

Anton Chekhov and the Modernization of Sexuality in Late Imperial Russia

By

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Abstract

This study focuses on how Anton Chekhov's short prose shaped the emerging cultural discourse on sex and sexuality during the last decades of the nineteenth century in Russia. The dissertation proceeds from the premise that Chekhov showed an intense interest in problems of sexual autonomy, authority, and evolution from the beginning of his intertwined careers of medicine and writing. After abandoning a purely scientific undergraduate thesis based on the work of Charles Darwin, Chekhov instead transmuted these themes into an artistic form, blending hard and popular science, journalism and literature.

As Chekhov matured as an artist, he continued to be drawn to writers who dealt with problems of sex on a grand scale. In addition to Charles Darwin, Chekhov also gravitated towards the panoramic work of Lev Tolstoy and Emile Zola. I look at Chekhov as the cultural inheritor of these senior writers' ideas on human sexuality and evolution, and my work examines Chekhov's adaptations, reworkings, and revisions of what can be called their "master plots" on sex authority. Each chapter of the dissertation focuses on Chekhov's engagement with one of the three authors above. In this framework I include Darwin's evolutionary epic *On the Origin of Species*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and his shorter but no less impactful *Kreutzer Sonata*, and Zola's twenty-volume family saga *Les Rougon-Macquart* (*The Rougon-Macquarts*). Chapter 1 lays the foundation for studying Chekhov's interrogation of human sexuality. The chapter details how Chekhov translated the Darwinian theme from his undergraduate thesis on sex authority into his creative work across his varied career. Chapter 2 explores Chekhov's relationship to another writer who

championed a scientific approach to literature, Emile Zola, specifically regarding the latter's depiction of modern sexuality and its evolutionary underpinnings. Chapter 3 focuses on Chekhov's relationship with an author who blatantly rejected both science and medicine as valid areas of inquiry—yet still considered himself an expert on the human—Lev Tolstoy. The conclusion offers varied approaches for the continued study of sexuality in Chekhov's oeuvre.

Introduction:

Sex and Sexuality in Russian Letters

My holy of holies is the human body...
Letter from Chekhov to A.N. Pleshcheev
4 October 1888¹

In late imperial Russia, to quote historian Laura Engelstein, “sex was a political subject.”² During the period between the mid-19th century and the Revolution of 1905, leading Russian authors and thinkers tended to pose questions of social injustice, political reform, and moral decline within the framework of domestic relationships between men and women. Provocative early examples of such works include Aleksandr Herzen’s social novel *Who Is to Blame?* (1846), which follows the relationship of a young couple which is torn apart by adultery, and Nikolai Chernyshevskii’s utopian novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), whose young heroine Vera Pavlovna breaks away from her family and an arranged marriage to build a collective of women workers. By the late 19th century, the publication of Lev Tolstoy’s novels *Anna Karenina* (1877), *Kreutzer Sonata* (1889) and *Resurrection* (1899) sparked heated public debates over the nature of sexual autonomy and authority in which Russia’s leading intellectuals took part.³

¹ *Pis'ma III*, 11.

² Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia*, 1.

³ Throughout the dissertation, Russian names and words are transliterated using the Library of Congress system (without the diacritical marks), with the exception of very commonly used spellings of authors such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Here I have retained the most frequent renderings in English to avoid confusion.

During this time period, Russian intellectuals were both positively and negatively responding to cultural influences from the West. Keeping this in mind, Engelstein notes, “it is therefore not surprising to find the question of sex deeply embedded in social and political concerns. Recent scholarship has shown that Western societies have made sex and gender norms central to the structure of fundamental power relations and to the organization of cultural categories.”⁴ The beginning of this era in Russian history is demarcated by Alexander’s Great Reforms of the 1860s, which transformed these power relations at all levels of Russian society. By freeing the serfs and loosening censorship constraints and reforming the systems of law and local government, he also created a modern civil society, made up of people from the professional disciplines, albeit one without access to political power for the vast majority of its members. Although a select few worked with bureaucrats in order to effect further policy reforms, most were excluded from holding official governmental positions. In essence, this meant that the majority of civil society was in direct competition with the Imperial authority for control over Russia’s modernization. One of the major issues of contention was the question of sexuality. The participants in this new civil arena—doctors, lawyers, teachers, writers—began to agitate for their views on the sex question.

At this time, there was much for this newly formed civic community to discuss. On the one hand, most of these professionals rejected the traditional patriarchal way of life. But, on the other, even after the reforms, women very much remained trapped in the old-fashioned patriarchal order. At all levels of society, Russian women were dependent on the

⁴ Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia*, 2.

consent of male relatives in order to seek paid employment, and even to obtain their passport so that they could move about the country without legal restraint. In the sphere of professional life itself, they were at a severe disadvantage; not only did they have limited access to higher education, but also, many professions refused to admit women, including administrative service to the state.

In the sphere of family life, women, in comparison to male heirs, were restricted as to the inheritance they could receive, although they were able to keep whatever property they might have brought into marriage. Even so, married life itself was fraught with limits on a woman's personal autonomy: abortion was illegal and divorces and legal separations were almost unheard of. Moreover, such dissolutions entailed a severe degree of personal and professional embarrassment for all involved. Despite the fact that in the latter half of the 19th century the nuclear family gained prominence as a building block of modern Russian urban society, and thus more and more people began to live lives that were more independent of a larger collective community, the female sexual autonomy that came to characterize these modern urban families was still difficult for many to accept.

Many prominent thinkers took part in this theater of ongoing public debate on sexuality and the status of women in the rapidly modernizing late imperial Russia, from the jurist V.D. Nabokov, to the writers Leonid Andreev, Vasilii Rozanov, and Lev Tolstoy. The participation of some writers in the public debates of this time period has been studied extensively by many scholars. However, a crucial voice, not as loud perhaps but no less passionate in its response, also contributed but has not been the subject of much scholarly enquiry: that of Anton Chekhov. Although Chekhov was not known for his outspoken social and political views, he nonetheless took part in the debate on sexual morality. As is usual

for Chekhov, he did not make any direct public statements or contribute to journalistic polemics. Rather, he wove his responses into his artistic work. The way in which Chekhov situated himself in the broader discourse on women and sexuality in late imperial Russia forms the subject of this dissertation.

The dissertation proceeds from the premise that Chekhov showed an intense interest in problems of sexual autonomy, authority, and evolution from the beginning of his intertwined careers of medicine and writing. When Chekhov was in medical school at Moscow University from 1879-1884, he planned to write a doctoral thesis inspired by the work of Charles Darwin. To be titled *A History of Sexual Authority*, the thesis was to examine the history of sexual dominance in the natural world's mating species, from insects all the way up the evolutionary chain to human beings. Considering how ambitious such a project would have been, it is not surprising that Chekhov abandoned it shortly after graduation in favor of more immediate concerns, such as earning a living by treating patients and writing for the small press. Issues of sex authority continued to captivate, however. Over the course of his writing career, Chekhov instead transmuted them into an artistic form that blended hard science and popular science, journalism and literature.

As Chekhov matured as an artist, he continued to be drawn to writers who dealt with problems of sex on a grand scale. Here it should be noted that the term "sex" refers to both ideas about what constitutes permissible and impermissible sexual conduct, as well as to what Engelstein terms "the political purposes accomplished by the creation of 'man' and 'woman' as social categories."⁵ In addition to Charles Darwin, Chekhov also gravitated

⁵ Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia*, 9.

towards the panoramic work of Lev Tolstoy and Emile Zola. In Chekhov's Russia, these three authors' writings were so widely dispersed that no debate on human sexuality could do without them. Although Darwin was writing in the scientific realm, his works *On the Origin of the Species* and *The Descent of Man* made him a household name and provided the symbolic capital necessary for the discussion of sex to take root in Russian intellectual circles. Also an avid reader of Darwin's work, Zola prided himself on both the sexual frankness of his novels and on his tremendous popularity in Russia. Both of these factors combined to give Zola's sexual decadence a uniquely strong grip on the Russian intelligentsia of the late 19th century.⁶ By way of illustration, a Russian correspondent of the time period used Zola's description of French country life to validate his own impressions of the graphic sexual nature of life in rural Russia. He writes,

I do not know whether Zola in *La Terre* correctly describes the life of French villages. But the ways of a Russian village, where I passed part of my childhood, fairly resemble those described by Zola. In the life of the rural population into which I was plunged everything was impregnated with erotism. One was surrounded by animal lubricity in all its immodesty.⁷

Finally, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, Tolstoy orchestrated renewed and vigorous debate on the meaning of sex in modern family life in Russia in the 1890s with his novella the *Kreutzer Sonata*, which so thoroughly permeated Russian cultural consciousness that no discussion on human sexuality could then take place without invoking Tolstoy's name for either good or ill.

⁶ Rosalind Marsh, "Sex, Religion and Censorship in a Russian Woman's Novel of the Silver Age: Anna Mar's *Zhenshchina na kreste* (*Woman on the Cross*)," 257.

⁷ This letter from an unnamed correspondent may be found in Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sex in Relation to Society*, 39.

I look at Chekhov as the cultural inheritor of these senior writers' ideas on human sexuality and evolution, and my work examines Chekhov's adaptations, reworkings, and revisions of what can be called their "master plots" on sex authority. Each chapter of the dissertation focuses on Chekhov's engagement with one of the three authors above. In this framework I include Darwin's evolutionary epic *On the Origin of Species*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and his shorter but no less impactful *Kreutzer Sonata*, and Zola's twenty-volume family saga *Les Rougon-Macquart* (*The Rougon-Macquarts*).⁸

Previous Research

To date, longer studies have been curiously silent regarding Chekhov's relationship to issues of sex. These lacunae are found both in works on 19th-century literary and cultural history in general and in studies on Chekhov's work in particular. In a seminal article from 1991, "Inappropriate Words' and the Image of a Classic," preeminent Chekhov scholar A.P. Chudakov traces the origins of this gap.⁹ As he explains, published editions of Chekhov's personal correspondence were purged of much of his frank commentary on women and sexual relationships. This process began with the first edition of his (selected) letters, edited by his sister Maria Pavlovna Chekhova, published in 1912-1916, and continued with the first complete edition published in 1948-1952 as part of the twenty-volume set of Chekhov's collected works. In total, Chudakov calculates that over 500 passages in this collected edition of Chekhov's letters were subjected to cuts. Even the Academy edition of

⁸ While this work was published as twenty separate volumes, it was viewed by both author and readers alike as one continuous narrative. In fact, the cycle was referred to in the Russian press during the 1870s and 1880s as the "bol'shoi roman" or "great novel."

⁹ See A.P. Chudakov, "Neprilichnye slova' i oblik klassika," 54-56.

Chekhov's works from 1974-1983 preserves many of these deletions. The excision of such unsavory passages was connected with "literary politics...for everything that did not correspond to the canonical image of a 'classic,' of a 'great author' had to be removed."¹⁰ Scholar Peter Ulf Moeller also discusses the consequences of such Soviet sanitation projects. In the introduction to his excellent study *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoy and the Debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s*, he notes that topics concerning sexuality were "an inconceivable subject during the Stalin era," while "the reservations of that period are still, to some extent, in effect today [through the late 1980s]."¹¹

In light of these circumstances, Chudakov notes that it comes as no shock that a sanctified image of both the man and the writer circulates in readers' minds and scholarly works. While Chudakov briefly mentions passages from Chekhov's censored letters that discuss literary works, and thus could shed light on sexual themes in Chekhov's creative output, he does not appear to have pursued this avenue of research. Chudakov died a few years after this article's publication, in 1997, seemingly not having applied his findings to Chekhov's prose. In his 2005 work *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, Michael Finke also discusses how biographers have tended to perpetuate the view of Chekhov as a sexual ascetic. He also goes into some detail as to why Soviet scholars avoided the discussion of sex regarding Chekhov's life and works.¹² A passage from Sophie Laffitte's 1974 biography

¹⁰ A.P. Chudakov, "Neprilichnye slova' i oblik klassika," 54.

¹¹ Peter Ulf Moeller, *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoy and the Debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s*, xiii.

¹² See Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, 142-146.

of Chekhov succinctly illustrates this trend. Without mentioning the terms “sex” or “sexuality” directly, Laffitte nonetheless concludes that Chekhov had nothing to do with either. In her chapter entitled “Chekhov and Women,” she writes,

By his own choice, love played little part in Chekhov’s life...he repulsed [women’s] demands on him, and defended himself doggedly and deliberately from the possessiveness that a woman can exercise on a man in love with her. Under no circumstances was he prepared to let himself be ‘devoured,’ engrossed or diverted from his essential task. That a man of talent should sacrifice everything to his talent, was young Chekhov’s firm conviction. A desire to protect his independence and concentrate on the aims that he had set for himself, was the basic reason for Chekhov’s extremely cautious attitude towards the pretty young women who surrounded him in his youth, some of whom loved him deeply.¹³

It should be noted that Donald Rayfield’s 1998 biography *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, swings to the opposite pole, marshalling a truly impressive amount of archival research to argue for Chekhov’s sexual promiscuity. Rayfield, however, has not to date parlayed his findings on Chekhov’s personal life into research on sex and sexuality in the author’s creative work.

In fact, the results of this squeamishness continue to reverberate today. On the one hand, while Laura Engelstein’s groundbreaking book *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* gives an excellent and thorough background to the debates on the sex question that raged in late imperial Russia and includes in detail such prominent writers as Tolstoy and Vasilii Rozanov, she does not discuss Chekhov’s participation in these polemics in any depth. On the other hand, even recent monographs on Chekhov tend to shy away from the admittedly touchy subject of sex. This is true for works such as Donald Rayfield’s 1999 update of his 1975 publication *Chekhov: the Evolution of His Art*, and Ronald Hingley’s studies *Anton Chekhov: A Biographical and*

¹³ Sophie Laffitte, *Chekhov: 1860-1904*, 193.

Critical Study and *A New Life of Anton Chekhov*. In these studies, “sex” and “sexuality” do not appear in the index, and appear only a handful of times in a digital search of the texts. A couple of exceptions are worth noting: Beverly Hahn’s 1974 study *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Stories and Plays*, which does feature “feminine sexuality” as a searchable subject item, and Finke’s aforementioned monograph *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*. However, the total number of pages Hahn devotes to in-depth analysis of this subject is small, while Finke’s focus is on symbolic interpretations of the erotic in Chekhov as well as on the significance of sex in Chekhov’s personal life, and not on contemporary dialogue. There have also been a few articles dedicated to the study of sexuality in Chekhov, although they too tend to focus narrowly on only a few select stories. Such articles include Joseph L. Conrad’s “Sensuality in Chekhov’s Prose,” Caryl Emerson’s “Chekhov and the Annas,” and Shoshana Knapp’s “Herbert Spencer in Chekhov’s ‘Skucnaja istroija’ and ‘Duel’”: The Love of Science and the Science of Love.” The dissertation draws upon these articles, in particular the work of Caryl Emerson, in order to tell a broader and more nuanced story.

By contrast to the above, the present study examines Chekhov’s creative treatment of such controversial subjects as sex, sexuality, and human evolution in a range of stories, from obscure early parodies and humoristic pieces from Chekhov’s early days writing for the penny press, to some of Chekhov’s most well-known and treasured works, such as “Anyuta,” “The Duel” and “The Lady with the Little Dog,” and in so doing, seeks to fill in a portion of this gap.

Methodology

The dissertation takes the position that Chekhov is an ideal and necessary figure to consider precisely in the context of sexual authority, because his dual careers of medicine and literature mean that he was located at the intersection of two disparate groups of professionals who were seeking to create a modern civil society with modern views on sexuality. As Engelstein notes, physicians went about this work by the exercise of public and professional responsibility, while writers did so via the molding of public opinion. Chekhov is unique in that he participated in both processes, the one informing the other. Chekhov himself considered both of these professions indispensable to the success of his work: as he told his close acquaintance Tania Shchepkina-Kupernik many times, “Study medicine, my friend, if you want to be a real writer.”¹⁴

The body of the dissertation will comprise a close analysis of Chekhov’s recastings of characters, motifs, thematic arcs and the underpinning ideology that were a part of the broader discourse on sexuality into his own stories. In order to focus the dissertation, I limit my analysis to Chekhov’s engagement with Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and *Kreutzer Sonata*, and Zola’s saga *The Rougon-Macquarts*. The analytic or close-reading approach will also play a significant role in my analysis, since both Chekhov and short stories in general presuppose the fact that every detail matters. Where appropriate, I also supplement my readings of Chekhov’s primary texts with material from his letters, notes and various other biographical realia, as it is very often the case that his personal documents offer insights both into his own creative output and his attitude towards the works of others never made public in any other forum. I place an especial

¹⁴ Tania Shchepkina-Kupernik, “O Chekhove,” in *A.P. Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, 240.

focus on his little-known (and even lesser-studied) works. These stories can thus be thought of as smaller “case studies” that put the larger ideas on sex into practice.

The framework used to analyze these stories will incorporate and interrogate conceptual and theoretical models from the cultural history of science and medicine (Engelstein, 1992; Vucinich, 1963; 1988), feminist criticism (Grosz, 2011; Mandelker, 1993; Mazzoni, 2002), as well as contemporary “popular science” works on biology and sexuality (Brehm, 1911; Veresaev, 1902; Zhuk, 1906).¹⁵ Insights from theories of parody augment the analysis of Chekhov’s humor, which often functions to mock those who misunderstand the science behind evolutionary biology and human sexuality. Empirical findings presented by historians James Allen Rogers and Daniel Todes (1989); the analysis of evolution and its opposite, degeneration, in 19th century Europe, as described by Daniel Pick (1989); and cultural analysis of the role of the “sex question” in Russian literature of the 1890s by Peter Ulf Moeller further contribute to my readings of Chekhov’s portrayal of sexuality as linked to a larger cultural phenomenon.¹⁶

Much of the analysis in this dissertation springs from Chekhov’s use of intertextual links with the authors mentioned above: Darwin, Tolstoy and Zola. As a literary concept,

¹⁵ See Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia*; Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought and Science in Russian Culture, Vols 1 and 2*; Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*; Amy Mandelker, *Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Victorian Novel*; Cristina Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions*; Alfred Edmund Brehm, *Brehm’s Life of Animals: A Complete Natural History for Popular Home Instruction and for the Use of Schools*; Vikenty Veresaev, *Zapiski vracha and Confessions of a Physician*; V.N. Zhuk, *Mat’ i ditya. Gigiena v obshchedostupnom izlozhenii*.

¹⁶ See the multiple articles by James Allen Rogers listed in the present study’s bibliography (these articles were meant to be gathered into one book-length volume which never materialized); Daniel P. Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*; Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918*; Peter Ulf Moeller, *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoy and the Debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s*.

the term “intertextuality” was coined by theorist Julia Kristeva in 1966 to describe the open exchange between the text of the subject and that of the addressee. It is important to note that, for Kristeva, a text is not a fixed, discrete entity; rather, it is a “permutation of texts.”¹⁷

In an article on intertextuality in the Russian literary canon, Slavist Lyudmila Parts explains:

As a rule, intertextual elements signal the author’s intent to respond to an earlier text. The effect of such a linkage is twofold: as the new text encapsulates the older one’s themes and images in order to use them for its own starting point, the older text is reread through the prism of the new one. The new text, meanwhile, establishes its place in the tradition, capitalizing on its relationship with those texts already sanctified by cultural memory. This sequence is potentially endless since there is always a possibility of a new voice joining in the exchange. By the same token, the sequence can reach as far back into the past as the chain of texts allows.¹⁸

Evidence from his personal correspondence reveals that Darwin, Tolstoy and Zola were among the most influential writers and thinkers for Chekhov. Moreover, they all wrote grand, sweeping narratives that provided seemingly endless material for a short story writer, famous for his brevity and economy, to mine. Their large works were all the more important because Chekhov himself famously had trouble sustaining his own large narrative structures. As a writer, he habitually attempted long and ambitious works, both of scientific research and imaginative literature, that he subsequently aborted. As was discussed above, Chekhov planned to write a Darwinian scholarly thesis while in medical school, but after graduation, he put active research on the project aside, in order to gather materials for another thesis he was never to write, this time on the history of medicine in

¹⁷ See Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and Novel” in *The Kristeva Reader*, 34-61.

¹⁸ Lyudmila Parts, “Down the Intertextual Lane: Petrushevskaja, Chekhov, Tolstoy,” 77.

Russia.¹⁹ On the creative side, Chekhov worked for many years on a novel that never made it past a fragmented state.²⁰ In a letter to Suvorin of 1888, Chekhov even goes so far as to claim he did not have the “strength” to complete a novel.²¹ For these reasons, scholars agree that the short story was the genre best suited to Chekhov’s talents. Thus, relying on these “master plots” as source material was an expedient way of ensuring Chekhov could write about the subjects that mattered to him, while still working in the genre in which he excelled.

This framework is in line with Caryl Emerson, as she posits that an artist writing in the short form could make use of larger, highly recognized narratives—a category which applies to all of these works under discussion by Darwin, Tolstoy, and Zola in the late 19th century—by “eroding or undermining a stereotype” from the larger work. By signalling the larger work’s plot “via easily recognized motifs,” the “new, barely sketched-in world would then suggest options without having to prescribe them or exhaustively fill them in.”²² As will become clear, this approach leaves room for the voices of Darwin, Tolstoy and Zola often to echo each other in the very same stories. Such overlap is to be expected and further confirms my readings of Chekhov’s stories. As Alexander Zholkovsky remarks in his

¹⁹ See Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 110. The materials for this work, entitled *Vrachebnoe delo v Rossii* in Russian, may be found in Volume XVI of the Academy edition of Chekhov’s *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 18 tomakh*, 1974-1983. Herein, citations from this work will be cited as *PSS* plus the appropriate volume and page numbers.

²⁰ Rayfield describes how, throughout 1888-89, Chekhov attempted to write a novel based on country life in the Sumy area, where he visited his friends the Lintvaryovs at their estate, but ultimately failed to make much progress on the work. See Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 61.

²¹ Letter of 24 October 1888. This letter may be found in Volume III of the Academy edition of Chekhov’s *Polnoe sobranie pisem v 12 tomakh*, 1974-1983, p. 41. Herein, citations from this work will be cited as *Pis’ma* plus the appropriate volume and page numbers.

²² Caryl Emerson, “Chekhov and the Annas,” 123.

review of I.P. Smirnov's *The Origin of the Intertext*, "in contemporary criticism the question is not whether there are intertexts but rather how many there are for each text and of what type."²³

Finally, it may seem odd to the Slavist to include what we might think of today as a scientific treatise, i.e., *On the Origin of Species*, in a group of imaginative primary texts. However, in the Anglophone tradition of literary studies, it has become increasingly common in recent years, not to mention enormously productive, to treat Darwin as a creative writer, and not just as a scientific one. This trend broke into mainstream scholarship in 1983 with Gillian Beer's landmark work, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*.²⁴ I draw on the theoretical tools of this tradition for my own analysis of Chekhov's relationship to Darwin and his work in Chapter 1. In this connection, we should also recognize that, in the 19th century, Darwin's language was very close to the lay reader's level, and not at all laden with the jargon that we might expect from a contemporary text on evolutionary biology. Indeed, Darwin saw himself as telling a story, and his goal was to reach as many readers as possible, not to alienate them with cumbersome terminology and obscure concepts. As

²³ Alexander Zholkovsky, "Intertextuality, Its Content and Discontents," Review of I. P. Smirnov's *Porozhdenie interteksta (elementy intertekstual'nogo analiza s primerami iz tvorchestva B. L. Pasternaka)*, 726.

²⁴ I discuss Beer's work in depth in Chapter 1 of the present study. Since the first appearance of her book, many other scholars have been working in what Beer calls the "critical coalface" of the study of science in relation to literature. Beer names some of the most noteworthy work in this vein as the following: Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Science: The Make Believe of a Beginning*; George Levine (ed.), *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature; Realism and Representation: Essays on the Problem of Realism in Relation to Science, Literature and Culture*; Elinor Shaffer (ed.), *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*. Works are cited in Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, xxv.

Gillian Beer, the pioneering scholar in the dialogue between scientific and imaginative texts in English, has observed:

The common language of scientific prose and literary prose at this period allowed rapid movement of ideas and metaphors to take place. It is clear that in *The Origin* Darwin was writing not only to the confraternity of scientists but with the assumption that his work would be readable by any educated reader. And ‘educated reader’ here must imply not simply a level of literacy but a level of shared cultural assumption and shared cultural controversy.²⁵

Indeed, while Chekhov and Darwin wrote different kinds of texts in different languages, they shared similar assumptions both about the possibilities of evolutionary theory and about writing itself. Closer scrutiny of both writers’ personal correspondence, as well as of the conversational style of Darwin’s non-fiction, reveals what might usefully be called their overlapping “philosophies of writing.” Common attributes include a mutual vendetta against superfluous words, as they distort the clarity and rigor of ideas, as well as an empirical orientation towards presenting the facts of the case to their readers and allowing them to judge a text’s truth for themselves.²⁶ In this connection, the dissertation posits that Chekhov, reading Darwin’s work in excellent translations into Russian, was one

²⁵ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 41.

²⁶ As George Levine points out, when making the case for natural selection in the *Origin*, Darwin is “characteristically modest and moderate” and “simply asks the reader to attempt to follow his arguments and decide—we provide the facts, you choose!...Although he is certainly himself absolutely convinced that natural selection works that way, he understands that his readers need to weigh the evidence themselves,” *Darwin the Writer*, 16. Analogously, in a letter to Suvorin of 30 May 1888, Chekhov wrote: “I don’t think that writers should solve problems like God, pessimism, etc. The task of the writer is to illustrate only who spoke and thought about God and pessimism, and how and under what circumstances they spoke and thought. The artist should not be the judge of his characters or of what they say, but only an impartial observer...while the jury, that is, the readers, make the judgment. My duty is only to be talented, that is, to have the ability to distinguish the important evidence from the unimportant,” *Pis’ma II*, 280.

of these “educated readers” who articulated his own response in creative prose, both to Darwin’s theories and to his poetics.

Structure

As indicated above, the dissertation is comprised of three chapters. Chapter 1, “Какая роскошь! Chekhov on Darwin, Desire and the *Origin of Species*” lays the foundation for studying his interrogation of human sexuality. The chapter explores how Chekhov translated the theme from his undergraduate thesis on sex authority into his creative work across his varied career. In order to provide a proper framework for understanding how Chekhov’s prose, instead of his proposed scholarly thesis, engages with Darwin, I develop key moments in the history of Darwin’s reception in Russia, showing how from his introduction there in the 1860s onward, he was received as a creative writer, as a poet and aesthete for a new scientific age.²⁷ Chekhov expanded this trend, invoking Darwin and Darwinian thought in his letters, stories and plays. In all, more than twelve Chekhov stories discuss Darwin and his works directly, while countless others appropriate Darwinian metaphors and cultural heritage.

Starting from Chekhov’s days at Moscow University, Darwin, more than any other author on this topic, was most connected to issues of sex and gender difference in Chekhov’s creative imagination. In pursuing this line of research, this chapter polemicalizes with the standard Slavacist interpretation of Chekhov’s engagement with Darwin, advanced by scholars such as Donald Rayfield, which holds that Chekhov was fascinated by Darwin

²⁷ Dmitri Pisarev, “Progress v mire zhitovnykh i rastenii,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvenadtsati tomakh*, 14.

when he was young, but grew increasingly disillusioned with his work, as well as the way others misused it, as he matured.

While previous work on Chekhov and Darwin has tended to conflate the following two phenomena, I argue that Chekhov was always invested in separating the (mis)use of Darwin *from* the thinker and creative genius himself. The goals of my analysis are thus two-fold: 1) to show that Chekhov was always aware of and striving to expose perversions of Darwin, i.e., this was not solely a post-Sakhalin development, especially those which misapply his theories of evolution to human society, and 2) at the same time and in opposition to such misconstrual, a mature Chekhov is equally capable of engaging with Darwin and his theories as sources of creative possibility, especially in works that concern relations between the sexes. My analysis of Chekhov's early stories involving Darwin shows that Chekhov adroitly parodied not the British naturalist himself, but rather those who misunderstood evolutionary theory. Further on, my interpretations of his later works, such as "The Duel" and "A Medical Case," demonstrate how Darwin and his theories remained a fruitful source of inspiration for Chekhov throughout his career.

As Chekhov himself was committed to bridging art and science, he was also drawn to other authors with similar goals. Chapter 2, entitled "Love at the End of the Century: Chekhov and Zola at the Crossroads of Sex and Science," explores Chekhov's relationship to another writer who championed a scientific approach to literature, Emile Zola. A controversial writer in his native France, Zola reveled in shocking critics and infecting readers with his graphic sexuality and love of raw detail, as well as with his haphazard blend of in vogue scientific theories and imaginative literature. These features shaped Chekhov's own work as well. In Chapter 2 I examine Chekhov's engagement with Zola's

epic cycle of novels *Les Rougon-Macquart* on issues of modern sexuality and its evolutionary underpinnings.

The *Les Rougon-Macquart* series, which follows the legacy of two intertwined families, the respectable and legitimate Rougons and the degenerate and illegitimate Macquarts, provided Chekhov with an expansive canvas. Through this series, and also inspired by Darwin's work,²⁸ Zola sought to pioneer a new scientific way of writing creative prose, a movement which came to be known as French Naturalism. In his exposition of the Naturalist method, Zola positions the Naturalist writer as a hybrid doctor-artist who is able to describe his characters with an extraordinary degree of scientific accuracy because he examines them in the same way a physician does an autopsy on a dead body. This analogy between literary characters and corpses, which Zola laid out in the introduction to his first major novel, *Thérèse Raquin*, formed the philosophical core of Zola's Naturalist project. The "second main factor of his naturalistic creed,"²⁹ his faith in heredity, further enables him to tell the scientific truth about a character, not only regarding their past and present, but also their future.

The chapter begins by chronicling Zola's history in Russia where, ironically, he was at times more popular than in his home country of France. I then situate Chekhov within the craze surrounding the father of French Naturalism. Chekhov himself was attracted to Zola precisely because they were both interested in the same problems. While in the early years of his career, Chekhov did indulge in abject parody of Zola's blatantly racy themes in

²⁸ Much has been and continues to be written about Zola's use of Darwin. For a helpful introduction to this topic, see David Baguley's 2014 article "Darwin, Zola and Dr. Prosper Lucas's Treatise on Natural Heredity."

²⁹ Douglas Parmee, from the Introduction to his translation of *Nana*, xi.

order to court the mass reader, he quickly moved on to more serious engagement with Zola. The accepted Slavicist interpretation of their relationship, advanced by Finke, Rayfield and others, holds that Chekhov went through a frenzied period where he was *too* enamored of Zola, only to abandon him completely after a few intense years. I break with this standard narrative, however, and demonstrate how Chekhov questioned Zola's application of the scientific method and biological heredity to storytelling from a very early stage. I argue that Chekhov, as both a professional physician *and* professional artist, responded particularly to Zola's dual self-posturing and its resulting implications for artistic truth. More specifically, the chapter addresses how many of Chekhov's most well-known stories, as well as misunderstood works, such as "Anyuta," "The Mire," and "Big Volodia and Little Volodia," expose the limits of French Naturalism when applied to creative work.

Finally, the third chapter focuses on Chekhov's relationship with an author who blatantly rejected both science and medicine as valid areas of inquiry—yet still considered himself an expert on the human—Lev Tolstoy. Chapter 3, "Tolstoyan Infection," challenges the commonly held critical viewpoint that Chekhov was under Tolstoy's ideological spell for much of his career. I demonstrate how Chekhov polemicized with Tolstoy on issues of sex and sexuality from a very early date. In particular, I investigate Chekhov's revisions of Tolstoy's two most significant and sexually charged works, *Anna Karenina* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*. As Edwina Cruise points out, "the Pandora's box of women's rights and relations between husband and wife is opened wide in *Anna Karenina* (1872-77), in many respects an encyclopedia of changing attitudes towards women in Russian society of the 1870s."³⁰ In

³⁰ Edwina Cruise, "Women, Sexuality, and the Family in Tolstoy," 199.

line with Cruise's assessment, I argue that, in several of his long stories from the 1880s and 1890s, Chekhov responds to the wide range of female experience which Tolstoy's novel elaborates. By looking at expressions of female sexuality that go beyond adultery, including pregnancy and motherhood, the present chapter tells a broader and more complex story.

The story that ranks as Chekhov's first major rewrite of *Anna Karenina* is his *povest'* "The Name-Day Party" ("Imeniny") from 1888. Chekhov's tale follows a young woman, Olga, who is in the third trimester of her pregnancy and about to go into premature labor, yet plays the consummate hostess at her husband's name-day party. Chekhov's attempt to narrate Olga's experience constitutes no less than a medical experiment in prose, for he, in contradistinction to Tolstoy and other authors of the 19th century, tells the story from the point of view of the woman. In so doing, Chekhov foregrounds the role of the physical female body in labor and delivery, something that Tolstoy completely ignores. As a result, Chekhov exposes pregnancy's sensual, frightening, and above all individualistic nature.

After the release of Tolstoy's most provocative novella on the dangers of human desire, the *Kreutzer Sonata* in 1890, Chekhov's response to the issues raised in *Anna Karenina* only became more fraught. By the early 1890s, Chekhov had become incensed by Tolstoy's refusal to become educated on any number of issues concerning female reproductive health and sexuality. This led Chekhov to rewrite those stories of Tolstoy which were built on this retrograde and ill-informed moralizing. Several stories he wrote throughout the 1890s, such as "Peasant Women" ("Baby"), "The Wife" ("Zhena"), and his scathingly parodic "Ariadne" ("Ariadna") have been interpreted as engaging with the *Kreutzer Sonata*. My chapter turns its attention towards a topic that scholars have not yet

broached: that Chekhov wrote his own counter-novella that sought to polemicize with *both* of Tolstoy's major works on female sexuality, in the form of the little studied and less appreciated *Tale of an Unknown Man*.

Finally, Chapter 3 analyzes how, at the end of his career, Chekhov mocks the Tolstoyan preoccupation with the destructive nature of sex, particularly for women, which plays such a prominent role in both *Anna Karenina* and the *Kreutzer Sonata*. The last part of Chapter 3 demonstrates that Chekhov's 1901 story "The Lady with the Little Dog" exposes and deflates Tolstoy's equation of the sex act with the murder of a live body. In place of the Tolstoyan viewpoint, Chekhov advances a reassessment of erotic love that emphasizes its possibility instead of destruction.

Chekhov's intertextual and intercultural engagement with these authors and their work only ended with Chekhov's own death in 1904. In his last published story, "The Fiancée," we find Chekhov still tinkering with the questions of sex bequeathed to him by these three predecessors. In "The Fiancée," we meet a provincial young woman named Nadya who is on the verge of marrying her own Kareninesque bridegroom but who, after a moment of radical transformation, leaves him to pursue her own education. The penultimate paragraph of Chekhov's story tells us that Nadya's life remains "new, wide-open, expansive, and this life, still uncertain, full of mysteries, attracted and enticed her."³¹ So reluctant is Chekhov to give us a definitive answer that he even ends the story on the question of whether or not Nadya will ever return to her hometown. Chekhov thus closes

³¹ PSS X, 220.

out his career in print by both reopening the question that underpins his thesis—how can women achieve equality on par with men?—and resolutely refusing to answer it.

Chapter 1: Какая роскошь! Chekhov on Darwin, Desire and the *Origin of Species*

*Both literature and science are cultural products,
at once expressing and helping to form
the cultural matrix from which they emerge.*³²

Katherine Hayles

*Science always raises more issues
than can be answered solely within
the terms of scientific enquiry.*³³

Gillian Beer

*The Bible tells its story; Dante, Milton, Darwin tell theirs.*³⁴

George Levine

Whatever boundaries others might see as firmly existing between the realms of science and art were always porous for Chekhov. And while he was famously reluctant to participate in literary polemics, Chekhov was ready to defend this position in earnest. When his close friend A.S. Suvorin, who was also his arch intellectual sparring partner, proposed a strict separation of systems of knowledge into the creative and the empirical, Chekhov wrote in protest:

Я хочу, чтобы люди не видели войны там, где ее нет. Знания всегда пребывали в мире. И анатомия, и изящная словесность имеют одинаково знатное происхождение, одни и те же цели, одного и того же врага — чёрта, и воевать им положительно не из-за чего. Борьбы за существование у них нет. Если человек знает учение о кровообращении, то он богат; если к тому же выучивает еще историю религии и романс «Я помню чудное

³² Katherine Hayles, "Information or Noise? Economy of Explanation in Barthes' *S/Z* and Shannon's Information Theory," in *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, 120.

³³ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, xxviii.

³⁴ George Levine, *Darwin the Writer*, 26.

мгновение»³⁵, то становится не беднее, а богаче, — стало быть, мы имеем дело только с плюсами. Потому-то гении никогда не воевали, и в Гёте рядом с поэтом прекрасно уживался естественник.³⁶

I don't want people to see a battle where there isn't one. Different areas of inquiry have always existed in the world. Both anatomy and imaginative literature have the same distinguished origin, the same goals, and the same enemy: the devil, and it isn't meet for them to go to war. They aren't engaged in a struggle for existence. If a person has knowledge of the circulatory system, then he is rich; if to that he also adds the history of religion and the verses "I remember a wonderous moment," then he becomes not poorer, but richer—therefore, we are only dealing with the positives. For geniuses never fight, and in Goethe the naturalist coexisted beautifully alongside the poet.³⁷

Chekhov's characterization of Goethe, as a writer whose inner poet got along splendidly with his inner empiricist, also describes himself: within Chekhov, too, the writer fruitfully coexisted alongside the physician.³⁸ Instead of courting conflict between art and science, Chekhov embraced and encouraged fertile crossover between these two worlds, both in his reading and his creative practice. His relationship to Charles Darwin and his work is a fascinating case in point. As we will see, Chekhov ranked Darwin not only as a

³⁵ This reference is to one of Glinka's songs, composed in 1838-1840, which is based on one of Pushkin's most famous poems. "I remember a wonderous moment" is often used as the common title and is taken from the first line of the poem "К***" ("To ***"). In these verses, written in 1825 to Anna Petrovna Kern, the poet recalls a moment of love. For a helpful analysis of the poem in English, see A.D.P. Briggs, *Alexander Pushkin: A Critical Study*, 65-67.

³⁶ It is likely not a coincidence that the terminology Chekhov employs in this letter to discuss the fertile interchange of science and art is itself shot through with evolutionary theory, such as "the struggle for existence" and the common "origin" of these two realms of thought.

³⁷ Letter of 15 May 1889, *Pis'ma* III, 215-217.

³⁸ In his study on Vladimir Nabokov's engagement with various branches of the natural and social sciences, *The Quill and the Scalpel*, Stephen Blackwell also cites Goethe as a fitting predecessor for Nabokov's professional blend of the artist and the naturalist. For more, see especially this work's Chapter 2: "Nabokovian Science and Goethean Science."

preeminent scientist, but as one of the world's leading creative geniuses, alongside such figures as Lev Tolstoy and William Shakespeare. And not unlike a fellow artist, this chapter will show that Chekhov was also committed to exploring the potential that Darwin's work had for writing creative prose.

Chekhov was hardly alone in his interest for the preeminent British naturalist. Such fascination with Darwin resonated with the broader Russian artistic and scientific communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As historian Alexander Vucinich, the foremost expert on Darwin's reception in Russia, explained, "Russian writers viewed Darwin not only as a giant in a specific branch of scientific endeavor but also as the creator of an epoch in the growth of human thought."³⁹ In a more recent article, critic Donald Rayfield notes, "One of the most interesting aspects of Darwin's reception in Russia between 1865 and 1900 is that poets and belletrists played an important part in interpreting Darwin, while Darwinist zoologists often themselves wrote fiction."⁴⁰ Perhaps more than any other factor, this interchange was facilitated by language itself. As literature scholar Gillian Beer observes,

In the mid-nineteenth century, scientists still shared a common language with other educated readers and writers of their time...Because of the shared discourse not only ideas but metaphors, myths, and narrative patterns could move rapidly and freely to and fro between scientists and non-scientists: though not without frequent creative misprision.⁴¹

³⁹ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 89.

⁴⁰ Donald Rayfield, "Darwin, Chekhov and Mandelshtam," 257. For a broader look at how various Russian authors, including Chekhov, reacted to Darwin, see N.G. Mikhnovets, "A.P. Chekhov v kontekste polemiki o Charl'ze Darvine 1860-1890-kh gg."

⁴¹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 4-5.

Chekhov read and wrote at the heart of this economy, invoking Darwin and Darwinian thought in his letters, stories and plays. In all, more than a dozen Chekhov stories discuss Darwin and his works directly,⁴² while countless others explore Darwinian metaphors and cultural heritage. Starting from Chekhov's days at Moscow University, where he was introduced to evolutionary thought, Darwin was most connected to issues of sex and gender difference in Chekhov's creative imagination. This is hardly surprising. For Darwin, sexual selection, or the process by which males and females entice partners to produce progeny, is what drives the evolution of life and is itself "above all creative."⁴³ More specifically, this chapter explores how relations between the sexes in a range of Chekhov's stories, such as "The Duel" ("Duel"), "My Life" ("Moia zhizn") and "A Medical Case" ("Sluchai iz praktiki") are in dialogue with Darwinian evolution.

Darwin in Russia

Darwin and his theories fell on welcoming and fertile ground in the Russia of the 1860s. Public figures who had played major roles in interpreting Darwin in Russia looked back upon this period fondly later in life, noting that Darwin had been met in their youth as

⁴² According to the index of Chekhov's *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, the following directly mention Darwin and/or his works: "Na magneticheskom seance" (1883), "S'ezd estestvoispytatelei v Filadel'fii" (1883), "Kto vinovat?" (1886), "Iz zapisnoi knizhki Ivana Ivanycha" (1886), "O zhenshchinakh" (1886), "Ivanov" (the second 1889 version), "Ogni" (1888), "Fokusniki" (1891), "Sosedii" (1892), "Duel" (1892), "V usad'be" (1894).

⁴³ This quote is from Elizabeth Grosz. Grosz further contends that "Darwin has suggested that sexual selection provides the artistic raw materials for song, dance, painting, sculpture, and architecture, or at least for the animal preconditions of these human arts," Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, 130.

a “long-awaited guest”⁴⁴ and with “profound sympathy.”⁴⁵ The 1860s were also the era of Emperor Alexander II’s Great Reforms. Alexander’s most famous accomplishment was the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, for which he earned the moniker of “Tsar-Liberator.” This era of freedom extended to academics as well, and made the 1860s a time of growing interest in science in Russia. During that decade, the works of prominent foreign scientists, such as Henry Thomas Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England (1857-61)* and Claude Bernard’s *Introduction to the Experimental Method in Medicine*, to name just two, were being translated into Russian with frenzied speed.⁴⁶ The same would hold true for Darwin. Russian universities at this time were also being populated with gifted students in the natural sciences,⁴⁷ which would prove crucial for Darwin’s sustained support in Russia as the nineteenth century progressed.

Darwin’s theory on the origin of species by means of natural selection first appeared in Russia in January 1860 in the *Journal of the Ministry of National Education*. The *Journal* printed a translation of prominent geologist Charles Lyell’s favorable review of the *Origin*,

⁴⁴ From M.A. Antonovich’s *Charl’z Darvin i ego teoriia*, pp. 233-34. Cited and translated in Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, 23.

⁴⁵ From the memoirs of A.O. Kovalevsky. Quoted by N. Umov in “Po povodu sbornika” in M.M. Kovalevskii et al., *Pamiat’ Darvina*. Cited and translated in Loren R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union: A Short History*, 57.

⁴⁶ Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England (1857-61)* was wildly popular in Russia, much more so than anywhere else in Europe, while Bernard’s *Introduction to the Experimental Method in Medicine* enjoyed broad appeal among scientists and philosophers alike. This latter work was, incidentally, translated by Nikolai Strakhov. Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 9-10.

Though they have not read his book, Alyosha and Mitya Karamazov nonetheless discuss the ethical implications of Claude Bernard’s work in Book XI, Chapter IV of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

⁴⁷ Also included in this number was the founder of the modern behavioral sciences, the physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936). Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, 22-23.

which he had given before the British Association for the Advancement of Science.⁴⁸ From there, Darwin's ideas were disseminated more broadly in Russia via their introduction into university courses, as well as essays on evolutionary thought published by such leading journals as the *Library for Reading (Biblioteka dlia chteniia)* and the *Russian Herald (Russkii vestnik)*.⁴⁹ As Darwin's Russian notoriety was increasing, his ardent supporters in the scientific community dedicated themselves to translating his primary texts into Russian, and fast. Thanks to the diligent work of Sergei Rachinskii (1833-1902), professor of botany at Moscow University, paleontologist Vladimir Kovalevskii (1842-1883), and other committed and enthusiastic Russian Darwinists, many educated Russians, Chekhov included, who did not possess a working knowledge of English, were nonetheless able to read their fill of the British naturalist's research.

Over the next several years Darwin's books appeared in Russia in rapid succession. In 1862 Rachinskii began the first translation of the *Origin* into Russian. While at work on this volume, in 1863 he published an article on Darwin to bolster support for evolutionary theory among Russian intellectuals, entitled "Flowers and Plants."⁵⁰ The article was meant to prepare readers to understand the *Origin*, "one of the most brilliant books ever written in the natural sciences."⁵¹ The appearance of Rachinskii's article began the braided history of Darwin's reception and imaginative literature in Russia, for it was printed in the January

⁴⁸ Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, 23.

⁴⁹ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 17-18.

⁵⁰ Rachinskii's article, titled "Tsvety i nasekomye" in the Russian, appeared in *Russkii vestnik* No1 (1863), 347-396.

⁵¹ Rachinskii's description of Darwin's work, translated and quoted in Hugh McLean, *In Quest of Tolstoy*, 160.

issue of the *Russian Herald*, bookended by Tolstoy's novella *The Cossacks* and the verses "From the Village" by poet Afanasii Fet (1820-1892). Rachinskii's full translation came out in 1864, just four years after the original *Journal* publication; a second printing followed closely behind in 1865. The year 1865 also saw the first Russian publication of the *Voyage of the Beagle*, while the Russian edition of *The Descent of Man* came out at almost exactly the same time as the English original in 1871. For his part, in 1867 Vladimir Kovalevskii published his Russian translation of *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* several months before the original edition came out in English, and a few years later was one of the main translators of the *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.⁵²

Upon their introduction in Russia, Darwin's theories were eagerly accepted by both the young radical intelligentsia and by young scientists. There was, of course, much crossover between these two populations; as Daniel Todes has observed, "youthful radicals, many of them the sons and daughters of declining gentry families, found science an ideologically satisfying vocation appropriate to post-reform society."⁵³ For the young radicals, Darwinian thought represented a validation of their populist materialist philosophies, such as socialism and nihilism.⁵⁴ Consequently, they as a group proved to be fervent propagandizers of Darwin in Russia. This coterie included the authors and critics Pyotr Lavrov (1823-1900), Dmitry Pisarev (1840-1868), and Pyotr Kropotkin (1842-

⁵² For more on these translations, see Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, pgs. 19, 22, 23, and 62; Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, 23.

⁵³ Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, 22.

⁵⁴ For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see James Allen Rogers' article "Darwinism, Scientism, and Nihilism."

1921).⁵⁵ In fact, in their study on Darwin's influence on Russian evolutionary biology, historians of science Francesco Scudo and Michele Acanfora argue that the people in this group, whom they categorize as scientific philosophers, were more influential in promoting the *Origin* among the Russian lay public than were specialists in biology.⁵⁶

For their part, scientists in the Russian Empire were especially primed to receive Darwin's theory of evolution as based on natural selection. This was due to the fact that the Russian Empire had already produced notable pre-Darwinian evolutionists working in the natural sciences, among them geologist and zoologist Count Alexander Keyserling (1815-1891), embryologist and anthropologist Karl Ernst von Baer (1792-1876), and zoologist Karl Rouillier (Rul'e) (1814-1858).⁵⁷ This situation made Russia's interpretation of Darwin unique.⁵⁸ In addition to fruitful preparation in favor of evolutionary theory, it is also worth noting that there was no pre-existing anti-evolutionary movement in Russia for Darwin's supporters to surmount.⁵⁹ The man who would become Darwin's biggest advocate in the Russian Empire, the botanist Kliment Timiriachev (1843-1920), inherited this tradition.

⁵⁵ Pointedly not included is radical thinker and critic Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889). For more on his objections to Darwin, see James Allen Rogers, "The Russian Populists' Response to Darwin," 460-462.

⁵⁶ Francesco M. Scudo and Michele Acanfora, "Darwin and Russian Evolutionary Biology," 738.

⁵⁷ For a detailed discussion of these Russian Darwinian precursors, see James Allen Rogers' article "The Reception of Darwin's *Origin of Species* by Russian Scientists."

To this list, Daniel Todes adds the following Russian scientists: A.N. Beketov, A.P. Bogdanov, K.F. Kessler, N.A. Severtsov, and G.E. Shchurovsky, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, 23. For their part, Francesco M. Scudo and Michele Acanfora add K.F. Wolff, "Darwin and Russian Evolutionary Biology," 735, while Loren R. Graham includes L.S. Tsenkovskii in his *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union*, 66.

⁵⁸ Francesco M. Scudo and Michele Acanfora, "Darwin and Russian Evolutionary Biology," 731-732.

⁵⁹ From the memoirs of A.O. Kovalevsky. Quoted by N. Umov in "Po povodu sbornika" in M.M. Kovalevskii et al., *Pamiati Darvina*. Cited and translated in Loren R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union: A Short History*, 57.

Timiriazev entered St. Petersburg University in 1860, and was thus one of the first science students to hear about Darwin's exciting new theory of the origin of species.⁶⁰ Encouraged by botanist Andrei Beketov (1825-1902), who himself was an important pre-Darwinian scientist, Timiriazev began to study Darwinism intently. This work culminated in a series of articles on Darwin's theory for the journal *Notes of the Fatherland* (*Otechestvennie zapiski*).⁶¹ These articles set the tone for the rest of his career, as Timiriazev would go on to spend the next forty years advocating Darwin and Darwinian thought in Russia, thus earning himself a reputation as Darwin's "Russian bulldog."⁶² This evolutionary zeal led him to publish numerous articles and give countless lectures and public talks on Darwin as a "model scientist" and "ideal scholar."⁶³ Timiriazev even protested in print when Tolstoy's Levin railed against Darwin in *Anna Karenina*.⁶⁴ As James A. Rogers notes, "under the influence of Timiriazev's popular writings on Darwinism, this scientific theory soon became a part of the political creed of all those persons who considered themselves progressive in social and political thought."⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Specifically, he first learned of it in Professor S.S. Kutorga's first-year biology course. See James Allen Rogers, "Charles Darwin and Russian Scientists," 380.

⁶¹ These articles were called "Kniga Darvina, ee kritiki i kommentatory." ("Darwin's book, its critics and commentators.") For more on Timiriazev's background, see Loren R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union*, 66-68.

⁶² This moniker is meant to serve as a Russian variant of Darwin's (native English) "bulldog," Thomas Henry Huxley. See Loren R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union*, 67.

⁶³ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 81.

⁶⁴ For a fascinating account of Tolstoy's engagement with Darwin, see Hugh McLean's chapter "Claws on the Behind: Tolstoy and Darwin," in his book *In Quest of Tolstoy*, 159-180.

⁶⁵ James Allen Rogers, "Charles Darwin and Russian Scientists," 383.

Though overwhelmingly positive, Darwin's Russian reception was not without its detractors. Polemic between Darwin's supporters and his critics was fierce in Russia from the beginning. As early as the 1860s, prominent thinkers and scientists were already debating the implications and possible applications of Darwin's work. The most established and respected of Darwin's opponents in Russia was Karl Ernst von Baer. Von Baer had made his career as a groundbreaking embryologist and was appointed a member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Science in 1834.⁶⁶ Despite the fact that von Baer's work had contributed much to the theory of evolution (indeed, Darwin himself cites von Baer as an important influence in the *Origin*⁶⁷), he dedicated the last decade of his life to disproving what he called Darwin's "hypothesis."⁶⁸ The crux of Von Baer's numerous articles and books objecting to Darwin lay in his contempt for the materialist focus that had become characteristic of modern science, as opposed to his own teleological world-view which promoted nature's purposiveness as the true agent of change. Though his criticism of Darwin's evolutionary theory was meticulous and wide-ranging, von Baer wrote in German and was not translated into Russian. Instead of reaching a broad audience directly, von Baer's writing instead served as ammunition for attacks from other anti-Darwinists.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ James Allen Rogers, "Charles Darwin and Russian Scientists," 376.

⁶⁷ In a preamble to the *Origin*, titled "An Historical Sketch", Darwin writes, "Von Baer, towards whom all zoologists feel so profound a respect, expressed about the year 1859 (see Prof. Rudolph Wagner, *Zoologisch-Anthropologische Untersuchungen*, 1861, s. 51) his conviction, chiefly grounded on the laws of geographical distribution, that forms now perfectly distinct have descended from a single parent-form." *The Origin of Species*, xxviii.

⁶⁸ K.E. von Baer, *Izbrannye raboty*, 93. Cited and translated in James Allen Rogers, "Charles Darwin and Russian Scientists," 378.

⁶⁹ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 97.

But by far the most virulent anti-Darwinists in Russia were the Slavophile duo comprised of Nikolai Strakhov (1828-1896) and Nikolai Danilevsky (1822-1885). In a curious historical twist, Strakhov had started out as one of Darwin's most ardent supporters. In his youth he wrote a laudatory review of the *Origin* for Dostoevsky's monthly publication *Vremia*, and, along with Timiriazev and Pisarev, was among Darwin's first popularizers in the 1860s.⁷⁰ It was, in fact, Strakhov who had translated the introduction of Darwin's theories into Russia, Lyell's review of the *Origin*, discussed above. But by the 1880s, Strakhov's passionate Slavophilism had led him to reject foreign influences on Russian life and thought. Consequently he launched a broader campaign against what he viewed as the pernicious Western scientific agenda, of which his attacks on Darwin formed a crucial piece.⁷¹ Prior to his very public anti-Darwinist statements, he was already known as a fierce critic of nihilism in Russia.⁷² Strakhov inserted himself into bitter polemic with Timiriazev over the merits of Darwinian thought in the mid-1880s, when he reviewed the publication of Nikolai Danilevsky's epic 1400-page attack on Darwin, titled *Darwinism: A Critical Investigation*.⁷³

Nikolai Danilevsky was a thinker who had been part of the revolutionary Petrashevskii Circle, along with Dostoevsky, in the 1840s. For participating in this group,

⁷⁰ Strakhov's review, entitled "Durnye znaki" or "Bad Signs," was published in *Vremia* 11 (1862).

