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## A. P. Chekhov's "The Shooting Party": The Problem of Perception

*The Shooting Party* represents one of the most interesting texts in Chekhov's early oeuvre in terms of structure and genre. On the one hand, this work is constructed in accordance with the formula of the criminal novel genre popular in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia, but on the other hand, the peculiarities of its narrative (the framework composition, the unity of the narrator and the criminal hero, which is revealed at the end, the absence of punishment for the guilty) make it impossible to give an unequivocal assessment of the status of this work. Despite the fact that Russian criminal prose of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century included a wide variety of works in terms of plot and construction and was generally open to authorial experimentation, its belonging to the field of popular literature created the need to leave the reader with a sense of calm and satisfaction after reading it. In the case of *The Shooting Party*, however, the reader, inevitably identified with the primary narrator, is likely to experience a difficult experience. This article offers an attempt to answer the question of what structural features of Chekhov's text account for such an effect.

**Key words:** A. P. Chekhov, narrative, reception, criminal prose, popular fiction.

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The Shooting Party may be called one of the most obscure Chekhov's stories. Some critics say that it travesties basic principles of the Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century detective stories [4; 6]; the others suggest it to be one of the serious Chekhov's masterpieces (for example: [1, p. 53; 2, p. 217]). If we consider the fact that Chekhov didn't include this story in his published collected works and didn't ever mention it, so that we don't know what

his own opinion about *The Shooting Party* was, it will increase the challenge to define adequately this text. Nevertheless, the variety of interpretations proves that although this text uses many literary formulas, it has a structure, which is more complicated than that of the stories and novels, which formed popular fiction back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>.

*The Shooting Party* is a frame narrative, representing the situation of reading when the narrator (the character named “the editor”) reads a book written by another character – Kamyshev, who claims that his novel is based on a true story. In the embedded text Kamyshev describes his relationship with the woman he fell in love with (her name is Olga Skvortsova, later – Olga Urbenina, and the name of Kamyshev’s autobiographic character is Zinoviev) and about her tragic death at the shooting party. As Zinoviev is a local investigator, he has to find the murderer, and he accuses Olga’s husband Urbenin of committing this crime. The editor, reading the manuscript, understands that Kamyshev (or Zinoviev) is the real criminal, who killed Olga<sup>2</sup>, so the editor blames him for it and Kamyshev doesn’t even try to deny the charge, but says that he wrote the novel intending to tell everybody about his secret, as he wants everybody to know that he isn’t an ordinary person, but man of a strong will.

It is obvious, that Chekhov’s story imitates the structure of the Russian popular crime story of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>, but it manages to break reader’s expectations, which were earlier formed by this genre, and this is why we face the problem of perception and interpretation.

As Svetlana Bakhanek states: «Чехов выстраивает стратегию истины, а именно ее незаданность. Он приглашает читателя в лабораторию построения смысла, построения текста, причем текста нового типа, применительно к концу XIX века. <...> Такой подход Чехова усложняет для читателя процедуру толкования и вместе с тем, допуская оригинальное прочтение, повышает статус текста» [1, с. 53].

<sup>1</sup> We should mention that Chekhov knew these formulas very well, as he used it in his detective parody short story *The Swedish Match*. See: [3].

<sup>2</sup> So we can say that the narrative structure of the Chekhov’s *The Shooting Party* prefigures one of the most significant criminal novels ever written – *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie.

<sup>3</sup> One of the main characters Kamyshev says: “Когда я писал, я брал в соображение уровень среднего читателя” /“When I was writing, it took the average reader’s level of intelligence into consideration” [10, p. 414]; in this article we use the translation made by Ronald Wilks [12].

## Materials and methods

The very first thing that forms reader's expectations is the title of the book. The title *The Shooting Party*, which was typical for the Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century popular fiction, appears twice in the text: it is not only the title of the whole Chekhov's story, but also the title of the novel, written by Kamyshev, as if Chekhov wanted to stress the fact that his own intention was to write an ordinary crime story.

