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EVALUATIVE CHARACTERISATION OF CHARACTERS IN THE WORKS OF A. P. CHEKHOV

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Abstract. The article examines how Anton Chekhov conveys an evaluation of his characters while refusing the role of an open moralist. Proceeding from the linguistic theory of evaluation and from the stylistic tradition of Russian Chekhov studies, the author argues that judgement in Chekhov's prose is not eliminated but displaced: it migrates from explicit authorial commentary into the selection of detail, the structure of a character's speech, the semantics of names, the reactions of other figures and the compositional arrangement of the text. Material from the stories "The Death of a Government Clerk", "The Chameleon", "Fat and Thin", "The Grasshopper", "The Man in a Case", "Gooseberries", "Ionych", "The Darling" and "The Lady with the Dog" is analysed. It is shown that the evaluative layer of these texts is typically ambivalent and dynamic, so that the reader is invited to complete the judgement independently. The findings may be useful for courses in Russian literature, literary stylistics and translation studies.
Keywords: Chekhov, evaluation, characterisation, artistic detail, speech portrait, irony, authorial position, short story.

Introduction

Few writers in the history of Russian literature have been read as differently as Chekhov. His contemporaries frequently complained that he lacked a clear "ideal" and that he described vulgarity, cowardice and boredom without telling the reader what to think of them. Later scholarship turned this reproach into a key to his poetics: the apparent neutrality of the narrator came to be understood as a deliberate artistic strategy rather than an absence of values. The question that remains productive, however, is not whether Chekhov judges his characters, but how the judgement is actually built into the fabric of the text.

Chekhov himself formulated the principle in a well-known letter to A. S. Suvorin of 1 April 1890, where he insisted that the artist should depict horse thieves objectively and trust the reader to supply the missing subjective element [3]. This statement is often quoted as proof of authorial detachment. Yet the same letter makes it clear that objectivity is a technique of presentation, not moral indifference. The evaluative charge is still present; it is simply transferred from the narrator's voice to the reader's inference.

The aim of this article is to describe the principal means by which evaluative characteristics of characters are created in Chekhov's short fiction and to show how these means interact. The material consists of stories written between 1883 and 1899, a period that covers both the early humorous miniatures signed "Antosha Chekhonte" and the mature prose of the 1890s. The methods applied are close reading, contextual and stylistic analysis, and elements of the linguistic description of evaluative meaning.

Theoretical framework: evaluation as a textual category

In linguistics, evaluation is treated as a modal component of meaning that expresses the speaker's attitude to an object on a scale of "good – bad". N. D. Arutyunova emphasises that an evaluative statement always presupposes a subject of evaluation, an object and a set of norms against which the object is measured [1]. E. M. Wolf distinguishes between explicit evaluation,

conveyed by lexical units with an inherent positive or negative sense, and implicit evaluation, which arises from context, presupposition and pragmatic inference [8]. This distinction proves especially fruitful for Chekhov, whose texts contain relatively few overtly judgemental words but a dense network of implicit signals.

In literary studies, the problem has been approached through the notion of the authorial position and the "point of view". A. P. Chudakov demonstrated that the mature Chekhov tends to filter the narrative through the consciousness of the character, so that the world is shown as the hero perceives it, while the narrator refrains from correcting this perception [4]. V. B. Kataev, in turn, described Chekhov's method as a consistent "cognitive" scepticism: the writer tests his characters' beliefs and reveals how general ideas break down when confronted with the complexity of life [5]. Both approaches suggest that evaluation in Chekhov is relational. It emerges from the gap between what a character says or believes and what the text allows the reader to see.

For the purposes of this study, an evaluative characteristic is therefore understood broadly as any element of the text that shapes the reader's attitude towards a character. Such elements may be lexical, syntactic, compositional or intertextual, and they can be attributed to the narrator, to other characters, or to the character himself.

Restrained authorial judgement and the evaluative detail

The most characteristic instrument of evaluation in Chekhov is the artistic detail [2; 4]. Instead of declaring that a person has become spiritually empty, the narrator registers a physical or material sign that makes such a conclusion almost unavoidable. In "Ionych" the decline of Dmitry Startsev is traced not through commentary but through a sequence of changes in his body, his means of transport and his habits. The young doctor who once walked several miles to the Turkins' house on foot later rides in a troika with bells, grows stout and short of breath, and in the final chapter is compared to a pagan god rather than a human being. The comparison is ironic: the grandeur it suggests only underlines how much of the man has disappeared. The evening hobby of counting banknotes taken from his patients completes the picture without a single directly negative epithet.

A similar technique governs "The Man in a Case". Belikov's galoshes, umbrella, dark glasses and the cotton wool in his ears form a coherent system of objects that materialise his fear of life. The detail here is not decorative; it works as a condensed metaphor of a social type. Because the objects accumulate, the reader moves from amusement to a sense of oppression, and the evaluation of the character changes with this emotional shift. Belikov is ridiculous, but he is also dangerous, since a whole town has learned to live by his favourite phrase "something might go wrong".

