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Book Review —A Classic

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The Gambler

*By Fyodor Dostoyevsky. (1996;1866). Trans. by Constance Garnett. New York: Dover Publications, 117 pages, paperback, \$2.00 US
ISBN 0-486-29081-6*

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When I first started working in the problem gambling field in the winter of 2000, the first book I wanted to read on the topic was Fyodor Dostoyevsky's classic gambling narrative *The Gambler* (1866). I felt sure that if anyone had anything to say about gambling it would be Dostoyevsky. An inveterate gambler himself, Dostoyevsky bet his entire oeuvre that he could write *The Gambler* in a month while in the midst of writing *Crime and Punishment*. I was not disappointed. Dostoyevsky creates memorable characters that bristle with energy and portrays the class-conscious casino society of his day with cutting satire.

In *The Gambler*, Dostoyevsky introduces a scheming cast of characters gathered in Roulettenberg, a fictitious German spa town with a casino and international clientele. Dostoyevsky employs the literary device of a diary to reveal the tumultuous inner life of Alexei Ivanovitch, a poor but educated young man who works as a tutor for the General. As a servant and outsider, Alexei both observes and participates in the tempest that surrounds the General and his entourage of blue bloods and social climbers. Alexei, painfully aware of his social class, both envies and mocks the aristocrats' airs and pretensions. The General, despite maintaining the trappings of wealth, is impoverished and heavily indebted to the Marquis de Grioux who bailed him out when he was accused of embezzling. He desperately loves Mlle. Blanche, a "gold-digger," while Alexei moons over Polina, the General's destitute stepdaughter. All fortunes depend on the impending death of Granny, a rich 75-year-old woman who arrives in Roulettenberg, very much alive, and proceeds to the casino.

Alexei and Granny are introduced to roulette and soon become hooked, although they start gambling for different reasons: Alexei thinks that "Money is everything!" whereas Granny wants to prove to her nephew, the greedy General, that she is still very much in control of the purse strings. They both "chase their losses" and pursue a cycle of winning, losing, desperation and exhaustion. Granny eventually burns out and returns to Moscow, but almost two years later, Alexei, still in denial, drifts from casino to casino.

Alexei, the protagonist, is a crass, immature and rather despicable character driven by greed and desire (one amazon.com reviewer refers to him as a "semi-psychotic provocateur"). At the beginning of *The Gambler*, Alexei is obsessed with Polina: he debases himself in front of her; he is her slave and loves her without hope; yet he hates and fears her. Alexei is jealous of her mysterious relationships with the Marquis de Grioux and the enigmatic Mr. Astley, the only decent character in the book. Given to emotional excess, Alexei vacillates between elation and despair. A slave to Polina, first, and then the roulette wheel, Alexei is tortured by his passions.

Dostoyevsky's Alexei is a prototypical gambler who rationalizes and defends his growing obsession with roulette. For Alexei, a big win at roulette would earn him entrance into the aristocracy and transform him from outsider to insider. Deliberately baiting the General, Alexei contends that "the Russian is not only incapable of amassing capital, but dissipates it in a reckless and unseemly way," a dig at the General whose lavish lifestyle belies his mounting debt. Yet, to "act in a reckless and unseemly way" is exactly what Alexei does after his first big win at roulette. Impulsively, he runs off with Mlle. Blanche to Paris, abandoning Polina and leaving the General to pine for Mlle. Blanche.

While the plot (which I don't want to give away) borders on farce with its fantastic twists and turns, it is also a vehicle for Dostoyevsky's savage wit and social commentary.

Granny is one of Dostoyevsky's most amusing and flamboyant characters. She arrives at this gambling saloon on the Rhine amidst various plots and schemes all predicated on her death. Incensed by the General's transparent agenda to get his hands on her fortune, Granny ridicules him for wishing her dead. She heads off to the casino, retinue in tow, and impetuously bets large sums on roulette. As luck would have it, she wins, and leaves the casino in an exalted state. Later that night, restless and unable to sleep, she summons Alexei and returns to the casino where she proceeds to lose all her winnings and more. Disgusted with herself, Granny decides she must leave Roulettenberg and return to Moscow; but despite her intentions, she stays and gambles away most of her fortune.

In Dostoyevsky's hands, Granny is an outspoken eccentric who exposes the artifice and deception of the Russian aristocracy. She calls a spade a spade, unmasks hypocrisy and has a great time at the roulette wheel until she starts losing. Granny is at her best when she is defying bourgeois social conventions by breaching gambling etiquette with her fits of pique. When Granny wins at roulette, she is elated, when she loses heavily, she throws tantrums. Dostoyevsky captures the tragedy of her descent into problem gambling, yet, *The Gambler* is also a social comedy, a dark but witty lampooning of high society.

In *The Gambler*, Dostoyevsky explores the subjects of class, obsession, chance and morality. Dostoyevsky probes the conflicts and dilemmas that create and perpetuate human suffering. These themes were important in his own life. Dostoyevsky paid heavily for his early anti-monarchist activism, and in 1849, a last minute reprieve saved him from execution by firing squad for crimes allegedly committed against Tsar Nicholas I. He spent the next five years exiled in Siberia, the subject of *The House of the Dead* (1860). During his incarceration, he endured physical and mental pain and recurring epileptic seizures. *The Gambler* is based on Dostoyevsky's love affair with Apollinaria Suslova as well as his frequent casino visits to play roulette, which he began playing in 1863, at a time when he was extremely poor. He experienced first-hand the excesses of gambling so aptly described in *The Gambler*.

In the end, the wheel of fortune was kind to Dostoyevsky. He married Anna Snitkina, the stenographer who transcribed *The Gambler*, and they had a happy union and raised children. He proceeded to write literary masterpieces—*Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Idiot* (1868)—despite his continued heavy gambling until 1871 when he declared himself free of this delusion

(Knapp, 2000). He went on to write *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) published a year before his death. That Dostoyevsky eventually stopped gambling should provide hope to any reader of *The Gambler* who has problems with gambling.

The Gambler is a particularly good read for those interested in the psychology of problem gambling. I sometimes felt like a voyeur —imagine your private musings, rants and raves laid bare for public consumption! Although Dostoyevsky is not known for his humour, I found *The Gambler* very funny. The first half of the novel sparkles with its behind-the-scenes plotting and snide gossip, while the second half seems quickly sketched. Still, Dostoyevsky is a masterful storyteller and a scathing social commentator. Short and engrossing, I had a hard time putting *The Gambler* down.

Reference

Knapp, B. (2000).

Gambling, Game, and Psyche. New York: State University of New York Press.

Notes

- 1) Sergey Prokofiev composed the opera *The Gambler* in 1915.
- 2) For a history of roulette, see: http://www.gamble.co.uk/roulette_history.htm

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