

Chekhov as a Founder of the Comedy of a New Type

Vera Zubarev
University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, **Purdue University Press** selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Zubarev, Vera. "Chekhov as a Founder of the Comedy of a New Type." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.1 (2011): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1716>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1716)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 13 Issue 1 (March 2011) Article 11
Vera Zubarev, "Chekhov as a Founder of the Comedy of a New Type"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss1/11>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.1 (2011)
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss1/>>

Abstract: In her article "Chekhov as a Founder of the Comedy of a New Type" Vera Zubarev discusses Chekhov's innovations within the framework of general systems thinking and the predispositioning theory. To this end, the notion of the positional style is used as a subject of systems analysis. Zubarev postulates that Chekhov's innovative style signified a new era of thinking now known as systems thinking. The main principles of the style correspond to those offered by the positional style in chess speedily developed at the time Chekhov worked on his stories and plays. Chekhov's reconstruction of the comedic genre had nothing to do with a simple recombination of the known dramatic genres. It was rather a new approach to the notion of the dramatic from the point of view of the characters' potentials and predisposition. Chekhov's comedy of a new type appeared as a result of his development of the positional style that posed questions regarding the degree of strength and richness of the system formed by the characters. Although Chekhov did not conceptualize his style, he made some considerable analytical remarks which suggest his innovative thing.

Vera ZUBAREV

Chekhov as a Founder of the Comedy of a New Type

It always remains a mystery how the same ideas and movements occur in sync in different fields, but the fact is, they do appear simultaneously often, although not always one may recognize instantly the similarity behind occurring paradigms. An example of such synchronicity is the fact that Chekhov's breakthrough in the field of the comedic genre coincided with another breakthrough — one in the field of chess, which also took place in the end of the nineteenth century at the time when Chekhov worked on his comedy of a new type. Chekhov's innovative style was larger than one may assume. It signified a new era of thinking, creating a solid background for the systems approach in days to come. Chekhov himself seemed to be a proponent of what is known today as systems thinking. In his letter to Suvorin (3 November 1888) he clearly stated that "with the help of the scientific method" one must "discover the common element" in "all the best works of art" and that finding "this universal something is necessary" (*Pisma* 3 54). In other words, he outlines the importance of finding isomorphism while approaching diversity. The literary style he introduced had "the common element" with that proposed in chess by Wilhelm Steinitz, a chess writer, theoretician, and the first undisputed world chess champion 1886-1894. Later the style became a subject for new theories in various fields, including general systems thinking, and specifically, Aron Katsenelinboigen's predispositioning theory (on systems theory with regard to the study of literature and culture, see, e.g., Schmidt; Tötösy de Zepetnek).

Chekhov made an essential reconstruction of the comedic genre, not a simple recombination of known dramatic genres as critics often argue, sometimes defining his plays as tragicomedies (see, e.g., Fadeeva), satirical drama (see, e.g., Senelick), melodrama (see, e.g., Kirk), drama (see, e.g., Lucas), and sometimes "a burlesque, a travesty in its self-referential game" (Senderovich 35). Chekhov's comedy was innovative for the reasons of first, he elaborated the positional style of writing; second, he switched the focus in comedy from the external features (laughter, survival, and chance) to the internal (the characters' potentials), and third, he introduced a quasi-strong potential of characters, thus, highlighting the question of the integration of a strong part and a weak whole. The segmental strength of characters' potentials forms the core of his quasi-drama. Features of this new type of comedy exhibit strong and isolated characteristics which may mislead into thinking that their potential is relatively strong. It would therefore be a mistake to attempt comprehending Chekhov's innovations within the traditional — Aristotelian — framework of the genre of drama. The Aristotelian school has never inquired into the character's inner structure. Its approach has been solely based on behaviorism (on this, see Ulea [Zubarev] 12). In the Aristotelian concept, the plot reveals the character through action, focusing on behavior rather than potential and predisposition. Perhaps such an approach was sufficient for traditional comedies or tragedies, but it clarifies nothing regarding contemporary tendencies. And it is not a matter of new developments of the dramatic genre but a matter of underdevelopment of the existing theoretical approach. It is certainly not writers, but theoreticians who overlooked the role of the characters' potential in the formation of the drama.

