Chekhov's Humorous Names

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The funny names, the droll expressions, the comic phrases he invented have passed into Russian speech...

Chekhov regarded most of his melancholy plays as "comedies," including his masterpiece, The Cherry Orchard (1904). Yet American critics have written that Uncle Vanya (recently performed in New York) is "totally tragic." We can find some plausible explanation for this in Slonim's statement:

And while the young humorist yielded to his gaiety, the mature writer evinced a melancholy tolerance of human frailties.

As in real life, so in Chekhov's plays, the comic goes hand-in-hand with the tragic, so well manifested earlier in Gogol's works. Generally speaking, Chekhov's characters, though often pathetic, lack the dignity and stature of traditional tragic characters. They are frequently a mixture of pity and sympathetic ridicule, and can hardly qualify as being truly tragic. The basic theme of Chekhov's subtle dramas is that the life of the provincial neurotic intelligentsia is dull, boring, and frustrating, especially in view of the fact that the characters lack the inner resources to escape the trifles of life, and to make their existence more rewarding. There is little excitement in routine work, in playing cards out of boredom, in bickering with the family, or in drinking vodka out of frustration.

Long before Sherwood Anderson or Sinclair Lewis, Chekhov probed the dullness of middle-class life and described boredom as the most prevalent disease of modern times. He felt acutely the despair of
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spiritless work, and stereotyped diversion, and he showed how the weight of habit transforms life into a series of conditioned reflexes, whether in love-making or in drinking or in conversation. Critics often blame the hopeless time, the uninspiring environment, in which Chekhov's "moody men" are acting. But already long before Chekhov, Russian writers excelled in creating a whole variety of sensitive but weak, helpless characters of noble extraction, known as "superfluous men" (in Russian, лишний человек), such as Pushkin's Onegin, Lermontov's Pechorin, Turgenev's Ráđin, Goncharov's Oblomóv, and Tolstoy's Count Vronsky, to mention just the best known of them. And Slonim rushes here to add: "Still, none of them was as melancholy and dejected as were Chekhov's heroes." This passivity of his characters did not disturb the author, and, according to Slonim, Chekhov doubted "if the matter of failure or success was of any actual importance," as one can see from his letter to Suvorin:

One must be God to be able to tell successes from failures... To divide men into the successful and the unsuccessful is to look at human nature from a narrow, preconceived point of view. Are you a success? Am I? Is Napoleon? Is your servant Vassily? What is the criterion?

Some of Chekhov's characters achieve an enviable social position, acquire a small circle of friends, find normal family life (thus, are not failures by the common yardstick), and yet, afterward, often "suffer from neurasthenia and deficiency of will power," or feel "lonely" and see around them nothing but base hypocrisy and emptiness. Do they lack the art of living, life's dogma, or is this the fault of their temperaments or environments? we leave this an
open question. It seems, however, that this is mainly the malady of Chekhov's contemporary intellectuals, as indicated by the selfish writer, Trigorin, in The Sea Gull, or by "the eternal student" Trofimov in The Cherry Orchard, or, as Chekhov himself wrote in later years in his letters:

I have no faith in our intelligentsia—it is hypocritical, false, hysterical, half-educated, lazy...

But young Chekhov just laughed at the fools, at the triviality of life, at the pettiness of insignificant officials, vindictive teachers, greedy merchants, cruel guardians of "law and order"—policemen, dishonest lawyers, judges indifferent to justice, or simply vegetating grotesque caricatures—the enemies of mankind. Pedants in their pettiness lose their human dignity, as, for instance, Belikov (Mr. White, or perhaps Mr. Chrysanthemum from colloq. belík 'Chrysanthemum Leucanthemum'), the hero of "The Man in a Case," a delightful story about a Greek teacher, who hides himself from life in an overcoat and is just an automaton of Greek quotations. Chekhov's masterful stories are brimful of such characters from all walks of life. The author's effort to achieve a clear, terse style, as he said, "with a few words to tell much," led him to a truly laconic formula of expressions; as he said, "to write briefly is to write ably" (kratko, to yést' talantlivo). What, in effect, could be more stylistically terse and expressive than Chekhov's descriptive names for his wretched characters? Thus Mr. Worm (Cherynyakóv), for a meek and submissive official; Mr. Crawler (Polzúkhin), for an obsequious yet very persistent job seeker; retired Sarge Neck-Breaker (Unter Prishi...
beyev), for a self-appointed village "law-and-order" guardian; Mr. Tippler (Zapykin), a tipsy village secretary; Mr. Swindler (Moshen-nikov), for a dishonest lawyer; Mr. Bribes (Mzda), for an eager inspector. Chekhov's unique humor is early revealed in his own sarcastically ridiculous pseudonyms from student days, such as "Antosha Chekhonte," "My Brother's Brother," "Man without a spleen," "spit-fire" (Vspyl'chivyichelovék), "Nettle" (Krapiva), "A mopish fellow" (Kislyayev), "Doctor without patients"—to mention just a few.\(^{11}\)

