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# I

## CHEKOV IN CONTEXT

## I

ALEXANDER CHUDAKOV

## Dr Chekhov: a biographical essay (29 January 1860–15 July 1904)

Chekhov was a first-generation intellectual: his grandfather was a former serf, his father a small shopkeeper. ‘There is peasant blood in me’, he wrote (*Letters*, vol. v, p. 283).<sup>1</sup> But in the history of Russian culture, the name of Chekhov has become synonymous with intelligence, good upbringing – and refinement. How did these qualities come to be acquired by a provincial boy who spent his crucial formative years up to the age of nineteen in a small Russian town? Taganrog, Chekhov’s birthplace, was typical of Russian provincial towns of the time: taverns, little shops, ‘not a single sign without a spelling mistake’; oil lamps, and wastelands thickly overgrown with weeds. Chekhov’s memories, of his ‘green’ years growing up in Taganrog, are full of references to puddles and unpaved streets.

Taganrog was also a southern port. The second floor of the Chekhovs’ house where Anton spent his early secondary school years overlooked the harbour crammed at the height of summer with steamers and sailing ships. One could walk several miles along the shore and not see a single Russian ship – instead, there were vessels from Turkey, the Greek Archipelago, Italy, Spain: the *San Antonio*; the *Sophia*, the *Ogios Gerasimos*, the *Mouludi Bagri*. They brought wine from Madeira and Asia Minor, lemons, oranges, olive oil from Provence, and spices. Taganrog was the staging post for the supply of provisions to the whole Azov region. By the time Chekhov was born this trade had already passed its peak, but it remained extremely active throughout his schooldays. The streets were filled with the babble of foreign languages. Near the port was a street with coffee-shops, and when the weather was fine the tables were packed with Turks, Greeks, French and English. Pavel Yegorovich Chekhov’s store was on the ground floor of a house, and for a time the first floor housed a casino. Nearby was the London Hotel, with a female band to entertain the sailors in the evenings. Taganrog was the Russian equivalent of the Mediterranean French ports.

Pavel Chekhov decided to give his elder sons a Greek education. There were six children: five boys and one girl, Maria Chekhova. Chekhov’s

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younger brother, Michael, recalled: 'At that time rich Greeks were the cream of Taganrog society . . . and father was convinced his children should follow the Greek example, and perhaps even complete their education at Athens University.'<sup>2</sup> So Anton and his brothers were sent to the Greek school. Nothing came of this, though they spent one year studying under the terrifying headmaster, Nikolai Vuchina.<sup>3</sup> They spent the whole summer bathing in the sea, swimming long distances. When Chekhov, by then a well-known writer, was returning from Sakhalin via the Indian Ocean, he amused himself by diving from the bow of the ship while it was sailing at full speed, and catching a rope hanging from the stern. Once he saw a shark in the company of pilot-fish. This episode is described in his story, 'Gusev' (1890). The impressions of a winter sea with its terrible storms are reflected in Chekhov's story 'On Christmas Night' (1883).

Taganrog was a southern town, surrounded closely on all sides by the Steppe. Anton and his brothers spent their summer holidays in the village of Knyazhi with their grandfather, a steward on the estate of Countess Platova. The village was forty miles from the town and the journey in a bullock cart took more than a day. At night they camped out on the Steppe, under the stars. After six years at grammar school, Anton spent a summer on the estate of the parents of his private pupil, Petya Kravtsov. That summer, the Taganrog student and 'tutor' became a skilled shot and an excellent horseman. Many years later, in 1898, Chekhov wrote: 'I love the Don Steppe. At one time it was like home to me and I knew every little gully' (*Letters*, vol. VII, p. 322). The Steppe landscapes are described in his earliest stories ('29th June' and 'The Mistress' (1882)), and in his first major work, the story 'The Steppe' (1888). From childhood experience of the Steppe, nature became a part of his very being. During his trip to Siberia in 1890, he took delight in studying nature at close quarters, and in his letters he describes with rapture how for a whole month he watched the sunrise from beginning to end. He was acutely aware of his bond with nature; his moods reacted to the changes in the weather like a barometer. The influence that nature exerts on the human psyche is reflected in stories such as 'The Student' (1894) and 'The Murder' (1895). So trees, flowers, clouds, dogs and wolves feel and think like people, as demonstrated in 'Agafia', 'Rusty' ('Kashtanka'), 'Patch' ('Beloloby', 1895) and 'Terror' (1892). They grieve, rejoice, worry and feel sad. Many Russian writers have portrayed nature and animals. Perhaps the works of Sergei Aksakov or Mikhail Prishvin<sup>4</sup> will survive to become unique evidence of how our planet *used* to be, and what amazing creatures lived on it. But for the present, we are more concerned with the experience of Chekhov who wrote not about the solitary life of man at one with nature and the birds of the

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air, but about the everyday encounters of modern civilised man pursuing an urban existence, living in a flat or a suburban dacha. Both in his writing and in his personal life, Chekhov offered us examples to follow in our dealings with our fellow creatures.

