

Reality Matters: Relevance of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* and Chekhov's *The Seagull* to Daily Life

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ABSTRACT

Described as the pioneers of modern drama, Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov shed light on the realities of daily life. Two of them, Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1884) and Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1895), defined as realistic dramas, are constantly compared with one another due to their shared and contrasting qualities. Even though these comparative studies contribute to clarifying areas such as plot, character analysis, themes, and symbols to establish a link between the two works, they do not explain the degree of their relevance to real life. Indeed, the problem is that Ibsen is regarded as the father of modern drama, and Chekhov's implied to be inspired by Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* while writing his *The Seagull*; because of that, the general conception is inclined to first's literary supremacy over latter. Therefore, this study analyzes the relevance of these plays to daily life and examines which one is more realistic than the other. For such a comparison, it has been paid attention to the plots' developments and the dialogues between the characters in both plays.

Keywords: *The Wild Duck*, *The Seagull*, realism

Introduction

Ibsen and Chekhov have always been praised for their distinguished works and styles. Particularly, Ibsen was the first author to convert centuries-old traditional drama into a different direction, that is, the flourishing of drama from Greek Tragedy to Modernity (Glytzouris, 2012, p. 3). For this transformation, Steiner states that “the most dangerous assaults upon man’s reason and life come from without, as they do in Greek and Elizabethan tragedy [but] they arise in the unstable soul” (1980, p. 293). The matter of unstable soul hints signal to the present condition of humans in real life. Since the problems around him capture the man, external factors designate his existence, and he has little influence over them. As in the case of Nora’s path crossing with Krogstad’s in *The Doll House* and Halvard’s encounter with Hilda Wangel in *The Master Builder*, heroes or heroines find themselves in an unavoidably complex situation. According to Rredhi, this complexity leads Ibsen’s “drama to reflect better daily life’s problems, preserve better the human dimension and juxtapose with a new aesthetic vision the dream and reality” (2015, p. 1482). This closeness to the facts of life and Ibsen’s being the first who established this novelty (i.e., the principle of modernism) in theatre plays to show how appropriate the “father of modern drama” identity undertook. In other words, Ibsen’s works are fed with real-life subjects. Thus, instead of belonging to a particular group, they focus on themes and experiences from all walks of life. In this sense, considering modernity and realism as one and unique concepts will not be a failure since both terms interchangeably are replaced by one another. However, it is still essential to add that these terms have different connotations in the literary base (Jameson, 2012, p. 475). The reason for their replacements comes from the shifting from Greek tradition to modernistic insight in drama, which deepens on reality-based occasions.

The Russian dramatist Chekhov, just like Ibsen, has shaped his plays within the frame of a modernist outlook. He handled the realities of modern man and became a true mirror in reflecting the social issues of his age. As expressed in his own words, Chekhov believes that “on the stage, everything should be as complex and as simple as in life. People are having dinner, and while they have it, their future happiness may be decided, or their lives may be about to be shattered” (as cited in Miller, 1964, p. 102). Chekhov’s synthesis signifies a fatalist approach that he put into his plays; real life can be as simple as a dinner but also as complicated as the events that fate weaves into the man having that dinner. Besides, Borny claims for Chekhov that “he wished to show his spectators imag-

es of people very like themselves who waste their potential by silly trivial lives” (2006, p. 141). Borny’s utterance indeed points out two inferences: First, the phrase “very like themselves” means that Chekhov adds nothing more than into the way of people’s representation of their nature while creating his recipes for the plays, whereas “silly trivial lives” indicate the scope of these people who usually belong to middle or lower classes. Furthermore, Rubenstein puts forward Chekhov’s modernity that “it was only in the second half of the 20th century that we began to perceive, from our post-existentialist vantage point, how modern Chekhov was, how sensitive as a writer to the contingencies of being” (2009, p. 59). In a way, as understood, Chekhov is as modernist as Ibsen.

