

# *Anton Pavlovich Chekhov*

## **Poetics—Hermeneutics—Thematics**

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# *The Cherry Orchard and Fathers and Sons*

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The question of the role played by the works of Ivan Turgenev in Anton Chekhov's œuvre has long attracted the attention of scholars. Several studies have been devoted to "Turgenev" elements in Chekhov's prose works as well as to the issue of the extent to which Turgenev's plays, and in particular *A Month in the Country*, foreshadow Chekhov's theatre.<sup>1</sup> Some fifty years ago the Russian scholar Maria Semanova proposed the following definition for the relationship between the works of these two writers "Chekhov did not blindly imitate [...], but rather introduced 'Turgenevian' themes that would have been recognized by his readers, in a creative manner, that was sometimes even at odds with the original, and that gave them a new [...] perspective."<sup>2</sup> In other words, by invoking in his reader's (or audience member's) memory some Turgenev work, character or situation, which he simultaneously repeated and modified, Chekhov provided his take on the current development of a Turgenev theme.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance any juxtaposition of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* and Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* might seem surprising and even capricious. A closer examination, however, yields some interesting parallels between the protagonists in these works, and especially between the servants. A remarkable picture emerges when we apply Turgenev's descriptions of Prokofich, Petr and Dunyasha to the three servants in *The Cherry Orchard*, Firs, Yasha and Dunyasha:

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<sup>1</sup> For a survey of the literature on this topic, see Elena V. Tiukhova, *Turgenev—Dostoevskii—Chekhov*: 45–57 and Nicholas G. Žekulin, "Chekhov and Turgenev. The Case of Nature Description."

<sup>2</sup> Semanova, "Chekhov and Turgenev": 179.

<sup>3</sup> See Mariia L. Semanova, "'Rasskaz neizvestnogo cheloveka' A. P. Chekhova ...": 222.

Firs is "alive and hasn't changed in the least. He grumbles just as he did before."<sup>4</sup> He "... has white hair, is thin and has a dark complexion, wears a brown frock coat with bronze buttons and a pink foulard round his neck" (Turgenev 7: 18); "in his own way [he] is ... an aristocrat no less than his master" (Turgenev 7: 44)

Yakov is "a young fellow with heavy jowls, a whitish down on his chin and small, lustreless eyes" (Turgenev 7: 7) "Everything [about him]: the turquoise earring in his ear, the pomaded vari-coloured hair and his deferential body movements, everything in a word, reveals a person of the newest, most refined, generation, with a condescending look about him ..." (Turgenev 7: 7); he is "is extremely egotistical and stupid with a continually furrowed brow, a person whose sole merit lies in the fact that he has a courteous look about him, reads haltingly and often cleans his frock coat with a brush ..." (Turgenev 7: 44)

Dunyasha is "a girl who is very serious when on duty and a giggler when off" (Turgenev 7: 42). She "giggles easily and quickly and flashes a meaningful sideways glance as she rushes by with dance-like steps" (Turgenev 7: 44). "Without realizing it, [he] had become the cruel tyrant of her heart" (Turgenev 7: 135) and "she had [...] to run away into the grove of trees in order to hide her emotion" (Turgenev 7: 150).

The quotations extracted from Turgenev's text could easily pass for unknown drafts by Chekhov for *The Cherry Orchard*, or for newly discovered notes by Stanislavsky for a production of the play. Nor are the parallels limited to the ones cited. After the duel between Pavel Petrovich and Bazarov, Prokofich declares: that "in his time also gentlemen fought, except that 'it was only gentlemen of quality with each other, and they would have ordered knaves like that thrashed in the stables for their vulgarity'" (Turgenev 7: 150). One inevitably recalls the words of Firs about the guests at Lyubov Andreyevna's ball: "In the old days, generals, barons, admirals danced at our balls, and now we send for postal clerks and the station master, and even they only come reluctantly" (S 13: 235).

<sup>4</sup> Turgenev, I. S. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*: 7, 14. Future references to this work are provided directly in the text with Turgenev's name (to differentiate them from the Chekhov citations), volume and page number.

Individual similarities might be just coincidental, but similarities in a series of protagonists, especially when those protagonists are all of the same social class, cannot be considered accidental. Two questions immediately arise from this. Firstly, are the coincidences confined to protagonists from one and the same social class, or are there other notable parallels? Secondly, what is the significance of such conspicuous parallels between Chekhov's play and Turgenev's novel?

