DRAMA

CRITICISM

VOLUME

9

DRAMA

CRITICISM

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

VOLUME 9

Lawrence J. Trudeau, Editor

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Preface

Drama Criticism (*DC*) is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

DC was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism* (*SSC*) and *Poetry Criticism* (*PC*), which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *Drama Criticism* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism* (*SC*).

Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Each volume of *DC* presents:

- 8-10 entries
- authors and works representing a wide range of nationalities and time periods
- a diversity of viewpoints and critical opinions.

Organization of an Author Entry

Each author entry consists of some or all of the following elements, depending on the scope and complexity of the criticism:

- The **author heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- A **portrait** of the author is included when available. Most entries also feature illustrations of people, places, and events pertinent to a study of the playwright and his or her works. When appropriate, photographs of the plays in performance are also presented.

- The **biographical and critical introduction** contains background information that familiarizes the reader with the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her works.

- The list of **principal works** is divided into two sections, each of which is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The first section of the principal works list contains the author's dramatic pieces. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.

- Whenever available, **author commentary** is provided. This section consists of essays or interviews in which the dramatist discusses his or her own work or the art of playwriting in general.

- Essays offering **overviews and general studies of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.

- **Criticism of individual plays** offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety.

- As an additional aid to students, the critical essays and excerpts are often prefaced by **explanatory annotations**. These notes provide several types of useful information, including the critic's reputation and approach to literary studies as well as the scope and significance of the criticism that follows.

- A complete **bibliographic citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism.

- The **further reading list** at the end of each entry comprises additional studies of the dramatist. It is divided into sections that help students quickly locate the specific information they need.

Other Features

- A **cumulative author index** lists all the authors who have appeared in *DC* and Gale's other Literature Criticism Series, as well as cross-references to related titles published by Gale, including *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. A complete listing of the series included appears at the beginning of the index.

- A **cumulative nationality index** lists each author featured in *DC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *DC* volume in which the author appears.

- A **cumulative title index** lists in alphabetical order the individual plays discussed in the criticism contained in *DC*. Each title is followed by the author's name and the corresponding volume and page number(s) where commentary on the work may be located. Translations and variant titles are cross-referenced to the title of the play in its original language so that all references to the work are combined in one listing.

A Note to the Reader

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in *Drama Criticism* may use the following general formats to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to materials reprinted from books.

[1]Susan Sontag, "Going to the Theater, Etc.," *Partisan Review* XXXI, No. 3 (Summer 1964), 389-94; excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism,* Vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 17-20.

[2]Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden* (Chatto & Windus, 1962); excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism,* Vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 237-47.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes of *DC,* or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor.

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Anton Pavlovich Chekhov
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Anton Pavlovich Chekhov
1860-1904

INTRODUCTION

Chekhov is one of the most important playwrights in all of Western drama. His name has been linked with those of Molière, Schiller, and Shakespeare for the impact his work has had on the history of theater. With a small handful of plays he overthrew the long-standing tradition of works that emphasize action and plot, in favor of dramas that treat situation, mood, and internal psychological states. The content and dramatic technique of Chekhov's four masterpieces, *The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters,* and *The Cherry Orchard* inaugurated fundamental changes not only in the way plays are composed but in the way they are acted, a revolution that persists to this day in works written for film and television, as well as those composed for the stage.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Chekhov's grandfather was a serf who bought his freedom, and his father was the owner of a small grocery business in Taganrog, the village where Chekhov was born. When the family business went bankrupt in 1876, the Chekhovs, without Anton, moved to Moscow to escape creditors; Anton remained in Taganrog until 1879 in order to complete his education and earn a scholarship to Moscow University. There, he studied medicine and, after graduating in 1884, went into practice. By this time he was publishing sketches, mostly humorous, in popular magazines. Chekhov did this to support his family, and, although he wrote literally hundreds of these pieces, he did not take them very seriously. In 1885, however, he moved to St. Petersburg and became friends with A. S. Suvorin, editor of the journal *Novoe vremja,* who encouraged the young writer to develop his obvious gifts.

