**The Bear**

**ANTON PAVLOVICH CHEKHOV  
1888**

[INTRODUCTION](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/bear#Introduction)  
[AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/bear#AuthorBiography)  
[PLOT SUMMARY](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/bear#PlotSummary)  
[CHARACTERS](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/bear#Characters)  
[THEMES](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/bear#Themes)

**INTRODUCTION**

One of Anton Chekhov's minor dramatic works, *Medved* (*The Bear*, sometimes translated as (*The Boor*) was written in 1888 and apparently held in low esteem by Chekhov, who described it as "a silly little French vaudeville," as Vera Gottlieb notes in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*. Yet much of Chekhov's literary income was earned through performances of *The Bear* and similar plays. Better known for his short stories and longer dramas than for such farces, Chekhov is considered a master of nineteenth-century, Russian realism. (Realism involves an attempt to depict people, environments, and objects as they exist in everyday life.) Even in comic, one-act plays such as *The Bear*, he vividly depicts details of the everyday lives of common people. The action of such works is driven by the characters and their interactions with one another. In *The Bear*, a widow, who mourns for her husband seven months after his death, is approached by one of his creditors, a man in dire financial circumstances who desperately requires the money that the widow's husband owed him. The exchange between the widow and the creditor quickly progresses from polite to explosive, and the creditor, who expresses his negative opinion of women in general, is transformed by the spirit with which the widow argues with him. Yet the two agree to duel, and the widow's willingness to meet this challenge compels the creditor to profess his love for her. The play ends with the pair embracing. Despite Chekhov's disparaging remarks about *The Bear*, it

is known from his letters that he took the composition of such plays as seriously as he viewed the writing of his fiction and lengthier dramas.

*Medved* was originally published in 1888, in Moscow, Russia, and was later translated as *The Bear* by Julius West in *The Plays by Anton Tchekoff*, published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1916. The work is also available in *The Cherry Orchard & Other Plays*, published by Grosset and Dunlap in 1935 and in *Plays by Anton Chekhov, Second Series*, published by Hard Press in 2006.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

The third son of Pavel Egorovich Chekhov and Evgeniia Iakovlevna Morozova, [Anton Pavlovich Chekhov](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/russian-and-eastern-european-literature-biographies/anton-pavlovich) (sometimes spelled Tchekoff) was born on January 17, 1860, in the city of Taganrog, Russia. (Chekhov's birthday is sometimes alternately listed as January 29, 1860, and the day of his death as July 15, 1904, instead of July 2, 1904, because two calendars were in use in the nineteenth century—the Julian calendar and the [Gregorian calendar](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/britain-ireland-france-and-low-countries/british-and-irish-political-geography/gregorian). The calendars differ in the way they calculate leap years.) Chekhov's father, an authoritarian man and a devout Orthodox Christian, owned a general store where Chekhov and his older brothers worked. The business ultimately failed, and in 1876, Pavel Chekhov fled from his debts and took his family to Moscow, where his two eldest sons lived. Anton Chekhov remained in Taganrog to finish [secondary school](https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/education/education-terms-and-concepts/secondary-school). After finishing school in 1879, Chekhov received a local scholarship and enrolled in the medical school at Moscow University. In 1880, Chekhov published his first story in the journal *Strekoza* (Dragonfly). Thus began his prolific career as a [short story](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general/short-story) writer, through which he supported his family. He continued to pursue his medical studies and graduated from Moscow University in 1884. The same year, using the pseudonym A. Chekhonte, he published his first collection of short stories, titled *Skazki Mel'pomeny* (Tales of Melpomene). Chekhov also opened a medical practice in 1884 and discovered, following his first pulmonary hemorrhage, that he suffered from tuberculosis. Over the next several years, Chekhov increasingly contributed to well-respected literary magazines and was praised as a talented newcomer in the world of literary fiction. Despite the critical praise Chekhov received during this time period, some reviewers felt that he shouldn't use his talent on trivial short stories.

