

Several details about life, work, and death of Tolstoy and Chekhov

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ABSTRACT: Life, work and death of Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov are briefly presented. Questioning the meaning of life has been an important preoccupation of literature from the time of Homer to many modern writers. The reaction of Tolstoy and Chekhov to the realization that man lives in a chaotic world, including the unknown purpose of life, caused different approaches to their lives. Tolstoy accepted the faith as the purpose of life, while Chekhov considered that man is a victim in the absurd world. Their own view on death and dying is quite different, as well.

Two great writers, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), realized that we live in a chaotic world. Few famous writers have successfully tackled this complex issue like these two literary giants. Science and philosophy did not give them an answer to the questions: What is the purpose of life? And what is our mission on Earth? Each of them in their own way, look at life and death. Tolstoy thinks that faith gives us the meaning of life, but his definition of faith includes the reason, as well. For Chekhov, man is a victim in an absurd world. [1,2]

I. Leo Tolstoy

Tolstoy is a Russian novelist, moral philosopher and religious reformer. From 1852 to 1856, he published an autobiographical trilogy (Childhood, Boyhood and Youth). Although it is about the son of a landowner, the work serves as a universal example of growing up. His participation in the Crimean War, Tolstoy was an officer in an artillery regiment, later directed him towards pacifism and provided him with examples for the description of war in literary works. His great realist novels, War and Peace and Anna Karenina, have long become the standard by which the achievements of novelists are measured. Tolstoy emphasized the ethical and moral side of Christianity,



USSR postage stamp: Leo Tolstoy

wanted to combine Western religious beliefs with Eastern ones (Buddhism and Taoism), [3] and rejects capitalism and private property; he was the first in the world to proclaim passive resistance, i.e. introduces the

concept of peaceful protest, which was accepted by Mahatma Gandhi (1860-1948) when he read the work the *Kingdom of God is Within You*. Later, Martin Luther King (1929-1968) was one of the many supporters of passive resistance.

Count Tolstoy bequeaths his lands to the people, renounces the royalties, comes therefore into conflict with his wife, leaves for the monastery to spend the remaining years of his life there, but dies on his way there at a railway station. In his works, but also in his life, he is obsessed by death. The best depiction of death in literature is given in his works the *Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *War and Peace*.

Tolstoy enjoyed reading Chekhov's stories, he compared them to the paintings of the Impressionists, and he especially liked the humor that emerged from his works; he told acquaintances that this quality is rarely found in writers. In August 1895, the two writers met for the first time. Chekhov traveled by train to Yasnaya Polyana where he spent two days. Chekhov was 35 and Tolstoy 67 at the time. Later, they saw each other occasionally, and the last meeting was recorded in 1901 at Crimea.

II. Anton Chekhov

Nineteen years before Anton Chekhov was born, his grandfather, a serf belonging to a Russian nobleman, purchased his own freedom and that of his family for 700 rubles per soul. He paid 3.500 rubles. Thus, Anton was born as a free citizen in Taganrog, a small city on the Sea of Azov where he lived for 19 years. The origin of Tolstoy and Chekhov must have had a strong reflection on their views on both life and death.

Chekhov graduated from the Medical Faculty at Moscow University in 1884. In the beginning, he worked as a doctor in the suburbs of Moscow, and eight years later he bought a modest property in Melikhovo, 70 km south of Moscow, where he lived with his family, and worked as a volunteer doctor until his health deteriorated



USSR postage stamp: Anton P. Chekhov

due to pulmonary tuberculosis. Then he went to Yalta, a resort city on the south coast of the Crimean Peninsula surrounded by the Black Sea, an area of mild climate. In Melikhovo, he examined patients during the day, and at night he wrote many stories and two plays, *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*. [4] He noted that the symbiosis of the muse and Æsculapis could markedly increase a writer's capabilities with his famous quip "Medicine is my lawful wife, literature my mistress. When I tire of one, I spend the night with another". He knew that he would have a short life due to tuberculosis of the lungs, but he was not afraid of death, nor did he often think about it, like Tolstoy.

