

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDREN IN  
DOSTOEVSKY'S THOUGHT

by

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Fyodor Dostoevsky gives the role of children special significance in his fictional works and in his moral philosophy. His novels and short stories show the theme of children emerging again and again as Dostoevsky attempts to construct an ideal world harmony; it is most often the child to whom he turns as a model of the virtues he considers most important. It is the child who holds the promise of a future paradise on earth.

Dostoevsky uses children in three ways. First, children appear as characters with significant roles in the plots in which they appear. An eager kindness and warmth, touched with a few human faults, are the elements usually included in the character development of children, such as with Kolya Krassotkin in The Brothers Karamazov. Secondly, the image of the child becomes a comparison for a certain type of adult. Stepan Trofimovitch in The Possessed, Madame Epanchin in The Idiot, and Makar Ivanovitch in A Raw Youth are three such characters who add elements to Dostoevsky's conception of goodness when they are seen from the perspective of the child. The third position children occupy in Dostoevsky's work is that of catalyst in the moral regeneration of adults. Here children appear as characters, but the focus of the scene is on the adults who find inspiration in the presence of a child in some moment of weakness or despair. Thus, in "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" the little girl who appeals to the man on the verge of suicide is really a plot device to deter the man from taking his own life; but it is important that Dostoevsky chooses a child for

the task of jarring the man into a spiritual awakening. Whether secondary or central in the plot or as a descriptive term for particular adults, Dostoevsky treats the child with care to show the ethical code by which he hopes to change the world.

The primary tenet in this ethical code is love. This is apparent in the moral attitude of Dostoevsky's favored characters and in their treatment of others. For example, in The Brothers Karamazov Alyosha consistently finds strength in love. Although he has great faith, Alyosha is also pursued by doubts, causing him to stumble when he realizes God has let the body of his elder Father Zossima decay. At the moment when he is ready to destroy his inner sanctity, he is morally reawakened by Grushenka, the fallen woman, as he recognizes the spirit of love in her. She has, as he says, "a treasure--a loving heart."<sup>1</sup> If love shores up Alyosha and Grushenka, it also adds a certain warmth to the life of Ivan, the deepest skeptic of the novel. After Ivan tells his story of the Grand Inquisitor, he says he cannot share Alyosha's faith; yet, something remains of joy in life for him, and it stems from the loving nature of Alyosha. Ivan says, "I shall only love [the sticky little leaves] remembering you. It's enough for me that you are somewhere here, and I shan't lose my desire for life yet. . . .Take it as a declaration

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<sup>1</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, trans. Constance Garnett (New York, 1950), p. 422.

of love if you like."<sup>2</sup> The Idiot contains the same reliance on love as a virtue to strengthen and warm man even in his blackest moments. In this spirit Prince Myshkin writes to Aglaia, his ideal love, when he is searching for Nastasya Filippovna, who, like Grushenka in The Brothers Karamazov, needs the help of someone spiritually strong. In the letter Myshkin tells of his need for Aglaia and his wish for her happiness; the thought of her at what he later calls "the bitterest moment of my life" is able to sustain him.<sup>3</sup> Thus, with his chief characters Dostoevsky emphasizes the value of love in human relationships.

Love also becomes the focal point for sermons from two of Dostoevsky's most articulate men of God, Father Zossima and Makar Ivanovitch. Both preach love as an all-embracing eternal virtue that is the redemptive force in life. Father Zossima pleads dramatically from his deathbed that men love one another:

Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. . . .if you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. . . .Love children especially, for they too are sinless like the angels; they live to soften and purify our hearts.<sup>4</sup>

The monk states man's first duty in life, that of loving, and also points to the child's special place among those to whom

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 313.

<sup>3</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Idiot, trans. Constance Garnett (New York, 1962), p. 410.

<sup>4</sup>Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, pp. 382-383.

one should respond.

If man is to love, he is to do so without reserve; the good life for Dostoevsky includes a suspension of judgment on the basis of man's common bond of sin. As Father Zossima preaches love, he also reminds his disciples that there is something of the criminal in all men and that no one is free from guilt. He feels that evil should be met with love and humility rather than scorn. Two of the novels show characters acting on the monk's advice.

Prince Myshkin, in The Idiot, practices the teaching of suspension of judgment on a large scale when he offers to marry Nastasya Filippovna. Despite the sins of her past he promises always to respect her. The other characters in the novel also escape censure from Myshkin so that tension builds as he is forced to choose courses of action among people whom he loves and refuses to condemn. In the end Prince Myshkin cannot successfully integrate his feeling of responsibility to those around him, and he lapses back into madness. Here a problem arises: is it humanly possible to suspend judgment completely? At any rate, it is necessary to attempt to cease deriding the weaknesses of others and at the same time to achieve stability in life. Myshkin, delicately balanced, fails at the latter requirement because he is unable to choose between two absolute commitments.

The Possessed gives further example of the need to refrain

from judging others. The most touching instance of this occurs after the murders of Marya the cripple, Lebyadkin her brother, and their servant. Liza, a beautiful and erratic young woman, feels she is indirectly responsible for their deaths; and she appeals to Mavriky Nikolaevitch, her betrothed, to kill her in return. He answers that no one, especially himself, has the right to judge her. Thus the characters in three of the major novels add a shared responsibility for sin to the proper mode of living the good life.

