

## **The Cards are Close to the Chest:**

### **Hermann's Displacement of Romantic Frustration in *The Queen of Spades***

"My pistol is not loaded"  
□HERMANN

In Pushkin's novella *The Queen of Spades*, the anti-hero Hermann is driven mad by the frustration of his obsessive desires. The ostensible basis for Hermann's obsessive behavior is a repressed predilection for gambling and a consequent fixation on the old Countess: she reputedly knows a fantastic secret for winning at cards. Thus it seems outwardly that Hermann loses himself in a quest to learn the Countess's secret, and finally snaps when he unexpectedly fails to translate that arcane knowledge into material wealth. However, the narrative contains a deeper psychological layer beneath the fantastic storyline of the Countess and the cards. The fundamental psychology of Hermann's compulsions is embodied not in the Countess or the cards, but in the Countess's young ward, Lizaveta Ivanovna.

Lizaveta is a strangely passive character, but it is what she represents, rather than her outward personality, that is vital to understanding Hermann's psychosis. Although on a superficial level it appears that Hermann merely takes advantage of Liza in order to get close to the Countess, Pushkin subtly undermines this interpretation by revealing in his hero a persistent ambivalence between pursuit of the old woman's secret and possession of the young ward. By declaring the initial appearance of Liza as the moment that seals Hermann's fate, Pushkin establishes the desire for romantic and sexual possession of Liza as the true catalyst for Hermann's madness. The idea that Liza, or rather what she represents, is Hermann's true goal implies that the outward obsession and frustration surrounding the cards is merely displacement of deeper, interpersonal frustration or discomfort. This displacement is represented explicitly in

Hermann's interview with the Countess, while his aberrant, bizarrely sexual thoughts about the old woman suggest a possible pathology behind his discomfiture.

Hermann, the anti-hero of Pushkin's The Queen of Spades, suffers from an unspecified romantic impotence or frustration, which he tries to deflect into an obsession with cards, but which ultimately drives him mad.

Hermann initially appears enthusiastic in courting Lizaveta, yet he is strangely paralyzed by the prospect of consummating the relationship. He readily takes up the part of a smitten lover when he comes daily to stare at her through the window (218). And he becomes quite passionate in his correspondence; although his first letter is "tender, respectful, and translated word for word from a German novel" (220), he quickly becomes caught up in his role and writes more "in a style . . . characteristic of him, expressing both the uncompromising nature of his desires and the confusion of his unbridled imagination" (221). Yet when he finally earns an invitation into Liza's bedchamber, when the intervening barrier of the windowpanes is removed and the opportunity for consummation arrives, he balks.

The simplest explanation is that Hermann is simply using Lizaveta the whole time and has no real interest in her outside of a means to get to the Countess. But this suggestion is brought into question when Hermann must actually choose between proceeding to Liza's room for a midnight rendezvous, and lying in wait in the Countess's chambers to interrogate her about the secret of the cards. The outcome that the reader expects, and the one that Hermann ultimately chooses, is to pursue the Countess and the fantastic promise of wealth. However, Hermann's underlying feelings are confused. Liza's letter tells Hermann that "in [the Countess's] bedroom, behind a screen, you will see two small doors: the one on the right leads to a study, which the Countess never enters; the one on the left opens into a corridor, where you

will find a narrow winding staircase: this leads to my room” (222). When Hermann reaches the described point, Pushkin’s narrative mirrors the details of Liza’s letter precisely:

Hermann went behind the screen. A small iron bedstead stood behind it; on the right there was the door leading to the study; on the left, another one leading to the corridor. Hermann *opened the latter and saw the narrow winding staircase that led to the poor ward [Lizaveta]’s room...* But he drew back and went into the dark study.

