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The Brothers Karamazov

Fyodor Dostoevsky · *1880 · Constance Garnett translation*

A father is murdered and three brothers are tested. Ivan argues that without God and immortality there is no virtue; the servant Smerdyakov acts on the idea; Dmitri, innocent of the deed, accepts suffering for his sins; and Alyosha, formed by Elder Zossima, answers with active love.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

If there is no God and no immortality, is "everything lawful"?

"There is no virtue if there is no immortality."
Ivan, at the monastery · Book II, ch. VI, "Why Is Such a Man Alive?"

The novel answers less by argument than by lives: Zossima's love, Dmitri's repentance, Alyosha's faithfulness — and Smerdyakov's crime, the theory carried out.

KEY CHARACTERS

Alyosha
faith, humility, active love

Dmitri (Mitya)
passion, shame, repentance

Ivan
intellect, pride, doubt

Smerdyakov
resentment; the idea carried out

Fyodor Pavlovitch
sensuality and mockery

Father Zossima
the elder; love in action

Grushenka
wounded pride turned to devotion

Katerina Ivanovna
pride and self-laceration

Ilusha
a boy's honour and suffering

THE ELDER'S COUNSEL

> *"love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams."*
> **Zossima to Madame Hohlakov** · Book II, ch. IV, "A Lady of Little Faith"

> *"I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love."*
> **Zossima: "What is hell?"** · Book VI, ch. III, "Conversations and Exhortations of Father Zossima"

Grades 11–12
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01 The Family

BOOKS I–III

A father who abandoned his sons, and sons who must decide what they owe him.

- **Fyodor Pavlovitch** — a mocking sensualist who neglected all his children
- **Dmitri (Mitya)** — passionate and reckless, yet honest about his own sin
- **Ivan** — brilliant and proud; his article on church courts stirs the monastery
- **Alyosha** — the youngest, a novice under Elder Zossima
- **Smerdyakov** — the lackey, rumoured to be Fyodor's son by Lizaveta

> *"Above all, don't lie to yourself."*
> **Zossima to Fyodor** · Book II, ch. II, "The Old Buffoon"

02 Roots of Conflict

BOOKS II–IV

Money, rivalry and wounded pride.

- Dmitri demands his mother's inheritance; Fyodor refuses
- Father and son both pursue Grushenka; 3,000 roubles wait for her in an envelope
- Dmitri secretly squandered 3,000 roubles of his fiancée Katerina Ivanovna's money
- Ivan loves Katerina; Smerdyakov quietly absorbs Ivan's ideas
- Zossima bows to the ground before Dmitri, foreseeing his suffering

> *"God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man."*
> **Dmitri to Alyosha, on beauty** · Book III, ch. III, "The Confession of a Passionate Heart — in Verse"

03 Faith and Doubt

BOOKS V–VII

The great argument, answered by a life.

- "Rebellion": Ivan will not accept a world built on the suffering of children
- "The Grand Inquisitor": Christ returns and is condemned for giving men freedom
- Christ answers only with a kiss; Alyosha kisses Ivan in turn
- Zossima's life and teaching: each is responsible to all; love in action
- Zossima's death and the swift corruption of his body shake Alyosha
- Grushenka's "onion" and the vision of Cana restore him; he kisses the earth

> *"It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket."*
> **Ivan** · Book V, ch. IV, "Rebellion"

04 The Murder

BOOKS VIII–IX

One night, two men in the garden.

- Ivan leaves town, though Smerdyakov all but warns him what may happen
- Frantic for money, Dmitri reaches his father's window, flees, and strikes old Grigory with a brass pestle
- Fyodor is found killed; the 3,000 roubles are gone
- Dmitri is arrested at Mokroe after a night of revelry with Grushenka
- Under questioning he dreams of a weeping "babe" and begins to change

> *"I go for all, because some one must go for all."*
> **Dmitri, awaiting trial** · Book XI, ch. IV, "A Hymn and a Secret"

05 Guilt and Judgment

BOOKS XI–XII

Who is guilty: the hand, the wish, or the idea?

- On Ivan's third visit, Smerdyakov confesses the murder and hands over the money
- He says he acted on Ivan's teaching that "everything is lawful"
- Ivan's nightmare: the devil appears as a shabby Russian gentleman and mocks him
- Smerdyakov hangs himself, leaving a note that blames no one
- At the trial Ivan collapses; Katerina produces Dmitri's drunken letter
- The jury convicts the innocent Dmitri

> *"You murdered him; you are the real murderer, I was only your instrument"*
> **Smerdyakov to Ivan** · Book XI, ch. VIII, "The Third and Last Interview with Smerdyakov"

06 Love and Resurrection

BOOK X & EPILOGUE

What saves is love that suffers for others.

- Alyosha befriends the schoolboys and Ilusha, whose father Dmitri publicly shamed
- Kolya and the boys are reconciled at Ilusha's bedside; Ilusha dies
- Dmitri accepts his sentence as suffering; an escape to America is planned
- Katerina visits Dmitri: "for a moment the lie becomes truth"
- At the stone, Alyosha asks the boys never to forget Ilusha or goodness

> *"Certainly we shall all rise again, certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened!"*
> **Alyosha to the boys** · Epilogue, ch. III, "Ilusha's Funeral. The Speech at the Stone"

Faith & Doubt · Freedom & Authority · Guilt & Shared Responsibility · Repentance & Suffering · Active Love · Fathers & Sons

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Follow one phrase — "everything is lawful" — from the monastery (Book II) to Smerdyakov's confession (Book XI). Who says it, and who acts on it?
2. Separate guilt for the deed, the wish and the idea. Which brother is guilty of which?
3. Ivan's "Rebellion" and "Grand Inquisitor" are never refuted by debate. How do Books VI–VII answer them?
4. Listen for Zossima's teaching in other mouths: Dmitri's "babe," Alyosha's speech to the boys.
5. Set the jury's verdict beside what the reader knows. What does the novel say about human and divine justice?
6. Notice who bows, kneels or kisses — and what each gesture confesses.

Quotations are verbatim from the Constance Garnett translation, Project Gutenberg #28054, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-brothers-karamazov/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.