

NATURE IN THE SHORT STORIES  
OF  
ANTON CHEKHOV

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short stories.

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## PREFACE

Among the several hundred stories which Anton Chekhov wrote during his brief lifetime, "Step'" is the tale which immediately comes to mind when one considers the theme of nature in Chekhov's works. However, the occurrence of nature in the stories is not limited solely to this tale, for nature passages may be found in stories of varying lengths and subjects written throughout the author's career. In the present work I have chosen a selection of Chekhov's stories spanning the years between 1883 and 1902, and I have analysed the element of nature in these works according to methods of portrayal, function, and concept.

Chapter I contains further comments regarding my method of analysis and my choice of stories to be examined. It also offers some introductory remarks about Chekhov's personal life and literary style. Chapter II begins the analysis of nature and concentrates on some of the author's early tales published between 1883 and 1887. In Chapter III the study begun in the previous chapter continues with a discussion of "Step'" and several other stories first published between 1888 and 1892. Chapter IV, in which I examine some tales written during the years of the author's artistic maturity, concludes my analysis. In the Conclusion

an attempt is made to describe the evolution undergone by the element of nature as revealed by my analysis of the selected stories.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Описания природы хороши, но . . . чувствую,  
что мы уже отвыкаем от описания такого рода  
и что нужно что-то другое.<sup>1</sup>

Such was the comment of Anton Chekhov on reading the works of Turgenev. While Chekhov admired Turgenev's nature descriptions, he felt that the highly subjective, verbose descriptive passage had had its day, and that new methods of expression were needed. In analysing the element of nature as it appears in Chekhov's short stories, I shall examine some of these new methods which came to distinguish Chekhov's literary style from that of most of his predecessors and contemporaries. Chapters II, III and IV of the present work will contain examples of Chekhov's nature description, discussions of how the landscapes and other natural details fit into the individual stories both structurally and thematically, and an appraisal of how Chekhov's characters apprehend the reality of nature. By examining the nature passages in each of the selected stories on the basis of methods of portrayal, function and concept, I hope to determine what kind of relation-

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<sup>1</sup>A. P. Chekhov, Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy i pisem, Moskva: Gosudarstvennoye izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoy literatury, 1944-1951, XVI, 32. Future references to Chekhov's works and letters will be to this edition and will give only volume and page.

ship exists among these aspects of nature in the short stories. Chapter V will contain the conclusions which I have drawn as a result of my study.

In my discussion of Chekhov's descriptive methods, I shall deal closely with the author's use of imagery by pointing out striking examples and then indicating where and with what function each is used. When considering the function of the nature passages, the first question which must be asked is whether the nature element constitutes merely a background, an accompaniment to the action, which is divorced entirely from theme. This leads to a consideration of whether, in any of the works, nature provides something more than a setting in which the plot of the story unfolds. If nature does, in fact, serve as more than a setting, one must determine whether it becomes an intrinsic part of the theme of each story and whether Chekhov combines his landscape painting with the psychological and philosophical aspects of his art. An important point to be studied here is how the nature sketches are fitted into the story. Do they come from the author directly, from one of the characters, or from both? Nastroyeniye or mood is an important factor in Chekhov's stories. Is nature perhaps used to create or to sustain the mood? Does it emphasize a particular theme in a story or comment on the characters in any way? One final question which I shall consider in my discussion of nature's function is whether or not Chekhov's works can be completely under-

stood or appreciated without an understanding of the nature passages.

A study of the function of nature description leads to a consideration of the concept of nature in the stories. This involves an appraisal of the relationship between man and nature as portrayed by Chekhov. One must determine whether nature is a participant in the inner world of Chekhov's characters. Is nature shown to be sympathetic or indifferent to man? In short, I shall try to determine how Chekhov's characters relate to nature.

The stories which I have chosen to discuss range, in respect to date of initial publication, from 1883 ("Osen'yu") to 1902 ("Arkhiyerey"). An attempt has been made to select stories which are representative of all stages of the author's artistic development. This method of selection was used in order to enable me to make note of Chekhov's treatment of nature portrayal from an evolutionary basis, for it provides a cross section of his stories dating from the time when he was a regular contributor to Leykin's Oskolki (a connection with a humorous magazine which began in 1882) until the turn of the century, when his brief but prolific literary career was largely behind him.

There is an equally broad range in my selection regarding the length of each story, its subject or theme, and the extent to which nature is present, simply in terms of number of lines or of references to it. In the story

entitled "Panikhida", for example, there is only one nature passage occurring in the entire tale; it consists of a few lines near the conclusion of the story. In a work such as "Step'", however, there are a large number of passages devoted to describing many aspects of nature. I stress the point that my selection is varied in these respects because, in order to assess the element of nature in Chekhov's short stories, one must give fair representation to a wide variety of works, including not only those especially noted for their nature content. Chekhov's earlier tales may hold revealing clues as to what part nature will play in those stories written during the author's mature period.

Before proceeding to an analysis of Chekhov's short stories, I would like to make a few introductory comments regarding Chekhov's personal life, his literary career, and his style of writing. Since this study deals with nature, I shall begin with some remarks about Chekhov's personal attitude to nature as it was revealed in his everyday life.

Sketches of nature, both brief and extended ones, appear frequently in Chekhov's short stories. They are lovingly and knowledgeably drawn and reveal to the reader an appreciation and a love of nature on the part of the author. Chekhov was never indifferent to nature; he always found it amazing because it was never static -- something new was always happening. Chekhov felt that the novelty and beauty of nature to a certain extent made up for the inconveniences

of life. At times nature was a kind of pacifier which could offer man solace.

The steppe of southern Russia was often used by the author as a setting for his stories. Chekhov's first visit to the steppe was made in 1876 with the Kravtsov family whose son he tutored during his student days alone in Taganrog, after the rest of the Chekhov family had moved to Moscow. The visit was spent at a Don steppe farmhouse owned by the Kravtsovs. Chekhov enjoyed this first experience of living in a semi-primitive manner immensely, and he was deeply moved and impressed by the steppe itself, with its seemingly boundless plains dotted with multicoloured wildflowers.

Chekhov loved to travel, and it was during his extensive trips throughout Russia and Europe and his overland journey to Sakhalin Island that he was able to observe nature in its many aspects and moods. The letters written in diary form which he sent home to his sister, Mariya, are filled with accounts of the countryside through which he was travelling, and they were kept as a source of literary material to be used by the author at a later date..

Many of Chekhov's personal letters written to other members of the family and to friends while he was living in the country contain comments on nature, some of them quite rapturous. These are worth examining because of the delight and marvel at his natural environment which the author expressed in them. During the summer of 1888, Chekhov and

his family rented a Ukrainian dacha near the Psyol River. It is not difficult to find, in the letters written during this summer, paragraphs describing nature which are reminiscent of descriptive passages in the short stories. In a letter addressed to Leont'yev-Shcheglov and dated May 10, 1888, we find the following:

Кричат лягушки и всякие птицы. Кричит где-то в камышах какая-то таинственная птица, которую трудно увидеть и которую зовут здесь бугаем. Кричит она, как корова, запертая в сарае, или как труба, будящая мертвецов. Ее слышно день и ночь. (XIV, 108)

From the experiences of travelling and living in the country stems much of the author's precise knowledge of nature. In some of Chekhov's stories such as "Agaf'ya" and "Step'" the narrator displays an intimate acquaintance with nature. There is further evidence of this in Chekhov's personal correspondence; some passages in his letters catalogue aspects of nature as one might expect a natural scientist to do. In a letter to his youngest<sup>r</sup> brother, Ivan, Chekhov describes the Psyol River which flowed past his dacha in the Ukraine:

Река широка, глубока и красива. Водятся в ней следующие рыбы: окунь, чебак, язь, судак, белизна, (порода шелишпера), голавль, плотва, сом, сибиль, щука ласкирка . . . (XIV, 107)

Certainly none of the natural description found in Chekhov's works is quite so drily conveyed, but in some passages which I will note in another section of this study, the impression with which one is left is that the scientist in the author occasionally comes to the fore. This is, however, in no way a fault, for it does not negate the aesthetic element present. Rather, it serves to convey the experience of seeing nature from still another point of view.

It was perhaps the combination of Chekhov's love of nature and his scientific interest in it which made of the author an avid gardener. During his youth he planted a small vineyard in the garden of the Chekhovs' family home in Taganrog. Later at Melikhovo he planted hundreds of cherry trees and replanted the bare patches in the forest. Even when, because of his serious illness, he lived in Yalta, Chekhov continued to plant flowers, bushes, trees -- anything that would make the earth more beautiful. And again his letters to family and friends contained many references to the beauties of nature, particularly to the flowers which he was cultivating. Chekhov once commented to Gorky that if everyone would do everything he could on his patch of earth, how beautiful the land would be. One finds in the author's personal attitude to nature a harmonious combination of aesthetic appreciation and practicality.

As well as bearing testimony to Chekhov's love of nature, the author's letters reveal his ideas on the subject

of how nature descriptions should be presented in literature. Throughout his literary career Chekhov was in the habit of helping and encouraging hopeful young authors; there is much evidence of this in his correspondence. Time and time again he wrote letters containing advice regarding descriptive methods in general and the related matter of the treatment of nature. A study of such letters helps one to understand the evolution of the techniques which he himself used in his own works. In another section of the present work attention will be brought to such letters, especially those dealing with descriptions of nature, in an effort to elucidate in the context of his short stories what Chekhov's ideal was in respect to descriptive procedures.

Although the principles governing description of nature in Chekhov's stories can be appreciated by the modern reader, this was not generally the case when Chekhov's first serious works appeared in the mid 1880's. At that time the short story was far from new to Russian literature, but the form which Chekhov gave it was. The low-key atmosphere with its absence of striking climaxes and of definite conclusions, coupled with the author's use of natural imagery as an important element of his stories' structure, created problems of comprehension no less for the critics than for the ordinary reading public. This caused Chekhov to experience feelings of frustration which elicited the following comment in a letter to Suvorin:

Критики нет. Дующий в шаблон Татищев,  
осел Михневич и равнодушный Буренин --  
вот и вся российская критическая сила.  
А писать для этой силы не стоит, как  
не стоит давать нюхать цветы тому, у  
кого насморк. (XIV, 257)

Two elements of literary technique which distinguished Chekhov's style from that of most other writers of the time are those usually referred to by commentators as "impressionism" and "objectivity". An inability to understand these unfamiliar techniques often caused Chekhov's critics to consider him an unprincipled writer who was alien to social problems and uninterested in the burning issues of the time.

The principle of objectivity as Chekhov applied it in his writing created problems of comprehension for the critics. They accused him of lacking opinions and failing to give the solutions to social problems which they expected a writer to provide. Chekhov, of course, refused to submit to the belief that writers should be a source of panaceas for whatever problems were plaguing society. But he certainly had opinions which he never failed to express. He simply preferred to do so with a restraint which shunned both sentimentality and didacticism.

A striking example of how important this principle of objectivity on the part of a writer was to Chekhov can be found through an examination of two versions of a sentence

contained in the story entitled "Pripadok". While walking along a street lined with brothels, Vasil'yev, a student and the central figure in the story, wonders that the clean, pure snow can fall in that street. In the first version of the story, written in 1888, Vasil'yev's thoughts are expressed by Chekhov in this line: "И как не стыдно снегу падать в этот переулочек!" (VII, 546) In the 1901 version which Chekhov prepared for the first complete collection of his works, he changed the sentence to read: "И как может снег падать в этот переулочек?" (VII, 546) In the second version the word "stydno" has been deleted. It seems a strong possibility that the change was made in an attempt to add a greater degree of poignancy to Vasil'yev's thoughts by presenting ~~them with greater restraint~~. It is precisely the contrast between Vasil'yev's love of the snow, which is mentioned earlier in the story, and the unemotional simplicity of his thought that is so startling. The impact of the contrast which Vasil'yev senses is greater for the reader when he is left to arrive at his own conclusion than when the idea of shame is actually mentioned.

One further general aspect of Chekhov's writing technique is his impressionism. The first use of the term "impressionist" in regard to Chekhov has been credited to Tolstoy, although Dmitry Chizhevsky points out that since certain comments which Tolstoy made about Chekhov's works are recorded only in the notes of a friend, A. B. Goldenweizer,

the use of the word "impressionist" could just as likely have been an attempt on the part of Goldenweizer to elucidate Tolstoy's comments as a use of the word by Tolstoy himself.<sup>2</sup> However, Tolstoy did realize how important the individual detail was in Chekhov's art, for he pointed out that, although details seemed thrown in at random, they all added to the total effect, and the seeming discord culminated in harmony and the creation of a mood.

The aptness of the application of the term "impressionism" to the literary style of Chekhov becomes clearer when one examines the exact import of the word as it is used in the field of painting where it originated. The term is associated with a specific artistic movement of the nineteenth century, when a group of artists who had organized an exhibition of their works in Paris dubbed themselves "Peintres Impressionistes". They had gotten the idea of the name from the title, "Impression-Sunrise", of a painting by Claude Monet, one of their group. Later, when the Impressionists were trying to work out a definition of the term "impressionism", one suggestion was "painting in terms

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<sup>2</sup>Dmitry Chizhevsky, "Chekhov in the Development of Russian Literature", in R. L. Jackson, ed., Chekhov. A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967, pp. 53-54.

of tone rather than in terms of the object itself". In other words, the Impressionists were more interested in reproducing the effect of light reflected from an object than in analysing the form of the object.<sup>3</sup> John Canaday describes the phenomenon this way:

And in painting colored light -- light colored because it is reflected from the varicolored objects making up the world -- the impressionists will shatter the surface of their canyas into thousands of fragmented tints.<sup>4</sup>

The result is a vagueness of form on a canvas covered with seemingly unrelated daubs of colour. Chekhov was often criticized at one and the same time for both a certain vagueness in his works and a concentration on unnecessary, trivial details. He tried to clarify this method by explaining that he chose to write after letting facts filter through his memory until only those details which were typical and important remained. The process was a kind of distillation.

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<sup>3</sup>John Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art, New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1959, pp. 180-184.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

Chekhov's style of writing was subjected to much criticism by the author's contemporaries. Some offered commentary which was intelligent, enlightened and appreciative of the innovations which Chekhov brought to the short story. Others rejected what they failed to understand and appeared to miss the significance of Chekhov's work in the evolution of Russian literature. Chekhov was a revolutionary in prose who not only understood that Russian literature was ready for "something new", but who also sensed that he had this "something new" to offer.

Having made a few general, introductory remarks which should help to give my more specific discussion of nature a suitable perspective, I shall now proceed to an analysis of nature as it appears in Chekhov's short stories.

## CHAPTER II

### THE EARLY STORIES

As a youth, Anton Chekhov enjoyed playing practical jokes, organizing amateur theatricals and writing jingles. His ever-present sense of humour and his flair for humorous writing proved an invaluable asset when Chekhov, having completed his studies at the gymnasium in Taganrog, joined the rest of the family in Moscow. The Chekhov family was large and their financial position was precarious. Anton's years alone in Taganrog had instilled in him an air of independence and self-assurance. Chekhov's family appreciated Anton's steadiness and sense of practicality, especially since in these respects he contrasted so greatly to his older brothers, Aleksandr and Nikolay who, since the move to Moscow, had begun to grow more and more wayward and undependable. As a result, the family turned to Anton for hope and help despite his youth and the fact that he was only beginning his medical studies and was hardly able to support such a large family. Chekhov recognized the family's need and assumed the burdensome responsibility.

It was at this time that his enjoyment of humorous writing proved useful in a practical sense. Needing money badly for the support of his family, Chekhov began to write material for comic magazines which were published in Moscow. He turned out a constant supply of copy comprised of anec-

dotes, puns, sketches, cartoon captions -- anything that would be acceptable to these publications and which would earn him a few more kopecks.

In 1882 Chekhov began his association with Oskolki, a Moscow humorous magazine, the editor of which was Leykin. During his years of writing for Oskolki, Chekhov was responsible for a column called "Fragments of Moscow Life". The column was made up of notes on what was going on in the city of Moscow. Chekhov spent many tiresome hours dashing about the city finding material for his column. Although he was not particularly fond of this task, it undoubtedly contributed to the wealth of situations and diversity of characters which eventually appeared in his serious writing.

Besides disliking his job as a columnist for Oskolki, Chekhov was troubled by the fact that any stories he wrote which were too long and which did not run completely in a humorous vein were rejected for publication in Leykin's magazine. This was largely due to the fact that Leykin's and other similar magazines were at the mercy of a strict policy of government-directed censorship, and any deviation from the type of writing acceptable to the censor could result in serious trouble for a magazine's editor and owner. Chekhov, however, determined to see some of his more serious tales published and he in fact managed to do so, despite Leykin's disapproval at his submitting material for printing

in publications other than his own. One such story, "Osen'yu", somehow managed to be published in Budil'nik, another humorous magazine issued in Moscow, despite the fact that this same story, reworked into a play and entitled "Na bol'shoy doroge", was refused publication in 1885 by the censor, who called it a gloomy and unsavoury play.

