CHEKHOV'S DOCTORS:
A PRESCRIPTION FOR A BETTER LIFE

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Abstract

Anton Chekhov pursued two careers simultaneously throughout his life—that of a doctor as well as a writer of prose and drama. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover many physicians amongst his characters but it is puzzling that the portrayal of doctors is frequently unflattering despite his admitted indebtedness to the profession. The thesis herein proposed is that the poor image Chekhov presents points to the necessity of self-determination in matters of emotional and spiritual health; if the doctors are incapable of healing themselves and those in their care, the patients might well take the biblical directive, "Arise! Take up thy bed and walk." In his stated desire to show people how bad and dreary their lives are, thereby assisting them in fashioning better lives, Chekhov's prescription is one of self-help. The short stories—Late-Blooming Flowers, Anyuta, Ward No. 6, The Head Gardener's Tale and The Doctor's Visit—and the plays—Platonov, Ivanov, The Seagull, The Wood-Demon, Uncle Vanya and Three Sisters—have been examined; beneath the incompetence and villainy of the doctors an affirming statement is discovered in the otherwise melancholy canon of Chekhov.
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In December 1884, his health having improved, Chekhov put up his brass plate and started his medical practice. Neither he nor any member of his family ever thought of his writing as anything but a temporary expedient to tide him over the difficult period before he could earn his living as a doctor. (Magarshack 87)

Thus began the medical career of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, newly graduated at the age of twenty-four from the University of Moscow. His literary career had begun some years earlier with frequent publication of hurriedly written anecdotes, short sketches, farces and cartoon captions in the popular little magazines of the period. Chekhov continued to practise medicine, in spite of his increasing preoccupation with writing, until 1897 at which time severe tubercular haemorrhaging made it impossible for him to withstand the rigors of medicine. While it is true that, despite his intention, he never established a long term medical practice in Moscow and exercised only intermittently and unsystematically his skill as a physician, there was one period during which his attention was given wholly to medicine. A seven month trip in 1890 across Siberia to the island of Sakhalin, the infamous penal colony was made, in part, Chekhov confessed, "... to repay however little a part of the debt I owe to medicine which, as you know, I have treated most shamelessly" (Magarshack 192). Throughout his life he ministered to the peasants in the surrounding countryside as well as to penniless artist friends. Even in his more-playwright-than-doctor mode at the Moscow Art Theatre he found himself prescribing sedatives as antidotes against opening night jitters as well as
distributing various medications to ward off coughs and colds during the long, draughty rehearsals. In Chekhov, the fusion between healer and artist was seamless.

Chekhov's pursuit of both careers gave rise to much comment and criticism: "Medicine gets in his way. If he weren't a doctor, he would write even better," Leo Tolstoy carped to Maxim Gorky (Pedrotti 233). Chekhov's editor and lifelong friend, Alexis Suvorin, chided Chekhov for "pursuing two hares at a time" with the implication that, given a single focus, Chekhov would enjoy even greater success. Yet Chekhov consistently defended his two vocations; in an oft-quoted letter to Suvorin, he defined his relationship with medicine and literature thus:

Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress. When I get tired of one I spend a night with the other. That may not be quite respectable, but at any rate it isn't boring, and, besides, neither of them loses anything from my unfaithfulness. If I had not had my medical practice, I should not have given my leisure and my superfluous thoughts to literature. (Magarshack 139)

From the perspective of style, critics defend Chekhov's medical training and credit it with his superb attention to detail, his objectivity, detachment and his treatment of characters as unique, case studies. In a rare autobiographical sketch written in response to the request of a former medical school classmate, neuropathologist G. I. Rossolimo, Chekhov admitted his indebtedness to medicine:

My work in medical sciences has undoubtedly had a serious influence on my literary development; it significantly extended the area of my observations, enriched my knowledge, and only one who is himself a physician can understand the true value of this for
me as a writer; this training has also been a guide, and probably because of my closeness to medicine, I have managed to avoid many mistakes. Familiarity with the natural sciences and scientific method has always kept me on my guard. (Ober 196)

From Chekhov's point of view—if not from Suvorin's or Tolstoy's—literature and medicine proved to be partners in a happy ménage à trois, the two careers providing a welcome and necessary balance.

And clearly, in terms of providing grist for the writer's mill, there are few vocations that offer equivalent advantages. William Carlos Williams, another writer/doctor, states his own case succinctly and poetically: "My medicine was the thing which gained me entrance to these secret gardens of the self. . . . I was permitted by my medical badge to follow the poor, defeated body into those gulfs and grottoes" (Morgan 53). Repeatedly present at those two momentous human experiences, birth and death, doctors are privy to the extremes of the human condition. Confrontation with death disproves the romanticized notion of ennoblement through suffering while acute observation of life, in all its frailty and brevity, reconfirms its infinitely precious nature. It is, therefore, entirely appropriate that Chekhov, doctor and writer, should declare in a letter written in 1902 near the end of his life, "All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are.' The important thing is that people should realize that, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves" (Gottlieb 189). The statement evokes an
image of Chekhov as a doctor of the emotional as well as the physical health of man.

Given his status as a physician more or less continuously from 1884 to 1897 it is not surprising that a significant number of Chekhov's short stories and plays should contain fictive doctors. More than twenty stories include a doctor who figures either peripherally or centrally and a complete exploration of Chekhov's yet untranslated material would, no doubt, yield still more. The first, full length extant play (commonly referred to as Platonov) portrays a doctor in a prominent role as do Ivanov and The Wood-Demon. (Wild Honey, an adaptation by Michael Frayn of Platonov, is here excluded due to substantial alterations in the play not the least of which is Frayn's decision to turn the murder of Platonov into a suicide.) In the late, major plays—The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard—only the last does not include a doctor.

But what is more significant than the number of physicians is the increasingly unflattering image. While the doctors in the early short stories are often far from saintly, periodically there surfaces a selfless physician to offset the slothful, grasping and uncaring ones. In the mature works, however, the balance is more difficult to discern; Drs. Dorn, Astrov and Chebutykin, despite their varying degrees of affability and personal magnetism, are studies in frailty and impotence. Indeed, Chebutykin from one perspective can almost be said to be villainous. Do these unflattering (although
strangely sympathetic) portraits mirror Chekhov's poor self-image, as some critics suggest, or indicate the writer's loss of faith in medical science, as others argue? Or is there some other ground in which these incompetents take root and which has some bearing on Chekhov's desire to help people create other and better lives?

It is relatively easy to dismiss the possibility of autobiography when dealing with Chekhov. Joanne Trautmann, in *Healing Arts in Dialogue*, makes the point: "Consistent with his theories about authorial objectivity, Chekhov hides his identity so carefully in his stories and plays—normally spreading his identity throughout all his characters, rather than choosing one for his representative—that biographical criticism, a risk at the best of times, is foolhardy in Chekhov's case" (125). Chekhov himself stated, "Subjectivity is a terrible thing. It is bad in that it exposes the poor author completely" (Simmons 55). Equally dangerous is the attempt to view the doctors as selective and stylized psychological representations of Chekhov by Chekhov as does Stephen Grecco in his article "A Physician Healing Himself." Grecco posits the argument that the reason for Chekhov's uncomplimentary treatment of doctors is a way of "exorcizing that rationalism that impedes his own full involvement in emotional life" (Grecco 9), which is to say that the detachment and objectivity required of medical men prevents Chekhov from achieving intimacy in his personal life. The critic perceives Dorn, Astrov and Chebutykin working through the emotional
inadequacies of the playwright; the absence of a doctor in The Cherry Orchard, he suggests, is attributable to Chekhov's resolution of emotional blocks through marriage to Olga Knipper. Grecco's argument presupposes that Chekhov was "fundamentally a sad and alienated man" (Grecco 4) but there is as much evidence to deny as to support his allegation; finally, there is simply insufficient evidence to prove Chekhov's emotional deficiency or need or a curative.

If the uncomplimentary characterization of doctors is not in response to his own personal inadequacies, there is also no reason to believe that Chekhov experienced a loss of faith in the practise of medicine in general or in medical men in particular, although as a man dying of consumption he had, perhaps, every reason for doing so. The state of the art was primitive and the training period shockingly brief; five years of medical school can hardly have been sufficient and young doctors, graduating at the age of twenty-four or less, must have felt desperately unprepared. The ineptitude of Chekhov's fictive doctors is not so much a failure of medicine, however, as it is a revelation of the deficiency of the individual characters. Richard Selzer, a New Haven surgeon, essayist and short story writer, makes a strong apology for doctors who have been broken by their practice:

We must surround ourselves with callouses so that we cannot feel the sharp prick and sting of what we do. Consequently the stereotyped surgeon with the tough exterior emerges. In every Western movie ever made, the alcoholic doctor is dragged out of the saloon to cut a bullet out of the sheriff's thigh. I sympathize with that surgeon who is drunk all the time. (Trautmann, Healing Arts 14)
Chekhov, too, made an apology for doctors:

The doctor must be forgiven a great deal because of the loathsome hours and days that make up so much of his life. For, in the face of the incurable, he is forced to preserve his external tranquillity while so often being ashamed of himself and his science. (Simmons 247)

But the apology is not a license, for Chekhov also claimed to "despise weakness and lack of mental and moral energy" (Simmons 391). Chekhov's personal commitment to medicine, in spite of its shortcomings and hardships, is an indication of the value he placed on hard-working practitioners and on medical science in general.

The unfavorable portrayals, if not indicative of self-doubt or doubts concerning the profession as a whole, must, therefore, find their source elsewhere. Chekhov's doctors cannot heed the directive, "Physician heal thyself," nor are they capable of healing those around them because the ailments they are called upon to treat include love and all its pain, despondency, frustration and boredom. There is an analogy between the doctor/patient relationship with its implicit dependency and Chekhov's "patients" who refuse to take responsibility for themselves. The failure of the doctors—or, to put it more charitably, the weakness of the doctors—is their inability or unwillingness to prescribe responsible behaviour and action as a way of mitigating unhappiness. Whether worn down by demands both physical and emotional or, in glimpsing constantly the infinite they are blind to the needs of the present, Chekhov's doctors almost unanimously renege on their responsibility as healers. Much is expected of doctors;
theirs is a role that is almost godlike in attempting to hold
the forces of nature at bay. Edmund D. Pellegrino, in his
introduction to Medicine and Literature, describes doctors as
"preventers of death and strategists in the struggle of the
individual against the laws of life" (xv). An examination of
some of the short stories and plays will focus on the doctors—
both "better" and "worse"—and reveal how successfully they
function as strategists. The material will be treated more or
less in chronological order for, as Chekhov matured and grew
increasingly ill, his doctors became less and less capable and
Chekhov's prescription for self-determination more and more
insistent. Perhaps if the physicians cannot heal themselves,
the other characters—and, by extension, the readers—will see
the wisdom in the advice, "Arise! Take up thy bed and walk."
In the spiritual sense and, frequently, in the actual sense,
this is the prescription that Dr. A. P. Chekhov wrote.

In 1920, sixteen years after Chekhov's death, a sprawling,
untitled manuscript was discovered in a safety deposit box of a
Moscow bank. Much speculation surrounds the play but scholars
now believe it to be the first full length play written by
Chekhov and suggest that it was written in the years 1880-1881,
at which time the playwright was in his first years of medical
school. Generally, it is titled Platonov, although various
translators and adaptors have used other titles including A
Country Scandal, Don Juan in the Russian Manner, That Worthless
Fellow Platonov and Wild Honey. It is an unwieldy play,
running almost six hours uncut. Ronald Hingley, the translator
and critic, although usually opposed to adaptations, admits to the necessity in the case of Platonov: "Since it would take rather longer to stage than Wagner's Götterdammerung or Tristan, while being on a somewhat less sublime artistic level, it must obviously be cut before it can be staged. . . ."1 A failed experiment, as it has been judged by critics, the play, nevertheless, introduces the absolutely unforgettable and enigmatic titular character as well as themes that Chekhov reworked in the major plays: the insensitive spoiling of the lives of others, the loss of family estates and the rise of the capitalist, for example. As well, characters in the later plays find their origins here; Anna Voynitsev prefigures Madame Ranevsky, Timothy Bugrov precedes Lopakhin and, more significantly, Dr. Nicholas Triletsky antecedes a long line of mildly--or, in the case of Astrov and Chebutykin, dangerously--alcoholic, incompetent doctors.

