

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PEASANT
UNIVERSE IN CHEKHOV'S SHORT STORIES



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CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Eva Bundala was born on May 26, 1942, in Czechoslovakia. Studied Science at the Comenius University of Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, where she graduated in 1968.

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The peasantry in the Russian Empire always constituted an overwhelming majority of the population. Perhaps for this reason alone, Russian literature dedicated a great deal of its attention and writings to the life and problems of the village. The literary beginning of this interest can be traced back to the end of eighteenth century-- to Chulkov's story entitled The Bitter Fate. Nineteenth century abounds in works on the peasant topic. Indeed, there is hardly a writer or poet who does not have at least one important work on the village theme. Among these men of letters who contributed to the peasant topic one finds the prose of Gogol, Turgenev, Grigorovich-- to name a few. In their works readers are confronted with the Russian peasant universe before the emancipation.

Nor was the peasant neglected in poetry. Koltsov's Russian songs (1835), I. Nikitin's The Tailor and Nekrasov's Who Can be Happy in Russia, may be taken as a representative sample of poetry dedicated to the peasant theme.

With the Edict of Emancipation promulgated by Tsar Alexander II, literary output focusing on peasants enters the phase of immense popularity. This phenomenon reflects, to a large extent, the ideological movement known in Russian history as populism. The basic belief of a populist rested on a conviction that Russianess and Russia's future are bound with the fate of underprivileged and oppressed masses of peasantry. This philosophy became almost a faith among the post-Reform socio-economic stratum, the so-called *raznochintsy*. This new "class" absorbed members from various social groups, chiefly from economically-ruined gentry. The populist movement climaxed in the so-called "going to the people" movement

which took place in 1873-1874. During this period many thousands of city young people went to villages with the intention of helping and living with peasants. The movement failed. Mainly because of its starry-eyed idealism. Indeed, many a youth were turned over to the police by peasants themselves always suspicious of anything coming from the city.

The intensity of populism subsided considerably during the reign of Alexander III, although it never ceased to be one of the main pre-occupations of Russian liberals and revolutionary alike. However the changing economic conditions and social stratification brought an assessment of the attitudes and new remedies for the eternal "peasant problem". The emergence of the proletariat during the last two decades of the tsarist Russia turned the interest of intelligentsia and literati away from the village. Yet, even then the peasant occupied the foremost position among Russian intellectuals and practical politicians as well.

The "golden" era of nineteenth-century populism spawned a veritable flood of prose about "the people". Much of what was published then belongs to literary archives, rather than literature. But there were writers whose works had a great influence upon the public's conscience and opinion as well as upon the great writers of the period. Among these writers one should place Ertel, Zlatovratsky, Nefedov, Zasodimsky, but above all, Gleb Uspensky. Each one of these writers projected a particular personal vision of the Russian village and its problems. The publishing of Chekhov's The Peasants and In the Ravine announces a new approach to an old problem; these two stories present a detached and objective analysis of the Russian village toward the end of nineteenth century.

The purpose of this dissertation is twofold: to study Chekhov's "peasant" prose on the background of the epoch as well as within the framework of the writer's own prose works. Chapter I and chapter II are concerned with these two aspects of the thesis. The second part of the dissertation is dedicated to the analysis of the major structural aspects of prose writing--chiefly plot, character and setting.

Point-of-view is not scrutinized in a separate chapter, for methods applied in analyses of the three preceding elements encompass author's "angle of vision" from which he presents the story. Concluding observations on this aspect are stated in the chapter Summary and Conclusions.

The main concern of the dissertation is to determine Chekhov's technique employed in executing plot, character, and setting.

The quotations from Chekhov's stories used in the thesis are cited in English translation; the corresponding Russian language texts are given in the Appendix. The source of these quotations is: A.P. Chekhov, Povesti i rasskazy v tryokh tomakh, Tom 3, Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, Moskva, 1959.

CHAPTER I

CHEKHOV'S PEASANT PROSE

The purpose and composition of the present chapter aims at providing a backdrop, both literary and historical, to the writer's fiction on peasant topics. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first focuses on Chekhov's total prose output between the years 1892 and 1904. The second part will concentrate on Chekhov's interest in the peasant "problem" in general, and on his "peasant" stories in particular.

The year 1892, in which Chekhov moved to Melikhovo is regarded as a literary as well as a biographical turning point. This date, which happens to fall half-way through the twenty-four years of his career, marks the beginning of a more settled period of short story writing than anything which had preceded it--from farce to literary maturity.

The entire body of Chekhov's fiction written between 1892 and his death in 1904, contains altogether forty-two stories. As this figure reveals, the quantity of fiction written by Chekhov during the last twelve years of his life falls below that which had preceded it. In the latest Russian complete edition seven volumes are assigned to the earlier, and only two to the later period. But this ratio does not correspond to their relative importance. Indeed, one main feature of the later short stories, as opposed to those which precede, and to all other sections of Chekhov's work, lies in the dominant position which they occupy in his artistic achievement in the field of prose.

The period which begins in 1892 shows Chekhov's new approach to fiction. In contrast to the earlier period, now he begins to abandon the

approach of a comparatively dispassionate observer. From 1892 on, Chekhov tends to handle his stories in a manner more consistent with the demands of those who looked to fiction for a comment on life. The consequence of this noticeable change was, that:

...social problems began to feature more prominently and though Chekhov's attitude to them never became tendentious enough to satisfy all his critics, although he did begin to show his own sympathies more openly, and to express protests,...against trends and theories which impressed him as undesirable.¹

From this perspective the later stories can be suitably grouped in accordance with problems which they tackle. Thus, one can speak of:

The Bourgeoisie Fiction, where the Russian social scene is of dominant importance: the growth of Russian industry, the new bourgeoisie and the worker, and the life in the village. In these stories the source of human frustration is related to the flaws of a social system in which a great majority of Russians lived in deprivation. Concern with social phenomena, though fundamental to the stories, is still subservient to Chekhov's main theme, human isolation. The stories: A Woman's Kingdom (1894), Three Years (1895), A Doctor's Visit (1898), are concerned with industrialization and the emergence of a new class--the bourgeoisie.

The stories dealing with the social order in the Russian village in the late nineteenth century--The Artist's Story (1896), The Peasants (1897), The School-mistress (1897), The New Villa (1899), and In the Ravine (1900),--constitute the group of fiction that could be entitled The Peasant Fiction.

¹ Ronald Hingley, Chekhov: A Biographical and Critical Study, G. Allen, London 1966, pp. 154-155.

The other group of stories can be named The Intellectual, since in them Chekhov expresses his attitude toward the intellectual whom he studied from various aspects. One such aspect is the Tolstoy's doctrine of "simplification":

Tolstoy considered most sorts of higher cultural or intellectual pursuit an immoral and unnecessary luxury. He thought that people capable of such complicated activity would do better to simplify themselves by sharing the labours and experiences of the common man. ²

In the story My Life (1896), for example, Chekhov gives very deliberate criticism of Tolstoyism by allowing readers to observe a test-case of simplification. Another variety of intellectual disapproved of by Chekhov was the talkative type that seemed incapable of making any genuine contribution to the community as found in--The Wife (1895), Neighbours (1892), and The Grasshopper (1892). The picture conveyed in such stories is reinforced by the outburst against intelligentsia to be found in Chekhov's correspondence:

...I have no faith in our intelligentsia, hypocritical, false, hysterical, ill-bred, lazy... ³

In the other group of stories Chekhov dealt with Freedom. To Chekhov freedom represented something of fundamental value, for which he was always yearning in his own life, and which he found lacking in many of the people around him. It was the absence of political freedom in Russia to which he objected. So far as he could see, individuals were often as a big menace to their own freedom. Lack of freedom could take many forms, as Chekhov

² Ibid., p. 165.

³ Louis S. Friedland, Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics by Anton Chekhov, B. Blom, New York, 1964, p. 286.

showed in the three stories, all published in 1898: The Man in a Case, Gooseberries, and About Love. These stories were intended to be read as a group, and are accordingly sometimes referred to as a trilogy--Ionych.

This thematic classification of Chekhov's short stories written between 1892 and 1904, proves clearly that Chekhov's fiction dedicated to the peasant is not a major theme; that the peasant universe is one of several, occupying the writer's attention during the years of intense and diversified literary activity.

Chekhov's own social origin, his professional training as a doctor, and especially, the years he spent in Melikhovo, enabled him to remain in close everyday contact with peasants. Indeed, he was well familiar with Russian peasantry, and --one may suggest--perhaps better informed than most gentile writers of his own and earlier days. L. Grossman emphasizes this strong link between Chekhov--the doctor and Chekhov--the writer.

Medical practice brought home to Chekhov with remarkable fullness the horror of life, the cruelty of nature, and the impotence of man. Incidents from his medical practice found in his stories and letters create such a painful picture of life's absurdity that they are enough in themselves to make a pessimist of the observer... 4

L. Grossman goes even further, when expressing his opinion on Chekhov's turn to the peasant world on the direct example of Zola "...to develop more fully that theme of the human menagerie which always intrigued him." 5

4 Leonid Grossman, "The Naturalism of Chekhov", in Robert Louis Jackson, Chekhov, the Collection of Critical Essays, Englewood Cliffs, New York, Prentice-Hall, 1967, p. 34.

5 Ibid., p. 39.

But anyhow, Chekhov gives us in his peasant stories a convincing picture, created as a mixture of gloomy and idyllic scenes of the various aspects of Russian villages. The presence of such idylls lies, probably, in the writer's intention to provide a contrast with the waking world, which "...he was too honest to idealize".⁶ Idealization was abhorrent to Chekhov, the artist. Because Chekhov with his "non-embellishing proneness",

...considered it his business as an artist rather to state the problem correctly than to attempt its solution, to state it in his concise and reticent way in fiction that should be truer to type than any individual transcript from life, and believed fundamental social changes to be necessary.⁷

During the period 1883-1904, several well-known stories reflect Chekhov's concern with the Russian social scene, particularly with the peasant milieu. However, this can be traced to Chekhov's earlier works--The Huntsman (1886) Agafya (1886), At the Mill (1886), The Steppe (1888), Gusev (1891), and Peasant Wives (1891). T. Winner⁸ remarks that these stories are a clear evidence that Chekhov knew and understood the peasant milieu better than he did the industrial world. T. Winner also considers the peasant characters in the Chekhov's early works as excellently drawn.

A group of Chekhov's early stories--set in a peasant and village

⁶ Walter H. Bruford, Chekhov and his Russia, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, London 1947, p. 41.

⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

⁸ Thomas Winner, Chekhov and his Russia, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1966, p. 138.

milieu-- opens with The Huntsman. In a brief dramatic scene the story presents two contrasting characters--a freedom-loving huntsman, and his stolid peasant wife, whom he married while drunk. The story is limited to a brief description of their meeting and conversation in open field, and their parting which follows--their differences still unresolved. This lack of a definite resolution becomes ever more frequent conclusion of Chekhov's stories. Nature is a part of the conversation in which they participate. The suggestion of the symbolism of the disappearing ducks and the delicate use of sounds foreshadows Chekhov's later sophisticated use of aural and visual elements, and symbolism of nature.

In the early peasant story Agafya, a narrator-observer describes a nocturnal rendez-vous between the village Don Juan, Savka, and the wife of the railroad switchman, Agafya. Savka, a variant of the Egor type in The Huntsman, is again the antithesis to the submissive type, Agafya, who offers him her love. Savka is not a villain, nor is he brute; nevertheless he treats Agafya unkindly. Like the huntsman, he is a rebel and nonconformist, who is sometimes gentle and sensitive to nature. The emptiness of Agafya's life had led her to Savka, but at the close of the story we see her walking slowly towards the threatening figure of her husband. The story concludes, as does The Huntsman--without resolution.