In "Gooseberries" the evaluative detail is placed at the culmination of the plot. Nikolai Ivanovich, who has spent his life saving money for an estate with a gooseberry bush, finally tastes his own berries and finds them delightful. The narrator, his brother Ivan Ivanovich, notes that they were hard and sour. The discrepancy between the character's rapture and the objective taste of the fruit becomes a judgement on the illusion of private happiness. The repeated comparison of the landowner with a pig reinforces the verdict, yet it is given through the eyes of a narrator who is himself not free from bitterness, so that even this evaluation is not absolute.

Speech portraits, names and self-exposure

A second group of evaluative means is connected with the character's own speech [7]. In the early humorous stories Chekhov often allows figures to condemn themselves through what and how they say. The police inspector Ochumelov in "The Chameleon" changes his verdict about a dog every time he hears a new version of who its owner might be, and his coat, which he orders to be taken off and put back on, mirrors the shifts of his opinion. No comment from the narrator is

required: the structure of the dialogue itself exposes servility as the only stable feature of the character.

In “Fat and Thin” the evaluation is encoded in a sudden change of speech register. As soon as the thin man learns that his old school friend has reached a high rank, his language fills with deferential forms, diminutives and a nervous giggle, while his wife and son seem to shrink physically. The scene shows how social hierarchy deforms speech and posture, and it is this deformation, rather than any explicit remark, that provokes the reader’s mixture of laughter and disgust. The narrator’s note that the fat man felt sick at such reverence indicates that the evaluation is shared even inside the story world.

“The Death of a Government Clerk” brings this strategy to its extreme. Ivan Chervyakov’s endless apologies to the general on whom he has accidentally sneezed reveal a consciousness entirely shaped by fear of rank. The grotesque ending, in which the clerk dies without taking off his uniform, turns a comic misunderstanding into a sad commentary on self-humiliation. Notably, Chekhov does not present Chervyakov simply as a victim; the clerk is also the author of his own misfortune, and the evaluation therefore combines pity and irony.

Speaking names form an additional evaluative layer, particularly in the early period. The surname Ochumelov is associated with the Russian verb meaning “to go out of one’s mind”, Chervyakov evokes a worm, and Belikov suggests pallor and lifelessness. In the later prose such transparent names become rarer, yet the semantic play does not disappear entirely: the name and patronymic of Startsev, reduced in the title to the familiar “Ionych”, records the transformation of a person into a type known to the whole town.

Evaluation through other characters and compositional irony

In the mature stories the judgement of a character is frequently distributed among several voices. “The Grasshopper” offers a clear example. Throughout the story the reader sees Dr Dymov mainly through the eyes of his wife Olga Ivanovna, who regards him as an ordinary, unremarkable man compared with the artists and singers she admires. Only after Dymov’s death, when his colleague speaks of him as a rare and talented scientist, does she realise that she has overlooked a great man. The evaluation is thus constructed by contrast between two perspectives, and the late recognition serves simultaneously as praise of Dymov and as a verdict on the heroine’s superficiality.

“The Darling” demonstrates how ambiguous such distributed evaluation can be. Olenka has no opinions of her own and repeats the views of each man she loves, from the theatre manager to the timber merchant and the veterinary surgeon. The story invites both a satirical and a sympathetic reading, and the history of its reception confirms this duality: L. N. Tolstoy, in his well-known afterword, interpreted the heroine as an image of selfless love, whereas many later critics stressed the comic emptiness of her personality. The very possibility of such opposed interpretations indicates that Chekhov deliberately leaves the final judgement open.

The most complex case is “The Lady with the Dog”, where evaluation changes along with the character. At the beginning Gurov is presented as a cynical man who calls women “the lower race” yet cannot live without them. The narrative does not condemn him directly; instead, it follows the gradual awakening of genuine feeling. A key moment is the episode in which Gurov, wishing to share his experience, hears from an acquaintance only a remark that the sturgeon had been slightly off. The banality of this response evaluates the milieu from which the hero is trying to escape, while Gurov himself begins to appear in a new, more sympathetic light. Evaluation here is not a fixed label but a process, and its dynamics constitute much of the story’s meaning.

Composition also performs an evaluative function. Chekhov often frames the main story with the voice of a narrator or listener, as in the so-called “little trilogy”, where the stories of Belikov, Nikolai Ivanovich and Alekhin are told by Burkin, Ivan Ivanovich and Alekhin himself. The framing allows the writer to show not only the hero of the inner story but also the limits of the narrator’s own understanding. As D. Rayfield observes, Chekhov’s storytellers are rarely fully reliable spokesmen for the author [6]. As a result, the reader evaluates two levels at once: the character being described and the person who describes him.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that the widespread view of Chekhov as an impartial observer requires refinement. His characters are constantly evaluated, but the evaluation is predominantly implicit and is realised through a coordinated set of means: the expressive detail, the speech portrait, the speaking name, the perspective of other figures and the compositional frame. In the early humorous stories these means tend to produce a relatively unambiguous satirical effect, whereas in the prose of the 1890s they create a layered, often contradictory image in which irony coexists with compassion.

A further conclusion concerns the role of the reader. Because Chekhov rarely closes the evaluative circle himself, the act of judgement becomes part of the reader’s experience of the text. This explains both the remarkable interpretive openness of his stories and the persistence of debates about characters such as Olenka or Gurov. Further research might profitably compare the evaluative strategies of the stories with those of Chekhov’s plays and examine how these implicit judgements are preserved or lost in translation into English and other languages.

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