Nicholas Triletsky is described in the list of characters as a "young doctor" and later by Platonov, "all healthy glow and shine and scent" (OC 2: 27). Something of a dandy, the doctor sports a "natty" haircut and, in the garden-party scene, a "peaked cap with a cockade." That he fancies himself a ladies' man is obvious in his response to Platonov: "I won't have barbers do my hair, I use women for that and if I pay them roubles, it's not for hair-dos!" (27). Yet the idealism that might be expected in a young doctor is non-existent. Retained

by the Voynitsev family as a family practitioner, he has, at least initially, little to do. Platonov refers to him condescendingly as "her ladyship's personal physician grade three" (27) yet Anna Voynitsev is in abundantly good health. (Clearly, Sergey's young bride, Sonya, is tubercular as is evidenced by her weight loss, chest pains and persistent cough. Triletsky's medical skills will be put to the test should Sonya survive Platonov's death and what, no doubt, will become a country scandal.) Triletsky, himself, admits to being a buffoon: "That's why I get board and lodging here, as a kind of court jester. Pocket money too. When they tire of me I'll be kicked out in disgrace" (82). It is a situation that provides little dignity yet the play implies that Triletsky has not lost his idealism—rather, that he has never been burdened with ideals. When Sonya asks Platonov what prevents him from serving an ideal, Nicholas scoffs at the notion and, aside, remarks, "The girl's talking through her hat" (36). Remarks are made throughout the play by various characters to suggest that Triletsky is better at billing than doctoring (an accusation that Chekhov will make repeatedly in his later short stories and plays). When called upon to minister to the village shopkeeper who has suffered a stroke, Dr. Triletsky, more than a little inebriated, refuses to go and curses the man: "Confound the man, I can't bother. I have a splitting head myself and a belly-ache too" (99). (Dr. Michael Astrov, many plays later, will echo Triletsky's reluctance as will Dr. Ivan Chebutykin, who will get drunk to avoid his duty.) That
Triletsky has always been, and continues to be, lax in his profession is clear when Platonov chides him and asks if he has seen his patients that day. Nicholas responds: "Look here, Michael, once and for all, will you leave me alone? I'm sick and tired of you and your lectures. . . . You'll get no change out of me, I can tell you that" (51). Triletsky's opinion of his profession can be summed up in his impatient outburst, "Damn and blast professional ethics" (104).

When finally motivated to perform, the doctor enjoys sporadic success. He bleeds Glagolyev when required, ministers to his nephew, albeit indifferently (although Nicholas's mother seems unduly concerned about the child's wellbeing), and performs competently when Sasha poisons herself. However, in the final moments of Platonov's life, it is questionable whether Triletsky responds appropriately; his first response is to open Platonov's frock-coat and the second, to order a carafe of water which he, himself, then drinks, throwing the carafe to one side. It is difficult to know whether he recognizes the impossibility of saving Platonov or whether he is finally weary of the entire situation. He has, after all, just come from what might yet prove to be his sister's deathbed. His conclusion, "Life's only worth a copeck" (162), whether arising from the recognition of a fundamental truth or from great weariness, is a summation of the human condition with which many of Chekhov's other doctors concur.

Apart from his strengths and weaknesses as a physician, Nicholas Triletsky is something of an emotional eunuch. His
relationship with Mary Grekov is nebulous as he admits: "Am I bored, am I in love, or is it something else? I've no idea. I know I miss her terribly in the afternoons" (15). Perhaps his uncertainty results from an acquired professional detachment that Chekhov claimed "dessicates" life (Ober 197) but whatever the cause, this uncertainty makes it difficult for him to react strongly to Platonov's perpetual cat-and-mouse game with the young student. How can he be expected to take sides when his attraction to both Platonov and Mary is equivalent? His friendship with Anna drifts uncomfortably between flirtation--"I like kissing your hand, it's like satin" (13)--and brotherly affection--"What soap do you use, they're so white? Wonderful hands" (13). And despite the appellation, "revered parent," with which he greets his old father, Triletsky's toying, although good-natured, tends to belie deep-seated respect. His sister, Sasha, alone commands his unwavering affection and concern; perhaps it is a sign of his emotional insufficiency that he is unable to find a satisfactory relationship outside this sibling bond. Typically in Chekhov, those characters lacking emotional depth, moral energy or conviction have insatiable appetites. As if compensating for emptiness, emotional or spiritual, Triletsky is constantly hungry, perpetually thinking about food and, like Gayev in The Cherry Orchard, unconsciously consuming sweets. In response to Anna's question, "... when will you have had enough?" (14) the answer, in the metaphorical sense is "perhaps never."
But ultimately, there are traits to be commended in Nicholas Triletsky and by the conclusion of Platonov he cannot simply be dismissed as "covered with fluff" (15) as he earlier described himself. Despite Ronald Hingley's comment that, consistent with the tendency of Russian fiction, Chekhov refuses to strike a moral attitude (OC 2: 5), sympathy definitely shifts away from Platonov in the last scene of the play. With most of the characters willing to forgive Platonov's roguish (and selfish) behaviour, the doctor, driven by his sister's attempted suicide, takes his friend to task. He is, admittedly, melodramatic in his attack but, far from vindictive, Triletsky merely states the obvious. Platonov has casually toyed with the lives of Anna, Mary, Sasha and Sonya and does, indeed, deserve what the doctor recommends, "a damn good hiding" (OC 2: 155). The scolding is peculiarly without rancor or malice (unlike Dr. Eugene Lvov in Ivanov, whose attacks appear to spring from moral priggishness) and Triletsky's genuine grief upon Platonov's death speaks of a generosity of spirit that is admirable. Platonov has, after all, led Nicholas's sister more than a merry chase.

But it is in the final moments of the play that Triletsky achieves a certain kind of dignity (despite the histrionics) in taking control of the situation. Nothing is to be gained--and much is to be lost--by admitting Sonya's crime of passion. Triletsky's declaration to all who stand "goggling" that Platonov has shot himself, is dishonest but charitable and pragmatic. Platonov has, in some sense, been bent on self-
destruction from the outset; Sonya can be perceived, with a
good deal of rationalization, as having been the instrument of
his intent. And, at least for the moment and until cooler
minds prevail, the lie is the most practical way of dealing
with the situation. His concealment parallels that of Dr.
Eugene Dorn, in *The Seagull*, inasmuch as it protects, for the
moment, those who will suffer most and, just as in *The Seagull*,
the reader is left to contemplate the wisdom of the doctor's
decision to withhold the truth. Whether his lie is to be
condoned or not, Triletsky assumes control and although it
seems trite, he suggests the obvious and most practical next
move: "Bury the dead and do our best for the living" (162).
His final advice in the play concerns the needs of the living
as he directs the distracted Sergey to help Sonya.

From a dramatic perspective, Triletsky-the-practical
cannot successfully compete with Platonov-the-rascal but by the
conclusion of the play, some tribute is finally paid to the
doctor. That Platonov's stocks have diminished in value is
pointed up in Frayn's adaptation in which the demise of
Platonov is accompanied by the smell of sulphur! However, in
choosing Platonov's death by suicide or accident—and it is
unclear in *Wild Honey* exactly what it is—Frayn cheats Nicholas
Triletsky of his moment of growth. It is not a great moment
but it is something. Considering the great list of
incompetents that succeed Triletsky, it is a pity to deny the
first of the line his brief glow. The next of the doctors to
be considered enjoys scarcely a flicker.
Late-Blooming Flowers, one of Chekhov's longer short stories, was published in four installments in 1882; Chekhov was by this time twenty-two and in his third year of medical school. His very first published short story had appeared in 1880 thus Late-Blooming Flowers represents a very early work and, predictably, it shows signs of a young writer struggling with his craft. There is a fairy tale mood and cadence to the story which, in part, arises from the names of the two principal characters, Prince Yegorushka and Princess Marusya. Of course, in Russia the titles "prince" and "princess" were somewhat loosely employed and did not have the exotic flavour they now do in the western world. But the tale involves poverty, unrequited then requited love and sorrow--hallmarks all of the fairy tale. Late-Blooming Flowers does not, however, have the mandatory happy ending.

Chekhov's much praised detachment has not in this story yet established itself and peppered throughout the story are authorial interjections: "forgive her, reader" (Late-Blooming Flowers 5) and "this news was too cruel for my little heroine" (45). Clever aphorisms appear as witty interruptions to the action: "When there is love there is reckless faith" (7) and "Fate is not always miserly; sometimes she even pays in advance" (8). But early as Late-Blooming Flowers was in Chekhov's career, there appears a medical man who is totally consistent with the playwright's later creations.

The doctor figures even more centrally in Late-Blooming Flowers than he did in Platonov; in fact, of heroic proportions
in Marusya's eyes is Dr. Toporkov, son of a serf and a self-made medical man, who in the course of creating himself, has destroyed his sensitivity and his compassion. Broadcasting a marriage proposal to all eligible women in town, he marries the first woman who meets his demand of 60,000 roubles—the price of the house he wishes to buy. The narrator comments, "On marriage itself, for which he felt the necessity, he looked quite indifferently; to him it was immaterial where the matchmaker called" (40-41). Here is one of Chekhov's first uncomplimentary portraits. Arrogant, pompous and insensitive, Dr. Toporkov coldly greets his patients, having first instructed his housemaid to inform them that five roubles are required. He allows only the briefest of examinations; ten minutes is all he permits regardless of the patient's ailment. In an iconographic moment, Dr. Toporkov is seen revealed:

The pose in which Marusya had caught him now resembled the poses of those stately models from whom painters usually draw great commanders. Near the hand he leaned on the desk were scattered the ten- and five-rouble notes he had just received from his women patients. (53)

It is not a flattering image, especially from the pen of one so newly engaged in the profession. Several motifs that appear in Late-Blooming Flowers reappear in many guises in later stories and plays: the apathy and decadence of the declining aristocracy, the drive and ambition of the recently emancipated serf class, the hypochondria of the upper class and the escape motif. Dr. Toporkov is one of the first in a collection of grasping physicians rigorously capitalizing on the real or imagined ailments of a bored and overfed society.
Also significant is Marusya, the penniless and unhappy young princess, who adores the doctor from afar. Declining suitors, which she can ill afford to do, she continues to pine for Toporkov, who had treated her in the past. Three roubles clutched in her hand, she visits the doctor:

Dragging herself through the wet mud, my heroine was plodding on her way to Dr. Toporkov's. Why was she going to him? I am going for treatment! she thought to herself. But do not believe her, reader! (47).

With the future "obscure" and "with little hope, much to be feared," the princess is paralysed, indecisive and looking outside herself for solutions. Her dependency upon Toporkov is pathological and misdirected. She represents a very typical Chekhovian character, rendered inert through circumstances or temperament, who is either unwilling or unable to take control. Ironically, her feigned cough, an excuse for the visit, becomes very real; Marusya is in the initial phase of consumption. Even if Dr. Toporkov had been able to perceive Marusya's unhealthy passion for him and even if he had been able to encourage her to break that dependency, Marusya is ill-fated.

