

TIME AND SPACE OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE FEAST TEXTS OF A. CHEKHOV: THE CULTURAL ASPECT

Irina Anatolyevna Mankevich

Russia, Saint-Petersburg
iamankevich@yandex.ru

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Abstract. The article studies the feast poetics as a text of daily culture and literature. The visual and verbal images of the feast appear as the feast text at least in three forms. The first form of the feast is the food itself, something that you can eat. The second is the way of behavior, the set of rules, the etiquette norms, the feast ritual and the feast cases. The third is verbal description of the feast from the idea to the aftertaste state in the literature. The experiment of cultural interpretation of feast texts in A.Chekhov's short stories and plays is presented in the article with reference to the time and space of everyday life (The Grasshopper, The Lady with the Dog, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, The Cherry Orchard). The author analyzes the semantic potential of feast texts as the source of cultural information of Chekhov's characters spiritual endeavor, their states of mind in different everyday context. Feast texts in Chekhov's compositions point out the transformation of narration emotional degree and forthcoming dramatic cataclysms in characters' everyday life.

Keywords: Feast aspect of cultural study, time in everyday life, space in everyday life, feast text, Anton Chekhov.

ВРЕМЯ И ПРОСТРАНСТВО ПОВСЕДНЕВНОСТИ В ЗАСТОЛЬНЫХ ТЕКСТАХ А.П. ЧЕХОВА: КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ РАКУРС

Ирина Анатольевна Манкевич

Россия, Санкт-Петербург
iamankevich@yandex.ru

Аннотация. В статье исследуется поэтика застолья как текста повседневной культуры и литературы. Под застольными текстами понимаются визуальные и вербальные образы застолья, выступающие, как минимум, в трех формах. Первая – застолье как съедобная вещь, т.е. собственно еда или питье. Вторая – застолье как модель поведения – свод правил, этикетные нормы, застольный ритуал, застольные ситуации. Третья – словесное описание застолья от идеи до стадии послевкусия, в том числе, в художественной литературе. Представлен опыт культурологической интерпретации застольных текстов в рассказах и пьесах А.П. Чехова в контексте категорий время и пространство повседневности ("Попрыгунья", "Дама с собачкой", "Дядя Ваня", "Три сестры", "Вишневый сад"). Анализируется семантический потенциал застольных текстов как источников культурологической информации о духовных устремлениях чеховских героев, их душевном состоянии в различных повседневных ситуациях. Застольные тексты в произведениях Чехова указывают на изменения эмоционального градуса повествования и грядущие драматические катаклизмы в повседневной жизни героев.

Ключевые слова: застолье, культурологический ракурс, время повседневности, пространство повседневности, застольный текст, А.П. Чехов.

For Russian everyday life, whether it takes place at the mansion of the rural area or the city, whether it is living principles of the nobility, the merchants or a craftsman, even if you are on the way, the feast is the time and the place for meetings, exchange of opinions, news, short leisure or long fun, time and place to lay bare your heart or to discuss some business matters.

As Lev Losev wittily noted: “Russian literature, pardon the pun, has always been fed from Russian cuisine.” [Losev 2005: 5] The above can be fully attributed to the Chekhov’s oeuvre. Like Pushkin, who easily fit the history of the life of the local nobility into five verbs ‘I drank, ate, I was bored, grew fat, weary’ Chekhov squeezed the “boring stories” of the unremarkable heroes of mankind to several paragraphs, in which various little nothings of life, including the little nothings of the feast genre, performed the key function.

The writer Alexander Genis, one of the founders of Russian culinary essays, notes in his essay “Bread and Circus” dedicated to William Vasilyevich Pokhlebkin, that a good meal, as well as its description, is capable of “uniting, body with spirit, stomach with heart, basic needs with spiritual impulses, the prose of life with its poetry ” [Genis 2004: 84]. Feast texts of short stories *The Grasshopper* and *The Lady with the Dog* are classical in this regard.

The intrigue of *The Grasshopper’s* plot could be defined as “the love and grouses”. In this short story Chekhov draws the everyday life of characters through discreet symbolism of *feast texts*:

“Dymov was not in the drawing-room, and no one remembered his existence. But exactly at half-past eleven the door leading into the dining-room opened, and Dymov would appear with his good-natured, gentle smile and say, rubbing his hands:

"Come to supper, gentlemen."

They all went into the dining-room, and every time found on the table exactly the same things: a dish of oysters, a piece of ham or veal, sardines, cheese, caviare, mushrooms, vodka, and two decanters of wine.

"My dear maître d'hôtel!" Olga Ivanovna would say, clasping her hands with enthusiasm" (S VIII, 11).

