UNHAPPINESS IN LOVE AND MARRIAGE
IN THE FICTION OF ANTON CHEKHOV

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UNHAPPINESS IN LOVE AND MARRIAGE
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The modern short story owes a great deal to the Russian writer Anton Chekhov, whose innovations in form and technique as well as expressions of many hitherto untried themes have immeasurably altered our literary traditions. Coming onto the literary scene at a time when the giants of modern Russian literature, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Goncharov, and Grigorovich, were making an impact on the reading public, he added a new depth of realism which had only been hinted at by the masters. His writings reflect his combined talents as storyteller, dramatist, man of science, and close observer of life. His great vitality and ability to enjoy life under any circumstances temper his sober reflections on life and make his stories believable and acceptable.

Chekhov never intended to follow a literary career; his burning ambition was to become a doctor. Lack of money, however, caused him to turn to writing short sketches for the humorous magazines the Alarm Clock and the Dragonfly. These stories had stock situations and types that would appeal to many levels of the population, such as the cuckolded husband, overeager damsels, young fops getting married, bribe-taking officials, temperamental artists and actors, and bungling doctors. The serious young medical student was not proud of
his first literary attempts, and he used the pseudonym Antosha Chekhonte to conceal his true identity.\(^1\)

The first story was accepted with only mild encouragement: Ippolit Vassilevsky, the editor of the Dragonfly, wrote, "Dear Sir, This journal has the honour of informing you that the story you sent us is not bad and will be published. We shall pay you five copecks a line."\(^2\) After more stories had been submitted, Vassilevsky complained that Chekhov's writings did not contain a critical attitude, a criticism which Chekhov admitted to be just. On October 17, 1887, he wrote to Vladimir Korolenko, a literary friend:

> Among the Russians who are happily writing at the present day I am the most light-minded and least serious. I am under warning; poetically speaking, I have loved my pure muse but I have not respected her. I have been unfaithful to her more than once and taken her to places unfit for her.\(^3\)

Indeed, the early stories were distinguished by nothing so much as by their frivolity. Chekhov, obviously uneasy about the quality of his material, resorted to a number of tricks to hold his reader's interest. He gave his characters grotesque names, put malapropisms and puns into their mouths, and produced an atmosphere of frenzy by covering his pages

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\(^1\)Ernest J. Simmons, Chekhov (Boston, 1962), p. 40.


with exclamation marks and injecting shrieks of joy or dismay liberally throughout. It is remarkable that even in the early years, before he thought of becoming a serious writer, his stories showed a decided criticism of life. Although his style was often slipshod and his choice of subjects haphazard, he always tried to look at life dispassionately and with the critical eye of a true creative writer. He refused to accept traditional attitudes toward people of rank, parents, clergy, and government officials. He dug below the surface of life for hidden motives and social influences which affected the actions of his characters. The humor of the early stories, however, was never to disappear from his work.

A new association with the Petersburg magazine Fragments resulted in the improvement of Chekhov's literary style, although he was irritated considerably when a statutory length of one hundred lines for a single story was imposed on him. The Little Story is a literary form which developed as a result of this limitation. Later association with New Times, the most powerful daily in Petersburg, caused Chekhov to desert his original formula and to consider writing as a serious career for the first time. The encouragement of A. S. Suvorin, the wealthy owner of New Times, and of the distinguished

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5 Magarshack, pp. 53-54. 6 Hingley, pp. 43-46.
novelist Grigorovich were largely responsible for Chekhov's new intention. They gave him the praise which he so badly needed, and they made several suggestions which helped Chekhov to establish himself as a serious writer. The first thing they advised him to do was to abandon the pseudonym Antosha Chekhonte. 7

Grigorovich had other advice: he told Chekhov that he was convinced that he had great talent, and that it would be a great moral sin if he were not to develop it slowly and carefully. The main thing needed, he said, is esteem for this rare gift, and no sacrifice, not even hunger, would be too great for its development. 8 He also gave some specific advice about the compatibility of refinement and realism:

Truthfulness and realism not only do not exclude refinement but even gain from it. You have such a powerful sense of form and a feeling for the plastic, that you have no special need, for example, to speak about dirty feet with turned-in toenails or a clerk's navel. These details add exactly nothing to the artistic beauty of a description and only spoil the impressions among readers of taste. 9

Chekhov acknowledged his gratitude for the kind words Grigorovich had bestowed on him, and he undertook to explain his lack of confidence in himself as a writer. His family, he said, had always referred to his literary efforts as scribbling, and they had advised him not to give up his real work for such worthless pursuits. He himself had always

7Simmons, pp. 88-95. 8Ibid., p. 96. 9Ibid.
regarded his work as being of little significance, a fact which did not bother him too much, since he considered medicine his career. Henceforth, however, he continued, he would take a different view and would try to follow the advice of the man he esteemed so highly.10

The new seriousness which Chekhov began to display was accompanied by a struggle to identify his artistic mission, a question which was to trouble him for the rest of his life. He found that life had suddenly become complicated by compelling responsibilities, real or imaginary, to society, which he felt he must assume as a serious artist. The adjustment produced a kind of spiritual illness.11 He was also compelled to face the relation of art to society. In a society where there was an endless struggle between revolutionary-minded individuals and a reactionary government, many had found spiritual consolation in the "new, electrifying doctrine of Leo Tolstoy--his search for truth, the urge to self-perfection, opposition to violence in any form, and man's duty to live by the moral law."12 Although the great Russian writers were looked upon as teachers, Chekhov had strong convictions that art must remain purely objective, yet the current demands for moral and social guidance did affect him. He was acutely

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10 Chekhov, Life and Letters, translated by Koteliansky and Tomlinson, p. 72.
11 Simmons, p. 125. 12 Ibid., p. 126.
aware of the shortcomings of the society in which he lived, and he was moved to write about these failings with profound pity but without accusing anger or disgust.\(^{13}\)

A great deal has been written about Chekhov's objectivity, which is one of the major trademarks of his writing and perhaps the greatest contribution he made to the art of writing fiction. A simple definition of the term would be impossible, however, for it exists on an aesthetic level and also on a stylistic level in Chekhov's work. In a letter to Alexei Suvorin dated October 27, 1888, he states his view on the role of the artist:

> In talks with the writing fraternity I always insist it is not the business of the artist to solve narrowly specialized questions. It is bad for an artist to tackle what he does not understand. For special problems we have specialists: it is their business to judge the community, the fate of capitalism, the evil of drunkenness, boots, female maladies. . . . The artist, though, must pass judgment only on what he understands; his circle is as limited as that of any other specialist—this I repeat and on this I always insist. One who has never written and has had no business with images can say there are no problems in his sphere, only answers. The artist observes, chooses, guesses, combines—these acts in themselves presuppose a problem; if he has not put this problem to himself from the very beginning, then there will be nothing to guess and no choice to make. To be more concise, let me finish with psychiatry; if one denies problem and purpose in creative work, then one must concede that the artist is creating undesignedly, without intention, temporarily deranged; and therefore, if some author were to boast to me that he had written a story without a previously considered intention, guided by inspiration, I would call him insane.

> You are right to require a conscious attitude from the artist toward his work, but you mix up two ideas:

\(^{13}\text{Ibid.}, p. 127.\)
the solution of the problem and a correct presentation of the problem. Only the latter is obligatory for the artist. 14

Stylistically, objectivity conceived as the technique of the effaced narrator produced two main results: first, brevity, which is essential to the short story, and second, freedom from sentimentality, which allows the reader to react to the story in his own way. 15 Chekhov himself voiced his purpose to Alexei Suvorin in a letter dated April 1, 1890:

You scolded me for objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, lack of ideals and ideas and so on. When I portray horse thieves, you would want me to say that stealing horses is an evil. But certainly this has always been obvious without my saying so. Let the jury pass judgment on them; it is my business solely to show them as they are. Here is the way I write: you are considering the subject of horse thieves, so bear in mind they are not beggars but well-fed people, that they are members of a cult and that with them stealing horses is not just theft but passion. Of course it would be nice to combine art with sermonizing, but that kind of thing I find extraordinarily difficult and well-nigh impossible because of technical considerations. Certainly if I am to depict horse thieves in seven hundred lines, I must speak and think as they would and feel with their feelings; I add a subjective point of view if I don't and then my characters will grow dim and the story won't be as compact as all little short stories should be. When I write I count upon my reader fully, assuming that he himself will add the subjective elements that are lacking in the telling. 16


As Chekhov began to reflect more seriously on his work, a new degree of skill in handling human relations began to emerge. "He had now fully learned that humor and tragedy, like love and hate, are often only the separate sides of the same coin." Atmosphere or mood became an important medium for conveying the feelings of his characters; irony pointed up the disparity between people's hopes and the reality of things; descriptions of nature were linked with the moods of the characters, giving emphasis and depth.

Although Chekhov was committed strongly to his doctrine of objectivity, he nevertheless succumbed at one period in his life to attempting to teach a way of life. It was the only time he was seriously attracted by any of the numerous movements in contemporary Russia. Tolstoy became absorbed with the problem of how men should live, and he spent the rest of his life working out a creed of rational Christianity. His study of the original teachings of the Bible resulted in five commandments: "(1) Do not be angry. (2) Do not indulge in illicit sexual intercourse. (3) Do not promise anything on oath. (4) Do not resist evil by violence. (5) Do not judge or go to law." The expression of these principles was conduct contrary to standards of human behavior: the rejection of war and of military service, and also of property, including

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17 Simmons, p. 132. 18 Hingley, pp. 78-79.
19 Ibid., p. 90. 20 Ibid.
money, which Tolstoy regarded as a means of enslaving the poor. The Tolstoyans wore peasant clothes, performed menial tasks, and worked on the land. Only the worldwide fame of the novelist-philosopher saved him from persecution and exile, for he preached an anarchy in which love should replace force as motivation in human conduct.\textsuperscript{21}

Whether Chekhov made a thorough study of Tolstoy’s theories is doubtful, but as a result of what he learned, he was attracted and impressed by the teachings without being drawn into a definite allegiance. Many of the aspects of Tolstoy’s creed did not tempt him; he did not wear peasant clothes, and he saw no purpose in giving up smoking and drinking. Asceticism was always repugnant to him, and he had a taste for many of the luxuries which Tolstoy denounced. In women he prized beauty above all else, a quality which Tolstoy considered unimportant. He also questioned the belief in religion as the basis of faith. Other points, however, he highly respected, especially the forbearance and tolerance prescribed by the precepts “Do not be angry” and “Do not judge.”\textsuperscript{22}

Chekhov’s endorsement of some of the teachings of Tolstoy was a result in part of the conflict he was undergoing over the still unresolved social and artistic problems which had troubled him from the outset of his success as a writer. He saw all about him the unhappiness, suffering, vulgarity, and

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 91. \hfill \textsuperscript{22}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 92.
social defeatism of Russian life. He had strong convictions about ordinary, decent behavior, but his artistic sense prevented any direct preaching. Some of the stories written in the Tolstoyan period do show a definite attempt to teach a way of life, but these didactic pieces are not very numerous, and they were produced simultaneously with many stories of other types which had no such purpose.23

By the end of 1889 Chekhov had reached a spiritual breaking point. He was compelled for a time to turn his back on his art and to seek relief in some other activity. In 1890 he undertook a trip to Sakhalin, a remote island in the Pacific where political prisoners were sent. Chekhov's reasons for making this arduous journey remained a mystery to his friends, but he allowed the belief to prevail that he was conducting the experiment in the interest of science. In truth, he still felt rather guilty about not practicing regularly as a doctor, and he hoped to publish the results of his experiment for the benefit of medicine and of sociology.24

The journey to Sakhalin caused Chekhov to become increasingly concerned with social problems, and his writings from 1890 on voice a degree of social criticism previously unknown in his work. He was now completely disenchanted with Tolstoyan doctrine, especially with the idealization of peasant life.

which had briefly attracted him. He showed marked impatience with the endless philosophizing of the do-nothing intelligentsia. In the stories that he wrote during 1891, his concern with this class took a more imaginative and psychological turn. Certain dominant themes relating to human deprivation of the spirit as the result of industrialization, the rise of the new bourgeoisie, the new thought, emerge. Isolation and man's destruction by poshlost occur repeatedly as conditions that man must deal with in his journey through life. Only toward the end of his life did Chekhov's mood lift; the stories written after 1898 have a more optimistic tone. Although most of these stories deal with man's isolation, there is a qualified hope in man's ability to find a certain happiness.

The style which finally emerged as the vehicle for expressing the themes of Chekhov initiated the modern short story. His trademarks are "terse introductions, impressionistic characterizations, internal rather than external action, and unexpected conclusions." The zero ending, a form in which the conflict leads to expectations of a dramatic conclusion but which results in fact in a relaxation of tensions without


26 Cf. W. H. Bruford, Chekhov and His Russia (New York, 1947), p. 200: "'Poshlost' . . . implies everything that is reprehensible morally, socially, or aesthetically, the ignoble, caddish, shabby in every form."

27 Winner, pp. 209-210. 28 Ibid., p. 5.
a climax, is a Chekhovian innovation. Most of the stories relating to love and marriage which will be examined in this paper exhibit the mature style defined above, for they were for the most part written after Chekhov began to regard himself as a serious artist.

Anton Chekhov's concern over social matters was the natural result of several strong influences in his life. He was born one year before the liberation of the serfs, an event which was to cause a tremendous upheaval in the political and social structure of Russian society. The son of a serf whose father had bought freedom for his family before the liberation, Chekhov rose in society to become a member of the intelligentsia, that class of people who were vitally concerned with the major trends of thought of that day. He was interested in literature from an early age, and he read with avidity the works of the great masters--Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy; he was able to discern when he was quite young the qualities of these writers which appealed to him, or which he felt inclined to reject.

The practice of medicine was probably the greatest influence on Chekhov's critical view of society. His interest in science gave him the ability to reserve judgment on complicated questions. "He was never much impressed by abstract theorizing, particularly when it was religious or metaphysical, and the only kind of generalizations which attracted him were

\[29\text{Ibid.} \quad 30\text{Hingley, pp. 2-4.}\]
those which could be tested against evidence."31 Moreover, the practice of medicine intensified his social sense, for he worked among people of all classes and knew firsthand the sociological implications of the society of his time. His practice gave him many ideas for plot and character in his stories, since he saw many intriguing types and many strange situations as he went among his patients, especially those peasants around his estate at Melikhovo.32

It remains, then, to mention friends and relatives, who turned up frequently as characters in Chekhov's stories. He was ever a genial and loving man, albeit singularly secretive about his personal life, and his house was always crowded with admiring family and associates. It was inevitable that many of these people appeared in his stories, sometimes to the extreme agitation of the subjects, as in the case of the painter Levitan and his mistress, Madame Kuvshinnikov, who recognized themselves as main characters in The Grasshopper.33 On one occasion there was an angry protest about the theme of a story, About Love. Lydia Avilov, a married woman for whom Chekhov had tender admiration, thought his implication that a man had no right to pay his addresses to a married woman with children in this story was pointed directly at her.34

The Russian social scene which Chekhov paints in such detail reveals a realistic appraisal of the major characteristics

31Ibid., p. 41. 32Simmons, pp. 289-292. 33Magarshack, p. 141. 34Ibid., p. 320.
of each class of Russian society—namely, the peasants, the landowners, the official class, and the intelligentsia—and a thorough description of town and country life. Industry and commerce are shown in their effect on the lives of individuals. Chekhov reports faithfully on all of these aspects from personal observation, since he had the unique background of rising from serfdom to the class of the intelligentsia, with experience of living both in the big city and in the country.

