Chekhovs' Ivanov: A Portrait of The Russian Hamlet of The Eighteen Eighties

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Chekhovs' Ivanov:
A Portrait of The Russian Hamlet of The Eighteen Eighties

Prof. Fuad Abdul Muttaleb (PhD)
Department of English\ Faculty of Arts
Jerash University\ Jarash\ Jordan

شخصية إيڤانوف عند تشيخوف

صورة هاملت الروسي في ثمانينيات القرن التاسع عشر

أ.د. فؤاد عبد المطلب
كلية الآداب/ جامعة جرش/ الأردن
fuadmuttalib@yahoo.co.uk

الملخص

يشير هذا العمل البحثي إلى أهمية شخصية إيڤانوف، في مسرحية تشيخوف التي تحمل اسم الشخصية، ضمن أعماله الأدبية والمسرحية الأخرى، إذ تتضمن بذور التطور المسرحي اللاحق لديه. ويكمن إنجازه هنا في إبداعه نموذجاً مسرحياً أصيلاً يمزج بين تقليدين أدبيين مختلفين: الشخصية الروسية المتمثلة في الرجل الفائض، والنموذج الهاملتي الذي يتبدى في سلسلة طويلة من الشخصيات الرئيسة في أعمال أدبية من القرن التاسع عشر. وبمزيد من التحديد، تأتي شخصية إيڤانوف ضمن التقليد الأدبي الذي يعكس فهم إيڤان تورغنييف لشخصية هاملت، كما تظهر من خلال مقالته الشهيرة "هاملت ودون كيشوت" (1858). يحاول هذا البحث تتبع الملامح الأساسية للنموذج الذي ابتدعه تشيخوف والذي يمثل المثقفين الروس في ثمانينيات القرن التاسع عشر ويعكس تصوره الفني لشخصية هاملت الروسي. وتجري دراسة العلاقة بين الشخصيتين الرئيستين لشكسبير وتشيخوف من خلال الأصداء والأفكار والإشارات والملامح الأخرى التي تُذكر بهاملت في المسرحية الروسية. تنظر الدراسة إلى إيڤانوف بوصفه نموذجاً يعكس زمنه، وهو زمن قمع سياسي وجمود ثقافي في الحياة الروسية، كانت فيه البطولة وحتى الأفعال الصغيرة غير ممكنة، بل ومستحيلة أيضاً. ويتم تقصي الموضوع عبر منظور مقارن وتحليلي يستند إلى التاريخ أو إلى أعمال نقدية أدبية ومسرحية تتعلق بالنقاش الدائر في البحث.

Abstract

This research work points out the importance of Chekhov's *Ivanov*, among his other literary and dramatic works, for it comprises the seeds of his later dramatic development. His achievement in this play lies in the creation of a genuine dramatic type that combines two different literary traditions: the Russian character of the superfluous man, and the Hamletic protagonist manifested in the long series of nineteenth century literary productions. More specifically, Ivanov is in the tradition of Turgenev's conception of Hamlet, as reflected in his famous essay "Hamlet and Don Quixote" (1858). The work endeavours to trace the main features of Chekhov's first type that represents the Russian intellectual of the 1880s and his version of the Russian Hamlet. Consideration of the relationship between Chekhov's and Shakespeare's protagonists is carried out through allusions, themes, echoes, images and other attributes reminiscent of Hamlet in the Russian play. In this context, Ivanov is taken, as a typical character of his time, a time of political repression and stagnation in the Russian intellectual life, when not only heroism but also little deeds seemed impossible. The topic is investigated through a comparative and analytical outlook resorting to history and other critical works of literature and drama whenever they appear pertinent to discussion.

On 10th October 1887, Chekhov wrote a letter to his brother Alexander that *Ivanov* had taken him "less than two weeks"[1] to write. The play had its première in November at the Korsh theatre in Moscow. Although Chekhov had a hard time with the cast[2], he was satisfied with it. The play was a success and his friends in Petersburg seemed very excited about it and urged him to give it a trial on the Imperial stage. On 18th December, he wrote to Souvorin that he had finished the new version of Ivanov. The changes Chekhov introduced into the play were more radical than he had first intended.[3] To Chekhov's astonishment, it turned out to be a huge success. The characterisation was thought to be original and lifelike; the acting was said to be brilliant; the play was compared to Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*.[4] Chekhov was overwhelmed, and even embarrassed. "I received more praise than I deserved. Shakespeare himself never heard the kind of speeches I had to listen to"[5], he wrote to Leontyev on 18th February 1889. From 1887 to 1889, he kept altering the play, completely rewriting it in 1889 for its production at the Alexandrinsky Theatre. Seven revisions of the play exist. The two main extant versions are those of 1887 and 1889.

This play has provoked controversy ever since its performance in Moscow in 1887.[6] One of the important views regarded Ivanov as a tragic character, "the Russian Hamlet of the eighties", and representation of the figure of the idealistic, tortured and impotent intellectual in the tradition of the superfluous man. This indicated the consideration how far Chekhov was held by critics to have created a world-weary character with particular relevance to the Russia of the 1880s, a time of disillusionment and despair for a generation of Russian intellectuals. Modern Russian productions of the play still reflect the peculiar quality of the character with various degrees; one Moscow Art Theatre production "followed another Ivanov, directed by Mark Zakharov at the Lenkom Theatre, with Yevgeny Leonov in the title role. Instead of presenting a 'Russian Hamlet', Leonov made him just an average intellectual, not the Ivanov – but one Ivanov, 'the million and first', as Alexander Kugel once described him. What was important was the typicality of this remarkable actor; Leonov's human dimension matched that of everyone in the audience. In contrast, Smoktunovsky performed precisely the 'Russian Hamlet', an extraordinary man, of undoubted strength, but sick from the common disease of the times. His Ivanov suffered an agonised, unable to define a place for himself either in life or in the space of the MAT stage".[7]

