

# Table of Contents

<b>Unit 1 Introduction: Reading the Short Story to Discover Meaning</b> .....	1
Anton Chekhov, "A Wicked Boy" .....	2
<b>Unit 2 Desire</b> .....	7
Frank O'Connor, "My Oedipus Complex" .....	8
Katherine Mansfield, "Feuille d'Album" .....	26
<b>Unit 3 Man and Woman</b> .....	39
John Collier, "The Chaser" .....	40
<b>Unit 4 Marriage and Family</b> .....	47
Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" .....	48
John Updike, "Unstuck" .....	54
<b>Unit 5 Capital and Commodity</b> .....	67
Max Shulman, "Love Is a Fallacy" .....	68
Mark Twain, "The £1,000,000 Bank-Note" .....	85
D. H. Lawrence, "The Rocking-Horse Winner" ...	114
<b>Unit 6 Society and Tradition</b> .....	137
James Joyce, "The Boarding House" .....	138
William E. Barrett, "Señor Payroll" .....	150
Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery" .....	157

<b>Unit 7 Racial Conflict</b> .....	171
Somerset Maugham, “Mr. Know-All” .....	172
<b>Unit 8 Reality and Representation</b> .....	183
O. Henry, “The Last Leaf” .....	184
Milos Macourek, “Jacob’s Chicken” .....	196
Julio Cortazar, “Continuity of Parks” .....	201
<b>Unit 9 Man vs. Nature</b> .....	205
Jack London, “To Build a Fire” .....	206
<b>Websites for Critical Theory</b> .....	230
<b>References</b> .....	231

# **Unit 1**

## **Introduction: Reading the Short Story to Discover Meaning**

## A Wicked Boy

*Anton Chekhov*

(1860-1904)

*Translated by Helen Reeve*

- 1 Ivan Ivanych Lapkin, a young man of nice appearance, and Anna Semionovna Zamblitskaia, a young girl with a little turned-up nose, went down the steep bank and sat down on a small bench. The bench stood right by the water among some thick young osier<sup>①</sup> bushes. What a wonderful little place! Once you've sat down, you were hidden from the world—only the fish saw you, and the water-tigers, running like lightning over the water. The young people were armed with rods, nets, cans of worms, and other fishing equipment. Having sat down, they started fishing right away.
- 2 “I'm glad we're alone at last,” Lapkin began, looking around. “I have to tell you a lot of things, Anna Semionovna... an awful lot... when I saw you the first time... You've got a bite... then I understood what I'm living for, understood where my idol was—to whom I must devote my honest, active life... that must be a big one that's biting... Seeing you, I feel in love for the first time, feel passionately in love!

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<sup>①</sup> osier: type of willow tree, the twigs of which are used to make baskets

Wait before you give it a jerk... let it bite harder... Tell me, my darling, I adjure<sup>①</sup> you, may I count on—not on reciprocity<sup>②</sup>, no! I'm not worthy of that, I dare not even think of that—may I count on... Pull!”

3 Anna Semionovna raised her hand with the rod in it, yanked<sup>③</sup>, and cried out. A little silvery-green fish shimmered<sup>④</sup> in the air.

4 “My Lord, a perch! Ah, ah... Quickly! It's getting free!”

5 The perch got free of the hook, flopped<sup>⑤</sup> through the grass toward its native element... and plopped<sup>⑥</sup> into the water!

6 In pursuit of the fish, Lapkin somehow inadvertently<sup>⑦</sup> grabbed Anna Semionovna's hand instead of the fish, inadvertently pressed it to his lips... She quickly drew it back, but it was already too late; their mouths inadvertently merged in a kiss. It happened somehow inadvertently. Another kiss followed the first, then vows and protestations<sup>⑧</sup>... What happy minutes! However, in this earthly life there is no absolute happiness. Happiness usually carries a poison in itself, or else is poisoned by something from outside. So this time, too. As the young people were kissing, a laugh suddenly rang out. They glanced at the river and were stupefied: a naked boy was standing in the water up to his waist. This was Kolia, a schoolboy, Anna Semionovna's brother. He was standing in the water, staring at the young people, and laughing maliciously.

