

**Boris Christa**

**“Les jeux sont faits”**

Money and Roulette as a Literary Communicative Device in  
“The Gambler”

aus:

Analysieren als Deuten

Wolf Schmid zum 60. Geburtstag

Herausgegeben von Lazar Fleishman, Christine Götz und Aage A.  
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## **“Les jeux sont faits”**

### **Money and Roulette as a Literary Communicative Device in “The Gambler”**

Boris Christa

Dostoevsky was adept at the use of images for sub-textual literary discourse. In his writing he makes frequent use of what Lotman has described as ‘secondary modelling systems.’ Clothing, locations, means of transport—all carry important communicative content. But perhaps the most frequently employed semiotic medium is money. ‘Money talks’ as the popular adage has it and Dostoevsky makes abundant use of the expressive faculty of sums of cash for his literary purposes.

The language of money is universal, incisive, factual and it requires little translation. It is not ubiquitous, but where it is used it can make great impact. Böll has remarked that there is very little reference to money in German literature<sup>1</sup> and, indeed, in many cultures it is a taboo subject. Dostoevsky certainly has no inhibitions in this area. In fact, he was a pioneer in penetrating through the veneer of appearance and bringing into literature banal facts of every day living. He was acutely aware from his own experience that in this context hard cash plays a central role. His writing has constant references to money and nowhere does he make it talk with greater eloquence than in his pressure-cooked and highly-spiced work, *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Böll H. Frankfurter Vorlesungen. Köln, 1966. S. 89.

*Gambler*.<sup>2</sup> Money sets the tone in the first sentences of the novel, it features prominently in the ending and completely dominates the action in between.

Dostoevsky seems to derive pleasure from writing about money. He mentions with relish most of the prominent European currencies of his day: francs, florins, friedrichs d'or, louis d'or, thalers, gulden and of course, roubles. He is familiar with their respective value and juggles the exchange rates with consummate ease. When specific sums of cash are mentioned they are carefully chosen and named to convey authentic messages. They occur on almost every page and communicate the drama of the action. The plot centres on debts and obligations, wins and losses, bills and allowances. As the hero formulates it: "Everything is completely dependent on the state of our finances" (222). Precise information regarding this is a vital element of the story-line. Dostoevsky, as a novelist, however, thrives on mystification. To create tension he relies heavily on either deliberately misleading the reader, or on withholding facts—to be communicated only very gradually to his audience. The characters are equally in the dark about each other, and we watch intrigued as they play out an elaborate game of bluff. Money defines and governs the relationship between all the participants, and only when the exact sums are named can the drama be fully understood.

Constantly aware of the semiotic function of money, Dostoevsky in *The Gambler* uses it as the main means of characterisation. A brief survey can demonstrate the crucial role it plays in defining each of the characters. At the beginning of the novel, for example, the financial status of the hero is indicated with a few deft touches. When Aleksey Ivanovich mentions to his employer that his salary is substantially in arrears, he is paid out 100 thalers (209). This sum is soon put into perspective when we learn that a simple supper of an omelette and some wine costs one and a half thalers (235). The reader is made aware in this way that the hero's salary is pitifully small.

Moreover, we learn that his modest means expose him to constant slights and he desperately wants to bolster his self-esteem and win social recognition. Lack of money is the key to his personality.

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<sup>2</sup> All references to *The Gambler* are to *Dostoevsky F. Igrok* // Dostoevsky F. Poln. sobr. soch.: V 30 t. Leningrad, 1972—1990. T. 5. Translations are by the author.



Similarly, the significant features relating to the General, the hero's employer, are communicated to the reader through the medium of monetary semiotics. Subtly, but unequivocally, we are informed that he is a very light-weight character, insecure, unreliable and morally flawed. We learn that he has massive debts and the dark secret that he has misappropriated government funds. He has only been saved from disgrace because the Marquis de Grioux made available 30,000 roubles to pay back the deficit. To obtain this loan the General has mortgaged all his assets to him. The ensuing financial dependency completely governs their relationship. His life is now centred on the hope that "Grandmamma", actually his aunt, will die and leave him her money. As all these financial facts regarding the General are gradually revealed, our perception of this character is formed and the portrait that emerges is totally unflattering.

