ALEXEY FEOFILAKTOVICH PISEMSKY
AS DRAMATIST

by

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

If an artist were to reproduce on canvas Pisemsky's Muse, from the evidence of the scattered "objective detailed" analyses of his critics, the Muse would definitely be the ugliest thing that any author could choose for his "inspirational" source.

The purpose of this study is to illustrate the unfair position accorded Pisemsky in Russian dramaturgy and to assign him a proper place in Russian drama by fresh evaluation of his abilities as the dramatist.

The Introduction suggests the possible reasons for which Pisemsky was placed in an oblivion. It also argues that the scepticism, which penetrated some of his works, even if it were somewhat peculiar to him in nature, was definitely aroused by the confusing multi-party Russia of the 1860's and 1870's. Chapter One retraces the more important themes in Russian drama in an attempt to place Pisemsky in the tradition. Chapter Two is a detailed analysis of the lingering critical attitudes toward Pisemsky which claim that his works lacked the revolutionary zeal for improvement of Russia, and that he was not a playwright but an author of
pamphlets.

In Chapter Three an attempt is made to define the main aspects of Pisemsky's art through his letters and views implicit in his plays. It is also suggested in this Chapter that Pisemsky's plays were revolutionary in their own way, and that they were not directed at the "yawning space", but, to people, directed with harsh rebuke, yet with sincere hope in an eventually brighter future. Chapter Four and the Conclusion are devoted to the analyses of his plays in an effort to show that many of them, in their theme, structure, form and other traditional elements of drama, indeed secure him much better place in Russian dramaticurgy than hitherto given him.
ERRATA

p.3  Line 18. The word "not" should be placed in front of "side".

p.9  Line 5-6 should read: published in 1825, 1831 and 1835 respectively.

p.12 Line 4. The words "The Journal" should be placed after "with".

p.28 Line 28 should read "feuilletons".

p.85 Line 8. Instead of "reader" the word should be "spectator".
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Finally, I record my indebtedness to my wife and to my Tania, for having patiently borne the long hours of my thesis work.
PISEMSKY'S PLAYS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE IN PRINT.

THE HYPOCHONDRIAC (IPOKHONDRIK, 1852.)

SPLITTING THE INHERITANCE (RAZDEL, 1853.)

THE VETERAN AND THE RECRUIT (VETERAN I NOVOBRANEC, 1854.)

*A BITTER FATE (GOR'KAYA SUD'BINA, 1859.)

THE DESPOTS (SAMOUPRAVCHY, 1867.)

LIEUTENANT GLADKOV (PORUCHIK GLADKOV, 1867.)

THE WORLDLY-WISE FALCONS (BYVYE SOKOLY, 1868.)

THE MINES (PODKOPY, 1873.)

BAAL (VAAL, 1873.)

ENLIGHTENED TIMES (PROSVESHCHENNOE VREMYA, 1875.)

THE FINANCIAL GENIUS (FINANSOVYJ GENIJ, 1876.)

THE FIGHTERS AND FENCE-SITTERS (BOJCY I VYZHIDATELI, 1886.)

FLEDGELINGS OF THE LAST FLIGHT (PTENCY POSLEDNEGO SLETA, 1886.)

MILOSLOVSKIE I NARYSHKINY (1886.)

THE FAMILY WHIRLPOOL (SEMEJNYJ OMUT, 1886.)

*With the exception of Bitter Fate, none of his plays have yet been translated into English.
"There are no laws except one: That of complete realism without any restrictions and compromises," snapped Pisemsky at one of the rehearsals where he played the main role of The Inspector-General. And despite the pleas from other actors to direct his monologues more at the audience than at the actors who were next to him or behind him, Pisemsky was persistent in his theory. "Your conservative routines," he would say to the actors, where is the realism in art, which we all seek now! ...when I am in the room talking to someone, do I worry that others hear me, except those to whom my speech is directed? If one of these persons stands in the corner of the room, am I to bring him to the middle of the room, rather than go to him to the corner? Am I to be concerned with the fact that I should not turn my back to any of the others present in the same room? Well, it should be exactly like that on the stage.

Pisemsky's (1821-1881) interest in the theatre dates from his early high school years, when, while not more than fourteen years old, he staged and took part in several amateur plays. His interest in the theatre continued until his death. This interest is evidenced in his superb reading of dramatic works, his extraordinarily well-developed sense for theatrical effect and finally his dramatic output of fifteen plays.
For Pisemsky men were, as seen from these plays, victims of the selves bequeathed them by nature and acted upon by the period they lived in, and most of his dramatic works aim at being thorough studies of disillusionment, self-deception, self-torture, and self-destruction. Such was Pisemsky's usual view of reality. The depiction of this reality in his plays is placed in dramatic situations and is consistent with his views expressed in the above quoted passage.

The purpose of this study is to re-examine the position occupied by Pisemsky as dramatist and assign him a more accurate one in Russian dramaturgy, by reconciling the grossly unfair criticism of his plays by his contemporaries and critics, with what is hoped to be a more objective analysis.

Pisemsky's critics, especially the socially-minded, have displayed inexorable and uncompromising hostility toward Pisemsky's "pessimistic" philosophy and, almost unanimously have emphasized his inability to understand the social and economic changes which had begun for the improvement of ailing Russia. And hence, they claimed that he was out of step with his own time. The critics who were concerned more with the work as the "work of art", maintained, under Afinenkov's influence, that Pisemsky's plays, particularly those of his later period, were mere pamphlets, barren
of clearly defined dramatic qualities.

The ire of the critics was aroused chiefly by the content of his plays. They slated the implausibility and squalor of the characters, the unsightliness of the subjects, the inartistic approach, and the general unfairness of what appeared to them a scurrilous attack on the revolutionary movement begun for the improvement of Russia. It is their resentment of Pisemsky's themes that led them to brand his plays as "pamphlets" rather than dramas; they ignored the generally plausible scenes built to a whole of economy and completeness.

It appears from the works consulted that most of Pisemsky's critics in evaluating his dramatic writings either resorted to impressions obtained from personal acquaintance with his private life, which they extended into their analyses, or relied heavily on his biographers for textual interpretation.

It is true that Pisemsky did not only side with theories expounded by the revolutionaries such as Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, Pisarev, and Mikhailovsky, in fact, he openly criticised many of their ideas. If Turgenev's novel Fathers and Sons, for example, indicated correctly that the birth of Nihilism was taking place in the 1860's and delivering a deadly blow to aesthetics, Pisemsky's novel The Troubled Sea signified clearly the utterly destructive
potential of the Nihilist tendency. This tendency was of such large proportions that Turgenev eventually had to retract some of the more vehement views he expressed. In Pisemsky's case the publication of *The Troubled Sea* seriously undermined the reception of his later literary works, but he remained firm in his views.

Admittedly, Pisemsky was sceptical in accepting the theories of the revolutionaries, but he displayed this scepticism, not because, as most of his critics claimed, a pessimistic tendency was inherently peculiar to him, but because he was highly practical and consistent in his theories, and he could not see clearly how the ideas of the revolutionaries were to improve the situation in Russia.

The period of the 1860's and 1870's, a period of intense intellectual activity, confused Pisemsky. It is in these two decades of the 19th century that reactionary, liberal, and revolutionary-democratic ideas came into conflict over the questions of education of the people, determination and direction of the proper use of sciences, and the role of literature and art. Shevyrev's and his supporters' theories in defence of "pure art" were superseded by those of radical theoreticians whose voices carried loud against these "abstract principles" and those of the aestheticians and who stressed the educational and didactic role of art. The period of the 1860's and 1870's witnessed
the birth of many political tendencies. Nihilism found its advocate in Pisarev. The latter's blow to aesthetics was only to be outdone by Chernyshevsky's dissertation, in which his attack on the Beautiful is all too apparent. Pisemsky, as mentioned, was greatly irritated, and openly denounced views held by both Pisarev and Chernyshevsky. His ire was to increase with the emergence of the Populists, who, he early noticed, were to turn into terrorists.

It was by no means easy to satisfy the radical critics of the period, who demanded such ideological correctness that many writers were placed on the defensive. And "non-radical writers could hardly feel anything but discomfort when faced with the underlying assumption made by the radical critics, the assumption that he who was not with the radical critics was against them and consequently deserving the heartiest condemnation...." No neutral stand was entertained. In such an emotional climate, little sane attention was paid by the outraged radicals to questions of structure and form. Among many who took the opposite stand from the prevailing radical tendencies in the 1860's were Leskov, Turgenev, Goncharov, and Pisemsky. They were all "subjected to merciless reprisals for stands interpreted as anti-radical." Pisemsky, as stated, was firmest of all in his principles, and it is his political enmity with the radicals that resulted in his oblivion.
The time has long been past to reconsider Pisemsky's case. And not from his biographers' point of view, but through his letters and the textual analyses of some of his plays.

An attempt is made in this study to indicate and reject the unfair methods used by his critics in pronouncing judgement on his works, and to give a fresh evaluation of Pisemsky, showing that he is a dramatist of considerable importance. Chapter One deals with the representative themes of the more important Russian dramatists of Pisemsky's time in order to place him in the tradition, by demonstrating that he was not out of step with his period, since his plays had similar themes and were sometimes structurally akin to those of Gogol, Turgenev, A.A. Potekhin, and Ostrovsky among others. Chapter Two is a detailed analysis of the main trends in the evaluation of Pisemsky's works by his contemporaries and critics. An attempt is made here to reconcile the existing views. Chapter Three deals with the main aspects of Pisemsky's art. Chapter Four is devoted to the analyses of his plays in an effort to show that most of them in their themes, structure and form are worthy of dramatic art.

The five plays here dealt with are The Hypochondriac, Splitting The Inheritance, Bitter Fate, The Despots and Baal. Each of these plays represents (with the exception of the
first two which belong to the same cycle) four distinct cycles of Pisemsky's dramatic output. With the possible exception of the fourth, the five plays were chosen mainly because Pisemsky's dramatic abilities clearly reveal themselves through these. Other plays are discussed in so far as it was thought that elements peculiar to them help form a better picture of Pisemsky's dramatic art.
REFERENCE NOTES TO INTRODUCTION


2Ibid., p. 399.


5Critics also claimed that, in addition to not being revolutionary in character, Pisemsky's works lacked in strength of expression and were not written for a clearly defined purpose. The fact that many of his works were censored for a long time (e.g. The Hypochondriac, and The Mines among others) for their political sharpness, escaped his critics.


8Ibid., pp. 71-72.
CHAPTER I

Representative themes in Russian drama in Pisemsky's time

Although by the 19th century protests against mere borrowing from the European theatre became more intense, the Russian theatre, even into the 1840's, (the notable exceptions were: Woe from Wit (Gore ot uma), Boris Godunov, and Inspector-General, published in 1825, partially in 1831, and 1835 respectively) thrived on translated or superficial home-made melodrama. The repertoire of the Russian theatre in "1830-1840 consisted primarily of melodramas, romantic dramas and especially vaudeville."¹

Melodrama, with an unlikely experience as its subject, plus its tension, artificiality in movement and characters, and a bizarre situation, was received favourably by the inexperienced theatre goers. Its characteristic grotesque, unexpected endings, mystery and exaggerated sense of adventure secured it supporters. Hence the theatre of the first-half of the 19th century abounded with such plays as Tridcat' Let Ili Zhizn' Igroka, Nevinnaià Prestupnica Ili Otcovskoe Prokliatie, Dvumuzhnica Ili Zachem Poidesh, To i Naidesh.²

Romantic dramas, which evolved from melodrama, dealt with heroic themes and often harboured strong, almost
chauvinistic patriotic feelings. They revolved around two central periods of the historic past, "the troubled times and the reign of Peter the Great." In his article *Russian Literature in 1844*, Belinsky characterized Nestor Kukol'nik's and N.C. Polevoi's dramas thus: they are

baked according to the very recipes by which the pseudo-classical dramas and comedies were put together. The same hackneyed plots and forced denouement, the same artificiality, the same 'decorated nature' the same types without features instead of characters, and "the same monotony" are present throughout.

Vaudeville was the most prominent genre of drama-turgy in the reign of Nicholas I. Reviakin's figures, obtained from the Fund of Dramatic Censorship, show that out of ninety-three plays submitted to the censor in 1848, thirty-five were vaudeville, while others ranged from comic opera to farce.

Gogol, whose dramatic career points to a new direction in the Russian theatre and whose ascendancy was particularly important in Pisemsky's early dramatic art, protested against the French influence on Russian theatre. Gogol felt that the influence was so strong that it distracted and restricted native self-sufficiency. Thus he wrote:
We have become so accustomed to colorless French plays that we are already afraid to look at our own. If we are given a living character we wonder if it is not a portrait of someone, because it does not resemble the usual peasant, stage tyrant, poet, judge, and similar well-worn figures which toothless authors drag into their plays as they drag on to the stage chorus girls who with their eternal smile entertain the public with the steps they have been dashingly executing for the past forty years.6

Gogol strove to avoid all this in his plays and his influence is felt in Ostrovsky's dramatic writings though the latter's plays, as those of Pisemsky, are generally free of grotesqueness and farce.

Like Pisemsky's, Ostrovsky's dramas deal with the human weaknesses of lust, greed, corruptibility, and tyranny. They expose, in somewhat milder manner than the former's, the vice and the stagnation of Russian society. Drawn from the world of greedy and headstrong merchants, corrupt officialdom, and a backward peasantry, Ostrovsky's plots and characters are highly dramatic and true to life.

The year 1856, ends the first period of Ostrovsky's dramatic career. To this period belong his Slavophile plays Ne V Svoi Sani Ne Sadis' (1853), Bednost' Ne Porok (1854), and Ne Tak Zhivi Kak Khochetsia (1855). These plays praise the old times, songs and dances, and tradition in general, and express sorrow that of all this only memories remain. The Slavophile movement, still strong in the Moscow
of the 1850's, played a major role in this period of Ostrovsky's dramas. However, Ostrovsky later breaks away from Pogodin and his journal, and establishes closer contact with Sovremennik and Nekrasov. In his subsequent plays "... the morbid features in life are depicted in the form of stupid wilfulness (samodurstva)." V Chuahom Piru Pokhmel'ie (1856) is the typical example. Here, the merchant class, in the person of Bruskov, is depicted with all its deficiencies. Unbridled in his aims, the samodur Bruskov is only too conscious of the power of his money and uses it unwaveringly to subject others to his will. In the next three years Ostrovsky writes Dokhodnoe Mesto (1857), dealing with bureaucracy, Ne Soshlis' Kharakterami (1858), which expresses criticism of the merchant class, and Vospitannica (1859), written under the influence of the pre-reform struggles. Before writing a series of historical dramas, his chef d'oeuvre, The Thunderstorm (Groza, 1860), appeared.

Here Ostrovsky raises an important question, which also concerned Pisemsky: the emancipation of the Russian woman from domestic slavery. People face an inevitable downfall because their will is bound by the family rules (domostroi), embodied in Kabanikha. A typical samodur Dikoy, and a dweller of the dark kingdom, Kabanikha are in conflict with sensitive and bright Katerina, a dreamer and
a lover of personal freedom.

