Impressions of Ordinary Life

One of the sweet comforts in life is curling up in a favorite chair with a short story that will carry us away from our everyday lives for an hour or two. On rare occasions, we find a tale that mirrors real life in such a way that we are strangely comforted by the normalcy reflected in the words. A perfect example of a story about ordinary life that will soothe the soul in search for some insight on understanding human behavior is Anton Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Little Dog.” This piece is definitive of the literary period of realism during the late nineteenth century that was influenced by this brilliant writer and others such as Guy de Maupassant and Kate Chopin. This style of writing has such a mass appeal because the “characters in [these] novels (and in short stories) wear recognizable social masks and reflect an everyday reality” (Charters 997). In his simple anecdote of a chance meeting between a middle-aged, chauvinistic, repeat-offender adulterer, unhappily married man, and a young, naïve, in-search-of-something-new, married woman, Chekhov paints a picture that gives a startling representation of how these two characters are influenced by the settings in which their chronicle takes place, especially with the budding of their relationship.

The narrative takes place in Yalta, a vacation spot for Eastern Europeans and Russians on the northern coast of the Black Sea. We are given a brief description of the main character, Gurov, who is a man that describes his wife as a woman “none too bright, narrow-minded, graceless,” (Chekhov 144) and has used these human imperfections as reasons to be unfaithful. We learn only minute details about his children and his employment, with more emphasis being given to his views on women, “an inferior race” (Chekhov 144), which are no doubt due to the sour experiences he has had in his extramarital affairs. We can use this information and the fact that Yalta is a place where one would go to search out “a quick, fleeting liaison” (Chekhov 144) to assess that this man is in Yalta looking for just that. As soon as Gurov gains sight of his prospective candidate and makes first contact with “the lady with the little dog” (Chekhov 144), the scenery begins to take shape and the setting is cheerful and airy, full of beautiful colors and tranquil light. After becoming acquainted, Anna and Gurov “strolled and talked of how strange the light was on the sea; the water was of a lilac color, so soft and warm, and over it the moon cast a golden strip” (Chekhov 145). Later, when he is alone in his hotel room, Gurov reflects on “her slender, weak neck, her beautiful gray eyes” (Chekhov 145) and his thoughts reveal that he has determined this young, vulnerable woman to be an ideal contender for another one of his many affairs that he just can't help becoming involved in. As the story unfolds, we see how the color gray is an integral component in the sort of comfortable, yet, unresolved feeling that the relationship between Gurov and Anna emanates.

When things are heating up between the two lonely travelers, so is the weather, which is “stuffy, but outside the dust flew in whirls” (Chekhov 146) and their thirst is unrelenting no matter what they eat or drink to quench it. “There was no escape” (Chekhov 146), seemingly, from the desire for one another that is beginning to blossom. On this particular evening, the couple makes way for the jetty to watch the incoming ship. A crowd of
people has gathered with many bouquets of flowers to greet arrivals. The churning ocean echoes the intensity of their attraction for each other, along with the mess of people surrounding them and Anna’s display of uneasiness and absentmindedness. As the crowd thins out, the mood is calm and dark; the air is full of the lingering scents of the flowers that are long gone with the people and commotion. This becomes the optimal milieu for the couple to surrender to their desires, free from the probing stares of the public.

Back in the hotel room, where it is again “stuffy” (Chekhov 146), Gurov is reminded of his past experiences in many similar situations, and it seems as though he may be fighting off the urge to run away from this potentially, if not, inevitably, disastrous scene. “Her features drooped and faded, and her hair hung down sadly on both sides of her face, she sat pondering in a dejected pose, like the sinful woman in a old painting” (Chekhov 147). Anna’s defenselessness is unappealing to Gurov, yet he is detached from his emotions in such a way that he will not even consider the prospect of the damage he could cause to this woman. Regardless of his indifference, there is an inkling of the feelings he is already beginning to have as he considers “the solitary candle burning on the table barely lit up her face, but it was clear that her heart was uneasy” (Chekhov 147). The change from dark to light signals Gurov really does care for this woman and is aware of his changing feelings, but he is far from learning to accept this.

Once the relationship is consummated and Gurov is able to console Anna, the lightheartedness returns to the scene, as if a dark cloud has been lifted, and the two take off on an outing to Oreanda. “The leaves of the trees did not stir, cicadas called, and the monotonous, dull noise of the sea, coming from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep that awaits us” (Chekhov 148). It is at this point when the reality of what they have done sets in and the landscape begins to take on a resolute quality, ostensibly validating the intricate feeling the two are experiencing together. They are reminded of the fact that life goes on regardless of any mistakes and “if you thought of it, everything was beautiful in this world, everything except for what we ourselves think and do when we forget the higher goals of being and our human dignity” (Chekhov 148). As Gurov considers the “unceasing movement of life on earth” (Chekhov 148), the light changes and “in the glow of early dawn” (Chekhov 148) the feeling is gray and mystical, uncomplicated and convoluted all at the same time.

When Anna and Gurov have decidedly accepted their fate together, the relationship swings into full force and the “outings were successful, their impressions each time were beautiful, majestic” (Chekhov 148). And then “fate itself” (Chekhov 148) makes a well-anticipated appearance, and the lovers must part, most likely forever, “and a moment later the noise could no longer be heard, as if everything were conspiring on purpose to put a speedy end to this sweet oblivion, this madness” (Chekhov 149). With the brisk winds of fall, Gurov is left alone on the train platform to contemplate his worthiness of the nature of the feelings this woman has for him, “he had appeared to her not as he was in reality, and therefore he had involuntarily deceived her…” (Chekhov 149).
Anton Chekhov is a master of portraying the complexities of the human condition and the difficulties we all have with communication, both inward and outward. The settings are artfully represented by imagery that evokes real emotions in the reader who has gazed upon the landscape searching for answers to life’s obstacles. Richard Ford describes Chekhov as “a writer for adults, his work becoming useful and also beautiful by attracting attention to mature feelings, to complicated human responses and small issues of moral choice within large, overarching dilemmas” (Ford 868). There are relationships in life that will change the very way in which we view our surrounds and ourselves, and sometimes living vicariously through another’s experience will inflict the same realizations. “The Lady with the Little Dog” will give any reflective reader a delicious taste of life in perpetual motion, the ongoing cycle of learning to live and accepting being human.

Works Cited

