ANTON CHEKHOV

A Critical Study

A Thesis Presented for the
Degree of Master of Arts

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The Ohio State University
1925

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INTRODUCTION

A number of incentives probably were responsible for the choice of Anton Chekhov and his literary offspring as the subject of this study. My first acquaintance with Chekhov was through reading the Cherry Orchard, a play that opened new vistas of realistic literature, with its delicate, almost ethereal touch, and its absolute emotional verity. Then followed the group of sketches embodied in R.E.C. Long’s translations of The Black Monk and Other Stories.

But it was really the first glimpses into Constance Garnett’s superb rendition of The Witch, that settled the matter. Too much cannot be said of the true greatness of the work of Mrs. Garnett. All of Chekhov’s stories worth publishing, have been carefully arranged and translated by her. Those omitted were mere pot-boilers -- avowedly farcical and written under the pressing need for money -- and considered perfectly worthless by the author. She has sufficiently Anglicized the tales to make the pictures ring true to our western minds. The fine phrasing of the Russian sentences are transcribed with a minimum loss of effect. The subtle artistry of the originals is preserved intact, losing nothing but an occasional twist of Slavic mind which depends entirely on colloquialism, and which would not be understandable in any possible translation. For these opinions we have
the solemn word of such authorities as Professor Wiener, William Gerhardi and Mr. Louis S. Friedland.

There was also the desire to escape the dangers of drawing opinions from the critics rather than from the author's work itself. It is easier to rely on comments, for argument, than on original work, but it is certainly not so productive. Chekhov once said: "With professors, Shakespeare is not the thing— it is the commentators on Shakespeare." Of course, this is a wide generalization, but it is a status to be carefully avoided.

The preface to The Black Monk and Other Stories, published in 1916, says of Chekhov: "...Although hardly known on the western continent of Europe, he has during the last fifteen years been regarded as the most talented of the younger generation of Russian writers.

....Chekhov's stories, though they have gone into numberless editions in Russia, are almost unknown abroad, being in fact, represented only by a few scattered translations and small volumes published in France and Germany, and by a few critical reviews in those countries. In England, Chekhov is only a name to most of those interested in Eastern literature, and not even a name to the general public."

At the present time, although Chekhov has long since ceased to be a novelty, and is tossed about by the glib tongues of the "intelligentsia", one hears...
little of him except as a sort of vague genius --
"one of the great masters of the short story!"
Even the writers and critics do not seem to have
grasped, in any large sense, his real significance --
his method, style, and peculiar artistic portrayal
of human minds and souls.

The mere pictures of the Russian life of
the last century's closing years which are embodied
in these twelve volumes are sufficient to lead one
on from story to story. Bits of life, glimpses
into the minds and hearts of the middle class --
government officials, doctors, lawyers, drifters,
idlers -- and the upper strata of peasant life,
follow each other in amazing succession through the
pages of Chekhov until one feels that he is collecting
an emotional history of the people from whom the
seeds of revolution sprouted. Their almost unbelievable
state of stagnation, of inertia is vividly impressed
upon us. Chekhov pictured the calm .... He never lived
to see the storm -- the storm which swung his beloved Russia
to the opposite extreme of the pendulum, which is certainly
as bad, although it could scarcely be worse than the pre-
revolutionary condition of the professional classes.

The man Chekhov is also fascinating. It
stretches imaginary power to the utmost to attempt a
comprehension of the mind which could see so many different phases of life so clearly .... the intellect that
could understand the minute mental processes of all sorts of people, analyzing them clearly and without prejudice .... and the artist who could give to all of them such a suitable form of expression that they live before our eyes as surely as they lived in Moscow, in Yalta or in Taganrog.

The wave of popularity which swept all things Russian into the West on the tide of the much over-idealized rise of the masses, brought Chekhov with it. But I think he has come to stay. Popular favor may rise and fall, but a work of art presents a solid front against which it has no power.

It will be necessary to quote frequently from Chekhov's letters, concerning his opinions and attitudes -- indeed, there is little else from which to quote in these matters. Those who knew him and who wrote intimately of his life and personality, have not as yet been translated. At any rate, the letters are interesting in point of view, often full of sparkling humor, and never tedious.
PART ONE

CHEKHOV'S LIFE AND ITS INFLUENCE

ON HIS CAREER
Any attempt at a brief biography is sure to be more or less of a bore. But there are certain facts in the author's life which have a profound influence on his literary work, and it is with these that we shall be concerned.

Perhaps the best manner of approach, in order to place Chekhov as to dates and to give an immediate insight into some of his attitudes, is to quote a letter to a would-be biographer, V.A. Tikhonov, written February 22, 1892:

"Do you want my biography? Here it is. I was born in Taganrog (an old Black Sea port) in 1860. I finished the course at Taganrog Gymnasium in 1879. In 1884 I took my degree in medicine at the University of Moscow. In 1888 I received the Pushkin Prize. In 1890 I made a journey to Sakhalin across Siberia and back by sea. In 1891 I made a tour of Europe, where I drank excellent wine and ate oysters. In 1892 I took part in an orgy in the company of V.A. Tikhonov at a name-day party. I began writing in 1879...... I have sinned in the dramatic line too, though with moderation. I have been translated into all the languages with the exception of the foreign ones, though I have indeed long ago been translated by the Germans. The Czechs and the Serbs approve of me also, and the French are
not indifferent. The mysteries of love
I fathomed at the age of thirteen. With
my colleagues, doctors, and literary men
alike, I am on the best of terms. I am
a bachelor. I should like to receive a
pension. I practice medicine, and so much
so that sometimes in the summer I perform
postmortems, though I have not done so for
two or three years. Of authors, my favorite
is Tolstoy....

All that is nonsense though. Write
what you like. If you haven't the facts,
substitute lyricism."

Chekhov came from no inspired ancestry.
His grandfather had been a serf; his father had married
a merchant's daughter and settled in Taganrog where,
during Anton's boyhood, he operated a small, unprofitable
provision shop. Anton was soon drafted into service at
the store, and he sometimes spoke regretfully in later
life of his hard-worked childhood. He was a close observer,
even when quite young, watching the customers and the
idlers who loafed about the shop, telling droll stories.
These he would whisper to his schoolmates, often incurring
severe punishment for this incorrigible habit.

His grandfather became manager of an estate near
Taganrog in the wild country of the Don Cossacks. Here
Anton spent his summers, fishing and roving about, sowing the seeds of that love for nature which he retained throughout his life. He would spend the evenings in the kitchen of the master's house among the servants and peasants, playing their games, and setting them all laughing with his droll and telling observations.

When he was fourteen, his father moved the family to Moscow, leaving Anton in Taganrog, and, relieved of his work in the shop, his progress in school became remarkable. At the age of seventeen he wrote a long tragedy, "Fatherless", which he afterwards tore up. Already he began to show sparks of the wit and insight which later flashed into his great genius. He graduated from the Gymnasium with every high honor, and enrolled in the University of Moscow, entering headlong into his duel role of medical student and author. Writing was the most lucrative means of keeping himself in school and of helping to support his struggling family.

His first story appeared in a Moscow paper in 1880, and he later secured a position connected with several smaller periodicals, for which he wrote, with amazing rapidity, a succession of sketches and stories of Russian life. He wrote, he tells us, during every spare minute, in crowded rooms where there "was no light and less air", never spending more than one day on any single story. It was during this period
that the play "On the High Road" was written, the interesting history of which will be given in the chapter on the drama.

He was always a devotee of humor, being especially fond of the comedies of Shakespeare. The people of Moscow demanded laughter, and Chekhov, with his deep-set sense of the tragically ridiculous nature of life, asked nothing better. His stories, while often based on the most serious of themes, were diffused by that light satirical touch which in later years won him the reputation of a great humorist.

He was at first subjected to the most scathing criticism, which tore at his sensitive and delicate nature. Indeed, his letters and life are full of this reaction to adverse comment which, coupled with his increasing ill-health, probably contributed largely to his despondent moods.

After taking his M. D., Chekhov actually practiced for some years as a municipal medical officer. He always spoke highly of the medical profession, and his doctors are drawn affectionately and sympathetically. If anyone spoke disparagingly of doctors in his presence, he would exclaim: "Stop! You don't know what country doctors do for people." His practice undoubtedly had a great influence on his writing. He even sometimes regretted the too vivid insight which it gave him. He said: "Only a doctor can know what value my knowledge of science
has been to me". And again: "it seems to me that as a doctor I have described the sicknesses of the soul correctly". He made artistic emotional diagnoses of his characters.

"The young doctor-writer is described at this time as modest and grave, with flashes of brilliant gaiety. A son of the people, there was in his face an expression that recalled the simple-hearted village lad; his eyes were blue, his glance full of intelligence and kindness, and his manners unaffected and simple. He was an untiring worker, and between his patients and his desk he led a life of ceaseless activity. His restless mind was dominated by a passion of energy and he thought continually and vividly. Often while jesting and talking, he would suddenly seem to plunge into himself, and his look would grow fixed and deep, as if he were contemplating something important and strange. Then he would ask some unexpected question which showed how far his mind had roamed."

