

The kiss by anton chekhov: a critical analysis



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The Kiss by Anton Chekhov is a brilliant short story. It contains all the requisite features of a good short story. Elements of excitement, drama, romantic infatuation and suspense make the story hold its ground. In terms of literary devices, the apt yet optimal use of imagery and symbolism accentuates the overall effect on the reader. The story is also outstanding for its accommodation of dual characteristics of the concrete and the abstract. In other words, while the romantic preoccupation of Ryabovitch has a certain immediacy and specificity, by the end of the story, it becomes clear that the author is dealing with human universals. The character of Ryabovitch pitted against the unexpected circumstances he finds himself in acts as a representation for broader human life. The rest of the essay will outline the summary, and analyze the themes and literary aspects of the story.

When the officers of a reserve artillery brigade pass through the countryside as part of their military excursion, they are invited for tea by local landlord and retired General von Rabbek. The invitation was largely a matter of courtesy and formality, as the General could have very little genuine interest in entertaining a group of officers unknown and unconnected to him. The event begins on an awkward note, but is soon smoothed by banter, good food and music. When music is played, the young officers choose attractive young women from the gathering to dance in duet. What should be a pleasurable evening out for most is quite the opposite for one young officer called Ryabovitch, who is the central character of the story. Ryabovitch is a shy, lean and modest staff-captain, who regards himself as unattractive. He thinks of himself as “ short, stooping... with spectacles and lynx-like side whiskers”. He could be true about this assessment of himself, or it could

have born of his low self-esteem. Either way, he finds social occasions discomfoting, especially if it involves attractive young women. He tries to minimize his discomfort by joining a group of officers in the billiards room, but soon gets bored. On his way back to the central hall, he gets lost in the labyrinthine design of the house and ends up visiting a darkly lit room. As he ponders where to go next, a young woman visits him in the room and from behind him, plants a kiss upon his cheek. Momentarily, she realizes that she's kissed the wrong man – something indicated by her surprised shriek and immediate rushing out of the room. Though aback by this unexpected yet very pleasant sensation of the young lady's caress and kiss, the young Ryabovitch enjoyed immensely the waft of delightful perfume and the rustle of her delicate dress. This accidental presentation of a powerful feminine charm would have a profound effect on him in subsequent days.

The days after the accidental kiss were one of fanciful infatuation, mixed with imaginative flights of romance, marriage and a happy conjugal life thereafter. All other activities relating to his military duties appear in a blur, as his mind was fixated on the kiss, though he knew well that there is nothing more to it than an accident. In these days of imaginative fancy, Ryabovitch “ goes on feeling the tingle of the kiss “ like peppermint drops” around his mouth; every night he visualizes the girl who kissed him, and retains his joy at fate's accidental caress.” (Evans, 2008, p. 26) Even when the brigade is on the move he daydreams about the kiss and the beauty of the girl. A moving brigade is a complicated affair, with all members of it playing their respective roles and coordinating with one another's movements. But even this deliberate and complex piece of military routine

appears to Ryabovitch as quite boring – an indication of the deep impact made by his evening at the General's.

Though his romantic urges are heightened by the event of the kiss, he slowly comes to realize the reality of his situation. That the girl intended to kiss another man and mistook for him in the dark was always known to Ryabovitch, but now he begins to consciously remind himself of this fact. But, when, after a three month interval, his brigade happens to cross the same village again, his pent up anticipation of meeting the girl who kissed him and pouring out his thoughts to her. But his desperate expectation of an invitation from General von Rabbek similar to the previous visit does not arrive on time. In the mean time, he admonishes himself for his own futile desperation and the purposelessness of his enterprise. When he is eventually informed of the General's invitation to tea, he sticks by the decision not to pursue the girl. In other words, he has honestly measured his own foolish romantic tendencies and evaluated the vacuity of meaning in his pursuit of the mistaken girl. Standing by his convictions and by his own assessment of the situation, he declines the invitation from the General. This approach is not only pragmatic but also righteous, balanced and courageous. Though the ending to the story may come across as anti-climatic, it actually shows Ryabovitch's conquering of himself, as opposed to the vanity of conquering the heart of an unknown girl.

It is important to understand the personal philosophy of the author to appreciate the work he has created. A 1888 letter Chekhov wrote to a friend reveals this philosophy as well as sets the conceptual framework for studying the short story The Kiss. The letter was written in an emotional tone and <https://assignbuster.com/the-kiss-by-anton-chekhov-a-critical-analysis/>

expresses Chekhov's personal credo that he was otherwise not ready to speak about:

“ I am neither liberal, nor conservative, nor gradualist, nor monk, nor indifferentist.... Pharisaim, dull wittedness and tyranny reign not only in merchants' homes and police stations. I see them in science, in literature, among the younger generation.... I look upon tags and labels as prejudices. My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom imaginable, freedom from violence and lies, no matter what form the latter two take.” (McConkey, 2005)

In studying *The Kiss*, the last sentence from the above passage provides the most relevant context. The story stands for ' freedom from lies' as much as it stands for other profound universal truths. In the case of Ryabovitch, the more accurate description is ' freedom from self-deception', which he at long last manages to achieve.

Another salient feature of *The Kiss* is its rootedness to the ethnic while also appealing to the universal. For example, *The Kiss* was written during the early twentieth century. To this extent, some of the sentiments and situations explained by it are specific to the time. Let us take the importance attached by the author to the chance ' kiss'. In contemporary culture, a kiss on the cheek is not a major life event – it happens as a matter of course in everyday life. But the social customs and norms of early twentieth century Russia is quite distant to current standards. Hence, a kiss by an un-married woman, chance or deliberate, carried a lot of significance. During that era, the society placed a lot of importance to the institution of marriage. Marriage

was seen as not only a stable economic and social arrangement, but it also carried prestige and respectability.