Gooseberries Study Guide

Gooseberries by Anton Chekhov

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Anton Chekhov is recognized as one of the great short-story writers of all time. His experimentation with the form led to innovations in theme and structure that have influenced generations of writers. The theme of isolation, a common one among Chekhov's works, is found in "Gooseberries," as is the use of an unusual structure.

In 1898 Chekhov published three stories that are generally considered a trilogy because of their similarities of form. The three stories are "The Man in a Shell," "About Love," and "Gooseberries." Each story concerns a person who seeks to avoid contact with the world. Each story includes the same characters, and in each story one of them is telling a story about someone else. The complexity of this trilogy is typical of Chekhov's writing during the last years of his life.

Author Biography

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born on January 16, 1860, in Taganrog, Russia, the third of six children. Chekhov's father, a grocer, was intense, religious, and demanding of his family. Chekhov's paternal grandfather was a serf who managed to buy his freedom, enabling his descendants to lead better lives.

Chekhov was a good student whose interests included writing, journalism, and drama. His mother's storytelling ability is often credited as the source of Chekhov's talent. When his father's grocery store failed in 1876, the family moved to Moscow, but Chekhov stayed behind alone to finish school. Upon graduating, he received a scholarship to attend medical school at the University of Moscow. While in medical school, he supported his impoverished family by writing for humor magazines. In 1884, he began practicing medicine and also saw the publication of the first collection of his writing.

In 1901, Chekhov married Olga Knipper, a well-known actress in Moscow. Chekhov's health had been steadily declining since his twenties, when he suffered the first symptoms of tuberculosis. His illness forced him to leave Russia for extended periods of time, and his wife was often unable to accompany him due to her stage success. On July 2, 1904, Chekhov died at a spa in Badenweiler, Germany, with Olga by his side. He is buried in Moscow. Literary historians note that his death marked the end of Russia's Golden Age of literature, an age that included the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and Ivan Turgenev.

Chekhov's career is often divided into three periods. The first, 1880-1887, spans his years of humor writing. The second, 1888-1893, found Chekhov writing at a more leisurely pace as he began writing more experimental and "literary" works. This period shows Chekhov's early adherence to Tolstoy's philosophy of nonresistance to evil. Chekhov abandoned this philosophy after an 1889 trip to a prison camp, when he decided that he could not justify passivity in the face of injustice and cruelty. In fact, Chekhov's second period is characterized by his growing concern over social and psychological ills. The third period, 1894—1904, reflects his evolution as a complex and innovative writer. "Gooseberries" was published during this time. This period also includes the bulk of Chekhov's writing as a dramatist. Today, he is still regarded as a master of both short fiction and drama, and numerous modern writers are influenced by his thematic and technical contributions to literature.

Plot Summary

Shelter from the Storm

The story "Gooseberries" begins on a dreary, overcast day as Ivan Ivanich and Bourkin are walking through the countryside. When it starts to rain, Bourkin suggests they go to a nearby friend's house where they can get shelter from the weather. Upon arriving at the mill owned by Aliokhin, they are greeted warmly and invited into the house.

Nikolai's Dream

After the three men enjoy baths, warm clothes, and refreshments, Ivan begins to tell a story about his younger brother, Nicholai. He tells that he and his brother spent their youth in the country after their father died, leaving them only a small estate. As an adult, his brother longed to return to the countryside that he loved. Ivan explains that his brother worked for a government treasury office but became increasingly preoccupied with his dream of buying a modest farm beside a lake or river, where he could live peacefully for the rest of his life. Central to his vision of this farm was the presence of gooseberry bushes, from which he could pick and enjoy his own fruit. For years, he saved and planned, scouring real estate listings to fuel his dream.

Money Hungry

As Nicholai became more determined to realize his dream, he became "terribly stingy," according to Ivan. When Ivan would give him money for a short vacation, Nicholai would put the money in savings instead. When he was about forty years old, he married an "elderly, ugly widow, not out of any feeling for her, but because she had money." He kept all of her money and gave her inadequate food in order to save more. Ivan blames Nicholai for her death, but adds that it never occurred to Nicholai that he had done anything wrong in keeping her underfed. Upon his wife's death, Nicholai purchased three hundred acres with a small farmhouse. Because there were no gooseberry bushes, he bought twenty of them and had them planted on his land.

Growing Fat

Ivan says that as his brother settled into country life, he became fat and lazy. He sometimes indulged the local peasants by giving them vodka. Feeling like a man of importance, he expected the locals to call him "Your Lordship."

Bitter Fruit

One night, Nicholai's cook served them a plate of gooseberries from Nicholai's own bushes. Although Ivan found them hard and sour, Nicholai declared them utterly delicious. Ivan explains that he believes that his brother has become delusional and is living in a state of denial and idleness. After this experience with his brother, Ivan began to see the world differently. He comments, "In my idea of human life there is always some alloy of sadness, but now at the sight of a happy man [Nicholai] I was filled with something like despair." Now he is disgusted by people who seem to be happy yet are living meaningless, empty lives based on their obliviousness to the rest of the world.

Grave Regrets

Ivan adds that he realized that he once lived in a state of contentment, too, but now he is filled with thoughts of the underprivileged of the world. This makes him impatient for change, and he is disturbed because he wants freedom and justice for everyone. At the same time, he feels that he has wasted his best years. He explains, "I am an old man now and am no good for the struggle. I commenced late. I can only grieve within my soul, and fret and sulk." He then approaches Aliokhin and encourages him to do what he can while he is still young and strong.

Turning In

Although they had been glad that Ivan was going to tell a story, Aliokhin and Bourkin are unsatisfied when Ivan concludes. They are, however, content because they are wearing warm cloths, sitting in a comfortable room, and being served by a pretty chambermaid. Aliokhin is tired and wants to sleep, but does not want to miss socializing with his guests. He gives no thought to Ivan's story or his plea. Soon, the three men retire to their rooms for the night.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

It is an overcast day when Ivan Ivanovitch, a veterinary surgeon, and Burkin, a high school English teacher, take their dogs for a walk in the country, a landscape that is familiar and beautiful. They can see the windmills of Mironositskoe when the rain begins to fall. Burkin suggests they take shelter at a friend's house.

Alehin lives in nearby Sofino, a wet, muddy and desolate place where the sound of the watermill drowns out the sound of the rain, and the dam shakes as if it will break. Ivanovitch and Burkin find their friend, a tall, stout man of forty with long hair, in his barn winnowing. He is filthy and his clothes are in disrepair, but he greets them warmly and takes them into his home. A beautiful young servant, Pelagea, supplies them with towels and soap. In the bathhouse, Alehin is apologetic as he dirties the water in his efforts to get clean.

Ivanovitch runs out into the rain and plunges into the millpond, cavorting like a dolphin. He enjoys himself so much that he forgets the time, and Burkin and Alehin are completely dressed before he even gets out of the water.

Pelageo serves them tea in the upstairs drawing room where Ivanovitch begins to tell his friends a story about his younger brother Nikolay. Their father, Tchimsha-Himalaisky, an officer who rose to the rank of nobility, afforded his children a carefree childhood in the country. Yet, after his boys grew up, each chose a very different life. Ivanovitch decided on an extensive education and a medical career, while Nikolay took a government job in the city.