Success came rapidly. His first collection of stories appeared in 1887 and another followed in the same year. Both met with immediate recognition,
and both went through many editions.

It was at this time, however, that the shadow of tuberculosis began to gather over his life. His mind, always extremely impressionable, began to assume the grey tinge of his time. His ill-health was, from this period on, ever-increasing. In a letter to Souvorin at this time, he said:

"There is a sort of stagnation in my soul. I explain it by the stagnation in my personal life. I am not disappointed... I am not depressed, but simply, everything has suddenly become less interesting. I must do something to rouse myself".

Weary of hard work, and with an obstinate cough, he went south in 1888, took a cottage on the banks of a little river "abounding in fish and crabs", and gave himself up to his love of nature, his passion for fishing, to the peace and gentleness of the country, and to the gay life and bright music of the peasants.

"One would gladly sell one's soul," he wrote, "for the pleasure of seeing the warm evening sky, and the streams and pools reflecting the darkly mournful sunset."

He wrote of visits to his neighbors and long drives in gay company, during which he said:
"We ate every half hour, and laughed to the verge of colic."

In 1889 he began to have attacks of heart trouble, one of which gave rise to a remark, characteristic of his sensitive nature: "I walked quickly across the terrace on which the guests were assembled, with one idea in my mind -- how awkward it would be to fall down and die in the presence of strangers."

Everyone now urged Chekhov to write some long and important work, but his poor health and his delicate artistry did not lend themselves well to lengthy works, and he continued the sketches -- his "Tidious Tales", as he often spoke of them -- and they will always stand as his greatest masterpieces. Even "The Steppe", one of his longest works, is a mere series of beautiful bead-sketches strung together on a fine connecting thread.

In 1890, after the trip to Sakhalin, his consumption became acute, and he was exiled to Crimea, where his last years were spent, broken by frequent journeys to Moscow in order to supervise the production of his plays at the Art Theatre.

Chekhov, late in life, married Mme. Knipper of the Moscow Art Theatre, leading lady with Stanislavski, and the feminine leads in his last plays were written for her.

He died suddenly in a little village in the Black Forest where he had gone in a final attempt to recoup his ruined health.
PART TWO

THE MATERIAL FROM WHICH CHEKHOV'S STORIES WERE DRAWN
Mr. Edward Garnett has given us a classification which includes all the material of Chekhov's stories. It may be convenient to simply list these headings and note a few of the most typical titles under each:

(I) **The brief, humorous tales and sketches.**
- The Chorus Girl; A Joke; A Story Without a Title; An Enigmatic Nature; At a Country House; "Anna on the Neck".

(2) **Stories of the town "Intelligentsia".**
- The Duel; Three Years. An Anonymous Story (Story of an Unknown Person).

(3) **Stories of Provincial Life.**
- The Party; The Kiss; The Grasshopper; Neighbors; The Teacher of Literature.

(4) **Stories of Peasant Life.**
- Peasants; The Steppe (in part); Peasant Wives.

(5) **Stories of unconventional and lawless types.**
- The Horsestealers.

(6) **Psychological Studies.**
- The Black Monk; Ward No. 6.

By summarizing briefly the nature of the material handled in each of these divisions, some general idea of Chekhov's range in subject matter may be ascertained.
The humorous tales comprise a wide variety of types, often dependant on domestic misunderstandings. They are diffused with gaiety, quick flashes of wit in some subtle twist of mind, occasional touches of irony, and are seldom without a tinge of pathos, a touch of sincere pity for the conflict of trivial natures with each other and with the supreme unconcern of their environments.

The stories of the town intellectuals -- the well-educated professional classes -- include three of Chekhov's longest and most interesting works. These stories deal with a unique type. The high pitch of energy which had accompanied the Turkish War, had died away, and the eighties ushered in an almost unbelievable dead-level of apathy. All intelligence was suppressed under the regime of Alexander III (1881 -- 1894) (who was personally uneducated and a strong reactionary), or was diverted into unproductive official channels. There was no outlet for the energy of the "Intelligentsia", who simply became content with a life of supreme ennui -- of gambling, drinking, parties, dissipation, and absolute aversion to work. The exceptional few who retained ideals and ambition, struggled in futile revolt against the horde of stand-stills. It is this conflict -- the pitiful efforts at extrication from the mire, at pulling out of the rut;
the grim irony of the stifling, grey atmosphere; the despair of the idealists as they viewed the life about them; the feeble hope of improvement, always in "two or three hundred years"; the tragic humor of it all -- which furnished the basis for many of Chekhov's finest, subtlest and most sympathetic portraits. In Moscow and Petersburg, in the Provincial towns -- everywhere, in professional circles -- he found the same tragi-comic struggle: the few against the many; the many against the inexorable dulness from which there was no escape.

This was Chekhov's natural field, and the one through which he makes his bid to long-standing fame. His best plays, The Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard, and many of the finest pictures of character in his stories, center about this class of people.

Chekhov wrote very few tales of peasant life. It failed to attract him as did the condition of the townpeople. This was not from ignorance of peasant character, however. In the story, Peasants, which is one of his masterpieces, he shows clearly that he understood their attitudes and reactions quite as thoroughly as he did those of doctors, lawyers, and government officials.
In 1861, Alexander II decreed the emancipation of the serfs who had, up to that time, been the virtual slaves of the landowners. A long time elapsed before the freedom was actually attained, and, as in the case of so many "reforms", it left many of the beneficiaries in a more impoverished and pitiable condition than they were before being liberated. The land allotted to them was often inadequate for the support of their families; taxes were exorbitant and payment virtually impossible; ignorance prevailed. The peasants were freed from the nobility, only to find themselves "serfs of the State".

They lived in wretched huts, grouped together in small villages. They suffered and struggled in a vain attempt to keep above water. In the poorer sections of the country, filth and disease prevailed, religion was a matter of hearsay, and education was unheard of. Even on the rich plains of Little Russia, the only advantage of the peasants was that they had enough to eat.

Nevertheless, with the typical Russian attitude, they made the best of it, dreamed of the old serfdom with its carefree abundance, tried to sing and dance and drink away the troublesome present.

This is one of the fundamental qualities of all Russian character -- a tendency to glorify the past, to submit to the present, however bad it may be, and, in the case of educated people, to dream hazily about a golden
future.

Strange characters, lawless rovers, abnormal minds, and similar subjects, interested Chekhov, but only as occasional relief. He doubtless had many opportunities of observing unusual types through his medical practice, but The Horse-stealers, The Black Monk, and Ward No. 6, are exceptions in his expression, not the rule. He preferred, and wisely, to present in his plays and stories, the ordinary man in his complicated relation to life -- neither the upper class aristocracy of Tolstoy nor the "Lower depths" of Gorky -- and this stands as Chekhov's great achievement. He has pictured accurately and vividly, the familiar, every-day, well-educated person, in a social condition which is unusual, not only in Russian, but in all history.
PART THREE

THE BASIS OF CHEKHOV'S ARTISTRY
it is axiomatic that in every true artist there must be the impulse to create — the urge to produce something fine and beautiful — to crystallize his view of life and give it expression. This is a vague, indefinable quality which occurs in a small measure in many people, but which rarely becomes a dominant force.

The great genius in any artistic field must possess the following qualities to a high degree:

(1) Sensibility -- the acute perception which derives impressions from life.

(2) The desire to reproduce these impressions.

(3) The artistic ability necessary to arrange them into beautiful and recognizable forms.

Chekhov had a vast wealth of story material which he was always eager to write down. From his school-boy days until the last months of his life, he was dominated by the passion for telling stories. He was, to some extent, a "primitive writer" — one who has a story, and is bursting to tell it. Writing was an obsession against which, most of the time, his other desires could clamor but feebly.

Trigorin, in "The Sea Gull", is Chekhov's one autobiographical character. He constantly complains of the trials of authorship. In the second
Act, he makes a bitter answer to the girlish praise of Nina:

"... Day and night I am held in the grip of one besetting thought, to write, write, write! Hardly have I finished one book than something urges me to write another, and then a third, and then a fourth -- I write ceaselessly. I am, as it were, on a treadmill. I hurry from one story to another, and can't help myself .... As soon as I stop working, I rush off to the theatre or go fishing, in the hope that I may find oblivion there, but no! Some new subject for a story is sure to come rolling through my brain like an iron cannon-ball."

