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A Note on the Issue of Modern Tragedy: Chekhov' Plays Perspective

Fuad Abdul Muttaleb

Jerash University, Jordan, fuadmuttalib@jpu.edu.jo

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sometimes takes detailed account of these lost struggles in the course of life. Chekhov endeavours to describe some of these struggles and to put them in their place. His dramatic work is an expression of those people's struggles and broken surrenders. Chekhov does not merely portray incompetence, or shiftlessness, or the drunken, decayed, violently mischievous eccentrics of rural sketches. He depicts also the real paralysis of will, failing not only to overcome a detestable embarrassing situation, like Hamlet's, imposed upon him by darkly evil times or vengeful providence, but also to encompass the span of man's life.

It is this peculiar artistic approach to tragedy that makes Chekhov one of the great dramatists in modern times.

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real issue is not «interest» but «exposure.» Like Hamlet, his protagonists show negative qualities, but they are sympathetic characters. Chekhov's characters show similar, yet steeper, ambiguity. The question of where Chekhov's attitude lies, although it is clearly presented and he showed more concern towards them, is not unambiguously answered. Actually, a kind of ambiguity extends to include Chekhov's dramatic form of tragedy. This has led some critics to argue that the plays are tragi-comedies, and others to take Chekhov at his word and follow his description of the plays as comedies. It is difficult however to interpret the drama of Chekhov in terms other than those of the plays themselves. Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, they appeal to human life in its various aspects; use comic episodes and characters, and prove the principle that unmitigated tragedy is out of place in this life. In the plays, Chekhov transformed the situation of a tragic deadlock into a new condition, that of a stalemate, where there is no possibility of movement at all for the wrestler with life, every willed action is self-cancelling. Inertia, boredom, weariness, despair and other Russian features represented by Chekhov's characters, amalgamated with dissatisfaction, melancholy, and intellectualism, constitute the temperament of the Russian at the turn of the century. These traits are the personal and psychological indications of declining social groups: estate owners, intellectuals, idealists, doctors, students, and servants. Ivanov shows essential characteristics of Chekhov as a mature dramatist. His characters in the subsequent plays like Trepliov, Astrov, Voinitsky, Andrey, Gayev and Trofimov can be compared with Ivanov either in their ineffectuality, indecision, idealism, exhaustion, frustration or inability to cope with reality.

In brief, failure can be found in every human situation. People sometimes cannot come to terms with their realities, they get tired. They wear out of work in vain, of self-sacrifice, of giving aid, of thankless husbands, wives, relatives, and friends. Drama

play shows a combination of the comic with the tragic elements. Feers is alone, locked in, sick, and perhaps dying :

My life's gone as if I'd never lived ... [lies down] I'll lie down a bit. You haven't got any strength left nothing's left, nothing ... Oh, you ... you're daft! ... [Lies motionless].⁶⁰

In the *Three Sisters*, the characters establish their claim upon our sympathy, then we observe them objectively as they appear to somebody else on the stage. They do appear sometimes puzzling or ridiculous, but a closer examination makes us more aware of their tragic situation. If they are happy, the happiness is seen to be temporary and frail, to involve some illusionary self-importance. If they are wretched, then it is their reality that shapes their lives or their inability to act that makes their wretchedness. In the play, when Olga's final words, "why we live, why we suffer... Oh, if we only knew, if only we knew!" is finally juxtaposed with Chebutykin's final statement, "What does it matter? Nothing matters!"⁶¹; the implicit tragedy of the sisters' struggle to find meaning out of their lives is countered by the comic perspective that suggests that nobody's life has any meaning, and it is rather absurd or laughable to seek one. Olga's anguished words draw us into her tragedy; Chebutykin's comic reply deepens this tragedy and makes us withdraw and observe it. The very absurdity of the people is in itself tragic for their lives, families, and society. It is evident that Chekhov did not use the terms <comedy' and <drama' in the narrow sense that critics came to impose on them; his plays are proof of his seriousness. His form was a means of expressing the tragic loss of hope and despair without putting the drama into pathos and melodrama.

In his plays, Chekhov always appears to be indicating that the

60. Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, op. cit. P. 393.

61. *Ibid.*, P. 330.

Chekhov himself.

Chekhov endows some of his characters with his own insight. The people, represented by his characters, view their misfortunes from a distant comic point of view. Old Sorin in *The Seagull*, who is carrying to his grave a sharp regret for an unadventurous life, lived without passion, without intensity, without achievement, spends his time in laughing. He sees the fun of the solemn practical joke that Nature has played on him. Masha, who is helplessly and painfully in love with Trepliov, when she hears him playing a melancholy waltz to comfort his passion for someone else, instead of underlining the pathos, pirouettes slowly to the music, humming, with outstretched arms, before she comments on the situation. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Trofimov is made shabby and ridiculous, and sent tumbling downstairs at a tragic moment. It is true that real life is just as unceremonious with intellectuals but for the moment one is shocked. In this way, a touch of humour is found amid a tragic situation. And these characters are not random laughing-stocks, they are expressly portrayed to carry out the central tragic motive of the dramatic work.

The comic elements are not there for light relief, though they naturally perform that function. On the whole, the comic element is used in effect to display and deepen the tragic. There is nothing comic about the hostile social conditions that produce despair, boredom, sense of loss, impotence, disintegration in the lives of the Russian people. In *The Cherry Orchard*, we have both a personal and socio-historical view of the situation. The personal tragedy of Madam Ranyevskaia and, to some extent, Gayev's lives is felt, yet they are also observed comically within the perspective of Russian social change. The comic line is inserted in the tragic loss of the estate when Chekhov gently ridicules the profound reactions in the charmingly evicted proprietors, yet for whom he, by no means, withholds his sympathies. The final scene of the

in a complex form rather than in a pure one. «Life», Calderon asserts, «is never pure comedy or pure tragedy... The universe does not stand still in awe of our private successes or misfortunes.»⁵⁸ However, drama and life are not the same thing; drama is a selective ordering of experience while life is generally a series of disordered experiences. Yet, drama is not an escape from life; if it is an escape at all, it is an escape into life. Turgenev was to the point while comparing and evaluating two main literary types: “It should not be forgotten that just as the principle of analysis is taken to the point of tragedy in Hamlet, so the principle of enthusiasm is taken to the point of comedy in Don Quixote, but that in life one seldom meets with the fully comic or the fully tragic”.⁵⁹ All aspects of life are ready material for the playwright, and he does not hesitate to combine the comic with the tragic, the laughing with the heroic, and the profane with the poetic. This is a new way to depict tragic experience which we must not be surprised to find displayed in modern drama.

