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Darkness and Despair, Love and Light: Imagery of Light and Darkness in *The Brothers Karamazov:*

> The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.
>
> ——Jn 12:46-47

Every human being has a fundamental choice, and all of us will see what we look for. If we choose to view the world as a place ridden with misery, suffering, and sin, then that is what we shall see. But, if we choose to see the world as a place of beauty, love, and lightness, then, likewise, that is how the world will manifest to our eyes. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky issues his readers this challenge: believe that the world is beautiful, truthful, and loving, and so it shall become. He asks his readers to focus their sight on the world's light, and not its darkness. Throughout his *magnum opus*, Dostoyevsky employs extensive imagery of light and darkness, flipping the traditional enlightenment motif: the sun, stars, constellations, candles, lamp posts, and even light from on high all represent faith and a personal closeness with God. Whereas, shadows, nights, abysses, black misery, and raging snowstorms, all symbolize a defective relationship with God caused by an inability to deal with suffering. The Karamazov brothers each provide insight into how God helps individuals confront suffering, which Dostoyevsky reveals through this two-sided motif.

From the opening pages of the novel, Dostoyevsky links Alyosha with the light of God, a trait which separates him from his brothers and sets him as the "hero" of the story. In the fourth chapter of the book, "The Third Son, Alyosha", Dostoyevsky gives a character sketch of Alyosha. He is described as "an early lover of humanity" who turned to the monastery as "the ideal way out for his soul struggling from the darkness of worldly wickedness to the light of love." (Dostoyevsky, 21). Immediately, light becomes associated with Christian faith and salvation from the darkness, which is tied to the evil and suffering in the world. Dostoyevsky presents love as the path to accessing this saving light. Immediately after describing Alyosha's connection to the monastery, the narrator recalls Alyosha's first memory, the love of his mother who died when he was four years old: "The slanting rays of the setting sun (those slanting rays he remembered most vividly of all), an icon in the corner of the room, in front of it a lighted lamp, and in front of the icon…[she was] hugging him close until it hurt and praying for him to the Mother of God." (Dostoyevsky, 22) Alyosha's first memory is one of his mother rapturously loving her son, and it emphasizes Aloysha's linking of light and love, and his resulting fondness of the light. The narrator describes the role of formative experiences like these: "Such memories may persist…only appearing throughout one's whole life like spots of light out of darkness…" (Dostoyevsky, 22). Alyosha remembers that from the outset of his life he was treated with love and shown the light of God in the world. Following this experience, he became predisposed to carry the seed of light in his heart for the rest of his life.

Crucially–Alyosha's upbringing wasn't truly spectacular as this memory would suggest, his father essentially abandoned him, his mother died, and he was raised poor. However, Alyosha does not focus on the overhanging misery and darkness of his childhood, he doesn't rationally analyze the traumas he endured, he instead faithfully focuses on the few moments of light.

Through that intentional focus, he becomes a better man, more apt to face the cruelties of the world and more willing to embrace the joys of life.

After Aloysha's mother plants a seed of light in his soul, Father Zosima becomes the sun that spurs its growth in Alyosha's life. Zosima, like Alyosha, holds fond memories riddled with imagery of light from his early childhood, and he carries the feelings these memories create in all his life. In book six, one of Zosima's writings reveals a teaching to Alyosha: "If you had been a light, you would have lightened the path for others too, and the evildoer might perhaps have been saved by your light from his sin." (Dostoyevsky, 277) Even from Alyosha's earliest memory, he was already following Zosima's path; he had always shone the light of God in all his life for the evildoers around him.

However, when Alyosha's new embodiment of light (Zosima) dims, Alyosha is faced with the darkness of loss and suffering in his life. In this darkness, he loses his path and no longer radiates God's light. At the start of book seven, darkness briefly overtakes Alyosha in a rebellion against God as he drinks alcohol and consumes sausage during lent. The epitome of his rebellion comes when Grushenka tries to seduce him and he doesn't try to stop her. It is only in the chapter "Cana of Galilee", that Alyosha is confronted with a vision of Zosima over his coffin, that Alyosha realizes his transgressions. Zosima speaks to Alyosha in a dream: "Begin your work, dear one, begin it, gentle one…Do you see our Sun, do you see Him?" (Dostoyevsky, 311) Zosima directly ties the "Sun" to "Him", meaning that God is the sun, God is the light. Zosima's words remind Alyosha of the path of light and bring him back to God. Thus, as Alyosha's relationship with God is mended, it follows that divine light should manifest itself within his world, and it vividly does. In one of the most breathtaking passages of *The Brothers Karamazov*,

Alyosha sees the stars gleaming down from the darkness of the night sky and his faith in God and life and love is restored:

