



READING 5A Analyze how complex plot structures and devices function and advance the action in a work of fiction.

The Darling

Short Story by Anton Chekhov

Meet the Author

Anton Chekhov 1860–1904

Like British writers Anthony Trollope and Elizabeth Gaskell, Anton Chekhov (chĕk'ôf) focused on the lives of ordinary people. But while these realist predecessors used conventional plot devices to structure their fiction, Chekhov organized his stories around the unfolding of character. He pioneered a subtle, naturalistic style—unsentimental and deceptively simple—that marked a radical departure from the dominant literary styles of 19th-century Russia.

Accidental Humorist Chekhov began publishing as a freelance journalist and humorist when he was in his 20s. To support his parents and siblings after his father went bankrupt, he wrote brief comic sketches for several Russian newspapers—while juggling medical school and a thriving social life as well. Chekhov's comic work proved so popular that by his late 20s, his “lowbrow” works were already more numerous than all of his later works combined.

A Serious Turn Russian editors and readers accepted the lack of political or moral philosophy in Chekhov's comic sketches. However, as he began to publish more serious work, some critics denounced it as ambiguous

and “unprincipled” writing. Chekhov resented these attempts to force ideology into his work, insisting that the purpose of his writing was neither to entertain nor to philosophize, but to present life as honestly as possible. His short stories and plays, such as *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*, illustrate his commitment to this approach.

Lasting Influence Despite his apolitical stance, Chekhov was a deeply moral person, beloved by his friends for his humor and optimism. Colleagues were drawn to his earnest, down-to-earth personality, and he spent much of his time mentoring and encouraging other writers. In 1897, Chekhov learned that he had tuberculosis after he suffered a lung hemorrhage. Although he tried to conceal his illness, he was forced to adopt the lifestyle of a partial invalid, which limited his ability to participate in the intellectual culture he so enjoyed. Though critically ill, Chekhov fell in love with Olga Knipper, an actress appearing in his plays. They married in 1901, just a few years before his death. Today, he is considered one of the fathers of modern short fiction and drama, and his work remains a prime example of naturalism.

Author Online

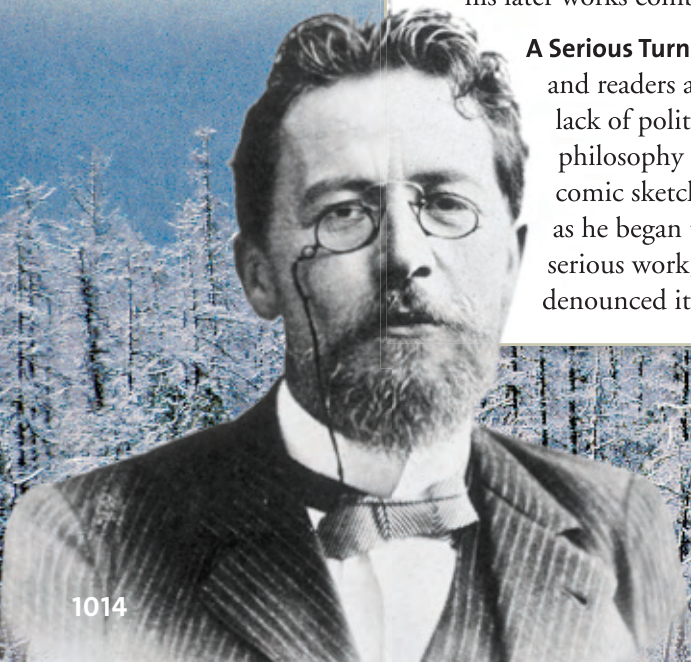
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DID YOU KNOW?

Anton Chekhov . . .

- was a gossip columnist early in his career.
- traveled 6,000 miles across Siberia to study living conditions in a prison colony.
- wrote several thousand letters, notable for their lively humor.



LITERARY ANALYSIS: NATURALISM

Naturalism, an offshoot of realism, emerged in Europe during the 1870s. Like the realists, naturalists depicted ordinary life, although usually from a more pessimistic viewpoint. Typical elements of naturalist fiction include

- detached, objective **narration** that conveys observations without moral judgments
- **characters** who are driven by forces they cannot control, such as instinct, personality, or environment
- skepticism about traditional ideals and values, such as faith, love, and progress
- avoidance of conventional **plot** devices

As you read this story, notice how Chekhov weaves these elements into his subtle, understated style.

READING STRATEGY: ANALYZE PLOT STRUCTURE

To analyze a plot's **structure**, you examine how its content is organized. Chekhov organized "The Darling" as a series of **parallel episodes**, or a sequence of repeated actions. Parallel episodes are often found in folk tales, such as "The Three Little Pigs." In this story, Chekhov uses the repetitive structure to emphasize the main character's patterns of behavior. As you read, watch for patterns of repetition and consider what they reveal about Olga's character traits.

