

## ДА СМРТ ДОБИЈЕ СМИСАО: ЧЕХОВ, ТОЛСТОЈ И ДАНТЕ MAKING SENSE OF DEATH: CHEKHOV, TOLSTOY, AND DANTE



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### АБСТРАКТ

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We all know that life will end. Most of us are afraid when the time for death approaches, but some brave or highly religious people remain calm at this critical moment. Three prominent authors of the past offer some insight into how we deal with the inevitable cessation of life. Tolstoy was strongly obsessed with dying for a large part of his life, and death was a frequent subject in his writings. Chekhov, no doubt contemplated death frequently because of his poor health. He was not obsessed with dying but accepted it as a necessary event. Perhaps all would agree that the purpose of natural death is to make space for the next generations, yet a premature and forced death, especially in war, is tragic. Dante posed an imaginative conclusion to the end of life that included a passage through purgatory, hell, and a variety of sins. He believed he had the solution to avoiding war. His book *Il convivio* suggests that the greatest danger to mankind comes from avarice; a person driven by such a strong desire injures others. The unequal distribution of wealth today that underlies global human dissatisfaction, and the other causes (such as, religion and cultural differences) may be considered as the greatest danger for peace. Let us hope that another strong and creative person will challenge the unchallengeable and come up with a modern formula to inspire us to wage our battles with words instead of guns. Death should be a natural event, not prematurely end of life caused by war.

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Сви знамо да живот има крај. Већина се плаши када се време смрти приближи, али има и храбрих или религиозних особа које су мирне у том критичном тренутку. Три врхунска уметника нуде увид у то како се може гледати на неизбежан крај живота. Толстој је био опседнут умирањем великим делом живота и смрт је била чест предмет разматрања у његовим делима. Због тога што је био слабог здравља, Чехов је без сумње мислио о смрти, међутим није био опседнут умирањем јер је сматрао да је смрт неизбежан догађај. Вероватно сви прихватимо чињеницу да је сврха природне смрти да се начини простор за нове генерације, али превремена смрт је, посебно у рату, трагичан догађај. Данте приказује имагинативни крај живота који укључује пролазак кроз чистиште и пакао. Сматрао је да је нашао решење да се избегну ратови. У своме делу „Гозба“ (*Il convivio*) указује на то да највећа опасност по човечанство долази од себичности; свака особа коју води таква жеља оштећује друге. Чињеница је да неједнака расподела богатства доводи до општег незадовољства, али и други фактори (нпр. религиозне и културне разлике) могу бити велика опасност по мир. Надајмо се да ће се једног дана појавити снажна и креативна личност која ће извести незамисливо и наћи модеран начин да нас инспирише да кренемо у битке речима, уместо топовима. Смрт треба да је природан догађај, а не да се дешава у рату.

## INTRODUCTION

We all know that life will end. Life and death are intimately connected, as it is nicely stated in the Bible [Genesis 3: 19]: *By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, until you return to the ground from which you are taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return* [1].

When a person is sick or very old, and the time for death is approaching, his/her thoughts are directed to life's end. Most of us fear this point, but some brave or highly religious people remain calm at this critical moment. Those who are brave accept it as a necessary event while religious people anticipate death as a passport to another kind of life, the post-mortal life. Wars account for the greatest number of people who suffer a premature death. In the early days of history, soldiers were the main victims, while in the present war, civilians have an equal or even greater chance of being killed.

This short essay highlights thoughts on death that were left to us by three great writers, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Dante.

## CHEKHOV AND DEATH

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860–1904) graduated from medical school in 1884 and started working as a physician in a suburban Moscow hospital. Eight years later, he purchased the rundown Melikhovo estate 70 km south of Moscow. He lived there until declining health due to lung tuberculosis forced him to move to the milder climate of Yalta. In Melikhovo, Chekhov saw hundreds of patients, made thousands of house calls, and fought against both cholera and illiteracy [2].

Although Chekhov was not a wealthy man, he did not charge his patients. He practiced medicine by day, but at night, he wrote masterpieces – stories and two magnificent plays, *The Seagull*, and *Uncle Vanya*. “Medicine is my legal wife, literature my mistress” are his famous words [3]. Thanks to his literary talent and his psychological approach, Chekhov enhanced both the modern story and the modern play.

In 1890, Chekhov made a long journey across Siberia to Sakhalin Island, where Russian convicts were detained. The hardships of that journey and his three-month sojourn on

the island were frightful. His account of that trip includes a moving description of the brutal beatings he witnessed. Chekhov's report made such an impression on the Russian public that corporal punishment was abolished for women in 1897 and for men in 1904 [4, 5].

During the last years of his life, Chekhov claimed to be an atheist. Despite his religious upbringing, and the fact that he observed church rituals, read about Russian monasteries, listened with enthusiasm to the ringing of church bells, wrote expertly about religious characters and analyzed religious themes, Chekhov not only had doubts about religion but plainly rejected it. He wrote *I would gladly become a monk if monasteries admitted people who are not religious, and who do not have to pray*. However, he accepted religion as a way of life, an indispensable moral code particularly suitable for a simple Russian man. Chekhov belonged to the generation of educated Russians who were ready to enter the post-religious era that began in the early twentieth century.