Chekhov inherited a genuine Russian Literary tradition, and his Ivanov is in the tradition of characterisation to be found in the plays and novels of Griboyedov, Lermontoy, Turgenev, Goncharov and Dostoevsky which sought to create typical 'heroes' of their times.[8] The decade of

1. See, Anton Chekhov, *Letters On Literary Topics*, edited by Louis S. Friedland (London: Vision Press, 1965), p.129.
2. See, ibid., pp.130-132.
3. For his changes in the play, see, David Magarshack, *Chekhov: the Dramatist (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980)*, pp.98-118.
4. See, Maurice Valency, *The Breaking String* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.89.
5. Quoted by David Magarshack in *Chekhov: the Dramatist*, p.99.
6. For more details about the various views, see, Fuad Abdul Muttaleb", Shakespeare' Hamlet, Chekhov's Ivanov and The creation of a Literary Type" *New Comparison: A Journal of Comparative and General Literary Studies*, Number 19 (Spring 1995), pp.67-68.
7. Anatoly Smeliansky, "Chekhov at the Moscow Art Theatre", *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, eds, Vera Gottlieb and Pall Allain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.34.
8. As for the influence of Russian works on *Ivanov* and Chekhov's dramatic work, see, for example, Richard Peace, *Chekhov: A Study of The Four Major plays*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), pp.1-15. Maurice Valency has also indicated Chekhov's indebtedness to Turgenev's characterisation, see, *The Breaking String*, pp.45-6. In his attempt to view Chekhov's place in the Russian dramatic tradition, W. Best

the 1880s was a time of political repression and stagnation in Russian intellectual life. It was a period when heroism seemed impossible; a time of the so-called 'little deeds'. Sasha excitedly describes local community in these words while defending Ivanov:

> Or if you could all do something, something quite small, hardly noticeable, but something a bit original and daring, so that we young ladies could look at you and say 'Oh', admiringly, for once in our lives![1]

Ivanov, himself, is a typical character of his time, and as such he echoes the superfluous men of the previous era. The true age of the so- called 'superfluous men' was that of the three decades between 1825 and 1855 during which Tsar Nicolas I reigned. These decades were like the time of the l880s, a period of repression occasioned by a grave political event, the suppression of the Decembrist uprising in 1625. Ivanov displays some of the qualities of key characters in the literature of this earlier age. Like Griboyedov's Chatsky he is at odds with his community, and suffers from its stupidity and gossip.[2] Like Turgenev's Rudin, he is a man of great potential, which he seems incapable of realizing; and again like Rudin, he objects when his 'heroine' suggest that they should escape. He is lazy, like the laziest man in Russian literature, the hero of Goncharov's novel *Oblomov*. Ostrovsky's plays can also be seen as forerunners of Chekhov's work'[3].

Chekhov, as a playwright, also inherited another Russian tradition which, although profoundly indebted to western models, has its own peculiar features; in the words of Valency, it exhibits "a magnificent picture gallery, but no great narrative ingenuity".[4] Although Valency here refers only to "the comedic tradition that leads from Griboyedov to Chekhov"[5], the same is true for Russian tragic literature as well, with its emphasis on character, and psychological insight at the expense of the neatly made plot. The portrayal of Ivanov was clearly a matter of some difficulty for Chekhov. In this play, Chekhov had created, as he himself asserted, a dramatic character of real importance. Valency aptly explains in this connection:

> In setting up for the stage a psychological situation of such intricacy he had, of course, found himself a little lost and lonely-he had not many forerunners in the field, and therefore turned for assistance to Shakespeare, the only sure guide for the aspiring dramatist. Ivanov has a good deal about him that recalls Hamlet. He is, in line with Polevoy's interpretation, unashamedly melodramatic, over-articulate, theatrical; in addition, his relation to Platonov is painfully evident, and his amply documented suicide at the end of the play obviously takes the measure of the writer's inexperience as a dramatist at this point of his career.
>
> Nevertheless, the richness of the characterization is striking. Ivanov is the first of that

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Harris Points to Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, and Ostrovsky as Chekhov's precursors, see his, "Tchekhov And The Russian Drama", *Annual Reports and Transactions of Plymouth Inst., Devon, and Cornwall*, 12 (1947-9), pp.141-150.

1. Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, translated and introduced by Elisaveta Fen (London: Penguin Classics, 1982), p.63. Subsequent *references* will be to this edition, except where noted otherwise.
2. Donald Rayfield points out the influence of *Woe from Wit* on both *Platonov* and *Ivanov*, see, *Chekhov: The Evolution of his Art* (London: Paul Elek, 1975), p.98.
3. J. Cooper, in his consideration of the greatest plays of Russian theatre before Chekhov, writes in connection with Ostrovsky's influence, "A 'Chekhovian' situation, in fact, and some of his last plays show interesting anticipations of the work of Anton Chekhov, whose first full-length play *Ivanov* was written in the year that Ostrovsky died". *Four Russian Plays*, translated and introduced by Joshua Cooper (London: Penguin Classics, 1972), p.39.
4. Maurice Valency, *The Breaking String*, p.17.
5. lbid., p.17.

remarkable gallery of portraits which Chekhov created, a face whose exprssion defies analysis and on which our minds dwell with wonder[1].

Thus, it is true to say that: the Russian and the Hamletic traditions merge together in the character of Chekhov's protagonist. With particular reference to Ivanov, and taking the period of the 1880s into consideration, Peace observes that "the term 'Hamlet' was almost synonymous with 'superfluous man' ".[2] For Chekhov the creation of Ivanov was a real achivement, and the fact that this figure was not highly realized at his time made it all the more important that it should be reworked until it came completely to life. *Ivanov* was soon forgotten, but the character remained a challenge[3], and the residue of this challenge was always there in Chekhov's artistic consciousness. Two years later Chekhov brought the Ivanov type vividly to life as Laevsky in "The Duel".

