The Bet

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANTON CHEKHOV

Anton Chekhov was born to a large family in Taganrog, southern Russia. His parents were struggling grocers and, while his mother was kind, his father was often abusive. When the family fled to Moscow in 1876 because the father faced debtors' prison, Anton stayed behind and finished his schooling. In 1879, he moved to Moscow and completed his degree in medicine. He proceeded to work as a doctor for most of his literary career, writing short stories and plays in his free time to pay for tuition and to support his family, for whom he was now the sole breadwinner. At 28, he won the Pushkin Prize, marking a major stepping stone in his career. In later years, he lived on a farm where he treated local peasants and dedicated his dwindling energy towards tending to his farmland. Though a longtime bachelor, he finally married Olga Knipper in 1901. He contracted tuberculosis as a young man, and it eventually claimed his life in 1904. At the time of his death, he had authored sixteen plays, a novel, five novellas, countless letters, and over 200 short stories. He is cited as one of the most respected short-story writers and history and is one of the most frequently adapted authors of all time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Chekhov was writing at a time of political turmoil in Russia. Tsar Alexander II, who had ruled throughout Chekhov's childhood, had implemented reformist policies in education and government, the most important being his elimination of serfdom. Upon his assassination by revolutionaries in 1881, however, the Tsar was replaced by his son Alexander III, who attempted to undo most of his father's progressive work. He strengthened the security police, brought back religious censorship, enforced the teaching of the Russian languages in schools, weakened the universities, and persecuted non-Russians within the Empire, especially Jews. Chekhov, as a noted intellectual, would have been troubled by the new regime and its anti-modern nature. Though much of his early work was silly and parodic, it became much more serious in nature as time went on, and "The Bet" is one of his densest works.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Chekhov is considered one of the greatest short story writers in history, as oft-mentioned as Ernest Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor, Edgar Allan Poe, O. Henry, and Franz Kafka. Among his most famous stories are "The Lady with the Dog," "The Man in a Case," "Ward No. 6" (which drew on his experience as a medical professional), and "The Darling." Chekhov wrote during the period of Russian Realism, a movement that centered human psychology, philosophical thought, and dark takes on human nature. Other major works of Russian Realism include Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Bet
- **When Published:** January 14, 1889
- **Literary Period:** Russian Realism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Russia
- **Climax:** The banker sneaks into the lawyer's room to kill him only to discover the letter he has written renouncing his right to his winnings.
- **Antagonist:** The banker
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Wasting Away. Chekhov lived with and was affected by tuberculosis for twenty years. The question of whether a slow or a long, painful, drawn-out death was crueler must have plagued him every day, as it does the characters in "The Bet."

Adaptation. Many of Chekhov's plays have been adapted into films, including *The Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and *The Seagull*.

PLOT SUMMARY

On a dark autumn night, the banker paces in his study and recalls a party he hosted fifteen years before. In a flashback, he and several of his guests, many of whom are journalists and scholars, discuss whether capital punishment is more moral and humane than life imprisonment. While many, including the banker, assert that imprisonment is crueler because it kills by degrees rather than instantaneously, a young lawyer argues that life imprisonment is preferable because it is better to live somehow than not at all.

The banker challenges him to be imprisoned in a cell for five years, and, not to be outdone, the lawyer insists he could do it for fifteen. The wealthy banker stakes two million rubles in exchange for the lawyer's freedom. The banker goads then the lawyer over dinner, telling him to back out while he still can, because three or four years of the lawyer's life (surely, the

banker assumes, he will not stick it out any longer than that) is more valuable than money that the banker can easily afford to lose. He also reminds the lawyer that voluntary imprisonment will be much harder psychologically than that which has been enforced.

The following evening, the lawyer is imprisoned in a garden wing of the banker's house. He is forbidden to leave, to interact with anyone or even hear human voices, or to receive letters or newspapers. He is allowed to write letters, read **books**, play the piano, drink, and smoke. As the years go by, the lawyer negotiates different stages of coping with what is essentially solitary confinement. At first, he is terribly lonely and bored, playing the piano, rejecting wine and tobacco, and reading only novels "of a light character." Then, in the second year of his imprisonment, he reads only classics. By the fifth year, he has stopped playing music and refuses to read. He writes letters but tears them up, often weeping, and often drinks and smokes. Next, he voraciously studies philosophy and languages, becoming an expert on several. Then he reads the New Testament, and, finally, in the last two years reads randomly, selecting everything from Shakespeare to the natural sciences.

The day before the lawyer is to be released, the banker is desperate–his fortunes have completely reversed, and he is now so deeply in debt that he cannot afford to pay the lawyer the two million rubles. The banker decides the only solution is to kill the lawyer. He sneaks out to the garden, where it is pouring rain, and deduces that the watchman is gone from his post because of the weather. He sneaks into the lawyer's room and discovers the man asleep, completely emaciated and sickly thanks to his imprisonment, aged far beyond his forty years, and seeming like a "half-dead thing."

