**Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Signature:

_____ _____

Haley Jo Laurila April 15, 2010

*Hamlet* and *The Seagull*: The Theatre for the Future

by

Haley J. Laurila

Adviser

Elena Glazov-Corrigan

Department of Russian

_____

Elena Glazov-Corrigan
Adviser

_____

Juliette Apkarian
Committee Member

_____

Matthew Payne
Committee Member

_____

April 15, 2010

# *Hamlet* and *The Seagull*: The Theatre for the Future

By

Haley Jo Laurila

Adviser

Elena Glazov-Corrigan

An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Russian

2010

Abstract

*Hamlet* and *The Seagull*: The Theatre for the Future
By Haley Jo Laurila

This thesis examines the role of Shakespeare's famous play *Hamlet* in Anton Chekhov's play *The Seagull*. *Hamlet* has played a pivotal role in Russian culture as a vessel for posing many of the most pertinent social, political, and intellectual questions, proving Jan Kott's assertion that *Hamlet* remains a relevant play to this day because of its propensity for absorbing all of the issues of the time of its performance. Echoing his protagonist in *The Seagull* in wanting artistic innovation, Chekhov was a harsh critic of traditional theatre and recognized in *Hamlet* the potential for revitalizing the stagnant Russian stage. While scholars acknowledge the relationship between *Hamlet* and *The Seagull*, they seem to stop short of fully illuminating the importance of this relationship, not only for the development of Chekhov's new drama, but also for the development of modern theatre. The plays' similarities extend to the protagonists, their relationship dynamics, and perhaps most importantly, the open contemplative space so important in both plays. But Chekhov also reversed many aspects of *Hamlet* for *The Seagull*, and consequently, expanded the space for interpretation in his play. Chekhov's new dramatic technique maintains the multiplicity of interpretation so key to his artistic vision. The play's action is disjointed; there is a lack of explication of the characters' motivations or pasts; the dialogue is full of miscommunication; there is no climactic moment and no resolution at the play's end. Chekhov's major innovation, one that is foreshadowed in *Hamlet*, is the unfilled spaces built into the dramatic structure, action, and dialogue of the play, all of which prevents the play from being finalized. The unfilled spaces, or what Iser terms blanks, imbue both *Hamlet* and *The Seagull* with their artistic vitality. *The Seagull*'s innovation points toward the emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd, but more than that, Chekhov's play, developed under the influence of *Hamlet*, anticipates further developments in modern theatre.

# *Hamlet* and *The Seagull*: The Theatre for the Future

By

Haley J. Laurila

Adviser

Elena Glazov-Corrigan

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Russian

2010

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Failures and Successes of *The Seagull*'s First Performances

The first performance of Anton Chekhov's play *The Seagull* was held in St. Petersburg on October 17, 1896. By this time, Chekhov was a well-known writer, and although he had written a few plays before *The Seagull*, he had not yet achieved critical acclaim as a dramatist. Therefore, *The Seagull*, staged in the Imperial Aleksandrinsky Theatre, was a major event, and for Chekhov, an opportunity to challenge the banality of Russian theatre. With characteristic understatement, both in his letters to his friends and in his diaries, he indicated his uncertainty about the play, anxious that its innovative vision would not be successful: "Can you imagine it – I am writing a play which I shall probably not finish before the end of November. I am writing it not without pleasure, though I swear fearfully at the conventions of the stage…I read of Ozerov's failure and was sorry, for nothing is more painful than failing" (*Letters on the Short Story* 145). He was particularly nervous about its inaugural performance, and yet in letters dated just before the night of the first performance, he seemed quite optimistic, remarking that Madame Vera Kommissarzhevskaya, who played the role of Nina, acted "amazingly"[1] (*Letters on the Short Story* 147). She even reduced everyone to tears during rehearsal. However, his hopes for a warm reception on the part of the audience were crushed – the reception was not merely indifferent; it was so completely negative that the beautiful Kommissarzhevskaya was reduced to a state of speechlessness (*Letters of Anton Chekhov*, 284).[2] On that night, *The Seagull* was a spectacular failure.

Several eyewitness accounts suggest that the reason for the play's failure was a major gap between the audience's expectations and the play's actual performance. One of the most telling reports belongs to Lydia Avilova, a great devotee of Chekhov and possibly his mistress for some

[1] Letter to Mikhail Chekhov on October 15, 1896.

[2] Letter to Anatoly Koni on November 11, 1896.

period of time.[3] Avilova was in the audience on the night of *The Seagull*'s debut, and her account is unsparing in describing not only the antagonistic mood of the audience, but also her own incomprehension. According to Avilova's account, the confusion had already set in during Act One, and neither she nor the audience knew what to think about the performance. More than this, they were deeply uncertain about what to expect from the play:

> It is very difficult to describe the feeling with which I looked and listened. The play seemed to have no meaning for me. It seemed to get entirely lost. I strained my ears to catch every word of every character who might be speaking. I listened with the greatest possible attention. But I could not make anything out of the play and it left no impression on me. When Nina Zarechnaya began her monologue, "People, lions, eagles…" I heard a curious noise in the stalls and I seemed to come to with a start. What was the matter? It seemed to me that suppressed laughter passed over the rows of people below, or wasn't it laughter, but an indignant murmur? Whatever it was, it was something unpleasant, something hostile. But it couldn't be! Chekhov was so popular! He was such a favorite with everybody! (Avilov 98)

It is clear, then, that the interpretative conventions of the theatre lovers were so thoroughly undermined that the audience was unable to generate any accessible guidelines that would have assisted in understanding a play like *The Seagull*. In everyone's mind, the performance was meant to be a specific theatrical event – a tribute, in fact, to an older comic actress whose career was celebrated on the popular stage.

The audience undoubtedly believed that they were about to see a comedy, as indicated by *The Seagull*'s description as a "comedy in four acts", but any expectations of lighthearted entertainment were altogether thwarted by their own emerging incomprehension:

> Spectators at the first performance of *The Seagull* who were used to more formal dramatic conventions must have been taken aback by the curious sight of Masha hopping off the stage in Act II because her leg had gone to sleep; or by the way in which all the characters near the end of Act III troop off to say goodbye to

[3] There is considerable debate over whether she and Chekhov were romantically involved, but she did correspond with him through various letters. Avilova writes more extensively about their relationship in her memoir *Chekhov in My Life*.

> Arkadina and Trigorin, and the stage remains for some moments completely empty. (Pitcher 19)

The result was a revolt on the part of the spectators, and even their love for Chekhov as a writer could not reign in the force of their disapproval; the play was interrupted constantly with boos and rancorous laughter. If the proper response to comedy is laughter, and the proper response to tragedy might be tears, Chekhov's play toed that line between comedy and tragedy in a manner that was altogether disconcerting for his audience. The outright disapproval of the play had a clear cause: the audience was deeply uneasy. Sensing their discomfort, Chekhov himself could sit only through the first two acts before he fled St. Petersburg, vowing never to write another play or to permit its performance on the Russian stage.

A month later, however, on November 7, 1896, Chekhov received a letter from Russia's famous judicial and literary figure, Anatoly Koni, who praised of the artistry of *The Seagull*. The importance of the letter cannot be overstressed: Koni's understanding of the play indicated a rare critical insight into Chekhov's artistic intentions. Koni described the play's absurd atmosphere with great aptitude, explaining its combination of comedic and tragic elements and the genuine nature of the characters' suffering in this unlikely setting, all of which imbued the play with an undeniable mixture of irony and compassion:

> *The Seagull* is a work whose conception, freshness of ideas and thoughtful observations of life situations raise it out of the ordinary. It is life itself on stage with all its tragic alliances, eloquent thoughtlessness and silent sufferings – the sort of everyday life that is accessible to everyone and understood in its cruel internal irony by almost no one, the sort of life that is so accessible and close to us that at times you forget you're in a theater and you feel capable of participating in the conversation taking place in front of you. And how good the ending is! How true to life it is that not she, the seagull, commits suicide (which a run-of-the-mill playwright, out for his audience's tears, would be sure to have done), but the young man who lives in an abstract future and "has no idea" of the why and wherefore of what goes on around him. I also very much like the device of cutting off the play abruptly, leaving the spectator to sketch in the dreary, listless, indefinite future for himself. (*Letters of Anton Chekhov*, 285)

Chekhov responded to Koni immediately. In a letter dated November 11, 1896, Chekhov confirmed that the audience's response was a product of a genuine misunderstanding between what was so accurately described by Koni as the elements of the absurd and what could have struck the viewers as altogether nonsensical and even idiotic. The dividing line between the audience's understanding of the characters as dramatically unsound and unreal, on the one hand, and Koni's definitive description, on the other, suggested that a new theatrical taste had to be forged. Otherwise, in Koni's words, "everyday life" would be "understood in its cruel internal irony by almost no one."

For the audience, the real problem of *The Seagull* was not merely the disorientation between comedy and tragedy, but rather between meaningless action and the absurd. As a result, the spectators, having misunderstood the play's absurd elements, reduced Chekhov's carefully-crafted play to a purposeless farce. Although a new theatrical genre was being forged, its initial failure was so devastating that Chekhov began doubting his talent for dramatic writing altogether. According to his intentions, this dividing line between meaninglessness and the absurd was pivoted on the power of the play's internal irony and the audience's ability to be shaken by it. At the time of his response to Koni, however, Chekhov seemed convinced that in the Aleksandrinsky Theatre, neither the audience, nor the actors, nor the play's director were able to understand the internal irony and indefiniteness of *The Seagull*, which had him wondering whether he had any skill as a dramatist:

> After the performance, that night and the following day, people kept assuring me that my characters were all idiots and that my play was dramatically unsound, ill-considered, incomprehensible, even nonsensical, and so on and so forth. You can see the situation I was in. It was a failure I couldn't have imagined in my worst dreams. I was embarrassed and chagrined, and left Petersburg filled with all sorts of doubts. I thought that if I had written and staged a play so obviously abounding

> in monstrous shortcomings, then I had lost all sensitivity and that consequently my mechanism had run down once and for all. (*Letters of Anton Chekhov*, 284)

It took several months, and the encouraging correspondence with Koni, for Chekhov to understand that the failure of the play was not merely the writer's fault. If the delicate emotional balance between the play's characters was not executed with subtlety and care, the performance would quickly turn into a dramatic farce in which the underlying meaning of the play would be altogether lost. Chekhov's situation was not an enviable one. The Aleksandrinsky Theatre was the foremost theatre in Russia, and yet its performance of *The Seagull* was plagued with misdirection, overacting, and melodrama. Moreover, the actors lost their confidence in front of a less than polite audience. Later performances in St. Petersburg met with less indignation, but *The Seagull* did not become a spectacular success until it came into the hands of the founders of the Moscow Art Theatre.[4]

It is quite astonishing how quickly the Russian theatre was able to adapt to this new, as-yet barely articulated artistic taste embodied in *The Seagull*, Chekhov's worst fears notwithstanding. When Konstantin Stanislavsky and Victor Nemirovich-Danchenko decided to stage the play as the second production for the newly established Moscow Art Theatre, the fate of *The Seagull* was hung in a dangerous balance. Nemirovich-Danchenko, in a letter to Chekhov, argued that *The Seagull* was important not only for the revitalization of Russian theatre, but for the liberation of art from stagnation:

> From among contemporary Russian authors I have decided to cultivate *only* the most gifted, those as yet insufficiently understood… I have made it my goal to show the marvellous pictures of life in the works 'Ivanov' and 'The Sea Gull'. The latter especially inspires my enthusiasm, and I am ready to defend the statement that the latent drama and tragedy in *each* figure of the plays will also

[4] It is significant that the creative energy of *The Seagull* was sensed with more insight in Moscow than in St. Petersburg, for Moscow, in the mind of many commentators was more attuned to Russia's changing character than the more European Imperial capital. On this theme see Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 147-216.

> inspire the enthusiasm of the theatrical public, provided they are shown in a skilful, unhackneyed, conscientious production. Perhaps the play will not provoke storms of applause, but that a genuine production with spontaneous qualities, liberated from routine, will prove a triumph of art – this I can guarantee. (N-Dantchenko 141)

Convincing Chekhov to accept his request proved to be a nearly insurmountable obstacle: Chekhov simply did not believe that the play could become a success. A deeply sensitive and self-conscious writer, he shirked from the slightest possibility of another failure; and with the disastrous first performance still on his mind, he adamantly refused to give *The Seagull* to the new Moscow Art Theatre. Yet Nemirovich-Danchenko persisted and eventually won the right to put on a production of *The Seagull*, which premiered on December 17, 1898, only two years after the debacle in St. Petersburg.

In hindsight, it is clear that the eventual triumph of *The Seagull* would not have been achieved without the assistance of the most innovative and visionary forces in the Russian theatre. In the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavsky both directed the play and also played the writer Boris Trigorin, and Nemirovich-Danchenko was in charge of the interpretation of the play's content.[5] While Nemirovich-Danchenko's reaction to Constantine Treplev indicated that he thought Chekhov's protagonist a luckless weakling, the role was given to a young student of Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, who, to the surprise of all, identified not only with Treplev, but particularly with his lines[6]: "We need new forms. New forms are needed, and if we can't have them, then we had better have nothing at all" (Chekhov 70). Treplev's passion,

---

[5] Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky disagreed considerably over the interpretation of The Seagull. Stanislavsky felt that Nina was a failure and Treplev a artistic visionary, while Nemirovich- Danchenko interpreted her in a more positive light. See Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art.*

[6] Meyerhold was with the Moscow Art Theater only four years, yet the dream for the new theater was already being articulated in 1898, in the conflict between Stanislavsky-Trigorin and Treplev-Meyerhold, who both had different ideas for the future of art, indicative of the atmosphere of fervent innovation signified in the Russian avant-garde.

misunderstood altogether by the older actors, took on a deeply personal meaning for the young generation, and Meyerhold's interpretation of the character essentially rewrote the view that Treplev was a degenerate and a failure. A theatrical miracle, a real step forward for the Russian theatre, was unfolding amidst differing expectations, dreams, and talent, and new emerging schools of dramatic thought. As a result, the efforts of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko met with tremendous accolades, and *The Seagull* was declared a stunning success. Nemirovich-Danchenko described the mood in the theatre after the first curtain close as one pervaded by an atmosphere of wonder followed by thunderous applause from the audience:

> Life unfolded in such frank simplicity that the auditors seemed almost embarrassed to be present; it was as if they eavesdropped behind a door or peeped through a window. As you know, there is no heroism of any kind in the play, no stormy theatrical experiences, no lurid spots to invoke sympathy, such spots as usually serve the actor to display his talents. Here was nothing but shattered illusions, and tender feelings crushed by contact with rude reality. (N-Dantchenko 188)

The readiness for risk and innovation, realized when Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko insisted that the play be staged in Moscow, turned into a legendary accomplishment, and it was Nemirovich-Danchenko who proclaimed that in the midst of the applause, that Chekhov's play had inaugurated unprecedented innovation: "The New Theatre was born" (N-Dantchenko 189). *The Seagull*'s success was not merely a triumph for the writer, since Chekhov's dramatic masterpiece also solidified the Moscow Art Theatre's reputation as a vanguard of "new forms."

Chekhov, it must be observed, was not fully at peace with the Moscow Art Theatre's production of his play. While the Moscow audience fell in love with *The Seagull*, the writer complained. He disliked the acting and praised only the early acting of Komissarzhevskaya[7] in

[7] Komissarzhevskaya, one of the most celebrated actresses of the twentieth century Russian theatre, eventually opened her own theatre in Petersburg in 1904 and played in considerable role in the advancement of Russian Symbolism

St. Petersburg and the intelligence of Meyerhold. Chekhov particularly disliked Stanislavsky's psychological interpretation of the play, which tended to diverge from the more abstract spectacle that Chekhov originally intended.[8] Nonetheless, Chekhov's notorious reticence and reluctance to explain his own wishes or the motivations and backgrounds of his characters allowed Stanislavsky to do what the great director did best -- to uncover buried subtexts in the dialogues of *The Seagull*. Stanislavsky also favored a naturalistic approach to theatre, so his imagining of the theatrical background emphasized the sound of rain or the sound of crickets chirping; he provided a detailed description for how each scene played out, including when the actors would sneeze, when dogs would bark, and when horse bells would ring. These naturalistic details were meant to "assist the spectator to get the feel of the sad monotonous life of the characters" (qtd. in Williams 110). Chekhov, however, did not approve. According to Vsevolod Meyerhold, in a conversation between Chekhov and *The Seagull*'s actors at the Moscow Art Theatre on September 11, 1898, the dramatist expressed not only his disapproval of the naturalistic background, but his belief that that the theatrical performance must emphasize the fact that the play is art:

> "Why all this? asked Chekhov in a dissatisfied tone of voice.
> "It's real," answered the actor.
> "It's real," repeated Chekhov laughing, and after a little pause said: "The stage is art. Kramskoi has a genre painting with wonderfully painted faces. How would it be if the nose were cut out from one of the faces and a real nose inserted? The nose will be 'real' but the painting is spoiled." (Meyerhold and Beeson 138)

According to Meyerhold's recollections, Chekhov's goal was not to recreate everyday reality with accurate detail, but to illuminate its hidden aspects through the medium of art. In

[8] Letter to M. Gorky, 9 May 1899: "I cannot judge the play with equanimity, because the seagull herself (Roxanova) gave such an abominable performance – she blubbered loudly throughout – and the Trigorin (the writer) [Stanislavsky] walked around the stage and spoke like a paralytic. He is not supposed to have "a will of his own," but the way the actor conveyed it was nauseating to behold." *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, 357.

Chekhov's mind, his text did not need any realistic "help" or assistance for interpretation. As Chekhov later observed, "the stage requires a certain convention: you have no fourth wall. Besides that, the stage is art, the stage reflects the quintessence of life and nothing superfluous should be introduced" (Meyerhold and Beeson 139). These disagreements notwithstanding, the force of innovation was undeniable, and between 1896 and 1900 *The Seagull* entered the theatre world's repertoire with a bang.[9] Much has been written since these occasions of *The Seagull*'s spectacular failure and equally spectacular success, albeit tinged with conflict and disagreement, and critics still argue about other authors and works of art that may have influenced Chekhov either in his conception of the play or in his desire to create new forms of art.[10]

It is the argument of this thesis that underlying The Seagull's conception and informing its spirit, there operates yet another play which has been changing theatre all over the world for many centuries – William Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* While critics have already observed the role of Shakespeare in *The Seagull*, there is little realization of the overall importance of *Hamlet*'s influence and the role of the play in Chekhov's conviction that "the stage would become art only in the future; now, it only struggles for that future" (Gromov 301).[11] Here Chekhov followed a deeply seated tradition of the intelligentsia of Eastern Europe,[12] and particularly of Russia, who recognized their own dilemmas in the character of Hamlet and readily identified with the unfortunate prince. Summarizing this theme in the Russian nineteenth century, Grigori Kozintsev, the Soviet director who achieved his dream of making Shakespeare's play into a film,

---

[9] The play did not merely ensure the success of the Moscow Art Theatre (the emblem of which became none other than the seagull) but also with the careers of many of Russia's most famous and influential figures.

[10] See Jacob H. Adler, "Two "Hamlet" Plays: "The Wild Duck" and "The Seagull"," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 1.2 (1970-1971): 226-248. Also, Michael Green, "The Russian Symbolist Theater: Some Connections," *Pacific Coast Philology*, 12 (Oct., 1977): 5-14.

[11] "Сцена станет искусством лишь в будущем, теперь же она лишь борьба за будущее."

[12] See Zdenek Stribrny, *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* (2002).

spoke with great respect about literary critic Vissarion Belinksy and the writer and social critic Alexander Herzen, who both viewed *Hamlet* as a vessel for posing pertinent social, cultural and political questions. Against a more traditional reading of Hamlet's character, Vissarion Belinsky argued for Hamlet as an individual of great personal strength: "By nature, Hamlet is a strong man. His bitter irony, his abrupt outbursts, his passionate tricks in the conversation with his mother indicate disdain and unconcealed abhorrence concerning his uncle – and all this bears witness to energy and greatness of spirit" (qtd. Kozintsev 117). In emphasizing Hamlet's forcefulness, Belinsky particularly commented on the progression of the play from "infantile unconscious harmony through disharmony [in] to future manly harmony" (qtd. Kozintsev 117-8).

