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Modernist and Poetic Expression in Chekhov's Dramaturgy

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Abstract

A luminary of Russian literature and a pioneer of critical realism, Anton Chekhov has always been celebrated as great master of drama. Throughout his life, Chekhov produced a limited yet profoundly influential corpus of drama. His major plays include Ivanov (1887), The Seagull (1896), Uncle Vanya (1897), Three Sisters (1901), The Cherry Orchard (1904), and Platonov (1907). His theatre broke from conventional dramatic aesthetics and experimented a form of modern drama. His unique life experiences provided a foundation for acute criticism embedded in his art works. Through unique and incisive language, Chekhov depicted the quotidian life of ordinary Russians, crafting characters with nuanced and typical personalities. Their mundane routines reveal an unwitting helplessness, vanity, and mediocrity, and speak about the conditions of Russian society in his times, though some traits of Chekhov's dramatic personae can be traced back to the playwright himself. While rooted in the specific national and social context, the philosophical depth and universal spirit of Chekhov's drama have secured their enduring impact worldwide.

Keywords: *Chekhov; Drama; Tradition; Modernism; Poetic.*

UNUSUAL EARLY EXPERIENCE

Anton Chekhov was born in 1860 in Taganrog, a port city on the Sea of Azov in southern Russia. His family had been serfs for generations until his grandfather purchased their freedom in 1841 for 3,500 rubles. In 1879, Chekhov enrolled at Moscow University to study medicine. Following his graduation, he worked as a physician in the Moscow district. An avid reader, he began writing short and humorous sketches while still a medical student and eventually produced over numerous literary works throughout his years of youth. Chekhov's literary career began in 1880 with the publication of these comic pieces. He soon distinguished himself with masterful short stories such as *Oysters, Misery, The Singer,* and *"Vanka,"* rapidly emerging as a prominent new star in Russian literary circle. In 1888, he was awarded the Pushkin Prize for his short story collection *In the Twilight*, which cemented his reputation. In 1890, setting aside urban comforts and his established literary fame, and despite his own frail health, Chekhov undertook a solitary and arduous journey of over a thousand miles to the penal colony on Sakhalin Island. There, he immersed himself in the lives of its inhabitants. Three years later, he published *The Island of Sakhalin*, a non-fiction work based on meticulous firsthand observation. In the book's preface, he reflected: "I am sitting all day long, reading and excerpting. In my head and on paper, nothing else than Sakhalin. Madness."[1]

Chekhov was one of six children, and his family endured considerable financial hardship, which necessitated frequent moves. The city of Taganrog, his birthplace and childhood home, bears a profound and lasting imprint of his life.[2] One can hardly imagine that today Taganrog has become a veritable "Chekhov City," where the author's legacy is ubiquitous. The cottage of his birth now serves as the Chekhov Birthplace Museum, situated on the renamed Chekhov Street. His family's former grocery shop now operates as the Chekhov Family Shop Museum at 100 Alexander Street, and his former school has been repurposed as the Chekhov Literary Museum. The theatre he frequently attended is now known as the Chekhov Theatre, while the library established posthumously through his donations and initiatives bears the name Chekhov Library. Additionally, the city's main museum, founded on Chekhov's proposal and funded via his campaigns, is designated the Chekhov Museum. Further commemorative acts include the 1934 renaming of a central square as Chekhov Garden and the erection of a monument in the city centre to mark the centenary of his birth in 1960. [3]

Taganrog, Chekhov's birthplace and childhood home, provided considerable freedom that nurtured his early intellectual and creative talent. His frequent attendance at the local theater and sustained exposure to dramatic performances inspired his initial forays into playwriting.

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Although Chekhov's dramatic output was relatively modest, his major works—including *Ivanov* (1887*)*, *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1897), *Three Sisters* (1901), *The Cherry Orchard*(1904), and *Platonov* (1907)—have secured his legacy.[4] Chekhov is renowned not only for his mastery of prose fiction but also for his revolutionary contributions to drama, and no doubt he stood as a preeminent figure of late 19th-century Russian realism. His plays have profoundly influenced the evolution of modern theatre. The experiences and literary practices of his formative years in Taganrog laid the solid groundwork for the social and critical dimensions of his dramatic works.