> …his soul, overflowing with rapture, yearned for freedom, space, openness. The vault of heaven, full of soft, shining stars, stretched vast and fathomless above him. The milky way ran in two pale streams from the zenith to the horizon. The fresh, motionless, still night enfolded the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the cathedrals gleamed out against the sapphire sky…The silence of the earth seemed to melt into the silence of the heavens. The mystery of the earth was one with the mystery of the stars…Alyosha, stood, gazed, and suddenly threw himself down upon the earth. (Dostoyevsky, 311-312)

Even in Alyosha's darkest hour after the death of Father Zosima, he is able to stand tall in the face of this suffering and find meaning through his profound connection with the light and with God. Aloysha's contact with the divine in this scene leaves him a changed man: "He had fallen on the earth a weak youth, but he rose up a resolute champion … 'Someone visited my soul in that hour.'" (Dostoyevsky, 312). In this moment of great suffering, the light that shined down to Alyosha from the vault of heaven was Christ. After this scene, Alyosha carries the light of God and continues to carry it for the rest of the novel. He acts as the light that Zosima spoke of in all the lives of those he interacts with. The light that permanently changes Alyosha is not the light of reason, as the Enlightenment motif would suggest, but rather the light of faith. This change is the consequence of divine revelation and not of deep rational insight. Dostoyevsky suggests through Alyosha's brother, Ivan, that the 'light of reason' is feeble in comparison to the light of faith, and perhaps, even a clear path into darkness.

From early on in the novel, Ivan is characterized as a rationalist atheist. He believes that there is no God, and as a consequence, he believes that there is no virtue. Ivan discusses these

subjects earlier in the novel with his father: "...'is there a God, or not?'...'No, there is no God.'...'and is there immorality of some sort, just a little, just a tiny bit?' 'There is no morality either.'" (Dostoyevsky, 120) Ivan arrived at these conclusions because he thinks it's impossible to rationally accept the abundant suffering and darkness in the world for the price of eternal salvation. Later in the novel, in the brilliant chapter, "Rebellion", Ivan tells his devout brother, Alyosha: "It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return to him the ticket." (Dostoyevsky, 213) These ideas of rational atheism cause Ivan strife throughout the novel, as his Karamazov thirst for life struggles against his rational rejection of the world. Ivan admits that his ideas are "derived from European hypotheses" (Dostoyevsky, 203), meaning that they are derived from the Enlightenment. Thus, Ivan's rationality is inherently linked to the Enlightenment version of the symbol of light, which held reason as the light in the world. However, Dostoyevsky flips this motif: instead of reason being the light of the world, it becomes a path leading to darkness, and reason's antithesis, faith is the world's true light.

In book 11, the destructive results of Ivan's rationality are brought to the forefront of the novel. In "The Third and Last Meeting with Smerdyakov", Ivan's consciousness had been tormented by the previous confrontations with Smerdyakov, who represents a complete acceptance of rationality. This mental anguish is represented by the raging snowstorm in the night around him: "...soon there was a regular snowstorm. There were scarcely any lamp posts in the part of town where Smerydakov lived. Ivan strode alone in the darkness, unconscious of the storm, instinctively picking out his way." (Dostoyevsky, 522) The motif of light and darkness is employed twice: the lack of lamp posts represents Smerdyakov's complete rejection of faith in God and all meaning in the world, whereas, the raging darkness of the storm symbolizes the

chaos induced by rationality within Ivan's mind. This environment of darkness and chaos is where Smerydakov and Ivan meet.

Smerdyakov confesses to Ivan that it was he who murdered Fyodor Pavolvich, and this information leaves Ivan in a moral quandary–something that he didn't even think was possible. He debates whether he should stay silent or come forward and reveal his guilt to everyone. Ivan ultimately decides to sacrifice his own welfare by confessing the truth of the murder. He takes this virtuous step because he feels moral responsibility for inspiring Smerdyakov's actions. However, the moment Ivan commits his virtuous self sacrifice, he is crushed by a realization of the incongruity of his actions and the betrayal of his rational principles. This conflict manifests itself in his soul: "...he felt something like a touch of ice on his heart, like…a reminder, of something agonizing and revolting that was in that room now…and had been there before." (Dostoyevsky, 532) Like Raskolnikov of *Crime and Punishment*, Ivan is a victim of a schism of ideas. The instant Ivan makes up his mind to act morally and sacrifice himself, he fundamentally rejects his own rationality and his own presuppositions, and consequently his mind is torn in two. This schism manifests itself in Ivan's mind as his hallucination, "The Devil".

