



ANTON PAVLOVICH CHEKHOV

Readings in Russian Literature: The Nineteenth Century
IIIT Hyderabad
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Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904)

- Born in Taganrog near the sea of Azov
- Grandfather was a serf who freed himself and his family before the Emancipation, father a grocer
- Orthodox religious education, sang in choir, altar boy, lost faith later, but
 - Literary depiction of prayers and church service unprecedented in accuracy;
 - Christian understanding of suffering

Osip Braz
Oil on Canvas, 1898
Tretyakov Gallery
Moscow



Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904)

- Big, loving family. Many siblings, all close to their simple, not-very-educated, pious parents
- Chekhov supported his family and brought them to live with him.
- In 1876, his father fled to Moscow to avoid debtor's prison.
- Sixteen-year-old Chekhov teaches to get himself through school and joined medical school in Moscow.
- Aleksandr and he write sketches and stories in popular magazines to support their family and pay for their studies.
- Dmitri Grigorovich takes his work to a publisher, scolds him for not taking writing seriously.

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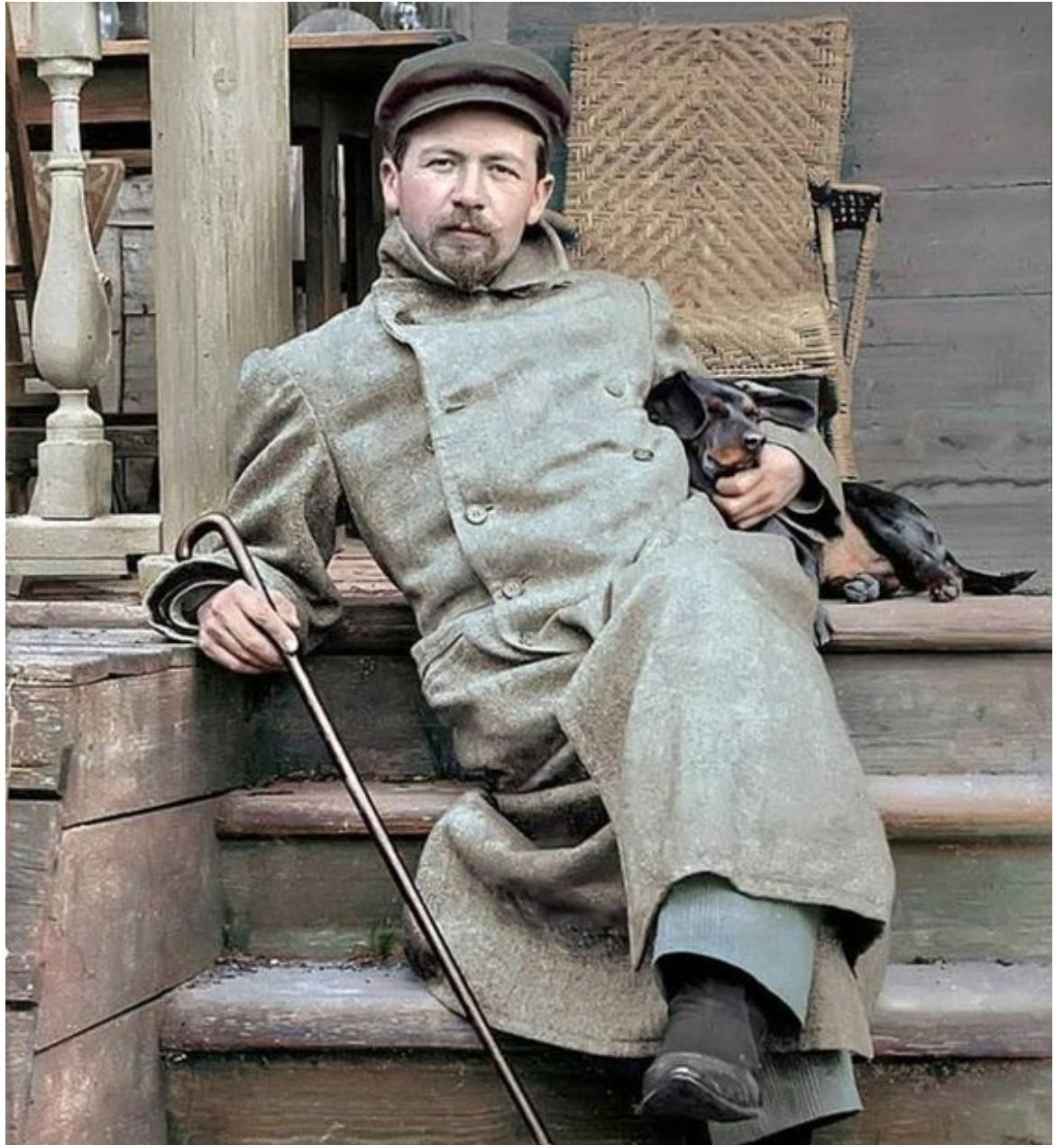


Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904)

- First collection of short stories published the year he completed his medical studies
- Second collection did so well that he decided to give up medicine.
- Began writing plays that were equally successful
- His biggest critics and opposition consisted of literary critics, who believed that literary work should have an ideology and a social message
- Instead, Chekhov produces a kind of realism, but not with a social purpose, “art for art's sake”
- He believed that a writer must be a craftsman, detached, restrained, modest, sober. No grand gestures, just craft. Maupassant: an important influence.

Osip Braz
Oil on Canvas, 1898
Tretyakov Gallery
Moscow





"I would like to be a free artist and nothing else ... 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. Such is the program I would adhere to if I were a major artist" (letter to Aleksei Pleshcheev, 1888; qtd in Pevear 8).

Chekhov's Artistic Principles

1. Absence of lengthy verbiage of a political-social-economic nature;
2. Total objectivity;
3. Truthful descriptions of persons and objects;
4. Extreme brevity;
5. Audacity and originality: flee the stereotype;
6. Compassion.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904)

- Strong sense of moral and social duty:
 - Graduated, but never set up a practice, set up free clinics and gave free treatment to peasants.
 - Worked in the cholera epidemics of 1891 and 1892, organized famine relief and medical aid.
 - Built several very successful schools for peasant children, donated books to libraries, helped set up research centres.
 - Resigned from the Russian Academy over Gorky's membership.
 - Split briefly from Aleksei Suvorin over the Dreyfus case.
 - Took a census of Sakhalin Island penal colony and reforms followed.

Osip Braz
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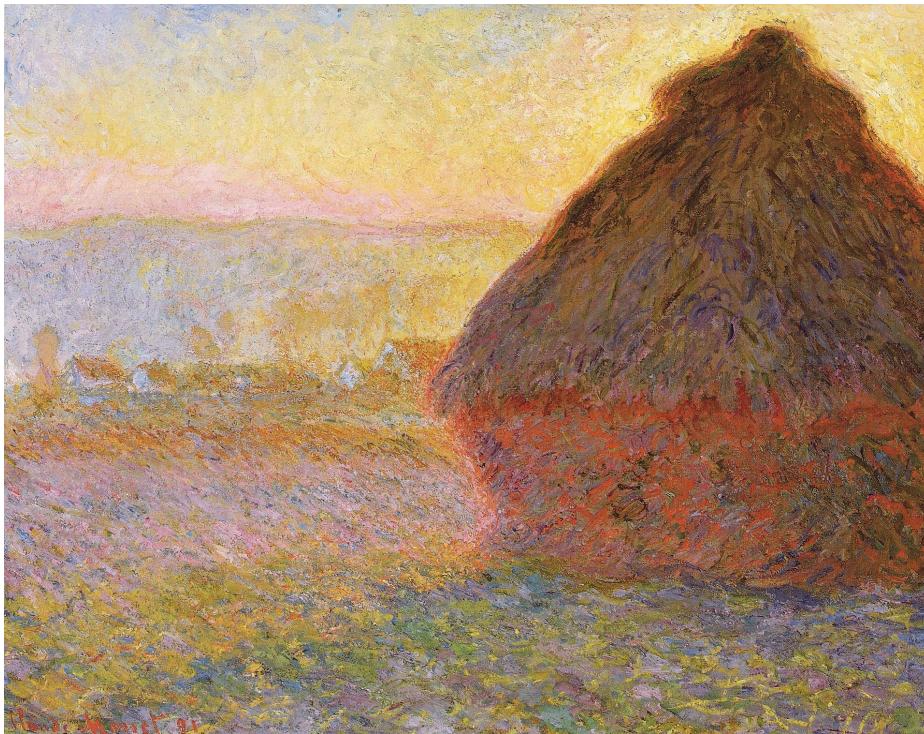


Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904)

- The only people he wasn't loyal to were women!
- Met and married Olga Knipper of the Moscow Art Theatre (f. 1898; Konstantin Stanislavsky, Dmitri Nemirovich Danchenko)
- *The Seagull* (1898), *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *Three Sisters* (1904), and *Cherry Orchard* (1904)
- So many short stories ... !
- “Death of a Clerk” (1883), “The Lady with the Little Dog” (1903)

Osip Braz
Oil on Canvas, 1898
Tretyakov Gallery
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Haystacks (1890-1891)
Claude Monet
Oil on canvas
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

"Chekhov is an incomparable artist ... an artist of life . . . Chekhov has created new forms of writing, completely new, in my opinion, to the whole world, the like of which I have not encountered anywhere ... Chekhov has his own special form, like the impressionists"

- Lev Tolstoi, qtd in Pevear 5-6.

Lyric Realism

- Lyrical realism: pleasing patterns in structure and symbols (such as symmetry or deep, beautiful visual language) limpid diction. Chekhov makes mundane things poetic.

"Chekhov's way of composition wordlessly extends the limited scope of the story by means of juxtaposition, alternation, simultaneity, that is, by means of a new kind of poetic logic. His art is constructive not in a narrative but in a musical sense ... his language is perhaps the plainest in Russian literature; but he built his stories by musical means—curves, repetitions, modulations, intersecting tones, unexpected resolutions" (6).

"And Anna Sergeevna began coming to see him in Moscow. Once every two or three months she left S., and told her husband she was going to consult a professor about her female disorder — and her husband did and did not believe her. Arriving in Moscow, she stayed at the Slavyansky Bazaar and at once sent a man in a red hat to Gurov. Gurov came to see her, and nobody in Moscow knew of it" (247).

He had married young, while still a second-year student, and now his wife seemed half again his age. She was a tall woman with dark eyebrows, erect, imposing, dignified, and a thinking person, as she called herself. She read a great deal, used the new orthography, called her husband not Dmitri but Dimitri, but he secretly considered her none too bright, narrow-minded, graceless, was afraid of her, and disliked being at home. He had begun to be unfaithful to her long ago, was unfaithful often, and, probably for that reason, almost always spoke ill of women, and when they were discussed in his presence, he would say of them:

"An inferior race!"

Woman with a Parasol
(Madame Monet and Her Son), 1875
Claude Monet
Oil on Canvas
National Gallery of Art

Reading (Portrait of Edma Morisot), 1873
Berthe Morisot
Oil on Fabric
Cleveland Museum of Art







