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## WHAT'S PAPA FOR? PATERNAL INTIMACY AND DISTANCE IN CHEKHOV'S EARLY STORIES

Connor Doak, University of Bristol, United Kingdom

In Anton Chekhov's 1886 story "Grisha," the eponymous child protagonist thinks of his father as an "extremely mysterious person."<sup>1</sup> While Grisha understands the role of his mother and nanny—"they feed [him], dress him, and put him to bed"—he remains puzzled as to the existential purpose of his father.<sup>2</sup> "But as for Papa," the narrative continues, "no-one knows what he's there for."<sup>3</sup>

Grisha's confusion about his father's purpose provides one example of a familiar narrative device in Chekhov's stories: adopting a child's point of view to provide a defamiliarizing perspective on society and accepted social conventions (Loehlin 40–41; Laponina). Specifically, Grisha's naive comment defamiliarizes the position of the father in the nineteenth-century home, causing the reader to ponder over the father's responsibilities. Is his role limited to that of breadwinner? How should a working father divide his time between the workplace and the home? Do fathers, and *should* fathers, get involved in the more intimate aspects of childcare? Why do children like Grisha experience a sense of distance from their fathers? These are precisely the kind of questions that now frame historical research on nineteenth-century fatherhood. This article demonstrates how Chekhov also addresses these issues in his oeuvre, particularly in the stories of the 1880s, a period when he wrote extensively about the relationships between fathers and young children.<sup>4</sup>

I am grateful to those individuals who provided feedback and suggestions as I was preparing this manuscript: Katherine Bowers, Ruth Coates, Tatiana Filimonova, and Derek Offord, as well as the editor of *SEEJ* and the two anonymous reviewers. The errors and shortcomings that remain are, of course, my own.

1. The Russian reads "личность в высшей степени загадочная" (5:83). References to Chekhov's works are to the *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem* (1974–1982). All translations are mine.

2. "они одевают Гришу, кормят и укладывают его спать" (5:83).

3. "но для чего существуют Папа—неизвестно" (5:83).

4. Peterson counts 287 child characters in Chekhov, and twenty stories written between 1880 and 1888 that focus on children (511). Her article goes on to examine Chekhov's depiction of

Drawing on the literature of fatherhood studies, I argue that Chekhov's stories in this period evince an anxiety about paternal distance: men who are unable—or unwilling—to relate to their children. I examine a range of fictional fathers from the stories from the 1880s, beginning with a discussion of the unseen father in "Grisha" and the farcical portrait in "Papasha" (1880). These stories demonstrate how Chekhov problematized paternal distance in the home and used language to highlight issues surrounding the father's absence or negligence. My second section then deals with fathers who attempt to overcome that distance, offering a comparison of "At Home" ("Doma" 1887) with Vladimir Korolenko's "In Bad Company" ("V durnom obschestve," 1886), alongside the father in Chekhov's "Oysters" ("Ustritsy," 1884), a would-be intimate father beset by harsh socioeconomic circumstances. I employ masculinity theory here to investigate how the language of emotion and affection becomes a key tool for overcoming paternal distance. My focus shifts to the language of paternal grief in the final section, which examines two stories of grieving fathers from the lower rungs of society: "Misery" ("Toska," 1886) and "The Requiem" ("Panikhida," 1886).

Of course, fatherhood is far from a new topic for Chekhov scholars. Biographers have long emphasized the writer's strained relationship with his own father, Pavel Egorovich.<sup>5</sup> Critics frequently find parallels between Pavel Egorovich and the tyrannical patriarchs who appear in works such as "Difficult People" ("Tiazhelye liudi," 1886), *Three Years* (*Tri goda*, 1895), and *My Life* (*Moia zhizn'*, 1896), to name but a few.<sup>6</sup> The best studies combine biographical insights with close textual analysis, as in Michael Finke's keen psychoanalytical reading of the Oedipal conflict in "At Sea" ("V more," 1883) (38–49).<sup>7</sup>

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children in the light of the discourse about children in his time; although she makes some valuable observations about fathers in passing, she does not explore fatherhood in depth. For an older, Soviet view, see Arkhipova 269–79; she emphasizes the social dimension of these stories.

5. Most biographies of Chekhov dwell on the regular beatings he received from his father as a boy, based on details from Anton's later correspondence, as well as the memoirs of Chekhov's siblings, especially those of Aleksandr. Donald Rayfield speaks of "Pavel's fondness for the rod, exceptional even for the unenlightened merchant class" and his "personal cruelty" (17). Hingley also discusses Pavel's harsh treatment of his children, but he notes that Chekhov's younger siblings remembered him more fondly, perhaps because he mellowed with age (5–11). Hingley suggests Pavel Egorovich was "trying to do his best for his children according to the primitive traditions in which he himself had been reared" (10). A more sympathetic portrait of Chekhov's father is also offered by Gromov, who describes Pavel Egorovich as a weak man, but not the tyrant or despot Aleksandr imagined him to be (30–38).

6. See, for example, Rayfield, who suggests Chekhov's description of the abusive father in *Three Years* is gleaned from his own experience (146). Similarly, V. S. Pritchett sees the father of the story "Difficult People," with his fits of rage and self-pity, as a fictionalized Pavel Egorovich (10).

7. Finke's illuminating study notes that Chekhov's fiction "situate[s] certain characters' psychological problems in respect to their relations with their fathers" (47) and that Chekhov's use of the Oedipal psychodynamic conflict anticipates Freud (44). In his addition to his reading of

Among drama critics, it is the absence of the father that has attracted most scholarly attention. Carol Apollonio Flath has argued eloquently for the importance of the absent father to the plot of *The Seagull* (*Chaika*, 1896). Paul Rosefeldt addresses how the absent father in *Three Sisters* (*Tri sestry*, 1901) casts a shadow over the play (82); a recent study by Harai Golomb refers to the “domineering figure of the dead father” and “his constant presence through absence” (50). The figure of the tyrannical father, then, continues to loom large in Chekhov scholarship.

The present study does not aim to discount the figure of the tyrannical patriarch in Chekhov's oeuvre, nor do I wish to dispute the powerful influence of Pavel Egorovich on the writer's representation of fathers. Chekhov's early stories do include memorable portrayals of tyrannical fathers: there is Shiriaev, the father prone to fits of rage and self-pity in “Difficult People,” the abusive drunkard Zhilin in “Paterfamilias” (“Otets semeistva,” 1885), and the insolvent alcoholic Musatov in “Father” (“Otets,” 1887).<sup>8</sup> However, these tyrants do not provide a complete picture of the fathers who populate Chekhov's works. My article proposes to move away from the authoritarian patriarch as a catch-all prototype for the fathers who appear in Chekhov's work. By focusing on fathers who do not fit this paradigm, I show how many of Chekhov's fictional fathers negotiate cultural norms, socioeconomic circumstances, and gender codes, all of which can serve to distance fathers from their children.

This move echoes the shift within historical research on fatherhood in the nineteenth century, which has largely abandoned mythologized or Freudian understandings of the father as a stern patriarch with unlimited power (Sanders 2–3). Research in fatherhood studies, particularly in the Western world, now appraises the nineteenth-century father as a subject in his own right, often trying to combine his duties in the workplace with his responsibility to his family (Broughton and Rogers 3–5; Lorentzen; Johansen). Nineteenth-century masculinity norms could discourage the father from becoming too involved in the increasingly feminized sphere of the home (Broughton and Rogers 7), and he often felt uneasy in his own home even though his status as head of household theoretically remained intact. Mary Ryan, speaking about middle-class families in industrializing America memorably put it thus: “A father in a Vic-

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“At Sea,” Finke reflects on the long-term psychological effects of negative fathering in *Three Years* and *Ward No. 6* (*Palata N° 6*, 1892) (115–31).

8. It is worth noting that even these fathers are tyrannical in different ways: Shiriaev in “Difficult People” flies into fits of rage and blames his children for being overly dependent on him, while Zhilin in “Paterfamilias” can be kind, but he turns abusive when drunk. In “The Father,” the drunken Musatov confesses that he has been violent to his wife and children in the past, and he continues to leech money from his now adult sons. More complex than Shiriaev or Zhilin, Musatov is a Dostoevskian figure: a compulsive liar who admits his own mendacity; a negligent father who makes groveling, emotive speeches to his son about his own negligence. Musatov's rare moments of self-awareness mean that he arouses more reader sympathy than Zhilin or Shiriaev, but he cannot escape the cycle of self-destruction in which he finds himself.

torian parlor was something of a bull in a china shop, somewhat ill at ease with the gentle virtues enshrined there” (232). Yet scholars have recently moderated this view, recognizing that some nineteenth-century fathers did become directly involved in the intimate work of childcare and did perform their share of domestic labor (Johansen; Lorentzen). John Tosh identifies four types of fathers among the middle class in late nineteenth-century Britain: absent fathers, distant fathers, intimate fathers and tyrannical fathers (94–97). He suggests that distant fathers and intimate fathers were much more common than fathers who were tyrannical or completely absent, and, indeed, it is these twin concepts of paternal distance and intimacy that I argue also play a central role in Chekhov’s early stories.

