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1st Year – 2nd Semester

Short Story

Lecture 7

“The Kiss” (Part 2)

Anton Chekhov (1860 – 1904)

Today’s discussion will continue with “The Kiss” by Anton Chekhov. We talked about the social and political atmosphere of the story, and of Russia itself in the time when the story was written.

In brief, we can say that there were two groups, the “haves” and the “have-nots” or the powerful and the powerless. The society itself was on the verge of revolution. The public reached the limit of their patience, and this is something that was represented symbolically in the story. People were under economic pressure, and everyone was living their own struggle that they could not even feel or communicate with each other. This is how it was represented in Chekhov’s story.

Last time, we discussed a few ideas in the story, and today we will focus mainly on the psychological change of Ryabovich. We said that his character is classified as an anti-hero rather than a hero. We mentioned that the protagonist was not introduced from the beginning of the story, and this is related to depicting him as an anti-hero. He is reacting rather than acting, and he is not an enforcing character that leads the action in story. What

happened to him was leading the development of the plot rather than what he was doing. In Chekhov's stories, in general, the setting and the atmosphere are the domineering force over the character.

The Setting – The Symbolism of the Road

One thing we can start analysing is the symbolism of the setting. Let us go to page 469 where we have the road. In a previous discussion, we said that the road is a recurrent symbol for journey. Here, unlike in "The Battler", we do not have one character on the road; instead, we have a bunch of characters. So, we need to see if we can read the road in a different way. Remember that a journey is most probably a psychological one because it develops the character.

The characters are on their way to the General's house. They did not really like the idea of the invitation, but due to the social obligation, they had to go. Let us read in the second paragraph:

In the square by the church they were told they could get to His Excellency's by the lower road -- going down behind the church to the river, walking along the bank to the garden, and there the alleys would take them to the house; or by the upper way -- straight from the church by the road which, half a mile from the village, led right up to His Excellency's barns. The officers decided to go by the upper road.

They had two options to get to the house of von Rabbeck, and I want you to think of the directions. We have **lower** road and **upper** road, and this reminds us of the social classes and hierarchy. At the top of the social hierarchy was the Czar or the Emperor, but this position does not count in our story so let us move down a little bit.

- ❖ **If they take the lower road**, they would go behind the church down to the house of his Excellency. This can tell us that the church is higher than the house of the general
- ❖ **If they take the upper road**, they go from the village up to the house of the general.

From the church to the house of the general it is a movement downwards, but from the village to the house of the general it is a movement upwards.

The road symbolises the position of these three elements that are the priests (represented by the church), the military generals (represented by the house of von Rabbeck), and the lower classes (represented by the village). At the top is the church, you go down to the generals and the landlords, and below them are the villagers. In that time, the Czar relied on both the military force and the religious force to keep his power. In other words, he made sure that had the support of the worldly powers and the divine powers.

The officers decided to take the upper road, and this is also symbolic. This tells us that they want to move up in the social ladder. The assumption can be supported with another passage. At the end of page 474 and the beginning of 475, the narrator tells:

Probably the same idea occurred to each one of them as to Ryabovich: would there ever come a time for them when, like Von Rabbeck, they would have a large house, a family, a garden -- when they, too, would be able to welcome people, even though insincerely, feed them, make them drunk and contented?

Although they were reluctant to go, and although they knew the invitation was insincere, they were still hoping to be able to do the same thing in their lives. This is human nature; the desire to have more and get higher,

especially for those officers who can see the position of General von Rabbeck, who is basically an officer like themselves.

Political Implication

Go back to page 470, where we have the description of von Rabbeck's wife:

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.

The name Eugénie sounds French, and the wife was actually using some French words, and we said that this is part of her showing off. However, here, the narrator is the one who is telling us that the wife looks like Empress Eugénie instead of simply saying that she looked like a queen or a lady. The importance of mentioning this specific Empress is that Empress Eugénie was dethroned in 1870, 17 years before the story was published. Empress Eugénie was the wife of Emperor Napoleon III of the second French Empire. As a result of losing the war, the Empire was overthrown, and the Empress was dethroned. Maybe Chekhov was not really pushing people to revolution in a direct way, but he was probably thinking of the hypocrisy of the ruling people who were not thinking of the lower classes. Maybe he is saying that such people are going to lose their positions like the Empress of France. As you see, a simple name can have many meanings and interpretations, and that is why you have to check for meanings when there is a name or a reference to something.

