



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487
Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-3; July-Sept(2025)

Nature of Conflict in Anton Chekhov's *The lottery Ticket*

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Article Received: 05/08/2025

Article Accepted: 01/09/2025

Published Online: 02/09/2025

DOI: 10.53413/IJTELL.2025.6305

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore the nature of conflict in Anton Chekhov's short story *The Lottery Ticket*. The article starts with discussion on defining conflict, its role and its importance in a short story. Anton Chekhov begins the present story describing the normal routine of Ivan Dmitritch, the protagonist. Against this normalcy he introduces the conflict arising out of the prospect of winning a lottery worth seventy five thousand dollars. As the ticket belongs to his wife Masha, Ivan tries to misappropriate the announced sum. The conflict compels Ivan to indulge in strategies to grab the fortune from her. The paper elaborates the function of conflict in terms of building characters, driving the plot, creating tension, engaging the readers and adding meaning and depth to the story etc.

Keywords: role, routine, prospect, sum, function, engaging, meaning, depth

1. Why is conflict important in a short story?

Conflict is inevitable in human life. Since time immemorial humans had disagreements, contradictions and competitive views and value systems which gave rise to conflict. As literature is the mirror of society, it is obvious that conflict is reflected in literature in a variety of ways. Confrontation is an integral part of literature. Without a conflict the story remains static and becomes monotonous. Conflict is said to be the soul of literature. We cannot imagine the existence of a short story without the conflict in it. Such a story will appear dull and boring. Conflict gives the short story a literary value in a true sense.

‘Conflict, in literature, refers to the different disagreement of characters in the story. It helps us to know how it is started and faced and solved for better solution in order to get wisdom in living.’



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A short story does not enjoy an extensive space for the plot development which is the general truth of a novel. A story has a contracted canvass and the writer has to wind it up meticulously within the limited space. So the writer prefers to introduce the conflict in the initial part of the story. Conflict makes the narrative dynamic. There are two types of conflicts generally found in short stories: the internal conflict is born when the characters confront the obstacles in the physical or external world around them while the internal conflict occurs when they face internal emotional struggle. Anton Chekhov's short story *The Lottery Ticket* showcases both the types conflicts.

'Internal conflict or man vs self was a struggle that took place in the character's mind because of the dual desires or different wishes and choice... themselves. External conflict dealt with: Man Vs Man, Man Vs Nature, and Man Vs Society.'

In a short story the writer carefully introduces a conflict. The readers are interested in knowing what the protagonist wants to achieve and what are the obstacles in his or her path. There may be an antagonist with contradictory goals. The role of the antagonist is to thwart that goal. So the protagonist proposes something while the antagonist tries to dispose it. However, the resistance does not emanate in the form of a human antagonist all the times; it may be an internal conflict that goes on in his or her mind. Or it may be some kind of internal fear that can cause an obstruction. It is also possible that the goal may be simply a desire that is difficult to be fulfilled.

1.1 Building characters

In a short story, developing characters is a crucial task. When the people in the story confront a crisis, the conflict begins to take shape. In the present story, for example, Ivan Dmitritch is a happy-go-lucky middle class person living a comfortable life with his salary. The first paragraph shows that the middle class person had absolutely no grudge.

'Ivan Dimitrich, a middle-class man who lived with his family on a salary of twelve hundred a year and was very happy with his wife, sat down on the sofa after supper and began reading the newspaper.' (Chekhov 311)

Against this stoicism, comes the conflict that transforms his attitude towards his wife. It depends on how he responds to the situation. He must act in this adverse condition. We understand that he harbours suspicion, hatred and animosity towards his wife. This change helps us understand his true nature. His response to the emerging prospect of winning a lottery worth seventy five thousand dollars further aggravates the crisis. Now rapid change takes place in his hitherto stoic nature. He becomes selfish, cruel and impatient.



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‘And for the first time in his life, he thought that his wife was old and plain, and that she smelt of cooking, while he was still young, fresh, and healthy, and could get married again.’ (Chekhov 316)

At one point, he thinks of divorcing with his ‘boring wife’. His list ‘to do list’ reveals his suppressed desires to seek gratification in material things. In this way, the conflict reveals his true motivation. By the middle of the story, we see a completely changed Ivan. This is not the same Ivan that we have met in the beginning of the story. The character has grown to a great extent. Now the readers understand Ivan well. His character becomes relatable, complex and memorable. Now we cannot forget him because we know him in relation to other people in the story. Thus Ivan’s character evolves as the conflict deepens.

1.2 Driving the Plot

A writer presents the story in his mind by arranging in it the form of a series of events. These events or actions of the characters follow cause and effect principle. So their actions affect the other people in their surrounding. Accordingly, the plot tells why and how the event happens. Conflict gives rise to plot. Plot is the outcome of conflict.

