The Psychology of Childhood Suffering: Unmet Human Needs, Emotional Deprivation, and the Crisis of Empathy in Selected Short Stories by Anton Chekhov

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines childhood deprivation in Anton Chekhov's short stories "Vanka" and "Oysters" through the framework of Humanistic Psychology. Drawing on Abraham Maslow's theory of human needs and Carl Rogers's emphasis on empathy and acceptance, the study explores how material hardship, emotional neglect, and social indifference affect vulnerable children. Through qualitative textual analysis, it investigates the relationship between unmet physical and psychological needs and the failure of individuals and society to recognise children's suffering. The paper also considers the contemporary relevance of Chekhov's representations, arguing that economic development and social progress have not entirely eliminated childhood vulnerability. By connecting literary interpretation with continuing concerns about child poverty, neglect, and protection, the study emphasises the importance of viewing children not merely as recipients of material support but as individuals deserving dignity, security, affection, and understanding.

Keywords: Humanistic Psychology, childhood deprivation, empathy, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Anton Chekhov

INTRODUCTION

Childhood is generally associated with security, affection, care, and opportunities for growth. However, these conditions are not equally available to all children. Poverty, neglect, exploitation, and social indifference can deprive children of the basic conditions necessary for their physical and emotional well-being. Such deprivation extends beyond the absence of food, shelter, and financial security. It may also involve the lack of affection, protection, belonging, and recognition. When these needs remain unmet, childhood becomes an experience of vulnerability rather than a period of safety and development. Literature offers an important means of examining these experiences because it represents not only the external circumstances of suffering but also the human responses, or failures of response, that shape the lives of vulnerable individuals.

Anton Chekhov's short stories "Vanka" and "Oysters" offer significant perspectives on childhood suffering under conditions of poverty and social neglect. Although the stories present different circumstances, both draw attention to children whose immediate needs are inadequately recognised or addressed. In "Vanka," the young protagonist experiences the loneliness and hardship of life as an apprentice and longs for the security and affection associated with his grandfather and home. His letter expresses a deep desire to escape his present circumstances and return to a place where he hopes to find care and belonging. The story therefore invites consideration of the emotional needs of a child whose longing for protection receives no effective response.

In "Oysters," Chekhov presents a child confronted with hunger and extreme material hardship. The boy's suffering reveals the physical consequences of poverty while also drawing attention to the responses of the adults who witness his condition. His experience raises questions about the relationship between suffering and social responsibility. While hunger represents an immediate physical need, the manner in which others respond to a hungry child reveals another dimension of vulnerability: the possibility that human suffering may be observed

without being adequately understood. Read together, the stories provide a basis for examining both material deprivation and the emotional consequences of a failure to respond with empathy.

Humanistic Psychology provides the principal theoretical framework for this study. Associated particularly with Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, this approach emphasises human needs, personal dignity, emotional understanding, and the conditions that support healthy development. Maslow's theory of motivation identifies physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation as important dimensions of human motivation (Maslow, 1943). Although these needs should not be treated as a rigid sequence that operates identically in every individual, the framework offers a useful way to examine how deprivation in one or more areas may restrict a child's opportunities for well-being. In Chekhov's stories, hunger, insecurity, loneliness, and the desire for affection can be examined in relation to these fundamental human needs.

Carl Rogers's humanistic perspective further strengthens the analysis through its emphasis on empathic understanding and acceptance. Rogers (1957) discusses the importance of empathy, genuineness, and acceptance in facilitating constructive psychological change. Applied cautiously to literary analysis, this perspective directs attention to the importance of understanding a child's experience from the child's point of view rather than judging that experience solely through adult expectations or social conventions. The children in Chekhov's stories can therefore be considered not merely as figures representing poverty but as individuals whose suffering calls for recognition and understanding. Humanistic Psychology enables the study to focus on the human significance of their experiences without reducing them to social problems alone.

The relevance of this framework extends beyond the nineteenth-century settings of Chekhov's stories. Contemporary societies have witnessed considerable developments in education, healthcare, technology, legislation, and child-protection initiatives. Nevertheless, childhood poverty, neglect, exploitation, and unequal access to essential resources continue to affect children in different parts of the world. Progress in material and institutional conditions does not automatically guarantee that every child receives adequate protection, affection, or respect. The persistence of childhood vulnerability therefore raises an important question: why do conditions that undermine children's well-being continue to exist despite social development and greater awareness of children's rights?

This study approaches that question through a focused reading of "Vanka" and "Oysters." Rather than assuming that society has remained unchanged, it considers the continuing gap between social progress and the effective recognition of children's needs. Chekhov's representations provide a literary starting point for examining how deprivation becomes more severe when accompanied by indifference and inadequate care. The contemporary discussion will situate these representations within the continuing concern for children's physical security, emotional well-being, and dignity, without shifting the paper's primary focus away from the two short stories.

