

# **“An onion, is better than a banquet!”**

TED Ankara High School. The beginning of the 70's. I'm in first grade of high school. During those years' literature was an important part of the curriculum; we had four hours of literature and two hours of composition lessons a week. We had the same teacher for both lessons. Composition lessons concentrated on creative writing and expression and we were asked to write prose on various subjects.

Our teacher had made this lesson a real pleasure for all of us. We all looked forward to these lessons. I will never forget the time she took the chalk, stood in front of the black board and asked us to say the first word that came to mind.

- “Hursit, tell me your word.”
- “Home”
- “And Serap, what's your word?”
- “Storm.”
- “And you Gulay?”
- “Bag.”

In that way, asking us one by one, she wrote ten words on the black board then asked us to write a cohesive composition containing these ten words. And she also told us to “underline each word as we used it”. In the remaining 45 minutes we had all finished our compositions. Our teacher began the next lesson by congratulating us all on our creativity and read out loud the compositions she had selected.

\*\*\*

We were met with another surprise in another of her composition classes:

- “Now children, take out your pens and paper. Write your surnames and student ID numbers at the top of the page. I'm going to read you a passage and I want you to write it down, word for word.”

She proceeded to read out to us a passage with the perfect diction and wonderful Turkish we had become accustomed to.

This was the passage she dictated:

*“Once upon a time there was a woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell to*

*God; 'she once pulled up an onion in her garden,' said he, 'and gave it to a beggar woman.' And God answered: 'You take the onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to the Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is.' The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her; 'Come,' said he, 'catch hold and I'll pull you out.' And, he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her out..."*

While reading our teacher suddenly stopped. Now it was our turn. We were to continue the story. We all scribbled down something or other, but it turned out that none of us had guessed how the passage ended.

In the next class our teacher had us reading each other's texts and then shared with us the actual ending of the passage. This is how the passage continued:

*"when the other sinners in the lake, seeing she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. 'I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours.' As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake and she is burning there to this day. So the angel wept and went away."*

Years later I was amazed when I came across this passage while reading one of the greatest novels ever written: *The Brothers Karamazov*. I realized that, without knowing, I had been introduced by my literature teacher to Dostoyevsky and his famous novel when I was in first grade.

\*\*\*

Russian literature is an academic field that has attracted the attention of tutors, researchers and students alike in universities throughout the world. In my opinion Professor Gary Saul Morson's classes in which he analyzes Russian writers is one of the greatest indications of this. The classes Morson gives regularly in the amphitheaters of Northwestern University are followed by students with great interest every year. Last year I attended one of these lectures in which he analyzed *The Brothers Karamazov*, Morson put particular emphasis on the story of the onion:

"This story has two moral lessons for us:

1. Even the smallest act of kindness can make big differences. As we can guess, and as Dostoyevsky teaches us, life does not revolve around big issues, it is about simple onions.
2. We, each one of us, have the innate strength needed to reshape our lives and, even if only on rare occasions, to choose to identify with our best actions! The old woman in the story had this choice, she could have been saved. But she chose to identify with her worst side.

Morson ended this part of the class and passed on, in a humorous way, the lesson he wanted his students to understand: "Sometimes an onion is better than a banquet"

\*\*\*

Winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature, the esteemed Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, said this about The Brothers Karamazov:

"In my opinion the best book of the last thousand years is Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov. I do not believe there is another book that succeeds in dramatizing life in this world as well as all the problems that arise from our relationships with people who are different from us and also from our dreaming of the other world. He does this with a such an expansive and heartfelt profundity that is almost encyclopedic.... This novel develops with such harmony and strength that the reader obtains the biggest prize possible: the feeling that our own life experiences are also a part of the common human experience."

Professor Victor Terras, widely considered an authority on Russian literature and Dostoyevsky in particular, describes The Brothers Karamazov as "the novel where a clean heart comes emerges victorious against a man of reason."

According to my tutor Gary Saul Morson "Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov may well be the best novel ever written."

