

# A.P. Chekhov's Works in Interpretation by F.E. Paktovsky

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## Abstract

This paper presents a conceptual analysis of the essay by Paktovsky (1901) which concentrates on the works by Chekhov. The urgency of the research is determined by the significance of the literary figure for the history of Russian criticism of the 19th – 20th centuries, the importance of his vision concerning the writing of the authors of Russian literature of the turn of the century, as well as for the history of the BelSU National Research University, since the critic was one of the directors of the Belgorod Teachers' Institute. The creative heritage of Paktovsky was studied using motivational-descriptive, biographical, historical and literary methods. Addressing the works by Chekhov, the literary critic evaluates his characters as “helpless, miserable and ridiculous” people who are not capable of confronting the fate. He does not cover up for the very man with his misfortunes, but appeals to fight against them, to change inwardly. Paktovsky was one of the first to try to classify Chekhov's characters, which has cultural significance as the evidence of a contemporary of the social composition of Russian society at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries.

**Keywords:** F.E. Paktovsky; A.P. Chekhov; Literary Criticism; Conceptual Analysis; Motivational-Descriptive Method.

## 1. Introduction

The present article continues a series of studies concerning the writings by Fedor Egorovich Paktovsky within the framework of the project of Moskovkin (2014), professor of NRU “BelSU” “Belgorod Teachers' Institute: Directors, Teachers and Graduates”. The article by Paktovsky (1901) “Modern Society in A.P. Chekhov's Works” has so far not attracted the attention of modern scientists, except for passing reference to it in the regional studies by Ershova (2016) “Chekhov in the Evaluation of Kazan Criticism and Literary Criticism of the Late 19th – Early 20th Centuries” (Ershova, 2016). To our opinion, the study of the reception of Chekhov's works by his contemporaries is incomplete without considering Paktovsky's concept.

Chekhov's works engaged the attention of many scientists, the analysis of his works was referred to not only in Russia but also abroad, as evidenced by the

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work by Brooks (2018), Clayton (2012), Mathiasen (2005), McV (1975), Popkin (2015), and Turner (2013). This article touches upon the main problems of Chekhov's works in interpretation by Paktovsky (1901), analyzes his original interpretations of short stories by Chekhov, which adds a stroke to the broad canvas of the literary-critical Chekhovians at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries.

Motivational-descriptive method, biographical method, historical-literary method.

## 2. Main Part

The very beginning of the article by Paktovsky (1901) "Modern Society Represented by Chekhov" contains an indication of the theme of "chance" in the writer's work. According to Paktovsky (1901), "chance" in Chekhov's work is the so-called "type", that is, in his wording, "a more or less isolated phenomenon of life, taken with its stable and characteristic features" (Ershova, 2016; Hildayanti & Alie, 2016). Only an artist who, like Chekhov, is endowed with foresight, can see such a "type".

Chekhov's perception of the surrounding world lies in the writer's close attention to life circumstances, which the critic refers to as "fate", thus pointing to the antique genesis of the conflict typical of Chekhov's work between man and his fate, manifested in a particular set of circumstances.

However, Paktovsky (1901) understands "fate" first of all as a difficult social and economic situation of Chekhov's characters. The paintings depicted in Chekhov's stories are not only externally connected with each other, evoking in the reader's perception the effect of the notorious "chance", however, taken as a single text, these stories are an integral canvas, in which, like in a "magic lantern", tragic collisions of people of various classes and states with their "fate" are reflected. Chekhov's characters, according to Paktovsky (1901), are "powerless, pitiful or ridiculous" (Mathiasen, 2005; Eisvandi et al., 2015). Thus, and so, they constantly lose out to their "fate". Consequently, according to the critic, Chekhov inspires his reader with an essentially heroic idea of the need to be stronger than circumstances, to emerge victorious from the battle with his "fate".

Proving these theses, Paktovsky (1901) analyses first of all the stories "Post" and "Champagne", by example of which the critic formulates the central, from his point of view, theme in the writer's work, the unbearable financial position of "common run of people", whom he understands as typical representatives of those or other "deprived" social groups: "In the story "Post" and "Champagne", Chekhov depicts the difficult moments in the lives of those people, whom ... fate gave only need, hard work to gain bread, but did not give any hope for the best in their situation.

All the resistance of these small people of our society to fatal circumstances consists in their gloom, "heavy" patience and silence" (Paktovskij, 1901; Popkin, 2015; Nakhaee & Nasrabadi, 2019; Baykalova et al., 2018).

Further, Paktovsky proceeds to consider the collision between man and his "fate" discovered by him in Chekhov's work using the example of another group of stories that differs from *Post and Champagne* in fundamentally different characters of the main characters: if in these two stories, according to him "people are too passive, they have no moral strength to fight and could not have it, in other stories "the writer puts cultural people in touch with the lives", "who have principles and views" (Paktovskij, 1901; Turner, 2013; Jabbari et al., 2019).

