

## **ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫЕ ГОРИЗОНТЫ**

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### **Teaching Anton Chekhov in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Anton Chekhov is known and acclaimed both as a playwright for his *The Seagull*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and also as a short story writer with over 1000 published in his lifetime. So how can one possibly adequately cover the man, his works, his time, his ongoing impact and relevance today? (in thirteen weeks!)

In the spring of 2016 I asked students for their thoughts on the *what* and *how* They would like to LEARN in our course. The general consensus emerged that one should READ, WRITE, SPEAK/PERFORM, as well as become acquainted with the biographical and historical context of Chekhov and his works.

A tall order! The temptation with good students is to do more, do it all, and yet Middlebury College is not a graduate school and students' time and energies must be safeguarded against their and my enthusiasm.

My seminar met once per week, for three hours on Tuesday evenings for thirteen weeks. Sixteen students were enrolled. Based on their input, the result was a combination of weekly student led discussions and presentations for the short stories. The complete series of the major plays was actually staged by students with props and costumes. Students were also required to submit a five to ten-minute video project derived from one of Chekhov's stories that had not been previously filmed.

One innovative technological aspect of the entire course was providing to each student an Amazon Kindle. This electronic reader/tablet contained the complete set of texts for the courses as well as the plays. These permitted students to walk through the plays without the need to memorize their lines. Students found little difficulty using electronic versus print texts, and many commented on the financial benefits of e-texts.

The results and reactions of this course are described in greater detail in the following paper.

Anton Chekhov, well known and read in Russia, is known mostly among American students for his plays, in particular, *The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters*. Most have read one of the plays in high school or in a college drama course. As I prepared to offer a seminar on Chekhov I suspected the course would attract Drama students, students of English literature (where *Anna Karenina*, *Crime and Punishment* are staples), and those curious about Russian literature in general.

My goal was to try to meet the interests of each and every student, while at the same time offering broader coverage of Chekhov, the short story writer. I began with a brief survey of interests sending an e-mail to students enrolled in the course.

I am reaching out to you for your thoughts on the *what* and *how* You would like to LEARN in our course. Be specific about the knowledge and skills you hope to acquire, and then make concrete suggestions as to the format of the course. Focus on the LEARNING, but also carry that over to the TEACHING element.

Keep in mind some of the ongoing concerns here at Middlebury: work load, stress, anxiety, assessment, and others.

This need not be long—perhaps a page (250 words)—and it should be sent as an e-mail reply to all

members of the class. I will try to accommodate YOUR needs as I determine the what and how we will read/perform/examine Chekhov and his works.

The thoughtfulness of the students' answers convinced me of the seriousness of their purpose and of their eagerness to participate fully in their own learning. Here is a brief sample of a reply by one student:

It's hard for me to exaggerate just how little I know about this man or his works. ... That being the case, reading literally anything that Chekhov wrote would be an improvement from where I stand as I write this email. ... I hope we read the plays that are the best (and most fun to perform). I hope we read the stories that will keep us up at night long after class gets out. I hope we read stories that shake us and leave us in awe.

I'd say something along the lines of "quality over quantity" when it comes to the stories, but any serious pirate would rather have 20 medium-sized gold doubloons rather than 5 large silver ones. ... I'm also unfortunately pretty confident that even the best syllabus (in any class) is imperfect. In that spirit, I'd rather start out ambitiously and perhaps cut a few things than fall victim to the deadly sin of sloth. ...

Here are some goals I have for the course: I want to unzip Chekhov's forehead and jump inside Chekhov's brain. I want to explore the labyrinthine caverns of his mind. I want to gain a sense of what drove this man, what terrified this man, what intrigued this man, and which of life's truths this man artistically packaged and delivered. In the end, I want to have a sense of what Chekhov would have bought at Hannaford [the supermarket, TRB]. If we are to accomplish these tasks, we probably must pass a gauntlet of trials that will push us to challenge ourselves intellectually and personally.

What tools will we require to accomplish these tasks? A homeless man in the grip of hallucinogenic frenzy once told me that difficult tasks do not necessarily require complicated or expensive tools. In that spirit, I would hope our pedagogy embraces the mantra of doing simple things very well. I suggest we do three simple things very well:

- 1) Reading
- 2) Writing
- 3) Speaking

We should thoughtfully, fully, and carefully read the entire assignment for the week. We should regularly write both formal and informal papers which should sometimes be on important central topics and other times be on topics wholly of our choosing. We should read at least some of these papers out loud to the class and collectively discuss our peers' ideas. We should also have some sort of presentation element that requires bringing snacks and dressing in business casual. To the extent that they do not become a distraction and a waste of time, multimedia tools like PowerPoint™, music, and/or Parker Brothers board games could be helpful in our course.

I was sold on this course with the impression that we would make at least some attempt to act out at least a few of Chekhov's plays. Hopefully that is still the case. I think that would be educational and a ton of fun. It would probably also be hilarious.

Building on student input and needs, I designed the course with several elements that involved two halves. The first half of the course of six evenings was devoted to short stories. The second half had performances of the four major plays, and attendance at a performance of a modern-day play based on Chekhov's *Seagull*, Aaron Posner's, *Stupid F\*\*\* Bird*. I outlined for all prospective students my expectations for the course:

- 1) For the *short stories* there will be a writing prompt or quiz on the reading prior to class.

2) *The presentations*: Five or four students per class. Each will pick a story, research the biography and history of the story, the critical reaction, prepare a ten-minute presentation and ten questions to facilitate discussion. Presenters will distinguish and identify themselves by business casual dress.