Ryabovich's Psychological Baseline

We have been talking about how the setting was affecting the narration itself. We have the description of the road and the choice of names and references. Let us start now with the psychological part of the story. On page 472, at the end of the first paragraph, where the narrator tells us about Ryabovich's reaction to seeing his comrades dancing with beautiful women, while he is not:

But with years he had grown used to this feeling, and now, looking at his comrades dancing or loudly talking, he no longer envied them, but only felt touched and mournful.

Ryabovich is aware that he is not handsome, and he adopted a psychological defence mechanism which is indifference. However, he could not hide or ignore all the negative attitude about his situation, and that is why he was touched and mournful. If you remember, we read last time that he was not the kind of young man who did not like women. We read a passage where he was looking at them and fancying them. However, he was aware that he could not get them. He tried to be OK with this fact, but deep down, and even if he did not admit it, he still wanted it.

The Kiss and Psychological Change

Let us move now to the main event of the story which is the kiss itself. On page 473, the second paragraph, the narrator describes the incident:

Ryabovich stood still in hesitation. . . . At that moment, to his surprise, he heard hurried footsteps and the rustling of a dress, a breathless feminine voice whispered "At last!" And two soft, fragrant, unmistakably feminine arms were clasped about his neck; a warm cheek was pressed to his cheek, and simultaneously there was the sound of a kiss. But at once the

bestower of the kiss uttered a faint shriek and skipped back from him, as it seemed to Ryabovich, with disgust. He, too, almost shrieked and rushed towards the gleam of light at the door. . . .

When he was with the group who were playing billiards, he felt that he was invisible. So, he decided to go back to the drawing room, but he got lost in his way. He realised that he got lost because he did not see the sleepy servants whom he met on his way to the billiard room. In this room, he heard a woman's voice saying "at last" and this tells us that the woman was waiting. Then we have the detailed description of the arms, cheeks, and the sound of the kiss. Notice that we have the "sound" of the kiss as if Ryabovich only heard it rather than felt it. That type of kiss was a normal kiss on the cheek, but at that time and in that society this normal kiss on the cheek was a big deal. However, the woman gave a faint shriek that appeared with disgust to Ryabovich. We understand that she realised that she kissed the wrong person, and her shriek makes us think that she felt terrible about this mistake.

If we think of Ryabovich and his attitude, we find that he was just fine before the kiss. We saw how he was trying to accept his situation as the shy and not-handsome man among his friends, and he was adopting a defence mechanism or strategy. However, after this kiss, things are going to change for him. Unlike his friend Lobytko who had a dancing experience and a semi-romantic experience with two different ladies at that night, Ryabovich had this little "romantic" experience that ended with a shriek of disgust.

Let us see his reaction towards this incident. When he went back to the room where everyone was dancing, his heart was palpitating. He felt ashamed as if he had done something wrong and that everyone knew about it. He felt ashamed about the experience while his friends would have

bragged about it if it had happened to them. This feeling can be attributed to that it was his first time to experience something like this. Moreover, it was because of the reaction of the lady who showed disgust. However, he did not keep this feeling of shame. After he calmed down, he realised that nobody actually knew about what happened, so **“he gave himself up entirely to the new sensation which he had never experienced before in his life.”** The sensation had been there since he was kissed, but it was overwhelmed by the feeling of shame. Now, he realised that nobody knows, so he gave himself to this new sensation and feeling. It could be joy and affection.

