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**Incongruity between World Play and Purpose: Disaster-prone Human and Their  
Alienation in Chekhov's 'Enemies' and 'A Swan-Song'**

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**Abstract**

*This article analyzes Anton Chekhov's short story "Enemies" and a one-act play "A Swan-Song" how life is absurd in the modern world and the characters Aboguin and Svetlovidov respectively go through deceptive maneuver. The deceptive maneuver, in the inconsistent world, denotes the sense of insecurity and loneliness of a person and the person feels being threatened by his/her situation and people around him/her. Modern people, though living with their kith and kin, feel lonely and do not find themselves safe and attended, and their trust on their friends and relatives shatters anytime unexpectedly. The feeling of being deserted has infiltrated this world now and the people suffer from personal loneliness and social alienation. Aboguin and Svetlovidov, though they are true to their love and the demand of the audience respectively, undergo abandonment from their trustees, wife and audience for whom they exert any means they have. While analyzing these two stories, the researcher uses the insight of Albert Camus's absurdism that portrays the apprehension of modern people. This article concentrates on 'why Chekhov's characters undergo betrayal and indifference though their veracity to their duty and responsibility suffices.'*

**Keywords:** absurdism, alienation, apprehension, disorder, divorce

## **Introduction**

This article aims at reading between the lines of Anton Chekhov's short story "Enemies" and a one-act play "A Swan-Song" as the stories of the withdrawal of human relationships in the modern world. This study attempts to unearth the problem why Aboguin and Svetlovidov are betrayed and ignored by the people for whom they spend their time and career respectively. These two characters become the victim of the modern world that is self-centric and promotes split between the mind of the modern people that desires and the world that disappoints them. Such a split has caused the never-ending defeat of a human because of the separation between man and his surroundings and setting, and life has grown absurd.

Aboguin's wife feigns severe heart attack to make her husband call the doctor home and treat her. Aboguin, being serious to his wife's illness, leaves home at night with the hurdles of darkness in the jungle and Dr. Kirilov, though he was in the sorrow of losing a single son, gets forced to make a house call. When they arrive at Aboguin's home they do not find the patient and they know that she had run away with a man by sending her husband out. Here, both are in sorrow but neither of them understands each other. Likewise, Svetlovidov enjoys the ovation of his audience ignoring his family life as long as he is young, but when he becomes old and the performance is over neither audience worry about him nor there is home to go. Once his wife made him choose one- acting or her, and he chose acting. She liked his acting but she did not like him as an actor. Or let's say, she did not like to be the wife of an actor. These two stories set the fact of life in the world that "Life—the paradigm of self-organization—literally defies an otherwise pervasive universal movement toward disorder. What we have of life we should revel in rather than merely strive to control or prolong. Life should inspire living in the face of inevitable physical disintegration" (Hoepfer 361). The path of life that the human follows swerves toward disorder and disintegration and causes apprehension. Such apprehension has been the product as well as process of the universal chaos and ruling this world with anomalies.

## **Literature Review**

Absurdism refers to the concept that human beings exist in a world that has neither purpose nor order. It means that human beings enact their duty and role thinking that events and circumstances are under their control and achievement and success are real and tangible. However, there is conflict between human inclination in seeking success and meaning in life and their capability to find these with any certainty. The term absurd/ism in portraying human condition in literature ". . . has come to mean "out of harmony with reason, or propriety; irrational, incongruous, senseless, stupid, silly, ridiculous" (Wegener 151). The human struggle to create meaning in a world of irrationality and

meaninglessness forces them to realize that the universe is absurd and futile. When human struggle ends in futility and emptiness, this situation alienates them from their purpose and causes existential anxiety. On the absurd condition of human, Victor Brombert states that "The absurd". . . is a condition as well as the lucid consciousness some people have of this condition. This notion of the absurd or irrational aspect of life arises from various causes, all of which results from the divorce between man and the universe" (120). The result of any action takes place from interaction between the person and their environs, and the result, seems to be against their expectation. The absurdity of human in this world arises when there occurs the contradiction between the man's intentions and the results. The relation between man and this world exists in ironical situation but man seems to be unaware of this human condition. The absurdity of the world originates from the naivety of human on reality.

Moreover, the inappropriateness in a man's desire and the world's disapproval to it makes the world irrational and devoid. On the emptiness of the world, George S. Seffler claims that "The world . . . reveals itself only as pure, brute facticity, devoid of inherent value. Despair seems imminent. Yet, in a moment of contempt, man revolts. In defiance of his situation, he perseveres in this absurd relation to the world" (415). Since the world inheres values without their meanings the world has been a place for man to struggle in futility. Life is going on in this world with inclination of man to purpose and the world has responded with disappointments. In regard to the absurdity of life, "The standard argument for absurd includes a discrepancy between expectations and reality and becomes an unavoidable perception if regarded *sub specie aeternitatis*" (Castelli 269). Indifferent world remains silent to the meaning seeking human that stagnates human expectation in limbo and causes lacks and lapses in life. Absurd life exists with the difference between expectations and actuality that becomes the part and parcel of every individual.