Many of the first serious stories deal with peasant life. Chekhov was the first of the Russian writers to state the actual truth about the Russian village. Before him, Turgenev and Grigorovich had treated the subject with a romantic attitude; after him, only Gorki and Bunin spoke of the peasant realistically. The old Russian village before the Emancipation had been almost completely self-sufficient, and its whole economy was based on that principle. The peasant family grew its own food, built its own house and made its own furniture and agricultural implements, and wore homespun clothes. The family unit, called a joint-family, consisted of three or four generations, because it was the custom before the Emancipation for a son to bring his wife to live in his father's house. Luxury consisted of tea for the women on special

36 Bruford, p. 44.
37 Ibid., p. 51.
occasions, and drink for the men on Sundays and feast-days. It was the Russian peasant's fondness for strong drink, as a matter of fact, that was a major cause of his impoverishment after the Emancipation, when he had no master to keep him in check, according to some authorities. Chekhov did not share this opinion, although he did not gloss over the fact that drink was responsible for many of the peasant's woes. Drunkenness, together with crowded conditions and poor sanitation in the one-room izba, naturally gave rise to constant friction, only kept in control by the firm hand of the head of the family. Ignorance and superstition hampered control of disease, and death was often a welcome choice between illness and treatment. There is little wonder that the Russian peasant did not have much to recommend him in the way of moral character: hard labor, cruel winters, scanty diet, and overcrowded living conditions made him coarse and insensitive.38

To the Russian peasant, a woman was a laborer, a servant. There was, of course, no romance about most peasant marriages. The natural labor unit comprised a man, a woman, and a horse; it was the father's duty to provide his son with a horse and the mother's duty to find him a wife. Physical strength and willingness to work were the standards by which a wife was chosen, beauty being a luxury which few peasants were willing to pay for. If a married son left the village to work elsewhere,

38 Ibid., pp. 46-50.
the wife remained with her parents-in-law. Inevitably, these marriages of convenience led to infidelity.39

Before the liberation of the serfs, the land-owning class enjoyed a life of sheltered ease based on serf labor. A member of the gentry was educated at home, and he never had the inclination for any kind of activity, lest it should injure his health. His arranged marriage usually turned out happily, because his wife found contentment in satisfying his simple material wants, and monotony did not trouble either of them. Ample midday meals, afternoon naps, tea in the afternoon, and drives through the countryside occupied their time. An occasional visitor brought news of the outside world. At night card games provided entertainment.40

After the Emancipation, everything changed. The problems of labor and capital forced the landowners to learn to handle free labor over which they had no disciplinary power, as in the past, and the peasants had to accustom themselves to employment as hired labor. The extreme shortage of capital brought small or thriftless landowners heavily into debt, and estates fell into a state of disrepair and neglect. Former ease gave these people an attitude of life marked by lack of initiative and energy, and an air of fatalism. A man could still make a living on an estate, but only if he was prepared for hard physical labor himself.41

39Ibid., pp. 50-51. 40Ibid., pp. 78-79. 41Ibid., pp. 80-85.
Girls of the landowner class were expected to marry within their own social stratum. They had thoroughly Victorian ideas about marriage, and to be left an old maid was a great misfortune. The unmarried daughter of a household waited quietly but anxiously for a proposal, all the while filling chests with linens in the hope that the collected goods would be a dowry. ¹²

The government during Chekhov's day was a complete autocracy, ruled by a highly centralized bureaucracy which was controlled by the czar. The system was so vast that it was quite beyond effective control, although for generations a strong attempt was made to direct the most important aspects of Russian life, even to civilize the country by decree. There were fourteen degrees of rank in the system, which determined status in society and established precedence. The officials were exempt from military service and from corporal punishment, and they had certain positive rights which were formerly reserved for the nobility. A rank of the fourth grade and higher carried with it a hereditary nobility, the rank of general in the civil service, and the title of Excellency. ¹³

Although the bureaucratic system was valuable in its early days in bringing the nobility to heel, recruiting them for work in the government and in the army and providing men unaccustomed to work with a new incentive, it resulted in the

¹²Ibid., pp. 87-88. ¹³Ibid., p. 93.
encouragement of mediocrity, because promotion was by seniority. It was difficult for clerks who had not a good education to gain authority. Bribery was almost universal, and intrigue and influence played a big part in gaining success.\textsuperscript{44} It remained for the police to keep a constant surveillance to curb as much of the graft as possible, and although they were for the most part ineffective, yet their constant watchfulness left an indelible mark on the Russian character. For fear of compromising themselves, people were afraid to say anything serious, a major cause for the inertia and indolence so prevalent among the educated classes.\textsuperscript{45} In the courts lethargy and a lack of imagination on the part of the lawyers often resulted in inhumanity and injustice.\textsuperscript{46}

The attitude of the official class toward women was anything but romantic. A life of routine and intrigue in which there was little idealism caused the government workers to regard women as a necessary evil, or as means for furthering political careers, but domesticity was considered extremely bourgeois.\textsuperscript{47}

The intelligentsia in Chekhov's time were members of a social class composed of people of higher education who were engaged in a liberal profession but not in the government service. These people had advanced political and social views, and they naturally felt the lack of political liberty more

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., pp. 93-99. \quad \textsuperscript{45}Ibid., pp. 104-106.
\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., p. 118. \quad \textsuperscript{47}Ibid., p. 102.
than the privileged nobility or officials, or the unawakened peasantry and commercial classes.\(^{48}\) The divergence between Russian society and the government had begun in the early part of the nineteenth century, after the war with Napoleon in 1812. After a glow of patriotic fervor aroused by this campaign, the gentry began to compare the Russian regime with the new social order of Western Europe. Dissatisfaction finally led to the famous December Revolt of 1825, which disclosed the bitter conflict between advanced Russian society, which followed the rationalistic ideas of the French Revolution, and Russian Tsarism, based on the principles of the Byzantine conception of the supreme mission of emperors. The bitter defeat suffered by the Decembrists caused the nobility to withdraw from political life, thereby proving their lack of decisive action.

Meanwhile, a new class of people, a lower-class intelligentsia, came into being. Although some of them were gifted and educated, the rasnochintsy, for such they were called, scorned the ideals of the nobility and began to undermine the traditions of culture and beauty, which were symbols of aristocracy.\(^{49}\)

By the 1860's this group had as its aim to rebuild contemporary society through the application of the principles of natural science, made popular by Darwin and Huxley. They saw religious superstition as the enemy of progress, and they attempted

\(^{48}\)Ibid., p. 142.

\(^{49}\)Nina Andronikova Toumanova, Anton Chekhov: The Voice of Twilight Russia (New York, 1937), pp. 62-64.
to subordinate the spiritual aspects of life to the scientific. To them, agnosticism was another word for freedom.\textsuperscript{50}

The rasnochintsy were an uncouth lot, rough in manners and disdainful of refinement and culture. They had no use for beauty, and they were scornful of traditional art and literature. Narrow-minded though they were, however, it must be admitted that some of their radical leaders were gifted. A succession of theorists advanced ideas which further established the rasnochintsy as a separate segment of society. The name "nihilist" came to be applied to Russian radical society. By the 1870's the nihilists and those repentant noblemen who were feeling pangs of guilt over the condition of Russia because of their ancient prerogatives had joined forces in the common interest of "the people." Thus was born the populist movement, so distasteful to Chekhov, which denounced beauty as the symbol of aristocratic corruption and which sponsored Philistinism and mediocrity.\textsuperscript{51}

From the sixties on, a mistrustful government looked suspiciously at everyone, and the intelligentsia split into two distinct groups: the skeptics, who sadly surveyed the Russian scene but did not make a move for better or worse, and the radicals, active and critical, whose restlessness led them into the conspiracy to assassinate Alexander II. The widening breach increased the melancholy of the Russians.

\textsuperscript{50}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 67-68. \textsuperscript{51}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 67-70.
The strengthening of the power of both church and state after the death of Alexander II brought still greater gloom. The pessimistic outlook of society in the 1880's which resulted from the reactionary policies of Alexander III were reflected by Chekhov when he first began to write his melancholy stories about 1886. As a true physician who diagnoses disease, he observed stagnation and inertia among the dissatisfied intelligentsia. Objectively, yet with kindness and deep human sympathy and pity, he commented on Russian character which reflected human nature influenced by political and sociological forces.52

By the time Nicholas II came to the throne in 1894, the Russians were becoming weary of populism. A growing interest in the philosophers Nietzsche and Vladimir Soloviev promoted timid attempts to find new avenues to real art and beauty. Literature had always been held in great esteem by the intelligentsia, who even in the gloomiest days sought answers there to life's problems.53 Now suddenly the gloom began to lift, and a new note of optimism and refinement began to creep in. "The unhappy, superfluous man, who for so many years had reflected the mood of society, was no longer the unchallenged ruler of literature."54 By the beginning of the new century, the prevailing current of thought was aestheticism.55

52Ibid., pp. 71-72. 53Ibid., p. 157. 54Ibid., p. 195. 55Ibid., p. 204.
The writings of Anton Chekhov reflect this trend in Russian thought.

Chekhov voiced his appraisal of the intelligentsia and his hope for the future in a letter to I. I. Orlov dated February 22, 1899:

Not the teachers alone, but all the intelligentsia are at fault—all of them. As long as they are students, pursuing courses, they are good, honest people... but no sooner do these students enter upon life independently, than our hopes and the future of Russia turn to smoke, and on the filter there remain only doctors who own villas, greedy civil servants, and bribe-taking engineers. . . . I have no faith in our intelligentsia, hypocritical, false, hysterical, ill-bred, lazy; I have no faith in them even when they suffer and complain, for their oppressors come from the same womb as they. I believe in individuals. I see salvation in a few people living their own private lives, scattered throughout Russia;--whether they be intellectuals or muzhiks, the power is in them, though they be few. A man is never a true prophet in his own country; and the individuals of whom I speak play an obscure part in society . . . whatever comes to pass, science keeps advancing, social self-consciousness increases, moral problems begin to acquire a restless character, etc. And all this is being done despite the procurators, the engineers, the teachers, despite the intelligentsia en masse, and despite everything. 

The intelligentsia are represented in many of Chekhov's stories by students who, although they are individuals, have in common the basic attitudes of their class. They all seem to live, morally and materially, from hand to mouth. They treat women as beings less than human, objects of lust and companions in drunkenness. They are agreeable enough, even gay and carefree on occasion, but morally they are insensitive.

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56 Anton Chekhov, Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics, selected and edited by Louis S. Friedland (London, 1924), pp. 286-287.
Critics are inclined to excuse this laxity, however, on the grounds that students had no organized activities, and early marriage was impossible. The women of the intellectual middle class are disciples of Ibsen whose experiments in social freedom or sexual equality do not live up to expectations. Chekhov's bored intellectual in "A Moscow Hamlet" describes them as follows:

The girls and ladies of my circle are also unusually clever and important. They are all alike; they dress alike, speak alike, walk alike, and the only difference is that one has heart-shaped lips, while the other, when she smiles, has her mouth wide like that of a turbot.

Marriage is a topic which Chekhov dealt with from the beginning of his career as a short-story writer. His early work for the comic papers treats of family events in all classes, "the trials of parents with daughters on their hands, of young men with mothers-in-law, proposals, marriages . . ." The subject had universal appeal, and he frequently returned to it in later stories. Marriage customs are revealed, and there is much talk about the dowry, about the role of the marriage-broker, and about the barrier of rank and wealth. It is in the handling of the man-woman relationship, however,

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57 Bruford, pp. 148-149.


60 Bruford, p. 195.
that Chekhov reveals his deep insight into human nature:

The infinitely complex and ever changing relations of man and woman display better than any other subject that 'disharmony between people's moods and circumstances' from which, as Mr. Edward Garnett so well says, 'springs the peculiar, subtle sense Chekhov conveys of life's ironic pattern of time and chance playing cat and mouse with people's happiness.'

In revealing the irony of man's relationship with woman, Chekhov comments on the supreme irony of life as a whole.

Chekhov's own marriage came late in his life, when, by his own admission, he met the only woman he had ever wanted to marry. It was his great tragedy that only after he knew for a certainty that he did not have long to live, he found one who satisfied the two conditions he considered necessary for a happy union.

He could not put up with the sort of happiness, he confessed to Suvorin, that went on from one morning to another. He wanted, in fact, that the woman he married should have interests and work of her own. The other was that he should be in love with her.  

The most important thing in family life, he said, is "love, sexual desire, one flesh; everything else is unimportant and boring, however clever your calculations might be." The philosophy which the mature Chekhov expressed on the subject of marriage was the expression of an idealism and a basic morality which persisted throughout his life.

