

Unveiling the Camusian Elements of Absurdism in Anton Chekhov's "The Death of a Government Clerk" and "Gooseberries"

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Abstract: Anton Chekhov is one of the greatest masters of modern short stories. His writings are accessible and meaningful to anyone who can read; at the same time, it contains depths as yet unexplored. His characters are passive, filled with the feeling of hopelessness and the fruitlessness of all efforts. The world of absurdity that many of his characters are entrapped in clearly suggests the plethora of meaninglessness surrounding the life of common man. Albert Camus is a prominent theorist who has explored the realm of absurdity and has made notable remarks on the nature of human life. This article attempts to read Chekhov's short stories "The Death of a Government Clerk" and "Gooseberries" from a the frame work of absurdism as proposed by Camus.

Key words: absurd, meaningless, human life, Sisyphus, experience, existence...

No one has ever understood the tragic nature of life's trifles so clearly and intuitively as Anton Pavlovich Chekhov did. Never before has a writer been able to hold up to human beings such a ruthlessly truthful picture of all that was shameful and pitiable in the dingy chaos of middle-class life. He once remarked, "Life gets more and more complex every day and moves on at its own sweet will, and people get more and more stupid, and get isolated

from life in ever-increasing numbers... Like crippled beggars in a religious procession” (Gorky 119). His enemy was vulgarity. All his life he fought against it, held it up to scorn, depicted it with a keen impartial pen, discovering the fungus of vulgarity even where, at first glance, everything seemed to be ordered for the best, the most convenient, and even brilliant. His stories are driven by the questions that still consume us: What is a good life? Why do we always want more than we can have? What does it mean to be happy?

As Sartre mentions in his work *Being and Nothingness*, “man is condemned to be free”. Being caught in a world of ever changing norms and values, it is difficult to find an essence in man’s life. Therefore man is basically trapped in a situation of absurdity.

Merriam-Webster defines Absurd, the noun, as “the state or condition in which human beings exist in an irrational and meaningless universe and in which human life has no ultimate meaning”. The dictionary traces the etymology of the word to the Latin term ‘absurdus’, which meant “out of tune, uncouth, inappropriate, ridiculous”.

The term Absurd was first applied in literature to a specific genre of drama by Martin Esslin. *The Glossary of Literary Theory* states that Absurd means, “Conspicuous in its lack of logic, consistency, coherence, intelligibility, and realism, the literature of the absurd depicts the anguish, forlornness, and despair inherent in the human condition” (Brown and Henderson). Absurdist fiction often includes satire, dark humour, incongruity, the abasement of reason and controversy regarding the philosophical condition of being “nothing” (Cornwell).

Samuel Beckett, the most eminent and influential writer in this mode, projected the irrationalism, helplessness and absurdity of life in his plays such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Even though “nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (Beckett 36), Beckett’s characters typically carry on, even if in a life without purpose, trying to make sense of the senseless.

The philosophy of the Absurd has its roots in the nineteenth century Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, which could be surprising given the anti-religious nature of Absurdism (*New World Encyclopedia*). Though Kierkegaard was a Christian, he listened to the criticisms of religion that he heard around him and became convinced that there could be no rational basis for believing in God. He ultimately concluded that there was no rational basis for taking console in any story about the purpose of existence. Thus, he became an absurdist.

Absurdism truly emerged as an anti-religious philosophical perspective out of the work of the French philosopher and writer Albert Camus, especially his manuscript *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*New World Encyclopedia*). By 1942, the year of the publication of the manuscript, Camus had witnessed and absorbed the disillusioning effects of the Spanish Civil War, the rise of Fascism, Hitlerism, and Stalinism, the emergence of the weapons of mass destruction and the subsequent reign of genocide and terror. In direct response to the events of this period, Camus's philosophy- with its core set of humanistic themes and ideas- emerged and gradually took shape.

The Myth of Sisyphus can be considered as an explicit criticism against existentialists such as Jaspers, Shestov, and Heidegger, as well as the phenomenology of Husserl. All of these philosophies have a common starting point; they all testify to the absurdity of the human condition. According to Camus, existentialists betrayed their initial insight by seeking to appeal to the transcendent. "They deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them" (Camus and O'Brien 24).

