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THE STRUCTURE OF *THE THREE SISTERS*
BY ANTON CHEKHOV

The Three Sisters by Chekhov, like his other last three plays, is structured in a particular way. The play can be included in the category of indirect-action drama¹. And, indeed, almost all main elements of this type of drama are in Chekhov's play. The task of these elements is to uphold a rather loose structure of the whole work. How well they play their role is visible, paradoxically, through all the phenomena in the play which seem to destroy the basic structural components of a dramatic work. In *The Three Sisters* this structure is constantly being violated. For example, the usually smooth flow of action of a dramatic work in Chekhov's play is often interrupted or, at least, suspended. And also, there is no strict dependency of particular pieces of action in the play.

This technique of interruption or suspension is used on many levels of the development of the action. The behavior of the characters, their statements, dialogues and actions, on and off stage events, even the author's comments and stage directions - all of these determine the uneven and irregular flow of the action and frequent interruptions in its development.

Chekhov equipped all his characters with features which emphasize a certain lack of coherence in their personalities. The relationships between the characters, their behavior, conversations and statements prove this lack of coherence. The most striking things are changes which take place in the characters throughout the play. The characters often change their behavior toward each other. They express views which lack uniformity. Sudden changes also occur in the characters, feelings and moods.

Placing the characters next to each other on the stage suggests that there is supposed to be an interrelation between them. But in

¹ D. Magarshack, *Purpose and Structure in Chekhov's Plays* [in:] *Anton Chekhov's Plays*. Transl. and ed. E.K. Bristov (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 259-271.

The Three Sisters such an interrelation does not seem to exist or, if it exists, it is broken. Regardless of the family links or friendships, the characters' attachment to each other is almost none. It does not mean, however, that they do not love or hate. But their feelings for one another change so often that even their strongest emotions fade away and thus, put into question the links between the characters.

The opening scene of the play presents some of the characters while talking. Not only does the subject of the conversation show the lack of interest of the characters in each other, but also their behavior. While talking Olga is correcting students' exercise books; Masha is reading a book and whistling a tune; Tuzenbakh is playing the piano; and Chebutykin is reading a newspaper while walking. Ignoring each other is such a common feature in the characters' behavior that even their little acts indicate the lack of respect for others. In act I a conversation between Masha and Irina about other people turns into a series of cruel jokes about their brother, Andrey, who lost money while gambling and their guest, Chebutykin, who owes the women a payment for the apartment. Masha and Irina are joined in their laughter by other characters. Both the members of the family and their friends and guests often either hurt each other or get angry at one another. Natasha's treatment of other people in the house is the best example. She wants to have control over everything and manipulate everybody and shifts the members of the family from room to room. She even evicts them from the house entirely. Natasha's cruelty in the treatment of the servants, especially old Anfisa, also shows the coldness of the relationships between the characters in the play.

The real nature of the links between the characters is well depicted in the attitude of Chebutykin, a doctor who forgot his profession and whose response to other people's concerns is his favorite saying: "it doesn't matter". Chebutykin's indifference to others' unhappiness is best expressed through his reaction to the killing of Baron in the duel. Singing and saying his favorite words is not enough for him. His earlier statement about the event went simply like this: "The Baron is a fine person, but one Baron more, one Baron less - what does it matter, anyway" (p. 149)².

Coldness, indifference and lack of interest determine the relationships between the characters of the play. As seen through their behavior, all the close links between them are being questioned. But,

² All quotations of Chekhov's text are from the following edition: *The Three Sisters* [in:] *Anton Chekhov's Plays*, pp. 103-157.

as it has been said, the characters often change their attitudes. Their actions toward each other are not only negative. Among the characters there are those who are loving, sensitive and concerned about their partners. Andrey, for example, loves Natasha and Tuzenbakh is filled with passion for Irina. Also, the characters sometimes try to comfort each other; they seem to care for others. But their positive feelings do not last long. They either fail at the beginning of a relationship or they find no response from others. Andrey's great love for his wife fades away when he sees vulgarity and evil in her. He states: "...there's something in her that corrupts, makes her something of a petty blind animal, rough and hard-skinned. In any case she's not human" [p. 149]. And Tuzenbakh's passion for Irina, although it is accepted by her, finds no emotional response since Irina does not believe in love. All the characters' search for happiness and love with others fails. In their changing attitudes love and attachment do not survive long. Coldness and indifference prevail, instead.

