

FREEDOM AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN THE
DRAMATIC WORKS OF ANTON CHEKHOV

Joseph Bartlett

Dr. Timothy Langen, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

In his five major dramatic works, Anton Chekhov crafts characters who struggle with existential despair as a result of their inability to perform such actions. This focus on action and inaction raises analogous 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 posit a lack of self-knowledge as 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.