Chapter V  A. P. Chekhov through his literary creations

1. The short stories

Anton Chekhov had certain definite theories on literature which he specified in many of his letters to friends and relatives\(^1\). To him, the writer had one important duty to fulfil: to select intelligently by dint of his talent significant details of life and project them to the reader as objectively as possible. Philosophising, moralising and any sort of didactism were, in Chekhov's view, totally redundant to literature and had the overall effect of undermining the aesthetic value of a creative piece of work. This is the fundamental premise from which Chekhov started off on his career in serious literature and which he never consciously rejected throughout his life. It was within this framework, which he had set for himself, that Chekhov gave expression to his versatility as a writer, and a general view of his voluminous output reveals the vast range and diversity of themes and styles handled by him. From this it is evident that by conforming to certain "morals" in literature, he had not limited or narrowed himself as he evolved as a litterateur.

However, it must be kept in mind that till 1886/87 Chekhov had given his literary career little importance and whatever serious thought he might have had about literature had not really germinated before this time. He did not think deeply on a subject which in any case he regarded as secondary to his major interest and preoccupation at that time. Consequently, the stories he contributed to the humour magazines from 1879 were many in number and were basically hurriedly written.

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pieces of work which served as a means of removing his immediate financial constraints. Early literary criticism of this century (of the 40s), reveals a tendency towards dismissing these works of Chekhov (his output till 1886) as totally useless and thematically crude. The critic, D. S. Mirsky, for example, finds in these stories “every kind of vulgarity and bad taste”\(^2\) and perceives their only saving grace to be “a higher degree of craftsmanship”\(^3\). Subsequently critics have adopted a more tolerant attitude and have attempted to trace in these much maligned early stories origins of his later genius in the realm of narrative construction.\(^4\) Thomas Winner, for example, stressed that many of his stories reveal how great an emphasis Chekhov placed on the end of all his tales. This technical preoccupation on Chekhov’s part along with a compact style of narration which he mastered rather early in his career was to continue throughout his life. Chekhov usually concluded the initial stories in two ways - by a surprise ending or by no ending at all. In the latter, after leading the reader to anticipate some sort of dramatic conclusion, his expectations are deliberately allowed to fall flat by presenting an anti-climax of a sort. Both these techniques were similar in that there was in them the same tension between the expected and actual conclusion. This second or so-called “zero ending”\(^5\) was originated by Chekhov and perfected by him in the later phase of his career. Thus even while these initial contributions to humour magazines reflected influences of Gogol, Lermontov, Tolstoy and Turgenev, we find Chekhov boldly breaking down traditional conventions of


\(^3\) Ibid., p 357.


\(^5\) Winner op. cit., p. 5.1
narrative construction and integrating his works with precise techniques of
narration, impressionistic description, internalised action and innovative
resolution. Recent structuralist studies of Chekhov's poetics contends that this schema
of plotlessness and consciously restrained narrative brings out the nuances of time
and memory in the Chekhovian tale of his mature years. The role of time as a
cyclical phenomenon emerges in an unaccentuated form in some of his stories
where his characters speculate about the state of things a hundred or a thousand
years later. Often a sense of timelessness experienced by characters comes out
through lyrical rhetoric.

Scholars have sometimes discovered the technical methods of a landscape
artist in Chekhov's fiction when he uses colour in his descriptions to denote the
moods and predicament of his characters. Use of gardens bathed in moonlight in
which the hero and heroine are dressed in black and white respectively to transmit
a sense of indecision and break of usual pattern form a part of Chekhov's
impressionistic style. Cold mist and smoke are often used symbolically to denote
"rationalising frigidity" of the heroine eg. in the story Verochka or "corrosive
detachment" of the hero as in Black Monk.

In his early writings Chekhov exploited with advantage his aptitude for
mimicry and parody to depict the taste of the reading public of
those times for detective novels, romantic fiction and horror stories. One

6. Ibid., passim.
7. Michael Finke, "The Hero’s Descent to the Underworld" in Chekhov in The Russian Review, vol 53,
8. Donald Rayfield, "Orchards and Gardens in Chekhov" in Slavic and East European Review vol 67, no
4, October 1989, pp 530-545.
Thousand and One Passions parodied a novel by Victor Hugo while The Crooked Mirror, The Restless Guest, The Swedish Match and The Hunting Accident were skilful renditions of horror and mystery stories - so popular with the humour magazines. In other tales of Chekhov - many of which were anecdotal in nature and quite satisfying artistically - one could perceive reflections of contemporary social types such as clerks with their cloying obsequiousness, school teachers aware of their humble position in life and members of the gentry reduced to penury. On the Nail, Death of a Clerk, Slander and The Coach all took up these stereotypes as their principal characters who were ridiculed for their idiosyncracies and abject humility for which they were themselves responsible. Fat and Thin, Goose Conversations and Chameleon all satirically stressed the excessive and unhealthy concern with bureaucratic rank and prestige, while Sergeant Prishibiyev pointed an accusing finger at the oppressive Russian state. His very early humour magazine days were interspersed with stories of a more serious nature. The Lady of the Manor, Livestock and Tardy Flowers while - not qualitatively of much value, anticipated to a certain extent Chekhov's later preference for more profound themes and provided a glimpse into the new literary styles which were to emerge with his maturity. It must be remembered that while writing for the 'thin' journals, Chekhov was constricted in his choice of themes by the preference of the editors. Moreover, this was the period when he was writing in conditions of general hardship and one finds a number of letters in his correspondence stating the difficulties he faced as a writer. By 1885, Chekhov had, partially with the help of Leykin, advanced one step as an author by beginning to contribute to the Petersburg Newspaper. His output during 1885 certainly revealed a marked improvement on his earlier works and many critics attributed this to the freedom which he now enjoyed regarding the choosing of plots for his stories. Artistry and Huntsman were the two most important achievements of this year-
both displaying maturity of style and novelty of theme in their depiction of an all-absorbing interest in the lives of their heroes - art and hunting respectively - compelling them to perpetuate cruelty on others, an evil Chekhov somehow justified in view of their extreme passion for their vocations.  

These two stories, the *Huntsman* in particular, attracted the attention of Grigorovich and Suvorin, who were thereafter to do their best to help Chekhov develop his art. The concrete results of this effort was perhaps *The Steppe* - a masterpiece which was probably the first work to really comply with Chekhov’s notions of literature. *The Steppe* differed from Chekhov’s earlier writings in more ways than one - the most significant change being that it was the longest piece of work that he had written till now. In fact it is in this respect that we find the influence of the stalwarts in the literary world at work upon him. Grigorovich's constant urging that Chekhov should leave off writing short pieces for magazines and begin to consider himself a writer of potential not only gave young Anton a tremendous amount of self-confidence but also removed whatever trepidation he might have had against even attempting to write a protracted piece. In fact Chekhov's correspondence clearly reveals that apart from Grigorovich many other important writers of the time, Vladimir Korolenko, for example, had felt that Chekhov was wasting his talent by confining himself to writing concise stories and had suggested that he should write a novel and thereby allow his superiority as a writer to express itself fully. Acting on this advice Chekhov began writing a long descriptive piece which, while falling short of what was considered at that time to be the requisites of a novel turned out to be a brilliant piece of writing, lyrically

10. Ibid., pp. 40 & 49.
12. Didactism and Utilitarianism as stated earlier were important pre-requisites of the novel in the eyes of progressives of the populist mentality.
describing life and nature in the steppe. Essentially *The Steppe* involved a comment on life in the Ukraine as seen through the eyes of a young boy Egorooskha undertaking a long journey with his uncle, a merchant trading in wool. All the different aspects of the life of the trading community - the main inhabitants of this region - are observed by a boy who, while unable to understand all the complexities he observes, conveys to the reader the various underlying tensions which ruffle the apparently placid existence of the people of the steppe. Characterisations of the obsequious Jewish innkeeper and his rebellious cynical brother are vivid. “This was the taverner, Moses Mosevitch, a middle-aged man, with a very pale face and a handsome beard, black as Indian ink... Mosevitch when he recognised the arrivals” - (the merchant Kuzmitchov, Father Christopher and Egorooshka) - “at first nearly died in the fullness of his joy, then clasped his hands and moaned. The folds of his frock coat flapped, he bowed till his back was bent double and his face became distorted with such a smile that it seemed as if the sight of the birtchka was not only pleasant but also too painful-sweet.” In Solomon by contrast “there was something defiant, arrogant and scornful in his attitude; at the same time it was in the highest degree pitiful and comic, because the more imposing his attitude became the more conspicuous became his short trousers, his short tailed coat, his caricature of a nose and fledgling-like appearance.” His contemptuous attitude of the unfair advantage which possession of wealth gave to a man can be discovered from his comments like “.... there is no gentleman or millionaire who will not shake hands with a miserly Jew if only he has a superfluity of kopecks. I, at present, am a miserly and indigent Jew and everyone treats me

