

# ***The Sorrows and Evils under the Feudal Yoke — On the Character Images in "The Death of a Government Clerk"***

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**Abstract.** The famous short story *The Death of a Government Clerk* written by Chekhov has stood the test of time and gained lasting reputation and widespread popularity among readers across the world. With his incisive writing skills and delicate characterization, Chekhov gradually unfolds the complete plot in the text. The story tells a tragic tale of a low-ranking government clerk who sneezes accidentally in front of his superior, falls into deep panic, and eventually dies of excessive fright. It reflects the corruption of the bureaucratic system under feudal tsarist autocracy and the hardships of people at the bottom of society, thus bearing profound social significance.

**Keywords:** Anton Chekhov, *The Death of a Government Clerk*, feudal bureaucratic autocracy, the little man

## **1. Introduction**

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860–1904) is an outstanding representative of Russian critical realism and one of the finest short story writers in the history of world literature [1]. He is a world-renowned drama reformer and master of short fiction. Together with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, he is known as one of the three giants of Russian literature, and also a founding figure of modern short stories worldwide. In the field of short story creation, he broke away from traditional plot structures, created a "blank-leaving" writing style, reshaped the aesthetic standards of the short story genre, and set a classic benchmark for short story writing. At the same time, Chekhov's stories are also known for "laughter through tears", and he brings his skills of humor and satire into full play in his works [2]. Among them, a series of classic short stories including *The Death of a Government Clerk*, *The Chameleon*, *The Man in a Case*, *Vanka*, *Anna on the Neck* and *Gooseberries* are representative works that directly embody this creative feature and are repeatedly read by readers around the world. The theme of "the little man" has always been a main thread running through Russian literature, carrying the strong humanistic tradition of Russian realistic literature. Chekhov is precisely the writer who truly pushed the theme of the little man to a new height [2]. Through the narrative framework of *The Death of a Government Clerk*, the author tears away the hypocritical veil of tsarist Russia's hierarchical system, exposes the distorted and alienated mode of interpersonal interaction in the bureaucratic environment, and satirizes the absurd living state of various official figures. It is of great research value precisely because it reveals the real social conditions of the time. The protagonist Chervyakov works as a low-ranking civilian clerk. Once when watching a performance

in a theater, he accidentally sneezed on the back of a general. This sudden mistake filled him with anxiety, so he visited the general many times to ask for forgiveness in person. In the end, his behavior angered the general; after being harshly reprimanded, he died in overwhelming distress and agony. An important feature of the language in Chekhov's story is conciseness and refinement. Gorky once said: "Chekhov can create an image with just one word, and write a short story, an amazing short story, with just one sentence [3]." In this short story of only over 700 words, Chekhov skillfully employs various rhetorical devices to shape well-rounded, vivid characters and depicts them in a lifelike manner.

