

Questions about Anton Chekhov's "Gusev":

1. How does Gusev see the world? He will see it this way again and again in this story, despite some pretty fierce persuasion from Pavel Ivanich to see it otherwise. How does he see it? Refer to the text in your answer.
2. How does Pavel Ivanich see the world? He too will see the world repeatedly this way throughout the story. Refer to the text in your answer.
3. So you have these two points of view that are diametrically opposed. And in the backdrop, you have two constants: silence, and darkness. Note that silence and darkness are mentioned repeatedly throughout the story, almost like a refrain. Darkness is mentioned in the first line of the story; it is mentioned again on p. 156, in the first line of the second section; and again on p. 166, in the first line of the fifth full paragraph down. Silence is mentioned on p. 154 in the first line of the fourth paragraph down; it is mentioned again on p. 159, in the first line of the seventh paragraph down; and again on p. 164 in the first line of the fourth paragraph down. Also, please note that silence and darkness usually appear after a passage of dialogue, as though to comment on it, or to have "the final word."

Why do you think silence and darkness are in the story as much as they are? And, why must the author repeatedly return the reader's attention to silence and darkness if he is to say what he wants to say?

4. There are many kinds of energy or motion in this story, and they seem to be opposed to one another, or to comment on one another. There is the forward-driving, rather shrill sounding energy that is Pavel Ivanich's relentless polemicizing. And there is the dreamier kind of energy that is Gusev's imaginings. And then there is the rolling and pitching of the sea. Things move in this story, pause, appear to stop altogether, and then move again. Do these "energies" or "motions," as I am calling them, contribute to your sense of what this story is about? Another way to say this is to direct your attention to Chekhov's unusually acute sense of rhythm. The rhythms of his writing can influence our sense of what the stories mean as much as what they 'say'. Do you see this happening in "Gusev"? Does this observation make sense to you?

5. One of the most remarkable things about this story is the way it ends. Gusev, the protagonist, dies—but the story continues. There are two things about this ending I'd like to point your attention to:

a) The first is the prose at the end of the story, which seems to contradict the action. The action, by itself, is depressing: a man dies, quite possibly the news of his death will never reach his family, a shark rips at his body, we look at colors in the sky for which we have no words. It would appear that Gusev is just another one of the “cattle” Pavel Ivanich’s polemic would reduce him to. And yet the prose suggests otherwise. The shark swims with “dignity and reserve,” the pilot fish are in “ecstasy.” The writer speaks with a quiet, almost primordial grandeur, the prose reminiscent of biblical narratives of origin and destruction: “There came a great beam of light transpiercing the clouds..”, and, “Then still another dark body appeared.” What do you make of the language in these last paragraphs of the story? Why do Chekhov has elected to make the imagery—and this prose—more “beautiful” in this section of the story than in any other?

b) The second thing about the ending I’d like to point out is the way the last sentence is structured. You will see that the subject of the sentence is the “sea,” and that the sea is “gazing” up at the enchanted heavens. This would suggest that the sea is an animate being. (By the way, other translations of this story also have the sea “gazing,” meaning that a gazing sea was Chekhov’s intention, rather than an accident of translation.) What do you make of this gazing sea? Does a gazing sea mean that Gusev’s view of the world has prevailed? Or is the matter more complex than that?

5. This last question is for Charlotte Hutchison: Where is God in this story? Think hard about this question, and do so with reference to the text. It’s a good question for discussion.

Questions about William Trevor’s “After Rain”

The Annunciation Harriet looks at in the story can be viewed at:

<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/b/bartolom/fra/index.html>

1. Harriet, the protagonist of “After Rain,” is obviously preoccupied. What is she preoccupied with, and how does this preoccupation show up both in the way she behaves, and in the way she perceives her environment? Refer to the text in your answer.

2. What does the man she dines with have to offer Harriet? Does she accept what he has to offer? Refer to the text in your answer.

3. Why do you think there’s so much “setting” in this story? For instance, the first whole page of this (only) 16 and ½ page story is almost entirely devoted to a description of place. Story writers are usually instructed to get the action going right away on the first page. Maybe Trevor missed that class; or, maybe he’s up to something. Note too the long description of the other diners in the Cesarina’s dining room on p. 84. Here we have nearly a full page of description that doesn’t include Harriet in any way. That’s a lot of undirected scene-setting to ask of a reader of a short story. Trevor risks boring his reader in this moment, or losing him altogether. Yet this is a master storyteller at the height of his craft, whose story, in its final moments, I think we can safely say has been successful. So he wants that description there. Why has he included it? (A helpful

reminder: It is Harriet who is noticing all these goings-on in the dining room; it is Harriet who is doing the describing, in her mind.)

4. Note that Harriet is sitting for the first nine pages of this story. Then, the first thing we hear in the second section of the story, after those nine pages are over, is that she *walks*. “She walks through the heat of the morning on the narrow road to the town.” (top p. 89) This seems important an important change. Does it seem so to you? Why?

5. The Annunciation Harriet views in the church of Santa Fabiola inspires in her a profound realization about her life. What is that realization? What does she come to understand?

6. *When* in the story does Harriet come to the realization about her life? This question of “when” seems as important as the realization itself. Do you see a theme here, perhaps indicated by the title, “*After Rain*”?

Questions for Joy Williams’s “Taking Care”

1. How does Jones “take care”? Does it help? How is this story about “taking care”? Please refer to the story in your answer.

2. Why do you think the scene with the rabbit is in the story? Williams could have easily not included it and shes still would have had a pretty good story. But as it turns out, it’s one of the story’s longest scenes. Some might even argue (like me) that the rabbit scene “makes” the story. Do you agree? Disagree? How does this scene contribute to the story’s mystery?

3. Why do you think the story is told in the present tense (as opposed to the past tense, which is more common in the writing of fiction)? Williams must have felt that the present tense would show Jones’s situation more effectively than the past tense. Why? If you think she made the right choice, why do you think she made the right choice?

4. Describe for yourself the tone of this story. How do you think Jones has achieved that tone? (Here you might think about how the sentences are structured, about pacing, diction, and so forth.) How does the tone of the story contribute to your overall impression of the meaning of the story? I find the tone de-personalizing, somehow—but that doesn’t mean I’m not moved by the story. Do you share my impression?

5. You might also have a look at the way the story is arranged on the page. It’s built out of long sections of no paragraph breaks, yet the sentences are relatively short. How does this arrangement participate in the story’s mystery?

6. Towards the bottom of page 238 there is a moment in which Jones seeks for the face of his daughter in his granddaughter, “but she is not there.” Then, immediately following this moment, we encounter the following two lines: “All is being both continued and resumed, but the dream is different. The dream cannot be revived.” I am struck by the obliquity of these lines, yet also feel that they absolutely belong in this story. Do you share my feeling? What do you think the lines mean?

7. Do you think this is a hopeful story? Why, or why not? Please answer this question last, meaning, after you’ve wrestled with the questions preceding it.