Ivanovitch goes on to say that Nikolay longed to return to the country. To that end, he scrimped, saved and planned for a farm from the house's architectural details to the gooseberry plants in the yard. Ivanovitch claims his brother went so far as to marry an elderly woman just for her wealth, and that she became so distressed by his frugality that she died and left it to him. Nikolay never dreamt he caused her death, Ivanovitch tells them, because "money, like vodka, makes a man queer." He cites two other examples of how crazy money can make people: there is a man who eats his lottery tickets to keep anyone else from benefiting and another who loses his leg under a train but is only worried only about the money in his boot.

Nikolay realized his dream of a country estate similar to his boyhood home when he purchased a 330-acre estate. There, he planted twenty gooseberry bushes, which would symbolically and literally bear the fruits of his labor. Ivanovitch had visited the estate, named for their father, a year ago. With little effort to hide his contempt for Nikolay, Ivanovitch says that his brother, and even his brother's cook and dog, had taken on the physical characteristics of a pig. Nikolay was no longer his timid baby brother, but someone who saw himself as a gentleman and was offended when

peasants did not address him as "your honor." He was concerned about his salvation, but performed sadly misguided works of charity such as giving peasants gallons of vodka on his birthday. He was full of insolent conceit, Ivanovitch asserts. Once afraid to voice an opinion, he now weighed forth on any issue and considered his opinions to be the right ones. The dinner they shared the night of his visit ended with Nikolay offering him some homegrown gooseberries. While Nikolay found them so delicious he could not stop eating them, Ivanovitch contends they were sour and unripe.

It was then that Ivanovitch says he reconsidered. He said he suddenly saw a man who had what he wanted and was happy, truly happy. He began to reflect on his own happiness always tinged with an element of sadness, the knowledge that eventually trouble comes for everyone – disease, poverty, losses. He tells his friends that he finds the happy hoards suffocating because they do not see or do anything about the world's suffering and are, in fact, happy because they do not bear witness to it.

Since his visit with his brother, Ivanovitch says he cannot bear to be in town where he might see a happy family gathered around a table to share a meal. At night when he tries to sleep, he has a rush of ideas that keeps him awake. He wishes he were young again, and then he turns his attention to the younger Alehin and advises him to be confident and do good; that it is more important than personal happiness.

Burkin and Alehin are left confused and dissatisfied by the story. They felt inclined to talk about elegant men and women like those in the portraits who had once had tea in this same room. Alehin concludes that Ivanovitch's story had no direct bearing on his life and goes to bed.

Burkin and Ivanovitch are shown to a room with beds freshly made by Pelagea. Ivanovitch says his prayers and goes to sleep, leaving his pipe on the table, smelling of stale tobacco. Burkin is restless in the dark, left wondering where the oppressive smell comes from. Outside, the rain falls all night.

Analysis

"Gooseberries" is considered one of a trilogy of short stories Anton Chekhov published in 1898. The story shares characters and a common form with "The Man in a Shell" and "About Love." In each story, one of the characters tells a story about another character that has chosen isolation over community.

The characters and theme also seem to have some autobiographical qualities. Chekhov, like Ivanovich, chose a learned profession. He graduated from medical school in 1884 and he practiced until 1892, when he bought an estate in the country village of Melikhove and became a full-time writer.

In "Gooseberries," his protagonist is Ivanovich who tells his brother's story. Nikolay has found happiness alone in the country home he longed for and finally acquired. However, Ivanovich dissects his happiness, questioning the price Nikolay paid for his happiness, how he lived like a beggar for so long, how others suffered for his dream. He accuses

his brother of killing his wife and never realizing he had caused her pain. He condemns his brother's desire to "retreat from town" as monasticism without the good works and his masquerade as a country gentleman as egoism. He belittles his brother's gifts to others as misguided. He protests Nikolay's existence so vehemently, that even before he confesses it, a reader will see through his narrative to his jealousy.

Ivanovitch's story climaxes with a sudden change of heart, his observation that the gooseberries he finds sour and unripe, his brother finds delicious. The gooseberries are a symbol to Nikolay, the veritable fruits of his labor. Therefore, of course, they are sweeter to him than to his brother. They were the image he held in his mind for so long of the happiness and fulfillment he would find upon his return to the country.

Ivanovich concludes that perhaps the greatest happiness comes from achieving one's dreams, and his brother has done just that. Instead of being happy for Nikolay, Ivanovitch confesses that it made him feel desperate for himself and for others. "You look at life: the insolence and idleness of the strong, the ignorance and brutishness of the weak, incredible poverty all about us, overcrowding, degeneration, drunkenness, hypocrisy, lying . . . Yet people continue in their ordinary, self-satisfied lives, ignoring those who suffer."

Part of his despair comes from seeing in himself a greater shortcoming than the one he found in his brother. While he belittled Nikolay's gift of liquor to the poor as a misguided attempt to ease the burden of the less fortunate, Ivanovich realizes that he has done nothing to ease the burden of the less fortunate – that he is one of the happy hoards he so detests. He acknowledges that Nikolay increased his own happiness by sharing his good fortune.

He cautions the younger Alehin not to suffer a similar fate, not to be content with his lot as Ivanovitch has been, but to do good works, which are a source of true happiness.

Alehin does not see the story as relevant to his life. He dismisses it without a second thought and goes off to bed. Ivanovitch asks God's forgiveness before he is able to drift off to sleep. Only Burkin is restless, but even he fails to attribute his uneasiness to Ivanovitch's story and possible message for him. Instead, he wonders where an oppressive smell is coming from.

Characters

Aliokhin

Aliokhin is a successful farmer who runs a mill. He owns a large, plain house where he employs at least one servant. Aliokhin is described as tall, stout, long-haired, and around forty years old. When his friends Ivan and Bourkin arrive unannounced, he welcomes them gladly and stops working for the day to properly host his guests.

Bourkin

Bourkin is a friend of Ivan's who accompanies him when they visit Aliokhin. Bourkin is a teacher who enjoys listening to Ivan tell stories, and he keeps Ivan from straying too far from the storyline. Bourkin is an even-tempered and mild-mannered man.

Ivan Ivanich

Ivan Ivanich is the central character in "Gooseberries." He is a veterinary surgeon who tells his friends Bourkin and Aliokhin a story about his younger brother, Nicholai.

Ivan is a cynical man who sees his brother as delusional, arrogant, and misguided. Ivan is unable to judge his brother's decisions based on his brother's happiness because he is too narrow-minded to understand a different way of life. Ivan's inability to understand Nicholai leads Ivan to give Nicholai money in an effort to try to change his lifestyle; he seems to want to control what does not make sense to him. At the same time, he has an upright sense of justice and is saddened by the way Nicholai treats the elderly widow he marries for her money.

Because of his experience with his brother, Ivan has become even more disenchanted with the world than he was previously. He is impatient for change that will bring advantages to the underprivileged and impoverished. He is upset that he has realized this too late, because he now feels that he is too old to join a worthwhile fight for good in the world.

