THE PRICE OF TRANSCENDENCE: MORTALITY, MADNESS, AND THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH IN CHEKHOV'S "THE BLACK MONK" (1894)

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Abstract: This article investigates the interplay between death, madness, and spiritual yearning in Anton Chekhov's "The Black Monk" (1894) by examining the tragic journey of the protagonist Andrey Kovrin. Employing existential insights from Kierkegaard, the archetypal framework of Jung, Mircea Eliade's sacred/profane dichotomy, and Foucault's critique of modern medical practices, the study reveals how Kovrin's visionary experiences embody a desperate search for transcendent meaning. His descent into madness—culminating in a fatal, serene smile—illustrates the inevitable outcome for a man whose inner mystical life is systematically pathologised by a society steeped in scientific materialism. The article contends that when spiritual ecstasy is dismissed as pathology, genuine transformative encounters with mortality are thwarted, leaving death as the sole recourse for the visionary. In fusing these interdisciplinary perspectives, the research situates "The Black Monk" within broader discussions on modernity's disenchantment and the existential challenges confronting those whose inner lives defy rational accommodation.

Keywords: Anton Chekhov, death, madness, existential crisis, modernity

INTRODUCTION

Anton Chekhov's "The Black Monk" plunges into a world where the desire for spiritual transcendence teeters on the brink of madness. At its core lies the struggle of Andrey Kovrin, a man whose visions of a spectral monk blur the line between divine

revelation and psychological disintegration. As he grapples with the tension between mystical insight and rational scepticism, the story unfolds as a meditation on the fragile boundary separating faith from delusion. Set against the backdrop of late 19th-century Russia, a period marked by the decline of religious authority and the rise of scientific materialism, "The Black Monk" reflects a society caught between fading spiritual traditions and an increasingly rational worldview. Chekhov, a physician by training and a writer by vocation, occupied a unique position within this context. His works often reflect an ambivalent stance toward religion and religious matters, neither fully rejecting the sacred nor embracing it uncritically. In "The Black Monk," this ambivalence manifests in the figure of the monk himself, whose presence defies easy categorisation. Is he a divine messenger, a psychological projection, or a harbinger of chaos? Chekhov leaves this question unresolved, inviting readers to grapple with the story's theological and existential implications.

The reception of "The Black Monk" has often oscillated between psychological and spiritual interpretations. Early critics, influenced by the growing medicalisation of mental illness in the late 19th century, viewed Kovrin's visions as symptoms of psychosis, framing the story as a case study in psychological pathology (Jackson 1993a, 78; Peace 1983, 45). More recent scholarship, however, has emphasised the story's engagement with religious and existential themes, situating it within broader debates about faith, doubt, and the search for meaning in a secularising world (Jackson 1993b, 82). This article builds on these interpretations while offering a new synthesis, arguing that "The Black Monk" embodies the paradox of religious experience, simultaneously transcendent and pathological, in a world increasingly defined by rationalism and scepticism. The theoretical framework of this analysis draws on four key thinkers: Søren Kierkegaard, Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Michel Foucault. Kierkegaard's concept of existential faith provides a lens for understanding Kovrin's "leap" into belief (Kierkegaard 1985, 67), while Jung's archetypal theory illuminates the monk as a

manifestation of Kovrin's unconscious (Jung 1969a, 48). Eliade's sacred/profane dichotomy reveals the story's spatial and symbolic tensions (Eliade 1959, 12), and Foucault's discourse on madness offers a critical perspective on how society pathologises spiritual ecstasy (Foucault 1988, 250). Together, these frameworks enable a multifaceted exploration of Chekhov's narrative, revealing its enduring relevance to contemporary debates about spirituality, mental health, and the human condition. By examining "The Black Monk" through these theoretical lenses, this article seeks to illuminate Chekhov's nuanced portrayal of faith and madness, while situating the story within the broader cultural and intellectual currents of its time.

"The Black Monk": A Narrative Overview and Thematic Context

"The Black Monk" (1894) follows Andrey Kovrin, a brilliant but fragile intellectual who, during a summer retreat at the estate of his childhood guardian, Yegor Pesotsky, begins experiencing visions of a spectral Black Monk. This enigmatic apparition convinces Kovrin that he is among the chosen few, destined for intellectual and spiritual greatness. His newfound sense of purpose, however, soon collides with the material and rational world embodied by Yegor and his daughter, Tanya, who view his visions as symptoms of psychological instability rather than divine insight. As Kovrin's hallucinations intensify, the tension between his exalted self-perception and the external reality deepens, leading to his ultimate collapse. Chekhov structures the story around a gradual yet inevitable unravelling. Kovrin, initially exhilarated by the monk's presence, finds his inspiration and confidence swelling; he becomes more productive, animated, and seemingly enlightened. However, this psychological elevation comes at a cost. His visionary episodes begin to disrupt his relationships, particularly with Tanya, who is both captivated and disturbed by his fervour. Under pressure from

his rationalist surroundings, Kovrin undergoes medical treatment that dulls his hallucinations, but with them, his vitality and intellectual fire also wane. The resolution is profoundly tragic: stripped of his visions, Kovrin descends into a listless mediocrity, culminating in his premature death.