In 1890, Chekhov spent three months on the island of Sakhalin, a prison for Russian convicts – a huge penal colony. The journey from Moscow through Siberia, 9,289 km long, was not easy. (5) At that time, the Trans-Siberian Railway had not yet been built, so he mainly used cart transport. He returned on the ship "Petrograd", which was transporting 300 soldiers from Vladivostok who were returning via the Suez Canal after military service in the Far East. When the ship was passing through the China Sea, the storm threatened the safety of the passengers. The captain of the ship told everyone who owned a revolver to load them, because death by gunshot is easier than death by drowning. Later, two sailors died on the way and were buried by being lowered into the

sea. Those funerals inspired Chekhov to write the story *Gusev* about a tuberculous patient whose body was buried at sea. That story touched many readers, including the composer Tchaikovsky.

In addition to numerous stories, Chekhov also wrote 14 plays, the most famous of which are: *Cherry Orchard*, *Three Sisters*, *The Seagull*, and *Uncle Vanya*. They are still shown in theaters around the world today. In the 2004 theatrical season, I had the opportunity to see all four in the Chicago theaters.

Chekhov lived only 44 years, but he strongly influenced many writers. He improved both the modern story and modern play writing, and he clearly showed the synergy of the Æsculapius and muse, but it was the muse who helped him survive. Many other famous medical doctor-writers have been in a similar position, where they share medicine and writing, sometimes abandoning medical practice altogether for writing. A short list of these doctor-writers would include: Arthur Conan Doyle, Anton P. Chekhov, Laza Lazarević, Friedrich Schiller, Mikhail Bulgakov, Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, Archibald Joseph Cronin, William Somerset Maugham, and William Carlos Williams. Some of them were more involved in medicine (LL, AJC, JJZ, WCW), others simply switched from doctoring to writing (FS, ACD, MB, WSM), or practiced medicine sporadically (APC). Although Chekhov knew that his life was short because of lung tuberculosis, he was not afraid of death, nor did he think about it often, like Tolstoy.

About some works of Leo Tolstoy

When *War and Peace* was published, many wondered whether it was a historical book or a novel. However, it soon became clear to everyone that it is a historical novel, as the title itself suggests. In it, history (war) and novel (peace) are equally represented, i.e. it is a comprehensive historical novel. The epic *War and Peace*, written during one decade (1863-1873), is a kind of cross-section of Russian society in the 19th century. Due to its global nature, it occupies one of the first places in Russian literature. Most of the characters are from aristocratic families, including the main characters of the novel - Pierre Bezukhov, Natasha Rostova and Andrei Nikolayevich Bolkonsky. The millions of people in Russia are rarely mentioned in the novel, and the benevolent Pierre owns 40,000 serfs. The serfs got their freedom in 1862, although few of them had managed to redeem their freedom before.

Interesting discussions were often held about the success of this extensive historical novel which was put on the big screen in 1956 by Paramount Pictures. This encouraged the Russians to make their own version. Sergei Bondarchuk directed a film that was made from 1966 to 1969, lasted 10 hours, and was rated by film critics as a perfect film adaptation of the novel. The BBC made twenty TV episodes in the early 1980s. That adaptation lasted for about 15 hours and conveyed many details from the novel. On the other hand, mini TV series and theatre adaptations reduce the number of important elements and mostly focus on the selection of visual segments that take place in "Peace". The "War" on the stage may be presented as a short excerpt on the screen. The first war campaign of the Western state against the great Eastern Empire is worth comparing with the third one, which was provoked by the powerful Western Alliance*. [6] The theater adaptation of "War and Peace" which is currently

*In the first war campaign, Bonaparte did not aim to conquer the economic wealth of Great Russia ruled by Tsar Alexander the First. Napoleon probably had the desire to subjugate a large state that had embarked on a strong development momentum. The current expansion of the Alliance into the East is largely an obsession with the desire to seize vast natural wealth, including oil, gas, ores, minerals and vast fertile land. "Well, is it right that Russia is the only one to use that wealth?", a very influential American recently asked herself. In his conquest enthusiasm, Hitler wanted to conquer Moscow because the undertaking would expand his influence and add enormous wealth, including oil. Today everything has completely turned around, *tempora mutantur*; foreign soldiers did not move towards Moscow to subdue it because the Western Alliance is conducting a hybrid war. The

being shown at the Belgrade National Theater would be interesting to many theater goers. I believe that this company might soon visit various cities and encourage the youth to read this extensive novel, as their parents read it.

