Anton Chekhov’s The Bet: A Successful Display of Modernism

From Anton Chekhov’s, “The Bet”, there are abundant amounts of wisdom and insight to learn from, that can as well relocate over on into our own lives. Chekhov, being one of the most quintessential modernist thinkers and writers of his time, perfectly displays these through the portrayals of each of his characters, transcription of themes and simple development of depth in his story, and in his characters: The lawyer and the banker. Both characters agree on a bet where the Lawyer would spend fifteen years of his life in confinement, and upon completion of that duration would win two million rubies. The entire plot and story development encircles the two main characters and their original beliefs and traits, and how they transmit to change both of them over the fifteen year time lapse. This bet quickly uncovers a sense of materialism and competition in both characters at the beginning of the story, and these traits are profoundly dominant in the banker throughout it. Whereas both the lawyer and banker are focused on money, the lawyer’s focus changes throughout his fifteen years alone. The lawyer leaves the material world behind, and begins to apply his mind and his thoughts to realizations of knowledge, and then interprets them into his own individual thoughts and ideas that eventually invoke an epiphany in him. The reader grasps that the lawyer’s time in isolation from the world has impacted him prominently. Although fifteen years alone may initially seem abysmal, the lawyer is able to make the best of his time and comes out of his confinement truly enlightened, whereas the banker enters his own unforeseen stint in isolation, where he traps himself to his
own regrets, wrong doings and misfortune. With no regard for money, material items or even the same humanity, the lawyer is eternally changed. However, the banker is not so easily changed, and is victim to his own wrong doings. At first, one might believe that “The Bet” may seem like a very simple short story, yet when put more into perspective and critical thought, it touches on some of life’s most inescapable features, truths and outcomes. Anton Chekhov paints a widespread picture with the ideas of modernism in his short story, as we delve into mindsets and themes that parallel many of our very own that are dominant in people today in our own society.

The story starts off with an argument amongst the banker and his guests, the topic of this argument being the death penalty, and if it is justifiable. The banker believes that the death penalty is the right thing to do, while a young twenty-five year old lawyer challenges the banker’s opinion, saying that he would rather be allowed to live his life if given the option. Quickly this argument becomes less about morality and ethics, and more about competition between these two high-efficacy men. So hastily, the two decide on their bet, “The banker, a spoiled, frivolous man at the time, who had more millions than he could count, was overjoyed at the bet” (Chekhov); The banker was to put at stake two million rubies on the line for the lawyer as long as the lawyer could make it through exactly fifteen years in confinement alone away from all other life and society. Immediately it is shown that both characters are out to prove their points. Both are driven by money, as well as the competition and greed of winning the bet. The banker simply does not feel that putting up two million is a risk for him, and out of stubbornness accepts the bet believing the lawyer will not last the fifteen years imprisoned without any human contact or freedom. The lawyer believes he can prove his point, but just as the banker does, so rashly puts up fifteen years of his life for the potential money as well as to appease the banker’s stance. Soon after the bet starts, the banker begins to feel remorse “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.” (Chekhov) As the fifteen years pass by, and the occupied time required of the lawyer in confinement according to the bet is about to expire, the banker has much less money now than he had many years earlier. “That cursed bet! the old man murmured clutching his head. “Why couldn’t the man die? He’s only just forty. He’ll take my last copeck, he’ll marry, he’ll enjoy life, he’ll play the stock market, while I jealously watch him like a beggar” (Chekhov) now risking bankruptcy if he loses the two million, and what he believes to be inevitable embarrassment and collapse of his own life. The banker refuses to let the lawyer win, the banker plots to murder the lawyer just before the bet is due to be over. This course of action by the banker only furthers his materialistic drives. Although he accepts that the competition was meaningless, he still refuses to lose his money and dignity. Not until the very end does the banker learned that the lawyer relinquished the bet, and the lawyer came to conclusion that the material world, as well as the banker’s money, was not what he wanted.

By Chekhov ending the story this way, we are left to conclude on the banker and his attitude towards the lawyer ourselves. There two scenarios: Either the banker realizes the error of his thoughts and plotting, or he does not and secretly acclaims the lawyer for leaving and forfeiting the bet and all of the money, so that the banker may keep his fortune and avoid bankruptcy. “Therefore, it is possible that the highly materialistic individual is less likely to develop a strong sense of self as the emphasis is upon acquiring status-enhancing objects rather than experiences that will form the fabric of a strong internalized sense of self.” (Watson) The Banker, being more concerned with money through the story, would be much less likely to care for the lawyer now. At this point, the actual cause of the bet is disregarded, any remorse the
banker had for the lawyer and his decision to spend fifteen years of his life in confinement is now gone. Now in a matter of morality versus material values, material values drive the banker, while moral values invade the lawyer. This leads the lawyer to the realization that he could not find true satisfaction in material items such as money, while it leads to the banker’s surprise that the lawyer changed over that fifteen year period.

Both the lawyer and banker prove to be similar characters at the beginning of the story. Each one shows their arrogance and foolishness in making the bet, and both show the need for each other to prove their respective points. Although the bet was seen as detrimental for the lawyer at first, it can be viewed much more worthwhile for him in some ways. In the time he spent alone, the lawyer was able to read and write to his heart’s desire, but most importantly the lawyer was able to deliberate. Free from all outside oppression and influence, the lawyer was able to comprehend and develop ideas for himself. This shows that the lawyer was able to widen his mind and learn more and more about life, as well as create his very own attitudes and outlooks towards humanity, but on the contrary, the lawyer has assimilated so much that he has almost lost all desire for life and humanity. Due to the lawyer’s realizations in confinement, there is a possibility that what the lawyer contemplated and transpired into in his confinement backs up his original argument “To live anyhow is better than not at all.”(Chekhov) This notion is the lawyer’s full accreditation in the bet. So now it can be argued that some of what the lawyer left confinement with was enough to justify his life’s worth, yet the same time what his time thinking headed to might be enough to justify that knowledge can be problematic as well, to the point where one might not even desire to live life.