Chekhov, like his literary ancestor, Gogol, came from Little Russia, the land of the Cossacks, north of the Black Sea -- "a country of immense plains, rich harvests, and smiling farms; of vines, laughter, and song" -- and he remained a "Little Russian" at heart, all his life. His greyest protraiture of character, his most melancholy realizations of the futility of trying to comprehend the secrets of human existence, and the darkest moments in his own career, were tinged and diffused by the airy gaiety, the bright humor, and the dancing,

1. Maurice Baring: "Landmarks in Russian Literature."
carefree spirit of his people.

He was, from childhood, a keen and critical observer of life, noting its variance of rhythm, the apparent aimlessness of nature, its discrepancies, and its vast power. And his attitude was always that of the calm spectator, grasping details, retaining ideas and impressions, arranging them into ordered schemes, and assigning them values. He found that they could be made intelligible through arrangement—by giving them that actual form which, to most of us, is invisible and incomprehensible in our surroundings.

The short humorous tales and sketches, of which he wrote literally hundreds, between the time of his entrance to the University and 1886, formed an easy and natural mode of expression, which furnished him the ready money necessary to continue his studies. In this period, if it may be so named, literature was not an actual goal to the young Chekhov; he meant to be a doctor, though he never quite knew why he had chosen this field.

In 1886, in answer to the letter from Grigorovich (which, incidentally, marked his first announcement of a serious purpose in literary work), he said:

"I can recall but a single story on which I worked more than a day; and "Igor", which
you liked, was written in a bath-house! As reporters dash off their notes about daily happenings and commonplace events, so I wrote my stories, mechanically, easily, caring nothing about the reader or about myself .... I wrote, and tried by all means not to lavish on the stories those images and pictures that were dear to me, and which, God knows why, I was treasuring and carefully hiding."

It is amazing to read these early sketches, knowing that the above statements are true. Many of them are so fine, so delicately beautiful, subtly humorous and true to emotional observation, that one is astounded at the man who could go on producing them, day after day, still "treasuring and carefully hiding" his finer and more comprehensive imaginings.

The study of medicine doubtless formed a most excellent balance-wheel for Chekhov. It sharpened his perception, enriched and broadened his grasp of character, enhanced his sensibility without detracting from his poetical qualities, and prevented him from making many of the innumerable mistakes to which every growing author is, to some extent, heir. It enabled him to see life more collectively, and helped his artistry express it in small quantities which always have a familiar tone and quality of the aggregate.
He maintained the dual role of doctor-writer until he was past thirty years of age. In 1888, he wrote:

"... Medicine is my lawful wife and literature is my mistress. When I get tired of one I spend the night with the other .... Neither of them loses anything from my infidelity ...."

But later, in 1893:

"I have lately been siezed with frivolity, and at the same time, I am drawn to people as never before, and literature has become my vocation, and I have become attached to it to such a degree that I have begun to despise medicine...."

Underlying all of Chekhov's work, one senses the author's overwhelming joy in analyzing people. He takes no narrow field of character specialization, but feels a great sympathy for all types. He succeeds with very quick, concise brush-strokes, in giving life to his psychological diagnoses. Probably his best work deals with the middle-class intellectuals, with whom he lived most of his life, but in "The Steppe", "Peasants" and other tales, he shows his insight into the lives of the lower classes; in "The Horsestealefs" is portrayed a rendezvous of wild, lawless rovers; "The Black Monk" and "Ward No. 6" show vividly his comprehension of abnormality
in character.

From childhood he had loved nature -- the sea, the sky, the plains, the streams and forests; loved them as only the great soul can, with a passionate calm, a sense of rest and repose, of acceptance, of silent wonder at the beauty and power of elemental forces. Chekhov never drew morals from the loveliness of his wild Cossack country or from its wide grain fields; never went into foolish ecstacies over the Volga; or shouted of some mighty Creator who could produce them all. He only knew that they were always there, waiting for him; that they gave him rest and solitude and the magnificent comfort of indulgence in human laziness.

Then, too, Chekhov was a poet, although he never actually wrote verse. His pages are interspersed with prose-poetry. One might compare (rudely) his sketches to a balance, the fulcrum of which is character study, the arms, his brilliant humor and lyrical word-pictures. One feels the atmosphere and tone of his settings through the direct, vivid poetry (no other word will do) of his descriptions. ..... It is night on the vast plains ... we are driving on a seemingly endless journey ... the moon has risen ... one remembers stories told by some old nurse from the steppe ...:
"...And then in the churring of insects, in the sinister figures, in the ancient barrows, in the blue sky, in the moonlight, in the flight of the night-bird, in everything you see and hear, triumphant beauty, youth, the fulness of power, and the passionate thirst for life begin to be apparent; the soul responds to the call of her lovely austere fatherland, and longs to fly over the steppes with the nightbird. And in the triumph of beauty, in the exuberance of happiness, you are conscious of yearning and grief, as though the steppe knew she was solitary, knew that her wealth and her inspiration were wasted for the world, not glorified in song, not wanted by anyone; and through the joyful clamor one hears the mournful, hopeless call for singers, singers!"

I.

From: The Steppe.
PART FOUR

THE METHOD OF CONSTRUCTION USED

BY CHEKHOV
We now have a brief summary of the author's life, a glimpse of the basic facts underlying his artistry, and a cursory review of the material from which he created his literary children: -- in other words, we have the oils, the canvas and brushes, and the artist. So naturally, we wish to see how he worked. Method of construction and style are often inseparable in any author, but especially is this true with Chekhov, because of the almost perfect blending of context and plot which marks all of his work.

His object was to reproduce in his stories and plays, the people and the life about him; human nature as he observed it. He loved the truth, and told it with a relentless faithfulness, not over-emphasizing the strength or weakness of his characters; evading neither their indelicacies nor their admirable points, their mistakes nor their achievements. In brief, Chekhov tried to show us the environment he was familiar with, not as he would have it, not as he dreamed of its being, but as it actually existed. This is the aim of psychological literature.

Absolute objectivity is the first fundamental element in his method: -- "the keynote of his artistic credo", as Mr. Friedland observes. In his letters, in his advice to friends and young writers, and in the
consistently impersonal quality of his own work, he proclaims the doctrine. In a letter to his brother, accusing him of sentimentality and false subjectivity, Chekhov said:

"To give up this acquired subjectivity is as easy as to take a drink. One needs to be more honest, to throw oneself overboard everywhere, not to obtrude oneself into the hero of one's own novel, to renounce oneself for at least a half hour .... And you did not write for the readers. You wrote because you like that kind of chatter."

And again:

"The artist should be, not the judge of his characters, and their conversations, but only an unbiased witness."

He believed that every story must have a preconception in the author's mind; the pattern must have formed; the characters must be concise and alive before they can take form on paper. Stories do not write themselves, although many of those which commonly pass as short stories in this country might well have done so (or better, have not written themselves). Chekhov said: "If an author boasted to me of having written a novel without a preconceived design, under a sudden inspiration, I should call him mad."
Another great creed of our writer is simplicity: -- to say the significant thing in the most beautiful and direct manner, with the fewest possible words.

Most prose writers strive to produce character -- to make their subjects live -- and Chekhov is no exception. But why do hundreds fail where one succeeds? One may have fine conceptions in mind, may even be able to write beautifully, but he may fail miserably because he does not know how to draw his pictures.

How do we remember our friends and enemies in real life? Is it from the things that they do, or is it from the manner in which they do them? Is it from events in their lives, or is it from traits of their natures which we inherently feel exist? Chekhov believed that the portrayal of true psychology -- positive character analysis -- could be achieved by presenting states of mind, independant of events. In other words, he defied the old tradition of even-plot, to which even Tolstoy and Dostoievski adhered to some extent, and produced largely static stories and plays. Instead of the obvious method of turning a story upon some happening which affects the action of all the characters, he employs the vastly more subtle means of utilizing changes of mental state, closely observed shiftings of mood, plays of attitudes.
leading to natural misunderstandings, to arrive at the same destination.

He often mistrusted his results, doubted his success in writing eventless stories, but he was never in doubt as to the method. In a letter to Souvorin, editor and publisher of Novoe Vremya (New Times), concerning The Duel, he stated: "It's all smooth, even; there is scarcely anything that is too long. But do you know... There is no movement in my novel, and that frightens me. I am afraid it will be difficult to read to the middle, to say nothing of reading to the end."

In all, I have read about one hundred, twenty of Chekhov's stories, and all his plays, but in no case can I recall anything comparable to a hairless-comb, watchless-watch-chain situation. I remember that Von Koren missed his shot at Laevsky in The Duel, that The Darling was in love successively with three men and a child, that The Chorus Girl gave up all her accumulated gifts to her lover's wife, etc., but these are incidents, events in the ordinary sense of the word, not events of plot; they are trivial... negligible. The plot involves the personalities, and they never depend on anything that happens to occur. The commonplace, blundering, accidental swing of life pervades the stories, but has little to do with the characters.
How, then, are they made so real? By contrast; by shading of light and dark; by fine emotional play; by striking an absolute balance of context; by a few phrases perfectly executed.