like a dog, but if I had money, then Varlamov would make as great a fool of himself before me as Moses does before you.”16 These two characters are offset by the portrayal of the rich Jewish merchant Varlamov, the uncrowned king in the trading world who in reality is a rather nondescript person. “In that small grey-clad man, with high boots, sitting on a seedy little horse, conversing with moujiks at that hour, when all righteous people are asleep, it was hard to recognise the mysterious elusive Varlamov, whom everyone is looking for, who is always ‘circling’ and has a great deal more money than the Countess Dranitska”.17 This first part of the story is followed by a change in tone when Egorooshka finds himself sharing the travel experiences of local small traders, listens to fantastic stories conjured up by one of the elders of the tribe and savours the close contact with nature which results from this temporary existence. In fact it is nature - the vivid description of the flora and fauna of the steppe, its fierce beauty as it is drenched by a storm - which forms the principal theme running through the entire story, brilliantly holding together the diverse but delightful impressions of the young boy. An example of Chekhov’s striking description of an incoming storm would not be out of place here: “The landscape was the same as it had been at noon... The air had become even more stagnant from the heat and stillness, submissive nature grew torpid in silence, there was not a breath of wind, nor a cheering cool sound, nor a cloud. But now, at last, when the sun was about to descend towards the west, the steppe, the hills and the air could no longer bear the pressure; jaded and their patience worn out, they made an attempt to throw off the restraint. Beyond the hills unexpectedly appeared an ash-grey curly cloud. It exchanged a glance with the steppe well, I’m ready - and looked threatening. Immediately there was a rift in the stagnant air, the wind sprang up, and with a

16. Linscott SAT, p. 360. Chekhov SS vol 6, p 44.
clamour and a whistling whirled about the steppe. The grass and the steppe-grass at once began to whisper, a spiral cloud of dust got up from the road, and fled over the steppe, drawing after it bits of straw, dragon-flies, and feathers, and the dark twirling column rose towards the sky, darkening the sun..."18 Interspersed within such vigorous imagery, the personification of nature and the main episodes are characterisations of different people, typical inhabitants of the region, like the priest Father Christopher, the Countess Dranitska and the hunter Constantine who move in and out of the story quite casually, but whose presence makes complete the entire picture of the steppe to the reader.

Chekhov had many misgivings while writing the story and felt that he had not succeeded in handling the rich material at his disposal competently enough. His major apprehension arose from the fact that he had too many worthwhile impressions to convey to the reader which when put down in writing might turn out to be dreary and unnecessarily rambling.19 In order to avoid such a consequence Chekhov believed that compactness of construction was to be given the greatest importance which resulted in each page being turned into a story in its own right. However, whatever Chekhov's personal opinion of The Steppe might have been (he writes to Grigorovich while writing the story that he does not yet know how to write long pieces20) it was very well received by contemporary critics. Critics with diverse political attitudes, such as Burenin 21 (who was

reactionary in his outlook) and Mikhailovsky (the populist writer), appreciated The Steppe as being of intrinsic literary value, though the latter regarded it to be somewhat purposeless in statement.22

The Steppe signified for Chekhov a glorious crossing of the threshold into serious literature and the very same year saw the publication of two important stories Lights and The Party. This two stories were very different from the kaleidoscope of impressions which one finds in The Steppe. Lights dealt with the specific theme of pessimism,23 while The Party24 was more ambitious in scope and presented a scathing view of intellectuals and generally of the educated and well-established echelons of Russian society of the sixties. The Party brings to focus incidents on a single day in which all the people who matter in a provincial town are assembled in the house of Pyotor Dimitrich in order to celebrate his birthday. What Chekhov seeks to emphasise in the story are the tensions which rankle in the minds of the hero and his pregnant wife while they are forced to maintain a facade of merriment and conventionality before the guests around them. The problems essentially arise from the fact that Pyotor Dimitrich is facing a court case for an indiscreet political statement, which causes him a great deal of anxiety - a feeling his standing in the intellectual world compels him to cover up. This latent fear makes him irritable and difficult and results in his withdrawal from his wife causing her great pain. Unable to stand emotional stress she ultimately breaks down giving way to hysterics and a premature labour. The story is resolved in the end with the husband and wife once more in complete understanding with each other when the pressure on them finds an outlet in a violent quarrel and mutual

22. Karlinsky LAC, p. 113 footnote, 2.
23. Rayfield 1975, p. 84.
suffering for the death of their child. A very vivid picture of Russian society in the 60s comes out as Chekhov describes the inanity of the guests and their ideas (which the heroine finds so irksome), the shallowness of the commitments of the young and politically conscious man who is a new-comer to the district and of the liberals who are actually quite conservative in their opinions.

Chekhov was advised by both Pleshcheyev and Suvorin on what they felt were certain technical errors in the construction of The Party. Chekhov admitted his so-called drawback of being unable to satisfactorily compose the ‘middle’ of his stories since he had so far been “used to writing short stories having only a beginning and an end.” To Suvorin too, who had made a similar criticism regarding this particular story, Chekhov confessed that his awareness of the fact that he was writing for a low budget journal like the Northern Herald had induced him to cramp up the middle of his story in consideration of the fact that he was their most expensive contributor. While giving in to this sort of criticism on matters of technique and style (he also conceded the fact that there were certain minor similarities with incidents to be found in Anna Karenina) Chekhov held his own where the actual drawing out of the characters was concerned. He made it clear to Pleshcheyev (according to whose advice he cancelled one of his characters in the story) that what he was trying to project to his readers was not the political attitude of his principal characters but the extent of honesty or falsity of their basic existences. It therefore seems that contemporaries and well-wishers

28. Karlinsky LAC, p. 113 footnote 6. Chekhov had omitted a character in the story through whom he had wished to project looked to past Russian achievements eg. the great Reforms and rejected the present.
misunderstood to some extent the ideological priorities the Chekhov wished to bring out through his works. His essential a-political attitude in the sense that he relegated outward political preoccupations to a secondary position and placed greater emphasis on the ideals and values that can be discerned in the everyday existence of individuals was missed by his contemporaries.

In fact it is this very same preoccupation that dominates Chekhov's next major work - *A Dreary Story* - which happens to be his most significant literary achievement of the year 1889. By now Chekhov had moved on to more thought provoking pieces, serious and profound in their content, hinting at philosophical complications which were really much more intellectually taxing than such artistic compositions as *The Steppe*. His success to date as a writer and the resulting confidence it gave him perhaps encouraged him to take up a subject as abstract and complex as that depicted in *A Dreary Story*, (also known as *A Boring Story*).  

Here Chekhov portrays the ultimate disillusionment experienced by an eminent professor condemned to death in his old age by an incurable disease. As the professor, who is quite aware of the fact that the end is near, lives out the last few months of his life, he experiences a strange isolation not only from his immediate family but from all that he once regarded as being worthwhile and precious in his own system of values. In these last days of increasing mental detachment from his surroundings and growing physical pain, the professor finds compatibility with Katya - his ward, a young woman who has experienced a similar detachment but at a much younger age. The extremely successful professional life of the professor of medicine, the extent of the fame he enjoyed and his fortunate family life, unencumbered by any real problem, is masterfully narrated in the first person at the beginning of the story so as to convey to the reader a sense of the

apparently enviable position which the professor held in society. This picture of the richness and completeness of the hero's existence is however immediately dispelled by the cynical comments of the professor revealing his true feeling towards his so-called worldly success. These accomplishments begin to lose their meaning in the context of the self-introspection emanating from his feeble attempts to battle against his physical discomforts. This emotional isolation overcoming him leads him to mentally reject everything (his career as well as his family) once held dear and to find solace in the instability of Katya - a woman who has been betrayed by her lover and has failed to achieve success in her career in acting. However his attempts at establishing any kind of meaningful relationship with even this young woman who understands him most, does not eventually succeed, as the professor is too caught up in his own particular trauma of bitterness to allow any one else to reach out to him and break his insularity.

The superior craftsman in Chekhov was certainly at work in this particular story which artistically constituted a superb piece of narration. This account of Katya's past is almost imperceptibly woven into the main plot as are the crude and repelling attitudes of the hero's wife and daughter, discerned by the professor during his last months of heightened sensitivity. Certain brilliant passages bring out the stark reality of the professor's impending doom and increasing isolation and bitterness... "Whether the sky is covered with clouds or the moon and stars shine in it, on returning home I always look up at it and think that I shall soon be dead. It would seem that at such moments thoughts ought to be as the sky, bright and striking... But no! I think about myself, my wife, Lisa, Gnekker, the students and about people in general; my thoughts are mean and trivial. I try to deceive myself and my view on life might be expressed in the words of the famous Arakcheyev, who wrote in one of his private letters: No good thing in the world can be without some evil, and there is always more bad than good'. In other words, every thing is disgusting, there is nothing to live for, and the sixty-two years of my life must be
regarded as wasted”. The final parting between the professor and Katya is depicted with overwhelming poignancy and provides a moving finale to a great piece of literature.