Nicholai Ivanich

The subject of Ivan's story, Nicholai is Ivan's brother, two years his junior. Although he does not personally appear in "Gooseberries," his story is the focus of the work.

As told in Ivan's story, Nicholai was employed with the government treasury but all the while dreamed of returning to the countryside where he spent his childhood. For years, he saved money and planned to buy a small farm with a creek and a gooseberry bush. According to Ivan, Nicholai's preoccupation with his dream became a "disorder." His

determination to realize his dream made him miserly, and he married an elderly widow simply because she had money. He prioritized his dream over her well-being and kept all of her money, allowing her no luxuries and little food. Once he was able to buy a farm, he purchased twenty gooseberry bushes to plant on his land so that his reality would live up to his dream.

According to Ivan, Nicholai became fat and lazy after settling in to country life. He also became arrogant, demanding that the local peasants call him "Your Lordship." Ivan also says that Nicholai was delusional because he thought the hard, sour gooseberries were delicious.

Pelagueya

Pelagueya is Aliokhin' s chambermaid. She is a dainty, reserved, and strikingly pretty young woman who performs her duties with grace and courtesy.

Themes

The story of Nicholai is one of single-minded determination. In Nicholai's case, he acquires the subject of his obsession, a small farm that allows him to lead a simple life in the country. Ivan comments, "Once a man gets a fixed idea, there's nothing to be done." Nicholai equates the lifestyle he longs for with the farm setting, and an important part of that setting is gooseberry bushes. He finds the gooseberry bushes a source of delicious fruit that is his own, yet he can enjoy it without exerting much effort to nurture the bushes. When he buys his farm, it does not have all the features he had always dreamed it would have, but the gooseberry bushes are so important that he buys twenty of them and plants them on his land. His obsession runs so deep that to achieve it he married an elderly widow who had money and then kept her underfed (to save money) until she died.

Having achieved his dream, Nicholai finds other benefits of his lifestyle that he did not anticipate, and these become new objects of his preoccupation. He finds that he is more educated and more wealthy than the local peasants, and he relishes his new feelings of superiority. He treats the locals to a feast on his birthday and occasionally gives them vodka. Because of his new "standing," he expects to be called "Your Lordship," and he spouts condescending opinions about the peasants. Ivan observes, "Nicholai Ivanich, who, when he was in the Exchequer [his former place of employment], was terrified to have an opinion of his own, now imagined that what he said was law."

Although Nicholai came to see himself as a success, according to Ivan's story, Ivan sees him as a complete failure. To Nicholai, his obsession with his dream brought it to fruition beyond his expectations, but to Ivan, the realization of the dream has made his brother foolish and misguided.

Isolation

Every scene in "Gooseberries" is set in isolation, including the outer story (with Ivan, Bourkin, and Aliokhin) and the inner story (with Nicholai and Ivan). There are never more than four people in any scene, and the locations are almost all isolated from the rest of the world. For example, the story begins with Ivan and Bourkin walking through fields, and then they visit Aliokhin, who lives alone. In the scenes that take place in the city, the characters (Nicholai and Ivan) feel isolated from their surroundings. They embody the idea of being alone in a crowd. This consistent sense of isolation throughout the story results in the reader feeling a subtle intimacy with the characters that would be lost if any of the story involved interaction with many people. While Ivan tells his story, for example, the reader cannot help but feel present in the cozy room with the characters.

By moving to the country and living alone (except for the cook) on a three-hundred-acre farm, Nicholai achieves the isolation he has wanted since childhood. He is unhappy working in the city, where his only pleasure is mentally escaping into his dream. Ivan judges his brother harshly for his decision to isolate himself: "To leave town, and the

struggle and the swim of life—it is egoism, laziness; it is a kind of monasticism, but monasticism without action." Once Nicholai moves out to the country, however, he is peaceful and content. For Nicholai, physical isolation makes him happy.

Aliokhin also lives in the country alone and is satisfied with his way of life. The difference between Nicholai and Aliokhin is that Nicholai has modest means, while Aliokhin is described by Ivan as wealthy. Chekhov shows the reader that money is not the source of peace or solitude, but rather that a certain state of mind is required.

After visiting his brother, Ivan says that he is no longer happy in the city because he feels oppressed by the peace and quiet he finds there. He seems to view city life not as a bustling community, but as a random collection of segmented lives. He cannot look in windows at happy people because his point of view has changed. For Ivan, the isolation he feels is psychological, and it makes him deeply unhappy.

Style

Story within a Story

Aliokhin's house is two-storied, and so is "Gooseberries." Chekhov introduces the outer story as Ivan and Bourkin seek shelter from the rain in Aliokhin's house. Ivan tells a story about his brother, which becomes the inner story. At the end, Chekhov returns to the outer story as Ivan finishes his story and addresses his audience, and the men retire for the night. The outer story frames the inner story, yet the two are related by the character of Ivan and the themes presented. While some authors utilize a framing technique merely to add interest to the inner story, Chekhov relates both in a meaningful and interesting way. The themes of obsession and contentment presented in the inner story come to reflect on the characters of the outer story.

Chekhov is known for his innovative storytelling techniques, and the use of a story within a story is a good example. "Gooseberries" is the second in a trilogy of short stories, all of which use this same framing device. This framing technique has been used effectively in other genres by other writers, such as William Shakespeare in the play *Hamlet* and Margaret Landon in the novel *Anna and the King of Siam.*

Mood

Chekhov sets the tone for "Gooseberries" in the first sentence and carries the mood throughout the story. The first sentence reads,

From early morning the sky had been overcast with clouds; the day was still, cool, and wearisome, as usual on gray, dull days when the clouds hung low over the fields and it looks like rain, which never comes.

As Ivan and Bourkin approach Aliokhin's farm, the weather is described as "unpleasant" and the river is imagined to be "cold and sullen." Although the travelers temporarily muse on how beautiful the land is, the overall feeling is melancholy, and the men's spirits are not lifted. The tone is bleak and dismal, a mood reflected not only in the landscape but also in the animals. When the rain starts, the dogs stand "mournfully" with their tails tucked. The wet horses also hang their heads.

Historical Context

Decline of Russia's Feudal Order

The end of the nineteenth century saw the end of the old feudal order in Russia. Political bodies and organizations were becoming obsolete in the face of new developments, and the economy (traditionally divided neatly along agrarian and aristocratic lines) was giving rise to capitalists and a new urban middle class. Unfortunately, the lower class suffered increased poverty, and although the middle class was growing, it was experiencing apathy and frustration. In fact, uncertainty characterized Russian society as a whole. Russian authors such as Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev were writing about weakened social institutions and structures in the 1860s and 1870s, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky was writing about the intellectual consequences of these changes. In the midst of the turmoil and upheaval, Chekhov emerged as a writer who depicted life without traditional heroes and villains.

Realism in Literature

Chekhov is considered the last of the great writers of Russia's Golden Age of literature. During this period, many Russian writers, including Chekhov, wrote realistic works. Realism in literature, which became especially prominent around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, refers to an author's accurate rendering of the way people, things, and events exist and act in life. Such writing is often concerned with realistic consequences of decisions made by characters. Chekhov, like most realistic writers of the time, was interested in democracy and frequently depicted life among common people.

