



THE COGNITIVE VALUE OF THE PLAYS OF CHEKHOV

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ABSTRACT

Anton Chekhov, the Russian Dramatist delineated the texture of everyday life in his plays. He articulates for people the still small voice of the heart rather than the fanfare of great historical events. His preoccupation with individual joys and sorrows is not divorced from his intense awareness of the social realities that birthed them. Chekhov's basic theme in his plays is the twilight of a social order in decay, the malaise that precedes great social changes, the disintegration of old social relationships when confronted with new material conditions of living and the futility of the individual against the inexorable determinants of history. To some the inevitable social changes appear too hard to bear and assume the semblance of an unreal dream. Chekhov manages to bring home to the readers the whole landscape of a particular era, its archetypes, its contradictions, the simultaneity of decadence and resurgence, of hope and suffering, of tears and laughter. He has captured the totality of human experience in a particular society, at a particular moment of time and this has made his works both timeless and universal.

Key Words Anton Chekhov, Plays, characterisation, plot, theme

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INTRODUCTION

Chekhov's genius as a dramatist is truly outstanding. In Chekhov, one can observe a complete identity of literature and life. In Chekhov there are no tragic heroes like Lear, Hamlet, Raskolnikov and Karamazov. There are no villains like Iago and Grushnitsky. This is because Chekhov is concerned with the rhythm and texture of everyday life. He does not portray the exceptional moments of social upheaval. His men and women are ordinary people one meets in everyday life.

Discussion

Chekhov has tremendous compassion for mankind. In the very depths of his artistic consciousness one can discern not only compassion for man but also faith in his salvation for the sake of everything that is good in him, buried as it may be

under vulgarity, grief and hopelessness. He leads the readers towards a great goal. His own goal was freedom from coercion and falsehood in any form whatsoever. His goal also included active compassion. His scepticism and agnosticism did not prevent him from believing in Man. He had unshakable faith in Man's ability to transform the world. Chekhov's infinite tactfulness and shy gentleness show the readers the sure path to a better life. People become better after reading *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*.

Chekhov's genius and moral strength are amply revealed in his exceptional modesty. His plays may appear gloomy but they express a great love and understanding of human beings, In the end one feels that if Chekhov can see so cleverly the vanity

and weakness of people and yet love them, then there is certainly hope for mankind.

Chekhov's attitude towards his own time changed when he attained greater mastery of form. His selection of material, the development of plot and the depiction of his characters were determined by the change in his perception and attitude. There was a connection between the acquiring of mastery of form and the increasing moral sensitivity towards the spirit of the times. Chekhov was fully aware of what had been rejected by society and what was replacing it and it was the acceptance of the link between aesthetics and ethics.

Chekhov's mature plays differ from his early plays and pre Chekhov drama as in that very slight emphasis is placed on action. Chekhov's maturity grew and he abandoned the direct presentation of major catastrophe on the stage. Nina's painful adventures in *The Seagull*, Tuzinbach's death in *Three Sisters* and the fateful auction of *The Cherry Orchard* are not presented directly to the audience. In Greek tragedy a similar convention is observed. Chekhov studied rather reluctantly the classics at school and there is no evidence of direct classical influence in his drama. His use of indirect action vastly differs from any Greek prototype.

Chekhov's mature plays are sparsely equipped with deeds of violence, but they are not entirely devoid of plot. Chekhov's plot is unobtrusive and his anti climaxes like climaxes need their build up. *Uncle Vanya* has to be set in motion to take part in a judiciously deployed family quarrel before he can shoot and miss his aim. Irina of *Three Sisters* must be made to consent to marry Tuzinbach before she can lose him in a duel. In *The Cherry Orchard*, sympathy for the hapless owners of the cherry orchard must be created before they lose their ancestral property. Chekhov leads his audience gently "down the garden path".

Chekhov's plays can be studied as plays of ideas. *Ivanov* is a play of action as well as a play with a message. Virtues of tolerance and avoidance of facile censoriousness are emphasized in the play. Nina's perseverance in *The Seagull* can be interpreted as a call to cultivate resilience, industry and persistence. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Trofimov can be considered as the mouthpiece of Chekhov

appealing to the audience and the readers to build a new and better society. The *Cherry Orchard* can be studied as a play portraying the decay of aristocracy in a doomed society. Chekhov is more concerned with the human condition in general than in presenting the problems of his own society. He criticises selfishness and insensitivity whereas he admires defencelessness and sensitivity. Harvey Pitcher in his book *The Chekhov Play* describes Chekhov's plays as plays of "emotional content". In the formation of a Chekhovian mood, time is an important and crucial ingredient.

Chekhov's characters are conscious of the swift passage of time and they regret the missed opportunities in the past. Their awareness of the missed opportunities makes them voice their aspirations for the future. Andrew Prozorov soliloquises in Act Four of *Three Sisters*: "Where is my past life, oh what has become of it - When I was young, happy and intelligent, When I had such glorious thoughts and visions, and my present and future seemed so bright and promising?" He regretfully looks back to the time when he had hopefully looked forward. In Chekhov's plays time is invoked in a number of contexts. The characteristic phrases from *Three Sisters* are: "It's exactly a year ago today since father died, and in twenty five or thirty years' time everyone will work." The *Cherry Orchard* is a time dominated play, where the first page sets the key: "What time is it ...two O' Clock...how late...a couple of hours...too late...living abroad for five years...I was a lad of fifteen ... in those days".

Chekhov's plays have had a great impact on successive generations of theatre goers. They have aroused universal enthusiasm, affection and concern. A dramatist can attract people with his interesting and innovative techniques of presenting some aspect of the human plight neglected by his predecessors. Chekhov had his own special view of mankind, and according to him human affairs were flatter, duller, uneventful and unheroic than they were presented by his predecessors. His outlook as a man was not pessimistic. He seemed to accept Henry Thoreau's thesis that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. His view of life has its own advantages. The sick hurry and divided aims of

a modern man enable him to derive consolation from Chekhov's view of life. Chekhov has succeeded in catering to a different area of human need. His audiences can recognize the world as real in an entirely new and special sense.. Chekhov's supreme skill gives them aesthetic satisfaction. A theatre goer can perceive that Chekhov's characters are less heroic and effective than himself. He can smile with affection when he sees Uncle Vanya, Vershinin and Lyuba as he is not outclassed by them. Chekhov loves to meander and to allow his characters to take over . After *Ivanov*, Chekhov avoided concentrating on a single character. In his mature plays all the main personages are given equal importance.

Chekhov's plays possess harmony of mood rather than of emotions that unite the characters. Chekhov's characters manifest on the surface their inability to communicate with each other even of practicalities. Lyuba and Gayev of *The Cherry Orchard* refuse to listen to the practical and sensible suggestions of Lopakhin, but they continue to remain firm friends.. Even when they quarrel they do not exhibit bitterness and enmity. Chekhov's plays do have wonderful evocation of atmosphere. The lake in *The Seagull* and the cherry orchard in *The Cherry Orchard* cast a magic spell over all the events of the play. The subtle use of various sounds and music adds to the charm of his plays.

Conclusion

Chekhov's all encompassing theme is Man and his works will be cherished by posterity. He will be remembered with reverence as a gentle, affectionate, sincere, optimistic and creative genius whose supreme mastery of characterization and innovative techniques will continue to fascinate discerning scholars the world over.

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