In *A Dreary Story*, Chekhov essentially developed the theme that he had begun in *The Party* in the sense that here too he sought to bring out the actuality of his principal character's existence in contrast to his social identity. He wrote to Pleshcheyev that his aim in this particular story was two-fold, he wanted to project life as it was in reality and then point out how far removed this kind of existence was from the ideal life.

Since Chekhov was himself not sure as to what exactly this ideal existence was, he pledged to conform to the truth which signified to him “the absolute freedom of man, freedom from oppression, from prejudices, ignorance, passion etc.” Consequently, the reader is primarily left with a sense of regret for the falsity which predominated the major part of the professor's life. The manifold ideas that emerged from the story created a stir in contemporary intellectual circles, which was what Chekhov had hoped for. The reaction was on the whole favourable though the lack of a moral framework in the story was noted. There was also a tendency to identify the professor's viewpoint with the ideas of Chekhov himself. While this was quite forcefully denied by the author in a letter to Surovin, it would not perhaps be totally incongruous to suggest that...

32. Friedland, p. 15 letter to Pleshcheyev from Moscow, dt. April 9, 1889. Chekhov PSSP, vol 3 (Pisma), p. 186
33. Ibid
34. Ibid, 1975, p. 92.
Nikolai Stepaanych's love for science and his sceptical views on modern literature and Katya's love for and her subsequent disillusionment with the theatre were to some extent a reflection of Chekhov's world-view. The professor's scathing comments on Russian literature tallied with Chekhov's assessment of the drawback of the majority of writers in Russia in general, while his generally skeptical opinion about the intelligentsia found a place in the professor's review of the intellectual milieu surrounding him. Chekhov, of course, admitted to Suvorin that his views on these various subjects like literature and the theatre should not be considered in isolation but as part of the circumstances depicted in the story. 36 In this way they would be relegated to a secondary position (which was his intention in any case), since what Chekhov wanted to lay stress on, were not the ideas themselves but the circumstances which led to the dissatisfaction of those caught up in the vicious circle of social hypocrisy.

The theme of drawing attention to the social milieu by delving into the political and moral attitudes and other mental characteristics of his heroes (represented as typical products of their social set-up) which Chekhov tentatively explored in A Dreary Story was magnified in The Duel37, written in 1891. This, once more, was a very long story, longer than even The Steppe in which Chekhov brought to the fore-front two principal characters in opposition to each other, where behaviour and attitudes were concerned. They, Layevsky the weakling and Von Koren the strong man of the story, are representatives of two different sets of social circumstances which emerge from differing world views. Thus Layevsky is a "superfluous man" of the type that has been thrown up by the Russian social structure with its drawbacks of injustice and oppression in which an intellectual is unable to find a groove for himself. He (Layevsky) has withdrawn from the hub of

36. Ibid.
Russian society at St. Petersburg into the Caucasus with another man's wife. Here he, and his lover Nadezhda plan to start life anew, based on Tolstoyan ideals of tilling the soil and living a simple and uncomplicated existence. However, Layevsky's natural inclinations towards laziness result in the erosion of all his idealism and convert him into a work-shirking government official, who through his immorality is nothing more than an unhealthy influence on the local population.

The "superfluous man", the self-styled Hamlet which Layevsky is, is offset by Von Koren, a Zoologist who is also a newcomer to the Caucasus. Von Koren is a dedicated scientist and a determined Darwinian in whose scheme of things, weaklings like Layevsky deserve no sympathy at all and should be exterminated at the first opportunity. Matters come to a head when Von Koren finds out that a dissatisfied Layevsky is planning to flee from the Caucasus leaving his lover in the lurch. He challenges Layevsky to a duel in which the latter is miraculously saved when the zoologist misses his aim. Things are resolved after the duel when, as a result of his traumatic experience, Layevsky recovers his equilibrium, takes hold of himself and effects a reconciliation with Nadezhda whom he now marries. Von Koren, on his part, mellows down slightly as a result, and the two take leave of each other on a note of friendship. While the story itself is filled with more drama than most of Chekhov's other serious tales, it is really the dogmatism of the two heroes who in their own ways are unable to move out of the niches in the realm of ideas which their adherence to particular schools of thought in Russian society has placed them in, that is to be taken account of. Von Koren steeped in Darwinism (which was popular in the Russian scientific world in Chekhov's time),

38 vigorous and usefully active in his personal life-style, was totally unable to comprehend the vacillations and doubts which wracked a "professional" intellectual unable to

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adjust himself to the difficulties of a society in flux. In fact, it was Layevsky and not Von Koren who ultimately proved to be the stronger of the two, as he was able to gather all his spiritual strength and avoid total mental disintegration by making truce with his conscience and with Nadezhda in the end. This ultimate innate self-sufficiency is something which Von Koren lacked for he relented only after Layevsky's transformation into a stronger and better person.

Through *The Duel*, Chekhov imperceptibly drew the attention of his readers to some of the different ideological preoccupations of the intellectuals of nineteenth century Russia. Darwinism as a political ideology - with its ruthless advocacy of natural selection of the strong - was pitted against the ultimate moral strength of spiritual independence. The predominant role which the Germans and other West Europeans played in the development of science in its formative phase in Russia is evident from the author's selection of a German name for his zoologist. While other West European schools of thought were able to take root in Russia and formed a background to the search for the means of social progress, the Darwinian theory of evolution was never really considered fit (even by scientists believing in it) to be extended to "social and moral reality".

Chekhov made his initial draft of *The Duel* in 1888, but finally wrote it in 1891. In the interval between his initial conceptualisation of the story and the ultimate completion of it, Chekhov busied himself with multifarious activities outside the field of literature. In 1891 he undertook a long journey across Siberia to the convict settlement of Sakhalin which he surveyed and then wrote about. He returned home after having touched India, Ceylon and the Suez Canal. Impressions

39. Ibid. p 433
of his activity seem to have found a place in his story when Von Koren in a manner reminiscent of the real Chekhov speaks of undertaking a long expedition to Siberia in order to enrich scientific knowledge. Chekhov was rather apprehensive about the reception *The Duel* would get in literary circles and wrote to Suvorin expressing his doubts, since he felt that his story was rather long and boring. He was visibly relieved when Surovin dispelled whatever apprehensions he might have had about the story and confessed that he had lately become quite unsure of himself regarding his skill as a writer. However, in spite of this lack of sufficient confidence in himself, Chekhov seldom conceded any changes suggested to him by his friends. Thus when Suvorin felt that it would be better to name his story "The Lie" instead of *The Duel*, Chekhov pointed out that a lie would have to be a conscious one in order to really imply falsehood. The theme of the 'superfluous man' had once earlier been Chekhov's focus of interest in the play *Ivanov*, which together with *The Duel*, constituted a telling but indirect comment on the problems faced by Russian intellectuals.

The years following saw an increase in the thematic intensity of the stories written by Chekhov, which reached a culmination in two powerful stories, *Ward No. 6*, and *The Black Monk*, written with a gap of about two years between them. These two works had the common motif of exploring the psychological working of the human mind. In both these stories Chekhov was able to utilise to its fullest extent his experience as a doctor in order to bring out the mental derangement of his heroes. In *Ward No. 6* specially, he was on very familiar grounds as the story had as its setting, a mental hospital. Chekhov was able to bring together all his

resources as a writer and doctor in order to give a very realistic description of the corruption ridden dilapidated lunatic asylum and the pathetic condition of its helpless patients. Chekhov was working in a situation when already in the 1820s & 1830s notions of insanity as an illness which could be remedied through scientific treatment began to gain ground. As such, a gradual proliferation of mental asylums and social welfare institutions followed in the wake of a new trend towards psychiatric reform on the part of the authorities. The first generation of Russian psychiatrists had to initially overcome a number of hurdles – including opposition of physicians – to establish themselves as specialists who could fruitfully care for the mentally tortured. Their efforts to establish special significance to the utility of their profession was embodied in their attempt to gain administrative control of the institutions which housed their patients especially in the provinces, which were constantly eroded due to interference by lay authority.