Throughout his life Dostoyevsky had financial difficulties. For that reason and mindful of the advance he would be given, he had to write most of his novels in a hurry and without being able to prepare a draft. One exception to this is his final novel, The Brothers Karamazov. At the time he was writing this novel he was relatively comfortable financially and he was able to prepare a draft of the text and write without the pressure of time.

The detailed table of contents (not included in Turkish translations) is in itself an indication of how detailed his preliminary draft of the novel was. As we read the novel chapter by chapter the narrative develops and it takes on an almost poetical form.

The story of the onion is related between Grushenka, who has a bad reputation in the town and Alyosha, considered by Dostoyevsky to be the hero of the novel.

The youngest of the Karamazov brothers, Alyosha, unlike his brothers, chooses, with the permission of his father, the monastic life. In Dostoyevsky's words, "The thing that attracted Alyosha to the monastic life was the famous "Staretz" Zosima whom Alyosha met at the monastery and whom he considered to be an exceptional man"

\*\*\*

In the Russia of that period the number of "Staretz", which can be translated as "old man, grandad or the leader of a religious sect", had fallen considerably. To quote Dostoyevsky again:

“Alyosha was completely under in the influence of the Elder Zosima. He was staying in the same cell as him, and even though he lived and slept in the monastery he had no official connection to the monastery and was free to leave the monastery and stay away for days.”

Alyosha told everybody with admiration about the visionary powers of the Elder Zosima. And it was true that the townsfolk and people from afar came to Zosima to tell him of their problems and share their worries. They hoped he would heal them and they would ask him for advice.

A discourse between Zosima and a woman who was suffering from a loss of faith goes as follows:

- “From what specially?”
- “I suffer... from lack of faith.”
- “Lack of faith in God?”
- “The thought of life beyond the grave distracts me to anguish, to terror and to fear... I don’t know whom to turn to, and have not dared to all my life.”
- “Don’t distress yourself about my opinion of you. I fully believe in the sincerity of your suffering.”
- “But I only believed when I was a little child, mechanically, without thinking of anything. How, how is one to prove it?”
- “But there is no proving it. Though you can be convinced of it”.
- “How?”
- “By the experience of active love. Strive to love your neighbor actively and indefatigably. Insofar as you advance in love you will grow surer of the reality of God and of immortality of your soul. If you attain to perfect self-forgetfulness in the love of your neighbor, then you will believe without doubt, and no doubt can possibly enter to your soul. This has been tried. This is certain.”

\*\*\*

Alyosha’s moment of crisis comes with the death of Zosima. The townspeople who believed in the sainthood of Zosima are waiting for the traditional miracle to happen. According to this miracle after his death Zosima’s body, instead of decomposing, would emit a pleasant aroma. However, when the Elder Zosima dies the exact opposite happens and his body starts to rot much sooner than would normally be expected. This shakes all Alyosha’s beliefs.

When the absurd character Madam Hakloкова, who used to visit Zosima regularly at the monastery to consult him on religious questions, hears of Zosima’s death and that the miracle had not happened, she says of Zosima, “I would never have expected such behavior from him.” Professor Morson drew our attention to this phrase saying, “This is the exact word she uses: ‘behavior’. As if a corpse can choose how it decomposes!”

When Alyosha is faced with the reality of the situation he revolts in a state of desperation. To all intents and purposes, he loses his faith. Rakitin, who has been waiting for a sign of weakness from Alyosha and the opportunity to show he is a failure, takes him to see the renowned Grushenka.

Word had it that Grushenka had been seduced by an army officer when she was only 17, was immediately deserted and left in a state of poverty and shame. Later on, she was given a house to live in the town by someone who had taken her under their protection and in four years “the owner of a fortune earned in various ways” had been transformed into a beautiful and charming Russian lady.

But on that occasion Grushenka too was in a state of nervous excitement. She had received a letter from her army officer; he was on his way to come and collect her. Grushenka was dressed in her best clothes waiting for news from the officer.

And this is the setting where Rakitin brought Alyosha and Grushenka together.

