

Seagull: A Chekhov's Unique Idea into Tragicomedy

BONYADI Ali Reza^{1,*}

¹ National Academy Science of Republic of Armenia. M Abeghyan Institute of Literature. Yerevan. Armenia.

* Corresponding author.

Received 21 October 2011; accepted 25 February 2012.

Abstract

Chekhov with his play called "The Seagull" presented the audience, a new kind of theatrical genre, which is specific to his always-changing creative experience. Contrary to the previous play "The Cherry Orchard", in "The Seagull" the segments concerning the characters are presented outside the stage view, or also known as in "the marginal principle". It has been noticed that it is a Tragicomedy by nature. "The Seagull" represents ideological people, which reflects Chekhov's inner world.

Key words: Chekhov; Seagull; Treplev; Trigorin; Arkadina; Nina; Tragicomic

BONYADI Ali Reza (2012). Seagull: A Chekhov's Unique Idea into Tragicomedy. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 4(1), 154-157. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320120401.2018> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120401.2018>

INTRODUCTION

The writers Trigoni, Tripolov and Dr.Dorn sum up Chekhov's life full of ups and downs. Through these three Chekhov has expressed his point of views about literature and new art. It is remarkable how those parts do not disappear, the characters on stage let the audience and each other know about the latter during monologues or dialogues. This is where the dialogues of the play are turned into deep psychological, philosophical monologues or dialogues, and in its turn the remarks are presented as a micro-monologue. This had given the writer the possibility to press the time and space of the play, and

make artistic time and artistic space. The best example of this is the suicide of Treplev, about which Dorn informs us. Here it is considered important to notice that the seagull is a summarizing symbol, which represents Treplev's and Nina's dreams, which are not fulfilled in the end. This is especially seen in the part where Treplev puts the stuffed seagull in front of Nina's feet, which, in its turn represents their dead, lifeless love. In comparison to pre-Chekhov classical dramas, which were created according to Aristotle's rules of poetry, Chekhov's dramaturgical thinking, the style system is new and fresh. Another new thing is that the play has double levels. In one way it has to do with real life, in another it is symbolic and metaphoric. The presented facts and reflections are deep, and inner, as in they are now presented to the audience not by the direct clash of characters, but by the resolution of the inner unresolved issues. That is probably the reason why we do not see dramaturgically emphasized peaks in all actions or dialogues of his plays. Everything takes place in each character's inner world regardless if it is tragic, comic, or the combination of both. It is specific to "The Seagull" play.

DISCUSSION

The young playwright, Treplev, wants the changes in forms of plays, because the classic dramas do not satisfy the modern audience. Treplev: "New forms are what we need. New forms, and if there aren't any, we'd be better off without anything at all." (Chekhov, 1973, p.43) This idea is not only Chekhov's but it is also a widespread demand of the modern public. Famous Russian director Vladimir Nemirovich Danchenko writes in his letter to Chekhov. "The Seagull" play you written has captured me in such a way, that I'm ready to assure you and take responsibility so that this mystic tragedy, with all of it's characters, may become an excellent and quality play and deserve the amazement of the whole audience. This play

may not receive that much applause but it will be far away from old patterns and will become an event of victory and pride for the theater.” (Chekhov, 2002, p.24-25)

Of course not all dreams come true, such as Treplev's wishes, but at the same time, he does not lose hope and continues to work, and that proves Chekhov's characters present a correct way of life to the audience. In the play there are also characters, for example Nina, whose dreams do not correspond with the public's dreams, because she thinks most about becoming a famous actress and she tries to reach her goals, whatever the price. Her desires are personal and have nothing to do with reality. “NINA: for the happiness of being a writer or an actress I would endure the displeasure of my family, poverty and disappointment, live in an attic, eat nothing but brown bread, and suffer agonies from the realization of my own inadequacy, but in return I would demand fame – real, resounding fame.” (Chekhov, 1973, p.64) In this play A. Chekhov speaks most about love, Treplev's love for Nina, Nina's love for Trigorin, Irina's love for Trigorin, Masha's love towards Treplev, Medvedenko's love for Masha, and Paulina's love towards Dr. Dorn. In the meantime the characters of “The Seagull” have failed both in art and in love. They suffer from their sad, monotone lives and misunderstanding each other. “The Seagull is not simply a play which exposes the illusions of romantic longing; instead it reveals the powerful operation of theatrical and literary representation of love within the imagination of its fictional characters and its impact on their lives.” (Whyman, 2011, p.84)