Accordingly, this paper aims to analyse the representation of unmet human needs in "Vanka" and "Oysters" through Maslow's theory of human motivation and Rogers's emphasis on empathic understanding. It examines the forms of material and emotional deprivation experienced by the child protagonists, considers the role of social indifference in intensifying their vulnerability, and reflects on the continuing relevance of these concerns in contemporary society. Through qualitative close reading and comparative analysis, the study argues that the well-being of children requires more than material provision: it also depends on the recognition of their dignity, emotional needs, and right to compassionate care.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Anton Chekhov's short fiction has attracted critical attention for its portrayal of ordinary people, social inequality, psychological suffering, and the complexities of human relationships. His representations of vulnerable individuals frequently reveal the distance between their needs and the responses they receive from others. Within this broader literary context, childhood suffering in "Vanka" provides an important point of departure for examining the relationship between poverty, emotional deprivation, and social indifference. Existing criticism offers useful perspectives on these concerns, while Humanistic Psychology provides a framework for investigating the physical and emotional needs underlying the experiences of Chekhov's child protagonists.

One relevant study is Raj Kishor Singh's "Pains and Pangs in Anton Chekhov's Story Vanka" (2020). Singh examines the suffering experienced by Vanka through critical discourse analysis, drawing attention to poverty, apprenticeship, and the abuse of power. The study interprets the protagonist's circumstances as an example of the hardships faced by children within unequal social relationships. It is particularly relevant to the present research because it establishes the significance of material deprivation and the mistreatment of a child in Chekhov's narrative. However, the present study approaches the story from a different theoretical direction. Rather than concentrating primarily on discourse, ideology, and power relations, it investigates how Vanka's unmet needs for security, affection, and belonging can be interpreted through Humanistic Psychology (Singh, 2020).

Olga V. Zakharova's "Chekhov's Short Story Vanka: Plot, Genre, Interpretation" (2020) explores the story through the critical debate surrounding its genre and ending. Zakharova discusses interpretations of "Vanka" as a Christmas story and considers the significance of the protagonist's dream, the possibility of a Christmas miracle, and the relationship between the story's artistic world and its apparent outcome. Her study challenges conventional readings that treat the narrative only as a straightforward account of a child's suffering. This approach is valuable to the present research because it demonstrates that Vanka's experience can be interpreted through the story's narrative structure and ending, rather than solely through its depiction of hardship. The present study, however, focuses on the protagonist's unmet needs and vulnerability while remaining attentive to the ambiguity of the narrative's conclusion.

Connor Doak's "What's Papa For? Paternal Intimacy and Distance in Chekhov's Early Stories" (2016) is particularly relevant to "Oysters." The article examines father figures in several early stories, including "Oysters," "Misery," "Requiem," "Grisha," "Papasha," and "At Home." Doak questions the tendency to interpret Chekhov's fathers exclusively through the model of the tyrannical patriarch and instead investigates physical and emotional distance between fathers and children. By situating paternal relationships within their historical and sociocultural contexts, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of family relationships in Chekhov's fiction. This perspective is useful for the present research because "Oysters" represents a child and his father experiencing extreme hardship together. Doak's discussion encourages attention to the father–child relationship and the social circumstances surrounding it, while the present study concentrates on the child's physical deprivation and the responses of the wider social environment.

Broader scholarship on Chekhov's representations of childhood also helps situate these stories within his literary practice. The study of Chekhov's children should account for the relationship between a child's perception of events and the adult world in which the child lives. The contrast between a child's limited understanding and the behaviour of adults can produce irony, distress, and critical reflection. Such narrative contrasts are important to "Vanka" and "Oysters," in which the children's experiences expose the limitations of the social environments around them. This perspective supports a comparative reading that attends to the children's circumstances, their attempts to communicate their needs, and the responses they receive.

The existing studies thus offer several important directions for the present research. Singh foregrounds suffering, poverty, and unequal power in "Vanka"; Zakharova examines the story's genre, interpretive traditions, and ending; and Doak investigates paternal distance and intimacy in a group of Chekhov's early stories that includes "Oysters." Together, these studies demonstrate that Chekhov's representations of childhood can be examined through social conditions, narrative form, and family relationships. They also indicate that the experiences of vulnerable children cannot be understood solely by recounting the events of a story.

The present study brings "Vanka" and "Oysters" together to examine childhood vulnerability through a focused comparative analysis. Rather than claiming that earlier critics have overlooked poverty or suffering, it investigates how the two stories represent different but related forms of deprivation: emotional insecurity and the longing for belonging in "Vanka," and hunger and material hardship in "Oysters." It further examines the relationship between these conditions and the failure to respond adequately to children's needs. Humanistic Psychology will be introduced in the theoretical framework section as the principal lens for this analysis. The subsequent discussion will connect the literary findings to contemporary concerns about childhood poverty, neglect, and protection, while keeping Chekhov's stories at the centre of the paper.

