

Name: _____ Class: _____

Home

By Anton Chekhov
1887

Anton Chekov (1860-1904) was a Russian playwright and author who is known for his skillful craft of the short story. "Home" is a comedy about a child-parent relationship—the act of disciplining his son provokes deep philosophical thoughts and attitudes in Yevgeny Petrovitch Bykovsky. As you read, pay attention to the way Chekov uses internal dialogue to develop the protagonist.

- [1] "Someone came from the Grigoryevs' to fetch a book, but I said you were not at home. The postman brought the newspaper and two letters. By the way, Yevgeny Petrovitch, I should like to ask you to speak to Seryozha. To-day, and the day before yesterday, I have noticed that he is smoking. When I began to expostulate¹ with him, he put his fingers in his ears as usual, and sang loudly to drown my voice."

Yevgeny Petrovitch Bykovsky, the prosecutor² of the circuit court, who had just come back from a session and was taking off his gloves in his study, looked at the governess³ as she made her report, and laughed.

"Seryozha smoking..." he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I can picture the little cherub⁴ with a cigarette in his mouth! Why, how old is he?"

"Seven. You think it is not important, but at his age smoking is a bad and pernicious⁵ habit, and bad habits ought to be eradicated in the beginning."

- [5] "Perfectly true. And where does he get the tobacco?"

"He takes it from the drawer in your table."

"Yes? In that case, send him to me."



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1. **Expostulate (verb):** to express disagreement
2. **Prosecutor (noun):** someone who starts legal action against a defendant; someone who makes an accusation
3. **Governess (noun):** a woman employed to teach children in a private household
4. **Cherub (noun):** depiction of an angel
5. **Pernicious (adjective):** terrible, wicked

When the governess had gone out, Bykovsky sat down in an arm-chair before his writing-table, shut his eyes, and fell to thinking. He pictured his Seryozha with a huge cigar, a yard long, in the midst of clouds of tobacco smoke, and this caricature⁶ made him smile; at the same time, the grave, troubled face of the governess called up memories of the long past, half-forgotten time when smoking aroused in his teachers and parents a strange, not quite intelligible horror. It really was horror. Children were mercilessly flogged⁷ and expelled from school, and their lives were made a misery on account of smoking, though not a single teacher or father knew exactly what was the harm or sinfulness of smoking. Even very intelligent people did not scruple to wage war on a vice which they did not understand. Yevgeny Petrovitch remembered the head-master of the high school, a very cultured and good-natured old man, who was so appalled when he found a high-school boy with a cigarette in his mouth that he turned pale, immediately summoned an emergency committee of the teachers, and sentenced the sinner to expulsion. This was probably a law of social life: the less an evil was understood, the more fiercely and coarsely it was attacked.

The prosecutor remembered two or three boys who had been expelled and their subsequent life, and could not help thinking that very often the punishment did a great deal more harm than the crime itself. The living organism has the power of rapidly adapting itself, growing accustomed and inured to any atmosphere whatever, otherwise man would be bound to feel at every moment what an irrational basis there often is underlying his rational activity, and how little of established truth and certainty there is even in work so responsible and so terrible in its effects as that of the teacher, of the lawyer, of the writer...

- [10] And such light and discursive⁸ thoughts as visit the brain only when it is weary and resting began straying through Yevgeny Petrovitch's head; there is no telling whence and why they come, they do not remain long in the mind, but seem to glide over its surface without sinking deeply into it. For people who are forced for whole hours, and even days, to think by routine in one direction, such free private thinking affords a kind of comfort, an agreeable solace.

It was between eight and nine o'clock in the evening. Overhead, on the second storey, someone was walking up and down, and on the floor above that four hands were playing scales. The pacing of the man overhead who, to judge from his nervous step, was thinking of something harassing, or was suffering from toothache, and the monotonous scales gave the stillness of the evening a drowsiness that disposed to lazy reveries⁹. In the nursery, two rooms away, the governess and Seryozha were talking. ;

"Pa-pa has come!" carolled the child. "Papa has co-ome. Pa! Pa! Pa!"

"Votre père vous appelle, allez vite¹⁰!" cried the governess, shrill as a frightened bird. "I am speaking to you!"

"What am I to say to him, though?" Yevgeny Petrovitch wondered.