At its core, "The Black Monk" is an exploration of the perilous intersection between genius and madness, faith and delusion, transcendence and self-destruction. It resonates with the *fin-de-siècle* anxieties of Chekhov's Russia, a society grappling with the waning authority of Orthodox spirituality and the rising dominance of scientific rationalism. Kovrin's predicament thus serves as an allegory for the modern existential crisis: the yearning for meaning in a disenchanted world. Now, having situated "The Black Monk" within its broader intellectual framework, the following sections will explore its engagement with existentialist thought, Jungian archetypes, and modernity's inclination to pathologise spiritual experience. Specifically, they will analyse how Kovrin's visions operate within this philosophical and psychological landscape, questioning whether they signify enlightenment or a descent into madness.

Faith as Subjective Truth: The Monk's Whisper and Kovrin's Inner World

In many ways, Kovrin's spectral visions illuminate Kierkegaard's assertion that deep and rewarding faith demands a blind "leap" (Kierkegaard 1985, 67). When the titular Black Monk first appears to Kovrin, declaring him "a genius" and one of God's chosen (Chekhov 1951, 33), the scholar's subjective reality mirrors Kierkegaard's conception of faith as a "subjective inwardness" untethered from objective proof (Kierkegaard 2009, 123). For Kierkegaard, true faith resides not in empirical verification but in the individual's passionate commitment to a truth that transcends rationality. The monk's prophetic whisper/allure to Kovrin echoes

the divine imperative Kierkegaard explores in *Fear and Trembling*, where Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac exemplifies the "teleological suspension of the ethical," a moment when the individual's relationship to the divine supersedes societal norms (Kierkegaard 1985, 98). Yet Chekhov subverts this paradigm.

While Abraham's faith, in Kierkegaard's interpretation, ultimately restores communal harmony, Kovrin's visions fracture his ties to the material world. His wife, Tanya, and her father, Yegor, embody the rational pragmatism of modernity, a worldview that pathologises spiritual experience. Tanya's insistence that Kovrin's encounters are mere delusions reflects Foucault's critique of Enlightenment rationality, which recasts non-normative states of consciousness as madness (Foucault 1988, 244). When she demands, "Explain why" to Kovrin's initial refusal of medication (Chekhov 1951, 28), her plea for empirical coherence clashes with Kierkegaard's assertion that faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off (Kierkegaard 1985, 72). This tension crystallises in Yegor's garden, a symbol of ordered materialism. Yegor's obsession with horticultural precision stands in stark contrast to Kovrin's ecstatic visions, which rupture the garden's rational framework. As Mircea Eliade observes, the sacred often intrudes upon the profane as a disruptive force (Eliade 1959, 12), and here, the garden becomes a spatial battleground between Kovrin's transcendent yearnings and Yegor's rigid empiricism.

In line with this analysis, we find similar conclusions from critics like Robert Louis Jackson who argue that Chekhov's ambivalence reflects fin-de-siècle Russia's "crisis of meaning," where Orthodox spirituality clashed with scientific materialism (Jackson 1993b, 82). Kovrin's refusal to dismiss the monk aligns him with Kierkegaard's *knight of faith*, who embraces paradox without guarantees. Yet his eventual demise critiques the peril of spiritual solipsism. Kovrin's hallucinations expose the danger of intellectual hubris, where genius blurs into madness. The monk's duality, simultaneously a "holy harmony" and a "phantom", symbolises, in many ways, Kierkegaard's claim that faith thrives in "the contradiction between

the infinite passion of inwardness and objective uncertainty" (Kierkegaard 2009, 206). As such, it stands to reason to argue that Kovrin's tragedy lies in his inability to reconcile these contradictions, his subjective truth collapsing under the weight of its own isolation.

The Pathos of Belief: Genius, Madness, and the Sickness unto Death

As the story escalates towards climax, starts to buy into the monk's claim that he is possessed by an unearthly genius. Here, we can notice the existential despair Kierkegaard terms the "sickness unto death," a dissonance born of the self's inability to reconcile finite existence with infinite longing (Kierkegaard 1989, 22). The monk's promise of "innumerable, inexhaustible fountains of knowledge" (Chekhov 1951, 18) initially liberates Kovrin from the material banality that had "upset his nerves" (Chekhov 1951, 3), offering him a sense of divine purpose. Yet this transcendence proves illusory. Unlike Abraham, whose faith secures his place within Kierkegaard's ethical order, Kovrin's prophetic identity collapses into isolation, conceivably mirroring Chekhov's society's waning religious convictions and shift toward secularism. The monk, devoid of doctrinal substance, offers only an abstract call to spiritual greatness, parodying institutional religion's failure to address the existential void.

