

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

Chekhov's stories are difficult to write about. Even professional literary critics will often preface their analyses by reminding readers of the subtle, delicate, nuanced nature of Chekhov's innovations. Imagine my delight then when, in the context of our WR 100 seminar on nineteenth century Russian literary masterpieces, I sat down to read Sandya Kola's final paper. It is an ambitious and original investigation into one of Chekhov's most famous—and most studied—stories, "The Lady with the Little Dog." The psychological depth of this piece is matched by Sandya's careful and inspired attention to Chekhov's poetics, scene by scene, detail by detail. Using two important critical studies to frame her argument, Sandya does a wonderful job balancing their insights with her own, and comes up with a convincing conclusion about ways in which Chekhov's characters are truly individuals.

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AN EXPLORATION OF CHEKHOV'S TANGIBLE WORLD

During Anton Chekhov's time, nineteenth century Russian literature often followed common formulaic literary techniques, which created a logical development of thought that moved towards a larger idea. Literary critic Alexander Chudakov notes in his "Randomness: Chekhov's Incidental Detail" that these larger ideas would, more often than not, belong to an abstract and "high spiritual plane [that] does not permit the intrusion of material things" (554). Chekhov, on the other hand, breaks many of these formulated rules, creating "a totally different method" (Chudakov 551) of writing, in which his "portrayal of the spiritual world is frequently interrupted by representations of the tangible world" (Chudakov 555). This can especially be seen in one of the author's more mature works, "The Lady with the Little Dog," in which Chekhov often creates a juxtaposition between the material and the abstract in order to question whether ideas such as spirituality and love are only—as they are commonly portrayed in literature—responses to a higher abstract sphere, or also—as Chekhov suggests—sense-based reactions to the more immediate tangible world. John Hagan's "Chekhov's Fiction and the Ideal of 'Objectivity'" claims that Chekhov believed it was a writer's duty to maintain an "artist's impartiality and disinterestedness" (411) towards external views and conventions when presenting such questions. Therefore, Chekhov uses this juxtaposition in "The Lady with the Little Dog" as an opportunity to suggest that intimate ideas like spirituality and love should not be solely defined by their conventional meanings or codified by their societal constructions, but interpreted through a more private and personal meaning that is relative to the individual, making Chekhov revolutionary in not only his innovative literary style, but also his redefinition of the purpose of literature.

Chekhov's, "The Lady with the Little Dog" follows an initially fleeting relationship between two married people, Anna Sergeevna and Dmitri Dmitritch Gurov, which later turns into a painful and difficult affair, ending with the realization that the two characters are in love with each other. In an artistic situation like this, in which characters experience a dynamic process of realization and change, they are also, at a literary level, undergoing a process of characterization. Chudakov states that in order to communicate this, authors use select tangible details in their texts that can serve as "reliable and expedient means of characterization" (551). However, this is not the case in Chekhov's writing. Chekhov's details throughout Anna and Gurov's transformation do not clarify the personality of the hero; they have no "characterological" (Chudakov 551) significance. Take the scene before Anna and Gurov's reunion in a provincial theatre:

A haze hung over the chandeliers, the gallery stirred noisily; the local dandies stood in the front row before the performance started, their hands behind their backs; and here, too, in the governor's box, the governor's daughter sat in front, wearing a boa, while the governor himself modestly behind the portière, and only his hands could be seen. (Chekhov 372)

What is the significance behind repetitive images of hands, or a particular accessory of the governor's daughter's evening dress? The purpose and meaning of these details have no direct connection to the characters, events or development of action. In fact, because these details do not appear to be obligatory, "the link in characterization within the *fabula* chain would not be harmed" (Chudakov 552) if we were to remove them entirely from the text. They are what Chekhov's critics would call "senseless and unnecessary" (Chudakov 555) details. However, Chudakov argues that these details are only "unnecessary" from the viewpoint of non-Chekhovian principles, and are otherwise "important and obligatory" (554) to Chekhov's new method.

This new method does not follow "characterological goals" (Chudakov 552), but rather attempts to advance the viewpoint of the character as an observer. Pre-Chekhovian methods of writing that attempt to use motivated, not random, details as a means to develop these "characterological goals" often lead to characters becoming associated with certain ideas. Characters become symbols that act as comments on the author and the reader's world, outside of the immediate text and outside the character's world. This is the very reason why Chekhov disperses random details throughout his text. They eliminate the possibility of his characters becoming symbols and endorsements of external ideologies, and allow these characters to act as mere observers and individuals within the constructions of their own world. Therefore, Chekhov allows his characters the ability to express their emotions and comment on the abstract and spiritual world, but also—unlike his literary contemporaries such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky—allows his characters' experience with the spiritual world to be interrupted by their observations of their more immediate and tangible environment—men with "hands behind their backs," or a "boa" around a woman's neck, if you will (Chekhov 372). When viewed through a non-Chekhovian function of description, such interruptions may, therefore, seem random and unnecessary against the background of a logical discussion, but are otherwise imperative to Chekhov's intentions—to afford his characters the opportunity to be mere ordinary individuals who experience everything that exists within a person and observe everything that surrounds them, both spiritual and material. He does not try to convey a logical and "continuous flow of thought" (Chudakov 555) through motivated details, as this does not accurately represent an individual's thought process, but a logical development that advances the author's personal ideologies.

