

# WORD ART

**An Approach to Literary Appreciation**

**For students of**

**B.A.English Literature - III Semester**

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## Reading and Appreciating DRAMA

### 4.3. The Defenseless Creature - *Neil Simon*

The lights come up on the office of a bank official, KISTUNOV. He enters on a crutch; his right foot is heavily encased in bandages, swelling it to three times its normal size. He suffers from the gout and is very careful of any mishap which would only intensify his pain. He makes it to his desk and sits. An ASSISTANT, rather harried, enters.

ASSISTANT (With volume) Good morning, Mr. Kistunov!

KISTUNOV Shhh! Please . . . Please lower your voice.

ASSISTANT (Whispers) I'm sorry, sir.

KISTUNOV It's just that my gout is acting up again and my nerves are like little firecrackers. The least little friction can set them off.

ASSISTANT It must be very painful, sir.

KISTUNOV Combing my hair this morning was agony.

ASSISTANT Mr. Kistunov...

KISTUNOV What is it, Pochatkin?

ASSISTANT There's a woman who insists on seeing you. We can't make head or tail out of her story, but she insists on seeing the directing manager. Perhaps if you're not well—

KISTUNOV No, no. The business of the bank comes before my minor physical ailments. Show her in, please... quietly. (The assistant tiptoes out. A woman enters. She is in her late forties, poorly dressed. She is of the working class. She crosses to the desk, a forlorn look on her face. She twists her bag nervously) Good morning, madame. Forgive me for not standing, but I am somewhat incapacitated. Please sit down.

WOMAN Thank you.

(She sits)

KISTUNOV Now, what can I do for you?

WOMAN You can help me, sir. I pray to God you can help. No one else in this world seems to care... (And she begins to cry, which in turn becomes a wail —the kind of wail that melts the spine of strong men. KISTUNOV winces and grits his teeth in pain as he grips the arms of his chair)

KISTUNOV Calm yourself, madame. I beg of you. Please calm yourself.

WOMAN I'm sorry.

(She tries to calm down)

KISTUNOV I'm sure we can sort it all out if we approach the problem sensibly and quietly ... Now, what exactly is the trouble?

WOMAN Well, sir... It's my husband. Collegiate Assessor Schukin. He's been sick for five months. . . Five agonizing months.

KISTUNOV I know the horrors of illness and can sympathize with you, madame. What's the nature of his illness?

WOMAN It's a nervous disorder. Everything grates on his nerves. If you so much as touch him he'll scream out— (And without warning, she screams a loud bloodcurdling scream that sends kistunov almost out of his seat) How or why he got it, nobody knows.

KISTUNOV (Trying to regain his composure) I have an inkling... Please go on, a little less descriptively, if possible.

KISTUNOV The bird was sick?

KISTUNOV (Braces himself) You're not going to scream again, are you?

WOMAN Not that I don't have cause . . . While he was lying in bed these five months, recuperating, he was dis-missed from his job—for no reason at all.

KISTUNOV That's a pity, certainly, but I don't quite see the connection with our bank, madame.

WOMAN You don't know how I suffered during his illness. I nursed him from morning till night. Doctored him from night till morning. Besides cleaning my house, taking care of my children, feeding our dog, our cat, our goat, my sister's bird, who was sick...

KISTUNOV The bird was sick?

WOMAN My sister! She gets dizzy spells. She's been dizzy a month now. And she's getting dizzier every day...

KISTUNOV Extraordinary. However—

WOMAN I had to take care of her children and her house and her cat and her goat, and then her bird bit one of my children, and so our cat bit her bird, so my oldest daughter, the one with the broken arm, drowned my sister's cat, and now my sister wants my goat in exchange, or else she says she'll either drown my cat or break my oldest daughter's other arm—

KISTUNOV Yes, well, you've certainly had your pack of troubles, haven't you? But I don't quite see—

WOMAN And then, when I went to get my husband's pay, they deducted twenty-four rubles and thirty-six kopecks. For what? I asked. Because, they said, he borrowed it from the employees' fund. But that's impossible. He could never borrow without my approval. I'd break his arm... Not while he was sick, of course... I don't have the strength. I'm not well myself, sir. I have this racking cough that's a terrible thing to hear—

(She coughs rackingly—so rackingly. that kistunov is about to crack)

KISTUNOV I can well understand why your husband took five months to recuperate ... But what is it you want from me, madame?

