

## FEATURES OF THE COMPOSITION OF A. P. CHEKHOV'S SHORT STORY "THE DEATH OF A GOVERNMENT CLERK"

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**Abstract:** Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's short story "The Death of a Government Clerk" (1883) exemplifies early prose in which compositional structure serves both artistic intent and social satire. This article analyzes key compositional devices—linear narrative progression, contrast, repetition, dramatic climax, and laconic resolution—that form a cohesive semantic framework. Special attention is given to the function of dialogue, narrative rhythm, and the role of detail as a compositional element.

**Keywords:** A. P. Chekhov, "The Death of a Government Clerk," composition, satire, bureaucracy, realism, dialogue

Chekhov's 1883 short story "The Death of a Government Clerk" occupies a distinctive place in his early oeuvre. Despite its brevity, the work exhibits a clear and meticulously designed compositional structure that maximizes the expressive power of its satirical design. Composition here is not merely a formal scaffold; it actively contributes to the exploration of human humiliation, fear of authority, and the absurdity of social hierarchies. As L. I. Brodskaya observes, it is precisely in these early stories that Chekhov develops the compositional principles that would later define his mature prose: "concision of form, precision of detail, economy of language" [1, 72]. These principles are especially evident in "The Death of a Government Clerk," where every

phrase carries semantic weight, and narrative progression follows the logic of psychological disintegration.

The narrative unfolds along a strictly linear trajectory: exposition—development—climax—resolution. This structure creates a sense of inevitability, underscoring the fatal nature of the protagonist’s predicament. Ivan Dmitrievich Chervyakov, a minor clerk, accidentally sneezes in a theater and spits on General Brizshalov’s bald head. This seemingly trivial incident becomes the catalyst for the entire conflict. From the very first sentence, Chekhov establishes an ironic tone: “In one of the most fashionable theaters, a little clerk sat in the front row” [2, 15]. The word “little” performs a dual function: it denotes both the character’s physical insignificance and his social marginality. This characterization lays the groundwork for the entire narrative, in which the protagonist attempts—and fails—to overcome his “smallness,” only deepening his humiliation.

The central compositional device is repetition. Chervyakov approaches the general five times to apologize, each time receiving increasingly irritated and brusque responses. This repetition is not mechanical; it reveals the protagonist’s escalating anxiety, his gradual descent into panic, and his loss of control. While external circumstances remain unchanged, Chervyakov’s inner state deteriorates. As E. N. Sokolova notes, “repetition in Chekhov’s prose often serves to reveal a character’s psychological condition rather than functioning as a mere stylistic flourish” [3, 89]. Through repetition, Chekhov illustrates how fear of authority transforms into an obsessive idea that destroys the self. Each new appeal to the general is less an attempt to rectify a mistake than a desperate quest for validation—proof of his social legitimacy. When this validation proves unattainable, his entire worldview collapses.

Dialogue plays a pivotal compositional role. It not only advances the plot but also exposes the social gulf between characters. The general’s responses progressively

shorten and grow harsher: from “It’s nothing” to “Are you making fun of me?” and finally, “That’s enough!” This dynamic reflects not personal animosity but the systemic rigidity of hierarchy, wherein any interaction across rank automatically becomes an exercise in domination and submission. According to V. E. Khalizev, “in Chekhov’s dialogue, what remains unsaid often resonates most powerfully: fear, humiliation, helplessness” [4, 103]. The general does not perceive Chervyakov as a person—only as an intrusive subordinate disrupting the established order. Dialogue thus ceases to be communication and becomes an instrument of social coercion.

The climax occurs not at the moment of the protagonist’s death but during his final encounter with the general, when Chervyakov loses all hope of reconciliation. The death itself, described in the closing line — “Chervyakov died”— is presented matter-of-factly [2, 17]. This laconicism intensifies the satirical effect: a man’s death from fear appears so ordinary as to provoke no surprise. This aligns with Chekhov’s broader narrative principle, wherein the most significant events occur “between the lines.” The ending lacks pathos, drama, or even pity—precisely what renders it profoundly tragicomic. A society in which death from fear seems natural becomes the true object of condemnation.

Particular attention must be paid to the role of detail in the story’s composition. A sneeze — a simple physiological act—triggers the tragedy. This seemingly insignificant detail sets off a chain reaction culminating in death. As M. M. Bakhtin argues, “in Chekhov, detail is not ornamentation but a semantic node concentrating the essence of the conflict” [5, 61]. Similarly, the general’s bald head, the theatrical setting, the clerk’s uniform—all function not as background but as elements in a compositional network revealing the theme of social enslavement. Even the choice of setting—the theater—is symbolic: a space of decorum where human dignity is dismantled. The

theater becomes not a venue for art but a stage for a social performance with preassigned roles.

The story's compositional structure also underscores its connection to 19th-century Russian satirical traditions. Yet unlike Gogol, whose absurdity often veers into grotesque exaggeration, Chekhov maintains realistic plausibility. His protagonist is not caricatured; he is a living, frightened man seeking reconciliation. This psychological authenticity sharpens the satire. As A. V. Arkhipova states, "Chekhov does not condemn the hero for cowardice—he shows how the system produces cowards" [6, 134]. Chervyakov does not choose his path; he has been conditioned to submit unconditionally, rendering his behavior predictable. Composition emphasizes this determinism: there is no moment when escape from the societal trap seems possible.

Notably, the story contains no descriptions of interiors or landscapes. All focus remains on character actions and dialogue. This compositional economy heightens narrative momentum and directs the reader's attention to the core issue: the relationship between power and subordination. As D. S. Likhachev aptly remarks, "in Chekhov's short prose, every word bears semantic weight; nothing is accidental" [7, 205]. The absence of external description creates a sense of confinement, offering the protagonist no exit. Even his home, to which he returns after confronting the general, provides no refuge—his wife fails to comprehend his distress. Thus, the entire world appears hostile, and composition reinforces this through formal compression and intense focus.

In conclusion, the composition of "The Death of a Government Clerk" constitutes a carefully engineered system in which every element—from narrative structure to individual utterances—serves to expose the dehumanization of the individual under rigid bureaucratic hierarchy. Linearity, repetition, concision, functional dialogue, and meaningful detail coalesce into a unified artistic mechanism that reveals the absurdity of social norms and the internal servitude of the human spirit. Through compositional

means, Chekhov does more than tell a story—he diagnoses a societal illness in which a single glance from a superior can extinguish a human life.

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