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Dostoevsky Goes to Hollywood

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I Want My Family Back:

Forgiveness, Redemption, and Karamazovian Guilt, in *The Royal Tenenbaums*

Fewer films in recent history have captured the tragedy, success, guilt, and humor of the American family with such grace and brilliance as Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums*. Each member of the ensemble cast portrays a member or close acquaintance of the Tenenbaums of 111 Archer Avenue whose three children were all, at early ages, proclaimed geniuses in their respective fields. Royal and Etheline, the parents to Chas, Richie, and Margot, get divorced as the children are still in the throws of their public brilliance, and Royal becomes estranged from the family soon after. Not surprisingly, "the children [enter] into adulthoods of failure and confusion, perhaps as a subconscious way of rebelling against their father's insatiable egotism and their mother's colonization of their lives" (Hoover). The plot, characters, and development of the movie bear much surface resemblance to the similar tale of siblings Ivan, Dmitri, and Alyosha in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. But the true similarities between the two works occur on thematic levels – the struggle against forces that tear families apart, the fight between intellectualism and heart, and the ultimate struggle to overcome past tragedy and find meaning in life. In *The Royal Tenenbaums*, Wes Anderson uses symbolically rich

mise-en-scene, emblematic characters and, above all, a sense of humor, to display all these difficulties as a group of increasingly insular people try to find meaning and love while living in the wake of crippling tragedy.

Anderson, along with co-writer and cast member Owen Wilson, lays the basis for Dostoevsky comparison as early as the *Karamazov*ian introduction of each character in playbill-style back stories. Just as Dostoevsky introduces his title family with quick, informative chapters explaining their past ("He was married twice and had three sons," "He spent a disorderly adolescence and youth," "After Yefim Petrovich died, Alyosha spent two more years at the local secondary school"), Anderson's voiceover narrator presents the Tenenbaums with quick vignettes regarding key family episodes – "Over the next decade he and his wife had three children and then separated," "He started buying real estate in his early teens and seemed to have an almost preternatural understanding of international finance," "She was a playwright and won a Braverman Grant of fifty thousand dollars in the ninth grade" (Dostoevsky 7, 11, 20; Anderson 2, 5, 6). These back stories and vignettes also indicate distinct parallels between the respective trios of siblings. Margot, the adopted female Tenenbaum, occupies a role within her family similar to the one filled by Dmitri, the oldest Karamazov. Dmitri has a different mother than his brothers, so both he and Margot find themselves battling with identity issues due to their semi-outsider status within the family. Margot in particular is never fully accepted as offspring by her father; at a cocktail party early in the film, Royal introduces Margot to black-tie partygoers by saying "This is my adopted daughter, Margot Tenenbaum" (Anderson 6). Margot, like her brother Chas, also exhibits tendencies and superior intelligence that are more reminiscent of Ivan Karamazov. Just as Ivan "was

gloomy and somewhat withdrawn" as an adolescent, Margot is "known for her extreme secrecy" and spends numerous hours locked alone inside her bathroom where she diligently hides her twenty year-old smoking habit (Dostoevsky 15, Anderson 17). Her skill as a prodigious playwright and interest in great works like *The Iceman Cometh* is also evocative of the "ardor for good works" that Ivan displays as child (Dostoevsky 15).

Like his sister, Chas Tenenbaum exhibits characteristics found in both Ivan and Dmitri. Chas's penchant for finance, displayed by his sixth-grade business "selling mice to a pet store in Little Tokyo," is matched by Ivan's "sort of unusual and brilliant aptitude for learning" (Anderson 5, Dostoevsky 15). Chas, however, shares Dmitri's anger and shame due to his family's history and his father's past indiscretions. When Chas's brother Richie says of Royal "He's your dad, too," Chas can only respond with a terse and bitter "No he's not" (Anderson 64). This outright rejection of his father invites comparison to Dmitri's claim that Fyodor Pavlovich "a deprived sensualist and despicable comedian" (Dostoevsky 73). Chas's character also deals most heavily with the distinctly Karamazovian burden of familial betrayal. Dmitri deals for most of the novel with his father's theft of three thousand rubles from him, a scenario that is echoed when Chas recounts how Royal "stole bonds out of [his] safety deposit box when [Chas] was fourteen" (Anderson 52). Dmitri is also the only Karamazov sibling to physically fight his father during his life, just as Chas is the only Tenenbaum to hurt his father; he takes Royal to court which results in Royal's disbarring and brief imprisonment.