The same applies to de Grioux, the elegant French dandy, who has had all the young Russian women sighing after him. His charms, however, remain entirely on the surface and Dostoevsky shows us the real nature of the man by reference to his monetary transactions. By a series of astute moves de Grioux has managed to obtain a controlling interest in the General's assets. Now he misuses his position to exercise power—especially sexual power. He has seduced the General's stepdaughter, Polina, and has been planning to exploit them both further. However, he abandons them when their prospective inheritance is gambled away and he can see no further advantage in the relationship. Through his ruthless pursuit of wealth, de Grioux reveals himself as an unscrupulous scoundrel who betrays both friendship and love.

In sharp contrast to him we have the totally honourable Mr Astley. All we know about this reticent Englishman is also communicated through money. We are told authoritatively that he is a man of immense wealth and we observe how he uses his money again and again to help others. It is this generous use of ready cash that is the most telling feature in this sketchy portrait.

The quite complex and detailed characterisation of "Grandmamma," the grand old barina from Moscow, owes all its depth and authenticity to the language of money. Her essential integrity and prudence is established by the many shrewd remarks she makes about money matters, such as her caustic comment to her nephew that his many telegrams to Moscow about her health must have cost him a fortune (253). Her down-to-earth common

sense is, however, counter-balanced by a capacity to kick over the traces. We watch spellbound as she wildly gambles away massive amounts of gold coins, demonstrating her dualistic and maximalistic nature.

Polina, the young niece, similarly reveals herself through her attitude to money. Her demonstrative disregard for it stamps her as a typical Dostoevskian heroine. Unhesitatingly she gives all her fortune, 700 florins, to Aleksey Ivanovich to gamble on her behalf and when he loses it all, she doesn't utter a single word of regret or reproach. When later he gives her 50,000 francs after she has spent a night in his bed, she throws the lot into his face and leaves.

The spurious French noblewoman, Blanche, is a complete contrast. She is totally money-orientated, knows how to invest and earn interest, but is greedy and ruthless in her pursuit of wealth. Her portrayal which, again, Dostoevsky does in money language, also serves well to illustrate his technique of using monetary semiotic markers to inform the reader about matters such as sexual transactions which could not be dealt with explicitly because of the taboos and censorship laws of the period. In this instance, the reader is told an episode from Blanche's recent past, when finding herself short of cash at the roulette table, she asks a fellow gambler "with a certain smile" to place 10 louis d'or on red for her (248). To the experienced adult reader the underlying message would have been clear. Her flirtatious request was a covert sexual proposal. Dostoevsky has informed us discreetly that Blanche is a prostitute, prepared to give sexual favours in return for monetary ones. This is amply confirmed later when she names to the hero her price of 50,000 francs for being his mistress in Paris.

Similarly, in the most erotic scene of the novel, the nocturnal visit of Polina to the hero's bedroom, Dostoevsky communicates the facts of the encounter in the language of money. Aleksey Ivanovic knows that she wishes to settle a debt of honour and offers her 50,000 francs, "as a friend". She refuses, saying she won't take money for nothing. We then have a discreet break in the narration of events, but in the morning her first words are, "Well, now give me my 50,000 francs" (298). Nothing of any sexual nature has been described explicitly but the reference to the money makes it clear what has occurred.

While Dostoevsky often uses the language of money to reveal unspoken truths, he is also fully conversant with the ability of monetary markers to create facades and fake an aura of wealth. The constant concern of the

characters in *The Gambler* is to hide their genteel poverty and ruthless opportunism and to maintain appearances. Early on in the novel, for example, the General who is very strapped for cash, sends Aleksey Ivanovic to the reception desk of their hotel to change two thousand franc notes. He knows that this is an effective semiotic ploy which will mislead the management into thinking he is very rich (208). In this example, money language has been used to mislead, to camouflage reality; Dostoevsky, however, is generally far more concerned with demolishing the facades of genteel poverty. Commencing with *Poor Folk*, he utilises monetary semiotic markers as a means of deconstruction. Information regarding financial status, with the mention of specific sums of cash, provides unequivocal clarity and dispels all pretence and bluff. In *The Gambler*, all the characters enter the novel apparently well-situated and affluent and leave it deconstructed and discredited. The General, for example, who has been strutting the social stage as a Russian grandee is stripped of all his affectations and emerges as a quite pathetic figure, who is left with 700 francs in cash and massive liabilities including a huge unpaid hotel bill.

Even more drastic is the reduction of the handsome prince on a prancing horse, who emerges as a suitor for Blanche after her disappointment with the General. He is demolished by Dostoevsky at a stroke of the pen, when we are told that he has tried to borrow money from her and is, in fact, totally without means.

