



UGC Approved Journal



IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Editor-in-Chief

**Volume 6, Issue 5
May 2018
www.ijellh.com**

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Expression of Chekhov's Unique Dramatic Skills in the *Cherry Orchard*

Abstract

The Cherry Orchard has often been described as Anton Chekhov's masterpiece. It is not only his last play, but also his last work. Written while he was dying and with great difficulty. *The Cherry Orchard* is the most farcical of Chekhov's full-length works, and so it was intended. The subject matter and themes, drawn from contemporary Russian life, show how daily routine gradually shrinks the spirit and drains the will. The characters long for happiness and wish to live useful lives, but they are thwarted by circumstances and their own personalities. Chekhov's realism is seen in his dramatic form, for the plays have an air of aimlessness which matches that of characters' lives. All violent deeds and emotional climaxes occur offstage. Chekhov treats all of his characters with tolerance and passion, but also makes them both sympathetic and ridiculous. Therefore, the pathetic and comic are mingled, often simultaneously. Chekhov also makes considerable use of symbolism – orchard in the *Cherry Orchard* itself is a symbol of the Old Russia and the aristocracy.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov is one of the most important writers to grow out of the conditions of pre-Revolutionary Russia. Chekhov's Russia was a country of stagnant atmosphere where the poor suffered from severe want, and the rich from idleness and boredom. In his plays, Chekhov did not portray his characters as they should be, but as they really are in other words, Chekhov's realism is realism with a "heart." It is much easier to misinterpret *The Cherry Orchard* as a tragedy as Stanislavsky and many others insisted it as a tragedy than to present it as a comedy. It is true that the play has plenty of emotional

undercurrents, but they are all of a 'comic' nature. Chekhov always insisted of calling it "not a drama but a comedy; in place almost a farce." (Introduction XXI). Eventually there is such a whirl of boisterous humour and ludicrous absurdity in *The Cherry Orchard*.

The main theme of the play is generally taken to be the passing of the old order, symbolised by the sale of the cherry orchard. The special thing about this theme is the comic twist Chekhov gave it. Many of the characters are presented in comic terms and purely farcical without sacrificing their essential humanity. People fall downstairs, break billiard-cues and lose their galoshes. The element of humour became more noticeable with each play that Chekhov wrote, and it is most prominent in *The Cherry Orchard*.

Even Trofimov, the only idealist in the play is essentially a comic actor. His physical appearance itself is comic. "A seedy-looking gent," (five plays 254) a shrewd country woman called him, and Mrs. Ranevsky half cries and half laughs when she looks at his beard. Simeonov – Pishchik also is a broad comic figure, whose name alone is ridiculous enough. This gentleman, with his inveterate borrowing, and claim to be descended from the horse which Caligula made a member of his Senate, is very much a figure of fun.

The comic figures also include the absurd governess Charlotte, and Gayev with his general ineptitude, mock billiards strokes and eloquent speeches which are liable to be addressed to the furniture. The two servants, Dunyasha and Yasha are also broad comic figures. They are caricatures of their masters. The relations between them and their masters are not what one would expect the relations between servants and masters to be. Yasha openly makes fun of Gayev and treats his mistress almost like an equal. Yasha demands to Mrs. Ranevsky in Act III.

"Mrs. Ranevsky, may I ask you something, Please? If you go back to Paris, do me a favour and take me with you. I can't stay here, that's out of the question. (Looks round, in an undertone.) It goes without saying, you can see for yourself, this is an uncivilized country and no one has any morals. Besides it's boring, the food they give you in the kitchen is something awful and on top of that there's old Firs wandering round mumbling and speaking out of turn. Do take me with you. Please." (Five plays 278 – 79)

Firs himself, whose loyalty to his masters is perhaps the most farcical, though also the most touching thing in the whole play. The only love triangle in the play is that in which Chekhov figures is Yepikhodov-Dunyasha-Yasha relation and it is entirely farcical.

In *The Cherry Orchard* Chekhov depicts the prostration of the cultured elite before the forces of darkness with a comic – ironic point of view. Instead of merely evoking

sympathy for the victims of the social conflict, he is satirizing them and instead of blackening the character of the despoiler, he is drawing him with a great deal more depth and balance. But the dispossession of the victims evokes strains of pathos. Even then Chekhov is more fitting and more just. The play is so finely balanced between pathos and humour. Here is a plot hinging on the tragic loss of a family estate that its feckless genteel owners dearly love, to an upstart business man. Yet the upstart is not a typical vulgar merchant, but a sensitive and compassionate man. And the tragic loss of the estate turns out neither a tragedy nor even much of a loss, once the blow has fallen. Such a personal crisis does not provoke any profound reaction in the charmingly superficial evicted proprietors, whom Chekhov gently ridicules, yet from whom he by no means withholds his sympathies.

