

# From Darkness into Light: A Comparative Study of Illusion and Reality in Anton Chekhov's "The Kiss" and Thomas Wolfe's "The Far and the Near"

Leila Hajjari<sup>1</sup>, Hossein Aliakbari Harehdasht<sup>1</sup> & Yasaman Mirzaie<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Persian Gulf University, Bushehr, Iran

Correspondence: Leila Hajjari, Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Persian Gulf University, Shahid Mahini Str., Bushehr, Iran. Tel: 98-77-3122-2100. E-mail: lhajjari@gmail.com

Received: July 12, 2017      Accepted: August 2, 2017      Online Published: August 9, 2017

doi:10.5539/ells.v7n3p8      URL: <http://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v7n3p8>

## Abstract

This paper is an attempt for a comparative study of two famous short stories, one by Anton Chekhov called "The Kiss" and the other by Thomas Wolfe by the name of "The Far and the Near". The focus of the study is on the analysis of the theme of *illusion versus reality*, and the approach to the stories has basically been *analogical* in essence which compares and contrasts this theme in the two stories, and the relevant aspects of the stories such as characterization, symbols, or motifs, to name but few, have been deployed as technical/literary tools for the better apprehension of the working appearance and reality on the protagonists. The results of the study show that the characters' inability in recognizing the true meaning of what *appears* to them as reality on the one hand, and their idealization of the apparent reality caused by their subconscious desire for self-deception on the other, have dismantled the protagonists' power of perception; the ensuing disillusionment caused by the final affirmation of reality which is achieved by recognition of reality/truth leads to their catastrophic end, that is, a deeper alienation and sharper feeling of alienation and desperation. The study finds significance in the fact that no similar comparative study of the two short stories have been yet done. The authors hope that this study will contribute hugely to the criticism of the two short stories and start a resurgence of interest in the study of them comparatively utilizing different approaches.

**Keywords:** Anton Chekhov, "The Kiss", Thomas Wolfe, "The Far and the Near", illusion, reality

## 1. Introduction

*People would rather sleep their way through life than stay awake for it.*

*-Edward Albee*

Unsatisfied with one's own characteristics and life, one may decide to alienate oneself from the real world and to lead a life of *illusion* (Note 1) or fancy. People usually shape their own inner world of dreams and imagination; however, they should not forget the real world. The world of dreams and unreality can be unlimited, but one should be careful not to go too far, otherwise they would get lost in the great realm of illusion which may ultimately end in the complete disconnection with the sensory world which is very common among the schizophrenic patients. However, this is not what happens in the two stories under investigation here. Anton Chekhov, in "The Kiss" and Thomas Wolfe in "The Far and the Near" depict a journey into the realm of dreams or fancy to the extent that they take an imaginary concept or event for reality; the journey, however short or long, ultimately takes them from darkness of unreality or fancy to the light of reality. That is, their characters finally undergo a change, grow into awareness (what one expects from dynamic characters), and perceive the truth about the falsity of their perceptions. What makes these two characters quite interesting for a critical study is the details about the manner of their self-deception and disillusionment; both of them experience plunging into fancy and immersion from it in relatively similar ways; nonetheless, there are some minute differences in their experience of appearance and reality which partakes of each character's singular approach to that experience.

The old locomotive engineer with no name and Riabovitch, the army officer both have a false notion of reality; in fact, what appears to them real is not real but they seek to attribute the quality of being real to the events that happen to them. They never desire to question the authenticity of the experience that happens to each in different time span. Thus, the question of what reality is come to the fore. What is reality? What is illusion? How can one

say them from each other? What are the ways that the two characters perceive reality and how come that none can detach himself from the self-deception until it is too late, until they suffer the agony of returning to their morbid reality of alienation and loneliness? To answer these questions, the authors will look deeply into the minute details of these characters' encounter with appearance and reality.