The rise of Chekhov's comedy had coincided in time with the appearance of the positional style in the game of chess. It is precisely at that time that the chess world was shaken by a new way of playing chess. At first, it was ridiculed and criticized because of its "inert" and "cowardly" nature which deprived the game of sparkling attacks and spectacular collisions inherent in the prevailing combinational style. The mainstream style that excited the viewers consisted of offensives, crafty combinations and a constant preparedness of the players to pounce upon the opponent's king, wiping out all obstacles in their way and stopping at nothing. In his book on aesthetics, Vladimir Volkenstein compares the combinational style in chess to the level of drama, with sharp collisions, peripeteia, and adventures (Volkenstein 42-47). On the contrary, the positional style is described as something boring, dull, and inert. Chess masters raised their eyebrows at the slowly developing positional moves on the chess board. And so did Chekhov's critics who didn't know how to appreciate his leisurely developing narrative with no sparkling conflicts (about critics' reactions to Chekhov's works see Chudakov, *Poetika Chekhova*). His innovations were well received by neither directors nor theatergoers. The nineteenth-century critic, N.A. Dobroliubov, made valuable suggestions for writers of how to keep the audience interested: "to make a deep, all-consuming long-term impression on your reader ... you should intro-

duce more action, more life, dramatic effects — use the lyrical as little as possible and nothing, absolutely nothing oratorical!" (<http://az.lib.ru/d/dobroljubow_n_a/text_0460.shtml>). Such an understanding of good literature was contrary to what Chekhov was doing.

What were the basic techniques of the positional style? In chess, the focus was on the step-by-step improvements of the position directed toward small advantages. The accumulation of those advantages was important for growing a future combination within the position; it was also a mighty antidote against the competitor's combinations and a great chance to survive unexpected outcomes. A German World Chess Champion for 27 years, mathematician, and philosopher, Emanuel Lasker, contrasted the positional "plan" with the combinational "idea," saying that "the idea has a point which surprises, which changes at one blow the state of affairs; the plan has breadth and depth which are imposing and which, by slow, methodical building, give structure to the position" (167).

The distinctive features of Chekhov's narrative such as "sluggishly developing" plot-lines, "excessive," "unnecessary" "personages, episodes and details," "not connected with the main clashes" corresponded with those inherent in the positional style in chess: "The author's knotted several intrigues together, and the spectator is looking forward to seeing the denouement, but, instead, Chekhov's characters begin to play lotto! ... The spectator is eager to know what is going to happen, but they still keep playing. After finishing the game, they leave to another room to drink tea" (*The Seagull*, Aleksandrovsky qtd. in *Sochineniia* 13 377). Unlike the plot-based combinational style of writing, whose main focus is on intrigues and clashes, the positional style in literature is characterized by the presence of digressions, descriptions, details, symbolism, and characters which do not link directly to the plot, but are mainly intended to create a predisposition. The plot usually plays an ancillary role in the positional work, and it rather resembles the positional plan than the combinational idea. Some of Chekhov's defenders, while admitting the lack of action in his plays, tried to justify his style by including his works in a character-based category: "Chekhov wanted to write a play of *characters*, not of *action*, and no one has the right to reproach him for that" (*The Seagull*, Gnedich qtd. in *Sochineniia* 13 382). However, Chekhov's plays did not match that category either, for his characters did not develop and there was no inner dynamics in them as it was typical for Tolstoy's or Dostoevsky's characters. Naturally, Chekhov paid a high price for being an outsider in the world craving for entertainments. All this was true for Steinitz as Lasker suggested: "The world did not comprehend how much Steinitz had given it; even chess players did not comprehend it. And yet his thought was revolutionary" (189).

The positional style was invented as an antidote for uncertainty; it was focused on the improvements of the current position in the face of the unknown future. Indeterministic by nature, the artistic system deals with uncertainty on a daily basis. The artist has no certainty regarding where his Muse would lead him, as it happened with Tolstoy who wanted to write a novel about Decembrists, but ended up with *War and Piece*. The two basic styles in chess correspond to the two basic types of literature. The combinational style is a foundation of mainstream literature that tends to lead its reader from the artistic uncertainty to the artistic certainty. On the contrary, the positional style is directed toward the advanced stage of the artistic uncertainty that is characterized by polysemanticism of extensive details, descriptions, digressions, open endings, and the like (Katsenelinboigen defined this stage in systems development as an advanced predisposition). Readers may speculate forever regarding the meaning of the seagull in Chekhov's play, but they will tell unambiguously what the meaning of the speckled band from Conan Doyle's story is.

Not only had Chekhov elaborated the positional style of his own writing, but he also introduced the idea of the two styles in *The Seagull* by depicting a belletrist, Trigorin, and a young writer, Treplev. Irina Rodnianskaia distinguishes between a belletrist and a serious writer in terms which, as she agreed, correspond to the idea of positional and combinational style of writing. A work of a belletrist is a well-designed literary product with details "exact and computed" (387), which are intended to produce a premeditated clash (combination), using "programming" as its main method (Katsenelinboigen 27). Such is Trigorin whose skillful writing is conditioned by the reader's demand. As Treplev complains, "Now Trigorin has a technique, it's easy for him" (*Four Plays* 85). True, Trigorin's devices are masterful, but it is not so much his talent just the fact that he is an artisan, not the artist: the reader dictates to him the intent and he skillfully crafts it. No wonder his success is accompanied by the sense of bitterness and the lack of freedom. On the contrary, "the artist's intent comes from his strivings to comprehend his own initial ideas" (Rodnianskaia 1 402). Full of polisemantic symbolism,