Realism and Symbolism

Chekhov's plays are often regarded as true and representative pictures of the Russian society. Any mention of a Russian landowner in literature of the second half of the nineteenth century is almost certain to be followed by the information that his estates are mortgaged and that he is heavily in debt. The more sensitive members of this class realized that their way of life was dying out, but they were so conditioned by education and environment as to be unable to do anything about it, and submitted to the social trend which brought about their complete extinction.

The Cherry Orchard is a combination of both the realism and symbolism. There is a realistic portrayal of the landlords of Russia. But at the same time the decadence of landlords is portrayed through symbolism. The landlords lived in palace like buildings surrounded by acres of estates were unable to pay the excessive revenues of the government and their estates were being auctioned or sold to pay the debts. This general condition of Russia has been described in *The Cherry Orchard* by presenting the wretched condition of the owners of the cherry orchard. Realism in the play is expressed by a satirical approach by mocking the idleness and extravagance of aristocratic families.

The whole action of the play revolves around a central poetic symbol – the cherry orchard. Cherry orchard is a symbol of Gayev family's fortune, prosperity, abundance and luxurious way of life. The central act of dispossession is symbolized through the central image, the famous orchard, hacked to pieces by the commercial axe. The cherry orchard also symbolizes the old social order and its destruction symbolizes a change. There are also many other symbols in this play. The sound of the breaking string symbolizes the disintegration and 'dreary' lives of the characters. The keys in the Varya's belt, which she throws at the feet of Lopakhin in the end of Act III symbolize her practicality and her power. Gayev's imaginary

billiards game symbolizes his desire to escape. Firs himself is a figure of time and symbol of old generation. Lopakhin at the same time symbolizes the upcoming capitalist. Anya and Trofimov are figures of hope. The symbols in this play are too numerous to count, but many of them hinge on the idea of the changing social order or the specific circumstance of a given character.

Indirect Action

Indirect action is a technique, Chekhov was most famous for. It involves action important to the play's plot occurring off-stage, not on the stage. Instead of seeing such action happen, the audience learns about it by watching characters react to it stage. Lopakhin's speech at the end of Act III, recounting the sale of the cherry orchard is the most important example of indirect action in the play. Although the audience does not see the sale, the entire play revolves around this unseen action.

The play has no sharp ending. It is not certain whether the given characters succeed or fail, live or die, because such an ending would rob the play of its greatest asset – the scope of imagination. The play left behind different possibilities for the imagination of the spectators. It is the play's ambiguity that provides so many interpretations and so many morals to different people.

Characterisation

Chekhov generally writes about one principal action and set his plays in one household, usually has more characters. Characters in the plays serve as contrasts, counterparts or compliments to one another. Chekhov was a master at weaving a rich tapestry with a number of characters. His great achievement is to put the important stress on 'relationships between' characters rather than on the characters themselves. Chekhov refuses to cast his characters in conventional hero-villain roles. Chekhov's despoilers act while his victims suffer. But the defeated characters, shuffling off the old life, begin to look forward to the new. In short, *The Cherry Orchard* is a subtle blend of serious, comic and sentimental elements.

Dramatic Atmosphere

Chekhov's plays create an atmosphere or a peculiar mood through various impressions which fall on the minds of the audience. Mrs. Ranevsky's arrival at the beginning of *The Cherry Orchard* and her emotionally-charged departure at the end of the play are equally capable of evoking atmosphere. She arrives back in her home early one morning after an absence of several years and cannot restrain her tears at the sight of the old 'nursery' where she slept as a little girl. She varied things as her brother's habit of

interspersing his conversation with imaginary billiard strokes, and the wonderful sight of the orchard in bloom. During her leave-takings, Mrs. Ranevsky is bidding farewell to her beloved cherry orchard in a heart-rending manner, “Oh, my dear, sweet, beautiful orchard. My life, my youth, my happiness, good-bye, Good-bye.” (Five plays 293).

Chekhov’s plays and stories are memorable for their total atmosphere. He makes use of the beauties of nature in building up atmosphere. The Cherry Orchard plays an even more important part in conditioning the mood of the play to which it gives its name. Mrs. Ranevsky addresses her orchard on her return in this way,

“ White! All white! Oh, my orchard! After the damp, dismal autumn and the cold winter here you are, young again and full of happiness. The angels in heaven have not forsaken you.” (Five plays 253)

Again and again the characters refer to the orchard. In the minds of Mrs. Ranevsky and her brother it is bound up with countless childhood memories. The old servant Firs remembers how forty or fifty years ago they used to send cherries by the wagon-load to Moscow and Kharkov, after subjecting them to a special preserving process-now nobody can remember the recipe. To Trofimov, the orchard seems to be an obsolete social structure, but serves as a reminder of the beautiful life which he believes is possible on earth. He develops this theme to Anya,

“All Russia is our orchard. The earth is so wide, so beautiful, So full of wonderful places. Just think, Anya. Your Grandfather, your great-grandfather and all your ancestors Owned serfs, they owned human souls. Don’t you see that from every cherry-tree in the orchard, from every leaf and every trunk, men and women are gazing at you? Don’t you hear their voices?” (Five plays 269)

Whereas all these characters relate the orchard to the past in their various ways, the businessman Lopakhin is more concerned with its future. Nobody listens to him when he points out that the cherry trees must be cut down so that summer cottages can be built. Finally the orchard has to be sold, and it makes its last contribution to the atmosphere of the play at the very end when the curtain goes down to the sound of axes as the work of felling begins. We can enjoy the play as a melody and can feel a sort of nostalgic feeling at the end of the play.