⁷¹ For more on Strakhov, see Linda Gerstein's monograph *Nikolai Strakhov*.

⁷² Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 130.

⁷³ The Russian title of the work is *Darvinizm: Kriticheskoe issledovanie*. The work itself was published in two volumes. Volume I, published in 1885, is a refutation of the *Origin* and the *Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*. Volume II, which was published in 1889, was unfinished at Danilevsky's death. It was intended to refute the whole of the *Descent of Man*, but only one chapter was completed. It came out with a substantial introduction by Strakhov. See James Allen Rogers, "Charles Darwin and Russian Scientists," p. 381, note 35.

he was exiled to Samara. Afterwards Danilevsky became involved in Russian scientific research expeditions, through which he established himself as an expert on fishing communities. Incidentally, he was first brought on board these missions by von Baer. He initially became famous in Russia as a significant conservative thinker for his treatise on Russian exceptionalism, *Russia and Europe*, published in 1869.⁷⁴ This work is predicated on the idea that each country is dominated by a unique “historical-cultural type.” Danilevsky saw science in particular as the strength of the countries of western Europe, while Russia’s great national strength lay elsewhere, in its messianic destiny. Therefore, the values of Russia are fundamentally incompatible with those of western Europe. He then applied this philosophy to Darwin, culminating in his magnum opus *Darwinism*. Therein he elaborated his theme of the Slavic mission to bring salvation to the world, which Darwin, as an Englishman whose theories resulted from the likewise very English notions of competition and struggle, naturally could take no part in. As a leader of the Russian conservative school of thought, Danilevsky’s views on history and human development were highly teleological, which “led him to see in Darwin’s idea of random variations only a meaningless universe of chance.”⁷⁵ Written in opposition to such decadent uncertainty, Danilevsky’s book has been characterized as no less than “a full demolition of Darwin’s theory of organic evolution.”⁷⁶ The book received generally poor reviews from the scientific community, which regarded it

⁷⁴ Donald Rayfield, “Darwin, Chekhov and Mandelshtam,” 259.

⁷⁵ James Allen Rogers, “Russia: Social Sciences,” 266.

⁷⁶ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 119.

as nothing more than a mishmash of long-stale objections to Darwin and the theory of evolution imported from Europe.⁷⁷

Strakhov, however, took ecstatic notice. In a review of *Darwinism* for the *Russian Herald* in 1887, Strakhov praised Danilevsky as “eminently successful in his effort to refute the principal ideas built into Darwin’s evolutionary theory” and consequently claimed the work as a major victory for the Slavophile cause.⁷⁸ Since Danilevsky had died just before his book came out in 1885, this review forged Strakhov in the mold of defender of the departed Danilevsky and his staunchly conservative point of view. Timiriazev was compelled to retaliate with a public lecture and two-part article “Has Darwinism Been Refuted?”, which only escalated the conflict. Strakhov wrote articles in counterresponse, and their war in print continued through 1889.⁷⁹ As Vucinich points out, this battle was about more than Darwinian theory; it also concerned “the question of the place of science in modern culture.”⁸⁰ These polemics, as we will see, also found their way into Chekhov’s art and thought.

Russia and Social Darwinism

Before turning to Chekhov and his prose, it will be necessary to distinguish between Darwin’s own theories as elaborated in his treatises and the various uses that his work

⁷⁷ Loren R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union*, 72.

⁷⁸ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 129.

⁷⁹ According to James Allen Rogers, the most important articles in this debate are: Strakhov, “Vsegdashnie oshibki darvinistov,” *Russkii vestnik*, 1887 and Timiriazev, “Bessilnaia zloba antidarvinista,” *Russkaia mysl’*, 1889. “Charles Darwin and Russian Scientists,” p. 382, note 39.

⁸⁰ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 135.

have been put to, most particularly Social Darwinism. As political scientist Mike Hawkins discusses in his invaluable study *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945*, the term “Social Darwinism” is itself the source of much controversy and confusion. It is, therefore, not reducible to one agreed-upon definition. Only partly in jest, Hawkins claims that the only reason for retaining it is “because the term refuses to go away.”⁸¹ And even though the term itself did not appear until 1877 in England,⁸² the notion that Darwin’s theories could be extrapolated onto humans, sometimes to nefarious ends, was not unknown in Russia. Such a warning was issued as early as 1862, when Strakhov published his review on the various translations of the *Origin*, discussed above. Therein he cautioned against the “bad signs” (*durnye priznaki*) of applying Darwin’s methods to other areas of inquiry. According to Vucinich, radical and racist positions that would come to characterize Social Darwinism were generally refuted by Russian intellectuals, beginning with the debut of Darwin’s work there in the 1860s. In his authoritative study *Darwin in Russian Thought*, Vucinich defines Social Darwinism as occupying an extreme position on the philosophical spectrum, “a blend of sociology and ideology which did not have a single supporter among the leading Russian naturalists and social thinkers.”⁸³ Representative of these naturalists and thinkers was the viewpoint of Pyotr Lavrov, who “distinguished between Darwin, with his great scientific contribution, and ‘Darwinists,’ who distorted the contribution’s significance.”⁸⁴ Support for this assessment is also found in Scudo and

⁸¹ Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945*, 16.

⁸² According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term first appeared in English in 1877 in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5, 250.

⁸³ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 20.

⁸⁴ Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, 181.

Acanfora, who note that “in Russia Darwin’s theories were explicitly considered as distinct from various forms of Darwinism; in the extreme form of this phenomenon, Darwin’s mature work could be fully accepted, while “Darwinism” was flatly rejected.”⁸⁵

The only public figure in Russia to advocate ideas consonant with what would become Social Darwinism in its more virulent strains was member of the radical intelligentsia Varfolomei Zaitsev (1842-1882).⁸⁶ Although “Social Darwinism” was not yet an accepted term when Zaitsev began to publish his racist views in 1864, his arguments, which discussed the inexorable inferiority of black people as opposed to the white race, placed him solidly in this camp. Loren Graham notes that Zaitsev’s stance “caused a crisis among Russian radicals.”⁸⁷ Rogers considers this episode to be the exception that proves the rule, for it gave the rest of the radical Russian intelligentsia the opportunity to condemn these kinds of vulgar Social Darwinist ideas resoundingly and in the public arena.⁸⁸ Furthermore, it allowed them to do so before similar polemics in Europe could influence their response.⁸⁹ In his spirited defense of Darwin’s theories from attacks by Russia’s anti-Darwinists such as Strakhov and Danilevsky, discussed above, Timiriachev also “contributed

⁸⁵ Francesco M. Scudo and Michele Acanfora, “Darwin and Russian Evolutionary Biology,” 739.

⁸⁶ For a detailed discussion on Zaitsev, see Loren R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union*, 60-63.

⁸⁷ Loren R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union*, 62. See also James Allen Rogers’ full account of this episode in “Darwinism, Scientism, and Nihilism,” 18-21.

⁸⁸ James Allen Rogers, “Darwinism, Scientism, and Nihilism,” 19.

Though beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to note that James Allen Rogers also speculates upon economic and political reasons for why Social Darwinism did not catch on in Russia. For more, see his articles “Darwinism and Social Darwinism,” “Charles Darwin and Russian Scientists,” 383, and “Darwinism, Scientism, and Nihilism,” 17.

⁸⁹ James Allen Rogers, “The Russian Populists’ Response to Darwin,” 458.

to making Russia a rare country that did not encourage the emergence of Social Darwinism as an ideological factor of serious consequence.”⁹⁰ As we will see, Chekhov, too, was firmly rooted in this tradition from the very beginning of his career.

Distinct, however, from ugly and racist forms of Social Darwinism, is a more moderate position, which is receptive to using Darwin’s theories as an avenue towards achieving a richer understanding of human beings. In Russia, the earliest advocate of such an approach was Dmitry Pisarev, who was arguably also the most vociferous Russian nihilist. His 1864 essay “Progress in the World of Animals and Plants” was a lengthy, detailed survey of Rachinskii’s translation of the *Origin* and one of the first responses to Darwin in Russia.⁹¹ Written from a cell in the Peter and Paul Fortress, where Pisarev had been imprisoned for anti-government activity, “Progress in the World of Animals and Plants” implies that evolutionary theory may be fruitfully projected onto people. Pisarev ostensibly tells the story of the complex interactions which characterize ant colonies, citing the importance of the environment in shaping animal life, but the attentive reader is meant to understand that human society lies at the heart of his narrative. Along the way, Pisarev expresses the immodest hope that his “weak and pale sketch” can show readers that

⁹⁰ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 206.

In 1871, the same year that Darwin’s *Descent of Man* had appeared in Russia in three separate translations, Dostoevsky, Leskov and others published works in *Russian Messenger* that took on the issue of Social Darwinism, or applying Darwinian logic too directly and crudely to social situations, including the concept of sexual selection. These works include *Demons* and *At Daggers Drawn*. For more on this literary and social context, see David M. Bethea and Victoria Thorstensson’s article “Darwin, Dostoevsky, and Russia’s Radical Youth,” forthcoming.

⁹¹ The article’s Russian title is “Progress v mire zhivotnykh i rastenii” and was originally printed in issues 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9 (1864) of the journal *Russkoe slovo*, which incidentally was the same journal that published Zaitsev.

Darwin's influence will extend beyond the boundaries of the natural sciences, for "Darwin, Lyell and similar thinkers are the philosophers, the poets, the aesthetes of our time."⁹²

While we cannot say with certainty if Chekhov read Pisarev's essay, the notion of Darwin as a new kind of artistic model fueled Chekhov's own creative imagination. Chekhov shared the belief that, as Darwin's research explained the development of the natural world, so too could evolutionary theory open up new ways of exploring human society. In many stories of the 1880s and 1890s, Chekhov's prose served as a laboratory in which to test these ideas.

Chekhov on Reading and Writing Darwin

From the very beginning, Chekhov's interaction with Darwin was a mixture of the subjective and the objective, the aesthetic and the scientific. Chekhov had been captivated by the British naturalist's work on evolutionary theory since the beginning of his medical training in the early 1880s, and he possessed the technical background necessary to understand its nuances. As Michael Finke notes in his study *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, "Chekhov's admiration for Darwin [was] entirely characteristic of his educational background and social and professional class."⁹³

Chekhov's studies at the medical faculty at Moscow State University were permeated by Darwin and his works. In the 1870s and 1880s, Moscow University professor of comparative anatomy Yakov Andreevich Borzenkov (1832-1883) was the leading

⁹² Dmitri Pisarev, "Progress v mire zhitovnykh i rastenii," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvenadtsati tomakh*, 14.

⁹³ Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, 99.

advocate for a Darwinian approach to anatomical studies.⁹⁴ Among other efforts, in April 1881, which would have been at the end of Chekhov's second year of medical school, Borzenkov gave a public lecture to students and faculty on the Darwinian future of biology.⁹⁵ Moreover, Chekhov's professor Modest Nikolaevich Bogdanov (1841-1888) was a friend of Darwin's biggest supporter in Russia, Timiriazev, and later, Chekhov personally knew—and had many lively discussions with—Timiriazev's ally, Dr. Vladimir Aleksandrovich Vagner (1849-1934).⁹⁶

In addition to recognizing the scientific prowess of Darwin's work, Chekhov also appreciated its artistic energy: the very act of reading Darwin produces in Chekhov a reaction similar to devouring a favorite juicy novel. In a letter to longtime friend and fellow author V.V. Bilibin (1859-1908), the mention of reading Darwin prompts Chekhov to exclaim, almost giddy with joy, "What luxury! I love him terribly."⁹⁷ Chekhov's enthusiasm is consonant with the twentieth-century critical assessment of Darwin's contribution to English letters, which holds that the British naturalist "moved outside the protecting terms of Baconian induction into a role more like that of a creative artist."⁹⁸ For Chekhov

⁹⁴ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 54; 72.

⁹⁵ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 78.

⁹⁶ Donald Rayfield, "Darwin, Chekhov and Mandelshtam," 261. In several publications, Rayfield erroneously names this person as Dr. Nikolai Vagner. Nikolai Petrovich Vagner (1829-1907) was a much older zoologist-turned-fiction-writer, who was one of the early champions of Darwinism in Russia (See Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 17; 51-52). Chekhov did not know this Dr. Vagner personally.

⁹⁷ Letter to Bilibin of 11 March 1886, *Pis'ma I*, 213. We do not know which of Darwin's works Chekhov was reading at the time. All that can be said with certainty is that a copy of the second volume of *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* («Прирученные животные и возделанные растения. Т. 2») remained in Chekhov's possession, to be found in his personal library at Yalta upon his death in 1904. *Pis'ma I*, 426.

⁹⁸ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 95.

Darwin's scientific treatises contained within them thrilling adventure tales, destined to be reanimated and retold, which he then inscribed into his own life story. Chekhov's greatest journey, his trek across Russia in 1890 to the island of Sakhalin and back again via the Pacific Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, was at least partly inspired by Darwin's seafaring adventures as recorded in *The Voyage of the Beagle*,⁹⁹ which he bequeathed to his close friend Olga Kundasova as a keepsake.¹⁰⁰ Indeed the note Chekhov wrote containing the instructions to give his copy of *The Beagle* to Kundasova embarked on a water journey of its own: Chekhov penned it on a Volga steamer and from there it was transported to Moscow.

But by far, the work of Darwin's that influenced Chekhov most in this regard was *On the Origin of the Species*.¹⁰¹ In a famous letter to his older brother Alexander of April 1883, an ambitious young Chekhov even went so far as to plan an undergraduate medical thesis based on *The Origin*.¹⁰² Entitled "A History of Sexual Dominance," the thesis was to trace the unequal distribution of power and authority between the sexes in different species, from insects to human beings.¹⁰³ The very title of the proposal indicates that Chekhov was most intrigued by Darwinian notions of striving for power in a gendered context. When

⁹⁹ Donald Rayfield, "Darwin, Chekhov and Mandelshtam," 263. The Russian title of the edition Chekhov would have had, first published in 1865, with a second printing in 1871, is «Путешествие натуралиста вокруг света на корабле "Бигль"».

¹⁰⁰ *Pis'ma IV*, 66; 410.

¹⁰¹ Though he does not explore this avenue, literature scholar George Levine remarks briefly on the similarities between the *Origin* and Chekhov's 1898 story "Gooseberries." Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, 104.

¹⁰² See Michael Finke, Donald Rayfield, Peter Ulf Moeller.

¹⁰³ Donald Rayfield's formulation from "Darwin, Chekhov and Mandelshtam," 262, which will be illuminating a bit later on.

describing the scope of his project to Alexander, Chekhov makes particular note, again, of being “terribly fond” of Darwin’s scientific methods. In a letter of 17/18 April 1883, he outlined to his brother:¹⁰⁴

Она не мыслитель. Но...не следует, что она не будет умницей: природа стремится к равенству. Не следует мешать природе — это неразумно, ибо всё то глупо, что бессильно. Нужно помогать природе, как помогает природе человек, создавая головы Ньютонов, головы, приближающиеся к совершенному организму. Если понял меня, то:

- 1) Задача, как видишь, слишком солидная, не похожая на <...> наших женских эмансипаторов-публицистов и измерителей черепов.
- 2) Решая ее, мы обязательно решим, ибо путь верен в идее, а решив, устыдим кого следовало и сделаем хорошее дело.
- 3) Идея оригинальна. Я ее не украл, а сам выдумал.
- 4) Я ей непременно займусь.

[Woman] is not a thinker...but that doesn’t mean that she won’t be someday. Nature strives for equality, one must not interfere with nature; it is not wise to do so, because all that is powerless is stupid. One must help nature as nature helps man, when he creates heads like Newton’s, heads that approach a perfect organism. If you understand me right you will see that:

1. The problem is a very serious one and quite unlike the screwing¹⁰⁵ around of our feminist journalist emancipators of women and phrenologists.
2. We will surely solve it, and by doing so we will shame those who deserve to be shamed and will do a good deed besides.
3. The idea is original. I didn’t steal it, but thought it up myself.
4. I will surely work on it.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting that Darwin had died only one year earlier, on 19 April 1882. Thus, this project may have been intended as a way to honor—or perhaps compete with—the British naturalist.

¹⁰⁵ This word is still censored from the official Academy editions of Chekhov’s letters.

¹⁰⁶ *Pis’ma I*, 65.

As this letter suggests, the main idea that leapt out to Chekhov regarding sexuality was nature's striving for balance between men and women. Though Darwin is the focal point in this letter, Chekhov also makes reference to other writers and their work on the position of the female in society, such as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895)¹⁰⁷ and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903).¹⁰⁸ Chekhov displays his confidence that a better understanding of the Darwinian evolutionary process would result in societal progress. Although the thesis itself never progressed past the introductory stages, and despite Chekhov's relative youth and immaturity as an artist when he made these plans,¹⁰⁹ this locus of ideas remained active in his work. As Peter Ulf Moeller has noted, they were placed "on the agenda for the rest of his life."¹¹⁰ The pages that follow will explore these preoccupations in detail in order to understand what it means to love Darwin terribly in the context of Chekhov's artistic prose, especially in stories that deal with relationships between human men and women.

¹⁰⁷ In addition to Sacher-Masoch's wildly popular sensationalist novels, from which the term "masochism" is derived, Chekhov had likely read Sacher-Masoch's play on the so-called "woman question," "Unsere Sklaven," which was translated into Russian as "Raby i vladkyi," *Pis'ma I*, 345-46.

¹⁰⁸ In particular Chekhov calls Spencer's essay on education, which treats women's education in detail, "excellent." Chekhov refers here to Spencer's treatise *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*, which had already been translated into Russian three times by 1883, *Pis'ma I*, 346. For further discussion on this aspect of Chekhov and Spencer, see Shoshana Knapp, "Herbert Spencer in Čexov's 'Skučnaja istorija' and 'Duel': The Love of Science and the Science of Love," 279-280.

For more on the influence of these essays on early Chekhov, see Jacqueline de Proyart's articles "Anton Čexov et Herbert Spencer: Premières investigations" and "Anton Chekhov i Gerbert Spencer: (Ob istokakh povesti 'Drama na okhote' i sud'be motiva gratsii v chekhovskom tvorčestve)."

¹⁰⁹ Chekhov had not yet, for example, published his acclaimed collection *At Twilight* («В сумерки»), which, thanks to Grigorovich's nudging intervention, won the Pushkin Prize in 1887.

¹¹⁰ Peter Ulf Moeller, *Postlude to The Kreutzer Sonata*, 239.

Darwin as Creative Source: A Note on Methodology

In order to discuss Darwin's influence on Chekhov's prose, we must tease apart two related but distinct literary phenomena: creative works which celebrate Darwin and his thought as a source of genuine artistic inspiration, and creative works which engage with the consequences of the use(s) of Darwin. Whether or not authors explicitly use the term "Social Darwinism," prominent in this latter category is the direct application of Darwin's theories to human social interaction, a point on which Darwin himself was deeply ambivalent.¹¹¹ To refer to these kinds of post-Darwin applications of evolutionary theory in a literary context, it will be helpful to consider the formulation of scholar John Tulloch. He groups those ideological positions that map Darwinian theory directly onto human society, such as Social Darwinism and degeneration theory, together under the umbrella term "outgrowth[s] of evolutionary thinking."¹¹² Creative works in this latter category are primarily interested in interrogating the validity of such "evolutionary outgrowths" in the context of the human.

In the Anglo-American tradition of literary criticism, scholars have embraced the notion that writers both past and present drew inspiration from Darwin himself as a creative figure. Though there had been preliminary work done on this topic throughout the twentieth century,¹¹³ British literary critic Gillian Beer is credited with constructing the

¹¹¹ On Darwin's famous reluctance to extrapolate to humans, see George Levine, *Darwin the Writer*, 151 and Howard Kaye, *The Social Meaning of Modern Biology: From Social Darwinism to Sociobiology*, 15-22.

¹¹² John Tulloch, *Chekhov: A Structuralist Study*, 118.

¹¹³ As George Levine points out, scholar Stanley Edgar Hyman considered Darwin a creative figure in his book *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud as Imaginative Writers*, first published in 1959. See *Darwin the Writer*, p. 2 and note 3, p. 30. Levine also names in his foreword to the third edition of *Darwin's Plots* Lionel Stevenson's 1932 work *Darwin Among the Poets* as another important predecessor, Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, xii.

theoretical framework for Darwinian literary studies. Her landmark work *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, first published in 1983 and then revised and expanded twice, once in 2000 and again in 2009, focuses on the connections between Darwin and Victorian literature, including writers such as Thomas Hardy and George Elliot. This work has spawned a veritable cottage industry of Darwinian literature and culture studies in English. Prominent literature scholars who have followed in Beer's path include Lawrence Frank, George Levine, and Jonathan Smith.¹¹⁴ In their analyses, Beer and others make the case that Darwin has exerted an influence on his literary successors in the English language that is comparable to the transformative reach of writers such as John Milton, Charles Dickens, and Virginia Woolf, to name but a few.

Especially notable in this branch of Darwinian literary studies is the interplay between evolutionary theory and sexuality. As Beer notes, Darwin's "account of change and development (of the out-flaring and continuity of life on the earth, as well as its extinction) is an account of procreative energies. Indeed, evolutionary process relies on sexual division."¹¹⁵ One of the most striking features of Darwin's creativity is the way he described these sexual processes. In this regard Darwin's "style and theory both are lyrical and effusive, rather than sceptical and parsimonious."¹¹⁶ American humanist philosopher

¹¹⁴ Representative works from these authors include Lawrence Frank's *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: the Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens and Doyle*; George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction and Darwin the Writer*; and Jonathan Smith's *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*.

¹¹⁵ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 116.

¹¹⁶ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 116.

Elizabeth Grosz also identifies sexuality as the driving force behind creation in Darwin's thought. She writes, "Darwin brings to his understanding of life as emergence the profound idea that it is sexual difference, through sexual selection, that enhances, intensifies, and varies life, elaborating more variation and more difference in the world."¹¹⁷

In recognition of the above, readings of literary texts in this tradition thus tend to emphasize the possibilities with which Darwinian theory can endow a creative world. As Levine elaborates in terms characteristic of literary, as opposed to scientific, analysis, Darwin bequeaths his readers a prose "alive with metaphor, brilliantly detailed descriptions, twists, and hesitations, and personal exclamations" which is "saturated with aesthetic, intellectual, and ethical energy, and with the sorts of tensions, ambivalences, and feelings characteristic of great literature."¹¹⁸ Beer's, Levine's, and others' close readings of the major Victorian novels have established that Darwin is indeed capable of making subsequent fictional worlds "vibrate" with a new evolutionary reality.¹¹⁹ In the pages that follow, theoretical support from this tradition will be essential for my treatment of Chekhov's prose, as well.

This line of enquiry is also notable for what it lacks: a discussion of Social Darwinism. To Beer's way of thinking, Social Darwinism is a belief that is "politically at odds with Darwin himself" and is thus not worthy of further comment.¹²⁰ Her predecessors

¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, 3.

¹¹⁸ George Levine, *Darwin the Writer*, 2.

¹¹⁹ "Vibrate" is writer Adam Gopnik's term, quoted in Levine, *Darwin the Writer*, p. 4.

¹²⁰ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 13.

have largely followed suit, omitting discussion of Social Darwinism from their analyses almost entirely.¹²¹

On the other hand, in the Slavic context, it has not been common to explore the idea that Darwin could have served as creative inspiration for Russian authors. In a recent article, Donald Rayfield claims that “the major Russian prose writers [i.e., Dostoevsky and Tolstoy] were concerned only with the implications of Darwinism in ethics and politics.”¹²² Rayfield here echoes Vucinich’s comment that “individual heroes of Dostoevsky’s and Tolstoy’s literary works provided graphic examples of the myriads of prisms refracting Darwinian science and showing the multiple strands of its impact on current thought and attitudes.”¹²³ Turning to Chekhov in particular, Rayfield further asserts that his reactions to Darwin are interesting “if only as those of a trained doctor”,¹²⁴ and pointedly not as a developing author. Taking an even stronger position, French Slavist Jacqueline de Proyart has argued that Darwin could have had no direct influence on Chekhov’s artistic style, maintaining instead that, for Chekhov, Darwin was only a source of scientific method and information.¹²⁵ More recently, in his 1998 monograph *Chekhov i pozitivizm*, Russian scholar

¹²¹ George Levine briefly mentions Social Darwinism in Chapter 1 of *Darwin and the Novelists*, but he does so in order to leave it utterly behind in favor of a focus on Darwin and his writings on their own terms. See Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*, 10-11.

¹²² Donald Rayfield, “Darwin, Chekhov and Mandelshtam,” 260.

¹²³ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 4.

¹²⁴ Donald Rayfield, “Darwin, Chekhov and Mandelshtam,” 261.

¹²⁵ For more, see Jacqueline de Proyart’s article “Chekhov and Darwin” in the Chekhov edition of the journal *Silex*, No 16, 1980, 101-105.

Pyotr Dolzhenkov has situated Chekhov's response to Darwin within the broader context of his relationship to the positivistic ideologies of the second half of the nineteenth century.¹²⁶

That Chekhov greatly admired Darwin as a man has never been in doubt. However, Slavists have predominantly argued that, as Chekhov developed into a mature artist, his stories abandoned a sense of admiration for Darwin and instead overwhelmingly protested against the growing problematics of Darwin's legacy, i.e., the previously mentioned "evolutionary outgrowths" which others employed Darwin's theories to justify. These so-called Darwinian stories, all written after Chekhov's expedition to Russia's notorious penal colony of Sakhalin in 1890, are thus counted as yet more evidence that this trip cured Chekhov of his innocent joys.¹²⁷ This line of analysis also relies on the assumption that Chekhov did not engage in critiques of the uses of Darwin, such as racist forms of Social Darwinism, before Sakhalin.

Representative of this point of view is the research of Michael Finke and Donald Rayfield. In his 2005 study *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, Finke devotes an entire chapter, entitled "Self and Other through the Lens of Science," to the ethical and moral dilemmas that the uses of Darwin posed for a post-Sakhalin Chekhov.¹²⁸ Therein, Finke discusses

¹²⁶ See Pyotr Dolzhenkov, *Chekhov i pozitivism*. Moskva: Dialog MGU, 1998.

¹²⁷ Sakhalin is often cited, even overemphasized, as a turning point in Chekhov's life and career. Another prominent example, which will be discussed further in this study's chapter on Tolstoy, is Chekhov's infatuation with Tolstoyan philosophy. That is, the received general wisdom tells us that Chekhov was enamored of Tolstoy and especially his philosophy of non-resistance to evil before he took his trip, but the horrors of Sakhalin taught him otherwise. For example, see Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*; Caryl Emerson, "Chekhov and the Annas"; Carol Flath, "Writing about Nothing: Chekhov's 'Ariadna' and the Narcissistic Narrator."

¹²⁸ This chapter yields many interesting insights, but it also depends on the total disavowal of Chekhov's biting irony with regard to those characters, such as Von Koren from *Duel*, who embody the ethical and moral positions under scrutiny.

Chekhov's youthful affinity for Darwin and considers his proposed undergraduate thesis as a source of optimism for remedying the inequities in Russian society, especially sexual inequality.¹²⁹ Finke, however, identifies Chekhov's "medical practice, his journey to Sakhalin, and his own illness" as culminating in a kind of crisis point in the 1890s, after which Chekhov began to reject evolutionary theory as an adequate agent of change.¹³⁰ Instead, Finke argues, his post-Sakhalin stories display a "dismantling" of Chekhov's previously held Darwinian hopes.¹³¹ Similarly, in a 2014 article, Rayfield focuses on Chekhov's artistic protest of Social Darwinist tendencies in the 1890s, as opposed to his earlier enthusiasm for the *British Naturalist*. After Sakhalin, Rayfield argues, "in his fiction the Darwinist becomes a terrifying figure."¹³²

One crucial exception to the trend outlined above is Russian scholar V.B. Kataev, whose articles suggest an exciting and untapped line of Chekhov research. In his article "Khristos i Darvin v mire Chekhova," he draws several preliminary yet intriguing comparisons between Chekhov and Darwin, including the following characterization of Chekhov's oeuvre as a whole:

¹²⁹ Finke also undermines Chekhov's thesis project by claiming that Chekhov was drunk when he wrote the letter which outlined his plans, Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, 215. While Finke is citing Chekhov's own words, I do not think that we can take Chekhov at face value here. As was discussed above, Chekhov wrote a famous letter to his brother Alexander, in which he outlined his ideas for a grand Darwinian thesis. He proposed to Alexander that they undertake the project together. Alexander, however, was lukewarm on the idea at best, and the project never got off the ground. It is in his follow-up letter that Chekhov claims he conceived the idea while drunk. It would have been entirely in keeping with Chekhov's self-deprecating personality to have written off his idea as drunken nonsense, in order to conceal his disappointment at Alexander's lack of enthusiasm.

¹³⁰ Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, 100.

¹³¹ Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, 100.

¹³² Donald Rayfield, "Darwin, Chekhov and Mandelshtam," 263.

Дарвиново начало всегда будет присутствовать в чеховском мире. Так, во многом легло в основу конфликтов в чеховских пьесах дарвиновское понимание борьбы за существование, идеи о зависимости одного органического существа от другого, о том, что борьба «бывает наиболее ожесточенной между особями одного и того же вида».

The Darwinian beginning would always exist in Chekhov's world. In fact, to a large extent, what lies at the heart of the conflict in Chekhov's plays is a Darwinian understanding of the struggle for existence, ideas about the independence of one organic being from another, as well as the fact that the struggle is most fierce between two beings of the exact same type.¹³³

While Kataev does not elaborate further, the Darwinian core that he identifies is important not only for Chekhov's plays that came at the end of his life, but also provides a productive line of inquiry into stories written throughout his career. In contrast to previous scholarship, this chapter demonstrates both of these critical approaches may be fruitfully applied to Chekhov's work as a whole. Indeed, they both must be if we are to arrive at an accurate understanding of Darwin's role in Chekhov's creative world. While previous work on Chekhov and Darwin has tended to conflate the following two phenomena, I argue that Chekhov was always invested in separating the (mis)use of Darwin *from* the thinker and creative genius himself.¹³⁴ The goals of my analysis are thus two-fold: 1) to show that Chekhov was always aware of and striving to expose perversions of Darwin, i.e., this was not solely a post-Sakhalin development, especially those which misapply his theories of evolution to human society, and 2) at the same time and in opposition to such misconstrual,

¹³³ Quoted from the Russian translation of the *Origin*, p. 75, in V.B. Kataev, "Khristos i Darvin v mire Chekhova", 165.

¹³⁴ As Grosz points out, specifically about racism, but applicable to other areas of Darwinian thought as well, we should take care not to dismiss Darwin's work itself on account of the troubling directions that others have taken it in. For more, see her Chapter 8, "Darwin and the Split Between Natural and Sexual Selection," in Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*.

a mature Chekhov is equally capable of engaging with Darwin and his theories as sources of creative possibility, especially in works that concern relations between the sexes.

Learned Neighbors and Philadelphia Naturalists: Darwin in Chekhov's Early Writing

Long before he journeyed to Sakhalin, Chekhov had ascertained that Darwin's thought was vulnerable to misunderstanding. What is more, he had also placed himself in the role of quiet defender of Darwin and his theories against the forces of distortion. For the most part, Chekhov was not publicly involved in the bitter polemics swirling around Darwin in the 1880s. However, his correspondence from the period makes his allegiance to Darwin—and to those who advocated for him in Russia—clear. In a letter to his brother Alexander of 7/8 September 1887, Chekhov registers his displeasure at the misinformed trashing of Darwin in Suvorin's paper *New Times*, where Alexander was currently employed. In an attempt to provoke Alexander into taking a more proactive stance against such injustice, he writes:

Ты для «Нов<ого> времени» нужен. Будешь еще нужнее, если не будешь скрывать от Суворина, что тебе многое в его «Нов<ом> времени» не нравится. Нужна партия для противовеса, партия молодая, свежая и независимая, а Готберги и Прокофьевы, видящие в Суворине Гаврилова и благоговеющие ради мзды, не годятся и бесполезны. Я думаю, что будь в редакции два-три свежих человека, умеющих громко называть чепуху чепухой, г. Эльпе не дерзнул бы уничтожать Дарвина...

You are necessary to *New Times*. You would be more necessary still if you didn't hide from Suvorin that there is much at *New Times* which you don't like. What is needed is a counterweight, a young, fresh and independent counterweight, while the Gothbergs and Prokofievs, who take Suvorin for a Gavrilov and worship him for their own gain, are ill-qualified and useless. I think that if in the office there were two or

three fresh minds who were capable of loudly calling a spade a spade, then Mister El'pe wouldn't dare destroy Darwin...¹³⁵

Chekhov refers here to a pair of inflammatory articles against Darwin by L.K. Popov, who wrote under the pseudonym El'pe.¹³⁶ El'pe had long aligned himself with conservative thinkers, such as Strakhov, in opposition to Darwin and his theory on the origin of species. Like Strakhov, El'pe had also written a glowing review of Danilevsky's *Darwinism* in 1885, which praised that volume's success in obliterating key evolutionary principles.¹³⁷ These pieces that so incense Chekhov here were precipitated by articles that Strakhov's, and thus El'pe's, enemy Timiriazev had written in defense of Darwin, discussed above.¹³⁸

What likely galled Chekhov above all was the fact that, as opposed to himself and his brother,¹³⁹ El'pe was a dilettante when it came to science. According to Vucinich, El'pe had made an earlier attempt to refute Darwin's theory of natural selection in print but was "obviously not well versed in the substance and in the style of Darwin's argumentation."¹⁴⁰ We have evidence that Chekhov, too, considered El'pe ill-qualified to comment on scientific subjects, such as the validity of Darwin's theories, in the public sphere. For example, in one

¹³⁵ *Pis'ma* II, 115-116.

¹³⁶ These pieces were part of a series entitled "Scientific Letters" that El'pe had run for *New Times* since 1883. *Pis'ma* II, 401.

¹³⁷ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 129. For El'pe's review, see his "Posmertnyi trud", as well as B.E. Raikov, "Iz istorii darvinizma," part 1, p. 21.

¹³⁸ El'pe's letters were called "Professor Timiriazev in the Role of Darwin's Defender," and were written in response to Timiriazev's two-part article for *Russian Thought*, "Has Darwinism Been Refuted?" *Pis'ma* II, 401.

¹³⁹ Alexander was by all accounts highly gifted intellectually and had graduated with distinction in the natural sciences at Moscow University. See Donald Rayfield, "Darwin, Chekhov and Mandelstam," 261-262.

¹⁴⁰ Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 88-89.

letter to Suvorin, El'pe's recent scientific advice prompts Chekhov to label him a "learned goose."¹⁴¹ And in another letter, Chekhov makes it known to Suvorin exactly what El'pe's articles on science are good for: swatting at mosquitoes (and even then, they are not very effective).¹⁴²

By contrast to his attitude towards El'pe, Chekhov extended his full support to Timiriazev. In 1891, Chekhov published the pamphlet "The Tricksters" ("Fokusniki"), which took Timiriazev's side in a controversy surrounding dodgy experimentation that was being carried out on animals at the Moscow Zoo.¹⁴³ Therein, Chekhov backed completely Timiriazev's demands for legitimate Darwinian experiments, and railed against the Director of the Zoo's "charlatanry."¹⁴⁴ Chekhov's admiration for Darwin's "Russian Bulldog" would prove to be long-lasting. More than ten years later, he wrote in a letter to his wife Olga that Timiriazev is a person whom he "very much loves and respects."¹⁴⁵ Chekhov's correspondence, then, establishes himself firmly against men like El'pe and on the side of Timiriazev and other qualified scientists who were dedicated to preserving what they saw as the true spirit of Darwinian thought against its would-be corruptors.

¹⁴¹ See Chekhov's letter to Suvorin of 14 May 1889, *Pis'ma* III, 214.

¹⁴² See Chekhov's letter to Suvorin of 4 May 1889, *Pis'ma* III, 203.

¹⁴³ Chekhov did not sign this pamphlet with his name, but just with the letter "Ts." However, this was not because he did not want to publicly defend Timiriazev and Darwinian thought. Rather, it was to protect his friend Vladimir Vagner. Vagner was allied to Timiriazev and Chekhov in the conflict, but he had yet to defend his dissertation. Chekhov was worried that his public signature would result in a refusal of his friend's degree. See his letter to Suvorin about the publication of "The Tricksters," 28 August 1891, *Pis'ma* IV, 264-266.

According to Rayfield, though, Suvorin made sure everyone knew the author's identity regardless of Chekhov's scruples. See Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 256-257.

¹⁴⁴ See Chekhov's letter to Suvorin about the publication of "The Tricksters," 28 August 1891, *Pis'ma* IV, 264-266. It was published on 9 October 1891.

¹⁴⁵ See Chekhov's letter to his wife Olga of 2 February 1902, *Pis'ma* 10, 183.

This theme carried over into Chekhov's fiction, as well. Chekhov develops a web of characters who, like El'pe, pompously claim to understand the scientific complexities of evolutionary theory but never, in fact, do. And beginning in his earliest parodies, Chekhov takes hilarious pains to point out their folly. If we look to Chekhov's early stories, simplistic reductions of evolutionary theory, with their attendant racist and sexist undertones, emerge as prime objects of ridicule. As a measure of the fascination the trivialization of Darwin held for Chekhov the writer, we may note that he tackles it for comic effect in his very first published story: his 1880 print debut, the epistolary tale "Letter to a Learned Neighbor" ("Pis'mo k uchenomu sosedu").¹⁴⁶

The story takes the form of a letter written to a distinguished scholar from an indignant older man. The speaker takes umbrage at his neighbor who, we gather, is a famous and accomplished Darwin supporter. As becomes clear at the beginning of the letter, the speaker has misunderstood evolution as advocating a direct and reductionist correlation between primates and humans and is consequently, and hysterically, outraged.¹⁴⁷

Вы изволили сочинить что человек произошел от обезьянских племен мартышек орангуташек и т. п. Простите меня старичка, но я с Вами касательно этого важного пункта не согласен и могу Вам запятую поставить. Ибо, если бы человек, властитель мира, умнейшее из дыхательных существ, происходил от глупой и невежественной обезьяны то у него был бы хвост и дикий голос.

¹⁴⁶ Both Chekhov's brother Mikhail and Chekhov's editors recognize this piece as his first publication. It consequently appears as the first story in Volume 1 of the collected works. It was first published in the *Dragonfly*, No 10, 9 March 1880. See *PSS I*, 558.

¹⁴⁷ As George Levine points out in the Preface to *Darwin the Writer*, entitled "I don't need to read Darwin to know what he says!", such misinformation surrounding what Darwin actually wrote circulates to the present day. For illustrative examples from Levine's own experiences speaking as a Darwin scholar in public, see his *Darwin the Writer*, v-xvii.

Если бы мы происходили от обезьян, то нас теперь водили бы по городам Цыганы на показ и мы платили бы деньги за показ друг друга, танцуя по приказу Цыгана или сидя за решеткой в зверинце. Разве мы покрыты кругом шерстью? Разве мы не носим одеяний, коих лишены обезьяны? Разве мы любили бы и не презирали бы женщину, если бы от нее хоть немножко пахло бы обезьяной, которую мы каждый вторник видим у Предводителя Дворянства?<...>Извените меня неужели за то, что мешаюсь в Ваши ученые дела и толкую посвоему по старчески и навязываю вам свои дикообразные и какие-то аляповатые идеи, которые у ученых и цивилизованных людей скорей помещаются в животе чем в голове. Не могу умолчать и не терплю когда ученые неправильно мыслят в уме своем и не могу не возразить Вам.

You were pleased to compose that man descended from the primatal tribes of baboons, orangatoons, and so forth. Forgive me old man, but I do not agree with you concerning this important point and I can spell out for you why. For, if a man, ruler of the earth, smartest of the respiratory creatures, descended from the stupid and ignorant primate, then he would have a tail and savage voice. If we had descended from primates, then the Gypsies would now lead us about the city on display and we would pay money to watch each other, stepping to the command of the Gypsy or sitting behind the bars at a wild beast show. Are we covered in fur? Do not we don garments, of which the primates are deprived? Would we love and not condemn a woman whom we see every Tuesday at the Marshall of the Nobility if from her wafted even the faintest scent of primate?...Pray excuse me for the fact that I am interfering in your learned affairs and expound in my old doddering way, and impose upon you my uncultivated and somehow coarse ideas, which for learned and civilized people sooner belong in the stomach than in the head. I cannot be silent and cannot tolerate when scholars cogitate wrongly in their minds and cannot not raise my objection to you.¹⁴⁸

We are, of course, meant to laugh at the woefully uneducated author's awkward phrasing ("cogitate wrongly in their minds"), non-standard words ("orangatoons" for "orangutans," "primatal" for "primate") and ridiculous leaps in logic (evolution cannot be

¹⁴⁸ PSS I, 12-14.

true because humans do not have fur and women do not smell like monkeys) that he employs in a failed attempt to sound intelligent and informed. But more importantly, in portraying such a speaker, Chekhov highlights the absurdity of—and thus, the problems with—the reduction of Darwin’s intricate process of evolution to a simple one-to-one correspondence between human and animal society, especially concerning the relations between human men and women. In other words, if you think that evolution is supposed to imply that people follow monkey rules, then you are just as stupid as the (fictional) author of this letter. This kind of absurd misunderstanding of contemporary philosophy would become one of Chekhov’s favorite tropes. For example, one of the most famous instances in Chekhov’s mature work occurs in *The Cherry Orchard* (*Vishnyovii sad*), when landowner Boris Borisovich Simeonov-Pishchik claims Nietzsche’s great works explain how to forge banknotes.¹⁴⁹

Similar hijinks continued in Chekhov’s prose from his university studies onward. A few years later, at the same time Chekhov was gathering the notes necessary to complete his serious doctoral project, he continued to pepper his stories for the penny press with Darwinian misadventures. Also written in 1883, alongside the famous letter in which Chekhov outlined his serious thesis project, was a second parody entitled “The Naturalists’ Conference in Philadelphia.”¹⁵⁰ This time, Chekhov lampoons those who style themselves Darwinists but who baselessly and hilariously make direct correlations between animals and human society.

¹⁴⁹ PSS XIII, 230.

¹⁵⁰ First published in *Oskolki*, No 18, 30 April 1883. According to the *primechaniia* to the PSS, Chekhov composed the story between April 16 and April 20, which overlaps with the span of time when Chekhov wrote his famous letter to Alexander, dated the 17th or 18th of that month.

The story takes the form of conference proceedings, wherein delegates from various countries offer their applications of evolutionary theory. While the first delegate purports to be in “full agreement with Darwin,” his text consists of an amusingly pompous “scholarly” referendum which claims that unlawful behavior in humans is the direct result of similar traits in monkeys: “Monkeykind is guilty for everything...if it weren’t for monkeys, there would be no people, and where there are no people, there are also no criminals.”¹⁵¹ As the story makes clear, this referendum specifically addresses Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, which marked the first time Darwin himself overtly explored humans as a species implicated in his theories of natural selection.¹⁵² In Chekhov’s spoof, the declaration against monkeys results in lively debate amongst the conference’s distinguished delegates. While feigning accord, contingents from other countries nonetheless take petty issue with the first delegate blaming the world’s ills on monkeys. Instead, they propose charging other animals with the guilt for modern nations’ present state of affairs, such as parrots, foxes, and frozen fish. The conference concludes with the astounding discovery—with which

¹⁵¹ PSS X, 130.

¹⁵² See George Levine, *Darwin the Writer*, 87; Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 16-17; James Allen Rogers, “Charles Darwin and Russian Scientists,” 378.

In the Russian, even more so than in the original English, this work appears very close in title and scope to the *Origin*. This is because the Russian title of *The Descent of Man* is «Происхождение человека и половой отбор», which uses the Russian word for “origins” or “background” to mean “descent.” This same word, происхождение, is taken from the translation of *On the Origin of Species*, which in the Russian is rendered as «Происхождение видов путем естественного отбора».

This point is also noteworthy because when the original edition of *The Descent of Man* was published in English, it was possible to interpret the word “descent” to mean a “fall” as related to man’s original fall from grace. As Beer explains, “‘Descent’ may imply his fall from his Adamic myth or his genetic descent (ascent) from his primate forebears.” Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 108.

But due to the translation, this interpretive path did not exist in the Russian. In Russian, man’s Fall in the Garden of Eden is known as “grekhopadenie.”

everyone happily concurs!—that magpies are to blame for the current criminal character of the Russian people.¹⁵³

Given this background, it is unsurprising that out of these early parodies emerged a more sophisticated critique of wayward “evolutionary outgrowths,” which indeed continued in Chekhov’s work throughout the 1890s. As Donald Rayfield justly points out, a notable “Darwinist” in the later stories is “the racist and snob Rashevich” of “V usad’be” (“On the Estate,” 1894).¹⁵⁴ Finke also cites Rashevich as proof that Chekhov’s “deeply personal engagement with Darwinian thought became increasingly complicated and ambivalent.”¹⁵⁵ Rather than signifying disenchantment with Darwin as Rayfield and Finke contend, however, this darkly funny tale is actually very close in scope and spirit to Chekhov’s early parodies on Darwinian misapplications.

In the story, Rashevich is a bumbling fool who clumsily uses Social Darwinism to justify his prejudice towards people of lower social status. Among other odious ideas, he expounds the belief that humans are divided into two categories: well-bred aristocrats who have “white bone” (“belaia kost”) and the turgid masses who have “black bone” (“chernaia kost”).¹⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, he considers those of “white bone” to have prevailed in the struggle for existence due to natural selection, for they possess unimpeachable “organic”—

¹⁵³Chekhov wryly notes that the conference delegates had no trouble believing that Russians descended from magpies, due to the well-known recent court trials of defendants Bush and Makshev, who had been charged with embezzlement and corruption. See *PSS* II, 487.

¹⁵⁴ Donald Rayfield, “Darwin, Chekhov and Mandelshtam”, 264. However, Rayfield, like Finke before him, ignores the fact that Chekhov’s attitude towards Rashevich is searingly ironic, which has the effect of utterly deflating Rashevich as an “outright villain,” to use Rayfield’s term.

¹⁵⁵ Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, 99. For his analysis of “V usad’be,” see page 120.

¹⁵⁶ *PSS* VIII, 333.

today we would say “genetic”—superiority.¹⁵⁷ He proudly declares himself “an incorrigible Darwinist” (“neispravimyi darvinist”)¹⁵⁸ without having the slightest idea of what Darwin actually wrote or argued. As a case in point, Rashevich’s favorite refrain is that the riffraff (“chumazyi,” which means “dirty” or “soiled”) should be given a lesson about knowing their place “right in the kisser!” (“priamo v khariu”).¹⁵⁹ Rashevich’s prejudices also have a significant impact on expressions of his daughters’ sexuality. He cannot abide their marrying low-class men who would sully their offspring—and his own grandchildren—with “black,” and thus impure, blood lines.¹⁶⁰

However, it is important to note that Rashevich, like Chekhov’s hapless misinterpreters of Darwin who preceded him, does not go unskewered: his daughters do not love him, while their lone suitor Meyer, a pleasant and open-minded (“nepredubezhdennyi”) young man, opposes Rashevich’s prejudiced views, proudly declaring that he himself is not of noble stock, but a petit bourgeois.¹⁶¹ Moreover, in a series

¹⁵⁷ PSS VIII, 334.

¹⁵⁸ PSS VIII, 333.

¹⁵⁹ PSS VIII, 339.

¹⁶⁰ PSS VII, 335.

¹⁶¹ Meyer cannot go along with Rashevich’s prejudices, declaring “я сам мещанин...Да, я мещанин и горжусь этим.” PSS VIII, 339. This seems to be a direct echo of poet Aleksandr Pushkin’s famous proud defense of his own heriitage which had come under attack by the billious critic Faddei Bulgarin, his poem «Моя родословная», usually translated as “My genealogy.” There, Pushkin proclaims multiple times that he is a petit bourgeois, building up to a climax of “Я сам большой: я мещанин.” While the poem was not published in Pushkin’s lifetime, it circulated in handwritten copies and was quite well-known to the Russian reading public. See Michael Wachtel, *A Commentary to Pushkin’s Lyric Poetry, 1826-1836*, p. 218-219, for more.

This makes an even bigger joke on Rashevich for his ignorance, as he openly states that Russia’s best artists were all of pure Russian heritage, literally, that they all were of “white bone” as opposed to “black bone,” PSS VIII, 335. In this list he names Pushkin first, a view that is laughably wrong, considering that Pushkin famously had African lineage, courtesy of his maternal great-grandfather, Abram Gannibal.

of ironic twists reminiscent of Chekhov's early parodies,¹⁶² Rashevich not only drives away his daughters' only suitor, thus ensuring that they will never have a chance to create the "pure" offspring that he so desperately craves, but Rashevich is also rendered an utter nonentity at the story's end. In view of his daughters' coldness, Chekhov has him write them a ridiculous and humiliating note to request that, upon his death, his body be sent to the anatomical theater in Kharkov for research purposes.¹⁶³ Readers familiar with Chekhov will recall that Kharkov figures as the height of ignorant provincial evil in works such as "A Boring Story" ("Skuchnaia istoriia"), where Katya goes to Kharkov to pursue a doomed career on the stage and where the protagonist Nikolai Stepanich presumably dies, and *The Cherry Orchard*, when Lopakhin must travel there on business, an office he labels "such a bore!".¹⁶⁴ Rashevich has thus received the ultimate comeuppance: in service of his science, he has become a de facto corpse that is relegated to rot in a city that Chekhov unquestionably regarded as one of the cesspools of the Russian Empire. Indeed, one could argue that, already within the boundaries of the text, Rashevich has become inhuman: all he can do by the end is mindlessly replicate one phrase, "In the kisser! In the kisser! In the

¹⁶² The most famous example is "Death of a Clerk" from 1883, about a low-ranking bureaucrat who sneezes on a superior official at the beginning of the story, and by the end, has died as a result of his own inconsequence.

¹⁶³ At this time, Kharkov was one of the eight cities in the Russian Empire that had faculties of medicine where students could hone their dissection and diagnostic skills on corpses in the anatomical theater or laboratory. The others were Dorpat, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, Kiev, Tomsk, Odessa and Warsaw. For more, see Mirko Grmek's informative essay, "The History of Medical Education in Russia," 317.

¹⁶⁴ PSS XIII, 204. Other works where Kharkov is suggested to be a provincial dump include the following: "Chaika", "Diadia Vania", "Pis'mo", "Novaia dacha", "Dushechka", "Gusev", "Krasavitsy", and "Perekati-pole." Chekhov's bottomline seems to be: stay away from Kharkov!

Ironically enough, there is now a restaurant in Kharkov called "Chekhov", which bills itself as an upscale establishment where "at last authentic country cooking and European service are united."

<<http://kharkov.restoranchik.com.ua/place/bar-restoran-chehov-kharkov-sumskaya-842.html>>

kisser!" like a parrot, and is thus deprived of the human component of language. The story closes on a comedic note: the daughters call their father a toad (*zhaba*), repeating the word over and over again in mimicry of the amphibian's croak.¹⁶⁵

Darwin as Artist

However, an exploration of the pitfalls of crude Social Darwinism forms only one thread of Chekhov's engagement with Darwinian themes. As the 1880s progressed, Chekhov's fiction began to advance a counternarrative which celebrated the creative impact of Darwin and his work, especially in stories that explored relations between the sexes. At approximately the same time Chekhov was railing at *New Times* for slandering Darwin, and long before contemporary scholars' comparisons between Darwin and celebrated authors in the English language, Chekhov was writing stories which put Darwin on an equal plane with great world artists, such as writers Lev Tolstoy and William Shakespeare. As V.B. Kataev notes, this trend became prominent in the mid-1880s with the original printed version of the story "Good People" ("Khoroshie liudi") and "Lights" ("Ogni").¹⁶⁶

"Good People" follows Vladimir, a mediocre writer who is smugly convinced of his own importance, and his sister Vera, an exhausted and broken physician. Vera is living with her brother while attempting to recover from both typhus and a morphine overdose. These circumstances cause the writer in Vladimir to relate to his sister not as a human being but

¹⁶⁵ PSS VIII, 341.

¹⁶⁶ V.B. Kataev, "Khristos i Darwin v mire Chekhova," 160.

as though she is merely “an ingenue, who has already performed all five acts of her life,”¹⁶⁷ thereby casting her in a tawdry drama of his own making. Vera senses this and becomes the only person to question her brother’s authenticity as an author. In an attempt to convince Vladimir to write with earnest conviction, Vera tells him to throw himself into his life’s work in the following manner:

честно, с восторгом, с той энергией, с какой Дарвин писал свое «О происхождении видов», Брем — «Жизнь животных», Толстой — «Войну и мир». Работать не вечер, не неделю, а десять, двадцать лет... всю жизнь! Бросить эту фельетонную манеру, а отнестись к вопросу строго научно, с серьезной эрудицией... Изучи ты историю и литературу вопроса, возьми себе на помощь биологию, литературу, философию, естественные науки, как это делают настоящие добросовестные мыслители.

honestly, with ecstasy, with that same energy that Darwin wrote his *On the Origin of Species*, Brehm, *The Life of Animals*, Tolstoy, *War and Peace*. Work not for one evening or one week, but 10, 20 years, your whole life! Drop this literary posing, and relate to your subject strictly scientifically, with serious erudition... Study the history and literature of your subject, avail yourself of the wisdom of biology, literature, philosophy, the natural sciences, as true conscientious thinkers do.¹⁶⁸

However, the brother and sister are unable to reach an understanding. Vera, feeling misunderstood and condescended to, leaves her brother’s house, while Vladimir dies alone and forgotten.

Published in 1888, Chekhov’s two-part long story “Lights” (“Ogni”) continues the elevation of Darwin to creative genius. The story’s outer frame takes place at a railroad building site and features a middle-aged engineer Anan’ev, who attempts to pass along

¹⁶⁷ PSS V, 415.

