

A CLASSROOM UNIT FOR TEACHERS

THE ANTON CHEKHOV INSTRUCTIONAL HANDBOOK

Teaching “The Lady with the Dog,” Chekhovian Structure, Ambiguous Endings, and Student Short-Story Writing



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HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is designed as a practical classroom companion: part literary guide, part teacher’s manual, part student-writing workshop. It moves from context to interpretation, then from teaching strategy to reproducible classroom materials.

- Use Part I to prepare students for Chekhov’s historical world and the modern short story.
- Use Part II to teach “The Lady with the Dog” through structure, inward climax, and open ending.
- Use Part III for comparative lectures on Maupassant, Joyce, and American short-story traditions.
- Use Part IV as a student writing workshop on Chekhovian craft, revision, and submission.
- Use Part V and Part VI for handouts and instructor keys.

The unit’s central claim is simple enough for students but rich enough for advanced discussion: Chekhov makes the deepest action of a short story happen inside consciousness, and he ends where life becomes most complicated rather than where a moral lesson becomes easiest.

UNIT AT A GLANCE

SECTION	CLASSROOM USE	CORE QUESTION
Historical Context	Introduce Chekhov, Russia, class, marriage, and public/private life.	Why does the social world make honesty difficult?
Story Analysis	Read “The Lady with the Dog” as an inward-climax story.	What changes if the climax is psychological rather than external?
Comparison	Contrast Chekhov with conventional moral tales, Maupassant, Joyce, and American writers.	What different promises can a short story make to readers?
Debate	Use ambiguous endings to develop evidence-based argument.	Does open form respect readers or frustrate them?
Writing Workshop	Move students from reading Chekhov to drafting their own short stories.	How can a quiet story still have pressure and movement?

PART I: CHEKHOV, CONTEXT, AND THE STORY

Anton Chekhov: Life and Work

Anton Chekhov was born in Taganrog in 1860 and died in 1904. He trained as a physician and became one of the great short-story writers and playwrights in world literature. His fiction is known for economy, objectivity, psychological precision, compassion, and endings that resist false closure.

Chekhov began as a prolific writer of comic sketches and magazine pieces, then developed into a central figure in modern fiction and drama. His major plays include *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. His major stories include *The Steppe*, *Ward No. 6*, *The Student*, *The Darling*, and *The Lady with the Dog*.

Medicine mattered to his art. It gave him habits of diagnosis, observation, restraint, and sympathy. He tends to look at people closely without reducing them to villains or lessons.

Russia, Morality, and Social Mores

Chekhov wrote in late imperial Russia, in a world shaped by class hierarchy, public respectability, marriage conventions, social caution, and the pressure of reputation. The world of “*The Lady with the Dog*” is one in which private desire cannot easily become public truth.

That context is crucial for students. Gurov and Anna are not merely choosing between romance and duty in a vacuum. They live in a society where scandal, divorce, and open sexual honesty carry consequences. The story’s uncertainty grows out of that pressure.

A student-friendly version: Chekhov wrote around 1900, when people’s public lives were often governed by strict rules about marriage and respectability. His story asks what happens when private feeling becomes more honest than the respectable life everyone else sees.

Story Information

ITEM	DETAILS
Title	“The Lady with the Dog”
Author	Anton Chekhov
First published	1899
Primary setting	Yalta and Moscow
Genre	Short story; psychological realism
Main characters	Dmitri Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna
Central problem	An affair becomes a serious emotional truth that neither character can easily make public.

Summary of “The Lady with the Dog”

Dmitri Gurov, a married Moscow banker, is vacationing in Yalta when he notices a young married woman walking with a small dog. Her name is Anna Sergeyevna. The two begin an affair that at first seems to Gurov like another passing episode in his life of casual infidelity.

When Anna returns home, Gurov expects the relationship to fade. Instead, he cannot forget her. He seeks her out in her provincial town, and the two begin meeting secretly in Moscow. By the end, they recognize that their bond is real and serious, but they also see that no simple solution is available. The hardest part of their lives together is only beginning.

Why the Story Is Great

The story is great because it transforms a conventional adultery plot into a profound study of inward change. It denies the expected melodramatic satisfactions of exposure, punishment, confession, death, or neat union. The true action is not scandal but recognition.

Gurov changes from a man of habit and casual contempt into a man unexpectedly altered by love and by the painful discovery that his public life and inner life are divided. Chekhov’s ending remains open, but the openness is not vagueness. It is an artistic commitment to complexity.

