

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

OLENKA*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Olenka** (in Chekhov's *The Darling*) **Agreeable**

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.

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 counterspoken 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 for ever...'

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?