Although each story has been studied separately by some critics, no comparative study of the two stories with the basic attention to the subtle nuances of appearance vs. reality has yet been done. The scant study of each short story is a good reason to know why having access to the original texts of the two stories have been difficult for the authors of this paper; they had to have recourse to some old texts such as Laurence Perrine's (1974) *Literature: Structure, Sound and Sense*, which provides the text as well as some introductory notes on the story in addition to some enlightening essay questions, and C. Hugh Holman's (1962) *The Thomas Wolfe Reader* which brings some parts of Wolfe's works including the short story under the study here with a short introduction. The critiques on the two short stories are not many and it is safer to say that they are rare; and none is extant considering the comparative study of the two works. Therefore, this study can be considered as a good opening to the study of the workings of illusion vs. reality in two rather culturally, geographically, and temporally distant short stories, one from the late 19th-century Russia and the other from the early 20th-century America. What keeps the two stories on a similar ground despite the geographical as well as cultural distances is their artistic approach to the alienating effects of the post-industrial bourgeois world of the late 19th-century and early 20th-century world, the period during which the political and social confusion in the great Empire of Russia and the age of depression in America had made it difficult for any individual not to feel the need for love and companionship.

## 2. Methodology: Comparative Literature

One can look at Comparative Literature in retrospect to pursue its historical development which has already been done many times by many prominent critics of the field. What matters most to us here concerning Comparative Literature as a discipline of literary study is the reason behind such an enterprise which has not been immune to the harsh criticism of its opponents. As Zepetnek & Mukherjee (2013),

At the same time, in and about the discipline of comparative literature it remains a recurrent view that it is lacking definition, has no or only a partial framework of theory and/or methodology, and that for these reasons the discipline remains with a history and presence of insecurity (see, e.g., Grabovszki). (p. 3)

Comparative Literature despite all harsh criticism has a claim to intertextual, intercultural, and eventually more democratic approach to the study of literature and culture. It aims at trespassing the boundaries of the *myth* of purity of literature in order to reveal the interconnectedness of literatures across time and space, across languages and cultures, and across literatures in general. As Tutun Mukherjee (2013) explains,

Time and space—or history and geography—inform our literary imagination: they shape our thoughts and direct our perception of the world around us. Over a decade into the new millennium, drastic temporal and spatial changes have so re-mapped the human social, geo-political and ecological habitat that questions regarding the nature and function of literature—what it is and/or what it should be—demand to be re-visited. . . . Perhaps no other field of study has deliberated upon such questions as a regular disciplinary exercise and, in tandem with changing times, allowed those deliberations to impact curricula and syllabi in teaching programs as comparative literature. (p. 36)

We live at a time that “one should not confine oneself to the narrow circle of a single linguistic domain or any isolated part of the globe... National literature has little meaning today” (Jost, 1974, p. 16). As Zepetnek & Mukherjee (2013) put it in their Introduction to the Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies, “The negotiation of the network of relationships in the rapidly transforming “glocal” milieu requires more than appropriate pedagogies: importantly, it requires a major shift in cultural and aesthetic paradigms and attitudes and a re-orientation towards being more inclusive globally” (p. vii). As Remak (1971) notes, Comparative Literature studies “literature beyond the confines of one particular country” (1). It is the study of the “relationship between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief such as the arts,... the science, religion, etc., on the other” (p. 1). Remak (1971) believes that Comparative Literature intends to give

more comprehensive understanding of literature as a whole rather than of a departmental fragments of literature. It can do so best by not only relating several literatures to each other but by relating literature to other fields of human knowledge and activity, especially artistic and ideological fields; that is, by extending the investigation of literature both geographically and generically. (p. 8)

