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EXPO S-15 CRN 34464 Section 4

9 August 2019

THE YALTA AFFAIR

Analyzing a Conflict/Redemption Structure in Chekhov

Dmitri held Anna. Her quivering body was aflame with a passion uncontested.

She was his “good one” (18). Not since seeing brown bears frolic at the Moskovsky Zoopark has she felt this aroused. With a sweeping toss of her blond tresses, she said, “I’ll happily take the consequences of my desires.” Dmitri pulled her close to his warm chest and growled, “For goodness’ sake, kiss me Anna Gurov!”

It is the Harlequin ending some readers would prefer when reading “The Lady with the Little Dog” by Anton Chekhov. Raised on broken romance and Hallmark cards it is not hard to grasp why. The setting is sufficiently foreign and the characters are enticing, if somewhat saturnine. At a squint, Chekhov’s narrative structure resembles a paper romance, outlining cautious beginnings and sexual melodrama. Love from desperation germinates declarations of love and titillated readers are teased with hints of eternal happiness. Cracks begin to show however, as rough-hewn realism is revealed through jagged, razor-sharp narration where vacuity would ordinarily reign. Most of all, Chekhov’s protagonists *are* the god-awful “other man” and “other woman” whose lurid dalliance wrecks families like Godzilla willy-nilly crushes tiny towns. Some readers hate that.

Gurov and Anna Sergeevna escape their dreary lives by taking trips to Yalta where, addicted to “a nice and light adventure, inevitably, with decent people” (2), he pursues her. Purity-spitz in tow, she takes daily promenades with her suitor and Gurov seduces Debbie Downer before she tramps home. Absence being as it does, he stalks his *fille de joie*, posing that life has gained a deeper meaning because of her. She acquiesces and they live together-ish, kind of believing that it may be love: #complicated.

In my view, the work is only partially a comment on Tartuffian reaction to pervasive perfidy and Gurov's vitriol as evidenced by gems such as his calling women "an inferior race" (2). Through synthesis of conflict and tension structures, the reader interacts in symbiosis with Chekhov. I pose that augmented interpretation repositions the work as a conflict/redemption structure. Gurov and Anna Sergeevna are artifices conflicting with blister-like marriages but aspire to be the versions of themselves who recognize "that this love of theirs had changed them both" (18). Each recognizes redemption in the other, despite being bound by conflict narratives seesawing on tensions from love born of deception. Chekhov goads his audience into thematic conflicts through use of analepsis and narrative stream-of-consciousness. He knocks the stuffing out of conventional tropes by courting the reader as a surrogate RBG, his narration testing our judgment because he "was unfaithful often, and, probably for that reason, almost always spoke ill of women" (1). Gurov's serial philandering causes him to callously apply salacious skills at wooing maudlin milksops. The narrations around marriage, coupled with frequent diatribes against women and "especially irresolute Muscovites, who are slow starters" (2), have a confessional quality, hinting at rancor extending beyond characterization. Gurov's rakish character is so meticulously stentorian that it could only be autobiographical in its betraying authorial proclivities.

Chekhov produces voyeuristic, imperfect polaroids of marred landscapes where "the town with its cypresses looked completely dead" (7), and of love between disfigured archetypes in need of repair from marital paralysis. Chekhov uses his medium to galvanize the reader around marriage and infidelity, which despite ersatz puritan outrage, are both of biblical provenance. He then dares the reader to get over any sanctimony sanctimoniousness around the "trite, trashy woman, whom anyone can despise" (6) with a we'll-gladly-replace-it policy. Gurov and Anna Sergeevna are set against this tense conflict/redemption structure affecting the reader with Aristotelian encouragement to purge superfluous emotion into assuming "utter indifference to the life and death of each of us" (7).

Gurov is what happens when a thorn in the side erupts into chronic lechery inseminated by Gehenna and pique. Moralists will savor the symbolism of the spitz growling at a frisky Gurov. They won't appreciate Anna Sergeevna's coquettish "he doesn't bite" to which she surely meant to add "hard" which would explain her coyness as he offers the dog a bone (3). The kittenish scene bristles with innuendo, humor, and Chekhov's dapper commitment to symbolism. Anna Sergeevna's growl is bigger than her reluctance given her gold-digging tendencies. Seduced by wealth, she is naive to the perils of her boy-crazy loins which caviar, operetta, or another gray dress simply won't sate. Gurov and Anna Sergeevna explore their newness as they intuit butterfly-buoyance, strolling by the sea "and a light, bantering conversation began, of free, contented people, who do not care where they go or what they talk about" (3). The narrative emphatically suggests a prophetic prolepsis which Chekhov could have cut and pasted right at the end, thereby spawning the epilogue which is cunningly denied. It is the seductive stuff of a couple, high on a puff of redemption. Chekhov however, cannot resist pressing the reader's conflict buttons as Gurov ruminates how Anna Sergeevna has "something pathetic in her all the same" (4). We collectively eye-roll, hoping that Anna Sergeevna has a BFF who will do her a solid and toss the rest of the Kool-Aid.