Dostoevsky believed that loving one's neighbor and refraining from judging him should stem from a deep faith in God, especially through the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church. According to William Hubben, Dostoevsky himself had great doubts about religious belief but found his faith strengthened most during his rigorous years in Siberia as a political prisoner.<sup>5</sup> His faith was a product of emotion and intuition rather than rationality.<sup>6</sup> To practice this religion truly is to identify with others in love and understanding rather than to follow the letter of theological law. The characters in Dostoevsky's works who are lonely and proud dealers in cold theory lack this feeling for others.<sup>7</sup> One may read Ivan's story of the

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<sup>5</sup>William Hubben, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka, Four Prophets of Our Destiny (New York, 1952), p. 56.

<sup>6</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to His Family and Friends, trans. Ethel Colburn Mayne (New York, 1961), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Helen Muchnic, An Introduction to Russian Literature (Garden City, N.Y., 1947), p. 177.

Grand Inquisitor as a powerful assertion of disbelief by Dostoevsky, but in a letter to the critic Pobedonostsev he refutes this interpretation as the direction of the book. Rather, the section "The Russian Monk," dealing with Father Zossima, provides the answer to the rational problem posed by the Grand Inquisitor:

and therefore I also tremble for it in this sense--will it be a sufficient answer? The more so that this answer now is not direct, not point by point to the theses that were expressed earlier (in the G. Inquisitor and before), but it is only implied. Here something is presented directly opposed to the world-outlook expressed above. . . . Then there are several things in the monk's teaching against which they will simply cry out, that they are absurd, for they are too exalted; of course they are absurd in the everyday sense, but in another, inward, sense, it seems they are justified.<sup>8</sup>

Thus it is the intuitive rather than the rational in the teachings of Father Zossima that gives them validity. Alyosha carries on his elder's teaching; and according to Helen Muchnic, his philosophy explains true faith as "a way that opposes human sympathy to rationality, strict individual morality to science, selflessness to egotism."<sup>9</sup> These qualities are characteristic of children. A child is quick to feel and to act upon his feelings so that the emotional response Alyosha and Father

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<sup>8</sup>Konstantin Mochulsky, Dostoevsky: His Life and Work (Princeton, 1967), pp. 590-591.

<sup>9</sup>Muchnic, An Introduction to Russian Literature, p. 170.

Zossima call for is more characteristic of the child than an intellectual response. Faith is questioned only with growing maturity and the ability to rationalize. Dostoevsky, then, speaking through Father Zossima, would have people develop a faith as simple and complete and intuitive as they might have held in their earliest years.

The novels of Dostoevsky show that it is difficult for man to exist without some kind of faith. In The Idiot Prince Myshkin, who has the devout faith of a child, says to the doubter Rogozhin that modern trends make it fashionable to deny God and that many verbal statements of skepticism seem to lack sincerity. Perhaps those who profess to doubt really have some basic religious beliefs after all. Even Ippolit, the young intellectual in the same novel, says he must believe in eternal life and Providence although they are beyond his understanding. The idea that men must devote themselves to some system of convictions is further displayed by Stepan Trofimovitch in The Possessed although he is saved from the evil of Stavrogin by his faith in liberalism rather than by traditional Christianity.<sup>10</sup> On his deathbed Stepan Trofimovitch is still not a confirmed believer, yet he recognizes the need for religion: "If there is a God, then I am immortal. . . .The one essential condition of human existence is that man should always be able to bow

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<sup>10</sup>Irving Howe, Politics and the Novel (New York, 1957), p. 74.

down before something infinitely great."<sup>11</sup>

Two other non-believers in The Possessed demonstrate this drive to worship what is great. The atheist Kirillov pursues disbelief, and yet he **says**, "God has tormented me all my life."<sup>12</sup> He is a man who does not want to believe in God but who cannot quite escape wondering if perhaps God exists. Shatov, by contrast, is trying to reach God by rational means and cannot succeed in his intellectual search: "I. . .I will believe in God."<sup>13</sup> He finds God at last through his love for his wife and child. Instead of running from God as Kirillov does, Shatov struggles toward Him, only succeeding when emotions rather than the intellect guide him.

Crime and Punishment offers a further example of the emotional quality of faith in the new openness Raskolnikov has toward religion at the end of the book; love and suffering have stirred the beginnings of faith in him where intellectualism had failed before. It was his carefully rationalized idea that eventual greatness could be founded on a base action that originally led him to crime. Although Raskolnikov still lacks the complete and childlike faith of Sonia, he is at least willing to keep her New Testament. Faith for Raskolnikov and Shatov,

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<sup>11</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Possessed, trans. Constance Garnett (New York, 1963), p. 674.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 256.

the intellectuals, is finally built on a cornerstone of love.

Dostoevsky's view of the good life is incomplete without the qualification of suffering since the common bond of humanity should engender love out of the acknowledgment of suffering. In a letter to his niece Dostoevsky says, "without pain, one comprehends not joy. Ideals are purified by suffering, as gold is by fire. Mankind must strive for his Heaven."<sup>14</sup> His own life was marked by the Siberian imprisonment, near execution, fits of epilepsy, and poverty and debt. Many of his characters also follow a road of suffering as their beliefs deepen and their human sensibilities increase. Crime and Punishment offers a clear-cut picture of one man's redemption through suffering. Raskolnikov murders the old pawnbroker as a consequence of his intellectual theories, and as a result he undergoes great mental agony. He wants to be released from the torment he feels, and Sonia points to the only way: "Go at once, this very minute, stand at the cross-roads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled and then bow down to all the world and say to all men aloud, 'I am a murderer!'. . . .Suffer and expiate your sin by it, that's what you must do."<sup>15</sup> Later Raskolnikov does exactly that, so that when he comes into his new life in Siberia, his spiritual renewal is a product of his suffering.

