

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE CHRISTMAS TREE AND THE WEDDING

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Overview

Dostoyevsky displays his brilliance in dealing with characters in extremis, pushed to the human limit. In his novels, Dostoyevsky penetrates souls from every walk of life—the loving and faithful prostitute, the saintly confessor, the homicidal young idealist, the mercenary and grasping old lady, the sardonic and merciless police detective, the demented but brilliant young theologian, Ivan. In the short story we profile here, ‘The Christmas Tree and the Wedding,’ we find another character extreme—that is of the calculating marriage maker—this time caught in a sharp and unforgiving cameo.

Story

This narrator of this haunting short story (1848) resembles the furtive outsider who narrates Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (1864), widely viewed as heralding the existentialist position in philosophy and literature. Each of these two narrators is an observer of settled and affluent bourgeois society, who feels both jealousy and contempt for the comfortable world he is himself forever excluded from. And in the texture of the fictions he narrates, Dostoyevsky is consistently sensitive to the individual who fits uncomfortably into his society: one could mention Raskolnikov (in *Crime and Punishment*, 1866), Myshkin (in *The Idiot*, 1869), or Alyosha (in *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1880), all of them sensitive and haunted outsiders who fit awkwardly into the fabric of society. The prominence, of this type of central fictional character, is fully in accord with the kinds of dysfunctional narrators Dostoyevsky excels in depicting.

The structure of the narrator’s stance, in the present fiction, stamps on the story, from the beginning, a distinctive temporal sadness; we observe a wedding in progress, but as we do so we are reminded of an earlier event, a Christmas party, at which the seeds of the present wedding are sown; seeds ripe with unhappiness which lies ahead.

The occasion is a high society Christmas season which has nothing to do with the classic ‘spirit of Christmas,’ the kind of Christmas especially geared to children; the present holiday gathering is all about the party master’s desire to set up profitable business connections. The narrator, who as an outsider has no one to talk to, takes the opportunity to observe, and the foremost object of his attention is the wealthiest of the guests, Julian Mastakovich, a robust and glowing businessman.

Gifts are given to the visiting children; among which gifts the finest seem designated for the children of the most prosperous guests; thus one little girl, whose dad is a respected government contractor, receives an elegant and charming doll, while a young boy, whose mother is the family governess, receives a modest children’s book, lacking covers or an illustration. Indifferent to the class struggle playing out around them, the two children wander off into a side room, and begin animatedly playing with the doll the girl has received.

Julian Mastakovich also wanders off into the side room, but not through interest in the doll. The narrator takes us inside the mind of this self-interested businessman, who we see is interested in the dowry awaiting this young girl, when she arrives at age sixteen. (He has calculated the astonishing sum of 500,000 rubles, without failing to add in the interest that would have accrued by the time she marries.) The scene following directly on these calculations is painful. Mastakovich approaches the little girl and kisses her on the head, a gesture she despises, seeking the protection of her playmate. What follows is, to the narrator, grotesque and sad:

Mastakovich tries to drive away the little boy, and, while whipping at him with his handkerchief, makes a nasty fool of himself.

This ungainly scene swamps the mind of the narrator who, at the beginning of the story, five years later, finds himself passing by the wedding of Mastakovich with the formerly young girl, now sixteen, whose dowry is ready to be harvested. Little more needs to be said, to lay open the narrator's reaction, or the power with which Dostoyevsky embraces the meaning of this small moment in social history.

Themes

Greed. Mastakovich looks at a charming small girl, who is herself indifferent to the differences of social and economic classes, and all he can see is dollar signs. He even calculates the interest that will have accrued to the girl's dowry, by the time she is sixteen.

Awkwardness. The narrator, who is himself a character in his own narration, is even more a misfit, in high society, than the little boy whose mother is the governess. The narrator is innocent and shocked by what he sees.

Characters

Mastakovich. This prosperous businessman, with an eye to enlarging his future fortune, is blinded to empathy. He is indifferent to the feelings of the little boy, who is being bullied by other children, but he is not even sensitive to the recoiling rebuff, given him by the little girl after he kisses her head.

