

**Realism in Russian Literature:
Capturing Truth and Eliciting Responses**

English Department
College of Liberal Arts
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

by
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March, 2010

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APPROVAL PAGE

Title: Realism in Russian Literature:
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LEO TOLSTOY AND ANTON CHEKHOV'S DEPICTIONS
OF LIFE MOMENTS AND EMOTIONS

The purpose of social realist literature is to provoke change. Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov both desired to portray human emotion and experience to readers so they would change their lives for the better. Tolstoy expresses the emotions and concerns of people during life moments such as marriage, going to war, experiencing innocence and harsh reality, aging, and dying. His observations of people articulately describe the emotions that people feel but have trouble describing or even explaining to themselves. He and Chekhov both criticize the complacency of a conventional life and challenge readers to desire to change their meaningless lives.

Tolstoy on Grief

In Tolstoy's final chapters of *Childhood*, he beautifully depicts the nature of true grief by comparing Natalia's reaction to her mistress' death (the speaker's mother) with the speaker's reaction at the funeral. While Tolstoy shows how grief is suffering of one having lost someone genuinely loved, it should not be self-seeking vanity. Virtuous grief should communicate depth of love but not envelope a person to the point that s/he thinks about his/her sadness all day or ceases to love others. Tolstoy captures the initial reaction people have to death when he describes the speaker's reaction to looking at his dead mother. Death does not seem real when it happens without warning. Tolstoy describes the

speaker's disillusionment and feeling that he exists outside himself and reality. Death seems so altered from reality that we, like the speaker, attempt to associate it with something tangible like past memories of that person while they were alive. The speaker "lost all sense of existence and experienced a kind of vague blissfulness which though grand and sweet, was also sad" (XXVII). The speaker also says that grief is wholehearted "during moments of self-forgetfulness." Human nature tends to be selfish: Tolstoy shows here that the mark of virtuous grief is the ability to get outside the self and genuinely attend to other people's needs.

While Tolstoy disproves of vanity, he also says that realistically, vanity is nearly impossible to fully avoid when grieving: "Vanity is a sentiment so entirely at variance with genuine grief, yet a sentiment so inherent in human nature, that even the most poignant sorrow does not always drive it wholly forth" (XXVIII). Tolstoy depicts this observation of human nature with the boy's realizations of his "egotistic consciousness" and concern for how he appears to others in his crossing himself and looking more sullen than he seemed at the time.

Although grief can be debilitating, Tolstoy says love will heal:

Only those who love strongly can experience an overwhelming grief. Yet their very need of loving sometimes serves to throw off their grief from them and to save them. The moral nature of man is more tenacious of life than the physical, and grief never kills (XXVIII).

Natalia loved her mistress dearly, and while she grieved the most, she also loved the best. She still performed every day tasks and helped others. Even Grandmamma recovered and

comforted the grandchildren because she loved them. Selfless love keeps people alive and productive.

Chekhov on Family Happiness and Death

In Chekhov's short story, "The Peasants," he depicts the struggles and grief of the peasants who live in a hut with a pessimistic, dying husband of a woman who fights to keep hope alive through faith in God and productivity. Chekhov writes with sympathy *and* criticism of the poor peasants' lifestyles. While he depicts the poverty and sickness to instill a sense of pity, he also portrays the dangers of idleness. All the men spend what little money their family has made on alcohol: "they drank fifty roubles from the communal funds: and then went round the huts and collected money for more vodka" (67). The Zemstvo take away the neighbor's livestock and the peasants repeat the question: "Who was responsible?" They blame the Zemstvo, but in reality, their lack of productivity gives the government no reason to help them if the peasants will waste money on alcohol. While class certainly influences the livelihood of people, their ability to make themselves useful does not diminish. Does that give the husband the right to complain and mope the entire time his wife struggles to feed her children? I think Chekhov criticizes the way family members do not support one another and mutually help one another. He also encourages charity as the student and his sisters give Sasha a twenty-kopeck piece (a week's worth of money) (59); however, he warns against the misuse of charity. The girls gave Sasha the money, I believe, because she seemed innocent and deserving of charity opposed to the other drunken peasants.

Chekhov's characterization of the mother and wife, Olga, seems odd because while she acts productively, she also does not protect her children from the grandmother's blows to Sasha. Olga wants no family discord so she tries to tell Sasha to respect her grandmother. In order to reassure Sasha that her grandmother's actions will be accounted for, one of the other peasants living with them tells her that her grandmother will burn in hell. The mix of the façade of family happiness with bitterness and the reality that violence will occur is an interesting combination. In order to live productively, the family needs to remain intact whether or not that is real happiness or a façade. Family happiness is many times not realistic, which he reveals here like Tolstoy does in "The Death of Ivan Ilych."

