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Anton Pavlovich Chekhov: Doctor-Writer and Humanist

✦ Кључне речи:

Chekhov, doctor-writer, Three Sisters, Sakhalin Island, Dreyfus case, Gorki, Tolstoy, Dante.

To commemorate Chekhov's centennial in 2004, the celebrations were organized from Russia to Germany, France, and England, all the way to the United States and Canada, and other countries. Recently, Colby College (Waterville, Maine) organized and hosted a festival dedicated to the famous Russian writer. On that occasion the North American Chekhov Society arranged a one-day conference titled "Chekhov Centenary Conference," for which over 30 papers were submitted by professors of Russian literature, physicians, and other persons well versed in Chekhov's life and work. It was followed by a two-day meeting, "Chekhov the Immigrant: Translating a Cultural Icon," which was attended by American translators of Chekhov's works, writ-

Овај чланак је је написан на основу ауторовог излагања на прослави стогодишњице смрти Антона Павловича Чехова (2004), Колби Колеџ, Вотервил, Мејн, С.А.Д. У чланку се говори о хуманизму Чехова као писца–лекара и анализирају неке одлике ликова лекара у његовим делима. Уз то, опширно је приказан лик Чебутикина из драме *Три сестере*.

ers, literary and drama critics and reviewers, historians, and other speakers. Film versions of Chekhov's works *The Seagull* (shot in 1975), *Three Sisters* (1965), *Vanya and Forty Second Street* (1994), and *The Cherry Orchard* (2002), as well as the plays *The Seagull*, an adaptation of the *Light Box Theatre* from Manhattan, *Three Sisters*, an avant-garde performance by *Wooster Company* from Manhattan, and *I Take Your Hand in Mine...*, a one-act play based on the correspondence between Chekhov and Olga Knipper, written by Carol Rocamora from New York were shown during that festival. Such a rich program in America comes as no surprise as Chekhov's plays are frequently performed here; in America only Shakespeare is performed more often than

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Chekhov. During the festival dedicated to Chekhov, the author of this article presented his paper Could Chekhovian Humanism Help us Today? It was written with the intention of highlighting some qualities of Chekhov as a doctor-writer as well as a humanist.

DOCTOR-WRITER

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In 1884 Anton Pavlovich Chekhov graduated from medical school and started to work as a physician in a suburban Moscow hospital. Eight years later he purchased the rundown Melikhovo estate, 70 km south of Moscow, and he and his family lived there for the next seven years. "He pursued his medical identity at the expense of his writing career—by providing free care to the country folk near Melikhovo, by donating his services to the government as a district physician, and by engaging regularly in public health initiatives." There, Chekhov saw hundreds of patients, made over 1000 house calls, fought against cholera and illiteracy. While he practiced medicine and public health by day, he wrote by night masterpiece stories, like *The Grasshopper* and *Ward №6*, and two plays, *Чайка* (*The Seagull*) and *Дядя Ваня* (*Uncle Vanya*). He started his day at five in the morning in his office where he examined patients and performed minor surgical procedures. Chekhov was an idealistic and hard-working doctor driven by his dedication to serving patients in rural Russia where corruption and incompetence ruled at all levels. He did not charge his patients, and he frequently even bought for his patients needed medications and gave them useful non-medical advice and financial help. Thus, the peasants called him *врач-чудак*, an unusual doctor.

As a young physician, Chekhov started a personal battle with lung tuberculosis which

lasted for 20 years. On July 15, 1904, Koch's bacillus ended his courageous battle against the disease. At that time medicine had only modest treatments for this infectious disease, such as providing adequate nutrition and rest to increase the body's defenses against the tubercle bacillus. (Streptomycin, the first effective antituberculous medication, was discovered during WWII, four decades after Chekhov's death from the disease that had threatened humanity for thousands of years.) Although Chekhov for some time doubted the diagnosis, the first haemoptysis that occurred in 1884 and the many subsequent episodes must have caused him tremendous anxiety and emotional distress as premonitions of early death.

