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ČEKOVIĆ'S USE OF IRONY IN HIS FICTION

DISSERTATION
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
Sonia Kovitz Gotman, B.A., M.A.

The Ohio State University
1971

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PREFACE

In this study of Čexov's fiction I have attempted to trace, to use the metaphor of Henry James, a "figure in the carpet" which has generally been passed over rapidly by critics or often overlooked entirely: the presence of irony. Although my primary intention is to read Čexov in a new way, not to understand irony in a new way, in the course of writing I have had to formulate a more extensive and multi-faceted definition of irony than I found in any one critical source. My method has been to relate Čexov's use of irony to several important themes in his fiction, all revolving around the central theme of awareness. Čexov's irony discloses varying levels of perception and blindness in his characters, and brings the careful reader to a penetrating insight. Yet there are many figures in the carpet of Čexov's fiction, and to examine one closely is to ignore the rest. In the final chapter I have attempted briefly to integrate irony within the larger pattern of Čexov's fiction as a whole.
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I wish to thank Professor Frank R. Silbajoris not only for guiding the progress of this dissertation, but even more importantly, for preparing me to write it. As his student I have learned much from his critical method with its remarkable blend of precision and imagination, and from his example as an exceptionally stimulating teacher.

I also wish to express my appreciation to the members of my reading committee. At some difficult moments in my writing Professor Jerzy Krzyzanowski helped me immeasurably with some very valuable questions which had to be considered before I could proceed. I wish to thank him for his aid and encouragement. Professor Hongor Oulanoff has played a central role in my process of revision. His extremely careful and apt criticism has helped me to eliminate, on a major scale, imprecise usage and serious over-simplifications in the first draft. I am grateful for his reading, which not only has improved this study, but which has given me an excellent model for future self-criticism in writing.

I also wish to thank Professor Leon Twarog, Chairman, for his instrumental role in helping me, in the face of much difficulty, to continue my studies as a graduate student.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREFACE</th>
<th>ii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. &quot;THE MAN IN A SHELL&quot;: FEAR</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. &quot;GOOSEBERRIES&quot;: HAPPINESS</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. &quot;ABOUT LOVE&quot;: ENTRAPMENT</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Čexov's stories are filled with many ironies, a feature which has already come to the attention of critics. Winner notes the presence of irony in connection with fifteen of Čexov's stories,¹ Poggioli mentions irony repeatedly in his essay on Čexov,² and John Gassner writes that Čexov was a "master of irony."³ Mathewson says of "Ward Six" that "the movement of the story may be described as a complex reversal of values made tangible in one enveloping irony: the two sensitive, intelligent men in the community are locked up as mad."⁴ Joseph L. Conrad comments about "The Man in a Shell" that "with obvious irony, Belikov was buried on a rainy day when all attending the funeral had to wear galoshes and carry umbrellas."⁵ Generally in articles on Čexov there is some passing mention of this or that ironic comment, gesture, turn of events, situation.⁶

But the topic of irony invariably is raised only to be dropped: once the irony of a particular episode or textual detail has been pointed out, the critic always moves on to other matters. Yet the very frequency with which critics discover irony in Čexov's fiction is surely an indication of its importance. Critical discussion of Čexov has generally dealt with his technique of laconicism and understatement, his use of symbolic detail, and with the recurrence of certain themes: mutual misunderstanding, human isolation, sensitivity.
stifled in an environment of banality, the poignancy of missed opportunities and wasted talents. As Mathewson has pointed out, however,

Time and the history of Chekhov's reputation have disclosed a number of obstacles to the full confrontation of his work. In a sense neither critics nor readers have fully possessed him, and Chekhov himself offers little help in this regard. He does not provide clear moral guidance in many stories that are clearly about the moral side of human behavior. Readers who cannot tolerate ambivalence tend to "read in" external or irrelevant values. . . . Despite [Chekhov's] contempt for critics, they are almost obliged to rush in to try to guess what he failed to spell out for us.7

Mathewson's own solution to this critical impasse is sound, I think:

On the basis of many readings, I have tried to point to what I have come to consider the basic order in the story, the relations of its larger working parts to one another. Knowledge of this aesthetic order, which contains and organizes the other ingredients, is the surest guide to our understanding. . . . The controlling order is made of the most exact balancing of tonalities, in harmony or in discord, or in a movement from one to the other, in the statement, development, and recapitulation of motifs, in the subtle and evocative use of setting.8

It it evident that irony also plays a definite role in the "controlling order" of a great many of Chekhov's stories, and yet the precise nature of this role has never been made clear. Perhaps this is because irony itself is an oddly elusive concept. "When we try to isolate the ironic as such," writes Northrop Frye, "we find it seems to be simply the attitude of the poet as such, a dispassionate construction of a literary form, with all assertive elements, implied or expressed, eliminated."9 Frye moves directly from "attitude" to "construction of a literary form," so the term irony evidently refers not only to an attitude but to the technique which creates the attitude, i.e. the technique of "eliminating assertive elements." But let us briefly consider two well known ironic techniques. In verbal irony
"one meaning is stated and a different, usually antithetical meaning is intended" and in dramatic irony "the words or acts of a character in a play carry a meaning unperceived by himself but understood by the audience." The use of these techniques assures that expressed assertive elements are eliminated, but it is simply not the case that implied ones are eliminated as well. The clear aim of both verbal and dramatic irony is to convey, by implication, a message, and in conveying any message whatsoever the speaker or author inevitably "asserts" himself in some way. So irony as an actual technique seems to contradict the notion of irony as a wholly dispassionate attitude, for if there is no implicit message then there is no irony either. I am suggesting that a dispassionate ironic attitude is a misconception: that irony consists rather of a dispassionate front, and only when we penetrate the front can we grasp the ironist's real attitude--of which we will have more to say later.

Our understanding of irony as referring simultaneously to a technique and to an implicit attitude or message brings us close to Wayne C. Booth's definition of the "implied author."

"Style" is sometimes broadly used to cover whatever it is that gives us a sense, from word to word and line to line, that the author sees more deeply and judges more profoundly than his presented characters. ... "Tone" is similarly used to refer to the implicit evaluation which the author manages to convey behind his explicit presentation. ... Similarly, "technique" has at times been expanded to cover all discernable signs of the author's artistry. If everyone used "technique" as Mark Schorer does, covering with it almost the entire range or choices made by the author, then it might very well serve our purposes. ... [But] we can be satisfied only with a term that is as broad as the work itself but still capable of calling attention to that work as the product of a choosing, evaluating person rather than as a self-existing thing. The "implied author" chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real
man; he is the sum of his own choices.\textsuperscript{12}

While irony does involve an implicit evaluation behind the explicit presentation, irony is not coterminous with the very broad concept of the implied author. How then does irony specifically differ from style, tone, technique as Booth defines these terms here? The \textit{Princeton Encyclopedia} gives the origin of the word irony as the Greek \textit{eironeia}, "dissimulation, especially through understatement," and tells us that "the \textit{eiron} of Greek comedy was the underdog, weak but clever, who regularly triumphed over the stupid and boastful \textit{alazon}."\textsuperscript{13} The origin of the word emphasizes again that the dispassionate façade—understood as dissimulation—will always conceal an ulterior purpose of some kind. But why does the author choose to speak to us using dissimulation rather than direct statement? Or, from another angle, what is this ulterior purpose that it can be served only through the use of irony? The question is so important that we can answer it only gradually. Our starting point must be what is given: the dispassionate façade itself. And that Čechov’s fiction does present a puzzlingly dispassionate façade critics have long been in agreement. Charles du Bos has neatly summed up the nature of this puzzle. "Čechov always wants some special angle of the real to be conveyed," he wrote in his journal, but he went on to admit:

Of course, this leaves unexplained the Chekhov transposition of life: in what precisely does the said transposition consist? to my mind at least, Chekhov offers no more difficult problem... [For] his art seems to have for its object that the reader should perceive no transposition at all.\textsuperscript{14}

Čechov himself seems to answer du Bos in this letter of 1888:

It is high time for writing folk, especially artists, to admit you can’t appraise anything in this world, as Socrates did in his day,
and Voltaire. The crowd thinks it knows and understands every­thing: and the more stupid it is, the broader seems to be its scope. If the artist, in whom the crowd believes, dares to declare that he does not understand what he sees, that alone comprises deep knowledge in the domain of thought and a good step ahead.15

In his article "Čexov's Fiction and the Ideal of Objectivity" John Hagan has written that Čexov "refuses to simplify situations in the interests of an easy moralism."16 The letters as well as the stories themselves reveal Čexov's constant concern to be accurate and impartial in his depiction of reality. Yet while accurate and impartial observation is a very important prerequisite, this is still not the final goal of Čexov's art, as du Bos realized with some puzzlement. Again, Čexov speaks for himself--here in a letter of 1889.

My purpose is to kill two hares at once: to depict life truthfully and at the same time to show just how far that life deviates from a norm. The norm is unknown to me, as it is to any one of us. We all know what a dishonest act is, but what is honor we do not know. I shall keep to the framework nearest to my heart, which has already been tried by men stronger and wiser than I. The framework is the absolute freedom of man, freedom from violence, from prejudices, ignorance, the devil, freedom from passions, and so on.17

Čexov's intention to "kill two hares at once" is very close to our initial understanding of irony, as if the truthful depiction of life were the neutral, objective façade and life's deviation from a norm were the implicit message. As for ulterior purpose, Čexov stated "framework" is an unmistakable hint: "the absolute freedom of man, freedom from violence, from prejudices, ignorance . . ." It is noteworthy that both these quotations expressing concern for impartiality and truthfulness also contain references to Socrates, explicit in the first instance and tacit in the second: "We all know what a dishonest act is, but what is honor we do not know."

Now, we might easily think of the "stupid" crowd which "thinks
it knows and understands everything" in terms of a "stupid and boastful" alazon. Socrates moreover is famous for taking on the role of the eiron in Plato's Dialogues, asking apparently naive and foolish questions but in the end demolishing his antagonist's case. As Fowler puts it:

Socratic irony was a profession of ignorance. What Socrates represented as an ignorance and a weakness in himself was in fact a non-committal attitude towards any dogma, however accepted or imposing, that had not been carried back to and shown to be based upon first principles.\(^{18}\)

We should emphasize that while Socrates professed ignorance, his clear though unstated purpose was the pursuit of a fuller, more absolute knowledge. Socrates, who saw his role primarily as that of a "gadfly," always refused to put forth definitions himself; he pursued fuller knowledge by prodding others to see the inadequacies of shallow and simplistic definitions, of empty generalizations. Socrates pursued knowledge by striving to release his fellow men from ignorance. And in Čexov's letter, too, we recognize a definite preoccupation with eliminating the stupidity of the crowd:

The crowd thinks it knows and understands everything: and the more stupid it is, the broader seems to be its scope. If the artist, in whom the crowd believes, dares to declare that he does not understand what he sees, that alone comprises deep knowledge in the domain of thought and a good step ahead.\(^{19}\)

My supposition here, which we will examine much more closely in analyses of individual stories, is that the ulterior purpose of Čexov's use of irony is in a very broad sense similar to that of Socrates: the search to attain knowledge (which is virtue) and to eliminate ignorance (which is vice).

Yet despite the similarity of ulterior purpose I am suggesting, Socrates was of course a philosopher and Čexov an artist; their methods
are inevitably very different. We still face the difficult problem of describing how it is, indeed, that Češov as ironist communicates an implicit message while still keeping the objective façade fully intact. Obviously a great skill and subtlety is involved in this sort of "dissimulation," and an equivalent degree of subtlety is needed on the reader's part to counter the ruse, to penetrate the façade. For while Češov plays the eiron in his fiction, the boastful alazon who "thinks he knows and understands everything" might be not only a character within a story, but, as we shall see in later chapters, the reader himself if he is not alert.

A concrete illustration will provide the best way of approaching the problem of actual technique. Let us use Češov's story "An Attack of Nerves" ("Pripadok"-1888). Vasil'jev is a sensitive law student with a "talent for humanity" ("he could reflect in his soul the sufferings of others"), and an initial exposure to the sordid reality of prostitution brings on a nervous collapse. The psychological reasons for the collapse are complex, as our more complete analysis in the next chapter will reveal; but for the present let us note that the collapse does occur at the very moment when Vasil'jev is finally overwhelmed by the sense of his own insignificance and helplessness in trying to help the prostitutes. After deciding to preach on the street-corner of the brothel district, so that "the men . . . should feel [their] immorality . . . and be horrified," Vasil'jev "experienced something like inspiration."

All this was like inspiration also in that it did not last long. Vasil'jev soon grew tired. The mass of the cases in London, in Hamburg, in Warsaw, weighed upon him as a mountain weighs upon the earth; he felt dispirited, bewildered, in the face of this mass;
he remembered that he was no speaker, that he was cowardly and
timid, that indifferent people were unlikely to be willing to
listen and understand him, a law student in his third year, a
timid and insignificant person, that genuine missionary work
meant not only preaching but deeds....

When it was daylight . . . Vasil'jev was lying motionless on
the sofa, staring into space. . . . His whole attention was turned
upon the mental agony which was torturing him. It was a dull,
vague, indefinite pain akin to anguish, to an extreme form of
terror, and to despair.  

Now, at three points in the story—in the introductory sentence,
in the crucial paragraph cited above, and in the final scene at the
psychiatrist's office—Chekov tells us that Vasil'jev is a law student.

On learning that Vasil'jev had taken his degree in the natural
sciences and was not studying law, the doctor grew thoughtful.
"He wrote an excellent thesis last year, ..." said the
medical student.
"I beg your pardon, but don't interrupt me; you're preventing
me from concentrating," said the doctor, and he smiled on one side
of his face. "Though, of course, that does enter into the case
history. Intense intellectual work, nervous exhaustion.... Yes,
yes.... And do you drink vodka?" he said, addressing Vasil'jev.  

In each of these instances the mention of Vasil'jev's academic back­
ground is fleeting and casual, for no one, including Vasil'jev himself,
attaches any but the most cursory significance to it. The fact is very
easily overlooked; indeed, Joseph L. Conrad devoted an entire article  
to a close analysis of this story (and several paragraphs just to
ironic detail) without seeing need ever to mention that Vasil'jev is a
law student. Clearly, the dispassionate façade is being faultlessly
maintained by the clever eiron. But Booth reminds us that "everything
[the author] shows will serve to tell."

In short, the author's judgment is always present, always
evident to anyone who knows how to look for it. . . . We must never
forget that though the author can to some extent choose his
disguises, he can never choose to disappear.  

And so, in recalling Booth's definition of the implied author as, in
brief, the "sum of his own choices," then we will immediately ask why Čexov chooses to make Vasil'jev a law student. This story was written for a memorial volume dedicated to V. M. Garšin, who had recently committed suicide. There is an intended similarity between the hypersensitive Garšin and Vasil'jev, but when Čexov makes his protagonist a law student holding a degree in the natural sciences—rather than an artist—the emphasis moves away from sensitivity in itself and moves toward the necessity of taking some kind of action. Although Vasil'jev suffers a nervous collapse brought on in part by a despairing sense of his own helplessness, he is clearly in a better position seriously to attack the problem of prostitution than are most men. Who will ever be in a position to attack the problem, if not an intelligent, sensitive law student with a "talent for humanity," who already has studied the natural sciences? But Vasil'jev never puts his considerable academic preparation to real use, although he briefly goes through the motions. He recalls the history of the problem but never does attack it scientifically, and moves rapidly to the solutions tried by his acquaintances in rooming houses.

He made an immense effort, repressed his despair, and, sitting on the bed, holding his head in his hands, began thinking how one could save all the women he had seen that day. The method for attacking problems of all kinds was, as he was an educated man, well known to him. And however excited he was, he strictly adhered to that method. He recalled the history of the problem and its literature, and for a quarter of an hour paced from one end of the room to the other trying to remember all the methods for saving women employed at the present time. He had very many good friends and acquaintances who lived in rooming-houses. Among them were a good many honest and self-sacrificing men. Some of them had attempted to save women....

"All these not very numerous attempts," thought Vasil'jev, "can be divided into three groups. Some, after buying the women out of the brothel, took a room for her, bought her a sewing machine, and she became a seamstress. And whether he wanted to or not, after
having bought her out he made her his mistress; then when he had taken his degree, he went away... And the fallen woman remained a fallen woman. Others... took a lodging apart for her, bought her the inevitable sewing-machine, and tried teaching her to read, preaching at her... The women stayed and sewed as long as it was interesting and a novelty to her, then getting bored, began receiving men on the sly, or ran away... Finally, those who were most ardent and self-sacrificing took a bold resolute step: they married the woman... Yes, marriage was the best and perhaps the only means.

"But it is impossible... I, to begin with, could not marry one!"

Then Vasil'jev arrives at the idea of "saving the men" and preaching on the streetcorners, as in the passage quoted earlier. His recognition at last that "genuine missionary work meant not only preaching but deeds" is the closest he comes to awareness of his dilemma; but rather than actually trying out "the method for attacking problems of all kinds [which] was, as he was an educated man, well known to him"—Vasil'jev experiences the attack of nerves at precisely this point in the story. Vasil'jev is psychologically demolished by his fearful sense of helplessness and insignificance, apparently quite blind to his own latent capabilities.

The source of irony, then, is the character's unawareness, and it is only when we see more than the character does himself that we catch this irony. In other words, this is a form of the specific technique of dramatic irony, when "the author and audience... share knowledge which the characters do not hold,"25 or in Fowler's words, "the surface meaning for the dramatis personae, and the underlying one for the spectators."26 Now, when Čexov shows us a sensitive man educated in both the sciences and the humanities who is genuinely tormented by the problem of prostitution, but who suffers a nervous collapse out of an unbearable sense of inability to solve the problem--
just what is Čechov trying to tell us? We must answer this question in several stages. First, let us consider the nature of that knowledge which is the source of the dramatic irony, the knowledge to which the character, but not the reader (as spectator), is blind. On the most superficial level, this knowledge consists of a very plain, small fact: that Vasil'jev is a student of law and of science. We have already noted how fleetingly and casually this information is given to us in the story, so casually that it is easily missed. But if this information is of potentially such great importance, then why is it given to us so casually? The answer, I think, lies in Čechov's concern to depict life truthfully, to be impartial.

I heard a confused, indecisive talk by two Russians on pessimism and so must convey this conversation in the same form in which I heard it, but it is up to the jury, i.e., the readers, to give it an evaluation. My job is only to be talented, i.e., to be able to throw some light upon some figures and speak their language.

You scold me for objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, lack of ideals and ideas and so on. When I portray horse thieves, you would want me to say that stealing horses is an evil. But certainly this has always been obvious without my saying so. Let the jury pass judgment on them; it is my business to show them as they are. . . . When I write, I count upon my reader fully, assuming that he himself will add the subjective elements that are lacking.

The characters in the story, above all Vasil'jev himself, obviously attach little importance to his being a law student, and this explains Čechov's fleeting and casual manner of giving us this information. But Čechov counts upon his reader fully--so we must work hard to merit his faith in us and be, above all, observant. For the conscious artistry underlying Čechov's ostensibly casual manner is evident in the definite structuring already noted: that it, Čechov tells us that Vasil'jev is a law student in the story's opening
sentence, in the crucial passage directly preceding the attack of nerves itself, and in the story's conclusion.

But now, having caught this information—and the burden is on us to do so—and thus having caught the irony, we must proceed to a more serious question. Just what is the author's purpose in creating dramatic irony in such a way, i.e. from such a "plain, small fact," an obvious feature of a character's own life? But Vasil'jev is indeed not blind to the plain, small fact in itself, to what is "obvious." The real source of the irony is to be found in the peculiar limitations of his vision, for the irony, from our point of view, begins at that dim threshold where Vasil'jev's vision ends.

Most simply, there is Vasil'jev's blindness to the larger aura of implication which surrounds his study of law, for example, the intrinsic value and usefulness of such an education. He says himself that "the method for attacking problems of all kinds was, as he was an educated man, well known to him." But, for some reason, Vasil'jev is prevented from applying what he knows. And at this point we would begin a more intensive analysis of the story, as we will do in the next chapter, and try to understand the attack of nerves. For Vasil'jev this is a "dull, vague, indefinite pain akin to anguish, to an extreme form of terror, and to despair"—but for the reader, with Čexov's help, the attack need not remain vague and indefinite. Čexov, through his use of dramatic irony, guides the reader to a deeper, more perceptive understanding of Vasil'jev than he possesses himself. Vasil'jev's very limited awareness functions as a serious obstacle in his life, prevents his accomplishing his idealistic aims, prevents his realizing
(in both senses of the word) his true capabilities. In prompting the reader, through the use of dramatic irony, to recognize Vasil'jev's self-delusion and its results, Čexov is communicating a very strong and clear message about the necessity for genuine self-knowledge.

Our discussion of technique based on concrete example has, as is quite natural, led us back to "ulterior purpose." But we should not abandon the topic of technique too quickly. John Hagan has written especially appropriately for our remarks on dramatic irony:

Dramatic scenes . . . are a striking feature of some of Čexov's fiction from the start. . . . The exclusive components of the scene become (a) dialogue or monologue, and (b) extremely terse, virtually "behavioristic" reporting of such simple observable facts (details of physical action, clothing, setting, etc.) as constitute a kind of sensory minimum. Čexov's purpose . . . [is] to establish between his readers and his story a relation analogous to that between an audience and a play. This method . . . has nothing to do with the question of whether in any given story he exhibits the impartiality of a judge, the indifference of a cynic, the analytical detachment of a research scientist, or what have you. Nor is it inconsistent with an attitude of strong moral commitment. The matter is purely one of technique—a question simply of the means by which whatever stance the author cares to take is communicated to his readers. Čexov's ultimate purpose is to communicate an attitude of one kind or another; but his immediate purpose is to create . . . an illusion that he is holding up for inspection a piece of unmediated reality, a segment of life rendered with matter-of-fact lucidity in all its circumstantiality, uncolored by the moods or opinions of any observer.29

Here we return once more to our original notion of irony's dispassionate façade and its underlying message, or attitude. But now we can specify more exactly wherein irony differs from the dramatic method in general, indeed from the concept of the implied author. This difference lies not in the façade itself, but in the nature of the underlying attitude, or, in Hagan's phrase, the "author's stance." For Čexov's attitude, as critics have long been aware, is elusive. In Mathewson's words quoted
earlier:

[Chekhov] does not provide clear moral guidance in many stories that are clearly about the moral side of human behavior. Readers who cannot tolerate ambivalence tend to "read in" external or irrelevant values. 30

Čexov's own comments in his letters are especially helpful in approaching this problem. More than once he refers to his readers as a "jury," as in the following letter written in 1888 to Suvorin (see also the two passages quoted above, p. 11).

You are right to require a conscious attitude from the artist toward his work, but you mix up two ideas: the solution of the problem and a correct presentation of the problem. ... The court is obliged to pose the questions fairly, but let the jury do the deciding, each in his own way (суд обязан ставить правильные вопросы, а решать пусть присяжные каждый по вкусу). 31

The metaphor of the jury is an especially important one, suggesting that the burden of judgment is on the reader and suggesting also the seriousness of the problem being judged. But the metaphor is misleading as well, seeming to imply that Čexov stands aside--entirely removed from the reader's verdict. The larger context of the letter in which the above passage is found will help correct this mistaken notion.

It is bad for an artist to tackle what he does not understand. For special problems we have specialists: it is their business to judge the community, the fate of capitalism, the evil of drunkenness, boots, female maladies.... The artist, though, must pass judgment only on what he understands; his circle is as limited as that of any other specialist--this I repeat and on this I always insist. ... The artist observes, chooses, guesses, combines--these acts in themselves presuppose a problem; if he has not put this problem to himself from the very beginning, then there will be nothing to guess and no choice to make. To be more concise ... if one denies problem and purpose in creative work, then one must concede that the artist is creating undesignedly, without intention, temporarily deranged ....

You are right to require a conscious attitude from the artist toward his work ....

The fact that he offers no specific solutions to social problems, Čexov
emphasizes here, does not mean that he creates "undesignedly" (непреднамеренно). Čexov wrote to Suvorin, for example, about "An Attack of Nerves":

I say much about prostitution, but solve nothing (ничего не решу). Why does your magazine write nothing about prostitution? Indeed it's a most terrible evil. Our Sobolev street is a slave market.32

But Čexov's intention in writing that story was not to propose an answer to the problem of prostitution; rather he intended to portray a law student who might have worked at solving the problem, but who was incapacitated by the anxiety of self-doubt: Vasil'jev's attack of nerves put a decisive end to his idealistic longings to help humanity. Čexov wrote also about this story, "It seems to me, as a doctor, that I described mental illness (душевная боль) correctly, according to all the principles of the science of psychiatry."33 Čexov, "the court," is concerned to submit the case fairly and accurately. But that Čexov stands aside, entirely removed from the jury as they "decide, each in their own way," is only an illusion. Čexov wrote as he began work on this story:

A young man of Garšin's spirit, uncommon, honest, and deeply sensitive, chances for the first time in his life to visit a brothel. As serious things are to be treated seriously, in this story everything will be called by its proper name. I may be able to write it so that it will produce, as I should like it to, an oppressive effect (неприятное впечатление).34

The illusion of objectivity is simply the ironist's neutral, dispassionate façade. For if the reader sympathizes with Vasil'jev's anxiety and self-doubt, but condemns the futile form of his idealism, this is only because Čexov has written with just that intention in mind. Čexov indeed wants the reader, as jury, to evaluate and interpret the scene he sets before us. But to do this is made especially difficult because
Čexov writes intentionally to arouse our criticism and at the same time our sympathy. Erich Auerbach writes that irony "presupposes a complex and multiple system of possible evaluations," and in a similar vein John F. Danby writes:

Irony can mean perspective and the co-presence of alternatives, the refusal to impose on the reader a pre-digested life-view, the insistence on the contrary that the reader should enter, himself, as full partner in the final judgment on the facts before him.

The common denominator here is still the objective facade, the illusion of unmediated reality—that which the implied author chooses to show us. And when Čexov chooses to show us an inside view of a character's emotional life—and also vividly depicts the genuinely difficult, painful, overwhelming side of a character's situation—our natural and appropriate reaction is to identify with the character, to experience an emotional reaction analogous to that of the character. (I use the term "sympathy" to refer to such an analogous emotional reaction.)

Indeed, our final judgment on the facts will be one-sided if we do not fully take into account the character's own perspective on reality. In his letters Čexov emphasizes repeatedly the necessity for sympathy as well as judgment:

A condescendingly scornful tone toward little people (malen'kie ljudi) merely because they are little does no honor to the human heart.

One should not humiliate people—that is the chief thing. It is better to say to a man "angel" than to call him "fool," although man is more like a fool than an angel.

About the characters of "The Name-Day Party" ("Imeniny"-1888) Čexov writes:

I have never hidden myself... If I feel sympathy for my heroine, Ol'ga Mixailovna, a radical and ex-student, I do not conceal it in
my story, which seems sufficiently clear. Neither do I conceal my respect towards the Zemstvo, which I love, nor to the institution of trial by jury. True, an inclination to balance the pluses and minuses may be suspected in my story. But I do not balance conservatism as against liberalism, which to me do not represent the main point, but the falsity of the heroes as against their truth. Petr Dmitryč lies and plays the buffoon in court; he is ponderous and hopeless, but I cannot help showing that he is a lovable and sensitive man by nature. Ol'ga Mixailovna never stops lying, but it must not be disguised that to tell lies causes her pain.\textsuperscript{40}

Čexov writes so that the attentive reader (not the naive reader) is drawn by two distinct but equally important impulses: to see a situation as the character himself does, from within, and to see this situation from a more detached and a wiser perspective, that is, from above. Northrop Frye writes of the ironic mode:

We have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration or absurdity. \ldots This is still true when the reader feels that he is nor might be in the same situation, as the situation is being judged by the norms of a greater freedom.\textsuperscript{41}

Then our first task is to read as carefully and observantly as we can, in order to achieve the quality of understanding toward which Čexov is continually but inconspicuously uiding us. We must look beneath the seemingly objective surface of his fiction, taking every detail into account, even the most ostensibly insignificant, and considering each detail not in isolation, but in context within the aesthetic order of the whole. For if we read casually or perfunctorily, we will miss those very details which are calculated to arouse sympathy or condemnation. Neither alternative can rightfully be ignored.

Now we realize that when Čexov directs the reader to judge for himself, he only seems to stand aside—for irony involves dissimulation, Čexov knows very well where he is leading his reader; this is the intention, the purpose implicit in the artist's act of choosing, guessing,
combining. Čexov is a Socratic teacher as he both guides the reader and stands aside. Like Socrates, Čexov knows the lesson is more compelling if we learn through our own sensibilities than through his preaching or lectures. Čexov indeed asks us to think, to feel, to judge on our own—but he has an implicit purpose in doing so. In counting on his reader fully, Čexov is asking the reader to achieve a wiser and broader perspective than the characters themselves can command. This distance between the character's limited insight and the reader's deeper understanding creates the double audience of dramatic irony: the surface meaning of events for the dramatis personae against the underlying meaning for the reader. And in asking us to perceive limited awareness in his characters and its causes, Čexov is asking us to deepen and extend the quality of our own understanding. Knowledge, or awareness, is the goal toward which Čexov, like Socrates, guides us.

Let us recapitulate. Irony, first of all, involves a contrast between the surface and the underlying meaning of events—but irony also involves as part of that underlying meaning the "co-presence of alternatives." The implicit meaning is rarely clear-cut or definitive, but is an elusive quantity which might vary according to our judgment of the facts. But, again, our judgment of the facts will always be based closely on the specific context which Čexov offers us. Cleanth Brooks, in his article "Irony as a Principle of Structure," is helpful in emphasizing this feature of irony, which he calls

the impact of the context upon the part. The part is modified by the pressure of the context.

For the theme in a genuine poem does not confront us as abstraction—that is, as one man's generalization from the relevant particulars. Finding its proper symbol, defined and refined by
the participating metaphors, the theme becomes a part of the reality in which we live--an insight, rooted in and growing out of concrete experience, many-sided, three-dimensional. Even the resistance to generalization has its part in this process--even the drag of the particulars away from the universal--even the tension of opposing themes--play their part.42

A story's context--which is the objective facade in all its rich detail, that is, the manifest result of the artist's "observing, choosing, guessing, combining"--is what is given, and its importance should not be underestimated. We must always work from the context, and let our understanding be guided by the "pressure" of that context. Thus does Čexov guide us, and thus, in "counting upon his reader fully," does he stand aside. We, as the jury, have the most awesome responsibility--and it is really we who are on trial as we read. But Čexov, as Wayne C. Booth reminds us, is always present in his fiction: "We must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear."43 Čexov shares our responsibility to understand and to judge. Herein is the intimacy between author and reader, the "collusion," in Čexov's irony.
NOTES


19See above, note 15.

20SS, VI, 236-237; The Portable Chekhov, ed. Avrahm Yarmolinsky (New York, 1947), p. 245 (hereafter referred to as Yarmolinsky). Unspaced ellipses her and in all other quotations from Čexov's stories and letters indicate those present in the original text.

21SS, VI, 240; Yarmolinsky, p. 249.


23Booth, p. 20.

24SS, VI, 234-235; Yarmolinsky, pp. 242-243.

25Booth, p. 175.

26Fowler, p. 305.


29Hagan, 417.