The banker reads the note the lawyer has written and left on the table, which is a long treatise that declares how he despises "freedom, life, health and all that your books call the blessings of the world." He has learned a staggering amount from all that he has read, and feels he has traveled all over the world, seen beautiful things, been with beautiful women, learned about the wonders of nature, and become immensely clever. He finds all of that meaningless, however, because it is temporary, and is bewildered by those whom he believes "have bartered heaven for earth." As such, he renounces the two million rubles and declares that he will leave five hours early so as to lose the bet.

The banker begins to weep and kisses the sleeping lawyer on the head, wracked with contempt for himself. The next morning, the watchman informs him that the lawyer has escaped. The banker goes to the garden wing to confirm the departure. He takes the note "to avoid unnecessary rumors" and locks it in his safe.

CHARACTERS

The Banker – Young, wealthy, and fairly reckless at the beginning of the story, the banker insists that death is preferable to life imprisonment and is the one who initially makes the titular bet with the lawyer. In his later years, his luck has faltered and his wealth dwindled, transforming him into a desperate man. Like the everyday people that the lawyer grows to despise, the banker is ruled by his need to maintain his wealth no matter the cost. He decides to kill the lawyer the night before the bet is completed because he fears that the lawyer will become rich and successful with his money while he himself becomes a beggar. Upon finding the lawyer's note and discovering what he has been through physically and psychologically, however, the banker is racked with guilt and self-hatred for making the bet in the first place. Nevertheless, he ultimately decides to protect himself from possible retribution on the part of the lawyer by hiding the letter in his safe. A complex character, the banker reveals both undesirable truths and redeemable realities of the human condition.

The Lawyer – Just 25 years old when he attends the banker's party at the beginning of the story, the lawyer initially asserts that life-imprisonment is far preferable to capital punishment. He proves as reckless as the banker in agreeing to the bet and foolish in lengthening his sentence for the sake of some misplaced pride. Unlike the banker, however, he is not responsible for anyone's safety but his own. He evolves as the years go by in his cell, eventually committing to reading as much as he can and sharpening his mind. By the end of his 15-year term he is a completely changed man—extremely learned yet completely dismissive of all earthly things, insisting that they are misleading mirages that blind human beings to the transience of life. He is resentful of others and sees himself as above those who have "bartered heaven for earth"—that is, who are living in sin. The banker notes that the lawyer is so emaciated by the end of his sentence that he is hard to look at, prematurely aged, and appears ill. This outward appearance contrasts with the lawyer's own belief that he has bettered himself. He ultimately renounces the bet by escaping his cell just five hours before he would be awarded his winnings.

The Watchman – The banker's watchman is mostly absent from the narrative, but he is there to make sure the lawyer doesn't escape. When the banker goes to sneak into the garden wing late at night before the bet is set to end, the watchman has presumably taken shelter from the bad weather and fallen asleep. Later, he runs to tell the banker that the lawyer climbed through the window and escaped.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

Anton Chekhov's "The Bet" sets up a seemingly simple bet about the nature and value of life. The banker, who believes that the death penalty is more humane and moral than life imprisonment, argues that experiences, pleasures, and relationships are what make life worth living. A life spent imprisoned, according to him, is thus essentially not a life at all: it is instead a slow, constant death. In contrast, the young lawyer argues that "to live anyhow is better than not at all"—that being alive, in and of itself, is better than to die. Implied in the young lawyer's argument is the belief that if one is physically alive, one can *make* life worth living regardless of its conditions. When the two men agree that if the lawyer can endure imprisonment for fifteen years then the banker will give him a large sum of money, it is these stakes that they believe the bet is about. Though the banker technically wins the bet, Chekhov ultimately leaves the answer to his initial question—that is, whether life has inherent value—ambiguous.

As the terms of the bet play out, the lawyer initially appears to be "winning." He reads literature, philosophy, history, theology, and the Gospels. Certainly the young lawyer struggles—at times he is described as lying all day on his bed or talking angrily to himself—but there are also moments of genuine elation, such as when he describes his "unearthly happiness" at having learned numerous languages and therefore getting even more access to the accumulated thought of "the geniuses of all ages and of all lands." What's more, day by day, the lawyer lives out his fifteen years of imprisonment without ever trying to escape.

Meanwhile, the banker, who all this time has been free, is miserable. He spends recklessly on earthly pleasures and plays the stock market poorly, and the luck of his early life has fizzled by the time the fifteen-year mark approaches. His millions having dwindled, the money he'll owe if he loses the bet might ruin him. As such, he takes steps to murder the lawyer in order to invalidate the bet. Though the banker had initially appeared to value life over rubles—telling the lawyer not to give up his best years for the promise of a later fortune—he changes his mind in the face of financial ruin.

Despite his complete isolation, the lawyer comes to understand the fleeting nature of pleasure that the banker has experienced first-hand in the outside world. In the letter that he writes on the final night of his imprisonment, the lawyer reveals all of the experiences and wisdom that he has gained through his reading during the prior fifteen years—and then declares all of it to be "worthless, fleeting, illusory, and deceptive, like a mirage" in the face of death. He claims that everything that humankind lives for on Earth—pleasure, love, knowledge, wisdom, *everything*—is worthless, and that only heaven holds value. To show this belief, the lawyer renounces the two million dollars he is owed and sneaks away hours before he is to be released.