In a most atypical manner, Chekhov allows Marusya's love for the doctor to break down Toporkov's hardened exterior—and he experiences a moment of self-realization:

What had he gained? Five-rouble and ten-rouble notes, and nothing else; study, life, peace, everything had been sacrificed to them. And they had given him in return princely quarters, a carefully chosen table, horses—everything, in a word, which goes by the name of comfort. Toporkov remembered his seminary "ideals" and his university dreams . . . and these easy chairs and this couch, upholstered in expensive velvet, these rugs completely covering the floor, these wall-sconces, this three-hundred rouble
clock appeared to him like a dreadful, impassable bog. (69)

Overcome, Toporkov lifts Marusya up, leaves his home and possessions and takes the now rapidly failing consumptive to the south of France where she dies. The more mature Chekhov becomes evident as the story concludes with Toporkov returning to his practice, continuing as a sad and frightened man to minister to his ladies but taking on the burden of Marusya's debauched brother, Prince Yegorushka, because "his chin is so like Marusya's." Although the story is laced throughout with uncharacteristic sentimentality and melodrama, the conclusion is ironic in the customary Chekhov manner.

As a young medical student, Chekhov had clearly and already perceived the hazards of the profession: the spiritual death of doctors motivated by financial reward. The fact that Toporkov returns to his practice albeit saddened, accumulating once again the five-rouble notes but unable to look into the faces of the women he treats, suggests only marginal improvement. There remains a strong sense of emotional malaise in Toporkov's admission, "it frightens him to look into a woman's face" (71). Toporkov has managed to save neither Marusya nor himself; her death is physical, his is spiritual. Self-knowledge has been too little and come too late. In the next short story, the young medical student fails to achieve even such brief enlightenment.

Anyuta, written in 1886 just two years after Chekhov began his practice, reiterates the complaint against insensitivity and indifference. Stepan Klochkov (which resonates remarkably
with Anton Chekhov) is a third-year medical student who shares a cheap apartment with the plain, but long-suffering Anyuta. Neither weary nor broken by the demands of medical practice, Klochkov is yet already thoughtless in his treatment of others. Cramming for an anatomy exam he orders Anyuta to remove her blouse so that he can study and diagram her lungs. The apartment is cold, frost has formed on the inside of the windows yet he is totally self-absorbed and totally insensitive to her shivering discomfort as he crayons the ribs on her chest. Oblivious to her distress, he is also unaffected by her womanliness. (Obviously, physicians must guard themselves against sexual attraction to their patients, but Klochkov's asexual response is typical of Chekhov's other doctors. While they may enjoy flirtation, as does Dr. Michael Astrov for example, there is a strange, non-sexuality in their response to women.) Klochkov's self-centredness knows no bounds: "Klochkov began sounding her, and was so absorbed in this occupation that he did not notice how Anyuta's lips, nose, and fingers turned blue with cold" (Anton Chekhov's Short Stories 21). Finished with his observation, he demands that she remain sitting like that without removing the crayon marks across her chest while he continues his studying. His thoughtlessness goes even further when, in "loaning" her to his artist friend for a few hours, he exhibits his full proprietary rights over Anyuta. By the conclusion of this very short story Klochkov has been persuaded by the artist, Fetisov, to tell Anyuta to move out; the apartment is unclean, untidy and taking no responsibility
for the chaos, Klochkov blames their squalid circumstances on Anyuta. He fails to comprehend that Anyuta's life is completely taken up with embroidering for the rich in order to earn the necessary copecks for their mutual survival. He does, to give him small credit, permit her to stay but makes it clear that one day they shall have to part: "We can't stay together forever" (23). It is a matter of speculation if Chekhov was making a comment on the ruinous nature of medical training or a comment on a type of character to whom medical practice appeals. Do analysis and objectivity rule out compassion? Certainly the story echoes Chekhov's personal concerns about the dessicating nature of science and parallels the playwright's fear: "Alas, what is terrible is not the skeletons, but the fact that I am no longer terrified by them" (Personal Papers 101).

Anyuta, however, cannot be totally absolved. Klochkov is the sixth student she has lived with and each, in turn, has abandoned her: "Now they had all finished their studies, had gone out into the world, and, of course, like respectable people, had long ago forgotten her" (Anton Chekhov's Short Stories 21). Anyuta's self-definition does not include respectability; respectable men use her and leave. Are there options open to Anyuta which would provide for greater happiness? What is it in her that prevents her from reaching out for what Chekhov referred to as "a better life"? The consequences of inertia are painful and wasteful as Chekhov's legion of characters illustrates again and again. Dependency
is potentially disastrous and her reliance on Klochkov, who does not love her, will ultimately lead to another desertion. The young medical student is far from blameless but Anyuta persists in self-destructive behaviour. Perhaps there are no options for her, but assuming that there are, the story is another prescription for self-determination. Klochkov will not leave her until it suits him and Anyuta will become the victim of his decision. There is little to commend Klochkov and the insensitivity that characterizes him will take up residence in other Chekhovian doctors. The insensitivity of Dr. Lvov in the next play, Ivanov, is of a different type but greater in magnitude.

Chekhov referred to Ivanov (1887-1889) as his first play, choosing to ignore the unperformed and largely unsuccessful Platonov. Written in ten days, the play at first delighted Chekhov: "To believe such judges as Davydov [the well known actor V. N. Davydov], I have the knack of writing plays. I turn out to have produced a completely finished article instinctively, by feel, without even knowing what I was doing—and haven't made a single mistake from the point of view of staging" (OC 2: 285). However, two years and three major re-writes later, Chekhov wrote to Suvorin: "I'm frightfully bored with Ivanov. I can't read about it and I feel awful when people start giving ingenious explanations of it" (OC 2: 298). The ingenious explanations arose, no doubt, from the enigmatic nature of Ivanov himself. While his creator defended him, it was—and remains—difficult to garner sympathy for Ivanov who
deliberately lets his wife die whilst engaged in a dalliance with another woman. Less difficult is it to dislike the young doctor who appears to be principled but whose exaggerated and misdirected integrity and honesty fuel his self-righteousness. That the play bewildered Moscow and St. Petersburg audiences is made evident by reviews reporting that Ivanov was greeted by both clapping and hissing. Chekhov was dismayed by audiences' lack of understanding: "If Ivanov emerges as a villain or odd-man-out and the doctor as a hero, if you can't see why Anna and Sasha should love Ivanov, the play clearly hasn't come off and there can be no question of [re-]staging it" (OC 2: 291). Despite many revisions to the manuscript, Ivanov's personal appeal is still problematic; Dr. Eugene Lvov, however, (in the same mould as Ibsen's Gregers Werle and with his same penchant for truth at whatever cost) poses no such difficulty.

The doctor in Ivanov is once again young; Ivanov remarks that Lvov has just graduated from medical school which indicates he could be as young as twenty-four or twenty-five. At any rate, Ivanov at thirty-five feels sufficiently older than the doctor to offer unsolicited advice. Lvov, like the earlier doctors, is unmarried and claims, when asked by Ivanov's wife, Anna, if he misses his mother, "I am too busy to miss anyone" (OC 2: 178). It is a claim made in various ways by other Chekhovian doctors. Unlike his predecessors who are either without ideals or who have lost them along the way, Eugene Lvov fairly bristles with idealism. Stage directions indicate a perpetual state of agitation, most of which arises
from his sense of foul play; he is alternately agitated, excited or upset. He paces, gestures despairingly and admits, "I can't sit still" (178). His over-indulged honesty interferes with common sense and alternately infuriates or bores others. Ivanov's consumptive wife makes the point when she gently chides Lvov for perpetually declaring his honesty: "Never talk to a woman about your good points, let her see those for herself" (195).

Ultimately, Lvov's moral outrage causes him to put at risk the well-being of his patient; the young woman, Sasha, is correct in upbraiding him:

In the name of honesty you, a doctor, didn't spare even his sick wife, you pestered her with your suspicions. There's no outrageous, rotten, cruel trick you couldn't play while still thinking yourself an unusually honest and progressive man. (226-227)

It is ironic that, in searching for a doctor who exhibits morality, idealism and responsible behaviour in Chekhov's work, Lvov's exaggerated ethical stance excludes him. That Chekhov meant him to be perceived thus is quite clear, and his lengthy explanation a year after the play was first performed, leaves no doubt:

He's the decent, blunt, hot-headed type, but narrow and obsessive--what some wits have dubbed "the well-meaning fool." Breadth of vision and straightforward reactions are outside his scope. He's a walking cliche--tendentiousness personified. He looks at everything and everyone through narrow blinkers, and his opinions are all prejudiced. . . He arrived in the district already biased. He at once took all the richer peasants for profiteers, and Ivanov, whom he doesn't understand, for a crook. . . He'll stop at nothing, and he never feels a qualm. . . (OC 2: 293-294)
Lvov's magnified definition of decency might well be exacerbated by his concern for Anna which appears to be more than professional. Ivanov's old uncle, Shabelsky, suspects as much and several times throughout the play makes a direct reference to Lvov's attentions: "Tell me, reverend high priest of science, what sage first discovered that ladies' chest complaints yield to frequent visits from a young doctor? A great discovery, great!" (200). At another point, Shabelsky scoffs at Lvov's diagnosis and claims that the young doctor is just looking for an excuse "to hang about" (189) and Lvov, indeed, does appear solicitous in protecting Anna from visitors when he "thinks" she's sleeping. In an oddly flirtatious tête-à-tête with Anna, Lvov tells her she is decent, intelligent and that she has "a nature most angelic." He does appear to be half-in-love with Anna and Ivanov's unfair treatment no doubt rankles Lvov unbearably. Anna's question at the conclusion of their intimate conversation--"Have you any brothers, Doctor?" (180)--is somewhat bewildering and sounds like an overture. That their relationship is more than that of doctor/patient, from Lvov's perspective at any rate, is clear when he admits, "It's bad enough not paying me, but they play hell with my feelings as well" (180).

But regardless of the source of Lvov's sanctimony, he stops at nothing. Anna's cure, as Lvov admits, is absolute rest and freedom from anxiety yet in revealing Sasha's presence in the Ivanov house to Anna, he accelerates the course of events and hastens his patient's death. He is a shallow
thinker, incapable of understanding Ivanov, unconscious of his own motives and his priggishness reaches its limit when he declares, "As an honest man I'm bound to interfere" (215). It is a peculiarity of the play that, as Ronald Hingley claims, "Lvov is at least superficially well intentioned and does his best to help Anna, but he is put forward as detestable. He is one of those 'do-gooders' whom Chekhov liked to show spreading alarm and despondency. . ." (OC 2: 5).

What is there to commend Lvov? His admonition to Ivanov to treat Anna better? His friendliness towards Anna when all have deserted her? His honesty in speaking what he believes to be true—that Ivanov is an unmitigated swine? It all seems like faint praise in view of the impending disaster. In chastising Ivanov, Lvov declares—almost godlike—"I'm a doctor. And as a doctor I insist you mend your ways—you're killing your wife" (208). Ivanov's behaviour is, indeed, killing Anna and he is incapable of change. But equally unsuccessful in mending his ways, or even aware of the need for change, is Eugene Lvov; his obsession with honesty at any price precipitates catastrophe, firstly with Anna and finally with Ivanov. That Chekhov did not thoroughly detest Lvov is evident in his apology: "Such people fill a need and are mostly likeable" (294). But Dr. Lvov is not mostly likeable; his excessive virtue proves irresponsible and fails to serve as a catalyst for initiating better lives for those in his care.

The doctors here begin to grow older. With few exceptions, Chekhov's physicians, disillusioned by failures
both professional and personal, now take on a weary resignation. Weaknesses or flaws perceived in the young doctors are, from this point, full-blown. A souring of the spirit takes effect and the doctors' humour declines into cynicism. Chronologically, Michael Khrushchov, "a landowner with a medical degree," should be considered next but because of its relationship to *Uncle Vanya*, *The Wood-Demon* (1889-1890) will be studied later.