But the private worlds of the characters exist at opposite poles. “As he sat in the train and afterwards as he looked for his villa in a big wood”, Dymov “felt all the while hungry and weary, and dreamed of how he would have supper in freedom with his wife... And he was delighted as he looked at his parcel, in which there was caviare, cheese, and white salmon.” (S VIII, 13).

However, Dymov was destined to be content with hurriedly drank a glass of tea and a cracknel, and the family dinner he brought with caviar and white salmon was “eaten” by his wife's guests – “the two dark gentlemen and the fat actor.” (S VIII, 15).

Dymov's spouse Olga Ivanovna, as one know, spent her weekdays, which were also as holidays, in search of great people, enjoying more from the process than from the result.

“The present was happy, and to follow it spring was at hand, already smiling in the distance, and promising a thousand delights” (S VIII, 12). “The past was vulgar and uninteresting, the future was trivial <...>. What have I to do with Dymov? The Volga, the moon, beauty, my love, ecstasy, and there is no such thing as Dymov <...> give me one moment, one instant!” <...> “One must experience everything in life. My God! How terrible and how glorious!” (S VIII, 15).

But when she was insulted by another “genius” the picture of the world suddenly changed. “A still moonlight night in July”, “it would be sweet to sink into forgetfulness <...> in the sight of that enchanted water with the fantastic glimmer”, “the fathomless sky”, “dreamy shores that told of the vanity of our life and of the existence of something higher, blessed, and eternal” changes to “the dirty peasant woman”, “a plate of cabbage-soup” in which “she wetted her fat fingers” and “one of God's elect” Ryabovskiy who was eating a cabbage soup greedily (S VIII, 19-20).

After Olga Ivanovna suffered a fiasco on the basis of the “great” and “rare”, she happily runs away from the floral delights of her barbizon [1] towards the pleasant sensations of civilized everyday life.

“Could it really be true, she asked herself, that she would soon be <...> sleeping in her bedroom, and dining with a cloth on the table? A weight was lifted from her heart <...>” (S VIII, 20).

There was Dymov at home “with his waistcoat unbuttoned and no coat, was sitting at the table sharpening a knife on a fork; before him lay a grouse on a plate.”

“<...> eat the grouse. You are starving, poor darling. She eagerly breathed in the atmosphere of home and ate the grouse” as if she was muttering her feelings and the one who caused it – “a splendid fellow Ryabovska”. But her unrealistically perfect Dymov “watched her with tenderness and laughed with delight” (S VIII, 20-21).

It is noteworthy that the acquaintance of the character of the short story *The Lady with the Dog* takes place in the setting of a resort evening (lunch) feast. The temptation of adventure pushes Gurov to meet an unknown lady by means of a trivial action for such cases - treating her canine companion with a bone. So the white Spitz, obviously graciously accepting the tail-wagging treat from a stranger, becomes a connecting link between the characters.

The short story has become classic and the feast details symbolically indicate the differences in the intuitive feelings of the characters of the dual situation in which they, by the will of fate, found themselves and the psychological barriers separating the private worlds of the characters. For instance,

the water-melon that Gurov “began eating without haste” at rather an inconvenient time of the romantic meeting with Anna Sergejevna, and “a whole plateful of salt fish and cabbage” which Gurov “could already eat” on his return to the usual Moscow life. “He already felt a longing to go to restaurants, clubs, dinner-parties, anniversary celebrations”. And the famous “the sturgeon was a bit too strong” which unexpectedly became a symbol of Gurov’s earthliness existence (S X, 136-137).

But even later, describing the secret meetings of the characters at the Slaviansky Bazaar hotel in Moscow, Chekhov draws a line separating the male and female views on their other life through the *tea text*, so familiar to his poetics:

“She could not speak; she was crying...” <...> “Let her have her cry out. I’ll sit down and wait,” he thought, and he sat down in an arm-chair. Then he rang and asked for tea to be brought him, and while he drank his tea she remained standing at the window with her back to him.” (S X, 142).

In Chekhov’s plays the connection between *feast texts* and the plot is inconsistent, discontinuous, but it fully corresponds to the general impressionistic tonality of the artistic period. In between tea, vodka or sparkling wine the Chekhov’s characters rush in search of the “cherry orchard” but their own destinies collapse by the will of the author without any hope for happiness.

The *tea text*, that was classic for the plays of the 19th century, is interrupted by lunch remarks at the beginning of the play *Uncle Vanya*, that is quite in the spirit of breaking away from traditions. These remarks are connected with arrival and then the unexpected departure of Astrov and all finishes with the shot of vodka – a classic motif of everyday life in Russia, not only at the turn of the century. Whilst the tea remarks are quite real because tea is present on the table and the characters drink it, but the lunch remarks are idle – the lunch is only talked about.

