

# The Creative Launcher

Journal Home URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 7 & Issue 1, (February, 2022)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on: 28 February 2022

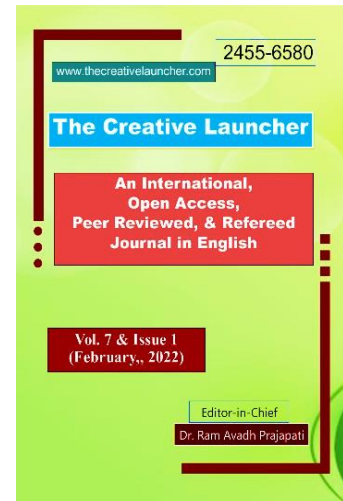
Peer Reviewed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

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Article History: Abstract received: 26 January 2022 | Complete article received: 26 January 2022 | Revised article received: 9 February 2022 | Accepted: 19 February 2022 | First Published: 28 February 2022



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## Beyond the Bond: Love, Marriage and Romance in Anton Chekhov's Selected Short Stories

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.1.11>

Pages: 73-78

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### Abstract

Anton Chekhov is a literary giant in nineteenth century fiction. He has contributed to the contemporary literature a deep awareness of human emotions, which foregrounds the necessity to understand the emotional values in narrative. Chekhovian realism has been a formula which writers have diligently followed ever since. In most of his fictional oeuvre he has depicted the individuals of modern society experiencing various shades of emotions which guide their

psychological, interpersonal as well as social life. The stories written by Anton Chekhov are kaleidoscopes of various experiences which are an integral part of modern existence. Interpersonal relationships, especially man-woman relationships are portrayed by Chekhov in a striking manner. The present paper is an attempt to study a few of his selected short stories, keeping in mind Chekhov's interest in a counter-presentation of such relations.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal Relations, Apathy, Discord, Realism, Psychology

A curious reader of Anton Chekhov would certainly appreciate his choice for such themes, in which humanity finds its most natural expression. Chekhovian imagery, symbolism, language and character delineation put the reader in an active role where s/he is supposed to study the ethos of the writer beyond words and page. The short stories of Chekhov are little pieces of intense sensibility which provide an outlook on the emotional state of modern individuals. Chekhov has a penetrating vision through which he peeps into the persona of his characters revealing their innermost emotional and cognitive perceptions. "Chekhov advanced the form of character creation from a romantic focus to what is now the modern character. Chekhov (...) avoids depicting the minds of his characters, instead letting the character's mood or feeling communicate their inner state" (Theriat).

Many of his short stories focus on marital and romantic relationships which are written in a manner far away from the traditional sense of romance. Interpersonal relationships are most severely affected in today's life. This paper is a study of selected short stories of Anton Chekhov in which this theme is predominant. The first story "Love" is a portrayal of love, the most elementary of human emotions, outside its vibrant imaginative colours. In this short story, love is devoid of its affective connotations and glory. The narrator experiences love not only as a desperate lover but also as a practical husband. The contrast between both emotions is well-developed and narrated. The story shows the development of love from its initial fervour and frenzy to boredom and frustrations. In Anton Chekhov's stories his dry wit and stark realism are remarkable elements. The narrator of the story, speaking in first person, recalls his emotions which seem quite surprising to himself at the beginning. Interestingly, the excitement of the narrator meets with an apathetic response by his ladylove Sasha. The dreamy, romantic young man seems quite old school in his expressions, as he loves sending scented cards and

hopes to meet her at secret places. He sleeps in restlessness, waiting for her response. He keeps weaving imagination around the life that he would spend with his beloved, his future wife. In a characteristic manner to Anton Chekhov's stories, the youthful exuberance of the narrator is contrasted with cold and detached attitude of the woman, who was more interested in the formalities of the wedding than in the emotions involved in it. Emotion itself takes a backstage in the process of formalising it. Sasha, the narrator's beloved turns from the muse of fanciful ideas into an image of practical wife-hood. The entire idea of love is question- marked, as the narrator is confused whether he ever experienced love in his life.

I remember my old lovelace days. I have cast off women for a stain on their stockings, or for one foolish word, or for not cleaning their teeth and now I forgive everything...

