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## SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET IN CHEKHOV'S PLAYS: DRAMATIC ACTION IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*This work studies the problem of action in Shakespeare's Hamlet and Chekhov's full-length plays. It investigates the relationship among these plays as far as the element of action is concerned. It aims at showing that the Russian dramatist learned the technique from the English playwright, for seemingly he was casting an eye on the English masterpiece and its protagonist for inspiration, when he was creating his main characters, their attitudes and actions when communicating or dealing with other characters and the milieu around them. The focus will be on Shakespeare's Hamlet and Chekhov's Ivanov, The Seagull, Uncle Vania, Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard. The study will be chiefly analytical and descriptive in its approach, using the texts of these plays as primary source and the critical and comparative literature produced on them as secondary source. The findings consist in the idea that Chekhov was able to creatively manipulate the English play and its melancholy prince, particularly the issue of dramatic action, and write plays of inward action. This testifies to his artistic ability in transforming the action of the play and the character of the Prince by drawing his genuine version of modern tragedy with its Russian Hamlet thus reflecting the predicament of social reality.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Chekhov's major plays, dramatic action, Aristotle's *Poetics*, dramatic transformation.

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## Introduction

The character of Hamlet became an example for several generations of dramatists: his tendency to reflection and melancholy, his inactivity and irresolution, his separation of words from deeds, his self-criticism and his dissatisfaction with his own times. There cannot be a Hamlet with some or all of these traits, despite the fact that these are not his only attributes. A similarity with Hamlet can be detected in the situations, actions, reflections and moods of Chekhov's characters. His plays tell a great deal about the characters' despondencies, passivities, weaknesses, discontents and desperate longings for some kind of life involving happiness and freedom. Russian authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century employed the character of the sad Prince to explore and express their own feelings, intellectual concerns and socio-political problems (Rowe, 1976). Shakespeare's *Hamlet* had thus been a mirror held up to Russian life, and as life changed, so did the nature of the drama and the image of its Prince. The English play exerted a considerable influence on the Russian artistic imagination during that period to the extent that one can recognize the character of the Russian Hamlet as a dramatic phenomenon. Anton Chekhov wrote at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and he received the literary Russian traditions and 'imitations' of Hamlet from his predecessors. Ivan Turgenev's use of the character of Hamlet, specifically, was a strong factor in the formulation of the image of Hamlet in the Russian literary scene during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Shakespeare's protagonist had its impact on the heroes Turgenev created in his sketches, stories and novels. Turgenev had his concept of an egotistical and skeptical Hamlet in his renowned essay "Hamlet and Don Quixote", and this concept was influenced by the romantic view of Hamlet as weak, dreamy and incapable of action. Turgenev's essay can be held as a true key to all what he wrote (Abdul Muttaleb, "Turgenev and Shakespeare's Hamlet", 2013). Significantly, this essay had a direct influence on Chekhov, for his idea of Hamlet was coloured by Turgenev's ineffectual dreamy characters who are often reminiscent of Hamlet at his most melancholic and self-analytical. Moreover, Tatyana Dubinina (2022) investigates how Ivan Turgenev's outlooks influenced A.P. Chekhov's play *Ivanov*, emphasizing how they both understood human nature. Although scholars have examined the typological relationships between female imagery and characters in various works, her study emphasizes a comparative approach grounded in Turgenev's philosophical writings. Both, Hamlet and Don Quixote represent fundamental human traits

that are intertwined in Chekhov's portrayal of Ivanov, who embodies traits of both characters, including egoism and true sorrow. Finally, the analysis emphasizes how important Turgenev's creative anthropology is to comprehending Ivanov. Chekhov was fascinated by the Hamlet-type; the references to Shakespeare's play that can be found in his stories and plays, letters, and notebooks, demonstrate his constant preoccupation with this play. These references form a whole network of themes, images, characteristics and echoes that make his plays comparable with that of the English dramatist. In his chapter, "Chekhov and the Literary Tradition", Donald Rayfield summed up this issue "Hamlet infects all of Chekhov's plays, from *Ivanov* to *The Cherry Orchard*" (1985, p.44).

Chekhov had a great respect for Shakespeare, but the Russian literary tradition also accounts for his conception of the character of the Russian Hamlet. Technically speaking, the writings of Chekhov are natural and continuous development of an artistic tendency prevalent in the Russian theatre and novel to concentrate less on plot than on portraiture, psychology and ideas. Chekhov was, like all Russian authors, steeped in the literature of his own country, and he quoted and used literary allusions widely from Russian literature. This article focuses on the influence of Hamlet rather than the Russian tradition in creating a drama with peculiar type of action (Abdul Muttaleb, "Shakespeare's Hamlet, Chekhov's Ivanov and the Creation of a Literary Type", 1995). Some important and relevant studies were produced on the relationship of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Chekhov's dramatic work. For instance, the following works can be mentioned among the academic studies that dealt with the literary and critical reception and impact of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, on Russian writers during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: the doctoral dissertations of George Gibian (1952); Eleanor Rowe (1976); Fuad Abdul Muttaleb (1989). Certain significant articles also can be spotted as treating Chekhov's creative manipulation of *Hamlet* when writing his plays and characters like that of Thomas G. Winner (1956); T. A. Stroud (1958); Arthur Herman Wilson (1952); Robert Porter (1980); Tatiana Shak-Azizova (1980); Fuad Abdul Muttaleb, (2016) and (2019). Moreover, a number of acknowledged books, in their own ways, touched upon the Anglo-Russian literary relations and the influence of Shakespeare upon Chekhov's works, among them are the following: F. L. Lucas (1963); Maurice Valency (1966); David Magarshack (1980); Richard Peace (1983). All of these aforementioned works dealt with the different aspects of Chekhov's works and the

