The Inquisitor argues that the patriarchal system of vertical power found in the Catholic Church is a superior expression of love for Man because it relieves Man of the burden of choice and belief. This chapter is related to Alyosha in the form of a hypothetical poem by the skeptic atheist Ivan and constitutes Dostoevsky’s most compelling argument against belief in Christianity. However, though Ivan delivers a compelling argument, Berman notes that Christ seems to win the day when he embraces his captor, the Inquisitor, as a brother and kisses him on the cheek. The next day, instead of immolating Christ, the Inquisitor releases him, conceding the victory to Jesus. For Dostoevsky, the power of brotherly, horizontal love trumps devotion to the father and necessitates Ivan’s return.

One of the ways that Ivan demonstrates his capacity for self-laceration in his complicated relationship with God. Stephen Bullivant places Ivan in the league of Dostoevsky’s “pseudo-atheists” in “A House Divided Against Itself: Dostoevsky and the Psychology of Unbelief” (19). Ivan’s atheistic beliefs form one of the major focuses of the critical discourse surrounding *The Brothers Karamazov* with much speculation on what can be gleaned from Ivan’s beliefs regarding Dostoevsky’s personal religion. Bullivant notes “Ivan’s searing indictment of God is *the* classic expression of the problem of evil in world literature. So convincing is it that- the rest of the novel, and the author’s own declarations notwithstanding- it is often thought that Dostoevsky *must* have agreed” (17). Reading too much authorial biography from an author’s fictional creations is always problematic, but in Dostoevsky’s case, is also largely unnecessary as the writer himself was vociferous and clear on his own evolving, but never wavering, commitment to the Russian Orthodox Church. Ivan’s atheism and the expression of his

intellectual skepticism in the chapters “Rebellion” and “The Grand Inquisitor” are meant to allow Dostoevsky the ability to discuss his greatest problems with the Church, problems that he hoped the rest of his novel would sufficiently address. Regardless of Dostoevsky’s personal religion, Ivan’s disbelief is centered on two central problems: that of the pointless suffering of innocents and children in “Rebellion” and the problem of free-will and the conception of an all-loving God capable of creating a situation in which one of his beloved could find themselves separated from Him and punished for an eternity in Hell as addressed in “The Grand Inquisitor.” Ivan’s implicit declaration that if there is no God, then anything is permissible coupled with these two assertions and the resulting rejection of God entirely are problematic; as Bullivant argues,

[I]f, as Ivan claims, moral values are dependent on God’s permission or prohibition, then not only is belief in God necessary to make a moral complaint against anyone, but the very idea of making a moral complaint against God becomes extremely complicated. The ‘God’ whom Ivan rejects, therefore, must be a false God. And he is only able to reject it because he has an implicit belief in the true one. (26)

His refusal to directly act on his subconscious belief in a higher power, and as an intellectual failing to see the logical fallacy of his assertions, culminate in his experience of self-laceration. Seeley notes of Ivan, “Like Job, he was delivered by God into the hands of Satan... When he rejects God’s world on account of the suffering of little children – it is unconsciously his own sufferings he cannot forgive” (128). The inadequacy he has internalized from Fyodor Pavlovich’s disinterest and carelessness results in his rejection of God. He has been rejected by his earthly father and in turn rejects his heavenly father. In doing so he fails to satisfactorily exact his vengeance as his earthly father is completely indifferent to anyone except himself, and

God remains likewise undiminished. The only destruction that Ivan's actions complete is to his own emotional well-being, which categorizes the problematic relationship as self-lacerative.

Ivan's return to his father is in part inspired by an act of fraternal loyalty in the face of paternal betrayal, but it is mixed with a measure of guilt that has followed him for his whole life. The man that is ultimately responsible for both of these deeply emotional motivations is Fyodor Pavlovich, the father that Ivan views with contempt and disgust. Ivan's deeply rooted hatred for his father make him an easy mark for Smerdyakov, who will later murder Fyodor Pavlovich and in essence frame Dmitri for his deed. Though on the outside Ivan is a cool, collected intellectual, the guilt-driven self-laceration that ultimately fragments his identity after his father's death belies a more tempestuous interior life. As discussed by Marina Kanevskaya, the critical discussion in regards to Ivan and Smerdyakov and the depth of their relationship is rather polarized. Many scholars believe that Ivan develops a powerful teacher-disciple relationship with Smerdyakov that by the end of the novel exerts a terrific influence over the lives of both men. I agree with Kanevskaya that such an extensively developed relationship "does not receive sufficient support from the text (361). This is not to suggest that the two do not begin to develop a form of close relationship, or that Smerdyakov remains completely uninfluenced by said relationship, but merely that Smerdyakov's actions cannot be seen as the fulfillment of Ivan's teachings or instruction. In fact, Ivan realizes quickly a fundamental lack in Smerdyakov as the latter "began to betray a boundless vanity" and notes "There was, in fact, something surprising in the illogicality and incoherence of some of his desires, accidentally betrayed and always vaguely expressed" (*Brothers* 241-2). Ivan distances himself from Smerdyakov as much as possible until after his father is murdered. Ivan's very struggle with the guilt and questioning of the degree to which he is responsible for Fyodor Pavlovich's murder indicate that Ivan at least does not see his and