## 2. Multidimensional analysis of the protagonist Chervyakov's character image

The most striking trait of the protagonist Chervyakov is his deep-rooted servility. He holds an almost morbid reverence for the hierarchical bureaucratic system of tsarist Russia and has completely lost his independent personality. It was nothing more than an accidental sneeze, yet he sought opportunities to apologize to his superior again and again. As a "great and meticulous" writer, what Chekhov presents to readers in the story is not the clerk's abnormal psychological process, but his abnormal behavior. Chekhov integrates the clerk's twisted psychology into the description of his abnormal actions [4]. There are six apology scenes designed throughout the story. By examining the details of these six apologies one by one, readers can clearly capture the protagonist's escalating emotional fluctuations. The first apology took place during the theater performance. After sneezing and realizing he had sprayed the general, Chervyakov said hurriedly, *"Извините, ваше-ство, я вас обрызгал... я нечаянно..."* ("Excuse me, Your Excellency, I have splashed you... I did not mean to..."). He apologized because he had sneezed on someone else by accident. It is easy to see that the protagonist felt uneasy at this moment, with a hint of embarrassment in his words. Out of politeness, he was not yet very frightened. The second apology came after the general replied "never mind". Still unable to set his mind at rest, Chervyakov immediately apologized again. He said, *"Ради бога, извините. Я ведь... я не желал!"* ("For God's sake, forgive me. I really... I did not intend to!"). This apology stemmed from his growing inner unease. He worried whether his first apology had truly earned the general's forgiveness, and whether the general would hold a grudge against him for the offense. His fear was more obvious and intense than the first time. The third apology happened during the intermission, when he took the initiative to walk up to the general again and apologize. He said, *"Я вас обрызгал, ваше-ство... Простите... Я ведь... не то чтобы..."* ("I splashed you, Your Excellency... Forgive me... I really... did not mean to..."). Anxiety and unease formed the emotional undertone of this apology, and suspicion gradually took root in Chervyakov's mind. In his subjective speculation, the general's forgiveness was merely polite pretense, and misfortunes such as losing his job or even his life would befall him at any time because of this offense. The fourth apology took place the day after the theater visit. The clerk specially put on a new formal uniform and went to the general's residence in person to apologize. He said, *"Вчера в «Аркадии», ежели припомните, ваше-ство, - я чихнул-с и... нечаянно обрызгал... Изв..."* ("Yesterday at the Arkady Theater, if you remember, Your Excellency, I sneezed... and accidentally splashed you... Excuse me..."). That Chervyakov dressed formally and went to the official's residence in person fully shows that he attached great importance to this apology, which he regarded as decent and official. His inner fear made him unable to sit still any longer. In his mind, the matter had become extremely serious, and only a face-to-face, formal apology could set his mind at ease. However, the general could not feel or empathize with the inner drama in his mind, and such repeated apologies only made the general feel annoyed. The fifth apology occurred when the general was receiving other petitioners. Chervyakov stepped forward again to apologize. He said nervously, *"Ваше-ство! Ежели я*

осмеливаюсь беспокоить ваше-ство, то именно из чувства, могу сказать, раскаяния! Не нарочно, сами изволите знать-с!" ("Your Excellency! If I dare to disturb you, it is purely out of remorse, I must say... I really did not do it on purpose, as you well know!"). By this time, fear had sunk deep into his heart. He tried to use an even more humble and sincere tone to seek the general's full forgiveness. The last apology was on the third day after the incident. He went to the general's house again for a final attempt. This time, he seemed to use up his last ounce of "strength" and said, "Я вчера приходил беспокоить ваше-ство, - не для того, чтобы смеяться, как вы изволили сказать. Я извинялся за то, что, чихая, брызнул-с..., а смеяться я и не думал. Смею ли я смеяться? Ежели мы будем смеяться, так никакого тогда, значит, и уважения к персонам... не будет..." ("I came to disturb you yesterday not to make fun of you, as you said. I apologized for splashing you when I sneezed... I never intended to laugh. How dare I laugh at you? If we all laugh at others casually, then respect for people... will cease to exist..."). His fear reached its peak. He spoke incoherently, and his spirit was on the verge of collapse. The story contains a great deal of linguistic description. Behind the portrayal of language and behavior lies a world-class art of satire: it exposes the shortcomings and ridiculousness of its subjects, often through exaggeration, to produce a humorous effect. Chekhov exaggerates and amplifies the inferiority and sensitivity of the little man, shaping him into an extreme figure who loses independent personality and self-esteem and yields blindly to the oppression of power [5]. Satirical language is a sophisticated linguistic art. Compared with plain language, it carries greater force, conveys stronger feelings, and is more likely to arouse emotional resonance in readers [6]. From the awkward unease of the first apology to the dying despair of the final plea, the drastic emotional changes running through the six apologies are rooted directly in the rigid hierarchical shackles of tsarist Russia. Chervyakov has become a living victim and deformed product of the hierarchical bureaucratic system. In addition, in terms of the artistic techniques of literary creation, a prominent feature of this short story is its use of repetitive and progressively in-depth descriptive skills. The protagonist Chervyakov makes as many as six "apologies" to his superior, each more cowardly and sorrowful than the last [7]. Tsarist Russian society in the late 19th century was the historical background of the entire story of *The Death of a Government Clerk*. At that time, Russia was in the stage of feudal imperialism. Although serfdom had been abolished in Russia by then, the tsar's autocratic rule remained stable, and the feudal privileges and conservative ideas of the old aristocracy and bureaucratic class still dominated society. The aristocracy and bureaucratic class held the core power of the government, the military and the judicial system. The legal privileges of the old aristocracy gave administrative officials the power to interfere in judicial affairs, leaving ordinary people at the bottom with no way to seek justice for their grievances. They regarded this hierarchical order as the "natural order of society", and tried every means to legitimize their wealth, glory and privileges. They vigorously suppressed new ideas, new trends and new orders, and did their best to maintain the old feudal order. At the same time, the landlord class monopolized most of the country's land and exploited the poor peasant class through high land rents and exorbitant taxes and levies. Bureaucrats held judicial and administrative power, accumulated wealth through oppression, corruption and bribery, and turned a blind eye to the sufferings of the people at the bottom. Ideologically, the aristocratic and bureaucratic class carried out enslaving education for a long time, which fostered a deep-rooted servile psychology among the masses at the bottom, making them believe that "offending superiors" is an unforgivable mistake. The life of the people at the bottom was miserable. Although peasants were freed from serfdom, they had to bear high land rents from landlords. Peasants who could not afford the rent had to move to cities and work as cheap labor in factories, doing high-intensity work every day for wages that barely made ends meet. Politically, the people at the bottom had no say at