Chekhov's plays are good examples of this way. There is the formlessness of ordinary experience, no obvious distinction between the hero and the villain, and the tragic situations are accentuated by inserting comic lines. In *The Seagull*, we have, Trigorin, the successful writer who does so much damage to Masha and Trepliov, who actually ruins the lives of both, is in effect an excellent fellow, fond of fishing, and perhaps possessing some of the features of Chekhov himself. In *The Cherry Orchard*, there is a contrast between the illiterate, detestable, materialist Lopakhin and the nobility, Madame Ranyevskaia and her family. However, this vulgar successful man should not be taken as the villain of the play. He is decent, sensitive, good-humoured person, full of kindness, and once more representing some of the features of

58. George Calderon «Analyses Chekhov's Method» in Chekhov: The Critical Heritage, P. 102.

59. Ivan Turgenev, Hamlet and Don Quixote, trans. Leon Burnett (UK: Essex University, 2009), P. 10.

I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulation, such as the Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instance, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations.

More simply, when the question of tragedy in art is not at issue, we never hesitate to attribute to the well-placed and the exalted the very same mental processes as the lowly. And finally, if the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it.⁵⁷

This essay, it should be noted, was originally written in defence of the *Death of a Salesman* as a tragedy. It may be mentioned in this respect that O'Casey's plays depict the lives of the Irish workers and the tenants of Dublin slums. Chekhov's plays are about the exhausted country life of middle class people: the Russian landowners, who are heavily in debt and whose estates are mortgaged, or the young men who came from college to their estates, determined to lift the misery of the people by their own efforts. For a time they worked, then slowly the apathy and meanness of the life round them choked strength and energy out of them. In the plays, everybody is a victim and nobody apparently to be blamed. Having no villains, it goes without saying that the author has no heroes. Thus, the tragic hero, in the traditional sense, disappears.

Chekhov's plays are realistic and present things as <they are', through tragic as well as the comic aspects. No work of drama, from a theoretical viewpoint, is exact and pure and ultimately without slight influences of different dramatic and other literary tendencies. This is so because in human life things always exist

57. Arthur Miller, «Tragedy and the Common Man», in Robert W. Corrigan, *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, op. cit., P. 168

Since the times when Chekhov at the Moscow Art Theatre showed how tragedy could underlie what proclaimed itself to be comedy, we have had a tragedy that exists for those few who stand apart from the drugged world..55

Why the Chekhovian tragedy is evaluated through the term <comedy' or <tragi-comedy', and today we no longer deal in tragedy, can well be answered in the light of the fact that the question of the nature of tragedy has changed along the centuries with the change of man's philosophies and life circumstances. The tragic experience and seriousness in a play is thus subject to the interpretation of the age in which it is produced. C. Hugh Holman writes in this connection:

Clearly tragedy defies specific definition, each age producing works that speak in the conventions and beliefs of that age the enduring sense that man seems to have of the tragic nature of his existence and of the grandeur of the human spirit in facing it.56

The change in the nature of tragedy necessarily implies a change in the status of the tragic hero. The question of the nature of the significance of the tragic hero is also answered in each age by the significance that is held in that age. In a period of monarchy, Shakespeare`s protagonists were kings and rulers; in other times they have been, and will be, other kinds of heroes. In modern times, a tragic hero can be the archetypal common man - a shoe salesman, a clerk, a scientist, a farmer, a servant, or a worker. It seems as if Arthur Miller has written his article, «Tragedy and the Common Man», appeared in the New York Times, February 27, 1949, in support of this issue. Miller expounds:

55. Clifford Leech, Tragedy, op. cit., P. 81.

56. C. Hugh Holman, A handbook to Literature, op. cit, P. 532.

pus Tyramus Sophocles did not write another play that is quite of that kind. Euripides was a great innovator, and the old Sophocles, under his influence, sought new forms. But people who concede that it would probably be absurd for anyone to compete with the Iliad, wonder why no serious playwrights nowadays write tragedies after the fashion of Oedipus Tyramus or King Lear.⁵³

However, what is modern in Chekhov's tragedy is not so much a brand-new form; for this is impossible. It is the adaptation or modification of an old form to suit the prevalent conceptions of the age. This point can be expressed in a more objective way: ours is an age of mixed genres; pure, unmitigated tragedy is almost impossible; black comedy or modern realistic tragedy is quite possible. Ours is an age of unprecedented experimentalism, and to stay within old forms seems so dull. What should be noted is not that nobody in the twentieth century writes Greek or Elizabethan tragedies, but rather that some writers and critics think this calls for comment and regret. Thus, the critic ought to be always aware of the transmitted and changing forms of tragic drama. «Tragedy is then», as Williams has pointed out, «not a single and a permanent kind of fact, but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions: It is not a case of interpreting this series by reference to a permanent and unchanging human nature. Rather, the varieties of tragic experience are to be interpreted by reference to the changing conventions and institutions.»⁵⁴ In this sense, Chekhov's tragedies cannot be approached on equal terms with the classical ones; and the different social and cultural history that ruled out the characteristic evolution of the Chekhovian tragedy should be taken into consideration. Leech suggests how with Chekhov tragedy formed the foundation of what proclaimed itself to be comedy:

53. Walter Kaufmann, Tragedy and Philosophy, P. 374

54. Ibid., P. 47.

tragic writing in modern times. Raymond Williams' views on the whole question seem eminently sensible. In the opening chapters of *Modern Tragedy*, Williams has brilliantly set down the case for a necessary break with theories and definitions derived from the past if we are to value ours as a major period of tragic writing and respond to its distinctive 'structures of feeling'. His argument is among the endless debate about the possibility of modern tragedy, "after almost a century of important and continuous and insistent tragic art,"⁵¹ that encourages inquiry into the variety of forms tragedy has taken on the modern stage. Williams rejected a general definition of tragedy beyond the idea that the tragic experience entails irreparable human loss and the sense that the protagonist is somehow alienated. The specific conditions of this alienation vary in different historical periods, and we can understand tragedy only in historical context.⁵² Chekhov's drama is in spirit at one with the tragedies of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Ibsen and all other tragedies. His drama must be different in manner, and must be considered on its intrinsic and extrinsic qualities.