A rather careful analysis of several typical stories from each of the classes, may divulge some of the artist's secrets of method, just as it may later lead to valuable discoveries in his style.

1. A Joke.

This is one of the most charming of the short sketches. There are three persons: -- Nadenka, "I", and the wind. It is unusual in the personification of the wind.

The first paragraph immediately introduces the characters: "I" is coaxing Nadya to coast down the wind-swept ice-hill. She is terribly frightened, but at length, agrees. As they careen down the glassy hill, the wind howls and shrieks like a demon.

"I love you, Nadya! 'I said in a low voice".

The sled stops. She is trembling with terror, but a curious new light in her eyes shows the impassive "I" her inward struggle.

Here is a fine contrast of emotion. The man is joking. Nadya thrills to the words, but in her fright, she does not know whether "I" or some hidden wind-voice has pronounced them. The man's
face is a masque, telling her nothing.

"Do you know what," she said without looking at me.

'Well?' I asked.

'Let us ... slide down again.'"

Her growing curiosity begins to rise above her fear of the toboggan.

So down the hill they go, time after time, the man always repeating his "I love you Nadya!" at the exact moment of the wind's shrillest clamor.

The emotion grows vividly.

They return to coast day after day.

Nadenka becomes obsessed by her puzzle -- "I" or the wind .... the wind of "I".

One day she summons up the courage to coast alone, but she is so terror-stricken that she cannot tell whether or not the magic words were spoken.

"I" watches the performance with glee, but the reader holds his breath.

Spring comes. The man is going to Petersburg. The day before he leaves, he comes to the high fence around Nadya's garden, looking through a crack in the boards. She is pale and mournful. She looks at the sky as if to draw from it some solution to her problem.

Waiting for the wind, he whispers through the fence in the same low voice, "I love you, Nadya!".
The change is instantaneous. She stretches her arms as if to embrace the wind. Now she knows.

This is the turning point. It depends entirely on her state of mind. "I" was carrying on his little jest. She was in deadly earnest. The conclusion follows. The only outcome, the only denouement, rests in the natural reactions of the two people.

"That was years ago. Now Nadenka is married...... That we once went tobogganning together, and that the wind brought her the words, 'I love you, Nadya' is not forgotten; it is for her the happiest, most touching, and beautiful memory of her life ...

But now that I am older I cannot understand why I uttered those words, what was my motive in that joke...."

There is no action. Only a rising curiosity, a heightened yearning, contrasted: (1) with definite fear of the descent; (2) with vague doubt; (3) with the teasingly calculative "I". She is satisfied that the wind has made love to her; he is left in doubt as to his own motives in carrying out the trick. It gives us something of the imaginative dreaminess of a Russian girl. It is perfectly balanced; a complete story --- in six pages.
This is only one of his methods -- direct contrasting of two natures, playing off mood against mood, without the introduction of any other characters. This is a very common mode of characterization with many short story writers, but Chekhov used it only in his earlier sketches and his one-act farces.

He later developed a much more effective manner of making his people live: -- by throwing personages into high relief against a number of other people, against a multiplied background. In this way, the picture is naturally vivified. Two large striking stars in a whole dark sky might be considered quite wonderful, but the same two are much more effective when placed in contrast with a whole sky full of smaller and less beautiful stars. But this only holds true in writing, when all the background characters are also given life, granted that the principals are sufficiently well drawn.

I shall try to illustrate this method in the following analyses.

II. "Anna on the Neck"

This story deals with Anna, a girl of eighteen, who marries a rich official, Modest Alexeitch, fifty-two years old, in order to save her brothers and her drunken father from starving, and her father from losing his position. It begins with the pair setting off on their honeymoon.
The characters may be grouped as follows:

**Major:** Anna and Modest Alexeitch,

**Minor:** Anna's father and brothers, government officials and ladies, His Excellency and Artynov.

The whole idea is ironical, almost cynical, and approaches a bitter touch as nearly as Chekhov ever could.

Alexeitch is a perfect hypocrite, rich and miserly, with typical middle-age passions concealed by a cloak of religion and morality.

As the train moves away, one is conscious of a profound sense of pity for this young creature married to an old fool. She is afraid of him, of his kisses, of his very presence. She married him for money, yet even her wedding dress was purchased on credit, and her father and brothers were probably left supperless at home. She is deeply unhappy.

He reminds her of a friend (also married to an Anna, a troublesome person) who had received the Order of St. Anna (a buttonhole insignia and a neck decoration), to whom His Excellency had said in presentation: "So now you have three Annas: one in your buttonhole and two on your neck". Alexeitch trusts that the same will not be said of him.

Then they stopped at the next station, where
a dance was in progress. Anna skipped onto the platform, greeting her acquaintances, with a touch of pride in showing off her wedding finery, and in flirting with the rich landowner, Artynov. She returns to the compartment, childishy happy, only to find ... Alexeitch ...

After the wedding tour, they settle down to a life of tedium. Anna's husband preaches to her drunken father and to her brothers, of duty and morality, at the same time giving them nothing, and allowing Anna no money of her own. She hates him, but is afraid to ask for money.

To show the hateful qualities of Anna's husband, a brief scene is given between him and Pyotr, her father, who wished to borrow fifty roubles. Alexeitch gives it to him accompanied by a sermon on the evils of drink.

"And long-winded phrases followed: 'inasmuch as' ..... 'in view of the aforesaid contention.....'; and Pyotr was in agonies of humiliation and felt an intense craving for alcohol."

He gave Anna trinkets but made regular inspections of her room to see that she had not lost any of them.

This comprises the first half of the story, the whole of which is a study in pluses and minuses of character. Anna is unfortunate in her marriage;
her father and brothers are no better off; her husband treats her as a naughty child. We sympathize with Anna. To this point her personality is all plus, opposed to entirely negative surroundings.

Part two begins with the announcement of the Christmas Ball. Alexeitch gives her a hundred roubles for a new dress, as he wishes her to be presented to Mrs. Excellency, so that he may receive advancement.

Anna is the belle of the party. She forgets everything in the dancing and flirtation. Her vanity rises with her success. She was presented to the wife of His Excellency, and given a booth in the bazaar to which the men flocked, paying enormous prices for glasses of tea and champagne. She overflows with the thrill of her blossoming. Her confidence grows and the old fear of Alexeitch disappears.

This marks the climax of the story and the plus ultra of her character. As the men became more soft and sugary before her domination, she grew more and more disdainfully conscious of her power.

Her father came to the booth and she began to feel ashamed of having such a commonplace parent.

She was escorted home. "Joyful, intoxicated, full of new sensations, exhausted, she undressed, dropped into bed, and at once fell asleep".

The slight touch of false pride in her attitude toward her father, marks the change in Anna.
From this point forward, she is a minus, in the most favorable sort of surroundings. The old case of prosperity and the few; but very subtly managed.

Next morning, Artynov and His Excellency called to congratulate her. Her husband appeared, and his face also bore the sugary smile. Before he could utter a word, Anna said: "Be off, you blockhead!"

Life became a whirl of parties; she spent outrageously, merely sending the bills to Alexeitch; she drove with three horses; and went hunting with Artynov.

So that when Modest Alexeitch received the Order of St. Anna, His Excellency remarked in congratulation: "So now you have three Annas, one on your buttonhole and two on your neck".

It concludes with a final minus: her father drunk more than ever; he and the boys without money; she, ignoring them:

"And whenever they met Anna driving in -- St. with Artynov on the box instead of a coachman, Pyotr took off his top-hat, and was about to shout to her, but (the boys) took him by the arm, and said imploringly:

'You mustn't, father. Hush, father.'"

Chekhov contrasted Anna with her husband, with her relatives, with the two crowds on the station platforms,
and with the gay assemblage at the Ball. The process is then reversed and repeated after she has risen to personal and social authority. This leaves us with nothing but scorn for the girl who elicited our pity in the first chapter. Anna's lovable qualities are inversely proportionate to her good fortune. She ends with a minus, and this is why the story gives the effect of cynicism.

It rings true to life and has a wide emotional scope. The background and Anna develop each other, by the rapid shifting of scenes, by momentary flashes of mood, until the whole picture stands clear before us.

In "The Teacher of Literature", Chekhov wishes to portray a man who is narrow and selfish. These traits in Nikitin, the teacher, are brought out by having him make love to Masha, the daughter of a well-to-do provincial official. The first of the story deals with their love-making, using a background of dinners and horseback rides with her family. Trivial and apparently worthless incidents of home life are emphasized: -- a bad-tempered dog; Masha's tiresome old father.

The next step is Nikitin's announcement, to the other teacher with whom he lives, of his coming marriage. His roommate is a simple person, always making perfectly obvious and stale remarks. Nikitin's egotism is beautifully shaded against this humorously
dull fellow, who sagely observes, after the marriage:

"Hitherto you have been unmarried and have lived alone, and now you are married and no longer single."