WOMAN What rightfully belongs to my husband—his twenty-four rubles and thirty-six kopecks. They won't give it to

me because I'm a woman, weak and defenseless. Some of them have laughed in my face, sir. . . Laughed! (She laughs loud and painfully, Kistunov clenches everything) Where's the humor, I wonder, in a poor, defenseless creature like myself? (She sobs)

KISTUNOV None ... I see none at all. However, madame, I don't wish to be unkind, but I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place. Your petition, no matter how justified, has nothing to do with us. You'll have to go to the agency where your husband was employed.

WOMAN What do you mean? I've been to five agencies already and none of them will even listen to my petition. I'm about to lose my mind. The hair is coming out of my head. (She pulls out a handful) Look at my hair. By the fistful. (She throws a fistful on his desk) Don't tell me to go to another agency!

KISTUNOV (Delicately and disgustedly, he picks up her fistful of hair and hands it back to her. She sticks it back in her hair) Please, madame, keep your hair in its proper place. Now listen to me carefully. This-is-a-bank. A bank! We're in the banking business. We bank money. Funds that are brought here are banked by us. Do you understand what I'm saying?

WOMAN What are you saying?

KISTUNOV I'm saying that I can't help you.

WOMAN Are you saying you can't help me?

KISTUNOV (Sighs deeply) I'm trying. I don't think I'm making headway.

WOMAN Are you saying you won't believe my husband is sick? Here! Here is a doctor's certificate. (She puts it on the desk and pounds it) There's the proof. Do you still doubt that my husband is suffering from a nervous dis-order?

KISTUNOV Not only do I not doubt it, I would swear to it.

WOMAN Look at it! You didn't look at it!

KISTUNOV It's really not necessary. I know full well how your husband must be suffering.

WOMAN What's the point in a doctor's certificate if you don't look at it?! LOOK AT IT!

KISTUNOV (Frightened, quickly looks at it) Oh, yes... I see your husband is sick. It's right here on the doctor's certificate. Well, you certainly have a good case, madame, but I'm afraid you've still come to the wrong place. (Getting perplexed) I'm getting excited.

WOMAN (Stares at him) You lied to me. I took you as a man of your word and you lied to me.

KISTUNOV I? LIE? WHEN?

WOMAN (Snatches the certificate) When you said you read the doctor's certificate. You couldn't have. You couldn't have read the description of my husband's illness without seeing he was fired unjustly. (She puts the certificate back on the desk) Don't take advantage of me just because I'm a weak, defenseless woman. Do me the simple courtesy



of reading the doctor's certificate. That's all I ask. Read it, and then I'll go.

KISTUNOV But I read it! What's the point in reading something twice when I've already read it once?

WOMAN You didn't read it carefully.

KISTUNOV I read it in detail!

WOMAN Then you read it too fast. Read it slower.

KISTUNOV I don't have to read it slower. I'm a fast reader.

WOMAN Maybe you didn't absorb it. Let it sink in this time.

KISTUNOV (Almost apoplectic) I absorbed it! It sank in! I could pass a test on what's written here, but it doesn't make any difference because it has nothing to do with our bank!

WOMAN (She throws herself on him from behind) Did you read the part where it says he has a nervous disorder? Read that part again and see if I'm wrong.

KISTUNOV THAT PART? OH, YES! I SEE YOUR HUSBAND HAS A NERVOUS DISORDER. MY, MY, HOW TERRIBLE! ONLY I CAN'T HELP YOU! NOW PLEASE GO!

(He falls back into his chair, exhausted)

WOMAN (Crosses to where his foot is resting) I'm sorry, Excellency. I hope I haven't caused you any pain.

KISTUNOV (Trying to stop her) Please, don't kiss my foot. (He is too late—she has given his foot a most ardent embrace.

He screams in pain) Agggghhh! Can't you get this into your balding head? If you would just realize that to come to us with this kind of claim is as strange as your trying to get a haircut in a butcher shop.

WOMAN You can't get a haircut in a butcher shop. Why would anyone go to a butcher shop for a haircut? Are you laughing at me?

KISTUNOV Laughing! I'm lucky I'm breathing... Pochatkin!

WOMAN Did I tell you I'm fasting? I haven't eaten in three days. I want to eat, but nothing stays down. I had the same cup of coffee three times today.