A broader juxtaposition of the protagonists of these two works reveals a remarkable number of links and references. Although they are not as obvious and striking as the links between the servants, there are many subtle connections, which, in the context of those close parallels, cannot easily be ignored.

In Turgenev's novel, the principal protagonists from among the landed gentry are two brothers; in Chekhov's play we also have a pair of siblings, a brother and sister. One of Turgenev's brothers is a bachelor; so is Chekhov's Leonid Gayev. Nikolai Kirsanov has two sons by two different mothers and the social origin of the mother of the younger one, Mitya, is rather ambiguous; Lyubov Ranevskaya has two daughters and we know nothing at all about the origins of the older, adoptive, daughter. The story of Pavel Kirsanov's romance with Princess R. is remarkably similar to the story of Lyubov Ranevskaya and her French lover. Turgenev provides a description of Pavel Kirsanov in the years he spent abroad "sometimes chasing after her, at other times deliberately letting her disappear from view; he was ashamed of himself, he was annoyed at his pusillanimity ... but nothing helped. The image of her, that incomprehensible, seemingly meaningless, but enchanting image had penetrated too deeply into his soul" (Turgenev 7: 32). This could well serve as a description of the condition of Lyubov Ranevskaya, with the only difference being that whereas the Princess R. dies and at the end of the novel Pavel Kirsanov leaves for Dresden and a lonely life as an expatriate, Lyubov Andreyevna's lover recovers from his serious illness and at the end of the play she leaves for Paris, presumably to take up with him again.

It is often suggested that in his works Chekhov was depicting the end of an era. For a variety of reasons, most often socio-political, the era in question is usually identified as the "era of the Russian land-owning gentry" (*dvoryanstvo*). I would like to suggest that the link between *The Cherry Orchard* and *Fathers and Sons* provides a more specific time frame.

Turgenev's novel was published in 1862 and is set in the period immediately before the emancipation of the serfs. *Fathers and Sons* can thus be viewed as marking the beginning of the "post-emancipation" period in Russian literature and consequently, through its link with this novel, *The Cherry Orchard* marks the end of the post-emancipation time frame.<sup>5</sup> Through his references to *Fathers and Sons* Chekhov turns our attention to the changes undergone by Russian society over the previous forty years. And it is the image of Nature—a comparison of the natural environment in which the protagonists of the two works find themselves—that serves as a metaphor for these changes.

In Turgenev's novel, after the division of his lands with the peasants, Nikolai Petrovich had to begin building his estate from scratch on a rather unprepossessing, flat and bare piece of land. "He built a house, the service and farm buildings, laid out a garden, dug a pond and two wells; but the young trees took poorly, only a very little water accumulated in the pond, and the water in the wells had a rather salty taste. The only thing that flourished was a bower of lilacs and acacias: they sometimes took tea or dined there" (Turgenev 7: 21). Only at the very end of the novel, in what is effectively its epilogue, we are told that: "Their affairs are beginning to improve. Arkady has become a keen owner and 'the farm' has begun to bring in a fairly sizeable income" (Turgenev 7: 186). In Chekhov's play, forty years later, the income from the cherry orchard has shrivelled to nothing. Firs reminisces: "In former times dried cherries were shipped by the wagon load to Moscow and Kharkov. There was so much money! ... They knew how to do it then ... [Now] they have forgotten how. Nobody remembers" (S 13: 206). At the beginning of this period ornamental trees were barely able to provide shade, and a steady income from the estate was just a dream; at the end commercial trees had become purely ornamental. The time had come for a different type of enterprise—leisure property: "The location is wonderful, the river is deep. The only thing is, of course, that it will need to be tidied up, cleared ... to knock down all the buildings, for example ... cut down the old cherry orchard..." says Lopakhin (S 13: 205).

<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps interesting that for many historians there is indeed a significant break point in Russian history, marked by military defeat in the Russo-Japanese War and the "first revolution" of 1905; events that Chekhov, of course, did not live to see, but that some may consider his last play to foreshadow.

