



Dostoyevsky's gambler: the story of a fall

A part of the life story of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow, it will all be over!"

The man and the writer

Joseph Frank (1918-2013), one of the greatest biographers and connoisseurs of Dostoyevsky, condensed in a few words what one can say about this Great Russian writer:

Some issues are fundamental and are part of Western culture and are issues that reappear again and again. I believe that great writers always express these issues, each in their way. And he [Dostoyevsky] is one of those few novelists who have done it. It is impossible to ignore or not to encounter these subjects that continually arise in his works. That's why today he is still a bestseller.

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) was born in Moscow. Her mother died when he was fifteen years old. Two years later his father also died, when he was pursuing his military engineering studies in St. Petersburg. His health was never stable, because he suffered from epilepsy, leaving evidence of the epileptic experience in several characters of his works.

In 1845 he left his military career to devote himself more fully to the literary career. In 1862 and 1863 Dostoyevsky made several trips through several European cities, where he began a double adventure, a loving one with a student who then rejected him and the other one awful for his unstable economy, due to his vice gambling in the roulette which led him to bankruptcy.

In 1866 his novel Crime and Punishment was published in twelve parts in the Russian Messenger and received a very favorable reception. But this success did not solve his economic problems.

It is at this moment that he writes the work that we are about to analyze, *The Gambler*. That same year he had committed himself to the editor of his works to deliver a new novel. His situation became so distressing and compelling that he was forced to dictate to a young stenographer a work that took him twenty-six days to conclude. The young lady's name was Anna Grigórievna Snítkina, her future wife, and the play was titled *The Gambler*.

Dostoyevsky's gambler

Joseph Frank, who we have already mentioned, in his biography *Dostoevsky A Writer in His Time* gives a quite complete vision of the personal situation of the Russian author and the literary context of this work (Frank, *Dostoevsky* 521-530).

According to Frank, the first mention that Dostoyevsky makes of the theme of a gambler goes back to the summer of 1863, when Dostoyevsky is making his trip around Europe. This is, in his period of gambling addiction. But the interpretation that Dostoyevsky makes of this Russian gambler seems to breathe superior airs than those of the prose since Dostoyevsky himself compares this player to a poet (Id. 521).

This poetic element works by way of active principle of the whole work since the novel becomes the psychological scenario where Russia and the West are the antagonists at stake.

As Joseph Frank notes, *The Gambler* is the only work of Dostoyevsky that can be called "international" and this is due to the contrast of the Russian characters compared to the Europeans of France, England, and Germany.

The studios Tamara Djermanovi has stated the following about the entire literary production of Dostoyevsky:

The vision of the relationship between Russia and the West that we find in the work of the Russian writer brings together emblematic and symbolically many keys that introduce us into the material and spiritual reality of his country and delves into the reasons for the eternal misunderstanding that has been maintained between those two worlds (Djermanovi, *Dostoevski between Russia and the West* 22).

The second peculiarity of this work is the psychological penetration of his protagonist, Alexey Ivanovich, who writes in the first person a kind of diary where he collects many of his impressions. Alexey is the tutor of the Children of general Zagorianski, already retired, and the novel is located at the time when the general and his children are in the fictitious German city of Roulettenburg, in the "original" german Roulettenburg, ie the "city of roulette".

From the first chapter, Alekséi puts the reader in context and opens his heart: he

has just arrived at Roulettenburg and the general along with the people of his circle, including the sister and stepdaughter of the general, Maria Filipovna and Polina Alexandrovna, receive him with coldness and indifference. Alekséi does not like the general, he even wonders in his notes the cause why remains part of his circle:

I found myself in a strange disposition of mind; and of course, before half of the meal, I had already formulated the eternal question: why should I spend time with this general and why haven't I left him long ago? From time to time he looked furtively at Polina Alexandrovna.

Yes, Polina, that young stepdaughter of the undecided and miserable general was the cause of his permanence in this circle of false people.