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Chekhov used these words to portray a woman in love. Complete each sentence with an appropriate word from the list.

| | | | |
|------------------|---------------|-----------|----------|
| WORD LIST | apathetically | naive | surmise |
| | capricious | ominous | unctuous |
| | inscrutable | prostrate | |

1. A(n) _____ clap of thunder warned of the coming storm.
2. The _____ student was easily tricked.
3. It was easy to _____ what had happened.
4. No one could interpret her _____ smile.
5. He would _____ himself in an effort to appease her anger.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Can you be too AGREEABLE?

Most people enjoy being with someone who is agreeable and easy to get along with. Unfortunately, it's possible to get too much of a good thing. When does the desire to please others become a minus instead of a plus?

DISCUSS List three advantages of being agreeable and three ways this quality could work against you. Based on your answers, do you consider being agreeable to be more positive or negative as a character trait?

| <i>Pros</i> | <i>Cons</i> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| • attracts friends easily | • gets taken advantage of |
| • | • |
| • | • |



The DARLING

Anton Chekhov



Olga, the daughter of the retired middle-grade civil servant Plemlyannikov,¹ was sitting on the steps of her house leading to the yard, lost in thought. It was a hot day. The flies were making an awful nuisance of themselves, and it was pleasant to think that evening was not far off. Dark rain clouds were gathering in the east, and from time to time there came a breath of moisture in the air from that direction.

Kukin,² manager and proprietor of the amusement park Tivoli, who lived in a wing of the house, was standing in the middle of it and looking at the sky.

“Again!” he cried in despair. “It’s going to rain again! Every day it rains, every day, as though on purpose! It’s the end! It’s ruin! Terrible losses every day!”

10 He threw up his hands in despair, and turning to Olga he went on:

“That’s what my life is like, my dear Olga. Enough to make you weep. You work, you do your best, you wear yourself out, you lie awake at night, always thinking how to improve things—and what happens? On the one hand, the public—ignorant savages. I give them the best musical comedies, dramatized fairy stories, first-class comics, but do you think they want it? Do they appreciate it? All they want is sideshows! All they ask for is vulgarity! On the other hand, look at the weather! Almost every day it rains. It started coming down in buckets on the tenth of May and it rained the whole of May and June. It’s simply awful! No business, but I have to pay the rent just the same, haven’t I? Paying the actors, aren’t I?”

20 The next evening the clouds gathered again, and Kukin cried, laughing hysterically:

“Well, what do I care? Let it rain! Let it flood the park, damn me! Damn my luck in this world and the next! Let the actors sue me! I don’t mind going to court. I don’t mind going to prison! To Siberia!³ To the scaffold! Ha, ha, ha!”

The next day the same thing. . . . **A**

Olga listened to Kukin in silence. She looked serious, and sometimes tears started in her eyes. In the end Kukin’s misfortunes touched her and she fell in love with him. He was small and thin, with a yellow face, his curly hair combed back at the temples;

Analyze Visuals ►

What details in this portrait reflect traditional feminine characteristics?

A NATURALISM

Reread lines 6–24. Consider the techniques Chekhov uses to reveal Kukin’s character traits. What details does the narrator state directly? What can you infer about Kukin from his dialogue?

1. **Plemlyannikov** (plyŭm-yă’nŭ-kôf’).

2. **Kukin** (kŭ’kŭn).

3. **Siberia** (sĭ-bĭr’ĕ-ə): a notoriously cold region in Russia, south of the Arctic Circle and stretching from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, that was used as a place of exile for political prisoners.



he spoke in a thin falsetto,⁴ and when he talked his mouth became twisted; his face always wore an expression of profound despair; and yet he aroused a deep and genuine feeling in her. She was always in love with someone and could not live without it.

When she was a young girl she had loved her daddy, who now sat in a darkened room in an invalid chair, gasping for breath; she had loved her auntie, who sometimes used to come to visit them twice a year from Bryansk;⁵ earlier still, as a schoolgirl, she had been in love with her French master.⁶ She was a quiet, good-natured, compassionate girl, with gentle, soft eyes and excellent health. Looking at her full rosy cheeks, her soft white neck with a dark mole on it, her kind, **naive** smile, which came into her face when she listened to anything pleasant, men thought “Yes, you’ll do!” and also smiled, while women visitors could not restrain themselves from catching hold of her hand suddenly in the middle of a conversation and declaring in a transport of delight:

40 “Oh, you darling!” **B**

The house in which she had lived since she was born and which was left to her in her father’s will was on the outskirts of the town in Gypsy Lane, not far from the Tivoli; in the evenings and at night she could hear the band playing in the park, the hissing and banging of the fireworks, and she could not help thinking that it was Kukin fighting with his fate and taking his chief enemy—the public—by storm; her heart thrilled at the thought, she did not feel like sleeping at all, and when he came back home early in the morning, she tapped softly at her bedroom window and, showing him only her face and one shoulder through the curtains, smiled tenderly at him. . . .