In this play Chekhov presents his character's inner experiences and their psychological sufferings beautifully, even love and art can not save them. Arkadina is an actress who has lost her personal life and all her properties because of her jealousy and selfishness. “The secret of her cheerful mood is that she is always good with her local material goal, which is to retain her audience and admirers. She believes that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and so she never changes her local “Olympus.” (Ulea, 2002, p.128) She doesn't even trust her own son, Treplev. It's no coincidence that Arkadina quotes HAMLET; Arkadina: (reciting from Hamlet) Oh, Hamlet, speak no more! Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul; and there I see such black and grained spots, as will not leave their tinct.” (Chekhov, 1973, p.47) Treplev is also forced to turn to Hamlet; “Treplev: (from “Hamlet”) And let me wring thy heart, for so I shall, if it be made of penetrable stuff.” (Chekhov, 1973, p.6) Arkadina thinks that her young and inexperienced son's play is a delirium and his aspiration toward new ways is an illness. “Arkadina: ... why didn't he choose an ordinary play, instead of making us listen to this decadent rubbish? I'm quite prepared to listen to rubbish as well, but this claims to introduce new form, a new era in art. If you ask me, what we're dealing with here is bad temper, not new art

form.” (Chekhov, 1973, p.49) Arkadina thinks that art is to serve people, but is pessimistic towards Treplev's new reality and considers it a sign of downfall of the new generation. Arkadina is an actress who has cut her only son off from money and love, has left her own brother, leaving him in hardship. She gets married to Trigorin, despite not having any feelings for him, and moves to Moscow. She is really in love with his reputation and thinks that with it she will be able to raise her own reputation. Arkadina herself is in a miserable state and lives in a dream life. Sometimes she tries to get out of that state. After having a quarrel with her son, she says to Medvedenko; “Arkadina: Quite so, but let's not talk any more about plays or atoms, it's such a heavenly evening! Listen, every one. Can you hear singing? (Listens) How delightful!” (Chekhov, 1973, p.50) In case of danger Arkadina's talent helps her and by using her sensitivity, she takes control of the situation. She brings an example of the lack of love Trigorin has for Nina. Arkadina: (to herself). Now he's mine. (Casually, as if nothing had happened). But by all means stay if you like. I shall leave, but you can come on later, in a week's time. There's no particular hurry, after all. (Chekhov, 1973, p.74) Trigorin is one of the leading writers of his time. Writers, who are fake behind their faces and only, long for a reputation, but as a writer Chekhov tries to put those people on the right path. Coming from the philosophy of satire Trigorin cannot be considered a flatterer. “Trigorin: A chariot! Who do you think I am? Agamemnon? (Chekhov, 1973, p.64) In another place Trigorin, similar to other actors turns to his compositions and highlights its wrong sides. “Trigorin: what success? I've never thought much of myself. Never liked myself as a writer. The worst of it is that I live in a sort of haze and often don't understand what I'm writing.” (Chekhov, 1973, p.64) Trigorin as a famous writer bows down to this absurdity, which is proof of modern life. He does not want to judge life and the world; he simply gives himself to the reality of life to understand it better. Writing has created a huge gap between Trigorin and real life. The glory and honor, which Nina sees in Trigorin is only a delusion to the latter. Trigorin tells Nina that, he is under the impression that all of the attention and compliments that he has gotten from his friends is fake. Just like Treplev, Trigorin feels unlucky in this kind of art, except Treplev rejects it and tries not to notice it, while Trigorin ironically, speaks about it freely. He says to Nina. “Trigorin: ... you talk about fame, happiness and a splendid, interesting life, but for me all these fine words are like candied fruit which I never eat” (Chekhov, 1973, p.62) He finds that if he was not a writer nor in the center of attention of the public, he would be a phony person. He also thinks that writing has ruined his personal life. “Trigorin: ... I give myself no peace, and I feel that I am devouring my own life, that to obtain the honey which I give to some remote person, I am gathering pollen from

my finest flowers, then plucking the flowers themselves and trampling on their roots. I must be mad, mustn't I?" (Chekhov, 1973, p.62)