Sound Effects

Chekhov is capable of evoking a poetic illusion of fluid reality through rhythmic sound effects. There is a subtle use of musical and other noises in his plays. They were a

particularly useful method of creating atmosphere. The ‘distant, dying and mournful sound of a breaking string’ which is heard twice in *The Cherry Orchard* is a perfect example of that technique. The play also provides the music of the Jewish band which serves as a background to the third act-an eloquent commentary on the household crisis with which it coincides. An examination of the stage directions in his plays provides innumerable illustrations of Chekhov’s feeling for sound.

Abandonment

Chekhov came to accept loneliness as an essential necessity of human life. His characters seem to exist in isolated pockets of vacancy. But at the same time they are all integral parts of a close network of interlocking motives and effects. Thus, while the dialogue seems to wander aimlessly into discussions of the situation in Russia and the temperature of the earth, it is economically performing a great number of essential dramatic functions: revealing character, furthering the action, uncovering the theme, evoking in the spectators a mood identical with that of the characters, and diverting attention from the melodramatic events that are erupting under the smooth surface of life.

Very often in Chekhov’s plays, especially in *The Cherry Orchard*, characters do not even listen to each other because they are too wrapped up in their own thoughts and desires. It sometimes evokes a sympathetic humour. This emerges in many ways, including the extraordinary manner in which he handles his dialogue – frequently used to emphasize the isolation of the characters from one another. Disconnected remarks are placed in juxtaposition to show how the various personages, absorbed in their own interests, ignore, or do not hear, what other people have to say. As an example of this form of humour is found in a passage from this play:

DUNYASHA. Yepikhodov – you know, the clerk – proposed to me just after Easter.

ANYA. Can’t you talk about something else? (Tidying her hair) I’ve lost all my hair-pins. (She is very tired and is actually swaying on her feet.)

DUNYASHA. I really don’t know what to think. He loves me so much, he really does.

ANYA (fondly, looking through the door into her room). My own room, my own windows, just as if I’d never been away. I’m home again! I’ll get up tomorrow and run straight out into the orchard. (Five plays 244)

Such is human sympathy. Such is comprehension. One thinks of love; another of hair-pins. The irony deepens when one knows that soon the rapturous Dunyasha will drop poor

Yepikhodov for Yasha, the Frenchified footman, and that Yasha in his turn will drop Dunyasha, just as indifferently, for his beloved Paris. All the characters are utterly lonely though most of them never realize how lonely they are. This disconsolate solitude is embodied with special vividness in the aged Firs-that deaf spectre from a vanished age, who replies at cross-purposes to remarks that he has misheard, till finally he is left abandoned and all alone. Likewise other characters, who imagine that they communicate, attain no real contact.

To Chekhov, the exchange of small-talk was often a sufficient vehicle for the presentation of complex and subtle emotions. Again and again his characters speak of trivialities at a time when their thoughts are quite clearly engaged on something quite different. A conversation illustrating this takes place at the end of *The Cherry Orchard* between Lopakhin and Varya, both of whom know that this is a likely moment for Lopakhin to propose, and that if he misses the opportunity his marriage with Varya is never likely to take place. All that comes out in the dialogue, however, is a few banalities about the weather, the fact that the thermometer is broken, and that Varya has lost something while packing. Though the dialogue turns on such neutral themes the real situation makes a greater impact on the audience than might have been possible if Chekhov had handled it directly.

Chekhov regrets the passing of a way of life that had much charm and beauty, a world which moreover consisted of affecting human beings; and he is equally mindful of the fact that the new dispensation is hard and pragmatic. Nevertheless, he recognizes the facts that life must move on and that there is a cleansing power in its unavoidable abrasiveness; the productive world of tomorrow is being born with every stroke of the axes that are felling the trees of the cherry orchard. Thus the end is an action that illustrates the changing social order in which the useless though decorative aristocracy is being displaced by the callous but practical middle class.

Conclusion

Chekhov makes his works an extraordinary compound of morality and reality, rebellion and acceptance, irony and sympathy-evoking a singular affirmation even in the darkest despair. The frail world of *The Cherry Orchard*, old and genteel, into which a night-marish, brutal reality irrupts, full of omens of pogrom and demolition, provides the most extreme confrontation in Chekhov's work between two realities – nature's and the hero's, the past and the future, active and passive. The play takes on its full meaning when considering the amount of material it has in common with the rest of Chekhov's drama : the 'closed box' setting, the musical accompaniment, the outside noises, the stage properties, the 'types' that

underlie many of the characters, the disintegration of a household, the techniques of one dialogue interrupting another, the imagery etc.

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