Of course, Chekhov in many ways is different from Ibsen. Aeschylus did not write like Euripides. O'Neill would not be able to write like Shakespeare. Willy Loman is not a noble hero like King Oedipus. Even Hamlet is so different from Romeo and Juliet. W. Kaufmann aptly argues:

In literature, many people still believe in the fixity of species. But no Greek after Homer wrote anything like the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. Sophocles abandoned the connected Aeschylean trilogy while Aeschylus was still alive and writing ; and after Oedi-

51. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, P. 46.

52. It may be noted that John Orr in *Tragic Drama and Modern Society* (London: Macmillan,1981), acknowledged William's broad perspective as a basis, for investigating the influence of changing social values on modern tragedies. William's own analysis of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* demonstrates his methodology. See, Richard H. Palmer, *Tragedy and Tragic Theory*, op.cit.,P. 79.

writers can no longer create true tragedy because of a collapse in the system of values that is essential for a tragic response.⁴⁶ The most influential of these studies, Joseph Wood Krutch's "The Tragic Fallacy",⁴⁷ advocates the tragic fallacy and depends on a specific conception of tragic hero that modern readers no longer believe in human nobility and can only participate in the experience of Sophoclean or Shakespearean tragedy. George Steiner's *Death of Tragedy* more clearly relates to the Romantic theories and modern pessimism. Rejecting any "near abstract definition" of tragedy, Steiner nonetheless built his requiem on a single premise, that tragedy must present inexplicable suffering that is beyond human control.⁴⁸ He rejected religious ethics, Rationalism, Rousseauism, Marxism, and scientism, or any other attempts to offer explanations or remedies for suffering. In Periclean Greece and Elizabethan England, the only cultures with a consistent climate for tragedy in Steiner's opinion, "moral actions are encompassed by forces which transcend man."⁴⁹ In brief, Steiner denies that tragedy can be written in modern times; he writes: "Tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls upon us as it falls on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie".⁵⁰ These views explain to a large extent why Chekhov's or O'Casey's plays have been considered in terms of "comedy" and "tragi-comedy" by some critics. In fact, Chekhov's attempt to draw on specific social and human conditions in Russia at the very turn of the century indicates a new urge to achieve

46. See, Richard H. Palmer, *Tragedy and Tragic Theory, An Analytical Guide* (Westport, Connecticut : Greenwood Press, 1992), P. 76.

47. See, Joseph Wood Krutch, «The Tragic Fallacy», in Robert W. Corrigan, *Tragedy: Vision and Form* (New York: Harper and Row publishers, 1981), PP. 227 - 37.

48. See, George Steiner, *Death of Tragedy*, PP. 8 – 9

49. Ibid., P. 193

50. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, P. 353.

Indeed, the term <tragi-comedy' in itself carries some considerable dangers when applied to Chekhov's plays. In critical literature, the term implies, for instance, that the plays, which hold this description, tend to close happily. This is very much unlike the endings of Chekhov's plays. The happy ending in tragi-comedy has been pointed out in almost every definition of the term. John Russel Brown writes that tragi-comedy is a «narrative drama that arouses both pity and fear but yet ends happily or has considerable comic, lyric or happy episodes ; its plot usually allows intense alternations of mood and marvelous incidents.»⁴³ Hugh Holman suggests the same point in his definition that tragi-comedy is a “play which employs a plot suitable to tragedy but which ends happily like a comedy. The action, serious in theme and subject matter until an unexpected turn in events, often in the form of a Deus Ex Machina, brings the happy Denouement.”⁴⁴

Clifford Leech repeats one of J. L. Styan's above-mentioned ideas that we nowadays deal no longer in tragedy. He suggests that in recent years dramatists are considerably far from the tragic sense that was common in the last two centuries. He writes:

We do not find the words <A Tragedy' on a title-page today, yet again and again dramatists have retold the ancient stories and have adapted them to a contemporary or near-contemporary setting or have interpreted them, while keeping to the original place and time, in the light of contemporary thought.⁴⁵

Leech's view reminds us of more noticeable opinions. Indeed, a contemporary critical commonplace is the idea that modern

Press, 1975), P. 109.

43. John Russel Brown, Drama (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1968), P. 20.

44. C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1972), P. 534.

45. Clifford Leech, Tragedy (Bristol: Methuen, 1969), P. 26.

well as for the critic, in defining them.

W.L. Courtney understands the harmonizing of the comic with the tragic and considers it a determining factor in describing Chekhov's drama as tragi-comedy. Chekhov, he says, "consciously set himself to write, not the conventional dramas which were likely to win immediate success with his public, but those more intricate studies of human life and human nature, which reveal the tragi-comedy of the world."⁴¹

Courtney's view of this quality recall that of a more prominent critic, J.L. Styan. He thinks that tragedy is no longer dealt with nowadays and that there is no term but tragi-comedy, despite its inadequacy, to describe Chekhov's plays:

Today we deal no longer in tragedy, it seems, but in problem plays, propaganda plays, modern morality plays, plays of ideas, or simply <dramas', and we are at a loss to explain our response to them as either tragedy or comedy. With the movement for naturalistic drama, dramatists imposed upon themselves the limitation of being as like life as possible, and refused themselves the heightening of tragedy and the exaggerations of comedy. Those who came very close to reproducing the true sensation of living, like Ibsen and Chekhov on the continent and Synge and O'Casey in Ireland, quickly discovered that tragedy and comedy were two sides of the same coin, and the naturalistic theatre aimed more and more to thrust together the laughter and tears in indivisible mixtures. Such plays allow us a degree of emotional response, while at the same time they keep us critically alert, and the inadequate term <tragi-comedy' is the only one we have to describe them.⁴²

41.«W.L.Courtney On Chekhov's Tragi - comedy», in Chekhov: The Critical Heritage, ed. Victor Emeljanew, op.cit., P. 118.