KISTUNOV (With his last burst of energy, screams)  
POCHATKIN!

WOMAN I'm skin and bones. I faint at the least provocation... Watch. (She swoons to the floor) Did you see? You saw how I just fainted? Eight times a day that happens.

(The assistant finally rushes in)

ASSISTANT What is it, Mr. Kistunov? What's wrong?

KISTUNOV (Screams) GET HER OUT OF HERE! Who let her in my office?

ASSISTANT You did, sir. I asked you and you said, "Show her in."

KISTUNOV I thought you meant a human being, not a lunatic with a doctor's certificate.

WOMAN (To Pochatkin) He wouldn't even read it. I gave it to him, he threw it back in my face ... You look like a kind person. Have pity on me. You read it and see if my husband is sick or not.

(She forces the certificate on Pochatkin)

ASSISTANT I read it, madame. Twice!

KISTUNOV Me too. I had to read it twice too.

ASSISTANT You just showed it to me outside. You showed it to everyone. We all read it. Even the doorman.

WOMAN You just looked at it. You didn't read it.

KISTUNOV Don't argue. Read it, Pochatkin. For God's sakes, read it so we can get her out of here.

ASSISTANT (Quickly scans it) Oh, yes. It says your husband is sick. (He looks up; gives it back to her) Now will you please leave, madame, or I will have to get someone to remove you.

KISTUNOV Yes! Yes! Good! Remove her! Get the doorman and two of the guards. Be careful, she's strong as an ox.

WOMAN (To kistunov) If you touch me, I'll scream so loud they'll hear it all over the city. You'll lose all your depositors. No one will come to a bank where they beat weak, defenseless women... I think I'm going to faint again...

KISTUNOV (Rising) WEAK? DEFENSELESS? You are as defenseless as a charging rhinoceros! You are as weak as the King of the Jungle! You are a plague, madame! A

plague that wipes out all that crosses your path! You are a raging river that washes out bridges and stately homes! You are a wind that blows villages over mountains! It is women like you who drive men like me to the condition of husbands like yours!

WOMAN Are you saying you're not going to help me?

KISTUNOV Hit her, Pochatkin! Strike her! I give you permission to knock her down. Beat some sense into her!

WOMAN (To Pochatkin) You hear? You hear how I'm abused? He would have you hit an orphaned mother. Did you hear me cough? Listen to this cough.

(She "racks" up another coughing spell)

ASSISTANT Madame, if we can discuss this in my office—

(He takes her arm)

WOMAN Get your hands off me . . . Help! Help! I'm being beaten! Oh, merciful God, they're beating me!

ASSISTANT I am not beating you. I am just holding your arm.

KISTUNOV Beat her, you fool. Kick her while you've got the chance. We'll never get her out of here. Knock her senseless!

(He tries to kick her, misses and falls to the floor)

WOMAN (Pointing an evil finger at kistunov, she jumps on the desk and punctuates each sentence by stepping on his desk bell) A curse! A curse on your bank! I put on a curse on you and your depositors! May the money in your the

vaults turn to potatoes! May the gold in your cellars turn to onions! May your rubles turn to radishes, and your kopecks to pickles...

KISTUNOV STOP! Stop it, I beg of you!... Pochatkin, give her the money. Give her what she wants. Give her anything—only get her out of here!

WOMAN (To Pochatkin) Twenty-four rubles and thirty-six kopecks . . . Not a penny more. That's all that's due me and that's all I want.

ASSISTANT Come with me, I'll get you your money.

WOMAN And another ruble to get me home. I'd walk but I have very weak ankles.

KISTUNOV Give her enough for a taxi, anything, only get her out.

WOMAN God bless you, sir. You're a kind man. I remove the curse. (With a gesture) Curse be gone! Onions to money, potatoes to gold—

KISTUNOV (Pulls on his hair) REMOVE HERRRR! Oh, God, my hair is falling out!

(He pulls some hair out)

WOMAN Oh, there's one other thing, sir. I'll need a letter of recommendation so my husband can get another job. Don't bother yourself about it today. I'll be back in the morning. God bless you, sir...

(She leaves)

KISTUNOV She's coming back . . . She's coming back ... (He slowly begins to go mad and takes his cane and begins to beat his bandaged leg) She's coming back... She's coming back...