The goal of Comparative Literature as a critical discipline is thus to be polemical as well as connective/corrective; it becomes a means of critical study of literature but is simultaneously used to bridge nations and cultures which are geographically and temporally aloof from one another so that the nations are able to study the similarities as well as differences of each other represented in their literary history, to get more familiar with each other and to correct their previous erroneous ways of treating each other, and to flatten sharp edges of enmity and fanaticism which are generally fueled by racial, ethnic and religious dogmatism. Comparative Literature connects human hearts across the world by relating the common themes and ideas which are discoverable in the literary works, either minor or major, of the artists across borders of the countries. Comparative Literature undermines the established essentialist approach to literature and corresponds with the twenty-first century need for appreciation of differences of the people who are ethnically, culturally and religiously different. It helps people see beyond the national scope and widens the eyes to see the global impacts of the interconnected web of relationships and thus lessens the atrocities against those who are different. To achieve its goals, Comparative Literature may work hand in hand with other disciplines or simply concentrate on the study of two or more literatures using the forms of literary appreciations that have traditionally been common among literary scholars. In order to do so, there is no need for special theoretical tools. As Remak affirms, "Comparative literature does not have, or need to have, a methodology exclusive to itself. The basic laws of gathering, sifting, and interpreting evidence governing literary research apply here as elsewhere" (1971, p. 21). Jost similarly avers that, "The facts and factors, the means and techniques may vary, but no specific and autonomous comparative methodology exists" (1974, p. 24); there may be no need for any other method of study except those already utilized by the literary scholars; that is to say, form is not as important as the objective which is the familiarity between self and other, "we must not be so concerned with its theoretical unity as to forget the perhaps more important functional aspect of comparative literature" (Remak, 1971, pp. 7-8). This can be given evidence by a reference to Behdad & Dominc Thomas' (2011) introduction to *Companion to Comparative Literature* where they trace this fact to René Wellek who is one of the pioneers of Comparative Literature in 20th century America,

In "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," the distinguished scholar of Comparative Literature René Wellek wrote "The most serious sign of the precarious state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" (Wellek, 1963, p. 282). That nearly over fifty years later, the same can be said of the state of a discipline that has grown to over fifty departments and programs worldwide (see <http://www.swan.ac.uk/german/bcla/clusa.htm>) underscores not only the timeliness of this volume, but also the precarious and plural nature of the discipline itself, a discipline which defines itself as an *inter-disciplinary*, *cross-cultural*, and *trans-national* endeavor. (p. 1)

The comparatist study concerns "four basic fields: influence and analogies; movements and trends; genres and forms; and motifs, types, and themes" (Jost, 1974, p. 33). The latter inquiry of Comparative Literature, that is, the motifs, types, and themes, has been the main concern of the present study, a study which in Comparative Study typology can be named as *analogy studies*. One of the areas that this type of comparative study undertakes is the study of a "given theme in a given literary genre all over the world" (Prawer, 1973, p. 56). Prawer (1973) believes that

There is interplay here between the three main factors that make for typological analogies; social (two societies may have reached a similar stage of development or find themselves faced with similar problems); literary (at certain stages of their development a given genre may develop a dynamic of its own and lead to similar development which then may, or may not, be strengthened by direct contact with foreign models); and psychological (the human mind has common ways of responding to common experience; two authors may have a similar cast of mind). (p. 56)

Though the authors of the two short stories were distant from each other geographically and temporally, they had been able to grasp the meaning of the souvenirs of industrialization/modernization—the spiritual destruction caused by the feeling of alienation of two men who were urged by their inner drive for love/being loved.

### 3. Anton Chekhov and a Synopsis of "The Kiss"

Anton Chekhov's stories are quite well-known because of their simple depiction of life as well as their realism. As H. S. Candy argues, Chekhov's stories are based on life, and

Joining the chorus of writers and critics who welcomed Chekhov's realism because it rescued the short story from the pattern of artificial irony that had overcome it, Leonard Woolf suggested that Chekhov had the ability to show 'exactly what a little piece of life is like. (as cited in May, 2002, p. 52)

"The Kiss" demonstrates Chekhov's realism to some extent as well. It begins with the setting. The exact time and place of a military setting, with a detailed descriptions of a realistic onset. Chekhov makes the reader want to know more, keep reading, and feel sympathetic for the main character, Riabovitch. From the very beginning there is a vivid reference to a confusion, "the confusion was at its height... when a civilian upon a remarkable horse road from the rear of the church" (Chekhov, 1974, p. 81). The Horseman invites the officers to General von Rabbek's house. The officers set out for his house and the story foreshadows chaos by referring to another similar party in the past.

