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Between Crime, Sin and Salvation: The Function of the Value of Mercy in Dostoevsky's Novels

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Abstract: Dostoevsky's novels are profound literary works that boldly explore the darker aspects of human nature, moral dilemmas, and conflicts of conscience. This study examines the concept of compassion, one of the core human values frequently addressed in Dostoevsky's major works, from a multidimensional perspective. In Dostoevsky's narrative universe, compassion is not merely an individual virtue but is also constructed as a form of theological, ethical, and philosophical resistance. It plays a central role in both the characters' internal processes of transformation and their interactions with society. In particular, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot*, and *Demons* illustrate how compassion serves as a bridge of forgiveness between the sinner and the victim. Beyond simple acts of pity or forgiveness, compassion in these works becomes a profound ethical principle that enables individuals to confront their own existence. Through the spiritual turmoil, sins, and internal struggles of his characters, Dostoevsky questions the relationship between humanity and God. In this context, compassion emerges as a terrestrial reflection of divine justice. Moreover, in Dostoevsky's texts, compassion functions as a moral counterbalance to social disintegration. The ethical movement that begins with the individual's inner purification also carries the potential for reconstructing the social order. Ultimately, Dostoevsky's portrayal of compassion transcends personal conscience, presenting a universal moral appeal to humanity. The aim of this study is to reveal the function of this ethical call within the framework of intertextual analysis.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, compassion, morality, theology, values education

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Introduction

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, one of the foremost figures of 19th-century Russian literature, holds a unique place in world literature not only for his mastery of the novel form but also for his profound analyses of human nature, moral dilemmas, and existential inquiries. In Dostoevsky's works, themes such as conscience, free will, guilt, and the quest for salvation are frequently explored within a theological context, wherein the concept of compassion emerges as a prominent motif. In his narrative structure and character development, compassion functions not only as an individual virtue but also as an ethical and theological principle. In contrast to modernity's emphasis on individualism and rationalism—often neglecting compassion—Dostoevsky positions this value as the foundation of personal transformation and a spiritual resistance against social disintegration.

Within Dostoevsky's fictional universe, compassion is not merely a feeling of pity directed at the victim; rather, it is portrayed as an inclusive, forgiving, and transformative moral stance—extended even toward the sinner, the fallen, and the oppressor. In this regard, Dostoevsky does not merely advocate for individual moral sensitivity but represents a value system rooted in Christian theology. His conceptualization of compassion parallels the

Christian notion of agape, which, in his characters, becomes the essential precondition for spiritual transformation, forgiveness, and rebirth. The aim of this study is to examine the fictional representations of compassion in Dostoevsky's four major novels: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot*, and *Demons*. These works not only depict personal tragedies but also allow for a comprehensive analysis of the social and moral crises of the era through the lens of compassion. A qualitative, text-centered methodology has been adopted to investigate the psychological depth and ethical orientation of characters, as well as the structural function of compassion in the narrative. Theoretically, compassion is addressed in a multilayered manner from philosophical, theological, and literary perspectives. While in ancient Greek philosophy it was situated at the heart of ethical reflection, in Christian theology, compassion has been seen as a central manifestation of divine love and forgiveness. Augustine and Aquinas described it as a grace bestowed by God, whereas in the modern era, thinkers such as Max Scheler and Emmanuel Levinas have regarded sensitivity to the suffering of others as the existential foundation of the ethical subject. In this framework, compassion in Dostoevsky's novels should be interpreted not merely as a literary motif but as an ontological and moral problem.



The influence of Orthodox mysticism, particularly observed in *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*, reveals that Dostoevsky developed a theological understanding of compassion grounded in Eastern Christianity. This notion of compassion encompasses not only pity but also a spiritual awareness that seeks to understand and forgive sin, depravity, and evil. In the relationships among his characters, compassion often appears as a trial, a process of purification, and a necessary threshold in the journey of spiritual transformation.

In conclusion, this study aims to build a bridge between literary criticism and moral philosophy. It proposes that Dostoevsky's conceptualization of compassion functions not merely as a personal emotion but as a universal mode of ethical inquiry into the human condition, thus contributing to contemporary moral debates.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative content analysis approach. Within this framework, Dostoevsky's four major novels—*Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot*, and *Demons*—have been examined with regard to their treatment of the theme of compassion. The analysis is structured around character development, plot construction, and narrative techniques. Key characters from the selected works (such as Raskolnikov, Sonya, Alyosha Karamazov, Prince Myshkin, and Stavrogin) are evaluated to explore the moral dimensions of compassion, including transformation, forgiveness, conscience, and social critique. In addition, the texts have been interpreted through an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates both moral philosophy and literary criticism. This approach allows for the examination not only of the function of compassion within the narrative but also of its reflections in historical, cultural, and religious contexts. The theoretical framework for the analysis draws on ethical theories, Christian theology, and contemporary literary theory. Through this methodology, the study aims to reveal how the value of compassion is constructed as a multilayered and multifunctional element in Dostoevsky's literary universe.

