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Interpreting Chekhov's Intent Through His Writing Style

Gooseberries by Anton Chekhov appears, at first to be a story within a story, using one to tell the other. However, there is only one true story and the only purpose of the story of Nicholai Ivanich is to prove the lesson learnt throughout reading is not meant to be the lessons the main character, Ivan Ivanich teaches through the story he tells, but is instead learnt from the hypocrisy of Ivan Ivanich himself. While it may seem to readers the lessons Ivan Ivanich wants to teach throughout his story is sound, it is not how the character himself acts and those ideas are only his excuses for the disdain he has for others and his unhappiness with his own life. The story within the story shows what Ivan Ivanich thinks and the frame story shows what he does. Chekhov intended for both parts of the short story to show the wrongs of Ivan Ivanich and intended for the character to be a model for how people should not act like. Ivan Ivanich isn't the medium through which Chekhov's message is told, instead the medium itself is the message. To think of Chekhov's character in *Gooseberries* as a medium for his own preaching would be to understand the opposite of Chekhov's true intentions. Chekhov himself does not give people solutions to problems but acts only as a reporter, telling people about events and ideas and does not agree with telling people how to live their lives (155, Spiers). Ivan Ivanich does the opposite, meaning Chekhov's philosophy is in direct disagreement with his character's. This may ironically mean Chekhov's pushing of these ideas contradict his own writer's philosophy.

If readers were to only read the frame story, being the parts of Ivan Ivanich in the current time and the words he says to his friends, excluding everything about the past and about his brother, they may already be aware of certain contradictions in the way which he conducts

himself. The story within, not even a real story, is meant to enforce those ideas so the readers may realise their learning of those contradictions was the reason the story was written. The part of the short story within the frame is described as an “essentially plotless portrayal of [Ivan Ivanich] in relation to his brother’s experience” (Freedman, 9). If there is no plot, there is no story, so Ivan Ivanich’s long dialogue is little more than a rant. Since the only important point of his brother’s experience is how it relates to Ivan Ivanich, then the focus of the story is on the progression and revelation of Ivan Ivanich’s character. “Chekhov’s stories are told through how characters see themselves and their world” (Isenberg, 110). In accordance with this, the tale of Nicholai Ivanich shows only how Ivan Ivanich sees a part of his world. The same literary analyst saw the tale as a way to progress the main story (Isenberg, 111). However, it does not progress how Ivan Ivanich thinks as he states what he thinks himself to his friends in the current time and explains his entire philosophy (72, Chekhov). His thoughts do not change from his youth to present time during his interactions with his brother, his story only implicitly reveal the reason he has elected to think the way he does. The story Ivan Ivanich tells does not change nor reveal more of what he thinks, it is only an excuse of why he thinks this way and to the readers, it only further shows his hypocrisy and jealousy.

Ivan Ivanich’s ultimate lesson in its simplest form is for people to do good instead of chasing their own happiness. However, this lesson depends on the premise of the impossibility of both being a good person and being happy. This happened because while Nicholai and Ivan Ivanich enjoy similar things, Nicholai Ivanich achieved his goals and Ivan Ivanich is now pursuing his own happiness by criticising others and their happiness. Firstly, what makes Ivan Ivanich happy and what makes his brother happy are shown to have many similarities. For example, Nicholai Ivanich’s love for the country, his most discerning characteristic, is shown to

be shared by his brother in the first paragraph when he was “filled with love for the [countryside]” (Chekhov, 35). Ivan Ivanich presents himself as upset and disillusioned with the world and one who dislikes selfish pursuits of happiness but as he is telling this to others, he is visibly excited and shown to be enjoying his rant (Chekhov, 71). He has some semblance of self-awareness of the fact he hypocritically does not follow his own teachings, shown through his excuses such as “if I were young” (Chekhov, 72). However, his own teachings are also an excuse for why he acts the way he does and condescends onto others for their happiness, when he does so because of his own pursuit for happiness. Ivan Ivanich is a character whose story teaches the readers to not be like him, a lesson Chekhov intended to teach through *Gooseberries*.

The short story *Gooseberries* was written not to present several perspectives and allow the readers to understand them and ultimately choose what to agree and what to disagree with, Chekhov saw Ivan Ivanich as a bad way to be and wanted his readers to think the same. “Ivan Ivanich gives [readers] to doubt his full credibility early on” (9, Freedman). The frame story works together with the literary device of an unreliable narrator, by revealing it early, readers are encouraged to press on and find out more internal contradictions made by Ivan Ivanich. The way the story is written is one which actively encourages finding the narrator’s faults. In response to *Gooseberries*, Joseph Conrad decided the Chekhov’s lesson in this short story was “man must not only maintain his freedom but is obligated to exercise and utilise his own qualities,” which is paraphrasing what Ivan Ivanich says to his friends (899, Wear). However, to come to this conclusion would require ignoring the relationship between the frame and inner story, Ivan Ivanich’s lack of action and almost everything else except for the words he says, which, even then, would require believing his words to be absolute truth which leads back to the frame story. For example, nearing the end of the story, when Ivan Ivanich finally finishes speaking about his

brothers, his listeners are bothered and uncomfortable, this is “Chekhov [] anticipating the readers’ reactions” (Malcolm, 180). If readers were not supposed to be encouraged or inspired by Ivan Ivanich’s lessons, then there is no possibly they were the lessons readers were supposed to learn. In response to the Conrad’s quote, an analyst thought it would mean “Ivan Ivan[i]ch is clearly a spokesman for Chekhov” (Wear, 889). Though it may seem wrong as Chekhov meant for Ivan Ivanich to be a disagreeable character, it does not mean he disagrees with his final philosophy, as it was not even meant to be the final message of the story. Ivan Ivanich is not a medium for which a lesson was transferred through from Chekhov to the reader, the person of the medium was the lesson itself. It may not be entirely inaccurate to call Ivan Ivanich a spokesman if he is considered as a cautionary tale instead of a lecturer.

Chekhov does not write any which is unnecessary to the story (Borny). Thus, when trying to discover the message his short story is meant to tell, the entirety of the story must be considered and the purpose of every factor must be revealed. From the way, the device of a story within a story is set up, the frame hints the readers of Ivan Ivanich’s nature of which his story further proves. It leads to finding faults of the main character, which through writing, Chekhov encourages readers to find, revealing the writer’s intentions. However, “Chekhov does not exhort his readers [and since] Ivan Ivanich violates this tenet[,] he might be the antithesis of what Chekhov stood for (900, Wear). When Ivan Ivanich’s forceful pushing of his philosophies onto others may be another way in which Chekhov disagrees with his characters, the way Chekhov facilitates, through his writing, for readers to also find Ivan Ivanich disagreeable may be considered him pushing his philosophy onto readers. Hypocrisy is one of Ivan Ivanich’s main faults, but it may be possible, through showing it in such a way without any support and hardly any mention for other possible perspectives, Chekhov himself was acting hypocritically through

his writing. Whether it is before or after the author's intentions in importance, whether this lesson he pushes is true or not has not been discussed. Further study will need to be done to try to understand other perspectives, as since Ivan Ivanich was written to be unreliable, so too is his philosophy in the way he expresses it. Then, whether Chekhov was truly being hypocritical and whether it affects the truthfulness of his message must also be discussed.

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