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Subtext in the Four Plays of Anton Chekhov

Abstract

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, an inimitable playwright as well as a short story writer became world famous though his output as a playwright was handful. Chekhov is remarkable for many aspects of his plays and one of it is language. The apparent simplicity of the language in the plays is elusive, because it is loaded with subtext. Chekhov is a challenging author to read because his plays are open for multiple interpretations. After repeated readings only the reader can understand the hidden beauty of his language and art.

The present paper examines the subtext in the four major, full-length-plays of Anton Chekhov, which were written mostly in the last part of his life. The plays are *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters* and the last one *The Cherry Orchard*. The sub-text of the plays helps us to understand the inner thoughts, emotions and feelings of the characters. It also enriches the text. Chekhov's plays though outwardly appear pessimistic, in them there is a great optimism for future.

Keywords: Anton Chekhov, plays, text, sub-text, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*

Introduction

Language is the most important instrument through which the characters in any work of art express their thoughts, emotions, intentions and feelings. This is also called 'text'. A work of art can be examined on two levels, through text and through sub-text. In order to understand this there is need to understand the two terms 'text' and 'sub-text' and the difference between them.

What is text?

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Fifth Impression 1991) -

Text means -

1. Written or printed part of a book or page.
2. Original words of an author, document etc.

While according to Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus (Fifth Impression, 2006) -

Sub-text means -

1. Underlying theme

In short a text means Explicit meaning while a sub-text means Implicit meaning

Discussion

A work of art can be examined on two levels – through text and through sub-text. Here the researcher will examine Anton Chekhov's above mentioned four plays on second level - through subtext. The subtext of these four plays will be explained through the different examples from Chekhov's plays.

Why the authors use sub-text?

Authors use subtext because it enriches the text in many ways. It adds another meaning to dialogue/actions. It creates complex characters and gives depth and more insight to the portrayal of a character. The playwright puts his ideas in the form of subtext and projects it on a multidimensional level and space.

A sub text can be examined by following aspects.

1. Characterization

Characterization is an important aspect of plays. It is through characters the playwright expresses his own thoughts, opinions and ideas. Chekhov has often used mouthpieces to express his hope for better and bright future of Russia. They are Treplev in *The Seagull*, Dr. Astrov in *Uncle Vanya*, Vershinin in *Three Sisters* and Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard*.

Secondly subtext is the content of the play which is generally not shown openly, but it is suggested. Chekhov believed that a thing is more effective when it is expressed indirectly and not uttered by character e.g. the black dress of Masha in *Three Sisters* and Masha in *The Seagull*. Many times Masha in *Three Sisters* is seen in black dress, which shows her unhappiness in her married life. On the contrary Irina is shown in white dress, which shows her energy and youthful bliss. Similarly the other character Masha in *The Seagull* is in black dress, when the play opens. Her opinion and her words is a text to show her unhappiness and her black dress is subtext to show it. It can be seen in a short dialogue –

Medvedenko – Why do you wear black all the time?

Masha – I'm in mourning for my life, I'm unhappy (Hingley 67)

2. Dialogues/Speeches

Language is the powerful weapon through which subtext can be explained. The dialogues or speeches used in Chekhov's plays are very simple, but still effectively express different feelings like love, hate, indifference, anger, pride, conflict etc. e.g. in the first act of *The Cherry Orchard* when the travelers arrive Dunyasha cheerfully tells Anya about Yepikhodov's proposal to her for marriage, but Anya is quite indifferent to it. It is perfectly understood from her speech

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

Anya – Can't you talk about something else? (Tying her hair) I've lost all my hair-pins.
(Hingley 244)

Dunyasha talks about a serious thing, but Anya talks and searches for a trifle thing - hair pins, which shows her indifference to Dunyasha's happiness. Secondly Chekhov expresses the pain, ephemeral nature and finality of death in *Three Sisters* through the character of Vershinin in act I

Vershinin – Yes, we'll be forgotten. Such is our fate and we can't do anything about it.
(Hingley 179)

The language or dialogues though appear very simple in Chekhov's plays, actually are elusive.

3. Gestures

Gestures, body movements, behaviour of characters also express the subtext effectively. There is non-verbal message in the actions of characters. The common gestures like clapping, shrugging of shoulders, the lifting of eyebrows, walking on the stage can also express subtext e.g. Anya's clapping in *The Cherry Orchard* shows her child-like innocence. Secondly in the third act of *Three Sisters* when there is fire in the town many characters try to help the victims of fire. Natasha through her words shows her anxiety for the victims of fire, but her gesture is not at all suitable to it.

Olga – You can't see the fire from this room, it's peaceful here.

Natasha- Isn't it? I must look a sight (stands in front of mirror) People say I've put on the weight. But it's not true, not a bit of it. Masha's asleep – tired out, poor girl. (Hingley 209)

Natasha, the vamp is not at all serious about the fire, but is anxious about her looks.

4. Pauses

Pauses are very important in Chekhov's plays. Sub text is communicated in the pauses. Unfinished speeches, break in dialogues, silences convey the other meaning or subtext effectively. According to Stanislavsky -

What is so wonderful about Chekhov's plays is not what is transmitted by the words but what is hidden under them, in the pauses, in the glances of the actors, in the emanation of their inmost feelings. (Styan 2)

All this pauses, silences, unfinished speeches can be judged better in the theatre e.g.in act one of *Three Sisters* Irina says –

Irina – You say life is beautiful. But what if it only seems so? As far as we three girls are concerned, there hasn't been any beauty in our lives so far, life has been choking us like weeds in the garden. I'am crying. I mustn't. (Hingley 186)

Here Irina's statement that life is beautiful changes into a strong disapproval immediately after a slight pause.