In his article *Crime fiction and the Russian Reader* Abram Reitblat claims that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century detective fiction was considered to be a scorned genre. Therefore the authors, who wrote detective stories, tried to represent them as non-fiction [5, pp. 294–306]. So, we face an unusual situation: trying to retrieve the status of their works, writers intentionally create the “non-fiction/fiction” opposition, where non-fiction is thought to be more valuable. However, every story or novel, which they try to represent as “non-fiction” is based on the popular fiction's principles thus forming a watertight strategy of reading and perception. Consequently, the created opposition breaks up, because in this context “fiction” and “non-fiction” become unequal and incommensurable things. “Fiction” in this case means the whole literature, and “non-fiction” turns out to be a kind of literary device. So, the opposition appears to be a literary convention, which doesn't help to distinguish between popular and classic literature, but combine them in one concept.

Nevertheless, this fact doesn't contravene our assertion about the conflict between the Chekhov's text and reader's expectation. Chekhov's subtitles (“A True Event” and “From the Memoirs of an Investigating Magistrate”) confirm that *The Shooting Party* is an ordinary crime story, but many of the popular fiction's principles are broken in this text (for example, it is almost impossible for a detective story to come up with a situation where a narrator turns out to be the murderer). This fact suggests why *The Shooting Party* is often considered to be a travesty text.

One of the main features that distinguishes the Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century crime fiction from the western one, is a type of the main character. In the European and American novels the attention is concentrated on the investigator or detective and everything that happens to him. As for the Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century crime fic-

tion, the main character is a criminal, and most attention is paid to his story and his repentance. As Jeffrey Brooks mentions in his book *When Russia Learned to Read. Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917*, criminals in Russian fiction symbolized freedom and rebellion, but they had to return to the community to survive, so the redemption was the only way for them. Brooks writes:

All popular fiction is the stuff of daydreams, but Russian daydreams are held in check by rules that do not govern French, English, or American popular literature. The constraints on individual rebellion and initiative, as expressed in the literature of banditry and crime in the late imperial period, were great. Individuals were restrained in the imagination of popular writers of both *lubok* fiction and newspaper serials by certainty that they were weaker than the political authority and the social order of their communities. Freedom lay outside that order, but it was a doomed freedom. The strong individual was inspired to sample that freedom, but in order to survive he had to return to the community [10, p. 207].

## Results

Russian literary tradition of redemption originates from hagiography and forms one of the main themes in popular fiction as well as in the Russian classic literature and in such a way it becomes yet another intersection of these two literary trends. But as opposed to the popular fiction classic literature authors doubt that the society (and all the more the authority) has the right to shape destiny of a person. According to Brooks, «the paths of acceptable behavior were much narrower in popular literature than in belles lettres» [10, p. 212].

Criminals in the Russian fiction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century bore little resemblance to the ones described in the European and American prose. Russian bandits were very far removed from the image of generous criminals like Robin Hood and innocent people often became their victims. It is very likely to think that readers' affection for such kind of character may appear because they were almost equal socially and it was easy for the reader to identify with the criminal character. What is more, bandits were very often represented as brave people with forceful personalities. And it is clear that one of the primary intentions of the popular fiction is to create an image of the ideal character

and let the reader identify with him. This is what provides reader's satisfaction from this kind of stories, and that's why popular fiction's characters are as a rule stronger and luckier than we are (John Cawelti writes about this function of popular fiction in his book *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* [11]).

At the end of the Russian detective stories the criminal character is always punished, and his redemption is thought to be a positive moment and represents the bandit coming back from chaos to order. We also should take into account, that “chaos” and “order” don't form an opposition, because both of them have negative and positive traits. Affection for the criminal doesn't reflect reader's wish to rebel, but more likely his wish to find an opportunity to break the vicious circle, created by any of these concepts. We also should remember that this wish combines with the sympathy for contrite sinner, originated from hagiographic tradition.