The Steppe, one of Chekhov's longest works, is constructed as a traditional tale of the adventures and observations of a traveling young boy Egor. There is neither the dramatic conflict, nor the traditional action plot. Instead, there is a symbolic, inner action. The dramatic tension consists more in Egor's withdrawal from the activity of his surroundings.

The end of the journey seems to be of little use, and Egor, who has witnessed so many adventures, seems more alone than ever. A subtext, which echoes throughout the story, states the Chekhovian contrast of the world of art, sensitivity, and beauty to that of "poshlost", of ugliness and vulgarity. Chekhov handles this contrast by the identification of Egor with nature. Through Egor's poetic perception is reflected nature, but he is as lonely, as deserted, and as misunderstood as is nature, and no one has the time to heed him. The people who are part of "poshlost" in a Chekhovian milieu are indifferent to beauty and likely to destroy it, just as those who surround Egor are indifferent to him and to the nature through which they are passing.

In 1890 Chekhov became increasingly concerned with the search for a more clearly defined world-view and for an answer to the question of the moral responsibility of the writer. He also began to think more seriously of social problems, and his writings voiced a degree of social criticism previously unknown in his work. To this period belongs Peasant Wives, with a village milieu as a setting. It is a study of the hypocrisy of a trader, one of whose victims is a Russian peasant woman. A subtheme is the subservient position of women in peasant society. Peasant Wives is, in many respects, a thematic prototype for many of Chekhov's later stories which depict the cruel treatment of women among the peasants and the lower middle classes.

Peasant Wives is a story of one character, that of Matvey Savvich. Other protagonists serve primarily to delineate Matvey more fully. The plot structure of this story is simple. The central protagonist arrives in a carriage, reveals himself by his action and speech, is seen through varying points of view, and leaves again--unchanged--as he had come. The initial

appearance of Matvey is marked as he crosses himself properly, it ends as Matvey leaves with the same gesture the next morning, but only after we have heard his cruel tale, which unmasks him. So, a significant gesture introduces and concludes the story on a note of irony.

Contemporaneous with Chekhov's growing concern about social problems is his search for a definition of his own world view, expressed in a series of stories between 1889 and 1893, which are concerned with specific philosophical questions.

In this period was written Gusev. The setting of the story is a board ship in a sick bay, a depressing ward. The impression of suffering is sharpened by contrasts with the peace and beauty beyond the portholes of the ward. The story presents the conversation of two moribund patients Pavel Ivanych and Gusev. Gusev is the simple peasant, who speaks naively in phrases filled with folk expressions. He humbly accepts death, which is dramatically emphasized when his corpse is devoured by a shark. Pavel Ivanych, a reversal of the Gusev type, and one of Chekhov's rebellious intellectuals, opposes Gusev's humility. He not only rejects the acceptance of evil, but also suggests the deification of science and intellectualism. The story ends with the death of both protagonists.

In the first two stories of the later cycle concerned with Russian village, The Artist's Story and My Life, Chekhov examines certain intellectual solutions and attitudes toward the "peasant problem". In these prose-works Chekhov explores the populist view that the peasant can be saved by education and sanitation (The Artist's Story), and the Tolstoyan tenet of "simplification" (My Life). But neither concepts are shown to be a solution.

In the peasant stories which followed, naturalistic pictures of village life appear more important than social issues.

The Artist's Story is only indirectly involved in the peasant question. But many discussions of solutions to the village problem contained in the story, justify its consideration as part of the "peasant cycle". In this story we find the contrast of beauty and sensitivity to a prosaic, utilitarian attitude to life. An artist--who is the narrator--loves a young, romantic girl, Zhenya. But Zhenya's sister, Lida, a village schoolteacher, causes this love to be frustrated. Zhenya and the artist, who see poetry in nature and life, are contrasted to Lida, the philanthropist and social reformer, who resents the artist because he does not share her faith in sanitation and medical facilities as a solution to the peasant problem. The artist's opposition to Lida's philanthropy stems from a conviction that:

...all these Annas, Mavras, Pelageyas and other peasant women are hard at work...They fall ill from working too hard, they spend all their lives trembling with anxiety for their sick...children, in terror of death and illness...they've no time to think of their souls ...

You go to their aid with hospitals and schools, but that's not free-⁹ing them from their shackles...It's only a worse form of slavery...

In the second story about peasants, My Life, concerned with solutions to the social ills of the Russian village, here too, peasants play only a secondary role, as a kind of documentation of the intellectual argument. In this story many of the protagonists seek to escape the boredom of society. Some adopt the Tolstoyan precepts of life. The protagonist, Misail Poloznev,

⁹ Ronald Hingley, The Oxford Chekhov, vol. viii, Stories 1895-1897, Transl. and Ed. by R. Hingley, London, 1965, p. 106.

expounds the redemptive power of physical labour. Misail, the son of a leading architect in a provincial town, rejects the society of his youth and refuses to pursue an occupation appropriate to his education and social status. Instead, he leaves the family and his position to become a simple laborer and later he attempts to work the land. But physical work does not bring him salvation, or even relief. His proximity to the peasants shows them to be devoid of the romantic emotions with which they were endowed by the Populists and by Tolstoy. Peasants are backward, drunken and brutalized by constant hard work. The barrier of distrust which exists between them and Misail is insurmountable. When Misail and his wife Masha, who has married him to escape the boredom of the town, try to help the peasants by constructing the school, the peasants are unco-operative and steal building materials.

Misail's venture represents the dismal failure of the "go to the people" movement of the seventies exposing the naive idealism of the early populism.

Chekhov's principal "peasant" story The Peasants, was published in the April issue 1897 of Russian Thought. In it he shows a typical village in central Russia through the eyes of Nikolay, a consumptive waiter, who has come back with his wife and child to his native village in the hope of recovering his health. Nikolay's parents live in a delapidated cottage, a single-room log hut. Here lived Nicolay's parents, both bent with age and toothless, with their two daughters-in-law Marya and Fyokla and eight grandchildren. Food was scarce, usually black bread, which they dipped in water and ate greedily. On a feast - day they bought a herring and made thin soup from its head. There is no mention of traditional costumes or of

stores of finery. This family has no reserves, and the only article resembling a luxury that they possess is a samovar. If the women have their tea, at any rate on special occasions, the men of the village could not be kept away from the inn. The over-crowding poverty and ever-present hunger gave rise to constant friction, kept within bounds only by the firm control of the head of the family. In the story it is the grandmother who was constantly nagging at her husband for his drinking and shiftlessness. The coarse Fyokla lost no opportunity of showing her dislike for the other two. When things went badly even the dying Nikolay was loudly cursed for inflicting himself and his family on the over-burdened household. Ignorance was the cause of much of their suffering and their fears, for the old traditions and superstitions were strong and they had little guidance.

As for the moral character and manners of the peasants--Chekhov gives an unfavourable picture in The Peasants. The whole work consists of a series of episodes which are only tenuously connected, but which create a total impression of peasant life. This was a sufficient reason for having a number of pages prohibited by a censor. However, Chekhov was able to reinstate these passages in the first its edition in the book form, since book publication was not subject to the same stringent censorship laws as periodicals. Chekhov writes to A.S. Suvorin in the letter written on March 1, 1897:

I have no luck. I wrote a novel on peasant life but they say that it will not pass the censorship, and that I shall have to cut it down to half. It means losses again.¹⁰

Chekhov had originally planned The Peasants as a larger work. Two further

¹⁰ Louis S. Friedland, op. cit., p. 24.

chapters have been found in rough draft among Chekhov's papers. They tell of Olga, Sasha, Kiryak and Fyokla and their life in the city. Olga leaves Sasha with her sister, a prostitute. Sasha also becomes a prostitute, and all live as hopeless lives in Moscow slums as they had in the village.

The Peasants made a great impression on the public and was discussed more in the press than any other of Chekhov's works of this period. The interest was aroused not so much by the story's purely literary qualities as by the ruthless depiction of the backwardness and poverty of the Russian peasants. Its theme was quite topical, for it appeared at the height of the controversy between the Russian Marxists and the Populists about the village community and other problems of Russia's village social development.

In the Marxist magazine Novoe Slovo, Peter Struve published a very favorable review of the story.¹¹ In the Populist Russkoe Bogatstvo, literary critic of those days, Nikolay Mikhaylovsky attacked both Chekhov and Struve.¹² The playwright and actor Yuzhin-Sumbatov, in a letter to Chekhov described The Peasants as "...the greatest work in the whole world for many, many years, at least for a Russian."¹³ There were also adverse opinions, besides Mikhaylovsky's, voiced in the press and expressed privately. Tolstoy was reported to have described the story as "...A sin with regard to the people"¹⁴ and to have said that Chekhov did not know the people. This opinion

11 Anton P. Chekhov, Seven Short Novels by Chekhov, Bantam Books, N.Y., 1963, p. 365.

12 Ibid., p. 365.

13. Ibid., p. 365.

14 Ibid., p. 365-366.

is not, however, in Tolstoy's own writings. The story was greatly admired by Maxim Gorky.

The last important work of Chekhov's "peasant cycle" is In the Ravine, published in 1900, in the Marxist journal Zhizn. Here Chekhov's concentration on rich peasants has a much deeper moral import and social ramifications.

One of the effects of peasants' emancipation by tsar Alexander's Great Reforms had been to remove the levelling influences of serfdom and to favour economic differentiation in the village. Consequently, some peasants became still poorer, a few, usually the more energetic ones, became richer. In Chekhov's story they are village shop-keepers, they have inns or even small factory. These village "capitalists" are represented as being on bad terms with the peasants, though they are connected with them by blood ties and cannot easily change the peasant way of life.

In the Ravine is a story of the life and fortunes of Gregory Tsybukin's family. Tsybukin kept a grocer's shop, but he dealt in more profitable wares, illegal sale of vodka as well, in anything that promised a good return. The family lived in a two-story stone house and enjoyed relative material comfort, but retaining, however, all others aspects of peasant's culture. It was only after Tsybukin's second marriage, late in his life, that his family began to use individual plates instead of common dish at dinner. His second wife, Varvara, also introduced lamps, tablecloths, and tended flowers in the garden. The Tsybukins worked hard. They could afford better clothes, horse, carriage, and expensive wedding reception. There was nothing of the muzhik's life in this luxury, yet the mentality and mode of life was that of a peasant. The sons were married to healthy, hard working and good

looking peasant girls without dowries. Tsybukin was rich enough to forego the dowry--one of very important item in peasant match-making.

Chekhov himself makes comments on this story in the letter to O.L. Knipper, written on Jan. 2., 1900:

My story is a very queer one, will be in the February number of Zhizn. There are a great many characters in it; there is a scenery, too, there's a crescent moon, there is a bittern that cries far, far away: "Boo-oo! Boo-oo!" like a cow shut up in a shed. There is everything in it.¹⁵

Quite different--when compared to that of The Peasants--but unanimous were responses to In the Ravine. Gorky praised it in a long article, in which he wrote among other things:

As a stylist, Chekhov is unmatched, and the future historian of literature, in speaking of the growth of the Russian language, will say that this language was created by Pushkin, Turgenev and Chekhov.¹⁶

Tolstoy, in a letter to Gorky, wrote: "How good is Chekhov's story in "Life". I'am exceedingly glad!"¹⁷ Alexander Koni, well known both as a writer and as a lawyer of distinction, a friend of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, wrote to Chekhov, that he had read and reread the story "with delight" and went on to say: "I think it is the best thing you ever wrote and one of the profoundest works of Russian literature."¹⁸ Bunin regarded In the Ravine

15 L.S. Friedland, op. cit., p. 24.

16 A. P. Chekhov , op. cit., p. 397.

17 Ibid., p. 397.

18 Ibid., p. 397.

as one of the greatest works in contemporary literature. It is undoubtedly one of Chekhov's most powerful stories on the "peasant problem" at that time.

