

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 163

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 163

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Thomson Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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The Seagull

Anton Chekhov

The following entry presents criticism of Chekhov's play *Chaika* (1896; *The Seagull*). For discussion of Chekhov's complete career, see *TCLC*, Volumes 3, 10, and 31; for discussion of his play *The Cherry Orchard*, see *TCLC*, Volume 55; for discussion of his play *The Three Sisters*, see *TCLC*, Volume 96.

INTRODUCTION

The Seagull is the first of Chekhov's four major plays, a group that includes *Dyadya Vanya* (1896?; *Uncle Vanya*), *Tri sestry* (1901; *The Three Sisters*), and *Vishnevyy sad* (1904; *The Cherry Orchard*). These plays are heralded for their rejection of melodrama and the conventional dramatic subjects and techniques that dominated the theater of Chekhov's time. *The Seagull* introduced the technique of "indirect action," a method whereby violent or intensely dramatic events are not shown on stage but occur during the intervals of the action as seen by the audience, and inaugurated fundamental changes not only in the way plays are written but in the way they are acted, a revolution that persists to the present day.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Seagull takes place at the estate of retired judge Peter Sorin. His sister, Irina Arkadina, a glamorous, selfish actress, is visiting with her lover, the successful writer Boris Trigorin. Irina's twenty-five-year-old son, Konstantin Trepliov, also a writer, lives on the estate with his uncle. Present as well are Eugene Dorn, a middle-aged doctor, and Ilia Shamrayov, Sorin's estate manager, along with his wife, Paulina, and his melancholy daughter, Masha. Simon Medviedenko, a teacher, is in love with Masha, who in turn is in love with Konstantin, who loves Nina Zarietchnaya, an aspiring young actress. Konstantin, a zealous proponent of new dramatic forms that are abundantly expressive, socially relevant, and lacking in artifice, has written a play and stages it for his mother's benefit during her visit; Nina is featured in a major role. During the performance, Irina refuses to take her son's play seriously and keeps interrupting. Nina is impressed by Trigorin's reputation and becomes infatuated with him. Konstantin, depressed



by his inability to inspire love in either his mother or Nina, shoots a seagull and brings it to Nina, claiming that he will soon take his own life as well. Overhearing this exchange, Trigorin sees in it material for a story; he tells Nina that the incident illustrates how human beings can be casually destructive, and that he sees her as a seagull endangered by callous men. Nina and Trigorin begin an affair, and she will eventually join him in Moscow. Konstantin shoots himself but is only superficially wounded, and he and his mother soon resume their bickering.

The play's final act takes place several years later. Sorin is now very ill, and Trigorin and Irina have come to visit him at the estate. Despairing of ever winning Konstantin's love, Masha has married Medviedenko and borne a child; she is still in love with Konstantin, however, and neglects her family. Konstantin has had some of his work published but is still unfulfilled. Nina had become pregnant but lost the baby after being aban-

done by Trigorin; she is now pursuing her acting career in various provincial towns. During this time Konstantin has relentlessly followed Nina, hoping that she will eventually return to him. Through occasional letters to him she has revealed her emotional distress; she has suffered numerous disappointments in her career and in her one-sided relationship with Trigorin. Nina returns to the estate and speaks with Konstantin, who still loves her. She is the only character who has changed in any way; she has learned to endure life's hardships and to continue living with hope for the future. Despite her continuing feelings for Trigorin, she leaves the estate to accept a position with a mediocre theatrical company in a small town. Konstantin now feels utterly desolate and lonely, and, while the others are playing cards, kills himself.

MAJOR THEMES

Chekhov's major plays 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 the characters' lives. The first play in which this technique of indirect action is employed is *The Seagull*. In this work, the highly charged, traditionally "dramatic" events—the affair between Trigorin and Nina, Konstantin'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—Konstantin's and Nina's idealism and the subsequent despair of the one and the resignation of the other. Even though Konstantin'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.

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 the four major plays is dissatisfaction with present conditions, accompanied by a perceived inability to change oneself or one's situation. Nearly all of the characters in *The Seagull* are dissatisfied with their lives, and see in love or artistic success the hope for improvement of their condition; all are ultimately disappointed. Trigorin, an apparently successful author, de-

scribes writing as a mere compulsion and notes that he is continually negatively compared to Turgenev and Tolstoy. Konstantin, failing in both his love for Nina and his desire to change the nature of drama, is doubly frustrated and commits suicide. Only Nina's guarded optimism rescues the play from complete pessimism.