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<sup>14</sup>Dostoevsky, Letters to His Family and Friends, p. 206.

<sup>15</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, trans. Constance Garnett (New York, 1917), p. 426.

In The Idiot it is the suffering in Nastasya Filippovna's face that attracts the innocent Prince Myshkin. As a young girl, she was forced to become the mistress of a rich merchant, and all her life Nastasya has been used immorally although she has the potential for great spiritual depth. Myshkin is drawn to her because of what she has undergone as he is drawn to the suffering countenance of Christ.

Painful experience is not only necessary for those who have sins to expiate; it is a stage even the good must pass through, as Father Zossima tells Alyosha when he sends him from the monastery. The elder warns Alyosha, "you will have to bear all before you come back."<sup>16</sup> Suffering is the critical stage in Dostoevsky's moral code; it is a physical and mental state through which all must pass to be spiritually purified and united with others in faith and love.

Dostoevsky's ideal for human experience does not stop with the present; there was a future objective to his moral beliefs. He feels they could lead to a regeneration of society into a state resembling primeval innocence. This dream is called the Golden Age after a painting by Claude Lorraine. Lorraine's picture, dealing with man before his fall into sin, is the subject for Versilov's dream in A Raw Youth. Versilov comments on man's original state by saying that his "wealth of untouched strength was spent on simple-hearted joy and love."<sup>17</sup> Into

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<sup>16</sup> Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, A Raw Youth, trans. Constance Garnett (New York, 1950), p. 462.

this idyllic setting greed and mistrust enter to drag mankind into a web of vice that leads to the present society. It is then that Versilov sees a new age dawn. This one is even more beautiful than the first because of the suffering on which it is founded. He says of this new breed, "they would be in haste to love, to stifle the great sorrow of their hearts. . . . they would grow tender to one another, and would not be ashamed of it as now, and would be caressing as children."<sup>18</sup> But Versilov is not the ideal dreamer; he lacks the religious faith that is part of Dostoevsky's teachings. His utopia is a godless one. Kirillov, in The Possessed, dreams of the same sort of new world. He plans to commit suicide purposely to show the falsity of man's old beliefs. Following his death, men will find release from their bondage to old ideas, discover their own goodness, and cease to sin. Again, this is a human brotherhood divorced from religious belief.

A more complete picture of the Golden Age is found in the story "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man." The Ridiculous Man himself tells the story of how he was at the point of suicide because he felt there was no tie to hold him to life. Then he is stopped in the street by a little girl asking for help for her dying mother. He refuses the child but later regrets his lack of action. Then it occurs to him that if he can care about this one human being his reason for suicide is invalid.

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<sup>18</sup>Dostoevsky, A Raw Youth, p. 467.

At this point, with his gun before him, the man falls asleep. He dreams first of the painting by Lorraine and then of a way to achieve this state of happiness. Mankind must simply decide to stop hating each other and to love instead. When the man wakes up, he begins to preach the doctrine of love to move the world closer to his dream. He starts with the child he abandoned in the night. The Ridiculous Man realizes his plan will seem impractical; the title "ridiculous" will be conferred on him by the logical people he encounters. But he explains that his plan is not based on the rationale of which man is so proud:

It was a dream, they say, delirium, hallucination. . . .  
 And is not our life a dream? I will say  
 more. Suppose this paradise will never  
 come to pass (that I understand), yet I  
 shall go on preaching it. And yet how  
 simple it is: in one day, in one hour  
 everything could be arranged at once!  
 The chief thing is to love others like  
 yourself. . . .The consciousness of life  
 is higher than life, the knowledge of the  
 laws of happiness is higher than happiness--  
 that is what one must contend against.<sup>19</sup>

Although the man's design is quixotic, it is motivated by the kind of childlike faith suggested by Father Zossima and Alyosha. This story is important for the way it spells out Dostoevsky's religious philosophy. It brings together his hope for a heaven on earth, universal brotherhood based on love and Christian belief, and the purification of mankind.<sup>20</sup> According

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<sup>19</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Short Stories of Dostoevsky, ed. William Phillips and trans. Constance Garnett (New York, 1946), p.614.

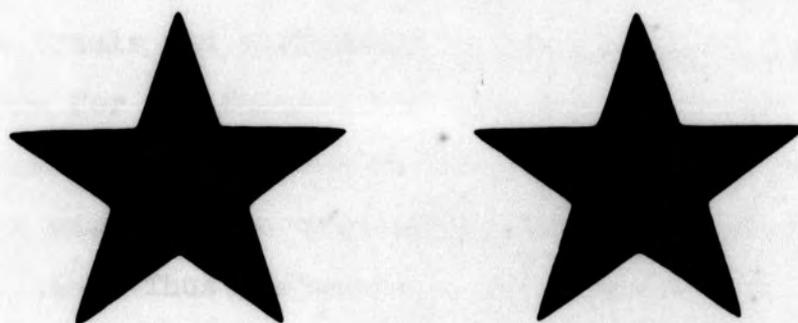
<sup>20</sup>Mochulsky, Dostoevsky: His Life and Work, pp. 556-557.

to the story, the work begins with the approach of a child.

In The Brothers Karamazov the same theme appears on a larger scale. It is the children who hold the promise of eventual world perfection in their natural goodness. When Alyosha speaks to the boys at the end of the novel, he is preaching the doctrine of Father Zossima which was intended to over-ride the skepticism of the Grand Inquisitor. The story of the trials and wickedness of the Karamazovs ends on a note of hope for the future; the idea is to take human beings before they have acquired much of the world's vice and to show them the right way so that their generation will be better than the old one. Thus Dostoevsky's salvation is not inherently otherworldly. It is rooted in the realities of earth.

