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From Ragin and Gromov to Tsars and Serfs

Ward no.6, written by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov and first published in 1892, portrays the thoughts of people wielding different amounts of power. As Ragin, the doctor in a position of power, loses his power and is lowered to the same level, he loses his original philosophies. It took being lowered to Gromov's societal standing to relate to his thoughts, which only humoured him previously. This shows their views on life come from the positions they are in. Their changing beliefs and statuses are based on the changing times of the emancipation of the serfs, which unbond peasants to the land, allowing them to travel and own property but taking their jobs and the landowner's workers in the process. (Hruska, 628) Both classes encountered instability and difficulty in making a living. The two main characters Gromov and Ragin What becomes of the two characters are representative of future of the two social classes. Gromov was shown as the lower classes, no choice in where to go or what to do like the serfs. Ragin's control and power over his own life and the lives of others cemented him as a symbol of the ruling class, his eventual death either a metaphor for loss of power or an accurate prediction for the future of Russia.

Ragin's life philosophy, before losing his job, was largely based around chance and fate, even saying "morals and logic have nothing to do with [who is in the asylum.] It all depends on chance." (Chekhov, 54) This is also the beliefs feudal kings and emperors were known to use to explain their power and as demonstrated by Ragin, anyone with any power can use as an excuse. King James I was a major figure in the development and usage of the theory of the Divine Right of Kings, stating the power of the king and his heirs was granted by God. (Figgis, 142) For the people, this meant the questions of who is the king is above the wills of men and women but solely attributed to something greater. It is identical to concept

of chance which Ragin believes in in the sense both beliefs completely shift the responsibility off of oneself and onto a concept under no one's control. King James I, as king, had the power to choose the king much like how Ragin, as a doctor, had the power to affect who is in the asylum and who is not and even to seek for the patients proper treatment. The belief allowed them to see themselves as bystanders by choosing to do nothing and ignoring the effects of their inaction. Ragin believed in stoicism, a school of philosophy based around finding happiness in the moment they are presented with, because the situations presented to him are enjoyable and under his control though he does not think it. To believe in fate is a privilege of those in power, as they, willing or not, are the ones who write the fate of others.

The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 by Tsar Alexander II muddled the once clear social standing of each citizen. It would seem, at first glance, to be a simple act of liberation for the oppressed. However, it removed the stability the people had grown accustomed to over eight hundred years. Before losing his job, Ragin's future was certain, without the certainty, Ragin lost his position and philosophies. Serfs no longer had a living without land to work and landlords felt their ownership of their ancestral lands were threatened as many serfs refused freedom without also being given land. (Hruska, 628) It was the first step towards the inevitable collapse of the classes, the same way Ragin's loss of job immediately set him on a path towards a life like Gromov's. An attempt at social equality kept the poor poor but also impoverished the rich. Khobotov meant to help Ragin the same way doctors meant to help the patients of the asylum, but like the doctors, including Ragin, they Ragin was made equal with Gromov, but neither party benefited. After Ragin was locked in the asylum, he started to be sympathetic to the revolutionary ideas about the unfairness of the ruling classes of Gromov. The lower classes are the only ones shown who think of the unfairness of the upper classes, by lowering the landlords, Alexander II only increased unhappiness towards the tsardom in the long run. There is no way for the Tsar to understand

the thoughts of either landowner nor serf. Much like Khobotov, in an attempt to help people he could not relate to nor understand, ideas of revolution and unfairness only spread.

Ward no.6 exists in writing as a medical facility to help the ones who have lost their sanity. In practicality, it keeps the ones deemed insane in permanently. There is no way for anyone to leave without the help of others. If Gromov is the lower class, then the asylum would be environment of the lower class, poverty. The cycle of poverty continues because the lack of resources makes it impossible to gain resources, alluded by there being no treatment happening in the asylum. After being locked into the asylum, Ragin realise how little there is in the asylum and how it would be impossible to be sane in that environment. (Chekhov, 80) The treatment for insanity leads only to more insanity. There are no ways to leave the cycle without support from others, however the doctors feel no obligation to help the ones in ward no.6. Ragin saw the problem and Khobotov saw how the problem came to be by watching Ragin lose his sanity, despite this and both of them being in a position to help the patients escape the cycle, they have no understanding of what the patients are thinking and therefore are unwilling to help. Ragin understood the reality of Gromov later and was terrified by it. (Chekhov, 81) By then, he no longer had the power to affect the cycle. The ones who are in a position to help do not understand enough to be willing to help, but the ones who understand enough to be willing to help are not in a position to help.

Times changed too quickly for Ragin, powerless and unable to adapt, he died. The downward spiral began with him being fired from his job, an allusion to the emancipation of the serfs. Ragin, as the upper class, lost wealth and power too quickly and as time passed, he only lost more of it. Gromov as a person represented the lower class, but the ideas of Gromov represented the revolution. Either Ragin decided to follow Gromov's philosophies after the wisdom gained from his experiences, or the revolution consumed him after he had lost everything. No matter which, when the revolution reached the ruling classes, there was no

more place for them. Gromov said because Ragin never suffered, he is feeble by nature. (Chekhov, 61) This was shown to be true, as Ragin was unable to survive in an environment Gromov and others like him lived in for years. Ragin died suddenly, with only two people at his funeral, the world moved on. The beginning of the end of the ruling classes started with them losing the serfs, not because they needed their workers so badly they cannot function without them, but because they lost stability. The loss of stability brings about revolution, and no matter the thoughts of the upper class and whether they are sympathetic or not to revolutionary ideas, individual people may join the lower classes but the class itself will not survive.

The characters, locations and philosophies of *Ward no. 6* can all be directly related to the events during and following the emancipation reform, which can all be related to all people of different social classes throughout history and different cultures, because the interactions and ideas do not come from the people but the power they have. The actions and thoughts of a person cannot be completely attributed to the person's nature, but instead what their position in society allows for. Oppressed people will continue to call for change, which people in positions of power will not understand as they continue to carry philosophies allowing them to not hold themselves responsible. As time passes, patterns repeat, there will continue to be few ways to understand others without having experienced what they have experienced. Social standing is a concept unlikely to ever become completely obsolete and as long as it exists, the cycle of suffering seems to have no end either. However, the emancipation of the serfs and similar events failed because of the mutual misunderstanding between the ruling class and the lower classes, a misunderstanding Ragin showed could be solved only through experiencing what life is like at a different position in society.

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