

Title: Chekhov, Zoshchenko, and the Shame of a Hack Writer
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This paper will explore the figure of the hack writer, which serves as both a self-conscious representation and effigy in the fictional works of Anton Chekhov and Mikhail Zoshchenko. By discussing both the distance and proximity between the author and his "litterateur" alter-ego I hope to reveal how each author answered the age old question of "What is art?" or rather "What isn't art?" in regard to their own creative output.

The constructed image of the hack serves not only to uncover the artist's individual creative ambitions but reflects the changing literary standards of their period. The short stories of the two authors share many stylistic similarities, and Zoshchenko explicitly identifies Chekhov as a literary predecessor; however, their notions of what constitutes real art versus hack art dramatically differ. Chekhov (who transitions from writing short humoresques for the weeklies "Strekoza," "Budil'nik," and "Oskolki" to writing "high literature") creates a half-educated, vaudeville writer character. Conversely, Zoshchenko (whose earliest works are written in a self-reflective, poetic key) mocks the pretensions of pre-revolutionary "high" art in his "Sentimental Tales" (1927) and "Michel Syniagin" (1930). I will argue that the fictional hack artists are to some degree the authors' self-conscious projections in a performance of exorcism for the benefit of a desired reader. The disparity in desired readerships before and after the revolution points to the rapid changes in Russia's reading culture and literary expectations between the time of Chekhov and Zoshchenko.