Dostoevsky's ideal society is based on the pattern of the old communal peasant life, which combines intuitive faith, close ties among people, and a love of the land. The soil is the most important thing in the world to the peasants; and with the wealth of it comprising non-industrial Russia, it is the obvious place to serve as the new Eden. He says of the New Age to come from the earth, which is identified with the peasants, and from the children, "land is everything. . .I am drawing no line between the land and the children; this inference of mine comes of its own accord. However, I am not going to enlarge upon this point; you will understand it yourself if

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you give thought to it."<sup>21</sup> In The Diary of a Writer Dostoevsky says that children must be reared in the country to escape the stifling conditions that are part of city life. Industrialization is not an evil in itself as long as the workers have a spot of land where they can go after they leave the factories. This contact with the earth will be the cradle of the New World: "Mankind will be regenerated in the Garden, and the Garden will restore it--such is the formula."<sup>22</sup> Mochulsky points out the relationship that exists between Dostoevsky's use of children and the land and his theme of the Golden Age:

Therefore, the theme of the children. . . forms a consecrated Trinity: paradise-children-the earth. . . The writer's political doctrine about being rooted in the soil and his religious teaching about the earth are united with faith in the regeneration of mankind.<sup>23</sup> Children are the symbol of this union.<sup>23</sup>

The regeneration is to begin in Russia where the volksgeist of the people underlying the Orthodox church is the kind of spirit needed for the Golden Age. The institution of the Russian Church evolved historically along with the Russian people and therefore serves as the best vessel for channeling the love that is to change the world.<sup>24</sup> In a speech in honor of Pushkin Dostoevsky explains that the role of the Russian is

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<sup>21</sup>F. M. Dostoevsky, The Diary of a Writer, trans. Boris Brasol (New York, 1949), I, p. 416.

<sup>22</sup>ibid., p. 417.

<sup>23</sup>Mochulsky, Dostoevsky: His Life and Work, p. 559.

<sup>24</sup>Avrahm Yarmolinsky, "Foreword," The Possessed, Fyodor Dostoevsky, v.

to be a brother to the people of other countries by understanding them and serving as a peacemaker among them. In this way the Christian brotherhood of mankind will come into existence.<sup>25</sup>

Shatov, in The Possessed, perhaps carries the identification of the Orthodox Church and the Russian people to the extreme in his discussion of the belief systems of different nations. He feels that Russia has the greatest religion because the nation is "god-bearing," and he would like to make the people into God.<sup>26</sup>

Not every man in Russia carries this messianic light within him; those most in accord with Orthodoxy are the peasants. Although Dostoevsky writes chiefly about the city, it is not pure romanticism which leads him to idealize the peasants with whom he lacks familiarity. Russian city-dwellers in an underdeveloped country could look to Europe for an example of how the modern concept of individualism would succeed and fail in society. Versilov provides the example of the destruction of the Tuileries in 1871 as a proof that rampant individualism could serve to tear down valuable institutions. The mistakes evident in Europe could cause a retreat to the more collective spirit of the Russian peasant.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Hubben, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup>Dostoevsky, The Possessed, p. 255.

<sup>27</sup>Howe, Politics and the Novel, p. 53.

The true Russian spirit underlies the short story "The Peasant Marey." A political prisoner surrounded by peasants can feel only disgust at their barbarism until he recalls an incident from his childhood involving just such a peasant. He had been playing in the forest when he suddenly thought he heard someone cry a warning against a wolf. In terror he ran to the arms of a peasant plowing in a nearby field. Marey, the peasant, soothed him tenderly, blessed him, and sent him home again. Now in prison the man is struck by the kindness of the peasant and begins to see his fellow prisoners as human beings worthy of his regard instead of as animals. This story demonstrates the glorifying of the nature of the Russian peasant as loving and generous. It is this spirit that will lead the world to brotherhood.

"The Peasant Marey" is one instance in which the figure of a child plays a significant role in the spiritual reawakening of a man. The child is the man himself in former years; the memory of himself and the peasant is sufficient to warm the man toward his fellow prisoners. The pattern of the child as catalyst for adult moral regeneration is a recurring theme in Dostoevsky's work. In this way children have an importance beyond serving only as a generation of innocents to be the inheritors of the New Age. They contribute to the movement among the present generation in an active way by helping to counteract the vices that have already taken hold. Another memory of childhood that has a beneficial effect in later years

is Raskolnikov's dream of the mare that was beaten to death before his eyes when he was a boy. It presents such a horror of cruelty and violence that he renounces the idea of the murder. He feels a great release and peace of mind. It is only by chance that he goes home through the Hay Market and overhears the hour when Lizaveta will be away from the pawnbroker's rooms. This information brings back the original intent to carry out the murder. The scene from childhood is designed to provide a moral shock for Raskolnikov, and it almost prevents him from committing the crime until he hears of an opportunity to implement his plans.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to memories of a character's own youth, meetings with other children also inspire a moral rejuvenation in adult characters. "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" illustrates this use of the child. When the little girl begs the man to help her dying mother, she sets off a chain of emotions in him: caring for another individual, valuing life, conceiving of the idea of a new world, and working to bring it about by preaching love. In Crime and Punishment Raskolnikov feels a similar sense of need after Marmeladov dies. The man must be buried and his widow and children provided for. Raskolnikov gives his last twenty roubles to the family and walks away "entirely absorbed in a new overwhelming sensation of life and strength

