

Public Abstract

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Freedom and Self-Knowledge in the Dramatic Works of Anton Chekhov

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In his five major dramatic works, Anton Chekhov crafts characters who despair over their inability to perform free and significant actions. Chekhov's focus on action and inaction raises similar questions on three distinct levels. First, the inactivity of Chekhov's characters is fundamentally at odds with the conventions of the genre of drama. Second, Chekhov tests the possibility of free action for literary characters. Finally, Chekhov suggests to the reader similar questions regarding free action in the actual world. Both Chekhov and Mikhail Bakhtin suggest that lack of self-knowledge is a hindrance to free action, but ultimately assert that such action is possible only by taking others into account. On Bakhtin's view, the self-knowledge necessary for free action is available only from others, while Chekhov's characters who find meaning in their actions are able to do so by virtue of their orientation toward others rather than themselves. The focus of this research is to explore the possible answers to the philosophical and literary issues raised by both Chekhov and Bakhtin. While it may be impossible to give definitive answers to these questions, this research explores the relation between the solutions offered by these two literary figures. Because the problem of free will remains a current topic in both philosophy of action and literary theory, the solutions suggested by Bakhtin and Chekhov may be taken as a starting point for further research and discussion of the question.