In the following chapter, Ivan's Devil confronts him in the raging snowstorm and the darkness of the night. Ivan hallucinates his devil, who is, like Smerydakov, completely dependent on Ivan for inspiration. Everything the Devil says, Ivan had thought himself; thus, when the Devil torments Ivan, Ivan's ideas are just tormenting himself. Ivan shouts at the Devil: "You are the incarnation of myself, but only of one side of me…of my thoughts and feelings, but only the nastiest and stupidest of them." (Dostoyevsky, 535). The "side" of Ivan that is left out of the Devil is the same side of him that chooses to act against Smerdyakov, that chooses the virtuous path even against his best interests. That side of him is the small light of faith that still

burns within the overhanging darkness of his soul. In his torment, the Devil drives Ivan to the brink of madness with a rambling rant about his absurd journey through the darkness of space to the Earth: “He was exerting himself to the utmost not to believe in the delusion and not to sink into complete insanity.” (Dostoyevsky, 538) Ivan enters into a dialogical relationship with his Devil, which is actually his own ideas, and is confronted with the absurdity his ideas lead to, the absurdity of a world without God. Thus, Ivan’s Enlightenment inspired ideas lead him to an absurd notion of the world which leaves darkness in his own soul. Nearing the end of their conversation, the Devil paints Ivan a picture of his atheist utopia: “Men will unite to take from life all it can give, but only for joy and happiness in the present world.” (Dostoyevsky, 542) What the Devil describes here is Ivan’s ideal society, but upon hearing it, Ivan begins “trembling all over” and throws a glass at the Devil. He acts thus, in order to escape the confrontation with the absurdity of his own ideas. Ivan feels in his soul that the ideal society and understanding of the world that his rationality points to is impossible, absurd, and dangerous. Juxtaposed to his typical rational understanding of the world, it is through some anti-epiphany that he understands his own ideas to be absurd. With this scene, Dostoyevsky fully rejects the Enlightenment motif of light as reason, and fully embraces faith in God as the true light.

The eldest brother, Dmitry, reveals the power of God’s light to heal a soul struggling in darkness. Dmitry starts the novel as a sensualist who finds little meaning in the world besides the “infernal curves” of his beloved, Grushenka. He struggles to find meaning in the world and it is only by revelation, in a dream, that Dmitry finds faith in some purpose. In book nine, while Dmitry is being unjustly interrogated for a crime that he didn’t commit, he falls asleep and dreams of a village of peasants and a babe suffering in the cold and the dark: “...why don't they sing songs of joy, why are they so dark from black misery, why don’t they feed the babe…”

(Dostoyevsky, 428) Dmitry is faced with the epitome of unjust suffering, the suffering of a child, in the same way his brother Ivan was before. Where Ivan confronts this suffering through reason, Dmitry confronts it through faith. Where Ivan's mind turns to hatred in the face of this problem, Dmitry's heart becomes full of rapturous love: "...his whole heart glowed, and he struggled forward towards the light, and he longed to live, to live, to go on and on, towards the new, beckoning light…" (Dostoyevsky, 428) Dmitry's outcome in confronting suffering is successful because his approach doesn't stem from rationality, but from faith in God's light, which comes not from reason but from revelation. Thus, this gleaming light becomes Dmitry's antidote to the problem of suffering in the world. Dmitry's solution to unjust suffering is the same as Alyosha's solution. Both of their solutions come in a dream by revelation, and both of their solutions cause their souls to glow with the light of God.

Later in the novel in book ten, while Ivan's mind is crumbling in the darkness of rationality, Dmitry comes to understand his revelation about the problem of suffering. In the chapter, "A Hymn and a Secret", he reflects on his dream and how it changed him in the company of his brother, Alyosha. Dmitry's heart is filled with light, just as before, and he cries out to Alyosha: "One may resurrect and revive a frozen heart in that convict…and at last bring up from the dark depths a lofty soul, a feeling, suffering creature; one may bring forth an angel, resurrect a hero!" (Dostoyevsky, 499) Dmitry realizes that every human heart, no matter how black and callous, has the potential to be saved by the light of God and turned into the glowing heart of a saint. He understands this fact, because his heart was saved in much the same way. He views himself as that very convict of which he speaks, and he has witnessed a hero replace the insect in his soul. Of this hero, of himself, he says: "And I seem to have such strength in me now, that I think I could stand anything, any suffering, only to be able to say and to repeat to myself at

every moment, 'I exist.'" (Dostoyevsky, 500) Dmitry has been entirely altered and invigorated, he was once a man weak to sensual pleasure, and now he is able to face any suffering the world can offer. Fully coming to grips with the revelation in his dream leaves his soul glowing again; he further states: "I see the sun, and if I don't see the sun, I know it's there. And there's a whole life in that, in knowing that the sun is there." (Dostoyevsky, 500) Dmitry sums up the conflict between light and darkness in one thought, it is through consciously knowing that the light is always present, even when it's hidden away in the darkest nights, that one can confront suffering courageously and virtuously.

In the *Brothers Karamazov,* Dostoyevsky's imagery of light and darkness guides his readers to a solution to the problem of suffering. This solution is choosing the path of meaning, love, and virtue as an act of faith, not as a choice of reason. One of the most famous quotes from the novel reads: "The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man." (Dostoyevsky, 98) Dostoyevsky implores his audience to dispel the darkness from their hearts, to act as a glimmering star in someone else's twilight, and to strive towards God, the sun that drives darkness from all our worlds.

Bibliography

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