
UNIT 14 'MISERY' BY ANTON CHEKHOV

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading the story and this Unit carefully, you should be able to

- look at the story in terms of human misery
- understand the meaning of the title 'Misery'
- appreciate the simple narrative prose style of Anton Chekhov

14.1 INTRODUCTION

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov is a well-known Russian short story writer and playwright. He was born on January 29, 1860 and died at the early age of 44. He was a doctor by profession and a writer by temperament and aptitude. He once said, "Medicine is my wife and literature is my mistress." He began by writing short humorous stories for journals, and light one-act comedies. Among the greatest of his mature short stories are "Ward No. Six" (1899), "Gooseberries" (1898) and "The Lady with the Little Dog" (1899). Plays like *Uncle Vanya* (1900), *Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) are



considered classics of world drama. He wrote sympathetically about characters of all classes, the bored upper classes as well as the deprived poor. His work is known for its unique combination of comedy, tragedy and pathos. Chekhov has enjoyed great popularity in England. English translations of his works started appearing as early as 1903, and influenced leading playwrights and fiction writers.

Chekhov is considered the most important influence on the development of the modern short story. His stories dispensed with plot; he concentrated on what is happening in the minds of his characters, their "stream of consciousness", rather than external incidents. He was an early practitioner of the "stream of consciousness" technique used by novelists like Henry James, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. In Chekhov, plot is subordinate to character. Because the short story as a form is too short for the development of character, Chekhov's stories focus on a particular mood. This new way of writing a story at times poses difficulties to the reader. Chekhov defended his open-ended stories saying "the role of an artist is to ask questions and not to answer them".

The story 'Misery', first published in 1886, does not pose any difficulty as it deals with an experience that touches all of us at some point in our lifetime. Let us now read the story, in an English translation by Ralph E. Matlaw.

14.2 'MISERY'

14.2.1 Text

"To whom shall I tell my grief?"

The twilight of evening. Big flakes of wet snow are whirling lazily about the street lamps, which have just been lighted, and lying in a thin soft layer on roofs, horses' backs, shoulders, caps. Iona Potapov, the **sledge-driver**, is all white like a ghost. He sits on the box without stirring, bent as double as the living body can be bent. If a regular **snowdrift** fell on him it seems as though even then he would not think it necessary to shake it off. . . His little mare is white and motionless too. Her stillness, the angularity of her lines, and the stick-like straightness of her legs make her look like a **halfpenny gingerbread horse**. She is probably **lost in thought**. Anyone who has been torn away from the plough, from the familiar gray landscapes, and cast into this **slough**, full of monstrous lights, of unceasing uproar and hurrying people, is bound to think.

It is a long time since Iona and his **nag** have **budged**. They came out of the **yard** before dinnertime and not a single fare yet. But now the shades of evening are falling on the town. The pale light of the street lamps changes to a vivid color, and the bustle of the street grows noisier.

"Sledge to Vyborskaya!" Iona hears. "Sledge!"

Iona starts, and through his snow-plastered eyelashes sees an officer in a military overcoat with a hood over his head.

"To Vyborskaya," repeats the officer. "Are you asleep? To Vyborskaya!"

In token of assent Iona gives a tug at the reins which sends cakes of snow flying from the horse's back and shoulders. The officer gets into the sledge. The sledge-driver clicks to the horse, cranes his neck like a swan, rises in his

seat, and more from habit than necessity **brandishes** his whip. The mare cranes her neck, too, crooks her stick-like legs, and hesitatingly sets off

"Where are you shoving, you devil?" Iona immediately hears shouts from the dark mass shifting to and fro before him. "Where the devil are you going? Keep to the r-right!"

"You don't know how to drive! Keep to the right," says the officer angrily.

A coachman driving a carriage swears at him; a **pedestrian** crossing the road and brushing the horse's nose with his shoulder looks at him angrily and shakes the snow off his sleeve. Iona **fidgets** on the box as though he were sitting on thorns, jerks his elbows, and turns his eyes about like one **possessed** as though he did not know where he was or why he was there.

"What rascals they all are!" says the officer **jocosely**. "They are simply doing their best to run up against you or fall under the horse's feet. They must be doing it on purpose."

Iona looks at his fare and moves his lips. . . . Apparently he means to say something, but nothing comes but a **sniff**.

"What?" enquires the officer.

