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3. Ending with a Twist

A whole body of contemporary criticism is dedicated to the analysis and appraisal of short stories' endings. A story's conclusion has often been thought of as an effective way of grasping the genre's characteristic features, as well as to understand the ways that readers experience the genre.¹ Influenced by the seminal reflexions of Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*,² critics like John Gerlach, Per Winther, David Sheridan and Susan Lohafer have all argued that endings were of key importance in defining the short story.³ This idea has been present since the very beginnings of the

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- 1 To use Rebecca Hernández's words: "the opening and closing markers" are "usually identified as fundamental criteria for triggering the sense of storyness". Rebecca Hernández, "Short Narrations in a Letter Frame: Cases of Genre Hybridity in Postcolonial Literature in Portuguese", in *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective*, ed. by Viorica Patea (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), pp. 155-72 (p. 167). See also Susan Lohafer in *Reading for Storyness: Preclosure Theory, Empirical Poetics, and Culture in the Short Story* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). Lohafer notes that there is a "[move] from the analysis of closural features and effects, to a test of the primacy, the necessity, the uniqueness of the short story in the family of genres" (p. 55).
 - 2 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1st ed. 1967]).
 - 3 John C. Gerlach, *Toward the End: Closure and Structure in the American Short Story* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1985); Per Winther, "Closure and Preclosure as Narrative Grid in Short Story Analysis", in *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*, ed. by Per Winther, Jakob Lothe and Hans H. Skei (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 57-69; David Sheridan, "The End of the World: Closure in the Fantasies of Borges, Calvino and Millhauser", in *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, ed. by Farhat Iftekharrudin, Joseph Boyden,

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genre. In his "Philosophy of Composition" (1846), an essay as famous as his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*, Edgar Allan Poe states that the whole short story is a kind of preparation for its ending, and insists that the writer should construct the story with its conclusion constantly in mind.⁴ In 1925, the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky also paid particular attention to short stories' endings.⁵

At the end of the nineteenth century, the surprise ending in particular came to epitomise the type of pleasure readers came to expect from the genre. In the newspapers where the bulk of the stories were published at that time, hundreds of stories ended with a "twist-in-the-tail". Lohafer has noted that surprise endings are now in critical disrepute "because they exhibit a simple notion of plot that can easily become simplistic, formulaic, and trivial".⁶ And readers and critics are prone to oppose dramatically Guy de Maupassant's classic short stories with the more "modern" stories of Anton Chekhov or Katherine Mansfield, as it seems they represent all the difference between a "closed" and contrived text and an "open", natural one. However, Lohafer also reminds us that one should not condemn these endings too hastily: Ian Reid has showed that the device can be used not only as a mere "gimmick" ("the merely tricky ending"), but also as the "ending which jolts us into perceiving something fundamental about what we have been reading".⁷

Joseph Longo and Mary Rohrberger (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), pp. 9-24; and Susan Lohafer, *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1983) and "Preclosure and Story Processing", in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 249-75.

4 "It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention". Edgar Allan Poe, "Poe on Short Fiction", in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 59-72 (p. 67).

5 Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. by Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), pp. 52-70.

6 Lohafer (1983), p. 97. Valerie Shaw, while discussing famous stories with a surprise ending makes the comment more general: "The main drawback to stories which gain narrative compression by making plot serve a single realization, however ironic in quality, is that like most jokes or anecdotes, they can never arouse the same bafflement and surprise twice over". Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London: Longman, 1983), p. 56.

7 Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 60-62. On the surprise ending, and its more complex variant the "surprise-inversion", see Richard Fusco, *Maupassant and the American Short Story: The Influence of Form at the Turn of the Century* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994). Fusco also talks about the "trick ending" as "a structural dogma", and about the critical disdain towards it (see his introduction, especially p. 4).

Having recognised the crucial importance of paroxystic characterisation and antithetic structure in previous chapters, we will now look at how the short story's ending, be it improbable or "natural", takes its force from the structure at large. The ending is where the forces at play in the narrative come to light. Final twists are one way of unleashing the full power of the antithetical forces, but "open endings" can serve a similar purpose.

