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# Paradise Lost: Biblical Parallels and Autobiographical Allusions in Chekhov's Story "The Black Monk"

Ivan Bunin in his memoir about Anton Chekhov writes of Chekhov's contradictory perception of immortality: once Chekhov promised Bunin to prove that immortality is nonsensical yet another time that it is factual.[1] Another memoirist, I. N. Al'tshuller, recalls Chekhov admitting the possibility of eternal life and God.[2] Despite telling his friends in the letters that he had no faith, Chekhov carried a cross necklace, had a crucifix on the wall of his bedroom in Yalta, visited monasteries and churches, liked reading about saints, liked church-bell ringing and church services, and even contemplated becoming a monk.[3] Chekhov's ambiguity towards God is best expressed in his diary: "Between 'there is a God' and 'there is no God' lies a whole vast track, which the really wise man crosses with great effort."[4]



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[1] See Ivan Bunin, *About Chekhov: The Unfinished Symphony*, trans. and ed. Thomas G. Marullo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 52.

[2] Igor Zakharov, ed. *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2005), 656.

[3] See ibid., 656; and Orlando Figes. *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 346—47.

[4] Anton P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridtsati tomakh* (*PSS*), ed. N. F. Bel'chikov et al., 30 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1974—83), 17:224. Unless stated otherwise, English translations are from Anton P. Chekhov, *Complete Works*, 5th ed. (Delphi Classics, 2011), Kindle edition, which contains Constance Garnett's translation of "The Black Monk." The spelling of some personal names in *Complete Works* and this article is different; the Library of Congress Transliteration System is used for spelling Chekhov's words in the article. Also, in *PSS* the numbering of volumes containing Chekhov's letters is separate from the numbering of his literary works: instead of continuing from number 19, it

"The Black Monk," completed in the summer or fall of 1893 at Melikhovo, when Chekov already knew that he was terminally ill, reflects his religious dichotomy maybe more than any other of his writings.[5] The story's Biblical references, philosophical statements and symbolism have generated various and sometimes contradictory perceptions of its characters, which allowed Vladimir Kataev to classify the critics as either Kovrinites or Pesotskyists depending on whose side they take or whose side, they believe, Chekhov takes in the conflict between the protagonist, Kovrin, and the antagonist, Pesotsky.[6] The nature of the conflict also has different interpretations: false dreams of an individualist vs. beauty of common people, grandeur of the dreams of maniacs vs. abnormality of human relations and mediocrity of mentally healthy people, illusions vs. normal life, and revolutionary ideas vs. tyranny.[7] Kovrin has been linked to both fictitious and actual persons: Faust, Raskolnikov, Oblomov, Merezhkovsky, and Vladimir Solovyov.[8]

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restarts at 1. To avoid referring to Chekhov's epistolary and literary works as if they were in two different publications, the volume numbering in this article goes from 1 through 30; therefore, volume 19 in the article corresponds to volume 1 of Chekhov's letters in *PSS*.

[5] For further information about the history of writing and publication of "The Black Monk," see the commentary to the story in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 8: 488—90.

[6] See Vladimir B. Kataev, *If Only We Could Know! An Interpretation of Chekhov*, trans. and ed. Harvey Pitcher (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 151.

[7] See Zinovii S. Papernyi, *A. P. Chekhov: Ocherk tvorchestva*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960), 136—37; G. A. Bialyi, "Chekhov," in *Istoriia russkoi literatury,* ed. M. P. Alekseev et al. 10 vols. (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1941—56), vol. 9, bk. 2:391; Igor. N. Sukhikh, *Problemy poetiki A. P. Chekhova* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1987), 116; and Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov: A Critical Study of Chekhov's Prose and Drama* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 128.

