

## Brutality of the Peasantry in *The Brothers Karamazov*: An Answer to the Grand Inquisitor

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It is considered that in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Zosima's teaching in Book Six and Ivan's Grand Inquisitor in Book Five debate pro and con of the authority of God. The Grand Inquisitor protests man's torment in his having to choose being good or evil. Scholars have been arguing that the Inquisitor's thesis in fact insults the dignity of men. Vladimir Golstein clarifies that the truth of the Inquisitor's "love" for humanity turns out to be his "failure to love and pity coupled with the eagerness to judge, despise, and condemn."<sup>1</sup> Contrary to what the Inquisitor presumes, man is voluntary in bearing and living with their immorality. For instance, as Kate Holland analyzes, the amulet on Dmitri's neck opens up "two competing narratives of prosecution and defense"<sup>2</sup>—the immoral depths to which Dmitri has sunk, and meanwhile, the possibility of moral freedom.

This research argues that it is Dmitri's adventure among peasants that more adequately refutes the authority of the Grand Inquisitor and supersedes his flawed governance of men. Dmitri's experience in the Russian peasantry occupies Book Eight and Book Nine of this novel, following Zosima's teaching and Alyosha's epiphany. But the significant function of this part of the novel is unclear in prior research. It is possible that Dostoevsky unconsciously composes Dmitri's involvement with the peasants as another rebuttal to Ivan's fictional kingdom of the Grand Inquisitor.

First, this paper analyzes the similarities between the Russian peasantry and the Grand Inquisitor—their functions in simulating godly authority. I will argue Dmitri's involvement with the peasantry and the brutality of the peasantry constitute a hierarchy of submission and authority.

Just like the Grand Inquisitor, the whole peasant class symbolizes a godly governance that subdues man. Second, this essay demonstrates that the peasants' authority allows for both the good and the bad in man, and thus maintains man's freedom. This feature of the peasantry proves an alternative to the Inquisitor's authority, which only dictates morality and deprives man of freedom.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, various common classes represent the Russian *narod* (the people) as a whole. Gentry or former members of gentry in misconduct and poverty can engage in manual labor. The merchant class also includes those working as farmers, cooks, servants, janitors, and watchmen. In fact, the jurors from different lower classes are summarized as "peasants" in this novel. Dmitri stands out with his thorough involvement in this broad peasant classes. He is the opposite of Ivan in this aspect, whose connection with the *narod* is in his condescension against his lackey Smerdyakov.

Dmitri's adventurous life, first, is deeply involved with the postreform "merchandise" of the Russian peasantry. His obsession with "Commodities"—gypsies, "cigars, tea, coffee, sugar" (*BK*, 345) would drive him to "pull out his bills and given them away" (*BK*, 369) to those common people. His merchandise spree is labeled by Maximov's folk dance that is anything but "well-bred, aristocratic" (*BK*, 371). His peasant celebration is characteristic of vulgarity, disorder, and "coarseness" (*BK*, 354) of the peasantry.

Moreover, Dmitri is connected with the disordered peasantry in a spiritual way. Out of nowhere, he suddenly regrets compassionately that he bumped into an old woman servant at Samsonov's. Without any proof, he spreads the word that he "parted friends" (*BK*, 342) with Captain Snegiryov. He even pleads in front of certain humble peasants for their deepest forgiveness although they are irrelevant outsiders. It even strikes him to tip the coachman Andrey

three times, all at very inappropriate timings.

Furthermore, Dmitri is involved not only in the messiness of the peasantry, but more importantly, the capriciousness of it. These peasants, merchants, and “the all” reciprocate Dmitri with brutal fickleness. While some peasants and merchants determined to “nurse” the blood-stained Dmitri, series of cheating, betrayal, and manipulation also occurred to the poor soldier. peasants could become phlegmatic and agitated about Dmitri’s being arrested, after they enjoyed and celebrated in a spree as Dmitri’s beneficiaries. An unpredictable, amorphous pattern of peasantry reciprocities is simply not for Dmitri to grasp.

