

## THE LITERARY REPUTATION OF ANTON CHEKHOV CHEKHOV'S READER IN THE ASPECT OF SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE

Liya E. Bushkanets<sup>1</sup>

---

Sociology aspects of culture are one of the most urgent problems of the entire world community, and its solving in the sphere of literature studies is connected with the idea that literature reflects the collective imagination and the collective unconscious of its contemporaries. The purpose of the article is an exploration of new approaches to study the mechanism of formation of fame and literary reputation of the writer. The leading method in that case is reconstruction of historical social psychology. The article uses the methodology of the analysis of the contemporary sociology of literature: it is necessary to base the research not only on the articles by literary critics, but on the sources, which help to understand the mood of the reader, such as archival materials, reader's letters to the writer and articles written by mass reader. Those materials are rare and are introduced into scientific circulation for the first time. This article examines the situation of perception of the personality and works of one of the most famous Russian writers A. Chekhov by his contemporaries. This is the beginning of his fame, which was created not by critics, as usually in Russia and in literature as a social institute, but by mass reader. As a result of studying the problem, we can come to the conclusion that readers could see in Chekhov's works their own hopes, despairs, fatigues; they looked at Chekhov as at the expression of their thoughts - more than his contemporary Leo Tolstoy. The article can be useful for further study of that problem and for theatre workers, critics, writers, because it helps to understand at what time rises the interest to Chekhov's works and what type of reader, including other countries, is fond of him.

**Keywords:** Russian literature, A. Chekhov, sociology of literature, culture Reception of cultural heritage, Russia, Society, World Cultural Heritage.

### INTRODUCTION

The Russian intelligent reader knew about Chekhov from the mid-1880s. And in the 1900s every schoolboy and schoolgirl had the Chekhov's portrait. In Yalta, Crimea, where he lived during last years of his life because of illness, on the wall, separating the garden with the house from the Yalta highway, hung curious vacationers.

Chekhov was the most favorite writer of the Russian reader in 1890-1910-s. Critic Alexander Izmaylov, who grew up on the ideas of the revolutionary democrats, nevertheless wrote: "Fate denied me the joy of seeing Chekhov in my life. <...> Sometimes I am painfully sorry about that. Sometimes I think it was almost good that it happened so. Because I haven't seen him and nothing destroys his image in my soul, which was created during my reading his stories and plays. May be Socrates had a nose with red veins, Pushkin was notoriously bad. As well,

---

<sup>1</sup> Institute of International Relations, History and Oriental Studies, Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kazan, Russia. *E-mail: lika\_kzn@mail.ru*

I have not seen nor Pushkin, nor Socrates, nor Chekhov – weak, sick Chekhov, with eyes of the mortally wounded deer and not very poetic gestures rolling papers into a tube where he spat his blood. It is necessary to be a person of our generation to love Chekhov, as he was loved and we loved him. Future generations might not quite understand it. Each era has its own mirror. He was our own quiet glow. We took him not with the mind but with feeling, and, perhaps, he will not inspire a large critical literature. Almost everything about him is said now. <...> what a pity that I haven't seen Chekhov. As well, it's all right that I haven't seen him..." (Izmaylov, 1910) Anatoly Kamensky, opposite to Izmailov in his literary and social sympathies, the futurist poet, said, however: "I dreamed about meeting him, often saw him in a dream, but I always had the feeling that in reality it is not fated to me as too big, impossible joy. It is so strange: so many people knew him, heard his voice... When in the sultry July day I read in «St. Petersburg Newspapers» a brief news about death of that my secretly beloved person, I ran outside. Wandered without purpose, seeing nothing before my eyes" (Kamensky, 1910). There were thousands of such confessions in newspapers and magazines in 1900-1910-s, in reader's letters to Chekhov!

Chekhov got incomparable popularity among his contemporaries. In the early 1900s, the adoration of Chekhov in Russia was comparable only with the attitude to Pushkin. This adoration was not caused nor by Leo Tolstoy with his dramatic quest, crises and "treatments", nor by Maxim Gorky, constantly appearing on the pages of the different political newspapers. After Turgenev no Russian writer was not in such intimate connection with the reader, as Chekhov – claimed one of the provincial critics in 1914, and a very popular mass women writer A. Verbitskaya said: "Without critics the readers themselves acknowledged Chekhov and me"(!) (Verbitskaya, 1911). A mere appearance of Chekhov on the street gathered a crowd of fans and admirers, after his death in "Chekhov datas" (1904, 1909, 1910, 1914) all other events in the newspapers and magazines were receded into the background.

