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"Little Things": Chekhov's Children and Discourse in the Comic Short Story

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“Little Things”: Chekhov’s Children and Discourse in the Comic Short Story

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

by

Rich Goode

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2010

May, 2013

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For Chekhov:

Thanks for all the laughs along the way.

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I would like to thank the entire staff and faculty of the English department at the University of New Orleans. Whether in allowing me to test out and defend certain aspects of my present argument in conversation, in suggesting articles and other readings to help in both the expansion and narrowing of academic inquiry in this thesis, or in simply providing a workspace amid the peaceful ambiance of a lakeside breeze and the comfort of good books, I and this thesis owe much to the bright and caring people of UNO English.

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Finally, many thanks to you, reader, for giving me but a little of your time. May you enjoy reading this at least half as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Foreword

This endeavor sprang from a love of the humorous in life, from an admiration of Anton Chekhov as a person and as a writer, and from an appreciation of the uniquely, sympathetically humorous in Chekhov's personality and writings. In exploring his authorship, I noticed that Chekhov's early, foundational fiction, though often unfairly dismissed by critics, displays many of the same comedic techniques for which his later, "mature" work is praised and emulated. I aimed to analyze a sampling of these earlier works and their comic elements in order to make a case for their inclusion in serious studies of the man and his work. In so doing, I found it necessary to explore the naturalistic foundations of comicality and narrative, to explain why certain words, phrases, or scenarios might be funny and worth hearing and repeating.

While I hope to have given a full account of the necessity of humor studies' adoption of a comprehensively naturalistic, and thus cognitive, approach, as well as its applicability to the literary arena, there is, of course, ever room for further research and expansion. As I finish writing this thesis in the spring of 2013, we are entering an exciting era of neuroscientific study, including most recently a presidential directive to map the human brain, similar to the DNA-mapping of the Human Genome Project of the 1990s; and I am confident that we will soon understand more about specific areas and processes of comic activation in the brain and, thereby, gain a more complete picture of the nature of mirth. In the meantime, I encourage literary scholars to test the theory presented in this paper against other famously funny writers and works, against the humorous tone in Chekhov's later stories and his plays, against others of his early "little things." As scholars, we should be open to using all available means at our disposal when analyzing the literary and determining its aesthetic value; an interdisciplinary, even empirical, vantage only offers more nuanced readings. Thus I have here applied the scientific method to Chekhov's formative writings in order to achieve the most objective interpretation: presenting an hypothesis, formulating a method for testing the hypothesis, and subjecting the hypothesis to a counter-example observation that could potentially prove it false. I invite others to repeat this experiment of sorts and determine the validity of the theory and the approach, thereby testing its empirical verity.

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Abstract

While most critics agree that Anton Chekhov is a funny writer and much critical commentary about his comedic techniques identifies *how* Chekhov is humorous, none examines *why* readers find him so. Using the tools of cognitive science, this paper explores the cognitive processes behind humor and narrative, as well as Chekhov's exploitation of them for comical effect in his early short stories – namely the very concise and blatantly humorous “Kids,” “Grisha,” “Vanka,” and “At Home” – and uncovers, in these early writings, the origins of his celebrated and oft-imitated authorial legacy.

Anton Chekhov; cognitive literary criticism; comedy; humor theory; short story theory

“Of things Russian, I love now most of all the Russian childlike quality of . . . Chekhov. . .”
-Doctor Zhivago

While most critics agree that Chekhov is a funny writer and much critical commentary about his comedic techniques identifies *how* Chekhov is humorous, none examines *why* readers find him so. Using the tools of cognitive science, I aim to explore the cognitive processes behind humor, as well as Chekhov’s exploitation of them for comical effect in his early short stories, and uncover, in these early writings, the origins of his celebrated authorial legacy. According to Matthew Hurley and his team of humor theorists, humor “must have been designed by evolution to perform some substantially important cognitive task, since it is ubiquitous in human beings, and its activity is powerfully rewarding” (62). Hurley’s recent work explains recognition of the comic as an important cognitive adaptation for checking individual and collective epistemic correctness. As Hurley asserts, our physiology rewards the successful discovery and abandonment of false belief with mirth, but only if the realization is relatively harmless and occurs too quickly for the misassumption to be consciously rejected. Thus the briefer a potential opportunity for comicality, the better the chances of the event’s actually being comical.

The short story, then, appears to be an ideal medium for inducing humor. Moreover, short narratives and humor apparently foster sociality by their very natures, inspiring collective merriment in or judgment of the challenges facing isolated, usually marginal, figures (O’Connor). Both short stories and comicality exhibit prime methods for sharing knowledge about others and the physical environment, and when working in tandem, the resulting comic short story can become a powerful replicator of cultural information. Anton Chekhov’s oft-dismissed early career, in the years before 1888, is marked by stories notably both briefer and more blatantly comical than those associated with his later phase of creation – narrative

characteristics that, I will argue, are related. Four such stories, 1886's "Kids," "Grisha," and "Vanka," and 1887's "At Home," demonstrate the epistemic power of the comic short story as well as Chekhov's artistic development into a master of the ironic realist narrative. Using the enduring cultural impact of the humorous short narrative, Chekhov forcefully addresses the need for human understanding and empathy amid the shifting landscape of the age of industrialism, creating a like-minded authorial lineage.

I. Still Laughing after All this Time: A Brief History of Modern Humor Theory

**Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana."
- Anthony G. Oettinger**

But before embarking on what may seem to be the comically grandiose quest to explain the cognitive foundations of humor, its inherent relationship to short narrative, and Chekhov's use of and growth through the genre of comedic short fiction, it is imperative to define terminology – to fully set up the punch-line of the argument, so to speak, lest the joke be on me. As we move toward an examination of humor and Chekhov's usage of it in his early writing, we should always be mindful that, for our purposes, the comic should not be confused with the comedy genre of drama, nor with the comedian, but rather should be viewed as any occasion that produces a degree of mirth, whether or not laughter results, which, as we will determine, stems from cognitive reward processes for detecting falsified belief. But I begin my examination of the comic from the view afforded atop the shoulder of some of the giants of modern Western humor theory – Bergson, Freud, Bakhtin, Koestler, and Frye.¹

Modern humor theory draws from the fundamental notions of these five theorists, whose work offer explanations of the triggers of comicality and its function in human society. The

range of notions proposed by the theorists place humor in roles as diverse as upholder and punisher of social and cultural norms, as a psychic release from those very norms, as a prime vehicle for protest, or as a societal unifier. While each contains elements that can be verified empirically and neuroscientifically, every theorists' ideas also contain propositions that are evidently fallacious when viewed in the same light.

Henri Bergson's 1900 *Le Rire* rings in the twentieth century and sets the stage for modern examinations of the comic. He sees comicality as the result of an audience's perceived notions of a person's physical and mental inelasticity (for example, slipping on a banana peel and falling robs one of physical autonomy). In his account, freedom of body and mind amounts to seriousness, while rigid automation provides the recipe for humor. Bergson thus posits laughter as a purely social phenomenon, as it "appears to stand in need of an echo" (3). Of necessity, laughter is communal, and likewise it must exist both in the domain of solely human responses and as an emotively indifferent and insensitive response. Each of Bergson's three central premises concerning comicality support one another, and thus each must be true in order to support any of his claims. Laughter at the expense of un-autonomous individuals (for instance, those who slip on banana peels), according to Bergson's principles, takes the form of social correction, prodding the object of derision into proper societal action and seriousness, and if sympathetic feeling is present, the sentiment "is a very fleeting one" (96). Thus, John Parkin labels Bergson an "aggression" theorist (44), for, in Bergson's view, an audience will always laugh at the bodily and mentally bound, and therefore inferior, person. In this way, society agonistically asserts norms and punishes deviants.

While Bergson views humor as a way for society to uphold cultural values, Sigmund Freud, in his 1905 *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, proposes that the comic instead

releases individuals from the repression of societal dictates. As M. Gelkopf and M. Sigal explain, “Humour according to Freud is an affect releaser . . . allowing the expression of sexual and aggressive tension in a socially acceptable and anxiety-avoidant way” (qtd. in Parkin 38). Humor also makes possible a degree of societally sanctioned psychic freedom merely in its ability to condense meanings and reduce mental effort in understanding, for example in the way that puns make use of single words or expressions to convey multiple and often vastly dissimilar meanings. Focusing mostly on jokes and puns, Freud believes that they stem “from the realm of the unconscious” (20) as an involuntary response to the psychological pressures imposed on the conscious self. Yet, whereas Freud’s notion of humor liberates the laughing individual, the comic is still perceived as stifling to the victim of the joke, who is seen as inferior to the joke teller and to the audience. Psychological differences, for Freud, ground any recognition of the comic, and “a comparison of another person with one’s self” (89), while acknowledging, consciously or not, “the difference between [the comic subject’s] empathetic expenditure and that of oneself” (189), is crucial to humor. Laughter, in this view, will always be in the face of physical and psychological adversity, and if a degree of sympathy occurs in the minds of auditors, it will always be quickly replaced with a feeling of superiority over such adversity. Whereas, unlike Bergson, Freud’s account of humor need not be socially corrective, the two concur that comicality produces sentiments of superiority in an audience.

Parkin notes that, while Bergson and Freud are commonly considered “the founders of modern humor theory” (37), Mikhail Bakhtin should be more widely recognized for his melding of Bergsonian aggression and Freudian release. In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin produces a model of the comic which views humor as a social phenomenon that both agonizes and relieves tension, his notion of the “carnavalesque,” which pits oppressed groups against their

cultural oppressors. Bakhtin's carnivalesque humor, gleaned from his observations of the social reversals of medieval Carnivale season, is "not an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event" (qtd in Parkin 101), but rather a shared experience of mirth directed against the powers-that-be, which aims not to assert the superiority of the downtrodden, but to equalize subordinate and dominant sectors of a culture through occasional reversals of roles and norms. Thus, ultimately, in a Bakhtinian account of the comic, humor is socially unifying and not contentious.