(Dim-out)

#### 4.3.1. Critical Analysis – Theme & Structure, Form & Devices

*A Defenseless Creature* is a one-act farce by Neil Simon which relates the efforts of a woman to force a bank official to pay her money that he does not owe her.

Attempt a critical analysis of the play after reading the play carefully:

Form/ Genre	One-Act Farce with satirical elements
Theme	Ingenuity of the woman, man's physical disadvantage – reversal of gender roles
Structure	Linear, comical, exaggerated action
Literary Devices	Verbal and Dramatic Irony, Foreshadowing

Recall the elements of a One-Act play – a dramatic work consisting of only one act, the dramatic equivalent of a short story. It concentrates on a single episode or situation and has only two or three characters. In theme, mood and subject the range is considerable – from farce to tragedy.

Recall the elements of Farce – highly ridiculous situations, stereotyped characters, exaggerated action, and violent horseplay all to evoke laughter

*Features of Farce:*

- begins with mistaken identity of the characters
- involves “funny” violence – actions that are played for laughs
- action happens quickly – timing adds to the comedy
- stock characters – hen-pecked man, strong woman
- one character trapped by rules of social conduct, another that breaks all rules
- satire on social codes

*Examine the Title*

- identify any dramatic devices used
- comment on the purpose of the use
- for example: The title itself is an example of dramatic irony as the events of the play disprove the woman’s claim that she is a weak defenceless creature.
- how does the plot present this irony?

*Examine the Plot*

- identify the setting
- put down the structure of the plot in terms of Exposition-Inciting Incident-Rising Action-Climax-Falling Action & Resolution
- identify scenes that contain farcical elements – funny violence, exaggerated action, loud theatrics, etc.
- What effect do they have on the protagonist?
- Do you as the reader feel the same way?

### *Examine the Characters*

- identify and main characters – protagonist & antagonist
- Do you feel sorry for the main character? Why?
- How do you feel about the actions of the antagonist?
- What is your opinion on why the character behaves in this manner?
- Do her actions reinforce or break the traditional image of a woman?

### *Examine the Dialogue*

- identify the lines that point to the weakness of the protagonist.
- identify the lines that point to the weakness of the antagonist.
- Does the action of the protagonist match the words? Does it prove that he is weak?
- Does the action of the woman match her words? What does it prove?
- How does the ironic words add to the comic effect?
- identify the words that foreshadow the pain of the man at the beginning of the play.
- Do they play out as predicted? what effect does it have on the reader?

Attempt an analysis of the play using the questions as guides to develop your ideas.



## Reading and Appreciating FICTION

### 5.2 Short Story - *The Bet* - Anton Chekhov

It was a dark autumn night. The old banker was walking up and down his study and remembering how, fifteen years before, he had given a party one autumn evening. There had been many clever men there, and there had been interesting conversations. Among other things they had talked of capital punishment. The majority of the guests, among whom were many journalists and intellectual men, disapproved of the death penalty. They considered that form of punishment out of date, immoral, and unsuitable for Christian States. In the opinion of some of them the death penalty ought to be replaced everywhere by imprisonment for life.

“I don’t agree with you,” said their host the banker. “I have not tried either the death penalty or imprisonment for life, but if one may judge *a priori*, the death penalty is more moral and more humane than imprisonment for life. Capital punishment kills a man at once, but lifelong imprisonment kills him slowly. Which executioner is the more humane, he who kills you in a few minutes or he who drags the life out of you in the course of many years?”

“Both are equally immoral,” observed one of the guests, “for they both have the same object - to take away life. The State is not God. It has not the right to take away what it cannot restore when it wants to.”

Among the guests was a young lawyer, a young man of five-and-twenty. When he was asked his opinion, he said:

“The death sentence and the life sentence are equally immoral, but if I had to choose between the death penalty and imprisonment for life, I would certainly choose the second. To live anyhow is better than not at all.”

A lively discussion ensued. The banker, who was younger and more nervous in those days, was suddenly carried away by excitement; he struck the table with his fist and shouted at the young man:

“It’s not true! I’ll bet you two million you wouldn’t stay in solitary confinement for five years.”

“If you mean that in earnest,” said the young man, “I’ll take the bet, but I would stay not five but fifteen years.”

“Fifteen? Done!” cried the banker. “Gentlemen, I stake two million!”

“Agreed! You stake your millions and I stake my freedom!” said the young man.

And this wild, senseless bet was carried out!