For students, the simplest formulation is: the story feels quiet because Chekhov has moved the climax from event to consciousness.

Style and Structure

- Low external plot, high interior pressure.
- Atmosphere and concrete detail used as emotional pressure, not decoration.

- Psychological realism rather than melodrama.
- A cool, observational narrative voice that neither condemns nor excuses.
- An open ending that refuses to pretend life is simpler than it is.
- A climax based on recognition rather than outward action.

Students who say “nothing happens” are noticing something important but naming it too narrowly. A more precise statement is: little happens externally, but something decisive happens inwardly.

Early and Later Reception

Some early readers were frustrated by Chekhov’s method because his stories could seem to stop instead of conclude. Complaints that “nothing happened” reflect expectations formed by more event-centered fiction.

Later criticism elevated “The Lady with the Dog” into the highest rank of short fiction. The very qualities that once seemed unsatisfying – open form, quiet plot, emotional restraint, and moral ambiguity – are now treated as central achievements.

PART II: TEACHING “THE LADY WITH THE DOG”

The Core Teaching Move

Begin by surfacing expectations. Ask students: If I tell you this is a nineteenth-century story about a married man having an affair on vacation, what ending do you expect?

- Exposure or public scandal.
- Punishment, illness, death, duel, or suicide.
- A return to moral order.
- A confession or repentance scene.
- A final choice between spouse and lover.

Then show them what Chekhov actually does. He gives no melodramatic punishment and no tidy solution. Instead, he ends at the moment when the lovers recognize both the truth of their feeling and the difficulty of living honestly.

Three Questions for the Final Pages

1. What is the last important external event? They continue to meet secretly, speak about their situation, and understand that no easy solution is available.
2. What is the last important internal event? Gurov recognizes the seriousness of his love, his age, his divided life, and the difficulty ahead.
3. Where is the climax? The climax is inward: a change in consciousness, not a public event.

Board Chart: Conventional Story vs. Chekhov

CONVENTIONAL STORY	CHEKHOV'S STORY
Event-centered climax	Inward climax
Moral closure	Open ending
Vice punished or virtue rewarded	Moral ambiguity and emotional consequence
Reader is directed toward a lesson	Reader must infer, judge, and hold uncertainty
External plot resolves the problem	Interior recognition reveals the problem more deeply

AP-Style Analytical Prompt

In “The Lady with the Dog,” Chekhov ends not with exposure, punishment, or resolution, but with the recognition that the characters’ real difficulties are only beginning. Write a thesis-driven paragraph explaining how Chekhov’s open ending shapes the meaning of the story. Use one specific detail from the ending as evidence.

Class Discussion Questions

1. Is Chekhov being honest or evasive by refusing to tell us what happens next?
2. Would the story be more satisfying if Gurov and Anna were exposed or punished? Would it be better?
3. Does the affair make Gurov morally worse, morally better, or simply more aware?
4. What does the story suggest about the difference between public life and private truth?
5. Can a story end well if the characters’ problems remain unsolved?

Mini-Lesson: External Action vs. Internal Action

Draw two lines on the board. The first line is the external plot line: meeting, affair, separation, return, secret meetings. It remains relatively low in dramatic amplitude. The second line is the interior line: boredom, surprise, memory, longing, self-recognition, divided life. That line rises steadily and peaks near the end.

This visual helps students see that Chekhov is not anti-plot. He relocates plot into consciousness.

PART III: COMPARISON AND LITERARY TRADITION

Conventional Stories of the Period

To teach Chekhov well, define the kind of story he quietly resists. More conventional late nineteenth-century short fiction often relies on a clear causal chain, a decisive crisis, a more explicit moral stance, and an ending that tells the reader what the events mean.

- A single dominant external conflict.
- A decisive revelation, death, confession, punishment, or reversal.
- Characters who function partly as moral or social types.
- A narrative shape that restores order or explains the lesson.
- A final moment that gives readers closure.

A Moral Tale Contrast

A useful classroom contrast is the nineteenth-century moral tale. In a moral tale, the pattern is often: Fault → Misbehavior → Punishment or crisis → Repentance or correction → Lesson.

The story “Ingratitude” from *The Carrier Pigeon and Other Tales: Illustrating the Rewards of Virtue and the Punishment of Vice* offers a representative model. A girl named Helen neglects the woman who cared for her, suffers consequences, and is pushed toward moral correction.

