



 Commentary

Commentary: *On the Harmfulness of Tobacco*; Chekhov's journey from vaudeville to empathy

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On the Harmfulness of Tobacco, a one-act monologue by Chekhov, was first written in 1886. Was the playwright ludicrously prescient? The relation between smoking and health has a troubling history. Sir Richard Doll traced the origins of links between tobacco use and cancer to the UK and Germany, by Hill in 1761 and Sommering in 1795, but this was put down to the heat of the pipe and ignored anyway.¹ Smoking was largely considered safe until reports emerged in Germany, in the 1920s and 30s, linking lung cancer and smoking.² For various reasons this work was not widely known so that even by 1950, Doll suggests, there was no mention in UK or USA medical textbooks linking smoking with diseases beyond Buerger's disease and cancer of the lip and tongue. Prospective studies were published first in the USA in May 1950,^{3,4} and then in the UK in September 1950.⁵

Chekhov, who like Doll himself, enjoyed the occasional cigar, (Donald Rayfield, personal communication), could not have known about tobacco, could he? There is evidence that smoking was not considered risk free in Russia in the late 19th century, to children at least:

Tobacco, when used in moderation by adults, causes no harm to health; but immoderate smoking may lead to very serious illnesses. Smoking tobacco slightly arouses the nervous system, relaxes and allows one to endure with greater ease mental and physical tensions. Smoking is without doubt harmful to children and young persons.⁶ [I am grateful to Professor Donald Rayfield for alerting me to this quote.]

In addition, there are a number of references from the 19th century Russian scientific literature of adverse effects

from tobacco to be found in a German book published in 1939.⁷ (I thank Professor George Davey Smith for informing me of this.) Chekhov may therefore have been aware that tobacco was not innocuous but, despite this, it is most likely that he was joking. In support of this is a short story from the same year as he dashed off—in two and a half hours—the first version of *On the Harmfulness of Tobacco*. In *Home* (1886)⁸ a lawyer, Bykovsky, is told of his 7-year-old son's smoking. The boy's governess explains that, 'at his age smoking is a bad and pernicious habit, and bad habits ought to be eradicated...' When she leaves, Bykovsky thinks 'of how children were mercilessly flogged and expelled from school, and their lives were made a misery on account of smoking, though not a single teacher or father knew exactly what was the harm or sinfulness of smoking'.

In the story he tries to tell his son Seryozha off, completely unsuccessfully, as the son refuses to take his father seriously. After lecturing him ineffectually he tells a bedtime story about the perils of smoking and then, only then, does the boy take notice. Chekhov entertainingly conflates a father trying to scold his beloved son with the power of narrative over didacticism. He also, incidentally, describes a form of synaesthesia in the son too.

Early in his career Chekhov wrote short stories for money, (starting because he had no money to buy his mother a birthday cake), managing to support himself at medical school and look after his parents and siblings. He boasted that he never spent more than a day on a story and, between 1883 and 1887, wrote between 35 and 65 per year. Then in 1886 an influential writer, Grigorovich, wrote to him complimenting him on his writing and essentially

saying he could do better. Chekhov's stories became fewer and more serious, falling to fewer than 10 per year. At the same time he was also writing plays and in contrast, these tended—for a while at least—to become more frivolous and comic, and it is this tradition in which *Tobacco* should be seen, at least in its original form.

The play's reputation is not wide, and indeed many biographies and studies of Chekhov either ignore it,^{9,10,11} or mention it in passing only [Rayfield, 1997, 'a dramatic and farcical monologue',¹² though to be fair, he has added that it is a wonderful piece for a stand-up comic (in a personal communication); Hingley, 1975, 'an amusing trifle'¹³]. Yet Chekhov wrote at least six different versions from 1886 to 1902, and when preparing his *Collected Works* in 1902, wrote to his publisher, Marks:

Amongst works of mine is the farce, '*On the Harmfulness of Tobacco*', which is one of the items I asked you to exclude and never print... Now I have written a completely new play with the same title, keeping only the surname of the dramatis personae, and I send it to you for inclusion.¹⁴

So he was quite clear that, despite the same title and large overlaps in text, it should be seen in a completely different way to the original, which he described as 'execrable'. It is the evolution of the drama and what it reveals of Chekhov's theatrical development which has interested a stream of writers.¹⁵

The original monologue has a 'hen-pecked' husband addressing an audience on a subject he does not understand, tobacco. But really he has been put up to it by his domineering wife to popularize her girls' school. During the talk the husband, Nyukin, also bemoans having nine (then reduced to seven) unmarried daughters and tells where they may be inspected by suitors, since they are too poor to entertain. The first version is full of jokes and comic turns, with mentions of an enema and a theatrical attack of asthma. It ends abruptly as Nyukin sees the time and struts out majestically, though only after he has described how wonderful his marriage of 33 years has been, and wept at distressing his wife with his weakness. This version, in truth, is inconsequential and reveals its rushed origin.