Smerdyakov's relationship as one between a teacher and a disciple. Ivan's guilt in the matter stems from self-lacerative admonishment and condemnation for his words to Smerdyakov and the extent of their influence on the murder, as well as his abandonment of Skotoprigonyevsk and his father to return to Moscow.

Smerdyakov essentially lays out his plan for murdering Fyodor Pavlovich to Ivan as the middle brother is preparing to return to Moscow after becoming frustrated and disgusted with the actions of his family. By removing himself from the volatile cocktail of familial dispute and failing to protect his father bodily or even to warn him of the suspected danger in the form of the illegitimate Smerdyakov, Ivan seems, to Smerdyakov at least, to signal his understandable complicity in the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich. This choice and the self-lacerative inability to process the resulting guilt, is what drives Ivan insane in the end. In her article discussing self-laceration and moral psychology, Edith Clowes closes her discussion of *The Brothers Karamazov* with a succinct description of Ivan's fate:

Ivan... has denied in himself the power of blind instinct... He comes to understand what role he has played... and guesses at the power of the subconscious forces that he tried to repress through sheer mental effort. This flash of insight represents the beginning of Ivan's torment, but it is a torment without the conscious sacrifice of his "small self," his ego, and its claim over his inner being. This festering self-laceration leads to a serious and possibly lasting psychological disorder. (132)

By juxtaposing the experience of the two brothers, it is clear that self-abnegation is a powerful tool to unlocking the positive transformative possibilities of self-laceration. When Dmitri loses his sense of self, he finds the ability for redemptive suffering. Ivan, however, is incapable or

unwilling to allow his perception of self to be diminished and is therefore subjected to excruciating mental torment. Grappling with the issue of selfdom is not the only experience that ties these two brothers together.

The depth and intensity of Dmitri's sufferings are foreshadowed, as are his brother's, by Zosima's deferential bow towards the one and blessing of the other. These gestures seem to come out of nowhere as Dmitri's bombastic sensuality would hardly seem to merit recognition by a respected representative of holiness in the figure of Father Zosima, nor would Ivan be expected by his brothers to accept a blessing, being a vociferous opponent to the Christian religion. The significance of Zosima's gestures are revelatory; as Kanevskaya notes: "Both Dmitri and Ivan suffer their own spiritual punishment for a guilt which they suddenly become acutely aware, not only the guilt of wishing their father dead, but also the guilt of being arrogant and violent toward the people around them" (363). This late awareness of responsibility for their fellow man is Dostoevsky's answer to the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" In that human life is interconnected and subject to impression, the answer gleaned from *the Brothers Karamazov* is categorically in the affirmative.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANGEL AND DEMON: ALYOSHA AND SMERDYAKOV IN *THE BROTHERS*

#### *KARAMAZOV*

Self-laceration is typically chosen by characters in reaction to a feeling of powerlessness in a seemingly predetermined life. Flying in the face of fate by choosing emotional disintegration effectively bestows upon these characters a modicum of control by means of choice. I have also demonstrated that in Dostoevsky's worldview, redemption from original and inherited sin may be attained through suffering. As the suffering of a particular character increases, so too does the hope for their final redemption. By choosing self-laceration, many of the characters are also choosing a heightened level of suffering and are therefore more likely to experience expiation. This is not necessarily a conscious choice by these characters, but by creating characters with self-lacerative tendencies and therefore greater vulnerability to the depths of human suffering, especially internal and emotional, Dostoevsky can then allow the experience of redemption.