What, then, to make of this ending? It seems that neither character—nor their original ideas about the meaning of life—have been entirely borne out. The banker's belief in worldly pleasures and experience has led him to misery (and likely would have led him to murder, had he not discovered the lawyer's plan to renounce the money). The lawyer, meanwhile, abandons his belief in one's ability to make life worthwhile through engagement with the knowledge, art, and wisdom of humanity, and instead proclaims that only heaven has any meaning. That "The Bet" ends on such a note leaves a *new* debate in the hands of the reader to ponder: a debate not about what the meaning of life is, but whether life has meaning at all.

GREED, CORRUPTION, AND IDEALISM

However ambiguous "The Bet" may be regarding the ultimate meaning of life, it is clear in its rejection of material wealth. The lawyer is willing to give up his freedom and remain in solitary confinement for two million rubles, while the wealthy banker throws his wealth around haphazardly to manipulate the banker into a cruel bet and later participates in financial recklessness that almost ruins him, leaving him willing to do anything—including murder—to maintain his status. While the banker is more profoundly affected by wealth than the lawyer (who ultimately renounces the money the banker owes him from the bet), Chekhov is suggesting that money and wealth are inherently corrupting influences.

In the immediate aftermath of the bet, Chekhov states: "The banker, spoilt and frivolous, with millions beyond his reckoning, was delighted at the bet." The money leveraged clearly means very little to the banker because he has so much to spare. The story suggests, then, that what seems like the banker's attempt to assert a moral conviction is actually just a stance he takes for his own enjoyment—and it is specifically his wealth that allows him such reckless frivolity. Fifteen years later, the banker seems to acknowledge as much, calling the bet "the caprice of a pampered man" and rejecting its ability to add genuine insight into the debate that spurred it: "What is the good of that man's losing fifteen years of his life and my throwing away two million?" he asks himself. "Can it prove that the death penalty is better or worse than imprisonment for life? No, no. It was all nonsensical and meaningless."

Even as excess wealth in the story engenders irresponsible and capricious behavior, the desire for more money breeds inarguable moral decay. The banker's "desperate gambling on the Stock Exchange" and "wild speculation" ultimately lead "to the decline of his fortune," transforming the "the proud,

fearless, self-confident millionaire" into "a banker of middling rank, trembling at every rise and fall in his investments." With the lawyer poised to win the bet, the banker fears being pushed into the life of an envious beggar. The idea of no longer being rich is so offensive to the banker that he decides the only solution is to kill the lawyer. Any respect he earlier professed for the sanctity of life has been subsumed by his greed.

The banker's corruption also makes him see those around him as corrupt, too. For example, as the banker admits to his own lack of ideals in making the bet, he also assumes that the lawyer similarly made the best out of "simple greed for money." Of course, the story never actually makes clear whether the lawyer made the bet out of true idealism or because, as the banker believes, he just wanted the two million. Regardless, the lawyer proves profoundly hostile toward money by the story's end. In his final letter, revealed when the banker sneaks into his prison to murder him, the lawyer renounces the money as part of proclaiming the worthlessness of all worldly things. Wealth, in his mind, is utterly incompatible with moral authority.

After reading the letter, the banker's reaction, in which he kisses the lawyer on the head, does not kill him, and then feels such contempt for himself that he can't sleep, shows the power of such true ideals. That the lawyer's letter has thrust the banker's corruption into such stark relief, suggests that, just as greed and wealth invariably corrupt, idealism and ascetism heal. And yet the story doesn't end there: the lawyer then sneaks off and disappears, and the banker puts the letter into his safe so that no one will ever see it. The story, then, shows both the power of true idealism and seems to suggest that such idealism can't actually find a way to exist in the real world, dictated as it so often is by monetary concerns and an association of success with financial well-being. Those who feel true idealism, like the lawyer, feel the need to remove themselves from society. And those who experience idealism in others may be briefly affected by it, but they soon hide that away in the face of other more pragmatic, more corrupt concerns.

IMPRISONMENT AND FREEDOM

"The Bet" creates a situation in which a young lawyer, as part of a bet, is voluntarily imprisoned in solitary confinement for fifteen years. The bet itself is spurred by a debate about the nature of imprisonment: the lawyer believes that life is still worth living even when one is completely isolated, while the bet's other party, the banker, holds that imprisonment, and the resultant loss of contact with the world, robs life of any value or meaning. The lawyer's survival of the subsequent fifteen years initially seems to suggest that he is right—that a life of strictly regulated isolation is better than no life at all. Meanwhile, the banker flounders despite his freedom, losing both his fortune and moral compass during the fifteen years he engages with a world that the lawyer is denied. This, combined with the lawyer's ultimate renunciation of all worldly society even after his imprisonment ends, raises the question as to whether *anyone* is ever actually free—or simply trapped in a prison of society's making.

Throughout his solitary confinement the lawyer plays music, reads books on subjects across all realms of human knowledge, drinks wine, smokes cigarettes, and so on. The lawyer not only endures his imprisonment, but at times he even seems to thrive—much to the banker's dismay, it becomes clear that the lawyer will win the bet. Imprisonment, the story seems to suggest, can't snuff out a purposeful life, and perhaps that a life that lacks purpose, such as the banker's, is the actual prison.

