



## PERFORMING THE SELF: A DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL ROLES AND IDENTITY IN DOSTOEVSKY'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES

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### Abstract

This research analyzes how Dostoevsky's characters are constructed and protects their public image while hiding their weaknesses and fears. The main objectives of this study are to explore the difference between public and private behavior of characters, to examine how pride, shame, and insecurity shape their actions, and to apply Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory to understand these behaviors in selected short stories. This research uses a qualitative approach, focusing on textual analysis rather than numerical or statistical data. The selected short stories serve as primary sources, while books, journal articles, and critical essays are used as secondary sources to support interpretation. The study is grounded in Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, particularly the concepts of front stage, backstage, and face-saving behavior. The findings reveal that Dostoevsky's characters often perform a strong and respectable "front stage" role to gain social approval. In contrast, their "backstage" life exposes fear, guilt, greed, and emotional pain. This contrast highlights his pessimism, moral struggle, and social hypocrisy.

**Keywords:** *Face-saving Behavior, Front Stage, Identity, Pessimism, Social Performance*

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of identity in social life has often been examined through the metaphor of performance, most notably articulated in the dramaturgical theory of Erving Goffman, who suggested that individuals present themselves in everyday interactions much like actors performing on a stage (Kirk, 2004). This perspective provides a compelling framework for analyzing literary characters whose behaviors are shaped by social expectations and internal conflicts. In the short stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky, characters frequently struggle between their inner selves and the roles they perform before society, revealing tensions between authenticity and social conformity. Stories such as *Mr. Prohartchin*, *An Honest Thief*, and *A Christmas Tree and a Wedding* depict individuals who carefully construct or conceal their identities through strategic self-presentation in order to navigate social judgment, morality, and class dynamics. Using Goffman's dramaturgical framework particularly the concepts of role performance, impression management, and the distinction between front-stage and backstage behavior this study explores how Dostoevsky's characters perform social roles to maintain appearances, hide vulnerabilities, and negotiate their place within society. Through this lens, the selected short stories reveal the complex interplay between social performance and personal identity in nineteenth-century Russian society.

### 1.1. Introduction of the Stories

#### 1.1.1. Mr. Prehatching

This story is about a poor-looking man named *Mr. Prehatching* who leads a straightforward, miserable life. He eats poorly, wears old clothes, and acts as if he has no money. But after his death, people discovered that he had secretly saved a large amount of money under his mattress. The story shows how fear, greed, and loneliness can destroy a person's happiness. *Mr. Prehatching* was not evil, but his obsession with saving money made him live like a beggar. Dostoevsky uses him to show how poverty and mistrust twist human nature and create silent suffering.

#### 1.1.2. An Honest Thief

This story is about a kind but poor man who shelters a drunken thief named Emelyn Ilyich. Emelyn steals his host's coat but later feels guilty and ashamed. He confesses to his theft before dying. The narrator tells this story to show how even a criminal can have a pure heart. Dostoevsky explores poverty, guilt, forgiveness, and the human soul. The thief is "honest" because he admits his sin and feels deep remorse. Through this touching tale, Dostoevsky reminds readers that every person, no matter how weak or sinful, has some goodness and deserves understanding rather than punishment.

#### 1.1.3. A Christmas Tree and a Wedding

This story begins at a Christmas party filled with rich guests and children. The narrator notices a man, Julian Mastakovich, showing an unusual interest in a little girl, the

daughter of a wealthy family. Years later, the narrator attends a wedding and realizes the same girl, now grown up, is marrying that man. It becomes clear that he wanted her only for her money, not love. Dostoevsky uses this story to expose greed, social hypocrisy, and the way adults exploit innocence for their own selfish ends. It's a dark, ironic picture of upper-class moral corruption.