Chekhov’s representation of the Western European version of Professor Serebrakoff daily routine in this play is of great interest. [Pokhlebkin 2005:360] Moreover, this routine should be followed by all inhabitants of the mansion. Sooner or later it leads to the scandal in the noble family alongside other ‘inconveniences’. The professor wakes up at noon, walks, while the samovar is already waiting for him, then he has breakfast, lunch is at 6-7 pm, as the French or diplomats do, and drinks tea again at 2 am. The departure of the Serebrakoff couple symbolizes the restoration of the previous lifestyle: “Now we shall have things as they were again: tea at eight, dinner at one, and supper in the evening; everything in order as decent folks, as Christians like to have it <...> It is a long time since I have eaten noodles” (S XIII, 66, 106).

In the play *Three Sisters* the *feast texts* are symbolically connected with the state of mind of the characters, the nature of their psychological makeup, and spiritual aspirations. Often it is the *feast texts* that mark the

change of milestones in the lives of the characters, their transition to another everyday life. We can hear the words of Irina, who was the youngest of the Prozorov sisters, about coffee as a kind of symbol of parasitism as soon as in the first act of the play: “<...> better to be a simple horse, as long as one works, rather than be a young woman who stirs at eleven o'clock in the morning, then drinks coffee in bed, then takes two hours to get dressed... Oh, that is appalling!” (S XIII, 123). It is noteworthy that Tuzenbach's last remark addressed to Irina on the verge of his death also refers to coffee: “I didn't have any coffee this morning. Please ask to have some brewed for me...” (S XIII, 181).

Coffee is usually associated with a cheerful state of mind, but in the context of the final events of the play, it is perceived rather as a gesture of feigned cheerfulness. The character masks the true state of the soul and, despite his presentiment, promises a new life for himself and his bride, the life that is never destined to be. In the end, the last memory of Irina's groom, whom she had never a chance to fall in love with, was a request for a drink which she did not approve. Thus, the only gastronomic ingredient, that Chekhov inlaid in the opening and final scenes of the play, by chance symbolically indicate the collapse of the heroine's life plans.

The Andrey Prozorov remark revealing his craving for the pleasure of enjoying the delights of private life even in the setting of a restaurant feast is also notable.

“I don't drink, I don't like the local inns, but how much I would love to be sitting now in Moscow at Tyestov's, or at the Great Moscow restaurant. <...> In Moscow you sit in a huge restaurant, you don't know anyone, and nobody knows you, but all the same you don't feel yourself to be a stranger. But here you know everyone and everyone knows you, but you're a stranger, a stranger. You're a stranger and you're alone.” (S XIII, 141).

As a matter of interest, in one of his remarks Andrey identifies "a roast chicken and vegetables" [5] with an idle lifestyle: “I see freedom, I see how I and my children will be freed from idleness, from cabbage pickle, from roast chicken and vegetables, from dozing after dinner, from crippling inactivity...” (S XIII, 182). However, according to V. Pokhlebkin, Andrey is deceiving himself because a goose with cabbage is just a restaurant option for serving this dish. A homemade one is a goose with antonovka apples, stewed potatoes and onions, which was common in a landowner's feast of the 19th century [Pokhlebkin 2005:417].

The range of *feast texts* symbolizing the private life of the characters can be continued. So, the water that the crying Masha drinks at the end of the play symbolizes emptiness: “A life gone wrong... I don't need anything now...” (S XIII, 185). Chekhov semantically correlates a homely little world of Andrey's wife Natasha with a fork which is a symbol of an evil woman according to Russian concepts (S XIII, 186).

At the edge of two realms in the play *tea remarks*, symbolizing the comfort of the hearth, and *cognac remarks*, preparing the public for the approach of emotional crisis in the development of the play, collide. For instance, Solyony, whose surname means ‘salty’ in Russian and associates with an unpleasant taste, refuses to drink "Bruderschaft" with Tuzenbach, and a cognac he drank alone appears to be a canary in a coal mine.