At this time, and for several years afterward, Chekhov's writings were profoundly influenced by Leo Tolstoy's ideas on ascetic morality and nonresistance to evil. But after Chekhov visited the penal settlement on the island of Sakhalin, which he would make the subject of a humanitarian study, he rejected Tolstoy's moral code as an insufficient answer to human suffering. In the late 1880s Chekhov began to produce what are regarded as his mature works in the short story form. At the same time he began experimenting with the writing of plays. In the 1880s he composed a number of comic one-act plays, or "vaudevilles," often adapted from his short stories. *Ivanov,* his first full-length work (aside from the early untitled and never-performed drama commonly referred to as *Platonov*), was staged in 1887, and *The Wood Demon* appeared two years later. Both *Ivanov* and *The Wood Demon* were unsuccessful when they were produced. His first major work as a dramatist, *The Seagull,* was also a failure when it was staged in a disastrous 1896 production at the Alexandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg. A discouraged Chekhov vowed never to write for the stage again. However, two years later, in their debut season, the Moscow Art Theater mounted an acclaimed revival of *The Seagull* which established both Chekhov as an accomplished playwright and the Moscow Art Theater company as an important new acting troupe.

Around this time Chekhov rewrote *The Wood Demon,* transforming it into *Uncle Vanya.* The new play was performed several times in the Russian provinces before it received its first professional staging by the Moscow Art Theater in 1899. The same company also presented the first performances of *Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). In 1901 Chekhov married Olga Knipper, an actress with the Moscow Art Theater. Because of his worsening tuberculosis, from which he had suffered since 1884, Chekhov was forced to spend most of his time in the Crimea, where, it was believed, the warm southern climate was better for his condition, and in European health resorts; consequently, he was often separated from his wife, who typically performed in Moscow. He died in a Black Forest spa in 1904.

MAJOR WORKS

Chekhov's interest and participation in the theater had its origins in his schooldays at Taganrog, when he acted and wrote for the local playhouse. His first serious effort in drama was written in 1881, during his residence in Moscow. This work, *Platonov*, initiated the first of two major periods of the author's dramatic writings. The works of this first period are conventional melodramas characterized by the standard theatrical techniques and subjects of the times. *Platonov,* a long and somewhat declamatory social drama, features a leading character whose reformist ideals are negated by the indifference of others and by his own ineffectuality. Chekhov's next drama, *Ivanov,* is less bulky and more realistic than its predecessor, though critics still view it as a theatrically exaggerated and traditional piece. Written during the Tolstoyan phase of Chekhov's works, *The Wood Demon* was his first attempt at the artistic realism fully achieved only in his later dramas. This didactic morality play on the theme of vice and virtue is criticized for the same dramatic faults as the other works of this period.

The dramas of Chekhov's second period constitute his major work in the theater. These plays are primarily noted for their technique of "indirect action," a method whereby violent or intensely dramatic events are not shown on stage but occur (if at all) during the intervals of the action as seen by the audience. Chekhov's major plays, then, contain little of what is traditionally regarded as "plot," and consist primarily of quotidian activities performed by the characters and conversations in which allusions to the unseen events are intermingled with discussions of daily affairs and seemingly random observations. Though not portrayed on stage, momentous events are thus shown by the characters' words and actions to be pervasive in their effects. By focusing more closely on the characters' reactions to events than on the events themselves, Chekhov's plays are able to study and convey more precisely the effects of crucial events on characters' lives. Although Chekhov utilized elements of this method in *Ivanov* and *The Wood Demon,* these works remain in essence traditional melodramas. The first drama in which the technique of indirect action is extensively employed is *The Seagull.* In this play, the highly charged, traditionally "dramatic" events—the affair between Trigorin and Nina, Treplev's suicide attempts—occur off stage. No "crises" in the usual sense are shown. What are presented are the precipitating events and consequent effects on the characters—Treplev's and Nina's idealism and the subsequent despair of the one and the resignation of the other. Even though Treplev's suicide attempts and Trigorin's seduction of Nina are resolutely kept off stage, their presence points to the fact that Chekhov was thus far unable to completely eradicate melodramatic elements from his work. Likewise, Vanya's attempt to shoot Serebriakov in *Uncle Vanya* and Tuzenbach's death in a duel in *Three Sisters* are remnants of the older tradition which Chekhov was unable to do without. Only *The Cherry Orchard* appears free of such theatrical "high points." In this play no-one dies. No shots are even fired—either on or off stage.

