

## ARTICLE

# From the gambler within: Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler*

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## SUMMARY

Fyodor Dostoyevsky is widely regarded as the greatest 19th-century Russian writer and a giant in world literature. He is familiar to literary-inclined psychiatrists for his rich and accurate portrayal of mental illness in several of his works. But his own chronic addiction to gambling and its consequent perils are less well-known. This article discusses *The Gambler*, one of Dostoyevsky's early (1866) semi-autobiographical novellas, inspired by his own addiction to roulette, focusing on its depiction of gambling. To better understand Dostoyevsky the gambler, the article also presents brief excerpts from letters that he wrote to his wife in 1867, when his gambling addiction appears to have been at its worst. Finally, the relevance of the central theme of this work, gambling addiction, to the present-day psychiatrist is discussed.

## DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None.

This article seeks to explore Fyodor Dostoyevsky's depiction of gambling in his novella *The Gambler* (completed in 1866), which many believe was made so rich and accurate by the author's insight into his own addiction to gambling. To better comprehend the origins of *The Gambler* and its contextualisation, I will present Dostoyevsky's life summary in two parts: before and after *The Gambler*. Dostoyevsky's guilt about and insight into his gambling addiction, and its severity and consequences, are portrayed with brutal honesty in letters that he wrote to his wife in 1867, when his gambling addiction was at its worst; hence, short excerpts will be presented.

Although not discussed here, Dostoyevsky's wider contributions to literature, existentialism and psychology/psychiatry are far-reaching. For those interested, I recommend Allan Beveridge's article in *Advances*, "Is everyone mad?" The depiction of mental disturbance in the work of Dostoyevsky' (Beveridge 2009) as a 'starter' and Joseph Frank's book *Dostoyevsky: A Writer in his Time* (2010) for those who wish to delve deeper into one of literature's greatest psychological explorers of the human mind.

## Dostoyevsky's life before *The Gambler* (1821–1866)

Fyodor Mikhaylovich Dostoyevsky was born, the second of six children, on 30 October 1821 at the Hospital of the Poor in Moscow, where his father was Chief Medical Director. At the time, Russia had a semi-feudal class system, run by the Tsars and nobility. However, literary Russia was also beginning to be influenced by Western ideas (Byron's Romanticism) and a national (Pushkin's) sense of egalitarianism and was opening itself up to covert debates about constitutional reform and equality of the masses (Freeborn 2003).

It would seem that while growing up, Dostoyevsky was closer to his mother than his father. His father, a strict disciplinarian, was distant yet caring, but not outwardly affectionate. His mother, however, was loving and compassionate and also introduced the young Dostoyevsky to Christianity, with their regular readings of the Bible, and to Russian literature. Growing up in the hospital 'environment', Dostoyevsky was exposed early to the world of deprivation and sickness, both of which were to influence his later work. Dostoyevsky was closest to his immediate elder brother, Mikhail, with whom he shared a room as a child and with whom he was to share his literary interests and publishing/editing ventures later in life.

After his mother's death from tuberculosis in 1837, Dostoyevsky (aged 16) was sent by his father, who had high ambitions for him, to the Military Academy for Engineers in St Petersburg. Here, Dostoyevsky is noted to have made few friends, mostly preferring his own company. His father died in 1839.

Dostoyevsky completed his studies at the Academy in 1844 and embarked on a career as a writer. His first novel, *Poor Folk* (1846), was published soon afterwards and was received with grand critical acclaim. The sociopolitical activist in him grew stronger and he became involved with a group of utopian socialists called the Petrashevsky Circle. This led to his arrest in April 1849; he was tried and sentenced to death. In December 1849, Dostoyevsky was subjected to a 'mock' execution: blindfolded and awaiting his turn, he came within minutes of being executed, only to be told that

he had instead been given a much more lenient sentence: he was to be incarcerated in a Siberian prison for 4 years and was then to serve as a common soldier in the army for a further 4 years. His prison diaries from those times would inspire his later work, *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* (1860). During his prison sentence, Dostoyevsky was not allowed to publish any material and was only permitted to read the Bible (New Testament), which was to reinforce his Christian beliefs. While serving as a soldier in Siberia, he met his first wife, Maria Isaeva, and they were married in 1857. On health grounds (epilepsy), Dostoyevsky obtained discharge from the army in 1858 and set out to re-invigorate his literary career. In 1859, Dostoyevsky, accompanied by his wife and stepson, returned to Russia.