The theatre in Taganrog was far from typical of the Russian provincial stage. How many of the smaller theatres could be regularly visited by touring Italian opera companies? Or by Sarasate,<sup>5</sup> or Liszt's pupil, Laura Carer. Tommaso Salvini sang the title role in *Otello*. The repertoire featured operettas by Suppé, Lehar, Lecocq and Offenbach. Perhaps these other aspects of Taganrog served only to accentuate 'the lethargy and boredom' of day-to-day reality.

On 23 August 1868 Anton Chekhov entered the preparatory class of the grammar school, where he was to study for the next eleven years (he repeated the third and fifth years). It was a classical grammar school and special significance was ascribed to the study of classical languages. At the graduation examinations, Chekhov got top grades in German and Scripture. In his earlier years the young Anton was hindered by having to help his father in the shop after school, working there until late at night. But if the work at the shop – under the sign 'Tea, Coffee and Other Groceries' – did not help Chekhov make progress at school, it certainly helped him in his creative writing. The shop sold a variety of goods, including oil, fish, flour, tobacco, buttons, coffee, knives, confectionery, candles, spades, shoe polish, and herrings. It provided not only an education in objects, but it also served as an animated lexicon. A shop in the provinces was a kind of club where people went not only to buy things, but also to drink a glass of vodka or wine. It was frequented by cooks, shop assistants, the wives of officials, policemen, cab-drivers, fishermen, teachers, school students, and sailors. They all talked, so from his early childhood Anton listened to the language of people of the most varied occupations. Later critics were to be amazed by Chekhov's knowledge of nautical terms, the language of timber merchants or of haberdashery assistants.

From early childhood Chekhov was kept busy with domestic chores: he shopped, cleaned the flat, fetched water from the well and even did the laundry. Household duties are exhausting in their monotony, in the meaningless repetition day after day of the same tasks, and such duties are especially burdensome for a young person. And not only for a young person – Chekhov would show later in his writing how anyone who lives only in the material world and lacks the ability to resist it becomes completely stifled by the everyday, and then the spiritual gives way completely to the material. In describing this situation, Chekhov understood this not merely as a detached observer but knew it from personal experience.

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No less forcibly, Chekhov was exposed from early childhood to the full force of the Church Slavonic language through compulsory church attendance, singing in the church choir, religious rituals at home and studying the Bible. But all this 'brought A. P. into contact with the beautiful ancient language of Church Slavonic, never allowing him to forget it, as happened with the great majority of Russian intellectuals, and nurturing in him an acute feeling for the simple vernacular tongue'.<sup>6</sup> Thus this childhood, divided by the airless store and the open sea, the corridors of the grammar school and the endless Steppe, between the narrow milieu of the petty clerks and the free and easy natural life of the country people, offered a vivid contrast between nature and the material world which promised to foster an artist with a most unconventional aesthetic perception of life.

Chekhov's father went bankrupt and was facing prison, so he and the family moved to Moscow. Anton spent the period from 1876 to 1879 alone in Taganrog, making a living as a tutor whilst managing to send money to his parents. It was a time of solitude during which his character took shape.

In 1879, he joined the Faculty of Medicine at Moscow University, where his lecturers were such eminent medical scientists as Grigory Zakharyin, Aleksei Ostroumov and Nikolai Sklifasovsky. Early on, he became acquainted with the theories of Charles Darwin, which he continued to study after graduating: 'I'm reading Darwin. What a treat! I simply adore him' (*Letters*, vol. I, p. 213). Studying the natural sciences 'exerted a colossal influence on the whole framework of his thinking. For him, the truths of the natural sciences radiated a poetic light and it was such truths as these, rather than socio-political doctrines, which shaped his fundamental perception of life as it is, and as it *should* be, and of man's place.'<sup>7</sup> This is confirmed by Chekhov, who in 1899, wrote in his autobiography: 'There is no doubt that my study of medicine strongly affected my work in literature' (*Works*, vol. xvi, p. 271).

