



A Psychological Reading of Anton Chekhov *The Death of a Government Clerk*

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ABSTRACT

Society is the culprit that had designed a set of pattern to be abided that has made the clerk a slave to his higher officer, very subservient before the Boss. Anton Chekov discusses human nature intensively where the rules of dos and don'ts in the socio-culture has become prejudiced. This short story *The Death of a Government Clerk* deals about the significance of an apology and the attitude of proper acceptance in regard to forgiveness.

A government clerk dies after a few days of anxiety because he sneezes accidentally upon a superior official who doesn't acknowledge the clerk's apology properly. This puts the clerk's mind out of rest and peace, who is very conscientious. His wife also is of high polite attitude. Both become troubled.He takes elaborate pains to apologize, but in vain. This paper focuses on how the protagonist's false guilt, obsession, anxiety, and the state of neurosis, causes his death because of his troubled psychological evolution.

Key words: ignorance, guilt, torment, psychological, anxiety, obsession, apology, over sensitiveness, neurotic, dejection, insensitiveness etc.

INTRODUCTION

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904) was a popular Russian playwright andmaster of the modern short story. Russian literature is known for its intensive study of the human nature. Chekhov particularly was keen on studying the inner psyche of his created characters. He was a literary artist who brought out the secret motives of his characters. He belonged to the nineteenth century Russian realist school and extraordinarily pictured the

contemporary life with his simple yet effective sketch of the characters in his short stories. During the mid-1880s, Chekhov practiced as a physician and began to publish serious works of fiction under his own name. His pieces appeared in the newspaper *New Times* and then as part of collections such as *Motley Stories* (1886). His story "The Steppe" was an important success, earning its author the Pushkin Prize in 1888. Like most of Chekhov's early work, it showed the influence of the major Russian realists of the 19th century, such as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. When he gave a piece of advice to his brother Alexander regarding writing of a story, he said that the shorter, the better; a bit of ideology and being up to date; caricature was just fine, but ignorance of civil service ranks and of the seasons was strictly prohibited. He practiced this theory in his *The Death of a Government Clerk*.

This paper focuses on how the protagonist's false guilt, obsession, anxiety, and the state of neurosis, causes his death because of his troubled psychological evolution. The story is of a government clerk who sneezed on a higher official at a theatre, and how he became tormented by speculations on the possible consequences of his act and worried to death, he died. The simple incident of sneezing is taken for a serious conception of a story by Chekhov. Chekhov states in the beginning of the story that it is not reprehensible for anyone to sneeze anywhere. Peasants sneeze and so do police superintendents, and sometimes even privy councilors. All men sneeze. They do not feel guilty but only embarrassed and ask sorry, as it is required out of manners. Sneezing sometimes helps people to realize that casual attitude is also humanistic. But here, this mere impulsive act blew the human trait of guilt, out of proportions, by the protagonist, as to be taken so seriously, the degree of putting himself to too much anxiety and thereby succumbing to his death. It really appears absurd and funny to a lethargic reader of the story of Chekhov, but it is not of question of sneezing, but that of one's guilty conscience that is developed either through his social position as a clerk or a human being with feeble mind that led to his neurosis and anxiety.

The story starts that while at the theater, the clerk, Ivan Dimitritch Tchervyakov sneezed and bespattered on a general who is not actually his direct superior, but important enough in the Department of Transport. Tchervyakov tries to apologize, but every time he attempts it, the general interrupts the apology and so the clerk never gets the chance to express his apology completely. Each time Tchervyakov gets cut off in the middle of a sentence, his anxiety rises. He starts to explain even more about the sneeze, then about the first unfinished apology, the first visit to the general's house, the second visit etc., thus

incurring unpleasant situation to the extent of making the official to shrug off his presence. An innocent situation quickly becomes a ridiculous occurrence by constantly bringing up the incident. The story takes a satirical form, and the civil servant is reduced to a mere caricature.

The story begins, “ONE fine evening, a no less fine government clerk called Ivan Dmitritch Tchervyakov was sitting in the second row of the stalls, gazing through an opera glass at the Cloches de Corneville. He gazed and felt at the acme of bliss” (1 Garnett). With these words, particularly the words, ‘no less fine government clerk’(1) kindles the curiosity of the readers to know where the emotionally weak clerk works and what department he belongs to. “But suddenly”(pg. 1, line 5), are words used by the writer to give impact to that something that happens suddenly to fill a man’s life with surprise, joy, fear or danger, any paradox of situation that occurs due to accidents.. Life is filled with all the unexpected events with a little scope for an expected moment. Chekhov is of the opinion that in stories one so often meets with this "But suddenly."(1). Chekhov further writes:

The authors are right: life is so full of surprises! But suddenly his face puckered up, his eyes disappeared, his breathing was arrested . . . he took the opera glass from his eyes, bent over and . . . "Aptchee!!" he sneezed as you perceive” (li.6-10)

Sneezing occurs all of a sudden even to surprise the producer and the people sitting in front. In this story, the clerk seems to verify that none is hurt because of his sneezing. It shows his basic courtesy and education that guide him to behave politely in the public sphere. “Tchervyakov was not in the least confused, he wiped his face with his handkerchief, and like a polite man, looked round to see whether he had disturbed any one by his sneezing. But then he was overcome with confusion (li.13-16)”. Much to his horror, “In the old gentleman, Tchervyakov recognised Brizzhalov, a civilian general serving in the Department of Transport.” (19-21). Now he assumed he had committed a crime. He observed Brizzhalov, wiping his bald head. He was appalled by his action. No clerk was supposed to behave in this impolite way even though accidentally. He was sure his action would bring wrath if not apologized profusely.