Iona gives a wry smile, and straining his throat, brings out **huskily**: "My son . . . er . . . my son died this week, sir."

"H'm! What did he die of?"

Iona turns his whole body round to his fare, and says:

"Who can tell! It must have been from fever. . . . He lay three days in the hospital and then he died. . . . God's will."

"Turn around, you devil!" comes out of the darkness. "Have you gone cracked, you old dog? Look where you are going!"

"Drive on! drive on! . . ." says the officer. "We shan't get there till tomorrow going on like this. Hurry up!"

The sledge-driver cranes his neck again, rises in his seat, and with heavy grace swings his whip. Several times he looks round at the officer, but the latter keeps his eyes shut and is apparently disinclined to listen. Putting his fare down at Vyborgskaya, Iona stops by a restaurant, and again sits **huddled** up on the box. . . . Again the wet snow paints him and his horse white. One hour passes, and then another. . . .

Three young men, two tall and thin, one short and hunchbacked, come up, railing at each other and loudly stamping on the pavement with their **goloshes**.

"Cabby, to the Police Bridge!" the hunchback cries in a cracked voice. "The three of us, . . . twenty **kopecks!**"

Iona tugs at the reins and clicks to his horse. Twenty kopecks is not a fair price, but he has no thoughts for that. Whether it is a **rouble** or whether it is five kopecks does not matter to him now so long as he has a fare. . . . The three young men, shoving each other and using bad language, go up to the sledge, and all three try to sit down at once. The question remains to be settled: Which are to sit down and which one is to stand? After a long **altercation**, ill-temper, and abuse, they come to the conclusion that the **hunchback** must stand because he is the shortest.

"Well, drive on," says the hunchback in his cracked voice, settling himself and breathing down Iona's neck. "**Cut along!** What a cap you've got, my friend! You wouldn't find a worse one in all Petersburg. . . ."

"He-he! . . . he-he! . . ." laughs Iona. "It's nothing to boast of!"

"Well, then, nothing to boast of, drive on! Are you going to drive like this all the way? Eh? Shall I give you one in the neck?"

"My head aches," says one of the tall ones. "At the Dukmasovs' yesterday Vaska and I drank four bottles of brandy between us."

"I can't make out why you talk such stuff," says the other tall one angrily.

"You lie like a brute."

"Strike me dead, it's the truth! . . ."

"It's about as true as that a louse coughs."

"He-he!" grins Iona. "Me-er-ry gentlemen!"

"Tfoo! the devil take you!" cries the hunchback indignantly. "Will you get on, you old plague, or won't you? Is that the way to drive? Give her one with the whip. Hang it all, give it her well."

Iona feels behind his back the jolting person and quivering voice of the hunchback. He hears abuse addressed to him, he sees people, and the feeling of loneliness begins little by little to be less heavy on his heart. The hunchback swears at him, till he chokes over some elaborately **whimsical** string of **epithets** and is overpowered by his cough. His tall companions begin talking of a certain Nadyezhda Petrovna. Iona looks round at them. Waiting till there is a brief pause, he looks round once more and says:

"This week . . . er . . . my . . . er . . . son died!"

"We shall all die, . . ." says the hunchback with a sigh, wiping his lips after coughing. "Come, drive on! drive on! My friends, I simply cannot stand crawling like this! When will he get us there?"

"Well, you give him a little encouragement . . . one in the neck!"

"Do you hear, you old plague? I'll make you smart. If one **stands on ceremony** with fellows like you one may as well walk. Do you hear, you old dragon? Or don't you **care a hang** what we say?"

And Iona hears rather than feels a slap on the back of his neck.

"He-he! . . ." he laughs. "Merry gentlemen . . . God give you health!"

"Cabman, are you married?" asks one of the tall ones.

"I? He he! Me-er-ry gentlemen. The only wife for me now is the damp earth. . . He-ho-ho! . . . The grave that is! . . . Here my son's dead and I am alive. . . It's a strange thing, death has come in at the wrong door. . . Instead of coming for me it went for my son. . ."