The "glorious weather" of the spring and Lieutenant Lobuitko's foresight that "there are women there" (Chekhov, 1974, p. 82) predicts a romantic event. When the general greets them at his house, they are shown rather as intruders than as welcomed guests: they "realized that they carried into the house an atmosphere of intrusion and alarm" (Chekhov, 1974, p. 83). "The Kiss" is the story of a man, one of these officers, Riabovitch, who is totally dissatisfied with his life until he experiences a strange adventure. After about two pages, Riabovitch appears as "a short, round-shouldered, spectacled officer, whiskered like a lynx," who feels so embarrassed that he is like "the victim of what men of science diagnose as "physical blindness"" (Chekhov, 1974, p. 83).

Riabovitch was "the most timid, modest, undistinguished officer in the whole brigade" (Chekhov, 1974, p. 83). He used to envy his comrades for their courage and appearance but after years "he had grown reconciled to his own insignificance and now looking at the dancers and loud talkers," feels not envious but "mournful emotions" (p. 84). Riabovitch has never had an interaction with any women, but one evening in a party held by a retired general, he is kissed in a dark room by a mysterious woman who has mistaken him for her lover. Finding out her mistake, she shrieks and flees. But Riabovitch, experiencing his first kiss, takes the incident more seriously and feels bold and confident. He falls in love with the woman he has never seen. The woman kissed him in a dark room. He knows that it was just a mistake, but he does not face up to the reality. After being unable to see or find the girl, and after visiting the house a year after he gradually thinks and accepts the reality and starts to think about the mysteriousness of existence.

#### 4. Thomas Wolfe and a Synopsis of "The Far and the Near"

Thomas Wolfe's "The Far and the Near", which was first published as "Cottage by the Tracks" in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, July 1935 (Holman, 1962, p. 448), begins with the description of the setting, too, and it is elaborately well-knitted. The first paragraph describes the cottage and its surrounding area in detail; everything is peacefully pretty and there is "modest comfort" (Wolfe, 1962, p. 482). Reading the first paragraph, one may expect a romantic story with a happy ending; however, the description of the train in the second paragraph breaks this peace and "the drowsy stillness of the afternoon" (Wolfe, 1962, p. 482).

The story is about a man, an engine driver, who for more than twenty years, every day after two o'clock in the afternoon, passing a small cottage by his express train, blows on the whistle. Each time that he does so, a woman and her daughter appear on the terrace of their house and wave to him. "The sight of this little house and of these two women" gives the engine driver "the most extraordinary happiness" and it is "carved so sharply in his heart" (Wolfe, 1962, p. 483) that he feels like he knows them well. After about twenty years from the time he retires he goes to the town to see these women.

As soon as he steps into the town, he feels that everything is strange and "unfamiliar, as disquieting as a city in a dream" (Wolfe, 1962, p. 483). Nothing is left from that peace and beauty which he felt from the distance. There is "heat and dust" (p. 483) and the lovely place turns into "the landscape of some ugly dream". He feels "confusion, doubt, and hopelessness," "a sense of bitter loss and grief" (p. 484); however, he goes on and enters the house.

Yet, contrary to what he expected, the women treated him quite coldly and invited him "almost unwillingly". They sit "in an ugly little parlor" (Wolfe, 1962, p. 484) and he tried to talk to them. Finally, he finds no alternative but to confront the reality. He has to accept the reality that he is a lonely old man, but this awareness is extremely harsh and sudden. He remains hopeless and "knew that all the magic of that bright lost way, the vista of that shining line, the imagined corner of that small good universe of hope's desire, could never be got again" (p. 485). His image of the supposed peaceful house and its lovely inhabitants is shattered; and he departs feeling quite lonesome; The old image of the beautiful calm house with its lovely inhabitants who always waved to his train whistles is completely destroyed.

#### 5. The Theme of Illusion vs. Reality

In his essay *On Truth*, Francis Bacon (2006) associates truth with light, and falsity with darkness. He prioritizes light over darkness, and likewise, truth over falsity; through these binary oppositions, he tries to define truth. At