The atmosphere of the story, in which the element of nature is an important one, is indeed gloomy. On inspection the story shows that Chekhov was using nature with a specific purpose in mind long before that element, as it appeared in "Step'", caused a great deal of comment from both the critics and the general reading public. In this tale nature is not greatly elaborated, but no stronger impression could have been evoked had the author used an accumulation of descriptive detail rather than the four brief, succinct references that he did make in an effort to create a suitable setting for the events of his story. It is the setting which is responsible for the creation of the story's atmosphere.

The first two nature descriptions, which provide a setting for the events that occur, have a twofold function: firstly, they provide a physical background for the action and, secondly, they create and maintain a suitable atmosphere. The first example of nature description is found in the second paragraph of the story and consists of a reference to the autumnal downpour and the accompanying violent wind

which beat passers-by on the face like a lash. Chekhov draws a comparison between the wind and the slapping of a whip and, in a brief phrase, succeeds in suggesting the sounds heard on a rain-soaked, windy autumn evening and the sensation of being pelted by the rain stinging the face the way a lash of a whip might do. The reader perceives the autumn evening with both the sense of hearing and the sense of touch. In the third paragraph Chekhov uses animation to describe the sound of the wind as it is heard from within the tavern. The eerie sound of the wind is conveyed by comparing it with a wolf which howls and whines. And later the sound and especially the force of the wind is suggested by describing it as attempting to tear the tavern door off its hinges. These two descriptive passages, although numbering only seven lines in all, express perfectly the sounds and sensations required to imagine a wet, dreary autumn twilight.

After the setting and atmosphere have been established, the action which takes place in a tavern begins. A man asks Tikhon, the proprietor of the tavern, to give him a drink. The man is an alcoholic who begs the tavernkeeper to give him a drink on credit, but when the latter refuses to do so, he gives Tikhon a small medallion with a woman's picture in it as security. After drinking, the alcoholic retreats to a bench and, at this point, the author again

alludes to the state of nature: the wind is singing its autumn rhapsody. Then a muzhik enters the tavern and recognizes in the alcoholic his formerly wealthy master who took to drinking when, on his wedding day, his new bride ran off with her lover. The muzhik ends his story, the alcoholic has several drinks, and then asks Tikhon to let him see the picture in the medallion. Both the scene and the story end with a further reference to nature which is juxtaposed with the portrayal of the alcoholic who is trying to see a picture that is no longer there because Tikhon has removed it. The nature setting becomes, in the last lines of the story, more than just an intensifier of mood. It assumes the role of a psychological image in that the autumnal weather is paralleled with the alcoholic's frame of mind. The final line of the story, "Бежа, где ты?" (II, 289), emphasizes this. Like the autumn rain that pours as if it will never stop, the alcoholic's sorrow seems endless and boundless. It is now the "autumn" of the alcoholic's life, when everything is cold, dreary and without hope. The mention of spring in the story's concluding line is a reference to the blissful time of the man's life, when he thought himself both in love and loved. The happiness of that memory seems as remote as does spring during the miserable, rainy days of autumn.

During the mid 1880's Chekhov was turning toward

more serious themes than was the case when he first began writing for the Moscow newspapers. However, he still wrote stories which were purely in a comic vein. One such story entitled "Nalim" appeared in Peterburgskaya gazeta on July 1, 1885. The incident in the tale was actually supposed to have occurred at Babkino, where Chekhov and his family spent the summers of 1885, 1886 and 1887. The story tells of two carpenters who are lured away from their job of building a new bathhouse by the temptation of trying to catch an eel-pout which is in the pond. There are some brief passages devoted to nature, the first of which occurs at the beginning of the story and describes a quiet summer morning. A second passage, in keeping with the humour of the subject, describes the ripples caused by one of the carpenters falling into the water as running in fear from the shore. And the third passage echoes the introduction:

А солнце печет и печет. Тени становятся короче и уходят в самих себя, как рога улитки... Высокая трава, пригретая солнцем, начинает испускать из себя густой, приторно-медовый запах. (IV, 9)

In this third passage Chekhov has used nature description to suggest the passing of time. This in turn emphasizes how long the carpenters have been spending in trying to catch the elusive eel-pout. "Nalim" is a simple, humorous

story in which nature content is minimal. But the natural details which Chekhov has included are not superfluous or simply decorative; rather, they serve to reflect the humour of the situation.

It was in the July 18, 1885, issue of Peterburgskaya gazeta that Grigorovich, an old, respected fiction writer, read Chekhov's "Yeger'" and praised the young author's literary talent:

. . . меня поразили в нём черты особенной своеобразности, а главное -- замечательная верность, правдивость в изображении действующих лиц и также при описании природы. (IV, 589)

Grigorovich specifically referred to Chekhov's veracity in his nature descriptions. Even at this early stage in his literary career Chekhov was beginning to display the masterful technique of nature portrayal which moved Levitan, a great Russian landscape painter, to remark that the landscapes in Chekhov's stories were the height of perfection.

"Yeger'" opens with a brief paragraph of nature description:

Знойный и душный полдень. На небе ни облачка... Выжженная трава глядит уныло, безнадежно: хоть и будет дождь, но уж не зеленеть ей... Лес стоит молча, неподвижно, словно всматривается куда-то своими верхушками или ждет чего-то. (IV, 21)

This paragraph of description, which gives ample evidence of the author's use of animation, sets a suitable atmosphere for the story. Nature is in a sultry mood and the introduction conveys a feeling of tension and expectation. At this point the huntsman of the story's title is introduced, in the second paragraph. Like nature, which is described in bright, vibrant colours -- "Направо зеленеет сеча, налево, до самого горизонта, тянется золотистое море поспевшей ржи..." (IV, 21) -- the huntsman is described as wearing a red shirt and being red from the heat. This paragraph closes with a reference to the lack of sound and again tension and expectation mount.

Now the huntsman's wife greets him and the drama begins. A conversation between the two reveals that the huntsman, Yegor, married his wife twelve years before while he was drunk and does not live with her because, as he puts it: "Я для тебя дикий человек есть, ты для меня простая баба, непонимающая. Нешто мы пара?" (IV, 24) Yegor loves the freedom of wandering the open fields with gun on shoulder, while his wife cannot comprehend what to him is not merely a pastime but a psychological necessity. There can be no meaningful communication between them. Near the end of the story the author inserts a natural detail which intensifies the sketch he has given of the huntsman's character:

Над сечей пролетают три дикие утки.  
Егор глядит на них и провожает их  
глазами до тех пор, пока они,  
превратившись в три едва видные  
точки, не опускаются далеко за  
лесом. (IV, 24)

The three wild ducks at which the huntsman gazes so intently represent the freedom that is vital to Yegor. Without the freedom which his spirit demands, the huntsman would find life unbearable. The story concludes with an impressionistic description of the huntsman disappearing into a field of wheat.

Nature in this story does not constitute merely a background, although this is one of its several functions in the story. It is more than just a setting, for it becomes part of both action and characterization, participating actively in both. Each occurrence of natural description is closely linked to the huntsman. In the opening scene Yegor is perceived against the background of the fields of grain. In the closing scene he walks away into the fields and merges with them. And, of course, the scene with the wild ducks is again linked to Yegor's personality. These three scenes serve to suggest the intimate relationship which exists between the huntsman and his environment. The natural element is important to the story because it helps the reader to understand the huntsman's character and the impossibility of the development of a mutually satisfying

relationship between Yegor and his wife.

A short story with a format similar to that of "Yeger'" had been written earlier by Turgenev. This story, which is entitled "Svidaniye", is recounted by the hunter-narrator of Turgenev's Zapiski okhotnika and was first published in Sovremennik in 1850. Akulina, a peasant girl who is in love with Viktor, a spoiled young valet of a rich nobleman, is being callously left behind by Viktor who is going to Petersburg with his master. Like Chekhov's story, "Svidaniye" contains passages of nature description. But the natural description in this story differs greatly in quantity and quality from that in "Yeger'". An examination of nature in both stories gives an idea of what Chekhov may have had in mind when he remarked to Suvorin that a new way of treating nature description was needed. "Svidaniye" opens with several paragraphs of detailed commentary on the state of nature in a small birch forest in early autumn. This is an example quoted from the introductory paragraph:

Листья чуть шумели над моей головой; по одному их шуму можно было узнать, какое тогда стояло время года. То был не веселый, смеющийся трепет весны, не мягкое шушуканье, не долгий говор лета, не робкое и холодное лепетанье поздней осени, а едва

слышная, дремотная болтовня. Слабый ветер  
чуть-чуть тянул по верхушкам.<sup>5</sup>

The style of writing is similar in the other passages: the description of nature is subjective, detailed and florid. The landscape is a beautifully drawn setting, but this seems to be its principal reason for being included in the story. While the nature description contributes to the drama which the hunter describes, it does seem somewhat overstated for the purpose. There is also a long paragraph devoted to nature near the end of the story. It is written in a sentimental tone, presumably in keeping with the unhappy conclusion to the meeting of Akulina and Viktor and the subsequently unhappy frame of mind of the hunter-narrator:

Мне стало грустно; сквозь невеселую, хотя  
свежую улыбку увядающей природы, казалось,  
прокрадывался унылый страх недалекой зимы.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, Chekhov treats nature objectively, with economy and terseness of language and an intent to make each

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<sup>5</sup>I. S. Turgenev, Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy i pisem, Moskva-Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo akademii nauk SSSR, 1960-1968, IV, 260.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., IV, 269.

nature passage pertinent to his story. There is an obvious difference in attitude to the detail. In "Svidaniye" details are amassed, whereas in "Yeger'" there is greater importance attached to the individual detail and its contribution to the story. Chekhov once told a young playwright seeking his advice that if he had a gun hanging on the wall in his first act, he would have to shoot it off later on. This principle is applied to nature description in "Yeger'". Each detail is functional, whether in establishing a mood, providing a suitable background, or clarifying character.

Another of Chekhov's stories which was first published in Peterburgskaya gazeta is "Gore". This story appeared in the November 25, 1885, issue of the newspaper, still under his pseudonym of Antosha Chekhonte. The story is about Grigory Petrov, a very talented turner, who looks back at a misspent life as he is taking his sick wife to the hospital during a blizzard. His wife, Matryona, dies en route, and Grigory, at the end of the tale, finds himself in the hospital suffering from severe frostbite and near to death.

With the exception of the last scene the events in the story take place in a snowstorm. There are really two dramas taking place in "Gore", one on a physical level and the other on a psychological plane, with the nature element uniting the two. As in "Yeger'" the introductory paragraph contains a description of nature. It consists of a few lines

describing the whirling clouds of snowflakes and the sharp, cold wind. There are additional references to the blizzard in the form of comments made by Grigory which punctuate his thoughts about the past. Remarks such as "Ишь метет! Все глаза запорошило." (IV, 93) and "А метет-то, метет!" (IV, 93) remind us that Grigory is fighting a physical battle with nature. It is interesting to note that, although a fierce wind is blowing, there is no reference to sound. The absence of words suggesting the sounds of nature emphasizes the feeling of isolation which Grigory experiences during his trip to the hospital. When he does hear something, he knows without turning around that the sound is the banging of his dead wife's head against the side of the sledge.

It is the snowstorm which will cause Grigory's death, for it contributes to his feelings of confusion and disorientation. But as well as having a physical presence in the story, the snowstorm also functions as a backdrop to the psychological drama which occurs. The blizzard intensifies Grigory's sense of isolation during the trip. In addition it provides a suitable accompaniment to the spiritual struggle which the old man undergoes. For a man who has spent the major part of his life in a drunken stupor, remembering only drinking, lying about and fighting, the realization that his life has been wasted causes as much mental anguish as the storm causes him physical distress.

The use of the word "tuman" in two different contexts

should be noted. It first occurs in the introductory paragraph: "За снежным туманом не видно ни поля . . ." (IV, 91) Later it is used in reference to Grigory's life with Matryona: "Жил он с нею сорок лет, но ведь эти сорок лет прошли словно в тумане." (IV, 94) This word acts as a link between the thoughts Grigory has about his life, and the nature description, which serves as a psychological image.

There is one striking natural detail to be noted in the concluding scene of the story. When Grigory awakens in the hospital, bright sunshine is pouring into the room. Although sunshine after a storm is usually associated with thoughts of peace, this is not the case in "Gore". Grigory, now at the end of his life, realizes how badly he has lived, but it is too late for him to rectify his errors. Time has run out for him, and all that remains is the torment of knowing that he could have accomplished a great deal in a life that had promised so much. The detail is cruelly ironical.

Although "Gore" is one of Chekhov's early works, it bears the earmarks of a literary style which came to be regarded as a typically Chekhovian method of short story composition. The story is one in which atmosphere dominates, whereas action is minimal. In "Gore" Chekhov concentrates on conveying Grigory's thoughts and sensations and on creating a mood. Like the seemingly unrelated daubs of paint on an Impressionist's canvas, the details focused upon in the story

all contribute to the production of a desired effect. In this regard the details of the natural setting are particularly significant, for they serve to establish and maintain the story's mood of isolation, frustration and futility.

Another story in which Chekhov used the natural imagery of the snow is one entitled "Toska". This tale, which was first published on January 27, 1886, in Peterburgskaya gazeta, deals with an old cabby named Iona Potapov whose son has just died. The old man tries to unburden his heart by talking to his fares about his sorrow, but when no one wants to listen or to offer sympathy, he drives back to the yard, takes his horse to the stable and says:

Таперь, скажем, у тебя жеребеночек, и ты этому жеребеночку родная мать... И вдруг, скажем, этот самый жеребеночек приказал долго жить... Ведь жалко? (IV, 140)

The story's events begin during evening twilight. Snow is falling and it covers Iona and his horse, who are both motionless: "Извозчик Иона Поталов весь бел, как привидение . . . Его лошаденка тоже бела . . ." (IV, 135) When his first fare of the evening rouses him, Iona tugs at the reins, ". . . отчего со спины лошади и с его плеч сыплются пласты снега..." (IV, 136) But when Iona's attempts to relate his feelings of sorrow to his fare end unsuccessfully,

the scene echoes the first description of the cabby and his horse: "Мокрый снег опять красит набело его и лошаденку." (IV, 137) After further attempts to talk to people fail, Iona returns to the yard. The theme of "Toska" is the lack of communication between people and the resultant sense of isolation acutely felt by an individual whose heart is bursting with a sorrow that he is forced to bear alone.

As in "Gore", nature details, while few in number and treated simply, contribute to the expression of the story's theme. At the beginning of the tale, Iona and his horse are set apart from others because only they are completely covered in layers of snow. The detail of the snow acts as an image which suggests a state of isolation from other people and events. When Iona shakes off the snow and begins to drive, his sense of isolation is slightly relieved only to be felt again when the driver is once more alone. And again he and his horse are completely covered by the snow. In "Toska" the snow represents in a physical sense the barrier which exists on an emotional plane between Iona and the people with whom he comes into contact. It insulates him and his grief. The voices of people whom he cannot see for the snow shout at him in anger; they threaten and curse, but never really communicate. The snow image emphasizes the lack of communication and the despair of Iona, who wants to unburden himself, but is repulsed by one person after another.

The story with which Chekhov began his contribution to Suvorin's Novoye vremya on February 15, 1886, is entitled "Panikhida". This is the story of a father who has never understood his deceased daughter's choice of acting as a profession. In church he insists on referring to her as an adulteress and, even after the priest has explained that the man's daughter was a famous actress whose death was written up in the newspapers, the father still refers to her as an adulteress during the requiem service.

"Panikhida" contains only one reference to nature, but this single episode is extremely important for an understanding of the conflict between the father Andrey and his daughter Mariya. During the requiem service for his daughter, Andrey recalls Mariya's life and, in particular, a visit she paid him when she was already an actress in Moscow. Before her departure Mariya insisted that her father take a walk with her by the river. During their walk the daughter reacted in this manner:

-- Какие чудные у вас места! -- восхищалась  
она гуляя. -- Что за овраги и болота! Боже,  
как хороша моя родина!  
И она заплакала. (IV, 166)

The father's reaction was a contrast to his daughter's:

«Эти места только место занимают... --  
думал Андрей Андреич, тупо глядя на  
овраги и не понимая восторга дочери.  
--От них корысти, как от козла молока». (IV, 166)

This brief episode involving nature summarizes the conflict of the story. Whereas Mariya is moved by the beauty of nature, her father is indifferent. Their reactions to nature as revealed in this passage help to explain Andrey's attitude toward his daughter. The father obviously lacks an aesthetic sense; if he cannot see a utilitarian aspect to something, then it is of no use to him. For this reason he could not possibly understand and approve of the theatre and Mariya's career as an actress. Nature in "Panikhida" is used to reveal this conflict which is at the core of the father's inability to understand his daughter.

The way in which Chekhov employs nature in "Panikhida" is similar to the technique he uses in "Yeger'". In both stories nature helps to clarify an irreconcilable difference between two people. Rather than giving full character descriptions, Chekhov skilfully introduces external details which enable the reader to understand the problem and its implications. In both "Panikhida" and "Yeger'" references to nature and incidents involving nature help to explain the central conflict of the story.

