

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-88077-0 - The Cambridge Introduction to Chekhov  
James N. Loehlin  
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*The Cambridge Introduction to  
Chekhov*

Chekhov is widely acknowledged as one of the most influential literary figures of modern times. Russia's preeminent playwright, he played a significant role in revolutionizing the modern theatre. His impact on prose fiction writing is incalculable: he helped define the modern short story. Beginning with an engaging account of Chekhov's life and cultural context in nineteenth-century Russia, this book introduces the reader to this fascinating and complex personality. Unlike much criticism of Chekhov, it includes detailed discussions of both his fiction and his plays. The *Introduction* traces his concise, impressionistic prose style from early comic sketches to mature works such as "Ward No. 6" and "In the Ravine." Examining Chekhov's development as a dramatist, the book considers his one-act vaudevilles and early works, while providing a detailed, act-by-act analysis of the masterpieces on which his reputation rests: *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*.

JAMES N. LOEHLIN is Shakespeare at Winedale Regents Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *Chekhov: The Cherry Orchard* in the Cambridge Plays in Production series, and the editor of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Cambridge Shakespeare in Production series. He has also written books on Shakespeare's *Henry V* and *Henry IV, Parts I and II*. He has directed, acted in, or supervised productions of all Chekhov's major plays, as well as twenty-five of Shakespeare's plays.

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*The University of Texas*



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521706889](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521706889)

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First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Loehlin, James N.

The Cambridge introduction to Chekhov / James N. Loehlin.

p. cm. – (Cambridge introductions to literature)

ISBN 978-0-521-88077-0 (hardback)

I. Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich, 1860–1904 – Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

II. Series.

PG3458.Z8L64 2010

891.72'3–dc22

2010022722

ISBN 978-0-521-88077-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-70688-9 Paperback

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## *Preface*

Shortly before Anton Chekhov died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-four, he went for an evening carriage ride with a young writer, Ivan Bunin, who visited him frequently during his illness. They drove from the Crimean town of Yalta, where Chekhov was convalescing, to the nearby coastal village of Oreanda. A cliff-top prospect in this village is the setting of one of the most famous episodes in Chekhov's fiction: Gurov's seaside epiphany in "The Lady with the Little Dog." In Chekhov's story, the timeless, indifferent beauty of the sea leads Gurov to the realization that "everything was beautiful in this world, everything except for what we ourselves think and do when we forget the higher goals of being and our human dignity."<sup>1</sup>

Chekhov and Bunin drove the same route that Gurov and Anna, the lady with the dog, take in Chekhov's story. Bunin's description of the carriage ride has some of the lyricism and pathos of Chekhov's evocations of nature: "We were quiet, looking at the shining, matted-gold valley of the sea. We first passed by a forest that had a springlike air, tender, pensive, and beautiful." Bunin's account leads, like Gurov's view of the sea, to a reflection on time, change, and the impermanence of human achievement:

We stopped the carriage and walked quietly under these cypresses, past the ruins of a palace shining bluish-white in the moonlight. Chekhov suddenly turned to me and said, "Do you know how long people will continue to read my works? Seven years, that is all."

Startled by this sudden assertion by a dying author whose works he greatly admired, Bunin asked, "Why seven?"

"Well, then," Chekhov responded wryly, "seven and a half."<sup>2</sup>

The sly, self-mocking irony in that added "and a half," the ability to find a joke in the midst of a reflection on his own death, is characteristic of Chekhov. His work is suffused with a consciousness of human suffering and stupidity, the sorry messes we make of our lives and the lofty indifference of the nature that surrounds us. Yet he avoids sentimentality or despair through the kind of acerbic wit he shows here, in recognizing and deflating his own vanity.

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Chekhov was able to look at human folly, even his own, with cool detachment, and turn his observations into art.

Chekhov's sense of his impermanence was premature. At the time of this introduction's publication, Chekhov's work will have outlasted his own estimate by exactly one hundred years. He is recognized as Russia's preeminent playwright and is exceeded only by Shakespeare as a staple of the international dramatic repertoire. His impact on the writing of prose fiction is incalculable: he helped define the modern short story. With paradigm-shifting contributions to two fields, fiction and drama, Chekhov has remained one of the greatest influences on the literature of the past century.

