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Subtext in the Texts of Turgenev and Chekhov

N. Vani Sri

Research Scholar

&

Prof. Rajeshwari C. Patel

HOD,

Dept. of English Language & Literature

Sri SathyaSai Institute of Higher Learning

Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

India – 515001

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Abstract:

In the world of literature, for instance, one may probably place the two Russian dramatists, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov and Ivan Turgenev, on the opposite sides of a mirror. This statement should not, however, be taken in a literal sense since it does not intend to analyse who reflects whom. Here, the mirror represents an instrumental technique called subtext which is, more or less, reflected in the work and style of the two giants of Russian literature. Both Chekhov and Turgenev put their heart and soul in giving a design of depth to their works by, occasionally, shifting the spotlight from the apparent details to the seemingly insignificant, yet essential, inner particulars.

Within a limited span of two to three hours, these playwrights, in a deliberate or subtle manner, make the readers experience a sense of *oneness* with the *multiple* characters of their plays. This can be made possible, perhaps, because of the balance between text and subtext whereby, when reading their plays, we sense the inner thoughts, feelings and emotions of the characters, and manage to relate them to our own life, unconsciously achieving, in the process, a comprehensive and well-balanced or integrated personality. This article tries to give a clear and concise picture as to how this *subtle balance* could be achieved by these two playwrights - through their usage of the technique called *subtext*.

Keywords: Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, Ivan Turgenev, plays, text, subtext, inner particulars, subtle balance.

Introduction

Wolfgang Iser said:

(O)ne text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. In this very act, the dynamics of reading are revealed. By making his decision, he implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility of the text; at the same time it is

this very inexhaustibility that forces him to make his decisions. (qtd. in Abbot 85)

A work of art reveals itself completely only when the reader equips himself - to see more, to hear more, to feel more - and only when he is fully receptive to all that is embedded in the work. The reader does not wait until the end to understand the text. From the very beginning, the reader starts to integrate the data of the text. Thus, reading can be seen as a continuous process that often requires a retrospective patterning of the earlier parts of the text.

In the world of literature, for instance, one may probably place the two Russian dramatists, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov and Ivan Turgenev, on the opposite sides of a mirror. This statement should not, however, be taken in a literal sense since it does not intend to analyse who reflects whom. Here, the mirror represents an instrumental technique called subtext which is, more or less, reflected in the work and style of the two giants of Russian literature. Both Chekhov and Turgenev put their heart and soul in giving a design of depth to their works by, occasionally, shifting the spotlight from the apparent details to the seemingly insignificant, yet essential, inner particulars.

Within a limited span of two to three hours, these playwrights, in a deliberate or subtle manner, made the readers experience a sense of *oneness* with the *multiple* characters of their plays. This was possible, perhaps, because of the balance between **text** and **subtext** whereby, when reading their plays, we sense the inner thoughts, feelings and emotions of the characters, and manage to relate them to our own life, unconsciously achieving, in the process, a comprehensive and well-balanced or integrated personality.

Subtext

“Subtext is the true meaning simmering underneath the words and actions. It’s the real, unadulterated truth. The text is the tip of the iceberg, but the subtext is everything underneath that bubbles up and informs the text. It’s the implicit meaning rather than the explicit meaning” (Seeger 2). ‘Subtext’ has a major impact on the total meaning as what one doesn’t say is often more powerful than what one says. One should remember that, very often, what we think we’re hiding is in plain sight. Subtext enriches a play in many ways. It creates complex characters, adds another layer to dialogue, and gives depth to the characters’ portrayal.

In a hologram, the image of an object gets suspended on a three-dimensional space, thereby giving it a magical effect. However, to get a clear picture of the object, one needs to view the reflection from an angle that brings all the three reflections together. Similar is the case with subtext. The only difference is that it reveals not three, but multi-dimensional facets. The playwright puts his ideas in the form of a subtext and projects it on a multi-dimensional space. The reader or the audience can get a clear picture (of what the playwright wants to convey) only when he/she brings together the different aspects of the subtext.

Characterisation:

Each person on this earth is part of a process, a process wherein he/ she is made and unmade by other people all the time. The impact of other people is continuous, and lasts one's lifetime. The characters in the plays of Chekhov and Turgenev undergo the same process, very naturally, without their knowledge. Each of them carries a unique world within their hearts, based on the experiences they have accumulated in the journey of life.

Subtext is the content of a play which is not announced openly by the characters. Hence, attention is paid mostly to the characters' physical description, emotions, actions, etc. For instance, Chekhov discovered that unhappiness could be more effectively conveyed when expressed indirectly. "Don't look sad . . .," he wrote to his wife in 1901, advising her on the technique of playing Masha's part in *Three Sisters*, "People who have been unhappy for a long time, and grown used to it, don't get beyond whistling and are often wrapped up in their thoughts. So mind you look thoughtful fairly often on the stage" (qtd. in Hingley 1: 2).