[8] See Thomas Winner, *Chekhov and His Prose* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 119; A. U. Astashkina, "Svoeobrazie simvoliki v povesti A. P. Chekhova 'Chernyi monakh,'" in *Tvorchestvo A. P. Chekhova: Osobennosti khudozhestvennogo metoda*, ed. S. I. Dudarenok (Rostov-na-Donu: Rostovskii-na-Donu gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii institut, 1986), 69; S. A. Larin, "Historia Morvi: 'Oblomov' I. A. Goncharova—'Chernyi monakh A. P. Chekhova," *Vestnik VGU*, no. 2 (2004): 36, http://www.vestnik.vsu.ru/content/phylo-

In this article, yet another view of "The Black Monk" is offered—that is, Chekhov through the use of allusions and symbols has reviewed his philosophy of life and recreated the conflict between man and God, which goes back to the story of the Garden of Eden. This interpretation is partially supported by some existing analyses of the story. For example, Thomas Winner refers to Pesotsky's garden as the "Garden of Eden," even without analyzing the similarities between the two gardens,[9] and Joseph Conrad finds that the monk in the story has features of a folklore devil. Furthermore, the story, despite falling into the period of Chekhov's objective manner, during which the writer tended to hide his feelings towards his characters, contains numerous autobiographical references revealing the under-the-surface subjective nuances and shedding light on some of the story's passages.[10]

The garden image appears in many of Chekhov's works, including "Ionitch," "The House with the Mezzanine," *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*, as a symbol of love, peace, and happiness.[11] It also reflects Chekhov's affection for gardening while at Melikhovo where he had written "The Black Monk." In the story, Pesotsky's garden is remarkably diverse and includes unique varieties of plants. Just as God "made all kinds of trees grow"[12] in the Garden of Eden, Pesotsky introduced "every sort of caprice" into his garden.[13] And just as the Garden of Eden is the place of blissful beginnings of humanity, Pesotsky's garden is the place of Kovrin's happy and innocent childhood during which Kovrin had

log/2004/02/toc_ru.asp (last accessed February 2, 2013); Georgii P. Berdnikov, *Chekhov* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1974), 327; and Paul Debreczeny, "'The Black Monk': Chekhov's Version of Symbolism," in *Reading Chekhov's Text*, ed. Robert L. Jackson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 180—81.

[9] Winner, *Chekhov and His Prose*, 117.

[10] For further discussion of Chekhov's objective manner, see Aleksandr. P. Chudakov, *Chekhov's poetics*, trans. Edwina J. Cruise and Donald Dragt (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1983), 43—63.

[11] For further discussion of the importance of the garden image in Chekhov's works, see Papernyi, *A. P. Chekhov: Ocherk tvorchestva*, 133.

[12] Gen. 2:9 NIV.

[13] A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 8:227.

an "angelic face," as described by Pesotsky, and saw the decorative part of the garden as if it were from a fairytale.[14]

The influence of symbolism on Chekhov's late writings, including "The Black Monk," manifests itself vividly in the role of colors in the story. Unlike Kovrin's happy childhood, which is associated with Pesotsky's multicolored garden—"a realm of tender colours,"[15] his adulthood is painted mostly in black by the visions of a black monk who appears to him in "a tall black column," "dressed in black, with a grey head and black eyebrows."[16] The monk usually comes to Kovrin at night, in the dark, and disappears in the dark—into "the evening twilight."[17] As a contrast to the description of Kovrin's face in childhood as angelic, the face of the monk is "pale, death-like," which along with the dominant black color of the monk suggests his demonic nature.[18] Other elements in the story support such view of the black monk as well. His tempting of Kovrin alludes to Satan's tempting of Eve in the Old Testament and of Jesus in the New Testament. To Kovrin's question about "the object of eternal life" the monk responds, "As of all life—enjoyment. True enjoyment lies in knowledge, and eternal life provides innumerable and inexhaustible sources of knowledge, and in that sense it has been said: 'In My Father's house there are many mansions.'"[19] Even though the monk quotes the Bible, his teaching about seeking knowledge is at odds with what God told Adam about taking fruit "from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" because, according to God, knowledge leads not to eternal life but death: "for when you eat from it you will certainly die."[20] The Russian adjective *lukavyi* (sly), which Chekhov uses to describe the monk's smile, means 'Satan' when used as a noun. As a final point, the insanity, which reveals itself in Kovrin through his visual and

[14] Ibid., 246, 227.