7 “Ah-ah-ah... you're kissing?” he said. “That's great! I'll tell Mama.”

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① adjure: solemnly urge to do something

② reciprocity: exchange of advantages between two groups

③ yank: pull suddenly and sharply

④ shimmer: shine with a soft trembling light

⑤ flop: move or fall in a loose, heavy, or awkward way

⑥ plop: fall with a sound that is like something solid dropping smoothly into liquid

⑦ inadvertently: unintentionally

⑧ protestation: a solemn declaration

8 “I hope that you, as an honest young man,...” muttered Lapkin,  
blushing. “It’s low-down<sup>①</sup> to spy, and to tell tales is foul and detes-  
9 table... I assume that you, as an honest and noble young man...”

“Give me a ruble and then I won’t tell!” said the noble young man. “Or else I will.”

10 Lapkin pulled a ruble out of his pocket and gave it to Kolia. Kolia squeezed the ruble in his wet fist, whistled, and swam off. And the young people didn’t kiss any more that time.

11 The next day Lapkin brought Kolia some paints and a ball from town, and his sister gave him all her empty pill-boxes. After that they had to give him some cuff-links with dogs’ heads on them. The wicked boy obviously liked all these things very much and, in order to get still more, he started keeping his eye on them. Wherever Lapkin and Anna Semionovna went, he went, too. He didn’t leave them alone for a minute.

12 “The bastard!” Lapkin gnashed his teeth. “So little, and already such a real bastard! What’s he going to be like later?!”

13 All through June, Kolia made life impossible for the poor lovers. He threatened to tell on them, kept his eye on them, and demanded presents; it all wasn’t enough for him, and he finally started talking about a pocket watch. And what then? They had to promise the watch.

14 One time at dinner, when the waffle cookies were being passed, he suddenly burst out in a guffaw<sup>②</sup>, winked an eye, and asked Lapkin:

15 “Shall I tell? Huh?”

16 Lapkin blushed terribly and started eating his napkin instead of the cookie. Anna Semionovna jumped up from the table and ran into the other room. And the young people found themselves in this position until the end of August, until the very day when, at last,

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① low-down: dishonest and dishonorable

② guffaw: a loud burst of laughter

Lapkin proposed to Anna Semionovna. Oh, what a happy day that was! Having talked to the parents of his bride, and having received their consent, Lapkin first of all ran out into the garden and started looking for Kolia. Once he had found him, he almost sobbed from delight and seized the wicked boy by the ear. Anna Semionovna, who had also been looking for Kolia, ran up, and seized him by the other ear. And you really ought to have seen what joy was written all over the lovers' faces as Kolia cried and begged them:

17 “Dearest, darling, angels, I’ll never do it again! Ow, ow! Forgive me!”

18 And afterwards they both admitted that during the whole time they had been in love with each other they had never once felt such happiness, such breath-taking bliss as during those moments when they were pulling the wicked boy’s ears.

## Critical Views

Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon<sup>①</sup>:

“Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate<sup>②</sup> a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus<sup>③</sup> should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. To achieve this, it is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by

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① Panopticon: a circular prison with cells arranged around a central tower, from which prisoners could at all times be observed

② inmate: a person who is confined to a prison or hospital

③ apparatus: any complicated device, system, or organization

an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so. In view of this, Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.”

—*Michel Foucault*

### Questions for Discussion

1. Fishing and the boy-meets-girl romance are juxtaposed<sup>①</sup> in the beginning of the story. What does this juxtaposition imply?
2. The title of the story, “A Wicked Boy,” may be viewed as ironic. What role does Kolia play in Ivan’s romance?
3. We may also understand the title literally, not as an irony. There are places in the story where Kolia is “staring at the young people” or “keeping his eye on them,” etc. Is there any way to relate his wickedness to this ever-present watchful eye? If yes, what wickedness does the boy represent?
4. According to the narrator, “Happiness usually carries a poison in itself, or else is poisoned by something from outside.” How do you understand the happiness Ivan and Anna feel when they are pulling Kolia’s ears in the end? What may be the “poison” in it?
5. What is the theme or central idea of the story?

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<sup>①</sup> juxtapose: place (two objects or ideas) close together or side by side