



CHILDREN'S PRAYER AS A METAPHYSICAL LIMIT OF A.P. CHEKHOV'S EARLY PROSE IN THE SHORT STORY "VANKA"

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Abstract

This research investigates the transformation of the axiological vector in the works of A.P. Chekhov between 1880 and 1887. The study focuses on the transition from a poetics of satirical deconstruction to the establishment of an existential verticality. Through a detailed analysis of the short story "Vanka" (1886), the author argues that the protagonist's undeliverable letter functions as a phenomenon of metaphysical prayer. This act marks a pivotal shift in Chekhov's anthropology, where human subjecthood is asserted through a transcendent impulse that overcomes the brutality of profane reality.

Keywords: A.P. Chekhov, "Vanka", Metaphysical Prayer, Existential Ethics, Axiological Vector, Poetics of Childhood.

Introduction

Scientific discourse regarding the prose of A.P. Chekhov has shifted from viewing his output as mere "newspaper humoristica" toward an analysis of underlying ontological structures. The mid-1880s represent a foundational laboratory where the author developed a unique vector of poetic transformation. This era is characterized by a quest for authentic existence amidst the total simulation of social meanings that defined late 19th-century Russian society.

Axiology, as the study of values, reveals that A.P. Chekhov's poetics developed through a systematic purging of the cultural landscape from "false idols". Before



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Axiology, as the study of values, reveals that A.P. Chekhov’s poetics developed through a systematic purging of the cultural landscape from “false idols”. Before affirming positive ideals, the writer performed a large-scale revision of contemporary anthropological concepts, using irony as a tool of ontological surgery to expose the vacuum within bureaucratic and social structures.

This axiological “cleansing” was not merely a destructive endeavor; it served as a necessary epistemological reset. In the early 1880s, the Russian social fabric was largely dictated by a vertical value system – a rigid hierarchy where an individual’s worth was calculated solely by their proximity to the center of imperial power. By utilizing the short story format as a microscopic lens, A.P. Chekhov identified that these external markers – ranks, medals, and official titles – had become hollow simulacra. His early narratives function as a cognitive corrosive, dissolving the “social mask” to reveal a profound spiritual desert.

Furthermore, the transformation of his poetics signifies a transition from sociological typification to ontological isolation. As the writer stripped away the ideological layers of the “little man” trope, he moved beyond the sentimental pathos of his predecessors. Instead of mourning the social disenfranchisement of his characters, A.P. Chekhov exposed their existential nakedness. This shift prepared the ground for a modern, non-dogmatic ethics, where value is no longer found in the adherence to collective myths, but in the internal, often solitary, struggle for personal integrity.

Consequently, the “quest for authentic existence” transitions from a purely thematic concern into a structural principle of his prose. By the time of the publication of *Vanka* (1886), the author had effectively replaced the grand



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narratives of the state and church with a horizontal axiology. In this new paradigm, the ultimate value resides in the micro-vibrations of the human soul and the sanctity of interpersonal communication. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the evolution of A.P. Chekhov's early prose is essentially a journey toward a "naked" humanity, where the absence of external certainty becomes the starting point for a new kind of metaphysical freedom.

In the first phase of his literary career, A.P. Chekhov focused on a "negative" axiology. In works such as *The Death of a Government Clerk* and *Fat and Thin*, the central mechanism of poetics became metonymic displacement. The character's personality is not merely subordinated to the social hierarchy; it is consumed by it. The "rank" (chin) becomes the very substance of the individual rather than a mere attribute [3, p. 45].

This transformation of a human being into a function creates an axiological vacuum. In the world of A.P. Chekhov, social values such as status and career act as surrogates for the sacred. The fear of a superior is depicted not as a social reality, but as a mystical trembling before a secular idol. By dismantling this trembling through comic absurdity, A.P. Chekhov prepared the ground for a coordinate system based on "being" rather than "appearing" [4, p. 112].

This metonymic reduction of the person to a function serves as the ultimate expression of Chekhov's "negative" stage. When the individual is entirely eclipsed by the chin (rank), the resulting vacuum is not merely social, but existential. In this void, the traditional verticality of the sacred is replaced by a "bureaucratic mysticism".

The character of Chervyakov in *The Death of a Government Clerk* does not die from a medical condition or social persecution; he expires because the secular idol – the General – has failed to grant him "absolution". By treating a minor breach of etiquette as a mortal sin, Chervyakov demonstrates how the mechanisms of the state have hijacked the religious impulse of the human soul. Chekhov's genius lies in using comic absurdity to desacralize this idol. By making the situation ridiculous, he breaks the spell of the hierarchy, forcing the reader to witness the tragic fragility of a life built entirely upon the "logic of the uniform".



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This deconstruction of the “appearing” self is a necessary precursor to the “being” self that emerges later in his work. Before A.P. Chekhov could explore the authentic inner life of a character like Vanka Zhukov, he had to demonstrate the absolute bankruptcy of the social persona. The “negative” axiology thus functions as an ontological clearance. By showing that the “rank” is a hollow shell, A.P. Chekhov redirects the reader’s gaze toward the “small human” who remains after the mask has been stripped away.

The shift toward “being” represents a move from metonymy to metaphor. While the early characters are defined by what they represent (their rank, their hat, their thinness), the later characters begin to be defined by what they long for. This transition marks the birth of Chekhovian subjectivity: once the secular idols of the 19th-century bureaucracy are dismantled, the individual is left alone with the silence of the universe, setting the stage for the metaphysical appeal found in the “children’s prayer” of his more mature prose.

The short story “Vanka” (1886) occupies an exceptional place in this evolution. Here, the author addresses “ultimate” existential questions through the unfragmented consciousness of a child. Nine-year-old Vanka Zhukov possesses an organic perception of the world, allowing A.P. Chekhov to construct a sophisticated spatio-axiological model.

