



## **AXIOLOGICAL VECTOR OF POETICS TRANSFORMATION IN ANTON PAVLOVICH CHEKHOV'S EARLY PROSE**

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### **Abstract**

This research provides an in-depth analysis of the axiological (value-oriented) evolution within the early literary corpus of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1880–1887). The author posits that the transformation of Chekhov's poetics during this period is not merely stylistic but fundamentally ontological. By examining the transition from the "Antosha Chekhonte" pseudonym to the mature "Chekhov" the paper identifies a shift from the negative axiology of social satire to a positive existential anthropology. The study utilizes a multidisciplinary approach, blending literary criticism with philosophical value theory, to demonstrate how A.P. Chekhov dismantled the "rank-based" consciousness of the 19th century to establish a new paradigm of human dignity.

**Keywords:** Axiological paradigm, A.P. Chekhov, poetic transformation, Early prose, ontological shift, ethical debt, existentialism in literature.

### **Introduction**

The scholarly discourse surrounding Anton Pavlovich Chekhov has long been divided between the perception of his early works as peripheral "humoristica" and his later works as profound philosophical dramas. During these years, the author developed a unique vector of poetic transformation that fundamentally restructured the Russian literary tradition.

Axiology, as the study of values, provides a vital lens through which we can observe how Chekhov's prose moves from the external (the social, the collective, the hierarchical) to the internal (the psychological, the spiritual, the solitary). This paper argues that the early prose acts as a deconstructive force, clearing the cultural



landscape of “false idols” to prepare for the emergence of a modern, non-dogmatic ethics [1].

This deconstructive process is most evident in the way A.P. Chekhov manipulates the traditional literary tropes of the 19th century, particularly the concept of the “little man”. While his predecessors often endowed this figure with a sentimental or social pathos, A.P. Chekhov subjects him to an axiological “acid test”, stripping away the layers of bureaucratic self-identification to reveal a profound spiritual vacuum. In stories such as *The Death of a Government Clerk* and *Fat and Thin*, the hierarchy of the “Table of Ranks” is presented not merely as a social structure, but as a surrogate religion. The transformation of the poetics here lies in the shift from external satire – aimed at social reform – to ontological irony, which questions the very foundation of human identity when it is predicated on external status.

Furthermore, the “axiological vector” of Chekhov’s early period (1880–1887) demonstrates a progressive interiorization of the ethical conflict. The author moves away from the situational comedy of the “Antosha Chekhonte” era toward what might be termed a “poetics of indeterminate values”. This is a crucial step for the doctoral-level understanding of his work: A.P. Chekhov does not replace one set of dogmas with another. Instead, he cultivates an epistemological humility, suggesting that the highest value lies in the honest recognition of life’s complexity and the refusal to simplify the human condition through ideological slogans [4].

By the mid-1880s, in stories like *Misery (Toska)* and *The Huntsman*, the axiological focus shifts toward the sacredness of the individual encounter. The failure of characters to communicate is not merely a psychological trait but a symptom of a fractured value system where the “Other” is no longer recognized as a subject. This transition prepares the ground for the “mood-driven” prose and drama of his mature years, establishing a horizontal axis of value where empathy and professional integrity replace the vertical authority of the state and church [7, 8].

The initial stage of Chekhov’s career is characterized by what we might call “axiological nihilism”. In the socio-political climate of the Russian Empire, the Table of Ranks was not merely a legislative document; it was a supreme value system that dictated human worth.

In stories like *The Death of a Government Clerk* (“*Smert’ Chinovnika*”) and *Fat and Thin* (“*Tolsty i tonkiy*”), A.P. Chekhov depicts characters who have



undergone an “axiological amputation”. The human “I” is entirely replaced by the “functional” status. When the “thin” friend learns of his friend's high rank, his behavior transforms instantly – not because of fear, but because his internal value hierarchy is hardwired to worship the “chin” (rank).