[15] Ibid., 227.

[16] Ibid., 234.

[17] Ibid., 243.

[18] Ibid., 241.

[19] Ibid., 242.

[20] Gen. 2:17 NIV.

aural hallucinations of a monk, has been traditionally viewed as demonic possession, and such understanding of mental illness was even more customary in the nineteenth century than today.

The scarcity of personal details as well as the confines of place, time, and functionality make the characters in "The Black Monk" symbolic.[21] Most of the action in the story takes place within the boundaries of Pesotsky's garden. One principal function or idea marks the main characters: megalomania in the case of Kovrin and horticulture in the case of Pesotsky. Despite having Kovrin's entire life outlined in the story, starting from childhood and ending with death, only one period, his sojourn on Pesotsky's estate, is given in detail. As far as Pesotsky is concerned, the story mentions hardly anything about his life outside the estate and prior to Kovrin's arrival.

If Pesotsky's garden can be perceived as a symbol of paradise, the Garden of Eden, then it is reasonable to assume that the characters in "The Black Monk" play symbolic roles similar to those of the Biblical characters—God, Satan, Adam, and Eve. As it was already mentioned, Pesotsky's function as a gardener is similar to that of God's in the Book of Genesis. His role as a father is also similar to God's role in the Garden of Eden in relation to Adam and Eve. Just as God created or, in a certain sense, fathered Adam and Eve to be husband and wife, Pesotsky, after raising Kovrin and Tanya together as if they were siblings, gives his blessing to their marriage. God entrusts the Garden of Eden to Adam, and Pesotsky entrusts his garden to Kovrin, hoping that Kovrin will not ruin his "beloved work."[22] The analogy between the two narratives continues when Kovrin breaks away from Pesotsky and his garden in the pursuit of eternal knowledge after the black monk convinces him of being a genius.

[21] Regarding symbolic features in Kovrin, Astashkina has aptly remarked, "Образ Коврина не так детально и многосторонне выписан, что и облегчает его перерастание в символический тип" (The image of Kovrin does not have very many details and planes which simplifies its outgrowing into a symbolic type [Astashkina, "Svoeobrazie simvoliki v povesti A. P. Chekhova 'Chernyi monakh,'" 69]). My translation.

[22] A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 8:237.

The biblical story of the discord between Adam and God established the literary tradition of the fathers and sons theme, so popular in the nineteenth century Russian literature. Chekhov's admiration over Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* expressed in a letter written during the year of working on "The Black Monk" attests to his interest in this theme.[23] The conflict in Chekhov's story, however, unlike in *Father and Sons,* does not concern any social or class issues; it is primarily philosophical. In this respect, it resembles the conflict between Chekhov himself and his father. Chekhov's abandoning of religion in adulthood was the consequence of the religious upbringing by his father whose despotic personality collided with Chekhov's lifelong love for freedom. As Chekhov admits in his letter written at Melikhovo,

> I received a religious education in my childhood—with church singing, with reading of the "apostles" and the psalms in church, with regular attendance at matins, with obligation to assist at the altar and ring the bells. And, do you know, when I think now of my childhood, it seems to me rather gloomy. I have no religion now. Do you know, when my brothers and I used to stand in the middle of the church and sing the trio "May my prayer be exalted," or "The Archangel's Voice," everyone looked at us with emotion and envied our parents, but we at that moment felt like little convicts.[24]

There are numerous evidences of the autobiographical origin of "The Black Monk." To begin with, the idea of the story was born at Melikhovo after Chekhov saw a dream of a black monk and after having discussions with friends and family about refracted and roaming mirages.[25] Like Pesotsky's estate, Chekhov's Melikhovo had a park and a beautiful and diverse garden com-

[23] Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, February 24, 1893, Melikhovo, in ibid., 23:174.