Page 223, my emphasis

We can assume that Hermann has studied Lizaveta’s letter carefully enough to be aware of where each door leads. After all, he is meticulous enough to follow her other instructions fanatically, entering the house at “exactly half past eleven” (222) for example. Therefore, his hesitation represents not simply confusion over what lies behind each door, but a deeper psychological ambivalence. Although his ostensible plan is to confront the Countess, and he has the premeditation to bring a pistol with him to intimidate her, he nevertheless falters and opens the door leading to Lizaveta’s room first. Moreover, the ellipses imply that he contemplates the hallway leading to her spiral staircase for some time. Hermann’s initial consideration of Liza’s doorway indicates that on some psychological level he is truly interested in her as more than just a means to reach the Countess. Furthermore, his long hesitation before the corridor suggests that his ultimate decision to abandon Liza is hardly a forgone conclusion.

If Lizaveta does have more significance than simply a means to Hermann’s ends with the Countess, it is still tempting to propose that perhaps the narrative merely uses her as a way of illustrating Hermann’s pathological obsessions. Perhaps Pushkin is simply driving home the unhealthy nature of Hermann’s gambling fixation by showing that he truly does care about Liza but throws her over nonetheless; he does not care about her as much as he cares about the cards. In fact, however, Pushkin undermines this interpretation in the very first encounter between Hermann and Liza, when Hermann first glimpses her through the window. Pushkin tells us

explicitly that when Hermann first beholds Liza from afar this is the moment that “seal[s] his fate” (219).

This statement is particularly surprising and meaningful if we take note of Hermann’s state of mind leading up to the encounter. From the start “the anecdote about the three cards fire[s] [Hermann’s] imagination” (219), an imagination whose potency we know all too well by the end of the text. Yet despite his growing fascination with the Countess’s story, Hermann is not ready to take action. Then, as he wanders lost in his thoughts of the Countess he suddenly finds himself standing before her house, although he recognizes it as such only after inquiring with a guard. It is not really explicit whether this arrival could be the result of some subconscious will or whether it is pure blind luck. But regardless, from Hermann’s perspective his sudden inadvertent appearance before the house seems to suggest the action of destiny. Nevertheless, this provocative moment does not seal his fate; he still proves resistant. He paces “up and down by the house, thinking” (219) and this indecision apparently continues for quite some time as it is “late when he return[s] to his humble lodging.” That night he has a frenzied dream of winning big at cards. He wakes the next day and wanders the streets until he again finds himself before the Countess’s house. This time his arrival before the house no longer seems fortuitous to the reader, but nevertheless Pushkin insists that from Hermann’s perspective some “mysterious force” must be at work. All the events of these two days reflect the buildup of psychological pressure within Hermann, yet despite this pressure he still has not reached the point of action.

That instant does not arrive until Lizaveta enters the scene. As Hermann stands dumbfounded before the house for the second time in two days, he glances up at the windows and notices a “dark-haired young head, bent, evidently, over a book or some work.” Then, in a

truly cinematic moment, the head is raised and Hermann beholds “a fresh young face and dark eyes.” It is *this* moment that Pushkin makes explicitly clear has “sealed [Hermann’s] fate” (219). This is the point at which Hermann is finally prompted to start down the path that leads to the choice between Liza and the Countess.

Under all the pressures of the feverish dream of wealth, the unconscious, almost somnambulant visitations and revisitations to the house, and the fatalistic impression of some mysterious guiding force in action, Hermann still seems willing to watch everything passively from outside. Nothing is able to spur him into action until the appearance of a “fresh young face and dark eyes.” It could be argued that since Lizaveta is so instrumental in Hermann’s later, developed scheme, he is only able to act once her appearance suggests the details of the plan. This explanation is hardly credible though; considering the powerful pressures that affect Hermann from the outset, it would take something very specific to hold him in check, not the lack of a few technical details. But for some reason Lizaveta, or at least something particular in her aspect, turns out to be just the specific key needed to release him.