The static quality of Chekhov's plays, in which nothing much seems to happen, is evoked by their content as well as their apparent "plotlessness." A common theme throughout Chekhov's four major plays is dissatisfaction with present conditions accompanied by a perceived inability to change oneself or one's situation. Treplev tries and fails to revolutionize the nature of drama. Uncle Vanya feels he has wasted his life supporting the fraud Serebriakov and believes he has no alternative but to continue on as he has. The three sisters feel smothered in the stultifying atmosphere of a provincial town and appear incapable of taking action to realize their dream of returning to Moscow. Ranevskaya and Gaev are faced with the loss of their beloved childhood home but cannot act decisively to prevent its sale. Chekhov escapes pessimism in these works by including characters who express optimism—or at least some degree of hopefulness—regarding the future. Sonya in *Uncle Vanya*, Vershinin in *Three Sisters*, and Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard* all anticipate some future state in which all present ills and discontents will be remedied.

The past, too, as well as the future, exerts significant influence on the behavior of Chekhov's characters. To Treplev in *The Seagull,* Arkadina and Trigorin represent the artistic past that he is attempting to overthrow. Vanya feels the burden of the past in the form of the years wasted supporting Serebriakov. Masha, Irina, and Olga long for the Moscow of their childhood. Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard* is tormented by the memory of her drowned son and her subsequent flight to Paris. But it is the present that concerns Chekhov most in these plays. Affected by the past, leading to some unseen future, the present with all its complexities and uncertainties is the stuff of which Chekhov's plays are made. Life as it is really lived, rather than highly melodramatic and theatrical incidents, Chekhov insisted, is the proper subject for plays. "After all, in real life," he observed, "people don't spend every minute shooting at each other, hanging themselves, and making confessions of love. They don't spend all the time saying clever things. They're more occupied with eating, drinking, flirting, and talking stupidities—and these are the things which ought to be shown on the stage. A play should be written in which people arrive, go away, have dinner, talk about the weather, and play cards. Life must be exactly as it is, and people as they are. . . . Let everything on the stage be just as complicated, and at the same time just as simple as it is in life. People eat their dinner, just eat their dinner, and all the time their happiness is being established or their lives are being broken up."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although the Moscow Art Theater production of *The Seagull* was a great success for both the company and the playwright, Chekhov was infuriated by the staging, contending that director Konstantin Stanislavsky had ruined the play. The sets, the lighting, the sound effects—which, famously, included the croaking of frogs and the chirruping of crickets—and the acting all emphasized elements of tragedy in a play that its author vehe-

mently insisted was a comedy. A similarly heated disagreement arose between author and director over *The Cherry Orchard,* which Chekhov subtitled "A Comedy," but which, in the Moscow Art Theater staging, was presented as a nostalgic parable on the passing of an older order in Russian history. Stanislavsky and his actors stressed, to Chekhov's dismay, the pathos of the characters' situation.