The "twist-in-the-tail" and antithetic tension

One of the most famous twist-in-the-tail endings is in Chekhov's *Toska* (*Misery*).⁸ It is a story of a sleigh-driver who has lost his son, and tries to tell everyone he meets about his grief. Each person in turn rejects him, including a hunchback whose infirmity should have made him sensitive to the misfortunes of others. Ignored by everyone, and left alone with his distress, his story ends with a twist: he must confide his sorrow to his horse, which is standing in the straw after the night's work. This ending reveals the depth of the sleigh-driver's despair and the terrible abyss separating him from the others. By showing an animal as the only possible confidant for a desperate man, Chekhov emphasises the world's cruel inhumanity.

This of course is a case of a surprise ending adding emotion to the text, as "it brings to the surface the real significance of the foregoing action".⁹ The essential point, however, is that the powerful emotional effect of the story is not created at the final moment, but was present in the text from the beginning. It comes from the antithetic structure, which makes us aware of the irreconcilable juxtaposition of two worlds: that of the unfortunate man and that of those who are indifferent to his suffering. Chekhov shows all the steps taken by the old man as a series of useless efforts — each one more desperate than the other — to stress the constant lack of understanding shown to him. The trick ending condenses that unrelenting coexistence into the paradox of the horse alone being gifted with the virtue of humanity. It sharpens our perception of it; it shocks us. But the entirety of the text is

8 Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*, ed. by Ralph E. Matlaw, trans. by Constance Garnett (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 12-16 (hereafter Matlaw). The Russian text of this story can be found in Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, 30 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-1983), IV, pp. 326-30 (hereafter Nauka). References will be given first to the translation, then to the original text in brackets.

9 Reid (1977), p. 61.

there to create the conditions of that surprise. What happens with the end is that it brings these worlds face to face *in praesentia*.

A most famous and often discussed surprise ending story, Maupassant's *La Parure* (*The Necklace*), is structured in the same way.¹⁰ In this story, a young clerical worker's wife, Matilda Loisel, poor and dreaming of luxury, borrows a diamond necklace from a very rich and worldly school friend to go to the Ministry ball to which her husband is for once invited. She is a great success at the ball, but loses the necklace. She has it copied by a jeweller, and she and her husband spend the next ten years working day and night to pay it off. One day she meets her friend promenading in the Champs-Élysées, and she explains to her why she has grown old and ugly to the point of being unrecognizable. A sudden turn of events: the friend informs her that the original necklace was nothing more than a cheap imitation.

André Vial suggests that the trick ending "balances" and carries equal weight with the rest of the text.¹¹ This idea can be taken further: the whole story is epitomised by the ending, which brings to the surface the tension that organises the text. Again, it is a question of a radical opposition between two worlds. On the one hand, the ordinary world of the working class — a theme eminently typical of Maupassant — carried to its extreme here in the powerful images of the frantic ten years' work of the Loisels. On the other hand, there is the life of elegance and luxury in the dreams of Mme Loisel — and in the actual world of her friend — which is epitomised by the necklace. The ending lays bare this system by reversing it; it gives the reader a key to this narrative by pushing the process to its paroxysm. By destroying the very idea of the necklace's value, Mme Loisel's dream is reduced to nothing. In a single act, ten years of intense effort — the sacrifice of an entire life — is undermined from within, made even more useless and senseless.

Franck O'Connor notes how remarkable it is that the reader of short stories never thinks about the future of the characters.¹² If we were to take

10 Guy de Maupassant, *The Complete Short Stories of Guy de Maupassant*, trans. by Artine Artinian (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1955), pp. 172-77 (hereafter Artinian). The French text of this story can be found in Guy de Maupassant, *Contes et nouvelles*, ed. by Louis Forestier, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, collection La Pléiade, 1974), I, 1198-1206 (hereafter Pléiade).