\*\*\*

Grushenka, after a polite conversation smiled at Alyosha and started flirting with him. She said that she had been thinking of him for a long time, that she had asked Rakitin to bring him to see her and that she was very pleased that he had come. Then, jumping up suddenly “laughing, on his knee, like a nestling kitten, with her right arm about his neck” she sits on Alyosha’s lap and saying, “I’ll cheer you up, my pious boy! Yes, really, will you let me sit on your knee, you won’t be angry? If you tell me, I’ll get off.” tries to seduce Alyosha.

Even though he hears Grushenka say “I’ll get off if you don’t like it”, Alyosha makes no reply, as if the cat had got his tongue.

The narrator of the novel describes Alyosha’s feelings to the reader as follows:

“The great grief in his heart swallowed up every sensation that might have been aroused, and, if only he could have thought clearly at that moment, he would have realised that he had now the strongest armor to protect him from every lust and temptation. Yet in spite of the vague irresponsiveness of his spiritual condition and sorrow that overwhelmed him, he could not help wondering at a new stage sensation in his heart. This woman, this “dreadful woman”, had no terror for him now, none of that terror that had stirred in his soul at any passing thought of woman, if such thoughts occurred to him at all. On the contrary, tis woman, dreaded above all women, sitting on his knee, holding him in her arms, aroused in him quite different, unexpected, peculiar feeling, a feeling of the intensest and purest interest without a trace of fear, of his former terror. That was what instinctively surprised him.”

While this was going on, Ratikin who was looking on with great pleasure, was filling the champagne glasses. After taking a sip Alyosha smiles silently and puts down his glass saying, "It would be better if I didn't drink!"

"Well if so, I won't either," said Grushenka. "If Alyosha has some, I will."

This is a chance for Ratikin to make fun of Grushenka and he interjects eagerly, "What touching sentimentality! (...) what's the matter with you? He is rebelling against his God and ready to eat sausage."

The following dialogue unfolds between them:

Grushenka: "How so?"

Ratikin: "His elder died today, Father Zosima, the saint."

Grushenka, who had been acting most professionally until then, is shocked to hear of Zosima's death. She crosses herself in a very pious fashion and gets up from Alyosha's lap as if apologizing. "Good God" she says "I did not know." After crossing herself devoutly, she said, "Goodness, what have I been doing, sitting on his knee like this at such a moment!"

Alyosha looks at her in amazement, his eyes shining bright. In front of him he now sees a "loving soul" who feels pity for him and who is being kind to him at this difficult time. He sees a different Grushenka and starts calling her "my sister".

Grushenka, however, tries to avert Alyosha's words of praise. "So don't praise me, Alyosha, don't think me good, I am bad, I am a wicked woman and you make me ashamed if you praise me." Then, as if in an attempt to justify this reaction, she relates the story of the onion:

"It's only a story, but a nice story. I used to hear it when I was a child from Matryona, my cook, who is still with me."

Grushenka identifying herself with the story concludes the tale by saying "The only charity I have ever shown is giving an onion."

In actual fact Grushenka, by turning away from her impure intentions, is offering Alyosha an onion. "that's the only good deed I have done."

The dialogue between them is the very essence of the story of the onion:

Grushenka: "Why did you not come before, you cherub? (...) I have been waiting all my life for someone like you would come and forgive me. I believed that nasty as I am, someone would really love me, not only with a shameful love!"

Alyosha: "What have I done for you? I only gave you an onion, nothing but a tiny little onion, that's all, That's all!"

In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha and Grushenka help each other. They listen to each other and treat each other with kindness. They give each other an onion.

In Professor Morson's words, "The message conveyed here is that even if we cannot solve other people's problems, we can at least show true and genuine interest in them. But on the whole people tend to shy away from doing that."

\*\*\*

Coming to the end of my article I would like to add a little footnote. My teacher in High School First Grade was the first person to instill in me all the beautiful emotions and thoughts that I value, that excite me and that I have adopted as principles. That teacher was my paternal grandmother, the late Cemile AYTAC.