The general situation was not satisfactory at all. He thought of himself as a "general", although he was just a simple colonel. Also, his assets were scarce and lived on loans. But he had his hopes put on an inheritance. It was an aunt of him, an old woman, who lived in Moscow and had begun to have some aches and even a disease that had put her on the verge of death. The general had hoped to receive a great fortune from this rich aunt of him. And this inheritance was the cause of the agitation of the circle of people that surrounded the general: a young Frenchwoman, who called herself Mademoiselle Blanche de Cominges and a young Frenchman, the Marquis Des Grieux. Both had a single goal that consisted of making the most of the capital of the general.

But the general also had another great goal, which went beyond the money and cash, and was precisely Mademoiselle Blanche de Cominges, who he was madly in love with.

The Alekséi Ivanovich's game

We have delineated two peculiarities of The Gambler of Dostoyevsky: The wide reach of the "international" scope of this work and the psychological penetration in the mind of his protagonist.

In this article we penetrate the process of inside and outside the fall of Alekséi, following closely the text of Dostoyevsky. In this way, the reader will be able to discover the soul and, as it were, the consciousness of Alekséi through the insightful pen of Dostoyevsky.

Dostoyevsky's descriptive depth is so prominent that a psychiatrist in addictions, Sanju George, has stated that "this novel captures and expresses in a simple but effective way the key structures and consequences of gambling addiction, better than most of the conventional text manuals reports" (George, «From the gambler within Dostoyevsky's The Gambler» 231).

The devastating blindness of a man

The nucleus of Alekséi's problems could be summed up in a single word: Polina. Why didn't he turn away from Roulettenburg? Why then would he devote himself to gambling without control? The cause of all was Polina.

The last time? says Polina, in the Schlangenberg, you told me that I was willing, before a word of mine, to pull headlong down, and I believe that there we were at a height of a thousand feet. There will come a day that I will utter this word only to see if you do honor to yours, and you can be sure I will stand firm (Dostoyevsky, *The Player* 32).

In reality, Alekséi had already cast his head down from the mountain of his will and had hurled himself to over a thousand feet in the abyss of the whims of his beloved Polina.

The proof is that this young lady will ask him to start gambling on roulette a certain amount of money, seven hundred to be exact, and Alekséi will accept despite not agreeing: "I confess, he writes later, that mission disgusted me."

Our protagonist could perfectly apply Propertius's elegiac gifts:

Ante pedes caecis lucebat semita nobis: scilicet insano nemo in amore videt.
Before my feet shone a path, but I was blind: nobody indeed sees in their madness of love (II, 14).

Alexey is already in the casino. But he doesn't hide his disagreement: «... I entered in the game rooms with an unpleasant feeling. At first glance, I was disgusted by what I saw there» (*the Player* 35).

In the mind of our protagonist, the game room meant contact with an environment that did not live up to his morality. It is impressive to see that he is aware of his baseness when he reflects on his situation after observing various players and the methods of gambling in the room:

As for my intimate moral convictions, they cannot naturally find room here. I agree that this is so; I say this to reassure my conscience. But behold, I have observed one thing: in recent times I find it dreadfully insightful to adjust my actions and ideas to a moral measure, whatever it may be. Another thing governs me... (Id. 39).

Yes, another thing ruled Alekséi Ivanovich, and it was Polina's will: "It seemed to me that, as I began to play for Polina, I annihilated my fate" (Id 40).

The inner process of a man who throws himself into doom can be the result of a

conscious act, as evidenced by the case of Alekséi. And so it happens in reality, for there are men who destroy themselves blindly by subjugating their freedom. This is one of the great paradoxes of a man concerning the rest of the animals: man can opt for his perdition consciously, something that not even the smallest of the insects makes, thanks to its instinct of survival.

But Alekséi wasn't alone. Two other candidates could snatch the love of his life from him: The Englishman Mr. Astley and the Marquis Des Grieux. According to Alekséi, the only way to conquer Polina was to show her that he could also be a rich man, as was said to be Des Grieux. And, with that idea in his head, he wanted to win for himself a big fortune in roulette. Even almost refuses to play once more for Polina:

Coming up to my room I was able to give Polina her gain and tell her that I would not gamble for her again.