Research on fatherhood in nineteenth-century Russia is not so developed. While scholars of Russian literature have produced a rich bibliography on the “fathers and sons” topos that runs through the nineteenth-century novel, this literature has often centered on ideological questions and has only recently turned to an examination of representations of fathering practices.<sup>9</sup> In the field of social history, Mironov discusses the gradual shift toward a “small democratic family” that accompanied urbanization and industrialization (219–81). However, the most significant study to combine the approaches of fatherhood studies with a broader sociocultural view of Russia is Igor’ Kon’s *Muzhchina v meniaiushchemsia mire* (*Man in a Changing World*), which includes a valuable outline of the history of Russian fatherhood. The present study is indebted to Kon, as he is one of the few scholars to afford significant consideration to Russian fatherhood in the nineteenth century rather than in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods that have attracted more attention.<sup>10</sup> According to Kon, Russians felt that the traditional patterns of fatherhood had been disrupted by the last quarter of the nineteenth century; he cites Dostoevsky’s lamentation about the loss of a common idea (*obshchaia ideia*) among Russian fathers in the 1870s, just before Chekhov began writing.<sup>11</sup> For Kon, clas-

9. See, *inter alia*, the discussions in Busch (on Dostoevsky and Turgenev), Frank (on Dostoevsky, esp. 396–411), and Wasiolek (on Turgenev, esp. 58–63), all of which tend to be ideologically focused. More recent work that highlights fathering practices has proved particularly productive for Dostoevsky: see Fusso (esp. ch. 6) and Golstein “Accidental.” For an overview of the fathers and sons theme in nineteenth-century literature, see Anikin. While the theme acquires a particular acuity in Russia, it is endemic to the nineteenth-century novel more generally. Thus Peter Brooks notes “paternity is a dominant issue within the great tradition of the nineteenth-century novel (extending well into the twentieth century), a principal embodiment of its concern with authority, legitimacy, the conflict of generations, and the transmission of wisdom” (63).

10. Important work now exists on fathering in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. See, *inter alia*, Kon, Kukhterin; Utrata, Ispa, and Ispa-Landa; Goscilo and Hashmova.

11. Dostoevskii writes: “In my opinion, the accidental nature of the contemporary Russian family stems from modern fathers’ loss of any common idea in relating to their families. There is no shared idea uniting these fathers, no idea that they all believe in and that they would teach their children to believe in, giving him a sense of faith for their life” (“[С]лучайность современного русского семейства, по-моему, состоит в утрате современными отцами всякой

sic nineteenth-century Russian literature “take[s] the father figure off his grand pedestal,” allowing us to glimpse his “human weaknesses and lack of skill as an educator” (348). Building on Tosh’s typology of fathers in Victorian Britain, Kon identifies the authoritarian father, the weak father, the kind father and the ambivalent father as recurring types among classic texts by Griboedov, Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy (339–46).

The aim of this article is not to assign a place in Tosh’s or Kon’s typologies to the fictional fathers in Chekhov’s work, nor is it to position Chekhov in the ideological framework of the “fathers and sons” topos.<sup>12</sup> Critics such as Simon Karlinsky and Aileen Kelly have stressed Chekhov’s aversion to political partisanship, and his poetics elude any easy categorization.<sup>13</sup> Just as scholarship on women in Chekhov has moved away from simplistic categorization of the writer as a misogynist or a progressive, so Chekhov’s fathers are too diverse to fit comfortably inside any ideological or sociological box.<sup>14</sup> My approach follows Karlinsky in viewing Chekhov as an artist who “deal[s] with social realities rather than social theories” (10), and I suggest that his stories provide an engaged but non-didactic commentary on fathering practices in late nineteenth-century Russia. His fictional fathers actively manage the degree of intimacy and distance that they have from their children, for better and for worse. Chekhov’s stories also demonstrate how such management occurs within a particular set of historical circumstances and constraints

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общей идеи, в отношении к своим семействам, общей для всех отцов, связующей их самих между собою, в которую бы они сами верили и научили бы так верить детей своих, передали бы им эту веру в жизнь”) (25:178, qtd. Kon 348).

12. A. A. Anikin argues that, beginning with Chekhov, the fathers and sons theme “lost its metaphysical depth” (“потеряла свою метафизическую глубину”) and suggests that “it was as if fathers and children came to exist in themselves” (“отцы и дети стали существовать сами по себе”). (Web.) Yet I would dispute Anikin’s claim that Chekhov’s work is characterized by “indifference” (*ravnodushie*) to the theme; as my article demonstrates, Chekhov’s work demonstrates a strong interest in the relationship between fathers and their children, even if he does not actively engage the topos as an ideological one in the way that Turgenev or Dostoevsky did.

13. Karlinsky’s essay “The Gentle Subversive” (1–32) proved pivotal in establishing the critical view of Chekhov as an unusual writer in the Russian literary tradition who purposefully steered clear of endorsing the ideologies of the Left or the Right. Kelly points out that Chekhov was “profoundly out of sympathy with the search to achieve what Russian intellectuals liked to call an integral view of the world (*tseľnoe mirovozzrenie*), which interpreted all human experience in the light of ultimate political or religious purposes” (179; see 171–91).

14. Sophie LaFitte calls Chekhov a “misogynist” (206), at least in his biography, if not in his writings; Virginia Llewellyn Smith also discerns misogyny, particularly where female sexuality is concerned. By contrast, Beverly Hahn argues that Chekhov’s portrayal of women is often sympathetic, “growing out of a theoretical commitment to human rights” and growing into “the magnificently realized, full and distinctive personalities of the sisters in *Three Sisters*” (212). Barbara Heldt points out that generalizations and typologies do not work well with Chekhov, considering the range of heroines in his work. She identifies at least two stories in which the writer challenges the assumptions of his era, suggesting that Chekhov carries out the “fictional testing of a socially-held hypothesis in which Chekhov himself did not necessarily believe” (49).

(based on gender, class, socioeconomic circumstances, and other variables). Close reading of individual stories reveals how the spectrum of paternal intimacy/distance functions in Chekhov's writing, and illuminates the key role that language plays therein.

### The Unseen Father in "Grisha" and the Negligent Father in "Papasha"

Although "Grisha" runs to a mere three pages, this vignette nonetheless offers valuable insights into fatherhood in a middle-class household in late nineteenth-century Russia.<sup>15</sup> Grisha's father is mentioned only briefly, but the boy's pithy description establishes him early in the story as an unfamiliar, almost unknown figure:

Beyond that room, there is yet another room. Grisha isn't allowed in there but sometimes catches glimpses of his Papa, an extremely mysterious person! Grisha can make sense of his nanny and his mama: they dress Grisha, feed him, and put him to bed. But as for Papa, no-one knows what he's there for.<sup>16</sup>

This passage establishes the presence of Grisha's father in a forbidden space. As Peterson notes, the phrase "mel'kaet Papa" ("he catches glimpses of Papa") evokes the elusive behavior of the father even more clearly (520). The father's study emerges elsewhere in the literature of the era as a mysterious realm where the father conducts unknown business. The narrator of Nikolai Zlatovratskii's *That's How It Was* (*Kak eto bylo*, 1890) describes it as a "container of something secretive, but important and serious" (635); we might also recall the episode in Tolstoy's *Boyhood* (*Otrochestvo*, 1854) when the boy with fascinated curiosity breaks into his father's portfolio and feels he has entered a different world.<sup>17</sup> "Grisha" contains another hint that suggests the father is a peripheral figure in his own home: the boy comments that the family cat resembles his father's fur coat (5:83), subtly suggesting that the child is used to seeing his father only when he enters or leaves the house.