The changing behavior and feelings of the characters determine the interruptions in the flow of the action of Chekhov's play. A relationship between the two characters, for example, does not develop. In fact, it may break anytime. And emotions of one single character, instead of going into one direction, switch so often that any predictions of their development fail. Anything can happen - the characters who ignore others can suddenly feel attached to the same people they ignored. They can also reverse their attitudes and unexpectedly from loving partners become those who hate and despise. The action that depends on this kind of change cannot develop smoothly. Its flow is constantly being interrupted or suspended.

The consequences of the changes in the characters on the action may also be seen through the conversations between the characters, their speeches and statements. What is striking about the conversations in the play is that the main aim of every conversation, that is communication, does not seem to exist. The characters talk to one another but their conversations do not have any impact on the partners of any conversation. Many times a character's statement in a discussion prolongs and turns into a long speech. Thus the characters seem to talk not to their partners, but to themselves. When the characters ask questions, for example, they usually do not receive answers. Their conversations are pointless and absurd whether the characters try to talk about their unhappiness like Irina or about the food they ate, like in the absurd argument between Solyony and Chebutykin (p.129). The real picture of the kind of communication the characters have is best depicted in the dialogue between Andrey and Ferapont:

FERAPONT. I can't know ... My hearing is not good ...
 ANDREY. If you heard all right, then I doubt if I'd be
 talking to you in this way. I must talk to someone. My
 wife doesn't understand me. I'm afraid of my sisters for
 some reason or other. (p. 120)

The lack of communication between the characters is also shown well in a different dialogue, a dialogue between Natasha and Andrey. At the end of their conversation which turns into Natasha's speech about the house, she asks her husband: "... why are you so quiet?" Andrey's response is as follows: "Well, I was thinking ... There's nothing much to say, I guess ..." (p. 120). The characters do not communicate because they do not understand each other. They also do not communicate because they talk with each other about two, three or even more different things at the same time. In one of the conversations Vershinin gives one of his philosophical statements about the cause of unhappiness in the world. His statement is interrupted by Tuzenbakh's "important" question: "Where on earth is the candy?" Luckily, he gets an answer from Irina, but neither of the two topics on happiness and on candy is continued because Vershinin receives a letter about his wife's suicide attempt and for a moment the letter becomes the subject of the further part of the conversation. The emptiness of such contacts is shown throughout the play. It is even emphasized by the fact that the characters realize that there is no communication between them. At a certain point Tuzenbakh concludes: "... it's difficult to argue with you, ladies and gentlemen!" (p.125). He also says straightforwardly: "Obviously, we don't understand each other" (p. 125). The characters are not only aware of their misunderstanding, but they also know that they have nothing to talk about. So... they choose to talk about what to talk about (p. 124).

The violation of the basic rules of communication implies that one should not expect any logical order in any of the dialogues in the play. A conversation can be as absurd as the following short dialog:

VERSHININ. This brandy is very good. What's it made of?
 SOLYONY. Cockroaches. (p. 117)

Since no rules of communication apply to these conversations, the action determined by them can be interrupted, suspended or at least, the direction of its development can be altered anytime. The uneven flow of the action is ceaselessly taking place. The dialogues which often turn into monologues do not assure the uniformity of the action. While saying their statements the characters often pause, and every pause brings a change to a topic. Longer statements can also

be interrupted by other speakers since it is not always the case that the audience falls asleep, as it does during Vershynin's philosophical speech in act III (p. 138). Furthermore, every single speaker's statement is very chaotic. He loses control over words he pronounces and keeps changing topics. Natasha in act IV, for example, turns to different people at the same time and thus, talks about things totally unrelated to each other (p. 155-156).

