



ST. LAWRENCE HIGH SCHOOL

A JESUIT CHRISTIAN MINORITY INSTITUTION



STUDY MATERIAL 9

Sub: ENGLISH 'B'

Class: XII

Topic : THE PROPOSAL

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About the Author: Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (29 January 1860 – 15 July 1904) was a Russian playwright and short-story writer who is considered to be among the greatest writers of short fiction in history. He was a literary artist of laconic precision who probed below the surface of life, laying bare the secret motives of his characters. Chekhov described the Russian life of his time using a deceptively simple technique devoid of obtrusive literary devices, and he is regarded as the outstanding representative of the late 19th-century Russian realist school. His career as a playwright produced four classics, and his best short stories are held in high esteem by writers and critics alike. Along with Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg, Chekhov is often referred to as one of the three seminal figures in the birth of early modernism in the theatre. Chekhov practiced as a medical doctor throughout most of his literary career: "Medicine is my lawful wife", he once said, "and literature is my mistress. Chekhov had at first written stories to earn money, but as his artistic ambition grew, he made formal innovations which have influenced the evolution of the modern short story.

Synopsis of the Play: 'A Marriage Proposal' (sometimes translated as simply 'The Proposal', is a one-act farce by Anton Chekhov, written in 1888–1889 and first performed in 1890. It is a fast-paced play of dialogue-based action and situational humour. Ivan Vassiliyitch Lomov, a long-time neighbor of Stepan Stepanovitch Chubukov, has come to propose marriage to Chubukov's 25-year-old daughter, Natalya. After he has asked and received joyful permission to marry Natalya, she is invited into the room, and he tries to convey to her the proposal. Lomov is a hypochondriac, and, while trying to make clear his reasons for being there, he gets into an argument with Natalya about The Oxen Meadows, a disputed piece of land between their respective properties, which results in him having "palpitations" and numbness in his leg. After her father notices they are arguing, he joins in, and then sends Ivan out of the house. While Stepan rants about Lomov, he expresses his shock that "this fool dares to make you (Natalya) a proposal of marriage!" Natalya then realizes that Lomov wanted to marry her and immediately gets hysterical, begging her father to bring him back. He does, and Natalya and Ivan get into a second big argument, this time about the superiority of their respective hunting dogs, Guess and Squeezer. Ivan collapses from his exhaustion over arguing, and father and daughter fear he's dead, sending them into another round of hysterics. However, after a few minutes he regains consciousness, and Chubukov all but forces him and his daughter to accept the proposal with a kiss. Immediately following the kiss, the couple gets into another argument over their dogs.

Critical Analysis of the Play: In Chekhov's A Marriage Proposal economic security takes precedence over romance and love. Even though Russia is the primary setting, it can be anywhere in the world, and the home can be the case of any household history. But they are representative of every man, every couple in the world of families. Anton Chekhov is a master at producing satirical comedies like 'The Proposal' that is so realistic. The theme of the play stems from the culture practice of 19th century Russia when economic stability of the upper classes rested in the possession of as much land as possible. This aspect is shown through the argument between Lomov and Chubukov and his daughter regarding the possession of the Oxen Meadows. The comic elements of the play mainly include the process of

courtship and getting married. It could be read as a satire on the upper middle class, majorly the landed gentry. Chekhov introduces us to the shortest form of one-act play. There is no complication in the plot. Though brief, the focus of the essay is complete in itself. The satire is conveyed successfully by emphasising the couple's foolish arguments over petty mundane issues. There are only three characters and they are over emotional and expressive as in a farcical comedy we normally observe. Though Chubukov himself once called 'The Proposal' 'wretched' and 'boring', but later this play became much popular in Moscow. The play successfully draws our attention to the flaws of the then society with the help of comedy and laughter.