R. Hingley¹⁹ ranks both, The Peasants and In the Ravine among Chekhov's most influential works and his finest stories.

L. Grossman finds in both stories the influence of Zola upon Chekhov:

There is no doubt, however, that the picture of savage avarice, cruelty, and uncontrolled passion in The Peasants (1897) and In the Ravine were not created independently of Zola's painful peasant epic. ²⁰

In the Ravine struck a more responsive chord among "people-loving" intelligentsia and guilt-ridden aristocracy because of its more balanced viewing of contemporary Russian village. Unlike the Zolasque panorama in The Peasants, In the Ravine probes deeper, the analysis is more complex and the implied answers to the "peasant problem" more profound and universal. In the subsequent chapters of this dissertation both, In the Ravine and The Peasants are the object of the analysis which will indicate, it is hoped, some areas of essential differences between the two stories.

¹⁹ Ronald Hingley, Chekhov, A Biographical and Critical Study, pp. 163-164.

²⁰ Robert Louis Jackson, op. cit., p. 39.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The past century is marked by many and significant developments and changes in the European literature, of which the most important and lasting occurred in the domain of fiction. It was during the nineteenth century that fiction overtook poetry--till then dominating form of literature. This dominating position of poetry was paralleled by an immense volume of critical literature on the subject of poetry's theory and practice.

Unlike poetry, fiction is comparatively poor in this domain; there is not, yet, a single, universally acceptable "poetica" of fiction. Instead, a student of fiction is confronted with numerous concepts, theories, critical approaches, and rich, but often vague and contradictory terminology.

The nineteenth century criticism concentrated preponderantly on "the message" contained in a given piece of fiction. This "message", the dominant idea--the content was closely scrutinized, then judged according to the criteria of social or philosophical views of a critic. The nineteenth century was chiefly concentrated with "what" is the studied book about. But "how" this book is made, what technique or techniques are employed in telling the tale--this aspect of fiction received peripheral critical treatment.

Toward the end of the century one notes the change leading in subsequent decades to the emergence of a more exact and scientific study of fiction. This trend produced various theoretical and critical schools during the last decades which, despite of differences, recognize a work of fiction

as the primary object of studies. The extra-literary elements--biography, social and ideological backgrounds--were relegated to the secondary level of critical interest. The priority reserved for the study of the work itself had another important result--it led to a more elaborate and precise critical apparatus.

The traditional, bifocal viewing of a work of art which gave preference to the "content" (the "what" of the work) tended to see "Form" as an independent entity as a sort of "...an envelope, a vessel into which one pours a liquid (content)"²¹. In the new critical approach the form becomes an organic element of the totality, an element tightly interwoven with content.

The organicistic criticism focussed its efforts on the manner in which the multiplicity of ingredients are put together. The twentieth century study of fiction has been thoroughly analyzing the writer's technique. One consequence of novel critical direction was the introduction of new terminology associated with writer's technical workshop.

Despite rich critical literature about the art of fiction, there is no one universally accepted poetics of fiction. But, there is a general agreement on the meaning of a number of terms pertinent to the basic structural elements of fiction. By "basic structural elements" one understands the major components which shape the design of a story. To these components belong: the structure of plot, character, background, and point of view.

²¹ Paul A. Olson (ed.), Russian Formalist Criticism, Four Essays, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1965, p. 112

1. Plot

"The idea of plot is too often confused with the description of events--with what I propose to call the story." --observed V. Shklovsky,²² the foremost Russian formalist. Similar remark was made by E.M. Forster in his Aspects of the Novel. This English critic made a distinct division between the term "story" and "plot" ; a "story" being "...a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence," and a "plot" "...a narrative of events in which emphasis falls on causality."²³ Both the Russian and English critics agree on the understanding of plot as an artifice, as a structure superimposed by the artist on the raw story material. This distinction made between the "story" and the "plot" is crucial in the study of fiction, since it accounts for the difference between art and non-art.

Not that current concept of plot is twentieth century creation; the foundations were laid in the Greek antiquity and were formulated by Aristoteles himself. Aristoteles saw plot as an action that is complete and whole; an action that has a beginning, a middle, and the end. A model of the Aristotelian story-telling technique consists of several distinct major portions.

The plot's beginning phase is the establishment of the situation. In it the characters are introduced and the conflict of plot is planted. Briefly, the establishment phase contains the main ingredients and the con-

²² Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", in Russian Formalist Criticism, op. cit., p.57

²³ E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, Penguin Books Pty., Ringwood, Victoria, Australia, 1964, p. 93.

tours of a given work of fiction.

The next stage is peripetiae (rising action, or complications). Here the developments follow the course that has been indicated at the beginning, leading at times, to the first turning point of the plot. Essentially, this phase is the development of the conflict.

The plot's second and more decisive turning point--the climax (recognition)--is the moment when characters become aware of the drastic change that has taken place in their relationship. A crisis may be a key turning point in a conflict between forces that have already been put into opposition during the plot's "rising action".

Succeeding climax is the denouement (falling action, or unknotting), the post-climax events that lead toward the final resolution.

Although a growing segment of contemporary fiction deviates from the traditional model, still, even in every technically experimental works one can detect the Aristotelian pattern of story-telling.

There could be neither plot nor story without conflict. Conflict, meaning the opposition of two forces, functions as the generating force of a work of fiction. A conflict is carefully planted, developed and processed through all the stages of the plot. Conflict controls plot's forward movement, and is chiefly responsible for retaining reader's interest.

There is an infinite number of techniques of plot. A plot may be structured around clearly demarcated conflict or one imperceptibly diffused throughout the narrative. One may have a complex or simple plot; a major plot and several sub-plots. A plot may have sharply defined phases or a great deal of overlapping between them. Similarly, the plot's climax

may, or may not be easily discernible. The denouement may provide a clear-cut solution, or it may be only implicit. Briefly, there are no ready-made rules and formulae. The choice of a particular technique will be the vector of many factors.

2. Character

Of the two--plot and character--the latter tends to occupy the greater part of the writer's efforts in prose structuring. After all, a story is about man and his world, and consequently, man occupies the centre of the stage.

The most frequently met terms associated with character building were coined by E.M. Forster in his Aspects of the Novel: "flat" and "round" characters, known also as "static" and "dynamic" characters. Thus, the "flat" character is the one that never surprises the reader. According to E.M. Forster, the "flat" character never undergoes basic changes from the moment of his introduction. The "round" character develops during the story to a point of becoming quite another hero from the one a reader met in the first pages of the work.

Although E.M. Forster's distinctive categories are helpful in an analysis of writer's techniques, they do not encompass all technical possibilities at writer's disposal. Most characters in modern prose combine the devices associated with both categories.

The key question a critic will most likely ask is the following: what was the principal method employed in creating character? Is it a direct method or indirect? This means, are characters revealing themselves

without the assistance of an outsider (narrator, author); or, is the narrator clearly visible during the process of character building. In the first instance, one deals with indirect characterization technique, in the other--direct.

In opting for the indirect technical model the writer is allowing the character to present himself without or with little assistance from outsiders. Indirect technique will tend toward a dramatic rendering of the story, i.e., characters will become the actors of their own roles.

Direct techniques imply the presence of narrator who presents characters to the audience. In this instance character himself performs a minor role in creating his own image. Consequently, narrator's description will be the chief method in structuring character.

A character developed by the direct method will tend toward "statism"--it will approach E.M. Forster's "flat" category. The indirect model will gravitate toward E.M. Forster's dynamic category of character.

Whether using the direct or indirect models, characters may be developed through a specific set of human and environmental traits. A hero may be structured with the assistance of outward characteristics, such as physical traits, manner of speech, relationships with others, clothes, and the like features. Or, if the writer chooses, his hero may be developed through the gradual unveiling of man's inward characteristics--his feelings, emotions, thoughts.

There are not set rules that a writer must follow, but one: to become an artistic creation, a character must be credible and it ought to be an organic and integral part of the whole--of a given work of fiction.

3. Setting

While character and plot are the principal sources of interest, they require the support of other elements in order to strengthen their lifelike qualities and to enhance interest. One such element which enters into the basic structuring of fiction is setting, also known as background.

24

E.A. Bloom in his The Order of Fiction denotes setting as:

... the physical background against which the story is projected and of which it is a coherent part ... it is a group of symbols ... by which the author conveys certain of his own expressions and by which ... he gives us a more or less specific point of spatial and temporal reference ...

The function of setting is to contribute to the development of plot and character, for setting is invariably connected with the events of the story. Like character and plot, setting arouses and helps to sustain readers' thoughts and feelings. It also calls into play visual imagination, which may be drawn from any aspect of nature (the world of trees, mountains, rivers, oceans, sun, stars, and so forth), or from man-made phenomena (cities, streets, houses, rooms, and the like). Setting or atmosphere is an important instrument in achieving a single effect.

Setting works especially well with mood, for it helps to strengthen the emotional responses through visualization.

Nevertheless, as E.A. Bloom states: "One of the most important characteristics of setting is its close affinity with development of plot and character."²⁵

24 Edward A. Bloom, The Order of Fiction, The Odyssey Press Inc., New York, 1964, p. 105.

25 Ibid., p. 120.

4. Point-of-view

Point-of-view is synonymous with "focus of narration", or "angle of vision" from which the author has chosen to present his story. The author must determine the spatial placement of his narrator in story's structure, after having decided who will serve credibly as his functional voice.

26

E.A. Bloom in his The Order of Fiction distinguishes three basic types of point-of-view:

Omniscient Point-of-View. In principle, every author is omniscient, for he has complete knowledge of everything that goes on within the story; an omniscient narrator speaks in his own voice as well as in that of his characters. Not only he describes all actions and thoughts, but also offers commentaries on them.

The Third-Person Point-of-View directs focus upon a main character through whose presence, actions and mind the story is told. Whatever is said, done, or thought is conveyed to the reader without visible authorial interference. This external point-of-view is immediate and yet without the bias of the "I", whether a direct-person or an omniscient narrator.

In The First-Person Point-of-View, the narrator (not to be confused with the author) speaks in his own voice. The "I" of the narrator can establish an exceptionally intimate bond with the audience. But his angle of vision is very restrictive and subjective, for the narrator can report no

26 Ibid., p. 147 *passim*.

more than falls within the limits of his experience, and he cannot avoid his personal bias.

Point-of-view is one of the most important ordering devices at the writer's disposal having important bearing upon the shape of plot, structuring of characters, the type of background, and other remaining elements of fiction.

5. Concluding observations

The preceding brief survey of the main aspects of the structure of fiction has focussed on those essentials which will assist in the subsequent analysis of Chekhov's stories: plot, character, background, and point-of-view.

No matter how important and attractive a theme (content) might be, it is the manner how it is told that determines the artistic qualities of a work of art.

Analysis of plotting, character building, setting, and point-of-view unveil the writer's narrative strategy and permits one to discover the tradition as well as the novel of the studied work. And, largely on the basis of findings accumulated from these studies one may proceed with formulating a critical judgement.

THE STRUCTURE OF PLOT

1. The Peasants

Having discussed in the preceding chapter the basic concepts of how the plot is structured, one can analyse Chekhov's The Peasants in order to determine the writer's technique in developing the story's plot. The first task of this analysis will be to study the plot in its major outline. The result of this analysis will permit one to determine the essentials of Chekhov's strategy as he develops the plot, as well as to point out the most important deviations from the classical model of the plot.

The Peasants' establishment phase introduces all the basic ingredients of the story: Chikildeev's family, the setting and some allusions to the economic and social aspects of the family's existence.

The story's central thread is Nicholas Chikildeev's return to his native village. It begins with the day of his family's arrival to his parents' hut, and ends with the departure of Olga and Sasha - Nicholas' wife and daughter. Nicholas himself died of the illness which forced his return to the village.

The time-span of the story is about nine months. It was harvest time, presumably August, when the family arrived in the village. The story ends when the two women left the village in the spring,-- late April or the beginning of May. Chekhov does not indicate precisely either of the two dates framing the story, although the time-span of various scenes and

incidents is fixed by indication of the exact day of the happening.

