

Vol. 6, Issue-1
February 2015

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English



6th Year of Open Access

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Time as a Presence: A Study of Anton Chekhov's *Three Years*

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Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's *Three Years* (1895) was written a decade before the Revolution of 1905—A period of marked lull that preceded the Revolution wherein the intellectuals either harboured a hope for a resurgent Russia or some (like Chekhov) viewed present with a critical eye knowing that dreams of a rosy future need more than just dreaming. This transitory phase had its tremendous impact on the Russian life and character. In the present paper, I am analyzing one of Chekhov's work *Three Years* which sets its characters against the milieu of a pre-revolutionary Russia showing how the passage of time not only determines the work of art per se but human relationships as well: My prime focus being the marriage at the heart of the story—that of Yulia and Laptev. Not only serial time but historical time as well finds a deep resonance in the narrative of *Three Years* in which past and present are inextricably fused while determining the future.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's *Three Years* (1895) is a work that defies neat categorization. Hugh Aplin in his introduction and translation of the book tells us how Chekhov started it off as a novel but eventually subtitled it *rasskaz* (short story) (xi). However, the term *povest* which he used for it before its publication is more appropriate. *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory* makes this entry for *povest*:

A Russian term for fictional narrative. It denotes the sum of facts and events connected with an individual or a particular event. . . Terseness and compression are characteristics of *povesti*, which have less complex plots than novels and are shorter. It is perhaps the Russian equivalent of German *Novelle* and by virtue of its length, at any rate, comparable with French *recit* (Cuddon 693).

Time plays a very important role in the *Three Years* and the work stands midway between being a drama and a novel. The main springs of the actions of the characters are thrown a scarce light upon, incomparably less than what would have been the case in a novel. At the same time the action moves swiftly (as in a drama) while the focus is on the “release of moods and feelings” (Harkins 47). At the centre of the narrative is the marriage of Yulia Sergeevna with Alexei Fyodorovich Laptev which shapes time as much as it is shaped by it. Laptev's relationship with Yulia is so skewed by his past that in her presence “he could even feel his unattractiveness on his skin” (Chekhov 5). Albeit, he proposes Yulia only to find that love will be ever missing in his marriage. As time passes on Laptev's love became “stronger and stronger, and Yulia seemed to him poetic and exalted, but still there was no mutual love, and the essence was that he was buying and she was selling herself” (26). Yulia unlike Olenka of “The Darling” (1899) is incapable of loving for the sake of love. She agrees to Laptev's proposal while mulling over the nature of marital life sans love:

“Was married life not possible without love? After all, it was said that love soon passed and habit alone remained, and that the very objective of family life was not found in love, not in happiness, but in duties, for example, in the raising of children, in the cares of housekeeping and so on. And the Holy Scripture perhaps meant love for a husband as for a relative, respect for him, indulgence.” (20)

She marries to alleviate her boredom and to get away from her self-obsessed father. She fails to love Laptev because love for her is an unearthly emotion that transcends temporality in which Laptev wants to pin her down. It is pertinent that Olya (Yulia's baby) dies and the mother's love also remains unearthly and immaterial. Yulia's love for God (which is unearthly in nature) satisfies her need to love and dote on someone but it fails to give a purpose to her existence. Her existence is best described in her own words: “Every day's a holiday for me from dawn till dusk” (16). Chekov, therefore, exposes the ennui and inertia that marked Russian life both in a provincial Russian town and Moscow as well. He once commented on the Russian character: “Russia is a land of greedy idlers. People eat and drink enormously, love to sleep in the daytime, and snore in their sleep. They marry for the sake of order in their homes, and take a mistress for the sake of social prestige.” (Gorky 281-282). However, pity is the redeeming feature of his works. Maxim Gorky comments on this aspect of Anton Chekhov: “He had an almost virginal modesty, he could never bring himself to challenge people loudly and openly . . . vainly trusting that they would themselves realize the urgent necessity of being more decent” (ibid. 282). Pyotr Bitsilli while juxtaposing Anton Chekhov with the great Russian poet Alexander Sergeyvich Pushkin (1799-1837) comments:

Chekhov sees everything in its true light, he reduces everything, he pardons everything, and in the end everything that he has observed and understood awakens his pity. Pity, Chekhov's chief feeling, is ubiquitous in his work. He has pity on his heroes, tiresome, awkward, incapable of loving and of being heroic . . . (173)

Yulia, too, incapable of loving soon regrets her marriage to Laptev who's incapable of being heroic; but it's the Moscow life of concerts, theatres, soirees and painting schools that keep her mind off her terrible marriage. Her marriage eventually becomes a tool to relieve the dullness of her life: “. . . It's probably just habit. I respect him, it's dull for me when he's away for a long time, but that's not love” (67). In the course of the first three years of their marriage (and of the title), Yulia accepts Laptev as her husband out of habit and it has some semblance of love as well: “Please come back early, if possible. It's dull without you” (86). Meanwhile, Laptev's adoration and admiration for Yulia pales away and he realises love and happiness are ever elusive for him. He accepts his fate and is ready to embrace whatever awaits him in future. First three years of his marriage to Yulia were enough to sniff out his boyish ardour and zeal for her and those three years were sufficient to kindle the warmth of companionship in her. He wonders how would they live with one another for next thirteen or thirty years but then embraces uncertainty and tells himself: “We'll have to wait and see.” (91). Time as if endowed with a being has a role to play in *Three Years* its corrosive effect shapes destinies of men and women. W. E. Harkins makes an astute comment with regards to what time does to Chekhov's characters:

His characters are the victims of inner corrosion, an eating away of ambitions, energies, talents, and, most important, of ability to love. Part of this inner corrosion is due to neurotic egotism and self-preoccupation. But part is also caused simply by the passage of time; time itself permits a gradual corroding to take place without our knowledge. We are made aware of the process only by chance circumstances, which trains of self-awareness, but only when it is too late (48).

In *Three Years* (1895) time is also tainted by history and finds its expression as trauma in present. Laptev shares the same history as that of Chekhov of being a grandson of a serf. Laptev is never able to come to terms with his new found position in society. He laments his state—“. . . I'm a slave, the grandson of a serf. Before we upstarts struggle out onto the right path, many of us will fall in the fight.” (74). This state of servitude runs so deep in his family history that it is reciprocated in the form of tyranny in father-son relationships in the coming generations. Laptev tells his brother: “Our grandfather was thrashed by landowners, and every last minor civil servant hit him in the face. Our father was thrashed by our grandfather, you and I were thrashed by our father. What did this distinguished family of yours give you and me? What nerves and what blood did we receive as our inheritance?” (80). Though, Laptev's family established themselves in the haberdashery business yet the ghost of past looms large on them. Just like the chain of tyranny continues in family, so does the merchant revel in his new found power—“The merchant likes not trading, but lording it . . .”(81). Hence, time disguises the old system of serfdom by an equally ruthless capitalistic society— as Laptev perceives it: “Yes, for trade such as yours you need salesmen who are depersonalized, deprived, and you yourselves prepare them, forcing them from childhood to bow down at your feet for a piece of bread, and from childhood you train them to think that you're their benefactors . . .” (81)

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