11 André Vial, *Guy de Maupassant et l'art du roman* (Paris: Nizet, 1954).

12 Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Company, 1963).

a moment to think about the characters in *The Necklace*, we would see that it would be impossible for no good to result from the efforts of the Loiseles. If they have replaced a real jewel with an imitation, they must now own a nice little fortune, equal to the value of the jewels. But our reading never gets that far: we are full of the sight of this misery and these broken dreams, and are unable to escape the magnetic circle which the text draws around us. The basic result of the trick ending is to magnify the already powerful effect of the tension created earlier in the story. And when rereading a story such as this one, our feeling for the drama will be intensified and the antithetic tension will be deepened. Rereading produces the tragic irony: the tension is increased because we know from the outset that all these efforts, described with such force and detail, are in vain. We have in mind the two poles and we see them clash constantly.

The “Twist-in-the-tail” and retroreading

Far from O. Henry’s simple trick endings, great stories with a “twist-in-the-tail” force us into some sort of a “retroreading”: a reconsideration of the entire text from its beginning.¹³ This is the case, for example, in *Poprygun’ya* (*The Grasshopper*), one of the few short stories that the mature Chekhov ended with a twist.¹⁴ Olga Ivanovna — the “Grasshopper”, or literally, the “praying mantis” — is an exalted young woman who is passionate about art and artists. She is the wife of a doctor, Osip Stepanich Dymov, whom she finds very dull compared to her seemingly brilliant artistic friends. As the story progresses she becomes increasingly disillusioned with these artists. The surprise at the end is that, upon Dymov’s death, Olga realises that her husband was, in fact, a scientific genius and the only great man she has ever known.

Behind the apparent neutrality of the narrator’s discourse, the reader quickly discerns his condemnation of the heroine and her poor ability to judge her friends. Confronted with the panegyric of men whose false grandeur only she is taken in by, we see clearly that Dymov, in his constant and quiet dedication to medicine, is the only character leading a useful life (something that is always important in Chekhov’s universe). The ending vastly strengthens the previous text by concentrating its scattered elements

13 The idea of “retroreading” is developed by Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978).

14 Matlaw, pp. 69-90 (Nauka, VIII, pp. 7-31).

and becoming the catalyst for a more energetic process. Olga's realisation at the moment of her husband's death comes, of course, too late.¹⁵ Here the "twist-in-the-tail" is realised in the mocking commentary she hears from the whole room: "You missed your chance! You missed your chance!"¹⁶ In other words: in your mad chasing of geniuses, you have ignored the one truly great man. As his wife, contributing to his fame, she could have been associated with Dymov's "grandeur", and, what is more, be truly loved.

In this case the trick ending does more than simply summarise the antithetic tension: it unveils it, making visible a whole aspect of the text that Chekhov had taken pains to conceal from us. Of course we knew from the beginning that Olga's high opinion of her friends was without foundation. From the first page the accumulative repetition of the name "Olga Ivanovna" — unexpected in a stylist as Chekhov — already rouses our suspicion that the tremendous qualities she sees in her friends are in direct proportion to the homage continually paid to her own talents. But the ending reveals the other pole of the tension, the one we could not have entirely foreseen, but which we recognise the moment it is presented: not only has she spent her life believing mediocre people to be great, but — the irony of fate — in her worldly blindness she did not see the one person who was worth noticing, her own husband. This ending creates nothing, but it provides the supplementary turn of the screw, and "clinches" the theme. All the metaphors of confinement are appropriate here: we remain struck by this apparition of destiny, which suddenly imprisons the heroine in an ironic end and leaves her no escape.

On rereading, in the harsh light cast by the ending, we can identify many elements that we underestimated the first time around, if not totally missed: the mention of the painter Ryabovsky's remarkable physical beauty, for example or the worldly tone assumed to judge the value of the drawings of a landowner as "veritable miracles".¹⁷ It is as if the short story were being

15 If it were not too late, the forces introduced would not unleash the maximum power they could produce. This is one of the reasons drama is so often mentioned in relation to short stories; see Shaw (1983), pp. 63-66, for example, or the French philosopher Hippolyte Taine on Maupassant's *Le Champ d'oliviers* (*The Olive Grove*), which, he exclaims, is "a piece from Eschyles" (quoted in *Pléiade*, II, p. 1702). This could very well be an accurate comparison on the level of structure where there is a "twist-in-the-tail": catastrophe brings short stories, like tragedies, to an end because at this point the height is reached and to continue would only weaken or change the subject.

