

Pains and Pangs in Anton Chekhov's Story *Vanka*

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Abstract

The present paper explores and analyses pains and pangs in Anton Chekhov's Story *Vanka* by the means of critical discourse analysis for pedagogical purpose. The study paper was carried out by using secondary resources. In *Vanka*, with his simplicity and minuteness of details, Chekhov reveals his sense of man's inhumanity to man. Poverty, widely discussed in Marxist ideologies, is a curse to majority of school age children. The school age child Vanka is not exception anyway.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideology, Pedagogy, Apprenticeship, Power Abuse

Introduction

The present paper is a reading between lines in Anton Chekhov's Story *Vanka* for exploring and analyzing sufferings and poor conditions of a little boy of school age. Analysis of the text is done by the means of critical discourse analysis for pedagogical purpose. This study paper, intended to apply the Marxist ideologies in the short story *Vanka*, deals about pathetically poignant conditions of majority of children in the world.

Language is a method of communication and literature can be the content being communicated. It is a set of gestures and words and phrases with meaning behind them, and literature is the manipulation and use of those gestures and words and phrases. It makes human closer to his/her demand. Cook (2008, p 1) says, “Language is at the centre of human life. We use it to express our love or our hatred, to achieve our goal and further our careers, to gain artistic satisfaction or simple pleasure or to blaspheme”.

In literature, language is meticulously and artistically crafted. It is not just to inform a reader but also to persuade him, to play and poke at his mind. There is demarcation between theory and practice. In theory, with the right rhetorical devices, we can write one thing but make a reader think something else. Literature is a lot more complicated than the ordinary language being used. Povey (1972, p 191) says, “Literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage and complex and exact syntax.” (Cited in Brumfit & Carter 1987, p 191).

Literature is an artistic human creation by the tactful and playful dictions expressing experiences, ideas, feelings, emotions, opinions, etc to depict social realities. There are many purposes behind creating art- beauty (aestheticism), truth, pleasure, realism, fantasy, imitation, reflection of life, didacticism (teaching), exposure of the world, etc. Therefore literature is an art. Basically, a literary work is an imitation of life. It presents an aspect of life, making the work itself a true mirror of life. Meaning of the work lies there. Literature is creative writing of recognized artistic value.

Literature for language teaching is beneficial in many ways. Literature widens students’ insights, deepens their experiences and heightens their awareness. It helps to develop all language skills because it extends linguistic knowledge by giving evidence, extensive vocabulary usage and exact syntax.

The study of literature makes literature itself the content or subject of a language course while the use of literature as a resource draws on literature as one source among many different kinds of texts for promoting interesting language activities. Clearly if it is the study of literature which is our aim, then developing the 'literary competence' of our students is crucial. (Lazar, 1993, p 14)

Lazar (2009, p 24) writes, "Literature is a useful tool for encouraging students to draw on their own personal experiences, feelings and opinions. It helps students to become more actively involved both intellectually and emotionally in learning English and hence aids acquisition."

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was a Russian writer. He was noted for crafting the "psychological" short story. Therefore, in his tales, we often find that the setting resides in the minds of the characters and dialogue. It is often a stream of interior monologue between only snippets of conversation. In his stories, action is minimal and conflict limited to cross purposes of characters registered in their feelings and suspicions.

His hundreds of short stories made him a master of realistic short story in the nineteenth century. Chekhov usually wrote about man's essential loneliness and frustration, and the dullness and stagnation of Russian life in his day. He shows both sympathy and realism towards his characters. In *Vanka*, with his simplicity and minuteness of details, Chekhov reveals his sense of man's inhumanity to man.

Literature Review

Marxist criticism views literary works as reflections of the social institutions from which they originate. Marxists believe that literature itself is an institution. They say that it has a specific ideological function, which is based on the background and ideology of the

author. The English literary critic and cultural theorist, Terry Eagleton (1976) defines Marxist criticism this way:

Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history.

Marxist literary criticism can include an assessment of the political 'tendency' of a literary work. It determines whether its social content or its literary form is 'progressive'. It also includes analyzing the class constructs - or classes and ranks in society- shown in the literature.

Literature, according to Marx, is the socio-political theory, “the philosophers have early interpreted the world in various ways, and the point is to change it.” According to this theory, everything is dialectical. The history and society can be analyzed to change the society. It is the ideology that has the study of politics, society and economic status of people. The class struggle is a major issue- rich exploits poor; governor governs and exploits the governed. The little poor boy Vanka is exploited by his master.

