

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

MASTAKOVITCH

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Julian Mastakovitch (in Dostoyevsky, *The Christmas Tree and the Wedding*)

Unconscientious

Overview We have profiled characters from Dostoyevsky's great novels *Crime and Punishment* and from *The Brothers Karamazov*, and perhaps marveled at his capacity to penetrate 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 all these vast panoramas, Dostoyevsky displays his brilliance in dealing with characters in extremis, pushed to the human limit. 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.

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?