In this way, the disordered reciprocities demonstrate a hierarchy, in which Dmitri is submissive to the peasant world. For instance, this hierarchy is metaphorically embodied by Dmitri’s encounters with Samsonov and Lyagavy. These two merchants figures are basically attached to the peasantry or still remain members of peasant classes. As Tvardovskaia analyzes, Dostoevsky emphasizes Samsonov’s peasant traits that “[r]elations between the head of the family and his household are patriarchal in the extreme”; and Lyagavy, addressed as a *muzhik* and dressed like a peasant, “still holds the social position, and lives the life, of a peasant.”<sup>3</sup> While Samsonov appears to Dmitri as a god-like authority who gets to decide Dmitri’s destiny, the mystical drunken Lyagavy seems quite impossible to be reached. Dmitri walks and walks to find Lyagavy, just finding out that he even cannot wake Lyagavy up to heed him. He fails to get any reaction from Lyagavy’s muteness. These two merchants’ unearthly immobility must exceed its literal meaning. Dmitri’s begging and crying for their mercy symbolizes the silent divinity that ignores man’s torment.

Finally, it is the unfair interrogation by the people that completely destroys Dmitri's dignity. The humiliation of nakedness reduces him to inferiority. And he associates his physical nakedness with the terror of spiritual nakedness before godly power.

In summary, despite Dmitri's one-sided frenzy, the Russian *narod* cast Dmitri's adventure in the shape of man's submission to a very capricious authority.

### *Peasant Brutality as Inherent Evil*

To further interpret the brutal peasantry as an authority that allows moral freedom for man, I demonstrate that based on Dostoevsky's *A Writer's Diary*, the Russian peasants, to him, embrace both man's good and evil. At first glance, Dostoevsky tries to prove the peasant brutality as environmentally determined in some entries of his *Diary*. I would argue, nevertheless, Dostoevsky would not deny an inherent evil in the Russian peasantry.

First, the writer clearly acknowledges man's susceptibility to brutality in general. He points out that "the Turks and the tormentors of Christianity over the Russians"<sup>4</sup> are the generators of evil, among whom "bestiality is elevated as a virtue."<sup>5</sup> This means that the boundary between brutality and virtue can be blurred during invasions. And the writer does not rule out that another *narod*, in addition to the Turks, could also instinctually bow down to a demonic idol. He provides an example of Russian peasants' susceptibility to inner brutality: a drunken courier and an abusive coachman share exactly the exact same type of evil. Dostoevsky associates the peasant's mercilessness against their horses with a Russian courier's abusive nature against a peasant. At this point, Dostoevsky clarifies that the demonic behavior of a drunken peasant beating his wife does not simply result from the courier or his environment. The

writer calls vodka a “demon” for a reason: it deteriorates the nature of man. The point is, people’s corruption is environmentally triggered but is acquired as inner nature.

To prove this, Dostoevsky evidently pinpoints certain peasants to inherent evilness. For instance, the peasant *muzhik* whipping his wife is described as animal-like and monstrous. When abusing his wife, “he himself did not know why he was beating her,” and such an unconscious heinousness is compared to his hanging chickens head down “just for his own pleasure.”<sup>6</sup> the writer notices that the “very large, heavy-set”<sup>7</sup> peasant husbands tend to marry very thin, skinny women, which suggests that the brutal peasants have inherent need for dominance. For Dostoevsky, evil qualities of the peasantry are inherent traits that are unconsciously acquired.

Moreover, it is important to point out that Dostoevsky confirms that even when peasants pardon criminals as unfortunate, they do not deny the crime. They are aware of the “air” or the environment but they know “they also share the guilt in every crime. . . . they believe, on the contrary, that the environment depends completely on them.”<sup>8</sup> Dostoevsky analyzes that people possess compassion for those evil ones nurtured in a corruptive environment, but they will never renounce the existence of sin.

In one word, the peasants judge themselves as bearing inherent evil. Dostoevsky understands his people not as morally Christian, but as seekers of “unsatisfied longing for truth.”<sup>9</sup> As he summarizes about the current status of peasantry morality, “[t]he people are continually seeking the truth, some outlet to it, and they cannot find it.”<sup>10</sup> Until one finds it, and since one has not yet found it, one considers himself to have sinned to the greatest degree.

Furthermore, Dostoevsky expresses the imperativeness that the Russian peasants *must more* candidly sanction evil. The writer takes issue with that suffering beaten wife and the monstrous tormentor husband. It seems like peasantry is not “compassionate” to the suffering

one but brutal to them: local people decided that this couple has to “learn to live together;” the village court forces their daughter back to the brutal husband, although they quite “knew what awaited the child.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the peasantry classes do not put a stop to abuse and suffering. Dostoevsky points out that the peasants are not civilized enough to perform as jurors, and they are painfully well aware of their own responsibility for such heinous crime. This is different from the defense attorneys’ reason to pardon: an attorney could just blame environment and deny the existence of any crime.