The small, submissive Lizaveta ultimately determines Hermann’s fate, not the fantastic, dramatic urgings of the Countess and the cards. However, although Lizaveta is indicated as the true catalyst for Hermann’s obsessive behavior, he nevertheless chooses to abandon her, albeit hesitatingly. This internal conflict of interest reveals that Hermann is somehow displacing his underlying desires and replacing them with the superficial fixation on gambling. This is the idea of displacement in the Freudian sense (although of course the text predates Freud): of avoiding internal frustration and stress by deflecting conscious desires onto a distal object, often a more obtainable or more comfortably pursued one. The implication is that Hermann does not in fact marginalize the potential relationship with Liza in order to pursue the Countess’s lucrative secret.

Rather, he pursues the Countess *in order to marginalize the potential for a true romantic or sexual relationship with Liza*.

Undercurrents of the principle of displacement run through the narrative. The most compact example is the epigrammatic opening to Chapter 6: “two fixed ideas can no more coexist in the moral sphere than can two bodies occupy the same space in the physical world” (230). This assertion is introduced to explain the power of the three magic cards to erase the Countess’s abrupt death and her ghost from Hermann’s mind. Fundamentally, however, this didactic passage outlines the principle of one fixed idea displacing another. Contextually, the concept allows Hermann to alleviate the stresses and discomfort associated with the marginalized memory of the Countess by focussing on the three cards. This is precisely the same mechanism that empowers Hermann’s subconscious substitution of obsessive gambling for unfulfilled romantic ambitions.

Displacement is further illustrated in Hermann’s fatal interview with the Countess. As the Countess remains obstinately silent in response to his pleas to reveal her arcane secret, Hermann abruptly, desperately kneels down and entreats:

If your heart ever knew the feeling of love, if you remember its ecstasies, if you once in your life smiled hearing the cry of a newborn son, if anything human has ever pulsed within your bosom, then I beseech you, appealing to the feelings of a wife, mistress, mother . . . do not refuse my request!

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This appeal to romantic, sexual, and maternal sentiment is strangely out of place and bears no explicit connection to Hermann’s demand for the secret of the cards. However, it is directly related to the displaced, deflected desires that these demands seek to preempt. In this wild, genuine speech Hermann, “trembling in anticipation,” unconsciously gives expression to the frustration that has led him to repress his romantic needs.

The immediate question is: what causes Hermann's interpersonal, romantic and sexual frustration in the first place? The answer does not seem to be provided for in the text specifically, my epigraph notwithstanding. Nevertheless, several cues, particularly his bizarre, aberrantly sexual thoughts about the old Countess, hint at the possible source of Hermann's romantic discomfiture.

As Hermann's fascination with the secret of the cards first develops, he contemplates how he may get close to the Countess, imagining that he "could be introduced to her, get into her good graces, *become her lover if need be*" (219, my emphasis). This idea of becoming the old woman's lover is itself a startling proposition, especially since it springs to his mind the second he first begins contemplating a plan. The abnormality of the suggestion is emphasized even more clearly in the sentence that immediately follows. "All this requires time," Hermann muses, "and she is eighty-seven: she may die in a week—in a couple of days!..." The apposition of Hermann's suggestion that he become the old woman's lover, and his simultaneous fear that she may keel over at any moment reveals Hermann's amorous aims as grossly abnormal, bizarre, and, considering the Countess's age, sadly naive and misguided. The Countess is very consistently characterized as "misshapen" (217), "barely alive," "loathsome," "horrifying" (223), certainly not capable of carrying on a love affair and certainly not an archetypal object of romantic intentions.

The aberrance of Hermann's inapt plan is further augmented by the suggestion made at the Countess's funeral that Hermann is "the dead woman's illegitimate son" (229). Pushkin does not actually seem to endorse the validity of this claim. Yet he includes it as another means of emphasizing the age difference between the two characters and as a means to introduce a new disturbing taboo connotation to their relationship.

Finally, the most vivid representation of aberrant sexuality is the passage in the secret stairwell. Hermann is escaping from the house with Liza's help after, quite literally, frightening the Countess to death. He leaves by a hidden staircase, "his mind agitated by strange feelings" (228).

