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A

CHEKHOVIAN DRAMATURGY IN THE PLAYS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, HAROLD PINTER, AND ED BULLINS

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

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ABSTRACT

Along with Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov is generally credited with having laid the foundations for twentieth-century drama. But unlike the dramaturgy of the two other dramatists, that of Chekhov continues to influence Western playwrights, including contemporary American ones. The explanation for his continuing effect has a great deal to do with his divergence from the traditional drama which he inherited and which surrounded him.

In his characterization, for example, he chose to dispense with the conventional, plot-motivating dichotomy between protagonist and antagonist. In fact, Chekhov's sympathetic characters are to varying degrees self-deluded, weak-willed people whose suffering derives from their illusions about themselves and their dilemmas. At the same time, his unsympathetic characters do not intend the suffering their actions often cause.

While Chekhov's characters reflect his view that in life there are no heroes or villains, his dramatic structure implies his belief that life is not a series of "dramatic" events but consists of routine, superficial events and conversations. These surface occurrences mask the tensions and conflicts which affect people's lives. To suggest this view of existence, the dialogue of Chekhov's plays frequently

seems pointless and disconnected, while the early action apparently provides little or no exposition. Further, the crises are subdued and the resolutions inconclusive. These structural elements reinforce the effect of a Chekhov play—the lethargy and stasis evident in The Sea Gull, Uncle Vanya, The Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard.

These techniques of characterization and plot have recurred to varying degrees in several playwrights of Britain and America. Among the most notable examples are Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter, and Ed Bullins. A large number of plays by each of these major dramatists reflects the effect of Chekhov's dramaturgy. Williams' plays, although more violent in language and action, evince the blurring of protagonist and antagonist and the apparent immobility of plot found in Chekhov, whom he admittedly admired. The works of Pinter, often linked with Chekhov, also utilize these techniques but are more clearly Chekhovian in their use of rambling, apparently pointless dialogue. And the dramas of Bullins, who claims a debt to no one, employ Chekhovian dialogue and ensemble techniques as well as characters who delude themselves about their predicament and whose actions are ineffectual.

These playwrights are only three of the many contemporary writers who consciously or unconsciously employ dramaturgical elements which Chekhov refined, among those others being Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Arthur Kopit, and Immamu Imiri

Baraka (Leroi Jones). In the view of Williams, Pinter, Bullins, and these other artists, people are self-centered, weak, and possess neither the knowledge of self nor the capacity to act decisively to improve their lives. Further, as their plays show, life is a series of loosely linked events through which human beings muddle and in which they rarely communicate meaningfully with each other.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Any explanation for the development of what we now term "modern drama" must include the whole spectrum of thought during the mid- and late-nineteenth century. These nondramatic elements range from Darwin's 1859 publication of The Origin of the Species and Marx's political and economic theories to Nietzsche's concept of the Superman and Freud's assertions about the nature of man's subconscious.[1] There seems to be little doubt that the general intellectual climate produced by these and other elements affected the more specific artistic climate of Europe during this period and the first quarter of the twentieth century. But while many of the present century's dramatists exhibit a knowledge of these philosophical pioneers and their descendents, clearer

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[1]For more detailed discussions of these and other philosophical influences on modern drama and their relation to specific major European playwrights of this period, the following works are useful: Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1946); Joseph Wood Krutch, "Modernism" in Modern Drama (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1953); John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1954); Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964); and Oscar G. Brockett and Robert Findlay, Century of Innovation (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973). A brief but helpful explanation of the major movements in modern drama may be found in the introductory essay to Haskell M. Block and Robert G. Shedd, Masters of Modern Drama (New York: Random House, 1962).

influences upon modern drama would seem to come from the literary movements of 1880 to 1910 and from the great playwrights who were working in that period. Among these major dramatic movements which either fostered the production of this era or were created by them are Realism, Naturalism, Expressionism, Symbolism, and Impressionism. Repeatedly, however, a search for theatrical roots leads past such broad artistic entities and even beyond the major philosophical discussions of the period to three specific dramatists: Henrik Ibsen of Norway, August Strindberg of Sweden, and Anton Chekhov in Russia. If historians of modern theatre agree on anything, it is that in the plays of these three men lie the thematic and technical elements most responsible for Western belletristic drama since the 1880's.[2] Of these

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[2]Agreement about the debt of modern drama to Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov is evinced in Bentley, Krutch, Brustein, and Brockett and Findlay as well as in Morris Freedman, The Moral Impulse: Modern Drama from Ibsen to the Present (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967); Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to the Present (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Tom R. Driver, Romantic Quest and Modern Query: A History of the Modern Theatre (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970); Richard Gilman, The Making of Modern Drama (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974); and Albert Bermel, Contradictory Characters: An Interpretation of the Modern Theatre (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1973). These works are among the assessments which credit to varying degrees all three men with founding modern drama. Some scholars emphasize the role of two of them, as in Maurice Valency, The Flower and the Castle (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963) [Ibsen and, especially, Strindberg], and Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949) [Ibsen and Chekhov].

three, the effect of Chekhov may have been most enduring, for his presence can be found in striking ways in British and American drama produced even since 1945.

It is difficult in the last quarter of the twentieth century to understand the furor Ibsen's plays caused almost one hundred years ago, for, like those of his disciple Shaw, many of them now seem dated. It was not so much his early plays, Brand (1866) or Peer Gynt (1867), which caused the commotion as it was his "social plays," most importantly A Doll's House (1879), Ghosts (1881), An Enemy of the People (1882), The Wild Duck (1884), and Hedda Gabler (1890). In them, Ibsen appears to attack virtually every institution dear to the audiences of Victorian-minded Europe. He seems to undercut the sanctity of the home, to question the wisdom of democratic rule, to treat openly the problem of venereal disease, and to scoff at the liberal reformer and idealist. It is interesting to note, however, that the playwright disliked such narrow interpretations of his plays. He never openly espoused any cause and was even embarrassed in 1898 by a testimonial banquet of the Norwegian Society of Women's Rights.[3] At that time he said that he had been "more a poet and less a social philosopher than people have generally been inclined to believe. . . . I must decline the honor of consciously having worked for

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[3]Gilman, p. 49.

women's rights. . . . To me it has been a question of human rights."[4] But whether or not he intended his plays as social criticism, they were often taken as such, and that is one element of his influence on European drama. He was, in fact, the first dramatist of his age to articulate the ideas of contemporary social thinkers. And, perhaps mainly through the influence of G. B. Shaw's understanding of Ibsen's social plays, they are credited by historians with beginning the mode of theatre-as-social-protest in the twentieth century.[5]

But if this were the only effect of the Norwegian's dramas, his importance for modern theatre could be expected to decline steadily as we become more remote from him. Perhaps Maurice Valency, in his study of the effect of Ibsen and Strindberg, has discovered the essence of Ibsen's importance when he argues that Ibsen "summed up an era." While the play of ideas had long been developed and none of Ibsen's subjects was new, he brought to the drama an "imaginative vigor that was wholly fresh and original."[6] Valency believes, and others agree, that Ibsen's significance lies in the combination of his use of the drama to express serious themes and his employment, first, of a prose style intended

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[4]Quoted in ibid.

[5]See Robert Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946); Driver; and Valency.

[6]Valency, p. 398.

to reflect everyday speech and, secondly, of a tightly constructed plot modified from the "well-made" play. A similar view is that of Raymond Williams, who believes that the conventions of European drama had, by the early and mid nineteenth century, become empty, that the plays of the French schools were vacuous displays of dramatic devices. Ibsen infused these conventions with a new "structure of feeling"; that is, he injected meaning and depth into what had become shallow formulae for dramatic action. Although other historians disagree in detail about Ibsen's use of the conventional elements of the theatre he knew, all agree that the distinguishing marks of his dramaturgy are a tightly constructed, clearly motivated plot, coherent dialogue which inexorably increases the tensions of the main plotline, and a choice of characters and situations recognizable in contemporary society. Further, they say, the dialogue of his later plays is intended accurately to represent common speech.[7] Ibsen's importance, then, lies in his powerful use of the dramatic conventions which had come down to him to express some of the major new ideas of the century.

If Ibsen was, then, summing up an age, Strindberg was striking out on his own in such a way as to influence the

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[7]For discussions of Ibsen's use and modification of the Scribean model, see, among others, Barret H. Clark and George Freedley, A History of Modern Drama (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1947); Gilman; and Bermel.

modern theatre more clearly for a longer time. His significance may also be divided into two areas. Especially in The Father (1887) and Miss Julie (1888), he is responsible for bringing to the stage the scientific Naturalism of Zola in which characters appear under the control of their heredity and environment. The social themes implied in these plays seem in direct contradiction to those of Ibsen; and, in fact, Strindberg also misunderstood Ibsen as an exponent of feminism. More important to the present study, however, are the technical features of these plays, which resemble Ibsen's in tightness of construction, in clear and inexorable movement revealed in the dialogue, and in their contemporary settings. But the distinction is that the responsibility for the actions of Strindberg's characters lies clearly outside their control: they are victims of what the past has bequeathed them or what their environment has forced them to be and do.

Strindberg's more obvious departure from the dramatic technique of Ibsen and earlier practitioners occurs in his later plays. The Road to Damascus (1898-1901), The Dream Play (1900), and The Ghost Sonata (1907) reflect a movement from the realistic/naturalistic conventions of Ibsen, and of Strindberg's own earlier plays as well, toward an attempt to portray not outer reality but the inner shadows and yearnings of the unconscious mind. This effort has come down to us as

"Expressionism." In his preface to The Dream Play, Strindberg describes the basic elements of expressionistic drama:

> Anything may happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space to not exist. On an insignificant background of reality, imagination designs and embroiders novel patterns, free fancies, absurdities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, vanish, solidify, blur, clarify.[8]

Strindberg's expressionistic plays nonetheless contain a discernible point of dramatic tension set in an unrealistic setting and developed by a coherent if also unrealistic dialogue.[9]

But since it is Chekhov's contribution to the modern and, especially, contemporary theatre under discussion here, it is important to examine, more closely than in the previous discussion of Ibsen and Strindberg, the Russian dramatist's (1) attitudes toward the drama around him, his (2) aim in his own plays, his (3) dramatic practice and its distinctions from that of the other two playwrights, and, finally, (4) the reactions to and evaluations of him by major commentators of the twentieth century.

While it is generally agreed that Chekhov was rebelling against much of what he found in the theatre of his time, it is important to remember that the theatre to which he

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[8]Quoted in Brockett and Findlay, p. 157.

[9]In addition to Valency's lengthy discussion of Strindberg, see also Raymond Williams, Gilman, Brustein, and Driver.

objected was not that of such masters of Russian drama as Gogol, Ostrovsky, Turgenev, or Tolstoy. Indeed, his debt to these men in terms of realism has been traced by Maurice Valency, who believes a direct line of realistic drama developed from Griboyedov's Woe from Wit (1824) to Chekhov. In addition, it was Ostrovsky who showed him the way "to the drama of 'life as it is,' and the relatively plotless fable."[10] And Turgenev, especially in A Month in the Country, led the way for Chekhov in terms of characterization and the effect of loosely linked scenes in a plot.[11] But the plays of even such dramatic giants were not good box-office attractions, and thus the influx of second- and third-rate works in the latter part of the nineteenth century. To attract paying customers, the tastes and desires of the public were catered to and satisfied. This audience demanded

> a gay, carefree, diverting repertory that would be piquant and titillating—and, please, with no world problems or other boring material. To beguile this public, cheap melodrama, farce, and trivia dominated the stage.[12]

Thus, Chekhov was not reacting against a tide of serious art. Rather, in many ways his dramatic works reflect the Russian

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[10]Valency, The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 36.

[11]Ibid., pp. 43-46. Chekhov even subtitled Uncle Vanya: Scenes from Country Life.

[12]Nikolai Corchakov, The Theater in Soviet Russia, trans. by Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 18.

belletristic tradition which preceded him, especially that including Turgenev's play.[13]

The relegation of such a tradition to the theatrical back seat brought about a theatre which has been characterized as "in almost everyone of its sectors a place of banality and contrivance."[14] And the "sad situation of the professional stage" in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century was one in which neither "the crown stage [the Imperial theatres in Moscow] nor the majority of private theatres . . . complied with even the most modest artistic requirements."[15] In the 1870's and 1880's when Chekhov was just starting to write plays, this theatre was dominated by the work of the "playwrights in residence" at the Imperial Theatres, the Maly and Alexandrinsky. Among these playwrights were Ippolit Schpazhinsky, Victor Krylov (who wrote 115 plays), Pyotr Nevelzhin, and Victor Ryzhokov,[16] all of whose plays have been called

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[13]In addition to Valency's discussion in The Breaking String, see also Leo Wiener, The Contemporary Drama in Russia (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1924); B. V. Varneke, History of the Russian Theatre: Seventeenth through Nineteenth Century (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951); Marc Slonim, Russian Theatre: From the Empire to the Soviets (New York: World Publishing Company, 1961); and Janko Lavrin, A Panorama of Russian Literature (New York: Harper and Row, Inc., 1973).

[14]Gilman, p. 124.

[15]Varneke, p. 429.

[16]Slonim, p. 83.

> spiritless concoctions made to please this or that actor and especially the high officials of the Imperial Theatrical Administration.[17]

Nikolai A. Gorchakov asserts that, particularly in terms of one of these resident playwrights,

> The repertory of plays on contemporary themes may be compared to steps on a ladder of falsehood and banality. At the top was the phenomenon that, in the early twentieth century, was called "Krylovism"—after the immoderately productive stager of minor plays with petty morals, V. Krylov.[18]

If one judges from his letters, Chekhov seems to have felt that Krylov especially embodied all that was wrong with the Russian theatre of his time. He called that theatre "an eruption, a nasty disease of the cities. . . . [It] is not higher than the crowd, but, on the contrary, the life of the masses is higher and cleverer than the theatre."[19] Later he asserted that this theatre was a "world of unintelligibles, K—'s [Krylov's] stupidity, and pretension" (Letters, p. 170). Krylov, he claimed, "hates the boards, the whole show, the actors, actresses, and that is why he succeeds" (Letters, p. 169). Elsewhere, he pitied another playwright, one "N." (perhaps P. N. Nevelzhin), who Chekhov thought had been

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[17]Ibid.

[18]Gorchakov, p. 18.

[19]Anton Chekhov, in Chekhov: Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics, Louis S. Friedland, ed. (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1964), p. 169. This volume will hereafter be referred to in the text as Letters.

deceived by "cultured and learned people" into thinking one of his plays a "gem," when in reality the "play is without merit" (Letters, p. 195). Of still another playwright, one R. R., Chekhov said, "he has no talent, is without an inner life, is insincere and lightminded . . ." (Letters, p. 200).

But the dramatists were only partially responsible for the condition of the theatre. Russian actors and actresses, it has been pointed out, were notoriously ill-equipped and trained. A potential "actor" needed only height, a resonant voice, and a mixture of "insolence and easy manners"; while an aspiring "actress" required merely beauty and a good figure.[20] As for adequate rehearsals,

> one had to get used to repeating half-correctly whatever sounds emanated from the prompter's box and to remember when and where the entrances and exits were made and where to stand on stage.[21]

We can understand, then, how Chekhov could compare Italian actors with Russian and conclude that in the latter's "acting there is not a bit of liveliness" (Letters, p. 196). He called an actress, N., "wooden" and claimed that "Sazonov played abominably in 'The Bear'" (Letters, pp. 194 and 193). In a blanket condemnation, Chekhov concluded:

> Our male actors have everything but education, intelligence, or, if you will permit me to express

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[20]Gorchakov, p. 4.

[21]Ibid.

> it thus, gentlemanliness, in the best sense of the word. Passing over drunkenness, junkerism, light contempt for work, dirty seeking for popularity, we conclude that there was lacking this innate gentlemenliness. . . . They are a good lot, but uneducated topers (Letters, p. 191).

Chekhov faced this theatre and decided to rebel against it. His attitude toward its specific dramaturgic elements seems clear from his remarks in 1887 to his older brother, Alexander:

> Modern playwrights begin their plays with angels, scoundrels, and clowns exclusively. Well, go and seek these elements in all Russia! Yes, you may find them, but not in such extreme types as the playwrights need (Letters, p. 130).

An implicit attack on this kind of characterization occurs in the first act of The Sea Gull, when in Treplyov's play, a World Spirit mouths meaningless abstractions about the history of the world and her own eternal struggle with the Devil. This attack on Symbolist theatre elicits a bored and humorous response from the spectators of the play-within-the-play. Such is also our own reaction, and it is the one desired by the playwright. An even clearer example of Chekhov's attack on melodramatic characterization occurs in Uncle Vanya, where he satirizes the melancholic lover as Vanya mopes about the stage complaining of his wasted life and frustrated love. We hardly need Astrov's critical eye to react to Vanya as Chekhov wished, but the near-farce of the attempted murder in Act III solidifies our ironic and humorous distance. In The Three Sisters, Chekhov further

attacks aspects of romantic melancholy in his portrayal of Solyony and Masha. The former character patterns his life after the Romantic poet, Lermontov, while the latter constantly quotes Pushkin.

Chekhov, then, disliked much contemporaneous Russian theatre because of its failure to portray realistically the simple and ordinary lives known to every Russian of the time. But the conventional stage also was at fault in the events it dramatized. Chekhov voiced his dissatisfaction with the action of contemporary plays in 1889 when he wrote that "declarations of love, the infidelity of husbands and wives; widows', and orphans', and all other tears, have long since been written up. The subject ought to be new . . ." (Letters, p. 170). Once again, this attitude toward melodramatic action prompted an attack in Chekhov's own plays. In Uncle Vanya, Vanya's repeated love confessions to Yelena bore the audience as well as the lady. In The Three Sisters, the infidelity of Masha and Vershinin derives principally from their own misguided romantic conceptions of their lives. In his pose as Lermontov, Solynoy's confessions to Irina become almost humorous. And, as Robert Brustein suggests, in each of his mature plays Chekhov utilizes the melodramatic plot structure of the "conflict between a despoiler and his victims—while the action of each follows the same melodramatic development: the gradual dispossession

of the victims from their rightful inheritance."[22] But Chekhov, he claims, qualifies our "sympathy for the victims":

> In most cases, they seem largely responsible for whatever happens to them. . . . Chekhov highlights their inertia, irresponsibility, and wasted lives; we also deplore their helpless inability to resist their fate.[23]

Chekhov attacked such plots of his day by employing but modifying their patterns. He posited the motivation for his own plots not in some simplistic dichotomy between good and evil in people but in the victimized characters themselves.

In this change lies Chekhov's aim in the theatre. "All I wanted," he wrote, "was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!'"[24] If people could be shown realistic characters in situations recognizable from everyday life, he felt, these people could then comprehend the flaws in their own daily lives and work to improve themselves. As a result, Chekhov conceived that his task as a playwright was not to suggest a solution but simply to depict the problem. Such representation required a close adherence to the kinds of people and events with which the audience was familiar. That these were his aims is a fact reinforced by The Sea Gull, a play which deals almost exclusively with the theatre. The

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[22]Brustein, pp. 151-152.

[23]Ibid., pp. 153-154.

[24]Quoted in ibid., p. 147.

play-within-a-play in Act I is a clear attack on Symbolist, nonrealistic, playwrighting and staging. The two characters are abstractions; the setting is other worldly; and the lines are juvenile and boring. Further, Chekhov allows the immature Treplyov to mouth the dictum of the "new" theatre: "One must depict life not as it is, and not as it ought to be, but as we see it in our dreams."[25] The bored reaction of the spectators on the stage makes clear the attack on Treplyov's purpose in theatre and implies Chekhov's own belief in an opposite purpose.

The dramatic practice resulting from his aim in drama represented not merely another instance of Ibsenite technique but a further break with existing drama. The major distinction between the practice of Ibsen and Strindberg and that of Chekhov occurs in the tone which results from the dramaturgy of each playwright. The realistic plays of Ibsen's social and Strindberg's naturalistic periods sustain a dramatic tension and audience involvement which Chekhov's plays do not. This difference exists despite the use by all three playwrights of contemporary settings and characters. In addition, such theatrical naturalism also distinguishes

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[25]Chekhov, The Sea Gull, in Four Great Plays by Chekhov, Constance Garnett, trans. (1923; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1958), p. 9. All further references to, or quotations from, Chekhov's four major plays are from this translation, and, except where noted, page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

Chekhov's plays fron Strindberg's expressionistic ones, even though Chekhov's plots appear to lack a clear point of tension and coherent dialogue. His plays differ from Ibsen's and Strindberg's, then, in the tone of inertia and pointlesness created by his unique concept of character, of dialogue structure, and of plot shape. These elements resulted from his belief that life is not a series of overt conflicts and emotional peaks but consists of long stretches of uneventfulness interrupted by brief, inconclusive periods of emotional strife. For Chekhov, the world is a vital, changing, yet infinite cosmos, in which finite and fallible men struggle with and adjust to the often unexpected and unreasonable demands of the universe. The dramaturgic elements which imply this view comprise Chekhov's departure from conventional theatre and explain his position as one of the founders of modern drama.