Chekhov's division of the story into chapters follows a corresponding division of the plot into separate and larger scenes, each constituting the main links in the story's development. In fact, except for the two last chapters, each one is fixed in time and duration. Thus, seven chapters out of nine encompass one day's action, and each is identified with a particular day of the week or with a month. It follows, that the calendar time is used as the indication of the progression of the story's narrative.

The Peasants is a story set between the arrival and the departure of Nicholas' family. In this sense, the narrative adheres to the traditional pattern of story-telling. How are the remaining components structured? Does one distinguish separate phases of the traditional plot: the establishment, the peripetiae, and the climax accompanied by the denouement? To answer these questions, one must carefully analyse each chapter.

Chapter one--the return of Nicholas' family to his parents' hut-- has all the traits of the establishment. Here an attentive reader will find the basic ingredients of the story; here one also detects the motive power of the conflict. The four-page narrative provides the most essential information regarding the purpose of Nicholas' return (it is the narrator who refers to the cause of his return)--his

unknown sickness which deprived him of employment in Moscow. In addition, one is given some information about the family itself, its mode of living and the surroundings. A careful scrutiny of the text unveils the story's conflict which is well verified by the subsequent stages. Soon after arriving and having met the members of the family, Nicholas "... knew that he had been wrong to come here--sick, penniless, and with a family too. A great mistake."²⁷

Why is this decision senseless? Although the subsequent chapters will provide a well-documented answer, the introductory chapter intimates that the strife among the inhabitants of the hut will, most likely, be the chief cause.

Indeed, the action of chapters two to eight inclusive, develop in a number of major scenes and incidents the various aspects of the strife which turned the family's hut into a battleground between the generations, as well as between the individual members of the family. Kiryak's drunken spree ends with the beating of his helpless and docile wife; Fyokla hates everybody in the hut; the grandmother terrorizes everyone. Nicholas, who thought his arrival to be "senseless", soon found himself in a steadily deteriorating situation. Really, there was no way out for him and his family; there was no place to go; nobody to turn to.

The tension mounts as the family settles down for the long, severe and hungry months of the winter. In this climate of growing hunger and incessant quarrels Nicholas dies. In the following chapter Olga and

27 Ronald Hingley, The Oxford Chekhov, p. 196.

her daughter Sasha take to the road leading to Moscow. To survive, she resorts to begging. And on this subdued tone ends the plot of The Peasants.

Does the plot's structure follow the traditional model?-- The answer is yes, but only in a very general manner. Chekhov's plot goes through the usual phases, the plot is pushed ahead by the conflict, and The Peasants' epilogue has all the traits of the unknitting of the story. But, having stated this, one should like to point out certain peculiarities of the plot's structure which render it somewhat different from the end of the nineteenth century literary conventions.

Firstly, The Peasants' plot develops slowly, uneventfully. Its individual phases are not marked off in a clear and definite manner. This signifies that there is a large area of overlapping between the phases. Secondly, the plot is not propelled by a fast-moving action, an action brimming with surprises or action marked by suspense, moving toward a climax and culminating in a total and exciting denouement. Indeed, it is rather difficult to trace the development of the plot and its protagonists. The plot is not rigidly structured from a fast-moving succession of episodes associated with the actions of the main characters.

That Chekhov's intention was not to narrate the dramatic story of the Moscovites upon their return home, is borne out by several indicators. Thus, the focus is not exclusively on Chikildeyev's parents, but on all the members of his family inhabiting the hut. A considerable amount of the writer's attention is given to the various aspects of the life in the village, events such as church services or the fire which is revealing of character. These and other events have a very limited bearing

on the protagonists, but such occurrences do enlarge the panorama of peasant life in the post-Reform Russia.

The plot of The Peasants is a description of the unheroic life of many peasants who make up a large gallery of the village's characters. It is the "plot of life", unaffected by the drama of Nicholas and his family. One sees the confirmation of this characteristic of the story's plot in a very subdued climax and ambiguous denouement.

If Nicholas and his family are considered to function as the protagonists, then his death and the resulting departure of his widow and her daughter represent the plot's climax and denouement. The first-- Nicholas' death-- is an event hardly noticeable in the texture of the narrative; just a mere half-page attached to the end of the chapter and concluding with: "He wanted to be put on the floor and asked the tailor not to smoke. Then he went quiet inside his sheepskin and by morning he was dead."²⁸

One could hardly write a more unheroic, understated end to the family's tragedy. Yet it is more effective, and more truly dramatic than the commonplace climaxes steeped in lyricism or the narrator's fanciful structuring of such an important point of the plot's strategy.

In quite similar fashion is structured the story's denouement. Without fanfare, rationalization, authoritative comment, the living protagonists--Nicholas' wife and daughter-- leave the village for an uncertain fate in Moscow. Indeed, one does not know whether they reach their

28 Ibid., p. 200.

destination, what the future holds in store for them. The story does not end in the traditional manner, but is left incomplete--open-ended-- as some critics labelled this typically Chekhovian ending.

2. In The Ravine

From the very beginning of In the Ravine, Anisim's involvement in the extensive production and distribution of the counterfeited rubles, becomes the major force shaping the fate and the drama of Tsybukin's family--the plot of the story. Anisim's unfulfilled dream of becoming rich in a hurry, brings in its wake the death of his infant son, the strife between the ambitious Aksinya and the rest of the family, the expulsion of Lipa, and the jail term for the originator of the "get rich" schemer himself.

Analysed with respect to this central conflict, the plot's establishment phase unrolls rather slowly occupying the two first chapters--approximately seven pages, or about one-sixth of the story's total. The first chapter constitutes a panorama of the countryside in which the writer placed the future seat of action--the village. The second chapter focuses on Tsybukin's family position in the village and on the individual members of the family. This purely descriptive chapter gives no clear and strong indication of later dramatic developments. But close reading of the part describing the arrival of Tsybukin's son shows a slight, but definite foreshadowing of the story's principal conflict. Here, too, enters Lipa, Anisim's future, ill-starred wife. Thus, by the second chapter one is familiar with main characters, the principal dramatis

personae are ushered in, and the future direction of the plot is intimated, if not strongly indicated.

What constitutes the climax of the story? Is it Anisim's imprisonment for the counterfeiting affair, of which readers are fully informed in chapter six; or, is it Aksinya's fury culminating in the premeditated murder of Anisim's infant son -- an incident taking place in the seventh chapter? Judged from the effect on the plot's development, the second event occupies a more strategic position in the plot's structure, and therefore should be considered as the plot's climax. The first incident--Anisim's imprisonment-- is the anti-climax foreshadowing worse things to flow out of the protagonist's naively-conceived illegal activity.

Between the two key points of the plot's structure--the conflict and the climax--Chekhov unrolls the canvas of the village's life, but concentrates on Tsybukin's family life evolving around its flourishing business. The preparation for the wedding and the wedding festivities depicted in chapter three, add little to the development of the story's action. The departure of Anisim in the subsequent chapter does not bring new elements either, apart from adding some details about his "get rich" scheme. In the following chapter-- the longest in the story-- the counterfeited rubles become general knowledge in the village. The news reaches Tsybukin's household, and the expected complication and upheaval ensue.

The "money affair" determines the bulk of the action of the next chapter. Here, though, ends Anisim's career and begins another stream of action as the logical consequence of the main conflict. In this unfolding stream of events, Lipa and her son are placed at the centre of the stage

with the latter's death occurring in the next chapter. The story's climax is reached. What follows is the post-climatic phase--Lipa's expulsion from the household and the wicked Aksinya's taking over the family's affairs.

The epilogue of the plot--the unknotting of the story--is compressed into the relatively short last chapter. The Tsybukin business flourished as it never did before, but now under the direction of Aksinya, who is both ambitious and clever, harsh and without pity. Toward the end the family's pattern of authority undergoes a complete reversal. The patriarchal, old Tsybukin is reduced to beggar's status. Anisim, the heir to the family's fortune, ends up serving a jail term, completely forgotten and ignored by his wife. Lipa rejoins her mother and attains once again her previous social status of a hired labourer.

The plot axis of In the Ravine is marked off with exact chronological indications. Very appropriately, the prologue of the story contained in the first chapter, is timeless; i.e. no precise time is indicated; the setting for the story could be almost anywhere. But the very commencement of the action begins with "one day before Shroveday..."²⁹ -- thus announcing the unexpected arrival of Anisim, and from this moment on, the plot is moving ahead. The plotting of action against time axes is indicated with great precision. The wedding was fixed for "Monday after Quasimodo Sunday"³⁰; Anisim arrived "...three days before the wedding"³¹

29 Anton P. Chekhov , op. cit., p. 402.

30 Ibid, p. 404.

31 Ibid.,p. 404.

and left for the town after five days. The first indication of the uncovering of Anisim's criminal activity occurs on "Friday, the eight of July"³². The same exactitude Chekhov applies to other incidents taking place in the story. For example, the events in the epilogue (the last chapter) take place three years after the main story.

In conclusion, the story's time scheme is very definite in terms of months and days. Consequently, the story's flow is placed within exact time limits.

32 Ibid., p. 413.

THE STRUCTURE OF CHARACTERS

1. The Peasants

The Peasants is well populated with characters— twenty men, women and children play part in the story, in addition to a number of individuals briefly ushered on the stage, but left unnamed. The present analysis will concentrate on characters actually named and more extensively developed.

In this gallery of characters one should distinguish several distinct groups separated on the basis of the criterion of importance they occupy in the story. Thus, the most prominent place, and the writer's greatest effort has been reserved for Chikildeyevs, a peasant family in the village of Zhukovo. From it are recruited the protagonists of Chekhov's short story.

The second level characters come from the neighbours of the protagonists - the peasants and the inhabitants of the same village. And still another group, to which belong several officials, members of administration, recruited from among the city-folk and local gentry. Globally taken, all characters in these three categories constitute a social microcosm of peasant universe with a significant set of relationships with non-peasant world: administration, manor house, church and local social centre --the tavern. Chikildeyev's family occupies the centre of the stage. It is composed of three generations: grandparents, sons, daughters and grandchildren, all living in a single dwelling --a dilapidated peasant hut. And, because of their focal position in the story, each member of

the family is fully introduced in the first, four-page chapter of the story. It is appropriate, therefore, to determine the type of material from which these protagonists are structured at the very outset of the story.

Except for Olga and the family's children, every grown-up is introduced by the narrator with several physical features. In the next phase, everyone is fixed with regard to his or her position in the family. Another set of characteristics employed in moulding the Chikildeys belongs to the psychological domain of each individual. And still another set establishes the family's socio-economic position.

As to the protagonists physical features—Nicholas' parents "...were gaunt, toothless and both of the same height."³³ Marya, their daughter-in-law, is "...broad-shouldered, strong, ugly woman."³⁴; Fyokla, another daughter-in-law, is introduced as "...good-looking woman, strong and broad-shouldered."³⁵ Kiryak, Marya's husband enters the story as "... a tall man...he had black beard and wore a fur cap."³⁶ From numerous children found in the hut, only one is briefly presented as "...about eight, fair-haired, unwashed..."³⁷

There is one striking omission: neither Nicholas Chikildeyev,

33 Ronald Hingley, The Oxford Chekhov, p. 196.

34 Ibid., p. 197.

35 Ibid., p. 197.

36 Ibid., p. 197.

37 Ibid., p. 195.

nor his wife Olga, nor Sasha, their daughter, are given any physical attributes. The others are drawn with few traits indicating the height and facial features: "good looking", "ugly", and Kiryak's terrifying face in the shadow of the lamp. In concluding, initially, Nicholas' family and his relatives emerge as scantily, but firmly drawn figures.