Treplev's play exhibits its positional qualities which can be hardly exhausted by one single interpretation. Critics often compare Treplev's play to that of Hamlet, but the difference is that Hamlet's play belongs to the applied art: this is a combinational way of getting confession from the "villains." Hamlet's task is not even close to Treplev's aesthetic goals which he formulates as a creation of "new forms." Arkadina, of course, sees it otherwise: in her mind the play has "revenge" as its subtext. But what to expect from one who belongs to the "art-on-demand" world? People of her circle are incapable of understanding reasons other than pragmatic. A sensitive spectator like Dorn can instantly feel and appreciate Treplev's sincere attempt to implement his artistic manifesto. Unfortunately the quasi-strong potential of Treplev's character doesn't allow him to withstand pressure of the artisans' world and so he fails.

The positional style in literature and chess did not appear out of nowhere. Both Chekhov and Steinitz had their talented predecessors. But they systematically developed the tendencies which existed before them. Gary Saul Morson praised the positional style of Tolstoy's writings in which "the unnecessary is necessary, the radically insignificant is radically significant" (*Hidden in Plain View* 147). The same can be said about works of Dostoyevsky and Gogol. However, Chekhov moved away from Gogol's coloring, Dostoyevsky's passions and Tolstoy's self-consciousness. He made the world of his characters unremarkable, mediocre, lacking events, and, therefore, expressly positional: "You can't immerse in his story as you plunge into Tolstoy's 'stream of life' that carries you away in no time and before you notice 'the current' pushes you back. He [Chekhov], on the contrary, requires from the reader well-trained attention, skills and qualification, not self-forgetfulness" (Rodnianskaia 1 443). True, such literature is not for entertainment, and the meaning of the positional style belongs to philosophical questions: the answer to it cannot be done from the point of view of a commoner who is convinced that the outcome determines everything, thus, missing the fact that life is an endless process, and a success today may turn into Pyrrhic victory tomorrow. Great writers understand that; therefore, their works are focused on the characters' predisposition rather than plot. Just as King Pyrrhus, Nina Zarechnaia forces her way through, dreaming of becoming someone famous. She wants to perform on a big stage, and live with Trigorin, "the famous writer." She succeeds in the beginning, her dreams do come true, although only half-way: she goes to Moscow, she gets an opportunity to perform on a small stage in Moscow area and Trigorin leaves Arkadina for her. Each step leads her to a victory, but in the end she loses everything at once. She returns to the estate for a moment, completely alone, having no friends, no supporters. No one cares about her, and, most importantly, she does not care about anyone either. Would Nina be able to reconsider her behavior in the same way? Judging by her predisposition, it is unlikely, but, still, the answer is in the eyes of the interpreter since the outcome is a point of departure, not the point of destination. In any case, one who focuses on combinations loses. The empty feeling often seizes the reader after the suspense is over.

In chess, the loss is even greater. The first world championship in the history of chess had become one of the most dramatic events of the nineteenth century. Holding its breath, watched the audience the match between the genius of the combinational game, Johannes Hermann Zukertort, a "Dumas père" of combinations and Wilhelm Steinitz, a mediocre combinational player. The match was like *A Dreary Story* versus *Three Musketeers*. Zukertort proved to be brilliant, daring, and aggressive. He "relied on combinations, and in that field he was a discoverer, a creative genius ... His opponent, on the contrary, seemed to be nothing but mediocre, and yet — though Zuckertort had lost none of his faculty, he was unable to make use of it, the positions yielding no response to his passionate search for combinations. Steinitz seemed to have the mysterious capacity for divining combinations long before they were realizable on the board, to encourage combinations favorable to himself and to forestall those which were unfavorable. Thus Zukertort, the great discoverer, searched in vain, whereas Steinitz, rather a poor hand at combinations, was able to foresee them" (Lasker 190-91). The result was stunning: Zukertort lost with a great gap and after that his career was over. Steinitz demonstrated that for the positional player, Zukertort's sophisticated combinations were rather trivial. In the same way, the suspense in literature is perceived as a mere triviality by the positional writer and reader. Zukertort tried to comprehend how Steinitz was able to win by such a seemingly ineffective method, but he was unable to solve the riddle. He became seriously ill, and soon he died a comparatively young man without solving the puzzle. Perhaps, the same shock would have experienced Chekhov's rival, Ignatij Potapenko, one of the most fruitful Russian writers and dramatists, whose popularity in

1890s was even higher than that of Tolstoy. Had he known about his posthumous oblivion and Chekhov's everlasting success he would have probably joined Zukertort in grief.

