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Short Story

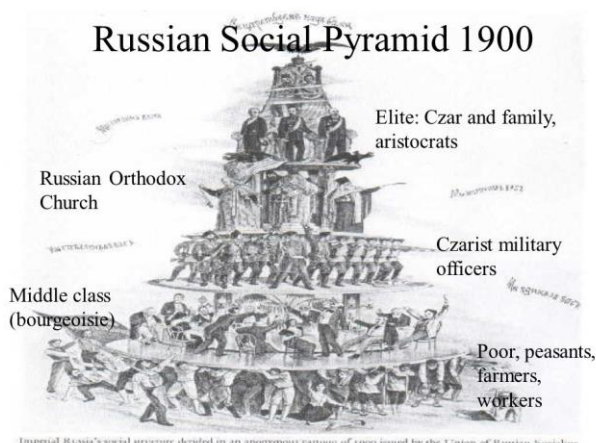
Lecture 6

“The Kiss” (Part 1)

Anton Chekhov (1860 – 1904)

I would like to welcome you to today’s journey with a distinguished Russian author, Anton Chekhov. Chekhov was a doctor and a writer at the same time. He was a realistic writer who wrote short stories and plays. There is a brief introduction of Chekhov on page 466 in the book, and you need to read it carefully (I will try to provide you with it as a scanned copy). **Chekhov** was born in 1860 and died in 1904. He lived only 44 years, but they were important years in the history of Russia. In 1917, which is after the death of Chekhov, the Bolshevik Revolution took place and ended the rule of the House of the Romanov. In other words, the entire regime in Russia was changed.

These events are important to understand Chekhov although he died



thirteen years before the revolution This is because, historically, the major revolutions like the Russian Revolution and the French

revolution, were preceded with difficult times where the poorer strata of the society suffer. Russia was under a feudal system, where a few people owned large lands and large numbers of peasants worked for them. The feudal system means that only a few people—who owned the lands—are rich, and the majority are just working for them. However, as you can see from the illustration above, the system was much more complicated than that. The nobility, the priests, and the military were the rich and powerful. The Bourgeoisie were beneath and the peasants occupied the bottom of the pyramid. This system created poverty and the majority of the people would struggle for survival in life. So, as you can see, the society was divided into classes, high and low, and on the top of that comes the Czar or the ruler who has power. Landlords who belonged to the nobility and aristocracy also had power, and most importantly people of religion had strong influence. However, those in power would collaborate with the ruler in order to have more money. In addition to that, the army was an important part to protect the lands and the ruler.

We have to keep this background in mind when we read Anton Chekhov because he is related to that period. As we said, his writings were realistic, which means they are linked to the historical context he lived in. Remember that fiction is always made up of two parts, reality and imagination. A writer would seek reality to create images or themes in his/her writing, just like what we have in dreams. No matter how weird the dreams are, the images come from reality, and they are combined with imagination. Back to literature, there is always an element of reality lying underneath. Anton Chekhov wrote realistically, but his writings are rich with symbols such as the nightingale in “The Kiss”.

Before we start with our story, I would like you to keep in mind that the characters of Chekhov share some characteristics. Usually, there is no real communication or understanding between his characters. They talk to themselves rather than to each other, and this is either because the other is not interested and does not care, or because the other simply does not understand. Of course, all these ideas are theoretical now, but once we start reading the story, I want you to remember them so we can link them to the story. Another characteristic is that there a big difference between what the characters desire they get.

“The Kiss” is full of descriptive details whether about the women, the house, the brigade, etc., and they are even repetitive at times. On the other hand, we do not have a lot of significant conversations. For example, when Ryabovich tells his friends about his adventure, they laugh at him, and this was not a real conversation. Thus, we feel that the setting is more important or is domineering the characters; the setting is directing the characters rather than the other way round. We do not feel that the characters have the power to make their own fate. They are more passive than active and more monologic than dialogic. They speak to themselves more than they speak to each other. As I have said, keep these ideas in mind while reading the story.

The Beginning:

“The Kiss” was first published in 1887, and this is an important date for understanding the world of the characters. The story begins as follows:

At eight o'clock on the evening of the twentieth of May all the six batteries of the N---- Reserve Artillery Brigade halted for the night in the village of Mestechki on their way to camp. At the

height of the general commotion, while some officers were busily occupied around the guns, while others, gathered together in the square near the church enclosure, were receiving the reports of the quartermasters, a man in civilian dress, riding a queer horse, came into sight round the church. The little dun-coloured horse with a fine neck and a short tail came, moving not straight forward, but as it were sideways, with a sort of dance step, as though it were being lashed about the legs. When he reached the officers the man on the horse took off his hat and said: “His Excellency Lieutenant-General von Rabbeck, a local landowner, invites the officers to drink tea with him this minute. . . .”