Karl Marx hypothesized that, as the productive forces and technology continued to advance, socialism would eventually give way to a communist stage of social development. Communism would be a classless, stateless, moneyless society based on common ownership and the principle of “ from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. (Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program, 1875)”

Norman Fairclough (1993) defines Critical Discourse Analysis as a branch of discourse analysis. In his view, it analyses opaque and transparent structural relationships of

dominance, discrimination, power and control as shown in a text and manifested through language. He writes,

....discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony. (p. 135)

Vanka: A Critical Analysis

Vanka is the story of the title character's situation after being orphaned. Vanka's master beats him and gives him little to eat, his life is generally miserable. This premise alone elicits a compassionate response from the reader; the child is acted upon, a victim of circumstance. However, structurally Chekhov does a number of things to make Vanka's situation more poignant. First, Chekhov structures the narrative in the form of a letter to Vanka's grandfather. By doing so, the audience is privy to the direct plaintive needs of the boy as he sees it, not as the reader believes they should be upon mere observation of events. The action of writing this letter, indeed the only action in the entire story, allows Vanka to be more accessible to the reader because he is more conscious of how he feels and his desire for a better life, more so than if Chekhov had objectively recounted the goings on in Vanka's life. Chekhov here is in command of what he wishes to portray.

“Dear Grandfather, Konstantin Makarych,” (Vanka)

And, *“I am writing you a letter. I wish you a happy Christmas and all God’s holy best. I have no mamma or papa you are all I have.”(Vanka)*

In these first few sentences, Chekhov establishes Vanka's goodness of heart and desperate situation, not only from what Vanka writes but because he is writing a letter. The reader sees implicitly that Vanka is trying to make a connection. What's more, it is unclear that the letter will ever reach his grandfather in the end. That Vanka's efforts may prove to be a useless gesture underscores his innocence and sincerity. The purpose of the letter also serves to remove the reader a step from Vanka's circumstance; this has the effect that Chekhov describes as follows:

“When you describe the miserable and unfortunate, and want to make the reader feel pity, try to be somewhat colder--that seems to give a kind of background to another's grief, against which it stands out more clearly. Whereas in your story the characters cry and you sigh. Yes, be colder....The more objective you are, the stronger will be the impression you make.”(--To Lydia Avilova, March 19, 1892 & April 29, 1892)

The letter provides a middle ground between objective reporting and direct access to Vanka's thoughts. Chekhov uses this device to subtly give the reader a wider perspective ('a kind of background'), and hence, a more complete understanding of Vanka's grief.

Anton Chekhov employs flashback sequences of Vanka's former life with his grandfather. In his mind's eye, Vanka daydreams of a jovial patriarch with whom he had delightful times. He is described as a "nimble old man of about sixty-five whose face was always crinkled with laughter" who cracked jokes and gave snuff to the dogs. Later, Vanka recalls happier times with his grandfather at Christmas getting a Christmas tree and being taught to read and dance by a young chambermaid. These scenes of blissful contentment are in stark contrast to his current plight and add to the background of his grief, accenting it.

Chekhov also incorporated the flashback sequences into a masterful use of symbolism. It is emphasized that Vanka's reveries was a dog called Viun, which wriggles and followed his grandfather around.

The wriggle of dog was extraordinarily deferential and demonstrative, looked with equally friendly eyes both at his masters and at strangers, but did not enjoy a good reputation. His deference and meekness concealed the most Jesuitical spite. No one knew better how to creep up behind you and suddenly snap at your leg, how to slip into the icehouse, or how to steal a hen from a peasant. More than once his hind legs had been all but broken, twice he had been hanged, every week he was whipped till he was half dead, but always he managed to revive. (Vanka)

This passage is artfully noncommittal in a typically Chekhovian manner. Whether this description of Wiggles is foreshadowing what Vanka may turn into, a glimpse into Vanka's state of mind, or just more 'background' is unclear, yet it resonates unease and a discomfort that the reader cannot ignore. At the end of the story Chekhov leaves the reader with Vanka dreaming of his grandfather reading his letter to the cooks while nearby Viun wriggles and wags his tail. All at once the reader is left with the image of a child dreaming sweetly of a better life, yet bitterly aware that not all is or will be right.