42. J.L.Styan, The Dramatic Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University

and situations in the plays are often developed naturally through the juxtaposition of the comic element with the tragic. Tragedy and comedy in the *Three Sisters* are woven more closely together until the sisters' desperate search for meaning of their tragic life is immediately countered by the absurdist reply that there is no meaning for anybody's life. Examples of the inter-plays of the comic and tragic can be seen widely in the plays. Though the comic and tragic elements are often harmoniously juxtaposed the prevalence of the tragic effect is palpable. It is, indeed, a drama in which scenes of comedy may precede or follow, or even merge with, scenes of deep tragedy. Ronald Hingley defines the plays in terms of the amalgamation of the separate terms tragedy and comedy which conceals the tension between comic and tragic points of view. In his view of the problem, Hingley seems to express a very precise position:

The plays are not comedies and tragedies in the accepted sense of either word, nor are they exclusively gay or sorrowful. They contain rather an extremely subtle blend of both elements. That the evocative atmosphere peculiar to Chekhov should combine harmoniously with broad farce is perhaps a surprising fact, but in *The Cherry Orchard* is there to prove the possibility of such a combination.³⁹

Chekhov's drama, to Hingley, is neither comedy nor tragedy, and yet it is a diverse drama which skillfully combines these two genres in a reconciliation of opposing forms. In a more recent work, Hingley emphasizes the same point that *The Cherry Orchard* is "a work of finely balanced humour".⁴⁰ However, that tension between the comic and the tragic seems in fact so essential to the Chekhovian dramatic method, and to be a main source of problem, both for producer and actor, in staging the plays as

39. Ronald Hingley, *Chekhov: A Biographical And Critical Study* (London : Unwin Books, 1966), P. 244.

40. Ronald Hingley, *A New Life Of Anton Chekhov*, op. cit., P. 302.

sometimes Gayev with his ineptness, mock billiard strokes and eloquent speeches which are likely to be addressed to the furniture. A comic detail can be cited from Charlotta's opening speech of Act Two:

But where I come from and who I am, I don't know who my parents were - perhaps they weren't properly married - I don't know. [She takes a cucumber from her pocket and begins to eat it]. I don't know anything.³⁷

There are also farcical incidents in the play. Characters fall downstairs, break billiard-cues and lose their goloshes. Yet, all this is manipulated within the general framework of the Russian tragedy depicted in the play. As a term, <comedy' has in fact no strong claim in Chekhov's context, for it is a thing in itself and requires a particular sort of drama. Therefore, comedy in Chekhov is not as problematic as tragedy. Comedy or farce basically aims at laughter. The farcical, the resort to hamming, clowning, wisecracking, or wide-open absurdity to stimulate laughter, is the spice of life to many comedies. Comedy generally, though not always, presents plots and situations less serious and important than those of tragedy. We can laugh in comedy at or with the characters with some or little concern for their problems. What we have in Chekhov's plays is something else.

In a letter to Korolenko in October 1887, Chekhov wrote: «Among all the Russians now happily writing, I am the most light-minded and the least serious, I am always being suspected by the grave folk.»³⁸ Undoubtedly, the comic element can be traced in the plays. Chekhov has a keen sense of comedy, and his grasp of the comic technique is remarkable. Against this comedy, the essential tragic element appears starkly in the plays. The ideas

37. Ibid., P. 354.
38. «Chekhov On His Plays», in Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics by Anton Chekhov, ed. Louis S. Friedland (London: Vision Press, 1965), P. 158.

Hingley continues to suggest that, in insisting on the comic or farcical aspects of *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov was really appealing for a lighter touch, a less overtly emotional style. In other words, since acting style ought to be the language of the playwright's vision, Chekhov was asking the Moscow Art Theatre company to use a subtler, more flexible dramatic method to cope with the complexity of his sense of truth. Yet, if the argument which has been suggested here has some truth in it, especially in relation to *The Cherry Orchard*, the matter is much more profoundly than acting style, and other practical matters.

Were Chekhov's plays, as he maintained, comedies? Did they contain, as he said of *The Cherry Orchard*, elements of farce? Certainly, the comic element is apparent with each play Chekhov wrote, and it is more noticeable in *The Cherry Orchard*. It may be noted that Chekhov widely declared the fact that he considered this play as a farce. And it is quite true that some of the characters can really be called comic, for instance, Simeonov-Pishchik, whose name is ridiculous enough. The landowner, with his inveterate borrowing, and claim to be descended from the horse, which Caligula made a member of his Senate, is very much a figure of fun. When Yasha brings a box of pills to Liubov Andreyevna, he intervenes:

Don't take medicines, my dear ... they don't do you any good ... or harm either. Let me have them. [Takes the box from her, pours the pills into the palm of his hand, blows on them, puts them all into his mouth and takes a drink of kvass.]³⁶

Almost half of the characters are presented in comic terms. These include, apart from Simeonov-Pishchik, the absurd German governess, Charlotta Ivanovna, most of the servants, and

36. Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, Translated and with an Introduction by Elisaveta Fen (London: Penguin Books, 1982), P. 345.

and whimsically eccentric, loveable in spite of their inadequacies. The Soviet criticism tended to see Chekhov as a realistic playwright depicting with comic vigour the shortcomings of the decaying upper class, and looking forward by implication and with confidence to the brilliant new future, which was to be ushered in, only thirteen years after his death, by the October revolution. And it has been suggested that Stanislavsky was mistaken in reporting Chekhov's views as he did.³³ Yet whatever the difference of opinion between Chekhov and Stanislavsky,³⁴ it seems certain that Chekhov would not have favoured a sentimental understanding, not because he thought the plays, particularly *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, ultimately comic, but because such an interpretation nullified his dramatic approach in a most fundamental way. That is why, it would be natural, however misleading, for him to fall back on the term 'comedy' as a way of amending a too sorrowful tragic emphasis. Ronald Hingley mentions that there seems less justification for Stanislavsky's tragic response in connection with *The Cherry Orchard*:

Stanislavsky had reacted to the advent of *The Cherry Orchard* in his usual over-demonstrative idiom and with characteristic glandular secretions. When reading Act Three, the exuberant actor-producer had sweated, he had sobbed through the whole of Act Four. All in all, the play had <driven him out of his mind`. That this might be no figure of speech was suggested by Stanislavsky's wire to Chekhov giving his first reaction to the play: Just Read Play Shaken Cannot Come To Senses In Unprecedented Ecstasy ... Sincerely Congratulate Author Genius.³⁵

33 See, Ernest J. Simmons, *Chekhov: A Biography*, op. cit., P. 513.

34. The fullest account of the dispute in English will be found in David Magarshack's two books, *Stanislavsky: A Life* (London: Mc Gibbon and Kee, 1950) and *Chekhov the Dramatist* (London : John Lehman, 1952).