From our overview of nineteenth-century fatherhood studies, we recognize the figure of the distant father here, one who is committed primarily to his work and only a peripheral presence in the home. Sanders notes that Victo-

15. Finke notes that Chekhov's early stories with domestic settings, including "Grisha," reveal his interest in the *gestalt* of the individual home: each home is treated as an "objective entity with its own 'personality'" (176). Peterson offers a fuller treatment of the theme of child psychology in the story; she traces "ten developmental benchmarks associated with children his age" (519; see 519–22). She further notes the story's depiction of maturation as a painful process, and sees the breakdown of communication within the family as the crux of the story.

16. "За этой комнатой есть еще другая, куда не пускают и где мелькает папа — личность в высшей степени загадочная! Няня и мама понятны: они одевают Гришу, кормят и укладывают его спать, но для чего существует папа — неизвестно" (5:83).

17. "вместилищ[е] чего-то таинственного, но важного и серьезного" (635). The boy in Zlatovratsky's narrative initially perceives his father as a distant, mysterious figure always involved in business, but when he grows older, he learns to understand and respect his father's role in the radical political movements of the day.

rian art and literature often depicted “the father [...] relegated to his study where he worked in a tangential relationship with the rest of the household” (6); Broughton and Rogers find that the middle-class father often appears “home, but only just” (3). Kon points out that nineteenth-century Russian literature often portrays the father as a “background figure” (*fonovaia figura*) who is peripheral in the story (339). That is true of “Grisha,” too, although I would suggest that Chekhov’s story problematizes the father’s liminal position in the home rather than accepting it as a given.

Grisha’s confusion about his father’s purpose—“no-one knows what he’s there for”—may prompt a wry smile from the reader, who recognizes that the two-year-old Grisha is too young to appreciate his father’s economic support. Yet the comment also draws attention to the limited nature of the father’s contribution: we infer that the father’s *only* role in the home is that of the breadwinner, with the women in charge of clothing and feeding the boy. Although many of Chekhov’s contemporaries might have accepted this gendered division of labor as the norm—as Mironov’s history suggests they would—Chekhov’s use of defamiliarization may make them pause for thought, and ponder whether the father might become more directly involved in the everyday work of childcare.

The crux of the story describes the nanny taking Grisha on his first trip outdoors, where she meets up with a male acquaintance—presumably a lover. Grisha exhibits a certain fascination with this man: he is impressed with the shiny buttons on his coat and with his “loud, mellow voice.”<sup>18</sup> Significantly, these two attributes both signify masculinity. We wonder, then, if Grisha’s interest in this male figure further implies a lack of contact with his own father, or perhaps he captures the boy’s imagination because he embodies certain ideals of masculinity more than his own father, presumably a middle-class civil servant, does. We recall here Raewyn Connell’s pioneering work on hegemonic masculinities and hierarchies of masculinity among men.<sup>19</sup>

The nanny, her lover, and Grisha pay a visit to some friends, and a scene of merriment follows in the kitchen, where the adults eat, drink and sing. Even Grisha is given a taste of an alcoholic drink. The nanny takes Grisha home, saying nothing to his parents about the day’s adventures, but the agitated boy is unable to sleep as his mind tries to process all he has seen. Overwhelmed, he begins to cry. His mother, unable to understand her son’s attempts at communication, assumes he has eaten too much and offers him castor oil.<sup>20</sup> The

18. “громкий, густой голос” (5:84).

19. Connell discusses hegemony, dominance, subordination, and marginalization within groups of men in *Masculinities* (see esp. 76–80).

20. As Peterson suggests, “The placement of the castor oil ‘cure’ for psychic distress [...] signals comic incongruity rooted in the failure of communication” (521). Cathy Popkin sees Grisha’s mother as a “narrowly conventional reader,” as she is unable to imagine that something significant may have transpired (40).

final image of the tearful, feverish boy, unable to express himself, offers a disquieting ending to the story.

The father is entirely absent in this closing sequence. Does it seem too presumptuous to conjecture that the father's implied distance from the family might have shaped the circumstances that left Grisha so unhappy? If so, it is worth remembering that incidental details often play an unexpectedly important role in Chekhov's stories. We might recall Flath's interpretation of *The Seagull*: she argues Treplev's missing father—who never appears on stage and is mentioned only in passing in dialogue—has laid the foundations for the key events of the plot, including Treplev's conflict with his mother and his eventual suicide (499). Grisha does not kill himself; he only develops a fever. Nevertheless, Chekhov's hints of the father's distance from the home in "Grisha" could imply that paternal inattention has a role in determining this outcome of events.

While Chekhov leaves it up to the reader to surmise the father's negligence in "Grisha," his earlier, less sophisticated story "Papasha" offers a more blatant critique. This farcical portrait of a dysfunctional middle-class family depicts a spat between a mother ("Mamasha") and father ("Papasha") over their son's failing grades. The father's solution is to wheedle a teacher into changing the boy's grades, rather than take positive action to remedy the difficulties his son is experiencing.

Throughout, the effusive narrator extols Papasha's virtues as a middle-class husband and father, but this praise is consistently undercut by authorial irony. Double-voiced discourse highlights the critique of the father's dalliance with the maid: we are told Mamasha "had already managed to grow used to Papasha's minor weaknesses, and was able to look at them from the point of view of an intelligent wife who understood her civilized husband."<sup>21</sup> Contemporary scholarship on gender, language and power emphasizes how rhetoric can support and naturalize male entitlement in the family (Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson 136–146), but Chekhov's irony here undermines the hegemonic masculinity norms of the day. Significantly, while Mamasha is resigned to the fact that Papasha will not fulfill his responsibilities as a husband, she will not let him shirk his more important paternal duties, telling him: "Good God! How thoughtless all you fathers are! Well, Pampushka, you'll have to at least be a father, even if you can't be—or won't be—a husband."<sup>22</sup> She urges him to take action about the boy's lack of progress at school.

Papasha would rather remain a "background figure," uninvolved in his son's education: "Let him repeat the year. It's no great disaster. At least he'll

21. "[Мамаша] успела уже привыкнуть к маленьким слабостям папаши и смотрела на них с точки зрения умной жены, понимающей своего цивилизованного мужа" (1:27).

22. "Боже мой! Как вы все, отцы, беспечны! Это ужасно! Пампушка, да будь же хоть отцом наконец, если не хочешь... не можешь быть мужем!" (*ibid.*)

be studying and not lazing around at home."<sup>23</sup> When Mamasha insists that a fifteen-year-old cannot remain in the third class, Papasha suggests beating the boy. Significantly, corporal punishment is not the first course of action that Papasha recommends, but his fallback option: he would rather remain an un-concerned, distant father rather than get directly involved with his son's up-bringing as a tyrannical father.

Eventually, Papasha agrees to pay a visit to the arithmetic teacher. After a failed attempt to bribe the teacher, he resorts to masculine camaraderie, using a combination of sycophantic flattery, dirty jokes and physical jostling to bring the teacher over to his side. Tellingly, Papasha's approach to this man-to-man chat includes a denigrating reference to his wife's weeping and palpitations, which appear as bothersome feminine symptoms that could easily be averted if the two men can agree on a way to change the boy's grades. Here, the father's language aims to create an in-group bond between himself and the teacher, again showing Chekhov's awareness of how language can reinforce dominant masculinities. Eventually, the exhausted instructor agrees to raise the boy's grades if Papasha can persuade the other teachers to do the same. The narrative ends with a return to business as usual in the family, with the maid back on Papasha's knee.

As Richard Stites puts it, Papasha "manages to satisfy wife, maid, son, and tutor with a little bit of infidelity and corruption" and is thus "a good example of the live-and-let-live morality that prevailed in [late nineteenth-century] Russian society" (179). From a fatherhood studies perspective, we can add that Chekhov's story implies that this system allowed negligent and distant middle-class fathers like Papasha to shirk their paternal responsibilities.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, a literary analysis might point out how the two stories use different narrative techniques to highlight the problem of paternal distance: whereas in "Grisha" Chekhov employs defamiliarization to question the father's absence, in "Papasha" he shows an awareness of how the father's hegemonic position is upheld through men's speech patterns and masculine discourse. Indeed, Papasha's self-aggrandizing remarks at the end of the story suggest his awareness of the power of his own language: "You don't get your own way with intelligent people simply through offering them money, but through good manners

23. "Пускай не переходит. Невелика беда. Лишь бы учился да дома не баловался" (*ibid.*).