Alexander Herzen not only agreed with Belinsky's assessment, but identified with Hamlet, observing that "Hamlet's character is largely common to all men, particularly in an era of doubt and hesitation, in an era when they are conscious of some sort of black deeds taking place nearby, some betrayal of the great in order to serve the insignificant…" (qtd. Kozintsev 117). Kozintsev, therefore, remarked that Herzen's comment had identified the crux of the interest in Hamlet, which, as far as Russia's subsequent history is concerned, would only intensify. Kozintsev particularly noted Herzen's praise of Hamlet's "hellish" laughter which indicated that the prince was a "frightening and great" man who found an ability to laugh in a moment of sorrow (Kozintsev 122). This laughter, Kozintsev noted, rings out in the silence and hints of rebellion and the possibility of arising against a dominant, highly structured system.[13]

[13] "There are various kinds of silence. The silence of the thirties was imposed. Muteness betokened loyalty. They made a career of meekness. The speechless memory, noiseless sorrow, and gagged anger were terrifying. Reason was replaced by instruction, conscience by ceremony. You were not supposed to think; just know the job. The police protected the silence, and it was guarded by sleuths; they oppressed by persecution if not be the noose, by despair if not be poverty" (Kozintsev 123).

Such interpretations of *Hamlet* explain the role of Shakespeare's protagonist within the ongoing intellectual discussions emerging out of the nineteenth century Russian society. In contrast to Herzen and Belinsky, Ivan Turgenev, the writer whose fame deeply troubled Boris Trigorin in *The Seagull*, chose Hamlet's personality as a symbol of a characteristically Russian predicament, when he addressed the Russian reading public in 1860 in a speech subsequently reproduced in print under the title "Hamlet and Don Quixote." According to Turgenev, there were two opposing sides of man's nature, a perennial conflict exemplified by the characters of Hamlet and Don Quixote.[14] For Turgenev, Hamlet was a man of inaction and, consequently, the ultimate egotist while Don Quixote was an enthusiastic and idealistic altruist. Preferring the Don Quixotes of the world, Turgenev did acknowledge, nonetheless, that neither Hamlet nor Don Quixote existed within society in pure form, but he did lament that there were far more Hamlets in the world than Don Quixotes (Turgenev 547-564).[15]

Chekhov, therefore, knew all too well Russia's resistance to action, but he saw in *Hamlet* not merely a reflection of the Russian psychological and social condition; he viewed the play as a vibrant impulse of artistic creativity, noting that Hamlet remained a living theater on Russia's stagnant contemporary stage: "[b]etter a badly acted Hamlet, than boring emptiness (*skuchnoe nichego*)" (qtd. Winner 103). Moreover, Chekhov had plans to write a version of *Hamlet* for the vaudeville stage to be called "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," and the significance of his desire to rewrite a well-known tragedy as a comedy still needs to be more carefully examined, for its implications for Chekhov's future artistic vision remains somewhat opaque. In letters written to his friend Alexander Lazarev-Gruzinsky in 1887, Chekhov outlines his requirements for a

[14] The difference between Hamlet and Don Quixote also demonstrates the dichotomy between tragedy and comedy, a dichotomy that Chekhov also opposes.

[15] Turgenev's preference for the Don Quixotes of the world reflected his desire for social change. He believed that the indecision of Hamlet was not suited to ensuring social progress.

vaudeville production of *Hamlet*: "1) complete confusion; 2) each character must possess individual features and idiosyncrasies and must speak in a language of his own; 3) no long speeches; 4) uninterrupted movement…6) it must be full of criticisms on the prevailing conditions of the stage, for without criticism our vaudeville won't be any use" (qtd. in Magarshack 55). The very idea of a vaudeville *Hamlet*, a more comical interpretation of one of the world's most widely recognized plays, provides then a significant clue as to Chekhov's artistic mindset. There is also an element of the absurd in the thought of the revered *Hamlet* as part of a form of popular entertainment that was intended to delight and amuse people. The vaudeville *Hamlet* never materialized, but what Chekhov did create was *The Seagull*.[16]

*Hamlet* is often viewed as a symbol of traditional theatre, yet Chekhov did not think of *Hamlet* as a traditional play, but as a catalyst for the revitalization of the stagnant Russian theatre. Vsevolod Meyerhold, Treplev of the 1898 production and eventually a world-famous actor and producer in his own right, thought that *Hamlet* was the greatest play ever written because of its propensity to produce a great number of interpretations, all different in character and content. According to Dmitri Shostakovich's recollection, Meyerhold liked to repeat that "if all the plays ever written suddenly disappeared and only *Hamlet* miraculously survived, all the theaters in the world would be saved. They could all put on *Hamlet* and be successful and draw audiences" (Shostakovich, 83). This thesis will attempt to demonstrate that it was precisely *Hamlet*'s openness to multiple interpretations that deeply influenced Chekhov's conception of "the theatre of the future" and that, guided by his own need to revolutionize the stage, he turned to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for the means of perpetuating his new theatre form. This thesis will

[16] Some critics have commented on the relationship between *Hamlet* and an earlier Chekhov play, *Ivanov*; while there are references to Shakespeare's play within the text, but most admit that his dramatic technique was not fully developed with this play. Chekhov did call his character Ivanov a "superfluous Hamlet."

also argue that Chekhov learned from *Hamlet* this open-ended world of drama and that in reinterpreting Shakespeare's famous play for the Russian stage in the form of *The Seagull*, Chekhov incited the birth of modern theatre and its tinge of the absurd, just as centuries before Shakespeare's plays had laid the foundation for theatre in England.

In developing this radical view of Chekhov's apprenticeship under Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, this thesis will consist of four chapters. Chapter 1 will examine the relationship between *The Seagull* and *Hamlet* and the scholarly interpretations of this relationship; it will argue that modern scholarship on the influence of *Hamlet* on *The Seagull* has a tendency to ignore the multiplicity of interpretation and potentiality built into that relationship. Chapter 2 will examine Chekhov's reversals in the structure of *Hamlet*, including the gender relations and the role of theatre in society; the analysis of the resonances between the two plays will show that it is precisely in the radical rewriting of theatre's most widely recognized play that the widest space for thought emerges in Chekhov's masterpiece. Chapter 3 will expand the meaning of *The Seagull* in order to erase the possibility for a single interpretation. It is the intent of this chapter to show that while major plotlines of Hamlet were realigned and others were negated, this multiplicity of interpretation becomes the key to Chekhov's dramatic art. Chapter 4 will conclude the thesis with an examination the connection between *The Seagull* and the Theatre of the Absurd.

## Chapter 1: Juxtaposing the Plays' Protagonists: Revealing the Significance of the *Hamlet*-*Seagull* Relationship

Critics of Anton Chekhov have observed that in his mind *Hamlet* served as a force of innovation in the Russian theatre and a powerful antidote against stagnation.[17] As a very young man, Chekhov reviewed a performance of *Hamlet* in the Pushkin Theatre in 1882. Although Chekhov disliked the acting of Ivanov-Kozel'skij, who played Hamlet in this production, the young writer not only praised Shakespeare and the play itself, but already conceived an interpretation of the prince's character that conflicted with the traditional theatrical view in Russia, as Chekhov noted in his review: "Hamlet was incapable of whining. A man's tears are valuable and must not be wasted (*nado dorozhit imi*) on the stage. … Hamlet was a man of indecision but he was never a coward" (qtd. Winner 103). The melodramatic portrayal represented all that the young writer despised about traditional theatre, and Ivanov-Kozel'skij's performance, according to Chekhov was unrefined and lacked finesse. Yet it is noteworthy that it was on this particularly occasion that he reaffirmed his preference for "a badly acted Hamlet" over "boring emptiness (*skuchnoe nichego*)" (qtd. Winner 103). Contained within this seemingly ordinary review, then, is the origin of Chekhov's inspiration for *The Seagull*.

There is, however, ongoing critical debate over precisely how influential Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was for Chekhov when he was writing *The Seagull*, and many scholars often underestimate the significance of similarities between the two plays by neglecting to mention their integral relationship. Yet several note a few clearly delineated similarities. The structure of *The Seagull*, for example, incorporates the play-within-a-play construction; the relationship

[17] Chekhov once wrote, "Shakespeare must be played everywhere for the sake of letting in fresh air, if not for the sake of instruction or some other more or less lofty purpose." Magarshack, *Chekhov the Dramatist* 28.

between Treplev and his mother mirrors that of Hamlet and Gertrude; Nina is a new Ophelia; and direct lines from *Hamlet* are quoted twice. In both of these instances, as we shall see below, the significance of Shakespeare's text tends to covertly summarize the problematic nature of the Russian play. However, according to Zinovii Paperny's analysis, the similarities extend much deeper than what seems to be immediately obvious. One of the few critics to insist on the central influence of Shakespeare, Paperny claims the omnipresence of Shakespearean text: "Like the ghost of Hamlet's father [Shakespeare] appears in the play and exercises an unseen influence on the course of the action and on its character. Associations with *Hamlet* enrich our perception of *The Seagull* and enter into the very structure of Chekhov's play" (Paperny 165). This chapter will not only accept Paperny's position; it will support his view and those of other critics working on this subject. After a brief overview of the critical literature on the similarities between the two plays, this chapter will extend the lines of comparison beyond the thematic level of the play to include the innovative aspects of the transformation of the theatrical genre analyzed throughout the thesis. In preparing the context of the next chapters, Chapter One will focus on the intertextual echoes that exist between the main characters of both plays.

It is noteworthy that while Chekhov always insisted that *The Seagull* was a comedy rather than a tragedy, he carefully incorporated the tragic environment of *Hamlet* into his play, situating the story within the realm of art rather than politics, or, more precisely, within the politics of art and culture. Konstantin Treplev, the play's main protagonist, is a budding artist longing to create a new kind of theatre, but he is trapped by the wills of his mother and the writer Trigorin, as well as by his own conventional limitations. Treplev, set in opposition to the other characters, embodies the theme of *Hamlet*, that is, the unsolved problem of what direction needs to be taken in a stifling environment that does not allow for definitive action within the realm of

art. In reflecting the setting of *Hamlet* in this manner, Chekhov does not merely adapt Shakespeare's tragedy for the early twentieth century Russian art world, but expands on it, using the play as a template for his own brand of modern theatre. Considering that Chekhov was writing at the turn of the century, a time of a tremendous social and cultural upheaval in his country, his introduction of the play into Russian theatre is reflective of Treplev's desire to introduce new art forms in *The Seagull*.[18]

As a result, Chekhov's new play challenged many of the deeply ingrained facets of traditional theatre. Much of the play's action is not actually seen by an audience; a plot, if one truly exists, is indiscernible; the play lacks a climax and a resolution; and there are no positive or negative protagonists. Contemporary critics were not initially impressed by the play's lack of an encompassing message, but that too was part of Chekhov's exploration of a new art form. However, a thorough understanding of the relationship between *Hamlet* and *The Seagull* is necessary before one comprehends Chekhov's innovative new theatrical form. This relationship cannot be overstressed. As already noted above in the Introductory chapter, Shakespeare has been a profoundly significant figure in Russian culture,[19] his name woven into the patterns of significant social, political, and cultural changes of Russian history.[20] The power of Hamlet's indecision, however, was remembered not only in the moments of confrontation with the toxic and inept system of Russian governance; Hamlet's predicament and the play as a whole were

[18] It is interesting to not the parallels between Treplev and Chekhov himself. Not only did both want new artistic forms, but both premiered plays to disastrous results.

[19] See Kozintsev, Shakespeare: Time and Conscience, and Rowe, Hamlet, A Window on Russia, for a more in-depth examination of Hamlet's role in Russian intellectual history.

[20] Shakespeare has led a particularly vibrant life in Russian culture. Literature: Nikolai Leskov, "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk," Ivan Turgenev, "King Lear of the Steppes." Poetry: "Hamlet" by Anna Akhmatova, "Hamlet" by Boris Pasternak, who also translated Shakespeare's play. Music: Tchaikovsky, *Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy*, Dmitri Shostakovich, music for Grigori Kozintsev's 1964 film *Hamlet* and 1971 film *King Lear*. Shakespeare has seeped into every facet and time period of Russian culture and history, and these are but a few examples.

also a creative force in Russian culture. Chekhov was able to direct this creativity into his understanding of the theatre's potential. Enumerating the intricate details of the precise instances of textual influence that Shakespeare exerted on Chekhov unveils only half of the story, for there remains a wider question of Shakespeare's role in Chekhov's creative process, in the very dreams of the Russian playwright for the potential of drama. As a preparation for this larger examination (see Chapter 3), however, it is necessary to probe first into the similarities between *Hamlet* and *The Seagull* in so far as these can be traced in the dynamics of relationships between characters, dramatic structure, and the plays' ongoing reflections on the role of art.

The critics who have studied the thematic similarities and contrasts between *Hamlet* and *The Seagull* have detected the resonance that Shakespeare's play has as a transformative force in the character development of Chekhov's play. *Hamlet*'s influence on Chekhov is only casually mentioned, however, or relegated to the background of other weighty scholarly interpretations. Harvey Pitcher, for example, while writing extensively about Chekhov's theatrical masterpieces, only mentions Shakespeare once in his analysis when he writes that "those opening lines of *The Seagull*, about Masha's black dress, sound like an amusing echo of Hamlet's 'inky cloak' and 'customary suits of solemn black'" (Pitcher 46). And even the scholars who have already acknowledged and explored the unique relationship between the two plays are somewhat conservative in their interpretations. For example, Thomas Winner, who first identified the textual parallels between the two works, approaches *Hamlet* merely as a dramatic device that serves as a contrast to *The Seagull* which, in turn, heightens all of the small tragedies and sufferings of Chekhov's characters by the comparison: "It has acted as an ironic commentary on Treplev's pretensions. By suggesting to us somewhat parallel situations and thus playing with our expectations, it has also been used by Chekhov as a device for heightening the tension, as we

are led, in Act IV, into a variant of the Aristotelian peripetia" (111). In that contrast, according to Winner, the audience is made to realize that Treplev is no Hamlet and that Nina is no Ophelia. Yet what Winner misses altogether is the unfinalizability[21] (the open-endedness) of Chekhov's play. He attempts to control the interpretation of what can only be termed an open system, a system of limitless potential that is essential to Chekhov's art. As a result, Winner insists that while "*Hamlet* is a tragedy about genius," Treplev's weakness makes *The Seagull* "a tragedy about mediocrity" (111). Yet it is important to note that regardless of Treplev's "mediocrity," this character has the potential to be a genius, and was such for the famous actor Vsevolod Meyerhold. The dramatic potential for wider interpretations, therefore, is integral to the play, and Chekhov's admiration for Meyerhold supports the view that the writer may not have thought that Treplev was mediocre.[22] Nonetheless, Winner does touch on the idea of something more in the *Hamlet-Seagull* relationship: he alludes, albeit in passing, to the irony and the reversals that Chekhov made in adapting *Hamlet* for his play. But in the end, his conclusions are too tentative, even though he accurately surmises that Chekhov used *Hamlet* to draw a parallel with *The Seagull* in order to heighten the tension in the play and later manipulate an audience's expectations.

T.A. Stroud is another major critic who is drawn to *Hamlet* and *The Seagull*. He chooses to focus only on the correspondence between the plays to the extent to which *Hamlet* influences the mood, characters, and plot of *The Seagull*. He establishes several highly valid points as he concludes that the tinge of irony emerges as the inescapable result of all the textual correspondences:

---

[21] незаконченность, nezakonchennost

[22] Chekhov wrote in his notebook: "Treplyov has no definite aims and that has led to his destruction. His talent is his undoing." (qtd. in Magarshack 194) If Treplev was a complete failure, it was not because he was without talent.

> Could it be that the paradoxical, sometimes impishly perverse playwright was denying the truth about his play as a means of stressing it? He apparently indulged in a similar caprice, we are told, in speaking of his short stories. Even when readers found them "excruciatingly funny", he continued to insist that he was writing "serious stuff". Yet, in a curiously ironical way, he could have meant that a play which inverts a tragedy, stands it neatly on its head, must be a comedy. And not just any tragedy, but *Hamlet*! (Stroud 372)

With these last few sentences, Stroud observes that regardless of Chekhov's intentions, most directors and actors do not stage the play as a comedy. In Stroud's view, Chekhov may have insisted on *The Seagull*'s comedic genre in order to underscore its tragedy, but Stroud eventually acknowledges the possibility that Chekhov inverted the tragedy of *Hamlet* precisely with the intentions of creating a comedy of irony. Stroud's comment could have been even more far-reaching if he had explored the mixture of irony and the play's open-endedness more thoroughly. Nevertheless, while other scholars tend to mention and then overlook *Hamlet's* influence, both Winner and Stroud point to a major area that needs further investigation. In short, while many critics mention Chekhov's "lifelong interest in *Hamlet*," most of them do not delve into the highly fruitful interplay between the two works.

One of the most clearly defined similarities in these two plays exists between Hamlet and Treplev, and this parallel extends to Hamlet's relationship with his mother Queen Gertrude and Claudius, and to Treplev's relationship with his mother Irina and the writer Trigorin. Hamlet, for example, finds that Gertrude's marriage to Claudius makes the new King a great impediment to his own prospects:

> He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother,
> Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,
> Thrown out his angle for my proper life
> And with such coz'nage – is't not perfect conscience? (5.2.63-66)

In a similar manner, Treplev sincerely wants to make a name for himself as an artist pioneering a new kind of theatre; however, his efforts encounter many obstacles, especially in the imposing

figures of his mother Irina and her particular friend, the famous writer Trigorin. Treplev's relationship with his mother and Trigorin, therefore, emphasizes the division between the young generation and the older generation, the division between tradition and innovation. In this context, Chekhov utilizes *Hamlet*, but also constructs a very new meaning for the clash between generations and power struggles. The clash becomes more complex because Chekhov's characters are far more similar to one another than the characters in *Hamlet*.

Nonetheless, like that of Hamlet and Gertrude, Treplev's relationship with his mother is complicated and more detrimental than beneficial. Treplev hates Irina's acting career and success, and at the same time, wants her approval for his artistic experimentation; he is also completely dependent upon her financially. In contrast to Gertrude, Irina is not a queen, but her position in Russian society is of a great importance for the country's cultural life: she is a well-known actress. And if the actors in Hamlet led the life of the travelling vagabonds and represented the only truth found in Denmark, the inner world of the great actress, who lives a very privileged life, is limited and banal: she is self-absorbed and more concerned with living a life of luxury and keeping up appearances than anything else. In sensing his mother's hostility toward him and being humiliated by his dependency, Treplev also hates Trigorin, who has committed the double offense of usurping Irina's attention and having achieved a successful writing career, all of which, from Treplev's perspective, is undeserved. Irina lavishes praise and attention over Trigorin: "You're so brilliant, so clever, you're the best writer of our day – Russia's only hope, so sincere and natural, with your spontaneity and healthy humour" (99). Treplev's hatred of Trigorin reflects Hamlet's animosity toward Claudius for marrying his mother and possibly killing his father in order to usurp the throne of Denmark. Thus, Irina and

Trigorin do not deny Treplev political power, but their influence is equally far reaching, for both lovers at various points within the play completely negate Treplev as an artist.