influence of Hamlet upon them: the plots, characters, themes, setting, dramatic structure, including action and other technical issues; however, they are not dedicated, specifically or wholly, to the investigation of the problem of action in Hamlet in relation to Chekhov's characters. This study tries to read, refer and make use of the previous works among others, in its attempt to dwell closely upon this topic.

Speaking comparatively, the professional readers' and audiences' perceptions of Chekhov's transformation of Hamlet throw threads of light retrospectively and help significantly in reevaluating Shakespeare's version of Hamlet. This reminds us interestingly with David Lodge's novel *Small World* when mentioning the student's writing about the influence of Eliot on Shakespeare: "Well, what I try to show", said Persse, "is that we can't avoid reading Shakespeare through the lens of T.S Eliot's poetry. I mean, who can read Hamlet today without thinking of 'Prufrock'? Who can hear the speeches of Ferdinand in *The Tempest* without being reminded of 'The First Sermon' section of *The Waste Land*?" (Quoted in Cesar Dominguez et al, 2015, VIII; Abdul Muttaleb, "Dramatic Transformation", 2019, p.23). George Steiner (1986) aptly writes that the image of Chekhov, the author, has entered the English culture and it corresponds to one of the interpretations that the Russians have put upon Shakespeare's protagonist, namely that "of a gloomy and cold man obsessed with the greyness of life" (p.130). Accordingly, Turgenev's understanding of Hamlet, in his essay and works, as well as Chekhov's in his plays and stories shed some light on the character of the 'inactive' melancholy Prince. In this sense, the following observation appears plausible and pertinent to the point in question that,

The past influences the present of literature, but the present also influences the past. If this is the case in terms of time, it is also true in terms of space. It is absurd to think that literature written in a given language or culture exists in self-sufficient vacuum. The classics of Greco-Roman, Chinese, and Arabic culture, no less than contemporary works in diverse languages and nationalities, all contribute to the creation of every individual literary artifact, which can only be understood and valued through comparison (Dominguez et al, 2015, p.3)

### Discussion

Hamlet remains predominantly a man of 'action' as long as we "keep in mind that 'action' includes a

great deal more than physical movements" (Brooks and Heilman, 1964, p. 8). Examining the aspects of action in Shakespeare's play involves normally looking at the acts of killings and murders, usurpation and revenge, among other things. Yet, it is only possible to speak of the decisiveness or activeness of Hamlet in the events of the play with great circumspection. Apart from the death of Hamlet's father, which took place before the play begins, it may be contended that almost all the deaths in the play happen by accident or through fits of wild passions. True, Hamlet kills Polonius, but he kills him in a fit of passion, having taken him for the King. The Queen is right enough to label Hamlet's deed "rash" (line.3.4). Polonius' death brings about Ophelia's madness and sad fate. Moreover, Hamlet cunningly and successfully turned the tables on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, sending them to their deaths. But here, too, he was acting on the spur of the moment. He tells Horatio this himself: "Rashly, and praised be the rashness for it, let us know, our indiscretion sometime serves us well, when our deep plots do pall" (line.5.2). Additionally, he expresses that there was no introduction or plan; his brain conceived the plan immediately without careful thinking, "Ere I could make a prologue to my brains, they had begun the play" (line.5.2). Gertrude is also murdered by mistake because the poisoned wine she tastes was originally intended for Hamlet in case he escaped death at the duel with Laertes. Again, Hamlet accepts the ostensibly friendly challenge from Laertes. Hamlet touches Laertes twice before the latter finally wounds him. In the duel, the swords are exchanged and Hamlet in a sudden anger wounds Laertes with the poisoned sword. We, as audience or readers, are quite aware that Hamlet did not mean to kill Laertes, and to him the duel with Laertes is a sort of game. And finally, in a fit of uncontrollable passion, he kills the king. His killing of Claudius is also problematic because of the complicated relationship between the two. Hamlet is pushed to kill Claudius also by mere chance; it is only when he knows that his mother is dying and his own death is inevitable and imminent, thus he rushes to kill him. The question whether Hamlet really wants to kill Claudius or not has been raised earlier in the play. One probable explanation is that the mouse-trap play is originally intended by Hamlet to catch his uncle's conscience so that he will confess his guilt. Hamlet is also hesitant to kill Claudius, in Act three, while he is at prayer.