He proposed to her and they were married. And when he had had a good look at her neck and her robust, plump shoulders, he threw up his hands and said:

“Oh, you darling!”

He was happy, but as it never stopped raining on his wedding day and on his wedding night, the expression of despair never left his face.

They lived well after their wedding. She sat in the box office, saw that everything in the park was in excellent order, kept an account of the expenses, and paid the wages. Her rosy cheeks and her charming, naive, radiant smile could be seen now at the box-office window, now behind the scenes, now in the refreshment bar. And already she was telling her friends that the theater was the most remarkable, the most important, and the most necessary thing in the world, and that it was only in the theater that one could obtain true enjoyment and become truly educated and humane.

60 “But,” she added, “do you think the public realizes this? All they want is a sideshow! Yesterday we gave *Faust Inside Out*, and almost all the boxes were empty. But if Vanya and I had put on some vulgar rubbish, then, I assure you, the theater would have been packed. Tomorrow Vanya and I are putting on *Orpheus in Hell*. Do come.”

Whatever Kukin said about the theater and the actors she repeated. Like him, she despised the public for their ignorance and indifference to art, interfered at the rehearsals, corrected the actors, looked after the good behavior of the musicians; and when a bad notice appeared in the local paper, she cried and then went to the editorial office to demand an explanation.

70 The actors were fond of her and nicknamed her “Vanya and I” and “darling”; she was sorry for them, lent them small sums of money, and if they happened to deceive her she did not complain to her husband but only shed a few tears in secret.

naive (nī-ēv') *adj.* simple; innocent or unworldly

B NATURALISM

Reread lines 31–34.
What do these details reveal about Olga?

4. **falsetto** (fōl-sēt'ō): a voice that sounds unnaturally high in pitch.

5. **Bryansk** (brē-ānsk'): a city in western Russia, southwest of Moscow.

6. **master**: teacher.

In winter too they lived well. They rented the theater in the town for the winter season and let it for short periods to a Ukrainian company, to a conjurer, or to local amateurs. Olga was growing stouter and was always beaming with pleasure, while Kukin grew thinner and yellower and complained of their terrible losses, although they had not done at all badly all the winter. He coughed at night, and she made him drink hot raspberry tea and lime-flower water, rubbed him with eau de cologne and wrapped him in her soft shawls.

80 “Oh, my sweet,” she used to say with complete sincerity, stroking his hair. “Oh, my handsome one!”

During Lent⁷ he left for Moscow to engage actors, and she could not sleep without him. She sat at the window and gazed at the stars. All that time she compared herself to the hens who also cannot sleep at night and feel uneasy when the cock is not in the hen house. Kukin had to stay longer in Moscow; he wrote that he would be back at Easter and was already giving instructions in his letters about the Tivoli. But late at night on the Sunday before Easter there was an **ominous** knocking at the gate. Someone was hammering on the gate as though on a barrel: boom! boom! boom! The sleepy cook ran to open the gate, splashing through the puddles with her bare feet.

90 “Open up, please,” someone was saying in a hollow voice. “There’s a telegram for you.”

Olga was used to getting telegrams from her husband, but this time for some reason she was paralyzed with fear. With shaking hands she opened the telegram, and read as follows: “Kukin died suddenly today stop metely awaiting instructions stop guneral tuesday.”

That was how it was actually written in the telegram, “guneral,”⁸ and some incomprehensible word, “metely.” It was signed by the producer of the operetta company.

100 “Oh, my darling!” Olga sobbed. “My sweet little Vanya, my darling! Why did I ever meet you? Why did I know you and love you? Who have you left your poor unhappy Olga to?”

Kukin was buried in Moscow on Tuesday. Olga returned home on Wednesday, and as soon as she got into her bedroom she flung herself on the bed and sobbed so loudly that it could be heard in the street and in the neighboring yards.

“The darling!” the neighbors said, crossing themselves. “Poor darling, how she does take on!”

110 Three months later Olga was returning home from mass, heartbroken and in deep mourning. It so happened that one of her neighbors, Vasily Andreyich Pustovalov, who was also returning home from church, walked beside her. Pustovalov, the manager of the merchant Babakayev’s⁹ timber yard, who wore a straw hat, a white waistcoat, and a gold watch chain, looked more like a land owner than a business man.

“Everything,” he said gravely, with a note of compassion in his voice, “happens according to the natural order of things. If any of your dear ones dies, it is because it is the will of God. In such a case we must be brave and bear our cross without a murmur.”

ominous (ōm’ə-nəs) *adj.*
threatening

Language Coach

Word Definitions In line 94, *stop* means “period.” Telegraphs use Morse code, a series of dots and dashes. To avoid confusion, a stop—which looks like a dot—is spelled out. How do the telegram’s stops and strange words affect this scene’s tone?

7. **Lent:** the 40 weekdays from Ash Wednesday until Easter, observed by Christians as a period of fasting and repentance.