When Treplev stages his first experimental play, Irina just laughs it off as trivial, leaving Treplev near tears. In *Hamlet*, the play-within-a-play is staged so that Hamlet can deduce the truth and awaken the conscience of the king: "I'll have grounds/ More relative than this: the play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.604-606). However, in *The Seagull*, though no conscience is being stirred after Konstantin's play, the truth is still revealed: his mother is deeply indifferent to his wishes and dreams. After her brother Sorin admonishes her for being so inconsiderate of Treplev's feelings, she scoffs:

> Now he turns out to have written a masterpiece. Oh, for heaven's sake! I suppose he put on this performance, and choked us with sulphur, not as a joke, but to prove a point. He wanted to show us how to write and act. I've really had about enough of this! These constant outbursts and digs against me – well, say what you like, but they'd try anyone's patience. He's a selfish, spoilt little boy. (76)

Furthermore, Irina even feels as though Treplev is constantly attacking her success, and his presence also reminds her of her increasing age and her fading beauty. Although they do share a few tender moments, their antagonism and Irina's self-centeredness constitute a constant obstacle to Irina's understanding of her own son. To ensure that the audience does not miss both the correspondence and the contrast with Shakespeare's tragedy, Chekhov accentuates the complex nature between mother and son by an early interchange in which they both quote lines from *Hamlet*. Irina chides him sardonically in the words of Queen Gertrude:

> O Hamlet, speak no more:
> Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;
> And there I see such black and grained spots
> As will not leave their tinct

Treplev responds with Hamlet's lines:

> Nay, but to live

> In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
> Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
> Over the nasty sty – (74)[23]

In Shakespeare's play, this exchange takes place in the last scene of Act III, after Hamlet has already staged his play entitled "The Mousetrap" about a murderous new King who has wooed the former King's wife. In staging the play, as already observed, Hamlet intends for the play to act as a gauge of Claudius and his mother's reactions, so that he himself can better understand what he must do next. During the pivotal play scene, Claudius realizes that Hamlet knows that he murdered the former king: "The performance of the play within the play before the assembled court is of the highest dramatic significance. Beneath the thinnest disguise of lip-civility, the opposing wills of the villain and the hero meet in a struggle of uncommon tensity, the consequences of which are of the greatest moment for them both" (Lawrence 1). The interchange cited above takes place between Hamlet and his mother after he accuses her of ignorance of King Hamlet's murder and also indifference to his father's death. With all the role changes and reactions, the resonances between the mother-son interchanges deepen and expand the range and significance of *The Seagull*'s central conflict, for Treplev also uses his experimental play to test his audience's reaction. In staging his first play he is attempting to assert his artistic identity. His actress-mother, Irina and the famous writer Trigorin are in the audience, and Treplev's play is his challenge to their traditional art. His audience is unaffected, but, nonetheless, it is a pivotal moment that establishes the complex dynamic between Treplev and his mother that pervades the whole play. The parallel between the two play-within-a-play scenes continues with Treplev's own accusations against his mother and Trigorin for their complacency toward the old ways of art. Additionally, Hamlet is angry with Gertrude for, in a

[23] Shakespeare, 3.4.88-94.

sense, choosing Claudius over him and his father's memory, while Treplev is angry with Irina for choosing the stage and a banal writer like Trigorin over his early dreams of a writing career.

It is worth noting that Treplev and Trigorin do not actually interact in the text of the play until Act 4, and even then their exchange is surprisingly brief. They avoid each other, Treplev constantly running out of the room at Trigorin's approach. In one of these moments, Shakespeare is quoted a second time when Treplev mutters sarcastically, "There's a genius for you. Struts about like Hamlet. Carries a book too. 'Words, words, words'" (88).[24] Nonetheless, when Treplev and Trigorin do finally interact on stage, their exchange is centered on the primary issue underlying their animosity – Treplev's writing and its artistic potential or lack thereof. Their brief conversation reveals that although Trigorin acknowledges Treplev's minor success in publishing a story, he never bothered to read it and never even cut those pages of the magazine where Treplev's story was printed. In this context, the absence of the relationship becomes as significant as a much more explicit interchange between Hamlet and Claudius, and Trigorin's reticence in his awareness of Treplev emerges as equally damaging as Claudius' forwardness. Trigorin clearly does not concern himself with Treplev, and his comments on Treplev's experimental play are remarkable precisely for their indifference. He says, "I couldn't make sense of it. I enjoyed it, though" (78). Of course, jealousy is a factor in this relationship, and undoubtedly, Treplev has nothing but loathsome feelings toward the man whom Irina favors over him and who has built his artistic success upon what Treplev sees as uninventive writing. But Treplev also detests Trigorin for not daring to pursue new forms of artistic expression. Treplev even challenges Trigorin to a duel, an incident which is only alluded to in the text. Still, while the relationship is focused upon writing, the theme of incestuous sexuality, so troublesome to the

[24] "Words, words, words" is Hamlet's reply to Polonius. Treplev's utterance of this famous line in reference to Trigorin hints at the reversals in character relationships that Chekhov made in rewriting *Hamlet*. This will be discussed more in Chapter 2.

Danish Prince, is incorporated, albeit in a somewhat different form, in *The Seagull*. The conflict between Treplev and Trigorin becomes ever more complex, extending beyond that of two rivals competing for fame or even for Irina's attention. In *The Seagull*, instead of the murder of the father figure, there is a seduction and extermination of first love. Trigorin steals Irina's love and the attention of the Russian artistic world, but he also seduces Nina, Treplev's first love. Nina and her love are intrinsically connected to Treplev's artistic success: his play features only her, and as the only voice in the play-within-a-play, she becomes the voice for his new art. Her rejection is the single greatest blow to his confidence, and though the young artist can survive his mother's indifference, he cannot survive the truth that Nina does not love him. Trigorin never marries Nina, and abandons her when she becomes pregnant, only to return to Irina's side. Thus, he usurps (and damages) all the roles to which Treplev aspires.

It is clear, therefore, that the relationship between the central characters of the play - Treplev, Irina, and Trigorin - mirrors that of Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius, and that Nina stands out, partially at least, as a reflection of Ophelia. These resonances between the protagonists are in no way limited to a single interpretive similarity or contrast, since the echoes between the plays create multiple pathways for interpretation. Just as Hamlet, for example, has nothing but disdain for the man who has supposedly killed his father and usurped the loyalty of his mother, Treplev, too, does not accept the world of his mother and her lover, and worries that he may never be able to break free from the imposing legacies of Irina and Trigorin. Worst still, just as Hamlet refuses to participate in the corrupt world of politics and yet knows that he trapped, Treplev too furiously asserts to his mother his love of art and his aversion to its present state: "I'm more talented than all you lot put together…You hacks have a stranglehold on the arts. You don't recognize or put up with anything except what you do yourselves, everything else

you sit on and crush. But I don't accept you! I don't accept either you or him" (97). In contrast to Gertrude's horror at Hamlet's state, Irina does not take Treplev seriously. Her rejection and indifference are, nonetheless, lethal – as lethal as Gertrude's misguided devotion to her son.

His mother's rejection gradually sends Treplev into a deep depression. Once again, Treplev's anguished mental state reminds the audience of Hamlet's possible madness. Both Treplev and Hamlet are tormented by the world that surrounds them, but the parallel in this regard also entails contrasts. Treplev's self-doubt prevents him from essentially breaking free of the artistic stranglehold forced upon him by his mother and Trigorin, for their success weighs on his shoulders and makes him consider himself a nonentity. For this reason, he wishes that his mother were an ordinary woman, so that he would not constantly be reminded of her success or surrounded by famous artists who are so explicitly indifferent to him. He laments bitterly:

> Who am I? What am I? I left the university in my third year, 'for reasons outside our control', as editors sometimes say. I'm no good at anything, I haven't a penny to my name and my passport description is 'provincial shopkeeper, resident of Kiev'. That, you see, was my father's official status, though he was well known on the stage himself. So when all these musicians, actors and writers deigned to notice me in her drawing room, they looked as if they were wondering how anyone could be quite such a worm. I could tell what they thought – I suffered agonies of humiliation. (70) [25]

This statement contains the only mention of Treplev's father in the play, and it reveals that he too was an actor, emphasizing that the world of the theatre in Russia is meant to remind the audience of the Danish royal court. Treplev feels that perhaps he too should be on the stage if only

---

[25] "Кто я? Что я? Вышел из третьего курса университета по обстоятельствам, как говорится, от редакции не зависящим, никаких талантов, денег ни гроша, а по паспорту я - киевский мещанин. Мой отец ведь киевский мещанин, хотя тоже был известным актером. Так вот, когда, бывало, в ее гостиной все эти артисты и писатели обращали на меня свое милостивое внимание, то мне казалось, что своими взглядами они измеряли мое **ничтожество**, - я угадывал их мысли и страдал от унижения..." The English text does not quite capture the meaning of the word 'ничтожество' which can is more accurately translated as "nonentity" or "insignificance."

because he was born from two actors, except that Treplev has no use for the old stage and harbors a need to make his own way and deny the world of his parents.

Hamlet's so-called existential despair is, therefore, matched by the young protagonist of *The Seagull*. Treplev's cries of "Who am I?" become reminiscent of Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" speech in which Hamlet contemplates his place in Denmark's unfolding political drama, just as Treplev continually questions his identity in the artistic world. Despite Treplev's greatest efforts, the form of the art of the future eludes him. Dorn, after seeing the play in the first act, warns Treplev that "a work of art must express a clear, precise idea. You must know why you write, or else – if you take this picturesque path without knowing where you're going you'll lose your way and your gifts will destroy you" (80). Once again, the plurality of interpretations that emerge when *Hamlet* is compared to *The Seagull* makes the audience question whether Treplev's uncertainty is a sign of his genius or his failure. His depression then can be understood either as the depression of a weakling or that of a major artist misunderstood by a mediocre crowd that pretends to represent art.

By the end of the play, which takes place two years later, Treplev has had a few stories published, but his minimal success is not satisfying enough; he still has not created a new form of art, and is mired in the old ways. In fact, it is possible that he has given up his dream altogether. When he sits down to write, he laments: "I've talked so much about new techniques, but now I feel I'm gradually getting in the old rut…This is agony. [*Pause*.] Yes, I'm more and more convinced that old or new techniques are neither here nor there" (111). Nina returns to the estate secretly and meets Treplev. She tells him of her newly found motivation for acting, and he observes sadly: "You've found your road and you know where you're going, while I still drift about in a maze of dreams and images, not knowing who needs my stuff or why. I've no faith

and I don't know what my vocation is" (114). After Nina leaves, Treplev shoots himself. This is in contrast to Hamlet who does not kill himself, but not to the famous speech in which Hamlet contemplates suicide and offers a glimpse into his mental anguish:

> To be, or not to be – that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep
> No more, and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep,
> To sleep – perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub,
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
> Must give us pause. There's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life.
> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
> Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
> The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
> The insolence of office, and the spurns
> That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
> When he himself might is quietus make
> With a bare bodkin? […] (3.1.56-76)

Hamlet's soliloquy poses the question of existence and death, of being and non-being. Kozintsev remarks that artists who illustrate Shakespeare's play are eager to depict Hamlet holding a skull: "The symbol is suggestive in itself: the man seems to be gazing into the limitless depth of nonexistence" (136). Chekhov recognized this suggestion and would incorporate Hamlet's contemplation of human existence, and more importantly, nonexistence, in *The Seagull* as Chekhov's characters compare their life events to nothingness in the perpetual transformation of Russian ничто and ничего (see Chapter 4).

In his speech, Hamlet also expresses the overwhelming enormity of his position within the court and his fears of what may happen if he acts too rashly. What separates Hamlet from the

other characters in the play is his conscience and his contemplation on the possible consequences of his actions. Yet he has no freedom within the highly politicized kingdom and risks being pulled into the cycle of destruction that threatens to overwhelm him. Hamlet contemplates suicide not as a decision of weakness, but as a rebellion against the world in which he is trapped and a conscious end to all the "heartache and the thousand natural shocks the flesh is heir to." If Hamlet cannot live on his own terms, than not being a part of the world may be the only solution; if Treplev cannot live on his own artistic terms, than he would rather not live either. Treplev cannot stand conventional plays in which the curtain opens on three walls between which actors demonstrate the rituals of everyday life: "Out of mediocre scenes and lines they try to drag a moral, some commonplace that doesn't tax the brain and might come in useful about the house. When I'm offered a thousand different variations on the same old theme, I have to escape…" (70). Treplev's last line could be applied to Hamlet as well. When Treplev says that he wants to escape the "same old theme" of art, it mirrors Hamlet's desire to escape the same old theme of politics and also the cycle of impending destruction that seems to follow him.

The only character that seems to escape the same old theme of art in *The Seagull* is Nina, who echoes Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Nina is an amateur actress who admires Irina Arkadina and finds joy in being on the stage, but she is always under the watchful and controlling eye of her father, and bereft of an inheritance. She says to Trigorin: "I'd suffer, being dissatisfied with myself and knowing how imperfect I was. But I should insist on being a real celebrity, with all the tumult and the shouting that go with it" (91). At the beginning of the play Nina is idealistic and full of hope, but by the fourth act, she has lost that innocence. The past two years have been difficult for Nina. Her affair with Trigorin ended tragically after she became pregnant: he abandoned her, and the baby died. Yet she has finally become an actress. She tells Constantine:

> Constantine, I know now, I've come to see, that in our work – not matter whether we're actors or writers – the great thing isn't fame or glory, it isn't what I used to dream of, but simply stamina. You must know how to bear your cross and have faith. I have faith and things don't hurt me so much now. And when I think of my vocation I'm not afraid of life. (114)

Some critics interpret Nina's speech as an affirmation of her success, but a closer reading of this speech paints a more suspect picture. Treplev followed her career for a while and describes how she went to Moscow and then the provinces, but he says: "She always took leading roles, but her acting was crude and inept, with lots of ranting and hamming. She had her moments when she screamed superbly and died superbly. But moments they remained" (106). He also mentions her letters, describing how, "every line seemed sick, like a frayed nerve, and her mind was slightly unhinged" (106). During her last meeting with Treplev, she comes across as frantic and vulnerable: when Treplev first notices her, she is sobbing. Nina refuses to come into the house and seems afraid of meeting anyone else besides Treplev. When she hears Trigorin's voice, it becomes clear that despite what he has done to her, she is still passionately in love with him. She calls herself a seagull, but quickly recants it, and then refers to her past life as "serene and warm, so happy and innocent" (114).

Taken alone, Nina's lines in the fourth act might seem to indicate her fortunate circumstances; however, when read together with the insight provided by the text as a whole, her fate at the end of the play is open to interpretation. As the seagull, her association with the lake echoes Ophelia's disastrous end drowning in a lake, but unlike Ophelia, Nina does not kill herself.[26] The similarities between the two female protagonists are much less clearly defined, and in *The Seagull*, Nina is actually a marked departure from Ophelia, a reversal that will be discussed further in the next chapter. Yet Ophelia, like Nina, is kept under the strict supervision

[26] Nina's name 'Zarechny' (sometimes Zarechnaya) means "across the river," a telling name.

of her father Polonius and brother Laertes. They tell her what to do, and she remains innocently ignorant of the horrific reality that is unfolding around her. Hamlet, the man she loves, tells her to go to a nunnery; and after her father Polonius is killed, she loses the protection his control once gave her. Her inability to cope leads her to madness, and she eventually drowns herself. Nina does not commit suicide**,** but she is also not the same naïve girl she was at the play's beginning. Trigorin shatters her innocence when he seduces her, just as Ophelia's innocence is shattered by the realization of the duplicity in the world around her. Ophelia occupies a peculiar role in *Hamlet*. She is an ambiguous character, surrounded in mystery, which ultimately means that her role in the play is subject to many interpretations.[27] In comparison to other characters, Ophelia does not play a major role in determining the direction of the play's action: she unassumingly wafts in and out of the background of the more dramatic events on stage at the behest of other characters, without a voice of her own. Ophelia finds a voice only in her madness. It is her madness that opens up the space for interpretation, but it is precisely this space that makes Ophelia so problematic a character. Many critics are left to speculate on the exact nature of her relationship with her father and Hamlet, and the reason for her madness.[28] Ophelia's role in *Hamlet* will be examined in a subsequent chapter, but it is important to note that Chekhov assigned Nina a similar role in *The Seagull* as a character surrounded in mystery. Nina is the character on which any interpretation of Chekhov's play hinges, since the

[27] Much of the modern scholarship on Ophelia is from a feminist perspective, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

[28] See Carroll Camden, "On Ophelia's Madness." *Shakespeare Quarterly*. 15.2 (Spring, 1964): 247-255. Also, a short article, Restarits, C.R. Restarits, "Ophelia's Empathic Function." *Mississippi Review*. The Hamlet Issue. 29.3 (Summer, 2001): 215-217.

interpretation of her character shapes the way in which other characters are interpreted. Nina and Ophelia are the most open characters of the two plays.

The associations between *The Seagull* and *Hamlet* are glaringly obvious on one hand, but, on the other hand, seem to melt into the complexity of Chekhov's dramatic art, or become overshadowed, so it is understandable that scholars have not explored the two plays' relationship in detail. It is necessary to fill this gap in scholarship. Chekhov is a multifaceted writer, and the intricacy and craftsmanship of his writing infuse his plays with many levels of meaning to explore within his vast body of work, so it is at least somewhat understandable that the Hamlet-Seagull relationship has not been investigated in detail. However, much of *The Seagull*'s complexity and innovation arise out of its relationship with *Hamlet*. The lack of scholarship on this subject is unfortunate, since the multiplicity of interpretations generated from the relationship between Shakespeare's play and *The Seagull* is key to Chekhov's new theatrical art. The similarity with Hamlet in Chekhov's play solidifies this relationship and enhances the meaning of The Seagull, yet how Chekhov radically reverses aspects of Shakespeare's play is perhaps a more important dynamic to this relationship.

## Chapter 2: The Rewriting of *Hamlet* and Constructions of Meaning*:* Reversals of Art and Gender

Although there are undeniable parallels between *Hamlet* and *The Seagull*, in many ways, Chekhov's play is drastically different. It is in the radical rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that the widest space for interpretation and thought is generated. Chekhov reverses *Hamlet*'s structure and character relationships, realigns parts of the plot, and establishes a different significance to the protagonists as seekers of truth in order for *The Seagull* to introduce its own new form of theatre. The reversals are important, because in these reversals, there is a multiplicity of interpretations that offer a key to Chekhov's dramatic art. One of the most significant reversals is in the characters' relationships that embrace and go far beyond those of the plays' protagonists. In rewriting these relationships, Chekhov actually removes the clear center of *The Seagull*, which expands not only the meaning of the play, but also the space for interpretation that is so characteristic of Chekhov's dramatic vision.

In the dramatic sense, Hamlet is the center of action in Shakespeare's play. All of the other characters are focused on his mood and his psychological state; all are wondering whether he has gone mad, and all of the courtiers are spying on Hamlet, trying to foresee what course of action he will pursue next. In other words, Hamlet and his position are central both to the thoughts of all the play's characters and to the those of the audience, while Hamlet himself, prototype of the philosopher and a voice of conscience, finds himself a less than willing participant in a highly politicized world, caught between caution and action. His father's ghost urges him to vengeance, but his conscience causes him to hesitate; and he cannot forgive Claudius because doing so would be insulting his father. If he kills Claudius, the whole country will be against him, but, at the same time, he cannot forget his father's ominous words, and he is

distinctly aware of his position as heir to the throne of Denmark. At these crossroads, all appearances are misleading, and everyone seems to be watching him. For his own self-interest, Hamlet would rather return to his studies and have nothing to do with the false world of his father and Claudius. He is disillusioned, and because he stays, he is unable to escape the past. His indecision is not a negative form of action; Hamlet is observing and waiting.

In this context, the intellectual and moral perception of Hamlet is a central facet of the play's overall meaning: Hamlet is conscious of the political reality in the kingdom of Denmark, and therefore, the voice of conscience in the play. He is in a precarious position. What does a man of conscience do in a military state where everyone watches one another? Hamlet postpones the action by feigning madness in the hopes of revealing the duplicity around him, the whole while ruminating on the purposelessness of participating in the politicized world. Yet while Hamlet is the center of Shakespeare's play, Treplev gradually seems to descend into a position of nonentity in *The Seagull*. This reversal in importance is further emphasized by the reversal in gender roles. If, according to Hamlet, "Frailty, thy name is woman," (1.2.146) then this perception of women is totally alien to *The Seagull*. Nina and Irina, in fact, help Trigorin in negating any talent Treplev might have and treat him as little more than a whining nuisance. The revisioning of Queen Gertrude and Ophelia as Irina and Nina in Chekhov's play demonstrates the formidable shift from Hamlet as the moral center in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to the absence of a moral center in *The Seagull*, for the women in Chekhov's play displace Treplev from the center position, but also fail to supply a moral focus that would replace him in keeping with Chekhov's characteristic objectivity.