Chekhov wrote the full-length play *Ivanov* in the fall of 1887, and it was produced in November of that year. It was published the next month and became a theatrical success. In 1888, Chekhov focused on his dramatic works, honing *Ivanov* and completing smaller works, including *The Bear*, which was published that year. In 1890, after months of planning the arduous and ambitious journey, Chekhov left for Sakhalin Island, a Russian prison colony (a community of prisoners and their families). He remained there for several months, gathering information for a census and material for a book. Following another year of various travels, Chekhov purchased a small estate south of Moscow, where he lived, wrote, and served the surrounding community as a physician. In the late 1890s, Chekhov's illness began to intensify, and he spent the winter of 1897 in Nice, France, with other tuberculosis sufferers. After returning to Moscow, Chekhov met an actress, Olga Knipper, who was to act in his play *Diadia Vania* (Uncle Vania), published in 1897 and produced in 1898. In addition to playwriting, he began to edit his earlier works of short fiction for another collection. He courted Olga, and the two traveled to Yalta, in what is now Ukraine, where Chekhov was having a new home built. In 1901, Chekhov and Olga married in Moscow. His last play, *Vishnevyi sad* (The Cherry Orchard), premiered in Moscow in 1904 and enjoyed the acclaim of theatergoers and critics. It was published the same year. In Badenweiler, Germany, a resort town where he and Olga had traveled to rest, Chekhov succumbed to tuberculosis; he died on July 2, 1904.

**PLOT SUMMARY**

A play in one act, *The Bear* takes place in a single setting, that of the widow Elena Ivanovna Popova's home. The scene opens with Popova staring at a photograph. Her elderly footman (servant), Luka, is arguing with her. Luka bemoans the fact that Popova never leaves the house, that she has grieved too long the death of her husband Nicolai Mihailovitch. Luka exclaims that it has been an entire year since she has left the house. Telling her about the regiment stationed nearby, Luka informs Popova that the soldiers are handsome and that each Friday there is a ball at their camp. Luka also states that Popova's beauty will fade and that when she finally seeks to be admired by the officers, they will not look at her, adding, "It will be too late." In reply, Popova professes that she will never stop mourning Nicolai. Admitting that Nicolai was cruel and unfaithful to her, Popova insists that she will "be true till death," thereby proving to her late husband her own constancy and goodness. Luka insists that she stop talking this way and encourages her to go out for a walk or have one of the horses, Toby or Giant, harnessed so that she may go for a drive and visit neighbors. At the mention of Toby, her husband's favorite horse, Popova begins to weep and orders Luka to feed the animal an extra ration of oats.

**MEDIA ADAPTATIONS**

* In 1938, *The Bear* was adapted as a Russian film titled *Medved*, produced by Belgoskino and directed by Isidor Annensky. The cast included Olga Androvskaya, Mikhail Zharov, and Ivan Pelttser.
* In 1950, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) television program *Nash Airflyte Theatre* produced an episode titled "The Boor," based on Chekhov's *The Bear*. The episode was directed by Marc Daniels and written by Ellis Marcus.
* In 1961, *The Bear* was adapted as a Czechoslovakian film titled *Medved*, written and directed by Martin Fric. The cast included Jan Werich and Stella Zázvorková.
* A remake of the 1961 Czechoslovakian film, *Medved*, *The Boor* is a 1996 Canadian-made, English-language film version of Chekhov's *The Bear*. The film was directed and written by Ian Thompson and distributed by Faust Films. The cast included Clyde Whitham and Colm Feore.

A bell rings, and Popova, wondering who could be visiting her, instructs Luka to turn the person away. In his absence, she returns her gaze to the photograph. Speaking to it, Popova affirms her faithfulness once more and chastises her husband for his adultery. Luka reappears and informs Popova that a gentleman has arrived who demands to be seen despite Luka's efforts to send him on his way. She agrees to see the man, and as Luka leaves, Popova comments on her annoyance with people. She suggests that perhaps entering a convent might be necessary. A man enters, yelling at Luka, and then politely introduces himself to Popova as "Grigory Stepanovitch Smirnov, landowner and retired lieutenant of artillery." Smirnov states that he has come regarding an urgent matter and further explains that Popova's husband died owing him over a thousand rubles. Additionally, Smirnov states, he must pay the interest on his own mortgage the next day, so he requires the money Nicolai owed him immediately. Popova informs Smirnov that while she currently does not have the money, her steward will arrive from town in two days, and upon his return, she will instruct him to settle the debt with Smirnov. Popova adds that it is "exactly seven months" since the death of her husband and that her current "state of mind" is such that she cannot attend to financial matters. An argument ensues between the two. Smirnov reiterates his dire need for the money, and Popova continues to insist that she does not have the cash to spare. Smirnov becomes more and more agitated, shouting and cursing at Popova. He tells her of the other people who owe him money, who also have an excuse as to why they cannot pay him. Popova chastises him for his language and tone of voice and exits the room. (Some editions of the text omit the stage direction indicating Popova's departure at this point, but it is clear that she leaves, as a stage direction for her reentrance appears shortly afterward.)

