

Title: Chekhov's Non-Prosaics: Creation and Apocalypse
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Chekhov is famous for his focus on the muted dramas of everyday life, devoid of the metaphysical probing characteristic of other nineteenth-century Russian writers. A proud materialist and doctor, he proclaimed an art based on the scientific method, a description of measurable surfaces. Though he often has occasion to depict features of the Russian Orthodox church, its rituals and its clergy (many examples include the famous stories “The Student” [1893] and “The Bishop” [*Arkhieriei*, 1902]), here as elsewhere in his writing, Chekhov claims to maintain an “objective” stance when it comes to the deeper questions of religious belief, the existence of God, and the mysteries of Christian faith. Between “there is a God” and “there is no God,” he proclaims, lies a “vast field that the wise man traverses only with great difficulty” (17:33-34). This in-between field, one that we can include under the purview of “prosaics,” is Chekhov’s ostensible artistic territory.

How is criticism, then, to deal with religious motifs that appear in Chekhov’s works? Is religion merely a subset of what we might call Chekhov’s “prosaic materialism”? Or is something deeper at work? The purpose of this paper is to explore depictions, in two of the writer’s most famous stories, of the kinds of eschatological extremes he claims to avoid. The 1890 story “Gusev” can be read as a particularly Russian version of an ancient creation myth—in fact, of Genesis. And at the center of the famous and radically prosaic 1897 story “Peasants” (*Muzhiki*), we discover a picture of the Last Judgment. In both cases, the naturalism of the stories’ surface has distracted readers—including the most attentive critics—from perceiving their underlying symbolism.

The proposed paper takes the form of a close reading of these two stories. Recent critical studies by Julie de Sherbinin, Daria Kirjanov, Michael Finke, Svetlana Evdokimova, and other scholars offer a solid context for exploring Chekhov’s religious imagery. “Hidden quotations” (*skrytye tsitaty*), often noted on the discursive level of the text of the writer’s stories, are shown to extend to the visual level as well. In “Gusev,” the veiled reference to Genesis explains much of the evocative power of the seascape at the story’s end; as for “Peasants,” it offers a textbook example of unframed *ekphrasis*: the depiction of the fire in the village can be viewed as an icon of the Last Judgment. Careful analysis of these textual facts will lead to broader hypothesizing as to the role of religious texts and imagery in Chekhov’s prose, whose deepest meaning, it turns out, inheres in its “non-prosaic” aspects.