






## Discourse of “Little Man” in A. P. Chekhov’s Stories

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### ABSTRACT

The article presents an experiment of a discourse approach to the term “little man”. This approach enables to establish its connection with such basic concepts of the Orthodox spiritual and religious tradition as “humbleness”, “humility of mind”, “apophathy”. More precise definition of the term as an inability of a literary character to humbleness / humility of mind, as a victim of apophathy, was based on the study of the text and subtext dependence (the mechanism of double eventfulness). Another direction in the study of the double eventfulness of Chekhov’s story was the analysis of the relationship between motif and character. This path makes it possible to compare humbleness / humility of mind with apophathy in the fortune of “little man”.

The choice of two stories by A.P. Chekhov of 1886 – Anyuta and Grief – helps to clarify the literary method of the writer, to draw the border line between realism and existentialism.

As a source of Chekhov’s subtext, a special aspect of the reference has been revealed – along the lines of external and internal reading of the text. Humbleness of a personality in the aspect of “non-event” (story Anyuta) has been featured. This is possible due to the twofold eventivity formed by the relationship between text and subtext, spectacular and sound symbolism. The basic narrative techniques, the author’s irony, the opposition of Ion Potapov’s humbleness of mind to the social character of Anyuta’s sacrifice are shown. The specificity of twofold eventivity of the story Grief is characterized from the standpoint of the multi-layered manifestation of the discourse of “little man”.

**Keywords:** A. P. Chekhov, Anyuta, Grief, “little man”, twofold eventivity, humility, humility of mind, apophathy, text, subtext.

### 1. Introduction

The reframing of methodology in literary criticism, which emerged in the late 1980s, concerned the reconsideration of the term “little man”. So, traditionally, *The Station Master* by A. S. Pushkin, *The Overcoat* by N. V. Gogol, *Poor Folk* by F. M. Dostoevsky were read within the context of the interpretation of the character as a victim of social evil and the author’s compassion. In many respects, this approach was dictated by the distinction between Russian sentimentalism (*Poor Liza* by N. M. Karamzin) and realism which redirected attention to social antithesis contradictions and resolution of the “man and environment” dilemma. Modern scholars project the emphasis from exposing the perpetrators of the tragedy of “little people” to the inability of a person to withstand the strokes of fate. Considering “little man” as an antihero, A. V. Zhuchkova notices that the social aspect of the problem is “one of the variants for representation of “little man’s” drive for avoiding responsibility by imposing it on someone or something external, on society” [1, p. 61].

Of particular interest for the development of modern views on the discourse of "little man" are the stories by A. P. Chekhov *Anyuta* and *Grief* (1886). Choosing them as an object allows for the clarification of the characteristics of writer's method. It is known that in the 1990s, Bulgarian literary scholars (L. Moncheva, R. Korsemova, N. Neichev) identified the features of existentialism in A. P. Chekhov's prose [2]. These ideas are consonant with the works by P. M. Bitsilli [3, p. 13–20].

A great contribution to the study of Chekhov's existentialism was made by R. S. Spivak. The existential dependence of the heroines on fate is described by R. S. Spivak as "rational violence to oneself" [4, p. 53].

At the same time, Orthodox axiology in nineteenth-century prose is accompanied by the phenomenon of apophathy (man's falling away from God), studied by I. A. Yesaulov [5].

The experience of studying the ideological function of the concept seems fruitful [6, p. 163].

The relevance of the study, therefore, is in establishing a connection between the discourse of "little man" and the concepts of Orthodoxy – "humbleness", "humility of mind", "apophathy" – as philosophical and aesthetic categories that determine the axiology of Russian literature of the 19th century.

The purpose of the article is to substantiate the term "little man" in terms of the inability to humility / humility of mind. The study of the text and subtext relationship as a mechanism of double eventivity, apophathy as a consequence of the refusal of humility / humility of mind determined particular lines of the research. The analysis of the relationship between the motif and the character also complements the notion of the double eventivity of Chekhov's story and allows one to compare the embodiment of humility / humility of mind with apophathy in two stories featuring the fate of "little man".

## 2. Methods

The methodological basis of the article is determined by the use of discourse approach and conceptual analysis of the text.

