



# Chasing Shadows: The Futility of Wealth in Chekhov's *The Bet* and Etgar Keret's *The Birthday of a Failed Revolutionary*

**M. Sweeti**

Research Scholar

**Prof Y. S. Sharada**

Research Supervisor

Dept. of English Language and Literature  
Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam

Tirupati-517502

Andhra Pradesh

## ABSTRACT

The present paper examines the theme of the futility of wealth in Anton Chekhov's *The Bet* and Etgar Keret's *The Birthday of a Failed Revolutionary*. Both stories offer a critique of materialism, though through different lenses. Chekhov's tale follows a young lawyer who, after fifteen years of voluntary imprisonment, rejects the wealth he was promised, discovering the hollowness of material gain. Keret's story features a wealthy man who buys birthdays in a desperate attempt to find happiness, only to meet a tragic end, highlighting the superficiality of his pursuits. By comparing these narratives, the article explores how both Chekhov and Keret depict wealth as inadequate for achieving true fulfillment, instead of leading to isolation and existential crisis. Through their respective approaches, these stories challenge the notion that material success equates to happiness, offering a powerful reflection on the deeper meanings of life and contentment.

**KEY WORDS:** Materialism, Isolation, Disillusionment, Existential-crisis, Intellectual Enlightenment, Philosophical-reflection, Human-Connections, Emotional Fulfillment, Absurdity.

## INTRODUCTION :

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) was a Russian playwright and short-story writer known for his deep psychological insight and subtle, realist portrayal of everyday life. Etgar Keret (born 1967) is an Israeli writer and filmmaker celebrated for his short, surreal stories that blend humor with poignant reflections on life.

In literature, the pursuit of wealth and its impact on human life has been a recurring theme, often serving as a mirror to society's values and aspirations. Two remarkable stories that delve into this theme are Anton Chekhov's *The Bet* and Etgar Keret's *The Birthday of a Failed Revolutionary*. Although written in different eras and contexts, both narratives offer a profound critique of the belief that material wealth can bring true happiness and fulfillment.

*The Bet*, written by Chekhov in 1889, explores the life-altering consequences of a wager between a young lawyer and a wealthy banker. This statement of a young lawyer marked the beginning of a profound experiment driven by the belief that "living in any way is better than not living at all." (*The Bet*, I) The lawyer accepted a staggering bet proposed by a wealthy banker: he would voluntarily endure 15 years of solitary confinement, and if he succeeded, he would receive 2 million rubles as his reward.

In a dramatic moment, the young lawyer boldly declared, “Agreed! You stake your millions, and I stake my freedom!”.(*The Bet*,I ) Motivated by the allure of wealth, he was willing to sacrifice his freedom, setting the stage for a compelling test of human endurance and the value of life itself.

In contrast, Etgar Keret's *The Birthday of a Failed Revolutionary*, a modern, surreal allegory, tells the story of a rich man who realizes that people around him, except one, value him only for his money, suffers deep emotional alienation.Despite his wealth, he found himself questioning the true source of happiness.

“There must be something in the world that I want, something that could make me happy,”he mused.(Fly Already,140) 'Something others might spend their entire lives striving to acquire, yet I could obtain with ease.' His riches, however, had not brought him the fulfillment he sought, leading him to explore every possible avenue in his search for genuine happiness.

He lying on a cold marble floor for days, struggles to find anything in the world that could bring him happiness, revealing the emptiness of his material success. His brief joy from a birthday call and flowers triggers an idea to buy more birthdays, reflecting his flawed belief that happiness can be commodified. The story critiques materialism, emphasizing the importance of genuine human connections and experiences that wealth cannot buy.

Together, these stories invite a comparative analysis of the futility of wealth, exploring how both authors depict the isolation, disillusionment, and existential crises that often accompany the relentless pursuit of material success. Through their unique narrative styles and settings, Chekhov and Keret offer timeless insights into the human condition, urging readers to question the true source of happiness in a world dominated by the allure of wealth.

Chekhov employs a realist approach to present the consequences of wealth through a straight forward narrative. The story is grounded in a plausible scenario—a bet between a banker and a lawyer—reflecting real-life ethical and philosophical dilemmas. The lawyer's gradual transformation from an ambitious young man to a disillusioned individual is depicted with psychological depth. His voluntary confinement, initially a means to achieve wealth, becomes a profound journey of introspection, revealing the inherent futility of materialism.