Undoubtedly Chekhov was deeply sensitive to efforts in this direction and to the poor level of psychiatric development on the whole. A perusal of the first two pages of the story immediately gives the reader a sense of the problems faced by an underdeveloped socio-economic system where human life and dignity are pushed low down in the scale of social priorities. It was with the intention of probing this sort of corrosion of normal human values that Chekhov presented the principal character of the story Dr. Ragin, who was the man-in-charge of the hospital. Dr. Ragin was an honest and kind hearted man, intellectual in his disposition but possessed of what was, in Chekhov's view a grave fault, indifference. This indifferent streak in the doctor's character induced him to remain inactive and do nothing to remedy the mismanagement and evil which he saw around him. Vehemently opposed to this apathetic attitude, Chekhov worked his plot out in

such a way that at the end of the story one found Dr. Ragin imprisoned as an inmate of the asylum by the evil which he unconsciously helped to perpetrate through his non-resistance. Interwoven within this basic plot was another important character, Gromov, an inmate of the asylum who had been suffering from a persecution mania and had thus been labelled by society as insane. Ironically enough Dr. Ragin, the intense and contemplative man that he was, found intellectual stimulation in conversation with Gromov, a book-worm like himself, who had certain quaint philosophical notions on matters regarding life and death. Through these conversations between Gromov and Ragin, Chekhov presented two different philosophies of life - the hope for a better existence as opposed to Ragin's stoicism; he also conveyed to the reader Ragin’s feeling that Gromov’s hopeful idealism really had very little connection with the ravings of a mad man. Gromov's pathetic indignation at being labelled insane by a society in which the majority of the so-called sane men live a life of immorality and corruption reminds one of the grievances of a political prisoner held unjustly by an autocratic and oppressive system. His hopes for a better world in which there would be minimisation of injustice and meaningless coercion, are reminiscent of the dreams of a radical political thinker who suffers martyrdom for the cause of the future. These coherent outbursts of Gromov were interrupted by his soaring imagination beyond logical levels when he began to talk of his belief in the final immortality of man which he felt would result from the increasingly progressive development of the human brain. And it was at this point that Ragin, himself a staunch advocate of the ultimate superiority of the human mind, but conscious of the total tragedy of human existence which was doomed to perish, found in Gromov’s philosophical ramblings scope for escapism from the morbid reality of the inevitability of suffering and death.
This powerful story, with political as well as philosophical overtones, regarded by contemporaries more as a political allegory than anything else, is unlike anything Chekhov had written before. In order to portray the grimness of the tragedy of Ragin's helplessness against the forces of evil which slowly overcame him, Chekhov almost totally dispenses with the use of beautiful description of nature which hitherto had always an important place in all his narratives. In The Duel, for example, the entire drama receives some relief from the beauty of the natural surroundings, which lightens the readers' mood even in view of the impending tragedy. In Ward No. 6 by contrast, in the few places where nature is brought in, it is utilised to emphasise the gruesome reality of the situation. Dr. Ragin's tortured mind and his sufferings, when he is imprisoned in the asylum by one of his scheming colleagues, is heightened by the imagery of the moonlight streaming in through the barred window of the ward with the reflection on the wall resembling a cobweb from which it is impossible for the insect-like Ragin to escape. Secondly, there was what Chekhov himself expressed as “the complete absence of women and the element of love”. These two elements had constituted an important aspect of most of Chekhov's earlier important stories and tales like The Grasshopper, (written in the same year) Ariadne, Ionich, The Darling and Lady with a Dog, Chekhov conceded that Ward No. 6 stood apart from most of his earlier creations and in a letter to Suvorin he said that this story contained much reasoning and “a fable, a plot and a denouement”. Its tendency, according to Chekhov, was ‘liberal’ which is perhaps why it was published in the liberal
journal *Russian Thought* 49, Chekhov certainly did not enjoy writing the story which depicted so much unpleasant reality and that is perhaps why he regretted (in the letter mentioned above) not having sent it to Suvorin for his comments before actually publishing it. It seems that Chekhov had an abiding faith in Suvorin's literary taste and remarkably little arrogance regarding his own abilities as a writer. Considering the fact that he had already had to his credit such masterpieces as *The Steppe* and *A Dreary Story* unequivocally acclaimed by all and sundry, his letter to Suvorin written from Melikhovo in November, 1892 was extremely self effusive in nature.\(^50\) Here Chekhov expressed his apologies to Suvorin for offering a mediocre story such as *Ward No. 6* and bracketed himself with other contemporary men of culture, such as, Nadason, Repin and Davidov, all of whom (in Chekhov's view) possessed only average talent. The reason for this malady was that the present generation of authors described "... life as it is and stop dead right there.... we have neither immediate nor remote goals, and there is an emptiness in our souls. We have no politics, we don't believe in revolution, there is no God... No one who wants nothing, hopes for nothing and fears nothing can be an artist...."\(^51\) Chekhov certainly underestimated the powerful comment which emerged in *Ward No.6* and the immense maturity on the part of the author which it revealed.

Even though *The Black Monk* \(^52\) contained within it all the elements of women and love as well as vivid descriptions of nature, it was certainly no less morbid or horrifying than *Ward No.6* The two stories are interestingly


50. Karinsky LAC, pp. 242-244.


enough, similar and dissimilar at the same time. The dissimilarity emerges from the fact that unlike *Ward No. 6* - which can be seen as a microcosm of humanity, complete with its evil and redeeming tendencies, *The Black Monk* is essentially the story of an individual - whose abnormal process of thinking often provides interesting and unusually perceptive observations about human existence. On the other hand, striking resemblances can be found in the thought processes of Gromov of *Ward No. 6* and Kovrin, the hero of *The Black Monk* who is insane for a certain portion of the story. Both these characters envisage the final immortality of mankind though while in Gromov's case all his ideas are in the context of society, Kovrin has himself as the focal point of all his thoughts. Chekhov himself wrote that the principal theme of his story was megalomania. "I wrote *The Black Monk* without any melancholy ideas, through cold reflection. I simply had the desire to describe megalomania".53 Chekhov himself dreamt of a black monk 54 and decided to utilise it in a story in which his interest in psychiatry would be put into use. The result was a highly imaginative piece of work which once more helped to prove his mettle as a writer and illustrated the superbly skilful handling of a difficult and abstract theme.

The hero of *The Black Monk* is Kovrin a young intellectual, with neurotic tendencies, who is asked to avoid emotional stress and take a long rest. This the hero does in the country estate of his former guardian who is a passionate horticulturist. This is the way in which Chekhov brings nature into his story and we find a realistic description of the orchard, wildly beautiful in some parts and symmetrically decorated and pretty in others forming a continuous background to the story. In fact, in the initial chapters, it is the garden and its enthusiastic

54. Ibid.
caretakers who constitute the two important foci on which the author concentrates. Kovrin's first encounter with the Black Monk who is in fact an apparition manufactured by the former's over-worked imagination, is brought in casually in the midst of his rapidly developing relationship with Tanya (his guardian's daughter) giving the entire episode an illusory and at the same time a certain sinister quality. As these encounters increase, Kovrin is gradually convinced of being a chosen one - a person distinct from the common herd by qualities of power and spirituality ordained to change in some way or other the destiny of men. His conversation with the monk symbolising a second consciousness gives him extreme satisfaction and enables him to define the purpose of life as being pleasure emanating from knowledge and ultimately leading to human immortality. His inner satisfaction makes him a kind and wonderful person to interact with and it is only when he is branded as insane by his wife and family and forced to undergo a treatment that he turns aggressive and self-destructive. He rejects his wife, strikes up an illicit relationship with another woman and ceases to take anything but a worldly and calculating interest in his academic pursuits. More general illness makes him a wrecked man physically and he ultimately dies while experiencing a final encounter with the black monk.

The irrational elements in the story are transformed into almost tenable experiences by the convincing skill of Chekhov's description. The first vision of the black monk taking shape from something akin to a whirlwind in a lonely spot, with his unusually pale face almost as if it had been yellowed with age seems an eerie though plausible incident even to a reader who might be a total sceptic regarding the supernatural. The convincing dialogues between Kovrin and the monk on the future of mankind, on eternal life and regarding ideas that outstanding men are destined to suffer while the common man need not feel any discomfort imbue the hero's megalomania with an element of naturalness and plausibility. Apart from his
increasing social activity, it must be remembered that during the early years of the 1890s Chekhov was himself extremely unwell, having contracted the beginnings of tuberculosis which may have enabled him to add a personal touch to his medical expertise when he was describing Kovrin's illness. Irksomeness at being constantly ministered to and fussed over, which Kovrin so strongly resents may well have been an experience of Chekhov's own personal life. Other elements in Chekhov's life certainly made their influences felt in *The Black Monk*. In 1892, Chekhov had purchased an estate at Melikhovo which provided him with an ideal home, some distance away from Moscow, for about four years. In the initial phase of his stay at Melikhovo, he spent much of his time helping to run the farm which formed a part of the estate and savouring the natural and partly wild beauty of the woods nearby. Much of this feeling, often in an exaggerated form of course, comes out in *The Black Monk* through the horticulturist Pesotsky's tending of his gardens and orchards and through the pleasure experienced by Kovrin as he convalesced amidst beautiful nature.