If we move a few lines down, the narrator says, **“all of him, from head to foot, he was full of a strange new feeling which grew stronger and stronger. . . .”** The growing of his feeling is essential because it shows us the development of his character. The feeling did not only come to him, but it was growing inside him, and it gave him a new attitude, so **“He wanted to dance, to talk, to run into the garden, to laugh aloud. . . . He quite forgot that he was round-shouldered and uninteresting, that he had lynx-like whiskers and an "undistinguished appearance.”**

This shows Ryabovich gaining confidence and forgetting his weaknesses that were overwhelming him all the time. It took only one incident to change his whole perspective towards life, and here he was not even the person meant by the kiss! This was a kiss that he got by accident, and still it gave him this growing feeling of confidence, so imagine if he was meant by the kiss! After that, at the last paragraph in the page, we can see Ryabovich socializing:

"I like your house immensely!" he said, setting his spectacles straight.

The General's wife smiled and said that the house had belonged to her father; then she asked whether his parents were living, whether he had long been in the army, why he was so thin, and so on. . . . After receiving answers to her questions, she went on, and after his conversation with her his smiles were more friendly than ever, and he thought he was surrounded by splendid people. . . .

This is the same person who, minutes ago, was looking at the people through the window! Now, he is experimenting and acting by starting a conversation with the hostess herself. The conversation developed a bit between them, and even though it was the kind of superficial conversation, he was doing what it takes. The people now appeared splendid to him. This is the development of the character of Ryabovich and the change of his attitude.

Later on, the narrator tells us that **“At supper Ryabovich ate mechanically everything offered him, drank, and without listening to anything, tried to understand what had just happened to him. . . .”** He is not listening to anyone, he is still in his world imagining and thinking. The following lines are him trying to understand what happened to him:

The adventure was of a mysterious and romantic character, but it was not difficult to explain it. No doubt some girl or young married lady had arranged a tryst with someone in the dark room; had waited a long time, and being nervous and excited had taken Ryabovich for her hero; this was the more probable as Ryabovich had stood still hesitating in the dark room, so that he, too, had looked like a person waiting for something. . . This was how Ryabovich explained to himself the kiss he had received.

This is his simple logical explanation for the incident. A young lady was waiting for her lover in the dark room, and Ryabovich also appeared like he was waiting. Remember that he was lost and did not know where he was. Thus, he appeared as if waiting for someone, and the lady thought that this is her lover. This explanation makes sense and we can agree with it. However, Ryabovich would not stick to it, and he would not forget what happened because it is something he desired. We said that before the kiss, he was acting fine knowing he was not handsome. However, deep inside he was touched and mournful. So, despite acting indifferent about his inability to talk to others and to women, he actually desired to have a romantic relationship.

Who was she?

The question now is about who the woman was. There is this feeling of curiosity to know who was the bestower of the kiss. Ryabovich started thinking whether it was this lady or that one, and by doing so, he was getting to know himself and what he really liked. So, he thought that it might be this lady, but she is not really beautiful or tall or whatever. He is kind of projecting his desires and what he likes on the potential ladies that might have kissed him.

He was contemplating all the ladies. However, he was not focusing on finding the real person; rather, he was thinking of the perfect one. He was very confident now that he would not take any lady to be the bestower of his mysterious kiss. A few moments ago, he would have accepted anyone, but now as he was getting more confident, he wants a perfect woman. It happens with us all the time. One day we dream of having a car or a house or anything, but once we get it, we desire something better. This

is human nature; once you trigger this desire, you can hardly satisfy it. Here, this is a great development in Ryabovich's character, and whether we like it or not, it happened to him.

In Greek mythology, there is the story of Pygmalion who was a sculptor. He made a statue that represents the perfect woman of his dreams, just like what Ryabovich is doing here. After he created the statue, Pygmalion fell in love with it and he could not resist giving it a kiss. He forgot that it was a statue, and he kissed it! So, the goddess Aphrodite granted life to the statue, and it became a woman and they got married. In our story, the kiss created Ryabovich, and he wanted to create the perfect woman. The mythological story is a little twisted but we have some similar elements. We have the kiss, and we have creating a new person represented by the new development in Ryabovich, and at the same time, Ryabovich was creating his own lady. It was easy for him to remember all the details about the lady except her face. He was able to recall every single detail even the smell of peppermint, but it was difficult to remember her face because he could not see it in the dark room.

