

Teaching in 21st century higher education: Reading Chekhov's 'A Boring Story' to stimulate reflective practice.

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Teaching in 21st century higher education: Reading Chekhov's 'A Boring Story' to stimulate reflective practice.

Chekhov's novella *A Boring Story: From an old man's journal*¹, provides a rich stimulus for reflecting upon the practice of teaching in higher education. The narrator's beliefs about academia, science and medicine alongside his tacit theories of learning and encounters with students and colleagues are reflected upon and speculated upon in light of contemporary teaching practice and pedagogic literature.

Keywords: Chekhov, reflection, lecturing, student engagement, autobiography

Introduction

Fictional narratives and scenarios are widely used in higher to stimulate reflective practice on 'real world-like' settings (e.g. Kemp 2001). Autobiographic approaches are widely employed (e.g. Vazir 2006; Song and Taylor 2005; Roy and Eales 2010; see also Brookfield 1995); the experience of the ill academic medical teacher has also been written about (Krpmotić 2003). Tan (2006) uses the fictional medium of the film to promote reflection. This article employs Chekhov's *A Boring Story* as a stimulus to reflect on teaching in higher education, a short story which, has commonalities with all four of these approaches.

1 Original title in Russian: Скучная история [skuchnaya istoriya]. It has also been translated into English as 'A dull story', 'A dreary story' and 'A tedious story'. The quotes, transliterations and page numbers used in this article are from the 1964 translation by David Magarshack found in Chekhov (1964).

Literary context to ‘A Boring Story’

Although this article is not a piece of literary criticism a very brief overview of some of the key themes and plot elements is useful –if for no other reason than to assist the reader unfamiliar with the text. Widely recognised as a masterpiece *A Boring Story* has been scrutinised for themes of impending death, spirituality, nihilism and living in a dying body yet continuing life as before.

A Boring Story is a short story, or probably more accurately a novella by Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), in which a 62 year old medical professor Nikolai Stephanovich ‘reflects’² on his academic career and personal life. With no more than six months to live (p. 57) he stubbornly battles on with his teaching duties, ‘aware that in six months’ time another man [sic] will be in charge of this lecture room’ (p. 58). He reflects on his relationships with his colleagues, his students, his family, his health and his financial situation. For the most part the reflection is contemporary—*A Boring Story* is neither an autobiography nor an obituary (though Flath (1997, p. 283) calls it ‘...an obituary told by its subject’.) The illness which afflicts the narrator is not identified (compare the real-life illness narratives in Krmpotic 2003), and the subtext of the novella is that his personality has changed from what it was before, though as Gattrell (2003, p. 262) observes this presumed personality change has already taken place. We do not see Nikolai Stephanovich *develop* a seemingly cynical outlook on life, but we see various clues in his narrative to suggest that we are meeting a man who is not only eminent in his academic field, but is well-liked by others, and can count many eminent men (sic) amongst his friends. His name ‘...is among those few fortunate names which it is

² I use the word ‘reflects’ in its everyday sense. I’m not convinced that the narrative constitutes ‘reflective thinking’ per se, in aiming for a conclusion as opposed to for ‘pure entertainment’ (Dewey, 1933, p. 5).

considered bad taste to abuse or speak of disrespectfully in public or in print' (p. 46). As he looks back on his life (though largely in the present tense – an example of the inherent contradictions of the story), he raises philosophical questions, but does not answer them (Flath 1997):

Unfortunately I am neither a philosopher nor a theologian. I know perfectly well I have no more than six months to live; it would therefore seem that I should be chiefly occupied with questions of the darkness beyond the grave and the visions that may visit my sleep beyond the grave. But for some reason my soul does not want to know anything about these questions; only my mind realises their importance (p. 57).

Like Nikolai Stephanovich, Chekhov was a physician and like Nikolai Stephanovich he apparently saw no value in seeking medical help for his own illness until the morning of his death in July 1904 (Loehlin, 2010, p. 16). Although Chekhov's letters of the time when he was working on *A Boring Story* focus on the illness and eventual death of his brother Nikolai, he tells his friend and publisher Alexey Suvorin not to see Chekhov in 'the professor':

If someone offers you a coffee, don't go looking for beer in it. If I present you with the ideas of the Professor, trust me and don't look for Chekhov's ideas in them, thank you kindly. Letter to Alexey Suvorin, 17 October 1889, (Chekhov, 2004, p. 194).