¹⁶⁸ PSS V, 589. The story was first printed in *Novoe vremia* (*New Times*) in 1886. Although Chekhov did excise this passage for the Marx edition of his complete works, his cuts most likely had nothing to do with Darwin. Instead, it seems his motivation was to distance himself from current polemics surrounding Tolstoy. See PSS V, 666, for more.

something of his life's experience to his younger colleagues. His vehicle for doing so, a story about an illicit romance from his youth with a young married woman named Kisochnka, forms the tale's inner frame. But Chekhov himself, likely embarrassed by the story's openly didactic tone and maudlin love affair, excluded it from his collected works.¹⁶⁹

Chekhov's own scruples notwithstanding, the story nonetheless, and quite literally, points to important intersections between scientific and artistic thought. Chekhov compares the engineer Anan'ev to Shakespeare's Othello, while the story's namesake "lights" function both as technological advances, that is, as concrete lights on the railroad tracks under construction in the immediate world of the tale, *and* as metaphorical beacons that harbor mysteries of the earth that man seeks to decode in art. The narrator describes their work camp in the following way:

Мы взобрались на насыпь и с ее высоты взглянули на землю. В саженьях пятидесяти от нас, там, где ухабы, ямы и кучи сливались сплошную с ночною мглой, мигал тусклый огонек. За ним светился другой огонь, за этим третий, потом, отступя шагов сто, светились рядом два красных глаза — вероятно, окна какого-нибудь барака — и длинный ряд таких огней, становясь всё гуще и тусклее, тянулся по линии до самого горизонта, потом полукругом поворачивал влево и исчезал в далекой мгле. Огни были неподвижны. В них, в ночной тишине и в унылой песне телеграфа чувствовалось что-то общее. Казалось, какая-то важная тайна была зарыта под насыпью, и о ней знали только огни, ночь и проволоки...

We climbed the embankment and from its heights looked down at the earth below. About 50 sazhens from us, there, where the ruts, pits and piles merged completely with the darkness of the night, flashed a faint light. After it glimmered another light, and then a third, and then, about a hundred paces away shone two red eyes side by side—probably, the windows of some hut—and a long line of these lights, growing ever closer and dimmer, stretched along the line to the very horizon, then in a half-circle veered off to the left and disappeared in

¹⁶⁹ PSS VII, 649.

the distant blackness. The lights were motionless. There was something in common between them, the silence of the night and the melancholy song of the telegraph wire. It seemed that some kind of important secret was buried beneath the embankment, and only the lights, the night and the wires knew about it...¹⁷⁰

That the lights are figured as red eyes only heightens the notion that they harbor knowledge both vital and enigmatic. While basking in the glow of these lights, the main character Anan'ev juxtaposes to his fellow railroad builders the two figures who represent the epitome of human "knowledge, poetry, and lofty thoughts": Shakespeare and Darwin.¹⁷¹ He warns his listeners against the currently popular philosophy of pessimism, which he claims will numb them to these heights:

Положим, что сию вот минуту вы садитесь читать какого-нибудь Дарвина или Шекспира. Едва прочли вы одну страницу, как отравка начинает уж сказываться: и ваша длинная жизнь, и Шекспир, и Дарвин представляются вам вздором, нелепостью, потому что вы знаете, что вы умрете, что Шекспир и Дарвин тоже умерли, что их мысли не спасли ни их самих, ни земли, ни вас, и что если, таким образом, жизнь лишена смысла, то все эти знания, поэзия и высокие мысли являются только ненужной забавой, праздной игрушкой взрослых детей. И вы прекращаете чтение на второй же странице. Теперь, положим, к вам, как к умному человеку, приходят люди и спрашивают вашего мнения, например, хоть о войне: желательна, нравственна она или нет? В ответ на этот страшный вопрос вы только пожмете плечами и ограничитесь каким-нибудь общим местом, потому что для вас, при вашей манере мыслить, решительно всё равно, умрут ли сотни тысяч людей насильственной или же своей смертью: в том и в другом случае результаты одни и те же — прах и забвение.

Let's say that this very minute you sit down to read something by Darwin or Shakespeare. You have barely managed to read one page, when the poison begins to manifest itself: and your long life, and Shakespeare, and Darwin all seem to you nonsense and foolishness,

¹⁷⁰ PSS VII, 106.

¹⁷¹ In his article "Khristos i Darvin v mire Chekhova," V.B. Kataev also makes note of this occurrence.

because you know that you will die, and Shakespeare and Darwin also died, that their thoughts saved neither themselves, nor the earth, nor you, and if life is deprived of its meaning in this way, then all of this knowledge, and poetry and lofty thoughts become only an unnecessary diversion, the toys of grown children. And you stop reading on the second page. Now let's say that people come to you as an educated person, and they ask your opinion about, for example, war: is it desirable, ethical, or not? In reply to that terrible question you only shrug your shoulders and make some kind of general statement, because for you, for your manner of thinking, it is decidedly all the same, if hundreds of thousands of people die a violent death or a natural one. In both cases the results are the same: ashes and oblivion.¹⁷²

The inspiration provided by Shakespeare and Darwin is thus rendered absolutely essential. Without them, people will lose any kind of a moral compass, and will not bat an eyelash at phenomena like violence and war.

As this quote indicates, in "Lights", as well as in "Good People," the main character is striving to realize philosophical endeavors that will satisfy them more than their everyday routine ever could. Vera is, as Chekhov tells us, undergoing a "genuine spiritual revolution,"¹⁷³ while Anan'ev yearns to become more than an average Russian diletante.¹⁷⁴ For Vera and Anan'ev, Darwin has come to represent more than a preeminent scientist; he is also a mysterious and inspirational figure along the path towards achieving higher human ambition.

The points of view of these two Darwinian acolytes are also remarkably similar to Chekhov's own. Like Chekhov, both of these speakers come from a scientific background

¹⁷² PSS VII, 111.

¹⁷³ PSS V, 422.

¹⁷⁴ PSS V, 135.

but also have humanistic bents: Vera is a doctor, while Anan'ev is an engineer.

Furthermore, Chekhov was certainly no stranger to these characters' desire to create something lasting beyond the professions they trained for, as he himself struggled to carve out an identity for himself as a full-time author, apart from his career in medicine from the mid-1880s on. In this connection, I argue that Chekhov also drew inspiration from Darwin to realize his own higher ambition, that of crafting serious artistic prose. The next story Chekhov would write that engages all of these themes—Shakespeare, Tolstoy and Darwin on the question of sex, as well as the forces of scientific and artistic inspiration—marks his most notorious venture into the realm of nineteenth-century scientific thought, his novella “Duel’.”

Scientific and Artistic Inspiration in “The Duel”

While it did not appear in print until 1891,¹⁷⁵ Chekhov actually began “The Duel” in 1888, the same year that he wrote “Lights.”¹⁷⁶ Thus it is not surprising that we should see overlap, in the form of Darwinian inspiration, between the two stories. Out of all of Chekhov’s works, “The Duel” is one of the most commented on, and with respect to Von Koren, its unapologetic Darwinist hero, is arguably the easiest to discuss in an evolutionary framework. But while Von Koren’s Darwinism has often been remarked upon,¹⁷⁷ Darwin’s

¹⁷⁵ “Duel’” actually began its serial printing in the same month that “The Tricksters” was published (October 1891) and in the same venue, *New Times*. PSS VIII, 688.

¹⁷⁶ For more on the creation of “Lights”, see the PSS VII, 645-650.

¹⁷⁷ See, for example, Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*; Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*; Pyotr Dolzhenkov, *Chekhov i pozitivizm*, Andrew Durkin, “Allusion and Dialogue in “The Duel’””; V.B. Kataev,

artistic influence on Chekhov's novella has yet to be satisfactorily explored. Below I argue that "The Duel" develops Chekhov's paradigm, first indicated by "Lights" and "Good People," that engages Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Darwin together as leading creative minds.¹⁷⁸ In so doing, Chekhov illustrates that a Darwin-inspired evolutionary transformation ultimately wins out over a misguided Social Darwinism.

"The Duel" is one of Chekhov's longest stories, and one of the few that is set in the Caucasus. The tale chronicles the contentious relationship between Laevsky, a dissipated civil servant, and the marine biologist Von Koren. Laevsky has moved to the Caucasus from Saint Petersburg to pursue a new life with his common-law wife Nadezhda, while Von Koren has ostensibly come to study aquatic animals. Von Koren, in addition to his research on the embryology of jellyfish,¹⁷⁹ loves also to use his scientific practice and theories of evolution to classify Laevsky's illicit and "unnatural" love affair, much to Laevsky's

"Evoliutsiia i chudo v mire Chekhova: Povest' 'Duel'" and "Povest' Chekhova 'Duel'" (K probleme obraza avtora); Zvonnikova, "Skvernaia bolezn': K nrvstvenno-filosofskoi problematike 'Dueli.'"

¹⁷⁸ Critics have long agreed that "Duel" is one of Chekhov's most intertextual works. Andrew Durkin, for example, observes, "The central characters in "The Duel" (Duel', 1891), the "humanist" Laevsky and the "scientist" von Koren, exist in an atmosphere thick with literary and cultural allusion, from Shakespeare through Pushkin, Lermontov, and Turgenev to Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Tolstoy's "Kreutzer Sonata.'" Andrew Durkin, "Allusion and Dialogue in "The Duel," 169.

The Russian-Soviet scholar V.Ia. Linkov details an even more comprehensive list: "In "Duel", as in Pushkin's novel, there is an extraordinarily large amount of names of authors, philosophers, scholars, literary heroes and titles of literary works. Here is a checklist of these names: Tolstoy, Spenser, Vereshchagin, Anna Karenina, Hamlet, Shakespeare, Onegin, Pechorin, Byron's Cain, Bazarov, Turgenev, Faust, Schopenhauer, Romeo and Juliette, William Tell, Kant, Hegel, Leskov, Lermontov," Linkov, *Khudozhestvennyi mir prozy A.P. Chekhova*, 52.

Russian fairy tales also join in, as the novella's sultry Caucasian landscape curiously features Baba Yaga's hut on chicken legs. *PSS VII*, 386.

Finally, Chekhov himself, when first describing his new work, labeled "Duel" as "Such a potpurri! God save us!" See his letter to A.S. Suvorin of 24 or 25 November, 1888. *Pis'ma III*, 78.

¹⁷⁹ The narrator tells us that Von Koren has come to the Black Sea "in order to study the embryology of jellyfish," *PSS VII*, 366.

consternation. Skirmishes predicated on this theme between these two characters form the novella's narrative arc, culminating in an actual yet clumsy duel, which no one, neither the principals nor the seconds, remembers how to fight properly.¹⁸⁰

As we saw in "Good People" and "Lights", so too does "The Duel" invoke multiple Shakespearean and Tolstoyan literary allusions.¹⁸¹ Here Chekhov draws upon the plots and images of *Hamlet* and *Anna Karenina* specifically as raw material to shape his own characters' views on love and their sexual relationships. To give just a few examples, the main character Laevsky styles himself as a Hamlet of the Caucasian backwater who cannot definitively make up his mind whether or not to abandon his mistress Nadezhda. After a particularly tedious lunch with his beloved, he thinks to himself:

Своею нерешительностью я напоминаю Гамлета...Как верно
Шекспир подметил! Ах, как верно!

In my very indecisiveness I resemble Hamlet...How truly
Shakespeare portrayed it! Ah, how truly!¹⁸²

For her part, Nadezhda's bare white throat and curls at the nape of her neck irritate Laevsky as violently as Karenin's ears did Anna. We should recall also that Anna's unruly curly hair is one of the symbols of her defiance of social expectations. At that very same lunch, it becomes clear that,

На этот раз Лаевскому больше всего не понравилась у Надежды
Федоровны ее белая, открытая шея и завитушки волос на
затылке, и он вспомнил, что Анне Карениной, когда она

¹⁸⁰ In keeping with the novella's overarching intertextuality, Von Koren sarcastically suggests consulting Lermontov or Turgenev. *PSS VII*, 447.

¹⁸¹ For a thorough, though by no means exhaustive list of these references, see the *primechaniia* to "The Duel" in *PSS VII*, 688-707 and Andrew Durkin's article "Allusion and Dialogue in "The Duel.""

¹⁸² *PSS VII*, 366.

разлюбила мужа, не нравились прежде всего его уши, и подумал:
«Как это верно! как верно!»

This time what Laevsky disliked most of all about Nadezhda Fyodorovna was her white, open neck and curls of hair at the nape of her neck, and he remembered that, when Anna Karenina fell out of love with her husband, what she had disliked most off all was his ears, and he thought, “How true that is! How true!”¹⁸³

However, just as important for the construction of “The Duel” is Chekhov’s exploration of Darwin, interpretations of his work, and the ultimate transformative power of evolutionary theory. Chekhov refracts this exploration through the prism of his dual heroes Von Koren and Laevsky. As we saw in Chekhov’s parodies above, so too in “The Duel” does he make a sharp distinction between Darwin himself and the misuse of ideas surrounding evolutionary theory. While Von Koren is often uncritically called simply a “Darwinist,” it is crucial that we recognize his views as oriented away from Darwin as such and aligned instead with an extreme form of Social Darwinism.¹⁸⁴ It is significant that Von Koren does not once utter Darwin’s name or call himself a Darwinist. In fact, Darwin is not mentioned in the text of “The Duel” at all. Rather, in all respects Von Koren is portrayed as a counterfeit Darwin: Von Koren calls himself a marine biologist, as was Darwin’s primary profession, but instead of working in the best climates for this kind of research and collaborating with other scientists, as Darwin did by joining the voyage of the *HMS Beagle*,¹⁸⁵ Von Koren has chosen to work in a region poor in marine fauna precisely

¹⁸³ PSS VII, 362.

¹⁸⁴ Dolzhenkov also emphasizes that “Duel” is Chekhov’s polemic specifically against Social Darwinism. See Pyotr Dolzhenkov, *Chekhov i pozitivizm*, 124-127.

¹⁸⁵ For a fascinating account of Darwin’s time aboard the *Beagle* and the research that came out of his journey, see Rebecca Stott’s delightful study *Darwin and the Barnacle*.

because it lacks human competition.¹⁸⁶ As Laevsky explains to their mutual friend Doctor Samoilenko, “in the depths of the Black Sea, owing to the abundance of hydrogen sulfide, organic life is not possible. All serious zoologists work in the biological stations of Naples or Villefranche. But Von Koren is solitary and stubborn. He works on the Black Sea because no one else does.”¹⁸⁷

Outwardly von Koren pledges his allegiance to Herbert Spencer. But here, too, Von Koren is guilty of misunderstanding and misapplying the work of a leading evolutionary theorist. As Shoshana Knapp has shown in her article on Chekhov and Spencer, Von Koren takes Spencer’s extension of Darwin’s ideas into the social realm to an abhorrent extreme. Knapp points out that “Von Koren speaks of Spencer as his ‘altar’” and mentions him six times in the space of one paragraph.¹⁸⁸ He also contemptuously claims that Laevsky is not fit to kiss Spencer’s bootsole, which implies that he, Von Koren, most certainly is.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, Von Koren takes Spencer’s tenet “survival of the fittest”¹⁹⁰ into his own hands, literally, as it will turn out, by declaring on several occasions that he would be doing society a favor by destroying a “weak organism” like Laevsky.¹⁹¹ In various conversations with

¹⁸⁶ The reference to conducting biological research on the Black Sea may also be a veiled allusion to the overly prescriptive Danilevsky, who, as we saw earlier, violently and haphazardly opposed Darwin in Russia. Danilevsky’s own thesis was on the flora of the Black Sea. He was planning to defend this thesis when he was arrested for participation in the Petrashevskii Circle in 1849.

¹⁸⁷ PSS VII, 398.

¹⁸⁸ Shoshana Knapp, “Herbert Spencer in Čexov’s ‘Skučnaja istorija’ and ‘Duel’: The Love of Science and the Science of Love,” 289.

¹⁸⁹ PSS VII, 362.

¹⁹⁰ Darwin allowed this phrase to appear as as synonymous with biological “natural selection” starting with the fifth edition of the *Origin*. James Allen Rogers, “Russia: Social Sciences,” 260.

¹⁹¹ PSS VII, 431.

Samoilenko, Von Koren explains that he would eagerly do any of the following: help Laevsky drown, hang him, shoot him, destroy him and/or cart him off to Siberia. In so doing, Von Koren actually betrays his idol: while Spencer championed the doctrine of “survival of the fittest,” for him it was a biological fact which nature manages on her own; she does not need human help in this endeavor.¹⁹²

It is unsurprising then that Chekhov has set up his Social Darwinist hero precisely to undermine him. As “The Duel” unfolds, it becomes clear that Chekhov has subjected Von Koren to his own cruel version of evolutionary logic, for Von Koren finds himself embroiled in a personal struggle for survival against Laevsky, i.e., the tale’s titular duel. As we will see, who ends up being more “fit” in Chekhov’s artistic world is both unexpected and speaks to the power of Darwin-inspired transformation.

In a blow that inflicts maximum damage to Von Koren’s exalted opinion of himself, Chekhov portrays his conflict with Laevsky in terms of the most fierce variant of Darwinian struggle,¹⁹³ or the type that exists between creatures of the very same kind, who share the same features and compete for the same resources.¹⁹⁴ Darwin outlines this type of struggle in its own subsection of the third chapter of the *Origin*:

¹⁹² Shoshana Knapp, “Herbert Spencer in Čexov’s ‘Skučnaja istorija’ and ‘Duel’”: The Love of Science and the Science of Love,” 289-290.

¹⁹³ As scholar Daniel Todes has shown in his study *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, the defining stylistic feature of the *Origin* is the use of many rhetorically powerful devices that have since taken on lives of their own. Such metaphors include “the struggle for existence” and attendant combat images, like the phrases “the great battle for life” and the “war of nature.” Of all of Darwin’s images, he points out that the most significant weight has been assigned to the struggle metaphors, Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, 19.

¹⁹⁴ V.B. Kataev also made note of the prevalence of this most fierce type of struggle in Chekhov’s plays. See Kataev, “Khristos i Darvin v mire Chekhova”, 165.

As the species of the same genus usually have, though by no means invariably, much similarity in habits and constitution, and always in structure, the struggle will generally be more severe between them, if they come into competition with each other...A corollary of the highest importance may be deduced from the foregoing remarks, namely, that the structure of every organic being is related, in the most essential yet often hidden manner, to that of all the other organic beings, with which it comes into competition for food or residence, or from which it has to escape, or on which it preys.¹⁹⁵

From the very beginning of the novella, Chekhov establishes his dual heroes as two sides of the same coin.¹⁹⁶ Not only are Laevsky and Von Koren both university-educated men from the major Russian cities, isolated now in a tiny town in the Caucasus, but also their mutual friends remark on how similar they are and how they should use these commonalities as the basis for friendship.¹⁹⁷ Instead, another point they both hold in common is that they continually hurl scientific as well as literary allusions from the same stories and plays at each other in rhetorical combat. Such skirmishes demonstrate that both Laevsky and Von Koren have read the same works and identify with the same bookish figures. To reference the Darwin passage just quoted, their “literary insides” are marked with the same textual impressions, relating them to each other in a manner that is both

¹⁹⁵ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 61.

¹⁹⁶ Many critics have made this observation, but not in terms of Darwinian struggle. See, for example, Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov* and Zvonnikova, “Skvernaia bolezn’: K npravstvenno-filosofskoi problematike ‘Dueli.’”

¹⁹⁷ PSS VII, 397.

essential *and* hidden from plain view. In keeping with the argument above, such allusions include Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*¹⁹⁸ and Tolstoy.¹⁹⁹

Moreover, as the novella brings Laevsky and Von Koren closer to the physical confrontation so tantalizingly promised by the title, they only grow more alike as organisms. In a pivotal scene Samoilenko attempts to reconcile the two adversaries by convincing Von Koren to lend Laevsky a hundred rubles. Von Koren reluctantly becomes Laevsky's benefactor, but at a price: his monetary gift comes with an "evolutionary" anecdote that foretells his and Laevsky's eventual showdown. As he moves to hand Samoilenko the hundred-ruble bill, Von Koren is in the middle of describing the territorial skirmishes of moles. He explains,

Между насекомоядными попадаются очень интересные субъекты. Например, крот...Интересно, когда два крота встречаются под землей, то они оба, точно сговорившись, начинают рыть площадку; эта площадка нужна им для того,

¹⁹⁸ For example, Laevsky and Von Koren have a heated exchange on the nature of artistic representation of the beauty of the physical world. While Laevsky states his belief that a direct impression is better than any description, the following argument ensues:

— Будто бы? — холодно спросил фон Корен, выбрав себе самый большой камень около воды и стараясь взобраться на него и сесть. — Будто бы? — повторил он, глядя в упор на Лаевского. — А Ромео и Джульета? А, например, Украинская ночь Пушкина? Природа должна прийти и в ножки поклониться.

— Пожалуй... — согласился Лаевский, которому было лень соображать и противоречить. — Впрочем, — сказал он немного погодя, — что такое Ромео и Джульета, в сущности? Красивая, поэтическая святая любовь — это розы, под которыми хотят спрятать гниль. Ромео — такое же животное, как и все.

— О чем с вами ни заговоришь, вы всё сводите к...

Фон Корен оглянулся на Катю и не договорил.

— К чему я свожу? — спросил Лаевский.

— Вам говоришь, например: «как красива кисть винограда!», а вы: «да, но как она безобразна, когда ее жуют и переваривают в желудках». К чему это говорить? Не ново и... вообще странная манера. PSS VII, 386-387.

¹⁹⁹ In one of his diatribes against Laevsky to their mutual friend Doctor Samoilenko, Von Koren sarcastically refers to the would-be populist reformer Laevsky as a "second Tolstoy." PSS VII, 374.

чтобы удобнее было сражаться. Сделав ее, они вступают в жестокий бой и дерутся до тех пор, пока не падает слабейший.

Among the insectivores very interesting subjects occur. For example, the mole...It's interesting, when two moles meet underground, they both, having come to an agreement, start to tamp down a small space; this small space is necessary to fight more expediently. Having done this, they engage in a cruel battle until the weaker one falls.²⁰⁰

As the novella's climax, the duel itself, approaches, both men transform into these moles facing off with each other in a fight to the death.

Indeed, the very next day, when Laevsky discovers it is Von Koren who has contemptuously lent him the money, he challenges the zoologist to a duel. From this point on, the men follow the underground moles' lead and figuratively transform into insectivores. After the passage quoted above, they each begin to relate to the other as though he were a bug to be crushed, with Laevsky and Von Koren quite naturally doing the crushing. In the night leading up to the duel, Laevsky brags to his friends about how he will "teach Von Koren a lesson," imagining in his mind's eye how he will shoot Von Koren and then toss him aside in the grass like "an insect with a torn-off leg."²⁰¹

Von Koren's "lesson" for Laevsky, too, involves the latter taking on insect form. Also on the evening before the duel is to take place, he explains to his friend the Deacon that weak men like Laevsky are male bees that must be killed, or else they:

останутся в живых, будут съедать мёд, развращать и душиить пчел— в результате преобладание слабых над сильными и вырождение последних.

²⁰⁰ PSS VII, 407-408. This story about the moles is taken from Alfred Brehm's *Life of Animals (Zhizn' zhivotnykh)*, which was extremely popular and well-known throughout Europe in the late nineteenth century. For the passage in English, see *Brehm's Life of Animals: A Complete Natural History for Popular Home Instruction and for the Use of Schools*, 293.

²⁰¹PSS VII, 427.

will remain among the living, they will eat up all the honey, corrupt and suffocate all the other bees—as a result the weak will dominate the strong, and the latter will degenerate.²⁰²

As we will see, Von Koren fancies himself the executioner.²⁰³ In his description of the morning of the duel itself, Chekhov plants another subtle hint on this theme. When one of Laevsky's seconds walks up to Von Koren in a hopeless effort to convince him to call everything off, Von Koren staunchly refuses. As he does so, Chekhov tells us that Von Koren is wearing a shirt with a flowery print.²⁰⁴ Such an image only reinforces the novella's Darwinian species interplay, for Von Koren is presumably luring the "apian" or bee-like Laevsky with the promise of honey, so that he may then exterminate him.

At the dueling site, both men begin to pace to and fro as the moles did to tamp down their space, and both men fire off their shots. But who is the winner? According to Von Koren's strict application of the "survival of the fittest" rule, it should be he. After all, Von Koren's broad shoulders "serve as proof of his good health and strong constitution,"²⁰⁵ while Laevsky on numerous occasions complains of poor physical health and a nervous

²⁰²PSS VII, 431.

Here, as in many other places, Von Koren displays his Social Darwinism, along with an incomplete and inadequate understanding of evolutionary biology. It is well-known to entomologists that such male drones are indeed purged from the hive if they become a drain on resources. Thus there is no need for Von Koren, the human scientist, to think himself above nature and interfere.

²⁰³ Michael Finke notes that grafting the rules of bee society onto human society was a common trope in nineteenth-century Russian thought. He references such prominent examples as Dmitry Pisarev's "pseudoscientific political essay" on "Bees," which was written in 1862 and published in 1868, as well as Tolstoy's use of the "extended beehive metaphor" for Muscovite society in *War and Peace*. Cited in Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov*, 217, note 32.

²⁰⁴ PSS VII, 445.

²⁰⁵ PSS VII, 367.

temperament.²⁰⁶ But, contrary to all his Spencerian predictions, Von Koren is not the victor. By accident, Von Koren's carefully aimed shot misses, and Laevsky lives. In an ironic twist, it is Von Koren who feels so feeble after the duel that he can hardly stand.²⁰⁷ He tells his friend the deacon, "this whole procedure, so disgusting to someone who isn't used to it, has worn me out. I feel horribly weak."²⁰⁸

Instead, the winner is Laevsky. But he has done more than merely survive an armed conflict. The morning of their showdown, just before he is to leave for the dueling site, Laevsky experiences a spiritual rebirth. One moment, Laevsky is in utter despondency, believing that he and Nadezhda both would be better off dead. The next, Chekhov tells us that Laevsky has "impulsively and tightly embraced [Nadezhda], showered her hands and knees with kisses," has realized that she is the only person who is "close, dear, and irreplaceable to him" and, most importantly, has decided that he wants to return home alive.²⁰⁹ Von Koren's wayward bullet makes Laevsky's nascent vow a reality. Not only is Laevsky reborn, but he and Nadya are finally able to marry and live the honest and purposeful life they had long dreamt of.²¹⁰ To add insult to injury, not only does Von Koren fail to live up to his Spencerian ideals, but he is made to admit he was wrong and instead

²⁰⁶ PSS VII, 358; 362.

²⁰⁷ In his undermining of Von Koren and the validity of the Social Darwinist position of "survival of the fittest," Chekhov would seem to be in agreement with his contemporary N.K. Mikhailovsky, who "suggested that the application of the Spencerian 'survival of the fittest' to human society in the name of Darwinism confused biological and social progress." Quoted from N.K. Mikhailovsky, "Chto takoe progress?" in *Sochineniia v 10 tomakh*, St. Petersburg: M.M. Stasiulevich, 1906-1913, 150-165. Cited in James Allen Rogers, "Russia: Social Sciences," 261.

²⁰⁸ PSS VII, 449.

²⁰⁹ PSS VII, 439.

²¹⁰ PSS VII, 450.

recognize that Laevsky and his now-wife Nadezhda were capable of change. At their last meeting, von Koren tells them in a speech riddled with cliché,

Не поминайте меня лихом...как вижу теперь к великой моей радости, я ошибся относительно вас, но ведь спотыкаются и на ровной дороге, и такова уж человеческая судьба: если не ошибаешься в главном, то будешь ошибаться в частностях. Никто не знает настоящей правды.

Don't think ill of me...as I see now, to my great joy, I was mistaken about you, but one can stumble even on a smooth road, and such is human fate: if you're not mistaken in the main thing, you'll be mistaken in the details. No one knows the real truth.²¹¹

This resolution is not, however, unproblematic. Ever since the original publication of “The Duel,” critics have been dissatisfied with what they view as a deflated ending. Scholars have long complained that Laevsky and Nadezhda’s abrupt transformation from superfluous adulterers to tenderly devoted spouses is weak and unmotivated, with Chekhov failing to give a believable explanation for their about-face. Some critics have considered this implausibility as the novella’s only shortcoming, others, its most glaring flaw.²¹² Representative of this point of view is Chekhov’s contemporary A.M. Skabichevskii, who declared, “I don’t believe that such people like Laevsky and Nadezhda Fyodorovna could, all of the sudden, as if by magic, be reborn and become virtuous, clean, abstemious, hard-working, etc., etc.”²¹³ Even Rayfield finds the ending unconvincing.²¹⁴

²¹¹ PSS VII, 452-453.

²¹² Such commentators include Chekhov’s contemporaries I.I. Iasinskii, Volynskii, Lipovskii, Skabichevskii, M. Yuzhnyi, Pertsov, as well as Chekhov’s friend, the minor poet Pleshcheev. See PSS VII, 704-705.

²¹³ Quoted from PSS VII, 705.

²¹⁴ Donald Rayfield, “Darwin, Chekhov, and Mandelshtam,” 264.

This refrain of a lack of motivation and unbelievability is, however, best understood not as a conclusion but as a beginning.²¹⁵ Kataev has quite correctly characterized “The Duel”’s narrative of Laevsky’s transformation as the “story of his evolution.”²¹⁶ For in a Darwinian framework, overt absence of purpose and unpredictability constitute the governing principles, not the outliers. As Levine observes, when building his theory Darwin “could not account for those ‘chance’ variations that occur in all organisms, but he knew that they occurred with no Lamarckian connection to particular environmental conditions, to parent stock, to need, or to any recognizable goal.”²¹⁷ For Darwin, such unmotivated, mindless and random variation is the only force capable of effecting change in the natural world and “may have been an even bigger idea for [him] than natural selection.”²¹⁸ As Beer explains, evolutionism, with “its eschewing of fore-ordained design (its dysteleology) allowed chance to figure as the only sure determinant.”²¹⁹ Consequently, random chance is what constitutes the “great creative forces in Darwin’s theory.”²²⁰

²¹⁵ Though he does not make reference to Darwin, as Cathy Popkin observes, “A.P. Chudakov, in his ambitious study of Chekhov’s poetics, emphasizes the importance of ‘chance’ (sluchainost’) as a positive structural principle for Chekhov, [but] most of Chekhov’s contemporaries saw the ‘randomness’ very differently,” Popkin, *The Pragmatics of Insignificance: Chekhov, Zoshchenko, Gogol*, 20-21.

For Chudakov’s discussion of the role of chance in “Duel”, see in English, *Chekhov’s Poetics*, 114-115 and 179-183; in Russian, *Poetika Chekhova*, 150-152 and 234-236.

²¹⁶ V.B. Kataev, “Khristos i Darvin v mire Chekhova,” 162.

In this article Kataev pursues a somewhat different argument to mine. Instead of discussing the role of random variation in the natural world, Kataev argues that Laevsky’s transformation is proof of Chekhov’s faith in otherworldly Christian miracle.

²¹⁷ George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, 93.

²¹⁸ Curtis Johnson, *Darwin’s Dice: The Idea of Chance in the Thought of Charles Darwin*, xi-xii.

²¹⁹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 6.

²²⁰ George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, 93.

Instead of dismissing Chekhov's ending out of hand, then, the Darwinian framework helps us arrive at a more nuanced understanding of Chekhov's narrative structure. If we look at how Chekhov describes Laevsky's transformation, we see that it also happens instantaneously and without commentary: Chekhov makes no attempt to give an explanation or probable cause. Laevsky's change, therefore, is full of creative potential. After he returns home from the duel, Laevsky, in place of words of justification for Nadya, has only words of affirmation for their future together. As Chekhov tells us, they are "dreaming aloud of their happy future life."²²¹ Tellingly, the conversation in which Laevsky and Nadya build their future takes place in a setting of infinite creativity itself—a garden. And even those words they use to construct their new life, Chekhov adds, are "short" and "abrupt" but seem to Laevsky "full" and "beautiful."²²² We are reminded of Beer's assertion that, for Darwin, "plenitude includes the crabbed, crooked and marred; it does not mean unerring perfection."²²³ In the final scene with Laevsky, Nadezhda, and Von Koren, Chekhov once again makes no attempt for Laevsky and Nadezhda to explain themselves. They barely speak. Chekhov's point, then, is that we cannot rationalize their transformation. In order to make sense of the fates of his heroes, and even rejoice on their behalf, Chekhov is challenging us to celebrate the minute chance mutation that spurs their development.

Certainly for some, this is a difficult proposition. As Levine explains,

The implications of the Darwinian argument obviously extend far beyond the perhaps parochial contest for scientific authority in which

²²¹ PSS VII, 485.

²²² PSS VII, 450.

²²³ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 68.

it was set. For to imagine a system in which disorder, dysteleology, and mindlessness are constitutive, and, indeed, the source of all value, is to turn the Western tradition, with its faith that all value inheres in order, design, and intelligence, on its head.²²⁴

Like the critics above, Von Koren, with his pointedly German background,²²⁵ struggles with these implications mightily. For Laevsky and Nadezhda have broken out of the order into which he had so confidently placed them at the beginning of the novella. For Von Koren, it is difficult to comprehend that Laevsky and Nadezhda have transcended the labels of “weak” and “depraved” that he was accustomed to assigning them.²²⁶ Instead of being beholden to stymying gendered stereotypes, Laevsky has transformed from the Superfluous Man into a diligent writer working to pay his debts, and Nadezhda is now not a Fallen Woman but a respectable wife. As Beer notes, this troubling of categories is a by-product of Darwinian evolution, in which “classification becomes not an end in itself but an arrested moment in a long story. Taxonomy and transformation are set in tension.”²²⁷ We see von Koren wrestle with this very tension: through the end of “The Duel,” he continues to marvel at, even disbelieve, the disruption.

The novella’s end suggests continued uncertainty for both characters, both physically and philosophically. In place of neat resolution, there is instead no limit to Darwinian struggle, for “The Duel” concludes on a vivid battle for life. The tale’s final scene

²²⁴ George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, 94.

²²⁵ As Rayfield observes, for the character of von Koren, “Chekhov insisted on a German name ...because von Koren’s energy and dedication had to be un-Russian.” Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 102.

²²⁶ See, for example, *PSS VII*, 373 and 393.

²²⁷ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 58.

depicts Von Koren leaving to prepare for an extended naturalist expedition around the Russian Empire, the details of which are worthy of further examination. By his own account, Von Koren will travel purely water routes, following “the coast from Vladivostok to the Bering Straits and then from the Straits to the Yenisei.”²²⁸ His avowed goal is to “draw a map, study the flora and fauna, and undertake thorough geological, anthropological, and ethnographic investigations.”²²⁹ These circumstances thus recall Darwin’s own journey that launched his career as a naturalist.²³⁰ While in his twenties, Darwin, too, sailed around the world in search of new species to document. His research aboard the *HMS Beagle* famously culminated in the theories elaborated in the *Origin*.

Following in Darwin’s wake, however, will not be straightforward. For Von Koren’s small boat is a poor match for the mighty sea. His friends who are looking on from the shore, and by extension, we readers can only watch as the vessel is bandied back and forth by the waves, uncertain of ever making any progress or even of surviving the trip:

Лодка бойко обогнула пристань и вышла на простор. Она исчезла в волнах, но тотчас же из глубокой ямы скользнула на высокий холм, так что можно было различить и людей, и даже весла. Лодка прошла сажени три, и ее отбросило назад сажени на две.

— Пиши! — крикнул Самойленко. — Понесла тебя нелегкая в такую погоду!

²²⁸ PSS VII, 383.

²²⁹ PSS VII, 383.

²³⁰ In several places, leading Chekhov scholar Donald Rayfield likens this journey to those of the famous Russian explorer Nikolai Przhevalsky. I think there is just as strong a case to be made for Darwin as a model here, since Von Koren specifically styles himself as a zoologist and marine biologist, the same professional affiliations that Darwin held, and not an explorer as such. Furthermore, Von Koren is traveling pointedly and exclusively by water, as did Darwin. Przhevalsky, by contrast, traveled over land *and* water, and was not a trained natural scientist, but a geographer.

This journey may also be a reference to Danilevsky as well, since he was a distinguished naturalist who built his career based on his detailed studies of fish from all over Russia.

The boat briskly rounded the pier and left for the open water. It disappeared in the waves, but instantly shot up from a deep trough onto a tall crest, so that you could espy both the people and the oars. The boat went three sazhen and then was thrown back two.

“Write!” yelled Samoilenko. “What the devil made you go out in such weather!”²³¹

Thus Von Koren, who is sitting near the boat’s helm, is not only fighting nature for his life, but also for his right to make the groundbreaking discoveries that he dreams of. Given his watery path indicated above, he will only continue to wage such battles.

Ever Von Koren’s double, it is Laevsky who transmutes this physical struggle into a philosophical one. Laevsky, who is standing on shore, is struck by the boat’s going three sazhen forward, only to be hurled two sazhen back. A newly minted writer, Laevsky layers this image of the boat onto the human struggle for what he calls the “real truth.” Just as with the boat,

Так и в жизни...В поисках за правдой люди делают два шага вперед, шаг назад. Страдания, ошибки и скука жизни бросают их назад, но жажда правды и упрямая воля гонят вперед и вперед. И кто знает? Быть может, **доплывут** до настоящей правды...
(emphasis mine)

So as in life...suffering, mistakes and boredom pitch people back, but a desire for truth and stubborn will spur them onward. And who knows? Maybe they’ll get there.²³²

²³¹ PSS VII, 454-455.

²³² PSS VII, 455.

Thus “The Duel” ends with us literally and unresolvedly in Darwin’s wake, while the real truth is something that we must continue to “sail towards.”

A Chance Encounter: “Sluchai iz praktiki”

In 1898, Chekhov experienced what would prove to be the last great surge in his career as a prose writer. This year saw the publication of six substantial stories, including Chekhov’s so-called “Little Trilogy” (“Malen’kaia trilogiia”).²³³ The final story of the year, printed in the December issue of the journal *Russian Thought* (*Russkaia mysl’*), was “Sluchai iz praktiki.” Various translations into English as “A Medical Case,” “A Doctor’s Visit,” “A Case History,” and “An Incident in Practice,” the tale follows Korolev, a junior physician who has been summoned to a country factory to treat the mysterious illness of a young heiress, Liza. While there does not appear to be anything physically wrong with Liza, she leads a stunted life which revolves around nightly nervous attacks and insomnia. After the initial consultation, Korolev is prevailed upon to stay the night and comes to understand that it is the horrendous factory life, and not disease, that is sickening his patient. The “cure” for Liza’s ailment forms the crux of Chekhov’s tale.

Scholars investigating “Sluchai iz praktiki” have typically viewed the story through a mythopoetic lens, as a descent of the Orphean hero into an industrial hell.²³⁴ The hero’s journey to the underworld also contains a Christian element, since Korolev is “resurrected”,

²³³ These stories are: “U znakomykh” (“An Evening at Friends”), “Ionych,” “Sluchai iz praktiki,” and the “Little Trilogy,” which is composed of “Chelovek v futliare,” (“The Man in a Case”), “Kryzhovnik” (“Gooseberries”), and “O liubvi” (“About Love”).

²³⁴ See, for example, Michael Finke, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, 159-160; V.B. Kataev, *If Only We Could Know! An Interpretation of Chekhov*, 235-242; V.B. Kataev, *Proza Chekhova: problemy interpretatsii*, 268-276; Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 192-193.

i.e., he emerges from the factory on a beautiful Sunday morning in May.²³⁵ While the Orpheus-Christ myth is certainly an important subtext, Chekhov's life-long interest in Darwinian thought also plays a central role in this tale's narrative structure. Closer examination of "Sluchai iz praktiki" reveals that the tale is driven by a kind of Darwinian double movement. Through the diagnoses made by his physician hero Korolev, Chekhov exposes extreme Social Darwinism as an inadequate tool for understanding human development. At the very same time, however, the accidental communion that Korolev finds with Liza bespeaks the power of evolutionary transformation.

As a physician, Korolev is quite naturally trained to find empirical causes for the ailments that plague both people and their environments. While touring the factory grounds, he is also searching for a reason, a diagnosis adequate to explain the misery he sees unfolding all around him:

Глядя на корпуса и на бараки, где спали рабочие, он опять думал о том, о чем думал всегда, когда видел фабрики...Он, как медик, правильно судивший о хронических страданиях, коренная причина которых была непонятна и неизлечима, и на фабрики смотрел как на недоразумение, причина которого была тоже неясна и неустранима...

Looking at the buildings and at the barracks where the workers slept, he thought again what he always did when he saw factories...He, as a medical professional, could make correct assessments about chronic diseases, the root cause of which was inexplicable and incurable, and he looked at the factories as a misunderstanding, the cause of which was also unintelligible and beyond cure...²³⁶

²³⁵ Due to the Eastern Orthodox Church's use of the Julian calendar, the Orthodox Easter cycle falls later in the calendar year in Slavic countries than it does in Western countries, which use the Gregorian calendar. Therefore, in Russia Easter Sunday can occur in May.

Furthermore, the religious significance of rising from the dead specifically on a Sunday is stronger in the Russian than in the English, because the Russian word for "Sunday" is "voskresen'e", which is identical save for one letter to the Russian word for "resurrection," which is "voskresenie."

²³⁶ PSS X, 80.

One of the “correct assessments” Korolev has been taught to make is that Social Darwinism explains why some people become strong and successful while others, downtrodden and wretched. But as he immerses himself in a factory environment for the first time, Korolev realizes that popular “scientific” studies which reduce complex human social relations to a battle between the strong and the weak are mistaken.²³⁷ He becomes convinced instead that:

Нужно, чтобы сильный мешал жить слабому, таков закон природы, но это понятно и легко укладывается в мысль только в газетной статье или в учебнике, в той же каше, какую представляет из себя обыденная жизнь, в путанице всех мелочей, из которых сотканы человеческие отношения, это уже не закон, а логическая несообразность, когда и сильный, и слабый одинаково падают жертвой своих взаимных отношений...

It must be that the strong hinder the life of the weak, for that is the law of nature, but this notion could be coherently and straightforwardly rendered only in a newspaper article or in a textbook, but in that hodgepodge which is everyday life, in the tangle of all the trivial details from which human relations are woven, it is not a law, but a logical absurdity, when both the strong and the weak alike fall victim to their mutual relations...²³⁸

It is worth noting that this passage has its roots in an earlier Chekhov story from 1896, the little-studied and underappreciated novella “My Life.” There, the hero Misail realizes that “both the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, equally share in the struggle for

²³⁷ Russian scholar Pyotr Dolzhenkov also cites this passage as an example of Chekhov’s direct criticism of Social Darwinism. He writes, “Besides ‘Duel’, a critical orientation towards Social Darwinism is obvious (in mature Chekhov) in the story ‘Sluchai iz praktiki.’” But Dolzhenkov makes this remark only in passing and does not develop the idea further. Dolzhenkov, *Chekhov i pozitivizm*, 125.

²³⁸ PSS X, 82.

existence.”²³⁹ Furthermore, at the end of the story, Misail is raising a little girl, the sole inheritor of a substantial fortune. The tale closes on the question of her development, with the only maternal love available to her happening as the result of chance encounters.²⁴⁰

In many ways, “Sluchai iz praktiki” may be regarded as an expanded discourse on this question, not least because it revisits the problems of viewing the world in terms of the strong versus the weak, with an especial emphasis on a wealthy young woman’s place in such a dichotomy. In the immediate world of the story, Korolev’s patient, the wealthy heiress Liza, is living proof of the logical absurdity described above; she is one of the “strong” beings who nevertheless suffers cruelly due to her entangled relationship with the “weak,” or the factory workers who support her empire of cheap calico.²⁴¹ Up until her life-altering encounter with Korolev, she “feels oppressed almost every night” because “everything” about the factory upsets her.²⁴² Liza has seemingly internalized the metallic rhythm of tools and machinery that punctuates life in a factory. These noises, “derr...derr,” “drinn...drinn,” and “zhak...zhak”, have become her own personal torture metronome: they reverberate nightly throughout the factory grounds, culminating in savage attacks of heart palpitations in Liza’s breast. In the Russian, the beating of the metal and her medical

²³⁹ PSS IX, 220.

²⁴⁰ PSS IX, 280.

²⁴¹ Here Chekhov is undoubtedly engaging in, and ultimately subverting, Russian literature’s tradition of “poor Lizas.” Beginning with Nikolai Karamzin’s eponymous 1792 tale, heroines with this name tend to suffer uncommon trials which often culminate in their physical and/or emotional deaths. Other examples of doomed Lizas may be found in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Turgenev’s *A Nest of Gentlefolk*, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, among many others. Pushkin was the first to spoof this trend, with his parodic tale “Mistress into Maid”, about a light-hearted girl named Liza who receives a fairy tale ending, complete with a noble suitor.

²⁴² PSS X, 83.

condition are connected via the same morphological root **bit'**, which means “to beat”, “to pound”: the machinery “**bil**” while heart palpitations are medically diagnosed as “serdtse**bienie**” (the root is in bold).²⁴³ This sound painting is consonant with another story from the great surge of 1898, “Gooseberries” (“Kryzhovnik”) in which the main character Ivan declares that every comfortable person should have a little man hanging around their door tapping with a hammer to remind them that others are suffering.²⁴⁴ As this passage makes clear, the popular Social Darwinist law of “survival of the fittest” applies only in the abstract. For the particular case of Liza, her status as “fit” is ironically destroying her life.

What *can* spur Liza’s personal development and liberate her from this “logical absurdity” forms the true focus of Chekhov’s tale. After Korolev returns from wandering the factory grounds, he visits Liza’s room. He finds her awake and distressed, and they begin to talk, not as doctor and patient, but as good friends. As Liza talks with Korolev, they both reach the consensus that she must abandon the factory in order to be cured. Scholars such as A.D. Stepanov and V.B. Kataev have remarked on how rare this kind of mutual understanding is in Chekhov.²⁴⁵ Their communion, which Liza has never experienced before with another person, is indeed noteworthy, for it alters them both. Before their conversation, Liza is repeatedly referred to in the text as “the patient” (“bol’naia”).

²⁴³ PSS X, 81; 76.

²⁴⁴ PSS X, 62.

²⁴⁵ According to Stepanov, the final conversation between Liza and Korolev is an example of “an extremely rare mutual understanding in Chekhov.” In “Sluchai iz praktiki (1898)—‘rasskaz otkrytiia’ ili ‘rasskaz prozreniia?’”, 108. For his part, Kataev writes of Liza and Korolev, “this surmounting of disunity between characters is a very infrequent event in Chekhov’s world.” Quoted from the English translation of a compilation of Kataev’s work on Chekhov, *If Only We Could Know! An Interpretation of Chekhov*, 238. The Russian original is from V.B. Kataev, *Proza Chekhova: problemy interpretatsii*, 272.

Afterwards, however, she appears only as her whole self, Liza.²⁴⁶ No longer entrapped by the label of “ill,” Liza has found a way to break free from her stunted life: the next day, she appears not sick and frightened, but intelligent, soulful, and as fresh and calm as the Sunday morning. The transformation cuts both ways. Korolev’s dire thoughts about the havoc that factories wreak on soul and body have dissipated. Instead, as he drives away, Liza’s festive white dress and flower in her hair inspire Korolev to dream about a “bright and joyous” future.²⁴⁷

Similar to their reactions to “The Duel,” discussed above, commentators have long found the ending of “Sluchai iz praktiki” to be unmotivated and accidental. Also like “The Duel,” many commentators have considered this randomness in a negative light. Shortly after the publication of “Sluchai iz praktiki,” critic I.N. Ignatov dismissed the story’s hopeful ending as groundless:

Нам кажется, что заключительные мысли доктора мало гармонируют с тем впечатлением, которое он вынес из своего путешествия. Где элементы, развитие которых может повести „к светлой и радостной жизни“, если только наблюдения его справедливы? Между посылками и заключениями существует какой-то пропуск, lacuna, которую читатель не может заполнить сам ввиду отсутствия необходимых данных.

It seems to us that the concluding thoughts of the doctor hardly harmonize with that impression which he gleaned from his journey. Where are the elements, the development of which could lead to a “happy and joyous life,” if his observations are just? Between the premises and the conclusions there is a kind of gap, a lacuna, which the reader cannot fill in himself on account of the absence of necessary evidence.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Before their communion, Liza is called “the patient” five times on the following pages: PSS X 75, 76, 77, 82.

²⁴⁷ PSS X, 85.

²⁴⁸ Ignatov’s review was originally published in *Russkie vedomosti*, 1898, No. 289, 19 December. Quoted from the *primechaniia* to the PSS X, 396.

Even more scathing was a critic for the newspaper *The Moscow Ledger* (*Moskovskii listok*), who complained, “basically, this is not even a stand-alone story—it is several pages that were *accidentally* ripped out from the author’s notebook” (emphasis mine).²⁴⁹

Only a few scholars have viewed the tale’s chanciness at all favorably. For example, Chekhov’s contemporary A.I. Bogdanovich praised the story’s “randomness” (*sluchainost’*) and “slapdash quality” (*nebrezhnost’*) as evidence of its author’s rare gift of replicating the dualities of life with “astonishing vitality.”²⁵⁰ More recently, critic A.D. Stepanov has written a brief article investigating the tale’s “motif of the absurdity of everyday life.”²⁵¹ In line with these scholars, my reading of Chekhov’s story takes his random accidents as a fruitful point of departure and considers this ending as part of an organic system of Darwin-inspired variation operating in Chekhov’s narrative world.

It will be helpful to consider Kataev’s observation that, in many of Chekhov’s stories, development is realized through the “intricate confluence of simple causes, leading to significant consequences.”²⁵² Kataev argues that Darwin serves as the source of this narrative arc in Chekhov, for the British naturalist “looked at evolution in nature as the result of the continual impact of a multitude of factors and forces, whose *accidental* confluence leads to changes, some of which are highly significant” (emphasis mine).²⁵³ As

²⁴⁹ Quoted from the *primechaniia* to the PSS X, 396.

²⁵⁰ Bogdanovich’s review was originally published in the journal *Mir bozhii*, 1899, No. 2, otd. II, p. 3. Quoted from the *primechaniia* to the PSS X, 396.

²⁵¹ See A.D. Stepanov’s 1993 article “‘Sluchai iz praktiki’ (1898) – ‘rasskaz otkrytiia’ ili ‘rasskaz’ prozreniia?’” in *Chekhovskie chteniia v Ialte: Chekhov v meniaiushchemsia mire. Sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, 107-113.

²⁵² V.B. Kataev, “Khristos i Darwin v mire Chekhova”, 163.

²⁵³ V.B. Kataev, “Khristos i Darwin v mire Chekhova”, 162.

Kataev notes, in the conclusion to the *Origin*, Darwin writes that natural selection is carried out “solely by accumulating slight, successive, favorable variations.”²⁵⁴ It will be recalled that Anglo-American scholars also agree that the idea which underpins Darwin’s theory of the evolution of organic life is random chance. In Levine’s succinct formulation, Darwin’s *Origin* argues “for a theory that required the life-giving contribution of apparently random variation.”²⁵⁵ And as is the case in the *Origin*, so too in “Sluchai iz praktiki” do small events that further development happen by chance.

In order to approach the story’s Darwinian trajectory, it will first be useful to reconsider its title. The word “sluchai” has a primary meaning of “case,” “incident,” or “event,” and indeed, the story is most often translated into English using one of those terms. What also interests us here is the word’s secondary definition, not apparent in these English translations, of “accident,” “chance,” and “variation.” In addition to his story literally chronicling the *event* of a doctor’s visit, the narrative structure of Chekhov’s tale also turns on this secondary meaning of *accident*. Korolev’s entire visit, and thus, the story itself, is a set of confluences both accidental and unmotivated which pull Korolev and Liza together.

These coincidences stem from the fact, seemingly unnoticed by scholars, that Korolev was never intended to treat Liza at all. The tale opens with the family sending a telegram specifically to a famous and reputable Moscow professor of medicine, begging him for a consultation.²⁵⁶ However, he passes the assignment on to one of his presumably

²⁵⁴ V.B. Kataev, “Khristos i Darwin v mire Chekhova”, 162. Kataev provides a quote from the *Origin*, which may be found in English in Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, New York, Oxford UP, 1996, p. 346.

²⁵⁵ George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*, 90.

²⁵⁶ PSS X, 75.

many trainees, who happens to be Korolev. Neither is this substitution presented with any degree of importance, as Chekhov makes no attempt to explain why Korolev was sent in the professor's place.

Once Korolev has reached the factory, he means for his visit to be a short one. That the consultation lasts through the night, that is, long enough for Korolev and Liza to have an opportunity to speak alone, is also the result of a minute, unexplained variation. We know Korolev himself planned to return to his family in Moscow that very evening, as he intends to catch the late train home.²⁵⁷ When Liza's mother asks him to stay, he is on the verge of detailing his many obligations; however, a mere glance at her face changes his mind and, more importantly, his motion, completely. Once again, Chekhov provides neither detail nor explanation for the shift, such as a plaintive description of the mother's facial expression or Korolev's recognition of their common concerns as parents. All we do know is that the glance is sudden, immediate, and decisive, as conveyed by Chekhov's use of the perfective verb "pogliadel."²⁵⁸ The next second, Korolev is removing his traveling clothes once more.

Another chance twist catalyzes Korolev and Liza's conversation together in private, when the rest of the household is asleep. It is very late, around two o'clock in the morning, but Korolev has not gone to bed. He therefore happens to hear the small sounds of "whispering and shuffling of slippers and bare feet" which draw him to Liza's room.²⁵⁹ When he finds Liza awake and they begin to discuss her predicament, we discover the most significant, yet imperceptible and unaccountable shift of them all: Korolev's transformation

²⁵⁷ PSS X, 79.

²⁵⁸ PSS X, 79.