- [15] But before he had time to think of anything whatever his son Seryozha, a boy of seven, walked into the study. ;

6. **Caricature (noun):** comic exaggeration
7. **Flog (verb):** to whip, beat or lash
8. **Discursive (adjective):** rambling, musing
9. **Reverie (noun):** daydream
10. French for, "Your father is calling you, go quickly!"

He was a child whose sex could only have been guessed from his dress: weakly, white-faced, and fragile. He was limp like a hot-house plant, and everything about him seemed extraordinarily soft and tender: his movements, his curly hair, the look in his eyes, his velvet jacket.

"Good evening, papa!" he said, in a soft voice, clambering on to his father's knee and giving him a rapid kiss on his neck. "Did you send for me?"

"Excuse me, Sergey Yevgenitch," answered the prosecutor, removing him from his knee. "Before kissing we must have a talk, and a serious talk ... I am angry with you, and don't love you any more. I tell you, my boy, I don't love you, and you are no son of mine..."

Seryozha looked intently at his father, then shifted his eyes to the table, and shrugged his shoulders.

[20] "What have I done to you?" he asked in perplexity, blinking. "I haven't been in your study all day, and I haven't touched anything."

"Natalya Semyonovna has just been complaining to me that you have been smoking... Is it true? Have you been smoking?"

"Yes, I did smoke once... That's true..." ;

"Now you see you are lying as well," said the prosecutor, frowning to disguise a smile. "Natalya Semyonovna has seen you smoking twice. So you see you have been detected in three misdeeds: smoking, taking someone else's tobacco, and lying. Three faults."

"Oh yes," Seryozha recollected, and his eyes smiled. "That's true, that's true; I smoked twice: to-day and before."

[25] "So you see it was not once, but twice... I am very, very much displeased with you! You used to be a good boy, but now I see you are spoilt and have become a bad one."

Yevgeny Petrovitch smoothed down Seryozha's collar and thought:

"What more am I to say to him!"

"Yes, it's not right," he continued. "I did not expect it of you. In the first place, you ought not to take tobacco that does not belong to you. Every person has only the right to make use of his own property; if he takes anyone else's ... he is a bad man!" ("I am not saying the right thing!" thought Yevgeny Petrovitch.) "For instance, Natalya Semyonovna has a box with her clothes in it. That's her box, and we -- that is, you and I -- dare not touch it, as it is not ours. That's right, isn't it? You've got toy horses and pictures... I don't take them, do I? Perhaps I might like to take them, but ... they are not mine, but yours!"

"Take them if you like!" said Seryozha, raising his eyebrows. "Please don't hesitate, papa, take them! That yellow dog on your table is mine, but I don't mind... Let it stay." ;

[30] "You don't understand me," said Bykovsky. "You have given me the dog, it is mine now and I can do what I like with it; but I didn't give you the tobacco! The tobacco is mine." ("I am not explaining properly!" thought the prosecutor. "It's wrong! Quite wrong!") "If I want to smoke someone else's tobacco, I must first of all ask his permission..."

Languidly¹¹ linking one phrase on to another and imitating the language of the nursery, Bykovsky tried to explain to his son the meaning of property. Seryozha gazed at his chest and listened attentively (he liked talking to his father in the evening), then he leaned his elbow on the edge of the table and began screwing up his short-sighted eyes at the papers and the inkstand. His eyes strayed over the table and rested on the gum-bottle.

"Papa, what is gum made of?" he asked suddenly, putting the bottle to his eyes.

Bykovsky took the bottle out of his hands and set it in its place and went on:

"Secondly, you smoke... That's very bad. Though I smoke it does not follow that you may. I smoke and know that it is stupid, I blame myself and don't like myself for it." ("A clever teacher, I am!" he thought.) "Tobacco is very bad for the health, and anyone who smokes dies earlier than he should. It's particularly bad for boys like you to smoke. Your chest is weak, you haven't reached your full strength yet, and smoking leads to consumption and other illness in weak people. Uncle Ignat died of consumption, you know. If he hadn't smoked, perhaps he would have lived till now."

[35] Seryozha looked pensively¹² at the lamp, touched the lamp-shade with his finger, and heaved a sigh.