All this creates an atmosphere from which Nikitin and Masha are eager to escape. And so the first weeks of their married life are idyllic. Nikitin is overwhelmed by his own happiness.

"Everything that she said seemed to him extraordinary and amazing; and what did not fit in with his convictions seemed to him naive and touching."

So far, the author has dropped only light hints of Nikitin's inner self. A series of trivialities follow against which the teacher's selfishness begins to stand out sharply.

His former roommate dies suddenly. Nikitin scribbles in his diary:

"I wanted to say a warm word at my colleague's grave, but I was warned that this might displease the director, as he did not like our poor friend. I believe that this is the first day since my marriage that my heart has been heavy."

They received the growling dogs as part of the
dowry. Nikitin's disgust with them grows. The house smells like a zoo. One day he lost twelve roubles at cards. He felt as if he didn't want to go home—a vague unpleasant sensation.

That night he woke up and looked at Masha, remembering that a general at their wedding had called her a rose:

"'Rose', he muttered, and laughed."

His laugh was answered by a sleepy growl from the dog under the bed.

"A heavy anger sank like a cold weight on his heart and he felt tempted to say something rude to Masha, and even to jump up and hit her; his heart began throbbing."

Everything begins to irritate him. Masha's family comes to dinner. They indulge in the identical, banal remarks which mark the early part of the story. The dog growls. Nikitin tries to be pleasant and affable, but the inner burning, the boredom resulting from the egoism, rises like a flame. He longs to work in a factory.

As soon as dinner is over, he locks himself in his study, and turns to his diary:

"Where am I, my God? I am surrounded by vulgarity and vulgarity. Wearisome, insignificant people, pots of sour cream, stupid women... There is nothing more terrible, mortifying, and distressing than vulgarity. I must escape from here, I must escape
today, or I shall go out of my mind."

This is the conclusion. The story is merely a character study of Nikitin, balancing him against the sweet but unintelligent Masha, the stupid teacher who died, Masha's family and the wearisome life they lead, and the external annoyances of the dogs.

The total effect is one of sympathy for the whole group. They are submerged in boredom. Nikitin is ambitious in his narrow way, but is hopelessly enmeshed by his environment.

These stories illustrate Chekhov's most common method of character portrayal. The shading has been done by selecting one or two people from the group for emphasis. One feels in many of these stories that any one of the characters could have been placed in separate stories and might have taken leading parts.

He used a still different method in Peasants, and The Horsestealers. In these remarkable stories, his object was to create a group atmosphere -- to give us vivid impressions of peasant life; and to show us a picture of horse-thieves. So he merely reverses the method: instead of employing the background to heighten the effect and further the characterization, the author simply utilizes the story and the (apparently) principal character or characters, to bring out the background.
This is a fine line to draw, however, as it is evident that the two cannot be definitely separated: they are too closely interwoven; by a few touches they can be made quite reversible, so that they blend perfectly. This is the impression, for instance, that one gains from reading his two best plays, The Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard.

In Peasants this unique and inverted method was used to such good effect that both Chekhov and the editors feared for some time that the censor would not pass it because of the reality with which the background of peasantry was drawn. Written in 1897, it represents a mature product, full of the later Chekhov's fascinating group atmosphere. The poverty, filth and squalor of peasant life, the ignorance and hopelessness of the ex-serfs, are faithfully and sympathetically analyzed.

Chekhov does not say: here is a dirty hovel full of poor people, half-starved and living on misty dreams. He uses a finer method.

He begins the story in Moscow, showing Nikolay, a native of the peasant village of Zhukovo, who has been a waiter in a hotel for many years. He has married a Moscow woman, Olga, and they have a little girl, Sasha. He is taken ill, and returns with his family to his old home.

In the hut live his parents, his two married sisters and their children. Nikolay has acquired
refinement and culture. Olga and Sasha are both intelligent and well-mannered.

The contrast is immediate and vivid. All through the story, the wretched condition of the peasants is highly emphasized by being seen through the eyes of Olga and Sasha.

The Moscow girl reads to the village children, much to their admiration.

The people of the village look up to the newcomers, but Nikolay's relatives are sorry they have returned, as it means more mouths to feed, and no added help with the work.

A striking example of differentiated viewpoints may be seen in the following: a village holiday ... evening .... the peasants are drunk and swearing incessantly at one another

"so that Olga could only shudder and say:
'Oh, holy Saints!'

She was amazed that the abuse was incessant, and those who were loudest and most persistent in this foul language were the old men so near their end. And the girls and children heard the swearing, and were not in the least disturbed by it, and it was evident that they were used to it from their cradles."
A villager's hut burns down. This has no bearing on the plot, but simply gives and opportunity for group arrangement and high emotional pitch.

A cook who lost his cap in the fire, later joins a group telling stories in the hut of Nikolay's parents. He tells a long yarn of the good things he used to prepare for a General. Nikolay interrupts him:

"And used you to cook cutlets a la maréchal?"

"No".

Nikolay shook his head reproachfully and said:

"Tut, tut! You were not much of a cook!"

To this and the other stories, the little girls and the other peasants listen in fascination. Constantly the group emotion swings about this delicate crossing of conversational threads, rising supreme in the picture.

Chekhov presents the peasants' hazy attitude on religion, by having a discussion on the subject. Then he accelerates this feeling to the highest pitch by showing the raptures of the people, as a travelling shrine of the Holy Mother passes through the village. Everyone becomes ecstatic, but the next day "everything went on as before; and again there was the sound of coarse, drunken oaths from the tavern."
Nikolay dies after being cupped by an ignorant quack doctor.

Olga and Sasha are packed off back to Moscow.

The story is done ... the picture is finished. Nothing has happened, but one feels as if he had visited Zhukovo, or had seen a series of marvellous paintings depicting the life of the peasant village.

The Horsestealers (written in 1890)

To reiterate the credo of objectivity, an excerpt from another letter to Souvorin may prove of interest:

"You see, to depict horse-thieves in seven hundred lines I must all the time speak and think in their tone and feel in their spirit, otherwise, if I introduce subjectivity, the image becomes blurred and the story will not be as compact as all short stories ought to be ..... So let me tell you that they are not beggars but well-fed people, that they are people of a special cult, and that horsestealing is not simply theft, but a passion."

This also gives a clue to the inversion of method. On first reading the story, one is puzzled by
the effect. It seems to be entirely the narration of the unfortunate experiences of Yergunov, a hospital assistant, who stumbles into a den of horsethieves, having lost his way in a snowstorm. But the puzzling prominence of the background is annoying, until one realizes that the horsethieves are the picture, and that Yergunov is merely the contrasting color which brings out the heart of the painting.

He is not even an interesting figure in the first part of the story, but a braggart and a drunkard—one of the easy-going officials so common to the time, with no aim in life but to amuse himself and relieve his own boredom.

At the tavern are two lawless men and a girl. Yergunov begins to brag and tell stories of his travels, but Verik and the others ignore him and go on with their own talk, after twice catching him in a lie, so that there is nothing left for the poor fellow but to get drunk. Here is a subtle point: the outlaws catch the conventional person lying.

The situation grows rapidly, the horsethieves telling marvellous stories of the old wild days of lawless freedom, until one longs to ride with them and revel in their devil-may-care, happy-go-lucky life. They faced
all sorts of dangers and were afraid of nothing: an existence of desire and conquest. The forlorn insanity of Yergunov makes the colors all the more brilliant. The girl, Lyubka, furnishes the third contrasting element, by her flirtation with Merik. They indulge in an exotic, passionate dance ending in a prolonged kiss, much to the futile envy of the helpless Yergunov. This dance makes us realize that the flaming past of the old-time horsethieves still persists in Merik and his fellows.

Merik boasts to Lyubka: "I'll find out where your old mother's money is hidden, I'll murder her and cut your little throat for you, and after that I will set fire to the inn."

Following this exciting state of affairs (static), are a few pages of rapid action, one of the rare cases in Chekhov, but as effective as the most thrilling romance of Stevenson. For once, a situation develops, and Chekhov "lets us have it" in a flashing scene, instead of becoming reluctant and merely implying, which is the great charm of much of his work.

Merik yawns and goes out after whispering to Lyubka. She bolts the door and holds it against Yergunov, pretending to make love to him. This throws him completely off his balance, giving Merik ample time to escape with his horse.
Too late, he rushes out into the yard. Returning, he goes straight to Lyubka's room where she is pretending to be asleep.

"Tell me where my horse is, or I'll blow the life out of you", shouted Yergunov.
"Get away, dirty brute!" she said in a hoarse voice.

So he tries to maul her; but she is too strong, and beats him into semi-consciousness, until he can do nothing but stagger off into the parlor. It is dawm and he walks back to the hospital, wondering what is the meaning of the whole scheme of things.

He loses his position, but begins to think:

"And he thought about himself that he had not hitherto been a thief, a swindler, or even a brigand, simply because he could not, or had not yet met with a favorable opportunity."