In effect, the influence of Shakespear's *Hamlet* on Chekhov's *Ivanov* can be discerned through certain echoes, themes, images and psychological features, common to both plays[4]. For instance, two main ideas, madness and psychological imprisonment, may be examined at first. In Shakespeare's play, almost all the characters, including the hero himself, to say nothing of the audience, are urged to consider the possibility of Hamlet's madness and describes his behaviour, when he breaks against his inexplicable grief: "This isn't anger, it's madness!" He denies it: "You think so? No, I'm not mad." [5] In the same scene, when he asks her to give him up because he does not want to ruin, she exclaims: "What a queer, crazy logic! …. he's come bursting in here like a lunatic…" Such a description of him is followed by his words: "I've explained to her why, but she doesn't want to understand". [6]

Moreover, in a conversation with Rosencratz and Guildenstern, Hamlet poses the problem of emotional and psychological confinement:

Hamlet. … What's the news?
Rosencrantz. None my lord, but that the world's grown honest.
Hamlet. Then doomsday near. But your news is not true.
Let me question more in particular: what have you,
My good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune,
That she sends you to prison hither?
Guildenstern. Prison, my lord!
Hamlet. Denmark's a prison.
Rodencrantz. Then is the world one.
Hamlet. A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o'th worst.
Rosencrantz. We think not so, my lord.
Hamlet. Why, then, 'tis non to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison. (II.ii. 235-248)

1. Maurice Valency, *The Breaking String*, pp.98-9.
2. Richard Peace, *Chekhov: A Study Of The Four Major Plays*, p.9.
3. See, Fuad Abdul Muttaleb, "Shakespeare' Hamlet, Chekhov's Ivanov and The Creation of a Literary Type" *New Comparison: A Journal of Comparative and General Literary Studies*, pp.69-70.
4. The duel in the last act of *Ivanov* appears as a distant reminder of *Hamlet*. In the fourth act, Lvov debates whether or not to challenge Ivanov to a duel: "I'll show you up! . . . it's my duty . . . but what am I to do? Explain everything to Lyebedev-waste of breath! Challenge Ivanov to a duel? Challenge Ivanov to a duel? Start a row? Oh, my God, I feel as nervous as a school boy, and I've completely lost the power to think things out. What am I to do? A duel?, p. 100.
5. Ibid., p. 190.
6. Ibid., p. 110-111.

Chekhov seems to have creatively used Hamlet's somber observation that "Denmark's a prison" by associating it with the idea of The Estate in *Ivanov* as well as in the later plays. Sometimes, Chekhov speaks directly of prison in his stories,[1] but often metaphorically in his plays, in the sense that he, "writes without direct reference to a place called a prison, but the sense of absolute confinement is there nonetheless, sometimes caused by society, occasionally by a sort of cosmic jailor, most often by forces excreted from ourselves, including disease, both physical and, especially mental". [2]

The theme of imprisonment, or freedom and its loss, had its original inspiration in the facts of Chekhov's childhood. His grandfather was a serf who bought the freedom of his family, but not soon enough for Chekhov's provincial father to escape the petty mentality of the slave, and in his turn he played the tyrant to his children. Chekhov's childhood memories were principally of being roused long before dawn to sing in the church choir directed by his father, of tedious work in his father's shop, of beatings, and of long hours of homework. Chekhov emphasizes this fact in his letter of January 2, 1889, to his brother Aleksandr: "Let me ask you to recall that it was despotism and lying that ruined your mother's youth. Despotism and lying so mutilated our childhood that it's sickening and frightening to think about it".[3] In two other well-known letters he speaks of what freedom means to him, and why. To Aleksev Plescheyev, he writes on October 4, 1888: "I am not a liberal, not a conservative, not a believer in gradual progress, not a monk, not an indifferentist. I should like to be a free artist and nothing more".[4] Chekhov wrote the second letter to Souvorin on January 7, 1889, in which he suggested a story outline, obviously from his own life. Thus, Chekhov the slave who had become a real man and free artist, re-experiences the loss of freedom through the characters he created.

In Chekhov's drama, the estate-prison metaphor is often linked to the motif of the horse, when signifying escape or freedom,[5] just as it is in Shakespeare's *King Richard III*, with the King's desperate cry for a horse:

King Richard. A horse! A horse? My kingdom for a horse!
Catesby. Withdraw, my lord; I'll help you to a horse.[6]

The resemblance here seems to be accidental, but one may ask whether Chekhov was thinking of that in Shakespeare's play. Yet, the significance of the horses and the estate-prison is not in *Ivanov* as it is in the other plays: it appears in a rudimentary stage in this play, it is developed in *The Seagull*, and it becomes more important and intricate in the last plays.

The action of Ivanov takes place in one of the remote provinces of central Russia, and on Ivanov's and Lyebedev's estates. A sense of claustrophobia is associated with the idea of

1. Concerning the theme of prison, both direct and metaphorical, in his stories, especially those written after his Journey to Sakhalin in 1890, see, Joanne Trautmann, "Doctor Chekhov's Prison'", in Healing Arts in Dialogue: Medicine and Literature, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University press, 1981, pp.131-7.
2. Ibid., p. 131.
3. Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought*,. translated and edited by Michael Henry Heim and Simon Karlinksy, p.129.
4. Anton Chekhov, *Letters on Literary Topics*, edited by Louis S. Friedland, p.63.
5. The symbolism of the horse is extremely complex, and beyond a certain point not very clearly defined. For its different meanings, see, J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols,* trans. Jacke Sage (London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p.152. Horses, however, are associated with the idea of escape to attain "freedom" or "peace of mind", see, Ade de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1976), p.261.
6. William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, edited by Anthony Hammond (London: Methuen, 1981), p.328. For the sources of these two lines in Shakespeare's play, see, Introduction in ibid., pp.82-3, and Appendix III, p.3273. It is to be mentioned that Shakespeare's words reappear in *Three Sisters* when Vershinin jokingly paraphrases them saying: "I'd give my life for a glass of tea! I've had nothing to eat since morning...", See, *Plays*, p.279.