Chekhov's playwright, "Uncle Vanya," shows the plight of the working-class and the hopelessness that so easily overcomes those who are embittered and depressed. To Uncle Vanya and Sonya, grief is what people like them feel when they work diligently, deserve appreciation and reward, but receive neither and expect to remain in their same hopeless situation for the rest of their lives. In addition, grief results from an epiphany that one has misspent years of his/her life that s/he cannot relive. Uncle Vanya tries to cope by complaining and attempting to kill Aleksandr Serebryakov, the man who underpaid Uncle Vanya and sold the house he lived in. The doctor, Astrov, drinks to "give [him] the illusion that [he's] alive." Sonya places faith in the hope that one day they will rest in heaven and one day suffering will end. Sonya, like Olga, holds the family together with hope and a productive work ethic that the others have grown weary of. This play also portrays the suffering of unrequited love or loss of love. Sonya loves Astrov

who loves Yelena who no longer loves her husband. Chekhov's "The Lady with the Toy Dog" also portrays the loss of love within marriage.

Astrov and Uncle Vanya's reflections about wasted time mirror Chekhov's ideas about idleness in his other short stories. Astrov comments to Sonya about Yelena's idleness: "How can an idle life be pure?" Yelena has beauty and vitality, but she chooses to spend her life waiting on her old husband. Uncle Vanya wishes he had fallen in love with Yelena years ago so that he could be happy now. Both Astrov and Vanya devote their lives to work, which demands more respect than those who do not work at all like Yelena. Astrov accuses Yelena of infecting everyone around them with idleness. While regret and deception is a part of reality, the way we handle reality says more about ourselves than the struggles we go through. Chekhov praises Sonya for her response of acceptance and hope. Although she feels bitter and angry, her work ethic and faith in the afterlife allows her to accept reality and continue living. Tolstoy noticed this attitude in the peasants during his own life. Whether or not Chekhov believed in God or just observed how people turned to God for hope, having faith in God or the afterlife makes people stronger than everyone else in his stories.

In "Gooseberries," Ivan Ivanich describes his brother, Nicholai, and the pitiful aspirations Nicholai lived for. Chekhov shows the pathetic illusion that a life of indulgences and idleness create the ideal life. Ivan explains his desires: "I look at this life and see the arrogance and the horrible poverty everywhere, overcrowding, drunkenness, hypocrisy, falsehood" (78). He struggles as a middle class man who enjoys simple luxuries like clean linen and beds but feels a calling to help the poor. Ivan urges his friends to live their lives with purpose and charity, but they do not care about what he

tells them. Chekhov describes his wish that there would be socially responsible people with hammers to knock on other people's doors, or symbolically, their conscience, to show them that other people are unhappy and deserve attention. In reality, people will seem interested but quickly forget other people's problems or not even care in the first place like Ivan's friends. Social realism attempts to provoke change, but writers still have to realize that reality may be that no one will change. Ivan realizes this sad fact: "But there is no man with a hammer, and the happy go on living, just a little fluttered with the petty cares of every day, like an aspen-tree in the wind—and everything is all right" (78). Realism can inspire change or simply reflect attitudes.

The characters in Chekhov's other short story, "The Lady with the Toy Dog," acknowledge that their idleness and family problems lead them to unhappiness. After countless affairs with women, Gomov realizes his life is filled with meaninglessness:

cardplaying, gourmandising, drinking, endless conversations taking up the best part of the day and all the best of man's forces, leaving only a stunted, wingless life, just rubbish; and to escape was impossible—one might as well be in a lunatic asylum or in a prison with lard labour (89).

Gomov does not even think he can escape this idle lifestyle: He takes a more naturalistic view and pathetically blames outside forces on his lack of contributing meaning in the world. I think that by showing this contrasting character's mentality, Chekhov encourages us to not justify our idleness with excuses of poor marriage, location, or position in class.

Tolstoy on Family Happiness and Death

The “Death of Ivan Ilych” in *Tolstoy’s Short Fiction* portrays Ivan’s grief about dying of old age and his wasted conventional life. By telling a story about Ivan’s process of dying, Tolstoy actually gives us insight into what his life was like through Ivan’s contemplations about the way he spent his life. Tolstoy, like Chekhov, warns readers about the dangers of conventional life: He points out the stupidity of marrying out of convenience or logic opposed to real love and he shows that men who devote their lives to their careers end up unhappy and disconnected from family. Ironically, their careers provide them with some extent of relief from dealing with their wives who they no longer get along with since they are disconnected from not being around. Ivan feels trapped in a marriage that “infringed both comfort and propriety” (94). His wife’s demands drove him farther away from his desire to be at his home and closer to clinging to his occupation to stay sane. Her shallowness of character shows in the way Tolstoy describes Praskovya Fedorovna’s desire: “She began to wish he would die; yet, she did not want him to die because then his salary would cease” (102). “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” similar to T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” captures the reality of broken relationships and points toward the need to live life with meaning found through loving relationships instead of materialism or careers. Eliot’s idea that disconnect and selfishness prevents people from experiencing real love reflects Tolstoy here. Tolstoy depicts the selfish lack of compassion in people. In “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” Ivan’s own wife and friends do not

sympathize with him: they try to benefit from his death by gaining better-paying positions or escaping from depressing impositions. His acquaintances felt no sympathy:

Each one thought or felt, 'Well, he's dead but I'm alive!' But the more intimate of Ivan Ilych's acquaintances, his so-called friends, could not help also thinking that now they would have to fulfill the very tiresome demands of propriety by attending the funeral service and paying a condolence call on the widow (84).

His dying opens up new positions for his friends and gets in the way of his wife living her life. Tolstoy criticizes this twisted point of view and points out our secret selfish desires like Fyodor Dostoevsky does in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Only Gerasim and the footman, Peter, care about Ivan and are disgusted by his wife's attitude.

Tolstoy also captures the human desire to be pitied and cared for. Ivan acknowledges this desire: "He wished most of all (though he would have been ashamed to confess it) for someone to pity him as a sick child is pitied. He longed to be petted and comforted" (115). Ivan's wife showed fake interest in his condition and the only person who cared was Gerasim (the butler's assistant) who brought in tea, medicine, and helped him dress and put his legs up. Ivan, like most older people who lay sick waiting to die, just wants someone to keep him company and sympathize with him to not feel so alone: "And he had to live thus all alone on the brink of an abyss, with no one who understood him or pitied him" (107). Furthermore, "no one felt for him, because no one even wished to grasp his position" (115). People are so concerned with living their own lives that they do not want to imagine themselves in a dying person's position let alone sacrifice their time to comfort the dying. Perhaps if Ivan lived differently and invested time into his

relationships at home and at work he would have had people visit him and help him during this time.

Fear of dying or worrying that a person wasted his/her life concerns many sick, dying people. Tolstoy said in *Childhood* that the “highest and best achievement in this world [is to] die without fear and without repining” (XXVII). Dylan Thomas’ poem, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” mirrors the way Tolstoy communicates the fear of leaving this world. Tolstoy explains how Ivan feels about waiting for death: “He struggled as a man condemned to death struggles in the hands of the executioner, knowing that he cannot save himself” (127). Ivan, like most people, like to feel in control of situations; however, death is clearly one instance we cannot control, especially in that time period when the doctor did not even really know what Ivan’s condition was. Tolstoy shows that the fear of dying stems from the uncertainty of a meaningful life. In *Childhood*, the dead mother’s mistress, Natalia, wishes she could die—not out of a suicidal desire, but a peace about her life and her wish to be reunited with loved ones in heaven. Ivan does not believe in God and fears his pointless existence and inability to make anything more out of his life.

In his last hours, Ivan reasons that death does not exist so he has no reason to fear: “He looked for his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. ‘Where is it? What death?’ There was no fear because there was no death” (128). Ivan’s only way of peacefully leaving the world is to come to the conclusion that death is really only a release from pain and a light that shines brighter on the other side. Even if death were nothingness with no afterlife, it would still be a release from his misery. Tolstoy grapples

with this instinctual desire to control things and the questioning that every person deals with at some point in their lives.

Tolstoy's *Confession* presents his own honest thoughts and ideologies. Tolstoy felt the need to feel like he promoted change and make significant differences in the lives of others—he strived for self-perfection. He expected that his marriage and teaching peasants how to read would satisfy him; however, he discovered that neither satisfied and he could not accept religion due to its lack of rational reasoning. Tolstoy places great value in the peasants and he learns that the belief in the infinite, though seemingly irrational, provides hope, which gives people sustenance to continue living (VIII and IX). Tolstoy's observation of the peasants' hope influences him during his childhood and his adult life. He explains the difference between the middle-upper class and the peasants:

In contradistinction to us, who the wiser we are the less we understand the meaning of life, and see some evil irony in the fact that we suffer and die, these folk live and suffer, and they approach death and suffering with tranquility and in most cases gladly (X).

This makes sense because those who suffer desire relief and know that they deserve rest and justice for their hard lives. It does not necessarily mean they led better lives, but they probably led lives with more courage and faith and less vain lives than others. Chekhov provides an interesting counter argument in "The Peasants" by depicting peasants who drink their money away and let their families down by complaining instead of being productive. Nevertheless, Tolstoy's wish to face death with tranquility is a good aspiration.