Gurov's "memory of carefree, good-natured women, cheerful with love," is as hard to take as the bedside bowl of morning-after pills for cougars "grateful to him for their happiness, however brief" (5), which hints at his being a three-minute-hero. It explains the exhaustive conscious-streamed coitus catalog (5). Gurov's compulsive affaires de coeur may be his droopy attempts at dominating women whose "underwear seemed to him like scales." (5). His dismissive behavior after consummation of their attraction and Anna Sergeevna's dramatic monologue (6) portends reality. It's a variation on a trope of freaked-out guys and disappointed girls; sometimes the other way round. While some view the episode as an exercise in thematic conflict, on closer inspection it holds up as an expression of anxiety between people who are vulnerable in emotional investment. Rather than being defined as part of the conflict/redemption structure, it reflects peripheral tension looming over the goings-on in Yalta.

Torrid imbroglios invite piebald interpretations. Anna Sergeevna's farewell with a honeyed, "Well, God be with you" (9) leaves Gurov stirred by their dalliance. Chekhov prods our optimism when Gurov admits that it is "[h]igh time!" (9) for him to move on. He could have added the sharp two-word statement using a transition to Gurov's previous words, accentuating a firm decision to head north. Instead, Chekhov separates the statement by narrative, flourishes it with punctuation, and Gurov verbalizes it as an affirmative point towards redemption.

Back in Moscow, the landscape's frigidity has Gurov pacing around, haunted by the specter of Anna Sergeevna who "seemed younger, more beautiful, more tender than she was" (10). He reaches an emotional apex in belligerence at the vacuity of "senseless nights, and such uninteresting, unremarkable days!" (11). Experiencing the invisibility of disregard, he is unheard when articulating his burgeoning ardor. Chekhov interrupts our cynicism by permeating characters with narrative profundity. He dials down Russianness to barely detectable GPS signals such as a "whole portion of selyanka from the pan" (10) and a mention "that at the Doctors' Club he played cards with a professor" (10). Going beyond his whatever-happens-in-Yalta wantonness, Gurov sets off for the multiple shades of gray that is S. If Yalta represents freedom from domesticity with bawdy shenanigans, and Moscow is a place of responsibility and a sourpuss wife, then surely S. will forever stand as the place where he "thought and dreamed" (14) for the first time in his life.

By contrast, Anna Sergeevna is a *dernier cri* in the cultural Chernobyl that is S. truly serving provincial realness with *passé* opera glasses and, just guessing, a gray frock. Not quite the apex of Viennese operetta, *The Geisha* by Sydney Jones was a pastiche of European imaginings of the East. The story parallels Chekhov in stating that since wives were such clunkers, men stray to tea houses for a geisha's company. There is irony in positioning Anna Sergeevna and Gurov's reuniting against the bawdy stage emanations as we contemplate how the provincial corps d'élite "were gazing at them from all the boxes" (14). Thematically, Belle Époque readers would have been pleased as Punch at the hijinks. Contemporary readers, missing the operetta's inferences mostly note Gurov's

disdain for the provincial orchestra. Anna Sergeevna appears emotionally gaunt and wholly forsaken when she plaintively confesses to being “barely alive” (15). And if Gurov at times seems to speak for the author, Anna Sergeevna speaks directly to the reader, raw in declaring that she’ll “never, never be happy, never!” (15). Chekhov is indulgent since her words will motivate the reader’s perception of the truth, counterpointed to diffuse at least *some* of what Gurov pipes up.

While not setting out to comment on motivation, Chekhov creates characters who reflect reality by being simultaneously loathsome and likable. Foucault is credited for posing that once completed, art belongs to the audience. He awards relevance to those actively engaging with the work after it has left the realm of the creator. Chekhov validates the theory through open-ended episodes trusting the reader to decode the thematic conflict/redemption structure and interpret an appropriate epilogue should they feel that it would bring closure or forsooth, bestow redemption.

Chekhov succeeds at affecting readers, leading them to question relationship survival rates against recurring animus. He drops a truth bomb when revealing that Gurov’s best parts “which constituted the core of his life, occurred in secret from others,” while his duplicity at work and home “was in full view” (16). And just like that, Gurov is redefined by his expressive honesty. Chekhov presents life as partially rooted in conflict, but close reading reveals hopeful nuance in his exploration of redemptive structures. He shifts from thematic fundamentals to reader inferences, epitomizing the concept that literature gains meaning through participation by active reading. Chekhov certainly knows better than to propose a Harlequin ta-da denouement.

Some pause at their sex-’n-Stoli state of bliss, but Gurov and Anna Sergeevna’s redemption is their personal creation: he becomes because she is. Compelled beyond narrative, they reach their own conclusion. It would be disingenuous to question the viability of them. It misses the crucial point that they are *able* to love—that *any* of us are even able to love. “The Lady with the Little Dog” is a celebration of love’s redemptive power against conflict. How we choose to view it reveals something about how we choose to view life.

Work Cited

Chekhov, Anton. "The Lady with the Little Dog by Anton Chekhov." Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, *Narrative Magazine*, 5 Mar. 2016, www.narrativemagazine.com/issues/winter-2016/classics/lady-little-dog-anton-chekhov.