

**CHEKHOV'S ART OF WRITING
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CRITICAL ESSAYS**

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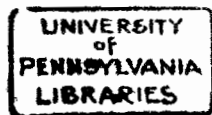
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CHEKHOV'S *SEAGULL*: ETHEREAL CREATURE OR STUFFED BIRD?

Ellen Chances

When discussing Chekhov's play *The Seagull*, one can divide criticism into two schools. There are those interpretations, set forth in excellent articles and excellent productions, which belong to the "ethereal creature" school. Nina is seen as a poor, naive, young girl who, like a seagull, strives to spread her wings and be free. The play within the play, according to "ethereal creature" proponents, represents the efforts of a struggling young playwright in his search for new art forms. The seagull image itself has been plucked bare. Leonid Grossman has stated that the seagull is a symbol of Nina's unhappy fate and of human fate in general. Nina is said to be like the wounded bird who silently watches the cruelties of life unfold before its eyes.¹ Or, the seagull is said to symbolize the fate of Trepnev.² Or, the seagull is made to represent the beauty of all living things.³ Or, it is interpreted as a representation of Nina's own personal struggle and of her ability to triumph, and as a symbol of the destruction of beauty.⁴

There are also those interpretations which belong to the "stuffed bird" school. The exponent of this school (the author of this article) certainly does not deny the perceptivity of other interpretations. It is, however, important to bear in mind that the play can be given a less serious reading as well. After all, Chekhov did entitle the play *Chaika. Komediia v chetyrekh deistviakh* (Emphasis mine-E.C.). In addition, Chekhov's use of symbols in the play is, to a certain extent, ironic.

Let us examine the evidence. Take Nina, for example. What is she? She is far from the beautiful, fragile, poetic being which she and others consider her. Rather, she is a plain, talentless girl, mesmerized by the vacuous notion of fame. One has only to count the number of times she repeats the word "famous" (*izvestnyi*). She casts aside the unknown author Trepnev in order to chase the double rainbows of fame and Trigorin, and she ends up as a mediocre provincial actress in a cold, empty hotel room in Elets.

Consider the play within the play as another telling piece of evidence. Treplev's creation, with its Eternal Matter, red devil eyes, and new forms, can hardly be treated in a serious manner. Although Arkadina the actress has no role in her son's play, Chekhov has given her a key role in the scene--that of discrediting the performance of the play. Her mocking comments, first that the play belongs to the Decadent School, and later, that the Devil with his blood-red eyes is merely sulphur, create in the real audience the sceptical attitude toward symbolism which cannot easily be dispelled when applied to other symbolic elements in *The Seagull*. In a way, one can even speak of elements of parody in the treatment of symbolism here.

Minor incidents of an episodic nature also contribute to the theory of *The Seagull* as a "stuffed bird" play. There is, for example, the exchange in which Treplev speaks to Nina of a Romeo-and-Juliet-like scene. He will follow her home, he says, and will stand in the garden all night, watching her window. Nina shatters this romantic illusion by answering: "You can't. The watchman will notice you. Tresor still isn't used to you; he'll bark" (XI. 148).

The very beginning of Act One serves as still another example. Chekhov blows up many a romantic balloon, only to stick pins in them. In fact, he uses this technique in the very first lines of the play. Medvedenko asks Masha why she always wears black. When she explains that she is in mourning for her life, Medvedenko injects the everyday world of rubles into her misty spheres of poetry: "I don't understand... You're healthy. Although your father isn't rich, he's well-off. My life is much more difficult than yours. I get only twenty-three rubles a month. In addition, they deduct my superannuation from that. All the same, I don't wear mourning" (XI. 144).

Masha tries again: "The money doesn't matter. Even a poor man can be happy" (XI. 144). Yet again Medvedenko responds to Masha's starry-eyed world with a lesson in economics. "That's in theory, but in practice, it works out like this: there's me, my mother, two sisters and my little brother, and my salary is only twenty-three rubles. After all, one has to eat and drink, right? And one needs tea and sugar, right? And tobacco, right? Try to get by on that" (XI. 144).