30Mathewson, pp. 393-394.
22


37 Wayne C. Booth writes: "Only immature readers ever really identify with any character, losing all sense of distance and hence all chance of artistic experience. ... [But] our modern awareness that such "feelings" are not identical with those we feel in our own lives has tended to blind us to the fact that aesthetic form can be built out of patterned emotions as well as out of other materials. It is absurd to pretend that because our emotions and desires in responding to fiction are in a very real sense disinterested, they do not or should not exist." The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 248.


39 Not included in SS (1960-1964 edition); Koteliansky and Tomlinson, p. 88. Letter to Čexov's uncle, Mitrofan, January 18, 1887.

40 SS, XI, 257; Koteliansky and Tomlinson, p. 117. Letter to Pleščeev, October 9, 1888.

41 Frye, p. 34.


43 Booth, p. 20.
CHAPTER II
"THE MAN IN A SHELL": FEAR

The stories "The Man in a Shell," "Gooseberries," and "About Love" (all of 1898) are united by the three narrators Burkin, Ivan Ivanyč and Alexin respectively, who "relate [exemplary] tales to each other as was traditional in the genre of frame stories (Rahmenerzählung)."

This trilogy is extraordinarily rich in implications for the whole of Čexov's fiction, and I have chosen it as a convenient framework around which to group thematically related stories in my own discussion. Yet my aim is neither to provide exhaustive analyses of Čexov's stories nor to offer a comprehensive review of his work, for the body of detailed criticism on a variety of facets of Čexov's fiction is already immense. Rather, I am trying to discover what a specific method of reading can teach us about his fiction, the method, that is, of approaching Čexov's skillfully maintained "illusion of unmediated reality" as the façade of a clever eiron. This method of reading, then, is the complement of Čexov's method of writing as I have understood it—and as such will teach us whatever it is Čexov wants us to learn. Our first task is to penetrate the façade, and we do this by careful attention to detail, to "the relation between part and part" for, in Cleanth Brooks' words, "each part modifies and is modified by the whole." This method of reading is an especially illuminating approach to the trilogy, for we will see, in addition to internal patterns, ways
in which each story importantly modifies and is modified by the other two. Dramatic irony, moreover, helps us to understand the role played by the three narrators; conventional criticism tends to overlook the full significance of the fact that the exemplary tales are spoken by fictional characters within a fictional framework.

In "The Man in a Shell" the high school teacher Burkin tells his friend Ivan Ivanyč about Belikov, a former colleague of his. The two men are on a hunting trip and are settling down for the night in the Elder's barn. The stimulus for the tale is Mavra, the Elder's wife, who "has spent the last ten years hugging the stove and only going out into the street at night."

"There's nothing remarkable about that!" said Burkin. "There are not a few people . . . who try to withdraw into a shell like a hermit crab or a snail. Perhaps it is a manifestation of stavism, a return to the time when man's ancestor was not yet a gregarious animal and lived alone in his lair, or perhaps it is only one of the varieties of human character--who knows?"3

And Burkin begins to tell about Belikov, a high school teacher of Greek who deliberately isolated himself from the outside world, carried an umbrella and wore galoshes and a warm coat even in the finest weather, wore dark spectacles, stuffed his ears with wool, and so on.

"In short, the man showed a constant and irresistible inclination to keep a covering about himself, to create for himself a membrane, as it were, which would isolate him and protect him from outside influences. Actuality irritated him, frightened him, kept him in a state of continual agitation . . ."(281/355)

The ostensible source of his agitation is a morbid fearfulness about regulations.

"Any infringement of the rules, any deviation or departure from them, plunged him into gloom, though one would have thought it was no concern of his . . . He simply crushed us with his cautiousness, his suspiciousness . . .
"Would you believe it, our teachers were all thoughtful, decent people, brought up on Turgenev and Švedrin, yet this little man, who always wore rubbers and carried an umbrella, had the whole high school under his thumb for fully fifteen years! The high school? The whole town! . . . We were afraid to speak out loud, to write letters, to make acquaintances, to help the poor, to teach people how to read and write." (282-283/356-357)

There is a triple angle of vision for the reader: this (a) timid, frightened soul is also (b) a harsh, irrational tyrant, although in his own eyes he is (c) an earnest law-abiding citizen simply doing his duty. But perhaps the full significance of "The Man in a Shell" will be clearer against the context of Česov's long-standing preoccupation with this theme. I will preface my analysis of the mature story with a review of two representative stories written much earlier, dealing also with the insensitive, self-righteous tyrant.

The detail of Belikov's "keeping the whole town under his thumb for fully fifteen years" leads us directly back to "Sergeant Prisibeev" (1885), an anecdote in which the sergeant makes life miserable for his village for the entire fifteen years since his return from the army. He bullies the children, spies on the women "like he were their father-in-law," and makes the rounds of all the houses "ordering everybody not to sing, not to burn lights." The story is in large part a dramatic monologue as the sergeant justifies himself before the judge (he has been accused of assaulting some policemen in his own zeal to ensure that regulations be followed). When the judge suggests that he is interfering in affairs which are none of his business, Prisibeev is outraged:

"How's that, sir? What do you mean--none of my business? That's queer, sir. People carry on disgracefully, and it's none of my business!"
Prišibeev's aim, at least, is not to persecute but to maintain order, and quietly mixed in with all the patent absurdities of his diatribe are indeed some legitimate points, for example, "Šustrova, the soldier's widow, lives in sin with Semjon Kislov" and "Mavra is a witch: she milks other folks' cows at night." But the story's central irony arises from Prišibeev's unconsciousness that his behavior is in any way unusual, for, like Belikov, he earnestly believes in the moral value and necessity of his rigorous supervision. His passionate devotion to justice (in the form of "law and order") is sincere, if misguided. The judge's sentence of guilty thus genuinely baffles him—and even seems to him, in a fine ironic touch, an indication of moral decay:

And it is clear to him that the world has changed and that it is utterly impossible to go on living. He falls prey to gloomy, despondent thoughts. (262/102)

If our immediate impulse was to condemn outright the dull, limited, tyrannical Prišibeev—and we are justified in doing so—certainly the man's well-meaning if blind sincerity should also make us pause. We might temper our condemnation by the reflection that Prišibeev, as a kind of golem, has really been shaped and set in motion, perhaps himself terrorized, by the powerful police state whose mentality he perfectly incarnates. His maniacal obsession with regulations certainly suggests his own fear before the powers that be. We do not wholly extenuate this obtuse tyrant, but we do not wholly condemn him either.

The certain points of similarity between Prišibeev and Belikov are in themselves ironic when we consider that a teacher of Greek is being compared to an army officer. In addition to the repeated detail
of the fifteen years, in the later story Čexov also slyly reminds us of "Sergeant Prisibeev" when Kovalenko exclaims:

"I don't understand how you can put up with that informer, that nasty mug. Ugh! how can you live here? The atmosphere you breathe is vile, stifling! Are you pedagogues, teachers? No, you are piddling functionaries; yours is not a temple of learning but a police station . . . " (287/363)

Another important guise which the insensitive, self-righteous tyrant takes in Čexov's early fiction is that of "head of the family." In the story by that name ("Otec semejstva"-1885) Čexov shows us that the much more intimate relationship of father and son, as compared to officer and villagers, entails a correspondingly greater possibility of serious moral damage. The story opens:

It is, as a rule, after losing heavily at cards or after a drinking bout when an attack of dyspepsia is setting in that Stepan Stepanyć Žilin wakes up in an exceptionally gloomy frame of mind.5 Žilin proceeds to quarrel spitefully with his wife and the servants, and finally turns his attention to his son Fedja, a "pale and sickly" boy of seven. He viciously accuses him of not sitting properly (the family is at dinner) and when the boy at last begins to cry, Žilin orders him from the table in a rage.6 But he continues to shout at Fedja ("Do you know, you nasty boy, what you cost me?" and so on), ending his diatribe by "washing his hands" of Fedja's upbringing:

"I humbly apologize that as a father, from a sincere desire for your welfare, I have disturbed you and your mentors. At the same time, once and for all I disclaim all responsibility for your future...." (221/99-100)

After his nap, though, he begins to feel the "stings of conscience."

He is ashamed to face his wife, his son, Anfisa Ivanovna, and even feels unbearably wretched (daže emu stanovitsja nevynosimo žutko) when he recalls the scene at dinner, but his amour-propre is too much for him; he has not the courage to be frank, and he goes on
sulking and grumbling. (221/100)

The next morning Zilin awakens in excellent spirits, and goes to breakfast whistling gaily. Fedja "gets up and looks at him helplessly."

"Well, young man," Zilin greets him good-humouredly, sitting down to the table. "What have you got to tell me, young man? Are you all right? Well, come, chubby, give your father a kiss."

With a pale, grave face Fedja goes up to his father and touches his cheek with his quivering lips, then walks away and sits down in his place without a word. (221/100)

With this the story is over, but the final paragraphs prompt us to reconsider the title and now catch its ironic message. For in the light of these final paragraphs we realize that the trite title phrase "Head of the Family" must refer to Zilin's smug self-image--and we realize simultaneously how little he deserves, much less understands, the phrase. Despite its triteness the phrase still evokes--at least for the reader, though not for Zilin--the traditional responsibilities of the position "head of the family." But Zilin is irresponsible in the extreme: his son Fedja's timid and fearful demeanor shows that he is utterly terrorized by his father. The title phrase, in creating an ironic double angle of vision, thus emphasizes Zilin's ugly sort of blindness--for self-indulgence of ill-humor is one thing, but such self-indulgence under the guise of virtue is quite another.

We realize, though, that Zilin is neither totally blind to the truth of his behavior, or he would not have felt ashamed and wretched (unlike Prišibeev, who never even felt ashamed), nor is he aware of the whole truth. From our perspective, the truth involves far more than the simple indulgence of ill-humor--and this is the real area of Zilin's blindness. Zilin clearly does greater moral damage to his family by lacking the courage to be frank, by playing the hypocrite, than by making
an ugly scene at the dinner table. Čexov quietly calls this to our
attention by Žilin's repeated platitudes--delivered to his wife, a
guest, and the governess--on the "bitter truth," as for example:

"Why don't you eat, Varvara Vasil'jevna? Offended, I suppose?
I see.... You don't like to be told the truth. You must forgive
me, it's my nature; I can't be a hypocrite.... I always blurt out
the plain truth" (a sigh). (221/99)

But we were told, in that brief paragraph describing Žilin's discomfort
and shame over his behavior, that "his amour-propre is too much for him,
he has not the courage to be frank" (ne xvatat mužestva byt' iskrennim).
Perhaps the most significant (for Čexov's later development), though
not the most obvious irony of the story is that father and son are
both afraid: Žilin, however, is unable even to recognize his fear as
such, while young Fedja, terrorized outright, has not yet developed
that self-protective shell of amour-propre (samoljubie).

We see how insidiously the sins of one generation are passed
onto the next--and what is most insidious is the hypocrisy, the head
of the family's mask of virtue. We also realize that Žilin's fear,
covered as it is by a self-righteous mask not unlike Prisibeev's, is
a rudimentary form of the shell of a self-righteous, fearful Belikov.
This mask is at once a virtuous disguise, a defensive protection
against the real world ("Well, chubby" he says to his sickly and
frightened son), and a means of hiding from oneself as well. By now
we are coming to realize how very serious--far from being a ludicrous
matter of umbrellas, galoshes, and cotton wool--is the theme of a
man's "shell."

And so when we begin once more to read "The Man in a Shell" we
are somewhat jolted by Burkin's introduction to his tale:
"Perhaps [withdrawing into a shell] is a manifestation of atavism, a return to the time when man's ancestor . . . lived alone in his lair, or perhaps it is only one of the varieties of human character--who knows? I am no naturalist, and it is not my business (не моё дело) to settle such questions." (280-281/355; italics mine)

We shall soon see from our reading of the story that the question of a man's shell hardly belongs to the realm of natural science, but is the legitimate concern of any thinking and feeling man. Perhaps Burkin, in refusing to see this, is in a shell of his own. In choosing to tell about Belikov, Burkin assumes a certain responsibility, especially as a teacher, to understand whereof he speaks. Yet his understanding of Belikov remains fairly superficial. Burkin begins his story by referring, for example, to "man's ancestor . . . [who] lived alone in his lair"--an image with crucial significance for our understanding of all that follows; but Burkin is concerned only with what is obvious--here, the obvious fearfulness in Belikov's behavior--and he looks no deeper than this. But only if we place Belikov's decorous preciosity (the galoshes, the interlined coat, the turned up collar, the watch in its chamois case) in the context of the primitive, unreasoning, animal-like terror of the lair do we get a real glimpse into the nightmarish reality of Belikov's inner world. It is the inner terror which of course explains Belikov's behavior. But Burkin is little concerned with Belikov's inner world; for him Belikov tends to remain a strange, ludicrous figure whose hallmark is his odd appearance: "And as though in his honor, it was cloudy, rainy weather on the day of his funeral, and we all wore rubbers and carried umbrellas."

Let us consider Burkin's description of Belikov at night:

"Belikov's bedroom was tiny and boxlike; his bed was curtained. When
he went to bed he drew the bedclothes over his head; it was hot and stuffy; the wind rattled the closed doors; a humming noise came from the stove and the sound of sighs from the kitchen, ominous sighs--And he lay under the quilt, terrified. He was afraid that something might happen, that Afanasy would murder him, that thieves would break in, and he had bad dreams all night long . . ." (283/358)

We should not forget that night sets loose monsters of the psyche which are very real to the one who sees them. And if the picture of Belikov under his quilt is at first humorous, it abruptly ceases to be so when we consider that the quilt for Belikov is an animal lair and that the terror is extreme. The earlier image of atavism and animals alone in their lair is then an excellent example of how the "pressure" of the context guides the reader's understanding.

Indeed, all the ostensible comedy surrounding Belikov--the eternal umbrella and galoshes, the repeated "Oh, you can't tell what may come of it!", the distress at Varenka on a bicycle, the noisy but safe fall downstairs--tends to obscure, at least in Burkin's account, that Belikov's terror of humiliation and ridicule is a mortal terror; he actually dies of it. "For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me" (Job 3:25). What moves us is not so much the terror itself, for we are all afraid, but that this creature cowering in his shell is too frightened to even speak up, as Job did, to the "voice in the whirlwind" (note that his ears are stuffed with cotton wool). He cannot become a man--"Anthropos!" he would exclaim--and he crawls back to his lair to die like an animal. Whether we call this tragedy or pathos, it is a painful spectacle--that is, unless we, like Burkin, have a shell to protect us, and then we see it as a farce:
"But just as he was rolling down the stairs, Varenka came in, accompanied by two ladies; they stood below, staring, and this was more dreadful to Belikov than anything else. I believe he would rather have broken his neck or both legs than have been an object of ridicule. Why, now the whole town would hear of it; it would come to the principal's ears, it would reach the Trustee. Oh, there was no telling what might come of it! There would be another caricature, and it would all end in his being ordered to retire from his post.

"When he got up, Varenka recognized him and, looking at his ludicrous face, his crumpled overcoat, and his rubbers, not grasping the situation and supposing that he had fallen by accident, could not restrain herself and burst into laughter that resounded throughout the house:

"'Ha-ha-ha!'

"And this reverberant, ringing 'Ha-ha-ha!' [the voice in the whirlwind?] put an end to everything: to the expected match and to Belikov's earthly existence. He did not hear what Varenka was saying; he saw nothing. On reaching home, the first thing he did was to remove Varenka's portrait from the table; then he went to bed, and he never got up again.

... "A month later Belikov died. We all went to his funeral..."

(290-291/367-368)

Now we see clearly that "The Man in a Shell" of the title could as easily refer to Burkin, though with a different shade of meaning, as to Belikov, and thus refer to all those townspeople, and Čexov's readers too, who consider that crazy fellow Belikov primarily a "joke"--and haven't we all known a Belikov? So Čexov's story is not, as might at first seem, the mere equivalent of its caricatural façade:

"Now listen to what happened next. Some wag drew a caricature of Belikov walking along under his umbrella, wearing his rubbers, his trousers tucked up, with Varenka on his arm; below there was the legend 'Anthropos in love.' The artist got the expression admirably, you know." (288/364)

The joke is on Burkin, though he doesn't know it--and on us too, if we're not careful--for Čexov, the eiron, writes so that we, the alazon, the crowd, must break through our own shell in order to understand that this story is more than a simple caricature of Belikov. For the image of the shell in the title has an ironic, multiple reference. The
primary, most obvious reference is of course to Belikov's shell—which
for Burkin at least is simply Belikov's odd custom of covering himself
in various ways and of retreating from the world. But Belikov's shell,
from the reader's point of view, has a far more profound reference than
to odd behavior. Belikov's shell is above all a pretense, to himself
as well as to the outside world, that everything is "all right" when it
clearly is not: and this in itself is an important source of irony.
So the various protective paraphernalia reveal to those who can see
just how blind Belikov is—as if an interlined coat, a sweater, and
a turned up collar could stave off the furies which howl within. For
the fear of humiliation covers a smothered longing for dignity and
self-respect ("Anthropos'"), and Belikov, in lacking the courage to
face the real nature of his fear (like the "dignified" head of the
family Zilin), has renounced all hope of attaining genuine self-respect.
Thus does he desperately pursue the outward guise of that self-
respect in the form of a virtuous self-righteousness.

"Lenten fare didn't agree with him [says Burkin], yet he could
not eat meat, as people might say that Belikov did not keep the
fasts, and he ate perch fried in butter—not a Lenten dish, yet
one could not call it meat. He did not keep a female servant for
fear people might think evil of him, but instead employed an old
man of sixty, called Afanasy, half-witted and given to drinking." (283/358)

And on his fateful visit to Kovalenko, Belikov says:

"I am very, very much troubled. Some malicious fellow has drawn
a caricature of me and of another person who is close to both of
us. I regard it as my duty to assure you that I had nothing to
do with it. I have given no grounds for such an attack—on the
contrary, I have always behaved as a respectable person would
(kak vpolne porjadočnyj čelovek)." (289/365)

But somewhere deep under the surface Belikov senses the truth, making
his fear all the more intense: "Oh, you can't tell what may come of it"
But Belikov's inability to confront the truth openly gives rise to his ludicrous behavior—which invites ridicule, that which he fears most—and moreover assures that he will remain within his shell, a helpless prisoner of his fear. Freedom comes only with the courage to see, to understand.

The image of the shell, that of the hermit crab and the snail, is an especially fitting symbol for frightened withdrawal—a primitive and perhaps indeed atavistic form of response. Belikov is an extreme case, and we will have more to say about his role in the story. But let us consider a further reference of the image of the shell. Psychological withdrawal is not always so obvious and extreme as in Belikov; there are subtler ways of withdrawing from the world. Burkin's indifference to Belikov's suffering is one form of such a shell—in the sense that it is easier to laugh at odd creatures like Belikov than to look behind the man's mask and try to understand him.

But our understanding of Belikov does not mean that we condone his behavior; we, along with Burkin, censure Belikov's suspicious surveillance of his colleagues and the fanatical, authoritarian attitude so similar to Prišibeev's. "Ugh! how can you live here?" Kovalenko exclaims. "The atmosphere you breathe is vile, stifling!" In the country of the blind, the one-eyed Kovalenko is king. For Burkin, and all the townspeople, submit meekly to Belikov.

"Would you believe it, our teachers were all thoughtful, decent people, brought up on Turgenev and Седрин, yet this little man, who always wore rubbers and carried an umbrella, had the whole high school under his thumb for fully fifteen years! The high school? The whole town! Our ladies did not get up private theatricals on Saturdays for fear he should find it out, and the clergy dared not eat meat in Lent or play cards in his presence. Under the influence of people like Belikov, the whole town spent
ten to fifteen frightened years. We were afraid to speak out loud, to write letters, to make acquaintances, to read books, to help the poor, to teach people how to read and write...." (282-283/356-357)

And Ivan Ivanych comments: "Yes, thoughtful, decent people, readers of Ščedrin and Turgenev, of Buckle and all the rest of them, yet they knuckled under and put up with it--that's just how it is."

Thus there is yet another important way in which a man remains within his shell--and that is passive acceptance of conditions as they are. We have come to understand Belikov's morbid fearfulness to some degree, but the townspeople's general fear of Belikov, "this little man who always wore rubbers," is even harder to understand and thus easier to condemn. The mutual fear reminds us once more of "atavism, a return to the time when man's ancestor was not yet a gregarious (obsčestvennoe) animal."

"And what do you think, with his sighs, his moping, the dark spectacles on his pale little face, a little face like a polecat's, you know, he weighed us all down, and we submitted, reduced Petrov's and Yegorov's marks for conduct, detained them, and in the end expelled them both." (282/357)

Our condemnation of Burkin and the rest of the town for "knuckling under and putting up with it" is heightened, rather than softened, at the story's end.

"I confess, it is a great pleasure to bury people like Belikov. .

"We returned from the cemetery in good humor. But not more than a week passed before life dropped into its old rut, and was as gloomy, tiresome, and stupid as before, the sort of life that is not explicitly forbidden, but on the other hand is not fully permitted; things were no better. And, indeed, though we had buried Belikov, how many such men in shells were left, how many more of them there will be!"

"That's the way it is," (to, to vot ono i est') said Ivan Ivanych, and lit his pipe.

"How many more of them there will be!" repeated Burkin. (291-292/369)
And at this point in the story we catch our first glimpse of Burkin as he walks out of the barn: "He was a short, stout man, completely bald, with a black beard that nearly reached his waist." The incongruous combination of a bald head and a long beard suggests at once a baby and an old man—for there is a mixture of immaturity and senility in the helplessness of Burkin's, and also Ivan Ivanyc's, reaction. The passive acquiescence ("That's the way it is") is the respectable mask of a primitive, fatalistic mentality.

It is also worth noting that Burkin the high school teacher has a conception of freedom which is childlike rather than mature. The following passage is especially ironic considering that in a week's time "life dropped into its old rut."

"As we were returning from the cemetery we wore discreet Lenten faces; no one wanted to display this feeling of pleasure—a feeling like that we had experienced long, long ago as children when the grown-ups had gone out and we ran about the garden for an hour or two, enjoying complete freedom. Ah, freedom, freedom! A mere hint, the faintest hope of its possibility, gives wings to the soul, isn't that true?" (291/369)

After Burkin has finished his tale there is a paragraph describing the silent, sleeping village in which the author seems to speak directly in his own voice. Purely objective description follows and precedes this sentence: "... the street is gentle, sad and beautiful, and it seems as though the stars look down upon it kindly and tenderly, and as though there were no more evil on earth, and all were well." We are easily lulled by the beautiful description, as by the landscape itself, and forget that it only seems "as though there were no more evil ..." But Čechov has just shown us how very much evil there is on earth, and that all is not well. This story tells us
that evil is wrought not only by men in a shell such as Belikov—and Burkin is right, "How many more of them there will be"—but also by men in a different kind of shell, such as Burkin himself.

"Yes, that's the way it is," repeated Ivan Ivanyć, "and isn't our living in the airless, crowded town, our writing useless papers, our playing vint—isn't all that a sort of shell for us? And this spending our lives among pettifogging, idle men and silly, unoccupied women, our talking and our listening to all sorts of poppycock—isn't that a shell, too? If you like, I will tell you a very instructive story."

"No, it's time to turn in," said Burkin, "Tomorrow's another day."

"To see and hear them lie," said Ivan Ivanyć, turning over on the other side, "and to be called a fool for putting up with their lies; to endure insult and humiliation, and not dare say openly that you are on the side of the honest and the free, and to lie and smile yourself, and all for the sake of a crust of bread, for the sake of a warm nook, for the sake of a mean, worthless rank in the service—no, one cannot go on living like that!"

"Come, now, that's a tune from another opera, Ivan Ivanyć!" said the teacher. "Let's go to sleep."

And ten minutes later Burkin was asleep. (292-293/370)

If the "man in a shell" is Everyman... But perhaps all hope is not lost, for although Burkin goes right to sleep,

Ivan Ivanyć kept sighing and turning from one side to the other; then he got up, went outside again, and seating himself near the door, lighted his pipe. (292/371)

And here we would move on to the next story of the trilogy—in which Ivan Ivanyć is the central narrator—"Gooseberries."

Čexov's use of irony in "The Man in a Shell" has pointed up several kinds of unawareness. Belikov fearfully covers himself with protective layers of clothing, but the reader sees that the cause for his fear lies within, not without. Burkin narrates a tale about a "man in a shell," and unknowingly reveals that he is a man in a different kind of shell. Although Ivan Ivanyć does, like Burkin, passively acquiesce—"That's the way it is"—he is evidently more aware than
Burkin; we know from his remarks after the story, remarks to which Burkin is indifferent, that he has been genuinely affected by what he has heard. We should note that Čexov refers to Ivan Ivanyč in the trilogy always by first name and patronymic, with this explanation: "[he] had a rather queer double surname--Čimša-Gimalaijskij--which did not suit him at all, and he was known as Ivan Ivanyč all over the province." But Burkin and Alexin are referred to always more formally, by their last name. The effect is to bring us closer to Ivan Ivanyč, and here, at the end of "The Man in a Shell," we see him as a sensitive, reflective person in whom we place our hopes. For by now it is clear that, despite the apparently casual framework of men telling stories while on a hunting trip, the themes touched on in the trilogy are important and fundamental--above all, Ivan Ivanyč's realization that spending one's life uselessly is "a sort of shell for us." And in "Gooseberries" this theme will receive a fuller exposition.

But first we might pause to examine the theme of a useless life as Čexov treats it in other of his stories. For once having penetrated the shell of a frightened Belikov and having glimpsed the monsters of the psyche which hide within, it is easier to see, in other characters, how fear can paralyze the spirit and render life sterile. My initial example of Čexov's use of irony was taken from "An Attack of Nerves" (1888) and now it is illuminating to return to Vasil'jev, whose intense, idealistic longing to save the prostitutes came to nothing in the end. In our earlier discussion we saw that Vasil'jev, as a captive of his own psychological blindness, was unable to put to use his considerable academic training in the natural sciences and in law.
The attack of nerves itself is described as a "dull, vague, indefinite pain akin to anguish, to an extreme form of terror, and to despair." Vasil'jev moreover experiences terror at several crucial instances throughout the story and we should now try to determine the origin of his fear—taking into consideration Vasil'jev's character as it is established in the story's context.

One of Vasil'jev's friends had once said of him that he was a talented man... he had a peculiar talent—a talent for humanity. He possess an extraordinarily fine delicate scent for pain in general. As a good actor reflects in himself the movements and voices of others, so Vasil'jev could reflect in his soul the sufferings of others. When he saw tears, he wept; beside a sick man, he felt sick himself and moaned; if he saw an act of violence, he felt as though he himself were the victim of it, he was frightened as a child, and in his fright ran to help. The pain of others worked on his nerves, excited him, roused him to a state of frenzy, and so on.

Whether this friend were right I don't know... "

Tchékov deliberately lets this interpretation remain ambiguous, for the concrete evidence of the story itself, Vasil'jev's behavior, must be brought to bear on it.

Upon visiting houses of prostitution for the first time, Vasil'jev, who "knew nothing of fallen women except by hearsay and from books," discovers that the reality is not "interesting and novel" as he had expected, but vulgar, cheap and ordinary.

He was tormented by the thought that he, a decent and affectionate person (such as he had hitherto considered himself), hated these women and felt only repelled by them... "It is because I am not trying to understand them," he thought. "They are all more like animals than human beings, but of course they are human beings all the same, they have souls. One must understand them and then judge...."

"Yes, one must make an effort to understand, one mustn't be like this..." Vasil'jev went on thinking.

And he began gazing at each of the women with strained attention, looking for a guilty smile. But either he did not know how to read their faces, or not one of these women felt guilty; he read on every
face nothing but a blank expression of everyday vulgar boredom and complacency. Stupid faces, stupid smiles, harsh, stupid voices, insolent movements, and nothing else. (228/234-235)

And at this point Vasil'jev begins a conversation with one of the women. We cannot ignore the evident sincerity of Vasil'jev's attempt to understand, but we are also struck by the inadequacy of the attempt, which consists mainly in looking for guilty smiles. Vasil'jev is prepared to understand only within the framework of his preconceived notion of prostitutes, a notion which is bookish and highly romanticized. When the reality totally contradicts the preconceived notion, Vasil'jev finds understanding impossible, for reasons which we will soon discuss.

Vasil'jev's conversation with one of the prostitutes is interrupted by a sound of weeping in an adjoining room, from which runs an angry man followed by the madam, who is shouting, "Nobody has given you leave to slap girls on the cheeks!"

A hubbub arose. Vasil'jev was frightened and turned pale. In the next room there was the sound of bitter, genuine weeping, as though of someone insulted. And he realized that there were real people living here who, like people everywhere else, felt insulted, suffered, wept, and cried for help. The feeling of choking hate and disgust gave way to an acute feeling of pity and anger against the aggressor. He rushed into the room where there was weeping. Across rows of bottles on a marble-top table he distinguished a suffering face, wet with tears, stretched out his hands toward that face, took a step towards the table, but at once drew back in horror. The weeping woman was drunk.

As he made his way through the noisy crowd gathered about the fair-haired man, his heart sank and he felt frightened like a child. . . He tore down his coat from the hanger and ran headlong downstairs. (230/237)

Vasil'jev, with his supposed "scent for pain" and sensitivity to the sufferings of others, and who at least seems to come closer to sympathetic understanding than either of his friends, is finally repelled. His "anger against the aggressor" is replaced by fear, and his artist friend takes action in a way that Vasil'jev can't.
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perhaps the only means" of saving the prostitutes, Vasil'jev suddenly catches himself: "But it is impossible! I, to begin with, could not marry one!" His is an empty idealism.

Vasil'jev's fear is obviously the source of his inability to put his ideals into practice. What is the real nature of that fear?

When he was left alone, Vasil'jev strode rapidly along the boulevard. He felt frightened of the darkness, of the snow . . . ; he felt frightened of the streetlamps . . . His soul was possessed by an unaccountable, faint-hearted terror. Passers-by came towards him from time to time, but he timidly edged away; it seemed to him that women, none but women, were coming from all sides and staring at him...

"It's beginning," he thought, "I am going to have an attack of nerves." (234/241)

(The image of the staring women coming from all sides is strongly suggestive of the ending of Gogol's story, "Ivan Šponka and His Aunt," when Šponka's "burlesque anxiety dream . . . translates the squire's fear of marriage into a wild proliferation of wives who keep emerging from under his hat, from his pockets, indeed from almost every wrinkle of his clothes."10) We might now consider a passage from the beginning of the story which will help us better understand Vasil'jev's fascination with and terror of fallen women:

He knew that there are immoral women who, under the pressure of fatal circumstances--environment, bad education, poverty, and so on--are forced to sell their honor for money. . . . But in spite of all that, they do not lose the image and likeness of God. They all acknowledge their sin and hope for salvation. (218/222)

Vasil'jev's fantasy of the shy, sensitive prostitute makes it easy for him to dream of helping such women. And thus the cheap vulgarity of the real prostitutes fills him with fear; hatred and repulsion, as Vasil'jev himself senses with great anxiety, are incompatible with his longing to understand and to help. He displays all
the symptoms of anxiety as he acknowledges his hatred of the women:

Vasil'jev's heart was pounding and his face burned. He felt ashamed . . . of his presence here, and he felt disgusted and miserable. He was tormented by the thought that he . . . hated these women and felt only repelled by them. (228/234)

We realize, helped by our earlier understanding of the "man in a shell," that Vasil'jev's fear, his Šponka-like vision of "women coming from all sides and staring" (a vision which reminds us of the ladies laughing at Belikov), is a fear of painful truths about himself which Vasil'jev dreads confronting openly. Like Belikov, he has a panicky sense that his claim to self-respect is spurious, and his humanistic ideals are then the equivalent of Belikov's pathetic cry of "Anthropos!" For there is no exit from the humiliating fear--from the inner landscape of staring women--so long as one remains passive, guilty and blind in one's living. Indeed Vasil'jev's fantasy of fallen women--"forced" by circumstance to sell their honor but who "acknowledge their sin and hope for salvation"--seems to be an unconscious reflection of his own status as a helpless, impotent idealist. It is easier to place the blame for one's failings on "fatal circumstance" than to shoulder full responsibility for them. Thus does Vasil'jev sympathize with the prostitutes wholly on the basis of this fantasy.