Because he sensed his early death, Chekhov, like many other tubercular patients, became tremendously active. He was a prolific writer and a dedicated doctor. Chekhov and several other doctor-writers, such as two Serbian classic writers, Laza K. Lazarević (1851–1891) and Jovan Jovanović-Zmaj (1833–1904), refuted Tolstoy's assertion that medicine stands in the doctor-writer's way. However, some writers – like Bulgakov (1891–1940) – who were educated as physicians gave up medicine for writing. Chekhov clearly showed that the symbiosis of the muse and Æsculapius may increase the writer's capabilities. His explanation is as follows: "My medical studies have had a serious effect on my writing. They have taught me how to classify my observations and they have enriched my observations." At the height of Chekhov's early literary success, Alexei Suvorin, his friend and editor had urged the young writer to give up medicine. "Medicine is a waste of your time and energy [...] become more focused. You'll never reach your potential unless you concentrate on writing." In response, the writer wrote famous passage on integration of the

arts of medicine and writing. “You advise me not to chase after two hares at once and to forget about practicing medicine. Well, I don’t see what’s so impossible about chasing two hares at once [...] Medicine is my lawful wedded wife and literature my mistress. When one gets on my nerves, I spend the night with the other. This may be somewhat disorganized, but then again it’s not boring, and anyway, neither loses anything by my duplicity.”

The doctor-writer situation is possibly a source of the apparent contradiction that may describe Chekhov. In his artist role he was so different from his doctor role. As a doctor, he was a man of action; he founded schools and clinics for the peasants in the Melikhovo region, donated books to libraries, always was ready to help patients, and pursued humanitarian causes. However, a majority of the protagonists in his stories and plays ironically show weakness, passivity, and ineffectiveness. Chekhov gradually realized that scientific rationalism could not give us the answers to some very important questions, such as what is the meaning of life, and he explored various individual events that present man as a victim in an absurd world. Regarding the ideological shortcomings of the characters in his writings, Chekhov often joked. Thus, in 1888 he wrote to Grigorovich: “I still lack a political, religious and philosophical view. I change it every month, and so I’ll have to limit myself to descriptions of how my heroes love, marry, give birth, die, and how they speak.” Despite his self-depreciation, Chekhov unquestionably, thanks to his literary talent and his approach to life, improved both the modern story and modern play, and it is hard to decide if he accomplished more as a dramatist or story teller.

CHARACTERS OF MEDICAL DOCTORS IN CHEKHOV’S WORKS

Although Chekhov’s life span was short, only 44 years, he was in good company. Pushkin, Lermontov, Mayakovsky, Blok, Yesenin, Lorca, Vallejo, Byron, Orwell, D.H. Lawrence, and many other writers also lived short lives. And like these masters, he was so innovative and prolific that his literary output secured him a place among the greatest men of letters. His works still strongly appeal to readers and theatre lovers all over the world, and they deeply move our moral and psychological selves. Even Chekhov’s private life, especially in view of the latest biographical details, provides an interesting insight into the last years of the 19th century. Sometimes this insight even inspires other works of art like the one written by Carol Rocamora or Aleksandar Novačić. Chekhov was obviously not mistaken when he said to his friend Tatiána Shchépkina-Kupérnik that in seven years he would be forgotten, but then he would be rediscovered, and would be long read. Like other great men, he left us a precious inheritance with a wide gamut, and we are trying to listen to him with apt attention and to interpret his polyphonic message.

A large number of characters in his short stories (Tolstoy compared Chekhov’s stories to the impressionists’ paintings) and plays demonstrate that man’s life cannot always follow a preferred path. Besides, unlike the endless and eternal sky above the vast steppes, which so deeply impressed Chekhov, the writer reminds us that life is too short, and the acknowledgment of this fact frequently leads us to isolation and disappointment. Unfulfilled wishes also have the same effect, and that is why we are forced to ask ourselves the big questions: What is the

meaning of life? How do we manage it? Are we the pawns in an absurd world?

