Chekhov’s Legacy: the influence of the implicit and the dramatic effect

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1 In Act 4 of Chekhov’s play, The Seagull, the writer Konstantin sits at his desk and crosses out sentences and whole paragraphs from a story he is currently working on. He is dissatisfied with his work, feels it is too explicit, full of superfluous adjectives and adverbs. He envies the writer Trigorin who can convey a dramatic scene in very few words. Konstantin looks through what he has already written:

   My description of the moonlit night is long and forced. Trigorin’s worked out his methods, it’s easy enough for him. He gives you the neck of a broken bottle glittering against a weir and the black shadow of a mill wheel - and there’s your moonlit night all cut and dried. But I have a quivering light and the silent twinkling of the stars and the distant sound of a piano dying on the calm, scented air.

2 The advice that Chekhov incorporated into this play is the essence of his poetics of the implicit in the short story. He repeated this advice again and again in countless letters to fellow writers – to cut back – to imply the obvious and the subtle, in order to create a potent scene that stands out.

3 It may seem to be a contradiction to say that a dramatic effect can be achieved through suggestion, through what is not stated directly, but it is this restraint, this holding back of the explicit, that creates the force, immediacy and proximity in Chekhov’s stories, and of those writers that have been influenced by him.

4 Chekhov was essentially a dramatist and this was reflected in his stories, in fact there are marked parallels in technique, situation and character in his stories and plays. Donald Rayfield writes that:

   Chekhov [used] on drama the techniques with which he had revolutionised short stories. Understatement, ambiguity, inconsequentiality, make the Chekhovian short story: it points to, but refuses to open the cupboard where the skeleton is concealed [...].

5 To take an example from Chekhov’s story ‘Sleepy’. The story takes place within twenty-four hours in a small room that is part of a cobbler’s home. A young girl is employed as a nursemaid and is totally exhausted working constantly without sleep. The entire
narrative is concerned with her battle to stay awake and the consequences if she falls asleep.

Our interest here, however, is not so much on the story that is narrated, as on the story that remains unsaid and hidden in the implicitude of the text, providing a basis on which to build a dramatic structure. In ‘Sleepy’ the scene that unfolds before the reader is vivid and palpable, and yet the only direct description of the room is found in the first paragraph. As the story opens, it is possible to visualise a stage upon which sits a young girl, surrounded by the following scene:

A little green lamp is burning before the icon; there is a string stretched from one end of the room to the other, on which baby clothes and a pair of big black trousers are hanging. There is a big patch of green on the ceiling from the icon-lamp, and the baby-clothes and the trousers throw long shadows on the stove, on the cradle, and on Varka ... When the lamp begins to flicker, the green patch and the shadows come to life, and are set in motion, as though it is the wind.  

There is nothing superfluous in this description. It not only evokes a strong feeling of the room, there are also elements that are referred to at points in the rest of the narrative that reinforce the setting and the atmosphere of the situation, creating a continuation of the dramatic effect in which the tiny room stands out as if on the stage. But there is a deeper implicit to be found here; Chekhov briefly creates this opening scene and interweaves elements of it into the story, not just to allow the reader to identify with Varka's situation, but even more powerfully, to feel what she is feeling. He insists that the deep emotion present within the text is more intimately realised through the unsaid.  

This is achieved through the device of analeptic dream sequences, in order to allow the reader a brief look at Varka's past and how she came to be in her present situation. A larger picture is effectively compacted within this limited time frame and cramped location, but it is in these dream sequences that we see the dramatic effect most vividly portrayed. For example, the dream sequences allow Varka to step out of the tiny room without having to actually leave it. Everything in the room is linked to her dream experience. The soporific effect of the green icon light, and the moving shadows, lull her to sleep, and they reflect through the images in the dreams where the crying baby is represented along with her desperate need for sleep. As she drifts in and out of her dreams and her past, this device brings about an extension of the scene in the opening paragraph at various points in the story:

The lamp flickers. The patch of green and the shadows are set in motion, forcing themselves on Varka's fixed, half-open eyes, and in her half slumbering brain [...] she sees dark clouds chasing one another over the sky, and screaming like the baby. But then the wind blows, the clouds are gone, and Varka sees a high road covered with liquid mud; along the high road stretch files of wagons [...]  