In the sixties, Ostrovsky, with many other Russian dramatists, turned to historical drama. This interest was fostered by the Russian intellectuals who in their desire to find a path for Russia's future looked into its past. By this time L.A. Mey had written *Tsarskaia Nevesta* (1849), and *The Maid of Pskov* (*Pskovitianka*, 1860), dramas of the times of Ivan the Terrible. Mey's dramas "started a continuous series of plays on subjects from Old Russian history before the time of Peter the Great, chiefly from the Moscow period." In the second-half of the sixties A.K. Tolstoy's famous historical trilogy appeared. These were: *Smert' Ioanna Groznogo* (1865), *Tsar' Pyodor Ioannovich* (1868), and *Tsar' Boris* (1870). Seeing in Ivan the Terrible the beginning of evil in Russian history, Tolstoy idealizes the pre-Moscow period of the Rus', the period of its feudal system. In 1865 Ostrovsky's *Voevoda Ili Son Na Volge* appeared. It was followed by *Dmitrii Samozvanec* (1867) and *Vasilisa Melent'eva* (1868) which was written in collaboration with S.A. Gedeonov. The historical plays of Ostrovsky show a "careful treatment, on the author's part, of the popular peoples' movements and a truthful...reproduction...of the epoch", but lack in dramatic qualities and adaptability to the stage. Mainly for this reason, Mirsky considers A. Tolstoy superior to
Ostrovsky as an historical dramatist. Tolstoy is, no doubt, also superior to Pisemsky as an historical dramatist. Pisemsky, in the mid sixties, also concentrated his energies on plays dealing with the past. The Despots dealing with the period of Paul I, Lieutenant Gladkov, an adventure connected with the enthronement of Anna Leopol'dovna, and Miloslavskie i Maryshkiny from the times of tsarevna's Sofia's reign, appeared in 1866 and 1867 respectively.

Turgenev's dramatic career was not as varied as Ostrovsky's, but he wrote a number of plays among which his best, A month in the Country (1850), played an important role in the development of psychological dramaturgy. Complex psychological conflicts, well-constructed dialogues, simplicity of subject and the natural flow of its development are characteristic of this play. Among Turgenev's earlier plays were Neostorozhnost', a parody on the Romantic theatre of the 1840's, Bezdenzhie (1845), "scenes from the Petersburg life of a young nobleman", Zavtrak u Predvoditelia (1849), and a light stageable comedy The Provincial Lady (Provincialka, 1851). The second and third of these plays clearly show Gogol's influence on Turgenev. Zhazikov and his servant Matvei of the Bezdenzhie have much in common with Gogol's Khlestakov and Osip. Zavtrak u Predvoditelia, with its exposure of the whole group of landowners reminds us of the galaxy of Gogol's officials in the
Inspector-General and of the eligible bachelors in *Marriage* (1842).

The period shortly before the reforms is characterized by exposure of the Government-apparatus, bureaucracy, corruptibility of the Government officials, and lawlessness. The somewhat optimistic theme, "and among officials there are good people", in V.A. Sollogub's play *Chinovnik* (1856) was quickly dimmed by A.A. Potekhin's, Saltykov-Shchedrin's, and the last two plays of Sukhovo-Kobylin's trilogy. All three dealt with the corrupt world of the officials. Potekhin's play *Mishura* (1858), in the person of Pustozerov, shows a vile businessman and careerist who could afford to refuse bribes, and who conceals his meanness under a seemingly honest front: "when will, finally, the ignorant people be convinced that Russia might have officials whom it is impossible to bribe."

Among Saltykov-Shchedrin's plays, *The Death of Pazukhin* (*Smert' Pazukhina*, 1857) is the best of his satires. The play does not only expose the moral corruption of the officials, it subjects the whole of the then society to scrupulous analysis. Its theme is similar to Pisemsky's play *Razdel* (1853). Saltykov depicts a cruel family struggle for the estate of the wealthy merchant, Pazukhin, who died and named no heirs.

Sukhovo-Kobylin's *The Wedding of Krechinsky*
(Svad'ba Krechinskogo, 1855) portrays an impoverished nobleman attempting to rectify his affairs by marrying an artless provincial girl who is faithfully dedicated to him. Like Gogol's Podkolesin, Krechinsky considers marriage a commercial transaction, merely a question of dowry. The Affair (Delo) and The Death of Tarelkin (Smert' Tarelkina), dedicated to the exposure of bureaucracy, appeared in print in 1869.

A turn to peasant themes in Russian Literature is noticeable in the late 1840's in prose as well as in drama. This interest was, no doubt, created under the influence of long discussions on the question of relations between landowners and serfs. In the 1840's and 1850's detailed studies of the peasant life were made. Folk songs and customs were collected and recorded, and an attempt was made to analyse the fundamental character of a simple man. It is said that the Crown Prince [later Alexander II] had on his table Turgenev's A Sportsman Sketches preparing to free the peasants.

Among the more important works on peasants are Turgenev's Sketches, in which the peasants are portrayed with greater sympathy than are the upper classes, and Grigorovich's The Village (Derevnia, 1846), and Anton Goremyka (1847). Unlike the story Pakhar' in which the main character bears the qualities of meekness, purity of the thought, and profound respect for order, The Village depicts
a mean peasant, Akulina's husband, who makes life unbearable for her and their little daughter Dun'ka.

Anton Goremyka is the portrayal of a peasant deprived of civil rights. It is a strong protest against the inhuman treatment of serfs. Goodness, piety and devotion embodied in Anton's character are precisely the cause of his ruin. Comparing Turgenev's depiction of peasant life to that of Grigorovich's, Savodnik remarks:

While Turgenev brings out a whole group of types from the peasant midst, which, with their spiritual powers, evoke one's involuntary respect, Grigorovich chooses his heroes from the ranks of those deprived, forgotten, and insulted by fate...whose life is made up of continuous suffering.15

Over sympathetic to his peasants' suffering Grigorovich does evoke the reader's compassion. This can be seen particularly in his description of Akulina's funeral.

Pisemsky makes his contribution to the peasant theme with the appearance of The Sketches of Peasant Life, the first of which was Pitershchik (1852). His Sketches, though very similar to the works of Grigorovich, in presentation of customs and landscapes, and in reproduction of typical peasant speech, are barren of any idealization.

Dramatists in this period also focus their attention on peasant themes. Characteristic of the early 1850's are A.A. Potekhin's plays: Shuba Ovechia-Dusha Chelovechia, Sud Lyudskoi-ne Bozhii, both of 1854, and Chuzhoe Dobro
Vprok ne Idet (1855). In Shuba Ovechia Dusha Chelovechia, Potekhin depicts the oppressed life of a peasant girl in the house of the lady of the manor. Sud Lyudskoi-ne Bozhii portrays another peasant girl, who fell in love with a young man, was cursed by her father, and later lost her mind. Reckless use of money leading to a man's spiritual and physical destruction is the theme of Chuzhoe dobro vprok ne idet. These plays abound with sentimentality for peasants in their unfortunate position. Potekhin's personages are God-fearing, law-abiding, and humble people. He idealizes the backwardness of the enslaved people, their patience and simplicity.  

Pisemsky's peasant drama Bitter Fate (Gor'kaya Sud'bina, 1859), although sympathetic to the peasant problem, precludes any idealization, and for the first time in Russian dramaturgy the peasant is regarded first as a human being and only after that as peasant. Like A.A. Potekhin, Pisemsky departs from the peasant themes at a time when Populism was gathering ever stronger support.

Pisemsky was suspicious of the theories expounded by the Populists. He had his own which greatly differed from those contained in Populism. And Pisemsky, grossly underrated, adhered to them with strength and vigor unmatched by most of his contemporaries.
REFERENCE NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. A.I. Reviakin, A.N. Ostrovsky, Moscow, Uchpedgiz, 1949, p.117.

2. Ibid., p. 118.

3. V. Vsevolodsky-Gerngross, Kratkij Kurs Istorii Russkogo Teatra, Moscow, Goslitzdat, 1936, p. 97.


13 See Bursov, *Russkie Dramaturgi*, vol. 3, p. 27.


15 V. Savodnik, *Ocherki po Istorii Russkoj Literatury XIX-Go Veka*, Moscow, Pechatnia S.P. Yakovleva, 1917, part 2, p. 120.

16 Bursov, *loc. cit.*

17 For further discussion of this point see M. Jenkins, "Pisemsky's Bitter Fate: The First outstanding Drama of Russian Peasant life," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 3 (1958), p. 77.
CHAPTER II

Critics on Pisemsky

Sometimes critics and readers commit injustices; they seek the established writers; they demand that the authors display at all times the highest achievement in their art, and often consider themselves right when they bypass those whose fame time may have somewhat tarnished. A greater injustice is committed, however, when expected to be criticising literary works objectively, critics resort to unscholarly methods, either to prove a lack of aesthetic standards in the work, or to indicate the falseness of the author's social outlook.

Pisemsky's literary works, and in particular his plays, have hardly yet received a just analysis, nor been assigned to a proper place in Russian literature. Pisemsky's critics, especially the socially-minded, have displayed inexorable and uncompromising hostility toward his philosophy and, almost unanimously they have emphasized his inability to understand the social and economic changes which had begun for the improvement of ailing Russia.

This chapter will examine some of the ideas common to most of the critics of Pisemsky, as displayed by contemporary writers, and by 20th century critics. Our brief remarks will also, in some places, be given.
An unsigned article in *Moskvitianin* of 1847 has the following to say about Gogol's School:

Gogol's successors provide the same fare—the unpleasant, the bitter. They exult in showing man's mediocrity, and inevitably conclude on a note of despair, frustration, or lack of purposefulness.1

A year later, M. Dmitriev in the same journal expressed his discontent with Gogol's direction in Russian Literature:

"...one would think that in Russia there is not an honorable or decent man", only "fools, rogues, boors, immoral and pitiable officials, ludicrous and contemptible landowners..."2

Such a range of characters with the exception of those in the *Bitter Fate*, are the protagonists to be found in Pisemsky's plays. Stepan Petrovich Shevyrev, an outspoken defender of "pure art" died in 1864, just about the time when Pisemsky began focussing his attention primarily on plays. We can with reasonable accuracy, judging from his views of Gogol's direction in Russian Literature, deduce that Pisemsky would have secured himself another opponent in Shevyrev, had not the latter died. However, it is probable that Shevyrev would have restrained himself in criticising Pisemsky's deficiencies in private life, and not followed the example of Vengerov, Skabichevsky, Ovsianiko-Kulikovsky, and even Annenkov,3 since he believed
that "such attacks are outside the sphere of criticism",
and furthermore that "the critic is not a policeman whose
task it is to circumscribe the activities or interests of
any writer."  

This was not so according to Vengerov however, for
two years after Pisemsky's death, in his book A.F. Pisemsky,
this biographer and critic wrote that:

Alexey Feofilaktovich was not only poorly
educated and unintelligent, but was also a
man who lacked mental development;  
that his works are completely barren of 'honest
laughter' and merely contain laughter bordering
on cynicism, and 'sobriety' approaching callousness;
that Pisemsky never had a clear-cut
trend, and that he treated all parties and
literary camps equally badly.

To summarize Pisemsky's life and literary career, Vengerov
concludes: "It will be best if we name him Falstaff..."
and he goes on to elaborate on the three basic qualities of
an English Falstaff:

...beside cowardice, cynicism, and gluttony,
Alexey Feofilaktovich had features of the
purely Russian landowner's licentiousness—
namely he was slovenly and ill-bred to the
point of ugliness.

And to support this statement Vengerov, resorts to the
following method: "The closest friends of Alexey Feofilak-
tovich told of truly legendary displays of this ill breeding."
in Pisemsky's plays. He does not seem to analyse the plays however. He is content to borrow Annenkov's term "pamphlet-like" in pronouncing judgement. He agrees with Annenkov that even the end of Pisemsky's play, Bitter Fate, when Anany repents and begs for forgiveness, had been suggested to Pisemsky by the actor Martynov. Pisemsky, according to Vengerov, is a pessimist to the marrow of his bones, and this pessimism characterizes his plays. How and where it is present he shows, at best by broad generalizations. The Despots is grotesque, positively a libretto; Lieutenant Gladkov is unbelievably sceptical and terribly unstageable; Baal (Vaal), a gloomy portrayal of Russia of the seventies, is on the other hand stageable, but only the part concerned with the love intrigue; The Mines and Enlightened Times are merely pamphlets; and The Financial Genius is so weak that Russkii Vestnik refused to publish it, and Pisemsky had to submit it to a much inferior publisher.

Just as antagonistic toward Pisemsky's works was A.M. Skabichevsky. To him they are simply sourness.

Skabichevsky, like Shchedrin (who will be discussed later) maintained as an indisputable truth that literature should be devoted entirely to the struggle for the improvement of human life. It should mold social consciousness, supply the answers to crucial questions of contemporary life and teach people to evaluate correctly
various other problems still to appear. Skabichevsky and, for a time, Shchedrin believed that Pisemsky's works failed to reflect this philosophy. And the main reason for this failure, according to Skabichevsky, was Pisemsky's lack of intelligence, insight, and sympathy. Like Vengerov, Skabichevsky holds that the main motivator of Pisemsky's art was a profound loathing of mankind. Like Vengerov, he often relies heavily on gossip. The following for example is a story about the playwright, with the difference that this time Skabichevsky heard it himself:

With my own ears I heard Pisemsky use a thoroughly unprintable aphorism, the gist of which implies that, as the earth rotates around its axis, the whole world moves around sexual attraction. Everything boils down to it, and everything is the result of it. And regardless of the most pious deeds committed on the earth—all are done as the means towards its achievement.13

And again like Vengerov, Skabichevsky likes broad generalizations. Witness his statement: "All the philosophy of Pisemsky and the inherent content of his works are expressed in this aphorism." It becomes enlarged, when considered that "for Pisemsky the whole human kind is moved exclusively by only one yearning—to indulge and cherish one's perishable body...and all the great deeds finally come to knavish-servility."14 In the opinion of Skabichevsky, gangrene, Pisemsky's favourite image for describing his country, was in fact devouring his own organism. Consistent with
Vengerov's belief, Skabinchevsky considered Pisemsky definitely out of step with his time.

Ovsianiko-Kulikovsky seems to share many of Vengerov's and Skabilchevsky's views on Pisemsky, although the study by Ch. Vetrinsky, his collaborator, is more objective than the studies of either of the former. He does admit, for example, that in the plays **Enlightened Times**, **The Mines**, **Baal**, and **The Financial Genius**, dealing with the money-frenzy of the sixties and seventies "Pisemsky, by his choice of themes really did pay attention to the important social phenomena in Russian life", and strongly protested against it. In his "enthusiasm against it", he continues, "a small estate Russian nobleman (Pisemsky had fifty-five 'souls') ascends at times to the heights of honest Christian socialism!"