²⁵⁹ PSS X, 82.

from routine physician to kindred spirit. When Korolev had first entered Liza's sick room the evening prior, her resigned manner and preemptively-bared breast made it evident that she had expected him to be like every other doctor who had examined her over the past twenty-some years.²⁶⁰ Yet in this pivotal scene, Liza is able, for the first time in her life, to pour her heart out to a sympathetic friend. The simple reason for this, as she tells Korolev, is "at the *first sight* of you *for some reason* it seemed that I could talk with you about everything" (emphasis mine).²⁶¹ Her very explanation in the current scene makes it clear that Korolev's transformation both happened abruptly and defies intelligible motivation. Korolev answered this shift with his own, for he, too, first saw Liza as just another patient to auscultate. But within a moment, she "suddenly" and inexplicably changed from an "unfortunate creature" to an intelligent and feeling person who would benefit most not from any prescribed treatment, but from fellowship.²⁶²

In the course of Liza's life, then, Korolev's visit represents the very opposite of reasoned, purposeful design. For, in contrast to all of the "very best doctors" who had been especially summoned for Liza's care, her governess and all of the teachers of "French language, dancing, and music" that her mother invited to further her personal development,²⁶³ the one who brings hope for change is the one whom she was never supposed to meet. While what happens next to Liza is unknown, the story concludes on an

²⁶⁰ This scene is also reminiscent of Kitty's squeamishness at her unsympathetic doctor's examination during her depression prior to her trip abroad in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. For more on how Chekhov engages with Tolstoy, particularly in connection with medical themes in *Anna Karenina*, see Chapter 3 of the present study.

²⁶¹ PSS X, 83.

²⁶² PSS X, 77.

²⁶³ PSS X, 77-78.

image of transformation writ large: that of a beautiful spring morning in which both characters may appreciate nature's—and their own—renewal.

Conclusion: Writing as Craft

For as different as Chekhov's and Darwin's texts may have been, both men approached their composition in similar ways. Closer scrutiny of both writers' personal correspondence, as well as of the conversational style of Darwin's non-fiction,²⁶⁴ reveals what might usefully be called their overlapping "philosophies of writing." Common attributes include a mutual vendetta against superfluous words, as they distort the clarity and rigor of ideas,²⁶⁵ as well as an empirical orientation towards presenting the facts of the case to their readers and allowing them to judge a text's truth for themselves.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ As scholar Stanley Edgar Hyman observes, the *Origin's* "prophetic quality comes from Darwin's predominant tone of personal testimony: I was there, I saw it, this happened to me," *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud as Imaginative Writers*, 35.

²⁶⁵ For example, in a letter of 25 September 1861 to fellow British naturalist W.H. Bates, Darwin wrote, "As an old hackneyed author let me give you a bit of advice, viz to strike out every word, which is not quite necessary to connect subjects...I think too much pains cannot be taken in making style transparently clear and throwing eloquence to the dogs," *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, Vol. 9, 25. Chekhov, meanwhile, had a comparable pearl to bestow on a young Maxim Gorky: "Another piece of advice: while reading proof, strike out, wherever possible, adjectives and adverbs. You have so many modifiers that it is difficult for the reader to focus...It is comprehensible when I write "the man sat down on the grass"; it is comprehensible because it is clear...Conversely, it is not easily intelligible and a bit difficult for the mind to grasp if I write, "the tall, narrow-chested man of average height with a red beard sat down on the green grass, which was already trampled by passersby, sat down silently, timidly and sheepishly looked around," *Pis'ma* VIII, 258-259.

²⁶⁶ As Levine points out, when making the case for natural selection in the *Origin*, Darwin is "characteristically modest and moderate" and "simply asks the reader to attempt to follow his arguments and decide—we provide the facts, you choose!...Although he is certainly himself absolutely convinced that natural selection works that way, he understands that his readers need to weigh the evidence themselves," *Darwin the Writer*, 16. Analogously, in a letter to Suvorin of 30 May 1888, Chekhov wrote: "I don't think that writers should solve problems like God, pessimism, etc. The task of the writer is to illustrate only who spoke and thought about God and pessimism, and how and under what circumstances they spoke and thought. The artist should not be the judge of his characters or of what they say, but only an impartial observer...while the jury, that is, the readers, make the judgment. My duty is only to be talented, that is, to have the ability to distinguish the important evidence from the unimportant," *Pis'ma* II, 280.

But perhaps the most fruitful intersection between the two authors is that, in Darwin, Chekhov found confirmation of his belief in radical, seemingly unmotivated transformation. In addition to the stories discussed above, we see comparable changes occur in other works which do not explicitly engage science or scientific ideas. Here we may include many of Chekhov's most famous stories, such as "The Student" ("Student", 1894), in which an encounter with peasant women affords the hero Ivan Velikopolsky a sudden spiritual breakthrough; "Rothschild's Fiddle" ("Skripka Rotshil'da", 1894), where the protagonist Yakov suddenly recalls the dead baby that he and his wife Marfa had fifty years prior and is, for the first time in his life, moved to tenderness towards her; and "The Lady with the Little Dog" ("Dama s sobachkoi", 1901), where Gurov metamorphoses from an inveterate womanizer into a faithful and loving partner.²⁶⁷

As readers familiar with these stories know, however, transformation does not guarantee favorable or long-term results. Emblematic of the subtly Chekhovian uncertain ending is the famous final sentence in "The Lady with the Little Dog," which reveals only that, despite the transformative power of Gurov and Anna's love for each other, "the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning."²⁶⁸ Rather, what most interests Chekhov was the *moment* of change and all of its attendant particulars. Here, too, he shares an affinity with Darwin, who eschewed definite outcomes in favor of the process of mutation. As Beer notes, "Nowhere does Darwin give a glimpse of future forms: and rightly so, since it is fundamental to his argument that they are unforeseeable, produced out of too many

²⁶⁷ While he does not engage Darwin or evolutionary theory directly, Robert Louis Jackson has written an article on the theme of transformation in Chekhov's story. See his "Evoliutsiia v rasskaze 'Dama s sobachkoi.'"

²⁶⁸ PSS X, 143.

variables to be plotted in advance."²⁶⁹ For Chekhov, this absence of a final form proves to be enormously productive, for it allows him the freedom to explore instead his characters' capabilities for change.

²⁶⁹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, xix.

Chapter 2: Love at the End of the Century: Chekhov and Zola at the Crossroads of Sex and Science

*When performing an autopsy,
even the most die-hard spiritualist
would have to question where the soul is.*
Letter from Chekhov to A.S. Suvorin of 7 May, 1889²⁷⁰

It is a critical commonplace that the young Chekhov owed a substantial debt to the French author Emile Zola, who was famous throughout European letters, even notorious, for his forthright, oftentimes graphic depictions of sexuality and the human body.²⁷¹ However, this commonplace is a shallow one: most parallels between Chekhov and Zola in contemporary criticism are made in passing²⁷² and a full-length study on the two authors has yet to be undertaken. This chapter will demonstrate how those very features found in Zola that so infuriated critics of his day—his graphic sexuality and love of raw detail, his oftentimes haphazard blend of in vogue scientific theories and imaginative literature—shaped Chekhov’s own work. In this chapter, I expose the ways in which many of Chekhov’s most well-known stories, such as “Anyuta” and “The Duel” (“Duel”), as well as

²⁷⁰ *Pis'ma* III, 208.

²⁷¹ See, for example, Donald Rayfield’s *Understanding Chekhov*, Thomas Winner’s *Chekhov and His Prose*, Aleksandr Roskin’s “Zametki o realizme Chekhova,” Pyotr Dolzhenkov’s *Chekhov i pozitivizm*, as well as Leonid Grossman’s ground-breaking article “Naturalizm Chekhova,” first published in 1914 in *Vestnik Evropy*, No 7, 218-247. An abridged English translation, “The Naturalism of Chekhov,” is available in *Chekhov: A Critical Collection of Essays*, edited by Robert Louis Jackson. Anthony Winner’s study *Characters in the Twilight: Hardy, Zola and Chekhov*, is a set of discrete chapters, rather than a comparative work.

²⁷² A perfect example of this kind of cursory comparison may be found in Ilya Ehrenburg’s essay “Re-reading Chekhov.” A noteworthy exception to this general rule is a portion of Michael Finke’s study *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*. See Chapter 2, “Looking the Part”, 95-98, where Finke discusses Chekhov’s response to Zola’s *The Masterpiece* (*L’oeuvre*) in the form of his short story “A Work of Art” (“Proizvedenie iskusstva”).

misunderstood works, such as “The Mire” (“Tina”) and “Big Volodia and Little Volodia” (“Volodia bol’shoi i Volodia malen’kii”) are constructed on polemic with Zola.

This present lack of focused comparative research is on a surface level startling, given the almost uncanny similarities between Zola’s and Chekhov’s personal and professional lives. Not only did both authors come from poor provincial backgrounds, suffer from digestive and nervous complaints their whole adult lives, attract a menagerie of animals, particularly dogs, wherever they lived, and die premature deaths;²⁷³ but also their careers unfolded in strikingly similar ways: they both made their reputations as writers in the journalistic small press, often writing sensationalized stories and reports, alienated close friends with all too intimate portrayals of them in their work,²⁷⁴ feared public readings,²⁷⁵ campaigned ardently for a new kind of theatre, and lamented the lack of true literary criticism in their respective countries. While the two writers did not meet in person, this was due to Chekhov’s own embarrassment about his rudimentary French, rather than a lack of opportunity: while in Paris in 1898, Chekhov was invited to a gathering with Zola on behalf of a Russian student society. Chekhov very much wanted to attend but declined, sending instead his best wishes for Zola’s health and happiness. Zola

²⁷³ There is another curious coincidence from, so to speak, beyond the grave. Both men died leaving behind two devoted women—in Zola’s case, his wife Alexandrine and his mistress Jeanne Rozerot, and in Chekhov’s, his wife Olga Knipper and his sister Maria Pavlovna—who were all able to bury their past animosities and, never to marry again, spent the rest of their lives honoring the man they had jointly lost.

²⁷⁴ Due to Zola’s unflattering portrait of him as the artist in *L’Oeuvre*, painter Paul Cézanne broke off their life-long friendship. For Chekhov’s part, he famously offended his close friends, most prominent among them Levitan, also coincidentally a renowned landscape painter, and Lika Mizinova by caricaturing them in both “The Grasshopper” and *The Seagull*.

²⁷⁵ See Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life*, 316, note 7.

responded in kind. This cordial exchange suggests that Chekhov and Zola would have had a successful meeting, had they been able to converse directly.²⁷⁶

As intriguing as these parallels are, the basis for inquiry into the two authors' relationship extends beyond biographical happenstance. Almost from his very first published stories, Chekhov displays a humorous fascination with Zola's work, and his correspondence and later stories are peppered with references to Zola and his novels that continue throughout his 25-year professional career. However, the nature of this impact, which reverberated in surprising and unexpected ways, has yet to be satisfactorily understood.

A Brief History of Zola in Russia

When Chekhov came of age as a writer in the 1880s, Zola was a dominant foreign literary influence in Russia. Zola's popularity there during this time was thanks to the double attack of the "Parizhskie pis'ma," his series of critical articles that appeared in leading liberal Russian journal *Vestnik Evropy*²⁷⁷ and his famous twenty-volume family saga *Les Rougon-Macquart*. The "Parizhskie pis'ma" or "Paris Letters" ran monthly from March 1875 through December 1880. Scholar Philip Duncan credits them with solidifying Zola's position in the Russian literary and cultural landscape, convincingly arguing that Zola's "ready access to the highly influential literary journals was the true measure of his

²⁷⁶ Details of this episode are found in the memoirs of E.P. Semyonov, entitled "Chekhov i Zolia", first published in *Peterburgskii kur'er*, 1914, No 159, 2 July. Reprinted in *Novyi mir* 1980: 1, 233-234.

²⁷⁷ Various translated as *The Messenger of Europe*, *The European Messenger*, as well as *The Herald of Europe* and *The European Herald*, this thick journal was published in St. Petersburg from 1866-1918. Mikhail Stasiulevich was editor from 1866 until 1908.

authority in Russian intellectual circles.”²⁷⁸ Indeed, this arrangement made Zola at that time “the most regular contributor, foreign or native, to a Russian journal.”²⁷⁹

Vestnik Evropy was then edited by former history scholar Mikhail Stasiulevich, and it was he who agreed to publish Zola’s “letters.” In the words of Ivan Turgenev, who had brokered the collaboration between Zola and Stasiulevich, the letters were to focus on “literary, artistic, and social facts.”²⁸⁰ In practice, these articles ranged from profiles of leading French literary figures, such as Alexander Dumas-fils, Balzac, Flaubert, Daudet, and the Goncourt brothers, to treatises on Naturalism such as “The Experimental Novel,” to satires of contemporary French society, including marriage and burial practices. When other obligations, professional and personal alike, overwhelmed him, Zola would instead substitute passages from his latest novel, such as *Nana*.²⁸¹ Zola was so precious a commodity in Russia that leading journals competed for his contributions.²⁸² Despite the fact that he did not personally care for his work, the publishing tycoon and Chekhov’s close friend A. S. Suvorin attempted, also through Turgenev, to convince Zola to dispatch similar

²⁷⁸ Philip Duncan, “The Fortunes of Zola’s *Parizhskie pis’ma* in Russia,” 109.

²⁷⁹ Philip Duncan, “The Fortunes of Zola’s *Parizhskie pis’ma* in Russia,” 109.

²⁸⁰ Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life*, 314.

²⁸¹ Soviet scholar Mikhail Kleman, author of several authoritative articles on Zola’s work and reception in Russia, divides the letters into three main groups: The first group, consisting of 10 letters, are complete belletristic works, such as novellas and the like; the second group, consisting of 13 letters, concern sociological matters and everyday life in France; the third and largest group, consisting of 24 letters, is on literary criticism. Letters that fall outside this schema include letters that are more in line with reporting or editorial work, as well as excerpts from larger novels. See M. Kleman, “Emil’ Zolia—sotrudnik ‘Vestnika Evropy’.” *Emil’ Zolia: Sbornik statei*, 274-275.

²⁸² Individual Russians also clamored for personal correspondence with Zola. For example, in a letter to Turgenev of 30 March 1875, critic Vladimir Stasov asked if the French author would be willing to exchange letters with him on literary matters. See Mikhail Kleman, “Iz perezpiski E. Zolia s russkimi korrespondentami” in *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* 32, 945.

correspondence to *Novoe vremia* (*New Times*).²⁸³ At around the same time, F. P. Baimakov, publisher of *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* (*The Saint Petersburg News*), tried to forge a comparable relationship with the French author.²⁸⁴ Zola politely refused both of these proposals, citing overwork. However, the most serious threat to *Vestnik Evropy's* monopoly on Zola appears to have been satirist Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin. The author-cum-editor tried to spirit Zola away to his own journal *Otechestvennie zapiski* (*Notes of the Fatherland*), and his proposals were attractive enough to tempt Zola to negotiate. In response to these machinations, Stasiulevich was forced to increase the fee from fifteen to twenty francs per page in order to retain his French sensation, a proposition Zola was only too pleased to accept.²⁸⁵

Though he moonlighted as a journalist during these years, Zola continued to release a new novel in the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle almost annually.²⁸⁶ Russia reciprocated his

²⁸³ In a letter to Turgenev of 28 March 1876, Suvorin wrote: "I by no means rate Zola as highly as some of our critics...In Zola there is so much flesh and fat that the soul is totally eclipsed, but it is there just the same; his descriptions sometimes contain more pretensions than they do real artistic coloring...But it would be better still if Zola agreed to publish from time to time in my paper, about twice a month, about whatever he wants, even if it's just his contes [tales, stories]. If you would make him such an offer in my name, I would be very grateful to you." Quoted from *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* 32, 947.

These misgivings, however, did not prevent Suvorin from continuing to publish (in some cases, even exploit) Zola's work. For example, *Novoe vremia* published *L'Assommoir* (1876), *Thérèse Raquin* (1879), *Nana* (1879-1880) and *Pot-Bouille* (1882). Suvorin even pirated, according to Donald Rayfield, Zola's novel *Paris* at the height of the Dreyfus affair in 1896. Suvorin provided no compensation for the publication of a translated work and all the while printed political attacks on Zola alongside each installment of his novel. See Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 185.

²⁸⁴ See *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* 32, 947-948. According to M. Kleman, Stasiulevich knew about this proposal and "voiced his energetic protest." It appears that Stasiulevich asked Turgenev to intervene on *Vestnik Evropy's* behalf—Turgenev then wrote to Zola, instructing him not to make a decision or answer the letter until they could discuss the matter in person. See "Emil' Zolia—sotrudnik 'Vestnika Evropy,'" *Emil' Zolia: Sbornik statei*, 285.

²⁸⁵ See Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life*, 316.

²⁸⁶ The only major exception to this rule was in 1880, presumably due to the death of his mother.

enthusiasm. Duncan notes that, “between 1871 and 1881, a total of fifty-one separate translations of Zola’s fiction appeared in the various literary journals of St. Petersburg—a body of material unequaled in volume by any other foreign writer. In the matter of independent volumes of prose fiction he ranked fifth among foreign writers, following such names as Jules Verne and Gustave Aimard.”²⁸⁷ Intrigued by Zola’s relentless examination of life in France during the Second Empire (1852-1870), the Russian reading public veritably gobbled up each new volume of the *Rougon-Macquart*: after a trip home in 1874, Ivan Turgenev told Zola, “In Russia, they read only you.”²⁸⁸ As revealed by its subtitle of “A Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire”, the cycle chronicles the fate of two branches of a family, one legitimate (the Rougons), the other, illegitimate (the Macquarts). Such overwhelming popular interest in Zola’s work is understandable if we look to his plans for the series. As stated in his personal notes, Zola strove to portray a family “that rushes in pursuit of all the good things the future promises at the outset of a century of liberty and truths, then stumbles and falls in its headlong race because of the troubled gleams of the moment, the fatal convulsions attending the birth of a world.”²⁸⁹ Scholars agree that Zola made good on his promise; according to critic Philip Walker, “no

²⁸⁷ Philip Duncan, “The Fortunes of Zola’s *Parizhskie pis'ma* in Russia,” 108-109.

²⁸⁸ The citation is from a letter of 23 September 1874, and is here quoted from M. Kleman, “Nachal'nyi uspekh Zola v Rossii,” *Emil' Zolia: Sbornik statei*, 224. Kleman gives his original source as E. Halperine-Kaminsky, *Ivan Tourgueneff d'après sa correspondance avec ses amis français*, 218. Kleman, however, is quick to point out that Turgenev had in mind that Zola was first in Russia amongst foreign authors only.

²⁸⁹ Quoted from Philip Walker’s article “Emile (Edouard Charles Antoine) Zola.” In *Nineteenth-Century French Fiction Writers: Naturalism and Beyond, 1860-1900. Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 123*. No pagination.

writer has been more caught up than Zola in the process of world destruction and renewal that has marked our age.”²⁹⁰

When Chekhov began to publish in the journalistic press in the early 1880s, nine sensational volumes of this influential saga had appeared in Russia:²⁹¹ *The Fortune of the Rougons* (1872), *The Kill* (1872), *The Belly of Paris* (1873), *The Conquest of Plassans* (1874), *The Sin of Father Mouret* (1875), *His Excellency Eugene Rougon* (1876), *L'Assommoir* (1876), *A Page of Love* (1877-1878), and *Nana* (1879-1880)²⁹². This was in addition to the Russian publication of Zola's pre-cycle novels such as *Madeleine Férat* (1879) and *Thérèse Raquin* (1879), as well as dramatizations²⁹³ of these works that received enthusiastic reception on the Russian stage.²⁹⁴ All of these were published in serial form in various Russian journals, some of which Chekhov himself contributed to, such as *Novoe vremia* and *Russkie*

²⁹⁰ Philip D. Walker, “Zola: Poet of an Age of World Destruction and Renewal.” In *Critical Essays on Emile Zola*, 172.

²⁹¹ A few of these number were not printed in their entirety in Russia due to censorship. They are: *The Belly of Paris* (1873) and *L'Assommoir* (1876). (I am grateful to Nina Lee Bond for this information.)

²⁹² The years given here are the years of publication in the Russian Empire. The titles of these works in the original French are: *La Fortune des Rougon*, *La Curée*, *Le Ventre de Paris*, *La Conquête de Plassans*, *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*, *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, *L'Assommoir*, *Une Page d'amour*, and *Nana*.

Many of these works were translated under various titles into Russian. What follows here are the most standard: *Карьера Ругонов*, *Добыча*, *Утроба/Чрево Парижа*, *Завоевание Плассана*, *Проступок аббата Мурэ*, *Его превосходительство Эжен Ругон*, *Западня*, *Страница любви*, and *Нана*, respectively.

²⁹³ Zola had adapted *Thérèse Raquin* into a play himself in 1873. In Paris, it seems the play was not well-received when it debuted in the summer of 1873. See Zola's letter as quoted in *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 2, 1932, 240. This version was translated into Russian by N.I. Shul'gin and produced in Russia to great success. The Russian translation was first published in the journal *Delo* in 1874, book 2, 220-305.

²⁹⁴ Chekhov himself was a fan of the stage version of *Thérèse Raquin*. In a letter to A.S. Suvorin of 2 November 1895, Chekhov advises Suvorin to produce the play at his theatre in St. Petersburg. Chekhov writes of *Thérèse Raquin* that it is “quite a good play,” *Pis'ma VI*, 89.

vedomosti. These works, in particular the *Rougon-Maquart*, were buoyed up by each successive installment of the *Letters*,²⁹⁵ discussed above.

The magnitude of his influence in Russia was not lost on Zola; he himself valued highly his notoriety abroad. While it is little mentioned today, in the 1870s Zola actually enjoyed greater fame as a novelist in Russia than he did in his native France.²⁹⁶ In the introduction to a collection of some of the *Paris Letters*, entitled *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*,²⁹⁷ Zola wrote:

Allow me to publicly express my gratitude to the great nation which welcomed me so warmly, and adopted me, at a time when not a journal in Paris would accept what I wrote and everyone was my enemy in my literary battle. Russia, in one of my hours of pain and discouragement, revived my faith in myself, renewed my strength, and gave me a public, and that the most critical and impassioned of publics. Her criticism of my writings made me what I am today. I cannot speak of her without emotion, and I shall keep her in eternal remembrance.²⁹⁸

To be sure, the French giant provided the Russian literary scene with much material to criticize, but even more importantly for the present study, also to imitate, to satirize, and to transform. And it is to one particularly active yet elusive member of this public, Anton Chekhov, that I now turn.

²⁹⁵ There were 64 letters in all. For a complete list in Russian, see Leshchinskaia, *Ukazatel'*, 65-67.

²⁹⁶ For contemporary critical assessments from the 1870s-1880s, see such articles as "Russkaia pechat", in *Novosti*, 26 June 1879, № 162, p. 3, and V. Burenin's "Kriticheskie ocherki", in *Novoe vremia*, 1885, 4(16) October, № 3449, p.2, both of which focus on Zola's earlier popularity in Russia than in France.

²⁹⁷ Zola's *Paris Letters* were brought out in France in four separate critical volumes in 1880-1881: *Le Roman experimental*, *Le Naturalisme au théâtre*, *Nos auteurs dramatiques*, and *Les Romanciers naturalistes*, Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life*, 316.

²⁹⁸ Emile Zola, *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, xi.

Chekhov and Zola: a Parodic Beginning

In the 1880s contemporary Russian critics relished making comparisons between up-and-coming Russian authors and Zola, particularly those authors who also published in journals. Chekhov, quite naturally, did not escape such parallels. For instance, in his review of Chekhov's now largely forgotten story "Bespokoinyi gost"²⁹⁹, about a hunter and a woodsman who believe they have witnessed a crime, the critic A. Disterlo recognized in Chekhov,

(как и в других писателях его поколения: Короленко, Ясинском, Щеглове, Баранцевиче) стремление к «формальной правде», подобное французскому натурализму Золя.

(as in other authors of his generation: Korolenko, Yasinskii, Shcheglov, Barantsevich) a striving towards "formal truth," similar to the French Naturalism of Zola.³⁰⁰

As we might expect, however, not all press of this sort was positive. Both authors were similarly taken to task for their supposed social indifference. As scholar John McNair points out, the critical response to Chekhov throughout the 1880s and 1890s, "notably

²⁹⁹ The story was first published in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* in 1886 and was subsequently included in Chekhov's collection *B sumerkakh*, published in 1887. That it is so little read or spoken of today is an injustice, for it is a fascinating glimpse into witness psychology.

³⁰⁰ Quoted from the *primechaniia* to *PSS V*, 640. First published in: *Nedelia*, 1888, № 13, 27 March, 421-422. A few years later, the critic V.L. Kign came to a similar conclusion in his review of the story, published in *Knizhki nedeli*, 1891, № 5, 201.

Chekhov himself, however, was not overly fond of having such labels applied to him and his work. D. Gorodetskii reports a scene in his memoirs, most probably from the late 1880s when Chekhov was working on *Medved'* and *Ivanov*, in which Chekhov describes how to create an effective play. His audience, after hearing his recommendations, asks by way of clarification: "So you mean naturalism in the style of Zola?" To which Chekhov responds, "You don't need naturalism or realism. You don't need to fit a kind of label. You need to show life as it is, and people as they are, and not stilted." Quoted from Volume 2 of Gitovich's revised *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva A.P. Chekhova*, 2004, 175-176.

from N.K. Mikhailovsky and other advocates of a ‘committed’ literature’ ...recalled the earlier attacks on Zola and his artistic method.”³⁰¹ Such a response was not limited to the critics; Lev Tolstoy himself was guilty of yoking the two authors together in similarly negative comparisons. In his diary, author I.L. Leont’ev-Shcheglov recorded Tolstoy as exclaiming:

По мне, совершенно одинаково стыдно и вредно писать
безнравственные вещи (Золя), но и писать поучительное
сочинение—холодно (Чехов).

To my way of thinking, it is absolutely just as shameful and harmful to write immoral things (Zola), as it is to write didactic pieces dispassionately (Chekhov).³⁰²

While we cannot determine definitively how seriously Chekhov took such critique—although there is strong biographical evidence that he was deeply affected by critical opinion³⁰³—it does seem reasonable to say that Chekhov himself did his fair share to *invite*

³⁰¹ John McNair, “‘Zolaism’ in Russia,” 456.

However, critics were not entirely consistent in this regard—they also praised Chekhov for the similarities his “experiential method”, i.e., his trip to the island of Sakhalin, bore to Zola’s own writing techniques. When Chekhov’s proposed trip was discovered, *Novosti dnia* (*News of the Day*) released the following announcement: “Sensational news. The talented A.P. Chekhov to undertake trip through Siberia with the goal of studying the life of prisoners.” The paper then compares this feat to the intense study that Zola and Maupassant devoted to the subject matter of their novels, asserting, “Mr. Chekhov, it follows, is in all respects an exception. In any case he is the first Russian author to go to Siberia and back” (1890, № 2359, 26 January). Quoted from the *primechaniia* to the PSS XIV-XV, 743-744.

³⁰² Reference here quoted from Volume 2 of Gitovich’s revised *Letopis’ zhizni i tvorchestva A.P. Chekhova*, 2004, 334. Original in *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* 68.

Similarly in a letter to his wife Sofia Andreyevna of 20 October 1893, Tolstoy wrote: “It’s terrible that all of these writers and Potapenkos and Chekhovs, Zolas and Maupassants don’t even know what’s good and what’s bad.” In *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii L.N. Tolstogo*, Tom 84, 198-199.

³⁰³ For example, according to Rayfield, Chekhov nursed a life-long hatred for the critic who wrote the following in *The Northern Herald* about his short story collection *Motley Tales*: “[Mr. Chekhov] will like a squeezed-out lemon inevitably die, completely forgotten, in a ditch...In general Mr. Chekhov’s book is a very sad and tragic spectacle of a young talent’s suicide,” Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 142.

these comparisons, by taking active part in the fashionable cottage industry of Zola adaptations and parodies during the early stages of his career. A particularly popular target for Russian authors was Zola's novel *Nana*,³⁰⁴ which depicts the rise and fall of a beautiful young Parisian cocotte at the end of France's Second Empire. *Nana* was published simultaneously in France and Russia in 1879-1880 in the journals *Le Voltaire* and *Novoe vremia*, respectively. It was the ninth installment in the *Les Rougon-Macquart* series, which will be discussed in more detail later. As in France, *Nana* caused a stir in Russia. So great was the commotion that she invaded the language of literary criticism, with Russian critics referring to the Naturalism movement itself and its perceived offshoots in Russia as "Nana-turalizm", and its practitioners, "nana-turalisty."³⁰⁵ There were also countless parodies and

Indeed, Chekhov must have mentioned this episode with some frequency: a retelling is included in Maxim Gorky's memoirs about Chekhov, which were written many years after the fact. See Gorky's entry "A.P. Chekhov" in *A.P. Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, 446.

³⁰⁴ It should be noted here that Zola himself was not above poking fun at his own work, *Nana* included. For example, at the author's estate of Medan outside of Paris, visitors were ferried over a stream to the guest chalet in a round-stemmed rowboat called the *Nana*, Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life*, 484.

³⁰⁵ The term garners little mention today; the only academic reference I have found for it is a small entry in the *Istoricheskii slovar' gallitsizmov russkogo iazyka (Historical Dictionary of Gallicisms of the Russian Language)*, by N. I. Epishkin.

Epishkin's entry is as follows: НАНА-НАТУРАЛИЗМ, НАНАТУРАЛИЗМ а, м. Его <золя> "Экспериментальный роман" или нана-натурализм (как назвал его какой-то шутник, чтобы избежать этого бессмысленного сочетания слова) не есть настоящий реализм. *Дело* 1880 3(2) 65. Французская порнография - этот самый распространенный вид здешнего "нана-турализма" по удачному выражению французов, - потеряна три четверти своей привлекательности. *РБ* 1900 10(2), 143. Они <акмеисты> вначале удовлетворяются тем ограниченным содержанием, которое присуще минутным воздействиям окружающей действительности, натурализме в жанре Золя, которое когда-то Лев Мечников в "Деле" насмешливо назвал "нанатурализмом" вместо натурализма. *РБ* 1913 7, 184.

NANA-NATURALISM, NANATURALISM. His (Zola's) *Experimental Novel* or nana-naturalism (as it was called in jest, in order to avoid a meaningless amalgam) is not true realism. *Delo* 1880 3(2), 65. French pornography, the most widespread variant of this "nana-turalism" according to the happy French phrase, has lost three-fourths of its attractiveness. *RB* 1900 10(2), 143. They [the Acmeists] from the start content themselves with this limited subject, which is peculiar to the short-lived influence of surrounding circumstances, naturalism in the style of Zola, which Lev Mechnikov at one time in *Delo* jokingly referred to as "nanaturalism" instead of "naturalism." Web resource, no pagination.

caricatures; operettas and playlets which appeared, such as *Nana: A Comic Operetta in Three Acts*,³⁰⁶ *Nana: A Comic Joke in One Act*,³⁰⁷ and *Nana: A Farce in One Act*,³⁰⁸ as did humorous portraits involving Nana in weeklies such as *Budil'nik (The Alarm Clock)*, to which Chekhov, incidentally, was a lively contributor. A particularly choice caricature depicted a cook offering the “Russian public” a frying pan containing a pie with Nana’s signature and the words, «Ай, что ты, отец! Чем больше салца, тем лучше...» (“Ah, what’s wrong with you, father! The more smut the better...”).³⁰⁹

For his part, Chekhov added to the number of Nana’s Russian offspring. His early humorous stories, such as “Po-amerikanski,” “Moia Nana,” “Rukovodstvo dlia zhelaiushchikh zhenitsia,” and others,³¹⁰ contain multiple light-hearted sallies squarely aimed at this work.³¹¹ These stories all concern the hunt for a potential bride, and Nana is

For further examples, see such critical articles as L.I. Mechnikov, “Noveishii Nana-turalizm. (Po povodu poslednego romana E. Zola)” in *Delo*, SPb, 1880, № 3, p. 36-65; № 5, c. 71-107. Podp.: V. Basardin (NB: it was this article that the *Dictionary* cites as being the origin of the term in Russian); “Po sezonu...Mordovshchina, kak konkurent Nana-turalizma”, in *Russkii kur'er*, Moscow, 1880, 6 July, № 181, p. 2; and Gleb Uspenskii’s “Pis'ma s dorogi”, which, according to Leshchinskaia, the author of the *Ukazatel'* of Zola’s works in Russian, is on the subject of Russian “nanaturalisty” (p. 126). Originally published in 1886 in *Russkaia mysl' (Russian Thought)*; reprinted in *Sobranie sochinenii*, Volume 7, 2011.

³⁰⁶ The libretto, based on Zola’s novel, was written by L. Ia. Nikol'sky, and the music was by a composer named Belinsky.

³⁰⁷ The author is A. Reymers.

³⁰⁸ The author is D. A. Berkutova.

³⁰⁹ The caricature appeared in the issue from 3 March 1880, № 10. Reference from Leshchinskaia, *Ukazatel'*, entry 1813, 112.

³¹⁰ Other early stories with references to *Nana* and/or Zola in the marriage context include: “Dopolnitel'nye voprosy k lichnym kartam statisticheskoi perepisi” (1882)—essentially a list of questions by Antosha Chekhonte for humorous personages who have left their visiting cards—and “Pered svadboi,” (1880), a pithy glimpse into the motivations of a shallow young couple on the eve of their marriage, in which the groom advises his bride to read Zola.

³¹¹ It should be noted that Chekhov was not particularly finicky about the purity of his parodies, and often combined various elements at will (there is, however, more work to be done on the young Chekhov’s parodic techniques). For example, in his pastiche of the French writer Emile Gaboriau’s famous detective novels,

parodically canonized as the negative ideal. “Po-amerikanski” (1880) takes the form of an advertisement for a bride in a newspaper, the successful candidate for which will not have read Zola’s infamous novel—presumably it would have tainted her! “Moia Nana” (1883) follows a young writer who, while he fancies himself in love with the beautiful but spoiled young daughter of a state councillor, feels compelled to teach her a lesson regarding her vanity.³¹² Rounding out this trio, “Rukovodstvo dlia zhelaiushchikh zhenitsia” (1885) is a three-page narrative of cheeky advice for men on the positives and negatives of potential brides. As may be guessed, the Nana-type does not make for a good wife, for Zola’s heroine has red hair,³¹³ and everyone knows that redheads are:

лукавы, лживы, злы, коварны... Любви без коварства не понимают. Обыкновенно бывают очень хорошо сложены и имеют на всем теле великолепную розовую кожу. Говорят, что черти и лешие обязательно женятся на рыжих. Где лживость, там трусость и малодушие. Достаточно хорошенько прикрикнуть на рыжую («Я тебе!»), чтобы она свернулась в калачик и полезла целоваться.

Wily, deceitful, evil, cunning...Love without design they do not understand. Usually they are very well put-together and have a wonderfully pink skin covering their whole bodies. They say that devils and forest spirits absolutely must marry redheads. Where there are lies, there are also cowardice and chicken-heartedness. It’s enough

“Shvedskaia spichka” (“The Safety Match”, 1884) the motive for murder is at one point pinned on a Russian peasant version of Nana. This theory is rendered ridiculous at the end of the story, when the victim is found hiding in his girlfriend’s abandoned bath house. For more on this story, see Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 18-19.

³¹² This “lesson” is surely one of the first, if not *the* first, instance of “Chekhov’s loaded gun.” In order to make the young woman feel empathy for another person, the young man writes her a letter, claiming that a loaded revolver is two feet from his breast and he will shoot himself if she does not respond. She grants him an invitation to tea and so the gun never fires, but still it has served its purpose, as the narrator gloats, “Valeriia Andreevna was ready to burst into tears. For the first time in her life she had learned that a revolver is not to be trifled with, and it was my letter that taught her!”, *PSS II*, 123.

³¹³ Nana’s hair color changes throughout Zola’s novel but is most notably red.

to raise your voice at a redhead (“Gotcha!”), for her to curl up and start kissing you.³¹⁴

As if laying the groundwork for the future intertwining of Chekhov’s fiction with his nonfiction, Nana did not stop with his stories; her spirit also permeated Chekhov’s letters. In his personal correspondence Chekhov humorously cast himself in the role of the popular French prostitute on more than one occasion. For example, to Maria Kiselyova he wrote in a letter of 13 December 1886,

В Питере я отдыхал, т. е. целые дни рыскал по городу, делая визиты и выслушивая комплименты, которых не терпит душа моя. Увы и ах! В Питере я становлюсь модным, **как Нана**.

In Peter I relaxed, i.e., for entire days I rambled about the city, going visiting and listening to compliments which my soul cannot bear. Alack and alas! In Peter I have become fashionable, **like Nana**.³¹⁵

Several years later, in a letter to family of 20 March 1891, he reveals,

Пишу вам из Вены, куда я приехал вчера в 4 часа пополудни. В дороге всё было благополучно. От Варшавы до Вены я ехал, **как железнодорожная Нана**, в роскошном вагоне «Интернационального общества спальных вагонов»: постели, зеркала, громадные окна, ковры и проч.

I am writing you from Vienna, where I arrived yesterday at 4 in the afternoon. On the way everything went smoothly. From Warsaw to Vienna I traveled, **like a railroad Nana**, in a luxurious car from “The International Order of Sleeper Cars”: feather beds, mirrors, huge windows, rugs, and the like.³¹⁶

³¹⁴ PSS II, 196.

³¹⁵ *Pis'ma I*, 278.

³¹⁶ *Pis'ma IV*, 199.

More generally, Chekhov's correspondence also reveals his penchant for painting his intimate acquaintance's love lives in gritty and cynical Zolaesque terms, as though they were scenes from one of his scandalous novels. For example, in a letter to his publisher Nikolai Leikin of 14 September 1885, Chekhov writes of his brother Nikolai (Kolia) and his mistress:

Женщина! Половой инстинкт мешает работать больше, чем водка... Пойдет слабый человек к бабе, завалится в ее перину и лежит с ней, пока рези в пахах не начнутся... Николаева баба — это жирный кусок мяса, любящий выпить и закусить... Перед coitus всегда пьет и ест, и любовнику трудно удержаться, чтобы самому не выпить и не закусить пикулей (у них всегда пикули!)

Woman! The sex instinct hinders work more than vodka...A weak man sets off for his woman, gets into her feather bed and lies with her, until his groin begins to hurt...Nikolai's woman—she is a plump bit of meat, loves to eat and drink...Before coitus she always drinks and eats, and its difficult for her lover to restrain himself, so that he too doesn't start to drink and eat pickles (with them it's always pickles!)³¹⁷

Of course, Chekhov's statements here are not meant to be taken seriously. They are instead devised to deflect the addressee's attention and quite possibly his anger away from the actual situation with Kolia—whose descent into alcoholism and the end stages of tuberculosis caused him to shirk his business commitments with Leikin³¹⁸—onto a comic scene.

1886-87: Chekhov and the "Zolaesque"

³¹⁷ *Pis'ma I*, 159.

³¹⁸ Kolia, a remarkably gifted artist, had contracted to provide illustrations for Leikin's journal.

What may have started out as a humorous, even pandering, vehicle for the budding Chekhov quickly grew into a specific body of work that may be understood as responding to Zola on more serious grounds. Specifically, the period of 1886-87, when Chekhov was publishing his first stories under the editorship of Alexei Suvorin, has been described by Donald Rayfield as Chekhov's "lubricious, Zolaesque sequence of New Times stories."³¹⁹ This period includes such stories as "Ved'ma," ("The Witch"), "Agafia" and "Tina," ("The Slough" or "The Mire"),³²⁰ among others. While critics have not attempted to elaborate a precise system of features that unites these stories, we may say generally that they all feature camera-sharp description thick with unsavory details and non-normative, at times aggressive, female sexuality. These stories were not free of controversy, and Chekhov's contemporaries did not always receive such frankness enthusiastically, often invoking Zola directly or strongly hinting at his nefarious presence in Chekhov's text.

The earliest example of such criticism belongs to the elderly writer Dmitry Grigorovich and was set forth in his famous series of letters that prophesied Chekhov as a serious talent in Russian literature. After Grigorovich made the young author's acquaintance in Petersburg, he wrote Chekhov two letters, one on 25 March 1886 and the second on 2 April 1886, that were to have a formative influence on Chekhov's career. It is noteworthy that, in what proved to be watershed correspondence, Grigorovich chose to compare the young author to the founder of French naturalism. Specifically, Grigorovich

³¹⁹ Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 149.

³²⁰ "Ved'ma" was published 8 March, 1886, "Agafia", 15 March, and "Tina", 29 October 1886.

took great pains to warn Chekhov away from the “details of a base material undertone,”³²¹ which he saw as Zola’s major flaw:

Правдивость передачи внешних впечатлений нимало не требует подробностей грубо матерьяльного оттенка. Это, между прочим, недостаток Золя—а уж на что талант!

Faithfulness to the representation of external impressions in no way requires details of a base material undertone. That, by the way, is Zola’s shortcoming, and what a talent he is!³²²

This second letter builds on themes Grigorovich had in fact broached earlier. In his first letter, he detected evidence that Chekhov was already in some danger and cautioned that in the young author’s stories:

часто взят мотив несколько цинического оттенка, к чему это? Правдивость, реализм не только не исключают изящества,—но выигрывают от последнего. Вы настолько сильно владеете формой и чувством пластики, что нет особой надобности говорить, например, о грязных ногах с вывороченными ногтями и о пупке у дьячка.³²³ Детали эти ровно ничего не прибавляют к художественной красоте описания, а только портят впечатление в глазах читателя со вкусом.

There is often a motif of a certain cynical undertone—what is the purpose of that? Verisimilitude and realism not only do not exclude elegance, but benefit from it. You command form and a feeling of plasticity to such a strong degree that there is no need to speak, for example, of dirty feet with ingrown toenails or the sexton’s

³²¹ Incidentally, this phrase is mistranslated as “pornographic subjects” in the Simon Karlinsky and Michael Henry Heim edition of Chekhov’s letters, still the most famous and widely used edition in English. See *Anton Chekhov’s Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary*, 60. This translation is a clear overreach; the words *порнография* and *порнографический* were used quite frequently in the 1880s when discussing Zola’s work in the Russian press, and presumably Grigorovich would have employed one of them if such a strong meaning had been his intent.

³²² Letter from Grigorovich to Chekov of 2 April 1886, *Pis’ma I*, 430.

³²³ These details are in reference to Chekhov’s 1886 story “Ved’ma,” about an unhappily married young woman whose much older husband believes she has supernatural powers, because attractive young men appear at their doorstep during snowstorms.

bellybutton. These details add absolutely nothing to the artistic beauty of description, but only spoil the impressions in the eyes of a reader with taste.³²⁴

Chekhov was clearly touched by the senior author's notice, and speedily sent him a heartfelt reply, in which he agreed with his would-be mentor's criticism:

Я с Вами во всем согласен. Циничности, на которые Вы мне указываете, я почувствовал сам, когда увидел «Ведьму» в печати. Напиши я этот рассказ не в сутки, а в 3—4 дня, у меня бы их не было...

I agree with you completely. The cynicism, which you point out to me, I felt myself, when I saw "The Witch" in print. If I had not 24 hours to write a story, but 3-4 days, it wouldn't be there...³²⁵

However, after Grigorovich's second letter to Chekhov, the one in which he explicitly charges him with coming precipitously close to imitating Zola's objectionable qualities, Chekhov seems to have cooled towards his benefactor; he does not respond at all to this letter³²⁶ and almost in defiance of the old man, Chekhov continued his "Zolaesque" series throughout 1886.

Joining Grigorovich's criticism some months later was Chekhov's personal friend and occasional author Maria Kiselyova. Without mentioning Zola specifically, Kiselyova nonetheless echoes Grigorovich's admonitions in an influential letter of her own from the end of 1886.³²⁷ She takes to task Chekhov's story "Tina" for what was, in her view, its crude

³²⁴ Letter from Grigorovich to Chekhov of 25 March 1886, *PSS* IV, 520.

³²⁵ Letter from Chekhov to Grigorovich of 28 March 1886, *Pis'ma* I, 219.

³²⁶ Chekhov's next letter to Grigorovich was written almost a year after their initial correspondence, on 12 February 1887. This letter does not touch upon any of the themes Grigorovich addressed in April 1886 and instead, as if by way of a peace-offering for long silence, praises Grigorovich's newly published story "Son Karelina," *Pis'ma* II, 28-31.

³²⁷ Kiselyova's own letter is without a date. It is most probably from the end of December 1886. The last letter Chekhov wrote to her in 1886 is dated December 13, and in it, he mentions sending "Tina" to her for critique (NB: this is the same later quoted above, in which Chekhov compares himself to Nana.) It is most likely that

and offensively pungent depiction of sexual relations between men and women.

Undoubtedly, “Tina” is a provocative story: it chronicles a young, attractive Jewish woman named Susanna who seduces local men in lieu of the money she owes them. In the wake of “Tina’s” publication, Kiselyova wrote to Chekhov:

Начну с того, добрейший Антон Павлович, что присланный Вами фельетон мне совсем и совсем не нравится, хотя я убеждена, что к моему мнению присоединятся весьма немногие. Написан он хорошо, — читающие мужчины пожалеют, если судьба не натолкнула их на подобную Сусанну, которая сумела бы распотешить их разнузданность; женщины втайне позавидуют ей, но большая часть публики прочтет с интересом и скажет: „Бойко пишет этот Чехов, молодец!“

<...> мне лично досадно, что писатель *Вашего сорта*, т. е. не обделенный от бога, — показывает мне только одну „навозную кучу“. Грязью, негодьями и негодяйками кишит мир, и впечатление, производимое ими, не ново, но зато с какой благодарностью относишься к тому же писателю, который, проводя Вас через всю вонь навозной кучи, вдруг вытащит оттуда жемчужное зерно. Вы не близоруки и отлично способны найти это зерно — зачем же тогда только одна куча? Дайте мне зерно, чтобы в моей памяти стусевалась вся грязь обстановки: от Вас я вправе требовать этого, а других, не умеющих отличить и найти человека между четвероногими животными, — я и читать не стану. Мой взгляд, конечно, не может иметь для Вас значения, но, в качестве Вашей хорошей знакомой, я позволяю себе высказать его, тем более, что Вы сами дали мне это право, прислав фельетон.

I will start, dearest Anton Pavlovich, with the fact that I thoroughly dislike the story you sent me, although I am convinced that precious few will share my opinion. It is well written—male readers will lament if fate does not grant them their own Susanna, who could gratify their licentiousness; women will secretly envy her, but the vast majority of the public will read with interest and say, “How cleverly that Chekhov writes, bravo!”

Kiselyova sent her diatribe in response after this date, but before the New Year festivities. Chekhov answered in turn on 14 January 1887. For these letters, see *Pis'ma I*, 277-279 and *Pis'ma II*, 10-14; 347.

...for me personally it is irksome that a writer of *your caliber*, that is, not short-changed by God, shows me only a manure pile. The filth with which scoundrels pollute the world, and the impressions that they create, are not new, and so with such gratitude you regard the author who, having led you through the entire stench of a manure pile, suddenly extracts forthwith a pearl. You are not nearsighted and are wonderfully capable of finding that pearl—so why do you show me only a manure pile? Give me the pearl, so that in my memory all the dirt melts into the background. I have the right to demand this of you, but others, who can neither locate nor distinguish man from amongst other four-legged creatures, I will not read. My point of view, of course, cannot have any meaning for you, but in the capacity of your good friend, I allow myself the freedom to express it, all the more so because you yourself gave me this right by sending me the story.³²⁸

He sent Kiselyova a pointed rejoinder defending his decision to make use of manure, the crux of which reads as follows:

Для химиков на земле нет ничего не чистого. Литератор должен быть так же объективен, как химик; он должен отрешиться от житейской субъективности и знать, что навозные кучи в пейзаже играют очень почтенную роль, а злые страсти так же присущи жизни, как и добрые.

For chemists nothing on earth is unclean. A writer should be just as objective as a chemist. He should turn away from subjectivity and know that a manure pile plays a very honorable role in the landscape, and that evil passions are just as essential to life as noble ones.³²⁹

In spite of this multilayered exchange, Chekhov's explicit period of Zola-inspired stories is thought to have ended shortly thereafter in 1887, with the publication of his story "Verochka" marking a new period of introspective lyricism.³³⁰ But here is where the

³²⁸ Cited in the *primechaniia* to the *Pis'ma* II, 347.

³²⁹ From a letter of 14 January 1887, *Pis'ma* II, 10-14.

³³⁰ Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 149. While he does not discuss Zola, scholar Joseph Conrad also falls into this camp, albeit with a slightly later end date. See his article "Sensuality in Chekhov's Prose."

framework of established scholarly opinion displays its inadequacy. This interpretation is too simple, too tidy; not only does it obscure the fact that Chekhov was already quietly planting the seeds of polemic with Zola as early as 1886, it also presumes that Chekhov left Zola behind as he matured as a writer, when in fact he continued to engage and even polemicize with the founder of French naturalism—and the latter’s intertwining of scientific theories and imaginative literature—throughout the 1890s.

To this end, I argue that the stories written during Chekhov’s “Zolaesque” period have themselves been misunderstood all along. According to Chekhov’s contemporaries, and even modern-day critics, Chekhov’s work during this period is often cheaply and crudely dependent on Zola. Moreover, Chekhov’s so-called movement away from Zola is viewed as a welcome stylistic and thematic improvement. However, like Grigorovich in the letter quoted above, Chekhov’s contemporaries and critics alike have been distracted by superficial ingrown toenails and clergymen’s bellybuttons.³³¹ For all of the unsavory details these stories may present on the surface, they actually counter the French Naturalist’s views on the intermingling of science and art.

It should be noted that critics have to date been too eager to assume that Chekhov and Zola share a joint view of a “scientific” approach to literature. This particularly applies to Chekhov’s “Zolaesque” period from 1886-87 currently under discussion. Donald Rayfield makes such an observation in his article “Chekhov and the Literary Tradition.” However, Rayfield’s characterization is critically undermined by circularity. On the one hand, he

³³¹ Such details led even Anna Akhmatova astray. Her contemporary, the historian of Russian literature and writer Natalia Roskina, records her as having complained that “Chekhov did not see much. He was short-sighted in his view of Russia. If one looks too closely all one sees are cockroaches in the cabbage soup,” Konstantin Polivanov, *Anna Akhmatova and Her Circle*, 186.

states, “Zola’s claims to be a disinterested scientist, trying to disentangle the sequence of human motivation and action, have a forensically Chekhovian ring.”³³² On the other hand, though, he claims that Chekhov’s reactions to criticism of his art, such as his response to Kiselyova’s letter quoted above, are dispatched “with a Zolaesque scientific disinterestedness.”³³³ The looseness of this terminology—where exactly does Zola end and Chekhov begin?—obscures deeper problems associated with equating the two writers in the “scientific” context. As I will seek to demonstrate, Chekhov’s fiction from 1886 and onward subtly undermines the success of the forensic method of art that Zola championed.

I argue that, even while Chekhov was writing stories that capitalized on the Russian reading public’s taste for Zola and his risqué earthiness, he did not wholly embrace the French naturalist or his artistic method. Indeed, during this period there is also another trend emerging that will eventually grow into polemic. Of particular interest here are Chekhov’s stories “Anyuta” and “The Mire” from 1886 (the very period when Chekhov was supposedly under Zola’s spell). “Anyuta” serves as a philosophical counterpoint to the principle tenets of Zola’s artistic program, while “The Mire” takes to task Zola’s faith in heredity, the “second main factor of his naturalistic creed.”³³⁴ This latter trend is further complicated in a more mature Chekhov work of the 1890s, “Big Volodia and Little Volodia.”

Zola’s statements on the Naturalist method of writing imaginative literature were first laid out in the preface to the second edition of his infamous novel *Thérèse Raquin*³³⁵

³³² Donald Rayfield, *A Chekhov Companion*, 48.

³³³ Donald Rayfield, *A Chekhov Companion*, 51.

³³⁴ Douglas Parmee, from the Introduction to his translation of *Nana*, xi.

³³⁵ How closely Zola’s own fiction—*Thérèse Raquin* included—adheres to these tenets has been a topic of renewed critical debate in recent years. This is a question, however, that I cannot broach further here, since

and later developed in lengthier articles of literary criticism such as “The Experimental Novel.”³³⁶ Chekhov would have been familiar with the ideas expressed herein, and for this reason it is a particularly intriguing juncture to examine for Chekhovian response.

Thérèse Raquin was published in France in 1867, and was Zola’s first major novel that predated the *Rougon-Macquart*. Although it is considered to belong to his early work, *Thérèse Raquin* is very strongly connected to the later cycle both thematically and formatively. Susan Harrow elaborates:

Thérèse Raquin reveals the prodigious skills that will come to maturity in the Rougon-Macquart cycle. Zola’s atmospheric description of the lugubrious Passage du Pont-Neuf betokens his evocation of the squalid tenement building of *L’Assommoir* (1877) and the miasmatic courtyard of *Pot-Bouille* (1882)...his analysis of Thérèse and Laurent...anticipates the portraits of such complex figures as Renée Saccard (*La Curée*, 1872), the eponymous Nana (1880), and Jacques Lantier (*La Bête humaine*, 1890).³³⁷

At its core, *Thérèse Raquin* is a love story gone wrong. The novel depicts, often in squalid and cringeworthy tones, a young couple’s extramarital affair that ends in murder and eventual double suicide. When the novel came out, it created a frenzy in the French press, some of it perhaps instigated by Zola himself so that he could leverage even more publicity in a campaign of spirited self-defense. In Zola’s own words, French critics gave the

my focus is Chekhov’s response to the preface itself. For more, see Susan Harrow’s article “*Thérèse Raquin*: Animal Passion and the Brutality of Reading,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Zola*. Mikhail Kleman also discusses the problem of how well *Thérèse Raquin* fulfills Zola’s promises with respect to Naturalism in his article “Problema realizma po frantsuzskoi literature i teoriia nauchnogo romana E. Zola” in *Emil’ Zolia: Sbornik statei*, 5-68.

³³⁶ “The Experimental Novel” (“Eksperimental’nyi roman” or “Le roman experimental”) was first published in Russia. It was an installment of the “Parizhskie pis’ma” (Letter number 54, *Vestnik Evropy* 1879, book 9, 406-438). For a discussion of the impact “The Experimental Novel” had on Russian letters, see Phillip Duncan’s “Echoes of Zola’s Experimental Novel in Russia.”

