

SMERDYAKOV: A REVIEW OF AN AMORAL
EPILEPTIC.

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In the domain of literature there is no author who has probed so deeply into the human soul as Dostoevsky. Possessed of great powers of introspection, and having experienced a most varied career, he was well fitted for the task of analysing the human mind and its motives. His intimate contact with criminals of all kinds during his exile in Siberia, together with the fact that he himself suffered from epilepsy, made him especially qualified to describe subnormal, criminal and epileptic types. Such a type is portrayed in his masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*, in the character of Smerdyakov; and as an example of amorality, this character is well worth study.

In the final trial scene two views of Smerdyakov are given. The prosecutor* asserts that he is a man of weak intellect, timid but honest, and quite capable of experiencing remorse; and that he committed suicide in a mood of melancholy. The defence, on the other hand, describes him as very intelligent, but spiteful, excessively ambitious and intensely envious. As is usually the case, neither counsel is actuated by any keen desire of giving an accurate scientific picture of the case. Each aims at presenting the character in a light favourable to his particular thesis of the murder. The truth, as one might suspect, is between the two, approximating more to the view of the defence.

What appears as intelligence in Smerdyakov is really his cunning, a trait common to epileptics and amoral criminals. The manner in which he plots the murder, with all its possibilities, to the smallest detail certainly appears impressive, but is not really so remarkable in view of the fact that his whole mind was absorbed, to the exclusion of almost everything else, in a desire to kill the man whom he regarded as responsible for his low social position. An intense impulse in a subnormal mind will often bring out a native cunning that works even unconsciously.

* It must be remembered that Dmitri and not Smerdyakov is in the dock.

Now there is no doubt that Smerdyakov had an intense hatred for old Karamazov (Fyodor). As Meier-Graefe* figuratively puts it, "already in the womb of his mother, Smerdyastchaya, he had stormed at everything connected with his procreator." Certainly he harboured a sense of injustice from his earliest days. . . . Why should he not have the social position of Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha? Was he not a son of Fyodor's just like them? . . .

We are prepared for his subnormal intelligence from the beginning. His inheritance is poor. His father is the drunken dissolute Fyodor; his mother, Lizaveta Smerdyastchaya, is an idiot†—"a dwarfish creature, 'not five feet within a wee bit.' . . . Her broad, healthy, red face had a look of blank idiocy and the fixed stare in her eyes was unpleasant, in spite of their meek expression. She wandered about, summer and winter alike, bare-footed, wearing nothing but a hempen smock. Her coarse, almost black hair curled like lamb's wool, and formed a sort of huge cap on her head. It was always crusted with mud, and had leaves, bits of stick, and shavings clinging to it, as she always slept on the ground and in the dirt. Her father, a homeless sickly drunkard, called Ilya, had lost everything. . . . Ilya's employers . . . tried to clothe her better, and always rigged her out with high boots and sheepskin coat for winter. But, although she allowed them to dress her up without resisting, she usually went away . . . and taking off all that had been given her—kerchief, sheepskin, skirt and boots—she left them there and walked away bare-footed in her smock as before. . . . She could hardly speak, and only from time to time uttered an inarticulate grunt." From such a source one naturally expects a creature of low intellectual level. And so indeed the illegitimate son proves to be. Smerdyakov will not read books. His excuse is that they are untrue (if fiction) or too dull (if scientific); not because his mind cannot apprehend the higher concepts. He occasionally makes long-winded speeches on religious or philosophical subjects, but they are obviously a repetition of phrases that he has learnt from Ivan. Their moral significance he certainly cannot grasp, for he lacks all moral feeling.

Throughout the book Smerdyakov does not exhibit a single altruistic action. He once returns three hundred roubles to Fyodor, but this apparent honest action is due to cowardice, for he well knew where suspicion would fall. As a child he displays sadistic tendencies, and amuses himself by hanging cats. To Grigory, who brings him up, he does not show the least gratitude.

* J. Meier-Graefe, Dostoevsky, 1928.

† The quotations are from the translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* by Constance Garnett.

Friendship and love, remorse or regret, are unknown to him. In the scene with Marya Kondratyevna he plays the egoist all the time, sitting like a tailor's dummy whilst she casts languishing glances at him. He, the lackey, admired by a lady. So his simple vanity is touched, but love there is none.

His amorality is best demonstrated, however, when he makes the mistake of confessing his guilt of the murder to Ivan. We fail to find in others those mental qualities that we do not possess ourselves. Smerdyakov thinks only of the safety of his own body; he has no conscience to disturb him. Surely Ivan is likewise! Is not Ivan partly responsible, and will he not be afraid to give Smerdyakov away and so involve himself also? Smerdyakov is sure that Ivan won't go to the Court, that he will not give evidence; he likes too much to be respected, etc., etc. . . . But here the epileptic makes a fatal error. There is something in Ivan that he has missed—the moral feeling, and it is because he finally realizes that Ivan will really give evidence that he commits suicide.

Lack of moral feeling is correlated with absence of the social instinct. Smerdyakov is morose, taciturn, rarely speaks and keeps to himself. "He was just as unsociable, and showed not the slightest inclination for any companionship. In Moscow, too, as we heard afterwards, he had always been silent. Moscow itself had little interest for him; he saw very little there, and took scarcely any notice of anything. He went once to the theatre, but returned silent and displeased with it."

All subnormals and epileptics have an inferiority complex. In this case, however, there is an added circumstantial factor. Smerdyakov never forgets that he is descended from a filthy beggar and that he is an illegitimate child. . . . Did they not throw it in his teeth even at Moscow? And did they not sneer at the degenerate appearance of his mother? Does not Ivan call him a stinking lackey? . . . He hates them all, he includes all Russia in his hatred!

He tries to compensate for his inferiority by assuming the airs of a "gentleman," and is haughty even to Ivan and Alyosha. In his simple mind clothes make the gentleman. So he brushes his suit twice daily, and with a special polish makes his boots shine like a mirror. Practically all his salary is spent on clothes, pomades and perfumes. It is only an accident of birth that puts him on a low level! In reality Dmitri is more stupid than he. It is true that he cannot understand poetry, but then it's all rubbish! . . . He despises everybody, criticizes everything and develops a highly conceited attitude.

Though a repulsive degenerate, a liar and a coward, it is, from one point of view, round Smerdyakov that the action centres. He is the symbol, the concentration of the three* brothers' hatred for old Karamazov. Once this *motif* of his life is accomplished he has nothing to live for, and it appears only natural that he should end his life.

* Dmitri and Ivan hated old Karamazov consciously, Alyosha unconsciously.