The one character who avoids all such deconstruction is the enigmatic Englishman, Mr Astley, who exits the novel as unscathed as he has entered it—independent, aloof and very wealthy. He, of course, avoids the pitfall responsible for the rapid downward mobility of his friends—the pastime of roulette. In the Casino, fortunes change hands with great speed and the transition from rich person to pauper, or occasionally vice-versa, can occur very quickly. Dostoevsky finds this an ideal context to demonstrate how the presence or absence of money conditions social attitudes. It becomes a ready means for unmasking servility and hypocrisy. He describes how in the gaming rooms the winners with money are at once surrounded by sycophants, while everyone turns away from the losers. Blanche treats the hero like dirt when he is an impecunious tutor. When he has money galore, she courts him and takes him to Paris as her lover. Aleksey Ivanovich tells Polina that “money is everything” (229) and explains that with money he will cease to be a slave and her behaviour towards him will be totally dif-

ferent. He is fascinated by gambling because, as he says, “one turn of the roulette wheel and everything changes” (311).

The hero is not alone in his addiction. The title of the novel could well be *The Gamblers* in the plural since nearly all the characters could be described as such. Their lives are centred on the Casino and the spinning roulette wheel and Dostoevsky depicts their world with total authenticity. Much of the action he depicts mirrors his own experiences.

Dostoevsky, the gambler, has attracted the attention of scholars since the earliest days of Dostoevsky research. The main emphasis, however, has been on the gambling syndrome in his biography and little attention has been given to the role which gambling plays as a medium for literary communication. The key episodes of *The Gambler* are located in the Casino and much of the inner meaning of the novel is conveyed by a contrastive description of gambling styles and outcomes. To make this meaningful to the general reader, Dostoevsky provides a great deal of background information. Within the text of his novel we find an introduction to the basic rules of roulette and quite detailed briefings regarding betting systems, probability theory, types of gamblers and even ways of cheating. All this ‘know how’ forms the basis of a secondary modelling system which Dostoevsky uses as a semiotic medium for literary communication.

The betting episodes of *The Gambler* are recounted with expert attention to detail. As they gamble, the characters not only reveal themselves, but their moves at the roulette table make sub-textual statements that contribute to the ideological message of the novel. The gambling styles vary from the pseudo-scientific and coldly rational to the wildly emotional and maximalistic. National characteristics are shown as influencing greatly the strategy and risk-taking profile of the gamblers. An important communicative factor is the specific size of the sum that is staked and the strategy of the player. Also very informative is the behaviour during and after the game. The losers reveal their moral qualities in how they take their defeat and the winners show themselves in the use which they make of their newly gained wealth.

The reader’s introduction to roulette begins with an episode involving the General. It illustrates well Dostoevsky’s technique of using the gambling events for literary communication. The General plays with faked aristocratic sangfroid. All his movements are pompous and haughty. He places his large stakes foolishly without any hedging of his bets and

promptly loses 1,200 francs in gold in three spins of the roulette wheel. Moreover, having earlier warned the hero against gambling he is now seen to be an addict himself, so the General is shown up to be a self-important hypocrite. Moreover, his style of gambling is seen to be unsubtle, ostentatious and unsuccessful, his behaviour forced and unnatural. His emerging portrait now assumes much clearer and unsympathetic outlines and the whole episode makes quite a strong anti-establishment statement.

The first gambling scene featuring the old Russian barina, similarly, speaks volumes. The moment she learns that there is a payout of 35 times the stake, if the ball lands on zero, she cannot wait to bet on it and no reasonable argument will stop her. The pursuit of a winning plunge on zero becomes an obsession and her betting gets more and more maximalistic. Although she loses twice running, she doubles her stake and promptly wins. Buoyed by that success, she continues to back zero against all odds. After a further loss, she then wins and receives a massive pay-out of 4,000 francs and 20 friedrichs d'or. Not satisfied even with that, she stakes all her winnings in one single plunge on red—the maximum allowed—wins, and then does the same a second time, gaining a total of 12,000 francs. She then stuffs the money into her bag and leaves.