The reversal of gender roles, nonetheless, is highly significant. Queen Gertrude and Ophelia are far more passive than their counterparts in *The Seagull* owing to the highly

politicized world of Denmark. In *Hamlet* Queen Gertrude and Ophelia are living in a world dominated by men. Conversely, Irina Arkadina and Nina are strong presences in *The Seagull.* Thus, Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude is conspicuously absent from the dialogue and action of Shakespeare's play. Little is known about her past. She has no voice of her own and is subject to the wills of her husband and son. Gertrude cannot even meet with her son without the permission of Claudius, and this is made clear already at the start of the play, when Claudius ascends to the throne of Denmark after Hamlet's father (and Claudius' brother), the former king, has died. The truth of Denmark's past and present is conveyed to Hamlet by his father's Ghost who tells Hamlet of Claudius' deception, entreating his son to seek revenge on his behalf:

> Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
> Of his wit, with traitorous gifts -
> O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
> So to seduce!--won to his shameful lust
> The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.
> O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there
> From me, whose love was of that dignity
> That it went hand in hand even with the vow
> I made to her in marriage, and to decline
> Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
> To those of mine!
> But virtue, as it never will be moved,
> Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,
> So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
> Will sate itself in a celestial bed
> And prey on garbage. (1.5.42-57)

Gertrude has married Claudius and so remains the queen of Denmark. There are lingering suspicions as to her involvement in her first husband's death but she seems rather oblivious to the gravity of the political climate around her. However, her sexuality bothers Hamlet, and he is incensed by the idea of his mother in bed with his uncle, an affront to his beloved father's memory. Hamlet denounces his mother with the famous line: "O, God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason, / Would have mourn'd longer" (1.2.150-151). Yet while Hamlet feels

betrayed, Queen Gertrude seems almost oblivious to her son's anger and frustration and unaware that she has done wrong by marrying her deceased husband's brother. The audience can only guess at her possible motivations. Perhaps she recognizes her position as weak within the power structure of court and marries for protection, or maybe she truly loves Claudius. Perhaps she is actually power-hungry. Whatever the reason, she goes so far as to allow Polonius to spy on her conversation with Hamlet, as she, initially at least, places her loyalty with her new husband. The so-called closet scene is the first time Hamlet confides his anger to Gertrude. This is the only scene where their conversation is not directed by Claudius, even though Hamlet, then, implores Gertrude to cease her relations with Claudius and stop offending the memory of his father. Yet Gertrude does not seem to comprehend the extent of her son's anger, and she comes across as very naïve:

> HAMLET: Now, mother, what's the matter?
> QUEEN: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
> HAMLET: Mother, you have my father much offended.
> QUEEN: Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.
> HAMLET: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.
> QUEEN: Have you forgot me?
> HAMLET: No, by the rood, not so!
> You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife,
> And (would it were not so) you are my mother.
> QUEEN: Nay, then I'll set those to you that can speak.
> HAMLET: Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge.
> You go not. I set you up a glass
> Where you may see the inmost part of you. (3.4.9-20)

Gertrude, caught between her roles as mother, wife, and queen, seems unaware of the dark reality, while Hamlet bears the full weight of what is occurring around him.

Hamlet's relationship with his mother, in turn, affects his relationship with Ophelia, who is in love with Hamlet. He loved her once too, but their relationship has started to unravel. There is a slight degree of ambiguity in Hamlet's attitude toward Ophelia: he wants to protect her from

the harshness of reality but is simultaneously disillusioned with the idea of love and marriage. In his disappointment over feminine weakness and women's subordination to the will of the new king, Hamlet treats Ophelia abominably, tells her that he does not love her, and belittles her feelings for him. Extremely innocent, Ophelia has no will of her own, for she is kept under the strict supervision of her father Polonius and brother: they tell her what to do, and she remains innocently ignorant of the horrific political reality that is unfolding around her. Nor does she object to this absence of privacy (a position in which she mirrors the queen) when all of her conversations with Hamlet are monitored and made public, and her feelings for Hamlet are ignored as trivial. When in the plays' beginning Polonius interrogates his daughter after her conversation with Hamlet, she appears to accept this invasion as a sign of her father's concern:

> POLONIUS: What is't, Ophelia, he hath said to you?
> OPHELIA: So please you, something touching the Lord Hamlet.
> POLONIUS: Marry, well bethought.
> 'Tis told me he hath very oft of late
> Given private time to you, and you yourself
> Have of your audience been most free and bounteous.
> If it be so – as so 'tis put on me,
> And that in way of caution – I must tell you
> You do not understand yourself so clearly
> As it behooves my daughter and your honor.
> What is between you? Give me up the truth.
> OPHELIA: He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders
> Of his affection to me.
> POLONIUS: Affection? Pooh! You speak like a green girl,
> Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.
> Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?
> OPHELIA: I do not know, my lord, what I should think. (1.3.87-103)

Ophelia is also trapped by her loyalty to her brother and her father, and they in turn are able to manipulate her, but at the same time, continuously negate her presence. Even Hamlet, the man she loves, orders her around, including his famous advice that she go to a nunnery. Ophelia's whole life, therefore, is strictly controlled, and after her father dies, she loses the protection his

authority once gave her. Madness engulfs her. David Leverenz summarizes Ophelia's precarious position:

> Even in her madness she has no voice of her own, only a discord of other voices and expectations, customs gone awry. Most obviously, she does what Hamlet preaches, or at least what he feigns, in going mad. Thinking she is not loved by him, she becomes him, or at least what she conceives to be his "noble mind ..." (3.1.150). Just as his absence in act 4 is reflected in the absence of her reason, so her suicide embodies what Hamlet ponders in his soliloquies. After all, Polonius has instructed her that love denied leads to madness (2.1.110-19), and Ophelia is forever faithful to her contradictory directives. She herself is a play within a play, or a player trying to respond to several imperious directors at once. (Leverenz 301-302)

Ophelia's inability to cope on her own leads her to madness, and she eventually drowns herself, because death is her only freedom. Leverenz already touches on the immense importance of Ophelia's madness for expanding the meaning of the play as a whole, for in her mad ravings are spaces for vast interpretation.

While there are parallels between the women of *Hamlet* and the women of *The Seagull*, those parallels are clearly inverted, as Shakespeare's weak female characters become strong presences in Chekhov's play. Already Nina's first appearance in the play indicates a state of rebellion, since she has snuck away from her father's house in order to act in Treplev's play, and this rebellion is echoed by Masha's pronounced indifference to her main suitor and then husband Medvedenko. When he professes his love for Masha, she replies bluntly: "What rubbish. Your loving me is all very touching, but I can't love you back and that's that" (67). Nicholas Moravcevich notes this emergence of Chekhov's strong women: "Starting with *The Seagull*, the feminine characters in the Chekhovian drama begin, not only to match their masculine counterparts in terms of complexity and plasticity of portraiture, but at times even to outdistance them in terms of aesthetic appeal and stage presence" (Moravcevich 204). In his article "Women in Chekhov's Plays" in which he addresses some feminist criticism of Chekhov's portrayal of

women, he isolates two main female types in Chekhov's drama: the *jeune fille* (young girl) and the dominant older woman. Both types are in *The Seagull* as Nina and Irina Arkadina respectively. Moravcevich concludes: "What is significant, however, is that in the crucible of that dreaded but inevitable Chekhovian change in which so many human hopes are abandoned, so many dreams extinguished and illusions shed, the Chekhovian female characters are as complexly developed and involved as are their masculine counterparts" (Moravcevich 215).

Irina Arkadina, the "dominant" older woman, according to Moravcevich's classification, is a well-known actress who ensures that her looks and power remain a consistent force. In this pursuit, she is narcissistic and more concerned with maintaining her lush lifestyle and her position as a well-known actress. Treplev also hates her supposed lover Trigorin, the object of Irina's affection and a successful writer. As pointed out in Chapter One, the relationship between Treplev, Irina, and Trigorin mirrors that of Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius. However, the difference in their power relations are striking: Irina spends most of her time trying to dominate Trigorin, to the point that she is able to win him back with plentiful flattery even after his affair with Nina. She also lords over Sorin's estate and rules over everyone with the force of her personality. Irina comes and goes as she pleases, throws parties, and does whatever she wants with everyone else at her beck and call. At the slightest suggestion of her having to think of someone other than herself, she breaks into tears until she gets her way. Irina's relationship with her son is equally fraught with obstacles of her own creation, constructed by her own ego. He is financially dependent on her, and yet she refuses him the money that would allow him a modicum of freedom or pleasure. Moreover, a few snide comments from her are enough to send Treplev into despair. The fact that Irina views his passion for art and his need for attention and

identity with indifference inevitably contributes to Treplev's depression, which is only heightened by Nina's rejection of him. She is a stark contrast to the submissive Gertrude.

According to Moravcevich, another type of woman characteristic of Chekhov's dramatic personages is the *jeune fille*, and she is also hardly a weak character: "The *jeune fille* is above all a creature of straightforwardness, purity, sincerity, and youthful naïveté. She is trustful, delicate, intelligent, frequently pretty but in a certain demure, nonassertive way, always quite enthusiastic and people, ideas, childlike, and full of certain ethereal, poetic frailty that inevitably clashes with her drab and prosaic surroundings" (Moravcevich 204). Nina, indeed, is young and on the verge of adulthood, an amateur actress who admires Irina and finds joy in being on the stage. Nina is also a reinterpretation of Ophelia in the sense that she is always under the watchful eye of her father, and bereft of an inheritance. Treplev is in love with her, and that gives her great power over him. Even when Nina is the nervous, star-struck amateur of her first performance in Treplev's play, her innocence also wins over the famous writer Trigorin, who inevitably treats her poorly, so that by the end of the play, Nina returns to her home a woman and a mildly successful actress. For Treplev, Nina is spokesman for his art, and in this role she again has power over him. When Arkadina dismisses his experimental play, he looks to Nina for solace, but she too, is derisively flippant toward him and indifferent. Without her love, Treplev cannot create his new art,[29] and this state of affairs becomes all too obvious in the last scene of the play. Treplev is excited to see Nina again after two years, indicating that he still harbors deep feelings for her. Nina, however, once more refuses his love and, adding insult to injury, tells him that she loves Trigorin. In this last scene, she once again shows no interest in his work.

[29] See Richard Gilman, "The Seagull: Art and Love, Love and Art," *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening to Eternity*, 70-100.

Nina's strong role in the play is emphasized by her association with the seagull. Early in the play, Nina introduces the image of the seagull when she says, "But something seems to lure me to this lake like a seagull" (71). The idealized image of the seagull is one of ecstatic flight and freedom and is connected to an image described by Dorn, who says that though he has led a happy life, he can only imagine what an artist feels in the wake of his creativity: "But if I'd ever experienced the uplift that an artist feels when he's creating, I think I'd have scorned my material environment and all that goes with it, and I'd have taken wing and soared away into the sky" (80). A more realistic image of the seagull might be one of a scavenger feeding on the scraps left behind by other animals. After Nina rejects Treplev, at their next meeting, Treplev shoots a seagull and throws its dead body at her feet. Nina does not understand his action and tells him: "You're touchy lately and you always talk so mysteriously, in symbols or something. This seagull's a symbol too, I suppose, but it makes no sense to me, sorry…I'm too simple to understand you" (87). Trigorin, upon seeing the dead bird, asks to have it stuffed. He comes up with an idea for a story about a girl who loves the lake, and is free like the seagull, but who is ruined by a man with nothing better to do, a foreshadowing of her eventual fate. The seagull appears again at the very end of the play when the stuffed bird is retrieved just as Treplev shoots himself. At this point, the seagull is merely a showpiece – it cannot fly and is looked at with indifference, as Trigorin does not even remember it.

Nina's connection with the seagull also provides proof of Chekhov's ambiguity toward definite interpretations of his characters. The seagull is a bird associated simultaneously with rapturous flight, but also scavenging, and while the seagull conjures up images of a beautiful lake and freedom, the only times a seagull actually figures concretely into the play is when Treplev shoots one and throws it at Nina's feet. Ellen Chances writes that *The Seagull* is a

parody of symbolism because there is so much irony in the play. According to her article, Nina is not the ethereal, vibrant survivor that some actors and viewers might perceive her to be:

> She is far from the beautiful, fragile, poetic being which she and others consider her. Rather, she is a plain, talentless girl, mesmerized by the vacuous notion of fame. One has only to count the number of times she repeats the word "famous" (*izvestnyi*). She casts aside the unknown author Treplev in order to chase the double rainbows of fame and Trigorin, and she ends up as a mediocre provincial actress in a cold, empty hotel room in Elets. (Chances 27)

Yet there is no indication that this interpretation of Nina is entirely correct. Nina can be interpreted in a variety of ways, either as a survivor who has accepted her reality and who will eventually achieve artistic success, or as a mediocre actress who seems a bit unhinged mentally as indicated by her confused and frantic state at the end of the play. Nina's exact fate is not significant; what is more important is the space that Chekhov allocated for the interpretation of her fate. Virginia Scott observes that the ambivalence within the image of the seagull is important to the irony of Chekhov's play:

> Chekhov thus takes a conventional sentimental story, a mainstay of matinee and magazine fiction, and reverses it. In doing so, he makes a comment on Trigorin's art of surfaces which is also an art of conventional techniques and strategies. This comment is summarized in the image of the seagull to which so many ironic perceptions adhere by the end of the play. The image can be explicated as a symbol of soaring creative experience, tied to Nina from her first line of dialogue, representative of her triumph as an artist. Such an explication pays little attention to the facts of the play; nonetheless, we cannot dismiss the ideal bird in ecstatic flight, for we need it as an ironic contrast to the real bird which we see twice in the course of the action, once dead, once stuffed. (Scott 366)

Thus, Nina's association with the ambiguity of the seagull's imagery is connected to the ambiguity of her own interpretation, which is pivotal for any interpretation of *The Seagull*. The potential for multiple interpretations and reversals, stemming from the readers' understanding of Nina's role, overshadows the range of interpretations connected to Constantine Treplev. At the same time, any specific interpretation of Nina's character determines the

audience's attitude to him. Thus, Treplev, who is desperately intent on forging a new type of theatre against the general malaise of conventional artistic expression, depends – and this is possibly his fatal flaw – for support and a positive reception from those closest to him. He can just survive Irina's indifference, but not that of Nina. By contrast, Nina is open to the rejection, and remains true to her dream: "I know now, I understand, that in our work, Kostya – whether it's acting or writing – what's important is not fame, not glory, not the things I used to dream of, but the ability to endure. To be able to bear one's cross and have faith, I have faith, and it's not so painful now, and when I think of my vocation, I'm not afraid of life" (114). Compared to Nina, therefore, Treplev is not strong enough to uproot traditional art forms alone, especially since he already feels himself slipping into a role of nonentity.

The theme of alienation and nothingness, so prominent at the play's finale, is especially tangible in the original Russian text where the words for nothing and nobody (ничего и никто) are established as a significant theme in Treplev's symbolist play, articulated on the stage by Nina in her role of the world-soul: "Я одинока. Раз в сто лет я открываю уста, чтобы говорить, и мой голос звучит в этой пустоте уныло, и никто не слышит" (Chekhov 1956, 237). These lines from his first "symbolic" play do become symbolic of the completeness of his future isolation and his inability to survive it (the smell of sulphur in the play foreshadows his fate, the smell of gunshot during Treplev's suicide):

> I am lonely. Once in a hundred years I open my lips to speak and in this void with none to hear me my voice echoes mournfully. You too, pale lights, you hear me not…Like a prisoner flung into a deep, empty well, I know not where I am or what waits me. All is hidden from me except that in the cruel, unrelenting struggle with the Devil, the principle of Material Force, I am destined to triumph. Then shall Spirit and Matter unite in wondrous harmony, then shall the reign of Cosmic Will commence…Until then there shall be horror upon horror. (75)

Treplev's rejection, first by his mother Irina and eventually by Nina, decide his fate and lead him to complete the act that Hamlet only contemplated. He cannot conceive of a life in which he has not succeeded in perpetuating new art forms or a life without the love and attention he craves. Even the minor success he has achieved with his writing at the end of the play is not enough to sustain him, especially when Irina cannot even be bothered to read any of his stories. By the end of *The Seagull*, Treplev has become a shadow, rather than a full-bodied personality, all too dependent on the approval of others. Thus, he has lost the position of the central character of the play. Styan defends Treplev to some extent when he writes: "But Treplev is not central in the traditional way, for he is no Byronic poet-hero, no Hamlet (in spite of the allusion in the dialogue). He is to be one of the new anti-heroes of the modern stage: the audience is to grow to understand but not admire him" (Styan, *Chekhov* 25). In this context, it is highly important that Treplev's last moments on stage before his suicide are not even spent contemplating his life but rather worrying about how Nina's presence might upset his mother. His suicide plays out in relatively placid fashion during the middle of a card game, his gunshot only an echo in the background, in stark contrast to Hamlet's glorified end. Even the other characters seem more concerned about sparing Irina from the knowledge of her son's suicide rather than with Treplev himself.

Nonetheless, even though Treplev loses the moral center of the play, no one can minimize his intellectual passion, and in this, his link to Hamlet remains unbroken, and the potentiality for deeper complexity within his character is intensified through this resonance. He is not merely Hamlet transported to a different time and place, but a different character in his own right, while the sense of contemplation that Hamlet seems to embody is one of Treplev's defining characteristics. Moreover, this propensity for contemplation flows from Treplev to

other characters of *The Seagull*. This constant critique of self, reflected in each of the play's characters, all of whom confront questions of existence and the search for meaning in their lives, makes every figure in the play a potential mirror of Hamlet, a process that, in turn, embraces even the nature of the locality where the play's figures find themselves. For this reason, among so many others, the play's more dramatic events occur offstage, so that what becomes most significant is not the activity itself, but the space for thought and reflection into which the audience is invited. The setting of Sorin's estate – the play's locality – is dormant and inactive enough to allot the characters with a space in which to study themselves while each is caught up in his or her own existential crisis.[30] Since each character is involved in his or her own crisis, the characters constantly miss each other in their conversations, and their miscommunication demonstrates a singular feature of The Seagull, one that is connected to the characters' anxious worries, as Chekhov's protagonists constantly fear that they are nonentities (ничтожества), that they are surrounded by nobody, that they have nothing to give one another. They are staring down their own nonexistence.

As Treplev asks "Who am I? What am I?" and strives for new forms of art, Irina must deal with the onset of age and the possibility that she will not always have her fame and beauty. Sorin, her brother and Treplev's uncle, questions what he has accomplished in life and is full of regrets. He wanted to be a writer, but pursued a career as a bureaucrat instead. He feels as though he has been abandoned in the country only to wither away: "Anyway, now I'm retired I've nowhere else to go, that's what it comes to. I have to live here, like it or not" (68). Masha, though young, constantly pines for Treplev and lives in the state of perpetual melancholy. Near the end of the play, she remarks, "I feel about a thousand years old. My life seems to drag on and

[30] Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 84-85. Irina remarks, "Oh, could anything be duller than this charming country boredom– so hot and still, with you all lolling round airing your views?

on endlessly, and I often think I'd rather be dead" (82). Polina too is unhappy in her marriage, while Dr. Dorn does not return her affection for him, showing in this something of Claudius' cruelty and Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia. Trigorin's obsession with writing brings him closer and closer to the realization that what he writes does not satisfy him, while Nina gradually struggles to find her place in the acting world. Yet as each person faces the reality of their own existence, all together, they are echoes of a larger indefinite reality, while Chekhov, their author, depicts the mechanisms of his characters' existence interwoven with their perpetual striving to find themselves and reinforce their will to live: "His deeper insight leads to an understanding of what is concealed in everyday life, what escapes notice and does not wish to be recognized. His play shows how each person's thinking and behavior can become a link in the chain of general misfortune" (Kataev 179). Each character is individualized, but also interconnected with the other characters. Unlike the relationships in *Hamlet* where all the characters are moving in different directions, Chekhov's characters move in the same tragic direction. Even Irina, seemingly too self-preoccupied to share in the overall tragic mood, will not be able escape the pain. The play points to this, signaling the future suffering which will follow upon the suicide of her son.

Trigorin's character is also deepened by his link to Hamlet's contemplative questioning. The self-serving egoist, who occupies a similar role to Claudius, receives, therefore, a new and complex life in *The Seagull*. Even though there are unmistakable similarities between Trigorin and Claudius, Treplev's characterization of Trigorin as cowardly and his hatred of Trigorin are not completely just. Trigorin is very much aware that he is not the equal of the famous writer Turgenev. He walks around collecting observations, descriptions, and phrases for his future

projects, but is constantly plagued by feelings of inadequacy. Trigorin even feels that the praise and admiration he receives are deceptive and questions the false reality of temporary fame:

> What success? I've never satisfied myself. I dislike my own work. I drift round in a trance and often can't make sense of what I write, that's what's so awful…As a writer, I feel I must discuss ordinary people, their sufferings, their future – science, human rights, all that stuff. So I do discuss it, all in great haste, with everyone furiously hounding me in all directions, while I scurry abut like a fox with the pack snapping at his heels. I seem to see life and learning vanishing into the distance, while I lag more and more behind, feeling like the village boy who missed the train, and end up believing that I can only do nature descriptions and that everything else I write is bogus through and through. (91).

