

## Chekhov's Death of a Clerk: A Critical Appreciation

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### Abstract

The present paper proposes to undertake a deep study of the *Death of a Clerk*. This beautiful short story has been written by Anton Chekhov, a prominent story teller of Russia. This story has been translated into English from Russian by Ivy Litvinov. This translation of Ivy Litvinov has been made the basis of the present study. The period of 1880-1885 is a very important period in the career of Anton Chekhov. During this period, he wrote hundreds of humorous tales. They show a keen sense of the social scene and of the incongruities of life. These tales reveal a deep feeling for human injustice and suffering. In these stories Anton Chekhov attempted to see things as they were and to deal with them as he saw them. According to him a reasoned life without a clear-cut point of view is not a life, but a burden and a horror. This was a strange idea for that day but it played a significant role in his works. Chekhov's *Death of a Clerk* is one of them. It beautifully presents the picture of the life of a society based on tyranny and servility.

Keywords: Short Story, Chekhov, Death of a Clerk.

Anton Chekhov is a great storyteller and playwright. He is undoubtedly a writer of genius. He has been an inspiration for several first rate writers of the world. He never departed from reality. As an author he is a profound believer in a happy future. About Chekhov Lev Tolstoy is of the view:

“As an artist,” he said, “Chekhov was in a class of his own...That sums it up perfectly....He was an artist of life....One quality of his writing is that everyone, whether he is Russian or not, can understand it and identify with it....That’s the most important thing.”<sup>1</sup>

The above-mentioned statement about Chekhov was prophetic. Chekhov is appreciated in the entire world. At the time when Chekhov was writing, the short story as a modern literary genre had just come into its own. Chekhov brought in with him a new way of handling the form. The terse representations of simple acts, sparse dialogue and understatement of emotion characterized his short stories. In English Catherin Mansfield, William Saroyan, Saki and several others tried to adopt this style. It appears that Chekhov, a close adherent of critical realism, mostly dealt with the people from the lower depths and presented his protagonists as fighting a losing battle against the more tangible socio-economic forces. The total effect of his stories is that of pathos and tragic failures. Chekhov’s stories are terse and compact. He would not retain a single word that did not serve his purpose. His short stories, much like Maupassant, are neatly crafted and sharply pointed towards a definite goal. Chekhov’s vision of life was tragic of course, but it was softened by a sense of humor. All these elements find fantastic expression in the *Death of a Clerk*.

The *Death of a clerk* is an excellent story by Chekhov. It deals with fear, anxiety, worry, insecurity and servility as the major themes. The story tells us about a clerk named Ivan Dmitrich

Chervyakov. Sitting in the second row of a theatre he is enjoying a programme. Suddenly, he sneezes. He wipes his face with his pocket handkerchief. And after that like a well-mannered man he looks around him to see whether his sneezing has disturbed anyone. He finds a little old man who is sitting just in front of him. That person is carefully wiping his bald cranium and neck with his glove. The clerk recognizes him. He is Civil General Brizhalov of the Ministry for the Communications. He feels embarrassed. Though Brizhalov, an important man, does not belong to his department, he at once decides to beg pardon for his offence. He leans forward and begs pardon. Brizhalov responds with 'never mind'. Ivan Dmitrich Chervyakov feels the need for further explanation. The General finds this annoying and tells him to forget about it and let him listen.

Chervyakov is no longer able to enjoy the performance. He feels uneasy and tries to apologize again. Brizhalov responds that he has already forgotten about that. But the clerk looks impatient. He returns back home and tells his wife about the accident. At this his wife gets frightened but as soon as she comes to know that Brizhalov belongs to different department, she becomes normal. She advises him to go to him to beg pardon. The next day Chervyakov puts on his new official uniform and goes to explain his conduct to Brizhalov. He is busy then in receiving petitions of petitioners. As soon as Brizhalov looks at his face he starts speaking of his dreadful breach of manners. The general ignores him and continues questioning the petitioners.

Chervyakov thinks the general's lack of response means he is angry about the incident, so after the questionings are over he tries to apologize again. At this Brizhalov accuses him of making fun of him. He returns back and decides not to go to him again but he would write a letter to him. But to write a letter becomes a difficult task for him. He tries his best but he is not able in writing even a single word. Thus the next day once more he goes to his office to beg

pardon. The General's irritation reaches at its height. He becomes very angry. He stamps his foot and orders to go out. Chervyakov returns back home. He sits down on the sofa and dies

The first sentence of this story introduces the protagonist and second beautifully introduces the reason of the death of the protagonist:

“It was an excellent night when the excellent clerk, Ivan Dmitrich Chervyakov, sat in the second row of the stalls, enjoying *Les Cloches de Corneville* with the aid of opera-glasses. He watched the stage and thought himself the happiest of mortals, when all of a sudden.... “All of a sudden” has become a hackneyed expression, but how can authors help using it, since life is full of surprises? All of a sudden, then, his face puckered up, his eyes rolled, heavenwards, his breath was suspended.... Turning his face away from the opera-glasses, he doubled up in his seat and- a-shoo! That is to say he sneezed.”<sup>2</sup>

The protagonist Ivan Dmitrich Chervyakov, a government clerk, sneezes over an old man Civil General Brizhalov of the Ministry for the Communications and after that his servile attitude begins to come into focus:

“I sneezed over him!” thought Chervyakov.

“He's not my chief, it's true, but still it's very awkward. I must apologise.”<sup>3</sup>

This thought or submission makes him a pet dog and he begins to go to say that he has done wrong. His manner of begging pardon and the words of address make it clear that he is not a government clerk but a slave. His lack of confidence and his traditional address seem the part of protagonist's character. But it is pitiable. If everyone has a right to sneeze wherever he likes, why is the clerk restless? Obviously it is the case of fear from bureaucracy.

Dmitrich Chervyakov is not an individual but a type. Here in this story he is the representative of his class. He plays a part of great slave. The servile attitude of the clerk reaches at its climax and he becomes worse than a dog that licks its master's feet. Due to lack of confidence he goes to beg pardon again and again, but he is not able to express his things. But at last he goes to Brizhalov and says:

“I ventured to trouble you yesterday, Your Excellency,” he began when the General turned a questioning glance upon him, “not to laugh at you, as Your Excellency suggested. I came to bring my apologies for having inconvenienced you by sneezing...As for laughing at you, I would never think of such a thing. How would I dare to! If we took it into our heads to laugh at people, there would be no respect left... no respect for superiors...”<sup>4</sup>

Chekhov hated bureaucracy and he attacks it suitably in this beautiful short story. Though the story is short and seems trivial but the aim or purpose is never trivial. The story is capable in revealing the dirt and filth of the tyranny and the cruelty of the bureaucracy. This is the fear of bureaucracy that is why the protagonist Ivan Dmitrich Chervyakov dies at last. After the incident like sneezing, which is natural to all either they are “peasants, police inspectors, even privy councilors”<sup>5</sup>, the clerk begins to lead a dog's life and at last dies a dog's death. It may also be said that his death is the death of a coward. It is crystal clear that after sneezing which is trivial but natural thing, the fear takes place in the heart of the clerk and his condition becomes pitiable. Just before this trivial incident, the clerk thinks himself the happiest of mortals. But the fear of bureaucracy or of superior officials destroys all his happiness and his happiness transfers into restlessness and sorrow. To go to beg pardon again and again, to talk to his wife and to die and

almost all the activities of the clerk are due to this fear. This fear is not mere the fear of Ivan Dmitrich Chervyakov alone but it is the fear of the whole of his class.

Chekhov presents the lively picture of characters and his story joins the rank of great story. In this story, Ivan Dmitrich Chervyakov is only one major character and he is apparent with his heart and mind before the readers. Except Ivan Dmitrich Chervyakov there is one more male character, Brizhalov. He is a minor character. There is again a female character whose name is not mentioned but it is clear that she is the wife of the protagonist in relation. She is not less important because her single statement is strictly adhered to the theme of the story. When the clerk goes home and talks about the incident, she feels fear for a moment. Though she does not take it seriously, but the fear for a moment is nothing else but the fear of bureaucracy and tyranny. Chekhov presents her fear in the following lines:

“When he got home, Chervyakov told his wife of ungentlemanly conduct. It seemed to him that his wife received his story with undue levity. True, she was alarmed for a moment, but finding Brizhalov was not “our” chief, she was reassured.”

“I think you ought to go and apologise, though,” she said. “Or he’ll think you don’t know how to behave in company.”<sup>6</sup>

Ivan Dmitrich Chervyakov, the protagonist, is a character with which the story starts, goes on its climax and ends with him. Thus through his fantastic art of characterization Chekhov makes it clear that only one incident presents different circumstances in the lives of different men. The incident “sneezing” makes the clerk restless and he dies. The wife of the protagonist takes this incident with undue levity and for Brizhalov it has no importance at all. In this story

nothing is useless, dry and boring. In short, this story is a story of a character. The character is the theme and the theme is the character.

Thus the *Death of a clerk* is a very fine example of gentle satire. In this short, satirical and humorous story, Chekhov creates an unprecedented panorama of tragic-comic existence in a world of bogus moral values, trivial concerns and worries

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