SOCIAL CRITICISM IN POETIC EXPRESSION

Through his humorous and incisive language of drama, Chekhov depicted the everyday lives of ordinary Russians, crafting characters with nuanced and typical personalities. Their mundane routines reveal an unwitting helplessness, vanity, and mediocrity, thereby capturing the conditions of Russian society at the time. In linguistic terms, Chekhov's drama is distinguished by a lyrical, poetic quality, as Peter Szondi observes, "the formal rejection of inevitable dialogue leads inevitably toward narrative art"[5]. Instead of the themes, the passage of time emerges as a paramount motif. In terms of structure, Chekhov excelled at situating intense conflicts offstage, employing a dual-layered technique of concealment: neither explicit interpersonal confrontations nor focused internal psychological struggles are directly displayed. Instead of representing such tensions through overt symbolism, he allows them to permeate the subtext, remaining unspoken yet profoundly felt.

In its broadest sense, drama is a mode of poetry, and encompasses the lyrical, the dramatic, and the epic. Chekhov's plays synthesize lyrical and dramatic poetic modes, a quality derived from the inherent poetic language. Readers and audiences invariably perceive his works as profoundly poetic. [6] This dramatic effect is achieved through the strategic use of pauses, ambient sound, and dialogue, all of which maintain an equitable and resonant relationship within the dramatic structure. Verbal and non-verbal elements combine to generate a pervasive lyrical quality, evident in moments where characters diverge into lyrical reveries and where their speech is imbued with poetic elegance. As Szondi notes, "The constant transition from social conversation to solitary poetry is precisely the charm of Chekhov's language. This is made possible by the highly talkative nature of Russians and the inherent poetry of Chekhov's linguistic style"[7]. Hence, to describe Chekhov's drama works as poetic is to recognize not only their qualities as poetic but, more specifically, the manner in which the verbal discourse of his characters, together with the rhythmic sounds cape of the plays, constitutes a distinctly lyrical realm.

Chekhov's plays generally avoid the centralized or explicit depiction of major events. On stage, incidents are often introduced abruptly and just as abruptly interrupted; even the most dramatic moments are merely retold by characters, without presenting the listeners' responses. For instance, *The Seagull* omits the scene in which the mother learns of her son's death, while in *Three Sisters* the duel is never presented by the duelists themselves but conveyed through an ensemble staging. This approach serves a dual purpose: it conceals the most crucial events and relegates intense conflict to the background. Moreover, Chekhov refrains from portraying the inner psychology of his characters. He thus employs a twofold concealment: not only are interpersonal conflicts left unstated, but internal emotional changes are also rarely articulated directly. Yet the characters' actions never appear abrupt or incongruous. Through a sequence of seemingly isolated gestures, Chekhov constructs an ominous atmosphere that hints at the protagonists' destinies, achieving the intended dramatic effect. Further illustrations can be found in *Three Sisters,* in whichthe audience readily accepts Tuzenbakh's death. Chekhov's plays also incorporate symbols, such as *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Seagull*. Yet these symbols are firmly grounded in concrete realities and take the form of explicit metaphors, where both tenor and vehicle are clearly supplied within the play: the cherry orchard evokes a glorious but bygone past, while the seagull represents Nina and other artists in their ceaseless pursuit of art.

In Chekhov's drama works, characters are seldom portrayed as resolute or uncompromising, and they are rarely placed amid violent or momentous events. Even when significant incidents do occur, the characters' reactions are often not given.[8] In *The Seagull*, the scene in which Arkadina learns of her son's death is left offstage. In *Three Sisters*, a duel, a death, and even a fire take place without showing how these events affect the three sisters. Moreover, the main characters in Chekhov's plays are deliberately kept in partial obscurity. Though they often speak at length, they seldom render words into decisive action. Rather than foregrounding individual heroes, Chekhov employs an ensemble dramaturgy that directs attention to the shared fate of the collective. This technique underscores the social dimension of his works, emphasizes collective human experience over private psychological drama.