Trigorin enjoys writing, but he cannot even stand to read his stories in print. He describes his younger years, when he first began writing, as sheer agony because he believed his readers to be hostile and indifferent, much in the same way Treplev worries about his future artistic career. So, perhaps, Treplev hates Trigorin because he recognizes their similarities. Treplev sees that he could end up like Trigorin, which is intolerable for a young artist with such a fatalistic passion. Trigorin is not the enemy or a negative character.[31] Even in the knowledge that he has seduced Nina only to abandon her later, the audience can still sympathize with him. Not only does Nina's tragedy take place off stage (the audience does not witness her tragedies firsthand), but Nina herself admits that she had tormented Trigorin by her feelings of jealousy and pettiness. Trigorin is a sincere writer, "haunted day and night by this writing obsession," (89) but he does not have the aim or the courage to pursue the truly innovative art that he aspires to create.[32]

*Hamlet* is famous for its complexity and the multiplicity of interpretations that it awakens. As Frank Kermode observes, echoing in this position Harry Levin, *Hamlet* is a

---

[31] Stanislavsky, who played Trigorin, thought he was "worthless" and a failure, while Treplev had "the soul of Chekhov and a true comprehension of art." *My Life in Art*, 355. Many critics agree that Stanislavsky misinterpreted his character.

[32] There is a conjecture among scholars that there are many similarities between Trigorin and Chekhov, and perhaps Chekhov imbued his own anxiety and doubt into his character.

spectacle where every position can appear at least twice, and each time as a somewhat different conundrum: “Certainly *Hamlet* is problematic, full of doubt concretely as well as discursively projected, unsparing of words, even to the point of habitually using two for one, as it uses two characters and two themes for one. It is of no clear shape, oblique, dubitant, duplicate” (Kermode 1183). Shakespeare’s text does not completely illuminate the motivations of his characters and leaves quite a few unanswered questions about the play, which inevitably engenders a space of interpretation between what the actors are saying and what the audience perceives from the actors lines. And as Jan Kott says, “*Hamlet* is like a sponge,” and will inevitably soak up all of the problems of the time in which it is performed. *The Seagull* expands this feature of Shakespeare’s play, and creates a world whose interpretation may change – and does change significantly – every time the play is performed. When Chekhov spoke about the theatre of the future, his dream must have included this impossibility of a final and static interpretation.

# Chapter 3: The Widening Resonance and Potential for Interpretation in the *Hamlet-Seagull* Relationship

On November 21, 1895, in a letter to A.S. Souvorin, Chekhov wrote: "Well, I have finished with the play. I began it *forte* and ended it *pianissimo* – contrary to all the rules of dramatic art. It has turned into a novel. I am rather dissatisfied than satisfied with it, and reading over my new-born play I am more convinced than ever that I am not a dramatist" (*Letters of Chekhov* 146). Less than a year later, Chekhov's apprehension would prove correct when his play *The Seagull* premiered in St. Petersburg with devastating results. This disastrous first production, however, was not due to a lack of skill or talent on Chekhov's part, but a lack of understanding on the part of the audience. Chekhov was aware that he had created a play that would push art to new forms, much like his protagonist Treplev.[33] His attitude toward the theatre of the late nineteenth century was one of disdain. He thought that the theatre of his time had reached its artistic limits and that the repertoire was stagnant: "Its atmosphere is leaden and oppressive. It is covered inches-thick in dust and enveloped in fog and tedium. You go to the theatre simple because you have nowhere else to go. You look at the stage, yawn, and swear under your breath" (qtd. Magarshack 28). Chekhov also was not fond of the melodrama that characterized the Russian stage. In introducing *The Seagull* to Russian theatre, he faced the monumental task of introducing a new, wholly modern type of theatre to an audience accustomed to traditional melodrama. *The Seagull* challenged deeply ingrained notions of theatre and dramatic tradition in nearly every aspect, including structure, dialogue, setting, time, the progression of events, and even stage direction. Chekhov's objectivity and the mechanisms

[33] It is interesting to note how Chekhov seemed to anticipate his own audiences' reaction to *The Seagull* in his portrayal of Treplev and his play. Chekhov knew exactly how difficult it would be to overturn traditional theatre.

of his dramatic art impart *The Seagull* with an unfinalized quality that allows for a multiplicity of interpretation[34] and erases the possibility for a single interpretation of the play.

The dramatic structure of *The Seagull* is illogical and disjointed by traditional theatre standards. Even in a peculiar play such as *Hamlet*, the series of events follows a logical progression designed to create suspense and a pattern of anticipation. The beginning of *The Seagull* does not introduce a conflict; there is no build-up towards a climactic moment; there is no resolution of any conflict by the end of the play; and there is no moral for the audience. Some of the most significant action even takes place offstage or is only referenced in dialogue, namely Treplev's first unsuccessful suicide attempt and his eventual suicide. He does not give a final speech or leave a suicide note which explains, even partially, his state of mind; the audience simply hears a gunshot. Moreover, by the end of the play, the characters have hardly moved past their problems already in evidence in the play's beginning: Treplev has not been able to solidify his own artistic identity; Trigorin still frets over the surrounding mediocrity; Nina is struggling to become an actress; Irina is still self-absorbed; Masha is still in love with Treplev; Medvedenko is still not appreciated by Masha; and Sorin's health fades as he continues to regret his past. One feels that these characters will be continually dealing with the same problems even after the play is over.

Yet *The Seagull* is not a haphazard series of meaningless incidents slapped together without respect for form or artistry. Chekhov meticulously crafted his play under different set of terms and principles than those of traditional or popular drama. Eric Bentley, in his article, brilliantly defends an approach that he considers crucial to Chekhov's dramatic poetics. Referring to Chekhov as a "master of dramatic form unsurpassed in modern times," Bentley

[34] Although works of art are generally subject to many interpretations, the multiplicity in Chekhov's play stems from a deliberate dramatic technique.

observes that traditional terms such as exposition, complication, and denouement cannot be used to understand a Chekhov play, which is not concerned with creating suspense. A Chekhov play, Bentley insists, follows the poetic principle of motion, which erases in a radical manner the need for brusque suspense:

> What makes Chekhov seem most formless is precisely the means by which he achieves strict form. I refer to the series of tea-drinkings, arrivals, departures, meals, dances, family gatherings, casual conversations, of which his plays are made. As we have seen, Chekhov works with a highly unified Action... The rhythm of the play is leisurely, yet broken, and, to suspense-lovers, baffling. It would be an exaggeration to say that there is no story and that the succession of scenes marks simply an advance in our knowledge of a situation which does not change…Chekhov does tell a story - the gifts of one of the greatest raconteurs are not in abeyance in his plays. But his method is to let both his narrative and his situation leak out, so to speak, through domestic gatherings, formal and casual. This is his principle of motion. (Bentley 238)

The lack of suspense generated by the sequence of scenes from everyday life, so characteristic of a Chekhov play, causes the plot to appear rather anticlimactic and disconnected, but that is precisely Chekhov's intention, since he is not interested in portraying extreme, overly dramatic situations. The anticlimactic progression of events is exacerbated further as potential conflicts do not come to fruition. Treplev challenges Trigorin to a duel, but that duel never happens. Treplev's frustration with his mother never reaches the level of a fully-realized confrontation. Trigorin never frees himself from the grip of Irina's dominating personality. Sorin's talk of moving to town gradually becomes more and more implausible. Nina's tumultuous love affair happens during the two-year interval separating Act Three and Act Four, and the painful climax of her hardship is barely mentioned, but seems to melt into the background of everyday activity.

Characters play cards and drink tea on stage; they engage with each other in small-talk; they seem to come and go as they please. The insignificance of such events may give the impression that the action of the play is disjointed and devoid of meaning, yet these seemingly

irrelevant incidental situations serve a purpose. Russia's leading Chekhovian interpreter and theoretician, A.P. Chudakov, explains that the purpose behind the play's indirect action, Chekhov's singular signature, is the experiment that brings to the stage the reflection of real life and, by means of this, expands the meaning of theatrical space, time, and action:

> Within Chekhov's dramatic system, the incidental is as varied and untidy as life itself is diverse and chaotic. It cannot have a unified meaning, a unified "subtext" or "mood." Incidental elements are as semantically and emotionally diverse as are the essential elements with which they coexist in the depicted world. Both the essential and the individually incidental are continually generated by life, each time in a new and unpredictable guise; they are two independent spheres and man belongs to both of them. Important events take place, fates are decided and people participate in and speak of these events. But people are not exclusively occupied with issues that affect their destiny, nor do they speak only of the central questions in life. They also go about their everyday humdrum business; they even talk about it; they have dinner and perform their proper societal roles. A man cannot free himself from these aspects of life. (Chudakov 154)

According to Chudakov's argument, Chekhov's innovation is radical; the writer believed that it is useless to separate life from art on the stage since in real life human beings are not able to separate themselves from the chaotic and diverse aspects of their existence. In other words, what might prove a logical pattern on stage in a conventional drama is not an accurate reflection of real life, since life does not follow a logical pattern; action does not follow a causal sequence; and dialogue is not always formal and soliloquized. Chekhov merges art and real life, but his play has gone beyond realism or naturalism. Chekhov's world on the stage is realistic, but it is an incomplete realism, one that is unfinalized in its construction, which produces the space for interpretation that is so integral to *The Seagull*'s ultimate dramatic form. That space is represented in the miscommunication between characters, the lack of explication of their pasts, and the ambiguity embedded in their fates.

In a similar manner, Chekhov's characters are both realistic and at the same time unconventional, and each one is important in the writer's world. Certain characters in *The*

*Seagull* may not have many lines or may not appear on the stage very often, but they are never merely part of the background, which habitually happens in traditional drama. Their importance for the action that they cannot influence or change in any way is precisely the quality that imbues the realism of Chekhovian action with the nuances of eccentricity and of the absurd and makes the distinction between tragic and comic realities equally obsolete: "Often Chekhov achieves this effect by giving his minor characters a strong colouring of the comic, the absurd or the eccentric. This is a way of ensuring that these characters are memorable and not just lost within the group, while at the same time it helps to strike a lifelike balance within the play as a whole between serious and comic elements" (Pitcher 13). Any character, therefore, deepens the ambiance of the intermixture of real and absurd. For instance, Masha Shamrayeva the first figure on the stage, is both the most ineffective and yet a most eccentric character, a challenge to the notions of propriety associated with a proper lady of late nineteenth century society. She smokes, spits tobacco, drinks hard liquor, speaks bluntly, and unavoidably announces the indisputable life-like reality of her type: "Don't look at me like that, women drink a lot more than you think. A few do it openly like me, but most keep quiet about it. Oh yes they do. And it's always vodka or brandy" 92). Her eccentricity masks the underlying tragedy of her situation, and this outburst, though peculiar, offers a glimpse into her drinking problem and portends her depression.

Masha brings with her into the opening scene yet another curious, and singularly ineffective, character – a schoolteacher Medvedenko, and their conversation is simultaneously deeply meaningful and yet comic. Medvedenko asks, "Why do you wear black all the time?" Masha responds, "I'm in mourning for my life, I'm unhappy" (67). Indeed, she is in love with Constantine Treplev, but he barely notices her and, moreover, will suffer the indifference of Trigorin, Arkadina, and eventually Nina. Thus, it might be easy to overlook Masha's

significance in the play, but she is a truly integral character, both connected to and disconnected from the deeper issues of the play, and one could not imagine the play without her. In addition, Masha's opening line, comical, yet ultimately tragic, sets the tone for the play, and mirrors Medvedenko's own unrequited love for Masha, and Treplev's love for Nina. The presence of these supposedly minor characters ensures that there are many storylines interwoven throughout the play in such a manner that they mirror the problems of Treplev, Nina, Trigorin, and Irina. Polina, Masha's mother, for example, is in love with Dr. Dorn, who works constantly and never gets a break. Ilya Shamrayev, Polina's husband, spends his time flattering Irina, frequently embarrasses his wife, and is not above showing disdain for his future son-in-law Medvedenko. Sorin, Treplev's uncle, laments his past and regrets his life in the country. He wishes he could have become a writer. This true-to life world is both realistic and simultaneously absurd, for the characters miss and overlook each other, and the potential for happiness of which they dream is locked in a complex network of mistaken interconnections. Nothing can change for the simple reason that the characters themselves are limited and self-absorbed, and yet their suffering is genuine.

The characters in *The Seagull* are always hoping and dreaming, but their eventual failure is an ominous possibility. For this reason, Chekhov's careful interweaving of *Hamlet* into the plot of *The Seagull* fits with the overall atmosphere of realism and the absurd quality of the action. In contrast to the larger-than-life characters of Shakespeare, Chekhov's focus is the 'little man', which means that his "dramatis personae" can only too often be characterized as weak and helpless. Bentley, however, defends Chekhov's characters against such sweeping characterization, viewing any straightforward categories as insufficiently subtle and insisting that

Chekhov, most of all, wants complexity to be present in his works, but complexity without heavy emphasis and melodrama:

> If one school of opinion romanticizes all Chekhov characters who dream of the future, another, even more vulgar, sees them as weak-lings and nothing else. Chekhov followed Ibsen in portraying the average mediocre man - *I'homnmem oyens ensuel*- without ever following the extreme naturalists in their concern with the utterly downtrodden, the inarticulate, the semi human. His people are no weaker than ninety-nine out of a hundred members of his audience. That is to say, they are very weak, but there are in them also elements of protest and revolt, traces of will power, and some dim sense of responsibility. If his characters never reach fulfillment it is not because they were always without potentialities. In fact, Chekhov's sustained point is precisely that these weeping, squirming, suffering creatures might have been men. And because Chekhov feels this, there is movement, interplay, tension, emotion, dialectic in his plays…His people do not dream only of what could never be, or what could come only after thousands of years; they dream of what their lives actually could have been. They are based on a conviction of human potentiality - which is what separates Chekhov from the real misanthropes of modern literature. (Bentley 234)

This insistence on Chekhov's humanity can be easily documented on the basis of the very same passages that, on many occasions, can strike reader as somewhat absurd, and this comic potential does not minimize the humanity of the action. Rather than melodramatic, emotional outpourings from larger-than-life characters, Chekhov's characters even speak as everyday people might. For instance, there is a natural flow to the conversations on the stage, resembling conversation one might have in everyday life, that is, conversation that follows what might be called an illogical sequence of thoughts. The communication between characters is filled with interruptions and background noise. Chekhov's characters frequently snore or hum, make small talk, and speak in idiosyncrasies. Though the conversation might seem superfluous, every line is actually quite significant and constructed with meticulous care.[35] For example, in Act One, Treplev and Nina

[35] "One must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it." Anton Chekhov, letter to Aleksandr Semenovich Lazarev (pseudonym of A. S. Gruzinsky), 1 November 1889. Quoted in Fred R. Shapiro, *The Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 146.

are talking before the start of Treplev's play. In the background the stage is being set up, and everyone will soon be gathering for the play's premiere.

> TREPLEV. We're alone
> NINA. I think there's someone over there.
> TREPLEV. No, there isn't [*They kiss*.]
> NINA. What sort of tree is that?
> TREPLEV. An elm.
> NINA. Why is it so dark?
> TREPLEV. Night's falling and everything's getting dark. Don't go home too early. Please.
> NINA. I must.
> TREPLEV. Then how about me coming over to your place, Nina? I'll stand in the garden all night gazing at your window.
> NINA. You can't, the watchman would see you. Our dog doesn't know you yet and he'd bark.
> TREPLEV. I love you.
> NINA. Shush!
> TREPLEV. [*hearing footsteps*]. Who's there? Is it you, Jacob?
> JACOB. [*behind the stage*]. Yes sir.
> TREPLEV. Get into position, it's time to start. Is the moon coming up?
> JACOB. Yes sir.
> TREPLEV. Have you the methylated spirits? And the sulphur? There must be a smell of sulphur when the red eyes appear. [*To Nina*.] Run along then – you'll find everything ready. Nervous?
> NINA. Yes, terribly. I don't mind your mother, I'm not afraid of her, but Trigorin's here. To have him in the audience – I'm just a bundle of nerves. A famous writer! Is he young?
> TREPLEV. Yes.
> NINA. His stories are marvelous, aren't they?
> TREPLEV. [*coldly*]. I don't know, I've never read them.
> NINA. Your play's hard to act, there are no living people in it.
> TREPLEV. Living people! We should show life neither as it is not as it ought to be, but as we see it in our dreams. (71-72)

In this particular seemingly unremarkable conversation, Nina and Treplev voice their thoughts without any definitive direction or goal, so that despite their potential, they are not going to resolve any problems, and the viewer will not be able to draw any conclusion from their conversation. Chekhov allows his characters to talk, but with a degree of self-consciousness in their dialogue that while being true to life, also pushes it beyond naturalism or realism. Even

though the life on stage is attuned to real life, the fact that it is chosen to be shared with the audience suggests some unspoken meaning hidden between the lines, and Chekhov is clearly able to direct that implicit symbolic ambiguity that is created from a certain excess of reality on the stage. That excess heightens the realism on stage to such an extent that the characters' reality seems ludicrous, or more specifically, absurd.

Critics have interpreted the meaning of Chekhov's informal, seemingly disorganized dialogue as the characters' inability to communicate fully or inability to understand one another, but there exists also yet another context of the communications characteristic of *The Seagull* that should be illuminated before one condemns Chekhov's characters as so completely tragic. In this context Bentley identifies a characteristically Chekhovian convention in which each protagonist expresses his or her thoughts without reference to the other, but even while missing a direct interlocutor on the stage, such a personage has a way of bringing "the fates of the individuals before the audience with a minimum of fuss." A potentially misdirected phrase becomes a highly meaningful utterance, an indication of future development, and yet remains a misdirected speech. Treplev, Nina, and Trigorin make precisely these long speeches addressed to themselves rather than to their immediate addressee. Bentley insists:

> The form of the long speech, which Chekhov reintroduces, is one of the chief means to an extension of content; and the extension of content is one of the chief means by which Chekhov escapes from prosaic naturalism into the broader realities which only imagination can uncover. Chekhov's people are immersed in "naturalistic" facts, buried in circumstances, not to say in trivialities, yet - and this is what differentiates them from most naturalistic characters - aware of the realm of ideas and imagination. His drama bred a school of acting that gave more attention to exact detail than any other school in history; it ought really to have bred also a school of dramaturgy which could handle the largest and most general problems. Chekhov was a master of the particular and the general - which is another sign of the richness and balance of his mind. (Bentley 241-242)

By giving these naturalistic and yet potentially symbolic utterances to his characters, Chekhov is emphasizing the all-embracing reality of their inner lives, the nothingness that surrounds them, but he does so without the long explicit soliloquies that explain the actions and motivations of a character. Take, for example, Nina's final conversation with Treplev in at the end of the play. She has returned to Sorin's estate after two difficult years. By all accounts, she has achieved some success as an actress. She says:

> Why do you say you kissed the ground I trod on? I'm not fit to live. [*Bends over the table*.] Oh, I'm so tired! I need a rest, a rest. [*Raising her head*.] I'm a seagull. No, that's wrong. I'm an actress. Ah, well. [*Hearing* IRINA *and* TRIGORIN *laughing, she listens, then runs to the door, left, and looks through the keyhole*.] He's here, too. [*Going back to* TREPLEV.] Ah well. It doesn't matter. Yes. He didn't believe in the stage, he always laughed at my dreams, and I gradually stopped believing too and lost heart. Then there were all the cares of love, jealousy and constant fears for the baby. I became petty and small-minded and my acting made no sense. I didn't know what to do with my hands or know how to stand on the stage, and I couldn't control my voice. You've no idea what it feels like to know you're acting abominably. I'm a seagull. No, that's wrong. Remember you shot a seagull? A man happened to come along, saw it and killed it, just to pass the time. A plot for a short story. No, that's wrong. [*Wipes her forehead*.] What was I saying? I was talking about the stage. Oh, I'm different now, I'm a real actress. I enjoy acting, I adore it. I get madly excited on stage, I feel I'm beautiful. And since I have been here, I've kept going for walks, walking round and thinking – thinking and feeling my morale improving every day. Constantine, I know now, I've come to see, that in our work – no matter whether we're actors or writers – the great thing isn't fame or glory, it isn't what I used to dream of, but simply stamina. You must know how to bear your cross and have faith. I have faith, and things don't hurt me so much now. And when I think of my vocation, I'm not afraid of life. (113-114)

She is talking with Treplev, but she is also talking to herself as though Treplev is not there, and those misdirected utterances ("I'm a seagull. No, that's wrong"), carry a lot of meaning. Her pauses are significant too. Nina seems to have become a successful actress, but her frenzied response to Treplev betrays her enough to make her seem mentally unhinged. Chekhov does not provide the reader or audience with a background history of each character. Nina barely references the hardships she faced during the past two years, and it is unclear whether she has

triumphed in the pursuit of her art. Her fate is completely open to interpretation, a deliberate technique that will shape the interpretation and meaning of the entire play. Without suffering through a series of over-dramatic or unrealistic soliloquies, the audience gets the feeling that there is something unusual happening in *The Seagull*, more complex than what is explicitly articulated in the text.