The past, too, exerts significant influence on the characters in *The Seagull*. Sorin, aging and ill, fears his life has been wasted. Nina is burdened by her restrictive upbringing under a harsh and cold father. Konstantin tries to overthrow the artistic past represented by his mother and Trigorin. However, it is the present that concerns Chekhov most. Affected by the past, leading to some unseen future, the present with all its complexities and uncertainties provides the central focus of *The Seagull*.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The Seagull was a failure when it premiered in a disastrous production at the Alexandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg on October 17, 1896. 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* that established both Chekhov as an accomplished playwright and the Moscow Art Theater company as an important new acting troupe. Chekhov himself was infuriated by the staging, charging that director Konstantin Stanislavsky had ruined the play. The sets, the lighting, the sound effects, and the acting all emphasized elements of tragedy in a play that Chekhov vehemently insisted was a comedy. Despite the author's contentions, *The Seagull* has routinely been interpreted as a tragedy by critics, performers, and directors, who perceive a mood of sadness and despair suffusing the play. Among such interpreters Chekhov has earned a reputation as a portrayer of the futility of existence and as a forerunner of the modernist tradition of the absurd.

A common response of early reviewers of *The Seagull* was to dismiss it as a meaningless assemblage of random events. Early critics censured its seeming plotlessness and lack of significant action. However, much critical attention has subsequently been paid to the organizational and structural elements of the drama. Scholars have shown that by the meticulous arrangements of sets, sound effects, and action Chekhov creates scenes and situations which appear static and uneventful on the surface but which are charged with significance and meaning. Numerous critics have explored the unifying effect of the symbolism of the play, most notably that of the seagull, but also that of the lake and horses (which are continually said to be unavailable). Scholars have examined the relationship

of *The Seagull* to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a portion of which Irina and Konstantin recite, and Guy de Maupassant's *Sur l'eau*, which Irina starts to read aloud but soon dismisses. Throughout such assessments, commentators have emphasized the role of *The Seagull* in ushering in a revolution in the ways plays are composed, staged, and performed. As Raymond Williams has asserted, *The Seagull* represents "a significant moment in the history of modern drama, for it shows a writer of genius beginning to create a new dramatic form."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Pestrye rasskazy* [*Motley Tales*] (short stories) 1886
Ivanov (play) 1887
Nevinnye rechi [*Innocent Tales*] (short stories) 1887
V sumerkakh. Ocherki i rasskazy [*In the Twilight*] (short stories) 1887
Leshy [*The Wood Demon*] (play) 1889
Rasskazy [*Tales*] (short stories) 1889
Khmurye liudi [*Gloomy People*] (short stories) 1890
Duel' [*The Duel*] (short stories) 1892
Palata No. 6 [*Ward No. 6*] (short stories) 1893
Chaika [*The Seagull*] (play) 1896
**Dyadya Vanya* [*Uncle Vanya*] (play) 1896?
Tri sestry [*The Three Sisters*] (play) 1901
Vishnevyy sad [*The Cherry Orchard*] (play) 1904
Tales. 13 vols. [translated by Constance Garnett] (short stories) 1916-22
Letters of Anton Chekhov to His Family and Friends [translated by Garnett] (letters) 1920
†Neizdannaya p'esa [*Platonov*] (play) 1923
The Oxford Chekhov. 9 vols. [translated by Ronald Hingley] (short stories and plays) 1964-1975
Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem. 30 vols. [edited by Nikolai Fedorovich Bel'chikov and others] (plays, short stories, notebooks, diaries, and letters) 1974-1983
Chekhov, the Early Stories, 1883-1888 [translated and edited by Patrick Miles and Harvey Pitcher] (short stories) 1994
The Undiscovered Chekhov: Fifty-One New Stories [translated by Peter Constantine] (short stories) 2001

*The date of *Uncle Vanya* is uncertain. A reworking of the earlier *Wood Demon*, it was probably composed in 1896.

†The composition date of this early, originally untitled play by Chekhov is uncertain, but was likely around 1881. It has been variously translated as *Platonov*, *That Worthless Fellow Platonov*, *Don Juan* (in the Russian *Manner*), and *Wild Honey*.