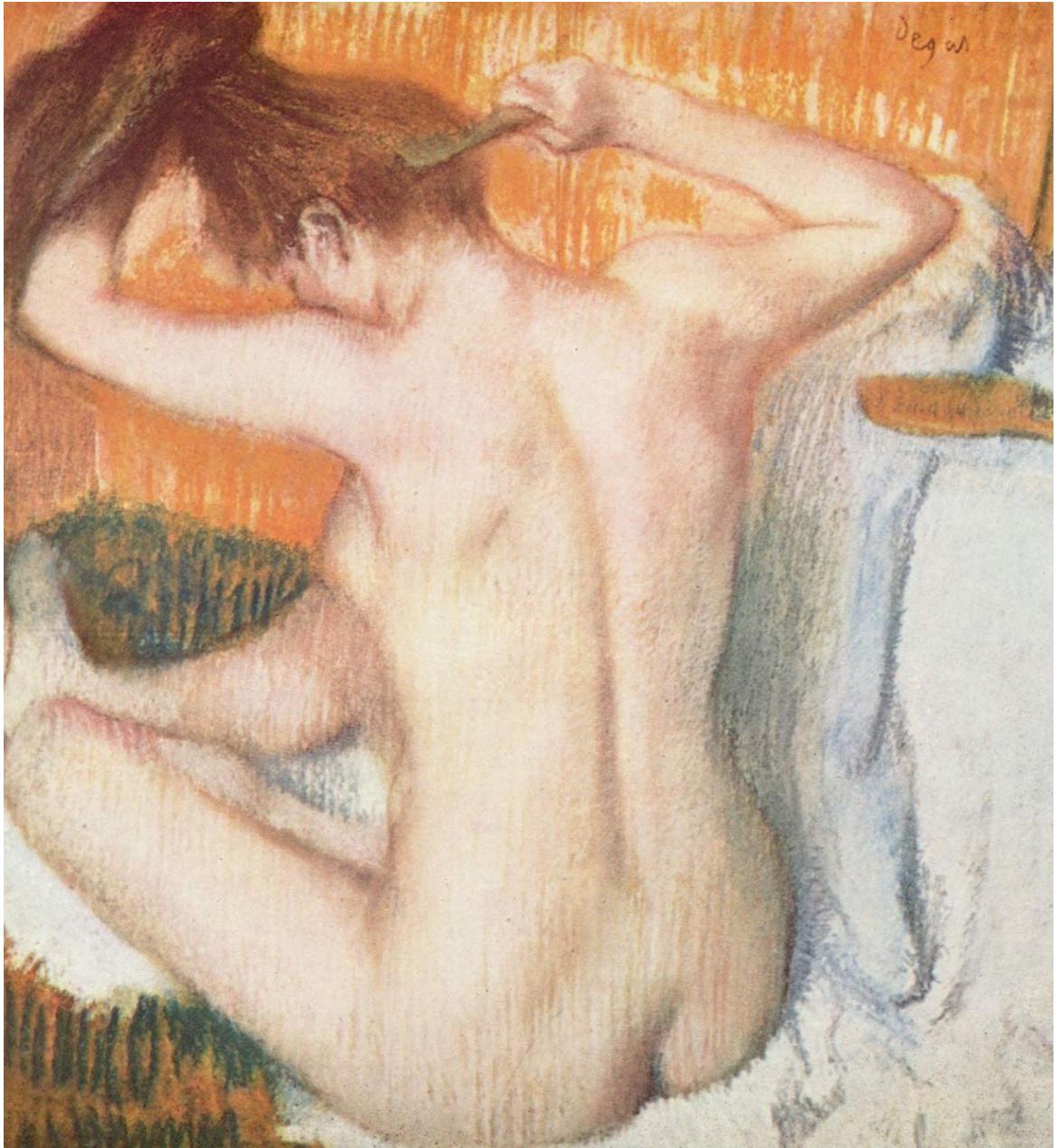
Terrasse à Sainte-Adresse
Garden at Sainte-Adresse (1866-1867)
Claude Monet
Oil on Canvas
Metropolitan Museum of Art

“And from her he learned that she grew up in Petersburg, but was married in S., where she had now been living for two years, that she would be staying in Yalta for about a month, and that her husband might come to fetch her, because he also wanted to get some rest. She was quite unable to explain where her husband served—in the provincial administration or the zemstvo council—and she herself found that funny. And Gurov also learned that her name was Anna Sergeevna” (240).



Terrasse à Sainte-Adresse
Garden at Sainte-Adresse (1866-1867)
Claude Monet
Oil on Canvas
Metropolitan Museum of Art

“But here was all the timorousness and angularity of inexperienced youth, a feeling of awkwardness, and an impression of bewilderment, as if someone had suddenly knocked at the door” (241).