8. **“guneral”:** In the original Russian version of the story, the misprint for *funeral* looks like the Russian word meaning “to laugh.”

9. **Vasily Andreyich Pustovalov** (vəs’yēl’yōē ən-dryā’yīch’ pūs-tō’vā-lōf’) . . . **Babakayev’s** (bä-bä’ kă-yěfs’).



Portrait of Ilya Efimovich Repin (1876), Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoy. Oil on canvas, 102 cm × 70 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. © Bridgeman Art Library.

After seeing Olga to her gate, he said goodbye and walked on. All day afterwards she could hear his grave voice and she had only to shut her eyes to see his dark beard. She liked him very much. And apparently she had made an impression on him too,
120 for a few days later an elderly woman whom she did not know very well came to have a cup of coffee with her, and as soon as she sat down at the table she began talking about Pustovalov. According to her, he was a most excellent man, whom one could depend on and whom any girl would be glad to marry. Three days later Pustovalov paid her a visit himself. He did not stay long, about ten minutes, and did not say much, but Olga fell in love with him so passionately that she did not sleep a wink all night, tossing about as though in a fever; and in the morning she sent for the elderly woman. Soon they were engaged, and then came the wedding.

After their marriage Pustovalov and Olga lived happily together. He was usually at his office till dinner time, then he went out on business and his place at the office
130 was taken by Olga, who was there till the evening, making out accounts and seeing to the delivery of the goods.

“The price of timber,” she would say to her acquaintances and customers, “rises twenty per cent every year now. Why, we used to sell local timber, and now every year my Vasily has to go for timber to the Mogilyov province.¹⁰ And the freight!” she cried, covering her cheeks with her hands in horror. “The freight!” **C**

It seemed to her that she had been in the timber business for years, and that the most important and necessary thing in life was timber; and there was something dearly familiar and touching to her in the sound of the words beam, block, board, balk, plank, slat, scantling, batten, slab.¹¹ . . . At night, when she was asleep, she
 140 dreamt of mountains of planks and boards, long, endless strings of wagons carting timber somewhere far from the town; she dreamt of a whole regiment of six-inch beams, twenty-eight feet high, standing on end and marching on the timber yard; beams, logs, and boards knocking against each other with the resounding crash of dry wood, falling and getting up again and piling themselves on each other. Olga cried out in her sleep, and Pustovalov said to her tenderly:

“What’s the matter, Olga darling? Cross yourself, my dear.”

Her husband’s ideas were her ideas. If he thought the room was too hot or business was slack, she thought the same. Her husband did not care for any diversions and spent the holidays at home. She did the same.

150 “Why are you always at home or at the office?” her friends asked her. “Why don’t you go to the theater, darling, or to the circus?”

“Vasily and I have no time to go to the theater,” she replied gravely. “We are working folk. We can’t waste time on all sorts of nonsense. What’s the good of theaters?” **D**

On Saturdays Pustovalov and Olga used to go to evening service, on holy days to early mass, and they walked side by side on the way back from church, an unctuous expression on their faces. There was a nice smell about both of them, and her silk dress rustled pleasantly. At home they drank tea with buns and various jams, and afterwards they ate pie. Every day at noon there was a lovely smell of beetroot soup and roast mutton or duck in the yard and in the street near the gate, and of fish on
 160 fast days, and it was impossible to walk past the gate without feeling hungry. At the office the samovar¹² was always on the boil, and customers were treated to tea and ring-shaped rolls. Once a week husband and wife went to the baths and returned side by side, both red in the face.

“Oh, we’re very happy, thank God,” Olga used to say to her acquaintances. “God grant everyone such a life!” **E**

When Pustovalov was away buying timber in the Mogilyov province, Olga missed him very much and lay awake at night and cried. A young army veterinary surgeon called Smirnin, who rented the cottage in the yard, sometimes came to see her in the evenings. He used to tell her all sorts of stories and played cards with her, and this
 170 used to divert her. His stories of his private life were particularly interesting; he was married and had a son, but was separated from his wife, who had been unfaithful to him, and now he hated her and sent her forty roubles¹³ a month for the maintenance of their son. Hearing this, Olga sighed and shook her head. She was sorry for him.

C PLOT STRUCTURE

Compare lines 128–135 with lines 54–64. What pattern of repeated actions do these examples establish?

D PLOT STRUCTURE

Explain what is **ironic** about Olga’s comment in lines 152–153. How does Chekhov’s use of parallel episodes call attention to this irony?

unctuous

(ŭngk’chōō-əs) *adj.*
excessively or insincerely earnest; smug

E NATURALISM

Compare lines 154–165 with lines 49–53. In what ways do these descriptions differ from conventional portrayals of love?

10. **Mogilyov** (mə-gĭ-lyōf’): **province**: a part of the eastern European nation of Belarus that at the time of the story was controlled by Russia; often spelled *Mogilev*.