Many of the characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* exhibit emotional self-harm for the reasons mentioned above. As I've shown, the expression of self-laceration is driven by a variety of reasons and manifests outwardly in different ways; whether it is the destructive skepticism of the intellectual Ivan, or the promiscuity and sensuality of Grushenka, the experience itself proves to be transformative. All of the self-lacerative characters experience some kind of metamorphosis through their struggle with self-laceration. In this way, choosing self-laceration can be viewed as not entirely destructive, but culminating in the development and evolution of a new personality. The experience of self-laceration itself seems to be an unsustainable practice, though many characters do choose it for extensive stretches of their lives. The volatility of such a lifestyle eventually gives way to an implosion of personality from which a stronger, or at the

very least different, self may emerge. This makes self-laceration an extremely potent tool for those whose lives have come to a place of stagnation. The emotional self-harm therefore serves as a method of regeneration in addition to being an instrument of vengeance against society (specifically the case for the ladies in the novel), mode of redemption (for Dmitri), and a declaration of control in spite of a world which seeks to limit agency.

Self-laceration becomes, for many of the characters in *Brothers*, a defining and focusing force. Katerina Ivanovna's entire life plan in the early stages of the novel circumscribes the core of her being, which has become her self-lacerative relationship with Dmitri. Grushenka's actions belie the anger that fuels her lacerations. Dmitri is monomaniacally focused on his destructive course and Ivan cannot see his way toward reconciling his lacerative relationship with his heavenly, as well as earthly, father. However, not all of Dostoevsky's characters demonstrate tendencies towards self-laceration and escape both the negative and positive implications that the experience provides. The youngest Karamazov, Alyosha, stands apart from most of the inhabitants of Skotoprigonyevsk in that he is truly a kind-hearted, selfless man and largely without any ulterior or surreptitious motives.

Alyosha drives the action of *The Brothers Karamazov* and most consider him to be the primary character and protagonist. Dostoevsky uses Alyosha as the perfect embodiment of his mantra of active love. He is unwaveringly kind and compassionate and referred to as, "simply an early lover of humanity" (*Brothers* 16). The narrator of the novel, and presumably Dostoevsky, is concerned about the reader's reception of such a good and pure character as he quickly assures that, "Alyosha was not a fanatic... not even a mystic" and he is never viewed as a, "simpleton or naïve person" (*Brothers* 16-7). In the following chapter, "Elders", the narrator even addresses his readers directly, again coming to the defense of Alyosha as exactly good and wholesome,

suggesting that Alyosha belongs to “our last [that is, former] epoch” because he is “honest in nature, desiring the truth, seeking for it and believing in it” (*Brothers* 20). Dostoevsky’s concern with the believability of a character that is so pure and good and the narrator’s repeated defense of Alyosha speak to the character’s otherness. This youngest brother does not impose himself onto other characters. His lack of self-will is often expressed in the form of a nonjudgmental attitude in dealing with the diverse, and many times morally flawed, characters of the novel. When he returns to his father’s house, a den of drunken debauchery, Fyodor Pavlovich is surprised when Alyosha does not immediately castigate him from his position of moral superiority. Fyodor Pavlovich has come to expect one of two reactions to his raucous actions, either a disgusted recoil or enthusiastic union and complicity. In his youngest son, Fyodor is offered a third choice, acknowledgment free of judgment but without approval. In the same spirit of understanding, Alyosha meets with his eldest brother, Dmitri, without revulsion for his own vodka-fuelled rascallionry that is little better than his father’s, and again with his vociferously skeptical brother Ivan. Alyosha’s self-less love for others allows for the uniquely genuine interactions that form the majority of the content in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Dostoevsky utilizes Alyosha as the primary vehicle through which the novel is experienced. His kindhearted and simplistic worldview is placed in juxtaposition with the widely varied personalities and perspectives of Skotoprigonyevsk. He spends the majority of his time delivering messages between the other characters as well as in conversation. Alyosha comes off as a man who is largely without a private agenda, instead furthering the agendas of others. If a character asks Alyosha to do something for them, Alyosha is certain to acquiesce without provocation or equivocation. This willingness to be blown around by the winds of others shows a lack of concern for an experience of control in a seemingly fatalistic world. This makes Alyosha



immune from one of the great base-level motivations that results in an experience of self-laceration, because he has already relinquished control of his life. He chooses instead to wholeheartedly place his faith in God and his hopes for redemption in Christ. Since he is self-less in his love for others, whole in his devotion, and does not feel the need to demonstrate his agency, Alyosha is an effective canvas upon which the disturbances and anxieties of the other characters can become highlighted and shown in contrast.

