About the Author:
Anton Chekov (1860-1904)

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov is among the major short-story writers and dramatists of modern times.

During the last half of the 19th century the old order in Russia was crumbling. Political institutions were out of line with actual developments, and the agrarian, aristocratic society was increasingly yielding to an urban bourgeoisie and a new capitalist class. Turgenev and Tolstoy, among other writers, had depicted the weakened social structure of the 1860s and 1870s; Dostoevsky had dramatically described the intellectual conflicts. Anton Chekhov, however, was the first to depict a world essentially without heroes and villains. A Chekhovian personage vacillates, often Hamlet-like, between what he should do and what he wants, meanwhile becoming ever more conscious of the wrongs he is helplessly suffering. Romantic illusion wars with disillusion. Time after time, the individual fails, almost fatalistically, but never without either discovering for himself or allowing the reader to discover the forces behind his contest with life. Dramatic understatement, a deeply poetic perception of loss and psychological impotence, exquisite and often gay humor, and extraordinary linguistic aptness characterize what has come to be called "the Chekhovian manner."

Chekhov was born in Taganrog in South Russia on the Azov Sea on Jan. 17/29, 1860, third of six children of a grocery store owner. Chekhov's grandfather was a serf who bought his family's freedom in 1841. While his father tried to improve his social status by attending to civic duties, the young Chekhov and his brothers and sisters worked in the family store and studied in the local school. In 1876 his father went bankrupt and fled to Moscow to start anew. Chekhov's mother soon joined his father in Moscow. Chekhov, then 16, was left behind to finish his schooling.

The blond, brown-eyed Chekhov was a self-reliant, amusing, energetic, and attractive young man. In August 1879 he joined his parents in Moscow, where his father was a laborer and his mother a part-time seamstress. Chekhov soon took his father's place as head of the household, a responsibility he shouldered all his life. He immediately entered the medical faculty of Moscow University. After graduating in 1884, he went to work in the hospital at Chikino, but by December
of that year he had begun to cough up blood, the first symptom of the tuberculosis that was to kill him.

In the winter after arriving in Moscow, Chekhov decided to try to augment family income by writing for the humor magazines he himself liked to read. In March 1880 the Dragonfly published his first sketch. During that year it published nine more, most of them signed "Antosha Chekhonte." In the fall of 1881 he had stories accepted by the Alarm Clock, and he and his older brothers Aleksandr and Nikolai published in a new humor magazine, the Spectator. In the fall of 1882 he was introduced to Leikin, editor of Fragments, to which he was soon contributing regularly. His first book was The Tales of Melpomene, a collection of six of these sketches published with his own money in mid-1884. Written for money under numerous pseudonyms, Chekhov's first sketches were the work of a gay, witty, enthusiastic reporter well aware of the dark side of life but unaware of his own literary promise.

Midsummer 1886 saw the appearance of Chekhov's first substantial book, Motley Stories; on the title page his real name stood beside his old pseudonym. The book did well, and Chekhov was recognized as a new literary talent. He practiced medicine less and wrote more. "On the Road" was a special success in the late fall of 1886. In February 1887 he was elected to the Literary Fund, an honor accorded only prominent authors. In the Twilight, a collection of short stories, appeared in August.

Chekhov's first completed play, Ivanov, was produced in Moscow in November 1887. He had given up writing for the light magazines in favor of serious fiction, art which would, as he stated in a letter, "depict life as it actually is. Its aim is truth, unconditional and honest…. A man of letters ...has to... realize that dung heaps play a very significant role in a landscape and that evil passions are as inherent in life as good ones." Nostalgia, disharmony, and a sense of life's pervasive irony became elements of his writing in this transitional period.

"The Steppe" (1888), a lyrical paean to the Russian countryside revolving around the adventures that befall 9-year-old Egorushka on his way with his uncle to a distant town, began a new literary life for Chekhov. Not only was it accepted by the fashionable Northern Messenger, bringing Chekhov a considerable (for him) sum of money, but it also was highly praised by outstanding writers. At this time Chekhov wrote, "I regard medicine as my lawful wife and literature as my mistress,
who is dearer to me than a wife." In October 1888 he won the Academy of Sciences' Pushkin Prize. "The Lights," "The Name-Day Party," and "An Attack of Nerves" all appeared in this year.

The one-act The Bear had a modest success, but the St. Petersburg production of a revised Ivanov in 1889 was a triumph. Another collection of stories, Children, was published in March. Chekhov calculated that he could now support his family by his writing. He spent the summer of 1888 in the Ukraine (where his consumptive brother Nikolai died) and at Yalta. The events of this period inspired the Tolstoyan "A Dreary Story" (1889), in which a dying old man muses on what he considers his pointless life.

In addition to some one-act plays (among them, "The Wedding"), Chekhov worked on The Wood Demon, but the St. Petersburg Theatrical Committee rejected the play, deeply wounding him. In March 1890 Chekhov's seventh book appeared, a collection of stories entitled Gloomy People.