The discourse approach is based on the identification in the structure of the double eventivity of referential and communicative events.

The authors are attentive to methodological linguistic conceptology (school by St. Petersburg professor N. L. Mishatina), known as the methodology of concept analysis of the text.

The synthesis of such approaches makes it possible to establish a relationship between the polar concepts in Orthodox axiology that explain the essence of "little man." Actuality for a new approach to the discourse of "little man" is supported by the ideas of M. M. Bakhtin about the status of the event, "the event that is told in the work" and "the event of the story itself" [7, p. 403], the idea of the double eventivity of Chekhov's prose developed by V. I. Tyupa [8, p. 273]. The scholar's experience in studying the prose of A.P. Chekhov as a Menippean satire by the example of the stories about reverence for rank led to a comparison with the medieval buffoonery rite [9].

We also considered other methodologically similar works of Russian and foreign Russianists (see: [10; 11; 12; 13; 14; 15; 16; 17; 18; 19; 20]).

## 3. Results and Discussion

Referring to the examples related to the theme of "little man", let us re-project them into the context of the concept "humility". Then the fate of Vyrin (*The Station Master*), Bashmachkin (*The Overcoat*) and Devushkin (*Poor Folk*), from the standpoint of ethical and psychological motivation of actions, will be as follows.

Resignation to Vyrin's fate does not have the character of lowliness in spirit. The emotional decision "I will bring the lost sheep of mine home" [21, p. 102–103] is replaced by the character's inability to resign to the fate of Dunya. The conviction that it is impossible to change the fate of his daughter (and his own) turns into not only the sinful "Upon the thought that Dunya is perishing too, so unwillingly you wish her grave" [21, p. 105], but it is also covered by the character's self-justification, exonerated of the sin of the wish of death.

Bashmachkin is capable of revenge in the guise of a phantom-ghost. The author's irony and sarcasm add a derogatory meaning to retribution. Interpreting the text in a rhetorical Orthodox perspective reveals the dubiousness of the character's deed as a "compensation" for the injustice that happened to him.

Devushkin's self-sacrifice, extending to the willingness to endure hardships for the sake of the illusory well-being of Varenka Dobroselova as Bykov's kept woman, does not fit into the mainstream of Orthodox humility.

The compassion of the authors and their awareness of the spiritual poverty of "little man" lie behind the heroes' humility. Characters' humbling is a consequence of rational, but not spiritual logic. Humility in the Orthodox aspect implies humility as a result of faith in God.

"Little man" by A. P. Chekhov marks a new stage in writers' understanding of apophathy. Let's take for consideration the stories *Anyuta* and *Grief*.

The dramatic overtone in the story *Anyuta* is determined from the first sentence. The projection of crippling poverty is emphasized by a diminutive suffix ("В самом дешевом номерке мебелированных комнат" [22, p. 341] / In the cheapest number of furnished rooms) and by an oxymoron – the comically pretentious name of the rooms –

“Лиссабон” / Lissabon. The “hoarse” (“Сиплый”) sound of the corridor clock – a sign of altered acoustics and breakdown – reinforces the impression of the meager furniture of the entire building. “Сиплый” / “hoarse” means “muffled harsh, hissing” [23, p. 882]. The sound of the clock conveys a violation of a societal norm. The repetition of the words “зубрил” (cramped) and “зубрячка” (cramming) creates the basis for the contrast of the future doctor’s mechanical memorization where the signs of fatigue (“пересохло во рту и выступил на лбу пот” (his mouth was dry and the sweat stood out on his forehead) [22, p. 342]) are opposed to Anyuta’s silent performing her work. Her crooked back, sitting on a stool by the window, and the humiliating position of an inhabitant (“жилицы”) complement the portrait of a meek brunette. The author’s remark (“работа была спешная” [22, p. 342] /it was rush work) is a source of subtext that creates a parallel to the narrative line movement. A double field of reference is created: along the outer and inner lines.