That framework clarifies what Chekhov avoids. “The Lady with the Dog” does not make adultery a simple fault to be punished and closed. It transforms it into a story about longing, deception, divided identity, and the pain of genuine feeling.

Chekhov and Maupassant

Chekhov and Maupassant are often paired because both helped shape the modern short story, but they represent different instincts. Maupassant builds tight, event-driven stories with sharp outcomes. Chekhov builds psychologically open stories in which meaning gathers gradually.

FEATURE	MAUPASSANT	CHEKHOV
Plot	Compact, causal, engineered	Loose, episodic, consciousness-centered
Climax	External turn, irony, or revelation	Internal recognition or shift
Characters	Often social types sharpened by event	Contradictory consciousnesses under pressure
Ending	Punch, twist, or moral closure	Open, unresolved, resonant
Reader experience	Swift satisfaction and clear architecture	Slow recognition and lingering ambiguity

For student writers, treat these as two toolkits. Maupassant teaches architecture and payoff. Chekhov teaches inward movement, restraint, compassion, and ambiguity.

Chekhov, Joyce, and “The Dead”

Joyce’s “The Dead” is useful in this unit because it joins Chekhovian interiority to a large social scene. On the surface, it is a Christmas party story. By the end, Gabriel Conroy’s private self-image collapses under the revelation of Michael Furey and Gretta’s memory.

Its final snow image widens a private marital discovery into a meditation on mortality, history, and the living and the dead. Like Chekhov, Joyce makes recognition more important than event, but he does so through a more symphonic social structure.

American Short-Story Adaptations

American writers absorbed both Maupassant’s structural discipline and Chekhov’s inward realism, then adapted those methods to American voices, regions, and conflicts. Poe emphasized unity and effect. O. Henry popularized twist endings. Hemingway and Carver developed understatement and subtext. Jackson and O’Connor used dramatic situations to expose communal violence, conformity, grace, and moral crisis.

WRITER	USEFUL CONNECTION
Edgar Allan Poe	Unity of effect; concentrated design; atmosphere.
O. Henry	Surprise ending and sentiment in a Maupassant-like line.
Hemingway	Understatement, subtext, and iceberg structure.
Raymond Carver	Minimalism, ordinary lives, gaps, and unresolved pressure.
Shirley Jackson	Ordinary detail that reveals social violence.
Flannery O’Connor	Grotesque plot events that force moral or spiritual confrontation.

Five Great Short Stories for Context

- James Joyce, “The Dead”: social realism, epiphany, symbolic enlargement, and one of the most powerful endings in modern fiction.
- Anton Chekhov, “The Lady with the Dog”: psychological nuance, open form, and the relocation of plot into consciousness.
- Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery”: calm social detail that culminates in a brutal revelation about conformity and tradition.
- Franz Kafka, “The Metamorphosis”: absurd premise used to explore alienation, guilt, labor, and dehumanization.

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- Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find": grotesque violence, dense symbolism, and an ambiguous moment of possible grace.

PART IV: STUDENT SHORT-STORY WRITING WORKSHOP

What Students Can Learn from Chekhov

- Fiction does not need to be loud to be powerful.
- A story can end without solving a life.
- Contradictory characters feel more real than symbolic ones.
- Small details can carry large meaning.
- Compassion matters more than judgment.
- Ambiguity can be truthful when it is earned by structure.

Chekhov's Advice on Writing

Chekhov's most famous craft advice appears in letters rather than in a formal essay. For students, his principles can be translated into six practical rules.

- Do not preach inside the story.
- Show life honestly rather than forcing a moral.
- Use exact details of people, objects, gestures, and places.
- Be brief and selective.
- Avoid stereotype and formula.
- Treat characters humanely, even when they are flawed.

Five Easy Story Outlines

OUTLINE	STRUCTURE
Choice at the Climax	Introduce a clear desire or problem; complicate it; force a meaningful choice; end with consequence.
The Day That Changes Nothing and Everything	Begin in routine; introduce a small disruption; follow inner change; end with a subtle but real shift.
Object with a History	Open with an object; connect it to the past; return to the present for a decision; end with a revealing gesture.
Two People, One Secret	Place two characters together; let dialogue and silence build tension; reveal or withhold a central truth; end with an altered relationship.
Wrong Assumption	Establish a mistaken belief; complicate it; bring the belief to a turning point; end with revision or refusal.

