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Illness, Guilt, Conscience, and Responsibility in *The Brothers Karamazov*

Sara Lambert

Illness runs amuck in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Characters have a tendency to fall ill following important events they have a role in. This pattern is followed by major and minor characters alike. What they each have in common is an overwhelming sentiment of guilt that precedes their illness. The guilt is sometimes but not always rational; however, it always reflects an important theme taught by Father Zosima: all are responsible for all. Thus, Dostoevsky carefully establishes a relationship between guilt, illness, and the idea of everyone being responsible for everyone.

The theme of a shared responsibility for humanity among humanity is slowly taught by Father Zosima, then spread through other characters throughout the novel. The theory begins a few days before Father Zosima's death, as he attempts to share all his knowledge before it is too late. He explains to the monks of the monastery that they are all "undoubtedly responsible for all men and everything on earth" and knowing that is the key to succeeding in their work (146). It is later revealed that Zosima learned this lesson from his elder brother who passed when Zosima was young but still played a great role in shaping his character. On his deathbed, his brother professed that "everyone is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything" (250). This was an explanation of his feelings of guilt because he believed he was guiltier than any man, robbers and murderers included. The theory is a source of mystery and controversy as it unravels. Both readers and characters fail to understand how one person can be responsible for the actions of all others, many that they have never even met. Further, how could a seemingly innocent person be guilty of the sins of the worst people? It seems impossible that the "only means of salvation" is through taking responsibility for others and recognizing that "you are to blame for everyone and for all things" (276). On the surface, the theory makes little sense but is further developed through Father Zosima's teachings.

In Alyosha's journal of Father Zosima's final conversations, the theory comes to fruition. One is guilty for the sins of others because one "might have been a light for the evildoers" (277). In other words, a person fails the world when he does not love mankind and act on that love. It prevents light from shining on sinners and saving them. This theory is at the root of many illnesses in *the Brothers Karamazov*. The characters' guilt stem from the knowledge that they could have done something different or been something better, and changed the outcome of certain situations in the novel. The pain caused by the burden of conscience is illustrated in the novel by Ivan's story of the Grand Inquisitor. The inquisitor claimed that "nothing is a greater cause of suffering" than man's "freedom of conscience" (221). Although most ideas presented in the Grand Inquisitor are at odds with the teachings of Father Zosima, that theory is shared by both. The difference comes into play when determining if freedom of conscience is worth it. This is especially true when it can materialize into a guilt that literally makes characters sick, which is something seen commonly from phrases like "sick with guilt." The characters of the novel suffer from illnesses of the conscience that manifest into physical symptoms.

The most notable illness in the novel is the fever and madness of Ivan Karamazov leading up to and following Dimitri's trial. Ivan's illness has three stages: before, during, and after Dimitri's trial. Each is characterized by a further escalation into madness and incoherency. It is first mentioned briefly in Katerina Ivanovna's exclamation, "he's mad" (505). She further explains that the doctor has diagnosed him with a "nervous fever." Thus, from the first indication

of Ivan's illness the reader knows it is born from his emotions. Chronologically, it is stated that Ivan began to "feel very ill" just after his second visit with Smerdyakov and subsequent conversation with Katya where she uncovered Dmitri's letter showing his guilt (521). This is contradictory to the fact that Dmitri is the most likely suspect at this point, which should lessen his guilt. Therefore, despite this new information, Ivan must still feel some responsibility. His emotions can be explained by Zosima's theory of all being responsible for all. Especially since Ivan left town after Smerdyakov warned him what might happen, so he could have done something to change the outcome but chose not to. Some of Ivan's guilt also comes from a more indirect role. Even if he did not kill his father, at times he did wish he were dead. Before his main illness or even Fyodor's murder occurs, Ivan showed a relationship between illness and guilt when he mentions to Alyosha about Dmitri and Fyodor that "one viper will devour the other" and it would "serve them both right" (Dostoevsky 196). He is wishfully thinking that maybe the two would destroy each other and the world would be better off. Directly after, he complains of a headache. This exhibits that from the beginning of the novel, the pattern is established through Ivan, and his character arc followed it most acutely.

Ivan's sickness is revealed to be the most intense of all illnesses in the story. In chapter nine of book eleven, the reader experiences a hallucination of the devil alongside Ivan. He is tormented by his "nastiest and stupidest" thoughts, and forced to face his role in Smerdyakov's murder of Fyodor (535). The devil becomes a manifestation of his guilt, a fact that is obvious because he is exposed to the reader just after Ivan discovers that Smerdyakov truly did murder Fyodor and did it for Ivan. Ivan and Smerdyakov are the most important examples of Father Zosima's teaching on responsibility. Ivan had the opportunity to lead Smerdyakov into the light, but failed to do so. If that was not enough to grant Ivan responsibility, he led him into the dark with his teachings about conscience and the idea that "everything is permitted" (531). Then, despite knowing the true murderer, Ivan decides to wait to tell the prosecutor until the next day at the trial. After making this decision, Ivan is described as "worried... and tormented" by something (533). His guilt is even greater because it is a culmination of his own responsibility for the death of his father and for his brother being framed. Thus, his illness is greater and his suffering as well.