The Profane World (Moscow): This is the horizontal space of the workshop, characterized by pain, alienation, and the loss of time. Here, the child is reduced to an inanimate object, a functional appendage of labor.

The Sacred World (The Village): This is the vertical space associated with the image of Grandfather Konstantin Makarych. The village is not a topographical point, but a metaphysical “paradise” where warmth, light, and belonging prevail. Vanka’s letter, written on Christmas Eve, is functionally identical to a prayer. It is a “cry from the depths” (De Profundis). The text is rhythmically organized like a liturgical act: moving from the enumeration of sufferings to the glorification of rural beauty. Prayer acts as the only form of preserving subjecthood; in the act of addressing the “grandfather”, Vanka restores his shattered identity [8, p. 215].

The spatial dichotomy between Moscow and the village serves as the structural foundation for this metaphysical transition. In the Profane World, time is stagnant and cyclical, manifested in the repetitive violence of the master and the



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mechanical nature of the apprenticeship. Vanka exists in a state of ontological “flattening”, where his human needs are negated by the industrial indifference of the city. Conversely, the Sacred World of the village is imbued with a “vertical” quality; it is a source of light and ancestral authority that reaches down into Vanka’s darkness.

This “prayerful” quality of the letter is further emphasized by Chekhov’s use of sensory memory. The vivid descriptions of the frost, the dogs Kashtanka and Vyun, and the crackling of the frozen forest are not mere decorations; they are the “icons” toward which Vanka directs his spiritual energy. By invoking these images, the protagonist temporarily reconstructs his lost universe. The act of writing becomes a ritual of transcendence, allowing a defenseless child to cross the impossible distance between the basement of a Moscow workshop and the warmth of a Christmas past.

However, the ultimate axiological breakthrough occurs in the paradox of the letter’s address: “To grandfather in the village”. From a pragmatic standpoint, this is a sign of tragic ignorance – a death sentence for the boy’s hopes. Yet, from a metaphysical perspective, A.P. Chekhov establishes the sanctity of the impulse. The value is located not in the successful delivery of the message, but in the child's unwavering capacity to believe in a “Saviour” (the Grandfather).

In this sense, Vanka’s final sleep is not a moment of defeat, but an entry into an ontological shelter. By committing his pain to the Word, he preserves his soul from being entirely consumed by the profane void of the city. This interiorization of the sacred marks the completion of the author's shift toward an ethics of “inner light”, where the individual’s internal integrity remains the final, impenetrable bastion against a deaf and indifferent universe.

The culmination of the story is the signing of the envelope: “To grandfather in the village”. From a pragmatic perspective, this is a catastrophe, signifying the hopelessness of rescue. However, in the context of the metaphysics of the text, it is a triumph of the spirit.

A.P. Chekhov establishes a vital ethical limit: the value of a prayer (or any authentic human impulse) does not depend on whether it is heard empirically. The true "addressee" is the human capacity to believe in the existence of the “Other” capable of mercy. The undelivered letter becomes a symbol of existential



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purity. Vanka, falling asleep under “sweet dreams”, finds an ontological shelter within his own faith [5, p. 88].

This transition from an “external” result to an “internal” state as the highest value marks Chekhov’s move toward non-didactic ethics. The author does not judge or propose social reforms; he concludes that the greatness of the human spirit lies in its ability to create sacred meanings even within a profane hell.

“Vanka” completes the transformation of the Chekhovian hero. By 1886, the protagonist is no longer a “type” (a clerk or a philistine) but an “existential subject”. A.P. Chekhov identifies those axiological dominants that would define his mature work: compassion, memory as the foundation of personality, and the recognition of the uniqueness of every individual existence [7, p. 134].

Children’s prayer, in this context, acts as the limit of sincerity. It is free from the social metonymy and linguistic cliches that plague the adult world. It represents a form of spiritual resistance, proving that even when the world is deaf, the human remains human as long as they are capable of a metaphysical appeal.

The transformation of the protagonist from a social “type” to an existential subject in the short story “Vanka” signifies a definitive threshold in the development of A.P. Chekhov’s poetics. By elevating the child’s desperate letter to the status of a metaphysical prayer, the author establishes a new ethical limit for Russian literature. The greatness of the human spirit, as manifested in Vanka Zhukov, lies not in its social agency or its ability to alter the external circumstances of a “profane hell”, but in its unwavering capacity to generate sacred meanings through the power of memory and longing.

This “limit of sincerity” achieved through the child’s consciousness serves as a diagnostic tool for the adult world. While the mature characters in A.P. Chekhov’s later works often remain trapped within the “social metonymy” and linguistic cliches of their status, Vanka offers a blueprint for spiritual resistance. His “addressless” appeal proves that ontological dignity is preserved as long as the internal “vertical” remains intact. The “deafness” of the world becomes secondary to the clarity of the soul’s inner voice.

Furthermore, the axiological dominants crystallized in this narrative – compassion, the sanctity of individual memory, and the recognition of unique existence – paved the way for the complex polyphony of the author’s later prose



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and drama. The movement toward non-didactic ethics is completed here; A.P. Chekhov ceases to be a social commentator and becomes an observer of the soul's metaphysical endurance.

In the final analysis, the story of Vanka Zhukov is the story of the birth of the modern Chekhovian hero. It is a hero defined by a "naked" humanity, one who finds light not in the certainty of an answer, but in the purity of the quest. Thus, the "metaphysical appeal" remains the final bastion of the human spirit – a prayer that, even if undelivered in the physical realm, achieves its purpose by affirming the presence of the divine within the human.

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