The banker, spoilt and frivolous, with millions beyond his reckoning, was delighted at the bet. At supper he made fun of the young man, and said:

“Think better of it, young man, while there is still time. To me two million is a trifle, but you are losing three or four of the best years of your life. I say three or four, because you won’t stay longer. Don’t forget either, you unhappy man, that voluntary confinement is a great deal harder to bear than compulsory. The thought that you have the right to step out in liberty at any moment will poison your whole existence in prison. I am sorry for you.”

And now the banker, walking to and fro, remembered all this, and asked himself:

“What was the object of that bet? What is the good of that man’s losing fifteen years of his life and my throwing away two million? Can it prove that the death penalty is better or worse than imprisonment for life? No, no. It was all nonsensical and meaningless. On my part it was the caprice of a pampered man, and on his part simple greed for money ...”

Then he remembered what followed that evening. It was decided that the young man should spend the years of his captivity under the strictest supervision in one of the lodges in the banker’s garden. It was agreed that for fifteen years he should not be free to cross the threshold of the lodge, to see human beings, to hear the human voice, or to receive letters and newspapers. He was allowed to have a musical instrument and books, and was allowed to write letters, to drink wine, and to smoke. By the terms of the agreement, the only relations he could have with the outer world were by a little window made purposely for that object. He might have anything he wanted - books, music, wine, and so on - in any quantity he desired by

writing an order, but could only receive them through the window. The agreement provided for every detail and every trifle that would make his imprisonment strictly solitary, and bound the young man to stay there exactly fifteen years, beginning from twelve o'clock of November 14, 1870, and ending at twelve o'clock of November 14, 1885. The slightest attempt on his part to break the conditions, if only two minutes before the end, released the banker from the obligation to pay him the two million.

For the first year of his confinement, as far as one could judge from his brief notes, the prisoner suffered severely from loneliness and depression. The sounds of the piano could be heard continually day and night from his lodge. He refused wine and tobacco. Wine, he wrote, excites the desires, and desires are the worst foes of the prisoner; and besides, nothing could be more dreary than drinking good wine and seeing no one. And tobacco spoilt the air of his room. In the first year the books he sent for were principally of a light character; novels with a complicated love plot, sensational and fantastic stories, and so on.

In the second year the piano was silent in the lodge, and the prisoner asked only for the classics. In the fifth year music was audible again, and the prisoner asked for wine. Those who watched him through the window said that all that year he spent doing nothing but eating and drinking and lying on his bed, frequently yawning and angrily talking to himself. He did not read books. Sometimes at night he would sit down to write; he would spend hours writing, and in the morning tear up all that he had written. More than once he could be heard crying.

In the second half of the sixth year the prisoner began zealously studying languages, philosophy, and history. He threw himself eagerly into these studies - so much so that the banker had enough to do to get him the books he ordered. In the course of four years some six hundred volumes were procured at his request. It was during this period that the banker received the following letter from his prisoner:

“My dear Jailer, I write you these lines in six languages. Show them to people who know the languages. Let them read them. If they find not one mistake I implore you to fire a shot in the garden. That shot will show me that my efforts have not been thrown away. The geniuses of all ages and of all lands speak different languages, but the same flame burns in them all. Oh, if you only knew what unearthly happiness my soul feels now from being able to understand them!”

The prisoner’s desire was fulfilled. The banker ordered two shots to be fired in the garden.

Then after the tenth year, the prisoner sat immovably at the table and read nothing but the Gospel. It seemed strange to the banker that a man who in four years had mastered six hundred learned volumes should waste nearly a year over one thin book easy of comprehension. Theology and histories of religion followed the Gospels.

In the last two years of his confinement the prisoner read an immense quantity of books quite indiscriminately. At one time he was busy with the natural sciences, then he would ask for Byron or Shakespeare. There were notes in which he demanded at the same time books on chemistry, and a manual

of medicine, and a novel, and some treatise on philosophy or theology. His reading suggested a man swimming in the sea among the wreckage of his ship, and trying to save his life by greedily clutching first at one spar and then at another.

The old banker remembered all this, and thought: “Tomorrow at twelve o’clock he will regain his freedom. By our agreement I ought to pay him two million. If I do pay him, it is all over with me: I shall be utterly ruined.”