"Gooseberries" is a good example of the realistic tendency away from neatly plotted stories with distinct beginnings, middles, and endings. Realists observe that life does not happen this way, and as a result their works are often asymmetrical or unevenly structured. Realists do not cater to readers' needs for satisfying conclusions with all loose ends resolved. Instead, they prefer to represent an episode (or episodes) as it might unfold in real life, leaving questions unanswered and a degree of uncertainty about where the characters will go after the story ends.

Critical Overview

Critical response to "Gooseberries" has been overwhelmingly positive. The story is praised for its complexity in content and form and for Chekhov's controlled presentation of his characters and themes. Relating the story to Chekhov's fiction in general, Milton A. Mays of *Southern Humanities Review* notes that it is "one of Chekhov's finest stories, and one which is central to an important thematic pattern in the author's work as a whole." Sean O'Faolain *of Short Story* remarks that "Gooseberries" is

one of the loveliest of stories. So much irony; so much humor; so kind and understanding; and wrapped up in the most delicate poetic mood. It is probably one of the most perfect stories in the whole of the world's literature.

As one of Chekhov's mature works, "Gooseberries" demonstrates his ability to address complex subject matters in subtle, realistic ways. Simon Baker in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction* praises Chekhov for this: Baker writes, "The lack of any overt didactic purpose, other than the fallible and ignored assertions of Ivan Ivanich, makes 'Gooseberries' all the more remarkable for its effect on the reader." Baker adds, "If a great story is not what it says, but what it whispers, 'Gooseberries' stands alongside the finest of Chekhov's achievements."

The character of Ivan has drawn comments because of the range of readers' responses to him. Mays finds that Ivan's underlying inconsistencies undermine the character's impassioned speech against oblivious contentment. In *The Look of Distance: Reflections on Suffering and Sympathy in Modern Literature—Auden to Agee, Whitman to Woolf,* Walter J. Slatoff observes that Ivan is a complex character who is at times amusing, absurd, lively, harsh, cynical, and paradoxical. He is also a gifted storyteller, despite his audience's lack of interest in the story about his brother. In *Twayne's World Authors Series Online,* Irina Kirk writes, "Ivan's description of Nicholai's life is one of Chekhov's most powerful portraits of the blind and sometimes destructive powers of banal romanticism." Many critics, such as Carl R. Proffer in *From Karamzin to Bunin: An Anthology of Russian Short Stories,* note that Ivan can be safely assumed to be Chekhov's own mouthpiece in the story, based on ideas and feelings expressed in his correspondence and other writings. In addition, Proffer notes, Ivan and Chekhov are both members of the medical community. In this light, then, it is not surprising that Ivan would be able to so eloquently express his views on Nicholai and his decisions.

Scholars continue to be drawn to Chekhov's innovative structural techniques, and the framing device used in "Gooseberries" has received its share of critical comment. Baker notes, "The subtleties of this fine story are barely explicable in so short a space [as his essay]: the 'story within a story' technique giving Chekhov a control that is barely visible." In *Studies in Short Fiction,* Thomas H. Gullason writes,

This story has layer and layer of meanings and plenty of contradiction in these meanings.... This story seems as artless, as unplanned, as unmechanical as any story can be; it seems to be going nowhere, but it is going everywhere. There is no beginning,

middle, and end; it is just an episode that dangles. Here Chekhov demonstrates how flexible the form of the short story can be.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey demonstrates how Anton Chekhov uses structural elements to portray the theme of perception.

Anton Chekhov is regarded as a master of the short story for his innovative structural techniques and his treatment of important themes. In "Gooseberries," Chekhov demonstrates both by using a specific structure to help convey a theme. "Gooseberries" contains a story within a story; the main character relates a tale about his brother to two of his friends. Some authors employ this technique to make the inner story more interesting, to create distance between the reader and the inner story, or to allow the story to be told by a certain kind of narrator. In "Gooseberries," however, Chekhov takes the reader into the framing story, then into the inner story. When he returns the reader to the framing story, the reader better understands the narrator of the inner story. As a result of this insight, the reader is able to grasp Chekhov's theme of perception more clearly, because the character of Ivan has been presented in two different ways.

Ivan tells the story of his younger brother, Nicholai. A government employee, Nicholai longed to buy a farm and move to the country. After years of planning, saving, and taking advantage of others, he has realized his dream. Having settled into farm life, he has become fat, lazy, and arrogant, but is happy above all. He is living exactly the life he dreamed of living. Ivan is judgmental of his brother and characterizes him as wasteful, self-centered, and delusional. He disapproves of both the means and the end of his brother's life in the country. Although Nicholai is certainly flawed and grossly mistreats a wealthy widow, he is not completely bad. Ivan perceives his brother from his own narrow point of view, however, and as a result he sees everything about his brother as disgraceful.

Ivan's harshest criticism of his brother, however, has to do with his willingness to be deluded. Ivan sees Nicholai's happiness as warped, because he is happy without regard for the rest of the world. He chooses a life of inactivity, giving no thought to doing any good in the world. While Ivan is visiting Nicholai, they are served a plate of gooseberries, plucked from Nicholai's own bushes. The gooseberry bushes were a central feature of Nicholai's dream, and so the moment when he will taste the berries is much anticipated. To Nicholai, the romantic dreamer, the berries are delicious, but to Ivan, the hardened realist, they are tough and sour. This is a clear example of the contrasting perspectives of the two men. Ivan thinks his brother is incredibly foolish to surrender so fully to his dream that he begins to substitute fantasy for reality.

While Nicholai is an obsessive dreamer, Ivan is a harsh cynic, and while Nicholai substitutes fantasy for reality, Ivan substitutes reality for fantasy. Ivan sees things in absolute terms and is unable to see beyond his brother's flaws to his virtues. He is never happy for his brother, who has finally achieved his one and only dream. Ivan sees Nicholai living contentedly, but Ivan is only disgusted by this. In fact, his experience with

Nicholai leads him to deeper unhappiness as he begins to perceive the rest of the world as living in blind contentment. To Ivan, there are greater callings in life, such as fighting for the underprivileged and seeking freedom for all. His resentment then festers because he feels he has learned this lesson too late in life and is now too old to take up a cause. His only hope is to inspire other men, like Aliokhin, but he fails to do so (although he does not realize he has failed). He hopes, as Chekhov does, that his words alone will change others, yet he can never really know whether he has reached anyone or not.

The two brothers' perceptions are opposite, and the men are unable to understand each other as a result. The difference is that Ivan forms very strong opinions about his brother, while Nicholai does not seem at all interested in sizing up Ivan. These fundamental differences between the brothers relate to another theme presented in this story, which is that of isolation. When Ivan first sees his brother, he seems to expect them to connect on a meaningful level because he projects his own feelings onto his brother. Ivan says, "We embraced and shed a tear of joy and also of sadness to think that we had once been so young, but were now both going gray and nearing death." It soon becomes apparent to the reader that while this may have been what Ivan was thinking, it is unlikely that Nicholai (who has never been happier in his life) was thinking the same thing. This comment shows the reader that Ivan is completely unable to understand and accept his brother.