The explanation of this forgiveness of everything lies in my love for Sasha but, what is the explanation of love itself, I really don't know. (*World's Great...*641)

In his other short story "A Trifle from Life" Anton Chekhov has sympathetically blended child psychology within a structure of troubled relationships. Marital relations resulting into separation or discord is one of his most recurrent themes in his short stories. The most popular feature of Chekhov's writings in such narratives is that he hardly gets into the details of what had caused the problem in relationships rather he focuses on the feelings that people experience either within a troubled marriage or romance, or outside it. Conflict and frustration mostly remain spoken, which becomes an even bigger cause of psychological torture for concerned people. If children are involved in such problematic relationships, the problem becomes graver. In this short story, Olga Ivanovna, who has been separated from her husband, is carrying a romantic relationship with another man Belyaev. Belyaev feels that their relationship is "a long, wearisome romance" (643), which certainly lacks attraction. The relationship seems to have lost the excitement that lovers experience at the beginning of affairs. What is left between them is no longer meaningful. Dry realism prevails in Chekhov's description of such relations. Upon catching sometime alone with Olga's son when she was not home, Belyaev begins to enquire him about his father. Hesitantly, Alyosha tells him that he had been secretly meeting his father, although he makes Belyaev promise that he would keep the information to himself. The tricks and treachery that Belyaev plays with little Alyosha in order to justify his own frustrated self is noteworthy in the short story. Alyosha was shaken out of his wits to realise that bigger men can easily break their promises. It seems that Belyaev

himself wanted to break away from the relationship therefore he used the secrets of Alyosha to benefit himself.

Evidently, Anton Chekhov did not have quite positive notions about love or marriage, as it appears in many of his fictional works. Scholars have tried to trace an autobiographical connection in his bitterness towards marriage and romantic relationships, especially in the relationship with his wife Olga Knipper which was not a happy one. “The experience of marriage constitutes a major preoccupation in Chekhov's oeuvre and yet since the earliest reviews of his work, scholars and critics assumed that when it came to marriage, Chekhov only and always took the dimmest view...” (Purves 2).

The story “Not Wanted” is a portrayal of sullen life being led by the protagonist Zaikin. The story depicts a husband's struggle to live up to the expectations of his family while dealing with his own challenges-physical, psychological as well as financial. The title of this story itself suggests its mood. The protagonist feels excluded from the emotional as well as social circle of his own wife. The wife is so engrossed in the pursuit of her own interests that she hardly cares about the difficulties that the husband goes through. He feels isolated, left-out and overlooked. The detached wife in a marriage is a popular trope used by Anton Chekhov in many of his short stories. The central character Zaikin is seemingly being stifled in a relationship with an apathetic wife who takes little interest either in him or their son. On his wife's insistence he had to rent a summer villa in the outskirts of the city where they could spend their summer vacation whereas the villa was quite expensive for Zaikin. He had to suffer financially. He also had to rush between the city and the villa so that he could meet his family and also do his job. The wife on the other hand remains so absorbed with her artist friends that he hardly cares about her husband's presence at home. His feelings are described in following manner;

Zaikin suddenly felt as though something heavy was rolling down on his liver and beginning to gnaw it. He felt so vexed, so aggrieved and so bitter, that he was choking and tremulous; he wanted to jump up, to bang something on floor and to burst into loud abuse. (*World's Great...651*)

Zaikin, rather, had to stay silent and suppress his anger. Thus, the relationship turns into a psychological torture for Zaikin. Apparently, the situation is same for many men and women who are unwillingly dragging such relationships along for the sake of family or society. In

another popular short story “The Husband” Chekhov has presented another shade of marital dissatisfaction. Many of his short stories revolving around the theme of marriage, love or romance are written keeping in the mind a man. Man is presented as a sufferer in relationships, while woman is the cause of suffering. One may notice that most of Chekhov's short stories on concerned theme focus on the state of mind or emotions of the male character, while the intricacies of female characters are overlooked. Thus, Chekhov appears less sympathetic towards his women characters. In this short story also the woman Anna Pavlovna is the main agent of misery for her husband, Shaiklov. Anna Pavlovna, a beautiful woman is married to a dull and boring tax collector Shaiklov. Anna Pavlovna is a lovely, enthusiastic creature who likes to live coquettishly. Her interest in fashion and a fashionable life remains unfulfilled in the company of her husband. The middle-aged, pot-bellied Zaikin is a regular prototype for government employees leading a routine life in a routine manner. Their pair is altogether unmatched. In many cases It is seen that marriages are arranged keeping in view social benefits. Therefore marriages, which happen for the sake of the same, eventually result into a problematic one. Along with time, such relations turn sour and frustrating. This story has very carefully portrayed the state of mind of Shaiklov, the unfit, un-attractive husband, who is trying to accommodate himself within the circle of other attractive men, who are a direct threat to him. Shaiklov feels acute jealousy with the handsome military men who at once catch the attention of women. Therefore, he orders his wife to come away with him from a party that she was thoroughly enjoying in the company of men. “Petty feelings of envy, vexation, wounded vanity of that small, provincial misanthropy engendered in the petty officials by vodka and a sedentary life swarmed in his heart like mice. Waiting for the end of mazurka, he went into the hall and walked up to his wife” (664). Zaikin tries to satisfy his inferiority complex by controlling the life of his wife, thus establishing a sense of superiority over her.

Chekhov’s stories strike the chord of emotions therefore it has a more profound impact on reader's psyche. The greatness of Anton Chekhov lies in the gaps and silences that he has created in his short stories, which offer a fresh meaning every time they are read.

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