11. **beam . . . slab**: jargon associated with the wood or timber industry. A balk is a roughly cut piece of timber; a scantling is a small beam; a batten is a sawed strip of wood.

12. **samovar** (sām’ə-vār’): a metal urn with an inner tube for heating water, used in Russia to make tea.

13. **roubles** (rōō’bēlz): Russian money; usually spelled *rubles*.

“Well, God preserve you,” she used to say, seeing him off to the stairs with a lighted candle. “Thank you for helping me to while away the time, and may the Lord and the Mother of God keep you in good health.”

And she always expressed herself with the utmost gravity and soberness, in imitation of her husband. Before the veterinary surgeon disappeared downstairs behind the door, she used to say:

180 “I think you really ought to make it up with your wife, Mr. Smirnin. You ought to forgive her, if only for the sake of your son. I suppose the poor little boy understands everything.”

When Pustovalov came back, she told him in a low voice all about the veterinary surgeon and his unhappy family life, and both of them, owing to some strange association of ideas, went down on their knees before the icons,¹⁴ **prostrating** themselves and praying that God should give them children.

prostrate (prɒs'trāt') v. to lie with the face down, as in prayer or submission

The Pustovalovs lived like that in peace and quiet, in love and complete concord, for six years. But one winter day, after drinking hot tea at the office, Vasily went out into the yard without his cap to see to the loading of some timber, caught a cold, and
190 was taken ill. He was attended by the best doctors, but his illness did not respond to treatment and he died after having been ill for four months. And Olga was once more a widow.

“Who have you left me to, my darling?” she sobbed, after burying her husband. “How can I live without you, unhappy wretch that I am! Take pity on me, good people, left with no one in the world to care for me!”

She went about in a black dress with long *pleureuses*,¹⁵ and gave up wearing a hat and gloves for good. She seldom went out of the house, except to go to church or to pay a visit to her husband's grave, leading the secluded life of a nun. It was not till six months later that she took off the *pleureuses* and opened the shutters of the windows.
200 Sometimes she could even be seen in the morning, but how she lived and what went on in her house no one really knew. People did **surmise** something from the fact that they could see her, for instance, having tea in her garden with the veterinary surgeon, who read the newspaper to her, and also from the fact that on meeting a woman she knew at the post office she said:

surmise (sər-mīz') v. to make a guess

“We haven't any proper veterinary inspection in our town, and that's why there are so many illnesses about. One is always hearing of people falling ill from drinking milk or catching some illness from horses and cows. One really ought to take as much care of the health of animals as of the health of people.”

She was repeating the veterinary surgeon's ideas and now she was of the same
210 opinion as he about everything. It was clear that she could not live a single year without some attachment and that she had found new happiness in the wing of her own house. Anyone else would have been condemned for that, but no one could think ill of Olga, for everything about her was so natural. Neither she nor the veterinary surgeon said anything to anyone about the change in their relationship. They tried to conceal it, but without success, for Olga could not keep a secret. When she handed round tea or served supper to his visitors, fellow officers of his regiment, she would begin talking about foot-and-mouth disease or tuberculosis among the cattle, or about the municipal slaughter houses, while he looked terribly embarrassed; and after the visitors had gone he would seize her by the arm and hiss angrily:

14. **icons:** in the Eastern Orthodox Church, sacred pictures of Jesus, Mary, the saints, or other holy figures.

15. **pleureuses** (plœ-rœz') *French:* the white bands worn on the cuffs of mourning clothes.

220 “I’ve told you a hundred times not to talk about something you don’t understand. When we vets are talking among ourselves, please don’t interfere. Why, it’s just silly!” She would look at him with astonishment. “But what am I to talk about, darling?” she would ask him in dismay.

And she would embrace him with tears in her eyes, imploring him not to be angry with her, and they were both happy.

This happiness, however, did not last long. The veterinary surgeon left with his regiment, left for good, for the regiment had been transferred somewhere very far away, almost as far as Siberia; and poor Olga was left alone.

Now she was absolutely alone. Her father had long been dead, and his armchair lay
230 in the loft covered with dust and minus one leg. She grew thinner and not so good-looking, and people meeting her in the street no longer gazed at her as before and did not smile at her; her best years were apparently over, left behind her, and now a new kind of life was beginning, an **inscrutable** kind of life that did not bear thinking about. In the evening poor Olga sat on the front steps and she could hear the music in the Tivoli gardens and the banging of fireworks, but this no longer stirred up any thoughts in her mind. She gazed **apathetically** at her empty yard, thinking of nothing, desiring nothing, and afterwards, after nightfall, she went to bed and saw nothing but her empty yard in her dreams. She ate and drank as though against her will.