Simultaneously, and on the same point, Chekhov also forwards a critique of Romantic idealism that surfaces most starkly in Kovrin's disintegration. His ecstatic belief that he will lead humanity "into the kingdom of eternal truth" (Chekhov 1951, 18) illustrates Friedrich Nietzsche's warning that the pursuit of absolute ideals risks moral and psychological collapse (Nietzsche 1989a, 13). This ethical vacuum is laid bare in Tanya's condemnation:

> My father has just died. I owe that to you, for you have killed him. Our garden is being ruined; strangers are managing it already … That, too, I owe to you.

> I hate you with my whole soul, and I hope you may soon perish. Oh, how wretched I am! Insufferable anguish is burning my soul … My curses on you. I took you for an extraordinary man, a genius; I loved you, and you have turned out to be a madman. (Chekhov 1951, 31)

Here, Tanya's words make clear to us the human cost of Kovrin's leap into his *visions*, revealing how his faith, though subjectively authentic as the story repeatedly describes, becomes a destructive force untethered from communal responsibility.

Kovrin's death by the end of the narrative, marked by a "blissful smile" (Chekhov 1951, 34), signals not transcendence but surrender to the absurdity he sought to master. Chekhov reframes Kierkegaard's leap as a tragic dialectic: faith's promise of meaning is inseparable from its capacity to annihilate. Chekhov's protagonist is, therefore, a representation of liminal existentialists, poised between transcendence and despair, a liminality crystallised in the monk's final whisper: "You are dying only because your frail human body… can no longer serve as the mortal garb of genius" (Chekhov 1951, 34). Here, Chekhov parodies the rhetoric of divine election, reducing faith to a narcissistic fantasy. Tanya's pragmatic worldview, rooted in the garden's ordered reality, embodies the secular scepticism Kierkegaard derides as the "crowd's" inability to grasp the singular individual (Kierkegaard 1962, 68). Yet her anguish, symbolised by her "tear-stained, woebegone face" (Chekhov 1951, 16), underscores the human toll of Kovrin's existential isolation. In the end, Chekhov offers no resolution to the tension between faith and reason, leaving readers to confront the unsettling paradox that the pursuit of transcendent truth may demand the sacrifice of earthly connection.

The Shadow and the Self

Jung's theory of individuation provides a compelling framework for understanding Andrey Kovrin's psychological journey in "The Black Monk". Central to Jungian theory is the concept of the

shadow, an unconscious dimension of the self that contains both repressed aspects of the personality and untapped creative potential (Jung 1969a, 8). The Black Monk, as an apparition, can be interpreted as Kovrin's shadow, embodying his suppressed genius and spiritual hunger. When the monk declares Kovrin a prophet, he articulates a distorted call to self-actualisation, a summons to embrace the latent potential within Kovrin that has been stifled by societal expectations and his own rational scepticism. For Jung, the shadow is not merely a repository of repressed desires but also a source of creative and spiritual energy (Jung 1969a, 20). The monk's prophecy, thus, represents both a challenge and a temptation: an invitation to transcend the limitations of the ego and a perilous descent into the uncharted depths of the psyche.

The figure of the monk in "The Black Monk" embodies a profound duality, at once ethereal and perilous, which, in the context of his appearances to Kovrin, mirrors the ambivalent nature of individuation. On one hand, the monk's presence serves as a catalyst for Kovrin's intellectual and spiritual awakening, endowing him with a sense of purpose and grandeur. On the other hand, this spectral encounter destabilises Kovrin's psyche, precipitating a fragmentation of his identity. Jung warns that individuation, while essential for psychological wholeness, is fraught with peril: "The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well" (Jung 1989, 335). Kovrin's failure to assimilate the monk's message into his conscious life exemplifies this danger. Rather than achieving a harmonious synthesis between his inner and outer worlds, he succumbs to spiritual inflation, mistaking the shadow's grandiose visions for ultimate truth. In this sense, his trajectory underscores the perils of an unchecked confrontation with the *unconscious*, where the promise of enlightenment gives way to psychological disintegration.

Kovrin's failure to integrate the monk's presence into his conscious life becomes increasingly evident in his growing

detachment from reality. While his visions initially offer a sense of exhilaration, they ultimately alienate him from those around him, particularly Tanya and Yegor, who serve as anchors to the external world. Jung notes that the shadow often disrupts relationships, exposing the conflict between the ego's need for stability and the unconscious's imperative for transformation (Jung 1969a, 15). Kovrin's descent into psychosis, then, emerges as a tragic consequence of his inability to mediate between these opposing forces. The monk, as an archetypal figure, encapsulates the paradox of individuation, a process that holds the promise of spiritual transcendence yet harbours the peril of psychological fragmentation.