The primary innovation in Chekhov's characterization lies in his transformation of the conventional plot-motivating opposition between hero/protagonist and villian/antagonist. This quality is the result of his "ensemble" technique: the practice of periodically crowding the stage with a large number of characters. Since heroes and villains are rarely so distinguishable in life, Chekhov's dramatic aims demand that distinction be blurred on his stage. Robert Brustein has this effect in mind when he says that

> Chekhov . . . cannot identify with any character enough to make him central; but even if he could, the character would remain firmly unheroic. . . .
>
> He also dispenses with villains. Chekhov's plays are not without malevolent figures, but the author invariably emphasizes their more commonplace characteristics.[26]

This emphasis on "their more commonplace characteristics," which recur in all Chekhov's characters and not merely in the less sympathetic or malevolent ones, reveals his aim of portraying human beings in all their dualities, complexities, and especially weaknesses. And Chekhov is at pains to make unheroic those characters whose dilemmas often seem the primary concern of the plays. It is true that they "often seem in conflict less with some other character than with their own weak wills; and . . . they are so self-involved that they often appear not to be listening to each other."[27]

Chekhov's innovations are also to be found in the nature of his dramatic action. An examination of a typical scene, for example, reveals a dialogue dominated by incoherence, by pauses between speeches, and by repetitions within them. Often, but not always, these qualities in the dialogue result from his crowding the stage with characters. The full effect of this dialogue structure is revealed in the unusual movement of a Chekhovian plot. In fact, there seems to be no movement. In the exposition and early action of a Chekhov

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[26]Brustein, p. 143.

[27]Ibid., p. 144.

play, the establishment and development of the necessary dramatic tensions and conflicts are often obscured by the dialogue. Later in the play, this early obscurity of dramatic conflict prevents full audience recognition of the crisis. In two of the four major plays, The Sea Gull and The Three Sisters, the scenes' climactic significance passes unnoticed. And in the other two plays, although the scenes are clearly climactic, the dramatic tensions which make them so have not been conventionally and obviously developed. Finally, because of this unconventional dramatic movement, the resolutions of Chekhov's four major plays lack the conventional implications of resolving anything. In fact, they indicate what can be called the circular shape of a Chekhov plot, the re-establishment of an order evident at or before the beginning of the plays. That order has been disrupted, its balance threatened by the coming to crisis of many dramatic conflicts beneath the plays' surfaces. This shape primarily results from the failure of the plays' events to change the characters significantly. Although the immediate conflicts of the plays' actions may seem ended, the problems of the individuals involved continue, as does the potential for the same crises arising out of the same kinds of conflicts.

There are, then, a number of techniques of a Chekhov play: modification of conventional character types and function derived from the use of "ensemble" grouping;

incoherence, pauses, and repetitions in the dialogue; obscurity of the establishment, development, crisis, and resolution of necessary dramatic conflicts; and circularity of plot shape. These techniques create the final effect of a Chekhov play, which is that quality we often have in mind when referring to other plays as being "Chekhovian." This ultimate effect of the action Chekhov chooses to portray and of his method of structuring it is that tone of inertia noted earlier. His plots seem not to move or, at best, to move lethargically and with little or no sense of direction. This primary and final effect of the actions and structure of a Chekhov play can conveniently be called "stasis."[28]

Students of the theatre since Chekhov agree that his attitude toward the prevailing forms of the day led him to seek a new mode to express his vision. At first, it seemed, he merely sought a break with existing dramaturgic conventions which he felt distorted the reality of experience. When his plays "were first performed the nature of [the dramatic] preparation was obscure and the effect of the surprise baffling."[29] The minds of theatregoers were so

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[28]The dramatic techniques summarized in these paragraphs will be discussed at length in Chapter II. See also the discussion of the "static nature" of Chekhov's plots in Alexander Bakshy, The Path of the Modern Russian Stage and Other Essays (Boston: John W. Luce and Company, 1918), pp. 40-41.

[29]Ashley Dukes, The Youngest Drama: Studies in Fifty Dramatists (London: Ernest Benn, Limited, 1923), p. 20.

accustomed to direct narrative that they were unable to adjust to such striking innovations.[30] Some writers have gone so far as to say that his break was with the dominant dramatic mode of expression of Western theatre for over two thousand years. Arguing that "calmly, and without seeming to realize that he was doing it, Chekhov deracinated dramaturgic traditions," Alan Reynolds Thompson lists the major traditions the playwright uprooted: "A play must have a protagonist"; "A play must have a plot"; "The dialogue and action must conform to the law of dramatic economy"; and "A play should have a unity of some kind."[31] Referring specifically to the action of a Chekhov play, Eric Bentley writes that if "the usual progression of a story is termed 'linear,' the Chekhov pattern might be termed spatial."[32] Tom R. Driver places Chekhov in the context of all Western drama when he argues that Chekhov was distorting the traditional, that is, Aristotelian pattern of action which had dominated Western theatre until the Romantic era. This pattern, defined as "purposeful action," "consequent endurance of suffering," and "eventual gain of new perception,"

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[30]Ibid.

[31]Alan Reynolds Thompson, The Anatomy of Drama (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1942), pp. 333-334.

[32]Bentley, p. 219.

Chekhov modified by subordinating "the pattern of action to the texture of the scene":[33]

> Chekhov's innovation was to bring the second mode to the fore and to dampen the other two. The main body of the play centers upon the "passion" of the characters—. . . upon their process of undergoing experience.[34]

By distorting the traditional pattern of action, Chekhov was less concerned with an inexorable progression of events than with the texture of life which those events evoke.

The impact of these techniques of Western theatre has been almost universally recognized, for when a playwright—like Chekhov—departs so radically and significantly from dramatic convention, he aids the creation of an artistic milieu which lasts long after his death, even though he may be only one important creator of this milieu. And Ibsen and Strindberg are, of course, only two other great innovators—Ibsen precedes Shaw, for example, and Strindberg comes before O'Neill—but these three, it seems correct to say, are most significant in the creation of "modern" drama.[35] Unlike the works of Ibsen and Strindberg, however, the contributions of Chekhov have affected even the most recent drama: his departure from "available conventions of

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[33]Driver, p. 222.

[34]Ibid., p. 223

[35]Williams, p. 21.

dramatic production" was a "major development in the theatre, and is still, after seventy years, influential."[36] Some critics even go so far as to assert with Robert Corrigan that in "the past fifty years the Chekhovian form has come to dominate much of the theatre," that we "see it in the plays of such different writers as Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Albee. . . ."[37]

Few critics have attempted, however, to demonstrate even casually the truth of Corrigan's opinion, and Corrigan himself never pursues its implications. But the implications are so important that they should be pursued, for the Chekhovian form does recur significantly in the body of contemporary British and American drama, and not just with the four playwrights Corrigan names. To show its significance as well as its pervasiveness, one can consider the works of three representative playwrights of today—Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter, and Ed Bullins—two of whom admittedly owe something to Chekhov's dramaturgy and the third, while admitting a debt to no one, nevertheless demonstrates the continued power of Chekhov's techniques. These three are chosen for at least two reasons: first, they are playwrights of diverse subjects and modes and of three distinct cultural

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[36]Ibid., p. 111.

[37]Robert Corrigan, "Introduction," in Comedy: Meaning and Form (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1969), p. 11.

milieux. And secondly, their importance is such that to show their consistent use of Chekhovian dramaturgy will imply that they are working in an artistic milieu created in part by the dramas of Chekhov. But before turning to a study of these individual contemporary playwrights, one should first demonstrate and analyze in some detail Chekhovian dramatic technique as it is found in Chekhov's four major plays, The Sea Gull, Uncle Vanya, The Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard.

CHAPTER II

THE CHEKHOVIAN MODEL

The dramatic techniques employed by Chekhov suggest that he envisioned society as consisting of ordinary, simple people who struggle with but finally reconcile themselves to life's dilemmas. This view is especially evident in his blending of the conventional character functions of protagonist and antagonist. The suffering of those characters who might function as protagonists does not destroy them nor do they undergo the recognition of their own responsibility in that suffering. Such recognition would provide them the opportunity to change themselves, perhaps radically, something they never do. And the paucity, feebleness, and misdirection of actions taken by these characters in response to their predicaments further modify their conventional function as protagonists. In the case of those who might function as conventional antagonists, either their goals are too petty and material or their effect on the sympathetic characters is unintentional.

Another aspect of Chekhov's vision implies that life does not consist of "dramatic," climactic events, but of routine, superficial events and conversation under the surface of which lie the tensions and conflicts of people.

That this was his belief is clear from the apparent immobility or, at best, lethargy of a Chekhov play, a condition that suggests its final effect, stasis. His unique plot techniques, especially his scenic structure and choice of action, reinforce such an effect. Finally, the overall shape of a Chekhov plot, the cyclical balance-disruption-struggle-adjustment-balance pattern, also suggests that plot's static nature. These elements and his conception of characterization have provided a model for much of modern theatre.[1]

Chekhov's attitude toward his characters is revealed in an incident which occurred early in his dramatic career. During the rehearsals for the ill-fated Alexandrinsky Theatre production of The Sea Gull, he reportedly admonished the actors on several occasions to play their parts simply: "The

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[1]This summary of dramatic techniques forms a basis for their discussion in this chapter. For greater elaboration and examination, see, among others, the following studies: David Megarshack, Chekhov, the Dramatist (New York: Hill and Wang, 1952) and The Real Chekhov (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1972); Maurice Valency, The Breaking String (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); J. L. Styan, Chekhov in Performance (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971); and Harvey Pitcher, The Chekhov Play: A New Interpretation (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973). The following shorter studies are also useful: Robert Brustein in The Theatre of Revolt, pp. 137-179; A. Skaftymov, "Principles of Structure in Chekhov's Plays," trans. by George McCracken Young, in Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Robert Louis Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 69-87; and Nils Ake Nilsson, "Intonation and Rhythm in Chekhov's Plays," in ibid., 161-174.

chief thing, my dears, is that theatricality is unnecessary. . . . Really unnecessary. It is entirely simple. They are simple ordinary people."[2] What Chekhov meant by "simple ordinary people" becomes clear upon an examination of his characters. They are all, to varying degrees, flawed people. The nature of their flaws, however, places them outside the heroic tradition which had dominated dramatic characterization before Chekhov. Robert W. Corrigan explains them in terms of their desire to live in a world of their own concerned always with that world and its problems. Chekhov's characters, he says,

> dramatize themselves. They all become, as does Astrov, introspective and consumed with critical self-analysis. . . . They look inward and see all their problems—real or imaginary—and then they build them up with great enjoyment. They either wallow sentimentally in themselves, or they project their own inadequacies and failures onto others.
>
> This self-dramatization makes it necessary for each of Chekhov's characters to build and then operate in his own little world. To be completely self-centered makes social responsibility of any kind nearly impossible. Each character has his own thoughts and problems with which he is usually morbidly consumed.[3]

The qualities Corrigan isolates indicate what is most important about Chekhov's characterization: it provides the transitional link between the heroic patterns of earlier

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[2]Quoted in Valency, p. 232. My italics.

[3]Robert W. Corrigan, "Some Aspects of Chekhov's Dramaturgy," Educational Theatre Journal, 7 (March, 1955), 109.

drama and the anti-heroic patterns of modern contemporary drama. Since Chekhov's characters are firmly nonheroic, the two terms normally utilized in discussions of conventional characterization, protagonist and antagonist, bear little functional relevance in Chekhov's four major plays, for they imply a sharper distinction of function than is there. But some terms must be established in order that these characters may be grouped for discussion. Perhaps more descriptive of those distinctions which do exist among Chekhov's characters are the terms "sympathetic" and "unsympathetic." To isolate Chekhov's major sympathetic and unsympathetic characters, however, forces one to run the danger of violating the spirit of his plays, for if his distinctive conception of character is to be understood, one must recognize how this dramaturgy transcends the conventional pattern of protagonist and antagonist. Among his characters, there are, first of all, some whose lives and dilemmas demand greater audience attention and evoke greater sympathy than do those of others. Such characters can, for convenience, be called "sympathetic." Secondly, there are those others who precipitate the action of the plays or who become merely dramatic catalysts. These can be categorized as "unsympathetic." Although they also are not free of problems, they

do not demand the attention or sympathy of the audience so much as do the former, larger group.[4]

Sympathetic characters are at the center of each of Chekhov's plays in the traditionally dramatic sense that a play can be about a character. In the four major plays, the sympathetic people are Treplyov and Nina in The Sea Gull, Vanya and Sonya in Uncle Vanya, the sisters in The Three Sisters, and Lyubov Andreyevna in The Cherry Orchard, each of whom evinces qualities which reflect Chekhov's deviation from conventional characterization and which make the characters nonheroic. These qualities result from three aspects of development: the cause and nature of a character's suffering, his capacity for action in response to that suffering, and the extent to which he is changed by his suffering.

One quality of Chekhov's sympathetic characters which functions to modify conventional patterns is the degree to which many cause their own suffering by deluding themselves

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[4]Although this scheme for categorizing Chekhov's characters is my own, it breaks no new ground. Its basic tension and the discussion which follows are implied in and incorporate much of the material from the following studies of Chekhov's plays: Magarshack, Valency, and Styan passim; Bert O. States, "Chekhov's Dramatic Strategy," Yale Review, 56 (Winter, 1967), 212-224; Nicholas Moravcevich, "Chekhov and Naturalism: From Affinity to Divergence," Comparative Drama, 4 (Winter, 1970-71), 219-240; and J. Oates Smith, "Chekhov and the 'Theater of the Absurd,'" Bucknell Review, 14 (1966), 44-58.

about the nature of the problem and the attendant responsibility. None of Chekhov's sympathetic characters ever recognizes the role of his own attitudes and personality in causing his suffering. This kind of self-delusion is exemplified in Madame Ranevsky. Although she has returned from Paris to solidify the shaky financial status of the family, she excludes the only possible solution, the sale of the estate. Throughout the first three acts of the plays, she refuses to recognize the possibility of that event—the auction—which will cause her the most suffering. This attitude, along with her past extravagance, is directly responsible for the final loss of the estate and the leveling of the orchard. Our recognition of her responsibility, however, does not lessen our sympathy for her suffering: it is real. The point here is that her own role in her suffering prevents her functioning in the conventional capacity as a protagonist.

A clearer example of suffering caused by self-delusion occurs in the case of Sonya in Uncle Vanya when, in Act II, she attempts to draw a declaration of love from Astrov, who clearly does not love her. When he says, "It's years since I cared for anyone," she replies, "You care for no one at all?" "None," he answers (p. 214). But Sonya persists with the childish ruse, "if I had a friend or a younger sister." Embarrassed, Astrov finally replies that he could not love

her. Again, however, Sonya seems not to hear.[5] This oblivion results in her disappointment in Act III when she is at last faced with the truth. Her suffering during the rest of the play, then, is caused not so much by her disappointed love as by her previous unwillingness to face reality. But, again like Madame Ranevsky, Sonya's suffering is real and elicits audience sympathy. Her responsibility in that suffering, however, modifies her role as conventional protagonist.

Uncle Vanya and the three sisters also share these characteristics. Despite Yelena's repeated rejections, Vanya finds opportunity to profess his love to her and to believe she will ultimately return it. Each of the three Prozorov sisters deludes herself about the manner of salvaging her unsatisfying life. Irina is bored with work yet agrees to marry a man she does not love. Masha enters into an affair with Vershinin in the full knowledge of his personal history and the hopelessness of his ever remaining with her. And Olga tries to ignore the realities of all their lives as she blindly hopes for a better tomorrow.

Chekhov's sympathetic characters also remain nonheroic in their incapacity to face the dilemmas and suffering of their lives. These characters rarely "act" to confront and

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[5]Chekhov, Uncle Vanya, Act II, in Four Great Plays by Chekhov, p. 214.

resolve the dilemmas facing them. Or, if they do act, their actions are often useless because they are either ineffectual or misdirected. This quality of Chekhov's sympathetic characters—their paucity,feebleness, or misdirection of action—plays a major role in helping to create that stasis earlier suggested as the final effect of a Chekhov play.

Once again, the best example of this kind of inaction is Madame Ranevsky. She reacts to events and problems through excessive emotionality and tears which evade the concrete, real dilemmas of the play. Despite her tearful reaction to the news of the sale of the orchard in Act III and to the revelation of who the new owner is, she allows events to take their course rather than act decisively to alter their direction. Thus, in Act IV, she seems visibly relieved that the necessity for action is passed. In The Three Sisters, also, Olga and Irina seem unable to act in the face of Natasha's clear encroachment on their house. They continually talk about going to Moscow, a dream that never materializes. It does not matter that moving to Moscow would not have been the bright, life-enriching experience each believes it could be. What does matter is that never in the first three acts does either sister make a concrete effort to effect that move. Their reaction to Natasha's advances is one of confused paralysis and, by the end of Act III and the beginning of Act IV, resignation.

But even when a Chekhovian sympathetic character does act in an effort to confront the dilemmas of his life, that action is often ineffectual. In The Cherry Orchard, for example, Gaev sends Anya to her great aunt in Yaroslavl for money to pay off the debts. But the amount sent is hardly one seventh of what the estate finally sells for. On his part, he has some characteristically vague plans to "raise a loan on an I.O.U. to pay the arrears on the mortgage" (p. 79). These plans, of course, never materialize. Perhaps the best example of this kind of ineffectuality in a character's actions is Vanya. In a very real sense, Vanya's pursuit of Yelena is a response to the dilemma which has arisen in the antecedent action of the play. Vanya has recognized by the beginning of the play the pedantry of the man he has spent his life supporting and admiring. But the pursuit of Yelena cannot reclaim his wasted life; and even more to the point is its uselessness—she continually rejects him. His attempt on the Professor's life in Act III dramatizes Vanya's ineffectuality. He shoots twice, the second time at point blank range and in full view of the audience, and misses each time.

Finally, there are those sympathetic characters in Chekhov whose capacity for action in other directions ironically contrasts with their feeble responses to potentially more destructive dilemmas. In Act III of The Three Sisters, the Prozorovhousehold opens to help the

residents of the town who have been burned out by the fire. Olga shows great decisiveness in turning over old clothes to relieve the suffering of the fire's victims. Yet, in the same act, she is helpless in dealing with Natasha's vicious attack on old Anfisa. Neither she nor Irina has been equipped emotionally to deal with such a creature. Finally, Sonya's abilities and energy in operating the farm and helping the peasants all contrast sharply with her inability to react realistically to Astrov's lack of affection.

A third characteristic of Chekhov's nonheroic sympathetic characters is related to the degree of change caused by their suffering. None of them changes significantly in response to this suffering because it derives primarily from self-delusion, and any change would require some cognizance of personal responsibility. Such recognition never occurs, and Chekhov's sympathetic characters never drastically change as a result of the pain they undergo. They merely adjust to the new conditions of their lives, usually by reconciling themselves to the new conditions and continuing to function under the same old illusions. Such adjustment allows them to maintain their emotional and psychological status quo.

Almost any sympathetic character from Chekhov's four major plays would suffice to exemplify this lack of change. In The Sea Gull, Konstantine Treplyov retains his Hamlet pose from his opening lines of Act I through his suicide in

Act IV. Not only does he fail to recognize the futility of his efforts to please Arkadina, he seems to relish the degradation caused by her ridicule and Nina's rejection. His suicide at the end of the play is yet another effort to gain attention. This apparent enjoyment of suffering is also found in Vanya, who, with Treplyov, shares the habit of consistently placing himself in situations in which he must suffer rejection. Moreover, Vanya is persistently morose, continually referring to his unhappiness, even into Act IV in which his resignation to his wasted life becomes another excuse to complain about how miserable he is. One of the best examples of the failure to recognize the need for change, however, is Madame Ranevsky. Because she is unwilling to act in the only possible way to save the fortunes of the family, she assures that event she most fears. Unable to change, however, she remains an emotionalizing, sentimental character, seemingly unaware of her responsibility in causing those events.

The aspects of Chekhov's sympathetic characters, then, which place them in the transitional stage from conventional heroic to contemporary anti-heroic characterization are these three: a capacity for self-delusion which makes them primarily responsible for the suffering they undergo; a paucity, feebleness, or misdirection of action in response to those dilemmas which cause their suffering; and a failure to change when change is needed. This final characteristic,

which results from an adjustment to new circumstances, allows the characters to maintain the emotional and psychological status quo evident in the opening acts of the plays.

That other group of characters in Chekhov's plays, the "unsympathetic" ones, either precipitate the main conflicts and, therefore, the action of the play, or they function as dramatic catalysts. The reason that they do not elicit audience sympathy for their own dilemmas and suffering is that Chekhov subordinates this suffering to their more dramatically prominent role in the dilemmas of their sympathetic colleagues. Although in some cases these characters may even provoke antipathy, none are conventional antagonists or villains: they do not maliciously plot the turmoil and pain they nonetheless cause. Although some appear more evil than others, specifically Natasha and Solyony, these characters do not intend the conflict and suffering which result from their actions. And in the case of Lopahin, he is hardly unsympathetic at all in the sense that the others are. By repeatedly mentioning the eventual sale of the estate, he is merely the dramatic catalyst for the tensions of the play.

The Three Sisters is the darkest of Chekhov's major plays because of the machinations of the two most unsympathetic of his characters, Natasha and Solyony. The more insidious of the two, Natasha plots and executes a systematic displacement of the Prozorov family from their own home.

