

Trees Woods and Literature – 41

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904)

The Russian playwright and short story writer, Anton Chekhov, was born in Taganrog, a port on the Sea of Azov in southern Russia in 1860 and died in Germany in 1904 while visiting a Black Forest spa seeking relief from tuberculosis. Despite his short life, Chekhov is regarded one of the greatest writers of short fiction in history. His career as a playwright produced four classics and his best short stories are now held in the highest esteem by writers and critics alike. Interestingly, Chekhov practiced as a medical doctor for most of his literary career: “Medicine is my lawful wife”, he once said, “and literature is my mistress, when I get tired of one, I spend the night with the other”.

When his father became bankrupt in 1876, the young Chekhov assumed the role of the family’s bread winner while also paying for his education. During this period, Chekhov wrote for financial gain only. However, as his artistic ambition grew, he is credited with developing formal innovations which have influenced the evolution of the modern short story. Chekhov made no apologies for the difficulties this posed for his readers, insisting that the role of an artist was to ask questions, not to answer them. His writings belong in the same genre as Joyce and Beckett.

During Chekhov’s lifetime, Irish and British critics did not generally look kindly on his work. In fact, one of the earliest non-Russians to praise his plays was George Bernard Shaw, who subtitled his *Heartbreak House* “A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes,” and pointed out similarities between the predicament of the British landed class and that of their Russian counterparts as depicted by Chekhov: “the same nice people, the same utter futility.”



Figure 1: *Anton Chekhov in April 1904. According to the Literature Museum Moscow, this was the last photograph to be taken of Anton Chekhov. Photograph courtesy of the Chekhov Museum in Badenweiler.*

John McGahern was frequently referred to as Ireland's Chekhov and McGahern often spoke of Chekhov's influence on his own writing. However, it took twenty-three drafts of *The Bank Holiday* before he accepted Chekhov's famous advice; "It is not necessary to portray many main characters. Let two people be the centre of gravity in your story: he and she."

The Seagull was the first of Chekhov's plays and initially it was not a success. *Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard* soon followed. Following his death a fifth play, *Dead Centre*, was published after it was discovered in the vault of a Moscow bank where it had been deposited by his sister some years previously. Many of his plays have been performed in Dublin. It is reported that the late Cyril Cusack loved being cast in Chekhov plays.

For health reasons Chekhov bought an estate near Yalta in the Crimea where he planted trees, shrubs and flowers (Figure 2). According to his brother Mikhail, he "looked after these trees as though they were his children". Chekhov had an urban upbringing and studied medicine in Moscow, but in later life he spent long periods in the Russian countryside, either working as a doctor or on holiday. This led him to develop a deep love and appreciation of the countryside. His affinity with Russia's natural environment was evident in both his short stories and his travel writings. He wrote about a journey through southern Russia in *The Steppe* (1888) and he chronicled his expedition across Siberia to the Russian government's offshore penal settlement in Sakhalin Island. On that journey he encountered the taiga – vast coniferous forests of larch, spruce and pine – that lie between the steppe to the south and the tundra to the north. In central European Russia, by contrast, most of the indigenous forest consists of hardwoods, particularly birch and oak. Chekhov voiced his sadness at the destruction of ancient hardwood forests in his short story *Rothschild's Fiddle* (1894) and, more prominently, in his major plays. All of these are set in the wooded countryside of central European Russia and they were partly inspired by the long summer holidays he spent with family and friends in *dachas* south of Moscow. Despite his love of forests, Chekhov was more of a horticulturist than a woodsman.

The prominence of forests in Chekhov's plays reflected the landscape in which most Russians lived. In the early 20th century, 39% of European Russia was forested, though in some regions such as the areas south of Moscow where Chekhov spent much time, this proportion was more than two-thirds. The utilisation and exploitation of those forests was a matter of great public and private concern. The Emancipation Act of 1861, which freed the Russian serfs, left most forests in the hands of large landlords. More than half of the forests were owned by the State, a third by private landowners, with the remainder held by the Orthodox Church or the peasantry.

While living at Yalta he wrote his last play, *The Cherry Orchard*, in 1903. The fate of the orchard symbolises not only the end of the old rural social order but also



Figure 2: Anton Chekhov in the White Dacha in Yalta. Photograph by Leonid V. Sredin in 1900 or 1901.

the suburbanisation of the countryside. That process was already apparent in Russia by the early 20th century when it was facilitated by the rapid expansion of the railway network. The threats posed by suburban development were not confined to Russia. In England, as in Russia, many cherry orchards and suburban woodlots were also cut down and sold as building sites.

Despite the prominence of conservation issues in Chekhov's plays, he did not write them as clarion calls to action. He described both *The Wood Demon* and *The Cherry Orchard* as comedies, although they are comedies of manners and ideas, rather than comedies in their plots and situations. Chekhov did not side with either the conservationists or the developers because he believed that he had an artistic duty to present convincing portraits of characters with opposing views on all manner of subjects. The ensuing disputes are not resolved and that is one of the hallmarks of Chekhov's drama. Nevertheless, he strongly denied that he was bereft of principles and he was clearly concerned by the destruction of Russia's woodland environment. In that respect, his outlook mirrored that of contemporaneous conservationists abroad, such as John Muir, who campaigned to preserve the giant sequoias in the Sierra Nevada of California.

The rural world that Chekhov depicted came to an abrupt end with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The new Soviet regime established state forest enterprises,

which provided employment, amenities and products for local communities. Their focus, however, was on exploiting, rather than conserving the country's forests. Deforestation proceeded apace during the Soviet era and has continued to the present day, being exacerbated in recent years by the huge demand for timber from the Far East. Nevertheless, Russia still has more than one fifth of the world's forests – much more than any other nation. There are signs, moreover, that the Russian government is now more aware than its predecessors of the need to conserve the forests – for global, as well as national, reasons. President Vladimir Putin has insisted that any climate change pact must take into account the major role that Russia's forests play in soaking up carbon dioxide in the world's atmosphere. Chekhov would have welcomed this new concern for the conservation of the forests, but he would have been surprised that it is not universally shared.

Chekhov was a very complex man. We understand little about him, some say we know more about the enigmatic Shakespeare than Chekhov who, with an art peculiar to himself, in scattered scenes, in haphazard glimpses into the lives of his characters, in seemingly trivial conversations, has succeeded in so distilling the atmosphere of the Russia of his day that “we feel it in every line we read, oppressive as the mists that hang over a lake at dawn, and, like those mists, made visible to us by the light of an approaching day”.

Always a very modest man, Chekhov could scarcely have imagined the extent of his posthumous reputation. Today, there are books of his famous quotes including the following: “Let us learn to appreciate there will be times when the trees will be bare, and look forward to the time when we may pick the fruit”, and “Doctors are just the same as lawyers; the only difference is that lawyers merely rob you, whereas doctors rob you and kill you too”!

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