Indeed Nikolai Stephanovich introduces himself as a man of 62 '...with a bald head, false teeth, and incurable tic' (p. 47). Chekhov wrote the story at the age of just 29 so there is limited mileage in analysing the work as an autobiographical piece. However the realism and characterisation of the work is such that it can form the basis of reflection for twentieth-first century pedagogy.

The one lens

To apply Brookfield's (1995, pp. 29–30) four 'lenses' for being a critically reflective teacher Nikolai Stephanovich is applying a solely autobiographical lens, the first lens. There is no second lens (student eyes), or fourth lens (the theoretical literature) and the third lens (colleague experiences) is present only inasmuch as it confirms Nikolai Stephanovich's own thoughts. At a surface reading Nikolai Stephanovich could be characterised as old experienced cynical lecturer with opinions on everything and everybody, the grumpy old man. The students are not as good as they used to be. His junior colleague is 'learned blockhead'. His family are bankrupting him. Russian writing is unremarkable (p. 86), Russian translations of foreign works are hard to read and translators are self-important—their footnotes and annotations '...an unwanted intrusion both on the author's independence and mine as the reader' (p. 87).

Situating my own experience into 'A Boring Story'.

In the protagonist's narrative I see an opportunity to reflect on my own practice as a teacher in HE and as a way-in to engage with colleagues and early career academics. I teach on a Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) course for new teachers in higher education at a university in the UK. It is a masters-level course which is taken by academic staff from a variety of disciplines from traditional (e.g. English Literature, biology), emergent (e.g. journalism) and vocational (e.g. nursing, podiatry) disciplines – I employ these categories simply to give an idea of the diversity of participants in the PGCert course. For some participants reflective writing is a part of their everyday professional practice, but for others it is very challenging. Some participants tell me they are unused to the idea that their own experiences, reflections and feeling are valid topics for academic writing. Others are more open, but feel they need a large amount of data from others to validate their experiences—if they suspect their experiences and

feelings are not common they perceive them as not being ‘significant enough’ to write about—Sebok (2014) has recently addressed differing notions of validity in interdisciplinary contexts. As Brookfield notes:

Many of us are so cowed by the presumed wisdom of authorities in our field ... that we dismiss our private misgivings as fantasies until an expert legitimises them by voicing them (Brookfield, 2005, p. 13).

In the past few months I have begun sharing my interest in *A Boring Story* with colleagues and students on our PGCert course. I’ve long seen the text as pedagogically interesting, but not shared this interest with others, perhaps feeling that my enjoyment of the text was nothing beyond enthusiasm. My colleague and I run a two-day induction course for the PGCert participants. We ask them what they think makes a good lecturer and what they think is the purpose of higher education. For the first time this year we used a quote³ about the lecture to stimulate some thought about what participants think a good lecturer is (lecturer being a generic term for a teacher in higher education, and to a certain extent associated mainly with practice of giving lectures—at least in the perception of students). I think *A Boring Story* offers an exemplar of sorts of how to write reflectively. Nikolai Stephanovich is an academic and scientist, yet he is the also the subject. He draws on his own observations and experience to reflect on how he teaches and conducts relationships with the people around him.

³ I can still lecture quite well; as before I can hold the attention of my audience for two hours. My passionate nature, the literary form of my exposition and my humour make the defects of my voice almost unnoticeable, though it is dry and harsh, and though its sing-song tone is that of a sanctimonious bigot (p. 47).

Although the PGCert is aimed at new teachers in higher education most come in at least a year or two of experience. Participants attend fortnightly Action Learning Sets (McGill & Beaty 2001). In this time they have developed views about higher education and teaching which are not dissimilar to those of Nikolai Stephanovich. The idea that students are not as good as they used to be persists—blame often placed on exam-focused ‘teaching to the test’ in schools.

They [the students] are ignorant of modern languages and express themselves incorrectly in Russian; only yesterday the professor of hygienics complained to me that he had to give twice as many lectures because of their unsatisfactory knowledge of physics and complete ignorance of meteorology (p. 82).

The cynicism about the younger generation’s abilities is even shared by Nikolai Stephanovich’s adopted daughter Katya who at 25 years old is of Chekhov’s own generation (p. 62).

