

**Debating Life and Death: Student Reflections on Contradictions in
Anton Chekhov's *The Bet***

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Abstract

*This study explores students' responses to Anton Chekhov's *The Bet* through the lens of Richard Beach's transactional theory, with a focus on their engagement with the story's central moral conflict. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, the study examines how students navigate the contradiction between life imprisonment and the death penalty by analyzing data from students' intellectual diaries, classroom discussions, and interviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in students' emotional, ethical, and cognitive responses. Findings reveal that students engage with the text in diverse ways, including emotional reactions, ethical reflections, and collaborative meaning-making. The study underscores the influence of personal experiences, values, and peer interactions on literary interpretation, highlighting the pedagogical significance of fostering critical engagement with morally complex narratives in higher education. This study also highlights the importance of selecting literature that challenges students with complex moral issues, as their emotional and ethical engagement with texts like *The Bet* fosters their critical thinking, self-reflection, and personal growth.*

Keywords: *Intellectual Diary, Literary Interpretation. The Bet, Transactional Theory, Students' Responses.*

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on capital punishment and life imprisonment has been a longstanding subject of contention throughout human history. Many countries have abolished the death penalty from their legal systems based on human rights considerations. However, a significant number of nations continue to implement capital punishment under strict regulations (Hamonangan, 2021), reserving it exclusively for individuals convicted of criminal acts who have crossed the human limit, endanger, and threaten many people or extraordinary crimes (Solihah & Masyhar, 2021).

Anton Chekhov's short story *The Bet* is a compelling exploration of the moral and philosophical tensions surrounding the death penalty and life imprisonment. Written in 1889, the story portrays a wager between a banker and a young lawyer that raises profound questions about justice, human dignity, and the value of life. The lawyer agrees to endure fifteen years of voluntary confinement in exchange for a monetary reward, while the banker stakes his fortune on the lawyer's inability to endure such isolation. Through this narrative, Chekhov presents a multi-faceted discourse on the ethical implications of punishment, forcing readers to grapple with the contradictions inherent in these forms of justice. For students, engaging with such a complex text provides an opportunity to confront their own beliefs and values, while also honing their critical thinking and interpretive skills.

In contemporary classrooms, texts like *The Bet* serve as valuable tools for fostering ethical awareness and encouraging dialogue about moral dilemmas. It can also serve as a powerful means of cultural education by offering valuable perspectives on the values, beliefs, convictions, and life experiences of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Hasbi & Bakri, 2024). The death penalty and life imprisonment remain highly relevant and contentious issues in today's world, sparking debates about their efficacy, humanity, and alignment with justice (Arifullah, 2024). For young readers, particularly those preparing to navigate a complex and diverse society, analyzing such themes can promote deeper understanding and empathy. This study aims to explore how students respond to the contradictory discourse presented in *The Bet*, using Richard Beach's transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1994) as a framework to understand the dynamic relationship between the reader and the text. By examining their emotional, ethical, and cognitive reactions, this research seeks to uncover how students negotiate meaning in the face of moral complexity.

Richard Beach's transactional theory offers a lens through which to analyze the interplay between students' individual experiences and their interpretations of *The Bet* short story. Building on the work of Louise Rosenblatt, Beach emphasizes that meaning is not passively received from the text but actively constructed through the interaction between the reader and the text (Kunjanman & Azis, 2021). This transactional process is shaped by the reader's prior knowledge, cultural background, and personal values,

making it particularly suited to studying how students respond to the ethical tensions in *The Bet*. By focusing on the reader's role in meaning-making, transactional theory allows lecturers to understand not only what students think about the story but also why they think that way.

The objective of this study is to analyze students' responses to *The Bet* story through the lens of transactional theory, with particular attention to their engagement with the story's central moral conflict. Specifically, this research seeks to uncover how students interpret the ethical dimensions of the lawyer's voluntary confinement and the banker's moral struggle, as well as how they reconcile these interpretations with their own beliefs about justice and punishment. By examining students' intellectual diaries (reflective journals), classroom discussions, and interviews, this study aims to illuminate the ways in which students construct meaning from the text and navigate its inherent contradictions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Richard Beach's transactional theory serves as the guiding framework for this study, providing a comprehensive approach to understanding how students interact with texts. Grounded in the principles of reader response theory, Beach's transactional model emphasizes the dynamic relationship between the reader and the text. Building on the work of Louise Rosenblatt, who introduced the concept of reading as a transactional process, Beach highlights the ways in which readers bring their own experiences, cultural contexts, and prior knowledge to bear on their interpretations (Marhaeni, 1998). This interplay between reader and text results in a unique and evolving construction of meaning.

