

Before You Read

THE BET

Make the Connection

The Search for Meaning

Would you give up all human company for years to win an amazing fortune? A character in this famous Russian story bets that he can do it, and his voluntary solitude raises some big questions—for him and for readers.

Quickwrite



Think about a time when you chose to be alone for a while. Maybe you needed to study to pass a test, or you may have wanted to be alone to think about an important decision. Jot down the details of your experience. What did you learn from your solitude?

Elements of Literature

Ambiguity: More Than One Meaning?

The **theme**, or overall meaning, of a story is almost never stated directly by the writer in any one place in the text. In fact, few writers want to reduce the meaning of their stories to *one* fixed and final statement. Instead, writers expect readers to make their own meaning after looking at the complex interplay of all the elements in the story. Because readers bring their own values and experiences to the reading of any text, individual interpretations are bound to differ.

Some interpretations even go beyond what the writer consciously intended the story to mean. “The Bet” is a striking example of a story that raises more questions than it answers. Its theme is particularly **ambiguous**, or open to a variety of interpretations.

The **theme**, or overall meaning, of a story is **ambiguous** when the elements that make up the story are open to many interpretations. *For more on Theme, see pages 182–183 and the Handbook of Literary Terms.*

Reading Skills and Strategies



Making Inferences About Theme

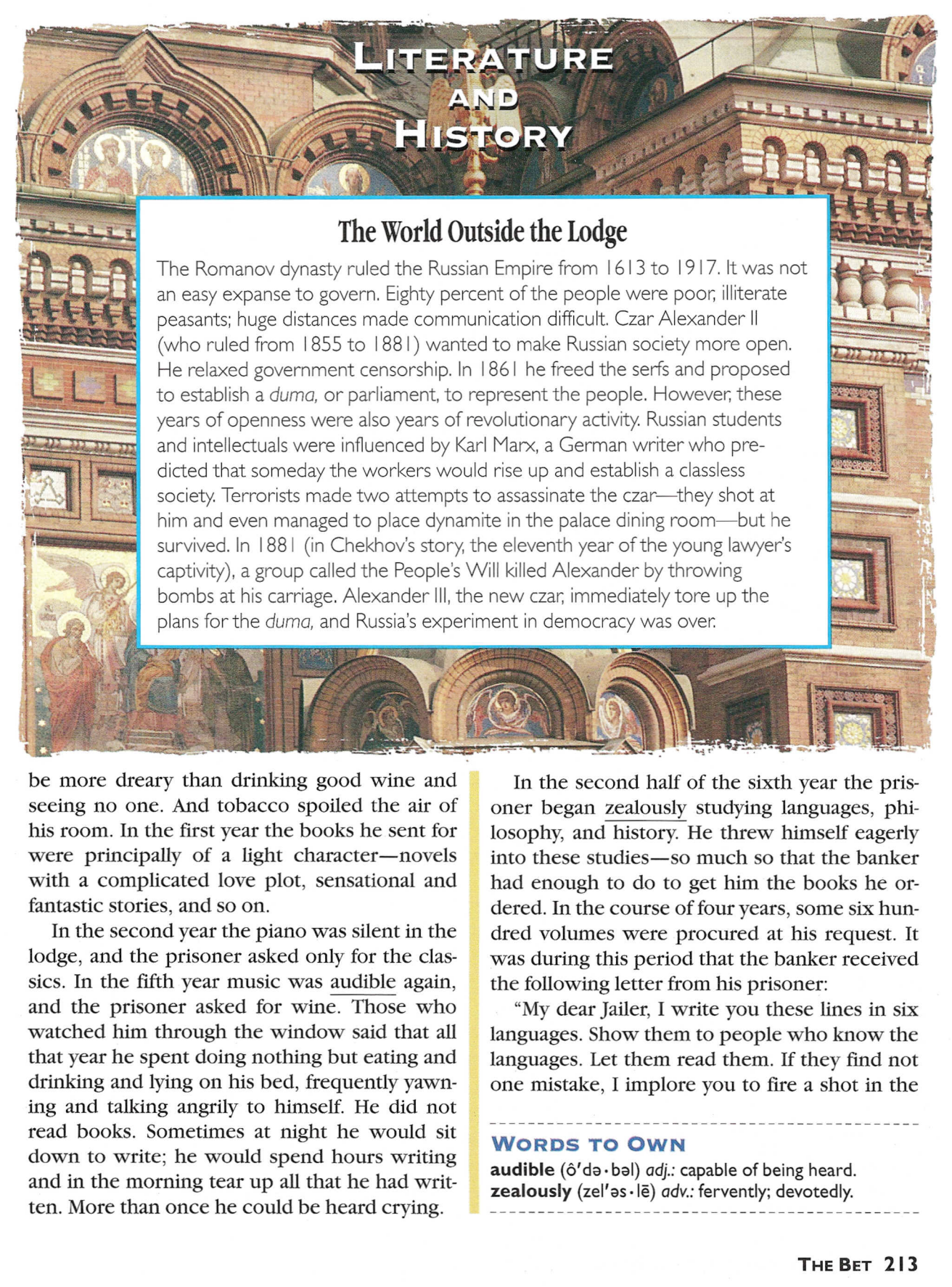
How would you go about determining the theme of a story? You’ll need to make **inferences**, or guesses based on clues in the story: You’ll look at the title, at whether the characters change, and at what they learn. You’ll look, too, for **key passages** that seem to hint at the author’s message. In “The Bet,” for example, the lawyer’s letter certainly merits a careful look.



