

The Trivialities Deconstructed the Sublime

-- On the Hostilities in Chekhov's Middle Stories based on Enemies

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Abstract

In the middle ages of Chekhov's writing life, the irreconcilable contradictions between the rich and the poor in his earlier works are shelved and diluted, and the antagonism in the short stories gradually shifts from the class center. Instead, the trivial and absurd life starts a tug of war with the beauty of human love. In *Enemies*, the individual sufferings disintegrate the fraternity and compassion between people, and the vulgar citizen life covers all the nobility of human nature like a big net, making all the people struggling to survive. Whether they are strong or the weak, they are suffering from the same hostility.

Keywords

Chekhov; Middle Stories; Enemies; Hostility.

1. Introduction

If Chekhov's novel writing career can be roughly divided into three stages, then in the early 1880s, readers can often find two obvious antagonistic forces in his works, which are composed of the sad and humble peasants and the "well-fed" who are indifferent observers. For example, in *Oyster*, readers watching people around a restaurant feeding a starving child with oysters. The apparent mockery of human suffering has drawn a class chasm between the ignorant and humble peasant and the happy and indifferent rich. The first-person narration from the perspective of a child highlights the helplessness and sadness of being innocent and insignificant against the cruel world. However, Chekhov's literary work did not stop there. His gradually changing worldview can be found in a series of short stories from 1885-1886 to the early 1990s. For Chekhov, a life without a clear worldview is not a life, but a burden, a terrible thing (He, 2017). Therefore, some scholars call this period as the period of experimentalism in Chekhov's creating career (Frydman, 1979).

From this period, the writer abandoned the class antagonism in his early works and tried to reveal how the trivial and vulgar life of the petty citizens disintegrate the beauty and nobility of human nature. In his 1986 work *Enemies*, he wrote: "... people should be united by the similarity of their sorrow, far more injustice and cruelty are generated than in comparatively placid surroundings" (Chekhov, 2014). At this period, the protagonists in Chekhov's works often cover up the long and habitual pain of life with unimportant conversations and trifles, which creates a depressing and cold atmosphere of the stories. In 1990, the Sakhalin trip changed Chekhov for the second time (He, 2017). He developed his own hesitant and converted writing attitude in the middle works, and since stood firmly on the side of democracy, trying to explain that the absurd and trivial life circumstances around people are the ultimate source of conflict between them. Based on all above this, this article will start with *Enemies* (written in 1887), one of the most critically discussed mid-term stories, to explore the composition of the

antagonistic emotions in his short stories, and to gain a deeper understanding of the theme of his works and the changing world view behind the writer's creation.

2. The Transitory Sublime of Humanity Section Headings

In Chekhov's art world, interpersonal relationships are always full of quarrels and misunderstandings. Anne Frydman noted that in his early stories, Anton Chekhov "Often pairs two kinds of characters with voyaging traits" (Frydman, 1979). But this habitual hostility does not start from the moment the two sides meet. On the contrary, the writer usually first inspires the character's human loftiness and fraternity through a specific plot. When the reader is touched and deeply pondering, the writer deconstructs the sense of sublime through vulgar and trivial absurd plots and dialogues, only leaving the readers stunned.

In the short story *Enemies*, the doctor Kirilov who just lost his beloved son, at the request of Abogin, is moved by what he calls "human love" and leaves his sorrowful wife for the patient. The noble and solemn behavior of the doctor can't help but remind people of the ending of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, where Rose of Sharon, who just gave birth to a dead baby, fed a starving man with her own milk of her weak body. In order to set the noble tone of the first part of the story, Chekhov first tried to heighten the tragic beauty of the doctor's home after the death of the child:

there was something that attracted and touched the heart, that subtle, almost elusive beauty of human sorrow which men will not for a long time learn to understand and describe, and which it seems only music can convey. There was a feeling of beauty, too, in the austere stillness (339).

The loss of a loved one, the doctor and the wife, in their sincere grief and anguish, burst out a timeless beauty. Even though the dead is terrible, the looks on people's faces are numbness and life is suffering and absurd, but at this moment, this pure sadness reveals the purest aspect of human nature, the sad despair in the name of love. Thus, as the intruder of this house, Abogin pleads with the doctor: "Life comes before any personal sorrow! Come, I ask for courage, for heroism! For the love of humanity!" The sublime beauty of pure grief gives the sublime of humanity. The gradual progression of the words "life", "courage", "heroism" and "love of humanity" evokes in the reader a sense of tragic generosity. Personal grief and loss are temporarily forgotten, and the doctor, urged not only by Abogin, but also by the narrator and the readers, leaves the house.

