

Does the symbol of the bear apply only to Smirnov, or does Popova's anger qualify her to be seen as a bear too? Support your answer with examples from the text.

In Anton Chekhov's one-act farce *The Bear* (also known as *The Boor*), the titular animal symbol traditionally attaches itself to Grigory Smirnov—the crude, unrefined, and blustering debt collector who barges into Elena Popova's home demanding immediate payment. However, restricting the moniker of the bear strictly to Smirnov overlooks the theatrical and thematic dynamics of the play. Popova's unyielding anger, fierce stubbornness, and aggressive rejection of social norms qualify her to be seen as a bear as well. Through their shared combativeness and mutual disregard for conventional decorum, Chekhov reveals that the term "bear" describes not merely a single character, but a shared temperament that ultimately drives their unexpected romance.

Smirnov's physical presence and boorish conduct naturally establish him as the primary candidate for the symbol. He stomps into Popova's country estate, refuses to leave despite being politely asked, and openly scoffs at her grief as mere dramatic posturing. Smirnov himself acknowledges the label when he bitterly exclaims that polite society views him as a "monster" or a "bear" simply because he speaks bluntly and demands what he is owed. Popova explicitly hurls the insult at him during their escalating quarrel, branding him a "coarse bear," a "bourgeois," and an "ill-bred creature." Smirnov fits the archetype through his physical intimidation, loud volume, and complete disregard for aristocratic hospitality.

Despite this explicit labeling, Popova displays an internal strength and explosive temper that match Smirnov's ursine nature step for step. Rather than retreating into traditional female submissiveness or weeping before an unwanted guest, Popova responds to Smirnov's aggression with equal savagery. Her fury manifests in an emotional stubbornness that mirrors his own: just as Smirnov refuses to leave her drawing room, Popova rigidly refuses to pay the debt until her steward returns from town. When Smirnov refuses to maintain a civil tone, Popova completely abandons her delicate mourning demeanor. The true peak of her bear-like nature emerges when Smirnov demands a duel; instead of cowering, Popova readily accepts the challenge, fetches her late husband's dueling pistols, and insists that Smirnov teach her how to shoot so she can put a bullet through his head. Her willingness to take up arms transforms her from a grieving widow into a formidable predator defending her territory.

The symbolic alignment of both characters as bears is essential to the play's comedic climax. Smirnov is not attracted to Popova despite her rage, but precisely because of it. Accustomed to women who faint or act coy, he is stunned by her ferocious, unyielding resistance. When Popova stands before him with a loaded pistol, radiating fury, Smirnov realizes he has met his equal, declaring his admiration for her fierce spirit. Chekhov uses the bear symbol to critique the artificiality of social decorum. Popova's initial exaggerated mourning is an unnatural act of self-suppression; her transformation into a bear allows her to shed that performance and embrace her true vitality.

Ultimately, the symbol of the bear applies equally to both protagonists. While Smirnov wears the label externally through his rough demeanor, Popova embodies the spirit of the bear through her

fiery anger and refusal to back down. Chekhov's farce succeeds because two bears occupy the same room, clashing until their fierce, untamed natures collide into genuine mutual admiration.