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LITERATURE AND HISTORY

The World Outside the Lodge

The Romanov dynasty ruled the Russian Empire from 1613 to 1917. It was not an easy expanse to govern. Eighty percent of the people were poor, illiterate peasants; huge distances made communication difficult. Czar Alexander II (who ruled from 1855 to 1881) wanted to make Russian society more open. He relaxed government censorship. In 1861 he freed the serfs and proposed to establish a *duma*, or parliament, to represent the people. However, these years of openness were also years of revolutionary activity. Russian students and intellectuals were influenced by Karl Marx, a German writer who predicted that someday the workers would rise up and establish a classless society. Terrorists made two attempts to assassinate the czar—they shot at him and even managed to place dynamite in the palace dining room—but he survived. In 1881 (in Chekhov's story, the eleventh year of the young lawyer's captivity), a group called the People's Will killed Alexander by throwing bombs at his carriage. Alexander III, the new czar, immediately tore up the plans for the *duma*, and Russia's experiment in democracy was over.

be more dreary than drinking good wine and seeing no one. And tobacco spoiled the air of his room. In the first year the books he sent for were principally of a light character—novels with a complicated love plot, sensational and fantastic stories, and so on.

In the second year the piano was silent in the lodge, and the prisoner asked only for the classics. In the fifth year music was audible again, and the prisoner asked for wine. Those who watched him through the window said that all that year he spent doing nothing but eating and drinking and lying on his bed, frequently yawning and talking angrily to himself. He did not read books. Sometimes at night he would sit down to write; he would spend hours writing and in the morning tear up all that he had written. More than once he could be heard crying.

In the second half of the sixth year the prisoner began zealously studying languages, philosophy, and history. He threw himself eagerly into these studies—so much so that the banker had enough to do to get him the books he ordered. In the course of four years, some six hundred volumes were procured at his request. It was during this period that the banker received the following letter from his prisoner:

“My dear Jailer, I write you these lines in six languages. Show them to people who know the languages. Let them read them. If they find not one mistake, I implore you to fire a shot in the

WORDS TO OWN

audible (əˈdɪ·bəl) *adj.*: capable of being heard.
zealously (zelˈəs·lē) *adv.*: fervently; devotedly.

