

**THE THEME OF FRUSTRATION IN THE PLAYS OF ANTON CHEKHOV
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO IVANOV AND THE SEAGULL**

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PREFACE

The drama of Anton Pavolovich Chekhov (1860-1904) has a great appeal for me. In choosing the plays of this distinguished artist as the subject of my research, I have felt I am not far away from English literature which is my major, for Chekhov exhibits a universal influence that no one can deny. Watching the world that he clearly portrays in his plays, I do not feel unfamiliar. So can the case be with any spectator or reader of Chekhov. Notwithstanding the attraction, familiarity and simplicity of his drama, a close and thorough examination proves it to be too complex to extract one definite classification or interpretation for it. His drama is so rich that it may be open for continuous criticism, discussion and analysis. Until very recently critical opinions about his works appear controversial. This unique feature results in an immense difficulty in placing Chekhov in any literary school. It is also difficult to understand the nineteenth century Russia in which Chekhov lived. Therefore, the objective of this thesis is neither to classify Chekhov nor to trace the history of Russia at his time but to assess the treatment of the theme of frustration in his plays, especially Ivanov (1887-1889), and The Seaquill (1896), and how far it is related to his modernity. This appraisal will attempt to point out how the feeling of frustration is involved in almost every aspect of his plays;

for, besides dominating the characters, it directs and motivates all the action.

In writing about the theme of frustration in the plays of Anton Chekhov, a quick survey of the climate in which Chekhov lived can be helpful to fully apprehend what motivated him to write about frustration. Furthermore, it is indispensable to give a definition of this painful human emotion, discuss briefly its causes and reactions from the point of view of psychology. There is no doubt that my readings in psychology on the subject of frustration have made me more capable of understanding and analyzing the psychology of Chekhov's characters. Therefore, the Introduction will include a few definitions of frustration as explained by some major psychologists as well as a general view of the age of Chekhov.

In the light of this background, Chapter I will be a critical study of Ivanov which belongs to Chekhov's first period of immature direct-action plays¹ (?1880-1895). Chapter II will concentrate on The Seagull as a representative of the writer's last period of mature

¹
e.g., the four-act plays Platonov (?1880-1883) and Ivanov (1887-1889).

INTRODUCTION

Part I: The Age of Chekhov

Against this background... Chekhov places his drama of human passion and frustration.¹

Chekhov was the great artist of the long period of twilight (1881-1904) that followed the murder of the Tsar Liberator, Alexander II who ruled Russia from 1855 to 1881. When comparing the artists of this period B.Pares finds that "Chekhov is perhaps the greatest artist of all; that is- he seems to make the most perfect portrait of the epoch to which he belongs..."²The great reforms of Alexander II concerning the administration of the countryside and the towns, the law and the army were belittled and curtailed by his successor, Alexander III (1881-1894) who took the country to earlier stages of severe retroactivity.³In spite of the economic and social developments these reforms resulted in, the most important problem remained untouched, dictatorship. Russia remained a backward agricultural country. The hopes of the common Russians, for whom these reforms were not really made, were frustrated. However, these far reaching reforms continued to be like a charter of

¹ David Magarshack, Chekhov: The Dramatist (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p.71.

² Bernard Pares, Russia (New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1943), p.54.

³ Ibid., p.67.

Liberalism, creating a new Russia and committing it to further progress. It was a period that reflected a strong need for a radical democratic liberation.

Because of the serfs' continuous struggle for their freedom and the land, Alexander II thought it was better to put an end to serfdom himself instead of forcing his people to revolt to do that. Thus in 1861 came his most important reform, the emancipation of Russian peasants who had been pushed down into the abyss of serfdom by the Tsars. This emancipation did give the peasant personal freedom but that was as far as his economic conditions could allow him to use it. The peasants thought that they at last had a good Tsar but they were deceived.¹ Their conditions were not really getting better. They were only given small pieces of the worst land and they had to pay a lot for these pieces as well as for themselves which was, of course, impossible for the poor majority of them. So they had to remain as serfs as they were. This forced them to start rising again in many parts of Russia. Their deceiving emancipation set going a

1

For detailed information see:

a) Alexiev and Caratsov, History of the Soviet Union, trans. into Arabic by Progress Edition (Moscow: Progress Edition, Zoboveski Boulevard, n.d.), pp. 80-84,

b) Pares, pp.42-43 and

c) Yepivanov and Vidossov, History of the Soviet Union, trans. into Arabic by Kheiri El-Damen and Nicola Tawil (Moscow: Progress Edition, Zoboveski Boulevard, n.d.), pp.365, 369, 381.

tremendous economic revolution which brought Russia into the first stages of capitalism which was not actually better than the previous feudal system and which reached its highest and worst final stage, imperialism, by the end of the nineteenth century.¹

The whole world was getting quite different with an urban emphasis, with vastly improved technical and industrial means and with the appearance of such famous figures as Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill. Science and progress were dominating. It was believed that both physical and human nature could be best mastered. The old Christian certainties were undermined by the new thought. Similarly Russia was changing and developing rapidly after the long periods of darkness, backwardness, isolation, ignorance, subjection, numberless famines and terrible epidemics. The emancipation of the peasants created a new industrial Russia and opened the door to every kind of Utopia although the peasants were still so poor and deprived of their human rights. Their terrible conditions pushed them to look for work in the newly opened factories but they discovered that the workers' conditions were not really better.² Every uprising or strike led by such oppressed peasants or workers was cruelly suppressed by

¹
Yepivanov, pp.373-374, 392, 407.

²
Alexiev, pp.87-90.

the Tsar's forces. Thus, this deceiving emancipation made revolution inevitable in the long run to solve problems which were not finally settled.