Theoretical Framework:

Humanistic Psychology provides the theoretical foundation for this study of childhood deprivation in Anton

Chekhov's "Vanka" and "Oysters." Emerging as an influential psychological approach during the mid-twentieth century, Humanistic Psychology emphasises human dignity, individual experience, psychological well-being, and the conditions necessary for personal development. In contrast to approaches that primarily explain behaviour through pathology or unconscious processes, the humanistic perspective directs attention to people's needs, feelings, relationships, and potential for growth. This orientation is particularly relevant to the study of children whose physical and emotional needs remain unmet within adverse social circumstances.

Abraham Maslow's "A Theory of Human Motivation" (1943) provides a central theoretical foundation for the present study. Maslow proposes that human motivation involves several categories of needs, including physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation. His framework is useful for understanding how the absence of essential resources and supportive relationships may affect human well-being. In literary analysis, this perspective enables the researcher to examine characters in relation to their basic needs rather than treating their suffering as an isolated narrative event. In "Oysters," the child's hunger foregrounds the immediate importance of physiological needs, while the surrounding social circumstances invite consideration of protection and dignity. In "Vanka," the protagonist's longing for home and his grandfather draws attention to emotional security and belonging. Maslow's theory therefore provides a useful basis for comparing the different forms of deprivation represented in the two stories (Maslow, 1943).

Carl Rogers's work contributes another important dimension to the theoretical framework. In "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change" (1957), Rogers emphasises empathic understanding and acceptance as significant conditions for constructive psychological change. Although his original discussion concerns therapeutic relationships, the concepts can be applied cautiously to literary representations of human relationships.

Rogers's concept of empathic understanding provides a framework for interpreting whether the children's feelings and perspectives are acknowledged, misunderstood, or ignored within these interactions. His related concept of unconditional positive regard also helps illuminate the extent to which the children receive acceptance and compassionate attention. By interpreting specific textual details through these concepts, the study explores how Chekhov represents the presence or absence of empathy in "Vanka" and "Oysters." Rogers's theory therefore informs the interpretation of narrative relationships and ethical concerns without treating the characters as actual patients or making clinical judgements about their psychological conditions.

In the present study, Rogers's perspective directs attention to whether the children's experiences are understood and acknowledged by the adults around them. The issue is not simply that the protagonists experience hardship, but that their suffering calls for a response grounded in understanding rather than indifference. This perspective is particularly relevant to a comparative reading of "Vanka" and "Oysters," in which the children's vulnerability becomes more significant when considered alongside the limited or inadequate responses available to them (Rogers, 1957).

The relevance of Humanistic Psychology to the study of childhood deprivation lies in its emphasis on the individual's needs, dignity, and capacity for development. Maslow's account helps identify the needs that remain unmet, while Rogers's emphasis on empathy encourages attention to the quality of human responses. Used together, these perspectives make it possible to consider both the conditions in which the children suffer and the relational dimensions of that suffering. The approach also prevents the analysis from reducing the protagonists to passive symbols of poverty. Instead, their longing, distress, and attempts to communicate become central to understanding their experiences. At the same time, the theories must be applied as interpretive frameworks rather than as clinical diagnoses of fictional characters.

The two selected stories offer complementary perspectives on childhood vulnerability. "Vanka" foregrounds the emotional distress of a child subjected to harsh treatment and separated from the affection he associates with home. "Oysters," by contrast, places hunger and material hardship at the centre of the child's experience. Reading the stories together makes it possible to examine how physical deprivation and emotional suffering

intersect without assuming that they are identical. The comparison also brings social responsibility into focus: the child's vulnerability is shaped not only by a lack of resources but also by the actions, attitudes, and limitations of the surrounding adults. These connected concerns provide a basis for examining how Chekhov

represents the consequences of failing to recognise children's needs.

Humanistic Psychology also provides a basis for connecting Chekhov's literary representations with contemporary concerns about children's welfare. Material assistance is essential, but children's well-being also depends on safety, emotional support, recognition, and protection from exploitation and neglect. Contemporary social progress has not removed every condition that undermines these needs. The persistence of childhood vulnerability therefore invites consideration of the relationship between social development and the recognition of children's dignity. In this study, the contemporary connection will be used to contextualise the literary analysis rather than to suggest that Chekhov's nineteenth-century characters directly represent every aspect of present-day childhood.