Dostoyevsky's marriage was not particularly happy and was further complicated by Maria's tuberculosis. Meanwhile, Dostoyevsky, while in Paris in 1862, fell in love with Polina Suslova, 20 years his junior, who remained his mistress for a few years. This affair ended in 1863 when Polina rejected Dostoyevsky's love for another man. Dostoyevsky scholars acknowledge that Polina inspired his portrayal of Polina Alexandrovna in *The Gambler* and that it was his own tempestuous affair that was reflected in the Alexei–Polina relationship in the novella. It is also possible that it was around this time that Dostoyevsky started to gamble excessively. In 1864, Maria died of complications of tuberculosis and 3 months later Dostoyevsky lost his brother Mikhail. These two losses caused him considerable pain and emotional suffering.

In 1865, Dostoyevsky started work on *Crime and Punishment*, one of his greatest novels, which he completed in a year while working on and finishing *The Gambler*.

### Origins of *The Gambler*

Dostoyevsky first had the idea to write a story about gambling as early as 1863. He wrote about it to his friend Strakhov, hoping to get an advance:

'I have in mind a man who is straightforward, highly cultured, and yet in every respect unfinished, a man who has lost his faith [...]. The main thing though, is that all his vital sap, his energies, his rebellion, daring, have been channelled into roulette. He is a gambler [...] deep down he feels it is despicable, although the need to take risks ennoble him in his own eyes. The whole story is the tale of his playing roulette in various gambling houses for over two years' (Frank 2010: p. 521).

Despite this original idea occurring in 1863, it was not until 1866 that *The Gambler* came to fruition, as explained below.

As a result of Dostoyevsky's own excessive gambling, he owed a considerable sum of money to Stellovski, a ruthless Russian publisher. In 1866, as a means to pay his debts, Dostoyevsky bet the publishing rights of all of his past and future works. He wagered that he would complete a new novel within 30 days. To hasten the pace of his work, Dostoyevsky hired a stenographer, something he had never done previously. The stenographer was Anna Grigorievna Snitkina, a star pupil of Russia's first stenography professor. Anna, 25 years his junior, would come to Dostoyevsky's apartment every day. He would write late into the night and early morning; while he dictated, Anna took notes during the day, took them home and brought the proofs the next day. This went on until the novella was finished. The work was completed by the deadline – with hours to go. However, the devious Stellovski had made himself unavailable, hoping that Dostoyevsky would not be able to submit his work and thereby not fulfil his contract. Hence, upon Anna's suggestion, Dostoyevsky registered the manuscript at the police station and obtained a receipt.

For a book 'written to order' within a month, *The Gambler* bears no sense of being a hurried job: superbly crafted characters, well thought-through depictions of Western character traits, complex and tumultuous relationships, portrayal of the author's own sense of Russian patriotism and the national character – all are wonderfully knitted together in one of Dostoyevsky's 'lighter' works.

### Plot summary and the wider relevance

*The Gambler* is a novella written as a first-person narrative, capturing the gambling exploits, love interest and related incidents in the life of the narrator, Alexei Ivanovich. The story is set in the fictional gambling spa (the equivalent of a casino) town of Roulettenberg, with Alexei employed as a tutor by a Russian General. Alexei is in love with Polina Alexandrovna, the General's step-daughter and places a bet at her request and wins. He continues to gamble and ends up losing his fortune, his job and his love. The General too has considerable debts and is expecting to receive an inheritance from his wealthy aunt ('Granny') to pay off his debts. But to his utter disappointment, Granny, far from being on her deathbed, arrives at the spa and gambles away most of her fortune at roulette. Other key cast members include a Frenchman, Monsieur le Comte (to whom the General owes a lot of money), Mlle Blanche and Mr Astley, an Englishman. Apart from Alexei, others too have debts and a central theme is the debt incurred from gambling and the vicious cycle of

gambling to make money, but in vain. Alexei's love for roulette and his tempestuous relationship with Polina, set among the gambling habits of other characters and their complicated relationships, often brought about and maintained merely by financial commitments to each other, are the key plot elements that drive the story.