Central to Beach's theory is the idea that readers do not merely extract meaning from a text; instead, they actively construct it through their engagement (Beach, 1993). This process is shaped by the reader's emotional, ethical, and cognitive responses, which are influenced by their personal and sociocultural contexts. In the case of Anton Chekhov's *The Bet*, students' interpretations of the story's ethical dilemmas—such as the value of life, the morality of punishment, and the nature of justice—are likely to be informed by their individual perspectives and life experiences. By examining these

responses, lecturers can gain insight into how students navigate complex moral issues and negotiate meaning in the face of textual contradictions.

Beach's transactional framework is particularly relevant for analyzing responses to *The Bet* because it accounts for the multifaceted nature of reader engagement. It allows for the exploration of how students reconcile conflicting ideas presented in the story, such as the lawyer's philosophical transformation and the banker's moral struggle. Furthermore, the framework provides a means of understanding how students' interpretations evolve over the course of their reading, as they reflect on the ethical and philosophical questions posed by the text. This approach not only sheds light on the reading process but also offers valuable insights into how literature can be used to foster critical thinking and ethical awareness in the classroom (Rosenblatt, 2014).

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore students' responses to the contradiction between life imprisonment and death penalty in Anton Chekhov's *The Bet*, focusing on their engagement with the moral and philosophical dilemmas presented in the short story. In qualitative research, a descriptive method involves analyzing data while remaining closely aligned with it, employing minimal theoretical frameworks and interpretation, and organizing the information into thematic categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

This research was structured in accordance with reader response theory, which emphasizes examining how readers engage with a text. In this approach, the reader is seen as an active participant who brings the text to life and shapes its meaning through interpretation (Deshpande, 2018). This research used data from students' intellectual diaries, classroom discussion and interviews. The intellectual diary, which is well-known for being a reader response journal, was utilized to gather opinions and reactions from students who had read *The Bet* short story. To further understand the students' reactions and perspectives on the contradiction of death penalty and life imprisonment, the classroom discussion and the interview data were utilized.

Source of Data

The research was conducted in a university literature classroom setting, with 34 participants ranging from 20 to 22 years of age. The 34 participants are students enrolled in English prose course. The study was conducted over a two-week period as part of the class's unit on literature interpretation and reception. Before reading *The Bet*, students were introduced to the historical and cultural context of the story to provide a foundation for their understanding of the text.

Data were collected through multiple methods to capture the nuances of students' responses. First, students maintained intellectual diaries or reflective journals where they documented their thoughts, emotions, and questions as they read the story. These journals provided insight into their individual reading processes and allowed for an in-depth analysis of their personal engagement with the text. Second, classroom discussions were recorded and transcribed to capture the collective dynamics of meaning-making. Finally, a semi-structured interview was administered at the end of the period to gather additional reflections on the students' overall experience with the text.

Technique of Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Richard Beach's transactional theory as the guiding framework. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in students' emotional, ethical, and cognitive responses to the text by using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thematic analysis is a useful and flexible method for qualitative research for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. In doing thematic analysis, six steps were conducted: (a) familiarizing with the data; b) generating initial codes; c) looking for themes; d) reviewing themes; e) naming and defining the themes; and (f) writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data from students' intellectual diaries were coded to categorize themes related to its similarities and differences. Second, the classroom discussions were analyzed for evidence of collaborative meaning-making, including instances where students challenged or built upon each other's interpretations. Finally, the interview data were examined to triangulate the findings from the diaries and discussions, providing a comprehensive view of how students engaged with the text.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings from the analysis of students' responses to Anton Chekhov's *The Bet*, focusing on their emotional, ethical, and cognitive engagement with the text. Guided by Richard Beach's transactional theory, the findings are categorized into three primary themes: (1) emotional engagement with the text, (2) ethical reflections and moral reasoning, and (3) collaborative meaning-making in the classroom.

1. Emotional Engagement with the Text

One of the most striking aspects of the students' responses was their deep emotional engagement with the characters and situations in *The Bet*. Many students demonstrated empathy for the lawyer, particularly as they reflected on the immense psychological toll of fifteen years of isolation. One student wrote in her diary, "I felt sorry for the lawyer because he gave up so much of his life for a bet. It made me think about what I would miss if I had to live in isolation for even a year." This sense of empathy often extended to reflections on their own lives, with students contemplating the value of freedom and human connection.

In addition to empathy, students experienced a range of emotions, including frustration, admiration, and shock. For instance, some students expressed frustration with the banker's initial arrogance and later desperation. One student wrote in his diary, "The banker's actions made me angry because he cared more about his money than the lawyer's sacrifice. It shows how greed can destroy people." These emotional responses reveal how students' engagement with the text went beyond intellectual analysis, highlighting the story's power to evoke strong affective reactions.

