

# Anton Chekhov

## (1860 - 1904)



### Biography:

**A**nton Chekhov, in full Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, (born January 29 [January 17, Old Style], 1860, Taganrog, Russia—died July 14/15 [July 1/2], 1904, Badenweiler, Germany), Russian playwright and master of the modern short story. He was a literary artist of laconic precision who probed below the surface of life, laying bare the secret motives of his characters. Chekhov's best plays and short stories lack complex plots and neat solutions. Concentrating on apparent trivialities, they create a special kind of atmosphere, sometimes termed haunting or lyrical. Chekhov described the Russian life of his time using a deceptively simple technique devoid of obtrusive literary devices, and he is regarded as the outstanding representative of the late 19th-century Russian realist school.

### **Literary maturity**

Chekhov's literary progress during his early 20s may be charted by the first appearance of his work in a sequence of publications in the capital, St. Petersburg, each successive vehicle being more serious and respected than its predecessor. Finally, in 1888, Chekhov published his first work in a leading literary review, *Severny vestnik* ("Northern Herald"). With the work in question—a long story entitled "Steppe"—he at last turned his back on comic fiction. "Steppe," an autobiographical work describing a journey in the Ukraine as seen through the eyes of a child, is the first among more than 50 stories published in a variety of journals and selections between 1888 and his death in 1904. It is on that corpus of later stories, but also on his mature dramas of the same period, that Chekhov's main reputation rests.

Although the year 1888 first saw Chekhov concentrating almost exclusively on short stories that were serious in conception, humour – now underlying – nearly always remained an important ingredient. There was also a concentration on quality at the expense of quantity, the number of publications dropping suddenly from over a hundred items a year in the peak years 1886 and 1887 to only 10 short stories in 1888. Besides “*Steppe*,” Chekhov also wrote several profoundly tragic studies at that time, the most notable of which was “*A Dreary Story*” (1889), a penetrating study into the mind of an elderly and dying professor of medicine. The ingenuity and insight displayed in that tour de force was especially remarkable, coming from an author so young. The play *Ivanov* (1887–89) culminates in the suicide of a young man nearer to the author’s own age. Together with “*A Dreary Story*,” that belongs to a group among Chekhov’s works that have been called clinical studies. They explore the experiences of the mentally or physically ill in a spirit that reminds one that the author was himself a qualified – and remained a sporadically practicing – doctor.

By the late 1880s many critics had begun to reprimand Chekhov, now that he was sufficiently well known to attract their attention, for holding no firm political and social views and for failing to endow his works with a sense of direction. Such expectations irked Chekhov, who was unpolitical and philosophically uncommitted. In early 1890 he suddenly sought relief from the irritations of urban intellectual life by undertaking a one-man sociological expedition to a remote island, Sakhalin. Situated nearly 6,000 miles (9,650 km) east of Moscow, on the other side of Siberia, it was notorious as an imperial Russian penal settlement. Chekhov’s journey there was a long and hazardous ordeal by carriage and riverboat. After arriving unscathed, studying local conditions, and conducting a census of the islanders, he returned to publish his findings as a research thesis, which attained an honoured place in the annals of Russian penology: *The Island of Sakhalin* (1893–94).

Chekhov paid his first visit to western Europe in the company of A.S. Suvorin, a wealthy newspaper proprietor and the publisher of much of Chekhov’s own work. Their long and close friendship caused Chekhov some unpopularity, owing to the politically reactionary character of Suvorin’s newspaper, *Novoye vremya* (“New Time”). Eventually Chekhov broke with Suvorin over the attitude taken by the paper toward the notorious Alfred Dreyfus affair in France, with Chekhov championing Dreyfus.