Although the central theme of this short novel is gambling, some additional noteworthy aspects make *The Gambler* different from Dostoyevsky's other works. *The Gambler* is painfully autobiographical (perhaps the most autobiographical of all of his works) on two counts: Dostoyevsky's own addiction to gambling was almost inevitably the inspiration for the novella and its central character Alexei; and Dostoyevsky's tumultuous affair with his mistress Suslova, during his first marriage, is reflected in his portrayal of the relationship between Alexei and Polina.

*The Gambler* is unique among Dostoyevsky's works in its non-Russian setting and the host of Western characters. However, it can be seen as Dostoyevsky's commentary on Russia – intensely patriotic and yet critical in places of the Russian character. The novel unequivocally paints Dostoyevsky's perceived sense of the superiority of Russian character traits, despite their flaws, over French and German. In the context of 19th-century Russian–European sociopolitical relations, Dostoyevsky has crafted perhaps harsh portrayals of Westerners, reflective of his own views of their national stereotypes, as displayed in their betting styles: for example, the passion and maximalism of Russians versus the calculating and cold prudence of Western Europeans (Leatherbarrow 2002).

By Dostoyevsky's standards, *The Gambler* is a 'lighter' work, lacking the psychological anguish and darkness seen in many of his other publications. Some commentators even see in it the origins of some of his future characters: outlines of Nastasya Filippovna and Madame Epanchina from *The Idiot* (1869) can be seen in Polina and Granny respectively (Frank 2010).

### *Portrayal of gambling in The Gambler*

Dostoyevsky accurately describes the anticipation or the intense sense of excitement experienced by gamblers even at the thought of gambling – an almost irresistible urge to gamble (page numbers in this section refer to a 1966 reprint of the work):

'Even on my way to the gambling hall, as soon as I hear, two rooms away, the clink of the scattered money I almost go into convulsions' (p. 110).

For some people addicted to gambling, it affords a means of being somehow superior or special,

particularly if they think themselves able to 'beat the system' or if they have underlying feelings of inferiority, which is true in the case of Alexei:

'The same evening I went to roulette. Oh how my heart beat! No, it was not money that I wanted. All that I wanted then was that next day all these ... Magnificent Baden ladies – that they might be all talking about me, repeating my story, wondering at me, admiring me, praising me, and doing homage to my new success' (p. 110).

These feelings are often combined with a risk-taking tendency or personality trait:

'At that point I ought to have gone away, but a strange sensation rose up in me, a sort of defiance of fate, a desire to challenge it, to put out my tongue at it' (p. 17).

This tendency is central to Dostoyevsky's treatment of gambling (W.J. Leatherbarrow, personal communication, 2010). In fact, Leatherbarrow (2005) interprets it as a form of existential struggle in Dostoyevsky's characters.

Gambling addicts often have various cognitive errors or distortions and these include the belief that they can 'beat the system' or predict the outcome – an illusion of control, overestimating their abilities and the probabilities of winning by using a set of 'rules' or ways of playing the game that they have devised. They fail to acknowledge the fact that the outcome is unpredictable and that it is determined by chance alone:

'Though there is no system, there really is a sort of order in the sequence of casual chances – and that, of course, is very strange' (p. 17).

Another classic cognitive characteristic of people with gambling addiction is 'magical' thinking, that is, they hold irrational beliefs in particular outcomes – it can be a very strong hunch or a belief that following certain rituals will guarantee success:

'I've borrowed money and I wanted to repay it. I had the strange and mad idea that I should be sure to win here at the gambling table. Why I had the idea I can't understand, but I believed in it' (p. 22).