Even as a first-year student, Chekhov was already contributing short stories to comic magazines (his first story appeared in *The Dragonfly* in 1880, but his main publisher was the magazine *Fragments*). It was not untypical for writers to start their careers in popular publications: this was true of Nikolai Nekrasov, Leonid Andreyev, Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, to name but a few. But none of them published as many comic stories, sketches, spoof advertisements, scenes or anecdotes as did Chekhov. It is widely believed that this involvement with comic magazines distracted Chekhov from serious literary work. But it was not as simple as that. Comic magazines offered freedom of form: there were only two requirements – humour and conciseness. Nothing else, whether plot, composition, technique or style, was bound by any literary rules. None of

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these publications belonged to any 'established' literary school or style. The small press was by its very nature eclectic. Authors were free to write in any manner, invent new techniques, modify the old conventions and experiment with new forms.

Chekhov realised this very early on. Like any great talent, he knew how to turn any circumstances to his own advantage. He was forever experimenting with new styles, assuming new *noms de plumes*, exploring ever changing areas of life. If one looks at stories he wrote in the first five years of his career, it is difficult to discover a social stratum, profession or trade that is *not* represented amongst his characters. There are peasants and landowners, shop assistants and merchants, sextons and priests, policemen and tramps, detectives and thieves, schoolteachers and students, medical orderlies and doctors, civil servants of all ranks, soldiers and generals, coquettes and princesses, reporters and writers, conductors and singers, actors, prompters, impresarios, artists, cashiers, bankers, lawyers, hunters, tavern-keepers, street-cleaners. From the beginning, Chekhov was an innovator who limited himself to no one area of subject matter, a writer of universal social and stylistic range. Yet for the reader there exist two Chekhovs side by side: the one who wrote 'Fat and Thin' (1883), 'A Chameleon' (1884), 'A Horse's Name' (1885), 'The Complaints Book'; and the other famous for 'A Dreary Story' (1889), 'The Artist's Story' (Chekhov's title is 'The House with the Mezzanine' (1896)), and 'A Lady with a Little Dog' (1899). What could these 'two' authors possibly have in common? Certainly that was his contemporaries' view. In 1897, the prominent critic Nikolai Mikhailovsky wrote: 'It is difficult to see anything in common between 'Peasants' (1897) and 'Ivanov' (1887–89), between 'The Steppe', 'Ward Number 6' (1892), 'The Black Monk' (1894), and vaudevilles like *The Bear* (1888), or the numerous comic stories.'<sup>8</sup> But in reality they are closely linked: Chekhov's 'humorous' past had a significant bearing on the evolution of his innovative creative thought. His early works contain the first sketches, the silhouettes, of his future acclaimed characters: Bugrov in 'A Living Chattel' (1882) foreshadows Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), while other characters prefigure those in the later works, such as Toporkov in 'Belated Blossom' (1882), 'Ionytch' (1898) (Hingley's title is 'Doctor Startsev'); the lathe operator Petrov in 'Sorrow' (1885) – and the coffin-maker Yakov in 'Rothschild's Violin' (1894), and many others.

Many of the artistic principles, explored by Chekhov in his first five years as a writer, remained constant for the rest of his career. There were preliminary expositions of the situation, no excursions into the characters' past, or similar introductions to the narrative – it always began instantly. It is the characters who create the action, and there is no explanation or, more

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accurately, *exposition*, as to the causes of these actions. As Chekhov wrote: 'Characters must be introduced in the middle of a conversation so that the reader has the impression they have been talking for some time' (*Works*, vol. IV, p. 359). The avoidance of extended authorial comment, as well as the famous Chekhovian evocation of landscape, are also traceable to his early work. Equally, many of the distinctive features of his dramatic works have the same 'humorous' genealogy, such as random or meaningless remarks through mutual misunderstandings, and so on. Thus, it is not a character's biography or some universal 'problem' that furnishes the basis of a comic story, but invariably some quite specific everyday disagreement or situation. For example, a character finds himself in the wrong place (the hen-house instead of the dacha), or is mistaken for somebody else (a swindler is taken for a doctor). Such mishaps occur all the time in everyday life and a comic story cannot exist in isolation from them. No matter how profound or sharply satirical the content may be (in, for example, 'Fat and Thin', 'The Death of a Clerk' (1883), 'A Chameleon' (1884), his comic stories are always developed out of an entirely concrete situation.