Character Analysis and the Conflicts Among Them: The three characters in The Proposal - Chubukov, Natasha, and Lomov — can be respectively introduced as Father, Daughter and Suitor to Daughter. Although the trio meets here to discuss marriage, they always tend to end up in a great dispute over some trivial matter. The origin of all their disputes can be named as the ineptitude of Lomov at keeping to the point. As he is mostly responsible for the disputes on the stage and he is the opponent of the other two, Chubukov and Natasha, it is logical to begin this character analysis with Lomov. Lomov is a landowner and is accepted by the Chubukov family as a member of their class. He lives in the neighbourhood of the Chubukovs and during the play he visits them unexpectedly, wearing tails and white gloves. His dress surprises both Chubukov and Natasha. That means, in 19th century Russia, it was not customary for a man to wear a tail suit on a surprise visit. Although the purpose of his journey is to make a proposal for marrying Natasha, he does not need to wear a tail suit during his visit for the preliminary discussions with her family. What Chekhov tries to show through his clothing is his lack of self-confidence and his habit of trying to cover up his weak personality in his best gear. However, he makes a joke out of his clothes by surprising both Chubukov who is in his ordinary clothes and Natasha who is in an apron that she usually wears for work. Chubukov welcomes Lomov, but the latter is too naïve to understand the element of condescension hidden in those salutations lavishly flowing from the mouth of his host. His tailsuit is reduced to a joke in Chubukov's question "Then why are you in evening dress, my precious? As if you're paying a New Year's Eve visit!" Lomov, although he expected his tail suit to help him, does not find any support from it at all. He goes on pouring out compliments for his host and mutters about some favour that he is expecting from the latter, but without explaining what it is. He confuses Chubukov and leads him to decide that, if it is money, not to give him any. With great difficulty he finally says that he wants to marry Natasha. Lomov learns from him that his daughter is "in love" with him "like a love-sick cat". Nevertheless, he is still very insecure about himself in this venture, as he cannot believe that Natasha will like him. This shows that Lomov, although he is a wealthy, good-looking landowner, has a great inferiority complex. Another prominent feature of his character is that he often complains about various physical ailments such as cold, heart problems, palpitations, trembling, noises in his head, stabbing sensations all over his body, and inability to sleep. In the introduction to his character, Chekhov mentions that he is a healthy, well-nourished person but querulous about his health. The author's description of his character and the complaints that he frequently makes establish that his ailments are not totally physical but psychological. A possible explanation for this contradictory nature of his character is that his psychological condition is so weak that he has hallucinations of these pains in his body. When Natasha appears, he cannot talk to her about the purpose of his coming. He declines her offer to organise some lunch and sits with her, but gets agitated by her question as to why he is wearing such formal dress, and continues to talk in an