The audience then has to read past the dialogue and past the incidental situations toward what Chekhov is not saying and toward the imagery he suggests in order to understand *The Seagull*. Chekhov suggests certain images and meanings with indirect means, which can make certain aspects of the play's dialogue and the characters' behavior seem unnecessary and superfluous. The image of the seagull, for example, is scattered throughout the play, and one is reminded of the odd events connected with its appearance: how Treplev shoots a seagull and throws it at Nina's feet, how Trigorin has the same dead seagull stuffed, only to forget about it. Their behavior is odd and somehow unnecessary, but the image of the seagull connected with those superfluous moments reverberates throughout the play, without an explicit meaning, only hinting at its purpose. Chudakov defends this aspect of Chekhov's play:

> In Chekhovian drama new principles of object selection become even more distinctly apparent than in prose dialogue. "Superfluous," "unnecessary" artistic objects are, of course, necessary and not superfluous. Only their purpose and meaning differ from canonical dramatic tradition. Their importance is not restricted to that speech or scene in which they appear. Their purposes are more general and far-reaching. These artistic objects, dispersed throughout the entire play, create a composite impression of a randomly selected, integral world, a world presented as an incidental, ephemeral, individual and specific moment in time, in no way rigidly connected in the play with any concrete idea or theme. (Chudakov 118)

Taken as a whole, the amalgam of seemingly inconsequential details in Chekhov's play constitutes a dramatic picture that illuminates the inner lives of the characters, their loneliness, loves, and passions. Treplev's loneliness particularly is represented in the little details that

reverberate throughout the play and foreshadow Treplev's unfortunate end. The smell of sulphur is first used in Treplev's play to signal the approach of the Devil. At the end of the play Treplev commits suicide by shooting himself; a sulphurous smell accompanies the firing of a gun. This sulphurous smell and the single shot of a gun appears more than once in the play's text. Connected to this is Treplev's loneliness which becomes another cage that prevents him from reaching his full potential and freeing himself from the cycle of tradition that has taken hold of art. With no one to support him, Treplev begins to think of himself as a "nonentity" (87).

The theme of art that pervades every level of Chekhov's play transforms *The Seagull* into a contemplative exploration of the role of art. Leo Tolstoy[36], the most preeminent figure in the literary world at the turn of the century, and Chekhov's close friend, was also one of his most outspoken critics. Tolstoy had his own ideas of art which were published in a weighty essay entitled "What is Art?" Tolstoy believed that the purpose of art was to transmit only the highest and best feelings of man to the whole of mankind. He wrote:

> Art is not, as the metaphysicians say, the manifestation of some mysterious Idea or beauty or God; it is not, as the aesthetical physiologists say, a game in which man lets off his excess of stored-up energy; it is not the expression of man's emotions by external signs; it is not the production of pleasing objects; and, above all, it is not pleasure; but it is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity. (52)

True art is universal art and should be accessible to the masses so that everyone can benefit from it. Art that is incomprehensible to the majority of people is not true art. True art is not limited to

[36] Tolstoy disliked Shakespeare. His article "Shakespeare and the Drama" published in 1906 as the introduction to *Shakespeare and the Working Classes* by Ernest Crosby. He describes the experience of reading Shakespeare's greatest works as repulsive and tedious. About *Hamlet* he writes:

> "But as it is recognized that Shakespeare the genius can not write anything bad, therefore learned people use all the power of their minds to find extraordinary beauties in what is an obvious and crying failure, demonstrated with especial vividness in "Hamlet," where the principal figure has no character whatever. And lo! profound critics declare that in this drama, in the person of Hamlet, is expressed singularly powerful, perfectly novel, and deep personality, existing in this person having no character; and that precisely in this absence of character consists the genius of creating a deeply conceived character." (73)

appreciation among the upper classes and encompasses a language understood by all. To Tolstoy, Chekhov's *The Seagull* was hardly considered true art. He once told Chekhov "But I still can't stand your plays. Shakespeare's are terrible, but yours are even worse!" (qtd. Pitcher 1). Tolstoy's opinion is indicative of the type of opposition that Chekhov faced. At the turn of the century, there was a tendency to view literature in terms of how it could be beneficial to society at large or in terms of its moral value, but Chekhov was not interested in framing his art in those limiting terms:

> You would have me, when I describe horse-thieves, say: "Stealing horses is an evil." But that has been known for ages without my saying so. Let the jury judge them; it's my job simply to show what sort of people they are…Of course it would be pleasant to combine art with a sermon, but for me personally it is extremely difficult and almost impossible, owing to the conditions of technique…When I write, I reckon entirely upon the reader to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story. (*Letters on the Short Story* 64)

Art, for Chekhov, was objective, in the sense that he was not going to offer his own judgment on his characters, but also that he was not going to offer authorial cues that might explicitly direct an audience's interpretations of characters. Rather, Chekhov uses more indirect means to imply and suggest certain nuances in dialogue, characters, and events. Contemporary critics initially disapproved of his objectivity; only later did they begin to appreciate Chekhov's artistry.

Treplev is never able to put on his great play, and is not able to live in a world in which his art is commonplace and he remains a nonentity. With *The Seagull*, however, Chekhov created a new type of play, one that was much more modern than the traditional plays in theatres of the time. Chekhov clearly saw the need to break away from the stagnant traditions of art; his sentiments are perhaps embodied in Treplev and Trigorin. However, critics were not as receptive to Chekhov's artistic innovation; critique generally focused on the play's lack of apparent purpose and the "haphazard" structure of episodes in which some important events

occur offstage. What Chekhov did create, and which was not completely understood until a few years later, was a new space of potentiality that allowed characters to have greater range of interpretation, which in turn gave a certain unfinalized quality to the play. This "unfinalizability" operates, however, as the most formidable textual and theatrical device which permits Chekhov to develop and expand the potential of the realistic theatre and find the potential for absurd in human relationships which in time will make him a singularly important figure for the development of the Theatre of the Absurd. It is precisely this capacity to end his play without absolutes by posing, rather than answering numerous questions generated by his text, shocked the audience when *The Seagull* was first performed.

Chekhov is far more interested in dramatizing the complexity of intersections and potential links in human destinies when the dividing line between art and life is erased on the theatrical stage than playing into the notion that "serving humanity is the sacred cause of art," (Tolstoy 70) and introducing commonplaces. His world, imbued with infinite pathways of meanings, is distinctly "adogmatic." This is precisely the argument of A.P. Chudakov who states that Chekhov's art reflects the multivalent existence of the ideas in reality:

> In the Chekhovian world an idea is not independent of its everyday incidental connection with its tangible environment or the specific conditions it encounters in real life. The ontology of the idea is the center of attention. The reader clearly senses that the creator of this world is involved less with the depiction of the idea itself, than with the complexity of its existence in and of itself; it is always fixed within the incidental circumstance of its worldly existence. An idea cannot be extracted from that empirical existence into which it is submerged. Once isolated and represented outside the conditions of existence, it ceases being *that* idea. An idea cannot exist in pure form independent of its relationship to everyday existence. (204)

Chekhov's art insists not merely on the existence of the idea, but on the explosion of multiple meanings that originates with that idea and underlies human actions. Although this explosive richness of meaning is missed almost completely by people in real life, art and theatre, in

Chekhov's view, may find a way of reminding its audience that the perceptions of the play's personages do not have to determine the perceptions of the audience.[37]

Just as Hamlet was trapped by the wills of his Father's Ghost and his mother, and by his duty, his sense of honor and his own self-doubts, so is Treplev trapped by the legacy of traditional art, the imposing legacies of his mother and Trigorin, his loneliness, and his self-doubts. In both plays, there is the need to rebel against the conventions and patterns of the past. Still, Chekhov does not merely adapt *Hamlet* for the early twentieth century Russian art world, but expands on Shakespeare's play, using it as a template for his own brand of modern theatre. Shakespeare is a cathartic experience for an artist because each play is an amalgam of what has been said and what has not been said, and is therefore open to interpretation. The space of imprecision contained within Shakespeare's *Hamlet* allows for an artist to appropriate the timelessness of the play while also adapting it for a contemporary audience, which in turn allows for the possibility of creating a new type of art.

Jan Kott, the eminent Shakespearean scholar and theatre critic, wrote that, "Great works of art have an autonomous existence, independent of the intention and personality of their creators and independent also of the circumstances of the time of their creation, that is the mark of their greatness" (Kott xii). Chekhov's *The Seagull* is one of those great works of art that propelled its artist into the pantheon of great dramatists. It is noteworthy then that Chekhov

---

[37] Chudakov describes Chekhov's works in terms of *fabula* and *syuzhet*, terms from Russian formalism. *Fabula* is the series of events that occurs, while *syuzhet* is the way in which the events are presented. According to Chudakov, there are two ways to present the *fabula*: a generalized approach that relies on resolved episodes to relate the events of the story, and a more dramatic approach that depicts an episode in its most complete expression. Chekhov utilizes the second approach in his writing, and even when his works contain more generalized episodes, Chekhov's *syuzhet*, or technique of presenting the events, prevents them from being perceived as concrete.

> Thus, the foundation of the Chekhov *fabula* comprises a concrete episode, depicted with all its idiosyncratic randomness. Episodes are not selected on the basis of their importance to the whole. Events lack resolution; the destinies of the characters are not finalized. All of these elements create the impression of a lack of selectivity; the author attempts, through this manipulation of material, to capture the chaotic complexity of existence. (175)

chose Shakespeare, perhaps the most widely known dramatist throughout the world, as his inspiration for his own play. A Shakespearean play may seem like the prototypical traditional drama, yet recent scholarship has described a particular phenomenon associated with Shakespeare's plays, mainly their capacity for interpretation. Kott is best known for his pivotal work *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, in which he states that Shakespeare does not fully draw out his characters' motivations and leaves his play unfinalized enough to allow for an incredible range of interpretation. Actors and audience members see their own reflection in the play, and while a modern production of the play might not be Shakespeare's intended *Hamlet*, nonetheless, it is still a relevant *Hamlet*, as Kott explains:

> *Hamlet* is like a sponge. Unless it is produced in a stylized or antiquarian fashion, it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time. It is the strangest play ever written, by its very imperfections. *Hamlet* is a great scenario, in which every character has a more or less tragic and cruel part to play, and has magnificent things to say. Every character has an irrevocable task to fulfill, a task imposed by the author. This scenario is independent of the characters; it has been devised earlier. It defines the situations, as well as the mutual relations of the characters; it dictates their words and gestures. But it does not say who the characters are. It is something external in relation to them. And that is why the scenario of *Hamlet* can be played by different sorts of characters. (64)

Chekhov realized the innovative potential contained within this feature of *Hamlet*. In The Seagull, he rewrites the scenario of *Hamlet*, reversing the structure so that it becomes a template for his new dramatic art. Undoubtedly, Chekhov had a vision for his play; his disapproval with performances of *The Seagull* is well-known: he did not want the actors to imbue his characters with their own interpretations and motivations, but to act as they would in everyday life, and maintain the objectivity of his intention.[38] He also employed new dramatic techniques to create

[38] Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko writes in his memoir: "Chekhov was incapable of advising actors, even later when he came into contact wit the actors of the Art Theatre. Everything appeared so comprehensible to him: 'Why, I have written it all down,' he would answer. To the stage director he said: 'They are *acting* too much." This did not mean that the actors were *overacting*. It meant that they were acting feelings, images, words. But *how to act without*

an atmosphere of ambiguity and ambivalence on stage, while in the process, erasing the possibility for a single interpretation of the play and simultaneously expanding the unfinalized space of the play. Chekhov recognized this space as crucial for its unusual innovative potential, and it is in this space that the foundation for a new theatre genre emerges, one that would only later be called the Theatre of the Absurd.

---

*acting anything* no one could tell them, least of all the author. 'It must all be done very simply,' Chekhov said, 'just as in life. It must be done as if they spoke about it every day.' It was easy to say that!" (63)

# Chapter 4: The Potential for the Theatre of the Future and the Emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd

Anton Chekhov recognized *Hamlet*'s innovative potential as imperative for the revival of the stagnant Russian theatre of the nineteenth century. The unfinalized structure of Shakespeare's play creates a space that allows for multiple interpretations, a space that Chekhov reintroduced in his own ground-breaking play. Although Chekhov's new form of theatre encompassed many original changes in dramatic technique and was in itself a radical departure from *Hamlet*, the influence of Shakespeare's play pervades every facet of *The Seagull* and enhances the depth of Chekhov's artistic experimentation. Rewriting *Hamlet* while working on *The Seagull*, in effect, established a new theatre genre that rejected traditional norms and that would become later become a most influential force in the development of the Theatre of the Absurd. While the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' is associated with the dramatic movement that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century in Western Europe with the plays of dramatists such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Adam Adamov, and Bertold Brecht, a close examination of Chekhov's *The Seagull* already reveals the essential techniques of dramatic absurdist works.[39] The startling aspect of Chekhov's theatre can be summarized as follows: the same principles and writing strategies can be viewed simultaneously as realistic and yet proleptic of the absurd spectacle. In other words, *The Seagull*, while remaining true to the psychological realism, is so exaggerated in its comic and tragic realities that the term 'realism' is not broad enough to encompass the play's complexity.

[39] Many scholars and critics often overlook *The Seagull*'s absurd elements and instead interpret Chekhov's play as a work of realism.

Nonetheless, how can the same textual tropes be interpreted as parts of very different genres? The answer to this question lies in the space of multiple interpretations in Chekhov's play. Wolfgang Iser, the intellectual leader of the Reader-reception theory, identified the blanks, or the unfilled spaces within a text, as the most effective technique for encouraging a reader's imagination:

> What is missing from the apparently trivial scenes, the gaps arising out of the dialogue – this is what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning. But as the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination, so the said "expands" to take on greater significance than might have been supposed: even trivial scenes can seem surprisingly profound. (33-34)

The process of stimulating a reader's imagination, according to Iser, is an act of ideation, and provokes the reader into conceiving the world behind the text, which then expands the meaning of the unfilled spaces. For Chekhov's studies, the unfilled spaces of miscommunication and pauses full of meaning and meaninglessness (which became later the major strategies of the theatre of the absurd) constitute some of the most promising avenues of exploration. Characters in *The Seagull* do not listen to one another, and only certain aspects of their lives are clarified for viewers, which inevitably generate a space of disparity between what is said in the text and what the audience perceives. The space for contemplation around nothingness is incorporated in The Seagull on many levels, and informs the multiplicity of interpretation. Possibly the character on which this space is concentrated most in *The Seagull* is Nina, whose ambiguous portrayal invites much speculation. This singular Chekhovian technique of creating blanks within the text, however, is also a most startling quality of *Hamlet*, particularly the effects of madness scenes involving Hamlet and Ophelia as agents of uncertainty, mystery, and yet also invitations to self-awareness. This technique, in fact, is articulated in *Hamlet* with great precision, not only in

Hamlet's instruction to the actors to minimize rather than maximize the emotions on the stage,[40] but particularly in the power that Ophelia acquires once her speech loses its meaning and "carries but half-sense". In her ranting, then, there is what Iser terms a blank, and this is what invites not only the characters of *Hamlet*, but also the audience, to fill in that blank with their own meaning. Ophelia's madness scene identifies her as a character surrounded by mystery and unfilled space, which, consequently, allows her to take on many interpretations, a characteristic that also emerges in Nina. Her madness is a pivotal moment in *Hamlet*, one that not only maintains the unfinalizability of the play, but also opens up the space for the emergence of the absurd.

At the point of her madness, Ophelia has just suffered the loss of her father Polonius, who was killed by Hamlet. Beyond consolation, she demands an audience with the king and queen. The queen is terrified because Ophelia's madness intensifies her hidden sense of guilt: "To my sick soul (as sin's true nature is)/ Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss. / So full of artless jealousy is guilt/ It spills itself in fearing to be spilt" (4.5.1-20). She does not want to see Ophelia. A gentleman, however, communicates that the young girl cannot be stopped, and it is here that Ophelia's strange power over other minds (or what Iser would calls acts of ideation) is clearly articulated:

> She speaks much of her father, says she hears
> There's tricks i' th' world, and hems, and beats her heart,
> Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt
> They carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
> Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
> The hearers to collection; they aim at it,
> And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
> Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
> Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
> Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (4.5.4-13)

[40] *Hamlet* (3.2.16-28)

Ophelia's nonsensical ranting is catching the attention of those who hear her sorrowful words, and unable to ignore her, some people are beginning to construct their own truths from her ravings. Horatio urges Gertrude to speak to Ophelia: "'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew/ Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds" (4.5.14-15). The lack of completeness in Ophelia's discourse disseminates the spaces of contemplation among her interlocutors, and they fill it with their own conjectures, thoughts, or uncovered feelings of guilt, as in the case of the Queen. It is not so much Ophelia's grief but the mystery surrounding what she may have experienced and understood that intrigues and stimulates the thoughts of her interlocutors. In her unshaped ravings, she becomes a part of the theatre's power to awaken conscience, a thought articulated by Hamlet when he announces "The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.605-606). In the world of *Hamlet*, there is truth in madness. Ophelia wafts into the room adorned in flowers; she sings of death, the seduction of an innocent maid, and betrayal. After the encounter with Ophelia, Claudius becomes aware of an impending threat to the stability of Denmark, and even the normally calm Gertrude realizes that Ophelia's madness foreshadows a great disaster. The image of Ophelia, in mourning, beating her heart and crying out in half sense is powerful and brings the reality of her own helplessness to the forefront of the play. The undercurrent of anguish and helplessness that instills *Hamlet* with a tinge of the absurd is woven throughout the text only to reveal itself in the most telling scenes of the play.

These telling scenes are presented as irrational events, according to Lev Vygotsky, the eminent Soviet psychologist who founded his own school of cultural-historical psychology,

examined Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in his seminal work, *The Art of Psychology*.[41] He insists that Shakespeare crafts his play in such a way that the internal contradictions within the tragedy constantly play with a viewer's emotions. The playwright sets up the events of his play along an expected pattern of resolution, but that expected pattern quickly gives way to multiple paths of action, so that the plotline of *Hamlet* is essentially one of contradiction and opposition, of converging and diverging paths. Irrational events disrupt the plot further and contribute to the plays' overall mystery and murkiness; scenes of Hamlet and Ophelia's madness, or the scene with the comical gravediggers, according to Vygotsky, emphasizes the play's absurdity, which in turn emphasizes the meaning of the play: [42]

> We may liken them to lightning rods of absurdity ingeniously placed by the playwright at the most dangerous points of his tragedy, in order to bring the affair somehow to an end and make the absurdity of Hamlet's tragedy plausible. However, the task of art, like that of tragedy, is to force us to experience the incredible and absurd in order to perform some kind of extraordinary operation with our emotions. Poets use two devices for this purpose. First, there are the "lightning rods of absurdity," as we called all the irrational and absurd parts of *Hamlet.* The action evolves in such an incredible way that it threatens to become absurd. The internal contradictions are extreme. The divergence between the two lines of action reaches its apogee and they seem to burst asunder, tearing apart the entire tragedy. It is at this stage that the action suddenly takes on the forms of paradox, pompous declamation, cynicism, recurrent madness, open buffoonery. Against this background of outspoken insanity the play's absurdity slowly becomes less marked and more credible. Madness and insanity are introduced in massive doses to save the play's meaning. (Chapter 8, *Psychology of Art*)

Vygotsky underscores two important points regarding the way in which Shakespeare crafted his play: the internal contradictions, and the moments of absurdity. The internal contradictions and diverging paths of action obscure the overall meaning of the play and produce moments in which

---

[41] Vygotsky began his lengthy dissertation on *Hamlet* after seeing a performance of the famous play. Seeing Hamlet sparked his lifelong interest, in much the same way as Chekhov was inspired.