The reader is best equipped to understand Ivan after he concludes the story about his brother and begins entreating Bourkin and Aliokhin to learn from Nicholai's example. Ivan especially focuses on Aliokhin because he is "young, strong, [and] wealthy." As he does so, the reader sees that, deep down, Ivan feels passionate but powerless. He hopes that he can get someone else to take up his cause, and this quest has become an obsession for him just as the farm was an obsession for Nicholai. Ivan is hypocritical, but only the reader can see that. Similarly, when Chekhov reveals that neither Bourkin nor Aliokhin is the least bit moved by Ivan's story, the reader understands more about the characters' perceptions than the characters do. Aliokhin is more like Nicholai than he is like Ivan, but Ivan does not realize it because he is so narrowly focused on what he believes is important. Aliokhin, like Nicholai, lives a life of contentment in which he concerns himself with his immediate environment. He is no more likely to take on Ivan's point of view than Nicholai is. In fact, after Ivan's story ends, Aliokhin's mind is wandering. Chekhov writes,

He did not trouble to think whether what Ivan Ivanich had been saying was clever or right; his guests were talking of neither goats, nor hay, nor tar, but of something which had no bearing on his life, and he liked it and wanted them to go on.

That Chekhov is able to lead the reader smoothly through two layers of storytelling to convey a theme is evidence of his genius as a writer. The technique is quite subtle and realistic. In fact, this is precisely the way people often learn about each other— through the stories they tell and how they tell them. Ivan does not give an objective telling of his brother's story, and while the reader may wonder what Nicholai's version of the story would be, the real lesson is about the incompatibility of narrowly defined perceptions.

While Ivan is pleading with his friends to learn the lesson of Nicholai's example (which they do not do), Chekhov is showing the reader how to learn from Ivan's example.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "Gooseberries," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Piano is a Ph.D. candidate in English at Bowling Green State University. In the following essay, Piano explores how Chekhov's story reveals the delusions of members of the Russian middle class who attempt to hold on to an image of rural life that no longer exists.

In the short story "Gooseberries" by Russian writer Anton Chekhov, two men out walking seek refuge from the rain at the house of a friend who lives nearby. After they settle down for the evening, one of the men, Ivan Ivanich, begins a story he was about to tell his walking companion, Bourkin, before the rain began. This story-within-a-story involves Ivan's brother Nikolai, who, in his quest to buy land, denies himself, as well as his wife, any comfort until he is an old man. After he acquires a piece of land, thereby becoming part of the landed gentry, he claims he has found true happiness. However, his brother's happiness has come at a price that Ivan finds deplorable. Nikolai's delight while eating the hard, sour gooseberries that he has spent most of his life dreaming about attests to Ivan's claim that his brother, though happy, will die a deluded old man.

However, such a compassionate and complex writer as Chekhov does not put any weight in moral pronouncements such as those made by Ivan Ivanich. Instead, in his analysis of "Gooseberries" in the *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* critic Simon Baker notes, "The power of the story lies in its ability to convey emotion which surpasses the words used to describe such a feeling." Therefore, rather than look for a moral, one must look for an evocation. Writing this in 1898, Chekhov aptly reveals the malaise of the Russian middle class, including its inefficiency, indulgence, and apathy. He does this by utilizing a clever apparatus, known as a frame story, to suggest that there are connections to be made between the story of Nikolai and that of Ivan, Bourkin, and Aliokhin. In doing so, the reader may realize that the illusion of happiness that Nikolai has succumbed to is not an exceptional case; instead, as Chekhov implies through his use of setting, details, and character, it is a middle-class epidemic.

On first reading "Gooseberries," one may find, as Russian critic Avrahm Yarmolinsky notes in *The Portable Chekhov,* that "Chekhov's stories lack purely narrative interest. They no more bear retelling than does a poem." Indeed, if one were to sum up "Gooseberries," it would take little effort: three men get together during a rainy afternoon and one of them tells the others a story that seems detached from their own lives and experiences. Afterwards, they sit silently and eventually go to bed, although one of them, Bourkin, has trouble sleeping. To understand the complexity of this story, one must understand the psyche of the Russian middle class in the late nineteenth century. The quest for happiness that drives Nikolai to fixate on attaining a social status that is beyond his means and limits attests to the fantasy worlds that many middle-class Russians created for themselves. Rather than confront the instability of a world changing right under their feet, many of them chose to ignore the social ills that would eventually lead to the events of the Russian Revolution in 1917 by focusing on their own desires and pleasures.

Typical of Chekhov's stories is the need to suggest through setting that, despite the appearance of ordinary activities and landscapes, things are not what they appear. Writer Richard Ford, in *The Essential Tales of Chekhov,* notes that the subtlety in stories like "Gooseberries" is due to Chekhov's particular approach to storytelling "in which the surfaces of life seem routine and continuous while Chekhov goes about illuminating its benighted *other* terrains as a way of inventing what's new ... in human existence." Thus, the description of the vista that opens up the story is compelling to both Bourkin and Ivan Ivanich simply because it appears so familiar; the stillness of the day as well as its monotonous tone all signal business as usual on the Russian plain. However, although a dullness pervades the day, there is also the possibility of bad weather approaching. The air is filled with expectation, yet the men choose to ignore it and go for a long country walk. When the rain does finally come, the men are not at all prepared.

The suddenness of the rain reflects the increasing possibility of social and political upheaval. On the brink of a social and political revolution, the Russian middle class ignored the signs of turmoil such as peasants' rebellions and workers' demands for living wages just as Nikolai chooses to ignore his own material needs (and his late wife's) to obtain a childhood dream. In his analysis of "Gooseberries" in the *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* critic Simon Baker notes:

The disintegration of feudal Russia in the 1890s resulted in increased poverty for the lower classes; apathy, boredom, and frustration for the middle classes; and a kind of cocooning paralysis throughout Russian society as a whole.

This cocooning is best illustrated by Ivan and Bourkin's retreat from the bad weather to Aliokhin's farm where they are treated to a warm welcome by Aliokhin and the impeccable service of the chambermaid Pelagueya. Their misery at walking in the rain dissipates as they take baths and settle down in "silk dressing-gowns and warm slippers ... lounging in armchairs." The comforts provided them in their host's house reveal how cushioned their lives are from any disturbing thoughts or discomforts; the chambermaid Pelagueya is an ideal servant, one who silently takes care of the men, never demonstrating in thought or appearance the despair and poverty pervasive among the peasant class.

The gentle irony infused throughout the story is made possible by the cross-pollination of the two stories, revealing certain parallel moments. Although most of the story is about Nikolai and his obsessive need to acquire an estate, the reader is constantly brought back to the scene of the storytelling. As writer Eudora Welty notes in her introduction to the story in *You 've Got to Read This,*

As Ivan talks, the farm, the day, the house . . . the seductive room with its beautiful attendant, its romantic portraits of ladies and generals around the walls, and the rain falling outside, all stand about the story he tells like screens of varying substance of reality and dream.

