

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ANTON CHEKHOV

(1860-1904)

Works. (Major plays and short story collections)

Plays

Ivanoff. 1889
The Sea-Gull. 1896
The Three Sisters. 1901
Uncle Vanya. 1902
The Cherry Orchard. 1904

Stories

Twilight and other stories. 1887
Variiegated Tales. 1894
Old Wives of Russia. 1894
The Duel. 1895
The Chestnut Tree. 1895
Word Number Six. 1897

Biography

Chekhov was born in Taganrog, near Rostov on Don, on January 17, 1860. His grandfather had been a serf, but his father married a merchant's daughter, and was able to go into business as a small tradesperson. Chekhov was pressed into the family business, where he began his extraordinary adventure in observing human behavior and making stories out of it. Far into his teens, his greatest pleasure was hanging out with his grandfather—who had by now become an estate manager, and would sit out in the evenings with his talkative work crew.

At his age of fourteen, Chekhov was left in Taganrog, in high school—for the rest of the family moved to Moscow. Young Anton was a brilliant student, took all the prizes, and wrote a long verse tragedy when he was only seventeen.

Chekhov matriculated at the University of Moscow, where he studied medicine, and continued his furious pace of creative writing. He formed the conviction, which he maintained throughout his life, that country doctors are the backbone of a society, and that nothing prepares you better than medicine, for the insights that go into imaginative writing.

In 1887, while deeply involved in his medical practice, Chekhov successfully published two volumes of short stories. By 1888, however, Chekhov was beginning to lose energy; in part from discouragement with the state of his homeland; in part due to the nagging poor health which was going to follow him through life. He took considerable time off, at this point, to settle into a small rustic cottage, where he could indulge his easy love of nature.

By 1889, however, Chekhov's physical condition had worsened, and his gloominess took him over. As he darkened in mood his thoughts turned increasingly toward the theater, a genre in which he felt new possibilities for the expression of mournfulness. In his play *Ivanoff*, 1889, Chekhov wrote a downbeat paean to the little man, the 'useless' people for whom he felt infinite pity. The play was at first

misunderstood, and Jeered, but Chekhov rewrote it accordingly, with great success, and thereby launched a career in drama, which would rival the greatness of his career as a short story writer.

In his last years, Chekhov spent most of his time in a self-imposed Crimean exile, making frequent trips back and forth to Moscow, to supervise the performances of his four last, and greatest, works: *The Seagull*; *The Three Sisters*; *Uncle Vanya*; and *The Cherry Orchard*.

Chekhov died in 1904.

Achievements

Mood. Chekhov was a master of silence, in theater, and of ironic fate in the short story. In *The Cherry Orchard*, one of Chekhov's greatest plays, we are forever moving around inside the minds of the main characters, trying to sort out their responses. In short stories like *The Wedding* or *The Bet* we discover that fate has unexpectedly come up through the inside of the story, and tripped up the main characters, just when they are most confident.

Directness. Unlike Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, who were prone to giving sermons and lectures in their novels, Chekhov managed to make his points directly, by the presentation of character or the rhetoric of conversation. The theater was his true love, in part because he knew how to let conversation echo in the psyches of all the fellow actors on stage—and thus in the inner ear of the theater audience. The skill in question was what joins him to Strindberg and Ibsen, fellow northerner creators of modernist drama.

Medical. Chekhov was equally drawn both to medicine and to writing, and he achieved a remarkable ability to join the two talents. He summed up this fusion of skills with the observation that 'it seems to me that as a doctor I have described the sicknesses of the soul correctly.' One has only to review his plays and stories to see how faultlessly he interprets motive and weakness in human interactions.

Historical. As in his play, *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov managed to give adroit pictures of the pathos and power of change in history. In his story *The Darling*, he illustrates how little an individual's personal nature changes, through the course of a life. In *The Cherry Orchard*, he induces us to see the inevitability of historical change, in a society passing from serf-and-aristocrat culture into new forms of competitive capitalism.

THEMES

Humility. Chekhov is always on the side of the little guy. In his play *Ivanoff*, he draws attention to the ordinary guy and his issues, and is both pilloried—for stooping to deal with the ordinary-- and praised, for the freshness with which he handles life at the ground level. Like Arthur Miller, in *The Death of a Salesman*, Chekhov wishes to show mere humanity, though unlike Miller Chekhov goes simply for the unadorned human, and not for the down and out.

Change. *The Cherry Orchard* crystallizes Chekhov's deep sensitivity to historical change. The cherry orchard itself is a symbol of the traditional past, but the fact is that the orchard needs to be sold, and the world needs to update from serf times to modern capitalism. Chekhov's play revolves about the historical tension: whether or not to cut down the orchard.

Aesthetics. Chekhov regularly addresses issues of aesthetics and of the author's mind. His play *The Sea-Gull* has much to do with an older seasoned writer and an ambitious younger one, and with their differences is aesthetic principles. The young idealist writer, Trepleff, insists: 'Let us have new, or else nothing at all,' while the older author, Trigorin, is an established master of tried and true forms.

Honesty. Both Chekhov's characters, and their author within them, are insistent on the truth. The result is that the dominant mood of Chekhov's stories and plays tends to be gloomy and pessimistic. As a doctor, Chekhov believed he was helping his patients to see the truth, and was thus carrying out the

greatest service to them. The same devotion to the truth makes his fictions particularly durable, quests to characterize human nature as such.

Characters

Chekhov's career as a medical doctor unquestionably fortified his realism and his observant eye for human situations. Both in his plays and in his short stories we feel the breath of tragedy, but it is never melodramatic, rather bone-chillingly true to the human situation.

Two of the characters before us, here, spring from the world of late Tsarist landed aristocracy. Both *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Sea-Gull* give us vivid snapshots of the clash between the older aristocracy and the serf or merchant levels of society. And in both plays we can feel Chekhov working through his understanding of this clash which defines his own world.

Trigorin, in *The Sea-Gull*, is Chekhov working through his own experience as a writer, as well as his experience of the social transformation of his world. The writer Trigorin is ready for change, views the history of his time dynamically, and yet takes a gloomy view of the role, in that world, of the writer. The writer is forever under criticism for faults about which he can do nothing. **Lopakhin**, in *The Cherry Orchard*, is the son of a peasant, and in many ways—though by this time he is a successful businessman-- he is crude and country. However, he is a realist; he advises the family he is visiting that they should cut down and sell their precious cherry orchard. In the end he himself buys the orchard, has it cut down, and makes his profit. He is the new world, for better or worse

The Banker and **Olenka** have nothing in common except their perfection as portraits, Chekhov's delight in holding the mirror up to nature. The Banker represents the gambler who makes a momentary decision with which he will have to live out his life. He bets a young lawyer that he cannot hold out five years in an improvised prison on the Banker's property, and gets the response that the lawyer will hold out fifteen years, and walk away with the awesome sum of money the banker has put up, at his end of the bet. The banker it is, who will eat the bitter fruits of impulse. Olenka, who is always in love, and delighted at all times to be 'somebody's darling,' is a woman without opinions—except for those of her husband or lover at the time—and is a to the tee replica, of the empty headed housewife of world culture.