Fifteen years before, his millions had been beyond his reckoning; now he was afraid to ask himself which were greater, his debts or his assets. Desperate gambling on the Stock Exchange, wild speculation and the excitability which he could not get over even in advancing years, had by degrees led to the decline of his fortune and the proud, fearless, self-confident millionaire had become a banker of middling rank, trembling at every rise and fall in his investments.

“Cursed bet!” muttered the old man, clutching his head in despair “Why didn’t the man die? He is only forty now. He will take my last penny from me, he will marry, will enjoy life, will gamble on the Exchange; while I shall look at him with envy like a beggar, and hear from him every day the same sentence: ‘I am indebted to you for the happiness of my life, let me help you!’ No, it is too much! The one means of being saved from bankruptcy and disgrace is the death of that man!”

It struck three o’clock, the banker listened; everyone was asleep in the house and nothing could be heard outside but the rustling of the chilled trees. Trying to make no noise, he took from a fireproof safe the key of the door which had not been

opened for fifteen years, put on his overcoat, and went out of the house. It was dark and cold in the garden. Rain was falling. A damp cutting wind was racing about the garden, howling and giving the trees no rest. The banker strained his eyes, but could see neither the earth nor the white statues, nor the lodge, nor the trees. Going to the spot where the lodge stood, he twice called the watchman. No answer followed. Evidently the watchman had sought shelter from the weather, and was now asleep somewhere either in the kitchen or in the greenhouse.

“If I had the pluck to carry out my intention,” thought the old man, “Suspicion would fall first upon the watchman.”

He felt in the darkness for the steps and the door, and went into the entry of the lodge. Then he groped his way into a little passage and lighted a match. There was not a soul there. There was a bedstead with no bedding on it, and in the corner there was a dark cast-iron stove. The seals on the door leading to the prisoner’s rooms were intact.

When the match went out the old man, trembling with emotion, peeped through the little window.

A candle was burning dimly in the prisoner’s room. He was sitting at the table. Nothing could be seen but his back, the hair on his head, and his hands. Open books were lying on the table, on the two easy-chairs, and on the carpet near the table.

Five minutes passed and the prisoner did not once stir. Fifteen years’ imprisonment had taught him to sit still. The banker tapped at the window with his finger, and the prisoner made no movement whatever in response. Then the banker

cautiously broke the seals off the door and put the key in the keyhole. The rusty lock gave a grating sound and the door creaked. The banker expected to hear at once footsteps and a cry of astonishment, but three minutes passed and it was as quiet as ever in the room. He made up his mind to go in.

At the table a man unlike ordinary people was sitting motionless. He was a skeleton with the skin drawn tight over his bones, with long curls like a woman's and a shaggy beard. His face was yellow with an earthy tint in it, his cheeks were hollow, his back long and narrow, and the hand on which his shaggy head was propped was so thin and delicate that it was dreadful to look at it. His hair was already streaked with silver, and seeing his emaciated, aged-looking face, no one would have believed that he was only forty. He was asleep ... In front of his bowed head there lay on the table a sheet of paper on which there was something written in fine handwriting.

“Poor creature!” thought the banker, “he is asleep and most likely dreaming of the millions. And I have only to take this halfdead man, throw him on the bed, stifle him a little with the pillow, and the most conscientious expert would find no sign of a violent death. But let us first read what he has written here ... “

The banker took the page from the table and read as follows: “To-morrow at twelve o'clock I regain my freedom and the right to associate with other men, but before I leave this room and see the sunshine, I think it necessary to say a few words to you. With a clear conscience I tell you, as before God, who beholds me, that I despise freedom and life and health, and



all that in your books is called the good things of the world.

“For fifteen years I have been intently studying earthly life. It is true I have not seen the earth nor men, but in your books I have drunk fragrant wine, I have sung songs, I have hunted stags and wild boars in the forests, have loved women ... Beauties as ethereal as clouds, created by the magic of your poets and geniuses, have visited me at night, and have whispered in my ears wonderful tales that have set my brain in a whirl. In your books I have climbed to the peaks of Elburz and Mont Blanc, and from there I have seen the sun rise and have watched it at evening flood the sky, the ocean, and the mountain-tops with gold and crimson. I have watched from there the lightning flashing over my head and cleaving the stormclouds. I have seen green forests, fields, rivers, lakes, towns. I have heard the singing of the sirens, and the strains of the shepherds’ pipes; I have touched the wings of comely devils who flew down to converse with me of God ... In your books I have flung myself into the bottomless pit, performed miracles, slain, burned towns, preached new religions, conquered whole kingdoms ...

