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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Axiology of Art in A.P. Chekhov's The Seagull and Its Interpretive Transformations

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Abstract

The article examines how the category of art functions as a value in Anton Chekhov's The Seagull (1896) and how the play's evaluation of art has been reshaped across a century of stage and critical interpretation. Working within the axiological approach to literary studies, the study treats the play as a distribution of competing value-positions concerning what art is and what it is for – fame, professional craft, formal innovation, and vocation. A close reading of the text shows that Chekhov withholds an authorial verdict among these positions, and that the value of art the play affirms is condensed in Nina's closing reevaluation, where worth migrates from external recognition to endurance and faith. It is argued that this axiological openness is the very mechanism that generates the play's interpretive plasticity: from the failure of 1896 and the Moscow Art Theatre triumph of 1898 to symbolist, modernist, and later deconstructive stagings, each interpretive community re-values art through the play. The findings support the thesis that the durability of Chekhov's axiology of art rests not on a fixed doctrine but on a question kept open.

KEYWORDS

Axiology of art; Anton Chekhov; The Seagull; value; interpretation; reception; drama; Moscow Art Theatre.

INTRODUCTION

Among Chekhov's four mature plays, The Seagull is the one most openly preoccupied with art itself. Its characters write and act, aspire to write and act, quarrel over how it should be done, and measure their own lives by success or failure in the arts. Criticism has long read the play as a study of the artistic vocation, and its poetics – the play-within-a-play, the recurrent bird motif, the muted off-stage catastrophe – have been described in detail [3]. What has drawn less sustained attention is the play's axiological architecture: the way art appears in it not merely as a subject but as a value, an object of evaluation around which the characters organise their sense of what a life is worth. It is this dimension that the present article takes up.

By axiology of art is meant here the system of value-judgments – held by characters, implied by the author, reconstructed by readers and spectators – concerning what art is, what it is for, and what claim it may lay on a human life. The axiological approach in literary theory treats the work precisely as a place where value is produced and contested, and distinguishes the several subjects, from author to reader to character, capable of assigning it [2]. The premise adopted below is that in The Seagull these judgments do not converge. Fame, craftsmanship, formal innovation, and vocation are each advanced, by different figures, as the true measure of art; and Chekhov, characteristically, declines to arbitrate between them.

The second concern is announced in the title: interpretive transformations. The Seagull has an unusually turbulent reception history. It failed at its St Petersburg première in 1896 and triumphed two years later at the Moscow Art Theatre, whose emblem the seagull became [3; 7]. Across the following century it was restaged by directors of every persuasion and translated into the idioms of psychological realism, symbolism, modernism, and postmodern deconstruction, before passing into film [7; 8]. The argument here is that these transformations are not external to the play's meaning but are generated by its internal axiological openness: because the text refuses to fix the value of art, each interpretive community is obliged to supply that valuation for itself.

The aim of the study is accordingly twofold – to describe the axiological structure of art in The Seagull, and to relate that structure to the play's capacity for interpretive renewal. Three questions organise the analysis. First, through which value-positions is art represented in the play, and to which figures are they assigned? Second, does the text affirm a value of art, and if so, where is it located? Third, in what sense do the play's interpretive transformations follow from its axiology rather than merely accompany it?

A brief contextual remark is in order. Chekhov's evaluation of art belongs to a wider reorientation of values discernible across his career, traceable from the early prose onward [6] and legible in the ethical ideals his language encodes even under conditions of broad, cross-cultural value change [5]. The Seagull makes a useful focal point because in it the general question of value becomes, explicitly and insistently, a question about art.

METHODS

Theoretical framework. The study adopts the axiological approach developed within literary theory, which regards the literary work as a site where value is produced, contested, and evaluated, and which separates the subjects – author, reader, character – able to assign it [2]. Three analytic distinctions are used throughout: the valuing subject (who evaluates), the object of value (what is evaluated – here, art in its several guises), and the value-position (the criterion by which the evaluation is made). On this view a character is examined not only as a psychological portrait but in its value-bearing aspect, as a bearer and measure of worth [2].

Material. The primary material is the text of The Seagull, consulted in the Russian original and in Peter Carson's English translation [1]. Chekhov's Russian text is out of copyright; short original phrases are cited where their exact wording carries the argument, each with an English gloss. The secondary material comprises the play's documented performance and critical reception, drawn from cross-cultural and reception-oriented scholarship [7; 8] and from critical studies of Chekhov's drama [3; 4].