This detailed account of the old lady's gambling not only adds substantially to her characterisation but also to the ideological message of the novel. It contrasts sharply with the gambling style of a young Frenchwoman to which Dostoevsky has drawn our attention a few paragraphs previously. He tells us that she comes every day for exactly one hour, bets coolly on the basis of careful analysis and calculations, wins a thousand or two and then leaves. The old barina watches her for a long time and comments dryly that "you can tell a bird by the way it flies" and that "evidently she has sharp talons" (263). She herself, however, has no interest in betting in this cerebral and controlled way. Betting cautiously and winning small sums doesn't suit her at all. Her impulsive temperament interferes with her attempts to bet rationally and moderately. Her betting style is passionate, courageous and thoroughly Russian. Later, when de Grioux, the detestable Frenchman, comes to try to advise her to play in a more controlled, Western style, she sends him packing.

Dostoevsky goes on to describe in absorbing detail the old barina's subsequent catastrophic roulette sessions. She is soon totally out of control and her bets become wilder and wilder, as gambling releases some unstoppable

impulses in her nature. In quoting all the exact figures Dostoevsky makes clear the extent of the financial disaster. In four marathon gambling bouts she loses all her ready cash, all the money she raises by liquidating her stocks and shares, her 5 % bills and her government loan bonds. All-in-all she loses 115,000 roubles—an enormous fortune at the time.

With his portrait of the old barina in the throes of gambling fever, Dostoevsky has succeeded in communicating semiotically and very effectively the innermost nature of a quintessentially Russian character. She emerges as an incarnation of many traditional Muscovite virtues. She is God-fearing, plain-spoken and direct, dislikes everything foreign and pretentious. She acts fearlessly and decisively, not cleverly, but motivated by her emotions and intuition. When she wins she is extravagantly generous. For instance, after her first big coup, she gives 5 gold coins to each of her servants, a gold friedrich d'or to each of her porters and two to a beggar who comes with a hardluck story. All the ladies of her entourage get valuable presents and Aleksey Ivanovich, 50 friedrichs d'or. But even when she loses, she remains a 'grande dame'. She retains her composure, shows uncomplaining fortitude in the face of adversity and evidently has a Dostoevskian capacity to cope with hardship. In terms of the ideological message of the novel, the old Muscovite barina embodies a temperament and code of behaviour with which Dostoevsky clearly has close affinity. He sees her impetuous and maximalist gambling style as mirroring the scope and depth of the Russian soul.

Using a narrative technique similar to that of the cinema that exploits to the full the semiotic elements inherent in the gambling process, the ways of the old lady are compared with the heartless rationalism of the Western gamblers, whose handling of money is described not merely as being prudent, but frequently as being dishonest. Dostoevsky, in fact, takes the opportunity to mount a scathing critical onslaught on the morality and lifestyle of the West. No chance is lost to point out evidence of decadence and corruption. All the descriptions are consistently slanted to support Slavophile positions. The local gamblers are rude, pushy and ruthless and their faces show nothing but greed. However, they are not evicted from the Casino as long as they spend money and keep changing 1,000 fr. notes to gamble. Moreover, he suggests, the Casino servants and the croupiers are corruptly paid by the management to encourage the players to keep playing

and losing. The criminal element in the Casino is so strong that a large number of staff and police is required to keep matters under control.

Ironically, Dostoevsky does not condemn roulette as such, but levels his broadsides at the outlook and conduct of the West Europeans. They are depicted as materialist and petty. The Germans are lambasted for their bourgeois acquisitiveness, the French for their superficiality, the Jews for their prudence and the Poles for cheating. But roulette is beyond reproach. As the hero says on several occasions, it is a game that might have been invented specifically for the Russians. In the West, he says, making money is the supreme goal. Russians are hopeless at making money, but they are good at spending it, so they readily take to gambling as a way of getting rich quickly without effort and it is really better to be a Russian rake and gambler than to be a virtuous petty-bourgeois German (226).

The hero's own style of playing roulette is as extreme as that of the Muscovite barina and Astley claims that all Russians are maximalists (317). However, his gambling makes a statement that goes far beyond Slavophile didacticism. The old lady bets every available copeck and loses all with remarkably good grace. For the moment she has nothing, but back in Russia she still has “three villages and two houses and is fairly rich” (288). In spite of her wild gambling spree, she remains at heart a pious, conservative member of the Russian establishment.

Aleksey Ivanovich's gambling is in quite another category. He is without income in a strange country, lacking even board and lodging and has no resources he can fall back on either abroad or in Russia. He believes roulette will be his salvation and his commitment to it is absolute. When he has to choose between love for a woman and his passion for roulette, he chooses roulette. His arrogant belief that he can single-handedly triumph against all odds has a demonic element reminiscent of Pushkin's hero in *The Queen of Spades*: “Is it possible, he asks, to touch the roulette table without immediately becoming infected by superstition?” (218). Indeed, his act of staking his very last coin on the spin of a roulette wheel goes beyond all common sense or reason. It requires much the same trancelike commitment to an idea that Raskolnikov manifests to prove to himself that he can do what lesser mortals fear to do. In both cases, it is a luciferic act of challenge to the gods.