“Your books have given me wisdom. All that the unwearying thought of man has created in the ages is compressed into a small compass in my brain. I know that I am wiser than all of you.

“And I despise your books, I despise wisdom and the blessings of this world. It is all worthless, fleeting, illusory, and deceptive, like a mirage. You may be proud, wise, and fine, but death will wipe you off the face of the earth as though you were no more than mice burrowing under the floor, and your

posterity, your history, your immortal geniuses will burn or freeze together with the earthly globe.

“You have lost your reason and taken the wrong path. You have taken lies for truth, and hideousness for beauty. You would marvel if, owing to strange events of some sorts, frogs and lizards suddenly grew on apple and orange trees instead of fruit, or if roses began to smell like a sweating horse; so I marvel at you who exchange heaven for earth. I don’t want to understand you.

“To prove to you in action how I despise all that you live by, I renounce the two million of which I once dreamed as of paradise and which now I despise. To deprive myself of the right to the money I shall go out from here five hours before the time fixed, and so break the compact ...”

When the banker had read this he laid the page on the table, kissed the strange man on the head, and went out of the lodge, weeping. At no other time, even when he had lost heavily on the Stock Exchange, had he felt so great a contempt for himself. When he got home he lay on his bed, but his tears and emotion kept him for hours from sleeping. Next morning the watchmen ran in with pale faces, and told him they had seen the man who lived in the lodge climb out of the window into the garden, go to the gate, and disappear. The banker went at once with the servants to the lodge and made sure of the flight of his prisoner. To avoid arousing unnecessary talk, he took from the table the writing in which the millions were renounced, and when he got home locked it up in the fireproof safe.

## Glossary

*Capital punishment*: also known as the death penalty, is a practice whereby a person is put to death by the state as punishment for a crime.

*Christian State*: a state that recognizes Christianity as its official religion.

*obsolete*: outdated

*immoral*: contrary to what is considered to be correct behaviour

*a priori*: based on theory rather than experience

*humane*: merciful, showing the best qualities of humans

*frivolous*: not serious

*trifle*: of little value

*lodge*: cottage

*caprice*: a sudden unpredictable action

*rapture*: great joy

*Theology*: the study of religious faith, practice, and experience.

*Gospels*: books written about the life of Jesus

*indiscriminately*: haphazardly, in a random manner

*Byron*: George Gordon Byron, a famous English Romantic poet

*emaciated*: abnormally thin

*ethereal*: delicate, heavenly

*Elburz*: mountains in Northern Iran

*Mont Blanc*: mountain in Switzerland

*shepherd's pipes*: small flutelike pipe instrument

*sirens*: from Greek mythology, sea nymphs whose sweet singing lured sailors to their deaths rocky coasts

<i>comely</i> :	attractive
<i>posterity</i> :	future generations
<i>renounced</i> :	given up

### **About the Author**

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) was a Russian short story writer, playwright and novelist. He was born into a peasant family, in Taganrog, near the Black Sea. When he was fifteen, he began tutoring younger children to help support his family. Although he qualified as a doctor, he did not practice medicine for very long. He began as a writer for comic magazines before turning to more serious stories and plays. His style of writing focuses on mood rather than action. Skilled in writing both fiction and drama, Chekhov became known as the father of the modern short story and the modern play. He earned worldwide fame for his stories and plays such as *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*.

### **About the Essay**

In this story, Anton Chekhov uses elements of the fable form to probe the true nature of humanity, morality and greed. He uses a two-part plot structure for the story. There are only two main characters in the story, the banker and the lawyer. The story hinges on the bet made between the two that the latter will spend fifteen years in solitary confinement in exchange for two million roubles. The story uses the flashback technique to build interest in the story. The climax of the story comes as a complete surprise, but the story has an open ending. The dark setting foreshadows the darkness of the themes and contributes to the psychological impact of the story. Chekhov does not preach to the readers about

the character of life, learning, morality and human nature, instead letting them draw their own conclusions.