### 1.2. Problem Statement

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's short stories *Mr. Prehatching*, *An Honest Thief*, and *A Christmas Tree and a Wedding*, the characters live in a world where social respect and moral identity depend on how people present themselves to others. Each character performs a "social role" to hide inner guilt, greed, or fear, much like actors on a stage. However, while Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory explains how individuals manage impressions through "front stage" and "backstage" behavior, there has been little research applying this lens to Dostoevsky's short fiction. The main problem lies in understanding how Dostoevsky uses these performances to expose the tension between appearance and reality, especially among the poor and morally conflicted.

### 1.3. Research Objectives

The aims and objectives of this research are;

- To analyze how Dostoevsky's characters perform social roles to conceal their true emotions, intentions, and moral weaknesses.
- To explore the difference between the "front stage" and "backstage" behaviors of characters in these stories.
- To study how deception and self-presentation shape social relationships, how characters use lies, politeness, or emotional masks to survive in a morally corrupted world.

### 1.4. Research Questions

1. How do Dostoevsky's characters in *Mr. Prehatching*, *An Honest Thief*, and *A Christmas Tree and a Wedding* perform different social "roles" to maintain or hide their true identities?
2. In what ways does Goffman's concept of "front stage" and "backstage" behavior appear in the daily lives and moral struggles of Dostoevsky's characters?
3. How does self-presentation influence the relationships between the characters and society in these three short stories?

### 1.5. Research Significance

This research is significant because it connects Dostoevsky's moral and psychological storytelling with Goffman's social theory of self-presentation. By studying these three short stories through the Dramaturgical lens, the research helps us understand how Dostoevsky's characters behave like actors who perform roles to gain acceptance, hide shame, or protect their dignity. It also highlights how social pressure and poverty

force people to wear masks and pretend to be something they are not. This study is critical because it shows that Dostoevsky's short stories are not only about personal guilt or greed but also about the social drama of everyday life, how people struggle between inner truth and outer image. Finally, the research adds new insight to Dostoevsky's lesser-studied short works, expanding his relevance beyond religion and morality to modern social psychology, where identity and performance remain central issues today.

## 2. Literature Review

Dostoevsky (2016) offers a deep look into the power of the first words a person speaks or writes, and how they mark the beginning of human thought and feeling. He explains that the first words often carry innocence, honesty, and emotion because they come directly from the heart before society teaches people to hide their true selves. These early expressions reflect a person's inner world and the natural wish to connect with others. The writing also explores how language shape's identity. Dostoevsky (2016) suggests that through speech, people learn to understand themselves and the world around them. He connects language with human morality and emotion, showing that words can express both truth and confusion. The first words are not only simple sounds but also signs of a person's spiritual and emotional awakening. The author highlights that the way humans begin to speak mirrors how they begin to think, dream, and feel. By focusing on this simple yet meaningful moment, Dostoevsky (2016) reminds readers that every word has life and purpose. His ideas help us see that language is deeply tied to human growth, communication, and the search for understanding.

Babushkin (2011) explores the hidden sides of human nature that Fyodor Dostoevsky often shows in his stories. She explains how his characters live with deep inner struggles, guilt, fear, and secret desires that they try to hide from others. These hidden emotions reveal the conflict between good and evil inside every person. Babushkin (2011) shows that Dostoevsky does not simply write about crime or sin but focuses on what happens in the human heart and mind after those actions. The discussion focuses on how secrets shape human behavior. People in Dostoevsky's work often act kindly on the outside but carry dark feelings inside. This creates tension between what they show to society and what they really feel. Adut (2005) connects these ideas to moral and psychological depth, arguing that truth and self-awareness emerge only when people confront their inner darkness. Through this lens, Dostoevsky's writing becomes a study of the human soul: how people hide pain, guilt, and love while still seeking forgiveness and meaning.