To be accurate, however, we note that when Chekhov received his M.D. degree (1884), he did have some patients, though mostly needy cases for which he got no payment. When he later moved to the summer resort at Babkino (near Istra) and became a country doctor there, Chekhov wrote: "During the whole summer, I was visited by hundreds of patients, but I earned only one ruble."\(^{12}\)

One might be tempted to risk a generalization here and contend that it was the Chekhovian stylistic endeavor, striving hard for economy of expression, that led him to use such picturesque names as Mr. Worm, Mr. Crawler, Mr. Neck-Breaker, Mr. Swindler, which became household words in Russia. Yet, in all honesty, there are more humorous and strange characters in his stories and plays with usual names, often just the first name and patronymic, such as the helpless administrator Fyodor Petrovich (in "Ladies"), the busybody and manuscript Olga Ivanovna (in "Grasshopper"), Dmitry Yonych Startsev, a sensible and sympathetic provincial doctor who later turns into a dry egotist, "a cash-register", afraid to talk to people, so as not to lose one minute of precious time (in "Yonych").
Moreover, popular прозвишча 'nicknames' are to found in Russian everywhere, in old саги—быкины, Добрýnya (goodness), in pre-Christian first names, Mстислаў (famed for revenge), Вячеслаў (more glory), Яропóлк (young warrior), in The Igor Tale, 1187, Prince Всёволод—Бу́й-Ту́р (the fierce aurochs), and on the Russian streets, Касьян—Блохá (flea).13 Furthermore Russian writers before Chekhov also used humorous and descriptive names, including the Empress Catherine II (1762-1796), a German princess by birth (Sophia Augusta of Anhalt-Zerbst), who enriched the Russian language by introducing in her comedies such amusing names as Mrs. Talebearer (Вéстникова) Mrs. Grumbler (Ворчáл-кина), Mr. Spendthrift (Расточитель'), etc. In the first truly Russian comedy, The Мínор, 1782, by Fonvisin, we find descriptive names, such as Mrs. Uncouth (Простакова), Mr. Oldthinker (Староум), Mr. Beastly (Скотин), Mr. Truthful (Пра́вдин), Mr. Fibber (Врлáман), etc.

The greatest Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin, seldom used grotesque names. But in his masterpiece novel in verse, Eugene Onegin, in order to paint a more expressive picture of the provincial nobility, Pushkin also applied humorous names, such as Mr. Trifle (Пустякóв), Mr. Nail (Гво́здин), Mr. Little Rooster (Петушкóв), Mr. Ruffian (Бу́янов). When we understand these names, how much more meaningful is Pushkin's text!—e.g., Mr. Nail (Гво́здин), a poor farmer, skinny as a nail, made his serfs beggars as well:

Beside his wife, that chubby charmer,
Plump Пустяков strides heavily;
Here comes Гво́здин, a first-rate farmer
Whose peasants live in beggary;
The two Скотинins, grey as sages,
Line up with children of all ages:
From two to thirty, in a row;
Here's Petushkov, a rural beau;
My cousin, sleepy-eyed Buianov,
Fluff in his hair, with visored cap
(I'm certain that you know the chap);
The old fat counsellor, Flyanov,
A gossip, glutton, clown and cheat,
Who likes a bribe as much as meat.  *(Onegin, V, 26)*