There was a great deal in Chekhov's background which might have turned him against marriage forever. His brothers

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61 ibid.  
62 Magarshack, p. 352.  
63 ibid.
Alexander and Nikolai were notorious in their ill treatment of women. In a letter to the former dated January 2, 1889, Chekhov upbraided him in irate language for his indecency in using foul language, shouting, parading about without his trousers, and becoming drunk in the presence of his wife and servant. Alexander's behavior, the younger brother pointed out, was all too reminiscent of the way their father treated their mother.64

Pavel Chekhov, the father of Anton, behaved like the serf he was. "In his determination to rise above the bondage into which he was born, Chekhov's father never rid himself of his serf heritage of harshness and acquisitiveness."65 Evgeniya Yakovlevna, his wife, was a devoted mother and a careful and thrifty housekeeper. She loved her husband very much, although the traditional serf attitude in marriage he displayed in his overbearing behavior toward her was horrible for the young Chekhovs to endure. "Beat your wife as you beat your old sheepskin coat" is the peasant proverb which suggests the behavior of Pavel Chekhov. Years later, Chekhov commented to his brother Alexander that their father's despotism had robbed their mother of her youth and ruined their own childhood. His brutal tirades over trifles were dreaded episodes which left an indelible mark on the sensitive Anton.66

64 Ibid., pp. 170-171. 65 Simmons, p. 6. 66 Ibid., p. 10.
Despite his bitter impressions of marriage in his early life, Chekhov expressed a desire to find a wife for himself. The subject was particularly on his mind in 1886, when he wrote to Alexander that he still was unmarried and had no children.\textsuperscript{67} Again in 1888 he mentioned the subject in a letter to a friend in which he said that he would like to marry, but circumstances prevented it.\textsuperscript{68} It is possible that the veiled reference implied the growing dependence of his family on his earnings, for Pavel had gone bankrupt and had sneaked off to Moscow, leaving Anton the virtual head of the family. Loneliness, though, plagued him. Perhaps, he said in a letter to Suvorin at the end of 1888, what he needed was an unhappy love affair.\textsuperscript{69}

It was not long before the unhappy love affair was a reality, although critics argue about the depth of Chekhov's feeling for Lydia Avilova, a married woman and mother whom he met in the early part of 1889. There is no tangible evidence that he was in love with her, Chekhov being always secretive about his personal affairs, but the lady detailed at length her correspondence and meetings with the now-famous author in her memoirs, which were published fifty years after their supposed affair.\textsuperscript{70} The first meeting, which took place in the home of Lydia's brother-in-law, a newspaper publisher,

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{67}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 80.
\item\textsuperscript{68}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 155.
\item\textsuperscript{69}\textit{Magarshack}, p. 173.
\item\textsuperscript{70}\textit{Simmons}, p. 207.
\end{itemize}
is described in the memoirs with subjectivity and with a great deal of assumption:

How difficult it is sometimes to explain and even to perceive the true meaning of some happening. And as a matter of fact nothing did actually happen. We simply looked closely into each other's eyes. But how much there was in the look we had exchanged! I felt as if something had burst in my soul, as if some rocket had exploded there brightly, joyfully, triumphantly, rapturously. I had no doubt that Chekhov felt the same, and we looked at each other, surprised and happy.\(^7\)

Whatever the true feelings of Chekhov toward Lydia, his arduous journey to remote Sakhalin has been attributed to an overwhelming attraction to her which could not be shaken.\(^7\) Love for Lydia is also given as the explanation for Chekhov's failure to propose marriage to the beautiful Lika Mizlnova, a frequent visitor in his home. This captivating girl stimulated his sense of fun. The brother-sister relationship which began between them gradually deepened into something more serious, and Lika was less able to hide the true state of their emotions than was Anton.\(^7\)

In May, 1891, Chekhov seemed resigned to bachelorhood when he wrote to his friend Suvorin that he did not intend to marry, that he would like to be a little, bald old man sitting in a fine study at a big table.\(^7\) It is possible that this resolution seemed the only sensible one in view of the fact that his sister Masha had rejected marriage and dedicated

72Magarshack, p. 174. 73Simmons, p. 243. 74Ibid., p. 244.
her life to serving her brother. Chekhov declared, however, that although it would bore him to fuss with a wife, he would welcome a love affair to relieve the tedium of life.\textsuperscript{75} There were several ladies who seem to have gratified his wish. The lovely actress Mariya Zankovetskaya, whom he dubbed "the Ukrainian queen," and Lydia Yavorskaya, another actress, were two of his most celebrated conquests. The romance turned out badly with the latter, however, for rumormongers spread the word everywhere that Yavorskaya was the model for Ariadne, one of the most callous and calculating females in Chekhov's fiction.\textsuperscript{76}

The tuberculosis which Chekhov tried so hard to conceal from his family still did not discourage him from thinking of marriage; his friends and his relatives—all except sister Masha—were especially anxious to see him married. In 1898, seriously ill and thirty-eight years old, the bachelor seemed to have altered his attitude toward marriage for himself. He openly declared in a letter to Suvorin that he could have fallen in love with Olga Knipper, an actress, if he had remained in Moscow after their meeting. As he grew older, he said, the pulse of life beat stronger and faster.\textsuperscript{77}

The final surrender to marriage brought an angry protest from sister Masha, who saw no reason why Olga should not be satisfied to remain her famous brother's mistress. Chekhov's reply to this letter gives specific reasons for the step he

\textsuperscript{75}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 284. \textsuperscript{76}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 334. \textsuperscript{77}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 449.
was about to take: he was more than forty years old, Olga was from a good family, and she was independent and could support herself if something happened to him. The form of his life and that of his family living with him would not change, he said. He would continue to live in Yalta alone, and Olga would continue her work in the theater in Moscow.  

The marriage of Olga Knipper and Anton Chekhov was one of intense love on both sides. Although a barrier seems to have existed between them on some subjects—Chekhov did not choose to tell his wife, for instance, how serious his illness was—each was lonely for the other when his convalescence or her work separated them. In some ways the marriage reversed the conventional situation. Olga was the stronger and more active, and Anton played a submissive and more feminine role. His failure to make financial arrangements for his wife after a year of marriage is surprising, considering that in that day wives seldom supported themselves, but the reason for this curious oversight was probably Chekhov's impractical attitude toward money matters, a trait which kept him in financial straits all his life.  

Three years of married life elicited from Chekhov an avowal that his life had changed for the better, and that what was ordinarily written about marriage was outright falsehood. Such bravado did not hint at the true state of affairs, however.

The prolonged separation had put a definite strain on the understanding of both parties: Olga, not realizing how ill her husband was, constantly nagged him to write more; Anton was impatient at being helpless and away from the activities that interested him, at this time the world of the theater, and he sometimes took his dissatisfaction out on his wife.\textsuperscript{81}

The last year of his life was one of improved health and one in which he found honor for his work and deep satisfaction with Olga. Death came peacefully in the German spa Badenweiler, with an attentive wife by his side.\textsuperscript{82}

Anton Chekhov had observed marriage in all of its aspects during his lifetime. A kindly man, capable of compassion and intense pity for his fellow man, he was nevertheless able to view the world with the objectivity of a man of science. He understood weakness and failure, he recognized nobility, and he could report on both from the viewpoint of the impartial observer. It is this quality which makes his work believable. This paper will examine Chekhov's attitudes toward love and marriage as revealed in his short stories. An attempt will be made to find certain themes which recur frequently and to discover the reasons for their recurrence. The conclusion will summarize the findings in the hope of defining Chekhov's general attitude on the subject of love and marriage.

\textsuperscript{81}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 608-609. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{82}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 635-638.
CHAPTER II

ISOLATION AS A CAUSE OF UNHAPPINESS IN LOVE AND MARRIAGE AMONG MEMBERS OF THE PEASANT CLASS

"If you are afraid of loneliness, do not marry."\(^1\) This reflection from the Notebook of Anton Chekhov voices one of the major themes which began to emerge from his writing when he became a serious artist in 1886. The mutual lack of understanding between human beings, the impossibility for one person to feel in tune with another became something like the \textit{leitmotiv} of all of Chekhov's later work.\(^2\) Chekhov saw isolation about him everywhere. It existed in every class of society, but nowhere did it cause so much unhappiness as it did in the world of the intelligentsia, for these people spent their years looking for solutions to life's problems. The peasants did not expect happiness, and the aristocrats found a certain satisfaction in indolence; they chose not to think too much. It was the members of the intelligentsia who looked about them and saw the ugliness and stagnation of Russian life, which they saw no hope of eradicating, or even neutralizing. Chekhov's portrayal of these people depicts not only the


dreadful impasse of mutual understanding but the complete and hopeless solitude of the individual soul. Failure to notice the distressing loneliness of their fellow men is their common lot. Unable to recognize helplessness, they either perish or else they become selfish and in turn make others suffer. Chekhov's unheroic heroes fail to evaluate properly the events of their existence or the people who surround them. A single word might bring understanding, but they never say that word. Therefore, an unimportant conflict grows until it becomes a real catastrophe.³

Chekhov's men and women are isolated individuals whose mediocre and wretched daily existence prevents their participation in any activity which would take them out of themselves. They are, as a matter of fact, unaware of their own pettiness and insignificance, for they are victims of an endless routine of doing things ordinary people do: they play cards, gossip, drink vodka, philander, take care of their business day after day, year after year, sometimes vaguely aware that there is an essential element missing from their lives, sometimes simply insensitive to the fact that they are engulfed in a mire of triviality. The same stupid jokes, the same old parties, the same compliments paid in combined insincerity and hope for a little variation of the routine alike produce the vague uneasiness.⁴

⁴Marc Slonim, From Chekhov to the Revolution (New York, 1962), pp. 63-64.
The earliest story in which the theme of isolation is clearly discernible is The Party (1887).\textsuperscript{5} "It is the 'biography' of a mood developing under the trivial pinpricks of life, but due in substance to a deep-lying, physiological or psychological cause (in this case the woman's pregnancy.)"\textsuperscript{6} A Dreary Story, published in 1889, marks the beginning of the mature period, when Chekhov had perfected his technique for displaying his themes. The leitmotiv of mutual isolation is brought out forcefully here. Chekhovskoe nastroenie, a term which the Russians associate with the words "Chekhovian state of mind," dates from this story also.\textsuperscript{7}

Atmosphere and mood, then, bear the main burden for supporting Chekhov's themes. Loneliness, futility, despondency are "felt" by the reader through pictures of a drizzly day, a muddy road, a gaunt horse being beaten unmercifully by its master, a shabby room filled with smoke from damp wood but with no warmth. Everything is unrelieved gloom, yet it would be erroneous to assume that the mood is uniformly one of despair. Chekhov draws "superfluous men,\textsuperscript{8} cranks, liars, and

\textsuperscript{5}In the interest of consistency, all stories by Chekhov mentioned in this thesis will be underlined, although some of them are classed as novellas.

\textsuperscript{6}Mirsky, p. 87.

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{8}Cf. Thomas Winner, Chekhov and His Prose (New York, 1966), p. 101: "The intellectual incapable of action is well-known in Russian literature of the nineteenth century as the 'superfluous man': a sensitive individual, alienated from, and bored by, society and incapable of decisive action."
weak-willed women, not to condemn them but to point out that life can and should be better. He is ever indulgent toward human failings, although it will be recognized that he has a hearty dislike for passivity and resignation.9

One stylistic device should be noted before the individual examples are examined in detail: most of Chekhov's main characters are really reciting monologues, for nobody listens to anybody. Everyone is wrapped up in his private little world, thinking his private thoughts—mostly about himself—and those who do cry out for contact with other mortals are merely voices in the wilderness.10 In The Lady with the Dog, Gurov, who has fallen genuinely in love with a woman he began a casual affair with, feels the need of confessing to someone this great and overwhelming emotion that has engulfed him. The only person he can find is a bureaucrat. "'If only you knew what a fascinating woman I made the acquaintance of in Yalta!' said Gurov, to which the official replied, after he had gotten into his sledge and started off, 'You were right this evening; the sturgeon was a bit strong!'"11

The reasons for isolation in love and marriage in Chekhov's stories are as varied as the characters themselves. In all classes of society, the custom of arranged marriage

9Slonim, p. 70. 
10Ibid., p. 67.

for economic reasons produces much of the strife between the sexes, and the illness of one partner is not a reason for loyalty but rather an excuse for infidelity. Few peasants have the refinement of soul to cause them to exhibit the noble quality of fidelity in marriage, although most are capable of recognizing the pitiful state of an animal being beaten or of a child being mistreated. Drunkenness and brutality are common causes of isolation among the peasants, and greed prevents happiness in this class, as well as in the other classes of Russian society.

Two stories which picture the barrenness of peasant life and the resulting isolation are *Rothschild’s Fiddle* (1894) and *Sorrow* (1885). Both stories show old men who have lived long lives with women they were completely indifferent to. Neither has ever said a kind word to his wife, and only when death comes to these women, a sweet release from a life of hardship for both of them, do the husbands realize the isolation which has existed. Yakov Matveyitch, the coffin maker in *Rothschild’s Fiddle*, does not even notice when his wife becomes ill one day. Although Marfa’s breathing is labored and she staggers when she walks, she performs her household duties. Yakov plays his fiddle and worries over his accounts. He loses about two hundred days of work a year because it is a sin to work on Sunday, and Monday is unlucky. He sometimes makes extra money playing his fiddle in the Jew Rothschild’s orchestra, but he hates Jews and consequently engages in
terrible tirades with Rothschild, so he is only sent for when he is sorely needed.

Yakov is bewildered when Marfa tells him she is dying. He notices that her usually pale face is bright with fever, but he does not understand why her unhappy look has been replaced by one which is bright and joyful. "It looked as if she really were dying and were glad that she was going away forever from that hut, from the coffins, and from Yakov." A vague realization of the life he has given her comes over him. He reflects that he has never shown Marfa any affection and has had no feeling for her; instead he has shouted at her, scolded her, and although he has never beaten her, reduced her to numbness and terror on occasion. All pleasures he has denied her, even a cup of tea now and then.

Marfa's death means to Yakov interrupted work and therefore financial loss. He measures her for her coffin while she is still alive to save as much time as possible, and when he has finished making the coffin he writes the cost in his book. He cannot remember the baby that had died years before, or the willow tree, which Marfa thinks of as she is dying. The struggle for a bare living has made Yakov see everything in terms of business. Even the funeral of his wife is calculated as profit and loss. Yakov reads the psalms over the body himself to avoid paying the sacristan, and the grave is dug

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by a crony of his. The pallbearers cost nothing, since they carry the coffin not for money but from respect. "As he took his last leave of Marfa he touched the coffin and thought: 'A good piece of work!'"\textsuperscript{13} As Yakov walks about the town after the funeral, taunts and jibes follow him, making it evident that he is isolated from nearly everyone. Then the sight of the willow tree mentioned by Marfa makes him realize his estrangement from his life's partner and wonder what has caused it.

Drunkenness, quarreling, and poverty are the causes of isolation between Grigory Petrov, the turner in \textit{Sorrow}, and his wife Matryona. Arranged marriage is another. Grigory's indifference and impatience with the sick spouse he is taking to the hospital in a snowstorm are conveyed with great realism through his dialogue as he drives his wagon through the blinding snow. He anticipates the searching questions of the doctor, and he is already thinking of what he will say when he is asked why he has not brought Matryona sooner for treatment. He shows the subservient, fawning attitude of the peasant in his speech, which is full of lies and rationalizations. He is clearly more concerned about the doctor's reaction than he is about his wife's feelings, for he cautions her not to tell of his mistreatment, the beatings and drunken behavior he has submitted her to through the years. Grigory in turn tells his wife that he is sorry for her and that he

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 245.
did not beat her from spite but from thoughtlessness. He is conciliatory, then angry and out of patience because Matryona is silent. She is dead. "He was not so much sorry as annoyed."\(^{14}\) His narrowness is emphasized when he reflects that she died for spite, just as he was feeling sorry for her.