During the game of patience the younger generation, too, gets it in the neck. ‘Our student audiences, too, are degenerating rapidly,’ Mikhail Fyodorovich [a friend and colleague of Nikolai Stephanovich] declares with a smile. ‘I’m not speaking of ideals and so on – if only they knew how to work and think properly. Yes, indeed, “Sadly I behold our younger generation” as the poet said’. ‘Yes, they’re terribly degenerate,’ agrees Katya. ‘Tell me, has there even been one outstanding personality among your students during the last five or ten years?’ ‘I don’t know about other the professors, but I can’t think of anyone among my own students’ (p. 81).

Indeed, I first entered university as an undergraduate 20 years ago. Back then I understood that I was not as exceptional or as intelligent as previous generations. Had I been born a couple of decades earlier I might never have been accepted to study at a UK university. The day I was due to collect my GCSE exam results (the national exams sat by 16 year olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland), I sat watching the lunchtime

news on television. The special guest discussing declining standards and the inadequacies of the school system was former education minister Sir Rhodes Boyson (1925–2012) comparing the relatively new GCSE exams unfavourably with the old and allegedly more ‘rigorous’ O–level exams. Does increasing age and distance lead me to believe we knew more, understood more and were better prepared than today’s students? And does that sense of distance inevitably reinforce the belief of falling standards? Like Katya I viewed my own generation as less well–prepared. I considered my parents (who attended selective grammar schools) to have received a better education than I did in my non–selective comprehensive school. I also believed though that they were the winners in a system which condemned most children to an intellectual prison of the secondary modern school, with all hopes of a university education dashed at the age of eleven.⁴ The glories are always in the past—At Nikolai Stephanovich’s university the porter, known only by his first name, Nikolai, is the guardian of this past.

He is the guardian of university traditions... He can tell you of extraordinary the sage who knew *everything*, of remarkable scholars who could go on working without sleep for weeks... It is not necessary to take all these legends and cock–and–bull stories at their face value, but put them through a filter and something of real importance will remain: our excellent traditions and the names of true heroes acknowledged by all (p. 53).

Two encounters

The narrator details two of his one–to–one encounters with students. Both students are male but neither is named. As I mentioned previously there is no direct voice in the

⁴Elder (1965) provides a detailed outsider’s contemporary account of British secondary education in the post–war period.

story apart from that Nikolai Stephanovich. However, with some imagination, we can use the *A Boring Story* ‘universe’ to give voice to his students and colleagues and to reflect on the place of his experience in the pedagogic literature— *A Boring Story* ‘fan fiction’ so to speak (Collins 2013).

Encounter 1: The failing student

Yegor [the servant] announces that one of my students wishes to see me. I say ‘show him in please.’ A moment later a young man of pleasant appearance enters my study. For nearly a year our relationship has been rather strained: he gives me the most abominable answers at examinations and I give him the lowest marks. Every year I get about seven of these fine fellows whom I ‘persecute’ or ‘plough’, in the language of students. Those of them who do not pass their examinations because of their incapacity or illness usually bear their cross with patience, and do not bargain with me; only those come to bargain with me at home who are optimists by nature, fellows of wide though not very profound interests whose failure in examinations spoils their appetites and prevents them from regularly going to the opera. The former I make allowances for; the latter I ‘persecute’ for a whole year (p. 59).

The narrative of the encounter between Nikolai Stephanovich and his student is coming only from the protagonist’s perspective. He believes (or knows) that this man is more interested in beer and opera than science, and tells him as such. He urges the man to give up as he does not seem to have the desire or vocation to become a doctor; ‘After all, it is better to waste five years than to do something you do not like for the rest of your life’ (p. 60).

This is a piece of fiction, but drawing on student perspectives, colleague perspectives and the literature we can use Nikolai Stephanovich’s words as a trigger to explore this scene further. The paragraphs which follow constitute my reflections and imaginations on the passage. I am not reflecting on this relationship as a late nineteenth

century Russian professor, but as a twenty–first century British academic. In other words we are creating the ‘missing’ three Brookfield lenses—the colleagues, the students and the literature.

