

Title: "Ward no. 6" as Ragin's Muted *Cri de Cœur*
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Since its publication in 1892, Chekhov's "Ward no. 6" has elicited a generally hostile reading of its protagonist, Dr. Andrei Ragin (Derman, Skaftymov). Criticisms along this order continue today, which mark Ragin out for odium as "criminally negligent" (Hahn 1977: 147), guilty of philosophizing his way out of his responsibilities (Popkin 1993: 227). Content, even, to apportion the blame of the doctor's ignominious death to the hero alone (Hingley 1971: 15), few critics have strayed from the conventional view of Ragin as the feckless product of his time, a "symbolic image of Russia" (Muratova 1983: 22). Common to each of these views resides the assumption that had Ragin acted differently, the doctor could have somehow alleviated the suffering of those around him, perhaps even delayed his premature and grisly death, or at the very least made life a little better. This illation—long uncontested by some of Chekhov's sharpest readers—begs an obvious question as to the availability of alternative measures Ragin could have taken

Seeing Ragin as more than the victim of his own impassivity (Pospelov 1970: 318), I argue an Existentialist reading of the work's main character. Stuck in a society that privileges either total conformity or complete complacency, Ragin represents the struggle for autonomy in a world of vast uniformity. Only semi-conscious of the supine role he plays, Ragin gradually gains a sense of self through his interactions with Ivan Gromov, an inmate in the psychiatric wing of the hospital Ragin oversees. These discussions stimulate in Ragin a desire to come out of his subjective, passive situation. And yet, while the recognition of life's absurdity enables Ragin to give meaning to his existence, the consequences of these discoveries ultimately prove fatal.