During the years just before and after his Sakhalin expedition, Chekhov had continued his experiments as a dramatist. His *Wood Demon* (1888–89) is a long-winded and ineptly facetious four-act play, which somehow, by a miracle of art, became converted – largely by cutting – into *Dyadya Vanya* (*Uncle Vanya*), one of his greatest stage masterpieces. The conversion – to a superb study of aimlessness in a rural manor house – took place sometime between 1890 and 1896; the play was published in 1897. Other dramatic efforts of the period include several of the uproarious one-act farces known as vaudevilles: *Medved* (*The Bear*), *Predlozheniye* (*The Proposal*), *Svadba* (*The Wedding*), *Yubiley* (*The Anniversary*), and others.

### **Melikhovo period: 1892–98**

After helping, both as doctor and as medical administrator, to relieve the disastrous famine of 1891–92 in Russia, Chekhov bought a country estate in the village of Melikhovo, about 50 miles (80 km) south of Moscow. That was his main residence for about six years, providing a home for his aging parents, as also for his sister Mariya, who acted as his housekeeper and remained unmarried in order to look after her brother. The Melikhovo period was the most creatively effective of Chekhov's life so far as short stories were concerned, for it was during those six years that he wrote "*The Butterfly*," "*Neighbours*" (1892), "*An Anonymous Story*" (1893), "*The Black Monk*" (1894), "*Murder*," and "*Ariadne*" (1895), among many other masterpieces. Village life now became a leading theme in his work, most notably in "*Peasants*" (1897). Undistinguished by plot, the short sequence of brilliant sketches created more stir in Russia than any other single work of Chekhov's, partly owing to his rejection of the convention whereby writers commonly presented the Russian peasantry in sentimentalized and debrutalized form.

Continuing to provide many portraits of the intelligentsia, Chekhov also described the commercial and factory-owning world in such stories as "*A Woman's Kingdom*," (1894) and "*Three Years*" (1895). As has often been recognized, Chekhov's work provides a panoramic study of the Russia of his day, and one so accurate that it could even be used as a sociological source.

In some of his stories of the Melikhovo period, Chekhov attacked by implication the teachings of Leo Tolstoy, the well-known novelist and thinker, and Chekhov's revered elder contemporary. Himself once (in the late 1880s) a tentative disciple of the Tolstoyan simple life, and also of nonresistance to evil as advocated by Tolstoy, Chekhov had now rejected those doctrines. He illustrated his new view in one particularly outstanding story: "*Ward Number Six*" (1892). Here an elderly doctor shows himself nonresistant to evil by refraining from remedying the appalling conditions in the mental ward of which he has charge – only to be incarcerated as a patient himself through the intrigues of a subordinate. "*In My Life*" (1896) the young hero, son of a provincial architect, insists on defying middle-class convention by becoming a house painter, a cultivation of the Tolstoyan simple life that Chekhov portrays as misconceived. In a later trio of linked stories, "*The Man in a Case*," "*Gooseberries*," and "*About Love*" (1898), Chekhov further develops the same theme, showing various figures who similarly fail to realize their full potentialities. As those pleas in favour of personal freedom illustrate, Chekhov's stories frequently contain some kind of submerged moral, though he never worked out a comprehensive ethical or philosophical doctrine.

*Chayka* (*The Seagull*) is Chekhov's only dramatic work dating with certainty from the Melikhovo period. First performed in St. Petersburg on October 17, 1896 (*Old Style*), the four-act drama, misnamed a comedy, was badly received; indeed, it was almost hissed off the stage. Chekhov was greatly distressed and left the auditorium during the second act, having suffered one of the most traumatic experiences of his life and vowing never to write for the stage again. Two years later, however, the play was revived by the newly created Moscow Art Theatre, enjoying considerable success and helping to reestablish Chekhov as a dramatist. *The Seagull* is a study of the clash between the older and younger generations as it affects two actresses and two writers, some of the details having been suggested by episodes in the lives of Chekhov's friends.

