Characters in Chekhov’s Works

In his short story, “In Exile,” Anton Chekhov introduces three dissenting opinions on life in exile through three different characters—the main opinion, though, coming from Old Semyon, who quickly becomes Chekhov’s in-story narrator. Did Chekhov use Semyon’s character as a vehicle through which he could express his own thoughts and opinions on exile? The articles “Chekhov’s Attitude towards Life” by George Z. Patrick and “Narrative Technique and the Art of Story-Telling in Anton Chekhov’s Little Trilogy” by John Freedman will help answer this question. Patrick’s article can be used to argue that Chekhov used Semyon’s character as a vehicle through which he could express his own thoughts and opinions on exile, while Freedman’s article can be used to argue in the opposite way. Through a close-reading of “In Exile” and further exploration of Freedman’s article, it becomes clear that in fact Chekhov’s unique literary style, whereby he creates opportunities for main characters to engage in story-telling (Freedman), leads to the understanding that Chekhov does not express his thoughts and opinions through his characters who act as in-story narrators. By understanding the separation between Chekhov’s expression of his thoughts and opinions in these two different kinds of works, we can gain insight into Chekhov’s different focuses in his different kinds of works.

Chekhov, in “In Exile,” introduces three dissenting opinions on life in exile through three different characters. An example of the opinion of the “…young Tartar whose name no one knew…” (161) can be found at the beginning when it says, “… [he] was telling how good it was
in Simbirsk province and what a beautiful and intelligent wife he had left at home” (161), thereby showing his longing for his wife and discontent with life in exile. The second opinion introduced is that of “Old Semyon, nicknamed the Explainer…” (161), who said, in response to something the Tartar said, “You need nothing! No father, no mother, no wife, no freedom…” (162), which shows that he valued simplicity and had great distaste for desires. The final opinion introduced is that of Vassily Sergeich, who Semyon introduces as, “…a gentleman [who] was sent here from Russia… They said he was a prince or a baron, but maybe he was just an official—who knows!” (163), whose opinion on exile is expressed when he excitedly announced, “I’m going to Gyrino to meet my wife. She’s taken pity on me and she’s coming” (163), showing his fulfillment of his desire. It is therefore clear that Chekhov introduces three dissenting opinions in life in exile through the Tartar, Old Semyon, and Vassily Sergeich.

Of Chekhov’s three dissenting opinions on exile, expressed by the aforementioned three characters, the main opinion comes from Old Semyon who quickly becomes Chekhov’s in-story narrator. The first way that we see that Old Semyon’s opinion on exile is the main opinion is in his ability to predict the future. An example of this can be found when Vassily Sergeich showed his wife and daughter to Semyon he said, “Well… all right, you won’t be overjoyed” (163), which later came into fruition when three years later Semyon ferried her away with one of the officials and, “Afterwards… he fell down and began howling and beating his head on the floorboards” (164). Another way which enables us to see that Old Semyon’s opinion on exile is the main opinion is that whenever he argues with either the Tartar or Vassily Sergeich he is consistently able to get in a stinging last word- showing the strength in his arguments. An example of this is seen when after Semyon tells the Tartar the story of Vassily Sergeich and the Tartar argues why he agrees with Vassily Sergeich, Semyon responded with, “You’ll get u-u-
used to it” (165), which is followed by, “The Tartar fell silent and fixed his tear-filled eyes on the fire” (165), displaying Semyon’s ability to get in the harsh last word of an argument. By looking at Semyon’s ability to predict Sergeich’s future and his strong argument tactics we see that his opinion on life in exile is the main one. We see that Semyon becomes Chekhov’s in-story narrator when, just a page and a half into “In Exile,” Semyon begins telling the Tartar the story about Vassily Sergeich which, itself, is the focus of the whole story. Did Chekhov use Semyon, as the character who presents the story’s main opinion on exile and the in-story narrator, as a vehicle through which he could express his own thoughts and opinions on exile?

In order to help answer this question, I looked at the articles “Chekhov’s Attitude towards Life” by George Z. Patrick and “Narrative Technique and the Art of Story-Telling in Anton Chekhov’s Little Trilogy” by John Freedman. George Z. Patrick, in “Chekhov’s Attitude towards Life,” says on the second page of his article that, “many of the characters in [Chekhov’s] stories and plays express thoughts that incontestably belong to the author himself” (659). Here, Patrick openly states that Chekhov’s characters express his own thoughts, which creates the possibility that Chekhov used Semyon’s character as a vehicle through which he could express his own thoughts and opinions on exile. John Freedman’s “Narrative Technique and the Art of Story-Telling in Anton Chekhov’s Little Trilogy,” however, analyzes Chekhov’s trilogy of short stories which includes “The Man in a Shell,” “Gooseberries,” and “About Love,” in order to establish Chekhov’s unique literary style in these stories. Before delving into his analysis of these stories, he says of Chekhov, “he always maintained a distinction between his own opinions and those of his characters” (2). Here, Freedman very clearly disagrees with the possibility that Chekhov used Semyon’s character as a vehicle through which he could express his own thoughts and opinions on exile because he says that Chekhov always “maintained a distinction.” Thus we
see that Patrick and Freedman, in each of their respective articles, help address this difficult question about Chekhov’s characters.

