



At Christmastime

By Hannah, Minnie, and Danielle

We will discuss

- Chekhov's family life
- Setting of the story
- Cultural context
- Connections to Russian culture today
- Connections to Chekhov's other works

Chekov's family life

Childhood

- Poor family
- Had to move to Moscow to work and support his family
- Familiar with the life of peasants and middle class Russians

Adulthood

- Loveless marriage
- Speculation that Chekhov and his wife, Olga Knipper, both had affairs with other people

How do you think Chekhov's own experiences influenced his portrayal of family life in *At Christmastime*?

Setting

- Russia in January 1900
- Petersburg and a Russian village
- Partially in a tavern
- Main social setting: the family

What do you think is the significance of the story being set at Christmas time?

Cultural Context

- Marriage customs
- Family structure
- Violence against women

Marriage in late 19th century Russia

Why Yefimia did not divorce her unloving husband?

- Marriages were usually arranged (in all social classes)
- Marriages were usually permanent
- Inequality between husband and wife
- Husband had much more liberty
- The wife was dependent on the husband for money, a house, a position, etc. (one reason why women could not divorce)

Marriages, however unhappy, were usually permanent.

Why?

Divorce was hard. The Orthodox Church decided who was allowed a divorce and there were only situations (some of which were very hard to prove)

- Divorce proceedings could be complex and expensive, so only the nobility could realistically get a divorce.

Chekhov vs. Tolstoy

- Novel (wordy)
- Serious

Family structure

- Women were dependent.
- On page 376, in the first paragraph of the story: “She would have liked to write the letter, but the old man did not know how to write, and there was nobody to ask.
- The house, wife, and the children were the husband’s property.
- In cities, the husband worked outside the home, while the wife did the housework.
- Peasants made very low wages and had to pay high taxes to the tsar and the landowner, therefore both spouses had to work the fields.
- The wife still had to do the housework.

Domestic violence

- *At Christmastime* as a social commentary
- We do not know for sure whether Yefimia was beaten by her husband, but on page 381: She was afraid of him, oh, how afraid!
- Domestic violence was an accepted part of life in 19th century Russia, women were expected to obey their husbands. If a woman was beaten, raped, or abused in any way it was considered her fault and she would be shamed by society.
- In fact, the courts of Russia sentenced women to lashes with a whip for “disobedience.”

Connections to Chekhov's other works

- Unhappy marriages
- Unloved and unappreciated wives who face derision
- *The Huntsman, Peasant Women, Rothschild's Fiddle*

Chekhov's writing style

- Chekhov's 6 principles: Does *At Christmastime* align with his principles for good writing or ignore them?
- Chekhov said that it is an artist's job to ask questions, not answer them. How do you think Chekhov this attitude influenced the writing of *At Christmastime*?

Judging by what you know from the story, do you think Vasilisa corresponds with the traits of other unhappy wives in Chekhov's story?

How is she different?

What is the significance of this for the story and its themes/social messages?

Domestic violence in Russia today

- Though numbers vary, Amnesty International reports that about 9000 women die in Russia every year due to domestic abuse.
- It is not a specific crime in Russia; it is seen as a private matter.
- It is hard for women to get help because they are often financially dependent on their partner and because domestic violence is not taken seriously.
- If a woman is abused people often think she must be “doing something wrong.”
- Social issues such as alcoholism and sexist attitudes contribute to this problem.

General Conclusions

What can you take away from this presentation about:

... Chekhov and his writing?

... Social issues in Russia in the 19th century and today?

... Themes and purpose of *At Christmastime*?

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