It is the strategic use of these chronological ellipses that give the sense of a continuum of the present moment, rather than that of missing information about what happened in the interim. Everything contained in the dream sequences links to her present situation. A palpable sense of linkage and movement, as present slips into past and past into present is shown in the next extract, as her need for sleep also manifests itself in the dream:

All at once the people [...] and their shadows fall on the ground in the liquid mud. "What is that for?" Varka asks. "To sleep, to sleep!" they answer her. And they fall sound asleep, and sleep sweetly, while crows and magpies sit on the telegraph wires, scream like the baby, and try to wake them.
This repeated back and forth from dream to reality, linking the events in the dream to circumstances in the waking state, give a vivid and dramatic picture without any interruption to the present. Not only do the dreams increase the effect of the sense of extreme sleep deprivation, they also give a more potent picture of her present circumstances:

Varka goes out into the road and cries there, but all at once someone hits her on the back of the head so hard that her forehead knocks against a birch tree. She raises her eyes and sees, facing her, her master, the shoemaker. “What are you about? [...] he says. “The child is crying, and you are asleep!” He gives her a sharp slap behind the ear, and she shakes her head, rocks the cradle, and murmurs her song. The green patch and the shadows from the trousers and the baby-clothes move up and down, nod to her [...] Again she sees the high road [...] and the shadows have lain down and are fast asleep’.

The birch tree in the dream denotes the transition to her present reality, the knock on the head intrudes into the dream, the green light and the movement of shadows lull her back to sleep again, and so it continues. At the end of this five-page story there is the sense that you have not only read something much longer, but that you have witnessed the whole scene as a seamless continuum through the strategy of minimum exposition.

It was Chekhov’s innovatory approach to structure, through his theories of laconicism and restraint, that appealed to the modernist writers, his ability to convey the dramas of life implicitly, the pathos, irony and absurdities of human experience, along with the breaking of conventional boundaries of the structure of a narrative. This influence is clearly demonstrated in Katherine Mansfield’s stories. In critiquing a fellow writer’s work she wrote:

[The] stories are awfully good, but they don’t quite come off because you used more words than were necessary. There’s a kind of diffuseness of expression [...] When one writes like that ... it’s as though the nerve of the feeling were gone [...]¹

This is Chekhov’s advice in different words. He wrote:

There ought to be nothing unnecessary. Everything that has no direct relation to the story must be ruthlessly thrown out.  ⁹

Mansfield’s stories are like one act plays. Through her use of the implicit dimension of language she removes all that does not directly contribute to the emotional impact. In the words of Wilfred Stone:

She concentrated the presentation of plot into a brief time span covering only the most dramatic moments. Time past, present, and future all seem to be occurring now in the mind of the protagonist. The whole weight of a life – or of a marriage – is compressed in a moment ¹⁰

Mansfield’s story ‘Bliss’ demonstrates this dramatic effect through her use of the implicit that is characterised by suggestion, inference, and indirection. In parallel to this she frequently disrupts continuity in the narrative through elliptically constructed sentences that provide silent spaces, and the possibility for the recovery of implicit meaning.

‘Bliss’ is a story of complicated relationships in terms of gender identification. The reader is immediately thrown into the centre of the story, exposing the main character’s state of mind. Although the language used appears to be depicting an exalted state of mind, it is actually exposing the opposite, something far deeper. The opening has a theatrical effect. The main character steps out onto the stage, so to speak, with a strong sense of movement, and energy, that expresses her mood as if she’s speaking directly to the reader/audience:
Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again, or stand still and laugh at - nothing - at nothing, simply. What can you do if you are thirty and turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss – absolute bliss! – as though you’d suddenly swallowed a bright piece of late afternoon sun [...] sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe? ...  

Although this is expressed as a third person narration, it has the same dramatic impact that Irina’s speech does in Chekhov’s play Three Sisters. As with the protagonist in ‘Bliss’, this outburst of heightened feeling overlays the opposite: in Irina’s case, a yearning to break free from an overwhelming atmosphere of provincial stagnation, with little prospect of change:

What a marvellous day! I’m in such a good mood, I don’t know why […] Tell me why I am so happy today? I feel as if I was sailing along with a great blue sky above me, and huge white birds soaring about. Tell me why?  

