



'THE BET' BY ANTON CHEKHOV

: UNIT STRUCTURE :

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall

- Discuss the plot of the story 'The Bet'
- Examine the theme of 'The Bet'

After completing the unit, you should be able to

- Summarize the story 'The Bet'
- Analyze the setting of 'The Bet'

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov is considered to be one of the classic masters of short stories from Russia. He is considered to be the direct successor of giants such as Maupassant, Tolstoy and Turgenev. He is an expert in handling prose by his treatment of characters, theme, setting and mood. Chekhov is a proponent of easy on the pocket use of language and engaging style, which brings in humor along with misery for highlighting the key aspects of life. Eventually, his techniques helped in developing the form of short story. He also contributed a technique of resolving the story, which is called "zero endings". The stories with "zero-ending" provide more realistic situations because the readers keep guessing what will happen next. Besides, Chekhov also developed "surprise endings" to challenge our predictability successfully. As readers, we can never tell how the story might end. As a result, even after a century, he is loved by the readers all over the world for his originality and freshness.

5.2 TEXT OF THE STORY 'THE BET'

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 They considered that form of punishment out of date, **immoral**, and unsuitable for Christian States. 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*, the death penalty is more 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."

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"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, spoilt 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 only receive them 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 the two million.

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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 be more dreary than drinking good wine and seeing no one. And tobacco spoilt 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 angrily talking 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

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you to fire a shot in the 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.

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Then after the tenth year, the prisoner sat **immovably** at the table and read nothing but the **Gospel**. 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. **Theology** 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 Byron 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 spar and then at another.

The old banker remembered all this, and thought:

“To-morrow at twelve o’clock he will regain his freedom. By our agreement 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!”

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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.

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.

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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:

"To-morrow 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 nor men, but in your books I have drunk fragrant wine, I have sung songs, I have hunted stags and wild boars in the forests, have loved women ...

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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, and from there I have seen the sun rise and have watched it at evening flood the sky, the ocean, and the mountain-tops 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, 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 ...

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“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 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 sorts, 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 hours 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.

5.3 ANALYSIS OF ‘THE BET’

5.3.1 Plot

Fifteen years back, a banker tossed a party in which he bet with a young lawyer two million rubbles that the lawyer could not remain in prison for five years. The

lawyer increased the time to fifteen years, and stayed in a garden house on the banker's garden. He had no contact with any people during this time; however had the liberty to peruse as many books he could read. The lawyer read extensively from books on literature to rationality and dialects to religious writings. Nothing more needed to be said. He enjoyed a real good time in learning the best of the knowledge of the world.

Presently, the period of fifteen years is nearly up and the banker is concerned about that. If he will pay him the promised two millions, he will be a bagger. Worried banker decides to kill the lawyer so that he does not have to pay him anything. So he secretly goes into the lawyer's room who is sleeping soundly. As the banker is going to murder him, he finds a note that clarifies that this bet has given a good opportunity to the lawyer to be wise and as a result he has decided renounce the material world. It turns out from the note that the lawyer has planned to escape from the house five hours before decided time and by that break the contract deliberately. The banker is happy finding this because he does not have to pay anything to him. Therefore, he kisses the lawyer's head, cries, and leaves. The next day the watchman reports that the lawyer ran away early. The banker takes the letter and places it into his safe.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:1

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN MAXIMUM 75 WORDS EACH.

1. Describe the bet between the banker and lawyer in your words:
2. What did the lawyer do during the first year of his confinement?
3. What did the lawyer write in the note on the last day?

5.3.2 Setting

The story begins in the same dark autumn night. However, as a master storyteller, Chekhov uses flashback as an artistic device wherein the story begins with the banker thinking about the night when he had made strange bet. It was a big party of intellectual men with their "interesting" conversations. Probably, they were all drunk because such a weird bet is only possible when people are out of their heads. However, as it turns out, they took the bet seriously because it was made in public. The rest of the setting is in the small room wherein the lawyer is kept for 15 years. We find him doing all kinds of things starting from adjusting with loneliness and frustration to playing music and drinking wine; and finally being extremely devoted to reading to be wiser.

At the end of the story, we are again brought amidst the cold night wherein the banker and the lawyer are alone in the garden house. The presence of the crowd in the beginning is sharply contrasted with the loneliness in the end. It is the loneliness that makes the banker make up his mind to kill the lawyer so that he does not have to pay him the promised two million rubble. The lawyer is fast asleep and the only man in action is the banker. It is a moment of great conflict, which makes us wonder what will happen next. However, the appearance of the note is the final twist in the story that shows the wisdom that the lawyer has earned during his jail-period. On the final counts, since the banker does not have to pay anything as per

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the note, he is happy letting the lawyer live and returns to his house at peace.

5.3.3 Theme

The major theme of the short story is knowledge or wisdom weighs more than material achievements. From the very day the bet was made, one keeps thinking that it is for two million that the lawyer has sacrificed his freedom and has accepted the punishment of solitary confinement. Not only that, when the banker said five years, the lawyer increased the time and made it fifteen years which suggests his desperation for getting the money. However, as the story develops, the lawyer gets busier in reading more and diverse. Finally, when he writes that note, we discover that that the lawyer actually pursued knowledge to become wise and now he does not want any money.

Secondly, '*The Bet*' seems to argue that in order to get wisdom, one needs to renounce the world and embrace solitude. The loneliness makes a person to spend quality time reading and thinking. Therefore, the story has a very powerful line, 'Fifteen years' imprisonment had taught him to sit still.' It means that he has not absolute control over himself, which is a mark of a wise person.