Among the characters created in the period of 1881–1900, we encounter a whole array of more than 30 medical doctors. For the greater part, they are people burdened with obligations to their patients, and are hindered by various life problems and poor working conditions. In addition to their already dulled ambition to succeed, they are restricted in their professional activities and duties. Some among them, like Dr. Ragin in the story *Ward №6*, succumb to mental illness, while others, blinded by one-sided medical observation, neglect the person, like poor Anyuta, who deserves at least a little human attention. In the *Ward №6*, Ragin is in charge of a district provincial hospital for twenty years. Initially he was an energetic doctor, but time eroded his enthusiasm and he has concluded that his efforts have made no difference. Hospital is very poorly equipped, socioeconomic state of his patients that affects their health is beyond his control, the mortality in the town did not decrease.

“If the aim of the medicine is by drugs to alleviate suffering,” Dr. Ragin thinks, “why alleviate it? [...] they say that suffering leads man to perfection; and if mankind really learns to alleviate its sufferings with pills and drops, it will completely abandon religion and philosophy, in which it has hitherto found not merely protection from all sorts of trouble, but even happiness.”

Now Ragin lives insolated, and he is in permanent state of emotional numbness. In one of his rare visits of the mental ward, he meets a sparkling paranoid Ivan Gromov, who has been confined for proclaiming that truth and justice must triumph one day. Ragin has strong desire to feel something,

even to suffer like Gromov, rather than to remain in his emotionless state. This obsession makes him even more dysfunctional, and, ironically, he was trapped by his superiors in his own ward. He achieves his goal, he suffers. Soon, following a beating by a nurse, Ragin dies of a stroke. When the novelist Nikolay Semyonovich Leskov read this masterpiece story, he said: “*Ward №6* is Russia!”

The character of Dr. Chebutykin deserves particular attention. A 60-year-old man, in days past in love with the mother of the Prozorovs, has developed strong feelings for her youngest daughter, Irina, who looks like her mother, and who looks upon the doctor as her protector. This emotional tie between Irina and Chebutykin ceases to exist when the doctor, drunk, broke a porcelain clock, a memento of her mother. However, Chebutykin is obsessed by his passion for the girl 40 years his junior, and his love provokes him into hating Irina’s future husband, Baron Tusenbach. That is why Chebutykin agrees to take part in an ill-matched duel between the Baron and a well-trained officer, Soliony, who survived three duels. Chebutykin hopes that killing Tusenbach will give him a chance to come close to Irina again.

MASHA: This duel should not be allowed. He might kill him. Or...he might wound...

CHEBUTYKIN: Who?

MASHA: ...the Baron.

CHEBUTYKIN: Well. The Baron is a fine man, but one Baron more or less. Let us not be sentimental (Pause.) Let them face each other.

(A voice is heard offstage.)

Wait! That is Skvortzov, his second.

He is in the boat.

ANDREI: In my opinion, any help in support of the duel, even if it came from a doctor, is wrong.

CHEBUTYKIN: It only seems so. We are not there. We do not exist. There is only semblance of our existence. (Pause.)

Almost all the characters in this drama can be arranged in a three-person group. (Generally, the relationships within trios are more complex, and tenser than within duets.) From the characters that appear on the stage, two mixed trios are made: Masha–Kulygin–Vershinin, and Irena–Tusenbach–Soliony, one is made of men, Chebutykin–Tusenbach–Soliony, and one of all women, Olga–Masha–Irina. In the play itself, we encounter a mixed trio made up of the characters from the stage and offstage characters: Natasha–Andrei–Protopopov, and the Prozorovs’ mother–the Prozorovs’ father–Chebutykin. Also, there are three unhappy marriages in the play, Masha–Kulygin, Vershinin–his offstage wife, and Natasha–Andrei.

Chebutikyn’s relationship with Irina is dual: fatherly and amatory. The role of the protector develops into sexual yearning when the young girl becomes a woman who resembles her mother–his love. *Three Sisters* is in fact an enigmatic play because, according to Moss, “you don’t know whether it had better be played with a sad and bitter kind of humor, or realistically, if helplessness could be interpreted as utopia.” Hamlet is the only other play, continues Moss, which provides a similar possibility of solutions: Could Chebutykin have saved Tusenbach in the last act? Is Vershinin’s vision of the future world only one cosmic version of Irina’s unfulfilled dreams about Moscow? Is the trio of Irina’s suitors only an ironic play reflected in the sisters’ mirror, one trio corresponding to another trio?