For student writers, 1,500 to 2,500 words is often an ideal length: long enough for character and conflict, short enough to revise carefully.

Current Themes and Styles

- Identity and belonging: race, gender, sexuality, diaspora, cultural hybridity, and domestic life.
- Mental health and interior life: anxiety, depression, burnout, neurodiversity, and family pressure.
- Technology and connection: phones, social media, gaming, AI, surveillance, and loneliness.
- Climate and future anxiety: quietly apocalyptic or near-future conditions treated as normal life.
- Power and injustice: class, labor, healthcare, institutional inequality, and family economics.

Current styles often favor lean prose, concrete detail, selective fragmentation, interior emphasis, tight scenes, and endings that echo rather than explain.

Ten Rules for Strong Short Stories Today

1. Focus on one central problem or desire.
2. Start late, near the first meaningful pressure.
3. End soon after the major turn or realization.
4. Keep the cast small.
5. Make sure something truly shifts by the end.
6. Use concrete details rather than vague labels.
7. Show more than explain.
8. Let dialogue reveal character and tension.

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9. Revise by cutting repetition and drift.
 10. Read the kind of stories you want to write.

Revision Checklist

- ☐ Can the central desire or problem be stated in one sentence?
- ☐ Does the story begin close to conflict or change?
- ☐ Has something shifted by the end?
- ☐ Is the language concrete rather than vague?
- ☐ Is there too much backstory or explanation?
- ☐ Can any scene, paragraph, or sentence be cut without loss?
- ☐ Does the ending leave an image, tension, or realization rather than a lecture?
- ☐ Does every scene either increase pressure or reveal character?
- ☐ Is the title doing real work?
- ☐ Has the writer proofread for grammar, paragraphing, and punctuation?

Submission Guidance for Strong Student Work

Students with strong work should begin with school literary magazines, campus publications, youth contests, regional venues, and age-appropriate journals. Exceptional work can later be submitted to adult literary magazines after students have read recent issues and studied guidelines.

- Follow word-count, genre, file-type, and reading-period rules exactly.
- Use clean manuscript formatting: standard 12-point font, double spacing where requested, title, name, and page numbers.
- Submit only through the requested method, such as Submittable, email, or a web form.
- Track submissions and responses.
- Treat rejection as part of literary professionalism, not as a verdict on talent.

PART V: REPRODUCIBLE STUDENT HANDOUTS

Handout: Moral Tale vs. Chekhov

Moral Tale Pattern: Fault → Misbehavior → Punishment → Lesson

Chekhovian Pattern in “The Lady with the Dog”: Encounter → Affair → Separation → Inner change → Secret continuation → Unresolved future

1. What fault would a moral tale emphasize most strongly in Gurov and Anna?
2. Does Chekhov punish the characters in a clear, traditional way?
3. What replaces punishment as the story’s central burden?
4. Why might an open ending feel truer than a moralistic ending here?
5. What would be lost if the story ended with exposure or repentance?

Writing prompt: Write a one-paragraph alternate ending to “The Lady with the Dog” as if it were a nineteenth-century moral tale. Then explain why Chekhov chose not to end that way.

Handout: Reading an Ambiguous Ending

Deliberate ambiguity means that an author intentionally leaves key questions open so readers must think, infer, argue, and live with uncertainty.

- ☐ Identify what remains unresolved.
- ☐ Find at least two details that suggest one possible interpretation.
- ☐ Find at least one detail that complicates or resists that interpretation.
- ☐ Explain why the author might stop at this point.
- ☐ Decide whether the ending feels hopeful, tragic, mixed, or undecided.

Handout: Ambiguous Ending Debate Protocol

Motion: The ending of “The Lady with the Dog” is hopeful rather than tragic.

1. Define the motion and key terms.
2. Divide into For and Against teams, with one moderator and one evidence tracker.
3. Give each side five minutes to gather two or three pieces of textual or structural evidence.
4. Opening statements: one to two minutes per side.
5. Evidence and elaboration: two to three minutes per side.
6. Cross-questions: each side asks about one passage or structural choice.
7. Closing statements: one minute per side.
8. Reflection: What evidence most changed or complicated your view?

Sentence stems: I claim that... because... The strongest evidence is... Another reading might be... I changed my mind when...