*Peasant Wives* (1891) is another story in which Chekhov points out the evils of arranged marriages and joint-family living, and the effects that poverty and the insensitivity of the peasant have on family life. This is a frame story, and the same conditions exist in both the external narrative, the frame, and in the internal narrative, the frame story. The major plot concerns Dyudya, a tavern keeper, and his family. Wives have been chosen for both the sons: Fyodor, the elder son and a foreman in a factory, is married to Sofya, a sickly woman who stays in her father-in-law's house and weeps while her husband works in another village; Alexey, the second son, a half-witted drunken hunchback, has been married to the smart and buxom Varvara in the hope that she will be a stabilizing influence. Dyudya's wife, Afanesyevna, is nothing more than a slave and is never mentioned as an equal.

The frame story also deals with arranged marriage, that of the weak bird-fancier Vasya and his pretty wife, Mashenka. Vasya's widowed mother, when she feels herself growing feeble, finds her son a wife in the hope that she will look after him. All goes well for awhile, and then Vasya is called to the army.

While he is away, Mashenka takes a lover. Vasya's return is a welcome excuse for the lover to break off his affair, since romance has faded. The lover, one of the most hypocritical of Chekhov's characters, pleads the sanctity of the marriage bond as his reason for withdrawing, and Mashenka, enraged that Vasya has interfered with her happiness, kills her husband in a fit of rage.

There is neither love nor loyalty to the marriage bond in the frame story, nor is there any in the external narrative, the story about Dyudya and his family. All are isolated individuals. The only faithful wives are Afanesyevna, who is old and worn out, and Sofya, who is ill. Varvara, a faithless wanton, runs around the countryside at night, making conquest after conquest. Only Sofya thinks it a sin to be unfaithful, but "she felt envious and sorry that she, too, had not been a sinner when she was young and pretty."\(^{15}\) The story ends as she and Varvara plot the murders of the father-in-law and of Varvara's husband, which were suggested to them by the account in the frame story of Mashenka's murder of her spouse.

The peasant who has risen in station and is thereby isolated from his wife is the subject of *The Huntsman* (1885). In order to work for a rich gentleman, Yegor has left his wife, Pelagea, in the village with his parents. When husband and wife

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meet by chance on the road, it is apparent that Pelagea
yearns for her handsome Yegor, now a huntsman for the gentle-
man, but he looks with distaste at her. She begs him to
come home to her, although the last time he had been there
he had been drunk and had beaten her, but he says that it
would be a waste of time, that he could not endure the
poverty and smoke of the village.

"You know yourself that I am a pampered man. . . .
I want a bed to sleep in, good tea to drink, and
refined conversation. . . . I want all the
niceties, while you live in poverty and dirt in
the village. . . . Suppose there were an edict
that I must live with you, I should either set
fire to the hut or lay hands on myself."  16

The isolation in this story is clearly the result of the
differing social aspirations of the man and wife.

Peasants (1897) reflects Chekhov's increasing skill in
close portrayal. In this story, there is more variation
of type and greater artistry through contrast. Nikolay
Tchikildyev, a Moscow waiter, has come home to his parents'
house in the village because he is ill. He brings with him
his wife and their child. The most important character in
the story is Olga, who is a loving and faithful wife, although
her meek acceptance of her position as an added burden to
the family can only lead to the conclusion that she is a symbol
of futility. She is full of platitudes which reveal her
superficiality, but nevertheless she is a departure from the
stereotyped peasant wife.  17

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16 Chekhov, The Huntsman, Vol. VI, p. 245.
17 Winner, p. 154.
There is contrast in the portrayal of the other two daughters-in-law: Marya is the cowering wife of the cruel Kiryak, who drinks and beats his wife constantly, and Fyokla, a strong, handsome woman, is married to Denis, who is away in the army. Both women hate their husbands, but there is a difference in their natures, which affects the way each reacts to her environment, a part of marriage in a joint-family.

Marya thought herself unhappy, and said that she would be very glad to die; Fyokla, on the other hand, found all this life to her taste: the poverty, the uncleanness, and the incessant quarreling. She ate what was given her without discrimination; slept anywhere, on whatever came to hand. She would empty the slops just at the porch, would splash them out from the doorway, and then walk barefoot through the puddle.²⁸

The old wife, too, is a departure from the usual type of peasant wife. She is domineering and hard, berating her weak husband and nagging continually about his drinking and his laziness. She is cruel to the children and stingy with the whole family. Toward the end of the story, however, Chekhov gives a clue to the harshness of this old woman: poverty and hard labor have eroded her soul, but more important, the security she had known before the Emancipation is gone. She thinks nostalgically of her former life on a big estate, and she is heartsick.

In the Ravine (1900) is one of Chekhov's last stories, and considered one of his best. Here again, as in Peasants,

there is greater variety of character, contrasted skillfully to bring out the qualities of good and evil forcefully. Grigory Petrovitch Tsybukin is a grocer, but he does a thriving business in the illicit sale of vodka. His family lives the life of a prosperous middle-class family, but the peasant mentality is revealed in the development of the story. Grigory's second marriage is a happy one, but it becomes apparent as the story progresses that Varvara's goodness and charity are an attempt to compensate for her husband's greed and lack of principle.\textsuperscript{19}

The main characters in the story are the two daughters-in-law, Aksinya and Lipa. Both are victims of arranged and loveless marriages, but one allows herself to be engulfed in the philistinism of the Tsybukins, and the other escapes and finds a certain kind of happiness in the simple peasant life. Aksinya, the wife of feeble-minded, deaf Stepan, is a beautiful, vigorous woman who finds great favor with her father-in-law because she is an astute businesswoman and a tireless worker. She pays little attention to her weak husband; she is unfaithful, in fact, but she is fairly tolerant of him because marriage to him affords her a place in the rich family. Lipa is a delicate, shy girl who is sacrificed in marriage to Anisim, the elder son, a police inspector who is in reality a counterfeiter. The extreme poverty of Lipa and her widowed mother

\begin{footnote}{W. H. Bruford, \textit{Chekhov and His Russia} (New York, 1947), pp. 57-58.}\end{footnote}
forces the girl into a loveless marriage, and she mourns as she takes the fatal step with Anisim. The bridegroom, too, finds the thought of marriage extremely distasteful, but he dutifully allows himself to be wed. Anisim's crassness is shown when he runs out into the street immediately after the wedding and catches a thief, shoving the drunken man into the room where Lipa is being undressed and locking him in the room.

Aksinya becomes increasingly domineering, and Lipa withdraws from the family as much as possible. When Lipa's husband is sent to prison for his counterfeiting activities, she feels that she no longer belongs in the household at all. Only her little son ties her there, but when Aksinya scolds him in a fit of rage because old Tsybukin has deeded him some property and the child dies, Lipa feels that she is no longer bound to stay. At the end of three years Aksinya has taken over the household and the business, and old Tsybukin is a broken man. His daughter-in-law will not even give him enough to eat. In the end of the story, Lipa, coming up the hill from the factory where she works with other peasant women, sees him and gives him a turnover, a gesture which demonstrates her forgiveness and her triumph over her former life.

Isolation is one of the powerful themes of *In the Ravine*. Philistinism is the major cause. It ruins the happiness of everyone in the story, with the exception of Lipa, who escapes. She, however, suffers from isolation more profound than that caused by her loveless marriage; she is alien to the whole
Tsybukin family, and when her baby dies, it seems to her that she is cut off from the world. As she is walking home from the hospital with her dead baby in her arms, she meets an old man on the road.

... "I have been at the hospital," said Lipa after a pause. "My little son died there. Here I am carrying him home."

It must have been unpleasant for the old man to hear this, for he moved away and said hurriedly: "Never mind, my dear. It's God's will. You are very slow, lad," he added, addressing his companion; "look alive!" 20

When she returns to the house, old Tsybukin and his wife blame her for the death of the child; she did not take care of him, they say. The extreme irony of this accusation is that Lipa's baby was the only thing she loved.

Chekhov's artistry in the use of symbolism is nowhere more evident than in the story In the Ravine. Aksinya symbolizes the triumph of evil over good, and Lipa symbolizes the profound indifference in the depths of the Russian heart to the riches of the earth. She is innocent and free of hatred, and she can only feel a deep surprise at so much wickedness and injustice. 21 The personalities of the two women emerge through the use of details which occur repeatedly. Aksinya always has "a naive smile on her lips," and there is no detail which shows her cruelty so plainly as the smile which appears after she kills the baby. 22 The snake metaphor


21 Toumanova, p. 146.

22 Winner, p. 158.
is recurrent in the description of Aksinya: she has unblinking eyes, a small head on a long neck, snake-like slenderness; she dresses in green and yellow and has a smile like a viper's.

Two motifs identify Lipa:

She has very large masculine hands, which contrast strangely with her childlike, defenseless physique and she is usually singing. She is compared to a lark which belongs in the fields and meadows, but which has been snared . . . 23

Powerful symbols of isolation occur in most of the stories mentioned above. The beautiful, mournful music of Yakov's fiddle expresses his grief as words are unable to do in the story Rothschild's Fiddle; the blinding snowstorm in Sorrow is as desolate as Grigory when he realizes that his wife is dead; a sultry, stifling midday is as bleak as Pelagea's heart when her husband tells her that he will not return in The Huntsman; the mournful cry of cranes follows Olga out of the village as she sets out for Moscow after her husband dies in Peasants. A lonely walk home in the moonlight and the husky, taunting cry of the cuckoo reinforce Lipa's complete isolation as she walks home from the hospital with her dead baby in her arms in the story In the Ravine. These symbols are evocative and stirring. They increase the feeling of isolation which is so apparent in these stories about peasant marriages.

23Ibid., p. 159.
CHAPTER III

ISOLATION AMONG MEMBERS OF THE MIDDLE AND UPPER CLASSES

Among members of the landowner class, isolation is often the result of preoccupation with self. The landowners, being the affluent members of Russian society, were accustomed to having all their wishes gratified: the hard labor of the peasants provided the means for the luxury in which they lived. The pursuit of pleasure to escape the boredom imposed on these people by the lack of useful employment produced in them an oblivion to the needs of others. Receiving was their natural right, according to tradition; giving was foreign to their experience. After the Emancipation, when the right of the peasant to realize some benefit from his labor other than a bare existence was recognized, some of the landowners began to feel guilty about their advantage over the peasant, and a few wanted to make amends. The selfishness characteristic of this class, however, impeded their efforts because they were not used to thinking in terms of objectivity. When an effort was made to help society, there was still a strong quality of egotism involved. This inherent egotism not only isolated the landowners from the other members of society but also estranged them from the members of their own class and
from the members of their own families. The three stories about the landowning class of Russian society dealt with in this paper show some degree of selfishness, or narcissism, as the cause of isolation.

Extreme preoccupation with self causes isolation in two stories about the landowner class, The Party (1888) and The Princess (1899). In the first story, the objectivity of Pyotr Dmitritch's wife lends poignancy, but the second story is an unrelieved account of a vain and self-centered woman who naively thinks that she is doing great good, when in reality she does harm. The wide gulf between members of the privileged class and the lower classes, and among members of the privileged class themselves, is clearly evident. It is also apparent that wealth does not diminish man's loneliness; in some cases, it increases it. And pretentiousness is never the road to happiness: the vain, shallow people who would fool the world lead lives of restless discontent. These stories voice Chekhov's chief aim, which was to divest men of pomposity and pretense.¹

The isolation between Olga Mihalovna and her husband, Pyotr Dmitrich, in The Party is sharpened by a mood aroused by the heroine's pregnancy. This story is a prime example of Chekhovian nastroenie. Olga's extreme sensitivity because of her condition makes her unusually aware of her husband's shortcomings, and her irritation grows throughout the story.

¹Marc Slonim, From Chekhov to the Revolution (New York, 1962), p. 73.
until it reaches a hysterical climax, which coincides with the onset of labor. Chekhov's development of the psychological details alongside the physical ones demonstrates his great skill in reinforcing plot with mood.\textsuperscript{2}

Olga is an heiress; she is also an educated woman, a fact which causes her to realize the ambivalence of her emotion, thereby increasing her isolation. Pyotr is a man of stature in the community, the president of the District Court. He is extremely handsome and attractive to both men and women, and he is a pronounced narcissist. The qualities which attract other people, and especially women, cause Olga to be passionately fond of her husband, and jealous. She feels that he only half belongs to her, and when she overhears his flirtatious conversation with a young girl at the birthday party given in Pyotr's honor, she is sickened and infuriated. Her native intelligence enables her to view the scene somewhat objectively, but she nevertheless plans to scold him for his behavior. She knows that she has nothing to fear from other women, but Pyotr's dalliance makes her acutely aware of his shortcomings: he is a liar and a flirt, and he poses constantly as \textit{un grand gentilhomme}.

Many times throughout the story Olga wants to reveal her anger at Pyotr in bitter accusation--she wants to inflict real pain--but she is always held back by her knowledge that

he is in reality a tortured man. Only she knows that his arguments with his colleagues and his swaggering conceal guilt and dissatisfaction with himself.

"What should I say to him?" she wondered; "I shall say that lying is like a forest—the further one goes into it the more difficult it is to get out of it. I will say to him, 'You have been carried away by the false part you are playing; you have insulted people who were attached to you and have done you no harm. Go and apologize to them, laugh at yourself, and you will feel better. And if you want peace and solitude, let us go away together."

Olga says nothing, and her inhibition results in increased irritation with her guests, which she conceals with difficulty. As she performs her duties as hostess at the party, Olga feels isolated from everyone. She wanders down to the gardener's cottage, and there she finds Varvara, the gardener's wife, with her small children. Varvara is expecting another baby, and Olga would like very much to talk of her fears about childbirth, but she is afraid the older woman will think her naive, so she goes back to her duties without discussing the impending ordeal. She rejoins her guests and goes with them on an outing on the lake. The sight of the handsome Pyotr, playing the part of the jovial host, is loathsome to her, and the guests seem evil and false. She surveys them one by one, and each is distasteful in some particular way. One young man is a rich mamma's darling, and another is a recent product of the University who fancies himself a great authority on this world's problems.

His wife is a parrot, echoing his every word. Still another target of Olga's scorn is a stout gentleman who pretends affluence but who is in reality heavily in debt.

Olga Mihalovna looked at the other boats, and there, too, she saw only uninteresting, queer creatures, affected or stupid people. She thought of all the people she knew in the district, and could not remember one person of whom one could say or think anything good. They all seemed to her mediocre, insipid, unintelligent, narrow, false, heartless; they all said what they did not think, and did what they did not want to.