Chekhov never applied the term "tragedy" to his works: aside from labelling *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard* "comedies," he called *Uncle Vanya* "Scenes from Country Life" and *Three Sisters* simply "A Drama." Nevertheless, the plays have routinely been interpreted as tragedies in countless performances and critical studies. Until recently, actors, directors, and scholars alike perceived a mood of sadness and despair blanketing all of Chekhov's major plays. Among such interpreters, Chekhov has earned a reputation as a portrayer of futile existences and as a forerunner of the modernist tradition of the absurd. The view of Chekhov as a pessimist, however, has always met with opposition, especially from Russian critics, who have seen him as a chronicler of the degenerating landowner classes during an era of imminent revolution.

A common response of early reviewers of performances of Chekhov's works throughout Europe and North America was to dismiss the plays as meaningless assemblages of random events. Early critics censured their seeming plotlessness and lack of "significant" action. However, much critical attention has subsequently been paid to the organizational and structural principles of Chekhovian drama. Scholars have shown that by the meticulous arrangement of sets, sound effects (including verbal effects: witness, for example, the "Tram-tam-tam" exchange between Masha and Vershinin in Act III of *Three Sisters*), and action, as well as the characters' speeches, Chekhov creates scenes and situations which appear static and uneventful on the surface but which are charged with significance and meaning. (It was the care with which he had arranged the various elements of his plays that led to Chekhov's exasperation with Stanislavsky: the director's myriad stage effects obscured or obliterated the delicate balance of parts that the writer sought.)

The subtlety and indirection of Chekhov's method of presentation required a new style of acting, free of the big gestures and declamation characteristic of traditional acting. A restrained, allusive style was essential, and here Chekhov was well served by the Moscow Art Theater, with its new emphasis on internalizing character and conveying elusive psychological states. Scholars and theater historians have repeatedly stressed that Chekhov, together with Stanislavksy and the Moscow Art Theater, forever transformed the ways in which plays are conceived, written, and performed.

The reception, then, of *The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters,* and *The Cherry Orchard* extends far beyond theater reviews and critical studies, and the influence of these plays continues to be felt by writers, actors, directors throughout the world.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

PLAYS

**Platonov* 1881
Ivanov 1887
Leshy [*The Wood Demon*] 1889
Chaika [*The Seagull*] 1896
†*Dyadya Vanya* [*Uncle Vanya*] 1896?
Tri sestry [*Three Sisters*] 1901
Vishnevy sad [*The Cherry Orchard*] 1904

SHORT FICTION

Pëstrye rasskazy 1886
Nevinnye rechi 1887
V sumerkakh 1887
Rasskazy 1889
The Black Monk, and Other Stories 1903
The Kiss, and Other Stories 1908
The Darling, and Other Stories 1916
The Duel, and Other Stories 1916
The Lady with the Dog, and Other Stories 1917
The Party, and Other Stories 1917
The Wife, and Other Stories 1918
The Witch, and Other Stories 1918
The Bishop, and Other Stories 1919
The Chorus Girl, and Other Stories 1920
The Horse-Stealers, and Other Stories 1921
The Schoolmaster, and Other Stories 1921
The Schoolmistress, and Other Stories 1921
The Cook's Wedding, and Other Stories 1922
Love, and Other Stories 1922

COLLECTED WORKS

Chekhov: Polnoe sobranie sochinenii 1900-1904
Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem A. P. Chekhova 1944-51
The Oxford Chekhov 1964-1980

*The date of this early, untitled play of Chekhov's is conjectural. Commonly referred to as *Platonov,* after its central character, it has also been called *That Worthless Fellow Platonov* and *Play without a Title.*

†The date of *Uncle Vanya* is uncertain. A reworking of the earlier *Wood Demon,* the play was probably composed by Chekhov in 1896; a letter of Chekhov's dated in December of that year seems to refer to *Uncle Vanya* as a completed work. Provincial productions of the play were mounted soon afterward, but it did not receive its first professional staging—in a Moscow Art Theater production—until 1899.

Overviews and General Studies

A. Skaftymov (essay date 1948)

SOURCE: "Principles of Structure in Chekhov's Plays," in *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Robert Louis Jackson, Prentice-Hall, 1967, pp. 69-87.

