

The Dangers of Modern Medicine and Ancient Philosophy in Chekov's "Ward No. 6"

Anton Chekhov's "Ward No. 6" is a story about how the privileged people blind themselves to the suffering of others. Anton Chekhov himself was born in a peasant family. His grandfather was a slave and his father experienced bankruptcy. It is clear to see that Chekhov's ideal world would be a place without income differences, no privileged, powerful and demanding figures that overlook the suffering of the poor. In "Ward No.6," the doctor, Andrey Yefimitch is that evil figure. He is lazy, dirty and most importantly, a doctor working for the government. He is officially a doctor, but he is insensitive towards his patients and the people around him. He even once stated that "suffering leads man to perfection," which can be true in certain instances, but out of the mouth of a doctor seems bizarre, inappropriate and ominous.

There were interactions and conversations between the doctor and the few "friends" he got. But these interactions further prove his ignorance. He sees the hospital as an "immoral institution... prejudicial to the health of the townspeople," but his actions and feelings state otherwise. 'Doctor' Ragin shows no compassion for his patients or inmates. Furthermore, doctors are expected to try to justify and prove their statements using science, but Ragin fully abandons that and explains that the health of the townspeople is subject to change, and luck plays the main role in the medical field.

"Ward No. 6" is far more than a portrait of Ragin's ignorance and evilness, it also demonstrates a microcosm of the Russian medical system at the time. Each character in the story represents a certain organization, authority or occupation in society. The porter Nikita treats and monitors his inmates like a prison guard; Moiseika could be seen as a capitalist for his love of collecting money; Gromov is the activist who challenges Ragin's evilness and ideology. Chekhov also challenges society's dehumanization of criminals and lunatics, which is demonstrated through Nikita's abusive manners towards the inmates. In particular, Chekhov also exposes the abuses committed by the state's doctors by portraying them as order-followers.

Chekhov cleverly embedded these arguments and challenges in "Ward No. 6;" however, we as readers were not forced to agree with him. We are left to make up our minds on the issue of state control and institutional corruption. "Ward No. six" is a story that raises important issues regarding the relationships between citizens and state, and between people in positions of power and those they weaken with the power they hold.

Additionally, Anton Chekhov's "Ward No. 6" criticizes the living conditions as well as of the abuses people faced in society. **It also mentions the stoic philosophy.** The "ward" is a small mental hospital complex where the severely mentally ill is housed, one of them being Ivan Dimitrich Gromov. Unlike other patients, although he suffers from paranoid delusions, he remains an independent thinker. He shows sanity and insight during the conversations with Dr. Andrey Yefimich Ragin, and clearly represents the voice of the author in this story.

The patients live in terrible conditions in the ward. They are physically abused and the cell-like space is dirty. Dr. Andrey Yefimich sees the terrible way in which the patients are treated, but he still allows it to continue. The doctor is adherent of stoicism, as he continues to reference stoic philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius. At one point, Dr. Yefimich tries to lecture Ivan Dimitrich on the advantages of having the same attitude as a stoic and becoming one of them, "You can find peace within yourself under any circumstances. Free and profound thought, which strives towards the comprehension of life, and a complete scorn for the foolish vanity of the world— man has never known anything higher than these two blessings. And you can possess them even if you live behind triple bars."

Ivan Dimitrich does not agree with this philosophy; he criticizes it by mentioning that humans are created to have blood, nerves, and organ tissues, and they react to any irritations. He also mentioned that the combination of feelings is what makes up life, and a doctor should know and understand these simple facts.

Dr. Audrey Yefimitch does describe stoicism quite well with words, but when his personal life turns bad, with the loss of his doctor position, financial security and his home, he is unable to apply his stoic principles to cope with his situation. With the story of the doctor, it is clear that Chekov is being critical of stoicism.

Chekov made a great point on stoicism in "Ward No. 6," but his philosophy and stoicism are two polar opposites of each other. Stoicism can be helpful in some situations, there are many examples of people who applied stoic philosophy successfully when dealing with hardship. It can be a useful way to cope with suffering from time to time. However, stoicism should not be the only solution to everyone's suffering. In addition, different people have different methods of coping and forcing a certain system on one can backfire.