Three Sisters, not *The Cherry Orchard*, is by many considered to be Chekhov’s best

drama. In that play, we meet three ladies – impeccably brought up, well educated, and who wish to do some good with their lives – which get only the worst from it; they are paralyzed by boredom and senseless existence. It is a true Chekhovian drama with a marked nostalgia and perfect harmony, the characters in this play hardly intercommunicate, and their speech is often addressed to nobody in particular, it is slow in tempo and full of pauses. In *Three Sisters*, like in *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*, there is an expression of longing for natural and unpolluted life. For example, Vershinin speaks enthusiastically about the value of the local forest and the river. Natural and unpolluted life is one that mankind cannot achieve if mankind exterminates other living beings (the duel ends the life of Baron Tusenbach), destroys forests (Natasha cuts the beautiful trees), and damages the planet that we all share. The Chekhovian theme of ecology strike us today as prophetic because ecological awareness is only a recent development.

The play ends with Olga’s words: “If only we had known...” She was probably referring to the fact that time goes on, and it cannot be stopped. And so, the time has come for the soldiers to leave the town while the sisters stay where they are. Nothing has come of their ardent wish to return to Moscow to their lost paradise, and the author points out that we cannot always look back, because there is no return to the past, you must have the courage to move forward and face the unknown. Thus, Vershinin is speculating about future of Russia with hope that one day life will become better, and he talks about the need to work towards that goal. That is why so much emphasis has been given to time in this play – minutes, hours, years and anniversaries are precisely stated, and it is no accident that Chebutykin is breaking a

clock. The place in this play is also precisely defined – men wish to stay where they are, and women, to go to Moscow, because their memories subconsciously pull them to their beautiful and secure past.

A VISIT TO SAKHALIN ISLAND, ALFRED
DREYFUS CASE, AND CHEKHOV'S
RESIGNATION FROM THE ACADEMY

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In 1890 Chekhov made a journey across Siberia to Sakhalin, a barren devil's island in the Okhotsk Sea, 800 kilometers north of Japan, the Russian convict island. Not only criminals, but many Russian writers and other political prisoners made involuntary, and in most cases one-way, journeys to Siberia. However, before Chekhov, only Nikolai Dobroliubov made a short voluntary exploration to the Siberia prisons. If Chekhov reached Sakhalin at all, his contemporaries thought, he would be the only Russian on the island who would be neither prisoner nor jailer.

The hardships of that journey and the three-month sojourn on this convict island were frightful. Despite of the worst conditions, Chekhov had carefully studied prison conditions there, and he collected the data for the medical geography of the island. This visit and Chekhov's subsequent report, *The Island of Sakhalin* drew the attention of Russian society to the misery of 10 000 convicts and soon forced the Czar to implement some reforms. The *Island* is also a masterpiece of travel writing whose extraordinary descriptions of the landscape and the wildlife of the Siberian steppe remains unsurpassed. He nicely compared his admired Volga with magnificent river Yenisey and described the power and enchantment of the taiga, strange villages that he passed when he sailed down the Amour, and marvelous landscape of Sa-

khalin. Yet even with his detailed descriptions, on this trip, Chekhov obviously missed "the greatest landscape painter of the day," as he called his adopted brother and close friend, Isaac Levitan, who had meant to go with him on the trip to Sakhalin. Levitan was in the entourage of friends and family who accompanied the writer on the first leg of his trip, but he did not continue, deciding in the end he could not leave his lover for that long.

Chekhov returned from Sakhalin to Odessa by way of the sea. He embarked on the steamer "Petersburg" at Vladivostok with more than 300 soldiers returning from service in the Far East. During the trip he was really frightened during a storm in the China Sea when the Captain told the passengers who had revolvers to keep them loaded; since death by shooting was preferable to death by drowning. Later on, two soldiers died in the ship's hospital, and they were buried at sea. These burials inspired Chekhov to write "Gusev," a story of the death of a tubercular soldier buried at sea that was praised by many, including his friend, Tchaikovsky who was deeply moved by the tale.