Camus, however, doesn't deny that even if we try and avoid such escapist efforts and attempt to live without irrational appeals, the desire to do so, "this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion" (51), is built into our consciousness and

thus our humanity. He urges that it is necessary that one doesn't succumb to these impulses and instead accepts absurdity. In contrast with existentialism, the absurd is "lucid reason noting its limits" (49).

Camus's major argument is that human beings cannot escape asking the question of the meaning of existence and that there is no answer to this question. Thus, whereas accepting that men inevitably attempt to grasp life's purpose, the author takes the sceptical position that the universe remains silent concerning any such purpose. Therefore, the human race must learn to bear an irresolvable emptiness. This self-contradictory state of affairs, between our impulse to ask ultimate questions and the impossibility of achieving any adequate answer, is what Camus calls the absurd. The philosophy of the absurd explores the implications arising from this basic paradox.

Camus tries to make clear that the Absurd expresses a fundamental disharmony, a tragic incompatibility, in our existence. In effect, he argues that the Absurd is the product of a collision or confrontation between our human desire for order, meaning, and purpose in life and the blank, in different "silence of the universe" (*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). He argues that life can be lived better if it has no meaning. The absurd thus becomes "an experience that must be lived through" (4).

Thus, humans ought to embrace their absurd condition. Man's freedom and the opportunity to give life meaning lies in the acceptance of absurdity. Once we reach the realization that the universe is fundamentally devoid of absolutes, then we as individuals are truly free. His appeal to "live without appeal" is a philosophical perspective that defines absolutes and universals subjectively, rather than objectively. The freedom of man is, thus, established in man's natural ability and opportunity to create his own meaning and purpose, to make decisions by himself.

Camus's concept of absurdity can be best captured in an image: the image of Sisyphus struggling to push his rock up the mountain, watching it roll down and then descending after the rock to begin all over again, condemned to endlessly repeating this action. Like Sisyphus, man cannot help but continue to ask the meaning of life, only to see the question tumble back down. Camus identifies Sisyphus as the archetypal absurd hero, both for his behaviour on earth and for his punishment in the underworld. He is scornful of the gods and displays a hatred of death and a passion for life. Camus reveals his fascination for Sisyphus's state of mind in the moment after the rock rolls away from him at the top of the mountain. As he heads down the mountain, briefly free from his labour, he is conscious, aware of the absurdity of his fate. His fate can only be considered tragic because he understands it and has no hope for reprieve. Yet the lucidity he achieves with this understanding ultimately places him above his fate.

Camus suggests that Sisyphus might even approach his task with joy. He might experience sorrow or melancholy when he looks back at the world he's left behind. However, it vanishes when he accepts his fate. When Sisyphus trudges after the rock when it has gone down the hill, it is him confirming the ultimate futility of his project. Camus calls this "the hour of consciousness." He states, "At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock" (Camus and O'Brien 121).

It is interesting to see that Camus uses the words "superior" and "stronger" when Sisyphus is revealed to have no hope of succeeding the next time. This is because a sense of tragedy "crowns his victory." Camus states, "Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent" (121). Absurdist philosophy reaches its natural conclusion at the tragic consciousness that man has to continue living, fully aware of the bitterness of his being.

Sisyphus accepts and embraces living with death without making any appeal to the illogical notion of God. "All Sisyphus's silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing" (123).

Camus suggests that acknowledging "crushing truths" like the eternity and futility of his fate is enough to render them less crushing. He refers to Oedipus, who, having suffered so much, ultimately finds "that all is well." Camus suggests that happiness and the absurd are closely linked, as they are both connected to the discovery that our world and our fate are our own; there is no hope for man if not for what we make of it.

As he descends the mountain, Sisyphus is completely conscious of his fate. And yet he finds himself above that fate precisely because he is aware of it. Camus concludes: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123). He fully incarnates a sense of life's absurdity, its "futility and hopeless labour" (119).