16 Matlaw, p. 89 (*Nauka*, p. 30). The original Russian is the ironic repetition of a unique word: "prozevala! prozevala!" ("missed! missed!").

17 *Ibid*, p. 70 (p. 8).

read in two different stages: before reading the ending, we were sensitive to the discordances. Some elements perhaps made us uncomfortable, but we were not sure why. On rereading, we discover another landscape in which the contours are clear and defined.

At the end of a story, when a trick ending reveals the truth about the narrative, our mind is settled. Theoretically, there are now two possibilities. Either one meaning replaces the other and eliminates it, or the text plays on the two scenes at the same time and the two meanings become superimposed on one another. Classic short stories generally belong to the former category. One meaning replaces the other: the sense of the first reading is seen to be wrong, and must be replaced by a different truth.¹⁸ This is the case in *The Necklace*, and most definitely in *The Grasshopper*. We certainly cannot go on thinking that the necklace is real (and that the Loisels' efforts are justified), and it is not possible to think that the "great men" around Olga are, in spite of everything, truly important artists. *The Grasshopper* establishes its truth very firmly, and behind the remarks of the artists on the diverse and varied talents of Olga, we read their snobbishness and Ryabvovsky's carnal desire for the heroine.¹⁹

One specific set of stories, however, retain their ambiguity until the end. Fantastic stories do not generally replace one "truth" with another, but superimpose two interpretations without withdrawing one or the other, as through a stereoscope. This is a feature of fantastic stories at large: generations of readers have discussed the reality of the facts in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, for example. The whole point of the "Modern Fantastic" is to put the reader in a state of uneasiness, where nothing is ever clear or definite,²⁰ and the surprise ending can be used to strengthen

18 This replacement is the origin of the "impossibility" of rereading most of the short stories that rely on a surprise ending. The beginning of the text "falls flat" from the moment the surprise is revealed and the mystery clarified. In the cases where there is no possible "retroreading", the beginning, which was meant to lead us into error, no longer misleads us, and the text loses all its charm.

19 May describes such a "retroreading" of James Joyce's *The Dead*. See Charles E. May, "The Secret Life in the Modern Short Story", in *Contemporary Debates on the Short Story*, ed. by José R. Ibáñez, José Francisco Fernández and Carmen M. Bretones (Bern: Lang, 2007), pp. 207-25 (pp. 216-18). See also Fusco's (1994) analyses of some surprise endings (pp. 22-26 and 107): "these three revelations sharply requalify our comprehension of the story and, hence, of war" — but also of codas (p. 18).

20 See Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the Fantastic as implying the reader's (and often the characters') "hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described". Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Cleveland, OH: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973), p. 33. See also Maupassant's own reflections, as developed in a famous article

that particular effect.²¹ A particularly remarkable example of this is found in Maupassant's *Sur l'eau* (*On The River*), which describes a fisherman's night of anguish when his boat is suddenly stranded in the middle of a river and he falls prey to strange visions.²² We saw in Chapter One that the structure of this story stems from there being two sets of paroxysms, antithetically opposed to each other: the admiration of the beauty of nature and the anguish which at times replaces it. The narrator claims to be mad about water, and begins his tale with a profession of faith: "Let a fisherman pronounce the word [river]. To him it means mystery, the unknown, a land of mirage and phantasmagoria..."²³ After developing the theme of the beauty of the river, he then in turn describes its danger: it is both seductive and treacherous. Moments of exaltation — the stillness of being at anchor after a long day's fishing, the contemplation of the "phantasmagorias" — alternate rapidly with moments of panic, when the anchor refuses to come up, the fog hides the boat, and the hero becomes prey to nightmares.²⁴ With daylight his misadventure comes to an end, and two fishermen help him lift the anchor. He is ready to laugh (and we with him) that his evening of terror was the result of his nerves playing an unexpected trick on him. Yet at the precise moment when the story is complete, and we the readers emerge with him from the nightmare, the fishermen manage to raise the anchor; but with it they bring up "the body of an old woman with a big stone tied around her neck".²⁵

Here the ending suddenly disturbs the balance which had only just been established: we thought we could laugh at the adventure, we believed it had been an hallucination caused by a mind weakened by solitude and alcohol, and we agreed with the narrator when he considered his feelings somewhat puerile. Then suddenly: "once more I felt the same strange

published in *Le Gaulois* (7 October 1883), p. 1: "[Since we entered Modernity], the writer kept roaming on the borders of the realm of the supernatural rather than entering it. He found terrifying effects while staying on the border of the possible, by throwing the [readers'] souls, aghast, into hesitation. The reader, uncertain, lost his footing..." (translation ours).