Unlike the rest of the family, Nicholas and Olga are introduced by their state of mind, emotions, and their state of health. Nicholas, one is told, fell ill because of some strange "numbness in his legs", a sickness which costs him his waiter's job and forced him to return to his native Zhukovo. Surveying the utter poverty of the family, he realized that he made a great mistake in coming home; he still dreams of his Moscow work. Even less is known about Nichola's wife, Olga. Two references are associated with her, and both reflect her emotions and thoughts. One passage contains Olga's own exclamation of wonderement when surveying beautiful view extending from the high shore of the river: "What a lovely morning! And how lovely life on earth might be but for poverty--sheer, grinding poverty that you could not escape from."³⁸ The other passage consists of Olga's endearing and consoling words addressed to Marya "...you must put up with things, that's all..."³⁹ - she concludes.

Much more expanded is the area of the relationships existing between the members of the family and the family's economic affairs. Clearly, there is no love, not even the slightest inclination towards love,

38 Ibid., p. 200.

39 Ibid., p. 199.

exhibited by Nicholas' relatives with respect to each other. The grandmother thinks of her husband and son as "a rotten lot", chiefly because of their uselessness as wage-earners and drinking. Kiryak's drinking spree is followed by a cruel beating of innocent, docile Marya, his wife. Fyokla despises everyone in the hut, including her absent husband. Nicholas' sickness and consequent return evokes no feelings of pity, compassion or understanding on the part of the other members of the family.

Further amplification of the main characters of the story is found in the family's utter poverty and backwardness largely responsible for dehumanization and cruelty. Thus, semi-starvation diet--"...how ravenously the old man and the woman ate their black bread, dipping in water..."⁴⁰; three generations in a single "izba" --"...all these bodies large and small, swarming on the sleeping platform, in cradles and in all the corners"⁴¹. Perhaps the worst evil was drunkenness --this is what Nicholas and Olga saw the first evening of their return. Chikildeyeys know neither to read nor write. Their perception and acquaintance with the world did not extend even to the local town. The village pub is their social centre. And most conversations center on "...about being ill and hard up".⁴²

The first chapter is focused on one family. It is, indeed, one large scene introducing all members of the family chiefly through several

40 Ibid., p. 196.

41 Ibid., p. 196.

42 Ibid., p. 197.

physical features and a sampling of their behaviour and attitude toward each other. The only exception to this pattern are Nicholas and Olga whom one gets to know through their thoughts, reflections, and emotions resulting from the confrontation with the reality they met upon their return. Already in the first scene each character stands out with own distinctive traits. Thus, nagging domineering grandmother, ineffective and drinking grandfather, cruel drunkard Kiryak, meek, weak, and suffering Marya; proud, independent, strong and hating Fyokla; ineffective and sick Nicholas; and tender, religious Olga. These are the characters' outlines emerging toward the end of the first chapter of The Peasants. But whether these initial impressions are correct can only be confirmed by the analysis of the remaining chapters of the story.

The analysis of the subsequent chapters shows that Chekhov did not introduce essential changes in the characters of Chikileyev's family. It means that the introductory scanty outlines of the individuals met in the first chapter turned toward the end of the story into more developed sketches which do not deviate from the original moulds. Chekhov simply amplified the features and traits implanted in the homecoming scene. As a consequence, Olga lives up to initially projected image of a compassionate and deeply, although naively religious young woman. Olga eventually becomes an ideal of simple, yet profound Christianity developed by the writer through a number of incidents and scenes. For example, her begging for alms reminds one of the Orthodox concept of Holy Fools, common in pre-revolutionary Russia. Olga meekly accepts the insults and hopeless situation through solace in religion. Chekhov's strategy aiming at a

figure of a saint among sinners, is revealed in Olga's mannerism of speech and emotional reactions. For example, the term "deary" with which she addresses everyone, sounds rather incongruous with crude and harsh environment in which she lives. Olga comforts herself with biblical proverbs and adages. Enraptured, she listens to her daughter's reading of the Bible without proper understanding of the text. Strange Slavic words move her to tears and her face radiates with compassion, love and religious exaltation.

Nicholas' final figure adheres to the initial outlines just as strictly as Olga's. Ineffective, meek, spineless he remains to the last moments of his life. Till the very end he lives in the dreamworld of his "career" in Moscow restaurant.

Kiryak, who is introduced as a raging, brutalized drunkard, continues to drink and terrorize the entire family. His life is depicted as two-cycle pattern alternating between drinking and mighty hangovers accompanied by typically alcoholic remorse and a feeling of guilt.

Nicholas' and Kiryak's father had not changed either. From the beginning to the end of the story he is a good-for-nothing, lazy drunkard: "...he was hopeless and might just have sat talking on the stove and never done a stroke of work if she had not kept on at him."⁴³ -- an apt summary coming from his wife.

From the women introduced in the first chapter, the grandmother's bossy character has been somewhat expanded in several situations and episodes, but not altered. She is much stronger, hard working and energetic,

43 Ibid., p. 202.

thus sharply contrasting with her useless and despised husband. Whatever else is later added to the character outlines of Marya and Fyokla does not change their introductory images either. To Marya's meekness and fear is added the hate towards the gentry, supposedly responsible for her miseries which made her wish for an early death: "Marya thought herself unhappy and said that she longed to be dead".⁴⁴

Fyokla's introduction as young and untamed character is well proven in the subsequent chapters of the story. To the very end she despises and hates the entire family and continues to carouse with the boys living across the river: "...the life suited her--the poverty, the filth, the frantic cursing."⁴⁵ Her boundless hate of the family is not subdued even by a compassionate assistance and treatment extended to her by Olga: "She took against Olga and Nicholas from the start just because they disliked this life."⁴⁶

A careful comparison of the six grown up members of Chikildeyev's family leads to the following conclusion: women are superior to men. And this is inescapable fact based on quantitative and qualitative criteria. Quantitatively, men occupy less than fifty percent of space allotted to women, although the two groups are numerically equal. Men are individualized very little, indeed. If Nicholas was as fond of vodka as his father

44 Ibid., p. 210.

45 Ibid., p. 210.

46 Ibid., p. 210.

and brother, then one could talk of a single-man character. Only Nicholas' abhorrence of drunkenness and his veneer of Moscow "culture" sets him apart from other men. In all other aspects, men are alike.

When one analyses women characters in terms of the same criteria, the difference is very clear and obvious. Chekhov's peasant heroines occupy more page-space. Their characters are more fully developed, and most important of all, each woman is individualized. Moreover, women, especially Grandmother and Fyokla, possess strength, vitality and determination which are absent in their male counterparts. Consequently, at Chikildeyevs it is women and not men who constitute the backbone of the family as well as its dominating force. Women too are the chief victims of the family's and village's semi-savage brutalized existence.

The second-level characters in The Peasants--whether of peasant, manor or administrative socio-economic background--are drawn with a few strokes. Some have an attribute or two, and are named. In this category one finds the names of Chikildeyev's neighbours, general Zhukov's cook, and the representatives of the two levels of administration: Antip Sedelnikov, the village's elder, and the unnamed tax inspector from the city. The latter's character consists of a few details: "A lean old man with grey whiskers wearing a grey tunic." ⁴⁷, in addition to several significant authorial remarks referring to his official indifference to and boredom with

47 Ibid., p. 214

thankless job of extracting unpaid taxes from penniless peasants.

Antip, the village elder, is depicted with considerably greater care. The writer gives more attention to this peasant's dealings with other peasants, his attitude to and interpretation of the administrative duties. As a result, Antip has two natures --the peasant one and that of lowly official aping the manners and the language of his superior. When it is considered convenient, or to dumbfound others, Antip, who "Never having lived in a town or read a book, he had somehow picked up a stock of long words and liked to use them in conversation, for which he was respected, if not always understood."⁴⁸ Antip acts as the executive arm of tsarist administration, and a very effective one, too.

The third group of characters making up the village population is projected several times as a small gathering or crowd, but without individualization. In such instances, no new human features can be detected. Indeed, whether during church celebration, or during the fire, the crowd's character is drawn from the ingredients which went into the making of Chikildeyev's family, especially its male members. One might postulate that a crowd of peasants is but another projection of Chikildeyevs in situations and events encompassing the entire village.

What conclusions can be submitted with regard to Chekhov's strategy employed in character building in The Peasants? The great deal of the writer's creative effort was dedicated to the family of Chikildeyevs. The family members are introduced chiefly through several physical

48 Ibid., pp. 213-214.

features and a sampling of their behaviour and attitude toward each other. The bulk of this information is provided by the narrator. The exceptions are Nicholas and Olga, depicted through the author's unveiling of their thoughts, reflexions, and emotions resulting from the confrontation with the reality they met upon their return home. Olga is the only character developed in greater detail than others. The minor characters remain undeveloped, given only their names or a few characteristics. Among them Antip Sedelnikov is outside this pattern--as the representative of both the peasant and the executive arm of tsarist administration--he is given more attention by the author. To conclude, both the protagonists and the minor characters are structured mainly by the narrator.

2. In the Ravine

The characters in this story come from various economic strata of the village's society. The cast of heroes and heroines corresponds to the economic stratification of Ukleyevo, a village which has been affected by the changes of post-Reform Russia. Consequently, among the story's characters one finds rich peasants turned merchants--Tsybukin and his family; the poor peasants--Lipa and her mother; Crutch, and a number of others; the village factory owners such as Khrymins and Kostyukovs; and the representatives of the clergy, state administration and the village "businessmen".

Of course, not all characters occupy an important position in the story. It is the criterion of character's relevance to the plot of the story which determines the degree of his development by the writer. Thus,

the central position is reserved for the members of Tsybukin's family: parents, their sons and daughters-in-law--Aksinya and Lipa. One should expect, therefore, that Chekhov's main efforts in character's structuring will be concentrated on the family of Ukleyevo's successful tradesman--Tsybukin.

Unlike in The Peasants, the individual members are introduced by their position and function in the family and its trading store. The first person so treated is the head of the family--old Tsybukin, the village merchant. The reader is told by the narrator about the type of business Grigory Petrov is in -- anything that sells, including the illegal sale of vodka. The introductory outline is summed up by a statement that Tsybukin "...was a shrewd old man".⁴⁹ The subsequent paragraph is dedicated to the introduction of Tsybukin's son and his "...beautiful, well-proportioned"⁵⁰ wife Aksinya. While the two sons initially earned brief mention, the younger son's wife--Aksinya--receives much more attention. Again, as in Tsybukin's instance, the narrator focuses on her activities in the store's business. She is, one is told, a woman with "...unusual business acumen"⁵¹, full of energy, and clearly second in command of the flourishing business enterprise.

Tsybukin's second wife, Varvara Nikolayevna provides a contrast to bustling Aksinya. Unlike her daughter-in-law, she concentrates on

49 A. P. Chekhov , op. cit., p. 398.

50 Ibid., p. 398.

51 Ibid., p. 399.

housekeeping. Pleasant, tender, always smiling and giving alms, Varvara adds another dimension to the family busy with money-making. "Her charity acted like the safety valve in a machine on these oppressive, gloomy days".⁵² These are the days when Tsybukin and Aksinya excelled in swindling peasants when selling rotten salt beef, bad vodka, and other sub-standard commodities.

The introductory chapter of In the Ravine projects four members of the family, each differing substantially and consistently from each other, mainly in respect to their function in the family business affairs. The deaf-mute son Stepan serves as a handy man; old Tsybukin and Aksinya are running the store, and Varvara's interest is in making a comfortable and pleasant home. They also differ in another respect, namely, in their attitude toward the customers -- the peasants. While Aksinya and her father-in-law are unscrupulous in their business dealings and despise their customers, Varvara is drawn as very much humane woman practicing Christianity with respect to the poor. The deaf son's aptitudes and qualities are not shown in the first stage of the story.

To conclude, the introductory character sketches are executed on the basis of two sets of attitudes: the first relating to the relationships within the family itself, the second, showing the relationships with the outside, with community. The protagonists are depicted by their actions. Chekhov describes only a few of the physical characteristics of various

52 Ibid., p. 400.

individuals and limits himself to such generalities as "shapely", "beautiful", "young", "old", and the like.