In any case, had Chekhov's innovations been limited to the positional style it would have probably made his life easier. However, he moved even farther, making some additional improvements and claiming that his works were comedies. This eventually turned critics and viewers against him. Subtitled as comedy, *The Seagull* (1895) was an ignominious failure. Its premier took place in the Alexandrinsky theater on 17 October 1896. The next play, *Uncle Vanya* (1899), was a revised version of a comedy, *The Wood Demon* (1899). Chekhov did not define the genre of *Uncle Vanya*; instead, he simply wrote "scenes from the country life." The subtitle suggested the lowering of the dramatic tone of the play, but that gentle hint on comedy has been often overlooked. In 1901 he wrote another comedy, *Three Sisters*, claiming that it was vaudeville: "It turned out to be not drama, but comedy, sometimes even farce, and I am afraid that you will 'get it for that' from Vladimir Ivanovich," he wrote in a letter to Maria Alekseeva in 1903 (*Pisma* 11 248). It remains unclear as to when and how the subtitle "drama" appeared on the front page of the manuscript. The edited version prepared by Chekhov for publication in December 1900 had been hidden in Nemirovich-Danchenko's archives for many years. It was found only in 1954, about which an article was published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (see Ulea [Zubarev] 115-16). The battle had been lost, but Chekhov did not give up. Working on his fourth major comedy, *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), he stated to Nemirovich-Danchenko that he was working on "comedy and in some places even farce," and this subtitle remained. "Oh, no, for the simple person it's a tragedy," Stanislavsky wrote to him. And then he added: "One who doesn't get it is a fool. This is my sincere conviction" (Chekhov qtd. in Stanislavsky, *Sobranie* 265-66). Stanislavsky was right: it was difficult to "get it" since Chekhov's style required a new theoretical explanation. The existed empirical approach equating the comic with the laughable was not enough to explain his pioneering ideas. Unfortunately, this approach still prevails in literary criticism. Although critics admit that comic theory "has received relatively little critical attention, far less than theories about more serious subjects" (Simon 12-13) and it "has been misdefined for two millennia" (Grawe 9) and thus the Aristotelian paradigm continues to be favored.

The empirical approach increases the number of criteria and features, but it cannot present one with a holistic view. Werner Heisenberg recollected that Einstein "explained that what can be observed is really determined by the theory. He said, you cannot first know what can be observed, but you must first know a theory, or produce a theory, and then you can define what can be observed" (Heisenberg <<http://www.aip.org/history/heisenberg/voice1.htm>>). Likewise, Russel L. Ackoff, while explaining the core of the systems thinking, insisted that in systems thinking one should, first, identify the "containing whole" and only then see how all the properties could be explained "within the containing whole" (16). Unlike Steinitz, Chekhov did not conceptualize his style, but he made some considerable analytical remarks regarding the way his characters should be approached. In a letter to Suvorin (December 30, 1888), he performed a painstaking analysis of the characters of *Ivanov*, approaching them from the point of view of their segmental strength. He wrote: "This is how I understand my characters. Ivanov is a gentleman, a University man, and not remarkable in any way. He is excitable, hotheaded, easily carried away, honest and straightforward like most people of his class. He has lived on his estate and served on the Zemstvo" (Chekhov, *Letters* 111). As one can see, Chekhov starts his analysis with the character's strong features, but then he switches to the weak whole, scrupulously discussing all the characteristics, which affect its strength:

Disappointment, apathy, nervous limpness and exhaustion are the inevitable consequence of extreme excitability, and such excitability is extremely characteristic of our young people. Take literature. Take the present time ... Socialism is one of the forms of this excitement. But where is socialism? You see it in Tihomirov's letter to the Tsar. The socialists are married and are criticizing the Zemstvo. Where is Liberalism? Mihailovsky himself says that all the labels have been mixed up now. And what are all the Russian enthusiasms worth? The war has wearied us, Bulgaria has wearied us till we can only be ironical about it. Zucchi has wearied us and so has the comic opera. Exhaustion (Dr. Bertensen will confirm this) finds expression not only in complaining or the sensation of boredom. The life of an over-tired man cannot be represented like this:

~~~~~

It is very unequal. Over-tired people never lose the capacity for becoming extremely excited, but cannot keep it up for long, and each excitement is followed by still greater apathy ... Graphically, it could be represented like this:

```
~~~~~
 \ ~~~~~
 \ \ ~~~~~
 \ \ \ ~~~~~
 \ \ \
 \ \
 \
```

The fall, as you see, is not continuous but broken. Sasha declares her love and Ivanov cries out in ecstasy, "A new life!" — and next morning he believes in this new life as little as he does in spooks (the monologue in Act III.); his wife insults him, and, fearfully worked up and beside himself with anger, he flings a cruel insult at her. He is called a scoundrel. This is either fatal to his tottering brain, or stimulates him to a fresh paroxysm and he pronounces sentence on himself. (Chekhov, *Letters* 114-15)

Chekhov points out Ivanov's quasi-strong nature which hampers its progress. In the same way, he talks about his next character, Dr. Lvov:

Not to tire you out altogether I pass now to Dr. Lvov. He is the type of an honest, straightforward, hotheaded, but narrow and uncompromising man. Clever people say of such men: "He is stupid but his heart is in the right place." Anything like width of outlook or unreflecting feeling is foreign to Lvov. He is the embodiment of a programme, a walking tendency. He looks through a narrow frame at every person and event, he judges everything according to preconceived notions. Those who shout, "Make way for honest labour!" are an object of worship to him; those who do not shout it are scoundrels and exploiters. There is no middle. He has been brought up on Mihailov's [Translator's Note: The author of second-rate works inculcating civic virtue with a revolutionary bias] novels; at the theatre he has seen on the stage "new men," i.e., the exploiters and sons of our age, painted by the modern playwrights. He has stored it all up, and so much so, that when he reads "Rudin" he is sure to be asking himself, "Is Rudin a scoundrel or not?" Literature and the stage have so educated him that he approaches every character in real life and in fiction with this question... It is not enough for him that all men are sinners. He wants saints and villains! He was prejudiced before he came to the district. He at once classed all the rich peasants as exploiters, and Ivanov, whom he could not understand, as a scoundrel. Why, the man has a sick wife and he goes to see a rich lady neighbour — of course he is a scoundrel! It is obvious that he is killing his wife in order to marry an heiress. Lvov is honest and straightforward, and he blurts out the truth without sparing himself. If necessary, he will throw a bomb at a carriage, give a school inspector a blow in the face, or call a man a scoundrel. He will not stop at anything. He never feels remorse — it is his mission as "an honest worker" to fight "the powers of darkness"! Such people are useful, and are for the most part attractive. To caricature them, even in the interests of the play, is unfair and, indeed, unnecessary. True, a caricature is more striking, and therefore easier to understand, but it is better to put your colour on too faint than too strong. (Chekhov, *Letters* 116-17)

Chekhov understood that for some, such types would be attractive simply because their own perception is "segmental." Still, he was against caricature because it kills the dialectical interaction between the part and the whole by making the potential homogenous. Chekhov's goal, however, was to show that his character was composed from heterogeneous characteristics, which made its potential quasi-strong, not ridiculously weak. The degree of strength of the character's potential is measured by the degree of its influence on its own environment. The influence on the reader/spectator should not be taken into account. The reader's feelings and reactions whether it's laughter or tears or indifference do not determine the type of the character's potential and, accordingly, the type of the dramatic genre. Human reactions should be a part of a psychological research, not literary theory. The writer has no way of knowing how his reader would react to a character's trials. While forming his characters' potentials, he, therefore, focuses on the character's interaction with its *environment* to reveal better its potential. It is not only the character's life, but his death as well that suggests the degree of its influential strength. Deaths of Romeo and Juliet had a tremendous impact on their society that decided to reconcile. On the contrary, Treplev's death in *The Seagull* would hardly change the lifestyle of his friends and relatives. Not once critics reproached Chekhov for the inclusion of the "unnecessary" scenes in his plays. To this belongs the scene of the quarrel between Arkadina and Treplev in the third act.

Critics considered it redundant and suggested to remove it along with the first suicide attempt. The attempt, however, revealed how little his life meant to his closest circle. Neither his mother, nor his beloved were willing to reconsider their attitude. Even seeing the wound so closely didn't stop Arkadina from making humiliating remarks. It was no better with Nina who continued flirting with his Trigorin. This only suggests that the aftermath of Trepev's suicide would not be grim. In fact, the suicide is followed by Dorn's remark that a small bottle of ether has exploded and most likely, Treplev will evaporate from the memory the same way. Every Chekhovian character should be approached using the technique generously offered by Chekhov in his letter to Suvorin. Only such a unity of analysis and synthesis may shed light on the quasi-dramatic nature of Chekhovian intelligentsia that has love for philosophizing and often makes fiery speeches against slavery, discrimination, wars, and the like, but in actuality, it just repeats some popular slogans. The question of what one should primarily take into account in analyzing such characters has been debated for decades; some critics say that Chekhovian characters must be judged by their actions; others insist that words are more important. Neither should be ignored, but both could be misleading since they are aspects of behaviorism that does not allow one to penetrate deeply into characters' motivations and psychology.

It is important to understand who is talking, not only what is being said, and who is acting, not only what kind of action is being performed. For that, one should refer to the character's potential. The study of the potential includes characters' decision making, values, ability to set goals, energy, willpower, and everything else that may not be revealed explicitly in the text. During her short secret visit of the estate, Nina in *The Seagull* proclaims that she is "a true actress now" (*Four Plays* 88) "Still, she had talent, didn't she?" Dorn asks Treplev who has difficulty answering with certainty. (*Four Plays* 80) Naturally, there is no "yes" or "no" answer to it; rather, it is the degree of talent that should be discussed, instead. Later Nina utters that now she understands that for the creator the most important thing is "not the glory," but "the strength to endure. The strength to gear your cross, to have faith" (*Four Plays* 88). This seems to be just another melodramatic act to Nina's taste, her "benefit performance" in front of her only spectator. It does not mean that she is insincere. She falls to the category of quickly ignited, histrionic characters which tend to enact something "grand and dramatic" (Morson, "Sonya's Wisdom" 69). Therefore it would be a simplification to treat her as a caricature. She is a quasi-dramatic heroine whose strong sides are not strong enough to change the weak whole. Another character, Dymov in the *The Grasshopper* does not say much about himself. He is modest and he does more than he says. His deeds, including his selfless sacrifice in the end, may make him a martyr in the eyes of a "simple reader." However, his last name that is derived from *dym* (smoke), suggests his quasi-strong potential.