Alternatively, Chekhov treats his characters with empathy, and looks at them on a level plane rather than from above. His plays depict a wide range of figures, each facing his or her own difficulties and dilemmas. As he famously remarked, "on stage, everything should be as complex and as simple as in life,"[9] a principle that renders his drama works more lifelike and realistic. At the same time, the destinies of Chekhov's characters carry a social component, embedding society into their fate and revealing a deeper sense of helplessness in the society. They can neither change society nor alter themselves, with *Three Sisters* particularly offering a profound exposition of this dilemma.

REPRESENTING THE EVERYDAY

More elaboration on *Three Sisters* will prove to be significant in this regard. Written in 1900 and widely regarded as one of Chekhov's masterpieces, this play is structured in four acts.[10] This formal framework is essential for its depiction of the mundane rhythm of daily life. Chekhov stated that in this play, he sought to portray the genuine tedium and bleakness of ordinary existence. Crucially, he aimed to compel audiences to recognize this reality. He believed that by becoming conscious of the monotony and emptiness of their lives, people would be inspired to strive for a new, albeit still unimaginable, form of existence—one fundamentally distinct from the their present. The play shifts focus away from individual protagonists toward a social group or type. In the play, the audience gains nearly equal insight into each character, which may reflect Chekhov's commitment to an ensemble-based naturalism.[11] Each act is confined to a single, static setting, produces an effect analogous to a static wide shot in film-making, where entrances and exits structure the action in line of life's own rhythm. The characters seldom disclose their inner selves fully, thereby preventing full emotional identification and shaping a more objective, critical perspective on the part of the audience.

The protagonists in the play are the three sisters themselves, whose drama lies in their quiet endurance of fate. At the beginning, each delivers a monologue that reveals her living conditions and inner state. By the final act, however, their destinies stand in stark contrast to their original hopes. Chekhov uses this contrast to suggest the changes within them. He employs narrative ellipsis and omits direct psychological explanation. In this way, the audience is invited to reflect more deeply and to search for the play's implications.

Three Sisters tells the story of three sisters and their brother in a Russian gentry family during the imperial era. The sisters long to return to Moscow, which they regard as their spiritual home and the place of their dreams. Yet reality turns out quite differently. As life changes around them, they endure many trials while holding on to a hope that grows ever more vague. At the start, each sister speaks in a monologue about her situation: on her birthday, Irina sets out a new outlook on life; Masha rejects the advances of her future husband and confesses her frustration; Olga complains that her work has consumed her youth. By the end, their lives have indeed changed, but in ways far behind what they once desired. Their common dream of returning to Moscow remains unfulfilled, actually destroyed by a fire that carries symbolic weight. The duel and the fire are important events, yet they are not caused by the sisters, and they affect them only indirectly. The Baron's death in the duel is not the real reason for Irina's change, since she does not love him and agrees to marry only as an escape from her work. The fire, though seemingly accidental, symbolizes Andrey's sale of the family estate: it robs the sisters of their home and takes away their last hope.

Chekhov's characters are often unaware of their true condition. Although the protagonists do not readily accept fate, their actions are shaped by their own reasoning. Their words, which seem like self-examination, often conceal their inner selves; what appears as dialogue is in fact closer to inner monologue, a sign that they are deceiving themselves. For this reason, when fate arrives, they accept it calmly, for they never truly believed in the future they once spoke of. In brief exchanges they sometimes reveal genuine feelings, showing the uncertainty and inconsistency of human nature. Chekhov does not state their self-deception directly, instead, he sets their words against their actions, letting the gap reveal itself. In *Three Sisters*, Masha dismisses her suitor in Act One, but by Act Two they are married—the missing process left to the audience's imagination. Likewise, Olga complains about her job, yet performs it with increasing competence at the post. This is not only a sign of limited self-awareness but also of fate—or, more precisely, of time. In Chekhov's plays, fate takes the form of time itself: inevitable, relentless, and beyond human control. His drama thus highlights forces external to the individual: subjectively called "fate," and objectively, "society."

