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THE VALUE SYSTEM AND THE PROBLEM OF LIFE CHOICE IN A. P. CHEKHOV'S THE CHERRY ORCHARD

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Abstract: *The article examines the value system of Anton Chekhov's last play, The Cherry Orchard (1904), and the problem of life choice its characters confront. Working within the axiological approach to literary studies, it treats the orchard as a contested value-object that means incompatible things to those around it – memory and beauty to its owners, an economic asset to the man who buys it, a debt owed to the past for the future-minded critic who scorns it – so that the action turns on how, and whether, the characters choose among these valuations. The analysis shows that Chekhov presents the problem of choice largely as a problem of evasion: the decisive act is deferred until the estate is sold, and the blurring of place and time that distinguishes the play deprives the characters of the stable ground on which a choice could be made. It is argued that this axiological indeterminacy – sustained across the play's Marxist, elegiac, and tragicomic readings alike – is a principle of Chekhov's late dramaturgy and a mark of his anticipation of modernism.*

Keywords: *axiology, value system, life choice, Anton Chekhov, The Cherry Orchard, time and space, modernism, interpretation.*

A. P. CHEXOVNING «OLCHA BOG' I» ASARIDA QADRIYATLAR TIZIMI VA HAYOTIY TANLOV MUAMMOSI

Annotatsiya: *Maqolada A. P. Chexovning so' nggi pyesasi «Gilos bog' i» (1904) qadriyatlar tizimi hamda uning qahramonlari duch keladigan hayotiy tanlov muammosi tahlil qilinadi. Adabiyotshunoslikdagi aksiologik yondashuv doirasida bog' munozarali qadriyat obyekti sifatida talqin qilinadi: u atrofdagilar uchun turlicha, bir-biriga zid ma'no kasb etadi – egalari uchun xotira va go' zallik, uni sotib olgan kishi uchun xo' jalik boyligi, uni rad etayotgan kelajakka intilgan tanqidchi uchun esa o' tmish oldidagi qarz; shu bois pyesa harakati qahramonlar bu baholar orasidan qanday va umuman tanlashi bilan belgilanadi. Tahlil ko' rsatadiki, Chexov tanlov muammosini asosan qochish muammosi sifatida taqdim etadi: hal qiluvchi harakat mulk sotilgunga qadar keyinga suriladi, pyesani ajratib turadigan makon va zamonning xiralashuvi esa qahramonlarni tanlov mumkin bo' ladigan barqaror zamindan mahrum qiladi. Bu aksiologik noaniqlik – marksistik, elegik va tragikomik talqinlarda barobar saqlanib qolgan holda – Chexov so' nggi dramaturgiyasining tamoyili va uning modernizmni oldindan sezishi belgisi ekanligi asoslanadi.*

Kalit so' zlar: *aksiologiya, qadriyatlar tizimi, hayotiy tanlov, A.P. Chexov, «Gilos bog' i», zamon va makon, modernizm, talqin.*

СИСТЕМА ЦЕННОСТЕЙ И ПРОБЛЕМА ЖИЗНЕННОГО ВЫБОРА В «ВИШНЁВОМ САДЕ» А. П. ЧЕХОВА

Аннотация: *В статье рассматривается система ценностей последней пьесы А.П. Чехова «Вишнёвый сад» (1904) и стоящая перед её героями проблема жизненного выбора. В рамках аксиологического подхода к литературе сад трактуется как оспариваемый ценностный объект, означающий несовместимые вещи для окружающих его людей: память и красоту – для владельцев, хозяйственный актив – для того, кто его покупает, долг перед прошлым – для устремлённого в будущее критика, который его отвергает; поэтому действие пьесы держится на том, как и выбирают ли герои между этими оценками. Анализ показывает, что Чехов представляет проблему выбора преимущественно как проблему уклонения: решающий поступок откладывается вплоть до продажи имения, а размывание места и времени, отличающее пьесу, лишает героев устойчивой почвы, на которой выбор был бы возможен. Обосновывается, что эта аксиологическая неопределённость – удерживаемая в равной мере в марксистском, элегическом и трагикомическом прочтениях – есть принцип поздней драматургии Чехова и знак его предвосхищения модернизма.*

Ключевые слова: *аксиология, система ценностей, жизненный выбор, А. П. Чехов, «Вишнёвый сад»,время и пространство, модернизм, интерпретация.*

Introduction. The Cherry Orchard, completed in 1904 as its author was dying, is Chekhov's last play and the one in which a whole way of life is brought to auction. An estate famous for its cherry orchard must be sold to pay its owners'

debts; around this impending sale the play gathers a household – the owner Ranevskaya and her brother Gaev, the merchant Lopakhin, the perpetual student Trofimov, the daughters Anya and Varya, and the aged servant Firs – who cannot agree on what the orchard is worth or what should be done with it. Long read as a social drama of a declining gentry and a rising merchant class, the play is, no less, a drama of value and of choice.

