

The castrating woman motif in Chekhov's "Darling" essay sample



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Essay Sample

This paper will argue that the character Olga in Chekhov's "Darling" embodies the castrating mother/wife image and not the "submissive wife stereotype" as Milla Bayuk argues in her 1977 article[1]. Bayuk's misinterpretation is caused by the ambiguity between the levels of *represented* and *implied* meaning in Chekhov's story. On the surface and as the story begins to unfold, Olga is presented as a kind, compassionate woman and devout wife. This image always appears in the foreground of the story because she remains faithful to all the men whom she marries and exteriorizes the same bland female powerlessness throughout the story. On the other hand, the text is filled with allusions which characterize Olga in an indirect manner about a quite different side of the coin which displays a dark and grim side of the character. This other side reflects Olga's monstrous, subconscious image as an emasculating wife and/as mother.

In a society in which the power prerogatives were attributed only to men, women felt powerless and unconsciously attempted to empower themselves by identifying and substituting the masculine other. This idea is the catalyst for the representation of the character of Olga in Chekhov's story and the author gradually unveils the mask of kindness and benevolence, revealing in the end the dangers inherent in the disempowering of women. Chekhov accomplishes a detailed and precise depiction of the castration complex in this story (which is quite remarkable, considering that Freud's writings on this matter appeared a few years after Chekhov's death) which takes place in four stages: compassion, identification with the male other, vulnerability

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and castration. Therefore, even the passages which describe Olga as compassionate and kind are actually nothing more than stages or facets of the castrating woman.

“ The Darling” begins with Olga as she sits dreamily on the porch of her father’s house and converses with Kukin, a theatre manager who constantly complains of the bad weather which prevents customers from coming to his summer garden. Kukin’s boisterous and self-pitying remarks attract Olenka’s attention and she begins to feel sorry for him – “ Olenka listened to Kukin silently, gravely, and sometimes tears would come to her eyes”[2]. Her pity for Kukin is the trigger for her falling in love with him and her decision to marry the man who was “ fighting his fate and assaulting his chief enemy, the apathetic public”[3]. Kukin thus represents the perfect victim, the romanticized incarnation of a man who is rescued by a providential woman. Olga immediately adapts to her new life, getting involved more and more in the theatre life until she receives the news of her husband’s death. The disappearance of Kukin leads Olga into a state of loud desperation as her mourning sobs can be heard by her neighbours who feel pity for her. However, this state of affairs does not last long because one day, as she walks from the church, Olga is accompanied by Vasily Andreich Pustovalov, a lumberyard manager who wisely advises her: “ There is a order in all things, Olga Semyonovna” [...] “ and if one of our dear ones passes on, then it means that this was the will of God, and in that case we must keep ourselves in hand and bear it submissively”[4].

The allusion is clear and Olga will soon marry Pustovalov. Upon this new marriage, Olga’s interests change completely; she seems to have completely

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forgotten about the theatre, only to become engrossed in the family business. She gradually appropriates all her husband's ideas and interests. However, her new-found happiness is short-lived because Postuvalov dies too after six years of (apparent) bliss. When he dies, Olga's concerns seem to be more directed to her own person than to the fate of her husband: " ' To whom can I turn now my darling?' She sobbed when she had buried her husband. ' How can I live without you, wretched and unhappy as I am? Pity me, good people, left alone in the world'"[5]. The death of the second husband marks a drastic change in Olga's behaviour: she becomes a recluse and leaves the household unattended to. However, in the gloom of her mourning, a small glitter of hope appears as rumours start spreading about a certain veterinary who pays her regular visits. From the repetition of the previous patterns - she becomes happy again, her vocabulary is infused with veterinarian terminology - the readers can infer that Olga is again " in love", that she has once again found a man upon whom she can cast her entire devotion.

Volodichka, however, is more resistant to her overpowering energy and eagerness: " I've asked you before not to talk about things that you don't understand! When veterinaries speak among themselves, please don't butt in! It's really annoying!"[6]. Probably attempting to escape Olga's stifling presence, the veterinary leaves her. The disappearance of the third man in her life leaves Olga completely " empty", devoid of any interests, opinions or ideas as if her whole universe had been alternately replaced by the personae of the three men in her life. When everything seems to be lost and Olga starts ageing, the veterinary suddenly appears at her door with the news

that he had returned for good but in the company of his wife and child. To this renewed emergence of alterity in her life, Olga responds with much eagerness and joy, offering her house as a place to live for the veterinary's family.

This is when her suppressed maternal feelings start to surface as she engages, body and soul, in the upbringing and education of the child, Sasha, whom she considers abandoned and undesired by his parents. Once again, as in Kukin's case she sees a "victim" whom she sees fit to rescue. Her compulsive behaviour re-emerges as she internalizes the child's interests and preoccupations and the motif of taking over the other male's life appears again. Sasha feels embarrassed by her overwhelming attentions and asks her to leave him alone. However, Olga does not seem to mind and continues her maternal affections. The story ends with Sasha's words while he is sleeping: "I'll give it to you! Scram! No fighting!"[7] which could signify that Olga's influence is beginning to bear on the child, who appears helpless and "girlish" in the school fight he is dreaming about.