His legacy is the product of a short but amazingly productive life. He wrote hundreds of stories, thousands of letters, and more than two dozen works in dramatic form, several of which helped revolutionize the modern theatre. Yet he did not, at least initially, see writing as his primary occupation, but as a way to earn extra money or refresh his mind from the strains of his medical practice. He worked as a doctor through most of his adult life and often asserted that "Medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my mistress." He credited his medical training with sharpening his powers of observation and giving his literary work a sense of direction. His dual professions of doctor and author, together with his romantic life, early death, and humanitarian efforts, have made him an immensely attractive figure to subsequent generations. The persona of Chekhov has achieved a legendary status rivaling that of his literary productions. While his personality was complex, elusive, and perhaps ultimately unknowable, he is a figure who continues to fascinate, both as a writer and a human being.

This study aims to provide the beginning reader with a broad survey of Chekhov's literary achievement, both in fiction and drama. I have thought it more important to give a sense of the range and scope of Chekhov's work, and his astonishing prolificacy, than to go into a few representative works in great depth. Accordingly, I consider some fifty of Chekhov's stories and fifteen plays in this volume, although more time is spent on the four final plays than on anything else. I have not tried to advance a particular "reading" of Chekhov, but rather to introduce the reader to how the texts work, by calling attention to the particular details encountered in reading or staging them. In the major plays, in particular, I try to show how the texts unfold moment by moment in performance, while drawing out some of the common themes, dramatic devices, and poetic images Chekhov builds these works around.

I have tried to give some sense of Chekhov's life and cultural context, and the reception of his works, but these are necessarily very brief overviews. I am grateful for the scholarship of my predecessors and colleagues in the field of

Russian literature, in whose territory I still feel myself very much an amateur. I write for the English-language reader who is beginning to discover Chekhov, and my goal is to communicate what makes these texts special, how they achieve their effects, and why they continue to live in the study and on the stage. This is, unavoidably, a rather personal perspective, and any errors or misinterpretations are my own.

I am grateful to Vicki Cooper, Rebecca Taylor, and everyone at Cambridge University Press for their patience and help with this volume. Jacqueline French has been an exemplary copy-editor, eagle-eyed and judicious. I thank my family for their inspirational examples, and my wife Laurel for her unceasing love and support. Thanks also to my University of Texas colleagues who have helped guide me in this unfamiliar Russian landscape, notably Tom Garza and Elizabeth Richmond-Garza. I am deeply indebted to the students with whom I have learned about Chekhov over the years; and especially to Graham Schmidt, who has been a most thoughtful and constructive collaborator.



## Chronology

- 1860 Anton Pavlovich Chekhov born on January 17 at Taganrog in southern Russia, third son of Pavel Chekhov, a small shopkeeper, and his wife Yevgenia
- 1861 Emancipation of the serfs by Alexander II
- 1867 Chekhov enrolled in Greek school in Taganrog
- 1868 Chekhov moves to Taganrog Gymnasium
- 1873 Chekhov sees his first play, Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène*, along with *Hamlet* and *The Government Inspector*
- 1875 Chekhov's older brothers go to Moscow to study; Chekhov sends them a home-made humorous magazine, *The Stammerer*, with sketches of Taganrog life
- 1876 Pavel Chekhov goes bankrupt; flees to Moscow with his family, leaving Anton behind to complete his education
- 1877 Publication of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* completed. Chekhov visits Moscow for the first time, where his family is living in poverty
- 1878 Chekhov writes the full-length play *Fatherlessness*, which is either destroyed or revised into the play now known as *Platonov*
- 1879 Chekhov matriculates from Gymnasium and wins scholarship to study medicine in Moscow; writes humorous pieces for magazine *The Alarm Clock*
- 1880 Publication of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* completed. Chekhov's first short story, "A Letter from the Don Landowner Stepan Vladimorich N., to His Learned Neighbor Dr. Friedrich," published in *The Dragonfly*; he publishes further stories under pseudonym Antosha Chekhonte
- 1881 Alexander II assassinated; severe repression follows under Alexander III. Chekhov begins contributing to magazine *Fragments*; offers the play known as *Platonov* to Maria Ermolova, but it is rejected
- 1882 Chekhov is able to support his family with his contributions to humorous weekly magazines