Usually popular fiction characters commit their crimes being led by circumstances or in the heat of passion<sup>1</sup>. It's more difficult to analyze texts, where characters do it intentionally. These kinds of plots are often represented in classic literature, for example in Dostoyevsky's novels. Speaking about perception of these texts, we should admit, that such characters mustn't create a feeling of sympathy, because unlike the ordinary bandits, who try to break up the hierarchy, the conscious villain establishes his own hierarchy, where he occupies the top position. Nevertheless, readers feel affection for such criminals, because at the end of Dostoyevsky's novel they admit their guilt one way or another and show repentance for what they've done, although in classic literature this problem is more difficult to solve, than in popular fiction. So, these two types of literature become closer when they address the tradition of penitent's story. Chekhov's *The Shooting Party* follows this literary tradition: Kamyshev tells the editor about his motives for committing the crime, but we can hardly consider his words as repentance, because he doesn't feel any regret for what he's

<sup>1</sup> Although we should admit that sometimes there were characters, who were proud of themselves for what they'd done. For example, in a short story by Alexander Shklyarevsky (his detective stories were extremely popular among Russian readers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) *Омчезо он убила их?* (Why did he killed them?) a murderer can be described as very vauntful person, and his self-exaltation disgusts an investigator [9, p. 135].

done. Even more, talking to the editor, Kamyshev mocks him as if his interlocutor was an incompetent detective, who tried to interrogate a wise villain. But at the same time Kamyshev is afraid of somebody's hearing his confession (he makes sure, that editor's study door is closed tight).

Speaking of Kamyshev's novel, there is no room for suggestion that it can be read as a kind of confession, because in his story he accuses an innocent person of the murder. Another point that supports our theory is that this character is proud of what he's done, and his novel can be seen as his attempt to show everybody his superiority<sup>1</sup>.

Looking at Olga at one moment, he almost can't keep his anger:

Гнев овладел всем моим существом. И этот гнев был так же силен, как та любовь, которая начинала когда-то зарождаться во мне к девушке в красном... Да и кто бы, какой камень остался бы равнодушен? Я видел перед собою красоту, брошенную немилосердной судьбою в грязь. Не были пощажены ни молодость, ни красота, ни грация... Теперь, когда эта женщина казалась мне прекрасней, чем когда-либо, я чувствовал, какую потерю в лице ее понесла природа, и мучительная злость на несправедливость судьбы, на порядок вещей наполняла мою душу... [7, с. 359]

(Anger gripped my whole being – and this anger was as strong as the love that had once begun to stir within me for the girl in red. After all, what person, what stone would have remained indifferent? Before me I saw beauty that had been cast by merciless fate into the mire. Neither youth, beauty nor grace had been spared. And now, when that woman struck me as more beautiful than ever, I felt what a great loss Nature had sustained in her – and an agonizing feeling of rage at the injustice of fate and the order of things filled my heart).

He gets furious when finds out than Olga has her own wish- and will and doesn't want to play his game. His ego is hurt, and we can see it, although he tries to conceal it appealing to nature and morality.

When the narrator blames him of committing the crime, he speaks in the tone that is appropriate to that of Dostoyevsky characters:

<sup>1</sup> In another work By Alexander Shklyarevsky *Рассказ судебного следователя* (*Investigating Magistrate's Story*) one of the heroines (Alexandra) kills her sister (Nastasya) claiming that Nastasya sank into vice and hit the bottom, so murdering her was the only way to save her [8].

Мучило же меня другое: всё время мне казалось странным, что люди глядят на меня, как на обыкновенного человека; ни одна живая душа ни разу за все восемь лет пытливо не взглянула на меня; мне казалось странным, что мне не нужно прятаться; во мне сидит страшная тайна, и вдруг я хожу по улицам, бываю на обедах, любезничаю с женщинами! Для человека преступного такое положение неестественно и мучительно. Я не мучился бы, если бы мне приходилось прятаться и скрытничать. Психоз, батенька! В конце концов на меня напал какой-то задор... Мне вдруг захотелось излиться чем-нибудь: начхать всем на головы, выпалить во всех своей тайной... сделать что-нибудь этакое... особенное... [7, с. 413–414]

(However, something else was tormenting me: all that time I thought it strange that people should look upon me as an ordinary individual. Throughout those entire eight years not once has a single soul ever given me a questioning look. I thought it strange that I didn't need to hide away. There was a terrible secret lurking within me – and suddenly there I was, walking down the street, attending dinners, parties, flirting with women! For one guilty of a crime such a situation is unnatural and distressing. I wouldn't have suffered so much if I'd simply had to hide and dissemble. Mine is a psychosis, old man! Finally, I was gripped by a kind of passion... I suddenly wanted to unburden myself somehow – to sneeze on everyone's head, to blurt out my secret to everyone, to do something of that sort, something special).