Olga manages to control her emotions until the party is over. She smiles and makes genial conversation. When she is finally in bed, she lies there, angry and exhausted. Pyotr lies in his bed, too, but he is silent and forbidding. Olga has the thought that if her husband would only turn to her and tell her that he was unhappy, she would be at ease. She tries to coax him to confide in her, but he replies, "We all have our personal life, every one of us, and we are bound to have our secrets." She feels rebuffed, and she lashes out at him with a bitter and hysterical tirade. She accuses him of hating her because she is richer than he is, and she says that he married her for her money. Pyotr is shocked and deeply wounded. Recovering from her outburst, Olga suddenly realizes that she is passionately in love with her husband and that she cannot live a single day without him. Pyotr has gone silently to the study, however, and there is complete isolation between them.

4Ibid., p. 32. 5Ibid., p. 41.
The onset of labor blocks off Olga from the world. After a long, weary time, she returns to consciousness and to the knowledge that her baby has died. The Pyotr who bends over her bed is thinner and hollow-eyed. His lips quiver, and tears drop from his eyes. The pain of Olga's bitter accusations is still with him, and the loss of the child causes him to declare that he does not care about anything. "Why didn't we take care of our child? Oh, it's no good talking!" he says as he leaves the room. Olga is overcome by a dull indifference to life.

Pyotr Dmitritch in The Party recognizes to some extent his own isolation, but he considers it a condition common to all human beings. Princess Vera Gavrilovna in The Princess, however, is isolated from humanity and is completely unaware of it. Her narcissism is so severe that she is unable to comprehend what the doctor is saying when he tells her in great detail that her intended charity is in reality a great burden to the people she thinks she is helping. Her frequent visits to the monastery, which she uses as a resort, inconvenience the monks and interfere with their work. But she feels pious and modest when she is there, even imagining that she is like the Father Superior, "and that, like him, she was created not for wealth, not for earthly grandeur and love, but for a peaceful life." The doctor tells her that her cooks have

6Ibid., p. 52.

gone blind in her kitchens from the heat of the stoves; that her footmen overeat and grow coarse; and that the young doctors, agricultural experts, and teachers are forced to leave their work in order to take part in her mummeries. All become hypocrites, toadies, sneaks. The old ladies in the palatial charity home the princess has built do not benefit from the luxurious furnishings in the home; these things are stolen by the attendants, and the old ladies are abused and degraded. Worst of all, the great sums of money spent to maintain all of this is wasted, when it could be doing so much good.

"The princess fancied she brought from the outside world just such comfort as the ray of light or the bird." The doctor's testimony labels her charity demoralizing and degenerating. What is lacking, he says, is love. Her whole system is built upon aversion for human voices, for faces, for everything that makes up a human being. No one is allowed to make a noise or to say anything that might have a disagreeable effect on the nerves or the imagination. She never shakes hands with anyone. Because there is no love, many deserving people run from her charity. The whole program, he concludes, is a farce, an amusement. Her charity is not given in God's name, for she has a god of her own—herself.

The doctor's straightforward talk to the princess does her no good: her only reaction is self-pity. She goes to her

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8Ibid., p. 281.
room and dreams of how she will be finally ruined and
deserted by all the people she has helped so much and of
how she will be jeered at by the whole world. She will
renounce her title, she decides, and go into a convent without
a word of reproach to anyone. She will pray for her enemies,
who will finally understand her and come to beg for forgive-
ness, but then it will be too late. Her husband, who has
deserted her, will be among the penitents. When she leaves
the monastery, there is a warm, serene feeling in her heart.
She bestows a soft and friendly smile on all as she departs.

Asorin in The Wife (1892) is another example of the
landowner class who is moved by the desire to serve the people,
but he is a more sympathetically drawn character than is the
princess, although there is an egoistic motive in his attempt
to alleviate the wretched conditions of the peasants during
a famine. The disturbance has interrupted his work of writing
a history of Russian railways, and it has also brought about
the alienation of his wife, who is greatly moved by the peasants' plight. Although Asorin is fundamentally a decent man, he
comes to realize during the course of the story that his habit
of treating others not as personalities but as tools has
causd his isolation.

The estrangement which exists between Asorin and his
wife, Natalya Gavrilovna, is baffling and painful, for he
realizes that he still loves her very much. They frequently
exchange cutting remarks, but neither will make an attempt
to discuss the reasons for the isolation which exists between them. Their tension is expressed in irritable behavior and in an exaggerated show of warmth and hospitality when visitors come to call. When Natalya Gavrilovna organizes a program of peasant relief, Asorin asks to be allowed to participate, but his interest is not aroused by the plight of the peasants but rather by his vanity, which makes him think that nothing can be organized properly without his help. The two cannot work together cooperatively, so Asorin announces that he will go away. He leaves for the city, but he goes to the home of a friend, Dr. Sobol, instead. The physician had once told him that he was disagreeable, and now Asorin wants to know why he thinks so. "It's impossible to respect you, my dear fellow. You look like a real man. . . . You use lofty language, and you are clever . . . but haven't real soul, my dear boy . . . ."  

Asorin learns that a rigidly righteous philanthropy is no substitute for the kind of personal giving that comes from the heart. His reaction to the famine relief has been one of annoyance, and it is this inhumanity and insensitivity which has poisoned the love of his wife.  

Asorin goes home to Natalya and asks her forgiveness. He says that he is changed, and he tells her that he loves her. In proof, he gives her

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free rein to help the peasants in any way she sees fit. They are reconciled and at peace.

When Chekhov turns to the official class—the bureaucrats—the causes of isolation are inhumanity, boredom, hypocrisy, and lack of moral principles. Exploitation of others and the quest for personal gain have robbed these people of sympathy and understanding. Sometimes education has produced a false kind of self-sufficiency which is a barrier. A preoccupation with routine stifles the imagination. It is here and in the world of the intelligentsia that Chekhov's chief hero, the "Moody Man," is often seen. A victim of his environment, he suffers from its impact but is too weak or sluggish to revolt against it. He is a summary of Chekhov's observations of society in the eighties and nineties, a generation for the most part devoid of dreams or passions.\textsuperscript{11}

An atmosphere of disgust and hopelessness hangs over An Anonymous Story (1893). Orlov, a Petersburg official, leads a life of routine boredom. His most striking feature is an ironical smile which is mocking but not malicious. He and his friends make jokes about everything in life; even the sight of a starving man is occasion for a silly remark. They do not believe in God, in the intelligentsia, or in the common people. Love is purely physical, and for a woman to have children or to talk about them is bourgeois and bad form.\textsuperscript{12}

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\textsuperscript{11} Slonim, pp. 64-65.

\textsuperscript{12} W. H. Bruford, Chekhov and His Russia (New York, 1947), pp. 100-102.
When Orlov's mistress, Zinaida Fyodorovna, leaves her husband and comes to live with him, his friends roar with laughter at such romanticism. Orlov is surprised and displeased.

Orlov and Zinaida are completely isolated in their respective views on love. She is very naive in thinking that Orlov's attention to her is the result of honest affection. Her domesticity offends his taste and appears to him extremely vulgar. He resents her interference with his daily routine, and he will not show her to his friends.

"I look upon love primarily as a necessity of my physical nature, degrading and antagonistic to my spirit; it must either be satisfied with discretion or renounced altogether, otherwise it will bring into one's life elements as unclean as itself. . . . Zinaida Fyodorovna in the simplicity of her heart wants me to love what I have been shunning all my life. She wants my flat to smell of cooking and washing up . . . ."13

Orlov's treatment of Zinaida is cruel and disgraceful. He lies to her, telling her that he is going out of town when he is in reality staying in another part of the city with friends. He takes the side of the maid who plots against Zinaida. When his mistress begins to realize his baseness, Orlov freely admits that her appraisal of him has been wrong:

"You imagined that I was a hero, and that I had some extraordinary ideas and ideals, and it turned out that I am a most ordinary official, a card-player, and have no partiality for ideas of any sort. I am a worthy representative of the rotten world from which you have run away.

because you were revolted with its triviality
and emptiness.

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
I can't rise to your level—I am too depraved;
you can't descend to my level, either, for you
are too exalted."  

Zinaida denounces love as absurd when she discovers
that Orlov is staying with his friends. "All this love only
clouds the conscience and confuses the mind. The meaning of
life is to be found only in one thing—fighting. To get one's
heel on the vile head of the serpent and to crush it!"  
Her bitterness and cynicism cause her to trust no one, not
even those who try to help her. She goes off to Italy, where
she dies of poison after giving birth to a girl. Orlov refuses
to take the child, saying that Zinaida's husband is legally
responsible. He is insensitive to the end.

Laevsky in The Duel (1891) is another example of the
"superfluous man" of the official class. He has run away to
a little town on the Black Sea with his mistress, Nadyezhda
Fyodorovna, in the hope of a Tolstoyan regeneration through
a life of tilling the soil. Instead of engaging in this
worthwhile pursuit, however, he remains a minor official of
the Ministry of Finance who does very little work. He has
even ceased to love Nadyezhda, who has come to represent to
him the senselessness of his existence. He now looks on his
former life in Moscow nostalgically, and he would like to
escape from his romantic entanglement, but he is afraid that

such a move might kill her. Everything that Nadyezhda does irritates Laevsky: her expression while she is drinking coffee and reading a fat magazine suggests that drinking coffee is a remarkable feat and that reading is an attempt to appear clever; arranging her hair in a fashionable style is a waste of time. Even her swallowing when she eats annoys him so much that his head tingles.

Laevsky does not tell Nadyezhda his true feelings about her. The only change in his manner is that now he is extremely polite, whereas when he was in love, he quarreled with her frequently. She is glad that of late he has been cold and reserved and not affectionate. In the past she has threatened with tears and reproaches to leave him when he has stormed at her, but now she blushes and looks guilty. They both feel guilty, for the same reasons: each would like to run away from the other. Their isolation is complete. Laevsky has no idea that Nadyezhda is intimate with Kirilin, the police captain, nor does he realize that the woman he thinks so dependent on him is in reality a vain, narcissistic creature who thinks herself the most attractive woman in town.

When word comes that Nadyezhda's husband has died, Laevsky waits a good while before he tells his mistress. He feels a terrible guilt toward the dead man, intensified by the return to rationality after his passion has cooled. When Nadyezhda finally learns of her husband's death, she also feels guilty: she would not have gone to a picnic the previous
day and laughed so loudly had she known. Uppermost in the mind of each, or course, is the fact that marriage is now possible. It has been apparent from the beginning of the story that Laevsky is averse to permanency, and soon the reader learns that Nadyezhda, the educated, emancipated woman, does not want marriage either. "Our getting married won't make things any better. On the contrary, it will make them even worse. We shall lose our freedom," she tells her friend Marya Konstantinovna.

The Duel is one of the few stories in which Chekhov injects a ray of hope by providing a partial resolution. A duel with Von Koren, a dedicated man of science and Laevsky's moral antagonist, causes Laevsky to suddenly realize that life is sweet, after all, and that marriage is the only thing that will save him from a life of lies and the consequent degeneration of his character. Nadyezhda is brought to the same conclusion, although an ugly scene with the police captain has helped her make the decision. The two marry, and the new Laevsky works long hours for his daily bread. On his face now is a look of happiness. The story ends on a wistful note, however, when Laevsky says to his friend Samoylenko that no one knows the real truth: "In the search for truth man makes two steps forward and one step back."^18

^17Bruford, p. 167.
Chekhov's contention that unhappiness and lack of mutual comprehension are often related to specific social problems is the theme of *Three Years* (1895), a long story about the upper-class merchant society in the Russia of the nineties. The message of the narrative is that the life of a merchant, directed only toward material profit and surrounded by an atmosphere of emptiness and cruelty, ruins man's capacity for happiness and love. All of the Laptevs, a family of rich Moscow merchants, suffer degeneration and finally ruin. Father Laptev, the patriarch of family and business, becomes blind and feeble; his daughter Nina, married to a cold and irresponsible husband, dies of cancer and leaves her children orphans; his son Fyodor loses his mind; and Alexei, the chief protagonist of the story, finds himself chained to a business he despises and a way of life he hates.\(^{19}\)

It is the social position of Alexei Laptev which prevents his love from maturing. He had tried to escape from his merchant background by refusing to join the family business and by living the life of an intellectual bohemian in his young years. He and his friends constantly criticized established values, and they pictured love as simply a biological phenomenon. Laptev loses interest in these theories, however, when he meets Yulia, the daughter of an ineffectual provincial doctor. He falls desperately in love with her and proposes

\(^{19}\)Thomas Winner, *Chekhov and His Prose* (New York, 1966), pp. 126-127.
marriage, but she rejects him, only to change her mind the next day because she is bored with provincial life and longs for excitement, which she thinks she will find in Moscow. She tells herself that love is not really necessary for marriage. Laptev is puzzled by Yulia's change of heart and believes that she is marrying him for his money. He feels awkward and unhappy, while she, in turn, is tormented by his love and unhappy because she knows that he suspects her motive.

*Three Years* pictures several unhappy loves. There is the unsatisfactory relationship of Laptev and Rassudina, his former mistress, a musician who has real love for his mind and not his money; of Rassudina and her new lover; and of Nina, Laptev's sister, and her husband, Panaurov, a dandy who has two wives and two sets of children, all of whom he deserts. All of these people figure directly in the plot to convey the theme of isolation and of its counterpart, the impossibility of love.

The story begins with the unhappy marriage of Laptev and Yulia, the fumbling groom beseeching his beautiful young wife, who is quiet and aloof, to love him. He begs her to pretend love at least, and the two are made miserable by the unevenness of their feelings. Gradually Laptev's love dims, and after three years, he is cold and indifferent to the world. Ironically, Yulia has quietly grown to love him, and at the end of the story she is sad and yearning, waiting for him to visit her at their summer villa. When he goes, he
takes with him Yartsev, a friend who is a scientist, to keep from being bored. When Laptev sits down with his wife to talk of business matters, she tells him blushingly that she loves him.

She had told him she loved him, and he could only feel as though he had been married to her for ten years, and that he was hungry for his lunch. She had put her arm around his neck, tickling his cheek with the silk of her dress; he cautiously removed her hand, stood up, and without uttering a single word, walked to the villa.\textsuperscript{20}

Details throughout the story comment on Laptev's futile search for love and happiness. One of the most ironic scenes occurs when he sits in the yard of his father's business, thinking of the destruction of his life. Behind the fence nearby he hears whispered declarations of love, which only remind him of the emptiness of his life. He wishes that he could escape from the world in which he cannot be happy, but then he realizes that the habit of servitude makes of his life a prison. The pain of his thoughts is increased by the contrast between the beautiful, magical night, full of fragrance and promise, and Laptev's depressing thoughts.