The men at Aliokhin's farm are distanced from the outside world of terrible weather and dreary lives. Listening to Ivan tell his story, it is easy to distance themselves from

Nikolai's experience due to the elegant surroundings, the beautiful Pelagueya, the warm clothes, and the food. Although they are unaware of it, the men, though appearing drastically different from Nikolai, are actually very similar.

Because Nikolai's situation appears much different from their own, both Aliokhin and Bourkin are quick to dismiss the story as irrelevant to their own lives. However, on closer inspection, all of the men, including Ivan, share in differing degrees an ideal image of rural life that ignores its sordid and troubling aspects symbolized by the factories bordering Nikolai's estate. Instead they embrace what is familiar and comfortable but ultimately illusory. As Ivan notes while telling his story, "'Once a man is possessed by an idea, there is no doing anything with him,'" so these four men are each enamored with particular images of rural life that refuse to accommodate the changes undergoing Russian society at the time.

On the surface, the details that Ivan uses to describe Nikolai's estate seem worlds away from that of Aliokhin's farm. The sour gooseberries, the "fat dog with reddish hair that looked like a pig," the overweight cook, the river that is the color of coffee all appear in stark contrast to Aliokhin's farm, which conveys a sense of efficiency with its mill, its peasants working, the beautiful Pelagueya, the bathing cabin, and the room upstairs with its pictures of elegant people. Yet Nikolai's illusion of happiness is not much different from Aliokhin's, the gentleman farmer who has surrounded himself with pastoral beauty and solace but who has not worked for it. Whereas Nikolai has tried to reproduce an image of rural life from his childhood and failed, Aliokhin is living a life that is enviable but also ephemeral. The idealistic image of the "country gentleman" that both Aliokhin and Nikolai believe in will soon become part of Russia's bourgeois past. However, it is so compelling an image that it prevents Ivan's message about happiness from affecting Aliokhin. The mill owner cannot understand the point Ivan is making because he is so saturated in a life that is incredibly removed from any other reality. The fact that he has not bathed for months underscores how circumscribed his life is. Only when he is confronted by his own filth in front of visitors does he decide to take a bath.

On the other hand, Bourkin, who is a high school teacher, seems to have little sympathy for Ivan's exhortations to "Do good," yet at the end of the story he is disturbed by the smell of Ivan's pipe next to his bed. Impatient yet reluctant to disagree with his friend, Bourkin is complicit in a social class that averts its eyes from impending disaster. Instead, he is lulled by the atmosphere of the room, with its frames of elegant people, and the beautiful chambermaid. His distraction is so ingrained that he cannot even detect the bad smell of Ivan's pipe but instead throughout the night he "kept wondering where the unpleasant odor came from."

Lastly, even though the story-within-a-story focuses on his brother Nikolai, central to the meaning of "Gooseberries" is the effect it has on Ivan. Rather than see his brother's story as one of success, Ivan realizes that accumulating material wealth and being content only shields people from the harsh realities that most people undergo: deprivation, struggle, and indigence. Yet in his desire to tell his story, Ivan does not take into account where he tells it. His lack of understanding this point contributes to the story's lack of effect on the others. As critic Milton Mays notes, in "Gooseberries and

Chekhov's Concreteness": "The issue is not whether Ivan's views are 'true' ... nor even whether they might be Chekhov's. It is rather that Ivan's story exists in a dramatic context which crucially modifies its meaning." In other words, his condemnations of illusion fall on deaf ears because his story is being told out of context. Aliokhin and Bourkin are incapable of understanding the story's message when sitting among such luxury and comfort. Their inertia is representative of the Russian middle class who, having been cushioned from discomfort for centuries, do not have the capacity to understand why society should change. The more dire become Ivan's pleadings, the more disillusioned Aliokhin and Bourkin become with their friend's story and the more they want to talk "about elegant people, about women."

Ultimately, this story is an indictment against the apathy of the middle class despite the growing signs of impending societal change. Educated, mobile, and powerful, the Russian middle class were also incredibly misdirected in their energies as is represented by Ivan, Nikolai, and Aliokhin. In his introduction to *The Kiss and Other Stories,* critic Ronald Wilks notes that

The human spirit is worthy of greater things than a few miserable gooseberry bushes and Chekhov saw the men of his generation as quite satisfied within the world of their own petty little domestic bliss and trivial amusements.

More effective than any diatribe against delusion and happiness is the symbol of the gooseberries that lies at the heart of the story. So invested has Nikolai become in acquiring personal happiness through material possessions that he has no ability to discern how terribly tasting the gooseberries really are. To do so would mean exploding the myth that Nikolai and the others ascribe to: the view of Russian rural life as being sweet and delicious, not hard and sour.

Source: Doreen Piano, Critical Essay on "Gooseberries," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Mays examines Chekhov's "Gooseberries" and the Chekhovian "irritated man.

The readings of Chekhov's "Gooseberries" all seem to run one way: Ivan Ivanych, who tells the "story within a story," and who points its moral, speaks for the author. "'Man needs not six feet of earth, not a farm, but the whole globe, all of Nature, where unhindered he can display all the capacities and peculiarities of his free spirit,'" says Ivan, passing judgment on the sordid life of his brother Nikolay, who has sacrificed everything for the country estate with the symbolic gooseberry bush. Professor Ernest J. Simmons, in his study of Chekhov, says of this pronouncement "Here is expressed Chekhov's own unquenchable thirst for all of life, for everything accessible to man." It seems to me that this reading much oversimplifies "Gooseberries," one of Chekhov's finest stories, and one which is central to an important thematic pattern in the author's work as a whole.

If the meaning of "Gooseberries" is reducible to the moral Ivan Ivanych draws from his brother's story, we may ask why Chekhov has elaborated the circumstances with such care. Why Burkin and Ivan Ivanych's walk over the plain, the rainstorm, the refuge at Alyohin' s, the bathing, and the tea upstairs with the "pretty Pelageya, stepping noiselessly across the carpet and smiling softly"? Why does Ivan Ivanych's story satisfy neither Burkin nor Alyohin? And why, finally, does Burkin, unable to sleep, notice an "unpleasant odor" in the room he shares with Ivan Ivanych—an odor that comes from his roommate's pipe? None of these circumstances receive much attention from Chekhov's critics. But the tendency of Chekhov's work is toward great economy of means—we recall the dictum about the gun on the wall in Act One which must be discharged before the play is over. "Gooseberries" is devised as a story within a story, and neither "envelope" nor "contents" alone can speak for the whole. The issue is not whether Ivan's views are "true" (who can quarrel with abstractions like "the meaning of life is to do good," as such?)—nor even whether they might be Chekhov's. It is rather that Ivan's story exists in a dramatic context which crucially modifies its meaning.