Chekhov's literary works draw attention of the readers because of the magnitude of the human condition in his works. Different critics have analyzed his works on the basis of their understanding of the theme and rhyme. Wantian Huang finds satire in "Enemies" and claims that ". . . Chekhov is skilled at creating satirical works, and his satire is not limited to one person or one class, but targets society as a whole. Abogin may be hypocritical, yet Dr. Kirilov cannot be said to be selfless" (102). In the same manner, Yuri Corrigan reads the story ". . . as a conflict between "melodrama" and "metadrama"—that is, between a "melodramatic" character caught emotionally within the confines of a dramatic situation and a "metadramatic" enemy observing the same situation ironically from outside" (275). Regarding Chekhov's another short play "A Swan-song," Katya Orrell discusses that "Chekhov's play *Swansong* could be describing a prison wing. . . . Using a concept of the swansong, a song considered to be more beautiful because of the fragility of a life that is about to end, . . . what is happening when a prisoner whose unprocessed grief and rage

threatens to destroy all creativity" (373). To overview these readings, critics have seen these texts as satire, melodrama and metadrama, and the psychological study of the character respectively; however, the researcher finds absurdity in these two short texts of Chekhov.

### **Unresponsiveness and Aloofness to Human Suffering in 'Enemies'**

Chekhov, in this short story, projects two characters, Aboguin and Kirilov, in the story who seek meaning and happiness in their lives and act and wait for that moment. However, both characters' means does not meet the end and their purpose goes awry. Aboguin is in trouble that his wife undergoes heart attack and needs a doctor. Aboguin commences a journey to doctor's resident on his carriage at night and finds himself lucky getting the doctor at home. He becomes happy that the doctor will understand the severity of the case and begins to say that "Suddenly my wife cries out, presses her hands to her heart, and falls back in her chair. We carried her off to her bed and . . . and I rubbed her forehead with sal-volatile, and splashed her with water. . . . She lies like a corpse. . . . I'm afraid that her heart's failed. . . . Let us go. . . . Her father too died of heart-failure" (56). Aboguin's sincerity to his wife's life forces him to cry for the immediate presence of doctor to the patient and take an action to save the life of the patient. The general expectation of the public is the readiness of the doctor, regardless of time and place, to protect the life of the patient.

Nevertheless, contrary to the general expectation and the code of the profession, the doctor shows his indifference to the severity of the case and the cry of the patient's relative. Doctor's indifference to the magnitude of the situation suggests how the emptiness of human relationship has ruled this world. Aboguin is begging the life of his wife to the doctor and the doctor remains silent. A patient's life is meaningful and complete when she/he gets proper care and cure from the doctor. But the doctor, Kirilov listens to Aboguin without any response as if he did not understand the Russian language though he was Russian—"Kirilov listened in silence as though he did not understand the Russian language" (56). This event reminds human beings how indifferent and apathetic this world is to the suffering of an individual. Life becomes absurd when the professional etiquettes become sterile. The complementary components of life and society appear to have been opposite forces to annul humanity. Aboguin reminds the duty and urgency to the doctor and points out that "The thirteenth volume be damned! I have no right to do violence to your will. If you want to, come; if you don't, then God be with you; but it's not to you will that I apply, but to your feelings. A young woman is dying!" (60). The human beings, in this world, have become spiritually sterile in such a way that the death of any kind draws no attention in an act of showing kindness. This world is devoid of love, mercy, kindness, generosity and justice. Mussoff Lenore sees the world where people are having marriages lacking love, families with no understanding and the contacts without

closeness (567). People do not know how come this situation exists in this world where the supreme beings are repelling human values.

The desires and demands of human beings have been in tension and the tension between our longings and the universe's denial to supply has created vacuum in the existence. In terms of the story, the doctor's heart melts and he becomes ready to go with Aboguin to his house in order to save the life of his wife. It was hard to find and carry doctor to the patient and it is harder to find his wife at home. His wife had run away with a man by sending him to call a doctor. Aboguin loses the meaning of his life by losing the honesty of his wife. For him, saving the life of his wife and living together forever is joyous and meaningful. In this moment of his life meets a crisis and affirms that "Deceived!" he cried, emphasising the syllable *cei*. "She deceived me! She's gone! She fell ill and sent me for the doctor only to run away with this fool Papchinsky. My God!" (65). Aboguin is honest and true to his wife and so he undermines any danger on the way to doctor at night and convinces doctor for house call willy-nilly. Honesty is rewarded in an ideal world but it suffers when play and purpose contradict.