Findings

The Role of Compassion in Moral Transformation: *Crime and Punishment*

Crime and Punishment contains one of Dostoevsky's deepest inquiries into human nature. The novel's protagonist, Raskolnikov, is a law student living in poverty who, by committing murder, violates not only an individual life but also the divine and social order. Though he attempts to justify his crime through a theory of the "extraordinary man," his conscience and inner turmoil soon dismantle this rationalist posture. The most critical turning point in this collapse comes in the form of Sonya's compassionate gaze. Sonya is one of Dostoevsky's most powerful embodiments of compassion. She herself is mired in suffering and moral dilemmas, yet her unwavering kindness toward Raskolnikov awakens his conscience. Her gift of the Bible and decision to accompany him into exile are not merely acts of personal loyalty; they symbolize Dostoevsky's belief that moral transformation is possible only through compassion. Raskolnikov's confession and acceptance of punishment are less a response to justice than a reply to Sonya's mercy. This reflects Dostoevsky's prioritization of spiritual purification over legal retribution. By the novel's end, Raskolnikov undergoes an inner awakening, serving as a powerful

example of the notion that a person can reclaim their humanity only through the compassion of another. In this context, *Crime and Punishment* demonstrates that moral transformation is not necessarily achieved through rational deliberation, legal reasoning, or external punishment, but fundamentally through selfless kindness, nonjudgmental acceptance, and the forgiving attitude of another. Raskolnikov's psychological and spiritual breakdown following the murder represents a confrontation with conscience more than a reaction to legal consequences. Sonya's role evolves beyond that of a supporting character—she becomes the human form of compassion, the key to Raskolnikov's reintegration into humanity. Dostoevsky highlights compassion as not just a relational virtue but as an ontological and universal value embedded in human nature. In the structure of the novel, compassion functions as a bridge to spiritual redemption and a foundational element of human morality. Thus, *Crime and Punishment* is not merely a tale of crime; it is an existential inquiry into how compassion can transform the human soul. Within Dostoevsky's ethical framework, ultimate justice is not found solely in law, but in compassion constructed on the pillars of love, understanding, and forgiveness.

Compassion as a Theological Virtue: *The Brothers Karamazov*

One of Dostoevsky's greatest masterpieces, *The Brothers Karamazov*, examines the relationship between humanity and God through complex discussions of free will, faith, doubt, and morality. Throughout the novel, compassion emerges as a central value, not only in interpersonal relationships but also in the individual's stance toward God and creation. The character of Alyosha Karamazov exemplifies compassion not as mere emotional softness but as spiritual discipline and divine stewardship. Alyosha embodies compassion as active empathy and service rather than passive pity. His apprenticeship under Elder Zosima and his spiritual education in the monastery demonstrate that true compassion involves transcending the self to bear the burdens of others. Through Zosima's teachings, Dostoevsky emphasizes the Christian principle that "everyone is responsible for everyone else," with compassion at its core. Conflicts among the novel's characters often reveal the absence or misdirection of compassion. Ivan Karamazov's intellectual skepticism and his assertion that "if God does not exist, everything is permitted" reflect Dostoevsky's critique of the insufficiency of secular moral foundations. In Ivan's "Grand Inquisitor" narrative, it is not compassion but authority and coercion that dominate. This contrast serves to further illuminate Alyosha's compassionate worldview. Alyosha's nonjudgmental, empathetic relationships underscore his role as a spiritual guide. Compassion in this context is not merely an expression of divine justice but its complement. For Dostoevsky, justice alone cannot save the world—salvation is possible only through love and mercy. Thus, *The Brothers Karamazov* portrays compassion as a multilayered virtue operating within not only interpersonal dynamics but also in the axes of God-human, individual-society, and faith-ethics. Beginning in the inner world of the individual and expanding into social responsibility, compassion becomes the central motivation behind moral action. The value embodied in Alyosha Karamazov transcends personal belief, manifesting in a holistic ethical practice that embraces empathy and service to others. Shaped by Dostoevsky's worldview rooted in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, this novel elevates compassion as a theological virtue. It is not only a reflection of God's love for humanity but also the principal means by which humans approach the divine. Accordingly, compassion is defined

not as passive emotion but as active participation in others' suffering, a bearing of burdens, and an alignment with divine order. Alyosha's lived practice represents this theology in action. His monastic life, shaped by Zosima's teachings, illustrates how individual compassion transforms into collective moral duty. Zosima's principle that "everyone is responsible for everyone else" clearly conveys Dostoevsky's ethical and theological unity. In this framework, compassion functions as a bridge between the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with society. In conclusion, *The Brothers Karamazov* presents compassion not as a limited private emotion but as a universal philosophy of life built upon collective moral responsibility. For Dostoevsky, compassion is both a manifestation of divine will in the world and the most sincere step in humanity's spiritual journey.