Among other writers, N. V. Gogol (1809-1852), the greatest Russian humorist, of Ukrainian descent, made wide use of humorous names, especially in his Ukrainian stories with grotesque characters, such as Mr. Naked-navel *(Holopúpenko)*, Mr. Itching-buttocks *(Sverbyhúz)*, Mr. Set-water-afire *(Palívoda)*, etc. But it is his Khlestakóv (Blusterer), his Chíchikov (Chirping Con Man, from Ukr, chíchikaty 'to chirp'), his Plyúshkin (Ugly Miser), and his totalitarian policeman, Derzhimórdá (Trap-holder), who live on today in Russia, as common swear-words. Soon they were joined by Goncharov's Oblómov (1859), 'One who has lost his ground', a dejected "superfluous man", a name which became a popular term for Russian laziness, inactivity, or unruffled peace, so much so that now "Oblómov" and "oblimovism" have become common household words throughout Russia, just as is Tartuffe in France, Pecksniff in England, and Babbitt in America. In a somewhat different meaning, Dostoyevsky's Raskólnikov (Dissenter), has become a universal word, implying any rebel, or one with a split personality. Dostoyevsky was not a humorist, but he also created a few humorous names, in the spirit of Gogol, such as Devushkin (Girl-boy), Prokhárchin (Food waster), Polzúmkov (Crawler), and even Opískin (Mr. Spelling Error), Knyagín'ya Bezzemél'naya (Princess Landless), etc. A leading Russian playwright,
A. N. Ostrovsky (1823-1886), though not frequently, also used such names, as, for a cruel policeman, Тигрий Львович Лютов (Mr. Tiger, Son of Lion, the Fierce), a mediocre teacher Корпелов (Mr. Sweat-brow), Устрашимов (Mr. Frightened), or the famous Russian satirist, М. Я. Салтыков-Щедрин, with names such as Лихобедев (Mr. Evil-doer), Прокодимтсев (Mr. Drifter).

After this short survey of meaningful names which could have been used as patterns, we return once more to Chekhov himself. From the above-mentioned descriptive names, perhaps his Inter Пршибейев, along with Гоголь's Держиморда, had the greatest popularity among the revolutionaries, as a sad reminder of the so-called "police brutality" in the czarist days. Here could be mentioned more meaningful names from Chekhov's stories, such as Дымов (Mr. Smoke), Кратеров (Mr. Crater), Лаптев (Mr. Bark-Shoes), Пochatkов (Mr. Beginning), Разсудин (Mr. Arbiter), Смычков (Mr. Fiddlestick), Тыбукин (Mr. Pipestem), Жуков (Mr. Black-Beetle), etc., but the described qualities of the respective characters have hardly any symbolic meaning in his stories.

In Chekhov's plays, there are also meaningful surnames; it seems to us, however, only a few of them were used intentionally to help us better understand the themes of his work. In The Sea Gull (1896), the young playwright, Треплев (Mr. Prattler), is engaged predominantly in useless rhetoric (as are many of Chekhov's characters), while his sweetheart, Нина Зареchnaya (Miss Beyond-the-River),
who lives a carefree life beside a lake, like a happy and free sea
gull, is seduced by his mother’s casual lover, a writer, Trigórin
(Mr. Three-Mountains). Afterward, this girl of his dreams, abandoned
by the old spider, returns to Tréplev, "but not as the same fresh,
free and happy creature—the sea gull,"¹⁶ that she used to be. Defeated
in love, in creative work and in life itself, Tréplev commits suicide.
There appears also a schoolmaster, Medvédenko (Mr. Little Bear), "not
too clever, but a kind and poor soul," who marries the not-too-devoted
Masha Shamróyeva (Miss Noisemaker), "who doesn’t know where she comes
from or why she is living in this world."¹⁷

In Uncle Ványa (1897), Mr. Voynótsky (from place Voynótsk/Voñík,
derived from vojn ‘warrior’), or Uncle Vanya, sacrifices his whole life
for the alleged "genius" of Professor Serebrýakov (Mr. Silver-Coin or
perhaps better—Mr. Cash-Register), who, after closer acquaintance,
proves to be nothing more than a low parasite and shallow egotist, or
just Mr. Cash-Register, as his name signifies. Uncle Ványa, completely
disillusioned, continues his fruitless toil, with the faint hope of
reward in heaven. Dr. Astrov (from astra ‘aster, star’), like
Dr. Startsey (from starets ‘old man’), could be easily understood
as one, who, in his youth, tried to reach the stars, but in his
old age has come to the sad conclusion that "life in itself is boring,
foolish, dirty...Around you are cranks, only cranks; and if you
live among them two or three years, you yourself slowly, unnotice-
ably to yourself, become a funny man." And he has turned to drinking.
The Three Sisters (1901) is another play full of the ironical twists in life, Chekhov's compassion for human failty and hatred of ugly conditions. But meaningful names are used ironically here. For instance, the promising scholar Prozórov (Mr. Sagacious) sacrifices his scholarly career for his limited and shallow wife, Natásha, who later betrays him. Officer Vershínin (Mr. Summit), although pessimistic, has some vision of progress "two or three hundred years hence."