There is no meal description throughout the action of the play *The Cherry Orchard*. In spite of audience expectations, the owner of the mansion, who has returned from traveling, is not greeted with a festive dinner. After a long journey Mme. Ranevsky limits herself with a cup of coffee that is not immediately served to her. With the help of numerous inclusions of the *coffee remarks* in the text of the play (we meet it 12 times!), that are connected to a desirable cup of coffee, Chekhov symbolically shows the mansion and its owner from behind the scenes. In this concern, all the characters in the play, except for the young footman Yasha, who “smell of poultry”, look like vegetarians. Only servants eat in the play and even then behind the scenes. In addition to beverages, the play directly mentions only snacks: cucumbers, anchovies and herrings. Together with suitcases, boxes, parcels and traveling dresses of Mme. Ranevsky and Anya the snacks become the background of the homeless life of the characters. It is remarkable that unlike other Chekhov's plays they do not even drink tea in *The Cherry Orchard*. Perhaps, Chekhov deliberately deprives his characters of the pleasure of sweetening their life with at least some delights. But the cherry orchard owner's surname is endowed with sweetness by Chekhov and originates from the plant kingdom. As Karasev suggests, the surname Ranevsky derives from the sweet kind of apple named *rennet* [Karasev 2001:233].

One of the symbolically important aspects of *feast texts* in the play is the ability of Chekhov to identify one or other meal or beverage, which is consumed or mentioned by the characters, with their private spiritual life. For example, Mme. Ranevsky drinks only coffee as Parisians do. Mr. Ranevsky “drank terribly” and “died of champagne”. Gaev “has eaten all his substance in sugar-candies”. The governess Charlotta Ivanovna takes a cucumber out of her pocket like a magician and eats it, while her dog eats delicacies for a human being - nuts.

The private life of Varya semantically related to two dishes mentioned in the play: one is milk soup, which is not exactly soup for a Russian; the other is peas that are completely not according to the culinary traditions, and only servants eat it. It is not spoken of how the peas are cooked. It can be porridge, soup, fried or grated peas, and even raw. Pokhlebkin ironically notes that such meal “restrains Lopakhin in his intentions to see Varya as his wife and to eat milk soup instead of cabbage soup”, as a happy marriage for the merchants means healthy food. So “this perspective is not possible for him” [Pokhlebkin 2005:423].

The leave of epochal scale everyday life is transmitted by Chekhov in the classical *cherry text* related to an old footman Fiers:

“FIERS. And then we'd send the dried cherries off in carts to Moscow and Kharkov. And money! And the dried cherries were soft, juicy, sweet, and nicely scented. . . They knew the way. . . .
LUBOV. What was the way?
FIERS. They've forgotten. Nobody remembers.” (S XIII, 206).

This dialogue is very remarkable not only in the context of literary innovations at the turn of the eras, but also in the context of transitional eras of any historical period. The ideology of the sudden destruction of the past in order to obtain instant benefits from the future turns out to be a hundred times better than the technology of useful everyday routine labor.

Unlike prose, the characters in Chekhov's plays eat little but drink a lot. On the one hand, this literary fact is a tribute to the era when so-called “absinthe lovers” become not the outcasts of society, but on the contrary almost the best representatives of it. On the other hand, the dual nature of the *wine text* makes it possible to metaphorically express something “un-speakable and tender”, non-verbal in other words.

Among all spirit-lifting drinks, the champagne played a special role in the creative life of Chekhov, as one may know. It is significant that all the remarks associated with champagne symbolically denote the collapse of the estate and family. Even Varya's hope for individual happiness vanishes, like champagne sipped by a footman. The main role of champagne as a part of a *feast text*, both in everyday life and in literature, is to be a symbol of a person's usual earthly life. Sometimes the charm of lasting moment of life may not be noticed in the vanity of everyday life. In Chekhov's poetics a *feast text* with champagne acquires a tragic meaning and becomes a symbol of ephemeral life. And it is so not only because “what has been lived and spilled cannot be reversed.” But mainly because “in the past it used to be better, the present is worse than the past.” [2] And only a feeling of sorrow for what was not drunk or experienced interprets that the characters have already crossed that invisible line separating their present everyday life from the past.

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Remarks

1. The Barbizon school (it takes its name from the village of Barbizon, France, on the edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau next to Paris) was a national school of landscape painting in France in the middle of the 19th century.
2. Quotation from: Anton Chekhov. Notebooks. M.: Vagrius, 2002. P. 54.

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Примечания

1. Барбизонская школа (от франц. Barbizon – название деревни во Франции близ Фонтенбло под Парижем) – национальная школа пейзажной живописи середины XIX века во Франции.
2. Цит. по изданию: Антон Чехов. Записные книжки. М., 2002 С. 54.

Манкевич Ирина Анатольевна – доктор культурологии, независимый исследователь.

Mankevich Irina – doctor of culturology, Associate Professor at the Department of Russian and Foreign Literature, independent researcher.

Dane kontaktowe / Contact details:

Манкевич Ирина Анатольевна – 196105. Ул. Кузнецовская, д. 44, кв. 294. Санкт-Петербург, Россия.