Madness as Spiritual Crisis

At the core of the story's psychological complexity is the question of whether Kovrin's visions signify a genuine call to transcendence or merely a pathological delusion. From a Jungian perspective, Kovrin's experiences can be interpreted as a spiritual crisis, a confrontation with the numinous that challenges the boundaries of the ego. Jung distinguishes between neurosis, which he views as a failure to engage with the unconscious, and *psychosis*, which he sees as an overwhelming encounter with its contents (Jung 1969b, 45). In this light, Kovrin's visions are not merely symptoms of mental illness but manifestations of a deeper, archetypal reality that demands integration. The monk's assertion that Kovrin is "one of God's chosen" (Chekhov 1951, 33) reflects the individuation process's central goal: the realisation of the Self, the archetype of wholeness that transcends the ego's limited perspective.

However, Kovrin's inability to navigate this process successfully underscores the fragility of the human psyche when confronted with the unconscious. Jung emphasises that individuation requires a delicate balance between the conscious and unconscious realms, a balance that Kovrin lacks. His breakdown can thus be understood

as a failure of integration, a collapse under the weight of archetypal forces that he is ill-equipped to manage. This interpretation contrasts sharply with a Freudian reading, which would likely view Kovrin's visions as manifestations of repressed desires or unresolved neuroses. For Freud, psychosis arises from the ego's inability to mediate between the id's primal impulses and the superego's moral constraints (Freud 1960, 25). In this framework, the monk's prophecies might be seen as projections of Kovrin's unconscious longing for greatness, a compensatory fantasy that compensates for his feelings of inadequacy or failure.

Yet Chekhov's narrative resists such a reductive interpretation. While Kovrin's visions undoubtedly contribute to his psychological unravelling, they also contain elements of genuine insight and spiritual truth. The monk's promise of "innumerable, inexhaustible fountains of knowledge" (Chekhov 1951, 18) resonates with Jung's description of the Self as a source of infinite wisdom and creativity. Kovrin's tragedy lies not in the visions themselves but in his inability to integrate them into a coherent sense of self. His final moments suggest a fleeting glimpse of transcendence, a momentary reconciliation with the archetypal forces that have haunted him. Yet this reconciliation comes at the cost of his earthly existence, underscoring the precarious nature of individuation when pursued without the necessary psychological groundwork.

Even as Kovrin approaches his demise, he recognises the value that the monk, whether a tangible figure from the external world or a manifestation of his subconscious, has brought him during a time when those around him had grown dull and disconnected from the virtues of possessive genius. In a moment of reflection, Kovrin speaks to the Black Monk, admitting:

> 'How happy were Buddha and Mahomet and Shakespeare that their kind-hearted kinsmen and doctors did not cure them of ecstasy and inspiration!" said Kovrin. 'If Mahomet had taken potassium bromide for his nerves, worked only two hours a day, and drunk milk, that astonishing man could have left as little behind him as his dog. Doctors and kindhearted relatives only do their best to make humanity stupid, and the time will come when

> mediocrity will be considered genius, and humanity will perish. If you only had some idea,' concluded Kovrin peevishly, 'if you only had some idea how grateful I am!' (Chekhov 1951, 28).

Chekhov's depiction of Kovrin's spiritual crisis invites a nuanced interpretation that integrates both Jungian and Freudian frameworks. Jung's lens allows for an understanding of the monk as an archetypal figure, positioning Kovrin's journey as a failed individuation process, while Freud's focus on repression and neurosis illuminates the psychological mechanisms underlying his breakdown. These perspectives together highlight the story's central tension: the delicate boundary between spiritual enlightenment and psychological collapse. Kovrin's madness, then, transcends mere pathology.

The Monk as Hierophany: Sacred Intrusion and Profane Fragmentation

Eliade's distinction between the sacred and the profane provides a revelatory framework for further interpretation of the existential rupture in Kovrin's world in Chekhov's "The Black Monk". For Eliade, a hierophany, the manifestation of the sacred, shatters the homogeneity of profane existence, creating a dialectic between the transcendent and the mundane (Eliade 1959, 11). In Chekhov's narrative, the Black Monk embodies this hierophanic force, intruding into Kovrin's meticulously ordered life as an agent of sacred chaos. The monk's appearances are strategically situated in liminal spaces and moments: the riverbank at twilight, the threshold between wakefulness and sleep, and states of psychological vulnerability. These interstitial zones, which Eliade identifies as traditional sites of sacred revelation (Eliade 1959, 26), serve as portals through which the *wholly other* breaches the ordinary. When the monk first materialises, floating "noiselessly" across the river with his "pale, death-like face," (Chekhov 1951, 11) he fractures the

rational framework of Kovrin's existence, offering a glimpse of a reality that defies empirical comprehension.

