

## Questions and Proposals about Anton Chekhov's story, "The Lady with the Dog" and Raymond Carver's story, "Cathedral"

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For future readers of these study questions:

In the All Souls Book Group at the Cathedral of All Souls in Asheville, NC, we began our course in the short story with Anton Chekhov's "Lady with the Dog" and Raymond Carver's "Cathedral." Both stories are included in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, Shorter Seventh Edition (New York, 2006), which is the story anthology we used for the course generally. This anthology offers stories both old and new, and by authors in race, ethnicity and aesthetic curiosity.

The questions about "Lady with the Dog" are longer than other story-questions on this website. My intention in making them this long was to encourage, with our first story, close attention to language. "Lady with the Dog" is one of those especially condensed and focused stories that, in their compression, yield an expansion of meaning.

Questions for Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" follow those for Chekhov's "Lady with the Dog."

**I. Questions for "LADY WITH THE DOG" (Translation: Ivy Litvinov) (The edition of Litvinov's translation we worked with is printed in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, Shorter Seventh Edition (New York, 2006).)**

**1. This is not so much a question, rather a description of the story as a kind of poem. This question applies to Carver's "Cathedral" as well.**

In some of Chekhov's stories – and "Lady with the Dog" is one of them – sense is conveyed not just through narrative development, but also through the music of Chekhov's prose. It is a kind of poetry I mean to describe: a repeated, in this case, *syntactical* structure, which we get used to, and which we come to expect--our "sense" of that repeated structure ultimately informing our understanding of what the story has said to us.

Let me back up a bit and say the following, as briefly as I can. The following applies to both "Lady with a Dog" and to Raymond Carver's "Cathedral," and to many modern short stories.

Usually in a short story (though not in all of them), it is the “truth” a character is *not* aware of, either inside herself, or out there in the world, that gets her into story in the first place—-that gets her into dynamic, sometimes chaotic, sometimes altering life. The challenge for the fiction writer is to find a way to communicate this truth, or an intuition of this truth, to the reader, without giving it away to the character. *If* the character were in possession of that truth, if that truth were within his or her conscious grasp, then he wouldn’t need, in a sense, his author’s help: he wouldn’t need the opportunities provided him by the story in which he’s about to become immersed. So, as I say, the fiction writer has a problem to solve: representing that “truth” to *you*, without allowing it into the field of character apprehension.

Now to Chekhov in particular: One of the many things that makes Chekhov special as a fiction writer (and as a playwright) is his astuteness for, also his respect for, those embedded habits of our psychology which very likely are never going to go away. I mean those habits that may feel to us, in our darker moments, imprisoning. In lighter moments, perhaps in moments of a kind of self-delusion, we might think we’ve overcome those habits, or that something is happening, or is going to happen, that will lead to a fresh encounter with life and with ourselves. Chekhov has tender respect for both conditions (perhaps they’re less “conditions” than they are stations in a dialectic?); and all he really sets out is to describe us as we move between them. This is to say that he doesn’t set out to change things for us, or to offer us moral instruction, or even to give us hope where, in the obduracy of lived experience, there isn’t any. All he does is describe us, within our respective contexts, as plainly and as faithfully as he can.

And now to “Lady with a Dog” in particular: Gurov, we might say, is imprisoned in certain habits of his own character psychology, habits he persists in even though they don’t bring him renewed contact with life. Falling in love with Anna, I think it’s fair to say, is going to shake him out of those habits. But before that happens, Chekhov has to find a way to reveal those habits of character to *you*, almost at the periphery of your awareness, while leaving Gurov in the dark.

The way Chekhov does this is *purely formally*. He does it with his syntax, and he does it with his pacing--with certain syntactical structures, paced at a certain speed, which act not so much on your thinking *about* the story, as upon your sensory experience *of* the story. These structures will act on you almost physically, the way the rhythms of music act upon your physiology. *The habits of his prose are an experiential embodiment of the habits of his story’s protagonist*--this is another feature of Chekhov’s writing that sets him apart. (And there are other great fiction writers who work their prose in this way, and, in my reading (so

far), they are: Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, Virginia Woolf, William Trevor, Flannery O'Connor, Alice Munro, Raymond Carver, Deborah Eisenberg, and probably many others.)

