

## Complexities of Doctor Patient Relationships

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In Anton Chekhov's "Enemies" and Margaret Edson's *Wit*, the authors introduce medical narratives full of complexities that seek to analyze relationships through pain. Audience members watch as pain creates a domino effect that ultimately ends differently for the main characters in each text. In Margaret Edson's *Wit*, Dr.'s Kelekian and Posner are researchers who happen to work as clinicians. Dr. Vivian Bearing, Ph.D., is subjected to callus treatment which forces her to consider her life and her relationships. In Anton Chekhov's "Enemies," Dr. Kirilov is placed into the compromising position of leaving his grieving wife and deceased child, or aiding the soon-to-be patient at the door. The doctor's relationship with himself is forever changed through this encounter, and what unfolds during the process. All relationships can be evaluated through the scope of pain because it causes one to stop and analyze the inner workings of the situation while opening the doorway to greater understanding of the self.

Doctors were once seen as the knights in shining armor, now doctors are portrayed as real people with real issues of their own. Dr. Bearing's physician is Dr. Kelekian, a tenured Oncologist who happens to teach a group of students fresh out of medical school. From the doctor's perspective, his issue is that his students are not as sharp or vigilant as they should be—given that they have recently completed medical school. As he explains the seriousness of Dr. Bearing's condition to her, he diverges from his speech when she mentions he is being thorough: "I make a point of it [thoroughness]. And I always emphasize it with my students..." Vivian: "...They are constitutionally averse to painstaking work." Kelekian: "Yours, too." ... Kelekian: "Mine are blind" Vivian: "Mine are deaf" (Edson 9, 10). Dr. Kelekian is worried about his own issues even as he teaches "blind" students about oncology. Dr. Kelekian's staunch researcher attitude is also reflected in his protégé, Jason Posner. Dr. Posner shows that he cares more about research than patients throughout the text; he is coarse, forward and slightly unsympathetic. The reader sees this when he goes in to check Dr. Bearing's vital stats, and Dr. Posner states, "Everybody's got to go through it [clinical]. All the great researchers. They want us to be able to converse intelligently with the clinicians...the clinicians are such troglodytes. So smarmy... just cut crap I say" (Edson 57). Dr. Posner sees clinical work as a waste of his time

since he will be a researcher. The very evidence for this is seen when he calls the clinicians troglodytes, or "a person who lives in seclusion, unacquainted with the affairs of the world; one considered to be a prehistoric cave-dweller" (OED "Troglodyte"). Dr. Posner disdains the clinicians referring to them as being Neanderthals; his issue is clinical work. With both Dr.'s Kelekian and Posner focused on their own issues, who is focused on the patient?

In Anton Chekhov's "Enemies," the doctor has his own set of issues which forces him to be distracted when his patient needs him the most. Dr. Kirilov's son, Andrey, dies of diphtheria at the tender age of six. As the poor doctor struggles with the death of his beloved and only child, the grief sets in. Within five minutes of the death, his services are needed of another patient. For Dr. Kirilov, his issue is that he leaves his wife to grieve alone, and sends the servants away. The second issue is he has not grieved properly, and is very fragile at this particular moment in time. With bottled-up emotions he is called away. Grief-stricken, his mind is elsewhere; which causes one to question once again, who is taking care of the patient? As the narrative shows, doctors have their own issues which in turn can affect the quality of treatment.

The doctors are so preoccupied in mind and thought that they forget to connect with their patients. Dr. Kelekian is not subtle with the news that Dr. Bearing has stage-three ovarian cancer. His direct approach may be good in the lab, but not in field. Dr. Bearing explains, "I'll never forget the time I found out I had cancer." Dr. Kelekian: "You have cancer" (Edson 9). Although comical from a reader's perspective, from a patient's perspective, he was quite short with her. Such news should be delivered with tact, but Dr. Kelekian was far from tactful. Although she does not realize it at first, she comes to realize what she wants is compassion; something she never gave to her students. As for "Enemies," the patient, albeit selfishly, wants the doctor to sympathize with him, and provide him with some support, for his wife has run off with his close friend. As he tries to reason out, explain, and express his concerns, the listening doctor contemplates the cruelty of man and the selfish behavior of human nature. The doctor is seen resting in an arm chair watching as the man walks back and forth. "The indifference and wonder on his face gave way to an expression of bitter resentment, indignation and anger. The features of his face became even harsher and coarser, and more unpleasant"

(Chekhov 38). Although the doctor was summoned for wife, he still had a patient, the husband. The doctor is justifiably upset, but he is doctor, and he is called to go above and beyond the normal realm of service. Throughout both texts, the patient searches for a kind ear, but none is found.