CRITICISM

Thomas G. Winner (essay date February 1956)

SOURCE: Winner, Thomas G. "Chekhov's *Seagull* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: A Study of a Dramatic Device." *American Slavic and East European Review* 15 (February 1956): 103-11.

[In the following essay, Winner explores parallels between *The Seagull* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.]

Chekhov's use of literary allusions or echoes represents one of the most striking variations of the playwright's many evocative devices. Such devices, which stand outside the immediate action of his later plays, frequently are of symbolic significance and sometimes have a commentary function similar to that of the Greek chorus. Chekhov's use of literary or folklore allusions in his later plays is usually eclectic and may shift from author to author, folksong to folksong. Quotations from Shakespeare, especially from *Hamlet*, occur in various plays of Chekhov. But in the *Seagull* we find more than incidental background snatches from *Hamlet*. For *Hamlet* appears related to the total structure of the play, and it would seem that the image of *Hamlet* is, in the intent of the playwright, most intimately connected with the situations and characters of the *Seagull*.

It is the task of this paper to analyze the role of the Hamletian elements in the *Seagull* and to suggest their relationship to, and role in, the dramatic structure and intent of the play. These remarks are offered in a suggestive mood, since the complexity of the relationship of *Hamlet* and the *Seagull* could doubtlessly lead to various interpretations. But it is hoped that such a study will aid in clarifying a frequently puzzling aspect of the *Seagull*.

In Chekhov's works, in his notes and letters, we find ample evidence of his preoccupation with Shakespeare's tragedies. As early as 1882, Chekhov, at twenty-two years, reviewed an apparently poor performance of *Hamlet* in the Pushkin Theater in Moscow.¹ While attacking what he considered the misrepresentation of the character of Hamlet by the actor Ivanov-Kozel'skij, he expressed strong praise for the play and its author, voicing the hope that Hamlet would aid in the much-needed rejuvenation of the Russian stage, even if played in mediocre fashion. "Better a badly acted Hamlet, than boring emptiness (*skuchnoe nichego*)," he exclaimed. Hamlet, he said, had been represented as a whiner, especially in Act I, although "Hamlet was incapable of whining. A man's tears are valuable and must not be wasted (*nado dorozhit' imi*) on the stage. Mr. Ivanov-Kozel'skij," Chekhov complains, "was frightened of the ghost, so

much so that one even felt pity for him. . . . Hamlet was a man of indecision, but he was never a coward."² This interpretation of Hamlet as a relatively strong personality must be kept in mind in considering the use Chekhov made of this character.

Unfortunately, we have no further record of any critical comment of Chekhov's concerning *Hamlet*, and thus much of our insight into Chekhov's interpretation of Shakespeare's much-disputed play must be left to inference. Incidental references to *Hamlet*, however, can be found frequently in Chekhov's letters and notebooks, revealing Chekhov's considerable preoccupation with this play.

References to *Hamlet* are frequent in Chekhov's creative writings. We know from his correspondence that in 1887 he was planning, in collaboration with his friend A. S. Lazarev-Gruzinskij, to produce what he called a "vaudeville" skit entitled *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.³ However, the skit was never completed and there are no extant copies of a draft. The skit apparently was to serve primarily as a critique of existing Russian stage practices and while Chekhov's letters to Lazarev-Gruzinskij regarding this work reveal considerable information about his views of dramatic technique, they disclose nothing of his views on *Hamlet*. Chekhov's first "vaudeville," *Kalkhas* (1887), contains, among many excerpts lifted without alteration from the dramatic repertoire of the Russian stage, excerpts from *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*. The Hamletian references and quotations in the short stories and plays are too numerous to cite. It is not clear whether Chekhov read Shakespeare in the original or in Russian, though evidence available in his own notes and letters would tend to support the latter hypothesis, as he frequently refers admiringly to the Shakespeare translations of Peter Isaevich Vejnborg (1830-1908), the dramatic theoretician and translator of Shakespeare, Goethe and Heine. At no point in Chekhov's writings is Shakespeare quoted in the original, nor could any reference to his knowledge of English be found.