5. Repetition of words

In Chekhov's plays some characters repeat the words even sentences in their speech e.g. the act four of *Three Sisters*. The play ends with Olga's repetition of sentences.

Olga – If we could only know, oh if we could only know.(Hingley237)

This repetition provides the subtext, her wish to make sense of life. The three sisters though confront many misfortunes, never surrender. She cheers her sisters in the last act

Olga – (embraces both her sisters) Listen to the band. What a splendid rousing tune, it puts new heart into you, doesn't it?

The splendid music of the band is equivalent to hope in life, While Olga's embracing her sisters shows her motherly care and warmth for them.

6. Symbolism

Symbols and images are used to convey the subtext in Chekhov's plays. The continuous image of the city Moscow used in *Three Sisters* represents the bliss and cheerful life of the place which the sisters desire for. Similarly the lake used in the background of the setting of the play *The Seagull* symbolizes the beauty of the nature. The big, beautiful and 'encyclopedia mentioned' cherry orchard in *The Cherry Orchard* symbolizes different emotions and feelings for different characters. For Lyuba the cherry orchard is the synonym of her happy childhood memories. For Lopakhin it is the symbol of his poor peasant childhood, where his father worked as a serf. Again it shows him as a hard working and successful business man when he buys it in the auction in the third act. For Anya the orchard is the suffocating issue. She wants her mother to come out of it and live a new life. For Trofimov the cherry orchard symbolizes the pain of serfdom. He questions Anya for it in act two

Trofimov - All Russia is our orchard. The earth is so wide, so beautiful, so full of wonderful places. (pause) 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? (Hingley269)

Trofimov who is taken as the mouthpiece of Chekhov in this play talks about the beauty of earth as well as the ruthless feudal system in Russia.

7. Sounds

Verbal echoes and sounds also express subtext effectively. The yawns of the man servant Yasha in *The Cherry Orchard* and that of uncle Vanya in *Uncle Vanya* shows laziness and their despair in life. The sudden and distant sound of the breaking string in act two of *The Cherry Orchard* symbolizes the destruction of the orchard. Lyuba shudder after hearing the sound. According to Firs the same thing happened before the ‘troubles’ that is when the serfs were given the freedom. In the same way the sound of an axe cutting the cherry trees in last act of *The Cherry Orchard* symbolizes the destruction of the old order and rise of new system, in short the decline of aristocracy and rising middle class.

8. Themes

Subtext refers to the real meaning underneath the words and actions of the characters. Subtext enriches dramatic structure, language etc. of a play. The themes in Chekhov’s play can also provide us the subtext e.g. the theme in *Three Sisters* is unending search for happiness. This search for happiness is search for meaning in life. The sisters think that Moscow is the place, which can make them happy. They desire to go to Moscow, but realize that they will never go there, though there is nothing which can prevent their going. They unnecessarily depend on Andrey for it. Secondly ‘death’ is a major theme in all these referred plays of Chekhov, but he never directly refers to it. Nowhere the word death is used. It is referred and shown through suicides, duels, depression etc. All plays end with death except *Uncle Vanya* Vanya too shoots Serrbryakov at the end of the play but is unsuccessful. In the other plays Treplev in *The Seagull* shoots himself out of depression and dies. Tuzenbakh in *Three Sisters* dies in a duel with Solyony. Firs in *The Cherry Orchard* dies at the end of the play due to his illness and age.

9. Thoughts and Attitude

The thoughts and attitudes of the characters can be seen through subtext. Subtext refers to the motives of the characters – what they really think about something or someone.

The different devices used by Chekhov to reveal the thoughts of the characters are asides, soliloquies, monologues, gestures etc. Chekhov has used a very unusual technique to show the characters' inward life through monologue which appears dialogue e.g. in *Three Sisters* act four Andrey's thoughts for his past and present life before a servant Ferapont though appear as a dialogue is really a monologue because the servant Ferapont is deaf. Similarly in act three of *Three Sisters* an off-stage event of fire reflects the attitude of the characters on stage e.g. Olga is busy in making arrangement for the victims of fire but Masha at such moment can be seen resting on a sofa. Olga's motherly and careful attitude while Masha's indifferent attitude is clearly seen.

10. Weather

In a play or in any work of literature weather or atmosphere is used to show the mood of the characters or what is happening in the mind of the characters. It is also used to show change in future Chekhov in his plays has used weather symbolically, to show the happiness and unhappiness of the characters e.g. in the first act of *Three Sisters* the atmosphere is sunny and pleasant. It starts on the fifth of May, Irina's name-day. Summer is the season of light, energy and fun. The characters are in pleasant mood, because a celebration is there. In short summer shows happiness.

In the same way the first act of *The Cherry Orchard* starts in the month of May, again the season is summer. The traveller's crowd, their loving exchanges of words, their meeting one another warmly, the cherry trees in blossom all add to happiness of characters. Chekhov a lover of nature can be clearly seen through his plays. Just as he uses nature to show happiness of characters, he uses it to show their unhappiness too. The auction of the orchard takes place in the month of August – a season of autumn, when Mrs. Lyuba Ranevsky loses her dear 'encyclopedia mentioned' cherry orchard. In this way the seasons and weather are used symbolically in Chekhov's plays.

Conclusion

Play is a genre of literature that can be better understood on stage and not in our study room, because it is meant for performing and watching. It is generally said that Chekhov's text 'reads badly' but 'plays beautifully' and this is because of his use of subtext. Subtext can be better understood on stage than on page. Chekhov in his plays has used subtext effectively through the above mentioned aspects. His aim is to show the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters, which makes his characters complex. But again these complex characters are very close to us because in our real life we can see people like Lopakhin, Lyuba, Olga Vanya, Masha etc., or a part of them is present in us too. When we see them on stage we feel that it is the description of our own life on stage and that makes the plays life-like and successful.

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