Procedure. The analysis proceeds in three movements. A close axiological reading first maps the value-positions on art onto the figures who hold them and locates the points at which those positions collide. The reading then isolates the play's own evaluative pivot – the moment at which a value of art is, however tentatively, affirmed – and tests it against the surrounding text. Finally, a historical-cultural and comparative survey of the play's principal interpretations examines how successive stagings and readings re-evaluate art through the play; here the reception-aesthetic assumption that meaning is completed in the act of reception connects the textual analysis to the performance record.

Limits. The study is interpretive rather than empirical: its conclusions are argued from textual and documentary evidence, not measured. It confines itself to a single play, chosen for the density of its engagement with art, and to interpretations documented in the scholarly record; it does not attempt an exhaustive stage history. The reconstruction of the value of art offered here is one defensible reading among possible others – a limitation that, on the present argument, belongs to the object itself.

RESULTS

The play distributes its evaluations of art among figures who scarcely understand one another. Arkadina, the celebrated actress, values art as fame and self-display; she measures worth by applause, notices, and the memory of former triumphs, so that her art is inseparable from vanity and career. Trigorin, the successful writer, values art as craft and as burden: his second-act confession – that he is compelled, «я должен писать» (I must write), even as the writing devours his life – presents art as a professional discipline shading into servitude [1]. Treplev, Arkadina's son, values art as innovation and revolt: his demand for «новые формы» (new forms) [1], and his symbolist experiment with Nina as the World Soul, set the claims of the new against the established craft his mother and Trigorin embody. Nina, at the outset, values art as glory;

she envies fame and would endure any hardship to obtain it.

These are not four opinions about one stable object; they are four different objects that happen to share a name. The collision is staged rather than resolved. Arkadina derides her son's play as decadent nonsense; Treplev despises Trigorin's polished realism; Trigorin himself doubts whether his craft amounts to anything beside Tolstoy or Turgenev. The quarrel of old forms and new, conducted here as a family drama, is also the quarrel out of which twentieth-century theatre would emerge – a point to which the reception history returns.

The bird that names the play condenses the ethical hazard of the artistic vocation. Seeing the gull that Treplev has shot, Trigorin jots down a «сюжет для небольшого рассказа» – a subject for a short story: a young woman, free like the bird, destroyed by a man out of idle amusement [1]. The notebook entry turns a living person into material, and Nina, who will later identify herself with the seagull, becomes the object of exactly the appropriating, aestheticising gaze the entry describes. The play thus sets the value of art against its cost: the writer's power to convert life into form can itself become a kind of predation. This tension – between art as the highest calling and art as a consuming egotism – is opened, not adjudicated.

The evaluative centre of the play lies in Nina's final scene. Returned after failure – an abandoned lover, a struggling provincial actress – she articulates a value of art that none of the earlier positions contained. What matters, she has learned, is «не слава, не блеск» (not fame, not glamour), the very things she once craved, but «уменье терпеть» (the ability to endure); «умей нести свой крест и веруй» (bear your cross and have faith) [1]. The worth of art is here relocated – from external recognition to inner endurance, from career to vocation understood as a discipline of faith. In the terms of this study, art is re-valued as a form of spiritual competence rather than as a means to glory.

Two features make this the play's affirmed value rather than one more private opinion. It is earned through suffering, not asserted from comfort: Nina alone among the characters has paid for what she understands. And it is at once shadowed by its negation – minutes later Treplev, who has found neither new forms nor a reason to endure, shoots himself off-stage. The play affirms a value of art, that is, largely by dramatising the fate of its absence.

Even so, Chekhov withholds the authorial stamp. Nina's formula is moving but not triumphant; her future remains precarious; the surrounding characters go on missing one another's meanings; the card game resumes over the news of the death. The value of art in The Seagull is left standing as a question the play keeps open – art as fame, as craft, as innovation, and as endurance held in unresolved suspension. This non-univocity is not a flaw in the design but its principle. It is what separates the mature play from the legible moral signposting of Chekhov's early one-act pieces, and it is what later readers would recognise as an anticipation of modernist dramaturgy [3; 4].

The play's reception history reads almost as a commentary on its own theme. At the Alexandrinsky Theatre in 1896 the première was a failure; two years later the Moscow Art Theatre, under Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, made it a landmark, and the seagull passed onto the theatre's curtain as its emblem [3; 7]. The same text that one audience valued at nothing another valued as the birth of a new theatre – an external re-enactment of the play's internal argument about the instability of artistic worth.

Later stagings continued to re-value art through the play. The Art Theatre's psychological realism found in it mood, subtext, and the poetry of the ordinary; symbolist and modernist readings took Treplev's demand for new forms in earnest and enlisted the play as a precursor of twentieth-century drama; still later directors subjected it to postmodern deconstruction [7]. Its passage across national cultures added valuations of its own, as the reception of Chekhov in different countries refracted local aesthetic and political preoccupations [8]. In each case the interpreters supplied the valuation the text declines to fix – which is why the play renews itself, rather than exhausting itself, in performance.