35 .Ronald Hingley, *A New Life of Anton Chekhov* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), P. 300.

is perhaps the dignity, sensitivity, and objectivity of the writer who, in John Russel Taylor's words knows that, "if what he has written does not, sooner or later and given a reasonable amount of careful attention, explain itself, then it has failed and there is little point in his trying to tell us what it ought to have said.»³¹ He preferred not to dig deeper into the play's definition simply because what he was writing was a particular sort of dramatic action which cannot be wholly interpreted on a traditional basis but should speak only in its distinct dramatic terms. Definitely, Chekhov is one of many dramatists who knew exactly what they were writing and could fully explain their dramas in terms of their staging. But when it comes to what he has to say concerning conceptual terms and underlying meanings, he is in a problem. His plays seem to be saying more than he said about them and perhaps something other than what he consciously intended. The plays become his means of expression, however he may describe their subject matter.

Indeed, there has been a great deal of discussion and little agreement among writers and producers endeavouring to interpret Chekhov's plays. Among the most characteristic approaches to Chekhov are the English and the Soviet approaches.³² In many British stage productions, Chekhov's vision is sentimentalized. The Cherry Orchard, like nearly all of his plays, becomes an elegy of the doomed gentry, who are portrayed as attractive

1963), P. 513.

31. John Russel Taylor, «Introduction», The Playwrights speak, ed. Walter Wager, op. cit., P.XIV.

32. References to these two approaches can be seen in many studies, for example, in Raymond Williams, Modern Tragedy, op. cit., P. 1451; G. J. Watson, Drama: An Introduction (London: Macmillan, 1983), P. 139; and for the early interpretations of Chekhov, see, Birgit Beumers, "The Chopping of The Cherry Orchard: Stanislavsky or Chekhov?", Essays in Poetics: The Journal of The British Neo-Formalist Circle, vol. 30, Autumn 2005, pp. 21-44.

But this approach is not always fruitful because once «a work of art is finally separated from its creator, it must lead an independent life of its own, embodying in itself its own standards of judgment. And when this has happened, we can fairly say after all, the creator's views of it are just one man's opinions, no more and no less to be accepted without question than anyone else's.»²⁸ A writer's ideas thus cannot make his work what it is not. If a playwright writes what he takes to be a comedy, and the critics at large agree to consider it as a tragedy, then there is nothing that his statement can do about it. In fact, when there can only be some measure of agreement about the fundamental nature of the work itself, the comment is useful.

The critic's position is largely to make connections and to provide contexts. Though every play should be considered on its own merits, the critic can usually show the audiences the way to enjoyment by placing a play, expounding how it fits into the dramatic and philosophical pattern brought forward by the playwright, or how it continues a certain course of development in the world of drama of the present day. The playwright thus provides the raw material and the critics, producers, and actors make the judgments and interpretations. Sometimes, the playwright is not quite accurate in explaining or describing his plays, this being the case with Chekhov. Friedrich Durrenmatt speaks about the dramatists' description of his work, «I hope I am interpreting myself correctly. We're often our own worst interpreters.»²⁹

At times, we find Chekhov drawing back from too much discussion of what his plays should be called. Chekhov nowhere described *Three Sisters* as a 'comedy'. On the title page, he called it a 'drama', that is, a serious play, if not quite a tragedy.³⁰ And this

28. John Russel Taylor, «Introduction,» *The Playwrights Speak*, ed. Walter Wager (London: Longmans, 1969), P. XI.

29. Ibid. P. XIV.

30. See, Ernest J. Simons, *Chekhov: A Biography* (London : Jonathan Cape,

gay comedies:

If [The Cherry Orchard] hasn't turned out as a drama, but as a comedy, in places even a farce.²⁵

The last act will be gay. Actually the whole play, [The Cherry Orchard] is gay and frivolous.²⁶

K.S. Stanislavsky, the first successful producer of Chekhov's plays, among whose greatest achievements were the production of *The Seagull* in 1898, *Uncle Vania* in 1899, *Three Sisters* in 1901, and *The Cherry Orchard* in 1904, interpreted Chekhov's plays as sorrowful tragedies. He wrote in *My Life in Art* (1924) that Chekhov "was convinced that he had written a gay comedy, but at the reading everyone took the play [*Three Sisters*] for a drama and wept as they listened to it".²⁷

Neither Chekhov himself nor Stanislavsky's reading of tragedy seem to have expressed the precise position on the subject. These two plays are not comedies or tragedies in the accepted sense of either word, nor are they exclusively gay or sorrowful.

As for Chekhov's views, it is a truism to say that an important approach to the structure and intent of a dramatic work is what the dramatist himself can tell about them. This approach can at least provide a certain kind of interest to the study of the plays, and this frequently happens if some special experience of the conditions in which a play was written, or of what the writer had in mind when he wrote it, is needed. The use of this approach explains why the critical opinions that emphasize the comic aspect and deny the tragic one of the plays have frequently been repeated in the light of Chekhov's own description of the plays.

²⁵Quoted by Ronald Hingley in *The Oxford Chekhov*, Vol. III (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), P. 8.

²⁶. *Ibid.*, P. 8.

²⁷. See, *ibid.*, p.8

stress here”, George Steiner says”, is the fact that Chekhov lies outside a consideration of tragedy. He himself insisted that his plays were comedies. Chekhov was a physician, and medicine knows grief and even despair in the particular instances, but not tragedy”.²⁰

Some critics referred to them as tragedies. Dorothea Krook, for instance, sees «the *Seagull* and the *Cherry Orchard* as the most characteristic of Chekhov's achievement as a tragic dramatist”²¹. Others have suggested a compromise formula such as ‘tragi-comedy’ or ‘comic tragedy’ to assert the interweaving of comic and tragic aspects of the breakdown of comedy and tragedy as traditional forms. “Chekhov”, Alfred Schwarz thinks, “displays a modern sensibility that is the starting point for the various forms which tragi-comedy was to take on the modern stage”.²² “The *Cherry Orchard*”, Valency says, “is a tragic play composed almost entirely of comic scenes”.²³ Calderon held a similar opinion that Chekhov's “plays are tragedies with the texture of comedy”.²⁴ The main point here is to suggest that, despite their genuinely comic aspect, it is a critical mistake to call the plays comedies or tragi-comedies; they are basically tragedies with their own distinct features.