Vengerov and Skabinchevsky, in an attempt to show that Pisemsky's was an inborn pessimism, made bleaker by his reaction to the revolutionary period of the sixties and seventies, constantly allude to Annenkov's article **The Artist and The Simple Man** (**Khudozshnik i prostoi chelovek**), exhausting it of passages bearing the slightest hint concerning one or other of Pisemsky's deficiencies. To show, through his mistrust of all contemporary ideological trends, of theoretical and philosophical discussions, that Pisemsky was neither their student nor supporter both quote such
excerpts from Annenkov, as: Pisemsky was "above all a nervous man", constantly "under the despotic yoke of his imagination and fantasy", lacking "even the smallest trace of self-discipline", afraid "of the crowd on the street, and suspicious of every new occurrence brought into life by the applied sciences...."^{17}

Vetrinsky, to show that Pisemsky was a sceptic, also summarizes Annenkov's description of Pisemsky's views on the Abolition of Serfdom and the reform of the Judicial Institutions: Pisemsky "distrusted the promises of wealth for the freed serfs, finding these mere decorative phrases used by politicians".^{18}

What all of the above mentioned critics disregard are, for example, the following passages from The Artist and The Simple Man:

"We can point out his deficiencies, disagree with his convictions, see the mistakes in his views, but not to recognize in him the expression of the popular way of understanding people and objects is impossible. The coarseness of the tone itself in his caustic exposure of vices and crimes, the choice of themes...show him as an experienced man, familiar with outlooks, feelings, and judgements of the masses."^{19}

Or, Annenkov's belief that the peculiarity of Pisemsky's talent is in his frankness and the spontaneous inspiration in his writings.^{20} Or, still another:
In our century of accumulation of huge capital and great reputations he remained indifferent to the persuasions of ambition and vanity. On the contrary, he participated mentally in the enthusiasm of contemporary opinion, when it gave due credit and apotheosis to true merit and dignity, never once thinking about his right to the same distinction.21

There is evidence to support the views that "Pisemsky lacked the reforming zeal...the faith in social theories that inspired the Russia of his day...", that, "he is free from all idealism",22 but only if we agree that those theories, as advanced by the revolutionaries, were absolutely unquestionable in their value. Introduction to this study, however, has shown a somewhat confusing period in the multi-party Russia of the 1860's and 1870's. Chernyshevsky commented on the lack of revolutionary ideas in Pisemsky's writings much earlier than did Mirsky, but he recognized Pisemsky's concern for contemporary problems.

An episode from Pisemsky's life in the early 1860's verifies this premise. In 1860, upon A.V. Druzhinin's resignation as editor of Biblioteka dlja chtenia, Pisemsky replaced him. It was a little later, under the pseudonym Nikita Bezrylov, that Pisemsky published a series of political and sociological feuilletons satirizing the radical camp in journalism.24 It is true that Pisemsky's taste in these fauilletons leaves a lot to be desired, but they must be regarded as his genuine protest against the short-
comings of the contemporary life as he saw it. "Nikita Bezrylov," we agree with V. Vetrinsky, with all his reckless mockery of fashionable radicalism, was not altogether wrong, when he spoke of himself as a radical. It was vague, nationalistic with small gentry nuances, but nevertheless radicalism, truly penetrating to the roots of things.  

Radicals however had a different interpretation. Writers like Pisemsky were an obstruction in the path of progress set out for mother Russia. "Nikita Bezrylov", fumed Eliseev, has indulged in a disgusting display of imbecility and compounded his impudence by mocking all the best aspirations and activities of contemporary Russian society.

And then follows a statement which is characteristic of the whole radical movement and which can explain, among other things, the dimming of Pisemsky's literary reputation: "nobody should be crude enough to sneer at the reforms the radicals are trying to effect", continues Eliseev, "...how can anyone negate these ideals when everyone's heart assures him that they are valid ones." Iskra picked this up and carried it further:

Does this Nikita Bezrylov belong to the number of those born of woman or did he just somehow appear accidentally in human society? Is there a human heart within him? Has there ever stirred within him a human thought, has
he ever been troubled by any human emotion whatsoever.28

Pisemsky's polemics with the radical camp achieved such proportions that he was challenged to a duel.29 This was a bitter lesson to him. He resigned as editor.

Annenkov, in his discussion of Pisemsky's polemics, attributes his failure as an editor and artist, to the lack of the author's preparation and experience in journalism, as well as to the anger that characterized his feuilletons: "It was vain at one and the same time to think of artistic creation and sharpen the pen for hostile abuse."30

But of particular interest is Annenkov's estimate of Pisemsky's dramatic works. He coined the term "pamphlet-like" to describe the quality of Pisemsky's plays and he used it invariably, particularly in regard to the later works. This epithet was not thoroughly examined by Pisemsky's critics with the view either to elaborate on Annenkov's statement, or to reconcile it with conflicting ideas. It was merely used. Vengerov, Skabichevsky, Ovsianiko-Kulikovsky, Petrov, not to mention the less important critics of the same period, and many Soviet critics, for example Zograf, Danilov, even Eremin, and Koz'ma, never fail to stress the "pamphlet-like" qualities of Pisemsky's dramas. Here is Annenkov's premise and definition of this
Pisemsky's pamphlet-like attitude to his subjects has so much taken possession of him that it has even crept into pictures that have long been obsolete now (The Despots and The Worldly-Wise Falcons) as well as into his depiction of contemporary manners. The aims and devices of literary pamphlets always and everywhere are the same. They consist of bringing a character or an event to the highest possible degree of deformity, and everything else not quite reaching this disgraceful apotheosis to depict more or less cleverly and plausibly. Pisemsky spent on this much talent, humor and energy. His comedy Baal, for example--chef d'oeuvre of this type of work--portrays the orgy of contemporary predatoriness and does so boldly, almost without any literary disguise, with the harshness of popular farce, calling everything by its name. But the pamphlet-like quality in treating the subjects, has one big deficiency: it eliminates any effort to develop the characters and remains content with merely the salient depiction of their main defect, leaving the characters themselves...to be rounded off by the reader's imagination.31

In conclusion Annenkov states that "pamphlet-like" work, after achieving its purpose, looses its value and "nothing remains of it, just as happens to the prosecutor's accusatory speech after the court verdict."32

Annenkov's definition of a pamphlet is indeed exuberantly expressed and is, no doubt, quite meaningful, but as to whether it can be applied to Pisemsky's plays is doubtful, as will be seen later. What is somewhat puzzling now, is that Pisemsky's good friend Annenkov, the instigator of the legendary epithet, in 1875 wrote to him concerning
his play *Enlightened Times*:

I am not surprised at its success on the stage because the large-scale characters and the extensive intrigue, marked by an extremely firm hand, could only produce a great effect. Lately you have become the father of the dramatic pamphlet and render to this new genre a skill which is beyond any doubt. Continue to develop this new genre and do not betray your methods: this genre is very important, very useful and will preserve your name and memory among contemporary and future generations.33

Annenkov wrote this in 1875 but in 1882 in his article *The Artist and The Simple Man* he damned Pisemsky's plays by ascribing to them his definition of the "pamphlet-like" character.

Among the writers of Pisemsky's time, who saw no glimmer of true love piercing the dismal gloom of his plays, Goncharov was the most forthright in pointing this out. At one of the literary evenings in the "Almost-Club", Goncharov expressed his regret that Pisemsky, the pure artist of *The Simpleton* (*Tiufiak*), was now in the late sixties and early seventies undermining his image by themes consisting of mere accusations and caricatures. "In my opinion", said he,

it is not worthy of an artist to allow himself to portray only petty scoundrels, who by no means represent the archetypes, just as it is not honest to establish a picture of life from
dirty accidental anecdotes. You, Alexey Feofilaktovich, as a big ship, should not swim in the small puddle—you are made for the large sea.\textsuperscript{34}

Goncharov's views were to change. Less than two years later, in 1875, in a letter to Pisemsky, he praised *Enlightened Times* which also deals with petty and big scoundrels.\textsuperscript{7}:

The play appears to me clever, lively, skillfully conceived, and extraordinarily successfully developed, as if cast immediately from one piece of metal. 'The sphere of movement of your characters bores some;' they say, that you show only 'knaves and courtesans'.

And then the bitter observation on their period follows:

But what can be done when this sphere spreads daily and captures more and more territory and people. And courtesans? They truly dominate society, and together with various stockholders and concessionaires have control of almost all speculative and industrial enterprises. Consequently, a large part of the social arena, social power, and money are in their hands.\textsuperscript{35}

Ostrovsky, whose dramatic endeavour was like Pisemsky's severely criticized for his treatment of similar themes, strangely enough thought that Pisemsky was a satirist of bad conduct. However, he praised Pisemsky as an artist, particularly for the detached manner in his writings.

Turgenev did not always approve of Pisemsky's methods and themes, but generally regarded them favourably.
A typical statement characteristic of Turgenev's attitude toward Pisemsky's later works is as follows:

You have preserved that strength, vitality, and truthfulness which are especially peculiar to you and which compose your literary physiognomy. An artist is seen, though somewhat tired.  

In 1863, Saltykov-Shchedrin, in an unsigned article, gave a harsh estimate of Pisemsky the dramatist, barren of definite ideals and concrete philosophy. Pisemsky was condemned for coarse and exterior naturalism in his portrayals. In 1875 however, Shchedrin, whose philosophy is well known "was ready to invite Pisemsky to be collaborator in Otechestvennye Zapiski." This gesture seems to suggest that Pisemsky's themes did have some effect on a one-time enemy of his works, and that they were revolutionary, in whatever sense Shchedrin interpreted them. 

N.S. Leskov, on the other hand, had, from the beginning, nothing but praise for Pisemsky: "It is not, for me to give you praise-worthy testimonials and awards, but through my impatience I can not help but shout that you are Hercules!"

Another literary figure, critic V.G. Avseenko, who maintained that Russian dramatic literature began its rapid decline from Griboedov to Gogol and from Gogol to Ostrovsky, found Pisemsky's dramas to be without
deficiencies. It seems strange that he should criticise Ostrovsky's later plays \( \ldots \) which bore similar themes to those of Pisemsky, and praise the latter's. Furthermore, while condemning Gogol's direction in Russian dramaturgy, Avseenko maintains that Pisemsky, who according to him is also a direct successor of Gogol, is a dramatist whose endeavours have contributed much good to the Russian Theatre. Whatever the reasons for his extra hearty praise of Pisemsky's plays may have been, his analysis was, nevertheless, often detrimental to Pisemsky as dramatist. A swindler, Kunicin, for example a character from Baal is, according to Avseenko, "the typical offspring of his time," which would suggest a trait of the pamphlet-like form discussed above. But as will be seen later, Kunicin is a man easily detectable in every age and every society. He is universal, whereas Avseenko interprets him as a local phenomenon, a product of a time of transition.

Pisemsky was little known to English readers during his life, and probably is even less known now. However, in France his works were read, in admirable translations by Victor Dereli. In 1880, for example, the French periodical Telegraphe, gives an estimate of Pisemsky's works, which serves well in refuting Avseenko's interpretation of the characters of Mirovich and Kunicin:

In his story Nov', Turgenev depicted a nihilistic world somewhat poetised, meek, dreamy, and philosophical. In the
novel *What Is To Be Done*, Chernyshevsky portrayed the followers of the new revolutionary beliefs as stoic heroes, the apostles of the sombre ideal. Pisemsky...whose works are completely original, holds more to the ground. He is not as poetic as Turgenev, and his aim is not in the least to create new characters, as we had seen in Chernyshevsky.45

However, those praising Pisemsky's works do so often merely to add more emphasis to their own theories. Pisarev wrote three long articles in praise of Pisemsky but failed to characterize the author's art to any degree.46 Those dealing with his plays more or less objectively are sadly outnumbered by critics who see only the negative element in them.

Although Chernyshevsky explicitly stated that "he unfolds his thesis with apparent coolness, i.e. devoid of emotion", and that, "the indifferent tone of the character does not at all prove that he would not want to see the problem settled in favour of one side or the other", but that "on the contrary, the whole speech is made up in such a manner that the solution does lean to the advantage of that side which seems to be in the right to the character",47 he does stress that Pisemsky's works are greatly hindered by a lack of revolutionary strength in his tone.

In Soviet reviews Pisemsky also serves for ideological purposes. Martýnov, for example, in accordance with
the still-practised Soviet theory of criticism, that that which is against the bourgeois way of life is almost in itself an artistic achievement, becomes forthright and says that

Pisemsky in his best works is close to us with his negation of the landed nobility's way of living, its State regime, and of law and morality. He is close to us through his interpretation of the plundering character of capitalism...."48

But when it comes to choose between the validity of views on the contemporary problems of two writers, as for example Pisemsky's and Herzen's, as occurs in B. Koz'min's article Pisemsky and Herzen,49 then Pisemsky is found to be backward in his interpretation of these problems; his themes are ill-chosen, save one or two here or there, and he really is a pessimist.

To mention the opinion of lesser Russian critics, or most scholars of non-Russian origin, on Pisemsky's works is only to repeat the familiar criticism of the negative tendencies and lack of art found in his works. K. Waliszewsky, a critic of considerable importance, for instance, claims that the success of Bitter Fate on the stage was surprising, for its content is based "firstly on melodramatic effects of a somewhat coarse nature...and then on an interpretation of the law of serfdom and its consequences, which really is strained, and anything but true."50 The
fact that Pisemsky based his plot on an authentic court case is absent from Waliszewsky's analysis.51

George Rapall Noyes chooses parts suitable to his opinions, from Annenkov, intermingles them with passages from Vengerov and Skabichevsky and arrives at the conclusion that Pisemsky's plays, like his novels, thrive in the pessimistic atmosphere and show no aspiration toward an improvement of Russian society.52 Noyes is to be given credit for his good translation of Pisemsky's Bitter Fate, but his brief analysis of it seems to indicate his misinterpretation of Anany's character. Here is his analysis. "It [Bitter Fate] is a drama of a time that is now a thing of the past", he says in his volume, Masterpieces of the Russian Drama,

of serfdom and of Russian patriarchal traditions. A Russian proprietor intrigues with the young wife of one [Anany] of his serfs: the squire is lord of the serf; the serf is lord of his wife...the proprietor really loves the serf woman; she loves him and hates her husband...the husband is a man of vigor and of violent temper, who refuses to submit tamely to injury.53

We are left with the impression that the dramatist's work is also a "thing of the past", which would deprive it of universal significance. If Noyes, in his last sentence instead of "a man of vigor" had written a man who believed in the dignity of man, as Anany undoubtedly did, he would
have seen that Pisemsky's drama blends the local with the universal. For in fact, and as will be seen later, Anany's protest is not directed against Russian serfdom. The action of the play takes place in serfdom Russia. But Anany's protest is against, as Burns had put it, "man's inhumanity to man", and abuse of human dignity.

Deming Brown, in a repetitious paper delivered at the Fifth International Congress of Slavists, takes thirteen pages to completely damn Pisemsky's works. In these he says "ideals exist solely for the purpose of being undermined... what is unique about Pisemsky is the intensity of his attempt to divest life of its poetry...." And

whatever the purpose of Pisemsky's effort to negate may have been, its very persistence demanded a vast amount of creative ingenuity. It required that he develop an aesthetic system to convey his scepticism...

concludes Brown's paper.

So we are faced with a Pisemsky whose themes lacked revolutionary zeal, and hence were out of tune with his time, were barren of ideals and therefore pessimistic; we are faced with a Pisemsky, who in order "to divest life of its poetry" sat down to develop his aesthetic system. It would seem that the majority of Pisemsky's critics, in the treatment of his works, either resort to impressions obtained from personal acquaintance with Pisemsky's private
life, or rely heavily on his biographers, none of whom apparently heard of the scrupulous methods adopted by Boswell in writing about a man's life, private and public, methods which might well be followed by all biographers. What is surprising, but what perhaps serves to explain these statements, is that only a handful of scattered detailed textual analyses of Pisemsky's works exist.

In this connection, it might be of interest to quote the ending of Annenkov's article *The Artist and The Simple Man*. Annenkov comments, probably after rereading it, that:

Pisemsky is a man, in many ways pitiable. Following the example of candour and frankness which he gave us throughout his life, we allowed ourselves to mention his illnesses and weaknesses. But maybe the biographical exposure of these will strengthen the reader's sympathy for this remarkable man.55

This is precisely what should be avoided. P.N. Polevoi, in his article *A.P. Pisemsky*,56 involuntarily fell into this trap. Pisemsky's letters, which his earlier biographers and critics had not seen and which were collected and published in 1935, serve as evidence that sympathy is the least of all that Pisemsky wanted.
REFERENCE NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO


3Annenkov's article, "The Artist and The Simple Man" in Literaturnye Vospominaniya, Moscow, Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'许vo Khudozhestvennoj Literatury, 1960, abounds with information on Pisemsky's private life. This information was used unfairly by Annenkov and other critics in judging his literary works.