The plot of the story moves along an external spiral: first, medical student Klochkov uses Anyuta as a visual material to memorize the position of the ribs, then artist Fetisov – as a model. The heroes turn out to be unconcerned about Anyuta whose lips, nose and fingers are blue with cold, she is trembling with cold. The cynicism of their actions is emphasized by the methods being typical of their profession: one charcoals on a woman’s body to make it easier memorizing difficult material, the other complains about the former sitter at a mention of her “blue legs”. In this context, the artist’s request to Klochkov (“одолжить прекрасную девицу” [22, p. 343] / to borrow a fair maiden) strengthens the status of the medical student as the owner of the “thing”. Comparison of Anyuta with a convict woman (“точно татуированная, с черными полосами на груди” [22, p. 343] / as if tattooed, with black stripes on her chest) creates a sign of the heroine’s outcast from the world of the masters of her life.

The fortunate background of her former “masters” whom the heroine remembers creates the external backdrop of the narrative. From the point of view of the title of the story which defines Anyuta as the protagonist, the content of her thoughts shifts the sub-text to the place of the main text, driven by the plot.

The first mention (“она все думала” [22, p. 343] / she did think) has something in common with the reflections of Jonah from the story *Grief*. On the one hand, the author’s reflection on Jonah (“Кого оторвали от плуга, бросили сюда в этот омут, полный чудовищных огней, тому нельзя не думать” [22, p. 326] / Whoever was torn away from the plow, thrown here into this pool full of monstrous fires, one cannot help but think) continues the line of *The Evil-Doer* about the consequences of the industrial revolution being tragic for the Russian village. On the other hand, Jonah’s thoughts are a form of loneliness: he feels castaway. Jonah’s words to his clients remain unanswered. Only his horse as a continuation of the owner becomes the character’s “confidant”. Silence becomes sacred: Jonah, unlike Anyuta, demonstrates humility of mind.

The author’s reproduction of Anyuta’s thoughts discloses the double eventivity of the story: the life of the character and the essence of her nature. Memories of five “decent people” whom she knew “for all six to seven years of her roaming around furnished rooms” [22, p. 345], deprive the reader of the illusion about the heroine. It is important to pay attention to the connotation of the words “порядочные люди” / “decent people”. The sarcasm of the author’s evaluation, which appeals to Anyuta’s phrase “decent people” (from the nobility), is based on the opposition “decent woman – kept woman.”

Anyuta’s lack of will is not the humility of mind when a person entrusts fate to the Almighty. The appearance of the sarcasm “decent people” (about Anyuta’s former cohabitants) is a reconstruction of the heroine’s view, a manifestation of her abject devotion. Hence the replacement of life with “roaming around furnished rooms”, an emergency shelter that belongs to others. The narrowing of the space around a woman’s life shows her lack of will, her lack of faith.

Anyuta’s inability to feel her personality is emphasized by the way the character thinks of the present, “Настоящее плохо. Нужно скорее оканчивать вышиванье, нести к заказчице и потом купить на полученный четвертак и чаю, и табаку” [22, p. 346] /The present is bad. I must finish embroidery as soon as possible, carry it to the customer and then buy an earned quarter worth of tea and tobacco. This state of being dissolved in someone else’s life gives the role of an ironic paraphrase to Fetisov’s picture with a plot about Psyche. The mythological meaning of the plot lies in the fact that Psyche felt unhappy: everyone admired her as soulless beauty, but none sought her hand in marriage. The fate of Anyuta as an “inhabitant” conveys the depth of her misfortune. Against this background, Klochkov’s words “Человек для искусства просит, а не для пустяков. Отчего не помочь?” /Man asks for art, not for trifles. You might as well help. [22, p. 347] acquire cynicism, and the subtext exposes the dominance of the plot about ruined soul over the plot of “little man”, whose social dependence is absorbed by the drama of slavish willingness to serve any master.

The twofold eventivity stands out the meaning of the story. The two stories about Anyuta – as a convenient “inhabitant” for use, lacking of her soul in the eyes of men, and as the heroine with an impersonal inner life – are connected by the impossibility and inability of the heroine to change her life.

The twofold eventivity formed by the text and subtext relationship is intensified by spectacular and sound symbolism. So, the sound of the clock is a tuning fork to the untidy atmosphere of the room, “Скомканное одеяло, разбросанные подушки, грязный таз, наполненный мыльными помоями, в которых плавали окурки, – все было

свалено в кучу." / A crumpled blanket, scattered pillows, a dirty basin filled with soapy slops in which cigarette butts floated – everything was piled up in a heap [22, p. 340].