He illustrates how wealth, while initially appearing as a solution to life's problems, ultimately fails to provide true fulfillment. The story portrays how the pursuit of wealth can lead to isolation and self-discovery. The lawyer's confinement becomes a journey that exposes the superficiality of material success, suggesting that intellectual and spiritual enlightenment are more valuable than financial gain.The lawyer's journey through solitude ultimately leads him to seek meaning beyond the material world. He immerses himself in literature, philosophy, and religion, which transforms his understanding of life and drives him to renounce the money he once desired.

The lawyer's realization of the emptiness of material wealth after years of isolation reflects a deep philosophical commentary on the nature of happiness.

For fifteen years I have been intently studying earthly life. It is true I have not seen the earth nor men, but in your books I have drunk fragrant wine, I have sung songs, I have hunted stags and wild boars in the forests, have loved women.... Beauties as ethereal as clouds, created by the magic of your poets and geniuses, have visited me at night, and have whispered in my ears wonderful tales that have set my brain in a whirl. In your books I have climbed to the peaks of Elburz and Mont Blanc, and from there I have seen the sun rise and have watched it at evening flood the sky, the ocean, and the mountain-tops with gold and crimson. I have watched from there the lightning flashing over my head and cleaving the storm-clouds. I have seen green forests, fields, rivers, lakes, towns. I have heard the singing of the sirens, and the strains of the shepherds' pipes; I have touched the wings of comely devils who flew down to converse with me of God.... In your books I have flung myself into the bottomless pit, performed miracles, slain, burned towns, preached new religions, conquered whole kingdoms.... (*The Bet*,II)

The young lawyer starts the bet with a strong belief in the value of life over money. However, after fifteen years of isolation, he becomes disillusioned with material wealth and the superficial pursuits of society. He ultimately renounces the two million rubles, realizing that true happiness and fulfillment cannot be found in money but in intellectual and spiritual growth.

And I despise your books, I despise wisdom and the blessings of this world. It is all worthless, fleeting, illusory, and deceptive, like a mirage. You may be proud, wise, and fine, but death will wipe you off the face of the earth as though you were no more than mice burrowing under the floor, and your posterity, your history, your immortal geniuses will burn or freeze together with the earthly globe. (*The Bet*,II)

All human endeavors—wisdom, pride, and even legacy—are ultimately meaningless because death renders everything transient and insignificant. The comparison to mice and the inevitable destruction of the world highlights the futility of seeking lasting significance in a mortal existence.

By the end appears the contrast between material wealth and personal transformation. The banker, driven by greed and fear of financial ruin, plans to commit murder to avoid losing his fortune. However, the lawyer's decision to renounce the money after enduring 15 years of imprisonment reveals his profound realization that material wealth is ultimately meaningless. His rejection of the money symbolizes a rejection of the corrupting power of greed, emphasizing the value of spiritual and intellectual freedom over material gain.

The story delves into existential questions about the nature of human existence and the true value of wealth. The lawyer's renunciation of the promised money reflects a profound realization about the futility of material success in achieving a meaningful life. Chekhov's narrative prompts reflection on the moral implications of valuing wealth over human connections and intellectual growth. The lawyer's ultimate rejection of wealth serves as a moral lesson on the limitations of materialism.

Keret's story illustrates how the rich man's immense fortune, derived from an invention whose origins he has long forgotten, leads him to engage in activities that are superficially productive but lack deeper significance. By investing in and profiting from basic necessities—land, housing, and water—he accumulates wealth but remains disconnected from more profound existential questions. His preoccupation with wealth and business highlights a common tendency among the extremely wealthy to focus on material gains while neglecting introspection and personal meaning.

When he finished selling everything at exorbitant prices, he went back to his enormous, beautiful home and thought about what to do with all the money he'd made. (*Fly Already*,139)

Having immense wealth from selling land and water, the rich man becomes lonely and dissatisfied with life. Despite being well-liked, he isolates himself, believing that people are only interested in his money. In an attempt to find happiness, he begins buying people's birthdays, enjoying the joy and affection that comes with the greetings, gifts, and celebrations.

Keret uses surreal and allegorical elements to critique materialism, creating an exaggerated and almost fantastical scenario in which the rich man attempts to purchase happiness by buying other people's birthdays. This pursuit highlights the absurdity and superficiality of his efforts, as he initially believes that wealth can bring him joy. However, he eventually realizes that these purchased experiences are empty and do not fulfill his deeper emotional needs, leading to his disillusionment with the power of money.

The rich man's thought reflects a deep sense of emptiness and desperation for validation. He realizes that material wealth and purchased experiences have failed to bring him true happiness, leading him to seek even more extreme and morbid ways to feel loved and appreciated.