Another of Chekhov's early serious stories which impressed Grigorovich was "Agaf'ya". This tale was first published in the March 15, 1886, issue of Novoye vremya. In a letter dated March 25, 1886, Grigorovich comments on Chekhov's nature description:

. . . вот что хочу прибавить: по разнообразным свойствам вашего несомненного таланта, верному чувству внутреннего анализа, мастерству в описательном роде (метель, ночь, местность в «Агафье» и т. д.), чувству пластичности, где в нескольких строчках является полная картина тучки на угасающей заре, «как пепел на потухающих угольях» . . . и т. д., вы, я уверен, призваны к тому, чтобы написать несколько превосходных истинно-художественных произведений. (IV, 619)

In another letter, written in 1888, the old writer praises Chekhov's style in "Mechty" and "Agaf'ya":

. . . ни в одном слове, ни в одном движении не чувствуется сочиненность, -- все правда, все как должно быть на самом деле; то же самое при описании картин и впечатлений природы: чуть-чуть тронуто, а между тем так вот и видишь пред глазами; . . . (IV, 619)

The natural details in "Agaf'ya" are reported by a hunter-narrator who inadvertently comes to visit Savka the

gardener on an evening when Savka is expecting a visit from Agaf'ya, one of the village women. Savka, a strong and handsome young man, does not feel impelled to have a regular job, and is finally sent by the villagers to be a watchman in the community kitchen gardens -- a job for an old man. Despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that Savka lazily misspends his strength and talents, the women of the village have a weakness for him, and the arrangement of a rendezvous with one of them is not uncommon.

Chekhov's description of a sultry summer evening suits the theme of a rendezvous well. The narrator early in the story mentions lying down near Savka's shack on a torn, threadbare sledge-rug which emits a ". . . густой и душный запах сухих трав." (IV, 197) Later the narrator describes the smell of the kitchen gardens:

Темные гряды глядели, как большие приплюснутые могилы. От них веяло запахом вскопанной земли и нежной сыростью растений, начавших покрываться росой... (IV, 203)

And he further mentions that Agaf'ya was intoxicated by the sultriness of the night. The description of the setting is closely linked to the portrayal of Agaf'ya, who is completely overcome by her passion and recklessly stays with Savka until

morning. In two instances of nature description the technique of animation is particularly well used, for it proves suitable to the mood and events of the story. The first example speaks of the night tenderly embracing nature:

" . . . а летняя ночь уж охватывала своей нежащей, усыпляющей лаской природу." (IV, 198) The second passage describes a flower tenderly brushing against the narrator's face:

Какой-то мягкий махровый цветок на высоком стебле нежно коснулся моей щеки, как ребенок, который хочет дать понять, что не спит. (IV, 204)

As in "Nalim" natural details are cleverly introduced to convey the passing of time. In "Agaf'ya", however, this technique is more fully developed than it was in "Nalim". The events in the story begin to unfold in the late evening, just as the afterglow of the sunset is fading from the sky. It is the description of this scene which was praised by Grigorovich:

За бугром догорала вечерняя заря. Осталась одна только бледно-багровая полоска, да и та стала подергиваться мелкими облачками, как уголья пеплом. (IV, 197)

With his homely comparison of the clouds covering the strip of crimson to ashes on embers, Chekhov evokes a striking picture of the fading sunset. Periodically throughout the rest of the story, there are additional references to nature accompanying the passing of the hours. Soon after the description of the sunset, the growing darkness is suggested when the narrator remarks that the eyes could no longer distinguish field from sky. The growing stillness is mentioned, and then there are further references to the deepening darkness, as objects lose their contours. A final reference to the crimson strip in the sky, which has now completely disappeared, leads the narrator to mention the stars, which are becoming brighter and more luminous. At this point Chekhov describes the night in terms of its sounds and the stars which now dominate the sky:

Меланхолически-однообразная трескотня куз-  
нечиков, дерганье коростеля и крик перепела  
не нарушали ночной тишины, а, напротив, при-  
давали ей еще большую монотонность. Казалось,  
тихо звучали и чаровали слух не птицы, не  
насекомые, а звезды, глядевшие на нас с неба...  
(IV, 199)

Although he concentrates on only two details -- the night sounds and the stars -- the description of the summer night is vivid. The narrator later mentions the stars growing

misty, the coolness of the later hours, and the bright morning light of the following day. The reader is made aware of the passing of night and the beginning of another day through descriptions of nature. Chekhov's portrayal of nature in "Agaf'ya" is highly successful both as an intensifier of mood and a complement to theme.

A story written by Chekhov in 1886 which elicited a letter of rebuke from a female acquaintance is one entitled "Tina". Chekhov received the letter (V, 485) from Mariya Kiseleva, on whose estate he and his family spent the summers from 1885 to 1887. The story, which was first published in Novoye vremya on October 29, 1886, is about a young Jewess who seduces two men and cheats one of them out of a sum of money which she owes him. When Mariya Kiseleva reproached the author for dwelling on such a distasteful topic, Chekhov's reply was that to expect him to concentrate on only the "pearls" of life was like asking the artist Levitan to paint a tree while forbidding him to depict the dirty bark and the withered leaves. (XIII, 261-265)

Chekhov succeeds in portraying the Jewess in the story as a thoroughly disgusting woman. His success in this portrayal is in part due to certain natural details which he introduces into the story. The first instance of a passage dealing with nature occurs in the opening paragraph of the

story. It describes the wholesome beauty of a summer day, and is particularly effective because it is juxtaposed with the description of the dirty, evil-smelling yard of the vodka distillery owned by the Jewess Susanna. The action of the story then moves to the Jewess's house, the interior of which is described quite fully. The description leaves the impression of a dwelling unsuited for human habitation: ". . . комната походила больше на оранжерею, чем на жилое помещение."

(V, 203) In this description Chekhov emphasizes two natural details which convey the impression of a suffocating, unnatural atmosphere that pervades Susanna's house. When Lieutenant Sokol'sky calls on the Jewess to collect, on behalf of his cousin, an outstanding debt, he is escorted by the maid to a room which, he soon realizes, is Susanna's bedroom. Sokol'sky is amazed at the abundance of flowering plants in the room. There are blossoming plants all over. They trail along the walls on trellises, blocking out the light from the windows, hang from the ceiling, and twine about the corners of the room. In the greenery there are small birds which bang against the windows. And pervading the room is a heavy, sweetish, sickening smell of jasmine. The Jewess's bed is located in a corner in which the plants are particularly dense. On two chairs near the bed are piles of clothes and shoes. It seems to Sokol'sky that the overpowering odour is coming from these rather than from the blossoms. In all

there are seven references to the smell of jasmine. Although the plants and the odour of jasmine are part of the natural world, in "Tina" they seem unwholesome and unnatural. The scent of the flowers affects Sokol'sky physically, causing him to cough and grow dizzy. To rid himself of the oppressive odour he breathes deeply when he leaves the room, but he continues to feel bemused and disoriented.

Again one is struck by how much importance Chekhov placed on an individual detail of setting. Simply by stressing the natural details of the jasmine and the other plants in the Jewess's room, Chekhov creates an atmosphere which complements the unsavoury character of the woman.

It is not unusual to find the element of nature in those of Chekhov's stories dealing with romance. This is true of "Verochka", written in 1887 and published in Novoye vremya on February 21 of that year. The events of this story take place on a warm, moonlit August night. Verochka is an attractive young woman who with her father has befriended Ognev, a young statistician, and helped him in his work. At the beginning of the story Ognev, having completed his work, is leaving the country and returning to Petersburg. Because she has fallen in love with Ognev, Verochka reveals her feelings toward him but is repulsed by Ognev who, for reasons which are later revealed, suffers from an emotional deficiency

which manifests itself in a kind of coldness.

The conversation between Vera and Ognev takes place in a garden. The setting is a romantic one; there is a fragrance of flowers in the air and the moon is shining. But nature is covered in a fog and is still. It is filled with a feeling of mystery and expectation. Chekhov's description of the state of nature sets the stage for Vera's avowal of love:

И лес, и туманные клочья, и черные  
канавы по бокам дороги, казалось,  
притихли, слушая ее, . . . (VI, 69)

After the conversation there is only one further reference to the fog. This occurs near the conclusion of the story, when Ognev returns to the garden: "По дороге и в саду тумана уже не было, . . ." (VI, 72) The fog is now gone, for the mood has changed. There is no longer any tension, everything has been said, and the outcome has been determined.

Before and during his conversation with Vera, Ognev thinks and talks about nature. Despite what he refers to as his ". . . бессилие души, неспособность воспринимать глубоко красоту, ранняя старость, . . ." (VI, 72) Ognev appears to be sensitive to nature. He recalls the beautiful

day in April when he arrived in the country and, when he is leaving at the end of summer, mentions to Vera that he does not want to leave in such beautiful weather. But although nature gives Ognev a sense of well-being, it also makes him aware that there is something missing from his life. He tells Vera that the element of romance has never entered his life and that he has never had a love affair. Ognev is not so aware of this deficiency when he lives in the city, but he feels it acutely in the country. Nature, perhaps because of its completeness, makes Ognev aware of his incompleteness.

As in all the stories which I have discussed to this point, nature in "Verochka" is lightly drawn, with concentration on only a few details. It provides a romantic setting, contributes to the establishment of atmosphere, and is involved in the portrayal of Ognev's character. But, unlike the other stories, "Verochka" comments on the relationship between man's life and nature. The story suggests that there is a disparity between man and the natural world which man senses when he is confronted by nature. When Ognev recognizes nature's perfection, he becomes aware of his own imperfection. "Verochka" shows the reader a man whose preoccupation with work and ensconcement in the city shield him from the realities of his life until he comes to the country. There his new perspective forces him to view his life against

the background of nature and reveals to him his own inadequacies.

In the spring of 1887 Chekhov visited the Don steppe. His impressions of the area are reflected in the story entitled "Schast'ye", which appeared in Novoye vremya on June 6, 1887, less than a month after his return home. The story consists largely of a conversation between an old shepherd and a horsetrainer. Their discussion takes place at night on the steppe and concerns the treasures which are said to be buried there, but which are very difficult to find. The old shepherd equates the finding of these treasures with the attainment of happiness. The theme of "Schast'ye" is that there is much happiness in the world, if people only knew where to find it, and the steppe in the story is an image which represents the world. The incomprehensibility of this world and of life is again touched upon when the horsetrainer Panteley, before travelling on, gazes into the distance and, noticing some rooks flying over the plain, makes this comment:

Проснувшиеся грачи, молча и в одиночку, летали над землей. Ни в ленивом полете этих долговечных птиц, ни в утре, которое повторяется аккуратно каждые сутки, ни в безграничности степи -- ни в чем не видно было смысла. (VI, 167)

A contemplation of nature leads Panteley to the conclusion that there is no sense in nature. And he remarks, still gazing over the steppe: "Экая ширь, господи помилуй! Пойди-ка найди счастье!" (VI, 167) The word "schast'ye" refers to the buried treasure, but the parallel drawn by Chekhov between the treasure on the steppe and happiness in life is obvious. Just as the treasure said to be buried on the steppe is difficult to find, so also is happiness elusive in a world which is vast and incomprehensible.

Chekhov's portrayal of the steppe in "Schast'ye" gives the reader a foretaste of the author's depiction of nature in "Step'", published in 1888. In "Schast'ye" nature is a central feature of the tale. It is both the setting and the subject of the conversation between the old shepherd and Panteley. And, as the story progresses, one realizes that Chekhov has used the steppe as an image to help him express certain conditions of human existence.

Another story dealing with the subject of romance or, more correctly, an illusion of romance, is entitled "Potseluy". This story first appeared in Novoye vremya on December 15, 1887. In "Potseluy" Ryabovich, a timid, undistinguished artillery officer, is kissed by mistake by an unidentified young woman in a darkened room. The incident is cherished by Ryabovich and causes him to escape into

daydreams for several months. But on his return to the village where the incident occurred, Ryabovich's dreams are shattered.

In the story there are two nature passages which accompany the development of events. These passages are — descriptions of the same scene -- the river and the surrounding area. The first portrays the scene in May, with the stars shining and a nightingale singing. It is a romantic picture which suits Ryabovich's mood well. Near the conclusion of the story the scene is again described, this time as it appears in August:

А на этом берегу было все то же, что  
и в мае: тропинка, кусты, вербы, навис-  
шие над водой... только не слышно было  
храброго соловья, да не пахло тополем  
и молодой травой. (VI, 354)

As Ryabovich gazes at the river he finally sees the past and the present in a clear light, and his illusions are dispelled. But he understands nothing. As he watches the river flowing by he is puzzled:

Вода бежала неизвестно куда и зачем.  
Бежала она таким же образом и в мае;  
из речки в мае месяце она влилась в  
большую реку, из реки в море, потом  
испарилась, обратилась в дождь и,

БЫТЬ МОЖЕТ, ОНА, ТА ЖЕ САМАЯ ВОДА, ОПЯТЬ  
БЕЖИТ ТЕПЕРЬ ПЕРЕД ГЛАЗАМИ РЯБОВИЧА...  
К чему? Зачем? (VI, 355)

Ryabovich, like Panteley in "Schast'ye", sees no sense in nature, and from his contemplation of nature he proceeds to a reflection on life. It seems to Ryabovich that the world and life are an unintelligible, aimless jest.

In "Potseluy", as in "Verochka", there is philosophical comment regarding nature and man's relationship to it. At the story's conclusion Ryabovich finds himself confounded by the never-ending cycle that is nature. In "Potseluy" Chekhov portrays a man intimidated by a universe which he cannot fathom. Although Chekhov continues to depict human relationships in "Verochka" and "Potseluy", there is a new element present. In these stories the author also examines the quality of the relationship between man and nature, and finds man to be aware of his own imperfection and frightened by nature because it can make life appear meaningless.

In the present chapter I have analysed a group of Chekhov's early short stories which offer a wide range of themes. In each of these stories the element of nature is present, although not always to the same degree nor for the same reasons. The techniques used to present nature

are similar in all the stories. The emphasis is on individual details which seemed to Chekhov to be representative of the scene being portrayed. There are no extended passages describing nature in the manner of Turgenev. Rather, the style is economical yet highly suggestive, and aptly termed impressionistic. The generally popular technique of animation occurs frequently, as I have indicated in stories such as "Osen'yu", "Nalim", "Agaf'ya" and "Verochka".

Just as Chekhov's themes and characters vary from one story to the next, so, too, does the function of nature. In each story nature provides a physical setting in which some or all of the events of the tale take place. But in each instance the natural details function as more than a mere background. For example, nature in "Yeger'", "Agaf'ya", "Panikhida" and "Tina" contributes to the depiction of character. "Nalim" and "Agaf'ya" show nature being used to suggest the passing of time. A very important function of nature in these early stories is the creation of mood or atmosphere. It is often the mood, established by details of natural setting, which lingers in one's memory long after exact details regarding the story's events have been forgotten. One remembers the feeling of isolation created by the blizzard in "Gore", or the gentle, velvety seductiveness of the summer night in "Agaf'ya". Chekhov's merging of nature

sketches with the psychological aspect of his art is highly successful.

Nature functions in still a different way in the last three stories which I have examined. Here the nature passages are involved in Chekhov's philosophical comments. The author portrays nature as vast, incomprehensible and indifferent to man. It can make man's life appear absurd and, so, easily intimidates him. The suggestion that this is the quality of the relationship between man and nature undoubtedly contributed to the view of Chekhov as a pessimist.

The stories discussed in the present chapter span Chekhov's career from when he was a major contributor to Oskolki until, in the latter part of 1887, he had severed his connection with this Moscow newspaper. Chekhov's attitude to his work had undergone changes during these years. Although the need to write for financial reasons was still great, Chekhov was taking more care with his writing in the late 1880's. This was due in part to Grigorovich's letter of March 25, 1886, which both praised Chekhov's talents and chastised him for not respecting these talents. The fact that his works were popular in Petersburg and that he was being referred to as a coming new force in Russian literature must also have caused Chekhov to reevaluate himself as a writer. By 1887 Chekhov felt the pressure on him

to write something "big". When an attempt to write a novel in 1887 failed, Chekhov turned to dramatic form and wrote Ivanov, which was first performed in Moscow on November 19, 1887. By the beginning of 1888 Chekhov was again concentrating on a lengthy prose work which he entitled "Step'", and which appeared in the "thick" magazine Severnnyy vestnik in March of that year.

CHAPTER III  
A LITERARY DEBUT

. . . я принялся за большую вещь. Написал уж я немного больше двух печатных листов и, вероятно, напишу еще три. Для дебюта в толстом журнале я взял степь, которую давно уже не описывали. Я изображаю равнину, лиловую даль, овцеводов, [...], попов, ночные грозы, постоянные дворы, обозы, степных птиц и проч. (XIV, 14)

In this letter to Grigorovich dated January 12, 1888, Chekhov went on to discuss his problems and apprehensions regarding his writing of "Step'". Chekhov was unaccustomed to writing at length and expressed concern that this principle of brevity was driving him to extremes. He was afraid that instead of an artistic, uniform portrayal of the steppe, he was presenting to the reader a "steppe encyclopaedia". But he felt that even an encyclopaedia might be of use, if it succeeded in opening the eyes of his contemporaries and showing them what wealth and beauty lay untouched and unapprehended in Russia. Chekhov said that he would be thankful if his story merely reminded his colleagues of the steppe, which they had forgotten, and made them thoughtful.