We understand now why the reality of prostitution is so frightening and disturbing for Vasil'jev, for the reality, first of all, destroys the comforting fantasy, and even more importantly, makes sympathetic understanding far more difficult than Vasil'jev had thought. The more Vasil'jev is repelled by the prostitutes, the further he is from his ideals. In his room, as the inspiration of preaching on the
streetcorner begins to recede, Vasil'jev recognizes that he is "cowardly and timid," "a timid and insignificant person," "that genuine missionary work meant not only preaching but deeds." The closer he comes to the truth, the more unbearable the anguish; but he cannot summon the courage to face the truth openly. The mere thought that "missionary work meant not only preaching but deeds" throws him into a state of "vague, indefinite" terror--and the attack of nerves now claims Vasil'jev as its helpless prisoner.

He was no longer thinking of the women, nor of the men, nor of missionary work. His whole attention was turned upon the mental agony which was torturing him. (237/245)

We sympathize with Vasil'jev's agony at the same time that we criticize the futile end of his idealism. Despite our sympathy, the story's central irony remains the fact that Vasil'jev's "talent for humanity," like his extensive education, is never used to good purpose. Vasil'jev comes close to seeing this, but not close enough:

Now they [his friends, the medical student and the artist] are singing, laughing, talking nonsense, but haven't they just been exploiting hunger, ignorance, and stupidity? They have--I have been a witness of it. What is the use of their humanity, their medicine, their painting? (232-233/240)

And law? we might ask. And Vasil'jev's talent for humanity? The more capable and sensitive Vasil'jev seems to us, then, the more we deplore the human waste. His indignation should refer to himself, as well as to his friends. It's worth noting, though, that Vasil'jev makes the above comment to himself after the artist has called him a "coward and an old woman"; evidently the accusation has hit home.

We deplore the waste of Vasil'jev's sensitivity all the more against the context of the other characters' indifference:
"We human beings do murder each other," said the medical student. "It's immoral, of course, but philosophizing won't help it. Good-by!" (233/241)

And in the psychiatrist's office Vasil'jev is struck by "the indifferent, reserved, and frigid tone in which his friends and the doctor spoke of the women and that miserable street."

"Doctor, tell me one thing only," he said, controlling himself so as not to speak rudely. "Is prostitution an evil or not?"

"My dear fellow, who disputes it?" said the doctor, with an expression that suggested that he had settled all such questions for himself long ago. "Who disputes it?" (240-241/ 250)

And Vasil'jev exclaims with conscious irony, "... because I cannot speak of fallen women as unconcernedly as of these chairs, I am being examined by a doctor, I am called mad, I am pitied!" When Vasil'jev leaves the doctor's office, however, "he was beginning to feel ashamed; ... the load under his heart grew lighter and lighter as though it were melting away." In the last line of the story, Vasil'jev "dragged himself languidly to the university"--the very picture, at least in our eyes, of the shackled prisoner, although from his own, his friends' and the doctor's point of view, Vasil'jev has been "cured." Both the healthy and the neurotic end by leaving the world just as it is, Čexov seems to tell us. And life goes on: a trivial, meaningless, imprisoning routine. We agree with Ivan Ivanyč that a useless life is "a sort of shell."

Vasil'jev is restored to sanity--and to indifference and insensitivity. Where in Čexov's fiction, if at all, shall we find real sensitivity, vision, understanding? "People who are fond of visiting insane asylums are few in this world," but if we visit the desolate Godforsaken annex "Ward Six" ("Palata No. 6"-1892) we shall hear such
words as these being spoken by the lunatic Gromov to Dr. Ragin:

"To pain I respond with tears and outcries, to baseness with indignation, to vileness with disgust. In my opinion this is exactly what is known as life. The lower the organism, the less sensitive it is, and the more feeble its response to irritation; the higher it is, the more receptive, and the more energetic its reactions to reality. How could you not know this? A doctor, and not know such elementary things! For a man to despise suffering, to be always content, to be surprised at nothing, he would have to reach this state--" and Ivan Dmitryč pointed to the fat, bloated peasant, "or else have become so hardened by suffering as to have lost all sensitivity to it, in other words, to have ceased living."[1]

But Gromov's life is strikingly more useless than Vasil'jev's; he sits behind the grilled windows of Ward Six. His sensitivity and vision is the obverse of an insane hypersensitivity, that is, his persecution mania. As a result the ironies of the story are shifting and complex, for Gromov at one moment sees with penetrating lucidity but at the next is a raving madman.

His speech, as in a delirium, is frenzied, spasmodic, disordered, and not always understandable, yet one detects something singularly fine in the words and in his voice. When he talks, both the lunatic and the man are distinguishable in him. (126/10)

Then our reading of the story can ignore neither alternative, neither the lunatic nor the man.

Gromov's insanity dates back to the day he happened to see four armed guards accompanying two convicts in chains: "For some reason he suddenly felt that he too could be clapped in irons and led in this same way through the mud to prison." Gromov soon becomes "absolutely convinced that he could be arrested at any moment," but his paranoiac symptoms become extreme only when his fear is exacerbated by the discovery of two partly decomposed corpses bearing marks of a violent death, an old woman and a little boy. Gromov fears people will think
it was he who had killed them, and decides to hide in his landlady's cellar. After several days and nights there some workmen come to reset the stove, as Ivan Dmitryč knows full well, but fear prompts him to think they are policemen in disguise. He dashes terror-stricken from the house:

Barking dogs tore after him, somewhere behind him a man shouted, the wind whistled in his ears, and it seemed to Ivan Dmitryč that all the violence in the world had gathered together in pursuit of him. (131-132/15)

Before long Gromov is in Ward Six with its grilled windows, stench of the menagerie, and piles of rubbish--on top of which lies the guard Nikita, "an old retired soldier wearing his rusty army insignia" who might be Prisibeev himself: "He is one of those diligent, simple-minded, dogmatic and obtuse individuals who love law and order more than anything else in the world, and as a consequence are convinced that they have to be beaten." Gromov's most "irrational" fears have been confirmed:

And, legal procedures being what they are today, a miscarriage of justice is not only quite possible but would be nothing to wonder at. People who have an official, professional relation to other men's suffering--judges, physicians, the police, for example--grow . . . callous. . . . And once this formal, heartless attitude has been established, only one thing is needed to make a judge deprive an innocent man of all his rights and sentence him to hard labor: time. Just the time necessary for the observaton of certain formalities for which a judge receives his salary--and it is all over. Then try to find justice and protection in this filthy little town two hundred versts from a railroad. (129-130/12-13)

Albeit exaggerated by madness, Gromov's acute sensitivity to violence and injustice in the world is nonetheless confirmed in good measure by reality. Thus an important source of irony in the story is that the lunatic's exaggerated sensitivity still strikes us as more
reasonable, more decent, than the bland indifference of the sane.

Dr. Ragin once happens, inadvertently, to visit the annex and soon is visiting ever more frequently, entering into long pleasurable conversations with Gromov. Ragin preaches the stoicism of Marcus Aurelius: "There is no difference between a warm comfortable study and this ward. Peace and contentment do not lie outside a man, but within him." The conversations are lengthy and frequent, but in essence Gromov replies:

"No, sir, this is not philosophy, not thought, not breadth of vision, but laziness, pretense, mental torpor.... Yes!" Ivan Dmitryč grew angry again. "You despise suffering, but if you pinched your little finger in that door, you'd probably start howling at the top of your voice." (157/37)

Ragin "rubs his hands and laughs with pleasure."

"I must confess that talking with you gives me the greatest pleasure. Well... I've heard you out, now be so good as to listen to me...." (157/38)

The rumor starts to make the rounds that the doctor is visiting the annex, enthusiastically conversing for long periods with a lunatic. Before long ("Only one thing is needed . . . time . . . and it is all over") Ragin finds himself imprisoned in Ward Six.

Andrej Efimyč walked to the window and locked out at the field. It was growing dark, and on the horizon at the right rose a cold livid moon. Not far from the hospital fence, some two hundred yards, stood a tall white building surrounded by a stone wall. It was the prison.

"So this is reality!" thought Andrej Efimyč, and he became terrified. (176/55)

Later on in the evening "something other than fear and a sense of ignominy had begun to gnaw at Andrej Efimyč." It is a longing for his beer and cigarettes. He who believed "there is no difference between a warm comfortable study and this ward" is driven to try to
escape the terrifying reality of Ward Six not from fear, not from ignominy, but from a longing for beer and cigarettes.

"I'm going out, my friend," he said. "I'll tell them to give us some light.... I can't stand this.... I'm not equal to it...."

Andrej Efimyč went to the door and opened it, but Nikita instantly jumped up and barred his way. (176-177/57)

Ragin might have recalled his own words to Gromov, spoken at his first visit to the annex:

"When society decides to protect itself from criminals, the psychologically ill, and other difficult people, it is invincible. There is only one thing left for you: comfort yourself with the thought that your presence here is indispensable." (149/30)

Ragin, and Gromov who tries to come to his aid, are both beaten severely by Nikita.

Then all was quiet. The moon shed its pale light through the bars, and on the floor lay a shadow that looked like a net. It was terrible. Andrej Efimyč lay still, holding his breath, waiting in terror to be struck again. He felt as if someone had taken a sickle, thrust it into his body, and twisted it several times in his chest and bowels. He bit the pillow and clenched his teeth with pain; and all of a sudden out of the chaos there clearly flashed through his mind the dreadful, unbearable thought that these people, who now looked like black shadows in the moonlight, must have experienced this same pain day in and day out for years. How could it have happened that in the course of more than twenty years he had not known, had refused to know this? Having no conception of pain, he could not possibly have known it, so he was not guilty, but his conscience, no less obdurate and implacable than Nikita, made him turn cold from head to foot. He jumped up, wanting to shout at the top of his lungs, to rush out and kill Nikita, Xobotov, the superintendent, the medical assistant, and then himself, but no sound came from his mouth and his legs would not obey him; gasping for breath, he tore at his dressing gown and the shirt over his chest, ripped them, and fell back on the bed unconscious. (178-179/58)

The story's last short chapter goes on to tell matter-of-factly of Ragin's death by an apoplectic stroke the following evening, and comes to a close only with the funeral. But by now we should be alert to the matter-of-fact front of Čexov the eiron. For the moment of Ragin's "dreadful, unbearable" illumination is crucial--and if we read
this one long paragraph rapidly and matter-of-factly ourselves and then soon put the story aside, we have become Burkin. If we stop and reflect when the story is over, we have become Ivan Ivanyč puffing on his pipe. Now the burden is on us, Čexov's readers, to become aware of an irony less obvious than that of the lunatic Gromov's sensitivity—but even more significant: "How could it have happened that in the course of more than twenty years he had not known, had refused to know this?" Just as Ragin did, we, Čexov's readers, have entered Ward Six with its stench of the menagerie knowing full well we can leave whenever we want to. Then perhaps our understanding at the end of the story is no different at all from Ragin's at the very beginning:

Time itself seems to have stopped, to be holding its breath with the doctor over his book, as if nothing exists but this book and the lamp with its green globe. Gradually the doctor's coarse rugged face lights up with a smile of impassioned delight at the workings of the human mind. Oh, why is not man immortal? he thinks. Andrej Efimyč leans back in his chair and closes his eyes to think a little. And, without realizing it, under the influence of the fine ideas gleaned from his book, he casts a glance at his past and at the present. The past revolts him; better not to think of it. And the present is no different. He knows that while his thoughts are whirling around the sun with the earth's cooling crust, in a large building right next to a doctor's apartment people are languishing in disease and filth; someone is perhaps lying awake trying to combat the vermin, someone else has been infected with erysipelas or is moaning because of a bandage that is wound too tight; patients may be playing cards and drinking vodka with the nurses. Twelve thousand people a year are swindled; the entire hospital system is based on theft, wrangling scandal-mongering, favoritism, and gross quackery, exactly as it was twenty years ago, and remains a vicious institution, in the highest degree detrimental to the health of the community. He knows that behind the bars of Ward Six Nikita beats the patients... (143-144/25-26)

Having finished Čexov's "Ward Six" we evidently know just what Ragin knows. But Čexov tells us in his story that there is more than
one kind of knowing—and the implicit ironic message here is that the reader's understanding might well be no different from Ragin's, as he nods over his book. For Čexov has just demonstrated at length what was needed to arouse for the first time in twenty years the conscience of this educated, good-natured, gentle man with "an intense love of honesty and reason."

Having no conception of pain, he could not possibly have known it, so he was not guilty, but his conscience, no less obdurate and implacable than Nikita, made him turn cold from head to foot.

Maynard Mack's excellent and timely article, "To See It Feelingly," is very appropriate here. He closes his article (which any serious student of literature should read in full) by quoting Archibald MacLeish:

[One way of accounting for our present sense of nightmare] is to say that the knowledge of the fact has somehow or other come loose from the feel of the fact and that it is now possible ... to know as a mind what you cannot comprehend as a man.

What I think of is the "good Germans" who knew the gas ovens in the concentration camps but were able to live with that knowledge . . .

Not until mankind is again able to see feelingly, as blind Gloucester says to Lear upon the heath, will the crucial flaw at the heart of our civilization be healed. And to see feelingly . . . poetry can teach us.

No man who comes to knowledge through a poem leaves the feel of what he knows behind, for the knowledge he comes to is the knowledge of that feeling life of the mind which comprehends by putting itself in the place where its thought goes—by realizing its thought in that only human realizer, the imagination.12

In "Ward Six" which seems to be told even more directly and unambiguously than many of Čexov's stories—"If you are not afraid of being stung by the nettles, come with me along the narrow path leading to the annex"—the use of irony is most subtle of all. That is because the reader who "thinks he knows and understands everything"—and who
thus overlooks the fact that Ragin's guilt might easily be his own guilt--is the real alazon of the story. Awareness, or knowledge akin to virtue, is the goal toward which Čexov, like Socrates, guides us.

A somewhat different perspective on madness is offered in "The Black Monk" ("Černyj monax"-1894). A talented scientist, overstrained by work, becomes afflicted with mania grandiosa; his illness transforms his useful and productive life into a waste, long before physical death finally claims him. "It seems as if all the world is looking at me from a hiding-place and waiting for me to comprehend it," thinks Kovrin, Magister, early in the story as he strolls through an open, peaceful, free landscape. All our previous reading has helped us appreciate the importance of Kovrin's urge to comprehend--but the following inconspicuous phrase should be enough, by now, to sound a warning: "with neither human dwelling nor human soul visible in the distance." For this moment is the closest Kovrin will ever come to comprehending the real world: he will soon be blind to all but the narrow confines of a lonely insanity. A wave passes over the rye and Kovrin has his first vision of the black monk, who will convince him in the course of repeated appearances that Kovrin is "one of the few who can justly be called the elected of God."

"You serve eternal truth [says the black monk]. Your thoughts, your intentions, your astonishing science, all your life bear the stamp of divinity, a heavenly impress..." 13

Yet the most obvious result of Kovrin's insanity is that the genius, the intellectual superman, is in no state to do productive work at all: he becomes feeble and exhausted, a mere shadow of his former strength and vitality. (The black monk himself has a "pallid, corpse-
like face.") To Kovrin's reminder of the ideal *mens sana in corpore sano*, the monk replies during one of their lengthy conversations: "All those things which distinguish poets, prophets, martyrs to ideas from ordinary men are incompatible with the animal life, that is, with physical health." The real reason for the monk's scornful attitude toward physical health emerges when Kovrin has temporarily recuperated:

"Why...why have you cured me? Bromide mixtures, idleness, warm baths... I had gone out of my mind... I had the mania of greatness.... But for all that I was bright, active, and ever happy.... I was interesting and original. Now I have become rational and solid, just like the rest of the world. I am a mediocrity, and it is tiresome for me to live...." (314/142)

The full significance of Kovrin's feeling that he is a mediocrity becomes clear only in view of the striking irony that he equates the intellectual superman, the man of genius, with "God's elect." To recognize that one is a mediocrity is hardly easy to do, but one might survive this painful recognition knowing that human dignity, above all one's worth in the eyes of God, rests not with intellectual brilliance: it is not geniuses, but the meek who "shall inherit the earth." Indeed the notion of "God's elect" is so totally, absurdly out of place in the Faustian context of the intellectual superman striving for all-knowledge that we would do well to examine it more closely. Perhaps the notion of God's elect is but a sanctimonious mask, and Kovrin's concern is not with his worth in the eyes of God—but in the eyes of man.

"What are you thinking of now?" [asked the monk].
"Of glory," answered Kovrin. "In a French novel which I have just been reading, the hero is a young man who does foolish things, and dies from a passion for glory. To me this passion is inconceivable.
"Because you are too clever. You look indifferently on fame as a toy which cannot interest you."
"That is true."
"Celebrity has no attraction for you." (310-311/138-139)
The black monk has of course withdrawn from the vanity of this world, has renounced all desire for fame and glory. Yet we recall that Kovrin, before the monk's first appearance, had thought to himself, "It seems as if all the world is looking at me from a hiding-place and waiting for me to comprehend it." Kovrin does not really want to withdraw from the world, like the monk. He wants to understand the world--and serve it:

"Without you [says the black monk] . . . humanity would be nothing; developing in the natural order it must wait the end of its earthly history. But you, by some thousands of years, hasten it into the kingdom of eternal truth--and in this is your high service." (304/132)

But when Kovrin asks the monk what he means by the words eternal truth, the monk does not answer--and fades into the twilight. Kovrin is unequal to the task he has set himself so he is, in his own mind, a mediocrity. Thus does he think of Polycrates, a usurper--for he knows, really, that his own claim to the "happiness" of genius is unfounded:

"Now I, like Polycrates, am a little frightened by my own happiness. From morning to night I experience only joy--joy absorbs me." (311/139)

Polycrates was a patron of letters and also a tyrant, a usurper who took over the island of Samos by means of a ruse. He ruled until lured back to the mainland, when he was put to death. Kovrin's classical allusion (like Vasil'jev's bookish fantasy of the shy prostitute) bespeaks an inner surpressed awareness of the truth. But the very idea of "hastening the end of human history by some thousands of years" is not a task for any man: this is the Millenium! "The stamp of divinity, the heavenly impress" are not enough: Kovrin, with his severe case of mania grandiosa wishes to be divinity. But this is blasphemy! Kovrin is
trapped and terrified.

Although Kovrin does long for worldly fame, while unable openly to admit it, the religious overtones of his mania (again, the monk) are not only a mask but express a genuine yearning: "You embody in yourself the blessing of God which rested upon the people." Kovrin, Magister, who wants desperately to stand among God's elect but who is also convinced of his unworthiness, does not know— in the story's ultimate irony—the simple Biblical truth, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." If the reader misses this irony, though, he will take Kovrin's anguished "I am a mediocrity" at face value and believe him. But we never find out in the story whether Kovrin is a mediocrity or not. We know only that he is convinced he is a mediocrity—and Chekov shows us the results of this conviction. Kovrin, an educated, talented man, is driven insane by the agony of not being a genius who might contribute everything, and so dies having contributed absolutely nothing. "The Black Monk" is a parable, and we are meant to learn an important lesson from the "immovable smile of happiness" frozen on Kovrin's dead face.

As we have read these stories, careful observation and interpretation of detail in context has brought us to a far deeper understanding of the lives of Chekov's characters than they possess themselves. The implicit ironic message, which in a general sense is markedly consistent from story to story, teaches that ignorance about the real world before our eyes, about the suffering around us, and about our inner self, is evil. Chekov shows us various ways in which his characters are limited and imprisoned, their lives warped, their human capabilities stifled. We have seen also that fear seems to prevent
Čexov's characters from seeing. It takes courage to face reality, to face the truth about oneself and one's life. The uglier the truth and the more it is denied, the more fearsome it becomes and the more potentially destructive. But Čexov's way is quiet; he writes with irony, that is, with restraint. If we read casually and superficially, our understanding will be as limited as that of his characters and we will join their level of bondage. To perceive the irony, we must be wiser than they. Thus when Čexov "counts upon his reader fully to add the subjective elements that are lacking," he invites the reader's active participation in his fiction in a very special sense. As Čexov knows full well, in order for us to deepen and extend the quality of our understanding as we read, we must break through our own shell of indifference. And we slowly realize that the process of reading Čexov's fiction and penetrating its neutral façade, of carefully interpreting every detail and nuance of his characters' behavior, is an analogue of "reading" life itself. Thus do we learn to penetrate the mask which each man wears in life. Čexov wrote in 1888:

There are moments when I positively lose heart. For whom and what do I write? For the public? But I don't see it and don't believe in it any more than I do in spirits: it is uncultured and badly educated, while its best elements are not conscientious or sincere toward us. . . . Do I write for money? But I never have any, and from chronic lack of it I am almost indifferent in my attitude toward it. . . . Do I write for praise? But praise only irritates me. . . . Had we any criticism, I would know that I provide material to work with--good or bad, it doesn't matter--and that to people devoting themselves to the study of life I am as necessary as a star to an astronomer. Then I would work painstakingly, and would know wherefore I was working.14
NOTES

1Thomas Winner, *Anton Chekhov and His Prose*, p. 192.


3*SS*, VIII, 280-281; Yarmolinsky, p. 355. Further quotations from this story will refer to those editions respectively, with page numbers given after each excerpt.

4*SS*, III, 261; Yarmolinsky, p. 102. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.

5*SS*, III, 218; *The Lady with the Dog and other stories* by Anton Chekhov, trans. Constance Garnett (New York, 1917), p. 95. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.

6In the midst of his harangue Zilin exclaims to his son, "You must be a man! A man! (nuzno byt' chelovekom! che-lo-ve-kom!) which provides a parallel with Belikov's exclamation, "Anthropos!"

7Semanova remarks that Chekov frequently creates an ironic contrast between a story's title and the content in "O chekovskix zaglaviyax," *Zvezda*, No. 1 (1960), 173.

8Ernest J. Simmons notes that Chekov's father, in 1877, had posted a lengthy schedule of work and domestic duties for each member of the family, which he concluded as follows: "Failure to fulfill these duties will result in a stern reprimand, then in punishment during which it is forbidden to cry, *Father of the Family* (Otec semeistva), Pavel Chekhov." (Italics in the original.) *Chekhov, A Biography* (Boston and Toronto, 1962), p. 29.

9*SS*, VI, 236; Yarmolinsky, p. 244. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.


13SS, VII, 304; The Short Stories of Anton Chekhov, ed. Robert N. Linscott (New York, 1959), p. 132. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.

"Whence do we come? What are we?" asks the title of Gauguin's famous painting, and fear must inexorably be part of our answer. With "Gooseberries" (1898) the theme is happiness: the vision and the ideal, "Where are we going?" As the story opens Ivan Ivanyč and Burkin are "already tired with walking, and the plain seemed endless to them."

Far ahead were the scarcely visible windmills of the village of Mironosickoe; to the right lay a range of hills that disappeared in the distance beyond the village, and both of them knew that over there were the river, and fields, green willows, homesteads, and if you stood on one of the hills, you could see from there another vast plain, telegraph poles, and a train that from afar looked like a caterpillar crawling, and in clear weather you could even see the town.¹

This landscape with its windmills and signs of communication and stirring life is a hopeful one. As Ivan Ivanyč lights his pipe, about to begin the "instructive story" he promised to Burkin the night before (near the end of "The Man in a Shell"), a sudden rainstorm prompts the two men to take shelter at their friend Alexin's nearby estate, Sof'ino. The name of the estate is an even more hopeful sign (the adjective is from Sofija, the Greek "wisdom")--for the reader is anxious to discover whether the reflective Ivan Ivanyč, left sleepless the evening before after Burkin's story about Belikov, has come to understand.

At Sof'ino the mill is going, the winnowing machine in the barn is running, and Alexin, who looks "more like a professor or an artist
than a gentleman farmer" greets Ivan Ivanyč and Burkin. He is covered
with dust and dirt, and invites his guests to bathe in the mill pond.

And only when the lamp was lit in the big drawing room upstairs,
and the two guests, in silk dressing-gowns and warm slippers, were
lounging in armchairs, and Alexin himself, washed and combed,
wearing a new jacket, was walking about the room, evidently
savoring the warmth, the cleanliness, the dry clothes and light
footwear, and when beautiful Pelageja, stepping noiselessly across
the carpet and smiling softly, brought in a tray with tea and jam,
only then did Ivan Ivanyč begin his story, and it was as though
not only Burkin and Alexin were listening, but also the ladies, old
and young, and the military men who looked down upon them, calmly
and severely from their gold frames. (296-297/374)

This is a solemn, auspicious moment. By now, having recognized the
imprisoning and disabling blindness of such characters as Vasil'jev,
Ragin, Kovrin, and of course Belikov and Burkin, we are acutely aware
of just how much is at stake, how much depends on Ivan Ivanyč's story--
whether he will understand, whether his listeners will understand.

The story is of Ivan Ivanyč's brother Nikolaj, a "kind and
gentle soul," a clerk in a government office, whose wish—which we
can sympathize with, so far—is to escape the empty routine of
"scratching away at the same papers." His dream also involves, though,
a return to the countryside, the scene of his childhood, but rather
than a return to nature à la Rousseau, Nikolaj must own his little bit
of property (he eventually buys a mortgaged estate, and at what cost,
we shall soon see). But the dream is not yet complete: there must be
a garden, river, mill, mill pond, and without fail, a gooseberry patch.

"Country life has its advantages," he used to say. "You sit
on the veranda having tea, and your ducks swim in the pond, and
everything smells delicious—and the gooseberries are ripening." (298/376)

If Nikolaj's bucolic vision of country life had begun to resemble Alexin's
estate, this last passage abruptly ends the resemblance. At Alexin's
estate, as we have seen, the work goes on ceaselessly—and Alexin himself had arisen at three that morning "to get some work done."

In order to realize his dream Nikolaj becomes a miser and a beggar, hoarding every penny and even wedding, in a ludicrous and horrible mariage de convenance, a rich elderly widow whom he proceeds to slowly starve.

"This second husband did not even give her enough black bread. She began to sicken, and some three years later gave up the ghost. And, of course, it never for a moment occurred to my brother that he was to blame for her death." (298/377)

Nikolaj at last buys his estate, but with no orchard, no gooseberry patch, no duck pond.

"There was a stream, but the water in it was the color of coffee, for on one of its banks there was a brickyard and on the other a glue factory. But my brother was not at all disconcerted: he ordered a score of gooseberry bushes, planted them, and settled down to the life of a country gentleman." (299/378)

Now Ivan Ivanyć tells of his visit to Nikolaj. He is met by a fat dog who looks like a pig ("It wanted to bark, but was too lazy") and by a fat cook who looks like a pig, and enters the house to find his brother sitting up in bed ("resting after dinner") with a quilt over his knees.

"He had grown older, stouter, flabby; his cheeks, his nose, his lips jutted out; it looked as though he might grunt into the quilt at any moment." (299/378)

The poor, timid clerk has become a "real landowner, a gentleman," conducts lawsuits, and is offended if the peasants don't address him as "Your Honor."

"[He] performed good deeds not simply, but pompously. And what good works! He dosed the peasants with bicarbonate and castor oil for all their ailments and on his name day he had a thanksgiving service celebrated in the center of the village, and then treated the villagers to a gallon of vodka, which he thought was the thing to do. Oh, those horrible gallons of vodka! . . . Nikolaj Ivanyć, who when he was a petty official was afraid to have opinions of his
own even if he kept them to himself, now uttered nothing but in­
controvertible truths and did so in the tone of a minister of state:
'Education is necessary, but the masses are not ready for it . . . '"
(300/378-379)

But the point of Ivan Ivanyč's tale, unlike Burkin's, concerns
not the ludicrous figure he is describing (a figure no less ludicrous
than Belikov), but himself.

"I want to tell you about the change that took place in me during the
few hours that I spent on his estate. In the evening when we were
having tea, the cook served a plateful of [Nikolaj's own] goose­
berries. . . . My brother gave a laugh and for a minute looked at
the gooseberries in silence, with tears in his eyes—he could not
speak for excitement. Then he put one berry in his mouth, glanced
at me with the triumph of a child who has at last been given a toy
he was longing for and said: 'How tasty!' And he ate the goose­
berries greedily, and kept repeating: 'Ah, how delicious! Do
taste them!'

"They were hard and sour, but as Puškin has it, 'The falsehood
that exalts we cherish more than truths that are a thousand strong' [sic; see p.70 ]. I saw a happy man, one whose cherished dream had
so obviously come true, who had attained his goal in life, who had
got what he wanted, who was satisfied with his lot and with himself.
. . . And now at the sight of a happy man I was assailed by an
oppressive feeling bordering on despair. . . . [At night] I could
hear that he was wakeful, and that he would get up again and again,
go to the plate of gooseberries, and eat one after another. I said
to myself: how many contented, happy people there really are! What
an overwhelming force they are!

. . . And such a state of things is evidently necessary;
obviously the happy man is at ease only because the unhappy ones
bear their burdens in silence, and if there were not this silence,
happiness would be impossible. . . . " (300-301/379-381)

Ivan Ivanyč is appalled, as the reader too can't help but be, at the
stupidity and emptiness of Nikolaj's life, and his visit to Nikolaj's
estate has prompted him to look more closely at his own life: "That
night I came to understand that I too had been contented and happy."

And he ends his tale by pleading to Alexin,

"As long as you are young, strong, alert, do not cease to do good!
There is no happiness and there should be none, and if life has a
meaning and a purpose, that meaning and purpose is not our happiness
but something greater and more rational. Do good!" (303/382)

But before going on to comment on Ivan Ivanyč's understanding of
his own tale, perhaps we should not dismiss Nikolaj quite so quickly as Ivan Ivanyč has done. Let us first examine two references to this story in Čexov's notebook:

Title: Gooseberries. X. serves in a government office, terribly stingy, saves up his money. Dream: he will marry, buy an estate, sleep out in the sun, drink in the grass, eat his cabbage soup. 25, 40, 45 years have passed. He has already given up the idea of marriage, dreams of an estate.

Finally 60 years old. Reads promising, alluring advertisements about hundreds of acres, orchards, rivers, ponds, mills. Retirement. Through an agent buys a small estate on a pond... Strolls around his garden and feels that something is missing. He finally comes to think that gooseberries are what are missing, orders them from a nursery. After 2-3 years, when he has cancer of the stomach and death is near, he is served gooseberries on a plate. He glanced at them indifferently... And in the next room his loud, bosomy niece was already taking over the household. (Planted the gooseb. in the autumn, lay down during the winter, and hasn't gotten up yet. Looking at the plate with the gooseb.: this is all that life gave me in the end [vot vse, čto dala mně v konce koncov žizň]). He is the son of ruined landowners, often recollects his childhood spent in the country.