The names of Chekhovian characters play roles similar to those of chessmen. The "established magnitude" of the unconditional valuations of the chess pieces "are: queen 9, rook 5, bishop 3, knight 3, and pawn 1" (Katsenelinboigen 54). The unconditional weight of chessmen was computed by Henry Taylor (1876). Without going into details, the analytical procedure computed "the number of safe checks ... that piece can make given the position of the black king" (Katsenelinboigen 54) and it was solely based on the rules of interaction between a piece and the opponent's king. Like chessmen, Chekhovian characters also interact with "the king" that is its Majesty Eternity: their names/last names convey their bearers' abilities to leave traces in society. Chessmen names are designed to bring one's immediate attention to their unconditional importance that differs from king to pawn. Analogously, Chekhovian names often give a first approximation about the "containing whole" — its magnitude in terms of unconditional valuations. If the containing whole is a smoke then everything else should be considered through the knowledge of it in order to avoid delusions regarding its strength. Characters' conditional value is conveyed through concrete episodes likewise the conditional value of chessmen is measured with regard to their position in game. The peculiarity of Chekhov's comedy is that he endowed his protagonists with relatively good conditional weights and low unconditional ones. In order to have a holistic view of the character one should compare the two weights.

For example, the gestalt of "smoke" in Dymov's last name is associated naturally with evaporation and vanishing. This must be taken into account while approaching Dymov's potential and predisposition. The external analysis would suggest that Dymov fell a victim of his predator-wife; the internal analysis would prove that he fell a victim of his own primitivism. First of all, his underestimation of the role of art as a necessary part of one's general education, affects negatively his psychological insight,



emotionality, imagination, fantasies, sensitivity to details and many other things important in the sphere of human relationships. It is his own narrow-mindedness that should be blamed for his failure, including the choice of the spouse he made. The lack of those same qualities affected Dymov's professional abilities, as well. While reading the story in Chekhov's pince-nez, one may come across some peculiar details of ironic nature. First of all, it concerns Dymov's passion for anatomization. As a pathologist he deals with the static analysis of a formerly dynamic system. He discloses the pathology *post factum* when it is too late for the patient, now deceased. This is correlated with Dymov's inability to comprehend the dynamic changes in his personal life whose pathological development is unclear only to him. Still, after everything is revealed under the scalpel of life he decides to pretend that nothing has happened, hoping that the decomposition of a dead "body" of his marriage will not go fast. Dymov dedicates his afternoons to anatomization; he is carried away by the process so much that he doesn't even notice when he cuts himself couple of times. This dangerous carelessness may cause him life as it happens with Turgenev's Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*, but fortunately and miraculously he remains unharmed. Ironically, Dymov is immune to the dead; ptomaine does not kill him. He dies from the living. His colleague by the name Korosteliiov, exclaims that "Compare him with all of us. He was a great man, an extraordinary man!" ("The Grasshopper" <<http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/grasshopper.htm>>). Well, perhaps he was, compared to the man whose last name was derived from *korostel'* (corncrake). Among such "corncrakes" Dymov was a Gulliver, indeed. By the same token, his dream of becoming a good general pathologist seems to be utopian: general pathology is based on systemic approaches to diseases and understanding of dynamic changes. Dymov's positive sides, such as willingness to self-sacrifice (perhaps, from hopelessness) and kindness, are "for the most part attractive" and may win one's favor, but, overall, they don't contribute to his general improvements.

The principle of integration of the part and the whole finds its further elaborations in Chekhov's bewildering plays in which a group of characters becomes the main protagonist. The introduction of a group poses a question of how to evaluate a group potential. In systems thinking, a group can be approached either as an aggregate or as a system: both are different representations of the whole. The difference is that if only objects of the group are considered then we talk about an aggregate. The introduction of relations between the objects forms a system. Such a differentiation is crucial in evaluating a group because it affects the result. For instance, if a group consists of objects of average potentials, the aggregate is considered to be of average potential. The analysis of relations may change one's estimation of the group. As an aggregate, a Chekhovian group may be treated as having average or above average potential, considering characters' intelligence, their education, experience, and the like. As a system, Chekhovian groups perform in a very poor way, eventually turning into a self-destructive unity. Therefore, the quasi-strong potential of the Chekhovian group is revealed when the aggregate is compared to the system. At this point, the aggregate's potential may be taken for a segmental strength of the weak system. The group in *Three Sisters* is relatively strong as an aggregate: it includes teachers, the military, doctors, all of whom are intelligent, educated people. As a system, it doesn't seem viable at all.