It may be said that the soliloquy of the fourth scene of the fourth act can be considered a turning point in the play, for Hamlet again reproaches himself with

inaction. And after this point traits of decision are supposed to become dominant in Hamlet's character; however, this view overlooks the fact that Hamlet concludes his soliloquy with the words, "O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (line.4.5). Hamlet here speaks of "thoughts", not "acts". Speaking artistically, Shakespeare needed the story of Fortinbras' campaign in order to juxtapose action without thought and thought without action.

Thus, the transition from words to deeds, from playing to murder, from poison in jest, as he calls it, to poison in deed, from acting to action through a series of murders are things he was not planning to do but were imposed upon him, thus dealt with them instinctively. Now, the crucial question arises: Why does Hamlet shun away physical action? It is quite obvious that he cannot tell the King straight to his face that he is a murderer, nor can he expect the King to confess his crime to the court; more importantly, he could not kill the King just on the word of a ghost until he makes sure about it, although he had a rare opportunity to do so when the King was at prayer. If he had carried this act he may have either been faced with execution or imprisonment or even being sent into a mad-house.

These external impediments would have helped in deflecting all his endeavors. This leads to fundamental questions: Does Hamlet then reject physical action because he is too weak or cowardly? Or is he inactive because he is confused by certain moral principle? Or is it because his task is too difficult and complex to be carried out? Or is it because of his exceptional state of mind or consciousness, in which reason and emotions, attitudes towards the self and other persons and the whole world, are actually conflicting? Consequently, the question of the internal reasons is of prime importance in this context, and it will be gradually answered as the discussion progresses and in as much as it is related to the main objective of the study.

First, let us specify what type of action Hamlet aspires to or embraces, since physical action is subsidiary for him. The gulf within the being of Hamlet appears clearly in sharp contrast to his uncle, who suffers no inner conflict and whose mind and action are coordinated to carry out his schemes and purposes. So, the type of action Hamlet is capable of and in which he is virtually involved in throughout the play is a mental one. And all through the play, the audience, critic or reader is stimulated to perceive this slow development of feelings, thoughts, and attitudes. Yet, despite the fact that hesitation,

inactivity, disillusion and melancholy tend to form the most prominent features of Hamlet's character in the play, he changes dramatically. Hamlet, in the last act, appears at the graveyard as a sad man who has been through hardships and suffered a great deal. We are not in the least surprised when we understand from the words of the gravedigger that Hamlet is thirty years old. And this is the same Hamlet whom we saw at the beginning of the tragic story as a very young man in love for the first time. His tragic story covers, from the point of view of calendar time - about two months. But from the point of view of dramatic or psychological time, the only kind which Shakespeare acknowledged as significant, several years of hard experience, hard thinking, and hard torments have gone by. The fact is that, with his artistic inner eye, he portrayed Hamlet in the graveyard as very far from being the same young man as at the beginning of the tragedy. Just as at the finale, in the duel scene, he introduced Hamlet, whose love (only two months ago, by calendar time) Laertes had compared to a spring violet, and whom Ophelia had called the "rose of the fair state" (line.3.1), as a stout, flabby man badly out of condition. "He's fat and scant of breath" (line.5.3), the Queen says of him. It is enough to compare Hamlet's first agitated, fiery, youthful soliloquy with the reserved, hesitant, quiet words he addresses to Laertes before the duel to perceive what a great way he has travelled. Even his revenge, which preoccupied him through the five acts, is finally carried out on the spur of the moment and without any preparation, and too late just when he realizes that he is dying.

Now, this artistic portrayal recalls to us Chekhov's major characters in his full-length plays, including *Ivanov*, which are similar to *Hamlet* in being dramas of internal action. It is interesting to note that shortly after writing his first 'Vaudeville', "Kalkhas" or "The Swan Song", Chekhov proposed to his friend, Lazarev-Gruzinsky, who at the time was also a contributor to humorous journals, that they should collaborate in writing a skit on the acting of *Hamlet* on the Russian stage under the title of 'Hamlet, Prince of Denmark'. He himself wrote the beginning of it and sent it on to Lazarev-Gruzinsky to finish. In his two letters to Lazarev-Gruzinsky, written on the 15th and 24th of November 1887, Chekhov gives a detailed description of his method as a dramatist; "a great deal of which", in the words of David Magarshack, "is equally applicable to his other plays" (Magarshack, *Chekhov: The Dramatist*, 1980, pp. 55-56). One of Chekhov's remarks about the character of Hamlet, in the second letter to his friend,

reads: "Hamlet is indignant, but at the same time he does his best to conceal his unhappiness" (p.56).

