

**ENGL 3060 Modern and Contemporary Literature**

Spring Semester 2003

Matthias M. Edrich

[matthias@edrich.de](mailto:matthias@edrich.de)**Essay 3**  
**January 28, 2003****"The Lady with the Pet Dog"**

A story of lost and born again love: both Anton Chekhov's 1899 original as well as Joyce Carol Oates' version of "The Lady with the Pet Dog" deal with the love lives and the unhappiness of two individuals. Anton Chekhov tells the story of Gurov – a well-to-do man from Moscow who is disillusioned by his unfulfilling marriage. During a vacation in Yalta, Gurov is acquainted with Anna, a young, upper-class lady who, as it turns out, is similarly disappointed with her love-life and husband. What starts out as a simple affair between Gurov and the Anna turns into a relationship which neither want to give up. Both eventually arrange to see each other regularly and discover, that they want to continue their affair despite being aware that this is not accepted by the society within which they live. Staying together is the only thing that gives them the feeling of being safe and happy.

Joyce Carol Oates borrows this original plot and creates a new story which describes a similar issue from the viewpoint of the woman. In addition, she transposes the entire setting to fit in with the 1970s atmosphere and societal circumstances. Here, the main character, Anna, becomes acquainted with a man, identified only as "the stranger", during a vacation trip to Nantucket, Massachusetts. As in Chekhov's version, both characters fall in love with each other and thus finally find new hope and love in their lives.

Chekhov's Gurov character can be defined as a man who lost faith in his wife and marriage because he feels that he cannot relate to her any longer. He recognizes that she

is "of limited intelligence, narrow-minded and dowdy" – in no way as "worldly" and educated as he would like her to be. Thus, Gurov has turned towards short-lived love affairs to combat his loneliness. Despite always ending badly, Gurov cannot resist new attempts in hopes that he may find someone who can break his solitude forever. His search for identity and love continues in such a fashion until he meets Anna. Although this affair initially begins like the others, he gradually realizes, that the reason for his continued loneliness is his focus on sexual aspects without much emotional depth. Thanks to Anna's character, he recognizes that he is not only in need of physical love, but also wants someone with whom he can talk about the "private realities of [...] life" (Gioia) - not about "frenzied gambling, gluttony, drunkenness [or] continual talk always about the same things" as he has experienced among men. Further, Anna seems to represent the opposite to his "unintelligent" wife, which makes her even more attractive. Gurov's attitude change as well as the realization of these qualities which he is looking for in a future girlfriend occur after Anna has traveled back to her home town of S---. As Dana Gioia describes in his review (Gioia) of "The Lady with the Pet Dog", the quintessential climax of the entire story occurs at this point. Gurov has returned to the daily routine of life in Moscow but still cannot seem to forget Anna. Here he realizes that he really does feel true love for her "really, truly – for the first time in his life", and, at last, he realizes that this was what he has been searching for.

While Chekhov executes his story in a straightforward style describing the events one after another, Joyce Carol Oates takes the main structure and mixes it into a roundabout version from the perspective of the woman, Anna. The first paragraph details Anna's surprise when she discovers that "the stranger" has come to Ohio to meet her. In Chekhov's version, this setting would have been where Gurov goes to meet Anna in S--- after realizing his true love for her. Chekhov's Anna seems to be taken aback by her lover's sudden appearance but shows no remorse for his love for her. Oates' Anna, on the other hand is shocked and unhappy by his visit. Since the reader now knows what is going on inside Anna, this gives a clear picture of her feelings towards "the stranger". As it turns out, Anna is at odds with her love for "Gurov" – on one hand she is madly in love with him because he offers her entertainment, a purpose in life and someone to believe in. On the other hand, she feels morally guilty for entering into the love affair with this

strange man. According to her, she must accept her fate "... to be here and not there, to be one person and not another, a certain man's wife and not the wife of another man". Her distress regarding this conflict which is tearing her between "the stranger" and her husband becomes so intense that she even plays with the idea of killing herself. Further, at one point she mentions to "Gurov" that it would be best if "one of [her men] would die" in order to free herself of the seemingly hopeless situation. Not until the end of the story does she finally confide to herself that she wants to keep her secret lover – after all: she cannot convince herself to commit suicide and she gives up hoping that her marital life gets better. Embracing her lover as "her truest lover, her destiny" is her acknowledgement that she accepts this secret love. This acceptance concludes her search for identity and love.

Oates' editing of the story in a circular way emphasizes Anna's conflict between lover and husband. Further, it mirrors the complexity of Anna's feelings for "the stranger" as well as her guilt for living two private lives. A linear plot, such as in Chekhov's story version would have dampened these conflicting feelings, hindered full expression of her thoughts and thus numbed the reader's observations of the conflict within Anna. However, if Joyce Carol Oates had followed the style set by Chekhov, this would have made it easier for the reader to follow the course of events within the "modern" story.

An interesting role in both Chekhov's and Oates' version of the story is played by the pet dog. In the first text, the dog is the only element that helps Gurov recognize Anna during his first few encounters with her. The white Pomeranian is the one detail which sets Anna apart from all the others in Yalta – not her "fair hair" or "medium height" which could apply to anyone. Similarly, in Oates' version, the dog's main purpose seems to lie in adding a point of reference to "the stranger" or further catching Anna's attention and providing for a first interface between her and the man. According to the text, the dog not only makes Anna feel comfortable speaking to its owner but also provides "the stranger" with a pretense for starting a conversation. Perhaps the situations in both versions of the story would not have occurred without this "pet dog" as initial intermediary between Anna and her soon-to-be lover.

In spite of time and cultural differences between the two versions of "The Lady with the Pet Dog", I believe that both stories express a common issue which holds true for past decades as well as in today's society: both Oates and Chekhov implicitly show how the perception of disregarding society's values affect men and women differently. While Gurov and "the stranger" show no sign of remorse for committing adultery and being dishonest to their wives, both Annas are filled with guilt and regret for having overstepped these boundaries of society. Although they are not so much concerned with others discovering their extra-marital activities, both have difficulties accepting their affairs while holding onto society's ingrained values of what one should and shouldn't do. In a way, this mirrors how society would convict women over men... in general, it seems more common and even accepted that men are prone to cheating their wives, while many find it incomprehensible and outrageous that women may also have the urge to commit adultery. This condonement of Anna's wish to be with her lover plays a large role in her inner conflict. She does not want to go against her values but cannot live without "Gurov" – he represents her purpose in life and her true love.

Both versions of "The Lady with the Pet Dog" were interesting to read in one way or another. What I enjoyed about Chekhov's version was the straightforward outline and execution of the story. Although he doesn't describe the woman's feelings at all, the reader nevertheless gets a nearly unrestrained depiction of what is going on in Gurov's mind. This helps me, personally, to better identify myself with him. On the other hand, the character of Anna in Joyce Carol Oates' version is much less transparent. Though Anna's thoughts are provided in the text, Oates' efforts to depict Anna as a woman nearing insanity makes it difficult to untwine her character in order to understand her as fully as we get to know Gurov. Anna is still a mysterious character to me despite of the description we get from reading the Oates version of the story. Therefore, in the end, I see her simply as the "Lady with the Pet Dog".

---

Chekhov, Anton. "The Lady with the Pet Dog" *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*. Michael Meyer. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. 12.

Oates, Joyce Carol. "The Lady with the Pet Dog" *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*. Michael Meyer. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. 13.

Gioia, Dana. "Anton Chekhov's 'The Lady with the Pet Dog'" *Eclectic Literary Review*. 1998. <http://www.danagioia.net/essays/echekhov.htm> (29 Jan. 2003).