As a medical professional, one's primary concern should be the patient's wellbeing. Dr.'s Kelekian and Posner should have been more sympathetic towards Dr. Bearing. One could argue that the doctors tried to treat the disease and that is what they are paid to do, but others would disagree. According to Dr. Rita Charon, the body and the patient are inseparable, yet are two separate entities (Charon, 36). In order to treat the person, and not just the disease, one must open the door of communication. The reader sees this with Susie, Dr. Bearing's primary nurse. Susie is not put off by Dr. Bearing's snarky attitude, but she continues to be kind and helpful right to the very end. For instance, when Susie sits down with Dr. Bearing to discuss her impending death, she approaches very sweetly. If Susie had not opened the line for communication she would not have had the influence that she did. As a result Dr. Bearing responds, albeit resentfully, "Now is a time for, dare I say it, kindness" (Edson 69).

As for Dr. Kirilov, he should have declined the house call the patient made. He is tired, over worked, and grieving; he was in no shape to professionally help a patient: "I can hardly stand and you talk to me about humanity! I am unfit for nothing just now....nothing will induce me to go, and I can't leave my wife alone" (Chekhov 33). Even when one looks at the description of him, his temples sunk, gray hair, and disheveled, one cannot help but think of a tired father. As one can imagine, tired professionals are more likely to make mistakes, and this can be detrimental. Readers see the effects of sleep deprivation as Dr. Kirilov becomes outraged with the patient. He even realizes the terrible mistake he has made, but it was to no avail. He tells Abogin, the patient "I'll come to you later. I must just send my assistant to my wife. She is alone, you know!" (Chekhov 34). He should have been home, and he knew he should have been. Likewise, Abogin knew that if the doctor went home, he would not return, but send his assistant. Ideally, Dr. Kirilov would have sent his assistant, or he would have been able to numb his personal feelings long enough to help the patient.

Since Doctors are humans, and are prone to ere, they often miss the mark of perfection. In the case of Dr. Posner, he misses his mark when he is supposed to do clinical: Dr. Kelekian says "Jason.' Jason: 'huh?' Kelekian: 'Clinical' Jason: 'Oh, Right. (To Vivian) Thank You, Professor Bearing. You've been very cooperative"(Edson 40). Evidently, Dr. Posner dropped the ball there, but he is not entirely

to blame, for he is a by-product of his schooling. For four years he was taught day-in and day-out to look at the symptoms, diagnose and resolve. The thing the staff did not teach him was to treat the patient also. With Foucault's *Birth of a Clinic* serving as the premise for modern medicine, it would be difficult for Dr. Posner to behave and other way. As for Dr. Kirilov, he misses his mark when he does not show the compassion he would have liked to receive. The doctor accompanies Abogin home only to find out that Abogin's wife has deceived him. The doctor is furious that he has been dragged from his home to only be a sounding board. He himself is struggles with the fact that he could not save him, his only son. All of these feelings begin to culminate as he listens to Abogin's incessant complaining. His emotional pain becomes apparent as he vocalizes his frustrations.

With all these things in mind, it leads one to question what message does this send about medicine? The text "Enemies" and play *Wit* remind the readers that doctors are human too, and that medicine is not perfect. When Dr. Bearing dies, the audience watches as Dr. Posner calls code blue only to be told she is a "Do Not Resuscitate." He is so awe stuck by error that before he could call a no code the team arrives and begins CPR. He then shouts "I MADE A MISTAKE!" (Pause. The CODE TEAM looks at him. He collapses on the floor." (Edson 84). Dr. Posner is human, and is prone falter like any other human being. Sometimes one has to simply yell "I MADE A MISTAKE!" and accept it. This is only way one learns and grows, by trial and error, but in a litigious society, it this is hard because everyone feels wronged, even if it was truly an accident. The second thing one learns from this is scene is that medicine is not perfect. Both Dr.'s Kelekian and Posner pushed for an aggressive treatment, but it ultimately failed. As for Dr. Kirilov, he reminds the reader that people have their emotional days too. Days where their judgment can be clouded by emotions, grief or pain, and one are to be realistic in the expectations of one's physician. Likewise, the medicine one thinks one should receive can be reciprocated by the fact the doctor does not get the patient that he or she may want.

## REFERENCES

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