24. Chekhov has been called the greater defender of bourgeois values: Gary Saul Morson comments "I can think of no other great writer who so forthrightly defended middle-class virtues as a prerequisite for human dignity," where middle-class virtues are defined as "proper habits, respect for one's surroundings, and, most bourgeois of all, hygiene" (4). It is true that Chekhov defended such values in his fiction, but it is worth adding that he frequently depicted middle-class characters who failed to live up to these values. Chekhov is particularly critical of those self-satisfied middle-class men, such as Papasha, who have acquired the language associated with these virtues, allowing them to exhibit unsavory behavior such as neglecting their children.

and a little bit of polite bullying.”<sup>25</sup> Chekhov’s story thus shows us how the power of the father can be upheld not only through tyrannical means such as physical violence, but also through controlling language.

### **Overcoming Paternal Distance? Chekhov and Korolenko**

Not all of the fathers in Chekhov’s stories are as distant as Grisha’s father, or as cynically opportunistic as Papasha.<sup>26</sup> “At Home” offers a more positive portrayal of middle-class fatherhood. The protagonist, Evgeny Bykovsky, is father to seven-year-old Seryozha; the recent death of his wife has left him a single parent. The premise is simple: Seryozha’s governess has reported to Bykovsky that she has caught the boy smoking, and she has asked him to take action.

At first, it seems that Bykovsky typifies the distant middle-class father, pre-occupied with his work as a prosecuting attorney and surrounded by the paraphernalia of work: books, letters, and a writing desk. His first reaction to the nanny’s report on Seryozha’s smoking is a chuckle, a shrug of the shoulders and the question “Well, how old is he?”<sup>27</sup> When he asks the nanny where Seryozha obtained the tobacco, she replies that the boy took it from Bykovsky’s own desk. Such details prime the reader to expect another comic tale of paternal negligence.

However, it soon becomes apparent that Bykovsky is an enlightened man who invests considerable thought in fathering. He draws on his professional knowledge of the law in his assessment of the situation: he rejects the easy solution of punishing his son because “punishment very often causes more harm than the crime itself.”<sup>28</sup> Instead, he engages in dialogue with the boy, yet he admits that he does not know how to relate to his seven-year-old son, and that they operate on completely different linguistic registers.<sup>29</sup> Thus

25. “[У]ченых людей не так уломаешь деньгами, как приятным обхождением и вежливым наступлением на горло” (1:27).

26. “The Tutor” (“Repetitor,” 1884) forms an interesting counterpart to “Papasha”: both deal with the interaction between a father and a teacher. In “The Tutor,” Udovov has hired a senior pupil to give private lessons to his twelve-year-old son Petya. Udovov visits one of these lessons and manages to outsmart the tutor, as he is able to solve a fairly simple mathematics problem that the tutor cannot, much to his son’s glee. Here, then, we see a less distant father, and certainly one who is more concerned with his son’s education than is Papasha. However, the reader does feel some sympathy for the humiliated tutor, particularly at the end of the story, when we realize that he has been awaiting payment from Udovov for a long time, and no money has been forthcoming.

27. “Да сколько ему лет?” (6:97)

28. “наказание очень часто приносит гораздо больше зла, чем само преступление” (6:98).

29. In his formalist reading of “At Home,” Nankov sees the difference between Seryozha and Bykovsky in terms of narrative and non-narrative worldviews: the story “portrays how the father (or the objectifying and the non-narrative) tries to impose his referential dominance over the son (or the expressivist and the narrative) by adjusting this dominance to the son’s language use” (444).

Bykovsky realizes: "If I want to get his attention and touch his feelings, it's not enough simply to use his own language, I'll need to be able to think the way he thinks as well."<sup>30</sup> Here the theme of miscommunication, one that has attracted ample attention in Chekhov scholarship, is highlighted.<sup>31</sup> Peterson rightly notes that "At Home" in particular depicts a "battle of discourses" between parent and child (522). But whereas she focuses on Chekhov's exposition of child psychology, my emphasis here is on the specific communication difficulties that emerge between a father and son as a case study of paternal distance.

Tellingly, Bykovsky believes that it is particularly difficult for a single father, without a wife, to relate emotionally to his children:

He would understand me perfectly, if I was genuinely upset about the tobacco, if I took offense and cried over it... I suppose that's why mothers are simply irreplaceable when bringing up a child. They are able to cry alongside children, laugh with them, experience the same feelings... You can't get anywhere with logic and morals alone.<sup>32</sup>

Nikita Nankov has offered a compelling analysis of this story, suggesting that Bykovsky represents a "male institutionalized pedagogy of power and constraint" that is "opposed to the female domestic pedagogy of love and empathy attached to his own son" (451).<sup>33</sup> Building on this interpretation, we can add that Bykovsky's anxiety that he cannot replicate a mother's emotional proximity relates to recurring concerns in fatherhood studies about masculinity preventing fathers building an intimate bond with their children. We recall here Broughton and Rogers's claim that masculinity norms often prohibited or discouraged fathers from becoming too involved in the intimate and emotional aspects of childcare. The easy option for Bykovsky would be simply to

30. "Чтобы овладеть его вниманием и сознанием, недостаточно подтасовываться под его язык, но нужно также уметь и мыслить на его манер" (6:102).

31. Stepanov's *Problemy kommunikatsii u Chekhova (Problems of Communication in Chekhov)* is the most comprehensive treatment of (mis)communication in Chekhov's oeuvre. For Stepanov, the traditional critical explanation of communication failing because of a lack of mutual understanding between characters does not go far enough. Rather, Stepanov suggests communication failures in Chekhov's work touch on "the very nature of the sign, language, and its systems" ("samu prirodu znaka, iazyka, i modeliruiushchikh system") (14), and he uses the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Roman Jakobson to build a sustained analysis of communication in the stories and plays. While communication failures are indeed pervasive in Chekhov's work, this article explores them specifically within the context of father/child relationships, arguing that fathers must negotiate codes of masculinity when attempting to communicate with their children.

32. "Он отлично бы понял меня, если бы мне в самом деле было жаль табаку, если бы я обиделся, заплакал... Потому-то матери незаменимы при воспитании, что они умеют заодно с ребятами чувствовать, плакать, хохотать... Логикой же и моралью ничего не поделаешь. Ну, что я ему еще скажу? Что?" (*ibid.*)

33. See also Golstein, who suggests that Chekhov's depiction of single parenthood in this story represents a reply to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* ("Doma" 75). Anna's son—another Seryozha—turns into a dour child after being left solely in the care of his father.

resort to beating the boy (as a tyrannical father might) or let the governess deal with the incident (as a distant or absent father might). However, as Peterson notes, Bykovsky is a loving father, and it is for this reason that he is “vacillating and uncertain in his parenting” (527). It is to Bykovsky’s credit that he attempts to get inside his son’s head and build an intimate fatherly relationship with him.

Interestingly, while the text portrays Bykovsky as a product of the masculine world of work with its “logic” and “morals,” it presents Seryozha as a delicate child of indeterminate gender:

One could only guess the child’s sex from his clothing. He was a weakly, pale and delicate child... His body was limp, like a vegetable grown in a greenhouse, and everything about him seemed unusually soft and tender: his movements, his curly hair, his gaze, his velvet jacket.<sup>34</sup>

As Nankov notes, Seryozha’s “femininity” provides a foil for the “masculine domestic and institutional power” that is associated with his father Bykovsky (451). This interpretation again resonates with fatherhood studies: Bykovsky belongs to the masculine world of the workplace, whereas Seryozha remains part of the feminized space of the home. In this environment, if Bykovsky relies exclusively on the masculine techniques of reasoning that he has learned in the courthouse, he risks becoming a proverbial “bull in a china shop” in his own home, the label that Ryan applies to nineteenth-century fathers who felt uncomfortable in the parlor of their own home. The term proves curiously apt for *Bykovsky*, whose name in Russian evokes *byk* (bull).

Bykovsky, however, is not so bullish that he cannot see the difference between the private realm of the home and public spaces such as the school and the courthouse:

But in school and in the courtroom, all these issues of roguery can be dealt with rather more easily than in the home. In the home, you are concerned with people whom you love beyond the bounds of reason, and love makes its own demands and complicates the issue.<sup>35</sup>

He recognizes that his professional training will not serve him well as a father within the affective space of the home, where “love makes its own demands.” It is productive to set this insight alongside the claim in historical fatherhood studies that middle-class fathers felt increasingly distanced from their home as the demands of the workplace took over. Bykovsky is fighting against this tendency, staking a claim to direct emotional involvement in his

34. “Это был человек, в котором только по одежде и можно было угадать его пол: тщедушный, белолицый, хрупкий... Он был вял телом, как парниковый овощ, и всё у него казалось необыкновенно нежным и мягким: движения, кудрявые волосы, взгляд, бархатная куртка” (6:99).