When the match went out, the old man, trembling with emotion, peeped through the little window. A candle was burning dimly in the prisoner's room. He was sitting at the table. Nothing could be seen but his back, the hair on his head, and his hands. Open books were lying on the table, on the two easy chairs, and on the carpet near the table.

Five minutes passed and the prisoner did not once stir. Fifteen years' imprisonment had taught him to sit still. The banker tapped at the window with his finger, and the prisoner made no movement whatever in response. Then the banker cautiously broke the seals off the door and put the key in the keyhole. The rusty lock gave a grating sound and the door creaked. The banker expected to hear at once footsteps and a cry of astonishment, but three minutes passed and it was as quiet as ever in the room. He made up his mind to go in.

At the table a man unlike ordinary people was sitting motionless. He was a skeleton with the skin drawn tight over his bones, with long curls like a woman's, and a shaggy beard. His face was yellow with an earthy tint in it, his cheeks were hollow, his back long and narrow, and the hand on which his shaggy head was propped was so thin and delicate that it was dreadful to look at it. His hair was already streaked with silver, and seeing his emaciated, aged-looking face, no one would have believed that he was only forty. He was asleep. . . . In front of his bowed head there lay on the table a sheet of paper, on which there was something written in fine handwriting.

"Poor creature!" thought the banker, "he is asleep and most likely dreaming of the millions. And I have only to take this half-dead man, throw him on the bed, stifle him a little with the pillow, and the most conscientious expert would find no sign of a violent death. But let us first read what he has written here. . . ."

The banker took the page from the table and read as follows:

"Tomorrow at twelve o'clock I regain my freedom and the right to associate with other men, but before I leave this room and see the sunshine, I think it necessary to say a few words

to you. With a clear conscience I tell you, as before God, who beholds me, that I despise freedom and life and health and all that in your books is called the good things of the world.

"For fifteen years I have been intently studying earthly life. It is true I have not seen the earth or men, but in your books I have drunk fragrant wine, I have sung songs, I have hunted stags and wild boars in the forests, I have loved women. . . . Beauties as ethereal as clouds, created by the magic of your poets and geniuses, have visited me at night and have whispered in my ears wonderful tales that have set my brain in a whirl. In your books I have climbed to the peaks of Elburz and Mont Blanc,⁶ and from there I have seen the sun rise and have watched it at evening flood the sky, the ocean, and the mountaintops with gold and crimson. I have watched from there the lightning flashing over my head and cleaving the storm clouds. I have seen green forests, fields, rivers, lakes, towns. I have heard the singing of the sirens,⁷ and the strains of the shepherds' pipes; I have touched the wings of comely devils who flew down to converse with me of God. . . . In your books I have flung myself into the bottomless pit, performed miracles, slain, burned towns, preached new religions, conquered whole kingdoms. . . .

"Your books have given me wisdom. All that the unresting thought of man has created in the ages is compressed into a small compass in my brain. I know that I am wiser than all of you.

"And I despise your books, I despise wisdom and the blessings of this world. It is all worthless, fleeting, illusory, and deceptive, like a mirage. You may be proud, wise, and fine, but

6. **Elburz** (el·boorz') and **Mont Blanc** (mōn blān'): Elburz is a mountain range in northern Iran; Mont Blanc, in France, is the highest mountain in the Alps.

7. **sirens**: in Greek mythology, partly human female creatures who lived on an island and lured sailors to their death with their beautiful singing.

WORDS TO OWN

ethereal (ē·thir'ē·əl) *adj.*: light and delicate; unearthly.

cleaving (klēv'in) *v.* used as *adj.*: splitting.

illusory (i·lōō'sə·rē) *adj.*: not real; based on false ideas.



First Thoughts

- Who do you think won the bet, and what did he win? Compare answers with your classmates.

Shaping Interpretations

- Imagine you are a psychologist observing the lawyer periodically during his confinement. Write a year-by-year **summary** of how he spends his time and what his emotional state appears to be. Use a **time line**.

