

Student petitions his professor, Russia 1899

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One of the things that literature can do that is hard to replicate otherwise is to give a boots-on-the-ground feel for what life was like in a different era. Being a professor, I am especially interested in what university life was like at different times and in different places.

Recently I came across Anton Chekhov's fascinating 1899 first-person novella "The Dreary Story" about a distinguished professor of medicine, Nikolay Stepanovitch, reflecting on his life, and recounting the daily banalities near the end of his career. He chronicles his interactions with colleagues, his preparation and delivery of lectures, his thoughts on the value of education, his thoughts about who will become great researchers and who will not and why, and thoughts about students. It is a fascinating read for anybody involved in education, both students and teachers.

Chekhov was a physician by training, and was not many years removed from his schooling when he wrote this novella just shy of his 30th birthday. He also was a tutor for some time, and so had close contact with a multitude of students's abilities, ambitions and life stories. The acuteness of Chekhov's observations combined with his recent close connection to higher education adds interest for me in this story.

There is one section that is particularly interesting with regard to student interactions with the professor. It reports of a "sanguine youth" visiting Professor Stepanovitch during office hours, asking to be passed on an examination. Professor Stepanovitch denies the student a passing grade, and during the recounting of this appeal reveals to the reader his unflattering thoughts about the student: he is more interested in beer than thinking, has no real commitment to medicine, lies on the couch most of the day, and could tell you much more about "the opera, about his affairs of the heart, and about comrades he likes" than about his studies. There are any number of modern-day unproductive diversions for students that could substitute for what Chekhov meant by "opera", such as following sports, pop stars, reality shows, movies, and other activities that have very little lasting value for the individual and present a huge opportunity cost when pursued to excess. Professor Stepanovitch's thoughts fit well with what gives today's professors concerns about some current students.

There is a moment when the student tries to give his "word of honour" that if he is given a passing score he will _____, but the student never finishes the thought, because Professor Stepanovitch has already waived his hands and sat down, signaling to the student that he has heard it before and he will not buy whatever the student is about to say. And what could the student have said? There are not many options. Perhaps the student is wishing to say, "I will

keep learning it over time and will make sure that it never hurts my ability to practice good medicine. Just pass me on this last hurdle, and I will be on my way and make you proud. You'll see. I promise.”

The professor will have none of that. It is often a young person’s fundamental confusion to believe that it is convincing to say “give me this thing I really want, and then I promise to do something good,” whereas life really works mainly in the other direction, “do something good, and then you will get something more.” Professor Stepanovitch ends his recounting of the office visit with a devastating unspoken send-off to the student: “Peace be to thy ashes, honest toiler.” He counts the student among the living dead, who will never understand and will never amount to anything.

It is a cynical story but presumably evokes well what Chekhov understood and saw in late 19th century Russia. So for all you students out there, if you eagerly sat through ESPN’s full coverage of “signing day” for college football, or if you are keeping up with the Kardashians, and you compromised success in the classroom in any way because of it, remember what Professor Stepanovitch would say, “Peace be to thy ashes.”

On the other hand, this story is from the perspective of a professor, who values, or at least has been conditioned over time to value, intellectual pursuits and academic success above anything else. There are more paths to a successful life than Professor Stepanovitch is able to admit, but he is surely correct that an imbalance of beer, “opera”, football, Kardashians, etc., are not compatible with the pursuits of higher academics or of intellectually intensive professions such as medicine. Young people have to choose.