Ivan's illness is worse by the time the trial rolls around. It forces him to miss his designated time to testify and therefore has to testify later, after Katerina. In front of the entire court, Ivan confesses that Smerdyakov was the murderer, that he incited him to do it, and that therefore he too was the murderer of Fyodor (576-577). His profession of guilt proves how sure he is of his own responsibility in Fyodor's death. He also suggests that his only witness was the devil, illustrating how far his illness had devolved. His ill-looking appearance and mad ravings did not provide him any credibility, so no one believed his confession. Dmitri is still convicted for a crime he did not do, which explains why Ivan does not get better, but falls into a coma after the trial. He was not able to right his wrong, or even take responsibility for it. Therefore, the novel ends with Ivan unconscious, with an uncertain fate of whether he will recover (631).

As Ivan lay in a coma, Dmitri Karamazov also faced his own illness, although not nearly as drastic. After receiving a guilty verdict, he fell ill of the same "nervous fever" that claimed his brother, another illness of emotion (634). Dmitri is plagued by guilt from two sources. Like Ivan, he too feels as though he bears some responsibility for his father's death. He too wished for the death of Fyodor. Despite his plea of not-guilty, Dmitri stated he would accept punishment for his father's death because he "meant to kill him" and "really might have killed him" (429). He holds himself accountable because he cannot condemn someone else for doing something he might

have done himself; it would have been hypocritical. Dmitri also believed deeply in Father Zosima's teaching, although he did not learn it from the monk. The eldest brother had a dream of a babe suffering that taught him that all are responsible for all, and in turn, that someone must suffer on behalf of others. The lesson becomes so profound to him that he was convinced he must go to Siberia for murder in spite of his innocence because "someone must go for all" (499). However, this way of thinking only served to further Dmitri's guilt and internal conflict when his brothers devised a plan for him to escape his sentence to Siberia. Since he was determined to take on the suffering of others, running away was a "question of conscience" (502). Mitya believed that fleeing meant rejecting his chance to be a savior and a righteous man. The choice weighed on him because he could not make it until knowing the verdict of the trial. Consequently, when the verdict came back guilty, he was forced to think of the escape plan in terms of reality rather than fantasy. With the full weight of the choice upon his shoulders, the "nervous fever" arrives. After the trial, he is described as "terribly preoccupied... pondering something heavily and painfully" (635). The decision to avoid punishment for a crime he did not commit should have been easy, but Dmitri did not see himself as innocent. He had a guilty conscience that tormented him because he believed in Father Zosima's teachings. In the end, Dmitri never makes a decision on whether to flee or not. He faces an uncertain fate very similar to his brother's. He has to make the same choice of whether or not he should take responsibility for his actions and for the actions of others.

The most important sickness among the minor characters of the novel is that of Father Zosima's visitor, Mikhail. Before entering the monastery, Zosima had a close relationship with an official of his town. They had nightly conversations until Mikhail admitted that he had murdered someone fourteen years before. He had come to Zosima to assuage the guilt he had finally began to feel. He did not feel guilty for his actions at first because no one suffered for the crime in his place. The man he had framed, Pyotr, died of illness "a week after the arrest," which is another example of guilt and illness in and of itself. (264). It is clear that Pyotr is innocent in the crime so his guilt is suggestive. His situation is similar to Dmitri's in many ways. He was framed for a crime that he looked very guilty of committing. Right before the crime, he was heard "angrily threatening to murder" the victim while drunk (264). He was also found with a weapon and stained with blood. The circumstances of his arrest were nearly identical to Dmitri's and like Mitya the town was convinced of his guilt. He was destined to be found guilty. Perhaps, also like Dmitri, he felt guilty of the murder because even if he did not do it he meant to. Pyotr could have just as easily committed the crime. This is a possible explanation for why he "fell sick of a fever" just after his arrest (264). He died of his illness which was very uncommon, although it makes sense if one looks at the nature of the illnesses throughout the novel. The sickness is a form of self-punishment, while the death can be viewed as a mercy. His passing was described as "God's will" (264). It saved a man described as "innocent" from the terrible fate of a guilty sentence (264). This death of mercy is seen again at the end of Mikhail's story, after he himself falls ill.