incoherent way. He has been already assured by Natasha's father that he is being loved by her, but he once again makes a different approach to the subject. He covers the long acquaintance between his family and hers, the location of their properties, and finally tries to trespass a prohibited zone, the Oxen meadows. This clarifies that Lomov places more faith in his family name, his clothes, his properties, and other external things rather than himself. He doesn't want to talk about love or something that stimulates a woman but about properties and family ties, because in his world those things decide one's personal affairs. Lomov upsets a hornet nest by referring to the Oxen meadows and gets involved in a very unpleasant dispute with Natasha and Chubukov. This increases the pains in his body, and finally, instead of trying to prove his ownership of the meadows, he starts insulting them and is confronted by a more vehement stream of abuse. The dispute becomes unbearable to him both physically and mentally, and he leaves the stage, ordered by Chubukov not to come there again. After sometime he returns to Chubukov's house. His returning suggests that although he is attacked by the Chubukovs, he is still interested in marrying Natasha. This may imply that landowners always have a common respect for each other although they break away at the times of dispute. He is still in a tight corner because he cannot move away from his class, his personal ambitions and his inefficiency in diplomacy. The key problem of Lomov's character is his difficulty to talk to the point. This may have been caused by his lack of education, which deprives him of the kind of pragmatic knowledge and social skills that one needs in today's world in communicating with people. Even his psychological constitution has some effect on his behaviour. He develops a kind of nervousness because he is not self-confident. This increases his complaints about all kinds of physical ailments throughout the play. His incoherence always throws him away from his topic. Twice he travels into the past and brings in facts about two different subjects, but he does not manage to achieve his aim, i.e., proposing marriage to Natasha. Even his knowledge about the latter's desire to get married to him does not support him in organising his conversation, because he has a grave defect in his personality. Chekhov uses him as a caricature of an uneducated but wealthy landowner in his society. Natalya Stepanovna or Natasha is an important character in the play because she is the main opponent of Lomov's arguments. Chekhov makes very effective use of her role in highlighting how social conflicts develop owing to communication failures. She is about 25 years of age, too old to live single in the 19th century Russian society. Her father considers her a burden in his life. She herself may be frustrated because it is unusual for a woman to live so long single. She appears as an enterprising landowner busy with the workers in her land. Her clothes suggest that Natalya is not such an extreme personality as Lomov. She is quite normal in her behaviour and attitude to life, although she is immature and inexperienced as the rest of the type of wealthy uneducated land-owning society introduced in the play. The conflict between Natalya and Lomov originates from her intolerance to those who appear to be a threat to her claims for and about various subjects, which matter to her class identity. According to her father, even before their meeting Natasha has been in love with Lomov in her dreams, although the latter did not know it, but she does not take any of this into account when it comes to arguing. There are two major disputes in the play: one is about the Oxen meadows, and the other is about the dogs. In both these disputes, Natasha is sharper and more articulate than Lomov in presenting her ideas. Each time she loses her temper when Lomov opens a taboo subject and then drags him into a long argument. She gets impatient when she hears Lomov mentioning the Oxen meadows as his and does not wait for him to finish his speech. It is difficult to put the blame on her for that because Lomov is guilty of digression, or dragging in unnecessary subjects while he wants to talk

about love, romance and marriage. She is a strong conformist in her family. Therefore she considers that she has an important role in protecting the beliefs, conditions, values and traditions set by her family. This makes her fight vindictively to disprove the claims of Lomov who she misunderstands as a rival force. Each time she manages to acquire her father's assistance in establishing her position about the subjects they discuss the Oxen meadows and the two dogs, she joins him in abusing Lomov in a destructive way. She even challenges Lomov that she will prove her ownership of the Oxen meadows, although later she admits with scepticism that they are his. Therefore it is clear that he tends to intimidate her opponents, although her claims are not always truth-oriented. Her frustration at living so long a spinster comes to light when she starts moaning and pressing her father to bring him back after she realises that Lomov came to make a proposal to her. She repents of her failure to get her marriage to him fixed. She is diplomatic in the way she reconciles herself with Lomov by apologising for her hasty arrival at the claim that the Oxen meadows are hers. When the air becomes clear for a fresh conversation, they start talking about their dogs. Her tendency to lose her temper when the other people praise their belongings is clear in her reaction to Lomov's description of his dog. She begins to talk high of her dog and to undermine her suitor's dog, and that adds straw to a burning fire. She betrays an element of immaturity in her question "Papa, tell us truly, which is the better dog, our Squeezer or his Guess?" Until Lomov collapses she continues to argue and then to abuse him. When he is thought to be dead, she starts shrieking, sobbing, and laughing hysterically, thinking that she has lost him forever. Her hysteria is a symptom of her frustration about becoming too old for marriage. In spite of Lomov's numerous complaints about various body pains, his conspicuous lack of self-confidence and his constant digression in speech, she wants to marry him. A possible explanation for this stance of hers is that, although he is the worst personality in the surroundings, he is rich and he belongs to her own class. Chekhov brilliantly shows the dominance of class-consciousness in the personal affairs of the members of this particular society. Once their marriage is initiated by Chubukov, she does not wait a second to make her point that "Guess is not as good a dog as Squeezer". This again provides a strong clue to her conformism. Chubukov shares most of the weaknesses that Natasha and Lomov possess, but he is the most experienced and mature of the three individuals. He is not a conscientious person, because he does not abide by the impression that he tries to create in his guest, Lomov. He vociferates quite a number of stereotyped salutations to please the latter, but promises to himself that he would not give him any money. The superficial kind of friendship that he tries to achieve with his neighbour implies that he is not as mature, profound and respectable a character as a dignified old man of his age could be. But his shrewdness is manifest in all his exchanges with Lomov. When he realises that Lomov came to visit him in order to make a proposal to his daughter, he is overjoyed. He exaggeratingly assures Lomov that Natasha is in love with him, and promises him a positive answer from her, but the way he describes Lomov's mission to Natasha leads to a great ambiguity. Although his cliché "a merchant come for his goods" to describe a suitor come to see his daughter is a key-phrase in such a situation, it does not reveal any respect for the institution of family on his part as the father of a grown-up daughter, but reduces the concept of marriage to the act of purchasing a commodity. This cliché not only leads to Natasha's misunderstanding of Lomov in the first instance but also illustrates the stereotyped values in the kind of society that Chekhov is trying to depict. The pack of abuses and insults that he exchanges with Lomov can be interpreted just as a product of this mentality. Like Natasha, he also does not tolerate Lomov's speaking style. When he learns the reason for his coming, he sends in his daughter and leaves the stage for a long time. He joins them again to find a boiling situation. He simply supports his daughter's argument that the