In his late prose, Chekhov focussed on more complex socio-psychological problems, but again they were never made explicit or central to the plot. The plot never revolved around such a problem, as is the case with Dostoyevsky. Or around a character's life-story as in Turgenev or Goncharov. As with the earlier works, the basis of the narrative is always furnished by some particular circumstances of everyday life. It could even be said that every problem is resolved against a particular background drawn from everyday life. But that is not quite accurate: everyday life is not the background, the backdrop to the scene; it lies at the very heart of the plot, is interwoven with it. The hero of a comic story is steeped in the material world. He cannot exist or be presented outside this world. In Chekhov's stories he is depicted in a bathhouse, a hospital, a railway carriage, a horse-drawn tram. He is depicted while fishing – or retrieving orange peel from a decanter.

Circumstantial detail permeates Chekhov's late prose as much as it does his comic stories. Characters meditate and philosophise while bathing, riding in a carriage or doing the rounds at a clinic, breaking off to deal with some mundane trifle or other.

Every character in the comic stories, whether a clerk, telegraphist, reporter, actor with a provincial company, or guest in some cheap hotel, invariably has some problem to deal with: how to get to a dacha, how to get to sleep when the next-door or upstairs neighbours are playing the piano or wailing about how to retrieve their own new boots in return for the worn-out ones that they took by mistake. Perhaps such characters help

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to reveal the tight bonds between people and the objects that surround them and so lead Chekhov to the conclusion that everyone is bound by his or her material environment and can never break free from it, and that this is the only way to portray people. Chekhov's comic sketches always take some fragment of life, with no beginning or end, and simply offer it for inspection. And don't his later works follow the same pattern, beginning 'in the middle' and ending 'with nothing'? The new artistic world that Chekhov created, the world of 'The Duel' (1891), 'The House with a Mezzanine', 'The Bishop' (1902), gives no indication of its humorous antecedents, but even so, the debt is considerable.

In Moscow the Chekhovs lived in poverty (sometimes with all six adults and children crammed into one room). For the summers they went to Voskresensk, outside Moscow (now called Istra), where Chekhov's brother Ivan was principal of a school and had a flat. For three summers (1885–87), Chekhov and the family stayed in the village of Babkino, not far from Voskresensk, where Chekhov worked in the local clinic. His impressions of life and nature in the countryside around Moscow are reflected in many of his short stories, such as 'The Conspirator', 'A Dead Body' (1885), 'Children' (1889), or 'The Kiss' (1887).

February 1886 was a landmark in Chekhov's literary career: his work began to be published in one of the most prestigious and popular Russian newspapers, *Novoye vremya* (*New Time*). The offer, unrestricted by volume and terms, came from the owner and managing editor, Alexey Suvorin. Within two months *Novoye vremya* had published 'Office for the Dead', 'The Enemies' (1887), 'Agafia', 'A Nightmare' (1886), 'Easter Eve' (1886) – all ranked amongst Chekhov's best short stories.<sup>9</sup> 'The five short stories, published in *Novoye vremya* caused a commotion in St. Petersburg' (*Works*, vol. 1, p. 242). The eminent writer Dimitri Grigorovich wrote to congratulate him. There were material benefits too: the money for the first story from *Novoye vremya* was more money than he could earn in a month from the journal *Fragments*. 1886 was the year of Chekhov's greatest productivity: he wrote more than a hundred works, and his first collection, entitled *Motley Tales*, appeared in print. Prior to this, he had only one small collection of six stories published in 1884, which appeared under a pseudonym.<sup>10</sup> Then in 1887 Chekhov wrote his first play, *Ivanov*.

Chekhov's collaboration with *Novoye vremya* continued through the late 1880s to the early 1890s, strengthening his friendship with Suvorin,<sup>11</sup> whose aesthetic views he valued very highly. For his part, Suvorin loved Chekhov and always helped him in hard times. The 337 surviving letters Chekhov wrote to Suvorin over the period 1886–1903 are the most fascinating of all his epistolary writings. In 1891 and 1894 they travelled



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abroad together. Suvorin published the first short story collection, *At Dusk* (1887), and it was partly due to Suvorin's enthusiastic backing that the book was awarded the Pushkin Prize. It was also Suvorin who published *Short Stories* (1888), *Gloomy People* (1890), *Motley Tales* (1891) and *Plays* (1897), all of which were then reprinted several times. A rift in their relations occurred after the Dreyfus Case, on which Suvorin's paper took an extreme nationalist stand.<sup>12</sup>

The late 1880s and early 1890s saw a blossoming of Chekhov's talent. New collections of his stories appeared, and he was awarded the Pushkin Prize, as noted above. His vaudevilles *The Bear* (1888) and *The Proposal* (1888–9) were staged by both professional and amateur companies in, for example, Kazan, Kaluga, Kostroma, Novocherkassk, Simbirsk, Revel, Tiflis, Tomsk, Tula, Yaroslav. Chekhov's fame grew, and his first major story, 'The Steppe', was reviewed in dozens of papers across the country.