imprisonment in the play, and this is achieved through a series of emotional and imagistic statements. The theme of confinement begins with Ivanov. Throughout the first act, he is so anxious to escape his estate and flee to the Lyebedevs. He has a noticeable difficulty in keeping still; at every moment, he has the tendency to leap up and move to another chair, or run away altogether. He is in debt, his wife is dying, surrounded by useless people and their gossip; engulfed by his own apathy, he addresses Lvov:

"... I'm dreadfully to blame, but my mind is so confused.... I feel in the grip of a kind of indolence, I can't understand myself... or other people. [Glances at the window][1] When Lvov starts to show his irritation with Ivanov, the latter mentions the coming of the horses as a sign of relief suggesting a psychological eagerness to leave the place, and a sense of outside and inside emerges: ". . . You can see better from outside. Maybe you can see through me. Probably I am very much to blame. (Listens) It sounds as if the horses are ready. I must go and change".[2] Ivanov's problem infects Lvov: "I can't talk to him calmly. I've only got to open my mouth and say one word, and something here (points at his chest) begins to suffocate me and turns over inside me, and my tongue seems to stick to my palate".[3] Although critical in his description of Ivanov's situation, he continues: "There he is, going out! ... His unhappy wife's only pleasure in life is having him near her; he's the breath of life to her; she implores him to spend at least one evening with her, but he ... he can't! He finds his home too suffocating, there's not enough scope here! Just one evening at home and he'd have to shoot himself for sheer boredom!"[4]

Not only does Ivanov feel confinement in the estate and want to leave to go to the Lyebedev's, but so does his wife who seems as a result of her illness sentenced to life and his uncle Shabyelsky who is usually left behind to take care of her. Shabyelsky expresses the acute need to leave the house: "You go out every night, and we're left here alone. We have to go to bed at eight o'clock from sheer boredom. It's hideous existence, it's simply not life at all. How is it that you can go out, and we're not allowed to? Why? ... do please take me along with you ... I haven't been out since Easter".[5] When Anna Petrovna begs him to stay at home, Ivanov is agitated and expresses the feeling of claustrophobia he suffers when he is at home or ever at the Lyebedev's; "I do implore you not to try to stop me going out in the evenings. I know it's cruel and selfish of me, but you must allow me to be selfish. I find it unbearably oppressive at home.... I'm depressed here, but when I go to the Lyebedev's it's even worse there. I come home, and I'm still depressed, and so it goes on all night.... I feel quite desperate... I have to get away from home, that's all".[6] The horse are mentioned with Ivanov'g leaving. Anna Petrovna thus reveals her loneliness to Lvov, she sobs and then decides to follow Ivanov: "I can't, Doctor, I'm going there.... To where he is... I'm going.... Will you order the horses?" [7] This happens while the watchman is heard knocking outside. [8] the sounds he makes strengthen the sense of confinement and loneliness.

In act two, the scene is a party in Lyebedev's home, everybody is bored rigid, the atmosphere is stifling, and there seems to be almost no signs of life from the gathered guests. Sasha says at the beginning: "The very air is stiff with boredom".[9] The need for horses to escape

1. Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, p.44.
2. Ibid., p.48.
3. Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, p. 44.
4. Ibid., p.62.
5. Ibid., p.49.
6. Ibid., p.50-51.
7. Ibid., p.54.
8. In former days it was usual for a man to go round an estate, striking a wooden board with a stick to frighten away potential thieves.
9. Ibid., p.50-51.

from boredom and spiritual confinement, and the unavailability of these horses are made clear in the conversation between Shabyelsky and Lyebedev. In his answer to Lyebedev's question, why does not he ever come to visit them, Shabyelsky explains the reason of his inability to do so: "But how can I come to see you? Riding a broomstick? I haven't got any horses of my own, and Nikolai won't bring me with him. He tells me to stay at home with Sarah, so that she won't feel lonely. Send your horses to fetch me, then I'll come to see you.[1] Lyebedev points out the impossibility of fulfilling that because his wife is the one who controls the means of escape: "Ziuiushka would sooner die than lend her horses".[2] Not only are horses not his, but he also suffers from his own imprisonment, he tells Shabyelsky: "you can't imagine how I miss my friends! Sometimes I could hang myself with boredom".[3] In the same act, Ivanov reveals to Sasha the overwhelming sense of confinement he feels: "My own home has become odious to me, and living there is worse than torture... even the company of my wife who loves me has become unbearable to me.... I've come here to you now just to amuse myself, but I feel bored even here, and I'm longing to go home again".[4] Referring to the desertedness and hopelessness of the place, Ivanov sympathizes with Sasha: "you must find it terribly difficult living here. When I lock at the sort of people who surround you, I feel quite afraid. Whom could you marry here? The only hope is for some passing lieutenant or student to take you away…"[5] The First Guest, a minor character in the play, bursts under the effects of the stifling atmosphere of the place: "I'm so bored, I could almast run and smash my head against the wall! What people, God forgive me! I feel I could start howling like a wolf and biting people from sheer boredom and hunger!" [6] Babakina also describes how suffocating the setting is: "How boring! They all just walk about or sit as stiffly as if they'd all swallowed pokers. My very bones are numb with boredom".[7] At the very end of the act, Sasha addresses Ivanov, expressing a morbid fear and inability to stay in this place any longer: "I'll go anywhere with you, to the other end of the world, even beyond the grave.., only for Heaven's sake, do let's go soon, otherwise I'll suffocate". [8]