A contemporary of Bakhtin, Arthur Koestler, lays out a framework for explaining humor in *Insight and Outlook* (1949) and expounds upon his theories in *The Act of Creation* (1964). Like Bakhtin, Koestler combines Bergsonian notions of aggression with Freudian notions of release, for he sees humor as the result of aggressive biological impulses and the consequent discharge of adrenalin. According to Koestler, humor exists, along with science and art, as one of three modes of creativity. His notion of "bisociation," the surprising likening of unlike objects and ideas, comprises the value and potency of each for the human mind but precludes any overlap among his trio of modes. For instance, because art often fosters sympathy, the sentiment is absent from the domain of humor. He begins to investigate a biological basis for humor and its "survival value" (qtd in Parkin 168), deeming it repressive and thus biologically unsatisfactory, because it channels the natural urges to kill or to copulate into socially acceptable comic avenues. For modern humans the comic stems from the evolution of a primitive impulse to defeat an opponent, mitigated by civilized society; thus, humor is solely a human phenomenon.

Northrop Frye's 1957 *Anatomy of Criticism* attempts to classify modes of literature, relegating the comic to those on the low art portion of his categorical spectrum. While more serious high art, such as "myth," "romance," and the "high mimetic," respectively represents either divine characters, super-human characters, or admirably heroic characters whose

demeanors and deeds are elevated above actual people and leaves little room for humor, those literary modes on the lower end of Frye's scale – namely the “low mimetic” with its recognizably human figures (including the genres of comedy and realistic fiction) – provide fertile ground for comicality. Because Frye asserts a relationship between literature and human rituals and specifically between the comic and the ritualistic, physical play as an act and as a rite becomes associated with the lower humorous arts. Following this, Frye's cultural foundations for the comic posit this phenomenon of low art forms as a transmitter of social values through enforcing comic punishment. Frye's conception of humor sees comicality as serving a socially punitive function, but he still allows for – indeed mandates – space for sympathetic reactions and motivations in an audience. Frye's model positions the comic as an outlet for social release and catharsis, and thus, Frye sees humor as communal once the comic figure has been punished by the social derision of laughter. For Frye, humor is welcoming and socializing, for “the theme of the comic is the integration of society” (qtd in Parkin 182).

From Frye's conception of the comic, Parkin extrapolates three separate categories of humor. Both “satire” and “parody” create comicality on the basis of the diverging values of a comic character and his or her audience, with satire punishing those who deviate from social and ethical expectations and parody instead celebrating rebels. By contrast, the “ironic” can contain both satirical and parodic elements and is dependent not on different values but on disparate identities; the humor of the ironic comic figure results from “a clash of identities deriving specifically from the fact that he does not belong in the clan we have adopted” (Parkin 212). Frye's work, like Freud's work before him, creates this important distinction, allowing the comic to be conceptualized fundamentally as a “clash” of mental states.

These five theorists provide the foundation for modern humor theories and the avenues that conceiving the comic have followed since. However, as shall be apparent, elements of their work stand or fall in relation to cognitive research of the years since their theorizing on how and why the mind processes humor. In the pages that follow, I hope to illustrate the various fundamental insights and oversights of each theorist as well as the efficacy of a cognitive, naturalistic approach to humor. Bergson's theories of humor's punitive role, following a line of thinkers from Aristotle to Hobbes, demonstrate the social nature of humor, while Freud rightly argues that, while humor is communal, it is often realized individually, as well. Freud also correctly identifies the empathic nature of comicality, if only momentarily. Although Bakhtin, like Bergson, fallaciously believes humor to be inherently social, his ideas about humor's societally unifying role stand the test of time. Koestler's conception of bisociation, while incorrectly painting humor as devoid of empathy, provides the groundwork for what may be considered the strongest current explanation of humor, epistemological incongruities in an individual's worldview; and his location of the comic in biological processes moves humor theory in a naturalistic direction. Finally, while Frye may be wrong in his seemingly low regard for physical play, he does recognize its relationship to comicality, and his identification of the "low mimetic" mode of literature, with its realistically human figures and comic potential, and of the "ironic" mode of humor and its identity-based jocularities will prove valuable to this examination of the comic short story and Chekhov's work in the genre.

A cognitive and naturalistic approach to the comic illuminates the fundamental function of humor in the human species and reveals comicality's triggers in the human brain. Taking the best of these theorists' ideas, those that remain cogent in light of the intervening decades of research in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, helps in formulating a model of humor

applicable to the competing current theories of comical occurrences. As Hurley et al. observe, today's theories of the comic tend to cluster around one of six schools of thought. *Superiority theory* holds that mirth attends "the recognition or sense that we have some level of superiority or eminency over some other target, the butt of the joke, as we say, or the protagonist in some humorous episode" (40). Arguably, each of the five modern humor theorists would support this claim to one extent or another – Bergson's model of aggressive and punitive laughter at the non-autonomous and thus inferior individual, Freud's psychic catharsis framework in which triumph over an opponent could permit mental release, Bakhtin's carnivalesque overthrow of culture, perhaps Koestler's bisociative humor if the comic victim's defeat be incongruous, or Frye's view of the comic's role as mediator of group values and punisher of deviants. Freud's theories maintain a direct influence on the current *release theory* of humor as a relief from psychic tensions present in civil society, and both Frye's conception of the comic as ritual release and Bakhtin's of the alleviating reversals of the social order in carnivalesque humor fit well within this category. *Incongruity theory*, which argues that humor occurs upon the resolution of an initially perceived set of mismatched words, ideas, or scenarios, owes much in modern times to Koestlerian bisociation. Bergson's notion of laughter directed at unexpected physical rigidity, Freud's identification of humor in homonyms and other verbal or semantic play, and Bakhtin's examples of the culturally powerful brought suddenly low with the carnivalesque all exhibit traces of incongruity. *Surprise theory* is similar to incongruity but distinctive in its focus on the emotional response of surprise, rather than on the mental perception of incongruous elements, and it is concerned with humor resulting not when the unanticipated happens but when the anticipated does not happen. *Play theory* also allots special attention to comic response, in this case laughter itself, attempting to explain how humor evolved out of play; perhaps Frye's

connection of the comic and physical ritual would be applicable here, and then only marginally, and Freud also identifies a relationship between play and humor. Finally, *biological theory* posits humor and laughter as adaptive traits in certain cognitively complex species, another line of reasoning about which the five theorists have little to add, treating laughter as merely a social communicator of humor.

Clearly, each of the above current theories and modern humor theorists contributes a great deal to any attempt of understanding the nature of the comic. What may be even more apparent to the reader at this point is the need now to simplify into a grand yet uncomplicated theory of the comic, one based in natural, biological causes, which illuminates the potency of comic narratives, especially those crafted by a master storyteller.

II. He Who Laughs Last Thinks Slowest: The Cognitive Basis of Humor

If you're reading this and don't think it's funny, maybe your timing is off.

From a naturalistic point of view, humor increases both biological and social fitness. According to Hurley's team, humor springs from the recognition and resolution of a false epistemic commitment, or belief, corrected in the safety of self-generated mental spaces. These mental spaces allow individuals to make assumptions and predictions pertaining to sensory information, and they facilitate moment-to-moment consciousness, ever harkening "back to pertinent recent perception, desire, or emotion" (101). In terms of expediency and energy economy and the always immediately relevant nature of conscious thought, the mind operates in an on-demand fashion, responding to stimuli instantaneously, in a phenomenon known as "just-in-time spreading activation" (JITSA). JITSA allows the brain both to draw from past beliefs and to create new ones in real-time from sensory input, "produc[ing activation] in rolling response to

the flow of stimulation arriving from [the]senses” (107). Thus, cognition necessitates the on-the-spot and often unwitting belief formation essential to fostering humor. Mirth occurs upon the safe realization that a committed active belief, covertly entered into one’s epistemological reality, is incongruous with external reality – a mental process that is continuous and biologically imperative. For example, with the joke “What is the difference between an English major and a park bench?,” the attentive listener or reader confronting this question for the first time will begin forming notions about the possible solution, searching through memory for associations with both objects as JITSA initiates. The auditor makes, or attempts to make, connections, unconsciously committing beliefs in a safe imaginary space. When the joke teller reveals the answer, “A park bench can support a family of four,” the folly of the auditor’s incorrect conjectures is apparent, and this non-threatening epistemological revision toward correctness can cause mirth². A belief must be both actively and unknowingly held for the full impact of the comical to be activated. However, “this activity [of testing belief] has to compete with other activities for time and resources in the brain” (120). Therefore, the reward for the successful and harmless use of this great amount of mental energy and the important resolution of mental incongruity must be commensurate with the risky use of resources, as the pleasure of mirth is.

Humor, as Kathleen Hart observes, operates beyond consciousness, working through the “adaptive unconscious: a collection of mental modules that perform independent functions outside of conscious awareness” (478). Previous experiences, especially those of the mentally, physically, and emotionally formative years of early childhood, color the way that youths and adults react to new situations, particularly those with some past experiential precedent. Neuroscientific data of the last few decades has shown that much of our daily experience and processing of experience happens without our conscious knowledge. According to researcher

Sam Harris, “activity in the brain’s motor regions can be detected some 350 milliseconds before a person feels that he has decided to move. Another lab recently used fMRI data to show that some ‘conscious’ decisions can be predicted up to *10 seconds* before they enter awareness” (103). Because so much of our immediate decision-making occurs on an unconscious level, evolution has provided minds with a pleasurable response to the discovery and amendment of fallacious moment-to-moment thoughts and actions. Thanks to human cognitive flexibility, our species can often alter our unconscious reflexes and suppositions and “respond promptly and effectively to changing situations, instead of relying on habitual assumptions” (Hart 481). And registering humorous information from the surround capitalizes on and rewards any consequent epistemic revisions, enhancing “our survival fitness precisely because it permits us to enjoy the sudden change of cognitive state that occurs when our mental patterns or expectations are violated” (479). Perceived incongruity, akin to what Koestler understood as the phenomenon of “bisociation,” slows down unconscious mental processes and allows for changes in thought patterns, and mirth exists as evolution’s pleasurable compensation for this potentially risky rethinking.³

In order to alter incorrect assumptions and beliefs and thereby learn, humans and other animals must be able to safely test them in recreational activities. James Caron asserts that physical play produces some of the earliest triggers for comicality. Play, especially in primates, functions instrumentally in the learning process by soliciting “response to novelty in the environment” (263), introducing incongruities into previously held knowledge – in other words, obviating an epistemic folly through new experiences. Smiling and laughing, contrary to Bergson and Koestler’s theories, can be found in species other than humans. For example, rats emit a gleeful squeak when tickled, and Darwin himself explains in his *Expressions of the Emotions*

how “if a young chimpanzee be tickled . . . a . . . decided chuckling or laughing sound is uttered” (qtd. in Storey 159), at the same time physically demonstrating what Robert Storey calls “the open-mouthed display” (159) of non-aggression and playfulness (fig. 1). Such open-mouthed displays and the vocal emissions that often attend them occur during play, the pleasure of which fosters learning in higher primates.

