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James N. Loehlin
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Chapter 1

Life

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For many readers, Anton Chekhov's life has exerted nearly as much fascination as his works. Not only was he a major literary figure with an unquantifiable impact on the drama and fiction of the modern period, but he was an indisputably good man, who worked heroically, throughout his short life, for the benefit of other people. Listing him on a roll call of "modern saints," Chekhov scholar Charles Meister has asserted that "Even if he had not been a great writer, Chekhov would have deserved worldwide recognition for his role as a humanitarian."[1] His achievements are incontrovertible: he raised his family from poverty through his own effort and talent, built schools and hospitals, gave free medical treatment to thousands, helped change Russia's penal conditions through his report on the Sakhalin prisons, stood up against injustices of all kinds, and wrote some of the greatest stories and plays in the history of literature, all while, for much of his life, fighting a losing battle against the tuberculosis that killed him at forty-four. Recent biographical revelations that Chekhov could be irritable, vain, or selfish, and that he kept others, especially the women in his life, at an emotional distance while accepting their devotion, have done little to tarnish his overall reputation. The letters, memoirs, and reminiscences of his contemporaries leave little doubt that Chekhov was deeply and deservingly loved; and that love has been reaffirmed by generations of readers.

Because of the richness of his short life, the complexity and ambiguity of his work, and the volatility of his own times and those that followed, Chekhov has been subject to myriad interpretations that have allowed him to be many things

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to many people. He has been hailed by Soviet ideologues as the harbinger of the Revolution, and by dispossessed aristocrats as the voice of twilight Russia. He has been seen as a timid recluse, kindly, shy, and sad, and as a brilliant *bon vivant*, the lover of fashionable writers and beautiful actresses. He has been a coolly objective doctor, ruthlessly anatomizing the ills of his society, and a passionate romantic, a nature-loving poet and environmentalist. He has been the toast of metropolitan society, and the offspring of serfs from Russia's impoverished margins.

Chekhov has himself provided various, often contradictory, ways for interpreting him. Though he professed himself a victim of "autobiographobia," he wrote about himself, his history, and his opinions in thousands of letters, as well as reflecting them, in mutated forms, in his stories and plays. One of the most compelling narratives of Chekhov's life is one that he offered to Suvorin, his friend and publisher, as a potential subject for a short story:

> Try writing a story about a young man, the son of a serf, a former shop boy and chorister, schoolboy and student, brought up to be respectful of his betters and to kiss the priest's hand, to submit to the ideas of others, to be grateful for every crust of bread, who is constantly thrashed, who goes out without galoshes to tutor other people's children, who gets into fights, torments animals, savours the taste of good dinners with rich relations, unnecessarily plays the hypocrite before God and his fellows purely from a realization of his own insignificance – and then go on to tell the story of how this young man drop by drop wrings the slave out of himself until, one fine morning, he awakes to feel that flowing in his veins is no longer the blood of a slave, but that of a complete human being …
>
> (January 7, 1889)[2]

One of the stories of Chekhov's life is this – his squeezing the slave out of himself. His social elevation from beaten shop boy to literary superstar (and his experience of both of these milieux) plainly informs his writing. But this life, fascinating as it is, does not in itself explain the work, nor is it always reflected in the work; Chekhov was, after all, a very private man. More illuminating are the artistic opinions and occasional manifestos he expressed in his letters. The best known, perhaps, is his declaration that "My holy of holies is the human body, good health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and complete freedom, freedom from violence and lies, no matter what form these last two may take" (October 4, 1888). Chekhov's revulsion from "violence and lies" is discernable everywhere in his work.

The story of Chekhov's life is intensely compelling and accounts, in no small way, for his popularity and celebrity. From the moment of his death, his family members, friends, lovers, colleagues, and even his literary rivals began to try to

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account for him, to preserve and embellish their memories of him, and to create the shifting, multifaceted image that we must accept as all we can really know of Anton Chekhov.

Childhood and youth

The simple biographical facts can be readily established. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born in the town of Taganrog, a port on the Sea of Azov in southern Russia, in 1860. His father Pavel was a shopkeeper, the son of a serf who had bought his freedom. His mother Yevgenia gave birth to five sons and two daughters; Anton was the third child. His elder brothers, Aleksandr and Nikolai, preceded Anton into literary and artistic circles in Moscow, though not with their brother's success. His sister Masha devoted much of her life to Anton, managing his household and eventually guarding his legacy. Anton played a semi-paternal role with regard to his younger brothers, Vanya and Misha. His youngest sister Yevgenia died in infancy.