The novella-length *Ward No. 6* appeared in print in 1892, exactly midway in Chekhov's literary career. It is a curious and sordid study and in its dark psychological probing anticipates Franz Kafka. The central character is Dr. Andrey Yefimitch Ragin, who as a young man wished to enter the theological academy, but, threatened by his surgeon father, reluctantly entered medical school; Andrey Yefimitch confesses more than once that "he has never had a natural bent for medicine or science in general" (*The Horse-Stealers and Other Stories* 47). He accepts the position of head doctor at an appalling village hospital, one hundred and fifty miles from any major town where the tremendous advances that he reads about in medical journals have not yet infiltrated: surgery done under sterile conditions, techniques in orthopedic surgery and a miraculous new cure for syphilis. Upon his arrival, Dr. Ragin sees the dreadful conditions—filth, violence and depravity—but he appears unable to make changes:

In his opinion the most sensible thing that could be done was to let out the patients and close the hospital. But he reflected that his will alone was not enough to do this, and that it would be useless;
if physical and moral impurity were driven out of one place, they would only move to another; one must wait for it to wither away of itself. (49)

Totally vanished is any youthful idealism he may once have had; and with reference once again to Edmund Pellegrino's description of doctors as strategists in the struggle of the individual against the laws of life, Dr. Ragin waves the white flag of capitulation. He institutes very inconsequential changes, withdraws from active participation and leaves the ministering to his assistant.

If the situation is bad in the hospital, it is even worse in Ward No. 6, a ward set aside for the mentally deranged in a squalid little lodge on the hospital grounds. Here the brutal warden, Nikita, guards his charges and controls them with beatings. One such patient is Ivan Dmitritch Gromov, a paranoiac, who in a Kafkaesque fashion imagines himself the object of police surveillance and in a self-fulfilling delusion, finds himself incarcerated in Ward No. 6. A chance meeting between Dr. Ragin and Gromov, an intelligent and articulate man apart from his paranoia, initiates a fascination on the doctor's part. He becomes a frequent visitor in the ward—a situation which arouses the suspicion of the hospital staff and village administrators. The dialogues in which the doctor and patient engage focus on the nature of freedom and suffering. The naive, comfortable Dr. Ragin argues for freedom as an inner state:

In any surroundings you can find tranquillity in yourself. Free and deep thinking which strives for the comprehension of life, and complete contempt for the foolish bustle of the world--those are two
blessings beyond any that man has ever known. And you can possess them even though you lived behind threefold bars. (69)

Quoting Marcus Aurelius, he denies the reality of pain: "A pain is a vivid idea of pain; make an effort of will to change that idea, dismiss it, cease to complain, and the pain will disappear" (74). Gromov dismisses Ragin's facile stoicism and is quick to point out that the doctor has not once suffered and cannot know the meaning of pain. And here the madman Gromov hits the mark, for Ragin has indeed become dead to the pain of others. Gromov echoes Chekhov's own fears when he evaluates the type of man Dr. Ragin exemplifies:

People who have an official, professional relation to other men's sufferings--for instance, judges, police officers, doctors--in the course of time, through habit, grow so callous that they cannot, even if they wish it, take any but a formal attitude to their clients; in this respect they are not different from the peasant who slaughters sheep and calves in the back-yard, and does not notice the blood. (40)

The comment parallels Chekhov's concern with his own diminishing terror of skeletons.

Predictably, Dr. Ragin comes to see that the lunatic, Gromov, is the wise man and his own philosophizing a stance, a mere facade to conceal his ineffectuality. Forced to resign by the hospital administrators and duped by his own assistant, he finds himself imprisoned in Ward No. 6 and, like the others, beaten by Nikita. His suffering, however, is shortlived for within two days, he dies of apoplexy. So much for contempt for and indifference to suffering.

It is not impossible to sympathize with Dr. Ragin especially in view of his demise and clearly Chekhov strove for
this balance of criticism and empathy. Yet despite the
balance—the pluses and minuses that Chekhov refers to—there
are clear indicators to assist in the final weighing and
measuring. Louis Pedrotti, in his essay "A Doctor in the
House," suggests that Chekhov's work parallels the physician's
method: ". . . we are asked to observe the effect of words and
actions on these 'patients' and we are called upon to come to
an appraisal of the evidence as given us in the brief time span
of four acts. . ." (241). Readers of the short stories
participate in the same process—a tallying up of information—and while Chekhov refrains from overt moralizing, it is not
impossible to judge the relative morality of his characters.
Piecing together what is known about Dr. Ragin, the picture so
constructed is, if not damning, harshly critical. Despite the
fact that life was "dull and stifling in the town" and that the
townspeople live a "dingy, meaningless life"—both phrases
significantly reminiscent of Chekhov's credo regarding his
intention to show people how meaningless their lives are—Dr.
Ragin cannot be absolved. In spite of his love of intelligence
and honesty "he had no strength of will nor belief in his right
to organize an intelligent and honest life about him. He was
absolutely unable to give orders, to forbid things, and to
insist" (50). Surely in accepting the position at the hospital
these are the very qualities required. Moreover, he is not
unaware that conditions in the hospital are shocking:

. . . gaunt looking patients in dressing-gowns
passed; dead bodies and vessels full with filth
were carried by; the children were crying, and
there was a cold draught. Andrey Yefimitch knew
that such surroundings were torture to feverish, consumptive, and impressionable patients; but what could be done? (52)

Demoralized by oppressive bureaucracy and weak-willed by nature, Ragin does nothing. And while half of his salary goes to his personal library, the fate of the patients worsens. He knows that beside his warm and comfortable house, people are suffering in sickness and physical impurity; he knows that Nikita knocks the patients about behind the barred windows of Ward No. 6. In this knowledge, he is damned. His confession that he serves in a corrupt institution and receives a salary from people whom he deceives leads him to the ultimate refusal to accept blame:

I am only part of an inevitable social evil: all local officials are pernicious and receive their salary for doing nothing. And so for my dishonesty it is not I who am to blame, but the times... If I had been born two hundred years later I should have been different... (63)

Even Ivanov scorns those who blame their "environment" and desperately searches within himself for the cause of his moral decline. If compassion is the ability to believe in the reality of others, Dr. Ragin has no compassion. Only when the pain is his own can he acknowledge its reality. He offers excuses—not care—to those for whom he has accepted responsibility and sympathy for him vanishes in the face of his indifference. It is as strong an indictment against physicians as has yet been made by Chekhov and in none of the remaining short stories and plays is the portrait quite so dark.

The Head Gardener's Tale is interesting in passing—and as momentary relief against the rapidly eroding image of the
Written in 1894, it is a tale-within-a-tale; the main plot involves a village's reaction to a crime so horrendous that it cannot be countenanced. Refusing to believe that a criminal of such malevolence exists within their community, the villagers choose to believe the murder of their saintly village doctor an accident. The accused is acquitted but years later when actual proof of the crime is unearthed, the murderer is once again acquitted. The judge, unable to pronounce the man's guilt, declares: "Man is not capable of falling so low" (Stories of Russian Life 238). The Head Gardener's Tale reveals an affirmation of man's inherent goodness, an affirmation seldom seen in Chekhov. It is not the optimism of the starry-eyed Sonya in Uncle Vanya nor the optimism of the revolutionary Trofimov in The Cherry Orchard but rather a quiet statement of man's perfectibility:

... for their faith God forgave the sins of all the inhabitants of that town. He rejoices when people believe that mankind is made in his likeness and image, and he is sad when they forget man's worth and judge him more harshly than they would a dog. Even if that acquittal did harm to the inhabitants of the town, think, on the other hand, what a beneficent influence their faith in mankind had on those people—a faith which does not remain inactive but breeds generous thoughts in our hearts and stimulates us to respect every man. Every man. (239)

Typically, the declaration is given to an elderly gardener who might be suspect in the deliverance of such homespun homilies. Chekhov frequently reduces or softens the impact of forceful statements in choosing an unlikely or unreliable speaker. But the power of the phrasing transcends the rustic speaker and
hope for a better world—a hope which Chekhov frequently
voiced—shines through.

But of particular interest in this study is the victim of
the crime. If Chekhov ever painted a clear portrait of the
good doctor, it is here:

He was ill himself of consumption, and yet when he
was summoned to a sick-bed he would forget his own
illness and, without sparing himself, would climb
panting up the mountains, no matter how high they
might be. He braved heat and cold and scorned
hunger and thirst. He never accepted money, and
the strange thing was that when a patient died he
would follow the body weeping to the grave with
the kith and kin. (235)

The description leaves no doubt as to Chekhov's sympathies; the
other doctors, portrayed in varying degrees of indifference,
fall short of his ideal. To some extent, the portrait is also
one of the playwright himself—as described by his patients and
friends.

In 1893 Chekhov submitted The Island of Sakhalin as a
thesis for the degree of Doctor of Medical Sciences, a degree
which would have allowed him to lecture at medical school. His
approach to the teaching of medicine was radical and
anticipated twentieth-century practice: "If I were a teacher, I
would draw my audience as deeply as possible into the area of
subjective feelings of patients, for I think that would prove
really useful to the students" (Ober 199). In his essay on
Chekhov, contained in Boswell's Clap and Other Essays, W. B.
Ober states that "it was half a century before the term
'psychosomatic medicine' came into vogue, but we can credit
Chekhov with having such an idea in embryo and for having
derived it himself" (199). In no other work is the connection between physical and emotional well-being as forcefully made as in *The Doctor's Visit* (1898) nor is there anywhere a doctor who comes closer to offering a truly useful prescription. Dr. Korolyov, unlike the doctors to follow, is both capable and willing to explore the "subjective feelings" of his patient and in doing so comes very close to effecting a "cure."

Summoned to the home of a wealthy factory owner, Dr. Korolyov is taken by carriage across the open countryside into the town dominated by monstrous buildings and smokestacks. Weary workers trudge home, yielding for the doctor's carriage with timidity and respect. Over everything lies "a gray powder as though from dust" (*Anton Chekhov's Short Stories* 202). Overwhelmed by the oppressiveness of the factory site, the doctor is received at the home of the factory owner, the widow Lyalikov, her daughter Liza and the governess. Liza, the patient for whom he has been called, is a young girl "fully grown up, big and tall, but ugly like her mother, with the same little eyes and disproportionate breadth of the lower part of the face" (203). The girl, ill for years, suffers from palpitations of the heart, an ailment for which the doctor can find no physiological source. She is distraught, breaks down into uncontrollable sobbing and Korolyov no longer noticed the little eyes or the heavy development of the lower part of the face. He saw a soft, suffering expression which was intelligent and touching: she seemed to him altogether graceful, feminine, and simple; and he longed to soothe her, not with drugs, not with advice, but with simple, kindly words. (204)
Here finally is a doctor who approaches Chekhov's ideal; in reaching into Liza's inner world, Korolyov sees that the chronic melancholy that plagues her and that manifests itself in illness results from the situation in which she finds herself. Heiress to a fortune yet imprisoned in a grand house which is maintained by the drudgery of thousands of ill fed and overworked labourers, Liza sees that she has no hope of happiness. Her dawning social awareness precludes contentment. A Doctor's Visit is one of the strongest political statements made by Chekhov and his left wing sentiments are unconcealed:

The strong must hinder the weak from living—such was the law of Nature; but only in a newspaper article or in a schoolbook was that intelligible and easily accepted. In the hotchpotch which was everyday life, in the tangle of trivialities out of which human relations were woven, it was no longer a law, but a logical absurdity, when the strong and the weak were both equally victims of their mutual relations, unwillingly submitting to some directing force, unknown, standing outside life, apart from man. (208)

Although the thoughts are Korolyov's, the authorial voice is undeniable.