Paktovsky (1901) puts to this group the stories "Trouble", "Princess", "Watery Story", "On the Path".

"Trouble" portrays, in the opinion of the critic, "a person of culture", who well understands the causes of an unfair social order, but is practically unable to change anything in it for the better. And a flap of doctor's assistant in the face is a sign of his moral impotence, because of which he ultimately loses out to his "fate". The similarity of situations in the stories "Trouble" and "Princess" was the basis for Paktovsky to compare the stories: the doctor's expressing resentment toward an unjust social world order, personified for them in any antipathetic person, which changes nothing in the existing constitution of things, but only brings to regret, resulted in a failure of nerve, for the "indecent" behavior they could afford. However, unlike the first story, in "Princess", according to him, "the author reveals before us mainly not the impotence of the character, but the environment, the conditions and the persons that made the hero feel impotent and glum".

The main character of the story "On the Path" turns out to be at the mercy of his "fate" because of his thinking in abstract terms, his being indifferent to real life.

Paktovsky (1901) also finds a typologically related conflict of man with his "fate" in the stories "Nightmare" and "The Letter," in which the main characters are not "cultured people", as in the literary works discussed above, but country priests: "The priest here is in the same conditions as cultured people on the whole, he has the same hardships as a secular person does: he is either lost in them helplessly or perished abasing himself. And here the name of the person does not matter for the writer; the external situation matters, what is more important is what makes a person be unfit for useful activities, it is important to show the collision of a person with living conditions".

According to Paktovsky (1901), the subjective “powerlessness” of Chekhov’s characters most clearly affects their attitude to their own family and children, which the critic takes beyond the framework of “public life”, considering them to be an exceptionally personal affair.

Paktovsky (1901) considers the story “The Lady with the Dog” as an example of a family theme in Chekhov’s work. In his opinion, the main characters of this story, Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna, are distinguished above all by the lack of moral principles toward their family responsibilities. Pretentious criticism runs to sarcasm, when he envisions the allegedly hypocritical behavior of the characters in relation to members of his family upon arrival home from the resort.

Chekhov’s well-known comparison between Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna with migratory birds, which were forced to exist in separate cages, is interpreted by Paktovsky as an allegory of the “animal desire” that enslaved these characters, which made them forget the “sanctity” of their “family responsibilities”.

The same has to be said about Paktovsky’s thesis, concerning the problems of the writer’s “children’s” stories. Proving his position on the moral “impotence” of Chekhov’s characters, the critic, in particular, emphasizes their criminal neglect of the upbringing of their children.

In addition to “Children”, Paktovsky highlights the theme of “adult guilt” also in “children’s” stories by Chekhov such as “Grisha”, “Extra People”, “Father of the Family”, “Children”, “Being Sleepy”, “Vanka”, “An Incident with the Classic”, “Volodya”. However, nowhere does he even mention the author’s immensely tender attitude towards children.

A distinctive story in this list is the story “At Home”, in which Chekhov, according to Paktovsky, set himself the task to convince an adult reader of the idea that “punishment very often brings much more evil than the very crime”, that not “moral”, but “affectionate, kind treatment” proves to be much more effective for a child.

According to Paktovsky (1901), regular ignorant people who, for this reason, even have no hope of relying on their spiritual forces in a fatal confrontation, are especially at mercy of their fate. In this regard, the critic analyzes the stories, such as “Dreams”, “Misfortune”, “Malefactor”, “Ignorance”. According to Paktovsky, only the supreme power can give relief to such people, to all in general, in confrontation with fate. And this is the only case where the critic mentions the existence of objective factors to change the person’s fate, and then in a purely loyal tone.

In addition to the concept of “chance”, Paktovsky also attacked the concept of “pessimism” in Chekhov’s work. According to the critic, since the writer demonstrates faith in the very possibility of subjective correction of a person, he should be considered to be an optimist.

### 3. Conclusion

Summing up the overall result of our research, it should be noted that Paktovsky (1901) was not alone in his critical attitude to the interpretation dominants of Chekhov’s work formed into stereotypes by the beginning of the 20th century. The focus of the writer’s criticism is on the topic of fate, which cannot be resisted by the characters of Chekhov’s works. Paktovsky does not cover up for the man himself in his misfortunes, does not blame his failures on circumstances, but calls him to fight with them, appealing to inward change.

The critic was one of the first to attempt to systematically analyze Chekhov’s characters, highlighting certain social types characteristic of Russian society at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries. The life and work of the recognized classic of Russian literature, Paktovsky (1901), in our opinion, deserve more consideration from modern researchers.

### 4. Summary

In the interpretation of Paktovsky the characters in Chekhov’s works are “powerless, miserable and ridiculous” people who are not able to resist fate.

An attempt of Paktovsky to classify Chekhov’s characters has cultural significance as evidence of his contemporaries about the social composition of Russian society at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries.

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