240 But the main thing, and what was worst of all, was that she had no opinions of any kind. She saw all sorts of things around her and she understood everything that was happening around, but she could form no opinions about anything and did not know what to talk about. Oh, how dreadful it is not to have any opinions! You see a bottle, for instance, or the rain, or a peasant, and you cannot say what they are there for, and you could not say it even for a thousand roubles. When married to Kukin or to Pustovalov, or when living with the vet, Olga could have explained everything and would have expressed an opinion about anything you like, but there was the same emptiness in her thoughts and in her heart as in her yard. And it was as frightening and as bitter as if she had supped on wormwood.¹⁶

250 The town was gradually spreading in all directions. Gypsy Lane was already called a street, and where the Tivoli and the timber yard had been there were houses and a whole row of side streets. How quickly time flies! Olga’s house grew dingy, its roof got rusty, the shed rickety, and the whole yard was overgrown with weeds and stinging nettles. Olga herself had aged terribly and had lost her good looks; in summer she sat on the steps, and as before she felt empty and bored and there was a bitter taste in her mouth; and in winter she sat at the window and looked at the snow. When spring was in the air or when the sound of church bells came floating on the wind, she would be suddenly overwhelmed by memories of her past, a delightful thrill would shoot through her heart and a flood of tears gush out of her eyes; but
260 that lasted only for a short time, and then there was the same feeling of emptiness and again she wondered what she was living for. Her black cat Bryska rubbed against her, purring softly, but Olga remained unmoved by these feline caresses. It was something else she wanted. What she wanted was a love that would seize her whole being, her whole mind and soul, that would give her ideas, an aim in life, and would warm her aging blood. And she would shake the cat off her skirt and say with vexation: “Go away, go away . . . I don’t want you!”

inscrutable

(ĭn-skrōō'tə-bəl) *adj.*
difficult to understand

apathetically

(ăp'ə-thēt'ĭk-lē) *adv.*
without interest or
feeling; indifferently

Language Coach

Roots and Affixes An affix at the end of a word is a **suffix**. The suffix **-ation** added to a verb forms a noun. What word in line 265 is a form of vex? What does it mean?

16. **wormwood**: a plant that yields a bitter extract, sometimes used to flavor wine.

And so it went on, day after day, year after year—no joy of any kind and nothing to express an opinion about. Whatever her cook Mavra said was all right with her.

Late in the afternoon one hot July day, just as the herd of cattle was being driven
270 along the street and the whole yard was full of dust, someone suddenly knocked at the gate. Olga went to open it herself, and she gazed thunderstruck at the visitor; it was Smirnin, the veterinary surgeon. His hair had gone quite grey and he wore civilian clothes. She suddenly remembered everything and, unable to restrain herself, burst into tears and put her head on his chest without uttering a word; and in her great excitement she never noticed how they both went into the house or how they sat down to tea.

“Oh, my dear,” she murmured, trembling with joy, “what has brought you here?”

“I’d like to settle here for good,” said the vet. “I’ve resigned from the army, and I’ve come to try my luck as my own master and open a practice of my own. Besides, it’s
280 time for my son to go to a secondary school. He’s a big boy now. I’ve made it up with my wife, you know.”

“Where is she?” asked Olga.

“She’s at the hotel with our son. I’m looking for a flat.”¹⁷

“But, good heavens, why not take my house? It’s a good enough place to live in. I won’t charge you any rent!” cried Olga excitedly and burst into tears again. “You can live here, the cottage will do nicely for me. Oh dear, I’m so happy!”

Next day the roof was already being painted and the walls whitewashed and Olga, arms akimbo, was walking about the yard giving orders. Her face lit up with her old smile, she brightened up and looked younger, as though she had awakened
290 from a long sleep. The vet’s wife arrived—a thin, plain woman with short hair and a **capricious** expression. With her was her little boy, Sasha, small for his age (he was nine years old), with bright blue eyes, chubby, and with dimples in his cheeks. As soon as the boy walked into the yard he ran after the cat, and immediately the place resounded with his gay, joyful laughter.

capricious (kə-prīsh’əs)
adj. impulsive or unpredictable

“Is that your cat, auntie?” he asked Olga. “When she has kittens, let’s have one, please. Mummy is terribly afraid of mice.”

Olga had a long talk with him, gave him tea, and her heart suddenly went out to him just as though he were her own son. And when he sat in the dining room in the evening doing his homework, she looked at him with great tenderness and pity and
300 whispered:

“My darling, my pretty one. . . . Oh, my sweet child, so clever, and so fair . . .”

“An island,” he read, “is a piece of land surrounded on all sides by water.”

“An island is a piece of land . . .” she repeated, and this was the first opinion she had expressed with absolute conviction after so many years of silence and complete vacancy of mind.

She already had her own opinions and at supper she talked to Sasha’s parents about how difficult children found it at secondary schools, but that a classical education was much better than a technical one for all that, for with a classical education all careers were open to you—you could be a doctor if you wished, or an engineer if you
310 preferred it.

Sasha began going to school. His mother went on a visit to her sister in Kharkov¹⁸ and did not return; his father went off every day somewhere to inspect cattle and

17. **flat**: an apartment.

