

Title: The Depth Model and the Genre of Confession in Chekhov's Overlooked Masterpiece "On Ponial!" ("He Understood!")

Author: Nikita Dimitrov Nankov, Indiana University

This paper demonstrates the beauty and sophistication of Chekhov's early short story, the overlooked masterpiece "On ponial!" ("He Understood!"), by analyzing it in two theoretical frameworks: that of the depth model and that of the genre of confession. This investigation helps us to understand some basic features of the poetics of Chekhov's prose fiction, and challenges certain labels given to the writer by the critics.

What I term the depth model in Chekhov's poetics is a narrative mode that represents the fictional phenomena as possessing a potential that unfolds and tries to reach its fulfillment, a gradual deciphering of experience, which leads to increasingly greater comprehension. The personal depth model uncovers a character's talent and ethical integrity that are suppressed by social norms. The universal depth model reveals the human and humane potential of social existence that is stifled by the status quo.

The three characters in "On ponial!" – Pavel Khromoi, Petr Egorich Volchkov, and Sergei – are portrayed according to the personal depth model. Moreover, the link between the personal and the universal depth model is explained by exploring two motifs of nature: that of nature expecting rain and that of a wasp trying to get free.

In "On ponial!," the encounter between Pavel Khromoi and Petr Egorich presents in miniature some of the historical key stages of confession as a genre in Western thought. Confession as a genre is defined by two major features: first, it is a dialogue between an Ethical Self (the one who confesses) and an Ethical Other (the one who listens to the confession); and, second, confession is based on subjective temporality rooted in consciousness. The interaction between these two features defines three historical stages of confessions: the traditional Christian phase, the Renaissance and modern one, and the extreme modern forms. If the Christian version of confession is still within the realistic paradigm in which Chekhov is usually interpreted, the second, the modern one, challenges the notion of Chekhov as a realist.