The intensity of his struggle to save his wife becomes futile when his wife performs a drama of treachery. As long as betrayal and duplicity persists in human relationship, the harmony between human beings and the world goes awry. He manifests her betrayal that "She's gone off! She's deceived me! But why this lie? My God, my God! Why this dirty, foul trick, this devilish, serpent's game? What have I done to her? She's gone off" (60). Aboguin's wife, in this world, represents treachery proliferating and becoming the part of life of the people. Friendship and relationship have become fake and false. There has been no trust in life partner that Aboguin manifests and such are the cases in relation of others in the world. He further laments on the duplicity of his wife that "Well, she didn't love me any more. She loved another man. Very well. But why the deceit, why this foul treachery?" . . . "Why, why? What have I done to you?"(66). The hue and cry of Aboguin on the duplicity of his wife indicates how this world is getting morally sterile and the world has become irrational and meaningless. Irrationality and meaninglessness in purpose propels this world to absurdity which does not seem ephemeral.

The way Aboguin seeks love and faith from his wife sounds absurd. He calls his wife a betrayer recurrently but he does not care whom he ignored and hurt to make her happy. While he is seeking happiness from his wife he forgets how he kills the hope of his parents from him. As long as he was not deceived by his wife, his happiness was connected with his wife not parents and other members of the family. He explains his devotion to his wife that was a treachery to others: "I swear I love this woman. I love her with devotion, like a slave. I sacrificed everything for her. I broke with my family, I gave up the service and my music. I forgave her things I could not have forgiven my mother and

sister. . . I never once gave her an angry look . . . I never gave her any cause”(67). The remarks of Aboguin seem to be contradictory and absurd. The thing that he did not give to his family and betrayed them suggests his absurd demand from his wife. What he sowed in his family the same thing he reaped from his wife.

Moreover, Aboguin indicts his wife but there is the space for his family to implicate him that he did not bear his responsibility to his family. This point of Aboguin justifies how this world is absurd and how we are seeking the things from others that we ignore in terms of behaving with others. In regard to Chekhov's men and women as characters, Ernest J. Simmons argues that “Chekhov's men and women often retain their illusions, for in the end they still seem to be lost in the jumble of life in which the profound exists along with the trivial, the great with the insignificant, the tragic with the ridiculous” (156). Aboguin is in illusion that he can barter love with hate that he has given to his family. The indifference that he gives to his family has been paid back by his wife; the expectation of love from his wife is ridiculous. The purpose of human life gets stuck with the self-centric values that ‘my needs and desires count first than others.’

Because of the hollowness of human essence, Kirilov becomes the victim of the loss of human sensibility in seeing others suffering. Kirilov has lost one and only child, the purpose and meaning of his life, and undergone sorrowful moment. His wife is mourning the death of her child by keeping her head on the dead body of her son and there is no one to soothe them. Aboguin enters the house not as a peacemaker but as a perpetrator. He is concerned with his suffering that his wife is going to die soon because of heart attack.

This situation of Aboguin does not let Kirilov lament on the death of his life. For Aboguin the sickness of his wife and the immediate action to save her life are more important than to smear the balm on pain in Kirilov family. By ignoring the suffering of Kirilov and focusing on the importance of his wife's life, he demands that “This life is more than any personal grief. I ask you for courage, for a brave deed—in the name of humanity” (60). Aboguin puts forward the selfish nature of human beings that their needs are more important than others. Kirilov reminds him the dual blades of humanity that “Humanity cuts both ways”. . . . “In the name of the same humanity I ask you not to take me away. My God, what a strange idea! I can hardly stand on my feet and you frighten me with humanity” (60). Kirilov undergoes the absurdity of life that he has needed one to show empathy to him and his family but unfortunately he finds a man to display apathy to his suffering. This situation manifests how suffering is human condition and the world is indifferent to it. M. H. Abrams, on the condition of human in the meaningless world, posits that “. . . the human condition is essentially absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd” (1). The story “Enemies” projects the characters Kirilov and Aboguin who represent the absurdity



of the life of people living in this world and support the idea that man is doomed to misery.

This world has evolved in contradiction and this flaw is timeless. Man tries to be happy but his happiness is menaced by the setting he is living on. Both characters of this story are seeking peace and happiness but their desires are shattered by each other. Since both are in trouble Aboguin does not understand the condition of Kirilov and nor does Kirilov. They have reluctance to understand each other. This situation elongates in the story because "Unhappy men are selfish, wicked, unjust and less able to understand each other than fools. Unhappiness does not unite people, but separates them; and just where one would imagine that people should be united by the community of grief, there is more injustice and cruelty done than among the comparative contended" (69). Unhappiness is human condition that is absurd and this absurd situation has made human beings unhappy. Both characters in the story are unhappy because one has the fear of losing wife whom he loves more than anything else and another has lost his single child and no one comes to pacify them about the loss. This unhappiness does not let them understand each other and hostility develops. The expected humanity and harmony in this world shatters because of contradiction between life and setting. This is a kind of divorce and "This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting is probably the feeling of absurdity" (O' Brian 7). The literature of absurd represents the world where people expect one and happens otherwise.