Consequently, Chekhov's story does not contain the traditional situation of villain's repentance. It's worthy of note that leaving it out from the plot, Chekhov excludes the element, which connects popular and classic literature, and this action leads to relieving the process of perception, which in its own turn determines the only possible reading strategy and either qualifies this text as popular fiction or high art, or pre-determine negative reader response to this text. But neither of the situations or possible perceptive strategies found their way into the story, so *The Shooting Party* still remains a very disputable Chekhov's work.

The absence of a criminal's confession not only contradicts the conventional Russian detective plot, but also prevents this text from performing one of the main popular fiction functions. As Cawelti notes, formula stories illustrate the process of conflicts harmonization. In Russian crime fiction this harmonization takes place when bandit comes back from chaos to order, and his redemption plays an integral role in it. The tragedy

must be lived through the text and eliminated at the end of it. The similar effect of literature was described by Sigmund Freud in his article *Creative Writers and Daydreaming*, where he claimed that a poet, who turns his fantasy into a story or a novel, gives us, meaning his readers, not only aesthetic enjoyment but also an opportunity to enjoy our own fantasies without feeling ashamed. In *The Shooting Party* the reverse situation is represented. The embedded story and the frame are written in the same genre, so the final scene of the former should harmonize the described conflict as well as the reader's emotional state. However, when the editor uncovers Kamyshev's secret, the embedded story becomes non-fiction and this idea is traumatic for the narrator, not only because of the Kamyshev's cruelty, but because the editor finds himself involved in the situation where fiction becomes reality:

Камышев кивнул головой и быстро вышел. Я сел за стол и предался горьким думам. Мне было душно [7, с. 416].

(Kamyshev nodded and hurried out of the room. I sat at the table and gave myself up to bitter thoughts. I felt suffocated).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

As a result, the real readers (especially those, trying to read this Chekhov's work as a detective story) may be depressed or shocked, and experience a feeling close to one that the reading narrator feels at the end of *The Shooting Party*. Reader's empathy is intensified by the fact that Chekhov gives the editor his own initials ("A. C."). This action creates an illusion that literature encroaches real life, as it happens in *The Shooting Party*. It turns the reader into the main character of the story, because the main event – appearance of the shocking feeling – happens to him, as if he was the narrator's alter ego (as the editor is up to a certain point Chekhov's alter ego). So, the only conclusion must be that the Chekhov's work is not only a story about a crime; neither it is a story merely about literature. Primarily *The Shooting Party* is a story about reading.



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К. С. Оверина

## «Драма на охоте» А. П. Чехова: проблема восприятия

«Драма на охоте» представляет собой один из самых интересных с точки зрения структуры и жанра текстов в раннем творчестве Чехова. С одной стороны, это произведение построено в соответствии с формулой популярного в России XIX века жанра уголовного романа, но, с другой стороны, особенности его повествования (рамочная композиция, единство рассказчика и героя-преступника, вскрывающееся в конце, отсутствие наказания виновного) приводят к тому, что невозможно дать однознач-

ную оценку статусу этого произведения. Несмотря на то, что русская уголовная проза конца XIX века включала в себя самые разные по сюжету и построению произведения и в целом была открыта для авторского эксперимента, ее принадлежность к полю популярной литературы создавала необходимость оставить у читателя чувство спокойствия и удовлетворения после прочтения. Однако в случае с «Драмой на охоте» читатель, неизбежно отождествляющийся с первичным нарратором, скорее всего, испытает тяжелое переживание. В данной статье предлагается попытка ответить на вопрос, какие структурные особенности чеховского текста обуславливают такой эффект.

**Ключевые слова:** А. П. Чехов, повествование, рецепция, уголовная проза, популярная литература.

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