If one were to view the introductory outlines from the perspective of the story's epilogue, one might pose the following questions: what significant elements were added in the later phases of the story?-- Has the writer substantially altered the initial character projections?

The figure of old Tsybukin does not undergo any important change which would alter the introductory sketch. And although in the final pages of the story he meets a rather unexpected fate suffered at the hands of the much admired Aksinya, the main lines of his personality remain incomplete. Already in the initial image Tsybukin is a mixture of greed and contempt for peasants, being as well as a loving father and husband. In comparison to the prevailing Russian literary stereotype of the despotic head of the peasant family, Tsybukin, as seen toward the end of the story, turns out to be a very meek, helpless, even fatalistic person. Unlike the literary stereotype of strong-headed, rough and brutal peasant pater familias, Tsybukin tolerates, and actually accepts the domination of women in his household: Aksinya and Varvara easily get what they want. It is his wife's suggestion that was indirectly responsible for his only grandson's death--if one recalls that Aksinya's fury was caused by Tsybukin's willing of property to the infant-grandson. Tsybukin also accepts without even the slightest opposition the expulsion of Lipa and the maltreatment he suffered at the hands of Aksinya.

The Tsybukin of the last episode is essentially the same character one meets in the introductory chapter. Only during the various stages

of the story the weak and meek elements developed by reaching at the end, an unexpected strength. One thing that remained with him to the very last is his dislike of peasants--the very stock he came from.

Varvara, Tsybukin's wife remains basically unchanged throughout the entire line of action, even more unchanged than her husband. Satisfied with her situation, ever-busy with housework, not given to meddling in business affairs, she too, is too weak to oppose a growing domination of Aksinya. Indeed, she is preoccupied with her jam-making and cooking and despite her feelings for the poor and her alms-giving, she meekly accepts Aksinya's murdering of the infant--all this to keep peace in the family and to retain the appropriate social status within the village.

Stepan, Aksinya's deaf-mute and feeble husband does what he is told to do by his wife whom he fears and obeys. He is the member of Tsybukin's family who receives the least attention.

Aksinya as seen in the first chapter is a woman endowed with energy, strong will, and both, business acumen and independence that is rather unexpected in a peasant wife. These ingredients of her character are retained throughout the story. But a significant element was added in the third chapter of the story: "Aksinya had gray, naive eyes... she looked around her the way a little snake looks...peering at passers-by from a young rye field in the spring."⁵³

Naive and unblinking eyes, naive smile, serpentine shapeliness,

53 Ibid., p. 409.

and suggested intimacy with Khrymins, develop Aksinya's character in an unexpected direction. The energetic, strong-willed young woman one meets in the first chapter, had changed into an immoral and repulsive person. Her "naive smile" becomes the outward sign of her cruelty extended into murder; of her greed, stopping at nothing--however despicable and unethical. These qualities make her, at the end, the undisputed head of the family and the sole heir to the family's fortune.

It was only the exceptional beauty of Lipa that guaranteed her entry into Tsybukin's family: "She was young, still a girl... in fact, beautiful, and the only thing one might find displeasing about her was her big masculine hands..."⁵⁴ Impressed by her youth and beauty the matchmakers disregarded Lipa's utter poverty and the traditional dowry. But apart from physical comeliness, Lipa has been endowed with the spiritual beauty which the writer transmits to the readers in the narrative. "A sad, timid smile never left her lips, and her eyes looked as the childrens do--trustingly and with curiosity."⁵⁵ This childlike innocence was later coupled with a simplicity, an eagerness for work, and a desire to help others. Lipa's character is later developed on the spiritual level. She is kind to all, including Aksinya, but has an intuitive premonition of something evil in Tsybukin's family. Lipa's simple-hearted but pure faith in God and her acceptance of life together with its tragedies--all these qualities which Chekhov included in structuring this

54 Ibid., p. 403.

55 Ibid., p. 403.

young village girl make her outstanding and unique in the entire family. Significantly, the story ends with an episode where Lipa offers " ... a piece of meat pie and kasha ..." ⁵⁶ to her hungry, wandering father-in-law — Tsybukin.

Lipa and Anisim are two characters added later to the family. Anisim -- the detective son living in the city, is introduced as an " ... uninteresting and unremarkable in appearance ... sickly build and shortish stature ..." ⁵⁷ This young man is known to like drinking. Although exposed to city life, he passively accepts a young girl he does not know as his wife who was selected by his family. The intellectual difference between Anisim and his deaf-mute brother Stepan is very small, indeed. Because of his superiority complex, which is demonstrated by his greed and stupidity, Anisim allows himself to be drawn into a counterfeit money scheme for which he receives a six year jail sentence. Despite his youth, and exposure to the life outside the village, Anisim is incapable of any common sense, any determined action which would prevent his own tragedy. His only defence are tears, prayers and tearful letters begging for help in rescuing him from the jail.

To complete the family of Tsybukin one should add more people: the already mentioned deaf-mute Stepan, Aksinya's husband, and the frail, extremely shy and scared Lipa's mother. Both occupy a very peripheral position in the family. Stepan is only briefly mentioned several times

56 Ibid., p. 433.

57 Ibid., p. 402.

in the story without anything added to his initial sketch. A similar minor role is played by Lipa's mother.

Chekhov's technique in developing characters follows a definite pattern. At first, there is the introductory phase where the members of the family are presented by the narrator. Only in a very few instances is character trait further supported by a brief episode in the form of an utterance, or dialogue. Although the number of dialogues and monologues is increased in the later phases, still the bulk of information about characters comes chiefly from the story's narrator. Of all characters making up the family, Aksinya is placed in the largest number of "acted out" scenes and episodes. The old man Tsybukin, too, is constructed chiefly from the narrative.

Dialogues and monologues serve to move the story's action. They are not used to unveil the characters' new dimension, to add new ingredients; rather, they illustrate what was stated before by the narrator. Dialogues and monologues break the monotony of narration, and enliven reader's interest in the story. In conclusion, Chekhov's technique in developing characters is a mixture of narrative and "acted" episodes.

The structuring of characters is achieved with a few physical and many more psychological traits. Chekhov's character is constructed from the attitudes and relationships toward the selected number of objects and goals. In this manner a reader can retain a distinct picture of each individual member of the family. One such set of attitudes and relationships involves the family itself; the other entails the family and the society. Viewed in this perspective, each individual depicts a different

attitude; each member relates differently to another and to the outsiders--the community. Consequently, each member of Tsybukin's family emerges as an individual with unmistakably own traits, peculiarities and views. Thus Aksinya's drive for power motivated by a sheer greed for wealth, sets her apart from the rest. At the other extreme, one finds a contrast in the young, naive angel-like Lipa. Lipa's simplicity, the fact that she is not tainted by greed, her attitude toward life and work, her very Christian acceptance of suffering, her love for people and nature--all these elements which enter into the composition of her character create a symbolic character denying everything Aksinya stood for.

Three men represent the family; none of them occupies the position comparable to either Aksinya or Lipa. Neither of them stands for the evil--Aksinya, or goodness--Lipa's categories. The men possess neither the dynamics of Aksinya, nor the spiritual capacities of Lipa. The father and his two sons, notwithstanding their privileged position accorded them by the patriarchal tradition of the Russian village, are weak, ineffectual, and the cause of suffering. Aksinya's strength channeled into greed was not countered by the supposedly stronger men. Anisim's reproachful letters from the prison evoke scorn in Aksinya. Her father-in-law's indecisiveness leads to his own fall as the head of the family. With all possible opponents eliminated from competition, Aksinya's intelligence, dynamism, and greed make her the sole ruler of the family and its fortune.

The cast of the story's characters includes people outside Tsybukin's family: gentrymen, peasants, and village and city administrators. However, no single character is developed beyond a mere sketch, made

known to the reader through the narrator. Kostyukov and the Khrymin brothers--the local gentry, active in small manufacturing--are known indirectly, that is, from the narrator's information, or the statement of other characters. Even less is known about various state functionaries who happen to do some business with Tsybukins. A score of peasants occupy a very peripheral role and turn up in several episodes.

From the secondary characters only Elizarov-Crutch, a peasant and wandering carpenter, has been given a lot of attention. Indeed, the carpenter's portrait is as ample and informative as those of Tsybukins. Elizarov is introduced during the wedding festivities. First, a brief sketch of the man--"...the master carpenter, a tall, emaciated old man with eyebrows so thick that his eyes were barely visible..."⁵⁸ -- followed by dialogue and again a lengthy narrative relating Elizarov's rather uncommon life-story. The extensive treatment accorded the master carpenter is attested to by the space taken up by this character: one page out of a six-page chapter filled with people and events.

Even a more extensive description is given to Elizarov in the fifth chapter dedicated to Lipa's return from the pilgrimage and the scene in front of Tsybukin's store. The portions of this chapter associated with him are executed, in the main, in the dialogues and Elizarov's monologues. From this content one obtains information about the village and its people as well as about the protagonists themselves. The carpenter in the second scene plays similarly a dominant role where he informs

58 Ibid., p. 407.

others about the counterfeited rubles circulated by Anisim. In this chapter Elizarov-Crutch utters a very important, indeed, the focal idea of In the Ravine: "That's it, children. The one who works, the one who suffers, he's superior."⁵⁹ Elizarov appears once more in the epilogue chapter in an episode in which two men talk about the fate of Tsybukin and the ingratitude of his daughter-in-law. Elizarov also participates in the closing episode.

This very extensive treatment of the carpenter is justified from the point of view of the function allotted him. One would like to emphasize here that the character of this peasant-tradesman is explored even more thoroughly than that of the key character--Aksinya. Elizarov's figure is drawn from numerous dialogues and monologues, from the narrator's material as well as from the opinions of other characters in the story. Unlike others, Elizarov is a many-dimensional person; he emerges as a human being with all his virtues as well as defects.

An important peasant character appears in the chapter depicting Lipa's return from the city hospital. One does not know his name, and Lipa calls him simply, Granpa. This chance acquaintance carries on a conversation with grieving Lipa. He answers Lipa's questions such as the reason for suffering borne by innocent infants; or, how long does the soul of a deceased man walk on earth. He offers Lipa words of consolation, kindness and understanding--something she did not get at her own home, from her own in-laws. Granpa's brief appearance has important bearing upon the

59 Ibid., p. 416.

"philosophy" of In the Ravine.

In summarizing Chekhov's handling of characters in In the Ravine, one ought to repeat the following most important technical characteristics:

Tsybukin's family, Elizarov, and the Granpa are the most developed characters. Some dozen or more participants in the story are silhouettes usually narrated, seldom named. Aksinya and Elizarov should be considered as the chief actors developed with a much greater detail than others. Tsybukins and Elizarov are recurrently structured by the narrator, acted-out scenes and episodes. Unlike minor characters in the story, the protagonists' personalities are presented from various points of view and various sources.

SETTING

1. The Peasants

The passages dedicated to the setting do not occupy much space. Yet, careful analysis indicates the writer's strategy in his deliberate selection of the type of description determined by the character it is associated with. It is very clear that Chekhov's most frequently employed technique is that of contrast. In other words, different types of settings are associated with characters charged with specific functions in the structure of the story's message. The subsequent examples of the contrast technique illustrate the point just made.