Camus's philosophy ultimately boils down to his idea that there is no absolute method to finding happiness. His notion is that individual humans can truly be happy, even without relying on hope, faith, or anything else that goes beyond immediate experience. He uses the mythical figure of Sisyphus to demonstrate that mankind can live with "the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it" (54).

Thus, the Camusian alternative to suicide or hope is to live without escape and with integrity, in "revolt" and defiance, maintaining the tension intrinsic to human life. He calls death "the most obvious absurdity" (59) and urges us to "die unreconciled and not of one's own free will" (55). Thus, he recommends a life without consolation, but instead one that is characterized by lucidity and acute consciousness of and rebellion against mortality. He makes his case for the acceptance of tragedy, the consciousness of absurdity, and a life of sensuous vitality with the image of Sisyphus straining, fully alive, and happy (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). As he states in *The Rebel*, "I revolt, therefore we are" (Camus

22), Camus combats religious faith not with philosophical reasoning, but with a kind of negative faith, a determination not to find any answers to the great questions of life.

Chekhov saw that life is godless, random and absurd. William Boyd stated that Chekhov as a writer was “secular, refusing to pass judgment, cognizant of the absurdities of our muddled, bizarre lives and the complex tragi-comedy that is the human condition” (Salazar). By abandoning the beginning-middle-and-end linear narration of plot, by refusing to judge his characters and by not striving for a neat narrative resolution, Chekhov made his stories appear almost unbearably life-like. Randomness, inexplicability and haphazard elision became the actual form of the short story, giving birth to a fictional style that corresponded with the random, haphazard, inexplicable lives we all lead.

“The Death of a Government Clerk” by Chekhov was first published in *Fragments* in 1883 with the subtitle “The case”. It was included in the stories collection *Motley Stories* (1886). In “The Death of a Government Clerk”, a minor government clerk, Ivan Dmitritch Tchervyakov, sneezes while seeing a show and to his horror discovers that the bald head in front of him was a high ranking official, the Privy General Brizzhalov. Tchervyakov apologizes so profusely and so insistently that the general, wearied with forgiving him, at last tells him to go to devil. Tchervyakov crawls home, takes to his bed, and soon dies from sheer fright. The inciting incident of “The Death of a Government Clerk” is a lowly clerk’s sneeze on the head of a higher official during an opera. The clerk, Ivan Dmitritch Tchervyakov, is petrified of the consequences of him sneezing upon the head of the official, the Privy General Brizzhalov. Tchervyakov apologises to the official, thinking that though “he is not the head of my department, but still it is awkward” (Chekhov 21). He feels that he “must apologise” (21). When Brizzhalov dismisses him, asking Tchervyakov to let him listen to the opera, the clerk grows uneasy. Chekhov describes that “he was no longer feeling bliss. He began to be troubled by uneasiness” (22).

Tchervyakov's reactions to the general's continuous dismissals evoke laughter. When the official tells him that he has forgotten about the incident, the clerk's thoughts go as such, "He has forgotten, but there is a fiendish light in his eye... And he doesn't want to talk. I ought to explain to him . . . that I really didn't intend . . . that it is the law of nature" (21). He even goes to the general's office to apologise. The official ignores him and his yearning to please his higher official is revealed through his thought processes.

He keeps on pestering the official for an apology till the official, evidently irked and "turning suddenly purple and shaking all over", yells at him to "Be off!" (22). He even repeats his warning, stamping the floor for emphasis.

The clerk's reaction is one of horror. "Something seemed to give way in Tchervyakov's stomach. Seeing nothing and hearing nothing he reeled to the door, went out into the street, and went staggering along..." (22). Chekhov once stated, "To live simply to die is by no means amusing, but to live with the knowledge that you will die before your time, that really is idiotic" (Gorky 119).

The nonchalant way in which Chekhov describes the titular death of the government clerk is a testament to the author's brilliant use of the absurd. It is as if the author is indifferent towards the ridiculous motivations of his protagonist. However, Chekhov is instead using the irrational fear of the character as a mirror to the pathetic situation of the middle and lower classes in the 19th century Russian society. This fear is a metaphor for the anxiety and stress that the lower classes in Russia lived within during this era.