"Step'" is a story about the Russian steppe and its people as perceived by a nine-year-old boy named Yegorushka. Yegorushka is being taken by his uncle, Ivan Ivanych Kuzmichov, to a far-away town to go to school, and it is the events and

impressions of the boy's journey which form the substance of the tale. Yegorushka sees the steppe in its many moods. He experiences its scorching heat and is caught in a sudden, violent storm. Yegorushka is one of the few who notices and is moved by the beauties and wonders of the land.

Chekhov's choice of Yegorushka as the story's narrator has both advantages and disadvantages. A child's naive perception, coupled with his imagination, promises to result in a view of nature very different from that of an adult observer. For the very reason that the child is naive and inexperienced, his observations, especially those on nature, will be tinged with a sense of wonder and mystery. He will probably notice things to which the adult eye has long since grown accustomed. There are obviously certain advantages to using a child-narrator. But the problems encountered by an author in choosing a nine-year-old child to act as a narrator are equally obvious. While a child is able to make observations, he is not always capable of drawing meaningful conclusions from what he sees. This would present a problem for the author when he wanted to express an idea or a concept which was not within a child's grasp. To remedy this problem, Chekhov's own voice is sometimes interjected into Yegorushka's thoughts and observations. But Chekhov accomplishes this so skilfully that

one is sometimes unaware of who is making the observations and where the transition from child to author is made. This treatment of the narrative element in "Step'" is reflected in the nature passages and will be referred to again later in the present chapter, in the context of the story itself.<sup>7</sup>

Yegorushka's journey begins on an early morning in July, even before the sun has risen. As the town is left behind, a wide, boundless plain stretches before the travellers. Chekhov at this point describes the sunrise over the plain. But rather than concentrating on the sun itself, which is behind the travellers, he describes only that evidence of the sunrise which can be seen ahead of them:

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Сначала, далеко впереди, где небо сходится с землею, около курганчиков и ветряной мельницы, которая издали похожа на маленького человека, размахивающего руками, поползла по земле широкая ярко-желтая полоса; через минуту такая же полоса засветилась несколько ближе, поползла вправо и охватила холмы; . . . (VII, 21)

The passage continues, telling how Yegorushka feels something warm touch his back, and how a streak of light steals up from behind, darts between the trap and the horses and meets the

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<sup>7</sup>N. A. Nilsson, Studies in Čechov's Narrative Technique, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1968, pp. 13-25.

other streak. Soon the whole steppe is bathed in sunshine.

The steppe in this story is portrayed in a symbolic as well as a literal sense, and there is a constant interplay of these two aspects which accompanies the interplay of narrators. There are instances in "Step'" when there is a certain vagueness as to the narrating voice. Usually it is a case in which Yegorushka is perceiving a scene, whereas the observations, thoughts and comments are those of the adult author. The scene in which Yegorushka hears the singing on the steppe contains this vagueness in narration. While his uncle, Father Khristofor and the driver Deniska are sleeping, Yegorushka suddenly hears a soft singing. At first he cannot tell where the song is coming from, but then it seems to him that the grass is singing. The next few lines describing the song come from the author:

. . . в своей песне она, полумертвая, уже погибшая, без слов, но жалобно и искренно убеждала кого-то, что она ни в чем не виновата, что солнце выжгло ее понапрасну; она уверяла, что ей страстно хочется жить, что она еще молода и была бы красивой, если бы не зной и не засуха; вины не было, но она все-таки просила у кого-то прощения и клялась, что ей невыносимо больно, грустно и жалко себя... (VII, 30)

Then there is a switch back to Yegorushka, to whom it seems that the dreary, mournful song is making the air hotter, more

suffocating and more stagnant.

At the end of the first day of travel, a storm threatens to spring up. Chekhov's description of the restless steppe, and especially the paragraph near the end of Chapter 2, has symbolic overtones. The first part of the passage describes the plants, insects, feathers and dust which rise skyward in a black column. Then Chekhov describes the reaction of the steppe birds to the sudden whirlwind. Certain details are animated: a cloud exchanges glances with the steppe and frowns, while some uprooted plants get caught in the whirlwind:

. . . и Егорушка видел, как два перека-  
поле столкнулись в голубой вышине и  
вцепились друг в друга, как на поединке. (VII, 34)

The animation is appropriate to a child's perception of nature, especially during such a violent scene. The entire section is animated, but the quality of language used and the kind of ideas expressed indicate whose view of the scene is being expressed. Both the beginning and the end of this section contain expressions more suitable to an adult viewpoint than a child's. Chekhov begins the passage by saying that at sunset,

. . . степь, холмы и воздух не выдержали гнета и, истощивши терпение, измучившись, попытались сбросить с себя иго. (VII, 34)

But when the storm fails to materialize, the steppe becomes submissively subdued:

Но невидимая гнетущая сила малопомалу сковала ветер и воздух, уложила пыль, и опять, как будто ничего не было, наступила тишина. Облако спряталось, загорелые холмы нахмурились, воздух покорно застыл и одни только встревоженные чибисы где-то плакали и жаловались на судьбу... (VII, 35)

Chekhov's liberal use of the technique of animation in this story results in the depiction of the steppe as a great, living being. The author's inclusion of words and phrases such as "гнет", "иго", and "гнетущая сила" convey the idea that it is somehow fettered and oppressed. Such a portrayal of nature has led to interpretations of Chekhov's steppe as a symbol representing the Russian land and its people. There are further examples of such descriptions in "Step'" which lend support to this interpretation. These will be pointed out and examined as they occur in the narrative.

As night approaches, the travellers stop briefly

at an inn owned by Moysey Moyseich, a Jew. Then they resume their journey. As they ride along, Yegorushka is awed at the steppe and the sky; the dark hills seem to be concealing something terrible, the sky is crimson, and the steppe is hiding in a mist ". . . как дети Мойсея Мойсеича под одеялом." (VII, 50) At this point the author begins a long description of a July night on the steppe. In this beautiful description the voices of the child, the sensitive poet, and the naturalist merge. The naturalist talks about the steppe creatures, the sounds of birds and insects in the grass. The child, with his lively imagination, transforms a bush or a stone into a silhouette which looks like a monk or, perhaps, a robber. He apprehends the steppe as a combination of broad shadows, monstrous shapes and uncanny sounds. The poet animates nature, seeing it as a huge, living and breathing organism. He also interjects the philosophical comments which occur throughout. Listening to the sounds echoing over the steppe, he asks:

Для кого они кричат и кто их слушает  
на этой равнине, бог их знает, но в  
крике их много грусти и жалобы... (VII, 51)

He looks at the sky and speaks of its depth and infinity, qualities which he says one can appreciate only when viewing

it at sea or on the moonlit steppe. These comments build up toward and finally culminate in the inspiring passage in which the steppe calls in vain for singers. The poet recognizes in everything that he sees and hears on the steppe beauty, youth, power, and a passionate thirst for life. And his soul wants to take flight over the steppe with the night bird. But the author is aware also of the steppe's yearning and grief:

. . . как будто степь сознает, что она  
одинока, что богатство ее и вдохновение  
гибнут даром для мира, никем не воспетые  
и никому не нужные, и сквозь радостный  
гул слышишь ее тоскливый, безнадежный  
призыв: певца! певца! (VII, 52)

This passage invites symbolic interpretation. Again the steppe is an image of the fatherland and its people, whose rich potential has so far been wasted and which cries for expression.

On this night Yegorushka, at his uncle's request, joins a group of peasants who are driving a train of wagons, loaded high with bales of wool, across the steppe. The remainder of Yegorushka's journey is made with these people. One of the peasants whom he meets is named Vasya. This man is unique among the characters in the story, for

he possesses a special kind of vision. His eyesight is extraordinarily keen and, because of his extreme long-sightedness, he is in the enviable position of being able to observe and appreciate the most intimate aspects of nature. He can see foxes playing and hares washing themselves with their paws. He can watch animals in their own haunts. Vasya's vision gives him access to a private, beautiful world unseen by anyone else. He is, perhaps, closer to the steppe than any other character in the story.

One evening, as Yegorushka continues his travels with the peasants, he lies on his back and gazes up at the sky. The sunset which he sees is described in childish images:

. . . ангелы-хранители, застилая горизонт своими золотыми крыльями, располагались на ночлег; . . . (VII, 72)

As Yegorushka watches the stars appearing, Chekhov interpolates a paragraph of philosophical comment. He describes the feeling of loneliness that is felt when one stares at the sky fixedly and for a long time. He implies a sense of disorientation in the realization that man's brief life and all that he holds dear and of value are insignificant against the background of nature. Nature, because of its constancy, indifference, and silence, frustrates man when he tries to

grasp its significance. He goes on to say that one is reminded of the solitude of death, and that such a thought makes the reality of life seem full of despair. Chekhov unites this passage with Yegorushka's thoughts by returning to the boy who is now thinking about his dead grandmother.

Another peasant whom Yegorushka meets is Yemel'yan, a former church chorister who, after bathing in the Donets River, caught cold and lost his singing voice. No matter how hard Yemel'yan tries, he emits only discordant gasps. There is clearly a parallel between this frustrated, melancholy peasant who passionately desires to sing, and the steppe, which cries for a singer.

~~The nature description in "Step'" reaches a tense~~ climax in the storm scene in Chapter 7. The discussions of nature in earlier chapters have helped to create a feeling of tension which the storm relieves. There are many references to the scorching heat and the suffocating air; there is the violent whirlwind, which occurs at the end of Chapter 2, and the tense nerves and ruffled tempers of the drivers and Yegorushka just before the storm begins.

Chapter 7 of "Step'" is devoted to a magnificent description of a steppe storm. Chekhov sets the stage for the storm by first talking about the drivers and Yegorushka

sitting around the fire and cooking their evening meal. The weather is sultry. Everyone feels oppressed and their tempers are strained. An argument begins. In the distance lightning is flashing every minute. Chekhov uses the detail of the lightning cleverly to augment the tension during the period just previous to the beginning of the downpour. As the storm approaches, the flashes of lightning occur more frequently. Chekhov's descriptions of the lightning, seen through the child's eyes, become more detailed and more fantastic. Winner complains that Chekhov's description of the storm shows "an uncharacteristic lack of restraint."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately he either does not realize, or ignores, the fact that Chekhov is describing the storm from the viewpoint of an awestruck, frightened child with a vivid imagination. Unlike other nature descriptions in "Step'", the account of the storm is written from a viewpoint which is consistently Yegorushka's, and the result is delightful. The frequency of the lightning flashes is expressed this way:

Направо сверкнула молния и, точно от-  
разившись в зеркале, она тотчас же  
сверкнула вдали. (VII, 91)

Yegorushka thinks of the lightning and thunder in these childish images:

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<sup>8</sup>T. Winner, Chekhov and his Prose, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966, p. 53.

Налево, как будто кто чиркнул по небу спичкой, мелькнула бледная, фосфорическая полоска и потухла. Послышалось, как где-то очень далеко кто-то прошелся по железной крыше. Вероятно, по крыше шли босиком, потому что железо проворчало глухо. (VII, 91)

Whenever he is not too frightened to keep his eyes open, Yegorushka watches the storm in amazement. The black sky yawns and breathes white fire, and the black shreds of clouds look to him like claws. The frequency of the lightning and the intensity of the thunder increase. The light penetrates even his closed eyelids, while the thunder explodes all over the steppe. Inadvertently opening his eyes, Yegorushka sees three huge giants with long pikes who later turn out to be peasants carrying pitchforks. Overwhelmed by the violence of the storm, Yegorushka, numb with cold, finally decides that it will never end.

This last example of nature description in "Step'" cost Chekhov a full week of effort and provides a fitting climax to the portrayal of nature in the story. While this story is a union of two themes -- a description of the steppe and Yegorushka's adventures -- the steppe dominates as the central feature, and the story is more saturated with nature than anything else Chekhov wrote.

Chekhov's fear that his story would seem to be merely a "steppe encyclopaedia" was unfounded. In "Step'"

Chekhov combines several viewpoints to produce an emotional work of art which has with justification been termed a "hymn" to nature. The methods of depicting nature which I have mentioned in previous chapters continue to be used in "Step'". Animation occurs frequently both because the steppe is being seen through the eyes of a child, and because the author is portraying the steppe as a great and vibrant being. In "Step'", as in "Schast'ye", nature functions as a symbol. In this tale it represents the Russian land and its people with their hopes and aspirations, as well as their frustrations and burdens.

When "Step'" appeared in Severnnyy vestnik in March, 1888, the periodical press assessed it as a talented, original work, but they had some reservations. Mikhaylovsky, for example, praised "Step'", but he also criticized Chekhov for a lack of discipline which resulted in the chance nature of impressions, and he referred to an "emptiness" in the work.<sup>9</sup> The difficulties encountered by readers of "Step'" were probably due to Chekhov's system of imagery. While "Step'" expresses humanistic ideas regarding Russia and its people, these ideas are embodied in the story's imagery rather than being stated more straightforwardly.

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<sup>9</sup>B. P. Gorodetsky, ed., Istoriya russkoy kritiki, Moskva: Izdatel'stvo akademii nauk SSSR, 1958, II, 350.

In December, 1888, "Pripadok" was published in a collection of stories compiled in memory of the writer Garshin, who had committed suicide earlier that year. At a literary gathering attended by Grigorovich, the actor Davydov read the story aloud, and a lively discussion followed. But Grigorovich complains:

Я бесился, что никто не оценил строчку  
6-ю на 308-й странице [-- «И как не  
стыдно снегу падать в этот переулок!» ];  
и были, говорили мне, еще поэты при  
чтении в литературном обществе!» (VII, 549)

In a letter to Suvorin Chekhov mentions this, and his frustration with his readers is evident:

Литературное общество, студенты, Евреинова,  
Плещеев, девицы и проч. расхвалили мой  
«Припадок» вовсю, а описание первого  
снега заметил один только Григорович. (XIV, 257).

The detail of the snow in "Pripadok" is obviously an important one in this story about a student named Vasil'yev who is taken by two friends to visit the Moscow brothels. Vasil'yev, shocked and overwhelmed by the debasement he sees, returns home and tries to devise a method of correcting the situation. He feels helpless and

his mental anguish soon results in a nervous attack. When his friends find him in a distraught condition, they take him to a psychiatrist who dispels the emotional pain arising from Vasil'yev's tortured social conscience by prescribing bromide and morphine.

The description of the snow noticed by Grigorovich first occurs near the beginning of the story, when Vasil'yev and his two friends set out to see the brothels. It is fresh and white and imparts a certain mood to the night:

. . . нравился ему воздух и особенно этот прозрачный, нежный, наивный, точно девственный тон, какой в природе можно наблюдать только два раза в году: когда все покрыто снегом и весной в ясные дни, или в лунные вечера, когда на реке ломает лед.  
(VII, 175)

After surveying a number of brothels with their garish cheapness and blatant vulgarity, Vasil'yev becomes miserable and disgusted and runs outside to wait for his friends to come out. As he stands outdoors Vasil'yev notices that the snow is still falling, and he wonders how it can fall in such a street. Vasil'yev is troubled by the contrast between the natural, pure, untainted snow and the brothels, which are so grotesque as to seem entirely alien to the world in which they exist. Chekhov's use

of the snow detail underscores the sensitivity of Vasil'yev, who alone is affected by nature's beauty, and whose attitude to the degradation that he has witnessed in the brothels is so different from that of everyone else whom he meets. Judging from Chekhov's comments, the author was obviously upset by the reading public's inability to cope with his style. The incident which I have mentioned concerning "Pripadok" illustrates how important a single detail of setting could be to the appreciation of a Chekhovian short story.

In 1890 Chekhov wrote "Gusev", the story of a discharged soldier who has been serving for five years in the Far East and who is now on a ship destined for Russia. Like ~~many other soldiers and sailors on the ship,~~ Gusev is so seriously ill that he will never reach home. As the journey continues, Gusev realizes that this is the case but, unlike Pavel Ivanych, a consumptive soldier who predeceases him, he does not complain about his fate. Rather, he regards death in the same simple, naive way in which he apprehends other natural phenomena. When Pavel Ivanych berates Gusev as ignorant because he believes that a big fish can smash a hole in a ship's bottom, and that the wind is a beast which sometimes breaks loose from its chain, Gusev muses:

Что странного, или мудреного, например, хоть в рыбе, или в ветре, который срыгается с цепи? Положим, что рыба величиной с гору и что спина у нее твердая, как у осетра; также положим, что там, где конец света, стоят толстые каменные стены, а к стенам прикованы злые ветры... Если они не сорвались с цепи, то почему же они мечутся по всему морю, как угорелые, и рвутся, словно собаки? Если их не приковывают, то куда же они деваются, когда бывает тихо? (VII, 300)

Gusev is a man of simple faith who is incapable of probing too deeply into anything and who accepts both life and death as he accepts nature -- at face value and with no disturbing questions.