And Iona turns round to tell them how his son died, but at that point the hunchback gives a faint sigh and announces that, thank God! they have arrived at last. After taking his twenty kopecks, Iona gazes for a long while after the **revellers**, who disappear into a dark entry. Again he is alone and again there is silence for him. . . . The misery which has been for a brief space eased comes back again and tears his heart more cruelly than ever. With a look of anxiety and suffering Iona's eyes stray restlessly among the crowds moving to and fro on both sides of the street: can he not find among those thousands someone who will listen to him? But the crowds **flit by heedless** of him and his misery. . . . His misery is immense, beyond all bounds. If Iona's heart were to burst and his misery to flow out, it would flood the whole world, it seems, but yet it is not seen. It has found a hiding-place in such an insignificant shell that one would not have found it with a candle by daylight. .

Iona sees a house-porter with a parcel and makes up his mind to address him.

"What time will it be, friend?" he asks. .

"Going on for ten. . . . Why have you stopped here? Drive on!"

Iona drives a few paces away, bends himself double, and gives himself up to his misery. He feels it is no good to appeal to people. But before five minutes have passed he draws himself up, shakes his head as though he feels a sharp pain, and tugs at the reins. . . . He can bear it no longer.

"Back to the yard!" he thinks. "To the yard!"

And his little mare, as though she knew his thoughts, falls to **trotting**. An hour and a half later Iona is sitting by a big dirty stove. On the stove, on the floor,

and on the benches are people snoring. The air is full of smells and stuffiness. Iona looks at the sleeping figures, scratches himself, and regrets that he has come home so early. . . .

"I have not earned enough to pay for the oats, even," he thinks. "That's why I am so miserable. A man who knows how to do his work, . . . who has had enough to eat, and whose horse has had enough to eat, is always at ease. . . ."

In one of the corners a young cabman gets up, clears his throat sleepily, and makes for the water-bucket.

"Want a drink?" Iona asks him.

"Seems so."

"May it do you good. . . . But my son is dead, mate. . . . Do you hear? This week in the hospital. . . . It's a queer business. . . ."

Iona looks to see the effect produced by his words, but he sees nothing. The young man has covered his head over and is already asleep. The old man sighs and scratches himself. . . . Just as the young man had been thirsty for water, he thirsts for speech. His son will soon have been dead a week, and he has not really talked to anybody yet He wants to talk of it properly, with **deliberation**. . . . He wants to tell how his son was taken ill, how he suffered, what he said before he died, how he died. . . . He wants to describe the funeral, and how he went to the hospital to get his son's clothes. He still has his daughter Anisya in the country. . . . And he wants to talk about her too. . . . Yes, he has plenty to talk about now. His listener ought to sigh and exclaim and lament. . . . It would be even better to talk to women. Though they are silly creatures, they **blubber** at the first word.

"Let's go out and have a look at the mare," Iona thinks. "There is always time for sleep. . . . You'll have sleep enough, no fear. . . ."

He puts on his coat and goes into the stables where his mare is standing. He thinks about oats, about hay, about the weather. . . . He cannot think about his son when he is alone. . . . To talk about him with someone is possible, but to think of him and picture him is insufferable anguish. . . .

"Are you munching?" Iona asks his mare, seeing her shining eyes. "There, munch away, munch away. . . . Since we have not earned enough for oats, we will eat hay. . . . Yes, . . . I have grown too old to drive. . . . My son ought to be driving, not I. . . . He was a real cabman. . . . He ought to have lived. . . ."

Iona is silent for a while, and then he goes on:

"That's how it is, old girl. . . . Kuzma Ionitch is gone. . . . He said good-by to me. . . . He went and died for no reason. . . . Now, suppose you had a little colt, and you were own mother to that little colt. . . . And all at once that same little colt went and died. . . . You'd be sorry, wouldn't you? . . ."

The little mare munches, listens, and breathes on her master's hands. Iona is carried away and tells her all about it.

14.2.2 Glossary

sledge: a long vehicle pulled by horses or mares for traveling over ice and snow

snowdrift: a deep pile of snow blown together by the wind

half penny gingerbread horse: a sweet cake flavoured with ginger made in the shape of a mare and priced at half a penny.