Chekhov insisted, in his letters, that his last two plays were

20. Ibid., PP. 301 - 2

21. Dorothea Krook, *Elements of Tragedy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), P. 124.

22. Alfred Schwarz, *From Büchner to Beckett* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1978), P.XX. From a practical angle, Esslin also claims : “The very fact that Chekhov's great plays can be seen both as tragedies and as comedies points to their actual nature as tragi-comedies.” See, Martin Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama*, op. cit., P.75.

23. Maurice Valency, *The Breaking String* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), P. 284.

24. «George Calderon Analyses Chekhov's Method», in *Chekhov: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Victor Emeljanew (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), P. 100.

«Ibsenite tragedy», Bentley writes, can end happily or not «.17 Or more specifically, is Peer Gynt 'tragic' or 'comic'? Peer himself, a mere peasant, takes both a tragic and a comic view of his predicament, and neither apparently is, on its own, adequate to describe Ibsen's overall view. Moreover, Esslin looks at the problem from a practical dramatic viewpoint; he maintains:

a play like *The Cherry Orchard* can be treated as comedy or as tragedy. The way in which Mme Ranevskaya loses her property through sheer incompetence and indecisiveness can be shown to be silly and therefore funny, something to be looked down upon by the audience who must feel superior to all that bungling, laziness and lack of willpower, but one could – and often does - produce the play as a deeply sad account of the downfall of the last truly civilized people in a society which is being engulfed by commercialism, vulgarity and mass barbarism.¹⁸

In effect, “the radical change of the notion of the tragic and the comic brought on by Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and Pirandillo”,¹⁹ led some writers and critics to consider modern tragic plays in terms of comedy and tragi-comedy, thereby ignoring that in the modern world the terms 'tragedy' and 'comedy' no longer describe distinct kinds of plays, and through the use of comedy it is possible to present a tragic experience or achieve a tragic ending.

Views are so wide apart over Chekhov's plays. Chekhov himself never called any of his plays tragedies. *Ivanov* and *Three Sisters* were called 'dramas', *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard* 'comedies', while *Uncle Vania* was designated 'scenes from country life'. Many writers and producers have taken Chekhov at his word and followed his descriptions of the plays. “All I would

17. Eric Bentley, The Playwright As Thinker (New York : Harcourt, 1967), P. 36.

18. Martin Esslin, An Anatomy of Drama (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), P. 69.

19. George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy, op.cit., P.124.

usually take for granted that it flourished only in Athens and in Shakespeare's time. The above-quoted argument may serve as evidence that as the plays of our time are considerably different from Shakespeare's and Sophocles' to lead some critics to deny them the title of tragedy, Shakespeare's «tragedies» in the same way, were so different from those of the Greeks that it would be argued in 1765 that they were actually not tragedies. Dr. Samuel Johnson was also historically incorrect, when he asserted: «I do recollect among the Greeks or Romans a single writer who attempted both»,¹⁵ tragedy and comedy. The acute breaks postulated by Johnson and some modern critics are fictitious, a continuum leads from Aeschylus to modern versions of tragedy, and one might say that black comedy is to Shakespearian tragedy as that was to Greek tragedy. However, we should not try to locate plays on a historical curve. Those who think in such a linear style always neglect some of the most intriguing evidence. If only to jar such schemes, it is better to call *Alcestis* and *Troilus and Cressida* black comedies, and *Waiting for Godot* a satyr play (Samuel Beckett calls it tragicomedy). W. Kaufmann adequately comments on this case:

The development that leads from Ophelia to Goethe's Gretchen, and hence to Büchner's *Woyzeck* and, in our time to Willy Loman is certainly interesting: the suffering hero is gradually replaced by the suffering victim, the noble agent by the passive anti-hero. Yet such contrasts can be overdone. *Philoctetes* and *Lear* come close to being suffering victims who endure more than they do. Willy Loman's tragedy resembles *Oedipus*' in that he gradually discovers what he is - and most sweeping contrasts of ancient and modern plays are simply uninformed and false¹⁶.

A new question has therefore appeared in modern tragedy.

15. Ibid., P. 321.

16. Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, op. cit. P. 376.

ic poet too”.⁹ This has been called a prophecy of Shakespeare. However, the point would scarcely have astonished Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides, each of whom had topped every trilogy with satyr play, and in the *Alcestis* and *Ion* Euripides had even shown that tragedy and comedy could be fused in a single play. Even though Plato may have meant in part that he himself, unlike Aristophanes, was a tragic as well as a comic poet, the mixing of the two genres was probably anything but exceptional in the fourth century, when Euripides' influence had far exceeded that of the two older tragic poets.

Shakespeare was not only a master of both comedy and tragedy but also mixed both. However, few critics nowadays recall «the censure which he has incurred by mixing comick and tragick scenes»¹⁰, or that Dr. Samuel Johnson, after stating this, continues to contend in his Preface to Shakespeare that “Shakespeare’s plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind”.¹¹ That he “united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition”¹² was, according to Johnson, “a practice contrary to the rules of criticism”¹³ but entirely pardonable, and Johnson then speaks of “the mingled drama”.¹⁴

Those who deny the existence of tragedy in modern times

9. *The Dialogues of Plato: Symposium*, Vol. II, Translated with comment by R. E. Allen (New Haven and London : Yale University press, 1991), P. 170. The argument must have been that tragedy and comedy are opposites; the same art has knowledge of opposites; therefore, anyone who is by art a tragic poet is a comic poet too. See, *ibid.*, P. 170.

10. *A Johnson Reader*, eds. G. L. Mc Adam, Jr. and George Milne (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1966) , P. 320

11. *Ibid.*, P. 320.

12. *Ibid.*, P. 320.

13. *Ibid.*, P. 320.