Attuned to her incipient social conscience, Korolyov knows there is no medicine that can "cure" Liza, no medication that can soothe her, and so it is with "simple, kindly words" that he tries to help her. Liza, herself, recognizes and articulates the problem:

It seems to me that I have no illness, but that I am weary and frightened . . . I am constantly being doctored . . . but I should like to talk, not with a doctor, but with some intimate friend who would understand me and would convince me that I was right or wrong. (209)
It is clear to the doctor that Liza must leave the factory with its promise of affluence and lifelong comfort; illness, he tells her, is an intelligent and admirable response to her world.

Falling just short of giving Liza the advice he wishes to give—or that needs to be given—Korolyov tells her that "our children and grandchildren" will know what to do. They will give it all up and go away. "Go where?" Liza asks. Korolyov replies: "Where? . . . There are lots of places a good, intelligent person can go to" (210). The seed has been planted in Liza's mind but it is uncertain whether or not she will let it grow. Upon his departure, however, Dr. Korolyov finds Liza dressed in white "as though for a holiday" with a flower in her hair: "She looked at him, as yesterday, sorrowfully and intelligently, smiled and talked, and all with an expression as though she wanted to tell him something special, important--him alone" (210). Perhaps the something special is the resolve to leave, to make provision for her own happiness. Perhaps Korolyov has succeeded where others have failed. And perhaps, in leaving, Liza will discover another and better life for herself. *A Doctor's Visit* provides an example of Chekhov's "escape" motif—a motif that runs through much of his work and, indeed, through much of the playwright's life. The story also provides an example of an almost exemplary doctor—one of Chekhov's finest—and one that will not be matched in the major plays.
The Seagull opened on October 17, 1896, at the Alexandrine Theatre in St. Petersburg and was such a fiasco that Chekhov declared he would never again write for the stage. The unsophisticated audience of this particular theatre, well known and well attended for its light comedies, could not fathom this startling new play in which the playwright admitted he had played "fast and loose with stage conventions" (OC 2: 334). Insufficient rehearsal time plus the failure of a celebrated comedienne to appear despite pre-performance billing, resulted in a disaster which drove Chekhov out into the St. Petersburg streets late that night. Two years later, V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, producer at the newly formed Moscow Art Theatre, persuaded Chekhov to allow The Seagull to be staged again and promised a more serious treatment of the text as well as an extended rehearsal period. Chekhov, at first reluctant, agreed.

The remarkable success of this re-staging has been well documented; at the conclusion of act 1 a long moment of silence was broken by tumultuous applause which caught the actors off guard. The cast was captured in disarray by a curtain call; Olga Knipper, later to become Chekhov's wife, had fainted from the strain while Stanislavsky, the director, was close to tears. It marked a major event in the history of Russian drama; although there are an off-stage suicide attempt and a suicide—both remnants of the old style Russian melodrama—for the most part the play is subdued, subtle and portrays people doing what people do—eating, drinking, playing cards and
whiling the time away in idle conversation. Chekhov's credo for the new realism which *The Seagull* ushered in had finally been accepted:

> After all, in real life people don't spend every minute shooting at each other, hanging themselves and making confessions of love. They don't spend all their time saying clever things. They're more occupied with eating, drinking, flirting and talking stupidities—and these are the things which ought to be shown on the stage . . . Life must be exactly as it is, people as they are . . . People eat their dinner, just eat their dinner, and all the time their happiness is being established or their lives are being broken up. (Ober 199)

This new subtlety, in addition to Chekhov's growing skill at highly complex characterization, produced characters—including doctors—that are extremely finely wrought. Dr. Eugene Dorn, in *The Seagull*, is faithful to Chekhov's declaration to create neither saints nor villains; Dorn falls comfortably—and uncomfortably—somewhere in between.

The doctor is, by his own admission, a has-been; ten or fifteen years ago he was the only decent obstetrician in the district and although he claims to be a "first-rate" doctor, there is now not much evidence to support his claim. Admittedly, no one requires the service of an obstetrician during the course of the play, so it is difficult to judge and there are few situations to provide clues to his medical expertise. He suggests he'd "better go up" and give valerian drops to Irina Arkadin and her brother, Peter Sorin, when a row ensues over the use of the carriage horses, but he might well be using the circumstances to escape an uncomfortable scene with Polina. When Irina thinks that Sorin might benefit from a
spa, Dorn is noncommittal: "Why not? Let him go. Or let him stay" (OC 2: 250). And when Sorin feels that he is seriously ill, the doctor refuses to get involved: "What would you like? Valerian drops? Soda? Quinine?" (271). It is difficult to know whether Dorn believes Sorin to be a hypochondriac, whether he believes that there is no medication to help him or whether he believes, like Dr. Triletsky in Platonov, that life is only worth a copeck and Sorin has spent his. Unlike Triletsky, Astrov and Chebutykin, Dr. Dorn complains only briefly and only once about his profession: "... in thirty years of practice—a busy practice with hardly a moment to call my own, day or night—I managed to save only two thousand roubles and I just got through those on my trip abroad. I'm broke" (270). And yet, there appears a deep feeling of un fulfillment in the doctor:

As you know, I've lived a varied life and enjoyed myself, I'm satisfied. But if I'd ever experienced the uplift that an artist feels when he's creating, I think I'd have scorned my material environment and all that goes with it, and I'd have taken wing and soared away into the sky. (246)

The language—and the sentiment—reveals a man who has made the best of things. Medicine has provided a livelihood—and a poor one at that—but has given him no joy. At fifty-five, he is winding down and takes some small pleasure in having once been the best obstetrician in the district.

He is also a has-been in affairs of the heart. Irina recollects a different, more exciting Dorn:

There was so much laughter, fun and shooting, I remember, and so many, many love affairs. But who was the darling and idol or all six estates? I
present (she nods towards Dorn) our doctor, Eugene Dorn. He's still charming, but in those days he was irresistible. (243)

Resist him she did, however, and the doctor finds himself a bachelor and increasingly ill at ease with affairs of the heart. Perpetually pursued by Polina, the wife of the Sorin estate manager, he avoids intimacy with her and is impatient with her mothering. "Polina: It's getting damp. Go and put your galoshes on. Dorn: I'm hot" (239). Once again, it is difficult to understand fully the doctor. Polina appears genuinely in love with Dorn: "Eugene dear, let me come and live with you, darling. Our time's passing, we're not so young as we were. Can't we give up all the lying and pretence now we're getting on in life?" (252). His response, "I'm fifty-five, it's too late for me to change my life" (252), can be interpreted at face value—that is, as a bachelor of many years, he cannot make the necessary adjustment—or it can be interpreted as an oblique way of putting Polina aside. Perhaps he simply does not love her. In an earlier draft of the play, Dorn was Polina's lover and Masha, their daughter. But in The Seagull there is little to prove his true feeling for Polina and it is quite possible to believe that the woman, unhappy in her marriage, imagines herself to be in love with the doctor and he with her. He seems a little in love with Irina although abundantly aware of her self-centredness and the possibility exists that, in the days of "laughter, fun and shooting" when he was irresistible, he failed to make a commitment to Irina and lost his chance. The past is a matter of speculation but
the present is somewhat more accessible. His response to Masha's heartbroken outpourings—"Ah, to be young" (246)—reveals a romantic nature held captive in a middle-aged man of science. Somewhere between the lakeside parties of his youth and arriving at midlife, something has been irretrievably lost. Surrounded by friends, the doctor is fundamentally alone and what has been lost—or never achieved—is intimacy.

Evasion of intimacy is a tactic at which Dorn excels. Whenever matters of deep concern are broached, he lessens the intensity by singing quietly. When Polina accuses him of "worshipping" Irina in act 1, she comes too close to the mark and Dorn responds, typically, in song: "Once more in thy presence . . ." (239). Again in act 2 when Masha pours out her misery, he dodges as her words begin to penetrate his defenses: "I feel about a thousand years old. My life seems to drag on and on endlessly, and I often think I'd rather be dead" (248). The doctor sings and the effect is a lessening of the discomfort he feels. While not downright miserable, Dorn has a well constructed shelter against the disappointments of life; the shelter keeps unhappiness at a distance but prevents him from responding to the very real pain that others experience. At the conclusion of act 1, for example, Dorn recognizes Treplev's state of nervousness: "Hey—a bit excited, aren't you? Tears in your eyes--. Now my point is this. You took your plot . . ." (246). Aware of Treplev's anxiety, Dorn prefers to remain on safe footing and so continues his discussion of the aspiring playwright's work. Work is a safe
subject; love is not. Moreover, in this particular instance, the doctor's own unrealized creative aspirations enjoy vicarious satisfaction; if he can't write, then he will help Treplev, whom he truly believes has talent. However, his failure to address Treplev's intense emotional state—"Come, come, dear boy, you can't go on like this. It's not right." (246)—amounts to more than oversight. As a doctor, he approaches incompetence.

It is at this point that Eugene Dorn moves uncomfortably away from the mid-point between saintliness and villainy. His failure—or unwillingness—to see Treplev's suicidal tendency is disastrous. In choosing, or settling for, a life without emotional depth, he has become blind to the emotional imperative in the lives of those around him. His personal frustration and lassitude spreads out around him; he cannot grasp the sixty-two year old Sorin's desire to live more fully: "One should take life seriously, but to go to your doctor when you're sixty and complain that you didn't enjoy yourself as a young man—well, I'm sorry, but that's just silly" (250). There are, indeed, elements of silliness in Sorin's longings, but it is Dorn's resignation and willingness to compromise that prevent him from seeing that Sorin—and he, himself—might yet enjoy life. Dorn's withdrawal from the arena of love makes him an unsatisfying confidant and yet there is a good deal of sympathy and tenderness in his response to the unhappy Masha: "But what can I do, my child? What can I do?" (247). Once
more, the Chekhov doctor confronts emotional malaise for which he has no medicine.

What possible prescription can be written? Advice given by Dr. Chebutykin in *Three Sisters* might have been given to Masha: "Pick up your stick, put on your hat, get up and go . . . go anywhere, provided you go away; change your life somehow, because change can only be for the better!" (OC 9: 10). Perhaps is would have saved her from a loveless marriage. Nina, acting upon her own advice, leaves home and pursues a theatrical career which is not totally successful but does provide for some moments of excitement. It does not alleviate her unhappy passion for Tregorin, however. But a man dies in the play and if there is a character who has the capacity to prevent the death, Dr. Dorn is that character. Acutely aware of Irina's effect on Treplev, Dorn might have interceded but for one so unsettled by such deeply personal concerns, his intervention is impossible. A word with Irina to suggest the gravity of Treplev's state or a sympathetic ear for the young writer might have succeeded. Edward Shorter in his history of the medical profession, *Bedside Manners*, claims that there is no substitute for a caring listener: "The doctor must use himself as a drug. It is his own concern, expressed in willingness to listen attentively, that may produce a cure" (256). Dorn listens attentively but his emotional neutrality prevents him from ministering effectively.

Critics disagree as to whether sparing Irina the immediate news of Treplev's suicide is an act of monumental evasion or
monumental compassion. In all likelihood compassion and evasion at this point in the play are so delicately woven into the character of Eugene Dorn that their separation is impossible. Much in the play demands that he be given the benefit of the doubt. As with Dr. Triletsky's lie in Platonov, Dorn's subterfuge arises from pragmatism mingled with tenderness. The picture Chekhov paints, finally, is one of a complex human being and although the image is largely sympathetic it is not entirely flattering. Eugene Dorn's self-imposed detachment and its resultant non-intervention makes him culpable, to some extent, in the death of Treplev. He fails as a preventer of death, a strategist in the struggle of the individual against the laws of life and proves to be, like the others, merely human.