Pavel Chekhov was an incompetent merchant and a bullying father; memories of childhood beatings and domestic tyranny permeate Chekhov's works. "Despotism and lies" destroyed his childhood, he felt, "so much so that we become sick and fearful when we remember it," as he wrote to his brother Aleksandr (January 2, 1889). Anton and his brothers worked long hours tending the family shop, which sold tea, coffee, sugar, olive oil, preserved foods, soap, candles, and other household supplies, as well as Greek wine and vodka by the glass. Pavel, a sternly pious man, was enthusiastically devoted to the sung liturgy of the Russian church. He became a choirmaster and conscripted his sons as singers. While Chekhov hated performing in the early-morning services in freezing chapels – "we felt like little convicts," he recalled later – he did gain a love for the Church Slavonic liturgy that enriched his writing. Chekhov was probably, later in life, a nonbeliever himself, though his attitude to religion was complex: he wrote that "An enormously wide field lies between 'God exists' and 'there is no God,' one that the true wise man traverses with great difficulty."[3] Whatever his own beliefs, he depicted profound religious feeling in many stories, including "Easter Night," "The Student," and "The Bishop."

Taganrog was in many ways a provincial backwater of muddy streets and squat, graceless houses. Chekhov later derided it as coarse and benighted: "the 60,000 inhabitants of this town do absolutely nothing except eat, drink and procreate; they have no other interests whatsoever" (April 7, 1887). Yet Taganrog also had a cosmopolitan side. European merchants traded there,

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Italian opera companies played at the theatre, and many of the leading citizens were Greeks. Anton and his brothers briefly attended the Greek school, which Pavel saw as the path to a mercantile career, but as they didn't speak the language, they were soon withdrawn and enrolled in the Taganrog Grammar School. Here Chekhov gained a good education, though he had to repeat two years because of his struggles with classical Greek. His schoolmasters, though they may have inspired some of the eccentric or pathetic figures of Chekhov's stories (notably Kulygin in *Three Sisters* and Belikov in "The Man in a Case"), seem on the whole to have been humane and diligent teachers. And while Chekhov's father may have tyrannized over his children, he did manage to secure for all of them the education he never had, and a chance to continue the family's move from serfdom to the middle classes. As a schoolboy, Chekhov began writing the humorous sketches that marked his early literary career; a handwritten magazine, *The Stammerer*, contained comic accounts of Taganrog life for the amusement of Chekhov's older brothers, who by then were studying in Moscow.

Although oppressed at home, bored at school, and worn out in the shop, Chekhov found solace in outdoor pursuits. He developed a lifelong passion for fishing, a sportsman's knowledge of animals and birds, and a keen sensitivity to nature and its changing moods. When he was eleven, he and his brother Aleksandr rode in an open cart to visit his grandparents, some fifty miles away across the steppe. This journey, with its vast skies and thunderstorms, its Scythian grave-mounds and humming insects, its natural grandeur and human squalor, left a permanent mark on Chekhov and years later inspired his breakthrough novella "The Steppe." Despite Chekhov's love for a vigorous outdoor life, he was often ill, even in his youth. On another summer excursion to a neighboring estate, he swam in a cold river and became very sick. He was diagnosed with peritonitis, but he may already have been infected with tuberculosis; the long, cold hours spent in shop and church cannot have aided his health. Back in Taganrog, Chekhov was treated by the school physician, Dr. Schrempf, whose kindness and diligence inspired him to study medicine.

One of the biggest influences on the young Chekhov was the Taganrog Theatre. Here he saw his first play, Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène*, as well as productions of Russian classics like Griboedov's *Woe From Wit*, Ostrovsky's *The Storm*, and Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (Chekhov also played the Mayor in an amateur version of the last of these plays). He saw Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which cast a long shadow over *The Seagull* and several of his prose works. He read widely, recommending *Don Quixote* to his younger brother Misha, but rejecting *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as sentimental and cloying: "I experienced the disagreeable sensation, familiar to mortals, of having overindulged in

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raisins and currants" (April 5, 1879). Even in his earliest letters, his sharp opinions and dry wit are evident.