[*The following is an abridged version of an essay that was first published in Russian in 1948. Skaftymov addresses the "question of the unity of form and content" in Chekhov's plays.*]

There is a rather large and in many respects substantial body of secondary literature on Chekhov's dramaturgy.

Contemporaries noted a peculiarity in Chekhov's plays at the time of the first productions. At first they interpreted this peculiarity as Chekhov's inability to manage the problems of continuous living dramatic movement. Reviewers spoke of "prolixity," of the lack of "stagecraft," of "insufficient action" and weakness of plot. In reproaching Chekhov, contemporaries wrote that "he himself does not know what he wants," that "he does not know the laws of drama," that he does not fulfill the "most elementary demands of the stage," that he writes some sort of "reports," that he gives little pictures with all the chance accidentality of photography, without any thought, and without expressing his own attitude.

K. S. Stanislavsky and V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko noted the so-called "undercurrent,"[1] the most essential principle in the dramatic movement of Chekhov's plays. They revealed the presence of a continuous, internal, intimate, lyric current behind the external, prosaic episodes and details; and in their endeavors at creative staging, they correctly directed all their efforts toward rendering this emotional current more perceptible to the spectator. The new, infectious force of Chekhov's plays became evident.

During this time critics ceased to speak of Chekhov's ineptitude in the field of drama. They reconciled themselves to the "absence of action" in his plays just as they did to the plays' evident strangeness; they defined Chekhov's plays as a special "drama of mood," and thereby seemed to answer all the questions for a time. Only a few critics continued to look back to traditional "dramatic laws," and as a mild reproof to Chekhov continued to speak of a "looseness" and of the "diffuseness of a Chekhovian scenario."[2] This reproof, however, no longer testified to dissatisfaction or ill will. They "forgave" Chekhov for his peculiarity. All the articles on Chekhov's plays now enumerated everything that contributed to the "mood": elements of lyric coloring in the characters' speeches, sound accompaniment, pauses, and so forth.

Chekhov and Olga Knipper in 1902.

Later on these same devices and peculiarities were described in special studies (Yuriev, Grigoriev, and Balukhaty). S. D. Balukhaty's contributions to the study of Chekhov's dramaturgy were especially considerable. In two books and several separate studies, he traced the history of the writing and first productions of each play and gathered a great deal of material characterizing Chekhov's own attitude toward his activities as a dramatist and the attitude toward his plays on the part of the critics and public. He carefully described the structure of each play and thoroughly mapped out the process of gradual formation of those special features and devices which constitute the specific character of Chekhov's plays. All this aids considerably in the study of Chekhov's drama.

Regrettably, even Balukhaty presents all the peculiarities of dramatic structure merely in a descriptive manner. The question of the unity of form and content in Chekhov's plays remains altogether untouched.

Much remains unclear. Specifically, what was the nature of the new attitude toward reality which required new forms for its expression? What ideological kind of creative force drew Chekhov to put together this particular complex of dramatic peculiarities? What motivated Chekhov to devise new methods of dramatic movement? Why does everyday reality occupy such a large and free place in his plays? Why does he abolish tightness of plot and substitute for it episodic, disconnected scenes, and why does he change all forms of interaction of dialogue? And mainly: how is it that all these peculiarities harmonize with each other; what is the nature of their interdependence; what underlying defining principle do they have in common?

The statement that Chekhovian drama is not drama in the usual sense, that it is "lyric drama" or a "drama of moods," and more precisely of "melancholy moods," has only descriptive value. Furthermore, it has little concrete meaning. It is true that in such a description, functional explanations are found for such elements as sound accompaniment, pauses, etc. But why, for the purposes of lyricism, was it necessary to resort to indirect rather than direct expression of feeling, moods, and so forth? If it is a matter of "lyricism" or "moods" in general, with the added note that this lyricism has a sad, melancholy character, then are the scattered quality of the everyday details, the absence of plot, and other purely Chekhovian features absolutely necessary for its expression?