He does, however, long for home. During hot days and stifling nights in the infirmary, Gusev envisions his homeland and his brother's family. In his delirium he speaks out as though his dreams actually had substance. In contrast to his sweltering surroundings, Gusev's vision of home has a winter setting. He sees his brother and his brother's children in a sleigh. There is snow everywhere and it is very cold. He watches the sleigh glide over the snow. But suddenly this scene disappears and is replaced by the sinister vision of a bull's head without eyes. In his delirium Gusev continues to imagine idyllic scenes of home, and each time the bull's head, like a premonition of death,

appears to blot them out. Chekhov juxtaposes Gusev's dreams of winter and frost with references to his unquenchable thirst and the unbearable heat.

Shortly before his death, Gusev goes out onto the deck and surveys the sky and the sea. While the sky is peaceful and quiet, the sea is restless. It seems to Gusev that there is neither sense nor pity in the sea, and that if the ship were not strongly built, both it and its passengers would be crushed by the waves. And yet the ship is very much like the sea; it, too, seems cruel and pitiless as it presses forward, fearing nothing. And suddenly everything in nature and in life seems absurd. But Gusev is not afraid. He describes his feelings this way:

А ничего нету страшного, -- говорит он.  
-- Только жутко, словно в темном лесу  
сидишь, . . . . (VII, 310)

Three days later Gusev is dead and is given a sea burial. Chekhov's description of Gusev's body, sinking toward the ocean bottom and being toyed with by a shark, is chilling.

The concluding paragraph of the story is a dazzling description of a sunset which contrasts with the previous scene. The sky and the sea are bathed in beautiful colours:

Небо становится нежно-сиреневым. Глядя на это великолепное, очаровательное небо, океан сначала хмурится, но скоро сам приобретает цвета ласковые, радостные, страстные, какие на человеческом языке и назвать трудно. (VII, 312)

Nature is completely indifferent to Gusev's grisly fate beneath the surface of the sea. The juxtaposition of the last two scenes is startling. Again the indifference of nature seems to indicate the absurdity of life.

The story of Gusev paints a gloomy picture of man's life in which nature dominates. Just as the ship is at the mercy of a pitiless sea, so is man in the hands of an indifferent force which he cannot understand. Chekhov offers no words of comfort in conclusion, no consoling philosophy which might anaesthetize the mind to the full implication of the story's conclusion.

In 1892 Russkaya mysl' published "Palata No. 6", one of Chekhov's most praised and most famous works. The story's title refers to the ward for mental patients in a Russian hospital located in a remote provincial town. The hospital's doctor, Andrey Yefimych Ragin, spends twenty years there, ignoring unsanitary conditions, brutality to patients, and scandalous behaviour among the staff. He attempts to remedy nothing, for his philosophy is one of

passivity and inaction. Ragin justifies this philosophy by saying that, because the basic laws of nature will never change, there is no point in troubling to ameliorate the conditions of man's day-to-day life. Only when he himself is confined to Ward 6 because of his conversations with Gromov, one of the inmates, does he get a brief but enlightening glimpse of reality as it is understood by the people whom he, by doing nothing, has helped to victimize.

Ragin's pessimism, which he conveniently uses as an excuse for doing nothing, is partly a result of his attitude to nature and the universe. On one occasion, while he is reading, he smiles with pleasure at the workings of the human mind. This thought leads him to a contemplation of man and his place in the universe:

О, зачем человек не бессмертен? -- думает он. -- Зачем мозговые центры и извилины, зачем зрение, речь, самочувствие, гений, если всему этому суждено уйти в почву и, в конце концов, охладеть вместе с земною корой, а потом миллионы лет без смысла и без цели носиться с землей вокруг солнца? Для того, чтобы охладеть и потом носиться, совсем не нужно извлекать из небытия человека с его высоким, почти божеским умом, и потом, словно в насмешку, превращать его в глину. (VIII, 126)

This passage summarizes Ragin's fallacious perception of

man and his place in the universe. Ragin views man's brief life against the perspective of eternity and the laws of nature, and his conclusion is that nothing in this life is of any consequence.

The unconscious cycle of nature troubles Ragin because there is no will in it. It simply occurs without end. Neither does the concept of seeing one's immortality in the transmutation of matter give him any comfort:

Видеть свое бессмертие в обмене веществ  
так же странно, как пророчить блестящую  
будущность футляру после того, как раз-  
билась и стала негодною дорогая скрипка.  
(VIII, 126)

Ragin allows his attitude to life to be governed by the fact that man, superior though he may be, is ultimately subjected to the unconscious processes of nature. When he is speaking with Gromov, Ragin expresses these ideas. While Gromov speaks fervently of his belief that the future will be better, Ragin says that ". . . сущность вещей не изменится, законы природы останутся все те же." (VIII, 132)

After Ragin loses his position at the hospital, his comfort in such a philosophy diminishes. When some personal matter annoys him, he tries to imagine the world as it would appear in a million years: "Все -- и культура, и нравственный

закон -- пропадет и даже лопухом не порастет." (VIII, 151)

But this line of reasoning no longer offers any solace.

Ragin's viewpoint begins to change and, finally, confined in Ward 6, he sees at first-hand what he has been ignoring all his life. Conscience-stricken he jumps up, wanting to do something that will remedy the situation, but he falls unconscious and dies of a stroke the next day.

Ragin in "Palata No. 6" views nature in much the same way as does the soldier Gusev. Both men feel that nature is indifferent to them. Yet their similar conclusions bring differing reactions. Gusev simply accepts his fate and thinks no more about it. Ragin, however, adopts a negative attitude, rationalizing that because, in the end, the laws of nature conquer man, the way in which he lives his life is unimportant. As the story progresses, we watch Ragin's philosophy crumble; we see his torment as he realizes that his life has been ruled by a fallacious belief in a philosophy of inaction. Chekhov's message in "Palata No. 6" is a positive one, for the story suggests that, although life may appear meaningless in the face of nature, one cannot renounce one's responsibility to it and its demands.

On December 25, 1892, the short story entitled "Strakh" was published in Novoye vremya. The central theme of the story is a philosophical one dealing with the incomprehen-

bility of life. As Dmitry Petrovich Silin, a landowner, and his friend, the story's narrator, sit on the church porch one evening, a fog begins to rise over the river. The description of the patches of fog is extravagantly animated, but suited to the subject of the story:

Они каждую минуту меняли свой вид и казалось, что одни обнимались, другие кланялись, третьи поднимали к небу свои руки с широкими поповскими рукавами, как будто молились... (VIII, 164)

The narrator comments that the appearance of the fog must have made Dmitry think of ghosts and the dead, for he begins to talk about how people fear these things. Dmitry does not understand why people fear the supernatural and yet do not fear life. He feels that life is incomprehensible and is unable to ascertain its purpose or its meaning. During this conversation Dmitry reveals that his wife does not love him and that, when she accepted his proposal of marriage, she told him that she did not love him but would be faithful. Dmitry then comments on her words:

«Я вас не люблю, но буду вам верна», --  
что это значит? Это туман, потемки... (VIII, 167)

The word "tuman" here takes on a psychological connotation.

In Dmitry's case, it is a comprehension of the situations of life that eludes him.

Dmitry's friend, however, does not share this fear of life:

«Жизнь, по его мнению, страшна, -- думал я, -- так не церемонься же с нею, ломай ее и, пока она тебя не задавила, бери все, что можно урвать от нее». (VIII, 171)

Later that night a strange thing happens; the narrator has an affair with Dmitry's wife, Mariya Sergeyevna. The episode passes as in a dream. The moon is shining, patches of fog float around trees and bushes, and Mariya seems to the narrator like a beautiful dream. The episode seems separate from reality. And then, in the early morning, as Dmitry is leaving on a trip, he discovers his wife walking from his friend's room. Once more he comments that he understands nothing. And his fear is soon communicated to the narrator:

Я смотрел на грачей, и мне было странно и страшно, что они летают. (VIII, 172)

Nature seems strange, terrifying and incomprehensible. And the narrator in perplexity ponders the incomprehensibility of what has just happened.

Natural details in "Strakh" contribute significantly to the development of the story's theme. Dmitry's contemplation of the rising fog leads him to broach the subject of his fear of life and his inability to comprehend its realities. References to the fog which recur in the story create a dream-like atmosphere of unreality in which the affair between Dmitry's friend and his wife takes place. Then, at the conclusion of the story, the reference to the rooks completes the thematic development. The narrator is now searching for meaning and sense in life, just as Dmitry was doing the previous evening.

The stories discussed in the present chapter show Chekhov's growing maturity as a writer and span the years between 1888 and 1892. These years were both difficult and rewarding for the author. He began contributing his stories to the better Petersburg literary journals and in 1888 received the Pushkin prize for literature. While both his reputation and his fame were growing, Chekhov was becoming more anxious about his work and what was expected of him as an author. Perhaps because of his increasing spiritual malaise, Chekhov spent a large part of 1890 working on a study of the penal colony on Sakhalin Island. He also spent much time travelling and working on the long-hoped-for novel which he never succeeded in completing. There was a sharp

decrease in the number of stories Chekhov had published during these years. The stories which I have examined in the present chapter are generally longer than the ones discussed earlier, and their subjects are more serious.

As I have indicated in individual tales, Chekhov's methods of presenting nature are similar to those used in earlier works. Chekhov continues to apply a light touch in his landscape painting, suggesting a scene or a mood through the choice of only a few details. The author's descriptive techniques appear to undergo refinement rather than change. Like the stories dealt with in the previous chapter, the tales examined in the present chapter (with the exception of "Palata No. 6") show nature being used to provide a setting for the events which occur. Nature also continues to be used in the function of underlining a certain theme. In "Pripadok", for example, the snow which symbolizes innocence and purity is a contrast to the degradation witnessed by Vasil'yev in the brothels. In "Strakh" the background of a foggy, moonlit night intensifies the sense of mystery felt at a contemplation of the incomprehensibility of life. In several instances nature forms an important part of the author's philosophical comments. This is true of nature passages found in "Step'", "Gusev", "Strakh", and "Palata No. 6". As Chekhov's career as a

writer progresses, the function of nature in the short stories undergoes an evolution. While it continues to appear as an element of setting and an intensifier of mood, its function varies to satisfy the needs of the subject.

In the stories considered in the present chapter, the author examines the relationship between man and nature. In "Step'", "Gusev", and "Strakh" Chekhov's concept of nature is similar to the one expressed earlier in "Verochka", "Schast'ye", and "Potseluy". Nature, which is vast and incomprehensible, makes man's life appear absurd. In "Palata No. 6", where Ragin succumbs to the sense of hopelessness generated by this concept of nature, Chekhov strongly criticizes his attitude and points the way to a different perspective on life that advocates concern and action, rather than indifference and passivity. Man's attempts to understand his role in respect to nature, and the effect which his view of the man-nature relationship has upon him are discussed in these stories.

The conclusion one draws from a study of these stories is that nature will probably remain an important element of Chekhov's works, both as an aspect of his method of expression and as a factor in the philosophy expressed, throughout the works of his maturity. In the chapter which follows, I shall analyse a selection of Chekhov's works written between 1894 and 1902, and examine the validity of this conclusion.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE MATURE STORIES

The dates of initial publication for the stories to be discussed in the present chapter range from 1894 to 1902. Some of these stories, products of the author's mature period, contain stringent criticism of specific aspects of Russian society. Yet they all reveal truths regarding the human condition which are relevant to people everywhere, not only to the society with which Chekhov was familiar. This is perhaps why these stories hold meaning for the modern reader.

The first story to be examined initially appeared in Artist in January, 1894, and is entitled "Chornyy monakh". The subject of "Chornyy monakh" is the experience of a young man named Kovrin, who is suffering from megalomania. The story's title refers to the vision of a monk, dressed in black, which Kovrin sees and which assures him of his superiority among men. Because of overwork Kovrin's nerves are shattered and, on the advice of a doctor, he decides to spend the spring and summer in the country. Most of the events in the story take place on the estate of Yegor Semyonich Pesotsky, a horticulturist, and formerly Kovrin's guardian. At the beginning of the story Kovrin arrives at Borisovka to spend some time with Pesotsky and Tanya, his daughter.

Early in the tale there is a description of Pesotsky's gardens, which are very beautiful, and on which much time and

effort are expended daily. Between the house and the river stretches an old gloomy park which has a melancholy atmosphere: ". . . и всегда тут было такое настроение, что хоть садись и балладу пиши." (VIII, 264) But there is a different mood to the flower garden, orchard and nursery closer to the house: ". . . было весело и жизнерадостно даже в дурную погоду." (VIII, 264) Although it is just early spring, there are enough flowers in bloom to give Kovrin the feeling of being ". . . в царстве нежных красок, особенно в ранние часы, когда на каждом лепестке сверкала роса." (VIII, 264) Another section of the garden which is purely ornamental has always impressed Kovrin as fantastic: "Каких только тут не было причуд, изысканных уродств и издевательств над природой!" (VIII, 264) Here Pesotsky has used his knowledge of horticulture to coax bushes and trees into shapes and forms unnatural to them. Life at Borisovka revolves around Pesotsky's gardens. Even indoors one is reminded of the garden, as in Kovrin's room, where there are flowers wet with dew in vases on the table.

While the gardens are very beautiful, there is a certain unnaturalness about them. The ornamental section of the garden is abnormal, and the lushness of the blooms seems exaggerated and forced. There is an artificiality to the perfection which has been achieved in these gardens, not by

nature, but by the tireless efforts of Pesotsky. These too well-ordered gardens are largely a creation of Pesotsky and would seem more appropriate to the realm of the imagination than to the natural world. Kovrin, however, loves the gardens. During a stroll outdoors he is reminded of the happy childhood he spent there, and his joy at returning approaches ecstasy.

Kovrin's pattern of living does not change with his move to the country; he reads and writes a great deal, drinks wine, and sleeps little. Yet he never seems tired and is always cheerful. One evening he hears a group of young visitors singing a familiar serenade which tells of a young girl with a morbid imagination who heard mysterious sounds in the garden at night. These sounds were so beautiful and so strange that the girl decided that they were heavenly and inaudible to ordinary mortals. After listening to the serenade, Kovrin takes Tanya aside and tells her about the legend of the black monk which has been troubling him since morning. The monk in the legend is a mirage which, because of some phenomenon of nature, keeps reappearing throughout the universe. According to the legend, the monk is soon due to reappear on the earth. Kovrin lets Tanya return to her guests while he goes out into the garden. The sun is just setting and there is a strong smell of flowers in the air. As Kovrin walks he begins thinking:

«Как здесь просторно, свободно, тихо!  
 -- думал Коврин, идя по тропинке. --  
 И кажется, весь мир смотрит на меня,  
 притаился и ждет, чтобы я понял его...»  
 (VIII, 270)

Kovrin finds nature peaceful, spacious and free. It seems to reassure him that an understanding of the world and of life is within his grasp, and it gives Kovrin a feeling of contentment. Then, suddenly, the vision of the black monk appears; it looks at Kovrin, smiles, and vanishes.

On another evening similar to this one, Kovrin sees the black monk a second time. Again there are guests, a violin is playing, people are singing, and Kovrin, who is strolling in the park, is reminded of the black monk. No sooner does he think of the vision than it appears. On this occasion the monk speaks to Kovrin and assures him of its existence in nature:

Я существую в твоём воображении, а  
 воображение твоё есть часть природы,  
 значит, я существую и в природе. (VIII, 278)

The monk tells Kovrin that he has been chosen by God to serve eternal truth and that he is gifted and far above the common herd. Then the monk begins to merge with his surroundings and finally disappears. Throughout the summer Kovrin continues to see the monk and to speak with him. In the fall Kovrin

returns to the city accompanied by Tanya, who is now his wife. One winter night Tanya awakens to find her husband talking to his hallucination. She and her father take Kovrin to a doctor who undertakes a cure.

When summer arrives, Kovrin and Tanya go back to the country. The story at this point comes full circle. Kovrin, much like Ryabovich in "Potseluy", returns to the scene of his former happiness to find that things have changed. Walking in the garden, Kovrin fails to notice the luxuriant flowers which the previous year had seemed so attractive. Having reached the river, he surveys the area where he first saw the black monk:

Угрюмые сосны с мохнатыми корнями, которые  
в прошлом году видели его здесь таким  
молодым, радостным и бодрым, теперь не  
шептались, а стояли неподвижные и немые,  
точно не узнавали его. (VIII, 287)

Nature is indifferent to Kovrin and seems not to recognize him. The intimacy he thought he shared with nature was an illusion. When the vision no longer appears, Kovrin feels that the cure which he has undergone has made him a mediocrity who is now like everyone else. Inside the house Kovrin is reminded of the joy and beauty of the previous summer:

Было тихо, и в открытые окна неся из сада аромат табака и ялалпы. В громадном темном зале на полу и на рояли зелеными пятнами лежал лунный свет. Коврину припомнились восторги прошлого лета, когда так же пахло ялалпой и в окнах светила луна. (VIII, 288-289)

He dashes to his study, lights a cigar and drinks some wine in an attempt to recreate the mood, but his attempt fails.