At about this time Chekhov was writing *Ivanov*. It is apposite to observe, therefore, that in the first version Ivanov did not shoot himself; he suffered a heart attack as the result of his inner tensions (p. 98). It was on the advice of his friends in Petersburg that Chekhov decided to dignify his hero by having him commit suicide, after reciting an appropriate monologue. Although Ivanov shoots himself in a fit of tormented passion, this is the only physical action he carries out, the action of the play remains mainly of an inner nature. In his letter of October 1887 to his brother Alexander Chekhov about *Ivanov*, he wrote: "the plot is complicated and not silly. I finish up each act as if it were a story: the action goes on quietly and peacefully, and at the end I give the audience a heavy blow on the mug" (Quoted by Peter Egri, in *Chekhov and O'Neill*, 1986, p.32). In a later letter of his he wrote: "A shot, after all, is not a drama, but an incident (Pitcher, *The Chekhov Play*, 1985, p.4). It is significant here to refer to the effects of an historical reason behind the inactivity of characters: after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, there followed a decade of political repression and lethargy in the Russian cultural life. It was a time when external action appeared impossible; the period of the so-called "little deeds". Sash, in the second act, defends Ivanov but angrily criticizes the men of local society for their inactivity,

Or if you could all do something, something quite small, hardly noticeable, but a bit original and daring, so that we young ladies could look at you and say "Oh", admiringly, for once in our lives! (Chekhov, *Plays*, 1982, p.63)

Platonov, the protagonist of a play by that title, Chekhov's first play, written 1880-1881, when he was student at Moscow University, and published posthumously, also compares himself with Hamlet. In one of the last scenes, he picks up a revolver, resolves to kill himself, and exclaims: "Hamlet was afraid of dreams. I'm afraid of - life" (Chekhov, *The Oxford Chekhov*, 1967, p.144). Yet then he decides in his weakness to live after all. Magarshack views the significance of the play in its being the "repository of themes and characters he was using in his later plays" (Quoted by Abdul Muttaleb, in "Dramatic Transformation", 2019, p.26). Chekhov rewrote this character later in *Ivanov*, revised it seven times until came into the final version of 1889.

Ivanov can be seen a tragic figure because he is endowed with a Hamletic mind and put in an almost the same situation, asked to act but he is unable to do so, that is why he can be described as "the Russian Hamlet of the eighties". He appears also as a romantic character which does often happen in Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, that is, the archetype that came to be known as the "superfluous man": the tortured intellectual and idealistic man who is incapable, for reasons as complex as Hamlet's, of engaging in effectual action. In *Ivanov*, through three direct references to Hamlet, in the second, third and fourth acts, we are reminded with the similarity between the two characters, the English and the Russian; though Ivanov rejects in them the idea of being identified with Hamlet, he became one, with all peculiar attributes of inaction compelled by the age (Abdul Muttaleb, "Chekhov's Ivanov", 2016, pp.17-33)

Some critics have noted this peculiar quality of Chekhov's plays in relation to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. F.L. Lucas (1963) refers to the fact that Chekhov "in his most typical plays the characters are often Hamlet-types, who find it hard to achieve any action at all" (p.24). Thomas G. Winner contends in "Chekhov's *Seagull* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: A Study of a Dramatic Device" (1956) that Anton Chekhov purposefully deepens the themes and structure of *The Seagull* by using Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a profound dramatic technique. Chekhov incorporates *Hamlet* structurally to reflect, contrast, and make observations about the characters and acts in his own play rather than just making references to it. In his article "The Influence of *Hamlet* upon Chekhov's *The Seagull*", Arthur H. Wilson (1952) remarks also that "Chekhov's plays are characteristically plays of inaction. The statement of inaction could apply equally as well to *Hamlet*, in which no genuine action occurs until the finale that turns out to be a general melee" (p.315). At the beginning of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the sorrowful Prince appears as a promising, moral, and educated man but who is truly shocked by the sudden rise of an evil ruler who usurps the throne of Denmark and all what the usurpation means. Full of visions, haunted by nightmares, alone and isolated in his ordeal, the Prince felt it is necessary to rebuild his own understanding and sense of his own times. The Prince appears preoccupied with this throughout the five acts of the play, without being able to act or even solve the dilemma even at the psychological level. The weakness, inadequacy, despondency and loneliness of Trepliov is emphasized by the inactivity, reflection and melancholy of the