She accomplishes this aim by marrying and then cuckolding the only Prozorov male. Using the children produced by these relationships, she gradually forces the sisters out of their house. In her takeover of the house, however, she does not set out to destroy the sisters and Andrey, nor does she even have this effect. Likewise, Solyony's actions are not intended to bring suffering to Irina, for throughout the play he is solely concerned with maintaining his pose as Lermontov. His futile pursuit of Irina merely allows him to play out his posture, and his duel with Tuzenback is only an element in that pose.

The majority of Chekhov's unsympathetic characters are not as thoroughly repugnant as Natasha and Solyony. Further, the conflicts they cause and the anguish which accompanies those conflicts are more clearly unintentional. The situations these characters precipitate proceed largely from the manner in which their basic egocentricity mainfests itself. As a result, just as Chekhov's sympathetic characters are not heroes, so these unsympathetic characters are not villains. Arkadina and Trigorin of The Sea Gull are examples. She does not desire the pain Treplyov goes through. Her spoiling of his play in Act I is not a slap against him or his talent; she is primarily doing what she does in any social situation: maintaining her position as the center of a group. To have watched his play quietly or even to have condescended to encourage him would require

of Arkadina a transcendence of self of which she is incapable. But, although her coldness towards Treplyov and her cruel treatment of him in Acts I and III are responsible in part for his anguish and eventual suicide, Arkadina does not derive satisfaction from his suffering. The same may also be said of Trigorin, whose relationship with and betrayal of Nina is best summed up by himself in Act II where he refers to the dead sea gull as the subject for a short story: speaking to Nina, he says, "A subject for a short story: A young girl, such as you, has lived all her life beside a lake. . . . But a man comes by chance, sees her, and having nothing better to do, destroys her like this sea-gull here" (p. 30). Although Trigorin has no wish to hurt Nina—he has "nothing better to do"—his responsibility in her suffering is in no way lessened. Thus the suffering which afflicts Treplyov and Nina in the play derives in part from the natural manifestation of the egocentricities of Arkadina and Trigorin rather than from conscious designs on their parts.

Yelena in Uncle Vanya best exemplifies the extent to which a character can unconsciously cause extensive suffering. She does nothing more in the play than wander through it, enchanting everyone with her beauty. Her desire to do nothing becomes clear when Sonya suggests that she do teaching or nursing on the estate as remedies for boredom. Yelena refuses: "I don't know how to do such things. And

they are not interesting. It's only in novels with a purpose that people teach and doctor the peasants" (pp. 219-220). Ironically, her very lethargy causes both disruption and suffering, but she desires neither. She certainly neither wills nor desires Vanya's attention, and her encouragement of Astrov is discernible only upon close scrutiny of the first two acts. Astrov, however, never suffers. The one scene in which she is the most culpable, her betrayal of Sonya's confidence in Act III, is damaging, but the effect on the audience is blunted by Sonya's failure to learn of the betrayal.

Similarly, in The Three Sisters, Vershinin does not coldly plan and execute the seduction and betrayal of Masha. In fact, his charm and eloquence foster sympathy in the people he meets. Chekhov also subtly suggests that Vershinin has habitually involved himself in love affairs. So there is no question finally of what Vershinin will do. He abandons Masha, but he is neither callous to nor satisfied by her misery. As with Arkadina, Trigorin, and Yelena before him, his actions are entirely consistent with his egocentrically defined world. Yet he is not malicious, and the pain he causes is almost accidental.

In these typical unsympathetic characters from three of his plays, then Chekhov has deviated from expected dramaturgy, since the antagonistic function has been filled by characters whose effect on the major characters is almost

coincidental. In The Cherry Orchard, however, Chekhov no longer utilizes the concept of an antagonist. Lopahin's function for two acts is limited to recurrent articulation of the major source of dramatic tension, the approaching sale of the estate. Although in Act III he becomes the source of the family's suffering by buying the estate himself, his description of this purchase shows that it is clearly accidental, something he does almost from impulse. Thus, to place him with the unsympathetic characters, as they have been defined, seems almost inaccurate.

Among Chekhov's important innovations, then, is the fact that his characterization transcends conventional, heroic dramaturgy in his manner of modifying the standard dramatic functions of protagonist and antagonist. But the innovativeness of Chekhovian dramaturgy is even more clearly revealed in the theatrical effect of his dramatic action—what is here being called stasis. This effect results partly from his technique in particular scenes, that is, his use of what has been described as "ensemble," the periodic crowding of the stage with several characters. Related to and supporting this technique is the peculiar nature of the dialogue, which is permeated by incoherence, pauses, and repetitions. Further, the playwright's peculiar use of exposition and rising action, climax, and resolution intensifies the audience reaction. These elements imply

finally the circular, and thus static, shape of a Chekhovian plot.

The cause for the lethargy of a typically Chekhovian scene can initially be traced to the technique of crowding the stage with characters and thereby diffusing the dramatic focus. Every act in Chekhov's four major plays, in fact, contains at least one such crowded scene which is permeated by the distinctive incoherence of dialogue. The disjointed conversation is the result of a variety of techniques. There are, for example, radical shifts from group to group within the crowd caused by remarks from one or more characters which have no apparent bearing on the situation or conversation. Yet, although there are tensions beneath this superficial and banal exchange of talk, its seemingly pointless recreation on stage seems lethargic because it retards the development of the dramatic conflicts of the scene and the play. This effect is reinforced by the recurrence of pauses consisting of varying time lengths when there is a lapse in the conversation or when the stage is empty. Finally, the effect of Chekhovian scenes is often aided by the repetition of words or phrases for no immediately clear reason. All of these elements do not recur in every Chekhovian ensemble scene nor is every scene as incoherent as the hypothetical one described. This kind of scene obscures the establishment of dramatic complications and arrests the development of dramatic conflicts.

Although there are many typical ensemble scenes in Chekhov's plays, some of the most illustrative are found in The Three Sisters. The opening scene of Act I displays the Chekhovian ensemble technique and its dependence on incoherent dialogue. In the drawing-room, Olga is expressing her hopes of going to Moscow. From the adjacent dining-room come bits of a conversation between Solyony, Tchebutykin, and Tuzenback which punctuate Olga's monologue with such lines as "The Devil it is!" and "Of course, it's nonsense" (p. 122). In the same room with Olga, Masha's whistling also distracts the audience's attention. Although, on the realistic level, this barrage of seemingly irrelevant comments and sounds had nothing to do with what Olga is saying; it diverts audience attention from her monologue and thus slows the emotional development of the scene. On the dramatic level, however, these sounds in part guide audience response to her optimism and reinforce the impression of her as an unrealistic dreaming spinster.

Another example occurs in the central scene of Act II, which begins with Vershinin and Masha's entrance, grows as additional characters wander onstage, peaks when Tchebutykin suggests, "it's time we were going" (p. 152), and ends when everyone but the servants momentarily vacate the stage before Tchebutykin and Andrey re-enter. During the conversation between Vershinin and Tuzenback about the "life that will come after us," Masha twice unaccountably interrupts by

laughing quietly. And after Vershinin states that his descendants may some day find happiness, Chekhov's stage direction reads, "Fedotik and Rode appear in the dining-room; they sit down and sing softly, playing the guitar" (p. 147). These interruptions parallel Chekhov's techniques in Act I of allowing the bits of conversation from the dining-room to guide our responses to Olga's monologue. Later in the same scene there is a clearer instance of this incoherence. The section deserves quoting in full:

> Fedotik (to Irina). I bought these chalks for you just now as I passed the shop. . . . And this penknife. . . .
>
> Irina. You've got into the way of treating me as though I were little, but I am grown up, you know . . . (takes the chalks and the penknive, joyfully). How lovely!
>
> Fedotik. And I bought a knife for myself . . . look . . . one blade, and another blade, a third, and this is for the ears, and here are scissors, and that's for cleaning the nails. . . .
>
> Roddey (loudly). Doctor, how old are you?
>
> Tchebutykin. I? Thirty-two (laughter).
>
> Fedotik. I'll show you another patience . . . (lays out the cards).
>
> (The samovar is brought in; Anfisa is at the samovar; a little later Natasha comes in and is also busy at the table; Solyony comes in, and after greeting the others sits down at the table.)
>
> Vershinin. What a wind there is!
>
> Masha. Yes. I am sick of the winter. I've forgotten what summer is like.

Irina. It's coming out right, I see. We shall go to Moscow.

Fedotik. No, it's not coming out. You see, the eight is over the two of spades (laughs). So that means you won't go to Moscow.

Tchebutykin (reads from the newspaper). Tsi-tsi-kar. Smallpox is raging here.

Anfisa (going up to Masha). Masha, come to tea, my dear. (To Vershinin) Come, your honour . . . excuse me, sir, I have forgotten your name. . . .

Masha. Bring it here, nurse, I am not going there.

Irina. Nurse!

Anfisa. I am coming!

Natasha (to Solyony). Little babies understand very well. "Good morning Bobik, good morning, darling," I said. He looked at me in quite a special way. You think I say that because I am a mother, but no, I assure you! He is an extraordinary child.

Solyony. If that child were mine, I'd fry him in a frying pan and eat him. (Takes his glass, comes into the drawing-room and sits down in a corner.) (Pp. 148-149.)

The focus in this section is constantly shifting; there are at least eight breaks in the continuity caused by leaps from one speech to another when there is nothing in the subjects of the speeches to link them. The tone resulting from these shifts from group to group and from the consequent incoherence in the dialogue is reinforced by the recurrence of pauses. In the long conversation between Vershinin and Masha which opens the scene defined earlier, there are at least thirteen pauses, indicated either by stage directions or by suspension points. These pauses work with the shifts

from everyday conversation to declarations of love all for the sake of arresting the growth of dramatic tension in the scene.

Finally, there is the effect of repeated words and phrases in Chekhov's dialogue. Twice in the central scene from Act II of The Three Sisters Tchebutykin remarks as he reads from his newspaper, "Balzac was married at Berditchev," as Irina "hums softly." Then, she lays out the cards for patience, "dreamily," and repeats the phrase. Just as with the incoherence and pauses, this repetition underscores the lethargy of the scene. In Uncle Vanya, such repetition occurs in the final scene of Act IV. Astrov has taken his leave of the household, and the stage direction, "The sound of bells," indicates he is driving off. Marina says, "He has gone." Sonya returns to the room and repeats, "He is gone." Then, in her long monologue accompanied by Telyegin on the guitar, Sonya repeats "We shall rest" six times (pp. 243-244). The effect of these repetitions is to reinforce the return of order and routine in the household, to create a mood of placidity. Similarly, in Act II of The Cherry Orchard, Chekhov allows verbal repetition to precede the strange and disturbing "sound of a breaking harpstring." Epihodov has just crossed upstage "playing on the guitar." Lyubov remarks, "(dreamily" There goes Epihodov." Anya repeats, (dreamily) There goes Epihodov" (p. 90). The action of the entire play seems to have ground to a halt in these lines and in the

subsequent useless attention to the setting sun. This lethargy, however, is preparatory to the mysterious, off-stage sound of the breaking harpstring, a sound itself repeated at the end of Act IV.[6]

Less tangible but more important in determining the static effect caused by a Chekhov play is the distinctive form of its action and plot. Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay in their Century of Innovation have summarized the characteristically Chekhov plot:

> Although on the surface seemingly simple, Chekhov's plays are among the most complex in the modern repertory. In them all violent deeds and emotional climaxes occur offstage and the plays conclude before any full reversal has taken place. Thus, the action is muted, for it is kept in the background. In the foreground, the onstage action, is placed a plethora of seemingly trivial, commonplace occurrences. But these details are chosen and arranged with enormous care to give the effect of randomness while at the same time they constantly reveal character, mood, and idea. As a result attention is concentrated not on events but on the texture of the life that surrounds and shapes the characters and upon their psychological responses. Since the characters, like most human beings, do not fully understand their own feelings and motives and since they seek to conceal as much as to reveal their emotions, it is in the seeming trivia, the nuances, the subtext that underlies the dialogue

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[6]The elements of Chekhov's "ensemble" technique and the qualities of his dialogue are discussed in Styan, especially, and in Magarshack, Valency, and Pitcher, as well as in William Gerhardie, Anton Chekhov: A Critical Study (1923; rpt. London: MacDonald and Company, Ltd., 1974); Siegfried Melchinger, Anton Chekhov, trans. by Edith Tarcov, World Dramatists Series (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972); Nilsson; and Skaftymov.

> that one must seek the revelations that constitute the dramatic action.[7]

The "randomness" which Brockett and Findlay speak of as the effect of the arrangement of "seemingly trivial commonplace occurrences" is the effect of stasis. Because Chekhov was more concerned with "character, mood, and idea" and because he felt life consisted primarily of these "commonplace occurrences," his plays do not appear to move, to progress. As a result, one must search beneath their surface for "revelations that constitute dramatic action."

Since the establishment of conflicts and tensions in the early scenes of each Chekhov play is almost totally obscured, the impulses which traditionally drive the action of a play and give its plot movement appear muffled or even absent. And because he blurs the distinction between antagonist and protagonist, one of the surprises is the realization by late in Act II or into Act III that with seemingly no dramatic preparation a relationship of some kind has been established between two characters. Chekhov characteristically employed the four-act structure in which the climax normally occurs at or near the end of Act III. Therefore, he had to establish the basic conflicts in Act I, develop them in Act II and the first part of Act III, bring them to a climax at or near the end of Act III, and depict

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[7]Brockett and Findlay, Century of Innovation, pp. 243-244.

the resolution in Act IV. By selecting and dramatizing the "seemingly trivial, commonplace occurrences" of life in the early acts, Chekhov obscures the establishment and development of the dramatic tensions.

The best example of this technique comes in Uncla Vanya in the development of the relationship between Astrov and Yelena. Acts I and II appear to focus on the dilemma of Vanya, who feels he has wasted his life in the service of a pedantic hypochondriac. But obscured in these acts are the subtle hints of an attraction between Astrov and Yelena, an attraction which Chekhov masks behind the surface of polite conversation.

> Astrov (to Yelena Andreyevna). I've come to see your husband. You wrote to me that he was very ill—rheumatism and something else—but it appears he is perfectly well.
>
> Yelena. Last night he was poorly, complaining of pains in his legs, but today he is all right. . . .
>
> Astrov. And I have galloped twenty miles at breakneck speed! But there, it doesn't matter! It's not the first time. I shall stay with you till tomorrow to make up for it, and anyway I shall sleep quantum satis. (P. 198.)

This exchange seems harmless enough, but later she is preoccupied by him.

> Yelena. That doctor has a weary, sensitive face. An interesting face. Sonya is evidently attracted by him; she is in love with him, and I understand her feeling. He has come three times since I have been here, but I am shy and have not once had a proper talk with him, or been nice to him. He thinks I am disagreeable. (p. 203.)

The placid tone of the scenes involving either or both Astrov and Yelena, then, obscures the real intent of the scene—the depiction of Yelena's attraction to the doctor.

A similar approach is taken to the development of Nina's love for Trigorin in The Sea Gull. Their long dialogue in Act II about his attitudes toward art conceals the development of their attraction for each other. In Act I of The Three Sisters, careful attention to Vershinin's early speeches reveals the clear hints of his infatuation with Masha that lie beneath his polished, urbane social charm. Masha's return of his attention, which begins in Act II, is suggested by nothing more than her inability to control her slight laughing. And in The Cherry Orchard, the uneasiness beneath the surface of family gatherings is often indicated merely by a billiard phrase from Gaev. Indeed, throughout all Chekhov, coherent speech rarely expresses as much as his pauses or the short bits of puzzling and apparently inexplicable catch phrases or songs. The point here, then, is that in the early acts Chekhov disguises the establishment of conflict and the relationships inherent in conflict by burying them beneath the surface of polite, urbane, conventional conversation and by diverting the theatrical focus to other characters.

In addition to innovation in terms of exposition and rising action, Chekhov also prevents the development of audience involvement by refusing to dramatize the normally

"dramatic" events of life. This is what David Magarshack has called Chekhov's "indirect action": the technique of relegating scenes of high tension and violent action or of love to offstage while presenting on stage scenes which seem mere "afterwords" to these more "dramatic" events.[8] One of the best examples is Treplyov's initial suicide attempt between Acts II and III of The Sea Gull. Although Chekhov partially prepares us for it, he does not portray the attempt. In another example, the insult and challenge between Tuzenback and Solyony occurs between Acts III and IV of The Three Sisters; Chekhov does not even allow the men to meet in Act IV.

What Chekhov does portray on stage are scenes which are not allowed to develop to a climax and are often cut off before they reach an emotional crisis. He accomplishes such an end by the insertion of an unrelated word or phrase from an outside character, by the theatrical entrance of another character, or by seeming nonsequitors from one of the participants in the scene. In Act II, Nina and Trigorin's long conversation about his art is a love scene without declaration of love. Vanya's discovery of Yelena in Astrov's arms is "climaxed" by Astrov's casual remark about the weather as he leaves the room. And in one of the most controversial scenes

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[8]Magarshack, Chekhov, the Dramatist, p. 164.

in Chekhov, the argument between Lyubov and Trofimov in Act III of The Cherry Orchard, the playwright undercuts the tension established by having Lyubov shout after him when he rushes from the room, "Petya! Wait a minute! You funny creature! I was only joking! Petya!" Then the sound of "somebody running quickly downstairs and suddenly falling with a crash" is heard, and Anya comes in to announce, laughingly, "Petya's fallen downstairs" (p. 100). Petya returns, and he and Lyubov dance together. These are only a few examples of how Chekhov portrays events so that the expected "drama" is short-circuited and dramatic involvement retarded.

Chekhov's plays are also undramatic in the portrayal of the "crisis" or "climas," which is traditionally "the turning point in the action, the place at which the rising action reverses and becomes the falling action."[9] His approximations lack emotional intensity. In two of his four major plays the crises are so subdued that the events are recognized as climactic only in retrospect. The clearest example occurs in The Sea Gull. After two lengthy scenes of intense conflict, first between Treplyov and Arkadina and then between Arkadina and Trigorin, the party is about to depart the estate. Trigorin, who has just been reunited

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[9]William F. Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, eds., A Handbook to Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 9.

with Arkadina, goes off to find his stick before leaving and meets Nina, to whom he declares his love. The preparation for this declaration has been embedded in their earlier conversation about his art (Act II). The brevity of the scene, however, and its emotional placidity, compared with the turmoil of the two previous scenes, belie its importance in the play: it is the scene towards which the play has been moving for two and two-thirds acts, although Chekhov has kept that movement almost totally obscure. Finally, it determines the action of the fourth act. Its function as the climax of the play is realized only much later.

The climax of The Three Sisters is similarly subdued. The complexity of the plot, with three major lines and several less distinct ones, would itself disperse the focus; but in keeping with the apparently lethargic movement of the play, Chekhov so diffuses the climax that it is almost undetectable. The strange love declaration between Masha and Vershinin is the culmination of that plot. Chekhov carefully but obscurely prepares for its unhappy outcome by inserting unobtrusively the rumor that the battery is about to be transferred. Further, he does not dramatize the actual insult and challenge that will eventually lead to Tuzenback's death. Finally, the plot involving Natasha's displacement of the sisters in the house quietly reaches climax when Masha reveals that Andrey has mortgaged the house and Natasha has taken the money. The meaning of this action, that the

sisters are defeated in any attempt to hold onto their home, is clear only when seen in the light of Natasha's gradual encroachment in the play.

Chekhov also defused the theatrical impact of the climaxes of the other plays. In Uncle Vanya, Vanya's resentment towards Serebryakov erupts in Act III after the Professor suggests selling the estate. But Chekhov refuses to allow the scene to develop conventionally. Emotionally, the scene's impact is diffused by both the initial offstage shot, which prepares us for the onstage miss, and the image of the play's hero in a temper tantrum. In the similar use of almost farcical action, Chekhov reduces the climactic impact of The Cherry Orchard. Lopahin, returning from the auction and about to reveal the new owner, is summarily decked by Varya, who is swinging at Epihodov. This humorous violence undercuts whatever dramatic tension would be expected to precede the revelation of the auction's results.

The resolutions or falling actions of Chekhov's plays also employ dramaturgical characteristics identified in his earlier acts. In the later scenes of the plays, for example, an evenness of tone is reflected in the apparent superficiality and inconsequentiality of the dialogue. And submerged conflict and tension are created through understatement and undercutting of traditionally dramatic action. In the resolutions, the world of the characters continues despite the disruption caused by, although not necessarily dramatized

in, the climaxes of the play. This continuum of life is reflected in the lack of change in the major characters consequent upon the crisis. For example, Lyubov's propensity for extravagance and emotionality is as prevalent in Act IV as earlier in the play. And Vanya's self-pity is just as strong in Act IV as throughout the first three acts.