all. The bureaucratic class monopolized all power, and their demands and resistance were often suppressed by violence. Long-term hierarchical oppression and ideological confinement made them timid, submissive and developed a morbid psychology. In terms of religious factors, tsarist Russia was a state with the unity of politics and religion. Religion was subject to the tsar and attached to the secular regime, so it became a tool for the feudal regime to rule and enslave the people. It was this mode of the unity of politics and religion that shaped the Russian people's national character of identifying with autocratic ideology and fanatically worshiping authority, and this national character is also the reason for the "servility" and "vulgarity" in the masses' hearts [8]. This is precisely the breeding ground for "the man in a case" among low-ranking officials represented by the protagonist Chervyakov.

At the same time, the protagonist Chervyakov has morbid sensitivity and anxiety. A casual reply from the general would be repeatedly misinterpreted and infinitely worsened in his mind, and the slightest change in the superior's expression would always tug at his tense nerves. The general's "silence" was regarded by him as impending "retaliation" against him. The general said, *"Ах, полноте ... я уж забыл, а вы всё о том же!"* ("Oh, come on... I have already forgotten it, yet you keep talking about it!"). From the perspective of ordinary people, this meant that the general had no intention of pursuing the matter further and hoped the clerk would stop talking about it soon. Yet this poor man twisted such a simple remark. He thought the general was warning him that his apology was not sincere enough and that he had not been truly forgiven; if he did not apologize more sincerely, he would lose his position. In his repeated self-consoling apologies, he fell into extreme inner fear of the power represented by people like the general. Under such fear and anxiety, he seemed to have imagined the tragic outcome of not being forgiven by the general. Trapped in all kinds of shackles he set for himself, he became a sheep under the high wall built by fear, unable to escape or breathe fresh air for his whole life, until he died of depression. Finally, the general could no longer stand his "torment" and shouted at him, *"Пошёл вон!!!"* ("Get out!"). These words split the clerk in two like a thunderclap. His inner fear erupted. He thought he had completely enraged the general, that he was at the end of his rope, and that there was no hope for his future. This clerk embodies the "sensitivity" of a person in a lower position throughout his being. The source of this "sensitivity" is never individual self-esteem, but the survival panic inherent in a low-status identity—the fear that a minor mistake will bring sanctions from the hierarchical system. Endless self-torment eventually exhausted all his vitality.

