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Title: Turgenev's Heirs in Chekhov's World: Characters Reading Characters

Abstract:

According to Yuri Lotman, Russian romantic literature in the early nineteenth century often served as a “program for behavior” for readers of the time, resulting in young people imitating the actions and appearance of the literary characters they read about. When writers like Pushkin and Lermontov made such behavior the subject of their own literary works, a complex layering emerged in which literary characters representing realistic social types adopted the behavior patterns of characters found in the literature they read. Russian realist literature furthered the practice of reflecting social phenomena in literary texts by naming those patterns, pushing them beyond the text into “the category of culturally recognized forms of behavior” (186). With his labeling of the “superfluous man” and depiction of independent, idealistic young women, Turgenev played a significant role in the identification and naming process that Lotman describes. His characters became recognized types within Russian society, and his works helped further the use of literature not only as a means of reflecting reality but also of pointing out social problems.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Chekhov returned to the blending of life and literature that characterized Russian romantic fiction by adding yet another layer to this literary typology: in works like “The Duel” and “An Anonymous Story,” he presents characters who perceive literary predecessors like those found in Turgenev not as models for imitation but rather as agents of their unhappiness. This paper explores how Chekhov's characters, in their claims to literary victimhood, look for the cause of their dissatisfaction not in the social reality that surrounds them, but instead in the literary types that Turgenev and other writers had used to explore that reality.

Bibliography

Lotman, Iurii M. “Concerning Khlestakov.” *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*. Ed. A.D. and A.S. Nakhimovsky. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.