- 1884 Chekhov graduates and becomes practicing physician at Chikhino rural hospital; first signs of his tuberculosis. Publishes the collection *Tales of Melpomene* and *The Shooting Party*, his only novel
- 1885 Chekhov begins friendship with Suvorin, publisher of *New Times*, and has relationships with Natalia Golden and Dunia Efros; writes over a hundred stories in the next two years
- 1886 Brief engagement to Dunia Efros. Chekhov receives encouragement from writer Dmitri Grigorovich and begins publishing regularly under his own name, producing dozens of pieces and publishing the collection *Motley Stories*
- 1887 Chekhov makes trip to Taganrog and the Don steppes; collection *In the Twilight* published; Chekhov writes *Ivanov* in two weeks for Korsh Theatre in Moscow
- 1888 “The Steppe” published in *The Northern Herald*; Chekhov wins Pushkin Prize; farces *The Bear* and *The Proposal* successful; Chekhov revises *Ivanov* for Petersburg
- 1889 “A Boring Story” published; Chekhov meets Lydia Avilova; death of Chekhov’s brother Nikolai; *The Wood Demon* a failure in Moscow
- 1890 Chekhov travels across Siberia to survey medical conditions on prison island of Sakhalin; return trip by sea (via Hong Kong, Singapore, and Ceylon) inspires story “Gusev”; collection *Gloomy People* published
- 1891 Severe famine; Chekhov organizes relief efforts. Relationship with Lika Mizinova. Chekhov publishes “The Duel” and writes “The Grasshopper”; travels to Western Europe
- 1892 Chekhov buys small estate at Melikhovo, near Moscow, where he lives with his parents and sister; Chekhov completes “Ward No. 6” and “Story of an Unknown Man”
- 1893 Serial publication of *The Island of Sakhalin*
- 1894 Death of Alexander III and accession of Nicholas II; Chekhov travels to Western Europe with Suvorin; publishes “The Student” and “The Black Monk,” among other stories
- 1895 Chekhov visits Tolstoy at his estate, Yasnaya Polyana; publishes “Three Years”; works on *The Seagull* and the stories “The House with the Mezzanine,” “Ariadne,” and “Anna on the Neck”
- 1896 Chekhov builds schools near Melikhovo and donates books to Taganrog library; writes “My Life.” Disastrous premiere of *The Seagull* at Aleksandrinsky Theatre, Petersburg
- 1897 Chekhov has severe lung hemorrhage; diagnosed with tuberculosis. Dreyfus affair causes rift with Suvorin over anti-Semitic stance of *New Times*. Publishes *Uncle Vanya* and “Peasants”

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- 1898 Chekhov meets Olga Knipper. Moscow Art Theatre, founded by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, produces *The Seagull* to great acclaim. “The Little Trilogy” published. Death of Chekhov’s father
- 1899 Moscow Art Theatre produces *Uncle Vanya*. “The Lady with the Little Dog” and “The Darling” published, among others. Chekhov sells estate at Melikhovo, arranges for publication of his collected works by Adolph Marx
- 1900 Chekhov settles in Yalta, works on *Three Sisters*; “In the Ravine” published in Gorky’s left-wing journal *Life*; Chekhov elected to Russian Academy
- 1901 Chekhov marries Olga Knipper; *Three Sisters* premieres at Moscow Art Theatre
- 1902 Chekhov resigns from Russian Academy over Gorky’s exclusion; completes “The Bishop”; Olga suffers miscarriage
- 1903 Chekhov completes his last story, “The Fiancée,” and his last play, *The Cherry Orchard*
- 1904 Premiere of *The Cherry Orchard* at Moscow Art Theatre; Chekhov’s health worsens; he dies of tuberculosis at Badenweiler in Germany and is buried at Novodevichy Cemetery in Moscow
- 1905 Disastrous Russo-Japanese War; Russian Revolution of 1905 leads to establishment of Duma (Russian parliament) and limited constitutional monarchy

## *A note on translations and transliteration*

Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Chekhov's dramatic works are from Laurence Senelick, *Anton Chekhov: The Complete Plays*. For the stories, I have used the translations of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky when available, otherwise, the Constance Garnett translations in the thirteen-volume Ecco edition. Citations from individual works are given in a note on first mention to clarify which translation is being used. For longer works, page references for all subsequent citations are given in the text. For shorter works and where acts are discussed individually, I have opted instead to give a page range in a note at first mention rather than cluttering the text with page references. For Chekhov's letters, I have used Rosamund Bartlett's *Anton Chekhov: A Life in Letters* where possible, giving the date in the body of the text.

In transliterating Cyrillic, I have tried to be consistent without being pedantic. Anglicized name forms are used for tsars (thus 'Alexander II', 'Nicholas I') and common Russian place names (e.g. St. Petersburg, Yalta), and I have used the established Western spellings of well-known figures (e.g. Fyodor Dostoevsky, Maxim Gorky, LeoTolstoy), even though this may lead to inconsistencies. For the most part, I have reproduced character names as they are transliterated in the translations I am using, although I have tried to avoid too many confusing variants. I have standardized the transliteration "Chekhov" in quotations. The soft sign is not denoted with Russian words in the text (e.g. glasnost).