Mikhail only begins to be "troubled by pangs of conscience" after he started to raise his children and teach them of virtue (264). Like Dmitri, he felt like a hypocrite. In addition, he felt "unworthy" of the gift of his children's life (265). Physical manifestations of his guilt occurred before his major illness. Mikhail was depicted as "often complain[ing] of headache" just before he confessed his crime to Zosima (263). After his confession and despite his obvious guilt, Zosima still would not exempt him from his crime; he told him to announce his crime to the town to repent. Zosima believed a public confession was important for multiple reasons. One

reasons was that Mikhail was the one who initially suggested it and wanted to do it. The idea of confessing grasped “a hold on his heart” before he met Zosima and prompted him to seek the man out after hearing of his duel (265). His obsession with the idea was there but he lacked the courage to follow through and needed Zosima to give him a push in the right direction. Zosima’s recognition of this need and his willingness to do just that followed his principle of all being responsible for all. Specifically, he knows it is his responsibility to make sure Mikhail was “saved by [Zosima’s] light from his sin” (277). So, he pushes Mikhail to do the one thing he knows will ease his conscience: the right thing. He struggles at first, but Mikhail eventually confesses and five days later “he was ill and his life was in danger” (268). Then, “a week later he died” (269). Zosima admitted that he could not explain “the nature of his illness” (268). Despite the tragic turn of events, Zosima did not view the illness as a bad thing. In fact, he “rejoiced at heart” and saw it as “God’s mercy” (268). After the years Mikhail spent tormenting himself with self-inflicted punishment, he would finally be at rest. Mikhail himself also saw it as merciful. He claims to have felt “heaven in [his] heart” from the moment he confessed (268). The burden of his guilt on his soul was finally lifted and his conscience was cleared. He did not deserve to suffer punishment from the state or society because he had been punishing himself for years better than any outward authority could. He also asserts that in doing the right thing he had done his “duty” (268). He was content to leave the world because he had fulfilled his purpose. In his final mention of Mikhail, Father Zosima calls him a “servant of God” (269). In an earlier conversation, Zosima told Mikhail that “God is not in strength but in truth” (266). Thus, Mikhail served God by serving the truth.

Mikhail and his scapegoat Pyotr are the only two characters besides Illyusha to die of illness. Both deaths were seen as acts of God and can be described as acts of mercy. Mikhail had suffered for a long time in his life, and Pyotr was guaranteed a life of suffering after his trial. Despite how it appears on the surface, death is not the ultimate punishment for sinners. The greatest form of suffering is living with the guilt weighing on one’s conscience. Death was a gift for those who did not deserve to suffer anymore and had cleared their consciences by atoning and forgiving themselves, for God cannot grant his mercy and forgiveness before an individual forgives himself. Illyusha’s death came as a reprieve as well. The boy believed he was being punished by God with consumption because of how he mistreated the dog, Zhuchka. He claimed it so often that his father became convinced that finding the dog alive was the key to his recovery. Instead, soon after the dog was revealed to be alive and well, Illyusha died. When he first saw Zhuchka again, his voice broke “with joy and suffering” showing how much his actions towards the dog were weighing on his conscience (458). Then when the dog jumps onto the sick boy’s bed, Zhuchka “instantly licked his face” (459). The show of affection can be interpreted as a symbol of forgiveness from the dog to the boy. With the dog’s forgiveness, Illyusha can forgive himself and therefore welcome God’s forgiveness and mercy into his heart. His guilt is eased and he can die with a clean conscience, no longer suffering just like Mikhail and Pyotr.

Grushenka, Dmitri’s love interest, also suffers from illness and guilt in relation to the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich. Her sickness comes after Dmitri is arrested and lasts through the months leading up to the trial. It began with a “slight feverish chill,” and though it is never directly called a nervous fever like that of Ivan and Dmitri, she suffers similar symptoms (425). It escalates soon after and she is “ill for nearly five weeks” and unconscious for an entire week of that period (475). The severity of her illness reflects the level of responsibility of guilt she feels for Mitya’s arrest. Grushenka also makes her guilt well known to the public. When Dmitri is first accused, Grushenka demands they be judged and punished together because “it was [her] fault”

and her “wickedness” that drove him to do it (388-389). Her guilt is, of course, founded because of her major role in the tension between Dmitri and Fyodor, which Smerdyakov uses to frame Mitya. In a way, she functions for Mitya the same way Ivan functions for Smerdyakov. She leads him into darkness, instead of into the light as Father Zosima believed humans should for one another. She fails to be a light for Mitya and does not live up to this theory, and therefore feels responsible for his actions. Additionally, perhaps because of their similar roles and actions, Grushenka and Ivan briefly suffer the same fate. Grusha lay in a coma for a week after her guilt struck, and Ivan ends the novel in a coma when his sickness finally conquers him.

