

## **Madness and Independent Thought in Russian Literature**

### **Intent**

Common in Russian literature is a character suffering from madness. These characters portray a variety of symptoms ranging from mild hallucinations to outright mania. Madness isn't included in a piece just for the sake of entertainment, but rather serves as vessel through which authors will make an argument. In Anton Chekhov's short story, *The Black Monk* and Sasha Sokolov's novel *School for Fools*, both authors employ madness to convey arguments in favor of independent thought. The intent of this thesis is to show that the messages of these pieces are just as relevant today as society is subjected constantly to the influence of advertising and media.

### **Background & Significance**

To better understand the intended message of the authors the pieces must be considered in context. Chekhov's *The Black Monk* was composed with the objective of encouraging free thought at a time that Russia saw the ascension of Czar Nikolai II following his deeply autocratic father Alexander III. Censorship of literature was becoming increasingly more common, most notably with the suppression of Tolstoy's "Kreutzer Sonata". In addition, Russia was undergoing a period of great industrial growth, leading to exploitation of a larger middle class. With the backdrop of pre-revolutionary Russia, Chekhov wrote *The Black Monk* to encourage the general pursuit of happiness. Chekhov's piece is directed at society as a whole.

*The Black Monk* follows Andrei Kovrin, a rising star in philosophy, at a time that he's struggling to progress in his work. At the suggestion of a colleague, he takes time off to return to the town he grew up in, visiting Pesotsky, a father figure of his, and Tanya, Pesotsky's daughter. Kovrin spends time tending Pesotsky's expansive garden and enjoying the slower pace of life. One evening, he tells Tanya the legend of the black monk, an apparition set to appear within the coming days. In the ensuing weeks, Kovrin converses with the monk as it appears to him, filling his head with ideas of grandeur, suggesting that man can become like god, be eternally happy, and Kovrin is one of God's chosen elect. Meanwhile, Tanya and Kovrin get married, and Tanya eventually discovers that he's been hallucinating. Once Kovrin is treated for madness, he becomes unbearable to be around, separates from Tanya, and eventually succumbs to tuberculosis. In his dying moments, the monk returns to him, questioning why Kovrin failed to believe in him.

Sokolov had similar inspiration for composing *School for Fools*, although he lived beneath a far more oppressive regime. Sokolov never felt at ease in the USSR and attempted to escape on multiple occasions, avoiding lengthy imprisonment or even death in large part because of his father's connections at high levels of the Soviet government. He finally immigrated to the United States in 1976, the same year *School for Fools* was published. The protagonist in his novel serves as an archetype for himself, a young man caught up in a commanding, oppressive system attempting to cure him of his madness. The protagonist doesn't believe in his own madness though, but rather in the madness of the people who believe themselves to be "normal". Sokolov uses this juxtaposition to decry the conformity and forced submission that was widespread in the Soviet Union.

*School for Fools* chronicles the life of a schizophrenic young man in a non-linear format established in two timelines. One period covers the youth of the young man in a countryside dacha, a time where he was not suffering from madness or from the eventual oppression of his later years. The second period is the late adolescence of the young man while he's attending the school for fools. He's suffering from schizophrenia, which includes split personalities, one from his past experiences at the dacha and another from his current life at the school. The school is run by a headmaster that's very intolerant of the protagonist's foolish ideations and a physician trying to cure the boy's madness by fusing his two personalities. The piece juxtaposes the boy's madness against the normalcy of his oppressors and his happier experiences in childhood.

The overarching message of these pieces of independent thought are especially pertinent today as they were when the works were first published. Both authors were writing against the growing censorship of their era, leading to a homogenized media dominated by government approved messages to the public. To them, the correction of independent thought and decline in spirituality was true madness. In our era, we are facing much of the same coming to pass again that Chekhov and Sokolov warned about. While censorship is nowhere near the level that it was in the Soviet Union or during the reign of the Czars, media is readily homogenized on an individual level, targeting consumers very directly. Market research is an industry worth more than \$40 billion, and advertising approaching \$200 billion. The whole purpose of market research is to identify and target consumers with ads designed to influence their decision making, like propaganda with a financial, and even political, motive. Brands create a lasting psychological impact on consumers, altering their thought processes, leading them to make decisions like buy a \$6 cup of coffee that only costs about 50 cents to brew. Breaking away from the influence of branding is difficult to do, as there are methods of correcting in place. Social

media serves as one form of correction. Social media reinforces the lifestyles brands are trying to sell to consumers and leaves a psychological impact of its own. Targeted advertising also serves as a form of correction and can manifest as emailed ads or constant advertisements on frequently visited websites. Maintaining the status quo is critical to the success of a brand.

### **Methodology/Procedure**

I plan to read each work several additional times to better analyze each piece, focusing on different aspects with each reading. I will analyze the protagonists as well as other characters in the pieces to better understand the role each party plays in defining madness and conveying the broader messages of independent thought. I will also break down the experiences of madness in each work to clarify what the authors are trying to convey. I also plan to explore censorship during the time of Chekhov and Sokolov to better understand the context of their writing. In addition, I will consult multiple secondary sources accessed through BYU's library system regarding the pieces, paying close attention to any remarks the authors have made regarding their works. I plan to utilize scholarly articles written by contemporaries of Chekhov and Sokolov as well as by more recently established experts.

### **Preliminary outline of completed thesis**

- I.     Introductory Remarks
- II.    Context of pieces

- a. Censorship under Nikolai II
- b. Censorship in the Soviet Union
- III. Brief Summary of *School for Fools* and *The Black Monk*
- IV. Defining Madness
- V. Analysis of Pieces
  - a. The arguments for independent thought
- VI. Modern Implications
  - a. Influence of pervasive media

### **Qualifications of Investigator**

I am qualified to undertake this project primarily because of my knowledge of and love for Russian culture and arts. I have completed a minor degree in Russian, taking various courses at BYU in which we were given instruction relevant to interpreting Russian literature. I also completed a study abroad in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, where I lived with locals and learned more in depth the language and culture. Outside of course instruction, I've also read a fair amount of literature by Russian authors, including additional pieces by Chekhov, as well as Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Vodolazkin, and others. Having experienced a breadth Russian literature, I will be better able to interpret and understand the pieces I am planning to examine.

### **Qualifications of Faculty Advisor**

I have spoken with Dr. Mark Purves, a professor of Russian at BYU, about advising me in my thesis project. Dr. Purves earned an MA and PhD at the University of Virginia and focuses

his work now on Russian literature. He has a substantial knowledge of the works of Chekhov as well as familiarity with Sokolov's *School for Fools*. He also regularly teaches a Russian literature course at BYU.

### **Qualifications of Faculty Reader**

Dr. Bruce Brown has agreed to be my faculty reader for this thesis. Dr. Brown earned a B.S. and M.S. at BYU before earning a Ph.D. at McGill University. Currently, he is the associate chair of the BYU psychology department, and studies Quantitative Electrophysiological Markers of Neuropsychiatric Disorders, Computational Neuroscience, Computational Linguistics and Onomastics, Quantitative Industrial/Organizational Psychology, and Multivariate Data Analysis and Visualization.

### **Proposed Schedule**

Proposal Submitted- September 27

Rereading and analysis of pieces- September 28- November 1

First draft of thesis- November 2- End of Fall Semester

Editing of thesis- Beginning of Winter Semester-February 7

Schedule Thesis Defense- February 9

Thesis Defended- March 2

Final Thesis Submitted- March 9