The doctors have up to this point been examined chronologically and their course has been uneven; there have been few wholly "good" doctors and few wholly "bad" doctors. As Chekhov matured his characters became much more complex and his doctors became more fallible; their humour gave way to cynicism and their acceptance, to resignation. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the comparison between The Wood-Demon (1889-1890) and Uncle Vanya (1897) which, because of their shared characters and situation, are often studied together despite the fact that The Seagull was written in the intervening years. Chekhov, upon completing The Wood-Demon, claimed that he had written a comedy and, except for the suicide of George Voynitsky (admittedly a very large exception
but one which the characters themselves overlook with alarming speed), he had, indeed, written something with an almost indecently happy ending. The play retains the farcical elements of Chekhov's earlier one-act plays—The Bear and The Proposal—and it concludes in the manner of Shakespeare's comedies in which the happy couples are united in the dying moments of the play. Ronald Hingley claims that The Wood-Demon is "by no means a negligible achievement. But its main interest is for what it shows us of Chekhov as a traveller" (OC 3: 5). Significantly, for this study, the comparison between The Wood-Demon and Uncle Vanya perfectly illustrates the doctor as a traveller, as well.

Chekhov's notes to Alexis Suvorin, with whom he initially planned to write The Wood-Demon, indicate that Dr. Michael Khrushchov, the wood-demon of the play, is a landowner with a medical degree and is between thirty and thirty-three. Although medicine is his profession, the forests are his passion:

Man has been granted reason and the power to create, so that he can add to what he's been given. But up to now he hasn't been a creator, only a destroyer. Forests keep disappearing, rivers dry up, wildlife's become extinct, the climate's ruined and the land grows poorer and uglier every day. (OC 3: 217)

His fervent environmental concerns set him apart from the rest of the characters who, in their complacency, find his behaviour peculiar, obsessive and suspicious. Helen alone understands him:

There's a bit more to it than forestry, you know. Don't you see, my dear? He's a brilliant man! You know what that means? It means he has courage, flair
tremendous vision. When he plants a tree or digs up half a hundredweight of peat, he's already working out what the result will be in a thousand years' time, already dreaming of man's happiness. People like that are precious and should be cherished. (236)

Sonya comes to understand and love him for his idealism. His love of nature surpasses his regard for medicine yet although he admits to being weary of his practice--"I'm sick and tired of my practice, it's like an unloved wife or a long winter" (216)--he responds, nevertheless, to calls without the glass of vodka that is increasingly essential to Chekhov's later doctors. In explaining his late arrival at the birthday party which opens the play, there is no rancor as he replies that he was "attending a patient" (213). And when the time comes for him to leave he good-naturedly addresses himself, "Well, Father Michael, your Reverence, you've had some food and drink and it's time to call it a day. Must be off" (216). In his doctoring of Serebryakov whom Khrushchov knows suffers only from nerves, he is sympathetic, kindly and concerned:

> Oh come, come, that's all right. But what do you mean by falling ill like this, Professor? Whatever next! This won't do, oh dear me no. What's the matter? . . . Come, we'd better go to bed. We're not comfortable here. It'll be warmer and more restful in bed. Come on. Then I'll listen to your chest and everything will be fine. (226)

(Significantly, in Uncle Vanya, it is the old nurse--not the doctor--who takes this role: "Come on, my lamb, I'll give you some lime-flower tea and warm your poor feet. I'll say a prayer for you" [OC 3: 33]. Called out in a storm, Khrushchov is not angry, he assures Sonya--"Not a bit" (OC 3:231)--but his reason, in this particular case, is that he loves Sonya and is
eager for any excuse to visit the Serebryakov estate. But the fact remains that the wood-demon fulfills his obligations as a medical man.

Michael Khrushchov is a doctor in love. Up to this point, none of the doctors have been married and few have been in love. (Dr. Toporkov comes to love Marusya in Late-Blooming Flowers and Eugene Dorn may or may not be in love with Irina or Polina in The Seagull.) Khrushchov's love is strangely conditional, however: "I'm not going to make out I love you more than anything in the world. Love isn't the whole of my life, it's my reward. But my darling, there's no higher reward for anyone who works, struggles and suffers" (232). His affection seems somewhat avuncular and his passion for the forests enjoys greater expression. Perhaps this is once again the dessication that Chekhov feared? All that remains to prevent Khrushchov from taking Sonya away from the house which he believes is poisoning her, is a declaration of love from her. Despite his maturity relative to Sonya, he is a neophyte in matters of the heart and he fails to understand Sonya's angry tirade: "I'm in love, so there. I'm in love and I'm terribly unhappy. Now leave me alone. Go away, for heaven's sake. And stop coming here, don't you come here any more" (233). While it is obvious to all, Khrushchov misunderstands her and leaves. By the conclusion of the play, they resolve their difficulty, confess their love and, presumably, live happily ever after.
George Voynitsky does not live happily ever after; the patient shoots himself. Yet, unlike Dorn, in The Seagull, who fails to take seriously Treplev's extreme unhappiness and suicidal nature, Khrushchov cannot be blamed despite his willingness to accept guilt: "... did I do anything to save George?" (164). His acceptance of the rumour concerning the affair between Helen and Voynitsky, may have added to Voynitsky's unhappiness but it remains a failing of The Wood-Demon that the suicide is insufficiently motivated. The doctor could not possibly have suspected the despair that underlies such self-directed violence; the failure in the play is not the doctor's indifference but in Chekhov's inability to root the suicide in a conceivable reality.

This was only one of many reasons given when The Wood-Demon was rejected by the major theatre companies and which relegated the play to a few, unsuccessful performances at a small private theatre in Moscow. Disappointed, Chekhov obviously could not let the play go entirely; the same situation and several of the same characters appear in the later—and much more satisfying—Uncle Vanya. Michael Khrushchov—energetic, passionate and impulsive— forfeits much more than his name and the titular role in Uncle Vanya. Gone is the joie de vivre—"What wonderful weather, and I'm absolutely ravenous" (OC 3: 213); gone is his ebullient laughter whenever he is with Sonya; and gone is his innocent naivete—"People should be beautiful in every way—in their faces, in the way they dress, in their thoughts and in their
innermost selves" (231). His counterpart, Dr. Michael Astrov, retains Khrushchov's passionate concern for the forests but loses the capacity to laugh, except when under the influence, and to love. If The Wood-Demon illustrates Chekhov the traveller it also illustrates the Chekhovian doctor as traveller; the end point is Dr. Ivan Chebutykin in Three Sisters but significant along the route is Dr. Astrov in Uncle Vanya, a play some believe to be the final draft of The Wood-Demon.

Uncle Vanya was first performed at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1899. It did not immediately enjoy the success of The Seagull but gradually theatre patrons came to accept the increasingly fine balance of sympathies that Chekhov declared he was seeking. This delicate characterization detaches the audience; the effect is similar to Brecht's de-familiarizing effect and the resultant ambiguity is provocative. Ronald Hingley claims that "Chekhov's chief discovery (which came between the writing of The Wood-Demon and Uncle Vanya) was the fact that his true element as a dramatist was inconclusiveness" (OC 3: 4). The late plays do not have a main character to the same extent as do Platonov or Ivanov, for example; instead, a cluster of characters prevails. And the characters to a greater extent than ever before are multi-dimensional. Chekhov consciously cultivated this quality:

Present-day playwrights begin their plays solely with angels, villains, and buffoons. Now, search for these characters in the whole of Russia. Yes, you can find them, but no such extremes as are necessary for a playwright. One is forced to squeeze them out of one's head, get into a sweat, and give it up...
I want to be original; I have not introduced a single villain nor an angel, although I could not refuse myself buffoons; I accused nobody, justified nobody. (Chekhov, Selected Letters 56)

If Chekhov does not accuse Dr. Michael Astrov he nevertheless offers an uncomplimentary yet sympathetic portrait that illustrates a further deterioration of the country doctor. Conveniently, for the sake of comparison, the thirty- or thirty-three-year-old Khrushchov has become the forty-year-old Astrov in the seven years between the writing of The Wood-Demon and Uncle Vanya. The years have not been kind. Disillusioned and worn down by his work, Astrov frequently finds refuge in alcohol; in fact, the play begins with the doctor's refusal of a glass of tea and the old nurse's well-founded suspicion that what he really wants is vodka. His opening soliloquy reveals a deep dissatisfaction with his profession and an admission of guilt arising not only from personal inadequacy but from primitive procedures in the typhus-ridden countryside. Richard Selzer in Healing Arts in Dialogue, suggests that guilt is endemic to the profession:

We doctors swim in a sea of guilt all day and all night. It is because we have to lay a hand on people, and we fear some complication may arise as a result of our actions. A surgeon is created on the wreckage of a legion of patients who have survived his mistakes. (Trautmann, Healing Arts 14)

Astrov's perseverance—until the arrival of the professor and his wife—in the face of such guilt and hardship, is admirable. But after their arrival a generalized languor sets in. He responds to the labourer who calls for help in an emergency at the factory, "This is a damn nuisance" (OC 3: 26), and he takes
a drink to fortify himself before departing. Even less commendable than his reluctance to serve is his attitude to his drinking: "When I'm in this state I get terribly bumptious and impudent. I feel equal to anything. I take on the most difficult operations and do them perfectly" (36). It is likely untrue. And unlike Khrushchov who is not a bit put out by the long drive when called to attend to Serebryakov, Astrov complains, "And I've driven twenty miles at top speed to get here" (24). By his own admission, Astrov has become "a pretty cheap kind of person" (36).

In describing himself as "second-rate," Astrov also admits that he has become incapable of loving or being loved: "I don't feel things keenly any more and I don't think I could grow fond of anyone any more. There's no one I love, or ever shall love now" (40). With the exception of the old nurse, Astrov finds no one to care for; his affection for Nanny, moreover, lacks commitment or passion and is rather more like that of a man for well-worn slippers. In a telling comparison, the confessions of Khrushchov and then Astrov reveal a major shift in their attitudes to love:

Khrushchov: When you walk in a wood on a dark night there's sometimes a glimmer of light shining in the distance, isn't there? Then you somehow feel so wonderful that you don't notice how tired you are or how dark it is or how the thorns and twigs hit you in the face... But now at last I've found my light shining in the distance. I'm not going to make out I love you more than anything in the world. Love isn't the whole of my life, it's my reward. But my darling, there's no higher reward for anyone who works, struggles and suffers. (OC 3: 232)
Astrov: You know, sometimes when you walk in a wood on a dark night there's a glimmer of light shining in the distance, isn't there? Then you notice how tired you are or how dark it is or how the thorns and twigs hit you in the face. As you well know, I work harder than anyone else round here, the most awful things are always happening to me and there are times when the whole business really gets me down. But for me there's no light shining in the distance. I don't expect anything for myself any more and I don't care for other people either. It's ages since I was really fond of anyone. (OC 3: 38-39)

It is a soul-destroying admission that Astrov makes; love is no longer possible. His dalliance with Helen is just that and despite Stanislavsky's efforts to heat up their relationship in performance, Chekhov remained adamant:

Astrov is attracted by Helen, she captivates him with her beauty, but in the last act he already knows there's nothing doing. He knows Helen's going away for good so far as he's concerned and in this scene he speaks to her in the same tone as when he talks about the heat in Africa. And he kisses her quite casually because he has nothing better to do. (OC 3:301-302)

The short-lived flourish with Helen is symptomatic of his emotional emptiness.