At the very beginning of the first chapter, Nicholas reveals his illusions about the native village, expressed in folk-saying: "Even illness is not so bad at home and life is cheaper. 'No place like home.'..."⁶⁰ This first remark indicates the irony of the story, for idealized dreams are shattered by the reality of peasant life. The description of the hut, which follows, foreshadows the extent to which it differs from Nicholas' memories. It is further indicated by a number of details: There are many flies, the stove leans to one side, the beams are crooked, bottle labels and scraps of newspaper are pasted on the wall instead of pictures:

...clumsy stove, black with soot and flies. It took up nearly half the hut. And what a lot of flies! The stove was lop-sided, the beams were askew and the hut looked just about to fall down. In the corner opposite the stove, bottle labels and newspaper cuttings had been stuck near the icons to serve as pictures. This was the real

60 Ronald Hingley, The Oxford Chekhov, p. 195.

poverty and no mistake.⁶¹

What follows is the description of a neglected peasant child im-
passive in her misery--a very gloomy description of peasant life: "On
the stove sat a little girl of about eight, fair-haired, unwashed, and so
bored that she did not even give the newcomers a glance."⁶² In the first
chapter is placed also the view of the village and its landscape:

Behind the villagers' gardens a steep slope, almost a cliff,
fell away down the river, with bare boulders dotted about in the clay.
(...) Down at the bottom stretched a bright green meadow, broad and
level, already mown, where the village herd strayed. The river was
the best part of a mile from the village and meandered between splendid
leafy banks. Beyond it was another broad meadow, a herd of cattle,
long strings of white geese, and then a steep upward rise, as on the
near side. At the top of the rise was a large village, a church with
five onion-domes and -- a little further off--a manor-house.

'Isn't it lovely here!' said Olga, (...) 'Lord, what an open view!' ⁶³
And this exalted uttering is followed by the bleak description of Nicholas'
parents everyday existence:

Nicholas went into the hut and saw the whole family, all these
bodies large and small, swarming on the sleeping platform, in cradles
and in all the corners. He saw how ravenously the old man and the
woman ate their black bread, dipping it in water... ⁶⁴

In the second chapter, the beauty of the landscape brings Olga
to sigh over dismal reality: "What a lovely morning! And how lovely life
on earth might be but for poverty--sheer, grinding poverty that you could

61 Ibid., p. 195.

62 Ibid., p. 195.

63 Ibid., p. 196.

64 Ibid., p. 196.

not escape from."⁶⁵

In yet another place the spell of the evening, coupled with the picture of dancing girls on the meadow, with songs gently sounding at a distance, is spoiled by drunken peasants gathered in and around the inn, who "...sang in discordant, drunken voices and swore so hard that Olga could only shudder."⁶⁶

In the final chapter of the story, the very enchanting pictures of spring in the village is again associated with the character of Olga, now with her decision to leave:

Every evening the blazing spring sunset and gorgeous clouds presented a new, unbelievable, extraordinary sight--the sort of colours and clouds that you just cannot believe if you see them in a picture.

Cranes sped past overhead, calling plaintively as if asking someone to join them. Standing on the edge of the cliff, Olga gazed for some time at the floods, the sun and the bright church which looked like new. Her tears flowed and she caught her breath, feeling a wild urge to go away somewhere into the blue, even to the ends of the earth. ⁶⁷

Very contrasting alternating insets of the setting are very effective in drawing the attention of reader to Chekhov's chief aim--to depict the life of peasants without embellishment. It is to be noted, too, that the gloom and the feeling of misery are permeating man-made settings -- homes, taverns, and the like. While the feeling of enchantment flows out of nature's backdrops, landscapes, and the views of nature. This

65 Ibid., p. 200.

66 Ibid., p. 203.

67 Ibid., p. 220.

beauty of nature is sensed and commented upon by Olga--the only character in the story sensitive to man's misery and the world surrounding him.

Out of the story's twenty-nine pages, settings occur mostly in the first half. They are very brief--varying from five to eight lines--but both compact and expressive. Chekhov's settings in this story are organically associated with individual characters and their lives.

2. In the Ravine

Settings in this story occur in most chapters and are associated with all most important events, such as the wedding, Anisim's imprisonment, Lipa's dying infant, and in the final scene. Their length varies considerably, from three to forty lines.

The most striking trait of setting in In the Ravine is the writer's use of sound. Its function here is to further mood of expectance or suspense already created by descriptive or narrative passages. For example, in the first chapter, as Aksinya washes herself, "...the samovar was boiling in the kitchen and droning predictions of misfortune."⁶⁸ Sound as bad omen is again heard during the wedding feast: "...and it was a kind of horrible, savage mixture of sounds that made the head whirl."⁶⁹ Sometimes sound comments like a chorus. When news comes that Anisim has been sent to Siberia,

68 A. P. Chekhov , op. cit., p. 400.

69 Ibid., p. 408.

...the cook in the kitchen, thinking decency demanded it, suddenly began lamenting as over a corpse: 'For whom have you left us, Anisim Grigorich, bright falcon...'

The excited dogs began barking. ⁷⁰

Various sounds are woven into the scene in which Lipa, with her dead infant in the arms, is walking home from the hospital:

From somewhere far away, no one know where, a bittern called like a cow locked in a shed, a muffled, doleful sound. The cry of the mysterious bird was heard every evening, but no one knew what it was or where it lived. (...) The cuckoo counted out someone's remaining years, became completely tangled in the account, and started over again. In the pond, angrily straining themselves, the frogs called to one another, (...) All these creatures seemed to be shouting and singing purposely so that no one would sleep this spring evening... ⁷¹

The sound Lipa hears suggests her loneliness and mystery as she walks with her dead son. Then voices momentarily break the spell as we hear the simple, human "Harness up, Vavila!"⁷² Lipa is comforted, but when the strangers leave and Lipa approaches the town, the sad and senseless animal sounds reappear: "... it seemed to her as if the very same cuckoo were crying continuously."⁷³ In the final passage it is again sound, the singing Lipa: "...singing in a shrill voice and trilling, looking up at the sky as if glorifying and giving praise that the day, thank God, had ended and one could rest."⁷⁴ This expresses the beauty of Lipa's world

70 Ibid., p. 421.

71 Ibid., p. 426.

72 Ibid., p. 426.

73 Ibid., p. 429.

74 Ibid., p. 433.

as compared to that of Tsybukins.

Let's consider another example of a group of symbols making up the setting--description of the village. In the exposition it is described matter-of-factly, stressed by such traits as: "mud was deep", "smell of factory refuse", "the water in the stream was often putrid from the tannery", "cattle suffered from anthrax", "there were only two decent houses."^{74a} Quite distinct is Anisim's view of the same village at the moment of his departure shortly after the wedding. Entire backdrop supports his fear of a risky future he expects:

The cattle were being driven out (...) Larks were singing everywhere, above and below. Anisim looked back at the church, graceful, white--it has been recently whitewashed (...) at the greenroofed school, at the stream in which he had once swum...joy surged in his breast and he longed for a wall to suddenly spring from the ground, preventing him from going on...⁷⁵

The same Ukleyevo, but seen through the eyes of Lipa, her mother, and Crutch, provides a different picture, full of peace and coziness:

...its willows, white church, and stream looked beautiful (...) Rye could be seen on the far slope (...) the oats were already ripe, too, and gleamed in the sun like mother-of-pearl. It was harvest time. (...) Distant thunder rumbled every day; it was sultry as if about to rain, and looking at the fields, now the peasants (...) their hearts were merry and joyful and anxious.⁷⁶

In conclusion, Chekhov's settings in In the Ravine depend on the nature of the situation as well as its mood, associated with the character

74a Ibid., p. 398 passim.

75 Ibid., p. 412.

76. Ibid., p. 415.

involved. Setting greatly contributes to the vividness of any passage read. Its role in this story is not the focal aspect. Yet, it is the example of both, the mastery of brevity and lucidity.

Chekhov's peasant stories initiated a new era in peasant fiction. In them Chekhov presented a new solution to village realities. Contrary to the prevailing populist notion, Chekhov pointed out that peasants themselves contribute to their semi-savage existence by usury, stealing, trading in vodka and by their general opposition to enlightened measures. The stories present a panorama of society riddled with vulgarity, man's inhumanity to man, greed, hard labour and poverty.

With the beginning of the year 1892 is marked Chekhov's new approach to fiction, when he becomes more perceptive and handles his stories in a manner more consistent. A tentative observation of the thematic content of Chekhov's stories written between 1892 and 1904, brings one to the conclusion that Chekhov's peasant fiction is not a major theme, but reflects his concern with the Russian peasant. There is the group of peasant stories, the so called "peasant cycle", to which belongs The Peasants--which critics agree to be his principal peasant story, and In the Ravine, closing this cycle. Many critical works have studied more or less profoundly Chekhov's short stories on the peasant theme, focusing mainly on the historical and sociological aspect of peasantry, but relatively little on the prose technique.

The critical literature about the art of fiction offers a general agreement on the meaning of terms incidental to the basic structural elements of fiction, i.e. those major components that shape the design of a story: the structure of plot, character, background, and point-of-view.

Critics agree on the understanding of plot as an artifice, as a structure superimposed by the artist on the raw story material. The

selection and re-arrangement of the "story" material in plot structuring shapes the aesthetic purpose. The model of plot, formulated by Aristoteles--still fundamental to the current craft of fiction-- consists of these distinct major portions: establishment, peripetiae, climax, and denouement.

The plot structure of The Peasants is drawn in the faintest, most general outlines. The plot's moving force is life; a grey, hard, sluggish, uneventful peasant life. It is a life without suspense which overshadows the fate of the protagonists and all characters of the story. The plot of The Peasants is not a well-defined action made up of forceful acts, but plot of the life of various individuals making up the village community. Consequently, the conventional demarcations between the various phases of the plot are hardly discernible, for they are patterned on the flow of life and not on the prescriptions of literary poetics.

The plot of In the Ravine tends to follow the classical model, for its various phases are clearly marked off. The plot's structure is shaped by Anisim's involvement in the affair with counterfeited roubles. It is directly Anisim's "get rich" scheme which causes the drama of Tsybukin's family. But underneath this tragedy one can feel a blow of the emerging industrial world that indirectly interferes with the lives of the characters, when arousing greed and inhumanity within them. Their interrelationships are restricted to "businesslike". Consequently, the actions of the characters function here as the driving force moving forward the plot which is marked by surprises and suspense. This results in that the plot In the Ravine is the plot of action in a contrast to the plot in The Peasants.

As the stories differ in the nature of plot, so their unknottings have the common feature: they do not solve conflicts. In each instance begins a new phase in lives of some of the main characters, and in both cases the stories might have finished with the words: it begins. Thus, the stories do not end traditionally, they are left incomplete -- open-ended.

In the prose structuring character tends to occupy the greater part of writer's effort. From a variety of technical schemes and terms offered by critical writings on building fictional heroes, there are most frequently used terms known as "flat" and "round" characters. The writer's possibilities can encompass also the one of two fundamental methods in creating character: direct or indirect.

In The Peasants, writer's attention is given to the Chikildeyev's family. Although Nicholas and his family are considered as the protagonists -- for they constitute the story-frame, the reference points which assist the writer in marking off the story's forward movement -- the real heroes are peasants in general. Nicholas, his wife, and daughter serve as one of many threads woven into the canvas of the life in the village. The minor characters -- except the village's elder -- rarely go beyond the name or a few features.

In In the Ravine, the author reserves the central position for the members of Tsybukin's family. An exception is Elizarov, although outside the family, is along with Aksinya a character developed with a much greater detail than the others. Both should be then considered as

the protagonists of the story. The members of Tsybukin's family in general are the most developed characters, with own clean-cut traits, peculiarities, and views. This may not be said about the peripheral characters that are narrated, but restricted to the name but undeveloped.

Chekhov's technique of structuring characters in The Peasants and In the Ravine consists of the initial projection of key characteristics presented by the narrator in the introductory phase. Further development of the plot, its later phases -- although broken by episodes or dialogues -- bears only the expansion and amplification of characters' traits, but not their change. This means that none of the characters deviates from its primary cast. Consequently, all characters in the stories -- whether protagonists or peripheral -- belong to E.M. Forster's "flat" category. In other words, they are built around a single idea or projection and such remain throughout the entire story.