Nina considers Trigorin's thoughts and ideas more real than Treplev's. She falls in love with him, has his child. After the child's death Trigorin leaves her. Nina feels more alone and abandoned. In the end she sees Treplev and she expresses a beautiful thought, which is of course Chekhov's idea. "Nina: ... it is not fame, not glory, not the things I used to dream about, but the captivity to endure. To bear your cross and have faith. I do have faith and it's not so painful now, and I think about my calling I'm no longer afraid of life." (Chekhov, 1973, p.90) In "The Seagull" the best presenter of Chekhov's thought was probably Treplev. Similar to Chekhov, he thinks that theater has a lack of new style and forms. He states that works of writers like Trigorin are of the 2nd or 3rd level. "Treplev: ... as for his writing, well... how shall I put it? It's nice and gifted, but after Tolstoy and Zola you don't feel like reading Trigorin." (Chekhov, 1973, p.43) Treplev complains of the ignorance towards his plays from the surrounding crowd. He says to Sorin, "Treplev: ...I felt their glances were measuring my insignificance, I guessed at what they were thinking and was terribly humiliated." (Chekhov, 1973, p.43) This feeling of deception pushes Treplev towards isolation. That is the bitter fate of a modern man. A man, who is defenseless against making logical connections between his past and traditions, and the one who strives towards horizons, in the name of the future he sacrifices his past and values. Treplev is exactly like that. He rejects the reality that others use in everyday life and tries to pass to a new reality. But this life, according to Arkadina, is a life of egoists and talentless people, who suffer from jealousy. On the contrary Nina thinks that it is an unreal dream life, which is far from the truth. Treplev has paid for his youngish outburst by an abandoned life, with hope that with this he can announce a bright future for mankind like prophets. Art is the miracle with which Treplev tries to bring others close to his dreams. So he himself falls into isolation and inattention. Nina's love gives him courage and the will to live. If art isolates Treplev, then love is the only thing linking him to life. Treplev's plays are natural and amazing. They present real life scenes, which open towards the lake and distant horizons. The main character of the play is Nina. Treplev considers modern theater too traditional and rejects the moral principles of unnecessary repetitions. He preaches the rejection from imagination.

Noticing that, Nina accuses Treplev of worshiping his dreams and stresses that it's another way of preaching. Treplev's answer to Nina is; "Treplev: Real live people! We have to show life as we see it in our dreams, not as it is or as it ought to be" (Chekhov, 1973, p.45) Treplev does not consider the main goal of art to be serving people and he does not combine that with moral effects but his mother

considered art a servant of mankind. Treplev's play's idea was about being alone, and Dr. Dorn likes that because he also feels lonely in his life. "By seeing the background in productive interplay with the foreground, we may see beyond ourselves and may re-imagine our life and our world. Treplev, the theatrical-literary visionary, may have lost his way, but his rough stage nevertheless endures as a powerful image of the way in which the theatre can both rudely challenge our preconceptions and open up for us a more expansive perspective." (Young, 2009, p.164) But Dorn has knowingly chosen his solitude. By that he wants to stay away from a sinful and empty life. According to Dorn, for people his age love cannot be an occasion for changing one's life. Dorn prefers being alone and thinks that the people who have no future prospects should live alone. He does not want to enter someone else's life so; he does not let anyone interfere in his life. That is the reason he leaves Polina Andryevna's love unanswered. Dorn approves Treplev's art because he considers it a big ideology. He is only a critic of Treplev's art's heavy style and thinks that Treplev himself does not understand this own complex style. Treplev protests against the absurdities of life. In the beginning he tries to turn to art for help, but then feels that art displays emptiness in a more vivid way. He tries to reject that worldview and considers death the only way out. According to Treplev art forms a worldview and love helps to understand the world better. If Trigorin's monotone life is similar to his art, Treplev is also condemned to it. "Treplev: I've talked so much about new forms, but now I feel myself gradually slipping into the old rut... I'm being coming more and more convinced that what matters is not new or old forms. But that a person should write without thinking about forms at all, write straight from the heart." (Chekhov, 1973, p.87) Treplev continues to be indifferent towards Nina, and when he meets with her for the last time, he feels as though he is losing her. Nina speaks of the past nostalgically and tells Treplev. "Nina: ... you're writer and I'm actress. We've both got caught up in it now. I used to be so happy, like a child. I'd wake up in the morning and burst into song. I loved you and I dreamed of fame, but now?" (Chekhov, 1973, p.88-89) The loss of happiness is also a loss for Treplev. Treplev tries to steal Nina's heart again but Nina says that she still loves Trigorin and more than before. So Treplev loses his last hope, and falls into loneliness, again turns towards suicide but this time, he succeeds. Nina always told Treplev that she was not a seagull. Is not this a similarity of Nina's and the seagull's fate? "In *The Seagull*, the bird and its death, and its stuffed resurrection, are used to indicate something about Treplev, and the general death of freedom which pervades the play." (Raymond, 1998, p.51) As a writer Treplev, similar to Trigorin, is not proud or satisfied of his work. Writing doesn't save him from absurdity and emptiness but only makes him descend faster. Treplev