What are some of the most striking characteristics of the use of Hamletian themes which permeate the *Seagull*? First the intensity of the Hamlet motif must be noted, in contrast to the incidental use of the theme in the other plays. *Hamlet* sounds, as it were, as a constant background music to the play and references to Shakespeare's tragedy and its characters are contained not only in quotations and brief references, but in broad dramatic situations, as the play within the play, and in some aspects of the dramatic structure of Chekhov's play as well. Secondly, we must note the frequent identification of Chekhovian characters with characters from *Hamlet*, notably Treplev with Hamlet and Arkadina with Gertrude. These identifications grow in intensity as they are presented against a background of other Ham-

letian themes. Particularly striking is the bandaging scene with its clear echoes of the closet scene between Hamlet and Gertrude. While the relationship between Arkadina and Treplev shows some striking resemblances to the Hamlet-Gertrude relationship, they are by no means exactly parallel.⁴ The disparities between the two relationships, as we shall see later, fulfill a definite function in Chekhov's dramatic plan. The relationship between Treplev and Nina again evokes the echo of Hamlet's frustrated relationship to Ophelia. Nina's resemblance to Ophelia is less obvious, however, than Treplev's to Hamlet, for, unlike Treplev, she does not herself express a feeling of identification.

Chekhov's intent and method may be clarified by a chronological analysis of the Hamletian evocations in the play.

We meet Treplev at the beginning of Act I and learn of his play and his relationship to Nina and his mother. "I love my mother," he tells Sorin, "but she is always running around with this writer." We are reminded of the much stronger words which Hamlet uses concerning the relationship of his uncle to his mother. The Hamletian mood is strengthened, as we learn that Treplev has recently returned from the university, just as we meet Hamlet upon his return from Wittenberg. When Nina enters in the same scene, we are confronted with the first, yet weak, shadow of the Ophelia motif which also grows in intensity as the play progresses. We learn from her that her father strongly objects to her association with the Arkadina-Treplev-Sorin household, as Polonius objects to Ophelia's association with Hamlet. We learn that Nina's mother, just like Ophelia's, is dead. More important, however, Nina introduces, for the first time, the symbol of the seagull, the central symbol of the play. A discussion of the many-levelled significance of this image in relation to Nina and the central idea of the play cannot fall within the scope of this paper. There is, however, one aspect of the seagull image which we might consider. The seagull is an image which gently hints at the connection we are to make between Nina and Ophelia. This is how Nina introduces the image: "I am drawn here, to the lake, like a seagull." Here, there appears to be a combination of two related images: the free-flying, and later to be destroyed bird, and the lake, which also serves as the natural backdrop to Treplev's symbolic play. As Chekhov's play progresses, we notice that the image of water is frequently associated with Nina. She mentions it as she first enters the stage; she sits against the background of water when she represents the world spirit in Treplev's abortive play; in Act II she enters and interrupts a joint reading of Maupassant's *Sur l'eau*; she tells Trigorin of her love for the lake on the shores of which she was raised and Trigorin notes it down as "a subject for a small tale. . . ." Finally, her name, Zarechnaja, seems also related to the water image. We are thus led to associate

Nina not only with the image of the seagull, as she does herself, but also with the image of the closeness to water, an image with which the seagull, as a water bird, is of course closely connected. Are we not again dealing here with a gentle echo from *Hamlet*? For water, so frequently representing the death image in Shakespeare, is closely tied to Ophelia's end.⁵ It is my suggestion then, that throughout the play Nina is identified not only with the destroyed seagull but also, unconsciously, with the fate of Ophelia, an identification which strengthens the premonition of her doom brought about by her relationship to the image of the bird.

We are now led into the central, climactic scene of the "play-within-the-play" which brings to the fore the conflict between Treplev and his mother. Two quotations from *Hamlet* are introduced, just as Treplev's play is about to begin, which direct our attention to the Hamlet theme and strengthen the association of the Treplev-Arkadina and Hamlet-Gertrude relationships, an association which has already formed in our minds. We are thus reminded of *Hamlet*, just before the play begins, by the interplay between Treplev and his mother. Arkadina quotes directly from Gertrude in the closet scene and Treplev answers with a weakened paraphrase of Hamlet's remarks about his mother's adultery in the same scene, which further illustrates his conscious identification with Shakespeare's hero.

ARKADINA:

(*reciting Hamlet*) My son! Thou turn'st my eye into my very soul.

And there I see such black and grained spots as will not leave their tinct.