Have a long look at the first two to three pages of "The Lady with the Dog" and ask yourself: What are Gurov's habits of character? And then ask yourself: How does Chekhov make you *feel* those habits, almost as though they were your own? Watch for patterns in the prose; or, listen for them. We will talk about this *poetic* dimension of the story when we meet. (Actually, it's not really a dimension of the story; it's the story.)

## **2. The famous last paragraph of this story: different translations.**

The translation we're reading in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction* (Shorter Seventh Edition), by Ivy Litvinov, is a good one. My favorite translation, however, is by Constance Garnett, and my reason for preferring Garnett's translation is for the way Garnett manages the famous last paragraph. Garnett's translation is below. Note that she doesn't separate the two propositions — *-and it seemed to them that a resolution was very close; and it seemed to them that a resolution was very far away--* into separate sentences (as does Litvinov.) Rather, she includes them in the same sentence, stationing them on either side of a semi-colon (and a semi-colon trembling under the strain of keeping the two propositions apart.)

Here is Garnett's translation:

"And it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found, and then a new and splendid life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that they had still a long, long road before them, and that the most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning."

What is the difference, in significance, between the two translations? This question is intended to increase your sensitivity to Chekhov's poetry.

## **3. Gurov's character change/development: A simple question:**

How does falling in love with Anna change or expand Gurov's character? We might say that Gurov starts out as someone in the habit of figuring his experience to himself by making arguments about it. Falling in love with Anna will shake him out of that habit. Thoughts?

## **4. Anna's character development.**

Anna's character also expands or changes across the story, though here the expansion is of a different kind than it is with Gurov. The change, with Anna, has to do with how she is perceived, or figured—both by Gurov, and by us (as it is Gurov's point of view that determines what we know about Anna.) The first time we see her—and this is in the first sentence of the story--she is "the lady with the dog." Several pages later she will again be titled, or captioned, "the lady with the dog" (on p. 113, bottom). Then, at the end of that paragraph, at the top of p. 114, her pose, "of dismal meditation," will be described as "like a repentant sinner in some classical painting."

Hurrah for Anna, Hurrah for Gurov: As the story unfolds, Anna will bust out of her title, she will step down from her boring, academic genre painting, into dynamic life. There she goes, out of the heavy doors (of the museum), into 3D. How does this happen? Where, in the story, does it happen?

### **5. Why the theater?**

Why do you think the scene in which Gurov recognizes that there is "no one nearer and dearer to him" than Anna takes place in a public theater, in which a crowd of people surrounds Anna, and, more important, in which the marks of class are almost systematically evident? What a choice Chekhov makes, to have this happen to Gurov in a public setting—of spectacle and of social display. Why do you think Chekhov has made this choice?

### **6. Class Consciousness**

This story can be read as a description of a particular class-consciousness prevalent in late-19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup>, pre-Soviet, cosmopolitan Russia. Such a reading will not exhaust the story's particulars, necessarily (though I sometimes wonder if it will)--in any event, it will certainly illuminate much about the story. Thoughts?

*A proposal:* Perhaps there is a sustainable reading of this story that says that what happens to Gurov when he falls in love with Anna, a creature as yet unschooled in the conventions and sensibilities of her class, is that he is freed from those conventions and sensibilities himself.

### **7. The famous watermelon scene.**

It is nowadays almost impossible to take an introductory course in the short story without reading "The Lady with the Dog," and without focusing on the scene in which Gurov cuts a slice of watermelon and eats it "slowly." This moment, which in our Norton anthology falls at the top of p. 114, comes right

after the one in which Anna worries aloud that Gurov will no longer respect her (because she is now an adulterer.) Please note that my summary of the scene is longer than the scene itself. It is a three-line, nearly negligible scene. Gurov cuts a slice of watermelon, eats it slowly, after which a half an hour passes in silence. This moment will tell you much about Gurov; and it will also tell you much about Chekhov's method of character revelation, a method studied with near religious devotion by later writers, many of whom would readily name themselves disciples of Anton Chekhov (Raymond Carver is one of them.) Look back at the previous page to see what Gurov has been up to. Look at the way he's been looking at Anna; look at the way he's been representing her. Look at what he's been thinking, look at the manner in which he's been thinking what he's been thinking; then hear what she says to him; and then watch what he does.