Furthermore, Storey notes that “empirical research now recognizes the importance of mastery in dealing with the incongruity of jokes” (162) and posits the pleasure felt in such mastery to be a primitive form of the comic. According to Storey, “Laughter is an expression of the pleasure of mastery, what Hobbes called, rightly, ‘a *sudden glory* arising from some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves,’ . . . although that eminency is not necessarily a social one” (167). Comicality, then, arises not as a strictly social phenomenon, as Bergson, Bakhtin, and Frye maintain, but as, perhaps, the by-product of individual cognitive processes. At its root, humor advances the interests of the individual rather than society, for “selection ultimately benefits the gene, and functionally it usually benefits the phenotype; its benefit to the group is an incidental affair” (Storey 158). Brian Boyd likewise asserts the importance of this “pleasure of mastery” in developing humans, for “pleasure is nature’s way of motivating creatures to perform an activity *now* – and, in the case of play, to expend energy eagerly in mastering skills and acquiring strengths they might need later in urgent or volatile situations, in attack, defense, and social competition and cooperation” (179). Because human infants and youths constantly confront novelty and thus irregularity in their epistemological constructions of reality, play and laughter are crucial to gathering formative information about the surround and to remembering emotionally and physiologically positive knowledge gained in recognizing incongruity. As Boyd claims, “Play constitutes a first decoupling of the real, detaching

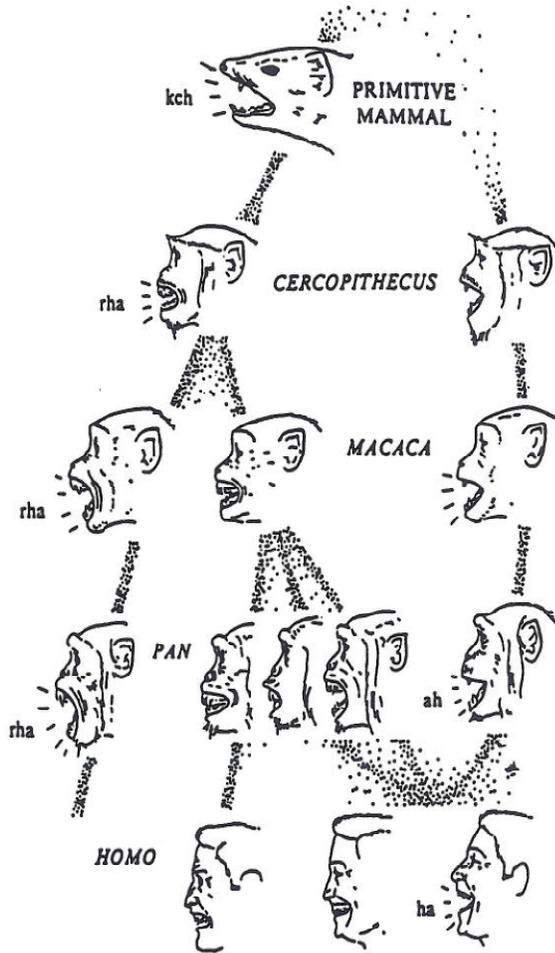


Fig 1. Storey’s “phylogenetic development of laughter and smiling” from the “silent bared-teeth display to the “relaxed open-mouth display” of play (161).

aggression or any other ‘serious’ behavior from its painful consequences so as to explore and master the possibilities of attack and defense” (180). Recreational activities teach survival skills, foster sociability, and pass on culture, while encouraging experimentation and innovation. And Hurley’s and his colleagues’ model explains why play and, thus, humor operates in this fashion.

Although highly subjective, humor also occurs upon placing oneself in another’s mental or physical position. Because humor essentially results from the physically and psychologically non-injurious correction of mistaken belief, one can find comicality in either first- or third-person recognitions of such false assumptions, respectively either experiencing the revision of epistemic folly personally or vicariously experiencing another’s falsified beliefs. Whereas basic humor (puns, riddles) operates on a personal level, more developed humor (jokes, comical stories) often makes use of humanity’s proficiency with theory of mind, what cognitive cultural critic Lisa Zunshine calls “*mind reading*” (194), in order to experience the mirth of another’s epistemic discoveries. While first-person humor, according to Hurley et al., was crucial to biological survival in the ancestral past, third-person humor carries the added cultural advantage of being integral to sociality, as a method of transmitting valuable information to group members. Due to theory of mind, or the attribution of “beliefs, desires, and other mental states and actions to *other* minds” (Hurley 144), we can empathetically imagine another’s outlook, and “[w]e may find things funny either if they are invalidated mental spaces in our own knowledge representations or if we recognize that they are invalidated mental spaces for another entity’s knowledge representation” (Hurley 145).

Storey asserts that laughter and smiles initiate from individuals’ “protective responses” to “agonistic encounters, the laugh closely tied to predatory attack, the smile to displays of both defensiveness and fear” (162), with both aimed at maintaining an organism’s fitness; but they

have evolved into social “‘nonagonistic signals’ . . . , the laugh into the pleasurable acknowledgment of safety during bouts of boisterous ‘mock aggression or play’ . . . , the smile into a gesture of friendliness and appeasement” (162). Moreover, “both are ways of either expressing or inviting a form of social relation that allows one superordination of autonomy (that is, mastery) without risking the injury or defeat of conflict” (162). And social, third-person humor, though still crucial to personal mental and physical development, has evolved beyond the strict parameters of biological fitness. Although smiling and laughing in play originate to increase fitness within the group, according to Caron, their evolved triggering mechanisms signify a “freedom from biological instrumentality” (271) into the realm of cultural aesthetics. Furthermore, even within the context of sociality, Caron observes a marked change in humor’s role in culture. Comicality’s initial interpersonal function, as a “social lubricant” (257) to relax group tensions, transforms into what he believes to be its current chief purpose of inciting disruptions of the social order – an aim proficiently accomplished in, for example, literature.

From its biological roots in the correction of epistemic folly and the subsequent enhancement of adaptive fitness, humor quickly assumes a social role, as the insights of comic scenarios become an important aspect of communication and the transmission of cultural norms. The same cognitive processes that make possible human theory of mind abilities – and, by extension, the comprehension of interpersonal humor – in creating purely mental spaces for processing imaginative data, give rise to the sharing of information in storytelling.

III. Have You Heard the One About...: The Roots of the Comic Short Story

“the more modest and uncomplicated the plot turned out to be the more deeply it affected. . .”
- Bykovski, “At Home”

Narrative emerges to relay personal and social knowledge to others. Storytelling allows extensive informational exchange and a deeper knowledge of another human's thoughts and desires, both essential to retaining solidarity among large groups of people (Sugiyama). Through stories real and fictional humans can imagine another's trials and triumphs and vicariously experience them. The shorter the shared experience, the quicker an audience can respond and, when necessary, adapt their own outlook.

While examining the primitive foundations of the comic experience and its powerful use in short stories, it is useful to explore the roots of the genre, of fiction, of narrative itself. Just as play, in particular the pleasure of mastery and discovery in humor, allows for rethinking and revision of thought processes, the human capacity for episodic memory and the narrative representation of it encourage epistemological change. As Boyd asserts, we retain episodic memories "partly so that we can reevaluate past incidents if we encounter new information that challenges our evaluations, and perhaps revise our understanding of this part of the past" (154). And storytelling permits us to relate these experiences and evaluations to other people. "With narrative," writes Boyd, "we could, for the first time, share experiences with others who could then pass on to still others what they had found most helpful for their own reasoning about future actions" (166). In the same way that play aids developing humans in testing actions and consequences in relative physical and psychological safety,

as we mature, the conflict between others' narratives and our own helps us understand in emotionally charged ways the differences among people's perspectives on events. We can learn such lessons partly through real-world narrative, through being caught up in the conflict of real-world story and counterstory; through the negotiations of play, which like real-world events

involve learning; and in fiction, which does not involve active participation but can be powerfully and pointedly shaped to dramatize the force of narrative and counternarrative. (173-74)

Likewise, maturity directly corresponds with the detection of incongruity, which necessarily involves prior experience and thus anticipation of congruous experiences. Both fiction and recognizing incongruity, then, are crucial to mental growth. Fiction strengthens our ability to view life from multiple vantages and perspectives, “and this capacity in turn both arises from and aids the evolution of cooperation and the growth of human mental flexibility [;] but maximum flexibility, in humans as in others, depends on play” (176). Moreover, Boyd claims that children “understand their *own* understanding of things as they come to understand others” (147). So fiction stems from both the innate human desires to relay personal and social information and to play; and empathy, the ability to detect and relate to another’s drives and desires, is the cognitive result.