In 1878, Tolstoy published *Anna Karenina*, one of the greatest novels ever written. The themes include family, marriage, adultery, Russian society, urban and rural life. The central story presents an extramarital affair between Anna and cavalry officer Count Alexei Vronsky. This affair scandalizes the social circles in Saint Petersburg. Throughout the novel, Tolstoy uses trains as a symbol for the societal transformations caused by the rapid introduction of technical advancement. Based on this novel various adaptations were prepared, including opera, theater, film, television, ballet, and radio drama.

Tolstoy published the story under the title *Kreutzer's Sonata* in 1889. The title of the piece was created after the author heard Beethoven's Violin Sonata, No. 9 (Kreutzer), which he liked very much, and the content was based on a true event that was published in the press. The writer used it to prepare a polemical text which then, and still today, encouraged numerous discussions. Pozdnishev, the main character, tells an unknown man at the train about the circumstances and reasons that led him to kill his wife in a moment of jealousy. When he returned unexpectedly late at night and found the wife having dinner with her violin teacher, he killed the woman. The alleged adultery may not have happened, as the servants were probably serving dinner and the children may have been awake until recently. It is possible that nothing happened that evening, and the victim had no opportunity to defend herself; possibly she just cried out, "Lord, nothing happened!" But the anger due to suspicion and the imagination of a jealous husband led to the murder. Thus, the inequality of the sexes is shown here, as claimed today by representatives of feminist movements.

If Pozdnishev had waited a little longer, perhaps his wife could have explained, and she would have played the Kreutzer's Sonata at the planned concert. However, in that case Tolstoy would not have written Kreutzer's Sonata—his most widely read and controversial literary work.

After Tolstoy experienced a spiritual crisis while writing *Anna Karenina* (at his age of 47), he points out that sex awakens an animal instinct that sometimes leads to criminal and other harmful behavior. Christianity, which unlike Judaism and Islam, often recommends avoiding carnal pleasure and sex itself, inclines toward puritanism. Abstinence is the only way to curb sex, Tolstoy concluded. When he was told that it would terminate the human race, he replied, "Well, so what!" [7]

Despite criticism and even prohibition of *The Sonata* in several countries, it became one of Tolstoy's most famous works. It is adored by literary critics for its expressive strength and skill of description of the psychotic state of jealousy. Based on this story, the ballet was composed, plays were performed, several film and television adaptations were made. Chekhov defended that work of Tolstoy because of its aesthetic values, and because "it is needed to initiate discussions of this problem".

Characteristic of most works of A. Chekhov

Due to the inability of science to explain the purpose of life, Chekhov created hundreds of characters characterized by weakness, passivity and inefficiency. [8,9] On the other hand, as a doctor, he was a man of action and a fighter for justice. While living in Melikhovo, he founded schools and treated the sick people free of charge, donated books to libraries, and bought medicine for the poor. He wrote at night.

In *Uncle Vanya* play, the action takes place in a summer residence. The main character is Yelena, a beautiful, much younger second wife of the elderly Professor Serebryakov. He inherited the summer residence from his late wife, which is maintained by Ivan Petrovitch Voynicki-Vanya, the brother of Serebryakov's first wife. Vanya and Dr. Astrov are impressed by Jelena and fall in love with her. She is dissatisfied with her marriage, but continues to live in it. The situation is similar with all nine characters in the play; they are all dissatisfied with

Russians are launching a "special military operation", an unpopular war in Europe today. If Western countries with the Ukrainians do not break them this time, the Russians will have to prepare differently for the fourth attack.

their lives, conditions, love or way of life, but none of them can achieve the desired change. They are incapable of taking any action that would change their lives. In fact, people are inert and have no desire to make a difference, like many other characters in Chekhov's plays and stories. Finally, a crisis appears after the Professor announced that he would sell the summer house. Vanya and Sonya, the daughter of the first professor's wife, who live on the estate, decide to work better and harder to acquire a new house.

There is an interesting segment in this play when Doctor Astrov longs for worldly justice in the form of hope that would only appear for a moment.

Astrov: When you walk through the forest in the dark night, and in the distance you see a glimmer of light, then you don't feel tired, nor the darkness, nor the prickly branches hitting your face... I work, you know that, harder than anyone else in the region, fate whips me incessantly, sometimes I suffer terribly, but I can't see a glimmer of a light source in the distance. For now, I don't expect anything...

Chekhov identifies two groups of people: in one, they are like Astrov, and in the other, people around the nanny Marina. The former have a hard time bearing the harsh worldly injustice, while the latter have a solution for it.