In *The Island*, Chekhov gave an impressive description of the brutal beatings which were done on an accidental basis to male and female prisoners alike.

The executioner stands to one side and strikes in such a way that the lash falls across the body. After every five strokes he goes to the other side and the prisoner is permitted a half-minute rest<...>After the first five or ten strokes his body, covered with scars from previous beatings, turns blue and purple, and his skin bursts at each stroke<...> And later, after twenty or thirty strokes, he complains like a drunken man or like someone in delirium: 'Poor me, you are murdering me...'

The warden cries, 'Forty-two! Forty-three!' It is a long way to ninety.

The Island made such an impression on the Russian public that corporal punishment was abolished, in 1897 for women and in 1904 for men. The campaign was led by the medical doctors. Why would a sick young physician go on a 5 000 km suicidal journey to visit criminal and political prisoners? "All educated Europe now knows that it is not the wardens who are to blame, but all of us; yet this is not a concern of ours, we are not interested," wrote Chekhov to Suvorin.

After the Jewish artillery captain, Alfred Dreyfus, had been sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island for betraying French military secrets to Austro-Hungarians, a member of the French general staff, George Picquart, found documents that convinced him of Dreyfus' innocence. The real betrayer was Major Esterhazy. However, Picquart's superiors ordered him to drop the case. French and Russian public opinion was deeply divided on this indictment: anti-Semites and nationalists faced off against democrats and internationalists. Many noted French persons worked to get Dreyfus a new trial, and among them was Zola, who wrote a polemical letter *J'accuse* (I accuse). This letter caused hurtful anger of the French establishment, but admiration of Chekhov. Dreyfus finally received a second trial in 1899, but despite apparent fact, Esterhazy was "cleared." Due to the opposing views on this case, the Chekhov-Suvorin long-lasting friendship was in deep crisis.

When Russia and all educated Europe had become fascinated by the unexpected appearance of Maxim Gorky, who sprang up from uneducated Russian people like a comet thanks to the linkage of his personal destiny and his literary achievements, he was elected to the Academy. However, this

election was nullified by the Czar's order, and huge scandal arose. Chekhov supported this brilliant poet who had tremendous elemental power, "a voice that gave to Europe a magnificent look and trustworthy picture of modern Russia," and he belatedly resigned from the Academy over Gorky's disqualification. Only Chekhov and two more academicians resigned over Gorky.

Impressed by Chekhov's humanism, the author of this article published a short paper on Chekhov during the days most critical for disintegrated Yugoslavia. The goal was to draw attention to the compassion of that doctor-writer, including his visit to Sakhalin Island, so that his example might inspire us, medical professionals and others, to re-examine the phenomenon of greed manifested in many sectors of the society.

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CHEKHOV AND DEATH

During the last years of his life, Chekhov used to say that he was an atheist. In spite of the fact that Chekhov was brought up in a religious family, liked to observe church rituals and to read about Russian monasteries, listened with enthusiasm to the ringing of church bells, expertly wrote about religious characters and analyzed religious themes, Chekhov not only had doubts about religion, but he plainly rejected it. The mentioned doubt was explicitly expressed when he wrote "I would gladly become a monk if monasteries admitted people who are not religious, and who do not have to pray." However, he accepted religion as a way of life, an indispensable moral code particularly suitable for a simple Russian man. Chekhov belonged to the generation of educated Russians who were ready to enter the post-religion era.



For Chekhov, a medical student and doctor, death was a phenomenon he often encountered, and no doubt he thought of it not infrequently because he knew that he would die early. However, he looked upon death as a part of the natural process, and when it came he died bravely and simply. In contrast, Tolstoy was strongly obsessed with dying, a good deal of his life. Because of his fear of death he added to his religious feelings a mystic concept of the departure of the soul into a "universal soul," but it did not dispel his fear. It is not surprising, therefore, that Tolstoy has described dying better than any other writer. The superb scenes of dying in world literature are those of Ivan Ilych, and Prince Andrey written by Tolstoy.