In 1876, his father went bankrupt. Having overextended his business just at the moment when Taganrog's economy was slowing down (neighboring Rostov-on-Don was usurping its status as the leading regional port), Pavel found himself unable to pay off the new house he had built for his family. With his main creditor threatening legal action, and in danger of imprisonment for debt, Pavel fled to Moscow. Sneaking out of town in a cart by cover of darkness, Pavel avoided the Taganrog railway station for fear of being arrested, joining the Moscow train further up the line. A lodger of the Chekhovs', Gavril Selivanov, paid off the 500-ruble debt but ended up taking possession of the house for himself. The furniture was impounded in lieu of unpaid interest, Yevgenia took the two youngest children to Moscow, and Vanya was sent to an aunt. At sixteen, Anton found himself alone, a lodger in his own house, tutoring Selivanov's nephew in return for room and board. The episode of his family's dispossession would provide material for Chekhov's final play, *The Cherry Orchard*.

Chekhov continued with his studies in Taganrog, supporting himself by tutoring and by selling what remained of the family's property. He was able to send some money to Moscow, where the rest of the Chekhovs were living in poverty in rented rooms. Visiting his family at Easter 1877, Chekhov was depressed by the squalor they lived in but impressed by the metropolis. He enjoyed the sights and the theatres, and began to think of moving there to study. Eventually Pavel got a live-in warehouse job, which had the double benefit of bringing in thirty rubles a month and keeping him out of his family's hair.

Medicine and literature

In 1879 Chekhov passed his exams, earning a scholarship from the city of Taganrog, and moved to Moscow to study medicine at the university. He also found himself effectively the head of a large household, earning the nickname "Father Antosha" from his brothers. While studying anatomy, chemistry, and other disciplines, he began writing short stories for popular periodicals in order to help support his family. His first story was printed in 1880 in the journal *Dragonfly*. "A Letter from the Don Landowner Stepan Vladimorich N., to His Learned Neighbor Dr. Friedrick" was a parody of popular scientific knowledge, the speculative musings of a provincial ignoramus. Chekhov received five kopecks per line, and the story appeared anonymously. Chekhov had no wish

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to compromise his position in the medical profession, though his pseudonyms eventually became rather transparent: "Antosha Chekhonte," a soubriquet from his schooldays, became the most prevalent. By 1883 he was publishing regularly in *Fragments*, the most popular journal of this type, and earning enough for his family to move to better quarters.

Chekhov's responsibilities as de facto head of the family led him to become frustrated with the dissolute lives led by his older brothers. He wrote them affectionate but sometimes strongly critical letters. He derided Aleksandr for the squalor in which he lived, arguing that he was setting a bad example for his infant daughter: "this kind of thing can ruin a little girl from her earliest years" (October 1883). He recognized that his brother Nikolai was wasting himself in drink and loose living. As Nikolai deteriorated, Chekhov remonstrated with him severely, once even sending him a list of requisites for the behavior of civilized people. This begins positively – "1) They respect human beings as individuals and are therefore always tolerant, gentle, courteous and amenable" – but soon moves into very specific attacks on Nikolai's lifestyle and companions:

> 8) They work at developing their aesthetic sensibility. They do not allow themselves to sleep in their clothes, stare at the bedbugs in the cracks in the walls, breathe foul air, walk on a floor covered in spit, cook their food on a paraffin stove. As far as possible they try to control and elevate their sex drive … Civilized people don't simply obey their baser instincts. They demand more from a woman than bed, horse sweat, and the sound of pissing … (March 1886)

He likewise reprimanded Aleksandr for his treatment of his common-law wife, a former girlfriend of Chekhov's named Natalia Golden:

> On my first visit to you, what wrenched us apart was your *appalling* treatment of Natalia Alexandrovna and your cook. Forgive me, but to treat women in such a manner, whoever they may be, is unworthy of a decent, caring human being. What heavenly or earthly power granted you the right to make them your slaves? Constant bad language of the most filthy kind, raising your voice to them, criticizing them, capricious demands at lunch and dinner, endless complaints about how your life is nothing but penal servitude and accursed drudgery – is not all that the mark of a coarse bully and despot? (January 2, 1889)

Chekhov's moralizing letters may have an element of priggishness, but they also give a strong sense of his own manners and values, as well as the pressures he felt in having been thrust into such a responsible position so early in life. His letters to both his elder brothers make evident Chekhov's concern for them and his fervent desire that they not waste their human possibility.

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Chekhov himself was far from a prig; despite the demands of medicine and literature, he found time for enjoying Moscow nightlife and developing flirtations with many young women of his acquaintance. He seems briefly to have become engaged to a young Jewish woman, his sister's friend Dunia Efros, but nothing came of this, though they remained on friendly terms. Chekhov would spend the next twenty years attracting and repelling women, charming them into intimacy but then keeping them at arm's length: he repeatedly avowed that the married state was not for him. "Let me have a wife who, like the moon, will not appear in my sky every day," he wrote some years later, adding, "Having a wife won't make me write any better" (March 23, 1895).