The gooseberries were sour. How stupid, said the official and died.

Čexov's comment that the official "often recollects his childhood spent in the country" perhaps implies that the official is unconsciously trying to recapture a childhood memory ("He walks around his garden and feels that something is missing")—for a childhood in the country is probably the only real happiness which the official ever experienced. That he is too limited to visualize happiness in any other terms is, in my own opinion, Čexov's point in this little sketch. The gooseberries, which earlier had seemed to be the "missing element," at death have come to dimly signify the official's own self-deception and the futility of his quest. In Ivan Ivanyč's narrative Nikolaj's childhood in the country also plays a part:

"After [our father's] death there was a lawsuit and we lost the
estate to creditors, but be that as it may, we spent our childhood in the country. Just like peasant children we passed days and nights in the fields and the woods, herded horses, stripped bast from the trees, fished, and so on. And, you know, whoever even once in his life has caught a perch or seen thrushes migrate in the autumn, when on clear, cool days they sweep in flocks over the village, will never really be a townsman and to the day of his death will have a longing for the open. My brother was unhappy in the government office. Years passed . . . but he went on thinking of one and the same thing: how to get away to the country. (297/375)

Although Ivan Ivanyč never returns to the origin of Nikolaj's dream, we would do well to realize that Nikolaj is evidently trying to retrieve the irretrievable happiness of childhood--and so his attempt is a futile one, doomed from the start. But Nikolaj, for Ivan Ivanyč, is a genuinely "happy man"--and as such is the impetus for all his further reflections on happiness.

"I saw a happy man, one whose cherished dream had so obviously come true, who had attained his goal in life, who had got what he wanted, who was satisfied with his lot and with himself." (301/380)

"I could hear that . . . he would get up again and again, go to the plate of gooseberries and eat one after another. I said to myself, how many contented, happy people there really are! What an overwhelming force they are!" (301/380)

But leaving Ivan Ivanyč's narration aside for the moment, let us just consider the "facts" which Čexov gives us: Nikolaj cannot sleep and gets up repeatedly to eat gooseberries--which we know are hard and sour. Why assume that this is a happy man? Why is Nikolaj wakeful? Happy and contented men, in Ivan Ivanyč's own words, "eat by day, sleep by night."

We recall that Vasil'jev dimly sensed the truth about himself, as did Belikov and Kovrin, all "educated men," and they hid from the truth in terror. A timid petty official turned pompous landowner (a suspicious transformation) might well sense the frightening truth just as these other characters did, and be even less able to tolerate the sensation.
So when Nikolaj greedily eats hard and sour gooseberries, exclaiming repeatedly "Ah, how tasty" and "Ah, how delicious" we can't help but sense (although Ivan Ivanyč does not) that he is protesting much too loudly. He has starved his wife to death, has starved himself and lived like a beggar for most of his life--and now, at night he gets up again and again to eat the hard, sour gooseberries. It seems clear that he is trying to retain that "cherished falsehood" at all costs, is pretending he is happy with a panicked desperation. And yet, in Ivan Ivanyč's words, this is a genuinely "happy and contented man," whose dream has "so obviously come true."

Ivan Ivanyč is a fictional character within the story like Nikolaj himself, Burkin, Alexin, Pelageja--and because he is in the process of narrating an "instructive tale" is no reason to identify him, as critics often do, with Čexov's own voice. Surely after we have just read "The Man in a Shell," the farcical manner in which Burkin depicted the pathetic, terrified Belikov is enough to put us on guard. Now Ivan Ivanyč reduces Nikolaj, a warped and twisted soul no less than Belikov, to a comic figure ("It looked as though he might grunt into the quilt at any moment") and as the final indignity, dismisses him as "happy and contented."

"But I am concerned now not with him, but with me. I want to tell you about the change that took place in me during the few hours that I spent on his estate." (300/379)

Before moving to judge Ivan Ivanyč too quickly, let us consider in detail his entire narrative, and see what sort of change has indeed taken place in him. "Look at life," exclaims Ivan Ivanyč,

"the insolence and idleness of the strong, the ignorance and brutishness of the weak, horrible poverty everywhere, overcrowding, degene-
ration, drunkenness, hypocrisy, lying--Yet in all the houses and on all the streets there is peace and quiet. . . . Everything is peaceful and quiet and only mute statistics protest: so many people gone out of their minds, so many gallons of vodka drunk, so many children dead from malnutrition--" (301/380-381)

This is all very true, but how will this knowledge change Ivan Ivanyč?

Perhaps Ivan Ivanyč knows the reality behind the statistics just as the good-natured and gentle Ragin (in "Ward Six") with his "intense love of honesty and reason" knows

that while his thoughts are whirling around the sun with the earth's cooling crust, in a large building right next to a doctor's apartment people are languishing in disease and filth; someone is perhaps lying awake trying to combat the vermin . . . Twelve thousand people a year are swindled; the entire hospital system is based on theft . . . and gross quackery . . . He knows that behind the bars of Ward Six Nikita beats the patients . . .

Ivan Ivanyč continues:

"We see the people who go to market, eat by day, sleep by night, who babble nonsense, marry, grow old, good-naturedly drag their dead to the cemetery, but we do not see or hear those who suffer, and what is terrible in life goes on somewhere behind the scenes. . . . And such a state of things is evidently necessary; obviously the happy man is at ease only because the unhappy ones bear their burdens in silence, and if there were not this silence, happiness would be impossible. It is a general hypnosis." (301-302/381)

But on the other side of the wall there was a man, his brother, who suffered--and Ivan Ivanyč, it is quite true, neither saw nor heard. And he left the next morning having "changed." Ivan Ivanyč's words, "We do not see or hear those who suffer"--and this is an especially significant irony--are more true than he himself knows. He applies them to others, but the reader sees that they also apply to himself. Perhaps Čexov's point, as distinguished from Ivan Ivanyč's, is that there is no "behind the scenes" at all, but rather it is we, in our separate shells, who do not know how or bother to see and hear. For our reading of Čexov's stories tells us again and again that unhappy people, and "ridiculous"
figures like Belikov and Nikolaj are unhappiest of all, stand before our very eyes. The general hypnosis is not around us, but within us—as Ivan Ivanyč's next words seem to suggest:

"Behind the door of every contented, happy man there ought to be someone standing with a little hammer and continually reminding him with a knock that there are unhappy people..." (302/381)

We sympathize with Ivan Ivanyč's indignation and concern for those who suffer, but we need not suspend our critical judgment either. For it seems clear that if man is not passive and indifferent to begin with, that is, if he has a conscience, he will not need a "man with a little hammer," which actually is a rather childlike image. For the "man with a hammer" is but a respectable, unoffensive version of Nikita, who loved "law and order more than anything else in the world," standing behind the door of Ward Six. We remember Ragin's moment of illumination: "Having no conception of pain, he could not possibly have known . . . , so he was not guilty, but his conscience, no less obdurate and implacable than Nikita, made him turn cold from head to foot."

But Ragin has to be viciously throttled by Nikita before his conscience after twenty years finally made him turn cold. Ragin is guilty, for human beings should and can have a conception of pain. Near the beginning of "Ward Six" Ragin thinks to himself:

"But, of course, I am nothing of myself, a mere particle in a necessary social evil: all district officials are bad and are paid for doing nothing... Consequently, it is not I who am to blame for my dishonesty, but the times...."

And then he goes to bed: "But he does not feel like sleeping." Ivan Ivanyč too was left sleepless the previous evening, after recognizing that a useless life is a sort of shell. Our reading of "Ward Six" (written six years before "Gooseberries") has taught us that there is
more than one kind of knowing. Thus we are still uncertain to what
degree Ivan Ivanyč grasps the full implications of his own words, and
to the degree that he doesn't, his words—albeit quite true, perhaps,
in an abstract sense—are in the present context painfully ironic.

"That night I came to understand that I too had been contented
and happy. I too over the dinner table or out hunting would hold
forth on how to live, what to believe . . ." (302/381)

But this is exactly what he is doing at the moment. We still do not
know if Ivan Ivanyč understands. His next words, though, are moving,
inepising, and true—and the wrathful glance directed at Burkin might
be directed at us also.

"I too [like Nikolaj] would say that learning was the enemy of
darkness . . . Freedom is a boon, I used to say, it is as essential
as air, but we must wait awhile. Yes, that's what I used to say,
and now I ask: Why must we wait?" said Ivanyč, looking wrathfully
at Burkin. "Why must we wait, I ask you? For what reason? I am
told that nothing can be done all at once, that every idea is
realized gradually, in its own time. But who is it that says so?
Where is the proof that it is just? You cite the natural order of
things, the law governing all phenomena, but is there law, is there
order in the fact that I, a living, thinking man, stand beside a
ditch and wait for it to close up of itself . . . when I could jump
over it or throw a bridge across it? And again, why must we wait?
Wait, until we have no strength to live, and yet we have to live
and are eager to live!" (302/381-382)

But now comes the blow that destroys the beautiful structure that
Ivan Ivanyč has been building in the air with his impassioned words. He
excuses himself from his own call to action:

"I am an old man now and unfit for combat, I am not even capable of
hating. I can only grieve inwardly, get irritated, worked up, and
at night my head is ablaze with the rush of ideas and I cannot sleep.
Oh, if I were young!"

Ivan Ivanyč paced up and down the room excitedly and repeated,
"If I were young!" (302/382)

Now we might reconsider the entire objective façade of the story,
and uncover many ironies which have been hiding under it all along. "I
left my brother's place early in the morning, and ever since then it
has become intolerable for me to stay in town. I am oppressed by the
peace and the quiet . . . " But earlier Ivan Ivanyč had told his
listeners,

"To retire from the city, from the struggle, from the hubbub, to
go off and hide on one's own farm--that's not life, it is selfish­
ness, sloth, it is a kind of monasticism, but monasticism without
works." (297/375)

And what about the constant work that goes on at Alexin's estate?

Ivan Ivanyč says also, "I am afraid to look at the windows, for
there is nothing that pains me more than the spectacle of a happy
family sitting at table having tea." Ivan Ivanyč despises happiness
while sitting in a comfortable drawing room, having tea and jam, dressed
in a silk dressing-gown and warm slippers.

"I am an old man unfit for combat," he had said. But his head
is ablaze with the rush of ideas, he paces the floor excitedly, and he
takes part in strenuous hunting expeditions. Especially telling is
Ivan Ivanyč's bath in the mill pond, when he resembles a schoolboy
"enjoying complete freedom for an hour or two" more than a feeble old
man:

[He] plunged into the water with a splash . . . thrusting his arms
out wide; he raised waves on which white lilies swayed. He swam out
to the middle of the river and dived and a minute later came up in
another spot and swam on and kept diving, trying to touch bottom.
"By God!" he kept repeating delightedly, "by God!" He swam to the
mill, spoke to the peasants there, and turned back . . . Burkin
and Alexin were already dressed and ready to leave, but he kept
on swimming and diving. "By God!" he kept exclaiming. "Lord,
have mercy on me."

"You've had enough!" Burkin shouted to him. (296/373-374)

Who's happy and contented now? Evidently Ivan Ivanyč belongs to that
overwhelming force of happy people whom he is angrily accusing. "How
many contented, happy people there really are!" he exclaims. (And in the preceding story Burkin had said, "How many such men in shells were left, how many more of them there will be!"

In another touch of irony, when Ivan Ivanyč went to bed that night, he, like Belikov, "pulled the bedclothes over his head." We can only conclude that Ivan Ivanyč too is in a shell.

Irony is always in part a device for excluding as well as for including, and those who are included . . . cannot but derive at least part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded. In the irony with which we are concerned [unreliable narration] the speaker is himself the butt of the ironic point. The author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting.5

But there can be little pleasure for us in seeing the irony of Ivan Ivanyč's impassioned and sincere words. His reverie after hearing about Belikov, the animated landscape with its distant windmills, the estate Sof'ino, the sense of peaceful expectancy as Ivan Ivanyč began to narrate, the faces in the portraits gazing down from their frames: all this combines to create a very strong expectation in the reader, makes us want to believe that here at last is a man who sees and hears, who understands. Čeșov is teaching us a lesson. "The falsehood that exalts I cherish more than mean truths a thousand strong" (T'ny nizkix istin mne dorože nas vozvyšajuščij obman). Ivan Ivanyč had slightly misquoted Puškin's line, saying, "The falsehood that exalts we cherish more than truths a thousand strong." But in omitting "mean" he has destroyed the real sense of the line: if the truth weren't mean there would be less reason to cherish the falsehood. Here Čeșov is telling us something important about Ivan Ivanyč--but when Ivan Ivanyč moreover says "we" rather than "I" the reader too should beware. If we are too anxious to
take Ivan Ivanyč's exalting words at face value, then we, along with him, are implicated by Puškin's line.

The many ironies in the story tell us that Ivan Ivanyč does not live up to his ideals—and this is a mean truth, but a very old human truth as well. Ivan Ivanyč talks enthusiastically about the "change" which took place in him, but the story seems to tell us that human nature never changes very much.

Also [were listening] the ladies, old and young, and the military men who looked down upon them, calmly and severely, from their gold frames.

They are calm and severe—not expectant and hopeful like the reader. The faces of history (especially the military men) know this mean truth better than we, it seems.

Afterwards all three of them sat in armchairs in different corners of the drawing room and were silent. Ivan Ivanyč's story satisfied neither Burkin nor Alexín. With the ladies and generals looking down from the golden frames, seeming alive in the dim light, it was tedious to listen to the story of the poor devil of a clerk who ate gooseberries. One felt like talking about elegant people, about women. (303/383)

On the one hand, the image of the men sitting silently in separate corners of the room reinforces our thought that each man is alone in his shell. Ivan Ivanyč's story, whatever his personal shortcomings, was genuinely moving—but his listeners were not moved. Their indifference (in preferring to talk of elegant people, of women) confirms Ivan Ivanyč's indignant words about the "happy and contented" ones who do not see or hear those who suffer. Clearly they do not want to see or hear.

On the other hand, perhaps man's "shell" is not the whole truth here.
And the fact that they were sitting in a drawing room where everything—the chandelier under its cover, the armchairs, the carpets underfoot—testified that the very people who were now looking down from the frames had once moved about here, sat and had tea, and the fact that lovely Pelageja was noiselessly moving about—that was better than any story.

Ivan Ivanyč had earlier admitted, "For some reason an element of sadness has always mingled with my thoughts of human happiness . . . " and he finds the spectacle of family happiness a painful one. Perhaps Ivan Ivanyč doesn't like to admit, for some reason of his own, the role which pure animal comfort inevitably plays in happiness. "Lord, have mercy" and "By God" he kept exclaiming as he swam and splashed in the pond, long after the others had been out and dressed. And then he had said to Alexin with a "pitiful, imploring smile, as though he were asking a personal favor" (italics mine):

"There is no happiness and there should be none, and if life has a meaning and a purpose, that meaning and purpose is not our happiness but something greater and more rational. Do good!" (303/382)

Nikolaj's "good works"—dosing the peasants with bicarbonate and castor oil and treating them to vodka—are an ironic echo of Ivan Ivanyč's plea to Alexin. Ivan Ivanyč moreover is evidently not as old and feeble as he claims, and if happiness is indeed "doing good," we wonder why he does not practice what he preaches.

Happiness, whatever it is, is greater than Ivan Ivanyč's limited conception of it (although he surely has a partial grasp of the truth), and it is also more than animal comfort and physical pleasure. Happiness is more, too, than the irretrievable childhood memory which Nikolaj, in vain, was trying to recapture with such desperation. Indeed, is there any such thing as an "overwhelming force" of happy people, as Ivan
Ivan’yč thinks?

"How many contented, happy people there really are! What an overwhelming force they are! Look at life: the insolence and idleness of the strong, the ignorance and brutishness of the weak, horrible poverty everywhere, overcrowding, degeneration, drunkenness, hypocrisy, lying—Yet in all the houses and on all the streets there is peace and quiet; . . . We see the people who go to market, eat by day, sleep by night, who babble nonsense, marry, grow old, good-naturedly drag their dead to the cemetery, but we do not see or hear those who suffer . . ." (301/380-381)

But how does Ivan Ivan’yč know the happy ones (where everything is "peaceful and quiet") from the unhappy ones (who "bear their burdens in silence")? Surely those who "babble nonsense, marry, grow old" also suffer. This story teaches us not to accept, naively and uncritically, Ivan Ivan’yč's exalting words as he "holds forth on how to live, what to believe."

All irony criticizes the imperfect ideas and theories of mankind, not by substituting for them other ideas and other theories, less imperfect, but by placing the facts of life, in mute comment, alongside of the theories.

Čexov's irony exposes the mean truths hiding under the cherished falsehoods, exposes the inadequacy of all simplistic formulas:

"To go off and hide on one's own farm . . . is a kind of . . . monasticism without works."
"Man needs not six feet of earth, not a farm, but the whole globe, all of Nature . . ." 
"Education is necessary, but the masses are not ready for it."
"Obviously the happy man is at ease only because the unhappy ones bear their burdens in silence . . ."
"There is no happiness and there should be none. . . . Do good!"

Perhaps Alexin is closest to the truth:

He did not trouble to ask himself if what Ivan Ivan’yč had just said was intelligent or right. The guests were not talking about groats or hay, or tar, but about something that had no direct bearing on his life, and he was glad of it and wanted them to go on. (303/383)

Or perhaps this is Alexin's shell. The story has shown us that, in any
case, it is hard to know for sure.

"Lord forgive us sinners," Ivan Ivanych murmurs as he gets into bed. Again, his words hold more significance than he knows, or perhaps he does know. The hopeful ending of the previous story, "The Man in a Shell"—when Ivan Ivanych was left sleepless, smoking his pipe in the doorway—is brought to mind by the final passage of "Gooseberries."

His pipe, which lay on the table, smelled strongly of burnt tobacco, and Burkin, who could not sleep for a long time, kept wondering where the unpleasant odor came from.

The rain beat against the window pane all night. (305/384)

We don't know why Burkin is sleepless. Is he thinking about what he has heard, or is he only wondering about the odd smell? Čeňov leaves us in uncertainty, but having finished this story we are a little less hopeful than before.

Ivan Ivanych had said of Nikolaj, "I saw a happy man ... who had attained his goal in life," and we felt that Nikolaj's happiness was not all it seemed to be. But we saw Nikolaj only externally, saw him deliver "incontrovertible truths," saw him get up at night and eat sour gooseberries. Let us consider a story, "Anna on the Neck" ("Anna na Čeňov knizčnici", 1895), in which the central character will, in her own mind, attain her cherished dream in life—and the reader is moreover granted an inside view of how it feels to live in paradise.

The story opens at the moment which is conventionally one of life's happiest: the bride and groom have just been married and are being seen off by family and friends on their wedding trip. But here are the bride's thoughts, as she sits in the train compartment beside her new husband, "an official of medium height, rather stout, who looked bloated and very well fed."
She remembered what agony the marriage ceremony had been, when it seemed to her that . . . everyone in the church had looked at her sadly: why was she, such a sweet, nice girl, marrying an elderly uninteresting man? Only that morning she had been in raptures over the fact that everything had been satisfactorily arranged, but during the ceremony and now in the railway carriage, she felt guilty, cheated and ridiculous. Here she had married a rich man and yet she had no money. Her wedding dress had been bought on credit, and just now when her father and brothers had been saying good-by, she could see from their faces that they had not a kopeck to their name. Would they have any supper tonight? And tomorrow? And for some reason it seemed to her that her father and the boys without her were suffering from hunger and feeling as miserable as they did the day after their mother's funeral. "Oh, how unhappy I am," she thought. "Why am I so unhappy?" (13-14/270-271)

Anna's unhappiness, the difficult family situation, the repulsiveness of Modest Alekseivich ("the soft movements of his bloated body frightened her; she felt both terrified and disgusted") all inspire the reader's sympathy. We, like everyone in the church, look at her sadly: "Why was she, such a sweet, nice girl, marrying an elderly uninteresting man?" But the answer, not a pretty one, is in front of us if we will see it. Already, in the railway carriage, Anna feels cheated: "Here she had married a rich man and yet she had no money."

[Vasil'jev] knew that there are immoral women who, under the pressure of fatal circumstances—environment, bad education, poverty and so on—are forced to sell their honor for money. Vasil'jev's words (from "An Attack of Nerves") are apt here, for Anna, now the wife of a respectable official, has sold her honor no less than a prostitute. "Why am I so unhappy?" she asks herself. This question is followed by reflections on her mother's death, her father's drunkenness, the "disgrace" of poverty. She indeed experiences her unhappiness as the result of fatal circumstances, and we sympathize with the difficulty of the circumstances. But they are not necessarily "fatal from our point of view if we recognize, as Anna does not, her willing
acquiescence in the selling of her honor.

Then some ladies they knew had bestirred themselves and started looking about for a good match for Anja. This Modest Aleksejević, who was neither young nor good-looking but had money, was soon found. (14/271)

Anna herself, only that morning, "had been in raptures over the fact that everything had been satisfactorily arranged." Now, sitting beside Modest, she feels "guilty, cheated and ridiculous." This fleeting sensation of guilt is as close as she will ever come to admitting her own responsibility for her "unhappy fate." Her eventual happiness will also be based upon self-deception; and if we don't recognize the self-deception (which is present from the start) then this is the fairy tale story of a dream come true. If we do recognize the self-deception, the story is ironic throughout: not a genuine fairy tale, but a fable of delusory happiness.

Anna is still thinking over the sad details of her life when the train stops at a station and "strains of music together with a sound of voices suddenly burst in at the window."

Tears were still glistening in Anja's eyes, but she was no longer thinking of her mother or money or her marriage. She was shaking hands with . . . boys and officers, laughing gaily and saying quickly, "How do you do? How are you?"

She went out into the moonlight and stood so that they could all see her new splendid costume and hat.

Noticing that Artynov was looking at her, she screwed up her face coquettishly and began talking aloud in French; and because her voice sounded so well and because music was heard and the moon was reflected in the pond, and because Artynov, the notorious Don Juan and rake, was looking at her greedily and inquisitively . . . she returned to her compartment feeling as if she had been persuaded at the station that she would certainly be happy in spite of everything. (14-15/272-273)

The rapidity with which the unhappy heroine oppressed by fate turns into a vulgar coquette should be suspicious from the reader's point of view.
And when intimations of happiness are aroused by the "accordion and cheap squeaky fiddle" of a military band and by the greedy glance of a notorious rake, there is no longer much doubt for the reader as to what the substance of that future happiness will be. Anna's blindness to tawdry reality is a source of irony, and yet there is pathos, too, in her very willingness to be persuaded of future happiness by cheap music and a suggestive glance. Despite our judgment of Anna for her unadmitted responsibility in her own fate, she has our sympathy too.

One of Anna's strongest claims on our sympathy is the reaction which the bloated, well-fed, smiling Modest arouses in her:

He smiled with his small eyes. And she, too, smiled, troubled by the thought that at any moment this man might kiss her with his full, moist lips and that she no longer had the right to prevent him from doing so. [But again, she chose this predicament.] The soft movements of his bloated body frightened her; she felt both terrified and disgusted. (13/270)

And in spite of our judgment of Anna for marrying Modest in the first place, it is primarily her fear of him which retains our sympathy.

Formerly her father would sometimes give her a twenty-kopeck piece, but now she never had a groat. To take money on the quiet or to ask for it, she couldn't; she was afraid of her husband. She trembled before him. It seemed to her as though she had been afraid of him for a long time. In her childhood the high school principal had always seemed to her the most imposing and terrible power in the world, moving along like a thundercloud or a steam locomotive ready to crush everything in its way. Another such power of which they often talked at home, and which for some reason they feared, was His Excellency. Then, there were a dozen other, less formidable powers . . . And now finally, it was Modest Alekseic, a man of principle, who resembled the head of the school in every particular . . . And in Anja's imagination, all these powers combined into one, and, in the shape of a terrible, huge white bear, bore down upon the weak and guilty, such as her father. (17-18/276)

But the image of the terrible, huge white bear also suggests Anna's inclination to interpret reality in terms of a "fairy tale." Earlier Anna saw Modest at the dinner table "holding the knife in his fist like
a sword." And we remember that cheap music and the glance of a Don Juan persuaded her that she would be happy "in spite of everything." The culmination of Anna's tendency to make-believe comes in the second chapter of the story, which opens as preparations for the winter ball are under way.

As Modest and Anna arrive at the ball, we are told the place "smelled of illuminating gas and soldiers," a reminder at the outset of the ordinary reality beneath the tinsel. But when Anna sees herself full-length in the huge mirror glowing with numberless lights, "her heart leapt with joy and with that presentiment of happiness which she had experienced in the moonlight at the station." A huge officer whom she had met on Old Kiev Street, while still a schoolgirl, asks her for a waltz. The recurrence of "huge" (gromadnyj) to describe the bear, the mirror, and the officer indicates the exaggerating, romanticizing cast of Anna's mind. He "loomed up before her, as though he had sprung up out of the ground" and "she felt as though she were sailing in a boat during a violent storm, while her husband remained far away on the shore..." (20-21/279)

The story's climax comes as Anna dances the mazurka with the same huge officer. At first he dances coldly and indifferently "like a king" while Anna is the imploring slave--but then the roles change as the officer is carried away by the dance: Anna becomes a queen and he a slave. (This very reversal will soon take place between Anna and Modest because of her success.) "At that moment it seemed to her that the whole ballroom was looking at them, and that everyone was thrilled and envious of them." This is the moment which marks a crucial turning
point in the story. Anna is entering paradise: the fairy tale comes true.

The crowd suddenly parted and the men drew themselves up queerly and let their arms drop. It was His Excellency, with two stars on his dress coat, walking toward her. Yes, His Excellency was really walking toward her, for he was looking directly at her with a sugary smile and was chewing his lips as he always did when he saw pretty women. (21-22/281)

Before Modest and Anna had left for the ball, Modest had said, "suddenly assuming a tone of solemnity":

"Anjuta, I have made you happy, and tonight you can make me happy. I beg you to get yourself introduced to His Excellency's spouse. Do it for me, for God's sake! Through her I may get the post of senior reporting secretary." (20/278)

In other words, both Anna's and Modest's dreams of happiness are realized simultaneously. For Anna is now introduced to His Excellency's wife, "the lower part of whose face was disproportionately large, so that she looked as though she had a big stone in her mouth." With this detail Čexov reminds us again of the vulgar and ordinary reality underlying Anna's happiness. Anna is invited to take the wife's place at one of the booths (it is a charity bazaar), and she charges "no less than a mble for a cup of tea."

Artynov, the rich man with the bulging eyes, who suffered from asthma [more ordinary details], came up too; he no longer wore the strange costume in which Anja had seen him in the summer at the station, but was in evening clothes like everyone else. Without taking his eyes off Anja, he drank a glass of champagne and paid one hundred rubles for it, then had a cup of tea and gave another hundred, all this without saying a word and wheezing with asthma. Anna solicited customers and got money out of them, firmly convinced by now that her smiles and glances could afford these people nothing but great pleasure. (22/281-282)

The balance of our sympathy for and our judgment of Anna has begun irrevocably to shift. That she "solicits customers" reminds us moreover of our earlier reflection that she has "sold her honor for money."
Anna is firmly convinced of the great pleasure afforded by her smiles and glances: the ironic distance between her perspective and ours has begun sharply to increase.

It had dawned upon her that she was made exclusively for this noisy, brilliant life, with laughter, music, dances, admirers, and her old dread of a power that was bearing down upon her and threatened to crush her now seemed ridiculous to her. She was afraid of no one . . . (22/282)

We cannot afford to miss the implication of Anna's loss of fear before those "formidable, imposing powers" (the high school principal, His Excellency, Modest Alekseic) which "in the shape of a terrible, huge white bear bore down upon the weak and the guilty, such as her father." Anna is no longer afraid--because she has joined forces with these powers and has become "formidable and imposing herself." She is visited the next day by Artynov and then by His Excellency himself who "eyes her with a sugary smile" and asks permission to come again.

She remained standing in the middle of the drawing room, amazed, entranced, unable to believe that a change in her life, a marvelous change, had occurred so quickly. And just then her husband walked in. He stood before her now with that ingratiating, sugary, cringingly respectful expression that she was accustomed to see on his face in the presence of the illustrious and the powerful, and with rapture, with indignation, with contempt, confident now that she could do it with impunity, she said, articulating each word distinctly: "Get out, you blockhead!"

After that, Anja never had a free day, as she was constantly taking part in picnics, excursions, private theatricals. . . . She needed a great deal of money, but she was no longer afraid of Modest Alekseic and spent his money as though it were her own; and she did not ask or demand it, but simply sent him the bills or brief notes like these: "Give the bearer 200 rubles," or "Pay 100 rubles at once." (23-24/283-284)

And as for the "weak and the guilty, such as her father":

And Anja went on driving about in troikas, hunting with Artynov, playing in one-acters, going out to supper parties, and she saw less and less of her own people. They dined alone now. Her father was drinking more heavily than ever; there was no money . . . (24/284)
Throughout the story Чехов continued to remind us of real life (notice Anna's proclivity for theatricals) which goes on as an undercurrent to Anna's fairy-tale happiness.

His Excellency proposed this toast: "This luxurious dining room is the appropriate place in which to drink to the success of the soup kitchens for which the bazaar was held." (23/282)

When Anja was escorted home, it was daylight and the cooks were going to market.

Each day she returned home in the early hours of the morning and lay down on the floor in the drawing-room, and afterwards told everyone touchingly that she slept under flowers. (24/283)

That Anna's self-delusion is the real point of the story is suggested by the title, "Anna on the Neck." The first, most obvious reference is to Modest's anecdote, told to Anna at the beginning of the story in the railway carriage:

"When, five years ago, Kosorotov received the order of St. Anna of the second class, and came to thank His Excellency for the honor, His Excellency expressed himself thus: 'So now you have three Annas: one in your buttonhole and two on your neck. I must tell you that at that time Kosorotov's wife, a quarrelsome person of a giddy disposition, had just returned to him and that her name was Anna. I trust that when I receive the Anna of the second class, His Excellency will have no cause to say the same thing to me.'" (13/270)

At the story's end Modest indeed receives the order of St. Anna of the second class.

When he went to offer his thanks, His Excellency put aside the newspaper he was reading and sank deeper into his armchair: "So now you have three Annas," he said, examining his white hands with their pink nails, "one in your buttonhole and two on your neck."

Modest Алексеич put two fingers to his lips as a precaution against laughing out loud and said: "Now I have only to look forward to the arrival of a little Vladimir. May I make bold to beg Your Excellency to stand godfather?"

He was alluding to the Vladimir of the fourth class . . . and he was making ready to say something equally good, but His Excellency was again absorbed in his newspaper and merely nodded to him. (24/284)
Modest's blissful unawareness that the earlier anecdote is being repeated--and that he is the butt of it--is no different from Anna's blissful unawareness as she pursues her own dream. Anna had originally commanded our sympathies because of her fear of and disgust at Modest Alekseic, but now she has become like him. Modest is the butt of His Excellency's anecdote, and Anna, our "unhappy heroine," is the butt of Čexov's anecdote. Anna experiences her life as a fairy tale: a wave of His Excellency's wand--and she lives happily ever after. Yet Čexov's story is not a fairy tale, but an ironic fable. Anna and Modest both attain their cherished dreams, and live together in a fools' paradise.