The tale might well have ended at this point, but Chekhov is not yet satisfied; he wishes to make the glorious picture of the horsestealers indellible. So he carries us forward a year and a half. Yergunov now is a person who can understand the freedom of the lawless, but not the bondage of the conventional. It is a spring night. Suddenly he sees a red glow spreading over the sky. The story concludes as follows:
"Two carts drove by on the road; in one of them there was a woman asleep, in the other sat an old man with a cap on ....

'Grandfather, where is that fire?' asked Yergunov.

'Andrey Tchirikov's inn,' answered the old man.

And Yergunov recalled what had happened to him eighteen months before in the winter, in that very inn, and how Merik had boasted; and he imagined the old woman and Lyubka, with their throats cut, burning, and he envied Merik. And when he walked back to the tavern, looking at the houses of the rich publicans, cattle-dealers, and blacksmiths, he reflected how nice it would be to steal by night into some rich man's house!"

This is Chekhov's closest approach to romance in character study, and of course, he would choose horsethieves. It is a dynamic story, somewhat in the manner of Tolstoy, but handling the material of a whole novel in a short story. It makes an idyll of lawless folk who do what they please. It is as bright and concise in tone as most of the other tales are beautifully vague.

In A Woman's Kingdom, Chekhov depicts a highly intellectual young woman who has inherited a large factory. She is excruciatingly bored with the
tedium of her life. She idealizes a handsome workman, and even believes herself in love with him, announcing to the servants that she intends to marry him.

But her butler, at dinner time, reminds her gently of the appearance the fine young animal would make in her dining room, with her gay assemblage of guests. Why, he wouldn't even know what a fork was used for, and he might ....

And she suddenly realizes that it is impossible -- that there is no escape. Her one dream fades, her illusion is shattered, so she tells the butler to impress the other servants with the fact that she was only joking.

These are again fine shades of character. The young workman is the one vivid man, and the factory owner, the one outstanding woman, in a large group of lesser people. But he cannot be made to fit into her scheme of life. So the sticky dullness of her habits holds her fast, and she is doomed to the grey ennui: -- and we know instinctively that she will never escape from it.

But one might continue the analysis indefinitely. In summary of the chief points, emphasis must be laid on: objectivity; simplicity of direct and careful psychological portrayal; subtle contrasting of emotional values, in character with character, character with a group, and a group with character; absence of event-plot; and complete handling of situation in the mental state of
the characters, without dependance on external factors.

The one other short story writer with whom one associates subtlety in psychological literature, is Henry James. But even he allows his fine emotional shadings to be hung on plot events. The fact that the external situations are very minutely worked out, and that their significance is seemingly very slight, makes them no less important in James' construction. In *Paste*, for instance, the brilliant study of three characters depends entirely for its denouement, on the fact that the pearls were real, and not paste, as was at first supposed. Time after time his stories turn on microscopic events -- indeed, his plots remind one of the monk who inscribed the Lord's Prayer on the head of a pin -- but they are none the less unnatural. They make beautiful stories, but a close analysis will show that their effect is far less subtle than that which Chekhov achieves, time after time, by consistently refusing the temptation of hanging his psychology on convenient events.

The true subtlety of psychological literature is that which is drawn from real life, selected and arranged into a suitable artistic pattern. Our everyday surroundings are simply overrunning with plots, but they are elusive, difficult to recognize, and the writer is too often tempted to invent rather than to observe.

Tolstoy said: "You can invent anything you like, but you cannot invent psychology."
Ulysses may be scientifically accurate, but it is not artistic because there is no selection. Every reaction is noted. This is very tiresome.

Chekhov uses none of the tricks of Maupassant, who, while never approving nor disapproving of his characters, and while often painting them vividly, depends largely on event-complication for his major effect, and on a sudden solution at the conclusion. This makes his stories essentially romantic, in spite of the searching light of emotional verity which he throws onto his figures.

Chekhov never builds around a thesis as Kipling and Galsworthy do, nor on a single effect such as Poe always aimed for, nor on a definite philosophy like Conrad, nor on mysticism, as Maeterlinck does. He constructs the multiplicity of lesser effects of ordinary life, the illusion of reality. This is only one method -- and who can say whether it is finer or more artistic than those of romance and mysticism? Realism is prose is comparable to free verse in poetry -- just one field of expression -- and only narrow fanatics will proclaim either of these modes as the one and infallible literary ideal. But in his chosen medium, Chekhov stands unsurpassed.

The western world is just beginning to realize that the great Russian has many secrets to reveal, many helpful suggestions for the realist.
Katherine Mansfield's work is the only visible result of his influence, up to the present time. Her stories, *The Fly*, *The Doll's House*, and *The Garden Party*, show that she studied his method deeply, and that it is quite as applicable to our western life as it was to the Moscow "Intelligentsia" of 1890.

But one predicts that in the future, both Chekhov's method and style will be studied and utilized more and more, as veritable textbooks of psychological art.
PART FIVE

CHEKHOV'S STYLE
The quality in literature which we term style, is probably its vaguest and most elusive characteristic. It includes word order for beauty of sound, manner of description, and characterization and narration in general, and the arrangement of material for artistic effect.

In translations, style suffers more than any other factor. Every language has a peculiar and individualized mode of saying what it wishes to say, and no translations can ever quite get the same effect -- especially is this true of the Russian, which is said to be overflowing with synonyms of delicate shading and fine lines of meaning. Many writers who are familiar with Russian, say that it presents a finer medium of literary expression than any other language.

So, in speaking of style, one must admit that, although he speaks of Chekhov, he is partially discussing Constance Garnett.

One has discussed in general his method of securing the illusion of reality. So we shall now look at a few of the details. Any survey of his style must include:

(1) Minimization.
(2) Means of vivifying single characters.
(3) Manner of securing ensemble effects.
(4) Poetic treatment of setting.
Chekhov saw art through the eyes of psychology. The life about him was shifting and evanescent in its shallow fluctuations; its only depth was in its boredom; it was gaily dismal; its sustained color was grey and its tone minor. Had he been more subjective in writing, he might have produced long novels, embodying a profound philosophy, and carrying the same characters through the whole gamut of human experience. But this was not Chekhov's aim.

By reading a number of his stories, one gets this effect of totality, but he never probed too deeply in any one place. That is for the reader to do. His people say what is necessary to express moods and traits, moments of high light or of ennui, and they say nothing more. This elimination of all superfluities in conversation is the first and one of the most notable qualities of his style. He minimizes the situations to their very essence, reducing the expressions of character to the least common denominator. This is a bit alarming at first. The talk seems as wavering and aimless as the dialogue we hear constantly from the people about us. But soon we see that every phrase has some significance, that the reiteration of a single word or sentence becomes typical of a person and recalls him instantly into the foreground. We know from the snatches of conversation
that the individuals are true to type, just as we learn to anticipate nature of the verbal responses of our friends to any given stimulus.

In *The Teacher of Literature*, the bride's father, in all moments of indignation, condemns anything and everything as "loutishness", so that whenever Chekhov wishes us to see the old man, he is pictured as violently denouncing some observation, or the world in general:

"It's loutishness! I shall tell him so to his face: 'It's loutishness, sir!' I shall say".

This effect is instantaneous. We see the old man whenever his presence is necessary to maintain the plus-minus balance. We hear him shout.

There is an evasive calm about Chekhov. But it is deceptive -- achieved by flinging emotions and ideas back and forth one against another, always with his uncanny sense of value, until they balance perfectly.

Chekhov becomes more and more reticent as he approaches a tense scene, or a moment of heightened or stressed emotion, thereby throwing the incident into high relief. The characters live through the fewest possible strokes of the artist's brush. In a letter to Gorky, he defined grace as "the least possible number of movements over some definite action."
The most apparently insignificant conversations suddenly rise to great power, opening whole fields of human nature, veritable psychological landscapes, to the astounded reader. Emotion is shown to be unstable, flambouyant, evanescent, easily shattered. Chekhov never loses sight of the merciless quality in every human being, of failure to understand other people. We can never quite comprehend the viewpoint of another person, because each of us is too much absorbed in his own. In trying to out-think those about us, we continually miss most of what they might contribute to our own store of knowledge.

These moods, created in the individual, are woven into group emotions, by playing them off, one against another. In this Chekhov excels. He creates ensemble scenes, comparable to those of actual life, by presenting every person as an individual, differentiated from every other person: -- never a lump of stereotyped humanity, grouped for effect, as in Wilde's drawing-room scenes. Every person is essentially alone in the group.

This creation of multiplied character in groups is a summary of the author's own reactions given to the reader entirely through the characters. (This almost approaches a definition of objectivity).
"This is one of the differences between life and art: in life the group mood is casual; in art, intentional. In Chekhov it is intentionally casual; but the intention is hidden from us: this is good art."

It is good art because it creates an immediately recognizable pattern of life.