35. “Но ведь в школе и в суде все эти канальские вопросы решаются гораздо проще, чем дома; тут имеешь дело с людьми, которых без ума любишь, а любовь требовательна и осложняет вопрос” (6:102).

son's life, and searching for ways to communicate meaningfully with him.

Near the end of the story, Bykovsky is on the cusp of giving up, but he finally manages to persuade Seryozha to stop smoking by inventing a fairy tale. His tale depicts a Tsar reigning over a beautiful, fantastical kingdom, but the Tsar's only son begins smoking and thus suffers an early death at the age of twenty. Crucially, as various critics have noted, the story has a strong affective dimension: the emphasis is on the helplessness of the Tsar after the early death of his son.<sup>36</sup> Bykovsky thus manages to attain the emotional intimacy that he has been seeking with his son: the boy tears up and promises to stop smoking. Even if Bykovsky cannot fully replicate the caregiving role that a mother would provide, storytelling allows him to traverse at least some of the emotional distance between father and son. Bykovsky teaches Seryozha a valuable lesson about smoking, but the more profound lesson in the story is the one he himself learns about fatherhood.

It is worth pointing out the significant similarities between "At Home" and Korolenko's "In Bad Company," published one year earlier. "In Bad Company" provides the fictional boyhood reminiscences of Vasya, the son of a well-to-do judge. The story centers on Vasya's friendship with Valek, a boy from the underworld society of beggars and criminals who have taken up residence in an abandoned chapel. Korolenko's humanitarian spirit and populist politics shine through in the sympathetic portrait of the vagrants, and the story highlights Vasya's growing awareness of social inequality.<sup>37</sup> However, as critics have noted, the story also depicts Vasya's distance from his father and culminates in a father-son conflict (Balasubramanian 27–28; Arkhipova 282–83). Like Bykovsky, Vasya's father works in the legal profession, though as a judge rather than an attorney. The judge—again like Bykovsky—is a well-meaning single-parent father who struggles to relate to his son. Vasya speaks of a widening emotional "gulf" (*propast'*) that has grown between him and his father after his mother's death (119): "My father, in the midst of his grief, seemed to forget completely about my existence."<sup>38</sup> He refers to his father

36. Golstein notes that Bykovsky is "emotionally awakened by the loving intimacy of his son" and "inadvertently reveals his innermost fear" in the tale: the "fear of being left alone" ("Doma" 78). Similarly, Peterson suggests that "the account of the eventual deal of the lonely father and of the destruction of the kingdom places the emotional trauma associated with the loss of the loved one at the tale's center" (526). Bidney argues that the story simultaneously reveals both the "father's terror tactics (coldness, ice) and vulnerability and love (the monarch is helpless without the precious prince)" (284).

37. Korolenko's humanitarianism is central to his fiction, and critics have speculated on whether it harms the artistry of his fiction (see Christian 449; Balasubramanian 9–10).

38. "Отец, весь отдавшись своему горю, как будто совсем забыл о моем существовании" (99). All references to Korolenko's story are from vol. 2 of the 1914 *PSS*; I have modernized the orthography.

using the clichés of the strict father of nineteenth-century fiction: “On seeing his stern, sullen face, marked with the severe stamp of incurable grief, I drew quiet and retreated into myself.”<sup>39</sup>

Just as Bykovsky can see that a mother would be able to provide the physical affection that would express an emotional connection, so Vasya longs for hugs, kisses, and especially tears, all of which would demonstrate his father’s concern for him. The boy fantasizes about weeping alongside his father: “Then I would press myself against his chest, and we would cry together—a child and stern man—about our shared loss. But his eyes were misted over when he looked at me, as though he were looking above my head, and I shrank away under this incomprehensible gaze.”<sup>40</sup> Vasya’s unfulfilled desire to cry alongside his father finds its reflection in the scholarly literature on men and masculinities almost a century later. A rallying call of the men’s liberation movement of the 1970s was “it’s okay to cry” as activists sought to show that masculinity norms stultified men’s capacity for emotional expression (Messner 37).<sup>41</sup> More recently, I. A. Morozov has identified how a taboo exists around men’s tears in many cultures—a taboo that can only be broken in extreme emotionally charged situations, in which tears take on the magical function of a “vitaly important substance, the life blood or water of life, which carries the life force.”<sup>42</sup> Vasya’s belief that his father’s tears would transform their relationship suggests that they would serve a similar magical function for him.

If masculinity norms are partly to blame for the emotional distance between Vasya and his father, the text also suggests that patterns of masculinity vary between men of different classes. Korolenko juxtaposes the regulated middle-class home of the judge, a nuclear family lacking a mother, with the “bad company” of the chapel. This “bad company” is an accidental family of sorts, made up of four men who are social outcasts for various reasons, and two children, Vasya’s friend Valek and his sister Marusya. Indeed, Vasya en-

39. “При виде строгого и угрюмого лица, на котором лежала суровая печать неизлечимого горя, я робел и замыкался в себя” (118).

40. “Тогда я прильнул бы к его груди, и, быть может, мы вместе заплакали бы—ребёнок и суровый мужчина—о нашей общей утрате. Но он смотрел на меня отуманенными глазами, как будто поверх моей головы, и я весь сжимался под этим непонятным для меня взглядом” (*ibid.*).

41. The men’s liberation movement of the early 1970s was a response to feminism. Warren Farrell, Joseph Pleck and Jack Sawyer used sex role theory, then current in academic parlance, to argue that men were harmed by sociocultural stereotyping as much as women. Michael Messner provides an overview of the importance of the men’s liberation movement for the later development of scholarly research on men and masculinities (36–41). Although critical of the movement’s shortcomings, Messner rightly points out that “a major attraction of men’s liberation was the permission it gave to men to expand their definitions of manhood to include the emotional expression, ‘It’s okay to cry’” (37).

42. “жизненно важн[ая] субстанции[я], живительн[ая] влаг[а] («жив[ая] вод[а]»), при помощи которой совершается трансляция жизненной силы” (61).

vies Valek's strong relationship with Pan Tyburtsy, the man assumed to be the two children's father:

"Is Tyburtsy your father?"

"I suppose he is," he [Valek] answered, caught up in thought, as though this question had never occurred to him.

"Does he love you?"

"He does," he replied, with more certainty. "He always takes care of me, and you know, he kisses me and cries."

"He loves me too and cries over me too," added Marusya with a child's expression of pride.

"But my father doesn't love me," I said, sadly, "He never kisses me. He's not a good man."<sup>43</sup>

The question of whether Tyburtsy can be named as Valek's father (biologically? legally?) proves less important than the emotional intimacy between the man and his son.<sup>44</sup> Even though Tyburtsy is also a single parent, he exudes warmth to his own children, and to Vasya. He is gregarious and affectionate where Vasya's father is taciturn and reticent, and he peppers his rich language with Latin phrases and moral *sententiae*. Thus he tells Vasya that it is good for him to have seen Valek's poverty because one should have "a little piece of human heart in one's chest, not just a cold stone."<sup>45</sup> Perhaps needing an explanation for Tyburtsy's wisdom, Korolenko creates a rumor in the story that he was the illegitimate offspring of an aristocrat and received a Jesuit education alongside his own father's legitimate son. Tyburtsy, then, emerges as a classless figure: a natural man who lacks the standoffish pretensions of the middle-class father, but who has sufficient education to provide the necessary moral instruction for his own children and for Vasya.

Tyburtsy's influence proves crucial in allowing the judge to develop a closer relationship with Vasya. The narrative culminates with the death of Marusya, Valek's sister, which prompts an unexpected visit from Tyburtsy to the judge's home. Vasya recalls how "Tyburtsy lifted me by the arms and sat me down on his lap in the presence of my father" before reporting the death (151). It is this display of paternal affection from a stranger that triggers a

43. "— Тыбурций тебе отец?"

— Должно быть, отец,—ответил он задумчиво, как будто этот вопрос не приходил ему в голову.

— Он тебя любит?"

— Да, любит,—сказал он уже гораздо увереннее.—Он постоянно обо мне заботится и, знаешь, иногда он целует меня и плачет...

— И меня любит и тоже плачет,—прибавила Маруся с выражением детской гордости.