The last lyrical drama, The Cherry Orchard (1904), the most popular of all Chekhov's plays, is enveloped in deep pathos. Its main theme is the decay of the landowning nobility, the break-up of its way of life, symbolized by the chopping down of the cherry orchard. Madame Ranévskaya (Mrs. Earlier, one who belongs to the past) and her helpless brother, Gáyev (Mr. Grove), have squandered all their money and are now forced to sell their property to Lopákhin (Mr. Big Spade), a businessman risen from the peasant class. The landowner's name Simeónov-Píshchik (Mr. Simon-the-Squeaker), is funny, but has no particular significance in the play.

The real humorous names and situations, often untranslatable, are to be found in a story called A Horsy Name (1885). Retired General Buldéyev (Mr. Chunk), ill with a terrible toothache, has tried all sorts of primitive medicines (because he refuses to have the tooth pulled, as the dentist has advised) and finally, although with contempt, agrees to call in a healer, who works magical cures. The general's clerk, Iván Yevséich, knows that the healer lives in the city
of Saratov, but he forgets his surname. It's "a very simple surname... kind of a horsy one..."--Kobylin (Mr. Son-of-a-Mare)?...No, not Kobylin! Wait a minute...Perhaps Zherebts6v (Mr. Son-of-a-Stallion)?--No, not Zherebts6v. I remember it was horsy, but which one--dropped out of my head..."

The general's whole family and household gets involved in trying to find every possible surname pertaining to a horse, or to an object connected with a horse. The general is agonizing in pain. He even promises five rubles to the one who can uncover the right name. They go through all the ages of a horse, both sexes, all kinds of horses, recall mane, horseshoe, harness...with all kinds of endings and suffixes: Zher6bkin...Loshak6v (Colt)...Korenn6y (Main horse), Presty6zhkin (Attached horse)...Tro6ykin (from troika)...Loshad6nsk6y (from the 'horse town'--Loshadinsk)...Loshad6vich (descendant of Loshad'--horse)...Kobyly6nsky (from the town of Kobylyansk)...Tub6nov (Horse-herd)...Kon6nko (Descendant of kon'--'horse')...Uzd6chkin (Harness)...Rys6sty (Canter)...Altogether they recall: forty horsy surnames, but alas, the right one evades them. As happens often in life, it is by mere accident that the sought-after information crops up. Completely exhausted, the general has his tooth pulled the next day. Returning to his carriage to go home, the dentist asks the clerk to sell him a bushel of oats...The clerk, Ivan Yevseich, clasping his hands together, runs to the general like a mad dog, all the way shouting "That's it, that's it! Your Excellency...Mr. Oat!...Mr. Oat is the name of the healer..."
The indignant General Buldeyev retorts:

"To hell with you now... I don't need your horsy name anymore!"*

Chekhov, storyteller and playwright, influenced many authors, both in Russia (Bunin, Fedin, Gorky), and abroad (Thomas Mann, Jules Romains, Bernard Shaw, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway). Yet, at home, his fame was not recognized at once; For instance, the philosopher and critic Lev Shestov (1866-1938) accused Chekhov of "destroying everything: art, science, love, inspiration," and of reducing them to dust.18 This harsh judgement came, perhaps, because Chekhov, like Tolstoy, divested men of their pomposity and pretense. Then it was Tolstoy, who stressed Chekhov's similarity with the Impressionists. At first glance, one sees colors and casual strokes. But if one looks from a distance, "one gets the remarkable impression of a colorful, irresistible painting."19 So it is with Chekhov's works. Thus, as we started, so we finish with Slonim's fitting observation:

Understatement is Chekhov's favorite device; he tells merely a few things, gives fragments of conversation about some trivial thing, while all the rest is left to the reader's conjecture and imagination.20

Chekhov's humorous names for his characters are also among those important few strokes, which add certain shadings and nuances to his elusive pictures.

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3 Slonim, op. cit., p. 61.


5 Slonim, op. cit., p. 63.

6 Ibid., p. 65.

7 Ibid., p. 66.

8 Ibid., p. 66.

9 Ibid., p. 65.

10 A. A. Zerchaninov, Russkaja literatura (Moscow, Uchpedgiz, 1957), p. 315.

11 I. F. Masanov, Slovar' psevdonimov russkich pisatelei, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1956-60).

12 Zerchaninov, op. cit., p. 301.

13 V. K. Chichagov, Iz istorii russkich imen otchestv i familij (Moscow, 1959), p. 5.


18 Slonim, *Modern Russian Literature*, p. 73.


*Chekhov's names and quotations of Russian text are taken from: A. P. Chekhov, *Sobranie sochinieniy* (20 vols.). (Moscow, Goslitizdat, 1954-57).