### 5.2.1. Critical Appreciation with reference to form, devices, theme and structure

The story opens with a banker, pacing uneasily in his room on a dark autumn night in 1870. In a **flashback** he recalls the bet he had made fifteen years before at a party that he had hosted. The guests at the party that evening included scholars and journalists who begin a discussion on the moral aspects of capital punishment. The banker and most of the guests viewed it as more humane than life imprisonment, while a young lawyer disagreed, insisting that he would choose life in prison rather than death stating that it was better to live somehow than not to live at all. The argument becomes heated and the banker and the lawyer impulsively agree to a bet: the banker challenges him to remain in solitary confinement for five years. Not to be outdone, the lawyer insists he could spend fifteen years in total isolation. The wealthy, frivolous banker is thrilled at the bet, saying he would pay him two million roubles if he fulfils his conditions. According to the terms of the bet, the lawyer would have no direct contact with any other person, but could write notes to communicate with the outside world and receive whatever comforts he desired. **This sets up the major conflict in the story between the banker and the lawyer. The bet reveals a great deal about the character of the two men. The banker has the arrogance of great wealth, while the lawyer is hot-headed and impulsive, taking a decision that will alter the course of his whole life on the spur of the moment.** A subtler

conflict emerges in the different ways in which the two men value human life. The **third- person narration** uses a **second flashback** to relate the effects of the confinement on the lawyer. **This second flashback foreshadows the eventual climactic moment in the story.**

Confined to a garden lodge on the banker's property, the lawyer suffers from loneliness and depression at first but eventually begins to read voraciously and study a wide range of subjects. He reads an astonishing range of books from Shakespeare and Byron to the Gospels and Greek myth. He writes a note in six languages and asks the banker to confirm if he has written correctly in the various languages. While the lawyer takes advantage of the solitude to educate and entertain himself in various ways over the years, the banker's fortunes begin to decline. The narrative returns to the present, as the banker realizes that if he loses the bet, paying off the lawyer will lead to his bankruptcy. **This is the climactic moment in the story, as the banker's character begins to unravel from this point. The second part of the two-part plot starts here.** In the early hours of the day when the fifteen-year period is about to expire, the banker resolves to kill the lawyer. It is a cold rainy night and the watchman has deserted his post. The banker enters the lodge stealthily, planning to kill the lawyer, but on looking at him at close quarters he finds him greatly emaciated and sleeping at a table. The banker reads a note written by the lawyer, who reveals that he has chosen to abandon the bet, having learned that material goods are fleeting and that divine salvation is worth more than money. Shocked and moved after reading the note, the banker kisses the lawyer on the head and returns

to bed. He begins crying at his own depravity in choosing wealth over morality. **Chekhov's use of paradox is evident at this point** when the lawyer at the very moment of winning the bet renounces the winnings from the bet. **The use of this trope serves to explicate the theme of greed and idealism.** The contrast between the two characters is striking, as the banker resolves to kill the lawyer to protect his fortune, whereas the latter voluntarily gives up his winnings because in his confinement he realizes the worthlessness of material possessions. When the banker wakes up later that morning, a watchman reports that the lawyer has climbed out the window and fled the property, forfeiting the bet five hours before the fifteen years were completed. To prevent the spread of rumours the banker locks the note in his safe. The story explores the meaning of life through the actions of the two main characters. Chekhov seems to subtly imply that perhaps it was the banker who was imprisoned by his avarice, whereas the lawyer, even though he was physically confined, frees himself of worldly desires. However, the author refrains from asserting any notion or belief explicitly, leaving the ending open for the readers to draw their own conclusions.

### Pause and Respond

I. Choose the correct answer.

1. The short story "The Bet" is set in the \_\_\_\_\_ season.  
a) winter   b) autumn   c) spring
2. The banker was for \_\_\_\_\_  
a) life imprisonment   b) drowning   c) capital punishment

3. The lawyer is \_\_\_\_\_ when he takes the bet.  
a) twenty two    b) twenty five    c) twenty eight
4. The lawyer believes that \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) death is better than imprisonment  
b) to live anyhow is better than not at all  
c) death is better than a poor life
5. The banker is characterized as \_\_\_\_\_ when he makes the bet.  
a) cruel                      b) careless                      c) frivolous

II. State whether true or false.

1. The lawyer agrees to the bet on impulse without thinking through the consequences.
2. The contrast in character between the two men is best seen in their attitude to money at the end of fifteen years.
3. The lawyer learns the value of human company during his solitary confinement.
4. The banker's disregard for human life shows his lack of compassion for others.
5. The desire to prove that you are right can lead to extreme consequences.