I want to jump a little bit to page 479, six pages from the incident of the kiss:

With the eagerness of a man indulges in dreaming, he pictured to himself little feminine feet tripping along yellow sand, and quite unexpectedly had a clear vision in his imagination of her who had kissed him and whom he had succeeded in picturing to himself the evening before at supper. This image remained in his brain and did not desert him again.

At this moment, the image was complete for him. The difference between the myth of Pygmalion and what happened to Ryabovich is the ending. In the myth, there was a happy ending, and a wish was granted, but for Ryabovich, he went back to reality at the end.

Let us get back to the development of the character. Ryabovich kept developing the experience and daydreaming for almost three months. The regiment left and came back in August, and through this time he was waiting for the invitation. At some point of their absence, when his friends went to have romantic relations with the villagers, he felt ashamed and apologetic. On page 481:

And on the evenings when the officers, out on the spree with the setter -- Lobytko -- at their head, made Don Juanesque raids on the "suburb," and Ryabovich took part in such excursions, he always was sad, felt profoundly guilty, and inwardly begged her forgiveness. . . . In hours of leisure or on sleepless nights, when he felt moved to recall his childhood, his father and mother -- everything near and dear, in fact, he invariably thought of Mestechki, the queer horse, Von Rabbeck, his wife who was like the Empress Eugénie, the dark room, the crack of light at the door. . . .

Notice the development of his character. He gained more confidence, and now he goes with his friends in their romantic adventures. However, he felt guilty because he was committed to a woman whom he imagined was waiting for him at von Rabbeck's house.

Epiphany:

He lived the illusion till the moment where no one sent for him. This is on page 482:

How stupid, how stupid!" thought Ryabovich, looking at the running water. "How unintelligent it all is!"

Now that he expected nothing, the incident of the kiss, his impatience, his vague hopes and disappointment, presented themselves in a clear light. It no longer seemed to him strange that the General's messenger never came, and that he would never see the girl who had accidentally kissed him instead of someone else; on the contrary, it would have been strange if he had seen her. . . .

This is what we call an epiphany; it is the moment of truth and realisation. Notice the words used here: vague hopes, disappointment, and accidentally. Now he is admitting it to himself, and he is resorting to logic. At some point of the story when the kiss happened, it was mentioned that he knew it was not meant for him. However, at that moment, logic would go away with the wind! In the intense emotions, he would willingly forget about logic. Now, after not receiving the messenger, he is back to reality. Here, you need to know that the story has what we call an epiphany plot because of the revelation that changes the direction of the plot.

Imagination vs. Reality:

The call of reality vs. imagination was always there in the story. On page 475, we have:

When these images vanished altogether from the broad dark background which everyone sees when he closes his eyes, he began to hear hurried footsteps, the rustle of skirts, the sound of a kiss and -- an intense baseless joy took possession of him. . . . Abandoning himself to this joy, he heard the orderly return and announce that there was no beer.

The first thing we notice is that he started by deleting the scene when she shrieked, and he remembered only the kiss. However, while imagining her, the person who was sent by Lobytko to get beer came announcing that there was no beer. It is a wakeup call, but Ryabovich kept insisting on daydreaming. At another point, when he is marching with the brigade, he also starts daydreaming, but someone starts calling them to “march” and this interrupts his imagination. It was not until the last moment, when there came no messenger, and when HE HIMSELF wanted to realise the truth, that he actually woke up and realised that it was all an accident. This is the epiphany. He had high hopes, but he realised it was all illusion. So, he is

going to crush down to earth and even below. Before the kiss, he was OK with himself being below ordinary. Being ordinary was like a dream to him. Now, things are different.

Let us go to the last page, where Ryabovich is thinking to himself, **“What for? Why? And the whole world, the whole of life, seemed to Ryabovich an unintelligible, aimless jest.”** He is posing existential questions about his purpose. He is not like anyone else, he is not achieving anything, and he is even worse than the normal people.

. . . And turning his eyes from the water and looking at the sky, he remembered again how Fate in the person of an unknown woman had by chance caressed him, he recalled his summer dreams and fancies, and his life struck him as extraordinarily meagre, poverty-stricken, and drab. . . .