At the very height of his success as a short-story writer and dramatist, Chekhov made his journey to Sakhalin – 'it was a place of the most unbearable suffering that could ever befall a man, whether captive or free' (*Works*, vol. IV, p. 32).<sup>13</sup> For a time, Chekhov was spared the necessity of working on the verge of the impossible, such as completing, while sitting his medical exams, a hundred stories a year – a task he had set for himself. By 'reading, looking around and listening, there is much to learn and to discover . . . Besides, I believe this trip, six months of uninterrupted physical and intellectual labour, is absolutely necessary for me, because my Ukrainian laziness has started to show of late. It's high time for me to get back into training' (*Works*, vol. IV, p. 31). This 'training' continued throughout his life, and is the outstanding characteristic of this most accomplished self-taught writer.

The trip to Sakhalin was beset with the most enormous difficulties. Chekhov had to travel right across Siberia, including 4,000 kilometres in horse-drawn vehicles. Within three months of his arrival, working on his own, Chekhov had made a complete census of the Sakhalin population, filling in over 8,000 reference cards. He spoke literally to each one, in their homes or in their prison cells. In 1895 his book, *The Island of Sakhalin*, was published. Impressions of the trip were also incorporated in stories such as 'Gusev' (1890), 'Peasant Women' (1891), 'In Exile' (1894) and 'Murder' (1895). After Sakhalin, Chekhov began to write such philosophical stories as 'Duel' (1891) and 'Ward No.6' (1892), questioning the meaning of life, death and immortality. Throughout his life Chekhov engaged in matters that were not directly related to literature: he organised relief for the famine-stricken provinces, practised as a doctor and built schools. These activities increased notably after March 1892 when he

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bought the Melikhovo estate, not far from Moscow. In 1892 and 1893 he ran a free medical centre on the estate in response to a cholera epidemic. Where previously his medical practice had been occasional, now he treated more than 1,500 patients in two years. Thus he extended the range of his experience.

Living in the country, Chekhov not only practised medicine, but also personally financed the construction of three schools in the neighbourhood and served as a member of the examination board. He also participated in all local affairs, making no distinction between major or minor issues, whether fighting the cholera epidemic, digging wells, building roads – or opening a post office at the railway station. ‘It would be great if each of us left behind a school, a well or something of that kind so that one’s life wouldn’t vanish into eternity without trace’ (*Works*, vol. xvii, p. 70). His impressions of Melikhovo are reflected in such major works as ‘Peasants’ (1897), ‘In the Cart’ (1897), ‘New Villa’ (1899) and ‘In the Ravine’ (1900).

Chekhov entertained many guests at Melikhovo: the famous artist Isaak Levitan, the actor Pavel Svobodin; the writers Ignatyi Potapenko, Ivan Leontiev-Shcheglov and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (shortly to co-found the Moscow Art Theatre), and Alexey Suvorin. Among the guests there were always young ladies.

By nature Chekhov was very reticent, and so little is known about his relations with women. He had his first sexual experience at the age of fourteen with a Greek woman, and his affair with an Indian girl in Ceylon is known only because he wrote about it in one of his letters. His complicated relationship with Yevdokia Efros lasted for a year-and-a-half. Chekhov even referred to her as his fiancée and the episode is reflected in the relationship between Ivanov and Sarah in *Ivanov*. No less complicated an affair was the one Chekhov had with ‘beautiful Lika’, Lidia Mizinova, a friend of his sister, Maria Chekhova, and later of the whole Chekhov family (echoes of this affair are found in *The Seagull*). His affair with the actress Lydia Yavorskaya was turbulent, but brief. During Chekhov’s trips from Melikhovo to Moscow he was often seen in the company of ladies from Moscow’s ‘bohemian’ artistic circles.

Once Chekhov was established as a serious writer the main criticism levelled at him was his lack of a central idea, a clear-cut outlook, a unifying theme. This criticism was best expressed by Mikhailovsky, who wrote in 1890: ‘Chekhov treats everything equally: a man and his shadow, a bluebell and a suicide . . . Here oxen are being driven and there the post is being delivered . . . here a man is strangled and there people are drinking champagne.’<sup>14</sup>

Beginning with the story, ‘The Steppe’, almost all of Chekhov’s works