The main thesis of this study stems from the fact that Chekhov’s play *The Seagull* is thought to be inspired by Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*. As Seyler declared in his article “*The Seagull and The Wild Duck: Birds of a Father?*”, these two bird-based plays “are too great to be coincidental” since Seyler puts a particular intention in Chekhov’s writing *The Seagull* ten years after Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*: “I suspect that Chekhov found a certain ironic pleasure in making his bird’s work so effectively as a symbol...” (p. 173). Another critic who emphasizes the inspiration of Chekhov is Jacob H. Adler: “Chekhov’s ‘*The Seagull*’ is the first important play owing a major debt to ‘*The Wild Duck*’” (1970-1971, p. 238). Of course, two great authors’ having two similar works is not a matter. After all, each has exceptional characteristics and specific purposes to be delivered to the audience. Literature has always embraced such works as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Elizabeth Whittaker’s *Robina Crusoe* (1882-83). *The Seagull*’s concern is being regarded as inferior and worthless, while its counterpart, *The Wild Duck*, is dignified. In a letter to one of his friends - Melikhovo, upon completing his work *The Seagull*, Chekhov disappointingly admits his so-called failure: “I have finished my play, the title is ‘The Seagull.’ It did not turn out at all as I hoped. Altogether I am a poor dramatist” (Friedland & Simmons, 1964, p. 146). He thinks *The Seagull* would not be appreciated as a successful piece of art. Then, Valency conveys another assertion from Chekhov for *The Seagull* after the play having been performed in Alexandrinsky Theatre in Petersburg in 1896: “If I live to be seven hundred, I’ll not give another play to the theatre. In this field I am a failure” (1966, p. 142). This statement by Chekhov reveals how little confidence he has in his play and how disheartened he is because of the criticisms he might have received. Indeed, Valency’s further quote from Tolstoy confirms the hopeless situation that Chekhov was in: “It is worthless. It reads like a play by Ibsen” (as

cited in “The Breaking String” 1966, p. 143). Simmon notes that the conversation between Chekhov and Tolstoy continues as follows: “You know, I cannot abide Shakespeare, but your plays are even worse” (as cited in “Chekhov: A Biography,” 1970, p. 495). As seen, both Chekhov and his *The Seagull* are humiliated and trivialized by scholars. This case may lead to the inference that Chekhov might lack some qualifications as a writer, which he expresses himself as well. However, the reason for such harsh criticism is that *The Seagull* was written after *The Wild Duck* and contains similar symbols and themes. In a way, the retelling of the original work with other bland and soulless characters (Beyad & Moradpour, 2009, p. 19) and similar relapse of events transforms Chekhov's *The Seagull* into an edited copy of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*.

The paper's argument exactly starts at this point. On the one hand, there is *The Wild Duck*, which is described as a respected work, and on the other hand, *The Seagull*, which, despite having similar symbols and themes to the previous one, is devalued by the critics. Since both works are representatives of the realistic tradition, this study examines which work is closer to reality and whether the negative criticisms of *The Seagull* cause it to be behind *The Wild Duck* in terms of “reality.” In other words, plots and dialogues within the plays will be examined, and it will be discussed which play is most likely to take place in real life.

Argument

Danish critic Georg Brandes declared once in his lecture that “what keeps a literature alive in our time is that it submits problems to debate” (as cited in Sprinchorn, 2021, p. 389). In this way, he associated the reality of any concept with the problems that might likely happen in everyday life. More specifically, a realist play depicts life as it is, due to which it occasionally is labeled as “problem play”. When social concerns are addressed, this kind of play is a tool to persuade the audience to rethink their preconceptions and societal norms (Ahmed & Abdillah, 2018). For this reason, everything on the stage, from décor to costumes, and everything within the play, from subject matter (i.e., love, poverty, illness, etc.), language, and plot to characters, must be accurate portrayals of real life. This brief depiction of a realistic play will help establish links between the plays and their degree of factuality in the subsequent parts.

To start with the plot analysis of *The Wild Duck* and *The Seagull*, each play, as observed, supplies a great deal of detail and a steady flow of events. In Ibsen's bird story, the audi-

ence is introduced to the Ekdal family, who lived a modest life until then. Although no cue regarding the past is given, it is assumed that Hjalmar Ekdal and his wife, Gina Ekdal, have not experienced any turmoil during their fourteen-year marriage. Their daughter Hedvig, who was thought to be the fruit of this marriage at the beginning, is also presented in the play. The family's long-year stability is suddenly disrupted when Gregers Werle arrives from Hoidal to visit his father. After a short chat, Gregers discovers that his close friend, Hjalmar, is married to Gina, who once flirted with his father.