5S.A. Vengerov, A.F. Pisemsky, St. Petersburg, Prometej, 1884, p. 42.

6Ibid., p. 66.

7Ibid., p. 131.

8Ibid., pp. 55-56.

9Critics, referred to in Chapter Two, claim that the actor Martynov suggested the ending to Pisemsky's play Bitter Fate. However, there is no concrete evidence to support their belief.

10See Vengerov, A.F. Pisemsky, pp. 156-165.

11Ibid., pp. 161-173.


24. In his feuilletons Pisemsky criticised the manner in which the "literary evenings" were conducted. But he was more severe in his reprehension of the radical theoreticians.


27 *Loc. cit.*

28 *Loc. cit.*

29 A detailed discussion may be found in B. Koz'min, "Pisemskij i Gertsen. K Istorii Ikh Vzaimootnoshenij," *Zven'iya*, No. 8, 1950, pp. 103-151.


38 Quoted in V. Lakshin, "Spor o Pisemskom Dramaturge," *Teatr*, No. 4, 1959, p. 95.


41 For an interesting development of this point, see Mogilyansky's discussion in A.F. Pisemsky, *Pis'ma*, p. 688.
Avseenko, op. cit., pp. 894-895.

Avseenko's analysis of Mirovich (Baal) would seem to support Annenkov's description of Pisemsky's work as "pamphlet-like" in character, yet, clearly this was not Avseenko's aim.

Avseenko, Komediya, p. 910.

Quoted in A.F. Pisemsky, Pis'ma, p. 792.


Chernyshevsky, Sochineniya, vol. 4, p. 571.


Koz'min, Pisemskij i Gertsen, p. 119.


Pisemsky based the plot of Bitter Fate on a real court case. See I.V. Milovidov, "Dve Chukhlomskikh Dramy," Russkaya Starina, vol. 64. (1889), pp. 335-360.


Ibid., pp. 11-12.


CHAPTER III

PISEMSKY AS AN ARTIST

In 1875, in Moscow, some of Pisemsky's admirers celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of his literary career. Pisemsky's speech at this anniversary is characteristic of the basic principles contained in most of his plays:

Twenty-five years of traversed literary pathways, just as the pathways of my friends-colleagues, was not easy. Conscious of all the weaknesses and shortcomings of my work, I only feel I have a right to say that in this work I had never stood under any alien banner. Good or bad, I always wrote what I thought and felt. For no exterior or vain aims did I break or constrain neither my understanding of people and events, nor the modest writer's ability given to me by nature. The sole guiding star in all my works was a desire to tell my country the truth, though perhaps somewhat harsh, about herself.¹

And this he did.

Considering objective depiction of life and the undecorated human being's existence in it, as one of the main objects of artistic work, Pisemsky, contrary to popular belief, does not premeditatively seek out for his subjects boors, almost resembling animals in their passion. He is far more interested in finding characteristics of the coarseness and banality there where exterior decorum in life
is preserved. He is interested in displaying the unsightly appearance of a character or a type dwelling among the good and honest people.

Pisemsky's themes do not differ greatly from those of his contemporaries. They deal with bureaucratic corruption and inefficiency, provincial backwardness, idleness, artificiality and emptiness among the upper classes, and their total lack of any kind of nobility of character.


As a realist, Pisemsky is not content with mere photographic depiction of life. His portrayal of human behaviour under varied conditions abounds with qualities of keen observation, wit, profundity and humor. Avseenko
correctly maintained that Pisemsky's keenness toward worldly conditions, his ability not only to depict his heroes by large and sharp strokes, but to catch the very air they breathe, often make his works, in all fairness, a live and broad picture of his period. And as stated, he was mainly interested in exposing the uncomely element in human nature.

All his life, Pisemsky despaired of the fact that people in pursuit of what he termed false happiness were ready to depart with qualities which, in fact, should be greatly cherished. The phrase "how can I profit" runs like a leitmotiv through most of Pisemsky's plays. He was keenly conscious of the destructive power of illusion. In fact, the central theme of most of his later plays is either illusion or disillusionment. He was conscious of man's helplessness before the seemingly attractive advantages; he was aware of man's anxiety to serve The Almighty Baal and in his subsequent failure. He knew that inertia and lack of initiative were deeply rooted in the masses and that only an untrammelled and honest view of the world could motivate them to raise themselves above the morass. Briefly he was aware of man's inability to recognize reality.

The train of Pisemsky's characters' lives has been destroyed by this inability; everything seems to be
vain; there is no hope. With the exception of a few characters there is no redemption. The majority of Pisemsky's heroes are weak and helpless; they are limited to one dream, and in their imagination do not reach far. Among his personages there are those who still believe in human dignity. But most of these again are infected with a Philistine attitude. Though they occasionally make attempts to rid themselves of this attitude, they lack the prowess to do it. The positive action of these people is also hindered, to an extent, by the confusing period of the multi-party Russia of the 1860's and 1870's.

It is this period that acts as a catalyst in making his characters face an eventual doom. The term "involuntarily" which frequently appears in Pisemsky's plays supports this premise. Involuntarily, at least so she claims, Lizaveta of Bitter Fate commits adultery, and involuntarily Prince Imshin of The Despots throws his "beloved" wife Nastasia Petrovna and her lover, Rykov, into the dungeon. Kunicin (Baal) in his conversation with Mirovich is forthright in pointing out this feature of Pisemsky's characters. Says he:

Life to-day is for those who help themselves, my friend, out of everybody else's pockets, but who keep tight hold of what they've got themselves. You see a swindler here, a knave there, and a dirty dog in the third place, and living among roses, one involuntarily breathes in their fragrance.

(Act II, Sc. 1. p. 374)
Other examples could easily be brought out. But as Eremin observed of Pisemsky's plays:

At the beginning one thing is doubtless: life is difficult and dismal. Here almost everyone constantly expects something immeasurably worse than has already happened. Relationships between his characters develop always in one and the same manner: at first there is hidden hostility, then suspicion, which with the unfolding of events become more apparent, open enmity, and then the alarming expectations are no longer in doubt: catastrophe moves in.  

Setting for themselves an aim of material comfort and attainment of ranks, Pisemsky's characters escape reality and take refuge in illusion. It is the result of this illusion that makes their lives painful, and the lack of moral strength when they sometimes realise the implications of a low deal, that makes them hopeless. In the first scene of The Hypochondriac, Durnopechin utters:

It's simply astonishing how my life passes! Some kind of fear ... depression ... boredom ... And how others, when you look, live beautifully: so happy ... brave ... how they know somehow to make use of life ....

(Act I, Sc. 1, p. 41)

and a little later he adds that his whole spinal column is damaged. His problem, he believes, is his lack of energy. But this, he decides, is because of illness. His spinal column actually is not in need of medical attention. The fact that it is not sturdy enough to allow him to face
reality is his problem. For this reason he is made to suffer. And yet again we notice clearly in this play the evil forces of nobility exercised on the man, who once, in his own way, was concerned with the question of conscience.

Sergei Vasil'ich and Anna Yefremovna of *Splitting The Inheritance*, having come to the village of Pochinok to divide the inheritance of their deceased relative, are persistent in their assurances that the inheritance is the least of their worries, and yet this is not true. "... For me," says Sergei Vasil'ich humbly, "any type of inheritance really is a drop in a bucket", Anna Yefremovna, on the other hand, maintains that she came out of Christian duty. They have gone so deep with their lies, that they almost believe their own stories. And yet somehow they know the real reason for their arrival.

Mirovich of *Baal*, on the other hand, cannot extricate himself from the morass of his languor. He does realise, however, his chaotic situation and utters something about the forthcoming changes, but is unable, in any way, to contribute to these changes. Sofia Mikhailovna (*Enlightened Times*) commits suicide when she fails to impart some of her sober views to the world of merchants living in illusion. "Strange woman, -- especially in our enlightened times", uttered by the manager of the "Russian Amusement" club ends the play.
This seems to indicate, at the first glance, that Pisemsky's plays abound in darkness, and that since he does not suggest definite remedies for the improvement of ailing Russia, he does lack the revolutionary zeal. It may also seem that his dramas display unrelieved pessimistic tendencies.

This is however, far from the truth. Despite his awareness that man is easily disillusioned and an easy prey for evil forces, Pisemsky never abdicated his sense of responsibility for his kind. All his life he strove to find a solution for the destructive forces in life. His letters serve as evidence. Pisemsky's life was filled with the kind of experience that engrained some scepticism into his views, but he was not a pessimist. Many of his years were spent in abject poverty, yet the generous spiritual world of Pisemsky manifested itself not only in his writings and his views on Art, but also in personal, friendly relations with others. Again his letters show how deeply he loved his wife and sons. They also indicate a close and affectionate friendship between him and his contemporaries, Annenkov, Leskov, Goncharov, and Ostrovsky among others. Of particular interest, to the biographer, as well as to the critic, is Pisemsky's friendship with Turgenev, where there is not even a shadow of envy for each other's successes.

And how about his lack of revolutionary zeal? But
who were the revolutionary writers of Pisemsky's times? Those who sided with Pisarev, Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov? Was not Pisemsky a revolutionary, in his own way, when he wrote a whole novel denouncing Nihilism, was condemned for it, but never changed, or retracted his views? Was he not a revolutionary when in 1877, he wrote to Professor Buslaev criticizing Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?* for prescribing "to the contemporary world ... what kind of lodgings it should have, and how these should be divided". And was he not a revolutionary when a year earlier, despite all the critics' warnings that his works would be forgotten, he wrote proudly to Turgenev:

> In the beginning I exposed stupidity, prejudice, ignorance, laughed at childish romanticism and empty phrases, fought against serfdom, pursued clerical abuses, described the flowers of our Nihilism, the fruits of which are already now maturing, and finally took up with, possibly, the strongest enemy of mankind, with Baal and with worship of Golden Calf ... it became evident to all that: the swindling of various employers and caterers is colossal; business is conducted in the most shameful deceptive way ... and under all this disgust, the radiant faces of our soldiers and officers, like those of good angels, appeared ... all these vermin I punish, at least, on the stage, since, regrettably, the procurator's supervision and court cannot yet find legal means to get at most of them.

Like Gogol, Pisemsky believed that the theatre is a rostrum from which much good could be said to the world. But to speak the good, according to him, one need not neces-
sarily talk about it. The strength of his plays lay in the strength of his belief that to condemn evil is the first step in its transformation towards the good. His way to condemn evil is to reveal it. Pisemsky does not want, as Deming Brown would like us to believe, to "divest life of its poetry", on the contrary, he wants to make it more poetic by freeing it from those "vermin" whose practices are dangerously infectious.

Where Gogol employs comical and lyrical digression in his works, hopefully to rehabilitate misled characters, Pisemsky points at naked and stern truth. Where "Gogol merely hints at the likelihood of the presence of such people as the Mayor, Khlestakov, Chichikov and others in other spheres of society", Pisemsky turns the high voltage search-light onto these characters and he tells the truth as he sees it about real contemporary problems and situations.

Pisemsky, observes Kirpichnikov, is Gogol's direct heir in that he determined the programme of the subsequent Russian Realistic School in the following words:

It is easy to depict characters of large proportions; one needs only to hurl the paint at the canvas. Black burning eyes, overhanging brows, the wrinkle cut across the forehead, a black, or scarlet, fire-like trenchcoat flung over one's shoulder, and the portrait is ready. But there are all the other gentry, and there are many of these in the world, who at first sight are very similar to each other, but who when studied, present many most elusive peculiarities—these
are terribly difficult to portray. Here one must strain, focus attention, until all the delicate almost invisible traits of a character are brought out.14

And many of Pisemsky's characters, although possessing similar aims display these "elusive peculiarities". Andashevsky (The Mines), Tolokonnikov and the famous doctor Samakhan of Baal, Dar'ialov, Amaturov (Enlightened Times), and the commercial consultant Sosipatov of The Financial Genius are all uncontrollable in their passion for material comfort and attainment of ranks. Yet each one is an individual. Each has his own way of realizing his dream; and the methods of each differ greatly. A large, muscular man, Andashevsky ruins the reputation of his father-in-law in order to satisfy his own zeal for comfort. He achieves his goal by applying brute force to every obstacle. Tolokonnikov, on the other hand, though physically well-developed lacks proportional courage. Thus he uses gossip, slander and blackmail as his operational weapons. Samakhan exploits his reputation as a highly-qualified physician to quench his thirst for money, and so on.

Pisemsky, who like Saltykov-Shchedrin spent many years in provincial towns, and who was forced to spend many years working as a civil servant in St. Petersburg and Moscow, had ample time to study his characters closely. But as suggested earlier, he did not deliberately choose the
negative characters. He was against premeditative depiction. The above quoted passage does not, as Skabichevsky believes, suggest that one should strain his eyesight and exert every effort to show man's baseness. If Skabichevsky were correct in his interpretation, then Pisemsky could be reproached for attempting to create a wasteland. It could be argued then that his aesthetic theory is based on the theory of negation for the sake of negation. This is clearly not the case. Pisemsky's interest lay not in creating the wasteland but in depicting it, as it appeared to him. This can best be seen from the analysis of his aesthetic views. These views are seen partially in his article (1855) on the second part of Gogol's *Dead Souls*. The first half of this article consists of Pisemsky's analysis of Russian literature before Gogol. He maintains that the main deficiency of this period was the desire on the writer's part to convey something which was beyond his ability to depict. This, he claims, resulted in bookish-abstracts. Even Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*, and especially the works of Marlinsky, Polevoi, Kukol'nik, and Benedictov belong to this category. "Nobody will say, of course", declares Pisemsky,

that all these writers had no talent: they did, and fairly vivid talent, if you like, but it is surprising that all of them, although different, had one common tendency, which completely departed from the true poetic trend begun by Pushkin. This, I can only refer to as the
tendency of tension, effort, impetuosity to say more than their comprehension could warrant - to express a passion which they have not experienced.18

Gogol is criticised for some of these tendencies. Pisemsky reproaches Gogol for his didactic inclinations in Dead Souls, for a desire to preach to the readers on the merits and demerits of the Russian man. It is the reasoning of Gogol's Author's Confession that Pisemsky rejects. This is what Gogol says:

I thought that lyrical power, of which I had more than enough, would help me depict these merits to the extent that every Russian would be proud; and the power of laughter, which I also had in reserve, would help me point out the deficiencies so vividly, that every reader would despise them even if he found them inside himself ... it is important to weigh and appraise both and to explicate this clearly to oneself ....19

At the end of his article Pisemsky appeals to other writers to tell the public only the truth. Pisemsky is against Gogol's insistence for an appraisal. "There is no reason," he remarks,

for an author to establish in his soul a court of barristers who would tell him whether he is guilty or not, but rather, he should depict life through the talent given to him by nature ....20

It could be argued strongly here that Pisemsky's literary views are not concrete. It is important, however to note that he believed they were. And it is important to realise
that he is consistent with these views.