In addition, the doctor and the reader are moved by another of Abogin's beggarly pleas: "Who should understand my horror if not you?" We have before us two men, both suffering and in need. Abogin's question echoes the epigraph to *Grief*, taken from one of the *Psalms*, "To whom can I tell my sorrow?" It introduces here, early in the story, the idea, or supposition, that those who suffer empathize with each other, can understand and help. The pains which are not heard by the "well-feds" in Chekhov's early novels is heard and understood here. Human love not only enables doctors to make the decision to save their lives, but also brings them closer and unites them as a community against human suffering. Here, the author spares no effort to show the nobility and beauty of human nature.

The story, specially, does not end there, but hinted at the faltering sublime. What happens further will address itself to this supposition, and, not surprisingly, will contradict it. As the intruder of the pure poetic grief of Kirilov and his wife, all of Abogin's pleas, whatever their name, are jarring. His displeasing voice and contrived intonation put a false veil over this sublime. If it achieves its' climax at the doctor's decision to ask "is it far?" then when the doctor gets into the carriage and regrets, Abogin keeps silent, and when they arrive at home, Abogin's

rich state and his hysteria after the farcical clown incident shatter all of the lofty tone set at the beginning of the story by the fact that both sides ignore or even denigrate each other's suffering, accusing and insulting each other. The transcendence of the union between the doctor and Abogin is broken, and Abogin's payment of money to the doctor further divides the class between them, causing a story of nobility and beauty to descend into a vulgar farce amid petty squabbles.

3. Trivial and Ridiculous Conversational Conflicts

In 1889, Chekhov wrote in his play *The Woods Demon* that the world is not destroyed by robbers and thieves, but by the hidden hatred, the rivalry between good people, and by petty squabbles. In *Enemies*, it is not the death of his only son itself that makes the doctor angry, nor the persistence of Abogin's pleas for him to out, but the humiliation of the failure of his noble act, in which he feels like in the midst of a vulgar comedy. This anger deepens in Abogin's demented muttering and disregard, and turns into hatred and hostility after a quarrel with him, whom he believes is "making a mockery of another man's sorrow." Abogin's feelings quickly changed from anger at being betrayed by his wife to hatred and insults towards the doctor. It is worth noting that the conflict between the two is not as intense and unified as in the traditional works, but goes on in long and trivial and meaningless dialogue. Indeed, the conversation goes from the doctor asking, "Where is the patient?" For a long time afterward, the two men talked to themselves, neither listening nor trying to understand each other, but overemphasizing unimportant details. Abogin, for example, recalls the man who ran off with his wife: "I did not notice that he came every day! I did not notice that he came today in a closed carriage! What did he come in a closed carriage for? And I did not see it! Noodle!" It is as if his grief at being betrayed by his wife is hard to understand in this kind of gag. Also, the doctor's angry blame "play the bassoon and the trombone, grow as fat as capons...", the seemingly off-topic and amusing metaphors in his speech make the reader feel confused and ridiculous.

It is the difference between the ordinary and trivial daily life scenes and the overall atmosphere that makes people feel confused, which eliminates the unique aesthetic effect after the violent outbreak of concentrated contradictions, realizes the contradiction between the characters and the usual psychology, and shows that the spiritual aspiration of the characters is gradually losing under the trick of fate.

A process in which the actual action of a character deviates from its spiritual appeal. Chekhov describes everyday pictures and trivial things as if they had no ideological content, but together they create a special world, a strange, puzzling and surprising world. The doctor's house call is originally from his sacrifice and noble intention, while Abogin's plea and candor are also from the close care. However, the result of the combination of the two is so unexpected that the noble feelings they have sought are broken, and both of them become mediocre people at the same time.

Enemies begins as this: "Between nine and ten on a dark September evening the only son of the district doctor, Kirilov, a child of six, called Andrey, died of diphtheria". The opening is reminiscent of the opening of Camus's naturalistic novel *The Stranger*: "Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure". Both recounting the tragic events of a loved one's death in the same dispirited tone. Chekhov's short story *Doctor*, written the same year, tells a similar story, also beginning with the death of a boy. And like *Enemies*, the protagonists of the story are both doctors, and the dialogue and conflict in the story are all set between two people. They promote the conflict in the trivial and long-worded dialogue, not giving a symbolic ending to the story. The unfinished contradictions and conflicts between the characters reflect the absurdity and helplessness of life as a whole, which makes the audience understand the helplessness and absurdity of life as a whole after a superficial feeling of the subtle

contradictions and conflicts among the characters. The grief over the death of a loved one in both works is actually expressed in *Grief* (1985), in which Abogin in *Enemies* pleads with the doctor, "Who should understand my horror if not you?" It forms intertextuality with *Grief*.