Thoughts and Attitudes:

Subtext refers to the tacit thoughts and motives of characters – what they really think and believe. Hence, it also refers to the feelings and intentions of the characters which get revealed only in an aside, gesture, monologue, etc. One of the ways used to disclose the characters' inward life is the convention of monologue. Through monologue, the author gets acquainted with the actual happenings in the inner world of his characters. The special thing about these Chekhov and Turgenev is that they are not loud, they do not make noisy scenes. Yet, their plays resonate with the critics as well as the public because they are able to penetrate into people's subconscious mind where the scenes get replayed repeatedly throughout their lifetime.

In Act III of *Three Sisters*, the fire, physical danger, mass hysteria and crowd movement - although kept off stage - force the characters into their current situation, physically, mentally and emotionally. It is the most hysterical and confessional of all the Acts, as each of the characters pour out their innerfeelings (which had no outlet for a long time) and then leave.

In Act III of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, the reader comes to know about Natalya's love for young Belyaev only through the former's monologue. It is only through this self-talk that Natalya herself realises for the first time that she is in love with Belyaev, despite knowing that her ward, Vera, is in love with him.

Themes:

Subtext refers to the true meaning seething underneath the words and actions. It is in fact, the real truth. Hence, this technique is the only way for the creator of a work to relay ideals, principles, controversial relationships or political statements without alienating viewers or readers who may refuse at the ideas outright and even reject the work. For example, the apparent theme in *Three Sisters* is the unending unhappiness of the three sisters

who yearn to go to Moscow. Over a period of some years, the three sisters grow unhappier, yearn still more for Moscow, but realise that they will never go to Moscow, though there is really nothing to prevent their going.

Chekhov's *Three Sisters* predominantly deals with the theme of a search for the meaning of life. Basically, people's search for *meaning* is a search for happiness. David Allen Karp, in his research work on depression, *Speaking of Sadness*, recalls an episode about Sigmund Freud who was once asked what people needed to be happy. The questioner expected a long, complicated answer that would reflect Freud's years of deep study on the matter. His simple response, however, was "arbeiten and leiben" (qtd. in Kharina 33), – work and love. Happy people feel connected to others at work and through their intimate relationships. When those connections are threatened, diminished, or broken, people suffer. Those who lack both things in their life – meaningful work and sustaining intimate ties – are the most vulnerable ones and are exposed to a severe existential crisis.

In Turgenev's *Fortune's Fool*, the theme of inescapable loneliness is handled in quite a remarkable way, especially in its climax. It is believed that man is a social being, but, at the same time, we should also remember that, at one point or the other in one's life, man is *essentially* a lonely being.

There is also the billiard theme which Chekhov develops in such a masterly fashion in the first three Acts of *The Cherry Orchard*. Every time it occurs, it indicates the presence of a subconscious struggle in Gayev's mind.

Atmosphere:

Often, atmosphere in a play can be used as a transparent medium to know what the characters undergo inwardly. One gets to know all that is happening inside a character's mind by just focussing on the atmosphere prevalent in the play. Atmosphere is also used to predict any major changes that may take place in the course of the play. For instance, *Three Sisters* begins on the eleventh of May, Irina's name day. It is a year since her father passed away. His death during summer, a season filled with energy and fun, indicates that he, along with those around him, are missing out on life.

In addition to weather and seasons, certain verbal echoes can be used to create the feeling of suffocation, oppression, etc. For example, in Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, Alexey says, ". . . I'm suffocating here, I want to be out where I can breathe" (5.118.), referring to Islayev's estate. It is worth pointing out that Chekhov also made an exhaustive use of words like 'stifling,' 'suffocate,' etc., in plays such as *Uncle Vania* and *Ivanov*.

Symbolism:

Subtext is used to imply controversial subjects, through the use of imagery, without specifically estranging people. In *Ivanov*, each time Anna appears on the scene, one can hear the hoot of an invisible owl. The reader may wonder as to why the author introduces the sound of the owl hooting only when Anna appears. From the mythological viewpoint, an owl

serves as a sign of an impending death. We may suppose that Chekhov wanted to suggest that Anna does not have even the last vestiges of life left on this earth.

The frequent image used in *Three Sisters* is Moscow. It represents that unattainable condition of life for which the sisters aspire. The Moscow of their dreams remains elusive since they do not put in any efforts to make it happen.

Sometimes, props are used as metaphors. Generally, objects carry with them the associations projected upon them by the characters. For instance, the three sisters pose for a photograph along with the soldiers. A photo freezes a moment – usually a happy moment – and, for these sisters, the presence of these soldiers spells happiness for them.