And what about the role of the seagull image, according to the "stuffed bird" school? The image does,

of course, play a very important part in the play. We human beings observe birds as they drift gently, always beyond our grasp, in the blue expanses above. In "To a Skylark," Shelley, for instance, places the skylark on a romantic pedestal--"Hail to thee blithe spirit!... and singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest." Chekhov endows his own bird image with a great number of dimensions. Already in Act One, Chekhov sets up the association between the seagull and Nina, who says she's drawn to the lake as if she were a seagull. Later, when Treplev lays a dead seagull at her feet and identifies himself with it, she mocks the very symbol which she had chosen for herself and which she later uses again. At the end of Act Four, the seagull makes a last entrance--stuffed, its poignant symbolic value underlined. Trigorin has forgotten that he ordered the stuffing of the very bird of which he had once spoken: "A subject for a short story: a young girl like you [Nina] has lived by a lake since childhood. She loves the lake as does a seagull, and she is happy and free as a seagull. But a man happens to come by who sees her; and to while away the time, he destroys her, just like this seagull" (XI. 168).

The seagull image, as we have seen, is usually interpreted in a serious way. Although to do so is valid, it is, I believe, just as appropriate to consider it in another light. Just as thematically and stylistically Chekhov was puncturing illusions, so too he brings the poetic bird down from its soaring heights. In his hands, the seagull becomes, by the final act, nothing more than a stuffed bird, a delight for taxidermists. The seagull has become a symbol, not only of destroyed lives or of Nina's or Treplev's fate, but of the overriding theme of the play, the stripping away of the many layers of artificiality. And the way Chekhov has done this is to laugh at the very image. After the tremendous build-up during the play, it is laughable that Trigorin cannot even remember that he has ordered the bird to be stuffed. The fact that Chekhov chooses a scavenger bird (although the seagull is, of course, also evocative of romantic visions of freedom and the restless sea) contributes to the touches of comedy. In addition, Chekhov's pounding the reader on the head with references to the seagull adds to the comic effect. Chekhov, master of subtlety and suggestion, creator of the half-statement, painter of an entire mood with but a few strokes of the pen,

knew full well what he was doing as he repeatedly dragged the seagull image before his audience in this play. Really, then, in many ways, the entire play might, perhaps, be considered as a parody of symbolism.

Chekhov's method can fruitfully be described as that which was first attributed to Gogol, *smekh skvoz' slezy* ("laughter through tears"). This feature runs throughout his short stories, even in his so-called "comic" pre-1886 period. In this respect one has only to think, for example, of "Death of a Government Clerk." The story is funny, but at the same time, there is a real sense of pathos, too.

The aftertaste--and not even the aftertaste, but an integral effect--of the play under consideration is not at all funny. What one is left with is the sad, melancholy, minor key. Chekhov's sad "message" is contained even in the small cues that he throws to his audience. At the beginning of Act Two, for instance, as Arkadina is reading aloud, Nina wanders by and asks what she is reading. The answer is Maupassant's *Sur l'eau*. It is indeed surprising that critical literature has hitherto failed to pick up the obvious connection between the two works.⁵

The passage which Arkadina reads from *Sur l'eau* concerns the practice in society for women, by means of flattery, to capture that much sought-after creature, the writer. The practice is compared to corn merchants' breeding of rats in their granaries. Arkadina emphatically denies the applicability of the statement to Russians. Citing herself and Trigorin, she insists that Russian relationships are based on love. The audience, however, readily sees that her relationship with Trigorin does fit the Maupassant description. She continues to read to herself, then abruptly closes the book after saying, "Oh, well, the next part isn't interesting and isn't true" (XI. 159).

Just what *is* this "next part"? Maupassant's narrator writes:

When, therefore, a woman has fixed her choice on the writer she intends to adopt, she lays siege to him by means of every variety of compliments, attractions, and indulgence. Like water which, drop by drop, slowly wears away the hardest rock, the fulsome praise falls at each

word on the impressionable heart of the literary man. Then, when she sees that he is moved, touched, and won by the constant flattery, she isolates him, severing, little by little, the ties he may have elsewhere, and imperceptibly accustoms him to come to her house, make himself happy, and there enshrines his thoughts. In order the more thoroughly to acclimatize him in her house, she paves the way for his success, brings him forward, sets him in relief, and displays for him, before all the old *habitués* of the household, marked consideration and boundless admiration.