This is the first paragraph, and as usual, we have the setting, the main characters, and the narrative point of view. The setting is the time and place, and here we have a detailed description of that. It is the evening of the 20th of May in the village of Mestechki, which is a real place, and it is related to where Anton Chekhov lived. The characters introduced are the officers, the civilian messenger, and the Lieutenant-General von Rabbeck. However, the main character Ryabovich is not introduced yet, and we have to wait a few pages till we meet him. We get introduced to almost every character before Ryabovich. We have von Rabbeck, his wife, his son who is the man speaking English, the guests, and almost everyone else except for Merzlyakov. So, Merzlyakov is the only character that is introduced after Ryabovich, who is the main character of our story. This can indicate that Ryabovich is not a prominent figure, he is a normal person just like anyone of us.

The Anti-Hero:

Ryabovich is an officer, like the others, and usually when we talk about officers, we imagine a brave figure that is tall and strong. In literature, life of army officers is full of adventures and romance. Officers

usually like women, and they are liked by women. The character of Lieutenant Lobytko represents this typical image of the officer. Look at his description on page 469 paper copy (P.2 PDF version):

Lieutenant Lobytko, who was walking in front, a tall and stalwart fellow, though entirely without moustache (he was over five-and-twenty, yet for some reason there was no sign of hair on his round, well-fed face), renowned in the brigade for his peculiar ability to divine the presence of women at a distance, turned round and said:

"Yes, there must be women here; I feel that by instinct."

This is the description of Lobytko, the typical officer. He is tall and stalwart, but notice that Chekhov puts something missing in him; he is without moustache. So, even the typical officer has a missing thing in him.

Let us move to the description of Ryabovich, our main character, on the next page:

The most ill at ease of them all was Ryabovich -- a short, somewhat stooped officer in spectacles, whiskers like a lynx's. While some of his comrades assumed a serious expression, while others wore forced smiles, his face, his lynx-like whiskers, and spectacles seemed to say: "I am the shyest, most modest, and most undistinguished officer in the whole brigade!"

Notice that there is emphasis on the type of moustache he has, the lynx-like one. Ryabovich is the opposite of the typical hero, and he represents what we call in literature the **anti-hero**. He is not tall or muscular, he is not confident, and he is not brave. He is short and stooped, and even his moustache is like whiskers (cat moustache); moreover, he is shy. Yet, he is our protagonist, and we call this character the anti-hero. In modern literature, you rarely find the typical hero; you would rather find anti-heroes, and this represents the "modern man". The anti-hero is one of the recurrent motifs in modern literature because the society is stronger than the human individual, nature is stronger than the human being, and life is

stronger than the human. The human individual is insignificant and helpless in the modern age, and that is why it is called anti-hero. We feel that we can identify with those characters one way or another. This is part of realistic literature that depicts characters which represent us. We might find those characters in people of our everyday life, or we can live experiences that are similar to theirs.

Let us compare Lobytko and Ryabovich on page 471 when the dancing starts.

After tea the officers went into the drawing-room. Lieutenant Lobytko's instinct had not deceived him. There were a great many girls and young married ladies. The "setter" lieutenant was soon standing by a very young blonde in a black dress, and, bending over her jauntily, as though leaning on an unseen sword, smiled and twitched his shoulders coquettishly. He probably talked very interesting nonsense, for the blonde looked at his well-fed face condescendingly and asked indifferently, "Really?" And from that indifferent "Really?" the "setter", had he been intelligent, might have concluded that she would never call him to heel.

Lobytko is very confident, and it took him only seconds to be standing by a beautiful blonde lady. Once he entered the drawing room, he found a woman to talk to. On the other hand, we have Ryabovich:

Ryabovich, who felt the brandy he had drunk, under the influence of the music stole a glance towards the window, smiled, and began watching the movements of the women, and it seemed to him that the smell of roses, of poplars, and lilac came not from the garden, but from the ladies' faces and dresses.

All he could do is *steal* a glance and watch from behind the window. They were out dancing, and he was just watching. Notice that he liked women; he was not the type of man who is not interested in women. However, he was so shy to talk to them or approach them. This is our hero who is not really a hero. He is the opposite to what we have in mind.

Social Hypocrisy:

Let us get back to the beginning and the invitation of von Rabbeck. It is mentioned that this invitation was a social obligation, and that is the only reason for von Rabbeck to invite this number of officers to his house. At the end of page 469 and beginning of page 470:

The General shook hands with every one, made his apologies, and smiled, but it was evident by his face that he was by no means so delighted as last year's count, and that he had invited the officers simply because, in his opinion, it was a social obligation.