‘Plot is the sequence of events in the story that is composed as functional interrelation that also marks the order of the inner parts overall fiction. Thus the groove is a blend of elements that building the story so that it is the main framework of the story. In a sense, the path regulates how actions should be related to each other, how the characters are portrayed and play a role in the event all related in one unified time.’

If nothing significant happens, the story will not develop. The process starts with the goal of the character. He/she has to do something. The writer has to establish the desire of the protagonist. The writer has to introduce a goal for his character and at the same time establish the major obstacles too. But the obstacle must be compelling. So the protagonist comes into action. If it is not a compelling obstacle, he or she will not act immediately. As a result, the plot will not move forward.

In the present story, Ivan Dmitritch comes into action in order to utilize seventy five thousand dollars, the probable fortune arising out of lottery ticket. He faces an external conflict because the ticket belonged to his wife Masha. Having led a life of deprivation, he passionately wishes to enjoy the material pleasures of life. At the same time Ivan is subject to an internal conflict too because he harbours jealousy, hatred and envy for Masha. The story unfolds various dimensions of his changed relationship with his wife. This is how the conflict pushes the plot.

1.3 Creating tension and suspense

Tension is created in a story when two opposing forces collide with each other. It is a powerful tool to engage the reader. It arouses the natural curiosity in the readers. They want to know



what will happen next and they get emotionally connected. They invest stakes. They are concerned about the action and response of the characters because there is tension in their lives. Due to this concern they are compelled to keep on reading the story. They get involved into the story. A dramatic change occurs in Ivan's attitude after knowing that Masha's lottery ticket would bring him a huge sum of seventy five dollars. But it is likely that she may not share the fortune with him. Thus the writer establishes a clear obstacle; there is no ambiguity about it. However, we come to know about his future plans. But it is Masha's ticket and he must do something in order to grab the money. He hatches a conspiracy in his mind. So the readers are eager to know about his modus operandi and its consequences.

'And pictures crowded into his imagination, every one more sweet and lovely than the last. And in all these pictures he saw himself healthy, happy, warm, even hot! Here, after eating a summer soup, cold as ice, he lay on his back on the burning sand close to a stream or in the garden under a tree... It's hot... His little boy and girl are crawling about near him, playing in the sand or catching ladybirds in the grass. He sleeps sweetly, thinking of nothing. He doesn't need to go to the office today, tomorrow, or the day after.' (Chekhov 314)

1.4 Adding depth and meaning

We cannot imagine a story without conflict. If the protagonist has no goal to achieve, the antagonist cannot oppose him or her. Such a story will not progress. It will lack direction and purpose. In that case the narrative will only describe the characters. It will look like a superficial narrative. It will not have a beginning, middle and an end. Ultimately, the story will cease to be a piece of literature. By means of conflict the writer tries to explore the deeper ideas. There are themes like betrayal, love, hatred, goodness, evil, joy, treachery etc. The stories narrate these themes. However, when the theme is executed with the help of the plot and characters, the readers get an illuminating experience. It casts a certain emotional impact on their minds.

In this story Ivan encounters a conflict because he wants to grab the lottery money that his wife has won. So Chekhov establishes the goal to his protagonist. This steadily keeps the story moving forward. Over a period of time, we see that various layers of conflict are revealed. The conflict continues to occur till the end of the story. Ivan begins to plan a number of things. The news of the lottery bewilders him. He would spend twenty five thousand on buying a real estate. He would reserve ten thousand for meeting the immediate expenses like buying furniture, travelling, paying debts etc. He also plans to deposit forty thousand in a bank and get interest on it. His imagination reveals his true nature and motivations. He plans not to take her on the tour. He begins to criticize Masha's relatives.



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‘All those wretched brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles would come crawling about as soon as they heard of the winning ticket, would begin whining like beggars, and fawning upon them with oily, hypocritical smiles. Wretched, detestable people! If they were given anything, they would ask for more; while if they were refused, they would swear at them, slander them, and wish them every kind of misfortune.’
(Chekhov 317)

The conflict makes the theme more meaningful. We understand how winning a lottery has corrupted Ivan. We also learn that fortune can spoil a person easily. We also understand that human beings are basically hypocrite and selfish creatures. They change their attitude easily. In an adverse condition, human beings act selfishly. They give priority to meet their selfish ends.

2. Conclusion

From the above discussion we can infer that conflict is crucial in a short story. Without a conflict, the narrative lacks a literary value. A well wrought conflict pushes the plot forward. It is the conflict that compell the character act and strive to achieve the goal. As a result it raises the stakes. The readers develop natural curiosity to know as to what will happen next. So they wish to know about the outcome of the protagonist’s decision of chooing a particular path. This enhances the reader engagement. It also generates suspense in the story. Finally, the conflict gives depth and meaning to the story.

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