Tolstoy on Selfish Tendencies in War

Tolstoy attempts to define courage in “The Raid” (*The Portable Tolstoy*) and “Sevastopol in May,” (*Tolstoy’s Short Fiction*). While an idea like courage is complicated and abstract, Tolstoy depicts what courage is not by considering human vanity and foolishness. A young soldier in “The Raid” foolishly runs out toward the enemy in a false attempt at courage. The speaker and the other soldier nearby comment on how it is unfortunate and foolish to have no fear whatsoever (197). Brave men are smart enough to fear some things and calculate to some degree when to exercise courage. The speaker recognizes that courage is dependant upon the motive, whether it is base or virtuous (170). In “Sevastopol in May,” Tolstoy uncovers the ugly motives of war and the power of vanity. He shows how the desire for recognition and honor can lead men to make foolish decisions in the name of bravery. He also shows that fear is normal even in Lieutenants. Ultimately, Tolstoy portrays the unavoidable mix of honorable and dishonorable characteristics we all exhibit in certain situations. He leaves the hero of the story to be “Truth.” Both Tolstoy and Chekhov explore truth through their depictions of life and emotions in order to teach mankind. Did their social realist reflections change people or simply reflect the unchanging stubbornness of people? I argue that their writing did both: Tolstoy and Chekhov impacted society but also commented on the unfortunate reality of sinful people who will choose to live their vain lives despite reasons to think differently.

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY'S REALIST PORTRAYAL OF HOW HUMAN NATURE
AND EXPERIENCE LEAD TO AN UNDERGROUND LIFESTYLE OR
REDEMPTION

In *Notes from Underground* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky's piercing portrayal of dishonorable human tendencies overtaking virtue reveals the unfortunate reality of our struggles and failures. *Notes from Underground* depicts a truly "underground man" which I will define in the next section. These works present characters with flaws, crises, and potential for change. Dostoevsky poses deep philosophical and religious questions so readers can engage in the reading and look for answers in dialogue, plot, and character development: This is Dostoevsky's didactic style. Characters' arguments and crises allow readers to actively think about morality, religion, and meaning in life. I will break down the multiple meanings of Dostoevsky's works in three sections: Facing the reality of the underground, struggling to fight underground tendencies, and attempting to cure the underground.

Facing the Reality of the Underground

When Dostoevsky talks about underground people, he means those who act against accepted human behavior or expectations. It is a complex definition because people fall into different levels of underground on the spectrum, but some aspects include the need to follow will over reason, a paradox of pride and self-loathing, an intense

hatred toward people who have hurt them or toward people they do not even know, and self-justification of their attitudes or actions (even crimes).

In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky reveals the inner thoughts and psychology of underground people through a bitter and strangely determined character. Dostoevsky desires to show how society and experiences cultivate the mindset and motivations of people who hate others so passionately that they, being aware of their irrational will, choose to remain embittered even though it leads to self-destruction. If these underground people are so superior to those around them then why do they let those inferior people get the best of them? Why do they sink in despair and loathing if they have such an inflated sense of themselves?

Dostoevsky suggests that these irrational people, though rational in many ways, will let past hurts dictate their future chance of happiness and do everything they can to victimize and exude power over others to revenge their past. The underground man sounds very strong-willed in Part 1, but in Part 2 he seems to fall victim to his hurt and inner desires to re-enter society. He is not that strong, as we see, and he struggles the entire time with his desire to be noticed and respected by his colleagues. The underground man says, “I was a nasty, disgusting fly—more intelligent, more highly developed, more refined in feeling than any of them, of course—but a fly that was continually making way for everyone, insulted and injured by everyone” (42). Here is the paradox of pride and self-loathing. He tries to inflate himself with lofty compliments to push away the pangs of not being accepted. Dostoevsky reveals how underground people are so sick of other people and their foolish ways that they retreat to be alone and free from the anxiety and stressful confrontation that leads nowhere for them. The character

tries to reconnect with colleagues, but he ends up insulting them and feeling even more isolated. The prostitute Liza gives him attention, which he should appreciate, but he cannot embrace it; he was “only insufferably oppressed by her being here. [He] wanted her to disappear” (98). Liza pities him, which makes the underground man reject her sympathy from his inflated pride as he does not want to feel similar to this inferior person.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Karamazov recognizes his own immorality and asks Alyosha to pray for him even though Fyodor cannot change his habits of drinking, mocking others (e.g. the elders), acting like a buffoon, and making a making a fool of himself while attempting to gain respect. He, like the underground man, “admits his own baseness even while he throws himself into it” (80). Fyodor goes to dinner to assert himself just like the underground man of *Notes From Underground*, but he ends up making a fool of himself and willingly indulges in his buffoonish acts of lying and making stupid remarks (86, 89). Underground people have an extremely difficult time pulling away from their desires and previous habits. While characters like Alyosha and Father Zosima try to cure people like them, the underground people may never come out of their deeply entrenched notions.