Babushkin (2011) highlights that understanding these secret emotions helps readers see the complexity of moral choice and the constant fight between conscience and desire. Straus (2006) examines how literature and social science connect by comparing Dostoevsky's fiction with contemporary issues such as terrorism and radical thought. He explains that Dostoevsky's characters, who struggle with guilt, faith, and rebellion, help

us understand the mindset of people who turn to extreme actions for moral or political reasons. Straus (2006) suggests that fiction can reveal emotional truths that social science often misses, especially about human motivation and the search for meaning. He explores how Dostoevsky's work shows the danger of ideas when people follow them unthinkingly. Characters who believe they act for justice often end up lost in moral confusion, similar to how modern extremists justify their violence. Straus (2006) argues that literature gives these issues a human face, showing inner conflict rather than just statistics or theories. Through this view, Dostoevsky's stories become a tool for understanding modern social and psychological problems. Straus (2006) highlights that both the literature and the social sciences should work together to study how personal beliefs, emotions, and ideologies can shape human behavior. His discussion encourages deeper reflection on morality, identity, and the roots of radical thought in society.

Dostoyevsky (2024) explores deep human emotions such as loneliness, love, and hope in *White Nights and Other Stories*. He focuses on characters that live in silence and dream of being understood. In *White Nights*, a shy, lonely man meets a young woman who brings light and joy to his dark world. Their short connection fills him with happiness, but it soon ends, leaving him heartbroken yet grateful for the brief experience of love. Dostoyevsky (2024) shows that even short moment of affection can change a person's inner world forever. The stories in this collection also reveal how people struggle between reality and imagination. The dreamer in *White Nights* escapes the pain of real life by living in his dreams, but when love briefly enters his life, he learns the beauty and sorrow of truth. Apollonio (2009) says that Dostoyevsky uses gentle language and deep feelings to show how isolation affects the human soul. He believes that every person, no matter how lonely, has a heart capable of love and kindness.

These stories remind readers that hope and emotion give life meaning, even when happiness is fleeting. Dostoyevsky's vision celebrates the quiet strength of the human spirit. Givens (2011) explores how faith and human weakness are shown through the character of Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. He explains, "that Myshkin represents a Christ-like figure whose kindness, honesty, and innocence make him different from the corrupt society around him. Givens (2011) suggests that the story combines elements of tragedy and comedy, showing how goodness can appear foolish in a world ruled by greed, pride, and desire. Myshkin's gentle nature brings light to others, yet he also suffers because people cannot understand his purity. The discussion highlights how Dostoevsky uses humor and irony to express spiritual truths. Givens (2011) points out that comedy in this story is not meant for laughter, but for moral reflection; it shows how faith can survive even in confusion and pain. Myshkin's failures and emotional struggles reveal that true faith is not perfect but deeply human. Through this view, Dostoevsky's work becomes a study of redemption through compassion. Givens (2011) shows that goodness,

even when misunderstood, remains powerful and divine. The analysis celebrates Dostoevsky's message that love, humility, and forgiveness are the real forms of spiritual strength in a broken world.

Hancock and Garner (2023) explore how Erving Goffman's ideas can be used to understand crime, deviance, and social behavior. They explain that people involved in crime often act like performers, managing how others see them to protect their reputation or avoid punishment. Using Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, Hancock and Garner (2023) show that criminals, like all individuals, present a "front stage" image to the public while hiding their true motives and emotions in the "backstage." This idea helps explain how people drift between moral and immoral behavior depending on the situation. The authors also discuss Goffman's concept of encounters, the social interactions where identities are formed and judged. In these encounters, people use deception, confidence, and emotional control to create believable roles. Fine and Manning (2003) give a clear understanding of Erving Goffman's ideas and how his work changed the way people study social behavior. They explain that Goffman saw everyday life as a kind of performance, where people act out roles to create good impressions and avoid embarrassment. According to Fine and Manning (2003), Goffman's main focus was on how people manage their identities in front of others, much like actors performing on a stage.