"The Husband" ("Muz"-1886), written nine years before "Anna on the Neck," bears some striking similarities to the later story. Čexov's method of arousing in the reader both sympathy for and judgment of his characters is especially obvious in the earlier, less subtle treatment of the theme of delusory happiness. In this story a ball is held in a provincial town when a military regiment passes through for the night. "Stale, sickly-looking, clumsy" husbands stand and watch their wives and daughters dance with "accomplished and graceful" officers.

Among the husbands was Sallikov, the tax-collector--a narrow spiteful soul, given to drink, with a big, closely cropped head, and thick, protruding lips. He had had a university education; there had been a time when he used to read progressive literature [in the original text: Pisarev and Dobroljubov] and sing songs, but now, as he said of himself, he was a tax-collector and nothing more.9

The phrase "and nothing more"--indeed the very transformation of a radical student into a tax-collector (akciznyj) already tells us of
his own dissatisfaction with himself and his life; but the description of him as a "narrow, spiteful soul" tells us also that this is not a man to admit such a feeling to himself. His own suppressed self-dissatisfaction is the underlying cause of his "disgust and indignation" at the expression of bliss on his wife's face as she dances. All the same he does read her expression with a vicious accuracy (the author's objective descriptions of her behavior will confirm the husband's interpretation).

It was evident that as she danced she was recalling the past, that faraway past when she used to dance at the "College for Young Ladies," dreaming of a life of luxury and gaiety, and never doubting that her husband was to be a prince or a baron. The tax-collector watched her and scowled with spite. (274/295)

Anna Pavlovna dances the mazurka with a black-haired officer who has bulging eyes. The resemblance to Artynov confirms that in both stories ludicrous details such as "bulging eyes" (Artynov also has asthma) point up the ironic distance between reality and the delusory bliss experienced by the two Annas.

Anna Pavlovna, pale and trembling, bending her figure languidly and turning her eyes up, tried to look as though she scarcely touched the floor, and evidently felt herself that she was not on earth, not at the local club, but somewhere far, far away--in the clouds. (274/296-297)

When the dance is over she sits with her partner, flirts her fan, and coquettishly drops her eyelids: "[She] was describing how she used to dance in Petersburg (her lips were pursed up like a rosebud, and she pronounced 'at home in Pütürsburg')." At this stage Šalikov's ironic vision of his wife and the reader's ironic vision actually merge, for we can't help but agree that Anna Pavlovna is making a fool of herself. But our point of view and that of Šalikov notably diverge, too--on the
crucial matter of his deliberate cruelty. For he now approaches his wife and maliciously insists that they leave the ball at that moment. As he watches the expression of bliss slowly drain from his wife's face, replaced by shame and misery, he "seemed to feel better in his soul" (u nego stalo kak budto legće na duše). They walk home together, silently, in the darkness:

The tax-collector walked behind his wife, and watching her downcast, sorrowful, humiliated little figure, he recalled the look of beatitude which had so irritated him at the club, and the consciousness that the beatitude was gone filled his soul with triumph. (276/299)

We are of course critical of Šalikov's petty and mean "triumph." But it is precisely at this juncture that we suddenly get a glimpse of Šalikov's almost Prufrockian vision of reality:

He was pleased and satisfied, and at the same time he felt the lack of something; he would have liked to go back to the club and make everyone feel dreary and miserable, so that all might know how stale and worthless life is when you walk along the streets in the dark and hear the slush of the mud under your feet, and when you know that you will wake up next morning--and again, nothing to look forward to but vodka and cards. Oh, how awful it is! (276/299)

Perhaps we are prompted more to sympathize with this anguished vision and pained awareness than with Anna Pavlovna's pathetic delusions as she poses and flirts, "not on earth, not at the local club, but somewhere far, far away--in the clouds." On the other hand, we can just as easily shift our perspective in the opposite direction: despite the foolishness, Anna Pavlovna's excitement as she falls "under the influence of the dancing, the music, the talk, the lights, and the noise" is an understandably human reaction. We might well sympathize with, rather than condemn this reaction--remembering that she is not necessarily the same Anna of "Anna on the Neck," but rather, in the
story's immediate context, simply an ordinary woman who wishes to vicariously escape "stale and worthless life" for a few hours. And she escapes by recalling her youth, a time when she used to dream of a life of luxury and gaiety." This cycle of dreams, to derive happiness from recalling a moment in the past when one was dreaming of the future, is empty of real substance--reveals to the reader the intrinsic poverty of past and present, and so heightens our sympathy. And if we continue this shift of perspective, perhaps Salikov's rage at his empty life is less a genuine vision of the truth, of "life as it is," than a way of hiding from himself, hiding from his own sense of personal failure.

[Anna Pavlovna] felt miserable, insulted, and choking with hate as she listened to her husband's heavy footsteps. She was silent, trying to think of the most offensive, biting, and venomous word she could hurl at her husband, and at the same time she was fully aware that no word could penetrate her tax-collector's hide. What did he care for words? Her bitterest enemy could not have contrived for her a more helpless position. And meanwhile the band was playing and the darkness was full of the most rousing, intoxicating dance-tunes. (277/300)

But if we enter into this domestic quarrel and "take sides" we will miss Čexov's message here--we will miss the irony of their mutual hatred. For the inner experience of each, on this festive evening, has been virtually identical: a pained realization of how hopelessly far life has departed from one's dreams and ideals. But they are estranged, rather than united by their anguished realization--one which is an inevitable part of living, and one which they somehow might have shared. The ultimate irony, then, is that this scene of chilling silence and alienation might as easily have been a picture of the greatest intimacy, a couple walking home together after the ball as music resound
in the darkness. Thus does Čexov show us how his characters build their own prisons around themselves.

Here we might naturally turn to the important theme of "entrapment" in Čexov's fiction, which will be the topic of the following chapter. For our perusal of happiness has so far led us only to self-delusion (Anna, Nikolaj, even Ivan Ivanyč) or directly to misery (Čalikov and his wife). But let us now consider a story of a quite different sort, "The Darling" ("Dušečka"-1899), in which the main character seems to approach real happiness—whatever that might be...

[Olenka] was always enamored of someone and could not live otherwise. At first it had been her papa, who was now ill and sat in an armchair in a darkened room, breathing with difficulty. Then she had devoted her affections to her aunt... Still earlier, when she went to school, she had been in love with her French teacher. She was a quiet, kind, soft-hearted girl, with meek, gentle eyes, and she enjoyed very good health. At the sight of her full pink cheeks, her soft white neck with a dark birthmark on it, and the kind artless smile that came into her face when she listened to anything pleasant, men said to themselves, "Yes, not half bad," and smiled too, while the ladies present could not refrain from suddenly seizing her hand in the middle of the conversation and exclaiming delightedly, "You darling!"

Olenka first falls in love with Kukin, a theatre manager, and after their marriage talks of nothing but the theatre. After his death she marries Pustovalov, a lumberyard manager, and talks, even dreams of nothing but lumber ("a regiment of beams, 28 feet by 6 inches, standing on end, was marching in the lumberyard"). Again she is widowed and Smirnin, an army veterinary, becomes her new love. She talks now of animal diseases and of the slaughterhouse. As Poggioli has noted, this is a "half pathetic, half mocking version of the 'merry widow' motif"—but the pattern "visibly crumbles" near the end. When Smirnin is transferred to Siberia, terrible emptiness and apathy overtake
Olenka.

She looked apathetically at the empty courtyard, thought of nothing, and later, when night came, she would go to bed and dream of the empty courtyard. She ate and drank as though involuntarily.

Above all, and worst of all, she no longer had any opinions whatever. She saw objects about her and understood what was going on, but she could not form an opinion about anything and did not know what to talk about. And how terrible it is not to have any opinions! You see, for instance, a bottle, or the rain, or a peasant driving in a cart, but what is the bottle for, or the rain, or the peasant, what is the meaning of them, you can't tell, and you couldn't, even if they paid you a thousand rubles. (354/406)

Smirnin eventually returns and his young son Saša, who comes to live with her, is her last love; now she talks of schoolwork and teachers.

She stands still and stares after [Saša] until he disappears at the school entrance. How she loves him! Not one of her former attachments was so deep; never had her soul surrendered itself so unreservedly, so disinterestedly and with such joy as now . . . For this little boy who was not her own, for the dimples in his cheeks, for his very cap, she would have laid down her life, would have laid it down with joy, with tears of tenderness. Why? But who knows why? (357/410)

Her only fear now is that this love, too, will be taken from her. A knock at the gate one night throws her into despair and trembling—thinking the child's mother has sent for him. But it is only the veterinary, returning from the club. "Well, thank God," she thinks, finally feels better—and in the story's closing passage, lies listening to Saša shouting in his sleep: "I'll give it to you! Scram! No fighting!"

The substance of his dream (like the portraits of military men in "Gooseberries") reminds us briefly—in this rare context of a pure, unselfish love—of the inevitable strife, the baser side of human nature. The reader of course knows that Saša will eventually leave too, and that Olenka's "house will be empty." Pathos is the dominant tone as the story closes.

But we are finally uncertain as to how to understand this "half
mocking, half pathetic" story. Critical opinion of "The Darling," moreover, varies widely. Tolstoj has written about the story (which was one of his favorites of all Čexov's work):

The author evidently wanted to laugh at this pitiful creature--as he judged her with his intellect, not with his heart--this "Darling," who, after sharing Kukin's troubles about his theatre, and then immersing herself in the interests of the timber business, under the influence of the veterinary considers the struggle against bovine tuberculosis to be the most important matter in the world, and is finally absorbed in questions of grammar and the interests of the little schoolboy in the big cap. Kukin's name is ridiculous, and so even is his illness and the telegram announcing his death. The timber dealer with his sedateness is ridiculous; but the soul of "Darling," with her capacity for devoting herself with her whole being to the one she loves, is not ridiculous but wonderful and holy.12

And Renato Poggioli, following in the spirit of Tolstoj's interpretation, discusses the relationship of "The Darling" to the myth of Eros and Psyche:

While the whole story seems to emphasize Olenka's "insight" [she sees angels where others see only men], her "blindness" is intimated by a single hint, hidden, of all places, in the title itself. . . . The "Darling" of the English translators is the Russian idiom Dushechka, meaning literally "little soul" and used colloquially as a term of endearment, a tribute of personal sympathy . . . Chekhov never pays the compliment himself, except by indirection or implication: he merely repeats it again and again, in constant quotations from other people's direct speech. . . . As we already know, everybody addresses Olenka in that way only when she is contented and happy, having someone to love and care for. As soon as she is left without a person on whom to pour the tenderness flowing from her heart, everybody ceases calling her Dushechka, as if she had lost her soul, as if she were no longer a soul.

. . . . What one witnesses is a sort of transfiguration, both symbolic and literal: by changing into Dushechka, Olenka ends by personifying the very idea of the soul. . . . We now realize that Dushechka, after all, is one of the Russian equivalents of the Greek Psyche . . .

. . . . What the legend means to say is that love is blind, and must remain so, whether the loved one is mortal or an immortal creature. This is the truth which the Greek Psyche had to learn, while the Russian Dushechka seems to have known it, though unconsciously, all the time.13

Thomas Winner has also written about the story, and takes issue
with Poggioli:

But is Olenka a wiser version of Psyche, or an ironical reflection of her prototype? The men whom Olenka loves successively . . . are but absurd shadows of the god of love. Had she held a light to her lovers, as did Psyche to Eros, Olenka's lovers might also have vanished. It was, however, their prosaic attributes, not their god-like qualities, which could not bear close inspection. Olenka and her lovers . . . examples of a lowered version of a myth. . . . [The echo of the myth] suggests that Chekhov's Olenka, who must retain her illusions, is naive and too simple to see or doubt.¹⁴

This is a curious conflict of opinion—ranging from a "wonderful and holy love" to "naive illusions." And yet both sides of the conflict are clearly supported by the dispassionate façade of the story itself. Our understanding of irony as the "co-presence of alternatives, the refusal to impose on the reader a pre-digested life-view," can resolve this critical impasse. Chekhov has shown us one extremely ambiguous version of human happiness: the darling Olenka is simultaneously ridiculous and sublime. For Chekhov will not reduce happiness to an exalting, simplistic formula—as Ivan Ivanyč was wont to do. Chekhov's use of irony in "The Darling"—a story which clearly demands of us that we "judge by the norms of a greater freedom"—also forces us to recognize how very hard it is to judge.
NOTES

1SS, VIII, 294; Yarmolinsky, p. 371. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.


4SS, VII, 145-146; Ward Six and other stories, p. 27.

5Booth, p. 304.


7SS, VIII, 13; Yarmolinsky, p. 269. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.

8SS, VI, 218; Yarmolinsky, p. 222.

9SS, IV, 273; The Lady with the Dog and other stories, p. 295. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.

10SS, VIII, 222; Yarmolinsky, p. 397. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.


12Quoted by Poggioli, p. 126.

13Poggioli, pp. 128-129.

CHAPTER IV
"ABOUT LOVE": ENTRAPMENT

In the final story of the trilogy, "About Love" (1898), Alexin in a sense resolves the ambiguous theme of happiness by simply sidestepping it: "To what extent personal happiness counts in love—all that is uncertain; and one can argue about it as one pleases." After Ivan Ivanyč's somewhat high flown rhetoric in the previous story, "Gooseberries," we are especially inclined to sympathize with Alexin's more modest and unpresuming tone:

"We Russians who are cultivated have a weakness for these questions that remain unanswered. Love is usually poetized, embellished with roses, nightingales; but we Russians embellish our loves with these fatal questions, and choose the least interesting of them, at that. . . . When we are in love, we never stop asking ourselves whether it is honorable or dishonorable, sensible or stupid, what this love will lead to, and so on. If that is a good thing or not I don't know, but that it is a hindrance and a source of dissatisfaction and irritation, of that I am certain."1

His introduction to his tale suggests that he has no special cause to plead, that he does not intend, as Ivan Ivanyč did, for his story to be instructive; rather, the urge to speak is explained in more simple and ordinary terms:

It looked as though he wanted to tell a story. People who lead a lonely existence always have something on their minds that they are eager to talk about. (306/385)

Then the source of irony here will not be, as was the case with Ivan Ivanyč, one's preaching in contrast with one's practice, but rather will
lie within the very nature of the experience. We are evaluating Alexin's life, not his theories or ideas. Indeed, from our point of view Alexin's tale itself is less about his love for Anna Alekseevna than about "how needless and petty and deceptive was all that had hindered [them] from loving each other." Čexov, as distinct from the narrator Alexin, is writing about entrapment--life's imprisoning actuality. The story is specifically ironic in the matter of judging the actuality, determining to what extent Alexin simply "rushes around like a squirrel in a cage" on his estate, or in fact leads a genuinely fulfilling life. The more difficult for us to appraise and evaluate the facts in this story, the more acutely aware we become of the responsibility we hold as "jury."

Alexin begins to tell about himself:

"I have been living at Sof'ino and been farming for a long time, ever since I graduated from the University. My education did not fit me for rough work and temperamentally I am a bookish fellow, but when I came here the estate was heavily mortgaged, and as my father had gone into debt partly because he had spent a great deal on my education, I decided not to leave the place but to work till I had paid off the debt. I made up my mind to this and set to work, not, I must confess, without some repugnance." (306-307/386)

First of all, we can't help but be struck by the pattern of circular futility in his life: Alexin's father accumulated a debt having spent "a great deal" on his son's education, but the bookish Alexin, after graduation, remains on the farm laboring to pay off the debt. (The story later implies that he will probably never leave.)

"[Luganović and Anna Alekseevna] were distressed that I, an educated man with a knowledge of languages, instead of devoting myself to scholarship or literary work, should live in the country, rush around like a squirrel in a cage, work hard and yet always be penniless. They imagined that I was unhappy (im kazalos', čto ja stradaju), and that I only talked, laughed, and ate to conceal my sufferings, and even at cheerful moments when I was quite at ease
I was aware of their searching eyes fixed upon me." (310/390-391) Alexin seems to say in this passage that while the Luganovičes imagined that he was unhappy and concealed his sufferings, Alexin himself did not in fact feel unhappy. But nonetheless, happiness or unhappiness aside, the important issue is raised of Alexin's life of hard labor in the fields balanced against his temperament and education. Alexin says that he set to work "not without some repugnance" and that he found the work "awfully tedious, and frowned with disgust." But we wonder if this is the whole truth, for his account of the work itself creates an impression of purposeful, meaningful work accomplished with much energy.

"I did not leave an inch of earth unturned; I got together all the peasants, men and women, from the neighboring villages; the work hummed. I myself plowed and sowed and reaped . . . " (307/386)

A "gentleman farmer" who was genuinely disgusted by such labor would not have arisen, as we learned in "Gooseberries," at three in the morning to work, nor would he keep so busy as to have no time even to bathe. In our initial glimpse of Alexin in that story he stood completely covered with mud and dust in the threshold of the barn, with the winnowing machine running full blast inside; and we had left Ivan Ivanyč at the end of "The Man in a Shell" in the doorway of the Elder's barn, reflectively puffing on his pipe, with Burkin sleeping inside. The ironic structural parallel drives home the difference between Alexin's dynamic and vigorous way of life, from which he evidently derives genuine satisfaction, and the way of life of the more passive, genteel Ivan Ivanyč and Burkin. Alexin's is a life of hard, honest labor, which it seems unjust to consider the mere equivalent of rushing around like a squirrel in a cage.
But we cannot forget the bookish temperament and the education, cannot forget that whatever the satisfaction of working the soil like a peasant, man's nature demands that he be more than a work-horse. There is some measure of truth in Ivan Ivanyc's remark in the preceding story:

"Man needs not six feet of earth, not a farm, but the whole glove, all of Nature, where unhindered he can display (projavit*, make manifest) all the capacities and peculiarities of his free spirit." But "the whole glove, all of Nature"—this is high-flown rhetoric.

Rhetoric aside, where and how can one truly display the "capacities and peculiarities of his free spirit"? Perhaps Candide was right, the answer is to "cultivate one's own garden," but Alexin seems to be cultivating his garden in too literal a sense, while disregarding more meaningful ways in which he could put his abilities and energies to good use. Alexin, for example, had been elected honorary justice of the peace and took part in sessions of the circuit court, including a "celebrated arson case":

"In the arson case the defendants were four Jews who were charged with collusion, and in my opinion they were quite innocent. At dinner I was very much agitated and out of sorts, and I don't recall what I said, but Anna Alekseevna kept shaking her head, and saying to her husband, 'Dmitrij, how can this be?'

'Luganovič is one of those good-natured, simple-minded people who firmly adhere to the belief that once a man is indicted in court he is guilty, and that one should not express doubt as to the correctness of a verdict except with all legal formalities on paper, but never at dinner and in private conversation. 

"'You and I didn't commit arson,' he said gently (mjagko), 'and you see we are not on trial and not in prison.'" (308/388)

Why is the educated and sensitive Alexin only an honorary justice of the peace, and not "the assistant president of the circuit court" instead of the simple-minded Luganovič? The significance of Luganovič's gentle but upon reflection quite appalling remark, "You and I didn't commit arson
and you see we are not on trial and not in prison," is especially
evident in view of Čexov's own concern at this same period with the
Dreyfus case. He had a serious disagreement with the conservative,
anti-Semitic Suvorin on the subject, and in February of 1898 wrote a
quite lengthy letter in which he summarized the entire case in detail,
stressing especially that Zola "builds his judgments solely on what he
sees, and not on spectres, as others do." But in the story "About
Love" this brief mention is all we ever hear about the implied mis­
carriage of justice in the "arson case." Alexin says no more about it;
indeed, the incident had occurred several years earlier, but Alexin's
life went on the same as ever. But this incident, above all Luganović's
attitude, might have prompted him to seek some responsible position in
society for which his education had prepared him. He was "very much
agitated and out of sorts" at dinner, but that was the end of his indig­
nation.

"They imagined that I was unhappy and that I only talked, laughed,
and ate to conceal my sufferings ..." Alexin says. And we have recog­
nized that he is apparently quite content to remain on his estate,
plowing the soil. What does make him genuinely unhappy, though, is not
the arson case, but his love for Anna Alekseevna.

"I was unhappy. At home, in the fields, in the shed, I kept
thinking of her. I tried to understand the mystery of a beautiful,
inelligent young woman marrying someone so uninteresting ..."

But again, the ambiguity is strong. By "ambiguity" I mean to say that
as we evaluate Alexin's love for Anna, our vision--alternately sympa­
thetic and critical, wavers extremely indecisively from one side of
the balance to the other. Alexin's love is already put into a certain
ironic perspective by his opening remark that, "It is all a thing of the past; and now I should find it hard to determine what was so exceptional about her." But also the sincerity of his attachment to her is suggested by the lines which directly follow:

"But at the time, at dinner, it was all perfectly clear to me. I saw a young woman, beautiful, kind, intelligent, fascinating, such a woman as I had never met before; and at once I sensed in her a being near to me and already familiar, as though I had seen that face, those friendly, intelligent eyes long ago, in my childhood, in the album which lay on my mother's chest of drawers." (308/388)

And so that we might know his love for her is not simply an "intrigue," of which there are many in Čehov's fiction, we are told: "Goodness knows what people were saying about us in the town already, but there was not a word of truth in it all." Alexin's love for Anna seems to be perverted by a sense of their psychic intimacy and closeness, a sense that they are "kindred spirits." Indeed, Alexin was initially attracted to Anna at the dinner during which they discussed the arson case; his agitation was communicated to Anna, who "kept shaking her head, and saying, to her husband, 'Dmitrij, how can this be!'"

"In the late autumn . . . I saw Anna Alekseevna . . . and again there was the same irresistible, striking impression of beauty and lovely, caressing eyes, and again the same feeling of nearness." (309/389)

"And every time I came to the town I saw from her eyes that she had been expecting me, and she would tell me herself that she had had a peculiar feeling all that day and had guessed that I would come." (312/393)

The dilemma posed by their love overwhelms both of them. They each are tormented by the fear of hurting those around them ("Would it be honorable?" Alexin asks himself) and we sympathize with this feeling, in itself fully justified as an obstacle to the fulfillment of their love. But honor is not all that stands in their way. Also self-doubt plays at
least as important a part, and then irony becomes possible, while it wasn't in relation to their sincere concern with not hurting people and with honor.

"It would have been different if I had led a beautiful, interesting life--if I had been fighting for the liberation of my country, for instance, or had been a celebrated scholar, an actor, or a painter; but as things were it would mean taking her from one humdrum life to another as humdrum or perhaps more so. And how long would our happiness last? What would happen to her if I fell ill, if I died, or if we simply stopped loving each other?" (311/392)

"And she was tormented by the question whether her love would bring me happiness--whether she would not complicate my life, which as it was she believed to be hard enough and full of all sorts of trouble. It seemed to her that she was not young enough for me, that she was not industrious or energetic enough to begin a new life . . . " (312/393)

Thus we are never sure whether it was honor or simply timid, fearful self-doubts which finally stood in their way. It is above all Alexin's passivity and fatalism--qualities already familiar to us from previous stories--which tend to sway the balance toward a critical attitude on our part:

"Luckily or not, there is nothing in our lives that does not come to an end sooner or later. The time came when we had to aprt, as Luganović received an appointment in one of the western provinces." (313/394)

But how would their dilemma have been resolved if Luganović hadn't received the appointment? In the train compartment Alexin parts with Anna--and only at this "safe" moment do they finally confess their love openly. The moment is safe because now they consider their fate has been sealed. Unable to make a decision one way or the other by themselves, they welcome the intrusion of circumstance, and voluntarily experience the circumstance as "inevitable." Thus it is not their love in itself, nor their parting in itself, which we view ironically--but rather the
very passive and helpless way in which they meet life's vicissitudes.  
"I kept trying to understand why she had met just him first and not me,  
and why such a terrible mistake need have happened in our lives," Alexin  
says, and he surely has our sympathy. On the other hand, Alexin is per­  
haps wasting his time trying to comprehend the incomprehensible; for  
it is only at their painful moment of parting that Alexin achieves a very  
different, much more important kind of understanding--and this when it  
is too late:  

"And with a burning pain in my heart I realized how needless and  
petty and deceptive was all that had hindered us from loving each  
other. I realized that when you love you must either, in your  
reasoning about that love, start from what is higher, more impor­  
tant than happiness or unhappiness, sin or virtue in their usual  
meaning, or you must not reason at all." (313-314/395)  

Ivan Ivanyč and Burkin after the story is over, go out on the  
balcony, "from which there was a fine view of the garden and the river  
which was shining now in the sunshine like a mirror."  

They admired it, and at the same time they were sorry that this man  
with the kind intelligent eyes who had told them his story with such  
candor should be rushing round and round on this huge estate like  
a squirrel in a cage instead of devoting himself to some scholarly  
pursuit or something else which would have made his life pleasanter.  
(314/395)  

Their reaction echoes the ambiguity we noted earlier: the genuine  
attractiveness of Alexin's life of hard, honest labor--but the sad  
wastefulness when an educated and sensitive man does not use all his  
talents and energies, does not "manifest all the capacities and pecu­  
liarities of his free spirit." But Ivan Ivanyč (who earlier spoke the  
preceding words!) and Burkin think, first, only of the beautiful view  
rather than of the labor, and secondly, only of making life pleasanter  
(bolee prijatnoj).
And [Ivan Ivanyč and Burkin] thought what a sorrowful face Anna Alekseevna must have had when he said good-by to her in the compartment and kissed her face and shoulders. Both of them had come across her in the town, and Burkin was acquainted with her and thought she was beautiful. (314/395)

As for Alexin's unfortunate love, Ivan Ivanyč and Burkin view it externally, see it as a touching scene, as it were an illustration from a novel: Anna's sorrowful face and her beauty, Alexin's kissing her face and shoulders. The inner experience which Alexin described with such candor, that is, the special nature of his love for Anna which had less to do with physical beauty than with psychic intimacy, provoked no real commentary or deeper reflection on the part of his listeners. The uniqueness of Alexin's love from his own point of view becomes, from the point of view of Ivan Ivanyč and Burkin, purely conventional.

The pattern is complete: all three men have tended to listen and react to each other's stories in a fairly casual manner, without pausing to consider what lies "behind the scenes." But at the same time that we criticize, we are aware that Ėxov perhaps is saying that such is human nature, or, as he wrote in one of his letters, "Another person's soul is darkness" (čužaja duša potemki).4 It is rather all the characters' tendency toward passivity and helplessness which we condemn much more unequivocally. Burkin and the townspeople submit meekly to Belikov, the little tyrant in rubbers, and Ivan Ivanyč assents, "That's the way it is." Ivan Ivanyč, moreover, exclaims indignantly, speaking about the need to bring about change, "Why must we wait, I ask you?" but then declares himself unfit for combat. And Alexin lets circumstance decide the outcome of his love for Anna, just as he let
circumstance govern his life: it was simply his father's debt—not his own desire to work the soil—which was the reason he settled down on the estate. Indeed, we never discover if that long-ago debt was ever paid off, which would have meant that Alexin might now leave. Evidently Alexin is content to remain just as he is. Although working the soil is surely a meaningful occupation, Alexin never actively chose the occupation, but was passively drawn into it "not without some repugnance." Thus its meaningfulness in the present context is diminished in our eyes. Here is an important form of a man's shell, that is, passive submission in allowing life to become an imprisoning, aimless routine—as one indeed "rushes around like a squirrel in a cage."

The three stories of the trilogy were written in June and July of 1898. The story "Ionyč," in which Čexov depicts the gradual but inexorable process of growth of a man's shell, was begun in January of that year, revised several times, and finished in July at the same time as the other three. In the figure of Ionyč the metaphor of the shell unites both the concept of frightened withdrawal which we saw in Belikov and the concept of passive, unthinking surrender to an essentially meaningless mode of life. At the outset of the story Dmitrij Ionyč Starcev is a hard-working district doctor; as the story progresses and as his shell evolves, he slowly descends into animality and death-in-life. At the end of the story he has become so corpulent that he can hardly breathe, and he communicates by banging his walking stick.

The story consists of five short chapters marking stages in Starcev's physical and spiritual deterioration—while the Turkin family, "the most highly cultivated and talented" in the entire town, remains
the same as ever. We are introduced to the family at the beginning of the story and given a full account of their various talents: Ivan Petrović tells anecdotes and uses nonsensical words in his speech; Vera Iosifovna writes novels and reads them aloud to her visitors; the daughter Ekaterina Ivanovna plays the piano; and even young Pava the footman performs. He flings up his arm and says in a tragic tone, "Unhappy woman, die!" As soon as Starcev is appointed district doctor in a nearby town he is told that "as a cultivated man it was essential for him to make the acquaintance of the Turkins."

On his first visit one summer evening he goes on foot, humming all the time, "Before I'd drunk the tears from life's goblet . . . " (lines from a poem by Delvig, set to music). Ivan Petrović puns, Vera reads from her novel, Kitten (Ekaterina Ivanovna) plays the piano, and Pava the footman declaims. Starcev thinks to himself as he leaves, "It's entertaining," and repeats one of Ivan Petrović's puns to himself as he falls asleep that night. As the second chapter opens we learn that Starcev is so busy at the hospital that he has no time to visit the Turkins and more than a year passes. He is finally invited by Vera Iosifovna, who suffers attacks of migraine due to Kitten's insistence on going away to the conservatory. Soon Starcev begins to visit quite often, for he has fallen in love with Kitten:

She fascinated him by her freshness, the naive expression of her eyes and cheeks. Even in the way her dress hung on her, he saw something extraordinarily charming, touching in its simplicity and naive grace. (321/73-74)

But when he speaks to her, his words are stilted and artificial:

"For God's sake, I entreat you, don't torment me; let us go into the garden!" (320/73)
"I have not seen you for a whole week; I have not heard you for so long. I long passionately, I thirst for your voice. Speak."

(321/73)

Our first impulse is to laugh condescendingly at Starcev's ineptness. The markedly satirical tone of the entire story, especially the humorous portrayal of the Turkins which is directly reminiscent of Čexov's style in some of his early comic anecdotes, sways us irresistibly. But just as the characters' "exalting" words and well-meaning sincerity in the trilogy prompted us, unless we were alert, to overlook a pervasive use of irony--in this story the undisguisedly satirical tone prompts us to overlook Starcev's sincerity and the genuine pathos of his situation and his fate. Thus does Čexov teach us a lesson in how very hard it is to judge the deceptive reality before our eyes. For if we are to judge impartially, we must resist the impulse to look no further than Starcev's ludicrous and eventually repulsive exterior; we have an obligation to penetrate the man's shell (grotesque corpulence will be the visible symbol of that shell) and see reality from his perspective too. Čexov reminds us of this obligation by a very significant stylistic detail. We should note that the title "Ionyč" refers to a brief passage in the final chapter, when Starcev has turned wholly into an ill-tempered, greedy, miserly, solitary fat man: "At Djaliž and in the town he is called simply 'Ionyč': 'Where is Ionyč off to?' or 'Should not we call in Ionyč to a consultation?'" This form of address, the use of the patronymic alone, can indicate contempt in Russian; the title refers, then, to the attitude of the townspeople toward the "repulsive" doctor. But Čexov himself never uses the name Ionyč in the story's text, and without exception refers to the doctor as Starcev.
Čexov is reminding us that we shouldn't dismiss the man so casually and contemptuously as the townspeople do.