³³⁷ Susan Harrow, “*Thérèse Raquin*.” *The Cambridge Companion to Zola*, 106.

book “a hostile and indignant reception.” One of the most noteworthy critiques came from the pen of Zola’s friend Louis Ulbach, who was writing under the pseudonym “Ferragus.” Published in January 1868 in *Le Figaro*, the review damned *Thérèse Raquin* as “putrid literature.”³³⁸ In Ulbach’s view, Zola’s “unhealthy preoccupation with lust, corpses, and decay was not only disgusting and immoral...it was an outrage against good taste.”³³⁹ According to scholar and the most recent translator of *Thérèse Raquin* into English, Andrew Rothwell, the dominant critical position on this episode is that “Zola may well have put [Ulbach] up to this attack himself in order to engineer an opportunity of publicizing his own views in a refutation.”³⁴⁰ Howsoever it came about, this critical backlash both spiked the novel’s sales and compelled—or created a prime opportunity for—Zola to write a preface for the second edition in justification of his artistic approach.³⁴¹ Zola allowed several months to go by after *Thérèse Raquin*’s raucous debut before publishing the second French edition with the accompanying preface in 1868.

By contrast, *Thérèse Raquin*’s reception in Russia was much more subdued, especially for a novel of Zola’s. This was largely due to the fact that it was not immediately translated into Russian; it came out in a full-length Russian version more than a decade later, in 1879, the same year that *Nana* made her debut.³⁴² Nonetheless, both the novel and

³³⁸ In the wake of Ferragus’s article, it became routine for detractors to refer to Zola’s work as “La Litterature putride.”

³³⁹ Quoted from the Introduction to *Thérèse Raquin*. Trans. and Intro. by Andrew Rothwell, ix. Original reference is from ‘La Litterature putride’, *Le Figaro*, 23 Jan. 1868; repr. in Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, ed. Henri Mitterrand (Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1970), 39-44.

³⁴⁰ Quoted from the Introduction to *Thérèse Raquin*. Trans. and Intro. by Andrew Rothwell, ix.

³⁴¹ See Frederick Brown, *Zola: A life*, 162.

³⁴² This translation was published by A.S. Suvorin in the inaugural issues of the literature supplement to *Novoe vremia* (also referred to as *Ezhenedel’noe novoe vremia*), March-April 1879, Nos 1-13. The novel was

its sensational preface were known to the Russian literary scene. According to scholar Mikhail Kleman, Vladimir Chuiko, one of Zola's chief propagandizers in Russia, published an article in the journal *Iskra* (*The Spark*) that summarized the contents of the novel and piqued readers' interest by declaring that it "makes the same deep impression as does Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*."³⁴³ Kleman goes on to assert that the preface was "undoubtedly known to Russian critics—Vladimir Ckuiko even quotes it directly in his article in *Iskra*."³⁴⁴ Chekhov likewise was undoubtedly familiar with the ideas in Zola's novel and its preface. As we have seen, these ideas hung in the air of Russian literary criticism during the 1870s and 1880s, and it was during this time that Chekhov was becoming integrated into Russia's leading literary circles.³⁴⁵

A scant five and a half pages long, *Thérèse Raquin's* preface nonetheless undertakes the enormous task of defending both the novel itself and Zola's Naturalism at large. According to Mikhail Kleman, in the preface Zola seized the opportunity to "settle scores with his literary opponents and to give his own assessment of the scientific novel."³⁴⁶ What

actually printed under the title *Nakazanie* (*Punishment*), presumably due to perceived similarities between Zola's narrative and Dostovesky's *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (*Crime and Punishment*). For example, critic A. Pleshcheev noted that Zola's novel "is built on a psychological motif, which in certain ways corresponds to the motif of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*." Quoted from M. Kleman's article "Nachal'nyi uspekh Zolia v Rossii" in *Emil' Zolia: sbornik statei*, 202. Original is from A. Plesheev's "Briukho Parizha (*Le ventre de Paris*), roman Emilia Zolia, 1873" in *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 1873, Book 7, 27-28.

³⁴³ Quoted here from M. Kleman's "Nachal'nyi uspekh Zola v Rossii", 201. Original is from Vladimir Chuiko's article "Sovremennyi frantsuzskii roman," *Iskra*, 1873, No. 29, 24 May, 3.

³⁴⁴ M. Kleman, "Nachal'nyi uspekh Zola v Rossii," 209.

³⁴⁵ It is quite possible that Suvorin advised Chekhov to read *Thérèse Raquin*. Suvorin certainly would have read it, since his paper published the first translation into Russian, and he was fond of making such recommendations. Moreover, he and Chekhov discussed staging the play version at Suvorin's theatre.

³⁴⁶ M. Kleman, "Nachal'nyi uspekh Zola v Rossii," 209.

is particularly intriguing for the present study is the way in which Zola positions the Naturalist *writer*. In reference to the true nature of his literary endeavor, Zola casts himself both as physician and artist in the creation of *Thérèse Raquin*. He explains:

I have simply carried out on two living bodies the analytical work which surgeons perform on corpses...The humanity of the models disappeared for me as it does for the artist who has a naked woman stretched out before him, and whose only thought is to put down on his canvas the truth of her form and coloration...I waited in vain for someone to say: 'No, you are wrong, this writer is just an analyst, one who may perhaps have become engrossed in human rottenness, but only in the same way as a doctor who lectures to students about disease.'³⁴⁷

As I will demonstrate, the resonance between the ideas in this passage and “Anyuta” is too strong to be ignored; for Chekhov, as both a professional physician *and* professional artist, seems to have responded particularly to Zola’s dual self-posturing and its resulting implications for artistic truth.

Written a few years later during Chekhov’s so-called “Zolaesque period,” “Anyuta”, curiously enough, takes as its subject the very themes Zola outlines above: the consequences of reducing a complex living character to the clinical status of a corpse, from the perspectives of both medicine *and* art.³⁴⁸ Although “Anyuta” was not published by

³⁴⁷ English translation quoted here from Andrew Rothwell’s Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Thérèse Raquin*, 2-3. Original found in Emile Zola, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Edition de la Pleiade, 1979), I, 520.

Another reason Chekhov may have taken issue with this statement is that he considered professionalization in one’s field to be extremely important. Time and again he railed against those who presumed to speak and act with medical authority, but who had had no training. Especially relevant here are his damning comments on Tolstoy regarding the *Kreutzer Sonata* (Chekhov upbraided Tolstoy for being unwilling to read even one or two books on female sexuality by specialists), as well as the character of Lida, who treats peasants with no real knowledge of their ailments, in his story “House with the Mezzanine.”

³⁴⁸ For an alternate take on the intermingling of medicine and art in “Anyuta,” see Cathy Popkin’s piece “Historia Morbi and the ‘Holy of Holies’—Scientific and Religious Discourse and Chekhov’s Epistemology.”

Suvorin in *New Times* but rather by the publisher Nikolai Leikin in his humoristic journal *Fragments (Oksolki)*, the story at first glance would seem to fit into the “gritty Zolaesque” paradigm. Not unlike the furor that tended to follow and indeed, spur on, each new work of Zola’s,³⁴⁹ controversy surrounded the publication of “Anyuta” on grounds of its supposed immorality. Not only do the main characters live in abject squalor, complete with signature stomach-turning Naturalist details, such as cigarette butts floating in greasy dish water, but also, the censor objected to the fact that Chekhov made no attempt to hide his heroes’ extramarital sexual liaisons. In order to print the story, Leikin was forced to negotiate with the censorship committee and agree to cuts that would obscure the main characters’ commonlaw marriage.³⁵⁰ For all of these surface features that would seem to fall in line with Zola, they actually serve as so many red herrings. For here, Chekhov’s ultimate conclusion is something very different. The scientific method of “engrossing oneself” and treating subjects as corpses that was so laudable for Zola turns out to have quietly tragic consequences in Chekhov’s artistic world.

Chekhov’s story begins with the title character Anyuta, who lives with the poor medical student Klochkov. Klochkov’s preferred method of studying for his coursework is to use Anyuta’s body. To learn the names and locations of various joints and bones, he draws them in charcoal on Anyuta’s bare skin, thereby superimposing a skeleton onto her living flesh. He does not notice that his actions lead her away from the living toward the dead, as he is deaf to her complaints that lying naked in an unheated Moscow apartment in

³⁴⁹ For a helpful summary of the debates surrounding the publication of Zola’s work, see Chapters 1 and 2 of Nina Lee Bond’s Ph.D. dissertation, “Tolstoy and Zola: Trains and Missed Connections,” 2011.

³⁵⁰ For more on the publication of “Anyuta”, see the correspondence between Chekhov and Leikin in Gitovich’s revised 2000 edition of *Letopis’ zhizni i tvorchestva A. P. Chekhova: 1860-1888, Volume 1*, 224-229.

winter is turning her blue with cold. Here we should note that Klochkov is studying for an anatomy exam. According to Vikenty Veresaev, a fellow writer-physician who received his university training during approximately the same years as Chekhov, medical students in the Russian Empire heard lectures on this subject in the anatomical theatre, working with cadavers.³⁵¹ When understood in this context, Anyuta becomes just another dead body for him to train on.

Art under such premises does not treat Anyuta any better than does medicine. While Anyuta is still serving as a human textbook to Klochkov, his unsuccessful artist friend Fetisov comes by, begging to borrow her for a while. He is attempting to paint Psyche and needs a model to sit for him. With her torso still marked in charcoal, Anyuta is made to go with the artist to his studio. Here, the subject of Fetisov's portrait itself plays a pivotal role. As scholar Renato Poggioli has demonstrated, the story "Anyuta" is a retelling of the Psyche myth. Anyuta herself turns out to be a reincarnation of the ancient Greek heroine, but which Chekhov uses "not openly, but obliquely, as a furtive hint that even in the profane prose of life there may lie hidden poetry's sacred spark."³⁵²

What scholars, including Poggioli, have not discovered before is that this story is also a retelling of Zola's preface to *Thérèse Raquin*. In the character of Anyuta, Chekhov has fashioned a human realization of Zola's avowedly inhuman theory. Under circumstances that echo Zola's very preface quoted above, Anyuta becomes the naked woman stretched

³⁵¹ See *The Confessions of a Physician*, Chapter 1, by Vikenty Veresaev, whose real last name was Smidovich. There is also a scarcer Russian edition entitled *Zapiski vracha*. Veresaev's career paralleled Chekhov's in many ways and thus offers many fruitful points for comparison; both received their medical training from Russian universities and became established writers in the journalistic press in the 1880s.

³⁵² Renato Poggioli, "Storytelling in a Double Key." In *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*, 320.

out before the painter. In this way, Chekhov, with subtle yet penetrating irony, underscores the consequences that thinking only of “the truth of her form and coloration” brings, for both Anyuta herself and the artist. Similar to her session with Klochkov, posing for the artist works a mortal transformation on Anyuta. She returns from their sitting together with the very flesh having been chiseled off of her face to reveal the sharp bone beneath:

Лицо у нее от долгого стояния на натуре осунулось, похудело, и подбородок стал острее.

From standing still for so long her face became drawn and thin, and her chin became sharper.³⁵³

Without mentioning Zola directly, Chekhov nonetheless is describing, in these scenes with Klochkov and Fertisov, the eventual failed results of analyzing people *à la Zola*, for both would-be surgeons and artists alike: his very method of analysis blocks us from acquiring the knowledge we seek. We see this in the case of the medical student, who is not able to learn anything from Anyuta’s body. At the end of the story, Klochkov is repeating the same anatomical information that he was trying to cram into his head at the beginning:

— Правое легкое состоит из трех долей... — зубрил он. — Верхняя доля на передней стенке груди достигает до 4—5 ребер...

— The right lung consists of three parts...he crammed. The upper part on the anterior wall of the thorax reaches the fourth or fifth rib...³⁵⁴

Compare these lines to Klochkov’s first words:

— Правое легкое состоит из трех долей... — зубрил Клочков. — Границы! Верхняя доля на передней стенке груди достигает до 4

³⁵³ PSS IV, 343.

³⁵⁴ PSS IV, 344.

— 5 ребер, на боковой поверхности до 4-го ребра... назади до spina scapulae...

— The right lung consists of three parts...he crammed. Boundaries! The upper part on the anterior wall of the thorax reaches the fourth or fifth rib...on the lateral surface, to the fourth rib, behind to the spina scapulae...³⁵⁵

Likewise, the artist's multiple attempts to paint "Psyche" are in vain, not because he cannot find the right models, but because he is incapable of understanding them as anything beyond motionless body parts. As Poggioli points out, neither the artist, nor the medical student, nor Anyuta "will ever realize that the only Psyche of the story is she herself."³⁵⁶ In frustration, Fertisov admits to Klochkov that he is "forced to paint everything from different models." He seems to understand that this hodgepodge is connected to the reason why he cannot produce a satisfying work of art, but he does not comprehend why this should be so, and instead, continues to search for new prototypes. Chekhov sums up this short-sightedness with a tiny detail: Fertisov is unable to sympathize with one of his models whose cheap stockings stain her legs blue (an ironic jab, perhaps, at Zola's insistence above on seeking the truth of the model's "coloration"? For here, the truth of her colored legs only irritates, instead of enlightens, the artist).³⁵⁷ She is too poor to buy herself proper clothing to keep warm in the middle of the Moscow winter, yet all Fertisov can do is express annoyance towards her tainted flesh:

Хороший сюжет, да всё как-то не выходит; приходится всё с разных натурщиц писать. Вчера писал одну с синими ногами.

³⁵⁵ PSS IV, 340.

³⁵⁶ Renato Poggioli, "Storytelling in a Double Key." In *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*, 321.

³⁵⁷ This could also be a reference to the hallucinations about the drowned victim in *Thérèse Raquin* involving his bluish dead body.

Почему, спрашиваю, у тебя синие ноги? Это, говорит, чулки линяют.

It's a good subject, but somehow it's not coming out right; I have to paint everything from different models. Yesterday I painted one with blue legs. Why, I asked her, are your legs blue? This one, she says that the dye in her stockings runs.³⁵⁸

More than a decade later, when he undertook revisions for the Marx edition of his complete works,³⁵⁹ Chekhov took measures that asserted himself further against Zola in this story. Not only did he eliminate features of Anyuta's speech that dehumanized her, other edits he made to the story suggest that he was trying to distance himself from the "dirty details" that put one in mind of Zola. According to the editors of the complete collected edition of Chekhov's works, in his revised version of "Anyuta":

Для собрания сочинений Чехов переработал текст, сделал ряд сокращений и замен и провел сплошную стилистическую правку. Существенно изменен образ Анюты: в ее речах и портрете опущены подробности, подчеркивавшие бесхарактерность и забитость...опущены натуралистические подробности в описании номера и вульгаризмы в речах персонажей.

Chekhov revised the text, completing a number of edits and changes and altering the style completely. The image of Anyuta was fundamentally changed: details in her speech and description that accented her weakness and timidity were dropped...also dropped were naturalistic details in the description of the room and vulgarisms in the characters' speech.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ PSS IV, 342.

³⁵⁹ In what most of his friends considered to be a disastrous business deal on Chekhov's end, Chekhov sold the rights to his works to publisher Adolph Marx in 1899, who then brought out new collected editions. See Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 481-487.

³⁶⁰ PSS IV, 516.

Indeed, “Anyuta” makes a fitting tribute to *Thérèse Raquin*, for Zola’s preface makes a conscious display of welcoming critical dialogue, in exchange for the actual reception his work received. Across distances of time and language, Chekhov calls Zola on his bluff, as it were, and proves to be the critic that Zola professed to be craving. In another passage from the preface, less frequently quoted, perhaps, but no less significant, Zola describes the kind of literary discourse he would wish to see:

I am merely astonished that my fellow-writers, whose practiced eye ought to let them recognize a novelist’s intentions within the first ten pages, should have made of me a sort of literary sewer-worker, and I am content to beg them humbly in the future to be good enough to see me as I am, and discuss my work for what it is. Yet it would have been so easy to understand *Thérèse Raquin*, to observe and analyse the book and point out to me its real faults, without immediately picking up a handful of mud to fling in my face in the name of morality. What was required was a little intelligence and a few real critical ideas. Accusations of immorality, in the field of science, prove absolutely nothing.³⁶¹

In writing “Anyuta”, Chekhov betrays himself to have had *more* than a little intelligence and a few real critical ideas. Without railing against an abstract and ill-defined morality,³⁶²

³⁶¹ English translation quoted here from Andrew Rothwell’s Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Therese Raquin*, 2-3. Original found in Emile Zola, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Edition de la Pleiade, 1979), I, 520.

³⁶² It is worth pointing out that Chekhov never resorted to terms related to “pornography” when discussing Zola. In fact, an electronic search of Chekhov’s correspondence in the online database FEB reveals that he did not use words such as “pornografiia” or “pornograficheskii” at all, which were quite popular terms in the Russian press at the time, particularly as concerns Zola. That these categories appear not to have been a part of Chekhov’s vocabulary reveals that he was a very different kind of critic of French Naturalism.

By way of illustration, here are several examples typical of the time period’s criticism of Zola, taken from Leshchinskaia’s *Ukazatel’* (emphasis mine):

Mikhailovskii, N.K. “O pornografii.” *Otechestvinnye zapiski* 1881, t. 256, No 5, otd II, 109-122: according to Leshchinskaia, the article discusses “*Nana* kak primer pornografii.”

“Po belu svetu.” *Golos*, 1882. An article from the collection published that year on Zola and French society was entitled “Pornograficheskia kleveta na frantsuzskuiu burzhuziiu.”

Chekhov nonetheless finds a way to engage Zola and his work, crafting a story that takes Zola's Naturalist tenets seriously while at the same time exposing their very real pitfalls. In fact, Chekhov's own comments about his story suggest that he himself considered "Anyuta" somewhat of a turning point for his work and career. In a letter to Leikin from 3 February 1886, Chekhov wrote of "Anyuta":

Шлю рассказ...В нем тронуты студиозы, но нелиберального ничего нет. Да и пора бросить церемониться....

I am sending a story...It has affected students, but nothing illiberal. After all, it's time to stop standing on ceremony....³⁶³

As we will see, neither did Chekhov stand on ceremony when it came to the intersections between scientific theories and literature in his future works.

Chekhov and Literary Heredity

Chekhov not only questioned Zola's scientific point of view as early as 1886, but also his views on heredity. Published several months after "Anyuta" in 1886, "The Mire"³⁶⁴ also attracted its fair share of negative publicity.³⁶⁵ Undoubtedly, "The Mire" is a provocative story: as summarized above, it chronicles a young, attractive Jewish woman named Susanna who seduces local men in lieu of the money she owes them. As we saw with

Zotov, V.P. "Ocherki inostrannoi literatury. Pornograficheskii element frantsuzskoi belletristiki. Protest protiv poslednego romana Zola. Tsinizm samogo protesta. Kaiushchiisia pornograf, vosstaiushchii protiv svoego uchitelia." *Nabliudatel'*, 1887, No 10, 1-5. According to Leshchinskaia, the article discusses a signed protest that five young French Naturalist authors made against Zola for his novel *The Earth* (*La Terre*, translated into Russian as *Zemlia*).

³⁶³ *Pis'ma I*, 192.

³⁶⁴ First published in A.S. Suvorin's *New Times*, 29 October, 1886.

³⁶⁵ See, for example, Maria Kiselyova's letter quoted above, *Pis'ma II*, 347.

“Anyuta,” this story, too, contains a striking number of parallels that evoke Zola’s general mood: all-pervasive scents and perfumes,³⁶⁶ jasmine for example, to signal the erotic³⁶⁷; a raw and sexually charged atmosphere; and a setting littered with nasty, sticky bits such as dirty underwear, scraps of tape, and crumpled caramel wrappers. What scholars have not noticed before is that “The Mire” draws extensively on *Nana*,³⁶⁸ both in its main character and in the dynamism of its plot.³⁶⁹ Moreover, Chekhov’s story interrogates a problem of heredity—which has been called an essential part of Zola’s creed³⁷⁰—that has particular resonance for Russia: the status of the Jew in Russian cultural life.³⁷¹

Both stories feature harlot-outcasts who ensnare the men around them. It is surely not a coincidence that the name of Chekhov’s heroine, “Susanna,” contains within itself the

³⁶⁶ My analysis builds on that begun by scholar Joseph Conrad, author of the most significant article that deals with smells in Chekhov’s work. Not only does Conrad discuss stories in this scentual/sexual context that are typically assigned to Chekhov’s Zolaesque period from 1886, such as “Ved’ma” and “Tina”, among others; but also, he convincingly argues that in “Tina,” smell is “developed more fully than in any previous story” and while “all the five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—are utilized...it is that of smell which figures most prominently.” Joseph Conrad, “Sensuality in Chekhov’s Prose,” 108-109.

³⁶⁷ Critics agree that Zola was a pioneer in the use of smell in his work during the late nineteenth century. According to Hans Rindisbacher, author of the only full-length study on the olfactory sense in literature, *The Smell of Books*, “In naturalism, writers such as Zola go far beyond bourgeois realism and introduce olfaction as a new aesthetic element in literature,” viii. Rindisbacher’s intriguing monograph focuses on olfactory perception in 19th- and 20th-century European literature. He devotes a section to Russian literature of the 19th century, entitled “Mother Russia, the very scent and smell of her,” 112-142. Discussion includes the use of scents and smells in Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Bunin. Disappointingly, he deliberately excludes Chekhov, claiming, “a detailed discussion of Chekhov would exceed the frame of this chapter,” 140, note 161.

³⁶⁸ As was mentioned previously, *Nana* was published in Russia during the same year that *Thérèse Raquin* appeared in that country for the first time. It is not surprising, then, that they would be linked together in Chekhov’s artistic imagination and surface at around the same time in his work.

³⁶⁹ In her study *Rewriting the Jew: Assimilation Narratives in the Russian Empire*, Gabriella Safran notes in passing that “the overpowering scent of jasmine in Susanna’s bedroom recalls the strong-smelling flowers that fill the dressing room of Zola’s courtesan Nana. Her seduction of the younger cousin, then the older one, also evokes Nana, who makes love first to the young Georges Hugon, then to his elder brother Philippe, whom she ruins financially,” 164. Safran does not, however, pursue further analysis of the Nana theme in Chekhov’s work.

³⁷¹ As Leonid Livak notes, Susanna “runs into the modern vision of ‘jewishness’ as an innate biological condition.” Quoted from *The Jewish Persona in the European Imagination: A Case of Russian Literature*, 239.

word “Nana.”³⁷² While Nana is not accepted by fashionable Parisian society due to her lowly birth and resultant profession as a notorious courtesan, Susanna is spurned by her Russian country milieu because she is Jewish by heritage, if not by conviction. (In Russia during this time, Jewishness also largely determined one’s career: Susanna’s family is engaged in the vodka trade.) An undeniable French connection exists in “The Mire’s” plot structure as well. At *Nana*’s climax, gossip swirls that she has gone to Russia to be the mistress of a wealthy prince. Nana then returns to France only to die, and so no further details are known, while the stories about her decadent time in the Russian Empire continue to multiply. Such circumstances give Chekhov a prime opportunity to fashion his own companion tale about a Russian Nana out of Zola’s rumor-riddled plot: in “The Mire,” it is clear that Susanna has recently returned to Russia from abroad, and that she has spent considerable time in France. Indeed, owing to her extensive knowledge of both countries, she is fond of repeating, not without irony, that “the destiny of Europe lies in the hands of the French and the Russians.”³⁷³

Instead of uncritically parroting the Frenchman’s style for personal gain, however, Chekhov uses these features to expose the pitfalls of heredity when taken as a foregone conclusion.³⁷⁴ Published in 1880, before Zola began to reexamine his changing beliefs on

³⁷² “Nana” itself is a nickname in the French for the heroine’s given name Anna.

³⁷³ *PSS* V, 374.

³⁷⁴ Indeed, there is evidence that Chekhov believed one could rewrite one’s own hereditary destiny. Like Nana, he was born into poverty, and sought both a way out and a way up the social ladder. See his famous letter to A.S. Suvorin from 7 January 1889: “What aristocratic writers take from nature gratis, the less privileged must pay for with their youth. Try and write a story about a young man—the son of a serf, a former grocer, choirboy, schoolboy and university student, raised on respect for rank, kissing the priests’ hands, worshiping the ideas of others, and giving thanks for every piece of bread, receiving frequent whippings, making the rounds as a tutor without galoshes, brawling, torturing animals, enjoying dinners at the houses of rich relatives, needlessly hypocritical before God and man merely to acknowledge his own insignificance—write about how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself drop by drop and how, on waking up one

heredity,³⁷⁵ *Nana* does not challenge the basic assumption that begat the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle: that the characters' genealogy is the force that drives their actions and shapes their futures. As *Nana* comes from the disturbed and unbalanced Macquart branch of the family, so she lives a destructive life and dies a corrupt death. An important clue that Chekhov stands in opposition to Zola is that, while *Nana* dies of her inbred moral corruption, Susanna suffers no such demise.³⁷⁶ In Zola's disgusting final scene, the smallpox pustules putrefying *Nana's* face represent the decay of France's morally bankrupt Second Empire:

Venus was decomposing; the germs which she had picked up from the carrion people allowed to moulder in the gutter, the ferment which had infected a whole society, seemed to have come to the surface of her face and rotted it.³⁷⁷

As a stark counterpoint, "The Mire" closes with a healthy, whole Susanna continuing to dominate her all-male salon in high spirits and a stunning black dress. Her final gesture is to blow the flaccid hero an animated kiss.

Rather, the characters that suffer a moral downfall in Chekhov's artistic imagination are the ones who approach Susanna with preconceived and repellant ideas about her Jewish heritage. The male protagonist, Alexander Sokol'skii, pays Susanna a visit to recover a debt that will enable him at once to discharge his army service honorably and marry his

fine morning, he finds that the blood coursing through his veins is no longer the blood of a slave, but that of a real human being, *Pis'ma* III, 133.

³⁷⁵ For more on the evolution of Zola's own genealogical thought vis-à-vis the ongoing *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, see Roger Clark, *Zola: 'Nana.'*

³⁷⁶ Another intriguing contrast here between the two authors is that Chekhov has inverted *Nana's* central economy. Instead of money being given in exchange for sex, as we see throughout *Nana*, in "The Mire", sex is provided in place of money, as Susanna consistently seduces men *instead* of paying their IOUs.

³⁷⁷ Emile Zola, *Nana*, trans. by Douglas Parmee, 425.

fiancée. He arrives at Susanna’s business fully cognizant of her Jewish last name (Rothstein) and with an admitted prejudice “in general against non-Russian (read: Jewish) faces.”³⁷⁸ More nuanced details also render careful readers of Chekhov incapable of admiring Sokol’skii as a positive hero. As scholars Toby Clyman and Leonid Livak have discussed, Sokol’skii is a failed Russian folk champion on a quest for a bride.³⁷⁹ Furthermore, Sokol’skii displays a penchant for making medical diagnoses that he lacks the necessary professional background to understand, which makes him a target for the uniquely Chekhovian ridicule discussed above that is reserved for dilettante-medics.³⁸⁰ We readers know that Sokol’skii has no relevant medical training—he is instead a dandified army lieutenant with a “snow-white tunic” and stars on his epaulettes. Thus we at first laugh at him for misapplying scientific terms in order to rationalize the world around him. But it then becomes clear that he is attempting to reason away his own unexamined bias. By way of explanation for what he views as the irritating quality of Susanna’s rapid, open speech, in which the *r*’s are rolled, he labels her a “psychopath.” He also feels compelled to make sense of the irksome contrast between Susanna’s pale skin and her dark hair:

а тут к тому же нашел, что к черным кудряшкам и густым бровям хозяйки очень не шло белое лицо, своею белизною напоминавшее ему почему-то приторный жасминный запах, что уши и нос были поразительно бледны, как мертвые или вылитые из прозрачного воска.

He considered, too, that the lady’s white face, the whiteness of which for some reason suggested the cloying scent of jasmine, did not go well with her little black curls and thick eyebrows; that her nose and

³⁷⁸ PSS V, 366.

³⁷⁹ Leonid Livak, *The Jewish Persona in the European Imagination: A Case of Russian Literature*, 236.

³⁸⁰ See Note 32 above.

ears were astonishingly white, as though they belonged to a corpse, or had been molded out of transparent wax.³⁸¹

His solution is to determine that she must be suffering from a clinically specific form of anemia, known as chlorosis. Of course, neither of these “conditions” requires a physician’s verdict or prescribed course of therapy; what damns Sokol’skii is that these features are both consistently marked as stereotypically Jewish in Russian culture.³⁸² In other words, they are the product of a misguided emphasis on heredity, and Sokol’skii’s clumsy attempts to “fix” them medically thereby expose his underlying discomfort towards Jewishness that a Russian man of his social class could not have admitted openly.³⁸³

In the world of the story, Susanna herself unmasks this very prejudice against Jews that Sokol’skii, subconsciously, perhaps, holds: in confidence, she reveals to him, “I am a Jewess, you know, to the marrow of my bones. I am passionately fond of Shmuls and Yankels, but how I loathe that passion for gain in our Semitic blood.” As Livak argues, these statements serve as false assurances that she is on Sokol’skii’s side, to lull him into easy complacency. The second Sokol’skii lets his guard down, Susanna is able to rob him of both his money and his freedom: she hides the IOUs inside her voluptuous apartment, compelling Sokol’skii to remain indefinitely if he wants to move on with his life.

By the end, Sokol’skii has fallen prey to his own beliefs about heredity. His simultaneous attraction to Susanna’s unique, “non-Russian” charm (several times in the

³⁸¹ PSS V, 366.

³⁸² See Leonid Livak, *The Jewish Persona in the European Imagination: A Case of Russian Literature*, 240-242.

³⁸³ For more on Russian liberals of the late nineteenth century and their relationship to Jewishness, see Leonid Livak, “Part III: The Discreet Pleasures of Liberalism,” in *The Jewish Persona in the European Imagination: A Case of Russian Literature*.

story, in spite of his apprehension about her person, Sokol'skii nonetheless extols her as “glorious!”) and repulsion towards her ethnic heritage binds him to her. Indeed, his only movement in the story is a closed circuit between his cousin's estate and Susanna's. The “unclean forces” make it impossible for the lieutenant to stay with her indefinitely—when Sokol'skii escapes back to his cousin's, he labels Susanna a “monster”—yet Sokol'skii craves her intimacy. On the seventh day after his first visit, he rides anxiously back to her, where he remains at the end of the story and, presumably, beyond. Sokol'skii thus defaults on his moral obligations, as his fiancée and military service are cast aside and disappear.

This realization gives us a new way to interpret the story's title, “The Mire.” What exactly *is* this mire? For there is no physical bog in the story. We must instead look to Chekhov's system of Zola-inspired olfactory images. It is not a coincidence that Chekhov repeatedly describes the jasmine that evokes the erotic relationship between Susanna and Sokol'skii³⁸⁴ as the Russian *pritornyi*. In addition to the primary definition of *pritornyi* as “sugary-sweet”, it also carries connotations of “syrupy”, “gooey”, “unctuous” and “cloying.” Against this etymological background, “The Mire” figures not so much a swampy marsh as it does a sticky fly trap. Or perhaps, sticky bird trap, since Susanna teasingly compares the men in her life to birds seeking their freedom, and the lieutenant's last name, Sokol'skii, has

³⁸⁴ Zola on innumerable occasions used smells, floral scents in particular, to develop sexual themes. The most relevant for the present study are Nana's obsession for violets in *L'Assommoir*, a precursor to her eponymous novel, and the role jasmine plays in *The Sin of Father Mouret*. Here Zola provides a unique antecedent for Chekhov's use of jasmine to evoke both erotic pleasure and shame. In Zola's novel the main character, the priest Serge Mouret, falls in love with a simple peasant woman, Albine. His feelings for her form a direct opposition to his duty to the Church; he falters under the weight of his perceived transgression, yet cannot renounce Albine. These competing devotions force Mouret into a hallucinatory crisis, in which he alternately confesses his guilt before a crucifix come to life and imagines himself making love to Albine in a field imbued with the “fragrance of jasmine” (269). His vision ends with the life-force, commanded by Albine, destroying the Church and thus his personal identity alongside, while Serge himself succumbs to mad laughter. The scent that represents his passion and joy is also a harbinger of his fall.

as its root the Russian word for “falcon” (sokol). In this way, the jasmine, with its paradoxical attributes of attraction and disgust, recalls Sokol’skii’s feelings towards Susanna’s Jewishness. Reading the story’s final scene, then, in which Sokol’skii feebly promises to leave the next morning, we cannot help but realize that his views on heredity constitute his true moral quagmire.

Hereditary blindness: Chekhov and the Case of *Doctor Pascal*

Chekhov did not stop reading Zola in the late 1880s. Chekhov’s correspondence demonstrates that he was engaged with both the writer and the man, up until Zola’s untimely and suspicious death in 1902.³⁸⁵ Upon hearing of Zola’s death, Chekhov wrote to his wife Olga Knipper on 18 September 1902 (Old Style):

Сегодня мне грустно, умер Золя. Это так неожиданно и как будто нехстати. Как писателя я мало любил его, но зато как человека в последние годы, когда шумело дело Дрейфуса, я оценил его ВЫСОКО.

I am grieved today that Zola has died. This is so unexpected and inopportune. I had no great love for him as a writer, but these past several years, during the Dreyfus Affair, I valued him highly as a person.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ Zola died of asphyxiation due to carbon monoxide poisoning in Paris on 28 September 1902 (New Style). It will most likely never be determined conclusively if the death was an accident due to a malfunctioning chimney flue or if Zola met with foul play, although this latter interpretation has dominated since the 1950s. See Frederick Brown, *Zola: A life*, 791-793.

³⁸⁶ *Pis'ma XI*, 41.

Chekhov's esteem for Zola the human being and activist as a result of the Dreyfus Affair is well documented,³⁸⁷ but as I argue below, Chekhov's assessment here of his value for Zola as a *writer* is misleading. Indeed, it may be this letter that has deterred scholars from even posing the question of Zola's influence on a more mature Chekhov's work. In general, critics have been much too quick to take what Chekhov says in his letters at face value, without regard for tone, context, perspective across time or the particular relationship Chekhov had with the addressee at a given moment.³⁸⁸ While Chekhov may have taken issue with much of what he encountered in Zola, it does not follow that this response made no significant impact on Chekhov's own work. Quite the opposite, in fact, occurred.

Chekhov remained abreast of Zola's latest writing throughout the 1890s. He was familiar with Zola's "Three Cities" trilogy, the French author's next project after the epic family saga *Le Rougon-Macquart*; in letters to P.F. Iordanov of 24 November 1896 and 6 January 1897, Chekhov discusses purchasing for the Taganrog library two of these novels, *Lourdes* and *Rim*.³⁸⁹ It is also clear that Chekhov considered Zola the author's letters to be important artifacts for cultural posterity. In his correspondence with childhood friend and fellow writer I. Ia. Pavlovskii of 13 October 1896, Chekhov requests that the addressee donate his letters from Turgenev, Zola, Daudet, and Maupassant to the Taganrog library, if

³⁸⁷ For a fuller account of Chekhov's thoughts and activities related to the Dreyfus Affair, see Donald Rayfield's *Understanding Chekhov*, Chapter 12, as well as various letters from Chekhov to Suvorin, Aleksandr Chekhov, and others, during the years of 1896 and 1897.

³⁸⁸ Examples are too numerous to list here and are beyond the scope of this chapter; suffice it to say that a critical study of Chekhov's correspondence has yet to be written.

³⁸⁹ *Pis'ma VI*, 234-240; *Pis'ma VI*, 266-267.

it would not be too painful to part with them. According to Chekhov, such a contribution would provide “great pleasure to the citizens of our Taganrog.”³⁹⁰

In 1893, Zola the belletrist reached a long-anticipated career milestone: the conclusion of the *Rougon-Macquart*, with the publication of the twentieth volume in the cycle, *Doctor Pascal*. The novel particularly intrigued Chekhov, which he read on the recommendation of his friend and chief correspondent Alexei Suvorin.³⁹¹ A measure of the fascination the book had for Chekhov may be taken by looking at his letters during this time: *Doctor Pascal* was a constant topic of conversation between Chekhov and Suvorin for several months.³⁹² Rather than serving as mere fodder for discussion, the novel afforded Chekhov the opportunity to revisit his critique of Zola and his approach to heredity. As I argue below, *Doctor Pascal* provided the inspiration and counterpoint for one of Chekhov’s least studied stories from the 1890s, “Volodia bol’shoi i Volodia malen’kii.”³⁹³

Chekhov wrote “Volodia bol’shoi i Volodia malen’kii” in 1893, publishing it in late December of that year. Overlapping with this story’s genesis was also a major European literary event: *Doctor Pascal* was being serialized all over the Continent, including Russia. From March through June 1893, *Doctor Pascal* was published concurrently in France and Russia, in the journals *La Revue Hebdomadaire (The Weekly Review)* and *Novosti i birzhevaia gazeta (The News and Stock Exchange Gazette)*, respectively. Very shortly

³⁹⁰ *Pis'ma* VI, 194.

³⁹¹ Chekhov mentions his friend’s suggestion in a letter to Suvorin of 24 August 1893, *Pis'ma* V, 229.

³⁹² See Chekhov’s letters to Suvorin from August-November 1893, as well as Chekhov’s letter to his brother Alexander of 22 November 1893, *Pis'ma* V, 228-231 and 248-249.

³⁹³ Toby Clyman has also noted the lack of criticism on this story, in her piece “Ambivalent Images of Women in Chekhov’s “Volodia bol’shoi i Volodia malen’kii.”

thereafter, four different editions of the novel appeared in Russian translation, including one from Suvorin's own press. This fact leads editors to believe that Chekhov most probably read a copy of Suvorin's edition, instead of following each installment of the novel as it appeared in serial form.³⁹⁴

Zola's novel follows the career of the middle-aged Dr. Pascal, as he attempts to discover a serum that will cure a given family lineage of their diseases, nervous conditions, and other problems due to heredity. While a novel in its own right, *Doctor Pascal* was also intended to provide resolution for all of the loose threads that still hung from the edges of the previous nineteen *Les Rougon-Macquart* installments. For precisely this reason, *Doctor Pascal* is considered by critics to be one of the less successful books in the cycle, as well as a bit of an anti-climactic finale to his grand project. The central theme of *Doctor Pascal* concerns how theories of evolution can be harnessed to move human beings forward. To propel his research, Dr. Pascal uses his own multi-generational clan as the test case. During his work he becomes involved in a quasi-incestuous relationship with his young niece Clotilde, whom he has cared for as a daughter since she was seven years of age. Their love survives the complications raised by their family, and even Pascal's own death: the novel ends with Clotilde nursing their newborn child, his hand raised skyward as a symbol of the future he holds for the Rougon-Macquart clan, "like a signal flag of life."³⁹⁵

Suvorin enjoyed the book without reservation,³⁹⁶ but Chekhov's assessment was more nuanced. While Chekhov found much to admire in *Doctor Pascal*, he objected to Zola's

³⁹⁴ For more details, see the *primechaniia* to the *Pis'ma V*, 492.

³⁹⁵ Emile Zola, *Doctor Pascal*, 292.

³⁹⁶ See Chekhov's letter to Suvorin of 24 August 1893. Suvorin's own letters to Chekhov, sadly with few exceptions, have not survived to the present day, *Pis'ma V*, 229.

treatment of female sexuality.³⁹⁷ As was the case previously with *Nana*, Chekhov's response to Zola's novel was a blend of the creative and the conversational, the public and the private. In his view, the young Clotilde was the best and most vibrant character, while Pascal himself was a bit contrived.³⁹⁸ In a letter from 11 November 1893, Chekhov further elaborates:

Паскаль сделан хорошо, но что-то нехорошее есть в нутре этого Паскаля. Когда у меня ночью бывает понос, то я кладу себе на живот кошку, которая греет меня, как компресс. Клотильда, или Ависага — это та же кошка, греющая царя Давида. Ее земной удел — греть старца и больше ничего. Эка завидная доля!<...>Она человек, личность, она молода и, естественно, хочет молодости, и надо быть, извините, французом, чтобы во имя чёрт знает чего

³⁹⁷ In his *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, Michael Finke claims it as a commonplace that Chekhov disagreed with Zola on matters concerning sexuality. Chekhov, according to Finke, said Zola “understands nothing and makes it all up by himself in his study,” 137. However, the evidence for such a commonplace is faulty and we can by no means take this conclusion for granted. (This is an anomaly in what is otherwise an excellently researched study.)

The memoirs Finke cites, written by Alexander Kuprin, do not actually support a narrowly sexological interpretation of Chekhov's comments. Reexamination of Kuprin's text shows that Chekhov was specifically speaking about local doctors treating patients in the countryside, a theme that is also present in *Doctor Pascal*:

Верил он [Чехов] в медицину твердо и крепко, и ничто не могло пошатнуть этой веры. Помню я, как однажды он рассердился, когда кто-то начал свысока третировать медицину по роману Золя "Доктор Паскаль".

- Золя ваш ничего не понимает и все выдумывает у себя в кабинете, - сказал он, волнуясь и покашливая. - Пусть бы он поехал и посмотрел, как работают наши земские врачи и что они делают для народа.

Chekhov held a firm and deep belief in medicine, and nothing could shake that faith. I remember how he once got angry when someone began haughtily to disparage medicine along the lines of Zola's novel *Doctor Pascal*.

-“Your Zola understood nothing and made it all up in his study,” he said, trembling and coughing. “Let him come and see how our local doctors work and what they do for the people.”

Memoirs quoted from A.I. Kuprin's “Pamiati Chekhova”, published in *A.P. Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, 533.

³⁹⁸ See Chekhov's letter to Suvorin of 24 August 1893, *Pis'ma V*, 229.

делать из нее грелку для седовласого купидона с жилистыми, петушьими ногами.<...>И что за дичь: разве половая способность есть признак настоящей жизни, здоровья? Разве человек только тот, кто употребляет?

Pascal is well done, but there is something ugly inside of him. When I have diarrhea at night, I put a cat on my stomach, which warms me like a compress. Clotilde is that cat. Her earthly lot is to warm an old man and nothing more. An enviable office! She is a person, an individual, she is young and naturally wants youth, and you'd have to be, forgive me, a Frenchman to, in the name of the devil knows what, make a hot water bottle out of her for a gray-haired cupid with stringy chicken legs...And, really, what nonsense: is sexual potency really the sign of an authentic life, of health? Are you a person only if you have sex?³⁹⁹

In his final salvo to Suvorin on the subject, Chekhov writes:

Что Клотильде самой нравилось спать с Паскалем...удивительного мало и, по человечности судя, это, быть может, даже и хорошо; но великому писателю и мыслителю радоваться тут нечему.

That Clotilde herself liked sleeping with Pascal...is not very surprising, and, judging by human nature, it is, perhaps, even good; but there is nothing here for a great writer and thinker to rejoice in.⁴⁰⁰

In these letters, there are two issues that merit further study. The first is that Chekhov takes particular issue with the idea that a successful human being is necessarily one who is able to procreate. This notion is one of the fundamental underpinnings of the theory of evolution, and one Zola embraces for its power to redeem the Rougon-Macquart clan and in turn, his entire cycle. Preliminarily speaking, what seems to disturb Chekhov is

³⁹⁹ *Pis'ma V*, 244.

⁴⁰⁰ *Pis'ma V*, 244.

the cost such an emphasis on sex has for Clotilde. (This theme will be explored in more detail below.) The second is Chekhov's charge that a great author and thinker has fallen short of his abilities, for he has used his artistic gifts to create what ultimately is a cruelly skewed power dynamic in execution of his final vision. So pressing were these concerns for Chekhov that he constructed his own tale in response. Through the lens of the correspondence quoted above, I will analyze "Volodia bol'shoi i Volodia malen'kii" as a Russian incarnation of *Doctor Pascal*, with the key difference being that Chekhov's version advances a counter-narrative that both charts a Russian Clotilde's rebellion against her status as merely a link in an evolutionary chain and exposes male authors' own literary "hereditary" bias.

To date, similarities between the two works have not been satisfactorily explored.⁴⁰¹ The root cause may be traced to the censor's red pencil, which excised major passages from the story at the time of its original publication, thus blinding Chekhov's contemporaries to the connections between *Doctor Pascal* and "Volodia bol'shoi i Volodia malen'kii", and, indeed, producing such a haphazard story that immediately critics panned it.⁴⁰² From there, the story has been relegated to the pile of Chekhov's less successful works.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ Russian scholar A.V. Kubasov has also posited links between "Volodia bol'shoi i Volodia malen'kii" and *Doctor Pascal*. His article draws connections between Chekhov and other writers in addition to Zola, as well as discusses many aspects of Zola's personal life. But it does not treat any one theme in particular depth, especially heredity, or include any of Chekhov's continuing dialogue with Zola prior to this story. See his "Dialog s Zolia i s "zolaistami" ("Volodia bol'shoi i Volodia malen'kii"), in *Proza A.P. Chekhova: iskusstvo stilizatsii*, 270-289.

⁴⁰² For more details on the uniformly negative reviews in the Russian press at the time, see the *primechaniia* to the story in *PSS VIII*, 486-488.

⁴⁰³ There is a pervasive tendency in Chekhov scholarship to focus on and apply new readings/treatments to ever the same group of stories ("The Black Monk," "The Lady with the Little Dog," "The Bride," "The House with the Mezzanine", etc.). The prevalence of this unofficial "Chekhov canon" effectively gives the cold shoulder to countless other works, thus impoverishing our understanding of his oeuvre in myriad ways.

Originally it was published by the journal *Russkie vedomosti* (*The Russian Gazette*) with such deep cuts that Chekhov charged the editors with butchering his work. According to a letter to his friend V.A. Gol'tsev, Chekhov understood the reason for the cuts to be the story's overt sexuality:

Ах, мой рассказ в «Русских ведомостях» постригли так усердно, что с волосами отрезали и голову. Целомудрие чисто детское, а трусость изумительная. Выкинь они несколько строк — куда бы ни шло, а то ведь отмахнули середку, отгрызли конец, и так облиял мой рассказ, что даже тошно.

Ну допустим, что он циничен, но тогда не следовало его вовсе печатать, или же было бы справедливо сказать хоть слово автору, или списаться с автором, тем более ведь, что рассказ не попал в рождеств<енский> номер, а был отложен на неопределенное время. Впрочем, всё сие неинтересно. Прости за скуку.

Bah, my story in the *Russian Gazette* was shorn so zealously that, along with the hair, they lopped off the head, too. Their chastity is purely infantile, their cowardice, astonishing. Had they eliminated only a few lines—that would have been of little matter, but no, they had to cast aside the middle and gnaw off the end, and my story has moulted to the point that it's nauseating.

Well, let's suppose that it is cynical, but then it would have been better not to print it at all, or at least to have a word with the author or correspond with him, especially so that the story wouldn't end up in the Christmas issue but saved for another time. However, all of this is uninteresting. Forgive me for boring you.⁴⁰⁴

Apart from this episode, we know comparatively little about the history of “Volodia bol'shoi i Volodia malen'kii”'s creation, other than that the bulk of it was most probably written in the Fall of 1893 and published in the Christmas issue of *Russkie vedomosti*. As

⁴⁰⁴ Letter to V.A. Gol'stev of 28 December 1893, *Pis'ma* V, 256.

Chekhov quite rightly points out in the letter quoted above, this was a most unfortunate time of year to do so.⁴⁰⁵ Significantly, this circumstance makes “Voldoia bol’shoi i Volodia malen’kii” one of the few stories Chekhov worked on while reading *Doctor Pascal*.⁴⁰⁶

In the story’s uncensored version, it is clear from the first pages of “Volodia bol’shoi i Volodia malen’kii” that Chekhov has taken *Doctor Pascal* as his model and imported Zola’s plot structure and thematics into the Russian countryside around Moscow.⁴⁰⁷ Chekhov’s story begins right after the marriage of the pretty and energetic twenty-three year old Sofia Lvovna to the grayhaired Volodia bol’shoi, who is thirty years her senior (compare to Pascal and Clotilde’s ages when they become lovers, which are 59 and 25, respectively). Volodia bol’shoi and Sofia are often in the company of Sofia’s childhood friend, Volodia malen’kii. Sofia’s husband is a life-long companion of both her father and Volodia malen’kii’s father; the three men served together during wartime and developed a fraternal bond so strong that Volodia bol’shoi watched Sofia grow up and for a long while, courted, and then discarded, Sofia’s aunt. Taken in total, all of these small details lead to the conclusion that our heroine has, in fact, married her *de facto* uncle. Also worthy of note is that these men who raised Sofia are either physicians themselves or compared to them: her

⁴⁰⁵ № 357, 28 December.

⁴⁰⁶ Chekhov’s biographer Donald Rayfield mentions that Chekhov made a start on it in late 1892, but does not give his reference. Anton *Chekhov: A Life*, p. 284. Ultimately, Gitovich’s *Letopis’ zhizni i tvorchestva A.P. Chekhova* would be the authority here and it is currently in the process of being updated, but the new editions to date only cover up to 1891. This leaves as the only comprehensive source of Chekhov’s timeline of work the inferior *Letopis’* published by Khudozhestvennaia literatura in the 1950s. In addition to having some inaccuracies, it is curiously silent on the entire exchange between Chekhov and Suvorin regarding Zola’s *Doctor Pascal*, as well as on the genesis of “Volodia bol’shoi i Volodia malen’kii.” The first mention in the *Letopis’* is the story’s publication date itself.

⁴⁰⁷ On another quasi-incestual note, Chekhov’s friends were wont to compare his pastoral life at Melikhovo with Masha to *Doctor Pascal*. See Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 296.

father and Volodia malen'kii's father were both army doctors, while Volodia bol'shoi is a womanizer about whom "the whole town talked, as though he made house calls to his admirers, as would a *doctor* to his patients"(emphasis mine).⁴⁰⁸

Beyond the love plot proper, Chekhov has, in this story of only fourteen pages, elaborated his own sprawling family saga in miniature. An echo of Zola's Rougon-Macquart family, Chekhov lays out his entire clan's past before us: how this clan came to be by springing forth from one common army division; how the experience of battle has intertwined them together and enrooted them to the same spot for the previous thirty years; and, how, with the marriage of one comrade-in-arms' daughter to another, their future is to be secured for successive generations. The Rougon-Macquart clan is also marked by a military past, for the Rougons "had risen from obscurity after Louis Napoleon's coup d'état" in 1851.⁴⁰⁹

A related feature that links this story with Zola is Chekhov's preoccupation with heredity and its consequences at every level. Chekhov's family, like the Rougon-Macquarts, passes down character traits that are both distinctive and problematic from generation to generation. Sofia's end is prefigured by her tragic aunt who, after being taken advantage of and then spurned by Volodia bol'shoi, is doomed to wander their provincial city aimlessly. The story thus mimics, again in miniature, Zola's technique of the Rougon-Macquart saga coiling back in on itself, like a serpent eating its own tail.⁴¹⁰ We see this heredity at work even between clan members who are not strictly related by blood. A circumstance

⁴⁰⁸ PSS VIII, 215.

⁴⁰⁹ Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life*, 653.

⁴¹⁰ Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life*, 652.

highlighted by their very names Volodia bol'shoi and Volodia malen'kii, the two male protagonists are but senior and junior incarnations of each other. They share good looks, an easy-going, disinterested temperament, and hobbies such as billiards and women. In light of this last similarity, perhaps the strongest evidence of all that one is but the carbon copy of the other is that no competition exists to divide them. Instead, they function as one sexual being, deriving pleasure from the same sexual conquests with no hint of jealousy. They are so completely in tune with each other that, while carousing together, "they often fell into competition with each other, but they never became jealous."⁴¹¹ Indeed, the same will turn out to be true of Sofia Lvovna: she is shared between the two Volodias at no cost to themselves. Moreover, while Sofia has been in love with Volodia malen'kii for some years, he does not show interest in her as a woman *until* she has become the wife of his double, Volodia bol'shoi.

After having laid the structural foundation from Zola, Chekhov then takes the plot in his own direction, examining head-on the very problems that he upbraided Zola for. In effect, Chekhov does the opposite of rejoicing that Sofia has married her Pascal. Two months after her marriage, we see Sofia face the conflict Chekhov outlined in the letter quoted above: she realizes she wants to become her own person, to transcend her proscribed fate of being an old man's young wife whose significance is concentrated in her ability, like Clotilde's, to coddle the older generation and produce the new. In essence, Chekhov is posing the question, what would happen if Clotilde confronted the problem in her situation and tried to build her own identity? Chekhov's heroine does what he would

⁴¹¹ PSS VIII, 216.

have Clotilde do, namely, admit the folly of her marriage, and the characature she has become, and the result is a very different tale indeed.

Sofia's identity crisis comes after an encounter with her old friend Olya who has since renounced worldly life to live in a monastery. While Sofia declares herself to be an unbeliever, she nevertheless during a scene of difficult self-exploration weighs the following questions:

Но ведь бог есть, наверное есть, и я непременно должна умереть, значит, надо рано или поздно подумать о душе, о вечной жизни, как Оля. Оля теперь спасена, она решила для себя все вопросы...но если бога нет? Тогда пропала ее жизнь...бог есть, смерть непременно придет, надо о душе подумать. Если Оля сию минуту увидит свою смерть, то ей не будет страшно. Она готова...Бог есть...да...Но неужели нет другого выхода, как только идти в монастырь? Ведь идти в монастырь—значит отречься от жизни, погубить ее...

But say that God exists, probably He does, and I surely must die, and so that means that sooner or later I need to think about my soul, about life eternal, like Olya. Olya is now saved, she decided every question for herself...but what if there is no God? Then her life is doomed...God exists, death will surely come, I need to think about my soul. If Olya were to face her death this very minute, it wouldn't be terrifying for her. She is ready...God exists...yes...But is there really no other option, except to go to a monastery? For going to a monastery means severing yourself from life, killing it...⁴¹²

Sofia's personal line of inquiry here is remarkable for the connection that it has with Chekhov's later thought on faith, wisdom, and man's position in the universe. Recorded in Chekhov's personal notebooks and further explored in his masterpiece "The Student" is the following quote on belief:

⁴¹² PSS VIII, 221.

между «есть бог» и «нет бога» лежит целое громадное поле, которое проходит с большим трудом истинный мудрец. Русский человек знает какую-либо одну из этих двух крайностей, середина же между ними не интересуется его; и потому обыкновенно он не знает ничего или очень мало.

between “God exists” and “there is no God” lies an entire giant field, which the genuine wiseman traverses with great difficulty. A Russian person knows only one of these two extremes, and the middle between them does not interest him; and therefore he usually knows nothing or very little.⁴¹³

We can draw many parallels between Sofia’s internal monologue and this quote from Chekhov’s notebooks. Chekhov has bequeathed his heroine the desire to be like the “istinnyi mudrets” and to seek, as she terms it, “a new life” in which she can “be a good, honest, clean person, not lie, and have a goal in life.”⁴¹⁴ In order to do so, she knows that she must find a “middle path” or “drugoi vykhod” between two poles: total devotion to God, as symbolized by giving her life over to a monastery on one side, and unbelief, on the other. Put another way, Sofia must traverse the field⁴¹⁵ to become this authentic self.