Chekhov will not ever allow the action of these resolutions to take traditionally theatrical paths. He mutes the effect of Treplyov's suicide by having Dorn relate it in a whisper to Trigorin and by not portraying its effect on Arkadina. Similarly, in The Three Sisters, he does not fully utilize the theatrical potential in the loss experienced by Masha and Irina. Masha and Vershinin simply meet, kiss, and part. To reduce further the scene's effectiveness, Kulygin appears, forgives Masha, and even clowns for the sisters. Nor does Chekhov allow Irina to mourn excessively; she, after all, admitted she did not love Tuzenback. Her quick recovery is very credible but theatrically weak. Also, any remaining sense of loss the audience may have felt after the departure of the family in Act IV of The Cherry Orchard is weakened by the unexpected entrance of Firs shuffling onstage following an appropriately dramatic pause. That pause had seemed to signal the end of the play in a conventional and melodramatic way. But from a strictly theatrical point of view, Firs' entrance detracts from the effect of the pause,

and is another example of Chekhov's refusal to follow traditional dramaturgy.

More to the point about Chekhov's resolutions, however, is that nothing is actually resolved in them. Although the conflicts established throughout the first three acts of all four plays may be solved, the problems of the characters continue, and the particular sociality of the worlds Chekhov creates remains almost unaffected. This kind of continuum is suggested in the closing scenes of the first three plays. The party at Sorin's estate continues playing cards; the routine of running the Serebryakov estate is resumed when the Professor, Yelena, and finally Astrov leave; and the pattern of random disjointed conversation which dominates most of The Three Sisters opens and permeates much of Act IV. In The Cherry Orchard, the party gathers again for their self-conscious farewells in what used to be the nursery. The differing attitude of each character toward leaving the estate still echoes those attitudes with which each began the play and suggests that no one is very affected by the loss of the estate nor believes he will be.[10]

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[10]The structure of this discussion of the action in a Chekhov play follows the more elaborate design in the studies of Styan and Pitcher. Further, the major qualities of Chekhov's action isolated here can be found in these two studies as well as in those of Valency and Magarshack, Moravcevich and Melchinger, and in Alexander Bakshy, The Path of the Modern Russian Stage; Beverly Hahn, "Chekhov: The Three Sisters," The Critical Review, 15 (1972), 3-22; James W. Gareth, "Chekhov's Undercurrent of Time," Modern

This continuance of life in the falling actions of his four major plays suggests the circular shape of a typical Chekhov play. In each of these four plays, a pattern of life has been established by a certain group of characters only to be strained and finally disrupted by the arrival of another group. After a series of conflicts and complications, the strain reaches a breaking point, a climax, after which the life of the social world Chekhov has created is resumed. This pattern in a Chekhov play usually takes tangible form in the journey motif: a group of characters visits or is already visiting another group in Act I and departs in Act IV. The effect of the visiting, disrupting group on the social world of the play is strong, but that world is only slightly altered upon the departure of the visiting group. The shape of Chekhov's plots, then, reflects a pattern of balance-disruption-struggle-adjustment-balance. Along with the other elements of Chekhov's dramaturgy already discussed here, this kind of plot emphasizes the static effect of his plays. After all the agony, struggle, and conflict, the characters and the world Chekhov creates have changed very little, a fact that makes it all seem for naught.

Language Review, 64 (1969), 111-121; and Daniel Charles Gerould, "The Cherry Orchard as a Comedy," Journal of General Education, 11 (April, 1958), 109-122.

Perhaps the clearest example of this circular shape and its static effect is the plot of Uncle Vanya. In its antecedent action, the equable world of the Serebryakov estate has already been disturbed by the Serebryakovs' settling there. This disruption of the estate's routine is suggested often by the servant, Marina. The consequences of the disturbance come together and climax in Act III not only in Vanya's attempt to kill Serebryakov but also in the disappointment of Sonya and the clarification of Yelena's attraction to Astrov. The ripples continue into Act IV but die out gradually as first the Professor and Yelena then Astrov leave. The final theatrical image of the play, its lyrical but static ending, reflects the restoration of the routine of running the estate: Sonya singing the platitudes of resignation and hope to the accompaniment of Telyegin playing a guitar, Marya Vassilyevna scratching notes into a pamphlet, and Marina clicking knitting needles. This surely is what life was like on the estate before the Professor came to reveal his feet of clay and brought his young wife to tantalize and disturb Vanya and Astrov.

But the other plays also have such circular plots. In The Sea Gull, the social world of Arkadina and Trigorin, of old Sorin and Dorn will continue. The ripples of Treplyov's suicide will subside. The Prozorov sisters will continue to believe in the future as the solution to their disappointing lives. And in The Cherry Orchard, Madame Ranevsky will

return to her Paris lover to resume the relationship which has been the partial cause of her anguish during the play.[11]

Chekhovian dramaturgy, then, can be identified by the kinds of people portrayed and the methods used for structuring action. His sympathetic characters, for example, are egocentric and weak-willed, while his unsympathetic ones do not plot and execute the suffering in the plays. These latter characters are not antagonists at all but are often merely dramatic catalysts for conflicts. Further, Chekhov develops the actions of his four major plays so that there seems to be no action—that is, no direction nor movement in their plots. He accomplishes this stasis by use of "ensemble" scenes and by incoherent and repetitious dialogue which disguises the establishment, development, and climax of the plots. In addition, the resolutions of his four major plays seem not to resolve anything: although the immediate dilemmas of the plays may be solved, the underlying character weaknesses which caused them continue. Thus the shape of a Chekhov play is circular: it appears to move on a pattern of balance-disruption-struggle-adjustment-balance. An order evident at the beginning of the play has been re-established at its end.

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[11]The theory of the circularity of action as the basic shape of a Chekhov plot is found in Styan, Valency, and Skaftymov, as well as in the discussion of the arrival/departure motif in States, Pitcher, and Eric Bentley, "Chekhov as Playwright," Kenyon Review, 11 (Spring, 1949), 226-250.

As with the innovations of Ibsen and Strindberg, these techniques of Chekhov were absorbed into the collective artistic consciousness of Western playwrights coming after him. And, although many dramatists of the twentieth century continued to write plays based on heroes and antagonists and on clear, coherent plot development, other writers consciously or unconsciously utilized many Chekhovian techniques to express their vision of the world. Such indebtedness is evident even in contemporary drama of Britain and America, especially in the plays of Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter, and Ed Bullins.

CHAPTER III

THE PLAYS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Tennessee Williams has expressed his admiration for Chekhov's dramatic talents by claiming that his favorite play, The Sea Gull, is "the greatest of all modern plays, and probably the first really modern poetic play as well as the greatest."[1] And his indebtedness to Chekhov's dramaturgy has been noted by most of Williams' commentators. Predictably, their insights concentrate on Williams' characterization and on his portrayal of action. Francis Donahue believes that, in Chekhov, Williams "met a cross section of the human comedy; in the main [Chekhov's] characters were unhappy, defeatist, weak of will, and often incapable of action. . . ."[2] Donahue further contends that "Williams learned [from Chekhov] the importance . . . of developing a mood or an atmosphere characterized by the ebb and flow of feeling."[3] Benjamin Nelson agrees: Williams "recognized the fierce activity and

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[1]Tennessee Williams, quoted in Benjamin Nelson, Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work (New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc., 1961), p. 76. Italics are Williams'.

[2]Francis Donahue, The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1964), p. 214.

[3]Ibid.

drama, which lay under the deceptively calm surface of Chekhov's plays. . . ."[4]

These correspondences are most apparent in the characters in Williams' plays. His sympathetic characters, like Chekhov's, suffer as a result of self-delusion about the major dilemmas of their lives. Their actions, if they act at all, are either ineffectual or feeble. No sympathetic character in Williams undergoes a significant change as a result of his suffering; he often struggles but usually adjusts to the new circumstances of his life. These characters in Williams are diverse and include Laura and Amanda in The Glass Menagerie; Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire; Brick, Maggie, and Big Daddy in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof; Reverend Shannon and Hannah Jelkes of The Night of the Iguana; Mrs. Goforth of The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore; Alma Winemiller of The Eccentricities of a Nightingale; and Clare of Out Cry.

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[4]Nelson, p. 25. See also, Alvin B. Kernan, "Truth and Dramatic Mode in the Modern Theatre: Chekhov, Pirandello, and Williams," Modern Drama, 1 (1958), 101-114; Mike Steen, A Look at Tennessee Williams (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., Publishers, 1969); and Tennessee Williams, Memoirs (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975). For other influences on Williams, see Seymour L. Flaxman, "The Debt of Williams and Miller to Ibsen and Strindberg," Comparative Literature Studies, Special Advance Number, 1 (1963), 51-60; Benjamin Nelson, "Avant-Garde Dramatists from Ibsen to Ionesco," The Psychoanalytic Review, 55 (1968), 505-512; and Samuel L. Macey, "Nonheroic Tragedy: A Pedigree for American Tragic Drama," Comparative Literature Studies, 6 (1969), 1-19.

Even Williams' unsympathetic characters reflect those qualities of Chekhov's which modify the conventional role of an antagonist. For example, although some are more repugnant than others, none, as with Chekhov, plots and executes the disruptions he causes in the plays. The unsympathetic characters include Stanley Kowalski in Streetcar, Gutman in Camino Real, Gooper and Mae in Cat, and Miss Fellowes in The Night of the Iguana. These are the darker of Williams' unsympathetic characters, but, as subsequent examination of them will show, they are not traditional antagonists. Other unsympathetic characters are Tom in The Glass Menagerie, Flanders in Milk Train, and Felice in Out Cry, each of whom more nearly approaches the role of dramatic catalyst than of antagonist. In their own dilemmas, they are often as sympathetic as the people with whom the plays are primarily concerned. But in their role as articulators of dramatic complications and tension, their function more closely resembles that of certain unsympathetic characters in Chekhov.[5]

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[5]Williams' characterization is discussed extensively by Nelson in his book-length study and by Donahue, as well as by Signi Lenea Falk, Tennessee Williams (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961); and Gerald Weales, Tennessee Williams (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965). Shorter studies include Durant da Ponte, "Williams' Feminine Characters," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of a Streetcar Named Desire: A Collection of Critical Essays, Jordan Y. Miller, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 53-56; C. N. Stavrou, "The Neurotic Heroine in Tennessee Williams," Literature and Psychology, 5 (1955),

Williams' portrayal of action also corresponds to Chekhov's techniques. The dominant characteristic of Williams' plot building, as with Chekhov, is the quality of creating vivid, affecting scenes, the links between which provide the plot line. These scenes, however, are not so much intended as links in a narrative, as they are used to modify, soften, and enrich an impression. Williams relies on the technique of obscuring the development and climax of the plot line and of partially resolving the major dilemmas of the plays to create the Chekhovian effect of stasis. Whereas Chekhov disguises the developments and crises of his plots beneath the urbane conversation of the inhabitants of his highly social world, Williams allows the violence of his characters' language to serve the same purpose. Further, while the conflicts and tensions of his scenes are often violently shown, the function of the scenes in an ongoing plotline, that is, their significance as elements in the narrative line, is—as with Chekhov—not immediately recognizable. Finally, the overall shape of a Williams play recalls Chekhov's technique and meaning. Several plays suggest a continuance of a problem within a character; despite

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26-34; and Philip Weissman, "A Trio of Tennessee Williams' Heroines: The Psychology of Prostitution," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of a Streetcar Named Desire: A Collection of Critical Essays, ibid., 57-64.

the conflicts and crises of life, man adjusts and continues. He is not destroyed by his predicaments.[6]

Like Madame Ranevsky, Sonya, and other Chekhovian characters, Williams' sympathetic characters suffer mainly through their self-delusion about the nature of their dilemmas. Amanda Wingfield exemplifies this quality perhaps better than any other of his characters. Her primary concern is with the struggle against the despair and degradation of encroaching poverty. The real dilemma of the family, however, is its imminent collapse because of Amanda's inability to relate to her children on a realistic level. In her devotion to the past and her attempt to impose on the present the dead values of that past, Amanda has so warped her children that Laura is slipping into schizophrenia and Tom can escape only into a world of movies, D. H. Lawrence, alcohol, and writing. Amanda's anxiety over the financial difficulties of the family simply intensifies these effects on her children and pushes the family toward that event which will cause her the most suffering. Unwilling to admit the seriousness of

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[6]Although most commentators on Williams' plays concentrate on the unusual characters whom he creates, others have also noted the distinctive form and shape of action. These include Nelson and Donahue and, especially, Esther Merle Jackson in two studies: "The Problem of Form in the Drama of Tennessee Williams," College Language Association Journal, 4 (1960), 8-21, and The Broken World of Tennessee Williams (Madison: the University of Wisconsin Press, 1966). Another examination of his dramatic form occurs in John Milstead, "The Structure of Modern Tragedy," Western Humanities Review, 12 (1958), 365-369.

Laura's mental imbalance, Amanda stages an elaborate dinner for Laura's Gentleman Caller, which is a thinly disguised effort to solve that facet of the economic problem. The party, however, functions finally as a catalyst for the family's demise.

Another example of this kind of suffering consequent upon self-delusion occurs in Blanche DuBois. Here is another Williams character caught in a vice of economic difficulty. But while Blanche clearly must find some financial solution, her actual dilemma is her propensity, like Amanda but more like Laura, to retreat into an elaborate but fragile dream world. As with Laura, Blanche must depend on marriage to solve the problem of her future. So incapable is she, however, of facing the truth of her dark past and the sordid world around her that she destroys any chance of security. Ironically, her superficial problem is solved but the real one persists: while institutionalization will provide her with the necessary care, her suffering will continue, since her need to exist in an isolated, unreal world of the mind must clash with the constant, insistent urgings of the much less pleasant world outside.

This self-delusion remains virtually unaffected by the events of the plays and controls, to varying degrees, the majority of Williams' sympathetic characters. Benjamin Nelson correctly points out that Stella in Streetcar is

consistently associated with sleep,[7] the reason being that she must ignore not only the precarious mental state of her sister but also the crude, animalistic basis of her marriage to Stanley. The result, however, is much mental as well as physical suffering. Another example is Mrs. Goforth in The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore. Although she clearly realizes that she is dying, she attempts to deceive herself about the nature of her illness. But while the attempt is consistent with her aggressive and pugnacious personality, it only increases her anxiety and suffering. Furthermore, her blindness to the blatant manner in which Rudy is robbing her and to the devotion of Blackie accentuates her internal blindness, her unwillingness to recognize her real dilemma.

Like Chekhov's, many of these characters seem either incapable of action in an effort to solve their predicaments, or the actions they do take are often feeble or misdirected. Again, Laura is the best example of a character who lacks the capacity to act at all. The direction of her entire personality is away from any situation which requires action, for she seems incapable of realizing that she has a dilemma. In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, although Brick Pollit recognizes his immediate problem, he is unwilling to take any action toward solving it. Actually, however, he is incapable of action, since such action would require a recognition and

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[7]Nelson, p. 147.

acknowledgment of the truth Big Daddy momentarily forces on him. In their incapacity to act in the face of serious and potentially tragic dilemmas, these characters resemble Lyubov Ranevsky and Sonya Serebryakov.

But Williams' sympathetic characters are not all paralyzed by their predicaments; some can act. The form of their action, however, dictates that their effort will be finally defeated. To combat poverty, Amanda Wingfield employs her son as the primary breadwinner, ropes in "subscribers to one of those magazines for matrons called The Homemaker's Companion,"[8] and enrolls Laura in Rubicam's Business College. Given her background, these may be understandable steps for Amanda to take; but because she has ignored several realities of her world, they are doomed to failure. She fails, first of all, to recognize Tom's need for a life of his own and the importance to him of his writing. She mistakenly believes that the charm of her personality and her association with the D.A.R. will attract subscribers to her magazine. And she fails to comprehend the seriousness of Laura's problem and the consequent uselesness of forcing her into the world. As a result of all these shortcomings, her actions fail disastrously.

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[8]Williams, The Glass Menagerie, in The Theatre of Tennessee Williams, Volume I (New York: New Directions Books, 1971), p. 159.

Another character who exemplifies this ineffectuality of action is the Reverend Shannon of The Night of the Iguana. The play suggests that whenever the external world threatens to upset the precarious balance of his internal world, he retreats to Maxine's tropical hotel to have his breakdowns. But in the play, it is no longer a retreat; the world, represented by Miss Fellowes and Jake Latta, pursues him. As a result, Shannon talks a great deal to delay the inevitable surrender of the bus key, but he finally gives in. His more pressing fight is with death and decay and their implications about the nature of God. But he abandons this fight, too, resigning himself to life with Maxine. These two characters, then, Amanda and Shannon, represent the weakness of most Williams characters to act effectively in response to the primary dilemmas of the plays. A notable exception to the pattern occurs with the tenacious Maggie in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. This type of strong, single-minded, capable, undeluded character, however, does not recur again except in the much less sympathetic Chicken of Kingdom of Earth. Other examples of characters whose capacity for action is either nonexistent or weak are Myra Torrance in Battle of Angels (later Lady in Orpheus Descending), Stella and Mitch in Streetcar, and Jacques Casanova and Marguerite Gautier in Camino Real.

Further, the form of action taken by many of Williams' sympathetic characters is not directed towards solving the

major problems which confront them. This misdirected action usually manifests itself in the creation of an interior, less threatening world to replace the exterior, more intimidating, real world of the dilemma. The predicament of Blanche DuBois is a clear example. For sometime before the beginning of the play, she has lived in a self-fabricated world of dead and forgotten values and attitudes. During the play's action, she increasingly closes herself into that world in an effort to reject that part of herself she feels is allied to the real world around her. She perceives this world in terms of its horror, suffering, and decay, of its death and brutal, animalistic drive for sexual gratification. Although the world of the play shows nothing to contradict such a view, Blanche's response of withdrawal does not affect in any tangible way that world or the overriding dilemma of her life. Her action in this case is, in fact, a direct result of that self-delusion practiced by so many characters in Williams and Chekhov.

In addition to being one who cannot act in response to her problem, Laura Wingfield also exemplifies this form of misdirected action by way of creating a more pleasant but less real world of her own. In the same sense, Mrs. Goforth's name in Milk Train becomes ironic because she is doing anything but going forth to meet decisively the major predicament of her life, her imminent death. Her walled and defended citadel symbolizes the interior, ordered world into which she

has drawn herself in a misdirected effort to retard or stop the encroaching end. Other sympathetic characters of Williams who reflect, to varying degrees, this form of misdirected action include Amanda Wingfield, Stella Kowalski, Alma Winemiller, and Clare, all of whom resemble, in that respect, Sonya, the three Prozorov sisters, and Madame Renevsky in Chekhov. This process of creating an interior world in response to the threats of the exterior world does not solve the primary dilemmas of such characters. Indeed, the process may even aid the problems. It makes no difference that the exterior, physical world of The Glass Menagerie, Streetcar, Camino Real, Cat, Night of the Iguana, Milk Train, or Out Cry is often brutal, crassly materialistic, animalistic, cold, or tinged with death and decay. The sympathetic characters deal with their predicaments in those worlds as the weak, egocentric people they are. They are usually the only people with whom an audience can sympathize, and certainly their predicaments are normally pitiable and harsh; but in their responses to the dilemmas, they reflect that modification of the traditional protagonistic role so evident in Chekhovian sympathetic characters.

The third affinity of Williams' characters with those of Chekhov also evinces this modification of traditional character function. Many of the sympathetic characters of Williams remain virtually unchanged by the events of the plays. As in Chekhov, they more often adjust to the new

circumstances of their lives than strive heroically and tragically against them. Again, Amanda Wingfield displays this quality. Despite her suffering and the radical change Tom's departure must bring on the family, the final theatrical image of the play suggests that she will adjust to her new problem and survive it as she has survived the desertion of her husband. She will continue to live in the dead past; she will continue to fabricate illusions based on that past. Just as she refuses to face her responsibility in the catastrophe of the play's climax, so she will not be destroyed by that event or, implicitly, by any of its adverse results.

More clearly than Amanda, however, Reverend Shannon in Night of the Iguana reflects this adjustment to circumstances which allows continuance of life. When the tension between his beliefs about God and his observations of the sordid world he sees in and around him grows too acute, he retreats to his favorite refuge—Maxine's tropical resort. This time, however, the ugly, brutal, accusing world follows him, and he is almost driven insane by the pursuit and its clear reminder of his own alliance with the world he hates. But the saving element is Hannah Jelkes' simple acceptance of depravity and distortion as part of the scheme of things, a philosophy that Shannon learns from her. And his acceptance of Maxine's proposition is a further acceptance of decay and death as part of God's nature. He adjusts, in other words, to what he has been running away from most of his life. The

argument about Shannon's adjustments, however, is not meant to imply that he changes from the essentially egocentric, pleasure-seeking character he has always been. His recognition merely relieves that tension and guilt which has always plagued his conscience.

So far as his sympathetic characters are concerned, then, Williams follows Chekhov's lead in modifying the conventional pattern of a protagonist. Similarly, his unsympathetic characters reflect a mixture of attributes which prevents them from becoming conventional antagonists. These characters, however, can be divided into two groups. Because the worlds Williams creates in his plays are much harsher, dirtier, and more brutal than Chekhov's, some of his unsympathetic characters are darker in comparison. Into the one group fall Stanley Kowalski, Miss Fellowes, Gooper and Mae, and Gutman. Less insidious, but still clearly possessing an unsympathetic function, are Tom Wingfield, Christopher Flanders, and Felice.