Accordingly, this study employs Maslow's account of human needs and Rogers's emphasis on empathic understanding as complementary interpretive perspectives. Maslow's theory helps identify the physical and psychological needs that remain unmet, while Rogers's approach directs attention to the human responses that may alleviate or intensify suffering. Together, these perspectives support a comparative reading of "Vanka" and "Oysters" that foregrounds childhood deprivation, emotional vulnerability, and social responsibility. The framework does not seek to diagnose the fictional children; instead, it uses humanistic concepts to interpret their experiences and to examine the continuing importance of recognising and responding to children's needs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on close textual reading and comparative literary analysis. Anton Chekhov's short stories "Vanka" and "Oysters" serve as the primary texts. The analysis is guided by Humanistic Psychology, particularly Abraham Maslow's theory of human needs and Carl Rogers's emphasis on empathic understanding and acceptance. These concepts are used as interpretive tools to examine the experiences of vulnerable children without treating the fictional characters as subjects of psychological diagnosis.

The study identifies significant narrative details, including the children's physical circumstances, emotional expressions, relationships with adults, and attempts to communicate their needs. In "Vanka," attention is given to the protagonist's working conditions, longing for his grandfather, memories of home, and letter seeking rescue. In "Oysters," the analysis focuses on the child's hunger, his relationship with his father, his encounter with the restaurant customers, and the public response to his suffering. These details are examined in relation to physiological needs, security, affection, belonging, dignity, and empathy.

A comparative approach is subsequently employed to identify similarities and differences between the two narratives. While "Vanka" foregrounds emotional deprivation alongside physical hardship, "Oysters" places hunger and the social treatment of poverty at the centre of the child's experience. The study also considers the contemporary relevance of these representations through reliable secondary sources on childhood vulnerability. Such evidence will contextualise the literary discussion rather than replace textual analysis. The interpretation remains grounded in the primary texts and the selected theoretical framework.

Textual Analysis of Vanka – An Emotional Deprivation and the Need for Belonging

Anton Chekhov's "Vanka" portrays the suffering of a nine-year-old boy who has been apprenticed to a shoemaker in Moscow. On Christmas Eve, when the adults in the household are away, Vanka writes a letter to his grandfather, pleading to be taken back to the village.

> Waiting till his master and mistress and their workmen had gone to the
>
> midnight service, he took out of his master's cupboard of bottle of ink

and a pen with rusty nib and, spreading out a crumpled sheet of paper

in front of him, began writing. (Chekhov,Vanka. p. 294)

Through the letter and the memories it evokes, Chekhov reveals a child's desire for safety, affection, and belonging within an environment marked by physical hardship and emotional neglect.

Before forming the first letter he several times looked round

fearfully at the door and the windows, stole a glance at the dark ikon,

on both sides of which stretched shelves full of lasts, and heaved a

broken sigh. The paper lay on the bench while he knelt before it.(Chekhov, Vanka, p. 294)

The opening scene establishes Vanka's vulnerability through his fearful behaviour and the circumstances in which he writes. He waits until the adults have left before taking the ink and paper, repeatedly looking towards the door and windows. His actions suggest that even the attempt to communicate his distress must take place secretly. The setting thus introduces an atmosphere of insecurity in which the child has little freedom to express himself. His statement that he has neither father nor mother and that his grandfather is the only person left to him emphasises his dependence on a remaining family connection.

Maslow's theory of human needs provides a useful framework for interpreting Vanka's circumstances. His basic physical needs are inadequately met: he describes limited food, insufficient rest, and harsh working conditions. He also reports being beaten by his master and mistreated by other workers.

> " And yesterday I had a wigging. The master pulled me out into the yard by my hair, and whacked me with a boot-stretcher because I accidently fell asleep while was rocking their brat in the cradle. And a week ago the mistress told me to clean a herring, and began from the tail end, and she took the herring and thrust its head in my face. The workmen laugh at me and send me to the tavern for vodka, and tell me to steal the master's cucumbers from them, and the master beats me with anything that comes to hand. And there is nothing to eat. (Chekhov, Vanka, p. 296)

These experiences reveal that his need for physical safety is not secured within the household where he works. The apprenticeship, which should provide a means of learning a trade, instead becomes an environment in which his vulnerability is exploited.

On the contrary, his memories of his grandfather and their Christmas activities sharply gives contradictory opinion of his present circumstances. He recalls the winter landscape, the journey into the forest to collect a Christmas tree, and the playful interactions associated with his former life. These memories are important because they show what Vanka longs to recover: not merely a different place to live, but a relationship and environment associated with familiarity, affection, and emotional security. His recollections become a means of expressing the needs that remain unmet in the present.