[24] Chekhov to Ivan Leont'ev (Shcheglov), 9 March 1892, Melikhovo, in ibid., 23:20.

[25] See Mikhail P. Chekhov. *Anton Chekhov: A Brother's Memoir*, trans. Eugene Alper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 189—91.

prised of numerous species of plants.[26] The song mentioned in the story is the serenade by Gaetano Braga that Chekhov's friend, Lika Mezinova, sang during her stay at Melikhovo.[27]

Many details in Kovrin's life were part of Chekov's, including the affliction by tuberculosis. The idea of being treated for tuberculosis produced in Chekhov "a feeling not far from loathing,"[28] and for some time he firmly rejected medical help. Kovrin also does not want to be treated for his mental illness, believing that the treatment will reduce him to idiocy. Despite having poor health, Kovrin, like Chekhov, drinks coffee and wine and smokes cigars.[29] Kovrin's decision to visit Pesotsky's estate after he "had exhausted himself, and had upset his nerves" parallels Chekhov's decision to settle in the countryside, that is, Melikhovo, with the hope of improving his health.[30] Even at Melikhovo, which, as described by T. L. Shchepkina-Kupernik, was Chekhov's oasis,[31] Chekhov, in the words of his brother Mikhail, "was suffering from a lot of stress and anxiety which led to trouble sleeping."[32] Also, in

[26] Chekhov's letters and the memoirs by Melikhovo visitors mention cherries, apples, gooseberries, roses, tulips, lilies, peonies, pines, and an oak growing at Melikhovo. Janet Malcom's mentioning of 149 species growing in Chekhov's garden in Yalta shows how seriously Chekhov took gardening. See Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey* (New York: Random House, 2001), 46.

[27] See M. P. Chekhov. *Anton Chekhov: A Brother's Memoir*, 189.

[28] Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 18 November 1891, Moscow, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 22:296. Chekhov's physician I. N. Al'tshuller also mentions Chekhov's resistance to medical treatment (see Zakharov, ed. *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov*, 657—58). See also Daniel Gillès, *Chekhov: Observer without Illusion* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), 266—67.

[29] See, for example, the following letters where Chekov mentions his affection for wine, cigars, and coffee: Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 13 February 1893, Melikhovo, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 23:172; Chekhov to M. P. Chekhova, 16 March 1893, Melikhovo, in ibid., 188; and Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 7 August 1893, Melikhovo, in ibid., 223. Gillès mentions that Chekhov acquired the habit of smoking cigars during his life at Melikhovo (see *Chekhov: Observer without Illusion*, 185).

[30] A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 8:226.

[31] See Shchepkina-Kupernik's memoir in Zakharov, ed. *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov*, 401.

[32] M. P. Chekhov. *Anton Chekhov*, 188. Gillès gives as one of the explanations of Chekhov's mood swings at Melikhovo his suffering from hemorrhages (see

a letter to his editor and friend, A. S. Suvorin, after refuting the assumption that in "The Black Monk" he described his own mental state, Chekhov admits that he has "no special desire to live."[33] The obvious contradiction between Chekhov's admittance of being depressed and his denial of depicting his own mental state in Kovrin is not surprising. First, Chekhov was very discrete not only about his personal life but also about his creative techniques and processes.[34] Second, it was not unusual for Chekhov to deny the connection between his characters and the real people used as prototypes, as it was the case in the scandal around his story "The Grasshopper," in whose personages everybody but Chekhov recognized Chekhov's friends: I. I. Levitan, A. P. Lensky, and the Kuvshinnikovs.[35]

The similarity between Kovrin's and Chekhov's lifestyles is natural due to the similarity of their professions: they are both intellectuals in the humanities, one in philosophy and the other in literature, spending a lot of time reading and writing. Kovrin's final assessment of himself as mediocre can be a reflection of Chekhov's own doubts in his greatness as a writer. Bunin recalls Chekhov saying, "People will read me for only seven more years, and I have only six more years to live."[36] In his correspondence, Chekhov also expresses his concern about being forgotten after death, "Everything written by me will be forgotten in 5-10 years."[37]

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*Chekhov: Observer without Illusion*, 186—87).