As one of the most commented upon of Williams' antagonistic characters, Stanley Kowalski appears to deviate from any pattern in Chekhov. He is ignorant, brutal, insensitive, loud, and crude. His hate for Blanche seems obvious, and his attack of her in scene 10 triggers her emotional collapse and defeat. But as villainous as Stanley appears, his actions stem from motives which qualify this image. With her refinement and taste, Blanche has intruded into a world

controlled and dominated by Stanley. As a result, Stella begins to recognize his crudity, and Mitch seems to find the woman who might take his mother's place. Thus, although the play is clearly concerned with Blanche and her dilemma, Stanley is not simply the villain of her tragedy. The qualities of his character, as mixed as those of Blanche, force an ambivalent response to him.

Other characters similar to Stanley in their apparently antagonistic roles, while yet evincing qualities which modify this function, include Miss Fellowes, Gooper and Mae, and Gutman. Closest to Stanley in her insidious nature, Miss Fellowes nevertheless does not precipitate the dilemma which faces Reverend Shannon. Like Stanley, she sees Shannon as a threat to her control over her group of hens; consequently, she chases him from their midst. Once she has safely wrested control from him, she leaves him alone. His progress to a crisis and resolution of his problem has little to do with her. In Gooper and Mae Pollit in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Williams creates mere caricatures whose shrill jealousies function almost as humorous relief from the agonizing predicament of Brick and Maggie. Gutman of Camino Real comes closest to the pattern Chekhov creates in Lopahin and which Williams utilizes in the second major category of unsympathetic characters. Far from causing the dilemmas in the useless lives of the egocentric people of the play, Gutman stands aloof and comments sardonically on their frailties

and illusions. His link with this more insidious group lies in his explicit control over the "streetcleaners."

In other plays, the characters who function in the unsympathetic roles often seem no less sympathetic than the sympathetic characters themselves. The best example is Tom Wingfield in The Glass Menagerie. The disruption Tom causes in the play as a result of conflicts between himself and Amanda are not willed by Tom. The points of tension in the play are caused by a clash between Amanda's effort to insure the economic survival of the family and Tom's attempt to wrest some worth and significance out of his thus far boring and wasted life. Tom even recognizes and regrets the effect his frequent clashes with Amanda have on Laura, although the responsibility for these clashes lies as heavily on Amanda as on Tom. But unlike her, he is genuinely sorry for those instances in which he inadvertantly hurts Laura in his efforts to reject his mother's smothering interference in his life. The pain and suffering caused by Tom's efforts to free himself are unintended and regretted. To survive intellectually and emotionally, however, he must fight Amanda.

There are numerous other examples of this type of unsympathetic character in Williams' plays, one being Christopher Flanders of Milk Train. His function in the play is to force in Mrs. Goforth a perception of the reality of her life and a reconciliation to her death. No other character in the play, not even Blackie, could do this for her. Her

recognition of him as an Angel of Death creates a tremendous conflict within her that is caused more by her impending death than by anything Chris does. Felice in Out Cry also brings about a perception on the part of Clare about the need to face the harsh realities of life and to continue in it regardless. He neither wills nor desires the suffering he causes; it is an unavoidable consequence of her desire to retreat from the world and his effort to save her. This unsympathetic character, who is the unwilling catalyst for conflicts and consequently the vehicle of dramatic complications, was seen in Chapter II in Boris Trigorin, Yelena Serabryakov, Colonel Vershinin, and especially Yermolay Lopahin.[9]

In addition to the kinds of people Williams portrays, his second affinity with Chekhovian dramaturgy concerns the nature of his portrayal of action. Both Chekhov's and Williams' plays are more concerned with creating a mood through the juxtaposition of emotionally colored scenes than with the more conventional goal of involving an audience in a clear and tightly motivated plot line and creating a catharsis at its crisis point. Williams is more concerned with allowing a series of vivid but apparently loosely linked

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[9]This Chekhovian character pattern recurs also in Alvaro in The Rose Tatoo, Val Xavier in Orpheus Descending, The Man in Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen, and Tom in This Property is Condemned.

scenes to create a cumulative impression about a situation or group of characters. It is very difficult adequately to illustrate this aim without examining every play. But at least one other critic has noted this lack of action. Esther Merle Jackson claims that, for Williams, "the play is an ordered progression of concrete images, images which together give sensible shape to the lyric moment."[10] Speaking specifically about The Glass Menagerie, she has stated that in this play, "there is little if any action in the Aristotelian sense; that is, there is in this vision no strict pattern of causal development, from beginning to end."[11] That she calls the play a "vision" suggests her recognition of its impression of immobility. Arguing that Williams is more adapt at writing impressive scenes that in constructing tight plot lines and that he is more concerned with giving "sensible shape to the lyric moment" is a parallel to what has been said of Chekhov's structure in Chapter II.

Although tension and conflict are more evident in Williams than in Chekhov, the American playwright employs many of the same techniques to create the impression of immobility or, at best, lethargy in many of his plots. Williams allows the movement of the plot line to be obscured by the seemingly disconnected scenes of tension and conflict.

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[10]Jackson, The Broken World of Tennessee Williams, p. 39.

[11]Ibid., p. 42. My italics.

This method also disguises the introduction of complications. Further, the crises in these plays are often reached and portrayed in a manner which conceals their significance as such. And, as in Chekhov, the resolutions of these plots are frequently only partial resolutions. To retard the movement of the plotline, Williams often interrupts the flow of action with such nonnaturalistic devices as screens, choruses, and extra-plot characters, devices not found in Chekhov but the effect of which aids the stasis created by each playwright's peculiar techniques of portraying action. The shape of many of Williams' plays contributes to this static effect and gives final evidence of their affinity with the Chekhovian form.

The opening act of The Night of the Iguana illustrates Williams' technique of obscuring the establishment of a clear plot line and its complicating elements. The rhythm of this act is as fluctuating and frantic as the Reverend Shannon himself around whom the action swirls. The attraction between Maxine and Shannon, the antagonism between Shannon and Miss Fellowes, and the curious intrusion of Hannah Jelkes and her father seem unrelated. The periodic entry of the trooping, singing, fat German family only accentuates this apparent chaos in the act and reinforces its sense of indirection and purposelessness. The subsequent acts of the play clarify the primary line of action and the function of Maxine and Hannah in relation to that line. Thus,

the nature of the primary plot and the function of the numerous frantic and obviously unhappy people are unclear in Act I, and the impression of the early action is that of immobility. The play finally gains some movement through Shannon's gradual loss of control over events. The early action of this play, then, is an excellent example of Williams' concern with creating an impression while partially disguising the complicating elements in a central plot line.

Perhaps a better example of this technique occurs in the early scenes of Camino Real, which are dominated by an incoherence in the dialogue and an indirection of movement. Various plot motifs are picked up, developed only slightly, then dropped, resulting in almost total immobility. The audience is witness to a world of "characters," people whose lives have reached their lowest point and whose existence is as purposeless as are their attempts at conversation. The open admission of Gutman further alienates the audience from the action, since his attitude is one of frank unconcern over the despair and degradation he supervises. Williams employs this extreme form of establishing and developing his plots only one other time, in Out Cry.

Even in his more conventional plays, Williams still conceals the development of a clear plot line in favor of an early series of vivid scenes which combine to create a unified impression of character. The vague yet obvious tension between the three Wingfields is established in the first

three scenes, which otherwise have no logical (in terms of plot) connection. In Streetcar, the initial development of the antagonism between Blanche and Stanley is obscured by the series of scenes which establish the frantic, precarious mental existence of Blanche and the squalor and brutality in the Kowalski household. In Milk Train, the opening scenes are dominated by the screaming frenzies of Mrs. Goforth. The elements of the plot—her disease, her robbery by her watchman, and the arrival of Christopher—are inserted almost tangentially to a depiction of her temperament. Other plays which reflect to varying degrees this technique are Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Orpheus Descending.

Partly because Williams is more concerned in the early scenes of many of his plays with establishing an impression derived from a series of vivid scenes than with building a clearly discernible and tightly motivated plot line, the crises—as with Chekhov—appear subdued and understated. So strong is this impression in some plays that the significance of an action or scene may pass almost unnoticed. Again, perhaps the best and certainly the most extreme example of the technique occurs in Camino Real. The experience and moral progression of Kilroy during his stay on the Camino Real is the primary concern of the play. But during performance, the play shifts its focus chaotically from Kilroy to Cassanova and Marguerite to Lord Byron and to others. Thus, when in Block Sixteen Kilroy snatches his golden heart

("as big as the head of a baby") from the Student, this action's significance as the climax of the play is not immediately clear. It does not seem the inexorable outcome of a series of progressive actions, yet it is. A close study of the play reveals the care in its construction and the tightness and coherence of its plot. But such examination is almost impossible in the theatre, and the scene's effect on subsequent events of the play is not immediately apparent. In retrospect, however, it becomes clear that it dictates the play's subsequent action, specifically Kilroy's joining Don Quixote's quest and the return of water to the fountain.

Such plays as Camino Real and Out Cry, whose complications are equally obscured and whose climax is just as subdued, are not typical of the Williams canon. Indeed, no play typifies Williams' dramaturgy. But among his other plays, the kiss in Scene Seven of The Glass Menagerie, although an obvious culmination of the events of Scenes Six and Seven, is not immediately recognized as the climax of the play. Its relation to and effect upon the remaining two members of the play are clear only after Tom's final departure from the house and the closing image of Laura with her candles. The climax of The Night of the Iguana, however, is even more difficult to perceive and can be understood only in relation to the title and the parallel between Shannon and the tethered iguana. This perception, however, can occur only at the end of the play when Shannon, the iguana, and

finally Nonno have been released from their torment. The progress of the play is toward Shannon's total loss of control over events, culminating in his loss of the bus key. His subsequent struggle to free himself of his cross and his imprisonment in the hammock begin his gradual process of reconciliation to himself and his dilemma. It is Hannah Jelkes who releases him from the physical cross hanging around his neck and the figurative one bearing down his soul. Thus her act of removing the cross from his neck early in Act III is the climax of the play. It symbolizes and determines the struggle and adjustment which Shannon undergoes in the remainder of the play. Other Williams plays in which the climax is equally difficult to discern include Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Milk Train among the full length plays. And among the short plays, this technique recurs in This Property is Condemned and Talk to Me Like the Rain in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton.

The resolutions of the conflicts in many Williams plays further echoes a recurrence of Chekhovian dramaturgy. In many instances the immediate conflict with which a play is concerned may be solved at its end, but the underlying problem which caused that conflict continues. Such is the case in The Glass Menagerie, in which Tom's departure from his home and family has resolved his immediate conflict with Amanda and freed him to pursue his own life, although his sense of responsibility to Laura continues. He states in

his ending lines, "I am more faithful [to Laura] than I intended to be!"[12] In Streetcar, despite the fact of Blanche's commitment, the central problem continues: she is unable to face reality squarely and accept the changes time brings. Again, it makes no difference that her reality, the one she has retreated into in Act III, is less brutal and more humane than Stanley's; the play condemns both worlds and the processes which create them.

In other plays by Williams, the resolution of the problem behind the major conflict is often only partially resolved. In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, for example, both versions of Act III end without clarifying the outcome of the struggle between Maggie, on the one hand, and Gooper and Mae, on the other; or between Maggie and Brick. They both certainly suggest very strongly an outcome but neither fully clarifies it. Leaving the plot thus apparently unresolved finalizes the impact of an incomplete action.[13] Williams' resolutions in all these plays leave unanswered, or partially answered, questions which the plots raise, and in many

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[12]Williams, The Glass Menagerie, p. 237.

[13]Other full-length plays which evince this partial sense of plot resolution are Suddenly Last Summer, Sweet Bird of Youth, The Night of the Iguana, Milk Train, and Out Cry. Among the short plays, In a Bar in a Tokyo Hotel and The Mutilated from Dragon Country and Talk to Me Like the Rain in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton are examples.

instances they do not resolve the central problems of the plays which precipitated the conflicts.

Williams also breaks the flow of whatever action is present by the use of apparently unrelated sounds and interjections and by such nonnaturalistic devices as screens and choruses. In some plays, he remains within the naturalistic mode, such interruptions being often bizarre but not violating the naturalistic portrayal of the action. An example of this device occurs in Summer and Smoke with the interruptions of Alma's deranged mother. In The Night of the Iguana, the bizarre antics of the frolicking fat German family intrude. In this same play, Hannah Jelkes' father often interrupts the progress of the action by shouting lines of his new poem as he composes them. As in Chekhov, especially in The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard, such breaks clearly serve a thematic purpose as commentary on the ongoing action. But in both Chekhov and Williams, their theatrical purpose is to retard further the movement of the plot.[14]

Williams also employs these interruptions outside a naturalistic framework. The most immediate and probably best known example is the use of legends projected on screens in The Glass Menagerie. Although in its original run, this part of the play was dropped, its use in any production would

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[14]Other plays by Williams which employ this technique are Battle of Angels, Streetcar, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Milk Train, and The Eccentricities of a Nightingale.

obviously detract from the movement of the action. Again, these legends often comment ironically on the action, as in Scene Two when Amanda has discovered Laura's "deception" and the screen reads "The Crust of Humility" (to the accompaniment of a "whisper of strings").[15] In other plays, Williams employs this kind of blatant nonnaturalistic device. A chorus and characters bridge the gap between the world of the audience and the world of the plot. The Stage Assistants in Milk Train function in such a fashion. Their comments and the lethargy with which they move about the stage provide direct insight on the frantic, at times nearly hysterical, Mrs. Goforth. Their presence and lines qualify the "vision" Williams has recreated in this play but also retard the movement of its plot. A more obvious use of this technique, however, recurs in The Mutilated, the action of which is periodically interrupted by a chorus, while at its end a sinister character named Jack in Black smiles and remarks wryly on the action. His closing lines certainly provide a perspective on the petty quarreling and illusions of all the characters in the play, but more to the point is the added effect of breaking the naturalistic flow of the plot.

Williams' use of sounds and nonnaturalistic devices to interrupt the flow of action in his plays recalls Chekhov's use of such broken plot movement in the major plays but

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[15]Williams, The Glass Menagerie, p. 155.

especially in The Three Sisters. Although Chekhov almost completely confines his technique within a naturalistic mode of expression, his use of "the sound of the breaking harp-string" in The Cherry Orchard begins to violate naturalistic convention. Williams explores the expressionistic possibilities suggested in the breaking string. And in Camino Real, he employs a great many Chekhovian techniques within an expressionistic mode: broken, incoherent dialogue, a stage crowded with clamoring egocentric characters, a consequent diffusion of dramatic focus, and an impression of immobility in the plot line. Mode, however, whether naturalistic, expressionistic, or some combination thereof, is not the important key to the parallels with Chekhov. Similar effects are achieved within different modes.

Williams' resolutions finalize the circularity of his plots. Furthermore, this shape emphasizes the adjustment of a sympathetic character to a situation brought about by the conflicts of the play. In other words, the character is not destroyed by the disruption and struggle undergone during the play; he or she adjusts and continues living. This pattern throughout Williams reflects the shape of action defined in Chapter I and exemplified in Chapter II as balance-disruption-struggle-adjustment-balance. Indeed, Williams employs the technique in The Night of the Iguana. Shannon's predicament derives in large measure from his inability to

reconcile his desire to believe in the goodness of God with what he sees in the world of death, decay, corruption, and filth. But, as argued earlier, the effect of Hannah Jelkes is to free him from the need to reconcile these apparent opposites. She shows him the way in her story of the Australian salesman who very politely requested an article of her clothing only to use it as inspiration for masturbation. When Shannon asks for the moral of her story, she replies that the moral is Oriental: "Accept whatever situation you cannot improve." When he asks whether she calls that "dirty little episode" a love experience, she emphatically assures him she does. Shannon then asks incredulously, "You mean it didn't disgust you?" Hannah replies, "Nothing human disgusts me unless it's unkind. . . ."[16] Shannon's acceptance of life with Maxine, an option he had steadfastly refused throughout the play, follows almost immediately. Although the play's ending does not restore an order present at its beginning, as in Uncle Vanya or The Three Sisters, it does treat the more important features of adjustment and continuance of life.

The circular shape is more fully represented in other plays. In The Glass Menagerie, the order evident in the opening scene is disrupted by Tom's dissatisfaction and

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[16]Williams, The Night of the Iguana, in The Theatre of Tennessee Williams, Volume IV (New York: New Directions Books, 1972), pp. 362-363.

Amanda's desire for economic survival. But the final scene of the play implies that when Tom departs, Amanda (and Laura) are not destroyed. The new condition will be adjusted to, and life, however meager, will continue. In Streetcar, the order apparent in the opening act, specifically the sexual order represented in the graphic "meat" sequence, implicitly will be renewed after Blanche's departure. Stanley's final appeal to Stella and Steve's closing comment suggest this return. As for Blanche, she has made the only adjustment possible given the progressive deterioration of her hold on reality evident at the first of the play. And in Out Cry, the disruption and struggle brought about by the dissolution of a supporting cast threatens to solidify Clare in her tendency to withdraw from the world. But Felice gently leads her toward an adjustment to the new conditions.[17]

Given the diversity and number of plays by Tennessee Williams, one cannot expect him to employ the same dramaturgical tools in every play. Indeed, from the beginning to the end of his career, and especially in Out Cry, he experimented with a multitude of techniques and approaches. Nevertheless, it is now obvious, especially in many of his more important

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[17]Other full-length plays which reflect such adjustment and restoration of order are The Rose Tattoo and Period of Adjustment. Of the short plays, The Long Goodbye, This Property is Condemned, and Talk to Me Like the Rain in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton and The Mutilated and The Confessional in Dragon Country are examples.

plays and in several short plays of first-rate quality, that Williams has employed to a significant extent dramaturgical elements identified as ingredients in Chekhovian form. His full-length plays which seem most clearly Chekhovian are The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, Camino Real, The Night of the Iguana, The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore, and Out Cry, all of which evince a number of Chekhovian qualities: self-centered, deluded people who cannot act and in the end are not destroyed by their predicaments but adjust to them; an apparent absence of a tightly motivated plot replaced by a series of seemingly superficially linked scenes designed to create a mood; and a consequent immobility or lethargy in the plot which conveys the effect of stasis. Although the world of a Williams play is more violent and more sordid, he is nonetheless as concerned as Chekhov with representing human beings and their predicaments. And the plays of both are equally concerned with presenting the texture of life rather than life as if it were a series of tightly plotted, causally connected events.

CHAPTER IV

THE PLAYS OF HAROLD PINTER

At first glance, there would appear to be few similarities between Chekhov's naturalism and Harold Pinter's absurdism. While Chekhov's characters often act eccentrically, their actions seem nonetheless more realistic than the actions of Pinter's characters, which are often so extreme and irrational that the audience questions their existence in any world it knows. At the same time, neither do the movements of the two writers' plays appear comparable. With careful attention to word nuance and stage action, one can discern the lines of dramatic movement in Chekhov. But in Pinter, such attention only reveals contradictory emotional impulses in the characters and conflicting lines of dramatic action in the plots. Nevertheless, Pinter's dramaturgy follows Chekhov's more closely than that of either Williams or Bullins. What accounts for the apparent dissimilarities is the recognition that Pinter has followed to their extremes Chekhov's naturalistic techniques in terms of characterization and plot building.[1]

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[1]Connections between Chekhov and Pinter have been noted by John Lahr, "Pinter and Chekhov: The Bond of Naturalism," in Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays, Arthur Ganz, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), pp. 60-71; Katharine J. Worth, Revolutions in Modern English

Pinter's characterization modifies further the more conventional functions found in Chekhov. Pinter so blurs the distinction between protagonist and antagonist that even using the terms can distort perception of the nature of his characterization. The egocentricity of his sympathetic characters is revealed in their chief concern for retaining a neat, ordered world, usually represented by a room or house. The order necessary to support the egos of these individuals must be maintained at almost any cost, including the manipulation of other human beings. This self-centeredness creates the main dilemmas and prevents recognition of their reasons. Further, as with the characters of Chekhov and Williams, the reactions of Pinter's characters are either immobilized or feeble enough to be useless.

An early example of a character's desire to retain the security of an ordered world at all costs occurs in The Room, where Rose's opening monologue is dominated by the first person singular pronoun and by constant references to the cold outside and the warmth and comfort of her own apartment. When, later, the pathetic and harmless Riley intrudes to remind her of some obligation to the outside world, she recoils and rejects him. Her physical blindness, which

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Drama (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1973); Martin Esslin, Pinter: A Study of His Plays (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973); and Arnold Hinchcliffe, Harold Pinter (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967).

occurs when Bert attacks Riley, suggests her inner blindness—her egocentricity. In The Birthday Party, Stanley also shows this pattern. He appears to have retreated to Meg's seaside resort to escape from some responsibility in the world. In this shelter, Meg and Petey are tools he manipulates to solidify his security. Meg functions as both mother and mistress, while Petey provides financial support for the household. McCann and Goldberg intrude, however, remind him of some crime he seems to have committed, break him emotionally, and then cart him off. His catatonic state at the end of the play recalls Rose's blindness and implies the inevitable outcome of such attempts at achieving security. In a later play, Old Times, Deeley does not want to change his earlier conception of Kate nor does he want to disrupt the quiet, ordered life they have established. The opening scene suggests the kind of relationship which best suits him: his persistent questions indicate how slight is his acknowledgement of her as a human being. The intrusion of Anna, with her disturbing power over Kate and her knowledge of Kate before Deeley knew her, results in Deeley's displacement from the dominant position in the household.