There is, indeed, much that unites Aleksey Ivanovich and Raskolnikov. Ultimately, what motivates them both is not materialistic gain but psycho-

logical need. Moreover, it is through the language of money that Dostoevsky makes it clear that the professed financial motivation for their actions is only a facade. Raskolnikov, after he has committed his deed, fails utterly to manage his ill-gotten gains. He does not even count the money he has taken and disposes of it quite senselessly. Aleksey Ivanovich, similarly, does not know what to do with the bagfuls of cash that he has won after breaking the bank. When Blanche taunts him and, on appropriate payment, offers to be his mistress while they live it up in Paris, he accepts without enthusiasm, simply because he has no better plan for disposing of his newly acquired wealth.

It soon becomes evident that Aleksey Ivanovich, in spite of his unilinear pursuit of it, does not really care for money as such. In the account of the Parisian episode, the hero's incompetence in handling money is constantly emphasized. Although it is his money, Blanche controls the purse strings and keeps him on a tight allowance. He does not object or complain and gradually she begins to realise the ironic truth that he is quite indifferent to money. She is prepared to battle over every 10 franc note and he simply does not care. "You ought to have been born a prince" she says (305), and with even greater insight, hails him as a philosopher (306).

His inability to cope with the actual possession of money lifts the hero very considerably in the ranks of Dostoevsky's heroes and heroines, the most admirable of which rise above the pursuit of worldly possessions and materialistic values. Indeed, one of the most vital communicative functions of money in Dostoevsky's novels is to act as a touchstone of moral worth. Invariably, characters are subjected to 'trial by money' and only the inferior ones remain fixated on the worship of Mammon.

Aleksey Ivanovich is not the only character in *The Gambler* for whom money holds no materialistic interest. Polina demonstrates on several occasions how little she cares for money. Similarly untainted by its evils is the ever philanthropic and rather shadowy Astley. He, of course, has the advantage of great inherited wealth, but he does not gamble and shows no symptoms of financial greed or meanness. So he and Polina are to some extent birds of a feather and they do flock together. The bond that unites them is an implied pursuit of nobler aims than the accumulation of money.

Aleksey Ivanovich on the other hand has no obvious, altruistic, higher aims. Yet, as Dostoevsky has made very clear, it is not the pursuit of materialistic goals or hedonistic pleasure that drives him to his kamikaze gam-



bling. His motivation is more subtle, more Russian and it lies in the psychological or philosophical sphere. It is based on a 'Weltanschauung' which, like so much else in the novel, is communicated in the language of money.

The icon of Aleksey Ivanovich's guiding philosophy is that very, very last gulden, with which he is prepared to gamble. In the staking of this last coin, he experiences a special thrill. In placing it on the roulette table against all dictates of rationality, he is committing an existential act of conscious, irrational will. It is an ultimate maximalistic assertion of personal freedom.

Life is frequently perceived as a lottery and the ups and down of roulette could well be viewed as a metaphor for life and the human condition. In pursuit of his money icon, Aleksey Ivanovich rejects the bourgeois ideals of sustained work and prudence. His gambling experiences range from the euphoria of breaking the bank to the despair of losing one's last gulden. Ultimately, he finds solace and a meaning to life in his existentialistic decision to live dangerously but to the full.

In summary, from the starting point of a diverting tale based on his own more lurid personal experiences, Dostoevsky fashions in *The Gambler* a complex multi-level, literary discourse. The semiotic resources of the language of money are effectively enlisted to further characterisation, deconstruct facades of appearance, convey hidden meaning and further the plot. Moreover, they are used to develop a secondary modelling system, based on gambling, which serves effectively for ideological communication. This medium becomes a message which conveys much of Dostoevsky's 'Weltanschauung,' not only in terms of his Slavophile positions, but even beyond. The reader is confronted by the abyss of an existentialist lifestyle where all everyday concerns are pushed aside in a frenzy of constant confrontation with destiny. The novel which started as a literary potboiler written with all speed to cover a pressing debt, through the semiotic exploitation of money and the gambling process, ends up making a powerful, philosophical statement.