On top of that, due to her eye problem (i.e., her father, Haakon Werle, is also troubled by her eyes), he concludes that Hedvig belongs to her father. Moreover, despite Hjalmar's belief that pure love brought him to Gina to Gregers, his father joined them to hide his true reputation. Accordingly, Gregers wishes the truth to come out and that this truth will serve as the foundation for true marriage. To make this wish real, Gregers tells all the truth to Hjalmar, and as expected, a family disaster ensues. First, Hjalmar and Gina are falling apart; their marriage is physically imperiled. Then, their daughter, Hedvig, kills herself with a gun, hoping to reverse the situation. All readers and viewers witness a girl full of the joy of happiness, a fourteen-year of marriage, as well as the happy family life of Ekdals destroyed in two days due to a secret that Gina keeps.

From an atomistic approach, all the incidents seem chained to one another with sound links. In other words, one event causes or triggers the other; nevertheless, this storyline should be evaluated holistically since a critical eye is needed to examine the whole plot. Rather than just one aspect of the problem, it is necessary to recognize that various factors interact and influence each other. Primarily, the fact that the entire play takes place in two days seriously reduces the story's believability. The development and resolution of all events in a few days show how weak and worthless the mutual love and respect in the family is. In other words, the peaceful family environment that lasted for fourteen years has been the victim of the two-day savagery of Gregers. To observe in detail Gregers's return after many years, revealing the big secret to his friend, Hjalmar's comprehending this secret and acting accordingly, the deterioration of the peace in the family. Finally, the little girl's suicide all happened at once. Of course, similar events occur in real life, but there is a connection between the occurrence and causes of events. If someone dares to kill himself/herself, there are past-based reasons behind this courage. However, Hedvig makes a big decision that could affect her life because of her father's behavior in the last two days. How can a person who was happy until that moment make

such a decision in two days? Or how could Gregers condition himself so harshly one day to ruin his friend's happy marriage? Even though the events' probability seems high, the time allowed for these events to happen significantly reduces their reality.

Moreover, the absurdity in the play is unconsciously supported by the characters' dialogues. Rather than expressing the true feeling of people, the conversations seem, at some points, meaningless and artificial. For instance, when Hjalmar comes home after his walking with Gregers:

HEDVIG (coming closer). Don't you feel well, Daddy?

HJALMAR. Well? Oh yes, well enough. We had an exhausting walk, Gregers and I.

GINA. You shouldn't do that, Hjalmar; you're not used to it.

HJALMAR. Hm. There are a lot of things a man's got to get used to in this world. (Walking about the room a bit.) Did anyone come while I was out?

GINA. No one but that engaged couple.

HJALMAR. No new orders?

GINA. No, not today.

HEDVIG. You'll see, there'll be some tomorrow, Daddy.

HJALMAR. I certainly hope so, because tomorrow I'm going to throw myself into my work-completely. (Ibsen, trans., 1978, p. 463)

In this scene, Hjalmar is aware of the facts and shaken by the feeling of infidelity. Nevertheless, he does not overreact and worries about his business and coming orders. Any person, man, or woman, after discovering such a truth — it is a truth that one finds out that his/her spouse has dated another man/woman and that the person who has been thought to be his/her child for years belongs to someone else — is not expected to be so calm, or to puzzle himself with daily routines. The foolishness goes on after Hjalmar declares to his wife that he was informed by the facts, while at that time, Gregers comes in:

GREGERS (advancing with a beaming countenance, hands outstretched as if to take theirs). Now, you dear people-! (Looks from one to the other, then whispers to HJALMAR.) But isn't it done, then?

HJALMAR (resoundingly). It's done.

GREGERS. It is?

HJALMAR. I've just known the bitterest hour of my life.

GREGERS. But also the most exalted, I think.

HJALMAR. Well, anyway, it's off our hands for the moment.