There are parallels too in the overuse of metaphor, and in how the diction, syntax and rhetorical dimensions of language are leading the reader/audience towards an implicit that suggests a state of mind in delusion, and advancing towards the hysterical in it’s yearning for the unattainable.

Mansfield doesn’t just describe the feelings of her protagonist; she brings her out of the page, drawing the reader into the emotional centre of the story. In this manifestation of character, if you like, it is the un-stated, the indirection in the language, that sharpens the experience of the dramatic effect.

The character’s state of heightened awareness is suspicious, but this is only suggested indirectly through a use of language that both announces and diminishes her self-confidence at the same time. There is a strong sense of movement as Bertha continues to fly through the story in this delusionary state of bliss, which inevitably draws towards a reality that is in opposition to this, although never stated directly:

[...] there was still that bright glowing place – that shower of little sparks coming from it. It was almost unbearable. She hardly dared to breathe for fear of fanning it higher [...]. She hardly dared to look into the cold mirror – but she did look, and it gave her back a woman, radiant, with smiling trembling lips [...] and an air of listening, waiting for something … divine to happen … that she knew must happen ... infallibly.

The elliptic last sentence is just a succession of phrases without any formal linking, but the pauses between them are significant. The gaps are revealing, this is where the story is the most potent and where the drama arises through a palpable sense of doubt, hesitation and even foreboding that pervades, not only this sentence, but the whole paragraph, and indeed the whole story.

The real story lies beneath the text and moves relentlessly to the ending, which is interrupted and inconclusive as Bertha’s bubble of bliss bursts after finding her husband and the woman she thinks she’s in love with together in the hall. The story breaks off abruptly at this point as she realises the extent of her delusion, as was anticipated at the start of the story. In the words of Andrew Bennett:  

The narrative trajectory of ‘Bliss’ [...] is revealed at the end to have been encoded within the prose from the story’s opening sentence.
It is in this active recovery of implicit meaning, on the part of the reader, that gives this story a keen edge, something more than just words on a page that ignite the imagination, instead, an intense participation that contributes to an experience that is akin to the theatrical.

It is not possible to discuss Chekhov and his influences, in relation to the dramatic effect, without mentioning the writer, Raymond Carver, who was significantly influenced by him, ‘Chekhov, the writer who has meant so much to me [...]’.  

As with Chekhov, Carver’s use of the implicit dimension of language, to convey meaning from the unsaid, is at the very centre of his compositional poetics and particularly in terms of a stark potency in the narrative, providing an intense dramatic reading. Carver writes:

What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it’s also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things.

This influence is clearly demonstrated in Carver’s story ‘Are These Actual Miles’. The omission of the most important fact in the story, that of Leo’s wife, Toni, having to spend the night with a salesman to achieve their goal of selling their car, is possibly one of the finest examples in short story writing of how the unsaid can ‘speak’ about a significant event with powerful and dramatic effect. Narrative tension is achieved by what is not stated, as in the following extract when Toni’s intention is hinted at from the opening of the story when she dresses carefully as if going on a date:


“You look fine,” he says. “You look great. I’d buy a car from you anytime.”

[…] “It has to be done, so I'll do it. You take it out, you’d be lucky to get three, four hundred, and we both know it. Honey, you’d be lucky if you didn’t have to pay them […] . I’ll have to have dinner or something, I told you that already, that’s the way they work. I know them. But don’t worry, I’ll get out of it,” she says. “I can handle it.”  

The oblique reference in this example establishes a sense of anticipation of what she might have to do in order to sell the car. The unsaid continues by the very length of her absence and Leo’s waiting, drinking Scotch. In the following extract it is possible to imagine this character sitting on a stage, alone, performing deliberate and precise acts in an attempt to suppress anxiety, and to pass time:

He sits on the step with the empty glass in his hand and watches the shadows fill up the yard. He stretches, wipes his face [...]. Inside he makes a large drink and turns the TV on [...]. He sits at the table with chilli and crackers and watches something about a blind detective. He clears the table. He washes the pan and the bowl, dries these things and puts them away, then allows himself a look at the clock.  