the beginning of the essay he claims there is “a natural though corrupt love of lie”, and at the same time, he considers truth as “the sovereign good of human nature”: “the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of human nature” (Bacon, 2006, p. 1552). He distinguishes different kinds of truth, such as “theological,” “philosophical,” and “truth of civil business” (Bacon, 2006, p. 1553). Ruth Meyer (1968) believes that for talking about illusion, we must first discuss truth. She declares that ““Truth” is generally considered a verifiable fact, “illusion” a false mental image, thus one that is unverifiable” (p. 61). Yacobi (2013) states that “there is no definitive answer to the question of what reality is. In broadest terms, one can define reality as all that exists, irrespective of whether or not it can be observed or understood” (p. 202). He distinguishes between physical and mental reality and declares that “ultimate reality cannot be defined by concepts or words” (p. 203). Thus, defining reality and truth is not an easy task. This dichotomy has always been discussed in literature throughout history. When people let their minds be deceived by illusions, they live a life of absurdity, of lies, but the inquiry and the quest to discover the reality, though bitter, brings meaning to life and this is what literature does for its readers. It helps the readers to identify themselves with the characters and takes them through darkness of lie and deception to the light of truth, of recognition of the reality of one’s “self”.

## 6. Walking in the Darkness; an Illusory World

As Sigmund Freud (1918) declares “illusions commend themselves to us because they save us pain and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead. We must therefore accept it without complaint when they sometimes collide with a bit of reality against which they are dashed to pieces” (p. 16). Both in Chekhov’s “The Kiss” and Wolfe’s “The Far and the Near,” the main characters suffer from being alienated from the world; therefore, they take refuge in their worlds of illusion. By doing so, in fact, they make their lives endurable. In “The Kiss,” Riabovitch feels alienated because of being timid and lacking self-confidence, but in “The Far and the Near,” the engine driver has been alienated by his job. These two men turn a trifle incident into an important event, visualize it, and create fantastic (of fantasy) image of it. Both Chekhov and Wolfe portray a kind of man who constructs an *ideal* dreamy world (of illusion) and enjoys the temporary satisfaction and perfection in it.

Once so timid that he never dared to talk to women, Riabovitch, after “his mysterious, romantic adventure” (Chekhov, 1974, p. 86) totally forgets about his round shoulders and “indefinite exterior” (p. 85) and spends all the evening scanning the girls’ different possible faces and appearances in his mind, trying to find the true image of the mysterious lady. He even seeks perfection in his hallucinatory daydreaming, “He composed a portrait of all these charms, and had a clear vision of the girl who has kissed him. But she was nowhere to be seen” (p. 86). In fact, he creates a non-existing woman in love with him, and plunges into imagining/hallucinating a love relationship. The external world of object and beings (reality in general) disappears and the ideal world of romantic love replaces it.

Although Riabovitch at the back of his mind knows that the event was just an accident, he desires to enjoy the pleasure that is felt in self-deception, “It was plain that one of the girls, he reasoned, had arranged a meeting in the dark room, and after waiting some time in vain had, in her nervous tension, mistaken Riabovitch for her lover” (Chekhov, 1974, p. 86). He likes and wants to be in the world of unreality, and enjoy the pleasures of an intoxicated person ecstatic by the narcotic power of the drug he has taken; he enjoys the magical charm of the illusive kiss. He shouts at the soldiers, “To the Brakes! And each time he dreaded that the cry would break the magic spell, and recall him to realities” (p. 90). Although, there are moments which he hovers between reality and illusion, he still remains faithful to his imagination. When he shares his experience with his friends, and when it takes him only a few minutes to tell the whole story, he wonders why it did not last the whole night (p. 91).

Chekhov uses the external world to depict and to reinforce the inner world and sensation of his character. After the party at the general’s house, when the officers are returning, they see the other bank of the river “lost entirely in gloom” and “sometimes the black water imaged stars” (Chekhov, 1974, p. 87); they hear a nightingale singing loudly, which does not stop singing even when they hit the bushes. The nightingale embodies the experience of the evening and also fits the charm and magic that the party has created (Perrine, 1974, p. 212). As Perrine (1974) points out, “two facts about the nightingale are stressed. It is singing loudly; it is oblivious of the reality around it” (p. 213). It describes Riabovitch’s condition. On their way to the camp, when the officers talk about the source of “a dull red light” across the river, wondering whether it was a “bonfire, a window light, or something else” (Chekhov, 1974, p. 87), Riabovitch, watching the light, felt that “it smiled and winked at him as if it knew about the kiss” (p. 87). All these outside elements reflect Riabovitch’s inner feelings. He gives up his dreams, living in a state of unreality. In Chekhov’s characterization, Riabovitch is “dead to his surroundings” (p. 85),

he had tried to argue that the kiss had no significance save as a trivial though mysterious adventure; that it was without real import; and that to think of it seriously was to behave himself absurdly, logic soon flew away and surrendered him to his vivid imagination. (p. 90)

Riabovitch is immersed in his dream of being lovable because in reality his ugly visage was a big hindrance for being loved by beautiful damsels.