The character in *Notes From Underground* seems to contradict his self many times, but he actually thoroughly explains his thoughts and proves that he is aware of his irrational side. Many times, we assume crazy people like those described in this account are disconnected from reality and are blind to the irrationality of their thoughts. This character, however, is not blind. He knows what he feels and why he feels it and chooses to continue living this way despite the irrationality of it all. His attitude mirrors this

mindset: “What man wants is simply independent choice, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead” (22). Sometimes his attitude “consist[s] in his desiring in certain cases what is harmful to him and not advantageous” (18). He doesn’t want to be predictable or make sense; he wants to do the opposite of what people expect just to be different and to not be a “piano key” as he puts it (26).

In the end, he tries to justify his existence and reasoning by saying there is more life in him than in all the others who deceive themselves and don’t really live at all. In a sense, the underground man is very aware of his thought processes and decisions, whereas others may not contemplate theirs as much. I think he is a deep thinker similar to Ivan in the *Brothers Karamazov*. Their philosophical nature comes as a curse to them but also proves that they struggle with deep issues that most people do not bother to think too much about. This is why the underground man says there is more life in him. He does not go through the motions as a piano key; he contemplates and asserts his existence by being individualistic. Every human being needs to feel justified in their existence if they are to continue living life. The psychology of the underground people is a uniquely shaped attitude that doesn’t really make sense to the rest of the world, but it makes sense to the people who are detached from the world, yet still living in it nonetheless. Smerdyakov and the underground man, for example, live with bitterness and make themselves miserable by not trying to heal the hatred building up in their hearts. The majority of people acknowledge that after a short time period, they need to let go of their bitterness or else it will infect every aspect of their lives.

Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov* closely resembles the truly underground man. Smerdyakov fosters bitterness and hatred toward his “family” who he has been a

servant for his whole life. He is described as “terribly unsocial and taciturn,” but “he had an arrogant nature and seemed to despise everyone” (124). Although Fyodor did not show love to any of his sons, he did trust Smerdyakov with his life, which is ironic since he ended up murdering Fyodor. Smerdyakov is the one person Alyosha did not try to help; I think Dostoevsky hints that some people are too entrenched in their underground lifestyle that they are no longer receptive or worthwhile to try to fix. This novel focuses on the brothers’ struggles to stay above ground, so to speak.

Struggling to Fight Underground Tendencies: The Karamazov Brothers and Their Crises

Ivan, Alyosha, and Dmitri all struggle with spiritual and moral dilemmas that force them to wrestle with their beliefs and try to overcome rebellion, doubt, pride, etc. Zosima says that experience allows people to learn from life, and that is what all the brothers do. Ivan’s struggle is an intellectual battle to prove or disprove the existence of God and the problem of suffering, especially the suffering of innocent children. Ivan writes articles about the ecclesiastical courts and the state, but the elder Zosima pinpoints Ivan’s dilemma:

For the time being you, too, are toying, out of despair, with your magazine articles and drawing-room discussions without believing in your own dialectics and smirking at them with your heart aching inside you... The question is not resolved in you, and there lies your great grief, for it urgently demands resolution (70).

Ivan has more questions than answers. His mind continually torments him with doubts and questions of why life is the way it is. Zosima sees Ivan's tendencies to let intellectual arrogance and his "devil's advocate" nature hinder him from truly seeking God.

Dostoevsky dedicates a section of his book to Ivan's fictional story about the problem of free will and suffering in "The Grand Inquisitor." His story claims people want answers to three central ideas that Jesus does not provide tangible answers to: miracles, mystery, and authority. People need authority to control their free will, so they look to the leadership of the Grand Inquisitor who gives laws and decides fates. Ivan's story reflects his struggles with free will, suffering, and the presence of God in the midst of life. Alyosha listens to Ivan and tries to help him understand the role of Jesus. However, even Alyosha admits he does not fully comprehend God's purpose of the innocent suffering.

Dostoevsky shows Ivan's stubbornness when Ivan says, "I'd rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, even if I am wrong" (245). Ivan heads toward the path of underground behavior, but finally realizes he must do what is right by telling the jury of Dmitri's innocence of his father's murder and Ivan's part in hinting to Smerdyakov (the real murderer) that Fyodor should be killed. Ivan's hallucinations of a devil represent the gravity of the issues Ivan struggles with: the existence of God, the problem of evil, etc. Even though Ivan has brain fever during these hallucinations, the timing is exactly when he wrestles with whether he should testify at Dmitri's hearing and condemn himself. The devil's advocate side of Ivan (come alive in hallucinations) shows readers the severity of his dilemma and thereby increases the significance of Ivan choosing morality over letting himself go free. Although no one took

him seriously because of Ivan's discombobulated speech at the trial, Dostoevsky semi-resolves Ivan's crisis by leaving us thinking his moral choice will result in a change of thinking about God and life. Alyosha says, "God, in whom he did not believe, and his truth were overcoming his heart, which he still did not want to submit" (655). Alyosha has great faith that Ivan will recover from brain fever and his prideful, doubting tendencies.

