



## Anton Chekov's *The Bet*: An Existentialist View

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### Abstract

This paper employs the framework of Fredric Nietzsche, as theorized in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, to interpret Chekhov's story *The Bet* (2013). The story is about a young lawyer who enters a contract to bargain his youthful fifteen years in solitary confinement to win two million from a rich banker. *The Bet* (2013) explores whether capital punishment is humane or life imprisonment is a better option for crime and punishment. The study is qualitative, and through textual analysis, findings have been reached using Nietzsche's existential theoretical lens. The study finds that the lawyer suffers imprisonment but leaves before its termination as he has discovered all meanings of life are mere illusions. The study concludes that Chekhov scans the normative behaviors of people, in this case, the Banker and lawyer, and proves to be a sad reflection on the human condition.

### Introduction

Chekhov's *The Bet* (2013) stands out among his renowned short stories, departing from his usual storytelling style. Unlike many of his other works, like "The Lady with the Pet Dog," which ends ambiguously without resolving conflicts, *The Bet* (2013) offers a clear emotional conclusion. Additionally, it surprises readers with an unexpected ending, a departure from Chekhov's typical narrative style reminiscent of the trademark twists found in the stories of Guy de Maupassant and O. Henry.

The reader is astounded as the prisoner ends his confinement right before his sentence concludes. The tale concludes with the detainee escaping, ultimately preventing the Banker from facing financial ruin. While *The Bet* (2013) lacks significant foreshadowing and anticipation, it still showcases remarkable literary skill. Within just a few pages, it spans a vast span of two lifetimes. The foremost critical scholarly techniques are exposition, flashback, exchange, and an ending that shocks the reader.

The rejection of the bet money, i.e., two million, by the lawyer after suffering almost 15 years of isolation, incarceration, and confinement is the problem to be explored in this paper. Initially, the young lawyer is as enthusiastic about getting the money as the Banker, who is too rich to foresee bankruptcy and being in debt. But at the end of it all, both lose their vitality, passions, and ambitions, raising the existential question of life's human condition and authenticity.

### Literature Review

Anton Chekhov's *The Bet*, (2013), a seemingly straightforward tale of a banker and a lawyer trapped in a fifteen-year wager on the value of human freedom, invites multifaceted interpretations thanks to its masterful deployment of ambiguity and psychological depth. This review delves into existing scholarship on the story, focusing on themes of existentialism, subjectivity, and the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Several scholars, including Janis (2021) and Muratova (1960), find *The Bet* (2013) grappling with questions of meaning and purpose in a seemingly absurd world. Janis reads the wager as a desperate attempt to impose structure and significance on a meaningless existence, while Muratova highlights the characters' ultimate confrontation

with the void. Christensen (2009) also touches on this aspect, questioning the "coldly objective" perspective often ascribed to Chekhov's narration and suggesting a deeper engagement with existential anxieties.

Corrigan (2011) offers a psychoanalytic lens, arguing that *The Bet* (2013) explores the concept of the "divided self" in modern individuals. He delves into the Banker's internal conflict between intellect and emotion, reflecting a wider societal struggle with modernization and alienation. Kargar et al. (2018) further this exploration with a Lacanian perspective, analyzing the characters' subjectivity through the lens of the unconscious and desire. Their reading sheds light on the characters' struggles for self-definition and the shattering of their perceived stability.

The presence of Nietzschean thought in *The Bet* (2013) is a recurring theme in critical discourse. Janis (2021) argues that the story can be seen as a critique of nihilism, with the protagonists' nihilistic wager ultimately leading to disillusionment and despair. Hingley (2015) also mentions Nietzsche's influence on Chekhov's broader body of work, suggesting a preoccupation with existential questions and the human condition in a godless universe.

*The Bet* (2013) continues to intrigue scholars and readers alike, exploring existential questions, the fractured self, and the impact of philosophical currents like Nietzscheanism. This review provides a springboard for further research, encouraging deeper examinations of the story's complexities and its enduring relevance in our own time.