Twenty-two years after this article and four years before his death Pisemsky wrote to Professor F.I. Buslaev revealingly:

Some French, German, and English novelists of our time attempted manifestly to educate the public. Eugene Sue's novel *Seven Deadly Sins* shows how sins are punished on earth... Our Chernyshevsky, in his novel *What Is To Be Done?* prescribed to the contemporary world... what kind of lodgings it should have, and how these should be divided. But, alas! That stupid world did not become terrified at all, by the pictures depicted by Sue, and continues, as before, to commit deadly sins, and, until now nobody arranged his lodgings according to the plan of the author of *What Is To Be Done?*... Cervantes, hardly thinking of instructing anyone with his *Don Quixote* merely painted the picture of dying chivalry, and it is remembered by the whole reading world... Walter Scott sealed forever in the minds of the people, old poetic Scotland... In Russia neither Pushkin, who gave us *Eugene Onegin* and *The Captain's Daughter*, nor Lermontov, who depicted *The Hero of Our Time* by irresistibly large strokes, did not at all, it seems, think about instructing, and as far as the reader was concerned, they acted thus: here put it in the sack, and at home you can sort out what suits you and what does not!21

Toward the end of this letter Pisemsky remarks:

Every artistic work must be born and not thought out; while being the fruit of author's material and spiritual organism, at the same time it must represent concentrated reality: whether exterior, open reality, or hidden, psychological.22

Again, these views may be argued against and rejected but, as seen, Pisemsky strongly adhered to them.
And then his statement on Gogol is not altogether wrong, for when Gogol in the second part of Dead Souls wanted very much to express the ideal Russian type, he failed. This is what Pisemsky meant by the desire on the writer's part to convey something which was above his ability to depict. This is what prompted him to say that an "artistic work must be born and not thought out".

Pisemsky, we have seen, focuses only on the morbid features in life, and if the general character and direction of these features are interpreted by him correctly, then his plays are also true, although in reality the described features existed not with the same degree of concentration.

Far be it from our opinion that the 1860's and 1870's were totally deprived of honest businessmen, and noble characters motivated by piety, kindness, justice and hope. There is no evidence either, in any of Pisemsky's plays that he thought otherwise. Each of his plays has a positive character. That there are more negative personages, is because Pisemsky's interest lay primarily in showing "the truth as it is", as he saw it.

He saw, it is true, mostly evil. And as his task he set out to depict it. In this depiction he displays a talent for selecting and combining his materials and techniques to create dramatic works, and not pamphlets, as most of his critics claim.
REFERENCE NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE


4. All quotations (unless otherwise indicated) are given from A.F. Pisemsky, P'esy, ed. E. Surkov, Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1958.


7. Ibid., p. 106.


10. Ibid., pp. 330-331.


15. See his article on Gogol's Dead Souls in Sochineniya (1895 edition), vol. 1, p. 76.


17. Pisemsky, op. cit., pp. 74-78.


22. Ibid., p. 366.
CHAPTER IV

THE HYPOCHONDRIAC AND SPLITTING THE INHERITANCE

In 1852, at the time of appearance of The Hypochondriac in print, Pisemsky wrote to M.P. Pogodin: "... Gogol died--his death produced on me a most difficult impression. He died from torment, contemplating reality from a distance, but how long will we have to live...in this whirlpool of banality, and to be in its total dependence." The Hypochondriac depicts this banality of the provincial nobility. This play was, no doubt, written under some influence of Gogol's dramatic art. But first let us look at the idea of the work.

A rich landlord, Nikolai Mikhailych Durnopechin, a kind of blend of Podkolesin and Oblomov, is besieged by his relatives and acquaintances who literally want to rob him. To achieve their aim they take advantage of his melancholy and overwhelming concern for his own illness. The dramatic peculiarity of The Hypochondriac, Eremin rightly sees as the absence in the root of its subject of that central event, which would attract the wishes and passions at least the majority of the characters. In this respect, The Hypochondriac--we agree with the critic--differs from Griboedov's Woe from Wit, Gogol's Inspector-
General, and most of Ostrovsky's plays. We also agree with the anonymous critic who reported in Yezhegodnik Imperatorskikh Teatrov that the action in The Hypochondriac develops slowly, that the play itself is too long and that some scenes have no apparent connection with other events. And the critic claimed rightly that this discrepancy seriously affected the unity of theatrical interest.

Pisemsky, however, in his first attempt to write a play, is more interested in developing the principal idea of his work than in achieving theatrical unity. This idea is fixed in the already quoted monologue of Durnopechin:

It's simply astonishing how my life passes! Some kind of fear...depression...boredom... And how others, when you look, live beautifully: so happy...brave...how they know somehow to make use of life...to my country I came supposedly to breathe fresh air and to calm down, and all of a sudden appears some old little love: while still a boy, I courted a certain girl, Nadezhda Ivanovna Kanorich, and now she writes that she'll take her own life if I don't marry her...What am I fit for? But on the other hand, what if she really does take her life? What will then lay on my conscience?"

(Act I, Sc. 1, p. 41.)

Naive Durnopechin does not realise that suicide is the furthest thing from Nadezhda's mind.

However, Durnopechin's monologue serves as plot, and Pisemsky poses a question here: "to take advantage of life" or to live "according to one's conscience."
Durnopechin, of course, does not seek an answer to the latter problem. His main preoccupation is how to become more clever, how to find the means which would help him dispense with the smatterings of conscience still present in his soul. His monologue reveals him as a man envious of the "happy" and "brave" noblemen. His hypochondria is intensified by his awareness that he does not know how "to take advantage of life." Like Vuland of *The Mines*, Durnopechin, although he would never be capable of the former's actions, suffers "not so much when things are bad for himself, but when he sees that somebody else is doing very well."

At any rate the problem of conscience does concern him, and it seems reasonable to suggest that it would have continued to do so were it not for the plundering character of his relatives and "friends". A distant relative, Nastasia Kirilovna extorts various things from Durnopechin for her son Vanichka assuming that the "noble man" will hardly object. Another distant relative, Prokhor Prokhorych Durnopechin, in order to get some money that had supposedly belonged to him, threatens the Hypochondriac with a lawsuit, hoping that "a man of conscience", and a sick man at that, will succumb to his demand. Mikhailo Ivanych Kanorich, tries to marry him to his sister, who would be only too glad to rise to a wealthier and more comfortable position in life. Durnopechin is at his wits end, when Solomonida Platonovna,
his aunt, comes to the rescue. Possessing some of the ruthless characteristics of Tolstoy's Matriona (The Power of Darkness), Solomonida Platonovna is energetic and unwavering in her will. Like Matriona she is not afraid to impose it on others. But unlike Matriona and the rest of the personages of The Hypochondriac, she respects the law, in that she does not attempt to steal. Her positive philosophy is "drink vodka, it will cure your hysterics." To her, Durnopechin's concern with the problem of conscience is "all trifles". The finale is highly ironic. Durnopechin makes another attempt to convey his concern regarding his refusal to marry Nadezhda Ivanovna, but this is once more rebuffed by his aunt:

By character, my dear aunt, says he, I'm a mild man, I think: the girl's not a fool, she's sensitive, maybe she really loves me... You won't believe it, but from the very day of my arrival here, I'm tormented by it; she asks that I marry her; but decidedly I cannot, and at any rate I don't want to, because, between us, I don't like her.

SOLOMONIDA PLATONOVNA: As if there's anything to like, a flinished cat that she is! Even if you had something with her, then you must throw it out of your head immediately...Right now I will go to church to offer prayers, and you, if you please, start packing: to-day I will take you to my place in the country.

DURNOPECHIN: It's excellent that everything now is so arranged: I'll go to the country and there settle down in life as a married man.

(Act IV, Sc. 6, p. 90.)
Solomonida Platonovna wins, as Durnopechin waves his hand at the once admirable quality we saw in him.

Of all the characters, a servant, Nikita, displays most common sense. More than that, in his speeches he is forthright in pointing out the reasons as they appear to him, for Durnopechin's sickness and offers a suggestion for its cure:

DURNOPECHIN: Well, at least, don't you feel, having got up in the morning that you want to hurry outside? Or...can you now in the morning do anything? Don't you feel some depression... laziness?

NIKITA (waving his hand with a smile): I don't know what you're saying! Our fate is known. You don't want to, but you do it...Fetch the water, clean the boots.... It's not the same life as yours: no time to loll around!

(Act I, Sc. 2, p. 42.)

Nikita's role in the play is very significant. Pisemsky allows him a short, but complete scene. We feel, that here Nikita is his mouthpiece. In Act I, Sc. 3, facing the public, Nikita imitates his master:

Oh, I can't eat anything, oh, I don't want anything, and I don't want to hear, he says, the mention of food, but when he gets hungry, then hand out everything; and he eats with such gusto that it makes one sick to listen; and when he is full, again back to the same thing. It's truly astonishing! He was sick, they say, in Moscow...Rich man's caprices—that's what—Yes! If he were put upon Lenten shchi and forced, like a
a peasant, to chop down a couple of cart-loads of wood, then everything would go away!
(Act I, Sc. 3, p. 44.)

This is necessarily a limited philosophy, and far from a solution to the problem of the oppressed Russian peasant, but then Pisemsky's aim in The Hypochondriac is not that of seeking any absolute solution to this problem. Nikita's speech is, in fact, a digression from the theme of the play. But his monologue is interesting, because we feel that he is Pisemsky's spokesman on the question of nobility. Nikita's role in the play is not that of a moralizer or a simple man supplying the answer to the old problem of serfdom, although we feel that his words directed at Durnopechin and the whole nobility have a tone of undoubted honesty. Like Osip of Gogol's Inspector-General, he is smarter than his master, and like Fekla of The Marriage, he is well aware of the dark side of the Russian noblemen.

It was suggested earlier that The Hypochondriac was written under Gogol's influence. Indeed there is evidence for this premise. We cannot help but compare Durnopechin to Podkolesin. Both men are excessively preoccupied with their ever-present fears. They are both irresolute and they both lack initiative. Podkolesin needs a backbone and finds it, from time to time, in "philosopher" Kochkarev. Durnopechin has his own Kochkarev in the
"philosopher" Solomonida Platonovna, whose sombre ideal is in great disparity with her derived name Solomon and Plato. Also attempts are made to marry both Podkolesin and Durnopechin, in both cases unsuccessfully. Another feature in The Hypochondriac that we find abundant in Gogol's and Ostrovsky's plays, is Pisemsky's attempt to characterize his personages by their names. Hence we have Durnopechin (possibly rendered in English as Mr. Halfbaken.) Prokhor Prokhorych (Mr. Successful), Kanorich (from Nikanorovich, someone seeing victories, therefore, maybe, Mr. Victory.) and others.

As in most of Gogol's plays, Pisemsky's dialogue in The Hypochondriac is most carefully composed in a pattern, in which repetition, exclamation and question, and interrupted speeches all indicate states of mind which symbolize the character. For example the dialogue of Durnopechin is mostly made up of a series of questions, exclamations and broken thoughts revealing his indecisiveness, and at the same time his concern. Ruthlessly domineering Solomonida Platonovna uses what we can mildly term as military language, interwoven with strong sarcasm. Her phrases are abrupt, colloquial and usually exclamatory. For example in Act I, scene 4, Durnopechin complains to his aunt about his incurable disease to which Solomonida Platonovna snaps: "Oh,
what a poor man! Prepared to die already? Stop it, my sir! It's disgusting to listen: What's that that gives you pain?"

The rest of the characters of The Hypochondriac also speak in colloquial language. They often resort to the proverbs, a device which gives the impression of immediacy. To this category belong terms like "bratec", usually rendered in English as "old man", "chap", or "my boy": Prokhor Prokhorych's speech abounds with this term. Other terms, found in Solomonida Platonovna's speeches, that appear frequently to create this atmosphere of immediacy are "batiushka" /"my dear fellow"/ and "otec" /"father"/—in this case used to address Durnopechin, of course. 

Patronymic names, as in Ostrovsky's plays, are pronounced by the characters of The Hypochondriac as it happens in real conversation, not in full but in the abbreviated form. Hence we have Nikolai Mikhailych, instead of Nikolai Mikhailovich, Mikhailo Ivanych, instead of Mikhailo Ivanovich, etc.

The comic element of The Hypochondriac, like that found in many of Gogol's and particularly Ostrovsky's plays, is conditioned not by the exterior situations and the action of the personages, but rather by the intrinsic peculiarities and manifestations of their characters. For example Mikhailo Kanorich is funny through his pretension to great strength and importance, Nadezhda Ivanovna through her self-conceit, and Nastasia Kirilovna's son is comical because of his stupidity.
Even before The Hypochondriac was published, Pisemsky made an attempt to get permission to put it on the stage. When the permission was granted five years later, he wrote to Ostrovsky to inform him that he had sent a letter to A.N. Verstovsky naming the actors for the respective roles. Pisemsky's desire was fulfilled and The Hypochondriac, in its first edition, was staged for the first time in 1855, in St. Petersburg. The success was meagre. The unsympathetic reviewers complained that the play was excessively long and that the finale was trite. This prompted Pisemsky to write to M.P. Pogodin to air his discontent. The excerpt from this letter is worth quoting as it shows the seriousness with which Pisemsky approached his work, as well as some of his more vehement views on the theatre, and theatre-goers and actors in the Russia of his time. "My Hypochondriac", wrote Pisemsky revealingly, had success, but not among the majority of the audience. However, it is to be expected from the masses brought up on the Italian Opera and French Theatre on one hand, and on the altered vaudevilles and Kukol'nik's plays on the other... For us theatre is still not instruction but amusement. They laugh at the phrase full of humor which the actor experienced deeply and which he uttered with his soul, and they laugh with the same laughter at the commonplace quibble which while pronouncing it, the actor makes faces like a clown.... The actor Samoilov ... plays only with his skin and muscles... and every word of his is full of artificiality, rudeness and cold cries.
Pisemsky's thinking here is clearly reminiscent of the revolutionary democrat Belinsky's.

However, at the insistence of his friends, Pisemsky wrote a second version of *The Hypochondriac* which he, with others, agreed was superior to the first. In the first edition, Durnopecchin, after hearing of the epidemic of cholera in his aunt's village refuses to go with her. This, as critics pointed out correctly, would somewhat weaken the character of that unscrupulous autocrat of the Dark Kingdom, Solomonida Platonovna. In the second edition, Durnopecchin succumbs to her will completely and at once his words, "...to my country I came supposedly to breathe fresh air and to calm down", become more ironic. The "consent" of the sick man to go with his aunt makes the play a considerably stronger protest against the ways of the provincial nobility.

Pisemsky, however, is not content only with the depiction of the provincial nobility. In 1853, with the publication of *Splitting The Inheritance*, he takes us into the midst of the nobility in the capital. The plot of this play is simple and immediately calls to mind Turgenev's play *Zavtrak u Predvoditelia*. The relatives of the deceased Mikhail Manokhin, arrive in his village of Pochinok to divide his estate. Each of the avaricious characters wants a bigger share for himself. Long and fierce arguments ensue until
the final settlement is reached. But before this settlement is reached we are shown how human beings are handled as a commodity, and are made to realise that Pisemsky's aim in this play was to show that the dividing of Manokhin's estate is in fact a manifestation of total corruption of the moral values of the heirs. This is the Russia depicted in Gogol's Dead Souls, with the difference that the "commodity" is still "living". Witness the conversation of the shrewd businessmen:

IVAN PROKOF'ICH: Very well! So you'd like a country estate near Moscow with a hundred souls and fifty thousand in cash, is that it?

ANNA YEFREMOVNA: I'll be happy with twenty-five thousand.

IVAN PROKOF'ICH: ... (to Sergei Vasil'ich) What would you like?

