

The price of life: chekhov's "the bet"



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Would you accept the offer of two million dollars in exchange for fifteen years of your life? Despite what you may think, some people would accept the offer without thinking twice. The short story "The Bet" by Anton Chekhov perfectly demonstrates that wealth delivers a happiness that only lasts for a fraction of time, while wisdom could last a lifetime. The symbolism employed by the author creates a vivid understanding that wealth is not everything; money without freedom is wealth acquired in vain.

"The Bet" mainly focuses on two characters, the old banker, and the young man. The banker was rich, while the young man was poor, so that each character could serve as a representative of a broad group. During a debate focusing on whether capital punishment is more just than imprisonment for life, the banker bets that the young man cannot stay imprisoned for more than five years in solitary confinement, for two millions, but the young man offers that he could "stay not five, but fifteen years" (Chekhov 89). The man was young, and prideful. He thought that he had found a way to get rich fast without putting worth effort, a decision he would later regret. He of course accepted the bet, believing that "to live anyhow is better than not at all" (Chekhov 89). Yet the young man soon learns that living anyhow is not always better than death, because he is even driven to the verge of insanity from the imprisonment. The young man goes through countless books during the imprisonment, and gains incredible wisdom for free, since the banker had to purchase all the books. After almost fifteen years, the young man has grown old, and the banker has grown much less wealthy than he once was. Since it seemed that the young man was going to win the two millions, the desperate banker tries to murder the young man and thus retain his money,

only to find that the young man is not going to accept any new arrangement. So, the next day, upon finally reaching fifteen years, the young man (who is not so young anymore) breaks the contract and escapes. When the old banker learns of this fact, he is delighted, yet also painfully aware of what he has done. While the banker kept his money, and the young man gained knowledge, both lost something they would never regain: time (Chekhov 93). While you may think that only the young man wasted fifteen years of his life, the banker also did. The hard-earned money that the banker made from his job, which took time, had to be used to support the prisoner and his books.

Throughout the story, the game of Russian roulette holds out strong as the main symbol. By the rules of this deadly game, only one of the two players will emerge victorious, and wholly intact. Both of the players stake not only wealth but also the most prized possessions of all; their lives and freedom. In the game, two people sit across from each other at a table, and after they bet all their money, they take turns shooting themselves in the head with a revolver. There is only one bullet loaded in the gun, and if you happen to be unlucky and shoot the chamber with the bullet, you die, and of course the winner takes all the spoils. But just as importantly, the two people who play Russian roulette constantly torture each other indirectly. While "capital punishment kills a man at once, but lifelong imprisonment kills him slowly," in Russian roulette, the person with the gun may be killed quickly with the pull of a trigger, but the other man will be imprisoned in a cage of shock and realization, hoping that the other man will die, but also thinking of when his own time will come (Chekhov 89). The revolver is not merely the "leech of freedom"; it is also the "bringer of death" (Chekhov 90). Thus, the simple

revolver in Russian roulette has a chance of killing someone, and therefore of stripping him or her of the freedom to live, but also the freedom to possess wealth. People who play Russian roulette are either desperate or lazy and want an easy alternative to making money. But, they are overlooking the fact that making money fast could also fast forward your life, and cut it short by a great amount. While money and wealth can easily be replaced or regained, three or four years of your life cannot ever be replaced, let alone fifteen (Chekhov 90). Yet, the years of your life also have wealth, more than money or jewels could ever buy; as indicated by "The Bet," the years contain experiences, some which only happen once in a lifetime.

Experiences are eternal, while wealth only aids you for a short while, and is worth absolutely nothing if you are dead or denied the freedom to use it. Either way, if you attempt to get wealthy and live a good life, remember that there are more important concepts in life to carry to the grave, concepts which only time can supply. These are the messages that Chekhov's "The Bet," part parable and part psychological study, conveys.