Neuroscientific research of the early 1990s and the discovery of an empathetic region in the brains of certain animals lend credence to Boyd’s assertion. Specific neurons in the premotor cortex, dubbed “mirror neurons,” activate not only when an animal acts but also upon its seeing or hearing of an action. Cognitively, humans and some other species go through the same processes of actions as others, particularly conspecifics, who are observed or heard of performing an act, usually without ever physically moving themselves. In Boyd’s account, “through mirror neurons and other systems we are wired for emotional contagion. We half imitate what we see others doings, although an inhibiting mechanism stops us from actually moving while we simulate. We automatically have empathy for others. We know how they feel because we literally feel what they are feeling” (163). Moreover, according to Boyd, the result of

mirror neuronal activity, theory of mind, may be responsible for the “unprecedented expansion of the human brain” compared with other animals, for the seat of cognitive empathy, the prefrontal cortex, exists as “the brain region most disproportionately enlarged in humans” (149). Fiction, then, actively engages the very human capacity for empathetic imagining by expanding our vicarious perspectives and experiences. Such narratives comprise a form of “social play” in imaginative spaces, allowing for the safe learning and honing of social skills, especially those “of low cost and high immediate benefit for teller and audience, like jokes, which [are] brief, portable, and steeped in the pleasures of surprise” (207).

Brevity and concision, for both narrator and auditor, are of the utmost importance for the successful transmission of fictional information. Narratives arise under the same conditions as the comic and for similar purposes of gaining and spreading personal and social knowledge. Moreover, especially in the ancestral past, both forms of communication operate within the same constraints of time and energy. Expediency is crucial when survival literally depends upon speed and the proper allotment of mental and physical resources. Thus, as short story theorist Charles May asserts, “[i]n the ancient history of narrative as a mode of communication, the short story precedes the long story as the most natural means of narrative communication” (“Nature” 131) and is the genre “which has remained closest to the primal narrative form” (“Nature” 139). Compression is a desirable quality for quickly relaying information to group members, whether disseminating knowledge serious or comic; therefore, the short story’s primacy both as a genre and as the narrative form best suited for comicality relates to its very shortness.

As Hurley and his team demonstrate, timing is crucial to creating the maximum humorous effect in a comic scenario. The longer a joke or a comic narrative runs, the more time

an audience possesses to either correctly anticipate solutions, or else, perhaps, to lose interest in the rambling set-up. According to Hurley et al.,

[d]uring the process of JITSA, to make an improper commitment an audience will often require just enough time to make the necessary faulty inference without enough time to double-check it. Wait too long, and activation [of memories and stored knowledge in the brain] spreads further, increasing the chance that some conflicting piece of information will bring the key belief into epistemic doubt. Once that occurs, the chance for humor is doomed. (276)

Consequently, humor fundamentally relies on compactness.

The short story must also be succinct. Brevity is essential to the short story as well as to comedy, and conciseness of narrative, according to Allan Pasco, “constitutes the most significant trait of [the short story] genre” (127). Both proficient comics and short story writers focus intensity, and committed attention, into narratives whose successes necessarily pivot upon brevity and concision. Humor works by providing just enough information to induce a mind to make a faulty inference, leaving one to wrongly conjecture until the resolution, the delivery of the punch-line. Short stories function similarly, economizing narrative and forcing the reader to fill in any gaps imaginatively. Chekhov himself acknowledges the importance of length restrictions to the reader’s experience, intuiting that “in short stories it is better to say not enough than to say too much, – because – because I don’t know why!” (“The Short Story” 198) and simultaneously demonstrating the potential for humor in a short span of words. Wendell Harris observes that “short fiction could be anecdotal – it [is] obviously well adapted to the humorous

contretemps” (187). Indeed, as the two can be seen to have co-evolved as narrative communicants, the short story is quite exquisitely “adapted” to the comical.

The short story very often conveys the disruption of societal protocols, primarily through its carnivalesque portrayal of individuals. Characters in short stories overwhelmingly represent members of, as Frank O’Connor famously states, “submerged population groups” (6), embodiments of “the Little Man” (3). The vast majority of central figures in short stories experience social isolation, in one form or another, occupying the margins of society. According to Good, the short narrative’s “field is the periphery of society” (157), and, consequently, the genre promotes sociality as it depicts the pitiable plight of the loner. The short story, he claims, “is a social form which gathers together a group of auditors, and in that way is directed against solitude; but the corollary is that it often tells the story of a solitary or outcast individual or group” (156). So the short story, like the interpersonal sharing of the comical, while originating as simply a means to relate information, now seems to serve the function of social cohesion and societal criticism.

IV. The Sad Comicality of Life

**First of all I’d get my patients in a laughing mood – and only then would I begin to treat them.
- Anton Chekhov**

Chekhov scholar Ronald L. Johnson identifies Chekhov’s as
a transitional author between nineteenth-century short fiction,
which is characterized by the humorous anecdote and the romantic
tale, and the modern short story, a form that enabled the literary artist
to explore the nature of the individual man in the modern world.

Within the development of Chekhov's own short fiction, many aspects of the rise of the modern short story can be traced. (ix)

Like the short story itself, Chekhov's writing encourages new modes of literary expression, and his influential hand in the evolution of the short narrative can neither be critically denied nor ignored. Arguably one of the greatest short story writers in history and decidedly one of the most prolific, Chekhov crafts stories which broaden the genre's parameters immensely with what May refers to as his "much discussed 'objectivity' and yet 'sympathetic' presentation" ("Chekhov" 210). His distinctive, oft-imitated style demonstrates a realistic but "sympathetic" understanding of the human condition, as he imbues his fictional worlds with a keen sense of the absurdity of life.

To encourage a certain empathic sentiment in his readers, Chekhov uses humor in his writing, honestly depicting the ridiculously sad members and mechanisms of Russian society. Vera Gottlieb invokes "[t]he evidence of the plays, the stories, and [his] letters [to suggest] again and again that what he called 'the sad comicality of everyday life' was the subject, while the treatment was a strong dose of comedy . . . and with that, the hope for a better future" (233). Vladimir Yermilov joins Gottlieb and a host of literary commentators in affirming that "[a]ll the facets of Chekhov's writing reveal the comic as one of the main features of his genius" (161); even those "writings that are not humorous . . . [possess] a latent comicality – one revealing the unreasonableness of the kind of life depicted – the *comedy of life*" (150). The man whom many name the father of the modern short story, Chekhov breathes fresh life into the genre with his humor-driven sympathetic realism. Yet, while his role in shaping the short story cannot be overstated, scholars tend to overlook a period of his writing life that is formative to his own career.

Despite the emphasis placed on his comedic techniques, critical attention rather often ignores the first stage of Chekhov's authorship, the years until 1887, when the young artist wrote very short, usually blatantly comic pieces for the small sums offered in local humor papers. Many justify this exclusion by citing Chekhov's self-deprecation of his early craft, for he alleged not to apply much thought to these "little things" (Petrovsky), as he called them. In his letters of the time, he confessed to practicing a "careless and casual approach to writing" (qtd. in McVay 23) and attacks his own second collection of stories as "a hotchpotch, a disorderly jumble of trivial works" (qtd. in McVay 29), suggesting it be titled "*Trifles*" (qtd. in McVay 24). Some scholars, such as D. S. Mirsky, themselves dismiss the early stories as a childish "sanctuary of every kind of vulgarity and bad taste . . . lack[ing] wit, restraint, and grace" and "mere trivial buffoonery" (294). Further, Mirsky and others fail to observe much of Chekhov's sympathy at all in his youthful writing, believing these narratives' "dominant note is an uninspired sneer at the weaknesses and follies of mankind [;] and it would need a more than lynx-eyed critic to discern in them a note of human sympathy and of the higher humor that is so familiar to the reader of Chekhov's mature work" (294).

But in the "little things" can be found the building blocks of Chekhov's mature craft. Perhaps such a watchful scholar would not so readily take the known prankster Chekhov seriously, when he discredits his earlier work in such facetious terms. Perhaps the "lynx-eyed" inquirer can see that his "mere trivial buffoonery" is not actually as silly or innocuous as its childlike exterior might suggest. As Harvey Pitcher notes, "Chekhov's early writing . . . is where one must look to find the origins, serious as well as comic, of Chekhov's mature art" (90). Pitcher observes that the critical disregard for the writer's early work stems partially from "its uneven quality and partly because of the sheer volume of material for consideration" (90);

however, “the accepted division between ‘early’ and ‘mature’ Chekhov is too neat and artificial: it absolves the critic from the need to look for continuities in Chekhov’s writing and to see his work as a whole. [Moreover,] its effect is particularly unfortunate in the case of Chekhov’s comic stories” (95). Scholars all too often assume that Chekhov grew almost overnight into a master writer at the end of 1887. Instead, these early writings, “too easily dismissed as little more than an expression of youthful high spirits, as something he soon outgrew,” actually “do feed his later work at several points and in unexpected ways” (95). Johnson agrees that “one method of tracking Chekhov’s evolution as an artist during this period is to examine his humorous stories,” which “chart Chekhov’s shift toward a realist sensibility” (18). Turning to some of his early work illustrates that, perhaps, he used his diminutive comic stories to speak large and sobering truths about his society, and that the humorous techniques wielded and sharpened before 1888 continued to serve him throughout his life as a writer of masterful fiction.