He was very much upset with his stupid behavior in front of a reputed gentleman and wanted to get things right and to get rid of his confusion and guilt. Guilt is something people acquire according to their own understanding of certain traits.

Guilt and its associated causes, merits, and demerits are common

themes in psychology and psychiatry. Guilt is an affective state in which one experiences conflict at having done something that one believes one should not have done [or conversely, having not done something one believes one should have done]. It gives rise to a feeling which does not go away easily, driven by 'conscience'.) ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>Guilt](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guilt))

It is because of his deep sense of guilt that he wanted to convey his apology, even though that man was not his department, instead of simply evading the situation, took it easy. When he conveyed his note of apology the reply he received was not that of kind and polite but of harsh and rough in tone, "Never mind, never mind.(li.27)" It further stimulated the guilty conscience that he might have probably made the gentleman a little angry. Brizzhalov's reply was that of polished politeness and of snobbish note. Tchervyakov's embarrassment and uneasiness was caused by his guilty conscience that pricked him in spite of the gentleman's acceptance of his unintentional fault.

Sigmund Freud described this as the result of a struggle between the ego and superego- parental imprinting. While removing one source of guilt from patients, he described another. This was the unconscious force within the individual that contributed to illness, Freud in fact coming to consider "the obstacle of an unconscious sense of guilt...as the most powerful of all obstacle of recovery." ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>Guilt](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guilt)) Though the mouth of the official said that he had forgotten the event, his lips were impatient. Here, Chekhov has observed the non-verbal reaction that had overcome the comforting verbal ones of the gentleman. "He has forgotten, but there is a fiendish light in his eye," thought Tchervyakov, looking suspiciously at the general.'(Garnett) His over sensitiveness being a kind of neurosis sprouted out fear and anxiety. That glint haunted his psyche.

Anxiety is a feeling of fear, uneasiness, and worry, usually generalized and unfocused as an overreaction to a situation that is only subjectively seen as menacing. ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>Anxiety](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anxiety))

When he told his wife of the bad manners he practiced to the gentleman in the theater, she initially was frightened and confirmed to him that the gentleman did not belong to her husband's department yet she asked him to convey his apology to that gentleman. Though the gentleman belonged to different department, she expected her husband to cultivate good

manners in the public and expected none should have mistaken him as a man of poor culture. He again went to the place of the civilian and attempted to explain him his heart at the petitioner's meeting. But the officer discomfited at his sight and just tell him to be off and enough of making fun. This gets the clerk all worked up. His senses heighten when he feels the officer's mistaken usage of 'making fun', which he had never intended. The anxiety leads him to stagger in his way back home. "Seeing nothing and hearing nothing he reeled to the door, went out into the street, and went staggering along. . . . Reaching home mechanically, without taking off his uniform, he lay down on the sofa and died".(Garnett)

A neurotic person experiences emotional distress and unconscious psychological conflict. It is his neurotic state that caused his death or may be his misunderstanding or simply his imaginary feeling of guilt. Was his death due to his too sensitive and neurotic state or the gentleman's insensitiveness as he was aristocratic? Or did his anxiety cause his demise? All these questions have not been answered in the story. Chekhov had led the readers to interpret through their own intuition. All the speculations of the clerk could have been simply thrown away if he had been given some soothing words instead of harsh two "Be off!" The end is really a shocking one that cannot be digested and taken as such. It may have been his fear of losing the job once his behavior was not properly accepted by the superior. The state of neurosis had arrested him. The final result of his neurosis was demise.

Cognitive problems such as unpleasant or disturbing thoughts, repetition of thoughts and obsession....neurosis may be defined simply as a "poor ability to adapt to one's environment, an inability to changes one's life patterns, and the inability to develop a richer, more complex, more satisfying personality".

(<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neurosis>)

The story reveals the lack of sincerity on the part of the higher official in acknowledging an apology and showing an act of magnanimity with significant acceptance with forgiveness. The general every time interrupts the apology rendered in an indifferent manner and the clerk is cut off in the middle of the sentence. It was the prime cause for the gradual development of guilt and thereby to anxiety, travelling from innocent situation to ridiculous deed, because of his insecurity and over-sensitiveness. People in the present day sometimes do not understand the necessity of apology and some think it is out of fashion.

People have forgotten how to apologize for the right reasons and have started apologizing in situations in which it is not exactly required.

CONCLUSION

This story is socially an attack on the whole system that ranks people by importance. Chekhov satirizes the conventions of the status snobbery that leads the clerk psychologically placing himself inferior and wanted to be apologized with a chain of efforts. Socio-culture is the culprit that has designed an impartial pattern and made the clerk a slave in his imagined social and cultural morality and political order. The obvious fact is that people have no time to listen to apologies. In the case of the clerk, he is not insane or crazy but the people around him became mechanical and insensitive to human bondage and basic manners. Tchervyakov, the government clerk, is over-apologetic and so, the modern society considers him insane. It is apt here to recollect the lines of Emily Dickinson, an American poetess, “Much Madness is the Divinest Sense”. It is the mad society that considers the real sanity as pretention and uses the scale of majority to decide upon sanity. Even a noble apology is marked as a sign of hypocrisy and pretence.

This kind of involuntary respect owed to the upper class; building a guilt complex to entangle the lesser mortals, who are more conscientious, often gets them into trouble. Culture and manners are inevitable discussion in the stories of Chekhov. This research will hopefully pave way for numerous psychological traits that can be traced through the stories from the legend to better understand the complexities in human relationship.

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