### Yalta period: 1899–1904

In March 1897 Chekhov had suffered a lung hemorrhage caused by tuberculosis, symptoms of which had become apparent considerably earlier. Now forced to acknowledge himself a semi-invalid, Chekhov sold his Melikhovo estate and built a villa in Yalta, the Crimean coastal resort. From then on he spent most of his winters there or on the French Riviera, cut off from the intellectual life of Moscow and St. Petersburg. That was all the more galling since his plays were beginning to attract serious attention. Moreover, Chekhov had become attracted by a young actress, Olga Knipper, who was appearing in his plays, and whom he eventually married in 1901; the marriage probably marked the only profound love affair of his life. But since Knipper continued to pursue her acting career, husband and wife lived apart during most of the winter months, and there were no children of the marriage.

Never a successful financial manager, Chekhov attempted to regularize his literary affairs in 1899 by selling the copyright of all his existing works, excluding plays, to the publisher A.F. Marx for 75,000 rubles, an unduly low sum. In 1899–1901 Marx issued the first comprehensive edition of Chekhov's works, in 10 volumes, after the author had himself rejected many of his juvenilia. Even so, that publication, reprinted in 1903 with supplementary material, was unsatisfactory in many ways.

Chekhov's Yalta period saw a decline in the production of short stories and a greater emphasis on drama. His two last plays—*Tri sestry* (*Three Sisters*), first performed in 1901, and *Vishnyovy sad* (*The Cherry Orchard*), first performed in 1904—were both written for the Moscow Art Theatre. But much as Chekhov owed to the theatre's two founders, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstanin Stanislavsky, he remained dissatisfied with such rehearsals and performances of his plays as he was able to witness. Repeatedly insisting that his mature drama was comedy rather than tragedy, Chekhov grew distressed when producers insisted on a heavy treatment, overemphasizing the—admittedly frequent—occasions on which the characters inveigh against the boredom and futility of their lives. Despite Stanislavsky's reputation as an innovator who had brought a natural, nondeclamatory style to the hitherto overhistrionic Russian stage, his productions were never natural and nondeclamatory enough for Chekhov, who wished his work to be acted with the lightest possible touch. And though Chekhov's mature plays have since become established in repertoires all over the world, it remains doubtful whether his craving for the light touch has been satisfied except on the rarest of occasions. Yet oversolemnity can be the ruin of *Three Sisters*, for example—the play in which Chekhov so sensitively portrays the longings of a trio of provincial young women. Insisting that his *The Cherry Orchard* was “a comedy, in places even a farce,” Chekhov offered in that last play a poignant picture of the Russian landowning class in decline, portraying characters who remain comic despite their very poignancy. The play was first performed in Moscow on January 17, 1904 (Old Style), and less than six months later Chekhov died of tuberculosis.

Though already celebrated by the Russian literary public at the time of his death, Chekhov did not become internationally famous until the years after World War I, by which time the translations of Constance Garnett (into English) and of others had helped to publicize his work. Yet his elusive, superficially guileless style of writing – in which what is left unsaid often seems so much more important than what is said – has defied effective analysis by literary critics, as well as effective imitation by creative writers.

It was not until 40 years after his death, with the issue of the 20-volume *Polnoye sobraniye sochineny i pisem A.P. Chekhova* (“Complete Works and Letters of A.P. Chekhov”) of 1944–51, that Chekhov was at last presented in Russian on a level of scholarship worthy – though with certain reservations – of his achievement. Eight volumes of that edition contain his correspondence, amounting to several thousand letters. Outstandingly witty and lively, they belie the legend – commonly believed during the author’s lifetime – that he was hopelessly pessimistic in outlook. As samples of the Russian epistolary art, Chekhov’s letters have been rated second only to Aleksandr Pushkin’s by the literary historian D.S. Mirsky. Although Chekhov is chiefly known for his plays, his stories – and particularly those that were written after 1888 – represent, according to some critics, an even more significant and creative literary achievement.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Francis Hingley, “Anton Chekhov: Russian Author”, **Encyclopedia Britannica**, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anton-Chekhov/Melikhov>

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