The Peasants and In the Ravine have in common also the apparent difference in drawing female and male characters. Female characters in general are endowed with beauty, are treated in greater detail than males, and are also better differentiated from each other, more individualized. Females are stronger, more vital and independent than males. Considering the family, it is a woman who dominates. Male characters in a role of mates are physically uninteresting, unremarkable, have some physical defect, or they are lonely, spiritually weak men.

Generally speaking, none of the characters in The Peasants and In the Ravine is "enlarged" or hyperbolic; they stay human in every respect.

In the stories they are emerging in correspondence with an image of the peasant in the post-Reform Russia. It is through their interrelationships that tragedies and dramas are created.

As setting is invariably connected with the events of the story, its function is to contribute to the development of plot and characters. Along with them setting helps to sustain the reader's thoughts and feelings, when calling into play a visual imagination.

The analysis of passages dedicated to setting in The Peasants disclosed the author's most frequently employed technique: a technique of contrast. The passages of enchantment flowing out of nature's backdrops alternate with those, expressing the gloom and a misery emerging from man-made settings. This demonstrates to be an effective technique in fulfilling Chekhov's chief aim--to disclose the peasant's life without embellishing.

Settings in In the Ravine are associated with all the most important events of the story. As the analysis exposed, the writer's conspicuous device in setting is sound, that supports a mood of expectance and suspense in already shaped descriptive or narrative passages.

To conclude, settings in both stories are in a close connection with the nature of the situation, its most subtle shade of mood or inducement of the character involved. Variations of settings are organically associated with characters that are given a specific functions in a structure of the story and so foster its main theme. In The Peasants and In the Ravine settings do not occupy much space, thus their role in

stories is not dominant, but they are both compact and expressive.

Point of View is one of the most important ordering devices at the writer's disposal, for he has to make a decision who will serve credibly as his functional voice. E.A. Bloom distinguishes three basic types of point-of-view: Omniscient, The Third Person, and The First Person Point-of-View.

After careful consideration of The Peasants and In the Ravine, their stories's totality, framework, and ideological content, one may conclude: in both stories there is the presence of the narrator who conveys author's aims in the manner of omnipresent observer. He, as executor of the author's design, directs the shaping of plot, structuring of characters, arrangement and type of background. The narrator with his complete knowledge not only presents these fictional elements, but also comments upon them. Both stories thus clearly correspond with E.M. Bloom's Omniscient Point-of-View.

In conclusion, judging from the four major components shaping the design of the stories The Peasants and In the Ravine--plot, character, setting, and point-of-view, to the analyses of which was devoted this thesis--one can state that Chekhov's greatest emphasis was placed on mood in the stories.

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The present study of the peasant universe in Chekhov's short stories falls into two parts. The first covers Chekhov's peasant prose on the background of both--the epoch and the writer's own prose works. The second part is dedicated to the analysis of the major structural aspects of prose writing: plot, character and setting.

Chapter I presents a literary and historical backdrop to Chekhov's fiction on peasant topics. The first part of this chapter focuses on Chekhov's total prose output between the years 1892 and 1904; the second part on Chekhov's interest in the peasant "problem" in general, and on his "peasant" stories in particular. The stress is given on the stories The Peasants and In the Ravine.

The brief discussion of the main aspects of the fiction's structure in Chapter II concentrates on plot, character, background, point-of-view, i.e. those essentials which assist in the analyses of Chekhov's stories.

With reference to the basic concepts of plot are in Chapter III analysed the stories The Peasants (section 1) and In the Ravine (section 2), in order to determine the writer's technique in developing the story's plot--the plot in its major outline, the essentials of Chekhov's strategy, and deviations from the classical model of plot.

Chapter IV studies Chekhov's strategy in character building in The Peasants (section 1) and In the Ravine (section 2)--the technique in developing characters, the treatment of chief actors and secondary characters, as well as the projection of male and female characters.

Chapter V contains the analyses of settings in The Peasants (section 1) and In the Ravine (section 2). Passages from the stories dedicated to setting disclose Chekhov's frequently employed technique, and both, the nature and function of settings occurring in the two stories.

Several observations are stated in the concluding chapter, chiefly with regard to Chekhov's execution of the major structural elements.

THE ORIGINAL RUSSIAN VERSION OF THE ENGLISH

QUOTATIONS USED IN A TEXT

27 "... то сообразил, что напрасно он сюда приехал, больной, без денег да ещё с семьей— напрасно!" /с.383/

28 "... просил, чтобы его положили на пол, просил, чтобы портной не курил, потом затих под тулупом и к утру умер." /с. 408/

29 "Как-то перед масленицей..." /с. 571/

30 "...на Красной Горке," /с. 573/

31 "... за три дня до свадьбы," /574/

32 " Восьмого июля, в пятницу," /с. 583/

33 " тощие, сгорбленные, беззубые, оба одного роста," /с. 383/

34 " широкоплечей, сильной, некрасивой женщины," /с. 383/

35 " красивая баба, тоже сильная и широкая в плечах," /с. 383/

36 " высокий, чернобородый мужик в зимней шапке" /с. 384/

37 " лет восьми, белоголовая, немытая," /с. 381/

38 " Какое прекрасное утро! И вероятно, какая была бы прекрасная жизнь на этом свете, если бы не нужда, ужасная, безысходная нужда, от которой нигде не спрячешься!" /с. 386/

39 " И-и, касатка! Терпи, и все тут." /с. 385/

40 "...с какой жадостью старик и бабы ели чёрный хлеб, макая его в воду..." /383/

41 "... все эти большие и маленькие тела, которые шевелились на полатах, в люльках и по всех углах," /с. 383/

42 "... все о нужде да о болезнях." /с. 383/

43 " Это был неосновательный, ненадёжный мужик и, быть может, если бы она не понукала его постоянно, то он не работал бы вовсе, а только сидел бы на печи да разговаривал." /с. 389/

44 " Марья считала себя несчастною и говорила, что ей очень хочется умереть." /с. 397/

45 " Фёкле же, напротив, была по вкусу вся эта жизнь: и бедность, и нечистота, и неугомонная брань." /с.397/

46 " И она с первого же дня возненавидела Ольгу и Николая именно за то, что им не нравилась эта жизнь." /с.397/

47 " становой, худощавый старик с длинными седыми бакенами..." /с. 401/

48 " В городе он не жывал и книг никогда не читал, но откуда-то набрался разных умных слов и любил употреблять их в разговоре, и за это его уважали, хотя и не всегда понимали." /с. 401/

49 "... был старик оборотливый." /с. 568/

50 "... красивая, стройная..." /с. 568/

51 "... необыкновенную деловитость..." /с. 568/

52 "... милостыня её действовала в эти тягостные, туманные дни, как предохранительный клапан в машине." /с.569/

53 "У Аксиньи были серые, наивные глаза,... и в её стройности было что-то змеиное... она глядела, как весной из молодой ржи глядит на прохожего гадюка..." /с. 579/

54 " Она была молода, ещё девочка... В самом деле она была красива, и одно только могло в ней не нравиться, это-- её большие мужские руки..." /с. 573/

55 "... грустная, робкая улыбка не сходила у неё с лица, и глаза смотрели по-детски--доверчиво и с любопытством." /с. 573/

56 "... кусок пирога с кашей," /с. 603/

57 "... неинтересную, незаметную наружность... при слабом, нездоровом сложении и при небольшом росте..." /с. 572/

58 "... подрядчик плотник Елизаров, высокий, худощавый старик с такими густыми бровями, что глаза были едва видны..." /с. 577/

59 " Оно так деточки. Кто трудится, кто терпит, тот и старше." /с. 586/

60 " Дома и хворать легче, и жить дешевле; и недаром говорится: дома стены помогают." /с. 381/

61 "... неопрятную печь, занимавшую чуть ли не половины, темную от копоти и мух! Печь покосилась, что изба сию минуту развалится. В переднем углу, возле икон, были наклеены бутылочные ярлыки и обрывки газетной бумаги-- это вместо картин. Бедность, бедность!" /с. 381/

62 " На печи сидела девочка лет восьми, белоголовая, невытая, равнодушная; она даже не взглянула на вошедших." /с. 381/

63 " За крестьянскими усадьбами начинался спуск к реке, крутой и обрывистый, как что в глине, там и сям, обнажились громадные камни /.../ а там внизу расстилался широкий, ровный, ярко-зелёный луг, уже скошенный, на котором теперь гуляло крестьянское стадо. Река была в версте от деревни, извилистая, с чудесными кудрявыми берегами, за нею опять широкий луг, стадо, длинные вереницы белых гусей, потом, так

же как на этой стороне, крутой подъем на гору, а вверху, на горе, село с пятиглавою церковью и немного поодаль господский дом.

" Хорошо у вас здесь!"--сказала Ольга,/.../"Раздолье господи!" /с. 382/

64 " Николай, войдя в избу, увидел все семейство, все эти большие и маленькие тела, которые шевелились на полатах, в люльках и во всех углах, и когда увидел, с какою жадностью старик и бабы ели чёрный хлеб, макая его в воду..." /с. 383/

65 " Какое прекрасное утро! И, вероятно, какая была бы прекрасная жизнь на этом свете, если бы не нужда, ужасная, безысходная нужда, от которой нигде не спрячешься!" /с. 386/

66 "... они пели пьяными голосами, все врозь, и бранились так, что Ольга только вздрагивала..." /с. 389/

67 " Весенний закат, пламенный, с пышными облаками, каждый вечер давал что-нибудь необыкновенное, новое, невероятное, именно то самое, чему не веришь потом, когда эти же краски и эти же облака видишь на картине.

Журавли летели быстро-быстро и кричали грустно, будто звали с собою. Стоя на краю обрыва, Ольга подолгу смотрела на разлив, на солнце, на светлую, точно помолодевшую церковь, и слёзы текли у неё и дыхание захватывало оттого, что страстно хотелось уйти куда-нибудь, куда глаза глядят, хоть на край света." /с. 409/

68 "... самовар кипел в кухне и гудел, предсказывая что-то недоброе." /с. 569/

69 "...и была какая-то ужасная, дикая смесь звуков, от которой кружилась голова." /с. 577/

70 "... кухарка в кухне вдруг заголосила, как по покойнике, думая, что этого требует приличие:

" И на кого ты нас покинул, Анисим Григорич, соколик ясный..."

Залаяли собаки встревоженные." /с. 591/

71 " Где -то далеко, неизвестно где, кричала выпь, точно корова, запертая в сарае, заунывно и глухо. Крик этой таинственной птицы слышали каждую весну, но не знали, какая она и где живёт/.../ Чьи-то года считала кукушка и все сбивалась со счёта и опять начинала. В пруде сердито, надрываясь, перекликались лягушки,/.../ Казалось, что все эти твари кричали и пели нарочно, чтобы никто не спал в этот весенний вечер..." /с. 596/

72 "Запрягай, Вавила!" /с. 596/

73 "... и казалось ей, что кричит все та же кукушка." /с. 599/

74 "... и пела тонким голосом и заливалась, глядя вверх на небо, точно торжествуя и восхищаясь, что день, слава богу, кончился и можно отдохнуть." /с. 603/

75 " В первый раз выгнали скотину /.../ Всюду, и сверху и внизу, пели жаворонки. Анисим оглядывался на церковь, стройную, беленькую--её недавно побелили /.../ на школу с зелёной крышей, на речку, с которой когда-то купался /.../ и радость кольхнулась в груди, и захотелось, чтобы вдруг из земли выросла стена и не пустила бы его дальше,"/с.582/

76 "... со св.ими вербами, белой церковью и речкой казалось красивым /.../ Видна была на этой стороне по ска-ту рожь /.../ и овес поспел и теперь на солнце отсвечивал, как перламутр. Была страда./.../ каждый день погромыхивал дальный гром; парило, похоже было на дождь, и, глядя теперь на поле, каждый /.../ и было весело, и радостно, и неспо-койно на душе." /с. 585/