The egocentricity in such characters prevents them from recognizing not only the truth about their relationships with other people but also the nature of the dilemma created by the intrusion of other people. Edward in A Slight Ache, for example, does not perceive the superficiality of his and

Flora's quaint country life together, nor can he understand that he projects his own fears onto the passive Matchseller. Consequently, his ordered world is destroyed, and he is reduced to a catatonic state. In The Caretaker, Davies' need to manipulate Mick and Aston emanates from his self-centered concern to establish himself firmly in the flat. The result is his final expulsion. The pattern established in these two plays, the pattern in which a sympathetic character allows his egocentricity to blind him to the nature of his dilemma, recurs in Rose and Deeley as well as in James in The Collection and Walter in Night School. This incidence of self-delusion and its effects recalls such Chekhovian characters as Vanya, Sonya, Masha Prozorov, and Madame Ranevsky.

Pinter's sympathetic characters reflect additional Chekhovian qualities in their lack of capacity for action. Perhaps the most obvious element in this category is the seeming paralysis which occurs in the face of a confrontation. When Rose realizes that something in her neatly controlled world has gone awry, she freezes. Although she strives to understand the problem, she is capable only of looking on in paralyzed horror at the prospect of her world being disrupted. Only Bert acts, and the results are disastrous for Rose. Similarly, Edward in A Slight Ache and Len in The Dwarfs appear immobilized in the face of a clear or imagined threat to their worlds. In The Homecoming,

Teddy watches impotently as his family paws over and plans the prostitution of his wife. And Deeley seems helpless in the face of Anna's power over Kate in Old Times.

Even when Pinter's sympathetic characters attempt action, it is usually ineffectual and feeble. In The Dumb Waiter, Gus's questions have apparently probed more deeply than the exterior power desires; but the items he and Ben send up the dumb waiter represent feeble and useless attempts to placate whatever is over them. When Gus realizes that he has overstepped his bounds, that his questions have disrupted the routine, he can only shout impotently into the tube and then sit morosely on the bed. In The Birthday Party, Stanley is reduced to beating furiously, but impotently, on the drum Meg has given him. His later attempts to throttle Meg and rape Lulu, both expressions of his need to react, fail. In an effort to learn the truth about Stella, James in The Collection visits and threatens Bill, but he never learns the truth.

At the same time, other characters fulfill the unsympathetic role. These persons either intend no disruption or conflict, as with Riley in The Room and the Matchseller in A Slight Ache, or their motives for causing such disturbances are not clear. These latter characters, who seem as petty and egocentric as the sympathetic characters, include McCann and Goldberg in The Birthday Party, Max and Ruth in The

Homecoming, Anna in Old Times, and Foster and Briggs in No Man's Land.[2]

The most striking quality of Pinter's unsympathetic characters is the lack of animosity they hold for those other characters whose conflicts they cause. This is most obviously true of Riley and the Matchseller. Riley is an emissary from a world Rose wants to forget; his patience and submission, which contrast with Rose's anxiety, finally make him pitiable. His intrusion, however, disrupts her world in spite of his lack of desire to cause suffering. The Matchseller functions similarly; he never articulates his reason for standing by the road, an action which arouses Edward's deepest fears and Flora's secret desires and which precipitates Flora's victory over Edward. Other Pinter characters who are not so passive, but who still do not desire the conflict and suffering they cause, include Stella and Bill in The Collection and Anna in Old Times. The former two never clearly verify nor firmly deny James' belief that they slept together in Leeds. In fact, they often seem bored by his anguish and yet do nothing to alleviate it. Anna's intrusion into Deeley's ordered world causes less disturbance than does

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[2]For a discussion of what are being called here "unsympathetic" characters, see John Pesta, "Pinter's Usurpers," in Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays, ibid., 123-135.

Deeley's own anxiety not to have that precarious world of illusions shaken.

Far more prevalent among Pinter's unsympathetic characters are those whose motives for disturbance remain obscure; this seeming purposelessness is a primary ingredient in the sense of terror pervading many of Pinter's plays. A lack of clear reasoning prohibits such characters from functioning as conventional antagonists: their disruption appears capricious. McCann and Goldberg are more sinister because we never know why they want Stanley. Why Mick torments Davies is likewise obscure. The first time they meet, Mick forces Davies to the floor by twisting his arm and then standing on him.[3] Later, he tortures Davies by repeatedly asking his name and then accusing him of having slept with his (Mick's) "Mum." In the same act, Mick terrifies Davies by chasing him around the darkened flat with an electrolux only to end by turning on the lights and calmly saying, "I was just doing some spring cleaning."[4] In The Dwarfs, Mark and Pete bring on Len's breakdown by continually suggesting to him that he is losing his hold on himself, on reality. Their motives, however, are never clear.

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[3]Harold Pinter, The Caretaker, in The Caretaker and the Dumb Waiter: Two Plays by Harold Pinter (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), pp. 28-29.

[4]Ibid., p. 46.

The unconventional nature of Pinter's unsympathetic characters suggests another aspect of Pinter's dramaturgy which echoes Chekhov; that is, there is an absence of dramatic tension resulting from the conflict between clearly protagonistic and antagonistic elements. This unusual use of characterization, so prominent in The Cherry Orchard, is reflected in several Pinter plays in which the plot is motivated by a sudden inexplicable tendency of a character—always a sympathetic one—to question the nature of things. This questioning, and not the plotting of an antagonistic character, disrupts the equilibrium established either in the antecedent action or in the exposition. It is this disruption which furnishes the tension for the rising action, climax, and resolution.

In The Dumb Waiter, for example, Gus unaccountably starts to ask Ben questions about their victims, their orders, their accommodations. That such questioning is disruptive of their routine is suggested by Ben's increasing irritation. The dramatic tension of the play, however, derives from the mounting tone of anxiety which informs Gus's questions until he realizes that he is the victim. Edward's anxious curiosity about the Matchseller in A Slight Ache is countered by Flora's attitude, and Len's curiosity, although aggravated by the coldness of his friends, is inexplicable. In The Lover, Richard's disruption of his marriage's routine fantasy leads to a confrontation with Sarah and a final return to that

fantasy—but why he first asks those questions is not clear. This unconventional manner of fueling the plot of a play excludes the conventional antagonist-protagonist technique. Equally contributing to this effect is the fact that the sources of tension are obscured. In fact, dramatic action, itself the result of such tension, seems almost non-existent, as in The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard. Pinter relies more obviously on these devices in his later plays. In Landscape, for example, two people lethargically reminisce in apparent oblivion of each other. There seems to be no conflict and no dramatic movement or action.

Pinter's dramaturgy resembles Chekhov's less in its characterization, however, than in the structuring of individual scenes and in the techniques employed to build plot. The typical Pinter scene is pervaded by disconnected, disjointed, incoherent, pause-dominated dialogue which results in apparent inaction. He frequently opens his early plays with such scenes. In The Room, Rose's rambling monologue punctuated by pauses and solicitations for Bert's welfare, drones on chaotically, providing little exposition about any action to come. In similar fashion, the opening scene of The Birthday Party exemplifies the halting, stumbling dialogue which gives many of Pinter's scenes the effect of lethargy and inaction. The questions and pauses present the scene from making dramatic headway:

Meg. Is that you, Petey?
[Pause.]
Petey, is that you?
[Pause.]
Petey?

Petey. What?

Meg. Is that you?

Petey. Yes, it's me.

Meg. What? (Her face appears at the hatch.)
Are you back?

Petey. Yes.

Meg. I've got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears.) Here's your cornflakes.

(He rises and takes the plate from her, sits at the table, props up the paper and begins to eat. Meg enters by the kitchen door.)

Are they nice?

Petey. Very nice.

Meg. I thought they'd be nice. (She sits at the table.)
You got your paper?

Petey. Yes.[5]

A short time later,

Petey. I've finished my cornflakes.

Meg. Were they nice?

Petey. Very nice.[6]

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[5]Pinter, The Birthday Party, in The Birthday Party and The Room: Two Plays by Harold Pinter (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), p. 10.

[6]Ibid., p. 11.

Such dialogue, with its repetitions and questions, goes nowhere, and there seems to be no dramatic development.

In addition, a tone of superficiality pervades many of Pinter's early scenes. This is evident in the early part of A Slight Ache and Night School. In one, Edward and Flora talk casually about the progress of spring in their garden, and in the other, Wally and his aunts chat harmlessly over tea and cakes. Although this tone masks the tensions between the characters, it nonetheless underscores the insignificance of the information supplied the audience, thus retarding the dramatic developments of the play. In the opening scene of The Lover, the superficiality conflicts with the actual topic of conversation: a man and wife are apparently discussing their lovers with marked casualness.

Such scenes in which the dialogue seems to lead nowhere are not restricted to the beginnings of Pinter's plays nor to his early and middle plays. In the later plays—Landscape, Silence, and Night, especially—, he foregrounds this technique by showing the egocentricity of his characters. All of Landscape is a disconnected meshing of two monologues:

> Beth
> But I was up early. There was still plenty to be done and cleared up. I had put the plates in the sink to soak. They had soaked overnight. They were easy to wash. The dog was up. He followed me. Misty morning. Comes up from the river.

Duff
This fellow knew bugger all about beer. He didn't know I'd been trained as a cellarman. That's why I could speak with authority.

Beth
I opened the door and went out. There was no-one about. The sun was shining. Wet, I mean wetness, all over the ground.

Duff
A cellarman is the man responsible. He's the earliest up in the morning. Give the drayman a hand with the barrels. Down the slide through the cellarflaps. Lower them by rope to the racks. Rock them on the belly, put a rim up them, use balance and leverage, hike them up onto the racks.

Beth
Still misty, but thinner, thinning.[7]

Pinter utilizes this radical form of incoherence again in Silence, although here he periodically couples two of the three characters into a dialogue. Ironically for the play and appropriately for the present point, these characters communicate no better when speaking to each other than when they are speaking to no one. In Night, a Man and Woman talk confusingly about how they first met or if they were the two on the bridge that night. Their dialogue, composed of frequent questions and reversals, solves nothing and apparently goes nowhere. At the play's end, the truth of what happened is no clearer than in the beginning. All of these plays are dominated by people talking by or away from others, by miscommunication and half-communication. The

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[7]Pinter, Landscape, in Landscape and Silence (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1970), p. 25.

result is that these plays, more than any others by Pinter, resemble Chekhov's in the effect of inaction, of stasis.[8]

Although the technique Pinter employs to develop a single opening scene plays this major role in creating the effect of stasis, the manner in which he develops entire plots also resembles Chekhov's technique. The disconnectedness or incoherence found in the very early action of such plays as The Room and The Birthday Party can also be found in The Dumb Waiter, A Slight Ache, A Night Out, The Caretaker, and The Homecoming. Further, Pinter seems to provide little by way of the usual exposition. In fact, in this early part of their plays, both Chekhov and Pinter mask the tensions which will eventually motivate the plot. Often Pinter seems to have dropped the audience in the middle of things and to allow it to piece together the antecedent action as best it can from the often incoherent, seemingly purposeless dialogue like that examined from Landscape. Although the degree to

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[8]Discussions of Pinter's dialogue abound. Some of the better ones occur in Esslin and Hinchcliffe, as well as in Lois G. Gordon, Strategems to Uncover Nakedness: The Dramas of Harold Pinter. Missouri Literary Frontiers Series Number 6 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1970); James R. Hollis, Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970); John Russell Taylor, Harold Pinter (Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co., 1969); Ruby Cohn, "The World of Harold Pinter," in Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays, ibid., 78-92; Kent G. Gallagher, "Harold Pinter's Dramaturgy," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 52 (1966), 242-248; and Robert P. Murphy, "Non-Verbal Communication and the Overlooked Action in Pinter's The Caretaker," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (1972), 41-47.

which Pinter employs this technique varies from play to play, an example would be the opening scene of A Slight Ache in which the breakfast room conversation of Edward and Flora provides almost no antecedent action. The tension between them, particularly the clues to Edward's egocentricity and Flora's disappointment in him, are discernible only on close attention. The apparently silly wasp incident takes on its sinister aspects only after some close consideration of Edward's lines. Then, without apparent preparation, the Matchseller is introduced into the action. The irrationality of Edward's antagonism toward the old man only intensifies the audience's feeling of having been placed in the middle of things. This technique recurs to varying degrees in Pinter. In The Dumb Waiter, for example, the tension, as shown in Ben's impatience, is obvious, but in Night School, the tea table chat masks the aunt's concern over having let Wally's room. Moreover, the name of a significant character in the play, Mr. Solto, is introduced so casually as to belie his ultimate importance. Since in The Dwarfs, Pete's subtle prods into Len's fragile ego go almost unnoticed, important elements of Len's final breakdown are de-emphasized at the first of the play. In Landscape, the audience can discern no connection between the speeches of Beth and Duff. What is apparent is a vague tension between the two which the information provided in their speeches does not seem to clarify.

Movement in the rising action of many of Pinter's plays is also often difficult to discern. Although in some plays, notably The Room, the devices of dramatic complications are more obvious, the early sections of most plays are characterized by a pointlessness and circularity in the dialogue, an inobtrusiveness in the introduction of complicating elements and a seeming lack of movement. This kind of dialogue is, of course, more prevalent in some plays than in others. While The Dumb Waiter displays more openly the conflicts between two characters, their speech is pointless and repetitive, as in Ben's frequent exclamations about stories in the paper to which Gus mutters "Go on!" or "Get away."[9] Such vague dialogue also dominates the first two acts of The Caretaker where each of the characters, but especially Davies, seeks to conceal part of himself. In Night School, such pointlessness becomes humorous:

> Annie: Sit down, Milly. Don't stand up.
>
> Milly: I've been sitting down, I've been lying down. I got to stand up now and again.
>
> Walter: You haven't been so well, eh?
>
> Milly: Middling. Only middling.

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[9]Pinter, The Dumb Waiter, in The Caretaker and The Dumb Waiter: Two Plays by Harold Pinter (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), p. 86.

Annie: I'm only middling as well.

Milly: Yes, Annie's only been middling.[10]

In The Homecoming, although the dialogue displays the resentments and conflicts between family members, it does not provide information for plot development because it incoherently changes focus from character to character. In this manner, the play's early action resembles Act I of The Three Sisters.

Another of Pinter's Chekhovian techniques, the unobtrusive manner of introducing complicating elements, is more evident in such plays as The Dumb Waiter, The Caretaker, The Dwarfs, The Lover, and Landscape. In The Lover, for example, the complicating elements are the questions Richard asks which violate a tacit understanding between him and Sarah and threaten to destroy their sexual fantasy. Such questions, which penetrate the superficiality of relationships and whose answers demand individuals to re-examine themselves, also provide the complication not only in The Dumb Waiter where Gus has begun to wonder about the basis of his and Ben's job, but also in The Dwarfs, where Len has begun to examine the nature of his association with Pete and Mark. The probing in each play, then, disturbs the equilibrium which the other characters wish to retain.

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[10]Pinter, Night School, in A Night Out, Night School, Revue Sketches: Early Plays (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), p. 53.

This unconventional method of introducing the dramatic complications—a method found in at least eight of Pinter's plays—conveys the impression that the plot is not moving at all. In The Dumb Waiter, for example, the incoherent and repetitious dialogue covers Gus's questions and their function of revealing the actual plot, which is the movement toward Gus's execution. And in The Dwarfs, the focus is on Len's gradual psychological disintegration, the reason for which is never made clear. Here the major source of tension in production derives from the increasing distance between the apparent sanity of Mark and Pete and the increasing insanity of Len.[11]

Furthermore, the nature of the crises of many of Pinter's plays intensifies this effect, as with Chekhov, whose crises are frequently subdued to the point of being barely discernible. Probably the best example occurs in the subdued climax in The Caretaker. Shortly after Mick has paid off Davies for his "caretaking" duties, Aston enters: "he closes the door, moves into the room and faces Mick. They look at each other. Both are smiling, faintly."[12] This smile solidifies the restoration of order between Aston and Mick and seals

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[11]Other plays in which the plot movement is difficult to discern include The Caretaker, The Collection, Landscape, Silence, Night, and No Man's Land.

[12]Pinter, The Caretaker, p. 75.

Davies' fate of being cast back out into the world he fears. The smile's significance at the climax of the play, a non-verbal cue, passes unnoticed until the play is over. Such an obscure climax also occurs in Night School when Solto returns from looking for the girl in Wally's photo. After a crescendoing list of improbabilities from Solto,

> Walter: Look here, Mr. Solto, if I were you, I'd give up the whole thing.
>
> Solto: You want my opinion? I think the photo's a fake. There's no such club. There's no such girl. They don't exist.
>
> Walter: That's exactly what I think.[13]

There certainly were such a club and such a girl, but Wally realizes she cannot possibly be what he has imagined. He has met Sally, knows she is the girl in the photo and that she is a prostitute. Although his abrupt change in the scene is surprising, it is hardly climactic, since the tone of the dialogue is barely above that of the rest of the play. These subdued crises recur in other Pinter plays including The Homecoming, Landscape, and Old Times. Once again, as with Pinter's characteristic technique of developing the rising action, this method of bringing the development to a crisis augments the impression of stasis in the plot movement. This kind of result is very close to that of the crises of Chekhov's four major plays.

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[13]Pinter, Night School, p. 86.

Especially in Pinter's many one-act plays, resolutions that follow the crises seem almost nonexistent. Nonetheless, parallels exist between his methods of resolution and those of Chekhov. First of all, although the particular conflicts established and brought to crises in the plays may be solved, the dilemmas of the characters in these conflicts often continue unresolved. Such is the case in The Room, in which, despite Bert's eliminating the source of immediate tension, the dilemma persists of Rose's responsibility to some unknown force or agency outside the room. Her blindness, which comes on as Riley is killed, suggests her kinship with him and, more importantly, the beginning—not the resolution—of entirely new conflicts. Stanley's imbecility at the end of The Birthday Party also suggests further conflicts in this play, which carries a step further the theme of responsibility to forces outside a womb-like room. That is to say, the resolution of the immediate conflict between Stanley and Goldberg and McCann has not resolved the predicament of Stanley in terms of his responsibility to a world outside the seaside hotel.

Although The Collection and The Lover also reflect such a continuance of dilemma, the best example is Davies' predicament in The Caretaker. The conflict between Mick and Aston has been resolved to exclude Davies, who must now return to the threatening world represented by "that Scotch git." His desire for security from the outside and for

retreat into his own dream world inside conflicts with the physical need to exist outside; his problem is not resolved by the end of the play.

This element suggests another feature of Pinter's resolutions. Because he is concerned with the nature of truth and how truth is finally unknowable, he often raises questions early, which neither the crises nor the resolutions answer. The Lover is a partial example. Even though Richard and Max are the same physical person to the audience, in Sarah's mind they are different—and she wants it to stay that way. Given the resolution of the play, that is, the return to the fantasy, what is the truth about Sarah's husband and Sarah's lover? The play seems to suggest that a particular truth depends on the perspective, in this case the audience's or Sarah's. But another and better example is The Collection, which never adequately answers the question of just what happened between Bill and Stella. Did they only sit in the lounge talking about sleeping together? Did they ride in the elevator, kiss, then part? Or did they, finally, sleep together? From one point of view, the answers to these questions do not matter. But in determining the final effect of the play, one cannot ignore the sense of question and lack of resolution which dominates the last scene between James and Stella. Pinter continues this sense of the obscurity of truth in Night in which neither the Man nor the Woman can straighten out the facts of their first

meeting. Again, considered from one thematic point of view, it does not matter what happened. The static effect of the play, however, depends on this sense of the incompleteness of truth. The stasis derived from the ambiguity in the play recalls a similar device in Chekhov, for example, in The Cherry Orchard, where the final act fails to resolve certain questions about various members of the family. What will happen to Luybov when her money runs out in Paris? What is the outcome of the relationship between Anya and Trofimov shown developing throughout the play? The ambiguity regarding these and other questions aids the final effect of the play and it is this kind of ambiguity which Pinter employs.

And, as with Chekhov's plays, many of Pinter's resolutions suggest the final circular shape of the plots, a return to a condition established either in the antecedent action or in the early action of the play. This equilibrium was already in the process of being disturbed in the antecedent action or is disturbed in the early action. The disturbance may often be caused by a partially explained or totally unexplained change in one of the characters or by the introduction of some character or characters from outside the group present at the outset of the play. With the resolution of the play, the action returns to conditions mirroring or resembling those at the first of the play. On its surface, A Slight Ache might not seem an example of this circularity, since Edward has changed places with the

Matchseller at the end of the play, and the latter is led off to be cared for and manipulated by Flora. The opening scene of the play, however, establishes a tranquility and equilibrium only partially undermined by the apparent tensions between the two people. At the end of the play, when Flora assumes control of Barnabas after handing Edward the match tray, the clear implication is a return to order and proper function. For Flora, the situation has been improved, since she now has two easily manipulated fixtures in her house.