Chekhov achieves a prismatic effect -- tears and laughter; violent passion and abundant generosity; sullenness; meanness; sudden violent delights -- which brush and tangle among the characters until the whole becomes symphonic, a beautiful orchestration, played so subtly and brilliantly by the author, that we fall unconsciously into mood after mood and are soon completely ensnared.

The last, and one of the most skillful and impressive characteristics of Chekhov's style, is his handling of background. The appeal, the poetry, of his settings are due to simplicity, and to his absolute comprehension of how to make vivid pictures. Most writers simply describe external objects in relation to each other, and the results in a more or less hazy image, according to the reader's imaginative scope.

I. William Gerhardi: Anton Chekhov
Chekhov gave the key to his own method in a letter to his brother:

"In descriptions of Nature one ought to seize upon the little particulars, grouping them in such a way that, in reading, when you shut your eyes, you get a picture.

For instance, you will get the full effect of a moonlight night if you write that on the mill-dam a little glowing star-point flashed from the neck of a broken bottle, and the round, black shadow of a dog, or a wolf, emerged and ran, etc. Nature becomes animated if you are not squeamish about employing comparisons of her phenomena with ordinary human activities."

In The Steppe, for instance, he shows us the vast plains through the eyes of a little boy (who is beautifully characterized). The steppe becomes idyllic in the child's mind, with its many-colored imagination. The subject is poetic, and Chekhov knew that to picture it by means of the child, would bring out its very soul to the mature reader.

We feel the emotional play in the characters of every story, and Chekhov, knowing this, wisely paints his background through them, instead of separating it and making it impersonal; so that the characters live in their setting instead of always seeming somewhat irrelevant.
The most effective way to illustrate this surprising faculty of the author, is to quote from Gusev. He is on shipboard, feversick, returning home from service in the Far East. He naturally thinks of his native village.

"There was a smell of hay and of dung. There were oxen standing with drooping heads by the ship's rail. One, two, three; eight of them! And there was a little horse. Gusev put out his hand to stroke it, but it shook its head, showed its teeth, and tried to bite his sleeve.

"Damned brute ..." said Gusev angrily. The two of them he and the soldier, threaded their way to the head of the ship, then stood at the rail and looked up and down. Overhead deep sky, bright stars, peace and stillness, exactly as at home in the village, below darkness and disorder. The tall waves were resounding, no one could tell why. Whichever wave you looked at each one was trying to rise higher than all the rest and to chase and crush the next one; after it a third as fierce and hideous flew noisily, with a glint of light on its white crest."
This is the method of the lyric poet, employed in the objective sense. Passages similar to this one abound in the various stories. They are as important as any other single factor in making the characters balance. And they lend a rare charm and beauty to the pictures which furnish welcome relief from the suspense of accumulated emotion.

Little has been said of Chekhov as a humorist, but this would be subject matter for a whole thesis in itself. Let it suffice to say that his humor is that of the irrelevancies of ordinary conversation, and the joke of existence in general which is ever apparent to the unbiased observer. Often his plots are built on the stark, bitter irony of life, but they are developed with a sympathy and an understanding which lifts them always into the realm of beauty. Chekhov smiles at the jest of life, but never laughs rudely, and never jeers, and often one can feel that the smile verges on tears.
PART SIX

THE CAREER OF CHEKHOV

AS A DRAMATIST
VI.

To study Chekhov's plays in detail would also form a complete dissertation in itself. But this paper would not be complete without a survey of his dramatic career in its general aspects. His writing for the stage falls into two classes: one-act farces; and four-act dramas (with the exception of On The Highroad which will be noted further, and The Swan Song, which is more of a Shakespearian dialogue than a play).

Chekhov was always more or less fascinated by dramatic writing, but he was afraid of the stage. Not until the last years of his life, which brought the production of The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard, and during which he was closely associated with the Moscow Art Theatre, did this aversion disappear.

His early plays were written for money, and are not worthy of much consideration. In this period he spoke of the stage only in disparaging terms: "The novel is a lawful wife, but the stage is a noisy, flashy and insolent mistress"; "An evil disease of the towns"; "The gallows on which dramatists are hung"; etc.
Chekhov tried acting while still in the gymnasium, and he wrote two plays: one, a long tragedy, *Fatherless*; and the other a vaudeville, *Not For Nothing Did the Hen Cluck*; both of which he later destroyed.

In 1884 he wrote *On The Highroad*, which was censored by a German official who called it: "A depressing and dirty piece -- cannot be licensed." It remained in burial until 1916 when a copy was found in the Censor's office, given up, and published. It had been a sort of family legend, and after Chekhov's death it sank from mere rumor to a complete mystery.

A unique position among his dramatic works must be accorded to this play. "In *The Highroad* we see, in embryonic form, the whole later method of his plays -- the deliberate contrast between two strong characters, the careful individualization of each person in a fairly large group by way of an introduction to the main theme, the concealment of the catastrophe, germ-wise, in the actual character of the characters, and the creation of a distinctive group atmosphere."

It is also a notable feature that Chekhov wrote this play about the moujics, gave it a stuffy I.

*Julius West: Introduction to Plays, Vol. II.*
and intense atmosphere, filled it with a deep mystic note of the pilgrims, and a burning thirst for vodka in the hero. It is really a fine piece of work, and had it not been for the ridiculous censorship, it might have been rewritten to advantage.

By 1887, when his reputation as a short story writer was firmly established, the theatre interests began urging Chekhov to write plays. His reticence was finally overcome by the pressing need for money, and he wrote Ivanov in two and a half weeks, in a furor of protest against some play he had seen in Moscow. He wrote to Souvorin:

"I have fostered the arrogant dream of summing up everything which has so far been said of pining and lonely people and of putting an end with my Ivanov to all such writings. It seemed to me that all Russian writers and dramatists have felt the need of delineating a despondent man and that they have all written instinctively, without having any definite picture or concept of the matter . . ."

And with its successful production, the old dim Russian character was given a final burial. Chekhov, like Sheridan, did what everyone else had
been doing, and did it so well that the old voices were silenced. A new era was dawning on the Russian stage, and era of absolute naturalism, followed in the natural order of things, by the modern theatre of moods and symbolism.

Its Moscow debut was a notable failure, but Chekhov rewrote it, and its production in St. Petersburg was an overwhelming success. It had the originality and freshness of his peculiar style, and came at an opportune moment for the Russian stage. The critics lavished praise on it, and Chekhov was acclaimed as a playwright. Even he admitted, in his quaint manner:

"Ivanov has had enormous, phenomenal success; in St. Petersburg there are two heroes of the day, Siemiradski's 'Nude Phryne' and 'Dressed-up I'; both of us make a noise."

Ivanov is not a great play. It has structural weaknesses and lacks the fine emotional weaving of his later work, but Chekhov was learning to polish and arrange the type of ensemble which was later to make him a real figure in the drama.

A series of rapidly-written, popular, one-act farces followed: The Tragedian in Spite of Himself; The Bear; The Proposal; The Wedding; and The Anniversary. They are "light reading", of a
vaudeville nature, full of shouting, and capable of
drawing boisterous laughter. Occasional flashes of
real dramatic quality are present, but they have
little value except to show what the popular theatre
demanded. Especially The Bear was enormously suc-
cessful. It played all over Russia, and formed a
lucrative source of income for the young writer, for
a number of years.

The Sea Gull was produced in 1896, and won
instant applause through its handling by the Moscow
Art Theatre players. Chekhov tried to adhere more
closely to the western stage conventions in this than
in any other of his plays. It is the least impres-
sive of his four-act dramas. It is full of conver-
sations about life and literature and has too much
love element; it begins forte and ends pianissimo.
It is interesting to read because the character
Trigorin, a writer, is almost wholly autobiographi-
cal in his conversations on the life of an author.

Uncle Vanya came next, marking the rapid
rise of Chekhov's dramatic power. It has beauty and
good characterization, but still it is not a remark-
able work. It denotes his transition from merely
good drama, to the artistic heights of his last two
plays. His analytical genius was increasing and
appeared with a sudden burst in The Three Sisters,
which, with The Cherry Orchard, will keep Chekhov in the foreground as long as realistic plays are staged.

The Three Sisters was his first play expressly written for the Art Theatre, and in it, the method and style which made him a great story writer, blossomed into dramatic expression. It deals with the provincial "Intelligentsia". Its tone, like that of so many of his stories, is the drab monotony of satiate existence. Provincial life dried people up.

The keynote of the play is the desire of the three women to move to Moscow. There is no reason why they should not do so: they have money, and are not forced to stay. But they are held by the firm grasp of their habitual existence, and there is no escape.