In Popova's absence, Smirnov continues to rant, stating that he has been "too gentle" with the people who owe him money, but that Popova might find out what he is really like. Concluding his tirade, he states that he will remain at Popova's house until she pays him. Complaining to Luka about what he believes is "silly feminine logic," Smirnov demands that Luka bring him some water. After bringing Smirnov the water he requested, Luka announces that Popova is ill and will not see him. Smirnov yells out the window to his driver, ordering him to unharness the horses, and then demands a glass of vodka from Luka. Shortly after Luka arrives with the drink, Popova reenters the room and asks that Smirnov stop shouting. However, both Popova and Smirnov resume yelling at one another about the debt, and Popova accuses Smirnov of being rude and not knowing how to properly behave around women. He begins to tease her, and attempts to shower her, sarcastically, with French pleasantries. Smirnov then launches into an extended speech about the lover he used to be, the women he used to woo, and how he believes all women are, in the end, unfaithful. This goads Popova into her own tirade about her cheating husband and her faithfulness. The argument returns to financial matters, and when Popova asks Luka to show Smirnov out, the creditor refuses to leave. Popova and Smirnov continue to shout at one another, while Luka wails in fear. Popova accuses Smirnov of being a boor, a bear, a monster, and a Bourbon (a derogatory reference to the French), and Smirnov is shocked that she would have the nerve to insult him. He suggests that she only feels free to do so because she is a woman and will not be subject to the same repercussions that a man would. Insisting that she pay for her insults and that if she wants "equality of rights" she will certainly get it, Smirnov challenges Popova to a duel. She accepts the challenge instantly and leaves to get her husband's pistols.

Smirnov ponders the spirit and nerve Popova possesses, marveling at her acceptance of the challenge. He admits to himself that he is no longer angry with her. Returning with the pistols, Popova asks Smirnov to show her how to use them. A fearful Luka departs, seeking the coachman and gardener to help prevent a catastrophe. Smirnov offers instructions to Popova, but informs her that he has no intention of shooting her. She asks him why he will not and accuses him of being afraid. Smirnov then confesses that he likes her. Popova responds with laughter. When Smirnov admits that he is nearly in love with her, Popova expresses her hatred of him. Threatening to shoot him, Popova remains adamant in the face of Smirnov's increasingly passionate proclamations of love. He even proposes to her but gets up to leave when it seems as if she will not have him. Popova stops him before he goes. Her brief speech that follows alternates between commands that he leave and insistence that he remain. When Smirnov moves toward the door, she asks where he is going but then yells at him to get out. As she continues to vacillate, Smirnov approaches her and embraces her. Despite Popova's protestations, Smirnov kisses her, just as Luka returns with the gardener, the coachman, and various workmen, all armed with tools. Popova turns to Luka and tells him not to give Toby any oats at all.

**CHARACTERS**

**Luka**

Luka is Popova's servant, an elderly footman. He speaks to his mistress in a familiar, fatherly way. Insisting that Popova has mourned her husband long enough, Luka describes his own brief mourning period following his wife's death. Luka advises Popova to visit the neighbors and to visit the soldiers' camp and attend their weekly balls. After Smirnov's arrival, Luka becomes increasingly fearful of the gentleman's shouting and insistence on remaining at Popova's house until he is paid. Luka is positively panic-stricken when Popova and Smirnov agree to a duel. Remaining politely deferential to Smirnov, Luka attempts on several occasions to ask Smirnov to leave, but when Smirnov responds with hostility and threats, Luka "clutches at his heart" and claims illness and shortness of breath. Weeping, he begs Smirnov to leave. Despite Luka's fear, he remains protective of Popova and departs to find reinforcements, leaving Smirnov and Popova alone together. Luka returns some time later with various workmen armed with an axe, a rake, a pitchfork, and poles. The men discover Smirnov and Popova kissing instead of arguing or dueling.