Alyosha's season of doubt occurs when Zosima dies and people dishonor him because his body smelled of decay instead of the romanticized, rumored, rose smell. He cannot understand why God would let ignorant people dishonor the memory of Zosima and praise the hypocritical, "holy fool" of Father Ferapont instead. Rakitin takes advantage of Alyosha's dejected state when he leaves the monastery and tempts him to indulge in eating sausage, drinking vodka, and visiting Grushenka. Alyosha overcomes sexual enticement with Grushenka when she shows him sympathy for his beloved elder's death. She jumps off his lap because she realizes he is being taken advantage of at this moment and she loves him enough to spare him. Alyosha exclaims, "I came here looking for a wicked soul—I was drawn to that, because I was low and wicked myself, but I found a true sister, I found a treasure—a loving soul" (351). This sympathetic love is part of the answer to curing the underground, as I will discuss further in the next section. Love heals Alyosha from straying away from God. Before, Alyosha's faith was rooted in Zosima's wisdom and fatherly presence, but now he is gone and Alyosha has to find wisdom without him. He probably never really questioned morality before either, but now Ivan's thoughts make Alyosha question his beliefs. Although he still questions God's world, he returns to the monastery and a dream inspires him to "[i]se up a fighter,

steadfast for the rest of his life” (363). He values the power of sympathy, love, and forgiveness in his dream and rises with new strength to help the world.

The eldest and wildest brother, Dmitri, pursues his passions and frenzies while acknowledging his crazy lifestyle. He tries to be honest, but his emotions overcome him and he continually struggles to retain honesty and morality instead of giving into his irrational desires. When Dmitri tries to win back Grushenka and save his money to return to Katerina, he tells Alyosha, “...I will carry out my base design, and in the future you can be my witness that I told you beforehand and with aforethought” (156). Dmitri is always saying strange definitive statements such as this one. Alyosha tries to prevent Dmitri from becoming a full-fledged underground man by speaking sense into him and talking through his motivations. Dmitri’s dream of a suffering child in the cold and his desire to be an honest man saves him from himself. He questions the innocent suffering (507) and this dream signals Dmitri’s progress as an individual seeking truth. Others, like Grushenka, testify to Dmitri’s honesty: “He’s not the sort of man who would lie” (683). He realizes the need for love, forgiveness, and justice, and although he knows he is not guilty of murder, he accepts the consequences of his sinful nature in general. While Alyosha does not think Dmitri deserves or can handle condemnation, Dmitri has still developed in his ability to understand the world around him.

In the trial, the prosecutor brings up a key theme that applies to everyone in society, which he calls “Karamazovian nature” (699). He says people are “capable of containing all possible opposites and of contemplating both abysses at once, the abyss above us, an abyss of lofty ideals, and the abyss beneath us, an abyss of the lowest and foulest degradation” (699). Dostoevsky communicates the reality of good and evil

tendencies in all of us, and tries to force us to see that we need to pursue a mixture of both good and evil to have moderation. This balance will prevent people from fostering underground tendencies.

Attempting to Cure the Underground

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky uses the head elder of the monastery, Zosima, to enlighten people with biblical and moral wisdom so they can retreat from their underground tendencies. Alyosha is also a significant voice of wisdom in the novel—mainly to his brothers and to the children. The main solution to helping people is love for humankind, community, recognition of sins, and gratefulness to God. Other aspects of curing the underground include: acceptance, sympathy, lacking judgment, giving advice, faithful friendship, and just listening to those who suffer. Even then, some people will inevitably still be underground like Smerdyakov or Lise.

Zosima sees Fyodor's insecurities and urges him to let go of his habit of lying so Fyodor can improve his lifestyle and reputation. Dostoevsky uses the virtuous character of Zosima to show that self-destructive behavior like Fyodor's will result in the person falling out of disrespect with others and themselves unless a change of heart and behavior take place. Dostoevsky also points toward the importance of analytically looking into oneself to find the root of insecurities and the motivations for actions in order to tackle such issues and improve one's lifestyle, however difficult the process may be.

Dostoevsky warns readers to recognize the underground tendencies we all have so we can reform our ways and live more fulfilling lives. For example, Dostoevsky points

out Fyodor was “fond of play-acting, of suddenly taking up some unexpected role right in front of you, often when there was no need for it, and even to his real disadvantage...”

(11). Fyodor lies to impress others, but he only hurts himself by living so deceptively.