The final twist of the story changes this understanding completely, however. After the banker decides he must win the bet and sneaks into the prison-house to kill the lawyer, he finds the lawyer's final letter. In the letter, the lawyer renounces the terms of the bet and gives up his winnings, on the grounds that he has come to realize during his imprisonment that everything he valued, and everything most people value—from money, to art, to wisdom, to love—is meaningless in the face of death, and that only heaven holds any worth.

Put another way, while earlier in the story it seemed possible to see the banker's immoral life as a prison and the lawyer's imprisoned life as free, what the lawyer here argues is that *all* life is a prison: that anything worldly that people pursue, whether immoral or noble, is a prison that blinds them to the truth of what matters (that is, heaven). The banker responds by feeling personal shame and sparing the lawyer's life, but also by locking the lawyer's letter away. This suggests that this prison, which holds all of humanity, is voluntary—any person could read the lawyer's message and reject the prison of life, but instead nearly every person instead chooses to live an imprisoned life.

CHRISTIANITY

The initial debate between the banker and the lawyer about the death penalty is explicitly grounded in Christian morality. In fact, everyone at the banker's party is presented as having the same general view of the death penalty: "They considered that form of punishment out of date, immoral, and unsuitable for Christian States." Though the story doesn't much mention religion again, a closer look at the ending reveals that the "The Bet" has a deeper interaction with Christianity than might first appear. For one thing, when the banker sees the lawyer for the first time in fifteen years, Chekhov describes the lawyer as Christlike in ways both general ("a man unlike ordinary people") and specific ("with long curls," a "shaggy beard," "his back long and narrow," and so on). Second, the lawyer's final letter reveals his ultimate rejection of all earthly things—not simply the money he is owed from the bet, but also love, art, knowledge, and wisdom, all of which, he says, are like dust in comparison to

heaven. The lawyer thus emerges from fifteen years of imprisonment with a radical religious message that is, in fact, not that different from radical interpretations of Christ's message about the relative merits of this world and the next.

Of course, that is not the end of the story's exploration of Christianity. Although the banker has decided to kill the lawyer to avoid losing the bet, he is moved by the lawyer's message and he feels contempt for himself. He's not moved enough to truly respect the lawyer's teachings, however: when the lawyer sneaks away in the night and disappears, the banker locks the lawyer letter explaining his newfound wisdom in the safe to avoid "unnecessary talk." The wicked banker, in other words fails to spread the lawyer's message, while the lawyer himself, now a radical prophet, also disappears, taking his gospel with him.

It's important to note that, though the lawyer reflects a certain religious asceticism (that is, the abstention from pleasure in the pursuit of spirituality), he also proves pessimistic and self-serving. The lawyer is plagued by hatred and derision towards regular people who engage with earthly life. He claims that earthly things, even natural beauty and hard-earned wisdom, are all irrelevant, silly, and false because of their ephemeral nature. For all of his reading and moralizing, he fails to embody the kindness and love that Christ preached. His dismissal of "all worldly blessings and wisdom," as well as his physically decrepit nature, indicate a perversion of religious enlightenment.

The story, then, seems to suggest that the original debate about Christian morals among the well-off intellectuals at the party was a kind of sham, a conversation among people who haven't truly devoted themselves to the morals they purport to respect above all others. This is made even clearer by their belief in the merits of intellectualism and their enjoyment of their status and money (all of which the lawyer renounces when he becomes a Christ figure). And with the lawyer's disappearance into the night, and the disappearance of his message into the banker's safe, the story suggests that it will always be this way: that the radical messages of religion, and Christianity in particular, will never truly come to hold sway in the world, but rather will always end up obscured and co-opted by society.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BOOKS

The books that the lawyer reads symbolize his mental state and philosophical outlook, as his reading choices track his evolving views on the nature and value of human life. When he initially agrees to the bet, the lawyer is young and callow, and as such the first books he reads are "light," selected to pass the time. He later asks for more substantial literature, which ultimately frustrates him to the point that he stops reading entirely. When he eventually returns to reading, he focuses on philosophy, history, languages, and, finally, the Bible. Although he becomes learned over his fifteen years in captivity, he never acquires actual lived experience, and in a way, he remains just as naïve and innocent of the ways of the world as he was in the beginning of the story, still willing to speak authoritatively about things of which he has no experience (which is what got him into the bet in the first place). In a way, then, he has learned nothing. He claims to be "cleverer than [them] all" by the end, and he surely has acquired wisdom, but the books represent a naïve understanding of the world that is devoid of wisdom gained through experience.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Green Bird edition of *The Bet and Other Stories* published in 2017.

Part 1 Quotes

"I myself have experienced neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment, but if one may judge *a priori*, then in my opinion capital punishment is more moral and more humane than imprisonment. Execution kills instantly, life-imprisonment kills by degrees. Who is the more humane executioner, one who kills you in a few seconds or one who draws the life out of you incessantly, for years?"