GINA. God forgive you, Mr. Werle. (Ibsen, trans., 1978, p. 467)

The strange thing is that although her marriage is in danger and Gregers is responsible for this danger, Gina remains as calm as her husband. Usually, she is anticipated to weep or mistreat Gregers for ruining her marriage, but she says, "God forgive you." In real life, people want to take revenge on people or things that hurt them or express their anger. However, Gina maintains her composure and dignity towards Gregers as if nothing significant has happened.

Lastly, the end of the play, where the audience is shocked by the death of Hedvig, appears to be contrarian against the facts of life. When it is understood that Hedvig shot himself, there is no extreme reaction other than the weak sadness of Hjalmar and Gina, who play the roles of father and mother. Besides that, Gregers, who knows the truth — that Hedvig is from his father, so she is his sister — shows no signs of distress either; furthermore, he has not been addressed any backlash even though he is supposed to be the implied murderer of Hedvig. Considering real-life death cases, people show an extreme response to those who cause the death of their beloved ones. They can even rebel against the God they believe in when it is thought the cause of death is from God. However, in this final scene, there is no rebellion or reaction. In this case, either Hedvig's death is too worthless or too far from real life.

Chekhov's *The Seagull*, like Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, is about a group of dissatisfied people who come together in a rural place and spend their time either grieving their wasted lives or grumbling about the meaningless of their existence. To start with the opening scene, a kind of bleak conversation between Masha and Medviedenko occurs:

MEDVIEDENKO. Why do you always wear mourning?

MASHA. I dress in black to match my life. I am unhappy.

MEDVIEDENKO. Why? [Pondering] I don't understand... You are in good health, and your father, though not rich, is well off. My life is much harder than yours. I get

only twenty-three roubles a month, and out of that they take something for the pension fund, but I don't wear mourning. [They sit down].

MASHA. It isn't a question of money. Even a beggar can be happy.

MEDVIEDENKO. Yes, in theory, but in practice it's like this: there's me, my mother, my two sisters, and a little brother—on a salary of only twenty-three roubles a month. People have to eat and drink, don't they? And they need tea and sugar? And tobacco? It's not easy to make ends meet. (Chekhov, trans., 1964 p. 105-106)

This short dialogue between the characters establishes the play's mood even before it starts. In some way or other, Chekhov signals to the audience what kind of a theme the play will be built on and, accordingly, to prepare themselves. Oppenheimer's definition of this theme is called "The Chekovian World": "[It] is a world peopled by characters suffering from boredom, frustration, lack of communication, unrequited love and shattered dreams – and ultimately some form of displacement" (1975, p. 60). Oppenheimer clarifies how Chekhov depends on the natural world and how little effort he makes to find his characters, which are not extraordinary nor clinched by remarkable duties throughout the play. The characters try to make money to survive and consume tea, sugar and tobacco-like any other ordinary people. When comparing with Ibsen, Beyad and Moradpou find Chekhov's soulless characters "as a true imitation of human nature" (2009, p. 18). Unlike Ibsen's characters, Chekhov's heroes or heroines do not stand out in any way, appearing as if they are real-life acquaintances of the audience.

Chekhov is mainly noticed with his individualistic style, known by many as "indirect action," which means that "the main events of the drama take place off-stage and text reflects only the trivial surface of life" (Borny, 2006, p. 141). Although Borny states that the texts are worthless in the face of events, as seen in the previous dialogue, the texts play an active role in the presentation of the general atmosphere of the play and the integration of the audience with the storyline. Especially in *The Seagull*, Chekhov uses woven narration, showing that the events that happen are not sudden but have a connection with the play is now and future. Thus, the audience can comprehend the incidents more efficiently with a constantly vivid memory. However, it is necessary to differentiate Chekhov from Ibsen in establishing the plot since they both have cause-effect reading. In *The Wild Duck*, readers are informed that the reason for the characters' suffering at the end is owing to the retroactive acts, which are not shown but told. For instance, verbal

statements forward Gina's relationship with old Gregers to the audience. In a way, Ibsen's characters suffer from past events that are not performed within the play. On the other side, Chekhov tries to present *The Seagull* in all its aspects, like a newborn baby. Thus, the viewers or listeners can witness this baby's developmental stages. More specifically, it is fully known via performing how Constantine and Nina start and finish their romantic affair, how Simon Medviedenko and Masha turn into a problematic family, and how Irina and Constantine develop a mother-son relationship. Rather than saying or flashbacking, Chekhov puts a wide magnifier onto scenes, which helps the audience create tangible links between the events. Thus—although they may seem trivial or frivolous—Chekhov's characters and events become more relevant to real-life than Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*.