Rogers's emphasis on empathic understanding further illuminates Vanka's attempt to communicate. The letter is more than a report of mistreatment; it is a plea to be understood by someone whom he believes may care for him. He describes his suffering, asks to be rescued, and promises to work in return for the opportunity to return home. His willingness to accept further punishment if he makes mistakes indicates the extent to which he has normalised harsh treatment and lowered his expectations of care. Rather than asking for a life free from all responsibility, he seeks the security of a familiar relationship and an escape from conditions he can no longer endure.

Nevertheless, the narrative does not offer a straightforward resolution. Vanka sends the letter addressed only to his grandfather "in the village," believing that it will reach him. The ending reveals that the boy falls asleep dreaming of his grandfather reading the letter. The reader, however, recognises the uncertainty surrounding the letter's delivery. This difference between Vanka's hope and the reader's awareness creates a painful contrast

between the child's emotional needs and the limited possibilities available to him. His dream offers temporary comfort, but it does not establish that his circumstances will change.

From a humanistic perspective, Vanka's suffering results not only from material hardship but also from the

absence of a secure environment in which his needs can be recognised and met. His memories and letter reveal a desire for belonging, while the events he recounts demonstrate the failure of the adults around him to provide adequate protection. Chekhov therefore presents childhood vulnerability as both a material and relational problem. The story invites readers to recognise Vanka as a child seeking dignity and compassionate care rather than merely as an apprentice enduring hardship.

"Oysters": Hunger, Poverty, and the Failure of Empathy

In "Oysters," Chekhov presents an eight-year-old boy whose experience of hunger exposes the physical and emotional consequences of poverty. The story is narrated retrospectively by the child, who remembers standing with his father on a rainy street in Moscow.

> …I had no pain at all, but my legs were giving way under me, the words stuck in my throat, my head slipped weakly on one side…It seemed as though, in a moment, I must fall down and lose consciousness. (Chekhov, Oyster, p. 273)

His father has been unable to find work and has finally resorted to begging in the roads of Moscow, …five months before, to look for a job as copying-clerk. For those five months he had been trudging about Moscow looking for work, and it was only on that day that he had brought himself to go into the streets to beg for alms. (Chekhov, Oysters, p. 273)

The boy's physical weakness on the one hand the city's beauty on the other hand, he started fascinating the whole place especially the restaurant's signboard which was in blue colour. It's windows, and his intense response to the word "oysters" establish hunger as the central force shaping his experience

Maslow's account of physiological needs is particularly relevant to this narrative. Unlike Vanka, whose story combines material hardship with a pronounced longing for family belonging, the boy in "Oysters" experiences hunger so intensely that it dominates his attention and imagination. The sight of the restaurant and the unfamiliar word on its sign awaken fantasies of food. When he asks his father what oysters are, he attempts to understand something he associates with the possibility of satisfying his hunger. His imagination transforms the unknown dish into a series of imagined meals, revealing how completely his physical need has taken possession of his thoughts.

The boy's experience also demonstrates how poverty affects family relationships. His father is not presented simply as an uncaring parent. He is himself impoverished, ashamed of begging, and unsuccessful in his search for employment. His hesitation to approach passers-by reflects the humiliation associated with public dependence. The child's suffering therefore emerges within a broader condition of economic insecurity that affects both father and son. Their circumstances suggest that vulnerability may be shared across generations, even though the child is especially dependent on adults for protection and sustenance.

The encounter with the restaurant customers introduces a more troubling dimension of the narrative. When the boy cries out for oysters, two gentlemen respond with laughter and curiosity?" Do you really eat oysters, youngster? That's interesting! How do you eat them?" (Chekhov, Oysters, p. 276) They take him into the restaurant, where a crowd watches him eat. Instead of being treated primarily as a hungry child requiring assistance, he becomes a source of amusement and spectacle. His inability to understand the food or eat it properly intensifies the scene's humiliation. "Ha, ha! He is eating the shells," laughed the crowd. "Little silly, do you suppose you can eat that? (Chekhov, Oysters, p. 277) The adults possess the means to provide help, yet their response is shaped by curiosity and entertainment rather than a clear recognition of the child's vulnerability.

Rogers's emphasis on empathic understanding offers a way to interpret this encounter. Empathy requires an effort to understand another person's experience rather than merely observe their behaviour from a distance. The

customers recognise the boy's unusual request, but their laughter suggests that they fail to respond to the need underlying it. The distinction between noticing suffering and responding compassionately is central to the story. Chekhov exposes the limitations of a social environment in which the distress of a poor child can become an amusing spectacle instead of prompting an appropriate response.

The ending reinforces the story's criticism of social indifference. After the boy has eaten, his father reflects that the gentlemen had paid a substantial amount for the oysters and wonders whether he should have asked them for money. His reflection reveals the missed possibility of direct assistance. The encounter has provided food in an immediate sense, but it has not removed the family's economic insecurity or restored their dignity. The child's subsequent discomfort also prevents the episode from becoming a simple story of rescue. The adults' actions have addressed the spectacle of hunger without meaningfully resolving the circumstances that produced it.