TREPLEV:

(*from Hamlet*) And why did you give yourself to vice and sought love in the abyss of vice. (*I dlja chego z ty poddalas' poroku, ljubvi iskala v bezdne prestuplen'ja.*)⁶

Reminiscent of "The Murder of Gonzago" is Arkadina's assertion, after Treplev's play has been abruptly terminated, that Treplev regards it only as a joke, calling to mind Hamlet's answer to Claudius' query as to whether offense is meant in the "play-within-the-play": "No, no! They do but jest, poison in jest, no offence i'th'world."⁷ Actually, both plays have, of course, a very serious intent. In objective function the two plays-within-the-play have very little relationship to each other: "The Murder of Gonzago" is the "mousetrap" by which Hamlet desires to entrap Claudius, while Treplev's play represents his attempt to create a new form of art. But perhaps both plays-within-the-play have satirical elements also. It has been suggested that the "Murder" represents Shakespeare's burlesque of the style of melodramatic acting prevalent in his days.⁸ It is clear that Chekhov's play-within-the-play is a parody, a

parody on the aimlessness of the "decadent" drama of Chekhov's days. Furthermore, both plays are used as devices to project discussion concerned with the proper role of art: in *Hamlet* through Hamlet's admonition to the players ("Suit your action to your words. . . ." III, 2); in the *Seagull* in Nina's conversation with Treplev,⁹ as well as in Dorn's remark to Treplev about Treplev's failure to express an important idea in his "play" (Act I).¹⁰ Both plays end abruptly and abortively. "The Murder of Gonzago" ends because the "mousetrap," which had been its goal, has been sprung and Claudius has become aware of the parallel between the murder of Gonzago and that of Hamlet's father. The "play" ends with the success which Hamlet had desired. Treplev's play, however, as an artistic experiment, ends in failure. Both plays end abruptly because of the offense they give to some of the spectators and because of the passions they arouse. The dismal ending of Treplev's play is perhaps symbolic of Treplev's inability to cope with a life which is filled with as many meaningless and empty formulae as is his play. The obvious echoes of the Hamlet "play-within-a-play" only help in pointing to Treplev's impotence, which becomes increasingly clear during the course of the play.

At the beginning of Act II we find the ironic identification of Treplev and Hamlet further strengthened by Masha's elevated vision of Treplev: "When he reads, his eyes burn, his face turns pale; he has a beautiful, sad voice." Here Masha, whom we have already learned not to take seriously, evokes a pointed image of Hamlet, the "man of pale cast." But lest we forget the satirical element in this association, there is Sorin, acting as a chorus and snoring loudly, having fallen asleep at Masha's words. The very same scene brings to mind a further identification of Nina with Ophelia in Nina's refusal to support the man who loves her and in her attack on Treplev's play, which she calls "uninteresting" in the presence of Arkadina. It is now, after the collapse of his "play" that Treplev needs Nina more than ever and just at this crucial point she turns from him and refuses him the solace of love and of the moral support he craves, just as Ophelia fails to give Hamlet the support he needs after the cellarge scene.

During the crucial scene in which the dejected Treplev presents Nina with the gull he has shot and expresses his weariness of life, there enters the other protagonist, Trigorin, with whom the image of the unhappy bird is also forever connected. Here the use of the Hamlet theme is rather complex. As Trigorin, whom Treplev has learned to hate and fear as a rival in love as well as art (and the two concepts are here symbolically one), enters reading a book, Treplev refers to him as walking like Hamlet and bitterly quotes Hamlet's "Words, words, words." To fathom the significance of this passage, we must again turn to *Hamlet* (II, 2). The lines quoted by Treplev occur after Polonius has plotted with

the King and Queen to "loose" Ophelia on Hamlet in order to determine the cause of his distemper. J. Dover Wilson¹¹ holds that Hamlet has overheard this plot and thus he accuses Polonius of being a "fishmonger" (in Elizabethan terms: a procurer) and of prostituting Ophelia to entrap him. This interchange is followed by Hamlet's expression of his weariness of life.¹² Apparently Treplev is reminded of the Hamlet-Polonius scene as Trigorin enters. He is also in despair over his disintegrating relationship to Nina, which he blames on Trigorin (with only partial justification). His despair is accentuated by his realization that his play has been an artistic failure. While he would like openly to taunt Trigorin, as Hamlet had taunted Polonius, he—unlike Hamlet—satisfies himself with a sneer and walks away, thus avoiding decisive action.