MODERNIST SUBJECT MATTERS

Chekhov's dramatic themes possess a striking marking of modernity. He sought to represent both the authentic social conditions of individuals and their psychological realities. Yet his dramaturgy retained some elements of naturalism and vestiges of the nineteenth-century theatrical convention. His innovation did not amount to a full transformation of dramatic form; instead, his themes often relied on direct exposition in dialogue, exposing a tension between content and form and suggesting that his structures were not yet fully adequate for autonomous representation. He portrayed the human condition within its social context through a distinctive blend of lyrical beauty and stark, unromantic subject matters. His plays offered no clear analysis or resolution of the social and existential dilemmas they raised, instead they tend to attribute them to a pervasive force of fate. Thus, the early version of *Uncle Vanya* was entitled *The Wood Demon*, a work that fore grounded reflections on humanity's exploitation of nature and implicitly invoked the motif of the tragic hero. Although the revised version incorporated interpersonal conflicts—such as the clash between Vanya and the Professor—it ultimately did not articulate a coherent thematic focus on the struggle between intellectuals and peasants.[12]

Chekhov's plays often follow the cyclical rhythm of the seasons and a recurring dramatic pattern: a group of people arrives at or returns to a provincial setting, only to leave again in the final act. Though their presence may bring temporary change, life there does not fundamentally improve and may even deteriorate further. In *Uncle Vanya*, the Professor and his wife come from the city and eventually return back, leaving behind only a deeper sense of futility. In *Three Sisters*, the arrival of the military brigade brings a promise of renewal—

or, more precisely, a nostalgic yearning for better days. When the officers depart, they take with them the last remnants of hope. The bleakness of Chekhov's theater lies in this paradox: life continues even when hope has already vanished, a quiet form of torment that gives his drama its distinctive poignancy. He conveys these harsh truths with lyrical beauty, while also pursuing a rational inquiry into social problems. In *Three Sisters*, the presence of the brigade frames the entire story; their departure marks the collapse of dreams and possibilities alike. Similarly, in *The Cherry Orchard*, [13] Ranevskaya returns from Paris, loses her estate, and departs once more. These arrivals and departures underscore both the characters' constrained circumstances and their lack of self-understanding. Their blind yearning reveals an irony: at the very moment they invoke hope, but it has already disappeared. For Chekhov, the irony of existence is not that "at least life goes on," but that life persists precisely after its illusions have been stripped away.

In his personal perspective, Chekhov's own hardships deeply shaped the pessimism that permeates his drama works. He regarded the absence of hope as the normal state of life and responded with a kind of bitter smile toward those who weep over it. His characters often speak words of hope even while crying in despair, a contrast that makes their plight all the more tragic. Yet Chekhov's point is not simply to dwell on hopelessness; he insists that hope is so vital that, when none exists, it must be imagined. He writes both the fantasies and the realities of his characters, and underscores their contrast as a form of social critique, while at the same time they express a deeper sense of resignation. In his view, the fault lay not in human beings themselves but in society, though he remained uncertain whether even social change could truly transform human destiny. Chekhov's characters typically enter the stage already in despair, or on the verge of it. They accept their fates, yet remain lost and unable to see any real light. This produces in his plays a dreamlike sense of repetition, with no resolution in sight. His dramaturgy conveys conflicts of values through finely drawn characterization and rich dialogue, while also satirizing the social conditions in his and his characters' era. In other words, Chekhov speaks about the human condition without romantic coloring, yet offers no clear analysis or solution to the crises he presents, reducing them instead to the force of fate.