SERGEI VASIL'ICH: I also need money, horses, and give me the peasants.

IVAN PROKOF'ICH: I think, oh, about a hundred and fifty souls?

SERGEI VASIL'ICH: Without the estate, of course a hundred and fifty.

IVAN PROKOF'ICH: Well, alright, a hundred and fifty...

(Act II, Sc. 9, p. 140.)

This conversation, it is evident, contains a greater implication that the play's basic theme, that is, a more splitting of inheritance, would seem to suggest.

Emilia Petrovna's words "This is not dividing an inheritance,
this is a killing", although ironic from her mouth, are painfully true. Whereas the action of Turgenev's *Zavtrak u Predvoditelia* ends ironically, where it began, leaving the reader emotionally unaffected, Pisemsky's *Splitting The Inheritance* seems to frighten the reader. "How long", we ask ourselves, "can Russia continue to exist in the Dark Ages?"

Both Turgenev and Pisemsky in their plays reject the depicted world. Pisemsky, however, is more vigorous in his rejection. One evidence is the serious tone of the play. *Zavtrak u Predvoditelia* is more amusing than frightening. Its subject is narrower than that of *Splitting The Inheritance*. It revolves around the quarrel of Bespandin and his sister Kaurova, who in lacking the ability to make up her mind, represents more the perennial feminine riddle, than a social disorder of larger implications. Pisemsky's subject is larger in that it involves more people interested in the lion's share of the inheritance. It shows a larger "slice of life". And it is more frightening than Turgenev's theme because of the absence in the play of law and order. In *Zavtrak u Predvoditelia*, the Marshal of nobility still represents the law. Is there a solution, we ask ourselves, to the existing disorder in *Splitting The Inheritance*? Pisemsky does not explicitly suggest one. However, there is a hidden answer to the question we posed earlier: "How
long can Russia continue to exist in the Dark Ages?" This answer is "not very long". The mere absence of law and order in *Splitting The Inheritance* strongly calls for proper state. For example, Anna Yefremovna's statement, "Our kind is not like others: our ties served as an example of accord and will continue to do so,"⁹ is highly ironic. Of course, the actions of Anna Yefremovna and of her relatives are in disparity with the statement made. A process of moral disintegration of the nobility's way of life, therefore is noticed. Pisemsky of course, did not consider peasantry as the moving force in establishing orders. Therefore since there are no external powers that might act as a catalyst to this disintegration, the whole process will have to proceed unaided. It may take longer, but the result will be absolute.

The contaminated air enveloping that part of Russia seen in *The Hypochondriac* is sensed more strongly in *Splitting The Inheritance*. In the latter play, however, Pisemsky's bright hope for the purification of this air reveals itself more fully.
REFERENCE NOTES TO THE HYPOCHONDRIAC AND SPLITTING THE INERITANCE

1 Pisemsky, Pis'ma, pp. 537-538.


4 Loc. cit.

5 This is Eremin's phrase in A.F. Pisemsky, P'esy, p. 18. My analysis is based on Eremin's idea.


7 Pisemsky, Pis'ma, p. 87.

8 Pisemsky, P'esy, p. 137.

9 Ibid., p. 106.
"If Pisemsky's first two comedies -- The Hypochondriac and Splitting The Inheritance", writes Eremin, "witnessed the appearance of another talented student of Gogol in Russian literature, then A Bitter Fate is a drama, written by the convincing hand of an artist who had his own words to say about art."²

Bitter Fate was Pisemsky's fourth play. Its plot was borrowed by Pisemsky from an authentic court case, the records of which were easily accessible to Pisemsky. As discussed earlier, a turn to peasant themes in Russian literature, was noticeable in the late 1840's. Pisemsky's interest in peasants manifested itself in his publication of The Sketches of Peasant Life as early as 1852. The appearance of Bitter Fate in 1859 marked the highest achievement of Pisemsky's dramatic art.

The plot of Bitter Fate is uncomplicated. Its hero Anany working in St. Petersburg returns home after a lengthy absence to find that his wife, Lizaveta, had committed adultery with their master, Cheglov-Sokovin, and bore him a child. Anany, a hardworking and ambitious man, and much more intelligent than an average peasant, is greatly shocked at his wife's infidelity. His excessive pride is one of the main causes of his tragedy. Anany is greatly troubled
and ashamed by the fact that he will have to face the public. "Just to avoid the disgrace," he says to his wife,

I'll take it all on myself; we'll make believe at least before strangers that nothing has happened; the child is mine then and you are my faithful wife so far! But if by chance you repeat such actions with that squire of yours, then it'd be better ... do you hear me?

(Act I, Sc. 4, p. 421)

But Lizaveta's loving Cheglov in her way and wanting to live with him, acts as a catalyst to the subsequent actions taken by sensitive Anany. He orders Lizaveta to stay in the house and forbids her ever to see Cheglov. However, when the peasants' mir comes to take Lizaveta from his home, Anany in reckless fury seizes the baby and kills it by throwing it on the floor.

Some critics of the 1850's saw in Bitter Fate above all a strong protest against serfdom. The anonymous critic mentioned earlier, for example, maintained that the meaning of Bitter Fate would completely change were Cheglov not the father of the child but somebody else who did not have any legal rights to meddle in Anany's family life. To make a statement of this kind is to misinterpret completely the truly tragic figure of Anany. It is true that Bitter Fate, at first sight, seems to be based on the protest against the serfdom. When Anany finds out that Lizaveta has been unfaithful to him with Cheglov, he says to her: "So that's what it's come to, eh? ... You got into high society, didn't you?" "I didn't want to do it," is
Lizaveta's excuse, which, no doubt, immediately puts the blame on the land-owner. "Why didn't you write me," snaps furious Anany,

... I might have dropped everything in Peter and have come here as quick as lightning to save my honor.... No matter how powerful the masters are nowadays, in that respect they are not any better than the rest of us. There's some justice in our country. If he had become very hard on us I might even have complained to the government. So why blame it on being afraid of the master, you cat? As if you didn't want to do it yourself, y`u shameless creature!

(Act I, sc. 4, pp.419-420.)

It is suggested in the last sentence of the quoted passage that Lizaveta sinned on her own decision. And this is true, for in a very touching scene with Cheglov Lizaveta confesses to him:

Do you think I went wrong because I was afraid of you? Are you that kind of a man? When you used to come here long ago, when you were just a boy, I used to look and look at you, and I can't tell you how attached I am to you now and how I love you. (Act. II, sc. 2, p. 427.)

Although the constraint of serfdom appears at first to be the underlying element of Bitter Fate, Lizaveta's confession makes it a drama with the conflict between the husband and intruder, in whose possession are his wife's feelings.

The play begins in the mood reminiscent of the Shakespearean tragedy. "Something is rotten in the village
of Sokovina", we tend to say after having read less than a page. Lizaveta's mother Matrena, and a neighbour, Spiridonyevna discuss Anany's coming home. From their conversation we first learn of Anany's character. "Of course she's afraid of him", says Matrena,

He's such a proud man and he's always had his own way.... You know as well as I that he wouldn't mind even his own father. He left a rich and comfortable home, and came to live with us poor folks so that no one could boss him. and now that he's got a start on his own account, I suppose he thinks more of himself than ever.

(Act 1, Sc. 1, p. 409.)

This passage reveals Anany as a very proud, determined, and self-respecting man. The fact that he came "to live with... poor folks" suggests that he is capable of feeling, of love.

Anany comes from St. Petersburg with presents for his wife and her family. Once again we learn more of his character and way of life. Unlike most of the peasants of his day he does not drink. He is the most intelligent among the peasants and he is proud of this fact. He manifests a basic knowledge of the economy. He amazes both Matrena and Spiridonyevna by telling them that the trains run at twenty miles an hour and even faster in foreign lands.

"That's not so fast....", Anany would say with self assurance and continue with sober observations: "It's because a train is something new here; they're afraid to make it run faster.... It's a big time-saver nowadays...and then it gives more profit
on food supplies." (Act I, Sc. 2, p. 414.) When Uncle Nikon challenges Anany by saying that a workman is a better man than a merchant, and that a merchant is a swindler, Anany, in his answer displays keen intelligence and honest business- man's judgement. Says he: "Why do you slander all tradesmen? We have a place in the world too. If you fool somebody once, he won't come back to you a second time." (Act I, Sc. 2, p. 417.) Anany is not so naive as to believe that every tradesman is honest, hence "why do you slander all trades- men?", but his final statement rings with honesty. Anany, despite Uncle Nikon's frequent sarcastic remarks, displays well-balanced self-composure.

But once he learns of his wife's infidelity, it is natural that with his high moral standards and delicately developed sense of dignity he can not bear this humiliation. He is grief-stricken and angry but still sufficiently com- posed to "take it all" on himself in order "to avoid the disgrace...before strangers." (Act I, Sc. 4, p. 421.) However, Anany warns Lizaveta that should she try to repeat the disgraceful action, he will use brute force. Anany's decision to take the sin on himself is the high point of the psychological drama. But his decision does not move Lizaveta. She continues to cherish her thoughts about eventual union with Cheglov. After all he is the man she "loves". She talks openly of Anany's cruelty to her and
reveals to other peasants the most personal particulars of their life. Anany's private life is thus destroyed. We feel sympathy for Lizaveta when she says "It's only because I was an orphan and very poor that they forced me to marry him—I felt as if I was being buried alive." (Act II, Sc. 2, p. 426.) But we also sympathize with Anany's reasoning that "no peasant ever marries because of any particular desire of his own, but when he marries in the Holy Church he must live according to its law...." (Act III, Sc. 4, p. 43'.) This to most people with a twentieth century outlook is a limited philosophy, but we must remember that among simpler people in Anany's Russia, his claim had more meaning.

Lizaveta's persistence in refusing to admit her guilt leads Anany to use the brute force with which he threatened her once. At the end of Act II he beats her.

Anany's anger once again calms down in the beginning of Act III. Under the heavy strain, Anany, by his own will, goes to the priest and returns in the peaceful composure that we observed immediately after his arrival from St. Petersburg.

Whereas at the end of the first act we saw Anany as a proud man saving his name and his honor, in the beginning of Act III we see in him a Christian scourging the proud man within himself. He begs his wife for forgiveness and reconciliation. "Here I am, pleading with you," says
Anany to his wife, "not in anger but with a bleeding heart, and with tears in my dyes right before your mother: be reasonable and let's live like other good folks." (Act III, Sc. 4, p. 437.) To this, indifferent Lizaveta coldly answers, "Good folks are no example for us!" (Act III, Sc. 4, p. 437.) Lizaveta's indifference to Anany's plea stems from her contempt towards her husband. Her hand was offered to Anany without her consent. She married him without any feeling of love. Anany's strong sense of self-respect and indisputable authority over his wife gave rise to her resistance which slowly grew into an open enmity. This hatred toward her husband prevented her seeing the qualities in Anany for which, as Eremin observes, if she could not love him, she could at least respect him. The situation becomes heavier when we realise that Anany deeply loves his wife and secretly experiences profound suffering for her lack of feeling toward himself.

At the end of Act III the bailiff and the "mir" come to take Lizaveta away from him. Anany's anger wells up again, but he still begs for understanding. "My dear people", he pleads with the peasants,

What's all this? Won't you help a poor fellow our? Think just a little of my present situation: to come to me all of a sudden and bring me such disgrace and such insults! (he gets down on his knees.) With tears in my eyes, and on my knees, I beg you to help out just a little; don't push me down to the bottom! God'll reward you for it.  

(Act III, Sc. 7, p. 443.)
The bailiff and the mir however remain mute to Anany's pleading. The bailiff now orders the peasants to take Lizaveta away. Anany, no longer able to control himself, snatches the baby and kills it. Dobrolyubov claims that Anany's moral values are far from the standard given to him by some critics, for to kill a child is an immoral deed. He further states that "if Anany is really a forceful personality, as the author wants to depict him, then he should direct his wrath at the cause of his misfortune...." Apparently Dobrolyubov sides with the critics who maintain that *Bitter Fate* was a protest against serfdom. This however is not important here. What is important is the implication, involuntarily creeping out, that Anany is not a tragic figure. There is no evidence anywhere in the play to afford reason for belief that Anany is a man capable of killing an innocent child. There is a great deal of evidence, however, for the proposition that in defence of his dignity he was subject to frequent outbursts of anger. And the killing of the child is precisely what we could expect in that final frenzied state of Anany.

Pisemsky, by having his hero kill the child, just as does Tolstoy in his *The Power of Darkness*, shows an axiom so frequently observed in life—that is that often an innocent human being bears an hapless fate in order to redeem the truly unfortunate one. The murder of an infant in *The
Power of Darkness had to be slow and cruel in order that Nikita be made to experience not only horror, but a particularly biting abhorrence of the crime so that he could be redeemed. And both Nikita and Anany are saved.

The latter is redeemed in Act IV, where like a hero of classical tragedy, he is conquered but not wasted. He realises the abomination of his crime and he is willing to bear the consequences. His pride is now stifled, and we feel that the basic qualities of honesty and sincerity we noticed in him will carry him through his tragedy. This can be seen from Anany's conversation with Shpringel, an official investigating the murder, where Shpringel informs Anany that his prison-sentence would be lightened if he would testify that his wife had an illegitimate child. To this Anany says:

All this I know very well, sir, but I have feelings of my own. Even if she did do something worse to me that I ever dreamed of, it's not for me to be her judge or testify against her: my sin is greater than any of hers and I don't want to make my sentence a bit lighter. Only God help me to bear it with patience; I am even ready to go through deadly tortures, if so I may gain just a little forgiveness for my great transgression!

(Act IV, Sc. 7, pp.454-455.)

Lizaveta also undergoes a change. The events which led to such disastrous results succeeded in breaking her. Instead of more hatred that she could feel towards
Anany for killing her child, Lizaveta forgives him, and herself begs for forgiveness.

_Bitter Fate_ strikes us with its simplicity of construction, immediacy of action, unity of plot, and compactness of composition. There is no superfluous detail, or a remark made which is not resolved finally in further action. Like Hamlet, Anany, whether on stage or not, is always in the mind of the reader.

A surprising characteristic of this drama is that most of the characters are good people. It has no real "villain". The landowner Cheglov-Sokovin, as some critics have mentioned already, is quite different from the boorish types depicted in the works of Grigorovich and A.A. Potekhin. Cheglov is a nervous, but good-hearted and generous man. He is educated, as can be seen from his frequent quotations of the passages from Griboyedov's and Fonvizin's works. It is true, however, that he lacks the honesty and sincerity that we find in Anany. For this reason we share little sympathy with him. In the scene where tormented Anany comes to see Cheglov the latter puts his education to ill-use:

...You are a tyrant [Cheglov yells out] you married her when you knew she didn't love you; when she used to avoid you at first, you assumed a husband's rights by force. Finally, you are a hypocrite: before strangers you were gentle and kind to her, but you tormented her with your jealousy--whole nights long you would torture her because she looked at a man, or for a sigh which escaped from her, possibly because she didn't love you--I know everything.

(Act II, Sc. 4, p. 431.)
He does know a great deal, but then Anany's jealousy was not completely devoid of justification. Cheglov, no doubt, could be at the present time, an outspoken defender of free-love. He thinks his love for Lizaveta is pure and calls Anany a "hypocrite" but little does he realise how hypocritical his actions are when he advises Lizaveta to abandon the child.

Nevertheless he is good to his other peasants and is respected by them.