Handout: Student Short-Story Planning Sheet

- ☐ My protagonist wants or fears:
- ☐ The obstacle or pressure is:
- ☐ The story begins when:
- ☐ The first complication is:
- ☐ The second complication is:
- ☐ The key choice, realization, or turn is:
- ☐ The final image, gesture, or line will suggest:
- ☐ The working title is:

Handout: Quick Revision Passes

REVISION PASS	QUESTION TO ASK
Focus	What is the story really about?
Structure	Where does the pressure rise, and where does it turn?
Scene	Which moments should be dramatized instead of explained?
Detail	Where can vague language become concrete?
Dialogue	Does each exchange reveal character or tension?
Cutting	What can be removed without weakening the story?
Ending	Does the last line resonate rather than explain?

PART VI: INSTRUCTOR ANSWER KEYS

Key: Moral Tale vs. Chekhov

Students should understand that a moral tale presents a linear and morally legible pattern: a character commits a fault, the world exposes or punishes that fault, and the ending clarifies the lesson.

A moral tale would likely emphasize adultery, deception, selfishness, or failure of duty as the central fault. Chekhov does not punish Gurov and Anna through public ruin or moral correction. Instead, the burden becomes emotional division, secrecy, longing, and the difficulty of imagining a truthful life.

A strong student response should recognize that the open ending preserves ambiguity and psychological truth. If the story concluded with confession, punishment, repentance, or death, much of its inward complexity would be lost.

Key: Teaching the Ending

PROMPT	STRONG ANSWER
What is the last important external event?	The lovers continue meeting secretly and acknowledge that they do not yet know how to solve their lives.
What is the last important internal event?	Gurov recognizes that his love is serious and that his life is divided between public falseness and private truth.
Where is the climax?	The climax is inward rather than outward. It lies in recognition and changed consciousness.
Why does the story end there?	Chekhov stops where the real difficulty becomes visible, trusting readers to understand that life continues beyond the frame.

Key: Five Easy Story Outlines

- Choice at the Climax: strong drafts center on a meaningful choice that reveals character, not an arbitrary decision.
- The Day That Changes Nothing and Everything: strong drafts show little outward alteration but meaningful inward movement.
- Object with a History: strong drafts use the object as a hinge between past and present, not as a gimmick.
- Two People, One Secret: strong drafts use dialogue, silence, and subtext rather than premature explanation.
- Wrong Assumption: strong drafts connect the mistaken belief to theme rather than relying on a cheap surprise.

Suggested Scoring Approach for Open-Ended Responses

CRITERION	STRONG	DEVELOPING	WEAK
Textual accuracy	Uses the story correctly and specifically.	Mostly accurate but general.	Vague or mistaken.
Structural awareness	Identifies inward climax, open ending, or design.	Notices plot but not structure.	Only summarizes.
Interpretive depth	Explains complexity and ambiguity.	Offers a simple but plausible reading.	Moralizes or oversimplifies.
Writing quality	Clear, organized, and supported.	Understandable but uneven.	Disorganized or unsupported.

Instructor Talking Points

- Chekhov is useful not because he is easy, but because he teaches students to read beyond event.
- “The Lady with the Dog” is not anti-plot; it relocates plot into consciousness.
- A moral tale tells readers what to think; Chekhov asks readers to live with uncertainty.
- Students often become stronger writers when they stop forcing endings and start trusting the pressure of unresolved life.

GLOSSARY

Ambiguity: Meaning that remains open, double, or unresolved.

Climax: The point of highest pressure or decisive change. In Chekhov, this may be internal rather than external.

Concrete detail: A precise sensory image, object, gesture, sound, or fact.

Didactic: Designed chiefly to teach a moral lesson.

Exposition: Background information that explains situation, character, or context.

Interiority: A character’s inner life of thought, feeling, memory, desire, and perception.

Moral tale: A story designed to reward virtue, punish vice, and make a lesson clear.

Open ending: An ending that leaves important matters unresolved while still producing meaning.

Psychological realism: Fiction that emphasizes believable inward life and emotional complexity.

Subtext: Meaning implied beneath dialogue, gesture, silence, or action.

Theme: The larger human question or idea a story explores.

Unity of effect: Poe's idea that a short story's elements should cooperate to produce a single powerful impression.

SOURCES

The full public-domain text of “The Lady with the Dog” can be supplied separately or accessed through public-domain editions. Useful sources include Project Gutenberg's Chekhov collection at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13415> and the HTML text at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13415/13415-h/13415-h.htm>.