At the same time, numb resignation is also fully reflected in the protagonist Chervyakov. Faced with unfair hierarchical oppression, the thought of resistance never crossed the protagonist's mind. The instinct to preserve his life forced him to regard constant bowing and obedience as the rule of survival. In the field of philosophy, Chervyakov's behavior falls into the category of "alienation". The philosophical concept of alienation is defined as follows: "The subject produces its opposite and an object through the development of its own contradictions, and the object, as an external alien force, stands above the subject, which in turn restrains and oppresses the subject." Using Freud's theory of personality structure, "alienation" can be explained as the compromise made by the ego after the opposing struggle between the id and the superego. The protagonist was torn by inner conflicts: was his apology sincere enough? Had he truly been forgiven by the general? He kept imagining a scenario where the general would never forgive him no matter what. This assumption haunted him constantly, breaking down his inner defense line time and again, turning him into an alienated person in an alienated society [9]. He believed that as long as he was humble enough, lowly enough and patient enough, he could protect himself and survive. Even when he finally realized that continuing to apologize might backfire, he only chose to beg even more humbly, rather

than questioning the injustice brought by this extremely ironic, man-eating feudal hierarchy. *"В животе у Червякова что-то оторвалось. Ничего не видя, ничего не слыша, он понявился к двери, вышел на улицу и поплелся... Придя машинально домой, не снимая вицмундира, он лег на диван и... помер."* ("Something seemed to snap inside Chervyakov. Seeing nothing and hearing nothing, he backed away to the door, went out into the street and dragged himself along... He wandered home mechanically, without taking off his uniform, lay down on the sofa and... died.") This passage describes Chervyakov's slow death in very brief language, and at the same time reveals a sense of absurdity—how could a person die over such a trivial matter? The sense of absurdity is an aesthetic concept in modern Western thought. It refers to something or behavior that goes beyond convention and violates common sense, appearing bizarre and ridiculous, leaving people unable to explain it and giving them a feeling of pessimism and despair [10]. Like another of Chekhov's stories, *The Chameleon*, this tale is bizarre and fantastic. Only after deep reflection can one understand the "man-eating" feudal society depicted by Chekhov. A series of dejected physical movements progressively reveal the whole process of the character falling into despair step by step. Trapped deep in the mire of the system, he was unable to save himself and was eventually completely devoured by the system. His death is the ultimate satire on "the inability of the little man to protect himself under an autocratic system".

### 3. Narrative function and symbolic connotation of secondary characters

As a microcosm of the old tsarist bureaucratic system, every word and action of the general directly affects Chervyakov's emotional ups and downs, and is a key trigger for the collapse of the character's mentality. Every word and gesture of his reveals indifference and arrogance towards his subordinates. Faced with the clerk's repeated apologies, his remarks escalated from *"Ничего, ничего... Ах, сидите, пожалуйста! Дайте слушать!"* ("Nothing, nothing... Oh, please sit down! Let me listen to the opera!") to *"Ах, полно же... Я уже забыл, а вы все о том же!"* ("Oh, enough! I have forgotten it, why do you keep bringing it up!"), and finally he could not bear it any longer and shouted, *"Пошёл вон!!!"* ("Get out!!!"). In his perception, people with such a huge gap in social status from him are not worth his attention. In the eyes of the high-ranking general, this accidental sneeze was trivial, and the endless apologies instead disrupted his daily life and damaged his dignity. From another perspective, the officer could not empathize with the clerk's fear, so he ignored it and was completely unaware of it. He even thought the clerk's sensitivity, suspicion and caution were unreasonable and that he was getting what he deserved. This indifference towards lower-ranking officials may not be because the general is inherently evil. It can even be seen from his first response to the clerk's apology—he did not mind at all and comforted him to continue watching the show—that the general is not a narrow-minded person; otherwise he would certainly have pursued the matter to the end. But what led to this tragedy was that he had long been at the top of the power hierarchy and had long grown accustomed to, even numb to, the obedience of lower-ranking officials. In his eyes, a low-ranking official was like a tiny fish or shrimp—their presence or absence did not matter at all, let alone their dignity. How could he consider their dignity and morality? Therefore, faced with the clerk's repeated apologies, he would not put himself in the other's shoes to think about why the clerk kept bringing up a matter that was insignificant to him. As a result, he became increasingly impatient and finally shouted loudly, which became the last straw that broke the clerk's back. If the clerk's death is regarded as an invisible murder, the man-eating bureaucratic system is the culprit behind it, and the numb and indifferent general has unintentionally become an accomplice of the system. Having long enjoyed the dividends brought by the hierarchical system,

the general spontaneously defends this system and safeguards his own vested interests imperceptibly.