The lawyer’s enlightenment brings us back to both the lawyer’s and the banker’s feud of which punishment is better, and to the perplexing idea that is any type of life better? Even if that
means living it to the point where one does not want to live it anymore? This was the intention of Chekhov “Chekhov did not side with either the conservationists or the developers because he believed that he had an artistic duty to present convincing portraits of characters with varying views on all manner of subjects. The ensuing disputes between them are not resolved and that is one of the hallmarks of Chekhov's drama.” (Quilnault,) leaving readers to formulate opinions on what is morally right, and who deserved to win the bet. Chekhov illustrates the banker as an older man with conservative values, and the lawyer as a younger man with more liberal values, and yet Chekhov never does formally declare who was the triumphant man or who was the morally “right” man in this situation. Instead, Chekhov allows us to grasp these characters, their motives and their rights and wrongs. “Whenever there was a diamond in the rough, Chekhov focused on the rough. […]Chekhov replied that the aim of literature should be to depict "life as it actually is....” (Morson) Chekhov shows people that his literature oscillates around realistic themes, where the answer is not always what is obvious, or what is “prettiest”, but rather what is most true to our lives. Chekhov leaves us at a crossroads for the readers to go on to fully decide on the actions and judgments of each main character.

Isolation is a heavy theme in the story that dominantly shapes both the lawyer and banker. The lawyer is put in captivity for fifteen years, and is most definitely physically isolated from the worlds, but despite just that it can be manipulated more than one might think. Isolation is almost not a satisfying term to use when describing the lawyer’s time alone in confinement. The lawyer may be physically isolated from both the world and people, but he is not spiritually and mentally cut off. The lawyer has access to an almost infinite supply of knowledge in confinement, and fifteen years of reading, learning and thinking off of a huge compilation of literature in which was available for the lawyer to read introduces him to much more “I declare
that I despise freedom, life, health and everything that those books of yours call the blessings of this world.” (Chekov) The lawyer grew to the point where he did not even care for those very ideas that originated from the banker and his own argument. In this way, the fifteen years the lawyer spent let him only get in more contact with basic human individuality, rights and ways of thought that our society is more adept to today.

In contrast to the lawyer, the banker, whom although is technically free, can be viewed as the real isolated one. The banker limits himself by his own selfishness, he waits years and years for the bet to be over and for him to be the winner, but as that draws nearer he grows farther from humanity. The banker decides he should secretly kill the lawyer in his sleep so he can unanimously win the bet and keep his money. The banker’s idea to murder the lawyer shows his own mental isolation from humanity, and his paranoia that the lawyer is ruining his life is not necessarily paranoia, yet an excuse for his own devastation of his very own life. By these examples, it is noticeable that the theme of isolation in Chekhov’s work might not be meant to be completely negative, as isolation in the story proves to be beneficial for the development of the lawyer’s thoughts and ideas, but in the banker’s case, it proves to be damaging. The banker anguishes for fifteen years questioning the legitimacy of the bet and what the consequences of the bet he made will be, while the lawyer is forced to render those kinds of thoughts behind him while in physical isolation, and progress as a thinker in a state of conscious liberation. In a way, the time the lawyer spent alone gave him life, and gave him purpose, in contrast to the banker whom one could say “lost” life, and never found that same purpose that the lawyer discovered.

Chekhov embedded deep and sentimental ideas into the storyline of his short piece “The Bet”. What is most interesting and representative of modernist idea is that Chekhov conveyed these various concepts in a way that the reader must pick up on his or herself. At the beginning
of the story, two seemingly selfish and arrogant men make an exacting bet which ultimately isolates the two of them in opposite ways. Although both were isolated in separate ways, one was actually enlightened by isolation, that being the lawyer in an individual way that transforms and transpires him into basically a brand new state of being. The lawyer, although secluded from people and events around the world, gets in touch with thoughts, emotions, and ideas. These revelations allow him to reshape his persona, and outlook on the bet, and money. The banker, whom is not secluded from the world, withdraws his own humanity with his competitiveness and greed. The banker, although not at all physically in contact with the lawyer is stressed out and changed by him, the lawyer’s elongated time alone led him to develop ideas and thoughts unlike anything he had before. One might say his time in confinement bettered him, but another might say it caused him to become mentally unstable or paranoid with his assessments on life. These are Chekhov’s aims as he allocates for readers and critics to decide what they make of each character and their mental determinations. Materialism is indefinitely evident in both characters at the beginning of the story, both of whom start out young, rich and cocky men, both aiming to be right. After their bet, the lawyer loses his focus for material values like money, but the banker does not, as he puts his money over his sense of nobility, and eliminates all respect and fairness he so selfishly may have once had towards the lawyer. Anton Chekhov is able to show us the complexity of what people value in only a few pages of text, both the lawyer and banker are representative of certain assemblies of people across the world and across all eras of mankind. Chekhov develops generality into mass detail, and conveys literary themes and style, along with philosophies into a piece of modernist literature that requires more thought, creativity, and differentiation to comprehend fully. What is delivered out of the story is simplicity that when examined in-depth results in more expansiveness.
Works Cited