The details of Anyuta's portrait after her having returned from the artist ("Лицо у нее от стояния на натуре осунулось" / Her face became hollow-cheeked because of posing as a model [22, p. 343]) contain death allusion. The signs of physical death in the portrait of Anyuta create an allegory about her spiritual suspended animation.

The concluding ("А в коридоре кто-то кричал во все горло: Грригорий, самовар!" / And in the corridor someone was shouting at the top of their voices: Grrigory, samovar! [22, p. 344]) loud "p"/ "r" is outwardly discordant with the hoarse clock, creating an illusion of a happy ending of the event. The vocative imperative remark of the servant becomes a metaphor for the fate of the heroine. The story takes on a paraphrastic sounding: sarcasm and irony in relation to Klochkov and Fetisov are emphasized with irony in relation to Anyuta, when the common noun "Grigory" as a nomination for the floor in a tavern in Chekhov's context becomes the voluntary fate of the character.

The double eventivity of the story *Grief* is defined, as in *Anyuta*, by the drama of a Russian peasant, squeezed into the city by the moloch of the industrial revolution. And against the background of the social indifference of the city, personalized by the image of the scurrying crowd, transformed into the text is the all-consuming grief of Jonah Potapov. The plot remains only an external marker of genuine eventivity.

Comprehending Jonah's story creates the discourse of "little man". On the one hand, the narrative techniques ("Извозчик Иона Потапов бел, как привидение. Его лошаденка тоже белая и неподвижна" / The driver of Jonah Potapov is white as a ghost. His horse is also white and motionless [22, p. 326]) contain allusions of the sacredness of death. On the other hand, the ironic author's phrase "Она погружена в мысль" / She is immersed in thought [22, p. 326]) is a metaphor for the syncretism of the character and the horse. Jonah's insensitivity to shouts is explained not only by his social position, but also by absorption in grief. The description of the hero's melancholy gives the story, in contrast to *Anyuta*, the character of the tragic dependence of man on fate.

Jonah's desire to overcome melancholy is a desire to speak out, "Слушатель должен вздыхать, причитывать" / The listener must sigh, wail [22, p. 330]. Filling the reference space of the story with the communicative strategy constitutes a new aspect of apophathy. The lack of participation on the part of people makes the hero a shadow, and his life – ghostly.

The hero's humility of mind does not allow him to become embittered. The symbolism of the white color of the snow that covered Jonah and his horse is significant here. It expresses the idea of death which becomes for the hero a way to overcome melancholy. The archetype of Earth Mother and Death as eternal beginnings of life ("Таперя у меня одна жена – сырая земля... Сын-то вот помер, а я жив" / Now I have one wife – damp earth ... My son has died, but I am alive [22, p. 330]) conveys in an interesting way the humility of mind of the hero that excludes sinfulness. His words about recognizing death as a mistake, confusing the choice of the victim, having taken his son instead of his father, embodies the meekness of Jonah. The character revives and gets carried away, opening his mind to the horse. This bitter irony of the author contains the axiology of Orthodox consciousness, which makes man's grief surmountable.

The opposition of Jonah's humility of mind to Anyuta's humbling, which is possible if a person has faith, albeit naive and subconscious, exposes the range of literary and philosophical strategies of A.P. Chekhov. Anyuta takes the dependence on the circumstances as her fate, Jonah's unreasoning readiness for fate is a sign of spontaneous faith.

#### 4. Summary

The discourse of "little man" we studied in relation to the concepts of Orthodoxy – "humbleness", "humility of mind" and "apophathy" – made it possible to clarify the border between realism and existentialism of the writer. The study of the text and subtext relationship showed the nature of the double eventivity and the difference between personal and social humility in the story *Anyuta* and humility of mind in the story *Grief*.

#### 5. Conclusions

Research of this kind can be continued both within the boundaries of Chekhov's work and within the framework of Russian classical literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. As an object of study, literary scholars have the right to take the stories by A. P. Chekhov, as well as those works of Russian literature that adhere to the great tradition, start with it, are in a productive dialogue with it. Last but not least, let us emphasize that this also applies to the texts of modern (actual) literature.

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