It is strange that Tolstoy, when paying a visit to Chekhov in a hospital, should introduce the subject of death and life after death, while Chekhov was expectorating blood. When Tolstoy ended describing his theory, Chekhov said that he does not want such a life after his death; he firmly stood in this world. Later on, he wrote to Suvorov: "It is terrible that after you die, you become nothing. They take you to the cemetery, return home, and begin to drink tea, and hypocritically talk about you. It is ugly to think about it."

When his health had completely deteriorated, Chekhov and his wife Olga left in June 1904 for a German spa, Badenweiler, in the Black Forest. "Everything has come to an end. I am going far away to die" he said to his friend. On the night of July 15th, he summoned the doctor and told him *Ich sterbe* (I am dying). The doctor tried to calm him and went out to order champagne. (The version of the story in which Chekhov himself ordered champagne is not correct.) Chekhov drank a glass of champagne lay down and died.

Why should Chekhov have gone so far away from his country to die? In all probability, Chekhov no longer had any hope even of a temporary improvement in his health, and some have blamed his wife, a woman of German descent, to have persuaded him to go to Germany. The real reason for his journey to Badenweiler we shall perhaps never learn, but it is possible that Chekhov, an atheist, "staged" his death in a distant country where even if he wanted to, he could not at the point of death send for a Russian priest, but only for a doctor.

EPILOGUE

Another humanist, Dante, suggests in *Il Convivio* (The Banquet) that the greatest danger to mankind comes from avarice. Wealth is not equally distributed, and the craving for it is the greatest danger to humanity. To satisfy such strong desire, you inevitably cause injury to others. Dante even believed he had the solution to avoiding war, but his idea unfortunately did not influence the rulers who often prefer to solve problems militarily. Chekhov went a step further than Dante; he personally sacrificed himself when he journeyed to the convict island, managed to draw the attention of society, and who then exerted pressure on the authorities to force them to implement humanitarian reforms.

Let us hope that before long a strong and creative person will come up with a modern formula to inspire us to wage a battle with words against those who rule and are armed with modern weaponry as efficient as the formula used by Chekhov. The author of this article has envisioned a salutary way, but only in his dreams:

Dream

Last night I dreamed that I was declaring war
On all the armies on this planet.

“I have no fear of guns, bombs, or rockets.
I have no army; words are my weapons.”

I was appealing to unarmed masses to seek justice,
Not to be afraid of any army,
And I was crying out: “Words are our weapons!”

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To the armed I sent word to abandon guns:
“Soldiers and terrorists, beware of your unarmed brethren,
Because the word of the people is the strongest weapon!”

With a start, I woke up from this century’s last night
Feeling unhappy that on this planet justice must wait.
Will the time ever come when sober reality
Will wake up masses from their profound sleep?

PS: Chilean brother Pablo unfurled
A message that the majority did not get.
“O beautiful is this planet,
I came to live in this world.”

“For a formula to prevent every unnecessary tomb,
To be secure as when sheltered in the womb,
A man doesn’t need the help of a smart dolphin’s steer—“
Exclaims Dudley, my distinguished peer.

Dear reader and distinguished friend,
Every war represents humanity’s end.

резюме**Σ Антон Павлович Чехов: врач, писатель и гуманист**

В прошлом году (с 7 по 9 октября) в колледже Колби (г. Уотервилл, штат Мейн) был проведен фестиваль к столетнему юбилею памяти А. П. Чехова (*The Chekhov Centenary Festival*). Автор настоящей статьи выступил на однодневном круглом столе, организованном «Североамериканским обществом читателей Чехова», с докладом *Could Chekhovian Humanism Help Us Today?* В докладе этом, послужившем

для написания настоящей статьи, рассматриваются вопросы отдельных персонажей «Трех сестер» (например, Чебуткин), подчеркивается значение факта о путешествии Чехова на Сахалин, затрагиваются отдельные аспекты темы «жизнь-смерть» в творчестве А. П. Чехова и Л. Н. Толстого.

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