At the age of nine most children are spending their time playing with their friends, going to school, and having fun living their lives. The boy relates both sad and happy memories in his letter. The only memories that a child at the age of nine should have are happy ones. Granted, that many children do not have completely happy thoughts but to have no pleasant thoughts or memories of growing up would make life a completely miserable place to live. Without a formal education, Vanka was forced to leave his grandfather. To obtain food and shelter, Vanka took apprenticeship with a local shoemaker in Moscow. His master, Aliakhin, used Vanka as a slave instead of an understudy. Vanka sighed, dipped his pen, and went on writing:

“And yesterday I had a wiggling. The master pulled me out the yard by my hair, and whacked me with a boot-stretcher because I accidentally fell asleep while I was rocking their brat in the cradle.” (Vanka)

In these sentences, Vanka told his sorrow to his grandfather in the letter, what his master did just one day prior, his master took Vanka outside to beat him. Vanka was accused of falling asleep while rocking the family's child. Although this was not a job for an apprentice, Vanka did odd jobs to appease the lord of the house. Unhappily, he stayed for he had nowhere else to turn. Somebody does not scold anybody if there is no matter of pinching. So as Vanka is also being scolded in above sentence by using the word ‘brat’, which is a contemptuous name for a child. His master and the family had gone to Christmas Eve Mass for the evening. Vanka took advantage of church time as a chance to rest and relax.

Vanka sat there and began to remember; for fond memories were the only escape from the job he called hell. His grandfather was the only family Vanka knew. He had only his grandfather alive. He had spent a lot of time with his grandfather; so his thoughts of the lovely old man were the only happiness he ever knew. Vanka had love for his grandfather and kept a vivid and colorful memory of this old man. "Extraordinarily, lively and nimble old man of about 65 whose face was always crinkled with laughter." Vanka began to reminisce of the good times he shared with his grandfather. Called to his memory were the pets that his grandfather kept and how they had personalities of their own. "The old bitch, Brownie and the dog Viun followed with him (grandfather) with hanging heads." These animals, for as plain as they sound, provided Vanka with much joy and liveliness. With his master in Moscow, he found no such happiness.

Vanka's slave master has no obvious respect for Vanka. Vanka tries to improve his performance when he is persecuted for his improper work ability, but his master and mistress are never satisfied. Vanka sighs, dips his pen, and goes on writing:

“And a week ago the mistress told me to clean a herring, and I began from the tail end and she took the herring and thrust its head in my face. The workmen laugh at me and send me to the tavern for vodka, and tell me to steal the cucumbers for them, and the master beats me with anything that comes to hand. And there is nothing to eat. In the morning they give me bread, for dinner, porridge, and in the evening, bread again; but as for tea, or soup, the master and mistress gobble it up themselves. And I am put to sleep in the passage, and when their wrenched brat cries I get no sleep at all, but have to rock the cradle. Dear grandfather, show the divine mercy; take me away from here, home to the village. It’s more than I can bear bow down to your feet, and will pray to God for you forever, take me away from here or I shall die.” (Vanka)

By reading these sentences written by Vanka, it is clear that he is too often beaten or mistreated by his master and mistress. Even while cleaning fish, the mistress beats him instead of teaching him about that. The young child cannot do it well because his age is of playing and schooling. And he could not recall a day in weeks when he had received bread and porridge as a meal. Exhausted and saddened, Vanka pleads with his grandfather to take him back from the hands of the master.

In exchange for his freedom, Vanka promises his grandfather he will perform the tasks of his grandfather's everyday life in order to relieve the old man of his burden. Vanka fills his letter with promises and pleas. Vanka would give anything to get escape and relief from his master. As Vanka writes, his mind slips back to warm memories that only draw him closer to the realization of his need to escape.

The story reports that Vanka's lips twitched, he rubbed his eyes with a black fist and gave a sob. And promised his grandfather, *“I will grind your snuff for you,”* he went on,

I will pray for you and you can flog me as hard as you like if I am naughty. And if you think there is nothing for me to do I will ask the steward to take pity on me and let me

clean the boots or I will go as a shepherd-boy instead of Fedya. Dear Grandad I cant stand it it is killing me. I thought I would run away on foot to the village but I have no boots and I was afraid of the frost. And when I grow up to be a man I will look after you and I will not let anyone hurt you and when you die I will pray for your soul like I do for my Mummie. Vanka)

Having finished writing the letter to his grandfather, Vanka is hopeful that his grandfather will surely come and take him back to village. He folds the sheet of writing-paper twice, and puts it into the postal envelope he has bought the day before for a kopeck from the last of his meager savings. Vanka has learnt that dropping the letter in a letter box takes it to its destination. Ignorant of his grandfather's address Vanka reflects for a while and addresses the envelope To *Grandfather in the Village*. He scratches his head, thinks a little, and adds his grandfather's name: *Konstantin Makarich*. Then he runs out on the street and posts the letter in the letter box.