But the statement about Chekhov's glory as a writer among his contemporaries comes into conflict with what we know about the attitude to him in criticism: critics were not united in their attitude to him. A fierce rejection by Z. Gippius is standing next to an enthusiastic justification by the symbolist writer A. Belyj. Popular journalist L. E. Obolensky praising Chekhov in the 1880s was in opposition to the leader of that literary group – N. Mikhailovsky. But all of them said something like that: "if any of the modern intelligent Russian would be asked about one of the latest writers attracting the most public attention" the only answer would be «Chekhov», although he had no large major works as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and in general he was famous for his "small sketches".

Many enthusiastic admirers of Chekhov agreed that he may not be a genius, but loved him no less. Literary critic A. Hornfeld (1910) appreciated Chekhov not so much as a writer, said in astonishment: "I don't think Chekhov is a great Russian

writer, as his predecessors. Even more surprising and significant seems to me his public role”.

Why Chekhov has won such a special place in the hearts of Russian readers? That question has theoretical and practical scientific interest.

### **METHODOLOGY**

How can we explain this paradox? The history of the critical reception of Chekhov in Russia was studied by famous literary researches such as A. Kuzicheva (2007), C. Le Fleming (2006), I. Sukhih (2002) and others, their works are devoted to the study of the history of lifetime and works of the writer.

And at the same time, despite the idea that much is understood in Chekhov's literary reputation, there are still lots of interesting questions.

Usually literary reputation of the writer is created by critics. Floating in the air the collective reader's emotion is corrected and clothed by them in a certain verbal critical formula. Many times repeated, they become clichés.

Two emotions – a painful impression from Chekhov works in general about the ordinary, poor good man, and immense admiration by the writer as a man of unprecedented honesty, kindness and attention to person - created a certain atmosphere of perception of Chekhov. Reprinted as “Chekhov's signs” were even the features of his portrait, his age and life, where the key parts of his style are pince-nez, doctoral beard and sadness and rejection of vulgarity. The force of that view was such strong that it influenced the representation of the meaning of Chekhov's works during the whole XX century and surprisingly has survived up to our time in the minds of readers of different social experiences, aesthetic preferences, and professional interests. It is necessary to raise the question about the real reader of Chekhov, in whose memory, whose minds and feelings the meanings of Chekhov's texts during the past twentieth century are constructed.

What was the real contemporary Chekhov's reader of 1880-1917s? Did Chekhov reflect the needs of his reader? These are the questions that define the purpose of our study.

This study deals with the problems of sociology of literature. Outdated works on the sociology of literature, which perceive literature as adequate or inadequate mirror of some period – this approach led to a negative attitude to the sociology of literature and a number of researchers in the past. The writer is not associated with his era mechanically, his “touch” with reality is manifested not in “telling” about the events contemporary to that writer – he unconsciously reflects the fundamental features of collective representations and collective fantasies; the writer looks for connection between everyday experience of contemporary man and the language in which all this must be said. Therefore, the researchers believe that not the writer of the second row, whose works would seem to show us the details and customs of his time, but the great writers, who symbolically embodies the ideologies of

contemporaries are closer to their own time. We must remember that literature reflects the values of its time, therefore it is necessary to identify the basis of these values, ideas about man and the meaning of life in this era, hopes and dreams, “the way of feeling”, and the researcher should try to describe them in terms and concepts of the people, in whose consciousness this way of feeling was formed, and identify socio-cultural significance of this inner life of people. On this basis (“talking about values”) the relationships between the writer with his readers are studied: in every specific historical moment the attitude to the writer is determined by the coincidence or conflict of values (Berger, 1977; Coste, 1979; Cavelti, 1976; Löwenthal, 2009; Bushkanets & Tushev, 2016; Jameson, 1981; Milner, 2005; Moretti, 2013; and others).

