

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Anton Chekhov – Doctor and writer

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Summary

Anton P. Chekhov was born 160 years ago. He graduated in 1884 at the Medical School, Moscow University. Then he practiced medicine in a middle-class section of Moscow, but many of his patients were poor and could not pay. He soon started to write stories, and after several years purchased the rundown Melikhovo estate. There he lived until declining health from tuberculosis forced him to move to the milder climate of Yalta. Chekhov asked the big question, what is the purpose of life? Science could not answer, so his writings presented man as a victim of a preposterous world, and he created hundreds of characters who embodied weakness, passivity, and ineffectiveness. In his own personal life, he elected not to marry and serve biological renewal as the purpose of being. Instead, he followed another path: creating innovative stories and plays that would become his legacy. Tolstoy

compared Chekhov's stories to impressionist paintings. These masterpieces and his best plays, including, "Three Sisters," "The Cherry Orchard," "The Seagull," and "Uncle Vanya", have influenced many outstanding writers, and they still strongly appeal to the readers and theatergoers around the world. Chekhov's numerous characters include an array of more than 30 medical doctors who are discouraged by various problems and poor working conditions. Chekhov, many his followers, and the majority of modern doctors-writers are perhaps trying to find the meaning of life in the reign of arts to science.

Key words: Chekhov, the big question, the purpose of being, doctors-writers

Anton P. Chekhov (1860-1904) noted that a symbiosis of the muse and Æsculapius could markedly increase a writer's capabilities with his famous quip "Medicine is my lawful wife, literature my mistress. When I tire of the one, I spend the night with another, and neither of them suffers from my infidelity"[1].

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 roubles per soul. For all, he payed a total of 3,500 roubles. Thus, Anton was born as a free citizen in Taganrog, a small city on

the Sea of Azov where he lived for 19 years. Anton was average student in his local gymnasium, but he earned a reputation for his satirical comments and funny stories.

When he passed his final exams, Anton went to Moscow, where he obtained a scholarship to study medicine at Moscow University. His family also moved to Moscow, and all of them lived together in a small, neglected apartment. Even while he concentrated on his studying, Anton earned money for the family by publishing hundreds of humorous sketches and stories under various pseudonyms in local newspapers and magazines. Although this

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form of moonlighting did not pay much, the added income allowed the family to rent a better apartment and improve their way of life [2].

Chekhov graduated in 1884. He then leased a small house in a middle-class section of Moscow that would accommodate both his medical practice and his family. He spent a good part of each day making house calls. Many of his patients were poor and could not pay, so his medical practice proved to be unprofitable. However, upon the advice of a publisher, he began to write serious short stories. Several years later, he was able to purchase the rundown Melikhovo estate where he lived. He continued to work as a volunteer doctor, primarily in the sphere of public health. He lived there, on the Melikhovo estate, 44 miles south of Moscow, until declining health from pulmonary tuberculosis forced him to move to the milder climate of Yalta, on the south coast of the Crimean Peninsula surrounded by the Black Sea.

While he lived in Melikhovo, Chekhov saw hundreds of patients; he made more than a thousand home visits all free of charge, and joined the fight against cholera and illiteracy. [3] Although he practiced medicine by day, at night he wrote many stories and two superb plays, "The Seagull" and "Uncle Vanya."

In 1890, he traveled across Siberia to Sakhalin Island, a prison for Russian convicts. The hardships of that journey and his three-month sojourn on the island were terrible. His report of the trip, "Sakhalin Island," includes a moving description of brutal beatings [4]. His writings about what he had witnessed made such an impression on medical professionals and the Russian public that corporal punishment was abolished for women in 1897 and for men in 1904 [5].

Insight into the meaning of life has been a central preoccupation of literature from Homer to many modern writers, but the science and philosophy are unable to give us a direct answer. Through all of his various explorations, Chekhov continued to ask himself--what is the purpose of life? Science could not answer his question, so his writings presented man as a victim of a preposterous world [6].

Despite enormous progress, contemporary science provides the only possible factual answer: the purpose of life is related to its obvious biological function – to continue the species. Maxim Gorki, as young poet, said: "Such question man should not ask himself. Live... that is all! When you think about its purpose, you will be unsatisfied with your life" [7]. To acknowledge science's inability to explain the purpose of life, Chekhov created hundreds of characters who embody weakness, passivity, and ineffectiveness. In his own personal life, he elected

not to marry and serve biological renewal as the purpose of being. Instead, he followed another path: creating innovative stories and plays that would become his legacy.

Tolstoy compared Chekhov's stories to impressionist paintings. These masterpieces and his best plays (including, "Three Sisters," "The Cherry Orchard," "The Seagull" and "Uncle Vanya") have influenced many outstanding writers, and they still strongly appeal to the readers and theatergoers around the world. Although Chekhov's life span was very short (only 44 years), he was in a good company; Pushkin, Byron, Lermontov, Njegoš, Lazarević, Mayakovsky, Blok, Lorca, Vallejo, Orwell, and many other prominent writers also had short lives. Like these masters, Chekhov's innovative and prolific literary output secured him a place among the greatest men of letters. Chekhov's numerous characters include an array of more than 30 medical doctors who are discouraged by various problems and poor working conditions.

In a long story titled "Ward No. 6," set in the psychiatric division of a provincial hospital, Dr. Ragin meets and becomes preoccupied by Gromov, a brilliant paranoid man who has been confined for proclaiming that truth and justice must triumph. Throughout the story, Ragin struggles with an internal battle of deciding whether or not his own life is of any value. There would be no point in living if his life would be forgotten once he was gone. And, because he did not think about the world around him for a very long time, the world in his spirit was lost. Ironically, Dr. Ragin is attacked by his superiors in his own ward, and after a beating by a nurse, he dies of a stroke. When the novelist Nikolay Leskov read this masterpiece, he said, "Ward No. 6 is Russia!" [8].

Chekhov improved both the modern story and modern play, 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, Fridrich Schiller, Mikhail Bulgakov, Archibald Joseph Cronin, William Somerset Maugham, and William Carlos Williams. Some of them were more involved in medicine (L.L., A.J.C., W.C.W.), others simply switched from doctoring to writing (F. S., A.C.D., M.B., W.S.M.), or practiced medicine sporadically (A.P. C.).

Since science and philosophy cannot give us an answer to the big question, the medical doctors who follow a man from his birth to death are often

occupied with this problem [9]. Chekhov, many his followers, and the majority of modern doctors-writers perhaps are trying to find the meaning of life in reign of arts to science. Traditionally, many medical doctors still answer the call of the muse, but most of their time is required to be devoted to medicine.

There are certainly others who wish to succumb to the muse entirely. These may soon appear in the literature of our times, perhaps hesitatingly at first, but finally to be recognized, as Chekhov was, as among the world's greatest physician-writers or become the classical writers.

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