Year 1	Year 2
is lonely, depressed	stops playing piano
reads <i>escapist</i> fiction	
plays piano	
refuses wine, tobacco	

- After making the bet, the banker tells himself that “greed for money” was the lawyer’s **motivation** for betting. Do you agree or disagree? Look for evidence in the text to support your view.
- For fifteen years, the lawyer lives in exile. How does this experience affect him? How do your Quickwrite responses compare with his experience?
- Looking back, the banker believes he took the bet on “the caprice of a pampered man.” How does he feel about himself at the end of the fifteen years? What do you think this reveals about Chekhov’s view of what is important in life?
- Identify what you think is the story’s most important passage. How would you interpret the story’s **theme**? Discuss your statement of theme with other readers. Are several thematic focuses possible?

Connecting with the Text

- At the story’s end, would you rather be the banker or the lawyer? Why?

Extending the Text

- Russian history has been a long and troubled search for freedom. (See the article on page 213.) How do you think the political problems in the last years of the czar’s reign might have influenced Chekhov’s—and his characters’—ideas on freedom, materialism, and personal sacrifice?
- Do you believe there is such a thing as “internal freedom”—the kind of freedom the lawyer comes to know in prison? Think of people imprisoned for their beliefs. Are they freer than their jailers? If so, how?

Reading Check

- Explain the terms of the bet.
- At the end of fifteen years, what has happened to the banker?
- After the same period, what has happened to the lawyer?
- Why does the banker go to the lodge on the last night of the lawyer’s captivity?
- What decision does the lawyer announce in a letter, and why?



“The death penalty is more humane than imprisonment for life.”



The Verandah at Liselund (detail) (1916) by Peter Ilsted. Oil on canvas.

Courtesy of Adelson Galleries, New York.

The Bet

Anton Chekhov

translated by Constance Garnett

1

It was a dark autumn night. The old banker was walking up and down his study and remembering how, fifteen years before, he had given a party one autumn evening. There had been many clever men there, and there had been interesting conversations. Among other things, they had talked of capital punishment. The majority of the guests, among whom were many journalists and intellectual men, disapproved of the death penalty. They considered that form of punishment out of date, immoral, and unsuitable for Christian states.¹ In the opinion of some of them, the death penalty ought to be replaced everywhere by imprisonment for life.

“I don’t agree with you,” said their host, the banker. “I have not tried either the death penalty or imprisonment for life, but if one may judge a priori,² the death penalty is more

1. **Christian states:** countries in which Christianity is the main religion.
2. **a priori** (ā’pī-ōr’ī): here, on the basis of theory rather than experience.

Portrait of the Painter Konstantin Alekseevich Korovin (1891) by Valentin Serov. Oil on canvas. Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia.

Scala/Art Resource, New York.

moral and more humane than imprisonment for life. Capital punishment kills a man at once, but lifelong imprisonment kills him slowly. Which executioner is the more humane, he who kills you in a few minutes or he who drags the life out of you in the course of many years?"

"Both are equally immoral," observed one of the guests, "for they both have the same object—to take away life. The state is not God. It has not the right to take away what it cannot restore when it wants to."

Among the guests was a young lawyer, a young man of five-and-twenty. When he was asked his opinion, he said: "The death sentence and the life sentence are equally immoral, but if I had to choose between the death penalty and imprisonment for life, I would certainly choose the second. To live anyhow is better than not at all."

A lively discussion arose. The banker, who was younger and more nervous in those days, was suddenly carried away by excitement; he struck the table with his fist and shouted at the young man: "It's not true! I'll bet you two million you wouldn't stay in solitary confinement for five years."

"If you mean that in earnest," said the young man, "I'll take the bet, but I would stay not five, but fifteen years."

"Fifteen? Done!" cried the banker. "Gentlemen, I stake two million!"

"Agreed! You stake your millions and I stake my freedom!" said the young man.

