

The Brothers Karamazov: Dostoevsky vs. Richard Brooks

Rajat Sirohi

For this assignment, I decided to watch the film adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov* directed by Richard Brooks and compare it to Dostoevsky's original novel. Overall assessment: If you're interested in the deep philosophical and psychological insights of Dostoevsky, stick to the book (you won't regret it!); if you're more interested in romance, consider the movie (you might still regret it). My primary objection to the film is as follows: **The movie prioritizes the romantic aspects of the novel at the expense of philosophical clarity and multifaceted character development.**

By the end of the film, the viewer could be forgiven for not understanding why Alyosha held faith in God; why Ivan obstinately rejected God's existence; why Smerdyakov discerned that 'everything is lawful, even crime' from Ivan's article, despite Ivan's obvious aversion to Smerdyakov's intimations; or why Father Zosima is so revered, except for his having a long white beard and advanced age. For the most part, these character traits were merely asserted rather than developed. Take, for instance, the scene around 26 minutes in where Fyodor Pavlovich, in his usual impertinent manner, challenges Alyosha to prove God's existence; in response, Alyosha rather lamely asserts 'faith doesn't require proof' and Ivan simply retorts 'For the last time, there is no God!' Had either of these provocative theses been developed through life experiences and substantive dialogue, as was done in Dostoevsky's novel, the viewer might have actually understood the basis for each character's position. Instead, both Alyosha and Ivan came off as dogmatic to me, and the time which could have been devoted to developing and substantiating their positions was instead spent on Dmitri's romantic escapades.

This issue of insufficient character development is best manifested through the one-dimensional character types in the film: Alyosha is the pious, responsible one; Ivan is the edgy intellectual; Dmitri is the conflicted sensualist; Fyodor Pavlovich is the debauch; Smerdyakov is the sycophantic nihilist; and so on. While these reductive descriptions are partially applicable even to the novel, Dostoevsky obviously devotes ample time to the nuanced psychology of someone like Ivan, for example, who is not simply an atheist but who acknowledges the benefits of religion on society in his article on the ecclesiastical courts, and who concedes that God may exist and may even have His non-Euclidean reasons for the suffering of innocent children. These nuances are totally lost in the film when Ivan's article is reduced to Smerdyakov's distorted interpretation that "There's nothing in the world to make Man love their neighbors. If there's no God, then nothing can be immoral; everything becomes lawful, even crime. Crime becomes not only lawful but inevitable." In the novel, these words are never directly stated by Ivan, who is far more subtle and less dogmatic. Most importantly, Ivan's transformation by the end of the film makes little sense without this context, since he should really have no reason to regard Smerdyakov as anything other than a lunatic who clearly misinterpreted his article. Almost humorously, Ivan somehow manages to be surprised at Smerdyakov's confession despite the fact that Smerdyakov pretty much explicitly confirmed to Ivan, before he left for Moscow, his intention to kill Fyodor Pavlovich, and effectively already confessed to Ivan after Dmitri's arrest (around 1 hours 43 minutes in). Ivan's subsequent guilt and repentance at the court therefore make little sense in the film without the important context provided by the novel.

The film's decision to reveal Smerdyakov's plans from the very beginning was also a very significant deviation from the

novel, where the reader doesn't learn that Smerdyakov was the murderer until his confession. This was especially surprising when so much suspicion was built up against Dmitri as a likely suspect, in terms of establishing a definite motive (money and Grushenka) and threat (Katerina's letter and Dmitri's fight with Fyodor Pavlovich).

At the end, the court scene was also drastically different from the novel's portrayal. Fetyukovich is backgrounded, replaced by Dmitri who speaks up several times and appears to have already repented completely. Overall, the trial is presented as generally effective in terms of bringing about the spiritual transformation of both Dmitri and Ivan. Whereas, in the novel, the trial is largely satirized for the bombastic speeches of the lawyers, sensationalist cheers of the audience, and overarching irony of convicting an innocent man. The film thereby misses Dostoevsky's important criticism of the effectiveness of the courts, especially following the reforms of 1864.

Having established my primary criticism, I'd like to turn to some miscellaneous comparisons between the novel and film. (1) In the film, Ivan appears to reference Freud's theory of the 'Oedipus Complex', despite the fact that Dostoevsky died before Freud published most of his works, "It's not unusual for a son to want to kill his father" [25:45]. (2) In the book, Dmitri pulls Captain Snegiryov by his beard and beats him publicly in front of his son, who weeps profusely and is then pelted with stones. In the film, Dmitri pulls Captain Snegiryov by his ear and Ilyusha's eyes merely water. There is no beating, and Ilyusha is then attacked by snowballs not stones. For me, this significantly diminished the extent of Ilyusha's genuine suffering as detailed in the novel, which would have made it difficult to fully appreciate his funeral scene at the very end, had it been included in the film! Additionally, Ilyusha's character is once again one-dimensional in the film, where he is portrayed as saintly and faultless; whereas, in the novel, Ilyusha is much more nuanced in terms of violently attacking Alyosha and feeding pins to Zuchka. This makes his suffering more compelling in the novel than in the film. (3) The film has no narrator, which leaves out a lot of insights such as in the whimsical author's introduction (whether that's taken to be by Dostoevsky or the narrator). (4) The novel begins with lots of exposition on the background lives of the characters, whereas the film immediately throws us into the main plot, forcing the viewers to piece together these background elements by themselves. (5) The film characters have English accents and mannerisms despite residing in Russia, where the Russian setting is crucial to Dostoevsky's novel. (6) Whereas in the book, Dmitri attempts to trick Katerina into sex by offering her 4,500 rubles for her an obligation of her father's, only to become disgusted with himself and give her the money without any strings attached; in the film, Katerina approaches Ivan for the money, claiming that he owes it to her, and she is the one who tacitly offers sex in exchange for the money, with Dmitri refusing and simply giving the money. So, in the book, Dmitri is cast as a debauch who corrects himself; in the film, Katerina is the one who is portrayed as contemptible. (7) In the film, the brothers all appear to be much older than they are in the novel. Alyosha is supposed to be 20, though he looks to be older. Ivan is supposed to be 24, though he looks to be in his 40s. Dmitri is the oldest, but still looks much older than he should be. (8) Most egregiously, the film left out a number of crucial scenes from the novel: no Grand Inquisitor scene, no death of Father Zosima, no scene with Dmitri and the coachman, no Devil scene with Ivan, no funeral scene for Ilyusha, and more.