Finally, two of the witnesses for the prosecution, Maximov and Madame Khokhlakova, miss the trial because of illness; this is only briefly touched on, so there is less evidence of guilt, but it still seems to follow the pattern of the other illnesses. They fall ill after giving their deposition to the investigators and prosecutor, but before the trial. Their testimony is still used against Dmitri. The town of the Karamazovs is small and everyone is familiar, so some of the guilt may stem from the betrayal of condemning a close acquaintance, if not a friend. The illness of Madame Khokhlakova is more significant because it is specifically mentioned that “her foot had for some reason swollen up,” which could not be defined by doctors (481). An undiscernible cause could be explained by the fact that the true cause is a subconscious guilt. Furthermore, it is possible that somewhere deep inside the witnesses, like Alyosha, do not believe Dmitri is truly capable of murder and only bought into the expectations of society (128). Although it was constantly suggested that Mitya may murder his father, it was not a threat anyone took seriously. Lastly, their guilt makes sense under Father Zosima’s ideals. Both Maximov and Madame Khokhlakova were frequent visitors to the monastery and of Zosima in particular. It can be inferred that they were aware of his beliefs because of their close relationship. Under his ideology that all are responsible for all, the two witnesses would feel guilt over not doing their part to prevent the crime, and for condemning Dmitri to a terrible fate in Siberia. According to the monk, they should have taken his suffering upon themselves which they do not do. Maximov and Madame Khokhlakova showcase a more general practice of Zosima’s teachings. It is simpler to analyze when compared to the main characters because it is not complicated by the bias of the familiarity of main characters. They also had a lesser role in the matter, so most of their guilt would come from the idea that all are responsible for all since they do not have much else to feel guilty for, but still fall ill.

There are some guilty characters who never seem to get sick, as though their consciences never catch up with them. The most prominent example of this is Fyodor Pavlovich. Fyodor lived a wild life full of debauchery and sin. He had more than enough over which to feel guilty, but he never seems to receive any form of punishment for it. Fyodor was a terrible father to his children, forgetting them as soon as his wives passed. He was not good to his wives either, stealing money from one and flaunting his affairs in front of the other. He likely raped Lizaveta producing a bastard son he named Smerdyakov, whom he tormented with his cruel name and used as a servant. He had many more stains on his conscience, none of which seem to have had any effect on him due to the fact that Fyodor never actually faced his sins. Instead, he used his servant Grigory as an external conscience. He did not look inside himself to reflect on his choices, he instead bared his soul to Grigory. When he did so, he claimed his “soul simply quake[d]” (86). Moreover, he needed Grigory because he would “overlook” all his debauchery and not “reproach or threaten him with anything” (86). Grigory would always forgive him no matter what so Fyodor could do anything without fear of punishment. He did not have to ask

himself if he were wrong or guilty because Grigory would bear that burden. Thus, Fyodor never had to feel guilty and never fell ill because Grigory was his external conscience.

Like Father Zosima, Ivan establishes his own theory and ideology in the novel. He professes that conscience does not exist at all, it is something he “makes up for [him]self,” and people are only tormented by it out of “habit” (549). The idea is fundamentally disproven by the characters of the novel and especially by Ivan himself. They each are tortured to the point of physical sickness by their consciences. Ivan may like to believe he does not suffer from the sting of his conscience, but truthfully he is best characterized by Katerina, the woman he loves and who probably knows him best. She distinguishes herself as having “the honor to be his only friend” (580). She depicts him to the court as having a “deep, deep conscience” (580). So instead of having no conscience, Ivan has the greatest conscience of all. He is tormented most out of anyone, leading to the most severe sickness befalling him. In the end, Ivan’s earlier argument reflects the true nature of conscience within the novel. In his discussion at the monastery about ecclesiastic courts, Ivan contends that courts of the State do not effectively punish or reform criminals. He refers to their form of chastisement as “mechanical” (60). In contrast, he believes that the Church can provide “the only effectual” punishment in the form of “recognition of sin by one’s own conscience” (60). Throughout the novel, characters’ recognition of their own guilt and crimes comes in the form of illness. In particular, Ivan himself provides evidence for his own argument.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, illness functions as a means of self-punishment in accordance to what a character believes they deserve based on the level of guilt they feel. In each scenario, there is no concrete evidence of their contribution to the crime, therefore no criminal charges can be brought against any character. Thus, they cannot rely on the legal system to deliver the punishment they need to soothe their consciences. Their own bodies begin to make them sick in order to penalize them for the perceived crime. In the end, their consciences function as a greater form of suffering than prison, exile, or execution ever could. Conscience truly is the greatest form of suffering for humanity. Death serves as the only true end of characters’ suffering. It is seen as God’s mercy to those who have repented, cleared their conscience, and no longer deserve to suffer.

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