And this wild, senseless bet was carried out! The banker, spoiled and frivolous, with millions beyond his reckoning, was delighted at the bet. At supper he made fun of the young man and said: "Think better of it, young man, while there is still time. To me two million is a trifle, but you are losing three or four of the best years of your life. I say three or four, because you won't stay longer. Don't forget either, you unhappy man, that voluntary confinement is a great deal harder to bear than compulsory. The thought that you have the right to step out in liberty at any moment will poison your whole existence in prison. I am sorry for you."

And now the banker, walking to and fro, remembered all this and asked himself: "What

was the object of that bet? What is the good of that man's losing fifteen years of his life and my throwing away two million? Can it prove that the death penalty is better or worse than imprisonment for life? No, no. It was all nonsensical and meaningless. On my part it was the caprice of a pampered man, and on his part simple greed for money. . . ."

Then he remembered what followed that evening. It was decided that the young man should spend the years of his captivity under the strictest supervision in one of the lodges in the banker's garden. It was agreed that for fifteen years he should not be free to cross the threshold of the lodge, to see human beings, to hear the human voice, or to receive letters and newspapers. He was allowed to have a musical instrument and books and was allowed to write letters, to drink wine, and to smoke. By the terms of the agreement, the only relations he could have with the outer world were by a little window made purposely for that object. He might have anything he wanted—books, music, wine, and so on—in any quantity he desired, by writing an order, but could receive them only through the window. The agreement provided for every detail and every trifle that would make his imprisonment strictly solitary, and bound the young man to stay there *exactly* fifteen years, beginning from twelve o'clock of November 14, 1870, and ending at twelve o'clock of November 14, 1885. The slightest attempt on his part to break the conditions, if only two minutes before the end, released the banker from the obligation to pay him two million.

For the first year of his confinement, as far as one could judge from his brief notes, the prisoner suffered severely from loneliness and depression. The sounds of the piano could be heard continually day and night from his lodge. He refused wine and tobacco. Wine, he wrote, excites the desires, and desires are the worst foes of the prisoner; and besides, nothing could

WORDS TO OWN

compulsory (kəm·pul'sə·rē) *adj.*: required; enforced.
caprice (kə·prēs') *n.*: sudden notion or desire.

garden. That shot will show me that my efforts have not been thrown away. The geniuses of all ages and of all lands speak different languages, but the same flame burns in them all. Oh, if you only knew what unearthly happiness my soul feels now from being able to understand them!" The prisoner's desire was fulfilled. The banker ordered two shots to be fired in the garden.

Then, after the tenth year, the prisoner sat immovably at the table and read nothing but the Gospels. It seemed strange to the banker that a man who in four years had mastered six hundred learned volumes should waste nearly a year over one thin book easy of comprehension. Theology³ and histories of religion followed the Gospels.

In the last two years of his confinement, the prisoner read an immense quantity of books quite indiscriminately. At one time he was busy with the natural sciences; then he would ask for Byron⁴ or Shakespeare. There were notes in which he demanded at the same time books on chemistry, and a manual of medicine, and a novel, and some treatise on philosophy or theology. 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 spar⁵ and then at another.

2

The old banker remembered all this and thought: "Tomorrow at twelve o'clock he will regain his freedom. By our arrangement I ought to pay him two million. If I do pay him, it is all over with me: I shall be utterly ruined."

Fifteen years before, his millions had been beyond his reckoning; now he was afraid to ask himself which were greater, his debts or his assets. Desperate gambling on the Stock Exchange, wild speculation, and the excitability which he could not get over even in advancing years had by degrees led to the decline of his

fortune, and the proud, fearless, self-confident millionaire had become a banker of middling rank, trembling at every rise and fall in his investments. "Cursed bet!" muttered the old man, clutching his head in despair. "Why didn't the man die? He is only forty now. He will take my last penny from me, he will marry, will enjoy life, will gamble on the Exchange, while I shall look at him with envy like a beggar and hear from him every day the same sentence: 'I am indebted to you for the happiness of my life; let me help you!' No, it is too much! The one means of being saved from bankruptcy and disgrace is the death of that man!"