Like an army without a general, the Prozorov family is lost in space. The late Prozorov father all his life had led his domestic "army" through everyday obscurity to the goal clear only to himself. He developed his simple tactics and the family followed them for the rest of his life. Every day the "army" should have made a little step forward while reading, writing, and studying music and languages. The meaning of this everyday "movement" had never been opened to the "army," so after the general died the question "what for?" became suspended in midair. Eventually, the sisters set the goal in almost military fashion, exclaiming, "To Moscow!" As the general's off-springs they probably thought in terms of "seizure of territory." The question "what for?" still wasn't answered. They did not achieve their goal, and the question remains if they would be able to do it in the future. The answer leads directly to the potential of the group. The world in *Three Sisters* oscillates between two extremes — chaos and order. The former is represented by the civil life; the latter is linked to the symbol of uniform. The relations between the two are the following: those, who work for the government, are safe. The rest is on its own. "That which loses its form, destroys itself" a school teacher, Kulygin, concludes, and he is absolutely right (*Four Plays* 158). As soon as Baron Tuzenbach resigns his commission and takes off his uniform he gets killed on a duel. Significantly, the duel occurs in the government grove. On the

contrary, old nanny Anfisa, who was banished from the house by cruel Natasha, obtains her peace and happiness in... a high school's apartment that belongs to the government: "A big flat, I have a whole room and a little of my very own. All paid for by the state. I go to sleep at night and — o lord, Mother of God, there's no happier soul on earth!" (*Four Plays* 207) The sisters do not share her happiness. Dreaming of freedom, they watch the birds of passage, but the irony is that birds are not free, either. Their migration is subjugated to the laws of nature. They are nothing but "soldiers" of instinct. It is not a coincidence that one of the soldiers is given a bird name, Skvortsov (*skvoretz* [starling]). The army and the birds become relevant in the play: both are seemingly free to "fly," both leave the city in autumn, and both do that in accordance with their "orders." There is no escape — the extremes are destructive, but if chaos destroys one's body, the order destroys one's soul.

It is ironic that the positional style in literature does not enjoy the same popularity as it does in chess where it has become the mainstream style for masters. Quite the contrary, the positional fiction still struggles with the mainstream literature which forces out "difficult" works. Rodnianskaia outlines some basic features of "difficult literary works" of post-Chekhov period. Among them, a diversion from entertainment, an "increasing opacity of language," open ending, and plotlessness. Modern criticism on such works resembles the criticism on "unusual Chekhov's short stories" (Rodnianskaia *Konets* 442). "They said about *The Lady with the Lapdog*: 'That story is just an excerpt, it has no real outcome.' Well, they eventually got used to Chekhov, found a way to interpret what he had done, and even included him in the school program. The genre, however, did not become easier for the reader's perception" (*Konets* 443). Rodnianskaia calls the "difficult literature" "literature squared" (*Konets* 442), saying that to read such literature a "qualification is required."

In hindsight, Russian writers of post-Chekhov period introduce various aspects of the comedy of a new type in their works. Aleksandr Vampilov's open-ended plays (see *Izbornoe*) with quasi-dramatic characters echo Chekhov's "unresolved" stories and plays. Still, he prefers to keep a main protagonist instead of a group, and his plot is structured around a "catchy" element, which keeps the reader in suspense, as it is in *Utinaia okhota* (*Duck's Hunt*) and *Voron'ia roshcha* (*Raven Grove*). Liudmila Petrushevskia follows Chekhov's principle of a slowly developing, "positional" plot with a group of protagonists, from three in *Chinzano* (*Chinzano*) to more than seventeen in *Moskovskii khor* (*The Moscovian Choir*). The groups, however, are of a weak, not quasi-strong, potential. Aleksandr Volodin introduces Chekhovian tonality by focusing on the occurring rather than the eventful. Besides, he prefers a small group to a single protagonist. In *Starshaia sestra* (*Older Sister*) both sisters are the focus of the play and the main events are offstage. Nevertheless, his characters are of dramatic nature: they are capable of changes and they do evolve. The number of writers working in the direction of adopting aspects and working towards the "comedy of a new type" is growing and it is gratifying to see that Chekhov's innovative thinking and writing remains an important element of drama.