[42] Vygotsky remarks that *Hamlet* is an enigma and, therefore, cannot be explained by any one critical interpretation, since the riddle of *Hamlet* cannot be solved completely. He maintains that most critical interpretations of *Hamlet* fail because they pay little attention to the struggle with external obstacles that represent the real meaning of the play, and rejects the idea that *Hamlet* is a tragedy of character.

the action of the play threatens to damage the tragedy. By employing moments of absurdity in the aid of channeling the contradictions, the play is rescued from becoming meaningless and full of insanity. The ultimate meaning of the play lies in the absurd moments of *Hamlet*, the scenes of madness.

Mildred Hartsock observes that Ophelia's madness scene captures the essence of the entire play. Ophelia's madness mirrors Hamlet's feigned madness, and their fates are interconnected. Ophelia's madness is the voice of truth in the play, and her suicide confirms Hamlet's suspicions of the farce of existence:

> Hamlet is a very prototype of the modern existential hero: confronted with human mortality and with human evil and with a world he never made, he cannot see the veritable good that is in it…Her tragedy is that in his poisoned world Hamlet cannot really see her at all. Her father's insensitivity, Hamlet's world-sickness, and her own youthful innocence drive her to her watery grave. And the last moments in which we see her are the emotional core of the whole play's meaning…But Hamlet only learns a resignation to the lostness of love and the inevitability of death. (Hartsock 58)

Hamlet does not want to participate in the world that he did not create, but he is trapped by the wills of his mother, Claudius, and his father's ghost. He does not know what action to take and doubts whether any action would be effective enough to prevent the impending destruction looming over him. Hamlet's world, a world where action is meaningless, where all is duplicitous, and where madness is his only truth, is an absurd world. His "To be or not to be" speech dramatizes the absurdity of his precarious position within the unfolding political drama around him and the absurdity of the human condition. Hamlet implicitly refers to his own existence in his speech, but because he does not explicitly use 'I', the speech becomes a philosophical debate over the eternal question of human existence:

> To die, to sleep--
> To sleep--perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause. There's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life.
> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
> Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely
> The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
> The insolence of office, and the spurns
> That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
> When he himself might his quietus make
> With a bare bodkin? (3.1.60-76)

He concludes that the fear and uncertainty of death prevents most people from embracing death even though it would provide reprieve from the "thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." Hamlet's choice is the focus of Shakespeare's tragedy, but regardless of his choice, a cycle of destruction has already been set in motion that will lead the play's protagonists to their deaths.

Thomas F. Van Laan insists that *Hamlet* is governed by the principle of ironic reversal, which functions to ruin even the best-laid plans in *Hamlet*. Ironic reversal is woven throughout the play as a leitmotif, influencing the direction of the plot and deciding the outcome of events. The influence of ironic reversal even makes the tragedy of *Hamlet* seem ludicrous at times simply because no matter what the characters might do to control their environment, this invisible force thwarts their every action: "When tragic situations take the shape of a convention of a farce, they of necessity create the impression a universe essentially absurd and savage so far as human pretentions are concerned. The farcical, sadistic aspect of the leitmotif suits well the thematic imagery of the cancerous ulcer" (Van Laan 258). Additionally the theme of death that pervades the play is a common feature of absurdist drama, and in *Hamlet*, death looms like a specter in the background of every scene. The appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost sets in motion the destructive ending that Shakespeare foreshadows throughout the play; Hamlet's soliloquy builds the tension; Polonius' death and Ophelia's suicide herald the approach of a disaster; and Hamlet's own preoccupation with death is exacerbated by his encounter with

Yorick's skull in a graveyard in Act Five. Yorick was the jester of his father's court, and his death signifies the death of a happier time, which only brings the troubling reality of his present situation to bitter clarity:

> Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow
> of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath
> borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how
> abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rims at
> it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know
> not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your
> gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment,
> that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one
> now, to mock your own grinning? quite chap-fallen?
> Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let
> her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must
> come; make her laugh at that. (5.1.185-195)

And death will have its grand finale in the final scene in which Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes meet their ends – Laertes and Hamlet in duel, Claudius by Hamlet's sword, and Gertrude by the poison meant for Hamlet. Grigori Kozintsev,[43] the director of the renowned Russian film adaptations of both *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, recognized the pervasive quality that death has in Shakespeare's play: "The theme of death, basic in the tragedy, begins well before the graveyard scene. The smell of corruption emanates from more than Yorick's skull. Marcellus's words, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," have been justly cited many times; the words are important. The state-prison is decaying" (Kozintsev 138).

The Theatre of the Absurd constitutes an indefinite category of dramatic techniques, but "its unitary principles revolve around the theme of an all-pervading sense of anguish at the absurdity of the human condition, the autonomy of the stage, and a new aesthetic toward language" (Wegener 151). The omnipresent "sense of anguish at the absurdity of the human

[43] In his film *Hamlet*, Kozintsev makes a reference to *The Seagull*; after Ophelia's suicide, a seagull is shown flying above Hamlet. It is also worth noting that his Hamlet was the most popular Soviet film of 1964.

condition" is crucial to the motif of *Hamlet*, but that same agony is also the key to understanding *The Seagull*. In rewriting *Hamlet*, Chekhov identified the undercurrent of agony in Shakespeare's play and amplified it in combination with the realism of his own play in order to emphasize the absurdity of the human condition and its place in art. What Chekhov did, then, was take the suggestion of the absurd in *Hamlet* and intensify it for *The Seagull*. Chekhov juxtaposed the underlying theme of death and the sense of anguish in Shakespeare's play with comedic elements for his own play. He placed that juxtaposition within a framework of realism, and crafted a dramatic technique to enhance the nuances that emerged from the relationship between the two plays. Chekhov did have a definite artistic intention, one that was meant to highlight the dreariness of everyday life, as indicated by a letter that Chekhov wrote to Alexander Tikhonov in 1902:

> You tell me that people cry at my plays. I've heard others say the same. But that was not why I wrote them. It is Alexeyev (Stanislavsky) who made my characters into cry-babies. All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!' The important thing is that people should realise that, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life. And so long as this different life does not exist, I shall go on saying to people again and again: 'Please, understand that your life is bad and dreary!' (qtd. Magarshack 13-14)

And life in *The Seagull* is certainly dreary, and that dreariness seeps into every aspect of the play. The tedious atmosphere of Sorin's provincial estate is stifling, even to Sorin: "Country life doesn't really suit me, boy, and I shall never get used to this place, you can see for yourself. I went to bed at ten o'clock last night and woke at nine this morning, feeling as if all that sleep had glued my brain to my skull or something. [*Laughs*.] Then I happened to drop off again this afternoon, and now I feel more dead than alive. It's a nightmare, that's what it comes to" (68). The "nightmare" in which Chekhov's characters are living in is where the tragedy of the play

lies, but it is their response to their own tragedies that gives the play its comedic touch. Rather than taking resolute action to change their situation, the characters respond with sighs of resignation and bemused chuckles, making their lives all the more absurd. Treplev's only response to Sorin's comment is, "Yes, you should really live in town." He is too involved in his own problems to worry about his uncle. Despite Sorin's most sincere longing to experience "a bit of life" and leave his isolated estate, he is never able to escape the tedium of country life, and by the end of the play, his health has declined dramatically enough to ruin those dreams indefinitely. This pattern repeats itself with every character, as each character's initial aspirations gradually fade in the face of passivity and inertia.

Geoffrey Borny acknowledges not only the futility of Chekhov's characters in *The Seagull* but also the play's parallels with the Theatre of the Absurd; however, he disputes the suggestion that Chekhov is a forerunner of the Absurdist and instead classifies Chekhov as a cautious optimist. His argument is based on the subtle distinction that while the Absurdists say "nothing is to be done," Chekhov's characters simply are not to do anything. Borny defends Chekhov's vision of reality as positive, which he insists, is what prevents *The Seagull* from being a work of the absurd:

> The essence of an absurdist view of life is contained in the opening line of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* when Estragon says 'Nothing to be done'. This one line sums up the sense of hopelessness and futility that characterises Beckett's unchanging and unchangeable world. However Chekhov is not Beckett. What he depicts is a world in which 'no one is doing anything'. Far from denying change or hope, his plays embody an attempt to awaken an audience to the possibilities of change and improvement. It is not existential angst at the fixed nature of the world that is being expressed by Chekhov, but his sense of humanity's comic and pathetic failure to make the most of the world. (27)

According to Borny, Chekhov's characters had the ability to make their lives better but they refused to act, and in their refusal to act is Chekhov's critique of the general complacency with a

dreary life that Chekhov noticed in his own society. This point is indeed valid considering that in 1891 Chekhov wrote a short treatise entitled "A Moscow Hamlet" in which he satirizes the malaise and indifference of nineteenth-century Russian society: "I am a Moscow Hamlet. Yes. In Moscow I visit the houses, the theatres, the restaurants, and the editors' offices, and everywhere I say exactly the same thing: "God, what boredom! What oppressive boredom!" And they answer me sympathetically, "Yes, truly, terribly boring." (Personal Papers 215). In portraying his characters as passive participants in their own lives, Chekhov, according to Borny, is attempting to provoke the audience to evaluate their own lives, imbuing *The Seagull* with a positive message, implying that an absurdist work generally presents a negative perspective on the human condition.

Borny's interpretation raises some interesting associations and perspectives, but it is not necessarily separate from the interpretation of Chekhov as a dramatist of the absurd. Chekhov's absurdist vision can coincide with a more positive interpretation of Chekhov's ultimate intentions. *The Seagull* portrays the absurdity of the human condition in order to show the audience the dreariness of their own lives: "In the Theatre of the Absurd, the spectator is confronted with the madness of the human condition, is enabled to see his situation in all its grimness and despair. Stripped of illusions and vaguely felt fears and anxieties, he can face the situation consciously, rather than feeling it vaguely below the surface of euphemisms and optimistic illusions" (Esslin 414). According to Martin Esslin, the purpose of the Theatre of the Absurd is to awaken consciousness, and that aim does embody a certain positivity and optimism. Chekhov's "sense of humanity's comic and pathetic failure to make the most of the world" is important to his absurdist vision of reality. Trigorin wants to write something completely original; Treplev wants to change art; Nina wants to become a great actress; Masha wants

Treplev; Polina wants Dorn; Sorin wants to leave his estate to live in town. By Act Four, these characters have not progressed. They remain on Sorin's estate trapped in the daily monotony of card games and tea-drinkings. Yet, what could Chekhov's characters have done to take charge of their own lives? Forces beyond their control prevent them from taking resolute action. Their lives are governed by an inescapable fate that seems to thwart their every plan and trap them in stagnant monotony:

> But because Chekhov is more concerned with the inner lives of his characters and is not interested in presenting an action, his plays seem lifeless, timeless, static. Such plays of "wrecked travelers" are bound to be the antithesis of an Aristotelian action. Like the characters in the novels of Kafka, Proust, and Joyce, the people in Chekhov's plays talk and plan a great deal, but they do nothing. In fact, part of each play's meaning derives from this disparity between language and action. And we notice that as he develops as a playwright, Chekhov increasingly seems to doubt the possibility of meaningful action (even negative) at all. (Corrigan, "Plays" 147)

The society that Chekhov criticizes is what serves as the force that makes the actions of the characters in *The Seagull* ultimately meaningless; it manifests in indifference. The indifference of his audience, particularly of his mother, renders Treplev's artistic aspirations worthless: he can shout all he wants about new forms, but he is powerless if no one will listen to him. While Irina wants to remain beautiful and famous, the indifference of time will make her efforts seem ridiculous. Masha cannot induce Treplev to fall in love with her because he barely notices her, just as Polina cannot make Dorn love her. Sorin cannot leave his estate if he cannot even get use of the horses. And Nina cannot become an actress if she cannot break into the long-established artistic world which clings so tightly to its dominance and traditions. Perhaps Nina is the one character who actually *does* something in the play, but even her foray into acting has been extremely difficult and not without hardships, and her success is suspect, since even after two years, she is still drawn to the lake. The only answer Nina can offer to the question of what to do

in this absurd world is to bear one's cross and endure because, in the face of their own absurd existence, all Chekhov's characters can do is ask, as Dorn does, "But what can I do, my child? What can I do?" (81). Chekhov's characters succumb to a cycle of dreariness resembling the cycle of destruction in *Hamlet*.

Regardless of Chekhov's intention, the world he portrays in *The Seagull* is absurd, and not just for its dramatic content, but for the dramatic technique through which it is portrayed. Adolph H. Wegener offers a detailed summary of the unitary principles of the Theatre of the Absurd, which constitute a variety of dramatic techniques**:**

> the restricted settings of a familiar environment, the brevity of disjointed plots or dramatic situations…emphasis on a static circular situation…farcical tragicomic elements in the contrast of sequence, cabaret, and vaudeville techniques on a pre-eminent stage; the deliberate omission of an explanation, solution, or a motivation for the action; the aspect of death; variations of dialogue and the employment of clichés, repetitions, incongruity, irony, fantasy, and rhapsodic monologue for the purposes of persiflage. (Wegener 155)

Most of these unitary principles are extremely applicable to Chekhov's dramatic art and particularly to *The Seagull*. With the use of a variety of these techniques, Chekhov presents his vision of the absurdity of the human condition. A closer examination of Chekhov's methods of presenting his absurd reality underscores the similarities between his plays and the Theatre of the Absurd, and the key to this comparison lies in Chekhov's careful use of several of these unitary principles, mainly, the use of an all-encompassing dramatic situation as the basis for *The Seagull*'s plot, the mixture of comic and tragic elements, his characteristic objectivity, and the disjointed nature of his characters' dialogue.

*The Seagull* constituted a major departure from traditional theatre, and one of the main innovations associated with the Theatre of the Absurd is a new attitude toward language. Chekhov replaced the formal language of traditional theatre with the dialogue that captures the

inconsistencies and nuances of everyday life. Robert Corrigan explains that the dialogical structure of *The Seagull*, due to its illogical sequence, contributes to the overall atmosphere of the absurd. Characters talk about their aspirations, but never actually do anything to fulfill them. They converse freely without reference to one another, and their thought pattern flows randomly from one observation to the next. According to Corrigan, who credits the new usage of language as the innovating force for theatre, dialogue functions as a dramatic device used to emphasize the opacity of Chekhov's vision of reality:

> Essentially, the comedy lies in the incongruous order of the dialogue. The incongruous substitution of what is for what ought to be is funny. All comedy is one kind of exemplification of the proposition that nothing actual is wholly logical. As a result one character in Chekhov's plays says something that makes sense and is important in terms of his own little world. The person with whom he is talking is in his own little world; and if he is listening at all, it is within an entirely different context. This results in a reply which makes very little sense. The comedy is further heightened when the first character continues as if the second had made a logical reply. ("Dramaturgy" 111)

Dialogue is also a means of reflecting the isolation in an absurd world. Chekhov's characters speak to one another, but because each is so engrossed in his or her own inner crises, no one really listens to anyone else. They ignore each other's greatest hopes and dreams, and shrug off each other's deepest fears. When one of his characters does say something perceptive, it is said within such a comical context that he or she is rarely taken seriously. Sorin's comment about life being a nightmare, for example, is almost completely ignored by Treplev, who is too anxious about the premiere of his play.

This constant missing of each other's deepest concerns operates as a leitmotif of blank spaces, absences, or inadvertent pauses in the text, a pattern that becomes more obvious in Chekhov's original Russian. As mentioned earlier, the characters of The Seagull are terrified of their nothingness which they nonetheless contemplate. The feeling of being a nonentity is

common to several characters, and each character at some point in the play, refers to his or her feelings as "nothing." In fact, Chekhov's Russian text subtly revolves around this central theme, so powerfully and yet simultaneously imperceptibly operating in the characters' articulations, for Russian "ничто, ничего, никто и никого" are deeply imbedded in the habitual linguistic utterances. Thus, Masha cries out, in spite of everyone's mild indifference: "Я страдаю. Никто, никто не знает моих страданий!" (Chekhov 1956, 244). Arkadina remarks in exasperation, "Ах, что может быть скучнее этой вот милой деревенской скуки! Жарко, тихо, никто ничего не делает, все философствуют" (Chekhov 1956, 247). Treplev laments, "я - ничто, и меня терпят только потому, что я её сын" (Chekhov 1956, 232). Dorn says, "Не знаю, быть может, я ничего не понимаю или сошёл с ума, но пьеса мне понравилась" (Chekhov 1956, 242). These words -- никто, ничего, никого, and ничтожество – are repeated numerous times throughout the play, continually stressing the absences, or missed opportunities, in the play. Both Treplev's initial attempt at suicide and his final irremediable action are accompanied by a leitmotif of "nothing" or "ничего," as Sorin notes upon seeing Treplev's bandage in Act III, "Ничего, ничего...Уже прошло... и все..." (Chekhov 1956, 259), and Dorn pacifies Arkadina, frightened by the shot in the last scene of the play, "Ничего. […] Не беспокойтесь" (Chekhov 1956, 282). And the whole while throughout the play, the conversations of the characters are punctuated by this constant reassertions of nothingness, as well as by the frequent breaks of the conversations, or equally frequent unfilled and lengthy pauses, which inevitably become ever more meaningful as open contemplative space, just as so many of the dreams and yearnings expressed by the characters in the play end in nothingness and so very few of the protagonists fulfill what they had promised to achieve.

The disparity between action and dialogue is a pivotal concern for dramatists of the absurd, because it conveys the falsity of language. Wegener points out that one of the unifying themes of absurdist playwrights, such as Eugene Ionesco, is the futility of communication when language is not an accurate reflection of reality:

> That the syllogistic structure of language is a contradiction which reflects a vanishing belief in a categorically harmonious relationship between man and the universe has been succinctly stated by Ionesco: "what is sometimes labelled the absurd is only the denunciation of the ridiculous nature of a language which is empty of substance, sterile, made up of clichés and slogans." If the non-communicable world is deprived of any authority from a divinely ordered universe and man is imprisoned in his own self-consciousness, then nothing in this world has any value and our language deceives us with all its imitations of higher meanings, for "language no longer corresponds to reality, no longer expresses a truth. . .” (Wegener 152).

A language of euphemisms and optimistic cries only conceals a layer of absurdity, and only by confronting the truth of that absurdity is it then possible to move beyond it, which is why it is necessary to liberate language from falsity. Moreover, Corrigan notes that since playwrights of the absurd distrust language, especially the language of traditional theatre, their plays contain no central message (“Search” 29). Traditional plays usually feature a main recognizable character who espouses a profound and universal truth, but Chekhov does not centralize a moral in one character, nor does he have his characters wax philosophical in long soliloquies. Chekhov’s characters only espouse the truth behind the absurdity of life. The dialogue in *The Seagull* is not completely nonsensical like the dialogue in Ionesco’s plays, but it does play a significant role in both Chekhov’s comedy and tragedy, the interplay of which produces Chekhov’s absurd reality.