The Board of Imperial Theatres expressed their fear of the "coarseness" of *Bitter Fate*. They were particularly critical of its language. But Pisemsky believed that the language added considerably to the expressive strength of the play. In 1863 he wrote to A.I. Nordenstrem:

...as far as the heavy effect and coarse expressions of the language in the play are concerned, I could not avoid or make them milder, because then I would have told a lie on the life depicted. Falsehood, and even worse, falsehood from the stage is an immoral and disgraceful thing.... I humbly ask that all the phrases be saved...to take them away, is to take away the colours without which it is not worth to stage the play.6

Pisemsky, as can be seen from the cited passage, is interested in saving not only individual words but whole phrases. The language of *Bitter Fate* is its remarkable feature. Uncle Nikon's speech, as that of Matrena and Spiridonyevna,
abounds with proverbs and aphorisms. Pisemsky in depicting these characters displays the same talent that we observe in the works of Grigorovich and Ostrovsky. The language of the landowners is individualized. Cheglov-Sokovin, for instance, speaks in the language that we could expect from a university graduate; he often quotes from the works of Griboyedov and Fonvizin. His brother-in-law, Zolotilov, often resorts to French, in order to reveal his noble upbringing. The peasant Kalistrat, Cheglov's faithful servant, has picked up smatterings of his master's speech and uses it with pride. Anany, who has lived for a considerable time in St. Petersburg, peppers his speech with city expressions.

Although the premiere of *Bitter Fate* was unsuccessful, subsequent productions assured it a firm position in the repertoire of the Russian Theatre. P.A. Strepetova became famous in the role of Lizaveta. The role of Anany was played by such distinguished actors as M.I. Pisarev, F.P. Gorev, and K.S. Stanislawsky. The latter comments on Pisemsky's work:

> The play is written with great mastery. After Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* it is the best play of our peasant life.7

D.S. Mirsky however, prefers *Bitter Fate*: "For all the intensity and power of the latter ["The Power of Darkness"],"
an unprejudiced critical judgement can hardly fail to conclude that, if the two are equal in human and tragic significance, Pisemsky's is the greater play, the completer artistic success. It has the intensity and inevitability of the classical drama, and while Power of Darkness is best of all defined as a morality play, A Hard Lot / Bitter Fate / is a genuine tragedy with that supreme logical unity which is the great characteristic of the plays of Racine.  

It is not the purpose of this study to defend either of the views expressed by Stanislawsky and Mirsky. Of greater interest to us is that a comparison of the two plays can be made. The action of both plays takes place in serfdom Russia. The plots of both dramas are based on an authentic court case. The parallel not only in situation, but also in words is easily detectable. Compare, for example the last scene of Bitter Fate, where Anany (bows) saying, "Forgive me, Christian people!" to the last scene of The Power of Darkness where Nikita utters "Forgive me, orthodox people! (bows down to the earth)."

Also, in both plays an innocent child is killed; and for allowing this to happen on the stage both Pisemsky and Tolstoy have been severely criticised.

Both Nikita and Anany are peasants, but the seeds of tragedy are to be found not so much in the circumstances of their period as in their individual selves. Nikita finds himself cramped between Matriona, the personification of
evil power, and Akim, the embodiment of the gospel; Anany between his excessive pride and his sincere belief in human dignity. Both Nikita and Anany are individuals, but they are also types since their problems are of universal significance.

Pisemsky was never to write another play that could stand comparison to *Bitter Fate*. But his dramatic abilities after this play did not decline. His historical plays, it is true, are his weakest dramatic output; this could perhaps be explained by the fact that he had to visualize the scenes he chose to depict.
REFERENCE NOTES TO BITTER FATE


2 M. Eremin, "Introduction," P'esy, by A.F. Pisemsky, p. 27.


5 Loc. cit.

6 Pisemsky, Pis'ma, pp. 155-156.

7 Quoted by M. Eremin in A.F. Pisemsky, P'esy, p. 440.


9 Noyes, Drama, p. 456.

In 1865, after completing his historical play The Despots Pisemsky wrote to K.S. Veselovsky:

It can be boldly stated that our people carry, both inside themselves and in their history, the seeds of real tragedy. All works of Knyazhnin, Sumarokov, Ozerov, Katenin, Kukol'nik, and Polevoi, regardless of their merits...cannot at all be called real tragedies, and especially not Russian. Only lately Ostrovsky and other more or less talented writers have attempted to clear the way for Russian tragedy. This work is also an attempt of the same kind. It is taken from the time of Paul I.... My main purpose is, having taken man's passion as the subject, to portray at the same time the period itself.¹

Pisemsky's historical plays unfortunately do not come up to the standard that he set out for himself. But let us look at the play itself first.

The plot of The Despots is uncluttered. Prince Imshin, a sixty-five year old but still active army general on leave, is married to the uneducated, young and beautiful Nastasia Petrovna. He loves his wife passionately and is tormented by jealousy. Act I opens with Prince Imshin's departure for duty. Suspicious of his wife, he asks his brother, Prince Sergey, to look after his wife and to report to him anything peculiar in her behaviour. But Prince Sergey himself has frequently made overt advances at Nastasia Petrovna, and having found out that she is having an affair with Rykov, a young officer from a neighbouring
village, he is not reluctant in his attempt to blackmail her. Nastasia Petrovna however remains indifferent to his offers and threats, and reveals to her husband, who is about to leave, Prince Sergey's desire to seduce her. At first, Prince Imshin does not believe his wife, but later doubts infiltrate his mind, and in the manner of vaudeville, he decides to postpone his trip and hide in the study in order to dispense with his suspicion. His doubts, however, prove correct as he overhears his brother's conversation with Nastasia Petrovna about her lover Rykov. Prince Imshin also realises that his wife's warning about Prince Sergey's behaviour with her was absolutely valid. This is the central point of the play. The pitiful Imshin now decides to overlook his duty and disregard the will of Emperor Paul I by staying and punishing the guilty. Here we observe that Pisemsky is a bit naive to think that anyone could so boldly neglect the Emperor's orders. He should have indicated somewhere that such action on Imshin's part was justifiable from a realistic point of view.

Prince Imshin arranges a wild orgy of revenge and punishment of the participants in his wife's infidelity, beginning with Rykov who is lured to the Prince's house by Nastasia Petrovna's letter, which is actually sent by Imshin. With his enemies gathered around, the Prince, as
a feudal landlord and despot in his feelings, creates a
court in his house. As the judge, he chooses his faithful
but disgusting jester, Kadushkin, who is as emotional in
his judgements as his master in his actions. Rykov is
brought before the "court" dressed in a bear's skin, and
dragging chains tied around his arms and legs. Both he and
Nastasia Petrovna are thrown into the dungeon. Prince
Sergey is challenged to a duel by the furious older brother,
but when he refuses to comply, he is told to get out. Those
among the servants who in any way served as accomplices to
the princess' "crime" are exiled.

Act IV and V show Devochkin, the father of
Nastasia Petrovna, who in his "constitution similar
to Suvorov". Devochkin appears with a gang; he burns
Prince Imshin's estate yelling "This is Suvorov's strategy", mortally wounds the Prince, and sets his daughter and her
lover free.

Before dying, Prince Imshin undergoes a radical
change which is not explained or justified in the play,
neither by an inherent need for resigning himself to the
passion of the moment, nor by an awakening of moral feeling
and a retrieved conscience. He forgives his wife and others
whom he earlier subjected to a merciless display of inhuman-
ity. His insistence that she marry Rykov does not seem
sincere. It cannot be, for Prince Imshin at no other place in *The Despots* shows that he is capable of such an action.

Eremin⁵ is correct in pointing out that in this play Pisemsky shows convincingly that the degree of despotism is directly proportional to the lack of morals. Prince Imshin behaves as an absolute autocrat, and it is for this reason that Devochkin leads a rebellion against him.

We would be wrong, however, to think that Pisemsky considers Devochkin a worthwhile opponent to the arbitrary rule of Prince Imshin, but Devochkin, as ill-educated as he is, does represent a reaction to Imshin's tyranny. It is for this reason, however artificial it may seem, that he is made to resemble Suvorov in his physical appearance.

The historical plays of Pisemsky, however, lack the democratic pathos and mass movements of people characterizing Ostrovsky's historical dramas. The weakness of *The Despots* lies partly in the amorphous and essentially technically incorrect last two acts but mainly in the conflict of mood resulting from the use of the comical character Kadushkin to symbolize a tragic significance.

Although *The Despots* clearly does not stand comparison with Pisemsky's better plays, it has, nevertheless, some vivid dramatic situations and concrete character depiction. Mirsky states that Pisemsky's historical plays
"have a strange fascination and, if revived on the stage, should prove extraordinarily effective." Stanislavsky, who in 1889 was very successful in the role of Prince Imshin, recalls that the audience complained of the heaviness of the play. "I played a beast", he observes, "but he is necessary to the play...my concern is to seek where he is good, where he suffers, repents, loves, where he is kind, and selfless..." The fact that he was successful in the role is evidence that The Despots is not totally bare of dramatic qualities.

The actor Samoilov, for example, in his role of prince Imshin, was always alert to the most dramatic cue. It is reported that the Prince's words to the audience at the end of Act I, "do not be surprised, good people, at the treatment they will receive from me," were pronounced by Samoilov as if under the influence of a swelling torment in his heart, and not merely from the desire for revenge. Scene 5 of Act IV, where Prince Imshin tells his sister of his torments, is very dramatic and stageable and was rendered as such by Samoilov.

Pisemsky's ability to transform dry historical facts into a work with some dramatic qualities, is seen in another historical play Miloslavskie i Naryshkiny, where he places nineteen characters and many other supporting figures into a logically constructed whole. Although
young Peter hardly appears in the play, his presence is nevertheless felt, and we become aware of how this young boy grows into the tsar. Another admirable characteristic of this play is that its dialogue aims at truthfulness to life, not at verbal richness. However, Pisemsky's historical plays are definitely inferior to his other dramatic works, a fact which he himself readily admitted. 9
REFERENCE NOTES TO THE DESPOTS

1 Pisemsky, Pis'ma, pp. 190-191.

2 Imshin does this because Rykov and Nastasia Petrovna, in their correspondence, frequently referred to Imshin as an "old bear".

3 Pisemsky, P'esy, p. 227.


7 Quoted by M. Eremin, "Introduction," P'esy, by A.F. Pisemsky, p. 31.


9 See Pisemsky, Pis'ma, p. 247.
BAAL

This four act play is based on the theme of self-deception of an idealistically minded man, Mirovich.

The three main characters of Baal are Burgmeyer, a middle-aged capitalist who has made a huge fortune as a contractor, mostly by illegal means, his young, beautiful, romantic wife, who married him in gratitude for his help to her family, and a young deputy of the district council, Mirovich, who has fallen in love with Burgmeyer's wife, Cleopatra. The secondary characters include a hanger-on of Burgmeyer, Rufin, who carries out much of his dirty work; a cynical lawyer, Kunicin, a friend of Mirovich; and a vicious society woman, Eugenia, an acquaintance of Cleopatra, who becomes first the mistress of Burgmeyer, then, during the same period, the mistress of Kunicin, and finally the wife of Rufin.

Mirovich and Cleopatra have more or less renounced their love for each other, and each has gone his own way. Suddenly Burgmeyer loses a large sum of money, and as a result, a building he has contracted to erect is completed in contravention of all the laws of safety. Mirovich is one of the members sitting on the Committee to pass on the building. Burgmeyer has been able to bribe all the other
members, but he cannot bribe or frighten Mirovich. He is at his wits end, when Eugenia suggests that he ask his wife to approach Mirovich. He does so, and when Cleopatra realises that he is practically asking her to leave nothing undone that will persuade Mirovich to issue the certificate she is shocked and amazed. She runs to Mirovich.

Burgmeyer by fair means or foul gets the building certified, and his fortunes are speedily restored. In the meantime he has ruined Mirovich, "who cannot get work anywhere." He and Cleopatra are living in abject poverty. Cleopatra stands it better than he does. Kunicin, having become the lover of Eugenia enters into a pact with her to rob Burgmeyer of as much as they can, and skip off to America. He finds this more than he can stomach, and confesses to Burgmeyer. Burgmeyer in great anger throws Eugenia out. She goes to Rufin.

But Bergmeyer still wants Cleopatra. He offers to forgive Rufin for having taken his cast-off mistress, on the condition that Rufin will find a way to get Cleopatra to return to him. Rufin finds that Mirovich can be arrested for non-payment of a debt he contracted in order to support Cleopatra. Cleopatra and Mirovich are now quarrelling, each reproaching the other for what has happened to them.

Finally Cleopatra realises that Mirovich's pride is more important to him than her love, whereas he believes
that her comfort is more important to her than his love. Kunicin cynically watches, tries to help, but his offers are rebuffed. Cleopatra sends for Burgmeyer, asking if he will take her back. She goes back to him, another sacrifice to the great god of greed, Baal.

The academician A.V. Nikitenko, after considering the play for the Uvarov prize, wrote:

The temper of our time, as is known to all those who think and those who are unable to think, is distinguished mainly by its peculiar feature—the excessive all-absorbing aspiration to riches. It is true that wealth everywhere is and always was highly respected; but in our time it has become the subject of some sort of idolization precluding all other beliefs, beliefs in honor, the moral dignity of man, in truth.... Heroes of the stockmarkets, concessions, and all kinds of speculations with their wide designs, and the courage with which they overcome all obstructions presented by their conscience and laws... truly excel in courage all the heroes of the Iliad.... Pisemsky's play is a serious artistic work. Its basic idea is completely contemporary.... We must give due credit to our Russian writer, author of Baal.

This is indeed a favorable review. Yet Nikitenko, among other critics, places too much blame on the period when considering reasons for Mirovich's downfall.

Unlike the secondary characters in the play, Mirovich does not aspire to riches. He is content with his job, and is moral enough never to have accepted bribes. Yet once faced with a problem, Mirovich reveals his character
fully. He certified the building for Burgmeyer, was honest enough to quit his job, and started living with Cleopatra. But when "marital" troubles arise and Mirovich is forced to get himself a job, we find that no job is good enough for him. He curses his situation, and fiercely blames his period.

During Cleopatra's stay with Mirovich we notice that he will face eventual downfall because of the lack of strength to carry out his convictions, indecisiveness and preoccupation with his hurt feelings. The time he spent living with Cleopatra in abject poverty and inactivity and the awareness of this unreasonable step (consenting to live with Cleopatra) harden Mirovich's feelings so much that he is afraid to look into his own heart when confronted with Cleopatra's question: "Tell me do you love me, at least a little? Or have you completely stopped loving me?" "How can I tell you the truth", begins Mirovich (with his eyes on the floor), "whether I've stopped loving you or not? I can't because it's a mystery to myself." (Act IV, Sc. 5, p. 420.) And here, with the faint-heartedness and self-justification he explains the atmosphere which surrounds his love:

I'm only conscious of one thing clearly--even under the most favourable conditions, when a man has nothing to worry about, nor to work, he still cannot hang around a woman doing nothing but perpetually making love to her. It's impossible. It's humiliating, disgraceful!
But even worse when in addition to that, he's sunk in poverty, when he knows that it's necessary to earn every bite of bread for himself and the woman, and at the same time knows there is no work—well even the very interlude of lovemaking is a torture, a torture made up of pangs of conscience, of boredom, of self-disgust, distaste, amounting, if you like, even to hatred!

(Act IV, Sc. 5, p. 421.)