DISSECTING THE CHEKHOVIAN STYLE

Chekhov remarked, "People don't go to the North Pole and monologue about their feelings."[14] In his plays, the true meaning and emotional turmoil lie beneath the surface of the dialogue. Characters speak about trivialities—the weather, food, a lost snuffbox—while their hearts are breaking. What is left unsaid is often more powerful than what is said. This requires characters to portray an internal, complex life rather than just delivering lines. Traditional plays are driven by clear goals and decisive actions, such as Hamlet's revenge. Chekhov's plays are built on inaction. Such events as the sale of *The Cherry Orchar*d, the duel in *The Seagull*, the professor's arrival and departure in *Uncle Vanya* often happen offstage. The real drama is the characters' psychological and emotional response to these events.[15] The focus is on the consequence of action, or the failure to act. Chekhov insisted his plays were comedies. Stanislavski, his famous director, initially staged them as heavy tragedies.[16] The truth lies in the blend. Life is not purely tragic or comic; it is both, often simultaneously. A deeply sad moment might be undercut by a character's absurdity or a mundane interruption. This delicate balance creates a profoundly human tone that is bittersweet, ironic, and deeply resonant.

Instead of single protagonist, Chekhov creates a group of characters, each with their own fully realized desires, disappointments, and philosophies. They are woven together like instruments in an orchestra, with their voices creating a symphonic effect about a central theme such as regret, hope, change, rather than a single melody about one hero. The mood and atmosphere is created in the environment. The sound of a distant string breaking, the chill of an approaching winter, the sight of a beautiful orchard doomed to the axe—these are not mere background; they are essential to creating the pervasive, often melancholic, mood that defines the themes of his works. Chekhov refused to judge his characters. He presents them with all their flaws self-deceptions, and weaknesses, but also with profound sympathy.[17] There are no true villains; only people trapped by their circumstances, their own psychology, and the passage of time. People are made to understand and empathize with even the most frustrating characters.

RELATED REFLECTIONS ON THEORIES OF DRAMA

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy and epic are of distinct genres: tragedy conveys its imitation of life through characters in action, rather than through narrative. The epic alone employs narration, and in ancient Greece it was composed in verse. Serving as the precursor to the modern novel, the epic imitates life through everyday language and narrative form—a mode of expression proper to literature itself. Both ancient Greek and Renaissance tragedy emphasize humanity's struggle against fate, which was itself a construct of human imagination. In Greek tragedy, the gods were projections of human subjectivity—embodiment of the unknowable realm. The conflict between mortals and gods was thus a spiritual construct, designed to strike directly at the audience's spirit, dramatizing both the effort to master nature and the assertion of human dignity. In Renaissance tragedy, epitomized by Shakespeare, fate was redefined as inseparable from personal character: tragedy arises from an individual's own flaws, which leads to unforeseen and irreversible consequences.[18] This shift did not mean that humans had attained a more objective understanding of themselves, rather, it expressed the belief that people were largely capable of shaping their own destiny, with tragedy emerging from the inescapable flaws of human nature. The hero's downfall shows that humanity can indeed create its world, but it must also endure the unbearable consequences of that creation.

To make it clear, the drama theorist Szondi examined the evolution of drama from a historical perspective. He defined the fundamental changes in modern theatre from an aesthetic standpoint and explained their causes. In his *Theory of the Modern Drama*, [19] Szondi outlines several defining features of traditional drama. First, characters create their world entirely through interpersonal relations, and they possess both the freedom and the power to transform it. This world is closed in upon itself: anything outside this relational sphere is excluded from representation. Second, dialogue serves as the primary medium of expression within this interpersonal world. Third, drama presents itself as an autonomous whole, with the audience remaining mere spectators of this self-sufficient world, and they are separated from the stage by the conventional "fourth wall." Fourth, the relation between actor and character is never revealed; the two must merge into a seamless unity. Fifth, drama is defined by its immediacy: its temporal existence is the absolute present, and unfolds as "an absolute series of present moments." These characteristics collectively establish that the foundation of traditional drama lies in "interpersonal dialectics." Szondi posits that modern drama has departed from the imitation of action through character, replacing dynamic interaction with narrative onstage exposition. As interpersonal relations cease to serve as the central content, a "crisis of drama" emerges. He contends that "for a new style to become possible, it is necessary to resolve not only the crisis of dramatic form, but also the crisis of tradition." He then proposes "epicness" or "narrativity" as defining features of modern drama. While contemporary theatre, particularly after Brecht's deliberate subversion of the fourth wall, widely embraces narrative techniques, Szondi traces the origins of modern drama to the moment of profound formal crisis. Narrative art, originally proper to literary forms such as the novel, implies the presence of a narrating subject, whereas drama is inherently immediate. The incorporation of narrative elements thus fundamentally transforms theatrical form, displacing it from its traditional foundations.