In the first act of Ivan Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, we see that Alexey is busy in making a kite for Kolya. Here, the kite symbolises the agitation he triggers in the lives of the other characters with his arrival on the estate.

Dialogue:

Subtext can be explained or interpreted using paraphrase. Paraphrasing is the narrowing down of dialogue to one word. This definitely makes the subtext clearer as only the most important words are focussed upon. The great plays of Chekhov have a structure in which every scrap of the dialogue is strictly relevant. In the very first Act of *Ivanov*, Borkin says, "Such is life. . . . It's like a flower that blossoms gaily in a meadow: along comes a goat, eats it up, and – it's all over . . ." (42). On the very first reading, this dialogue of Borkin seems out of context. But, when we read it again, we come to know that the 'life' implied in the context is the life of Anna, who is fast approaching death at a very young age. Apparently, upon re-reading, we realise that the same truth has a universal application. It includes all those people who reach the peak of their profession at a young age, and then death comes and eats them up, thereby putting an end to their life and career.

In the same Act, we have Ivanov advising Lvov,

....And, generally speaking, my friend, build your whole life according to an ordinary, commonplace pattern. The more flat and monotonous the background, the better. Don't try to battle with the multitude single-headed, don't go fighting with the windmills, don't try to ram down walls with your head....Shut yourself up in your shell and do your small job, the job God gave you....It's more human and honest and healthy. (47)

Through this dialogue, Chekhov, perhaps, wanted to convey that there is more peace and harmony in an ordinary life, and in the performance of ordinary jobs, compared to an extraordinary life that is busy in its fulfilment of unusual activities.

Subtext is also the content underneath the spoken dialogue. The dialogue may express conflict, indifference, anger, competition, pride or other implicit ideas and emotions.

For instance, Chekhov expresses the pain and finality of death against a background of indifference in the natural world when Vershinin says, "Yes, we shall be forgotten. Such is our fate, and we can't do anything about it. And all of the things that seem serious, important

and full of meaning to us now will be forgotten one day – or anyway they won't seem important anymore" (1.259-60).

Sometimes, the characters tend to say the opposite of what they really feel, especially in moments of confusion and conflict. An instance is Rakitin's response in Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, after Natalya confides in her friend, Rakitin (who has been in love with Natalya), and tells him how she was taken in by Alexey's youth and fell in love with him:

RAKITIN bitterly. Yes, ma'am . . . Natalya Petrovna, I'll do my best to deserve your trust in me . . . but would you allow me to collect myself a little . . .

NATALYA PETROVNA. Collect yourself? Why, are you afraid of some . . . unpleasantness? Has something changed?

RAKITIN *bitterly*: Oh no! Everything is exactly as it was. (3.67)

Gestures:

Subtext refers to all the meanings that are not stated, but lie beneath – and this implies not just words but also gestures, behaviour, actions, and images. One needs to decode the non-verbal messages such as a shift in the tone of the voice, a shrug of the shoulder, the lift of an eyebrow, in order to be alerted to the existence of subtext. In Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, Natalya and Vera often take deep sighs. Sighs, in general, are linked to a negative mood – a sign of disappointment, defeat, frustration, boredom, etc. They can also be an expression of resignation. Natalya's sighs can be perceived as an expression of discontentment with her life, and that of Vera's a reflection of life's sadness.

Pauses:

Sometimes, subtext is communicated in the pauses. More important than action and the spoken word is the conveyance of the atmosphere of life compounded of indefinite half-feelings, misty emotions, perceptible only in the trailing off of an unfinished speech, a break in dialogue, a forlorn pause, a moment of silence, etc. For instance, in *A Month in the Country*,

NATALYA PETROVNA. Poor little thing – you're in love. . . . *Vera presses herself closer to Natalya Petrovna's bosom.* You are in love . . . and, he, Vera, he?

VERA *still without raising her head.* Why do you want me to tell you . . . I don't

know. . . Maybe . . . I don't know, I don't know . . . *Natalya Petrovna shudders and remains motionless. Vera lifts her head and suddenly notices an odd expression on her (Natalya) face.* Natalya Petrovna, what's the matter? (3.73)

Natalya's face changes, perhaps, from a loving to a stern expression because she is quite shocked to hear even a slight affirmation from Vera's side. The validation, however small, comes as a bolt out of the blue for her, as it confirms her worst fear. Though not expressed explicitly by Vera, Natalya reads through Vera's pauses that Belyaev indeed reciprocates Vera's love.

In *Three Sisters*, Irina says, "You say life is beautiful. Maybe it is – but what if it only seems to be beautiful? Our lives, I mean the lives of us three sisters, haven't been beautiful up to now. The truth is that life has been stifling us, like weeds in a garden" (1.268). Here, Irina's statement that life is beautiful changes into a strong disavowal immediately after a slight pause.