**Elena Ivanovna Popova**

Elena Ivanovna Popova is the widow of Nicolai Mihailovitch, who has been dead for seven months. She remains deep in mourning for her husband, and has vowed to mourn him for the rest of her life in order to prove her faithfulness to him. Despite Smirnov's initial show of respect for her, Popova is curt and abrupt. However, she does not attempt to shirk her husband's debt; rather, she offers to pay Smirnov within a few days, after her steward has returned from town. After she leaves and reenters, the stage direction indicates that her eyes are "downcast," perhaps suggesting that Popova is attempting to remain civil and respectful. When Smirnov refuses to leave, she quickly becomes fiery, insistent. When their ensuing argument turns to the topic of faithfulness, Popova's pain at having been betrayed by her husband reveals itself. Yet, as she affirms her intentions to remain faithful to him and mourn him until her death, her grief appears to transform into spitefulness and anger. Smirnov points out that even though she has chosen the life of a shut in, she still powders her face, hinting that she might in fact be interested in attracting a man. Indeed, though she is initially dismissive of Smirnov's compliments and insistence on his love for her, Popova hesitates when he attempts to leave. Confused, both with Smirnov's change of heart and by her own fluctuations in emotion, Popova cannot decide if she wants Smirnov to stay or depart. She continues to resist him until he embraces and kisses her. Following the kiss, though, Popova emphasizes the transference of her affections from her dead husband to Smirnov. She tells Luka not to reward the horse Toby with a ration of oats after all, demonstrating that she will no longer indulge her memories of her late husband. Significantly, it is Smirnov who sold the oats to Popova's husband, and it is this debt that he has come to collect; Popova is now aligning herself with her husband's creditor. By denying the horse the oats her husband purchased from Smirnov, and by transferring her affections to this man in particular, Popova not only rejects her husband's memory but snubs him as well. Her actions, while symbolic of the end of her mourning period, seem petty, as it is the innocent horse—whose only crime is having been the husband's favorite—who is punished.

While Popova's spirit impresses Smirnov, the fact that she is won over in such a short time by only his persistence and his kiss suggests that Popova may be as fickle as some of the other women whom Smirnov has already ridiculed. Additionally, Popova displays a capacity for deception. As Smirnov observes, she claims to want to shut herself off from society, yet she continues to be concerned about her appearance. Furthermore, she is clearly a strong-willed woman, unafraid of expressing her views, yet she attempts in various instances throughout the play to portray herself as more demure and reserved than she actually is. She apparently behaves this way for the sake of propriety, and yet she shows a blatant disregard for what her society deems proper by first verbally insulting Smirnov and then agreeing to the duel with him. Popova is a study in contradiction, and as such is the source of some of the play's humor. She is also a representation of both Chekhov's ability to create subtle, mutable characters with flaws and depth, and his willingness to do so even in a "simple" play.

**Grigory Stepanovitch Smirnov**

Grigory Stepanovitch Smirnov enters the play with a polite request of Popova, asking her to pay him the money Nicolai Mihailovitch, her husband, owed Smirnov for oats for horse feed. Popova's repeated response that she will be unable to pay him transforms Smirnov's demeanor from polite to hostile. He stubbornly intends to remain in her house until she pays him, and as their argument intensifies, he taunts and teases her. While Popova has reprimanded Smirnov for not knowing how to properly speak to a woman, he twists her desire to be treated respectfully into an opportunity to tease her about the way he believes women like to be wooed. He recounts stories about the women he has loved, who have been unfaithful to him. His challenge to a duel stems from Popova insulting him repeatedly, and Smirnov feels that if a man had carried on in such a manner, a duel would be the obvious way to address the situation. Yet his surprise at her response to the challenge triggers a transformation in his feelings for her. He feels that at last he has found a "real woman." He finds that not only is he not angry with her any longer but that he actually likes her. As he explains to her the proper way to hold and fire a pistol, he begins to notice her physical beauty.