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<sup>28</sup> Philip Rahv, "Dostoevsky in Crime and Punishment," Partisan Review, XXVII, Summer (1960), 396-397.

that surged up suddenly within him."<sup>29</sup> At that moment Polenka comes running to thank him in complete trust and love. He looks "at her with a sort of rapture. It was such a joy to him to look at her, he could not have said why."<sup>30</sup> After the horrors of his crime and the mental torment following it, Raskolnikov acts on impulse to be charitable and finds himself rewarded with the complete confidence and admiration of little Polenka. He has discovered a purpose and hope in life again. In the final version of The Idiot the influence of children plays a diminished role from that originally planned in the notebooks. Myshkin is conceived of as constantly surrounded by children; and in addition to reinforcing Myshkin's own purity, they also increase Rogozhin's moral sensitivity. This more elaborate design has been eliminated in the novel, however.<sup>31</sup> The original plan for The Idiot, along with Crime and Punishment and "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," show how Dostoevsky places children in the paths of adults who need awakening in a moral sense. The children--loving, trusting, and warm--bring out the same traits in the unhappy men whose paths they cross.

In the same way the presence of a baby can inspire a man to feel a new value in life. The best example of this is Shatov's love for his wife Marie and her child. He is not the boy's

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<sup>29</sup>Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, p. 189.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>31</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Notebooks for The Idiot, ed. Edward Wasiolek and trans. Katharine Strelsky (Chicago, 1967), p. 162.

natural father, yet he accepts him completely as his son. A tie of love becomes even more important than a tie of blood.

Shatov is struck by the miracle of birth: "There were two and now there's a third human being, a new spirit, finished and complete, unlike the handiwork of man; a new thought and a new love. . .it's positively frightening. . .And there's nothing grander in the world."<sup>32</sup> He and Marie decide to begin a life of faith and love with the baby, their symbol of a chance for a new start. This is perhaps one of the most tragically ironic moments in Dostoevsky's writing since Shatov is murdered minutes afterward by the political schemers with whom he had just planned to sever ties. Prince Myshkin, in The Idiot, finds a baby to be a symbol for him as well. He tells Rogozhin an anecdote about a peasant woman who prayed when she saw her baby smile for the first time, and also of a man who sold his cross for drinking money. The latter incident discourages him, but he finds a greater hope in the first episode. In the baby's smile and the mother's reaction to it he sees a true religious spirit which he feels is representative of the Russian people. A baby, a new human life, may thus work symbolically on those who see in him the promise of the future.

A child is not always enough in himself to act powerfully on people; sometimes it is the death of a child that stirs

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<sup>32</sup>Dostoevsky, The Possessed, p. 603.

the latent feelings of faith and love. Father Zossima relates one incident of grief over a child's death. A woman's son had just died, and the monk comforts her by telling her that her sorrow is good instead of by trying to stifle it. In thinking of her son she will remember God, and eventually become closer to Him and find peace and happiness. This passage describes her sadness poignantly, and it is especially touching since it was written after Dostoevsky's own son died from epilepsy.<sup>33</sup>

A more dramatic conversion occurs in a tale by Makar Ivanovitch in A Raw Youth. Here a miserly merchant frightens a widow's son into committing suicide out of sheer insensitivity on the merchant's part. When he regrets his responsibility for the boy's death, he marries the widow and hopes they will have a child of their own to replace the dead boy. A child is finally born but he too dies. This convinces the merchant that the only forgiveness for his former sin lies in suffering for himself so that he finds peace wandering through Russia as a penitent. Materialistic schemes are also the dream of the hero of A Raw Youth, Arkady; but he never sinks as low as the merchant of Makar's story. Arkady's human sensibilities are too near the surface of his nature to need such a severe lesson as the merchant. When Arkady is at the height of his Rothschildian ambitions, a foundling is left at his house; and the young

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<sup>33</sup>Avrahm Yarmolinsky, Dostoevsky, His Life and Art (New York, 1957), p. 357.

man loves and cares for the baby Arina. When she dies, he realizes that between saving his money and helping the child, he has done the latter. His "idea" is not so important as the value of life.

One final episode with a child, in this case a dream-child, underscores the importance of the purity and goodness of the young. Svidrigailov, the lustful character who hovers through the pages of Crime and Punishment like the essence of evil, dreams of a little girl. She needs his help, so he takes her to his room and puts her to bed. There, as he looks at her, her face changes into a harlot's face. Sensuality fills him so completely that there is no innocence left in the world for him, not even in a sleeping child. The gesture of helping a child, so refreshing for Dostoevsky's other characters, brings only increased lust to Svidrigailov. Completely demoralized, he commits suicide. There is nothing left for him to live for.

In Dostoevsky's work the decisive meetings with children call adults away from the sadness and vice into which they have fallen through the lack of a loving upbringing. Dostoevsky feels a great sympathy for those neglected in their early years and frequently points out the terrible effects that cruelty and bad example have on children. The inspiration for The Idiot came from an actual case of parents neglecting their child. This leads to the girl's attempt to burn the estate

in a desire for both affection and revenge, and the account provides the basis for the victimized childhood of Nastasya Filippovna in the novel.<sup>34</sup> Crime and Punishment offers another picture of the victimized child, this time within the sarcasm Raskolnikov levels at Sonia's faith: "Haven't you seen children here at the street corners sent out by their mothers to beg? I've found out where those mothers live and in what surroundings. Children can't remain children there! At seven the child is vicious and a thief. Yet children. . . are the image of Christ. . . they are the humanity of the future."<sup>35</sup> In the context of Dostoevsky's overall religious belief the fault lies not basically with God, but with man that such conditions exist. The city street where a child may become a thief and the country estate where a child may resort to arson are places devoid of love; it is unlikely that children reared without love will be a very humane generation in the future.