If Chas and Margot are equal parts Ivan and Dmitri, balancing the intellect of the former and the emotional complexity of the latter, then tennis prodigy Richie Tenenbaum is the Alyosha of his family. Throughout the movie, Richie is obsessed and driven by

love and acceptance, and he constantly tries to bring his bitter and resentful family back together despite their differences and disagreements. In the movie's first scene, when Royal explains to the children that he and Etheline are divorcing, Richie's first and only question is "Do you still love us?" (Anderson 2). Young Richie's simple question points out one of the key aspects of his character – he knows that if Royal still loves the children then they will be okay. For his whole life, Richie remains trusting in the healing power of love; when Chas confronts him angrily about allowing Royal back into the family, Richie repeats "You're my brother and I love you" (Anderson 64). Just like Alyosha, Richie Tenenbaum is truly "a lover of mankind" (Dostoevsky 18). And like Alyosha, Richie "live[s] all his life, it seem[s], with complete faith in people, yet no one ever consider[s] him naïve or a simpleton" (Dostoevsky 19). Instead, Richie is the only one of the famous Tenenbaum geniuses to be recognized and appreciated in public by complete strangers – and when an old fan greets him with an excited "Hey Baumer…all *right*!" he is of course generous enough to oblige an autograph despite the fact that his professional tennis career ended in shame and embarrassment during a pathetic tournament match in which he committed "seventy-two unforced errors" (Anderson 53, 50).

The fact that Richie's field of brilliance is tennis is, like his siblings' professions, very symbolic of his character. While Margot and Chas are both firmly grounded in intellectual fields – Margot indulging the creative right side of the brain and Chas the rational left side – Richie's athletic, muscular talent is a metaphor for the strength of his most important muscle, his heart. Margot and Chas are creatively and rationally brilliant minds who nevertheless have difficulty expressing and receiving love. Margot, an acclaimed creative writer, finds herself personally stalled and unable to express her

feelings. When her husband Raleigh St. Clair asks if she still loves him, she can only respond "I do, kind of. I can't explain it right now," hardly the words one would expect from an award-winning playwright. This struggle between intellectual rationalism and emotion is echoed throughout *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan is something of a cross between Margot and Chas in that he is a writer who deals with societal and rational issues. His article about the consolidation of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Government earns him a certain amount of intellectual celebrity and he attracts "the attention of…a [large] circle of readers so that a great many people at once noticed and remembered him" (Dostoevsky 16). This intellectual and rational prowess does not protect Ivan, however, from a crippling and frightening mental breakdown during the course of Dmitri's murder trial. Ivan is deeply troubled by feelings of guilt, hatred, and unrequited love, and he is affected by "the torments of a proud decision, a deep conscience" despite his amazing intellectual prowess (Dostoevsky 655). Likewise, Chas Tenenbaum is accused of having a nervous breakdown after the sudden and tragic loss of his wife in a plane crash. His subsequent obsession with the safety of his children, coupled with a resurgence of hatred and ill will towards his father when Royal moves back in with the family, push Chas to an emotionally dangerous place where he can not call upon his financial aptitude to solve his problems.

Of course, neither Anderson, whose movies always contain moments of dark and awkward humor, or Dostoevsky, who's troubled life and disturbed psyche are both well documented, would fill their work with a sentiment so trite as "A good heart will protect a person from emotional turmoil." Instead, both Alyosha and Richie, the emotional and loving centers of their respective families, encounter as much sadness and emotional