Related Characters: The Banker (speaker), The Lawyer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the banker is explaining his stance in the debate over whether capital punishment or life imprisonment is more humane. The banker believes that to live in prison is to die slowly, and it is difficult or impossible to live a meaningful life without freedom. There is some morality in a quick and painless death, he asserts, which (for him) makes capital punishment less cruel than life imprisonment. Notably, he also thinks that the State has the right to take away life, which the lawyer does not.

Like the lawyer, the banker speaks *a priori*, which is Latin for "without lived experience." This establishes a kind of ignorance towards the reality of imprisonment that everyone at the party shares even as they express opinions on the topic. This will contrast with a later scene after

fifteen years have passed, when both the banker and the lawyer have acquired different kinds of wisdom.

"Capital punishment and life-imprisonment are equally immoral; but if I were offered the choice between them, I would certainly choose the second. It's better to live somehow than not to live at all."

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker), The Banker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment the lawyer offers his perspective on the debate over the morality of capital punishment. Unlike the banker, who believes the death penalty to be a form of mercy, the lawyer believes that it would be immoral for the State to take away life in any form. The lawyer judges that life imprisonment would be preferable to capital punishment simply because it is not death; for him, the value of life is simple—that one has it. This moment, then, cuts to the deeper issue at the heart of the debate: it is not simply about the morality of imprisonment, but whether life has any inherent meaning at all. The lawyer's stance, of course, soon puts him in a dangerous position when he attempts to make a wager with the banker, because he has declared that as long as one is alive, any kind of hypothetical suffering short of death is acceptable. Though the banker's age is not specified, the lawyer is said to be only twenty-five years old and is frequently referred to as "young." His naïveté and inexperience contribute to his foolhardy bet.

"Why did I make this bet? What's the good? The lawyer loses fifteen years of his life and I throw away two million. Will it convince people that capital punishment is worse or better than imprisonment for life? No, no! all stuff and rubbish. On my part, it was the caprice of a well-fed man; on the lawyer's pure greed of gold."

Related Characters: The Banker (speaker), The Lawyer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

On the eve of the lawyer's release, the banker grows distraught and reflects on the foolishness of the bet. He realizes now that he never stood to gain anything in the first place, and will likely lose a substantial amount of money. The lawyer, meanwhile, has lost fifteen years of his life, something that can never be repaid. Here the banker admits to himself that, for his part, the bet was never about his moral conviction, but rather something he did for his own enjoyment. That his fortune allowed him such frivolity underscores the corrupting nature of wealth. Though the banker asserts that the lawyer, like himself, was initially fueled by greed, this is never confirmed by the story. The lawyer may, in fact, have undertaken the bet out of a genuine desire to prove his belief in the inherent value of life. Regardless, it appears here that the banker's own corruption pushes him to view everyone around him as corrupt as well.

During the last two years of his confinement the prisoner read an extraordinary amount, quite haphazard. Now he would apply himself to the natural sciences, then he would read Byron or Shakespeare ... He read as though he were swimming in the sea among broken pieces of wreckage, and in his desire to save his life was eagerly grasping one piece after another.

Related Characters: The Lawyer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Before the bet, the lawyer had professed the belief that life is worth living no matter the circumstances, and he quickly resolved to educate himself while he is imprisoned—that is, to use his time wisely. His last two years' worth of books, however, reveal a drastic shift in these beliefs. He has obtained a great deal of knowledge over the past thirteen years, yet the desperation evident in this passage shows him to be at his wits' end. His indiscriminate choice of books suggests the lawyer's struggle to maintain any sense of purpose that would make his life worth living. He appears to be "eagerly grasping" for meaning, and failing to find what he is looking for.

Part 2 Quotes

"He will take away my last farthing, marry, enjoy life, gamble on the Exchange, and I will look on like an envious beggar and hear the same words from him every day: 'I'm obliged to you for the happiness of my life. Let me help you.' No, it's too much! The only escape from bankruptcy and disgrace—is that the man should die."

Related Characters: The Banker (speaker), The Lawyer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

On the eve of the lawyer's release, the banker, who has lost his fortune in the intervening years, begins to fear what will become of him should he have to adhere to the terms of the bet and pay the lawyer the two million rubles he is owed. The banker cannot envision a meaningful life in poverty—for him, the value of life is wealth. So repulsed is the banker at the notion of being poor that he resolves to murder the lawyer to preserve his own financial status. Chekhov is again suggesting the corrosive nature of excessive wealth and greed. This moment also suggests that, though ostensibly freer than the imprisoned lawyer, the banker—and much of society—is actually in a prison of his own making, completely beholden to earthly financial concerns. This moment, then, serves as an indictment of a materialistic, corrupt society on the whole.

"Before the table sat a man, unlike an ordinary human being. It was a skeleton, with tight-drawn skin, with long curly hair like a woman's, and a shaggy beard. The color of his face was yellow, of an earthy shade; the cheeks were sunken, the back long and narrow, and the hand upon which he leaned his hairy head was so lean and skinny that it was painful to look upon. His hair was already silvering with grey, and no one who glanced at the senile emaciation of the face would have believed that he was only forty years old."