While so many of the characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* experience disintegration and anguish, if not outright physical harm or death, Alyosha further stands apart from the rest in that he remains largely unscathed. Besides being gripped in concern for others, the point of greatest suffering that Alyosha experiences is in the monastery shortly after the death of his beloved Elder, Father Zosima. The body of the saintly man produces an unholy smell of decay that causes the reactionary monks, many of whom were expecting a great miracle, to decry Zosima as a false saint because God would never allow one of His own to deteriorate in such an odiferous and unheavenly way. Father Zosima's enemies, those that would prefer even greater aestheticism in their saints, whip up a fervor of despair and retroactive doubt concerning Zosima's teachings that greatly affect Alyosha, bringing him close to despair. This is an instance in which Alyosha could pursue self-laceration, but this never materializes. Alyosha, in a weakened, fragile emotional state, is numbly led to Grushenka's house by Ratikin, who seeks his ruination at the force of Grushenka's promiscuity. Ratikin is, however, foiled in his designs as Grushenka and Alyosha only enhance one another's pure love. Instead of choosing the self-lacerative path of rejecting God and giving in to his Karamazovian impulse towards sensuality, Alyosha's faith is increased as he pulls Grushenka somewhat out of the mire of her own self-

laceration. This is one instance of many that Alyosha is presented with a situation that could result in emotional self-harm, but he chooses a more positive and loving way.

Alyosha is given another opportunity to choose self-laceration after his discussion with Ivan in the chapters surrounding and containing “Rebellion” and “The Grand Inquisitor.” Ivan is extremely persuasive and a master of logic. Joseph Frank writes, “Ivan has set out to unsettle Alyosha’s faith, and he succeeds momentarily” (870). Alyosha momentarily agrees with Ivan, which is akin to agreeing with the devil’s argument, but recovers himself and “recalls that the fabric of human destiny (at least in their moral universe) is founded on another principle- that of self-sacrificial Christian love” (Frank 871). Giving in to Ivan’s persuasive arguments represents another chance for Alyosha to succumb to self-laceration. However, the usually pliant young man manages to stand firm in his spiritual convictions and avoid self-laceration.

The interaction between Alyosha and Captain Snegiryov in which the former is attempting to mitigate the unconscionable actions of his eldest brother in disrespecting the latter in front of his child and his peers is another example. Alyosha attempts to give the destitute captain a sum of money to ease the burdens of being the sole provider for his family, many of whom are ill. Just as Snegiryov has been convinced to accept the aid, he has a change of heart and rejects the gift out of pride. Instead of becoming dismissive, frustrated or combative with the poor man which would have been damaging to his good spirit and therefore emotionally harmful and self-lacerative, Alyosha exhibits a heightened level of compassion and love for Snegiryov. With infinite patience Alyosha indulges the Captain’s pride and resolves to gift the money again after giving his wounded ego a moment longer to heal. Alyosha demonstrates throughout the novel a Christ-like capacity for understanding and saintly compassion.

Anna Berman writes, “A parallel exists between Christ’s love of mankind and Alyosha’s treatment of the boys he befriends. Alyosha wins the love of Kolya Krasotkin by treating him as an equal” (268). Alyosha extends love outwards and cultivates egalitarian power relationships because of his rejection of self. He operates as a vessel in which Christ’s love may be carried into the world. This leaves little to no room within Alyosha for the standard preoccupation with one’s self that leads so many of the other characters into self-laceration.

Alyosha is self-less, and without a strong sense of self, there cannot be a self-laceration. Although Alyosha has such a depth of love and compassion for the characters he encounters throughout the novel, he is by no means perfect. Berman suggests that his failure to extend this love and compassion towards the development of a relationship with his half-brother Smerdyakov represents Alyosha’s greatest failure as a messenger of spiritual wholeness. She notes, “Loving Smerdyakov is test that Dostoevsky presents to his characters in order to link the main action of the novel back to the central ideological struggle in the Grand Inquisitor” (278). This is no easy task as Smerdyakov is purposefully portrayed by Dostoevsky as difficult to love by immediate relation as he is the illegitimate brother, or by fundamental character, as he is cast as unnervingly, primally repulsive. The test of extending horizontal love and respect to this, the lowest and most abject of beings, is a test that Alyosha proves to be unequal to. Kanevskaya notes that Smerdyakov’s vengeance against the Karamazovs takes many forms as he “uses the temptation of jealousy, greed and voluptuous desire to destroy the father and Dmitri... the temptation of pride to destroy Ivan...[and] eventually succeeds in using Alesha’s moral fastidiousness to make Alesha ignore him and thus fail to avert the impending tragedy” (370). Despite Alyosha’s seemingly saint-like selflessness and his extension of brotherly love not only to his blood relatives but also to Captain Snegiryov and the little children of the village, Alyosha