The orchard is the play's central value-object. In the axiological reading adopted here – which regards the literary work as a field in which value is produced and contested, and which distinguishes the subjects, from author to character, who assign it [2] – the orchard is not one thing valued in one way, but a single object that bears incompatible values for the people around it. For Ranevskaya and Gaev it is memory, beauty, and the sign of who they are; for Lopakhin it is land that could be cleared and let for summer cottages; for Trofimov it is a debt owed to the serfs whose labour made it, and therefore a past to be repudiated in the name of the future. The drama of the play lies less in the sale itself than in the characters' relation to the choice the sale demands of them.

That relation is the second subject of the article, named in its title as the problem of life choice. The phrase captures the play's peculiar suspense: everyone knows what must be decided, and yet the decision is deferred, talked around, and finally taken out of the family's hands by the auctioneer's hammer. The argument advanced below is that Chekhov stages choice largely as evasion, and that this evasion is bound up with the play's celebrated dissolution of stable time and place – with the difficulty, for characters and audience alike, of saying quite where and when they are.

The aim of the study is to describe the value system organised around the orchard and to relate it to the problem of choice the play sets its characters. Three questions guide the analysis. Through which valuations is the orchard constituted, and to whom do they belong? How does the play present the problem of choice, and why is it so largely a problem of non-choice? And in what sense does the play's treatment of value and choice connect to its handling of time and space, and to the plurality of its interpretations?

The Cherry Orchard is a fitting site for such an inquiry because it stands at the end of a value trajectory traceable across Chekhov's work – from the early prose, in which the poetics themselves undergo an axiological reorientation [8], to the mature drama, in which the ethical ideals his writing encodes are tested against irreversible change [7]. In this last play the question of value becomes explicitly a question of how to live in the face of loss.

Methods and methodology. The study adopts the axiological approach in literary theory, which treats the work as a site where value is produced, contested, and evaluated, and which separates the several subjects capable of assigning it [2]. Three distinctions recur in the analysis: the valuing subject, the object of value – here the orchard and, beyond it, the past and the future it stands for – and the value-position from which the evaluation is made. Character is read, accordingly, not only as psychological portrait but in its value-bearing aspect, as the carrier of a stance toward what is worth preserving and what may be let go [2].

The primary material is the text of The Cherry Orchard, consulted in the Russian original and in Peter Carson's English translation [1]. Chekhov's Russian is out of copyright; short original phrases are cited where their wording carries the argument, each with an English gloss. The secondary material comprises critical studies of Chekhov's drama [3; 4], a monograph devoted to the play's treatment of time [5], and the record of its performance and reception [6].

The analysis moves in four steps. It first maps the competing valuations of the orchard onto the characters who hold them. It then examines the problem of choice as the play presents it, attending less to the choices made than to the evasions and deferrals that dominate the action. It next takes up the play's handling of time and space, following the argument that a blurring of temporal and spatial coordinates unsettles the very ground on which choice depends. Finally, it considers the plurality of the play's interpretations as evidence of the axiological indeterminacy the earlier steps describe.

The study is interpretive rather than empirical, argued from textual and documentary evidence. It treats a single play and a selection of its documented interpretations rather than an exhaustive stage history. Its central claim – that the value system of the play is left deliberately unresolved – is itself a reading, subject to the same plurality it describes; the analysis does not stand outside its object but seeks to characterise it from within.

Results. The play distributes its valuations of the orchard among characters who do not so much disagree as fail to meet. For Ranevskaya the orchard is inseparable from childhood, from the memory of her mother, from an identity she cannot imagine surviving its loss; its worth is aesthetic and commemorative, and on that ground it is, for her, beyond price and beyond sale. For Lopakhin, whose father and grandfather were serfs on the estate, the same orchard is an under-used asset: cleared and divided into plots for summer cottages, it could pay the debts and turn a profit. His proposal is not cynicism but a different scale of value, and his triumphant *«Я купил»* (I have bought it) in the third act is the moment at which one valuation displaces another [1]. For Trofimov the orchard is neither beautiful nor profitable but accusing: from every tree, he says, human beings look out – the serfs whose unpaid labour the beauty rests upon – and the past must therefore be answered for rather than mourned [1]. Anya, taught by Trofimov, comes to value not the orchard but its relinquishment, and the planting of a new one; Firs, the old servant, embodies the orchard's vanished order and is, at the last, forgotten inside the shuttered house.

These are not competing opinions about one stable good; they are different goods sharing a name. Memory, profit, historical debt, and future promise cannot be weighed on a single scale, and the play declines to supply one. The orchard's meaning is exactly the sum of incompatible meanings assigned to it, and the sale resolves the plot without resolving the question of what has been lost or gained.

If the orchard poses the question of value, the characters' conduct poses the question of choice – and answers it, for the most part, by not choosing. Lopakhin repeatedly lays out the one practicable course, the cottages, and begs the owners to decide; Ranevskaya and Gaev meet him with tears, reminiscence, and Gaev's empty oratory, deferring the decision until the estate is auctioned and the choice is made for them by others. The play's suspense is thus of an unusual kind: it does not turn on what the characters will decide but on their inability to decide at all, on a paralysis that the approaching auction renders ever more visible. The one decisive act, Lopakhin's purchase, is performed by the character the family had counted on to save them on their own terms, and it saves nothing they wished to keep.