### **Sterility of Life and Purpose in 'A Swan-Song'**

A swan-song refers to the final performance in an actor's career. It means that the actor never steps on the stage for the public performance. Svetlovidov, a stellar actor, has been sixty-eight years old and he has been on the stage for forty-five years. His performance on the stage and the applause from audience become the part and parcel of his life. He enjoys such moments and determines to make the audience happy. His fame as an actor makes him blind to know how absurd the world is. He takes applause from the audience and fame in acting permanent "But all kinds of fame are ephemeral" (O' Brian 57). His illusion to this world does not last long and realizes how selfish the audience are. During the performance he gets the round of applause from the audience that he still remembers: "They called me before the curtain sixteen times, they presented me with three wreaths and a lot of other things . . . they were all delighted, . . ." (77). Such moments force him to abandon his wife and family. Now he has become old and needs family that he deserted for his career and audience:

SVETLOVIDEV: I don't go there. I don't want to. There, I am alone . . . I have nobody, Nikitushka, no relations, no wife no children . . . I am alone like the wind in the fields . . . I shall die and there will be no one to pray for me . . . I am frightened all alone . . . There is no one to comfort me, to

make much of me to put me to bed when I am drunk . . . . Whom do I  
belong to? Who needs me? Who cares for me? Nobody cares for me,  
Nikitushka!. (78)

Svetlovidov survives in tragic moment that he once found meaning in his career and love of audience when he was young and energetic but now he has become old and needs support from his wife and children. In front his age, his audience, wreaths and career have become meaningless. There occurs a chasm between his life and the world he lives in.

Moreover, Svetlovidov's judgment of his life on the basis of the reaction of the audience and leaving the necessary parts of life—family signifies absurdity. To be satisfied on a particular situation that is beyond our control is meaningless. The way human beings are running after the meaningless things and trying to make them meaningful validates absurdity. On an attempt of making things and situations meaningful, O' Brian argues that "All is well, everything is permitted and nothing is hateful – these are absurd judgments" (80). Svetlovidov's 'all is well' judgment during his youth and successful career as an actor costs him in old age. In his life time, artistic gain has been accompanied by loss—family. Svetlovidov remembers those days that ". . . a woman fell in love with me for my acting. She was elegant, slender as a poplar, young, innocent, pure, and full of fire as a summer sunset! The darkest night could not have withstood the light of her blue eyes, her exquisite smile. . . . I besought her to make me happy. And she . . . she said, "Leave the stage." Leave the stage! . . . she could love an actor but be his wife, never! (79). Svetlovidov's life contradicts in such a manner that he demands happiness but he gets despair from whom he expects meaning in his life.

Svetlovidov expects to be successful in both parts of life—acting and family life, but his beloved sabotages his desire. Such a failure of an actor to his life and his decision to abandon acting suggests the nothingness of life. Absurdity seeks meaning in nothingness and ends in nothingness. Svetlovidov realizes the nothingness of his life as an actor as he finds his audience selfish and decides to leave the stage:

"Away! And never to return!

I flee from Moscow through the world to seek,

Where wounded heart may find a place in rest!

A coach! I want a coach!" (84)

A great actor, an apple of the eye of audience, escapes from his acting. Here, the relation between the actor and his audience and the actor and his beloved is conflicting. On one hand, they love his acting, on the other hand, they are indifferent to his condition of loneliness and helplessness. Such Janus-faced behavior of his beloved and audience forces him to flee from the meaning of his life.



## Conclusion: Devoid of Joy, Purpose and Connection in the World

This article assumes that the two stories of Chekhov manifest characters and events result in the nothingness of the world. Though they are faithful to the situation, Aboguin and Svetlovidov cannot find meaningful end of their action. They are seeking meanings in their lives and events that are inherently meaningless. It is ridiculous to think and act having the sense that meaning remains in the center of the world and people need to move around it. Since there is conflict between man and his actions the human condition in this world is absurd and meaningless. These two stories portray the condition of marriage without love, contact without empathy and family without understanding. Chekhov by projecting the characters Aboguin and Svetlovidov and their fate in 'Enemies' and 'A Swan-Song' respectively illustrates how they purport to save the life of wife and make the audience happy by forsaking personal life but all in vain. The contradiction in man's will and the world has been persistent from the time man and the world began to coexist. Since the relation between man and his setting is absurd man is doomed to suffer. Man's thought and action have mocked themselves; however, man seems to be ignorant of such phenomenon, which is absurd.

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