Gambling addicts often minimise the negative consequences of their own gambling or even justify their gambling behaviour:

'And why should gambling be worse than any other means of making money – for instance, commerce? It is true that only one out of a hundred wins, but what is that to me?' (p. 9).

'Chasing' losses is yet another classic feature of addiction to gambling and often serves to maintain the behaviour: 'As sure as I'm alive, I'll win it back' (p. 77).

As with those addicted to substance misuse, people addicted to gambling find it difficult

or almost impossible to control or stop their gambling:

‘The following day she lost everything. It was what was bound to happen. When once any one is started upon that road, it is like a man in a sledge flying down a snow mountain more and more swiftly’ (p. 79).

They become totally preoccupied with gambling, to the exclusion of all else, and persist despite obvious harms:

‘Between ten and eleven there are still to be found in the gambling halls the genuine desperate gamblers for whom nothing exists at a spa but roulette, who have come for that alone, who scarcely notice what is going on around them and take no interest in anything during the whole season, but play from morning till night and would be ready perhaps to play all night until dawn, too, if it were possible. And they always disperse with annoyance when at twelve o’clock the roulette hall is closed. And when the senior croupier announces, just before midnight, “*Les trois derniers coups, messieurs,*” they are ready to stake on those last three strokes all they have in their pockets – and do, in fact, lose most at that time’ (pp. 89–90).

Gambling addiction can have numerous adverse consequences for the addict and through Mr Astley we see how much gambling has ruined Alexei’s life:

‘You’ve grown rusty. You have not only given up life, all your interests, private and public, the duties of a man and a citizen, your friends (and you really had friends) – you have not only given up your objects, such as they were, all but gambling – you have even given up your memories’ (p. 112).

Apart from the accurate portrayal of the typical characteristics of gambling addiction, equally interesting in *The Gambler* is Dostoyevsky’s description of the setting and goings on in the betting spa: roulette is painted in intricate detail – how it is played, its rules, how players and croupiers act and react, details of monies lost and won, etc. Various colourful characters who all share a passion for gambling are also vividly described. I have limited my focus in presenting the plot of *The Gambler* in the previous section and in discussing *The Gambler* in this section to portrayals of gambling and given less attention to a cultural and psychological exploration of the book. For an in-depth ethnopsychological analysis of *The Gambler*, read Frank (2010).

### **Dostoyevsky’s life after *The Gambler* (1867–1881)**

Betting, risking everything, to finish *The Gambler* in 30 days is one gamble that paid off for Dostoyevsky. This ‘production’ also had another happy outcome in his life: he fell in love with Anna and the feeling was reciprocated. After

completing *The Gambler*, Dostoyevsky proposed to Anna in November 1866 and they married in February 1867.

Anna was to be a strong and supportive life partner for Dostoyevsky. Apart from being a truly devoted wife and mother to their children, Anna was also a great support to Dostoyevsky’s literary career. She took dictations for all of his novels from 1866, managed his publishing affairs and, in her own words, took on the goal of ‘disseminating the works of my husband’ (Leatherbarrow 2002). The few years after his marriage were perhaps the most tumultuous of Dostoyevsky’s life: he spent an ‘enforced’ 4 years out of Russia (see below), his gambling addiction was at its worst, he was struggling financially, his epilepsy was poorly controlled, he had bouts of depression and he was unhappy at not being in Russia, which he always saw as an essential inspiration for his work.

Two months after they were married, Dostoyevsky and Anna were forced to leave St Petersburg for Europe to escape creditors. Although when they left on 12 April 1867 to Berlin it was only intended as a 3-week break, it ended up being a 4-year ‘exile’. 1868 saw the publication of *The Idiot*, yet another of Dostoyevsky’s great works.

The Franco–Prussian war and Dostoyevsky’s quest for literary inspiration from his homeland prompted the Dostoyevskys to return to Russia in 1871. Although there are no precise accounts, it would appear that Dostoyevsky gave up gambling in 1871. One could speculate as to why: he was not spending as much time in Europe (with its gambling spas), he had his own family in Russia and was increasingly committed to them, and his literary career had taken off in Russia, which also led to better financial stability.

