Marlmeladov, a retired government official and an alcohol abuser in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, serves not only as a mirror of the protagonist’s actions but also as a criticism of corruptive nature of poverty, alcohol, and loss of pride. His struggles at supporting and leading his family out of their poor condition are results of his internal despair and desolation. He violates his moral principles and fails to conform to social and personal ethics due to his wretched physical and mental state. The poverty that has eternalized in Russian society pushes Marlmeladov away from salvation and establishes in him a desire for suffering. His immoral actions arise from his state of misery as alcohol serves as his only resort and though he relates to his family’s desolation, his lack of pride and status in society inhibits him from working towards betterment. The inability to escape his life accustoms him to the continual discontentment from his daughter’s prostitution and his wife’s attempts at clinging to a prosperous past. The paradoxical nature of his situation hinders him from abiding to the expectations as a father and a husband. Dostoevsky seeks to evoke pity in the reader for Marmeladov’s helpless lack of morals and innocence in an impoverished community through vivid depictions of his encounters with Roskolnikov and failures at coping with his circumstances in order to instill greater understanding of the corruptible nature of poverty and pride and make mankind mindful of the flaws in human judgment.
Dostoevsky’s thorough representation of Marmeladov as one cannot conform to his society’s moral standards and is incapable of leading his family out of suffering impresses a sentiment of understanding upon the reader as Dostoevsky exposes the effects of poverty on a naïve and feeble state of mind and compels mankind to question judgments made based upon actions alone. The degrading nature of need and the lack of repute in the 19th century Russian society extinguish the innocence and bring Marmeladov to an altered and miserable state of mind whereby alcohol serves as the sole retreat from reality. He is diverted from his goal in life and indulges in alcohol to deviate himself from the burden of responsibilities that he is not capable of fulfilling. While his society in St. Petersberg dismisses Marmeladov as he fails to live up to his familial duties, Roskolnikov comprehends the cause of such immorality: “There was something very strange about him. When he looked at you there was the flash of a kind of exaltation and perhaps even intelligence, too, and sense; but also the glitter of a kind of madness” (Dostoevsky 9). Marmeladov still displays the attitude of his past years that saw him rise to his position in the government but the current impoverished state brings him to the ground. He struggles to cope with the despair of a daughter lost to debauchery due to the family’s hardships and his inability to provide a better future for his wife and children. While he cannot bring himself to surmount the hurdles of social structure and scarcity, he possesses a desire for being rescued from the current state. Dostoevsky evokes sympathy in the reader through the apparent weight of poverty that holds back Marmeladov from his desires and hopes for his family. The pitiful condition portrays the effects of the poverty and the reader is forced to not only reconsider the judgments established of Marmeladov as simply an immoral alcoholic but also to sympathize for his situation, a circumstance that is a result not of Marmeladov’s supposed immorality but that of his society’s treatment of the inferior. In addition to Roskolnikov’s interpretation of Marmeladov’s
state of mind, Dostoevsky further reveals Marmeladov’s inner turmoil and guilt. Dostoevsky presents Marmeladov’s desperate desire of betterment for his family and his powerless attempts at virtue to depict the blamelessness of the human mind when overpowered by feelings of degradation in order for the reader to comprehend the root of Marmeladov’s immorality. Marmeladov struggles to justify his inability to support his family in hopes of keeping his head high during adversity while explaining to Rodya that “In poverty you may still retain your innate nobility of soul, but in destitution-never-no-one. For destitution a man is not chased out of society with a stick, he is swept out with a broom to make it as humiliating as possible; and quite right, too, for in destitution I am the first to humiliate myself” (23). The extreme poverty that corrupts Marmeladov’s moral nature further hinders him from rising up and attempting to help his family. Though he possesses a desire of being salvaged from the poverty, the pain inflicted on the mind when poverty allows his society to regard him as far beneath them renders Marmeladov incapable of proving his virtuousness. Deprived of all pride, Marmeladov fails to cope with the expectations and his feeble state of mind moves him further away from the goal. His true immorality as visible to his society lies in the inability to support his family but the root of this immorality continues to thrive even after his death in the society whose members suppress all attempts at rising up and seek to gain a false sense of pride through their economic and social superiority. The vivid detail of his state of mind pushes the reader to grasp the reasoning behind Marmeladov’s actions and gain sympathy and understanding for the effects of poverty on the deprived. Dostoevsky highlights the flaws that exist in human nature as mankind continuously strives to not be emotionally moved by the state of an unfortunate by preconceiving the unfortunate’s state as a result of his immorality. The greater understanding of the social structure in the society of St. Petersberg during the 1880’s and the social structure’s ability to inhibit
redemption from poverty illuminates mankind to the flaws in judgments imparted upon others based solely on actions considered evil or immoral.