Compassion Against Social Corruption: *The Idiot*

The Idiot is one of Dostoevsky's most symbolic and intense treatments of the concept of compassion. The central character, Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin, represents unconditional and nonjudgmental love. With his epilepsy, innocence, and sincerity, he stands in stark contrast to the prevailing social norms and is Dostoevsky's attempt to create "a truly good man" in fictional form. However, Myshkin's purity and limitless compassion are misunderstood by those around him and perceived as a threat by the corrupt society in which he lives. Myshkin's compassion acts not only within personal relationships but also as a form of passive yet profound resistance against the moral decay of society. His deep empathy for Nastasya Filippovna—the so-called "fallen" woman—takes the form of divine mercy. Nastasya's self-loathing and rejection of Myshkin's love reflect the burdens and social ostracism imposed upon women by a judgmental society. Myshkin's acceptance of her without condemnation constitutes not just a personal virtue but a critique of collective moral blindness. Through Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky reveals how absolute compassion is misinterpreted and even weaponized in a corrupt social context. Myshkin's being labeled an "idiot" exemplifies how society equates exalted virtues like compassion with weakness or madness. His goodwill and loving approach are rendered meaningless in a society dominated by power and self-interest. The novel thus becomes not only a personal tragedy but also an allegory about the impossibility of compassion's survival in a morally degraded world. *The Idiot* critiques how pure compassion is misunderstood, misused, and ultimately suppressed in such a society. Myshkin's unconditional love clashes with a culture shaped by competition, materialism, and rigid class structures. This conflict interrogates not only how individuals perceive compassion, but also what kind of values the social order permits to flourish. Dostoevsky poses a critical question to the reader: Is absolute compassion truly possible, or is it inevitably repressed in corrupt social environments? Myshkin's goodness is perceived as an anomaly within the system's value codes; his compassion is equated with naïveté or insanity. This signals Dostoevsky's profound anxiety regarding society's capacity for moral discernment. Throughout the novel, compassion transcends personal virtue and becomes a test of collective ethical awareness. Myshkin's tragic fate emphasizes that compassion functions not only as an individual moral stance but also as a value intricately linked to the moral health of society. The narrative thus becomes part of Dostoevsky's broader project to construct not only personal morality but also a shared social conscience. *The Idiot* asserts that the cultivation of compassion as a personal virtue is only possible

when society recognizes, protects, and collectively reproduces this value. Otherwise, individuals who embody pure compassion will inevitably be marginalized, damaged, or pushed to the periphery of the system.

Conclusion

The novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky should be read not only as literary narratives but also as philosophical texts that question the spiritual, moral, and social boundaries of human existence. In this context, compassion emerges in Dostoevsky's literary universe not merely as a human emotion, but as one of the most fundamental indicators of humanity and an existential principle. The four novels analyzed in this study—*Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot*, and *Demons*—demonstrate how Dostoevsky constructs the value of compassion in a multilayered, profound, and critically nuanced manner. In *Crime and Punishment*, compassion is portrayed as the key element enabling an individual's moral transformation. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is grounded theologically in divine love. *The Idiot* presents compassion as a form of personal resistance in a morally decayed society, while *Demons* depicts the absence of compassion as a harbinger of moral collapse extending from the individual to the societal level. Thus, Dostoevsky presents compassion not only as an ethical principle but also as a vital concept for the sustainability of social order and the preservation of human dignity. The author's conception of compassion offers a powerful critique of the secularized, individualistic, and utilitarian value systems of the modern world. For Dostoevsky, compassion is not simply an emotional reaction arising in interpersonal relationships; it is the expression of a deeper responsibility toward one's own existence, the suffering of others, and the metaphysical connection established with God. His characters, when confronted with this value, either achieve spiritual purification or deteriorate into existential decay through their lack of compassion. In this sense, compassion becomes a precondition for establishing oneself as an ethical subject. The findings of this study reveal that Dostoevsky's literary language generates not only aesthetic narratives but also a universal ethical discourse. He invites the reader not only into the inner conflicts of his characters but also into a personal moral reckoning. The various forms in which compassion is represented throughout the novels demonstrate that it is understood as both an individual virtue and a social responsibility. Future studies may reconsider Dostoevsky's understanding of compassion through its representations in contemporary literature, cinema, or other cultural contexts. Furthermore, comparative analyses of how compassion is perceived in different civilizations and belief systems, alongside Dostoevsky's fictional world, would offer valuable contributions to interdisciplinary literature. In this regard, Dostoevsky has left a rich intellectual legacy that continues to guide not only 19th-century Russian literature but also contemporary ethical discourse.

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