George Z. Patrick, in “Chekhov’s Attitude towards Life,” takes issue with whether or not Chekhov uses his character to express his own opinions, and he fervently believes Chekhov does indeed do this. Characters in “In Exile,” like many of Chekhov’s other stories, discuss their opinions on the meaning or purpose of life. For example:

When Semyon first starts to tell the Tartar the story of Vassily Sergeich, Semyon says, “I need nothing. God grant everybody such a life” (162), and continues one paragraph later with, “You need nothing! No father, no mother, no wife, no freedom, no bag, no baggage! You need nothing, damn it all!” (162) which, because of his emphasis on the value of needing nothing, displays Semyon’s opinion that one should strive to need nothing in life. Patrick said,

…Chekhov loved to create situations for his heroes and arrange settings in which they were forced to enter into disputes with one another concerning the… meaning of life. And it often happens that in these debates the characters utter thoughts that are too poignant and too original to be their own… (They) are a key to Chekhov’s own aspirations. (659)

Clearly, Semyon’s opinion that one should strive for a desire for nothingness is an example of what Patrick was referring to—therefore showing that Patrick’s opinion that Chekhov’s opinion is expressed through his characters pertains to “In Exile.”

John Freedman’s “Narrative Technique and the Art of Story-Telling in Anton Chekhov’s Little Trilogy” discusses Chekhov’s unique literary style, whereby he creates
story-telling opportunities for his in-story narrators. At the conclusion of his analysis of Chekhov’s trilogy of short stories, he addresses the issue of Chekhov’s personal presence in his writings. He says, “For those readers who have sought to find Chekhov in his stories, here he is: The craftily ‘absent author…’” (16), meaning that Chekhov does not include his own opinion in his stories because he is, ‘absent.’ Freedman’s description of Chekhov as ‘absent’ proves that his opinion on Chekhov is that he does not use his characters, like Semyon, as a vehicle through which to express his own opinion on whatever is being discussed in the story.

By looking further at both “In Exile” and John Freedman’s article it is clear that Chekhov creates opportunities for his main characters to engage in story-telling as in-story narrators in his short stories. As mentioned earlier, in “In Exile” Semyon becomes the narrator of the story which becomes the focus of the entire story on just the second page. It is clear that this story is important because of the fact that any background information is given through Semyon’s telling of the story; intertwined between dialogue and setting sections. In Freedman’s article about Chekhov’s literary style, he says, “Each of the three stories is a frame story narrated by a different teller… In all three cases, Chekhov’s narrator sets the stage for his story-teller and then almost entirely disappears during the course of the frame story” (2). Like Chekhov does in his trilogy, “The Man In the Shell,” “Gooseberries,” and “About Love,” “In Exile” is structured in the same way with a frame story and its story-teller.

Knowing that Chekhov creates opportunities for his main characters to engage in story-telling, we can see that Chekhov does not express his thoughts and opinions through his characters who act as in-story narrators. In order to gain a better understanding of the conflicting
nature of Patrick’s and Freedman’s articles, a closer look must be taken at both of them. Patrick argues that Chekhov’s characters often “express thoughts that…belong to the author himself” (659), while Freedman argues that, “…he always maintained a distinction between his own opinions and those of his characters” (2), which clearly oppose each other. However, because we know that Freedman discusses this in the context of his article about Chekhov’s unique literary style, a new understanding emerges: Like Patrick said, Chekhov does often use his characters as vehicles through which to express himself, but like Freedman said this does not take place in stories which include main characters who engage in story-telling within a frame story.

Through this understanding of the separation which lies between Chekhov’s expression of his thoughts and opinions in his two types of works we gain insight into Chekhov’s different focuses in his different kinds of works. Because we know that Chekhov expresses himself differently in works which do and do not contain main characters who engage in story-telling through a frame story, we can infer that he has different focuses in each of these two types of works. Perhaps, in his works which do not contain main characters who act as in-story narrators and do contain, as Patrick said, characters who express Chekhov’s own opinion, Chekhov’s goal is to express himself through the framework of a multi-character short story because of its ability to convey multiple opinions. This in contrast to his works, like “In Exile” and his short story trilogy, which contain main characters who act as in-story narrators through a frame story, where, as Freedman said, Chekhov “maintained a distinction” between his own and his characters’ opinions, with his goal being to sustain the purity of his short story by telling it without the cloud of his own personal opinion.

Ariel Stess
1/14/14 12:49 PM
Comment: Dear Julia,

Your grade for Essay 3 is an A. Again, it was a pleasure to have you in class. Good luck with all of your future endeavors! Your academic and professional career looks incredibly promising.

A Stess
Works Cited


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