After Treplev's first suicide attempt, of which we hear in Act III, Trigorin tells us that Treplev plans to challenge him to a duel. Here the double meaning of the Treplev-Hamlet identification becomes more pronounced, since Treplev of course never challenges his opponent. While Hamlet fulfills the challenge of his life by killing Claudius, Treplev only meekly suggests a duel and is ready to forgive and forget at his mother's behest.

The scene which bears the closest single reference to *Hamlet* and which sheds further light on Chekhov's skillful manipulation of the Hamlet theme, is the bandaging scene in the third act, presented in a manner which must remind us of the closet scene (III, 4), in which Hamlet, in passionate tones, accuses his mother of adultery. We are the more let down when Treplev gives further illustration of his immature emotions. He feels sorry for himself and asks from his mother the sympathy which he no longer can get from Nina. He is incapable of a mature relationship with his mother, or with anyone else, just as he is incapable of producing real works of art. And when he chides his mother over her affair with Trigorin, his is a childish complaint. His squabble with his mother never attains the tragic; it remains on the level of the petty: a silly, name-calling duel, soon patched up by a sentimental reconciliation and an acceptance by Treplev of Arkadina's request to be reconciled with Trigorin. When the latter appears, again in the Hamletian pose of reading a book as he walks on the stage, Treplev flees, embarrassed and afraid of meeting his rival. Hamlet, in the end of the closet scene, breaks down Gertrude's defenses and forces her to speak the very words which Arkadina quotes to Treplev before the beginning of his play. Hamlet, unlike Treplev, never weakens in his tirade against Gertrude. And when, after the ghost's disappearance, he speaks kind words to his mother ("I must be cruel only to be kind"), these are the result of his conviction that his argument has been at least partially successful. Hamlet thus can afford to be tender from a mature conviction

of the righteousness of his cause. Treplev, however, can be tender only when he assumes the position of a child.

It is the events in Act IV which point to the true significance of the Hamlet theme in the *Seagull*. The complex relationship of the characters of the *Seagull* with their Hamletian counterparts has been built up in the minds of the audience. While Treplev continues to think of himself as a Hamlet, charged with the task of righting the wrongs in the state of literature, the audience has become increasingly aware of the contradictions and irony of this identification. The Nina-Ophelia association is also strongly suggested by now, though with none of the ironic overtones with which Chekhov tempers the Treplev-Hamlet self-identification.

During the final dialogue between Treplev and Nina the intent of Chekhov's use of the *Hamlet* motif becomes more than clear. For, in the final interview between Treplev and Nina, which brings us to what we might term a Chekhovian peripetia, we are forcibly made to realize that the two protagonists are not what they had pictured themselves to be. Nina, far from being an unhappy Ophelia, who is destroyed as the unhappy bird was destroyed, is actually the only one in the play who has had the strength to realize her convictions and to achieve the aim for which Treplev has suffered: true art. She has outgrown her youthful romanticism and conquered the sufferings of her earlier unsuccessful attempts to act; and while Treplev has only talked, she has finally met reality. "Know how to bear your cross and have faith," she tells Treplev, "I have faith and I no longer hurt. And when I think of my profession, I am not afraid of life." How very unlike Ophelia and the seagull symbol as Nina had applied it to herself! "I am a seagull," she keeps repeating to Treplev in the state of semi-hysteria into which she has been brought by walking back into past memories. But no, she interrupts herself, "that is not so" (*ne to*). And Treplev suddenly realizes that the table of symbols has been turned: Nina is neither a seagull nor an Ophelia. And it comes to him with terrifying force that he is not a Hamlet, but that a part of the seagull symbol actually applies to him.

Thus what we have is a Hamlet in the wrong key. Treplev does not, as does Hamlet, end in grandeur; instead, he ends "not with a bang, but a whimper," as a total failure, walking quietly out of life, his last remarks being concern lest his mother be irritated by Nina's visit. The hero is an artist who failed, instead of a defender of kingdoms. For Treplev does what Chekhov, in his early essay, had asserted that the Prince of Denmark never did: he whines; he is a coward who poses as the bearer of Hamlet's indecision to hide from himself his inability to act in the creation of the new art which he craves.

The finale in *Hamlet*, beginning with the graveyard scene, is death. So is Treplev's finale. But what difference in deaths. There is no *catharsis* in Treplev's death as there is in Hamlet's. Hamlet, in the end, has abandoned his suicidal ideas. His antic disposition and indecision are gone and he has his mind on revenge. He is noble, though he has a weak strain, while Treplev is weak, though we cannot deny him a noble strain.