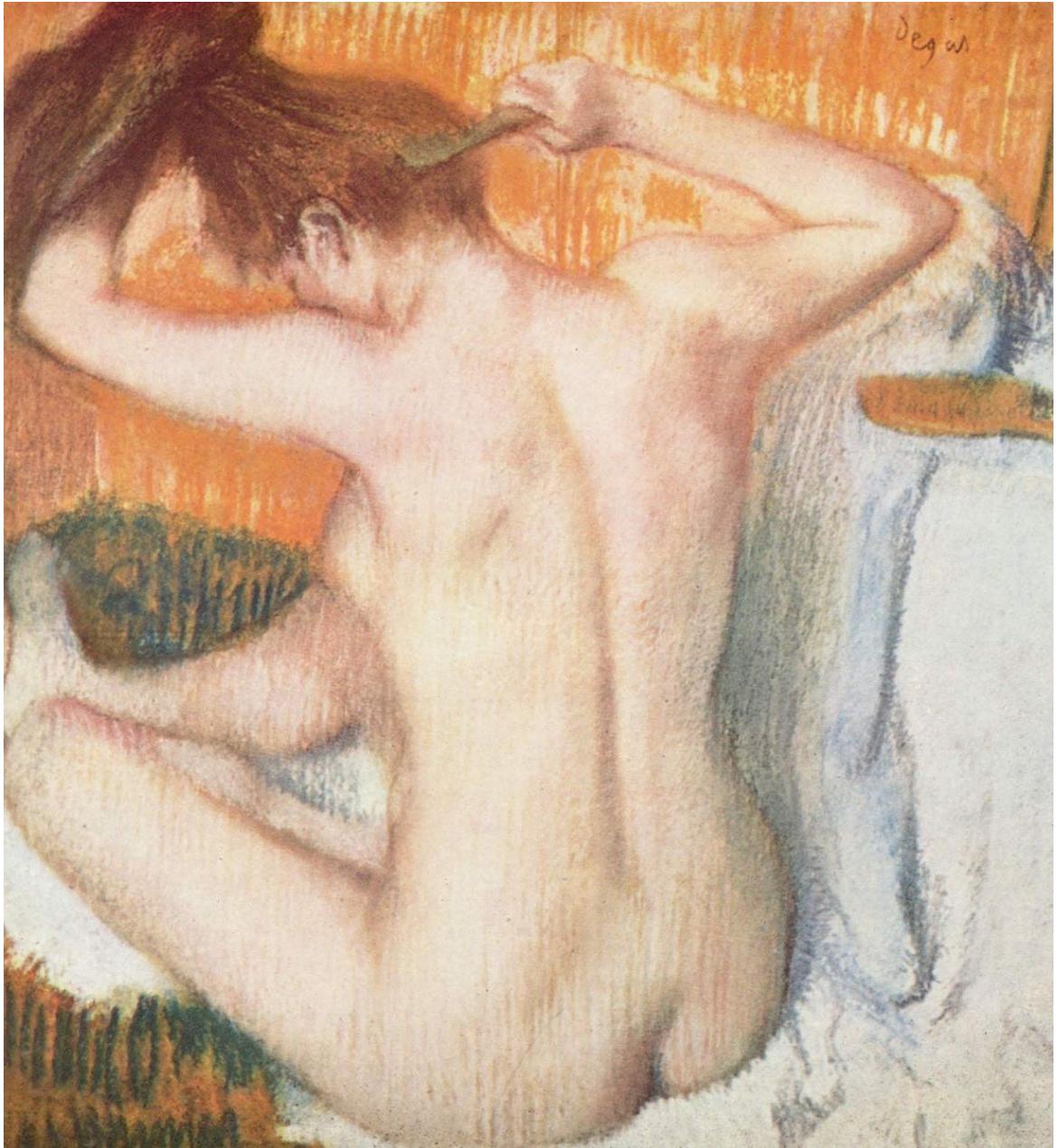


"It's not good," she said. "You'll be the first not to respect me now."

There was a watermelon on the table in the hotel room. Gurov cut himself a slice and unhurriedly began to eat it. At least half an hour passed in silence.

Anna Sergeevna was touching, she had about her a breath of the purity of a proper, naive, little-experienced woman; the solitary candle burning on the table barely lit up her face, but it was clear that her heart was uneasy. (241)

La Toilette (Woman Combing Her Hair),
c.1885
Edgar Degas
Pastel on Paper
The Hermitage



"Gurov was bored listening, he was annoyed by the naive tone, by this repentance, so unexpected and out of place; had it not been for the tears in her eyes, one might have thought she was joking or playing a role" (241).

La Toilette (Woman Combing Her Hair),
c.1885
Edgar Degas
Pastel on Paper
The Hermitage

“The leaves of the trees did not stir, cicadas called, and the monotonous, dull noise of the sea, coming from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep that awaits us. So it had sounded below when neither Yalta nor Oreanda were there, so it sounded now and would go on sounding with the same dull indifference when we are no longer here. And in this constancy, in this utter indifference to the life and death of each of us, there perhaps lies hidden the pledge of our eternal salvation, the unceasing movement of life on earth, of unceasing perfection. Sitting beside the young woman, who looked so beautiful in the dawn, appeased and enchanted by the view of this magical decor—sea, mountains, clouds, the open sky—Gurov reflected that, essentially, if you thought of it, everything was beautiful in this world, everything except for what we ourselves think and do when we forget the higher goals of being and our human dignity” (242).