Read axiologically, this paralysis is not weakness of will alone but the effect of an unsettled value system. The owners cannot choose because they cannot bring the orchard's incompatible valuations into any order that would tell them what to do; to sell is to betray memory, to keep is impossible, and no third term reconciles them. The problem of life choice, in this play, is the problem of acting when one's values neither cohere nor can be surrendered.

This difficulty is deepened by the play's handling of time and space. Where an earlier work such as the story *«Ионыч»* marks its stages with clear temporal intervals and a legible location, so that the reader always knows when and where events stand, The Cherry Orchard withholds such coordinates: the season turns, the years of exile and return blur, and the estate hovers between a Russia that is passing and one not yet arrived. A study devoted to the play's temporal structure has shown how thoroughly its life is organised as a life in time – a suspension between a lost past and an unclaimed future rather than a sequence of decidable presents [5]. Since consciousness orients itself precisely by placing the self in time and space, this blurring loosens the ground on which a deliberate choice would stand. The characters drift because the coordinates that would let them locate a decision have themselves been dissolved. It is in this dissolution, rather than in any single theme, that the play most clearly anticipates the modernist theatre that would learn from Chekhov how to stage a consciousness adrift.

Chekhov withholds a verdict on all of this, and the record of the play's interpretation registers the fact. It has been read as a Marxist parable of a just axe laid to a rotten old world, as an elegy for a lost paradise, and as a tragicomedy in which pathos and absurdity are inseparable; its author called it a comedy, while its first director staged it as a tragedy [4; 6]. That a single text sustains such incompatible valuations is not a failure of clarity but the sign of a deliberate indeterminacy – what may be described as a crisis of authorial judgment, in which the writer declines to tell his audience which loss to grieve or which future to trust. Critical scholarship has cautioned, accordingly, against reducing the play to any one of its ideological readings [4], and its performance history shows each era projecting its own valuation onto the orchard [6]. The enigmatic sound of the breaking string, and Firs's murmur that life has passed as though he had never lived, close the play on precisely this note of unresolved value [1].

Discussion. The analysis yields a single connected claim: in The Cherry Orchard the value system is left deliberately unresolved, and the problem of life choice that the play sets its characters is, in consequence, largely a problem of non-choice. The two findings are aspects of one design. Because the orchard's valuations cannot be ordered, the owners cannot choose; because the play's time and place are blurred, the ground on which a choice might be made is itself unsteady. The paralysis so often read as a trait of Chekhov's gentry appears, on this account, as an axiological condition realised in dramatic form.

Set against the critical record, the reading gains support and definition. Rayfield's account of Chekhov's mature drama, with its avoidance of denouement and its refusal of clear resolution, describes the formal means by which such indeterminacy is achieved [3]; Kataev's insistence that the play resists conventional ideological schemes names its effect on interpreters [4]; the monograph on the play's life in time supplies the temporal analysis on which the argument about the ground of choice depends [5]; and the performance history documents the successive valuations that the open text has invited [6]. What unites these is the recognition that the play does not deliver a judgment but withholds one – and that the withholding is the point.

This has a bearing on Chekhov's late axiology more broadly. If the value of the orchard, and of the life bound up with it, is left as an unresolved field rather than settled by authorial verdict, then the values of Chekhov's last play are better described as a question posed than as a doctrine delivered – continuous, in this respect, with the reorientation of value discernible from his early prose onward [8] and with the ethical ideals his writing carries into an age of irreversible change [7]. The problem of life choice is not solved within the play; it is handed, unresolved, to those who watch it, much as the modernist drama that followed would hand its audiences the task of completing a meaning the text leaves open.

Several limitations qualify the conclusions. The reading rests on one play; the same axiological pattern would need to be tested across Chekhov's other mature dramas before it could be generalised. The account of interpretation is selective,

keyed to the documented record rather than to a full stage history, and it compresses complex productions into their governing tendencies. And the location of the play's indeterminacy is itself an interpretation, exposed to the plurality it describes – a limitation that belongs, once more, to the object as much as to the study.

Conclusion. The Cherry Orchard organises its value system around a single contested object, an orchard that means memory to its owners, profit to the man who buys it, and historical debt to the critic who would be rid of it – valuations that cannot be brought onto one scale and that the play refuses to rank. Against this unresolved field the characters face the problem of life choice, and meet it, for the most part, by deferring the decision until it is made for them; their paralysis is the form that an unordered value system takes in a human life. The blurring of time and place that distinguishes the play loosens the ground on which a choice might stand, allying the work with the modernist theatre it anticipates. Sustained across the Marxist, elegiac, and tragicomic readings the play continues to invite, this axiological indeterminacy is not a defect of design but a principle of Chekhov's late dramaturgy: the value of what is lost, and of what is chosen in its place, is left as a question handed to the audience – which may be the most exacting demand a play can make.

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