

OLD VERSION

The meaning of life, or the meaning of man?

Is ignorance bliss, or is the unexamined life not worth living? Philosophers have debated this question since the time of Socrates, when he famously posited the question at his trial for impiety, and for which he was subsequently sentenced to death. Questions like these have consequences. In Anton Chekhov's "The Bet" readers get one man's answer and while no one dies this time, things do not exactly end well either. While widely known for his zero endings and realism, it is the characters in Chekhov's story that give the reader the greatest insight into his views as narrator. In this short tale two characters, the banker and the lawyer, enter into a bet whose terms require the lawyer to remain in solitary confinement for fifteen years. During this time he becomes the ultimate student, reading all subjects in various languages. The lawyer ends the story a changed man. But it is how Chekhov chooses to end his story that gives the reader insight into how he answers the age old question of what makes life worth living. Authors often provide evidence for their broader worldviews in their fiction. In "The Bet" Chekhov tries to answer the question of the true meaning of life through the character of the lawyer.

NEW VERSION #1

Alternate Worldviews

Whether it is *Doctor Sleep*, *The Space Between Us*, *Everything, Everything* or *John Wick* everyone enjoys getting lost in a story. The need to escape reality, if only for a few hours, holds a strong appeal.

But fictional stories can do more than simply let the audience escape; the best fiction also lets one see life through another's eyes.

Both Chekhov's "The Bet" and Merimee's "Mateo Falcone" allow readers to sample a worldview that they would otherwise never experience. Most people will never feel the crushing isolation of fifteen years in solitary confinement, and until time travel is invented no one will ever experience the moral code of 19th century Corsica.

It is only through story that one can experience either.

As these stories show, authors often provide evidence for their broader worldviews in their fiction. In "The Bet" Chekhov tries to answer the question of the true meaning of life through the character of the lawyer, while in "Mateo Falcone", author Prosper Merimee discusses how right and wrong are not necessarily objective ideas.

NEW VERSION #2

Fiction's Function

What is the purpose of reading fiction? Entertainment? Education? Escapism? All of these are true to a degree, however, one of the key reasons people read is to gain an understanding of people they've never met and places they've never been. The best fiction forces one to see his own world somehow differently from before. When the

reader can experience a slice of life through another's eyes it causes the reader to see his own life through a new lens. Both Chekhov's "The Bet" and Merimee's "Mateo Falcone" allow readers to sample a worldview that they would otherwise never experience. In "The Bet" this takes the form of a young lawyer spending fifteen years locked in a cell, while in "Mateo Falcone" the foreign moral code of 19th century Corsica is explored. Both stories make evident the idea that authors often provide evidence for their broader worldviews in their fiction. In "The Bet" Chekhov tries to answer the question of the true meaning of life through the character of the lawyer, while in "Mateo Falcone", author Prosper Merimee discusses how right and wrong are not necessarily objective ideas.

BODY 1

TRANSITION & TOPIC: Once the bet has been established Chekhov uses the Lawyer's time in "prison" to eliminate the things many people value one by one. **CONTEXT:** The first to go is the concept of leisure, or entertainment. The lawyer of course must spend his time alone doing something and the first things he thinks to do revolve around leisure. Chekhov makes sure to set the stage first by explaining how the Lawyer suffered from loneliness during that first year. In other words he is stripped bare and now is a clean slate upon which Chekhov can perform his thought experiment. **QUOTE:** So, he first has him try to entertain himself with the likes of music and books " *principally of a light character; novels with a complicated love plot, sensational and fantastic stories, and so on*" (Chekhov 3). **ANALYSIS:** But clearly these are not enough, as this only lasts the first year of his fifteen year sentence. Through the lawyer Chekhov is saying that while entertainment and leisure may be good, they are not enough to sustain us. The meaning of life can not simply be found in distraction. **CLOSING:** There must be more and so the lawyer moves on.

Transition- *Need to move the reader from the landlady to the yellow pill. Quick intro to story.*

Topic of paragraph- *Basic topic sentence. What is the point of this paragraph? What will you show?*

Context/Point/Argument- *Couple sentences that explain how Y.P. develops suspense and makes readers guess for instance.*

Quote set up- *Talk about what is happening right before your quote.*

Quote 1-

Context/Point/Argument- *Bring up a second point that supports how suspense is developed.*

Quote Set up- *Talk about what is happening right before your quote.*

Quote 2-

Wrap up- *Closing sentence/Transition to conclusion*

BODY 2

In the next section of the story the reader sees the lawyer become a student, but not just any student. Chekhov seems to be trying to have his main character represent the ultimate student. His devotion to study is amplified by his self imposed exile. For the next ten years the lawyer progresses through what could be called a homeschool doctorate degree with his education including all the various disciplines. He goes from studying the classics, to history and languages. In fact he becomes fluent in at least six of them asking the banker to verify his proficiency. *"I write you these lines in six languages...if [you] find not one mistake I implore you to fire a shot in the garden"* (4). However, as proud as the lawyer is at attaining this level of education it is clearly not enough as he soon moves on to philosophy and religion. Curiously, he spends an entire year on just religion. But again, Chekhov has the protagonist failing to find the answer he is searching for. *"His reading suggested a man swimming in the sea among the wreckage of his ship, and trying to save his life by greedily clutching first at one spar and then at another"* (5). The author has now discounted both entertainment and education as sources for the answer to the timeless question, what is the purpose of life?

Conclusion:

Chekhov struggles with the meaning of life, and through the character of the lawyer he has given the reader one possible answer- human relationships. Everything else can be taken away; money, power, fame and possessions are all temporal and easily lost. But the bonds we create between each other are ours to nurture and grow. One does wonder what Chekhov would have to say about the fleeting nature of some relationships. Does life lose meaning if friendships grow stale or die? Perhaps that is the topic of another tale. Afterall, if literature has a greater purpose than simply entertainment, then surely it is giving the reader something powerful to ponder.

NEW CONCLUSION EXAMPLE FROM PREVIOUS STUDENT

By reading “The Bet” and “Harrison Bergeron,” the readers are able to understand how two different authors each viewed life and society. Throughout their stories, Chekhov and Vonnegut hint to their readers their opinions through the way their characters act and think. While not everyone may agree with the ideas presented in these two stories, they serve as a starting point for discussion. Our society can be compared to a field of flowers. Each flower is different, a different height, a different kind, and in a different place. This means that each flower would have a different perspective of the world as do the people in our society. The only difference is that those flowers convene to create a beautiful field, yet our society struggles to unite because of our different opinions. Our contradictory beliefs should not be what gets in the way of our society’s improvement. Instead, they should be what starts discussion to make our society better.