During this period the Russian society was still suffering from the effects of serfdom, the tyranny of Tsardom which only fell in 1917 and the great famines of 1891-3, consequently followed by epidemics.¹ It was a society that was almost forced to have faith in the futility of everything. The ideal of the government was "public silence."² The futile autocracy paralysed all life. All the old ideals crashed. The official church was corrupted by monks working for the Tsars' interests. The foul Monk, Grigori Rasputin (1872-1916) ruled Russia through his influence on the Empress, wife of Nicholas II ruling from 1895 to 1917. The real government at that time was in the hands of the Empress. She believed that Rasputin was the voice of God and also of the common people of Russia and so turned a deaf ear to all his shameful scandals.³ By the beginning of the twentieth century, capitalism was naturally developing into imperialism and this led to an economic crisis as it did in the whole world.⁴ During the years (1900-1903) the Russian economic crisis resulted in a great

¹ Pares, p.107.

² Ibid., p.66.

³ Ibid., pp.83, 103.

⁴ Yepivanov, pp.453-455.

reduction of the number of workers, an increase in unemployment, a deterioration in the wages of workers and consequently in extreme hunger and poverty. There also followed a growth in the idle bourgeois people who depended on yearly incomes and did not participate in any production.¹ In 1900 Russia became greatly in debt which was increasing due to the great interference of the foreign capitalists.² Moreover, in the field of education Russia was more backward than European countries. Schools were not enough and learning was not possible for a big majority.³ All such conditions were bringing about the threat of revolution.

By the end of the nineteenth century signs of Bolshevism, that is to say, Communism, had already appeared, especially when the two Russian Socialist Parties were founded although they were mere aspirations cut off from their public. Their leaders had to live abroad. The first party was the non-Marxist party of Social Revolutionaries that was first named "The Will of the People" and was responsible for the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. It was founded in 1896 for the peasants. The second was that of the Social Democrats which was first known as "The Black Partition." It was founded in 1898 for the factory workers by Nikolai Lenin (1870-1924). Its members were the first

¹ Ibid., p.459.

² Ibid., pp.456, 460.

³ Ibid., p551.

Marxists in Russia.¹ These are examples of the secret means founded to struggle for freedom, land and democracy. However, it was only in 1917 that the Emperor Nicholas II was finally forced to abdicate and was killed in 1918 by the Bolsheviks.² This was the end of the Russian dynasty of Tsars. The following great changes necessitated a new kind of government, a government consisting of the common Russians and not of Tsars, capitalists or landowners.

A number of writers, such as W.H. Bruford, E.Fen, D. Magarshack, R. Peace, G.Woodcock, P.Egri, R.T. Fisher Jr., L. Hellman, K.A. Lantz and B.Pares, deal with the gloomy and pessimistic atmosphere of Russia in the twilight period of Chekhov. Some, like Fen and Pares, set the Russians and the Englishmen in comparison; and although, in some respects, Russian history does not follow the Western European pattern of cultural development, Fen and Pares draw some similarities between them. For instance, serfdom which had disappeared in England before the Middle Ages and in France by the end of the eighteenth century was not abolished in Russia until 1861. The two hundred fifty years of Tartar domination affected all aspects of Russian life. This domination was followed by repressive autocracies which lasted into the twentieth century (1917). Yet, Fen, for example, comparing "the disenchanting Russian of 1880-1900

¹ Pares, pp.90-91.

² Ibid., p.105.

and the frustrated Englishman of 1919-39,"¹ says that similar climates produce similar results, moods and thoughts. The two periods which are sad interludes between wars and revolutions are stamped with spiritual discouragement, disappointment and depression. She adds that the English may envy the Russians their ability for unashamed self-revelation,² a self revelation which Chekhov is extremely fond of as the rest of the thesis will reveal.

In spite of the oppression, cruelty and persecution of the Tsars, the Russians could achieve many successes in the fields of science, literature and art. The terrible conditions of Russia and its oppressed people at this time made realism the prevalent and successful attitude in art and literature. It was only the kind of art and literature which expressed real life honestly that was most successful.³ Although the best representatives of Russian culture were punished with either early death, imprisonment, hard labour, or eternal military service, the Russian culture did develop. Such cruel and unfair punishment did not prevent writing about the drawbacks of serfdom, dictatorship of autocracies, the oppressing proprietors, the peasants' deprivation of their human rights and the necessity of a

¹ Elisaveta Fen, "Introduction," Plays: Anton Chekhov, trans. Elisaveta Fen (England: Penguin Books, 1959), p.9.

² Ibid., pp. 8-9.

³ Yepivanov, pp.350, 355.

revolution. The influence of Marx's and Engels' works which were translated into Russian in the second half of the nineteenth century was obviously felt.¹

Perhaps the government's cruel persecution of anyone writing against it revealing its severe faults was the reason why Chekhov intelligently hid any obvious attack against the government and neither believed in nor defended any particular political view directly otherwise he would have met the same tragic fate as, for example, Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), the greatest figure in Russian literature or Michael Lermontov (1814-1841), an acknowledged Russian poet and he would not have been able to escape from the autocrat and the police who were getting severer after the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. To continue writing and to have his writings accepted and published was very important to Chekhov because he wrote to support a big family instead of his father at the beginning of his life. Nevertheless, it can be strongly maintained that Chekhov's honest and lifelike presentation of the boring, trivial and empty life of the Russian upper and middle classes was nothing except a revelation of this life and of how the rich and intellectual people were detached from the common people's real problems and miserable life.

¹
Ibid., pp.409,429.