Zosima explains that “a man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point where he does not discern any truth either in himself or anywhere around him, and thus falls into disrespect towards himself and others” (44). If someone’s whole life is characterized by lying, that person may very well begin to believe his or her own lies and lack discernment. We all, however, display some sort of trait similar to Fyodor’s, which derives from low self-esteem and cripples our movement toward wholeness. Zosima counsels individuals in the monastery by observing their crippling traits and pointing these traits out to them so they can find freedom (27). He recognizes that finding freedom or living in active love is “labor and perseverance, and for some people, perhaps, a whole science” (58). Zosima counsels many people who search for quick, painless answers such as the rich woman in Part 1:4, but real love and freedom can only come from digging deep into oneself (which can be painful) and muddling around in the murky waters of the soul to find oneself. Zosima also tells a faithful woman of God who lost her son to not feel bad for grieving, as it is a necessary step in the healing process.

Alyosha gives advice, loves well, does not judge, and sets an example for others. He believes that brotherly love (or the Greek “*philia*” love) between family, friends, and community will heal the world, and more specifically, the underground world. Alyosha dedicates his efforts to his brothers and to the friends of Ilyusha—the boy who bit Alyosha’s finger. Alyosha listens to his brothers, questions their beliefs and motivations, and encourages them to pursue morality and God. In Ivan’s case, his ideas rub off on

Alyosha and serve as a healthy reminder to question what he believes in and why he holds those beliefs. This doubt actually helps Alyosha move forward in his development. With Dmitri, Alyosha cannot stop Dmitri from committing rash actions, but he faithfully loves him and believes that Dmitri can redeem himself. Alyosha also helps a troublesome young boy named Kolya whose pride and fear of rejection threatens his future of staying “above ground.” Kolya realizes Alyosha sees through his attempts to look brave and smart, and he calls himself a scoundrel (557). Alyosha helps others by sharing truth, pointing out problem areas, and even encouraging constructive self-judgment (558). Kolya says Alyosha knows how to give comfort. Alyosha inspires the boys at Ilyushecka’s funeral to “be kind, then honest” and to “never forget one another” (775). He also says that good memories help retain the good in people (774). Memories may serve as reminders that happiness can be reached and that good things result from morality.

Finally, Dostoevsky prescriptively urges people as a community to be responsible for acting morally and helping those who are sinking into the underground. Zosima continually reiterates the idea that each of us is guilty for the sins of others. The three brothers end up feeling responsible for other people’s sins. Dostoevsky seems to think this mindset is redemptive. By comparing the extreme ideas of the defense attorney and the prosecutor at the trial, Dostoevsky suggests a balance of mercy and personal responsibility should exist for a productive society. A community cannot mercilessly throw a perceived criminal into prison and expect him or her to come out of it a better person; however, a community cannot expect complete mercy and forgiveness to reform the wild ways of a criminal either. Love and community as well as struggling with tough

issues of faith versus unbelief are key components to fighting underground tendencies that could develop into deep, nearly incurable underground behavior. This novel presents problems and works through the way people deal with their issues. The wisdom and even the negative examples of human nature teach us more about how to make it through life.

EXPOSING THE UGLY TRUTH TO PROVOKE SOCIAL CHANGE: ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSY ON GULAG PRISONS

In *The Gulag Archipelago* chapter of *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn challenges the structure of the Cheka-KGB and the ideas of Marxist-Leninism that threaten personal dignity and freedom. Solzhenitsyn's first-hand experience in the prison camps further enlightens him with the oppressive nature of the Stalinist regime and this reality that Boris Pasternak shares in *Doctor Zhivago*:

The main misfortune, the root of all evil to come, was the loss of confidence in the value of one's own opinion. People imagined that it was out of date to follow their own moral sense, that they must all sing in chorus, and live by other people's notions, notions that were being crammed down everybody's throat (404).

Solzhenitsyn fights for his right to express truth to a society that is heading in a downward spiral. He contemplates the differences between good and evil, bravery and cowardice, and truth and lies. Solzhenitsyn argues that evil suppresses the only good that

is left in society by persecuting people and rejecting truth, thereby destroying hope for restoration.

Solzhenitsyn reveals the destructive force of groupthink in the Cheka-KGB system and argues that true evil lies in blind conformity and oppression of Russia's best people—the ones who earnestly seek truth and try to open blinded eyes to see the cancer that is spreading throughout their society. Solzhenitsyn's personal account of living in the Gulag prison camps not only makes his writing credible, but also powerful and heart-wrenching. He mocks the guards who were having trouble finding their destination on a map and ended up asking Solzhenitsyn how to get to the prison they would throw him into upon arrival (220). He further insults them and the organization they work for (*Organs*):

There is just one thing you must never forget. You, too, would have been just such a poor block of wood if you had not had the luck to become one of the little links in the *Organs*—that flexible, unitary organism inhabiting a nation as a tapeworm inhabits a human body (227).