A student voice

We know of this unnamed student is that he is male, has a ‘pleasant appearance’ and keeps failing his exams (at least five times). But what is this student thinking about? We don’t know from the text so I speculate from this point forward. He’s been accepted to study medicine at university. Let’s say his ambition to be a doctor is the basis of his identity. He is working hard (despite what Nikolai Stephanovich thinks), but doesn’t understand why he is failing, and he begs for a pass. We know from the text he comes up with the commonplace excuse that he is passing all other classes with some distinction, except this one. He is optimistic, but stressed. With the help of the kindly and eminent Nikolai Stephanovich he thinks he can eventually do enough to pass. Nothing is going to stop him becoming a doctor—except perhaps his tendency to drink.

The colleagues speak

Nikolai Stephanovich’s colleagues do not feature in this encounter, but there are clues in the story as to how certain colleagues might react to this student. Nikolai Stephanovich’s reputation as a pleasant character may make him this student’s last hope. Could Peter Ignatyevich help? We know from Nikolai Stephanovich’s testimony that he knows his field well, but, to use 21st century terminology he lacks social skills and emotional intelligence – for example he is indifferent to news of a colleague’s death (p. 54) suggesting an inability to accurately perceive emotions in others (Mortiboys, 2012, p. 3). Although these students are training to be doctors we don’t see any reference made to their practical and professional skills. In class, the students sit,

Nikolai Stephanovich talks and Peter Ignatyevich dissects. The only character in the novella noted for their practical skills is Nikolai, the porter and former soldier who can assemble a human skeleton, prepare slides and knows enough Latin terms to pass for a scholar to an outsider. However, ‘... so simple a theory as, for instance, the circulation of the blood is still as great a mystery to him as it was twenty years ago’ (p.53). There is no ‘artistry of professional practice’ (Thompson & Pascal, 2012, p. 313) here –Peter Ignatyevich is a ‘technical rationalist’ and Nikolai might possibly be thought of an artist— although not an academic he is best able to relate to Nikolai Stephanovich on a personal and academic level.

Literature

Through the literature lens we might begin to think about why this student keeps on failing. In doing so, I gradually move away from this particular encounter to scrutinising Nikolai Stephanovich’s entire pedagogic practice. It may be unfair to subject Nikolai Stephanovich to the lens of twenty-first century pedagogic literature in English, but there is enough similarity to use his narrative as a stimulus for self-critique.

We could start from the position that this student has got onto the course. Let’s say that we don’t accept students whose prior experience of learning and assessment suggests that they are unlikely to be successful. Perhaps the student has undiagnosed dyslexia. Perhaps his ‘learning style/ preferences’ would be better served through alternative assessment methods. Perhaps the curriculum has emphasised and rewarded expertise at the higher level ‘basic science’ and neglected the ‘technical skills of day-to-day practice’ where ‘General, theoretical, propositional knowledge enjoys a privileged position.’ (Schön, 1987, p. 9). Perhaps this student is good practitioner, but not a good theoretician.

I suspect Nikolai Stephanovich might be one of those lecturers who views the lecture as the ‘preeminent’ form of teaching (Ramsden, 2003, p. 147). Like Ramsden my first experiences of teaching higher education came through leading seminars in support of lectures and likewise I considered lecturing the highest form of teaching. My notion of the university lecturer was one in which I stood in front of a large class uninterrupted for hour or so. I too presumed that this was how students learnt best. I thought of the seminars as little more than a backup or an opportunity for students to ask questions. As far as I know no one made any complaints about me and I regarded this as evidence that my abilities were at least satisfactory.

Nikolai Stephanovich regards himself as good lecturer and believes he can keep his classes together for two hours. Peter Ignatyevich does the practical bits while Nikolai Stephanovich lectures without a break (p. 56). Presumably there is some practical element to the work the students do. Do the students learn by doing? We don’t know. Do his courses having learning outcomes and constructively aligned assessments? (Biggs and Tang, 2010). Does this high level of theoretical knowledge have any use to a physician in practice or has the assumption that ‘research yields professional knowledge’, gone unchallenged (Schön, 1987, pp. 9–10)?