Related Characters: The Lawyer, The Banker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This moment describes the first time that the banker sees the lawyer after fifteen years, when he sneaks into his cell to kill him. The lawyer has changed immensely from a callow twenty-five-year-old to a prematurely aged, extremely sickly-looking person. The use of "skeleton," "it," and phrases like "unlike an ordinary human being" create distance from the lawyer's humanity. This suggests that isolation is unnatural, and that human beings require society to function.

The description of the lawyer here also evokes religious imagery, as his long curly hair and shaggy beard recall images of Jesus. This suggests the lawyer is a Christ-like figure, and indeed the banker will soon uncover the lawyer's gospel in the form of his final letter.

"To-morrow at twelve o'clock midnight, I shall obtain my freedom and the right to mix with people. But... [o]n my own clear conscience and before God who sees me I declare to you that I despise freedom, life, health, and all that your books call the blessings of the world."

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is from the lawyer's letter that the banker reads. One might think that someone who has been imprisoned for so long would eagerly anticipate their freedom and rejoice at its approach, but the lawyer speaks in a bitter tone about his release. His rejection of "freedom, life, health" further reveals a perversion of typical values and suggests that the lawyer has become a parody of the enlightened scholar. Despite his extensive knowledge gained from books, he cannot appreciate the things that make human life enjoyable. Nothing in life is meaningful to him anymore, which is an enormous reversal of his stance in the beginning of the story (that life is valuable no matter the circumstances).

"Everything is void, frail, visionary and delusive as a mirage. Though you be proud and wise and beautiful, yet will death wipe you from the face of the earth … You are mad, and gone the wrong way. You take falsehood for truth and ugliness for beauty... So do I marvel at you, who have bartered heaven for earth. I do not want to understand you."

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker), The Banker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This is another excerpt from the lawyer's letter, in which he declares all earthly pleasures and knowledge illusory, and therefore, meaningless. This reflects the story's broader rejection of materialism and its notion that society itself is a prison, but also calls into question the lawyer's moral authority. In his hatred for everyone and everything (particularly virtues like freedom and health), the lawyer represents a perversion of the religious ascetic who sacrifices certain normal aspects of human life for the sake of enlightenment. His obsession with death and hatred of other people further separates him from figures like Christ, who believe they are sacrificing themselves for the good of others. Though the lawyer talks about heaven and often speaks in Christian terms, he ultimately proves a parody of a good Christian in his hatefulness and contempt for other people.

"When he had read, the banker put the sheet on the table, kissed the head of the strange man, and began to weep … Never at any other time, not even after his terrible losses on the Exchange, had he felt such contempt for himself as now. Coming home, he lay down on his bed, but agitation and tears kept him a long time from sleeping…"

Related Characters: The Lawyer, The Banker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after finishing the lawyer's letter, the banker is overcome with emotion and breaks into tears, feeling tremendous contempt for himself. The lawyer's letter has perhaps caused the banker to acknowledge his own corruption, suggesting that while greed breeds moral decay, a certain rejection of materialism can be redemptive. Of course, the banker may also simply be relieved that he will no longer have to pay the two million rubles. Indeed, the fleeting nature of his supposed moral redemption will soon be evidenced by the fact that he locks the letter away from the rest of the world.

"The banker instantly went with his servants to the wing and established the escape of his prisoner. To avoid unnecessary rumors he took the paper with the renunciation from the table and, on his return, locked it in his safe."

Related Characters: The Lawyer, The Banker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In the final moments of the story, the banker locks the lawyer's letter away in his safe. The letter is in essence the lawyer's gospel, and the banker's hiding of it thus suggests that the banker's moral redemption was fleeting, quickly subsumed by more pressing material concerns. This again echoes the idea of society itself as a prison, preventing people from embracing spiritual enlightenment. The lawyer's idealism cannot coexist within such a corrupt world, and as such he removes himself from it entirely. If one views the letter as akin to radical message of Christianity, then the banker's actions also reflect the shallowness of his and his intellectual companions' assertion of Christian values in the beginning of the story. He refuses to share this new gospel with the rest of the world, suggesting that such radical religious teachings will always be co-opted and obscured by society. Finally, Chekhov creates a sense of irony through the fact that the lawyer's letter—an assertion of the meaninglessness of this earthly life—is itself effectively rendered meaningless by the banker's earthly concerns.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

On a dark autumn night, the banker paces in his study and recalls a party he hosted fifteen years before. In a flashback, he and several of his guests, many of whom are journalists and scholars, discuss whether capital punishment is more humane than life imprisonment. Most guests disapprove of capital punishment, claiming it is obsolete and immoral under a Christian state and should be replaced by life imprisonment.

The question of life imprisonment vs. capital punishment is really a question of morality and mercy, and one that further depends on one's interpretation of the inherent value of life. Chekhov's mention of a Christian state adds a religious element to the story and foreshadows the lawyer's ultimate, near-Christlike renunciation of earthly goods and pleasures.

The banker disagrees, suggesting that capital punishment is in its way more moral than life imprisonment because it kills instantaneously instead of by degrees, which is more humane. An unnamed guest remarks that they are both equally immoral, because the State does not have the right to take away that which it cannot give back. A young lawyer then speaks up, agreeing that both punishments are equally immoral but adding that he would prefer life imprisonment because "it's better to live somehow than not to live at all."