Soon after his return to Russia, Dostoyevsky published *Devils* in the *Russian Herald* (1871/1872). Over the next 2 years, he published prolifically: *An Accidental Family* (1875), *A Gentle Girl* (1876) and *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (1877). In 1878, he started work on his final and perhaps among his best works, *The Brothers Karamazov*, which was published in 1880. Work on *The Diary of a Writer* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, it would seem, took up Dostoyevsky’s last few years until his death in 1881. These years were relatively stable: his epilepsy was better controlled, he was psychologically more balanced, he was productive creatively (which also brought him great literary acclaim and recognition) and his financial situation was more under control.

Working hard for 3 years on *The Brothers Karamazov* took its toll on Dostoyevsky’s health. He became frail and lethargic but continued to

**BOX 1 Dostoyevsky's letter to his wife (Homburg, 24 May 1867)**

'Anya, my dear, my friend, my wife, forgive me, don't call me a blackguard, I have committed a crime, I have lost everything you sent – everything, to the last Kreuzer. Yesterday I received it and yesterday I lost it. Anya, how shall I ever be able to look you in the face again, what will you say to me now? One thing and one thing only horrifies me: what will you say, what will you think of me? It is only your judgement I fear. Can you, will you respect me now? And what is love without respect? Our very marriage is shaken by this. Oh! My friend, don't condemn me completely! I loathe gambling, not only now, at this moment, but yesterday, and the day before yesterday I cursed it [...].

I was so confident of a small win. At first I lost a little, but as soon as I began to lose, I wanted to win it back. I lost still more, then I was compelled to continue playing, at least to regain the money necessary for my departure – and I lost everything Anya, I will not implore you to take pity on me, better be dispassionate, but I am terribly afraid of your judgement [...] Send me quickly, this very minute (at once) some money for my journey, even if it is your last [...] As soon as you get this letter send me 10 imperials [...] – i.e. 90 odd gulden just to settle everything here and to return to you.'

(Dostoyevsky 1930 reprint)

work on *The Diary of a Writer*. By the start of 1881 his emphysema had worsened and Dostoyevsky himself is noted to have expressed doubt as to whether he would live for much longer. On 28 January 1881, in his last hours, Dostoyevsky, a devout Christian, is said to have asked his wife for the New Testament (the one given to him in the Siberian prison), which he always kept with him. As was his habit, he randomly chose a passage and gave it to Anna to read. The passage read: 'And Jesus said to him: "Delay not, for thus it becomes us to fulfil the truth"' (Matthew 3.15). So, Dostoyevsky said to his wife, 'you hear—delay not—that means I will die' (Frank 2010). And so he did: on 28 January 1881, Dostoyevsky breathed his last. He was laid to rest in the Alexander Nevsky Monastery. His tombstone reads, 'Verily, Verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it

**BOX 2 Dostoyevsky's letter to his wife (Saxon-les-Bains, 18 November 1867)**

'Anya, my dear, my precious, I have lost everything, everything, everything! Oh! My angel, don't be sad, don't worry. Be confident, a time will come when I shall be worthy of you and I shall stop robbing you like a wretched low thief! [...]

I pawned both my ring and my winter coat and I lost everything. I shall have to pay 5-francs for the ring and the coat and I shall redeem them (you will see how). But this is not what I want to talk about [...]. In half an hour's time I shall hand this letter in at the post office. You will receive it tomorrow. All this time my bill at the hotel

is mounting up and it will be impossible for me to leave. So I implore you, Anya, my angel, my saviour, send me 50 francs to settle my hotel bill. If you are able to send it to me on Wednesday early in the morning or tomorrow, Tuesday evening, then I shall receive it on Wednesday evening and I shall be with you on Thursday morning or at six o'clock in the evening. My friend, don't weep because I have ruined you. Don't worry about our future. I will put everything, everything right.'

(Dostoyevsky 1930 reprint)

bringeth forth much fruit,' which is a passage from the Gospel of St John (12.24) and the epigraph of his last novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.