The difference is that in *Grief*, the farmer's long-winded and mediocre outpouring is not listened to. At the end, he tries to pour out his sorrow and regret to the onlookers, but the doctor in the ward just walks out of the ward with a wave of his hand. In *Doctor*, the doctor tries to get the woman to answer his pressing questions, but the woman lies and cries, and the man's soliloquy and exhortations seem to be drowned out in the sound of the woman's crying. Only in *Enemies*, Doctor Kirilov and Abogin first agree to listen to each other in the name of human Love, although the brief listening and conversation were destroyed by the trivial human sufferings.

4. The Setting of the Antagonism

The antagonism between Kirilov and Abogin is foreshadowed from the start, even as the author creates a brief atmosphere of sublime and peace through suffering and grief. "Just as the doctor's wife sank on her knees by the dead child's bedside and was overwhelmed by the first rush of despair there came a sharp ring at the bell in the entry." The sadness of the interruption established Abogin as an intruder, and the mournful house in which the doctor is shrouded in darkness contrasts sharply with Abogin's dignified white scarf and face, "so pale that its entrance seemed to make the passage lighter." Abogin, the intruder of the sorrow, has unknowingly placed himself in the Doctor's enemy position. Then, "like people always do who are frightened and overwhelmed, he spoke in brief, jerky sentences and uttered a great many unnecessary, irrelevant words." This triviality makes him even more annoying. After doctors tells him his child has died five minutes earlier and that he is unable to leave the house, Abogin says: "My God, at what an unlucky moment I have come!" but then he added: "A wonderfully unhappy day... wonderfully. What a coincidence.... It's as though it were on purpose!" It is as if in his eyes the loss of the doctor's family was just a coincidence set up by God for his own unfortunate. It can be seen that from the very beginning, he never stands on the doctor's point of view, put himself in his place to understand him and sympathize with him. Thus, when he later pleads for a home visit, even impressing the doctor and even the reader with some grand words, the narrator intervenes in time, writing:

Abogin was sincere, but it was remarkable that whatever he said his words sounded stilted, soulless, and inappropriately flowery, and even seemed an outrage on the atmosphere of the doctor's home and on the woman who was somewhere dying. He felt this himself, and so, afraid of not being understood, did his utmost to put softness and tenderness into his voice (339).

This passage hints at the hypocrisy in which Abogin moves the doctor in the name of humanity, and at the conflict and shame to come in the story when this false humanity collapses.

If Abogin becomes the intruder of the pure sorrow in the doctor's home, then when the scene switches and Doctor Kirilov arrives at Abogin's home, the "intruder" becomes the doctor himself. Abogin is distraught by his wife's sudden betrayal, but in the eyes of the doctor, it is just "vulgarity". He lashed out at Abogin for showing no respect for human dignity and "...mockery of other man's sorrow". As soon as the doctor's mood passes from sadness to anger, the sublime sense of beauty vanishes from him. To some extent, the doctor's criticism of Abogin forms a kind of tense irony, that is, he thinks that the tragedy that happens to Abogin is just a vulgar farce that he is forced to participate in. This identification forms a structural intertextuality and symmetry with Abogin's "what a coincidence" in the first scene, that is, the doctor only understands other's sorrow from his own point of view. On the one hand, he accuses

Abogin of disrespecting human suffering, but on the other hand, he makes his own definition of suffering. He calls Aboguin's tears of pain "act", which itself is an act of mocking human suffering. There is a similar plot in Chekhov's early novel, *Oyster*, except that the antagonists are poor children and farmers on one side and the cold-hearted well-feds on the other. Suffering that goes unheard by the well-feds in *Grief* is scorned again in *Enemies*. And the doctor's subsequent rebuke of the Abogin's class deepens the theme—that suffering makes men enemies, that power subjugates both the strong and the weak to it. As the author writes: "...rather than bringing people together, unhappiness drives them further apart."

5. Conclusion

Take *Enemies* as an example, Chekhov shifted his focus to depict the antagonism between people in the middle stage of his writing career. It was not class antagonism, nor deep enmity, but resentment and cruelty arising from petty and vulgar quarrels between ordinary citizens. The author does not begin by focusing on hostility, but rather seeks to subdue it, to show the sublime in human nature and then to break it down mercilessly, gradually promote the antagonism between the two sides in the trivial and absurd squabble.

References

- [1] All references of Anton Chekhov's *Enemies* are from Complete Works of Anton Chekhov, Delphi Classics, 2014, Hastings, East Sussex.
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