### **Research Methodology**

The text has been closely read, analyzed, and interpreted under the theoretical framework. Relevant lines and terms have been taken to bring home Chekhov's worldview in *The Bet* (2013). Thematic patterns, in line with the existential view of life, have been explored, which, among other things, interpret the two contested views on capital punishment. More so, the meaning of life and the existential crisis that the two protagonists, the Banker and the lawyer, face. Since it is qualitative research, interpreting the views of the two main characters, who are strangely but significantly unnamed mainly because of the symbolic representation, is the main way this text has been analyzed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To explore the meaning of life as seen by the existential thinkers and philosophers, the views of major theorists have been triangulated to analyze the themes of the short story. The meaninglessness of all material things, money, status and the spiritual exhaustion of the lawyer, after reading all that was humanly possible, in the almost fifteen years of voluntary confinement, which is more traumatic than compulsory punishment awarded as a result of a judicial proceeding in civil society, is a potent point which all existentialist thinkers and philosophers from Fredric Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger to Soren Kierkegaard and, Jean Paul Sartre attempted to address and theorize about it. For this research, the critical lens of Fredric Nietzsche has been used to explore Chekhov's worldview in *The Bet* (2013).

Generally, nihilism and existentialism are synonymous, but this point of view is contested, and the views are interestingly opposing. For the nihilist, life is pointless to its core, but for the existentialist, it isn't very sensible; to live it, one must put meanings in it. For nihilists, there is no good or evil, neither is there any truth, but for the existential thinker, life can be authentically lived if there is a purpose that an individual pursues (Tartaglia, 2016). In this respect, the lawyer first enters into the Bet to get compensation of 2 million for the fifteen years that he has voluntarily given up. Still, at the end of it all it becomes irrelevant and worthless for him, while for the Banker who is not as rich as he once used to be, it is everything and for which he wants to kill the prisoner.

Fredric Nietzsche believes it is the will of individuals to empower themselves and overcome people's existing complacency about the authenticity of institutions, including religions. This point is the focus of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra - A Book for All and None* (2008). Nietzsche views existence through the lens of light and to him, "You must be ready to burn yourself in your flame; how could you rise anew if you have not first become ashes?" (p. 47) His emphasis is on the individual and his drive for self-realization and fulfillment in the larger scheme of things. "Man is a rope between beast and overman — a rope over an abyss. What is great in man is that he is a bridge, not an end" (p. 7). Such a person transcends the pettiness of life and its traditional and prosaic obsessions and rises above the enslaving circumstances. "He who climbs upon the highest mountains laughs at all tragedies, real or imaginary" (p. 28). This arduous quest to search for one's true self and overcome all obstacles is the pathway to an individual becoming a Superman.

### Analysis

*The Bet* (2013) delves into an ethical theme regarding the value of human life. It cleverly intertwines a gripping twist that circles back to the original Bet about whether the young lawyer could endure fifteen years of solitary confinement, revealing an unexpected outcome while maintaining a critical and amusing tone. One can ultimately see that Anton Chekhov presents the readers with two distinctive ways within the story. One of them is the Banker, who cannot confront his morality, and the other is the lawyer (the prisoner) who truly faces his morality but falls into pessimism since he is so disengaged from the exterior world, even after picking up so much information from reading a great number of books in isolation. These two characters may flourish due to change, but they modify their human values and virtues in incredible ways. The indulged Banker is notably nervous and excited when he places the Bet with the lawyer.

The story mainly focuses on the two main characters, the young lawyer and the old Banker. The Banker is rich while the lawyer is poor, which shows us the divide and difference between the two characters and their reaction to this Bet. The lawyer sees this as an opportunity to gain financial support, so he eagerly agrees to the Bet, but the banker bets that the young man would not be able to stay in prison for more than five years. Although initially the lawyer believes that any sort of life is better than death, as he is driven to insanity in those fifteen years of solitude, that belief is completely altered as he no longer experienced that to be true.

The tale delves beyond mere desire for wealth; it uncovers the contradictions in existence. For fifteen years, the young lawyer voluntarily endures solitary confinement as a testament. Within the confines of a room in the Banker's estate, he immerses himself in an extraordinary number of books. These books become his tutors, imparting a comprehensive understanding of life and guiding him towards self-realization. They stand as his sole companions, aiding him in grasping the essence of humanity, the intricacies of reality, life's fleeting nature, the despair of unchanging human nature, and other profound themes encompassing mind, heart, and soul.