lost in thought: absorbed in thought

slough:	a very soft wet area of land
nag:	horse, especially one which is old or ill
budged:	moved
yard:	an area outside a building
brandish:	to wave in order to threaten
pedestrian:	a person walking in the street
fidget:	to make constant small restless movements, unable to remain still or quiet
possessed:	as if taken over by madness or an evil spirit
jocosely:	humorously, playfully
sniff:	a sound of sniffing
huskily:	sounding rough as if throat is dry, hoarse
huddled:	curled one's body into a small space
goloshes:	rubber coverings worn over shoes in wet weather
kopecks:	a unit of money in Russia; one-hundredth of a rouble
rouble:	chief currency in Russia
hunchback:	a person with a hump on his back
altercation:	a noisy argument
cut along:	go on
whimsical:	unusual or rather playful
epithets:	adjectives or phrases to describe a character or an important quality
stand on ceremony:	behave formally
care a hang:	not care at all
revellers:	merry making persons, especially after alcoholic drinks
flit by:	pass by

heedless:	without paying attention
trotting:	moving at a steady pace
deliberation:	careful consideration
blubber:	cry noisily

14.3 DISCUSSION

This is a story of a father's grief over the death of his son. The grief is within him and he desperately wants to speak about it to lighten his burdensome misery. But no one is ready to listen to him. The story describes the old man's urge to share his grief with others, his despair at not being able to find a compassionate audience and his final effort to disgorge his misery by talking to his mare, his one and only companion. (disgorge: pour out)

The old man in grief is a sledge driver. He is the protagonist of the story. The other characters who appear briefly during the course of the story are riders on his sledge who have neither the time nor the inclination to listen to him. They live in a world of their own and cannot sympathetically relate to the old man in grief.

The story 'Misery' has a sub title 'To Whom Shall I Tell My Grief?' While the grief is over the loss of his son, his misery is not finding an outlet to unburden his grief.

After reading the story, note how many times the word 'misery' appears in it. You will discover that it appears towards the latter half of the story five times and on a sixth occasion it is used as an adjective 'miserable'.

Can you see the significance of this word in the context of the title of the story?

In this one word 'misery' the title accurately summarizes the mood the story carries. It tells us about the self-centred, unresponsive and feelingless nature of human beings in this world. The title 'Misery' portrays the overwhelming grief of Iona Potapov, the old sledge-driver over the loss of his son and his futile attempts to share it with fellow travellers in his sledge.

The first part of the story describes the old man's grief and his repeated efforts to catch the attention of the sledge riders and his failure to make them listen to his tale of woe. The resulting emotion goes beyond grief and becomes misery. Hence the title word 'misery' appears in the latter part of the story.

Misery means a great suffering of the mind or body. Here the suffering is not physical but felt within the heart. There can be no cure for emotional distress unless it is let out and shared with others. The old man has to keep his emotions within, as there are no listeners to lend an ear. He has been rendered alone by the death of his son, but his loneliness increases when he finds no

one with whom he can share his agony. He is severely alone and therefore is miserable.

'Misery' by Anton Chekhov

Let us see how the story begins.

It is evening. Chekhov describes realistically the shades of darkness all around, heightened by the white snow. We hear a lot of movement of people, but in the darkness no one is visible. Iona Potapov is an old man bent double with age and grief. He sits white like a ghost and his mare stays still and motionless. All around them is the constant motion of people who are not seen but whose voices are heard. The writer is able to focus on the loneliness of Iona, the sledge driver. He is surrounded by people and yet remains all alone in his grief. The darkness around him is a measure of the darkness within him. He is like a ghost in white (as he is covered by the snowflakes) for he experiences a death-in-life existence.

The first passenger is an army officer. He is in a hurry to reach his destination. He is a contrast to Iona in every respect. Iona is old and weary, the officer is young and full of life. Iona is lost in grief, the officer jokes in a light-hearted mood. Iona desperately seeks the officer's attention, the officer sits with his eyes shut and his ears closed "disinclined to listen". Chekhov using the stream-of-consciousness technique presents the continuous flow of grief in Iona without resorting to graphic description.

The second group of passengers on the sledge is a bunch of three revellers, young, rumbustious (making merry in a noisy way) with not a care of the world. They behave as though they are drunk. One of them is a hunchback. Despite his physical deformity, he feels superior to the old man who is weighed down with grief. All of them have no sympathy for the old man who tries to tell them of his son's death. The old man is gentle and kind to his mare; he does not whip his mare to speed up. In contrast the revellers ride roughshod over his feelings. Iona is happy to see them merry, but they have no eyes to discern the old man's sorrow. An officer or a party goer, their attitude to the old father in grief is the same. Neither can empathise with Iona's sadness.