Late in April 1890 Chekhov set out for the penal colony on the remote Siberian island of Sakhalin. After spending 3 months studying the island, Chekhov returned home and wrote Sakhalin Island, which was serialized in 1893-1894.

Chekhov, who had once asked his brother Aleksandr for literary advice, now willingly helped younger writers. In the summer of 1890 the young Ivan Bunin brought his manuscripts, and he and Chekhov soon became warm friends. In the spring of the following year Chekhov spent 6 weeks in Europe. By summer he was in the country again, working on the story "The Duel," which delves into the characters' isolation from each other and discusses political and moral themes in the life of the intelligentsia. Olga Ivanovna, an amateur artist and the central figure of "The Grasshopper" (1891), so desperately seeks for a great man that her sense of beauty and of moral worth is obscured. Chekhov was scornful of the philistine and of the frivolous side of art; he admired science and dedicated his life to helping people in need, like those who suffered cholera in the wake of the famine of 1891-1892.

In February 1892 Chekhov bought the 675-acre "Melikhovo," 2 1/2 hours by train from Moscow. He, the grandson of a serf, had bought an estate, and he settled down on it with his family. To the local peasants he was a sympathetic doctor, but to his literary and theatrical friends he was the proprietor of a country retreat,
and guests streamed out to visit him. By the end of 1893 he had paid off most of the mortgages on the estate and was supporting his family comfortably.

Chekhov began writing more slowly. "Ward No. 6" (1892), a powerful story of brutality and madness, added greatly to his reputation. "The Story of an Unknown Man" (1893), which tells of a love affair between a terrorist and another man's mistress, expressed new psychological care in portraiture. Unfortunately his health took a turn for the worse. To relieve his coughing, he went to Yalta in the spring of 1894 but quickly grew bored and hurried back to Melikhovo.

Stories by Chekhov regularly appeared in the leading St. Petersburg and Moscow magazines. Among his bestknown works of this period are "The Black Monk" (1894), "The Literature Teacher" (1894), "Three Years" (1895), "My Life" (1896), "The House with the Balcony" (1896), "The Peasants" (1897), "Ionych" (1898), "The Lady with the Dog" (1898), "The Gooseberry" (1898), "The Man in a Case" (1898), "The New Summer House" (1899), and "In the Ravine" (1900). The last years of his life, chiefly devoted to playwriting, saw revisions of his earlier stories for Collected Works (1899-1901) and creation of two new ones, "The Bishop" (1902) and "The Fiancée" (1903). Through most of them ran the haunting themes of human isolation, hopelessness, and want of understanding, which seem to reflect the Russian fin-de-siècle atmosphere with exceptional accuracy.

In Moscow, as in St. Petersburg, Chekhov was lionized. Long a bachelor and devoted to his sister Masha, who in turn idolized him, he had a number of vivacious, pretty, and talented women friends but none for whom he felt "love, sexual attraction, being of one flesh" in terms strong enough to propose marriage. But in 1898, when he was 38 and seriously ill, he met the actress Olga Knipper. By the time they married in May 1901, he not only was one of Russia's leading literary men, having been the first writer elected to honorary membership in the Academy of Sciences (January 1890), but was also engrossed in the theater, madly in love, and gravely tubercular.

The first draft of The Sea Gull (1896) drew heavily on a romance between Chekhov's former love Lidiya Mizinova and his writer-friend I. N. Potapenko. The play failed in its first presentation, but in 1898 in the new Moscow Art Theater it was such a spectacular success that the gull became, and remains, the theater's official emblem. Chekhov's other great plays followed quickly: Uncle Vanya, an extensive revision of The Wood Demon, in 1897; Three Sisters in 1900-1901; and
The Cherry Orchard in 1903-1904. They all are about the passing of the old order. In each, a group of upper-class landowners, isolated in boredom and social impotence, struggles to preserve cultural values against the energetic social change insisted on by the middle-and lower-class teachers, writers, and businessmen to whom the new life belongs. Each character thinks chiefly only of himself, so that the conflict is expressed in the subtleties of small gestures, musically orchestrated, leading up to an overwhelming climax, usually a suicide, which is followed in a minor key by the general admission that nothing further can be done. The expressed hopelessness is counteracted by declarations of faith in an ideal. The audience perceives the difference between the esthetic harmony and the insurmountable pressures of moral choice and failure in everyday life.

Chekhov was at the height of his fame. He encouraged the writers Bunin and Andreyev, recommended writers for the Pushkin Prize, and was eagerly sought out for advice and comment. His wife acted in Moscow during the season while he stayed in Yalta. The letters between them indicate a deep and mutual passion. Chekhov's health worsened rapidly in 1904. Even in Yalta, where he lived in a villa he had built, little could be done. His doctors told him that he must go to a sanatorium. In June 1904 he set off for Badenweiler in the Black Forest. A friend who saw him in Moscow on the eve of departure for Europe quoted Chekhov as having said: "Tomorrow I leave. Good-bye. I'm going away to die." On July 2, 1904, he died in a hotel at Badenweiler; his body was returned to Moscow for burial.