Scattered through the story are isolated, rather inconspicuous hints which will help us understand Starcev. On his first visit to the Turkins he hums lines from poems by Delvig, and also Puškin. An important implication of his humming these lines is made clear by his reaction to Kitten's pianoplaying: "After the winter spent at Djaliz... to listen to these noisy, tedious, but still cultured sounds was so pleasant, so novel" (italics mine). The evening he comes to propose to her, despite a state of "soporific stupefaction,"

a sort of cold, heavy fragment of his brain was reflecting:
"Stop before it is too late! Is she a match for you? She is spoilt, whimsical, sleeps till two o'clock in the afternoon, while you are a deacon's son, a district doctor..."
"What of it?" he thought. "I don't care." (324/78-79)

The truth is that Starcev, a deacon's son, is ill at ease at the new social level to which he has risen, and is playing a role, trying his best to be cultured and debonair: "I long passionately, I thirst for your voice." But in spite of his unsureness, Starcev's longing for culture and knowledge seems genuine and sincere. He is attracted to Kitten not only by her naivété but because

at the same time, in spite of this naivété, she seemed to him intelligent and developed beyond her years. He could talk to her about literature, about art, about anything he liked; could complain to her of life, of people, though it sometimes happened in the middle of serious conversation she would laugh inappropriately or run away into the house. Like almost all girls of her neighborhood, she had read a great deal... This afforded Starcev infinite delight; he used to ask her eagerly every time what she had been reading the last few days, and listened entranced while she told him. (321/74)

But the Turkins, the "most highly cultivated and talented family" in the "dreary and monotonous" provincial town, are no less ludicrous
than Starcev himself appears at moments; their talent is a pose and an affectation. Starcev, however, cannot see this and considers their cultivation and talent to be genuine; in a real sense their posturing is a model for his posturing. Although Starcev's background explains much of his own naivété, we do not simply excuse him either. For at his first visit to the Turkins, he perceives the falsity of their performance—but, in his ignorance, considers the falsity a mark of culture, and therefore he likes the falsity, and experiences it as something pleasant.

Vera Iosifovna read her novel. It began like this: "The frost was intense...." The windows were wide open; from the kitchen came the clatter of knives and the smell of fried onions.... It was comfortable in the soft deep arm-chair... and at the moment on a summer evening when sounds of voices and laughter floated in from the street and whiffs of lilac from the yard, it was difficult to grasp that the frost was intense, and that the setting sun was lighting with its chilly rays a solitary wayfarer on the snowy plain. Vera Iosifovna read how a beautiful young countess founded a school, a hospital, a library, in her village, and fell in love with a wandering artist; she read of what never happens in real life, and yet it was pleasant to listen—it was comfortable, and such agreeable, serene thoughts kept coming into the mind, one had no desire to get up. (317/68)

A true artist would have made his listeners forget the summer night, and would have enthralled them with his story. But Starcev, whose mind wanders as he listens, does not draw this conclusion, which seems so obvious to us.

Ekaterina Ivanovna sat down and banged on the piano with both hands, and then banged again with all her might, and then again and again. Her shoulders and bosom shook. She obstinately banged on the same notes, and it sounded as if she would not leave off until she had hammered the keys into the piano.... Starcev, listening, pictured stones dropping down a steep hill and going on dropping, and he wished they would leave off dropping.... To listen to these noisy, tedious but still cultured sounds, was so pleasant, so novel... (318/69)

Starcev has already been told how talented and cultivated the Turkins are,
and therefore is convinced that they must really be. He is so sure of his own insignificance in this "novel and pleasant" milieu, obviously quite different from his own background, that he surrenders all right to judge. Years earlier Čexov, who himself was the son of a poor shopkeeper who eventually went bankrupt, had written to his younger brother Mixail:

There is one thing [in your letter] I do not like: why do you call yourself my "insignificant and unnoticeable little brother"? Do you admit your insignificance? Not all Mishas, my dear fellow, must be alike. Admit your insignificance, but do you know where? Before God, also before intelligence, beauty, nature, but not before men. Among men one should be conscious of one's dignity. Surely you are not a rogue; you are an honest fellow. Well, respect the honest fellow in you and know that no honest fellow is insignificant.

Then here is an important source of Starcev's ruin: the conviction of his own insignificance. This leaves him vulnerable to be crushed and demoralized—unnecessarily so, we feel—by Kitten's refusal to marry him, an incident which will mark the beginning of his decline. For Kitten at the time of his proposal is manifestly unworthy of him, behaving like a cruel, selfish and capricious child. She makes a fool of him, for example, by setting up a rendezvous in the cemetery as a prank.

As though the moonlight warmed his passion, he waited passionately, and, in imagination, pictured kisses and embraces. He sat near the monument for half an hour, then paced up and down... waiting and thinking of the many women and girls buried in these tombs who had been beautiful and fascinating, who had loved, at night burned with passion, yielding themselves to caresses. How wickedly Mother Nature jested at man's expense, after all! How humiliating it was to recognize it!

Starcev thought this, and at the same time he wanted to cry out that he wanted love, that he was eager for it at all costs. (323/77)

As the moon suddenly goes behind a cloud it becomes so dark that he can hardly find the fate. Perhaps Kitten has indeed made a fool of him,
but the reader has been granted an important glimpse into Starcev's inner life; the sincerity and depth of his longing for love is especially important for our further understanding of the story. And this was Starcev's only night of passion—spent in a cemetery with dead women.

When Starcev tells Kitten that he was at the cemetery waiting for her, and that he suffered, she bursts into laughter, "pleased at having so cleverly taken in a man who was in love with her." But Starcev is apparently blind to the cruelty and superficiality of the girl; we criticize Starcev's self-delusion, but our criticism is modified by our understanding gained from the scene in the cemetery. We realize that the very intensity of Starcev's desire for love is what blinds him to Kitten's unworthiness. Later that evening, in an ill-fitting borrowed dress suit, Starcev proposes. His language is, as usual, stilted and comic, but we shouldn't let the comedy distract us from the sincerity and truth of the thought contained in his words:

"Ah, how little people know who have never loved! It seems to me that no one has ever yet written of love truly, and I doubt whether this tender, joyful, agonizing feeling can be described, and any one who has once experienced it would not attempt to put it into words. What is the use of preliminaries and introductions? What is the use of unnecessary fine words? My love is immeasurable. I beg, I beseech you," Starcev brought out at last, "by my wife!" (325-326/80-81)

Ekaterina Ivanovna's words are similarly stilted, but, in contrast to Starcev's, there is no truth or sincerity contained in them:

"Dmitrij Ionyć, I am very grateful to you for the honor. I respect you, but..." she got up and continued standing, "but, forgive me, I cannot be your wife. Let us talk seriously. Dmitrij Ionyć, you know I love art beyond everything in life. I adore music; I love it frantically; I have dedicated my whole life to it. ... To become a wife—oh no, forgive me! One must strive towards a lofty, glorious goal..." (325-326/81)
Starcev leaves the club and tears off his tie, drawing a deep breath. He feels ashamed, and his vanity is wounded: "he was sorry for his feeling, for that love of his, so sorry that he felt as though he could have burst into sobs or have violently belaboured Panteleimon's broad back with his umbrella.

For three days he could not get on with anything, he could not eat or sleep; but when the news reached him that Ekaterina Ivanovna had gone away to Moscow to enter the conservatory, he grew calmer and lived as before.

Afterwards, remembering sometimes how he had wandered about the cemetery or how he had driven all over the town to get a dress suit, he stretched lazily and said: "What a lot of trouble, though!" (326/82)

These two brief paragraphs say much—but only if we take the trouble to read between the lines. The "pressure" of the context, as suggested in our discussion up to this point, should tell us that the three days during which Starcev could neither eat nor sleep were filled with intense suffering. Starcev, who even before the proposal was sure of his own insignificance in this new and "cultured" milieu, must therefore have taken Kitten's refusal as a confirmation of his low worth. Now we are seeing delineated fairly explicitly the way in which a man's shell first begins to form: in Starcev's case the acutely painful humiliation of being refused by Kitten plays a crucial role. Just as he earlier was uncertain how to conduct himself and thus spoke in stilted, theatrical language, evidently an unconscious echo of the Turkin's own, now, having no inner resource of real self-respect with which to counter the humiliation, he tries to create at least the outward impression of dignity. And Starcev's mask of dignity consists of silence:

And Starcev avoided conversation, and confined himself to eating and playing vint; and when there was a family festivity in some household and he was invited to a meal, then he sat and ate in silence, looking
at his plate. (327/83)

It is easy to criticize the phoniness of Starcev's dignified mask, but it is less easy to see the pathos. For when he spoke, earlier, he apparently made a fool of himself; then now he decides it is safer not to speak at all. The family festivities, moreover, can't help but remind Starcev that he is solitary, and only an onlooker. Thus does he look only at his plate. His behavior is described objectively and neutrally, for example, "All such entertainments as theatres and concerts he declined," but the reader, if he bothers, can catch in each instance the underlying implication--here, that Starcev probably avoids such entertainments because they remind him of the Turkins.

Starcev's lonely, joyless existence evidently has no pleasures other than those of greed: excessive eating and amassing money.

He had another diversion to which he took imperceptibly, little by little: in the evening he would take out of his pockets the banknotes he had gained by his practice, and sometimes there were stuffed in his pockets notes--yellow and green, smelling of scent and vinegar and incense and fish oil--up to the value of seventy rubles . . . (327-328/83-84)

But we should not overlook the pathos here, too, for the assorted smells of the banknotes--scent, vinegar, incense, and fish oil--perhaps evoke images of the different lives led by the people who pay Starcev--in contrast to which his own life must seem singularly empty and monotonous.

One day he receives a note from Vera Iosifovna begging him to visit and "relieve her sufferings;" in a postscript Ekaterina Ivanovna "joins in her mother's request" that he visit. Starcev does not like her new expression and manner, in which "there was something new--guilty and diffident, as though she did not feel herself at home here in the Turkins' house." She looks at him expectantly, as if he will ask her into
the garden, but he remains silent. She finally invites him herself, and they sit under the old maple just as they had done four years before. He begins to remember all that had happened, and "a warmth began glowing in his heart."

"Do you remember how I took you to the dance at the club?" he asked. "It was dark and rainy then...."

The warmth was glowing now in his heart, and he longed to talk, to rail at life....

"Ech!" he said with a sigh. "You ask how I am living. How do we live here? Why, not at all. We grow old, we grow stout, we grow slack. Day after day passes; life slips by without color, without expressions, without thoughts.... In the daytime working for gain, and in the evening the club, the company of card-players, alcoholic, raucous-voiced gentlemen whom I can't endure. What is there nice in it?" (330/87-88)

The more lucidly Starcev sees the dullness and emptiness of his life, the more we sympathize with him. But now when Ekaterina Ivanovna's love which he once longed for so intensely has become a real possibility, he rejects it. If he is rejecting Ekaterina on the basis of her previous cruelty and superficiality, then we approve of the fact that he has become more perceptive than before. Yet we shouldn't ignore that Ekaterina herself has changed, is no longer so pretentious; here she evidences modesty and self-awareness:

"I was such a queer girl then; I imagined myself such a great pianist. . . . I played . . . like everybody else, and there was nothing special about me. I am just such a pianist as my mother is an authoress." (330/88)

In fact, we are never told exactly why Starcev no longer likes Ekaterina Ivanovna.

Now, too, he thought her attractive, very attractive, but there was something lacking in her, or else something superfluous—he could not himself have said exactly what it was, but something prevented him from feeling as before. He did not like her pallor, her new expression, her faint smile, her voice, and soon afterwards he disliked her clothes, too, the low chair in which she was sitting; he disliked something in the past [the truth comes out] when he had
almost married her. He thought of his love, of the dreams and hopes which had troubled him four years before—and he felt awkward. (329/85-86)

Has Starcev become more perceptive in evaluating Ekaterina Ivanovna, or is it only that he has suppressed the memory of the full pain of his humiliation, and her presence brings it back to him and thus makes him uncomfortable? In the story's context the latter possibility seems much more likely than the former, especially since the girl is no longer the same as she once was, and feels out of place in the Turkin's house. Although she has penetrated her own illusions about herself, however, Ekaterina now seems to blindly shift those illusions onto Starcev.

"What happiness to be a district doctor; to help the suffering; to be servint the people! What happiness!" [she] repeated with enthusiasm. "When I thought of you in Moscow, you seemed to me so ideal, so lofty...." (330/88)

Starcev's reaction is suddenly to think "of the notes he used to take out of his pockets in the evening with such pleasure, and the glow in his heart was quenched." He says no more, and gets up to go into the house—never again returning to visit the Turkins. Starcev's habit of greed and miserliness has already become entrenched to the degree that the mere thought of sharing his banknotes with a wife is enough to "quench the glow." The pleasures of eating and amassing money, at first a substitute for the love he had desired but which was denied him, have by now replaced the longing for love—when that longing might finally have been fulfilled.

In the final chapter we see the ironic apotheosis of Starcev, who "has grown stouter still, has grown corpulent, breathes heavily, and already walks with his head thrown back."

When stout and red in the face, he drives with his bells and his
team of three horses ... it is an impressive picture; one might think it was not a mortal, but some pagan deity in his chariot. (332/90)

His practice is so immense he has "no time to breathe." But if we had thought that Starcev's enormous practice both in the village and the town was perhaps a saving grace, that at least medicine might be important and meaningful for him, then this passage abruptly dissuades us:

He has a great deal to do, but still he does not give up his work as a district doctor; he is greedy for gain, and he tries to be in all places at once. . . .

. . . . His temper has changed, too; he has grown ill-humoured and irritable. When he sees his patients he is usually out of temper; he impatiently taps the floor with his stick, and shouts in his disagreeable voice: "Be so good as to confine yourself to answering my questions! Don't talk so much!" (332/91)

Čexov's implicitly critical attitude in describing Starcev's rude and impersonal behavior with his patients becomes especially clear in the light of this comment he made in 1893 to a fellow doctor: "If I were a teacher [in the medical faculty] I would try to draw my audience as deeply as possible into the area of the subjective feelings of patients, for I think that this would really prove useful."7 Starcev's professional life is as sterile as his emotional life.

In addition to his busy practice, Starcev has taken to buying houses; when he hears that a house is for sale, he marches through the rooms "regardless of half-dressed women and children who gaze at him in amazement and alarm," and he prods at the doors with his stick, asking "Is that the study? Is that a bedroom? And what's here?" Yet Starcev's behavior here is pathetic even as it is offensive, for the houses containing the women and children are suggestive, in the form of an ironic echo, of the family life which the solitary doctor has renounced.

At the club if the waiters don't satisfy him, he flies into a
rage and bangs the floor with his stick—and he seems less and less human. Yet the ugly extremes of his behavior should indicate the depth of Starcev's original painful experience—those three days when he could neither eat nor sleep. In "The Man in a Shell" the humiliation of falling downstairs and being laughed at by ladies was enough to send Belikov to his death—and Starcev's rejection by Kitten had no less profound consequences. Although not a physical death, Starcev's death-in-life is perhaps even more terrible. Externally, at least, Starcev has come to resemble one of the inmates of "Ward Six" (written six years earlier): "a peasant so rolling in fat as to be almost spherical, with an inane and totally vacant expression [who] long ago lost the capacity to think and feel." The lunatic Gromov's words in "Ward Six" are very appropriate for our reading of "Ionyč": "For a man to despise suffering, to be always content, to be surprised at nothing, he would have to reach this state—' and Ivan Dmitryče pointed to the fat, bloated peasant, 'or else have become so hardened by suffering as to have lost all sensitivity to it, in other words, to have ceased living.'" For in "Ionyč" Čexov has shown us the gradual process by which Dr. Starcev has indeed become "hardened by suffering," and his attitude toward his patients shows that he despises suffering as well, just as Gromov suggests. "What happiness to help the suffering!" Ekaterina Ivanovna had exclaimed, and Starcev rose to go into the house. But we are never sure if Starcev consciously catches the irony of her comment, and thus dismisses her as foolish—or if he is, to the contrary, vaguely disturbed by the reference to suffering for the reason noted above in Gromov's
For the reader Starcev's suffering, like Belikov's in "The Man in a Shell," is especially hard to see—and if we don't bother, as we read, to take account of the man's inner perspective on reality, then he, like Belikov, appears as simply an odd figure whom we refer to contemptuously as "Ionyč." Most illuminating of all is the understanding we gain from the story of the underlying reason Starcev becomes "hardened by suffering," which is an especially fitting description of how a man's shell is formed. Here and throughout his fiction Čexov, as in the early letter to his brother, teaches that if one is an honest fellow and not a rogue, "among men one must be conscious of one's dignity."

Starcev's unexpressiveness and taciturnity in combination with his unpleasant behavior made it especially difficult, as in previous stories, for us to penetrate the man's shell and become aware of the hidden suffering. But in "A Boring Story: From the Notes of an Old Man" ("Skučnaja istorija: Iz zapisok starogo čeloveka"-1889) Čexov uses the special fictional form of a man's first person confession, and the problems of reading are of a quite different sort. Rather than beginning with the author's objective façade and then trying, before judging, to arrive at the character's perspective on reality from within, we actually start with the character's perspective. Our task then is even more difficult than before, for now we must supply the objective version solely on the basis of the character's subjective view.

Mathewson writes:

The story's subtitle, "From the Notes of an Old Man," places it squarely in the tradition of Gogol's "Notes of a Madman," Turgenev's
"Diary of a Superfluous Man," and Dostoevsky's "Notes from the Underground." Chekhov—with an extraordinary ingenuity—has made the borrowed form yield an additional result. In earlier "confessional" stories the narrator undertakes to describe and account for the failure of his life; Chekhov makes the act of description and analysis of the past into a relentless process of further discovery. Describing his life, he destroys it retroactively by uncovering the full extent of its emptiness. At the end of his destructive analysis, when death would be a deliverance, he is left, in the bleakest existential terms, condemned to live a while longer.8

The subtitle, "From the Notes of an Old Man," is important not only to establish the story's place in a literary tradition, but to establish a certain perspective in relation to the story itself. The subtitle should warn the reader not to become overly preoccupied with the fame of the Honored Professor Nikolaj Stepanyč, privy councilor and knight, at the expense of the man himself. That is, if our concern is to judge the human being and not simply the public figure, we cannot allow our judgment to be swayed, in either one direction or the other, by the man's imposing front. It is indicative that we meet the famous name, in a first person fictional confession, before we meet the man, as Nikolaj Stepanyč describes his full rank and academic honors in the third person before finally coming to the bearer of the name, which is to say myself, . . . a man of sixty-two, bald, with false teeth and an incurable tic. My person is as drab and ugly as my name is illustrious and beautiful. . . . When I smile my face is a mass of hoary, cadaverous wrinkles. There is nothing imposing about my miserable figure, except perhaps when I undergo a seizure of my tic, at which time a rather peculiar expression comes over my face that must suggest to anyone looking at me the grimly imposing thought: "This man, apparently, has not long to live."9

Mathewson has written that "we are constantly asked to consider the contrast between the man and his name," "the discrepancy between the public and the private man," for fame and reputation "have imposed on him a disfiguring mold." But perhaps the discrepancy between the "renowned
name" and the "old man" is more ambiguous than Mathewson suggests. Why did Nikolaj Stepanyczy give us his illustrious name and all his honors first of all, before showing us his "miserable figure" with its cadaverous wrinkles? His renown is perhaps more important to him than he ever admits outright. If fame and reputation have imposed on him a disfiguring mold, then Nikolaj Stepanyczy himself is surely implicated. For Chekov's story is essentially a dramatic monologue; in order to achieve genuine insight into the narrator we cannot naively accept everything he says at face value. We must take careful note not only of what he tells us, but also of the manner in which he tells us. The professor himself admits:

I can still lecture fairly well. . . . But I write badly. That segment of my brain which directs the faculty of writing refuses to work. My memory is impaired, there is a lack of sequence in my thoughts, and when I set them down on paper it always seems to me that I have forgotten the beginning. Often I forget the simplest words. . . . And it is remarkable that the simpler the letter, the greater the strain to write it. I feel far more fluent and intelligent writing a scientific article . . . And another thing: I find it easier to write in German or English than in Russian. (272/164)

There might well be more to Nikolaj Stepanyczy's "writing what he does not mean" and "forgetting the beginning" than simply a decline of mental processes. When self-examination is painful, the mind shrinks back from it. And here is the primary source of the story's irony. Nikolaj Stepanyczy writes his confession in a sincere and agitated effort at self-examination, for he has become newly aware of his life's hitherto unsuspected emptiness. He comes vividly to see his own shell in a way Chekov's characters ordinarily do not. At the same time, however, Nikolaj Stepanyczy is unable to carry his process of self-examination to its logical conclusion; he has some serious blind spots which conventional
criticism of the story has tended to overlook. For the more Nikolaj Stepanyč sees, especially in comparison to most of Čexov's self-deluding characters, the harder for the reader to recognize those areas in which he does not see. We are invariably drawn into the professor's experience by the sustained inside view which Čexov offers us, but we must work hard, also, at being impartial in our judgment. Although Nikolaj Stepanyč is acutely aware of the disturbing change in his life, he is nonetheless left somewhat at a loss, unable fully to comprehend it. Yet Nikolaj Stepanyč, as an honored professor, is accustomed to knowing—and thus the new, vertiginous sensation of "not knowing" is particularly unpleasant for him. This helps to explain the many weighty pronouncements—on the theatre, modern literature, the younger generation of students, and so on—which fill his notes. At first these miniature essays seem ironically out of place in a process of self-examination; but evidently the professor is trying very hard to maintain, for his own benefit, his air of knowledgeability. For example, his family takes him to the theatre for an "airing" twice a year: "This, of course, doesn't entitle me to be a judge of the theatre, so I will say very little about it." All the same he cannot resist going on to deliver at length his opinions on the subject, as if the very process itself were somehow comforting.

The professor's passing judgments are moreover revealing for the reader in other ways. In criticizing contemporary belles-lettres he writes:

When it comes to serious articles by Russian writers on such subjects as sociology, art, and so on, I avoid reading them out of sheer timidity. In my childhood and early youth I had a fear of doormen and ushers, a fear which I retain to this day. I am still intimidated
by them. It is said that we are only afraid of what we do not understand. And it is difficult, indeed, to understand why doormen and ushers are so pompous, so supercilious, so majestically rude. And when I read serious articles I feel this same undefined fear. Their extraordinary pomposity, the tone of Olympian waggery ... (314-315/202)

This passage can provide a key to our understanding of the professor. First of all, we sympathize with his exposure of pomposity in scholarly circles: indeed, the professor in casting a sharp and critical eye upon the falsity around him seems himself to play the role of an eiron. This is the case when he describes the students and colleagues who come to visit him; he mercilessly "dissects" them, exposes the hypocrisy hiding beneath their social and scholarly exchange. But we cannot forget that it is really Čexov, not Nikolaj Stepanyč, who is the author of the notes, and thus Čexov is the real eiron. Although Nikolaj Stepanyč's critical vision in many ways approaches the quality of Čexov's own vision, nevertheless the professor is not invulnerable to Čexov's irony. He is a fictional character delivering the equivalent of a dramatic monologue, and the closer some of his judgments come to Čexov's own, then the more we must beware of automatically and uncritically accepting all of his judgments as valid. Thus the reader's task is especially difficult because the professor alternately is mistaken and genuinely perceptive, and the boundary between the two realms is always elusive.

In the passage quoted above Nikolaj Stepanyč criticizes, rightfully so, the falsity he perceives in the scholarly world. Then as part of his process of self-examination the next, most obvious question he should ask--since he holds a very conspicuous place in the scholarly world--is if he himself might not be supercilious and false in some ways.
Even disregarding how we might eventually answer this question, it is surely significant that the professor never dares even to ask it of himself.

In my childhood and early youth I had a fear of doormen and ushers, a fear which I retain to this day. I am still intimidated by them. It is said that we are only afraid of what we do not understand. And it is difficult, indeed, to understand why doormen and ushers are so pompous . . .

Our previous reading of Čexov's fiction should tell us that such a fear as the professor describes may hold more significance than he knows. For there is an unmistakable note of superciliousness in his own judgments of academe and his colleagues, however much truth the judgments might contain at the same time. His assistant Petr Ignat'jević might well be a mediocre "learned clod" who "will never set the world on fire," but he is also, from Nikolaj Stepanyč's description, sincere, conscientious and hard-working; yet the professor actually detests him (ja nenavižu bednjagu). "In brief, he is not the master, but the servant, of science," Nikolaj Stepanyč concludes, and he is quite right. But science surely has need of its hard-working servants as well as of its illustrious masters, and Nikolaj Stepanyč's unrelieved contempt is unbecoming even, or especially in a master. In 1888 (a year before writing this story) Čexov wrote in one of his letters: "Who cannot be a servant must not be allowed to be a master."10

Nikolaj Stepanyč justly criticizes his assistant's narrowness of vision and extremely circumscribed specialization, and comments: "For the scientist, for any educated man in fact, there can be only university traditions as a whole, with no differentiation between medicine, law, and so on." But the greater context of the story some-
what warps the professor's comment, once we realize what he means when he says "university traditions." We discover this when in the course of describing his daily routine he comes to Nikolaj the door-
man, his namesake and "the guardian of university traditions."

He can tell of extraordinary sages who knew all there is to know, of remarkable workers who could go for weeks without sleep, of innumerable martyrs and victims of science; and good always triumphs over evil in these stories, the weak vanquish the strong, the wise man the fool, the humble the proud, the young the old.... There is no need to take all these legends and marvels at face value, but filter them, and the essentials remain, our splendid traditions and the names of the real heroes, recognized as such by all. (279/169-170)

The professor wouldn't consider Nikolaj the doorman to be the guardian of the university's traditions if he himself weren't preoccupied with the drama and the h. roics of the quest for knowledge, at the expense of a concern with the intellectual substance of the quest.

There is indeed extreme ambiguity surrounding the entire matter of Nikolaj Stepanyč's relationship to scholarship and science. For in the lengthy introductory passage, with its full listing of academic honors, Nikolaj Stepanyč never mentions, or even hints at, what his field of study might be. It is only in his description of Nikolaj the doorman, several pages later, that we get our first inkling of the professor's field of study, which is apparently medicine:

If an outsider were to hear how freely Nikolaj uses our terminology, he might think him a scientist ( ucenyj) disguised as a soldier. As a matter of fact, rumors about the erudition of university watchmen are greatly exaggerated. It is true that Nikolaj is familiar with more than a hundred Latin terms, knows how to put a skeleton to-
gether, occasionally prepares certain equipment, amuses the students with some lengthy scientific quotation, but such a relatively simple thing as the circulation of the blood, for instance, is as obscure to him today as it was twenty years ago. (279/170)

But the actual word "medicine" is mentioned for the first time in the
story only in connection with the professor's mediocre assistant, and then we discover the professor's concern with "university traditions as a whole." Even in granting the legitimacy of this concern, we are somewhat surprised by the professor's indifference to his own field—he even forgets to mention it directly—although he devotes considerable space to his academic honors and his renown. As he explains it, "Only one imperfect [medical] tradition has survived—the wearing of a white tie by doctors." And yet he does not consistently maintain his role as eiron:

I only ask indulgence for my weakness [in not wishing to retire] and that it be understood that to sever a man from his professorship and pupils, when to him the destiny of bone marrow is of more interest than the ultimate purpose of the universe, would be tantamount to nailing him up in his coffin before he is dead. (283/174)

The irony is now at his expense, and is moreover heightened if we juxtapose this passage with the scene in which he angrily shouts to a student, "For the thousandth time, I ask you all to leave me in peace!"

There is much falsity in the intellectual world of which Nikolaj Stepanyć is a part, and this the professor has come to see with extreme lucidity—but he cannot bear to take the next step, and see that there is falsity in himself as well. Then we should now ask how the professor's conscious sense of unease does express itself. The most obvious symptom of his new psychological condition is constant insomnia. Night after night he paces the floor, contemplates the pictures on the walls, or sits motionless "thinking of nothing, desiring nothing." The insomnia clearly indicates that life has become a horror; in Mathewson's words, "Being awake/alive has become the worst of all torments." But insomnia, which takes place against one's will, can hardly be considered
a form of self-knowledge. For as far as active, conscious discovery of his life's emptiness goes, the professor either "thinks of nothing," or mechanically reads novels, or counts to a thousand. The inconsistency is especially obvious when he says, and in the same chapter,

Now, on the threshold of death, the only thing that interests me is . . . science. Even as I breathe my last, I shall go on believing that science is the most important, most beautiful, most essential thing in the life of man, that it always has been and always will be the highest manifestation of love, that by means of it alone will man conquer nature and himself. . . . For me to overcome this belief of mine would be impossible. (283/174)

If the underlying truth about his life is indeed thrusting itself upon him in the form of his mindless insomnia, then clearly the professor does not want to face that truth.

One night he suddenly leaps awake feeling he is about to die:
"I experienced no particular bodily sensation that would indicate the end was near, but my soul was as oppressed by horror as if I had just seen a huge ominous glow in the sky." This is one of the most revealing moments of the story. The implication is that physical death is perhaps irrelevant to the professor's dilemma, although in the opening paragraphs he particularly emphasizes the signs of his decline and approaching death; for the man's soul is in the throes of a more terrible kind of death. Nikolaj "knows" this—in that he is now experiencing the soul's death agony, but he continues consciously to back away from the truth in terror. That night, after he is already awake, suddenly he hears his daughter scream.

I could not tell whether it came from outside or from within my breast.
"Kee-vee! Kee-vee!"

My God, how frightful! . . . I was in the grip of an unaccountable animal fear, unable to understand what I was afraid of. (323/210)
We are beginning to grasp that these are truly the notes of an "old man" facing some urgent, serious questions as his life draws to a close. That he is "famous, richly endowed, and unquestionably useful" is, like his physical decline itself, more irrelevant than he is willing to admit. Thus his critical appraisal of the scholarly world, however accurate, can easily distract us, as it seems to distract him, from what is even more important: the state of his soul. The emptiness is not necessarily without, but within. In a letter of 1889 Čechov wrote:

When a man does not understand a thing, he feels discord within himself: he seeks causes for this dissonance not in himself, as he should, but outside himself.

We might turn now from the professor's professional life to his private life and his family, which he describes at some length in his notes. As before, he takes on the role of an eiron in exposing the hypocrisy and pretense which he can see clearly, but to which his family is oblivious.

To describe our dinners nowsdays would be as unappetizing as to eat them. Along with her usual worried look, my wife's face wears an expression of triumph and ostentatious dignity. . . . Liza breaks into her staccato laugh and screws up her eyes. (298/187)

I gaze at my wife in childish wonder. Bewildered, I ask myself: is it possible that this corpulent, ungainly old woman with the dull expression that comes of petty concerns and anxiety over her daily bread [the wife of a privy councilor and knight!], with eyes dimmed by the perpetual brooding on debt and want, and who is capable of talking only of expenses . . . is it really possible that this woman was once the slender Varja whom I so passionately loved for her fine clear mind, her pure soul, her beauty, and, as Othello loved Desdemona, "that she did pity me"? (274/166)

But we cannot ignore that Nikolaj Stepanyč himself is evidently the model for the unpleasant qualities he perceives in his wife and
daughter. As for the wife's "perpetual brooding over debt and want":

My daughter often sees me, an elderly and celebrated man, blush painfully because of owing money to my footman; she sees how my anxiety over petty debts forces me to drop my work and spend hours pacing the floor and thinking. (276/167)

"When my daughter comes to me ... with a forced smile [I] turn my face away," Nikolaj Stepanyč says--and accordingly the daughter has an artificial laugh and screws up her eyes. Even the wife's "expression of triumph and ostentatious dignity" might be not unlike the professor's own.