A balmy summer evening is also the device which contrasts Laptev's passionate love for Yulia in the beginning of the story and his indifference to her at the end. The beautiful night is romantic to the young lover, but it is heavy and depressing at the close of the story when Laptev cannot

\textsuperscript{20}\textit{Chekhov, Three Years}, Vol. I, pp. 310-311.
respond to Yulia's beauty in the moonlight. It is, more
ironically still, Yartsev whose love is aroused, while Laptev
looks on dispassionately and wonders what the future will
bring.

The "superfluous man," the victim of isolation and
consequently of frustration, is most often found in the world
of the intelligentsia. Two stories, The Man in a Case (1898)
and A Dreary Story (1889), have as their main characters a
teacher of Greek and a professor of medicine at Moscow
University. The teacher hides behind the facade of antiquity
because he is afraid to face the world; the professor's con-
suming interest in science cuts him off from life. There is
a personality difference, then, but the result is the same.

Byelikov, the teacher of Greek in The Man in a Case,
wears galoshes and carries an umbrella, even in the finest
weather. His umbrella is in a case, and his watch, and his
penknife, too. His face looks as if it were in a case because
it is always hidden in a turned-up collar, and he wears dark
glasses. Reality irritates and frightens him, and he always
praises the past and what never existed because of his aversion
to the actual. The classical language which he teaches is
in reality galoshes and an umbrella which shelter him from
real life. Worst of all, Byelikov tries to hide his thoughts
in a case. The only things clear in his mind are government
circulars and newspaper articles in which something is forbidden.
He mistrusts sanction or permission, and his only security
lies in staying closely to the rule, any deviation or
departure being abhorrent and depressing to him.

The narrator of Byelikov's story is Burkin, a teacher
in the high school. He relates that all of his colleagues
are crushed by the teacher of Greek because they fear him,
and in fact the whole town has been under his domination for
fifteen years. Byelikov is afraid of everything, and everyone
is afraid of him. The situation might have remained the
same for many years longer if a new teacher, Kovalenko, had
not come to town and brought with him his sister, Varinka.
Byelikov is strongly attracted to this lady in spite of him-
self, and the other faculty members encourage his courtship
of her because they think that if he were married, he might
be a little less oppressive. He is seriously considering
marriage, but then he sees Varinka riding a bicycle, and he
is shocked beyond belief, for this is a slight deviation from
the rules of society. He warns Kovalenko that such behavior
must stop at once, but the latter becomes angry, tells
Byelikov to mind his own business, and pushes him down the
stairs. This is the first time that anyone has dared to be
rude to the forbidding man. When Varinka comes in just as
Byelikov is falling, she laughs, and this is the last straw:
Byelikov cannot stand ridicule. He goes home and goes to
bed, never to get up again. A month later he dies.

Now when he was lying in his coffin his expression
was mild, agreeable, even cheerful, as though he
were glad that he had at last been put into a case
which he would never leave. Yes, he had attained
his ideal! And, as though in his honor, it was
dull, rainy weather on the day of his funeral, and
we all wore goloshes [sic] and took our umbrellas.21

After relating the unusual story about the teacher of Greek,
Burkin remarks that the townspeople were at first relieved
that Byelikov was gone; they expected to enjoy freedom such
as they had not experienced for many years. However, within
a week, life had proved to be as oppressive as ever. Burkin
comments then that many men in cases were left after Byelikov
was gone, and many more will be. And he asks if living in
a crowded, airless town and writing useless papers, playing
cards and gossiping, is not the same as being in a case.

Certainly this story, a kind of allegory, speaks out
plainly on the subject of isolation. It also expresses the
idea that some people are so estranged from life that they
can find happiness only in death. Fear isolates Byelikov,
and he welcomes, invites death. Such is not the case of
Nikolay Stepanovitch in A Dreary Story, however. This illus-
trious professor has won every honor for his long years of
dedicated service in medicine. He is now sixty-two years
old, and he knows that he has a physical condition which will
bring about his death in a few months. He looks upon his
situation with objectivity and equanimity, and he does not
fear death, but he does not welcome it, as does Byelikov.

For death to him is the extinction of the highest manifestation

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of love, the most essential, splendid thing in life, science. He is interested in nothing else. He muses,

It might be supposed that I ought now to be chiefly concerned with the question of the shadowy life beyond the grave, and the visions that will visit my slumbers in the tomb. But for some reason my soul refuses to recognize these questions, though my mind is fully alive to their importance. Just as twenty, thirty years ago, so now, on the threshold of death, I am interested in nothing but science.\textsuperscript{22}

It is this great love for science which has isolated the professor, and he realizes at the end of his life that although he has derived much personal satisfaction from his work, his life has not been the glorious one his admirers have thought it to be. Judging on the basis of human understanding, he is a total failure, for he has lost communication with his wife, his daughter, his son, and his ward, the last being the greatest loss of all to him. He hardly recognizes the flabby, spiritless old woman his wife has become as the once-beautiful, intelligent Varya. Years of anxiety over money difficulties have distilled the life out of her, so that now her husband, in his pain over what she has become, can only be silent and let her say what she likes, his only way of giving her comfort. Ironically, Varya's insistence that they live in a way commensurate with the professor's high rank has brought about the financial strain which causes so much worry. This pretension has also destroyed the former

\textsuperscript{22}Chekhov, \textit{A Dreary Story}, Vol. V, p. 148.
pleasant family gatherings around the table. The simple Russian fare which her husband enjoyed so much has been replaced by ostentatious meals, served by a snobbish butler.\textsuperscript{23}

The isolation between the professor and his wife becomes more clearly defined when one regards their separate views of their daughter, Liza. Varya pities the girl because she does not have the clothes befitting the daughter of a distinguished professor. The professor, on the other hand, resents strongly the fact that Liza insists on taking expensive music lessons when she knows that the family is heavily in debt. She sees her father blush painfully at being his footman's debtor, and she sees him pace the floor from anxiety, yet she never offers to pawn her jewelry or to give up the lessons. About the son, too, the husband and wife differ: she is anxious to send the young man money so that he can keep up the luxurious life of a commissioned officer; the professor resents bitterly being kept in poverty and humiliation by a young man who is clever and able-bodied.

The professor's isolation from Katya, his ward, is perhaps the most tragic, for the reasons are basic to their personalities and not superficial. Katya, like the professor, has committed her life to a specific pursuit, the theater, an undertaking which does not bring satisfaction. Katya realizes that she has no talent; she appeals desperately to the wise scientist, who can, though he never does, help her. They are

\textsuperscript{23}Winner, p. 94.
cut off from each other by the professor's inability to understand others, the result of a concentration on science and a neglect of the spiritual, and by Katya's lack of warmth and human contact, caused by the absence of a unifying philosophy, a "general idea." The professor sadly reflects that he, although he is facing death, is yet happier than Katya, who will never find peace because she has no world view. When she says goodbye to him at the very end of the story, her manner is cold and strange. As she walks away, he expects her to look back, but she does not, and he knows that he will never see her again.

Although the immediate cause of the professor's isolation is his dedication to science, the overall result of this preoccupation is the lack of a "general idea," a "world view," which has prevented him from experiencing life fully. In all of Chekhov's philosophical stories, he is concerned with man's search for and inability to find life's completeness and with man's resulting isolation from society.25

From the study made above, it is apparent that the problem of isolation exists at every level of society. It is interpersonal and also between man and society; it is spiritual as well as social. The specific, immediate causes—selfishness, greed, philistinism, to name a few—are almost as varied as individuals themselves, but the major cause,

24Ibid., pp. 94-96. 25Ibid.
the primary one, is the inability of man to see all of life in a balanced pattern and to achieve mutual understanding with his fellow creatures. Chekhov does not provide specific solutions to these problems; some of them, in fact, do not have solutions. But his intent is clear in many of the stories, and it is evident that as his career lengthened he became increasingly concerned with the eternal questions of life.
CHAPTER IV

THE DESTRUCTION OF LOVE

BY POHLOST

It was Chekhov's spiritual integrity which made him so acutely sensitive to every kind of banality, or poshlost, as the Russians call it. Social or aesthetic immorality, ignominiousness, caddishness, and shabby behavior in any form were the bitter enemies of beauty, or love, according to his ethical convictions. In a letter to his brother Nicolai in 1886, Chekhov outlined his conception of the principles of a gentleman, and this list of qualities might be considered his credo, the core of his general philosophy.¹

A gentleman, according to Chekhov, (1) respects human personality and is therefore always kind, gentle, polite, and reasonable. (2) He has sympathy and understanding for others, not only beggars and cats. (3) He pays his debts. (4) He is sincere and does not lie, even in small matters. (5) He does not pity himself. (6) He is self-effacing, not conceited. (7) He respects his own talent. (8) He develops his aesthetic sense and is intolerant of filth and laziness. He tries to restrain and refine his sexual impulses; and he

likes women who are fresh, who have good taste, and who have the human feeling of a good mother, not the qualities of a cocotte.  

In most of Chekhov's stories, cruelty and vices stem from boredom and shallowness, from pettiness and mediocrity. Pedestrian desires and narrow minds produce distorted existences. The peasant who acts as viciously as a savage over a foot of land, the petty official who is disgustingly obsequious and servile to his superiors, the simple-minded merchant who fights ferociously over a penny, the teacher who seeks refuge in the monotony of a regulated existence—all of these are distorted by banality, or poshlost. They are all victims of triviality and emptiness. Human dignity is destroyed, and the characters are merely living caricatures.

The destruction of love by poshlost is a theme which became increasingly important in Chekhov's work of the later eighties and the nineties. By this time he had mastered the technique of symbolism, a powerful means of expressing this theme. Animal images, music, colors, smells, falsely elevated style of speech, and preoccupation with eating and drinking are recurring symbols. Any mention of roast turkey is usually a prelude to the evocation of poshlost. Nature plays an

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3Marc Slonim, From Chekhov to the Revolution (New York, 1962), p. 64.
4Bruford, pp. 49-50.
important role: "On the one hand it is an image of beauty calling for similarly beautiful life on earth; on the other it is an image of a monster, which devours human lives with indifference."5

Many of the symbols of poshlost are used to develop the theme of Ariadne (1895), the effect of hypocrisy on love. The story is a scathing portrayal of a woman who is obsessed by the desire to conquer and to be loved, in an attempt to escape her own coldness. Ivan Ilyitch Shamohin, a Moscow landowner, is the narrator, telling of his attachment for the beautiful girl who is deceptively refined and charming to a gentleman he meets on board a steamer bound for Sevastopol. The account grows out of a discussion the two men are having about women. Shamohin says that Russians idealize women and think that love and happiness are synonymous. Marriage without love is despised, and sensuality is ridiculed and inspires repulsion. But after two or three years of marriage or of intimacy, he says, disillusionment sets in, and women are regarded as lying, trivial, even cruel; they are, in fact, grossly inferior to men. The story of Ariadne illustrates Shamohin's opinion.

Shamohin is one of Chekhov's disillusioned intellectuals, a man of principle in regard to love and marriage. There

is irony in the fact that this man who speaks for a platonic attitude toward love falls for the sensuous and flirtatious Ariadne, whose thirst for personal success and wealth render her cold to love, to nature, and to art. The naive Shamohin is shocked when he discovers that Ariadne has gone off to Italy with Lubhov, an impecunious married man, but he lulls himself into thinking that there is nothing serious between the two, and when Ariadne calls on Shamohin to rescue her, he rushes to her aid. Because Ariadne and Lubhov have been discreet in observing the proprieties, Shamohin is convinced that theirs is a platonic relationship, and he repeatedly lends Lubhov money.

The extravagant use of money is a strong symbol of poshlost as Shamohin spends freely in his travels about Italy with Ariadne and Lubhov. Many times he sends home to his father for additional funds, and the old gentleman is forced to mortgage his land to provide means for the lavish living in expensive hotels, the expensive meals, and the search for pleasure of his son and his two companions. Food is a symbol of poshlost occurring frequently in the story:

"We ate enormously. In the morning they gave us café complet; at one o'clock lunch: meat, fish, some sort of omelette, cheese, fruits, and wine. At six o'clock dinner of eight courses with long intervals, during which we drank beer and wine. At nine o'clock tea. At midnight Ariadne would

declare she was hungry, and ask for ham and boiled eggs. We would eat to keep her company."\(^7\)

Visits to museums occupy the time between meals, but the trio are always rushed for fear they will be late for dinner or lunch. Shop windows are more interesting than pictures, however, for the displays are gaudier. There is no appreciation of art in these excursions, and boredom is the prevailing atmosphere.

After Lubhov tires of Ariadne and goes home to Russia, Shamohin feels that he has a chance with her. He wants to take her home, but she thinks life there would be boring, so she refuses to go. She wants to continue her slothful life in Italy, taking art lessons, sleeping, and eating. Shamohin begins to be disenchanted as he notices these and other things, especially her deceitfulness and her cruelty.

"She was continually deceitful every minute, apparently apart from any necessity, as it were by instinct . . . She was deceitful with me, with the footman . . . with her acquaintances; not one conversation, not one meeting, took place without affectation and pretence."\(^8\)

Even when she is in good humor, Ariadne enjoys insulting servants, killing insects, watching bullfights, and reading about murders. The picture which Shamohin now has of her is one of a heartless woman who is incurably narcissistic and insatiable for attention from men:

She had an extraordinary opinion of her own charms; she imagined that if somewhere, in some

\(^7\)Chekhov, Ariadne, Vol. I, p. 53.

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 61.
great assembly, men could have seen how beautifully she was made and the colour of her skin, she would have vanquished all Italy, the whole world.9

Shamohin’s account of the death of his love for Ariadne is described in terms which show the turning-away from poshlost:

"Little by little I grew cold to her and began to be ashamed of our tie. . . . That I might not be completely disgusted with myself, I began reading and visiting museums and galleries, gave up drinking and took to eating very little."10

Ariadne becomes bored, too, and at last they decide to return to Russia. The narrative is now brought up to the time of Shamohin’s account to the gentleman, and the disillusioned man tells his listener that, since in Russia marriage is the only socially acceptable relationship, he feels bound by honor to marry Ariadne, although all attraction is over. Shamohin longs for a chance to atone for his follies by working hard on his estate to redeem it from debt. His last words express hope that a rich marriage with a former suitor will take Ariadne off his hands.

Anna on the Neck (1895) is also the story of a heartless woman, but one who becomes so as the result of poshlost. Anna sacrifices herself in marriage to a man three times her age in order to save her drunken father and two little brothers from starvation, only to find that her marriage brings luxury but no money. Furthermore, Anna is corrupted

9Ibid., pp. 62-63.  10Ibid., p. 64.
by the opulence she falls heir to, and she turns her back on the family she wanted to help. The change in Anna's personality is illustrated by the fear she has of her husband in the beginning of the story and by the scorn she exhibits toward him at the end, after she finds a new security in the success her beauty wins for her at a charity ball. It is the husband who fears her at the close of the story.