[33] Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 25 January 1894, Melikhovo, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 23:265. Since Suvorin's letters to Chekhov are missing, it is impossible to tell whether it was Suvorin or his wife, Anna Ivanovna, or both who saw Chekhov in Kovrin. The reason why it could have been Anna Ivanovna's observation is the request in Chekhov's letter to Suvorin to tell Anna Ivanovna that he, Chekhov, "has not gone out of his mind yet" (ibid., 265).

[34] To learn more about this trait of Chekhov, see I. N. Potapenko's and A. I. Kuprin's memoirs, in Zakharov, ed. *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov*, 458, 637; and Berdnikov, *Chekhov*, 344; Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov*, 40.

[35] See Gillès, *Chekhov: Observer without Illusion*, 180—81; and Ernest J. Simmons, *Chekhov: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), 251—52.

[36] Bunin, *About Chekhov*, 24.

[37] Chekhov to A. S. Lazarev (Gruzinskii), 20 October 1888, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 21:39 (my translation). Besides Kovrin, another Chekhov's intellectual, Trigorin, is uncertain about his talent: "Here lies Trigorin, a clever writer, but he

Kovrin's unsuccessful professorship alludes to Chekov's failed attempt to pursue an academic career by getting a PhD for his book *The Island of Sakhalin* and becoming a lecturer at the Moscow University medical school.[38] Even Kovrin's attitude towards his wife, from whom he had separated at the end of his life, is similar to Chekhov's relations with women. After avoiding commitments for a long time, Chekhov married Olga Knipper in 1901, three years before his death, with whom he spent a great deal of their marriage separately. Kovrin's situation of being taken care of by a woman "who looked after him as though he were a baby" and who was not his wife resembles the arrangement in Chekhov's household where his sister Maria was the primary caretaker.[39]

Both Chekhov and Kovrin have sacrificed the comforts of conventional life and family for the sake of demanding careers and personal freedom. Kovrin could have signed under Chekhov's credo, "My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom imaginable."[40] Kovrin's pursuit of freedom is shown not only in his relations with the Pesotskys but also symbolically through his tendency to trespass the confines of Pesotsky's "Garden of Eden." After crossing the river that separates the garden from the outside nature, he exclaims, "How open, how free, how still it is here!"[41] This is the very place where Kovrin meets the black monk for the first time. Kovrin's loneliness (Kovrin does not have any friends besides the Pesotskys with whom he eventually breaks up) and his

was not as good as Turgenieff" (ibid., 13:30).

[38] See Grigory Rossolimo, "Memories of Chekhov," in *Memories of Chekhov: Accounts of the Writer from His Family, Friends and Contemporaries*, trans. and ed. Peter Sekirin (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 31; and Simmons, *Chekhov: A Biography*, 344—45.

[39] A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 8:253. About the importance of Maria as the caretaker in Chekhov's household see memoirs by T. L. Shchepkina-Kupernik and V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, in Zakharov, ed. *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov*, 406—407, 448; and Savelii Senderovich, *Chekhov s glazu na glaz: Istoriia odnoi oderzhimosti A. P. Chekhova* (Dmitrii Bulanin: St. Petersburg, 1994), 116.

[40] Chekhov to A. N. Pleshcheev, 4 October 1888, Moscow, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 21:11.