A. Reitblat determined literary reputation as “the views on the writer and his works that have developed within the literary system and characteristic of a considerable part of its members (critics, writers, publishers, booksellers, teachers, readers). Literary reputation contains a description and an assessment of art and literary-social behavior of the writer <...> the existence of literary reputations is necessary for structuring literary system, to maintain hierarchy, for ensuring its functioning and dynamics” (Reitblat, 2001). As literary reputation should be understood the General cultural opinion about the writer and his place in literary hierarchy, which affects his perception by next generations. It is not constant.

The time of the authors living is the context that unites the author and the text, and the readers, who are his contemporaries. A study of the artistic life cannot be separated from its enclosing society, it is necessary to build such concepts, within which there would be a suitable place not only for the artist, his work and audience, but for the public, even sometimes indifferent to the artist and to his works. Such approach should be based on the study of the system of values of society in a certain period (Zhidkov & Sokolov, 2005).

## RESULTS

Chekhov’s works, as any literary phenomenon, are a dialogue with expectations and values of contemporary reader. However, historic social psychology of Russian society of a period is a poorly known problem.

Many attempts of a critical attitude to the works of Chekhov and to his personality, especially after his death, were met with enthusiastic attitude to the writer from the reader. As a result the critics were forced to admit the exceptional place of Chekhov in contemporary literature. In the formation of Chekhov’s literary reputation the opinion of his readers proved decisive. That is why it is necessary to base the research not only on the articles by literary critics, but on sources that help to understand the mood of the reader, such as archival materials, letters to the writer and the articles written by mass reader.

The Chekhov's reader declared himself in numerous letters to the writer, telegrams and letters to editors of newspapers and magazines, in inscriptions on wreaths, numerous poems about Chekhov, etc.

He became a national legend, and this legend was developed after Pushkin and before Russian poet A. Blok.

But what constitutes the mass consciousness at the turn of the XIX and the XX centuries, how Chekhov is included in the socio-cultural context of its time?

In fact, the popularity of Chekhov can be compared with the popularity of popular literature. John Cawelti, analyzing the ways of interaction of literature with other aspects of life, argued that literature does not reflect the reality but reflects the collective imagination of people of a certain time. The basic models contained in the most popular works of the epoch reflect the main tendencies and values that influenced the formation of these fantasies. Mass literature, in his opinion, reinforces existing interests and attitudes, presenting an imaginary world in accordance with these interests and attitudes" (Cawelti, 1976), because the main feature of popular literature and its most important function is not aesthetical one, but psychological, compensatory. Chekhov, in the opinion of many of his contemporaries, acted on their soul "as music." It surprisingly coincided with important collective emotions and experiences for his contemporaries.

The public mood of the era was closely associated with the mood of the intelligentsia.

It was told by many critics, such as D. Filosofov (1910) and others: he said that recently the discussions about Chekhov seemed purely literary, but later the society understood their symbolic significance, the dispute was not about literature but about life itself, because Chekhov manifested individual and collective psychology of the Russian intellectual society.

Modern Chekhov criticism always try to make clear what ideals Chekhov expressed. Chekhov was accused in the absence of social programs, later he was accused in the absence of "philosophical worldview".

But from the 1880s there appeared in Russia a democratic intelligent reader – boy and girl students, teachers, small journalists, etc., who became Chekhov's readers. And it turned out that the main thing is not in accordance of his works to the worldview of critics, but in the reflection of the attitude of the intellectual person to his life. And that was the cause of the readers' admiring. According to Chekhov's readers, Leo Tolstoy stood away from loving and suffering human masses, lived in altitude; it is difficult to the common man to share with him their everyday sorrows and joys. Chekhov experienced the mood of modern thoughtful society with all persons, tried to explain to the reader his own life, to open their own souls, he "expressed us", and therefore the most common definition of Chekhov was "a writer - a friend."

At the beginning of XX century many critics (Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskiy, 1911) and readers wrote about Chekhov as the representative of the intelligentsia: "Your stories are read mostly by intellectuals - let me witness it. You had to confuse well-fed contentment of the bourgeoisie, which, however, avoids to read you, fearing that bleak picture will break their harmony, reduce their appetite or sleep <...> Hundreds, thousands, millions of people read your works, and think, think, think" (Halisev, 1964).