By the beginning of the 1890s, Chekhov was publishing quite frequently in the liberal journal *Russian Thought* and all his differences with Vukol Lavrov - its editor and publisher had been settled. *Russian Thought* - more radically inclined than other contemporary journals - had once accused Chekhov of being a writer with no scruples. The reasons for this kind of attack on the a-political Chekhov was perhaps the fact the *Russian Thought* had among its critics men like Mikhail Protopopov who reviewed culture from a constricted world view in an effort to keep alight the flame of idealism of the sixties. However, Chekhov was quite

well aware of the fact that whereas Russian Thought in its zest for progress sometimes tended to be quite ruthless in denouncing what was not in their view utilitarian literature, New Times was equally narrow in outlook and often carried out attacks on any effort in the realm of culture by men of Jewish origin. While New Times had always been overtly averse to change and progress, and this was acceptable to Chekhov inspite of its conservative leanings, what he would not tolerate was its crude anti-Semiticism. In fact it was impossible for Chekhov with his extremely kind and gentle disposition to bear with any kind of unfairness and rough handling of an artist through journalism. This attitude might have been responsible for the fact that he had gradually been severing his connection with New Times - though there was no perceptible dent in his personal friendship with Suvorin. Russian Thought on its part had changed its outlook regarding Chekhov considerably and Vukol Lavrov had cultivated better relations with him which ultimately developed into friendship. Many of the writer's important stories had been published in Russian Thought which came to value Chekhov's contributions immensely.

It is perhaps significant that of the stories published in Russian Thought many had seemingly political overtones an element that Chekhov avoided in most of his works. As already mentioned, Ward No. 6, regarded by many as a political allegory, had found scope for publication in this very journal. Subsequent to The Black Monk, two important stories The House with the Attic and My Life appeared in the pages of Russkia Mysl, both of which had, as a common point, the ventilation of political ideas by leading characters. Of the two, The House with the Attic had a lyrical touch but it since it was after all the story of an artist. It

was basically a love story in which the artist - one of the principal characters - was forced to defend himself against the accusation of a young woman, a politically committed social worker, of living an ivory-tower existence, cut away from the mainstream of ordinary life through deliberate intellectual self-isolation. The tale begins with an account of the life-style of the artist who is a gentle inhibited person leading a quiet and almost idle existence in a provincial town. Through the artist's words - (the entire tale is narrated in the first person) one gets a picture of serenity and idyllic conditions within which the hero of the story spends his time. This placid existence is soon disrupted as N - (which is what Chekhov chooses to call the hero) makes the acquaintance of two sisters - the elder, strong and forceful in character believing in leading a socially useful existence and the younger, emotionally soft and not too determined in her conviction. N immediately falls in love with Missy, the younger girl, but at the same time develops a strange relationship with the elder sister whose searing contempt for the life-style of the man of culture - who in this case is a "landscape painter" - forces N to react and bring together and express his hitherto scattered and almost sub-conscious ideas on life. Chekhov skilfully brings out two philosophies of life - one of action and the other of passive idealism - through the intellectual arguments which take place between the artist and the elder sister, Lida. While the former advocates alleviation of the conditions of poverty-striken Russian peasants by making efforts at educating them and offering them basic amenities like hospitals and schools, the latter believes in the impossibility of truly changing peasant existence which has remained unchanged since time immemorial through such palliatives. He holds that schools and hospitals would only add to the burden already borne by the peasant and that it would be better to aid his spiritual development instead, by lessening his labour through sharing a part of it. Chekhov perhaps gets his own back at the populists through this story when he depicts Lida, steeped in her socialism, as the ruthless intervener preventing Missus and N from finding ultimate happiness in
each other. Her political and social commitment is overwhelming to the extent that it undermines her sympathy for the finer things in life if they stand in the way of the development of her ideology in the very same way the idealists of the sixties were ready to reject aesthetic qualities in art and literature if they were totally divorced from didactism. However in projecting the views of N., Chekhov established a dialogue with populism and attempted to see beyond it: for what N visualised i.e. not only breaking out of one's class, and mingling with the peasants, but also sharing their burden was much more revolutionary than the ideas of any organised group in contemporary Russia. Through this, Chekhov argued for a vision far beyond the populist valorization of peasant communal life, and demanded a proper encounter with all that was wretched in a rural existence which was (only too clearly) far from idyllic.

What N advocated in *The House with the Attic* was put into practice by the hero of *My Life*, a very long story which Chekhov published in the journal *Niva* in 1895/96. This story, more than any of Chekhov's other works, had a bearing on the socio-political scenario of Russia and it was perhaps because of this that it had quite a bit of trouble passing the censors. Chekhov wrote to A.A. Tikhonov expressing his annoyance with the censorship corrections which this particular story had to undergo. *My Life* begins on a rebellious note when it portrays the hero of the story wilfully destroying all hopes of gaining security in personal life by rejecting his job as a clerk in an office and deciding to embark on a new kind of existence by taking up work as an ordinary labourer. The middle class with its narrow, closed and totally inflexible values constitutes the social

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background from which the hero seeks his escape. Chekhov does not endow Misail
Polozniev with any great intellect or outstanding qualities but decides to set him
apart from the rest of his class by characterising him as a person with much
greater sensibility than the average man enjoying a similar social status. Thus at the
beginning of the story we find Misail bitterly resentful of his father's ideas which
saw great respectability in spending one's life as a lowly clerk harbouring a
constantly obsequious attitude and cutting oneself off from true intellectual
exercise of any kind. In fact his father, the town architect, is portrayed as a
somewhat grimly comic character who, like many mediocre men is highly self-
opinionated and has a tremendous pride in his ancestry which has produced a
postmaster and a general. He cannot reconcile himself to the fact that his own son
does not appreciate the good fortune of being placed in these circumstances. He is
able to terrorise his daughter into accepting this view-point but, with all his threats,
is unable to bring his twenty-five year old son who has a certain steel-like quality
of strength in his personality, to book. Misail initially tries to find solace in the
company of the Azhoguin family who have a comparatively modern outlook and
who provide some culture in his life through their amateur production of plays.
However Misail's continuous rejection of efforts on the part of his friends - to
rehabilitate him in a position at par with other mediocrities of his provincial town
results in his taking up a job on a railway some distance away from his home town.
This kind of work does not satisfy him perhaps because of the fact that he had
secured it with the help of Anuita Blagovo - a woman who loves him, but does not
venture to associate with him openly because of his non-conformity. He therefore
steps even lower down in the social scale when he accepts a job as house-painter
under the supervision of a skilful craftsman Radish, a man whose life is governed
by a simple moral philosophy in which Misail finds a strange appeal. It is at this
point that he comes into closer contact with Masha Dolzhikov - daughter of the
engineer Dolzhikov - who owns the railroad in which Misail had previously
worked and the two fall in love and get married. Masha who has true proletarian blood in her veins and whose station in life would have been much inferior to that of Misail's but for the wealth her father had acquired by sheer hard work and a certain degree of unscrupulousness induces her husband to experience the life of a peasant which she was convinced would give him ultimate self-satisfaction. The hero while complying with this, is unable to really attune himself to the hardships of ploughing and realises that he had been certainly more at home with his house-painters who had accepted him into their fold and with whom he had established a relationship of easy camaraderie. In the end, however, Masha proves to be more impatient with and intolerant of the ingratitude displayed by the peasantry in return for her attempt to provide an educational institution for them. She leaves her husband, hoping to use a new career in singing as a means of self-expression something she was unable to do through her philanthropy for the peasants. Misail thus emerges as the true sympathiser of the peasants. Though unable to physically emulate their life-style (he goes back to work with the painters) he has the capacity to understand their mind to justify their cheating and thieving in the context of the greater corruption of the upper classes. Misail and Masha are not the only non-conformists in the entire story. Misail's timid sister Cleopatra gradually comes to accept his ideas especially when she falls in love with the married Dr. Blagovo who impresses her with his talk of culture and progress mankind is destined to witness. However both Dr. Blagovo and Masha prove to be insincere in their convictions, Dr. Balgovo more so than Masha, since we see no effort on his part to break away from traditional social bonds. In fact he behaves rather typically when he abandons the pregnant Cleopatra to her fate in his efforts to further his own career. The end of the story sees the hero's father, absolutely untransformed in his convictions, unable to forgive his children in spite of the crisis which has befallen his daughter and Misail's life, somewhat changed due to the new purpose it has acquired as the responsibility of bringing up his dead sister's child falls on him.
In presenting a practical manifestation of the ideas in *The House with the Attic* - through the life of Misail Polozniev, Chekhov clarifies his attitude towards the middle classes as well as the peasantry and the working class. It should be pointed out that while N had spoken of alleviating the lot of the peasantry by sharing their burden, a slight modification of the ideology takes place in *My Life*, where we find Misail living out the rough existence of a labourer instead of that of a peasant. While there is not much spiritual elevation among the workers - Misail certainly is benefitted by Radish's moralistic approach to life and the entire experience turns out to be more rewarding for our middle class hero Misail, than for anyone else. Chekhov thus perhaps insinuates the greater moral bankruptcy of the priviledged classes in society as compared with that of the lower orders which may lead one to recognise the affinity of his ideas with those of Tolstoy's so far as drawbacks of the middle class society are concerned. The point at which Chekhov refuted Tolstoy was in the latter's belief in a simple existence and the moral rejuvenation resulting from it as a general principle. What he attempted to depict in *My Life* was the innate self-satisfaction which a member of a particular class might sometimes find, once he allowed himself to come out of social constrictions and mingle with the other classes. At the same time he hinted at the essential lack of understanding of the peasant by the intelligentsia, however-much he might idealise them from afar. And this was really where he differed from Tolstoy and all philosophies which envisaged a total removal of class barriers especially in the context of Russian society at the end of the nineteenth century.