While Chekhov’s early comic stories may appear to be written simply for amusement, a closer examination of the author’s views on comicality signify a deeper tone of desire for social change. His life does not conform to the idea of a writer coldly poking fun at others, as Mirsky assumes of the early stories. The son of an ex-serf, forced to spend his childhood and teenage years minding his dictatorial father’s grocery store between school hours, Chekhov experienced the mirthlessness of labor exploitation first hand and at a young age. Moving at nineteen years old to Moscow, the young writer found himself in a capital city on the verge of industrialism. The masses of former serfs, liberated in 1861, supplied a nigh inexhaustible labor reservoir for the rising middle class, and by this time, according to Roger Portal, “industrial development [had] . . . taken monopolistic forms of organization which brought on the beginning of a sclerosis not only in the economic domain, but also in that of society” (170). These former chattels,

though “legally emancipated,” still “remained tied to the larger estates, and many faced a difficult situation without the goodwill of the landowners” (Johnson 10). In Moscow, where production becomes the chief civic virtue, Chekhov saw workers, young and old, commodified and disregarded, and he felt moved to chronicle their plight. From 1883-85, he published a series of articles in the comic city-wide publication *Fragments of Moscow Life*, condemning “the position of shop assistants and factory workers, the high death-rate amongst the poor, the insanitary conditions of the houses and streets . . . the uncivilized manners of the merchants, the absurd customs of the middle class” (qtd. in Gottlieb 228-29). As a doctor, Chekhov personally worked to improve the meager existence of the peasant workforce and “treated several hundred and earned just one ruble” (Chekhov qtd. in McVay 20), offering aid in a medical as well as a literary capacity. As a writer from a serf lineage, he empathized with the lower echelons of late-nineteenth century industrial Russia and provided them a voice amidst the “absurdity” of bourgeois indifference, highlighting society’s ills with a sense of humor. His stories narrate snapshots of common people, from the self-important state official to the lowly schoolboy, the world-weary elder to the world-wondering toddler.

One life-long grievance, which Chekhov comically and sensitively explores in the various forms of childhood in his stories, concerns his absurd dual boyhood role as both a jovial student and as a grave grocer, the “sad comicality” of his own youth. Ernest J. Simmons notes how “[m]emories of those endless hours of servitude in his father’s grocery store always remained with Chekhov” and shaped the “lives of the children of his tales” (6). While, as Boris Gorshkov claims, “[c]hildren make up a surprisingly large segment of the industrial labor force” (2), which “outraged many great writers of the era, including Anton Chekhov” (1), those fortunate enough to attend classes learn to obey and internalize societal norms of social

hierarchy. Like Chekhov, so many children of industrial Russia experience “a childhood that was no childhood” (Chekhov qtd. in McVay ix). Therefore, he commits much of his authorial powers to representing the unspoken-for submerged social group of young people of all classes, and several of his early stories demonstrate, with characteristic narrative irony, the necessity of allowing boys and girls to play, to experiment, and thereby to increase their epistemic fitness and quality of life.

Pitcher, who argues that Chekhov’s comedic techniques in the early stories extend to his later mature work, identifies four categories of early Chekhovian humor. The “situation” method of humorous storytelling “takes the basic comic situation and elaborates on it with a wealth of comic detail” (90); the “subversion” approach “exposes and holds up to ridicule the whole authoritarian, hierarchical arrangement of society” (92); the “surprise” method involves guiding readers down garden paths, creating expectations, and abruptly “turn[ing] everything on its head” (93) with “an unexpected ending, a comic twist” (93); and the “absurd” method consists of anything from the “‘ridiculous’ to [the] ‘bizarre’ and ‘grotesque’” (94).

My argument builds on Pitcher’s four Chekhovian comic classifications, analyzing one early story about children that I deem to fit more or less under each category – though the lines distinguishing each group are often porous and ill-defined⁴; for example, each of these stories is subversive to a greater or lesser degree. While I recognize the subjective nature of such analytical choices, indeed the highly personal cognitive nature of comic realizations and responses in general, I will argue that humor can be objectively identified by the presence of its component elements. In other words, if the building blocks of comicality – the safe recognition and correction of epistemic folly on the unconscious level – are present, potential for mirth is also empirically testable, whether or not we are moved to actual laughter and jocularly (although

laughter exists as an obvious sign of mirth in these stories' fictional characters). As Hurley's team asserts, "when entering a fiction, we commit to assumptions as true-in-the-fiction," due to human theory of mind capacities, "and this is commitment enough to lay the groundwork for humor" (193). In the following short analysis of four of Chekhov's early stories about children – 1886's "Kids," "Grisha," and "Vanka," and 1887's "At Home" – using Hurley et al.'s explanation of the comical, it is apparent that Chekhov's brand of comicality in these early examples of his writing is inextricable from the realistic ironic narratives synonymous with his name.

Chekhov's writings, telling tales of common people, can be viewed as examples of realistic fiction, Frye's "low mimetic" class of literary productions, and those dealing with children characters, who "clash" mentally with adult readers, can be considered under the rubric of Frye's "ironic" mode of comic stories, the mode which can blend satire and parody and is concerned with conflicting identities. In these writings about children, who obviously cannot articulate at the same level as adults, Chekhov delves into the consciousness of the adolescent "Little Man," providing children a voice and effecting empathy in the minds of his grown-up audience. As the adult readership imaginatively identifies with the child subjects, especially via the "social lubricant" of the comical and of fiction, the cognitive mechanisms behind "mind reading" impulses activate to foster a degree of sympathetic response. Chekhov's comedic passages and punch-lines in these early narratives are calculated for their joint comedic and subversive impact and exhibit the revolutionary power of discourse in the comic short story.

V. Funny Little Things

**Writers are the children of their age.
- Anton Chekhov**

“Kids,” “Grisha,” and “Vanka,” all published in 1886, demonstrate the relationship between brevity and sustaining humor. All three very compact narratives offer single punch-lines, set up from the story’s opening to its ending, by virtue of their very shortness. Each also contains several smaller instances of humor within the larger story-spanning joke, in which fictional characters feel what Hurley’s team refers to as first- and third-person comicality, comicality experienced personally or else directed at another through “mind reading.”

In “Kids,” an example of “subversion” humor in its critique of bourgeois values, four adolescent siblings and the young son of their maid gather together to gamble over a card game. When the maid’s son, Andrei, tries to wiggle his ears, “mov[ing] his eyes, lips, and fingers and think[ing] his ears are moving too [, t]here is humor all round” (*Collected Works* 29) over his epistemic folly, a demonstration of third-person mirth. Later, Andrei and the youngest child, Alyosha, experience first-person laughter in the wake of a non-injurious play fight. “Grisha,” which I identify as one of Chekhov’s “absurd” humorous narratives, tells the story of a two-year-old’s first excursion out of “the world which was called the nursery” (*Short Stories* 32). “Until that day the only universe known to Grisha” (*Short Stories* 32) consists of his nursery, and so his initial encounter with the outside world fills him with “a boundless perplexity” (*Short Stories* 32). Eventually, Grisha’s first-person amusement over “[t]he sunlight, the rumbling of the vehicles, the horses, the shiny buttons, all . . . so amazingly new and yet unterrifying” becomes so great “that his heart overflowed with delight and he began to laugh” (*Short Stories* 33). “Vanka,” a story of comic “surprise,” relates the tragic life of the eponymous beaten and maltreated young apprentice shoe-maker and his written plea to “Grandfather in the village” (*Short Stories* 52) for salvation. He imagines his drunken, merry trickster of a grandparent, continuously finding humor at the expense of others, pinching maids or offering them snuff and

then “being overcome with delight [and] breaking out into jolly laughter” (*Short Stories* 50), instances of third-person mirth at their momentarily falsified feelings of comfort.

Hurley’s model of the comic explains that in each scenario the cause of comicality arises from the safe recognition of active false beliefs, made either by the characters in question themselves, or else by others at their expense. Moreover, in each instance, non-lethal physical and imaginative testing, experienced either in the first- or the third-person, produces humor. Chekhov purposely emphasizes the importance of playfulness and learning through experience – whether in the honing of mental, physical, and social skills in the relatively harmless squabbling of “Kids,” the delight of vastly expanding one’s epistemic horizons in “Grisha,” or the potentially innovative and downright impish fun of pranks in “Vanka.” But regardless of the source of humor from the fictional characters’ perspectives, any mirth felt by the reader is ultimately other-centered, activated by human “mind reading” abilities. As the stories progress, each comic aside maintains the empathy that accompanies both the vicarious experiences of fiction and third-person humor. The comic crescendo achieved at the end of but a few pages becomes all the more effective in its consciousness-raising aims through the strongly affective nature of the brief comic story.

Chekhov’s final punch-lines in these three narrative-length jokes, bolstered by the comic and empathic tone running throughout the first- and third-person humor in their respective setups, appear carefully weighted for ironic impact. Each, as a unit of humor, rests on the comic final scene. In all three of these “little things,” Chekhov deliberately balances tone and timing to achieve the maximum subversively comic effect, crafting them to realistically represent societal absurdity and the need for change. Due to their shortness, he can create narratives composed of a

single, humorous joke. And with the power of the comic short story and its strong ties to group cohesion, Chekhov's "trifles" evoke empathy in the minds of his audience.

First, in "Kids," Chekhov introduces the reader to each child-participant's mentality and motivation for playing the game of chance, plunging the audience into their outlooks in turn. Grisha, a nine-year-old, "is already in the preparatory class at school, and regarded as the biggest and cleverest" (27). He plays with the most verve, stealing "anxious and envious glances at the others' cards" (27), because "[h]e is playing entirely for the sake of money" (27). Grisha is the oldest and thus, interestingly, the most concerned with monetary gain; and a "fear of losing, envy, and financial considerations that fill his shaven head will not let him sit still and concentrate" (27). Anya, a year younger, also maintains a sharp eye on the competition, but "the money does not interest her. Success in the game is for her a question of vanity" (27). Conversely, the two younger siblings are unconcerned with increasing either finances or prestige. Six-year-old Sonya plays solely "for the fun of it. Her face glows with sheer delight. She laughs and claps her hands, no matter who wins" (27). The youngest, Alyosha, "a plump chubby little chap," plays for "neither greed nor pride. He is just thankful that no one has sent him away or put him to bed" (27). Alyosha, the most cognitively underdeveloped because of his age and, therefore, the child with the most to learn from reconciling incongruity, participates in the game "for the inevitable squabbles which it produces. He just loves it, if one player hits another or says something rude" (27), because he can gain the most knowledge from play-fighting exchanges. The fifth player, their maid's son Andrei, "does not care at all about the money or who wins, for he is completely absorbed in the arithmetics of the game" (27). Chekhov explores each competitor's viewpoint and reason for playing and thus allows the reader access to their epistemic outlooks.