Thus, the writer needs the peasant jurors to “call evil by its name” because only in this way, they can make a positive difference to the environment. To pardon out of our fears only means to irresponsibly “flee from our own pity and acquit everyone so as not to suffer ourselves.”<sup>12</sup>

Oppositely, only by recognizing evil and daring to punish the evil ones, one recognizes oneself as evil and punishes oneself. Dostoevsky believes the peasants should purge themselves in this way and feel their responsibility to further “improve the environment.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, despite that the peasantry is profound enough to bear the responsibility for all crimes, the writer insists the necessity for them to more clearly “call evil evil.” And in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he does manage to have the peasants “call evil evil”: they sentence Dmitri to twenty years. However, the peasants’ verdict does not “cleanse” the environment, as the Inquisitor’s management does, but aims at a better environment with both the good and the bad accepted in the community.

### *Conclusion: the Peasant Kingdom of Freedom*

Given that peasantry can acknowledge both good and bad in man, this paper concludes that peasantry has indeed provided Dmitri a chance to convert in freedom. Dmitri gains

something more than ignorant submission. He finally decides to “rebel” against the punishment and run away for “another exile as bad, perhaps, as Siberia” (*BK*, 637). He refuses to repent for his crime by being in Siberia. He wishes to suffer outside the territory of law, work for “the land,” and forever lives with the punitive destiny to its moral depth. Dmitri finds the unjust judgment as just and holy, not because he is in fear of man’s immorality, but because he becomes capable of fighting his evil inside. In this way, the authoritative verdict of the peasants appears positive in the novel. While Zosima does not provide any solid proof of the potential of man, Dmitri succeeds in pursuing morality among the Russian peasantry.

In conclusion, both the Grand Inquisitor and the peasant brutality simulate godly authority in *The Brothers Karamazov*, yet only the Russian peasantry admits both good and evil in man. In this way, the Russian peasantry in *The Brothers Karamazov* symbolizes authority, but it entrusts to man his freedom to choose to convert.

By looking at Dmitri’s involvement with the peasantry and the verdict issued by the peasantry, we can better understand the writer’s acceptance of the Russian peasants’ brutality and his praisal of the peasantry’s harsh judgment. The writer believes only by admitting evilness one can confirm evil and purge oneself to voluntarily improve the environment.

This conclusion is further useful in that it reshapes our understanding of the structure of the novel. What is usually considered a reply to the Inquisitor—Zosima’s teaching in Book Six, develops motifs from the Book of Job and focuses on man’s submissive acceptance of holy creation. The older evades the Inquisitor’s question about how man can live with immorality when abandoned by God. This results in Zosima’s thesis as a less pertinent answer than Dmitri’s adventure in the Russian peasantry. Dmitri epitomizes the evilness of man assumed by the Inquisitor and this paper explores his destiny as a counterargument against the Inquisitor’s thesis.

His insistence in the duality of the human heart contrasts and is superior to the Inquisitor's blasphemous assertion that man is weak and seeks comfort. And only in the Russian peasantry he finds morality in his freedom. It becomes clear that, from this perspective, in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky examines the relation between godly authority and the evilness of man with Dmitri's adventure in the Russian peasantry.

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<sup>1</sup>Vladimir Golstein, "Accidental Families and Surrogate Fathers: Richard, Grigory, and Smerdyakov," in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 2nd ed., trans. and ed. Susan McReynolds Oddo (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011), 763. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BK* with page number.

<sup>2</sup>Kate Holland, "The Legend of the Ladonka and the Trial of the Novel," in *A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov*, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 198.

<sup>3</sup>Valentina A. Tvardovskaia, "Postreform Russia's Social Inventory in *The Brothers Karamazov*," *Russian Studies in History* 47, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 66. The critic validates the peasant traits of Samsonov described by Dostoevsky: his large stone house is covered in dust with dull, gloomy furnishing of fake marble walls; and stuck in a small bedroom, he is inactive in business.

<sup>4</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, trans. Kenneth Lants (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 2:970.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:969.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:141.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:142.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:138.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:1348.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.* In this way, the peasants retain both their sinking down and their longing for Christianity: "it was as if a sea of drunkenness washed over Russia, and even though this continues to wreak havoc even now, the People, sodden with drink though they may be, have not lost their longing for something new, for the truth" (*ibid.*).

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:143.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:135.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*