It struck three o'clock. The banker listened; everyone was asleep in the house, and nothing could be heard outside but the rustling of the chilled trees. Trying to make no noise, he took from a fireproof safe the key of the door which had not been opened for fifteen years, put on his overcoat, and went out of the house.

It was dark and cold in the garden. Rain was falling. A damp, cutting wind was racing about the garden, howling and giving the trees no rest. The banker strained his eyes but could see neither the earth nor the white statues, nor the lodge, nor the trees. Going to the spot where the lodge stood, he twice called the watchman. No answer followed. Evidently the watchman had sought shelter from the weather and was now asleep somewhere either in the kitchen or in the greenhouse.

"If I had the pluck to carry out my intention," thought the old man, "suspicion would fall first upon the watchman."

He felt in the darkness for the steps and the door and went into the entry of the lodge. Then he groped his way into a little passage and lighted a match. There was not a soul there. There was a bedstead with no bedding on it, and in the corner there was a dark cast-iron stove. The seals on the door leading to the prisoner's rooms were intact.

WORDS TO OWN

indiscriminately (in'di·skrim'i·nit·lē) *adv.*: without making careful choices or distinctions; randomly.

3. **theology** (thē·äl'ə·jē): the study of religious teachings concerning God and God's relation to the world.

4. **Byron**: George Gordon Byron (1788-1824), known as Lord Byron, English Romantic poet.

5. **spar**: pole that supports or extends a ship's sail.

“You have lost your reason and taken the wrong path.”

death will wipe you off the face of the earth as though you were no more than mice burrowing under the floor, and your posterity, your history, your immortal geniuses will burn or freeze together with the earthly globe.

“You have lost your reason and taken the wrong path. You have taken lies for truth and hideousness for beauty. You would marvel if, owing to strange events of some sort, frogs and lizards suddenly grew on apple and orange trees instead of fruit or if roses began to smell like a sweating horse; so I marvel at you who exchange heaven for earth. I don’t want to understand you.

“To prove to you in action how I despise all that you live by, I renounce the two million of which I once dreamed as of paradise and which now I despise. To deprive myself of the right to the money, I shall go out from here five minutes before the time fixed and so break the compact. . . .”

When the banker had read this, he laid the page on the table, kissed the strange man on the head, and went out of the lodge, weeping. At no other time, even when he had lost heavily on the Stock Exchange, had he felt so great a contempt for himself. When he got home, he lay on his bed, but his tears and emotion kept him for hours from sleeping.

Next morning the watchmen ran in with pale faces and told him they had seen the man who lived in the lodge climb out of the window into the garden, go to the gate, and disappear. The banker went at once with the servants to the lodge and made sure of the flight of his prisoner. To avoid arousing unnecessary talk, he took from the table the writing in which the millions were renounced and, when he got home, locked it up in the fireproof safe.

WORDS TO OWN

posterity (pās·ter’ə·tē) *n.*: descendants or all future generations.

renounce (ri·nouns’) *v.*: give up, especially by formal statement; reject.

The Verandah at Liselund (1916) by Peter Ilsted. Oil on canvas.

Courtesy of Adelson Galleries, New York.



MEET THE WRITER

Master of Ironies

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) was the grandson of a Russian serf—this means that his grandfather was a farm laborer who could be bought and sold with the land he worked. Eventually Chekhov's grandfather succeeded in purchasing his freedom and raising a family as a free man. Chekhov's father tried to move up the economic ladder by running a general store in a small town in southern Russia, but he did not prosper. The young Anton, trying in his turn to better himself, won a scholarship to medical school. While he was studying in Moscow, his father went bankrupt, and Chekhov had to support his parents, four brothers, and a sister. He managed to do this and stay in school by writing stories and sketches for humor magazines. These short, light pieces, published under an assumed name, earned Chekhov a popular following, a steady income, and an opportunity to develop

as a writer. After receiving his medical degree, he practiced medicine for a short time only. He chose to continue writing instead. By the time he was in his thirties, Chekhov was recognized as a serious writer and was wealthy enough to purchase a country estate, an unexpected achievement for the grandson of a serf. In the last years

of his short life, knowing he was dying from tuberculosis, Chekhov wrote five full-length plays, all dealing in some way with the theme of loss. Four of them are considered masterpieces of realistic drama: *The Sea Gull*, *Uncle*



Anton Chekhov in Yalta at the beginning of the 1900s.