The emotional engagement also influenced students' interpretations of the story's themes. For example, students who felt a strong connection to the lawyer often interpreted his decision to renounce the wager as an act of moral superiority, while others viewed it as a tragic loss. These varied interpretations underscore the transactional nature of reading, as students' emotions played a key role in shaping their understanding of the text.

2. Ethical Reflections and Moral Reasoning

The ethical dilemmas presented in *The Bet* prompted students to engage in thoughtful moral reasoning. The central conflict between the death penalty and life

imprisonment sparked intense debate, with students drawing on their own values and experiences to form their opinions. During a classroom discussion, one student argued, “Life imprisonment is worse than the death penalty because it takes away a person’s hope. At least with the death penalty, it’s quick and final.” Another countered, “But life imprisonment gives people a chance to reflect and possibly change. It’s more humane than just ending someone’s life.” These contrasting viewpoints illustrate how the story encouraged students to critically evaluate complex ethical issues.

Students’ reflections often extended beyond the specific context of the story to broader questions about justice and human nature. In their diaries, many students wrestled with the lawyer’s ultimate rejection of material wealth, interpreting it as a critique of societal values. One student wrote, “The lawyer’s decision shows that money isn’t everything. He found something deeper during his time in isolation, even if it cost him his youth.” Others questioned the fairness of the wager itself, describing it as an unethical experiment that dehumanized both participants.

Richard Beach’s transactional theory emphasizes the role of readers’ prior knowledge and personal values in shaping their interpretations. This was evident in the ways students connected the story’s ethical dilemmas to their own lives. For example, some students drew parallels between the lawyer’s confinement and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting how isolation affected their mental health and priorities. These connections enriched their understanding of the story and demonstrated the relevance of literature to contemporary issues.

3. Collaborative Meaning-Making in the Classroom

Classroom discussions played a crucial role in fostering collaborative meaning-making, allowing students to build on each other’s ideas and challenge differing perspectives. Guided by open-ended questions, these discussions often revealed the diversity of interpretations among students. For instance, when asked about the lawyer’s decision to renounce the wager, some students viewed it as a moment of triumph, while others saw it as a sign of defeat. One student remarked, “The lawyer is the winner of the bet. He proved that he’s better than the banker because he didn’t let money control him,” while another argued, “He failed. He wasted fifteen years of his life only to give up at the end. It’s tragic.”

These differing viewpoints sparked lively debates, encouraging students to articulate and defend their interpretations. This process of negotiation and dialogue aligns with Beach's concept of collaborative meaning-making, where readers construct understanding through interaction with others. Students often cited specific passages from the text to support their arguments, demonstrating their engagement with the story and their ability to use evidence effectively.

The collaborative nature of the discussions also allowed students to explore alternative interpretations they might not have considered on their own. For example, one student noted, "I hadn't thought about how the banker's fear of losing his fortune shows his own imprisonment. It's like he's trapped by his greed." Such moments of insight highlight the value of collaborative learning in deepening students' understanding of literature.

Implications for Teaching Literature

The findings of this study have several implications for teaching literature in secondary education. First, the emotional and ethical engagement demonstrated by students underscores the importance of selecting texts that challenge them to confront complex moral issues. Stories like *The Bet* not only foster critical thinking but also encourage students to reflect on their own values and beliefs, making literature a powerful tool for personal and ethical growth.

Second, the study highlights the value of using intellectual diaries as a means of capturing students' individual responses to texts. The diaries provide a space for students to explore their thoughts and emotions in depth, allowing lecturers to gain insight into their reading processes. This can inform instructional strategies and help lecturers support students' development as critical readers.

Finally, the collaborative nature of classroom discussions underscores the importance of creating a learning environment that encourages dialogue and diverse perspectives. By guiding students with open-ended questions and fostering a culture of respect and curiosity, lecturers can facilitate meaningful discussions that enhance students' interpretive skills and appreciation of literature.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the rich and varied ways in which students engage with Anton Chekhov's *The Bet*, from emotional responses and ethical reflections to collaborative meaning-making. Through the lens of Richard Beach's transactional theory, it becomes clear that students' interpretations are deeply influenced by their personal experiences, values, and interactions with peers. By understanding these dynamics, lecturers can better support students in navigating complex texts and developing the critical and ethical thinking skills needed for a diverse and interconnected world.

Future research could explore how these findings apply to other literary works and student populations, as well as the long-term impact of transactional approaches on students' reading practices and worldviews. Ultimately, this study reaffirms the transformative potential of literature in the classroom, offering valuable insights for lecturers seeking to foster meaningful engagement with texts.

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