I look from one to the other, and only now, at the dinner table, does it become clear to me that long ago their inner lives slipped from my control. A startling change has taken place in both of them; somehow I failed to observe the long process that produced this change--no wonder I am unable to understand it. Why did the change take place? I do not know. Perhaps the real trouble is that God did not endow my wife and daughter with the same strength He gave to me. Since childhood I have accustomed myself to resist external influences, have steelèd myself against them: such catastrophes as fame, high rank, the transition from mere sufficiency to living beyond one's means, acquaintance with celebrities and so on, have scarcely touched me. I have remained intact and unharmed; but all this has fallen like an avalanche on my wife and daughter, weak and undisciplined as they are, and has crushed them. (298-299/187-188)

We recognize in the professor's "resistance to external influences," of which he is so proud, the shell which our reading of Čexov's fiction has made quite familiar. "Somehow I failed to observe the long process that produced this change ..." The professor, in his shell, was oblivious all along to the inner lives of his wife and daughter, and even now, in a kind of self-pitying narcissism, responds to their suffering by reminding them of his own. Indeed he loved his wife, as a girl, "as Othello loved Desdemona, 'that she did pity me.'" The original quotation reads: "She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I loved her that she did pity them" (I, iii, 168-9). Nikolaj Stepanyč's unwitting distortion of the line not only creates an
ironic contrast between himself and the adventurous Othello, but clearly expresses his self-centered wish for pity. After her nightmare his daughter sobs, "I don't know what's the matter with me... I'm so miserable!" and his answer is "There's no need to cry. I am miserable too." In the story's final scene Katja, the professor's former ward and closest friend, comes to him in desperation, and he is unable to respond to her:

"Come, let's have some breakfast, Katja," I say with a forced smile. "No more crying."
And then I add in a sinking voice: "I shall soon be gone, Katja...."

Čexov wrote about this story:

My hero—and this is one of his chief traits—views with complete unconcern the inner life of those around him, and while they are weeping, making mistakes, and lying, he calmly discusses the theatre or literature. If he were of a different cut (inoj sklad) Lisa and Katja might not, perhaps, have come to nothing (pogiblji).

Katja, who was his ward as a child, plays an important role in the story. The professor gives an account of her life in some detail. From houth her passion was the theatre, and finally she left to join a troupe.

Her first letters, written on the road, were wonderful. I read them and was simply amazed that those small sheets of paper could contain so much youth, purity of spirit, and blessed innocence, combined with a subtle, practical judgment that would have done credit to a first-class masculine mind. (291/181)

Things go well for over a year, and then Nikolaj Stepanyč notices obvious signs of a decline, as she starts to complain of her companions. "In reply I sent Katja a long and, I must confess, boring letter." His letter irritates Katja, who writes back:

"I cannot tell you how bitter it makes me to see that the art I love so much has fallen into the hands of people I detest; how bitter, too, that the best men view this evil only from a distance, not caring to
come closer, and instead of taking one's part, write heavy-handed
commonplaces and utterly superfluous sermons..." (293/183)

While with the troupe she falls in love, is deceived, attempts suicide,
bears a child who dies, and finally returns.

She had been away for about four years, and during all that time,
I must admit, I had played a strange and not very admirable role
with regard to her. . . . [She] wrote me of her wish to die and later
of the death of her child, [but] on each occasion I lost my head and
my concern for her fate was expressed only in thinking about her
and writing long boring letters. (294/183)

It is at such moments as these that the professor seems genuinely on the
verge of real self-knowledge--but he does not pursue his reflections,
does not ask himself why he writes long boring letters. The use of
"boring" (skučnyj) to refer to the letters and also its use in the
title is a significant hint that the professor's notes, as well as the
letters, are full of "heavy-handed commonplaces and superfluous sermons."
A re-reading of the story itself will make this much clearer than my
analysis has been able to, since I necessarily omit many of these
"superfluous" sermons. Just as the professor does not pursue his reason
for writing boring letters, he also does not pursue the obvious parallel
between Katja's complaining of her companions as a sign of her decline--
and his own complaints about Petr Ignat'ević, for example, "The art I
love so much has fallen into the hands of people I detest."

Yet Katja (whose father was a famous oculist) does at least see
the truth about her own life in a way Nikolaj Stepanyč seems unable
to, about his own.

To avoid sharp words I haten to change the subject [why Katja doesn't
return to the stage] . . . Only when we leave the woods and are
driving toward Katja's house do I return to the subject and say:
"But you haven't told me why you don't want to go back to the
stage."
"Nikolaj Stepanyč, this is really cruel!" she cries, suddenly
blushing all over. "Do you want me to come right out and tell you the truth? Very well, if that's what you want! I have no talent! No talent and ... and a great deal of vanity! There!" (321/208)

Katja lives with this painful self-knowledge, but she is crushed and demoralized by it—and only lolls at home reading novels all day, spending the money left her by her father. Nikolaj Stepanyč, whose vision at least of the faults of those around him is always penetrating and accurate, is disturbed by Katja's aimless life.

I often ask her:
"Katja, what will you live on when you have run through all your father's money?"
"We shall see when the time comes," she replies.
"That money deserves to be treated more seriously, my dear. A good man worked hard to accumulate it."
"You have told me that before. I know." (319-320/206)

But one night soon after that, Katja unexpectedly comes to him with tears in her eyes

and her whole face was radiant with the expression of trustfulness that I knew so well but had not seen for a long time.

"I beg you, implore you . . . if you do not scorn my friendship and respect for you, do what I ask of you!"
"What is it?"
"Take my money!"
"Come now, what an idea! What would I do with your money?"
"You could go away somewhere for your health. You need medical treatment. Will you take the money? Will you? Yes, my darling!"
She gazed eagerly into my face and repeated:
"Yes? Will you take it?"
"No, my dear, I will not take it," I said. "Thank you."
She turned her back to me and bowed her head. No doubt there was something in the tone of my refusal which did not admit of further talk about money. (326/212)

But money is not the point! Katja asks despondently, "So you don't consider me your friend?" and Nikolaj Stepanyč still refuses to understand. "I didn't say that," he answers, "but your money is of no use to me now." His own point of view is the only one he can grasp; Katja's perspective is not real to him. And his only thought as she leaves is:
"And she went away so quickly that I had no time to say good-by to her."

Yet Katja, who from childhood, the professor tells us, was always characterized by an extraordinary trustfulness, continues to have complete faith in Nikolaj Stepanyč and in his ability to help her.

"You are a very good man, Nikolaj Stepanyč," she says. . . . "I envy you, envy you terribly! After all, what have I made of myself? What?" She thinks for a minute, then asks: "Nikolaj Stepanyč, I'm nothing but a negative quantity, isn't that so? Isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," I answer.

"Hm-m... And what can I do about it?"

How am I to answer her? It is easy to say: "Work," or "Give all you have to the poor," or "Know thyself," and just because it is so easy, I have no answer for her.

My colleagues who teach therapeutics advise: "Individualize each particular case." One has only to follow this advice to be convinced that the remedies recommended in textbooks as the best standard treatment prove to be absolutely useless in individual cases. This is no less true in moral disorders.

But I must give her some sort of answer, and I say:

"You have too much free time, dear. It's imperative that you find something to do. Why don't you go on the stage again . . .?"

The professor is perceptive and honest in recognizing that simplistic formulas are meaningless: "and just because it is so easy, I have no answer for her." And he is aware of the necessity of "individualizing each particular case"—which is "no less true in moral disorders." All the same, he does neither of these things: "But I must give her some sort of answer" (No otvetit' čto-nibud' nužno)! Katja's trustfulness merited at least honesty and sincerity on his part, no matter what he chose to say. If he knew there was no easy answer, and this is probably closest to the truth, it was dishonest of him not to say so outright.

Or, if he thought that individualizing the case was necessary and possible, then he could have done that too. But instead he gives her an answer which is neither the former nor the latter, but simply a "heavy-handed commonplace"—as in his boring letters to her in the past.
But despite our criticism of Nikolaj Stepanyč's behavior, we feel that he is surely not deliberately false, but rather is genuinely at a loss. He does not know how to respond, and remains in a kind of emotional limbo. Earlier, in response to Katja's tragic experiences while with the troupe, he had said: "On each occasion I lost my head, and my concern for her fate was expressed only in thinking about her and writing long boring letters." The professor is aware of the pattern, but can do nothing to change it—nor does he seem even to try, we might add. His recollections of Katja as a child make clear how pervasive is the pattern:

More than once I saw something taken away from her, saw her unjustly punished, or her curiosity left unsatisfied; at such times a look of sadness mingled with the invariable expression of confidence in her face—but that was all. I did not know how to defend her, but when I saw her sadness, I felt like drawing her close to me and consoling her like an old nurse: "My dear little orphan!" (288-289/178)

It is hardly clear why he does not "know how" to defend her, or why he only "felt like" drawing her close to console her. In retelling the incident he evidently considers the impulse to be enough in itself; it never occurs to him to ask if he might have been wrong or guilty in not carrying through the impulse in reality. If the notes were a genuine act of self-examination, then surely he would have asked this of himself. As it is, he goes on to say, "I also remember that she loved dressing nicely ..." We might note also that after Petr Ignatević's visit the professor comments, "Only when he has gone do I have an impulse to call out to him and say, 'Forgive me, my dear fellow!'" And of course he never does, nor does he think any more about it. This is a form of awareness, but a very limited awareness. The emotional pattern
is repeated throughout the notes, but does not change; indeed the pattern remains identical in the professor's account of the past and the present alike. The reader might well sympathize with the professor's emotional sterility, but at the same time he should not let himself be so influenced by the professor's general air of authority and knowledgeability that he credits him with active understanding solely on the basis of simple description. Mathewson has referred to the story as a "destructive analysis" by the professor of his own life, but we realize that description far outweighs analysis. We should not overlook the fact that it is easily possible to describe without fully comprehending. The professor is especially sensitive to falsity and pretense, and this he points out again and again. But here his understanding stops—for apart from perceiving falsity, he remains baffled by the inner lives of those around him. The night his daughter awoke screaming his wife implored, "Help her, help her! Do something for her!"

What could I do? I could do nothing. The poor girl's heart was burdened with something I did not understand, something I knew nothing about, and I could only murmur: "Never mind, never mind.... It will pass...." (324-325/211)

But the professor, earlier that night, had just experienced a similar horror himself!

Now we should listen to how Nikolaj Stepanyč consciously gives voice to his own inner distress.

"Things are in a bad way with me, my dear," I began, sighing deeply. "Very bad."
"What's the matter?" [Katja asks].
"You see, dear, it's like this.... The highest and most sacred prerogative of kings is the right to pardon. And I have always felt myself a king, for I have made unlimited use of this right. I have never judged, but have always been indulgent, showering my pardons right and left. Where others have protested or expressed indignation, I have merely counseled and persuaded. All my life I have endeavored
to make my company tolerable to my family, students, colleagues, and servants. And this attitude of mine, I know, has been edifying to those around me. But I am no longer a king. Something worthy only of a slave is going on inside me: evil thoughts prowl through my mind day and night, and my soul is a hotbed of feelings such as I have never known before. I feel hatred, contempt, indignation, resentment, fear. I have grown excessively severe, exacting, irritable, discourteous, suspicious. Things that in the old days would have provoked no more than a pun or a good-natured laugh, now evoke dark feelings in me. Even my sense of logic has undergone a change: in the old days it was only money I despised, now I harbor feelings of bitterness not with regard to money, but the rich, as if they were to blame; in those days I detested tyranny and violence, now I detest the men who practice it, as if they alone were guilty, and not every one of us who is incapable of bringing out the best in one another. (302-303/191-192)

The vision here is that of the eiron, although the appropriateness of the term is seriously qualified by the fact that the professor regards this new quality of vision neither as good nor important; rather he speaks of "evil thoughts" which are worthy only of a slave. Indeed, what he describes is less a quality of vision than, as he says, "a hotbed of feelings" which puzzle and overwhelm him. He describes, moreover, his reaction to the world around him, society in general--but does not apply his critical attitude to his own behavior. In his soul, he says, he feels "hatred, contempt, indignation, resentment, fear"--but can be no more specific than this. And he goes on:

"What is the meaning of this? If these thoughts and feelings have arisen from a change in my convictions, then what has caused the change? Can the world have grown worse and I better, or is it that I have been blind till now, and indifferent?" (303/192)

Here the reader mentally affirms that the latter is the case. And if the professor fully recognized that this were so, he would have achieved an important kind of self-knowledge. But he continues:

"If the change results from a general decline of my mental and physical powers--I am a sick man, you know, losing weight every day--then my situation is indeed pitiable: it means my new ideas are abnormal, morbid, that I ought to be ashamed of them and con-
He cannot accept even a limited version of the truth, although he seemed right upon it. Katja answers him and affirms that he has been blind and indifferent up to now.

"It has nothing to do with illness," Katja interrupts me. "It's simply that your eyes have been opened, that's all. You have seen what you refused to see before. In my opinion, what you ought to do first of all is to break with your family and go away."

"You're talking nonsense."

"You no longer care for them, why be a hypocrite?"

"Katja!" I say sternly. "I want you to stop talking like this."

"Do you think I enjoy talking about them? I'd be happier not even knowing them. Listen to me, dear: give it all up and go away. Go abroad. The sooner the better."

"What nonsense! And what about the university?"

"Give that up too. What's the university to you? It makes no sense. You've been lecturing there for thirty years, and where are your students now? How many of them are well known scientists? Just count them! It doesn't require a good and talented man to increase the number of doctors who exploit ignorance and pile up hundreds of thousands of rubles for themselves. You are not needed."

"My God, how bitter you are!" I exclaim, appalled. "How bitter! Stop, or I shall leave. I don't know how to reply to such harshness." (303-304/192-193)

We agree that Katja is harsh, perhaps in excess, but the truth, too, is harsh. Yet Nikolaj Stepanyč refuses even seriously to consider Katja's words. Katja, moreover, is not even referring to the inner man, to the soul, but only to the outward conditions of the professor's life. Nikolaj Stepanyč himself had seemed, as an eiron, to expose the falsity and pretense of his academic and family life—but he is appalled when Katja does the same. Evidently he will play the eiron only in the privacy of his notes, but in the public eye, even before Katja, he must maintain his dignified exterior, fully conscious of his renowned name and his reputation as an honored professor. He himself is in many ways pompous and false, fully participating in that which he condemns. He lectured
loudly and indignantly, for example, to the aspirant who came to ask perfunctorily for a thesis topic, but after he had finished shouting and insulting the man, he did give him a "worthless topic" rather than send him off without one. He makes fun of the conversations with his colleagues which are "gilded in the most Celestial Chinese manner"--but plays the role himself all the same: "When at last I return to my room, my face goes on smiling--from inertia, I suppose."

But to Katja's criticism, perhaps even milder than his own, he replies, "How bitter! Stop, or I shall leave." He finds it disturbing that others might see what he too sees but will admit only to himself. And at this point Nikolaj Stepanyč writes that "the maid brings in the coffee." When he might have shifted from description of an especially meaningful conversation, such as this one, to genuine self-analysis, he invariably chooses to return to more description, and often of a most trivial kind. After having "poured out complaints," then, now he feels like "indulging in another weakness of old age--reminiscing."

"Sometimes I would walk in our seminary garden. . . . I would listen to the accordion, to the receding sound of bells, and imagine myself a doctor--painting pictures for myself one better than another. And, as you see, my dreams came true. I have had more than I dared to dream of. For thirty years I have been an admired professor, I have had splendid comrades, have enjoyed a notable fame. I have loved, married for passionate love, had children. In short, looking back, I see my whole life as a beautiful composition, the work of a master." (304-305/193)

Then the professor hasn't at all, in Mathewson's words quoted earlier, "uncovered the full extent of [his life's] emptiness."

"Now it remains for me not to spoil the finale. And this requires that I die like a man. If death is, in fact, a peril, then it must be met in a manner worthy of a teacher, a scientist, and a citizen of a Christian country: with courage and an untroubled soul. But I am spoiling the finale." (305/193)
The imminent physical death which monopolizes Nikolaj Stepanyč's attention is, in his own mind, the cause of his new distress. But that night when he had suddenly awoken feeling on the verge of death, it was his soul which was oppressed by horror. And then he concludes: "Drowning, I run to you with a plea for help, and you say to me: drown, that is what you ought to do." But each time Katja has come to him asking for help—as she will do again in the final chapter, this is precisely the way Nikolaj Stepanyč has answered her, only not even so honestly as she has done here. And in his notes he continues, after the above sentence, as follows: "The doorbell rings . . . ."

In the last chapter of the story the professor is in Xarkov, at the prompting of his wife, to investigate the "suspicious" Gnekker's background. Gnekker is his daughter's suitor, a dandy in fashionable clothes whose smooth plump face has a "doll-like expression."

He neither plays nor sings, but has some connection with music and singing, sells mysterious grand pianos to mysterious customers, goes frequently to the conservatory, is acquainted with all the celebrities, and has something to do with concerts; his judgments on music are delivered with great authority, and I observe that everyone is eager to agree with him. (297/186)

In many ways Gnekker is an ironic, lowered version of Nikolaj Stepanyč himself ("I too love fine clothes and good scent," speaking in reference to Katja). The detail of being a dandy is only meant to lead us to the more significant similarity between the two, which is the falsity hiding beneath the air of authority. Nikolaj Stepanyč continues to describe Gnekker, whom he indeed detests.

Rich people always have their hangers-on, and it is the same with the arts and sciences. I don't suppose that any one of the arts or sciences anywhere in the world is free from such "foreign bodies" as this Mr. Gnekker. I am not a musician, and perhaps I am mistaken about Gnekker, whom, moreover, I hardly know, but the
air of authority, the dignity with which he stands at the piano and listens when any one plays or sings, look very suspicious to me. (297/186)

According to an already established pattern, Nikolaj Stepanyč sees through Gnekker's air of authority to the falsity beneath (while his family and all those others who are "eager to agree" with Gnekker do not see so clearly); but again, he cannot go on to see the ways in which his role in the academic world is so similar to Gnekker's in the music world: "[he] goes frequently to the conservatory, is acquainted with all the celebrities, and has something to do with concerts."

Čexov wrote about this story:

If you are given coffee do not look in it for beer. If I present you with the thoughts of the professor, believe me and don't look in them for Čexov's thoughts. I humbly thank you. In the whole story there is only one idea which I share and which sits in the head of the professor's son-in-law, the rogue Gnekker, and it is, "The old fellow is gone crazy."13

Here is the passage he refers to: "Knowing that my wife and daughter are on his side, he holds to such tactics as responding to my gibes with a condescending silence (the old man's crazy--no use arguing with him) or making amiable fun of me." And this very thought, that he is crazy, sits, in a respectably veiled form, in the professor's own head, too.

Realizing, then, that the "suspicious" Gnekker is an ironic echo of Nikolaj Stepanyč, it comes as no surprise that Gnekker turns out to be an imposter, that there is no wealthy family by that name in Xarkov. Yet Nikolaj Stepanyč's real reason for coming to Xarkov, as a matter of fact, is simply so that "the last days of my life should be irreproachable, at least outwardly." Then he didn't really care much about the future fate of his daughter, about to marry the rogue Gnekker.
Later that night he gets a telegram—"Gnekker and Liza married secretly yesterday. Return."—and is alarmed, not by the marriage, but by his own indifference.

He had arrived at midday and had sat "blankly" on the bed as the clock struck the hours from one to six. It grows dark.

In order to occupy my thoughts, I try to recover the point of view I had before I became indifferent, and ask myself: why am I, a distinguished man, a privy councilor, sitting in this little hotel room, on the side of this bed with the strange gray blanket? . . . . Is this in keeping with my reputation and high position? My answer to these questions is an ironic smile. It amuses me to think of the naivete with which, in my youth, I exaggerated the importance of fame and the exceptional position that celebrities are supposed to enjoy. I am famous, my name is pronounced with reverence, my picture has appeared in the Niva and the Illustrated World News, I have even read my biography in a German magazine—and what of it? Here I sit, utterly alone, in a strange city, on a strange bed, rubbing my aching cheek [the tic] with the palm of my hand....

. . . . Let us suppose that I am celebrated a thousand times over, that I am a hero of whom my country is proud; that bulletins on the state of my health appear in all the newspapers, letters of sympathy pour in from colleagues, students, the general public; yet all this will not prevent me from dying in a strange bed, in misery and utter loneliness.... No one is to blame for it, of course, but, I am sorry to say, I have no love for my renown. It appears to have betrayed me. (328/214)

The professor seems right on the verge of seeing the truth—that is, his ironic smile at his youthful exaggeration of the importance of fame—but we read on to discover he means only that fame will not prevent him from dying in a strange bed "in misery and utter loneliness."

Each time (for we have seen this pattern before) that he comes to the threshold of the truth, that is, his life's emptiness, he backs away and lapses into self-pity.

That he feels "betrayed" by his renown ("No one is to blame for it, of course") tells us how little he understands his predicament, although he is experiencing its full horror. We might now reconsider
the story's opening paragraphs in detail for the irony, in retrospect, is strong. Of course Nikolaj Stepanyč never intended irony, although now, at the end, he feels the name has betrayed him. But we understand that he has betrayed the name.

There lives in Russia a certain Honored Professor Nikolaj Stepanyč, privy councilor and knight, who has received so many decorations, both Russian and foreign [Nikolaj the doorman was described as looking like a scientist disguised as a soldier], that when he has occasion to wear them all, his students call him "the icon stand." He moves in the most aristocratic circles and ... there has not been a single eminent scholar with whom he has not been intimately acquainted. . . . He is an honorary member of the faculty of every Russian university and of three universities abroad. And so forth and so on. All this, and a great deal more that might be said, constitutes what is called my "name."

... It is one of the few fortunate names which it is considered in bad taste to take in vain, to abuse in public or in print. And that is as it should be. . . . All things considered, my academic name is without blemish and beyond reproach. A fortunate name. (271/163-164)

Remembering Nikolaj Stepanyč's thoughts on the traditions of the university, we understand his preoccupation with being a hero: his many decorations.

The distance separating the name, which is "without blemish and beyond reproach," from the man as we have come to know him, is vast indeed. But in the last chapter Nikolaj Stepanyč has come to a limited recognition of this distance. As he sits on the strange bed, he is brought a newspaper in which he reads the following news item: "The celebrated scientist, Honored Professor Nikolaj Stepanyč So-and-So arrived in Xarkov yesterday by express train, and is staying at the Such-and-Such Hotel." This leads him to reflect:

Great names are apparently created to live a life of their own, apart from those who bear them. At this moment my name is nonchalantly parading-about Xarkov [like the "imposter"-nose of Gogol's story 14]; in another three months, set out in gold letters, on my tombstone, it will blaze like the sun itself--while...
I shall be covered with moss. (330-331/216)

The only great names which "live a life of their own" are those which don't legitimately belong to those who bear them. But again, rather than catching the true significance of his words, the professor evidently misses this point and lapses into self-pity, speaking of his tombstone.

They say that philosophers and wise men are indifferent. This is not true. Indifference is a paralysis of the soul.

The professor is quite right, but still misses the enormous implication of what he has just said. His paralysis of the soul is indeed the source of his life's emptiness. And yet he continues:

Again I go to bed and try to think of something to occupy my mind. What am I to think about? Everything has been thought over; there seems to be nothing left to arouse my interest.

When daylight comes I ... try, for want of something better to do, to understand myself. [At last!] "Know thyself" is excellent and useful advice; it is only a pity that the ancients failed to indicate a method for following it. [This is Nikolaj the doorman who can put a skeleton together but who doesn't understand the circulation of blood.]

In the past when I wanted to understand someone [when?], or even myself, I took into consideration, not actions, which are always conditional, but desires. Tell me what you want and I will tell you what you are.

And now I examine myself. What do I want? I want our wives, children, friends and students to love in us, not the fame, the label, the connections, but the ordinary man. What else? I should like to have assistants and successors. What else? I should like to wake up a hundred years from now and have a glimpse of what is going on in science. I should like to have lived another ten years.... Anything else?

No, nothing else. I think and think, but can think of nothing further. And no matter how much I may think, or how far-reaching my thoughts, it is clear to me that there is nothing vital, nothing of great importance, in my desires. [But what of his wish that people "love in us the ordinary man"?] In my passion for science, in my desire to live, in this sitting up in a strange bed and trying to know myself, in all the thoughts, feeling, and conceptions that I formulate, there is no common element, nothing that would unify them into a whole. Each thought and feeling exists in isolation, and in all my judgments of science, the theatre, literature, and my students [all of which judgments are irrelevant here], in all the pictures my imagination paints, even the most skillful analyst
would be unable to find what is called a general idea, the god of a living man.
And without this there is nothing.

I am defeated. This being so, it is useless to go on thinking, useless to talk. I will sit and wait in silence for what is to come.

The professor has finally come to the very heart of his problem, and the truth seems to be staring him in the face—but still he doesn’t really see it. What is the "god of a living man"? The soul. "And without this there is nothing." Nikolaj Stepanyč is an ikon stand without a soul.

There is a knock at the door and to the professor’s astonishment, Katja stands there. The trustful Katja, who still believes in him and who has come for help, might be an angel miraculously coming to offer him a last chance for redemption.

"I am very happy to see you," I say, shrugging my shoulders, "but I am surprised.... It's as if you had dropped from the sky. What have you come for?"
"Oh... I just thought... I'd come..."
Silence. All at once she jumps up and impulsively comes to me. "Nikolaj Stepanyč!" she says, turning pale and pressing her hands to her breast. "Nikolaj Stepanyč! I cannot go on living like this! I cannot! In God's name, tell me quickly, this very minute: what am I to do? Tell me, what am I to do?"
"What can I say?" I am perplexed. "There's nothing I can say."

"Help me! Help me!" she pleads. "I can't go on any longer!"

"There is nothing I can tell you, Katja," I say.
"Help me!" she sobs, seizing my hand and kissing it. "After all, you are my father, my only friend! And you are wise, educated, you have lived a long time! You have been a teacher (ucitel’)! Tell me: what am I to do?"
"Honestly, Katja, I do not know...."
I am utterly at a loss, bewildered, touched by her sobs, and barely able to stand on my feet.
"Come, let's have some breakfast, Katja," I say with a forced smile. "No more crying."

And then I add in a sinking voice:
"I shall soon be gone, Katja...."
"Just one word, even a word!" she weeps, stretching out her hands
to me. "What shall I do?"

"What a queer girl you are, really..." I mutter. "I don't understand... Such a sensible girl, and suddenly you... go off into tears."

Silence. Katja arranged her hair, puts on her hat... Her face... is wet with tears, but her expression is cold and austere.... Looking at her I feel ashamed of being happier than she is. I have discovered in myself the absence of what my philosophic colleagues call a general idea (obščaja ideja) only recently, in my decline, and in the face of death, but the soul [!] of this poor creature has never found and never in her life will find refuge... never in her life!

"Come, Katja, let us have breakfast," I say. (331-332/217-218)

They converse briefly on the "gray town of Xarkov" and soon Katja gets up, "smiling coldly," and without looking at him holds out her hand. He feels like saying, "So you won't be at my funeral?" but Katja doesn't look at him. (She is wearing black; perhaps she is attending his funeral now.)

Now she has left me, and walks down the long corridor without glancing back. She knows that I am watching her and will probably look back when she reaches the turn....

No, she did not look back. Her black dress has disappeared from sight for the last time, the sound of her footsteps dies away.... Farewell, my precious (sokrovišče)!

In this final passage of the story it is not so much the professor's inability to give Katja an answer as his diffident and distant behavior, his forced smile, the intrusion of his own self-pity, which we condemn. The scene is the culmination of a lifetime of such distant, frozen behavior to those around him. His own feelings are real and vivid enough, but he cannot give them expression except silently, in thought. Then the lyrical "Farewell, my precious"--which is never spoken--at once deepens the irony and the pathos as the story closes.
NOTES

1 SS, VIII, 305-306; Yarmolinsky, p. 385. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.

2 SS, VIII, 297; Yarmolinsky, p. 375.


4 SS, XII, 218; translation my own. Letter to Avilova, August 30, 1898.

5 SS, VIII, 316; The Lady with the Dog, p. 66. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.

6 Not included in SS; Koteliansky and Tomlinson, p. 43. Letter to Mixail Čejov, July, 1876.

7 Simmons, Chekhov: A Biography, p. 345.

8 Mathewson, pp. 382-383.

9 SS, VI, 272; Ward Six and Other Stories, p. 164. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.


14 In Nikolaj Gogol's "The Nose" Kovalev, a Collegiate Assessor, awakens one morning to discover there is "only a flat patch on his face where the nose used to be." Later in the story the nose is seen strut ting on Nevsky Prospect in the uniform of a State Counciller (a higher rank than Kovalev's own).
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

The stories chosen here to illustrate the workings of irony in Čeòov's fiction, as must be clear by now, deal primarily with the educated class. We think of Belikov and Burkin, high school teachers; Ivan Ivanyć, veterinary; Alexin, educated "gentleman farmer"; Vasil'jev, law student; Kovrin, Magister; Ragin and Starcev, doctors; Nikolaj Stepanyć, Honored Professor. And Čeòov's use of irony, in a very general sense, has meant that "author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing on the standard by which he is found wanting."\(^1\) In his letters Čeòov often expresses a critical attitude outright:

I do not believe in our educated class, which is hypocritical, false, hysterical, poorly educated and indolent; I don't believe in it even when it suffers and complains, for its persecutors emerge from its own bosom. I believe in individual personalities scattered here and there throughout Russia--they may be intellectuals or peasants--these are the ones with the power, however few they may be. A prophet is not honored in his own country; the individual personalities of whom I speak play an insignificant role in society. They do not dominate, but their work is apparent; at any rate, science is continually going forward, social consciousness is growing, questions of morality are beginning to cause uneasiness, etc., etc.--and all this is being done despite the public prosecutors, the engineers, the tutors, despite the intelligentsia en masse and despite everything.\(^2\)

It is then no accident that Čeòov uses irony so pervasively (but of course, not exclusively) in stories dealing with the intelligentsia, when he considers it in many ways hypocritical and false. Certainly any character who is in a false position is a perfect potential target.
for irony. This is the alazon, "the imposter, someone who pretends or
tries to be something more than he is," who, in Northrop Frye's words,
"is one of the predestined victims of the eiron." Our analyses in
preceding chapters have revealed that one of Čexov's important aims
in his fiction is to expose falsity, self-delusion and pretense.

I hate lies and coercion in all their aspects.... Pharisaism,
stupidity and idle whim reign not only in the homes of the
merchant class and within prison walls; I see them in science,
in literature, amongst young people. . . .
My holy of holies are the human body, health, intelligence,
talent, inspiration, love and the most absolute freedom--freedom
from force and falsity, in whatever form these last may be
expressed.