The children's underdeveloped sense of the adult world sets up the humor of the difference in theirs and the audience's view of reality and competition. When conflicts arise, the young opponents are quick to forgive. Five minutes after Alyosha and Andrei's play-fight over accusations of cheating, "the children are laughing again and chatting peaceably" (30). And following their gambling game, itself falling victim to a carelessly lost kopeck and the children's sleepiness, the young competitors abandon their oppositional roles and sprawl out peacefully atop one another in exhaustion, and the story's driving comedy resides in the last lines, which call attention to the greediness and "the uncivilized manners of the [bourgeois] merchants" (*Fragments* qtd. in Gottlieb 229). At the end of "Kids," "Mother's bed is an interesting sight. Sonya is fast asleep, with Alyosha snoring next to her. On their legs lie the heads of Grisha and Anya, also fast asleep. And Andrei, the cook's son, is curled up there too" (32). Social class means nothing to the children and the fictional fact that "the kopecks [,] which have lost their power until the next game" (*Collected Works* 32), exist as mere playthings runs counter to the reader's expectations for a game of chance with monetary stakes, and we experience third-person humor over the absurdity of divisive avarice – especially when unnaturally fostered in children. "Kids," an example of "ironic" humor, demonstrates the clash of adult and child mentalities, as it parodies grown-ups' love of money and celebrates the child-like rejection of financial lust.

Secondly, "Grisha" pokes fun at "the absurd customs of the middle class" (*Fragments* qtd in Gottlieb 229) with a running joke criticizing bourgeois child-rearing. Chekhov depicts the bounded world of two-year-old Grisha, and thus the boy's limited worldview. Before his outing beyond the walls of his home,

the only universe known to Grisha had been square. In one corner of it stood his crib, in another stood Nurse's trunk, in the third was a chair, and in the fourth a little icon-lamp.

If you looked under the bed you saw a doll with one arm and a drum; behind Nurse's trunk were a great many various objects: a few empty spoons, some scraps of paper, a box without a lid, and a broken jumping-jack. In this world, besides Nurse and Grisha, there often appeared Mama and the cat. Mama looked like a doll, and the cat looked like Papa's fur coat, only the fur coat didn't have eyes and a tail. From the world which was called the nursery a door led to a place where people dined and drank tea. There stood Grisha's high-chair and there hung the clock [. . .] From the dining-room one could pass into another room with big red chairs; there, on the floor, glowered a dark stain for which people still shook their forefingers at Grisha. Still farther beyond lay another room, where one was not allowed to go, and in which one sometimes caught glimpses of Papa, a very mysterious person! (32)

From the toddler's perspective, readers get a sense of his naïve, functional mind and how it perceives his little, enclosed environment. Much like the clock "made only in order to wag its pendulum and strike" (32), Mama's and Nurse's purposes "were obvious: they dressed Grisha, fed him, and put him to bed; but why Papa should be there was incomprehensible. Aunty was also a puzzling person. She appeared and disappeared" (32). Papa's busyness and lack of interaction with Grisha make his function in Grisha's life less apparent to him, and the same is true for Aunty, whose absences after visits to the house confuse the toddler and leave him searching for her "under the bed, behind the trunk, and under the sofa, but she was not to be found" (32). Thus, to Grisha and his confounded and confined conceptions, everything about the bustling life outside of his nursery, in which "there are so many Papas and Mamas and Aunties that one scarcely knew which one to run to" (32) and in which "the funniest [because] oddest things of all were the horses" (32), is cause for amazement and often amusement.

Grisha confronts a vastly expanded worldview, his empathic mirror neurons activate, and he responds with mimicry and play-testing that give rise to occasions for third-person humor directed at him. After seeing a squadron of marching soldiers bearing down on him and Nursie, he mirrors her unthreatened emotive state – because “Nursie neither ran away nor cried, so he decided it must be safe” (32) – Grisha also mimics the troops: “He followed the soldiers with his eyes and began marching in step with them” (32). Immediately afterwards, upon spying two large cats bounding across the street, Grisha copies the cats, feeling “that he, too ought to run” (32). Later, when Nursie shares a drink with friends, Grisha feels compelled to drink too and is allowed a sip of the alcoholic beverage. This imitation leaves a less-than-satisfying taste in his mouth than perhaps expected, providing other-centered humor to the cook, who can mentally place herself in the child’s epistemic position, and thus, while Grisha “screwed up his eyes, frowned, and coughed for a long time after that, beating the air with his hands, . . . the cook watched him and laughed” (34). Each new experience provides a learning opportunity for the two-year-old, as he adds to the knowledge that he can draw upon as he grows.

Much of the comicality in “Grisha” resides in the differences between an adult’s outlook and the toddler’s, especially in Grisha’s inability to verbalize his mental states. He wails about and at a frightening, fiery stove and speaks in the broken and limited syntax of the very young, for “somehow his tongue would not obey him” (33); and he can only frown, cough, and wave his hands around to express his dislike of the alcohol given to him. Back at home, Grisha attempts to relate “to Mama, the walls, and his crib where he had been and what he had seen,” but he conveys his discoveries “less with his tongue than with his hands and his face; he showed how the sun had shone, how the horses had trotted, how the terrible oven had gaped at him, and how the cook had drunk” (34). Due to his ironic position of in-articulation at such a

tumultuousness and momentous occasion, and because his parents are absent from his overwhelming first outing into the hectic, exciting world full of horses and soldiers and terrifying stoves – Nursie accompanies him, rather than his Mama; and his busy Papa, “a very mysterious person!” (*Short Stories* 32), scarcely participates in his life – the toddler fails to communicate his excitement to them, is misread as feverish, and, “shaken by his first impression of a new life apprehended for the first time[. . . is] given a spoonful of castor-oil by his Mama” (*Short Stories* 34). The story ends thus, once the comedy of his many epistemic upheavals builds to an effectively empathetic level, imparting the punch-line to the reader at Grisha’s expense, with a criticism of middle class absentee parenting. But fundamentally, this “ironic” narrative satirically pokes fun at the mentally underdeveloped toddler as he integrates into the society and world around him.

Finally, the drollery of “Vanka” also hinges on its closing revelations, as the reader realizes that the pitiful young apprentice’s desperate letter will never reach its intended destination. The story largely alternates between the nine-year-old worker’s writings about his horrid conditions in the Moscow shoe shop and his imaginings of the blissful life of his younger years in the village, and readers can clearly see the unfair differences between the boy’s tearful misery and his grandfather’s “smiling face and eyes bleary with drink” (49), as well as the discrepancies between Vanka’s naïve understanding of the world and an adult reader’s experience. While the old man “was probably standing at the gate at this moment . . . fooling with the servants” (50), the boy’s existence is bleak. Vanka is underfed and under-rested, and, when he commits mistakes, “the master beats [Vanka] with the first thing he finds” (50). His life compares more to that of his grandfather’s dog Eel, “beaten within an inch of his life every week” (49), than to the elder man’s life, and Vanka writes that his own existence is “a miserable

life worse than a dogs” (51). Irony lies in the grandfather’s conversely jovial state and his ignorance about Vanka’s poor position as well as in the boy’s naïveté about the workings of the adult world, from the mysterious ways that the stores in the big city maintain stocks of fish and meat and guns, to the curious operation of the postal service.

The comedy of this other-centered humor must compete with the tragedy of Vanka’s predicament, and thus the pay-off of this story-long joke depends upon maintaining a light atmosphere regardless. Therefore, Grandfather provides comic relief, and the final words about the contented dog Eel, whose resilience metaphorically mirrors Vanka’s, allow for the assumption that the boy too will “[survive] it all” (*Short Stories* 49). Thanks to authorial manipulation of mood, the humor here works on the reader’s assumption that Vanka’s falsified beliefs, although unbeknownst to him, occur in an environment safe enough for survival. Moreover, in this sadly comical atmosphere, the grandfather can play while the grandson cannot. The reader’s “mind reading” capabilities, already forging empathic ties with the protagonist through well-written interpersonal humor, can clearly detect that “the position of shop assistants and factory workers” (*Fragments* qtd in Gottlieb 298), especially the children among them, warrants attention. As “Vanka” demonstrates the differences between the grave, adult world of labor exploitation and its unfortunate imposition on the child’s mind, parodically celebrating the downtrodden protagonist’s spirit and condemning the cruelty of the society that would allow such injustice, the story exists as an “ironic” narrative,

Though still humorous and short compared to Chekhov’s later stories, “At Home,” exists as a counter-example of sorts and a piece marking Chekhov’s artistic transformation from the brief and blatantly comic to the longer and more serious story. Published in 1887, the final year of his “trivial” phase, “At Home” is lengthier and thus employs a different comedic tack, which

becomes the hallmark of his later sympathetic ironic realism. Similar to the other three, this story of “situation” humor, which narrates a state attorney’s attempts to dissuade his seven-year-old son from smoking, uses its characters’ recognition of humor to comic effect. In several instances, the father, Bykovski, laughs at his son Seriozha’s as well as at his own expense. Seriozha’s lies provide third-person humor, for Bykovski himself knows the truth and, thus, his son’s folly in believing that the deception will work. And Bykovski amuses himself twice at the thought of “the little tyke with a cigarette in his mouth . . . enveloped in clouds of tobacco smoke” (*Short Stories* 52) and repeatedly at his own inability, as a life-long defender of moral authority, to reason with his son – examples of first-person mirth over the recognition of his own fallacious beliefs.