Since the whole situation is significant, a recapitulation will be useful. Burkin and Ivan Ivanych, two old hunting companions, are trudging wearily through the fields on a dull day when it begins to rain; by the time they have reached the estate of a nearby acquaintance, Alyohin, they are soaked. In a glum mood they arrive at Alyohin's mill, with its noise, vibration, wet horses standing about, and peasants running here and there with sacks over their heads. "It was damp, muddy, dreary; and the water looked cold and unkind. Ivan Ivanych and Burkin felt cold and messy and uncomfortable through and through; their feet were heavy with mud and when, having crossed the dam, they climbed up to the barns, they were silent as though they were cross with each other." But Alyohin greets them with pleasure, and invites them to bathe with him in his bathhouse on the millstream before changing. Later, all three men sit upstairs in Alyohin's best parlor "savoring the warmth, the cleanliness, the dry clothes and the light footwear," while Pelageya, the chambermaid—"a young woman so beautiful that both

[Burkin and Ivan] ... glanced at each other"—brings in the tea. In a mood of perfect physical content after fatigue and discomfort Alyohin and Burkin listen to Ivan's story of his brother Nikolay.

Nikolay's life-long dream of a country estate has co-existed with a sordid reality of avarice, cruelty, and self-delusion; indeed in a sense the dream has entailed this reality. As he tells his story, Ivan gets more and more worked up, ending with a diatribe against all contentment, and a pathetic plea to Alyohin to "do good" while he has his youth and strength. But "Ivan Ivanych's story satisfied neither Burkin nor Alyohin"; and the reasons for this are crucial to an understanding of "Gooseberries." Chekhov could be saying that Ivan's listeners are examples of that very complacency he is inveighing against. But this is not so: both the tone and the sense we get of their character in the other two stories of the group ("The Man in a Shell" and "About Love") prevent our thinking of Burkin or Alyohin as insensitive men. It is rather that Ivan has told the wrong story, in the wrong situation, and, especially, in the wrong tone. Certainly Nikolay has led a degraded life, and his happiness is disturbing: he has killed his own soul to acquire the property that is his dream; and he has also killed the woman he married for her money. Nikolay's contentment is swinish; he is a pompous, opinionated, snobbish ass eating sour gooseberries beside a polluted stream amid his equally swinish servants. In all this one agrees with Ivan; but we must be very careful about condemning "illusion" in Chekhov's world, for in too many stories (see "Daydreams" and "The Kiss," for instance) he suggests, like Ibsen in *The Wild Duck,* that illusion underlies much of life, perhaps most of its happiness—and that "truth-saying" is often destructive.

But in any case the conclusion Ivan Ivanych draws from his brother's experience is an ethical non-sequitur: because Nikolay's happiness is disgusting, it does not follow that all happiness everywhere is guilty or illusory. "Behind the door of every contented, happy man,'" holds Ivan, "'there ought to be someone standing with a little hammer and continually reminding him with a knock that there are unhappy people, and that however happy he may be, life will sooner or later show him its claws ...'" For Ivan, "there is no happiness, and there should be none,'" and the purpose of life is to feel guilt and do good. Ivan has ironed the rich texture of life out to a liberal platitude; but the very scene into which he introduces his story, like a bad smell, proves him wrong. Ivan, Burkin, and Alyohin are sitting in a luxurious drawing room, dressed in "silk dressing gowns and warm slippers," savoring the physical ease after a long, fatiguing, wet day. "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." And finally, "the fact that lovely Pelageya was noiselessly moving about—that was better than any story." As life is better than any, even the best, abstractions. The reality of the moment is caught in the concreteness of Chekhov's prose: we are made to feel the circumstances, sense the well-being, respond to the splendid woman. Only Ivan is a discord. No authorial statement of this is necessary, not even conveyed through the minds of Alyohin and Burkin, for the whole situation is expressive.

Even worse than Ivan's "moral" is his tone— querulous, strained, even obsessive. Ivan is prone to extremes, it seems—lacking in a certain saving balance or humor. His "man

needs not six feet of earth, not a farm, but the whole globe ..." is a piece of flatulence of the kind 19th century Russian liberals are famous for, than which nothing could be further from the personal tone of Chekhov. It reminds us of Trofimov, the student radical in *The Cherry Orchard* (for whom the orchard represents a load of guilt that must be atoned for by suffering and work) when he says "All of Russia is our orchard." As Ivan Ivanych gets more carried away he confronts Burkin "wrathfully," and pleads "with a pitiful imploring smile" for Alyohin to "do good" while he has still his youth. Ludicrously excessive is Ivan's "There is nothing that pains me more than the spectacle of a happy family sitting at table having tea.'" As for himself, Ivan Ivanych admits "'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.'"

Ivan belongs, in fact, to a fairly distinct breed of Chekhovian character that might be called the "irritated man"—idealists, all, no doubt, but finally unbalanced. Ivan shares with his brother Nikolay a kind of "excessiveness"—he is the manic phase of which Nikolay is the depressive, so to speak. Ivan, with his oppression, irritation, and wrath, is akin to Pavel Ivanych, perhaps Chekhov's most interesting example of the type, in "Gusev." Pavel and Gusev are both dying in the sick-bay of a troop ship on its way back to Russia from the Far East. But if Gusev seems sane in his acceptance of life, for all his peasant simplicity, Pavel's is a rancorous hatred of life, fundamentally abstractive and life-denying. "Joy" is associated with Gusev—even if it comes only in the delirium in which he thinks he sees his family back in the village; and it is a joy reflected by nature as his body is received by the waters. Pavel, that "uneasy chap" with a "boastful, challenging, mocking expression," prides himself on being a truth-seer and a truth-sayer, whatever the consequences: "I always tell people the truth to their faces ... 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.'" Nothing can shut him up; he is Ivan Ivanych's man with a hammer. But "all my acquaintances say to me: "You are a most insufferable person, Pavel Ivanych." I am proud of such a reputation ... That's life as I understand it. That's what one can call life.'"

Chekhov's comment on life as Pavel Ivanych sees it is made quite concretely: "Gusev is not listening; he is looking at the porthole. A junk, flooded with dazzling hot sunshine, is swaying on the transparent turquoise water. In it stand naked Chinamen, holding up cages with canaries in them and calling out: 'It sings, it sings!'" Gusev sees a fat Chinaman in a boat and thinks "'Would be fine to give that fat fellow one in the neck,'" yawning as he watches. This is life as Chekhov sees it—a close weave of beauty, love, and joy, with brutality, ugliness, and meaninglessness, no single strand of which is to be raveled out as "Truth."

Ivan Ivanych's story is a "bad smell" in the context in which he tells it, and his "truth" traduces reality. Similarly, ideologically-bound critics traduce literature in trying to reduce it to statement. Ivan is in such a state that he is insensitive to the social circumstances; one might call his diatribe an expression of "bad form," an offense against taste. When Trofimov has his comic-pathetic encounter with Madame Ranevskaya in Act III of *The Cherry Orchard* it is again an encounter between abstractive ideology and rich, if

muddled, life-involvement. "You mustn't deceive yourself. For once you must look the truth straight in the face," says Trofimov. Madame Ranevskaya replies "What truth? *You* know what truth is and what it isn't.... You're able to solve all your problems so decisively—but tell me ... isn't it because ... life is still hidden from your young eyes?" She asks for sympathy, not a moralistic lecture, but when Trofimov says "You know I sympathize with you from the bottom of my heart" Ranevskaya replies in a way also appropriate to Burkin and Alyohin's response to the gooseberries tale: "But you should say it differently ... differently." Image and tone suggest Chekhov's meaning in the conclusion to "Gusev": as Gusev's canvas-shrouded body sinks into the sea, there is a shark waiting, but there is also a magnificent sunset; as Burkin lies in the cool bed "which had been made by the lovely Pelageya" and "gave off a pleasant smell of clean linen" Ivan Ivanych's pipe with its unpleasant odor keeps him awake for a long time, but "the rain beat against the window panes all night."

