

## Anton Chekhov's "The Bet" and "The Dance Pianist"

**People and Objects** Why are names used in some places but not in others? Chekhov doesn't give names to the characters in "The Bet". Instead he uses titles like "young lawyer", "old banker", "my dear jailer", and "the prisoner". Why?

Why do the characters in "The Dance Pianist" insist on objectifying people with terms like "solid, red-faced mama-auntie types", "old hag", and "the piano player"?

**Social Isolation** In "The Bet", the prisoner is in a box, cut off from everyone. The original debate was about capital punishment versus life imprisonment. But the prisoner was in solitary confinement. Would the outcome have been different if the prisoner had been allowed to have human contact?

"He's just a piano player – a musician! That's what she was talking to!"

The Pianist is also cutoff from society; he can't even talk with a girl except by accident.

**Aesthetics versus Drones** "I despise all that you live by"

"You have lost your reason and taken the wrong path. You have taken lies for truth and hideousness for beauty."

"In the homes of merchants I'm addressed as an inferior, given a tip, and – no offense intended."

"You lack fire, spleen, force; you have no passion! Why you aren't a chemist or a cobbler instead of a writer, Christ only knows!"

Both stories portray a mutual hatred between practical, boring people and the starving artists, seekers of truth.

**Struggle Against a Hostile Universe** The Banker fights unsuccessfully in the market while his prisoner struggles to survive in isolation.

The Pianist and his author roommate struggle to earn enough money to survive, while the merchants they serve struggle for social dominance.

**Madness** Does the prisoner lose his mind? Or was he right in asserting that his confinement allowed him to see the world as it really is? Is insanity the rational response to the absurdities of existence?

"The aristocratic reception room was filled with new sounds: I became hysterical."

What actually happens to the Pianist? Does he lose his mind?

Does the prisoner fare better than the pianist? Why or why not?

**Other Issues** "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"

What is the wreckage that the prisoner is trying to save himself from? What is he searching for?

"a retired lieutenant colonel married to the illegitimate daughter of Count von Krach—consequently, an aristocrat." "This Eskimosov is...ill bred, a swine in a skull cap"

Is this irony or sarcasm?