The artistic essence of this poetic transformation is crystallized in Chekhov’s masterly employment of metonymic displacement. In the administrative landscape of his early prose, the “rank” (the signifier) does not merely represent the man (the signified); it entirely consumes him. This linguistic strategy serves a profound axiological function: by reducing a human being to a title, a uniform, or a gesture of subservience, A.P. Chekhov exposes the ontological void lurking behind the rigid facade of the Russian imperial bureaucracy. The “negative” axiology inherent in these narratives operates as a form of “reductio ad absurdum”. By systematically stripping his protagonists of their individual dignity and reducing them to bureaucratic functions, A.P. Chekhov compels the reader to confront a disturbing realization: the total absence of authentic, transcendental values in a socio-cultural milieu pathologically obsessed with external status and hierarchical positioning [4]. As the decade of the 1880s progressed, a significant meta-textual shift occurred: the axiological vector underwent a process of interiorization, turning away from the external mechanics of society toward the internal landscapes of the soul. The primary conflict was no longer defined by the friction between “man and the rank” (a vertical, social clash), but by the far more complex tension between “man and the Other” (a horizontal, ethical encounter).

This transition marks the genesis of the Chekhovian ethical debt – a fundamental concept in his mature poetics. This “debt” is not a legalistic or religious obligation, but an ontological responsibility that arises from the mere fact of human coexistence. In stories such as *Misery* or *The Huntsman*, the value is located in the agonizing gap between one’s need to be heard and the other’s capacity to listen. Thus, the transformation of his poetics signifies a move toward an axiology of the “Between”, where the ultimate value is found in the fragile, often failed, attempt at authentic communication between two isolated consciousnesses [7, 9]. In the story *Anyuta* (1886), the protagonist, a medical student, uses a poor girl as a visual aid for his anatomy studies. Here, A.P. Chekhov critiques the utilitarian axiology that was prevalent among the liberal intelligentsia. The girl, Anyuta, is perceived not as a person but as a “resource”. The author's poetic innovation is found in the



“open ending” and the “unspoken reproach”. There is no moralizing narrator; instead, the value is asserted through the reader’s sudden realization of Anyuta’s quiet suffering.

A.P. Chekhov discovers that the most profound values are not social or political, but interpersonal. The “poetics of silence” begins to emerge, where the true value of a human soul is found in what is not said [2].

The culmination of the early period’s transformation is found in the novella *The Steppe* (1888). This work represents a radical departure from the “small story” format and a significant leap in axiological scale.

In *The Steppe*, A.P. Chekhov introduces Nature as the ultimate axiological benchmark. The vastness of the Russian landscape dwarfs the social concerns of the characters. Through the eyes of the boy, Yegorushka, the world is revealed in its raw, non-hierarchical beauty.

The axiological vector here moves from the profane (the world of trade and travel) to the sacred (the world of the eternal steppe). A.P. Chekhov asserts that the highest value is the human capacity for “wonder” and the recognition of one’s place in the infinite universe. This is a crucial transformation: the “little man” of the 1880s is no longer a victim of society, but a witness to the majesty of existence. This ontological shift provides the necessary framework for Chekhov’s later exploration of “the meaning of life” in his major plays [7].

Throughout his early prose, A. Chekhov systematically avoids providing “ready-made” answers. He rejects the didacticism of Tolstoy and the religious fervor of F. Dostoevsky.

He constructs an open axiological space in which meaning is not imposed from above but emerges through lived experience, fleeting insight, and silent contemplation. The author deliberately decentralizes the narrative voice, transferring the burden of value judgment to the reader, who becomes an active participant in the process of meaning-making. Such a strategy marks a radical departure from the moral absolutism characteristic of nineteenth-century Russian realism.

Chekhov’s characters are rarely granted moments of revelation in the traditional sense; rather, they encounter brief, almost imperceptible flashes of awareness that do not resolve existential contradictions but merely illuminate them. This poetics of understatement transforms ethical inquiry into an ontological one: the question



is no longer how one ought to live, but how one exists within a vast, indifferent, and yet mysteriously meaningful world. In this context, silence, pause, and the unsaid acquire axiological weight equal to that of articulated thought.