— А меня отец не любит,—сказал я грустно.—Он никогда не целовал меня... Он нехороший." (130)

44. Interestingly, a parallel can be drawn here between Korolenko and Dostoevsky. As Susanne Fusso has argued, Dostoevsky's last three novels suggest that "fatherhood must be based on the difficult, day-to-day labor of love, not merely on biological connection and the title of 'father'" (116). Tyburtsy's role as surrogate father echoes Alesha's paternal behavior toward the boys in *Brothers Karamazov*.

45. "кусочек человеческого сердца вместо холодного камня" (138).

change in the judge's attitude to his son. "It was only then that my father began to see in me the familiar features of his own son," comments Vasya (151). The story concludes with Vasya and his sister paying visits to Marusya's grave, "sometimes even with father" ("inogda dazhe s ottsom") (153). Their shared mourning thus unites the family, and Vasya finds the emotional connection with his father he has longed for. "In Bad Company" is thus framed by two deaths: the death of Vasya's mother, which is responsible for creating distance between Vasya and the judge, and the death of Marusya, which creates a new bond between father and son.

Read together, these two stories suggest a broader sociocultural anxiety about the emotionally distant father among the middle classes of the late nineteenth century. However, the significant differences in how each approaches the problem reveal wider differences in their poetics.<sup>46</sup> As Mark Conliffe notes in his discussion of "In Bad Company," "Korolenko has something to say about judgment and conscience (and says it more openly than Chekhov might)" (217). Moreover, Korolenko retains a strong sentimental bent, employing the death of a child as a tool to ignite a more hopeful relationship between father and son. His down-and-out Tyburtsy is an idealized man of the folk who also embodies the perfect father. Whereas Korolenko's story concludes with a solution to the problem of paternal distance, Chekhov is characteristically more circumspect. Indeed, as Peterson notes, Bykovsky remains unsatisfied with the fairy tale he has constructed for his son (526), asking: "Why must morality and truth not be presented in the raw, but with extraneous substances, in a sweetened or gilded form, like pills?"<sup>47</sup> One wonders whether Bykovsky's question might unintentionally apply to Korolenko's tale as well as his own.

While Chekhov's portraits of the lower classes are often sympathetic, he did not create larger-than-life heroic characters like Tyburtsy from their ranks. A case in point is "Oysters," an 1884 story depicting an unemployed father wandering the streets of St. Petersburg with his son. Whereas Tyburtsy is loquacious, resourceful enough to provide for his family in spite of circumstances, and able to offer moral guidance, the unnamed father in "Oysters" is a sympathetic man but one who cannot provide materially; indeed, his pride

46. Although Chekhov and Korolenko admired each other's work, Karlinsky writes "there was no real spiritual affinity between them"; he notes that unlike Chekhov, Korolenko was a "political activist by temperament" (67, note 1). Chekhov's letters express praise for Korolenko tempered with comments that his work "lacked youthfulness and freshness" ("в нем не хватает молодости и свежести") (from a letter to A. N. Pleshcheev, 26 June 1889, *PSS Pis'ma* 3:228). Ivan Bunin recalls a conversation in which Chekhov complained of the writer's sentimentality and moralism; Chekhov even quipped that "Korolenko needs to cheat on his wife in order to write better. He's too noble" ("А Короленке надо жене изменить, обязательно, — чтобы начать получше писать. А то он чересчур благороден") (Bunin 9:68).

47. "Почему мораль и истина должны подноситься не в сыром виде, а с примесями, непременно в обсахаренном и позолоченном виде, как пилюли?" (105).

prevents him even from begging on the street. By the end of the story, he appears unable to speak at all, as he paces back and forth across the room, desperately waving his hands around. There is undoubtedly an element of social critique in “Oysters,” and its concerns provide a Russian example of Valerie Sanders’s account of how art and literature in Victorian Britain often treated the working-class father sympathetically as a hapless victim of circumstances. However, Chekhov refuses to romanticize the figure of the down-and-out father in the vein of Korolenko in “In Bad Company,” giving us a harsher look at poverty and how it might affect a father/son relationship.

Like Korolenko’s text, “Oysters” is narrated by an adult son remembering his father. This narrator sees his father as an affectionate—if rather ridiculous—man: “That poor, rather silly crackpot, whom I love all the more as his dandyish summer coat becomes dirtier and more tattered.”<sup>48</sup> The father, then, proves a would-be intimate father who nevertheless becomes distanced from his son through a combination of socioeconomic circumstances and the pernicious psychological effects of those circumstances. Jobless and poverty-stricken, he cannot fulfill the basic role of breadwinner, fundamental to nineteenth-century fatherhood.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, his lack of economic resources is mirrored in his paucity of language, as is highlighted particularly in the passage where he cannot bring himself to beg money from the passersby: “From his eyes, I see that my father wants to say something to the passersby, but the fateful word remained suspended like a heavy weight on his trembling lips that he could not let drop.”<sup>50</sup> Language takes on an unusually tangible quality here, and it is arguably the sociocultural norms and expectations of fatherhood—the breadwinner discourse—that lead to the father’s clamming up.

The father’s humiliation deepens in the restaurant scene, where two passing rich gentlemen treat the son to a plate of oysters, not so much out of genuine charity but because they find the idea amusing. Their top hats mark their wealth and their position in the masculine hierarchy above the father in his tattered coat, although the formerly “dandyish” (*frantovatoe*) appearance of the father’s coat hints that he too may once have enjoyed such socioeconomic status. In any case, the rich men’s wealth allows them to temporarily usurp the role of the father-provider, paying for the boy’s sustenance, and they delight in the humiliating spectacle they have set up. The boy closes his eyes to avoid seeing what he imagines to be slimy, frog-like creatures on his plate, but nevertheless gorges himself on the oysters, even attempting to eat the

48. “Этот бедный, глуповатый чудака, которого я люблю тем сильнее, чем оборваннее и грязнее делается его летнее франтоватое пальто” (3:132).

49. Writing in the American context, Lamb notes that during the industrial revolution that “breadwinning came into focus as the most important and defining characteristic of fatherhood” (5).

50. “По его глазам [отца] я вижу, что он хочет сказать что-то прохожим, но роковое слово тяжелой гирей висит на его дрожащих губах и никак не может сорваться” (*ibid.*).

shells, before making himself sick and fainting. Yet the humiliation is greater still for the father, who must stand back and watch the men demean his son for their own entertainment, knowing the oysters may be the only meal that the boy can get. Paternal distance takes on a different coloration here: unlike the cases of “Grisha” or “Papasha” where a comfortable middle-class father willfully ignores his son, “Oysters” shows a portrait of a father who lacks the economic resources to support his son, and the psychological resources to save him from this degrading spectacle.

When the boy awakes, he hears his father muttering, reprimanding himself for failing to ask the men for money. The story concludes with the boy watching his increasingly frustrated father as “he still paces back and forward and gesticulates with his hands...”<sup>51</sup> This non-verbal gesture is repeated twice in the text: perhaps the father may be repeating the motions of begging that he had found so difficult on the street. His knowledge that he has failed his son has led to this nervous, compulsive behavior, and deprived him, at least temporarily, of speech. This unsettling image concludes the story, implying the father’s awareness of his own failures has led to a descent into despair, and further deepening the division between father and son.

One recurring feature in all the stories analyzed in this subsection is the crucial nature of language in father/son relations in the period. Well-meaning middle-class fathers, such as the judge in Korolenko’s story or Bykovsky in “At Home,” are straitened by norms of masculinity that prevent easy communication with their sons, but they possess the resources to overcome these difficulties: Bykovsky by experimenting with different registers and the judge by learning from Tyburtsy. However, Chekhov retains suspicion of the skillful use of language, which can often function as a mark of insincerity in his stories. For example, the dubious Papasha is able to use language to solve his son’s difficulties at school, although his actions only address the surface of a deeper problem. Another story from this period, “The Father,” depicts Musatov, a voluble father who constantly makes histrionic apologies for his neglect and abuse of his children, yet such words are never matched by a change in his actions. By contrast, the awkward stuttering and silences of the father in “Oysters” mark a certain authenticity of the father’s feeling. Chekhov explores the question of whether and how a father can express his emotions in greater depth in “Misery” and “The Requiem.”