Shakespearean character. Chekhov's use of *Hamlet*, goes beyond its significance for the character of the Russian Hamlet, Trepliov, alone, though this character is central in play. Trepliov's relation and attitude towards Arkadina, Trigorin, Nina, and Dorn recall that of Hamlet's with Gertrude, Claudius, Ophelia, and Horatio. The idea of usurpation in *Hamlet* mainly hovers over the throne of Denmark; in *The Seagull*, it is associated with the world of art, yet Trepliov's frustrated endeavors to contest with Arkadina and struggle to replace Trigorin, reaches to a deeper level of the idea: the usurpation of life itself by art. In this respect, T. M. Nizamutdinov (2022) studies Chekhov's *The Seagull* as a modern play indebted to the Shakespearean traditions of dramaturgy. He argues that Trepliov is a Chekhovian image of Hamlet. Trepliov is the son of a wealthy aristocrat, whereas Hamlet is the son of a king. Nizamutdinov demonstrates that while Hamlet discovers the truth of his uncle Claudius very early in the play, Trepliov spends his whole work in search of the reality of and revenge on Trigorin, the counterpart of Claudius. The writer holds that Shakespeare's tragedy "shows a world in which aristocratic tradition still works, in which the hero dies for a reason and his death means something, in which an aristocratic act can correct an aristocratic mistake.... *Seagull* shows a world in which aristocratic traditions die, shows the fatal impracticality of the aristocratic world, in which most people –and among them such non-aristocrats infected with aristocrats as Masha and Trigorin – have become small versions of Hamlet"(3, p. 244). Much of the prominent critical writing on Chekhov's plays has taken Aristotle's ideas as a starting point (Hubbs, 1997; Gruber, 1971; Fergusson, 1953) Magarshack's study approaches them from the standpoint of Greek tragedy and Aristotle's thought. Magarshack sensibly classified Chekhov's plays into two categories: plays of direct action and plays of indirect action. The plays written before 1895, including *Ivanov* and *The Wood Demon*, belong to the first category, that is, "plays in which the main dramatic action takes place on the stage in full view of the audience". The four major plays written after 1895 belong to the second, that is, "plays in which the main dramatic action takes place off stage and in which the action that does take place on the stage is mainly 'inner action'" (p.53). Magarshack's claim seems valid, but something else should be added here in light of the view that Chekhov's drama, in a way, differs from the Aristotelian pattern. What is at issue is not the adequacy of the above-mentioned critical observations, but rather the general critical

approach which underlies them, in view of the now well-recognized break that Chekhov made with dramatic tradition.

Chekhov's major plays look as if they were written deliberately in defiance of Aristotle (Valency, *The Breaking String*, 1966, p.100). for Aristotle proposed that tragedy "is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude" (*Poetics*, p.25); thus, a play consists essentially of action, and as a result, plot is more important than character, and this is typical of Aristotle's conception of the elements of tragedy. Chekhov appears to assert the opposite conviction that often character is more important and vital than plot. This belief led to his being criticized for a "lack of plot, and lack of drama" (Beckerman, 1979, p.100). The plays also have been viewed as "plotless" (Bentley, "Chekhov As Playwright", 1949, p.226) or "actionless" (Hubbs, "The Function of Repetition in the Plays of Chekhov" 1979, p. 115). Clearly, the characters in Chekhov's plays often find it difficult to fulfil almost any physical action. Aristotle's Unity of Action, therefore, seems to be replaced by a whole series of trivial actions which embody no dramatic unity. Characters who are often incapable of considering or even comprehending one another, but endlessly absorbed in themselves, become far more essential than the plots which merely bring them together for a moment before they move apart again. In other words, the characters have a transcendent unity, without that unity being expressed in the action or plot. They come to appear like performers in an orchestra, each playing his own instrument, yet gathering to set up a symphony of melancholy, frustration, passivity and discontent. Chekhov's plays are thus memorable for the total atmosphere that hangs over the pathetic fate of Ivanov, over the sad lake of *The Seagull*, over the gloomy forest round Uncle Vania's hopeless home, over the boring dusty provincial streets of *The Three Sisters*, or the unhappy bridal whiteness of the blossoming cherry orchard before its eventual downfall. In this regard, F.L. Lucas (1963) observes that

The men and women of most tragic drama, from Aeschylus to Ibsen, crash; those of Chekhov drift and rot, in a mist. From the active drama of Aristotle, he has moved closer to the "static drama" of Maeterlinck (though Maeterlinck remains far more mystical, and less warmly human). With Greek tragedy Chekhov has little in common; except that such few drastic actions as do occur, occur mainly behind the scene. (p.24)

Lucas also stresses that 'Mood' often constitutes "the ultimate effect of his dramas" (p.25). This viewpoint reminds us of a similar opinion held by W. K. True (1977) when he suggests the term 'drama of mood' as the most suitable to describe the plays of Chekhov. W. R. True argues that the term implies a lack of action (forward movement) caused by a "simplified plot fabric and apparently unsystematic combination of facts and actions". True recognizes the apparent immobility or lethargy of a Chekhov play, a condition that suggests its final effect: stasis (True, "Anton Chekhov, And the Drama of Mood", 1977). Also, Harvey Pitcher (1973) comments on the development implied in the reworking of the earlier *Wood Demon* into *Uncle Vania*: "what Chekhov has in fact done is to replace a play of action by a play of emotional content" (p.78). There is some truth in these observations, for Chekhov's plot techniques indeed create this effect (Magarshack, 1980; Valency, 1971; Styan, 1971; Brustein, 1965; and others). Emotional atmosphere or mood is an indispensable view in Chekhovian drama criticism, although it may seem often to be over-emphasized. Practically, to reduce everything to 'mood' or emotion is to make a play an abstract work of art and to negate meaning. "The very essence of mood", Richard Peace remarks, "is its lack of rational reaction to meaning and significance not clearly apprehended: a response to elusive suggestion rather than precise statement" (p.2). Chekhov's stance is poised between emotion and reason, and his drama combines mood with action, much as his tragedy mixes pathos with laughter. And what should be emphasized here is that action in Chekhov's drama, as in *Hamlet*, is of an inward nature. As Pitcher appropriately pointed out: "it still seems clear that Chekhov's plays do stand or fail by their ability to involve our interest in the inner lives of the characters" (p.6).