Aspling (2011) expands Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory to explain how people present themselves on the internet and social media. He shows that online spaces blur the line between private and public life because people control how they appear through pictures, posts, and messages. Aspling (2011) explains that, just as actors on a stage, users create a "front stage" image for others to see while keeping certain emotions and truths hidden in the "backstage." This makes online identity a performance shaped by attention, approval, and social expectations. The discussion highlights how digital communication changes the way people manage impressions. Unlike face-to-face meetings, online performances can be edited, repeated, or even faked. Trepanier (2013) argues that this freedom allows people to explore different identities but also creates pressure to look perfect. He points out that social media makes it harder to separate real personality from performed behavior.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The Dramaturgical Theory, developed by Erving Goffman in his 1959 work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, is one of the most influential ideas in sociology and social psychology. It explains how human beings behave in society as if they are performing in a play. Goffman believed that life is a continuous stage in which every person plays different roles depending on the situation, the people around them, and society's expectations (Võsu, 2010). He used the metaphor of theater to describe how people manage their behavior, emotions, and appearance to create a desired impression.

This theory focuses on how individuals try to control the image others have of them, which is called impression management. People act differently in different settings, much like actors changing costumes or scripts to fit their audience. According to Goffman, human interaction can be divided into two main stages: the front stage and the backstage.

The front stage is where people perform for others, trying to appear confident, moral, or respectable. For example, a person at work acts polite, serious, and professional, even if they feel tired or angry inside. Backstage, on the other hand, is where people can relax and express their true emotions without fear of judgment. It is a private space where individuals prepare for or recover from performances. These two parts of life are always in balance, and people move between them as they interact with society. This constant performance shows how much social life depends on appearance, expectations, and self-control. The Dramaturgical Theory overlaps with several other sociological theories, such as symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, and role theory (Lestari, 2024). Symbolic interactionism, developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, also focuses on social interaction and how meaning is created through communication.

Both Goffman and Mead see the self as something built, not born, and as changing in response to interaction and context. Social constructionism also connects to Goffman's theory, as it argues that reality itself is not fixed but is constructed through language, actions, and social agreement. Goffman's model supports this by showing that people construct their identities through performance and communication. Similarly, role theory examines how people behave in accordance with expected societal roles, such as those of parent, teacher, or student. Goffman expanded this idea by adding the concept of performance, showing that roles are not just rules but living actions shaped by human emotions and context. Goffman's perspective can also be linked to Michel Foucault's ideas about surveillance and self-discipline, especially from *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

According to Domunco (2021), both thinkers explain how people shape their behavior under social pressure and in response to observation. Foucault focused on how institutions such as schools, prisons, and hospitals control people through power and discipline, while Goffman examined how individuals willingly perform to meet social norms. Goffman's theory explores the micro-level of daily interaction. In contrast, Foucault explores the macro-level of social control, but both agree that society constantly forces people to manage their image and behavior. Another related thinker is Pierre Bourdieu, who developed the concept of "habitus," meaning the social habits and behaviors learned from one's environment. Like Goffman, Bourdieu believed that social behavior is shaped by class, culture, and upbringing. However, Goffman focused more on individual presentation and choice, while Bourdieu emphasized social structure and long-term patterns. The two ideas overlap in showing that identity is not natural but is created through performance and practice within social spaces stays organized and manageable. It

does not aim to study everything about Dostoevsky but focuses on aspects that best show how human beings perform and hide their true selves under social pressure, as described by Goffman.