looses his meaning of life and his mission, and says to Nina with grief. "Treplev: you have found your path. You know where you are going. But I'm still thrashing about in a chaos of dreams and images, not knowing who needs it or why. I have no faith and do not know what my calling is." (Chekhov, 1973, p.90) Chekhov has created Constantine Treplev's tragic character in "The Seagull" and with it presented his innovative search. By rejecting Treplev's talent, instead created a character, which is a symbol of the art of theater in 19th century during the 90's, seeing in him the real artist's talent. "The fact that he conducts this theatricals discourse on art and its complex relationship to the life of the artistic practitioner, through the figures of a failed artist, a rather vulgar actress, a mediocre, self-hating writer and a young actress who may or may not succeed, accounts for the rich layering of ideas in the play." (Kilroy, 2004, p.86) If Chekhov wants to talk about his desires and life goals, he condenses Treplev's presence. If he wants to speak about the difficulties of life he pushes Nina forward. Chekhov, as a writer, is portrayed in Trigorin's character. Treplev, Nina and Trigorin are 3 phases and faces of Chekhov's life. Chekhov's partner in his outburst against old art patterns is Treplev. Nina is his sympathizer in his life full of hardships, but Trigorin, is the character of "The Seagull" play that speaks with the tongue of Chekhov and wants to live a simple, quiet life in a faraway village. Through Trigorin, Chekhov expresses his desires. "Trigorin: If I lived in a country-house like this, by a lake, do you think I'd write?" (Chekhov, 1973, p.86) It would be wrong to think that Trigorin in "The Seagull" is totally identified with Chekhov.

CONCLUSION

Chekhov, in his personal life and in his art stayed as a believer in real and high art. He only introduced the hazards and threats in his life through Trigorin. In a letter to Soverin, in 1895, Chekhov confirms that "The Seagull" play is a comedy;

"3 women and 6 men take part in this Comedy which is divided into 4 scenes. The view opens towards the lake

and the main dialogues are about literature. The moments are limited, but you can find as much love as you want." (Chekhov, 2002, p.108)

While directors such as Constantine Stanislavski and Danchenko considered "The Seagull" which is a tragedy and what is really hidden in Chekhov's plays, particularly in this one that brings the genres of comedy and tragedy so close together? Maybe we can find the answer to this question in George Steiner's words. "After reception Socrates convinced his listeners that comedy and tragedy are same by nature. Everybody was drunk and nobody could comprehend the meaning of his words, they fell into a deep sleep one by one. The only person awake was Socrates. Even Aristophanes couldn't stay awake and understand why we his works may be considered tragedies. He couldn't bring to life Socrates' logic about the similarities of comic and tragic dramas, while the reasons for that are hidden in Chekhov's art." (Steiner, 2001, p.280)

REFERENCES

- Chekhov, A. P. (1973). *Selected Works in Two Volumes*. (Vol. 2). (K.Cook, Trans.). Moscow: Progress publishers.
- Chekhov, A. P. (2002). *Chekhov's letters*. (vol. 3). (N. Kashichi, Trans.). Tehran: Tuse Publisher.
- Kilroy, T. (2004). *The Seagull: An Adaptation*. In V. Gottlieb & P. Allain (Ed.), *Chekhov* (pp. 80-90). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raymond, V. (1998). Anton Chekhov. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Modern Critical Wives, Anton Chekhov* (pp. 45-56). USA: Chelsea House Publisher.
- Steiner, George (2001). *The Death of Tragedy* (B. Ghaderi, Trans.). Tehran: Namayesh Publishing House.
- Ulea, V. A. (2002). *Concept of Dramatic Genre and the Comedy of a New Type: Chess, Literature, and Film*. USA: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Whyman, R. (2011). *Anton Chekhov*. London & New York: Routledge Publisher.
- Young, S. (2009). *A Blind Spot: Chekhov's Deepest Horizons*. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Anton Chekhov*. New York: InfoBase Publishing.