Astrov: Those who will live for a hundred, two hundred years after us and for whom we pave the way, will they remember us with a good word? Nanny, are they going to forget us?

Marina: People will forget us, but God will not.

One of Chekhov's rules for writing was that every element in a story must be necessary: "Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be there."

When the young poet Maxim Gorky became a unique literary voice that emerged from the lowest strata of society and fascinated Russia and the whole of Europe, he was accepted as a member of the Russian Academy of Arts. The emperor annulled the admission of that writer because he was uneducated. All academics then voted to cancel the acceptance, except Chekhov and Vladimir Korolenko, a Russian writer born in Ukraine. In protest, they left the Academy. Chekhov also supported Emile Zola and his letter entitled *J'Accuse*, addressed to the French president, published in 1898. In 1894, French General Alfred Dreyfus, a Jew, was falsely accused of spying for Germany and imprisoned at Devil's Island for life. Chekhov's support for Dreyfus brought his relationship with a great friend and publisher, Alexei Suvorin, into deep crisis. [10]

Chekhov traveled to Sakhalin to collect data for scientific work. His book-report, "Sakhalin Island", was published in 1895. The Sakhalin Island contains descriptions of the inhabitants, one half are prisoners, and the other half are their guards with their families. The book also describes the guards' cruelty actions to the prisoners. Those descriptions forced the Russian emperor to ban the beating of prisoners, women (in 1897) and men (in 1904). [8,11]

The executor stands on one side and strikes so that the whip leaves a mark on the body. After a few blows, he goes to the other side and the prisoner has half a minute of rest... After the first five or ten blows his body, covered with scars from the previous beating, turns blue and purple, and the skin cracks after each blow.... And later, after twenty or thirty beatings, he complains like a drunk man or a person in a delirium: "I'm miserable, you're killing me..."

The guard counts: Forty-two! Forty three!

We are far from ninety.

Death and dying

There is a significant difference between Tolstoy and Chekhov about death and dying. We all know that we are in the world temporarily, as it is nicely said in the Bible (Genesis 3:19): *In the sweat of your body you will eat your bread until you return to the land from which you came; for, you are dust and you will return to dust.* [12]

When Tolstoy visited Chekhov who was hospitalized due to his lung disease, he presented the subject of death and life after death, when very ill Chekhov expectorated blood. Chekhov's response to Tolstoy's theory was that he does not want such life after his death. [10] Chekhov identified himself as an atheist. However, he believed

that religion was an important component of life for a simple Russian man. He wrote: "I would gladly become a monk if monasteries would accept people who are not religious and who do not have to pray."

Chekhov belonged to a generation of educated Russians who were ready to enter the post-religious era "which will begin in the early twentieth century."

Poor health must have often directed his thoughts to death. At the very end of his life, he went to the spa in Badenweiler, Germany, to die. On the fifteenth of July, 1904, he called the doctor and told him *Ich sterbe!* (I am dying.) The doctor gave him a glass of champagne. The patient drank it and died. [10]

Tolstoy believed in the teachings of Christ, but he rejected church dogma. He was excommunicated from the Orthodox Church in 1901. At midnight on October 28, 1910, Tolstoy left his house. That was the end of his marriage from September 23, 1862 when Tolstoy (34) married Sofia Andreyevna Bers (18). The early years of the marriage were largely joyful, thirteen children were born, and in this period Tolstoy wrote his greatest novels. However, during the writing of the novel *Anna Karenina* (1875-1877) he had a spiritual crisis that changed the rest of his life. He became an extreme rationalist and moralist, rejected both church and state, and condemned private ownership of property. In 1897, he even rejected his own novels, and of many other classical writers, because these creations are products of the elite for the elite. Such views caused great difficulties in his relationship with his wife.

That night, Tolstoy left a brief note to Sofia: "I am doing what old men of my age usually do; leaving worldly life to spend the last days of my life in peace and quiet." He and his entourage took a train from Yasnaya Polyana to a distant monastery, but pneumonia stopped him in Astapovo where he stayed in the home of the chief of the railway station. He found neither solitude nor peace there, and he died ten days later. He was buried at Yasnaya Polyana. [13]

Modern medicine can now in every medical center extend life artificially, [14] and if Tolstoy were alive today, he would likely reject such possibility. He would choose to die the natural way.

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