An apparent technique of a Chekhov play is its incoherent dialogue, that is, radical shifts in conversation occur from group to group caused by remarks made by one or more characters which have seemingly no bearing on the conversation or situation. Meanwhile, impulses and tensions do exist beneath the superficial exchange, its ostensible reconstruction on stage proposes inaction because the dialogue tends to slow the development of the outward conflicts of the scene and play. There are many scenes in Chekhov which exemplify the incoherence in the dialogue; the opening scene of Act I and the central scene of Act II in *Three Sisters* are examples.

The form of dramatic composition used by Chekhov relies on the inner acts in the lives of his characters, rather than on the traditional dramatic method of exposition and rising action, climax and resolution. Robert Brustein (1965) noticed this phenomenon and thus stated: "Chekhov's most effective masking device is to bury the plot (Magarshack's concept of the 'indirect action') so that violent acts and emotional climaxes occur offstage stage or between the acts. In this way he managed to avoid the melodramatic crisis and obscure the external conflict, ducking the event and concentrating on denouement" (Moravcevic, "The Obligatory Scene in Chekhov's Plays", 1966, p.99). Chekhov in his plays used a four-act dramatic structure in which the climax normally occurs at or near the end of act three. So, he had to project the basic conflicts in act one, develop them in act two, bring them to a climax in act three, and depict the resolution in act four. And, since the establishment of conflicts and tensions in the early scenes of a Chekhov play is obscured by the incoherent dialogue, the motives which traditionally drive the action of a play and give its plot movement appear covered or muted. This dramatic structure recalls to us the observation of Brockett and Findlay (1973) when they maintained that the actions of the plays are muted, kept in the background by the relegation of "all violent deeds" off stage. They write that

In the foreground, the on-stage action, is placed a plethora of seemingly trivial commonplace occurrences.... As a result, attention is concentrated not on events but on the texture of the life that surrounds and shapes the characters and their psychological responses. (pp. 243-244)

That "texture of life" and the "psychological responses" which Brockett and Findlay note as the effect of Chekhov's structure is the effect of inner action. Chekhov's plays accordingly do not appear to move or progress outwardly; hence, one has to search beneath their surfaces for revelations which constitute that particular kind of dramatic action. By selecting and dramatizing the "seemingly trivial, commonplace occurrences" of life, Chekhov obscures in the early scenes of the plays the dramatic tensions. Examples of this technique come in the first two acts of *Uncle Vania* in which Chekhov disguises the evolution of the Astrov-Yeliena relation by focusing the action and dialogue on Vania. And, in act one of *Three Sisters*, attention to Vershinin's early speeches reveals the hints of his infatuation with Nasha that lies beneath his polished, urbane social charm. Masha's return of his attention, which begins in act two, is suggested by nothing more than her inability

to control her slight laughing. And the whole movement of *The Cherry Orchard* has been described by Pitcher in one sentence: "Chekhov was reacting strongly against the kind of popular action-filled drama that was entirely divorced from everyday experience" (p.2).

A consideration of the development of Chekhov's plays may demonstrate that he needed sometimes to break away totally from the existing dramatic conventions. The structural pattern of his early plays *Platonov* (1880-81) and *Ivanov* (1887-1889) reveal some influences of the principles of the direct-plotting technique which demanded full on-stage presentation of dramatic material so arranged that it progresses neatly from the expository beginning, through a series of complications leading to climax and denouement. His first dramatic work, *Platonov*, which was only discovered in manuscript form after his death, is filled with theatrical effects and melodramatic incidents. Also, the pistol-shot in *Ivanov* remains one of the influences of traditional dramatic concepts. As an early play, *Ivanov*, may also look as if structured according to the well-made play. For instance, in the play, the first act ends with Anna's decision to follow her husband to the Lyebedevs' estate, the second act ends with her discovery of Ivanov and Sasha in each other's arms, the third act with Ivanov's brutal revelation to his wife that she is soon to die, and the fourth act with Ivanov's suicide. As the plays progress, however, the element of "strong action decreases, until in his last play, *The Cherry Orchard*, he found himself able to dispense for the first time with that prerequisite of conventional action drama: the pistol-shot" (Pitcher, p.2). Starting from the structure of the "well-made play" enriched his dramatic experience in the construction of a play; the path from the plan of *Platonov* to the technique of *The Seagull* had to go through the writing of *Ivanov*, and also through the rewriting of the *Wood Demon* into *Uncle Vania*.