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

According to Goffman, social life can be compared to a stage where people perform different roles in front of others. Individuals often try to hide their weaknesses and inner emotions while presenting a socially acceptable image. Dostoevsky's characters also behave in similar ways, as they act according to social expectations to protect their identity or gain acceptance in society. In Goffman's view, every person performs a "social role," like an actor playing a part on a stage, to fit society's expectations. Dostoevsky's characters also act in certain ways to survive, to hide their weaknesses, or to gain acceptance. In *Mr. Prehatching*, the main character pretends to be a poor, harmless clerk while secretly hiding a large amount of money. His "public role" (front stage) is that of a simple, struggling man. His "hidden self" (backstage) is greedy, fearful, and deeply lonely. His double life shows how people perform false roles to protect their private world. In *An Honest Thief*, Emelyn Ilyich plays a humble, helpless drunk, but inside he carries guilt, shame, and moral pain. He tries to appear innocent and dependent, yet he hides his inner self that knows he has done wrong. In *A Christmas Tree and a Wedding*, the wealthy guests play polite, respectable roles. However, their "true selves" are selfish, materialistic, and morally corrupt. The story shows how social gatherings often become stages where people act to hide their greed and cruelty.

##### 4.1. Performance of the Social Roles

In Goffman's view, every person performs a social role like an actor playing a part on a stage in order to fit society's expectations. Dostoevsky's characters also act in certain ways to survive, to hide their weaknesses, or to gain acceptance from others. In *Mr. Prokharchin*, the main character pretends to be a poor and harmless clerk while secretly hiding a large amount of money. His public role, or front stage behavior, shows him as a simple and struggling man who lives a modest life. However, his hidden self, which represents his backstage reality, is greedy, fearful, and extremely lonely. He carefully hides his wealth and pretends to live in poverty in order to avoid attention and protect his private world. "You are a puppy, you are a featherhead, you are not one to give advice, so there, you mind your own business, sir. You'd better count the stitches in your own socks, sir (Dostoevsky, 2024, p.33)."

This quotation shows *Mr. Prokharchin*'s defensive and proud nature. He becomes angry when others interfere in his life or give him advice. His rude language works as a protective shield for his self-respect and privacy. According to Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, this reaction represents face-saving behavior, which means that a person tries to protect his public image when he feels threatened or embarrassed. In *An Honest Thief*,

Emelyan Ilyich plays the role of a humble and helpless drunk. People around him see him as weak and dependent, and his appearance creates sympathy. However, inside he carries strong feelings of guilt and shame because he has committed theft. Although he tries to appear innocent and harmless, his inner self is deeply troubled. “Emelyanoushka, you ought to take a thought and mend your ways. Have done with drinking! Just look what rags you go about in... (Dostoevsky, 2024, p.50)”

This quotation shows Astafy’s concern for Emelyan and highlights the poor condition in which Emelyan lives. His appearance and behavior make others see him as helpless, but they also hide the emotional conflict and guilt that he feels inside. In *A Christmas Tree and a Wedding*, the wealthy guests also perform social roles during the celebration. They appear polite, respectable, and well-mannered in public gatherings. However, their real personalities are selfish, materialistic, and morally corrupt. Social events in the story become a stage where people act in order to impress others and maintain their social status. “Go away; what are you doing here? Go away, you scamp; are you after the fruit here, eh? Get along, you naughty boy! (Dostoevsky, 2024, p.91)” This quotation shows Yulian Mastakovitch’s cruel and arrogant nature. He insults and frightens a poor child simply because he feels powerful and superior. His rude behavior reveals his real personality, which contrasts with the polite image he presents in front of other adults.

#### **4.2. Front Stage and Back Stage Behavior**

According to Goffman, front stage behavior refers to the way individuals behave in public in order to impress others, while back stage behavior represents their true emotions and actions when they are alone. Dostoevsky’s characters constantly move between these two spaces. In *Mr. Prokharchin*, the character’s front stage image is that of a poor and humble clerk who lives a modest life. People believe that he has very little money and struggles to survive. However, his backstage reality is completely different. He secretly hides a large amount of money and constantly worries about protecting it. “He carried his love of truth at last to such a pitch as to venture... to inquire of Demid Vassilyevitch himself concerning the credibility of the strange rumours (Dostoevsky, 2024, p.79).” This quotation reveals his unusual honesty and straightforward personality. His actions show that he values truth strongly, but they also make him appear socially awkward because questioning a superior was considered inappropriate in his workplace.