At last, realizing that he is now an idol, he remains in the temple. He finds, moreover, that the position affords him every advantage, for all other women lavish their most delicate favors upon him to entice him away from his conqueror.⁶

Although this is the only place where the Maupassant work is mentioned, knowledge of the novel reveals its immense significance for the Chekhov play as a whole. The narrator of *Sur l'eau* is on a small boat, the Bel-Ami, which sails from port to port along the French Mediterranean coast. Each chapter of the book is constructed around the narrator's observations as he wanders through a town. In the second chapter, "Cannes," the one which is quoted in *The Seagull*, Maupassant's narrator takes note of the preponderance of princes and prince worshippers. He describes those who eagerly encircle the prince and then tell you what the princess answered or the Grand Duke replied. "One feels, one sees, one guesses," continues the narrator, "that they frequent no other society but that of persons of Royal blood, and if they deign to speak to you, it is in order to inform you exactly of what takes place on these heights."⁷ The narrator then delineates the "...various races of heroworshippers."⁸

He continues his discourse on Cannes by writing that he is certain that he can predict the topic of conversation at parties, at villas and hotels: "...people were gathered together this evening, as they will be tomorrow and...they are talking. Talking! about what? The Princes! the weather! And then?--the weather!--the Princes!--and then--about nothing!...I have lived in

hotels, I have endured the emptiness of the human soul as it is there laid bare."⁹

A similar undercurrent of the phoniness of life runs through the Chekhov play. Nina, as we have observed, serves as a prime example. Sorin, at one point, comments that his appearance is the tragedy of his life. Because he *looked* as if he drank, women were never attracted to him, he tells Treplev. Appearance was more important than substance. Maupassant's narrator informs us that there is a promenade which goes along the coast. Roses and orange blossoms line the walks. Yet the fragrant aromas are merely covering the odors of death, for this is also the location of a cemetery, filled with aristocratic victims of tuberculosis from all over Europe.

It would almost seem worthwhile to reproduce the entire Cannes chapter, so much of which is crucial to the understanding of *The Seagull*. After a few more emphatic statements about the stupidity and false pride of the human animal, our visitor to Cannes philosophizes on the nature of happiness. Some people are happy, he writes, because they envision life as a light play in which they themselves are the actors. Life, or the play, amuses them although it offers nothing of substance. Arkadina, who plays equally insipid roles on stage and in life, seems to fit well into this category. Even if she herself lives behind a wall of illusion, the audience cannot be kidded about the true nature of her life. She is shown as a flighty creature who acts in second-rate plays and is concerned mainly with facades. She rejects her son, for he reminds her of the fact that time does not stop. She clings to Trigorin, the Very Famous Person, even in the face of his infatuation with Nina.

Technical as well as thematic considerations bind the two works. In one chapter, Maupassant's narrator speaks about the mysterious influence which the moon exerts on human beings. The poet, he says, promotes romantic illusions about the moon. "When it rises behind the trees, when it pours forth its shimmering light on the flowering river...are we not haunted by all the charming ruses with which it has inspired great dreamers?"¹⁰ However, the narrator quickly disperses any illusion. The moon, he says, like any other woman, needs a husband. Disdained by the sun, this heavenly body is nothing more than a cold virgin, an old maid.

In similar fashion, the narrator deflates any notion which considers war a noble pursuit. "Civilized" man should not look down haughtily at cannibals, he maintains. After all, who is the real savage, the person who fights to eat or the person who kills for no purpose other than to kill? From all these descriptions of the Maupassant work, one can readily see that the French author in *Sur l'eau* is doing exactly the same thing as Chekhov is doing in *The Seagull*: both constantly puncture illusions, constantly remove the venerated cover of falsity to expose the deflated reality.¹¹

What Chekhov does throughout the play leads to a sad commentary on life. Yet, it seems to me that in coming to grips with the play, people have placed more emphasis on the tears than on the laughter, which is certainly there. Yes, Chekhov's seagull can mean one thing, an ethereal creature, but at the same time it is very much to be seen as a stuffed bird, too.

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NOTES

¹Leonid Grossman, "The Naturalism of Chekhov," in *Chekhov. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 34, 35.

²V.V. Ermilov, "Chaika." *Materialy i issledovaniia* (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1946), 46.

³Maurice Valency, *The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1966), 154.

⁴David Magarshack, *Chekhov the Dramatist* (London: John Lehmann, 1952), 192.

⁵In a footnote (p. 177) in *Problemy dramaturgicheskogo analiza. Chekhov* (Leningrad: Academia, 1927), S.D. Balukhatyi mentions the Maupassant passage which is quoted in Chekhov's play. Balukhatyi does write that the passage is a reflection of Arkadina's relationship with Trigorin. This is as far as he goes, though.

⁶Guy de Maupassant, *Sur l'eau or On the Face of the Water* (New York: M. Dunne, 1903), 20-21.

⁷Ibid., p. 16.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 49-50.

¹¹In fact, a study of the Maupassant work would indicate that Maupassant was Chekhov's spiritual father in drama as well as in the short story.