The spatial symbolism in "The Black Monk" accentuates the tension between the sacred and the profane. Yegor's garden, shaped by human design and scientific order, epitomises the profane realm, a space where nature is subjected to human control and rationality. The garden, with its precise arrangement and utilitarian focus, reflects the desacralization of modern existence, as Eliade describes: a world in which the sacred is suppressed in favour of a mechanised, homogenous order (Eliade 1959, 13). Yegor's obsession with maintaining this ordered space reveals his deep fear of disorder, which he equates with chaos and loss of meaning. In contrast, the monk inhabits wild, untamed spaces, the riverbank, the twilight hour, zones where nature operates beyond human manipulation. These unregulated environments, neither fully defined nor constrained by rational thought, act as conduits for the sacred, challenging the hegemony of the profane and revealing the delicate balance between transcendence and the limitations of the material world.

Julius Evola's critique of modernity in *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934) deepens this analysis. Evola contends that modernity represents a rupture from the "Traditional World," a hierarchical order grounded in metaphysical principles, leading to a "Kali Yuga" or dark age marked by materialism and spiritual decay (Evola 1995, 5). Yegor's garden, with its geometric precision and profit-driven ethos, embodies Evola's "Modern World", a realm where nature is stripped of its sacred essence and reduced to a commodity. The monk's intrusion into this sterile environment mirrors Evola's assertion that modernity's "hypertrophy of the rational" (Evola 1995, 78) suppresses the transcendent, leaving individuals spiritually adrift. Kovrin's visions, in this light, represent a doomed attempt to reclaim the "divine virility" Evola associates with traditional heroes (Evola 1995, 203), who derive authority from sacred hierarchies rather than productivity.

The hierophanic encounter, however, exacts a psychological toll. Eliade posits that engagement with the sacred is inherently transformative but perilous for those unprepared to integrate its destabilising force (Eliade 1959, 17). Kovrin, ensnared between modernity's materialist ethos and the monk's transcendental summons, oscillates between ecstatic illumination and existential disintegration. His initial embrace of the monk's presence invigorates him, imbuing him with a sense of divine election; he perceives himself as a genius destined to elevate humanity. Yet this proximity to the sacred proves unsustainable. Conditioned by rationalist dogma, Kovrin's psyche cannot reconcile the numinous with the quotidian. Eliade's assertion that the unprepared risk psychological fragmentation is borne out in Kovrin's unravelling (Eliade 1964, 33). His descent into madness is not a rejection of the sacred but a symptom of his society's failure to accommodate it, a world where hierophany is pathologised as psychosis.

Kovrin's trajectory echoes the shamanic crises Eliade examines in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, wherein initiatory encounters with the sacred precipitate either spiritual rebirth or annihilation (Eliade 1964, 62). Traditional shamans navigate these liminal states through communal rituals, achieving equilibrium between worlds. Kovrin, however, lacks such mediating structures. His visions oscillate between enlightenment and persecution, reflecting Eliade's contention that the sacred, when exiled from collective meaning, manifests as individual torment (Eliade 1959, 210). The monk, initially a herald of divine knowledge, becomes an agent of Kovrin's undoing, a tragic testament to modernity's estrangement from the transcendent.

The Failure of Profane Order: Desacralization and Existential Collapse

As explored earlier, Chekhov's narrative critiques modernity's overreliance on rationality, exemplified by the disintegration of

Kovrin's psyche and Yegor's garden. These symbols of control, Yegor's cultivated landscape and Kovrin's mental stability, highlight the fragility of the rational world. Yegor's meticulously organised garden, with its geometric precision, reflects the Enlightenment's confidence in mastering nature through human will. Yet, this belief in order proves unsustainable when confronted by the monk's presence, which intrudes with sacred disarray. The monk's appearance destabilises Kovrin's firmly entrenched rational worldview, drawing him into a space beyond the boundaries of the profane.

Eliade warns that the desacralization of existence precipitates existential crisis, as humanity severs its connection to the transcendent (Eliade 1959, 204). Kovrin's descent into madness reflects the vacuity of a life reduced solely to material concerns. His poignant observation that the glory of "the flower-beds" was still hidden away in the hot-houses (Chekhov 1951, 10) captures the soul-deadening effects of a world focused on utility, devoid of the transformative potential that comes from mystery and transcendence. The sterile nature of the garden's hidden beauty underscores the existential crisis modernity engenders, a disenchanted society that denies meaning beyond the empirical. René Guénon's analysis in *The Crisis of the Modern World* reinforces this view, arguing that the modern worldview privileges quantitative measures over the qualitative, relegating spiritual truths to obsolescence (Guénon 2001, 16). Yegor's obsession with "clear profit" mirrors this reductionist approach, in which life's deeper dimensions are obscured by a focus on efficiency and control. Guénon's critique of modernity's metaphysical bankruptcy illuminates why Kovrin's visions, far from being celebrated, are framed as a form of mental instability. The contrast between the closed, artificial environment of the hot-houses and the open potential of the garden suggests a loss of access to the transcendent truths once considered essential to human flourishing.