"Uncle Ignat played the violin splendidly!" he said. "His violin is at the Grigoryevs' now. ;

Seryozha leaned his elbows on the edge of the table again, and sank into thought. His white face wore a fixed expression, as though he were listening or following a train of thought of his own; distress and something like fear came into his big staring eyes. He was most likely thinking now of death, which had so lately carried off his mother and Uncle Ignat. Death carries mothers and uncles off to the other world, while their children and violins remain upon the earth. The dead live somewhere in the sky beside the stars, and look down from there upon the earth. Can they endure the parting?

"What am I to say to him?" thought Yevgeny Petrovitch. "He's not listening to me. Obviously he does not regard either his misdoings or my arguments as serious. How am I to drive it home?" ;

The prosecutor got up and walked about the study.

[40] "Formerly, in my time, these questions were very simply settled," he reflected. "Every urchin who was caught smoking was thrashed. The cowardly and faint-hearted did actually give up smoking, any who were somewhat more plucky and intelligent, after the thrashing took to carrying tobacco in the legs of their boots, and smoking in the barn. When they were caught in the barn and thrashed again, they would go away to smoke by the river ... and so on, till the boy grew up. My mother used to give me money and sweets not to smoke. Now that method is looked upon as worthless and immoral. The modern teacher, taking his stand on logic, tries to make the child form good principles, not from fear, nor from desire for distinction or reward, but consciously."

11. **Languid** (*adjective*): without energy

12. **Pensive** (*adjective*): thoughtful

While he was walking about, thinking, Seryozha climbed up with his legs on a chair sideways to the table, and began drawing. That he might not spoil official paper nor touch the ink, a heap of half-sheets, cut on purpose for him, lay on the table together with a blue pencil.

“Cook was chopping up cabbage to-day and she cut her finger,” he said, drawing a little house and moving his eyebrows. “She gave such a scream that we were all frightened and ran into the kitchen. Stupid thing! Natalya Semyonovna told her to dip her finger in cold water, but she sucked it ... And how could she put a dirty finger in her mouth! That’s not proper, you know, papa!”

Then he went on to describe how, while they were having dinner, a man with a hurdy-gurdy¹³ had come into the yard with a little girl, who had danced and sung to the music.

“He has his own train of thought!” thought the prosecutor. “He has a little world of his own in his head, and he has his own ideas of what is important and unimportant. To gain possession of his attention, it’s not enough to imitate his language, one must also be able to think in the way he does. He would understand me perfectly if I really were sorry for the loss of the tobacco, if I felt injured and cried... That’s why no one can take the place of a mother in bringing up a child, because she can feel, cry, and laugh together with the child. One can do nothing by logic and morality. What more shall I say to him? What?”

- [45] And it struck Yevgeny Petrovitch as strange and absurd that he, an experienced advocate, who spent half his life in the practice of reducing people to silence, forestalling what they had to say, and punishing them, was completely at a loss and did not know what to say to the boy.

“I say, give me your word of honour that you won’t smoke again,” he said.

“Word of hon-nour!” carolled Seryozha, pressing hard on the pencil and bending over the drawing. “Word of hon-nour!”

“Does he know what is meant by word of honour?” Bykovsky asked himself. “No, I am a poor teacher of morality! If some schoolmaster or one of our legal fellows could peep into my brain at this moment he would call me a poor stick, and would very likely suspect me of unnecessary subtlety... But in school and in court, of course, all these wretched questions are far more simply settled than at home; here one has to do with people whom one loves beyond everything, and love is exacting and complicates the question. If this boy were not my son, but my pupil, or a prisoner on his trial, I should not be so cowardly, and my thoughts would not be racing all over the place!”

Yevgeny Petrovitch sat down to the table and pulled one of Seryozha’s drawings to him. In it there was a house with a crooked roof, and smoke which came out of the chimney like a flash of lightning in zigzags up to the very edge of the paper; beside the house stood a soldier with dots for eyes and a bayonet that looked like the figure 4. ;

- [50] “A man can’t be taller than a house,” said the prosecutor.

Seryozha got on his knee, and moved about for some time to get comfortably settled there.

“No, papa!” he said, looking at his drawing. “If you were to draw the soldier small you would not see his eyes.”