The refusal of dogmatic closure allows A.P. Chekhov to reconfigure the very notion of responsibility. Meaning is not bestowed by ideology, religion, or social mission; it arises from attentiveness to life itself to landscape, time, the Other, and one's own inner hesitation. This ethical minimalism anticipates the dramaturgical structure of Chekhov's mature plays, where action is displaced by *ожидание*, and decisive events occur not on stage but within the consciousness of the characters.

Thus, the early prose of the 1880s should be understood not as a preparatory or marginal phase, but as a coherent axiological system in *statu nascendi*. It is precisely here that A.P. Chekhov formulates the foundations of his later philosophical dramaturgy, in which the "meaning of life" is neither proclaimed nor denied, but persistently questioned within the fragile horizon of human existence.

He creates a space of ethical freedom. By refusing to judge his characters (like the "chameleon" Ochyumelov or the tragic Misail Poloznev), A.P. Chekhov transfers the axiological responsibility to the reader. This "de-ideologization" of the text is perhaps the most significant transformation in his poetics. It reflects a modern understanding of value as something that is not "given" but "created" through individual choice and daily labor [8].

The transformation of the axiological vector in A.P. Chekhov's early prose (1880–1887) represents a transition from the satirical destruction of idols to the existential discovery of the individual.

A.P. Chekhov proved that even within the constraints of "minor" genres, it is possible to address the ultimate questions of human existence. His early work was not merely a preparation for his later fame; it was a rigorous philosophical inquiry that redefined the values of Russian literature. By the end of the 1880s, the "Antosha Chekhonte" humorist had evolved into a "doctor of the human soul", capable of diagnosing the moral crises of his era and offering a quiet, persistent hope based on the values of truth, beauty, and personal integrity.

This "de-ideologization" of the text serves as a pivotal mechanism in the transformation of Chekhov's poetics, marking the birth of a non-authoritarian aesthetic. By vacating the position of the "moral judge", A.P. Chekhov fundamentally alters the reader's role, transforming the act of reading from passive



consumption into an active axiological labor. The “axiological vacuum” left by the author is not a sign of indifference; rather, it is a deliberate artistic strategy that mirrors the uncertainty of the modern condition [8, 9].

The transformation of the axiological vector in A.P. Chekhov’s early prose (1880–1887) represents a transition from the satirical destruction of idols to the existential discovery of the individual. In the early “fragments” and “miniatures”, we witness a systematic dismantling of the utilitarian paradigm – where a person’s value was determined by their social utility or rank – and the emergence of an intrinsic paradigm, where the mere fact of human existence and the capacity for suffering become sacred. This shift is particularly visible in the evolution of his “poetics of detail”. In the later stories of this period, a single sensory detail – the glint of a bottle neck in the moonlight or the sound of a distant bell – carries more axiological weight than the lengthy moralizing monologues of traditional 19th-century realism [4, 7].

A.P. Chekhov proved that even within the constraints of “minor” genres, it is possible to address the ultimate questions of human existence. His early work was not merely a preparation for his later fame; it was a rigorous philosophical inquiry that redefined the values of Russian literature. He moved beyond the binary axiology (good vs. evil, hero vs. villain) toward a multi-dimensional ethical space where the tragic and the comic coexist in every moment of human experience.

By the end of the 1880s, the “Antosha Chekhonte” humorist had evolved into a “doctor of the human soul,” capable of diagnosing the moral crises of his era and offering a quiet, persistent hope based on the values of truth, beauty, and personal integrity. This transformation effectively bridged the gap between the classical Russian tradition and the dawning age of modernism, establishing a new literary anthropology where freedom is found in the “small deeds” and the quiet, unyielding pursuit of intellectual honesty [2, 10].

The early prose of A.P. Chekhov should be regarded as a foundational stage in the European axiological turn, anticipating the existentialist explorations of the 20th century. His legacy lies in the demonstration that when the “false idols” of social hierarchy and ideological dogma are cleared away, what remains is the fragile, yet invincible, dignity of the individual consciousness.



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