Repetition of words for resonance:

Sometimes, a word is repeated several times. The subtext comes out not just through the individual word but also through the repetition of it. In *Three Sisters*, Olga's dialogue – "if only we knew" (4.330) - is repeated several times to reveal a strong desire for making sense of life.

Panpsychism:

People tend to see objects as 'they' are, since these objects mirror their past, their pains, their hopes, etc. In such cases, these things cannot be treated as 'mere objects.' They become an integral part of people's feelings and life. It is clear that Chekhov imagined his characters down to the last detail of mannerism and dress: Chekhov gives a detailed description of the character, Lopakhin, to Danchenko – Lopakhin wears a white vest and brown boots; carries a lot of money in his breast pocket; he takes big steps and waves his arms as he walks. He thinks while he walks and, therefore, walks in a straight line. Since his hair is rather long, he often tosses his head back. When lost in his thoughts, he strokes his beard from back to front, i.e., from neck to mouth. Thus, in Chekhov's plays, even costumes and mannerisms 'act.'

Leonid Andreyev coined the word 'panpsychism' (qtd. in Hudson 22) for this animation of inanimate objects. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Ranyevskaia feels a kind of pure happiness the minute she looks at the bookcase, while, for Gayev, it is a source from which his ancestors drew courage and wisdom. The nursery room reminds Ranyevskaia of her happy and innocent childhood days; whereas, for Lopakhin, it brings back memories of his origins.

Conclusion

Life on this earth begins with the arrival of the soul, and ends with its departure. So is the case with the plays of both Turgenev and Chekhov. All their plays unfold between two ordinary events – arrival and departure – be it with the arrival and departure of Belyaev in *A Month in the Country*, Serebriakovs in *Uncle Vania*, the regiment in *Three Sisters*, the Ranyevskaias in *The Cherry Orchard*, Lyubin in *A Provincial Lady*, or Yeletsky's arrival and

Kuzovkin's departure in *Fortune's Fool*. However, the plays don't come to an end with the departure of these eccentric characters, as both the characters and the impressions left by them still echo and live for a lifetime in the minds of Chekhov's readers.

In Act IV of *Ivanov*, Lyebedevev says to Ivanov, "(...) this is all I want to tell you: just calm your mind down! Look at things simply, as everybody else does! In this world everything is simple. The ceiling is white, the boots are black, sugar is sweet . . ." (111). On the surface level, this is addressed to Ivanov. But, when the same is projected on a bigger level, we realise that it pertains to the whole of humanity as such: At times, people complicate their lives by looking at things with eyes blinded by complexity. Life can be simpler, when viewed with eyes and a heart filled with simplicity. Every man is the painter and sculptor of his own life. Therefore, his life is bound to undergo a lot of chiselling, hard hammering, scraping and polishing. At the end, the art of living is all about enjoying a little and enduring much.

Through the character of Telyeghin in *Uncle Vania*, Chekhov seems to assert the need for one to have contentment, patience, a forgiving nature and, most important of all, to live in the present in order to experience life to the fullest:

TELYEGHIN. You know, Marina Timofyeevna, whether I'm driving through the fields, or taking a walk in a shady garden, or even just looking at this table – I feel inexpressibly happy! The weather is marvellous, the birds are singing, and we all live here in peace and harmony – what more do we need? (1.190)

In life, man gives a great deal of importance to principles. He goes to the extent of implementing them at the cost of losing one's peace of mind. One character, who seems to say that it is man's responsibility to take his principles in the right sense, and, thereby, implement them accurately, is Mariya:

MARIYA [to VOINITSKY]. You seem to be blaming those former principles of yours for something or other....It isn't they but you who are to blame. You're forgetting that principles are nothing in themselves – just empty phrases....You ought to have done something that mattered. (1.195)

Life is very simple. It is men who make it complicated. One should not complicate one's life. We need to remain calm and cool even in the worst conditions, without succumbing to anger and anxiety. The only thing that one can do is to enjoy the given moment. As George Bernard Shaw asserts, "Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is sort of a splendid torch which I have a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it over to future generations" (qtd. in Hooti 105).

They gently invite us into the subconscious world of their characters, and, as we live there for two/ three hours, we are able to get in touch with our own subconscious, humanity and perception of life. The characters in their plays walk amongst us every day. Or, perhaps,

they live within us. All of us probably have a little of Ivanov, Kuzovkin, little of Belyaev, a bit of: Rakitin, Vera, Natalya Petrovna in us. There is a miniscule form of Olga (s), Masha, Irena, and Natasha, and a small part of Ranyevskaia, Lopakhin, Ania and Varia within us. By looking at them on the stage, these two playwrights make us realise that it is we who are depicted on the stage in disguised forms.

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