**Dostoyevsky's letters to his wife (1867)**

Dostoyevsky was a prolific letter writer and whenever he was away from his wife (which was not often) he wrote to her. Over the 15 years in which he knew her (1866–1881), Dostoyevsky wrote more than 160 letters to her (Dostoyevsky 1930). Some of these letters, particularly the ones written in 1867, were voluminous – as many as 2000 words. Anna kept a diary, in shorthand as she did not want her husband to read the entries, which are a natural complement to Dostoyevsky's own letters to her.

Dostoyevsky's letters from 1867 are particularly helpful in trying to understand his addiction to gambling and the careful reader can extract some key themes:

- his erroneous belief (as many gamblers have) that if he followed 'a system' of gambling, he would not lose (i.e. the illusion of control);
- the severity of his addiction and how, despite several attempts to resist or stop, he is unable to do so;
- the multiple negative consequences, mostly financial, that gambling has on his life;
- Dostoyevsky's own feelings of shame and guilt at his gambling, his expressions of remorse and his insight into the suffering that it is causing his wife; and
- the desperate measures to which Dostoyevsky resorts to continue funding his addiction are painted with brilliant clarity and striking honesty.

Boxes 1 and 2 contain condensed excerpts from two of Dostoyevsky's letters to Anna, written on 24 May and 18 November 1867. In these, the themes discussed above become abundantly obvious.

**Relevance of *The Gambler* to psychiatry**

There is much relevance of *The Gambler* and Dostoyevsky's letters to his wife to contemporary psychiatry and its practitioner. First, it is a good starting point for psychiatrists to understand more about gambling addiction, its characteristics and its consequences. Gambling addiction has languished in relative obscurity within psychiatry, perhaps as a result of the conceptual ambiguity and nosological confusion that have shrouded it for decades. Psychiatrists cannot and should not continue to ignore this 'hidden' addiction, as it is highly comorbid in their patient group and, if undiagnosed and untreated, can have multiple

deleterious consequences and burdens on the patient, their family and society. All psychiatrists, at the very least, should have basic knowledge and skills in screening and assessing for gambling addiction (George 2011). Psychiatrists in the UK ought to take special note for the following reasons:

- there are about 250 000 gambling addicts in the UK;
- ten times that number are 'at risk' of developing problem gambling in the future;
- for every addict, between eight and ten other people are also significantly affected;
- the UK has liberal gambling legislation, the remote (telephone, television and online) gambling industry is expanding rapidly and the country will soon have several more very large 'Las Vegas style' casinos; all the international evidence suggests that these factors will result in more gambling-related problems;
- young people, women and ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable to gambling addiction.

Second, I have found that *The Gambler* and Dostoyevsky's letters to his wife can be effectively used to teach medical and non-medical professionals about gambling and its consequences. This novella, better than most conventional textbook accounts, captures and conveys in a simple yet powerful manner the key features and consequences of gambling addiction. Dostoyevsky accurately and richly illustrates the cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects of the addiction and its various effects on the personal, social and familial lives of the addict. Complementing this, Dostoyevsky's letters to his wife comprehensively capture the strong grip of gambling on his life, his inability to control it, his guilt and shame and its impact on his life, finances and marriage.

Finally, it is also hoped that, for readers unfamiliar with Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler* and the letters will act as a 'taster', tempting them to enter the wider and deeper world of Dostoyevsky's other creations. Several of his works provide rich, accurate, moving and complex depictions of

mental disturbance, 'which has relevance for how contemporary clinicians conceive mental illness', as this journal has explored (Beveridge 2009).

## Conclusions

'To be able to write well, one has to suffer', Dostoyevsky himself once wrote (Karyakin 1971). And write well he certainly did, but he suffered terribly too. It is unfortunate that in life Dostoyevsky endured considerable physical and emotional suffering and significant financial hardship, only to posthumously be universally acknowledged as an all-time literary great. It was precisely this instability and suffering that informed his spectacular psychological perceptiveness and inspired him to create everlasting masterpieces. For that, the literary world is unrepentantly grateful.

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