The monk's role as an agent of sacred chaos ultimately precipitates Kovrin's destruction, reflecting the spiritual

impoverishment at the heart of modernity. Eliade's theory that the repression of the sacred does not eliminate the human need for transcendence but distorts it is fully realised in Kovrin's tragic trajectory (Eliade 1959, 210). Initially, his hallucinations offer him glimpses of boundless knowledge, yet they quickly devolve into psychosis, precisely because modernity has no framework for interpreting the sacred as anything but madness. Tanya's insistence on treating Kovrin's experiences with medicine, and Yegor's simplistic reliance on bromide, are symptomatic of a worldview that reduces profound, spiritual encounters to pathologies. This reductionist logic, characteristic of modernity, ignores the deeper significance of spiritual crises, reinforcing a culture that is ill-equipped to address the existential hunger for transcendence. Jung's perspective on modernity's spiritual alienation adds a psychological layer to this critique. He suggests that severing the connection to the collective unconscious leads to neurosis, as individuals lack the archetypal symbols necessary for navigating their inner worlds (Jung 1933, 125). Kovrin's visions, when seen through this lens, represent a rupture in the rational mind, where the sacred, in the form of the monk, emerges as an archetypal force trying to integrate wholeness. However, Kovrin's failure to reconcile this force with his conscious reality illustrates the existential alienation of the *modern ego*, which fears the irrational and unconsciously represses the sacred (Jung 1933, 141).

Kovrin's fate, dying with a "blissful smile" (Chekhov 1951, 34), suggests a fleeting reconciliation with the sacred, achieved only through self-annihilation. Eliade's framework illuminates this tragedy as a cultural, rather than individual, failure. The monk, as hierophany, exposes the void at modernity's core: a world stripped of transcendence, where the sacred returns as chaos. The clinical pathologisation of Kovrin's visions illustrates historical efforts to suppress mystical experiences, recasting divine encounters as neuroses (Foucault 1988, 243). Eliade argues that such repression fosters nihilism or destructive transcendence (Eliade 1959, 212), a dichotomy embodied in Kovrin's final moments. His smile signifies

neither victory nor despair but a tragic acknowledgement of a society that exiles the sacred, mistaking illumination for illness. Through Eliade's lens, Chekhov's story can be read as a meditation on the existential consequences of *desacralization*. At the same time, the monk's intrusion, both terrifying and enlightening, underscores the inescapable presence of the sacred, even in a world that has repressed it.

PATHOLOGISING THE MYSTIC

Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) argues that the Enlightenment's rationalist project redefined non-normative states of consciousness, including mysticism, prophetic visions, and religious ecstasy, as pathological conditions to be managed by institutional power (Foucault 1988, 46-47). This framework illuminates the societal response to Kovrin's visions in "The Black Monk," where his encounters with the monk are labelled as "delusions" by Tanya and Yegor, reflecting a broader 19th-century cultural anxiety toward spiritual deviance. Foucault notes that the 18th and 19th centuries marked a shift from viewing madness as a "tragic experience" to a "mental illness" requiring correction (Foucault 1988, 64), a process Chekhov critiques through Kovrin's ostracisation. When Tanya insists that Kovrin must see a doctor immediately, her panic reflects the medical establishment's encroachment on spiritual subjectivity, reducing transcendent experience to a symptom of neurosis.

The medicalisation of Kovrin's visions aligns with 19th-century Russia's embrace of positivism, which sought to explain all phenomena through empirical science. Yegor's garden, a microcosm of this ideology, embodies the Enlightenment's obsession with order and productivity. His meticulous cultivation of pyramidal poplars and candelabra plum trees reflects a worldview that equates value with utility, leaving no room for the irrational or sacred (Chekhov 1951, 3). Foucault suggests that such

societies pathologise the "unproductive" elements of human experience (Foucault 1988, 210), and Kovrin's hallucinations, though they grant him intellectual fervour, are deemed dangerous precisely because they defy instrumental logic. The doctor's prescription of bromide and enforced idleness symbolises modernity's attempt to neutralise spiritual dissent, rendering Kovrin's ecstasy a "problem" to be solved rather than a mystery to be understood.