Nikolai Stephanovich appears neither aware of, nor addressing the diversity of his students (see Wisker, Exley, Antoniou & Ridley, 2008). His students are all male – women, in Katya’s words at least, are confined to domestic service and acting (p. 75). He loves lecturing and knows what he wants to talk about, but that is the limit of his preparation:

I know what I am going to lecture about, but I do not know how I shall lecture, what I start with and end with. There is not a single ready-made phrase in my head. But as soon as I glance at the audience, sitting round me in an amphitheatre, and utter the stereotyped ‘At our last lecture we stopped at – ’ the sentences roll out

in a long succession and – I am off! I speak with irresistible rapidity and passion, and it seems that no power on earth could interrupt the flow of my speech. To lecture well, that is to say without boring your listeners, and to benefit them, you must possess not only talent but also the right kind of skill as well as experience, you must also have a perfectly clear idea both of your own abilities and the subject of your address. In addition you must never be thrown off your guard, never relax your attention, and never for a moment lose sight of your audience. (p. 55)

After giving his reader advice he shares the joy; the class is a ‘many-headed hydra’ which needs to be conquered.⁵

No debate, no entertainment, no game has ever given me so much pleasure as giving a lecture. Only while lecturing have I been able to give myself up wholly to passion, and to understand that inspiration really exists. And I can’t help think that Hercules, after the most sensational of his exploits never had such an exquisite feeling of lassitude as I experienced every time after a lecture (pp. 56–57).

Are his students learning? Evidence suggests that students’ levels of arousal, their memory abilities diminish after about twenty minutes (Hayes et al 2012, pp. 85–87). Nikolai Stephanovich understands this on a certain level — after 15–30 minutes the students start ‘staring at the ceiling’ (p. 56). He resolves his student boredom by speaking an amusing pun: ‘All the hundred and fifty faces smile broadly, their eyes merrily, for a brief moment one can hear the roar of the sea. . . . I join in the laughter. Their attention is refreshed and I can go on.’ (p. 56). There is no variation of activities, breakouts for group work or even invited questions. A joke is made, then it is back to

⁵ Slaying the Lernaean hydra was the second of the twelve labours of Hercules (see

Apollodorus (attributed), *The Library Book Volume 2, Section 5*) J. G. Fraser (Trans 1921.) <http://www.theoi.com/Text/Apollodorus2.html>

the lecture. So what has the student who has been listening to Nikolai Stephanovich for two hours learnt?

We are not told if the more junior professor Peter Ignatyevich was one of his own students, but he is presented a man full of information of facts— intelligent in his specialisation, but otherwise a child. He is the centre of his own universe and cannot relate to others:

He works from evening to night, reads a terrific lot, and remembers everything he has read, and in this respect he is worth his weight in gold; but in all other respects he is just a cart–horse, or in other words, a learned blockhead. The characteristic cart–horse features which distinguish him from a man of talent are narrowness of outlook and sharply limited specialization. Apart from his special subject he is a naïve as a child. (p. 54)

Might Nikolai Stephanovich ask himself if he has created this ‘learned blockhead’ or other graduates like him? Have his teaching methods rewarded a man who can retain information but cannot relate to the news of a human death or anything outside his direct realm of experience (p. 54)? We might perceive Peter Ignatyevich as man who has a high level of professional knowledge, but seems to lack the skills required of a competent practitioner in the field, and apply his knowledge under ‘real life’ conditions of uncertainty (Schön, 1987, pp. 10–11).

Nikolai Stephanovich speaks of his lecturing activities in enthusiastic terms but one–to–one interactions with students are presented negatively (see next section).

Unlike his family and colleagues no student is named, not even the two who come to see him one–to–one. Perhaps he doesn’t know their names or maybe he sees their names as inconsequential to his narrative, a possible indication that he does not pay attention to the emotional dimension of what Mortiboys (2012, p. 4) calls the ‘teaching and learning exchange’.

Encounter 2: The advanced student

A young newly qualified doctor arrives at his house. All is innocuous to begin with. The man is asked to take a seat. He asks Nikolai Stephanovich to be his dissertation supervisor and suggest a topic. He gives the potential student a lesson in what a dissertation is supposed to be.

‘I should be delighted to be of use to you, colleague’ I say, ‘but let’s first see if we agree about what exactly a dissertation is supposed to be. This word is usually understood to mean a written composition which is the result of independent work. Isn’t that so? A work written on a subject suggested by someone else has a different name.’ (p. 61)

Has a teachable moment has occurred here? The tone in which the above is said is not immediately clear. Is it matter of fact, sarcastic, angry? Does the young doctor now know the nature of a dissertation? Does he feel ready to suggest his own topic? Is he instead embarrassed to get such a reply from the eminent academic? Perhaps Nikolai Stephanovich has relied on his past personality and reputation to motivate students rather than his knowledge of the subject matter (Dewey, 1933, pp. 60–61).