The banker presents an opposing argument that suggests a certain morality to the death penalty. The lawyer, meanwhile, insists on death as the ultimate punishment. The answer to the debate again rests on whether one believes that life is inherently valuable, or if meaning is gleaned only through engagement with the world—and, as such, meaningless within the confines of life imprisonment.

The banker loses his temper, bangs his fist on the table, and makes a bet with the lawyer for two million rubles that he couldn't stay in a cell for five years. The lawyer, equally roused, raises the stakes to fifteen years. The bet is solidified in front of numerous witnesses.

Both the banker and the lawyer prove themselves haughty and inexperienced, so eager to prove their own points that they raise the stakes of the bet to the point of absurdity. This lends the story a fable-like quality (Chekhov in fact originally titled it "Fairytale").

The banker further goads the lawyer over dinner, telling him to back out before it is too late. He points out that the lawyer would be losing "three or four of the best years of [his] life," though no more because he would surely not be able to stay any longer than that. He also reminds the lawyer that voluntary rather than enforced imprisonment is much harder psychologically.

The banker values years of life over money at this point in the story; of course, as an already wealthy man, he does not yet understand the allure of money for someone in poverty. The lawyer, meanwhile, agrees to give up years of life with the promise of later fortune. Both instances suggest the corrupting nature of money.

Back in the present, the banker bemoans his decision to make this bet, because nothing has been gained: the lawyer has lost fifteen years of his life, it looks like the banker will lose two million rubles, and no one will have gained any knowledge as to whether capital punishment or life imprisonment is preferable.

The banker's lament suggests how far his fortunes have fallen in the intervening years. It also reflects the story's own ambiguity as to whether life is inherently meaningful.

Fifteen years previously, the lawyer is put under strict observation in a garden wing of the banker's house. He is forbidden to leave, to interact with anyone or hear human voices, or to receive letters or newspapers. He is allowed to write letters, read **books**, play the piano, drink wine, and smoke tobacco. He can also send notes through a little window, asking for things like books or wines. Any attempt to escape means the banker will not have to pay the two million rubles.

The terms laid out for the lawyer during his imprisonment dictate how he will live for the next fifteen years, limiting his access to the parts of life that, for most people, make living worthwhile. Such restrictive rules set the stage for the story's meditation on whether life has meaning without earthly pleasures or human interaction.

At first, the lawyer struggles to adjust to the loneliness and boredom of his captivity. He plays piano all day and night, reads **books** "of a light character" to pass the time, and rejects wine and tobacco, fearing the former would excite desires he cannot fulfill while the latter would spoil the air in his room.

The dismissive description of the lawyer's initial reading list as being "of a light character" suggests that such books are a waste of time, in contrast with the lawyer's later pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. The lawyer's renunciation of pleasurable things like wine, meanwhile, suggests the danger of temptation, or desiring what one does not have—ironically, exactly what the lawyer has done in his pursuit of future riches.

In the second year, the lawyer stops playing piano and starts reading classic **books**. By the fifth year, he is playing music again and asking for wine. That year, he often simply lays around. He does not read, and though he writes occasionally he tears it up and often weeps.

The lawyer remains miserable and unfulfilled, weeping and resorting to the alcohol he previously denied himself—underscoring the toll imprisonment is taking on his psyche and calling into question his initial assertion of the inherent value of life.

In the sixth year, the lawyer begins to zealously study languages, philosophy, and history, reading more **books** than can easily be brought to him. He writes a letter to the banker in six languages and expresses joy at being able to understand the geniuses of the world. In the letter, he also asks the banker to fire a gun in the garden if there are no mistakes found in his translations, which the banker does.

The lawyer finds moments of happiness as he devotes himself to acquiring knowledge about the from which world he has been separated. The learning of languages in particular suggests a desire to engage with the world beyond his cell, yet he has no one to speak with.

In the tenth year, the lawyer reads only the New Testament. In the next two years, he reads haphazardly and randomly, focusing on anything from the natural sciences to Byron and Shakespeare. He reads almost desperately, as though "he were swimming in the sea among broken pieces of wreckage, and in his desire to save his life was eagerly grasping one piece after another."

The suggestion that the lawyer is "at sea" and attempting to save his own life indicates that he is at his wits' end, having been isolated for so long. He searches for meaning in religion, though his subsequent focus on seemingly random works suggest an inability to find what he is looking for.

PART 2

It is fifteen years later and the eve of the lawyer's release. The banker is distraught because he cannot afford to pay the two million rubles. At the time he made the bet, he was exceedingly wealthy, but in the intervening years, gambling on the stock exchange, risky speculation, and recklessness destroyed his business.

Though free, the banker has also suffered in the intervening years. His reckless spending and pursuit of earthly pleasures has brought about his ruin, underscoring the corrupting nature of greed.

The old banker fears that the lawyer will, having won the bet, become wealthy, marry, and enjoy life the same way he had years ago, while the banker himself becomes a beggar. The banker concludes that the only solution is to kill the lawyer.