Some families, however, are worthy models of child-rearing. Father Zossima was surrounded in his earliest years with peace and love. He had extensive religious teaching and the example of a dedicated older brother who taught him humility and the suspension of judgment of others. Later in life he says childhood memories are the most precious ones, especially those of a harmonious background. The monk cautions adults to always

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<sup>34</sup>Dostoevsky, The Notebooks for The Idiot, pp. 6-7.

<sup>35</sup>Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, p. 335.

set a good example since anger can sow "an evil seed in [a child] and it may grow, and all because you were not careful before the child, because you did not foster in yourself a careful, actively benevolent love."<sup>36</sup> Father Zossima himself reflects the serenity of his childhood, and with his own highly developed sense of human sympathy he is selected to refute the assertions of skepticism in the novel. Alyosha echoes the sentiments of Father Zossima when he speaks to the boys after Ilusha's burial. He asks them to remember the goodness of the moment for future strength. A wealth of memories like this will guard against evil all their lives, and even one remembrance may provide inspiration at some decisive moment. Dostoevsky later offers explicit guidelines for good child-rearing practices in a letter to a mother who has asked him how to bring up her son. His answer to her is a restatement of Father Zossima's childhood: to be a good example worth remembering, to teach the Orthodox religion, and not to overdo attention. He felt that religious teaching was most important for producing a fine adult.<sup>37</sup> Dostoevsky stresses the need for a happy childhood to foster a child's natural virtues and to stifle the human tendency to evil. Only in this way can a generation of children mature to bring the real world a step closer to the Golden Age.

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<sup>36</sup>Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 383.

<sup>37</sup>Dostoevsky, Letters to His Family and Friends, pp. 236-237.

Dostoevsky's conception of the natural goodness of a child may be found by examining the young people in his works. The Idiot was originally intended to contain a wealth of children who would provide a backdrop for the activities of Myshkin. He forms a club with them, and only with them can he be completely at ease. Since Dostoevsky attempted to make the Prince "the representation of a truly perfect and noble man," it is a comment on the children's own innate nobility that he can only be himself in their company.<sup>38</sup> The finished version of the novel has not deleted all the children. The episode in the Swiss village remains in which the children at first jeer at the poor consumptive Marie. Myshkin teaches them to love her, and they finally come to treat her with more respect and tenderness than the adults in the village. Myshkin is struck by the happiness of the children; he uses the memory of their joy as a touchstone in moments of sadness and wishes that all people could find the key to this happiness. He also comments on children's understanding of adults and adult situations by saying that children may be told anything and be trusted to give reliable advice. The notebooks contain a further tribute to the naïveté of children about worldly experience that would crush their dreams when Myshkin tells them the story of

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<sup>38</sup>ibid., p. 142.

Columbus. Each can picture himself in the role of the discoverer, who, Myshkin points out, sailed against the rationality of his day.<sup>39</sup>

The Brothers Karamazov contains another boy named Kolya, much like the Kolya of The Idiot. He shows pride in his own ability, tenderness toward the brother and sister in his care, and respect for the goodness of Alyosha. Alyosha is able to stir his generosity toward the sick child Ilusha so that Kolya Krassotkin becomes the leader of the group of boys who brighten Ilusha's last days. Ilusha himself is a character filled with great pride and love for his father, and he is very courageous in his sickness and poverty. At Ilusha's funeral the children treat the family with sympathy. They are as touched by the death of their friend as the children in Prince Myshkin's Swiss village over the death of Marie.

The compassion of children is demonstrated further in the short story "A Little Hero" in which an eleven-year-old boy, naïve in the ways of the world, is moved to help the beautiful young woman who is his first love. She has an over-bearing husband and also a lover; and although the little boy does not understand what he is doing, he instinctively comforts her by giving her a farewell letter from her lover that she had lost. For him this act is the beginning of a new understanding of

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<sup>39</sup>Dostoevsky, The Notebooks for The Idiot, p. 194.

sympathy toward others. The children of Dostoevsky's work are compassionate, brave, and respectful; they are happy individuals possessing simultaneously innate wisdom and naïveté. The virtues of children and their significance are summed up by Arkady in A Raw Youth while describing a baby: "a laughing, merry one is a sunbeam from paradise, it is a revelation from the future, when man will become at last as pure and simple-hearted as a child."<sup>40</sup>

Some of the goodness of childhood does carry over into adult life despite the wear of age and experience. Dostoevsky's novels contain grown-up characters who are compared frequently to children, and a study of the reasons for the comparison leads to a further revelation of the desirable qualities of a child's nature. One of the adults most frequently identified with a child is Prince Myshkin. His original name was Yurodivyi, meaning "he is with the children."<sup>41</sup> Dostoevsky's notes on this character contain the emphatic statement: "The hero of this novel, the Prince, is not comical but does have another charming quality: he is innocent!"<sup>42</sup> The Prince himself calls Madame Epanchin a child. She joins the children's club projected in

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<sup>40</sup>Dostoevsky, A Raw Youth, p. 351.

<sup>41</sup>Dostoevsky, The Notebooks for The Idiot, p. 122.