#### **Articulating Paternal Grief: “Misery” and “The Requiem”**

Both “Misery” and “The Requiem” present fathers attempting to express their sorrow for a recently deceased child. Both men come from the lower echelons of society. Iona Potapov in “Misery” is a Petersburg cabby who has been mourning the loss of his son Kuzma for one week. Andrei Andreich,

51. “он всё ещё ходит и жестикулирует...” (*ibid.*).

grieving for his adult daughter Mashutka in “The Requiem,” has slightly better financial circumstances: he is a village shopkeeper, having previously worked as a servant to a nearby gentry family.<sup>52</sup> Neither Iona nor Andrei Andreich appears to have a wife to share his sorrows, so both widowers face the prospect of mourning alone as single fathers. Here, paternal distance no longer takes the form of father/child communication; rather, it concerns their articulation of their grief. Certain social constraints—particularly based on gender and class—deny the men the opportunity to mourn.

In “Misery,” Iona faces disinterest, at best, and ridicule, at worst, when he tries to speak about his son’s death to his passengers, only finding comfort when he resorts to speaking to his horse about his grief.<sup>53</sup> In “The Requiem,” Andrei Andreich writes a prayer request for the repose of his daughter, but evokes the wrath of the local priest when referring to his own daughter as the “whore” (*bludnitsa*) (4:352) Maria, thinking the word a suitably Biblical one to describe the girl who had grown up to be an actress, a career that he considered sinful. The two men are foiled by authority figures who impose limits on their discourse as they attempt to articulate their grief.

In “Misery,” all of urban modernity seems to conspire against Iona, who is of peasant origin: the city is a “whirlpool of monstrous lights, ceaseless noise, and harried people” (4:326).<sup>54</sup> As Jackson has pointed out, Chekhov here draws on the “little man” topos whose personal sorrows appear irrelevant, particularly amid the imposing grandeur of St. Petersburg (355). Like the father in “Oysters,” Iona suffers humiliation from men who occupy a higher place on the masculine hierarchy than he does: an officer, and three bragging young men who flaunt their masculinity by boasting about their drinking exploits to one another and fight over the seats in the cab. This group of men tease and threaten Iona, who can respond to these humiliations only with a “terrible forced joviality” as he commends the gentlemen for their humor (Dessner

52. The narrator’s allusion to Andrei Andreich as a member of the local intelligentsia and the priest’s accusation of his “philosophizing” are ironic: his handwriting is poor and he knows little of the world beyond his village. In fact, the story is centered on the gross misconception of an uneducated man.

53. Livingston discusses the importance of sympathetic listening in “Misery” and another Chekhov story, “A Doctor’s Visit” (“Sluchai iz praktiki,” 1898) (77–90). Conrad notes that although “Iona does find communion and therefore relief from his frustration” when he finally speaks to the horse, the reader is nonetheless “left with the burdensome knowledge that Iona is forever condemned to isolation” (56).

54. “омут, полный чудовищных огней, неугомонного треска и бегущих людей” (4:326). This description of St. Petersburg is not quite the city seen through Iona’s eyes, but the city as the *horse* would see it. The narrator presents the horse, accustomed to plowing rural fields, as confused and overwhelmed by the bustle of the city. However, we later learn that Iona himself is from the village: he is presumably from that new category of peasants who came to the city following emancipation but who retained their rural roots. His daughter has stayed behind in his village. Paternal distance is thus doubly present in this story: Iona misses his daughter and mourns for his dead son.

251). His repetition of the nonsensical phrase “Gy-y” (4:327; 4:328), perhaps a stifled laugh or a verbal tic, suggests he has been temporarily deprived of the power of denotative language.<sup>55</sup> This unintelligible utterance recalls the father’s retreat to gesticulation at the end of “Oysters.” Just as the father in “Oysters” resorts to gesticulation, so Iona takes recourse to a pre-symbolic language of babbling when he cannot express his grief.

All of Iona’s unsympathetic listeners are male, and the story emphasizes the fact that the inability to grieve is a phenomenon that afflicts men in particular. Iona wishes he could share his grief with a woman, because “[a]lthough women are fools, they start sobbing after just two words.”<sup>56</sup> While Iona reveals an element of essentialist stereotyping in perceiving women as fools who cry easily, he nonetheless recognizes women’s capacity for emotional outlet, which would help him perform the correct rituals at this time of mourning.<sup>57</sup> A significant scholarly literature recognizes the gendered dimension of grieving, and it may be useful to consider Iona’s remarks within the long tradition in Russia (and elsewhere) of the lament as a woman’s genre, one to which he does not have ready access.<sup>58</sup> As Huss points out, it is significant that when Iona does articulate his grief, he speaks to a *female* animal: his mare (140). Yet while Huss focuses on the story’s sympathetic portrayal of women, I suggest that we must also read “Misery” as an *exposé* of the limits of masculine discourse and how these limits affect Iona, the grieving father, psychologically. Such an interpretation allows us to see Iona’s words as a less eloquent version of Bykovsky’s idea in “At Home” that fathers lack the repository of emotional expression that women have, an idea also found in Korolenko’s “In Bad Company,” where masculinity norms prevent the judge from voicing his grief.

Just as Bykovsky tries to adopt a more affective, child-like language when speaking to his son, so Iona adopts a mawkish, childish tone when addressing his horse.<sup>59</sup> In Bykovsky’s case, this move is largely successful, as he manages to get through to his son, whereas Iona’s case evokes pathos, since

55. Siemens has argued that “Misery” is concerned primarily with the “sound of ‘toska’” (271; see 271–273) and notes how Iona repeatedly experiences difficulty in expressing his grief to his various interlocutors.

56. “Те [бабы] хоть и дуры, но ревут от двух слов” (4:330).

57. Kataev notes Iona’s need to rely on ritualized forms to fully express his grief (49); Stepanov builds on this interpretation, noting how language proves inadequate for Iona voicing his grief (262–64).

58. See Wilce’s discussion of lament as a gendered form in a variety of world cultures; Wilce particularly notes women’s ability to express emotion through the lament and discusses how the lament has served both to empower women (giving them voice) but also to circumscribe their role (they are only permitted access to highly emotive forms that can be cast as irrational) (119–31). For a discussion of the importance of the lament as a (mostly, but not exclusively) female genre in the Russian context, see Olson and Adonyeva 36–42; Sedakova 119.

59. As Dessner notes, Iona “drops into an appalling baby-talk, mawkishly and unpardonably sentimental in any imaginable context, except, perhaps the present one” (253).

the reader knows that the horse cannot understand his master's situation. Both men, however, find they must step outside the normal prism of language available to adult men: Bykovsky to speak *to* his son; Iona to speak *about* his son. Yet in both cases, the two men have to transgress the boundaries of masculinity, particularly those pertaining to the expression of emotion through language.

"Misery" provides no details about Iona's relationship with his son, but we may assume from his immense grief that he has been a loving, intimate father. By contrast, Andrei Andreich in "The Requiem" admits that he has been a distant father to his daughter Mashutka. Once again, work pressures are to blame: "Preoccupied with his work as a servant, he hadn't even noticed his little girl growing up."<sup>60</sup> He did find time to teach her the basics of the Orthodox faith, but, tellingly, "[s]he repeated the prayers after him with a yawn" but "livened up and listened when he would begin telling her Bible stories."<sup>61</sup> Here we see shades of one of Bykovsky's revelations in "At Home": the father who merely recites laws and morals to his children cannot be a successful communicator, but the device of storytelling allows for more meaningful interaction.

Mashutka, then, is brought up not primarily by her own father, but by the gentry family he serves. They eventually take her to Moscow, where she becomes an actress. The passage describing her return to the village as an adult proves particularly poignant, as it reveals the distance that has grown between father and daughter. Communication breaks down: he has nothing to say in response to her boasting of her theatrical successes in the city: "And they spent some two weeks in silence, not looking at each other until her departure."<sup>62</sup> Mashutka, accustomed to city life, expresses her delight at the scenery surrounding her native village, but Andrei Andreich, familiar with that environment all his life, can only look nonplussed at the ravines. "You get as much use out of them as milk from a billy goat," he nonchalantly replies, making use of a folk saying with a gendered resonance; the phrase perhaps hints at his own limited parenting skills as a single father.<sup>63</sup> The dialogue here further illustrates how class difference compounds the distance between father and daughter: Mashutka has moved up in the world, and the father cannot understand her values or find a language to communicate with her.

Differences of discourse also explain the *faux pas* that Andrei Andreich

60. "За лакейской суетой он и не замечал, как росла его девочка" (4:354).

61. "Молитвы повторяла она за ним зевая"; "начинал рассказывать ей истории, она вся превращалась в слух" (*ibid.*).

62. "И молча, не глядя друг на друга, они прожили недели две, до самого отъезда" (4:355).