This is why Chekhov does not restrict his details to the direct dialogue or scene in which they are present, but instead associates them with a larger connection to the character's overall experience and emotions at that moment. Because of this, Chekhov's works are not, unlike non-Chekhovian literature, "directed toward its own semantic center" (Chudakov 555). By using random and unnecessary details that create "an element of chaos in an otherwise harmonious system of motivated details" (Chudakov 553), Chekhov's images and details shoot out of orbit instead of creating a centripetal progression of thought. In other words, or in those of John Hagan's, it is a refusal to make one's works "an organ for the propaganda of any sect or party" (411).

Unlike his contemporaries, "Chekhov remained notably aloof during this early period [the nineteenth century] from the various kinds of revolutionary ferment" (Hagan 411) that influenced many of his fellow writers. These other writers believed it was their social and literary duty to use their works as "trademarks or labels" (Hagan 411). In other words, the purpose of such works was to advance the competing political and social agendas of, say, liberals, conservatives, evolutionists, etc. However, this wasn't the case for Chekhov. Chekhov believed that an artist must display a kind of impartiality and disinterestedness towards these external ideas. This does not mean "the artist

should suppress his personal feelings and attitudes”; instead, he should “treat his subject with perfect neutrality” (Hagan 412). By doing so, Chekhov is not presenting his works as an endorsement of ideas from a group ideology, but as an honest and faithful representation of “things as they really are” (Hagan 412).

Chekhov’s rejection of external ideologies and conventions is easily seen in his unique treatment of spirituality. Authors like Tolstoy, for example, used numerous religious symbols and “details [that] give meaning to the whole story” (Chudakov 555). However, this meaning is often driven by ideas of religion and Christian ideals; it endorses ideas from Christianity. Chekhov, on the other hand, often uses similar religious images and dialogue in order to stir the reader’s mind—a mind that has been conditioned by literature like that of Tolstoy—to expect these details to carry a religiously symbolic meaning. One night, during the beginning of Anna and Gurov’s affair, the two lovers decide to take a late night drive to Oreanda, where “they sat on a bench not far from church” (Chekhov 366). Here, Chekhov introduces the image of a church, which, in works of Tolstoy or non-Chekhovian literature, would normally be used as a religious symbol. Perhaps it would serve as a juxtaposition between the morality of religion and the immorality of two adulterous lovers. Yet Chekhov does not use this image in a religious way. Instead of employing the image of the church as an opportunity to digress into discussions about religion, morality and spirituality, the narrator instead continues to comment on more descriptive observations of the tangible world, making no reference to ideas of religion or Christian beliefs. He notes the “white clouds” hovering above mountaintops, and the “dull noise of the sea” from below (Chekhov 366)—random but tangible details that drive the meaning of this image away from any kind of religious symbolism or semantic center. Ironically, Chekhov uses a traditionally religious symbol not to associate this scene with the higher spiritual plane of religion, but to draw attention to the more immediate, literal and tangible world. Hence, though the church carries symbolic potential to be a sign of Christianity or religion, Chekhov does not treat it as a religious symbol; to Chekhov, the church just so happens to be a building near to which two lovers sit silently. This is the honest and literal representation of things that Hagan was referring to.

Yet there must be a motivation for Chekhov to purposely lure his readers into anticipating a discussion on religion through associated religious images in the text. This motivation is to raise questions on how we define spirituality. Take, for example, the contrasting spiritual rhetoric of Anna and Gurov. Anna, who believes her affair has turned her into a “trite, trashy woman” (Chekhov 366), often uses religious interjections—such as “God forgive me” (Chekhov 365), “I swear to God” (Chekhov 366), and “I adjure you by all that’s holy” (Chekhov 373)—to express a desire for moral redemption. Hence, Anna’s connection to her spirituality is through religion. Gurov, on the other hand, often criticizes this. In a scene where Anna uses such religious rhetoric, Gurov remarks: “It’s like you’re justifying yourself” (Chekhov 365). This suggests that Anna uses religion as a justification for her actions. She considers her religious speech and rhetoric an absolution of her sins. Hence, Gurov is implying that Anna relies on religion to find her path to salvation, without creating her own relationship with her spirituality. She uses religion as means for, as Hagan calls it, “easy moralism” (412). This is quite a contrast to Gurov’s connection with his spirituality. Gurov, unlike Anna, does not depend on religious stimulation to engage with the spiritual world, but rather a tangible stimulation. This can be seen during the scene at Oreanda. As Gurov and Anna look down on the sea, Gurov observes the motionless “leaves of the trees” and the foggy haze of “morning mist” (Chekhov 366). And he notes that in this unceasing perfection of life on earth “perhaps lies

hidden the pledge of our eternal salvation” (Chekhov 367). Hence, Gurov uses his senses to not only see the tangible world, but to also engage with larger spiritual ideas.