"Perhaps," he [thinks], "up this very staircase, about sixty years ago, into this same bedroom, at this same hour, dressed in an embroidered coat, with his hair combed *à l'oiseau royal*, pressing his three-cornered hat to his heart, there stole a lucky young man, now long since turned to dust in his grave; and the heart of his aged mistress has stopped beating today..."

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This fantasy of a young lover stealing through this very same secret passageway is the height of morbid sexuality. We must remember that Hermann has, perhaps a mere hour before, indirectly murdered the Countess. His act of killing her, of course, suggests its own historical, Elizabethan sexual connotation, which is played up by Pushkin's language: "he drew a pistol from his pocket, at the sight of the pistol the Countess once more betrayed strong emotion" (225). Furthermore, after conferring with Liza, Hermann must travel back through the Countess's bedroom to reach the hidden stairwell. As he passes "the dead old woman" (227) he "stop[s] before her," and "look[s] at her for a long time" (228). Thus his fantasies as he descends the secret stairs are all the more gruesome in the context of having just contemplated at length the body of the woman he has accidentally slain.

Acknowledging the underlying motives behind Hermann's obsession with the cards provides an interesting interpretation of his ultimate failure to beat the game. Armed with the secret of the "Three, Seven, and Ace," Hermann takes on the dealer Chekalinskii and tries to satisfy his confused cravings through gambling victory. This enterprise is doomed from the start however; the hero's true goal never really was to win at *faro*; that dream was just the displacement of frustrated sexual ambitions. Therefore, it is not surprising that Hermann

sabotages himself by intentionally, although subconsciously, picking a losing card. Furthermore, this self-delivered *coup de grace* is a resurgence of his original psychosis. Just as he is unwilling to face the potential consummation of his romantic overtures, he is unwilling to face the possibility of actually winning the card game. He buries his desire for romantic consummation in an obsession with gambling, but if he actually triumphs in the gambling arena, then he will have nowhere left to hide his sexual frustration. Thus he prefers to send himself all the way back to square one where he can continue to strive, albeit entirely maniacally this time, without the perceived danger and uncertainty of consummation.

The conclusion of The Queen of Spades sets out, in epilogue style, Hermann's ultimate fate and the later lives of Liza and Tomskii. "Hermann has lost his mind . . . he doesn't answer questions, just keeps muttering with uncommon rapidity, "Trey, seven ace! Trey, seven, queen!" (233). Both Liza and Tomskii, on the other hand, live up to normal societal expectations; although their two final positions are intentionally contrasted, they are both enjoying socially correct marriages. Thus it seems that in his conclusion, Pushkin draws a specific comparison between Hermann and the other characters in which Hermann's gibbering madness is contrasted not with fantastic material wealth, but rather with simple, socially correct domesticity. This ending drives home the point that Hermann's true tragedy is not in his failure at the *faro* table, but in his inability to realize domestic and romantic happiness.

Hermann characterizes himself as a "gambler at heart" (219), yet this appraisal is belied by his behavior; until he has learned the secret to certain success he never dares to touch a card. Tomskii, on the other hand, describes his friend as "a truly romantic character" (226), and Hermann's passionate letter writing and heartfelt entreaty to the Countess's "feelings of a wife, mistress, mother—to everything that is sacred in life" (224), do seem to pin him as a

downtrodden romantic. Yet, just as at the card table Hermann refuses to proceed in the face of uncertainty, he is likewise paralyzed by any romantic potential with Lizaveta outside of the distant, window-gazing, letter-writing role that he has constructed for himself. I have endeavored in this paper to uncover Hermann's obsession with gambling as a mere extension of romantic impotence. Fundamentally, however, The Queen of Spades is a narrative on the frustration of trying to control or predict, to impose rigid rules on, systems that cannot be predetermined. The central tragedy of Hermann's character is his unwillingness, or inability, to submit to uncertainty, and his fatal choice to replace the potential stress of exploring a romantic relationship with the perceived security of ensured winnings in the fantasy of the cards.