confusion as their siblings: Richie is so overcome by his forbidden love for Margot that he attempts suicide and Alyosha has to deal with his father's murder, the sentencing of Dmitri, the chilling breakdown experienced by Ivan, and the eventual death of his young friend Ilyushechka. Clearly neither Dostoevsky nor Anderson means to imply that good heart will protect a person from the inherent difficulties and pitfalls of life, but both Alyosha and Richie end their stories in fairly healthy spirits and health. Coincidentally, the two men end both of their stories helping children, attempting to pass on knowledge they have learned throughout their trials and tribulations. Richie's last two appearances in *The Royal Tenenbaums* encapsulate his character perfectly – he is shown "teaching competitive tennis to eight- to twelve-year olds at the 375th Street Y," and finally "throw[ing] a white flower into the grave" of his just-buried father (Anderson 119, 120). Alyosha ends *The Brothers Karamazov* in a similar fashion, imparting knowledge to children and serving yet again as the moral compass of a novel otherwise riddled with betrayal, murder, lust, and revenge. "Do not be afraid of life," Alyosha addresses the mourning friends of Ilyushechka, "How good life is when you do something good and rightful" (Dostoevsky 776). While Dostoevsky and Anderson and too cynical and realistic to completely shield their moral characters from suffering and disappointment, they do present the characters as being able to deal with those things more successfully than their family members.

Beyond the clever and emotive script, Anderson also expresses the emotional complexity of his characters with his use of subtle symbolism patterns and creative, purposeful mise-en-scene. The cinematography of *The Royal Tenenbaums* is deliberately dense – each camera shot is fully packed with visual stimuli, from "a framed drawing of a

pair of underwear" to a "dusty old games closet with everything from Chutes and Ladders to the hilariously named Magnashapes" (Nunziata). The complexity of every shot echoes the other complexities that the script points out – those of individuals and those of human relationships, specifically families. The intricacy of each shot also adds realism and depth to the characters as the viewer learns everything about them, from their wall hangings to their home interiors to their book collections.

Also heavily present within the visually crowded film is the repeated symbol of picture frames. Every major character in the film is introduced early on by way of a portrait-like shot of them in surroundings specific to their character. Richie, the romantic, searching Tenenbaum sibling, is seen "on board an ocean liner;" Chas, the pent-up, overprotective father that he is, is seen shaving with his two sons "in the locker room of a boxing gym;" Margot, the stalled artist, is seen in a beauty parlor holding (but not reading) "an open copy of a book of plays by George Bernard Shaw" (Anderson 12, 11). Each person is centered perfectly and the shots are displayed from the same perspective: an eye-level view similar to that of a person looking at a life-sized portrait in a museum. In addition, Anderson's camera rarely moves during the course of the film. All senses of place and scenery are established by cuts and not by long tracking shots, which embellishes the portrait-like quality of the cinematography. This photographic quality of the film also compliments the recurring motif of picture frames that repeats throughout the film. The idea that each character has a variety of wall hangings or is constantly framing something establishes that the Tenenbaums are a family obsessed with preserving specific moments. The Tenenbaums were at one time considered the absolute pinnacle of familial success but have since fallen into obscurity and dysfunction. The

one-time "Family of Geniuses," to steal the title of Etheline's book, can now only relive their past greatness through preserved memories (Anderson 4). It makes sense, therefore, that each person's character is identified by their decorations or the book they have written – both things can serve as reminders of past greatness and both things are examples of a moment frozen in time. The Tenenbaums have learned the hard way that talent and greatness does not always last forever, and so they cling to pictures and books as examples of things that do. Anderson echoes this desire in his deliberate and portrait-style photography.

The Royal Tenenbaums and *The Brothers Karamazov* share many similarities in both thematically and in plot. The three siblings in the movie and the novel represent three different approaches to life. Ivan, along with his counterparts Chas and Margot Tenenbaum, earned a certain early fame due to his intellectual abilities. Chas also shares the overly emotional nature of Dmitri Karamazov, and their angry and bitter nature leads them to become detached and unhappy. The only emotional compasses of the families are Richie and Alyosha, whose respect and love for mankind carries over into their families. They are the only people in their stories who have the capacity to forgive; while their siblings forget that "individuals are part of something bigger than themselves, and that their individual narratives must be understood in a context that is graspable from their own minds," Richie and Alyosha remained constant examples of love and the desire to reconnect their increasingly dysfunctional families (Sellar). Richie, while still exemplifying his siblings' tendency to look to the past, never gets stuck trying to run from present problems. Instead, he attempts to overcome the emotional plight of his family by focusing on the possibility of reconnecting everyone. Ultimately, Dostoevsky

and Anderson both tell stories about the difficulties of overcoming past tragedies, especially within the complicated context of family. In both stories, many people let tragedy run their lives and let anger define their character. The heroes, Richie and Alyosha, instead "do something good and rightful," and attempt to instill love and forgiveness back into their families (Dostoevsky 776).

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