Much of the story’s humor rests in the ironically divergent worldviews of the father and son, as Chekhov carefully conveys them. Bykovski’s legal mind produces ethical and logical argumentation to convince Seriozha of the dangers of smoking for a young boy. When Seriozha lies about his tobacco use, Bykovski’s law background compels him to attempt an ethical appeal: ““You used to be a good boy, but now I see you have grown bad and naughty”” (54). Seriozha is unfazed and unconvinced, so Bykovski then explains the logic behind personal possessions and the wrongness in taking another’s belongings, such as his tobacco. ““People only have a right to use their own things,”” he explains. ““[I]f a man takes other people’s things he – he is bad. [. . .] For instance, Miss Natalie has a trunk with dresses in it. That trunk belongs to her, and we – that is, you and I – must not dare to touch it, because it isn’t ours”” (54-55). Again, Seriozha fails to grasp his father’s adult reasoning, explaining that his father is welcome to any of his pictures and toys, so Bykovski tries a last appeal to logic. Seriozha must stop his smoking or else possibly develop consumption, like his late Uncle Ignatius, who ““[i]f he hadn’t smoked [, . . .] might

have been living today” (55). All the while, the child can hardly follow the grown-up’s persuasions, instead asking his father how glue is made, drawing pictures, and wondering about Uncle Ignatius’ violin and his uncle’s and mother’s recent deaths. No matter what Bykovski’s legal training and educational opinions have prepared him for, he concedes that, in dealing with children, “[n]othing can be accomplished by logic and ethics” (56). Not even an ethical appeal for Seriozha to give his father his word of honor that he will cease using tobacco is effective, because Seriozha’s childish experience provides him with no conception of the notion of honor; and instead, he plays with the language: “‘Wo-ord of honor!’ sang Seriozha. ‘Wo-ord of ho-nor! nor! nor!’” (57). The pair’s mentalities are vastly different, providing readers sources of other-centered comicality.

The reader, of course, finds third-person comicality in the occurrences of Bykovski’s laughter at himself and at the boy, as well as in the miscommunications that plague the father’s and son’s exchange. The two fail again and again to understand one another, as Bykovski lectures the boy on legal and educational principles, and Seriozha’s mind wanders from the origins of glue to death and violins to his drawings, until the father improvises a childish parable of warning and reaches his son. Bykovski is only understood by Seriozha when he allows himself to think like a child, to open himself up to imaginative storytelling. Mirsky and others rightly claim “one of Chekhov’s favorite and most characteristic themes [. . . to be] the mutual lack of understanding between human beings” (295), a motif used in “Kids,” “Grisha,” and “Vanka,” but further developed in “At Home.” And, indeed, the chief humor in “At Home” can be found in the series of misunderstandings between the father and son, wherein the absurdity of contemporaneous legal and pedagogical practices is scrutinized, and the ironic emphasis again resides in playful, imaginative learning. Satirically poking fun at Seriozha and encouraging his

integration into a social set of values while parodically celebrating his childish rejection of adult educational legalism, “At Home” demonstrates the combination of the two humor modes made possible in “ironic” narratives.

Again, in this connected string of humorous communication errors, Chekhov orchestrates comedic elements for empathic impact. However, unlike the other three stories, this longer narrative does not possess the concise simplicity of a joke nor the disarming quality of a punchline. Owing to its lengthiness, in comparison to the others, “At Home” cannot sustain a single running gag, and so Chekhov instead uses the lessons learned in his briefer comedies to explore the divergent mindsets and to create related instances of comicality, particularly in the story’s miscommunications, which produce its irony. Because “At Home” and, by extension, any other comic short story is short, moreover, the comical and subversive air it creates is sustained throughout. Regardless, Chekhov assuredly takes care to shape each of these four early comic short stories into subtly persuasive arrangements, and the ironic incongruity between the children’s perspectives and the adult readers’ itself offers opportunities for humor.

Chekhov had a tremendous appreciation for comicality⁵, and these early stories illustrate his skill in producing mirthful narratives. Illustrated through this sampling of stories are the various merits and shortcomings of current humor theories and the ideas of certain modern theorists that have shaped them, and thus the validity of the outlined approach that consolidates all thinking of the comic under one naturalistic umbrella.

All four short narratives contain some elements of *surprise* for a reader, but the unexpected exists as a necessary but insufficient indicator of the comic. A feeling of *superiority* need not be present at all, yet an incongruous victory in the mind of the victorious would be ripe for humor. Indeed, while feelings of eminency can arguably be detected perhaps in the other

children's laughter at the physical non-autonomy of Andrei as he fails to wiggle his ears or in Bykovsky's mirth at his own cleverness in the face of his son's lies, can we definitively say that unempathic superiority is the source of comicality in these and other instances in the stories? Surely, Andrei and Alyosha do not laugh condescendingly at one another in the wake of their mock fighting, when no clear victor exists; and readers do not likely find the kids' disregard for the kopecks funny because we believe our sensibilities better, but rather perhaps the opposite is true. Grisha does not laugh at his own discoveries with an air of superior scorn any more than readers feel dominance over the poor, medicated toddler at the story's humorous conclusion. Readers assuredly do not find comicality in "Vanka" because of feelings of superiority over the pitiful lad. Bykovski's laughter at Seriozha springs from affection and empathy, not eminency. Does he really revel in thoughts of triumph over the beloved son he attempts to instruct? Does an audience feel superior to the filial pair?

Similarly, *play*, physical and mental, can be seen to be integral to humor, though not a complete explanation of the comic. Each story represents physical and imaginative recreation in a positive light, but the idea of play itself cannot explain why, for example, laughter follows Andrei and Alyosha's wrestling but is not a constant reflex during the entirety of the children's mock gambling game. Like play theory, *biological humor theory* explains only *why* the ubiquitous human comicality trait works evolutionarily, falling short of identifying *how* it works. Though Freud and his modern disciples of the *release* school correctly view humor as the result of unconscious processes, they fail to see the comic as the product of cognitive honing – a process we have seen throughout the analysis of the stories – but rather as a reliever of the stresses of cognition. *Incongruity theory* seems the most comprehensively plausible line of humor thought, as each story exhibits in the detection and correction of epistemic follies, yet it

too does not go far enough toward describing how incongruity functions cognitively. Instead, the model of comicality formulated by Hurley et. al, positing that humor occurs upon the safe obviation of a fallacious active belief, committed in the moment, most completely accounts for the comicality present in these early stories and throughout Chekhov's career.

Besides a cognitive, naturalistic approach to humor, each humor theory and theorist observes the stimuli for comicality or the effects of the stimuli, rather than the more fundamental examination of the mind's processing of such stimuli. While Bergson incorrectly sees laughter as inherently social, aggressive, and unsympathetic, he does see rigidity as incongruous and thus humorous. Freud also wrongly leaves little room for empathy in his model and sees mirth as a psychic release, yet he correctly identifies the intimate relationship of comicality and play, the importance of brevity and the condensation of meaning for impactful humor, and humor's basis in unconscious processes in the individual. Bakhtin may fallaciously paint the comic as solely a communal phenomenon, but he also recognizes humor's potential for subversion and social unification. At the same time that Koestler erroneously posits comicality as unsympathetic, aggressive, and biologically unsatisfying, he is right about humor having a fundamental "survival value" and the underlying incongruities of bisociation which largely make humor possible. Frye may not hold play in high aesthetic esteem, and yet he correctly sees its important relation to the comic. Hurley's and his colleagues' cognitive model of comicality demonstrates the importance of humor to mental flexibility in recognizing and revising epistemic incongruities, as shown in the analyzed instances of first- and third-person humor in Chekhov's fictional characters and real-world readers.

Though he tended to neglect overt moral pronouncements, Chekhov's use of the comic short story, a narrative mode with a heritage of societal disruption, subtly engages his audience's

cognitive capacity for social empathy. In the stories examined, empowered by the potent capacity for human empathy made possible by our brains' imaginative responses to fiction, Chekhov carefully (and playfully) crafts his narratives, employing the full force of the rebelliously humorous to suggest that children be given opportunities to play, to learn and grow, to laugh all on their own terms. Moreover, these four stories demonstrate the intimate connection of shorter narratives and comicality: the earlier, more truncated three are able to sustain a single, story-length joke, while the slightly longer "At Home" incorporates the epistemic power of the narrative-spanning joke into even briefer recurrent comic motifs – a method Chekhov masters as he grows in years and his short stories grow in length.

VI. Opposite Attraction: Incongruity and Cultural Transmission, or Chekhov and Beyond

Criticism seems to be badly in need of a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole.

- Northrop Frye

Nothing travels like a good joke. The potential for individual and collective epistemic change, especially when safe and pleasurable, inherent to both humor and narrative, makes jokes and comic stories highly spreadable within and without societies. While many researchers posit explanations for such items of cultural transmission, with Richard Dawkins's theory of "memes" itself as perhaps the most transmitted, most theorists fail to completely account for why units of cultural information pass on from generation to generation. However, observing the phenomenon of cultural transmission from a fundamentally naturalistic vantage reveals why certain ideas and

artifacts endure and, perhaps, why Chekhov's comedic techniques in his early writings have persisted in the works of many short story writers across time and space.

A cognitive approach to humor demonstrates that humans, organic “anticipation generators” (Hurley et al. 120), are hardwired to seek out the incongruous and comical – a biological must, which has evolved to promote interpersonal interaction and to simultaneously engage and foster empathic “mind reading.” Tracing the origins of both humor and the short story demonstrates the co-evolution of nature and culture, as human sociality, and consequently survival, necessitates and produces the brief comic narrative. This form of communication, dependent on brevity and simplicity and subversive by definition, contains the ingredients for a powerful cultural item. According to Hurley's team, “[j]okes are memes evolved for enjoyment. . . . Those that evoke the most enjoyment – of any kind – are the most likely to be transmitted, provided that they are structured in memorable (if possible, *unforgettable*) ways” (214). Furthermore, “[m]ost *jokes* these days, in fact, have their humor inextricably bound together with pleasures of other kinds,” such as the short fictional experience, which “makes it a more potent item” (214). Dawkins explains information transmission through the notion of “memes,” in which “[j]ust as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (192). Hurley may be correct in his assertion that comic narratives are highly transmittable, but what he and Dawkins view as a memetic process can maybe be better conceptualized when, like the humor theory advocated in this paper, expressed on the fundamental and causal level rather than as neat and pure replication.