Her model for doing so can be found in “The Student,” which chronicles a particular Good Friday in the life of seminary student Ivan Velikopolsky. As he makes his way home through the winding paths of the Russian countryside, Ivan comes across two peasant women, Vasilisa and her daughter Lukeria. In halting words, he tells them his version of the

⁴¹³ PSS XVII, 224.

⁴¹⁴ PSS VIII, 224.

⁴¹⁵ For a different and thought-provoking take on the idea of the field in Chekhov’s work, see Steven Brett Shaklan’s article “Mapping the Artistic ‘Поле’: Chekhov’s Little Trilogy as a Style Guide for the Successful Story.”

story of the Twelve Gospels.⁴¹⁶ What is important about the way this motif develops in “The Student” is that the male character who is crossing this field is not doing it alone. He has the help of interlocutors, of discourse partners who take his feats and struggles seriously. For Ivan Velikopolsky, it is the two peasant women to whom he relates the story of the Passion of Christ. This two-way communication is precisely what guides Ivan along.⁴¹⁷ It might be argued that Sofia’s line of inquiry is not very sophisticated, that her language is even banal. That might be the case, but then, so is Ivan Velikopolsky’s. Indeed, one of the most moving aspects of “The Student” is how awkwardly the hero tells his story; his clumsiness is a testament to his sincerity.

Sofia knows that such a dialogue is necessary for her to find her way and attempts to ask the person she has cared for most since she was a child, Volodia malen’kii, to engage in these problems seriously with her. She puts various forms of her questions to him three times. To her first two entreaties about how to live a meaningful life without shutting one’s self up in a monastery, Volodia malen’kii answers in one word: *tararabumbia*.⁴¹⁸ This answer will be familiar to readers of Chekhov as Dr. Chebutykhin’s leitmotif from the play *The Three Sisters* (*Tri sestry*) and was at the time “the song understood all over Europe as

⁴¹⁶ “The Twelve Gospels” refers to a composite reading of twelve passages from the four Gospels that describe the Crucifixion. This reading is a part of services on Holy Friday in the Russian Orthodox Church. See Pevear and Volokhonsky, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, 473, note 4.

⁴¹⁷ As Michael Finke notes, in “The Student”, “the central characters are transformed as the result of mythopoetic storytelling,” *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, 161.

⁴¹⁸ PSS VIII, 224.

code for sexual intercourse."⁴¹⁹ Thus, Volodia malen'kii is blinded to her thirst for a new life by her erotic potential: when she asks him for guidance, all he sees is sexual conquest.⁴²⁰

The third question is the climax of both Sofia's appeal and Volodia's denial. In the scene that simultaneously consummates their relationship and paralyzes Sofia's growth permanently, she asks:

Володя, за что вы меня презираете? Вы говорите со мной каким-то особенным, простите, фатовским языком, как не говорят с друзьями и с порядочными женщинами. Вы имеете успех как ученый, вы любите науку, но отчего вы никогда не говорите со мной о науке? Отчего? Я недостойна?

Volodia, why do you hold me in such contempt? You are speaking to me in some kind of, forgive me, foppish language, as you don't speak with friends and respectable women. You are a successful scholar, you love science, but why do you never talk to me about it? Why? Am I unworthy?⁴²¹

⁴¹⁹ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 122.

⁴²⁰ In fact, that their relationship will take an ominous sexual turn is encoded in the story. During their childhood, Sofia and Volodia malen'kii lived under the same roof but in separate apartments; thus they had to navigate various twists and turns through hallways to find each other to play, dance, and study French together. This mirrors the living situation of Chekhov's sometime lovers, sometime friends Tania Shchepkina-Kupernik and Lidia Iavorskaya. Their own clandestine yet turbulent relationship was aided by the corridors that linked the Hotel Madrid (where Tatiana lived) to the Hotel Louvre (where Lidia lived). This was known to intimate acquaintance as "the catacombs." Among other activities, the two women were fond of games, dancing and writing poetry to each other, often in French. Their love reached a cataclysm in the fall of 1893, and by February 1894, they were asked by a hotel management weary of their notorious scenes to move elsewhere. They left for Naples shortly thereafter to live openly together.

Another connection to Zola here is that Chekhov told Iavorskaia, at best unflatteringly, that she should play the lead in Zola's stage adaptation of his novel *Thérèse Raquin*. See Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 301-309; 334.

⁴²¹ PSS VIII, 223.

Just as crucial as the basic fact that Volodia malen'kii refuses to relate seriously to Sofia is *how* he refuses her. He responds to this third question with the following sarcastic rejoinder:

Отчего это вам так вдруг науки захотелось? А, может, хотите конституции? Или, может, севрюжины с хреном?

Why all of the sudden do you want to study science? Maybe, you would like constitutions? Or maybe sturgeon with horseradish?⁴²²

This quote is a variation on lines from satirist Saltykov-Shchedrin, who used them in three of his stories in the 1870s: "A Provincial's Diary in Petersburg," "The Gentlemen from Tashkent," and "Cultured People."⁴²³ The original reads,

Не знал, чего ему хотелось: не то конституций, не то севрюжины с хреном.

He didn't know what he wanted: now constitutions, now sturgeon with horseradish.⁴²⁴

This phrase was used by Saltykov-Shchedrin to characterize, in a mocking tone, people who pretended to be more educated and enlightened than they actually were. According to the *Russian Encyclopedic Dictionary of Popular Sayings and Expressions*, it can also be used "ironically about the behavior of a person who cannot get a handle on his own desires, who does not know what he wants (which fact causes others around him to suffer)."⁴²⁵ Thus, this phrase utterly dismisses Sofia and casts her pleas as frivolous and unworthwhile.

⁴²² PSS VIII, 224.

⁴²³ The titles in Russian are: "Дневник провинциала в Петербурге," "Господа Ташкентцы," and "Культурные люди."

⁴²⁴ PSS VIII, 488.

⁴²⁵ Vadim Serov, *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' krylatikh slov i vyrazhenii*. Web resource. No pagination. The original Russian reads as follows: "иронически о поведении человека, который не может разобраться в своих желаниях, не знает, чего хочет (отчего страдают люди, его окружающие)."

This quote is not accidental on Chekhov's part, for Volodia malen'kii is a doctoral student in literature, who, as we find out earlier in the story, shares the secrets of his dissertation only with Volodia bol'shoi. As we see here, he most pointedly does *not* share them with Sofia. Instead, he uses this training to mock her aspirations and smash her hopes for a new life: to silence further philosophizing, he begins to kiss her. After their encounter is over half an hour later and Volodia has, according to the narrator, "gotten what he needed," Sofia's former nuanced line of inquiry is reduced to only three words, "Where? Today? When?"⁴²⁶ She does not receive a satisfactory reply to any of these questions. After a week, Volodia has gotten bored and moves on to someone new, and the results of his refusing to enter into meaningful dialogue with her are clear: Sofia now spends her days riding around the countryside in the carriage or in the troika, making daily visits to Olya. In other words, Chekhov leaves us with the image of Sofia circling aimlessly in the field, located geographically between her home and Olya's monastery.

The story is also significant in the broader context of Chekhov's writing. There are some striking resemblances between Chekhov's earlier work, *Doctor Pascal*, and the abovementioned scenes in "Volodia bol'shoi i Volodia malen'kii." As Michael Finke points out,

Dr. Pascal's niece, who eventually becomes his mistress, incarnates the fantasy addressee of Chekhov's early projected "History of Sexual Dominance"⁴²⁷ when she tells her uncle: "I want to thank you...Master, you and you alone have made me what I am. As you have explained to me, so clearly and so often, you have corrected my hereditary tendencies."⁴²⁸

⁴²⁶ PSS VIII, 224.

⁴²⁷ For an outline of his thesis project, see Chapter 1 of this study.

⁴²⁸ Donald Rayfield, *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*, 137.

Extending this insight, we may say that Chekhov took *Doctor Pascal* as an invitation to revisit his undergraduate thesis project in “Volodia bol’shoi i Volodia malen’kii.” The character of Sofia Lvovna, too, strives to correct her frivolous *institutka*⁴²⁹ background and meet the men in her life on a more equal plane. In contrast to Zola, however, Chekhov’s heroine does not receive a cure-all from a more highly evolved masculine figure. Rather, we witness Sofia realize the importance of self-development on her own initiative.

How Sofia goes about this process is worthy of further study. As we saw in Chapter 1, one of the key themes of Chekhov’s undergraduate thesis project is how to achieve equality in Nature, particularly between men and women. Chekhov wrote, the main task is to “help Nature as Nature helps man, creating...thinkers that approach the perfection of the species.”⁴³⁰ However, Chekhov’s letter does not develop what this idea of “helping Nature” would actually entail. In this story, and most sharply in the character of Sofia Lvovna, we see something of what this equality might look like. More particularly here, self-evolution takes the form of navigating increasingly higher levels of language. When Sofia attempts to engage Volodia malen’kii, she focuses on language: she specifically wants to learn how to discuss scholarly topics that demand greater linguistic complexity and takes precisely his “foppish language [in which] you don’t speak with friends and respectable women” to be a

⁴²⁹ “Institutka” was a label given to young women in nineteenth-century Russia who went away to “finishing schools” where they learned such skills as foreign languages, dancing, music, etc. This is in contrast to “kursistka”, a young woman who enrolled in higher-level college courses, such as the Bestuzhev courses in St. Petersburg.

⁴³⁰*Pis'ma I*, 65.

sign of the highest scorn.⁴³¹ He is literally looking down on her from the vantage point of his more developed language; unlike the eager-to-help persona of Chekhov's youthful letter to his brother Alexander, Volodia malen'kii is not willing to surrender his superiority in favor of Sofia's growth.

The end of the story makes clear the consequences that follow from such a denial of linguistic exploration: personal development is halted. After Volodia abandons her, Sofia's varied sources of language have dried up, and she is left with nothing but the same conversations *ad infinitum*. Sofia daily recounts her problems to Olya, and Olya responds, "mechanically, in the tone of a memorized lesson she told her that everything would be fine, that it all would pass and God would forgive."⁴³²

It is important to note, however, that Chekhov gives the impression that Volodia malen'kii has not acted alone. Rather, his at once flippant and cruel behavior towards Sofia is itself the product of a kind of heredity. Members of the Volodias' acquaintance tell the story of their visit to Volodia malen'kii at his student lodgings near the university in Moscow. Upon knocking at his door, they would always hear a commotion, followed by his footsteps and a half-whisper in French, "I am sorry, but I am not alone"; the implication being that Volodia malen'kii was always with some woman or other in his room.⁴³³ When Volodia bol'shoi learns of this, he consecrates Volodia malen'kii as the next true Don Juan:

Володя большой приходил от него в восторг и благославлял его на дальнейшее, как Державин Пушкина, и, по-видимому, любил его.

⁴³¹ PSS VIII, 223.

⁴³² PSS VIII, 225.

⁴³³ PSS VIII, 216.

Volodia bol'shoi walked up to him in ecstasy and blessed his future, as did Derzhavin Pushkin, and, it appeared, loved him.⁴³⁴

Set against this background, Volodia malen'kii has taken Volodia bol'shoi's lead, just as the abovementioned scene predicts he would: he has dropped Sofia and found someone else, the way Volodia bol'shoi dropped her aunt.

Chekhov's allusion to the Russian literary tradition here transports us from the immediate world of the story onto intersecting biographical and metaliterary planes. I argue that Chekhov is using Zola's avowed focus on *biological* heredity as a jumping off point to discuss his own complicated relationship to *literary* heredity. The literary reference Chekhov employs is ostensibly to Pushkin's famous recitation during his graduation from the Lycée in Tsarskoe selo on 15 January 1815, at which Derzhavin was present. It has become almost legend that, after hearing the fifteen-year-old Pushkin perform his "Recollections in Tsarskoe selo," the aged poet proclaimed the young man the future of Russian verse.⁴³⁵

Even on the surface, such a comparison is odd and creates a kind of disharmony in the text: Chekhov is not showing the usual reverence to the greatest Russian poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that this anecdote normally evinces by yoking them together with two insignificant, vulgar and cruel provincials, one of whom will seemingly never finish his literature dissertation. The question then becomes: why does Chekhov make such a reference at all? If we investigate further, however, we find that the direct

⁴³⁴ PSS VIII, 216.

⁴³⁵ For a recent detailed account of this famous event, see T.J. Binyon, *Pushkin, A Biography*, 33-35.

citation of Derzhavin and Pushkin is at once a type of self-camouflage and a self-implication. Although almost all of Chekhov's acquaintance and readership would have been unaware at the time, the particular circumstances of the scene with the Volodias concern Chekhov himself, and amount to an inversion of what is normally construed as a sacred moment in Russian cultural mythology: the passing down of the literary torch from "father" to "son."

When he was in his early twenties, Chekhov had a similar encounter of his own in which he, as a beginning writer, was named the successor to a senior member of the literary tradition, Nikolai Leskov. Unlike Pushkin receiving Derzhavin's mantle in the hallowed halls of the Lycée, however, Chekhov's rite of passage transpired under much less august circumstances. In a letter to his brother Alexander, Chekhov reported having the following exchange with Leskov:

- «Знаешь, кто я такой?»
 — «Знаю».
 — «Нет, не знаешь.. Я мистик...»
 — «И это знаю...»
 Тарацит на меня свои старческие глаза и пророчествует: — «Ты умрешь раньше своего брата».
 —«Может быть».
 — «Помазую тебя елеем, как Самуил помазал Давида... Пиши».
- Do you know who I am?
 —I do.
 —No, you don't. I am a mystic.
 —I know that too.
 And then he stared at me with his aged eyes and prophesied, "You will die before your brother."
 —Maybe.
 —I will anoint you with oil, like Samuel anointed David...Write.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁶ Letter dates from between 15 and 28 October 1883. *Pis'ma* 1, 88.

What is crucial to my analysis here is that this bonding ceremony took place while the two men were traveling home, inebriated, after a night of carousing with call girls in the Salon de Variétés in Moscow's famed red-light district, Sobolev Lane. This district was conveniently located near cheap lodgings for students at Moscow State University, where Chekhov himself lived while attending MGU's medical school. The scene in "Volodia bol'shoi i Volodia malen'kii," then, is much more closely related to Chekhov's own youthful encounter than it is to Pushkin's. Instead of Derzhavin and Pushkin, the text actually interrogates the legacy that Leskov passed down to Chekhov. Lurking beneath the Volodias' story we find Chekhov's own. In effect, Chekhov is making ironic use of the way in which his own professional and sexual identities have been problematically intertwined from the moment of his induction into major Russian letters. This leads us to the insight that, against a background of biological heredity, which reached a culmination for Zola in *Doctor Pascal*, Chekhov is also probing issues of literary heredity, traits that are passed down from established writers to their offspring. As scholar Daniel Pick has convincingly argued, Dr. Pascal's major flaw is that he puts himself beyond heredity's grasp.⁴³⁷ As we see here, Chekhov, instead of falling into this trap, unmasks it. If celebrated writers come of age in brothels, Chekhov appears to be wryly asking, is it any wonder that their stories also bear the marks of sex inequality? Should we then be surprised when, for Zola's vision of evolutionary progress to triumph over problems of heredity, the Clotildes must be willing to accept their parts in the plan that retard their own development?

⁴³⁷ See Pick's illuminating study, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918*, especially Chapter 3, "Zola's Prognosis."

It would seem then, that Chekhov is pointing the finger at practitioners of literature, himself not excluded, as being part of the problem in handing down and encoding certain ways of writing women. This brings us back to the problem Chekhov outlined previously in regard to *Doctor Pascal*, when he describes Clotilde as a vibrant character whom Zola misunderstands and even misuses. A subtle critique of Zola's thought, in "Volodia bolshoi i Volodia malen'kii" Chekhov points up the contradiction between setting out to write a great work that takes as its goal the elimination of hereditary problems and the securing of **human** happiness, while at the same time, recycling the very situations which obstruct this goal.

Conclusion: Sex and the Classics

As scholar A.P. Chudakov observes in a watershed article from 1991 entitled "Neprilichnye slova i oblik klassika," a sanitized portrait of Chekhov prevailed after his early death. Chudakov notes that "throughout both readers' minds and literary biographies of Chekhov, for many decades wandered the image of an uptight, modest gentleman with a cane who wouldn't allow himself one dirty word, rather Lenten and sickly, who was little interested in women."⁴³⁸ In an effort to prove this image wrong, Chudakov brought to light full passages from several of Chekhov's letters which had been previously censored due to their explicit sexual content. Of prime importance for the present study is that one of the most significant letters concerned the depiction of sexuality in Zola. On 24 or 25 November 1888, Chekhov wrote to Suvorin:

⁴³⁸ A. Chudakov, "Neprilichnye slova' i oblik klassika," 54.

<Распутных женщин я видывал и сам грешил многократно; но Зола и той даме, которая говорила Вам «хлоп – и готово» я не верю. Распутные люди и писатели любят выдавать себя гастрономами и тонкими знатоками блуда; они смелы, решительны, находчивы, употребляют по 33 способам, чуть ли не на лезвии ножа, но все это только на словах; на деле же употребляют кухарок и ходят в рублевые дома терпимости. Все писатели врут. Употребить даму в городе не так легко, как они пишут...> Писатели должны быть подозрительны ко всем рассказням и любовным эпопеям. Если Зола <сам употреблял на столах, под столами, на заборах, в собачьих будках, в дилижансах, или своими глазами видел, как употребляют, то верьте его романам, если же он> писал на основании слухов и приятельских рассказов, то поступал опрометчиво и неосторожно.

<I have seen wanton women and have sinned myself many times; but Zola and that lady who said to you, "Wham-bam," I don't believe. Wanton people and writers love to pass themselves off as connoisseurs and shrewd judges of smut; they are brave, decisive, resourceful, they screw 33 different ways, everything except on the edge of a knife, but all of this is only words; in real life they screw cooks and visit one-ruble brothels. All writers lie. To screw a woman in the city is not as easy as they write...> Writers should be suspicious towards all cock and bull stories and romantic sagas. If Zola <himself screwed on tables, under tables, on fences, in dog houses, in carriages, or saw others doing so with his very own eyes, then believe his novels, but if he> was writing on the basis of rumors and friends' stories, then he acted rashly and carelessly.⁴³⁹

The censored portion undoubtedly holds considerable entertainment value. But more than this, it demonstrates that Chekhov was drawn to Zola not only because of his provocative language, but because he himself was fascinated by the problem of portraying sex in realist prose. As Chudakov points out, "now, when this side is more and more touched upon in literature, it is full of deep interest for the consideration of an author of such caliber" as Chekhov.⁴⁴⁰ While Chudakov himself never published specifically on Chekhov's literary

⁴³⁹ Letter quoted from A. Chudakov, "Neprilichnye slova' i oblik klassika," 55-56. The symbols < and > indicate previously excised material.

⁴⁴⁰ A. Chudakov, "Neprilichnye slova' i oblik klassika," 55.

engagement with Zola—he died a few years later in 1997—his article laid the groundwork for future study.

Chapter 3: Tolstoyan Infection

--*What is that you're doing?, an acquaintance asked Chekhov.*
 --*Correcting a story of Tolstoy's.*
I want to show how I would have written it...
 From the memoirs of N.M. Ezhov⁴⁴¹

As soon as you recall Tolstoy's Anna Karenina,
all of those Turgenev heroines with their seductive shoulders
fly to the devil.
 Letter from Chekhov to A.S. Suvorin of 24 February 1893⁴⁴²

What impact did *Anna Karenina* have on Chekhov? According to the memoirs of writer Ivan Bunin (1870-1953), Chekhov had the following reaction to Tolstoy and his work:

- Боюсь только Толстого. Ведь подумайте, ведь это он написал, что Анна сама чувствовала, видела, как у нее блестят глаза в темноте! - Серьезно, я его боюсь, - говорит он, смеясь и как бы радуясь этой боязни.

-“I am afraid only of Tolstoy. Just think, it was he who described how Anna could feel and see her own eyes glistening in the dark! Seriously, I am afraid of him,” he said, laughing, as if rejoicing in his fear.⁴⁴³

Chekhov refers here to the description of Russian literature's most famous heroine from the end of Part II, Chapter IX of *Anna Karenina*, where Tolstoy tells us how Anna senses her own eyes lighting up at the thought of her lover while she lies in bed alongside her snoring husband. While Chekhov's comments here are brief, they nonetheless betray an intriguing

⁴⁴¹ Reproduced in V.Ia. Lakshin, *Tolstoi i Chekhov*, 2nd ed, 319. Originally printed in N.M. Ezhov, “Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (Opyt kharakteristiki),” *Istoricheskii vestnik*, 1909 August, VIII, 515.

⁴⁴² *Pis'ma V*, 174.

⁴⁴³ Ivan Bunin, “Chekhov,” in *A.P. Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, 491.

creative anxiety: his ambivalent relationship, alternating between attraction and aversion, towards Tolstoy's portrayal of female sexuality.

While Chekhov did not meet Tolstoy in person until August of 1895—their first significant conversation was quite literally in the flesh, as it took place while they swam together naked at Tolstoy's estate at Yasnaya Polyana⁴⁴⁴—their written dialogue had already begun. As early as 1888, Chekhov alluded to the impact that Tolstoy had on his work.⁴⁴⁵ In a well-known letter to A.S. Suvorin from 27 October of that year, Chekhov professes to hold *Anna Karenina* in the highest esteem:

Я иногда проповедую ересь, но до абсолютного отрицания вопросов в искусстве еще не доходил ни разу...Художник наблюдает, выбирает, догадывается, компокует — уж одни эти действия предполагают в своем начале вопрос; если с самого начала не задал себе вопроса, то не о чем догадываться и нечего выбирать...Требуя от художника сознательного отношения к работе, Вы правы, но Вы смешиваете два понятия: решение вопроса и правильная постановка вопроса. Только второе обязательно для художника. В «Анне Карениной» и в «Онегине» не решен ни один вопрос, но они Вас вполне удовлетворяют, потому только, что все вопросы поставлены в них правильно. Суд обязан ставить правильно вопросы, а решают пусть присяжные, каждый на свой вкус.

I sometimes preach heresies, but I haven't once gone so far as to deny that problematic questions have a place in art. The artist observes,

⁴⁴⁴ See the chapter "Tolstoyan Interlude" from Sophie Laffitte's biography *Chekhov: 1860-1904*, 189-190.

Love was also in the air during this visit. According to biographer Rosamund Bartlett, Chekhov stole the heart of Tolstoy's daughter Tanya. See Rosamund Bartlett's biography *Tolstoy: A Russian Life*, 370. She cites as her source biographical materials found in L.D. Opol'skaya, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi: materialy k biografii s 1892 po 1899 god*, 252.

⁴⁴⁵ For his part, Tolstoy famously sorted the best, from his point of view, of Chekhov's stories into two tiers, the first place and the second. In the first tier were the following tales: 1) "Detvora" 2) "Khoristka" 3) "Drama" 4) "Doma" 5) "Toska" 6) "Beglets" 7) "V sude" 8) "Van'ka" 9) "Damy" 10) "Zloumyshlennik" 11) "Mal'chiki" 12) "Temnota" 13) "Spat' khochetsia" 14) "Supruga" 15) "Dushechka." The following stories occupied the second: 1) "Bezzakonie" 2) "Gore" 3) "Ved'ma" 4) "Verochka" 5) "Na chuzhbine" 6) "Kukharka zhenitsia" 7) "Kanitel" 8) "Perepolokh" 9) "Nu, publika!" 10) "Maska" 11) "Zhenskoe schast'e" 12) "Nervy" 13) "Svad'ba" 14) "Bezzashchitnoe sushchestvo" 15) "Baby." This information was passed along to Chekhov by Tolstoy's son, I.L. Tolstoy, in a letter of 25 May 1903. Quoted in the *PSS* III, 537.

selects, guesses and synthesizes. The very fact of these actions presupposes a question; if he hadn't asked himself a question at the start, he would have nothing to guess about and nothing to select...You are right to demand that an author take conscious stock of what he is doing, but you are confusing two concepts: answering the questions and formulating them correctly. Only the latter is required of an author. There's not a single question answered in *Anna Karenina* or *Eugene Onegin*, but they are still fully satisfying works because the questions they raise are all formulated correctly. It is the duty of the court to formulate the questions correctly, but it is up to each member of the jury to answer them according to his own preference.⁴⁴⁶

What is of chief interest to the present chapter is that this letter—and its highly publicized remark that Chekhov found *Anna Karenina* “fully satisfying”—seem to have made scholars wary of exploring the notion that Chekhov could have questioned, let alone polemicized with, Tolstoy's masterpiece. This sentiment is especially true for the late 1880s, when Chekhov is commonly considered to have been under “Tolstoyan hypnosis.” During this period, by Chekhov's own admission, “Tolstoy's philosophy deeply touched and obsessed [him] for 6-7 years.”⁴⁴⁷ Stories from these years are thought to suffer especially from Tolstoy's influence. This line of inquiry began with A.B. Derman's groundbreaking study, *Tvorcheskii portret Chekhova (A Creative Portrait of Chekhov, 1929)*. Derman argues that such stories as “The Cossack” (“Kazak”) and “The Beggar” (“Nishchii”) exemplify the spell Tolstoy had over Chekhov, for they straightforwardly preach simple morals such as embracing the land and helping the poor. In “The Cossack,” for example, a young peasant Maxim revels in his beautiful and simple country life, but it all goes to ruin when he refuses to help a poor Cossack beggar he meets on the road on Easter Sunday.⁴⁴⁸ “The Beggar”

⁴⁴⁶ *Pis'ma* III, 45-46.

⁴⁴⁷ From Chekhov's letter to A.S. Suvorin of 27 March 1894, *Pis'ma* V, 283-284.

⁴⁴⁸ Even Ivan Chekhov wrote to Anton himself that the story “had too much of the Tolstoyan” about it. Quoted in the *primechaniia* to the Chekhov PSS VI, 657.

follows a lawyer's efforts to rehabilitate a poor homeless drunkard, and takes its theme from Tolstoy's book *And What Then Must We Do?*,⁴⁴⁹ about the deplorable poverty conditions facing Russia's urban areas. Derman's work was expanded in the Russian/Soviet context by scholars V.B. Kataev and A.S. Melkova. Anglo-American Slavists have also elaborated on this theme.⁴⁵⁰ For example, Donald Rayfield notes that Chekhov's 1886 story "The Boredom of Life" ("Skuka zhizni"), about an old woman who is inspired to redeem herself in the face of imminent death, elaborates Tolstoy's image of "life as a purgatory in which no one has a right to individual happiness," while the hero of "The Nightmare" ("Koshmar") goes to the people in order to improve conditions for the local population.⁴⁵¹ After viewing their hardships first-hand, he arrives at a Levineqsue wonder at the value of his own life. Another major source of Tolstoyan fascination for Chekhov during this period was non-resistance to evil. As Thomas Winner explains, in "The Meeting" and in *The Wood Demon (Leshii)*,

Chekhov considers the Tolstoyan view that vice can be conquered by kindness, humbleness, and non-resistance. In "The Meeting" a thief is regenerated because his victim refuses to report him...In the play *The Wood Demon*, however, the general moralistic tone, which is so little characteristic of Chekhov, seems to be meant in a serious vein.⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁹ This observation is noted in the *primechaniia* to the Chekhov PSS VI, 629.

⁴⁵⁰ In Derman's study, see especially Chapter VII, "Nravstvennaia distsiplina-Tolstovstvo," and Chapter VIII, "Bor'ba s disgarmoniei khudozhestvennym tvorchestvom."

The conversation about such stories is continued in the following: V.B. Kataev, *Literaturnye sviazi Chekhova*, 54; A.S. Melkova, "Literaturnaia polemika serediny 1880-kh godov i 'tolstovskie' rasskazy Chekhova," in *Chekhov i ego vremia*, 301; Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 61.

⁴⁵¹ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 38.

⁴⁵² Thomas Winner, "Chekhov's Ward No. 6 and Tolstoyan Ethics," 322.

But by the mid-1890s, Chekhov had declared that “the Tolstoy ship had sailed, he no longer occupied my soul, he had gone away, saying, ‘Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.’ I no longer have a lodger.”⁴⁵³ Chekhov’s ultimate break with Tolstoyanism, particularly with his credo of non-resistance to evil, manifested in such weighty stories from the late 1880s and 1890s as “A Boring Story” (“Skuchnaia istoriia”), “Ward Number 6” (“Palata No. 6”), and “Peasants” (“Muzhiki”) is well documented. All of the major Chekhov biographies elaborate this theme,⁴⁵⁴ as does the research of such Anglo-American scholars as Beverly Hahn, Logan Speirs, and Thomas Winner, and Soviet scholars V.Ia. Lakshin and A.P. Chudakov, among others.⁴⁵⁵

The first major countertale in this series, “A Boring Story” was published in 1889 and polemicizes with Tolstoy’s view of the dying process as illustrated in his famous novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Tolstoy’s story follows the titular hero Ivan Ilyich, a career bureaucrat, as he falls ill and comes to terms with his own death. In Tolstoy’s narrative, only when a person is dying can he truly understand what it means to live a pure and noble life. In this way, Tolstoy reaffirms that there is only hope in death, for we are released from an earthly sinful life into, as writer Vladimir Nabokov explains, “God’s living light...Life with a capital L.”⁴⁵⁶ This realization leads us to understand that Tolstoy’s hero has conquered

⁴⁵³ From Chekhov’s letter to A.S. Suvorin of 27 March 1894, *Pis’ma V*, 283-284.

⁴⁵⁴ These include *Anton Chekhov: A Biographical and Critical Study* and *A New Life of Anton Chekhov* by Ronald Hingley, *Chekhov: 1860-1904* by Sophie Laffitte, and *Anton Chekhov: A Life* by Donald Rayfield.

⁴⁵⁵ See, for example, Beverly Hahn, *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Stories and Plays*; Logan Speirs, *Tolstoy and Chekhov*; Thomas Winner, “Chekhov’s Ward No. 6 and Tolstoyan Ethics,” *SEEJ* (3.4), 1959; A.P. Chudakov, “‘Tolstovskii epizod’ v poetike Chekhova,” in *Chekhov i Lev Tolstoy*, 167-198; V.Ia. Lakshin, *Tolstoi i Chekhov*, especially 15-41.

⁴⁵⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 237.

the Great Destroyer: death itself has disappeared at the novella's end, when Ivan "sought his old habitual fear of death and could not find it. Where was it? What death? There was no more fear because there was no more death."⁴⁵⁷ As an experienced medical doctor with tuberculosis, however, Chekhov was unable to see anything uplifting or victorious in a long, cruel and protracted illness. He takes Tolstoy's template for the decline of a middle-aged man after a distinguished career in his "A Boring Story." The family structures in both stories are hauntingly similar, comprised of a husband and wife who have lost interest in each other, a son, and a daughter named Liza who has just come out into society. But instead of chronicling a triumph over death, Chekhov focuses on his hero Nikolai Stepanych's mounting despair as he realizes that his family and medical career somehow have no meaning for him, and it is too late to repair any of his personal relationships, especially that with the person who had been closest to him, his ward, a young woman named Katya. This point is painfully emphasized by the story's end, in the final scene when Nikolai Stepanych and Katya meet in Kharkov. They both realize that Nikolai Stepanych will soon die and to assuage his fear of death, he longs to ask if she will at least be at his funeral to mourn his passing. But he is unable to speak, as Katya turns away from him for the last time and does not look back. Nikolai Stepanych's last words of "farewell, my treasure" (Прощай, мое сокровище!) echo only inside his head.⁴⁵⁸ In place of Tolstoyan victory we have abandonment and emptiness.

⁴⁵⁷ Lev Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 53.

⁴⁵⁸ PSS VII, 310.

Published in 1892, "Ward Number 6" has been analyzed as Chekhov's own personal laboratory, in the form of a derelict country mental hospital, constructed in order to disprove Tolstoy's pet theory of the moral superiority of non-resistance to evil. In Winner's view, this story constitutes "the most developed and critical handling of Tolstoyan issues and the most direct attack on the crucial Tolstoyan doctrine on non-resistance."⁴⁵⁹ In the story we see a country doctor, Andrei Ragin, espouse his allegiance to the philosophy of stoicism or the belief that all human suffering is equal, inevitable, and necessary to life, and therefore should not be alleviated. Instead, people should look inside themselves, and only inside themselves, for happiness and relief. Ragin professes his views as having their origins in the stoic teachings of Marcus Aurelius, but as Winner notes, surely another source of inspiration is Tolstoy's doctrine.⁴⁶⁰ The only opposition to this idea comes from one of Ragin's own mental patients, Ivan Gromov. Gromov, having been intimately acquainted with acute pain and suffering for most of his life, argues passionately against his physician's beliefs. An unlikely friendship thus develops between the two men. The tragic irony of the story lies in the fact that Ragin becomes a victim of his own philosophy: his friendship with Gromov, who is considered crazy by the citizens and other doctors of the town, causes Ragin to be declared insane as well. Ragin is then forcibly committed to the hell that is psychiatric Ward No. 6. After receiving a savage beating at the hands of the guard, Ragin's "head ached, his ears rung, and his whole body felt sick;" shortly thereafter, he dies of apoplexy.⁴⁶¹ In the final days of his life, Ragin comes to see that his, and Tolstoy's,

⁴⁵⁹ Thomas Winner, "Chekhov's Ward No. 6 and Tolstoyan Ethics," 325.

⁴⁶⁰ Thomas Winner, "Chekhov's Ward No. 6 and Tolstoyan Ethics," 329.

⁴⁶¹ PSS VIII, 125.

philosophy is actually inhumane and immoral—for who has the resources to comfort themselves when they are suffering from pain and abuse?—but the realization comes too late.

Finally, the story “Peasants,” published in 1897, is a prime example of Chekhov’s refusal, in contradistinction to Tolstoy, to be astounded by “peasant virtues.”⁴⁶² Tolstoy proselytized the simple life that the Russian peasants led and urged other classes of Russian society to follow suit, to, in Chekhov’s sardonic paraphrase, “wear bark shoes and sleep on the stove with the laborer.”⁴⁶³ In order to strip bare the illusions from Tolstoy’s idealized notion of peasant life, Chekhov has constructed a story that follows a family of city dwellers as they retrench to a remote rural village. The father, Nikolai Chikil’deev, has taken ill and can no longer work as a waiter at the Slavyansky Bazaar hotel in Moscow. He, along with his wife Olga and daughter Sasha, must move back to his childhood village of Zhukovo. In other words, they literally do leave civilization and go sleep on the same stove with countless of their peasant relatives. In Zhukovo, the Chikil’deevs are not greeted by an hospitable environment:

Приехал он в свое Жуково под вечер. В воспоминаниях детства родное гнездо представлялось ему светлым, уютным, удобным, теперь же, войдя в избу, он даже испугался: так было темно, тесно и нечисто. Приехавшие с ним жена Ольга и дочь Саша с недоумением поглядывали на большую неопрятную печь, занимавшую чуть ли не пол-избы, темную от копоти и мух. Сколько мух!

He arrived at his Zhukovo towards evening. In his memories of childhood he had pictured his home nest as bright, cosy and comfortable. But now, upon

⁴⁶² From Chekhov’s letter to A.S. Suvorin of 27 March 1894, *Pis’ma V*, 283-284.

⁴⁶³ From Chekhov’s letter to A.S. Suvorin of 27 March 1894, *Pis’ma V*, 283-284.

entering the hut, he was even frightened: it was so dark, crowded and unclean. His wife Olga and his daughter Sasha, who had come with him, kept looking in bewilderment at the big untidy stove, which took up almost half the hut and was black with soot and flies. So many flies!⁴⁶⁴

The story is divided into nine parts, perhaps to indicate the nine circles of rural hell. As Nikolai, Olga and Sasha discover, peasant life is anything but an idyll: they witness husbands beating their wives in the face, the food is moldy and the playground of cockroaches, and what worldly goods the family does possess are seized to pay back taxes. Very few peasants can read or write; almost all bicker and complain constantly. And while Chekhov does not allow us to forget their humanity—he emphasizes that, “yet, they were human beings, they suffered and wept like human beings, and there was nothing in their lives for which one could not find excuse”⁴⁶⁵—he is also anxious we understand that peasant life is not the easy, joyful paradise that Tolstoy championed. The story’s final image drives this point home: Olga and Sasha must walk all the way from the village back to Moscow to find work, but all they have to wear on their feet are the bark shoes which Chekhov ridiculed in his letter.

By comparison with the above line of inquiry, Chekhov’s dialogue with Tolstoy’s views on sex and sexuality remains underdeveloped. A valuable preliminary work in this area has been written by Caryl Emerson. In her article “Chekhov and the Annas,” Emerson discusses Chekhov’s use of what she terms the “Anna Plot”—recombinations of *Anna Karenina*’s couples and events, such as trains, balls, and the synecdochal falling out of love

⁴⁶⁴ PSS IX, 281.

⁴⁶⁵ PSS IX, 311.

with lovers' body parts—in his short stories.⁴⁶⁶ As she elaborates, “Chekhov could use *Anna Karenina* in this way because Tolstoy’s famous novel, by the 1880s, had become an ‘infidelity stereotype’; the briefest invocation of its plot, via easily recognized motifs (black curls, squinting eyes, prominent ears, trains), could set the stage for an estrangement or a re-emphasis of that plot.”⁴⁶⁷ Emerson’s analysis, which focuses on depictions of adultery in Chekhov’s later stories featuring heroines named Anna, such as “Anna Round the Neck” (“Anna na shee”), “About Love” (“O liubvi”), and “Lady with the Little Dog” (“Dama s sobachkoi”), is illuminating, if all too brief.

As Emerson shows, these three major stories all feature heroines called Anna who, to varying degrees and with various consequences, pursue romantic attachments outside of their marriages.⁴⁶⁸ The first story, “Anna Round the Neck” (1895), follows a young bride as she marries her own personal Karenin, here a bureaucrat named Modest Alexeich. As Emerson notes, this relaunch of the “Anna Plot,” unlike Tolstoy’s original, is a story without love or tragedy. The heroine is a young woman who gleefully pursues the men around her as a display of personal power, to the detriment of her family relationships and her own personality.⁴⁶⁹ In his turn, we discover that Modest Alexeich only married his coquettish

⁴⁶⁶ See Caryl Emerson, “Chekhov and the Annas,” in *Life and Text: Essays in Honour of Geir Kjetsaa on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday*, 121-132.

⁴⁶⁷ Caryl Emerson, “Chekhov and the Annas,” 123.

⁴⁶⁸ Although Emerson does not discuss this, three of the characters in these stories have a connection to the masculine name Alexei, which is the given name of both Anna’s husband Karenin and her lover Vronsky. Both Modest Alexeich from “Anna on the Neck” and Anna Alexeevna from “About Love” have fathers named Alexei, while the hero from “About Love” has the last name Alyokhin, which is derived from the nickname for Alexei, Alyosha. This repetition of this name further reinforces the link between these stories of Chekhov’s and Tolstoy’s novel.

⁴⁶⁹ Caryl Emerson, “Chekhov and the Annas,” 124-125.

young bride to advance his own career in the civil service, eventually using her powers of flirtation to secure the coveted award of the story's title, the Order of St. Anna. Emerson notes that the story is without children or true family, which are always the "moral measurement, the compass in a storm" in Tolstoy's creative world.⁴⁷⁰ The end of Chekhov's story only reinforces the selfish nature of both parties, for the husband now sets his sights on a "son," not a real child but the award of the Order of St. Vladimir, while Anna continues her whirlwind of social activities that will conceive such progeny. The "Anna Plot" is thus treated to a darkly cynical retelling, in which both husband and wife use each other to amass social capital, and produce no innocent children to get caught in the emotional crosshairs.

The next story is "About Love" (1898). Although it is not the final entry in Chekhov's sequence, is nonetheless the one Emerson considers the most perfect of all of his rewrites. "About Love" is the third story in Chekhov's so-called "Little Trilogy" and follows the tale of the unconsummated love between the intelligent farmer Alyokhin and Anna Alexeevna, the wife of his friend Luganovich. Alyokhin recounts the failure of their relationship to two friends many years later, concluding that their non-action was a mistake. In Emerson's reading of the tale, Alyokhin and Anna Alexeevna play the roles of a Levin and a Kitty who fall in love, "both decent, modest, proper people, committed to responsible behavior—but *after* she has married someone else."⁴⁷¹ Both parties are too upstanding and virtuous to admit their love for each other, which leads to private yet mutual agony. After several years

⁴⁷⁰ Caryl Emerson, "Chekhov and the Annas," 127.

⁴⁷¹ Caryl Emerson, "Chekhov and the Annas," 129.

of respectable misery, Luganovich receives a job transfer, and he and Anna must leave the district. Alyokhin and Anna's relationship ends on a train scene which reproduces in miniature the tragedy of Tolstoy's grand original, for it crushes all hope of their love ever flourishing: they kiss and part forever as the train carries Anna away. Alyokhin is left behind on his farm to live in solitude. This frustrated and frustrating ending leads Emerson to conclude that Chekhov's tale shows "the truly dark side of a virtuous prosaics,"⁴⁷² for we have a Levin and a Kitty whose very decency, instead of bringing them rewards for their exemplary behavior, as would happen in Tolstoy's narrative world, only quelches their happiness.

Emerson also discusses Chekhov's most famous love story, 1899's "The Lady with the Little Dog." As is well known, the story follows the womanizer Gurov as he embarks on yet another affair, this time in Yalta with a young woman named Anna. In Emerson's view, "Gurov resembles a Vronsky, or perhaps an Oblonsky, and Anna Sergeevna is a timid, inexperienced Kitty."⁴⁷³ Their relationship starts out stereotypically enough: both Anna and Gurov feel an attraction, but after their time together in Yalta is over, both parties are anxious to forget their indiscretions and move on. However, the second half of the story witnesses a blossoming of deep and abiding love between them. They both begin to live two lives: an official life in which they are still married to their lawful spouses, and a secret life, in which they are faithfully pledged to each other. The story's famous open ending, in which the dark times for Gurov and Anna's love are just "beginning," offers no resolution

⁴⁷² Caryl Emerson, "Chekhov and the Annas," 130.

⁴⁷³ Caryl Emerson, "Chekhov and the Annas," 127.

between these two disparate worlds. Emerson suggests that the main difference between Tolstoy and Chekhov is that the latter allows for the existence of this “double life,” which then in turn enables true love to survive, in contrast to Tolstoy’s insistence on the complete integration between an inner and outer self.⁴⁷⁴ Curiously, out of these three major stories, Emerson devotes the least amount of attention to “The Lady with the Little Dog,” scarcely two pages. In light of this, the story is ripe for expansion in the framework of Tolstoyan dialogue, and I will devote considerable attention to it later in this chapter.

The present chapter considers Emerson’s work as a fruitful point of departure. I take the position that, for Chekhov, Anna represents more than just an “infidelity stereotype.” As Edwina Cruise points out, “the Pandora’s box of women’s rights and relations between husband and wife is opened wide in *Anna Karenina* (1872-77), in many respects an encyclopedia of changing attitudes towards women in Russian society of the 1870s.”⁴⁷⁵ In line with Cruise’s assessment, I argue that, in several of his long stories from the 1880s and 1890s, Chekhov responds to the wide range of female experience which Tolstoy’s novel elaborates. By looking at expressions of female sexuality that go beyond adultery, including pregnancy and motherhood, the present chapter tells a broader and more complex story. We should keep in mind that Chekhov found *Anna Karenina* “fully satisfying” precisely *because* of its open-endedness. For Chekhov himself, as an almost maniacally active member of the Russian literate public,⁴⁷⁶ is *also* a member of the jury. The

⁴⁷⁴ Caryl Emerson, “Chekhov and the Annas,” 128.

⁴⁷⁵ Edwina Cruise, “Women, Sexuality, and the Family in Tolstoy,” 199.

⁴⁷⁶ In his lifespan of only forty-four years, Chekhov wrote over a thousand stories and plays, in addition to thousands of letters. According to Chekhov biographer Rosamund Bartlett, over 4500 letters have been saved for posterity and published in collected works. See Rosamund Bartlett, *Anton Chekhov: A Life in Letters*, xiii.

letter quoted above, therefore, does more than establish Chekhov's profound respect for Tolstoy's work. It also vouchsafes him the right to answer Tolstoy in his own way.

Early parodies and reenactments

In contrast to his treatment of other major authors of his time, the young Chekhov does not appear to have been much engaged in bald-face parody of Tolstoy in his early writing. A rare example of mild ribbing at Tolstoy's expense may be found in Chekhov's 1886 story "The Literary Table of Ranks," in which Count Tolstoy, along with writer Ivan Goncharov, is listed as a privy councillor, or a civil servant of the third rank.⁴⁷⁷ But neither was Chekhov opposed to appropriating *Anna Karenina* for his own, often humorous, ends. We first see this trend emerge in his epistolary writing. In a letter to his family of 10 March 1887, Chekhov confides that "sweet and dear Anna" (in print form) comforted him on a horrendous train journey from Moscow to Petersburg.⁴⁷⁸ Considering the heroine's unfortunate relationship to the railways, Chekhov's comments are not without a certain dose of irony. In a similar vein a few years later, in a letter to Suvorin of 24 July 1891, Chekhov writes,

Чтобы нажить капиталы, как Вы пишете, и вынырнуть из пучины грошовых забот и мелких страхов, для меня остался только один способ — безнравственный. Жениться на богатой или выдать «Анну Каренину» за свое произведение.

In order to amass capital, as you wrote me, and emerge from this vortex of nickle-and-dime cares and petty anxieties, only a lone option

⁴⁷⁷ PSS V, 143.

⁴⁷⁸ *Pis'ma* II, 35.

remains for me, an unscrupulous one. Either marry a rich woman, or pass *Anna Karenina* off as my own work.⁴⁷⁹

While Chekhov himself went on to deem such a mystification impossible, he nonetheless remained fascinated by the possibilities *Anna* afforded his own prose. Edwina Cruise perhaps best encapsulated the legacy of Tolstoy's masterwork when she declared that "*Anna Karenina* has prompted generations of readers to propose, dispose, and continually revise and reinvent the nature of female experience."⁴⁸⁰ A passionate reader of Tolstoy, Chekhov, too, found himself appropriating and reappropriating *Anna* when it came to creating his own women characters. As this chapter will show, much of Chekhov's most ambitious and serious work finds its origins in Tolstoyan reinterpretation.⁴⁸¹

Re-reading "The Name-Day Party"

Chekhov's re-reading of *Anna Karenina* throughout the late 1880s inspired more than just witty letters. In September 1888, Chekhov composed his long story, "'Imeniny,'" variously translated into English as "The Name-Day Party" or simply "The Party," which, as I will argue, ranks as Chekhov's first serious revisit of Tolstoy's novel. The story demands to be read in tandem with the letter about *Anna Karenina* posing all of the right questions which was quoted above, for only one month separated the writing of these two documents. Far from taking *Anna Karenina* as a perfect creation, however, Chekhov's story actually uses echoes from the novel to challenge the senior author's idealized vision of

⁴⁷⁹ *Pis'ma* IV, 251.

⁴⁸⁰ Edwina Cruise, "Women, Sexuality, and the Family in Tolstoy," 204.

⁴⁸¹ Though such an analysis exceeds the scope of this study, it is worth noting that one scholar has seen the characters in *Anna Karenina*, particularly *Anna* herself, as the prototypes for Chekhov's famous "encased people." See Khalizev, "Khudozhestvennoe mirosozertsanie Chekhova i traditsiia Tolstogo," 46.

maternity. Whereas for Tolstoy, childbearing should be a family-and community-building act undertaken by a collective of pure, sacred mothers, Chekhov exposes its sensual, frightening, and above all individualistic, nature.

Commissioned and published by the journal *The Northern Herald* (*Severnyi vestnik*), “The Name-Day Party” chronicles a day in the life of an unhappy marriage between Olga, a liberal, educated heiress, and her provincial bureaucrat husband Pyotr. As the story opens, it is midsummer in the Southern provinces of Russia. Chekhov tells us that “the trees and air were overcast as before rain, but in spite of that it was hot and stifling.”⁴⁸² Olga is in the third trimester of her pregnancy and about to go into premature labor, yet she plays the consummate hostess at her husband’s name-day party, a grueling all-day affair that demands she sacrifice the well-being of both herself and her child in favor of good manners and societal propriety.⁴⁸³ Via the character of Olga, who navigates both the vast grounds of her country estate and a seemingly endless stream of party guests, Chekhov offers his own interpretation of the Western literary canon’s trope of the birthing woman who “stands on the frontier between culture and nature.”⁴⁸⁴ Throughout the day Olga is plagued by what she perceives as the hypocrisy and pettiness of her guests and even of her spouse, with whom she seems to have fallen out of love. By the party’s end, Olga’s bodily and mental tensions have reached a crescendo: she simultaneously quarrels with her husband and

⁴⁸² PSS VII, 168.

⁴⁸³ While there are many saints named Peter (Пётр) in the Russian Orthodox Church, and consequently many namedays associated with them, given the story’s midsummer setting, we are most likely celebrating the Apostle Peter, whose day fell on 12 July, according to the old style (Julian), and now official Orthodox, calendar.

⁴⁸⁴ Robbie Pfeufer Kahn, *Bearing Meaning: The Language of Birth*, 33.

goes into labor. But even here, Olga is denied a release from societal constraints: the birthing mother's cries of pain must be stifled to maintain the respectability and decorum of their social engagement, for, as her husband admonishes her, she must be quiet because a few guests are staying the night in the next room. After countless agonizing hours, she has an emergency operation and is delivered of a stillborn baby. Her marriage, meanwhile, remains in the "passage perilous."

Despite initial positive reviews from Chekhov's acquaintance, "The Name-Day Party" has proven to be a polarizing work among critics, who do not agree on a standard interpretation. Chekhov himself was keenly fond of his heroine⁴⁸⁵ and expressed high hopes for the story that, according to his own evaluation, he was ultimately unable to fulfill.⁴⁸⁶ Simon Karlinsky and Michael Henry Heim have categorized it as one of Chekhov's most overtly political stories,⁴⁸⁷ and Beverly Hahn praises the tale's "general human insight into the tension between the social and private nature of people's personalities."⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁵ In a letter to A.N. Pleshcheev of 9 October 1888, Chekhov writes, "I've made no attempt to hide it. If I love you, or Suvorin, or Mikhailovsky, I have not concealed this anywhere. If I am partial to my heroine Olga Mikhailovna, who is liberal and studied at the women's higher courses, then I don't hide it in my story. This is, it seems, clear enough." *Pis'ma* III, 18.

⁴⁸⁶ In a letter to A.S. Suvorin of 27 October 1888, Chekhov writes:

"You write that the hero of "The Name-Day Party" is a figure who is worthy of focusing on. Good Lord, I am not an unfeeling brute, I understand that! I understand that I slaughter my heroes and ruin the good material that has come my way in vain...I would have methodically, with pleasure, with feeling, described my entire hero, would have described his soul during his wife's labor, the court case against him, his nasty feeling after the verdict of "not guilty," would have described how the midwife and doctors drank tea in the night, would have described the rain...But what can I do? I start a story on 10 September with the idea that I must finish it by a deadline of 5 October; if I exceed it, then I am acting a lie and I'll end up without money...and what comes out of me is not literature but something along the lines of the threads of Trishkin's kaftan [reference to a Krylov fable]. But what to do? I don't know and I don't know. I'll hold out for a cure-all." *Pis'ma* III, 46-47.

⁴⁸⁷ See *A.P. Chekhov's Life and Thought*, edited by Simon Karlinsky and Michael Henry Heim, 88.

⁴⁸⁸ See Hahn's chapter on "The Name-Day Party" in *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Stories and Plays*, 238.

However, Donald Rayfield dismisses it as “frigidly constructed.”⁴⁸⁹ While some Russian critics of the time period praised the story’s nuanced psychological portrayals,⁴⁹⁰ others disparaged it as a prime example of Chekhov’s staunch refusal to pick a side in contemporary Russian literary debates,⁴⁹¹ and even as a rejection of established literary norms.⁴⁹² Another common complaint is that at two *lists* or almost fifty printed pages, the story is much too long for an artist of Chekhov’s particular gifts to sustain.

But perhaps the most curious criticism involves the tale’s perceived use of Tolstoy. While it is not new to posit links between this story and *Anna Karenina*, such connections have predominantly been viewed as weak imitations on Chekhov’s part. Chekhov’s friend and author A.N. Pleshcheev, who had originally commissioned the story for *The Northern Herald*, ranks as the first to have noticed such parallels. In a letter to Chekhov from October 1888, he complains that,

<...>разговор Ольги Мих. с бабами о родах и та подробность, что затылок мужа вдруг бросился ей в глаза, — отзывается подражанием «Анне Карениной», где Долли также разговаривает в подобном положении с бабами и где Анна вдруг замечает уродливые уши у мужа.

Olga Mikhailovna’s conversation with the peasant women about birth and that detail about her husband’s bald patch catching her eye savor

⁴⁸⁹ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 65.

⁴⁹⁰ See, for example, V.V. Kuz’min, “Chitateľ. Zametki chitatelia,” *Novosti dnia*, 1888, № 1944, 2 December; A.I. Vvedensky, “Zhurnal’nye otgoloski,” *Russkie vedomosti*, 1888, № 333, 3 December; V.K. Stukalich, “Ocherki sovremennoi literatury,” *Russkii kur’er*, 1888, № 319, 18 November; kritik A-’, “Zhurnal’noe obozrenie,” *Den’*, 1889, № 219, 5 January. All citations taken from the *primechaniia* to the *PSS*.

⁴⁹¹ See, for example, P.P. Pertsov, “Iz’iany tvorchestva. Povesti i rasskazy A. Chekhova,” *Russkoe bogatstvo*, 1893, № 1. Citations taken from the *primechaniia* to the *PSS*.