Suggestion suffuses the whole story. Carver delivers narrative tension deftly in the waiting for the wife to phone or return home. It is not difficult for the reader to imagine what’s going on, but not a word is written to indicate what is exactly happening:

He circles the kitchen and goes back to the living room. He sits. He gets up. In the bathroom he brushes his teeth very carefully. Then he uses dental floss. He washes his face and goes back to the kitchen. He looks at the clock and takes a clean glass [...]. He fills the glass with ice. He stares for a while at the glass he left in the sink.
The uncluttered simplicity of the prose – the short, direct sentences – gives vitality and dynamism to the text, which is evocative of drama. It is what the characters do not say that is strengthening to the story. The implicit emotion contained in these small domestic tasks shows a glimpse of the truth, the impact of which is stronger than if it were more explicit.

In this, he’s following Chekhov’s advice to the letter. Chekhov wrote:

If I introduce subjectivity, the image becomes blurred and the story will not be as compact as all short stories ought to be. When I write, I reckon entirely upon the reader to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story.

The implicit aspect in the unsaid, and in the character’s actions, does not directly show a man beset by anxiety, instead, he performs mundane tasks, but the basic nature of his simple actions emphasises his distress more dramatically than a more explicit representation. Again, this device is seen in Chekhov’s plays. For example, at the end of Act 4 in The Seagull Konstantin silently tears up his manuscripts and throws them in a wastebasket under his desk. He then meticulously tidies his desk, placing each item carefully and deliberately. Not a word is spoken; he is alone on the stage, the atmosphere of something unpleasant about to happen is potently conveyed.

In an interview, V.S. Pritchett stated:

I think intensity is something very marked in the best short stories. They’re not superficial in just hitting upon one or two things. They’ve chosen those things for a purpose which runs clean through the story. And which sharpens it ...

The Chekhovian story is one that demonstrates this, these are stories that are not epic in proportion, and do not contain details that examine a moral or social context in which a character is placed. Instead, the dramas of everyday life are portrayed within a sharp, uncluttered narrative that highlights the intensity of the situation, without unnecessary distraction. The focus, is, as if through a telephoto lens, rather than a wide angle, depicting a scene that can be sharply visualised as if on the stage. The theatricality of these stories lies in what is un-stated, in what is left out, leaving a vivid impression of only the most essential elements that actually highlight implicit meaning by which a fuller picture is then created.

NOTES

3. Implicitude: a term coined by Marcella Bertuccelli, in relation to the story that is left unsaid and hidden in the implicit dimension of language, Implicitness in Text and Discourse (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2002)
5. ibid, 65
6. ibid, 65.
7. ibid, 67
18. ibid, 150-151.
19. ibid, 153.
20. ibid, 154.

ABSTRACTS

L’emploi de la dimension implicite du langage pour exprimer le sens à partir du non-dit se situe au cœur-même de la poétique textuelle de Tchékhov. Cet article examine la structure narrative des nouvelles choisies et y repère la présence de l’effet dramatique au travers de ce qui n’est pas dit. Cette caractéristique est ce sur quoi reposent la structure dramatique et les divers effets produits. Ainsi, dans la nouvelle “Sleepy”, une forte image visuelle est produite par une brève phrase décrivant “une petite lampe verte qui brûle devant l’icône”. L’effet de la lumière verte qui projette des ombres mouvantes dans la toute petite pièce est subtilement renforcé dans l’ensemble de la nouvelle et crée l’impression palpable d’une atmosphère oppressante proche de l’expérience théâtrale. Dans un second temps, l’article montre comment la poétique tchékhovienne de l’implicite liée à l’effet dramatique est incorporée aux œuvres de nouvellistes postérieurs qui indiquent ainsi l’influence de Tchékhov sur leur écriture.

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Jacqueline Phillips completed her PhD in creative and critical writing at Lancaster/Edge Hill University. The title of her thesis is ‘The Short Story: Theory and Practice’. She also lectured in Creative and Critical Writing and the Twentieth Century Short Story, at Edge Hill University. She is a short story writer and has published several articles and essays on the short story, most recently an essay for The Salt Companion to Lee Harwood, “The Prose Narratives: Dream Quilt and the