18. **Kharkov** (kär’kôf’): a city in Ukraine.



Village Boy (1890), N. P. Bogdanov-Belsky. © ak-g-images.

was often away from home for three whole days. Olga could not help feeling that the poor boy had been completely abandoned, that no one cared for him, that he was dying of hunger, and so she took him to live with her in the cottage and made him comfortable there in a little room of his own.

For six months Sasha had been living with her in the cottage. Every morning she came into his room and found him fast asleep with his hand under his cheek, breathing inaudibly. She did not feel like waking him.

320 “Sasha dear,” she would say sadly, “get up, darling. Time to go to school.”

He got up, dressed, said a prayer, then sat down to breakfast, drinking three cups of tea and eating two large buns and half a buttered French loaf. He was only half awake and consequently in a bad mood.

“I don’t think you really know your fable by heart, Sasha,” said Olga, looking at him as though she were seeing him off on a long journey. “You’re such a worry to me, dear. You must try and do your lessons well, darling. Obey your teachers.”

“Oh, leave me alone,” Sasha said.

Then he walked down the street to school, a little fellow but in a big cap and with a satchel on his back. Olga followed him noiselessly.

330 “Sa-a-sha!” she called after him.

He looked round, and she thrust a date or a caramel into his hand. When they turned into the street where his school was he would feel ashamed of being followed by a tall, stout woman.

“You’d better go home, auntie,” he said. “I can go the rest of the way by myself.”

She would stop and follow him with her unblinking eyes till he had disappeared in the entrance of the school. Oh, how she doted on him! Of all her former attachments not one had been so deep. Never before had her soul submitted so entirely, so selflessly, and with such delight as now, when her maternal instincts were getting a more and more powerful hold on her. For this little boy, to whom she was not related
340 in any way, for the dimples in his cheeks, for his school cap, she would have given her whole life, she would have given it gladly and with tears of tenderness. Why? Who can tell why? **F**

Having seen Sasha off to school, she would return home quietly, contented, at peace with herself, brimming over with love; her face, which had grown younger during the last six months, smiled and shone with pleasure. People who met her in the street could not help feeling pleased.

“Good morning, Olga darling! How are you, darling?”

“They make you work hard at school nowadays,” she would tell them at the market. “It’s no joke! They gave my boy, who is in the first form,¹⁹ a fable to learn by heart, a
350 Latin translation, and a problem. How do they expect a little boy to do all that?”

And she would start talking about the teachers, the lessons, the school books, repeating what Sasha had said about them.


At three o’clock they had their dinner, in the evening they did his homework together and cried. When she put him to bed, she would make the sign of the cross over him for a long time and would whisper a prayer; then, when she went to bed herself, she would dream of the far away misty future when Sasha, having finished his studies, would become a doctor or an engineer, would have a big house of his own, horses, a carriage, would get married and have children. . . . She would fall asleep, thinking of the same things, and tears would run down her cheeks from her closed
360 eyes. Her black cat lay purring at her side: “Purr . . . purr . . . purr . . .”

Suddenly there would be a loud knock at the front gate. Olga would wake up, breathless with terror, her heart pounding violently. Half a minute later another knock.

“It’s a telegram from Kharkov,” she thought, beginning to tremble all over. “It must be Sasha’s mother sending for him. Oh, dear!” She was in despair. Her head, feet, and hands would turn cold, and she could not help feeling that she was the most unhappy woman in the world. But a minute later she would hear voices: it was the veterinary surgeon coming home from the club.

“Well, thank God!” she would think. **G**

370 The weight was gradually lifted from her heart and she felt at ease again; she went back to bed, thinking of Sasha, who was sleeping soundly in the next room and crying out in his sleep from time to time:

“I’ll give you one! Get out! Don’t hit me!” 

Translated by David Magarshack



TEKS 5A

F PLOT STRUCTURE

Parallel episodes that feature a single character facing different situations emphasize the character’s patterns of behavior and provide clues to the story’s theme. It is useful to compare what is similar and what is different among these episodes to trace these patterns of behavior. Reread lines 328–342. How is Olga’s interaction with Sasha in this passage similar to previous attachments she made? How does it differ from them?

G NATURALISM

Reread lines 361–369. What about Olga’s situation has changed since the beginning of the story? What remains the same?

19. **first form:** the first grade of secondary school.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Why does Olga's first marriage end?
2. **Summarize** What happens to Olga after the veterinary surgeon is transferred?
3. **Clarify** Why does Olga end up caring for Sasha?



READING 5A Analyze how complex plot structures and devices function and advance the action in a work of fiction.

