

Title: Confessional Narrative as Weapon: *A Boring Story*
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Nikolai Stepanovich of Chekhov's *A Boring Story* (1889) inspires intense reactions. Shestov called him a nihilist; in a letter, Chekhov accused the character of being responsible for the destruction of his daughter and foster-daughter. Many respond sympathetically to him, however. Conceding that he fails his family, Flath (SEEJ v. 41 1997) exonerates him, arguing that his moral failures arise from physical illness.

I reopen the question of Nikolai Stepanovich, and more broadly, what he reveals about the confrontation with mortality. I argue that Nikolai Stepanovich's behavior in the period before his death is not reducible to illness or intelligible as nihilism. Attempts to understand him naturalistically or philosophically illuminate dimensions of the text, but fail to grasp its essence: a refutation of the genre of end-of-life reflections or introspection as inherently self-serving.

Attention to the confessional first-person narrative form reveals that mortal illness does not elevate Nikolai Stepanovich: his encounter with death elicits moral evasion and self-justification. Chekhov goes beyond refuting the hope for redemption held out by Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886, recognized as an important inspiration for *A Boring Story*). I reveal intriguing parallels with a contemporaneous Tolstoy text, *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), drawing on Golstein (*Russian Literature* 1996). Just as Pozdnyshev's tirades about sex are decoys distracting us from his murder of his wife, so do Nikolai Stepanovich's reflections about his family, medicine, the need for a general idea, merely distract him (and readers) from the real task: assessing his role in the spiritual murders of his daughters.

Chekhov makes the enterprise of end-of-life reflection look suspect. If Nikolai Stepanovich had lived well, there would be no need for it; he has lived badly, and his moral errors reduce his final self-narration into a weapon wielded against the women of his family.