It is perhaps in order to come to terms with this situation that Chekhov decided to delve into the lifestyle of the peasants in some of his later stories. A combination of two stories *Murder* and *The Peasants* succeeds in bringing out a penetrating picture of peasant life in Russia in many of its hitherto unfathomable
aspects. *Murder* \(^{64}\) highlights the distortion and narrow interpretation of religion by ignorant peasants, which ultimately has the effect of only inculcating violence in the believer instead of elevating him spiritually. The story is set in a remote and isolated Russian village, in the district of Progonnaya in which the most important idea pervading its stagnant society is religion. It therefore, begins with a description of a religious ceremony where the enthusiasm of its participants for the celebration is given prominence. Chekhov then goes on to a characterisation of Matvey Terekhov - a man whose abiding faith had once led him to be over-rigid in his practice of abstinence, so as to be almost a heretic, but who thereafter came to his senses and returned to orthodoxy. However, his inclination towards religious excess was continued by his cousin Yakov Terekhov so much so that when he was interrupted by Matvey during his prayers, he, in a fit of fury, killed Matvey. Yakov Terekhov’s passion for religious ceremonies and his faithful and over-zealous adherence to all sorts of customs is brought out in sharp contrast to his economic well-being. Yakov is the owner of the coaching inn of the village and is worth “at least thirty thousand”. This contradiction in his existence brought about by his religious instincts on the one hand, and his exceptional economic prosperity on the other, perhaps creates in him a kind of tension in the context of which violence seems only inevitable. The horror of the murder is brought out with the customary skill and precision which one can expect of Chekhov. The description of gloomy nights in which blizzards rage and the oak trees shiver adequately creates a sense of premonition of evil in the mind of the reader. Yakov Terekhov is ultimately tried and imprisoned, and it is this suffering that finally mellows him and helps him to understand the meaning of the spiritual. Chekhov

\(^{64}\) Anton Chekhov, “*Murder*” in *The Duel and Other Stories*. op. cit. Chekhov SS vol 8, pp 31-59. "*Ubitstvo*".
thus ends his story with a remarkable description of Yakov's metamorphosis and through it conveys his innate understanding of the peasantry to his reader.

The dramatic element which characterises *Murder* is almost totally absent in *The Peasants* 65, a piece of writing which is really more akin to a sociological study of peasant life than to a work of fiction. The tale is basically made up of the impressions of rural as seen through the eyes of Olga, a newcomer to the village. Olga, along with her daughter and husband Nikolai (who has lost his job as a waiter in a Moscow hotel), decides to return to Nikolai's native village and try to build up their lives anew. The poverty of her husband's family and the downgraded values of the peasants strike Olga as being in sharp contrast to the free open spaces and beauty of the rural setting. The constant drunkenness and brutality of the men and the loose morals and shrewish nature of her woman relatives shock Olga to the extreme. In an atmosphere where children are brought up listening to curses, the city-bred, and therefore more genteel Olga finds solace only in religion, in the New Testament which she loves to recite - but which she does not fully understand, Chekhov contrasts her simple faith in the teachings of the old Testament with the tendency among the villagers to place greater emphasis on ritualism and fasting, a state of things for which the church was perhaps primarily responsible. The distorted religiosity which was the principal theme of *Murder* is once more repeated in *The Peasants*. Circumstances lead to Nikolai's death and a disillusioned Olga decides to return to Moscow to fend for herself. However as she leaves the village she realises the basic honesty of peasant existence, the sincere warmth of their conduct, their abject poverty and the extent of the responsibility of the Czar's officers in abetting the corruption of peasant values. The accuracy of this observation on Chekhov's part may perhaps be testified to, by

the fact that this portion of the story was deleted by the censors at one point of
time.

The reaction of critics to these stories of Chekhov was quite voluble and very unlike the critical reaction to his earlier longer work *My Life*. Strangely enough, contemporary critics showed no immediate reaction to *My Life*,\(^66\) which was to be rated as being among Chekhov's most significant works. They were perhaps too nonplussed to find Chekhov, whom many had earlier accused of being too uncommitted to the problems faced by Russian society, airing ideas in *My Life* which certainly could not be termed wholly a-political. This initial silence was, however, followed by attempts to identify his views with those of Tolstoy's. Where criticisms of *Murder* and *The Peasants* were concerned, one can discern a distinct sense of wonder in the literary world regarding Chekhov's attitude to peasant life.\(^67\) No idealisation of their existence could be seen to have emerged from the stories which were used not as a medium for sermonising on this particular class but to depict masterfully many hither-to incomprehensible elements of their particular world.

During these years (1894-97) which saw Chekhov treading hitherto unexplored spheres where the thematic content of his work was concerned, his personal life was marred by illness. All his actions had perforce to be governed by restrictions imposed on him due to ill-health and his life-style saw a change from his hectic and socially active life to an existence which was characterised by long periods of convalescence. He had to give up interest in animal husbandry at Melikhovo, as well as medical pursuits and resign himself to the idea that he was

\(^66\) Rayfield,1975, p. 163.
\(^67\) Ibid., p. 177.
fast becoming an invalid. In this period the only really happy event in his personal life was his marriage to the famous actress Olga Knipper. At about this time, the event that was to catch his attention most was the Dreyfus affair in France and he was to exert himself to a great degree to publicise his views on the unfair anti-Semitism the French government had displayed.  

Chekhov's severe illness and his impending death which he must have been aware of, perhaps led him to write a story which was to assert with force faith in the beautiful and finer aspects of life. The result was The Lady with the Dog or Lady with Lapdog in which he abandoned many of his recent preoccupations and the subject of peasant life and went back to his initial theme of love whose intensity he revealed with the help of beautiful descriptions of nature. In The Lady with the Dog one reads the story of an illicit love affair acquiring such great dimensions so as to become the life-force of the two participants in the affair. The narrative is set in Yalta, a holiday resort, where Chekhov had been forced to live due to illness, and thus gives the author ample scope for providing a beautiful backdrop for the major part of the tale. In fact Chekhov plays up the beauty of the surroundings so skillfully that one gets the impression that it is principally responsible for the vulnerability of the beautiful and young heroine Anna Sergeyevna to the approaches of Dmitri Dmitrich Gurov who is at the beginning of the tale a practised flirt.

Gurov's flirtatious instincts are justified when, at the commencement of the account the author presents his readers with a concise but graphic description of Dmitri's wife whose supercilious attitude at once makes the reader sympathetic to


69. Anton Chekhov, Lady with Lapdog and other Stories, op. cit. Chekhov SS vol 8, pp 389-405, "Dama c Sobakoi".
the hero. Anna is portrayed as a charming and innocent creature whose marriage has proved a failure but who while enjoying the pleasures of her relationship with Gurov is haunted by the thought of having sinned in the eyes of God. Chekhov's partial intention in the story was perhaps to lead the reader to witness the mental metamorphosis undergone by both Gurov and Anna as their love progressed. A forced separation makes them realise what they meant to each other and the flirt in Gurov is transformed into a true lover, while Anna's feeling of remorse is replaced by her determination to continue loving Gurov and courageously facing the pains of living a double existence. The outward immorality of their relationship is wiped out by their inner faith and sincerity and constitutes Chekhov's particular invocation to the everlasting glory of love.

Chekhov had among his admirers as mentioned earlier rising stars in the literary firmament like Gorky and Bunin. We find Gorky going into ecstasies over The Lady with the Dog and regarding it as just the story which contemporary Russian society needed in order to be shaken out of its lethargy.70 And in describing this work as an important political comment, Gorky perhaps pinpointed the principal thrust of the story which was dexterously interspersed between the lines of the love affair of Anna and Gurov. As Gurov realises the seriousness of his feelings for Anna, he becomes increasingly aware of the superficial life-style and the purposeless, often crude existence of his middle-class contemporaries. This searing comment on middle class lack of initiative and purpose was thus easily seen as a general reflection of the shortcomings of Russian society which Chekhov did not wish to ignore even in the final years of his life. Gurov's heightened sensitivity, resulting from his elevation as a person, following his love for Anna, reveals to him the essential secretiveness of that part of his existence which is most important to

him: “..... everything that made up the quintessence of his life, went on in secret, while everything that was a lie, everything that was merely the husk in which he hid himself to conceal the truth, ..... all that happened in the sight of all”. As the sham of everyday, conventional existence hits him, Gurov realises that it is because of this that the personal life of an individual is always kept a secret and that civilised men are keen to have their personal secrets respected. Thus Gorky's analysis of Lady with the Dog as a catalyst for social rejuvenation was indeed a penetrating one. The story is perhaps very characteristic of its author who was ultimately a master-craftsman at presenting a picture of the general set-up out of a particular and seemingly very individual experience. And in this sense he was able to live up to his own prescription of the duties of a writer: in presenting to his reader the “reality” in as objective a manner as possible and allowing the latter scope for applying his own judgement in assessing the truth.