⁴⁹² According to Simon Karlinsky and Michael Henry Heim, Chekhov’s “quiet discarding of hitherto accepted forms of fictional narrative in “The Steppe” and “The Name-Day Party” caused one of the critics to complain of Chekhov’s ‘inability or unwillingness to write as required by literary theories,’” *A.P. Chekhov’s Life and Thought*, 88.

of an imitation of *Anna Karenina*, where Dolly also speaks in a similar manner with the local women and where Anna suddenly notices her husband's detestable ears.⁴⁹³

While Chekhov does not disagree with his friend's assessment, he plays coy as to his intentions here, demurring that the conversation about birth "means nothing." As for the husband's bald spot, Chekhov claims he did not have the courage to refuse it, that he felt sorry for it!⁴⁹⁴

Pleshcheev's interpretation remains unchallenged by mainstream scholarship. In Chudakov's view, what lies at the heart of "The Name-Day Party" are "the fundamental principles of Tolstoyan psychological analysis,"⁴⁹⁵ while V.Ia. Lakshin argues that, in his heroine's disgust for deception, Chekhov falls in line with Tolstoy.⁴⁹⁶ More recently, Donald Rayfield has asserted that "The Name-Day Party" smacks of Tolstoy to an awkward degree. In his study *Understanding Chekhov*, he writes that this story contains:

an embarrassing number of coincidences which seem derivations from *Anna Karenina*. In one scene the husband scythes hay, amazing the girls who watch him, as Levin amazes himself in Tolstoy's novel. The heroine talks with the gardener's wife about childbirth, as does Tolstoy's Dolly. She hates the back of her husband's neck with Tolstoyan vehemence...Even the word Tolstoyan, *Tolstovets*, springs to the heroine's lips.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹³ Quoted in the *primechaniia* to the *Pis'ma* III, 324.

⁴⁹⁴ Letter to Pleshcheev of 9 October 1888, *Pis'ma* III, 20. However, not only did Chekhov not remove these references from "The Name-Day Party," he even used them again a few years later in his novella "Duel," when Laevsky questions his love for Nadezhda. Thus, these mentions served as a signal of Chekhov's ongoing polemic with Tolstoy.

⁴⁹⁵ A.P. Chudakov, "'Tolstovskii epizod' v poetike Chekhova," in *Chekhov i Lev Tolstoy*, 179. In his article in the same volume, G.V. Krasnov echoes Chudakov's sentiments. See G.V. Krasnov, "Krizisnye situatsii," *Chekhov i Lev Tolstoy*, 86-89.

⁴⁹⁶ V.Ia. Lakshin, *Tolstoy i Chekhov*, 26.

⁴⁹⁷ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 65.

These details undoubtedly bring to mind Tolstoy. However, to claim that they merely mimic the great Russian prose master is to ignore their context in Chekhov's work, and ultimately, to sell a young and flexible Chekhov short. On the contrary, the coincidences that Rayfield deems flaccid derivatives actually serve to parody and even challenge Tolstoy. For instance, when the husband Pyotr is cutting the hay, we are not meant to take him—or his dreams of living on a farm in Ukraine and becoming one with the land—seriously. Instead, we laugh at his ridiculous bravado, especially when we consider his audience: a flighty teenager named Lyubochka who is fresh from finishing school and runs away from bees in a state of full-blown hysteria, and two anemic and absurdly named sisters, Nata and Vata.⁴⁹⁸ Surely it is no coincidence that the word “vata” in Russian means cotton wadding or fluff! Furthermore, when Olga utters the term *Tolstovets*, she does so with biting irony, as she uses it to refer to Lyubochka's equally insipid future husband.⁴⁹⁹

But what of the theme that is surely most central to a story entitled “Imeniny” or “The Name-Day Party,” birth? For Olga's premature labor realigns their baby's birthday with the christening—and by extension, the birth—of its father. This coincidence is even stronger in the original Russian, which uses the same word, *imeninnik*, to denote both a person celebrating his/her name day and a person celebrating his/her birthday. Curiously, both Pleshcheev and Rayfield comment on the resemblance between Chekhov's heroine and Tolstoy's Dolly regarding childbirth. But what critics have not explored is that Olga's

⁴⁹⁸ PSS VII, 180.

⁴⁹⁹ PSS VII, 180.

experience of pregnancy and childbirth diverges from Tolstoy's portrayal in purposeful and significant ways.

As multiple scholars have noted, "it was during the late 19th century that fundamental changes in the practice as well as in the representation of childbirth took place, and it is therefore especially useful to investigate this period."⁵⁰⁰ For Tolstoy this theme is of particular importance. American Slavist Amy Mandelker notes that Tolstoy, as articulated in his essay *What Then Must We Do?*, "appreciates, values, and empathizes with the oppressive work of pregnancy, childbirth, and domestic cares."⁵⁰¹ Edwina Cruise goes even further, declaring "it is fair to say that in his essays, even though he acknowledged the high price a woman had to pay, Tolstoy consistently regarded the mothering role as the most worthy human calling."⁵⁰²

It is a critical commonplace that for Tolstoy, the most admirable women are able, as Ronald LeBlanc explains, to channel their energy "into maternal love and family life."⁵⁰³ Out of all of Tolstoy's female characters, perhaps no one embodies this maternal orientation, by turns both joyful and punitive, better than Dolly Oblonskaia. Marina Ledkovsky has noted that "an unconditional worship of motherhood...comes to a culmination precisely in Dolly," who is "the image of the ideal, self-sacrificing woman."⁵⁰⁴ In Part Three of *Anna Karenina*, just after Levin has first come to know the pleasures of sweaty haymaking, we see Dolly

⁵⁰⁰ Cristina Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions*, 173.

⁵⁰¹ Amy Mandelker, *Framing Anna Karenina*, 22.

⁵⁰² Edwina Cruise, "Women, Sexuality, and the Family in Tolstoy," 192.

⁵⁰³ Ronald LeBlanc, "No More Horsing Around: Sex, Love, and Motherhood in Tolstoy's *Kholstomer*," 564.

⁵⁰⁴ Marina Ledkovsky, "Dolly Oblonskaia as a Structural Device in *Anna Karenina*," 543.

both struggle with country life and triumph when she bonds with local women over motherhood. As Jane Costlow argues,

From the world and work of peasant men the reader is directed to the world and work of women. The description of Dolly's work as mother ends with her conversing with peasant women: their maternal experiences erase class boundaries; they share a common language.⁵⁰⁵

Indeed, Tolstoy tells us that "Darya Alexandrovna did not want to part from the women, so interesting was it for her to talk with them, so perfectly alike were their interests."⁵⁰⁶ Dolly and these women laugh together and have no difficulty discussing infant birth, death, and weaning practices governed by folk wisdom.⁵⁰⁷ Through these scenes, Tolstoy reinforces the belief that, for women, motherhood is the sacred common denominator.

However, the discourse surrounding childbearing and rearing is more complicated in Chekhov's view. In "The Name-Day Party" we see Olga discuss the mysteries of her impending motherhood with the wife of their gardener, Varvara. Much as the details mentioned above concern *Anna Karenina* precisely to depart from it, here too does Chekhov reference Tolstoy in order to strike out in his own direction. Undoubtedly Chekhov has taken the scene with Dolly as his starting point. Just as she finds herself in the countryside with her children during the month of June, so too does Olga host her

⁵⁰⁵ Jane T. Costlow, "The Pastoral Source: Representations of the Maternal Breast in Nineteenth Century Russia," 229.

⁵⁰⁶ *Anna Karenina*, Part III, Chapter VIII, 280.

⁵⁰⁷ For his part, Chekhov does not deny that folk practices regarding childbirth exist. But he does subtly yet thoroughly expose them as futile. At the end of "Imeniny," when Olga is in active labor, her maid and the gardener's wife Varvara attempt to ease her suffering by opening and unlocking all blocked passages, such as drawers and boxes, that symbolically represent the mother's birth canal. Varvara even calls for the priest to open the holy gates at the local church. According to Slavic folklorist Linda Ivanits, this kind of ritual opening and unlocking were common practice in Russia in order to accelerate childbirth. For more, see her invaluable study *Russian Folk Belief*, 46. However, Chekhov's story makes it clear that Olga's birth was not viable and the baby must be removed surgically.

husband's name-day party on their provincial estate in summer. And in both works, women of differing social statuses engage in common conversation about childbirth: after managing to escape from the party, Olga initiates the following conversation with her gardener's wife Varvara:

— Ну, как ты себя чувствуешь?

— А ничего...

Наступило молчание. Обе женщины молча как будто понимали друг друга.

— Страшно родить в первый раз, — сказала Ольга Михайловна, подумав, — мне всё кажется, что я не перенесу, умру.

— И мне представлялось, да вот жива же... Мало ли чего!

"Well, how do you feel?"

"Oh, all right. . . ."

A silence followed. The two women seemed to understand each other without words.

"It's frightening to give birth for the first time," said Olga Mikhailovna after a moment's thought. "It seems to me that I won't get through it, that I'll die."

"It seemed that way to me, too, but I'm still alive. You can imagine all sorts of things!"⁵⁰⁸

However, structurally speaking, the scenes stand in opposition to each other. While in Tolstoy's version, Dolly is stationary and the peasant women walk over to her, in Chekhov, the landowner Olga seeks out the gardener's wife Varvara, who is sitting on the doorstep to her modest cottage. Dolly also appears with her brood of six, while in Chekhov's version, it is Varvara who is sitting with her four sons. These structural reversals give rise to thematic ones, as well. Most strikingly, Olga and Varvara are not able to achieve the Tolstoyan ideal of maternal community, despite the fact they are both currently in an advanced state of pregnancy. In Chekhov's creative world, pregnancy emerges as a uniquely female field of competition in which someone of lower social status can, by virtue

⁵⁰⁸ PSS VII, 181-182.

of experience, triumph over a social superior. When confronted by Varvara and her army of closely-cropped sons, Olga immediately senses the other woman's superiority and loses her nerve to ask about the fears that trouble her as she prepares to give birth for the first time. As Chekhov tells us, Varvara "was expecting already for the fifth time and experienced, and looked down upon her mistress, speaking with her in a didactic tone," while Olga "was afraid to appear to Varvara as simple and naïve, and so was silent."⁵⁰⁹ She decides to wait until Varvara herself will offer some advice, but Olga's husband calls her away, leaving behind a frustrated promise of kinship.

In place of the Tolstoyan communal model, Chekhov advances a counterview of pregnancy as an individual, sometimes frightening, even erotic state. In contrast to Tolstoy's pastoral vision of Dolly bonding with local women while bathing her children in a fresh, pure stream, "The Name-Day Party"'s most lyrical and pleasurable sequences feature Olga sneaking *away* from the collective for a secluded tryst with her unborn child. The private nature of their encounter is encoded in the story's geography, as it occurs when Olga makes the transition from a more public space to a more private one: to prepare for this encounter, she turns from the wide avenue to the narrow footpath. Chekhov tells us that there, in the shadows of the fruit trees,

а в мыслях выростал образ маленького человечка
неопределенного пола, с неясными чертами, и начинало
казаться, что не паутина ласково щекочет лицо и шею, а этот
человечек; когда же в конце тропинки показывался жидкий
плетень, а за ним пузатые ульи с черепяными крышками, когда в
неподвижном, застоявшемся воздухе начинало пахнуть и сеном и
медом и слышалось кроткое жужжанье пчел, маленький
человечек совсем овладевал Ольгой Михайловной. Она садилась

⁵⁰⁹ PSS VII, 182.

на скамеечке около шалаша, сплетенного из лозы, и принималась думать.

the image of a little person of indeterminate sex and obscure features would rise in her mind, it seemed to her that it was not a spiderweb caressingly tickling her face and neck, but this little creature, and when...the still stagnant air began to smell of hay and honey and the urgent buzzing of bees could be heard, then the little person possessed Olga Mikhailovna completely. She would sit down on the bench near a hut of woven branches and sink into a reverie.⁵¹⁰

Certain elements, such as the darkness, the heady, damp air, the little person who both lovingly tickles or titillates Olga—the verb here in the Russian, *shchekotat'*, suggests both meanings—and who finally dominates her to the point where she can no longer stand upright, all combine to suggest this encounter is an erotic one for Olga. It is fitting here that Olga finds pleasure in communicating with her child in a language beyond spoken words: Chekhov asserts in his story “Enemies” (“Vragi”), published the year prior in 1887, that lovers understand each other better when they are silent.⁵¹¹ That Olga *cannot* talk to her child, then, serves to strengthen their unique connection.

While this secrecy endows the text with many of its most beautiful passages, Chekhov suggests that it is also a source of fear. We can contrast this point of view to *Anna Karenina* as well, specifically to Kitty, when she declares to Levin that she is completely unafraid of her impending labor.⁵¹² While Chekhov certainly admired Tolstoy’s characters, his medical training must have impressed upon him the naiveté of Kitty’s pronouncement.

⁵¹⁰ PSS VII, 167.

⁵¹¹ PSS VI, 35.

⁵¹² *Anna Karenina*, Part VII, Chapter XIII, 285.

Rather, in “The Name-Day Party,” we see a threatening undercurrent in the second encounter Olga has with her unborn child:

Небо, воздух и деревья по-прежнему хмурились и обещали дождь; было жарко и душно; громадные стаи ворон, предчувствуя непогоду, с криком носились над садом. Чем ближе к огороду, тем аллеи становились запущеннее, темнее и уже; на одной из них, прятавшейся в густой заросли диких груш, кислиц, молодых дубков, хмеля, целые облака мелких черных мошек окружили Ольгу Михайловну; она закрыла руками лицо и стала насильно воображать маленького человечка... В воображении пронеслись Григорий, Митя, Коля, лица мужиков, приходивших утром поздравлять...

The sky, the air, and trees, still sullen, promised rain; it was hot and sultry; a great flock of crows, anticipating the storm, flew over the garden cawing. The closer the paths came to the kitchen gardens the more narrow, dark, and overgrown they were; on one of them, hidden in a thicket of wild pears, sorrel, young oaks and hops, clouds of tiny black flies enveloped her. She covered her face with her hands and forced herself to think of the little person...Through her imagination coursed the figures of Grigory, Mitya, Kolya, and the faces of the peasants who had come with their congratulations in the morning...⁵¹³

We have a setting similar to the one before: the sky, the air and the trees all promise rain as they did in the first meeting, and Olga is again to be found traversing dark, narrow garden paths by herself. Also as before, the thoughts of her child disappear as soon as she is no longer alone. This time, though, key details suggest that Olga is in danger. In addition to the murder of crows that the text names as a portent of bad weather to come—it is worth noting that throughout the story Olga’s premature labor is identified with the burgeoning rainstorm—she is attacked by a swarm of gnats, against which she summons her child as a

⁵¹³ PSS VII, 178.

talisman. However, instead of offering protection, her child is actually the cause of her agitation, as her imaginings of the little person grotesquely transform into the faces of all of the guests she has had to endure that day. This nightmare will be realized at the end of the story, when instead of a new little person, Olga will be delivered of a corpse, and presumably her life will again be filled by the same monotonous acquaintance.

This end, too, is best understood as a rewrite of *Anna Karenina*. In creating Olga's birth scene Chekhov has once again drawn upon Tolstoyan models, namely Kitty's well-known first experience of childbirth. Many details in Chekhov's tale recall Kitty's confinement: both scenes feature icon lamps prominently, start at around five a.m., and most memorably, are imbued with an uncertain and seemingly interminable sense of time, which is only vaguely demarcated by the changing of candles. However, the defining feature of Tolstoy's version is the narrative focus on Levin's (and to a lesser extent, other relatives') perception of Kitty's labor. As Gary Saul Morson observes, "Tolstoy narrates the sequence in which Levin's son is born almost entirely from Levin's point of view. To everyone but Levin, the event seems, as it is, utterly commonplace, just one of the facts of life."⁵¹⁴ It is important to note, though, that Kitty might not have agreed with this assessment of her own labor, had she been given a voice in this scene. In fact, we are privy to Kitty's sensations only as they are visible to or affect her husband or other family members, while Kitty's own body is markedly absent.⁵¹⁵ She is even deprived of her most

⁵¹⁴ Gary Saul Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely*, 72.

⁵¹⁵ Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's fin-de-siecle*, 33. Arens and Kennedy also remark on the lack of Kitty's body in the text, as well as on the fact that her "physical presence is cloaked by several additional layers," thus further hiding her body from Levin and from readers, Katherine Arens and Monica Valdez Kennedy, "Anna Karenina': Medical Propriety as Social Practice," 27; 31.

distinctive physical characteristic, her face. To give just one of many examples, during a particularly violent contraction, Levin,

Не помня себя, он вбежал в спальню. Первое, что он увидел, это было лицо Лизаветы Петровны<...>Лица Кити не было. На том месте, где оно было прежде, было что-то страшное и по виду напряжения и по звуку, выходившему оттуда.

forgetting himself, ran into the bedroom. The first thing he saw was Lizaveta Petrovna's face...Kitty's face was not there. In that place, where it had been earlier, was something frightening, both in its strained look and in the sound that came from it.⁵¹⁶

Tolstoy's scene bespeaks an undeniable power. His contemporary, the poet Afanasii Fet, wrote that "no one since the beginning of time [had] accomplished" such an aesthetically bold feat,⁵¹⁷ while the Russian symbolist Nikolai Minsky hailed Kitty's birth scene as "an apotheosis of motherhood."⁵¹⁸ But as much as we identify with Levin's simultaneous feelings of joy and uncertainty when his son finally arrives, Tolstoy is only concerned with describing half of the story. As Olga Matich argues, this scene, with its exclusion of Kitty's perspective, constitutes "perhaps Tolstoy's most original, though failed, representation of the bodily."⁵¹⁹ While it is impossible to determine whether or not Chekhov would have agreed with Matich's assessment, the questions Chekhov takes up in "The Name-Day Party" are the very ones Tolstoy so pointedly ignores: how does the birthing mother herself experience labor and delivery? How can she feel both connection to

⁵¹⁶ *Anna Karenina*, Part VII, Chapter XV, 293.

⁵¹⁷ Quoted in Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's fin-de-siecle*, 33.

⁵¹⁸ Quoted in Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's fin-de-siecle*, 54. Original in Nikolai Minsky, "14-oe religiozno-filosofskoe sobranie," *Novyi put'* 9 (1903): 319.

⁵¹⁹ Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's fin-de-siecle*, 33.

her emerging child and distance from the physical process in whose throes she is caught against her will? In Chekhov's tale, in pointed contrast to Tolstoy, a woman's experience of childbirth is regarded as a subject worthy of a work of art.

Even before Olga's labor begins, Chekhov focuses on exploring Olga's internal physical state as a pregnant woman. As has been noted, Chekhov's tour de force in the story consists of "making the reader continuously aware that the heroine's perception of people and events is constantly affected by her physical discomfort."⁵²⁰ The burden of pregnancy is compounded by the fact that Olga must wear a corset which "wearied her to the point of exhaustion."⁵²¹ For the sake of social respectability, Olga must wear the corset to conceal her pregnancy from their guests, despite the fact that, already in the 1880s, the Russian medical establishment had documented the harm corsets inflicted on women's bodies, particularly pregnant ones. Such adverse effects included anemia, elevated pulse, digestive problems, oxygen deprivation, and damage to internal organs such as the liver, kidneys and stomach.⁵²² Women were advised not to use corsets past the fourth month of pregnancy, and even then only to wear them at all "if there already exists a strongly ingrained habit (большая привычка) to wear them."⁵²³ Chekhov emphasizes that Olga is in her seventh month of pregnancy, well past the time when such a restrictive garment was considered

⁵²⁰ *A.P. Chekhov's Life and Thought*, edited by Simon Karlinsky and Michael Henry Heim, 88.

⁵²¹ *PSS* VII, 167.

⁵²² For an in-depth description of these ill effects and other advice regarding the clothing and care of pregnant women, see Chapter 5 of V.N. Zhuk's *Mat' i ditya. Gigiena v obshchedostupnom izlozhenii*, p. 150-173. This practical medical manual was first published in 1880 and a new edition came out every three to five years thereafter, through the turn of the twentieth century. All citations are taken from the edition widely available today, which is the eighth edition, published in 1906.

⁵²³ Recommendation of Kashevarova-Rudneva, cited in *Mat' i ditya. Gigiena v obshchedostupnom izlozhenii*, 156.

safe. As we will see, the consequences to the health of her child are grave. We see this burden reflected in Chekhov's writing style as well, for contemporaries and critics alike have considered the narrative plodding, taxing and heavy. For example, Rayfield complains that the story is "over-extended," while Chekhov's friend Pleshcheev was not shy about declaring that the middle of "The Name-Day Party" was "boring" and that "the action flails about in one place for a very long time; even the same phrases are repeated, so that the reader, along with the hosts, begins to wish that the guests would leave as soon as possible."⁵²⁴ But this, too, can be understood as a carefully considered artistic choice. As Olga's corset grows ever more restrictive of her body as the day wears on, so too does the turgid prose exact a similarly cumbersome effect on its readers. For example, in the middle of the story when Olga is pouring guests tea, Chekhov laboriously describes the distribution and taking up of glasses and seemingly endless permutations of tea preferences, while those who have yet to be served are "depressed-looking figures [who] wandered like shadows at a little distance from the table, pretending to look for mushrooms in the grass or read the labels on the boxes."⁵²⁵

Such a foregrounding of the physical is especially developed in the story's birth scene. Not only does Olga get to keep her face throughout her ordeal, but also, Chekhov makes us acutely aware of how every part of Olga's body participates in her labor: while she is lying on her back with the blanket up to her waist, her legs and shoulders throb painfully and she thrashes from side to side as "throughout her whole body as before she

⁵²⁴ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 65; Pleshcheev's letter is quoted in the *primechaniia* to the *PSS* VII, 656.

⁵²⁵ *PSS* VII, 186.

felt some kind of discomfort.”⁵²⁶ The description of Olga’s contractions, too, are rooted in her own physical sensations. As her labor begins, Chekhov tells us, “All at once something gripped her below the stomach and in the lower back with such violence that it silenced her wailing and made her bite the pillow in agony.”⁵²⁷ Chekhov goes on to describe a series of contractions, each more painful than the last. This mode of stream-of-consciousness labor continues through to the end of the story, as Chekhov privileges Olga’s own bodily awareness of an operation being performed on her and her physical and spiritual emptiness due to her baby’s death: “her soul was empty... that dull indifference to life, which had been with her since those two doctors did the operation, had not yet quit her.”⁵²⁸

Chekhov’s attempt to narrate Olga’s experience constitutes no less than a medical experiment in prose. As Mazzoni points out, in literary texts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pregnancy is “too easily...silenced, misunderstood, turned against itself, or worse yet ignored.”⁵²⁹ Particularly prevalent is a lack of narratives which describe birth from the point of view of the laboring mother herself.⁵³⁰ The debate concerning “accurate” depictions of labor and delivery from a female perspective in literature continues to the

⁵²⁶ PSS VII, 189.

⁵²⁷ PSS VII, 193.

⁵²⁸ PSS VII, 198.

⁵²⁹ Cristina Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions*, 105.

⁵³⁰ For more on the lack of literary depictions of childbirth, see the following: Tess Cosslett, *Women Writing Childbirth: Modern Discourses of Motherhood*, 1; Cynthia Huff, “Delivery: The Cultural Re-presentation of Childbirth”; Barbara Korte, “In Sorrow Thou Shalt Bring Forth Children—On Childbirth in Literature,” 34; M.C. Kreppel, “Books I’ve Read: Crosscurrents in Obstetrics and Literary Childbirth,” 4; Carol H. Poston, “Childbirth in Literature;” Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 166.

present day.⁵³¹ More specific to the Russian context is the work of Barbara Heldt, who has shown that, before Chekhov, childbirth was reported in Russian literature solely through the eyes of bystanding non-specialist male characters.⁵³² In addition to *Anna Karenina*, Heldt also examines how the theme of birth is treated in *War and Peace* and Turgenev's short story "First Love." Here it might be tempting to argue that Chekhov, as a man, is unfairly appropriating female experience in order to write about birth at all. However, we should also bear in mind that Chekhov the physician spent countless hours assisting women during labor and delivery, often foregoing both sleep and payment.⁵³³ By virtue of such contributions, he, too, was a stakeholder in the birth process and had the professional training necessary to provide a critical addition to previous narratives.⁵³⁴

⁵³¹ See, for example, the recent articles from the literature section of *The Guardian*: Emily Cleaver, "Can fiction give life to childbirth?", from 3 March 2011 and Alison Mercer, "Why Doesn't Fiction Deliver Birth Scenes?", from 5 August 2012.

⁵³² Heldt's fascinating study offers many invaluable insights. However, I disagree with her hasty and dismissive interpretation of "The Name-Day Party." Heldt's pronouncement of Olga's pain over losing her child at the end of the story as disempowering, simply because Olga is too distraught to speak, fails to take into account the power of silence in Chekhov's narrative world. See Barbara Heldt, "Men who Give Birth: A Feminist Perspective on Russian Literature," 163.

⁵³³ See, for example, A. Kuprin's memoirs about Chekhov, published in "Znaniie," kn. 3-ia, SPB, 1905, 3-42. Cited in Knizhniakov, *Anton Pavlovich Chekhov kak vrach'*, 109.

For a similarly powerful scene depicting childbirth, by Chekhov's contemporary and fellow physician-writer Vikenty Veresaev, see his *Memoirs of a Physician*, 7-9 (English) and *Zapiski vracha*, 19-20 (Russian).

⁵³⁴ Who has the "right" to write about pregnancy and childbirth is contested in feminist criticism, a subject which exceeds the scope of this study. The extreme position in this polemic restricts authentic descriptions of birth only to those women who have given birth themselves. We will suffice it to say that Chekhov's experiences as a doctor made him aware that a woman's experience of childbirth was a story worth telling, and that women of the time welcomed his efforts to bring this perspective to bear on a creative work.

Chekhov's personal correspondence makes it clear that Chekhov valued both the father's and the mother's experiences of the birth of their child. In a letter to his friend Alexander Kuprin of 1 November 1902, Chekhov writes, "Tell your wife, so that she won't worry, that everything will go well. The birth will last around 20 hours, and then you will find yourself in the most blessed state, when she will be smiling and you will want to cry from tenderness." *Pis'ma XI*, 67.

Olga's deeply personal struggles with the raw forces of human reproduction formed a key part of contemporaries' reception of the work as well. In letters written to colleagues following "The Name-Day Party"'s publication, Chekhov describes how readers reacted to Olga's final scenes. The most important feature of such responses is how Chekhov's audience evaluates the accuracy and power of Olga's performance as a woman struggling in active labor. In a letter to A.S. Suvorin of 15 November 1888, Chekhov foregrounds the reactions from women, i.e., those who spoke from intimate personal experience, to the *believability* of his vivid portrayal:⁵³⁵

Своими «Именинами» я угодил дамам. Куда ни приду, везде славословят. Право, недурно быть врачом и понимать то, о чем пишешь. Дамы говорят, что роды описаны *верно*.
(emphasis in the original)

With my "The Name-Day Party" I pleased the ladies. Wherever I go they praise it. Truly, it's not a bad thing to be a doctor and understand what you are writing about. The ladies say that the birth is described *faithfully*.⁵³⁶

In another letter, this time to Pleshcheev, Chekhov reports that all the players of the Maly Theatre read his story. While everyone expressed admiration, the story held particular appeal for the actresses in the company.⁵³⁷ His female physician friend Elena Lintvaryova also wrote expressly from Sumy, their family seat in Ukraine, to praise the story. The Lintvaryov family, composed of a powerful matriarch and three sisters, two of whom were

⁵³⁵ It seems that Chekhov's description of childbirth made an impression on someone else as well: Ernest Hemingway. While Hemingway outwardly denigrated Chekhov's talent as a writer (see Hugh McLean's study *In Quest of Tolstoy*, 200, note 10), he nonetheless made use of Chekhov's content. Scholar George Monteiro has argued that Hemingway's description of a woman in labor in his novel *A Farewell to Arms* has its origin in Chekhov's tale. See his article "Chekhov's Rain. Hemingway's War," *Estudos Anglos-Americanos* 17-18 (1993).

⁵³⁶ *Pis'ma* III, 70.

⁵³⁷ See his letter to A.N. Pleshcheev of 13 November 1888, *Pis'ma* III, 69.

doctors, valued his stories highly, often staging dramatic readings of them. In part, this was because one of the sisters suffered a brain tumor and had gone blind as a result.⁵³⁸

According to Elena, Chekhov's tale caused a "big sensation" in their household.⁵³⁹

The importance that "The Name-Day Party" held for Chekhov may be indicated by his disappointment that it could not accomplish all that he wished. He wrote to Suvorin that he would have happily devoted a half a year to this story—eons in Chekhov-time!—if only he had the resources to do so.⁵⁴⁰ Chekhov's artistic laments notwithstanding, "The Name-Day Party" occupies a crucial place in his development as a writer and thinker in the Russian tradition, for it set Chekhov on a path of reworking and reexamining *Anna Karenina's* portrayal of female sexuality that would occupy him for the rest of his career. In reference to the letter with which we began, this chapter demonstrates that, integral to the notion of an artistic work being "fully satisfying" is that other members of the jury are compelled to tinker with, reinvent, and challenge it. And that part of the perfection of works such as *Anna Karenina* lies in the revisions they inspire.

Chekhov and the *Kreutzer Sonata*

Chekhov's reinterpretations of Tolstoy, however, did not remain static. Rather, Chekhov's response to the issues raised in *Anna Karenina* only became more fraught with the release of Tolstoy's most provocative novella on the dangers of human desire, the

⁵³⁸ See, for example, the description of the Lintvaryov household in Donald Rayfield's *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 171.

⁵³⁹ See her letter to Chekhov, quoted in the *Letopis' Tom 2*, 471.

⁵⁴⁰ See Chekhov's letter to Suvorin of 27 October 1888, *Pis'ma III*, 46.

Kreutzer Sonata. In his stories of the 1890s Chekhov engages with both of these works simultaneously, thus anticipating twentieth-century critics who have seen the *Kreutzer Sonata* and *Anna Karenina* as forming a kind of continuum of Tolstoyan sexual morality.⁵⁴¹ As Andrey Tolstoy aptly points out, the *Kreutzer Sonata*'s main narrative "takes place inside the very train that crushed Anna Karenina years earlier."⁵⁴²

Initially banned by the censors, the *Kreutzer Sonata* was gleefully circulated in handwritten copies before its official publication in Russia in 1891. Chekhov himself participated in this pre-Soviet form of samizdat, as he is known to have sent a copy to M.I. Tchaikovsky, the composer's brother, with instructions on whom to send it to next.⁵⁴³ This sanctioned release only came about through the efforts of Tolstoy's wife Sophia, who sought a private audience with the tsar to lobby on her husband's behalf for the *Kreutzer Sonata*'s publication. The tsar acquiesced, granting permission to include it only in Tolstoy's collected works, under the presumption that few Russians would be able to afford such a pricey edition.⁵⁴⁴

At the center of Tolstoy's tale is the hero Pozdnyshov, who, as a result of his mounting jealousy over his wife's relationship with a musician, murders her with his very own hands in a sexually charged rage. The narrative follows Pozdnyshov's retelling of the

⁵⁴¹ See, for example, Mark Aldanov, *Zagadka Tolstogo*, David Herman, "Stricken by Infection: Art and Adultery in *Anna Karenina* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*," and Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's fin-de-siècle*.

⁵⁴² Quoted in Michael Katz, *The Kreutzer Sonata Variations*, 354.

⁵⁴³ Melkova, L.N. *Tolstoi i A.P. Chekhov: Rasskazyvaiut sovremenniki, arkhivy, muzei....*, 75.

⁵⁴⁴ For more about the controversy surrounding its publication, see Michael R. Katz, *The Kreutzer Sonata Variations*.

scandal to a group of captive listeners (and readers) while traveling on a train. The novella unleashed fiery debate in Russia regarding the nature of love and sex in marriage and the place of women in society at large.⁵⁴⁵ According to Peter Ulf Moeller, “for some time after the *Kreutzer Sonata* nothing could be taken as a given in the discussion of love and marriage.”⁵⁴⁶

In a space of only about a hundred pages, Tolstoy expounds on a bounty of controversial ideas, from women’s aversion to sex and the idea of married women as nothing more than fancy prostitutes, to celibacy as the ideal human relationship, even for lawfully wed couples. As Pozdnyshev tells the story of how he met and married his wife and their mutual descent into a vicious cycle of passionate lovemaking and passionate fighting, he serves as a direct mouthpiece for Tolstoy’s strictures on the horrors of sexual love. Throughout the story, the one saving grace for their relationship is their children. After his wife bears him five children, she begins to use contraceptives, which causes Pozdnyshev to lament, “the last excuse for our swinish life—children—was then taken away, and life became viler than ever.”⁵⁴⁷ Despite—or perhaps because of—his own ambivalence towards their relationship, Pozdnyshev is a jealous husband and viciously resents the interaction his wife has with other men. His resentment reaches a fever pitch when his wife begins to collaborate with the violinist Trukhachevsky on a performance of Beethoven’s *Kreutzer*

⁵⁴⁵ For more on this fascinating period in Russian cultural history, see the following: David Herman, “Stricken by Infection: Art and Adultery in *Anna Karenina* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*”; Michael R. Katz, *The Kreutzer Sonata Variations*; Igor S. Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*; Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia’s fin-de- siècle*; Peter Ulf Moeller’s outstanding monograph *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoy and the Debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s*.

⁵⁴⁶ Peter Ulf Moeller, *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoy and the Debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s*, 237.

⁵⁴⁷ Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

Sonata (Sonata No. 9 in A Major for piano and violin, Op. 47). Their joint concert leads Pozdnyshev to contemplate the raw sexual power of music and the nefarious deeds such melodies can drive a man to. As Pozdnyshev exclaims,

Страшная вещь эта соната. Именно эта часть. И вообще страшная вещь музыка. Что это такое? Я не понимаю. Что такое музыка? Что она делает? И зачем она делает то, что она делает? Говорят, музыка действует возвышающим душу образом, -- вздор, неправда! Она действует, страшно действует, я говорю про себя, но вовсе не возвышающим душу образом. Она действует ни возвышающим, ни унижающим душу образом, а раздражающим душу образом. Как вам сказать? Музыка заставляет меня забывать себя, мое истинное положение, она переносит меня в какое-то другое, не свое положение: мне под влиянием музыки кажется, что я чувствую то, чего я, собственно, не чувствую, что я понимаю то, чего не понимаю, что могу то, чего не могу.

A terrible thing is that sonata, especially the presto! Music in general is a terrible thing. What is it? I don't get it. What is music? What does it do, and why does it do what it does? They say that music stirs the soul. What nonsense! What a lie! It acts, it acts frightfully (I speak for myself), but not in an ennobling way. It acts in a way that neither ennoble nor debases the soul, but irritates it. How shall I say it? Music makes me forget myself, my true situation. It transports me into a state which is not my own. Under the influence of music I really seem to feel what I do not feel, to understand what I do not understand, to have powers which I cannot have.⁵⁴⁸

To escape the temptations that music would therefore lead him into, Pozdnyshev takes a trip, but ends up returning early. When he arrives home, he discovers his wife and the musician playing together. He assumes they too have been infected with the lustful music, and his rage at his wife's betrayal drives him to stab her to death. At the trial, Pozdnyshev goes free because his wife's adultery is deemed the cause of her murder.

⁵⁴⁸ Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

Pozdnyshev uses his own tale to draw a useful moral lesson for both listeners and readers alike: that women are trained from birth only to be sexually pleasing to men, and it is this training that is responsible for the modern broken marriage. In order to repair relationships between husbands and wives, women will need to set their highest ideals as “virginity, freedom from sensuality,”⁵⁴⁹ rather than cultivate their image as objects of masculine desire.

The distribution of the *Kreutzer Sonata* prompted responses and condemnations to pour in from around the globe, ranging from French writer Emile Zola, who swore that any author who could fashion such a thing had to be “cracked in the head,”⁵⁵⁰ to a United States judge who deemed the work to possess “very little dramatic interest or literary merit.”⁵⁵¹ In 1890, the United States Post Office Department banned the circulation of newspapers containing installments of the *Kreutzer Sonata*, a ruling the United States Attorney General confirmed.⁵⁵² Even American president Theodore Roosevelt felt compelled to call Tolstoy a “sexual moral pervert.”⁵⁵³

Chekhov, too, took part in these polemics. While it is fair to say that he read the novella with great pleasure, his critical assessment of it was mixed. On the one hand he praised its beauty of expression, but on the other, he objected to what he considered

⁵⁴⁹ Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

⁵⁵⁰ Quoted in Michael Katz, *The Kreutzer Sonata Variations*, 296. Original quote is from *The New York Herald*, August 24, 1890.

⁵⁵¹ Quoted in Michael Katz, *The Kreutzer Sonata Variations*, xii. Original quote is from “Count Tolstoi Not Obscene,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 1890.

⁵⁵² Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, introduction by Doris Lessing, xi.

⁵⁵³ Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, introduction by Doris Lessing, xi.

Tolstoy's retrograde and ill-informed moralizing on sexually transmitted diseases and expressions of female desire. In a letter to A.N. Pleshcheev from 15 February 1890,

Chekhov writes:

Неужели Вам не понравилась «Крейцера соната»? Я не скажу, чтобы это была вещь гениальная, вечная — тут я не судья, но, по моему мнению, в массе всего того, что теперь пишется у нас и за границей, едва ли можно найти что-нибудь равносильное по важности замысла и красоте исполнения <...> Кроме всего того, что Вы перечислили, в ней есть еще одно, чего не хочется простить ее автору, а именно — смелость, с какою Толстой трактует о том, чего он не знает и чего из упрямства не хочет понять. Так, его суждения о сифилисе, воспитательных домах, об отвращении женщин к совокуплению и проч. не только могут быть оспариваемы, но и прямо изобличают человека невежественного, не потрудившегося в продолжение своей долгой жизни прочесть две-три книжки, написанные специалистами.

Do you mean you really don't like the *Kreutzer Sonata*? I won't say it's an immortal work of genius—I'm no judge of that—but in my opinion, among the mass of what is presently being written here and abroad, you are unlikely to find anything to match it in importance of conception or beauty of execution...In addition to all that you have enumerated, there is still one thing there that I don't want to forgive the author, namely, the audacity with which Tolstoy pontificates about what he doesn't know and, from pigheadedness, he doesn't want to understand. His judgments on syphilis, founding homes, women's aversion to sex and so forth are not only debatable, but are illustrative of a person who is ignorant, who hasn't, in the course of his long life, bothered to read 2 or 3 books written by specialists.⁵⁵⁴

Due to the backlash the novella received, Tolstoy was compelled to write an addendum to the *Kreutzer Sonata* to explain the true meaning of his story. However his "Postscript," written and illegally circulated in 1890, instead of clarifying the nuances of his position, only hardened his conservative views on love and marriage. In a fiery apologia

⁵⁵⁴ *Pis'ma* IV, 18.

addressed directly to the reader, Tolstoy not only reiterates Pozdnyshv's attacks on sexual desire within marriage, but, as Moeller notes, he also goes further by denying marriage's legitimacy as a Christian institution at all.⁵⁵⁵ Instead, Tolstoy elaborates the notion that the true Christian ideal is total celibacy. In order to bring everyone around to this conclusion, "Men and women ought to be educated in their homes and by public opinion to look, before and after marriage, upon infatuation and the carnal love connected with it, not as a poetical and exalted condition, such as it is now considered to be, but as upon an animal condition, degrading to man."⁵⁵⁶

After Tolstoy penned this "Postscript," Chekhov's criticism of Tolstoyan sexual morality became more pointed. This was especially true in the wake of Chekhov's trip to Sakhalin, after which the *Kreutzer Sonata* ceased to be a significant event for him, and instead became "ridiculous and nonsensical."⁵⁵⁷ In another letter to Suvorin from 8 September 1891,⁵⁵⁸ Chekhov goes on to say,

Я третьего дня читал его «Послесловие». Убейте меня, но это глупее и душнее, чем «Письма к губернаторше», которые я презираю. Чёрт бы побрал философию великих мира сего! Все великие мудрецы деспотичны, как генералы, и невежливы и неделикатны, как генералы, потому что уверены в безнаказанности. Диоген плевал в бороды, зная, что ему за это ничего не будет; Толстой ругает докторов мерзавцами и невежничает с великими вопросами, потому что он тот же

⁵⁵⁵ Peter Ulf Moeller, *The Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata*, 186.

⁵⁵⁶ Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

⁵⁵⁷ From a letter to A.S. Suvorin, 17 December 1890. *Pis'ma IV*, 147.

⁵⁵⁸ Based on this letter, it appears that Chekhov read the "Epilogue" more than a year after it was originally composed and circulated. The likely reason that it took so long for Chekhov to read and comment on the "Epilogue" is that, when it came to public notice, Chekhov had been undertaking his arduous journey to Sakhalin. Therefore, Chekhov missed the initial controversy caused by the work. It seems that it took him several months after his return to European Russia in December 1890 to get completely caught up on the literary and cultural events that had occurred during his absence.

Диоген, которого в участок не поведешь и в газетах не выругаешь.

The day before yesterday I read his "Postscript." I'll be damned if it isn't stupider and more stifling than [Gogol's] "Letters to the Governor's Wife," which I detest. To the devil with the philosophy of all the great ones of this world! All great sages are despots, like generals, and impolite and indelicate, like generals, because they are certain of their own impunity. Diogenes spit in his own beard, knowing that nothing would happen to him for it; Tolstoy disparages doctors as blackguards and mucks around with great questions, because he too is a Diogenes whom you can't march down to the local precinct or ream in the papers.⁵⁵⁹

While explicit references to the *Kreutzer Sonata* drop off in Chekhov's letters after this point, Tolstoy's work continued to smolder in the younger writer's artistic imagination. In this regard, Chekhov certainly was not alone, for the *Kreutzer Sonata* itself was forged in a crucible of reinscription, reappropriation, and ultimately, renewal. As David Herman points out, Tolstoy was inspired to pen his novella in the first place by a live performance of the Beethoven sonata at Yasnaya Polyana. What is more, Tolstoy's tale was meant to be a member of a trio: on the night of the concert he proposed to an actor and a painter also in attendance that they should all elaborate Beethoven's theme in their respective media.⁵⁶⁰ As for Tolstoy's composition itself, it famously went on to spawn seemingly infinite artistic reinterpretations. Its very first reading in St. Petersburg, which took place at the house of Tolstoy's sister-in-law, spurred the Russian realist painter Grigory Myasoyedov to immortalize the scene in an 1893 painting that now hangs in the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House).⁵⁶¹ Neither was Tolstoy's own family immune. As Michael Katz

⁵⁵⁹ *Pis'ma IV*, 270.

⁵⁶⁰ David Herman, "Stricken by Infection: Art and Adultery in Anna Karenina and the Kreutzer Sonata," 16, note 3. Herman draws here on autobiographical materials from L.D. Opul'skaia, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy: Materialy k biografii s 1886 po 1892 god*, 117-121.

⁵⁶¹ Michael Katz, *The Kreutzer Sonata Variations*, xi.

demonstrates in his recent hybrid work *The Kreutzer Sonata Variations*, both Tolstoy's wife Sophia and his son Lev penned counter-stories which not only "convey their deep disagreement with the 'great man's' views, but they also passionately strive to undo the message of the original."⁵⁶² The heroine of one of Sofiya's stories, entitled "Whose fault?," is even a raven-haired beauty called Anna.

Turning to Chekhov in particular, several stories he wrote throughout the 1890s, such as "The Duel," "Peasant Women" ("Baby"), "The Wife" ("Zhena"), and his scathingly parodic "Ariadne" ("Ariadna"), have been interpreted as engaging with the *Kreutzer Sonata*.⁵⁶³ "The Duel," which is discussed extensively in Chapter 1 of this study, centers on a love triangle between Laevsky, his mistress Nadezhda, and Nadezhda's lovers. According to Laevsky, in an echo of Pozdnyshev, a woman "needs only the bedroom" ("женщине прежде всего нужна спальня").⁵⁶⁴ The night before the famous duel, Laevsky does walk in on Nadezhda involved in a tryst with her young lover. In this early rewrite, however, everything is decided differently: not only are there not horrible consequences for Nadezhda, but she and Laevsky are able to forgive each other. It is apparent from "The Duel"'s 1891 publication that Chekhov's polemic with the *Kreutzer Sonata* thus began almost immediately. "Peasant Women" is a comparable tale of erotic rage and spousal murder, related by a traveler to an innkeeper, but this time set in the peasant world of rural

⁵⁶² Michael Katz, *The Kreutzer Sonata Variations*, xix. Sofiya's stories are entitled "Whose Fault?" and "Song without Words." For his part, Lev's story is called "Chopin's Prelude."

⁵⁶³ For a detailed analysis of these stories see the following: Carol Flath, "Writing about Nothing: Chekhov's 'Ariadna' and the Narcissistic Narrator," Peter Ulf Moeller, *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoy and the Debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s*, M.L. Semanova, "Kreutzerova sonata L.N. Tolstogo i 'Ariadna' A.P. Chekhova."

⁵⁶⁴ PSS VII, 360.

Russia. The traveler, Matvei Savvich, tells the story of his love affair with a young woman named Mashenka, whose husband, Vasily, had been drafted into the army. After a few years, Vasily is discharged due to illness and returns home. Matvei Savvich ends the affair and confesses everything to Vasily, who attempts to forgive them. But when it becomes clear that Mashenka will always love Matvei Savvich, Vasily beats her violently. The next day Vasily dies of what appears to be arsenic poisoning. Mashenka is tried for murder, and while Matvei Savvich has no proof, it is his testimony about her “obvious” woman’s guilt which condemns her to Siberia. As Matvei Savvich tells his story, he betrays no awareness that he was at all to blame for what transpired; as in the *Kreutzer Sonata*, the fault is placed squarely on the woman. Chekhov, however, subtly emphasizes Matvei Savvich’s own cruel nature, which indicates that he bears some responsibility: he roars at Mashenka’s young son Kuzka for misplacing his cap, calling him “little swine” and threatening to beat him.⁵⁶⁵

Published in 1892, “The Wife” features a well-off and respectable couple who used to be attracted to each other but now are stuck in contentious deadlock. Husband Pavel Andreevich and wife Natalia Gavrilovna live on separate floors of a large mansion and only sporadically come together to quarrel. As Peter Ulf Moeller points out, the husband’s description of their domestic life is inspired by the violence inherent in the *Kreutzer Sonata*;⁵⁶⁶ for instance, Pavel Andreevich tells us that his wife “had an expression on her face as though I had a knife or a revolver concealed in my pocket.”⁵⁶⁷ Furthermore, in the earliest drafts of the story, the jealous Pavel Andreevich declares that he is afraid his

⁵⁶⁵ PSS VII, 352.

⁵⁶⁶ Peter Ulf Moeller, *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata*, 254.

⁵⁶⁷ PSS VII, 470.

spouse will “embrace a musician as in the *Kreutzer Sonata*.”⁵⁶⁸ Although Pavel Andreevich does not follow his jealousy to the ultimate conclusion by killing his wife so that no one else can have her, as does his predecessor Pozdnyshev, the story does not end on a reconciliatory note. After many heated battles, the husband and wife reach a kind of truce, but only after Pavel Andreevich appears to have lost his mind. Afterwards, the wife is able to undermine her husband completely by giving away all of their possessions to help famine victims, while the husband can only sit alone in his room.

Of all of these tales, “Ariadne” (1895) has received most of the critical attention in this vein. Structurally, “Ariadne” bears a striking resemblance to the *Kreutzer Sonata*, since we have a passenger, Shamokhin, who relates both his love story and his personal theories on the battle between the sexes to the narrator and readers while on a journey: this time, we are all trapped together with him and his woe on a steamer bound for Sevastopol. To escape would be to jump overboard. But as Moeller notes, the story is not so much a retelling of the *Kreutzer Sonata* as it is a parody of it. Moeller elaborates:

But while Pozdnyshev’s passionate monologue spellbinds his audience throughout the night, in Chekhov the situation is less intense: “You’re not bored, are you?”⁵⁶⁹ Shamokhin repeatedly asks, noticing his listener’s increasing sleepiness (“I was already tired of contradicting him and wished to sleep”; “I heard no more, as I had fallen asleep”⁵⁷⁰). The weakness of his listener’s interest indicates that the very subject of Shamokhin’s confessions has become somewhat hackneyed....⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁸ PSS VII, 472, 599.

⁵⁶⁹ PSS IX, 108-109.

⁵⁷⁰ PSS IX, 131-132.

⁵⁷¹ Peter Ulf Moeller, *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata*, 254.

Rayfield points out that Chekhov's portrait of the grasping and conniving young female that began in stories like "His Spouse" ("Supruga") and "Anna Round the Neck," reaches its apotheosis in "Ariadne."⁵⁷² As the unfortunate Ivan Ilyich Shamokhin⁵⁷³ spins his tale, we discover that, as a young man in the Russian countryside, he fell in love with Ariadne, a selfish and cold young woman whose sexual appetites destroy the life and the bank account of every man she beds. Shamokhin is charmed by her narcissistic behavior but cannot bring himself to propose to her, for he does not believe she is capable of loving in return. To punish Shamokhin, Ariadne runs off to Europe with a married man, Lubkov. However, once his money has started to run out, Ariadne begs Shamokhin to visit Abbazia to help them and then accompany them to Italy. In this way, Shamokhin is tricked into becoming first her protector, then, on a subsequent visit to Italy, her lover. Although she is beguiling, Shamokhin pays dearly for his obsession: by the end of the story, he has lost almost all of his money and credit with his friends and family. Shamokhin would like to leave Ariadne for a pure and noble woman who has not been raised to practice sexual voodoo on men, but he is powerless to do so. In tones reminiscent of the *Kreutzer Sonata*, he believes his tragic situation could have been avoided if people would only "teach the young girl, right from the cradle, that men are not primarily cavaliers and wooers, but fellow human beings, her equal in all things."⁵⁷⁴ In this way, Shamokhin embodies the philosophical core of Tolstoy's novella, for, as Carol Flath points out, "Shamokhin's ideas

⁵⁷² Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 124.

⁵⁷³ This character's name may also be a swipe at Tolstoy, since Shamokhin shares a first name and patronymic with the title character of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. In Chekhov's tale, instead of the physical death of the hero, we witness his moral decline.

⁵⁷⁴ PSS IX, 131.

reflect the influence of Tolstoy's dream of chastity in marriage, expressed most notably in the *Kreutzer Sonata*.⁵⁷⁵ In keeping with the tale's parodic motif, Chekhov ends with a wry dig at the *Kreutzer Sonata*'s broad and damning generalizations. As Moeller observes, "Chekhov's own reservations regarding all kinds of patent solutions can be glimpsed in the listener's quiet protest: 'why generalize, why judge all women on the basis of Ariadne?'"⁵⁷⁶ Rayfield concurs, arguing that this interjection comes from a "spectral Chekhov—the only time that Chekhov peeps from behind the scenes in his mature work."⁵⁷⁷ But what scholars have not yet explored is that Chekhov wrote his own counter-novella that sought to polemicize with *both* of Tolstoy's major works on female sexuality: the little studied and less appreciated novella *Tale of an Unknown Man* (*Rasskaz neizvestnogo cheloveka*).

The Story of an Unknown Man: Chekhov's "unknown" response to Tolstoy

First published in 1893, *The Story of an Unknown Man* has received comparatively little scholarly attention.⁵⁷⁸ Most of the modest amount written on it stresses the story's political and revolutionary elements. Simon Karlinsky characterizes this work as one "in which Chekhov confronts the issue of revolutionary violence."⁵⁷⁹ More recently, Donald

⁵⁷⁵ Carol Flath, "Writing about Nothing: Chekhov's 'Ariadna' and the Narcissistic Narrator," 237.

⁵⁷⁶ Peter Ulf Moeller, *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata*, 254; *PSS IX*, 130.

⁵⁷⁷ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 125.

⁵⁷⁸ *Unknown Man* was printed in the February and March issues of the journal *Russkaia mys'* (*Russian Thought*) that year.

⁵⁷⁹ Michael Henry Heim and Simon Karlinsky, *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary*, 202.

Rayfield has written that *Unknown Man* is a story whose “political overtones lack plausibility.”⁵⁸⁰ Even the poet Anna Akhmatova has been quoted on this subject, declaring,

I don't like Chekhov, and I know why. “Story of an Unknown Man” is phony and contrived. Chekhov did not know anything about the Socialist Revolutionaries...And what about Chekhov's understanding of the civil service? He takes high-level Petersburg bureaucrats and describes them as if they were lowly policemen from Tsarevo-Kokshaisk [a provincial town, M.M.]. They walk around in their bedrooms giggling over their slippers. Who ever heard of such a thing! It's ridiculous.⁵⁸¹

One major scholarly work stands in opposition: Saveliy Senderovich's groundbreaking study *Chekhov—s glazu na glaz* (*Chekhov: Up Close and Personal*), which explicates the myth of St. George the Dragonslayer in Chekhov's oeuvre. Senderovich maintains that, far from spinning an unsophisticated tale of political corruption, *Unknown Man* ranks instead as one of Chekhov's most enigmatic works which has suffered from inadequate scholarship.⁵⁸² In line with Senderovich, this chapter seeks to open new areas of inquiry on Chekhov's tale.

On the surface, *Unknown Man* does unequivocally follow a political radical who attempts to spy on an important government official by pretending to be a servant and working as a valet to the official's son. The very reason this interpretation has proven to be so unsatisfying, however, to critics and readers alike, is because it is only a veneer left over from previous and unsuccessful drafts. Chekhov began the tale in 1887-1888 but grew disenchanted with his attempt and cast the manuscript aside to focus on other works, such

⁵⁸⁰ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov: A Critical Study of Chekhov's Prose and Drama*, 119.

⁵⁸¹ From the memoirs of Natalia Roskina, reproduced in Konstantin Polivanov, *Anna Akhmatova and her Circle*, 185-186.

⁵⁸² Saveliy Senderovich, *Chekhov—s glazu na glaz*, 232.

as *The Duel*.⁵⁸³ By the time he returned to it four years later, other ideas had already begun to take root.⁵⁸⁴ A closer examination of the text and the conditions under which it was created reveal the relative unimportance of the political to the story as a whole.