In their statements the characters most often express their views and talk about their failed lives. These statements turn into declarations - the characters having realized the misery of their condition declare a change in their attitudes; they talk about breaking with their old ways of living and beginning new lives. Throughout the play this is well-symbolized through the main characters' dreams and plans of departure for Moscow. All the declarations, however, instead of being followed by the characters' actions bring no developments. The characters stay in their passivity and inaction. The declarations followed by no actions are misleading which violates the unexpected flow of the action. In other words, the inconsistency of the characters' statements and actions leaves the further course of the events open and by this it also interrupts it.

In a play like Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* with its unusually structured action the cause of almost all events seems to be indirect. It has been pointed earlier that the characters' personalities and their behavior are very inconsistent. The events resulting from the actions of such characters have no definite forms. The world presented in the play is placed between reality and dream and between the characters' past memories and future plans. This state of inaction in the presented world brings alienation, loneliness, unhappiness and boredom to the characters' lives. Most actions, because there are few, undertaken in this world take place in a vacuum and therefore, the only effect they have on the events in the play is their suspension. This relates, though, to certain actions of the characters such as searching for happiness and seeking an aim in life. All other actions, those "physical", influence the events directly. When Anfisa brings Vershinin a letter informing him of the suicide attempt of his wife, Anfisa's (or Vershinin's wife's?) action changes the direction of the events - Vershinin has to leave (p. 127). Similarly, Natasha's unexpected behavior at the end of act II has the same effect on things. She interrupts the party and forces all the guests to leave the house (p. 129). These kind of direct actions have a dramatic influence on the flow of the events. Such actions always abruptly interrupt this flow. In the extreme cases they stop the action of the play entirely. When drunk Chebutykin all of a sudden drops the porcelain clock

and breaks it, the conversation between the characters is totally interrupted. In the stage directions the author comments that there is a pause and that everybody is confused (p. 137). After a moment the action is renewed, but the whole event ruins it quite thoroughly, and its flow does not regain its previous form.

A similar role to the on-stage events is also played by off-stage events. The off-stage events either interrupt the action or change it by slowing it down or bringing dynamism to it. The fire in town, for example, is an event which becomes a force interfering with many on-stage events in most of act III. This event is a good dramatic tool which adds chaos to the flow of the action.

The lack of uniformity in the development of the play can also be seen through its atmosphere³. The atmosphere of the play determined in part by the characters' behavior and actions as well as all the events changes as often as the characters themselves and may be as dynamic as some of the events.

Usually the atmosphere of a given act or part of it is at first suggested by the author in stage directions. He describes the setting, the time and the look of the scenery. He also comments on sound and music, if that is the case, which serve as a background for the coming events. Sometimes during the development of the play the background, instead of being a completion of the events, contrasts with them and thus, breaks their flow. A sunny and bright day, for example, which sets the background in act I is in opposition with the scene in which Olga dressed in black expresses her gloomy thoughts and talks about the death of her father.

While stage directions in combination with some elements of the action only suggest the atmosphere, its full build-up takes place through the further development of the characters, behavior and the events. The atmosphere constantly changes along with the characters. The topics of their conversations and statements dictate the tone in a given part of the action. The characters, reflections on their failed lives, wasted hopes and passing of time bring the atmosphere of sadness, gloominess and melancholy. The conversations about dreams and the statements on the future plans, and the discoveries of an aim in life create, in turn, the atmosphere of cheerfulness, brightness and vitality. All of these qualities change rapidly and frequently during the development of the action. An interruption of a statement and a change of a topic always cause a shift in tone.

³ On the atmosphere in Chekhov's plays see: R. Hingley, *Nastroenie and Atmosphere in Chekhov's Plays* [in:] *Anton Chekhov's Plays ...*, pp. 311-312.