Anna on the Neck begins with the marriage of Anna and Modest Alexeitch. Instead of the usual festivities, however, the pair simply drink a glass of champagne and start off on a wedding trip to a monastery, a journey planned by the pompous Modest to make his young bride realize that even in marriage he puts religion and morality above everything. It is ironic that the wedding lacks merriment, for it is just the merriment missed here which Anna enjoys later at the ball, leading to her triumph over Modest. There is a hint of the Anna of the last part of the story when the train stops at a railway station. The music and the elegant crowds of people cause Anna to lose her fears, and she flirts and poses in the manner of a cocotte. She especially notices a wealthy owner of a summer villa, Artynov; she screws up her eyes at him and talks aloud in French. He responds with great interest, and Anna suddenly feels joyful as she returns to her compartment.

When Anna and Modest are settled in town after their trip, Anna is moved to tears of boredom by her pompous old
husband. His talk is of nothing but politics, the necessity of hard work, duty, thrift, and morality. His speech is stilted and his phrases long-winded; in desperation Anna runs off to see her family. The reception she has there, however, is disappointing:

Her father and the boys looked at her in a peculiar way, as though just before she came in they had been blaming her for having married for money a tedious, wearisome man she did not love; her rustling skirts, her bracelets, and her general air of a married lady, offended them and made them uncomfortable.\(^{11}\)

Modest's materialism is exhibited in his buying Anna beautiful clothes for the annual winter ball. He hopes to win a promotion when His Excellency sees her beauty. Anna's success at the ball is tremendous: she is admired by everyone, and as she dances and whirls through the gay evening, she attracts the attention of His Excellency and of Artynov, the man she has seen at the station. Only the appearance of her drunken father shatters her dream: she is ashamed of him now, and she does not like to recall that she has such a poor, ordinary father. Success gives Anna the courage to say to her husband, "Be off, you blockhead!"\(^{12}\) He accepts the new attitude of his wife because His Excellency's admiration of her has produced the desired results: the Order of St. Anna is offered to Modest. Already a symbol of mediocrity and dullness, Modest exhibits poshlost in his willingness to

\(^{11}\)Chekhov, Anna on the Neck, Vol. IV, p. 193.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 205.
sacrifice self-esteem for public recognition and money. Anna, too, exhibits poshlost in humiliating her husband in public, and her steady progression toward heartlessness gains momentum from this point in the story. She leads a life filled with parties and frivolity; the amount of money she spends is astounding. At the end, Anna has completely forgotten her father and her two brothers, who are worse off than before.

There are many other symbols of poshlost in Anna on the Neck. The motif of gluttony recurs in descriptions of Modest, who looks well fed and has fat cheeks. He is pompous and obsequious and speaks in an exaggerated civil-service jargon. His Excellency, who awards the decoration, has a saccharine smile and chews his lips when he sees a beautiful woman. Music, wine, food, and dancing are in abundance at the ball, the great scene of the story and the turning-point in Anna's life. Anna's future lover, Artynov, is there, too, the symbol of Anna's break with her past. Money and social recognition are the yardstick by which success is measured in this story, setting the standard for Anna's increasing heartlessness.¹³

Poshlost causes Olga Ivanovna to be blind to her husband's genius in The Grasshopper (1891). Like Anna on the Neck, this story begins with a wedding which sets its ironic tone. Olga, a member of the bohemian group of the

¹³Winner, pp. 180-182.
Intelligentsia, feels that she must in some way explain to her friends why she has married such a simple, ordinary, and unremarkable man as Osip Stepanitch Dymov: "Look at him; isn't it true that there is something in him?" Her question is vague because she is not sure what distinction Dymov has, since he is only a doctor, with no greater rank than that of a titular councillor, and his income is small. Her friends, on the other hand, are not quite ordinary people.

Every one of them was remarkable in some way, and more or less famous; already had made a reputation and was looked upon as a celebrity; or if not yet a celebrity, gave brilliant promise of becoming one. Olga is a vain, narcissistic woman. Her sense of values is so false that she thinks her interest in landscape-painting makes her a more important person than her husband, who is in reality a brilliant medical research worker. Olga is obsessed with the search for great people who are to be her own discoveries, and she fills her drawing-room with artists, musicians, actors, and writers in the hope of finding one with genius. Among this group Dymov is out of place, but he good-naturedly smiles and says nothing.

The marriage of Olga and Dymov is happy for a while, but then the gradual disillusionment of Dymov begins, until finally he does not want to live any more, and he brings about his own death by allowing himself to become infected

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15 Ibid., pp. 89-90.
by one of his patients. Love has existed in any real sense only on the part of the doctor, however, since Olga's attraction is merely a vague awareness of the strength and power of her quiet husband. His simplicity, good sense, and kindheartedness comfort her as she restlessly searches for fame and recognition in a mundane society, but Olga exploits Dymov to serve her bohemian friends better, and in so doing she kills the only genuine love in the story.

There is a frantic quality about Olga and her surroundings which suggests the failure of poshlost to provide serenity or beauty, either physical or spiritual. Her speech is often disconnected and bordering on the hysterical as she attempts to devour the attention of her friends and to impress them: "Listen, listen! . . . Listen, Ryabovsky! You, my writer, listen; it is very interesting! Come nearer." Cliches and condescending expressions reveal her pretentiousness. She calls her husband by his last name, thus indicating the lack of understanding between them, and she invents a number of affected phrases to describe Dymov in a light more favorable to her bohemian companions: he has "honest hands," a face as "powerful as a Bengal tiger," and bearlike strength. Olga's conceit is emphasized in her repetition of a comment she has made which so pleases her that she must say it over and over again, although the words reveal her complete lack

16 Ibid., p. 91.
of understanding of her husband's despair and resignation when he discovers that she has been unfaithful. "This man tortures me with his magnanimity" is ironic in its conveyance of pain inflicted on the wrong party, for it is Dymov who suffers real torture and not Olga.¹⁷

The disarray of Olga Ivanovna's apartment suggests her cluttered activities and her superficiality. The inharmonious mixture produces an effect at once ludicrous and depressing, but Olga's friends think her home very charming.

Olga Ivanovna hung all her drawing-room walls with her own and other people's sketches, in frames and without frames, and near the piano and furniture arranged picturesque corners with Japanese parasols, easels, daggers, busts, photographs, and rags of many colors. In the dining-room she papered the walls with peasant woodcuts, hung up bark shoes and sickles, stood in a corner a scythe and a rake, and so achieved a dining-room in the Russian style.¹⁸

The dark cave of her bedroom, draped from ceiling to floor with dark cloth and guarded by a figure with a halberd, suggests the essential isolation of Olga from love and beauty. Olga's clothes, beguiling yet false, like her unsubstantial friends, also exhibit poshlost. They are pretentious and absurd, but Olga's set consider them marvels of bewitching artistry.

Olga's artist-lover, Ryabovksy, is also characterized by mannerisms of speech and by action which indicates banality.

¹⁷Winner, pp. 78-79.

He is full of pretentious-sounding observations, and he has a penchant for puns and senseless expressions like "not badsome." He is languid and lacking in purpose, seeing no meaning in the past and no hope for the future. "I am tired," he says with closed eyes as Olga looks at him adoringly; he should be filled with joy and contentment, but he is filled with ennui instead. He recognizes but does not understand his own lack of talent, blaming it on Olga and failing to see that the vacuity of his life is the enervating force. Even his decision to break with her is passionless as he says softly, wiping his mouth with a towel instead of a dinner napkin as they sit at table, "Well, go, then."19

Dymov, whose final disillusionment comes with his knowledge of Olga's affair with Ryabovsky, might yet have been saved had his wife shared with him his triumph in being offered a readership in General Pathology. But she does not know what is meant by the terms, and so she says nothing in reply to his announcement. She hurries off to the theater, leaving her husband sitting silently, with a guilty smile on his face. After he has become ill with diphtheria, he apologetically asks Olga to send for the doctor, cautioning her not to come near for fear of contagion. Only after he is unconscious does she fully realize the goodness and genius of her uncomplaining husband:

19Ibid., p. 109.
Olga Ivanovna remembered her whole life with him from the beginning to the end, with all its details, and suddenly she understood that he really was an extraordinary, rare, and compared with everyone else she knew, a great man. And remembering how her father, now dead, and all the other doctors had behaved to him, she realized that they really had seen in him a future celebrity.\(^{20}\)

She wants to tell him that she has made a mistake and that life can still be beautiful and happy, but his half-opened eyes look only at the quilt that covers him as she makes her passionate declaration.

Like Olga, Nikitin in *The Teacher of Literature* (1894) discovers that love is destroyed by banality; unlike her, he realizes that the conflict within his own character contributes to the destruction. He falls desperately in love with Masha, idealizing her and failing to recognize in so doing that the world of her family, the Shelestovs, is vulgar and empty. As the story progresses, it becomes apparent that Nikitin himself is infected with the same crudity and lack of ethical standards which seem to him to have destroyed his happiness. A budding sensitivity is attended by increasing dissatisfaction, until finally Nikitin realizes that he must escape from the Shelestovs or go insane.

Nikitin's passion for Masha blinds him to the vulgarity of her taste. Her great love of horses and of animals of all sorts is a fact which he overlooks as a possible cause of friction until after he is married. Then he realizes

the constant irritation, the invasion of privacy, which a houseful of animals can cause. He had not liked the animals which were free to roam the house at the Shelestovs'; they were, in fact, the only things he did not like when he visited Masha before they were married. There were so many dogs that he could only recognize two, Mushka, a mangy little animal with a shaggy face that hated Nikitin and growled whenever he came near, and Som, a big black dog which had the habit of putting his head on people's knees at dinner and dripping saliva on their clothes. The rest of Shelestov life he enjoyed with relish. The hearty preoccupation with eating and drinking, the arguments, the bellowing of Masha's father, whose favorite word was "loutishness," the sight of Varya, Masha's sister, attired in her dressing-gown in the presence of guests, the dancing, the music, and the card-playing--such ebullience seemed to him stimulating and amusing. Even Masha's nickname, Marie Godefroi, which she acquired because of her love of the circus, he used for her himself as a term of endearment.

The defeat of romanticism is subtly suggested in the proposal scene. Nikitin had intended making a formal speech to Masha in the garden, but instead he finds himself in a narrow, dark corridor of the house, surrounded by expressions of poshlost: cats asleep on the stairs, and the sound of clattering scissors being used by a seamstress. The speech is abandoned, and the bargain is sealed with a kiss. Later,
when Nikitin asks Masha's father for her hand in marriage, the old man further deflates the idyllic picture by suggesting that marriage is a bondage which young people should not be eager to enter into. When Varya interrupts the conversation with an announcement that the veterinarian has arrived, the last shred of romanticism is gone. Nikitin goes home, and there he finds another detractor of his happiness in the person of Ippolit Ippolititch, a prosaic geography teacher with whom he lives.

Ippolit serves two purposes in the story: he echoes old Shelestov's warning that marriage may not live up to Nikitin's expectations, and he also serves as a symbol of mediocrity and lack of initiative among teachers, which Nikitin recognizes in himself at the end of the story. In response to Nikitin's ecstatic announcement of his forthcoming marriage, Ippolit comments that Masha was his pupil at the high school and that she was not bad at geography, although she was inattentive in class. His further comment, a collection of platitudes, is that marriage is a serious step. "One has to look at it all round and weigh things thoroughly; it's not to be done rashly. Prudence is always a good thing, and especially in marriage, when a man, ceasing to be a bachelor, begins a new life."\(^21\)

The second chapter of *The Teacher of Literature* is told in part in the first person by Nikitin through excerpts

from his diary; he reveals his gradual defeat by poshlost in his description of his marriage to Masha. The dominant mood of the narrator as he describes the wedding is one of egotism and sentimentality. He is tearful and triumphant as he thinks of how his life has blossomed:

"Two years ago I was still a student, I was living in cheap furnished rooms, without money, without relations, and, as I fancied then, with nothing to look forward to. Now I am a teacher in the high school in one of the best provincial towns, with a secure income, loved, spoiled. It is for my sake three candelabra have been lighted, the deacon is booming, the choir is doing its best; and it's for my sake that this young creature, whom I soon shall call my wife, is so young, so elegant, and so joyful." 22

The marriage ceremony, as described by Nikitin, is filled with poshlost: the people gathered in the church are noisy and restless, and the priest is forced to admonish them severely to be silent and to think of God.

After the marriage, Nikitin is rapidly disillusioned and succumbs to the environment of banality. He becomes increasingly fond of idleness, his favorite days being Sundays and holidays, when he can watch Masha "arranging her nest." He enjoys asking her for a glass of milk, just to upset her, for she has already established rigid rules for the running of her household. He even laughs when he learns that the food she allows the servants to eat is stale and scant. He is complacent in thinking that the happiness he enjoys is of his own making, but his remarks no longer

22 Ibid., p. 231.
seem sincere. Nikitin has become pompous and didactic. This new tone is especially evident in the diary entry which describes the funeral of Ippolit Ippolititch after his sudden death:

"We have just consigned to the tomb Ippolit Ippolititch Ryzhitsky. Peace to your ashes, modest worker! Masha, Varya, and all the women at the funeral, wept from genuine feeling, perhaps because they knew this uninteresting, humble man had never been loved by a woman."

The entry also reveals the first indication of Nikitin's failing character, the fact that he wanted to say a word at his friend's grave, but that he refrained because he feared the displeasure of the school director.

Nikitin becomes careless of his happiness. He plays cards and loses money, coming home late at night to find Masha lying languidly in bed with her cat beside her. The animals in the house, symbols of poshlost, increasingly disturb him, and he begins to realize the vacuity of his life. He begins to long for work which will elevate him from the world which has become so monotonous. With horror he realizes that he really knows nothing about teaching; he only knows how to conceal his stupidity. He thinks of his colleagues, and he realizes that they, too, are ignorant and discontented. The last scene in the story brings the narrative full circle as it pictures the Shelestovs, who have come to dinner. Varya complains, old Shelestov eats

\[\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 237.\]
and declares ironically that loutishness (a synonym for poshlost) is the source of the world’s evils. Nikitin writes in his diary as he tries not to listen to the din:

"Where am I, my God? I am surrounded by vulgarity and vulgarity. Wearisome, insignificant people, pots of sour cream, jugs of milk, cockroaches, stupid women. . . . There is nothing more terrible, mortifying, and distressing than vulgarity. I must escape from here, I must escape to-day, or I shall go out of my mind!"24

Poshlost, then, is the enemy of love, and never its benefactor. Often disguised as pleasure, it leads to a life of disillusionment. It appears in many forms—in luxurious living, in the mind, and in traits of character. Wherever it is, it distorts and detracts, and its influence is so subtle, its action so pernicious, that its victims are often unsuspecting until it is too late. The prey of poshlost are often ambitious people, whose downfall is the more tragic because they expect so much.

