Strung Out: Chekhov’s Neurasthenics, Trauma, and Nineteenth Century Models of Nervous Shock


Hamrick-Nevinglovskaya began her lecture by describing how sciences of the mind became a popular discourse in literary and cultural spheres during the second half of the nineteenth century, not only in Russia, but in Europe in general. During this time period, mental sciences like neurology arose, along with the emergence of psychological fiction in Russia. Particularly in Russia, previous scholarly assumption of an active science and passive literature was a fallacy. Science and literature were part of a greater, more inclusive, interdependent milieu. Although each contributed to the other, both the scientific and literary discourses claimed that they could best explain the human mind, making claims about what was psychologically and morally healthy in individuals and, by extension, in nations.

In his work, the Russian writer Anton Chekhov explored various nervous conditions on the shock spectrum from hysteria-like “overstimulation” to neurasthenic-like depletion. Neurasthenia, an important topic of scientific and literary discourse, was defined as a depletion of nervous force, exhibited in exhaustion and overstrain. In her lecture, Hamrick-Nevinglovskaya highlighted how Chekhov’s exploration of neurasthenia clearly revealed the struggle between the scientific and literary discourses for authority over the Russian psyche and soul. He acknowledged and challenged both discourses. In his fiction, Chekhov looks at the close relationship between science and fiction, particularly neurasthenia. Unlike some of his contemporaries, notably Leo Tolstoy, Chekhov insisted that literature should not be divorced from science, an assertion that demonstrated his inseparable identity as a doctor and author.

In Ivanov (first published in 1887 and substantially revised in 1889), Chekhov dramatizes the struggle between scientific and literary discourse over the soul and psyche of the eponymous protagonist, Nikolai Ivanov, a nobleman who has lost his taste for life. Formerly robust and active, he is now apathetic and even cruel. However, neither of the two discourses explains Ivanov’s state of mind. Chekhov illustrates the struggle between the discourses as fruitless and dangerous. In the play, Ivanov is unable to love his wife, Anna Petrovna, a Jewish woman he had married for love, who converted, changed her name, and was disowned by her family when she married him. He has commenced a love affair with the 20-year-old Sasha. Seemingly, Ivanov is another “superfluous man” of Russian literature, a social misfit and perpetual adolescent who is unable to mature into an adult. Yet, Chekhov subverts the “superfluous man” concept, showing it as inadequate to explain Ivanov’s mental condition. Despite his horrible treatment of his dying wife and other faults, Ivanov is a character who is neither all-good nor all-bad, but hyper-
This is the new cultural type that Chekhov produces. Though several characters seek to diagnose and treat Ivanov using a scientific or literary model, each of those characters (such as Anna Petrovna’s physician, Dr. L’vov) misdiagnose him and prescribe a treatment that harms him, ultimately leading to his suicide.

Ivanov is a play without clear heroes or villains, without a moral position. It questions literature’s moral mission and reform-oriented ideals, a feature of Russian literature advocated by nineteenth century writers such as Nikolai Chernyshevsky. Contemporary audiences saw Ivanov as a nervous-age type who is tired of living, broken and overstrained. Through the depiction of Ivanov’s mental state, his self-diagnosis, and the failed diagnoses of various characters who used assumptions that never really explained his condition, Chekhov shows that both literary and scientific discourses need to look at cases individually, instead of applying a preconceived template to all cases. Chekhov’s new cultural type draws from the leading types of his time, but also preserves individuality rather than merely copying a predefined formula. In Ivanov, Chekhov advocates for seeing cases of suffering on an individual basis, observing only what is there, in the objective spirit of the sciences. Additionally, one should be empathetic by acknowledging a person’s interiority, something which literature reveals.

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