A humanistic reading of "Oysters" therefore brings together physiological deprivation and the need for humane recognition. The boy's hunger is undeniable, but the story also draws attention to the way society responds to visible suffering. His father's shame and the customers' amusement reveal different consequences of an unequal social environment. The narrative does not suggest that every observer is equally responsible for the family's poverty; rather, it questions a response that turns another person's distress into entertainment when practical compassion is possible.

Through this portrayal, Chekhov presents poverty as more than a shortage of food or money. It is an experience that can expose individuals to humiliation and make their needs vulnerable to the judgement of others. The child's suffering is intensified when those with greater resources fail to recognise the dignity of the person before them. In this respect, "Oysters" complements "Vanka": while the latter highlights a child's longing for emotional security and escape from mistreatment, the former emphasises hunger and the social failure to respond to a child's immediate need with understanding and care.

Comparative Analysis of "Vanka" and "Oysters"

Anton Chekhov's "Vanka" and "Oysters" portray childhood suffering within conditions of poverty and social inequality. Both stories focus on young protagonists whose circumstances expose their vulnerability and dependence on adults. However, the nature of their suffering, their relationships with adults, and the narrative outcomes differ significantly. While "Vanka" centres on a child's mistreatment and longing for home, "Oysters" foregrounds hunger, economic desperation, and the humiliating experience of receiving public attention in a moment of extreme need.

Similarities: Poverty and Childhood Vulnerability

Poverty is a central element in both stories. Vanka lives under harsh conditions as an apprentice to a shoemaker, where he experiences inadequate food, exhausting work, and physical punishment. In "Oysters," the young boy and his father face hunger and destitution after the father fails to find employment. Both children are exposed to circumstances that undermine their security and well-being.

Another similarity lies in the children's limited ability to change their situations independently. Vanka attempts to obtain help by writing a letter to his grandfather, while the boy in "Oysters" depends on his father and the strangers they encounter. Their actions reveal their dependence on adults and the restricted choices available to children living in poverty. Neither protagonist possesses the power or resources necessary to overcome his circumstances.

Both stories also reveal the consequences of inadequate social support. Vanka experiences direct mistreatment within the household where he works, while the boy in "Oysters" encounters people who respond to his suffering in ways that do not fully address his vulnerability. Through these contrasting situations, Chekhov draws attention to the difficulties faced by children whose needs are not adequately met by the adults and social environments surrounding them.

Differences in the Nature of Suffering

Despite these similarities, the two stories emphasise different aspects of childhood suffering. In "Vanka," emotional distress occupies a prominent position. The boy longs for his grandfather and recalls the village, familiar surroundings, and Christmas activities associated with his earlier life. These memories contrast with his present hardship and reveal his desire to return to a place where he believes he may find affection and security. His suffering is therefore closely connected to separation, loneliness, and the absence of a dependable source of protection.

In "Oysters," hunger is the immediate force shaping the child's experience. His attention is drawn to the restaurant and the unfamiliar food advertised there. His fascination with oysters reflects the urgency of his physical need and the limited understanding available to him as a hungry child. Although the narrative also exposes humiliation and social indifference, its central episode develops around the boy's desperate desire for food.

The distinction is important because the stories do not present poverty as a uniform experience. Vanka's situation emphasises the combination of physical mistreatment and emotional deprivation, whereas the boy in "Oysters" experiences the immediate effects of hunger alongside his father's economic insecurity. Both suffer, but the circumstances and narrative emphasis differ.

Different Representations of Adults

The portrayal of adults provides another significant point of comparison. In "Vanka," the adults responsible for the boy's working conditions subject him to harsh treatment. His grandfather, by contrast, represents the affection and familiarity he associates with home. Because the grandfather is absent, however, the possibility of rescue remains uncertain.

In "Oysters," the father is physically present but unable to provide adequately for his son. His unsuccessful search for work and his humiliation while begging reveal his own vulnerability. He should not be equated with the adults who mistreat Vanka. His circumstances illustrate how economic hardship can affect parents as well as children.

The restaurant customers introduce a further contrast. They take the hungry boy inside and provide oysters, but their laughter and curiosity make the encounter humiliating. Their response offers immediate assistance without adequately addressing the circumstances that brought the child to the restaurant. Through these different adult figures, Chekhov depicts a range of responses to childhood vulnerability, including direct mistreatment, helplessness, and assistance complicated by a lack of sensitivity.

Communication, Hope, and the Endings

The protagonists also differ in how they attempt to escape their circumstances. Vanka writes to his grandfather, explaining his suffering and pleading to be taken home. His letter expresses hope that someone will respond to his distress. Yet the address he provides is incomplete, and the story does not establish that the letter will reach its destination. The ending, in which Vanka dreams of his grandfather reading the letter, contrasts the child's hopeful imagination with the uncertainty of his actual future.