Wolfe's engine driver is alienated from the external world due to type of job he does. Working as an engineer on a locomotive obliquely refers to the alienation that industry and technology has exerted on man. He has "grown old and gray in service" (Wolfe, 1962, p. 482) or servitude to the soulless industry; he has seen tragedies happen on the railroad. Beauty and peace stood aloof from the railroad, on the rural towns through which the train passed. For more than twenty years, he has passed the beautiful cottage and the waving women, "The sight of this little house and these two women gave him the most extraordinary happiness he had ever known" (p. 483). He is apart from his own family and children, and cherishes this family and "the little house in which they lived such tenderness as a man might feel for his own children" (p. 483). He makes this simple image of the waving women as a significant event of his life because it has happened over twenty years. He has seen them so many times from the distance that make him consider them as his own family. The driver, like Riabovitch, allured to the acceptance of the illusion, what he took for his object of affection, as reality; he fails to consider the fact that they may have been waving at the train, and were never actually able to see the engine driver in his cab on the moving train from that distance. He is so lonely in and dissatisfied with the reality of his soulless job that he tries to find the relief in his imagination.

But no matter what peril or tragedy he had known, the vision of the little house and the women waving to him with a brave free motion of the arm had become fixed in the mind of the engineer as something beautiful and enduring, something beyond all change and ruin, and something that would always be the same no matter what mishap, grief or error might break the iron schedule of his days (Wolfe, 1962, p. 483).

In this part, the author somehow implements a foretaste of the unhappy ending and the grief which soon overshadows the story. Nonetheless, both Riabovitch and the engine driver eventually discover the reality at the end of the stories: although the engine driver's awareness is sudden and harsh, Riabovitch's takes place gradually in about three months.

## 7. Coming into the Light; Facing the Reality

Time lapses more slowly in Anton Chekhov's "The Kiss" and Riabovitch's journey from illusion to disillusionment takes only about three months. The engine driver's hallucination, his imaginary world, has been made over more than twenty years. Therefore, in "The Kiss," Riabovitch gradually reaches for the reality, "All this, though it seems to me impossible and unearthly, is in reality very commonplace" thought Riabovitch, watching the clouds of dust raised by the general's carriage. "It is an everyday event, and within everyone's experience" (Chekhov, 1974, p. 91). When, at last, relieved from impatience and anger, he walks toward Von Rabbek's house, and in the dark garden, he unfolds the reality. His hope is dead and "the history of the kiss, his impatience, his ardor, his vague aspirations and disillusion appeared in a clear light" (Chekhov, 1974, p. 92). Chekhov uses symbolism to reinforce the meaning. For instance, as mentioned before, when he is in the world of unreality, there is a singing nightingale, reflecting his situation as well as inner feelings.

At his second trip to the general's house, Riabovitch's mode has changed. The nightingale is not singing anymore. He goes near the river and "then, for no reason whatever, touches a towel" (Chekhov, 1974, p. 93) which is cold and wet. He looks at the river and sees "the moon's ruddy reflection, overrun by ripples which stretched it, tore it in two" (p. 91). As Perrine (1974) states, this "touch of the cold, wet towel suggests the disillusioning of Riabovitch's return to reality. What is happening to the moon's reflection is like what is happening to Riabovitch's heart" (p. 213).