According to Szondi, the modern concept of "drama" applies only to post-Renaissance theatre, excluding medieval religious plays and Shakespeare's history plays. He argues that the interpersonal relations which once sustained traditional drama as its very substance had disintegrated in the modern era.[20] With this, the essential foundation of traditional drama collapsed. As narrativity entered the theatre, new dramatic forms such as Expressionism and Realism emerged, broadening the stylistic and thematic scope of dramatic creation.

The most representative form of modern drama is Expressionist theatre, which arose during the age of industrial culture as a response to human alienation in an industrialized society. At first glance, it seems the most subjective of theatrical forms, presents the perspective of a single individual while renders other characters as one-dimensional figures. Expressionism strips away the outer shell of traditional drama in order to portray the protagonist's entire inner world. At the same time, it shows how social reality shapes that inner life and produces an imagined world through which the play indirectly reflects and critiques society. Modern drama thus shifts its focus to society—that is, the objective world—whereas traditional drama showed little interest in social conditions, and concentrated instead on individual characters. Modern civilization gave humanity the power to create new worlds through individualism, strong will, and ambition, but it also brought a host of destructive consequences. This led to the recognition that humanity is not only imperfect but may also harbor ugliness within—an idea foreshadowed in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, a precursor of modernism.

Playwrights like Chekhove came to realize that the dramatic representation of human action had considerably lost the aura in industrial society, where human beings experienced acute alienation, Once separated from society, individuals lost their very sense of agency. As a result, playwrights redirected their creative focus toward an inquiry into the determinants of behavior, i.e. the structural pressures of society and the individual's perception of those conditions. Since the two world wars, this skepticism has deepened, and is towards almost complete loss of faith in humanity. They tend to believe that meaningful, deliberate action was no longer possible in modern society. Instead, they began to detect the unconscious and irrational dimensions of experience, which gave rise to the Theatre of the Absurd and other schools of drama. [21] And the Absurdists faced a central paradox: if existence itself is meaningless, what justifies the creation and performance of absurdist drama? The very act of artistic creation presupposes intention and reason—a contradiction to the movement's insistence on human irrationality.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental distinction between traditional and modern drama lies in the change from writing about individuals to representing on the objective world in crisis. Alternatively, modern drama views the human condition through a penetrating lens. In traditional theatre, human action produced meaning that is both certain and signified; in modern drama, it gives rise to doubt about every thing. In this paradigm, only "repetition" seems to remain as the sole form of serious belief.[22] It is evident that Chekhov shares many common features of modern drama. His plays broke decisively with the aesthetic of traditional drama. Through employed normal life facts of ordinary people in his drama and explored their psychological worlds, he has thereby contributed immensely in transforming dramatic development. Chekhov's work remains vitally contemporary because he diagnosed a permanent human condition--the tension between our dreams and realities. In an age of anxiety, distraction, and often-paralyzing choice, his characters feel more relatable than ever. The playwright gave us a language for our quiet despairs and our small, resilient

hopes. According to him, drama isn't just in the gunshot, but in the long, aching silence that follows it. His turning the spotlight on the ordinary revealed the extraordinary drama of simply being human, and this method of dramaturgy has been enlightening playwrights of his times and practitioners of drama in the contemporary era.

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