### **8. Why This of All Stories Considered the Greatest?**

It may interest you to know that this story has garnered the reputation of being "the greatest story of all time." Why do you think anyone would pick this story over all the many others as the "greatest"? After all, the story is not really about anything. It's just about two run-of-the-mill bourgeois people falling in love. Come to think of it, not even the imagery in this story is especially beautiful (not as it is, say, in the world of Vladimir Nabokov.) If the greatness of this story doesn't lie in the import of its subject matter, or in the beauty of its imagery or its language, where does its greatness lie?

Saying which literary work of art you esteem as the best or greatest is not just an exercise in self-aggrandizing hyperbole (though it is often that.) It is also a way to name your fidelities, to say what you think is true. And so in making such a judgment, it is important to have read the work you've esteemed as "best," along with the work you've ranked below it, closely.

### **9. A philosophy here?**

Sometimes a short story will open onto a kind of philosophy. For me, "Lady with the Dog" is one such story. Do you sense something like a philosophy here? To me the offering has to do with love -- with showing how conventional language cannot, in the end, represent what happens to us when we fall in love. (And in this story, anyway, it is class-consciousness that determines those conventions.) Gurov lives in these conventions, he thinks and speaks in them (and eats watermelon in them); the story, too, thinks and speaks in those conventions; yet what most deeply happens to Gurov in this story, happens somehow beneath or behind it, like a landscape discerned through mist.

Thoughts?

## II. QUESTIONS FOR RAYMOND CARVER'S "CATHEDRAL"

### 1. Habits of the narrator.

The narrator of this story, like Gurov in "The Lady with the Dog," is also, at the story's opening, sunk in habits of character that are keeping him from a fresh encounter with life. What are those habits of character; and how has Carver, also a kind of poet, created them with his prose?

### 2. Hearing the narrator/ the "voice" of the story

Reading the first few paragraphs of this story out loud will help you "hear" this narrator. I suggest you try it.

### 3. Third person versus first person.

Chekhov's "Lady with the Dog" is told in the third person; Carver's "Cathedral" is told in the first person. Why do you think the third person is the best point of view from which to tell "The Lady with the Dog," and why is the first person (*I, I, I*) best for "Cathedral"?

### 4. Who is Robert?

Robert is not the generic blind man the narrator expects. How does Robert exceed the narrator's expectation? How has he exceeded yours?

### 5. Why does Carver not give his narrator/ central character a name?

You'll note that the narrator is never named. The only name he gets is an endearment from Robert (I guess it's an endearment): "Bub." Why do you think Carver chooses not to name him?

### 6. A "Dinner Party" story

This is a classic "Dinner Party" story. The "Dinner Party" story is sort of a sub-genre I've heard writers talk about over the years. It features a meal, the progress of which mysteriously changes its participants. "The Dead," by James Joyce, is another dinner party story. So is Isak Dinesen's "Babette's Feast." In Carver's "Cathedral," eating together readies the narrator and the blind man for a kind of – well, for a big change. I'm not sure what the question is here; I suppose what I'm doing is inviting you to reflect upon the

mysteries of sharing a meal with others and how it can change us/ you.

### **7. Why a cathedral?**

What is it about describing, and then drawing a cathedral that will send the narrator into a new kind of understanding? At the end of the story the narrator will say, "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything." Again, why a cathedral?

### **8. The narrator's readiness to have this experience**

If you go back over the first half of the story (meaning, the part before the narrator experiences a kind of epiphany or transformation), you'll see that, though in many respects closed to new experience, there is an openness there as well. Go back and look at what the narrator looks at. Watch for the sensitivity of his observations; watch also for his curiosity. There is a...sweetness there? (Is sweetness the right word?) A child-like-ness? A vitality of imagination? Thoughts?

### **9. The onion skins**

Anyone else love those onion skins that fall out of the shopping bag in the middle of p. 84? As a detail of setting, they get a lot of work done; they say a lot of things. Do you agree? What do you think? What do they say?

### **10. The short story as a "vertical novel"**

In the literature about fiction you often hear scholars and critics comparing short stories to poems. One of my favorite analogies of this sort comes from Deborah Eisenberg, who describes the short story as a "vertical novel." Thoughts?

Looking forward to seeing you Monday,

Emilie