As Dan Sperber asserts, “A causal explanation is mechanistic when it analyzes a complex causal relationship as an articulation of more elementary causal relationships,” and a naturalistic explanation assumes “that these more elementary relationships could themselves be further analyzed mechanistically down to some level of description at which their natural character would be wholly unproblematic” (98). Such a naturalistic approach can perhaps illuminate how and why Chekhov’s techniques, begun in his early stories, have been emulated, and thus clarify their impact on literary history. Sperber describes cultural transmissions, like fiction, indeed all culture, as a process of manifesting and spreading “public productions,” meaning “any perceptible modification of the environment brought about by human behavior,” including physical objects, as well as “bodily movements and the outcomes of such movements” (99). The human brain, evolved through a process of natural selection to detect and seek out the incongruous and humorous, creates and responds to these public productions of cultural information; and

Typically, public productions have mental representations among their causes and among their effects. Mental representations caused by public productions can in turn cause further public productions, that can cause further mental representations and so forth Public productions are likely to have many mental representations among their causes, and, conversely, every link in a causal chain may be attached to many others, both up and down the causal path. (99)

While a memetic framework posits all cultural transformations as the result of “a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (Dawkins 1992), Sperber believes imitation itself to comprise only one of two avenues of diffusion, with communication making up the other. And

so, in its perception and allowance of only a linear process of ideas “leaping from brain to brain” (Dawkins 192), in a purely imitative manner, Sperber sees memetics as severely limiting to an account of culture and cultural transmission. The meme model, in his view, can only contend with ideal circumstances of unadulterated replication and has little to say about the complexity of various influences which may go into the creation of a mental representation and, in turn, a public production.

According to Sperber, mental representations of an idea, an action, or a tangible object hardly ever reflect perfect replication: “representations don’t in general replicate in the process of transmission, they transform . . . as a result of a constructive cognitive process” (101).⁶ Whereas the memetic view, modeled after Darwin’s genetic theory of sexual selection, holds that “cultural representations are self-replicating representations” (101), Sperber exposes the fundamental flaws of this notion. Unlike cultural replication, genes do not mutate upon every transmission, for, if they did “not just occasionally, but all the time, they wouldn’t be replicators any more and selection would be ineffective” (102). Thus, “the very possibility of cumulative effects of selection,” essential to genetic mutation and organic evolution, “is open to question” (103). Moreover, rather than being the pure replica of one source item, or, as is the case with sexual reproduction, of an amalgamation of two parents, public productions are the outcome of any number of sources, “some of which have played a much greater ‘potential’ role than others” (104). Although the memetic schemata ignores how such influences might be chosen or internalized, seeing “human organisms as agents of replication or synthesis, with little or no individual contribution to the process of which they are locus” (105), Sperber’s model considers both human intention and the environmental reasons behind unconscious transmission.

As argued earlier in this paper, the recognition of the incongruous in mental, imaginative spaces is crucial to humor and, more fundamentally, survival; therefore, “human brains use all the information they are presented with not to copy or synthesize it, but as more or less relevant evidence with which to construct representations of their own” (106). Because cultural transmissions of public productions and mental representations appear to consist of incremental transformations rather than pure replications or aggregate mutations, Sperber explains the phenomenon in terms of “attractors.” An attractor, non-material and not “attracting” anything physically, can be conceptualized as “an abstract, statistical construct, like a mutational rate or a transformation probability” (111). Furthermore, “to say that there is an attractor is not to give a causal explanation; it is to put in a certain light what is to be causally explained: namely, a distribution of items and its evolution, and to suggest the kind of causal explanation to be sought: namely, the identification of genuinely causal factors that bias micro-transformations” (111). And these attractors, operating on the elementary, mechanistic, and thus naturalistic, level, result from the dual influence of the environment and the parameters of the mind. “The environment determines the survival and composition of the culture-bearing population; it contains all the inputs to the cognitive systems of the members of the population, it determines when, where, and by what medium transmission may occur; it imposes constraints on the formation and stability of different types of public productions” (113). The mind, then, “determines which available inputs are processed, how they are processed, and which information guides behaviours that, in turn, modify the environment” (113). Both the mental make-up of a culture and its environmental contours, continually impacting one another, work together to determine attractors that affect the proliferation of public products, transformed from generation to generation on a micro scale.

Because, as I maintain and as Sperber argues, “human cognitive processes are geared to the maximization of relevance[, m]ost factors of relevance are highly idiosyncratic, and have to do with the individual’s unique location in time and space” (114). Humor (especially what is perceived as congruous or incongruous) and cultural transmissions are highly subjective and dependent upon cultural context and the minds that comprise the given culture. Irina Sirotkina notes the dominant function of literature in Russian culture approaching the twentieth century, how the literary “created the image of Russia both inside and outside the country [and how] it dramatically shaped expression of fears and aspirations” (vii). Furthermore, “foreigners came to see the Russia of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and Russian men and women modeled themselves on literary characters” (vii). In an environment and in minds ripe for the influence of attractors of a literary kind, Chekhov’s stories exist in a time and place ideal for internalization and transmission. If Hans-Robert Jauss is correct, literary information is best handed down when it defies an audience’s “horizon of expectations,” (1412) a jarring of auditor’s anticipated standards of genre, literary content, and lived experience. In industrializing Russia, according to Pitcher, Chekhov’s style was decidedly “un-Russian . . ., since he was not rambling and verbose, but laconic, with an offbeat, understated sense of humor” (89), “an unconventional approach . . . which could only have occurred to someone in whom a taste for the comic-absurd was highly developed” (101). His affinity for the incongruous, first evident in “those early stories, in which Chekhov *deliberately* set out to surprise his readers, misleading them with *false expectations in their minds*” (100, emphasis added), and the Russian public’s tendency to internalize and emulate literature work together to unsettle expectations, and thus, with such a fertile environmental and mental setting, to engage human empathy and to change the short story genre and conceptions of the social landscape the world over.

As any comedian knows, even with good material, delivery is just as important as timing. While the subversive potential of the short story is readily available to any writer, Chekhov, using the power of the short comic narrative in his “trifles,” teaches people the value of a realism that sympathetically recognizes the sadly comical absurdity of life. And his early comic narratives about children show the foundations of this approach. Even the worst scenarios – castor oil for a toddler, or a working lad’s physical and psychological abuse at the hands of his trade master – can be subject to a kind of comic ridicule and used for subversive laughs at society’s expense.

Although he wrote to shed light on and change his industrializing Russia, Chekhov and his comically subversive techniques endure across time and space. According to May,

his most immediate impact has been on the three writers of the early [nineteen-]twenties who have received the most critical attention for fully developing the so-called ‘modern’ short story – James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, and Sherwood Anderson. And because of the wide-spread influence of the stories of these three writers, Chekhov has thus had an effect on the works of such major twentieth-century short story writers as Katherine Anne Porter, Franz Kafka, Bernard Malamud, Ernest Hemingway, and Raymond Carver.” (“Chekhov” 201)

And this continues, as each new generation of writers incorporates the techniques of their predecessors, in a line stretching back to turn-of-the-twentieth-century Moscow. As Boyd asserts, whether a narrative is thematically standard in a culture, or thematically unexpected, especially as in the case of Chekhov’s Russia, where basic human sympathy was often a rarity, “[s]torytellers’ appeals to values genuinely shared will meet with easier acceptance and will help

entrench what the community esteems and welcomes: individual values that are also valuable for the group . . . and cooperative values like sympathy” (196). Chekhov’s legacy, carried by those inspired by his methods, consists of showing the world the progressive potential of sympathetic, ironic realism through the enduring power of comical, concise storytelling. Chekhov, the subtle subversive and father of the modern short story, lives on in his masterfully-crafted ironic writings, starting with his early “little things,” and in the kindred works of his authorial children.⁷

End Notes

- 1 In selecting which theorists to use, I refer to John Parkin’s *Humor Theorists of the Twentieth Century* and his recognitions of their importance to the field. Additionally, each theorist examined puts forth ideas pertinent to this thesis.
- 2 As part of the central humor theory adopted in this thesis demonstrates, comicality hinges on resolving epistemic incongruity, the perception of which depends on experience and thus, often, cultural context. The level of mirth experienced in learning the answer to this joke or any other will then rely on what the auditor believes to be subjectively congruous and incongruous as well as the amount of attention and false conjecturing devoted to discovering the solution.
- 3 While Koestler notes the similar bisociative properties present in the “Haha” of the comic and the “Aha!” of discovery (which he reserves solely for the realm of science), Hurley explains the commonalities among the humorous detection of incongruity and such detections that evoke little or no mirth: “The contrast between mirth and *Aha!* Is quite sharp in many instances, but the boundary is porous between humor and such problem-solving artifacts as puzzles and riddles. After all, many jokes *are* riddles in form, and many puzzles exploit the denial of rather well-hidden assumptions in their solution[;] and when they do, solving them – or giving up and being told the solution – is often accompanied by laughter” (125). Moreover, often “related pleasures are very similar to mirth, such as other epistemic emotions: the joy of insight, the *Aha!* Of discovery or problem-solving, and the appreciation of wit” (214).
- 4 Pitcher also offers a compelling argument for the continuity of Chekhov’s comedic techniques from the early short stories to the later stories and plays in his essay “Chekhov’s Humor.”
- 5 Pitcher thoroughly demonstrates Chekhov’s appreciation for humor and incongruity; for example, “From a general study of his life Chekhov emerges as someone who preferred the company of people who were lively and amusing, unpredictable and good fun, and who were not inclined to take themselves too seriously or to attach great importance to their own

celebrity; [he was] someone who enjoyed comic banter and was forever inventing comic nicknames for himself and other people, assigning them comic roles and weaving comic fantasies around them” (88-89), or “He was especially attracted to the odd and incongruous. Physical incongruities caught his eye” (89).

6 The exact composition of jokes and comic narratives will likely change when others retell them, perhaps relative to a given audience or the teller’s remembrance of motivation for remembering and retelling; as long as the comic components of the set-up and punch-line remain, so will the humor. In any case, pure replication is rare.

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