The work raises the theme of the "little man". The subject of ridicule here is a minor official, who is constantly confused without any reasons. The little man in this story is both comic and pathetic. Ridiculous Tchervyakov's perseverance causes laughter and compassion begets his zealous humiliation of himself. The name of the protagonist itself denotes his

lowly status: Cherviak in Ivan Dmitritch Tchervyakov means 'a worm'. As evident by "The Death of a Government Clerk", Chekhov employed satire as a means for enlightening his reader.

However, it is remarkable how assured Tcheryakov is of his "meaning of life": to please his superiors. This is evident in the passage in which he tells his wife of the sneezing incident, "It struck him that his wife took too frivolous a view of the incident" (21). He pursues his goal vehemently, as the following day, "Tchervyakov put on a new uniform, had his hair cut and went to Brizzhalov's to explain" (21). He reminds one of Sisyphus in his determination to achieve his "meaning".

The absurdity here is of a person in power being able to take away the financial livelihood and well-being of another in an instant, even if not for reasons of being incompetent as an employee, but for not being able to adhere to a social construct. Ivan attempts to apologize to the general in order to display that he knows how to carry himself in public. Ironically, in his sincere attempt, the general begins to believe that he does not know how to carry himself, only that he is a pest who won't leave him alone.

In this tragicomic tale, one feels confused whether to sympathise with the plight of the clerk or to laugh at him, pointing to the absurdity of having two vastly different reactions to a single situation.

Chekhov examines two of his favourite themes within "Gooseberries": social injustice and the quest for fulfillment. "Gooseberries" was published in 1898 as the middle story of *The Little Trilogy*, a trilogy of stories describing a summer hunting trip taken by the veterinary surgeon Ivan Ivanovitch and the school teacher Burkin. In "Gooseberries", the veterinary surgeon Ivan Ivanovitch is telling the story of his younger brother, Nikolay. A government employee, Nikolay Ivanovitch longed to buy a farm and move to the country. After years of planning, saving, and taking advantage of others ("he married an elderly and

ugly widow without a trace of feeling for her, simply because she had filthy lucre” (389)), he has realized his dream. Having settled into farm life and growing and eating his own gooseberries, he has become fat, lazy, and arrogant. In a sense, life has become static for Nikolay and the reader comes to view his happiness as pathetic.

Ivan is particularly incensed at his insensitivity as Nikolay pursues his own level of happiness and cares naught about the happiness of others. He characterizes him as wasteful, self-centred and delusional. He disapproves of both the means and the end of his brother's life in the country. To Nikolay, the romantic dreamer, the berries are delicious, but to Ivan, the hardened realist, they are tough and sour. Nikolay's delight while eating the hard, sour gooseberries that he has spent most of his life dreaming about attests to Ivan's claim that his brother, though happy, will die a deluded old man.

Ivan states that, “Money, like vodka, makes a man queer” (389). He goes on to illustrate two bizarre instances to support this statement. The first one is of a merchant who “before he died, ordered a plateful of honey and ate up all his money and lottery tickets with the honey, so that no one might get the benefit of it” (389). Then, he relates the tale of a cattle-dealer who fell under an engine and had his leg cut off. He reminisces that the dealer kept asking them to look for his leg because “there were twenty roubles in the boot on the leg that had been cut off, and he was afraid they would be lost” (389). Chekhov once again brings forth the absurdity of man's material pursuit.

Chekhov underlines the spiritual impoverishment of the bourgeois society in Ivan's statement, “A change of life for the better, and being well-fed and idle develop in a Russian the most insolent self-conceit” (390). Ivan further relates “a case of general hypnotism” with his comment that “the happy man only feels at ease because the unhappy bear their burdens in silence, and without that silence happiness would be impossible” (391). This could be interpreted as a Marxist exhortation of the absurdity of the capitalist system in that the

labourer cannot enjoy the fruits of his labour. If taken as such, Chekhov underlines the spiritual impoverishment of the bourgeois society.