In act II Vershinin and Tuzenbakh are having a philosophical discussion on future life on earth. The topic of the discussion creates a serious tone in this part of the action. But the tone is suddenly interrupted by Masha who starts laughing and talking about the cheerful day she had (p. 124). Other tones can be brought up in a similar way. The atmosphere of pleasantness of social life often gets destroyed by the characters' unexpected statements. These are ridiculous and absurd remarks which introduce awkwardness, surprise and embarrassment to the different moments of action. Such is the role of many of Chebutykin's statements. In the scene in which he breaks the clock he declares: "Perhaps I didn't break it, but it only seems that I broke it" (p. 137). His statement embarrasses and upsets everybody and ruins the atmosphere of the whole scene. A similar effect is caused in another scene in which Solyony gives his brilliant answer to Vershynin's question about the reason why the railway station is twenty versts away:

SOLYONY. But I know the reason for it. (...) Because if the station were nearby, then it would not be far away: but if it is far away, then, that means, it cannot be nearby. (p. 110)

The absurd and grotesque statements affect the atmosphere so radically that it rarely gets restored immediately in the further flow of the action.

The changes in the atmosphere are also caused by other elements of the characters' behavior. It happens very often that in one scene the characters argue, cry, sing, dance and laugh. Such a series of changes is well illustrated in act II. The argument between Chebutykin and Solyony causes tension but is being quickly discharged by Andrey, Tuzenbakh and Masha who suddenly start dancing and singing. This cheerful atmosphere, however, is interrupted first by Solyony who starts arguing with Andrey and then by Natasha who forces the guests to leave the house (p. 129-130). Through their behavior the characters manifest their feelings and mood which range from sadness and despair to delight and hope. The broad range of such qualities determines the dynamic atmosphere of the play.

The changes in the atmosphere also take place through the events. A slow move of the action, for example, can be changed any time by an incident. A change in the pace of the action always modifies the atmosphere. The appearance of Vershinin on the stage in act I adds dynamism to the action and ends the gloomy mood of this part of the act (p. 109). The opposite effect is created by such events as leave-takings of the characters. Departure in Chekhov always brings the tones of sorrow, regret and disappointment.

The fact that there is no uniformity in the atmosphere of Chekhov's play has big repercussions for the development of the action. The constant changes in the atmosphere have the same effect on this development as the characters' behavior and the events. If they do not interrupt the flow of the action entirely they at least suspend and change its direction. Thus, the flow of the action continues to be irregular and uneven.

As it has been pointed out, many of the components of the play's action situated on its different levels give the impression of being organized very loosely. Through their organization they seem to violate the usually strict structure of a dramatic work. *The Three Sisters* with its inconsistent proceedings and interruptions in the action makes the reader wonder what holds the structure of the whole work together and what, despite all, gives the work compactness.

Being an indirect-action drama Chekhov's play contains many elements which uphold its structure. The main striking element and the best dramatic tool combining the structural components of the play is tension. Tension serves to build and move the action forward. In the play there are numerous moments and situations which create tension. It may be an argument between the characters or just one character's actions like Natasha's secret plans to evict everybody from the house. These kind of tense actions which can be compared to a current flowing under the surface of the events links all pieces of the action of the play. Another important element which upholds the structure is the theme of the play. Briefly, the theme can be defined as life in a provincial town in the nineteenth century Russia. Although the theme often seems to vanish in the loose structure of the play, certain motives of the theme are always present. They sustain all interruptions and suspensions in the action. The theme comes back to the conversations between the characters and it always determines their actions. An aim of one's life, search for happiness, the reasons of a failed life, passing of time, these are the returning points in the conversations and actions. They build the theme of the play.

The most striking motif in the play is the three sisters' dream of Moscow. Many conversations and actions focus around this dream. It is the source of hope and happiness in the sisters' gloomy lives. The dream returns in many parts of each act and closes two of them, II and IV. Thus, the motif of the dream of Moscow is this element in the play which combines many pieces of the action.