21 Fusco (1994) does not consider that, in Maupassant's surprise-inversion stories, one meaning replaces the other; he insists to the contrary on the "weav[ing of] competing perspectives" (p. 48). The examples he gives, however, are of fantastic tales or tales of madness — which make a very particular use of the form and, as we will see in this book's epilogue, finally led to its deconstruction.

22 Artinian, pp. 169-72 (*Pléiade*, I, pp. 54-59).

23 *Ibid.*, p. 169 (p. 54).

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 171-72 (pp. 58-59).

25 *Ibid.*, p. 172 (p. 59).

nervousness creep over me. The anchor remained firm” and, as the body appears, everything is brought into question.²⁶ It is not that we are ready, consciously, to recognise that the presence of a body blocking the anchor could produce supernatural effects. But at the least expected moment, the apparition of the corpse gives meaning to a whole series of indications of something bizarre that we had observed in passing without being able to give them any precise form or value.

The narrator, trying desperately to “reason with himself”, had refused to make the necessary connection between the various bizarre elements. It is the ending that identifies this connection, even though it is only through, and for, our unconscious perception. The rapidity with which it comes upon us is the best guarantee of our accepting this connection, even if only to refute it immediately. It forces us to review all the elements accumulated in our memory and to see how well they are organised. We can therefore no longer ignore either one or the other interpretation; they are no longer exclusive, and we are left with the absolute ambiguity, the very basis of the “Modern Fantastic”. What has taken place? The only conclusion would seem to be the one given by the narrator at the beginning: a “singular adventure”, which leaves one perplexed.

A traditional comparison associates the short story with the sonnet, because of the intensity of its impressions: in the short story, as in the sonnet, we have in our head all the significant traits which work together to obtain a universal effect. This concept seems to me to be quite accurate from a technical point of view, and I hope to have shown why: in a genre that is so dependent upon antithetic tensions, where the structure is essential, and rests so heavily on the paralleling of elements, the reader is completely accustomed to a work of structural order. We have just seen that if the signs accumulated in the course of the text do not take on meaning immediately, they are organised into a sort of secondary account, half-hidden but perceptible. The elements are, as it were, put on reserve in the memory, and the ending gives them a definitive place in the structure. Whether one rereads it or not, the fullness of meaning of the structure — and of course its brevity — means that it amounts to the same thing. At the end of the text, one’s mind runs through the elements stored during the reading and gives them back their hidden meaning, the meaning provided by the general structure and economy of the work.

26 Ibid, p. 170 (p. 57).

“Open” texts and tension

One consequence of the structure of the classic short story is that there is no radical difference between “open” texts and those “locked in” by the trick ending; the absence of a twist does not mean that there is no tension, but simply that the tension has not been “unleashed”. Sometimes the impact is even more powerful if the tension does not materialise in such an ending. Chekhov’s *Dama s sobachkoi* (*Lady with Lapdog*) can be considered the epitome of the “open” text, with its last word: “beginning”.²⁷ This is a particularly important and complex story, with very subtle effects — and one of the very few where the distancing of the characters will be finally supervened. However, I would like to stress here that the structure Chekhov sets up is the same as in the classic stories we have already seen; and that even the ending’s effect is very close to what can be observed in texts locked in by the surprise ending, although this effect is reached through the opposite process.