Kovrin eventually leaves Tanya, blaming her and her father for his unhappiness, and lives with another woman. Because of his failing health he travels with her to the Crimea. One night he stands looking at the sea from his balcony. The view of the moonlit sea is enchanting and seems very peaceful to Kovrin. After reading part of a bitter, unnerving letter from Tanya, Kovrin again gazes at the sea, and it seems to beckon to him. Then he hears the familiar serenade and the vision of the black monk appears one final time. Kovrin collapses and dies soon after, believing that he is, indeed, among the chosen ones of God. As he dies, he remembers once more his wife, his youth, and the happy months spent at Borisovka with its huge garden filled with luxuriant flowers drenched in dew, the park, the pines with their shaggy roots, and the field of rye.

The fantastic and beautiful gardens at Borisovka provide the perfect backdrop for the drama which takes place in Kovrin's unhinged mind, for the atmosphere of the gardens complements Kovrin's state of ecstasy and even increases it.

The sensation of a beautiful unreality which characterizes the atmosphere of the gardens aggravates rather than soothes the mental condition which leads Kovrin's mind to fabricate the vision of the black monk. While ill and in a state of ecstasy, Kovrin apprehends the natural world as something which he will soon understand. To his deranged mind, a comprehension of the mysteries of nature seems accessible. When his condition has been treated and cured, however, he no longer feels close to nature, and it seems totally oblivious to him. Only when he has been restored to health does Kovrin see that his belief that he could understand nature was a delusion, and that nature must remain incomprehensible to him.

On April 16, 1894, Rusскиye vedomosti published "Student" which was at that time entitled "Vecherom". The title was changed to "Student" in the collection Povesti i rasskazy, 1894, and it remained "Student" in subsequent collections.

This short story of only four pages is about a young seminary student, Ivan Velikopol'sky. As he is returning home through the woods, the weather suddenly changes:

Но когда стемнело в лесу, некстати подул с востока холодный пронизывающий ветер, все смолкло. По лужам протянулись ледяные иглы, и стало в лесу неуютно, глухо и нелюдимо. Запахло зимой. (VIII, 345)

It seems to the student that the sudden cold has upset the harmony and order in everything. The unexpected change in the weather intimidates and depresses Ivan, and his thoughts become pessimistic. He thinks about his home and of the illness and poverty there. Then it occurs to him that this same bitter, indifferent wind which is numbing his fingers blew throughout history -- in the time of Rurik, Ivan the Terrible, and Peter the Great. And he concludes that the poverty and hunger, the anxieties and burdens of life have been as constant in man's life as this wind. Ivan fears that the future will bring no improvements.

On his way home he stops to warm himself at an open fire tended by two village widows, a mother and daughter, who look after the kitchen gardens. While he is warming himself, the student recounts the story of Peter's denial of Jesus. Both women are visibly moved and the mother even begins to sob. Continuing on his way, Ivan thinks about what has just happened and arrives at this understanding of its meaning:

Прошлое, -- думал он, -- связано с настоящим непрерывною цепью событий, вытекавших одно из другого. И ему казалось, что он только что видел оба конца этой цепи: дотронулся до одного конца, как дрогнул другой. (VIII, 348)

As he climbs the hill near his village, the student looks at the cold, crimson sunset and thinks:

. . . правда и красота, направлявшие  
человеческую жизнь там, в саду и во  
дворе первосвященника, продолжались  
непрерывно до сего дня и, повидимому,  
всегда составляли главное в человеческой  
жизни и вообще на земле; . . . (VIII, 348)

The weather is still bitter, but the state of nature no longer intimidates Ivan, for he has unexpectedly succeeded in finding meaning in a life which he had only recently considered without hope or significance.

In "Student" Ivan finds himself drawing the same devastating conclusion arrived at by Ryabovich in "Potseluy". Nature seems to him to be completely indifferent to man. This conclusion frustrates and depresses Ivan, as it did Ryabovich. But after his conversation with the two women, Ivan moves a step further toward an understanding of his life and its significance. Regarding himself and his life as a link in the chain of human endeavour, a chain which continues unbroken through time, Ivan feels heartened. He finds solace not in a religious philosophy but in the thought that his place in the chain of human progress assures him of a kind of immortality. Finding comfort in this thought, Ivan no longer fears the indifference of nature.

This tone of optimism contrasts sharply with the mood

of the concluding pages of "Uchitel' slovesnosti", the second chapter of which was published in Rusскиye vedomosti on July 10, 1894. The first chapter, entitled "Obyvateli" had appeared in Novoye vremya on November 28, 1889. These two chapters were published as one story entitled "Uchitel' slovesnosti" in the 1894 collection Povesti i rasskazy.

The story is about Nikitin, a school-teacher, who falls in love with a young woman named Manya Shelestova, marries her, and then, becoming deeply troubled by the "poshlost'" of his wife's family's life and of the growing banality of his own existence, yearns for escape.

As a counterpoint to the theme of Nikitin's growing love, Chekhov introduces descriptions of nature in the spring:

Был седьмой час вечера -- время, когда  
белая акация и сирень пахнут так сильно,  
что, кажется, воздух и сами деревья стынут от  
своего запаха.  
.....  
Здесь уже не пахло акацией и сиренью, не  
слышно было музыки, но зато пахло полем,  
зеленели молодые рожь и пшеница, пищали  
суслики, каркали грачи. Куда ни взглянешь,  
езде зелено, . . . (VIII, 350)

Nikitin surveys these scenes during a horseback ride with Manya and some other young people. The sight of trees bursting into leaf and of the sky crimson from the sunset increases Nikitin's feelings of happiness and well-being. Even while he is at school, Nikitin gazes out the window,

entranced by the cloudless blue sky, the gardens, and the azure distance. Nikitin is completely enchanted by nature, which enhances the joy of his romance with Manya. After his proposal of marriage and her acceptance, Nikitin and Manya run out into the garden, where even the flowers seem to share in the romance:

. . . а над садом светил полумесяц, и на земле из темной травы, слабо освещенной этим полумесяцем, тянулись сонные тюльпаны и ирисы, точно прося, чтобы и с ними объяснились в любви. (VIII, 361)

During his marriage ceremony, Nikitin reflects on the events of the past months and recalls the lovely weather, "которая, как нарочно, все лето была дивно хороша; . . . ." (VIII, 364)

For several months Nikitin is ecstatically happy with Manya and his marriage. Then, as spring approaches, he feels a vague discontentment with his life, but at first is unable to define the cause. This new tone in Nikitin's attitude is heralded in the text by a reference to the weather:

Зима была вялая, без морозов, с мокрым снегом; под Крещение, например, всю ночь ветер жалобно выл поосеннему, и текло с крыш, . . . (VIII, 368)

After this gloomy nature description, Chekhov begins to

introduce suggestions that something is disturbing Nikitin. There is one more reference to nature in the story which is found in the concluding paragraph:

Начиналась весна такая же чудесная, как  
и в прошлом году, и обещала те же  
радости... (VIII, 371)

The following sentence and, in fact, the rest of the paragraph reveal Nikitin's assessment of his situation and his desire to escape it. The reference to spring and its joys strikes an ironic note, for Nikitin's new perspective makes him realize that there will be no future joy if he continues to live as he has lived in recent months. And from his new vantage point he reassesses the "joys" of the previous spring and understands that he has been living under an illusion:

Он догадывался, что иллюзия иссякла и уже  
начиналась новая, нервная, сознательная  
жизнь, которая не в ладу с покоем и личным  
счастьем. (VIII, 371)

Chekhov makes interesting use of animal imagery in "Uchitel' slovesnosti". In the opening pages of the story Nikitin, the Shelestov daughters, and another friend, Pol-yansky, are going riding. Manya is an expert horsewoman who fusses about the finer points of horsemanship. Like her

father, she is passionate about horses, whereas Nikitin's only concern is that Manya might prefer some officer who is a better horseman than he. Nikitin has no genuine interest in the sport.

After their ride the young people return to the Shelestovs'. Nikitin enjoys visiting this family; he likes their home, the garden, evening tea, even the word "khamstvo", which Manya's father frequently uses. The only things that upset Nikitin are the great number of dogs and cats kept by the family, and the large cage of pigeons on the terrace. There are so many dogs at the Shelestovs' that Nikitin knows only two by name: Mushka and Som. Mushka is a nasty dog that constantly growls at Nikitin, while Som is a benign, stupid animal which lays its snout on Nikitin's knees and repeatedly slavers on his clothes. When Manya's older sister Vera pronounces her "r's" with particular emphasis, Mushka seems to answer her:

И это «ppp» ... выходило у нее так  
внушительно, что Мушка непременно  
отвечала ей из-под стула: «ppp...  
нга-нга-нга» ... (VIII, 353)

Chapter 1 concludes with Nikitin, who has now proposed to Manya, dreaming of the Shelestovs' horses.

There are further references to animals in the second chapter of the story. After a few months of bliss, Nikitin is annoyed by something:

Только одно иногда волновало и сердило его и, казалось, мешало ему быть вполне счастливым: это кошки и собаки, которых он получил в приданое. (VIII, 368)

The house smells like a menagerie and it is impossible to get rid of this odour. The cats and dogs fight, while Mushka eats ten times a day and continues to growl at Nikitin. One night, when Nikitin comes home from his club, he finds a cat sleeping on his bed and Mushka growling beneath it. There is an obvious parallel between the physical encroachment of Manya's cats and dogs upon Nikitin's household, and the growing "poshlost'" of his life.

In Chapter 1 Chekhov's use of animal imagery suggests the quality of life led by the Shelestovs. The animals symbolize the banality and stupidity of the family's existence. Perhaps the fact that Nikitin is annoyed by the animals and even dreams about them indicates that, subconsciously, he recognizes the "poshlost'" of the Shelestov household. However, at this stage, he is too enchanted by his

romance with Manya and the remarkably beautiful weather to come to grips with the situation and distinguish reality from illusion. Eventually Nikitin does reevaluate the past. The expression of his growing disillusionment and subsequent self-knowledge begins with a complaint about Manya's cats and dogs and finally culminates in an honest appraisal of his situation:

«Где я, боже мой?! Меня окружает пошлость и пошлость. Скучные, ничтожные люди, горшочки со сметаной, кувшины с молоком, тараканы, глупые женщины... Нет ничего страшнее, оскорбительнее, тоскливее пошлости. Бежать отсюда, бежать сегодня же, иначе я сойду с ума! >> (VIII, 372)

In "Uchitel' slovesnosti" Chekhov uses nature to create mood and to support and develop the story's theme. The development of the plot is aided by nature passages. The descriptions of nature found near the beginning of Chapter 1 accompany Nikitin's growing love for Manya. Nature even seems to want to share in the excitement and romance of the marriage proposal. Later, in Chapter 2, a nature passage accompanies Nikitin's growing dissatisfaction and disillusionment with his marriage. Finally, in the last paragraph of Chapter 2, a reference to nature echoes the beginning of

the story and brings the events of the tale full circle.

The animal imagery found in "Uchitel' slovesnosti" is largely responsible for characterizing the Shelestovs. References to the numerous cats and dogs owned by the family are amusing and yet damning, for they embody the Shelestovs' banality. After Nikitin's marriage, this same banality envelopes his life, too. The final reference to Manya's cat, which is now sleeping on Nikitin's bed, portends for him a life characterized by "poshlost'". In "Uchitel' slovesnosti" nature, in the form of scenic description and animal imagery, is instrumental in creating the story's nuances of mood.

In April, 1896, Russkaya mysl' published "Dom s mezoninom". The story is narrated by a landscape artist whose romance with a young girl named Zhenya is ended by her older sister, Lida. Because of ideological differences between herself and the artist, Lida decides that Zhenya must not remain under his influence and sends her away.

The story's theme of love is enhanced by nature descriptions which are romantic and, in this respect, complement the personality of the artist. The first nature passage occurs near the beginning of the story and describes an estate which the artist comes upon but has never seen before. The description creates a melancholy mood, perhaps a presentiment of the outcome of the story:

. . . Потом я повернул на длинную липовую аллею. И тут тоже запустение и старость; прошлогодняя листва печально шелестела под ногами и в сумерках между деревьями прятались тени. Направо, в старом фруктовом саду, нехотя, слабым голосом пела иволга, должно быть, тоже старушка. (IX, 87)

It seems to the artist that he has seen this very same landscape at some time in his childhood. He continues to visit the estate, falls in love with Zhenya, and the summer days pass happily and leisurely. Then one August evening, after a spirited discussion with Lida which angers her, the artist sees Zhenya for the last time. He does not realize that this will be their final meeting, but nature seems to prophesy it:

Была грустная августовская ночь, -- грустная, потому, что уже пахло осенью; покрытая багровым облаком, восходила луна и еле-еле освещала дорогу и по сторонам ее темные озимые поля. Часто падали звезды. Женя шла со мной рядом по дороге и старалась не глядеть на небо, чтобы не видеть падающих звезд, которые почему-то пугали ее. (IX, 100)

The artist suddenly feels the desire to paint again, but only for Zhenya since, because of her, he no longer feels hopelessly alone and useless in the midst of nature. But when he returns to the estate the following day, he learns that Zhenya and her mother have left to visit an aunt in another province.

As the artist leaves the estate for the last time, he retraces the path which first brought him to the house, but in reverse. The final nature description echoes the first one, but there are some differences:

На том поле, где тогда цвела рожь и  
кричали перепела, теперь бродили  
коровы и спутанные лошади. Кое-где на  
холмах ярко зеленела озимь. (IX, 102)

As he gazes at this scene, the artist's mood becomes sober and prosaic, and he is once more as bored with life as he was before meeting Zhenya.

In "Dom s mezoninom" there is an interplay of two contrasting moods. While the story describes the growing love of the artist for Zhenya, Chekhov's nature passages hint at an unhappy outcome of the romance. The underlying melancholy atmosphere of the natural description merges with the theme of the artist's love at the end of the story, when he learns that his relationship with Zhenya has ended.

The delicate, subdued nature descriptions in this story help to create a low-key, romantic mood. But Chekhov's emphasis on the melancholy aspects of nature suggests early in the narrative that the happiness of Zhenya and the artist is evanescent.

In April, 1897, Russkaya mysl' published Chekhov's "Muzhiki", a truthful, compassionate account of the life of the Russian peasant at that time. The story centres on the impoverished Chikil'deyev family who live in the village of Zhukovo. It begins with the arrival in Zhukovo of Nikolay, one of the Chikil'deyevs' sons, from Moscow, with his wife Ol'ga and his daughter Sasha. Nikolay returns home because he is ill and no longer able to work in the city.

The life of the peasants as described in this story is bleak. There is illness, poverty, drunkenness, dishonesty among officials, and stealing. Religion is apprehended as a ritual to be performed rather than as an adherence to Christian precepts of morality. Among these grim pictures of peasant life the author introduces occasional nature descriptions, often from Ol'ga's point of view. After she surveys the lovely meadows and the winding river with its beautiful, wooded banks, Ol'ga marvels at the expanse stretching away before her. Together Ol'ga and Nikolay sit on the edge of a ravine and watch a dazzling sunset. The beauty of nature is a striking contrast to the village and to the overcrowded hovel which they are now forced to call home.

Ol'ga likes the open country and enjoys walking to church with her sister-in-law Mar'ya in the early morning. During one such excursion, the two women come upon Fyokla,

another sister-in-law, bathing in the river. At this point Chekhov employs a narrative technique which he used freely in "Step'". He creates the impression that the scene is being viewed by Ol'ga and Mar'ya, but at the same time he introduces some philosophical thought which is his own and which echoes the principal theme of the story. After a brief description of the glorious morning, Chekhov comments:

Какое прекрасное утро! И, вероятно, какая была бы прекрасная жизнь на этом свете, если бы не нужда, ужасная, безысходная нужда, от которой нигде не спрячешься! Стоило теперь только оглянуться на деревню, как живо вспомнилось все вчерашнее -- и очарование счастья, какое чудилось кругом, исчезло в одно мгновение. (IX, 197)

Even for the children in the Chikil'deyev household, nature provides only a temporary escape. While Sasha and Mot'ka, Mar'ya's daughter, are watching their grandmother's kitchen garden to make sure that a neighbour's geese do not get in they are attracted by a lush, grassy slope:

От камня до самого низа шел ровный, отлогий скат, покрытый мягкой зеленою травой, которую хотелось рукой потрогать или полежать на ней. (IX, 202)

Having become bored with standing in the garden doing nothing, the children find amusement in rolling down the slope. Suddenly they hear their grandmother's familiar, shrill voice screaming because the geese have gotten into the cabbages. The realities of a difficult life spoil even the children's brief enjoyment of nature.