By the time Popova is ready to go into the garden to have the duel, Smirnov has resolved to shoot his pistol into the air to spare Popova. The more she insists she hates him, the more Smirnov falls for Popova. On his knees, he confesses his love for her. Popova continues to resist his advances but in a manner that is hesitating enough to give Smirnov hope. Emboldened by her confusion, which suggests to Smirnov that Popova might be willing to consider him as a suitor, Smirnov kisses her.

**THEMES**

**Death and Mourning**

In Chekhov's *The Bear*, death, grief, and mourning are portrayed in a comic, lighthearted manner. Popova's husband has been dead only seven months, but her melodramatic comments, combined with Luka's exaggerations and comic reactions to Popova's grief, make the serious issue of death something to joke about. From the beginning of the play, Luka amplifies Popova's response to her husband's death, and through his exaggeration of the situation, he turns Nicolai's death and Popova's grief into something other than a serious event and an appropriate response. Furthermore, he attempts to legitimize the fact that he finds Popova's grief silly. Luka opens the play by chastising Popova for sitting in her house and not enjoying herself, adding that every other living creature is able to enjoy itself, even the cat outside. He claims Popova has not left the house in an entire year, even though we learn later that it has only been seven months since Popova has become a widow. In response, Popova defends herself, but her comments reflect an arguably exaggerated view of grief, in that she plans to grieve forever. She states that she will never go out again, as her life is over anyway; her husband is dead, and she has "buried" herself "between four walls." Luka, trying to be practical, replies that although Popova's husband *is* dead, it was God's will, and Popova has been right to mourn him. Yet she cannot mourn forever, he insists, explaining that when his own wife died, he grieved for her as well. He cried for a month, and "that's enough for her." The "old woman," as he repeatedly calls her, was not worth him wasting any more of his life on grief. Luka continues to complain about Popova never leaving the house due to her grief. He jokes that they live like spiders, never seeing the light of day, and that the mice have devoured his livery (uniform). Popova will not be swayed, and she expresses her determination to prove how much more faithful to her husband she was and will be than he ever was to her. She even bursts into tears at the mention of her husband's favorite horse. While Luka chides Popova for her extended mourning, Smirnov scoffs, believing that her mourning is really all a show, so that others will find her "mysterious" and "poetic." Finally, after Smirnov's feelings for Popova transform from anger into love, her grief dissolves as Smirnov kisses her. Because Popova's grief has already been the object of jokes since the beginning of the play, it does not come as a shock by the play's end that she is willing to put her grief aside and embrace Smirnov.

**Love and Faithfulness**

For Popova, love was something she felt for her husband until his death, and faithfulness became a duty, a point to prove afterwards. Readers learn in her opening exchange with Luka that Popova loved her husband, Nicolai, even though he treated her cruelly at times; she also admits that he was unfaithful to her. But Popova vows to be faithful to Nicolai until her own death, to show him how *she* loves. Alone and speaking to Nicolai's photograph, Popova states that she will show him how loving and forgiving she can be and asks if he is ashamed. Promising to keep herself locked away and faithful until her death, she calls him a "bad child," and bitterly recalls how he deceived her and left her alone for weeks at a time. After Smirnov's appearance, when their discussion has shifted from financial matters to matters of the heart, Smirnov makes a speech about the women he used to love, and how passionately he loved them. Yet he has been deceived by them, he insists, and asks Popova if she has ever known a woman "who was sincere, faithful, and constant." Popova, whose own life has been scarred by an unfaithful husband, rails at Smirnov, stating that the best man she ever knew, her husband, could not manage to be faithful. She describes the depth of her love for Nicolai, how she worshipped him. Popova discovered, she tells Smirnov, "a whole drawerful of love-letters," following Nicolai's death. She has since admitted to herself what she probably suspected when Nicolai was alive—his trips away from home were opportunities for him to be unfaithful. Yet, in spite of Nicolai's deception and adultery, Popova states, she continues to remain faithful and will do so "to the very end." Her faithfulness, as her comments indicate, seems to be generated by her need to spite Nicolai after his death, to prove to him that she is stronger and better than him. As her whisperings to his picture suggest, she simply wants Nicolai to have the decency to feel ashamed of his actions. By the end of the play, as she begins to be swayed by the force of Smirnov's feelings, Popova shows a willingness to abandon her futile bitterness. In this sense, her embrace of Smirnov may be seen as an openness to a new relationship, despite the emotional risks involved.