A general sense of claustrophobia and confinement can be felt in the third and fourth acts. Act three begins with Ivanov trying to make sense of the dilemma he is in. His inner tension increases throughout the act. There seems to be a continuous pressure mounting inside Ivanov that he can barely embrace. At times, in acts three and four, his nervous excitement is so sharp. He speaks rapidly, and his movements are sudden and startling. His conversation with Sasha suggests that he is gripped by a feeling of suffocation and anger. In the last act, Ivanov makes one last, desperate attempt to convince Sasha to call the wedding off. After he decides to marry her, on his wedding day, he decides to end it all. He is now in the forefront of everybody's mind and the cause of so much confusion to all. Towards the end, Lyebedev, in an imagistic statement, expresses the situation through blaming lvanov: "You've brought so much fog into our lives that I feel as if I were living in a chamber of horrors. I look on and I don't understand anything.... It's simply dreadful"[9] After a long self-critical speech, the immediate motivation for Ivanov's suicide is revealed; he exclaims: "I feel suffocated with anger".[10] Briefly, Ivanov is given a new lease of

1. Ibid., p.64.
2. Ibid., p.64.
3. Ibid., p.64.
4. Ibid., p.71.
5. Ibid., p.72.
6. Ibid., p.73.
7. Ibid., p.74.
8. Ibid., p.76.
9. Ibid., p.111.
10. Ibid., p.113.

life, a will-power, but it is only the will to kill himself. Chekhov's stage direction simply reads: "Runs aside and shoots himself".[1]

As regards the more apparent Hamletian features in *Ivanov*, chekhov, it would seem, was recalling *Hamlet* while creating the character of his protagonist.[2] Three direct allusions to Hamlet, made by Ivanov, can be found in the play.[3] In the second act, Ivanov addresses Sasha and denies Hamlet[4]. Ivanov, makes another reference to Hamlet, in the third act, while talking to Sasha.[5] Finally, when his psychological tension increases seriously, Ivanov mentions Hamlet while answering Sasha[6].

An overall outlook on these three references will show that Hamlet is not an appealing character for Ivanov and that Ivanov tries to detach himself from being identified with Hamlet. And the character of the prince, as viewed by Ivanov, and apparently as seen by the audience, leaves a dark mark on his personality, and becomes a psychological burden which brings a feeling of disgust, disgrace and shame that overwhelms him whenever he remembers the similarity, or is reminded of it by Sasha. Surely, Chekhov admired the character of Hamlet, but he did not pass his admiration of Hamlet to his protagonist. In other words, the Hamlet that had stirred his imagination is reflected as an unacceptable, additional burden for Ivanov.

In order to discuss this issue appropriately, certain introductory points should be made first. Hamlet has influenced several generations in many different ways: his tendency to reflection, his apparent inactivity, separation of words from deeds, self-criticism, or Hamlet's inability to come to terms with himself and his evil world, his uncle's murder and intrigue, his mother's sin and weakness, and the courtly life that produces vice, hypocrisy, and treachery. A comparison with some of these Hameltic attributes can be conducted through the attitudes, idiosyncrasies, situations, and reflections of Chekhov's characters. In the plays of the Russian dramatist, the characters' despondencies, passivities, weaknesses, dissatisfactions and desperate longings for some different kind of life involving some kind of freedom and happiness can be seen clearly. Hamlet infected almost all the plays of Anton Chekhov. Ivanov was his first true type to represent the intellectuals of the 1880s and his version of the Russian Hamlet.[7]

The theme of Hamlet runs through much of the Russian drama, literature and criticism in the second half of the nineteenth-century. Hamlet was used as a character who has the potential but unable to take any action about anything concerning is personal life or his social duties. Turgenev's portrayal of Hamlet in his essay 'Hamlet and Don Quixote' (1858) [8] had its influence

1. Ibid., p.115.
2. F. L. Lucas asserts the relation between the two protagonists and states that Ivanov is "so clearly a descendent of Hamlet". See, *The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello* (London: Cassel, 1963), p.33.
3. Also, in one of the early revisions which Ivanov underwent, Chekhov showed his hero momentarily "merry and bright", laughingly addressing the determined Sasha, "0 Frailty, thy name is woman?" Later, Chekhov cut this scene from the play, apparently because of his "fear of distorting Ivanov's character". See, David Magarshack, *Chekhov: the Dramatist*, p.109.
4. Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, translated and introduced by Elisaveta Fen, p.71.
5. Ibid., p.93.
6. Ibid., p.108.
7. See, Fuad Abul Muttalab, "Shakespeare's Hamlet, Chekhov's Ivanov and The Creation of a Literary Type", *New Comparison*, pp. 64-65.
8. For a detailed discussion of this major theme, especially in the light of the essay, see, Fuad Abdul Muttaleb, "Turgenev and Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Comparative Literary Study", *Irbid Journal for Research and Studies*, vol. 16, No. 2, (Feb. 2013), pp. 188-218.

on Chekhov[1]. Ivanov has his own view about himself as a 'Hamlet' in Act Two, Three, and Four, and about himself as 'Don Quixote' in Act Four.

In *Ivanov*, there is a man who does not want to be a Hamlet, a man for whom the comparison is nothing but "shame". Answering this matter requires an exploration of Ivanov's understanding of Hamlet, his creator's intention, and the historical moment in Russia that throws its light on Hamlet. Virtually, the reason why Ivanov does not want to be identified with Hamlet can best be approached if we take into consideration the years in which Chekhov created his work. The fact that Ivanov was to a good extent Chekhov's own pronouncement on the type of the liberal and the populist of the eighties is clearly displayed in the author's letter to Souvorin about his play (December 30, 1888). N. A. Toumanova writes: "in the drama *Ivanov* Chekhov gave for the first time a finished portrait of the man of the '80s. Many of his contemporaries recognized in the hero their own psychology: the confusion of the soul, the lack of faith and of ideals - the greatest weakness of that generation".[2] In the words of V. Morgan, "the only real force of the time was inertia"[3]. The paralysed intellectuals were so common in the Russia of Chekhov, during the years which were filled with repression, despair and despondency.[4] Within this historical context, Hamletism came to be equated with pessimism and apprehended as a disease affecting Russian social and intellectual life. Arguing that: "our contemporary pessimism is the sum total of our life", Skabichevsky said that "Garshin is a thousand times right in his Hamletism; Hamletism is anything but some chance personal quality of the author's, nor is it the trivial whim of a sick imagination; it is a sickness common to all of us [intelligenty]". [5] The historical explanation, however, is not the whole answer. Chekhov was by no means one of those paralysed intellectuals, he even despised ineffectuality in them. He made great efforts to portray those superfluous men, and to criticize them. Yet, he felt a touch of their dissatisfaction, boredom, loneliness and tiredness. And in depicting these human weaknesses, he was expressing one side of himself. "One feels that Chekhov must have seen something of himself in the character of Ivanov"[6], wrote John Geilgud in his article on Ivanov in the New York Times (May 1, 1966). There came to the normally cheerful man from time to time moments of anxiety, gloom, and despair, such as his characters experience. It seems actually that Chekhov had sometimes a