The boy in "Oysters," on the other hand, expresses his need more directly. His request for oysters leads to an encounter in which strangers provide food, but the experience does not resolve the family's poverty. The immediate need is met, yet the child's vulnerability remains.

The endings thus differ in their treatment of hope and relief. "Vanka" concludes with an imagined reunion that may never occur, while "Oysters" depicts a concrete act of assistance that provides temporary relief without changing the family's economic circumstances. Both endings resist presenting the children's suffering as fully resolved, but they do so through different narrative means.

Significance of the Comparison

A comparison of "Vanka" and "Oysters" demonstrates that Chekhov represents childhood deprivation through more than one kind of experience. In "Vanka," the child's longing for home reveals the emotional consequences of separation and mistreatment. In "Oysters," hunger exposes the physical consequences of poverty and the humiliating conditions under which assistance may be offered. Both stories show children depending on adults, yet the adults' capacities and responses vary according to their circumstances.

The stories also differ in their presentation of responsibility. Vanka's suffering is intensified by the abusive treatment he receives, whereas the boy in "Oysters" suffers within a family facing economic desperation and a public environment that treats his hunger as an occasion for amusement. This distinction prevents the two narratives from being reduced to identical accounts of neglect. Instead, their differences reveal the varied ways in which poverty and inadequate care affect children.

Taken together, the stories demonstrate Chekhov's sustained concern with the lives of vulnerable individuals. Their literary significance lies in the contrast between the children's needs and the limited relief available to them. By presenting emotional isolation in one story and acute hunger in the other, Chekhov encourages readers to recognise the multiple forms childhood suffering can take. This comparison provides a foundation for considering why child poverty, neglect, and inadequate protection remain important social concerns today.

Contemporary Relevance: Childhood Vulnerability in Contemporary Literature

Although Anton Chekhov's "Vanka" and "Oysters" were written in the nineteenth century, the concerns they raise about childhood deprivation remain relevant to contemporary literature. Poverty, child exploitation, hunger, emotional neglect, and the failure to recognise children's suffering continue to appear in literary representations across different societies. Contemporary writers revisit these concerns in changing social contexts, demonstrating that economic and social development does not automatically eliminate childhood vulnerability.

Lily Swarn's short story "Chhotu" (2016) offers a particularly relevant Indian example. The story portrays a young boy whose childhood is shaped by poverty, hunger, abuse, and the struggle to survive. Like Vanka, Chhotu experiences circumstances that deprive him of the security and care associated with childhood. The story also recalls the material deprivation depicted in "Oysters," where hunger exposes a child to humiliating and precarious circumstances. Both Chekhov's stories and Swarn's narrative draw attention to children whose needs remain inadequately protected by the adults and social environments surrounding them.

Another relevant work is Francisco Jiménez's *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* (1997), a collection of interconnected autobiographical stories about a Mexican migrant family working in California. This c**ollection of short stories about a migrant worker family remains as relevant and poignant today as it was in 1997.** The Circuit," the story of young Panchito and his trumpet, is one of the most widely anthologized stories in Chicano literature.

These stories follow the family through their circuit, from picking cotton and strawberries to topping carrots--and back again--over a number of years. As it moves from one labor camp to the next, the little family of four grows into ten. Impermanence and poverty define their lives. But with faith, hope, and back-breaking work, the family endures. Through the experiences of the young narrator, the work explores poverty, insecure living conditions, interrupted education, and the difficulties faced by children in families dependent on seasonal labour. Its representation of a child's desire for stability and educational opportunity resonates with Vanka's longing for a secure home and a more hopeful future. However, Jiménez places these concerns within the specific circumstances of migrant labour and displacement, demonstrating that childhood vulnerability takes different forms across historical and cultural settings.

Another correlated work is "Children at Work," associated with the children's book *It So Happened*, which portrays children surviving through informal labour and life on the streets of Chennai. Its representation of children forced to confront hardship at an early age provides another Indian context for considering the relationship between poverty, protection, and childhood. It is about Velu, an eleven-year-old boy who runs away

from his village to escape his abusive father. After a long, hungry journey, he arrives at Chennai Central railway station without a ticket. Overwhelmed by the noise, crowds, and confusion, he sits lost and hopeless.

These works are not identical to Chekhov's stories, nor do they suggest that the social conditions of different periods are interchangeable. Instead, they demonstrate the continuing literary significance of childhood vulnerability. While laws, educational opportunities, and social-protection systems have developed, children may still experience deprivation, exploitation, and inadequate care. The continuing appearance of these concerns in literature invites readers to question whether social progress has been accompanied by sufficient attention to children's dignity and well-being. In this respect, Chekhov's stories remain relevant because they encourage reflection on a persistent human concern: the responsibility of society to recognise vulnerable children and respond to their needs with care and understanding.