63. "От них корысти, как от козла молока" (*ibid.*). As Kataev notes, Andrei Andreich's inability to see the beauty in the world around him is a failing common to many of Chekhov's characters (158).

makes when requesting a prayer for the soul of “whore Maria” at the requiem mass. As he explains to the priest, he had no malevolent intention in using the word: “I didn’t say it to judge her, Father Grigory, I wanted to make it more holy.”<sup>64</sup> While the word may seem to connote paternal distance—even paternal contempt—he actually uses it to afford a sacred status to his daughter. Indeed, as he points out to the priest, the Bible not only uses the word, but also emphasizes the Lord’s forgiveness for fallen women. Unconvinced, the priest goes on to chide Andrei Andreich as a father: he should appreciate his daughter’s successes as a famous artist, and that if the Lord forgives fallen women, then he should, too.

Yet the reader maintains some sympathy for Andrei Andreich.<sup>65</sup> For all his failings as a father, he has tried to make amends after his daughter’s death, and his use of “whore” merely reflects his misguided attempt to interpret his daughter’s life according to his crude knowledge of Orthodoxy, the only value system he has. Father Grigory has acted as a gatekeeper in restricting Andrei Andreich’s access to Biblical language. “The Requiem” thus continues the theme of “Misery,” in that the fathers in both texts have to struggle against greater forces so that they can mourn in a meaningful way, and in both cases, the discourses with which they are familiar prove inadequate for these men to articulate their grief.

### Conclusion

Speaking of how the patriarchal model of fatherhood proved resistant to change at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly among working families, the social historian Mironov notes: “It can hardly be a coincidence that all the children in Chekhov’s stories are ‘afflicted beings, even oppressed or captive’. The same can be said about the children in Korolenko” (257).<sup>66</sup> However, my close readings of Chekhov’s and Korolenko’s stories shift focus away from the children under the thumb of tyrannical fathers toward the variety of fathering practices on display.

All the fathers confront the issue of paternal distance to a greater or lesser degree, suggesting that the problem may be an inevitable one in the context

64. “я не для осуждения, отец Григорий, а хотел по-божественному...” (4:353).

65. My reading diverges from the majority of critics here, who have expressed little sympathy for Andrei Andreich. Thomas Winner sees him a representative of *poshlost'*, and notes that his repeated use of the word *bludnitsa* “reminds us that his feeling of kindness is only a superficial sentimentality” (41). Julie de Sherbinin suggests that Andrei Andreich’s “religious consciousness appears to be grounded in a stringent adherence to text with nothing of the emotional coloration that might connect it to the spiritual” (85).

66. “Вряд ли можно считать случайностью, что все дети в рассказах А. П. Чехова— «существа страждущие или же угнетенные и подневольные». То же следует сказать и о детях в произведениях В. Г. Короленко.” The phrase in chevrons is a quote from Aleksandr Chekhov (qtd Gitovich and Fedorova 30–31).

of the rising modernity of late nineteenth-century Russia. Chekhov posits the question as to how fathers might overcome that paternal distance. Unlike Korolenko, he offers no easy solutions. However, he does valorize those men who strive to overcome that paternal distance, particularly when their attempts prove successful (Bykovsky). He also extends sympathy to those who try but struggle to succeed, such as the father in "Oysters." Iona's case in "Misery" evokes particular sadness, because, despite his affection for his departed child, language and society impose barriers that prevent him mourning the boy. Even Andrei Andreich, despite his limitations, attracts some sympathy in his interactions with his daughter and his clumsy attempt to mourn her. Read together, then, these stories show that the degree of paternal intimacy and distance is a pressing moral question in late nineteenth-century Russia, and for Chekhov specifically.

Some may object to this moral framework being applied to Chekhov; we recall here Chekhov's famous statement that the artist should not answer questions, merely pose them correctly.<sup>67</sup> Yet as Vera Gottlieb points out, although Chekhov is neither a "revolutionary" nor a "reactionary" in his work, he is both a "progressive" and "humanist" (148), a view also affirmed by Hahn when she speaks of his "positive commitment to enlightened values" (311). Both Gottlieb and Hahn stress the moral urgency of Chekhov's writings: Gottlieb comments "the *leitmotif* of play after play is *tak zhit' nel'zia*—one cannot and must not live like that" (148).<sup>68</sup> She reverses the usual emphasis in Chekhov's famous quotation: "[S]olutions are not provided, but the questions *are* posed" (*ibid.*; italics Gottlieb's). Moreover, in a study that focuses on fatherhood, it is worth recalling how Chekhov used his childhood beatings as a barometer of progress: "Since childhood, I have come to believe in progress and I am convinced of it, because there is an enormous difference between the period when I used to get beaten, and the period when the beatings stopped."<sup>69</sup> I would contend that there is a moral imperative in these stories, not only directed against men like Papasha who shirk their responsibilities, but also the socioeconomic circumstances that underlie the father's situation in "Oysters." An implicit critique of masculinity norms also runs

67. The full quotation reads: "You are correct to demand that the artist take a conscious attitude to his work, but are you confusing two things: answering a question and posing it correctly. Only the latter is obligatory for the artist." ("Требуя от художника сознательного отношения к работе, Вы правы, но Вы смешиваете два понятия: решение вопроса и правильная постановка вопроса. Только второе обязательно для художника"). From a letter to A.S. Suvorin, 27 October 1888, *PSS Pis'ma* 5:46.

68. I have altered the transliteration here to accord with the modified Library of Congress standard.

69. "Я с детства уверовал в прогресс и не мог не уверовать, так как разница между временем, когда меня драли, и временем, когда перестали драть, была страшная." From a letter to Suvorin dated 27 March 1894, *PSS Pis'ma* 5:283.

through these stories alongside recognition of how masculinity is enacted and performed through language.

More broadly, this study has demonstrated how historical fatherhood studies can produce new readings of canonical nineteenth-century texts. Whereas Kon's work laid valuable foundations in this area, it is now incumbent upon scholars to carry out more detailed work, so that we can better understand what is unique about fatherhood in the Russian context. A thorough treatment of historical sources would be necessary to provide a full understanding of late nineteenth-century Russian fatherhood, but literary sources have a valuable role in completing this sociocultural picture. Chekhov's stories reveal broader anxieties about paternal distance, particularly highlighting the centrality of language as an instrument that can both hinder and facilitate communication between fathers and children. The study of fatherhood in nineteenth-century Russia, then, offers significant possibilities for new, interdisciplinary research that will add to our knowledge about the lived experience of historical fathers, but will also potentially revise our understanding of "fathers and sons" in the Russian canon.

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## Тезисы

Коннор Доук

“Для чего существует папа?”: Отцовская интимность и дистанцированность в ранних рассказах Чехова

В этой статье анализируется роль отца в некоторых ранних рассказах Чехова: “Гриша”, “Папаша”, “Дома”, “Устрицы”, “Тоска”, “Панихида”. В отличие от большинства критиков, которые сосредотачивают внимание на образе отца-тирана в творчестве Чехова, я считаю, что эти рассказы раскрывают не столько тиранство отца, сколько его физическую и эмоциональную дистанцию от своих детей. Статья опирается на современные историко-социокультурные исследования отцовства в девятнадцатом веке (Игорь Кон, Джон Тош и другие). Эти исследователи отошли от традиционного портрета отца девятнадцатого века — патриарха с неограниченной властью. Напротив, они изображают его как зависимого субъекта, который действует в рамках определенных исторических условий. Исходя из этих исследований, я утверждаю, что мы должны рассматривать отцов в рассказах Чехова не как всемогущие авторитарные фигуры, но как субъектов, сталкивающихся с нормами маскулинности и несправедливости социально-экономических систем. Мой научно-методический подход к рассказам совмещает анализ текстов и применение современных теорий маскулинности и отцовства; проводится также сравнение между творчеством Чехова и повестью Короленко “В дурном обществе”. В результате я показываю, что рассказы Чехова выражают широкую социокультурную озабоченность ролью отца в семье в конце девятнадцатого века в России, в эпоху индустриализации и больших общественных и экономических перемен. В творчестве Чехова отдалённость отца прежде всего выражается в языковом барьере между отцами и детьми, и этот барьер связан с конкретными конфигурациями пола и класса. Статья не только предлагает новые интерпретации рассказов Чехова, но и кладет начало ревизионистскому подходу к теме “отцов и детей”, одной из центральных тем русской литературы девятнадцатого века.