After a severe winter during which Nikolay dies, spring finally arrives. Once again nature is inexpressibly beautiful but indifferent to the hardships and sorrows of the peasants' lives. The joyful sights and sounds of the land in spring make Ol'ga passionately yearn to go away. When the ground has dried and the weather has become warm, Ol'ga and Sasha set off on foot for Moscow. Nature, which is bright and cheerful, heartens the two as they begin their journey. When nature rejoices in "Muzhiki", it points up the cruelty and difficulty of life in the village. Its beauty can offer only a temporary solace to an existence characterized by hardship and sorrow.

As in "Student" nature in "Muzhiki" is shown to be indifferent to man and his life. While thrilling man with its beauty, it also cruelly reminds him of how wonderful life could be were it not for the devastating realities of poverty, illness, and ignorance. Nature exists and functions according to its own laws and remains unconcerned with man. Whereas Ivan in "Student" finds comfort and inspiration in a concept of

immortality which offsets his sense of despair before nature, no one among the impoverished villagers in "Muzhiki" is so fortunate. At best, nature reminds these people that there is beauty in life, however fugitive or unattainable it may seem.

On November 16, 1897, the story "V rodnom uglu" was first published in Ruskiye vedomosti. In this story Chekhov returns to a description of the steppe. Vera Ivanovna Kardina, the heroine of the tale, comes from Moscow to live permanently on her steppe estate. After a short time she becomes bored and frustrated and hastily enters into marriage with a doctor from the neighbouring iron works, in the hope that this move will give her life a definite direction.

"V rodnom uglu" begins with a description of a carriage ride over the steppe. The portrayal of the countryside in the opening paragraph is reminiscent of the nature descriptions in "Step"; there are references to the steppe's immensity, boundlessness, monotony, and to its tranquilizing effect, which makes one reluctant to think of the past. These sentiments, which are the author's, lead to a discussion of how Vera regards the steppe:

. . . и Вера тоже поддалась обаянию степи, забыла о прошлом и думала только о том, как здесь просторно, как свободно; ей, здоровой, умной, красивой, молодой -- ей было только 23 года -- не доставало до сих пор в жизни именно только этого простора и свободы.

(IX, 233)

As Vera looks at the steppe with its blossoming flowers and strange birds, and smells the fragrance emanating from the warmed earth, she feels serene.

On the day after she arrives, Vera spends a long time walking around the house, the garden, and the fields. Looking into the distance, she thinks of the new life which began with her arrival on the estate, and tries to grasp what is in store for her:

Этот простор, это красивое спокойствие  
степи говорили ей, что счастье близко и  
уже пожалуй есть; . . . (IX, 235)

While the steppe seems to assure Vera of happiness, it also frightens her by making her feel insignificant:

И в то же время нескончаемая равнина, одно-  
образная, без одной живой души, пугала ее,  
и минутами было ясно, что это спокойное  
зеленое чудовище поглотит ее жизнь, обратит  
в ничто. (IX, 235)

Vera is troubled because she cannot understand how all that she has done -- her travels, her extensive reading, her mastery of three languages -- can end in her settling down on a remote steppe farm with no real purpose in life. As the days pass, Vera becomes convinced that she will not be happy

living here, and yet she is unable to formulate any plan which will improve her situation:

Громадные пространства, длинные зимы, однообразие и скука жизни вселяют сознание беспомощности, положение кажется безнадежным, и ничего не хочется делать, -- все бесполезно. (IX, 242)

Vera's discontent and exasperation finally result in an emotional outburst directed at a maid who works in the house. Frightened and shocked at her behaviour toward the girl, Vera runs out of the house and hides in a nearby ravine. While she is there reflecting on what has just happened, dull, uninteresting Dr. Neshchapov from the iron works rides by, and Vera decides to marry him in order to begin a new life.

Later that day Vera again goes out into the fields alone. She thinks about what the future will be like, decides that she will live as other women of her circle do, accept all that has happened as her destiny, and want nothing better:

. . . . Ведь лучшей и не бывает! Прекрасная природа, грезы, музыка говорят одно, а действительная жизнь другое. Очевидно, счастье и правда существуют где-то вне жизни... Надо не жить, надо слиться в одно с этой роскошной степью, безграничной и равнодушной, как вечность, с ее цветами, курганами и далью, и тогда будет хорошо...  
(IX, 243)

Vera feels helpless and overwhelmed before the expanse, monotony, and dreariness of the land, and eventually she succumbs to the intimidation she feels before nature by marrying Neshchapov. In moving to the iron works, however, she accepts a way of life which epitomizes the dreariness that she feels in the steppe. The "quiet green monster" does, in the end, swallow up Vera's life.

Like Ragin in "Palata No. 6", Vera feels helpless and insignificant before nature. Because its vastness disorients her, she grasps at any solution that will give her life a new perspective. She feels driven to devote herself to some interest which will totally engross her and, so, give her life some sort of significance. Nature in "V rodnom uglu" is portrayed as indifferent and overwhelming. The happiness which it seems to promise Vera does not materialize. Chekhov's depiction of nature in this story echoes a remark which the author had made in a letter written to Grigorovich and dated February 5, 1888:

В 3[ападной] Европе люди погибают оттого, что жить тесно и душно, у нас же оттого, что жить просторно... Простора так много, что маленькому человечку нет сил ориентироваться... (XIV, 34)

On December 21, 1897, Russkiye vedomosti published the story entitled "Na podvode". The story recounts a day in the life of Mar'ya Vasil'yevna, a country school-teacher, who is making her usual trip to the town for her salary. On a lovely April morning, Mar'ya sets out in her cart with old Semyon driving. Spring is just beginning and the weather is very beautiful, but Mar'ya does not appear to be impressed by nature:

Зима злая, темная, длинная была еще так недавно, весна пришла вдруг, но для Марьи Васильевны, которая сидела теперь в телеге, не представляли ничего нового и интересного ни тепло, ни томные, согреты дыханием весны прозрачные леса, ни черные стаи, летавшие в поле над громадными лужами, похожими на озера, ни это небо, чудное, бездонное, куда, кажется, ушел бы с такую радостью. (IX, 244)

It is all the same to her whether it is spring or autumn or winter. She is interested only in reaching her destination as quickly as possible. Mar'ya's indifference to nature is a result of the difficult conditions of a country school-teacher's existence, which have reduced her life to a series of hardships and struggles to which beauty and happiness are alien. Mar'ya's situation is inimical to a contemplation of nature's beauty. She is constantly preoccupied with eking out a living on the meagre salary she receives, with fruitless

attempts to improve conditions at the school, with frustration at the dishonesty and ignorance of school officials, and with the general hopelessness of the situation. Mar'ya has gradually grown indifferent to beauty because it simply does not exist in her life. As she rides along she notices only the water-filled ruts in the road and the mud. There are several references in the story to the mud which makes driving difficult.

Just before Mar'ya reaches the town of Vyazov'ye, her cart must wait at a train crossing. At one of the windows of the passing train, she glimpses a woman who reminds her of her dead mother. This episode causes Mar'ya to remember her childhood in Moscow, her family and their home there. The memory fills her with joy and, for a moment, her surroundings acquire new meaning for her:

. . . и казалось ей, что и на небе, и  
всюду в окнах, и на деревьях светится  
ее счастье, ее торжество. (IX, 251)

Then her dream is abruptly dispelled by the driver's comment --"Васильевна, садись!"(IX, 252) -- and everything is as it was before.

Because Mar'ya is constantly preoccupied and burdened by an endless list of wearisome problems, she does not readily

respond to the beauty of nature. Chekhov's concentration on the detail of the muddy road serves to reveal something about Mar'ya's frame of mind. Although she is a teacher, Mar'ya's duties seem to have little relation to those of an educator. In fact, she has no time for idealistic thoughts of bringing enlightenment to the people, for her chief concern is one of survival. Her trip to town is made for the practical purpose of collecting her salary. For this reason she notices only the muddy road which, because of its poor condition, might present an obstacle. The radiance of a spring-morning has no place in her life; indeed, it would seem strange if this harried woman did notice the natural beauty around her. As in "Muzhiki" nature represents the beauty which Mar'ya glimpses only infrequently because the conditions of her life have made her generally oblivious to its existence.

In December, 1899, the first story to be completed during Chekhov's Yalta period was published in Russkaya mysl' and entitled "Dama s sobachkoy". The story tells of how Dmitry Gurov, a married man and the father of two, meets and has a love affair with a young woman named Anna Sergeyevna, who is married to an official whom she considers a flunkey. Gurov and Anna meet in Yalta and, at the end of summer, they part and return home. Gurov later realizes that, for the first time in his life, he is profoundly, if hopelessly, in love.

The couple begin to meet again and the story ends with the suggestion that the most difficult and most complicated part of their relationship is yet to come.

The setting in which the liaison begins is a romantic one. Chekhov describes the sea which is lilac in colour and which has a golden band of moonlight shining on it. One night Gurov and Anna sit in silence, looking down at the sea which is mysterious and beautiful. As they listen, the sea seems to speak of the peace, the eternal sleep which awaits everyone, and it leaves an impression of indifference to man:

. . . теперь шумит и будет шуметь так  
же равнодушно и глухо, когда нас не  
будет. (IX, 363)

But Chekhov suggests that in nature's constancy and complete indifference to man's life there lies

. . . залог нашего вечного спасения,  
непрерывного движения жизни на земле,  
непрерывного совершенства. (IX, 363)

While the natural cycle remains unconcerned with man, life on earth ceaselessly progresses toward perfection. This hopeful view is similar to the one expressed in "Student".

Enchanted by nature, Gurov reflects that everything

in the world is beautiful except what man thinks or does when he allows himself to forget the higher aims of life and his own human dignity. In the midst of these surroundings, which inspire both fear and hope, and which reveal to him something about life, Gurov develops a deep love for Anna.

At the story's beginning Gurov views himself as an experienced man who lives the same way everyone else in his circle lives. Unhappy with his wife and bored and uncomfortable in the company of other men, Gurov seeks diversion in casual affairs with any woman who interests him. This affair with Anna at Yalta begins like any other affair, but in the presence of enchanting, beautiful nature, something changes. Nature teaches Gurov something and, so, profoundly affects the course of his life.

After his trip to Yalta, Gurov senses more and more acutely the discrepancy between what he has learned and the kind of life he and his acquaintances lead in Moscow. Whereas nature in "Posteluy" destroys something in Ryabovich by divesting him of his illusions, it has the opposite effect upon Gurov. When nature teaches Gurov that he must neither forget man's higher aims nor sully human dignity, it gives him a new perspective on his life and a new understanding of how he must live in the future. Although the new life envisioned by Gurov will be difficult to attain, he will be sustained by the lesson which he has learned from nature.

The optimistic view of man's life in relation to nature is reiterated in the story entitled "V ovrag". This tale first appeared in a new magazine called Zhizn' in January, 1900, and centres on the activities of a provincial merchant family named Tsybukin.

The natural setting for the village in which the events of the story occur emphasizes the evil character of the family. Ukleyevo is situated in a ravine where the atmosphere is unhealthy because of frequent fogs and the mud is thick even during the summer. The river is rank and the meadows are contaminated by refuse from the cotton plants located nearby. The village is never free from fever.

Ukleyevo has only two decent brick houses; the Tsybukin family occupies one of them. The head of the family, Grigory, owns a grocery store, but this is only for appearances' sake. He actually deals in anything that comes to hand, in anything that will make money, honestly or dishonestly. His elder son Anisim works away from home, while the younger Stepan has little to do with the family business because he is unwell. Stepan's wife Aksin'ya, a shrewd, dishonest woman, bustles about the shop from early in the morning until late at night. Grigory's second wife, Varvara, tends the house and takes great joy in performing acts of charity among the same peasants whom her husband is cheating.

Into this ugly environment comes Lipa, an attractive

peasant girl who is chosen to become Anisim's wife. If the Tsybukins represent the evil elements of their society, then Lipa symbolizes all that is pure and good. After she has lived with the Tsybukins for a while, Lipa asks her mother, Praskov'ya, why she married her into this family. Both mother and daughter are aware of the evil in the Tsybukin household, yet something consoles them:

Но, казалось им, кто-то смотрит с высоты  
неба, из синевы, оттуда, где звезды,  
видит все, что происходит в Уклееве,  
сторожит. И как ни велико зло, все же  
ночь тиха и прекрасна, и все же в божьем  
мире правда есть и будет, такая же тихая  
и прекрасная, и все на земле только ждет,  
чтобы слиться с правдой, как лунный свет  
сливается с ночью. (IX, 400)

Chekhov here uses a nature description to convey the idea that good will triumph in the end. He suggests that in time good will become one with everything on the earth just as naturally as moonlight blends with the night. Lipa and Praskov'ya sense this as they observe nature, which is calm and beautiful, and their thoughts comfort them. As in "Student" and "Dama s sobachkoy", Chekhov suggests that life on earth is continually evolving toward perfection.

Lipa is never comfortable living among the Tsybukins, and the family member whom she fears the most is Aksin'ya.

She refers to the strange, greenish gleam in her eyes, which remind her of the eyes of a sheep. Chekhov uses animal imagery in his portrayal of Aksin'ya several times in the story. She is twice compared to a snake, and the dress which she wears on Lipa's wedding day is green and yellow. Chekhov combines these two details in a striking image that emphasizes the sinister element which dominates Aksin'ya's character:

И в этих немигающих глазах, и в маленькой голове на длинной шее, и в ее стройности было что-то змеиное; зеленая, с желтой грудью, с улыбкой, она глядела, как весной из молодой ржи глядит на прохожего гадюка, вытянувшись и подняв голову. (IX, 390)

When Lipa has a son, Grigory decides to will Butyokino, the place where Aksin'ya has set up a brickyard, to the child. In a fit of anger and jealousy, Aksin'ya scalds the child with boiling water. Lipa takes her son to the district hospital, where he dies. Before returning to Ukleyevo that night, Lipa sits down by a pond, cradling her dead baby in her arms. All around her the night is vibrant with sound; all of nature seems to be rejoicing:

Какой был шум! Казалось, что все эти твари кричали и пели нарочно, чтобы никто не спал в этот весенний вечер, чтобы все, даже сердитые лягушки, дорожили и наслаждались каждой минутой: ведь жизнь дается только один раз!  
(IX, 407)

In the midst of all this joy, of this assertion of the life force, which is completely indifferent to her sorrow, Lipa feels a desolate loneliness. Nature offers Lipa no consolation. In her grief she yearns for human companionship and is comforted only when she meets some travellers on the road.

At the end of the tale, Aksin'ya is in complete charge of her father-in-law's business, and it is rumoured in the village that Grigory has been turned out of his own house. In a poignant scene which concludes the story, Lipa and her mother, with whom she is now living, meet Grigory on the street and, realizing that he is hungry, give the old man some of their own food to eat. This scene reinforces the point made by the author in his earlier nature passage. The final paragraph of the story depicts a peaceful day's end and Lipa and Praskov'ya walking home together, crossing themselves. In these two women, and especially in Lipa, the force of good is dominant and triumphant. It is through such people, Chekhov says, that good will merge with everything on the earth, ". . . как лунный свет сливается с ночью." (IX, 400)

Again Chekhov portrays nature as self-sufficient and unconcerned with human life. At a time of great sorrow, nature emphasizes to Lipa all that she has lost. And yet Lipa finds the strength to bear her torment because she senses in the natural world around her the promise of a better future.

The final story to be examined in the present chapter is entitled "Arkhiyerey". This tale was first published in April, 1902, in Zhurnal dlya vsekh. The story recounts the last few days in the life of a bishop who dies during the joyous Easter season. The narrative is interspersed with brief nature descriptions which are important to thematic development.

At the beginning of the story Bishop Pyotr, although unwell, is officiating at an evening church service. After the service, during the drive back to the monastery where he lives, the bishop looks at and thinks about his natural surroundings:

Белые стены, белые кресты на могилах,  
белые березы и черные тени, и далекая  
луна на небе, стоявшая как раз над  
монастырем, казалось теперь, жили своей  
особой жизнью, непонятной, но близкой  
человеку.

. . . . .  
. . . все было кругом приветливо,  
молодо, так близко, все -- и деревья, и  
небо, и даже луна, и хотелось думать,  
что так будет всегда. (IX, 417)

The Bishop feels that although nature lives its own inscrutable life, there is a closeness between it and man. But later, as his condition worsens, the Bishop is disturbed by the moonlight, perhaps because he is becoming more conscious

of its immortality and, at the same time, more aware of his own mortality. As his illness develops, the Bishop reminisces about his life and feels troubled:

. . . но все же не все было ясно, чего-то еще недоставало, не хотелось умирать; и все еще казалось, что нет у него чего-то самого важного, . . . (IX, 425)

His anguish is similar to that suffered by the Professor in "Skuchnaya istoriya" who, when he learns that his life is nearly over, has similar thoughts:

И сколько бы я ни думал и куда бы ни разбрасывались мои мысли, для меня ясно, что в моих желаниях нет чего-то главного, чего-то очень важного. (VII, 279)

But, unlike the Professor, the Bishop, when he is near death, feels comforted by the fact that he will now be free from the responsibilities which had always burdened him.

