

MEET ANTON CHEKHOV

Anton Chekhov was an unlikely genius. Who would suspect that a provincial Russian doctor and son of a bankrupt grocer would revolutionize the short story and produce the best plays for the European stage since Shakespeare?

Paradoxically, it was his mundane background that fueled Chekhov's literary triumphs. As a doctor, he was trained to observe and analyze without judging his patients; in his writing, he applied the same principles to his characters. Chekhov focused on mundane life, capturing the tiny flaws and failures that make up daily life. His new approach revitalized Russian literature and helped popularize the realist school of writing.

Humble Beginnings Like many great authors, Chekhov had a traumatic childhood. His father, Pavel, was a harsh disciplinarian. In 1875, he declared bankruptcy and moved his family to Moscow. Chekhov, then 15 years old, remained behind in his hometown, where he completed his studies while supporting himself as a tutor. Chekhov was deeply affected by his family's financial failure; he would frequently turn to similar themes and situations in his plays and short stories.

Doctor and Writer In 1879, Chekhov moved Moscow where he rejoined his family. There, he enrolled at Moscow University, where he received a scholarship to study medicine. To help support himself, Chekhov began selling anecdotes and stories to humor magazines. While he was never proud of these early writings – and would later

refuse to publish them in his collected works – through them he developed great skill as a writer of comic sketches.

By 1885, Chekhov began submitting his stories to more serious literary journals and magazines. By 1888, he had won Russia’s coveted Pushkin Prize for his short story collection, *In the Twilight*. Over the next 10 years wrote some of the most highly regarded stories in Western literature, including “The Kiss” and “The Duel.”

In his stories, Chekhov wrote with no “moral” in mind; as he told a friend, “evil passions are every bit as much a part of life as good ones.”

<Display Quote>

The dramatist is not meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say; his only job is to be an impartial witness...”

—Anton Chekhov

A New Kind of Drama After 1895, Chekhov focused on playwrighting. In 1896, his play *The Seagull* received a disastrous production, closing after five performances. Chekhov was devastated, but his hopes were renewed when it was restaged in 1898 at the Moscow Art Theatre.

Following the successful remounting of the *Seagull*, Chekhov continued to write plays for the Moscow Art Theatre, though he often disagreed with their interpretations. He described his plays, including *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*, as light social comedies. In them, he

presented the lives of sympathetic people who are too weak to change their own lives. He was annoyed by productions that staged the plays as overwrought melodramas.

A Literary Legacy Just as he began to experience great success on the stage, Chekhov's career was cut short. He had long suffered from tuberculosis, and died of a heart attack at age 44. His style of narrative realism would later influence nearly every major playwright of the 20th century, including George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, Eugene O'Neill and Tom Stoppard.

Anton Chekhov was born in 1860 and died in 1904.