14. *Ibid.*, P. 320.

and O'Casey in Ireland brilliantly used this form to express their conceptions of tragedy. Humour is thus used to make us more conscious of the tragic situation of human beings. «Tragedy in the modern world», Freedman says, «may perhaps be found only in a form of bleak comedy».8

However, the true beginnings and practices of mixing genres were in the Elizabethan drama, particularly Shakespeare. For instance, in the well-known scene of Shakespeare's tragedy King Lear when Gloucester meets the disguised Edgar, who intends at that moment to lead his father to Dover and promises to aid him in jumping off a cliff, near Dover. Edgar allows Gloucester to roll down a small incline. From Gloucester's point of view it is tragic, he is in despair and wants to end his life. But from ours it also includes the possibility of the comic. We are conscious, at every point, that Edgar is playing a trick on his father, who falls forward only onto the bare boards of the stage, and then is easily persuaded that he has indeed fallen three hundred feet, by eloquent and picturesque speech delivered in tones sufficiently cultivated to distinguish Edgar from his earlier role as Gloucester's peasant helper. What makes Gloucester's experience tragic is that Shakespeare encourages us to enter fully into his state of mind, to see the world from his angle.

Actually, the origin of this method can be traced to ancient Greece. Plato's first philosophic work The Apology fuses comic and tragic motifs. Moreover, at the end of Plato's Symposium, when all the other guests have either left or fallen asleep, Aristodemus comes to as the cock crows and hears how Socrates compels the great Aristophanes and Agathon, the tragic poet, both of them drowsy, to agree "that same man knows how to compose comedy and tragedy, and he who is a tragic poet by art is a com-

8.Tragedy: Texts and Commentary, ed. Morris Freedman (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1969) , P. 438.

ness which causes no pain or destruction, thus, to go no farther, the comic mask is something ugly and distorted but painless»⁷. The dire endings of tragedy were one way of stressing the high dignity of their subject matter. The happy endings of comedy indicated the fact that comic situations were not significant in the same way. Death became a way of evaluating the terminated life. And generally speaking, people do not die in comedies because that would give their lives the wrong sort of concern.

Each period of history has had its prevailing views which at times hardened into rigid rules, these then often became strait-jackets. The neo-classical interpretations, socially and historically, had connections with the class structure of an aristocratic rather than a feudal world. Only kings, princes and people of noble birth led life of great importance to be treated in tragedies. This was based on the assumption that only people of such high rank could have sentiments noble enough to comply with the high requirements of the genre. Merchants, minor country gentry lawyers and then the ordinary people, craftsmen, shopkeepers, and servants were material for comedies. When, in the eighteenth century, plays were written with a sad ending and with leading characters from the middle classes, this was felt to be quite a revolution and the term <bourgeois tragedy> or <domestic tragedy> was coined to distinguish these lowly plays from the traditional high tragedy. From about the end of the century, and then more rapidly after the French Revolution and the Romantic Movement, these social distinctions became increasingly otiose, and the neo-classical interpretation correspondingly arid.

In the nineteenth century, a new idea of tragedy emerged mainly in the works of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. An idea, introducing comedy into a context of intense feeling, suggested that this new mood of tragedy within one play is possible for a modern audience. At the beginning of the 20th century, Synge

7. Ibid., PP. 23 - 4.

The most frequently used terms in the critical vocabulary of drama are those denoting the two basic genres: tragedy and comedy. A great deal of speculation and philosophising exists on this subject and these two theoretical concepts have exerted a deep influence on the actual process of playwriting, acting and production. Moreover, there is no consensus about it all, no generally accepted definitions of either tragedy or comedy, let alone of the many intermediate genres like tragi-comedy, farce, burlesque, melodrama and so on. Of course, 'tragedy' and 'comedy', in origin, are Greek words relating to Greek plays. Aristotle's critical artistic theory was formed around the distinction between them. These distinct dramatic types required distinct kinds of character, of situation, and of speech.

Tragedies were about noble persons, engaged in matters of exalted and public significance, spoken in lofty language, usually verse, and ending unhappily. The construction and the object of tragic art was introduced into theory by Aristotle:

Tragedy, then, is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude, by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts, enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative, through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics.⁶

Comedies were about ordinary or low-life characters, practicing the ordinary business of everyday life in ordinary everyday speech, and ending happily. (Comedy), Aristotle defined as «an imitation of persons, who are inferior, not, however, going all the way to full villainy, but imitating the ugly, of which the ludicrous is one part. The ludicrous, that is, is a failing or a piece of ugly-

6. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Gerald F. Else (United States of America: The University of Michigan Press, 1983), P. 25.

There can be no question about the fact that the majority of the makers of modern theatre have had a tragic sense of life. One need only think of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, O'Neill, Williams, Miller, Lorca, and Pirandello. It is also increasingly apparent that we may well have passed through another «Historical Moment». We have been or are in the process of experiencing a major transformation of culture similar to what we have observed in fifth –century B. C. Greece and sixteenth-century England.⁴

The question of tragedy is highly problematic. Oedipus Rex, Doctor Faustus, King Lear, All For Love, Ghosts, are not tragic in the same way. None resembles the tragedies, which we shall be attempting to define. However, the differences can be described, although some mistake Chekhov's and O'Casey's for comedies or tragi-comedies, and Miller's for other types of drama. In discussing the problem of tragedy, we come to it, in Raymond William's words," by many roads. It is an immediate experience, a body of literature, a conflict of theory, an academic problem"⁵

For historical and critical reasons, we use 'tragedy' and 'comedy' as terms for the discussion of drama, and their very existence opens the way not only to categorize plays, but also to start the search for certain qualities like the 'nature' or 'essence' or 'spirit' of tragedy or of comedy, and how to evaluate and understand the qualities through different approaches. In this introduction, however, the main interest lies in defining rather than in tracing the continuing life of tragedy in the theatre. Examining for a while the historical development of tragedy, this study is not meant to be a history, but an introductory critical study of a particular mode of tragic drama, the Chekhovian, on the modern stage.