Time also matters in Chekhov's play, which is crucial in increasing authenticity. There is plenty of time between the events; precisely two years elapse between the third and fourth acts. Using the persuasive power of time, Chekhov positions *The Seagull* closer to real life. The readers find enough time to understand the events in the play, and they can establish the cause-and-effect relationship more strongly. Of course, the cause-effect relationship also exists in Ibsen's play; however, the sudden emergence of these relationships before they mature can shock the readers. Openly, in *The Wild Duck*, Gregers ruins his friend's life after an angry meeting with his father. Indeed, there is a tie between Greger's visiting Ekdals and the family's pain at the end, but this tie seems poor due to the given time. Suppose Ibsen had let the spectators observe all the events during the play. In that case, they could have been more integrated with the characters, and thus, the play could be more realistic than it was. In opposition, Chekhov uses time spaciously; for instance, the audience grasps why Nina still follows Boris even though she has been disappointed by him since Chekhov lightens the beginning of their relationship on the stage; even further, he diligently shows how Constantine is dragged to the death step by step through his mother's careless manners and Nina's preference's someone else instead of him.

Conclusion

Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* and Chekhov's *The Seagull*, which contemporary literary critics highly appreciate, are based on real-life conditions and described as modern and realistic dramas. Although there have been numerous articles on the two plays, this study, unlike the others, is prepared to argue which play is closer to real life. The motivation behind

this study is that Chekhov was exposed to negative criticism for releasing *The Seagull* after Ibsen and was deemed a second writer of the same work, *The Wild Duck*. Accordingly, Chekhov's *The Seagull*, seen as secondary and inspired, has been compared in terms of real-life relevance to *The Wild Duck*, which is regarded as an original, realistic drama. In the study, the plays' plots and the characters' conversations have been examined. As a result of the examination, Chekhov's *The Seagull* was more realistic than Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* since Chekhov's use of the time in the broader concept. The characters he employed did not have distinctive and superior qualities, just like real-life people.

Many of Ibsen's plays, such as *A Doll House*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *The Master Builder*, are about the disintegration of the main characters in a concise time because of an incident or a secret they are left behind. *The Wild Duck* also tells the drama of a family devastated by the revelation of a secret Gina kept for years. Ibsen's choice to reveal these hidden facts is accompanied by a short period and the characters' enlightened speech. The time mentioned in those plays is usually one week or shorter, which does not allow the audience to digest the events appropriately. To scrutinize *The Wild Duck*, the spectators cannot witness how Gina and old Werle have been in a relationship, how she met with Hjalmar and started a family, or what old Werle did to old Ekdal. These matters are inferred from the dialogues; the play puts an invisible distance between itself and the viewers since both sides cannot be integrated fully. Also, the dialogues show strangeness at some points, making it seem that their social meanings do not match the context. In another way, unexpected speeches are uttered in remarkable cases. For instance, Hjalmar's surprise at salt meat and remembering his eating habit while he is in the middle of almost an ended marriage shows a contradiction to the atmosphere of the case. Another point regarding the characters' utterances is that Ibsen confronts them after the secret comes to light. Those scenes are elaborated with profound psychological and illuminating statements, seen through Dr. Relling's and Greger's sentences when Hedvig kills herself. In these situations, Ibsen appears as if he is presenting a theory-based psychological class rather than detailing real life, a way of displaying the psychological consequences of an undesired case through assertions.

Chekhov's plot development in *The Seagull* is simple and effective as Ibsen's. However, he can adapt the time efficiently, making comprehension and pursuit of events easier than in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. Also, his characters seem less capable and distinctive than the ones in *The Wild Duck*; they are visibly cold and aimless. In that way, by employing soulless characters, he boosts the plausibility degree of his play.

The study was carried out on Ibsen's and Chekhov's plays focusing on bird symbols. More plays by the authors can be compared with each other to grasp the difference between the two authors better. Hopefully, this study can be a steppingstone to future similar studies.

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