Chekhov observed primarily the intelligentsia. So, Chekhov's heroes like to talk about future happy life. For the people of that time there were their own dreams: "Their own duality between real existence and illusory, their dream of reality, their dissatisfaction and their desire to join up with the strong and heroic impulses towards the sky with diamonds – the audience saw in Chekhov's plays, the reader perceived in Chekhov's stories," wrote critic I. Ignatov (Ignatov, 1914). The audience understood the Chekhov's allusions and filled them with their own emotional content and their own psychological experience. One of Chekhov's contemporaries wrote, "Chekhov is essential for us because he expressed the mood of his moment – it was a typical man of the generation of the 1880-90s, with his earlier exhaustion, ideals for bright and beautiful life, with eternal anguish to the dull of everyday life" (Izmaylov, 1905).

Everything that was associated with "sadness", "boredom", a grey provincial town, isolation of life and feeling of hopelessness began to be perceived as "Chekhov's mood".

For his contemporaries he became a writer, who glorified their aspirations. That's why Chekhov's stiffness and irony, also represented in his attitude to his characters, remain generally unnoticed. And, the reader's interpretations subdued Chekhov, creating so strong tradition of perception that made it impossible to create another interpretations. This happened, of course, not only with Chekhov. In Russian literature there are a lot of examples of how Dostoevsky's novel could be read by a human like Raskolnikov or Smerdyakov. But in the case with Chekhov we have a phenomenon, which in Russian literature there was no more.

So is the paradox: of course, not being a representative of "mass literature", Chekhov was for his time a writer for the mass intelligent reader. Reader, not a critic, made Chekhov's glory and his literary reputation.

Many of these sentiments felt the starting Russian modernism. But it should be remembered that the amount of readers of the symbolists, futurists, etc. were very little. The theatricality and artificiality of the literary and personal behavior, individualism, etc. were alien to the mass of the intelligentsia who needed "their own", all understanding the writer.

Another letter, written in June 1900, was by Maria Narkevich from a small village far from Moscow. As often, it ends up asking for money and help. The correspondent wrote that the letter "was written after a number of hard days and

sleepless nights, so for God's sake read it and then judge... My youth coincided with the 1860s and I experienced all the joy and then disappointment of that time. Then came the reaction, everything was spat upon... I was so desperate... And then came love. He had my age and experienced the same mental state. Before that we had forgotten about ourselves, and at that time we wanted happiness". They got married and three years of marriage withdrew her despair. They lived a wealthy life, worked, but after chronic inflammation of the lungs her husband got tuberculosis. Botkin sent them to Mentone, but it was too late – he leaved only for 6 months. During this time she also lost health. Because of lack of funds she went to leave to the village. "I began my life in a remote village, in a large gloomy house, without anyone, even relatives.... The link with the past was maintained only by correspondence, by reading newspapers and magazines - the only luxury I could afford. Solitude, insomnia - don't know how I survived and did not become crazy... When the despair passed, I began to teach children <...> But what about the village I had no illusions. Nothing filled my emotional loneliness. So past 12 years, it was a kind of slow suicide." But there came by chance a relative of her husband and died left six-year-old daughter. A child was hunted, undeveloped. She adopted her, and life gained a new sense. The girl also became ill with tuberculosis. The doctors told her to live in the South, but to earn money "in our remote corner" was impossible. Last winter she's "withered": it was getting dark at 3 hours, the endless winter in a huge cold house, covered with snow, and the girl needed the South.

"At night I sleep badly and all I think about is my pain... last night I moved in my thoughts from his personal grief to the general. I remembered my everywhere meetings with a triumphant vulgarity and arrogance, sadness and resentment of the minority and all that hard things that're happening. This idea jumped on some books, articles of journals, then I remembered You, the man of another generation, but with the same bitter note of sadness, which sounds in Your works and captivates with its sincerity. And then came a sudden and quite a ridiculous idea. Why not to write to him? He <...> understands the human heart. And here am I writing this insane, ridiculous letter to a person familiar only from his books and that has the slightest cause to me." The reporter begs to help her daughter, her only beloved creature: "I suffer", "a blank wall" is around me (Russian State Library).

Of course, we can assume that only people of a certain psychological type wrote to Chekhov, not those who were happy and content with life. But the totality of the materials of the era allows to suggest that those who wrote were the most sensitive persons. They experienced the situation of "the sixties", they contrary to their hopes and ideas about the results of the reforms, saw the triumph of money and the uselessness of intellectual labor, rampant vulgarity, the human "foam" on the surface, that appear in that period, it turned out that the intelligentsia had to work hard to survive, etc. Weak and exhausted with life in Russia, moving to capitalism, there were millions.