What is built by *Lady with Lapdog* is a dynamic antithesis of the same kind we saw at work in *The Grasshopper* or *The Necklace*. At the beginning of the story, Dmitri Dmitrich Gurov is an apathetic Moscow civil servant and also a libertine; he is a philanderer who constantly deceives his boring wife, only to find in his liaisons an almost greater boredom. In the end, Gurov, in contrast to this past, lives only for his mistress Anna Sergeevna, whom he loves with a prodigious intensity; their love is compared to the natural attachment of two migratory birds, indestructible and with the commitment of a married couple. Gurov is not immediately transformed by the liaison with Anna: at first it is shown to be even more boring than his other adulterous adventures. But from the moment that his life obeys the mandates of his passion, this love becomes as extreme as his boredom had been, the sole principle of his life, the law that governs all of his existence.

This is not to say that *Lady with Lapdog* is confined in the frame of the classic short story. What happens in this story is that, using exactly the usual tools, Chekhov will in fact be moving *beyond* the classic short story; as Charles E. May puts it, he is here “present[ing] spiritual reality in realistic terms”.²⁸ But it is important to recognise that what we have here

27 Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, *Lady with Lapdog and Other Stories*, trans. by David Magarshack (London: Penguin, 1964), pp. 264-81 (hereafter Magarshack). For the Russian text, see Nauka, X, pp. 128-43. The story ends with the line: “the most complicated and difficult part was only just beginning” (p. 281 [p. 143]).

28 May (2007), p. 210.

is a transitional form. In a few of the short stories Chekhov produced at the end of his career, such as *The Bishop* (1902) and *The Betrothed* (1903), Chekhov renounced anecdote and freed himself from the classic form — we shall come back to this in the book's conclusion. But *Lady with Lapdog* is a perfectly classic story, based on the usual structure and characterisation process. The remarkable point is that *within* this frame, he has been able to “confront the quintessential problem of the modern short story [...] How is it possible for a realistic narrative to convey meaning and significance,” to quote May again.²⁹

As we are now used to recognising as typical of the classic short story, Gurov's “conversion” represents the passage from one paroxystic state to another, from the depth of boredom to the height of passion. Chekhov never once justifies Gurov's “conversion”. *Mutatis mutandis*, and the same thing happens here as in *Gramigna's Mistress* (see Chapter One): the passage from one pole to the other is sufficient in itself and does not need justification in the eyes of the reader. At no point does Chekhov try to explain Gurov's passion, especially not by means of Anna's own qualities or the quality of their relationship: Anna is remarkably little defined. One single trait is added to that of “the bored young woman”: her complete inexperience, the “diffidence and angularity of inexperienced youth”.³⁰ Of course, one could say that it is left to the reader to add the missing links: Gurov, perhaps, was moved by this gaucherie; Anna was, perhaps, an exceptional young woman. But this reading is never supported by the text. What gives the text its structure and builds its basic strength is the tension between the two ways of existence. The absence of a “twist-in-the-tail” does not make it a different kind of text; on the contrary, it ultimately plays the same role; it is the crowning element of the process already at work, the revelation of the force of the antithesis. By finishing with the picture of Gurov searching desperately for a solution to their situation, by indicating that “the most difficult part was only just beginning”, Chekhov creates an uncertainty that only deepens the effect of this conversion, albeit subtly.

One of the great characteristics of Chekhov's short stories is that they go beyond the classic use of the form by involving its formal characteristics in the thematic plan. The tension in this story is not established between two narrative elements, but between truth and falsehood, between the life

29 Ibid, p. 216. May is again speaking here about Joyce's *The Dead*. The sentence goes on: “It is the same problem that Chekhov had to deal with”.

30 Magarshack, p. 268 (Nauka, p. 132).

of a libertine and a first love. Chekhov exploits the tension like a dramatic device, in order to create emotions that owe nothing to the psychological richness of his characters, nor to the complexity of their relationship, but are entirely based on the collision between two worlds established at the outset of the story. The text, however, seems to us neither abstract nor schematic (even though it is based on effects that are both), because of its concreteness and the strength of Chekhov's description. The radical absence of a definitive solution, for which this text is famous, serves just as well as a trick ending to emphasise the clash between the "normal" life of the man who is blasé and the "extraordinary" life where love is the centre of everything. The open ending shows them both to be inescapable.