Stephen Grecco in his article in Medicine and Literature, suggests that Chekhov is working out his own problems through his fictive doctors. While this may or may not be true, Grecco's comments with regard to Astrov are valid when he discusses the "dysfunctional nature" of Astrov's empathetic response:

The doctor is a human being as well as a scientist . . . and as such has an unstated obligation to minister to both spirit and flesh, is not by virtue of his training relieved of the necessity of attending to the very real needs of the soul. (9)
Perhaps demands made upon doctors are excessive but if the image of the good doctor in *The Head Gardener's Tale* (who had consumption yet climbed mountains, braving heat and cold, scorning thirst and hunger, etc.) is being offered by Chekhov as the exemplar, then Astrov suffers in the comparison. His lack of sympathy for Vanya when he pleads for a "new life" is indicative of Astrov's sympathetic bankruptcy: "Oh, get away with you. New life indeed. Our situation's hopeless, yours and mine" (OC 3: 60). While excessive sympathy for Vanya's plight might well be ruinous to a man with a recently proven flair for the melodramatic, a modicum of compassion would seem appropriate; and while the doctor might have written his own life off, it does not automatically follow that he should counsel resignation to those around him. His summation leaves no glimmer of hope, no shining light and does nothing to encourage Vanya or Sonya to seek other and better lives:

> Those who live a century or two after us and despise us for leading lives stupid and tasteless, perhaps they'll find a way to be happy, but as for us—. There's only one hope for you and me, that when we're resting in our graves we may have visions. Even pleasant ones perhaps. (61)

All that remains of Astrov's idealism is his passion for the forests and almost line for line he repeats the words of Khrushchov:

> Man has been endowed with reason, with the power to create, so that he can add to what he's been given. But up to now he hasn't been a creator, only a destroyer. Forests keep disappearing, rivers dry up, wildlife's become extinct, the climate's ruined and the land grows poorer and uglier every day... When I plant a young birch and later see it covered with green and swaying in the breeze, my heart fills with pride and I—. (28)
At this point he sees the labourer who has come to take him to the factory where an accident has occurred. Astrov takes a glass of vodka to fortify himself and proceeds to undercut all that has been said before: "Anyway, this is all a bee in my bonnet, I daresay. I bid you good day" (28). What was once blazing idealism has become something of an embarrassment to the doctor. And although the excitement has been caught by Sonya, it is doubtful that she will put into effect any of his theories. A sell-out on many fronts, Dr. Astrov remains steadfast in rejecting a loveless marriage. He does not love Sonya, he believes he cannot love anyone, and to use Khrushchov's expression, there are few things as miserable as an unloved wife. It speaks well for Astrov when he leaves but in all probability his environmental concerns leave with him.

Astrov describes "everything going downhill because people have found the struggle for existence too much for them" (48). This appears to describe his own dilemma. Now little more than an actor in his own life, he remarks without regret, "The show is over" (63). Playing a part and no longer fully engaged, Astrov can no longer encourage those who need his support. Charismatic and intelligent as he is, he is ineffectual in helping Vanya and Sonya put their lives together again in any real way. That he has not been useful in offering solutions for or suggesting alternatives to their situation as it exists at the conclusion of the play, is evident in Sonya's concluding soliloquy in which she looks forward, beyond the grave, to a better life. Astrov is, ultimately, as lame as the horse that
he casually comments requires shoeing. Chekhov, in assisting Stanislavsky who was having difficulty grasping the nature of the doctor, commended succinctly: "Uncle Vanya weeps, but Astrov whistles" (302). While whistling might be preferred to weeping, perhaps it isn't unreasonable to expect more from the doctor. More is not forthcoming, however, in the person of Dr. Ivan Chebutykin, the last of Chekhov's stage physicians.

Three Sisters, first mentioned by Chekhov in a November 24, 1899, letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko at the Moscow Art Theatre, found its way to the stage on January 31, 1901. Chekhov regarded the writing of this play as "terribly hard" (OC 3: 306) and there exist two distinct manuscripts—the "Yalta" manuscript and the later "Moscow" manuscript. Ronald Hingley states that the manuscripts do not differ substantially but "the changes affect style and tone rather than content and are best thought of as a pre-final and final polish given by Chekhov to Three Sisters" (310). The changes made in the characterization of Dr. Ivan Chebutykin in the later manuscript are, however, noteworthy. The detail about the woman whom the doctor claims to have killed through incompetence was added and quite critically alters the perception of Chebutykin. Two further additions increase this negative impression; following Chebutykin's smashing of the clock, his reluctant admission, "No doubt it was your mother's if you say so" (115) and his later cruel flippancy, "The baron's a nice enough fellow, but one baron more or less in the world—what does that matter? Let them get on with it" (129), both reinforce Chekhov's
portrayal of the doctor as deeply cynical. In discussing the humour in Chekhov's plays, Hingley includes Chebutykin amongst "the clownish spongers" from the gentry (11) and to view the army doctor in this way is unfortunate enough. But to see that Ivan Chebutykin's apathy is murderous is to witness the end point in a slow but steady decline in Chekhov's doctors.

At sixty, Dr. Chebutykin, like all the other doctors, remains a bachelor; the reason for his single state he says to Masha is, "I never got round to marrying because my life has just flashed past like lightning, and besides I was madly in love with your mother and she was married already" (106). While it may be true that, like Dr. Astrov, he had no time for marriage, had "other things to do," Chebutykin's unmarried status is more likely explained by his unrequited love for the mother of Olga, Masha and Irina. Failure to marry as a result of early disappointment in love is a common subtext in both the plays and short stories; in Dr. Startsev (1898) it forms the main story line. And, as with the other doctors who suffer unrequited love, Chebutykin's loneliness becomes something of a perversion as he engages in courting behaviour with Irina, the youngest of the sisters and the image of her mother who has been dead for eleven years. The gift of the silver samovar on Irina's nameday is an embarrassment to Irina and a social faux pas; that particular gift is the traditional Russian offering from a husband to his wife on their twenty-fifty wedding anniversary. Irina's displeasure is not merely that the gift is extravagant but that it is inappropriate. For a young woman
with no happy prospect of marriage in an uncultured, provincial backwater, the gift is also cruel. Chebutykin, forever backward looking, remembers the day Irina was born, when he used to hold her in his arms. This memory, followed directly by, "And I loved your mother, God rest her soul" (79) suggests that the doctor has simply substituted an unrequited love for an impossible one. Balzac may have married late in life in some obscure town--like the one in which the doctor finds himself--but Chebutykin's hope of finding happiness in anything other than a grandfatherly fashion is non-existent. His twice repeated lines, "That love alone might rule the earth / Kind nature gave us mortals birth" (83 and 89) comment ironically on Chebutykin's loneliness which, as he tells Andrew, is "a terrible thing" (106).

Chebutykin's loneliness and emotional nonfulfillment appear to have two very negative consequences. The first is the impact on his profession. Although still commissioned as an army doctor and attached to the battalion there is nothing to suggest any competence. Out of breath, Andrew Prozorov asks Chebutykin if there is anything he can do; the doctor replies, "Why ask me? I don't know, dear boy. Don't remember" (106). His present research amounts to copying trivia from the newspaper: "If your hair starts falling out, take two drams of naphthalene to half a bottle of spirit. To be dissolved and applied daily. Must note that down" (75). He admits his utter uselessness when his expertise is most needed: "Damn the whole lot of them. To hell with them. They think I'm a doctor and
can cure diseases, but I know absolutely nothing. What I did know I've forgotten, I don't remember a thing, my mind's a blank" (113). While the town goes up in flames, Chebutykin gets drunk and wallows in self-pity and guilt arising from the death of a woman patient. "She died, and it was all my fault," he claims (113). It is difficult to know if indeed Chebutykin is guilty. Dr. Astrov, in *Uncle Vanya*, also suffers from guilt but there is a distinction to be made. Astrov claims:

> They brought someone in from the railway, a switchman, I got him on the table to operate, and damned if he didn't have to die on me under chloroform. Then just at the worst possible moment my feelings did come to life and I felt as guilty as if I'd murdered the man. (OC 3: 20)

Sympathy flows out to Astrov who, in the course of his work, loses a patient and feels "as if" he has murdered the man. In contrast, Chebutykin admits his inability to remember any of what is necessary; his guilt appears more than possible and it is tempting to accept him at his word.

The second but equally dire consequence of Chebutykin's personal failure is a destructive cynicism that allows him to remain indifferent to impending disaster. His complicity in tempting a highly vulnerable Andrew to the gambling casino where the unhappy cuckold loses the family estate to his vulgar wife, Natasha, is more than thoughtless. The consequences to the three sisters will be devastating and ironically will drive Irina to accept a proposal of marriage from a man whom she does not love thus paralleling the situation of her sister, Masha, who is bound to a husband whom she finds disagreeable. But far more deadly is Chebutykin's apathy to the duel between the
rivals for Irina's affection, Tuzenbakh and Solyony. Behind the apparent flippancy of his comments—"What affair? It was nothing. Lot of poppycock. Nothing matters anyway." (126)—there exists the knowledge that Chebutykin will return to the estate upon his retirement and enjoy forever Irina's company. Chekhov, in his notes, writes that the doctor—ostensibly a healer—"enjoys being at a duel" (Hingley 219) and his crassness at the prospect is unpardonable: "Bang, bang!" (219). The doctor's knowledge that Solyony has survived unscathed two previous duels is a clear indictment against Chebutykin's non-intervention; it is clear that Tuzenbakh might die. Following the duel, Chebutykin responds with apparent unconcern to the news of the baron's death: "I'm worn out. (Takes a newspaper out of his pocket.) They may as well have a cry. (Sings softly.) Tararaboomdeay, let's have a tune today. Anyway, what does it all matter?" (138). Admittedly, there is the possibility that he, too, is upset and conceals his feelings but the fact remains that had he been able to rouse himself to mediate or, at the very least, to have admitted to Irina the seriousness of the rivalry between her suitors, the fatal shot might not have been fired. His inability or unwillingness to console Irina at this point comments harshly upon the quality of his love and even more severely on his lack of compassion. He does not participate in her reality and has reached the point at which he doubts his own existence: "Perhaps I'm not even a human being, perhaps I only pretend to have arms and legs and a head, perhaps I don't even exist at all, and only
imaging I walk about and eat and sleep" (113). If Dr. Ragin in Ward No. 6 evades responsibility by blaming the time or the situation, how much worse is Chebutykin's evasion in claiming his own non-existence? As a doctor, as well as a human being, this existential pondering renders him worse than useless: his neutrality affects the life of a man.

Unlike some of the other doctors, there is little to commend Chebutykin either from a professional or personal perspective. Yet despite Hingley's appellation—"a clownish sponger"—the doctor is no buffoon. There is one startling incident during which the doctor's facade cracks and reveals a thinking, responding human being. In act 3 when Irina suggests that, along with the battalion leaving town, she and her sisters will also depart, Chebutykin drops her mother's clock and it smashes, as he says, "to smithereens" (115). That brief moment brings sharply into focus the doctor's continuing discontent and perhaps even more, reveals his deep dependence upon Irina. The smashing of the clock is the equivalent of his smashed life. And in that moment, as the others stare in disbelief at his carelessness, he also speaks the unspeakable: "Natasha's carrying on with Protopopov and a lot of notice you take. You sit around as if you'd lost the use of your eyes while Natasha carries on with Protopopov" (115). The facade once again in place, he sings a ditty and departs. The affair between Natasha and Protopopov lies at the centre of an ugly situation the consequences of which are their brother's profound unhappiness and the three sisters' homelessness. It
has been, until this time, all too easy to dismiss the army
doctor as an elderly buffoon; in this brief moment, however,
his massive rage is revealed—rage against his loneliness, rage
against Natasha's vulgarity and infidelity, rage against what
might have been, rage, in short, against life's
disappointments. He has, however, no cure for life's
unpleasant turns; incapable of satisfying his own needs, he is
not only equally ineffectual in helping others but he no longer
even tries. Balanced precariously between a buffoon and a
villain, Chebutykin, in the guise of a beard-combing old
duffer, represents the final point of descent. Useless, old
and apathetic, Ivan Chebutykin is the last doctor created by
Chekhov. The baron, immediately prior to the duel, confesses
to Irina:

I feel marvellous. I feel as if I'm seeing all these
fir-trees, maples and silver birches for the first
time. All these things seem to be watching me as if
wondering what was going to happen next. What
beautiful trees. And when you come to think of it,
what a beautiful thing life ought to be with trees
like this around. (132)

Ironically and sadly, it is Baron Tuzenbakh who is the casualty
of Chebutykin's cynicism and apathy.

