

"the betrothed" by chekhov essay sample

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Chekhov's short story, *The Betrothed*, is about a young woman who leaves home days before her wedding in search for a different life. The life of this heroine represents a larger liberation of women of the nineteenth century. To fully understand the evolution of women within Russian literature, it is necessary to compare *The Betrothed* to literature of the earlier part of the century. Karamzin's *Poor Liza* also illustrates the fate of a young woman and if put side by side with *The Betrothed*, will trace the liberation of women of that time. This paper will focus on the opportunities given to women towards the end of the nineteenth century as can be observed in Chekhov's " *The Betrothed*" in comparison to Karamzin's " *Poor Liza*".

The title Karamzin uses for his story, " *Poor Liza*", creates right away an image of a woman helpless and dependent. Liza does, indeed, live up to this image. She is a very fragile woman of an excessively emotional nature, who is very vulnerable and easily hurt. That is the protocol for most, if not all, women throughout history and leading up to the early 19th century Russia. In those times a woman's role was defined by her status and for Liza there is no other prospect than marriage. She isn't posed with the question of what to do with her life, whether to get married or get an education, for her that conflict does not exist. As Liza meets Erast, her calm and nonchalant life takes a different focus, and she becomes consumed with her feelings for him and devotes herself to that relationship completely. She says to Erast, " when you press me to your heart, and glance at me with your tender eyes, oh! then I feel so good, so good, that I forget myself, I forget everything

except-Erast!" (61) It is very easy for a woman of that time to lose herself because she doesn't live for herself, or for personal happiness. She lives for her family as a child, and, later in life, for her husband and children.

So it is no surprise that Liza invests all her happiness and future in Erast, and when things don't work out, she has nothing to fall back on, no life to call her own. "As for Liza, having given herself to him completely, she lived and breathed only in him; in everything, like a lamb, she submitted to his will and she supposed that her own happiness was in his pleasure." (63) There is a total absence of individuality and character to women. They leech on to a position or a person and that gives meaning to their lives. A woman's sense of herself doesn't exist and she only sees herself in the context of others. When Erast informs Liza that he is going into the service, she says, "Oh why is it that I do not know how to read and write! You would inform me about everything that happens to you and I would write to you about my tears!" (64) This quote shows that women did not have the opportunity to be educated and also reveals the degree of Liza's attachment to Erast. When Liza decides to physically give herself to him, she, in a sense, becomes his property, because if he doesn't marry her, no one else will.

That is the reality of a woman of that time, every aspect of their lives is controlled by outside forces. When she finds out that she lost Erast forever, she takes her own life. Karamzin writes, "at this point she threw herself into the water. Anyuta screamed, began to cry, but could not save her; she ran to the village- the people gathered and they pulled Liza out, but she was already dead." (66) In a sense, Liza was dead before she committed suicide,

because she had nothing else to live for. Her death has more to do with her fear of being judged by society, than with the pain of her loss; because, she can't even go to see her mother and sends Anyuta to pass on her message. She is disgraced, her honor and innocence are besmirched, and, on top of that her heart is broken. Karamzin's style may be a little extreme and too sentimental, but it paints a realistic picture of a woman's life in early 19th century Russia.

In his story, "The Betrothed", Chekhov depicts the life of a woman who lives in a different time, but finds herself in a similar predicament as Liza. Nadya, the main character, is supposed to get married, but she doesn't love her fiancé. She is posed with the question of following the path that's paved for her by her family and society, or following her heart. Liza faces the problem of societal pressure, except that she doesn't have a choice that Nadya has, nor is she faced with the conflict of making that choice. The new opportunities available to women in Chekhov's time are very liberating because they give women a chance to assert their individuality, but with the choice comes a conflict that Liza was never faced with. Liza never thought of whether to get an education and liberate herself from the pressure of society, those ideas never entered her mind. This very conflict that comes with making a choice is the main focus of Chekhov's story.

Nadya makes a bold decision to leave her family and her fiancé and moves to the city to get educated. This decision marks her entrance into the public sphere, which adds dimension and complexity to her life. She now has an external world as well as an internal world. This can be observed upon her

return back home. Chekhov writes, "Granny and Nina Ivanovna never went out for fear of meeting Father Andrey and Andrey Andreyich. Nadya walked about the garden and the streets, looking at the houses and the drab fences, and it seemed to her that the town had been getting old for a long time, that it had outlived its day and was waiting, either for its end, or the beginning of something fresh and youthful." (262) This quote clearly shows Nadya's detachment from the external world of judgments and expectations, a world that her granny and mother are still very much dependent on. She walks freely in the town not afraid to meet her ex-fiancé or his father, or the judging eyes of the neighbors.

"Nadya's only distraction was the little boys in the next house who banged on the fence when she strolled about the garden and laughed at her, shouting, 'There goes the bride!'" (262) These boys are a symbol of the external world that remind Nadya that no matter how much she changed, society hasn't. By taking charge of her life, she develops an internal world of peace and confidence, which is heard loudly in her voice after she returns. The fact that Nadya decides to return back home demonstrated her courage before the public and her acceptance of herself. Liza doesn't have the strength to face her mother or the world and her fear and guilt provoke her suicide. For Nadya, the decision she made changed her life and the way she views the world forever, so much that she could never again live in a place where everything is antiquated and the people's ideas are obsolete. "She went upstairs to pack, and the next morning said good-bye to her family, and left the town, gay and full of spirits-as she supposed forever." (263)

Nadya could have married Andrey, lived a peaceful life, and remained in everyone's good graces, but she wouldn't be happy. Nadya lived in a time when women could finally ask the question, " Do I want to live for other people or for myself?" it is not that Liza is of weaker character, but she lived in a time when posing such a question wasn't an option. Chekhov's story introduces a new woman in Russian literature; one who is capable of building her own life and one who is strong enough to break the rusted chains encircling women.