In the remaining few paragraphs of the story, Chekhov describes how life continues after the Bishop's death and how the Bishop is eventually forgotten. The implication in the last scenes is that, although the individual man is mortal, human life continually reiterates itself, thus assuring man of a kind of immortality. For this reason man should not

feel intimidated before the immortality of nature.

The conclusion drawn at the end of the previous chapter was obviously valid; nature does remain an important element in the works of Chekhov's maturity. There are no startling changes in the author's methods of presenting nature, although the later stories do show a more discriminating use of the technique of animation. His use of animal imagery as an element of characterization is not a new development, for other examples may be found in earlier stories such as "Tina" and "Step'". As in earlier stories Chekhov concentrates on a few details to create a mood. In "Chornyy monakh", for example, the moonlit nocturnal scenes establish the perfect backdrop for the story's supernatural theme. In "Dama s sobachkoy" Chekhov concentrates on details of the sea and the sky to create an atmosphere of enchantment in which Gurov experiences a revelation which will deeply affect his life.

The nature passages in the stories discussed in the present chapter provide settings in which the plots unfold, but they also continue to underscore theme, to contribute to characterization, and to be involved in the author's philosophical commentary. In none of the stories which I have examined in the present chapter does nature description appear

only as an artist's impression of the world around him.

The concept of nature in this group of stories undergoes further evolution. In these works Chekhov's characters grapple with the problems which arise when man is confronted by immortal nature. While nature continues to puzzle, awe, and even frighten man, a new dimension of man's attitude to nature is revealed. In stories such as "Student", "Dama s sobachkoy", and "Arkhiyerey", man finds a way of coping with nature when he views himself as a part of the advancement toward perfection of life on earth. This is not a religious concept of immortality; rather it is a concept which centres on man, his endeavours, and his progress.

Having completed a detailed analysis of nature in a selection of Chekhov's short stories, I should now like to summarize the conclusions which I have drawn as a result of my study.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In my examination of a selection of Chekhov's short stories, I have made many specific observations on the element of nature, and on how the author dealt with this aspect of his art in each of these stories. I have used quotations to illustrate the form in which nature appears, and what its relationship is to the work as a whole. The three previous chapters contain much detailed information, all of which was chosen in order to provide as varied an analysis as possible. At this point I should like to synthesize this mass of specific information, and to offer a more general statement regarding the principles of literary composition to which Chekhov adhered in his treatment of nature, and the philosophy of nature as it is revealed in the stories.

Chekhov had at his disposal the usual literary devices used to create vivid sketches of nature. His frequent use of animation in earlier works was, as Nilsson points out,<sup>10</sup> in keeping with the style of landscape painting favoured at the time. The evocative use of sounds and smells, the suggestive use of colour words, and the partial comparison of different things through imagery were techniques which had all been used by fiction writers to describe nature before

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<sup>10</sup>Nilsson, pp. 46-47.

Chekhov used them. But the usual devices, coupled with Chekhov's own guiding principles of literary composition, produced unusual nature passages which enhanced the expression of the author's view of reality.

Chekhov has been spoken of as a revolutionary in prose. During Chekhov's lifetime Gor'ky, after reading "Dama s sobachkoy", commented:

Дальше Вас -- никто не может идти по сей стезе, никто не может писать так просто о таких простых вещах, как Вы это умеете. После самого незначительного Вашего рассказа -- все кажется грубым, написанным не пером, а точно поленом. <sup>11</sup>

Chekhov himself was aware early in his career that he was creating new paths in Russian literature. In a letter to Lazarev-Gruzinsky dated October 20, 1888, Chekhov wrote:

Все мною написанное забудется через 5--10 лет; но пути, мною проложенные, будут целы и невредимы -- в этом моя единственная заслуга. (XIV, 201)

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<sup>11</sup>M. Gor'ky, *Sobraniye sochineniy*, Moskva: Gosudarstvennoye izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoy literatury, 1949-1956, XXVIII, 113.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the author's principles of nature description is his emphasis on simplicity. Chekhov's art is one of understatement. How much more pathos his restraint in nature portrayal injects into the situation described in "Yeger'", than is the case in Turgenev's "Svidaniye". Chekhov's economy of language and his impatience with the prevailing style of scenic description resulted in stories of taut construction. There is no excessive piling up of details which the reader must trouble to assimilate. Bates, when making an observation regarding Chekhov's treatment of nature, says that there is

. . . no fuss, no grandiose staying of the scene, no elaborate signalling that the reader is about to be the victim of a description of nature.<sup>12</sup>

In a letter to Leont'yev-Shcheglov dated January 22, 1888, Chekhov warned the writer about including too much detail:

У больших, толстых произведений свои цели,  
требующие исполнения самого тщательного,

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<sup>12</sup>H. E. Bates, The Modern Short Story. A Critical Survey, London and New York: T. Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1942, p. 81.

независимо от общего впечатления. В  
маленьких же рассказах лучше не до-  
сказать, чем пересказать, . . . (XIV, 22)

Although Chekhov's nature descriptions are characterized by simplicity, they are never superficial.<sup>13</sup> This is the point which often evaded the author's critics and contemporaries, who mistook Chekhov's literary compactness for oversimplification and superficiality. Details which they insisted were trivial and irrelevant had been chosen by Chekhov to express, as briefly and concisely as possible, the essence of a scene. In nature description, Chekhov preferred to evoke a vivid picture of a landscape through his choice of a few details rather than by minutely describing everything in that landscape. This brings to mind Grigorovich's remark regarding nature description in "Agaf'ya". Grigorovich's comment is similar to some advice on nature description which Chekhov gave his brother Aleksandr in 1886:

В описаниях природы надо хвататься за  
мелкие частности, группируя их таким  
образом, чтобы по прочтении, когда  
закроешь глаза, давалась картина. (XIII, 215)

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

There is no elaborate description in Chekhov's short stories, no purple passages. Splendid natural phenomena are often depicted through homely images: in "Agaf'ya", ashes on embers suggest clouds covering a sunset; the striking of a match evokes lightning in "Step'"; also in "Step'" the hollow sound of thunder is compared to someone walking barefoot on an iron roof.

Judging from the stories which I examined in Chapter II and the advice and comments offered by Chekhov during the mid and late 1880's, the author's principles of nature description which would guide him throughout his career were already established. In regard to specific descriptive techniques such as impressionism, imagery, use of sound, etc., the only technique which the author eventually grew to avoid was animation. When advising his brother Aleksandr on the subject of describing nature, Chekhov, in a letter written in 1886, recommended the comparison of nature with human actions:

Природа является одушевленной, если ты  
не брезгуешь употреблять сравнения  
явлений ее с человек [ескими] действиями  
и т. д. (XIII, 215)

This technique of animating nature was used frequently by

Chekhov during the earlier part of his literary activity. However, years later, in 1899, he chided Gorky for using this method to excess:

. . . Вы настоящий пейзажист. Только частое уподобление человеку (антропоморфизм), когда море дышит, небо глядит, степь нежится, природа шепчет, говорит, грустит и т. п. -- такие уподобления делают описания несколько однотонными, иногда слащавыми, иногда неясными; красочность и выразительность в описаниях природы достигаются только простотой, такими простыми фразами, как «зашло солнце», «стало темно», «пошел дождь» и т. д. (XVIII, 11-12)

While Chekhov never completely stopped using animation, there is, in the stories of the mature period, a more discriminating use of this technique. In "Strakh", for example, the animation used in the description of the fog is suited to a discussion in the story of the supernatural and the incomprehensibility of life. In "Gusev", "V rodnom uglu" and "V ovrage", Chekhov uses animation in portraying nature as a great, living organism. The author's eventual disapproval of the excessive use of animation is perhaps the most distinct change in descriptive technique. The emphasis on simplicity and veracity in description never diminished.

The extent to which nature is present varies according to the requirements of each story. Because the theme of "Nalim" is a light, humorous one, nature content is reduced to a minimum. In stories which deal with more serious subjects, there is more nature content. "Step'" is, of course, in a category of its own; nature is the central feature around which the plot, characters and ideological commentary are arranged.

In discussing Chekhov's natural imagery, Chukovsky emphasizes that the strength of a great writer does not lie in any separate images, no matter how good they are, but rather in their interaction, in their internal link with the theme of the work in which these images are found. This statement is equally valid when applied to Chekhov's nature description in general. While Chekhov's nature passages are an artistic expression of the author's perception of nature, they also have a thematic role. This is true not only of extended nature descriptions, but also of single natural details, such as the smell of jasmine in "Tina", which are repeated several times in the work. The nature passages which I have examined, with the exception of those in "Palata No. 6", provide a background, a physical setting, an accompaniment to the action, although nature is not always present to the

same degree. In each of these tales there is a link between the story's theme and the nature element. For example, many of Chekhov's characters regard nature as something mysterious and unfathomable. Therefore this quality of mystery is stressed in the author's landscapes, in stories such as "Verochka", "Strakh", and "Dama s sobachkoy". Sound is sometimes used to imbue a scene with an uncanny, strange atmosphere. In "Schast'ye", for example, a strange sound echoes over the quiet steppe:

В тихом воздухе, рассыпаясь по степи,  
пронесся звук. Что-то вдали грозно  
ахнуло, ударилось о камень и побежало  
по степи, издавая: <тах! тах! тах! тах! >>  
(VI, 166)

Reference to bird sound<sup>14</sup> achieves the same effect in "Vovrage", in the scene near the story's conclusion, in which Lipa is cradling her dead baby while nature, oblivious to her sorrow, rejoices.

Chekhov's landscapes, in contrast to most of his characters, are sketched in vibrant, often brilliant colours. This again conveys nature's strangeness and the difference between himself and nature which man senses. Chekhov boldly

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<sup>14</sup> Chekhov must have been fascinated by this elusive bird, for he refers to it in letters written in May, 1888, at Sumy to Leont'yev-Shcheglov (XIV, 103-104) and to Suvorin (XIV, 115-120).

paints nature in a full range of colours which, as he remarks in the concluding sentence of "Gusev", " . . . на человеческом языке и назвать трудно." (VII, 312) In keeping with Chekhov's concept of artistic economy, the element of nature as it appears in the stories has a greater function than that of only providing a suitable physical setting. While nature does serve as a physical reality, it does not do so exclusively; nature plays a many-faceted role in the construction of the stories.

Nature in Chekhov's stories can create and sustain a mood and, in so doing, it emphasizes a certain theme. Even in as early a story as "Osen'yu", published in 1883, the natural background is evocative of atmosphere, in this case an atmosphere of pathos. Admittedly, the use of autumnal setting and the reference to spring do tend toward sentimentality, for such parallels are commonplace. However, the point I want to stress is that, as far back as 1883, Chekhov recognized the value of using a description of nature for the creation of atmosphere and as a psychological image. And he continued to use nature for these purposes throughout his career, as I have indicated within the context of each story discussed in previous chapters.

Because nature in Chekhov's works is closely linked to theme, it can contribute to the development of a story

almost as if it were another human character taking part. It sometimes elicits from a character philosophical comments about the human situation and man's relationship to nature. As early as 1887 Chekhov, in "Verochka", has one of his characters, Ognev, explain how nature makes him feel that his life suffers from some insufficiency. In "Potseluy", also published in 1887, Ryabovich contemplates nature and finds it and life incomprehensible. In later stories such as "Step'", "Gusev", "Strakh", and "V ovrage", nature continues to play this role of catalyst or teacher, revealing to man basic truths about his existence in relation to nature.

In Chapter III of the present work I touched on the problem of narration in "Step'", and I pointed out that occasionally Yegorushka's view of nature and Chekhov's comments regarding nature merged almost imperceptibly. The use of this narrative technique is not limited only to "Step'". In the scene in "Muzhiki" which finds Ol'ga by the river with her sister-in-law Mar'ya, the author remarks that life would be glorious were it not for poverty. Chekhov begins the paragraph with a reference to the scene by the river being enjoyed by the two women. Then he interjects his own remark, after which he ends the paragraph with a reminder that the scene is being viewed by Ol'ga and Mar'ya. In "Dama s sobachkoy" Chekhov employs the technique again in much the

same way in the scene at Oreanda. The author first establishes that Gurov is viewing the sea with Anna. Then Chekhov inserts a comment regarding the constancy and indifference of nature and the ceaseless progress of human life toward perfection. Chekhov uses this method of narration so skilfully and unobtrusively that the reader must take care to distinguish what is expressed directly by the author from what he expresses through his characters.

In an article discussing the relationship between nature and Chekhov's characters, and the Chekhovian character's concept of nature, Rossbacher concludes:

The Chekhovian character is thirsting for full life against the background of his inability to attain it. Nature's fullness symbolizes to him his own incompleteness and makes him once more aware of the hopelessness of a reality which he is free to reject, but cannot overcome. <sup>15</sup>

Rossbacher paints a pessimistic picture of how Chekhov's characters apprehend the reality of nature. While his conclusion is valid for some of the stories, my own observations indicate that it is an over-generalization. Some of Chekhov's

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<sup>15</sup>P. Rossbacher, "Nature and the Quest for Meaning in Chekhov's Stories", The Russian Review, XXIV (October, 1965), 392.

stories do portray nature as aloof, indifferent and incomprehensible. In "Potseluy" Ryabovich returns to a scene of former bliss to realize that his happiness was only a dream, an illusion. As he gazes at nature, he sees no sense in it or life. Kovrin in "Chornyy monakh" undergoes a similar experience. In the case of Kovrin, Ryabovich and Vera (in "V rodnom uglu"), nature at first seems to promise a happy future which does not come about. When Chekhov's characters finally distinguish reality from illusion, they also see nature in a different light; it then seems aloof and senseless. This philosophy is expressed in "Step'" as well, when the author speaks of how man's life seems insignificant in the context of eternal nature, and of how, when he tries to understand nature, its silence, constancy and indifference frustrate his attempt. The story "Gusev" points out the absurdity of man's life and nature's indifference. The title of a story published in 1892, "Strakh", represents man's fear of the incomprehensibility of life. The narrator of this story begins to experience this fear when he sees rooks flying in the sky and finds that he cannot understand why they are flying. As the incomprehensibility of nature overwhelms him, life seems frightening and unintelligible. In "Palata No. 6" Dr. Ragin struggles with the problem of man's

relationship to nature and arrives at a pessimistic philosophy of life.

It would be inaccurate, however, to conclude that the concept of nature as revealed by such stories is the definitive concept. In several stories published during the 1890's, other more heartening aspects of nature are revealed. In "Student" Ivan at first does not see any meaning in life, as he thinks about the indifference of nature and the unchanging conditions of man's life. At the end of the story, however, he recognizes that everything is part of an uninterrupted chain which never ends and which thus gives significance to life. In "Muzhiki", published in 1897, Ol'ga and Mar'ya, for a brief but joyful moment, sense in the happiness ~~of the natural world around them the idea that man's life,~~ too, could be glorious, if it were not for want. In "Dama s sobachkoy" Chekhov clearly states that nature's indifference and constancy need not be feared by man. In the story entitled "V ovrage", nature reveals, as it did to Gurov, an ideal, for Lipa and Praskov'ya sense, when looking at the sky one night after a discussion about the evil Tsybukins, that one day goodness will triumph on the earth. Finally, in "Arkhiyerey", human life is shown to be immortal just as nature is immortal. In these stories there is a decidedly optimistic view of nature.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the relationship of nature to the other elements of Chekhov's short story is to compare the story to a piece of polyphonic music. Just as each melody or voice in the piece of polyphonic music is individual and yet in harmony with all the other melodies or voices, so it is with the element of nature in Chekhov's stories. Nature plays an individual role, in the sense that passages devoted to describing it represent artistic impressions of Chekhov's perception of nature and can be appreciated as such, irrespective of whatever else they contribute to the work. However, at the same time, nature harmonizes with and contributes to the expression of other elements in the story such as theme, mood and character.

~~It is obviously with good reason that Chekhov expressed disappointment that only Grigorovich noticed his description of the first snow in "Pripadok".~~ Besides failing to comprehend the thematic significance of his nature imagery, his readers were passing unimpressed over the descriptive passages which, by their beauty alone, should have elicited an appreciative response. How much more rewarding their reading of the story would have been had they responded to the beauty of the natural details and realized that the nature content contributed significantly to the story's theme. For it will be plain from the present study

that Chekhov's short stories cannot be adequately understood or appreciated without an understanding of the role played in them by the element of nature.

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### Chronological Table of Works Discussed

- 1883: Osen'yu
- 1885: Nalim  
Yeger'  
Gore
- 1886: Toska  
Panikhida  
Agaf'ya  
Tina
- 1887: Verochka  
Schast'ye  
Potseluy
- 1888: Step'  
Pripadok
- 1890: Gusev
- 1892: Palata No. 6  
Strakh

1894: Chornyy monakh  
Student  
Uchitel' slovesnosti

1896: Dom s mezoninom

1897: Muzhiki  
V rodnom uglu  
Na podvode

1899: Dama s sobachkoy

1900: V ovrage

1902: Arkhiyerey

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