

The Beggar

by Anton Chekhov

Focus Spot

Major Themes:

The major themes in Anton Chekhov's short story 'The Beggar' are as follows:

➤ **Alcoholism, Desperation and Struggle**

The story is part of Chekhov's collection 'The Complete Short Stories'. The story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator and right from the beginning the readers realise that Chekhov is exploring the theme of desperation and struggle.

Due to his alcoholism, Lushkov is no longer able to work and has to resort to begging in order to survive. He also begins to lie about his misfortune hoping that the story he creates (e.g., schoolteacher) will help him to get money from strangers as they will take pity on him. He knows that if a stranger hears that he wants money so that he can continue to drink no one will help to him.

In essence, Lushkov is being dishonest in order to survive or satisfy his addiction to alcohol. It is interesting to note that due to his lying Sergei shows Lushkov little or no compassion believing that hard work will cure him of his homelessness and addiction to alcohol.

➤ **Kindness and compassion**

One might argue that the path Sergei follows is probably a noble one, yet it turns out that Sergei's suggestion does not work for Lushkov and it is only through the kindness and compassion of Olga that Lushkov begins to transform his life and give up drinking. It is through listening and talking to Olga that Lushkov realises the error of his ways and is finally able to mend his life.

Though it is true that Sergei provided the impetus (or work) for Lushkov to change it is Olga who needs to be given full credit for the compassion and kindness that she showed Lushkov. Had it not been for Olga, Lushkov's life would not have changed for the better.

➤ **Dishonesty**

It is also worth noting that Sergei is allowing his ego to take credit for helping Lushkov improve his life. In reality, Sergei may be more impressed with himself and his ability or at least his ego-boosting belief that he was able to help someone than the actual act of helping an individual. Throughout the story, the reader can perceive that Sergei's goodwill is more about him boosting his ego than helping Lushkov get back on his feet. Rather than showing Lushkov compassion when they first meet Sergei is upset that Lushkov has lied to him. He doesn't understand that Lushkov was left without an option but to lie to him in order to try and survive. If anything, Sergei may be the more dishonest of the two men even though he is constantly judging Lushkov for lying without taking into consideration his circumstances.

➤ **Selflessness**

Some critics suggest that Lushkov continued to lie to Olga about being unable to chop the wood and took advantage of her good nature it is more likely that Lushkov through his alcoholism was unable to physically exert himself. Something that is lost on Sergei. It is also worth noting that though Sergei thinks he is acting out of charity he is in fact gaining something as he is getting his wood chopped. He is not acting selflessly though he intends others to see him in that light. The number one person in Sergei's life throughout the story is Sergei himself. Each task that Sergei asks Lushkov to carry out is for his own gain. Whether it is chopping the wood or helping him to move furniture. He cleanses his soul through the act of paying Lushkov and in many ways patronizing him when it comes to Lushkov's alcohol intake. At no stage in the story is there a sense that Sergei understands Lushkov's alcoholism.

Olga on the contrary is in several ways is the opposite to Sergei. She attempts to help Lushkov physically by chopping the wood and giving him advice on the evils of alcohol. She takes more of a selfless interest in Lushkov's life than Sergei does.

➤ **Gratitude**

It is also noticeable that Lushkov is grateful to Olga something that the readers become aware of when he is talking to Sergei at the theatre. Despite the passing of time he has not forgotten all that Olga has done for him which comes as a surprise to Sergei who have so long believed that he is the one who is responsible for helping Lushkov reclaim his life. However, the reality is that Sergei's words and deeds are no match for the actions of Olga who is the real impetus for change in Lushkov's life.

➤ **Transformation of one's character**

It may also be a case that Chekhov is suggesting that when it comes to transformation on a man's character, it is the woman's selfless silent caring hand that will guided Lushkov revisit his actions rather than Sergei's intimidation. Instinctively, Olga knows what is best for Lushkov while Sergei is critical and compare his own circumstances and the benefits of Lushkov who is less fortunate.

Though it would appear that Sergei was thinking of others, the reality is that he was judgmental of Lushkov considering him to be no more than a liar and an alcoholic. Both of which was true but Lushkov through Olga's guidance and selfless compassion showed that he has so much more to offer. That he is just as good as anyone else even though he may have had difficult circumstances to overcome.