In contrast to the prevailing scholarly opinion, I argue that the story is best understood as Chekhov's unique entry to the debate on sexual morality that was ignited in Russia in the 1890s by Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*. This chapter is in concert with V.B. Kataev's assertion that the *Kreutzer Sonata* "resonated in Chekhov's work, and far from all of these resonances have been recognized thus far."⁵⁸⁵ In re-evaluating *Unknown Man*, the present study takes the position that the novella's Tolstoyan elements, such as dialogues, love triangles, and plot sequences that have been adapted both from *Anna Karenina* and the *Kreutzer Sonata*, are too powerful and too pervasive to be ignored. Through a close-reading analysis of these elements, I demonstrate that Chekhov engages both *Anna Karenina* and the *Kreutzer Sonata* to provide a comprehensive rejoinder to Tolstoy's sexual morality.

It is perhaps unsurprising that *Unknown Man* polemicizes with the *Kreutzer Sonata*, since it was completed and published in the wake of Chekhov's trip to the penal colony of Sakhalin, a journey which, as mentioned above, altered his outlook on Tolstoy's radical text. This surrounding context becomes apparent in the beginning of *Unknown Man*, when the narrator, a former lieutenant in the navy, is reminiscing about his travels:

мне грезилось море, наша эскадра и корвет, на котором я совершил кругосветное плавание. Мне хотелось еще раз испытать то невыразимое чувство, когда, гуляя в тропическом

⁵⁸³ Chekhov recounts these details in a letter to L.Ia. Gurevich of 22 May 1893, *Pis'ma V*, 211-212.

⁵⁸⁴ For more on the composition of *Unknown Man*, see the *primechaniia* to the PSS VIII, 466-486.

⁵⁸⁵ V.B. Kataev, *Literaturnye sviazi Chekhova*, 58.

лесу или глядя на закат солнца в Бенгальском заливе, замираешь от восторга и в то же время грустишь по родине. Мне снились горы, женщины, музыка, и с любопытством, как мальчик, я всматривался в лица, вслушивался в голоса.

I daydreamed of the sea, of our squadron, of the corvette that had taken me around the world. I wanted to experience once again that inexpressible feeling when you're strolling in a tropical forest or watching the sunset on the Bay of Bengal, swooning with rapture and at the same time longing for your motherland. I dreamed of mountains, women, music, and with curiosity, like a boy, peered into faces, listened to voices.⁵⁸⁶

The passage above contains striking parallels to Chekhov's own memories of the trip back from Sakhalin by sea via the Pacific and Indian oceans. In a detailed letter to Suvorin of 9 December 1890, Chekhov outlines his adventures thus:

Затем следует Цейлон — место, где был рай. Здесь в раю я сделал больше 100 верст по железной дороге и по самое горло насытился пальмовыми лесами и бронзовыми женщинами. Когда у меня будут дети, то я не без гордости скажу им: «Сукины дети, я не своем веку имел сношение с черноглазой индуской...и где же? в кокосовом лесу, в лунную ночь.»⁵⁸⁷

After that came Ceylon, the place where I found paradise. Here in paradise I traveled more than a hundred versts by train and had my fill of palm groves and bronze women. When I have children, I'll say to them, not without pride: "Why you sons of bitches, I've had relations in my day with a black-eyed Indian girl, and guess where? In a coconut grove, on a moonlit night!"⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁶ PSS VIII, 140.

⁵⁸⁷ Due to language and content, the underlined portions of this letter are still censored in the academy edition of Chekhov's complete works. The restored cuts were made widely available to the Russian reading public only in 2008, when a new edition of Chekhov's complete works began to be released in Moscow by the publishing house Voskresenie. The letter quoted here is from the volume in that collection entitled *Anton Chekhov: Novyi profil'. Iz perepiski A.P. Chekhova s A.S. Suvorinyim*, 337-340. The restored cuts are found on pages 338-339.

⁵⁸⁸ *Pis'ma* IV, 140.

From these two excerpts, it becomes apparent that Chekhov has bequeathed to his hero his own experience of paradise in Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), which is located on the Bay of Bengal, the geographic location the narrator of *Unknown Man* dreams of. Not only do the palm and coconut groves of Chekhov's liaison make an appearance in the lieutenant's memories as tropical forests, but also does the tryst itself, for which the latter's "swooning with rapture" would seem to be code. Moreover, the tone of exploration, curiosity, enraptured remembrance and the longing for an exquisite past that characterizes Chekhov's imagined future interaction with his children colors the narrator's thoughts as well.

When the tale opens, the narrator has just begun a new position as personal valet to Georgii Orlov, the son of a prominent Petersburg official. His original reason for working as Orlov Junior's servant is to gather information on Orlov Senior as part of an anti-government conspiracy. However, the narrator becomes distracted from his political duties by Orlov's mistress Zina, with whom he falls in love. The narrator becomes intimately involved in his employer's life when Zina suddenly leaves her lawful husband and moves into the apartment as well. Orlov and Zina's romantic relationship, however, proves to be uneven and short-lived. Once it falls apart, the narrator attempts to salvage Zina's maimed reputation by taking her abroad to live in Europe. They travel together for several months, but to Zina's mounting distress, she discovers the narrator's love for her and takes her own life out of despair.

In crafting his unhappy lovers, Chekhov draws heavily on Tolstoyan models, for Orlov and his retinue have inherited their sexual worldview from the *Kreutzer Sonata's* cynical hero Pozdnyshev, while Zina is drawn to a large extent from Tolstoy's famous Anna.

Like Tolstoy's protagonists, both Orlov and Zina hail from St. Petersburg high society. Chekhov's narrator even goes so far as to say that Orlov has "a Petersburg appearance: narrow shoulders, long torso, sunken temples, eyes of an indeterminate color, and a skimpy, drab growth of hair on his head, chin and upper lip. His face was sleek, worn, and unpleasant."⁵⁸⁹ This circumstance makes the tale's parallels with Tolstoy all the more striking, since this milieu is one that Chekhov hardly ever described in his work. Thus it seems that Chekhov models his male characters on those found in the *Kreutzer Sonata* specifically in order to expose the "ridiculous and nonsensical" nature of their point of view.⁵⁹⁰ Orlov and his cronies are cynical, petty, and, like Pozdnyshev, spend all of their time discussing love and women. Like Pozdnyshev, who believes that a typical wife is "an animal,"⁵⁹¹ Orlov responds to Zina's romantic advances only when she begs affection from him like a dog begging for a treat: as the narrator tells us, "to obtain an insincere smile or a kiss from him, she went on her knees before him, fawning like a little dog (собачонка)."⁵⁹² For Orlov, the "lady" and the "little dog" are one and the same. When Zina behaves as a complex human being with hopes, goals and frustrations, he ignores her, preferring to drink and play cards with his friends instead. Furthermore, chief among Orlov and his friends' beliefs are that there are no faithful wives, that there is no "wife from whom, given a certain knack, one could not obtain caresses without leaving the drawing room, with the

⁵⁸⁹ PSS VIII, 140.

⁵⁹⁰ In a letter to Suvorin of 17 December 1890, Chekhov dismissed the undergirding ideas of the *Kreutzer Sonata* as "ridiculous and nonsensical." *Pis'ma* IV, 147.

⁵⁹¹ Tolstoy, *Kreutzer Sonata*.

⁵⁹² PSS VIII, 169.

husband sitting right next door in his study.”⁵⁹³ This sentence could be said to summarize the climax of the *Kreutzer Sonata*. Not only does the protagonist Pozdnyshev believe that he, as far as infidelity is concerned, has a typical wife who is only interested in sex, but also, when Pozdnyshev comes home unexpectedly from a business trip in order to catch his wife and her lover in the act of adultery, they are in the drawing-room, while he quickly reconnoiters in his study.

On a linguistic level, Orlov parrots Pozdnyshev’s speech patterns as well. Tolstoy’s hero uses nonsensical, phony statistics when talking about the number of failed romantic relationships in modern society, when he has no concrete knowledge to back up such claims. Orlov follows suit, claiming that,

Все опыты, известные нам из повседневной жизни и занесенные на скрижали бесчисленных романов и драм, единогласно подтверждают, что всякие адюльтеры и сожителства у порядочных людей, какова бы ни была любовь вначале, не продолжаютя дольше двух, а много — трех лет.

all the experiences known to us from everyday life, and set down in the scrolls of countless novels and plays, unanimously confirm that no adulterous relations and cohabitations among decent people, however great their love is in the beginning, last longer than two years, three at the most.⁵⁹⁴

This final assertion echoes Pozdnyshev’s notion that love has an “expiration date,” as

Tolstoy’s hero reasons:

В жизни бывает это предпочтение одного перед другими на года, что очень редко, чаще на месяцы, а то на недели, на дни, на часы.

⁵⁹³ PSS VIII, 149.

⁵⁹⁴ PSS VIII, 159.

In real life this preference for one person instead of another may occasionally last for years, but more frequently it is measured by months, or even by weeks or days or hours.⁵⁹⁵

Significantly, in his version Chekhov has removed the heady and all-consuming passion for the beloved which characterized Tolstoy's hero. Not only does Orlov not love Zina enough to kill her or kill for her, but he also loses interest in her quite rapidly, abandoning her after about three months for his next conquest. In this way, Chekhov exposes the blatant cynicism of high-society morality and sexual attitudes which permeates the *Kreutzer Sonata*, for Orlov unapologetically brings to life his own contemptuous philosophy.

As is not surprising for Chekhov, the hints that serve to invalidate Orlov's Tolstoyan worldview are understated but significant.⁵⁹⁶ The narrator considers conversations between Orlov and his cronies to be banal and "a most disgusting music,"⁵⁹⁷ which would seem to be a subtle but snide comment on the *Kreutzer Sonata's* melodic underpinnings.⁵⁹⁸ This theme is further elaborated by Orlov's crony Kukushkin, whose name is derived from the Russian word for a cuckoo, "kukushka."⁵⁹⁹ Much as a cuckoo bird's speech is limited to

⁵⁹⁵ Tolstoy, *Kreutzer Sonata*.

⁵⁹⁶ Another connection between Orlov and Tolstoy is that Chekhov accuses them both of being Diogeneses, i.e., like the great Greek philosopher who, on the basis of his lofty status, could afford to be a tyrant of thought. See PSS VII, 149 and *Pis'ma* IV, 270.

⁵⁹⁷ PSS VIII, 148.

⁵⁹⁸ The musical elements of the *Kreutzer Sonata* are treated eloquently and incisively in Ruth Rischin's article "Allegro Tumultuosissimamente: Beethoven in Tolstoy's Fiction."

⁵⁹⁹ This character's name could also be an allusion to Turgenev's character Kukshina from *Fathers and Sons*. Chekhov greatly admired this work, the satirical portrait of Kukshina in particular. A letter to A.S. Suvorin of 24 February 1893 reveals that Chekhov had been meditating on the significance of Turgenev's novel just as *Unknown Man* was being published. *Pis'ma* V, 174.

the repetition of the same meaningless sounds, so too are these men merely repeating words that are devoid of meaning. Here, it is interesting to note that the narrator considers Kukushkin to have a mouth “shaped like a little heart,”⁶⁰⁰ a detail which further solidifies the relationship between these men’s meaningless utterances about love and marriage and the ridiculous.

The final blow that renders *Kreutzer Sonata* thinking inviable in Chekhov’s narrative world is a small but key detail: galoshes. Readers of Chekhov will be familiar with the role that galoshes usually play in Chekhov’s work. They are typically found on the feet of characters who have narrow-minded and vulgar (*poshlye*) worldviews, or the prototypical “encased people.” Ippolit from “The Literature Teacher” (“Uchitel’ slovesnosti”) and Belikov from “Man in a Case” (“Chelovek v futliare”) both wear galoshes, as do Olga from “The Grasshopper” (“Poprygunya”) and Professor Serebryakov from *Uncle Vanya* (*Diadia Vania*), to name but a few. In *Unknown Man* the narrator expressly tells us that Orlov’s friend Kukushkin wears leather galoshes, while the narrator himself, who looks on Orlov and his worldview with repugnance, pointedly runs outside *without* galoshes on his feet.⁶⁰¹

Implicated too in *Unknown Man* is Chekhov’s revisit of Anna Karenina’s complex fate. In creating Orlov’s lover Zina, Chekhov has borrowed extensively from Tolstoy’s troubled yet enchanting heroine. Like the Karenins, Zina and her lawful husband occupy a high social position in Petersburg, and Zina herself bears a strong physical resemblance to Anna. When we first meet her, she is wearing a black dress, and her white skin and dark

⁶⁰⁰ PSS VIII, 146.

⁶⁰¹ PSS VIII, 187; 188.

hair are emphasized.⁶⁰² She is also around thirty years old, the same age as Anna, and craves a life that will answer her passionate desires. Like her literary predecessor, Zina sparkles with an energy and vitality that cannot be contained: she loves to smile and laugh “like a young girl (девчонка)”⁶⁰³ and, as Chekhov tells us, the narrator is enthralled with “what a magnificent woman she is! How she loves!”⁶⁰⁴ The plots of their love affairs are strikingly similar as well. Both women leave a husband they do not love to start a life with a new man; begin to fight with their lovers when the charm of their union starts to wear off; are considered “fallen women” and are barred from Petersburg society, while their lovers are still free to move about in the same social circles as before; threaten suicide; flee to Italy to escape the oppressive atmosphere in Russia; give birth to a baby girl; and finally take their own lives out of despair.

There are also metaliterary hints that Zina’s story has come straight out of a previously written novel. The narrator tells us that,

Когда она сидела таким образом, стиснув руки, окаменелая, скорбная, мне представлялось, что оба мы участвуем в каком-то романе, в старинном вкусе, под названием «Злосчастная», «Покинутая» или что-нибудь вроде.

when Zina sat with her hands clenched, stony, grief-stricken, I imagined both of us participating in some novel in the old-fashioned taste, entitled *An Ill-Fated Woman*, *An Abandoned Woman*, or something of the sort.⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰² PSS VIII, 142.

⁶⁰³ PSS VIII, 151.

⁶⁰⁴ PSS VIII, 172.

⁶⁰⁵ PSS VIII, 199.

It is easy to see how these titles encapsulate Anna Karenina's tale as well, and could even serve as substitute titles. Anna is ill-fated from her first appearance in the novel: while at the train station during an accident, she pronounces the event "a bad omen,"⁶⁰⁶ only to suffer the same death herself. Gary Saul Morson even goes so far as to attribute Anna's downfall to her proclivity for reading her own life as a series of ominous—and narratively significant—events.⁶⁰⁷ She also perceives herself to be abandoned by the end of the novel: in the hours leading up to her suicide, a confluence of factors convince Anna that she has lost Vronsky forever. These include his departure to the country, his lack of response to her telegrams, and, finally the fact that she hears that another princess and her daughter have come to the country, too, to visit him.

Unquestionably Zina's suicide forges a bond between her and her Tolstoyan predecessor. But these heroines differ in one very important way: the motivations for their suicides. Anna kills herself because she believes she has lost Vronsky's love. Zina, by contrast, does not take her own life because she has lost the love of a man. Instead, she does so because she realizes that her life has nowhere to go. After discovering Orlov's infidelity, she and the narrator run away to Europe, ostensibly to build a new life together while chastely serving the revolutionary cause. Zina wishes to reconstruct her identity as a "living, feeling, and reasoning person."⁶⁰⁸ However, as Orlov disappointed Zina with promises of affection that proved hollow, so too does the narrator seduce Zina, this time ideologically, only to disillusion her when his passionate crusading turns out to be only a

⁶⁰⁶ *Anna Karenina* Part I, Chapter XVIII.

⁶⁰⁷ See Gary Saul Morson's article "Anna Karenina's Omens."

⁶⁰⁸ *PSS* VIII, 206.

veneer for his personal feelings. As it turns out, the narrator has been irresistably drawn to Zina's vitality since the beginning of the novella: as the narrator tells us, every morning he "waited with bated breath till [he] would at last hear her voice and footsteps," and every night he dreamt of her rosy cheeks and melodious voice, the kind that he wishes his wife to possess.⁶⁰⁹ After Zina discovers that he is in love with her, she realizes that all of his "beautiful ideas come down to one inevitable, indispensable step: [she] must become [his] mistress."⁶¹⁰ Thus, instead of the glorious symphony of love that the narrator imagines they could share, Zina sees only a relationship which would result in a "tedious comedy."⁶¹¹ Neither romantic love nor political activism ultimately proves to be a viable alternative, for they both collapse into one and the same conclusion. It is this realization that leads Zina to poison herself.⁶¹²

In using Tolstoy's template for the life and death of an adulterous woman but altering the reasons for her suicide, Chekhov offers a poignant corrective to Tolstoy's direct moralizing. That Anna kills herself because her affair does not work out would seem to condemn sexual love outside of wedlock unequivocally. In Chekhov's story, Zina's death is not meant to be a moral judgment against adultery. Rather, it serves to show readers a more realistic reason for why a person would commit suicide: the lack of sustainable models women had on which to base their lives.

⁶⁰⁹ PSS VIII, 168.

⁶¹⁰ PSS VIII, 206-207.

⁶¹¹ PSS VIII, 207.

⁶¹² This is how Madame Bovary ends her life as well.

No less important is what transpires after their deaths: both these women's stories leave behind the same legacy of a helpless baby girl. Both stories must address the question of the baby girl's future—will the natural father raise her, or will the mother's lawful husband do so? By extension, whose worldview will shape her? Who is morally fit to have her charge? Tolstoy answers absolutely, for Karenin takes Anna's baby and raises it as his own. Unlike Tolstoy, Chekhov does not validate the moral superiority of the rejected yet lawful husband. Instead, he pointedly leaves the question open. In *Unknown Man's* final scene, the narrator has come back to Petersburg to discuss the future of Zina's child with Orlov. While Orlov pressures the narrator to decide what to do with the baby, the narrator refuses to allow a solution to be found, in effect ending the novella on this uncertainty. The novella's last words tell us that the baby girl "was sitting on the table and looking at [the narrator] attentively, without blinking, as if she knew her fate was being decided."⁶¹³ It is significant that the girl's name is Sonya, the diminutive form of the given name Sophia, which means "wisdom" in the original Greek.⁶¹⁴ Here, we can see that Chekhov is not telling us which side has possession of wisdom or even who might be worthy of it. In destabilizing Tolstoy's narrative and abjectly refusing to give us a definite answer, Chekhov subtly emphasizes that we cannot know the whole truth.

Tolstoy in "The Lady With the Little Dog"

⁶¹³ PSS VIII, 213.

⁶¹⁴ Dostoevsky makes use of this meaning as well, for it is the name of the prostitute heroine who rescues Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*.

As Andrey Tolstoy points out, the “*Kreutzer Sonata* is not a monologue, but a dialogue lying in wait, on a train that never stops with a companion who never sleeps.”⁶¹⁵ Chekhov, too, was Tolstoy’s constant co-traveller until his early death in 1904. Both Anglophone and Russian Slavists agree that Chekhov continued this dialogue in his mature story “The Lady with the Little Dog.” Lyudmila Parts has noted that this dialogue characterizes the last stage of Chekhov’s career.⁶¹⁶ More specifically, Thomas Winner asserts that “echoes from *Anna Karenina* are perhaps nowhere clearer than in “Anna on the Neck” and “The Lady with the Pet Dog.”⁶¹⁷ Russian scholars B. Meliakh and N.I. Prutskov have both written articles on the connections between the novel and Chekhov’s story.⁶¹⁸ However, what scholars have not yet explored is that, rather than being a response to *Anna Karenina* alone, Chekhov has instead crafted a tale that mixes elements from both *Anna Karenina* and the *Kreutzer Sonata* in order to achieve a new perspective on romantic love.

Common details between Tolstoy’s works and “The Lady with the Little Dog” abound. We may begin with the descriptions of the titular women: both Annas have gray eyes and are compared to the flickering light of a single candle. Similar character dynamics are at play as well, for both Gurov and Anna have uncongenial “Karenin-like” spouses that they have since come to despise.⁶¹⁹ Like the original Anna whose aunt arranged her early

⁶¹⁵ Quoted in Michael Katz, *The Kreutzer Sonata Variations*, 354.

⁶¹⁶ See Lyudmila Parts, “Down the Intertextual Lane: Petrushevskaiia, Chekhov, Tolstoy.”

⁶¹⁷ Thomas Winner, *Chekhov and His Prose*, 184.

⁶¹⁸ See B.S. Meliakh, “Dva resheniia odnoi temy” and N.I. Prutskov, “Ob odnoi paralleli (Anna Karenina Tolstogo i ‘Dama Sobackoj’ Cexova).” For his part, P.N. Dolzhenkov has written an article on “The Lady with the Little Dog” and the *Kreutzer Sonata*. See his “ ‘Dama s sobachkoi’ A.P. Chekhova i ‘Kreutzerova sonata’ L.N. Tolstogo: Dva vzgliada na liubov.”

⁶¹⁹ Caryl Emerson, “Chekhov and the Annas,” 127.

nuptials, Gurov was “married off” when he was too young to know or much care for his own preference. The Russian syntax makes this clear, as the narrator tells us that “they married him young, when he was still a second-year student” (“его женили рано, когда он был еще студентом второго курса”).⁶²⁰ However, Gurov betrays some of Pozdnyshev’s cynicism as well concerning the integrity and inherent value of women. In the beginning of Chekhov’s tale, we learn that Gurov habitually refers to his wife and other romantic conquests as “the lower race,” which is reminiscent of his Tolstoyan predecessor’s frequent characterization of his wife as an “animal.”⁶²¹ Moreover, both men cannot do without the company of the “inferior sex” and, in line with Pozdnyshev’s philosophizing on the ephemeral nature of sexual desire, Gurov tends both to feel passion for his lovers and then abandon them after only a brief time together.

But perhaps all of these similarities hit a little too close to home for Tolstoy, because “The Lady with the Little Dog” attracted his particular ire. Upon reading Chekhov’s latest work, Tolstoy remarked in his diary that its heroes were both like animals who were unable to tell good from evil.⁶²² But Chekhov takes especial care in his tale to mock the Tolstoyan preoccupation with the destructive nature of sex, particularly for women, which plays such a prominent role in both *Anna Karenina* and the *Kreutzer Sonata*. In what is perhaps the story’s most recognizable scene, right after Anna and Gurov consummate their

⁶²⁰ PSS X, 128.

⁶²¹ PSS X, 128; Tolstoy, *Kreutzer Sonata*.

⁶²² PSS X, 426. On January 16, 1900, Tolstoy wrote in his diary: «Читал Даму с собачкой Чехо<ва>. Это всё Ницше. Люди, не выработавшие в себе ясного мирозерцания, разделяющего добро и зло. Прежде робели, искали; теперь же, думая, что они по ту сторону добра и зла, остаются по сю сторону, т. е. почти животные».

relationship in her hotel room, Anna bursts into tears at her moral transgression, while Gurov calmly has his way with her watermelon.⁶²³ Parallels between the two Annas are explicit and often remarked upon. For example, like her Tolstoyan predecessor, for whom a single candle which she reads by signals her own moral and physical demise when it burns out,⁶²⁴ Anna Sergeyevna strikes the pose of a “woman who was a sinner” as the “solitary candle burning on the table threw a faint light on her face.”⁶²⁵ But what is even more striking is that Gurov’s pleasurable vivisection and consumption of Anna’s watermelon can be understood as a parodic deflation of Tolstoy’s fusion of murder and the sex act. As Olga Matich notes, the entire *Kreutzer Sonata* itself is a “blowup of the post-coital scene in *Anna Karenina*, in which Vronsky experiences himself as a murderer who disperses Anna’s body.”⁶²⁶ And while Vronsky uses a metaphorical dagger to commit the deed, Pozdnyshev uses a real one, both to penetrate his wife’s body and to kill: as he stabs her, Pozdnyshev “hear[s] and [remembers] the momentary resistance of the corset and of something else, and then the immersion of the knife into something soft.”⁶²⁷ The sexual dominance of the male perpetrator over a female victim is also present in Chekhov’s scene, only it has been rendered far less serious and even comical: in place of a body, we see Gurov using his knife to bring the juicy, moist red flesh of Anna Sergeyevna’s watermelon

⁶²³ For more on the substitution of food for sex in Russian literature, see Ronald D. LeBlanc, *Slavic Sins of the Flesh: Food, Sex, and Carnal Appetite in Nineteenth-Century Russian Fiction*.

⁶²⁴ Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Part 7, Chapter 31.

⁶²⁵ PSS X, 132.

⁶²⁶ Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia’s fin-de- siècle*, 51.

⁶²⁷ Tolstoy, *Kreutzer Sonata*.

to yield (significantly he does not ask her permission to eat it), while Anna Sergeyevna, like Anna Arkadyevna before her, is beside herself with grief at her own ruination.⁶²⁸ We chuckle ruefully as Gurov, instead of being able to comfort Anna, merely sits there in an awkward thirty-minute silence, which is punctuated only by his slicing and chewing. If, as Caryl Emerson notes, Tolstoy's scene is marked by "shame, nakedness, spiritual death and expulsion from the Garden of Eden,"⁶²⁹ Chekhov's hero at least manages to escape with some of the garden's bounty for the road. Eventually, as if to crown the ridiculousness of the entire scene, Gurov and Anna both begin to laugh.

But if Chekhov invokes a Tolstoyan beginning to their affair only to deflate it, then how are we to read the rest of the story? I argue that, in place of an unequivocal Tolstoyan condemnation of adultery, Chekhov is instead concerned with developing a reassessment of erotic love. The point is not so much that Chekhov supports adultery. In fact, he is famously unclear as to how things turn out for Anna and Gurov, since the story's final sentence speaks only to the difficulties that lie ahead. As was discussed briefly in this study's first chapter, the narrator concludes with their mutual realization that "the end was still a long, long way off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was only beginning."⁶³⁰ Rather, Chekhov's innovation is that, through their adulterous affair, Gurov and Anna are able to achieve both true love and more authentic versions of themselves. If, as Ruth Crego Benson argues in her study *Women in Tolstoy: The Ideal and the Erotic*,

⁶²⁸ After she and Vronsky have slept together for the first time, Anna "felt so criminal and guilty that all that was left for her was to prostrate herself and beg forgiveness," *Anna Karenina*.

⁶²⁹ Caryl Emerson, "Chekhov and the Annas," 122.

⁶³⁰ PSS X, 143.

Tolstoy fears and ultimately damns the “destructive and limiting power of romantic love,”⁶³¹ Chekhov is challenging us to reconsider its possibilities.

It is a critical commonplace that Anna and Gurov’s affair does not start out as anything remarkable. In fact, when they part in Yalta, both fully expect to return to their regular lives. But as the months pass, Gurov discovers that his memories of Anna become only more vivid, not less so as he had expected: Chekhov tells us that they “burned brighter and brighter.”⁶³² Such recollections drive him to seek out the flesh and blood woman once more. When they meet again at a crowded theatre in the city of S., Anna reveals that she has not been able to expunge Gurov from her mind, either. They renew their affair, with Anna traveling to the Slavyansky Bazaar hotel in Moscow every few months. During this time, Anna and Gurov experience a love they had never felt towards their respective spouses: it seems “fate herself made them for each other.”⁶³³ In stark contrast to Tolstoy’s prototypical couples (e.g., Anna and Vronsky, Kitty and Levin), Anna and Gurov’s relationship is able to bridge the fissure between disparate forms of love. As Benson notes, for Tolstoy romantic or erotic love (*eros*) and love based on tender devotion (*agape*) “can never flow toward the same person.”⁶³⁴ However, as Anna and Gurov’s relationship matures, it comes to rest upon the blend of both of these forms of expression. For example, when they see each other again after only a few months’ separation, they embrace passionately and “their kiss was slow and prolonged, as though they had not met for two years,” yet Chekhov also tells us

⁶³¹ Ruth Crego Benson, *Women in Tolstoy: The Ideal and the Erotic*, 43.

⁶³² PSS X, 136.

⁶³³ PSS X, 143.

⁶³⁴ Ruth Crego Benson, *Women in Tolstoy: The Ideal and the Erotic*, 123.

they “love each other like very close, dear people, like husband and wife, like tender friends.”⁶³⁵ As a result, their love sets the stage for an inversion that would be impossible in Tolstoy’s novelistic world. Their affair comes to constitute their only true reality, while their external, societally sanctioned lives have become the deception. For Gurov, and by extension, for Anna as well, their relationship and “everything that was important, interesting and essential for him, everything in which he was sincere and did not deceive himself, everything that made the kernel of his life, was hidden from other people.”⁶³⁶

It is undoubtedly this riddle that has made “Lady with the Little Dog” one of Chekhov’s most famous and beloved works. Critic Janet Malcolm notes that “the story’s most interesting and complicated paradox lies in the inversion of the inner-outer formula by which imaginative literature is perforce propelled. Even as Gurov hugs his secret to himself, we know all about it.”⁶³⁷ Except that we do not, actually, know *all* about it. Chekhov pointedly refuses to share with us the details regarding how Anna and Gurov’s affair turns out, thus observing his tale’s poetics of deliberately hiding the self from the outside world in order to preserve its integrity. This is in sharp contrast to Tolstoy, who is careful to describe in excruciating detail how Anna dies under the train, and to tell us that Vronsky perishes on the battlefield.

By ending their story on the word “beginning,” Anna and Gurov are suspended in a state of perpetual becoming that is cordoned off from readers, and consequently, from the rest of the world. It is likely this quality that led writer B.A. Lazarevsky to confide to

⁶³⁵ PSS X, 142, 143.

⁶³⁶ PSS X, 141.

⁶³⁷ Janet Malcolm, “The Kernel of Truth,” *The Guardian*, 25 January 2003.

Chekhov that, when he stays at the Slavyansky Bazaar, even years after the story's publication, "I constantly walk the corridors and look at the room numbers, all the while thinking, isn't this where Dmitry Dmitrievich Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna von Diderits met? It is difficult for me to reconcile myself to the notion that they never existed."⁶³⁸ Chekhov's notoriously open ending allows for his characters to be alive somewhere, still eternally "beginning" their difficult journey.

Conclusion: Tolstoy and "The Darling"

The critic Z.S. Papernyi has argued that "Tolstoy's influence on Chekhov did not have the character of a flare-up, a short-lived fling, or an 'episode.' The author of *Anna Karenina* remained a primary guidepost, a point of poetic departure, for Chekhov always."⁶³⁹ For his part, Tolstoy always made it a point to read Chekhov's latest work, often taking extensive notes on the younger author's stories in his diaries and writing about them in letters to friends and family. The two men were always on cordial terms, and Chekhov respected the elder author greatly, even calling him not a human being but a "Jupiter"⁶⁴⁰ and declaring, "I love no one as I do Tolstoy."⁶⁴¹ However, they were always working on different artistic wavelengths. As this chapter has demonstrated, though he adored Tolstoy's work, *Anna Karenina* in particular, Chekhov was constantly polemicizing with it. But their artistic

⁶³⁸ Quoted in the *primechaniia* to the PSS X, 426. Lazarevsky's letter was dated 16 March 1903, more than three years after the story was originally published in December 1899 in the journal *Russian Thought*.

⁶³⁹ Z.S. Papernyi, "Detal' i obraz," 166.

⁶⁴⁰ Letter to Suvorin of 11 December 1891, *Pis'ma* IV, 322.

⁶⁴¹ Letter to Men'shikov of 28 January 1900, *Pis'ma* IX, 29.

dialogue was very much a two-way street, for Tolstoy engaged in reinterpreting and reimagining Chekhov's work as well. A case in point is Tolstoy's response to Chekhov's 1899 story "Dushechka," usually translated into English as "The Sweetheart" or "The Darling."

"The Darling" tells the story of a young woman named Olenka who, having no personality of her own, completely absorbs the lives, thoughts, and characters of the men around her. Over the course of the story, she becomes romantically involved three times: first to the theater owner Kukin, second to the timber merchant Pustovalov, and third, to the veterinarian Smirnin. With each new relationship, Olenka appropriates her man's dominant traits, even becoming more authentic than the originals. While she is married to Kukin, she takes over his theater business, repeating all of his views on culture and the arts. During their relationship, Olenka's benefit is Kukin's loss, for she "gained weight and was all radiant with contentment, while Kukin grew skinnier and yellower."⁶⁴² After he dies suddenly in Moscow, she marries her second husband, Pustovalov, which leads her to abandon the theater and instead adopt the personality of her new mate. She takes over Pustovalov's timber offices in the evenings and dreams only of lumber at night. The similarity of both husband's names, Vanechka and Vasechka, suggests that Olenka has merely exchanged one for the other. Indeed, Pustovalov does not fare better than did Kukin, for he dies inexplicably of a simple cold. Once again, Olenka is not alone for long; this time, she has found a Volodechka Smirnin whom she invites to live in a lodge on her property while he sorts out family troubles. He and Olenka then begin an affair. When he

⁶⁴² PSS X, 104.

must leave too, it becomes clear that Olenka is but a void when a man is not around to fill her. As Chekhov tells us, the worst part of her grief lies in the fact that

у нее уже не было никаких мнений. Она видела кругом себя предметы и понимала всё, что происходило кругом, но ни о чем не могла составить мнения и не знала, о чем ей говорить...И так жутко, и так горько, как будто объелась полыни.

she no longer had any opinions. She saw the objects around her and understood everything that went on around her, but she was unable to form an opinion about anything and did not know what to talk about...and it felt as eerie and bitter as if she had eaten wormwood.⁶⁴³

While Smirnin seems to escape the fate of his predecessors, the fact that both Kukin and Pustovalov unexpectedly die of trifling illnesses after having been married to Olenka suggests that Olenka's behavior borders on the vampiric; once she has sucked the life force out of her husband, there is nothing left for him to live on. He then expires, and Olenka moves on to her next victim. By the end of the story, Smirnin has reconciled with his wife and has brought his family to live at Olenka's lodge, but the closing scene suggests that Smirnin's son Sasha has fallen prey to her ministrations instead. Olenka cares for Sasha as though he is her own son and repeats everything he says about his school lessons and teachers; as a result, Olenka's face has actually grown younger since she began to mother Sasha and he, instead of timber, now fills her dreams. The last line of the story, however, suggests the toll Olenka has begun to take on Sasha's health as well, for he cries out in his sleep, "I'll sh-show you! Get out of here! No fighting!"⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴³ PSS X, 109-110.

⁶⁴⁴ PSS X, 113.

As scholar Renato Poggioli discusses in his classic article on Chekhov, “Storytelling in a Double Key,” Tolstoy’s response to “The Darling” is particularly illuminating. In direct opposition to Chekhov, who created the story as a “half pathetic, half mocking version of the ‘merry widow’ motif,” Tolstoy believed that the “final esthetic outcome transcends the tale’s original intent.”⁶⁴⁵ That is, instead of recognizing the havoc that Olenka’s bloodsucking behavior causes, Tolstoy found in her support for his ideas about the female calling to serve and love others,⁶⁴⁶ which he felt applied to the “majority of women.”⁶⁴⁷ According to Gorky’s memoirs, Tolstoy compared the story to a piece of lace into which a virtuous young woman had woven her dreams about happiness and pure love.⁶⁴⁸ Tolstoy felt so strongly about the story’s message that he held several readings of “The Darling” in his Moscow home in January 1899. An attendee at one of these soirées recalled that Tolstoy said the story was “excellent” and described “a genuine womanly feeling, so succinctly, so masterfully!”⁶⁴⁹ Another acquaintance noted that he was treated to three such performances of “The Darling,” and each time, Tolstoy read “marvellously, as though *he himself* were telling the story” (emphasis mine).⁶⁵⁰ Tolstoy’s reaction to the tale demonstrates he

⁶⁴⁵ Renato Poggioli, “Storytelling in a Double Key,” 324; 322.

⁶⁴⁶ Tolstoy’s daughter Tatyana also found the description of Olenka to ring true, for, as she confesses to her diary, she recognized herself in Chekhov’s heroine. This circumstance, she notes, is not so shameful as having recognized herself in another of Chekhov’s women, the aforementioned Ariadne. T.L. Tolstaya’s words are quoted in the *primechaniia* to the Chekhov PSS X, 411.

⁶⁴⁷ Original is from *Tolstoy*, т. 55, p. 129. Quoted in the *primechaniia* to the Chekhov PSS X, 413.

⁶⁴⁸ Gorky also relates that Chekhov had been present for this praise, which had been so effusive that he could only exhale in embarrassment and reply that the story contained typos. Gorky is quoted in the *primechaniia* to the Chekhov PSS X, 411.

⁶⁴⁹ PSS X, 410.

⁶⁵⁰ PSS X, 410.

understood that much in Chekhov was a polemic directed at him, and, as we will see, he published his own interpretation of Chekhov's story as a way to fight back.

Significantly, after Chekhov had already passed away, and thus when he was no longer able to argue, Tolstoy planned to write a preface "explaining the meaning" of "The Darling."⁶⁵¹ While it does not seem that such an introduction was ever created, Tolstoy did compose an afterword that explained his interpretation of "The Darling" in February 1905 for the publication *Circle of Reading*. In his afterword, Tolstoy cites the Biblical tale of the Moab King Valak, who invited Valaam into his kingdom so that he could curse the Israelites. Valaam, however, blesses them instead. According to Tolstoy himself, his motivation here is to show that something similar happened to Chekhov's story; i.e., that Chekhov wished to damn Olenka, but the "god of poetry" would not allow this, and instead, Chekhov unwittingly penned a tale that blessed her.⁶⁵² In order to arrive at such an interpretation of "The Darling," Tolstoy had willfully to misunderstand Chekhov and ignore all the facts in the story which point to the suffocating parasitism that Olenka practices on her male victims. Indeed, in the edition of "The Darling" that Tolstoy planned to print along with his new ending,⁶⁵³ he excised certain phrases that paint Olenka in a negative or ironic light, such as when the narrator exclaims that she has no thoughts of her own, or when she coquettishly attempts to entice other men with her physical beauty.⁶⁵⁴ These changes bring

⁶⁵¹ Original in *Tolstoy*, т. 75, p. 199, quoted in the *primechaniia* to the Chekhov PSS X, 412.

⁶⁵² Original in *Tolstoy*, т. 41, p. 374, 377, quoted in the *primechaniia* to the Chekhov PSS X, 412.

⁶⁵³ Tolstoy's version of "The Darling" with these sections cut was published in *Circle of Reading (Круг чтения)*, Vol. 1, 1906, 421-433. PSS X, 413.

⁶⁵⁴ The specifics of Tolstoy's edits are discussed in the *primechaniia* to the Chekhov PSS X, 412-413.

Olenka much closer to Tolstoy's conception of the tale's heroine, and much further from Chekhov's original creation.

As Poggioli notes, Tolstoy "has an axe to grind" regarding Chekhov's view of women: while Chekhov meant to show a woman's "right and duty to have a mind and a soul of her own," Tolstoy strongly opposed female emancipation and supported a view of women that cherished their loving and care-giving capabilities to the exclusion of almost everything else.⁶⁵⁵ Thus, as Chekhov was compelled to recast his favorite Tolstoyan heroine in his own fiction, so too was Tolstoy driven to recreate his beloved Chekhovian heroine in his own image.

⁶⁵⁵ Renato Poggioli, "Storytelling in a Double Key," 324.

Conclusion

*What is Chekhovian? We hear of Chekhovian situations,
Chekhovian despair, Chekhovian resolutions...
[but] Chekhov's work is innovative, lively, and exciting—
it reads as being experimental before its time.*⁶⁵⁶

Peter Constantine

The preceding chapters present the ways in which Chekhov takes master narratives of sexual authority, such as those from Darwin, Zola, and Tolstoy, and experiments on them in his own personal fiction laboratory, changing variables to explore different outcomes. As the above analyses illustrate, instead of examining how dynamics of sexual dominance evolved across different species in the animal kingdom, as his Darwinian undergraduate thesis proposed to do, Chekhov's work became a study in the literary evolution of relations between the sexes. It has been my goal to demonstrate that, while Chekhov was not a vociferous public disputant, he nonetheless polemicized with leading contemporary figures in debates on the nature of sex and sexuality in Russia during the final decades of the 19th century. While Chekhov deeply respected and admired the three writers under scrutiny in this study, my readings of his creative prose show beyond any doubt that he was always critical of them, and this criticism was informed by his extensive medical training.

Twentieth-century literary critics, both Anglophone and Russian alike, have tended to propagate an image of Chekhov as a sexual ascetic. However, from his early days as a writer, Chekhov gravitated towards problems of sex. While still a medical student, Chekhov

⁶⁵⁶ Peter Constantine, "Anton Chekhov: A Post-Modernist Way Ahead of His Time."

had planned to approach them through a scientific lens. Soon, however, Chekhov discovered that purely scientific research would provide too narrow a scope for the questions he wanted to explore, and so he turned to creative prose instead.

Though he switched venues, so to speak, Chekhov did not abandon the writer who first inspired him to examine sexual authority, Charles Darwin. My analysis shows how, throughout his career, Chekhov returned again and again to Darwinian themes, both to defend the British naturalist from those who would attack and misunderstand him, and to confirm his own belief in radical transformation, particularly regarding relationships between the sexes. In addition to Charles Darwin, Chekhov also gravitated towards the panoramic work of Emile Zola and Lev Tolstoy, adapting, reworking, and revising their fictional “master plots” on sex authority. As an avid proponent of evolutionary theory, Zola was interested in the same questions Chekhov was: how is the artist to describe human sexuality and heredity in a scientifically accurate way? The second chapter of this study explores how, while Chekhov ultimately disagrees with some of the methods Zola uses and the conclusions that he reaches, both authors remained dedicated to the fruitful interaction of science and art. Finally, Chekhov was also irresistibly attracted to a writer who mistrusted science and medicine on a deep, almost fundamental level: Lev Tolstoy. In the third chapter I investigate the ways in which Chekhov strove to adapt the creative and dynamic plots of *Anna Karenina* and the *Kreutzer Sonata*, which so moved him with their energy and beauty, into stories that honestly appraise and even celebrate sexuality rather than unequivocally condemning it.

In these final pages, I will take the opportunity to discuss briefly two more possible directions this research could go: Chekhovian drama and Chekhov's relationship with the man who made his resounding success possible, his publisher Alexei Suvorin.

Sex and Sexuality in Chekhovian Drama

There is room for expansion on the theme of sexuality in Chekhov's dramatic works. In the interest of focusing the dissertation, I have chosen not to undertake in-depth analysis of Chekhov's plays. However, they are no less relevant to my central thesis, as sexual tension and questions of female autonomy drive the plots of all four of Chekhov's mature plays: *Uncle Vanya*, *The Seagull*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. Furthermore, contemporary theaters treat his plays as sexual comedies of manners, and some modern directors have begun experimenting with graphic productions of Chekhov on stage. While applying the angle of sexual dominance from Chekhov's undergraduate thesis to the plays would not change the conclusions reached in this study, such an approach would yield provocative and nuanced readings of Chekhov's dramas.

Chekhov's Dialogue with Suvorin

The arguments presented in the chapters above should not imply that Darwin, Zola and Tolstoy are the only authors with whom Chekhov polemicized. Chekhov's dialogue with contemporary ideas also included some less studied figures. In fact, a fruitful area for further research is the role played in Chekhov's intellectual discourse by his close friend

and mentor, the famous St. Petersburg publisher Alexei Suvorin.⁶⁵⁷ Suvorin is recognized for being instrumental in jumpstarting Chekhov's serious career as a writer by printing the young, talented author's work in his newspaper *New Times*, as well as for playing a pivotal role in Chekhov's personal biography. But, as the present study attests, correspondence with Suvorin was a rich source for Chekhov's intellectual development as well. Their letters served as a collaborative space for both men to articulate their points of view on all aspects of Russian literary life and culture, which in particular challenged their ideas on sexuality. To give just one example, Chekhov was fond of recommending medical articles to Suvorin to read on the subject of men and women, as he did on 25 January 1894, when he advised Suvorin to read an article published in the journal *Vrach (The Doctor)*, entitled "K voprosu o polovykh snosheniakh" ("Towards the question of sexual intercourse").⁶⁵⁸ What scholars typically ignore, however, is that Suvorin himself was also a writer of stories and plays who had come from humble means, much like Chekhov himself, and that Chekhov enthusiastically read and commented on his work. A project of more substantial scope could investigate the creative dialogue between Chekhov's and Suvorin's fictional worlds.

Suvorin's work has particular implications for the present study, as his own personal literary taste gravitated towards sex, sexuality, and the so-called "woman question." According to Chekhov biographer Donald Rayfield, Suvorin "liked brooding sexuality and graphic naturalism."⁶⁵⁹ Indeed, Chekhov's own interest in these themes is

⁶⁵⁷ For more on Suvorin's life and career, see the following: E.A. Dinershtein, *A.S. Suvorin: chelovek, sdelayshii kar'eru* and S.P. Ivanov, *Telokhranitel' Rossii: A.S. Suvorin v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*.

⁶⁵⁸ *Pis'ma V*, 264.

⁶⁵⁹ Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 129.

largely what attracted Suvorin's attention to his stories in the first place. Unfortunately Suvorin's own imaginative prose has been almost totally disregarded as a focus of research in the Russian tradition. The primary reason for this gap is that Suvorin was shunned by the Soviet critical establishment for being a right-wing, anti-Semitic, pro-monarchy retrograde who was not at all compatible with the Revolution, as they so enthusiastically read Chekhov to be. As a result, critics were also anxious to put as much distance as possible between Chekhov and Suvorin, which further precluded serious scholarly inquiry into their literary relationship. The time is ripe for a reexamination of their work, for in recent years, several volumes on Suvorin have been published that would shed light on this question. In 1999 an uncensored edition of Suvorin's diary was published in Russian under the editorship of Donald Rayfield and Olga Makarova.⁶⁶⁰ Rayfield also supervised Makarova's doctoral dissertation, which is the only full-length study on Suvorin and women. The dissertation, entitled "'The Woman Question' in the Life and Works of Aleksei Sergeevich Suvorin," has also given rise to several articles published in Russia.

We have concrete evidence that, from relatively early on in his career, Chekhov responded to Suvorin's views on female sexuality in his own creative output. In particular, there are two literary points of contact between Chekhov and Suvorin that merit further study. In 1888 Suvorin wrote a racy and scandalous play based on the public suicide of Russian actress and opera singer Yevlalia Kadmina in 1881, entitled *Tatyana Repina*. Contemporaries such as MXAT founder and director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko

⁶⁶⁰ The volume, released in both Great Britain and Russia, is entitled *Dnevnik Alekseia Sergeevicha Suvorina*.

interpreted the play as primarily addressing the “woman question.”⁶⁶¹ The following year, Chekhov penned his own one-act continuation but for unspecified reasons was reluctant for anyone to read his fifth and final act. An excellent place to begin research in this vein would be the following resources: John Racin’s English translation of Suvorin’s play, complete with a translation of Chekhov’s own response, an introduction, entitled *Tatyana Repina: Two Translated Texts—the 1888 Four-Act Tatyana Repina by Alexei Suvorin and Anton Chekhov’s 1889 One-Act Continuation*. According to Racin’s insightful introduction, the play on which Chekhov and Suvorin collaborated concerns in the main the “hunt, desire, pursuit of women, with Tatyana, a beautiful actress, the passionate interest of a number of predatory males.”⁶⁶² Perhaps unsurprisingly, the original title of Suvorin’s play was *The Hunt for Women (Охота на женщин)*. While Suvorin himself believed Chekhov’s work to be a mere spoof of the original,⁶⁶³ scholar A.S. Dolinin has refuted this claim, arguing instead for understanding Chekhov’s *Tatyana Repina* based on its own artistic merits.⁶⁶⁴ However, further examination is necessary to determine the exact nature of Chekhov’s reworking of Suvorin’s lascivious plot.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶¹ Nemirovich-Danchenko lamented upon seeing the play, “Why did the author have to deal so inappropriately with the women’s question?” Quoted in Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 187.

⁶⁶² John Racin, *Tatyana Repina: Two Translated Texts—the 1888 Four-Act Tatyana Repina by Alexei Suvorin and Anton Chekhov’s 1889 One-Act Continuation*, 8.

⁶⁶³ For Suvorin’s reaction, see the *primechaniia* to the *PSS* XII, 367.

⁶⁶⁴ A.S. Dolinin’s article “Parodiia li ‘Tatiana Repina’ Chekhova?” may be found in a collection of his work entitled *Dostoevskii i drugie: stat’i i issledovaniia o russkoi klassicheskoi literature*.

⁶⁶⁵ There are few studies of Chekhov’s *Tatyana Repina*. In addition to Dolinin’s article, the *PSS* mentions only one other, an article on the relationship between Chekhov’s play and a novel by a French woman author, entitled *Around Marriage (Autour de mariage, 1883)*. See E. Smirnova-Chikina, “‘Tatyana Repina’ Antona Chekhova.”

Even more important for extending the present study is the fact that Suvorin wrote a hefty 500-page novel on human sexuality in the late 19th century, entitled *V kontse veka. Liubov'* (*At the End of the Century: Love*). Suvorin himself certainly considered it a highlight of his career. According to his biographer Olga Makarova, who has written the most prolific historical scholarship on Suvorin in the last decade, the novel was Suvorin's "favorite child."⁶⁶⁶ What is more, the novel caused quite a sensation; Rayfield labels it "half puritanical, half pornographic,"⁶⁶⁷ while scholar Tatyana Shabalina notes that Russian literary criticism credits it with being a "forerunner to the Russian decadence movement."⁶⁶⁸ First published in book form by Suvorin's own press in 1893, its last printing was released in 1903. It has never been translated into English or even appeared in Russian in the new orthography. This is a shame, not only because it was a well-received novel at the time of its release, but also because Chekhov read and adored it, as well as offered nuanced critique. Therefore, it is a prime area to examine for Chekhovian adaptation.

Suvorin's novel follows the personal relationships of a group of young people on the verge of the 20th century as they grapple with fierce passions and free love. The problem of female autonomy lies at the heart of the novel. As Suvorin's protégée E.A. Shabel'skaya, who translated the novel into German, wrote, *At the End of the Century: Love*, should bear

⁶⁶⁶ Olga Marakova, "Uzh esli Suvorin, izobretshii ee, otvernulsia... 'Delo Shabel'skoi' i uchastie v nem izdatelia 'Novogo vremeni,'" *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 101.

⁶⁶⁷ Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 339.

⁶⁶⁸ Tatyana Shabalina, "Aleksei Sergeevich Suvorin," *Entsiklopediia Krugosvet*.

the subtitle “the woman question.”⁶⁶⁹ In a likely echo of *Anna Karenina*, the main character Varya “steps over the bounds of accepted norms of morality” in pursuing her love affair.⁶⁷⁰ Significantly, Varya’s ultimate fate remains unclear, and critics have linked Suvorin’s refusal to give a concrete answer to the influence of Chekhov’s poetics at the expense of Tolstoy’s.⁶⁷¹ Indeed, Chekhov himself noticed that Suvorin’s novel contained a “tirade against Tolstoy” and Varya is even religiously reading Tolstoy’s teachings.⁶⁷² On 6 July 1892 Chekhov wrote to Suvorin after reviewing an excerpt of the novel,

Честное слово, Ваша повесть мне чрезвычайно понравилась. Я прочел ее в два присеста с тем вниманием и интересом, с каким читаются одни только захватывающие вещи. В ней очень много свежего, нового и чёртова пропасть умения. Первая часть до появления молодого Мурина показалась мне замечательной по оригинальности, и я чуть не заревел от ужаса, когда явился церковник Мурин и своим целомудрием, никому ненужным и неинтересным, заслонил и затуманил образ грешной, но единственной в нашей литературе Вари. Варя прекрасна, даже очень прекрасна и я теперь верю Савиной, которая говорила кому-то, что Вы знаете женщин. Быть может, Вы вовсе не знаете женщин, но обладаете тонкою способностью угадывания или же даром вымысла, что собственно и есть настоящий талант.

Really and truly, I liked your story tremendously. I read it through in two sittings with the attention and interest that only a real page-turner can command. There is much in it that is fresh and new, as well as goddamn loads of cleverness. The first part until the appearance of the young Murin seemed to me remarkably original, and I very nearly screamed out of fright when the cleric appeared, and with his chastity, neither interesting nor necessary to anyone, shielded and hid the image of the sinful Varya, who is unique in our

⁶⁶⁹ Olga Marakova, “Uzh esli Suvorin, izobretshii ee, otvernulsia... ‘Delo Shabelskoi’ i uchastie v nem izdatelia ‘Novogo vremeni,’” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 101.

⁶⁷⁰ E.A. Polotskaya, “Suvorin, Aleksei Sergeevich.” Entry in *Russkie pisateli: Biobibliograficheskii slovar’*, volume II.

⁶⁷¹ E.A. Polotskaya, “Suvorin, Aleksei Sergeevich.” Entry in *Russkie pisateli: Biobibliograficheskii slovar’*, volume II.

⁶⁷² *Pis'ma V*, 90.

literature. Varya is fine, very fine indeed, and I now believe Savina, who once told someone that you know women. It could be that you don't know women at all, but have the acute sensitivity to guess or just the gift of invention, which itself is a real talent.⁶⁷³

Chekhov's enthusiastic reception of the novel must have made an impression on Suvorin, for three years later he presented Chekhov with his own copy printed on luxurious paper and inscribed, "from the kind and virtuous author."⁶⁷⁴ As the present work has demonstrated, for Chekhov, to admire a fellow writer's work meant having the right, even the obligation, to repurpose and reinvent it, and further study could illuminate how Chekhov inscribed *At the End of the Century: Love* into his own final decade.

Reading Chekhov in the context of contemporary sexual politics must be understood as a challenge leveled at the still widely held assumption that Chekhov was indifferent to topical social problems. Such a reputation persists because, unlike his contemporaries Emile Zola and Lev Tolstoy, Chekhov was not inclined to involve himself in public debates on modern sexuality and the role of women in society. Reticence in the public domain continues to be mistaken for personal apathy.

The time has come, then, to broaden both readers' and critics' horizons. By employing a multidisciplinary approach that examines not only the creative prose of Chekhov and his fellow writers but also texts on evolutionary theory, period medical journals, and popular science volumes, we are able to redraw the boundaries of Chekhov studies to include his contribution to the sex question. While it has largely been overlooked by scholars, Chekhov's role is vital, for, instead of providing definitive answers to the many

⁶⁷³ *Pis'ma V*, 89.

⁶⁷⁴ Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, 339.

issues raised in these polemics, Chekhov recast the questions in a new and provocative manner, ultimately leaving it up to his readers to decide.

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