

Fear and Loathing in Chekhov's "The Bet"

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"Perhaps it was the sweetness of their lives that made the ancient Egyptians so obsessed with death." – Larry Gonick

Very rarely, a master author presents his readers with a fragment of prose that crystallizes his entire body of work into a single sentence. Chekhov has given us just such a sentence when he writes "Any idiot can face a crisis; it is this day-to-day living that wears you out". This gem will be our guide in exploring Chekhov's story "The Bet". Viewing the story through this lens will ultimately show that Chekhov presents us with two failed paths in "The Bet": the banker who refuses to face his own mortality and the prisoner who faces it, but falls into despair (and loses his mind) because he is so disconnected. Both are failures, but in different ways.

We will begin by considering why facing crisis might be easy. Human beings thrive on change. While they may feel fear and uncertainty when presented with a crisis, they're also likely to feel exhilaration at the prospect of novelty that crises offer. Most importantly though, crisis forces one to live in the moment, responding to immediate threats only with

no concern for the long term future and no regrets for the past. In a very real way, crises free people, at least momentarily, from the shackles of past guilt and future fear.

Chekhov draws heavily on these ideas in his construction of the banker's character. The banker, "a pampered man" (290), "spoilt and frivolous" (289), is habitually nervous and lets himself get "carried away by excitement" (289). Chekhov assures us that this is not the impulsiveness of youth since he describes it as "excitability which he could not get over even in advancing years" (291). Chekhov paints the portrait of a cowardly man who lacks the courage to endure "day-to-day living". Instead, the banker must subsist on one manufactured crisis after another.

Let us now turn our attention to the erosion brought about by day-to-day living. At first glance, it appears that the prisoner is shielded from the travails of day-to-day living since all his material needs are met and he is free to spend his time indulging in wine, music and books. On closer examination however, we can see that the prisoner must still continue the task of living from one day to the next, without the distractions posed by external crisis. Despite his material comforts, he is forced to endure far more than the banker, simply because he cannot retreat into the endless distractions of the market, pressing social concerns of the day, or the weather. That is not to say that he does not try. Chekhov writes that in the first year, his books were "principally of a light character; novels with a complicated love plot, sensational and fantastic stories, and so on" (290). He also played the piano "continually day and night" (290) using music as a talisman to ward off a bitter awareness. But there was no where for him to run, no place in which he could hide from himself.

Yet all of the prisoner's attempts at distraction were in vain since all the while he "suffered

severely from loneliness and depression” (290) and “more than once could be heard crying” (290). What was it about day-to-day living that so terrified him?

He must often have asked himself “Did I make the right choice in accepting the bet?” or “What could I have done differently?” or “Have I wasted my life?”. Everyone asks these fundamental questions of regret, self doubt, and recrimination from time to time. Their sting comes not from the baseness of our everyday lives, but from the rarity of each day. To waste something so precious as a day of one’s life on a dull, drab, humdrum, unchanging existence is truly horrifying. As time goes on and we become increasingly aware of our own mortality, we look upon our lives and despair at the thought of having wasted so many precious days in the travails of day-to-day living. All the while, the unchanging monotony of our existence insatiable consumes what precious little time we have left with no hint of stopping.

This dread awareness of one’s mortality is why the prisoner devoted himself so completely to the study of “languages, history, and philosophy” (291) in his sixth year. Having glimpsed his impending doom, the prisoner felt compelled to make the most of what little time he had left. As the old proverb says, “Nothing so concentrates a man’s mind as knowing he’ll be hanged in the morning”. His zeal for study also fulfilled a desperate search for meaning in his life: gaining proficiency in languages gave him something to do, something with which to infuse his days with meaning and hence justify his existence.

This awareness also explains why the prisoner grew so hopeful on reading the Gospel. The narrator reports that “the prisoner sat immovably at the table and read nothing but the Gospel” (291). Christianity offered him a way out by holding open the prospect of eternal life in paradise. If the Gospel were correct, then the prisoner’s wasted days were

irrelevant since he would be spending eternity in incomparable joy. In the end, though, the promise of Christianity could not sustain him. Chekhov writes that “in the last two years of his confinement, the prisoner read an immense quantity of books indiscriminately” (291) thereby suggesting that, at last, his hunger for spiritual and theological books was sated.

In the end, this same mortality awareness motivates the prisoner’s desperate knowledge binging in the last two years of his confinement as well as his decision to forsake his winnings. The narrator describes the prisoner’s last two years saying “his reading suggested a man swimming in the sea among the wreckage of his ship, and trying to save his life by greedily clutching first at one spar and then at another” (291). Now we can finally decode that mysterious metaphor. The prisoner is truly adrift on an existential ocean, far from the land that represents all the social support and distractions he previously relied on to avoid confronting his own mortality. Even worse, in his final years, the vessel on which he relied has disintegrated and he is left to desperately try one plank after another in search of one that will bear him up above the waves. The ship on which he sailed is comprised of everything he did in the first 13 years to deal with his own mortality. It’s timbers include his early attempts at distraction with music and lighthearted novels, his intense study of languages as an attempt to give meaning to his life, and his deep investigation of Christianity in search of eternal life. In time, all these fail him, and the prisoner is left in despair.

In that state he writes to his jailer, “I despise freedom and life and health and all that in your books is called good” (293) and later, “It is all worthless, fleeting, illusory, and deceptive, like a mirage” (293). Given what we know of the prisoner now, this all makes perfect sense. He disdains freedom because it makes no difference whether he is confined

to a cell or free to roam the Earth: in either case, he must confront the terror of his own mortality while retaining some zest for life; the previous quote illustrates that he is quite unable to do that. The transitory nature of life is the source of the prisoner's disdain of life and health. What does life matter if it will be taken from you in so short a time? In the face of eternal nonexistence, what does the flash of time that comprises our life matter?

Looking at both the banker and the prisoner, it seems clear that Chekhov endorsed neither of them. The banker is portrayed as a pathetic figure, running from one crisis to another desperate to avoid dealing with his own mortality, and, consequently, squandering his life as a result. The prisoner hardly fares better; he faces his mortality, but is so cut off from human contact and real achievement (note his confusion about doing versus reading about other's actions on page 293), that in his acceptance of ultimate oblivion, he forsakes the short life available to him. In the end, he runs from one book to another, searching for momentary shelter, not unlike the banker and his crises. Chekhov is arguing that these two characters represent paths open to all people: one based on fear of death and the other based on loathing for living. Between these two extremes lie a path of moderation, straddling obliviousness and despair, and that is the path that Chekhov asks us to take.