draws a distinct line of disassociation with language in regards a relationship with Smerdyakov. Anna Berman continues, “Dostoevsky offers no explanation of this failure on Alyosha’s part, and I am likewise unable to explain it” (278). I suggest that Alyosha’s failure to love his illegitimate brother in the active fashion that Father Zosima preaches is yet another way in which Dostoevsky introduces a level of nuance into the novel. Perfection is alienating and un-relatable. If Alyosha maintained a flawless moral character throughout, the fears of the narrator discussed above would indeed be valid. However, by eschewing an infallible moral center for the novel, Dostoevsky embraces moral ambiguity as discussed in Edith Clowe’s article. It is a limiting and unbeneficial endeavor to discuss Alyosha as perfectly good, just as it is dangerous to discuss Smerdyakov in terms of pure evil.

Smerdyakov, the illegitimate half-brother of Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha, is one of the most compelling characters of Dostoyevsky's *Brothers*. By murdering his father and framing his eldest brother for the deed, Smerdyakov commits the action around which the central murder plot line is constructed. Smerdyakov is tied to Alyosha not only by the blood of their shared father, but also because he too does not demonstrate self-laceration (though he does commit suicide, the ultimate act of self-harm) like many of his fellow characters. His experience is therefore devoid of any of the positive outcomes of self-laceration and the distinction between self-laceration and self-destruction are revealed.

Smerdyakov’s unique worldview does not allow him an emotional response to the murder of his father. Instead all of his emotions seem to stem from Ivan's reaction to his deed. While frequently cast as a “secondary character” (Shneidman 23) scholarship of *The Brothers Karamazov* discusses Smerdyakov as the double of Ivan and the antithesis or foil of the saintly Alyosha. Smerdyakov is the forceful expression upon the world of Ivan’s ideas. The difference

between the illegitimate brother and those that, even to a diminished degree, Fyodor Pavlovich will claim is the former's moral freedom. Because, as Ivan articulates, there is no God, everything is permissible and without God there can be no morality, therefore Smerdyakov is freed from the burden of morality under which everyone else in the novel is bound and is able to exact his murderous revenge on his father.

Smerdyakov is the product of Fyodor's rape of the mentally handicapped Lizaveta Smerdyastchaya. He is aware and ashamed of his origins, but constantly reminded of them working in his father's house. Marina Kanevskaya further highlights the level of Smerdyakov's abject place noting: "The father contemptuously names his illegitimate son 'Pavel Fedorovich'- an inverted form of his own... while 'Smerdiakov' has two meanings: 'smelly' and 'slave'" (365). Faced with such abhorrent treatment, the murderous feelings of the odd brother may be forgiven, but parricide strikes an even more extreme feeling of horror. Striking down one's father represents the ultimate rebellion in a patriarchal society. Parricide is then an expression of dissatisfaction with all systems of vertical power, namely the State and the Church. To kill the father is to kill God. Smerdyakov also strikes out at the concept of brotherly, horizontal love in the form of his suicide. Shneidman writes that his suicide "is not an act of submission. Rather it is an active of spiteful rebellion against his brothers" (27). By this action Smerdyakov believes he has insured the destruction of the Karamazov family: the father that brought him into a world of such pain, as well as the brothers who failed to acknowledge their familial bond or their obligation of common connection between humans.

A discussion of the relationship between Alyosha and Smerdyakov, the youngest of the Karamazov boys, is necessary towards a greater understanding of their rejection of self-lacerative tendencies in pursuit of a conception of control in a deterministic worldview. Alyosha

finds the drive towards an expression of agency unnecessary in his complete devotion to a higher power, while Smerdyakov finds liberation in the rejection and disavowal of this same power. By creating two characters that are so essential to the core plotline of *The Brothers Karamazov* that are free from the quality of self-laceration, Dostoevsky effectively avoids didacticism and delivers a novel that is that much more believable for its nuance. That these two strong characters do not make the same emotionally self-destructive life choices of their peers enhances the impact of those choices in the others. Furthermore, by having the characters that do not demonstrate self-laceration be so opposed in regards to worldview and life experience, Dostoevsky illuminates the positive and negative effects of such an experience.