Why? She asked alarmingly.

Because I want to play for myself, I answered, looking at her with wonder and that prevents me (Id. 41).

After listening to Polina's insistence, he yields again and goes to the gambling halls, losing everything.

The blindness and slavery in which Alekséi lived extended to the relationship between the general with Mademoiselle Blanche. The general did not realize that the French girl's interests were placed in his pockets and not in his heart. And the situation of both stories reaches a climax with the arrival to Roulettenburg of the general's aunt, the fearsome Antonina Vasílevna Tarasévicheva.

The general was anxiously awaiting the death of this old aunt of him, with whom he stumbles in the same city where he is. And seeing her so alive, full of energy and reluctant to leave him an inheritance, all his expectations and those of the people around him vanish, starting with the young Mademoiselle Blanche.

Alekséi becomes the tour guide of the old woman and she insists stubbornly to go to the game rooms. There the old woman loses everything, "almost one hundred thousand rubles", as she will confess later to the same Alekséi. And with that lost money, the general, Mademoiselle Blanche, and Des Grieux lose all hope. It dissolves the circle of the general, but in the blind spirit of Alekséi a flame is ignited: the roar of gain.

This hunch to win in the roulette is born in the heart of our blind hero when Polina decides to go to him after the Frenchman moves away from Roulettenburg. Alekséi did not fit himself with happiness by seeing such a clear show of love on the part of the woman he was madly in love with. It was just a matter of hours. He enters the

casino with few guilders and leaves with 25.000 guilders in banknotes and coins. He pretends to earn his beloved, but the only thing that provokes is her rejection. And the next day she moves away from him.

Alekséi thought he loved Polina, but he was actually deceived about his infatuation:

I swear I felt sorry for Polina; but, strange thing, from the very moment, that the night before I had reached the game table and started to pile up money, my love seemed to have gone to the background. I say this now, but I have not yet noticed it very clearly (Ib. 189).

From this crucial moment begins the fast suspension of the poor Alekséi. The best description of his spirit is the words directed by Mademoiselle Blanche in French: "Ah, vile enclave!"

With confusing ideas in his head and a clear fortune in his pockets, he becomes the slave of the delicious Mademoiselle Blanche, who takes him to Paris, with the sole purpose of squandering florins and taking advantage of the cheapness of lucky Alekséi. The general's aunt died in the meantime leaves a certain inheritance to the general with which he manages to win the favor of Mademoiselle Blanche. And they both get married.

When his goods are finished, Alekséi leaves Paris and returns to his only refuge: the game room. After a year and eight months without writing a note in his diary, he sums up with these words his situation: "I am much worse than a beggar!" (Id. 207).

The dim light of hope

The work does not end in the abyss of despair despite all these vicissitudes. There's a little exit in the tunnel. Things happen like this: Alekséi finds himself coincidentally with Mr. Astley who declares that Polina loved him. She is sick and is convalescing, but amid her illness, she had not forgotten Alekséi.

The end is nothing romantic, but extremely realistic. Alekséi receives money from Mr. Astley and decides to leave the following day to Switzerland, but...

Oh, I have a hunch, and it can't be any other way! I have fifteen Louises now and I started with fifteen guilders!

[...] Twenty minutes later he came out of the casino with a hundred and seventy guilders in his pocket. [...] What if I lose my temper now and not dare to decide...?

Tomorrow, tomorrow, it's all over! (Id. 218-219)

In reality, the happiness of Alekséi is hanging off a thread and we do not know how his days will end. The truth is that he wants to be "reborn again, resurrected." The

interpretation of the end finds a key at the end of the work which occupied that same year (1866) the literary ingenuity of Dostoyevsky, *Crime, and Punishment*:

"But that is the beginning of a new story, the story of the continual renewal of a man, the history of his gradual regeneration, of his transition from one world to another, of his initiation into a new and until then unknown reality. This could be the subject of a new narrative, but this one now ends here "(Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 634).

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