The pipe with the bad smell may seem the only crude touch in this story; but we see what Chekhov's intention is, and it cannot be ignored, because his endings are carefully contrived. "My instinct tells me," Chekhov has said, "that at the end of a novel or story I must artfully concentrate for the reader an impression of the entire work." The endings of "Gusev" and "Gooseberries" project a sense of resolution, of a truth beyond "Truths," something for which (as Chekhov puts it at the end of "Gusev") "it is hard to find a name in the language of man."

Source: Milton A. Mays, "Gooseberries' and Chekhov's Concreteness," in *Southern Humanities Review,* Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1972, pp. 63-67.

Topics for Further Study

Read a sampling of William Blake's poems from *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* Write an essay in which you relate some of these poems to the perspectives of Ivan Ivanich, Nicholai Ivanich, and Aliokhin.

Ivan Ivanich and his brother seem to be two very different people. Speculate as to whether you think this is because of their inborn personalities or because of their experiences. Make an argument in the tradition of the "nature versus nurture" debate in which you account for the differences between the two brothers. You may make assumptions about the men beyond what is told in the story as long as your assumptions are reasonable given what Chekhov reveals about them.

Imagine Ivan Ivanich, Bourkin, and Aliokhin lounging by the fire as Ivan tells his story. Select a theme song for each character that reflects his state of mind and personality. Write a short essay explaining why you chose each song.

Compare and Contrast

1898: Social interactions are often unplanned, yet welcome, and people are entertained simply by conversation. At times, one person relates a story while the others sit listening without interrupting. Because of heavy workloads, people do not make a habit of socializing every weekend but go for extended periods of time without enjoying social interaction.

Today: Social interaction has changed in the last century as the result of technology (television, cinema, computers, etc.) and easier access to entertainment. People have more ways to entertain themselves without gathering together and more entertainment to distract them when they do get together. However, people continue to enjoy one another's company in social situations, and communication has become freer as the result of the looser political climate.

1898: Bathing is done in facilities separate from the main house, even in the homes of wealthier people. Such facilities generally consist of a small bathhouse that contains a pool or tub of some kind that is filled with rainwater, well water, or water from a nearby river or stream.

Today: Indoor plumbing has made it possible (and convenient) to have bathing facilities inside the house. Because pipes bring water into the bathroom, there is no need to fill a pool with either rainwater or well water and leave it. Instead, water for each bath is fresh and is drained after the bath is completed.

What Do I Read Next?

Anton Chekhov: Selected Stories (1990), translated by Ann Dunnigan, is a collection of twenty of Chekhov's short works. Because this collection spans the author's entire career, not just his mature writings, it enables the reader to see how he developed and changed over the course of his writing years.

Chekhov scholar Donald Rayfield presents Chekhov's life story in *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (2000). This biography draws on correspondence and various accounts of the author's life to provide the reader with an insightful and detailed look at Chekhov's life and experiences.

Nicholas Rzhevsky edited *An Anthology of Russian Literature from Earliest Writings to Modern Fiction: Introduction to a Culture* for publication in 1997. This anthology is arranged chronologically, with an introduction prefacing each section. It is a good introduction for the student of Russian literature, as it provides a sweeping overview of literary developments and also comments on adaptations of works.

Further Study

Chekhov, Anton, *Chekhov: The Major Plays: "Ivanov," "The Sea Gull," "Uncle Vanya," "The Three Sisters," "The Cherry Orchard,"* translated by Ann Dunnigan, with a foreword by Robert Brustein, Signet Classic, 2001.

This edition is a reissue of a collection of Chekhov's most well-known plays. Each is considered a classic, and Dunnigan's translations of Chekhov's work are considered accessible and reliable.

Tolstoy, Leo, *Walk in the Light: And Twenty-Three Tales,* translated by Aylmer Maude and Louise Maude, Plough Publishing House, 1999.

Aylmer and Louise Maude present their translations of over twenty of Leo Tolstoy's short stories. Chekhov was an early adherent of Tolstoy's philosophies, and reading some of Tolstoy's works provides valuable insights into both authors.

Yarmolinsky, Avrahm, ed., *The Portable Chekhov,* Viking Press, 1987.

This collection is a valuable resource for the student of Chekhov's writing, as it contains six hundred pages of complete stories and letters. Some of the stories are previously translated versions, while others are the editor's translations.

Bibliography

Baker, Simon, "Gooseberries,'" in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* 1st ed., edited by Noelle Watson, St. James Press, 1994.

Chekhov, Anton, "Gooseberries," *in Short Fiction: Classic and Contemporary,* 3d ed., edited by Charles Bohner, Prentice Hall, 1994.

Ford, Richard, "Introduction," in *The Essential Tales of Chekhov,* edited by Richard Ford and Constance Garnett, Ecco Press, 1998.

Gullason, Thomas H., "The Short Story: An Underrated Art," *in Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 2, No. 1, Fall 1964, pp. 13-31.

Harmon, William, and C. Hugh Holman, "Realism," in *A Handbook to Literature,* 7th ed., Prentice Hall, 1996.

Kirk, Irina, "Anton Chekhov," in *Twayne's World Authors Series Online,*http://www.galenet.com/servlet/Twayne/ (1999).

Mays, Milton A., " 'Gooseberries' and Chekhov's Concrete-ness," in *Southern Humanities Review,* Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1972, pp. 63-67.

O'Faolain, Sean, "The Technical Struggle: On Subject," in *Short Story,* Devin-Adair Company, 1951, pp. 171-92.

Proffer, Carl R., "Practical Criticism for Students: 'Gooseberries,'" in *From Karamzin to Bunin: An Anthology of Russian Short Stories,* Indiana University Press, 1969, pp. 38-39.

Slatoff, Walter J., "Some Varieties of Armor and Innocence," in *The Look of Distance: Reflections on Suffering and Sympathy in Modern Literature—Auden to Agee, Whitman to Woolf,* Ohio State University Press, 1985, pp. 15-10.

Welty, Eudora, "Introduction to 'Gooseberries,'" in *You've Got to Read This: Contemporary American Writers Introduce Stories That Held Them in Awe,* edited by Ron Hansen and Jim Shepard, HarperPerennial, 1994, pp. 176—77.

Wilks, Ronald, "Introduction," in *Chekhov: The Kiss and Other Stories,* Penguin Classics, 1982, pp. 22.

Winner, Thomas G., "Anton Chekhov," in *European Writers,* Vol. 7, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985, pp. 1855-881.

Yarmolinsky, Avrahm, "Introduction," in *The Portable Chekhov,* Viking Press, 1968.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535