Literary Analysis

4. **Make Inferences** Reread lines 353–373. Describe Olga's and Sasha's state of mind in this concluding passage. Why might Chekhov have chosen to end the story on this note?
5. **Analyze Structure** Describe the pattern that characterizes Olga's relationships. What message about Olga's personality is illustrated through Chekhov's use of **parallel episodes**?
6. **Analyze Tone** Chekhov's tone, or his attitude toward his subject, varies throughout the story. Consider how he portrays Olga in each of the following passages. In each case, what attitude toward Olga does Chekhov convey?
 - description of Kukin (lines 25–30)
 - Pustovalov's courtship (lines 123–127)
 - description of Olga (lines 254–262)
 - Olga's feelings for Sasha (lines 335–342)
7. **Examine Naturalism** How does the plot structure and character-driven storytelling of Chekhov's story reflect the influence of naturalism? Explain your answers.
8. **Make Judgments** Consider what you learn about Olga's relationships and what motivates them. In your opinion, do her attachments qualify as true love? Explain your answer.

Literary Criticism

9. **Critical Interpretations** Critic Robert Lynd described Chekhov as "something of a pessimist, but a pessimist who does not despair." Do you agree or disagree with this comment? Cite details from the story in your answer.

Can you be too **AGREEABLE?**

Olga is very agreeable, which seems to be a redeeming trait, but what kinds of problems does it create for her? What are other examples of traits that are usually deemed positive, but can become negative if taken to extremes?

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Test your knowledge of the vocabulary words by answering these questions.

1. Is a **capricious** person greedy or impulsive?
2. Which part of a movie is more **ominous**, closing credits or scary background music?
3. Is an **unctuous** person nervous or self-satisfied?
4. When you **surmise**, do you guess or wait to learn the facts?
5. Is an **inscrutable** facial expression clear or puzzling?
6. Would someone behaving **apathetically** yell or shrug?
7. Which is more **naive**, trusting a stranger or opening a bank account?
8. When you **prostrate** yourself, are you standing upright or lying down?

WORD LIST

apathetically
capricious
inscrutable
naive
ominous
prostrate
surmise
unctuous

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• analyze • dominate • impact • resource • scheme

Olga relies on her husbands and finally a small boy as the main **resources** she draws on to define herself. How do we rely on other people to define ourselves? Use two of the Academic Vocabulary words to respond to this question.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: CONTRASTS AS CONTEXT CLUES

A **contrast**, or opposite, is a type of context clue. Terms like *but*, *however*, *unlike*, and *while* are clue words that point to a contrast. Other context clues may suggest the word's **nuance**, or shades of meaning.

EXAMPLE

Some students learned classical subjects, studying literature, history, and Latin, while others received technical training.

The clue word *while* points to a contrast. The underlined word, *technical*, is an **antonym**, or opposite, of *classical*. The double-underlined text supplies the nuance of *classical*, suggesting topics that would be part of a classical education.

PRACTICE Use context clues to determine the antonym of each boldface word below. Underline the clues in items 2 and 4 that tell you the word's nuance.

1. Weary of conflict, the former foes determined to achieve **concord**, putting aside all differences to find common ground.
2. The widow lived a **secluded** life, seldom taking part in public events.
3. Unlike Greta, whose **convictions** about the vote were firm, Jorge had doubts.
4. Rafi felt neglected even though his aunt **doted** on him, fulfilling every whim.



READING 1B Analyze textual context within a sentence to draw conclusions about the nuance in word meanings.

Interactive
Vocabulary



Go to thinkcentral.com.
KEYWORD: HML12-1028



Fiction as Social Teaching

Times of social upheaval invariably raise a great deal of concern about a society's moral health. As values and customs shift in response to changing times, some people see these shifts as cracks in the society's moral foundation. Changes cause many to reflect closely on social behavior and think seriously about what is right and what is wrong. The late 19th century in England was just such a time.

Realism in Victorian fiction developed very much in response to social and moral concerns. Novelists such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot exposed moral corruption and other social ills through elaborate tales and well-developed characters. Depicting everyday life in realistic detail, these and other authors devoted a great deal of attention to their characters' motivations and behaviors.

With the rise of a literate middle class came an audience hungry for such tales. Eager to read about middle-class characters struggling with everyday problems, these readers looked for opportunities to reflect on their own moral lives and decisions.

Writing to Reflect

George Eliot once wrote, "Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds." In light of this statement, consider the major characters in Anthony Trollope's "Malachi's Cove" and Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell's "Christmas Storms and Sunshine." Could it be said that their deeds determine who they are? Choose a major character from either story and write an essay in which you reflect on Eliot's statement as it relates to this character. As you write, think about the moral commentary delivered by the story.

Consider

- the moral dilemma faced by the character
- the character's final behavior
- the outcome of this behavior



Extension

VIEWING & REPRESENTING

It was not only literature that depicted the gritty, everyday realities of Victorian life. Photographers, too, turned their lenses to the street to document the lives of the working class in realistic detail. The photograph here shows female workers at an English factory, striking for the same wages as their male counterparts. What is the tone and message of this photograph? Write a brief analysis, citing details about the photograph's subject matter, light and shadow, and composition.



WRITING 15A Write an analytical essay.