The social obligation was the only reason he invited them, and from the beginning, we know that even the officers were not really happy to go there. They had a bad experience last year, when they were invited by a Count who kept them all night and did not let them sleep. Now, they have had a long day, and they only need to rest. That is why after the messenger left, the narrator describes the reaction of the officers:

"What the devil does it mean?" grumbled some of the officers, dispersing to their quarters. "One is sleepy, and here this Von Rabbeck with his tea! We know what tea means."

So, it is apparent that it is not the only time they get invited. Usually, some generals or Lieutenants feel a social obligation to invite officers. Here, in the case of von Rabbeck, no one is happy with this invitation, neither von Rabbeck nor the officers. Last year they were invited by a Count, and the experience is mentioned at the end of page 468 until page 469, and at the end:

while the weary and exhausted officers looked and listened, longing for their beds and yawning in their sleeves; when at last their host let them go, it was too late for sleep.

The Count kept showing off, showing them pictures, and telling them stories from his past. He was having fun, but the officers were not. They were exhausted and wanted only to sleep. This is one of the characteristics of Chekhov's characterization; one character is interested while the other is not happy. Even when they were spending a night that is supposed to be joyful, only one person or one side was happy. The officers were having a terrible time because they were sleepy, and that is why with this invitation, they say that they know what "tea" means.

Might not this Von Rabbeck be just such another? Whether he were or not, there was no help for it.

They are obliged to go whether they like it or not. Notice how the social rules are stronger than all the characters. Von Rabbeck tells the officers that they cannot stay for the night because of some guests who suddenly came to his house, but from the description, we understand that it is an unbelievable lie. The officers felt that they crashed some social event in the house because they were strangers. We can call this social hypocrisy, and we have many signs of this hypocrisy in the visit. For example, the smile of the wife fades immediately when she turns around, which means that it is a fake smile. The officers also show some of those signs. On page 470:

The officers -- some with very serious and even stern faces, others with forced smiles, and all feeling extremely awkward -- somehow made their bows and sat down to tea.

Other signs of social hypocrisy are made by the wife and the son of von Rabbeck. The wife speaks some French words:

Upstairs at the entrance to the drawing-room the officers were met by a tall, graceful old lady with black eyebrows and a long face, very much like the Empress Eugénie. Smiling graciously and majestically, she said she was glad and happy to see her guests, and apologized that her husband and she were on this occasion unable to invite *messieurs les*

officiers to stay the night. From her beautiful majestic smile, which instantly vanished from her face every time she turned away from her guests, it was evident that she had seen numbers of officers in her day, that she was in no humour for them now, and if she invited them to her house and apologized for not doing more, it was only because her breeding and position in society required it of her.

By using French words, she appears to be pretentious, and that is part of the social hypocrisy. Moreover, the son was speaking English, and this is part of showing off. Remember that the story is Russian, so the language of characters is Russian; however, the wife is using French words and the son is speaking English. That is why we take this behaviour as a sign of social hypocrisy on the side of the family. They were obliged to invite the officers, and they acted in a pretentious way to live up to the social expectations.

Miscommunication:

We said that one of the recurrent motifs and themes that Chekhov has in his story is miscommunication, lack of communication and understanding among characters, and showing little interest in what the other is saying. We have an example of that in the incident where Lieutenant Lobytko was talking to the blonde lady:

He probably talked very interesting nonsense, for the blonde looked at his well-fed face condescendingly and asked indifferently, "Really?" And from that indifferent "Really?" the "setter", had he been intelligent, might have concluded that she would never call him to heel.

He was talking nonsense, and she was pretending to be interested. An intelligent person would understand that this conversation will not get any further because of the indifference. Another example is when Ryabovich told his friends about the kiss.

Go to page 475:

At the end of the way the path went uphill, and, skirting the church enclosure, led into the road. Here the officers, tired with walking uphill, sat down and lighted their cigarettes. On the farther bank of the river a murky red fire came into sight, and having nothing better to do, they spent a long time in discussing whether it was a camp fire or a light in a window, or something else. . .

The officers did not have a real topic to discuss, so they spent the conversation talking about the fire. There is nothing fruitful coming from their conversation.

Ryabovich, too, looked at the light, and he fancied that the light looked and winked at him, as though it knew about the kiss.

Ryabovich was not participating in the conversation, but he was living in his own world of fantasy. His friends were discussing where the fire came from while he was living in his own world and thinking that the fire was winking at him. He was infatuated with the incident that happened with him.

On reaching his quarters, Ryabovich undressed as quickly as possible and got into bed. Lobytko and Lieutenant Merzlyakov -- a peaceable, silent fellow, who was considered in his own circle a highly educated officer, and was always, whenever it was possible, reading the "Messenger of Europe," which he carried about with him everywhere -- were quartered in the same cottage with Ryabovich. Lobytko undressed, walked up and down the room for a long while with the air of a man who has not been satisfied, and sent his orderly for beer. Merzlyakov got into bed, put a candle by his pillow and plunged into reading the "Messenger of Europe."