Perhaps a better example, however, is The Homecoming. In this play the tensions and overt conflicts at the play's opening suggest a disorder which has begun in the antecedent action. By the consistent reference of Max and Sam to Max's wife Jesse, the audience realizes that her death has precipitated the rancor evident early in the play. Upon Ruth's arrival, despite the momentary conflict it causes, the family begins to adjust to her and realizes she is a way of re-establishing the order disrupted in the antecedent action. The final theatrical image of the play—Joey's head in Ruth's lap, Max groveling before her, and Lenny watching all as if he were a stage manager—suggests an equilibrium and order the household has sought. In terms of a clear plot shape of order-disruption-struggle-adjustment-order, The Basement seems the best example. Nor does it matter for the purposes of the theatrical effect of the play that Law and Stott have

changed positions at the end of the play, for the final theatrical image and tone are identical to those which opened it. This circularity of shape in the plot is reflected in such additional plays as The Birthday Party and The Caretaker in which this shape reinforces the impression of inaction and immobility. These qualities suggest the overall effect noted as the primary one of a Chekhov play: stasis.[14]

A summary of the dominant Chekhovian qualities which recur in Pinter should carry the caution that not all of Pinter's plays reflect all those qualities. Nor do they appear to the same extent in each of the plays which utilizes them. Those dramaturgical elements which do recur with regularity and to a significant degree are the portrayal of characters whose chief trait is an egocentricity that blinds them to their dilemmas and whose paralysis and feebleness of action fall far short of solving those dilemmas. These traits are revealed in the incoherent and seemingly trivial dialogue and in the impression of inaction and immobility through the rising action of the play. In the most Chekhovian

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[14]Plot structure and patterns of action of Pinter's plays are discussed thoroughly by Esslin and Hinchcliffe, whose two works remain the most important studies in Pinter scholarship. Others who have perceived such elements as are outlined here are Hollis and Gordon, Gallagher and Cohn, and Simon Trussler, The Plays of Harold Pinter: An Assessment (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1973); and Robert Hayman, Harold Pinter. World Dramatists Series (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973).

of his plays—The Caretaker, The Homecoming, Landscape, and Old Times—Pinter portrays humans as creatures unable and often unwilling to communicate with their fellows. As a result, the dilemmas of people are not resolved but are merely adjusted to, and the conditions of life by-and-large continue despite momentary disruptions. Life is a continuum, haunted and often controlled by the past, in which little is clearly discernible as true and much is to be adjusted to and endured.

CHAPTER V

THE PLAYS OF ED BULLINS

Ed Bullins' attitude toward Western drama might seem to doom any attempt to place him in the main current of that drama. He has, in fact, defined such theatre as one which "shies away from social, political, psychological or any disturbing (revolutionary) reforms, just as the reactionary society which it reflects does."[1] Elsewhere, he states that when Robert Macbeth and he began discussing a Black theater ensemble company, "we committed ourselves to moving away from European references for our art and lives."[2] Bullins' anxiety to divorce the new Black theater and his own work from the major strains of Western drama is understandable but futile. Bullins, like Williams and Pinter, is working within a literary and theatrical milieu fostered in part by the plays of Anton Chekhov. The extent to which his plays are Chekhovian, in spite of his denial, can be seen by an

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[1]Ed Bullins, "The So-Called Western Avant-garde Drama," in Black Expression: Essays by and about Black Americans in the Creative Arts, ed. by Addison Gayle (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), p. 145.

[2]Bullins, "I Introduction: Black Theater: The '70's—Evolutionary Changes," in The Theme is Blackness: "The Corner" and Other Plays (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973), p. 10.

examination of the kinds of people Bullins creates and of the techniques he employs to build his plots.

Bullins' characterization deals with "ordinary Black folk whose sensibilities [have] been shaped by the common Black experience."[3] Clayton Riley adds that this "remarkable artist has elevated to the averted eyes of Negro America, all the uncool, incorrect, funky Black urban field-hand life style which we had always imagined could have no practical serviceability in the design of our new truths, our reconstructed myth-dynamic."[4] It is this technique of focusing on the "street life" of Black experience, of drawing characters who reflect what every urban Black knows that suggests a similarity with Chekhov. For he, too, chose his characters from everyday life. Bullins has said of his characters that they are Black people "who have been crushed by the system, turned into gross distortions of what they can and should be, because they are denied knowledge of themselves and a space to grow."[5] This lack of "knowledge of themselves" points to

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[3]Geneva Smitherman, "Ed Bullins/Stage One: Everybody Wants to know Why I Sing the Blues," Black World, 23 (1974), 9.

[4]Clayton Riley, "Introduction" to A Black Quartet: Four New Plays by Ben Caldwell, Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, and LeRoi Jones (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. xx.

[5]Ed Bullins, as quoted by Gerald W. Haslam, "Two Traditions in Afro-American Literature," Washington State University Research Studies, 37, No. 3 (1969), 187.

a basic similarity with Chekhov's characters. Don Evans believes that the "Bullins' characters seldom 'get over' [overcome, succeed] merely because they accept and work within the slave mentality of life in a world of pervasive defeat."[6] Bullins' people do not overcome their dilemmas; they adjust to them and, implicitly, continue living. In addition to the reason Evans gives for their failure to overcome, another reason is the inadequacy of the actions many of the characters of Bullins take in response to their dilemmas—their actions are often feeble or misdirected. Such qualities closely approximate those of Chekhov's characters; that is, both playwrights deal with ordinary people who lack sufficient knowledge of themselves and yet adjust to their predicaments. A study of these characters in Bullins' plays reveals that their lack of self-knowledge results in a primary concern for self and a consequent capacity for self-delusion.

In their concern for self, their propensity to delude themselves, and their inability, feebleness, or misdirection of action, Bullins' sympathetic characters evince such a modification of conventional protagonistic function that they seem anti-heroic. Such characters include Cliff Dawson of The Corner, In the Wine Time, and In New England Winter; Steve Benson of In New England Winter and The Duplex; Curt

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[6]Don Evans, "The Theatre of Confrontation: Up Against the Wall," Black World, 23 (1974), 18.

of Goin' 'A Buffalo; and, to a lesser extent, Ray of In the Wine Time and Velma Best of The Duplex. But such a listing of sympathetic characters violates one of the main Chekhovian elements in Bullins' plays because so numerous are the characters of The Duplex, In the Wine Time, and especially The Fabulous Miss Marie, that no single character fully enlists audience sympathy. Further, a Bullins play is rarely generated by the clash between one of these sympathetic characters and a clearly unsympathetic or antagonistic character. This is especially true of such plays as The Corner, The Fabulous Miss Marie, In the Wine Time, and The Pig Pen, where, while unsympathetic characters may exist, the actions of the plays do not derive from that kind of antagonism. Thus, just as these plays cannot be said to have a protagonist, neither do they have a villain or antagonist. Some of these unsympathetic characters include Bummie in The Corner, Art in Goin' 'A Buffalo, O. D. Best in The Duplex, and Jack in Clara's Ole Man. Especially in these last two plays does Bullins' characterization resemble that of Chekhov. In The Duplex, although conflict is obvious between Stevie and O. D., the latter's absence from the stage for most of the play prevents the action from deriving from that conflict. In Clara's Ole Man, Jack is merely an unwitting vehicle for the dramatic complications of the plot. All the people of Bullins' plays, however, reflect that

Chekhovian side of humanity which emphasizes self-centeredness, self-delusion, and feebleness of action.

Another clear parallel to Chekhovian dramaturgy is discovered in Bullins' techniques for portraying the theatrical actions. Many of his plays are so crowded with people that the dramatic and theatrical focus shifts from one person to another. Tension and conflict are clearly present to varying degrees, but such elements are ever shifting; they erupt and subside only to erupt again during the course of the play. Further, the action seems to be inaction, or at least to have no direction, much of it consisting of people sitting about drinking, playing the "dozens," arguing, or hustling. Thus, although the tensions and conflicts between individuals may often be clear, the plays themselves seem to lack direction. Samuel Hay has commented on this aspect of Bullins' dramaturgy. Defining "action" as "forward movement," he identifies the structural elements of The Duplex:

> Marked by a flowing conversational style, Duplex relies on two structural devices to create mood and transport its unifying idea: (a) unplanned and casual actions, and (b) frequently disconnected dialogue. Also, there is very little developed action in the play.[7]

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[7]Samuel A. Hay, "'What Shape Shapes Shapelessness?'": Structural Elements in Ed Bullin's [sic] Plays," Black World, 23 (1974), 22.

Hay believes that an "earlier theatrical example of this structural style can be found in the Russian playwright Chekhov, whose simplified plot fabric and apparently unsympathetic combination of facts and actions caused his plays to be termed 'drama of mood.'"[8] As in Chekhov, central action in Bullins is internal, buried beneath the desultory activity of a card game; or, as in The Fabulous Miss Marie and In New England Winter, two or more plot lines may be developing while still buried beneath the talk and drink. Consequently, a Bullins' play is more a series of loosely linked incidents, hardly causally related, than a tightly constructed plot line. The parallels between his and Chekhov's exposition and rising action, especially in Uncle Vanya and The Three Sisters, are clear. Further, the crises of his plays are often so subdued that their significance as the inevitable culmination of the action is momentarily lost. Finally, his resolutions amount to a continuation of life much as it was before the crises. In most cases, the characters have adjusted to altered circumstances and resumed their egocentric way. The effect of such techniques, which are an attempt to recreate the reality of the characters' lives, is that primary effect of a Chekhov play: stasis.

The major sympathetic characters in Bullins' plays are usually in the process of searching for a way out of the

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[8]Ibid., 25.

dehumanizing cycle of poverty, crime, and alcohol. The means these characters select to break this cycle, however, reflect their basic egocentricity and self-delusion. In their efforts, they use and abuse other people freely, and the actions they take to solve their dilemmas are often misdirected or feeble. Cliff Dawson, as a prominent figure in so many plays, is the best example of a typical Bullins' sympathetic character. Cliff first appears in The Corner, in which he decides to create a new life by rejecting the self-defeating cycle of wine, boredom, and sex represented by the corner's crowd. But when he appears again, in In the Wine Time, he spends the evening much as he must have done before the climax of The Corner: drinking wine and bickering with his wife and his neighbors. Taking the blame for the death of Red does interrupt his boredom and fulfills his own definition of a man: "When the time comes . . . be a man. . . . Just do what you have to do as a man."[9] But no matter how much it may elevate him in the eyes of the audience, as an action whose purpose is to free him from the despairing cycle of his life, it fails. After Cliff is released from prison, he takes part in an armed robbery in In New England Winter. At the play's climax he becomes accessory to murder. It makes no difference that in both

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[9]Ed Bullins, In the Wine Time, in Five Plays by Ed Bullins (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1968), p. 171.

plays he admirably displays his loyalty to Ray, his nephew, and Steve, his half-brother. The effect is the same: his actions only mire him deeper in the degrading cycle he seeks to escape. In the latter play, his wife and son have disappeared. Further, no matter how much he may protest to Ray in In the Wine Time of his love for Lou, he clearly is concerned solely with what will benefit himself. This is not to imply too dark a picture of Cliff; his affection for Lou, Ray, and Steve is real. And his apparent desire to change (The Corner) and his momentary heroism (In the Wine Time) are genuine. But Cliff also deludes himself about the means to effect a change in his life, about how to achieve that stability and dignity he so desperately desires. His life is epitomized by his bickering with his neighbors in In the Wine Time and perhaps is prefigured in the person of his wino father in The Duplex. At this point in its composition, he is the most complex character in Bullins' series of plays, Twentieth Century Cycle; but like Treplyov in The Sea Gull, Vanya in Uncle Vanya, and Madame Ranevsky in The Cherry Orchard, his actions, although intended to rectify the dilemma of his life, are forever doomed by his self-centeredness and his failure to understand himself.

Another example of a Bullins sympathetic character in whom these two qualities subvert the effectiveness of his actions occurs in Goin' 'A Buffalo. The hope of all the characters in this play is expressed in the title, for they

all see the possibility of starting a new life, especially a "straight" life for Curt and Pandora, in Buffalo. But to accomplish this dream, Curt relies on what he knows—crime and vice. He plans an armed robbery and saves the proceeds from Pandora's prostitution as means of raising the capital for the move to Buffalo. The play implies that these efforts in themselves would be enough to damn his dream; his actual downfall, however, is caused by his illusions about Art Garrison. Not only does he refuse to see his inability to break his pattern of crime, but he is also blind to all the signs of Art's betrayal. This is especially clear when Rich, in Act III, tries to tell Curt of Art's attentions to Pandora. His concern throughout the play, however, is with himself and the importance for him to get to Buffalo. His anger in Denny's club is precipitated not so much by his sense of betrayal by Denny as by his recognition that the money for Pandora's dancing will be lost. As a result, he "puts her on the block," again for his own purposes. All of these actions, however, are intended to allow Curt to break out of the crushing cycle of crime and jail. The shape of the play records his failure: at its start, he has only just been released; but at its end, he is back. Those actions he thought would break this cycle are the very causes of his return. His pressing need for action, which leads him to defeat, is contrasted with Art's philosophy of waiting—and Art wins.

Such a pattern of egocentricity and feebleness or misdirection of action recurs in other Bullins plays. In The Pig Pen, Len represents the Black intellectual whose search for acceptance has alienated him from other Blacks and led to such ludicrous self-sacrificial acts as giving up his home and white wife to anyone who desires them. His actions bring about the opposite of his intentions. In The Fabulous Miss Marie, Marie Horton apparently lives from one young lover to another, searching for that completeness in which Bill has failed her. These actions, however, reflect her concern for herself and bring about the opposite of what she hopes to achieve: Bill is emasculated by her escapades and by her ability to recover his job for him. Still they cling to each other out of selfish but humiliating need. Two sides of Steve Benson are shown in In New England Winter and The Duplex. In the first play, he is able to repay a score in one setting of the play, but in the other he loses through his inability to control the forces around him. The play implies that he will not be able to recover Liz despite the success of the robbery. In The Duplex, he vacillates between loving Velma and giving her up. When he finally decides to love her, it is too late. He fails to recognize her masochistic need, which prevents her from leaving O. D. In this play, we see a Bullins sympathetic character unable to act decisively; when he finally confronts O. D., he is beaten. The irony of the last scene and the

crucial point about Steve is his inability to recognize that he was beaten long before the fight.

Another Chekhovian quality about Bullins' sympathetic characters is their willingness to adjust to their dilemmas. Even though they may struggle to overcome them, many characters finally adjust to their predicaments rather than continue to struggle or allow themselves to be destroyed. The end of The Duplex does not suggest that Steve Benson has adjusted to the loss of Velma; but by the time he reappears in The Fabulous Miss Marie, he has. In Goin' 'A Buffalo, Pandora's alliance with Art suggests she may have recognized the suicidal nature of Curt's plans and decided to ally herself with the only hope for her survival. Later, although she is stunned by Curt's capture, Pandora does not allow it to destroy her. She adapts to the new reality of her condition and prepares to join Art. Marie Horton, recognizing the futility of struggling against the end of her relationships with Ruth and Art, adjusts by saving Bill's job and inviting Steve to replace Art.

If the sympathetic characters of Bullins' plays display these unconventional qualities, so also do the major unsympathetic characters become villains or antagonists. The characters in Bullins' plays who seem most clearly unsympathetic are Art in Goin' 'A Buffalo, Red in In the Wine Time, O. D. in The Duplex, Oscar and Bummie in In New England Winter, and Ernie in The Pig Pen. As dislikable as these

characters are when compared to others in their plays, they do not function as antagonists in the plot because the movements in which they appear are not precipitated by a conflict with sympathetic characters. This point can best be illustrated in The Duplex. One clear source of tension in the play is uncertainty about when O. D. and Steve will collide. The actual dramatic movement of the play, however—discernible beneath card games, wine, and violence—concerns Steve's recognition of his love for Velma and the change which takes place in him. O. D. has nothing to do with this internal action. Art Garrison provides a similar example in Goin' 'A Buffalo. The direction of the play, the building of details toward a projected break with the crime and vice of L. A., has nothing to do with Art. The plot portrays the gradual breakdown in Curt's dream of going to Buffalo to start a new life. That dream begins to crumble in Act II and dissolves in Act III, but Art's betrayal is only one element in the failure and not even the major cause.

Another function for an unsympathetic character is portrayed through Jack in Clara's Ole Man. Here, the term is somewhat inappropriate, since Jack is not unsympathetic except insofar as he is ashamed of his origins and his people. Although Bullins is obviously attacking these attitudes, Jack functions more precisely as the accidental antagonist for Clara, a role similar to that of Trigorin in The Sea Gull and Yelena in Uncle Vanya. He unwittingly

provides the tension for the movement of the play until his recognition of his own ignorance provides the climax of the play. Bummie, in The Corner, functions much the same way in his fear of how Cliff will act after what has occurred between Bummie and Steve.

Bullins mirrors Chekhov's characteristics, then, in choosing his characters from the ordinary people of his experience. His sympathetic characters are egocentric and unable to do anything effectively to remedy the major dilemmas of their lives. They act often out of concern for themselves or out of illusions about themselves and others; consequently, their actions are doomed to failure. At the same time, the unsympathetic characters are not the major sources for dramatic conflict; they merely reflect another side of that street life which Bullins portrays.

The clearest similarity between Bullins' dramaturgy and Chekhov's occurs in the techniques for representing the dramatic actions and, more importantly, for the effect produced. The impact lacks forward movement or action. As in Chekhov, the central dramatic action of a play is internal. The establishment, development, climax, and resolution of the tensions and conflicts which comprise such an action's movement are disguised, in part, by the numerous characters, which causes a shifting and consequent diffusion of dramatic and theatrical focus. In some plays, it is difficult to define the exact character central to the play. Further,

much of the action consists of people sitting around in apartments or on stoops drinking wine, arguing, hustling, or playing cards. As a result, the plays lack a central point of dramatic tension because the dialogue does not express much development. In conventional dramaturgy, dialogue provides the information for interpreting a clear plot line. In Bullins' plays, also, the tensions and conflicts are present, often erupting into verbal and physical violence. The multiplicity of characters, however, the shifting theatrical focus, and the apparent incoherence of the dialogue disguise the establishment and development of such a plot line. Also aiding this effect is the apparent lack of causal relationship between the scenes in a Bullins play. As a result of the seeming insignificance in dialogue and the lack of overt connections between scenes in the entire play, the arrival of the crises is often obscured. When the resolution of the play occurs, it seems merely a continuance of the mood of earlier scenes. This stasis, which is the primary effect, is comparable to that in Chekhov's four major plays.

The Bullins play which best exemplifies all of these qualities is The Fabulous Miss Marie. The setting is a party at the home of Marie and Bill Horton. During the course of the evening, the dramatic and theatrical focus shifts from relationships between Marie and Art Garrison, Marie and Bill, Marco Polo Henderson and Wanda, Gafney and Art and Wanda, Bill and Wanda, Bud and Ruth, Tonie and Art, and Steve Benson

and Art. The progress of any one of these relationships would provide sufficient dramatic material for a single play, but Bullins allows glimpses of them only at significant points to suggest their details without allowing any of them to become a clear plot. The theatrical practice of briefly illuminating one character or set of characters prevents fully realized dramatic scenes.

The main plot seems to be the threat to the security of Marie's precarious relationships with Ruth, Art, and Bill. Ruth, Marie's "cut buddy," has become sexually involved with Bud. Art, Marie's male "cut buddy," has likewise become involved with Toni. Bill, whose job has financially supported the precarious balance of Marie's relationships, has been indiscreet enough to take his white mistress to his job where he slapped her in the presence of his white employer. Consequently, he has been fired. The play's crisis occurs when Marie realizes the breakdown of her relationships with Ruth and Art and the apparent loss of the financial security of Bill's job. But by exercising some unknown leverage on the employer's wife, Marie gets Bill reinstated with promotion, raise, and bonus. And Steve Benson replaces Art. The shifts from character to character are so rapid and diffuse that the development and climax are obscured. The play appears as a series of meetings, often confrontations, between people seeking various kinds of personal gratification: sexual, financial, emotional. The tone of the play's action never

seems to fluctuate, and the significance of the various events remains obscure because of the numerous characters and the continual shifting of dramatic and theatrical focus. As a result, the impact upon which conventional plot structure and climax depend is lost; little audience involvement is sustained in any of the various relationships. Indeed, perception and full understanding of the main plot is delayed.

Other plays which to lesser extents exemplify the same inaction and diffusion of dramatic and theatrical focus include The Duplex, Goin' 'A Buffalo, In the Wine Time, and In New England Winter. The Duplex accomplishes these effects not only by shifting from relationship to relationship among its numerous characters, but also by its theatrical use of the duplex. During the course of one scene upstairs, for example, a portion of the downstairs or the exterior may be illuminated. The second act of Goin 'A Buffalo shifts from group to group in the strip club as the tension mounts to the confrontation at its end. In the Wine Time shifts periodically from Lou's stoop to "The Avenue" or to the figures of Lou and Cliff's neighbors. In New England Winter utilizes the most radical form of shifting dramatic and theatrical focus in its use of two seemingly unrelated plots, the common element being Steve Benson.