“The train left quickly, its lights soon disappeared, and a moment later the noise could no longer be heard, as if everything were conspiring on purpose to put a speedy end to this sweet oblivion, this madness. And, left alone on the platform and gazing into the dark distance, Gurov listened to the chirring of the grasshoppers and the hum of the telegraph wires with a feeling as if he had just woken up” (243).

“He was touched, saddened, and felt some slight remorse; this young woman whom he was never to see again had not been happy with him; he had been affectionate with her, and sincere, but all the same, in his treatment of her, in his tone and caresses, there had been a slight shade of mockery, the somewhat coarse arrogance of a happy man, who was, moreover, almost twice her age. She had all the while called him kind, extraordinary, lofty; obviously, he had appeared to her not as he was in reality, and therefore he had involuntarily deceived her . . .” (243)

“He had two lives: an apparent one, seen and known by all who needed it, filled with conventional truth and conventional deceit, which perfectly resembled the lives of his acquaintances and friends, and another that went on in secret. And by some strange coincidence, perhaps an accidental one, everything that he found important, interesting, necessary, in which he was sincere and did not deceive himself, which constituted the core of his life, occurred in secret from others, while everything that made up his lie, his shell, in which he hid in order to conceal the truth—for instance, his work at the bank, his arguments at the club, his ‘inferior race,’ his attending official celebrations with his wife—all this was in full view. And he judged others by himself, did not believe what he saw, and always supposed that every man led his own real and very interesting life under the cover of secrecy, as under the cover of night” (247-48).

The Lady with the Little Dog

- Mundaneness of life, but like all Maupassant's stories, artistic refinement is hidden behind an air of casualness and seeming superficiality.
- Conflict: She sees it as false and immoral, he sees it as the most real thing in his life.
- Gentle story: great internal turmoil of the soul and body, but no loud or melodramatic representation. Almost something mundane about their meetings.

The End

“And it seemed that, just a little more — and the solution would be found, and then a new, beautiful life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far, far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning.

December 1899”

- “That is all. The story does not build to any moment of truth; it does not reach any significant conclusion. It simply stops” (Pevear 6).

Death of a Clerk

Death of a Clerk

- Several clerks and other kinds of civil servants in this course → a preoccupation among Russian writers, owing to the visibility and power of the imperial bureaucracy,
 1. whose intricate network was spread across a vast transcontinental empire;
 2. which played a critical role in centralization of power and maintenance of socio-economic structure of the state.
- From the pathetic and wheedling Akaky Akakiyevich of Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" → the corrupt country clerks of Ivan Turgenev's "The Office" → the slavish echo with cosmopolitan urban pretensions in Fyodor Dostoevsky's "The Crocodile."
- Aleksandr Pushkin's "Death of a/the Poet" → anticlimactic, satirical, realistic.
 - "Death of a/the Poet" was a sign of the times, so is "Death of a Clerk" a sign of its own time.

Death of a Clerk

- Cherviakov – Cherviak – “a worm”; Brizhalov – sprayed upon/grumbler.
- Ironic, sarcastic comment: sneezing is hardly unexpected.

“But suddenly . . . This ‘but suddenly’ occurs often in stories. The authors are right: life is so full of the unexpected! But suddenly his face wrinkled, his eyes rolled, his breath stopped ... he put down the opera glasses, bent forward, and . . . ah-choo!!!”

- Narrator sincerely narrates the incident of the sneeze as if it is beyond the narrator’s control, as if they too are an observer outside the story.

“As you see, he sneezed. Sneezing is not prohibited to anyone anywhere. Peasants sneeze, police chiefs sneeze, sometimes even privy councillors sneeze. Everybody sneezes.”

Death of a Clerk

- Cherviakov
 1. anxiously scrutinizes every bit of the General's behaviour, real or imagined, and attributes meaning to it
 2. develops a more and more elaborate apology each time, taking care to plan his appearance and words.
- Why does the General get more and more angry, progressively?
- Clear, unambiguous dismissal is too much to bear for this man trained in obedience and protocol. The consequences of offending rank are too great to ignore and be reconciled to.

Works Cited

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