The narrator. The narrator conveys his own personality through his attitude of withdrawal and observation. In fact he entitles us to attribute to him unusual sensitivity, a quickness to observe the bullying of the little boy, the absurdity of Mastakovich's effort to drive the boy away, and the naturalness with which the boy and girl disregard the social differences between them.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Julian Mastakovitch (Unconscientious)

Character The character of Julian Mastakovitch comes to the attention of the story's narrator, as they find themselves invited to the same Christmas party. The narrator self-presents almost solely as an observer, and a sharp one he is, lurking around corners eyeing the behavior of the gregarious and much flattered Julian, the 'life of the party.' Portly, red cheeked, self-satisfied, this life of the party came especially to life when he heard it rumored, among the other guests, that the evening's host was 'an immensely wealthy business man,' and that, as for his adorably lovely eleven year old daughter, 'three hundred thousand roubles are set aside for her dowry already.' The narrator is clear: the financial news is what Julian is listening for.

Parallels Goldiggers are prominent in the literatures of the modern west, for in fact capitalism spawns the drive for an easy buck to be made through romance or marriage. Becky Sharp, in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), is the classic social upstart with a flair for wealthy older gentlemen, who seem to consider themselves well repaid for their bargains with her. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) treats us to a pair of con men gold diggers, The King and the Duke, who seem merrily able to talk just about anyone out of their cash. Daisy, in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, 1885, is a romantic but also a realist, when it comes to Jay Gatsby's considerable bank account; what could surpass his party filled life of conspicuous expenditure?

Illustrative moments

Conspicuous Julian Mastakovitch is the center of the party, as the narrator initially sees it. All eyes are on this prosperous portly guy, and he responds in kind, assuring his host that he has never spent such a pleasant evening. But the narrator is not so happy in the presence of this person, and 'went into a little sitting room, entirely unoccupied,' and sat down in a small conservatory, where the children—full of genuine fun, unlike their elders—had gathered to play. It was from this perch that the narrator was able to observe Julian at his real work, planning the future.

Calculating While the children are playing, and the narrator is watching half-concealed by the Christmas tree, Julia enters the room mumbling calculations under his breath; he is calculating the amount of money the dowry of the young girl will bring with her: a huge sum, exactly to his liking. As she enters the room, Julian finds the lovely Cupid playing most happily with the young son of the much looked down on governess of the house, a simple maid. Julian roughly pushes away this young usurper, who is exactly the playmate the young girl wants. He then plants a kiss on the top of her head, and then asks her: 'If I come to visit your parents will you love me, my dear?'

Disputatious In a comic and unseemly way, Julian Mastakovitch feels instant jealousy for the son of the family governess, who is plying joyfully with the little princess by the Christmas tree, behind which the observant narrator is half hidden. 'So strong was his dislike (or was it jealousy?) of the child that he actually began to carry on like a madman.' Julian follows the young kid out into the parlor, where he tries to drive him off into the kitchen. A most comical sight, coming from this 'somewhat corpulent man, heavy, well-fed, puffy cheeked, with a paunch and ankles as round as nuts.'

Successful The narrator has recently passed a church where he saw a wedding taking place. It was, we quickly learn, the wedding of Julian Mastakovitch to the beautiful young girl he had wooed when she was only a little princess. Now she is sixteen. 'But the beauty was pale and sad. She looked distracted. It seemed to me that even her eyes were red from recent weeping.' 'I heard gossiping in the crowd about the bride's wealth—about her dowry of five hundred thousand roubles...' 'Then his calculations were correct,' I thought, as I pressed out into the street.

Discussion questions

Does Dostoyevsky paint a convincing picture of the living room tussle between Julian and the governess' son? Does Julian come off nasty or just comical?

Has the narrator a view point toward the tale he narrates? Is he simply critical and even sarcastic toward Julian? Or is his attitude more complex?

Who is the 'other gentleman present'—paragraph three-- at the party, in which the narrator finds himself?