Lastly, celebration of life is the third theme of the story '*The Bet*'. The very bet was about choosing life over death. The lawyer goes to the prison and sacrifices his freedom to make only one point: "To live anyhow is better than not at all." It is a very positive spirit that shows Chekhov's worldview about life. The result of the bet is very clear. The banker is happy because he does not have to pay anything and the lawyer is happy because now he has so much that he does not need anything.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 2

MATCH THE WORDS OF COLUMN 'A' WITH THEIR ANTONYMS GIVEN IN THE COLUMN 'B'.

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Freedom | A. Immoral |
| 2. Wide | B. Imprisonment |
| 3. Ethical | C. Delighted |
| 4. Sad | D. Crying |
| 5. Laughing | E. Narrow |

5.3.4 Prose Style

While reading '*The Bet*', we come across a beautiful prose style wherein Chekhov uses seven sections to describe developmental stages in the life of the character. The distinct quality of '*The Bet*' is to-the-point story, which does not allow the readers to get bored or get away their sight from the main action. Chekhov's ability to make the readers imagine all the possibilities in the life of the character's life is a real gift that a short story writer can have.

One of the striking features of Chekhov's prose style is to present all the background information first and then set the story into motion. For example, in '*The Bet*' we find the details of the characters, the setting, party and people; and then the process and result of the bet. Like his other stories, '*The Bet*' also wakes up

to the content in terms of length. In other words, he makes the story as long as the content allows it; not more or less. *The Bet* has many proverbial statements, which are so profound that we feel like using them as quotes. For example,

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- The State is not God.
- To live anyhow is better than not at all.
- The geniuses of all ages and of all lands speak different languages, but the same flame burns in them all.
- You have taken lies for truth, and hideousness for beauty.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: 3

C. STATE WHETHER THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ARE TRUE OR FALSE.

1. The time period of imprisonment was five years.
2. The lawyer drank a lot of wine in the first years.
3. The banker wanted to kill the lawyer.
4. The lawyer read religious stories in the jail.
5. The watchman saw the banker entering the garden house.

D. ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN DETAIL.

1. Why does the lawyer choose to break the bet by escaping early?
2. Write a short note on the major themes of the story.

5.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt

- Plot of the story
- The themes of the story
- Unique features of Chekhov’s prose style through *The Bet*

a. KEY WORDS

1. Capital punishment: Punishment of death
2. Disapprove: Reject
3. a priori: Based on theory
4. Restore: To bring back
5. Stake: Valuable
6. Frivolous: Playful
7. Reckoning: Thinking
8. Confinement: Jail
9. Pampered: Spoiled
10. Threshold: Boundary
11. Solitary: Lonely
12. Audible: Something you can hear
13. Zealously: Passionately

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14. Unearthly: Heavenly
15. Immovably: fixed
16. Gospel: Teachings of Christ
17. Theology: The study of religions
18. Indiscriminately: Randomly
19. Wreckage: Breaking and sinking of ships
20. Assets: Property
21. Speculation: Assumption
22. Excitability: State of being excited
23. Muttered: Telling something softly
24. Bankruptcy: Financial failure
25. Rustle: Crackle
26. Damp: Slightly wet
27. Howling: Sound of pain
28. Pluck: Pick up
29. Suspicion: Doubt
30. Groped: Slightly go through
31. Creak: Scrape
32. Shaggy: Hairy
33. Streak: Vein
34. Emaciated: Very weak due to illness
35. Conscientious: Careful
36. Crimson: Pink
37. Ethereal: Airy
38. Cleave: Slice
39. Slain: Killed
40. Conquered: Won
41. Unresting: Restless
42. Despise: Hate
43. Deprive: Devoid
44. Deceptive: Illusionary
45. Converse: Discuss
46. Hideousness: Ugliness
47. Contempt: Dislike
48. Flight: Escaping
49. Comely: Pleasant
50. Renounced: Leaving away

5.6 BOOKS SUGGESTED

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- 1) *Ward No. 6 and Other Stories* by Anton Chekhov
- 2) *Gooseberries* by Anton Chekhov
- 3) *The Shooting Party* by Anton Chekhov
- 4) *The Story of a Nobody* by Anton Chekhov

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Let the students write in their own words. However, refer to the section one of the original story.
2. For the first year of his imprisonment, the prisoner suffered severely from loneliness and depression. The sounds of the piano could be heard continually day and night from his lodge. During this time, he read books with principally of a light character; novels with a complicated love plot, sensational and fantastic stories, and so on.
3. Refer to the last section of the story. However, following points can be written:
 - The lawyer wrote about the knowledge he got from reading various kinds of books
 - He experienced various kinds of places, people and interesting event through books
 - He also wrote that the wisdom is so much important for him that he had planned to break the bet by leaving 5 hours earlier than the decided time.

Check Your Progress 2

- | | |
|-------------|-----------------|
| 1. Freedom | A. Imprisonment |
| 2. Wide | B. Narrow |
| 3. Ethical | C. Immoral |
| 4. Sad | D. Delighted |
| 5. Laughing | E. Crying |

Check Your Progress 3

C. Match the columns:

1. False
2. False
3. True
9. True
10. False

D. Answer the questions in detail:

1. The lawyer chooses to break the bet because he thinks that there is no point in getting the material wealth as compared to the knowledge and wisdom he has gained in the last fifteen years.

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Going away from the society and spending more times in gaining knowledge makes a person wiser. Therefore, if he keeps up the bet, he would end up collecting more and more wealth, which is of less importance.

2. There are three major themes of the story ‘*The Bet*’

1. Knowledge is more important than the material gains
2. In order to get wisdom, one needs to renounce the world and embrace solitude
3. Celebration of life