After completing his medical certification in 1884, Chekhov became a practicing physician at Chikhino rural hospital near Moscow. His medical work gave him local color and incidents for his stories. He wrote to Nikolai Leikin, the editor at *Fragments*, about a grotesque open-air autopsy he performed on a factory worker, killed in a drunken brawl, whose injuries had been exacerbated by attempts to resuscitate him: "apparently the Manekhino peasants, when they found the body, rocked and pummeled it so enthusiastically for two hours that any future defense lawyer the murderer may have will have every right to call expert witnesses to state whether the ribs might not have been broken as a result of these attentions" (June 27, 1884). The absurd details and mordant tone might have come from one of Chekhov's stories, and indeed the episode is recalled in "On Official Business" some fifteen years later. For all his irony, Chekhov was a conscientious and sympathetic doctor, working exhausting hours and treating peasants free of charge. His medical training also, in his own view, had an impact on his writing. "It significantly enlarged the scope of my observations and enriched me with knowledge whose true worth to a writer can only be evaluated by somebody who is himself a doctor," he wrote, adding that his medical background provided "a sense of direction" and helped him "to avoid many mistakes."[4] Though Chekhov practiced medicine successfully for many years, he did apparently misdiagnose or deceive one of his patients: himself. By 1884 he was coughing blood from his lungs, but for years he refused to acknowledge that he was suffering from the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him.

Chekhov initially found the constrained format of *Fragments* a useful discipline, but he soon wanted an outlet for stories of greater scope and variety of tone. He wrote some more serious stories for the *Petersburg Gazette*, and then, in January 1886, he began to contribute to Russia's largest daily newspaper, the *New Times* (*Novoye Vremya*). Its publisher, Aleksey Suvorin, became Chekhov's most important patron and confidant. Though twenty-five years

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older than Chekhov, and of conservative political views that often led to conflict between the two men (especially over the Dreyfus case), Suvorin became a central figure in Chekhov's career as well as a close friend. *New Times* allowed Chekhov to expand and develop in both form and content, and exposed him to consideration as a serious author.

In March 1886, Chekhov received a letter from one of the most distinguished Russian writers of the time, Dmitri Grigorovich. In it the older writer praised Chekhov's talent and urged him to take it more seriously and cultivate it: "you must have respect for a talent which is so rarely granted. Stop doing hack work."[5] This letter struck Chekhov "like a bolt of lighting"; he wrote back with unfeigned gratitude, acknowledging that "until now I have approached my writing in a most frivolous, irresponsible and meaningless way," and he resolved to give more time and attention to his work (March 28, 1886). Soon thereafter, on Grigorovich's urging, he began regularly presenting his writings under his own name. He also began publishing works in collections, *Motley Stories* (1886) and *In the Twilight* (1887).

In this period Chekhov also began to become known as a dramatist. In his teenage years he had written a play, called *Bezottsovshchina* (*Fatherlessness* or *Without Patrimony*), which he had shown to his brother Aleksandr, who critiqued it harshly. This piece was either destroyed or transformed into the sprawling, untitled work, not performed or published in Chekhov's lifetime, generally known as *Platonov*. In 1887, the Moscow impresario Korsh encouraged him to write a play for his theatre; he produced *Ivanov* in less than two weeks. It was a mixed success, but with Suvorin's encouragement Chekhov revised it for Petersburg, where it fared better. However, it was Chekhov's one-act farce *The Bear* that established him in the theatre and became an ongoing source of income (he jokingly referred to it as "The Milk-Cow").

A return visit to Taganrog in 1887 inspired his longest and most original story to date, "The Steppe," which appeared in a Petersburg journal, *The Northern Herald*. Following a young boy's cart-trip to the faraway town where he will attend school, it displayed Chekhov's brilliance as a nature-writer as well as his experimentation with narrative form. Chekhov was now recognized as a leading talent of the day; he was awarded the Pushkin Prize for Literature in 1888 for *In the Twilight*. He wrote fewer, longer, and more ambitious stories. Another early masterpiece, "A Boring Story," explored the emotional barrenness of a dying medical professor. It manifested a growing psychological and philosophical sophistication in Chekhov's work, and perhaps intimated the author's desire for a radical break with his current way of living.