A profile emerges from this exploration of Chekhov's
fictive doctors; they are well educated, single (except for Dr.
Toporkov in Late-Blooming Flowers, who marries for money) and
childless. The most frequent reason they give for not
marrying—if they give a reason at all—is lack of time. Life
has passed them by or, as Chebutykin claims, "... my life has
just flashed past like lightning" (OC 3: 106). Astrov, in
answering Helen's interrogation regarding his feeling for Sonya, replies, "I have too much to do anyway. You know how busy I am" (OC 3: 49). Work has consumed these men and they almost unanimously rail against a life pre-empted by medicine. Dorn complains that he has made little money in the course of much effort and Astrov, that he has become a freak through overwork: "On my feet from morning to night with never a moment's peace, and then lying under the bedclothes at night afraid of being dragged out to a patient... It's enough to make anyone look old" (OC 3: 19). Yet despite these disclaimers, a more likely reason for their lack of romantic involvement is an emotional reserve or detachment that typifies them with the notable exception of Khrushchov in The Wood-Demon. That this play—and Khrushchov—are an aberration in the Chekhov canon is evident in the summation of one of the characters: "Journeys end in lovers' meetings" (OC 3: 270). A less typical Chekhovian conclusion can scarcely be imagined! Although few of Chekhov's characters can be termed lusty or passionate, the doctors are even less so except when it comes to the forests and the two wood-demons' concerns for them. Embarrassed by intimacy they sing, as does Dorn; read newspapers and comb their beards as does Chebutykin; or retreat, as does Astrov. They are masters of evasion and it is not at all surprising that all remain bachelors but for Toporkov whose motive for marriage disqualifies him at any rate.
Why Chekhov's doctors suffer this emotional paralysis is a matter of speculation but in all likelihood emerges from a combination of reasons. Medical training emphasizes the objective and analytical to the detriment of the subjective and intuitive. Possible, too, is the desensitizing nature of medicine; death, for most, holds much dread but for Dorn, for example, "fear of death's an animal thing, you must get over it" (OC 2: 271). Not the least of the reasons for their diffidence is that the struggle for existence simply wears everyone down or, as J. L. Styan phrases it, they are all victims of "life destroying agents always at work" (136). Life itself seems to be a disease for which there is no cure. Inertia affects many if not most of Chekhov's characters and the doctors are no exception; all founder because they cannot act. They persevere in what Chekhov termed "that grey dawdle" (Styan 236). What makes the doctors' lassitude worth of both note and blame is the common expectation of responsible behaviour. They are expected to be involved in what E. D. Pellegrino suggests is an "unremitting paradox" shared by both writers and doctors; "The need simultaneously to stand back from, and yet to share in, the struggle of human life" (xv). They may be allowed—as are the doctors of the wild west—to drink but they are expected to remove the bullet from the thigh, nevertheless.

None of Chekhov's characters has a bullet in the thigh and very few have physiological ailments. Marusya, in Late-Blooming Flowers, must feign a cough; Anna, in Ivanov, has
consumption and Serebryakov, in both *The Wood-Demon* and *Uncle Vanya*, may have gout, rheumatism or nothing at all. Liza, in *The Doctor's Visit*, admits, "It seems to me that I have no illness, but that I am weary and frightened" ([Anton Chekhov's Short Stories](OC 2: 209)). The real illnesses are emotional and spiritual and Chekhov's doctors, with their inability to deal with the emotional health of their patients are at a distinct disadvantage. In *Darkness*, a fairly early short story, a character comments:

> The doctor does not know anything about such matters, that is a sure thing . . . though he is a gentleman, he is only taught to cure by every means, but to give you real advice or, let us say, write out a petition for you—that he cannot do. ([The Horse Stealers and Other Stories](OC 2: 175))

The old colonel in *Platonov* restates the problem: "Medicine won't save her if her trouble's in the psychology department" ([OC 2: 156]). Herein lies the real dilemma that confronts Chekhov's doctors: the problems are psychological and there is nothing in the black bag to relieve the pain. "The Wood-Demon's saving our forests but what about people? There's no one to save them," cries Helen in *The Wood-Demon* ([OC 3: 244]). "Give me some medicine or something," pleads Vanya to Astrov. "Tell me, how should I begin? Where do I start?" Astrov can only reply, "Oh, get away with you. New life indeed. Our situation's hopeless, yours and mine" ([OC 3: 60]). Astrov is typical of the doctors in his inability to help.

But what possible remedy could there be for these characters, caught as they are at the crossroads of Russian history, a period of declining aristocracy, rising bourgeoisie
and a nation headed for revolution? Is happiness possible at such a time? Two positions are posited by Chekhov's characters: happiness deferred beyond the grave—or for others who will come later—and happiness denied, that is, happiness as an impossibility. The first position is voiced by Astrov, Vershinin and Sonya (in *Uncle Vanya*):

**Astrov:** And I thought of the men and women who will be alive a hundred or a couple of hundred years after we've gone, those we're preparing the way for. (OC 3: 20)

**Vershinin:** Two or three hundred years, or a thousand years if you like—it doesn't really matter how long—will bring a new and happy life. We'll have no part in it of course, but it is what we're now living for, working for, yes and suffering for. (OC 3: 98-99)

**Sonya:** And when our time comes we shall die without complaining. In the world beyond the grave we shall say that we wept and suffered, that our lot was harsh and bitter, and God will have pity on us. And you and I, Uncle dear, shall behold a life which is bright and beautiful and splendid. We shall rejoice and look back on our present misfortunes with feelings of tenderness, with a smile. And we shall find peace. (OC 3: 67)

Khrushchov, in *The Wood-Demon*, and one of Chekhov's most positive characters comments on a life of self-sacrifice such as is implied in the happiness deferred stance and suggests that it is "just pandering to your own vanity" (OC 3: 260). It is unlikely that Chekhov, author of so many delightful farces and reputed trickster, could be a proponent of joy postponed and beyond the pale.

Equally unlikely is his support of happiness denied as argued by Tuzenbakh in *Three Sisters*:
Forget your two or three hundred years, because even in a million years life will still be just the same as ever. It doesn't change, it always goes on the same and follows its own laws. And those laws are none of our business. Or at least you'll never understand them. (OC 3: 99)

Despite his gloomy outlook, Tuzenbakh is happy; he is about to be married and to embark upon a new life. Ironically, it is Tuzenbakh who dies but his death does not appear to be a condemnation of his position. More probably, his death comments upon the cruel arbitrariness of life.

Happiness deferred as opposed to happiness denied—these are the poles in the argument. A third position appears possible and ironically it is Chebutykin who offers the alternative to Andrew: "You just put your hat on, pick up a walking stick and go. Go on and on and on, and don't ever look back. And the further you go the better: (OC 3: 130). But his advice comes too late and is fraught with contradiction. On one hand it is a recommendation for evasion of responsibility, commitment and involvement but on the other hand it is a recommendation for taking responsibility, for doing something in the face of what Chekhov described as "the stagnation of the soul" (Trautmann, Healing Arts 132). The alternative that Chebutykin suggests is self-determination: don't wait for the ditch to fill up--jump in or build a bridge. Reject happiness deferred, denounce happiness denied and act now to get what happiness is available. Chekhov's characters seldom act in their best interests. Are they too caught up in their own inertia? And if so, where are the doctors to "save the people?"
Dr. Korolyov, in *The Doctor's Visit*, stands alone amongst Chekhov's doctors as one capable of prescribing what is needed. Intuitively he understands Liza's predicament and compassionately he suggests its resolution. When the time is right, Liza must leave. She must take responsibility for herself, must make her own way. Like Nina, in *The Seagull*, Liza may meet with difficulty and grief; she may exchange one set of problems for another but at least she will break the continuum that provides no possible joy. Perhaps going to Moscow would solve no problems for the three sisters, but it is advice that Chebutykin might have suggested to bring to a halt the paralysing inertia that plagues them. The important thing is to act, to be self-directing. In Chekhov's short stories and plays, as in his life, this shaking up—if it happens at all—takes the form of flight. Real or metaphorical, making a move is a bold step; few of Chekhov's characters try it and few of his doctors prescribe it.

Chekhov's doctors have proven inept; they have been seen in an uneven but steady decline, the end point of which is Dr. Ivan Chebutykin who remembers nothing, claims that nothing matters and does nothing to prevent an avoidable death. Not only have they failed to encourage others but they have been singularly unsuccessful in finding happiness for themselves. Disillusioned, unfulfilled and impotent, Chekhov's physicians are clear indicators that the quest for happiness must be undertaken unaided, that little help is at hand and that the
quest for joy is uncomfortable at best. Marusya, in *Late-Blooming Flowers*, was delighted that Toporkov had found her to be sick... now she might visit him without ceremony as often as she liked, every week even! It was so wonderful in his consulting room, so cosy! Especially wonderful was the couch which stood in the depths of the room. She longed to sit with him awhile on this couch and talk over anything and everything... (60-61)

Being doctored, Chekhov believed, was "a form of the most repulsive egoism" (Simmons 402). It can be, if the ailment is a sickening of the heart or soul, an unwholesome dependence. There can be no doctors to provide easy remedies for spiritual malaise and Chekhov's almost unremittingly unflattering portrayals of doctors places responsibility for a "better life" squarely upon the individual. The portraits are sympathetically--often affectionately--drawn.

Chekhov died at the age of forty-four on July 2, 1904, while embarking upon an escape of his own; after many years of at least outwardly denying his tuberculosis, Chekhov and his wife, Olga, travelled to Badenweiler in the Black Forest where he underwent--unsuccessfully--the kumiss treatment. In 1902, after more than twenty years of writing, he had stated quite clearly what his intention had been and the quote is here repeated:

All I wanted was to say honestly to people: "Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!" The important thing is that people should realize that, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves. (Gottlieb 189)

Another and better life was not a possibility for Chekhov, victim of a bacillus that slowly but relentlessly stalked him.
But Chekhov's hope in writing short stories and plays that illustrate people living out bad and dreary lives—and who had alternatives—was that they would create other and better lives for themselves. Far from being pathetic, the plays from this perspective can be seen to be the comedies that Chekhov claimed some of them to be: characters repeating useless behaviour and consistently failing to take stock of themselves—the stuff of farce, in short. But Chekhov's hope contains the operative phrase, "for themselves," and the onus of creating a better life, he implies, is on the individual. His attitude anticipates existentialism in declaring the individual ultimately responsible and, viewed from this perspective, his work reveals a positive and affirmative philosophy beneath the melancholy. Clearly Chekhov did not systematically degrade his doctors over the course of his literary career just to make the point; he denounced intellectualizing and firmly believed that writers should present the problems and refrain from providing solutions. However, in the declining ability of his doctors to offer real succour, there lies an implicit truth: in a spiritual sense, no "doctor" can heal a "patient" and seeking a cure outside the self is futile. Chekhov's doctors have proven to be hopeless and the prescription is obvious: in matters of the heart and soul we must learn to heal ourselves.
Works Cited


