Revealing ordinary life: An analysis of Chekhov’s short story “An Incident”

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Abstract: Chekhov’s literary techniques to present the plots of his short stories and the real meanings of their ordinary themes rupture the limits of the short stories themselves and subvert the traditional patterns of this genre, discovering, according to Reid (1977, p. 63), “a freedom and imaginative truth inherent in this genre.” Mostly based on the works of Carpeaux, this study will explore the plot — which seems to be non-existent — of one of the author’s short stories, “An Incident”, as well as the explosion of significance that goes beyond the mere anecdote being told, which causes a great effect on the reader, who finds in this plot a revelation of ordinary life, that normally would not have anything to be revealed.

Key words: Chekhov’s literary techniques, short story, plot, significance.

A common theme with domestic scenes is developed in “An Incident”1 (2006), written by Anton Chekhov, who has created short stories by developing ordinary subjects. This study will be based mostly on two works of Carpeaux on the Russian writer and will explore the presentation of the significant plot of “An Incident”, which, at first, may seem to be non-existent.

This short story has an apparent simplicity by representing domestic occurrences, but it actually reveals a real plot, which was not commonly recognized in the author’s work by many Russian critics, according to Carpeaux (1999, p. 485). The meanings of the author’s simple themes were also discussed by Woolf (1957, p. 222), who argued that “our first impressions of Tchekhov are not of simplicity but of bewilderment. What is the point of it, and why does he make a story out of this? we ask as we read story after story.”

In “An Incident”, it seems that nothing really important happens because the narrator presents facts that could happen to anyone and that appear to have nothing to reveal, since they are so ordinary for people in general. Incidents that will have significance and effect only if analysed from the children’s point of view.

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1 Originally published in Peterburgskaya Gazeta (a Petersburg Journal) in 1886, according to http://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/ (Consulted on August 14th, 2006, at 6 p.m.).

All excerpts from this short story will be taken from the English version and presented in italics.
In the short story, we are presented to a Russian family and to a cat that just gave birth to kittens. The children, Vanya, a six-year-old boy, and Nina, a four-year-old girl, cannot stop admiring the kittens. Their parents receive some friends and also their uncle, who brings his big dog, Nero, that eats the kittens. The children get desperate, but their parents do not even care about them because they could not ruin their night because of such a trivial occurrence. Basically, this is what is presented by the narrator, who presents the story in frames. The reader knows the information through this omniscient narrator and through the scenic dialogues of the characters (who are common people and have no extraordinary characteristics), which make the focus of narration objective.

The narrator adopts the point of view of the children and presents the adults’ point of view at the same time.

According to the plot, for Vanya and Nina, the birth of the kittens was a symbol of life. In fact, it was a great event that happened in their daily routine. The news of their birth has completely changed their mood because it was something extraordinary in their ordinary lives. They have faced it with the astonishment that can only be found in the face of a child who experiences something for the first time.

On the other hand, the adults did not even notice the event because it was too trivial for them to care about it. They also had more “important” things to worry about, such as worrying about the visitors, so they did not pay attention to the children’s excitement.

The children’s feelings for the cats were truthful. From the moment of the birth on, the kittens were the most important thing in Vanya’s and Nina’s lives. They definitely forgot their usual games, their usual routine, their usual lives. After their astonishment, the children got concentrated and worried about the kittens’ future. They planned the little cats’ lives. They decided “that one kitten shall remain at home with the old cat to be a comfort to her mother, while the second shall go to their summer villa, and the third shall live in the cellar, where there are ever so many rats”. Then, it took them a long time to decide who was going to be the kittens’ father; that was the only thing that was missing. “Their choice falls on a big dark-red horse without a tail, which is lying in the store-cupboard under the stairs, together with other relics of toys that have outlived their day”.

Everything was planned and it seemed that the cats’ lives would be like that. It is perfectly clear that the children took the situation very seriously. An example
of this is the following excerpt, which describes the children imagining the tragedy that would happen to the family of cats if they had their death in the cesspool as their father wanted.

“Nina, leave the table!” cries her father angrily. “Throw the kittens in the cesspool! I won’t have the nasty things in the house! . . .”

Vanya and Nina are horrified. Death in the cesspool, apart from its cruelty, threatens to rob the cat and the wooden horse of their children, to lay waste the cat’s box, to destroy their plans for the future, that fair future in which one cat will be a comfort to its old mother, another will live in the country, while the third will catch rats in the cellar.