2. The plays

The master of the short story who set into motion a focus on the povest, which introduced an important dimension to Russian prose writing at the turn of the century, was to adopt a totally new genre - the drama - in his intellectual repertoire towards the end of his life. That Chekhov left an indelible impression on drama, enriching it in many ways by his incisive and objective analysis of human nature and society is a literary axiom. Interestingly Chekhov's efforts at play writing coincided with a new dynamism in the world of the performing arts in Russia. This was the time when Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich - Danchenko, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Olga Knipper and Boris Snegirov interacted with each other, either in the training classes of the Moscow

Philharmonic School or in the Moscow Art Theatre. This pooling together of diverse artistic resources of talented young men and women broadened the scope of the dramatic environment in Russia enabling it to graduate from the influence of the Meningen Theatre to the naturalistic productions of the Moscow Art Theatre and the impressionistic productions of Vsevolod Meyerhold's "The Fellowship of the New Drama", which were often highly innovative in their touches of Symbolism and Futurism. This was the period when we find Stanislavsky lamenting the dearth of good theatre in Russia "Like me, he (Nemirovich-Danchenko) saw no hope for the theatre as it was at the end of the 19th century, a theatre in which the brilliant traditions of the past had degenerated into a simple though skilful technical method of playing." This was the time when Stanislavsky was about to relegate the stage director's role in a play to a slightly less important position and project the actor forward, instead of allowing him to wallow in his earlier almost nonfunctional role, totally under the control of his autocratic stage director. He was quite disapproving of the Meningen Theatre's attitude of paying attention not to the acting but to the production. This was the Stanislavsky who felt that "the whole regime in the theatre needed revising and rejuvenating. In those days all the dramatic performances began with music. The orchestra, really unnecessary for any purposes of the play itself and living its own peculiar life, was in the most prominent place before the stage and interfered with the actor and the spectators." "Then there was another age old tradition we had to fight against. For instance leading players and visiting actors usually made their

73. Ibid, p. 216.
75. Ibid, p 234.
entrances amidst ovations and began their performance by thanking the audience."^76 These were the artificialities that the naturalistic theatre movement, spearheaded by Stanislavsky and V. I. Nemirovich Danchenko sought to remove and thereby imbue Russian drama with mature emotion, simplicity and realism.

It was at this crucial juncture of experimentation and search for new cultural expressions that the Chekhovian play began to carve out a niche for itself in the world of Russian drama. The earlier popularity of the operetta (some of the outstanding pieces performed included Audran's Mascotte, the Sullivan operetta The Mikado, and Rimsky-Korsakov's Sadko) had gradually given way to in the 1880s to plays by Pushkin, (Miser Knight, The Stone Guest) Pisemsky (Bitter Fate, Usurpers of the Law) Tolstoy (Power of Darkness, Fruits of Enlightenment) and by Ostrovsky (The Dowerless Bride), while in the sphere of organisation, The Society of Art and Literature was merged into the Moscow Popular Art Theatre, the brain-child of V. I. Nemirovich - Danchenko and Konstatin Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky comments that "...continuing to reach to all that was new, we paid special tribute to the fashionable influence of symbolism and impressionism prevailing in literature."^77 Staging the plays of Ibsen posed the challenge of finding a meeting point between the "superconscious" and "the natural and normal development of the actor's spiritual and physical life on stage."^78 Thus when Nemirovich - Danchenko chose The Seagull as the next suitable play to be staged by the Moscow Art Theatre his actors having already staged fantasies like Ostrovsky's The Snow Maiden, Hauptman's Wit Works Woe and Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, When We Dead Awaken, The Ghost etc. were all intellectually well

76. Ibid, p 235.
77. Ibid, p 258.
78 Ibid, p 259.
equipped for the Chekhovian drama of "intuition and feeling". However audience-response in Russia to such techniques was at this point seriously in question, as indicated when the Alexandrinsky Theatre's production of *The Seagull* at St Petersburg met with humiliating failure in 1896. Chekhov perhaps had an ominous inkling of this sort of a situation way back in 1889, when after the performance of *Ivanov* and its misinterpretation, Suvorin, who was helping to direct the play, and criticism by his brother Alexander he wrote, "What they don't know is that it is difficult to write a good play and twice as difficult, and terrifying besides - to write a bad play. I would like to see the entire public merge into one person and write a play. Then you (Suvorin) and I would sit in Box 1 and hiss it off the stage". Misconceptions about the characterisation of his *Ivanov* must have made Chekhov even more aware of the two dimensional visualisation of a play's content, – by the director and actors and finally and perhaps more important, by the audience, including critics, which could either make or break a playwright's reputation. In spite of this, the tirade of the dramatic critics against *The Seagull* after its maiden St. Petersburg performance, accompanied by reports of unruly audience behaviour, turned out to be a traumatic experience for Chekhov, especially in the context of the stature he had by now acquired in the literary world as master of the short story.

In Stanislavsky's view however, it was really lapses on the actors' part rather than audience failure to understand the play which had such drastic results for the Chekhovian masterpiece. Stanislavsky felt that actors who could not even communicate their feelings to fellow actors on stage in the course of a play would fail totally to reach out to the spectator in front of him. This was the malady


that perhaps bedevilled the impressionistic Chekhovian play as it was presented to
the public for the first time in spite of the fact that some of the best actors had
taken part in it. "Actors engaged in Chekhov's plays are wrong in trying to play, to
perform. In his plays, they must be, i.e. live, exist, proceeding along the deep inner
line of spiritual development. Here Chekhov is strong in his most variegated,
frequently unconscious methods of influence. At times he is an impressionist, at
others a symbolist...." 81

Stanislavsky set to work to remedy the situation, once Nemirovich-
Danchenko had chosen The Seagull in his bid to stage contemporary works by
young writers. At first he found the task rather difficult as he himself floundered
with the apparent monotony and absence of activity in the written version of the
play. However his years of concentrated preoccupation - both physically and
mentally with the world of the theatre, of directing, acting and communicating with
the audience, together with his considerable self-confidence, helped him to tide
over his hesitation about writing the mise en scenes for a new type of
impressionistic play which had failed to appeal to a particular type of audience.
Perhaps ideas about the function of a director and an actor - which were to be
enumerated in a clearcut way much later ("the ability to observe, to think and to
build one's work so that it will arouse in the audience the thoughts needed for our
contemporary society" 82) crystallized during the production of the Seagull for the
Moscow Art Theatre in 1898. It was in this production that Stanislavsky chose to
assimilate his own stage directions with that of the author's to present an artistic
performance which would put across to the audience the emotional nuances which

81. Op Cit, My Life in Art, p 262.
underlay the apparently undramatic format of the new Chekhovian play. Stanislavsky's production-notes of his first presentation of *The Seagull* reveal his meticulous attention to detail with regard to arrangement of sets and emphasis on the actors' physical discipline and expressive use of the body and face to convey the subtleties of human emotions to the audience. Stanislavsky's emphasis on the expressiveness of gesture, pauses and looks of the actors was certainly a step forward in the proper execution of Chekhov's play which had a variety of human reactions hidden behind sparse and often cryptic dialogue. Stanislavsky began the first act of *The Seagull* in darkness with only a dim light and flashes of lightning to portray an August evening and, in keeping with the realistic perceptions of the Moscow Art Theatre, broke the stillness with the croaking of frogs and the howling of dogs. Stanislavsky elaborated considerably on the author's stage directions in his production notes, often changing the direction of entry of the characters onto the stage. Suppressed excitement on the part of the characters as denoted by the playwright was converted to positive physical expressions by the director in his efforts to communicate directly with the audience. For example in the first scene of the first act when Konstantin Treplev examines the stage, just before the beginning of his own avant garde play, Stanislavsky stresses physical expressions of the suppressed excitement of the young playwright.  

Stanislavsky writes in his mise en scene "Konstantin throws down the costume, runs up to the rocking bench, examines the stage, bending down right and left, then jumps on to the bench rocking it (so) violently ....." "I cannot help thinking that all through this scene Konstantin is very excited."  