The three officers—Ryabovich, Lobytko, Merzlyakov—are together in the same tent. However, each one of them is indulged in his own world. Merzlyakov is reading **The Messenger of Europe**, which is a magazine and it has its significance and symbolic value that I will get back to.

Lobytko was still not satisfied, and he wanted some beer. Ryabovich was asking himself the question “who was she?” So, there are three persons in the same place, but they are not having any exchange of thought or real communication. They are present together, but their minds are not there together. This loneliness is one of the motifs of Anton Chekhov. Characters are mostly alone although they are physically together with other characters.

Characterisation:

Let us move to the way that Chekhov draws his characters. We have the description of Ryabovich on page 470:

The most ill at ease of them all was Ryabovich -- a short, somewhat stooped officer in spectacles, whiskers like a lynx's. While some of his comrades assumed a serious expression, while others wore forced smiles, his face, his lynx-like whiskers, and spectacles seemed to say: "I am the shyest, most modest, and most undistinguished officer in the whole brigade!"

When we talk about characterisation, you need to learn that there are three main techniques that writers use to create their characters and describe them for the reader. said that there three ways to do characterisation. They are **announcement** or **statement**, **descriptive detail**, and **dramatic rendition**.

Let us learn them through Chekhov’s characterisation of Ryabovich: Chekhov employs *announcement* to depict Ryabovich when he says: **“I am the shyest, most modest, and most undistinguished officer in the whole brigade!”** He is simply *stating* his characteristics, and this is a statement about the character; the narrator is directly telling the reader that this character is shy, undistinguished, etc.

Chekhov also uses *descriptive details* in Ryabovich's depiction, when the narrator says, **"a short, somewhat stooped officer in spectacles, whiskers like a lynx's"**. From this description, we can speculate that Ryabovich is not brave or strong although the narrator did not state it directly. From the description, we can create a mental image of the physical characteristics and the personality of Ryabovich.

In a different occasion, we have the use of *dramatic rendition* in the scene when they started dancing.

Ryabovich, who felt the brandy he had drunk, under the influence of the music stole a glance towards the window, smiled, and began watching the movements of the women, and it seemed to him that the smell of roses, of poplars, and lilac came not from the garden, but from the ladies' faces and dresses.

Here we can see our character in action. We learn about him through his behaviour. We are told that Ryabovich was looking at the women from behind the window, and by doing this we learn that he is shy. His behaviour tells us that he is not daring or self-confident, and the narrator is telling us this only by showing his action. This is dramatic rendition, and it is as if we were presented with a dramatic scene to show us the nature of the character. I want you to keep this information and those ideas in your mind when you read the stories. Try to figure out the characterisation whether it is announcement, descriptive, or dramatic rendition.

As a practice for this, I want you to think of this extract and decide what characterisation technique(s) the characterisation of Lobytko uses:

Lieutenant Lobytko, who was walking in front, a tall and stalwart fellow, though entirely without moustache (he was over five-and-twenty, yet for some reason there was no sign of hair on his round, well-fed face), renowned in the brigade for his peculiar ability to divine the presence of women at a distance, turned round and said:

"Yes, there must be women here; I feel that by instinct."

The Narrator:

We have a third-person narrator in our story, and we talked about different variations of this type. We can have omniscient third-person narrator, or limited third-person narrator. The omniscient narrator has access to everything, even the minds of the characters. Let us go to page 471:

Like a lecturer making his first appearance before the public, he saw everything that was before his eyes, but apparently only had a dim understanding of it (among physiologists this condition, when the subject sees but does not understand, is called mental blindness).

The sentence between two brackets is somehow different from the rest of the narration. It is an additional comment coming directly from the narrator, but we feel that the narration could have been totally fine if we deleted this comment. However, it is a comment from the authorial narrator directly to the reader, and that is why it is between two brackets. Although this is not the most prominent example of the authorial narrator, but it is still authorial. Sometimes, the voice of the authorial narrator is stronger, like in the novel **Joseph Andrews** which, hopefully, you will study next year. The narrator would say something like, "I could have done this, but I decided that it is better to end the chapter here." The narrator is directly addressing the reader. In another novel called **The French Lieutenant's Woman**, the authorial persona tells the reader something like, "I wanted the character to take that road, but he went out of control and decided to go in a different direction." So, the example in our story might not be the best of authorial narrators in comparison to other works, but you need to know it is still an authorial because the narrator is addressing the reader.

Next time we are going to focus on the symbolism of the road, the river, and the nightingale. We will also talk about the psychological change and the development of Ryabovich as a character. We have the different phases of before the kiss, his first reaction, and his later reaction. So, think about these ideas while you read the story, and read the life of Chekhov.

Have a Nice Time!

Stay Safe!