As Vanya and Nina were really worried about the cats, they thought about letting Nero, their uncle Petrusha’s dog, be the kittens’ father, as we can see in the following excerpt: “I say, Nina,” says Vanya, opening his eyes wide. “Let Nero be their father, instead of the horse! The horse is dead and he is alive, you see.”

They waited for the right moment to arrive and, when they were finally going to make Nero the father, Stepan, the footman, told everybody that the dog had eaten the kittens. Nobody punished Nero and, at the end of the plot, Vanya and Nina went to bed crying and “thinking about the injured cat, and the cruel, insolent, and unpunished Nero”, while the parents were busy with the samovar or playing cards because they would not leave their play time just on account of such an ordinary event. That was the real incident that the author needed to describe: an unpleasant and unusual event in the lives of two innocent children, a fact that had no impact on the adults, who showed indifference to it.

In the denouement of the plot, the children experience a reversal of their plans. Everything was planned to be the way they wanted the cats’ lives to be. They gave all their attention to the pets and they wanted all the best for them. When they finally found the “perfect” father for the kittens, the solution for their troubles, they discovered that the dog had killed them. It is a clear peripetia of their plans, that leads to an anagnorisis, or a “knowledgement”. They discovered that the world is not just “a box of kittens”, in other words, the world is not just their lives at home. They had contact with the reality of the real world because of the visits and of Nero. The dog is a symbol of death, the same death that swallows life in the reality (Carpeaux, 1968). Not only did the children have an anagnorisis, they also had a change of understanding because what they used to consider as a good idea turned out to be a bad and stupid thing to do.
Vanya and Nina discovered that adults become unaware, static and indifferent during their lives. Shocking events with deep significance usually help children to build personality and become adults, but when they finally grow up, they forget the real significance of the affairs in their lives. Adults become indifferent because of the constant recurrence of some experiences and they cannot find inhumanity in the circumstances anymore, as a child can. The simple incident that happened during just one day has revealed to the children an ironic aspect of life, the inevitable death and the adults’ contempt for the strong effect of the happening on them. The day that was supposed to be one of the happiest days for them became such an unpleasant time.

For adults, incidents like the one presented in this short story are as natural as their daily chores. The fact of eating the cats was also natural for Nero as it usually is in the animal world. There is a pathetic fallacy described by the narrator in the excerpt below that says that the mother cat was the only one who was “uneasy”, which means that only the mother and the children could have human feelings about the incident.

The children expect that all the people in the house will be aghast and fall upon the miscreant Nero. But they all sit calmly in their seats, and only express surprise at the appetite of the huge dog. Papa and mamma laugh. Nero walks about by the table, wags his tail, and licks his lips complacently. . . . the cat is the only one who is uneasy.

According to the children’s point of view, the cats were a metaphor of life while the dog was a metaphor of death. It means that they discover that there is injustice in real life. Besides injustice there is also unpunishment and delusion that are faced naturally by people. The children learn the lesson by experiencing the painful situation of losing someone. They didn’t expect it to happen, but crucially, the incident actually had a great influence in their comprehension of life.

The plot of this short story was the incident itself. According to Reid (1977), “Galsworthy said Chekhov’s stories are ‘all middle, like a tortoise’, and Chekhov himself once remarked: ‘I think that when one has finished writing a short story one should delete the beginning and the end’ ”, which means that he only presents the middle of them. In this sense, he ignores the Aristotelian elements (Aristóteles, 1973) in most part of his stories. Hemingway’s iceberg theory (Mangum, 1982) can be applied to Chekhov’s stories, since their real meaning is hidden. Specifically in the case of “An Incident”, there is a hidden plot and what seems to be inconclusive offers the characters
and the readers another way of concluding stories while it raises some questions because of the effect it has on the reader.

Chekhov also presents a break in the daily routine, an opportunity to think about simple and ordinary facts that, when presented by such a good technique – that only authors like him or Katherine Mansfield have –, give the reader wide horizons about the reality and the soul (Cortázar, 1974; Woolf, 1957).

The simple themes of ordinary incidents and facts reveal how Chekhov made his short stories get close to real life. He subverted the old patterns of the short story while keeping bonds with the literary aspects. According to Gotlib (2002, pp. 46-47),

Through the analysis of “An Incident”, it was suggested that the author could find greatness in tiny things, in apparently unimportant occurrences and could reveal that a mere “Incident” can have such an impact and an effect on the characters and mainly on the reader, who finds an explosion of significance beyond the anecdotes (Brooks and Warren, 1971) of the works of the modest Chekhov, who wrote pleasant works that were simultaneously critical and sad, in other words, real literary works (Mann, 1988).

Bibliographical references


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