As he revised it, however, Chekhov moved from simple comic, externally expressed, effects to consider the internal life of the character. For Simmons:

The changes between first and last versions [of *Tobacco*] illustrate the transformation in Chekhov's approach to the revelation of character on stage. In the first version Nyukin's monologue... is designed solely to amuse by external comic effects deriving from oddities, vagaries and rambling speech of the pathetic old man... In the final version the emphasis has entirely changed. Most external comic effects have been

replaced by a subtle psychological analysis of the inner man. He reveals himself as he really is, a man whose fine qualities have been distorted and destroyed by an insensitive, selfish and dominating wife.^{15,16}

Gottlieb highlights a shift, 'from the "comic sense" of a man giving a lecture about which he knows nothing to a "tragi-comic" emphasis on the man himself'.¹⁷ Magarshack, in turn, suggests that Chekhov used *Tobacco* 'for experiments in a new method of writing dramatic dialogue which depends on inner rather than outer action':¹⁸

Acting for his plays... did not mean rushing about the stage and expressing emotions by gestures. Strong emotion should be expressed on stage as it is expressed in life by cultured people, not with the hands and feet, but with the tone of one's voice and one's eyes, not by gesticulating but by always keeping one's poise.

The changes in comic effects used within the monologue are good examples of this development. In the 1890 version the asthma is toned down to hiccups, and by 1902 it is a blink of the eye, an expression of his nerves rather than a mere comic turn. Borny suggests that *Tobacco* goes from a comic monologue to become more realistic, with text and sub-text, and with the audience asked to watch both the externalized, objective life and an internal, subjective inner experience which, Borny suggests, Chekhov had by then found ways to reveal without telling us directly.¹⁵ For example, in the 1890 version he wrote, 'Children don't laugh at me. After all you don't know what's going on inside me'. Later, less is said and more implied. The 1890 version expands on his marriage, 'Thirty three years... not the best of my life... I've meekly accepted [her] punishment... it's better not to get married'. In the 1903 version we have to deduce this for ourselves.

In the earlier versions of the play, it ends after he has told the audience where his unmarried daughters are displayed. In the 1890 version an important section is added, one which brings recognition to Nyukin of his situation and of the revelation of his feelings. He makes a gesture for having a drink:

One glass is enough to make me drunk. It feels good but indescribably sad at the same time... The days of my youth come back and I long to escape from this rotten, vulgar, tawdry existence that has turned me into a pathetic old clown. Escape from this stupid, petty vicious old skinflint of a wife, escape and stop in the depths of the country, stand there like a tree, a post or scarecrow and watch the moon and forget. How I'd love to lose my memory... Once I was young and clever. Now I want nothing but peace and quiet.

Then he notices his wife arrive and asks the audience, 'If she asks, please tell her I behaved with dignity'.

In the 1903 version, this later section has expanded as the play moves from being a humorous lecture to the stark depiction of a man's breakdown:

I am a complete failure. I've grown old and stupid. Here I am, lecturing and looking pretty pleased with myself, when I really feel like screaming and taking off for the ends of the earth. There is no one to complain to... I somehow long – more than you can possibly imagine – to escape. To run away, leave everything behind... Where to? Who cares? If only I could escape from this rotten, vulgar, tawdry existence that's turned me into a pathetic old clown and imbecile. Escape from this stupid, petty, vicious, nasty, stupid mean old cow of a wife... Oh, to stop somewhere in the depths of the country and just stand there like a tree or a post or a scarecrow on some vegetable plot under the broad sky and watch the quiet bright moon above you all night long and forget, forget! How I long to lose my memory... I don't need anything. Once I was young and clever and went to college. I had dreams and I felt like a human being. Now I want nothing – nothing but a little peace and quiet.

His wife arrives and so he returns to the subject of tobacco and ends. The play epitomizes Chekhov's movement from melodrama to realism during his career; from externalization to inner life, from vaudeville to empathy. It is clear, also, that it was not only Nyukin who was intended to see he has wasted his life. The audience was nudged towards reflection on their own lives.

As such it might be considered alongside other Chekhovian plays of melancholy and hopelessness. In fact many have suggested he was a progenitor of the absurdists like Genet, Ionesco and Beckett, that he is, 'a poet of hopelessness... [with] a sense of void in his works, killing hope... the legitimate father of the absurd movement in theatre'. Stein goes on to suggest that Chekhov's heritage 'of pseudo comedy is now being 'turned inside out in the dustbins of Beckett'.¹⁹ Others, however, have resisted such an approach and stressed instead that however deep Chekhov's analysis, it was always framed in such a way as to encourage people to see how they lived in order that they might change. There is evidence that Chekhov was at times depressed, and understandably so, since for 20 years he lived with TB which killed him at 44; but despite this, he believed in progress through education, science and enlightenment, and followed these in his non-literary career.¹⁵ In addition to his journey to Sakhalin to expose conditions on its penal colony:²⁰

His life was one continuous round of alleviating famine, fighting epidemics, building schools and public roads,

endowing libraries, helping organise marine biology libraries, giving thousands of needy peasants free medical treatment, planting gardens, helping fledgling writers get published, raising funds for worthy causes and hundreds of other pursuits.²¹

Returning to Nyukin's plight, Chekhov's aim it was for us to ask, 'If he is so miserable why not do something about it?' Stand up to his wife; make something of himself, even leave before his youthful potential drains away, before he is dragged down to become 'a clown or an imbecile'.

However pessimistic his characters may appear, his aim is to challenge:

You tell me that people cry at my plays... but that is not why I wrote them... all I wanted was to say honestly to people, 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are..' The important thing is that people should realise this, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves.¹⁸

That is perhaps the kernel of his work and life, and this tiny one-act play's journey from vaudeville to mature Chekhovian miniature epitomizes it. This is why Chekhov wanted it included as a new play in his collected works and this is why it retains interest. That its title is so arresting today is not something Chekhov could have predicted, despite him writing in *Home*, 'Tobacco is very bad for the health, and anyone who smokes dies earlier than he should'.

Conflict of interest: None declared.

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