

## CHEKHOV, ANTON

1860-1904

Russian short-story writer and playwright

Anton Chekhov's "A Nervous Breakdown" ["Pripadok," also translated as "A Nervous Fit," "A Nervous Attack," "An Attack of Nerves," and "The Fit"] is an important part of the canon of nineteenth-century Russian literature devoted to the problem of prostitution. Written in 1888, it was published the following year in a collection of stories to honor the memory of the recently deceased writer Vsevolod Garshin, whose "An Occurrence" (1875) and "Nadezhda Nikolaevna" (1885) had developed the long-standing theme of the "fallen woman." Though a few of Chekhov's critics attacked the story for its subject matter, "A Nervous Breakdown" was not only well-received, but even met with little difficulty at the hands of the tsarist censors. The story was rejected only once, when it was to be reprinted in a collection called "For the Fallen" [Za padshikh"] in 1891. The entire collection was banned.

"A Nervous Breakdown" is the story of a law student named Vasil'ev, who, against his better judgment, is convinced to join his friends on a visit to a series of brothels on the notorious S\_\_\_ Street (clearly modeled on Sobolev Street, a well-known red-light district in prerevolutionary Moscow). Prior to this excursion, Vasil'ev familiarity with "fallen women" was limited to books and newspapers, but he had already developed strong opinions on the matter: "He knew that there were such immoral women, who, under the pressure of fatal circumstances—their environment, a bad upbringing, necessity, etc.—were obliged to sell their honor for money." Vasil'ev's attitude clearly falls within the "progressive" side of late nineteenth-century Russia, since he assumes that prostitution is—at heart—a social problem. At the same time, his attitude is also based on romantic or religious concerns rather than on pure materialism: he is convinced that, despite their sins, prostitutes are still made in God's image, and can still hope for redemption. He agrees to join his friends not out of any

conscious sexual desire, but rather to become more knowledgeable about this moral problem.

Vasil'ev's disenchantment is almost immediate: first and foremost, he is appalled by the sheer vulgarity of his surroundings (the decor, the entertainment, the servants, the women's dresses and manners), and then by the mercantile basis of all brothel interactions: in the first house they visit, Vasil'ev naively spends his money buying drinks at a prostitute's request, unaware that the madam has instructed all her "girls" to get their clients to spend as much on food and drink as possible. After witnessing a scandalous scene where a client beats a drunken prostitute to the accompaniment of screams and tears, Vasil'ev refuses to continue his expedition and has a falling out with his friends. Upon returning home, Vasil'ev cannot stop thinking of the women and their fates, desperately trying to devise a solution to their plight. Eventually, his friends bring him to a psychiatrist. He asks the doctor if prostitution is evil, to which the psychiatrist responds: "My dear man, who could argue?" The psychiatrist gives him some medications, and soon Vasil'ev feels well enough to go back to the university.

Chekhov's approach to prostitution in "A Nervous Breakdown" is noteworthy for a number of reasons. Like most Russian prostitution narratives, it addresses the problem while remaining decidedly discreet in referring to sexual activity itself; Chekhov's story goes even further in that the protagonists visit several brothels without even having sex at all. "A Nervous Breakdown" maintains the high moral tone established for such stories by previous writers (especially Garshin), but it adds an element of self-consciousness that was previously absent. Vasil'ev has one advantage over the heroes of other tales of attempts at rescuing the "fallen woman": he has read their stories, and he knows how they usually end. In a clear reference to Nikolai Chernyshevsky's radical novel *What Is To Be Done?* [Chto delat'?] (1863), which established the pattern for Russian literature about prostitution for decades to come, he

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recalls cases in which men have liberated individual prostitutes from their madams and their pimps, set them up in their own apartments, and bought them "the inevitable sewing machine" to help them learn an honest trade. None of these attempts ends well, and all of them are a piecemeal solution to a wide-scale social problem. If prostitution stories are usually narratives of salvation (attempted or successful), Vasil'ev finds them unsatisfactory at least in part for their focus on the individual woman.

"A Nervous Breakdown" problematizes prostitution by placing it on the very cusp between the personal and the social: the story is about the lives of individuals, but the context is such that the main character can never be satisfied with an individual, small-scale answer. Indeed, Chekhov's brothel expedition can easily be interpreted as a microcosm for the entire Russian public sphere: besides Vasil'ev, a law student, the other two men on the S\_\_ street tour are an artist and a medical student. Each of them represents the professions that, in theory, should be most concerned with this phenomenon, yet only Vasil'ev even considers it a problem. And none of them brings his expertise to bear when visiting the brothel: it is Vasil'ev, rather than the artist, who objects to his surroundings on aesthetic grounds, but Vasil'ev himself never considers prostitution from a legal point of view. This intersection between the established professions (such as medicine and law) and the "oldest profession" would be developed further in Alexander Kuprin's encyclopedic potboiler *The Pit [Iuma]* (1908–1915).

### Biography

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born January 17, 1860 in Taganrog, Russia. Completed medical school in 1884. Began his writing career in 1880, initially as the author of humorous short stories for popular newspapers and magazines, before moving on to longer narrative forms. His work in the theater in the 1890s and early 1900s established his reputation as one of the greatest playwrights of the modern era. After suffering from tuberculosis for twenty years, he died of the disease in 1904.

ELIOT BORENSTEIN

### Selected Works

- Chekhov, Anton. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*. 30 vols. Moscow, 1977.
- Chekhov, Anton. "An Attack of Nerves." *The Portable Chekhov*. Edited by Avrahm Yarmolinsky. New York: Penguin, 1988.
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### Further Reading

- Borenstein, Eliot. *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929*. Durham: Duke, 2000.
- Match, Olga. "A Typology of Fallen Women in Nineteenth Century Russian Literature." *American Contributions to the Ninth International Congress of Slavists*. Vol. 2. Columbus, OH: Slavic Press, 1983. 325–343.
- Meister, Charles W. *Chekhov Criticism: 1880 through 1986*. London: McFarland & Company, 1988.
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## CHEVRIER, FRANÇOIS ANTOINE

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1721–1762

French satirist, political publicist, pamphleteer, and journalist.

A prolific writer, Chevrier tried many genres: in addition to several plays he published numerous writings based on private scandals, on the history

and politics of several European countries, or a mixture of the two. There are sketches of social types in the manner of La Bruyère (*Les ridicules du siècle*), but really Chevrier was a scandal-monger; at best he aspires to be a sort of chronicler of the life of his times, like Restif de la Bretonne after him; and like Restif he seems