In *An Honest Thief*, Emelyan’s front stage behavior shows him as a harmless and quiet man. He appears humble and weak in front of others. However, his backstage emotions reveal guilt and shame after stealing from Astafy. “Haven't you simply stolen them from me like a thief and a robber, in return for the bread and salt you've eaten here? (Dostoevsky, 2024, p.17)” This quotation exposes the hidden truth behind Emelyan’s actions and reveals the moral struggle that he experiences. In *A Christmas Tree and a Wedding*, the rich guests display perfect front stage manners during the celebration. They

smile, speak politely, and behave respectfully. However, their backstage motives include greed, ambition, and social manipulation. “A great rascal, as I notice,” answered Yulian Mastakovitch (Dostoevsky, 2024, p.44).” This line shows the judgmental and arrogant attitude hidden behind the polite social behavior.

#### 4.3. Deception and Self-Representation

Goffman explains that self-presentation is the process through which people try to control how others see them. Dostoevsky’s stories show that this constant performance strongly influences social relationships and often leads to misunderstanding or emotional distance. In *Mr. Prokharchin*, the character’s false self-presentation isolates him completely from society. Because he hides his money and pretends to live in poverty, nobody truly understands his real life. “He had a glimpse, too, of the figure of the old man with a sickly face, in an old wadded dressing-gown... (Dostoevsky, 2024, p.106)” This symbolizes loneliness and emotional isolation that result from his secretive behavior. In *An Honest Thief*, Emelyan presents himself as a weak and pitiful man. This behavior earns sympathy from Astafy but also creates a relationship based on pity rather than respect. “Emelyanoushka, you ought to take a thought and mend your ways... (Dostoevsky, 2024, p.118)” This line shows Astafy’s compassion and moral guidance toward Emelyan. In *A Christmas Tree and a Wedding*, self-presentation becomes a tool for social manipulation. Wealthy characters use politeness, fashion, and manners to impress others and strengthen their social position. “Go away; what are you doing here? Go away, you scamp... (Dostoevsky, 2024, p.89)” This quotation exposes the hypocrisy of the upper class, who appear polite in public but treat weaker individuals with cruelty.

This research concludes that Fyodor Dostoevsky’s short stories strongly reflect dramaturgical behavior, where characters act according to social expectations rather than personal truth. Using Erving Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory, the study shows how individuals maintain a respectable public image while hiding their inner fears, guilt, and weaknesses. The findings reveal that characters rely on front stage performances such as politeness, authority, and generosity to gain approval. In contrast, their back stage lives expose fear, guilt, selfishness, and emotional pain. This dual behavior creates psychological conflict and moral tension. Dostoevsky presents a pessimistic view of society where material success and social status often dominate moral values. Human relationships are based more on appearance than sincerity. Weak individuals suffer silently, while powerful figures manipulate social roles to maintain their influence. This study demonstrates that Dramaturgical Theory provides an effective framework for understanding identity, hypocrisy, and social pressure in Dostoevsky’s fiction, making his work timeless and relevant even today.

#### 5. Conclusion

This research concludes that Fyodor Dostoevsky's short stories strongly reflect dramaturgical behavior, where characters act according to social expectations rather than personal truth. Using Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, the study shows how individuals maintain a respectable public image while hiding inner flaws. The findings reveal that characters rely on front stage performances such as politeness, authority, and generosity to gain approval. In contrast, their backstage lives expose fear, guilt, selfishness, and emotional pain. This dual behavior creates psychological conflict and moral tension. Dostoevsky presents a pessimistic view of society where material success and status dominate moral values. Human relationships are based on appearance, not sincerity. Weak individuals suffer silently, while powerful figures manipulate social roles to their advantage. This study proves that Dramaturgical Theory is an effective framework for understanding identity, hypocrisy, and social pressure in Dostoevsky's fiction. The research highlights how literature reflects real human behavior and social realities, making Dostoevsky's work timeless and relevant even today.

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