13. a musical instrument with a droning sound played by turning a handle

Ought he to argue with him? From daily observation of his son the prosecutor had become convinced that children, like savages, have their own artistic standpoints and requirements peculiar to them, beyond the grasp of grown-up people. Had he been attentively observed, Seryozha might have struck a grown-up person as abnormal. He thought it possible and reasonable to draw men taller than houses, and to represent in pencil, not only objects, but even his sensations. Thus he would depict the sounds of an orchestra in the form of smoke like spherical blurs, a whistle in the form of a spiral thread... To his mind sound was closely connected with form and colour, so that when he painted letters he invariably painted the letter L yellow, M red, A black, and so on.

Abandoning his drawing, Seryozha shifted about once more, got into a comfortable attitude, and busied himself with his father's beard. First he carefully smoothed it, then he parted it and began combing it into the shape of whiskers.

[55] "Now you are like Ivan Stepanovitch," he said, "and in a minute you will be like our porter. Papa, why is it porters stand by doors? Is it to prevent thieves getting in?"

The prosecutor felt the child's breathing on his face, he was continually touching his hair with his cheek, and there was a warm soft feeling in his soul, as soft as though not only his hands but his whole soul were lying on the velvet of Seryozha's jacket.

He looked at the boy's big dark eyes, and it seemed to him as though from those wide pupils there looked out at him his mother and his wife and everything that he had ever loved.

"To think of thrashing him ..." he mused. "A nice task to devise a punishment for him! How can we undertake to bring up the young? In old days people were simpler and thought less, and so settled problems boldly. But we think too much, we are eaten up by logic... The more developed a man is, the more he reflects and gives himself up to subtleties, the more undecided and scrupulous¹⁴ he becomes, and the more timidity he shows in taking action. How much courage and self-confidence it needs, when one comes to look into it closely, to undertake to teach, to judge, to write a thick book..."

It struck ten.

[60] "Come, boy, it's bedtime," said the prosecutor. "Say good-night and go."

"No, papa," said Seryozha, "I will stay a little longer. Tell me something! Tell me a story..."

"Very well, only after the story you must go to bed at once."

Yevgeny Petrovitch on his free evenings was in the habit of telling Seryozha stories. Like most people engaged in practical affairs, he did not know a single poem by heart, and could not remember a single fairy tale, so he had to improvise. As a rule he began with the stereotyped: "In a certain country, in a certain kingdom," then he heaped up all kinds of innocent nonsense and had no notion as he told the beginning how the story would go on, and how it would end. Scenes, characters, and situations were taken at random, impromptu¹⁵, and the plot and the moral came of itself as it were, with no plan on the part of the story-teller. Seryozha was very fond of this improvisation¹⁶, and the prosecutor noticed that the simpler and the less ingenious the plot, the stronger the impression it made on the child.

14. **Scrupulous** (*adjective*): having moral integrity

15. **Impromptu** (*adjective*): done spontaneously without practice or planning

16. **Improvisation** (*noun*): the process of resolving a situation with what is available in that moment.

"Listen," he said, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Once upon a time, in a certain country, in a certain kingdom, there lived an old, very old emperor with a long grey beard, and ... and with great grey moustaches like this. Well, he lived in a glass palace which sparkled and glittered in the sun, like a great piece of clear ice. The palace, my boy, stood in a huge garden, in which there grew oranges, you know ... bergamots, cherries ... tulips, roses, and lilies-of-the-valley were in flower in it, and birds of different colours sang there... Yes... On the trees there hung little glass bells, and, when the wind blew, they rang so sweetly that one was never tired of hearing them. Glass gives a softer, tenderer note than metals... Well, what next? There were fountains in the garden... Do you remember you saw a fountain at Auntie Sonya's summer villa? Well, there were fountains just like that in the emperor's garden, only ever so much bigger, and the jets of water reached to the top of the highest poplar."

[65] Yevgeny Petrovitch thought a moment, and went on:

"The old emperor had an only son and heir of his kingdom -- a boy as little as you. He was a good boy. He was never naughty, he went to bed early, he never touched anything on the table, and altogether he was a sensible boy. He had only one fault, he used to smoke..." ;

Seryozha listened attentively, and looked into his father's eyes without blinking. The prosecutor went on, thinking: "What next?" He spun out a long rigmarole¹⁷, and ended like this:

"The emperor's son fell ill with consumption through smoking, and died when he was twenty. His infirm and sick old father was left without anyone to help him. There was no one to govern the kingdom and defend the palace. Enemies came, killed the old man, and destroyed the palace, and now there are neither cherries, nor birds, nor little bells in the garden... That's what happened."