In the action of Chekhov's play there are other, maybe minor, elements upholding the structure of the play. These can be certain events around which the characters gather. Irina's name day in act I,

for example, can be seen as an event which helps hold up all loose components in this part of the play. Next to being a force which interrupts and changes the atmosphere, also the arrival and departure element serves as a tool which supports the structure. Like the other elements, it centers many actions and events, especially those taking place at the end of the play. Other minor elements which uphold the structure worth mentioning are: the presence of "invisible" characters (Protopopov), the chorus element, peripetia and the "messenger" element⁴.

All of the elements which have just been pointed out are a good counterbalance for the interruptions and suspensions taking place throughout the action of the play. These elements bring compactness to the loose structure of the play. Without them Chekhov's work would lack its expressiveness, and its subtle way of presenting the dramatic action would not take place. Both the elements upholding the structure of the play and the phenomena which break its components show how complex Chekhov's work is.

STRUKTURA TRZECH SIÓSTR ANTONIEGO CZECHOWA

STRESZCZENIE

Przedmiotem artykułu jest struktura dramatu *Trzy siostry* Antoniego Czechowa. Należąc do typu dramatu o akcji "niebezpośredniej" ("indirect-action drama"), gdzie widoczna jest luźna budowa utworu i ciągłe naruszanie jego przebiegu wydarzeń, sztuka Czechowa odznacza się szczególną mnogością zjawisk, które burzą strukturę dzieła dramatycznego. W artykule poddana zostaje analizie stale przerywana lub zawieszana akcja utworu.

Zastosowana w *Trzech siostrach* technika przerywania lub zawieszania przebiegu wydarzeń jest dostrzegalna w zachowaniu bohaterów, w ich wypowiedziach i działaniach, w wydarzeniach mających miejsce zarówno na scenie, jak i poza nią, w sposobach kreowania atmosfery, w didaskaliach wreszcie. Czechow wyposażył swych bohaterów w cechy uwydatniające w ich osobowości brak spójności i logiki. Uderzają zmiany, jakie zachodzą w bohaterach w przeciągu rozwoju akcji. Zmieniają oni często zachowanie w stosunku do siebie, wyrażają sprzeczne poglądy, ulegają zmiennym nastrojom i nie są stali w uczuciach. Wydaje się, iż nie istnieje jakakolwiek wzajemna relacja między bohaterami pomimo tego, że zostali umieszczeni na scenie obok siebie. Często ignorują oni się nawzajem, a jeśli dochodzi do kontaktu między nimi, to zwykle jego wynikiem jest zranienie uczuć, gniew, irytacja i wyrażony brak szacunku. Dobrze ilustruje to postawa Nataszy wskazywana przykładowo w analizie. Sposób traktowania przez bohaterkę zarówno członków rodziny, jak i gości ujawnia jej żądzę do manipulowania ludźmi. Wszelkie pozytywne uczucia bohaterów, miłość, wrażliwość, troska, jeśli dochodzą do głosu, nie trwają długo, gdyż zwykle nie znajdują odpowiedzi u drugiej strony.

