

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

THE BET

Chekhov

Overview Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) was a Russian playwright and short story writer, as well as a medical doctor; his literary work was among the finest fiction of the 19th century. His modernist theater, along with that of Ibsen and Strindberg, opened fresh possibilities to drama, while his moody and dark short stories went a long way to define the entire modern cultural temper. He suffered a creative setback when *The Seagull* (first produced in 1896) proved to be a major flop, but on a revival, by the Moscow Art Theater, this play awakened tremendous attention, and went on to join the four or five play theatrical canon which defines Chekhov for the stage.

Story

The Bet is a short story (10-12 pages) by Anton Chekhov. Its plot is simple, but its implications are wide reaching, in the compressed fashion of the author's best work.

An old banker paces up and down in his rooms, reflecting on a party which he hosted fifteen years earlier. The discussion at the time concerned capital punishment, and the crowd of intellectuals on the whole inclined against the practice. There was a widespread feeling that life imprisonment should replace capital punishment. There follows a disagreement between many guests and the banker, who favors capital punishment, because it is quick and complete, rather than protracted over a lifetime of what is essentially daily torture.

The key event takes place next. A young lawyer, twenty five years old, intervenes to say that he hates both capital punishment and life imprisonment, but that he would prefer the latter, because at least the prisoner remains alive.

The banker, who is at the point in his life where he is flush with success and cash, immediately throws out a challenge (the bet) to the young lawyer, challenging him to pass even five years of his life alone in a cell. In the drama of the moment, in the midst of the party, the lawyer accepts the challenge, and it is agreed that he will spend the next fifteen years in total isolation in the banker's garden cottage, and that at the end of that period he will receive two million rubles. The deal is ratified, the iron door of the cottage is locked, and the lawyer is left alone, except for a piano, wine and tobacco as he wishes and a narrow window through which he can look out, but without communicating.

This history and the setting of this bet are rumbling through the banker's mind, as he tells the present story, and as he fills out in thought what he understands of the experience the lawyer has undertaken. In his mind the banker, who by now has lost most of his money, and grown tired and old, tracks the course of the lawyer's fifteen year incarceration, bringing us in comprehension to the point where the lawyer, by now an emaciated but still living skeleton, decides to break his deal with the banker, to escape before the contract is up, and to forego the two million rubles he has bargained for.

The banker, who needs and gladly recovers his bet, has by this time taken us through what we suppose to be the thought passage of the lawyer during his fifteen year imprisonment. The lawyer has passed through many stages of dealing with his isolation, writing texts—which he then discards--reading great literature, finally reading The New Testament. In the course of all these adventures in the great thoughts and imaginings of mankind, the lawyer, he says in the document

he leaves behind him, has compressed all great thought into a small lump in his head. He is smarter than any of his fellow humans. Yet he is doomed to death. Learning and life have no meaning. He has in a sense won his bet, that he can live in solitary, but he has discovered the emptiness of that victory.

Theme

The vanity of human existence. Although the lawyer survives all but five minutes of his self-imposed sentence, he has won a hollow victory, in his bet. He knows the wisdom of mankind but it is empty for him. The banker has recovered his investment in the bet, but he is too old and tired for it to mean much. The cynical conclusion, left to the reader to decide on, is that capital punishment is preferable to life in prison, while careless betting is pure folly.

Characters

Banker The banker is the host of the dinner at which the bet is made, and is at the same time the narrator of the story about the dinner. At the time of the narration, the banker is thinking back onto the events that provoked the bet, and onto the folly he and the lawyer were launched on, on the night of the bet.

Lawyer The lawyer enters the story as a rather impulsive dinner guest, at the banker's dinner, and clashes with the banker over the relative merits of capital punishment and life imprisonment. Willing to take the banker's bet, the lawyer contracts for fifteen years of lock-up on the banker's grounds. His dreadful emaciation, when he escapes at the end, is evidence of his desperate error in choosing self-incarceration.