This ending struck Yevgeny Petrovitch as absurd and naïve, but the whole story made an intense impression on Seryozha. Again his eyes were clouded by mournfulness and something like fear; for a minute he looked pensively at the dark window, shuddered, and said, in a sinking voice:

[70] "I am not going to smoke any more..."

When he had said good-night and gone away his father walked up and down the room and smiled to himself.

"They would tell me it was the influence of beauty, artistic form," he meditated. "It may be so, but that's no comfort. It's not the right way, all the same... Why must morality and truth never be offered in their crude form, but only with embellishments, sweetened and gilded like pills? It's not normal... It's falsification ... deception ... tricks ..."

He thought of the jurymen to whom it was absolutely necessary to make a "speech," of the general public who absorb history only from legends and historical novels, and of himself and how he had gathered an understanding of life not from sermons and laws, but from fables, novels, poems.

"Medicine should be sweet, truth beautiful, and man has had this foolish habit since the days of Adam... though, indeed, perhaps it is all natural, and ought to be so... There are many deceptions and delusions in nature that serve a purpose."

17. **Rigamarole** (*noun*): ridiculously complicated process

[75] He set to work, but lazy, intimate thoughts still strayed through his mind for a good while. Overhead the scales could no longer be heard, but the inhabitant of the second storey was still pacing from one end of the room to another.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: As it is used in paragraph 8, the word “scruple” most closely means: [RL.4]
- A. hesitate
 - B. bother
 - C. think deeply
 - D. conscience

2. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph provides the best clue to the meaning of the word “scruple” as it is used in paragraph 8? [RL.1]
- A. “very intelligent”
 - B. “did not understand”
 - C. “cultured and good-natured”
 - D. “sentenced the sinner”

3. How does the author use internal dialogue to characterize Yevgeny? Cite evidence from the text in your answer. [RL.3]

4. What is the author’s likely purpose for including parenthesis, ellipses, and dashes in paragraph 28? [RL.6]
- A. To highlight Yevgeny’s nervousness about disciplining his rebellious son.
 - B. To suggest that Yevgeny has planned his speech out very carefully.
 - C. To emphasize Yevgeny’s uncertainty for how to handle the situation.
 - D. To imply that Yevgeny is pausing repeatedly for dramatic effect.

5. How do paragraphs 37 and 38 contribute to the overall story? [RL.5]
- A. They suggest that Yevgeny and Seryozha do not have a close relationship as father and son, and Yevgeny is realizing the emotional distance.
 - B. They show how Seryozha is too young to comprehend the seriousness of Yevgeny's points and his attempts at discipline are fruitless.
 - C. They reveal that Seryozha is pretending not to understand his father's argument, so as to have an excuse to continue his negative behavior.
 - D. They emphasize the irony of the miscommunication between Yevgeny and his son, as Yevgeny assumes Seryozha "does not regard... [his] arguments as serious."

6. How does Yevgeny get through to his son? Cite evidence from the text in your answer. [RL.2]

7. PART A: What do the piano players and the man pacing the second floor symbolize? [RL.3]

8. PART B: Which paragraph from the story best mirrors the symbolism mentioned in Part A? [RL.1]

- A. Paragraph 11
- B. Paragraph 28
- C. Paragraph 56
- D. Paragraph 72

9. PART A: Which of the following best states the theme of the story? [RL.2]
- A. Imagination is a frivolous indulgence.
 - B. As much can be learned from creativity as from logic.
 - C. Reason, above all, is what keeps civilization in line.
 - D. When children are treated like adults, they learn to behave like them.
10. PART B: Which paragraph from the story best provides support for the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
- A. Paragraph 48
 - B. Paragraph 50
 - C. Paragraph 58
 - D. Paragraph 68

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In paragraph 18, Yevgeny claims that he doesn't love his son because of his behavior ("I am angry with you, and don't love you any more. I tell you, my boy, I don't love you, and you are no son of mine...") Does Yevgeny mean this? Why might Chekov include this detail?
2. Chekhov is renowned for his sense of humor. What methods does Chekov employ in this story to create humor? Why are they effective?
3. According to the story, what is true of parent-child relationships?
4. In the context of this story, what does it mean to be a grown-up?