The old man is left alone. Let us see how the writer describes his situation:

Again he is alone and again there is silence for him. . . . The misery which has been for a brief space eased comes back again and tears his heart more *cruelly than ever*. *With a look of anxiety and suffering Iona's eyes stray* restlessly among the crowds moving to and fro on both sides of the street: can he not find among those thousands someone who will listen to him? But the crowds flit by heedless of him and his misery. . . . His misery is immense, beyond all bounds. If Iona's heart were to burst and his misery to flow out, it would flood the whole world, it seems, but yet it is not seen. It has found a hiding-place in such an insignificant shell that one would not have found it with a candle by daylight.

His misery is immense. It can swamp the whole world and yet its immensity is not seen. It is within him and no one can even fathom the depths of its intensity. Iona longs for people to whom he can unburden himself. When the revellers are in his sledge, he is comforted with the thought that he has

company to share his grief with. To that extent his grief is eased. But when he is back alone in his sledge watching crowds moving to and fro, he realizes that a crowd is no company. "Iona drives a few paces away, bends himself double, and gives himself up to his misery."

One more attempt to speak to a young cabman proves futile. He is alone but he still has his mare. He unburdens his heart to the passive mare. For the first time, he mentions his son's name Kuzma Ionitch. He is gone. He has preceded him to the grave. He asks the mare how she would feel if she had a colt and the colt died. "You'd be sorry. Won't you?" The mare does not answer. It breathes on his hand. But in that unspoken moment the animal's tender and unprotesting looks comfort the old man. He feels that he has touched a sympathetic chord in his mare — the only possession he has still with him. He pours his heart out to her. He has found an outlet for his grief.

Is the mare really listening? Is she compassionate and understanding? Or is the last part of the story just the old man's fancy? The ending is deliberately left inconclusive. But the story drives home the point that humans are basically insensitive to other's pain and lack any involvement and sharing in the grief of fellowmen.

14.4 STYLE

The story you have read is written in a straightforward narrative style. What strikes the reader is its quality of simplicity. Chekhov has an eye for detail and he is a photographic and cinematographic realist. It is as though he has a camera that accurately portrays a piece of life. Chekhov once said that "Art tells the truth" and Tolstoy said "Art tells the truth because it expresses the highest feelings of man." Chekhov's seemingly simple story affirms the truth about human behaviour.

'Misery' is a good example of Chekhov's typical theme and narrative structure. It does not focus on everyday reality, but centres on the psychological aftermath of an event that breaks up everyday routine and leaves the central character helpless. The rhythm of the sledge driver Iona's life is broken by the news of his son's death. He feels the need to communicate his feelings of loss to his fares. The story is not about an event, it is rather about the lack of one. It is the objectification of grief and its incommunicable nature, through the presentation of deliberate details.

Chekhov's prose is lucid, with a simple vocabulary (the translator has attempted to follow this style). He uses metaphorical language to recreate the scene – consider the description of the sledge-driver, "all white like a ghost". This simile is apt for the snow, it also indicates the listlessness of Iona, overpowered by grief.

Reading his story in prose is like reading a poem as the style is compressed, imaginative and almost lyrical displaying strong emotions and feelings. A Russian critic, Andrei Voznesensky writing about Chekhov says that he is "a master of understatement, of concealed meaning, of twilight scenes and of prose as compressed as poetry ...".

Exercise 1

'Misery' by Anton Chekhov

- i) Relate the sub title 'To Whom Shall I Tell My Grief?' to the main title of the story 'Misery'
- ii) Who is more sympathetic — the officer or the revellers or the young cabman? And why?
- iii) Why does Iona pour out his history to the mare?

14.5 LET US SUM UP

The story 'Misery' by Anton Chekhov deals with human insensitivity to other people's grief. It captures the agony of an old man who has been recently bereaved following the death of his son and his need to speak about his grief and unburden himself. The indifferent and unsympathetic world has no time to respond to his misery.

The story gives an authentic portrayal of human nature that remains unaffected by the sorrows of the world so long as they do not impinge on it at a personal level.

14.6 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Exercise 1

- i. Refer to section 14.4.2
- ii. The officer at least asks him the question as to how his son died. The revellers have nothing to ask him. The only question they put to him is to mock at him as to whether he was married. Refer to 14.4.2 to elaborate
- iii. Refer to the last section in 14.4.2. Give your own interpretation as to whether talking to the mare shows Iona to be fanciful or truthful. Does he find the tenderness and affection seen in the mare's eyes comforting in contrast to the unresponsive indifference of fellow men?