It is vital, says J. D. Wilson,¹³ to Shakespeare's purpose that we maintain our sympathy with Hamlet right to the end. "Rob us of our respect for the hero and *Hamlet* ceases to be a tragedy." Yet, this is essentially what Chekhov has done with his hero. We cannot respect this self-styled Hamlet, though we cannot deny him our sympathy. While *Hamlet* is a tragedy about genius, perhaps we might call Treplev's, in so far as it is a tragedy, a tragedy about mediocrity, a mediocrity which is sharpened in our minds by the constant allusions to *Hamlet*.

Thus, the use of the *Hamlet* theme in the *Seagull* has fulfilled a dual purpose. It has acted as an ironic commentary on Treplev's pretensions. By suggesting to us somewhat parallel situations and thus playing with our expectations, it has also been used by Chekhov as a device for heightening the tension, as we are led, in Act IV, into a variant of the Aristotelian peripetia.

Notes

1. This review, signed "Man Without Spleen," appeared in the journal *Moskva*, No. 3, 1882, and referred to the *Hamlet* performance of January 11, 1882. Cf. A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij i pisem* (Moscow, 1944-51), I, 489-91, 596-70, hereafter referred to as PS.
2. PS, I, 490.
3. Cf. Letters No. 218, 322 (1887), PS, XIII.
4. David Magarshak (*Chekhov the Dramatist* [London, 1952], pp. 173, 192, 194-95, 198-99) discusses briefly the mother fixation parallel and has suggested some aspects of Chekhov's variations on this theme. Magarshak's analysis of parallels between the *Seagull* and *Hamlet*, however, is limited to the mother fixation problem and is not concerned with the many other aspects of the relationship of Chekhov's play to *Hamlet*.
5. Cf. *Hamlet*, IV, 7: after Gertrude informs Laertes of Ophelia's drowning—Laertes: "Too much water hast thou, poor Ophelia."
6. Magarshak (*op. cit.*, p. 199) incorrectly quotes Hamlet's rejoinder to Gertrude:

HAMLET:

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,

Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty.

Here Chekhov uses verbatim the *Hamlet* translation of N. A. Polevoj (*Gamlet, princ datskij*). This translation is available in the Folger Library in an edition of 1876 (*Shkol'nyj Shekspir*, P. N. Polevoj, ed. [SPB, 1876]). It is interesting to note that among all the *Hamlet* translations which existed in Chekhov's time and which are available in this country, Polevoj's is the only one which deliberately softens Hamlet's reply to Gertrude. All other translations use a rather accurate translation of Hamlet's angry words hurled at his mother. (Cf. *Gamlet, tragedija v pjati dejstvijax*, M. V., transl. [SPB, 1828]; *Gamlet*, A. Kronenberg, transl., 2nd ed. [Moscow, 1861]; *Gamlet, princ datskij*, M. Zaguljajev, transl. [SPB, 1861]; *Gamlet*, A. L. Sokolovskij, transl. [SPB, 1883]; *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij V. Shekspira*, P. A. Kanshin, transl. [SPB, 1893], vol. 1.) Whether Chekhov was aware of the softening of the lines in the translation he used and deliberately chose them to hint at the difference between Treplev and Hamlet, or whether he was acquainted only with Polevoj's translation, is unfortunately not clear.

7. *Hamlet*, III, 3.

8. Cf. J. Dover Wilson, *What Happened in Hamlet* (New York, 1935), p. 301.

9.

NINA:

Your play is hard to act. There are no live characters in it.

TREPLEV:

Live characters! One must depict life not as it is in reality and not as it ought to be, but as it presents itself to us in dreams.

(Act I)

10. Both Nina's and Dorn's criticisms represent Chekhov's views. Cf.: "Remember that the writers whom we consider immortal or even just good, possess one very important common characteristic: they get somewhere and call upon us to go with them. We feel not only with our reason but with the whole of our being that they have an aim. . . . The best of them are realists and depict life as it is, but because every line they write is permeated . . . with the consciousness of a goal . . . one feels not only life as it is in reality, but as it should be and that is what delights you." (Letter to Suvorin, No. 1186, November 25, 1892, PS, XV, 446.)
11. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 106.