The aspirant is silent. I lose my temper and jump out of my chair (p. 61).

How long the silence lasts is not clear, but the next words out of Nikolai Stephanovich’s mouth.

‘Tell me, why do you all come to me?’ I shout angrily. ‘Do I keep a shop? I’m not a dealer in subjects for dissertations. For the hundredth time I ask you to leave me in peace, I’m sorry to be outspoken, but I am sick and tired of the whole thing’ (p.61)

More silence.

‘I don’t keep a shop,’ I repeat angrily. ‘What an extraordinary business! Why do you loath freedom so much?’ (p. 62).

More silence.

Nikolai Stephanovich goes on talking and ‘cools down’. He accepts the student who will write ‘a useless dissertation for a useless degree’. The reader may speculate at this point, but what value does this description have to the twenty–first century academic reflecting upon teaching?

The student may have an incorrect view of the dissertation which Nikolai Stephanovich corrects. ‘Tell me, why do you all come to me?’ suggests that the young doctor is bearing the brunt of long–standing anger hitherto not expressed. The possibility exists that the young doctor is the first student who has been told to be independent. Has anger revealed a truth that can only serve to benefit the young doctor? Or does he leave no wiser than his predecessors who have only met the ‘respected’ (and presumably nice) Nikolai Stephanovich?

Is this student intellectually irresponsible? He desires a gift of a dissertation topic. We don’t know what topic he is given, but his need for the gift suggests that he is unlikely to become absorbed and committed to the subject (Dewey, 1933, p. 32).

Although Wisker (2012, pp. 117–118) notes that students have differing motives in pursuing a research project, she takes it largely as given that the student is coming with some sort of interest in the topic. It is possible that Nikolai Stephanovich’s student has yet to reach this starting point, yet knows he must write this dissertation. Although a professor, Peter Ignatyevich also comes in for similar criticism for his lack of independence—he has a ‘slavish worship of authority and a complete absence of independent thought’ (p. 54). Academic success has not guaranteed independence for either of these men.

Perhaps we see a loss of curiosity on the part of Nikolai Stephanovich as well as his student. Maybe the student has been so ‘spoon-fed’ by the lectures he cannot exhibit independent learning, yet he has the knowledge and skills required of a physician. Maybe this is a case of ‘inert routine and lazy dependence on the past’. (Dewey 1933, p. 202). On the other hand Nikolai Stephanovich may be a good practitioner and exhibit good teaching methods, but his prior emotional intelligence is diminished.

When you are with a group of learners, you have the chance to connect with them beyond the transmission and discussion of ideas and facts, and thereby transform the experience for both you and them. If you do use emotional intelligence in your teaching, the value of both your knowledge of your subject and your learning and teaching methods can be seriously diminished. (Mortiboys, 2012, p. 3)

But our purpose is not to understand Nikolai Stephanovich or Chekhov, but to reflect on our own pedagogic practice. My initial thoughts on reading this passage were to think about what makes *me* angry/ annoyed in my interactions with students? Do I correct student misconceptions or do I ‘give in’? Does one student bear the sins of his or her predecessors? What does silence from our own students signify? *A Boring Story* is also a reminder that there is ‘nothing new in the world’ and the notion of ‘dumbed down’ students in a ‘dumbed-down’ curriculum was a true in late nineteenth century Russia as it is in the UK in the early twenty-first. However, on reflection I see the notion of independent learning and the transition to being autonomous as central to this section. The young doctor has passed his exams, but he cannot think for himself.

Conclusions

There is enough twenty-first century similarity in the academic life portrayed in *A Boring Story* to relate to Nikolai Stephanovich’s narratives despite a century of time difference and a very different culture from my own. The lecture remains key to the 21st

century concept of learning in higher education, whether it is delivered live in front of a student audience or through an live or recorded online medium. Moreover the issues faced by struggling students, difficult colleagues and a belief that students are not as good as they once were are all too familiar.

The fictional Nikolai Stephanovich and those with whom he interacts offer a useful springboard to reflect through the lenses of pedagogic literature, our experiences and imaginations. There is no ‘real’ Nikolai Stephanovich to disprove our speculations—we are not seeking an insight into a historical figure, but an insight into ourselves.

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