<sup>42</sup>ibid., p. 191.

the original plan for the novel.<sup>43</sup> Although Madame Epanchin makes mistakes, she is always a vigorous, lively character in touch with reality in a way that is characteristically Russian.<sup>44</sup>

Stepan Trofimovitch, in The Possessed, is also compared to a child; however, until the end of the novel, he completely lacks Madame Epanchin's realistic touch. Joseph Frank criticizes the whole character of Stepan Trofimovitch as "morally impotent" and lacking a feeling of realism.<sup>45</sup> However, Frank misses the significance of the old man's kneeling in the mud, his knees "soaked by the wet earth," as he sets out at the end "to seek for Russia."<sup>46</sup> Since the earth and the child are symbols linked with Dostoevsky's dream of the New World, Stepan Trofimovitch attains a new dignity when he abandons his old pretenses to search in simplicity for something more honest than what he has known, something wedded to the reality of the Russian mud.

Raskolnikov compares Sonia to a child in her purity of heart. Although she is a prostitute, Sonia never sinks to the degradation of her position; what she does is a matter of necessity for her family, and she remains somehow aloof from the sin of which she is a part. Raskolnikov underlines her

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>44</sup>Murray Krieger, The Tragic Vision (New York, 1960), p. 227.

<sup>45</sup>Joseph Frank, "Nihilism and Notes from Underground," Sewanee Review, LXIX (January-March 1961), 33.

<sup>46</sup>Dostoevsky, The Possessed, pp. 548, 549.

deep faith in God which nothing can shake, and furthermore her belief that righteousness exists in the world in spite of the experiences life has dealt her. Sonia echoes the purity and goodness of Prince Myshkin. Along with the vitality of Madame Epanchin and the idealism of Stepan Trofimovitch, they add dimension to Dostoevsky's conception of the nature of the child.

The child's personality also has very human tendencies toward evil, as Dostoevsky points out to the lady who wrote for advice on how to rear her son. Good example is one way to combat these potential vices.<sup>47</sup> However, if not properly curbed, flaws may develop, and they appear even more alarming when they exist in the person of what should be an innocent child. Arkady, in A Raw Youth, recalls his low status at Touchard's school because of his illegitimacy. Touchard treats him with little respect, and the boys follow his example so that Arkady becomes only a lackey who fawns on everyone for attention. In later years Arkady dreams of being ashamed of his mother because of the effect of her poverty and humility on the people at the school. Another unnatural trait Arkady possesses from childhood on is a distaste for women which stems from his having watched a prostitute when he was a boy. The instinctive fawning, the shame for his family, and his feeling about women are some of the problems Arkady meets in growing from a raw youth to a good young man. He is an appropriate character to comment on the corruptibility of children: "the question of childhood

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<sup>47</sup>Dostoevsky, Letters to His Family and Friends, p. 236.

in our day is truly awful; for a time those golden heads, curly and innocent, flutter before one and look at one with their clear eyes like angels of God. . .and afterwards it turns out that it would have been better if they had not grown up at all!"<sup>48</sup>

Kolya Krassotkin, who exhibits such kindness under the influence of Alyosha, at first mouths the atheistic teachings of Rakitin. He professes to believe that Christianity is only a method of the rich for keeping the poor enchained. The doctrine appeals to him as something novel and intellectual so that he is willing to give up traditional Orthodoxy for the flash of an exciting idea. Thus even a child's faith may be shaken by other doctrines which look attractive. Alyosha's example of the truly Christian life prevents the loss of Kolya's faith.

Another child whom Alyosha helps is Lise, who is sickly and spoiled by a concerned mother. Here the evidence of bad example is not evident. There seems to be a demented strain in her character, intensified by her illness, that forces her into brooding inactivity. Lise has a propensity for teasing people, Alyosha among them. She confesses to him that she wants to do evil, even to commit suicide, because she "loathes[s] everything."<sup>49</sup> The fate of Lise is carried no farther than

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<sup>48</sup>Dostoevsky, A Raw Youth, p. 29.

<sup>49</sup>Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 711.

the promise of Alyosha to weep for her when she dies and a note she sends to Ivan that he never bothers to read. Ivan refuses to think of her even when Alyosha pleads that she is on the verge of insanity. One can only speculate what a consistent attempt at warmth and understanding would have done for the character of Lise.

Lacking the natural joy of a child, Lise presents a departure from the usual character development for her age. Kolya Krassotkin lacks for a while the child's faith; however, his wavering is corrected by Alyosha's example. Finally, Arkady presents a negative contrast to the pride and love Ilusha shows for his poor family regardless of its low status. Lise, Kolya, and Arkady represent ways that innocent natures may be corrupted if their virtues are not properly fostered. A repetition of this process throughout the world produces adults incapable of attaining Dostoevsky's New Age and seriously threatens the moral regeneration of the world. This underscores the critical role of childhood in Dostoevsky's thought.