### Works Cited

- Ackoff, Russell L. *Creating the Corporate Future*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981.
- Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich. *Pisma* (Letters). *Polnoye sobranie sochinenij i pisem* (Complete Works and Letters). Moskva: Nauka, 1974-1980. 30 vols.
- Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich. "The Grasshopper." Trans. Constance Garnet. *The Wife and Other Stories*. By Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. <<http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/grasshopper.htm>>.
- Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich. *Sochineniia* (Works) *Polnoye sobranie sochinenij i pisem* (Complete Works and Letters). Moskva: Nauka, 1974-1980. 30 vols.
- Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich. *Letters of Anton Chekhov to His Family and Friends with Biographical Sketch*. Trans. Constance Garnett. New York: Macmillan, 1920.
- Chudakov, Aleksandr Pavlovich. *Poetika Chekhova* (Chekhov's Poetics). Moskva: Nauka, 1971.
- Dobroliubov, Nikolai Alexandrovich. "Nechto o didaktizme v povestiakh i romanakh" ("Something about Didactics in Novelettes and Novels"). *Dobroliubov Nikolai Alexandrovich* (2009): <[http://az.lib.ru/d/dobroljubow\\_n\\_a/text\\_0460.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/d/dobroljubow_n_a/text_0460.shtml)>.
- Ermilov, V.V. *AP. Chekhov*. Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1959.
- Fadeeva, N.I. *Novatorstvo dramaturgii A.P. Chekhova* (The Innovations of Chekhov's Dramaturgy). Tver: TGU P, 1991.
- Grawe, Paul. *Comedy in Space, Time, and the Imagination*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983.

- Heisenberg, Werner. *The Development of the Uncertainty Principle*. Audiotape (1974): <<http://www.aip.org/history/heisenberg/voice1.htm>>
- Katsenelinboigen, Aron. *The Concept of Indeterminism and Its Applications: Economics, Social Systems, Ethics, Artificial Intelligence, and Aesthetics*. Westport: Praeger, 1997.
- Kirk, Irina. *Anton Chekhov*. Boston: Twayne, 1981.
- Lasker, Emanuel. *Lasker's Manual of Chess*. Philadelphia: McKay, 1947.
- Lucas, Frank. *The Drama of Chekhov*. London: Cassell, 1963.
- Morson, Gary Saul. *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in War and Peace*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987.
- Morson, Gary Saul. "Sonya's Wisdom." *A Plot of Her Own: The Female Protagonist in Russian Literature*. Ed. Sona Stephan Hoisington. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1995. 58-71.
- Petrushevskaja, Liudmila. *Chinzano* (Chinzano). Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1989.
- Petrushevskaja, Liudmila. *Moskovskij khor* (The Moscovian Choir). Sankt Petersburg: Amfora, 2007.
- Rodnianskaia, Irina. *Dvizhenie literatury* (Literary Movements). Moscow: Iazyki slavianskikh kul'tur, 2006. 2 Vols.
- Senderovich, Savely. "The Cherry Orchard: Chekhov's Last Testament." *Russian Literature* 35 (1994): 223-42.
- Senelick, Laurence. *Anton Chekhov*. New York: Grove, 1985.
- Simon, Richard Keller. *The Labyrinth of the Comic: Theory and Practice from Fielding to Freud*. Tallahassee: U of Florida P, 1985.
- Stanislavsky, Konstantin. "A.P. Chekhov v khudozhestvenom teatre" (A.P. Chekhov in Artistic Theater). *A.P. Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov* (Chekhov in the Memoirs of His Contemporaries). Moscow: Khudozh. lit-ra, 1960. 371-419.
- Stanislavsky, Konstantin. *Sobranie sochinenii* (Collected works). 8 vols. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1954-1961. 8 Vols.
- Sukhikh, I.N. *Problemy poetiki A.P. Chekhova* (Problems of Chekhov's Poetics). Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Universiteta, 1987.
- Schmidt, Siegfried J. "Literary Studies from Hermeneutics to Media Culture Studies." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.1 (2010): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss1/1>>.
- Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Systemic Approaches to Literature: An Introduction with Selected Bibliographies." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 19.1-2 (1992): 21-93.
- Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "The New Humanities: The Intercultural, the Comparative, and the Interdisciplinary." *Globalization and the Futures of Comparative Literature*. Ed. Jan M. Ziolkowski and Alfred J. López. Thematic Section *The Global South* 1.2 (2007): 45-68. □
- Vampilov, Aleksandr. *Izbrannoe* (Selected Works). Moskva: Soglasie, 1999.
- Volkenstein, Vladimir. *Experience of Contemporary Aesthetics*. Moskva: Academia, 1931.
- Volodin, Aleksandr. *Starshaia sestra* (Older Sister). Sankt-Petersburg: Ingvar & Velimir, 2003.
- Ulea, V. [Zubarev, Vera]. *A Concept of Dramatic Genre and the Comedy of a New Type: Chess, Literature and Film*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002.

Author's profile: Vera Zubarev teaches Russian literature at the University of Pennsylvania. Her fields of interests in research include systems thinking, decision-making, genre theory, and, in particular the work of Chekhov. In addition to numerous articles, Zubarev's book publications include *A Concept of Dramatic Genre and the Comedy of a New Type: Chess, Literature, and Film* (2002) and *A Systems Approach to Literature: Mythopoetics of Chekhov's Four Major Plays* (1995). E-mail: <[vzubarev@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:vzubarev@sas.upenn.edu)>.