

The bet

Literature



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The short story by Chekhov depicts an agreement between a millionaire and a young lawyer, in which the latter agrees to spend fifteen years in solitary confinement and thus will be provided with two million rubles by the banker. The inmate optimally manages this time for self-perfection and finally decides to reject his financial reward. For me, the most amazing aspects of the narrative are the revelation of humanistic values at the beginning and context of the epistle, produced by the voluntary prisoner.

The first part of the literary work depicts a group of intellectuals, who seem to hold a vibrant debate on the nature of lifelong imprisonment, in which the wealthy man assumes: “ [...] but if one may judge *a priori*, the death penalty is more moral and more humane than imprisonment for life. Capital punishment kills a man at once, but lifelong imprisonment kills him slowly” (Chekhov, at www.classicreader.com).

In fact, not a long ago I was to certain degree consistent with this view, given that life imprisonment seemed to me deprivation of opportunity to meet all higher-level human needs, including those for belonging and social identity, for respect and recognition, for love, family life and emotional support, and, finally, for self-actualization as the most rational investment of one's true potential.

Further, I heard a real-life story about a man, who was condemned to fifty years of imprisonment and successfully socialized within the peer group through making a career of prison librarian; after being released, he endures such a destructive anomia, or disappearance of allegedly stable values of life, that suicide appears the outcome of his liberation. In this sense, I can

assume that physical and social freedoms are important but not exceptional conditions for successful psychological functioning, as human being is blessed with the capacity of transcendence and abstractive thinking.

The protagonist's example is illustrative in terms of the focal shift from the physical and social to the intuitive and spiritual: " He was allowed to have a musical instrument and books, and was allowed to write letters, to drink wine, and to smoke. By the terms of the agreement, the only relations he could have with the outer world were by a little window made purposely for that object" (Chekhov).

Whereas the first years of his detachment are marked with the overuse of the above stated products of civilization, the main character soon grows disinterested in the objects making material life more convenient. I can describe this phenomenon in the following way: given that the physical environment is limited to a narrow space, the inmate unintentionally " shrinks" the spatial perception of himself; the same tendency actually refers to the social bonds, which decline owing to their initial weakness.

The abandonment of the material manifestations of this reality turns the protagonist into a " cosmic" creature that travels around the world using exceptionally the power of imagination: " It is true I have not seen the earth nor men, but in your books I have drunk fragrant wine, I have sung songs, I have hunted stags and wild boars in the forests [...]" (Chekhov).

To me view, the way the sage highlights the benefits of such fantasy journey points to the fact that he has already realized that the socially imposed values of objective reality like financial stability, fitness and commitment to <https://assignbuster.com/the-bet/>

public opinion are miserable and finite, as they wax and wane spontaneously, similarly to the moon. At the same time, the mysterious properties of human soul allow extending time and going beyond the daily experiences.

Speaking in philosophical terms, it seems to me that the protagonist declares in his letter that he has turned to the idealist account stating that the potential of human mind skillfully crafts existence. However, I cannot label him as a subjectivist due to his emphasized capacity of ascending over the bodily and social boundaries, as the ex-lawyer has been studying human society “ from above”, similarly to a biologist observing an ant hill using his magnifying glass.

Interestingly, he finally rejects even intellectual qualities, probably implying that their meaning is irreversibly corrupted by the objective reality given that its physical and social dimensions determined their development: “ And I despise your books, I despise wisdom and the blessings of this world. It is all worthless, fleeting, illusory, and deceptive, like a mirage” (Chekhov).

At first I wondered if there were original and eternal values available to humans; the suggestive answer can be found in the following statement: “ [...] so I marvel at you who exchange heaven for earth” (Chekhov). To my view, modern people actually exaggerate the importance of physical fulfillment and social inclusion and turn their earthy life into a cult, but the protagonist’s position can not be accepted as well due to reduction of personality to logos and spirit.

The basic structure of this reality suggests that the Creator intended us as social and interdependent beings, who are to learn to peacefully coexist using common rules or collective philosophy of life. In this sense, I can recollect a really edifying experience of my ex-schoolmate, who was ostracized by peers for her "oddness". She seemed conceited and voluntarily isolated herself from coevals so that she tended to make friends only with books; at the age of fifteen, she was voraciously reading the classics of sociology, psychology as well as ancient and modern thinkers.

As a result, in spite of her age, she created an impression of an old and tired person who comprehended the truth of life too early. I encountered her when she already was a university student with finance as major (by parental insistence) and was astonished with the fountaineering energy she displayed; at that time, my former schoolmate became a course leader, organized a female football team as well as several discussion groups.

She recognized that the true freedom of consciousness consisted in the ability to identify the person's own covert aspirations and move towards them rather than in the absence of connections to the physical and social realities. The humanistic value of life the protagonist declares in the introductory paragraphs is substantially compressed towards the end of his confinement, given that he begins to reject any faculty, any quality, shaped or affected by society and distinguishes spiritual life, probably in the afterworld, as a genuine value.

I cannot agree that he embodies true wisdom, as the prospects for his socialization after the release are quite poor, as he is no longer willing to

interact with humans, whereas the direct necessity is likely to appear soon. However, the reflective transcendence of his spirit to freedom in fantasy and conscience constitutes an admirable and useful pattern of broad-mindedness.