1. English translation of the essay can be found in unpublished manuscript by Leon Burnett (Colchestor: Essex University, 2009). For a comparison, see: Robert Nicolas, *Hamlet and Don Quixote* (London: Henderson, 1930). The former translation is much closer to the original and done from Russian, the latter from the French.
2. Nina Andronikova Toumanova, *Anton Chekhov: the Voice of Twilight Russia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p.75.
3. Victor Morgan, "Chekhov's Social Plays And Their Historical Background", *Papers of Manchester Literary Club*, Vol.64 (1939), p.102.
4. According to V. Morgan, these intellectual groups originated in the sixties: "new social class (the Raznochintsi) had been growing up, meaning individuals, educated children of peasants and merchants, children of clergy and small civil servants who did not wish to follow their father's calling and children of impoverished nobles. From their origins these people felt themselves in close sympathy with the peasants and, divorced from contact with the government by the new legislation, they concentrated on devotion to the needs of the lowest classes, whose lot at this time was pitiable". He adds: "It was with the highest ideals that the intelligentsia gave up their homes to go and live with the peasantry, where they suffered the greatest privations and, often through inability to cope with the hugeness of their self-imposed labour, found the task of developing them impossible". In 1881, Alexander II was assassinated and a period of corruption, intrigue and repressive measures followed, and "the intelligentsia, full of revulsion after the murder of the Czar, lost all hopes and ideals, sinking into apathy". See ibid., pp. 100-102.
5. Quoted by Peter Henry in *A Hamlet of his Time: Vsevolod Garshin (*Oxford: Willem A. Heeuws, 1983), p.288.
6. Quoted in *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought*, translated and edited by Michael Henry Heim and Simon Karlinsky, p.70.

dual temperament, the eager energy and the disillusioned activity. Though he used to overwork himself, he could yet write to Souvorin on May 4, l889:

> ….. in this world one must be indifferent. Only those who are unconcerned are able to see things clearly, to be just, and to work. Of course, this includes only thoughtful and noble people: egoists and empty folk are indifferent enough as it is. You say I have grown lazy. That does not mean that I am now lazier than I used to be… and for literature I have not enough passion, and therefore not enough talent. The fire burns in me slowly and evenly, without sudden spluttering and flaring up. . . . I have gone downright silly. There is a sort of stagnation in my soul. I explain it by the stagnation in my personal life.... I must do something to rouse myself.[1]

Chekhov's attitude to that kind of Hamletism grew out of his bitterness, his inability to adapt himself to his world, and his hostility towards this world. His dissatisfaction and hostility increased by the nineties, and resulted in a bitter outburst in his essay "A Moscow Hamlet" (1891):

> I am a Moscow Hamlet. Yes. I go to houses, theatres, restaurants, and editorial offices in Moscow, and everywhere I say the same thing: "God, how boring it is, how ghastly boring!" .. . Yes, I could have! I could have! But I am a rotten rag, useless rubbish. I am a Moscow Hamlet. Take me off to the Vagankov cemetery!.[2]

In the essay, there is an advice twice offered to the hero by an unknown irritated gentleman: "Oh, you take a piece of telephone cord and hang yourself on the nearest telephone pole! That's all that's left for you![3] It would be interesting also to consider to what extent Hamletism influenced Chekhov himself through his experiences displayed in his correspondences in the eighties and nineties. Even so, a true Hamlet in Chekhov's early literary life and imagination was not to be confused with Ivanov. Chekhov realizes that there are some particular characteristics in the Danish Prince that were not inherent in his Russian double. Chekhov himself apprehended special traits in Hamlet. In his review of a *Hamlet* performance at the Pushkin Theatre, he states: "Hamlet was incapable of whining. A man's tears are valuable and must not be wasted on the stage". Mr Ivanov Kozelsky, Chekhov complains: "was frightened of the ghost, so much so that one even felt pity for him .. . Hamlet was a man of indecision, but he was never a coward".[4]

Renouncing Hamlet, Manfred, and superfluous people, Ivanov holds his time responsible for ruining his figure, and for making him a sort of Hamlet. He is thrown into a baffling situation: forced to act and not to act. He is given a complex state of mind, in which reason and emotions, attitudes towards the self and the other persons, are displayed sometimes directly through self-analysis, declarations of passion, and sometimes through a series of petty encounters. On January 7, 1888, Chekhov wrote to Souvorin: "It seemed to me that all Russian novelists and playwrights were drawn to depict despondent men".[5] It is thus pertinent to indicate one main reason for the melancholy that consumed Ivanov: "As soon as the sun goes down, a sort of anguish begins to torment me. And what anguish it is"[6] - and its echoes sound through the writings of those years.

1. Anton Chekhov, *Letters On Literary Topics*, edited by Louis S. Friedland, pp.62-63.
2. Anton Chekhov, *Plays and Stories*, translated by S. S. Koteliansky, pp.343, 349.
3. Ibid., pp.343, 349.
4. Thomas G. Winner, "Chekhov's Seagull and Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Study of a Dramatic Device", *American Slavic and East European Review*, vol. XV, 1956, pp.103-4.
5. Anton Chekhov, *Letters on Literary Topics*, edited by Louis S. Friedland, p.143.
6. Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, p.50.