⁴ D. Magarshack, *ibid.*

Zmienne zachowanie i niestałość uczuć bohaterów decydują o nieciągłym rozwoju akcji, której przebiegu nie sposób przewidzieć. Pokazują to rozmowy między bohaterami. Wydaje się, że nie potrafią się oni komunikować, gdyż każda rozmowa przekształca się w długi monolog danej postaci, każde pytanie pozostaje bez odpowiedzi, każda wypowiedź zawiera sprzeczne informacje. Bohaterowie *Trzech sióstr* nie mogą się porozumieć dlatego, że prawie zawsze mówią o wielu różnych rzeczach jednocześnie. Wymownym tego przykładem jest przytoczony w analizie fragment dialogu, w którym Wierszynin próbuje sformułować odpowiedź na pytanie o przyczynę nieszczęścia na ziemi. Jego filozoficzne rozważania zostają przerwane przez Tuzienbacha stawiającego nieoczekiwane i banalne pytanie: "gdzie u licha są cukierki?". Przerywany bieg akcji powodowany chaotycznością rozmów i wypowiedzi jest jeszcze bardziej widoczny w momencie, gdy bohaterowie po zdaniu sobie sprawy ze swej trudnej kondycji życiowej deklarują wprowadzenie zmiany i rozpoczęcie nowego życia. Ich deklaracje nie wpływają jednak na bieg wydarzeń w oczekiwany sposób, gdyż bohaterowie wbrew swoim postanowieniom dalej zachowują bierną postawę i nie podejmują żadnych działań. W taki sposób bieg akcji ulega zawieszeniu. Pasywność bohaterów nie oznacza jednak braku wszelkich działań. Mimo stanu bezruchu i bierności, w którym tkwią, wszyscy przecież poszukują szczęścia lub celu życia, wszyscy wykonują też jakieś czynności: Natasza przerywa przyjęcie i zmusza gości do opuszczenia domu, Czebutykin nagle upuszcza na podłogę i rozbija porcelanowy zegar. Czynności bohaterów, zwłaszcza te "fizyczne", znakomicie służą przerywaniu akcji.

Nie tylko zachowanie bohaterów, ich rozmowy i wypowiedzi oraz wydarzenia, w których uczestniczą, decydują o nieciągłości biegu akcji. Decyduje o tym atmosfera sztuki, która zmienia się niezwykle często i niespodziewanie. Zwykle zmienna atmosfera danego aktu czy sceny sugerowana jest już w didaskaliach. Opisuując scenę i tło wypowiedź autora może na przykład uprzydatnić ich kontrast z nadchodzącymi wydarzeniami. Tak w sposób kontrastowy rozpoczyna się akt I, gdzie jasny i słoneczny dzień służy jako tło sceny, której ubrana na czarno Olga mówi o śmierci swego ojca. To, jak zmienna atmosfera sztuki wpływa na bieg akcji, jest szczególnie dobrze widoczne tam, gdzie atmosfera jest wytwarzana poprzez samo zachowanie bohaterów i rozwój wypadków. Smutek i melancholia wypełniające daną scenę mogą ulec raptownej zmianie, gdy bohaterowie niespodziewanie zmieniają temat rozmowy i od refleksji nad ludzkim losem i przemijaniem czasu przejdą do szybkiej wymiany zdań o planach na przyszłość i sensowności życia. Znamienne jest, że w jednej scenie atmosfera może ulec zmianie kilka razy, bohaterowie bowiem potrafią kłócić się, płakać, śpiewać, tańczyć i śmiać się zarazem. Wyraz uczuć smutku i rozpaczy, albo radości i nadziei decyduje o dynamice stwarzanej atmosfery, która jeśli nie zawsze burzy bieg akcji sztuki, to za każdym razem zawiesza go lub zmienia jego kierunek.

Końcowa część prezentowanej w artykule analizy poświęcona jest wskazaniu tych zjawisk w utworze, które sprawiają, że pomimo stałego naruszania ciągłości jego akcji, cechuje go zwartość i jednolitość. Wśród wymienionych zjawisk podkreślona została rola napięcia jako głównego narzędzia dramatycznego podtrzymującego budowę utworu. Wypełnia ono każdą scenę, łącząc poszczególne części akcji i nadając utworowi zwartość. Tę samą funkcję pełnią temat sztuki i jego powracające motywy, jak np. marzenie sióstr o podróży do Moskwy, oraz wiele pomniejszych zjawisk. Zastosowana w *Trzech siostrach* technika przerywania lub zawieszania akcji znajduje zatem swą przeciwagę. Bez niej sztuce Czechowa brakowałoby siły wyrazu, a prezentacja dramatycznej akcji w tak subtelny sposób nie byłaby możliwa.