The scenes are restrained, minimized, filled with moments of loosened restraint and sharpened attention, quiet, perfectly balanced, and deftly woven. The characters simply live on the stage. There is no action. Across this beautiful, subtly-created background, a vivid passion flares: -- that of Masha (the middle one of the sisters in age) and Vershinin, a colonel in the regiment stationed in the town where the sisters live. Both are married, but they are perfect lovers. There is no violent love-making, but through a few marvellously constructed
lines, we feel the power of their emotions. In the fourth act, the regiment is leaving for a distant post. Veshchinin waits to say farewell, his watch in hand. The youngest sister calls Masha...

"Olga: Here she comes.

(Enter Masha)

Versh: I came to say goodbye...

(Olga steps aside a little, so as not to be in their way)

Masha: (Looking him in the face) Goodbye...

(Prolonged kiss)

Olga: Don't, don't. (Mahsa is crying bitterly)

Versh: Write to me... Don't forget! Let me go... It's time. Take her, Olga Sergeyevna... It's time... I'm late...

(He kisses Olga's hand in evident emotion, embraces Masha once more, and goes out quickly.)"

Contrasted with the accumulated emotional tension of the preceding scene, this quiet and dignified farewell, so natural and spontaneous, makes an unforgottably beautiful effect. The sustained note of gloom is broken by Chebutikin, the old army doctor, who says:

"I'm tired (takes a paper from his pocket)
Let 'em cry .... (sings softly) 'Tarara-
boom-deay, it is my washing day' .... Isn't
it all the same!"

Again the individual is alone in the group.
They talk of vague future hope; of going to
Moscow; the regiment is gone, the band music fading
into the distance.

"Chebutikin: (Sings softly) 'Tara ... ra-
boom-deay .... it is my washing day' ....
(reads a paper) It's all the same! It's
all the same!

Olga: If only we could know, if only we
could know!

(Curtain)"

This is one of the finest endings in all
drama. It is naturalism supreme, as indeed, is the
whole play, along with all of the Cherry Orchard.
The people simply live and the emotional structure
is perfect.

In these two plays Chekhov develops an
art peculiar to himself -- scenes from life -- with
some of the most subtle and artistic groupings of
characters in all literature.

The Cherry Orchard, written in the year of
his death, pictures a member of the rising merchant
class, taking possession of the estate of Mme. Ranevsky,
one of the declining aristocratic landowners. She could have saved all the rest of her property by sacrificing the cherry garden, but none of the family could even begin to understand giving up this cherished tract, so all is lost.

The final farewell in the last act again rises to superb orchestration, in scattered ejaculations, and in the contrasting of the viewpoints of Mme. Ranevsky and her brother Gaev, with those of her children. Dozens of pages might describe these effects, but still not arrive at the means of securing them, for the secret defies analysis -- it is Chekhov.
PART SEVEN

CHEKHOV'S ATTITUDE TOWARD LIFE

CONCLUSION
VII.

Chekhov's naturalism in drama, and the finished realism of his stories, are the product of a distinguished line of literary ancestors. Gogol is usually thought of as the father of Russian realism, but the seeds were really sown in the latter half of the eighteenth century, in two novels: The Captain's Daughter, by Pushkin; and The Hero of Our Own Time, by Lermontov. The trend away from romanticism began in these books. For the first time, the everyday man emerged, to some extent, from the protoplasmic dreams of romance: the man in relation to society and not to sentimentalism.

Gogol, in the early nineteenth century, continued the study of humanity in prose writing. Dead Souls, his greatest novel, is a marvellous picture of a commonplace man with a novel idea. It is in part a satire on serfdom, and is filled with delightful humor and touching pathos. Every one of us can see something of himself in the hero, Chichikov. His play, The Inspector-General (Revisor), marked a new era of the Russian stage. Russia was ready for great realistic writers, and she found them: Turgenev - Tolstoy - Dostoievski - Chekhov - Gorky: a series of names unsurpassed in a single century of
prose literature in any other country.

In a succession of beautiful and artistic novels, Turgenev analyzed the life of his country. *Fathers and Sons* introduced the Nihilist -- the man Bazarov -- who believed in nothing. The deceptive title *A Sportsman's Note-Book* gave serfdom one of its hardest blows by picturing peasant life just as it was, without idealization or emphasis on exceptional sordidness. Turgenev's star flamed across western Europe, breaking down the language barrier between the West and Russia. Although it has paled somewhat during the rise of Tolstoy and Dostoievski, both more dynamic and more powerful, but not more artistic writers, Turgenev lives on as a classic realist.

Tolstoy, with his tremendous power, a philosopher (although often a puzzled one), and a superb artist, is known to every reader of eastern novels. *Anna Karenina, The Kreutzer Sonata, Resurrection,* and his plays, *The Powers of Darkness* and *Redemption,* are common titles in literature. He loved the truth and was a bitter fighter against every lie of life.

Dostoievski, with *The Brothers Karamazov,* *The Idiot, Crime and Punishment,* and *Memoirs From a Dead-House,* is recognized as one of the most profound analysts of the degredations of the human soul. His books are filled with flaring passion, wild and exotic -- almost a whole drunken Russia -- but one feels
that he loves mankind in spite of its greatest weaknesses and its most lurid mistakes. He lacks the balance and the delicate artistry of Turgenev and Chekhov, but his novels are vital and real.

Chekhov, opposed to this growing tradition of novel-writing, of tremendous dynamic productions, of passionate writers, presented a calm front of scepticism. In answer to Souvorin's challenge that his plays lacked "alcohol", were, indeed, "lemonade", he confessed:

"We have neither immediate nor remote aims, and in our soul there is a great empty space. We have no politics, we do not believe in revolution, we have no God ..... Flog us and we can do no more!"

He stood still because, in his mind, there was a continual harangue of Shaw and Chesterton, of anarchist and priest, of psychologist and poet, all shouting at the same time. So he merely let them shout, listened to any and all of them when they had anything worth while to say, and wrote.

Chekhov was not a philosopher. He drew a multitude of conclusions from life and literature, but he was loath to generalize, and always in doubt as to the results obtained. To Chekhov, by every
mathematical problem of logic, life made nonsense. Man exists and can be observed. No one knows the why behind life. All philosophy is guesswork. So Chekhov's whole outlook is one of inconclusiveness. He draws saints and sinners with an equally sympathetic brush; by his very abstraction, he walks in the shoes of every person of whom he writes. As Mr. Gerhardi observes:

"It is the cruder writers, with undigested things to say, who like to end on a conclusive note. Their passion sees them through. Whereas Chekhov's passion is a passion for dispassion."

In this, is he not, perhaps, more conclusive than most of our "realists" and "romantics" -- the truth-mongers of the literary moment -- in that his whole theme is the demonstration that truth itself is shifting and inconclusive?

"The mob thinks it knows and understands everything; and the more stupid it is, the more it thinks it understands, and the wider it imagines its outlook to be." (Letter)

The attitude of observer is questioned also. Chekhov's philosophic credo was doubt. He met life at every corner with an interrogation.
"So long as a man likes the splashing of a fish, he is a poet; but when he knows that the splashing is nothing but the chase of the weak by the strong, he is a thinker; but when he does not understand what sense there is in the chase, or what use in the equilibrium which results from destruction, he is becoming silly and dull, as he was when a child. And the more he knows and thinks, the sillier he becomes." (Letter)

"I am afraid of those who look for a tendency between the lines, and who are determined to regard me either as a liberal or a conservative ....

I am not a liberal, not a conservative, not a believer in gradual progress, not a monk, not an indifferentist. I should like to be a free artist and nothing more ...." (Letter)

In this letter he strikes his own middle C of objectivity. It is the writer's place to be an artist to his highest possibilities and nothing more -- it is the reader's place to judge. The inevitable test of time bears this out.

Chekhov is impatient of all generalities masquerading as progress:
"Only those who are indifferent are able to see things clearly, to be just and to work. Of course, I am only speaking of intelligent people of fine natures." (Letter)

Chekhov stands still and watches. He neutralizes and is reluctant to judge. He has no axe to grind. His delicate and incisive humor maintains his wonderful intellectual poise.

He has great hopes for literary criticism of the future, but his attitude on the critics of his own day was one of just ridicule and gentle condemnation. Gorky, in his Reminiscences of Chekhov, tells of his following statement:

"Critics are like horseflies which prevent a horse from plowing", he said with his wise smile, "The horse works ... a fly settles on his flanks and tickles and buzzes... he has to twitch his skin and swish his tail. And what does the fly buzz about? It wants to proclaim: 'Look, I too am living on the earth. See, I can buzz too'.... For twenty-five years I have read criticisms of my stories, and I don't remember a single remark of any value or one word of valuable advice. Only once S -- made an impression on me ... He said I would die in a ditch, drunk".
In conclusion, one might build an airy castle of superlatives, and still say nothing. Chekhov's place in Russian literature is already firmly established, and only time can ascertain whether his appeal to the West will grow stronger into permanence, or recede into mere curiosity.

I feel now, after completing this dull discussion, that I shall never tire of reading his sketches, but as he himself would say: -- in a few years .... who knows?