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Sakhalin

The watershed year was 1890, when Chekhov suspended his writing and medical practice to make a five-thousand-mile trek across Siberia to the prison island of Sakhalin. Several factors may have contributed to his decision to embark on this extraordinary journey. He was sensitive to criticism that his writing lacked social convictions and may have felt impelled to put his personal values to the test through some ambitious humanitarian endeavor. He was disenchanted with the theatre; his play *The Wood Demon* had been rejected by the imperial theatres in Petersburg and performed unsuccessfully in Moscow. Chekhov's personal life was also becoming, perhaps, too involving. He had grown friendly with his sister's friend Lika Mizinova, from whom he sometimes felt a need to distance himself; he had also met the writer Lydia Avilova, who would later claim, probably in self-delusion, to have been the great love of his life. Finally, in 1889, his brother Nikolai had died horribly from tuberculosis – an event that must have confronted Chekhov with his own mortality and plagued him with a survivor's guilt.

Chekhov's proposed project was ambitious but ominous: to survey conditions on Sakhalin island, the penal colony for the most wretched prisoners of tsarist Russia. Sakhalin was an island in the Pacific, at the far end of the Russian landmass, as far from Moscow to the east as New York was to the west. After undertaking an in-depth study of Sakhalin's history and geography, Chekhov set off on a river steamer down the Volga, beginning his passage east. He went by boat as far as Perm, in the Urals – the provincial backwater that would later inspire *Three Sisters*. He went another 400 miles by train to the end of the railway line – the Trans-Siberian Railway would not be constructed for several years. By sledge or cart, through snow and mud, Chekhov made his way across Siberia. He carried a revolver, though he never drew it; he risked freezing and starvation, and survived a troika crash. He crossed Lake Baikal on a ferry, and took a steamboat down the Amur River, on the Chinese border. Finally, in July 1890, after two and a half months of travel, he arrived at Aleksandrovsk, the central settlement of Sakhalin.

Life in Sakhalin was even worse than Chekhov had expected. The convicts lived in extreme hardship, doing heavy manual labor and often wearing leg-irons. Physical conditions were appalling, with freezing temperatures for half the year. Exiles lived in poor cabins, beset by disease and alcoholism. Chekhov was struck by the number of children on Sakhalin, many of them offspring of prostitution or promiscuous cohabitation; Chekhov estimated that there were 25 women for every 100 men in the colony. For three months,

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Chekhov conducted a painstaking census of the population, recording information through personal interviews with thousands of exiles. One of these conversations, with a ten-year-old boy, he recorded verbatim:

I What is your father's patronymic?
He Don't know.
I What do you mean, you don't know? You're living with your father and you don't know his name? For shame!
He He's not my real father.
I What do you mean – not your real father?
He He lives with my ma.
I Is your mother married or a widow?
He Widow. She came because of her husband.
I What do you mean, because of her husband?
He She killed him.[6]

After his return to Russia, Chekhov helped set up orphanages for the child beggars and prostitutes of Sakhalin, and sent thousands of books for the children of the convicts.

Chekhov went back to Russia by sea, via Vladivostok, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Ceylon. He witnessed two burials at sea, inspiring his story "Gusev." He made love to "a black-eyed Hindu girl … in a coconut grove, by the light of the moon," as he claimed he would one day boast to his children (December 9, 1890). Finally, he sailed through the Red Sea and Suez Canal, eventually landing in Odessa, and then making his way by train back to Moscow, with a pet mongoose as a souvenir of his trip.

He did not remain long in Russia, however. Having explored, as he put it, the hell of Sakhalin and the paradise of Ceylon, Chekhov now headed west, on a tour of Europe with Suvorin. He approved of the cleanliness of Vienna, where the churches looked "more like cakes than buildings"; he also noted that "It is a strange feeling to be able to read and say whatever one likes" (March 20, 1891). He was enchanted by Venice: "You drift along in a gondola seeing the palaces of the Doges, Desdemona's house, the homes of famous painters, churches … And inside these churches sculpture and paintings such as one sees only in dreams" (March 24, 1891). He wore himself out in the museums of Florence and the Vatican, and hiked up to the mouth of Vesuvius: "It is terrifying, and yet one is gripped by a desire to leap straight down into the monster's mouth. I now believe in Hell" (April 7, 1891). After traveling on to Nice, Monte Carlo, and Paris, Chekhov had finally had enough and returned to Russia more exhausted by the cosmopolitan life of the European capitals than by his trek across Siberia.

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