Due to the letters Chekhov was well aware of moral and social situation in the country.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The intelligentsia experienced socio-cultural crisis of the turn of XIX–XXs centuries in different ways: some adapted to the fact of the triumph of mass culture with a utilitarian set of values, others suffered from this procession of vulgarity and barbarism, and still others were eager to fight it in the name of a new life. All Chekhov's readers felt how accurately was reflected this situation in his works. Thus, there was a unity of the reader as the recipient of Chekhov's text and the real reader, who identified Chekhov's text as his own, addressed to him. However, let us remember that the meanings in Chekhov's works much wider than it were understood by his contemporaries. The mass distribution of Chekhov's works identified both positive and negative aspects of his literary reputation; and the insights and misconceptions of his readers were mixed with each other. The main thing is that professional literary criticism perceived Chekhov as a writer of the crowd, and this determined dramatic conflict between the public and the critics in their fight for understanding Chekhov, which unfolded from 1880-s for several decades. Understanding that Chekhov is not a "mass writer" occupies a high position in the literary hierarchy, appeared in Russia only to 1910s.

But this analysis is important not only for Russia. It shows at what age and for which reader one of the most famous Russian writers is particularly relevant. This is a time of change, crisis, frustration and despair. Another time is to other writers.

### *Acknowledgements*

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

### *References*

- Berger, M. (1977). 'Real and imaged worlds. The novel and Social Sciences'. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Bushkanets, L.E. Tushev, A.N. (2016). 'L. Tolstoy and A. Chekhov in the reception of the reader of the early twentieth century: reception of literature in the aspect of social psychology' .*The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication* - TOJDAC November. Special Edition: 2440-2445.
- Cawelti, J. (1976). 'Adventure, mystery and the romance'. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- Coste, D. (1979). 'Three conception of the reader and their contribution to a theory of the literary text'. *Orbis Litterarum*, 34(4): 271-286.
- Filosofov, D. (1910). 'Life, events and oblivion'. *Yubilejniy Chekhovskiy sbornik*. Moscow: T-vo I. Sytina, 133-147.



- Fleming Le, Stephen. (2006) 'Critics and Mr. Chekov. Anthology'. Saint Petersburg: Letniy sad.
- Halisev, V. (1964). 'From reader's letters to Chekhov'. *Scientific reports of Higher school. Filol. Science*, 4: 164-174
- Hornfeld, A. (1910). 'Questionnaire about Chekhov'. *Odesskije novosti*, 30 Jan.
- Ignatov, I. (1914). 'Chekhov's Readers'. *Russkije vedomosti*, July 2.
- Izmaylov, A. (1905). 'A. P. Chekhov'. *Birgevyje vedomosti*. July 2.
- Izmaylov, A. (1910). 'Questionnaire about Chekhov'. *Odesskije novosti*, 30 Jan.
- Jameson, F. (1981). 'The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act'. London: Methuen.
- Kamensky, A. (1910). 'Questionnaire about Chekhov'. *Odesskije novosti*, 30 Jan.
- Kuzicheva, A.P. (2007). 'A. P. Chekhov in the Russian theatrical criticism'. Saint Petersburg: Letniy sad.
- Löwenthal, L. (2009). 'A margine. Teoria critica e sociologia della letteratura'. Chieti: Solfanelli.
- Milner, A. (2005). 'Literature, Culture and Society, second edition'. London and New York: Routledge.
- Moretti, F. (2013). 'Distant Reading'. London: Verso.
- Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskij, D. (1911) 'The history of the Russian intelligentsia. Part 3: the 80s and early 90s'. In: Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskij D. 'Works', V. 9. SPb.
- Reitblat, A. (2001). 'How Pushkin became genius. Historical and sociological essays on book culture in Pushkin's era', Moscow: NLO.
- Russian State Library. Fund 331. Chekhov. K. 53. 1 34.
- Sukhih, I.N. (2002). 'A.P. Chekhov: pro et contra'. Saint-Petersburg: Russian Christian humanitarian Academy.
- Verbitskaya, A. (1911). 'Provincial overview: what the province reads'. *Vestnyk Evropy*, June.
- Zhidkov, V.S., Sokolov, K.B. (2005). 'Art and society'. SPb., ALETHEIA.