Oxen meadows are theirs and later on attacks Lomov with all types of scandalous stories about his family. When Natasha presses him to bring back Lomov, he is really embarrassed and talks about committing suicide. This implies that he is frustrated by his family. His belief "I'm the most unhappy of men!" supports Lomov's remark "your wife used to beat you". Although he has all the shrewdness of a wealthy landowner suspected by everybody for conspiring against others, he is afraid of his daughter. As a father he does not try to prevent the heated arguments, but joins Natasha in battling against Lomov. When she pleads him to bring Lomov back, he runs out. The banality of their father-daughter relationship emerges in his warning to her "Hurry up and get married and well to the devil with you!" Here he considers the act of marrying his daughter to Lomov as a trick to get rid of her. The play ends while he is trying to shout them down by calling for "Champagne". The most common elements in all these three characters are conformism, banality, pride and aggressiveness. They all conform to the traditions in their families. Therefore, they respect even the bad in their class. They become aggressive even for trivial matters, because they are banal and very devoted to their pride. Lomov mentions the Oxen meadows not because he wants to claim them but to show the strength of his relationship with the Chubukov family. Even if his intention is to claim them, there is no reason to argue. By arguing with each other, they will not solve any problem. They get trapped in a long argument just because of their lack of tolerance towards each other and their desire to keep their pride. When somebody praises her dog, it does not provide any reason to quarrel with her. But these three characters get involved in a conflict with regard to their dogs. By establishing one's dog's superiority to another's, one does not achieve anything except a feeling of pride. Chekhov highlights the primitive nature of the three individuals in both these disputes, where they display their conformism, banality, pride and aggressiveness by boasting about their families, properties and their pets.

Significance of the Title: Anton Chekhov's one – act play 'The Proposal' is a play where farce is used to laugh at the society that believed marriage would bring about economic stability. All the characters are influenced by the marriage proposal. Lomov, aged about 35, is desperate for a wife. Natalya is unable to find her man and Chubukov wants Natalya, his daughter, to be married soon. Hearing Lomov's proposal, Chubukov is overwhelmed. But before direct proposal to Natalya, Lomov allows himself to be side – tracked into arguments with Natalya over land and their hunting dogs. Later, after listening about Lomov's proposal Natalya demands her father to get Lomov back and eventually the proposal was successfully complemented. Marriage during Chekhov's time is only a convenient business deal more than anything else. It really does not matter if the two individuals involved are of different temperaments or held different opinions or loved each other. Lomov comes to ask for Natalya's hand in marriage but later he admits that he is not in love with her but he wants to marry her for economic and social stability. Chubukov is the business like father who considers his daughter a liability and wants her daughter's maximum gain through marriage. Hence, marriage proposal is the central theme of the drama and the title is appropriate.