The core of the story is Ivan's statement that "There is no happiness, and there ought not to be; but if there is a meaning and an object in life, that meaning and object is not our happiness, but something greater and more rational. Do good!" (392). There couldn't be a clearer instance of a character finding his purpose in life. He states that there is no inherent happiness or meaning in life, staying true to the absurdist dictum. He also goes on to find his meaning in the "more rational" act of "doing good". He becomes an embodiment of Sisyphus in his determination to revolt against the existing social hierarchy.

However, his audience is not particularly receptive of his message Ivan tries to convey. They find it "dreary" to listen to the story of "the poor clerk who ate gooseberries" (393). "They felt inclined," Chekhov states, "to talk about elegant people, about women." (393). Perhaps Ivan's entreaty that "Lord forgive us sinners!" (393) is his prayer for the Russian commoner to rise in revolt against the oppressing structures, counting himself as a sinner for having been "happy and contented." In what might strike one as a far-fetched observation of absurdity, it is interesting to see Chekhov, through his characters, calling the story "dreary", as the major portion of "Gooseberries" has in fact been Ivan's narration. Thus, in a manner, Chekhov is calling out his own story as "dreary".

Yet it is difficult to see a compassionate and complex writer as Chekhov putting much weight in moral pronouncements such as those made by Ivan. Here arises the question of the relationship between the character Ivan Ivanovitch and the author Chekhov. Though it seems in first sight that Ivan speaks for Chekhov when he declares that young people should avoid self-indulgence and should dedicate their lives to good works, it should also be asserted that Chekhov presents a skeptical view of Ivan's message by emphasizing the character's hypocritical enjoyment of Alekhin's country estate even as he criticizes the banality of land

proprietorship. It becomes necessary to view the story from Nikolay's perspective. However deluded the methods he has employed to attain his wishes might have been, it is undeniable that the character has managed to find real happiness. It might be that Chekhov is presenting Nikolay as our absurd hero, creating a notion of happiness that only he himself can truly decipher.

Furthermore, Ivan passing the responsibility to alter the societal structure to Alehin rather than to take it up himself because he is "old" and "not fit for the struggle" (393) strikes the reader as Ivan being lazy, the same accusation he applied to Nikolay. He thus becomes a "sinner", having been "happy and contented" in his prime and calling for revolution when he can't or won't participate in it. This could be interpreted as Chekhov reprimanding the Marxist theorists who only wrote or theorised about the revolution, never being an active part of it.

If we embrace this perspective and look at Ivan's grand theorizing, we see that Chekhov raises more questions than he answers. What is probably closer to the truth is the critic O'Faolain's argument that "Gooseberries" is an ironic tale with a "double edge" rather than a story with a clear message: "What is happiness?—asks Chekov . . . inviting us to answer as we will but never to forget that human nature is like that, an instrument playing tricks on itself" (O'Faolain 175).

In Chekhov, one sees a man so aware of the minutiae of human life and a writer so aware of its absurdity. What Chekhov was really after was the understanding that life is absolutely beautiful and it's absolutely horrible at the same time. Chekhovian characters are often running away from something or running towards something - running towards this amorphous notion of what it means to be happy.

Chekhov really recognizes the central paradox of life, which is that we live as best we can, knowing that all of this is absurd, knowing that life is going to end, knowing that all our

decisions are problematic. And yet, in spite of that, we persevere. Chekhov also uses the elements of Absurdism to bring out the rotten state of social structures and the need to renovate this through a mindset change in the actions of the ordinary human.

In finding their own meanings of happiness in a ridiculous world, one sees each of the protagonists of the selected stories become the embodiments of Sisyphus. They are often misunderstood and ridiculed by other characters inside the story and even subjected to terrible punishment, as in the case of Tchervyakov in “The Death of a Government Clerk”. However, it doesn’t stop them from pursuing their destiny, and we see them leading the way towards their meaning without any remorse or regret, in “revolt and defiance”. As with Sisyphus, their fate belongs to themselves. Chekhov creates a world with no clear answers, leaving it up to the readers, who have to find the ‘meaning’ for themselves. It is what he decides that makes up the story. Thus, ultimately, the reader takes the seat of Sisyphus and ponders over the absurd world where he is taken to.

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