[41] Ibid., 8:234.

liking for solitude, as is apparent in the above episode, are also akin to Chekhov's personality. Chekhov, for example, after inviting multitudes of people to visit him in Melikhovo and Yalta, would become irritated by the distractions from work and the lack of privacy. [42] The description of Kovrin's lonely life and death resonates with Chekhov's entry in his notebook, "Как я буду лежать в могиле один, так в сущности я и живу одиноким" (As I shall lie in the grave alone, so in fact I live alone).[43]

Pesotsky, on the other hand, has some resemblance of Chekhov's father, Pavel Egorovich, who was a controlling, ill-tempered—but at the same time caring—person.[44] Pavel Egorovich shared his son's passion for gardening and landowning while living at Melikhovo. Unlike his son, however, Pavel Egorovich was strict with the peasants.[45] Considering his habit of flogging his children, when they were little, and his ornery attitude towards his subordinates, Pavel Egorovich would not have hesitated to thrash the workers at Melikhovo had it been legal.[46] Pesotsky, who complains about not having the right to flog

[42] For further discussion of Chekhov's solitary personality, see Gillès, *Chekhov: Observer without Illusion*, 188—90; and Shchepkina-Kupernik's memoir, in Zakharov, ed. *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov*, 400—401.

[43] A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 17:86. Chekhov also confesses his loneliness in his letters. In a letter to the writer Vladimir Korolenko, he writes, "…I have no one around me with a need for or a right to my sincerity" (Chekhov to Vladimir Korolenko, 9 January 1888, Moscow, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 20:170. The translation is taken from Anton P. Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, ed. Simon Karlinsky [New York: Harper and Row, 1973], 89). In this regard, Chekhov's letter to his sister expresses even stronger emotions than the previous one, "If I were to shoot myself I should thereby provide the greatest gratification to nine-tenths of my friends and admirers" (Chekhov to M. P. Chekhova, 14 January 1891, St. Petersburg, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 22:161).

[44] See Shchepkina-Kupernik's description of Chekhov's father in Zakharov, ed. *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov*, 405. V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko recalls Chekhov's mentioning of having a life-long grudge against his father for being flogged by him in childhood (ibid., 447).

[45] See Chekhov to Al. P. Chekhov, 21 March 1892, Melikhovo, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 23:29.

[46] Chekhov describes an episode with Pavel Egorovich accompanying two construction workers to give them supplies with a look as if he were taking them for flogging (see Chekhov to M. P. Chekhova, 2 March 1895, Melikhovo, in

the peasants, is not different from Pavel Egorovich in this respect. The scene with the smoke that Pesotsky uses to protect his garden could have been inspired by Pavel Egorovich's habit of burning incense at Melikhovo.[47] Pesotsky's cult-like obsession with horticulture is similar to Pavel Egorovich's obsession with religious rites and practices. Both patriarchs, Pesotsky and Pavel Egorovich, were instrumental in the management of their estates, and that is why the estates collapse after their passing. Chekhov admits in a letter that after his father's death "все как-то потускнело и пожухло" (everything somehow has lost its luster and faded) at Melikhovo prompting his decision to sell the estate.[48]

The theme of death, a common occurrence in Chekhov's late writings, is explored in "The Black Monk" as the final evaluation of the protagonist's life. In youth, Kovrin had two choices: a conventional and risk-free life with Tanya in Pesotsky's "Garden of Eden" or a risk-taking pursuit of ambitious goals. Shortly before dying, Kovrin realizes that he paid too much for his second choice:

> He thought how much life exacts for the worthless or very commonplace blessings it can give a man. For instance, to gain, before forty, a university chair, to be an ordinary professor, to expound ordinary and secondhand thoughts in dull, heavy, insipid language—in fact, to gain the position of a mediocre learned man, he, Kovrin, had had to study for fifteen years, to work day and night, to endure a terrible mental illness, to experience unhappy marriage, and to do a great number of stupid and unjust things which it would have been pleasant not to remember.[49]

Chekhov literary career also cost him a lot. As he has said, "What writers belonging to the upper class have received from

ibid., 24: 33).