Obviously, calling attention to the lyricism and melancholy mood of Chekhov's plays is inadequate as an answer to these questions. One must consider the qualitative substance of those "moods," that is, see what thoughts and ideas are connected with them. Only then will the essence of Chekhovian forms be revealed as the specific nature of content—a content which could only, and exclusively, be expressed through the given forms.

Balukhaty's suggestion that Chekhov, with his new type of drama, was seeking to supersede the old canon of the drama of everyday life explains little. It is true that Chekhov was dissatisfied with the "tried and true poetics" of the drama of everyday life, that he was "seeking to overcome the schematic character of the drama of everyday life" just by using new "elements and colors from everyday life," to "create in the theater the illusion of life," and "to construct new, fresh dramatic forms in place of the former, conventional typification of scenes and characters."[3] But one can hardly agree that Chekhov includes "facts, actions, intonations, and themes," in a drama merely because they were "new," "strikingly impressive," and because they had not yet been "utilized" on the stage; that merely for the sake of such "novelty," Chekhov "avoids vivid, dynamic elements," simplifies the plot fabric, and substitutes "an apparently unsystematic combination of facts and actions" for "the dramatically conceived, strictly motivated movement of themes one finds in the drama of everyday life."[4] Supposedly, Chekhov did all this in order to "tone down the customary 'theatricality' of plays and to revivify dramatic writing by *naturalistic* and *psychological devices* within the complex structure and relations of routine, ordinary life."[5]

The suggestion of a striving for novelty does not define the real nature of that novelty. If the term "naturalistic" is understood to mean Chekhov's striving not only toward novelty, but also toward the utmost truthfulness, that is, toward the closest approximation of the forms of life itself, then, of course, it would be generally correct to say that Chekhov discovered certain new aspects of reality, and in his creative work as an artist-realist sought to reproduce them. But a striving for truthfulness is insufficient as an explanation. . . . The crucial question is why Chekhov stubbornly and persistently sought to combine so many diverse elements of reality, the unity of which makes up the specific substance of his plays. He must obviously have perceived some sort of connection between all these elements of reflected life. . . . This article is an attempt to reveal the structural peculiarities of Chekhov's plays as an expression of a special dramatic quality of life discovered and interpreted by Chekhov as an attribute of his epoch.

As we know, theater critics reproved Chekhov most of all for introducing into his plays superfluous details from everyday life, and thus violating the laws of stage action. The presence of such details was put down to his ineptitude, to the habits of the writer of tales and short stories, and to his inability or unwillingness to master the requirements of the dramatic genre. These views were expressed not only by newspaper and theater reviewers who were distant from Chekhov and did not know him, but even by those who clearly wished him well (for example, A. Lensky and Nemirovich-Danchenko).

Chekhov himself, at the time he was writing the plays, apparently experienced the greatest difficulty and confusion on this point. While working on ***The Wood Demon,*** he saw that instead of a drama (in the usual sense) he was arriving at something like a story. "***The Wood Demon*** is suitable for a novel," he wrote A. S. Suvorin October 24, 1888.

> I am perfectly well aware of this myself. But I haven't the strength for a novel. I might be able to write a short story. If I wrote a comedy ***The Wood Demon,*** then not actors and a stage would be in the forefront, but literary quality. If the play had literary significance, it would be due to that.

After ***The Wood Demon,*** Chekhov turned away from the theater for some time. Seven years passed. He was now at work on ***The Seagull.*** His purpose was not to get rid of details from everyday life, but to overcome the seeming incompatibility between such details and the demands of dramatic genre and to effect a synthesis of these details. "Details" in the new play were, he knew, prevalent to a degree inadmissible in the usual play, but obviously, he could not forsake them. While working on the play, he wrote: "I am afraid to make a mess of it and to pile up details which will impair the clarity." And further: "I am writing the play not without satisfaction, although I