This process reflects what Foucault terms the "medical gaze," wherein doctors assume authority to define and regulate individual subjectivity (Foucault 1994, 54). Kovrin's visions, while reminiscent of religious epiphanies, are reduced to clinical symptoms, illustrating modernity's conflation of spirituality with pathology. Chekhov underscores this mechanisation of healing through the physician's impersonal approach: Kovrin is not engaged in dialogue but merely diagnosed, prescribed, and controlled. The detachment of medical discourse from individual meaning reinforces Kovrin's alienation, as the spiritual weight of his experiences is stripped away under the guise of rational intervention. The result is a dehumanising erasure of his interior life, mirroring historical treatments of visionaries institutionalised rather than understood (Foucault 1988, 250).

Madness as Resistance

Kovrin's refusal to relinquish his visions positions him as a subversive figure, challenging the hegemony of scientific rationalism. Foucault contends that madness can function as a form of resistance, exposing the limitations of dominant epistemologies (Foucault 1988, 281). Kovrin's declaration that his hallucinations contain "innumerable, inexhaustible fountains of knowledge" (Chekhov 1951, 17) destabilises the empirical certitude of Yegor's world, asserting the validity of subjective truth. He insists that the monk is not a phantom and that he is, in

fact, a living man. This, gradually, becomes an act of defiance, rejecting the binary between sanity and insanity imposed by his society. Yet this resistance is tragically futile. The "cure" imposed on Kovrin, sedation and surveillance, exemplifies Foucault's "great confinement," where deviant individuals are stripped of agency under the guise of treatment (Foucault 1988, 38). The bromide treatments suppress not only his visions but also his vitality, reducing him to a "frail human body" devoid of purpose (Chekhov 1951, 34). This erasure of subjectivity underscores the paradox of modernity: society claims to "save" individuals by extinguishing the very qualities that define their humanity. Kovrin's lament "Why have you cured me? … I am a mediocrity now!" (Chekhov 1951, 27)—reveals the violence inherent in pathologising spiritual experience. His tragic arc is reflective of Foucault's critique of psychiatry as a tool of social control, silencing dissent by medicalising it.

Chekhov's irony lies in the fact that Kovrin's "madness" is the only source of meaning in a world obsessed with material progress. The monk's prophecy— "You will lead humanity thousands of years earlier into the kingdom of eternal truth… You embody in yourself the blessing of God which rested upon the people" (Chekhov 1951, 18)—becomes a grotesque parody of modernity's utopian promises. By silencing Kovrin, society not only destroys a visionary but also condemns itself to spiritual sterility. The tragic irony of his fate underscores Chekhov's central question: Is it better to live a rational but empty life or to embrace ecstasy, even at the cost of self-destruction? Kovrin's final moments suggest that modernity's rejection of the sacred breeds an existential void, masked by the illusion of progress.

Irony and the Death of Certainty

It would appear to us by now that "The Black Monk," as a story, resists any attempts at theological or philosophical absolutism,

embodying the quintessential modernist rejection of grand narratives that attempt to fix the meaning of life or truth. The story's ambiguous nature, leaving open the question of whether the monk is a divine emissary, a mere psychological projection, or perhaps even a manifestation of genius, mirrors Nietzsche's scathing critique of religious certainty. Nietzsche condemns religious belief as a "slave morality," a constricting force that suppresses the individual's will and authentic expression (Nietzsche 1989c, 34). Similarly, Kovrin's journey in "The Black Monk" interrogates the dangers of both spiritual and secular systems of thought that attempt to impose definitive answers on the complexities of human experience. Initially, Kovrin is intoxicated by the monk's promise of transcendence, an ecstasy that suggests the possibility of a higher, divinely ordained purpose. But this initial bliss quickly unravels as he becomes ensnared in solipsistic delusion, thereby exposing the futility of trying to locate absolute truth in a world marked by uncertainty and fragmentation.

The monk, in his ontological ambiguity, becomes a symbol of modernist scepticism toward metaphysical claims. Just as Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor offers a critique of the Church's oppressive power over the individual, Chekhov's monk oscillates between roles of saviour and tempter, embodying the contradictions of faith itself. His holy harmony, which promises peace and understanding, is rendered hollow and destabilised by his spectral unreality. Chekhov, deliberately and masterfully, refrains from offering a resolution to this tension, urging readers to confront the paradox of faith in a world that has lost its sacral core. Kovrin's death, accompanied by a "blissful smile" (Chekhov 1951, 34), neither signals redemption nor despair, but instead points toward an acceptance of existential uncertainty. This notion aligns with Nietzsche's *amor fati*, an embrace of fate without illusion or expectation of divine justification (Nietzsche 1989b, 89). However, where Nietzsche's philosophy exudes strength and defiance, Chekhov's irony adds a layer of tragic

resignation, making the acceptance of this uncertainty not a triumph but a reluctant submission.