Chekhov constructs the image of Olga as a castrating mother/wife stereotype gradually, incorporating several dimensions - some of them quite misleading - of this motif. First of all, Olga is presented as compassionate and caring, which might be construed as a sign of typically female weakness: "Olenka listened to Kukin silently, gravely, and sometimes tears would come to her eyes. In the end his misfortunes moved her and she fell in love with him"[8]. However, early on, Chekhov embeds ironical allusions to her particular way of loving which amounts to her complete submission to the "other" in her life, be it her father, her aunt, her French teacher. Significantly, <https://assignbuster.com/the-castrating-woman-motif-in-chekhovs-darling-essay-sample/>

her whole life is equated with a series of amorous moments and Olga simply cannot live without being in love. Her compassionate and kind nature is then part of a fantasizing scheme by which she gives the object of her affections the possibility to “enjoy” her attentions and love.

This changes the angle of our perception of Olga's generosity as her acts of love also appear as narcissistic displays of her disempowered self which she is attempting to valorize through the figure of the other. That her affections towards the male other are actually signs of her love for herself becomes plain after Kukin dies when the character is deploring her own fate: “ ‘ My precious!’ Olenka sobbed. ‘ Vanichka, my precious, my sweet! Why did we ever meet! Why did I get to know you and love you! To whom can your poor unhappy Olenka now turn?’ ” [9]. The same “compassion” resurges in Olga's relationship with Sasha, when she takes it upon her to ensure that the child will not feel the absence of maternal love. However, her maternal love is compulsive, abusive and on the brink of madness, as the episodes from the end of the story reveal:

‘ Sashenka!’ she calls after him. He turns around and she thrusts a date or a caramel into his hand. When they turn into the school lane, he feels ashamed at being followed by a tall stout woman; he looks round and says: ‘ you'd better go home now auntie; I can go alone now.’

She stands still and stares after him until he disappears at the school entrance. How she loves him! Not one of her former attachments was so deep; never had her soul surrendered itself so unreservedly, so disinterestedly and with such joy as now when her maternal instinct was

increasingly asserting itself. For this little boy who was not her own, for the dimples in his cheeks, for his very cap, she would have laid down her life, would have laid it down with joy, with tears of tenderness.[10]

The fact that Olga's love seems to be whole only with Sasha suggests the idea that the previous men in her life had been merely surrogate objects of her maternal instinct and that her love for them had something of the possessiveness and emasculating influence that mothers have on their sons.

The next feature of Olga that Chehov insists upon is the character's complete lack of personality, her total identification with the male self. In Freudian terms, a woman's identification with a man signifies the disempowered woman's unconscious attempt at gaining control and power which were, at the time, the exclusive prerogatives of the male. As Olga becomes alternately a theatre director, then a lumberyard manager, a specialist in veterinary science and a surrogate mother, she is also unwittingly undermining the men's status as well as deprives them of the very tokens of masculine power. This effect becomes obvious only at the end of the story. From this perspective, the deaths and flight of the three men in Olga's life can be interpreted as symbolic acts of castration. Her smothering mother instincts seem to drain the life away from the men who fall victims to the overpowering influence of Olga's immense need for protection and control whose insidiousness is all the more dangerous as it hidden behind her rosy cheeks and fresh appearance.

As was stated previously, Olga feeds of the other to fulfill her own life and in the brief intervals when she is alone she becomes desperate, anxious and

empty. This anxiousness indicates the pathological nature of her love. The first sign that is given about her vulnerability when deprived of a masculine image with which to identify, is given the moment Kukin leaves for Moscow: " She sat at the window and watched the stars. It occurred to her that she had something in common with the hens: they too stayed awake all night and were disturbed when the cock was absent from the henhouse"[11]. Her complete decay and apathy, lack of interest for the outer world and the void around surge with a vengeance when she remains alone: " Above all, and worst of all, she no longer had opinions whatever. She saw objects about her and understood what was going on, but she could not form an opinion about anything and did not know what to talk about"[12]. This signifies that, as much as an " aggressor" and castrating model, Olga is also a victim of the society in which she lives, a society which has imposed feelings of inferiority and inadequacy on her in relation with the masculine other.

Sources:

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[1] Milla Bayuk, " The Submissive Wife Stereotype in Chekhov's Darling",
College Language Association Journal, vol. 20, pp. 533-38, 1977.

[2] Chekhov, p. 397

[3] Chekhov, p. 398

[4] Chekhov, p. 401

[5] Chekhov, p. 404

[6] Chekhov, p. 405

[7] Chekhov, p. 411

[8] Chekhov, p. 397

[9] Chekhov, p. 400

[10] Chekhov, p. 410

[11] Chekhov, p. 399.

[12] Chekhov, p. 406