CHAPTER 5  
IN CONCLUSION

In Dostoevsky's worldview, suffering is a litmus test for authentic human experience. Dostoevsky was acutely aware of what Edith Clowes identifies as the "ambiguity of suffering," that is that suffering is able to take as many forms as there are human beings to experience it. The masterful expression and portrayal of deeply personal human suffering is one of the many qualities that insures Dostoevsky's timeless fascination for readers. Nietzsche hails Dostoevsky as one of his greatest influences (Clowes 121). Dostoevsky's clear understanding of psychology and interior suffering finds expression in one way through the recurring theme of self-laceration. Self-laceration is a uniquely Russian expression of self-harm in that consists of a capacity for deep feeling, an acute awareness of the self, a willingness to take ideas to absolute extremes of expression, and acknowledgment of the necessity for personal freedom and the agency to make a choice. This cocktail of qualities finds fertile ground in the milieu of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russia. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky explores the multifaceted expressions and consequences of a self-lacerative life.

A self-laceration can be expressed by those in precarious social positions as a means of seizing a feeling of control in their lives as well as vocalizing discontent with their diminished state. Dostoevsky's special preoccupation with the women of *The Brothers Karamazov* indicates an acknowledgment and positive valuation of their internal struggles. The vengeance of self-immolation is seen particularly through their chosen form of self-laceration through relation. Dostoevsky's women are much more than mere foils upon which the male characters project egos, nor are they merely objects to be acquired or calls to action. In *Brothers* the depths of self-

lacerative capacity suggests Dostoevsky's acknowledgement of their rich interior lives, interior lives made the richer for being limited in exterior possibilities.

Furthermore, the manner in which the self-lacerations of the novel are portrayed highlights the role in which this emotional harm is used to fashion a self. Choosing self-harm is understood to be deeply rooted not only in conceptions of worth but also of identity. This concept again returns to the idea of self in relation to other. Constructing an identity founded upon relations with others is problematic because of what Baudelaire refer to as "the unbridgeable gulf which prevents communication" (*Modernisms* 15). The other is unknowable and a self founded upon others is therefore fundamentally unknowable. Nicholls notes "the solitary [person]... reacts violently to aspects of himself glimpsed in others, only to find in the same moment that it is he himself who is the victim of his violence... a doubling of role which associates a certain desire for self-wounding and mutilation" (16). This personal emotional violence is not always negative, however.

Another of the unique qualities of self-laceration is that, unlike self-destruction in a physical sense, the trial of self-laceration can potentially be positive in that it allows for the possibility of positive transformation. In the aftermath of a moment of intense emotional distress, or in emotional distress that builds over the course of a lifetime, there will come a breaking point, a moment in which the self-lacerator will be forced into a moment of enlightenment or disintegration. Dmitri's revelation finds increased poignancy in juxtaposition to his brother's lunacy at the close of *Brothers*. Dostoevsky successfully crafts a nuanced portrait of the creative and destructive possibilities of a character's struggles with self-laceration.

While touching on a number of primary characters specifically, there is much more room for a continued study of the theme of self-laceration in *The Brothers Karamazov*. A more in



depth analysis of Captain Snegiryov could yield interesting discoveries especially in regards family structures and horizontal versus vertical power relationships therein. A detailed study of the children of the novel, obviously of huge import to Dostoevsky, and their experiences with self-laceration as caused or mollified with a relationship with Alyosha could be revealing. Or a discussion on the monastic lifestyle and the necessary laceration that comes with spiritual abnegation and self-imposed aestheticism. Self-laceration is an important, focusing lens in this novel and can be explored in a number of interesting directions.

Self-laceration deserves a more comprehensive study in the future, especially as expressed in Dostoevsky's other works. A study of the holy-fool in self-laceration found in the character of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* or of the protagonist in *Notes from the Underground* might offer an intriguing read. Reading Dostoevsky's peers, especially Turgenev with his more Western worldview or Tolstoy with his prosaic and pastoral writing, would also convey how self-laceration works across the literature of Russia in the nineteenth century. Expanding the scope of self-laceration to Western literature would also be interesting. I certainly detect some self-lacerative tendencies in Melville's *Moby Dick*, especially in the character of Ahab.

Importantly the theme of self-laceration is the result of the complex of factors unique to Russia in the nineteenth century. The ramifications of a self-lacerative speak to many important factors of life: a relationship with the Church and spirituality, a place in relation to the State and socially, and finally in relation to self and identity.

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