The rich man thought, "Maybe there's something here. Dead people can't enjoy all the love showered on them, but I can. Maybe I can buy the anniversary of people's death, too?." (*Fly Already*,143)



By imagining buying the anniversaries of people's deaths and hearing mourners express their grief, he reveals a profound longing for emotional connection and affirmation, even if it means manipulating death to satisfy his need for attention. This thought underscores the tragic absurdity of his quest for meaning in superficial and artificial ways, highlighting the futility of seeking fulfillment through materialistic means.

However, his attempts are misguided, as he seeks fulfillment in material possessions rather than in authentic human experiences or self-understanding. His tragic end underscores the futility of his pursuit and highlights the need for genuine meaning in life.

“His body was found among the torn wrappings of presents he'd received for a birthday he'd purchased from a failed revolutionary. Later, it was discovered that one of the presents had been booby-trapped and sent by a ruthless, tyrannical regime”.(Fly Already,143)

Keret's narrative presents wealth as woefully inadequate for achieving genuine happiness. The rich man's attempts to buy celebrations underscore the superficial nature of his pursuits, and his tragic end serves as a critique of the materialistic mindset, emphasizing the emptiness that wealth cannot fill. By using surrealism, Keret amplifies the absurdity of the rich man's actions, offering a sharp critique of contemporary materialism. The story contrasts the rich man's superficial efforts to buy happiness with the deeper, more meaningful experiences that money cannot purchase, ultimately highlighting the futility of wealth in attaining true personal fulfillment.

By connecting these stories, it becomes evident that both narratives serve as powerful critiques of materialism and the flawed belief that wealth can equate to happiness. The lawyer's fifteen years of isolation lead him to profound introspection and self-discovery. While his isolation results in a deepened understanding of life and a rejection of materialism, it also alienates him from society and human connection, leaving him with a sense of detachment from the world. The rich man isolates himself from others due to his suspicion that people only value him for his wealth. His self-imposed isolation exacerbates his loneliness and disconnects him from meaningful relationships.

Anton Chekhov's *The Bet* and Etgar Keret's *The Birthday of a Failed Revolutionary* explore the deep psychological and existential consequences of pursuing material wealth at the expense of more meaningful aspects of life. In *The Bet*, the lawyer's journey is one of profound transformation. Initially driven by the promise of immense wealth, he voluntarily subjects himself to fifteen years of isolation, only to emerge with a deep disdain for the money he once coveted. His time in confinement allows him to explore the depths of human knowledge and spirituality, ultimately leading him to the realization that material wealth is hollow and insignificant compared to the richness of intellectual and spiritual fulfillment. The lawyer's rejection of the money at the story's end symbolizes a complete disavowal of the materialistic values that initially motivated him, serving as a powerful statement on the futility of wealth as a source of true happiness.

Similarly, in Keret's *The Birthday of a Failed Revolutionary*, the rich man's pursuit of happiness through the acquisition of others' birthdays underscores the absurdity of equating material possessions with emotional fulfillment. Despite his vast wealth, the rich man's life is marked by loneliness and despair, as he attempts to fill the emotional void with superficial celebrations. His tragic end, triggered by the misguided belief that he can purchase happiness, serves as a stark reminder of the emptiness that often accompanies material success. Unlike the lawyer in *The Bet*, the rich man in Keret's story never reaches a moment of enlightenment; instead, his life spirals into tragedy, highlighting the dangers of a life devoted solely to the pursuit of wealth.

Through their respective narratives, both Chekhov and Keret challenge the reader to reconsider the true value of wealth and the human cost of materialism. These stories illustrate how the relentless pursuit of money can lead to isolation, disillusionment, and existential crises, ultimately proving that wealth is inadequate for achieving genuine fulfillment. By drawing attention to the limitations of material success, *The Bet* and *The Birthday of a Failed Revolutionary* offer a powerful reflection on the deeper meanings of life, urging readers to seek happiness in more enduring and meaningful pursuits, such as intellectual growth, spiritual enlightenment, and authentic human connections.

## References:

Keret, Etgar. "The Birthday of a Failed Revolutionary." *Fly Already*, Granta Publications, 2020, pp. 139-143.

Chekhov, Anton. *The Bet and Other Stories*. Serapis Classics, 2017 (Online). *Google Books*, [https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/The\_Bet\_and\_Other\_Stories\_Serapis\_Classi/E9d4DwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0].

\*\*\*