CONCLUSION

The comparative reading of Anton Chekhov's "Vanka" and "Oysters" reveals that childhood suffering is neither uniform nor confined to a single form of deprivation. While Vanka's experience foregrounds emotional isolation, harsh treatment, and the longing for affection and belonging, "Oysters" presents the immediate desperation of hunger and the humiliation associated with poverty. Despite these differences, both stories expose a fundamental failure to recognise and respond adequately to children's needs. Their comparison demonstrates that deprivation is multidimensional: a child may suffer from physical hunger, emotional neglect, social exclusion, or several of these conditions simultaneously. Recognising these distinctions is essential to understanding childhood vulnerability in its full complexity.

The significance of this comparison, however, extends far beyond the literary world of Chekhov. In contemporary society, children continue to experience poverty, exploitation, displacement, educational disadvantage, domestic insecurity, and emotional neglect. Although the circumstances have changed across historical and geographical contexts, the fundamental questions raised by the two stories remain relevant. How does society respond when a child's basic needs are unmet? Who recognises the suffering of children whose voices are rarely heard? Is providing temporary relief sufficient when the social conditions that produce suffering remain unchanged? These questions connect the experiences represented in "Vanka" and "Oysters" with continuing inequalities in the contemporary world.

The contrast between the two stories also offers an important perspective on present-day responses to childhood suffering. The experience of Vanka draws attention to the private and often concealed nature of emotional deprivation. A child may appear to be living within an established social structure while remaining deprived of affection, security, and meaningful communication. In contemporary settings, similar forms of vulnerability may remain hidden within households, workplaces, and institutions, where a child's emotional distress is overlooked or dismissed. "Oysters," in contrast, directs attention towards visible material deprivation and the responses it generates in public spaces. Hunger may attract immediate attention, sympathy, or temporary assistance, but such responses do not necessarily address the economic insecurity and social exclusion that sustain it. Read together, the stories suggest that both visible suffering and less visible emotional distress require sustained attention rather than occasional acts of sympathy.

This distinction is particularly significant in a world where images and accounts of suffering circulate rapidly through digital media. Contemporary society can witness the struggles of vulnerable children across geographical boundaries, yet visibility does not automatically produce understanding, responsibility, or meaningful action. Public attention may be brief, and expressions of sympathy may not translate into lasting support. The comparison between "Vanka" and "Oysters" therefore encourages a deeper consideration of the difference between witnessing suffering and responding to it effectively. Genuine concern requires more than recognising a child's immediate distress; it also requires an awareness of the circumstances that make the child vulnerable and a willingness to address those circumstances.

Modern literature continues to explore these concerns through different representations of childhood. Francisco Jiménez's *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*, for instance, portray children whose lives are shaped by poverty, labour, migration, and insecurity. Although these works emerge from contexts distinct from

those represented in Chekhov's stories, they demonstrate how literature continues to examine the relationship between childhood and unequal social conditions. Such literary connections suggest that the representation of vulnerable children is not merely a retrospective concern but an ongoing engagement with the realities of the present. By placing different literary experiences in conversation, readers can recognise both the persistence of certain forms of suffering and the diversity of circumstances through which they occur.

From this perspective, Humanistic Psychology offers a useful way of considering the responsibilities involved in responding to childhood vulnerability. The importance of basic needs, emotional security, belonging, and empathic understanding becomes especially clear when children are viewed not simply as recipients of assistance but as individuals whose feelings, dignity, and experiences deserve recognition. Nevertheless, empathy alone cannot eliminate poverty, exploitation, or structural inequality. Individual care must be accompanied by social responsibility, effective child-protection measures, access to education, and conditions that enable children to live safely and develop fully. The comparison thus moves beyond an exclusively psychological understanding of suffering towards a broader recognition of the social conditions necessary for human well-being.

Ultimately, the continuing relevance of "Vanka" and "Oysters" lies not simply in their portrayal of suffering but in the questions their comparison raises for the present. They remind us that childhood deprivation cannot be understood through a single image of hunger, a single experience of loneliness, or a single act of neglect. Each child's circumstances demand attention to both material conditions and emotional needs. A society that responds only to what is immediately visible risks overlooking the deeper experiences that shape a child's life; a society that offers sympathy without addressing the causes of suffering risks allowing inequality to continue. By bringing these two distinct representations of childhood together, this study emphasises the need for a more comprehensive and compassionate understanding of vulnerable children. The real challenge for the contemporary world is not merely to acknowledge that children suffer, but to ensure that their suffering does not become so familiar that society learns to live with it.

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