In *The Far and the Near*, the engine driver discovers reality more abruptly than Riabovitch does. In the first half of the story the reader may assume that the story ends in happiness, but as the man walks in the town everything changes,

Everything was as strange to him as if he had never seen this town before. As he walked on, his sense of bewilderment and confusion grew. Could this be the town he had passed ten thousand times? Were these the same houses he had seen so often from the high windows of his cab? I was all as unfamiliar, as disquieting as a city in a dream, and the perplexity of his spirit increased as he went on. (Wolfe, 1962, p. 483)

Quite interestingly, he was so obsessed with his dreams and illusions of this house that when he sees the reality he calls it “a city in a dream” (Wolfe, 1962, p. 483). However, after paying the visit, he returns to reality. The pretty house afar becomes the “ugly little parlor” (p. 484), and the two seemingly nice women, with their unfriendly looks, “almost unwillingly” (p. 484) invite him to the house. Finally, he finds out that what he has seen from a far distance is not what it really is from near.

Riabovitch undergoes a change. After overestimating an incident, and being obsessed with an unknown woman’s mistaken kiss, “and from head to foot he was soaked in new and extraordinary sensations, which continued to grow and grow” (Perrine, p. 85), he reaches a kind of insight and enlightenment; he looks at the river and then at the sky and thinks about the whole world and life. No longer is that kiss an important mystery; rather, it is the life or existence that becomes a mystery, “And the whole world-life itself-seemed to Riabovitch an inscrutable, aimless mystification” (Chekhov, 1974, p. 93). He finally asks significantly philosophical questions: “For what purpose? Why?” (p. 93).

It is quite ironic that in both of these stories, “such a trivial accident” turns to have “such a disproportionate effect on the characters’ thoughts and feelings” (Perrine, 1974, p. 217). It is also ironic that Riabovitch should finally deny the invitation that he has been waiting for so eagerly, “The story would have been complete without the second invitation, but the ironic twist gives the change in Riabovitch an emphasis it would not otherwise have had” (p. 217).

Each of the two stories reveals a dichotomy of illusion vs. reality. To live a life of appearances is easier than living in bitter reality. As Edward Albee puts it, “people would rather sleep their way through life than stay awake for it” (Albee, 1963, p. 25). At the end of the two stories, the main characters metaphorically go through a journey from darkness into light and face reality. Both characters have lived in a world of illusion for some time. However, what distinguishes these two characters is that first, Riabovitch, being timid and lacking self-confidence, is separated from the world and other people by himself, while the engine driver is somehow alienated from the world of reality by his job, “He had known all the grief, the joy, the peril and the labor such a man could know” (Wolfe, 1962, p. 482). Secondly, at the end of the story, the reality is not as harsh for Riabovitch as it is for the engine driver. For the latter, it is full of despair, instability and fear, “His heart, which had been brave and confident when it looked along the familiar vista of the rails, was now sick with doubt and horror” (Wolfe, 1962, p. 485). This deeper sense of despair and alienation is because of the elongated and hence deeper sinking into the realm of illusion for the engine driver which eventually makes emersion from it very painful. Besides, the agony of a lost soul in the iron technology is sharper than a man who has a closer bond with nature. All people, all over the world, need dreams and imagination to keep their lives; nonetheless, going to the extremes of trespassing the boundary of reason will be dangerous. That is, one cannot stay in the state of daydreaming; therefore, they must not continue self-deception. Reality one day will find its way to the life of the fancy-ridden individuals and will force itself over the inner world of imagination; if people continue to ignore it, they will miss the train of life and will suffer more painful strokes of disillusionment.

Although the authors are from different countries and centuries, their stories share the similar theme and dichotomy of illusion vs. reality. There were no direct connections between these two authors; however, Chekhov had great influence on American writers, including Thomas Wolfe, “In Wolfe’s novel, *Of Time and the River*, the protagonist reads aloud a passage from the book he has written, whereupon one of his listeners’ remarks, “It is as good as ‘The Cherry Orchard’” (Nikoliukin, p. 214). Nevertheless, such a connection is not necessary for all types of comparative study. As went before in the methodology section, two authors may write about the same subjects without knowing, meeting or reading each other’s work.