Chekhov's drama seems to demonstrate a remarkable transfiguration of Aristotle's theory: the principle of Unity of Action is replaced in Chekhov by a series of intense emotional and psychological inner actions. It may be contended that Chekhov's technique has been derived from Aristotle, but Tom F. Driver, for example, calls Chekhov's break with the Aristotelian tradition more radical than any other in modern times, yet he insists that

It is only in the light of Aristotle's thought that Chekhov's achievement can be understood, and the principal categories of Aristotle's dramatic theory remain the most helpful in interpreting the Chekhovian play.

What we have to deal with is a transformation of the Aristotelian understanding, a transformation that is none the less radical for remaining within the traditional terms of discussion (1970, p.218).

Dorothea Krook (1969), using a particular scheme of tragedy, based on Aristotle's theory, demonstrates that *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard* are fully tragic; remarking that until very recently: ". . . in relation to the classic analysis of tragedy contained in Aristotle's *Poetics*, practically every theory of tragedy in our literary culture has either been directly derived from or has leaned heavily upon the Aristotelian account" (p.18).

Hence, it can be suggested that the break with Aristotle's view does not mean that Chekhov discarded the notion of cause and effect, or that dramatic change, development and progression are wholly absent in his plays. The fact, however, remains that Chekhov presented the lives of his characters on the stage differently from the manner in which characters had been presented hitherto. The actions of Chekhov's own characters are usually ineffectual because they remain spiritual and psychological, and in the plays, there is no complete action in the Aristotelian sense because nothing outwardly changes. However, the state of almost all of his characters, at the end of the plays, reveals the long dramatic journey they have travelled to: the full awareness of the hopelessness and helplessness of their situations. Thus, Chekhov dispenses with the traditional dramaturgic structure involving confrontations between characters and focuses his attention on the critical situations and turning points in the inner life of his characters. That is why his dramatic works are so emotionally tense and expressive. The tension derives not from outward events, but from inner psychological and emotional action. His presentation of the characters' inner lives may be considered a fundamental feature of his dramas. An indication of Chekhov's general approach to the theatre and acting is to be found in his letter of January 2, 1900, to Olga Knipper:

The immense majority of people are nervous, you know: the greater number suffer, and a small proportion feel acute pain: but where-in streets and in houses do you see people tearing about, leaping up, and clutching at their heads? Suffering ought to be expressed as it is expressed in life-that is, not by the arms and legs, but by tone and expression; not by gesticulation, but by grace. Subtle emotions of the soul in educated people must be subtly expressed in external way. You

will say- stage conditions. No conditions allow falsity. (Friedland Ed., *Letters*, 1963, p.186).

Once, after he had been watching a performance by the Moscow Arts Theatre of *Uncle Vania*, Chekhov expressed dissatisfaction with the way in which the actress playing the part of Sonia had at one point in the third act thrown herself at her father's feet and started to kiss his hand. "That's quite wrong", he said, "after all, it isn't a drama. The whole meaning, the whole drama of a person's life is contained within, not in outward manifestations..." (Pitcher, p.4). Stanislavsky, in many ways, differed with Chekhov and understood the plays through his own peculiar approach. However, the author and his producer in one important respect, remain united. Stanislavsky, in *My Life in Art*, wrote of Chekhov's works:

His plays are full of action, not in their external but in their inner development. In the very inactivity of his characters a complex inner activity is revealed. (Quoted by Elisaveta Fen in her introduction to *Chekhov: Plays*, 1982, p.7)

One may consequently deduce that Chekhov's works are plays of "inner action", which are highly suggestive and full of psychological implications. Discussions of the main qualities of Chekhov's action can be found in several works; among these are the books of Styan, Pitcher, Valency and Magarshack, as well as in shorter studies as those of, Bert O. States, William Gruber and others. On the other hand, it is not wholly true to think of Chekhov as a psychological dramatist; or to consider Chekhov's plays, in the words of Pitcher, "as vast coded documents which can only be deciphered with the utmost patience, and in which every remark, however innocent on the surface, is full of hidden psychological meaning and conceals a most complex web of motivation" (p.4). Although the most prominent of Chekhov's dramatic characters are often ordinary people, leading unremarkable lives, they are often from a psychological point of view highly complex or unusual. But this is mostly true in connection with *Ivanov* and *The Seagull* for the test of psychological interpretation is one that the characters of Chekhov's later plays will pass with different measures. In studying the development of Chekhov's dramatic approach to characterization, a significant movement forward can be noticed. His first four-act play to be performed, *Ivanov* (1887), is a close study of a psychologically complex character. In a letter of

untypical length (December 30th, 1888) to his friend, the publisher Souvorin, Chekhov analyzes his protagonist's past and present life in the most thorough psychological detail, even making use of his medical knowledge and drawing little graphs so as to explain Ivanov's psychological condition (Henry, *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought*, 1997, pp.75-83). Trepliov, in *The Seagull* (1895), is another psychologically complex portrait. One may argue that Chekhov appears to anticipate the psychoanalytical approach when he makes Trepliov unconsciously reveal the contradictions of his personality through what he says about himself, his past life, and especially about his mother. This thorough examination of the individual personality undergoes a remarkable change with *Uncle Vania* (1897), *Three Sisters* (1900) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1903).