The action of *The Seagull* also lends itself to the absurd in Chekhov’s play, although perhaps it is more accurate to discuss the lack of action in *The Seagull*. Chekhov’s most significant departure from traditional theatre is the fact that the most theatrically dramatic and climactic events take place off stage. Treplev’s first attempt at suicide and eventual suicide are

only alluded to in the play's text, and Nina's love affair with Trigorin is not expanded upon in detail. And even in Act Four, two years later, the characters are still trapped in the monotony of routine. Robert Corrigan insists that Chekhov is the "legitimate father of the so-called "absurdist" movement in the theatre," based on the innovations in his plays ("Plays" 145). All of the Absurdists, according to Corrigan, are striving to create a theatre based on themes and emotional states, rather than one that is defined by a prearranged plot, so essentially they want a theatre that is left open and unfinalized. However, liberating the dramatic structure from plot immediately raises new obstacles. Since plot usually governs a play's action, characters, and ideas, removing the authority of the plot enhances the dominance of dramatic situations:

> We are now dealing with a dislocated drama; its traditional elements have been given a violent wrench. So we find that the plot has been twisted into a situation that is to reveal an emotional state. There are many dramatic situations in a plot; here the situation has been stretched to take the place of the plot. This inflation of the situation into the source of dramatic action, so that it replaces the plot, is the vital secret of the Theatre of the Absurd… [A] plot is capable of endless ramifications largely because character changes circumstances. Once you have fixed your characters, their psychological reactions are no longer of interest. The situation assumes full command. (Corrigan, "Search" 25)

*The Seagull* has no discernible plot in traditional terms, and it lacks a sequential dramatic structure: there is no suspense, climax, or denouement, and, as explained earlier, the characters do not actually do anything or even progress over the course of the play. Leo Shestov adds that the basis of action in *The Seagull* is "naked accident, ostentatiously nude," and without regard to logic or cause and effect (15). Each character's inevitable failure assumes command and determines the play's action in *The Seagull*. The movement of the story follows each character's preoccupation with his or her inadequacies, and one gets the sense that Chekhov's characters will continue to struggle with their own problems even after the play has ended. In addition to Corrigan's observation is one by Esslin, who describes a similar feature of Chekhov's play. He

observes that Chekhov, rather than stringing together a series of increasingly dramatic events in logical and sequential fashion, illuminates all of the seemingly inconsequential details of a certain theme or situation in order to create a poetic image that gradually supersedes the play's plot, so that the viewer must wait until that image is presented before exploring the play's form and impact. The poetic image does not provide the viewer with a solution, but a framework in which to formulate questions (416). Between the details presented by a poetic image, then, are the blanks that Iser identifies as important for engaging and provoking viewers. Corrigan also suggests that in his plays, Chekhov freed the "is-ness" of human existence from conventional forms and utilized a new form of concentric action to express the murkiness, ambivalence, confusion, and complexity of human experience ("Plays" 151).

Often, in placing so much emphasis on the tragedy in *The Seagull*, the comedic elements are overshadowed, but the absurd exists at the interplay of tragedy and comedy.[44] Corrigan observes that for Absurdists, "tragedy and comedy are both manifestations of despair, of the act which exists, exists alone in its own motivated isolation" and to reduce the complexity of that despair to a well-ordered storyline with a triumphant hero, a logical sequence of events, and a clean ending is to deprive that act of despair of its elemental absurdity ("Search" 22). Despair is the underlying theme of *The Seagull*, but Chekhov's clever use of comedic elements prevents his play from descending into the depths of tragedy. The comedy in *The Seagull* is manifested in the characters' dismissive dialogue and incongruous comments, the disjointed sequence of action, and eccentricities of the characters. Chekhov places the infinite suffering and incomparable loneliness of his characters within a ridiculous context by exaggerating the realism of his play: "His drama is an attempt to show what the nature of man's existence is in reality – an attempt to

[44] See J.L Styan, *The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy*, for a more general examination.

show life as it is. He achieves this by heightening the apparent reality to such a point that it becomes ludicrous; in this way we come to recognize the meaning of the all-important inner world of emotion which exists beneath the surface" (Corrigan, "Dramaturgy" 108). Tragedy and comedy exist simultaneously in a Chekhov play, as opposed to a traditional tragic-comedy that alternates the tragic and comedic aspects. It is why Irina's ego and narcissism is both over-the-top but also betray her own insecurities; why Masha's blunt comments may seem shocking but hide her depression and her drinking problem, why it is easy to laugh at Treplev's ranting but also to feel sorry for him, why Polina seems ridiculous in her unrequited love for Dorn but how in doing so she betrays the unhappy state of her marriage, and why Medvedenko is laughable for loving Masha but his love only means that he is lonely. The comedy of the absurd is aware of suffering and human failure and, according to Richard Gilman, of blurring the lines between profoundly deep tragedy and comedy, Chekhov kept his play unfinalized:

> When Chekhov is engaged in writing a comedy the situations he invents receive their identifying energy and shape from his decision to keep them open, not yet determined; something can be done about what otherwise would be taken as inescapable fate. Clearly the comedic aspect of *The Seagull*…lies in its attitude or point of view, not in its literal series of events or despite any of them…Attitude shows itself, of course, not declaratively but in structure, design, and tone. One thing we will see in *The Seagull* is that Chekhov constantly deflects matters away from being taken too seriously, which in this context means either tragically or in too absolute a way. (Gilman 74-75)

Ultimately, Chekhov's characters seem incapable of escaping their own sad fates: "Only in these cases of ignorance and final impotence does [Chekhov's] humour reveal itself with its utmost delicacy" (Werth 625). Amidst this stifling, random atmosphere of *The Seagull* is where Chekhov hits precisely on the absurd.[45] The comedy in *The Seagull* is also intended to prevent

[45] Esslin writes: "In the Theatre of the Absurd, on the other hand, the audience is confronted with characters whose motives and actions remain largely incomprehensible. With such characters it is almost impossible to identify; the more mysterious their action and their nature, the less human the characters become, the more difficult it is to be carried away into seeing the world from their point of view. Characters with whom the audience fails to identify are

the play from falling into a definitive category of interpretation. The combination of comedy and tragedy prevents the play from being finalized and therefore deprived of its artistic vitality.

Martin Esslin coined the term 'Theatre of the Absurd,' and he makes the argument that Chekhov is the forerunner of modern drama, because his plays, so realistic and yet so unfinished, provoked viewers to confront their own reality. In crafting his stage reality as a precise reflection of everyday life, Chekhov forces his viewers to confront their own realities as they watch the characters on stage. Chekhov's objectivity also allows viewers to fill his open dramatic structure with their own meaning, one that is relevant to each person's own everyday reality:

> In creating so convincing a picture of the randomness and ambivalence of reality, he, more than any other dramatist before him, opened up the question about the nature of reality itself. If every member of the audience has to find his or her own meaning of what he or she sees by decoding a large number of signifiers, each spectator's image of the play will be slightly different from that which his or her neighbour sees, and will thus become one's own private image, not too far removed from being one's own private dream or fantasy. The Theatre of the Absurd merely builds on that foundation by posing, less subtly, more insistently than Chekhov, the question: "What is it that I am seeing happening before my eyes?" (*Chekhov and the Modern Drama* 143-144)

Seeing the absurdity in the lives of Chekhov's characters might then provoke the viewers to evaluate the absurdity of their own lives, not because they necessarily identify with any of the characters, but because viewers inevitably attempt to discern meaning of the play by organize the disjointed events and incongruous dialogue into a cohesive pattern. Esslin does not go so far as to explicitly claim Chekhov as one the dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd, but the implication is there. Chekov provided the foundational innovation for Absurdist drama with *The*

---

inevitably comic…As the incomprehensibility of the motives, and the often unexplained and mysterious nature of the characters' actions in the Theatre of the Absurd effectively prevent identification, such theatre is a comic theatre in spite of the fact that its subject-matter is somber, violent, and bitter." *Theatre of the Absurd*, 411.

*Seagull*, but, more than that, his play opened up completely new paths for modern theatre as a whole, even beyond the Theatre of the Absurd.

## Concluding Remarks

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the Prince gives very precise direction to the actors of his own play "The Mousetrap" about a murderous king. In adding his own lines, Hamlet has imbued the play with a hidden meaning that he hopes Claudius will recognize. Hamlet stages his play for the purpose of revealing Claudius' conscience, and in order to do this, he implores his actors to minimize any melodramatic expressiveness and instead, employ a more natural approach to their performance. He urges them to emphasize the calmness inherent to the storms of most emotional outbursts so that their speeches are imbued with a stillness that underscores all of the nuances beneath the play's dialogue:

> Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion
> be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word
> to the action; with this special observance, that you
> o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so
> overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end,
> both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere,
> the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature,
> scorn her own image, and the very age and body of
> the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone,
> or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful
> laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the
> censure of the which one must in your allowance
> o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. (3.2.16-28)

In feigning subtle, natural emotions, the actors are able to reveal the true emotions of Claudius and Gertrude, otherwise any overly articulated emotional displays would reduce the play to a mockery. Hamlet's speech also offers a clue as to how he himself is acting out his own madness. His evasive, cryptic responses to Claudius, Gertrude, and the courtiers mask his suspicions of the world around him, raising more questions than answers. At the end of the play, when Hamlet sees Laertes shouting at the stars near Ophelia's grave, he once again asserts his

own right to say less rather than more: “For, though I am not splenitive and rash/ Yet have I in me something dangerous,/ Which let thy wisdom fear” (5.1.261-263).

Hamlet’s speech to the actors of the play-within-a-play contains many of Shakespeare’s views on acting and, therefore, on the theatre. Hamlet’s intention for the players acting to become a mirror of nature reflects Shakespeare’s own artistic intentions, which actually suggest something of postmodern drama, centuries before its time. The “something dangerous” that Hamlet alludes to within himself hints at the unknown power behind his words, within the unfinalized space, the same power that lies within the unfinalized space of the play - the power of art. Vygotsky’s “psychology of art” focuses on art as a series of signs that are meant to arouse emotion, and Vygotsky aims to examine works of art from an objective perspective, looking at form and the material of the work without regard for the author or viewer. In his famous interpretation of *Hamlet*, Vygotsky speaks about a space of mystery, created in the play, a space necessary for the “psychology of art” to remain vibrant. He observes that in *Hamlet*, “a veil has been thrown over the picture, but in trying to lift it in order to examine the picture beneath we discover that the veil is painted into the picture itself (Chapter 8, *Psychology of Art*). According to Vygotsky, while *Hamlet* is widely recognized as a profoundly enigmatic play, most critics attempt in some way to solve the riddle that is actually embedded in the tragedy and essential to its meaning. It is the argument of this thesis that Chekhov understood the importance of this veil and approached it as the only true path in his creation of a living theatrical drama. In other words, Chekhov did not so much rewrite *Hamlet* as use the play as a template for a theatre that was equally as innovative in its conception. Chekhov approached the world of Shakespeare’s play as an artist looking toward the future; he worked with some of *Hamlet*’s major tropes to

create a work of art as rich in its potential for interpretation as the tragic play of the Danish prince.

The central technique that Chekhov learned from Shakespeare, therefore, is the unfinalized structure of Chekhov's play means that no one explanation can adequately elucidate all of the complex and intricate mechanisms at work in *The Seagull*. The subtly provocative nature of Chekhov's plays is an indication of its effectiveness as art. *The Seagull* may have absolutely disconcerted the audience of its St. Petersburg premiere, but art is often created when conventions and expectations are challenged, within the space of discomfort, in which "a tug of war ensues between impressions that have undoubtedly been received and critical preconceptions that clearly exclude the possibility that any such impressions could have been felt" (Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* 28). It is clear then, that the unfinalizability is the most significant feature of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, and even Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The absences apparent in *The Seagull*'s dialogue and structure generate, as Iser observes, a space for viewers to fill with their own meaning. That space is absolutely intentional, as the space of multiple interpretations. Therefore, any attempt to finalize that unfilled space detracts from the meaning of Chekhov's play, since the enigma of *The Seagull* cannot be solved logically.

Shakespeare laid the foundation for the theatre in England and consequently altered the theatre world forever. Chekhov, too, has had tremendous influence on the development of modern theatre. In fact, he was a visionary. While scholars have noted the connection between *The Seagull* and the Theatre of the Absurd, they fail to recognize that the artistic innovation contained within Chekhov's play originates in Chekhov's rewriting of *Hamlet*. Harry Levin calls *Hamlet* the "most problematic play ever written by Shakespeare or any other playwright" due to its complexity and all of the questions that the play raises. Chekhov recognized the complexity

and innovative force in *Hamlet* as the solution to the stagnant Russian theatre of his time, and in doing so, he was able to anticipate modern scholars such as Martin Esslin and Jan Kott. *Hamlet* resonates in nearly every aspect of *The Seagull* and their similarities enhance the meaning of Chekhov's play. Yet the reversals are even more striking, for it is in the radical rewriting of *Hamlet* that the widest space for thought occurs. The multiplicity of interpretation and unfinalized structure of *The Seagull* is key to Chekhov's new dramatic art, for both imbue the play with its artistic vitality. The most significant innovation of Chekhov's art, one that he learned from Hamlet, was the unfilled space built into the structure, dialogue, and action of The Seagull, for it is this space that laid the foundation for modern theatre. The ambiguity and ambivalence of his stagecraft is true to his artistic intentions to illuminate the truth behind everyday life, since, as Iser points out, it is the unfilled space that invites contemplation on the part of the viewer. Chekhov incorporated new dramatic techniques that expanded the space for interpretation, and he adopted that space as his own in order to create a new genre of theatre, one that predicts the development of the Theatre of the Absurd. Esslin believes that "[t]he Theatre of the Absurd forms part of the unceasing endeavour of the true artists of our time to breach this dead wall of complacency and automatism and to re-establish an awareness of man's situation when confronted with the ultimate reality of his condition" (400). This breach is precisely what Chekhov accomplished in his pivotal play *The Seagull* as he used the innovative potential found in *Hamlet* to generate a theatre genre that looked toward the Theatre of the Absurd and even beyond.

Works Cited

Adler, Jacob H. “Two “Hamlet” Plays: “The Wild Duck” and “The Seagull”.” *Journal of Modern Literature*. 1.2 (1970-1971): 226-248. *JSTOR*. Web. 17 March 2010.

Avilov, Lydia. *Chekhov in My Life*. Trans. David Magarshack. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950.

Bentley, Eric. “Chekhov as Playwright (Reconsiderations, No. XI).” *The Kenyon Review*. 11.2 (Spring, 1949): 226-250. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 March 2010.

Borny, Geoffrey. *Interpreting Chekhov*. Canberra: Australian National University, 2006.

Camden, Carroll. “On Ophelia’s Madness.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*. 15.2 (Spring, 1964): 247-255. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 April 2010.

Chances, Ellen. “Chekhov’s Seagull: Ethereal Creature or Stuffed Bird?” *Chekhov’s Art of Writing: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Paul Debreczeny and Thomas Eekman. Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 1977.

Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich. *Chaika* in *Sobranie sochinenij*. Tom IX. Ed. Vladimirsky, S.I. et al. Moskva: Khudozhstvennaya literature, 1956.

Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich. *Five Plays*. Trans. Ronald Hingley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

---. *Letters of Anton Chekhov*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim with Simon Karlinsky. Ed. Simon Karlinsky. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

---. *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics*. Ed. Louis S. Friedland. New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1964.

---. *The Personal Papers of Anton Chekhov*. New York: Lear, 1948.

Chudakov, Aleksandr Pavlovich. *Chekhov’s Poetics*. Trans. Edwina Cruise and Donald Dragt. Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1983.

Corrigan, Robert. “Some Aspects of Chekhov’s Dramaturgy.” *Educational Theatre Journal*. 7.2 (May, 1955): 107-114. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 March 2010.

---. “The Plays of Chekhov.” *The Context and Craft of Drama*. Ed. Robert W. Corrigan and James L. Rosenberg. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1964. 139-167.

---. “The Theatre in Search of a Fix.” *The Tulane Drama Review*. 5.4 (Jun., 1961): 21-35. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 March 2010.

Curtis, James M. “Ephebes and Precursors in Chekhov’s The Seagull.” Slavic Review. 44.3 (Autumn, 1985): 423-437. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 March 2010.

Esslin, Martin. “Chekhov and the Modern Drama.” *A Chekhov Companion*. Ed. Toby W. Clyman. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985.

---. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Harmondsworth, Sussex: Penguin Books, 1980.

Figes, Orlando. *Natasha’s Dance*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003.

Forker, Charles R. “Shakespeare’s Theatrical Symbolism and Its Function in Hamlet.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*. 14.3 (Summer, 1963): 215-229. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 March 2010.

Gilman, Richard. *Chekhov’s Plays: An Opening into Eternity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Green, Michael. “The Russian Symbolist Theater: Some Connections.” *Pacific Coast Philology*. 12 (Oct., 1977): 5-14. *JSTOR*. Web. 17 March 2010.

Gromov, Mikhail. *Chekhov*. Moskva: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1993.

Hartsock, Mildred E. “Major Scenes in a Minor Key.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*. 21.1 (Winter, 1970): 55-62. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 March 2010.

Iser, Wolfgang. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Jacskon, Robert Louis. “Chekhov’s *Seagull*: The Empty Well, the Dry Lake, and the Cold Cave.” *Chekhov’s Great Plays: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Jean-Pierre Barricelli.

Kataev, Vladimir. *If Only We Could Know! An Interpretation of Chekhov*. Trans. and Ed. Harvey Pitcher. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002.

---. “On the Nature of the Comic in Chekhov.” *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1989.

Kermode, Frank. “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.” (Introduction to the play) *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans with J.J.M. Tobin. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Trans. Boleslaw Taborski. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974.

Kozintsev, Grigori. *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*. Trans. Joyce Vining. New York: Hill and Wang, 1966.

Lawrence, William Witherle. "The Play Scene in "Hamlet"." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. 18.1 (Jan., 1919): 1-22. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 March 2010.

Leverenz, David. "The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View." *Signs*. 4.2 (Winter, 1978): 291-308. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 March 2010.

Magarshack, David. *Chekhov the Dramatist*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1960.

Meyerhold, Vsevolod, and Nora Beeson. "From 'On the Theatre'." *The Tulane Drama Review*. 4.4 (May, 1960): 134-148. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 March 2010.

Moravcevich, Nicholas. "Women in Chekhov's Plays." *Chekhov's Great Plays: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Jean-Pierre Baricelli. New York: New York University Press, 1981. 201-217.

Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, Vladimir. *My Life in the Russian Theatre*. Tran. John Cournos. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1968.

Paperny, Zinovii. "Microsubjects in *The Seagull*." *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1989.

Pitcher, Harvey. *The Chekhov Play: A New Interpretation*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973.

Restarits, C.R. "Ophelia's Empathic Function." *Mississippi Review*. (The Hamlet Issue.) 29.3 (Summer, 2001): 215-217. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 April 2010.

Rowe, Eleanor. Hamlet, A Window on Russia. New York: New York University Press, 1976.

Scott, Virginia. "Life in Art: A Reading of "The Seagull"." *Educational Theatre Journal*. 30.3 (Oct., 1978): 357-367. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 March 2010.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. A.R. Braunmuller. New York: Penguin Group, 2001.

Shapiro, Fred R. *The Yale Book of Quotations*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Shestov, Leo. "Anton Chekhov (Creation from the Void)." *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1989.

Shostakovich, Dmitri. *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*. Ed. Solomon Volkov. Trans. Antonina W. Bouis. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

Stanislavksy, Konstantin. *My Life in Art By Constantin Stanislavski* (psued.). Trans. J.J. Robbins. New York: Theatre Arts Books, R. M. MacGregor, 1948.

Stribrny, Zdenek. *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Stroud, T.A. *"Hamlet* and *The Seagull*." *Shakespeare Quarterly*. 9.3 (Summer, 1958): 367-372. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 March 2010.

Styan, J.L. *Chekhov in Performance: A Commentary on the Major Plays*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1971.

---. *The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Tolstoy, Leo. *What is Art?* Trans. Almyer Maude. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960.

Turgenev, Ivan Sergeevich. "Hamlet and Don Quixote." *The Essential Turgenev*. Ed. Elizabeth Cheresh Allen. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994. 547-564.

Van Laan, Thomas F. "Ironic Reversal in Hamlet." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 6.2 (Spring, 1966): 247-262. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 March 2010.

Vygotsky, Lev. "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark." *The Psychology of Art*. Trans. Scripta Technica, Inc. MIT Press, 1971. Web. April 3, 2010.

Wegener, Adolph H. "The Absurd in Modern Literature." *Books Abroad*. 41.2 (Spring, 1967): 150-56. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 March 2010.

Werth, Alexander. "Anton Chekhov." *The Slavonic Review*. 3.9 (Mar., 1925): 622-641. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 March 2010.

Winner, Thomas G. "Chekhov's Seagull and Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Study of Dramatic Device." *American Slavic and East European Review*. 15.1 (Feb., 1956): 103-111. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 March 2010.