Pushkin said after reading the first two chapters of Gogol's *Dead Souls*: "God, what a sad country is our Russia'.[1] An English writer, in his attempt to evince the difference between English and Russian writings and the particular quality of Russian literature that makes it comparable to Hamlet, alludes to Ivanov-like characters. He explains that the Russian writers:

> ….. join issues with the slightest tracery of 'plot', but with a close lacework of feeling, through which one discerns the power of the distressed and dispirited personality that we English are wont to associate with the character of Hamlet. The Russian, in his turn, associates it with his country's misfortunes, with the failure of all the Russian revolutions, and the heavy drain of noble types that generations of exile have involved. So much of his literature is sad. It shows people in low spirits, idealists at twenty, disillusioned at thirty, much too old at forty - a race not easy to comfort and dying young.[2]

A wide-ranging panorama of various types of dejected people, both in literature as well as in life, was before the eyes of Chekhov. In his letter about Ivanov to Souvorin, he wrote: "Ivanov and Lvov seemed so alive in my imagination. I'm telling you the whole truth when I say that they weren't born in my head out of sea foam or preconceived notions or intellectual pretentions or by accident. They are the result of observing and studying life. They arc still there in my mind, and I feel I haven't fied a bit or exaggerated an iota".[3] All this brought about a unique and healthy reaction in Chekhov. He wrote: "I have been cherishing the bold dream of summing up all that has hitherto been written about whining, miserable people, and with my Ivanov saying the last word".[4]

Chekhov, in fact, did not say his last word, but he continued expressing carefully and regularly a dull, grey, and miserable image of life, an image which corresponds with that of Hamlet, 'weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!" (I.ii.). However, it is too much to argue that Ivanov is a Moscow Hamlet, for the character of Ivanov is accompanied by the self-analysis of the 'hero', and in the letters by the author's explanation. In his analytical letter to Souvorin on the play and its hero, Chekhov himself is indignant at this tone of a man exhausted before his time. We should bear in mind the anxiety and melancholy with which Ivanov recalled the period of "fighting with windmills",[5] as the best years of his life, "isn't it infuriating? It's hardly a year since I was tough and healthy, in good spirits, too, energetic, enthusiastic..."[6] Ivanov ascribes the changes that have taken place in him, the attrition of high spirits, energy and enthusiasm, to the fact that he exhausted himself by taking at an early age a burden of work and suffering beyond his strength:

> it seems to me that I've strained myself, too. The high school, then the university, then farming, schools for peasant children, all sort of plans and projects.... I had different ideas from all the other people, I married differently, I took risks, I threw my money about right and left, I got too excited... I've been happier and I've suffered more than anyone in the district. Those have been my sacks, Pasha. .. I hoisted a load on my back, but my back gave way. At twenty we're all heroes, we undertake anything, we can do anything, but at thirty we're tired already and good for nothing.
>
> Tell me, how do you explain the way one gets so tired?[7]

1. Quoted by F. I,. Lucas in *The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats, And Pirandello*, p.1.
2. H. W. H., "The Tragedy of Low Spirits", *The Nation* (January 4, 1913), pp.601-3.
3. Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought*, translated and edited by Michael Henry Heim and Simon Karlinsky, p.82.
4. Anton Chekhov, *Letters on Literary Topics*, edited by Louis S. Friedland, p.143.
5. Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, p.47.
6. Ibid., p. 88.
7. Ibid., p.87.

His author does not contend with him, and does not even give any further explanation; but he makes careful use of the term 'exhaustion' in a medical sense, while speaking of the social and psychological motives. To Chekhov, exhaustion coincided with periods of social despair for the Russian intelligentsia, and led to loss of strength, to disillusionment and discontent with life and oneself. "The extreme excitability", Chekhov asserts, "the feeling of guilt, the liability to become exhausted are purely Russian".[1] Ivanov is a country gentleman and Russian intellectual of thirty-five whose youth had been fired with idealism and enterprise. Ivanov's author wrote also to Souvorin in December, 1888, "Russian excitability has one specific characteristic: it is quickly followed by exhaustion".[2] Ivanov overstrains his back continuously and thus becomes a cripple like Hamlet. Such a tendency in Russia of the nineteenth century seems to have been recurrent. Ivanov is an individual who is conscious of being "exhausted in mind and body"[3], and his is the tragedy of a whole generation that longs for a new life, having been forced to discard its faith in its present life.

Tatiana Shakh-Azizova observes that Ivanov is "A Hamlet type of intellectual hero" who is brought into "a Hamlet situation".[4] She aptly emphasizes this aspect when she comments on a well-known actor and director, Innokenty Smoktunovsk, who "discerned in this play the drama of consciousness and the tragedy of a remarkable man, 'the Russian Hamlet', doomed to loneliness and misunderstanding".[5] He stands and reasons at the turning point of the age, expressing his distress and irritation in the face of the dilemma of his existence; "I don't know who I am, or why I live, or what I want"[6] Besieged in a Hamlet situation, he cries out; "But what am I to do? What?... What am I to do?"[7] He is exasperated with himself for his own impotence.