Another dramatic element which supports the effect of inaction or stasis in a Bullins play is the presence of often

incoherent dialogue. Again, a section from The Fabulous Miss Marie exemplifies this technique:

Bud

. . . And my ole lady, Toni . . . she's kind of foxy, huh? Bet you'd like to get a little taste of that, wouldn't cha? Yeah, I know you would. But I don't think that's likely.

(Lights and music change. Art and Marco appear again.)

Art

Since we both hustlin' men, Marco . . . I can talk to you, can't I?

Marco

(Suspicious) Yeah . . . sure . . . you can talk to me.

Art

Well I was thinkin', man . . . since we both playin' this Marie Horton scene that we shouldn't kill the goose that lays them good eggs . . . You know what I mean, man?

Marie

(Off, young, seductive) Oh Art . . .

Marco

Nawh . . . Now I don't

Art

It's like this, man . . . you take care of your side of the street, dig? . . . I'm here already . . . and I don't need that much company.

Marie

(Nearer; soft, sweet) Oh, Art . . .

Marco

You tryin' to tell me somethin', man?

Art

Yeah . . . Like I don't want to see you around here that much more. All you out here for is to put Wandi through some changes for your own kicks . . . then screw her a little and browbeat her a lot . . . I'm trying' to get my groceries

together, fellow, and you holdin' up the action . . . See what I mean?

Marie
(Almost on top of them; strange) I'm here, Art . . .

Marco
Yeah, man . . . I see what you mean.

Bud
Don't get me wrong about your not bein' able to hit strong on chicks. It's just where my ole lady, Toni, is concerned, that's all. . . .[10]

But a clearer example occurs in Scene 4 of the Third Movement of The Duplex. Mamma and Sister Sukie have come to comfort Velma after her husband, O. D., has slashed her with a knife. The incident leads each character into a monologue about her relations with men.

Velma
You know . . . this is the only real home I've had.

Mamma
When I met Pops he thought he'd stand up on his rare legs . . . yes, indeed he did . . .

Velma
First time I've ever sunk roots this deep.

Sukie
I had an ole nigger once. Thought he was bad.

Mamma
Called himself "Dawg" then . . . leastwise that's what his no-count friends used to called him . . . not so long ago neither.

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[10]Bullins, The Fabulous Miss Marie, in The New Lafayette Theatre Presents, ed. Ed Bullins (New York: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1974), pp. 43-44.

Velma
Even when I was back home . . . that wasn't like home . . . really. That was just my mamma and daddy's place. I just lived there.

Sukie
I told that man, 'Nigger! If you ever look at me funny you gonna be sorry . . . you gonna be sorry for the day you was born.' Yeah . . . that's what I told that nigger.

Mamma
Clifton Slaughter Dawson . . . that's his name . . . his real name. But I just call him Pops now . . . like everybody else . . . that's what I'd call him . . . was my special name for him.[11]

Goin' 'A Buffalo and A Son, Come Home also utilize this technique of incoherent dialogue. The static effect produced is in the tradition of similar techniques in Chekhov, especially in Uncle Vanya and The Three Sisters.

These two characteristics, the diffusion of dramatic and theatrical focus and periodic incoherence in dialogue, point to the Chekhovian manner in which Bullins develops and shapes his plots. As the discussion of the plot of The Fabulous Miss Marie suggests, Bullins introduces the elements of dramatic tension and complication without calling attention to their significance as such. In The Corner, the main plot is finally seen to be the effect on Cliff Dawson of Bummie's having humiliated Cliff's half-brother, Steve. This plot's introduction and complications, however, are almost

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[11]Bullins, The Duplex: A Black Love Fable in Four Movements (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1971), pp. 129-130.

indistinguishable within the street talk of the people who gather on the corner. A close examination of scenes one and two shows how Bummie steers the conversation away from talk about Cliff and what he might be planning to do to Bummie. Clara's Ole Man similarly buries the establishment and development of the main plot beneath the wine and talk. Although the tension between Big Girl and Jack is evident from the start, it seems more the product of Big Girl's mood than anything else. The truth is that Jack, a male and an "oreo," is a threat to the precarious balance of Big Girl's lesbian relationship with Clara. Big Girl realizes this threat early. But since the audience does not learn the truth of the two girls' relationship until the climax of the play, this function remains unnoticed by the audience. In similar manner, Bullins disguises the establishment and development of the main plot in almost all his plays, The Fabulous Miss Marie being the best example, along with In the Wine Time, The Duplex, and In New England Winter. In all these plays, this technique in their early action delays or even prevents the identification of plot.

As a result, the crisis in many Bullins plays, while often recognizable as the emotional highpoint of the action, seems only one more incident in a string of loosely connected incidents. In other words, a scene's significance as the inevitable outgrowth of a series of causally connected earlier scenes is not clear. Again perhaps the clearest example of

this technique is the climax which occurs shortly after Wanda's song, "It's little enough,"[12] when the various plot strains established among the guests converge and are revealed to Marie. She has heard Ruth from another room:

> Ruth
> (Off) Shoot'em . . . oh, lawd have mercy . . . I already got my civil rights . . . I'm free as a white lady . . . yes, I am . . .
>
> Marie
> She's with her man? Bud?
>
> Art
> Yeah . . . Bud.
> (Marie begins laughing slowly, pick up to near hysteria, then weeps. They [Steve, Art, Toni] stand about her, soothing her, not looking at each other.)
>
> Marie
> (Finally) Ruth and Bud?[13]

Toni reveals to Marie that she and Art were also "having a little thing." Marie's recognition of these relationships, along with the apparent loss of Bill's economic security, function as the climax for the play. But for the audience, all this is still not clear and will not be for some time.

In other Bullins plays, the significance of a scene as the crisis of an action is likewise not immediately clear. In the robbery plot of In New England Winter, all the tension seems to emanate from Steve and Cliff and from Chuckie and Bummie. Thus Steve's stabbing Bummie does not seem the

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[12]Bullins, The Fabulous Miss Marie, p. 58.

[13]Ibid., p. 61.

logical climax of that plot's action. An examination of the lines, however, would reveal that their antagonism had been growing steadily. But this plot, as in The Corner, is buried within the talk, drink, and verbal warfare. Similarly, in The Pig Pen, the announcement of the assassination of Malcolm X seems unrelated to the events of Len's party. An examination of the relationships between the Blacks and the whites and among the Blacks in addition to an understanding of Malcom X's criticism of integration would disclose how this revelation functions at the play's climax. This type of climax, resembling in technique and effect those of The Sea Gull, Uncle Vanya, and The Three Sisters, is also found in The Corner and The Duplex. In each of the plays, the establishment and development of the main plot in the early action are obscured so that the crisis is not readily apparent. Stasis is the resultant effect.

These similarities between the dramaturgy of Chekhov and Bullins extend to the resolutions of their plays. In most Bullins plays, the immediate dilemma of the individuals may be solved, but the problems which precipitated those dilemmas continue. As a result, the resolutions do not seem to resolve anything; that is, the plays of Bullins often seem merely to end with little or no implication of anything having been changed or affected by the play's action. The Duplex is one of the best examples. When the fight between O. D. and Steve begins, it seems as if the conflict over

Velma expected throughout the play has finally begun. This would be the conventional climax. But as argued earlier, Velma has already decided to stay with O. D. Steve's attacking him, then, becomes more a gesture of frustration and disappointment. The fight can have no effect on Velma's situation. And when it is finished, nothing is settled. As Tootsie drags Steve upstairs after O. D. has almost killed him, Steve is shouting, "next time . . . man, next time."[14] There may be a "next time"; but as with this time, nothing will be solved. The confrontation towards which the entire play seemed headed has solved nothing. The resolution in The Fabulous Miss Marie also exemplifies this point. Although Marie managed to meet the immediate threat to the intricate balance of her emotional world, the problems which precipitated that threat still exist. Bill, whose indiscretion and racial self-hatred threatened Marie's financial support, still provides that support. The replacement of Art by Steve as "houseboy" merely reflects her continuing need for emotional props through sexual alliances with younger men. The play also vaguely suggests that Toni may replace Ruth in that now disrupted lesbian relationship.[15]

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[14]Bullins, The Duplex, p. 165.

[15]Resolutions in other Bullins plays which follow this pattern, The Corner, Goin' 'A Buffalo, Clara's Ole Man, and The Pig Pen, resemble in tone and effect Uncle Vanya, The Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard.

Additionally, these resolutions in Bullins' plays reflect the circular shape of the plots. Like Chekhov's, Bullins' plots often evince a return to a pattern of existence established in the antecedent actions. The disturbance of this equilibrium usually provides the major point of dramatic tension, and the crises point the way to a re-establishment of that order. This pattern of balance-disruption-struggle-adjustment-balance, as much as any other dramaturgical element, shows The Fabulous Miss Marie to be Chekhovian. Prior to the opening of the play, Marie has sustained an emotional and psychological balance by establishing sexual relationships with Art and Ruth, an order financially supported by Bill's job. But his indiscretion, the subversion of Ruth by Bud, and the betrayal by Art for Toni apparently disrupt the order of Marie's world. She is not destroyed, however, nor has her capacity for endurance been damaged. She can bring herself to save Bill's job for him and to replace Art with Steve. The singing of her song at the end of the play clearly signals the restoration of that order disturbed and threatened during the play's action.

Clara's Ole Man is perhaps a more concise example of the circular shape of a Bullins plot. The routine and order of Big Girl's life—her relationship with Clara, especially—are threatened by the intrusion not only of a man but a Black man who has turned his back on his "people," the street people of his origins. In other words, he is both a sexual

and racial threat. The tension of the play builds behind these two elements. The values Jack brings with him to visit Clara implicitly condemn Big Girl, Stoogie, and the street culture they represent. At the crisis point when Jack realizes the nature of the relationship he has intruded upon, Big Girl's victory is complete. The beating administered by the gang follows logically upon this realization, and the order disrupted by his intrusion and racial shame is restored as Big Girl and Clara go off to the movies.

Other Bullins plays whose plots have this shape are Goin' 'A Buffalo and The Duplex. The structure of these and, in fact, all his plays implies that continuance of a life which supports their circular shape. The basic pattern of life and the attitudes of the characters remain virtually unaffected by the events of the plays. This continuance of life is an essential element in the shape of a Chekhovian plot.

Regardless of the vehemence with which Ed Bullins may denounce Western drama and despite his wish to divorce himself and his art from the artist milieu derived from that drama, his plays show a skill in the management of characters and tone which is in every sense Western. Specifically, in his choice of ordinary people as inspiration for his characterization and in his use of indirect action in his plot development, Bullins recalls the techniques of Anton Chekhov. In addition to this characterization, many of his plays

evince a recurrence of Chekhovian dramaturgy in their manner of crowding the stage with characters and dividing the dramatic and theatrical focus among them. This technique combines with the obscuring of the establishment, development, and crisis of a clear plot line to effect that stasis evident in Chekhov's four major plays. Along with the circular, realigning shape of his plays, the presence of these techniques suggests that Bullins is working entirely within an approach to art similar to that of Chekhov.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Anton Chekhov was only one of several European playwrights responsible for the form and content of modern theatre. Like Ibsen and Strindberg, Chekhov felt the need to break with conceptions of characterization which prevailed in Europe from the early nineteenth century until the 1870's and 1880's. Whereas the pervading Romantic attitude called for a clear distinction between protagonist and antagonist, these playwrights wanted to portray human beings in all their complications and contradictions. Chekhov's modification of conventional character patterns, however, differed from that of the other writers in that he did not view these qualities as potential for tragedy or heroism. Throughout his plays, characters remain the firmly unheroic, basically egocentric, and self-serving individuals who begin them. His sympathetic characters delude themselves about their problems and about how their selfishness augments those dilemmas. As a result, they do not act to solve them, or what they attempt is ineffectual because it is either feeble or misdirected. This pattern is exemplified in Treplyov of The Sea Gull, Vanya of Uncle Vanya, the Prozorov sisters in The Three Sisters, and Madame Ranevsky in The Cherry Orchard. Further, Chekhov does

not allow his unsympathetic characters to become full antagonists or villains. Although they evince the same self-centeredness and delusion as the sympathetic characters, the sufferings they cause are unintentional, as with Trigorin, Yelena, and Natasha.

Chekhov's more obvious contribution to modern drama lies in the techniques employed to develop the actions of his plots. In these devices, he not only makes a clear break with the expectations of Romantic and melodramatic plot elements, but also diverges from those of Ibsen and Strindberg, who continued to rely on coherent dialogue within individual scenes, on conventional plot building methods, and on clear plot direction and movement. Chekhov's individual scenes appear to lack direction because the dialogue seems dominated by incoherence, repetitions, or pauses. Although this kind of dialogue pervades Chekhov's plays, its occurrence in the early and middle actions obscures the establishment and development of the dramatic conflicts and tensions required to fuel the plots. Further, the crises are often so subdued by this dialogue that their significance as such is recognizable only near or after the end of the play. In addition, Chekhov's resolutions rarely resolve anything. In them, the sympathetic characters' dilemmas may be momentarily relieved, but the underlying character weaknesses which caused the problems persist mainly because the characters have merely adjusted to the new conditions. The effect of

such scene structuring and plot building is the appearance of immobility, or stasis.

Chekhov's plots, then, appear to lack movement and direction. This effect is emphasized by the circularity in their action. An equilibrium among characters at or before the beginning of a play is or has been disturbed by the intrusion of a group of (usually) unsympathetic characters. The tension increases beneath the surface of apparently pointless dialogue, reaches a crisis, then subsides. Whatever disturbance of routine which persists is adjusted to, and the placidity evident in the early scenes is restored. This pattern of balance-disruption-struggle-adjustment-balance finalizes the effect of stasis so characteristic of a Chekhov play. The best examples are Uncle Vanya and The Three Sisters.

These Chekhovian techniques of characterization and plot building have been absorbed into the work of almost every major twentieth century playwright of Europe and America. For example, one of the best known recurrences is in G. B. Shaw's Heartbreak House. His concentration "on the group picture . . . recalls Chekhov's method of discouraging audience identification with a single hero; and like Chekhov, Shaw is now permitting the exposition of plot and character

to proceed at a very leisurely tempo."[1] In another example, the ironic detachment fostered by Chekhovian techniques is recalled in Bertolt Brecht's theory of "Verfremdungseffekt," the elements of which are intended "to create an atmosphere of scientific impartiality. Identification is discouraged. Empathy is forbidden."[2] Brecht aspires to "that strict impersonality achieved by more Naturalistic playwrights like Chekhov."[3] And the work of Arthur Adamov reflects his admiration for Chekhov's indirect dialogue.[4] In addition, Clifford Odets in Awake and Sing! evinces Chekhov's emphasis on "ensemble" scenes and on portraying "the texture of a life that undermines bright hopes."[5] But plays of Samuel Beckett show some of the most pervasive recurrences of Chekhov's techniques. In Waiting for Godot, Beckett's characters seem almost comical in their selfishness and delusion. These qualities cause the recurrence of another Chekhovian characteristic: the apparent purposelessness in the dialogue which is so evident in The Three Sisters. And in Godot, Endgame,

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[1]Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt, p. 223.

[2]Ibid., p. 259.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovation, p. 601.

[5]Ibid., p. 528.

and Krapp's Last Tapes, the plot seems directionless. Beckett's beliefs in the pettiness of human beings and in the meaninglessness of life—themes suggested in all Chekhov's four major plays—are reflected in these techniques.

The most extensive recurrence of Chekhovian elements in contemporary British and American drama is perhaps found in the plays of Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter, and Ed Bullins. For example, Chekhov's attitude toward portraying human beings is evident in the earliest of these three playwrights. Williams' sympathetic characters, like Chekhov's, suffer because they delude themselves about the major problems of their lives. Their actions to solve these problems, if they act at all, are useless or weak. The anguish they undergo does not change them; they struggle against, and finally adapt to, the new conditions brought about by the plays' actions. The most clearly Chekhovian of these characters include Amanda (The Glass Menagerie), Blanche (A Streetcar Named Desire), Reverend Shannon (The Night of the Iguana), and Mrs. Goforth (The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore). Furthermore, Williams' unsympathetic characters do not plan and execute disruption and suffering. In many plays, they are merely dramatic catalysts. These include Stanley Kowalski (Streetcar), Miss Fellowes (The Night of the Iguana), Tom (The Glass Menagerie), and Christopher Flanders (Milk Train).

Chekhovian conceptions of characterization are also apparent in the plays of Harold Pinter and Ed Bullins. Pinter's sympathetic characters reveal their egocentricity in a desire to retain a neat ordered world and a willingness to manipulate other human beings to do so. They include Rose (The Room), Edward (A Slight Ache), and Deeley (Old Times). Also like Chekhov, Pinter's unsympathetic characters either intend no disruption (the Matchseller in A Slight Ache), or their motives for causing suffering are never clear. McCann and Goldberg (The Birthday Party) and Anna (Old Times) are examples. Finally, in the most recent of these contemporary playwrights, the Black American Ed Bullins, Chekhovian attitudes toward characterization are evident in his choice of people from the "street life" of Black experience. This principle of choice resembles Chekhov's use of people from the everyday life of late nineteenth-century Russia. Like Chekhov's, Bullins' sympathetic characters are usually attempting to break out of a cycle of crime, vice, and boredom. But in their concern for self, the actions they take are self-defeating, and they end up by adjusting to the circumstances of their lives. These characters include Cliff Dawson of The Corner, In the Wine Time, and In New England Winter and Steve Benson of In New England Winter and The Duplex. At the same time, and also like Chekhov's, the unsympathetic characters do not function as antagonists because the movements in which they appear are not

precipitated by a conflict with the sympathetic characters. These characters include Art in Goin' 'A Buffalo and The Fabulous Miss Marie, and O. D. in The Duplex. In Clara's Ole Man, Jack recalls Chekhov's Trigorin in the former's manner of functioning as an accidental antagonist for Clara.

In addition to characterization, Chekhovian techniques of developing action recur widely in the plays of these three dramatists. The plots of Williams' plays resemble Chekhov's in their appearance of being a series of loosely linked scenes or dramatic images. The tension and conflicts between characters are often violently shown, but their development for the purpose of plot movement is obscured by the very violence of the plays' language. The Glass Menagerie, Streetcar, The Night of the Iguana, and Milk Train exemplify this obscurity of plot development. In Pinter, the disconnected and repetitious dialogue which Chekhov uses in The Three Sisters is taken to its extreme and conveys the impression that Pinter's plots are immobile and directionless. So disjointed seems the conversation that exposition and antecedent action are often not provided and crises are rarely discernible. Especially such plays as The Dumb Waiter, The Homecoming, Landscape, and Old Times display these Chekhovian elements and effects. Bullins, however, achieves the apparent stasis in many of his plots not only by the desultory and seemingly pointless dialogue of his characters but more often by crowding his plays with

characters. Thus, dramatic and theatrical focus is diffused as several plots are evident but rarely show distinct movement, direction, or resolution. These qualities are especially prominent in The Duplex and The Fabulous Miss Marie. The final element of Chekhov's dramaturgy, the circular shape of the plot, most clearly recurs in Pinter and Bullins. The equilibrium in Pinter's plays is usually disturbed by a sympathetic character's propensity to ask questions which disrupt the order evident in the play's opening. But by the end of the play, balance has been reaffirmed and life goes on. Such a pattern is evident in A Slight Ache, The Lover, and The Homecoming. In Bullins' plays, the intrusion of an unsympathetic character disrupts the balance among several other characters. This disturbance is usually resisted and always causes suffering, but finally the sympathetic characters adjust to it and a new order emerges. Goin' 'A Buffalo, The Fabulous Miss Marie and Clara's Ole Man are clear examples.

The techniques of Chekhovian dramaturgy developed out of a desire to portray human beings and events as realistically as possible. For, although Chekhov the dramatist knew that plays as works of art must show unity in movement and action, Chekhov the man also recognized that the events of human existence rarely followed such logical and coherent plots as the drama surrounding him displayed. From such a recognition grew the desire to design stage action as if

there were no movement nor direction. And allied to this intention was the desire to present human beings in all their complexities and contradictions, for they were the qualities which the drama he saw failed to present. The relevance of his unique dramatic views to twentieth-century drama is obvious. For many artists of this century, life has lost its purpose and meaning. Therefore, art and specifically drama can reflect the loss by appearing to lack order, movement, and direction. Further, because man for many of these same artists can no longer be heroic and tragic, drama can show his character in all its numerous and conflicting facets.

Although several major twentieth-century playwrights have adopted neither this view nor Chekhov's techniques, many of those writers sensitive to the apparent insanity of World War I and the development three decades later of possible nuclear extinction have incorporated in their plays Chekhovian techniques which suggest how unheroic is man and how meaningless is life. And there seems ample evidence that these techniques will continue to be relevant for contemporary playwrights. Among the dramatists whose plays employ them are Edward Albee, Arthur Kopit, and Immamu Imiri Baraka. The vision of humanity implicit in Chekhovian techniques of characterization and plot structure resembles the view of these playwrights. In their view, people are self-centered and weak-willed and possess neither the

knowledge of self nor the capacity to act decisively to improve their lives. Further, to many of these playwrights, as with Williams, Pinter, Bullins—and Chekhov—, life is a series of loosely linked events through which human beings muddle and in which they rarely communicate meaningfully with each other.

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