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24 Ibid., p. 243.
CHAPTER V

THE NEW MOOD OF HOPE IN
CHEKHOV'S LAST STORIES

Although many of the stories of Anton Chekhov convey a feeling of doom and futility, they seldom lack an element of hope. A positivist and an agnostic, Chekhov went through a long and painful process of doubting and seeking, until at last he arrived at a system of what were for him genuine values. He believed in the maturing of the human personality and the improvement of human life through hard work and education. It was not until the last period of his writing career, however, that Chekhov expressed a qualified hope that man can find a certain happiness. Beginning in 1898, his writing acquired a new tone. The three stories which express most clearly this new mood are The Darling (1898), The Lady with the Dog (1899), and The Betrothed (1903). Although all three are concerned with man's isolation, and all are filled with symbols of poshlost, Chekhov achieves greater depth by using these themes as both destructive and motivating forces. Also, his characters have greater purpose; they have more feeling, they change, they learn. All of

these qualities together express Chekhov's new mood of optimism.2

Although Olenka, the main character in The Darling, is devoid of personality, lacking inner resources and entirely dependent on others for her happiness, she is distinguished from Chekhov's typical characters of emptiness and hypocrisy by the fact that she is capable of love, even though it is submissive and possessive. Olenka must find a person she can love with complete abandon, and when she finds such a person, she loses what little individuality she has in the personality of the other.3

When Olenka marries Kukin, she shares his opinions about everything, and especially about the theater, which is his life:

Like him she despised the public for their ignorance and their indifference to art; she took part in the rehearsals, she corrected the actors, she kept an eye on the behaviour of the musicians, and when there was an unfavorable notice in the local paper, she shed tears, and then went to the editor's office to set things right.4

When Kukin dies suddenly, Olenka mourns him for three months before she marries again, this time Pustovalov, the manager of the local lumber yard.

Now Olenka's life is timber; it seems to her that she has known nothing else in her whole life. Words like "post,"

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3 Ibid., p. 211.

"beam," and "plank" are magic words to her, and timber is the most necessary thing in life. This husband, too, influences Olenka's every thought. Whether he thinks the room too hot or business slack, she thinks the same. Pustovalov does not like the theater, so now Olenka dislikes it, although it had been her whole life during her marriage to Kukin.

When Pustovalov dies suddenly, it takes Olenka six months to find another man to lavish her affections on. But this time the man she chooses is married, although separated from his wife. It makes no difference to Olenka, however, and she lives with the veterinary surgeon Smirnin, adopting his every opinion as she had those of her husbands. But Smirnin leaves her when he is transferred, and Olenka almost ceases to live. She gets thinner and plainer, and she loses all interest in life. Worst of all, she has no opinions about anything. She ages rapidly, and nothing seems to change her feeling of futility. She still longs for a love which will completely absorb her, but it does not come her way until one day, when Smirnin knocks at her gate. He is grey-haired now, and he brings with him his wife and little boy, with whom he has been reunited.

Olenka takes the Smirnin family into her house, and now she begins to live again. But this time her love is lavished on the ten-year-old son of the veterinarian, Sasha. More and more she concerns herself with his care. When his
mother goes off and does not return, Olenka has Sasha to herself.

Ah, how she loved him! Of her former attachments not one had been so deep; never had her soul surrendered to any feeling so spontaneously, so disinterestedly, and so joyously as now that her maternal instincts were aroused.

Although Olenka's love for the child seems selfless, it is as possessive as her love for the men in her life. She gives only to receive. The final note of irony in the story is the suggestion that Sasha will leave her like the others, either because he will grow up or because his mother will take him back, and that Olenka will be left as before, empty and dull.

The Darling is by no means a story of unqualified happiness, but it is apparent that Olenka is able to achieve some measure of contentment, and this, perhaps, is as much as the average human being manages. Chekhov, the realist, is never able to say that his characters "lived happily ever after." It seems to be enough for him to say that they reached a certain state of happiness and to leave the reader to conclude that if they found it once, they can keep on finding it. Olenka is able to satisfy her inner longings; perhaps she can continue to do so until she dies. This is the hope that Chekhov holds out to the reader.

The Lady with the Dog ends on the same note. Dmitri Dmitritch Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna begin an affair which

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5Ibid., p. 19.
at first appears to be a temporary escape from their respective boring worlds, but they soon find that real love has taken the place of casual attraction. At the end of the story they are both still faced with many problems which prevent total escape to complete happiness, yet the reader is left with the feeling that a solution may still be found, although Chekhov's final suggestion is that the splendid life is difficult to achieve.

One change in Chekhov's attitude can be seen in this story in his presentation of romantic love as a reality and not a fleeting emotion. Nor do isolation and poshlost destroy love, although both are present. In the beginning of the story Gurov has a contemptuous attitude toward women; he looks upon Anna as merely a summer conquest. But her innocence and warmth and the honesty of her emotion change him gradually into a gentle and loving person. The isolation between them slowly dissolves as love begins to grow. Symbols of poshlost emphasize the difference in their attitudes at the beginning of the affair: after Anna and Gurov have become lovers, she is remorseful and ashamed. While she is expressing her feelings to Gurov, he is calmly eating a piece of watermelon. His answer is made in a tone of contempt and irritation, and he uses the familiar form of address, while she continues to address him in the polite form.

It is only after he has returned to Moscow, to his former life, that Gurov begins to undergo a psychological
and moral change. The contrast of his memories of Anna with his old world—a routine of going to his clubs and mingling with distinguished people—causes him to realize that he is truly in love with her. Strangely, it is the simple sounds of home which call up his most vivid memories of her: the voices of the children preparing their lessons, the wind whistling up the chimney, or the crackling of the fire in the fireplace. Now he is isolated as never before, because he has no one to confide his memories to. These images serve to make Gurov conscious of the conflict between beauty and poshlost, and they cause him to go in search of Anna.

When Gurov arrives in Anna's city, he sees again a world of poshlost, denoted primarily by the color gray. Everything in his hotel room is gray, and Anna's house is surrounded by a long gray fence. At the theater, where he finds Anna, the sounds of the inferior orchestra, with its provincial violins, and the sight of the "vulgar lorgnette" in Anna's hand fail to dim the joy he feels at seeing her. His triumph over poshlost is expressed when he addresses Anna politely, standing while she sits.6

The last scene in the story contrasts Gurov's former relations with women and his new happiness with Anna. He had known many women, but not one had been happy with him:

6Winner, pp. 220-221.
"Time passed, he had made their acquaintance, got on with them, parted, but he had never once loved; it was anything you like, but not love." Chekhov states positively that Anna and Gurov feel that love has changed them both.

The Betrothed, Chekhov's last story, does not find the heroine, Nadya, with a definite person on whom to fix her affections, as The Lady with the Dog has; it does not, in fact, qualify Nadya's hope in terms of romance, but it implies that somehow she will find happiness. The main point of the story is that she has escaped from a world of poshlost and marriage to a dull husband, and that the education she has received will give her the opportunity to choose her own life.

There are two kinds of isolation in the story. The first is between Nadya and Andrey Andreitch, her fiancé, and the second is the isolation between Nadya and her family after she returns from her studies in Petersburg. It is the vague feeling of discontent which she feels when she and Andrey are planning their life together which causes Nadya to listen to Sasha, a young friend of the family, when he urges her to seek a better life. Evidence of poshlost strengthens her resolve as she contemplates flight. A visit

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7Chekhov, The Lady with the Dog, Vol. III, p. 27.
8Ibid.
to the house Andrey has furnished for their married life causes Nadya to make her final decision to go away.

Andrey is very proud as he leads Nadya about the house on Moscow Street. It is newly painted, and the furniture is polished and upholstered in bright colors. The hall is dominated by a big picture in a gold frame of a naked lady with a purple vase beside her, and the wall of the drawing-room is graced by a big photograph of Father Andrey wearing a priest's velvet cap and decorations. The bedroom looks as though "it would always be very agreeable there and could not possibly be anything else."\(^9\) As she strolls through the rooms with Andrey's arm around her waist, Nadya is overcome by a feeling of nausea: she hates the rooms, the beds, and the picture of the naked lady. "She saw nothing in it all but vulgarity, stupid, naive, unbearable vulgarity, and his arm round her waist felt as hard as an iron hoop."\(^{10}\)

At home, Nadya's growing awareness of the emptiness of her life is intensified by details suggesting poshlost. The Shumin household in which she lives is composed of her domineering grandmother, her defeated mother who has intellectual pretenses, and the father of Andrey, a priest who makes pointless jokes and puns continually. Food is mentioned repeatedly in the first part of the story to strengthen


\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 65.
the atmosphere of banality:

She could hear from the open windows of the basement, where the kitchen was, the hurrying servants, the clatter of knives, the banging of the swinging door; there was a smell of roast turkey and pickled cherries.\(^{11}\)

Chekhov uses the beauty of nature skillfully to contrast the ugliness of Nadya's surroundings. He also uses space, a new dimension, to show the difference between her world as she has always thought of it and the way she begins to see it as she awakens to a new sense of beauty. From the garden, her mother had seemed beautiful, but when Nadya goes into the house, Nina Ivanovna's pince-nez and her fingers covered with diamonds make her appear gaudy and lacking in taste. From a distance Nadya sees her grandmother bustling about in her luxurious silk dress; at closer range, the grandmother is "a very stout, plain old lady with bushy eyebrows and a little moustache."\(^{12}\)

Recognition of the ugliness of Nadya's mother and grandmother is followed by a change in attitude toward their personalities:

Nadya remembered that quite a little time ago she had thought her mother an exceptional woman and had listened with pride to the things she said; and now she could not remember those things, everything that came into her mind was so feeble and useless.\(^{13}\)

Andrey, her handsome fiancé, now appears to her shallow and stupid.

\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 52.  \(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 55.  \(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 67.
Chekhov uses Nadya's enlightened picture of Andrey and the gaudy house he has furnished as the basis for her evaluation of Sasha after she has been away at school:

"My dear, darling Sasha," she said, and tears gushed from her eyes, and for some reason there rose before her imagination Andrey Andreitch and the naked lady with the vase, and all her past which seemed now as far away as her childhood; and she began crying because Sasha no longer seemed to her so novel, so cultured and so interesting as the year before.  

When she returns home, her grandmother and her mother have suffered further change: they both look older and plainer. The town is not at all as she remembers it. The streets look very wide and the houses, small and squat, appear to be covered with dust. The Shumin house seems smallest of all.

It is at this point in the story that Nadya experiences the second isolation, mentioned earlier.

She recognized clearly that her life had been turned upside down as Sasha wished; that here she was, alien, isolated, useless, and that everything here was useless to her; that all the past had been torn away from her and vanished as though it had been burnt up and the ashes scattered to the winds.

In this story, as in The Lady with the Dog, a new type of isolation results from new experiences which outmode the past, and it is the motivation for the search for a new life. Gurov goes to find his new love, and Nadya leaves her home forever to seek a brighter world.

In his last stories, then, Chekhov puts his themes of isolation and destruction by poshlost to new use. They are

\[\text{14}^{\text{ibid.}, \ p. \ 75.} \quad \text{15}^{\text{ibid.}, \ pp. \ 79-80.}\]
still destructive forces, but they destroy life that is no longer satisfactory, and they drive the characters on to greater happiness. The characters in these stories are different, too. They have more purpose: they try harder to find a more rewarding existence. If Olenka in The Darling never expresses in words her yearning for love, her actions reveal her seeking; Gurov in The Lady with the Dog and Nadya in The Betrothed have no trouble in voicing their needs. These last three stories give a satisfying ending to Anton Chekhov's career as a short story writer.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

A study of Anton Chekhov's handling of the subject of love and marriage in his short stories reveals that he saw two main causes for the conflict which often results in estrangement between man and woman, the mutual lack of understanding between human beings and poshlost, or banality. These conditions exist in every class of society, but they cause the most unhappiness among members of the middle class, and especially in the educated segment of this group. Preoccupation with improving the mind often results in neglect of the spirit; failure to refine the senses blinds the individual to the deadly effects of poshlost.

Chekhov's stories show that the primary cause of isolation, found in every class of society, is involvement in routine daily existence which fails to take the individual out of himself. Man does not see his own pettiness and insignificance as he engages in an endless round of doing things ordinary people do. More specific causes of isolation are narcissism, drunkenness, brutality, philistinism, poverty, class differences, boredom, hypocrisy, lack of moral principle, fear, and the inability to see all of life in a balanced pattern. A strong social cause for isolation is the custom
of arranged marriage, one of the characteristics of Russian society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chekhov was especially concerned over the destruction of love by poshlost. To him, love was synonymous with beauty, and beauty was the noblest expression that man or nature is capable of. Meanness in any form negates the benefits of love, or beauty, and renders it dull, lifeless. Poshlost encompasses all the defects of the human personality, among them shallowness, pettiness, hypocrisy, cruelty, materialism, and vanity. These weaknesses are glaringly pointed out in Chekhov's stories through the use of symbols which evoke in the reader strong impressions of poshlost. Animal images suggest cruelty, cowardice, and cunning; discordant music suggests disharmony; colors produce a feeling of gloom and futility; smells are often associated with food and drink, powerful images of gluttony; a falsely elevated style of speech reveals the pretentiousness of the speaker. Nature images have a twofold purpose: on the one hand they suggest beauty, the opposite of poshlost, and on the other they suggest ugliness itself.

In the last years of his life, Chekhov's dark mood lifted, and the stories of this period register a qualified hope that man can find a certain happiness, in spite of the discouragements of life. He saw isolation and poshlost as conditions which were still present, but now he saw them as motivating as well as destructive forces. Man, through
education and self-analysis, could use these conditions as spurs which might push him on to a more rewarding life. He could improve his own lot and all of society through study and effort. The characters in Chekhov's last stories are capable of decreasing isolation and of turning away from poshlost. They find some degree of happiness, and they look forward to a brighter future.

Anton Chekhov's strong moral consciousness is evident in all of his stories. His objectivity in dealing with virtue and vice alike conveys his great sincerity and is convincing in its lack of emotionalism. Chekhov, the physician, was at once clinical and compassionate, a quality which makes the reading of his stories a rewarding experience. Chekhov believed that man can improve his life through education; he contributed a great deal himself to man's enlightenment.
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