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THREE SCENES IN CHEKHOV

Gaining insight through close textual analysis

“There was a watermelon on the table in the hotel room. Gurov cut himself a slice and unhurriedly began to eat it. At least half an hour passed in silence” (6).

Mothers don't prepare us for “Heavens to Betsy!” moments when realness reveals the calloused underbelly of life. It would be too easy and expected for the lovers, in post-coital glow, to whisper sweet bon-mots in her “stuffy” hotel room (5). Rather, Chekhov demonstrates his nihilism by dodging the sanitized schoolmarmish codas which some may prefer. He goes libertine, resolving the episode with a deliberately meaningless action, seemingly bereft of emotion.

Chekhov's textured realism presents ego and obsession in conflict. Gurov is an articulation of nineteenth-century views on women, replete with dismissiveness and misogyny. But he is also a contemporary articulation. He courts cougars and MILFs, getting derogatory about their insecurities when they get clingy. He covets young girls with taut bodies. Gurov is a leery lounge lizard caught between dysfunctional marriage and sex addiction. Anna Sergeevna is trapped in a hollow life and a lethargic marriage. Chekhov magnifies the vast internal conflicts within both Anna Sergeevna and Gurov, leading to externalized conflicts and inevitable mutual attraction.

Chekhov reveals *where* things are, but not *how* they are. Gurov's watermelon craving and dismissal of Anna Sergeevna's bravura monologue epitomizes toxic masculinity. The fruit is merely Chekhov's red herring diversion. Gurov's disengagement after the conquest and mild impatience

with her kvetching represents the “Why won’t you talk to me?” of loneliness in need of procuring redemption. Neither feels validated by their spouses nor by in an increasingly impersonal age.

Chekhov composes a version of life through impressionistic glimpses with verismo results. He offers truths of unvarnished conjugal interaction: relationship stuff like toenail clippings and sleeping on the wet spot. Brief tableaux revealing the milieu, mundane objects, and claustrophobic conditions in impressionistic realism. Chekhov depicts the densities of human existence and the lack of linear certainty. As with good jazz, meaning is not found in the given, but in the silence between.

“You were right earlier: the sturgeon was a bit off!” (11)

Jolting nineteenth-century realism into a bolder style with a soupçon of absurdity is this, the “what was that?” moment in the short story. Arrestingly out of place, the line stands out in breathtaking austerity. Imagine the scene if the official had turned around and called out: “You were right earlier: she would make a fine babushka!” While possibly true, the effect would have been lost. Beyond dialogue, the line is a catalyst. It signifies Gurov’s break with the old version of himself. He gets a wake-up call. Happy with mere fleeting trysts, Gurov now crosses his Rubicon. His nihilism has prevented him from believing in the redemptive qualities of both women and love. Gurov unrepentantly indulges in Sisyphean pursuits and he consequently feels indignant. Meeting Anna Sergeevna affected him profoundly, leaving him determined to push pause and pursue a life with her.

The sturgeon passage presents a shift in the timbre of both narration and Gurov’s behavior. While he still finds plenty of reasons to complain about things like the provincial orchestra, he can objectively evaluate his life and choices. Filled with optimism, he is justifiably wonderstruck when realizing that finally “he thought and dreamed” (14).

The scene illustrates deftness of narration by blending realism and impressionism into a crisp anticipatory style. Chekhov blurs the outlines of realism by regularly shifting points of view.

Reflecting pointillism in art, he layers harried lines, reflecting the harried layers of Gurov's mind. Similarly, Chekhov's angular narration mirrors Gurov's escalating spikiness.

The paragraph following the sturgeon line narrates Gurov's dismay at the shallowness of life while acting as a placeholder. Chekhov appears to comment on a bloodless society caught in the ordinariness of life. The new century promises to push boundaries. Public opinion will resist embracing the stylistic diversities of expressionism. By introducing the (not entirely out of place) absurd sturgeon remark in his nimble attention-deficit version of realism, Chekhov foreshadows an alienating new world that will unleash Kafka, Kandinsky, and Stravinsky.

“...and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far, far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning” (18).

Optimism pussyfoots its way through Chekov's parting paragraph which explores the vagaries of love in a lonely place. He knows that life is fundamentally rooted in conflict and doubt. The narration is layered with dynamic punctuation, stream-of-consciousness narrative, and word iteration. The conclusion encourages interpretation sculpted by shifting points of view. Chekhov stifles the denouement with latent cynicism. Characters are perpetually in conflict: internally, with each other, against their world, and with fate. He goads the reader into reflexive value conflicts leading to divergent perspectives on the outcome.

I take a rosy view of the final lines, commencing with Gurov's recognition scene. Reality sets in as he confronts mortality and through his love for Anna Sergeevna, he professes transformation. Gurov 2.0 is the kind of man who ruminates on the truth of life while indulging in iffy metaphors. By contrast, her ascendance to self-determination is somewhat clouded by residual doubt. The complete picture portrays more buoyancy than detailed impressions may divulge.

In the last paragraph, Chekhov cannot resist throwing a banana peel on their path to nirvana. He ventures that “it seems ... just a little more” (18) would be needed to start their idyll

together. Anna Sergeevna may want her white purity-Pomeranian back. The nuanced hint belongs to the vexing it's-always-something-isn't-it strain. We've all been there: shit or get off the pot.

But to me, the slow-burn of Gustav Mahler's "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" from the *Rückert Lieder* mirrors the crux of Gurov's awakening. The song describes becoming a stranger to the world, the living death of emptiness, and choosing love in a private haven. I choose to interpret the last paragraph as Gurov and Anna Sergeevna's succumbing to a love that reaches beyond the outer edges of the story. Their bond extends, shrouded under Chekhov's words, jumping off the page into what remains in their lives. However ephemeral that may prove to be.