We, the readers, know that this letter, addressed in such a way, is not likely to reach his grandfather in some distant remote village. But Vanka thinks that his grandfather will get his letter and know that, after reading it, his grandfather will surely come to Moscow to rescue him, free him from his tyranny and life of slavery and take him back to the happy life in the village. Lulled by the sweetest of hopes, Vanka goes to sleep with these happy thoughts and dreams that his grandfather is reading the letter and his dog Viun is wagging his tail.

Vanka's situation was not abnormal or a rarity where poverty and slavery were common occurrences. From the world's history, we have read that illnesses and death often left young children alone to defend themselves. Forced to work at a young age, Vanka did not receive a formal education. Vanka had his downfall because of his lack of education. He had been sent for apprenticeship because of the lack of education. We know that his grandfather

will never come and rescue him because of his lack of education. This condition of his life- lack of education and ignorance- creates an ironic parallel between his life and his freedom. The unaddressed letter never reached his grandfather. His grandfather did not know of his grandson's living conditions.

An additional bit of irony can be found in the religious aspects of the master and his family. As brutal and harsh people, the family, both the master and the mistress abuse and take advantage of Vanka. It is ironic in the story that they attend church for religious purpose after causing the child so much pain and torture.

Inspired only by the pleasant memories of his grandfather and his dog Viun, Vanka tries to make a better life for himself. This can only be achieved through his departure from the shoemaker's house to his grandfather's. The letter is simply addressed- "*To Konstantin Makarich.*" The reader is left to wonder if the letter addressed as so will ever reach its proper destination. The matter of his emotional purging is the one thing that will keep Vanka's frame of mind intact. The idea that his grandfather will receive the letter really comforts Vanka immensely; this in turn will give Vanka a reason for going on in life.

In the story "Vanka", we can see Vanka and his master are playing roles sitting in their rank as apprentice and the shoemaker but master and his family misuse and take benefits of having such hierarchy.

Similarly, Marx described the oppressive hierarchy of hegemonic group(s) dominating negative reference groups, in his examples the bourgeoisie ,who are called haves dominate the proletariat ,who are called haves not by controlling capital (the means of production), not paying workers enough, and so on.

We can see the division of society into two parts; master and labor which consists of two main economic parts. Between these people, there is relationship of productive property and

labor. Aliakhin dominate Vanka by giving him all the house work even he was sent to apprentice in shoe shop And Vanka is trying to be free from the slavery condition.

In Michel Foucault's opinion, power is not something that can be owned, but rather something that acts and manifests itself in a certain way; it is more a strategy than a possession. Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something this only functions in the form of a chain. Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization. Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. This way of understanding power has two key features: a) power is a system, a network of relations encompassing the whole society, rather than a relation between the oppressed and the oppressor; b) individuals are not just the objects of power, but they are the locus where the power and the resistance to it are exerted. The relational of power, meaning that power is always a case of power relations between people, as opposed to a quantum possessed by people. (Foucault, 1980)

We can see in the story “Vanka”, the power relation and the impose of power between Aliakhin and Vanka. Aliakhin got power because he is master and owner of the shoe shop. Vanka is an apprentice of the shoe shop. However he must do all the work of shoe shop as well as house hold what the master and his family orders. It seems that power relations can obtain only among human beings because they possess volitional and rational capacities that set them apart from other animals.

In the story “Vanka”, we find power abuse, domination and sufferings upon a child by cruel master. He is misusing the power. Here, we can see that Vanka was dominated and abused in these lines.

“And yesterday I had a wiggling. The master pulled me out the yard by my hair, and whacked me with a boot-stretcher because I accidentally fell asleep while I was rocking their brat in the cradle.”

In these sentences, Vanka told his sorrow to his grandfather in the letter, one day before, his master took Vanka outside to beat him. Vanka was accused of falling asleep while rocking the family's child. This was not a job for an apprentice; however he did odd jobs to appease the lord of the house. Being unhappy also he stayed for he had nowhere else to turn.

Conclusion

Vanka is a case for misfortune and exploitation attributing to the millions of children in the world. They are deprived of education, happiness and pleasure, family love and attachment. Misuse and abuse of power over children of school age is commonplace in our world. It occurs in homes, schools, churches, government, etc. And sadly, we can find such things in therapist's practices and healing workshops. Any position of power, for example the shoemaker in this story, carries with it the temptation to abuse that power, which is in the case of Vanka. Children, selling newspapers or doing household works, may be late for school and punished by teachers, without knowing the truth. It is our responsibility to learn how people form their relationship with power, how power should be used, how power should be relevant, and how power should be fruitful for welfare of children (in present case of this paper). We should be responsible to learn how power is misused and abused in our work, and how we can help to heal the relationship with power in ourselves. We should be responsible towards children for their rights, dignity, freedom, and other essential requirements.

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