MAIN CHARACTER

The Banker (unconscientious)

The Bet turns around the impulsive and greedy behavior of a wealthy banker, at an intellectual gathering in which the main topic is capital punishment. The occasion was in the autumn fifteen years previous to the narration, but every detail of the discussion is sharply edged on the banker's mind. He himself argues that capital punishment and life imprisonment are equally immoral, but that 'if I were offered the choice between them I would certainly choose the second. It's better to live somehow than not to live at all.' The discussion accelerates, the banker insisting that a young lawyer, present in the discussion, 'wouldn't stick in a cell even for five years.' The younger man takes him up, the banker guarantees two million roubles if the young man—who has now upped the ante to fifteen years—will stick in a cell, under certain conditions. The banker, still lively and risking, licks his lips at the challenge.

Parallels The ancient Greeks were intrigued with the interplay between chance and necessity, and thus—it followed—with 'taking chances.' One might argue that Oedipus takes a huge chance, at the beginning of the play of his name, in plunging incautiously into a total search of his background and of the nature of the plague destroying his country. One might say, in the end, that he 'lost his bet.' In 547 B.C., at the Battle of Pteria, Cyrus is told by the Oracle that 'if he crosses the Halys he will destroy a great Empire,' and he gambles (incorrectly, it turns out) that the Empire in question is the enemy's and not his own. Perhaps the most famous gambling bet in modern thought is Pascal's 'pari,' his argument that one should wager on God's existence, for to lose that bet is to lose nothing, while to wager on God's non-existence is to place no winning bets.

Illustrative moments

Bettor 'So this wild ridiculous bet came to pass.' The banker's original bet is carried out impetuously, as are the immediate plans to set up a voluntary imprisonment house, on the

banker's grounds. With great precision the better and the lawyer lay out the conditions of the bet: voluntarily self-imprisonment. The voluntary prisoner agrees to remain fifteen years in self-imposed solitary, while the banker will enjoy—he guesses—freedom and happiness, and a continuous large bank account. At the moment of this reflection, however, the banker is beginning to sense that he made a foolish deal. On his part, he now feels, the bet was 'the caprice of a well fed man; on the lawyer's pure greed of gold.'

Compliant It is the banker's responsibility to provide wine, musical instruments, and books to the prisoner, and so he does. That begins to be a heavy responsibility. 'In the second half of the sixth year, the prisoner began zealously to study languages, philosophy, and history. He fell on these subjects so hungrily that the banker hardly had time to get books enough for him.' In a letter to the banker, the prisoner requests a favor: he is sending lines written in six different languages, if the banker, after checking with experts, finds that there is no mistake in the lines, then he is to have a gun fired off in the garden. The banker makes the requested check, and finding the lines faultlessly written, orders a commendatory gun shot.

Lesson As the completion of fifteen years draws near, the banker feels a tremendous desire to look in on his voluntary prisoner, which he does. What he saw shocked him. 'His hair was already silvering with grey; and no one would have believed that he was only forty years old.' Before the prisoner, on the table, lay a note to the banker containing a message to the bettor. 'On my own clear conscience and before god who sees me I declare to you that I despise freedom, life, health, and all that your books call the blessings of the world.' All that he had learned, the prisoner says, 'is compressed to a little lump in my skull. I know that I am cleverer than you all.' What the banker has learned is a surprising reversal of the expected outcome of the fifteen year imprisonment.

Better The next morning the banker learned, from the night watchman, that the voluntary prisoner had sprung the coop, just before the completion of his time in jail. He had not stopped for the money due him, because, as we have just learned, he now despised money and its products. (In the meantime, in the course of the past fifteen years, the banker had lost most of his money on the stock market.) The banker's final act, in this drama, was to 'take the paper with the renunciation'---of the millions due the prisoner—and to 'lock it in his safe.' The prisoner was free, the banker was the prisoner now, hiding the lawyer's secret

Discussion questions

Is the narrator sympathetic with the banker, or with the lawyer, or is he making an 'objective point'? If so, what is that point?

In what way did the lawyer win the bet over the banker? Why did the lawyer escape at the last minute, without taking his money?

Did the banker or the lawyer eventually win the bet? Was either happier after making the bet than before?