Dostoevsky begins many of his characterizations with an account of the individual's childhood; and, true to their environment, those with an irregular background develop into unstable adults. The Karamazov family offers the most spectacular example since none of the boys had a normal home life. Dmitri, the eldest, was abandoned by his father after his mother's death and brought up by the servant Grigory, then by a cousin

in Moscow, and finally by one of her daughters. From this pillar-to-post boyhood Dmitri develops into a sensual man who is weak from his own lack of self-restraint. Ivan and Alyosha were not shuttled around as much, yet they were cared for first by Grigory and later by a rich general's widow. The position of the Karamazovs in the town made a negative impression on Ivan when he was still quite young: "At ten years old he had realized that they were living not in their own home but on other people's charity, and that their father was a man of whom it was disgraceful to speak."<sup>50</sup> Thus Ivan is deprived of a close secure family background which could have instilled the traditional culture of Russian Orthodoxy in him; instead he is subject to an irregularity that encourages his skepticism. Alyosha, who shares his upbringing, follows a different path. Carrying a memory of his mother in his heart, Alyosha enters a monastery when he is about nineteen where his religious nature is profoundly influenced by the holy Father Zossima. The fourth brother, Smerdyakov, is really only half a Karamazov. His childhood is cursed by the general belief that his father is Fyodor Karamazov and his mother, the idiot Lizaveta. Although Grigory rears him to the best of his ability in the Orthodox faith, Grigory's ability is limited. He cannot answer the boy's sarcastic questions about his Bible lessons, and Smerdyakov takes to strange amusements like hanging cats to play at burying

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<sup>50</sup>Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, p. 13.

them. The circumstances of his birth and the low status they afford him create a personality that is self-seeking and lacking in imagination.

Another character who develops into an unstable adult is Stavrogin in The Possessed. The spoiled darling of his mother's eye, with no father, Stavrogin is treated as an equal by his tutor Stepan Trofimovitch so that unintentionally the child's mind is filled with all the adult questionings that Stepan, the romantic liberal, can devise. This stirs a longing that can never be satiated in the child for inordinate knowledge. In later life Stavrogin pursues physical, emotional, and intellectual experiences as far as he is able to until at last he commits suicide. Although Stepan is a sympathetic character, his lack of self-control in regard to the child whom he taught may have aided the development of a man of unnatural desires.

The ruining of Nastasya Filippovna was, by contrast, purposeful. She was brought up by Totsky in luxurious seclusion until she was sixteen, when she was old enough to become his mistress. With her innocence gone and no one to protect her, Nastasya becomes a young woman who is highly self-willed, yet desperately unhappy. The drive for both revenge and love, taken from the true story of the girl who tried to burn her family's estate, appear in Nastasya's irrational alternation between Rogozhin and Myshkin. In the end it is feeling for her that destroys both the men, and Nastasya herself is murdered by Rogozhin. Nastasya, Stavrogin, and the Karamazovs all

present samples of the kind of adults who may grow from a background lacking a family strong in love and faith with good models after which the children may pattern themselves. Only Alyosha is saved by the memory of his mother.

Dostoevsky's own childhood exhibits many of the problems his characters had to face in their early years. The situation was not completely bleak. While his mother was alive, Dostoevsky received thorough Orthodox training in Moscow; with her on their country estate he enjoyed healthy outdoor games and associated with the serfs. The incident with the peasant Marey was drawn from these years.<sup>51</sup> However, there were more bitter influences which predominate in the autobiographical elements of his novels. The theme of suffering first appeared when Dostoevsky was not promoted at school as he felt he should have been.<sup>52</sup> Much more traumatic was his father's murder at the hands of his serfs when Dostoevsky was eighteen. This led to a feeling of guilt for his lack of love for his father and thus a share in the responsibility for his death. Physically the murder resulted in Dostoevsky's epilepsy.<sup>53</sup> Artistically, the murder evoked the themes of fathers and children and guilt and responsibility, all captured finally in The Brothers

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<sup>51</sup> Yarmolinsky, Dostoevsky, His Life and Art, pp. 11-13.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Mochulsky, Dostoevsky: His Life and Work, p. 7.

Karamazov.<sup>54</sup> Dostoevsky describes his own home in a passage from A Raw Youth:

There are children who, while still in childhood, begin to reflect upon their families, who begin to be offended by their fathers' unsightliness, their fathers' and their surroundings,' and above all, who in childhood already begin to understand the disorder and haphazardness of the very foundation of their whole life, the absence of the established forms and ancestral tradition.<sup>55</sup>

The power to create order and transform the world lies within a strong family, such as Dostoevsky lacked, where values are prized and life has meaning. Proper example and a warm upbringing are necessary to reinforce the child's virtues and suppress vices in him. The generosity, understanding, and innocence of children all need to be protected so that a new and better generation can mature. In the meanwhile adults can be influenced positively by children who sometimes even in infancy, sometimes by their deaths, reawaken moral values in them which may have been crushed by living.

The child's good qualities are all those demonstrable in an earthly paradise. Dostoevsky feels Russia can help to bring about this state since the essential Russian spirit preserves these traits. Unquestioning universal love and a deep emotional faith are the most important elements in Dostoevsky's moral philosophy. That men recognize their joint responsibility

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<sup>54</sup> ibid., p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> ibid., pp. 7-8.

for sin and cease to judge each other follows as a corollary to faith and love. All these virtues will exist in the Golden Age that will finally come about after centuries of suffering. Here a paradox arises since suffering is a prime source of nobility, according to Dostoevsky, and his own suffering produced his art. Yet in the Golden Age no suffering will exist. Is the perfected man to be less noble then, or is he to bear the stamp of the misery that produced him? Dostoevsky never solves this dilemma.

But other characteristics of the Golden Age are clear. The union of love that will someday bind all men together is shown among the boys who with Alyosha scatter crumbs over the grave of Ilusha so that the birds will come to cheer his rest; among the children of Prince Myshkin's Swiss village who nurse the dying Marie; in the little girl Polenka who promises in complete trust and affection to pray for the murderer Raskolnikov. Dostoevsky draws his children with much care; their innocence offers hope for a better world.

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