

# THE DARLING

## Anton 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** Olenka is a short story by Anton Chekhov. Its principal character is a woman who is dependent on men to make up her opinions and values. As we first see Olenka, she is sitting on her porch musing on the mindset of her lodger, Mr. Kukin, who is manager of a local theater, and who has come on hard times. Mr. Kukin doubts that he is going to be able to make it in his business, and Olga's sympathy for him gradually leads her to fall in love with him. This pattern, compassion followed by sympathy followed by love, is emblematic of the whole course of Olga's romantic life—which is actually her entire life. Not only the whole course of her life, but the way it plays out. For Kukin's original melancholy disposition is not a mindset that goes away, on marrying Olga, but rather one that stays and grows. Olga's melancholy remains tied to Kukin's feelings; so that, in the end, when she receives news of Kukin's death, she is left empty, back where she was when she first met Kukin.

There follow a couple of liaisons, then marriages, in which Olga is led down the same path of affections, in each instance taking on the opinions and 'world-views' of her husband to be. It is not that she is indifferent to the lives and deaths of her mates, for she is genuinely compassionate, but that 'one thing leads to another,' and she is always passively ready. After three months of mourning the death of Kukin, Olga finds herself attracted to the manager of a local timber yard, and after a few days of courtship—during which Olga is persuaded, by an elderly female friend of hers, that Vasily is of the best character—the two friends marry. In no time Olga absorbs the attitudes of her new husband: she grows religious and grave, as he is, speaks of the theater as 'nonsense,' and encourages a new friend of hers, Smirnin, to forgive his adulterous wife for the sake of his son. Olga and Vasily remain married for six years until Vasily is hit by what becomes a fatal cold, and dies.

Smirnin becomes the last character in the parade. The friend to whom Olenka gave good advice about forgiving his wife grows ever closer to Olenka. Though he is embarrassed by her wholesale adoption of his ideas—he is a veterinarian; hence a new set of preoccupations for Olenka, this time centering around animal diseases—he falls for her. Just as their love is deepening, though, he is posted to Siberia, and leaves behind the now aging widow, who has no one's opinions to parrot.

The final chapter is sad and touching. Smirnin, now married and with a son, moves back to Olenka's home town, finds no place to live, and is taken in by her as a lodger—with his wife and son. Olenka gradually falls in love with Smirnin's son, takes him to school, helps him with homework, but is quietly rejected, by this kid who feels smothered with 'auntie's love.'

The irony of this story is that Olenka *is* in fact a 'darling'—just the term that all her friends used of her when she was young—but that she is too much a darling, and too dependent.

### Themes

**Dependence.** If you are dependent on other people for love they lose interest in you. You have to offer something considerable to others before they will love you. If you offer mere companionship and a repetition of their own ideas, people will soon lose interest in you.

**Love.** The darling falls in love easily but is not truly capable of love, where that feeling means caring for another person in and of themselves. Olenka is too needy herself to enter the life of another person.

## Characters

**Olenka** The darling is a woman who has few ideas of her own, but who picks up all her ideas from the current man in her life. She goes through several marriages, assuming the values and interests of each husband she marries, and of a final lover, a veterinarian surgeon, who never marries her, but whose small child, by another woman, becomes the last of her spokespersons in the present tale. We last see the darling as she receives the news that Sasha, the young lad, is about to be taken away by his mother, and to leave the darling once again alone. One again the darling is on her own, and by now, neither everybody's sweetheart nor in any way good looking, the only direction seems to be down.

**Kukin** The theater manager who complains constantly about everything from weather to the downturn in his business. Kukin is the darling's first husband, until, fittingly enough, he dies of a bad cold.

**Pustavalov.** The darling's second husband, manager of a successful lumber yard. Until he is sent on mission to Siberia, Pustavalov and Olenka are inseparable, and her opinions, because they are also his, become conservative and religious.

**Smirnov.** The veterinarian surgeon who becomes Olenka's third major emotional bond. They do not marry, but what does it matter? In the end he returns from distant travels, married now, and moves in with her.

## MAJOR CHARACTER

**OLENKA** (Agreeable)

**Character** The darling is a woman who has few ideas of her own, but who picks up all her ideas from the current man in her life. She goes through several marriages, assuming the values and interests of each husband she marries, and of a final lover, a veterinarian surgeon, who never marries her, but whose small child, by another woman, becomes the last of her spokespersons in the present tale. We last see the darling as she receives the news that Sasha, the young lad, is about to be taken away by his mother, and to leave the darling once again alone. One again the darling is on her own, and by now, neither everybody's sweetheart nor in any way good looking, the only direction seems to be down.

**Parallels** Ancient literatures abound in portrayals of the submissive and abused tribe of women, from the Daughters of Zion, who are in the Judaic Old Testament forever bearing the sufferings of their race, to the chorus of Persian women in Aeschylus' *The Persians* (472 BC), who are lamenting their defeat by the Greek forces at the Battle of Salamis (480 BC). The theme of female submissiveness permeates literature (and life) to our times, though it has been sharply counter spoken by Feminists and independent women since the beginning of time. It is only on rare occasions that the sexual detour of perverse female submissiveness draws artistic attention to itself, as in the stunning arts of the female submissive in Pauline Reage's *The Story of O*(1954).

## Illustrative moments

**Kukin** The darling's first lover, in the present tale, is the theater owner Kukin, a despondent loser who is forever complaining about his lot, the weather, the markets. Whatever Kukin says about the ups and downs of the theatrical life—'the audience is fickle,' 'the audience is ultimately just after cheap thrills'—is repeated by Olenka, as though it were the last word. She is thus repeating the pattern of her whole life to

date, which has been a sequence of bland repetitions of what was said by the many—from her sick father and her aunt on—who formed her opinions for her.

**Vasily** After the death of Kukun, the darling needed some three months of expected mourning, before falling into a second episode of romantic mimicry. This time it is the portly, stuffy Vasily Pustovalov, the manages of the lumber yard of a local merchant. All of Olenka's conversation now turns to the question of the current price of lumber, the exorbitant taxes imposed on the lumber business, and the desirability of staying at home in the evenings instead of going out into town, like most people did. 'She felt as if she had been dealing in lumber forever...'

**Smirnov** When Pustovalov absented himself for a longish time, on a distant lumber buying expedition, the darling felt herself intensely lonely—no one's opinions to repeat—and she started having friendly 'evening chats' with Smirnov, a veterinary surgeon 'who lodged in the wing of her house.' Unfortunately, though, this budding relationship was broken, when Smirnov was sent away permanently with his regiment. The inevitable then happened: 'she got thin and homely, and the people who met her on the street no longer looked at her as they used to, nor smiled at her. Evidently her best years were over, past and gone.'

**Sashenka** Years after having been sent away with his regiment, and after having married, separated, and been left with a small boy, the veterinary surgeon Smirnov returns to Olenka's town, and in the course of things, given the daily busyness of the surgeon, the small boy, Sasha, moves in with Olenka and becomes her daily companion. She prepares all his lessons with him, feeds and clothes him, and talks about schooling issues with other parents, in just the terms she has heard them discussed by Sasha. Eventually, of course, the darling's last effort to borrow a personality fails, and Sasha's mom calls him back to her, leaving Olenka 'in despair. Her head, her feet, her hands turned cold.'

### **Discussion questions**

What is it about the darling that makes people want to call her that, and makes men like to be with her—for a while?

Why is Olenka dependent on other people to form her opinions for her? Is it that she was babied from childhood on?

Is there any future for the darling, by the end of the story? Has she some resources, or resilience, left in her?