Besides, Chervyakov's wife is also a character worthy of in-depth exploration. Living at the bottom of society, she is bound by backward ideas of the times, and mediocrity and cowardice are labels etched into her character. In the story, she lacks independent thinking and judgment. Faced with her husband's apology turmoil, her state of mind always swings back and forth with the development of events. At first, she advised her husband, "*А все-таки ты сходи, извинись, сказала она.*" ("But you should go and apologize anyway.") This reflects the instinctive fear of the upper class among people at the bottom. Later she said, "*Подумает, что ты себя в публичке держать не умеешь.*" ("People will think you don't know how to behave in public!"). These two remarks fully embody the timidity of the little people at the bottom and their bondage to class rules. In her eyes, she only cares about "whether she will offend the superior" rather than whether the incident itself is reasonable. After learning that her husband had been reprimanded by his superior, she urged him to apologize again. She wanted to settle the matter peacefully, but also feared offending the powerful and thus affecting her future life. Her mind is always imprisoned in the belief that "a higher rank crushes people". Every move of the superior is infinitely magnified. Like marionettes, they are led by the nose by their superiors in every breath. This is both sad and pitiful. She has long been enslaved by the feudal bureaucratic hierarchy of tsarist Russia. She lacks independent thinking and an independent personality, and only knows to blindly submit to the powerful class. She is a low-ranking character full of servility. At the same time, the author does not completely deny the bright spots of human nature in the two characters. The wife's sincere concern is one of the few glimmers of warmth for the protagonist in the gloomy and oppressive life. When her husband was trapped in the internal friction of apologizing and could not get away, the wife's dissuasion came from genuine marital affection; she could not bear to see her loved one dragged into despair by meaningless obsession. This is a very simple affection between husband and wife, without any embellishment, but it flows gently like a gurgling stream. As for Chervyakov, he is not entirely cowardly, humble and timid. He still embodies the simple kindness and positive traits of ordinary little people at the bottom. His repeated apologies are essentially adherence to social etiquette, stemming from basic respect for others. Apart from the flattery of a subordinate to a superior, this normal social etiquette reveals the kind nature at the bottom of the protagonist's heart. At the same time, he has the courage to face up to his "mistakes". Sneezing at someone accidentally was an unintentional act, and he could have kept silent about it. But he did not choose to escape; instead, he took the initiative to step forward and apologize. Even though his subsequent repeated apologies were somewhat paranoid, he actually wanted to face and make up for his "mistake", retaining the courage of ordinary people to face errors. It is just that this valuable courage was misdirected under the oppression of autocratic power and turned into endless self-torment.

#### 4. Conclusion

Taking Chekhov's *The Death of a Government Clerk* as the research object, this paper focuses on the characterization in the story. Combining the plot with the historical background, it studies and analyzes the images of the protagonist Chervyakov, the general and Mrs. Chervyakov, with a focus on the role of Chervyakov. It finds that this character has both positive and negative personality traits. The characters' behaviors and words are not accidental, but the inevitable result of the feudal autocratic system of 19th-century tsarist Russia. This paper sorts out the typicality and uniqueness of the character images in *The Death of a Government Clerk*, which reflects the good and evil in human nature and also provides a reference for contemporary people to understand the relationship



between themselves and society. In summary, the character image of the protagonist Chervyakov is the core artistic carrier in *The Death of a Government Clerk*. It not only carries the thematic thought of the work, but also shows a picture of human nature under the specific historical background. His complex and multidimensional character image not only demonstrates the artistic charm of Chekhov's stories, but also has ideological value that transcends the times, making him one of the classic images in the history of world literature.

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