When making comparisons, differences are no less important than similarities. There is one protagonist in Turgenev's novel, and a central one at that, who at first glance seems to be absent from Chekhov's play: namely the main hero, Evgeny Bazarov. This is indeed the case, if one thinks of Bazarov from the perspective of the evolution of that character in subsequent Russian literature, as a representative of the nihilists, who later became the radical youth pursuing revolution. (This was the perceived evolution, regardless of whether one supported or decried it). But what if one were to consider Bazarov outside of this tradition and, taking as a starting point how he is actually depicted in Turgenev's novel, imagine that as a future for him? Bazarov then emerges as a student who never completed his studies, someone who spends more time dreaming about abstract theories than about his practical medical studies. Forty years later, Trofimov is still a perpetual student dreaming about a bright future that he is incapable of either defining or implementing. I would suggest that in Trofimov, now very much a subsidiary character, Chekhov is pointedly rejecting the Bazarov tradition in Russian literature and arguing that the path represented by this tradition is a dead end and that the direction that Russia should be pursuing lies with a protagonist, who is not to be (and could not have been) found—indeed, could scarcely have been imagined—at the time of Turgenev's novel, namely with Lopakhin. Significantly, this new central character is a mature man who has already achieved much and promises to achieve more.

The contention that Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* represents the end of one era (that of landed gentry), and the beginning of another and that, in his view, the future belonged not to the intelligentsia, but to clever peasants, is hardly new. On the contrary, it is more of a confirmation of a widely held traditional view, albeit with some substantive refinements. Set against Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, the historical context is made more specific by defining more precisely the chronological parameters; *The Cherry Orchard* marks the end of the post-emancipation period of Russian history, the beginning of which is marked by Turgenev's novel. At the same time, Chekhov is also taking sharp issue with the radical tradition that had developed in Russian literature out of Turgenev's seminal novel. The point is not that the hopes of the landed gentry who had tried to adapt to the post-emancipation economic order, were doomed. Nor is the point that the future did not belong to the Bazarov type, whom Chekhov depicts here as an eternal student (and else-

where in his works as the cynical country doctor). Despite the general mood in this play of decay and collapse that it has become traditional to emphasize ever since Stanislavsky's original production, placing *The Cherry Orchard* in the context of *Fathers and Sons* clearly suggests that the central theme of the play lies in Chekhov's assertion that the future belongs to the grandchildren of the peasants whom Nikolai and Arkady Kirsanov encountered heading for the local drinking den at the beginning of the novel (Turgenev 7: 13). It is no accident that Chekhov had Stanislavsky in mind for the role of Lopakhin, not Gayev (the role Stanislavsky chose for himself).<sup>6</sup>

In the context of *Fathers and Sons*, *The Cherry Orchard* can therefore be seen as Chekhov's attempt to provide an alternative reading of the evolution of Russian society since the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. A comparison of the characters of Ranevskaya, Gayev, Trofimov and Lopakhin with the protagonists in *Fathers and Sons* would thus confirm Semanova's view that Chekhov used and adapted Turgenev's works as a means of providing a commentary or a corrective to Turgenev's themes. However, the marked similarities between the three servants in the two works thereby become even more intriguing. After all, the conditions in which these servants lived had changed fundamentally, their juridical and social status had changed more than that of any of the protagonists from other social classes, and yet it is these servants whom Chekhov depicts in virtually identical terms to the ones given by Turgenev on the eve of the emancipation.

In deliberately and pointedly echoing Turgenev's servants in a play in which he emphasizes social changes, Chekhov is asserting his belief in the immutability of basic human nature. External circumstances and conditions may change, may even change beyond recognition, but fundamental human character traits remain the same. One continues to find the conservative, endlessly complaining about all changes and unwilling to adapt to new circumstances. Similarly, one continues to find the vacuous young egotist, for whom rudeness and ignorance are essential character traits and not some political statement. One continues to find the flighty young girl, who is ready to fall for the first unsuitable

young man she encounters. Petya Trofimov envisages a happy bright future in which "new people" will live in some fundamentally new way. The repetition in *The Cherry Orchard* of the servant characters in *Fathers and Sons* asserts that even when circumstances change, basic human characteristics remain unchanged. The changed circumstances in Russia made it possible for a Lopakhin to appear, but not every peasant is destined to become a Lopakhin. For Lopakhin himself became Lopakhin not because he is a peasant, but because of the native intelligence, enterprise and hard work that are his essential character traits. Similarities—the focus, in other words, on what has *not* changed—thus assume no less important a role for our understanding of the way in which Chekhov uses Turgenev's works in his own to present a changing world peopled by familiar human characters.

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<sup>6</sup> See the notes to this play in S 13: 496.