But we have seen also that Čexov's criticism of his characters' falsity
and self-delusion is born of understanding and tempered by sympathy.
Herein is irony's "breadth of view, the incisive rendering [by indirect
suggestion] of a clearly defined, complex evaluation." From our previous discussion, moreover, we know that irony
involves not only complexity and breadth of view, but a special depth
as well. Čexov's use of irony prompts the alert reader to achieve a
penetrating quality of vision of that which lies beneath the surface
appearance of things. The technique, then, is the complement of the
all-important theme in Čexov's fiction of awareness, of learning to see.
For Čexov the necessity to "see and hear those who suffer behind the
scenes" (Ivan Ivanyč's words in "Gooseberries"), to have a "conception
of pain" (Ragin's words in "Ward Six"), to know, is not just a theme
in his fiction--but a moral imperative in living. In this sense
Čexov's biography provides an especially revealing perspective for our
understanding of the stories, in that it makes clear the integrity of
Čexov's moral stance.
After finishing "A Boring Story" in late 1889, Chekov began to talk of going to Saxalin Island, the Russian penal colony in the Far East. Simmons writes in his biography of Chekov:

While reading Misha's classroom notes on criminal law, Chekhov remarked: "All our attention is centered on the criminal up to the moment when sentence is pronounced, but as soon as he is sent to prison, we forget about him entirely. But what happens in prison? I can imagine!" Then, Misha added, he suddenly began to plan a journey to Sakhalin Island, thousands of miles away on the Pacific, to study life in the penal colony there. It was difficult to know, concluded Misha, whether he spoke seriously or jokingly.

It is hard to understand the rather condescending attitude over the years toward Chekov's decision (he was already afflicted with tuberculosis) to make the six thousand mile journey to Saxalin (Simmons gives an account of numerous conflicting explanations put forth). Yet few seem to respect Chekov's own words; Simmons refers to the following letter as a "tirade" and others ignore it. The letter is to Suvorin, written in March, 1890, shortly before departure.

By reading, looking around, and listening I shall get to know and to learn a great deal. I have not gone yet, but thanks to the books which I have been forced to read I have learnt much of those things everyone should know, or else should suffer the pain of forty strokes, but of which I was in ignorance before. . . . You say that Saxalin is of no use to anyone, or is it of any interest to anyone. But is that true? Saxalin may be of no use, and of no interest only to a society which does not banish thousands of people there, and does not spend millions on it. After Australia in the past and Cayenne, Saxalin is the only place where colonization by convicts can be studied; all Europe is interested in it—and to us it is of no use? No further back than twenty-five or thirty years men of our own Russia in the exploration of Saxalin performed great deeds that make man worthy to be worshipped. Yet we have no use for it! We don't know who those men were, but we sit within our four walls and grumble that God has created man badly! Saxalin is a place of intolerable sufferings, of which only man, free or bound, is capable. The men who worked on it and in it achieved fearful and responsible tasks, and so they are doing still. I am sorry I am not a sentimental man, or I would say that it is to places like Saxalin we should make pilgrimages, as the Turks go to Mecca; and the navy and experts in the penal system in particular ought particularly to study Saxalin, as the military study Sebastopol. It is
evident from the books that I have read and am reading that we have sent millions of people to rot in prisons, we have destroyed them at random, without reflection, barbarously; we have driven men through the cold in iron chains for thousands of miles; we have infected them with syphilis, deprived them, multiplied criminals, and for all this we have thrown the blame on the red-nosed prison superintendents. Now, all civilized Europe knows it is not the superintendents who are to blame, but all of us. But we do not care; it does not interest us. The glorified sixties did nothing for the sick and the prisoners, and thus violated the chief commandment of Christian civilization. In our time something is being done for the sick, but nothing for the convicted; penitentiary methods do not interest our jurists at all. No, I assure you, Saxalin is of use and of interest; the only regret is that it is I who am going there, and not someone who knows more about the business and is better able to arouse public interest. Personally, I go there but for trifles.⁸

In his letters—here, as elsewhere—Čëxov states outright what he often says with irony, by indirect suggestion, in his stories; and in the preceding chapters I have sometimes used Čëxov's letters to confirm a story's ironic implication and certain points in my own discussion. But Čëxov also speaks directly, although of course very differently from in the letters, in his stories too. As a preface to considering the place of irony within the larger pattern of Čëxov's fiction as a whole, a concrete example will prove especially useful. The story "Gusev," written in 1890 immediately upon Čëxov's return from Saxalin, excellently illustrates the interlocking of ironic and non-ironic discourse. It is indicative, moreover, that we are no longer dealing with the intelligentsia but with an orderly, Gusev, and with a man "of uncertain social status," Pavel Ivanyč. In previous stories we have seen characters who were metaphorically imprisoned—trapped in various ways by the deadening quality of their life—and for the most part unaware of being trapped or, if aware, helplessly unable to escape. This is the "scene of bondage, frustration
or absurdity" to which Frye refers in speaking of the ironic mode. But Gusev and Pavel Ivanyč manage, each differently, to transcend their prison, which is the stifling infirmary of a steamer in the Far East and the fact of rapidly encroaching death.

The first four of the story's five chapters consist of a conversation, with long pauses, between Gusev and Pavel Ivanyč, although neither really hears--or understands--the other. Here is a significant irony in the story, although one which will become clear only later in our reading.

"Do you hear me, Pavel Ivanyč? A soldier in Suchan was telling me: while they were sailing, their ship bumped into a big fish and smashed a hole in its bottom." But Pavel Ivanyč is silent "as though he hasn't heard." There are only the sounds of the boat creaking and the wind.

"The wind has broken loose from its chain," says Gusev, straining his ears.

This time Pavel Ivanyč coughs and says irritably:

"One minute a vessel bumps into a fish, the next the wind breaks loose from its chain... Is the wind a beast that it breaks loose from its chain?"

"That's what Christian folk say."

"The Christians are as ignorant as you... They say all sorts of things. One must have one's head on one's shoulders and reason it out. You have no sense (besmyslennyj čelovek)." (351/252)

But Gusev's words are not idle. He "ponders for a long time about fishes as big as a mountain and about stout, rusty chains." His thoughts contain a childlike logic and also an intense curiosity (the beginnings of wisdom).

What is there that is strange or out of the way [Gusev thinks to himself] about that fish, for instance, or about the wind breaking loose from its chain? Suppose the fish were as big as the mountain and its back as hard as a sturgeon's, and supposing, too, that over yonder at the end of the world stood great stone walls and the fierce winds were chained up to the walls. If they haven't broken loose, why then do they rush all over the sea like madmen and strain
like hounds tugging at their leash? If they are not chained up
what becomes of them when it is calm? (351/252)

Gusev (in the words of H. N. Fairchild, speaking of what he calls
"romanticity" in human nature)

give[s] the unknown something of the firmness and tangibility of the
known. He not only fills the unknown with his illusions, but makes
those illusions as concrete and specific as possible.\textsuperscript{11}

This quality of imagination, fusing the familiar with the strange, the
known with the unknown, is a very old human trait. The power of th
human imagination is nowhere made so real in Čexov's fiction as in
Gusev, and it is with this power that he vicariously escapes his prison.

He falls to thinking about his home . . . He pictures an immense
pond covered with drifts. On one side of the pond is the brick-
colored building of the pottery with a tall chimney and clouds of
black smoke; on the other side is a village. His brother Aleksej
drives out of the fifth yard from the end in a sleigh; behind him
sits his little son Vanka in big felt boots, and his little girl
Akulka also wearing felt boots. Aleksej has had a drop, Vanka
is laughing. Akulka's face cannot be seen, she is muffled up.

"If he doesn't look out, he will have the children frostbitten,"
Gusev reflects. "Lord send them sense that they may honor their
parents and not be any wiser than their father and mother."

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

He is glad he has had a glimpse of his people. In fact, he is
breathless with joy, and his whole body, down to his fingertips,
tingles with it. "Thanks be to God we have seen each other again
(privel Gospod' povidat'sia)." (352-353/253)

For Gusev the scene is so real he fears the children will be frostbitten,
and he reacts to this "glimpse of his people" as if he had really been
there: "... we have seen each other." This is one form of, in MacLeish's
words, "that feeling-life of the mind which comprehends by putting itself
in the place where its thought goes--by realizing its thought in that
only human realizer, the imagination."\textsuperscript{12} Rather than indirectly leading
us to this thought, through irony (as he did, for example, in "Ward Six"),
Čexov portrays directly and vividly the quality of Gusev's imagination.
But Pavel Ivanyč, the rationalist, scoffs at Gusev, says he has no sense. In the second chapter, it is his turn to speak.

"I begin to guess... Yes, I understand it all perfectly now."
"What do you understand, Pavel Ivanyč?"

"Here's how it is... It has always seemed strange to me that terribly ill as you fellows are, you should be on a steamer where the stifling air, the heavy seas, in fact everything threatens you with death; but now it is all clear to me... Yes... The doctors put you on the steamer to get rid of you. They got tired of bothering with you, cattle... You don't pay them any money, you are a nuisance, and you spoil their statistics with your deaths... So, of course, you are just cattle. And it's not hard to get rid of you... All that's necessary is, in the first place, to have no conscience, and secondly, to deceive the ship authorities. The first requirement need hardly be given a thought—in that respect we are virtuosos, and as for the second condition, it can always be fulfilled with a little practice... and when the steamer was on the way, people discovered that there were paralytics and consumptives on their last legs lying about the deck..."

Gusev does not understand Pavel Ivanyč; thinking that he is being reprimanded, he says in self-justification:

"I lay on the deck because I was so sick; when we were being unloaded (nas vygruzali) from the barge [indeed, like cattle] onto the steamer, I caught a bad chill." (353-354/254-255)

Gusev does not understand Pavel Ivanyč—but his imagination tells him what his reason does not. The vision of his family, quoted on the previous page, was suddenly replaced with "a huge bull's head without eyes, and the horse and sleigh are no longer going straight ahead but are whirling round and round, wrapped in black smoke." And in the second chapter Gusev again sees a vision of his family, followed by the bull's head and black smoke. Yet the first instance was in the first chapter, even before hearing Pavel Ivanyč's words: Gusev senses the truth on his own, although he does not know it rationally. Then there is irony here that Gusev's instinct tells him what his reason refuses to admit. That Gusev consciously misinterprets Pavel Ivanyč's words and understands them as a reprimand reveals, moreover, to what extent his mentality has become servile and submissive. To Pavel Ivanyč's
exclamation, as he shakes his head sadly, "My God, my God! To tear a man from his home, drag him a distance of ten thousand miles, then wear him out till he gets consumption and... and what is it all for, one asks?" Gusev answers:

"It's not hard work, Pavel Ivanyč. You get up in the morning and polish the boots, start the samovars going, tidy the rooms, and then you have nothing more to do. The lieutenant drafts plans all day, and if you like, you can say your prayers, or read a book or go out on the street. God grant everyone such a life."

"Yes, very good! The lieutenant drafts plans all day long, and you sit in the kitchen and long for home... Plans, indeed! ... It's not plans that matter but human life. You have only one life to live and it mustn't be wronged." (354-355/256)

Gusev "fills the unknown with his illusions" (the winds chained to the walls) and transcends with his imagination his immediate prison, but his understanding of reality is limited: "If you live as you ought and obey orders, who will want to wrong you?" The childlike, vivid imagination has as its obverse a naive credulousness. And there is yet another form of ignorance in Gusev, that of prejudice. Indeed, Gusev's name is from the Russian gus', goose.

"...if, let's say, they lowered the boat this minute and an officer ordered me to go fifty miles across the sea to catch fish, I'll go. Or, let's say, if a Christian were to fall into the water right now, I'd jump in after him. A German or a Chink I wouldn't try to save, but I'd fo in after a Christian." (362/266)

Imagination is incomplete without reason. Although neither Gusev nor Pavel Ivanyč understands each other, Pavel Ivanyč understands more than Gusev. So a central irony of the story is that what Gusev doesn't know, and needs to know, Pavel Ivanyč is telling him--but the words fall on deaf ears.

"In Xarkov I have a friend, a man of letters. I'll go to him and say, "Come brother, put aside your vile subjects, women's amours and the beauties of Nature, and show up the two-legged vermin... There's a subject for you."
For a while he reflects, then says: "Gusev, do you know how I tricked them?"

"Tricked who, Pavel Ivanyč?"

"Why, these people... You understand, on this steamer there is only a first class and a third class, and they only allow peasants, that is, the common herd, to go in the third. If you have got a jacket on and even at a distance look like a gentleman or a bourgeois, you have to go first class, if you please. You must fork out five hundred rubles if it kills you. 'Why do you have such a regulation?' I ask them. 'Do you mean to raise the prestige of the Russian intelligentsia thereby?' 'Not a bit of it. We don't let you simply because a decent person can't go third class; it is too horrible and disgusting there.' 'Yes, sir? Thank you for being so solicitous about decent people's welfare. But in any case, whether it's nasty there or nice, I haven't got five hundred rubles. I didn't loot the Treasury, I didn't exploit the natives, I didn't traffic in contraband, I flogged nobody to death, so judge for yourselves if I have the right to occupy a first class cabin and even to reckon myself among the Russian intelligentsia.' But logic means nothing to them. So I had to resort to fraud. I put on a peasant coat and high boots, I pulled a face so that I looked like a common drunk, and went to the agents: 'Give us a little ticket, your Excellency,' said I--"(357/259-260)

Pavel Ivanyč is the eiron here as he exposes the hypocrisy, indeed the moral turpitude, of those who distinguish "decent" people from the common herd. Gusev himself, who would save a Christian "but not a German or a Chink," is also a target of the irony.

One of the card-playing sailors interrupts Pavel Ivanyč at this point and asks, "You're not of the gentry are you?"

"I come of a clerical family. My father was a priest, and an honest one; he always told the high and mighty the truth to their faces and, as a result, he suffered a great deal."

Pavel Ivanyč is exhausted from talking and gasps for breath, but still continues:

"Yes, I always tell people the truth to their faces. I'm not afraid of anyone or anything. In this respect, there is a great difference between me and all of you men. You are dark people, blind, crushed; you see nothing and what you do see, you don't understand... You are told that the wind breaks loose from its chain, that you are beasts, savages, and you believe it; someone gives it to you in the neck--you kiss his hand; ... I am different, my mind is clear. I see it all plainly like a hawk or an eagle when it hovers over the earth, and I understand everything. I am protest personified. I see tyranny--I protest. I see a hypocrite--I protest, I see a triumphant swine--I protest. And I
cannot be put down, no Spanish Inquisition can silence me. No.
Cut out my tongue and I will protest with gestures. Wall me up
in a cellar—I will shout so that you will hear me half a mile
away, or will starve myself to death, so that they may have another
weight on their black consciences. Kill me and I will haunt them.
All my acquaintances say to me: 'You are a most insufferable (nevyno-
simejsij) person, Pavel Ivanyč.' I am proud of such a reputation.

... My friends wrote to me from Russia: 'Don't come back,' but here
I am going back to spite them... Yes... That's life as I understand
it. That's what one can call life.'

Gusev is not listening ... (357-358/260-261)

It is easy to smile at this weak consumptive, gasping for breath, crying
out, "I am protest personified." But the context confirms, rather than
ironically warps Pavel Ivanyč's role here. He says, for example, he
sees like a hawk, and Čexov tells us he has a long and sharp nose, which
grows sharper as he approaches death. For once, when irony seems
obvious (as it rarely is in Čexov's fiction), to look upon Pavel Ivanyč
with irony is entirely inappropriate, and it is important for the
reader to see this. Why should we look ironically at Pavel Ivanyč's
protest simply because death is near? If he believes in the power of
his protest even after death—"Kill me and I will haunt them"—then we
should believe too, or we dishonor ourselves. And at a quite similar
moment in "Ward Six," when we might be tempted to view Gromov ironically,
irony is again inappropriate for the same reason.

"I may express myself in a banal way—laugh if you like—but the
dawn of a new life is at hand, justice will triumph, and—our day
will come! I don't expect to see it, I'll be dead by then, but
other men's grandchildren will witness it. I congratulate them
with all my heart, and rejoice for them! Forward! May God
help you, my friends!"

Ivan Dmitryč, his eyes shining, got up, stretched his arms
toward the window and went on speaking in an emotional voice.
"From behind these bars I send you my blessing! Long live
justice! I rejoice!"13

At the end of the chapter in which Pavel Ivanyč cries out, "I am
protest personified," Čexov writes:
Time flies swiftly by. Imperceptibly the day passes. Imperceptibly darkness descends... (359/261)

He begins the story: "It is already dark, it will soon be night." The message is for the reader, quiet, but nonetheless direct; it is imperative that the reader heed, now, what Čexov is saying in this story. Time is short. Čexov writes for the same reason that he went to Saxalin: to bear witness to those who suffer, and thus to try to bring about change. Pavel Ivanyč and Gusev soon die—but the reader was present, saw and heard everything, and should have been importantly affected by what he has heard. The reader must understand more than Pavel Ivanyč and Gusev can each separately understand. Their mutual non-comprehension is ironic for us, but not their separate qualities which Čexov portrays directly, not ironically: the power of reason and the power of imagination.

In the fourth chapter hours pass, there are sounds and voices, and then the soldier with the bandaged arm says, "The Kingdom of Heaven be his and eternal peace."

"What?" asks Gusev. "Who?"
"He died, they have just carried him up."
"Oh, well," mutters Gusev, yawning. "The Kingdom of Heaven be his."

In the last chapter Gusev's condition becomes worse. "He sleeps for two days and on the third at noon two sailors come down and carry him out of the infirmary." The moment of death of Gusev and of Pavel Ivanyč is never mentioned—because it is not important. What we have learned from the two men is more important. Gusev is sewn up in oil cloth and two gridirons are put in for weight.

The discharged men and the crew cross themselves and look off at the waves. It is strange that a man should be sewn up in sailcloth and should soon be flying into the sea. Is it possible that
such a thing can happen to anyone? (363/267)

The obvious answer to Cexov's question, especially in the context of this story, will remind us that what counts is how we live before death claims us. "It is already dark, it will soon be night."

The story continues to follow Gusev's body into the water: he is carried by the current, runs into a school of fish, a shark rips the sailcloth, one of the irons drops out and frightens the fish, the body sinks rapidly to the bottom. In a letter to Suvorin written while returning from Saxalin, Cexov says:

On our way to Singapore two dead bodies were flung into the sea. When you look at a corpse sewed into canvas flying head over heels into the water and when you realize it is a couple of miles to the bottom, your sensation is one of horror, as if somehow, you yourself were about to die and be thrown into the ocean . . .

I recall Singapore only vaguely as I was sad somehow, close to tears, as I traveled past it. 14

But in the story Cexov ruthlessly follows the body down to the ocean floor--for a reason. He is overcoming the horror of it. What is he saying to us, then? Death is not as important or as frightening as we think it is--for there are more important things to think about while we are alive. Here is the conclusion to the same letter:

God's earth is good. It is only we on it who are bad. How little justice and humility we have, how poor our understanding of patriotism! . . . Instead of knowledge, there is insolence and boundless conceit, instead of labor, idleness and caddishness; there is no justice, the understanding of honor does not go beyond "the honor of the uniform," a uniform usually adorning our prisoners' dock. We must work, the hell with everything else. The important thing is that we must be just, and all the rest will be added unto us.

The story continues, after Gusev's body has reached the ocean bottom.

Meanwhile, up above, in that part of the sky where the sun is about to set, clouds are massing, one resembling a triumphal arch, another a lion, a third a pair of scissors. (364/268)
We read these images into the clouds—images which are magnificent or prosaic at our whim. We impose, by reason and imagination, sense and order onto the physical world: "God's earth is good, it is only we on it who are bad." Earlier in the story, as Gusev and the soldier stood staring at the ocean, Čexov wrote:

The sea has neither sense nor pity. If the steamer had been smaller, not made of thick iron plates, the waves would have crushed it without the slightest remorse, and would have devoured all the people in it without distinguishing between saints and sinners. The steamer's expression was equally senseless and cruel. The beaked monster presses forward, cutting millions of waves in its path; it fears neither darkness nor the wind, nor space, nor solitude—it's all child's play for it, and if the ocean had its population, this monster would crush it, too, without distinguishing between saints and sinners. (362/265)

The implication is that man does, or should have sense and pity, and should distinguish between saints and sinners. Čexov's description of the sea and the steamer is ironic, though, in that it makes them sound human—for humans do crush and devour each other, with neither sense nor pity, without the slightest remorse.

It is often unpleasant and painful to see what is. And Čexov's first reaction at seeing the corpses flung into the water, on his trip, was horror and sadness. But in "Gusev" he follows the corpses to the bottom and writes in qualified affirmation of man.

The heavens turn a soft lilac tint. Looking at this magnificent enchanting sky, the ocean frowns at first, but soon it, too, takes on tender, joyous, passionate colors for which it is hard to find a name in the language of man. (364/268; italics mine)

The affirmation—of reason and imagination—is directly present in this story, but irony too is present, qualifying the affirmation. Čexov was "a master of irony," John Gassner writes, "and irony was in his case a sensible defense against excessive expectation on the part of
one who believed in the possibility of progress."15

We might now consider the place of irony within Čexov's fiction as a whole, using our reading of "Gusev" as a helpful basis for illustration. For our discussion of irony throughout the preceding chapters has given us a new perspective on some traditional categories of Chekhovian criticism. Irony as the "warping of a statement by the context" (Cleanth Brooks' phrase16) has shown new ways in which "each part modifies and is modified by the whole." Critics have long been aware of Čexov's use of the telling, significant detail to achieve an exceptional brevity and economy of means. In "Gusev" an example of the non-ironic significant detail is Pavel Ivanyč's hawk-like appearance, confirming his belief that he sees plainly like a hawk hovering over the earth. But Anna (in "Anna on the Neck") has the self-image of a fairy tale heroine, suggested by numerous details already discussed, while the story as a whole renders the image ironic. For an important, though not exclusive function of the telling detail in Čexov's fiction is the creation of irony--and it is our attention to the entire aura of possible implication, in context, of each detail which is the first step in our becoming aware of irony's presence. We must not overlook, for example, Vasil'jev's considerable education against the context of his crippling sense of impotence and helplessness. Ivan Ivanyč, moreover, swims in the pond with the energy of a schoolboy (an easily overlooked detail) and walks all over the countryside on a hunting trip, but condemns happy and contented people, and uses old age as an excuse for not following his own call to action. Ragin smiles and rubs his hands with pleasure as he discusses suffering. Kovrin considers himself an
intellectual superman, but nightly conversations with the black monk make him too feeble and tired to work.

From a different point of view, irony's dispassionate façade involves another familiar concept of Chekhovian criticism, that is, Chekhov's concern with objectivity—the truthful depiction of reality. For the façade of Chekhov's fiction—which is really the sum of the implied author's choices; the manifest result of his act of observing, choosing, guessing, combining; that which we read in the simplest, most obvious sense—is always based on Chekhov's careful and close observation of life as it is.

I am telling you in all sincerity and in accordance with the dictates of my conscience that these people were born in my head and not out of ocean spray, or preconceived ideas, not out of "intellectuality," and not by sheer accident. They are the result of observation and the study of life.

Chekhov's concern for faithfulness to life is well illustrated in "Gusev" in the matter of Gusev's vision or the bull's head without eyes, which repeatedly follows his vision of his family; the symbolic suggestion of impending death is confirmed by Pavel Ivanyč's comment that the doctors loaded the invalids, like cattle, onto the ship in order to get rid of them. And we discover later in the story, when Gusev goes up on deck, that the discharged soldiers and sailors lie sleeping side by side, "so many it is difficult to pass," and the steer, with drooping heads, stand at the ship's rail. Here is the actual source of Gusev's disturbing mental image. Chekhov will not make a detail "symbolic" unless the actuality makes the detail, in itself, believable and probable.

But the accuracy of observation is never an end in itself, as
this example indeed makes clear. Čexov begins with the truthful
depiction of reality, but his ulterior purpose in writing is more than
this, more than realistic verisimilitude. He not only shows us life,
but also tells us something important about life, shares what he has
learned. The moment of death, for example, of Pavel IVanych and Gusev
is never mentioned; we discover their deaths only when they are
carried out of the infirmary. And we feel Čexov writes here on the
basis of his experience as a doctor: death is not a supreme, dramatic
moment (as it often is in literature), but an imperceptible, insignifi-
cant event.

Now, for example, a simple person looks at the moon and is moved as
before something terribly mysterious and unattainable. But an
astronomer looks at it with entirely different eyes... with him
there cannot be any fine illusions! With me, a physician, there
are, also, few illusions. Of course, I'm sorry for this--and it
somewhat dessicates life. 17

But in the context of the story Čexov is not only telling us death is
an imperceptible moment, but that more important than how we die is
how we live.

He spoke the following words in a conversation with Tixonov,
in 1902:

Most of all, my friend, one must not lie. In this respect art is
especially precious, for it is impossible to lie in it. One may
lie in love, and in politics, and in medicine, one may deceive
people and the good Lord himself--there have been such cases--but
it is impossible to deceive in art. I've often been blamed, even
by Tolstoj, for writing about trifles, for not having any positive
heroes--revolutionists, Alexanders of Macedon--or none, even like
those of Leskov, honest district police officers. But where am I
to get them? I would be happy to have them! Our life is provincial,
the cities are unpaved, the villages poor, the masses abused. In
our youth we all chirp rapturously like sparrows on a dung heap,
but when we are forty, we are already old and begin to think of
death. Fine heroes we are! You say that you have wept over my
plays. Yes, and not only you alone. But I did not write them for
this purpose, it is Alekseev [Stanislavskij] who has made such cry-
babies of them. I desired something else. I only wished to tell people honestly: "Look at yourselves, see how badly and boringly you live!" The principal thing is that people should understand this, and when they do, they will surely create for themselves another and a better life. I will not see it, but I know it will be entirely different, not like what we have now. And as long as it does not exist, I'll continue to tell people: "See how badly and boringly you live!" Is it that which they weep over? 18

And it is here that Čexov's use of irony enters into the already familiar concept of accuracy and truthfulness in art. "My purpose is to kill two hares at once: to depict life truthfully and at the same time to show just how far that life deviates from a norm."19 And Chekhovian irony, as we have seen, has repeatedly exposed how badly and boringly people live. But irony refers not simply to the author's communication of an implicit message through the neutral façade--for indeed all conscious artistry has as its aim, in Booth's phrase, an "implicit evaluation behind the explicit presentation."20 Rather, irony refers specifically to the complex quality of the evaluation we might make of that façade, that is, of life itself as Čexov chooses to present it. The technique of irony, with its "co-presence of alternatives,"21 is especially appropriate to give us a strong sense of the moral complexity of the issues presented. And moral complexity is a feature of Čexov's fiction which has long been the subject of critical discussion; Čexov has been labeled pessimistic and optimistic, and accused of taking no moral stance at all.

Our examination of irony in Čexov's fiction, however, has shown that while the problem of moral evaluation is always complex, the necessity of arriving at some kind of moral judgment remains. For the pressure of the context, once we become fully aware of that pressure, will quietly guide our judgment. Our reading here of Čexov's stories has
been essentially a careful process of arriving at a judgment—of Ivan
Ivanyč, Burkin and Alexin, of Ragin, of Nikolaj Stepanyč and all the
rest. Čexov's use of irony does not preclude our sympathetic under­
standing, but neither does it preclude distinct condemnation as well.
If Čexov has seemed to some readers to be genuinely neutral and dis­
passionate in his attitude toward human affairs, then this discussion
of irony teaches that the neutrality is only irony's dissimulation.
For irony conveys the necessity to "judge by the norms of a greater
freedom," in Frye's words—and at the same time conveys the very
real difficulty of judging. But the difficulty notwithstanding, Čexov's
readers, as jury, and upon whom Čexov "counts fully to add the subjective
elements that are lacking," must not renounce their responsibility to
judge, and of course to judge impartially. To judge impartially is not
the same as to remain passively neutral, taking no stand at all.

Our discussion of irony has also touched on the important and
pervasive theme of reciprocal misunderstanding between people. The
trilogy with its explicit theme of a man's shell provides an excellent
metaphor for such misunderstanding. And we have seen the source of
this misunderstanding in men's indifference to each other's suffering
(suffering which for Ivan Ivanyč seems, at least, to go on "behind the
scenes"); in man's passivity (Burkin); in man's self-absorption (Belikov).
And in this category of Chekhovian criticism at least, irony is
invariably present, for the reciprocal misunderstanding—each man alone
in his shell—is bondage as it were by definition. And in the ironic
mode we look down upon a scene of bondage, that is, we see what the
characters either cannot see at all, or cannot escape or change.
This brings us to a crucial problem of Čexov's fiction present only tacitly in our discussion so far: to what extent Čexov portrays man's bondage as inevitable, a corollary of the human condition, or to what extent he implies that man can and should change himself and his situation. Irony clearly applies more to the latter case than to the former, which verges on genuine tragedy.

Northrop Frye writes:

As a phase of irony in its own right, the fourth phase [of the tragic mythos] looks at tragedy from below, from the moral and realistic perspective of the state of experience. It stresses the humanity of its heroes, minimizes the sense of ritual inevitability in tragedy, supplies social and psychological explanations for catastrophe, and makes as much as possible of human misery seem, in Thoreau's phrase, "superfluous and evitable." 23

Here I cannot begin to resolve the difficult problem of distinguishing the boundary between tragedy and irony in Čexov's fiction, but it is a problem toward which our discussion of irony has inexorably drawn us. This is indeed a new direction which Chekhovian criticism might pursue with profit. Robert Louis Jackson has touched upon the question in his survey of "Perspectives on Chekhov":

Čexov's view of tragedy extends far beyond the notion of man as the victim of blind chance. The notion of determinism, of course, is inherent in all forms of scientific work; and certainly Chekhov own involvement in a scientific discipline as well as the influence of such contemporaries as Darwin, Claude Bernard, and Zola deepened his sense of the limits of the human will in interaction with the given--the multiple and complex elements of reality. . . . Yet this is only half of the truth. Chekhov also recognizes . . . man's involvement in his own fate, his "guilt," his responsibility for his condition, and therefore, his responsibility for his condition, and therefore, his responsibility before the present which he is preparing for the future. This is the essential other half of the truth. "I believe both in the innate purposefulness and in the necessity of all that is going on around us," the narrator declares in "An Anonymous Story" in response to Orlov, to his attempt to seek some "objective," even "biological" rationale for the feebleness of his generation; "but what do I care for this necessity.... One wants to live indepen-
dently of future generations.... Life is given but once and one would like to live it boldly, intelligently, beautifully. One would like to play a prominent, independent, generous role, one would like to make history so that those same generations will not have the right to say of each of us: they were an insignificant lot, or even something worse than that." Man's tragedy, for Chekhov, lies primarily not in any absolute helplessness before his fate, but in the fact that he is continually affirming fate's autonomy through abdication of his own personality.²⁴

But at this point, if we avow man's responsibility for his fate—and our reading has led us in this direction—man's bondage is not tragic but ironic.
NOTES

1Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 304.


5Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, p. 194.

6Simmons, Chekhov: A Biography, p. 204.

7Simmons, pp. 207-212.

8SS, XI, 398-399; Koteliansky and Tomlinson, pp. 177-178. Letter to Suvorin, March 9, 1890.

9Frye, p. 34.

10SS, VI, 351; Yarmolinsky, p. 251. Further quotations from this story will refer to these editions respectively.


13SS, VII, 149; Ward Six and other stories, p. 30.


17Simmons, p. 480.

18Simmons, p. 581.

161

20Booth, p. 74.


22Frye, p. 39.

23Frye, p. 237.

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