What Mirovich says in the above excerpt is absolutely true. However, the decision to live with Cleopatra was his own. It is also evident from the above speech that, while trying to acquit himself of blame and justify his inactivity, Mirovich looks for ways to blame Cleopatra and succeeds in showing that he is tired of her. And when the unfortunate woman realises how much egotism is hiding behind what she took for love and tells Mirovich she is going back to her husband, his false pride shows itself. Greatly shocked he shouts: "You know quite well that would be worse for me than anything else. I'd lose all respect for you then...it would be less humiliating for me if you took a lover." (Act IV, Sc. 5, pp. 421-422.) "But why", Cleopatra asks sorrowfully, and Mirovich goes into a tirade about the exploitation of the labourer, the indecency and oppression of businessmen:

Right now all the efforts of the best and most honest brains are directed to doing away with businessmen, to taking away all power from capital. The hour is coming soon for that gentry. Accounts will be settled with them, and more drastically than they were settled once with feudal noblemen. (Act IV, Sc. 5, p. 422.)
So it is the period that caused it all! In the meantime, he will remain motionless. His speech is highly ironic, for a few pages earlier Mirovich remarked:

My generation, that is me and my contemporaries, while we'd still hardly left the class-room, began to boast, reproaching and cursing our parents and grandparents for taking bribes, giving false judgements, for being embezzlers, for their complete lack of honour or sense of civic duty....

(Act II, Sc. 6, pp. 386-387.)

It becomes even more ironic when we realise that it comes from the mouth of a man who lacks vigour and courage to change his ways.

For Mirovich, Cleopatra's return to her husband is only a question of self-love. "And if you prefer him to me, what must I appear? A piece of trash for which a name can hardly be found." (Act IV, Sc. 5, p. 423.) And his last words sound bitterly:

Baal, accept two more sacrifices for your altar. Torture them, bloodthirsty god...soon all will bow down to you, in this century stripped of ideals, aspirations and hopes, this century of the brazen ruble and the forged papers!

(Act IV, Sc. 9, p. 432.)

Again it is the period!

We agree with Nikitenko, however that "wealth... became the subject of some sort of idolization," in the
Russia of the 1870's. There are Burgmeyer, Eugenia Nikolaevna, Rufin, and, partially Kunicin in this play to prove his point. Burgmeyer's wrong move, in fact serves as the plot. When faced with inevitable bankruptcy he finds this is more important than love for his wife. We also notice weakness and a startling lack of feeling hovering over all, even the secondary characters, who, in their aspiration for material comfort, are motivated by their unconscious nature as well as their conscious purpose. Even Samakhan, the doctor who comes to see Burgmeyer, confesses that he always visits the wealthiest before the poorest. Burgmeyer, after throwing Eugenia out, wants Claopatra back, but nay, not because he has changed or repented, but because in addition to his restored fortune it is nice to have a beautiful woman next to him. He knows that Cleopatra does not love him, but it is of no consequence to him. Kunicin, on the other hand, explicitly states that he is determined "to marry the daughter of a nice rich businessman, and if nothing comes of that", he will "oblige some over-weight husband-hunting female." (Act II, Sc. 1, p. 373.)

In *Bitter Fate*, passion, tossing the characters into dramatic conflict, goes hand in hand with self-sacrifice. In *Baal*, the urge propelling the characters makes them, for egotistical reasons, sacrifice their loved-one. It is in the inability for self-sacrifice, for profound feelings, the
incapacity for pure emotion, as seen in the play that Avseenko sees the symptoms of the new society of the 1860's and 1870's described by Pisemsky. Is Mirovich, then, the representative of this gloomy new transitional period? Avseenko, as already stated, thinks that he is. He claims that, by showing only the negative side of his hero, Pisemsky makes Mirovich the child of an unstable, unscrupulous, transitional period. But Pisemsky does not show only the negative qualities of Mirovich's character. The fact that his hero refuses to be bribed is but one of his better qualities. Also the dialogue between Kunicin and Mirovich (Act II, Sc. i.) on the power of money reveals the latter as a man with a sober philosophy, who could improve if he dispensed with some of his prejudiced views.

_Baal_, which Avseenko claims is the _chef-d'oeuvre_ of Pisemsky's later dramatic career, would simply be a pamphlet if Pisemsky were foolish enough to think that a period of transition could bear a new man. A period can expose the hitherto unseen elements of a character. It can serve as opportunity or reason for gain, achievement or failure. Pisemsky knew this very well. For this reason his _Baal_ is far from a pamphlet. Mirovich's tragic position is not to be traced merely to his circumstances or the period but to the very nature of his character. Anany Yakovlev, a peasant serf, finds himself also in tragic conflict, but, as we have
seen, mainly because of the nature of his character. Disillusioned Mirovich readily blames the "century of the brazen ruble" and "the forged papers", but the truth is that he is himself at fault. In fact the story of Mirovich is partially the story of Adam and Eve. In Act II, Scene 6, where Cleopatra offers to live with him, Mirovich, after considering her proposal, admits that he is going through the "infernal, agonizing struggle". "Here--the very paradise of love," he says, in an attempt to decide what to do," and there--a farce. If I commit this action," he further meditates, "I'd have to be false to the banner I thought I'd live under for the rest of my life." (Act II, Sc. 6, pp. 386-387.) In other words he knew the consequences awaiting him. This fact precludes any theories that he succumbed in the moment of hopeless passion. It is himself that he should blame and not the period. His best friend, Kunicin points this out, after Cleopatra has left Mirovich: "No, my friend, no! No matter how you rationalize it, you're guilty in every particular." (Act IV, Sc. 9, p. 432.) The 1860's-1870's, serve solely as local background in Baal, just as serfdom Russia does in Bitter Fate. Both Mirovich and Anany are types, and for this reason both plays have universal significance. Mirovich, therefore is not the representative of the new transitional period. Every period has its own Mirovich. It could be argued, though, that the unscrupulous, unstable period makes him more confused and indecisive, for
"the century of the brazen ruble and the forged papers" act as a catalyst to those going to the altar of bloodthirsty Baal. But the seeds of tragedy, as seen through Baal, are generally carried within each of these characters. Kunicin, for example, a symbol of "laughter through tears", is far from being a product of any one period. He is universal and the most consistent of all Pisemsky's characters. He is simply a small profiteer whose profits grow larger with the confusion of the period, and whose methods are easily adapted to suit the situation. He is convinced, like Eugenia Nikolaevna and Rufin, that the only aim in life is riches. Money can buy everything: "What can't be bought with money?", he asks Mirovich, "What?". "The love of a real honest woman! Nor the ability to be an artist..." answers Mirovich. "You say love can't be bought. Ha, Ha, Ha! My dear Mirovich", continues Kunicin, "you should just see the beauty I'll buy. What's charm? She'll be red-hot with passion for me. She'll worship me." (Act II, Sc. 1, p. 374.)

In 1874, Avseenko wrote:

Denouement in Baal in an ordinary sense seems... favourable. Burgmeyer brings his wife back to him, who, no doubt, will excellently serve as his faithful safe guard; the lover leaves for America... from where he will send to Petersburg's papers tracts about labour associations and meetings in favour of women suffrage. The fallen woman will calm down in the luxury of her previous existence, expiating her shame by realising that once in her life she acted as a contemporary and honest woman.
Eugenia Nikolaevna, having married Rufin, will still blind the dandies with the last glitter of her dying beauty, and maybe again will take up with Kunicin...3

Avseenko reads too much into the play. Baal is disheartening when we think of Mirovich; but inspiring when we think of the possibilities of human nature. No, human nature will not change. The hope lies in the possibility of controlling human instincts, in the coming of that time, to put it in Tennyson's words "when the years have died away," when man's convictions, reason, will-power, and conscience will control his passion and false perception.

Of all Pisemsky's plays, those belonging to his later period as a dramatist have been criticised most severely. The critics claimed, with some justice, that they are strongly tendentious. It is true that we find this tendentiousness in the plays, The Financial Genius, The Mines, and Enlightened Times. In the last of these, for example, it is clear, that the merchant Russia of the 1860's and 1870's is the direct cause of Sofia Mikhailovna's death.

But the critics, discussed in Chapter Two, were too anxious to brand these plays as pamphlets, failing, in their emotional eagerness, to substantiate their beliefs by at least a partial discussion of the methods employed in them by Pisemsky. For this reason it is necessary to examine some of these methods.
Unlike Chekhov, Pisemsky is not an inventor of new dramatic forms and techniques. But like Chekhov, Turgenev, and Ostrovsky among other Russian dramatists, he uses all of the traditional elements of dramatic action—love, murder, suicide and revenge. Architectonically, his plays are a well-proportioned, well-structured whole. Generally there is no prolixity in Pisemsky's plays; everything refers to the basic idea. The scenes develop and link with each other by natural relationships always following from the idea.

Since the central theme of most of Pisemsky's later plays is illusion or disillusionment, most of his dramatic devices are ironic. This is very well seen in the disparity between what his characters say and what they do. Thus, Mikhailo Ivanych (The Hypochondriac) tells his sister Nadezhda Ivanovna how he will get back her lover, Durnopechin: "Wouldn't you like, my dear sir, to see this fist, that is my fist! It weighs, I'll tell you, exactly ten pounds." (Act II, Sc. 1, p. 56.) Two acts later, Mikhailo Ivanych backs away from a fist fight with Durnopechin.

Or, take another example from The Mines. In an argument with her father Olga Petrovna says to him: "Feeling is a man's most precious possession." The very moment she utters these words, we are aware that she herself has none. And yet after having read the play we begin to realise the
validity of her statement.

Another example of ironic disparity between speech and action we can see in Act I, Scene 3 of the same play. Miamlin relates how Prince Mikhail Semenovich praised him: "Oh, you good Russian soul, says he, you rejoice at the smallest success of Russia! Oh well! I admit, I'm a patriot! I love my country," (Act I, Sc. 3, p. 497.) says Miamlin, with modesty and timidity reminiscent of Khlestakov. That Miamlin is the very opposite of what he claims, is made clear only a few scenes later.

Still another ironic device used by Pisemsky reveals itself through his characters' surrender to speech making. This is a very useful device, for in addition to what we already think of the character, we learn of what he thinks of himself and of others. In this way Pisemsky is able to portray that part of life which he sets out to depict. Miamlin (The Mines), for instance, incessantly talks about one's duty to his country. Kunicin (Baal) on the other hand, has a weakness for philosophising, and Mirovich, like Chekhov's Trofimov, talks about the new world.

There is another feature to Pisemsky's art which is similar to Chekhov's dramatic art, but used for quite different ends. Chekhov's characters are prone to aestheticizing life, by comparing themselves to the works of art, or to characters in the great novels. This ten-
dency is a device used by Chekhov to portray his characters' awareness of their failure as human beings. It is for this reason that Treplev compares his agony to that of Hamlet. In Pisemsky's dramatic art, however, a similar device is put to a different use. Many of Pisemsky's characters identify themselves with works of art, not because they are aware of their own shortcomings, but because, in their view, the fashion of the time dictated it. This is one of their ways of reaching higher levels in society. Prince Platon's (The Despots) villa, for example, displays two portraits, one of Emperor Paul I and the other of Voltaire, and not because of Platon's respect for the first and admiration for the second. It was his duty as a general to have the portrait of the Emperor; the second portrait was his way of showing "appreciation" for the great philosopher. We have to read only two scenes, however, to realise how ironic this display is. On the one hand we see the Emperor's orders calling him to active duty completely disregarded, and on the other, we soon learn that Prince Platon's theories are anything but reminiscent of those of Voltaire.

Or to take another example, that of the ruthless businessman, Burgmeyer, (Baal), whose house boasts of two original portraits of Rubens and his student Van Dyke. But Burgmeyer's ignorance of art is all too obvious from the moment he opens his mouth. His attempt to identify himself
and display his taste through the work of art is as false and ironic as his earlier annual subscription to opera tickets.

Another aspect of this tendency found in Pisemsky's characters, is their readiness to emphasize their knowledge of Russian and foreign literature, as well as the Bible, and thus create an impression of their well-rounded education. Thus Kunicin often resorts to quotations from Pushkin and Shakespeare. Sosipatov (The Financial Genius) also quotes from Shakespeare as well as from The Bible. Similar examples could be brought out.
REFERENCE NOTES TO BAAL

1 Quoted in A.F. Pisemsky, Pis'mа, pp. 701-702.


3 Ibid., p. 913.


6 Corrigan's phrase, op. cit., p. 94.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In 1881 Pisemsky died. His funeral was attended by his relatives and as few admirers as there are now readers of his works. As for the first part of the above statement, we can only express sorrow; the second implies a sheer ignorance on the part of his critics and readers who still allow their own judgements to be influenced by the unfair criticism of "Falstaff's" works expounded by critics such as Skabichevsky and Annenkov among others.

It is as unrealistic to claim, as many of Pisemsky's critics do, that most of his plays are pamphlets, as it would be to maintain that all of them are perfect dramatic works. We have seen, for instance, some of the weaknesses of his historical plays. Lieutenant Gladkov, belonging to this cycle is but one example. In this play Pisemsky, in his painstaking effort to render historical authenticity and depict the colouring of the period, has his characters use expressions which are direct quotations from official histories and memoirs. This device only made the play more artificial.

Among his later plays there are also some that do not come up to the expected standard. The Financial Genius, which has more personages than Pisemsky could handle, is only one example. The introduction in the final scene of
new characters whose speeches resolve the action is dramatically poor. An example of this can be found in the last scene of *The Mines*, where Andashevsky and the company are shorn of their illusions. Even *Baal*, the best of Pisemsky's later dramatic works, has its weaknesses. The scene where Burgmeyer waves a pistol at his Jewish servant Rufin smacks of melodrama. In the same play Pisemsky, without any finesse, allows his characters to make fun of Rufin's Jewish origin. There is no evidence that Rufin's role in *Baal* demanded that he be a Jew. That is why we feel that the emphasis placed on Rufin's origin was more a product of Pisemsky's prejudice than a justified element used to further the action. This does not, however, deprive *Baal* of its other admirable qualities.

But there are also his other plays, significant in idea and interesting in artistic rendering. For when Pisemsky managed to discipline his art and imbue it with vitality and intelligence, as he did in *Bitter Fate*, *Baal*, and *Enlightened Times*, he was a dramatist worthy of place occupied by Gogol, Turgenev, Ostrovsky, and Sukhovo-Kobylin among others, in Russian drama.

The critics' claim that he was out of step with his own time is again exaggerated. At the beginning of the 1850's many of the novelists and playwrights accepted and utilized eagerly in their works, Gogol's artistic methods;
Pisemsky also belonged to this group of writers. His *Hypochondriac* and *Splitting The Inheritance*, were written under some influence of Gogol's dramatic writings. In the 1840's and 1850's when the peasant question became vital, works appeared depicting the muzhik. Pisemsky also contributed to this theme. We saw in Chapter One that a definite turn to historical plays was noticed in the early sixties. In this period Pisemsky focused his attention on the past. The late sixties and seventies were characterized by plays dealing with corruption, money-frenzy, and the bureaucracy in the government apparatus. Pisemsky, once again joined such playwrights as Sukhovo-Kobylin, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Ostrovsky in reflecting modern life and probing modern problems. It is interesting to note that the creative development of Pisemsky at times runs parallel to that of Ostrovsky and we notice clearly their similarity of themes and motifs.

Pisemsky's plays depict man's follies, futile dreams, sordidness, sometimes nobility, and vanity; and he accomplishes this without a trace of venom or flavour of superiority, usually detaching himself from what he depicts in order the better to represent it. The best among these plays are a confirmation that life as Pisemsky saw it and dramatic art are not incongruous.
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