One significant similarity between these two stories is that they depict characters who follow their ideals and try to reach them. These ideals detach them more and more from the world of reality but seemingly give them temporary pleasure. However, this semi-satisfaction turns to dissatisfaction at the end. Eventually, they both realize that their ideals were nothing but illusions and that reality is something else. In these stories both characters are detached. Riabovitch alienates himself because of his physical appearance and his lack of confidence; he has put himself in self-exile. The engine driver is detached from the world and people because of his job and his loneliness. His job has driven him into exile. He cannot see the reality from the window of his cab on the speedy train. He sees the waving women for a long time and even considers them to be his own family. Finally, when he is retired, he goes there and meets them. This visit brings him back to his loneliness even further. The major difference, however, between the stories is the way they confront reality. Riabovitch is able to find his way but the engine driver fails to do so. Riabovitch gradually accepts the reality and gains an insight into the world and himself, whereas the old engine driver is unable to tolerate the tragic effect of reality.

## 8. Conclusion

The dichotomy of illusion vs. reality has been extensively discussed in literature. This paper tried to illuminate it in two short stories, “The Far and the Near” written by Thomas Wolfe and “The Kiss” by Chekhov. Illusions exist in our inner world, in our mind, and sometimes prevent us from observing the reality. Riabovitch, the protagonist of “The Kiss” earns the skill to distinguish between appearance and reality. Eventually, he rejects the other invitation. He gains self-awareness; whereas, the old engine driver who has lived a longer life of illusion is not able to come to terms with that kind of recognition basically because he is quite old and has no more time to start over.

## References

- Albee, E. (1963). Edward Albee: Interviewed by Digby Diehl. *The Transatlantic Review*, 13, 57-72.
- Ali, B., & Dominc, T. (2011). Introduction. *A Companion to Comparative Literature* (pp. 1-12). West Sussex, United Kingdom: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.
- Bacon, F. (2006). Of truth. In S. Greenblatt (Ed.), *The Norton anthology of English literature* (pp. 1552-1553). New York: Norton.
- Chekhov, A. (1974). The kiss. In Laurence Perrine. *Literature: Structure, sound and sense* (pp. 81-94). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
- Freud, S. (1918). *Reflections on war and death* (Trans. A. A. Brill & Alfred B. Kuttner). New York: Moffat Yard and Company.
- Holman, C. H. (1962). *The Thomas Wolfe reader*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Jost, F. (1974). *Introduction to Comparative Literature*. Indianapolis and New York: Pegasus.
- May, C. E. (2002). *The short story the reality of artifice*. New York: Routledge.
- Meyer, R. (1968). Language: Truth and illusion in *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* *Educational Theatre Journal*, 20, 60-69. <http://doi.org/10.2307/3204876>
- Mukherjee, T. (2013). Comparative Literature and Ex-centricity. In S. T. d. Zepetnek & T. Mukherjee (Eds.), *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies* (pp. 36-49). New Delhi, Foundation Books.
- Nikoliukin, A. N. (1997). Chekhov and America. In N. E. Saul & R. D. McKinzie (Eds.), *Russian-American dialogue on cultural relations 1776-1914*. (pp. 212-221) [Google Books version]. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=irnw4ksE-RQC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- Perrine, L. (1974). *Literature: Structure, sound and sense*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
- Prawer, S. S. (1973). *Comparative Literary Studies: An Introduction*. London: Duckworth.
- Remak, H. H. H. (1971). Comparative Literature; Its Definition and Function. In N. Stallknecht (Ed.), *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective* (pp. 1-57). Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Wolfe, T. (1962). The far and the near. In C. H. Holman (Ed.), *The Thomas Wolfe reader* (pp. 481-485). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Yacobi, B. G. (2013) The human dilemma: Life between illusion and reality. *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, 3, 202-211. Retrieved from <http://www.philosophyoflife.org/201312.html>
- Zepetnek, S. T. D. & Mukherjee, T. (n. d.). Introduction to the Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies, (pp. vi-vii). *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies* (pp. 36-49). New Delhi: Foundation Books.

## Note

Note 1. The term illusion here has not been considered in its pathological and/or psychological context; rather, it has been taken as interchangeable with unreality, fancy, imagination and dream. Consequently, disillusionment in this study refers to the characters return to reality from a fanciful or imaginative state by coming to awareness and recognizing the fact that what they have seen and imagined to be true is just the creation of a fanciful mind.



**Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author, with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).