Ivanov is so close to Hamlet is so far as he is unable to reconcile himself with his evil times. Ivanov however does not admit this and does not admit to being a Hamlet. His refusal to be a Russian Hamlet is not without significance. He is by comparison with Shakespeare's hero, an ordinary man, according to Chekhov, "not remarkable in any way",[8] a typical character. In this fact consists a real dramatic quality, not only of Chekhov's creative process, his manipulation of "ordinary people", but also of the epoch itself when Hamletism appeared to be the characteristic not only of an extraordinary individual, but of a long succession of people. Within this context, Tatiana Shakh-Azizova concludes: "The objectivity of Shakespeare and Chekhov lies in the fact that they show a man as being complex, contradictory, and capable of diversity. But with Shakespeare the complexity is created by the clash of good and evil on a large scale, while in Chekhov it is the clash of the significant and the ordinary, the tragic and absurd, the lofty and the

1. Anton Chekhov, *Letters on* Literary *Topics*, edited by Louis S. Friedland, p.140.
2. Ibid. , p.135.
3. Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, p.71.
4. Tatiana Shakh-Azizova, "A Russian Hamlet: Ivanov and His Age", *Soviet Literature*, No. 1, 1980, p.100.
5. Tatiana Shakh-Azizova, "Chekhov on the Russian stage", in *The Cambridge Companion To Chekhov*, eds. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.170.
6. Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, p.113.
7. Ibid., p.91. Here, Ivanov is actually in the tradition of Turgenev's conception of Hamlet. Turgenev states, "What does Hamlet represent in himself? First and foremost, analysis and egoism, and then unbelief. He lives entirely for himself, he is an egoist; but even an egoist may not believe in himself; it is possible only to believe in what is outside us and above us. But this ego, in which he does not believe is dear to Hamlet. This is the initial point to which he returns continually, because he finds nothing in the whole world to which he might apply his soul; he is constantly engaged not with his responsibility, but with his position. Doubting all things, Hamlet, of course, does not spare even himself; his mind is too developed for him to be satisfied with the way he is". See, Ivan Turgenev", Hamlet And Don Quixote", translated by Leon Burnett (Colchester: University of Essex, 2009), p.3.
8. Anton Chekhov, *Letters on Literary Topics*, edited by Louis S. Friedland, p.134.

commonplace. A prosaic and humdrum age has cheapened the material from which in former times tragic, romantic, demonical heroes used to be created; it has lumped it all up with the everyday humdrum things".[1] With all his inner conflicts and lack of reconciliation with himself and his world, Hamlet is still a high-tragic hero. But Ivanov, as Chekhov himself said, "summed up" various characteristics of "whining, miserable people", ranging from the tragic to the absurd.

Chekhov did not justify Ivanov in his behaviour and confusion, for there are moments when Ivanov's attitude cannot be justified. There is some justification for Hamlet's cruelty to his mother and Ophelia, which was stimulated by their intentional treachery, Gertrude's sensuality and Ophelia's filial obedience. Ivanov's cruelty to his sick wife, his offensive words at the end of act three make him morally responsible, and an unsympathetic hero. Cruelty however is not a trait of Ivanov, the formerly sincere and charming man, as he lives in the memories of Sarah and Sasha. This is in fact a manifestation of a tragic and inevitable breakdown of his personality, a breakdown which ends in suicide.

Ivanov does not deserve to be condemned, not merely because he explicitly despises himself, but above all because he is not lazy, impotent or nerveless. Chekhov, although he did not give Ivanov the right to tragedy, has turned the story of Ivanov into the tragedy of a man with a capacity for life but who cannot come to terms with it. And in finding a 'hero' to whom he was more or less attached, Chekhov saw his principle not merely in the expression of personal feelings but in the objective situation; before him emerged a typical image of Russian Hamletisin, expressed not only in the image of a Moscow Hamlet, but in the tragic intensity of spirit.

That different answers to Chekhov's attitude towards Hamletism can be put forward comes as no surprise because his ideas, moods, and attitudes changed later. He was not so precise in his comment on Ivanov, that is, he could not put a limit to the theme he had laid down, since life itself did not put a limit; but in the character of Ivanov, he had created "a type that has literary value".[2] Chekhov saw in this respect the whole point in the summing up. Ivanov was only the starting point, to be followed by the creation of a whole range of figures, who are given to thought rather than action and show a peculiar lack of reconciliation with themselves and their lives, but whose thought and discontent widen and deepen continuously, drawing themselves gradually from their own personal fate, and rising above it to problems of social and national dimensions. The inactivity, melancholy, and dissatisfaction of his characters with themselves and the prevailing social system, alien and hostile, was to prompt Chekhov's interest and bitterness until the very end of his creative life. Thus Chekhov left his heroes playing a role on the surface of the age and posing as important heroes. He tried to indicate the need for a new positive hero, but he was unable to establish the image of that hero, because this hero did not exist actually in contemporary life. Chekhov was a realistic artist, and the task fulfilled by him was that of a subtle critic. V. Yermilov comments: "Chekhov did not meet with heroes in contemporary life capable of waging the struggle against actual conditions, of striving for freedom, resolutely, rationally, consistently. .. . As a matter of fact he subjected to a searching impartial analysis of all the main aspects of the active men, the "heroes" advanced by the intellectuals of the eighties and nineties, creating a portrait gallery of their types. And while carrying on this artistic research of his he became, to his sorrow, more and more convinced that there was among them no true hero, capable of exerting any real influence on life, of altering it for the better".[3]

There is always a deep reason in Chekhov's attitude to Russian Hamletism and to the sort of people who are represented by Ivanov, ranging from Platonov to the characters of *The Cherry Orchard*. "Chekhov's intent and method", Winner writes, "may be clarified by a chronological

1. Tatiana *Shakh*-Azizova, "A Russian Hamlet: Ivanov and His Age , *Soviet Literature*, p.l6l.
2. Anton Chekhov, *Letters on Literary Topics*, edited by Louis S. Friedland, p.129.
3. Vladimir Yerimilov, *Anton Pavlovich Chekhov*, p.250.

analysis of Hamlet in evocations in the play".[1] His views and attitudes became more complex, even in connection with Ivanov, the strange man who did not wish to be a Hamlet and yet became one; the Russian Hamlet of the eighties with all the characteristic alterations made by the age. Other characters, like Ivanov, in the later plays would also be complex and tragic in their exhaustion, boredom, indecision, melancholy, ineffectuality and inability to adapt themselves to social reality.

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4. Thomas G. Winner, "Chekhov's Seagull and Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Study of Dramatic Device", *American Slavic And East European Review*, p.105.

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