

## The Mystery of the Mastery

Much of life results from choices we make. How we meet every circumstance, and also how we allow those circumstances to affect us dictates our life. In Anton Chekhov's "The Lady With the Little Dog," we are given a chance to take a look inside two characters not unlike ourselves. As we are given insight into these two people, their character and nature unfolds, presenting us with people we can relate to. Even if we fail to grasp the fullness of a feeling or circumstance, we are still touched on our own level, evidencing the brilliance of Chekhov's writing.

In the exposition of the story, Chekhov immediately delves into his character generation, introducing us to both Anna Sergeevna and Dmitri Gurov, the main players in the story. He also gives us a physical description of Anna, as well as a beginning presentation of Dmitri's character. Of Anna, Chekhov writes, "...a young woman, not very tall, blond, in a beret, walking along the embankment; behind her ran a white spitz" (Chekhov 144). Of Dmitri he comments, "Gurov, who had already spent two weeks in Yalta...began to take an interest in new faces" (Chekhov 144). Chekhov immediately offers a feel for how each character will shape up to be, and presents a chance for us (the reader) to attach ourselves to these perhaps not-so-unique individuals. Without further ado, Chekhov expounds on his initial description of Dmitri through the next five paragraphs. We learn that he is almost forty, has three children and a wife, but that he is not happy at home. He married early, and is not in love with his wife. He outwardly proclaims extreme chauvinism towards women, but we learn that "in the company of men he was bored, ill at ease, with them he was taciturn and cold, but when he was among women, he felt himself free and knew what to talk about with them and how to behave; and he was at ease even being silent with them" (Chekhov 144). Through this description, Dmitri gains a soul and

personality. He becomes a round, developed character with whom we can relate and identify ourselves. Even if we are not completely like Dmitri, his “normal” character helps us to identify ourselves with him in some way.

Chekhov’s ability to define character and produce an effect in the reader is not limited only to the description and action provided in the story. He expertly weaves location and setting into the development of theme. “Setting is essential if the reader is to be given the opportunity to glimpse a truth about the internal life from the characters and the plot” (Charters 1008). The story begins in Yalta, obviously in warmer weather, which sets a happy tone for the exposition. However, once the couple meets, the weather begins to change. “A week had passed since they became acquainted. It was Sunday. Inside it was stuffy, but outside the dust flew in whirls, hats blew off” (Chekhov 146). Chekhov illustrates how the characters are developing through the change in the weather. In the beginning, when the relationship is mostly superficial, the sun is shining, and it’s a nice time for a stroll. However, as the adulterous relationship continues, the weather become tumultuous, foreshadowing the turmoil that will soon begin inside both Anna and Dmitri. After the lovers commit their adulterous deeds, “when they went out, there was not a soul on the embankment, the town with its cypresses looked completely dead...” (Chekhov 147), indicating the death inside both the lovers. There is no turning back at this point, and death may loom ahead. Through the environment the characters live in, we learn what they are going through, and understanding of the characters expand beyond mere words and actions.

The brilliance of Chekhov’s writing cannot be overstated. In “The Lady with the Little Dog” there is an untypical depth to the relationship between Anna and Dmitri. While the plot itself may be little more than that of a soap opera, the

development and depth to which the characters are taken is far beyond any afternoon television program. As Richard Ford says, Chekhov “concentrates [his] narrative attentions *not* on the conventional hot spots – sex, deceit, and what happens at the end – but rather, by its precision, pacing, and decisions about what to tell, it directs our interest toward those flatter terrains of a love affair where we, being conventional souls, might overlook something important” (871). Sex, lies, and deceit do take place, but they are all off stage. Chekhov takes this critical time to develop character, showing us what is going on inside the souls of the adulterers, rather than sensationalizing on the outside events that are all too popular in today’s society (as well as back when the story was written).

Although Chekhov’s story is filled with complex issues of moral struggle and turmoil, it is a story we can all relate to. Everyone faces difficult decisions in life, and Chekhov brings the inner mayhem to light. Focus upon people rather than events impacts us in ways we cannot even describe. We are connected to the people in the story as we identify with the feelings and personalities of these fictional characters. “Everything that he [Gurov] found important, interesting, necessary, in which he was sincere and did not deceive himself, which constituted the core of his life, occurred in secret from others” (Chekhov 154). We are forced to reflect upon circumstances in our own lives, and all of life’s little nuances become significant once we realize that they affect the fiber of our being. Chekhov attracts “attention to mature feelings, to complicated human dilemmas, any part of which, were we to encounter them in our complex, headlong life with others, might evade even sophisticated notice” (Ford 869). We become more sensitive to human interaction, and begin to empathize with others, beyond the mere situation, and their deep inner struggles.

Without the brilliant illustration of Chekhov's characters, we would miss much of the meaning of the story. "The importance of being honest with your feelings" could be a theme in "The Lady with the Little Dog." If Chekhov did not produce such dynamic, realistic characters, we might be insensitive to the true feelings of Anna and Dmitri. This character development is essential to understanding of the theme. "And only now, when his head was gray, had he really fallen in love as one ought to – for the first time in his life" (Chekhov 155). Chekhov tells the reader, "It's not too late. 'Even when [your] head [is] gray' you can still find true love." Once the reader has identified with the character, they begin to take the practice (and success) of the character to bear in their own life. The theme is fully digested, and creates inspiration in the reader to begin their own quest for truth.

### **Works Cited**

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