[47] About Pavel Egorovich's use of incense, see, for example, Chekhov to L. S. Mizinova, 29 March 1892, Melikhovo, in ibid., 23:38.

[48] Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 26 June 1899, Moscow, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 26:213 (my translation).

[49] A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 8:256.

nature for nothing, plebeians acquire at the cost of their youth."[50] To Chekhov, who had realized before turning forty that he would not reach an old age because of his illness and who was not sure that his fame would outlive him, the cost of his literary success could have seemed unreasonably high.

The resemblance of the relations in "The Black Monk" with the relations in the biblical Garden of Eden, on the one hand, and the similarities between Chekhov and Kovrin, on the other hand, justify the assumption that in "The Black Monk" Chekov evaluated his own life through the life of Kovrin: his relationship with God, his father, and women—and even his career decision. Such a reading of the story would not be possible without referring to biographical facts about Chekhov. One of Chekhov's biographers, Boris Zaitsev, has come to a conclusion based on his analysis of Chekhov's life and of his late story, "The Bishop," that Chekhov was getting closer to God during his final years.[51] Even if "The Black Monk" has no direct textual evidence to support such a statement, it still testifies to Chekhov's interest in the relationship between man and God shown through biblical allusions and complex symbolism. Dying Kovrin calls out to what he had previously rejected: his wife and the garden. Chekhov, after purchasing Melikhovo, liked to mention that if he were not a writer, he would have become a gardener.[52] Chekhov was well aware of the detrimental effect of a writer's lifestyle on his health and, conversely, of the benefits of gardening when he wrote, "если бы я теперь бросил литературу и сделался садовником, то это было бы очень хорошо, это прибавило бы мне лет десять

[50] Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 7 January 1889, Moscow A. P. Chekhov, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 21:133.

[51] See Boris Zaitsev, *Chekhov: Literaturnaia biografiia* (New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1954), 227—29. In his memoir about Chekhov, Al'tshuller shares his impression that Chekhov was gradually advancing along the field ("track" in Garnett's translation—see the quote at the beginning of the article) that lies between not believing and believing in God, especially during his last years. See Zakharov, ed. *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov*, 656.

[52] See, for example, Chekhov to M. O. Men'shikov, 20 February 1900, Yalta, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 27:58; and Shchepkina-Kupernik's memoir in Zakharov, ed. *Chekhov v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov*, 402.

жизни" (It would've been very good for me to quit writing now and become a gardener—it would've added ten years to my life).[53] Paradoxically, Chekhov, a die-hard bachelor who believed that "women rob men of their youth," spent his final years as a married man and died with his wife by his side.[54] Didn't Chekhov during his final years try to embrace some of the ideas that he had rejected in his youth—something that was too late for his dying character, Kovrin—that is, religion, family, and a low-key but noble career, like gardening, that requires much fewer sacrifices than creative writing?[55]

[53] Chekhov to O. L. Knipper-Chekhov, 6 December 1901, Yalta, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 28:132 (my translation).

[54] Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 21 January 1895, Melikhovo, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 24:18 (the translation is from Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, 265).

[55] Apparently, Chekhov's decision of pursuing an ambitious career of a professional writer was not something about which he had always dreamed. His choice of the medical profession was at least partially motivated by practical reasons of securing a stable income (see A. P. Chudakov, *Anton Pavlovich Chekhov: Kniga dlia uchashchikhsia* [Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1987], 52). In his youth, he dreamed of becoming a rich merchant (see ibid., 57). For Chekhov, hacking for magazines while being a medical student was a way of supporting himself and his family. After receiving a medical degree, Chekhov had not abandoned medicine for the sake of literature considering medicine to be his "lawful wife" while literature his "mistress" (Chekhov to Al. P. Chekhov, 17 January 1887, Moscow, in A. P. Chekhov, *PSS* 20:15).