Again in the last act for example when Nina the young actress returns for a brief reunion with Konstantin, her former lover and confesses her passion for the writer Trigorin, her entire speech is "made to the


84 Ibid, p 143.
accompaniment of the howling wind." While Chekhov describes Konstantin's actions after Nina's departure with a concise "During the next two minutes Konstantin tears up all his manuscripts and throws them under the desk; then he unlocks the door on the right and goes out" 85, Stanislavsky translates this short sequence into a long and elaborate performance, "For fifteen seconds Konstantin stands without moving, then he lets fall the glass from his hand ...... Konstantin crosses slowly over to the writing desk. Stops. Goes up to where his manuscript lies, picks it up, holds it for a moment in his hand, then tears it up. Sits down, picks something up and tries to read it, but tears it up after reading the first line. Falls into a reverie again, rubs his forehead disconsolately, looks round as though searching for something, gazes for a moment on the heap of manuscripts on his desk, then starts tearing them up with slow deliberation, Gathers up all the scraps of paper and crosses over to the stove with them (noise of opening stove door). Throws the scraps of paper into the stove, leans against it with his hand, looking for some time at the flames devouring his works......" 86

As noted by Professor S. D. Balukhaty certain novel and naturalistic overtones characterised Stanislavsky's first handling of Chekhovian drama in terms of stage sets and scenery. Through innovations in stage layouts Stanislavsky presented theatre-going audiences in Russia with unconventional yet naturalistic scenery which tallied with authorial ideas about new formats and finesse in communication. Therefore in the first acts, Stanislavsky introduced novelties like actors sitting on benches with their backs to the audience, parallel to the footlights. This was an effort at naturalising movements as distinct from adhering to hither-to conventional stage moments. Scenes were arranged in the foreground as well as

85. Ibid, p. 283.
86. Ibid, p 283.
the background of the stage to convey an impression of large vistas which was something new to the audience. Moreover in other acts, scenes were constructed at angles in an effort to create a realistic representation of the domestic setting in which the characters were to enact their roles, with sensitivity and intuition. 87

The Moscow Art Theatre's endeavour, guided by Stanislavsky, to project Chekhov as a playwright of value before the right kind of audience met with resounding success. Most of the contemporary reviews of the play were unrestrained in their praise, though a few did pass only a reserved judgement. Newspapers and journals like the Courier and Russian Thought pointed out the artistry of the productions and its ability to catch the mood of the play. Russian News and News highlighted the excellence of the settings and the unsurpassable performance of the actors. Chekhov received hundreds of letters congratulating him, and was himself quite satisfied with Stanislavsky's execution of his work. 88

The spectacular success of the Moscow Art Theatre with its first Chekhovian production was followed by similarly successful presentations of The Three Sisters, Uncle Vanya and The Cherry Orchard. However newer perceptions of Chekhov's plays began to disturb the minds of a few performing artists who began to reject the Stanislavskian emphasis on naturalism. Vsevolod Meyerhold, who played the part of Konstantin Treplev in The Seagull under Stanislavsky's direction and was later to enact Tuzenbakh in The Three Sisters (in 1901) was one of the first to join the quest for new forms in theatricality. In fact Chekhov himself had been rather skeptical of any excessive emphasis of naturalism right from the beginning even in the early Moscow Art Theatre days. Meyerhold's diary quotes Chekhov's reaction to attempts at realistic presentations on stage " 'Realistic'....

87. Ibid, Passim.
88. Ibid, Passim.
The stage is art. Kramsky has genre picture on which the faces are painted beautifully. What would happen if one cut out the painted nose on one of the faces and substituted a real nose for it? The nose would be "realistic" but the picture would be ruined. Unable to reconcile himself with the constraints of directorial impositions on his acting, Meyerhold left the Moscow Art Theatre to found his own company of actors in 1902 which decided to hold its first shows at Kherson in the Ukraine. Even though the repertoire was similar to that of the Moscow Art Theatre and projected the works of Chekhov, Ibsen and Hauptman without much stylistic innovations, audiences in Kherson were highly appreciative enabling Meyerhold to tour other provinces and present works of Symbolist playwrights like Maeterlinck.

It might be pertinent to point out here that the provinces in Russia had a long tradition of theatre experiences that went back to the days of Catherine the Great. In those days serf theatre patronised by the local nobility and held on their estates provided a principal source of entertainment in rural Russia. These plays were often held in theatres especially built for the purpose. They had elaborately designed sets, and often estates had gardens which provided ideal settings for theatre performances. Much of the success of these estate theatres depended on serfs who designed and helped to build the exteriors of the nobles' country houses which often formed the backdrop to provincial theatre. The development of histrionic talent as well as playwriting was encouraged by endeavours of this sort and contributed to a rich cultural tradition from which Russian drama was to benefit in the nineteenth century.

89. Ibid, pp 59/60.
Moreover deliberate effort by the government as well as by factory owners to provide entertainment to the masses both in the rural and urban areas led to the establishment of popular theatre. The government policy of industrialisation which turned peasants in large numbers into factory workers generated the need for popular entertainment which often took the form of theatre. Initially concentrating on indigenous theatrical forms, popular theatre by the mid 1890s developed a tendency towards professional presentation of modern plays. Important writers like Tolstoy, disappointed with the crude elements in traditional drama, implemented the idea of writing plays for the people. Works like *The First Distilling* by Tolstoy found popularity among theatrical audiences while plays like *Typhoon, Grandpa of the Russian Fleet, Live Free and Easy* etc. by minor writers achieved immense success among the peasant masses. The vitality of the reperatory of popular theatre was maintained by the works of A. N. Ostrovsky whose forty seven original plays were a conscious effort to create a national theatre. Adopting the language of the masses by using colloquial inventive Muscovite Russian, Ostrovsky in his plays *like It's a Family Affair - We'll Settle it Ourselves* and *Moskvitianin, The Poor Bride* and *Poverty's No Vice* presented to his low class audience a world they were absolutely familiar with. Investigating into the tension between religiously oriented patriarchal authority and the new idea of individualism, Ostrovsky, through his mastery of authentic Old Russian speech produced quality drama which impressed upon his mass audience new ethical problems which they could deliberate over. However, Ostrovsky refrained from preaching or moralising, preferring to place before his audience a picture of a typical Russian environment.

Provincial Russia thus provided fertile ground for experimentation in dramatic formats which were successfully carried out by Meyerhold in the first

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decade of the twentieth century. In his attempts to break away from the Moscow Art Theatre, from the constant orientation towards naturalism and the inclination towards constructing the “fourth wall”, on stage, Meyerhold used Chekhovian theatre as a stepping stone towards newer innovations in dramatic technique and style. We find Meyerhold as an independent director, writing to Chekhov from Kherson in 1903 “we are waiting for your play with great impatience. The season opened on the 15th and there is nothing good to perform: good plays are that rare, that few. The troupe is bored because there is nothing to be enthusiastic about. We need you to stir our stagnant water. We are waiting, waiting, waiting.”

This dependence on Chekhov was significant, as Meyerhold was at that point of time steeped in new ideas about theatricality and Chekhov seemed to be one of the few contemporary Russian dramatists whose work provided scope for substantial experimentation. Meyerhold highly appreciated the way in which “Chekhov progresses from subtle realism to mystically heightened lyricism” in The Cherry Orchard and thoroughly disapproved of the Moscow Art Theatre's handling of it. “Your play is an abstraction like a Tchaikovsky symphony. And the director must catch its “sound” before everything...... when one reads the play, the third act produces the same effect as the ringing in the years of the sick man in your story Typhus. A sort of irritation. Jollity with overtones of death. In this act there is something terrifying, something Maeterlinckian.” It was this impressionism which attracted Meyerhold who soon began to transform this on the stage through new stylisation of dramatic form. “The Fellowship of the New

94. Meyerhold on Theatre, op cit., p 33.
95. L. N. 68 , p 448.
Drama", as Meyerhold's new company was called, began to concentrate on the expositions of Symbolism in drama. Playwrights like Maeterlinck (*Death of Tintagiles*), Ibsen, Gorky, Polevoy (*Russian Heroism*), Przybyszewski (*Snow*), Hauptman (*Colleague Krampton*) etc. were chosen in the repertoire of the Theatre Studio. "Various attempts were made to break away from the realism of the contemporary stage and to embrace stylisation whole-heartedly as a principle of dramatic art. In movement there was plasticity rather than impersonation of reality; groups would often look like Pompeian frescoes reproduced in living form. Scenery was constructed regardless of the demands of realism; rooms were made without ceilings .. dialogue was spoken throughout against a background of music..."96.

By the beginning of the twentieth century Russian drama had matured immensely both in terms of content as well as execution. Emphasis on gesture, stylisation and body language and creation of "atmosphere" rather than realistic representation began to be quite well-received by Russian audiences as has been proved by the success of some of Meyerhold's efforts. And it is in this maturing of new forms leading to outright Symbolism in drama that Chekhov had a pivotal role to play - through his subtle and sophisticated stories and plays. In Meyerhold's words "Literature has always taken the initiative in the breaking down of dramatic forms". It was Anton Chekhov who ushered in this transformation and, creating an environment where playwrights like Verhaeren, Bruisov and Vyachislav Ivanov were to break new ground, tilted the balance totally in favour of pure aestheticism in art in the Russian mindset.

96. *Meyerhold on Theatre*, op cit, p 45.