Chekhov shows enough about his characters to make us understand their situation, and to feel with them in the crisis which they suffer; but the characters do not analyze themselves much, nor do we know much about the influences that have shaped their lives. There is even some bluntness about the manner in which Chekhov gives background information on the characters at the beginning of the play, as if eager to finish with such unimportant matters as quickly as possible. Chekhov's correspondence no longer shows any letters similar to the one about Ivanov. Chekhov definitely knew his characters very well; but the details that he now gives about them are more descriptive than analytical and sometimes border on the impressionistic. So, the term of 'psychological dramatist' may be applied but with considerable caution, for in the latter plays the analyst seems to have moved quietly forward into something else. That is why Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is directly relevant to Chekhov's *Ivanov* and *The Seagull*. Each play presents a protagonist, Ivanov and Trepliov, who is a modern Russian variant upon the type of Hamlet. *Uncle Vania*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard* can commonly be considered mature examples of the situation discussed in *Ivanov* and *The Seagull*. There are no single protagonists, and as Bentley puts it: "in the later plays life is seen in softer colors; Chekhov is no longer eager to be the author of a Russian Hamlet" (Bentley, 1953, p.342). Yet here, *Hamlet* merges into the plays. Chekhov's later works display a remarkable change from the dramatic resolution of the fate of a single individual to that of the social and national fate of Russia. *Hamlet's* relevance to the early two plays may be thus described as direct, textual and comparative, whereas it is broad, contextual and thematic as regards the last three plays.

### Conclusion

Chekhov's full-length plays look as if they were written obviously in defiance of Aristotle's conception that a play consists essentially of action, and as a result, plot emerges as more important than character; this is typical of Aristotle's conception of the elements of tragedy. Chekhov appears to assert the opposite conviction that often character is more significant and pertinent than plot. He is often criticized for this conviction. Artistically speaking, action in Chekhov's plays is predominately of an internal nature. Three aspects may be given as reasons accounting for this case: Chekhov's personal artistic talent, the realistic Russian literary tradition that emphasizes portraiture, psychology and ideas rather than plot, and the Hamlet-type that was prevalent during these times and often literally and intellectually associated with the character of "the superfluous man", to the extent that they became synonymous.

Chekhov has created through Ivanov a typical character of his own time that echoes the so-called superfluous man of the previous eras. This character is particularly relevant to the decade of the 1880s, a period of disillusionment and despair, and Ivanov appeared a spokesman for a world-weary generation. Although, in the play, Ivanov was too honest and did not want to be a Hamlet, yet he became one: a Hamlet-figure with all the qualities necessitated by his own historical moment. Other characters in later plays are as complex and tragic as Ivanov in their predicaments. There is often a deep reason in Chekhov's attitude to Russian Hamletism and to the kind of characters who are represented by Ivanov, ranging from *Platonov* to the characters of *The Cherry Orchard*. Chekhov's dramatic method of characterization can fruitfully be investigated through a chronological observation of the actions of the main characters in the plays.

Chekhov's peculiar dramatic approach to characterization that admits the psychological and social motives makes him one of the renowned masters of world modern drama. By combining the artistic skill learnt from Shakespeare with truthful observation of contemporary Russian life, he was able to express the inactivity of his characters and their failures in daily struggles. This method perhaps made him one of the distinct writers of tragedy, the tragedy of the modern man who he is often asked to act but he could not act, due to external impediments that made his actions inward. In his article "A Note on the Issue of Modern Tragedy: Chekhov's Plays in Perspective", Abdul Muttaleb sums up the point in a

statement that Chekhov in his plays "endeavours to describe some struggles of his own people and to put them in their place. His dramatic work is an expression of those people's struggles and broken surrenders. Chekhov does not merely portray incompetence, or shiftlessness, or the drunken, decayed, violently mischievous eccentrics of rural sketches. He depicts also the real paralysis of will, failing not only to overcome a detestable embarrassing situation, like Hamlet's, imposed upon him by darkly evil times or vengeful providence, but also to encompass the span of man's life" (2015, p.490).

Chekhov's plays, especially *Uncle Vania*, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, appeal to human life in its various dimensions; use comic episodes and characters in the midst of wide tragic situations, and demonstrate the principle that unmitigated tragedy is out of place in this life. In the plays, Chekhov transformed the situation of deadlock into a new condition, that of a stalemate, where there is no possibility of movement at all for the wrestler with life, every willed action is self-cancelling. Shakespeare could not resolve in action or do anything about Hamlet's dilemma except present it with great realism. Chekhov likewise could not resolve the stalemate of his characters; he could do nothing about their situations except express them with deep realism. Chekhov tried to "hold the mirror up to" the Russian life, for he wanted to show that "something is rotten" in that life; the plays therefore stand as "the abstract and brief chronicle of the time".

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