Sarcastic yet powerful comments like this one show his awareness of the destructive totalitarian system and his ability to find a way to rise above it. Although he was certainly affected by being in the prison camps, he always remained true to himself and his convictions. He saw the evil that penetrated the system and recognized the false power of the interrogators and prison guards who seem powerful, but really are controlled themselves by the government they are slaves to.

Solzhenitsyn said this about good and evil:

But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish (231).

Writers could either embrace the cowardice and evil in themselves and be used as an instrument for Stalin's agenda, or they could be brave and stand up for their beliefs risking persecution, but providing hope for redemption to their society.

Solzhenitsyn also shares his thoughts on good and evil when talking about how the people of Russia suffered two world wars, the Plague, the Bolshevik Revolution and famine, and the civil wars, all of which were brought on by Russia herself, with the exception of WWI and WWII. This is evil as well. Not only did the Cheka deprive society of their best thinkers and writers, but they also denied millions of peasants—the backbone of Russian society—food and land to survive. Solzhenitsyn says this: "...for every activist killed in self-defense, hundreds of the most industrious, enterprising, and level-headed peasants, those who should keep the Russian nation on an even keel, were eliminated" (295). He says the lie of revolutions is that "they destroy only *those carriers* of evil contemporary with them"—when in reality, they exterminate the carriers of good as well (266).

Solzhenitsyn explains how prison gave him the chance to examine his own life and his heart. He questioned whether he was better than the executioners or the people who are considered evil. "Lev Tolstoi was right when he *dreamed* of being put in prison. At a certain moment that giant began to dry up. He actually needed prison as a drought

needs a shower of rain!” (266). He was thankful for being in the prison camps because the experiences opened his eyes to what good and evil consists of, how it comes about, and how it can affect society.

Solzhenitsyn challenged authorities and society when he asked this question: “Do you think you can build a just society on a foundation of self-serving and envious people? Everything in the country is falling apart. Why do you spit in the hearts of your best people?” (232-233). That last question resonates in my mind because it is exactly what happened throughout Russian history. Stalin got rid of the intelligentsia who offered real truth and insight, and the Bolsheviks killed the peasants who formed the backbone of Russian society. Paranoia and evil together cloud minds with notions that things will be better if only those people were eliminated. The evil in society lies in the rejection of the ones who try to help.

Solzhenitsyn disapproves of the way innocent people suffer the most while the evildoers do not get what they deserve: “(And yet...the innocent are those who get punished most zealously of all.) And what would one then have to say about our evildoer torturers: Why does not fate punish *them*? Why do they prosper?” (262-263). He recalls a man named Boris Kornfield who believed that “...there is no punishment that comes to us in this life on earth which is undeserved.” Soon after, Solzhenitsyn experienced this:

And I was wakened in the morning by running about and tramping in the corridor; the orderlies were carrying Kornfield’s body to the operating room. He had been dealt eight blows in the skull with a plasterer’s mallet while he still slept...and he died on the operating table, without ever regaining consciousness (263).

What his fate deserved? The only explanation Solzhenitsyn can give is that the torturers and evildoers are slowly getting what they deserve in the sense that their quality of humanity and good is depleting and bringing them to a lowly point of existence (264).

Solzhenitsyn was well rewarded for his persecution in prison camps. Unlike many authors, he saw glory in his lifetime and Russia could no longer hide from the world what had been done under the regime. This is the first step in healing a nation. Russia is still torn by her dark history, but authors like Solzhenitsyn bring justice and truth to a nation in desperate need of reconciliation and healing. They challenge Russians to take courage to stand up for their beliefs and reject the lie that it is out of date to follow their moral sense. The decision to stand up for what they believe in can make all the difference in the future of a nation.

CONCLUSION

Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, and Solzhenitsyn impacted Russian society and the rest of the world with their insightful and prescriptive writing about handling life moments and suffering. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky's talent for accurately depicting the human psyche and motivations allows readers to better understand themselves, people around them, and the moral implications of human shortcomings. While the Soviet state disapproved of Dostoevsky's political pessimism, leaders still acknowledged his ability to touch the soul of the reader and communicate the importance of violent protest against

class oppression (Shneidman, 537). As for Chekhov, his plays gained popularity in England during the 1920s and influenced American playwrights, such as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Throughout their history, Russian authors have been prominent commentators on society and politics and have many times demonstrated roles as activists and moralists in their personal lives. Tolstoy, for example, contributed to furthering the education system for children and for peasants in Russia. Solzhenitsyn exposed the crimes of the Russian Gulag prison system and convinced people (Europeans especially) of the brutality of the Stalinist regime. He even won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970. These 19th and 20th century writers are some of the greatest literary influences in history and their works continue to reveal insight to readers.

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