Vanya, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. Chekhov died tragically young, when he was only forty-four years old. The critic V. S. Pritchett says that the stories are Chekhov's life, tunes that his Russia put into his head.

“ ‘What is the meaning of life?’ Olga [his wife] once asked in a letter . . . Chekhov replied: ‘It is like asking what a carrot is. A carrot is a carrot and nothing more is known.’ ”



Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy.



Anton Chekhov reads his play *The Sea Gull* to the actors of the Art Theater.

Writer's Notebook

1. Collecting Ideas for Analyzing a Story

Focusing on theme.

But what does it all mean? In a single sentence, try to express the **theme** of "The Bet" or of another story you've read in Collections 1 to 3. Use the chart below to help you. Remember:

- The theme expresses a general insight about human life or human nature.
- No single statement of theme is "correct."
- A story may have more than one theme.

Save your notes for the Writer's Workshop on page 240.

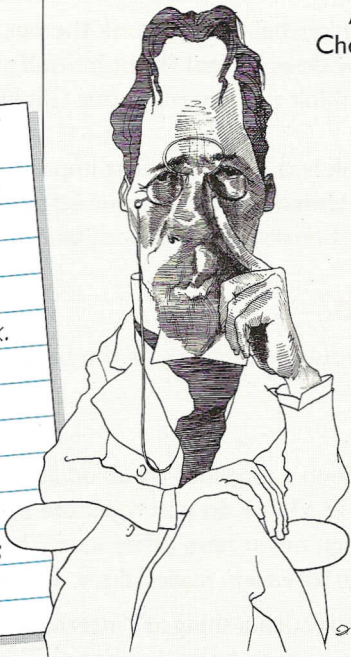


Creative Writing/ Dramatizing

2. Famous First Words

Suppose the fleeing lawyer finds himself at a village inn some distance from the lodge, among a group of strangers. He hasn't spoken to anyone in fifteen years, but he decides to confide his feelings to a stranger. Write a **dialogue** for the lawyer's first conversation as a "free" man. Work with a partner to develop the character of the confidant. How that person reacts to the lawyer will depend on his or her own background and values. Rehearse your **scene**, and present it to your class or group.

Anton Chekhov.



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Reflective Essay

3. Home Alone

Imagine yourself in the lawyer's place: What would you do if you were confined alone for one year? The rules include no human contact, no exit, no TV or radio, no VCR, no phone, no computer. You can ask for books, hobby supplies, musical instruments, and exercise equipment. Write a brief essay, telling how you imagine you'd spend 365 days (the lawyer spent 15 times that) alone. It seems unimaginable, but think about it. How *would* you spend the time?

Speaking and Listening

4. Philosophy of Life

In Chekhov's story, the lawyer's letter to his "jailer" is quite specific about his philosophy of life—what he considers important and unimportant and what freedom means to him. In a small group, read the letter, and then hold a **round-table discussion** of the lawyer's views. Choose a discussion leader who will make sure that all who speak offer reasons and examples to support their views. At the close of the discussion, prepare a **summary** for the class of the group's responses to the lawyer's philosophy.

- **Story:** "Geraldo No Last Name" by Sandra Cisneros
- **Possible statement of theme:** Realizing the possibility of sudden death comes as a shock.
- **Clues to theme:**
 - **Key passages:** "But what difference does it make?"
 - **What character learns:** Life is fragile; we are all vulnerable.