4. Robert W. Corrigan , «tragedy , the tragic , and the historical moment «, assaph C. No.6, 1990.

5. Raymond Williams, Modern Tragedy (London: Verso Editions, 1969), P.13.

A Note on the Issue of Modern Tragedy: Chekhov's Plays in Perspective

Recent critics admit that tragedy as an art form has undergone an inevitable transformation. Some of them consider the end of the 19th or the very beginning of the 20th century an approximate date for this change, while others would have it start as far back as the age of Racine. In any case, during the 1960's, Steiner wrote of the "Death of Tragedy"; Esslin coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd"; and Abel contrasted older tragedy to "Metatheatre"¹. Few years later, Kaufmann took issue with the chief parts of Steiner's argument and terminology, but nevertheless acknowledged the decline of tragedy, linking this decline to the sense of despair occasioned by the horrors of modern times.² And similarly, in the same year, Brereton suggested that "all critics have experienced the same real difficulty in deciding what happened to dramatic tragedy in the present century. Merely to say that it died is unsatisfactory. No doubt it did die [however] as a single body"³ To sum up the opinions of the critics mentioned above together with the views of many other commentators, it would be plausible to say that while there existed a coherent concept of tragedy among the theatres of fifth-century Athens, Elizabethan England, and seventeenth-century France, the artistic contributions to tragedy by Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and other playwrights appeared either transitional or problematic, and since the very beginning of the 20th century until the late few decades it has been so questionable and doubtful to apply the title "tragedy" to modern dramatic writings. The purpose of this study is to emphasize and illustrate that the disappearance or disjunction in the traditional concept of tragedy can be largely accounted for in terms of a dramatic and critical notion of cultural transformation. Corrigan has appropriately expressed this point:

1. See, George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London : Faber and Faber, 1982) ; Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday, 1961); and Lionel Abel, *Meta-theatre : A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York : Hill & Wang, 1963).
2. See, Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York : Doubleday, 1968).
3. Geoffrey Brereton, *Principles of Tragedy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968). In the same decade R. J. Kaufmann discussed the career of tragedy in western drama, suggesting - contrary to the above - cited critics - that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did in fact create tragedy comparable to fifth - century and seventeenth century England. See, R. J. Kaufmann, "Tragedy and Its Validating Condition", *Comparative Drama*, 1, 1967, 3-18.

نظرة حول قضية المأساة الحديثة؛ مسرحيات تشيخوف مثالا

د. فؤاد عبد المطلب ❖

ملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى توكيد الطبيعة الخاصة للمأساة في المسرح الحديث وإلى ضرورة تقويم هذه المأساة وفق شروطها الخاصة، إذ لا يمكن تصنيفها وفق التقاليد المسرحية الكلاسيكية المعروفة. فقد أدى تصنيفها من خلال تلك التقاليد إلى عدها مسرحيات هزلية أو مضحكة أو مأساوية - مضحكة. لتحقيق ذلك يتقصى هذا البحث المفهومات المسرحية المعقدة التي ظهرت حول أصول المأساة وطبيعتها ووظيفتها. ويعكف هذا العمل على دراسة طبيعة المسرحيات المشار إليها، من خلال تتبع معالجة المأساة في الفكر النقدي الأدبي الكلاسيكي خصوصاً عند أفلاطون وأرسطو، وعند كتاب المسرح الإغريقي من أمثال سوفوكليس ويوروبيدس، وفي مسرحيات عصر النهضة الإنكليزي ولا سيما شكسبير، وفي المسرحيات الكلاسيكية المحدثّة عموماً، والآراء النقدية المسرحية المتعلقة بذلك وأهمها آراء صامويل جونسون. يناقش البحث فكرة المأساة الحديثة، التي تمزج بين عناصر مختلفة: المضحك والمأساوي، والعادي والبطولي، والخاص والعام، واليومي العابر والإنساني الدائم، مستنداً إلى الآراء النقدية التي تؤكد خصوصية المأساة في المسرح الحديث مثل آراء كونستنتين ستانسلافسكي وأرثر ميلر وريموند ويليامز وآخرين. كما يتطرق البحث إلى ما كتبه جورج شتاينر وج.ل. ستيان، ووالتر كوفمان وغيرهم حول موت المأساة في المسرح الحديث، وذلك بالإضافة إلى توصيفات تشيخوف نفسه لمسرحياته. ويدرس البحث مسرحيات أنطون تشيخوف الرئيسة من منظور المأساة الحديثة مستخدماً اقتباسات وإشارات إلى المسرحيات نفسها، ومن أعمال نقدية تلقي مزيداً من الضوء على فكرة البحث الأساسية. ويجري البحث عموماً عبر رؤية مسرحية نقدية تاريخية تركز إلى الكتابات الإنكليزية، البريطانية والأمريكية، والروسية المترجمة، الصادرة حول هذا الموضوع.

❖ أستاذ/ قسم اللغة الإنكليزية وآدابها/ كلية الآداب/ جامعة جرش.

A Note on the Issue of Modern Tragedy: Chekhov' Plays Perspective

Fuad Abdul Muttalebl*

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Abstract

This research work aims at emphasizing the peculiar nature of modern tragedy and the necessity of assessing this tragedy through its own terms, for it is inaccurate to interpret this drama in terms of a different dramatic tradition. This issue has led actually some critics to deal with the plays as comedies or tragi-comedies, including Chekhov's plays. The work provides a comprehensive critical survey of the development of the idea of tragedy, trying to spotlight the main theoretical notions and the relevant supporting arguments: the classical, the renaissance, the pre-modern and modern. The different critical opinions produced on the nature and function of tragedy leads to a synoptic display of the notions, with citations about the main points to illuminate the purpose of the study. The debate is that modern plays, among them the works of Chekhov, can be considered through an amalgamation of the comic and tragic elements, in addition to other artistic features. The sources of this incongruity are various: inadequacy or delusion, foolishness or bureaucracy, failure or dejection, the inability or insignificance of the individual in a changing society, the naturalistic forces beyond human control, and paralysis of human will or anti-heroism. The special artistic mode Chekhov followed in his plays in approximating and interpreting reality produces an open and ambiguous ending. Besides, Chekhov held a non-sentimental objective view of reality and his synthesis of the comic and tragic is an illustration of his artistic assessment. Technically speaking, the work offers a series of themes, ideas, and observations made through a critical discussion of the issue of modern tragedy. Examining the modern conception of tragedy necessitates citations from the different critical writings produced over a long period of time, without which the discussion of such a wide and complicated issue would remain incomplete.

* Professor/ Department of English/ Faculty of Arts/ Jerash Univer

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