The attorney cherishes his collection of thousands of books, which he has devoured over fifteen years. These books serve as his pathway to enlightenment, reminiscent of Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree or Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness. They enable him to scrutinize not just his existence but also the presence of others. Anton Chekhov ingeniously diverts readers' thoughts from the main theme of life's insignificance, using the subplot of the death penalty. Just as some find enlightenment through sacrificial acts like the Crucifixion or serene isolation like Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in a dark cave, others attain it through reading (Rahman et. Al, 2009).

One of the main themes within *The Bet* (2013) is how a society with riches can struggle with its values. The Banker is greatly affluent, has the opportunity, and values realism. On the other hand, the lawyer has his opportunity taken away; however still values knowledge. The Banker states, "Two million is a trifle." He exclaims, "Why didn't the man die? [...] he will take my final penny from me. The one means of being saved from bankruptcy and disgrace is the death of that man!" (Chekhov 4) The lawyer leaves a note clarifying how he needs to toss off the Bet, so he doesn't have to take the money. The note peruses: "To demonstrate to you in activity how I despise all that you live by, I renounce the two million of which I once dreamed as of paradise and which now I despise. To deny myself of the right to the money I shall go out from here five hours before the time fixed, and so break the compact ..." (Chekhov 5). Throughout his years of being in imprisonment, the lawyer "had mastered six hundred learned volumes [... Including] chemistry [...and] a novel, and some treatise on philosophy or theology" (Chekhov 3).

It is almost impossible to derive a singular meaning from *The Bet* (2013). It is a stunning and undoubtedly original study that uses many elements of literature to convey the message that modern society's accepted definition of prison and the solution to criminality, as such, may be completely wrong, be it morally or practically.

The Banker had a good chunk of the money, which the young lawyer would acquire at the end of the Bet, but it proved futile. The question of whether life imprisonment is a lesser sentence of suffering is at the heart of the short story, yet it exposes the pointlessness of life and its authenticity.

*The Bet* (2013) is a deeply psychological understanding of human nature concerning ambitions and self-realization. Its reading engages the readers in exploring a young lawyer who thinks bargaining fifteen years to get rich is no raw deal. He rejects not only his dreams and destiny but also turns down the bet money that the banker, being in

debt, now does not want to give. It is a realistic text that masterfully portrays the transformation and making of a young, ambitious lawyer into a wise man, seeing the nothingness of life in its totality.

As the story unfolds, neither the vanity of the Banker, intoxicated with wealth and riches nor the arrogance and confidence of the young lawyer is sustained as time takes its toll. However, the lawyer's realization concerning existence and its challenges is the theme in focus. In this regard, he explores that getting the bet money of two million rubles to enjoy the remaining years of his life proved to be a folly after reading the knowledge, like treasure, present in volumes of the books he read during the nearly fifteen long years of isolation.

In line with Fredric Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2008), Chekhov explains and finds the ridiculous meaningless of all and sundry in human life – the worthlessness of money included. Chekhov presents all the intricate existential issues detachedly through the point of view of an almost antagonistic narrator (Donskis, 2012). He skillfully pins the issue, putting the two worldly, wise, materialistic individuals who look at reality superficially until the end of fifteen years when the two contenders reach the ground zero of their existence.

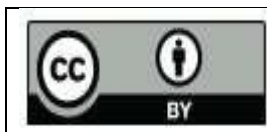
### Conclusion

*The Bet* (2013) is critical of human interactions and the ensuing conflicts and crises, which, artistically and with obvious sensitivities to the human condition, have been presented through irony, the setting, parody, symbols, and tone. Man's greed caused him to be unreasonable and do things he did not understand the consequences of.

In essence, Anton Chekhov laughs at human vanity, arrogance, and ignorance and that the protagonists, the lawyer, and the Banker, symbolize pointlessness and absurdity. The autumn reaches for both the contenders in a tragic realization and a greater sense of loss. The lawyer is old but wise beyond his years, and the Banker cries like a baby at the insignificance of money and financial security. It was greed both ways that worked on the ignorance and the materialism of the two protagonists.

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