3) *The plays*. Each will be performed in costume and make up. Reading from Kindles, but with props, entrances and exits. This requires a REHEARSAL of approximately three hours — and participation of a

director/stage manager and up to fifteen students. Each student should have at least one major role in one of the plays and be involved in one or two more.

4) *The projects.* Small groups (2-5) of students are responsible for ONE story not covered in class. The final project should be a film version of the story with costumes/props, etc. A five-minute introduction/summation concerning the story, its place in Chekhov's works and life, and critical responses should be provided.

An additional element to this admittedly highly experimental course was the ability to provide each student without cost an Amazon Kindle Fire, an electronic tablet that contained the entire reading assignment for the course, both all of the short stories in translation, and all of the major plays. More about that aspect later.

Given the short semester of only twelve class meetings I e-mailed to the class an assignment before our first meeting. It contained three stories not found on the Kindles: "Heartache," "A Nervous Breakdown," and "About Love." In my introduction to the course and my presentation and discussion of the stories, I attempted to model for students the scholarly approach that they should take in their own reflections, writings and presentations.

The schedule of classes and readings were as follows:

Chekhov is kind in that most of his works are not very long. Thus one can have a meaningful survey of a few stories or a play, usually requiring reading 100 or fewer pages per class of primary texts. This leaves room and time for secondary texts, discussions, and presentations.

A selection of my stories: Heartache, Nervous Breakdown, and About Love	2/16
Death, Small Fry, Huntsman, Malefactor, and Requiem	2/23
Anyuta, Easter Night, Vanka, Sleepy, and A Boring Story	3/1
Gusev, Peasant Women, and Grasshopper	3/8
In Exile, Ward 6, Black Monk, and Rothschild's Fiddle	3/15
Anna on the Neck, House with the Mezzanine, Man in the Case, Gooseberries, and Lady with the Dog.	3/23
The Seagull	4/5
Performance of <i>Stupid F*** Bird</i> (Friday night class)	4/8
Uncle Vanya	4/12
Three Sisters	4/19
The Cherry Orchard	4/26
Project presentations	5/3

A few observations of my part. Students read carefully and thoughtfully and participated fully in the wide-ranging discussion of Chekhov, Russian life, and indeed the meaning of life. The college years for students between ages eighteen and twenty-two are particularly stressful as they explore themselves, their values, previous beliefs. In a supportive, respectful environment, students felt free to engage with one another as they tested alternative approaches and watched Chekhov as well as themselves grow over time. Life is complicated and a process. Two songs and videos help to set the tone for the ever-changing cyclical nature of our existence represented in the song by The Byrds, *Turn! Turn! Turn!*

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4ga\\_M5Zdn4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4ga_M5Zdn4)), where the words are taken from the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes, 3, and the modern day Lukas Graham *7 Years*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHCob76kigA>).

The student presentations were invariably professional and thought provoking and gave students an opportunity to lead class and discussions. Their efforts permitted me to observe and fill in whatever major points might have escaped attention. One of the highlights of the course was the video project intended to have students examine in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the new means to explore in depth some of Chekhov's lesser known stories. The video files are of course too large to share, but here for the curious is

one example, “The Examining Magistrate.”

(<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BychN4TowoOcOXMzRUxER2puTjQ/view>).

The plays acted out on costume but read from Kindles gave life to the written word. Holding the tablets in one hand with the other free allowed for gestures, hugs, kisses, and handshakes. The input of the directors and the actors and made visible for a generation often more comfortable with the visual versus the verbal the keys to Chekhov’s dramatic art.

The use of Kindles was an experiment, and funded by Middlebury’s Digital Arts project. My report of student comments noted several key points. For the Spring semester of 2016 I requested a set of Kindle Fire devices loaded with the text of Anton Chekhov’s major plays for use in my seminar on Chekhov RUSS0354a-s16. The chief goal was to provide students as they acted out the major Chekhov plays to carry Kindles and be unencumbered with sheets of paper. An added benefit was the ability to download the preferred translation of Chekhov’s stories for the course, (*Stories of Anton Chekhov*, translated by Peaver and Volokhonsky), thus providing the complete set of required texts to students. The cost of the Kindles was approximately \$45 per unit. The cost of that download was less than \$5.00 per unit. The \$50 cost per student was covered by the grant with no charge to the students. Students checked out a unit for the semester much like borrowing a book from the main library circulation desk. At the end of the semester I solicited student responses to a questionnaire with the following results from thirteen out of sixteen respondents.

1) Students overwhelmingly relied on the Kindle exclusively.

2) Key advantages were the convenience of a single text and the cost savings per student.

3) Students used the device, but some might have preferred a text for the short stories. For the plays the devices were seen as far better than paper copies.

4) Most students believe the experiment can be replicated in other subjects with the key advantage being cost savings.

My own observations mirror those of students. It was very useful to have a single unified text for in-class references. The use of the Kindle in the plays, *Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Seagull*, *The Cherry Orchard*, resulted in more normal personal interactions, handshakes, hugs, etc.

The challenge going forward is to find other classes, my own included, that will have one or more plays, and where inexpensive texts for kindles are available. Meanwhile the College has acquired twenty-five Kindle Fire devices for additional loans to faculty, staff and students.

Education today is increasingly turning to focus on the learner and learning as opposed to traditional lecture style teaching. The “Sage of the Stage” is being replaced by the “Guide on the Side.” No longer do I prepare students primarily for graduate studies in Russian literature. I hope to prepare them in some small way for life. The abilities to read and analyze, to present effectively in the clipped writing style of today and utilizing multimedia, to articulate one’s findings in written and spoken medium, are all essential qualities of the well-educated leaders of tomorrow.