Chekhov raises similar questions when he deals with ideas of love. Like he does with the definition of spirituality, he questions whether love should only be seen as a response to the incomprehensible abstract world, or also a reaction to the material and more immediate world before us. For example, once Gurov and Anna’s affair starts to become less of a tempting and “fleeting liaison” (Chekhov 362), and more of a serious and passionate relationship, Gurov notes that Anna “seemed to transform him” (Chekhov 367). But what transformed him—“the heat,” “the cascade,” or the “smell of the sea” (Chekhov 367)? It seems that Gurov’s stimulation for developing feelings towards Anna was through impressions of the physical and tangible world around him. This turns conventional ideas of love on its head, as Chekhov is suggesting—as he has done with the idea of spirituality—that love is not merely a spiritual transcendence, but also a change stimulated and inspired by the senses.

This can lead readers to a common misreading that Gurov and Anna were never really in love. After the two parted ways in Yalta, they were left with only memories and thoughts of the other, which unintentionally fueled their nascent and undeveloped feelings into what they believed was love. This is usually the source of such objections. Anna and Gurov’s relationship was inspired by impressions of the tangible world and intensified by mere memories and recollections. Because this relationship was not based on a more conventionally accepted idea of a deep, spiritual connection, but is instead built upon what would be called the trivial and transitory nature of raw human senses and perceptions, many readers assume that their relationship was not love, but something more superficial—a tempting, romanticized idea of love. And although I consider this a misunderstanding of Anna and Gurov’s relationship as well as a misunderstanding of Chekhov’s message, there is a degree of truth in this claim that I agree with.

After Gurov returns to Moscow, he states how he cannot forget Anna: “Yet everything was as clear in his memory as if he had parted with Anna Sergeevna only the day before” (Chekhov 369). But everything was not “clear”; his memories of Anna are but romanticized imaginations. In these memories, Anna “seemed younger, *more* beautiful, *more* tender” (Chekhov 369), more than what she actually was. Anna herself claims that she “lived by my thoughts of you [Gurov]” (373). Hence, I agree that Gurov and Anna’s love was a product of their imagination. Yet this does not mean they were not in love. Gurov acknowledges that “he thought and dreamed” (Chekhov 372) of his love for Anna, but “Anna Sergeevna was not a dream” (369), and nor was their love. Perhaps they lived by a love “their imagination had created” (375). But why should this mean they did not love each other?

Anna and Gurov’s relationship does not fit a conventionally accepted definition of love. They loved each other “*like* husband and wife, *like* tender friends” (Chekhov 376), yet they are none of those things. Instead, they are merely two individuals who “loved each other like very close, dear people” (376). Perhaps Anna and Gurov’s love was a product of their imagination. Perhaps their relationship cannot be understood through definitions of socially accepted relationships like marriage, friendship, etc. And this forces Gurov himself to question: “Had he been in love then?” (369) He acknowledges that there hadn’t been anything “beautiful, poetic, or instructive, or merely interesting, in his relations with Anna Sergeevna” (369); his relationship did not meet traditional expectations of what love should be. Yet he also acknowledges when he finally sees Anna in the

theatre that “there was now no person closer, dearer, or more important for him in the whole world” (372). Does this not convey the emotions that love should elicit, regardless of the nature of this relationship and how the two came to these emotions?

In his “Randomness: Chekhov’s Incidental Detail,” Chudakov includes a comment from literary scholar A. G. Gornfeld on the significance of Chekhov’s revolutionary and innovative style, in which Gornfeld calls Chekhov’s works a “genuine work of art” (Chudakov 561). But although Gornfeld was saying this in reference to the aesthetic significance of Chekhov’s literary style, I think this artistic greatness touches on something deeper. As we have seen, Chekhov does not blindly adopt group ideologies and project societal conventions in his works. His treatment of spirituality and love, for example, raises questions on ideas whose conventional definitions have become accepted without question as the sole and only definition for such ideas. But abstract human emotions and their relation to the individual who is experiencing them cannot be codified by such convention; there is more to spirituality than its definition through religion, just as there is more to love than its definition through marriage.

Hence, Chekhov encourages not only his characters, but also his readers to reject conventional definitions of spirituality, love, etc., and to create more personal and intimate meanings that are relative to the individual. For this reason, Chekhov’s works affect us deeply, far beyond the confines of the text and into societal conventions and norms. This is the “genuine work of art,” the true depth and complexity of Chekhov that makes his works great literature. In John Hagan’s “Chekhov’s Fiction and the Ideal of ‘Objectivity,’” he notes that Chekhov “accused nobody, justified nobody” (412). Chekhov was never the “judge of his characters or of what they say, but only an objective observer” (Hagan 412). He offered a realistic treatment of his characters and the ideas that he worked with, making his depictions of such people and ideas not conclusive, but potentially interrogative. And by doing so, he gives his characters the freedom to be mere individuals, not vehicles for advancing personal and social agendas; he gives his stories freedom to be art, not propaganda; and he gives his readers the freedom to question ideas in both Chekhov’s works and their own personal lives.

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