This is how he sees his life; extraordinarily meagre, and meagre means little and bad. It is something less in quality and in quantity, and there is nothing good about it. His life was drab, dull, boring, and he is just living to die. He is just following orders; remember that he is in the military. He will follow orders until he dies. This sad idea reflects the atmosphere in Russia in the time of the story.

The Nightingale & the River:

I want to go back to the moment when they left the house after the invitation. There was a nightingale, that was brave enough not move even when the officers came close to it. Usually when you approach a bird, it just flies away, but this nightingale in the dark was brave and did not move. On page 475, the second paragraph, the narrator describes:

Drowsy sandpipers cried plaintively on the farther bank, and in one of the bushes on the hither side a nightingale was trilling

loudly, taking no notice of the crowd of officers. The officers stood round the bush, touched it (touched the bush), but the nightingale went on singing.

The nightingale symbolises Ryabovich himself. He is now confident after having the kiss, and he does not care about the people around him. Like the brave nightingale, Ryabovich now does not care about others.

Another important thing is the river which is mentioned three times in the story. When something is mentioned more than once, we should compare how different or similar it appears each time. The river is mentioned three times, and in all these times we should think of the state of Ryabovich and his emotions.

First, the river is described after the invitation is over. On page 477, the fourth paragraph:

When he had ridden on half a mile, he looked back: the yellow church, the house, and the river, were all bathed in light; the river with its bright green banks, with the blue sky reflected in it and glints of silver in the sunshine here and there, was very beautiful. Ryabovich gazed for the last time at Mestechki, and he felt as sad as though he were parting with something very near and dear to him.

The officers are leaving the village now, and the river appears bright.

Let us compare it to the time when they come back in August. On page 481:

He did not hear the officer who was riding beside him and saying something to him, he forgot everything, and looked eagerly at the river shining in the distance, at the roof of the house, at the dovecote round which the pigeons were circling in the light of the setting sun.

Now he is coming back, and the river is still shining. Just like the nightingale who was not aware of the officers, Ryabovich here does not care about the officer riding beside him. The river here is also still shining.

The last time the river is mentioned is on page 482:

He went down to the river. [...]. The river ran rapidly and with a faintly audible gurgle round the piles of the bathing cabin.

The river now is not shining; it is rather faintly audible, almost silent, and as if it was not there. There is nothing bright or shining about it.

In the first time, Ryabovich was leaving the village, overwhelmed with joy from the kiss. The second time, he was coming back to what he thought “his beloved one”. In both times the river was shining. However, the third time is right before the epiphany. In this case, it is as if the quietness was paving the way for the epiphany; it was not bright and shining, and it reflects how the emotions are quiet. The quietness of the emotions opens the way for logic to work. That is why it led to the moment of epiphany. So, the river in the third case actually represents how the way was paved for Ryabovich to reach his epiphany.

Other Realistic Elements

❖ The Messenger of Europe:

The “Messenger of Europe” that Merzlyakov was reading is a political, liberal magazine, and this means it was leftist in its political views. *Liberal* is from liberation and having freedom, and it is related to having rights. This is significant to the time of the story because as we said, the political atmosphere in the Russian society was on the verge of revolution. People and even army members were reading liberal magazines. These are hints of the change that was coming. Chekhov died about 13 years before the Revolution, and here lies his greatness, in his ability to foresee the future.

❖ **The Turkish Donkey:**

Another thing is on page 478:

There were six batteries in all in the brigade, and four cannons in each battery. The procession covered a third of a mile; it ended in a string of wagons near which an extremely appealing creature -- the ass, Magar, brought by a battery commander from Turkey -- paced pensively with his long-eared head drooping.

The donkey or the ass is Turkish, and this is a significant point. This represents the everlasting clash between the two nations, the Turkish nation represented by the Ottoman Empire at that time, and the Russian Empire. Even now, they are still major powers in conflict. This shows us how the context of the author can be reflected in the literary work.

This is all about “The Kiss”. In our next lecture, we will focus the discussion on the theoretical part, so I want you to read the glossary.

Have a Nice Time!

Stay Safe!