DISCUSSION

The analysis supports a single connected claim: in The Seagull the value of art is realised as an open question, and it is this openness that drives the play's interpretive transformations. The point bears directly on how Chekhov's mature method is understood. Where his early drama assigns value legibly – distributing sympathy and censure so that an audience can read the author's judgment – the mature play deliberately suspends that judgment [3]. Kataev's insistence that Chekhov resists the conventional interpretive schemes readers bring to him is consistent with this reading: the play does not so much answer the question of art's worth as expose the partiality of

every answer on offer [4].

Setting the finding beside the reception record clarifies the relation between text and interpretation. Senelick's cross-cultural history shows how the staging of Chekhov has tracked the social, political, and aesthetic dispositions of particular times and places [7], and the world-reception perspective assembled by Clayton and his contributors shows the same plasticity across national cultures [8]. On the present argument these are not accidents of theatrical fashion but consequences of the text's axiological design. A play that fixed the value of art – that told its audience plainly whether Treplev or Trigorin was right – would offer far less purchase to successive re-interpretation. The Seagull invites re-valuation because it withholds valuation.

This carries an implication for the larger question of Chekhov's value system. If the worth of art in the play is located, so far as it is located anywhere, in endurance and faith rather than in recognition, then the value of art in Chekhov is better described as a constant posed as a task than as a doctrine delivered. The trajectory of his evaluation of art, discernible from the early prose onward [6] and legible in the ethical ideals his language encodes [5], reaches in The Seagull a form in which the value is affirmed precisely by being held in question. The endurance Nina names is not only the content of that affirmed value but also the mode of its survival: the play endures interpretively because it asks its audiences to bear, rather than to resolve, the tension it stages.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The reading rests on a single play; the same axiological structure would need to be tested across the other mature dramas before it could be generalised to Chekhov's theatre as a whole. The account of the play's interpretations is selective, keyed to the documented scholarly record rather than to a comprehensive stage history, and it necessarily compresses complex productions into their governing tendencies. Finally, the location of the affirmed value in Nina's closing speech is itself an interpretation, exposed to the very re-valuation the article ascribes to the play; the argument does not escape its object's condition but, at most, describes it from within.

CONCLUSION

The Seagull represents art through four incompatible value-positions – fame, craft, innovation, and vocation – assigned to figures who cannot translate between them, and it declines to rank them. Its one affirmed value, condensed in Nina's closing reevaluation, relocates the worth of art from external glory to endurance and faith, and that affirmation is confirmed, negatively, by Treplev's collapse. The play's refusal to fix the value of art is not an evasion but a principle, and it is the source of the play's remarkable interpretive afterlife: from the failure of 1896 to the Moscow Art Theatre's triumph, and onward through symbolist, modernist, and deconstructive re-stagings and cross-cultural reception, each interpretive community has completed the valuation the text leaves open. On this evidence the value of art in Chekhov endures not as a settled doctrine but as a question sustained across a century of transformation – which may well be the most durable form a value can take.

Three questions framed the study, and the analysis returns a definite answer to each. Art enters the play under four value-signs – fame, craft, innovation, and vocation – borne by figures who cannot translate between them; the play affirms a value only once, in Nina's relocation of worth from glory to endurance and faith; and the interpretive transformations that follow are not incidental to this design but issue from it, since a text that leaves the valuation of art open compels every audience to close it in its own terms. The contribution of the reading lies less in any one of these findings than in their connection: it is by treating art in The Seagull as a value, rather than only as a theme or a matter of poetics, that the link between the play's internal openness and its external afterlife becomes visible.

That connection has a bearing beyond the single play. If the worth of art is affirmed here as a task to be borne rather than a doctrine to be stated, then the value of art in Chekhov is better understood as one of the durable constants of his artistic world – durable precisely because it is never fixed. The mature drama's refusal to paint its figures in a single moral colour, so often described as reticence or coldness, appears on this account as an axiological principle with consequences: it is what keeps the plays open to re-interpretation, and what allies Chekhov, across the distance of a century, with the modernist theatre that learned from him.

The argument invites extension rather than closure. The same pairing of axiological reading and reception history could be brought to Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard, and to the screen and cross-media adaptations through which Chekhov now reaches his audiences, in order to test whether the pattern observed here – a value affirmed by being held in question – holds across the mature theatre

as a whole. Should it prove general, it would suggest that the endurance Nina names is not only a motif within The Seagull but a description of how Chekhov's values themselves survive: carried forward, reinterpreted, and never settled. In that sense the play does not merely represent the persistence of art as a value; it enacts it.

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