The banker's vision of the lawyer as successful, wealthy, and wed, while he himself is a beggar, reveals how deeply he connects wealth with personal success. Though the banker previously proclaimed life more valuable than rubles—telling the lawyer not to give up his prime for a later fortune—he changes his mind in the face of financial ruin.

It is three o'clock in the morning and everyone is asleep. The wind howls and it is pouring rain. The banker sneaks out to the garden and calls for the watchman, but he gets no answer. He suspects the watchman has taken shelter from the bad weather and fallen asleep. The banker thinks to himself that the watchman will be the first one suspected of the crime, if he can bring himself to do it.

The banker's plan to let the watchman take the blame for his crime further reflects how deeply corrupt he has grown over the past fifteen years. The world outside the lawyer's cell is thus suggested to be full of temptation and greed. Freedom, Chekhov suggests, is no guarantee of a more moral—or perhaps meaningful—life.

The banker enters the hall and sees that the watchman is indeed missing. He taps on the lawyer's window but the prisoner does not stir. He cautiously opens the door. The lawyer is revealed to be skeleton-like, with "tight-drawn skin," a yellow color, and sunken cheeks. His is aged far beyond his forty years and so emaciated that the banker finds him painful to look at. There is a sheet of paper beside him. The banker thinks to himself how easy it would be to kill this "half-dead thing," but he decides to read the paper first.

Imprisonment has resulted in the lawyer's extreme physical deterioration, revealing the toll such isolation takes on human beings and suggesting the inhumanity of such a punishment. This deterioration is linked both to his physical isolation and the overabundance of knowledge that made him almost "know too much."


The lawyer has written that he will receive his freedom the next day, and with it the "right to mix with people." But before he leaves, he wants to say a few words to the banker. First of all, he hates freedom, life, health, and all the blessings of the world that he discovered in the **books** he read. The lawyer continues that he has studied "earthly life" for fifteen years, and despite never seeing any of it in person, he feels he has truly experienced everything he's read about—that he drank the wine, sang the songs, hunted the animals, loved the beautiful women, and traveled the world. He has even done things that are impossible or unimaginable, like cast himself into abysses, worked miracles, burned cities to the ground, and conquered countries.

Whatever wisdom the lawyer has gained seems to have done him no favors. Instead, he emerges from his imprisonment a bitter, hateful man with no appreciation of those "blessings of the world" that make life worth living. This suggests a reversal of his previous argument of the inherent value of life. He further equates his "study of earthly life" with actual lived experience, insisting that his immersion onto the fantastical worlds of literature is as valid as anything the banker has actually lived through.

All the wisdom from the **books**, writes the lawyer, is condensed into a little lump in his skull. He has become cleverer than almost everyone, but he despises wisdom, blessings, and books because they are hollow and a mirage. Death will claim everything that is wise, proud, and beautiful, he writes. The lawyer asserts that everyone is mad and misguided. They take falsehood for truth and ugliness for beauty, and they do not understand what is truly beautiful and holy. They have traded the promise of heaven for a full but illusory life on earth, which he cannot and does not want to understand.

The lawyer declares all of the knowledge and pseudo-experience he has gained to be worthless, fleeting, and illusory in the face of death. His assertion of the transitory nature of earthly pleasures is illustrated by the banker's current state of ruin, suggesting that the lawyer's wisdom, however dismal, is not entirely incorrect, and that he has come to understand much of the world even when isolated from it. Both men, on either side of the prison cell, end up in a far darker place than where they started, adding to the story's sense of ambiguity as to the inherent meaning of life.

The lawyer has come to hold people who appreciate earthly things in contempt, and as such he waives the two million rubles because this money, like everything else, is shallow and transient. He maintains the terms of the bet, though, by announcing that he will leave his cell five hours early so that the lawyer is legally absolved from paying him. There the letter ends.

Though the lawyer's disdain for earthly things is supposed to connote a connection to heaven, he despises everything in a way that a true religious ascetic—one who rejects earthly pleasures in the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment—likely would not. He maintains the conventions and morality of the banker's society, however, by not reneging on the bet or cheating.

The banker has begun to cry. He puts the letter down and kisses the lawyer on the head before leaving. He is full of contempt for himself, and he has trouble falling asleep because he is so agitated that he cannot stop crying.

The banker's reasons for crying are never made precisely clear, though he likely feels guilty for his own corruption and his wicked scheme. The lawyer's letter has perhaps caused him to acknowledge has far he has fallen, in a moral sense, over the past years. While he may be touched by the lawyer's spiritual change, it is just as likely that he decides not to kill the lawyer because he believes that the lawyer will indeed renounce the money, and as such there is no point to his murder.

The next morning, the watchman comes running to the banker and says that the lawyer climbed through the window into the garden and escaped. The banker goes to the garden wing and establishes that he has indeed escaped. He takes the paper with the renunciation, just to "avoid unnecessary rumors," and locks it in his safe.

Whatever guilt the banker felt has softened enough by the next morning that he is willing to hide the lawyer's letter, which is a sort of religious gospel. Whatever wisdom the lawyer acquired will remain locked away—ironically making his grand assertion about the meaninglessness of life itself meaningless.

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