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Despite the inhospitable climate of his homeland, Anton Chekhov was a passionate gardener in the later years of his life and the motif of gardens recurs frequently in both his prose and dramatic works. Critic Donald Rayfield observes that these gardens provide more than a setting or mood and that they are often "symbolic of characters' inner world" (532). This is true of the garden in "The Black Monk", which is endowed with an intense spiritual dimension in accordance with the story's themes of divine genius and madness, happiness and suffering. On the one hand it represents a manmade Eden, on the other the hellish site of toil and mania. In "The Black Monk" the religious symbolism and contradictions contained within the garden develop alongside the conflicts within Kovrin and the larger themes of the work.

In the Christian tradition, the Garden of Eden symbolizes humanity's innocence, represented as an idyllic existence preceding the comprehension of sin, evil, and suffering. In the garden, God is said to have walked and communicated directly with man (Genesis 3:8), and Kovrin's hallucinatory dialogues with the monk echo this direct contact between man and the divine. The world of Pesotsky's garden is in no way a straightforward Eden, but for Kovrin the trip to visit his former ward and his magnificent garden entails a return to a childlike innocence: "a joyful young feeling stirred in his breast, such as he had experienced in childhood running about in these gardens" (Chekhov 228).

During his initial descent into madness Kovrin returns to a state of innocent bliss as he fails to recognize the turmoil around him. He loses touch with the reality of pain and suffering so enthralled is he by his perceived divine purpose. His dialogues with the monk confirm that he recognizes he is mentally ill and hallucinating, but he is comforted because "he [is] now firmly convinced that such visions came only to the chosen" (Chekhov 242). He believes his work is essential to hasten the return of mankind to paradise (239). The juxtaposition of reason and irrationality in these dialogues calls in to question the classification of sane or insane, natural and unnatural. The rational psychologist in Kovrin uses logic to justify the veracity of his hallucination as the monk of his own creation explains, "I exist in your imagination, and your imagination is a part of nature, which means that I, too, exist in nature" (237). Further destabilizing these categories is the depiction of Pesotsky's own manias his obsession with the orchard and its fate after his death— like Kovrin he is described in terms of a disjointed and duplicated self.

In tension with Kovrin's blissful attitude towards his environment is the hellish imagery describing the garden in the text. In Pesotsky's garden there is an insidious sense of order as the natural world is subjugated to the will of man for profit and even "the flowers . . . gave off a damp, irritating smell" (Chekhov 229). Despite the uniformity of this garden that "made the picture monotonous and even dull" (225), Kovrin remains inspired and full of joy. The most threatening image is the ominous "thick, black, pungent smoke [covering] the ground and enveloping the trees, [that] saved those thousands from the frost" (224-5). Without the smoke the garden would perish, but at what cost? There is a parallel between the oppressive smoke essential for keeping the gardens alive and profitable and Kovrin's madness and the imposition of a cure and normality that destroys his happiness. Both appear essential for the survival of the organism, but they cast a shade over pleasure for the sake of the practical. Rayfield suggests the garden in the "The Black Monk" is the setting for "its Dantean descent into unfamiliar fields of suffering" (538), but it isn't until after Kovrin is cured of his state of mad innocence that he can recognize the world of the gardens as such.

Kovrin's fall from the lofty height of believing himself a divinely inspired genius involves a loss of innocence. His return to the Pesotsky's garden the following spring is notably one filled with suffering and anger. Upon his sad, sluggish return to the site of his initial rapture he moves through the garden "not noticing the luxuriant flowers" and when he visits the gloomy pines of his earlier vision he finds they stand "motionless, mute, as if they did not recognize him" (Chekhov 245). There is a profound disconnection between Kovrin and nature as spaces that were once a source of joy now seem empty and agonizing.

During his initial illness, Kovrin loses all sense of emotional balance. In their final conversation before his treatment he tells the monk, "It seems strange to me that I experience nothing but joy from morning till evening. It fills the whole of me and stifles all my other feelings. I don't know what sadness, sorrow, or boredom is" (243). To this the monk responds, "Is joy a supernatural feeling? Should it not be the normal state of man?" (243), contained in this statement is an idealized vision of humanity, like that in the Garden of Eden, but it is a vision that denies the abundance of suffering and confusion that defines one's human experience. In reality, there can be no good without evil, joy without pain, or life without death. It is the negotiation of these opposing forces that gives life its full meaning. Only after Kovrin is cast out of the Pesotsky's garden, spending two years in exile with a new woman, does he come to understand how his own pride and selfishness acted as a

force of evil amidst the three of them. He recognizes his cruelty to Tanya and to her father. His experience of this knowledge causes him great shame, as it also demonstrates a new degree of self-awareness and perception.

Kovrin's experience outlines his own fall from innocence and happiness into suffering. In his recollection the bitter taste of this knowledge forces him to recognize that he is not unique and that he has inflicted great pain and suffering on others. Nevertheless, Kovrin's final moments seem to combine the irreconcilable opposites from before, "his breath was taken away and his heart wrung with sorrow, and a wonder, sweet joy, such as he had long forgotten, trembled in his breast" (251). He experiences great pain alongside bliss and the oppositions find some resolution within him. The final scene is morbid cacophony of rapturous joy and extreme physical suffering, but there is a degree of redemption in the pleasant description of the garden, and the calling out of Tanya's name, and "out to life that was so beautiful" (252). Kovrin's apparently happy death problematizes any definitive moral judgment; it remains ambiguous to the end whether he is a madman or a genius– perhaps he is a mixture of both. In this final return to the garden and to belief he has a renewed sense of suffering and anguish, not just his own, but the pain that he has caused others.

Rayfield describes "The Black Monk" as a *historia morbi*, or the account of "symptoms gathering to a syndrome and death" (544) and he argues that for Chekhov gardens often symbolize a "characters' mentality mapped out"(534). The account of Kovrin's sickness and death is paralleled by the description of the garden, the dark smoke casting a shadow like madness, and the destruction of one is mirrored by the collapse of the other. It is only after Kovrin learns that Pesotsky is dead and with him his garden that he succumbs to his own disease. In "The Black Monk" the religious symbolism of the garden is as fraught with internal tensions and contradictions as the experiences of the protagonist and his relations. From the beginning, during Kovrin's fits of happy genius, the descriptions of the garden suggest paradisiacal allusions to the Garden of Eden alongside with hellish images of toil and suffering. These contradictory impressions reinforce the thematic oppositions of genius and madness, innocence and experience, happiness and suffering, and suggest the dynamic interplay of these apparent polarities and their dependence of one upon the other.

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