KOVRIN AS A SECULAR SAINT

Kovrin's tragic demise evokes the archetype of the secular saint, a figure whose personal sacrifice in pursuit of an elusive truth becomes both an act of defiance and a form of self-destruction. In many ways, Kovrin's journey mirrors that of Albert Camus's Sisyphus, who finds meaning not in transcending his fate but in the very act of resistance itself (Camus 1991, 5). Like Sisyphus, Kovrin is confronted with the absurdity of existence: the chasm between his lofty spiritual aspirations and the universe's utter indifference to his suffering. Yet, Kovrin's final smile, which could be interpreted as an expression of fleeting reconciliation, suggests a moment of clarity, albeit a moment born not from spiritual salvation but from the harsh realities of self-annihilation and the acceptance of his own limitations.

In this light, Chekhov's modernist theology rejects both the certainties of religious dogma and the despair of nihilism. The monk's final words—"You are dying only because your frail human body… can no longer serve as the mortal garb of genius" (Chekhov 1951, 34)—mock the conventional rhetoric of divine election and salvation, reducing it to an absurd jest. This declaration, though seemingly elevating Kovrin to the status of a *chosen one*, actually underscores the futility of any grand narrative that seeks to impose meaning on an inherently chaotic existence. Kovrin's death, therefore, is neither the fulfilment of a heroic journey nor the culmination of a meaningless existence. Rather, it is a tragic affirmation of the human capacity for both wonder and self-destruction, a bittersweet acknowledgement of the human condition's complexity. In this way, Chekhov anticipates Camus's assertion that "there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by

scorn" (Camus 1991, 23), though Chekhov's treatment tempers this philosophy with a profound sense of resignation and tragedy.

Conclusion: Literature as a Mirror of Spiritual Crisis

Chekhov's "The Black Monk" stands as a masterful interrogation of modernity's spiritual disarray, weaving together existential, psychological, and sociopolitical threads to expose the fractures in a world increasingly defined by rationalism and disenchantment. Through the tragic trajectory of Andrey Kovrin, a scholar whose visionary encounters with the Black Monk spiral into self-destruction, Chekhov critiques the violent binaries of his age: faith versus reason, sacred versus profane, genius versus madness. This narrative, far from offering a simple allegory, operates as a polyphonic text that resonates with the dissonant philosophies of Kierkegaard, Jung, Eliade, Foucault, and Camus, positioning itself as a cornerstone of modernist literature's engagement with existential fragmentation. Kovrin's hallucinations, dismissed as pathological by the story's empirical pragmatists, encapsulate the tension between Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" and Foucault's "medicalisation of deviance." Kierkegaardian existentialism frames Kovrin's visions as a subjective truth that defies objective verification, a testament to the individual's struggle for authenticity in a secularising world. Yet Foucault's analysis of power reveals how society pathologises such transcendence, reducing Kovrin's ecstasy to a neurosis to be managed through bromide and surveillance. Similarly, Jung's archetypal shadow theory illuminates the monk as both a manifestation of Kovrin's repressed genius and a destabilising force that fractures his psyche, while Eliade's sacred/profane dichotomy underscores the monk's role as a hierophany rupturing Yegor's sterile, rational garden. Camusian absurdism, meanwhile, haunts Kovrin's demise, as his *blissful smile* in death mirrors Sisyphus's futile yet defiant embrace of meaninglessness. Chekhov synthesises these frameworks not to

resolve their contradictions but to amplify the existential void they collectively diagnose, a void modernity fails to fill.

In contemporary discourse, "The Black Monk" resonates with urgent debates about mental health, spirituality, and neurodiversity. Kovrin's hallucinations, pathologised by his peers as delusions, invite reconsideration through modern lenses that distinguish between psychosis and mystical experience. Where 19th-century psychiatry sought to erase such phenomena, contemporary paradigms increasingly recognise neurodivergent subjectivities as valid modes of engaging with the world. Chekhov's refusal to moralise Kovrin's choices, whether as martyr, madman, or visionary, challenges readers to confront the limitations of diagnostic categories that reduce spiritual longing to pathology. The story's ambiguity becomes its greatest strength, resisting the reduction of Kovrin's suffering to a single narrative and instead inviting empathy for the irreducible complexity of human consciousness. Ultimately, "The Black Monk" is a searing indictment of modernity's Faustian bargain: the trade of transcendent mystery for the illusory mastery of reason. In this, Chekhov anticipates the 20th century's existential quandaries, where the absence of divine certainty does not liberate but paralyses, and where the pursuit of absolute truth often culminates in despair. The narrative's enduring relevance lies in its refusal to offer solace. Chekhov neither sanctifies faith nor sanctimoniously condemns rationality; instead, he lays bare the cost of a world that cannot reconcile the two. In an era marked by escalating mental health crises and a resurgence of spiritual seeking, "The Black Monk" compels us to ask: What is lost when we exile the irrational, the mystical, the unquantifiable? The answer, etched into Kovrin's fate, is a warning: a society that reduces the sacred to a symptom does not cure madness—it *perpetuates* it.

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