Death was a phenomenon Chekhov often encountered, and no doubt he contemplated it frequently because of his poor health. When his health had completely deteriorated, Chekhov and his wife Olga went to Badenweiler, a German spa in the Black Forest. *Everything has come to an end. I am going to die*, he said to a friend. On the night of July 15<sup>th</sup>, he summoned the doctor and told him *Ich sterbe* (I am dying). The doctor tried to calm him and went out to order champagne, as was the custom in those days. (An altered and incorrect version of this story has Chekhov himself ordering the champagne.) Nonetheless, Chekhov drank a glass of champagne and died [6].

Perhaps we shall never learn the real reason for his journey to Badenweiler. It may be that Chekhov, an atheist, arranged to die in a distant country, where even at the point of death, they could not send for an Orthodox priest, but only for a doctor.

### TOLSTOY AND DEATH

Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828–1910), usually referred to in English as Leo Tolstoy, was born in Yasnaya Polyana, in central Russia.

After serving in the Crimean War, he retired to his estate and devoted himself to writing, farming and raising his large family. His novels and outspoken social polemics brought him world fame. Tolstoy is regarded as one of the greatest novelists of all time.

In contrast to Chekhov, Tolstoy was strongly obsessed with dying for a large part of his life. Because of his fear of death, he developed a mystic concept of the withdrawal of the soul into a "universal soul", but this did not dispel his fear. It is not surprising that Tolstoy describes dying better than any other writer of his time. The most outstanding scenes of dying in world literature are those of Ivan Ilych, and Prince Andrey, both written by Tolstoy. *The Death of Ivan Ilych* was published in 1886; it is the masterpiece of Tolstoy's fiction. *The Death* is more than a story about death; the story leads the reader through an exploration of the reason for death and what it means to truly live.

Interestingly, Tolstoy once visited Chekhov who was hospitalized as a result of his lung disease. Tolstoy expounded upon the subject of death and life after death, even as the very ill Chekhov expectorated blood from his damaged lungs. Chekhov's response to Tolstoy's theory was that he wanted no part of such a life after his death [6]. Later on, Chekhov wrote to Suvorov, his friend and publisher, *It is terrible that after you die, you become nothing. They take you to the cemetery, return home, and begin to drink tea, and hypocritically talk about you. It is ugly to think about it*.

Tolstoy continually struggled with self-doubt and spiritual reflection, especially as he approached his own death. Over the last decades of his life, Tolstoy persistently criticized of the Russian imperial regime and the Russian Orthodox Church. He believed in Christianity based on the teachings of Christ but rejected the dogma of the Church. He was excommunicated in 1901.

In his final year, Tolstoy left home on October 28, in the middle of the night, leaving his wife, Sonya, a disturbing letter that said, *I am doing what old men of my age usually do; I wish to spend the last days of my life in solitude and quiet*. His travel by train to a distant monastery

was soon interrupted by his illness with pneumonia, and he had to leave the train at Astapovo, where the stationmaster accommodated him in his own house [7].

There was little solitude or quiet for the aging author because the news spread all over the Russia and Europe that a great man was dying. Hundreds of his admirers and reporters gathered to this village in order to catch Tolstoy's final moments. Tolstoy died on November 7, 1910, at the age of eighty-two, in the Russian village of Astapovo.

As Tolstoy had been excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church, no priest was invited to attend his deathbed. Even though Tolstoy always held a negative opinion of medicine, several medical doctors were with him in his last hours to administer various medications, including morphine, starting twelve hours before his death [7]. Humane principles dictated that physicians should keep the patient from unrelenting discomfort surrounding death. Tolstoy slipped unconscious from his life. No doubt that if he had been conscious, he would have resisted those last ministrations because he would certainly have preferred life to take its natural course during his last hours.

Modern medicine can now maintain the human body with artificial ventilation, and other assist devices. Such techniques are used in every modern medical center with access to these sophisticated life supports. It is possible to extend life artificially until there is no way for life to continue without this technology. Then, the question is whether the patient would want to be awake before life support is withdrawn and he/she is allowed to die, and who should make that decision [8]. If Tolstoy were alive today, he would likely reject modern medicine's ability to maintain life in moribund patients.

### DANTE AND THE GREATEST DANGER TO HUMANITY

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is considered the greatest literary work written in the Italian language and a masterpiece of world literature [9]. The author is often regarded as the father of Italian literature and the Italian language. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321; the exact date of

his birth is unknown) was born in Florence, and he died in Ravenna, Italy. His parents died when he was young, and a statesman, Brunetto Latini, supervised his education. Dante studied philosophy in Bologna and Padua and theology in Paris. He was a poet, linguist, and statesman.

Dante's love for a beautiful girl named Beatrice inspired his best writings. Dante claims that he carried this love for her his whole life. His outstanding works are the *New Life* and the *Divine Comedy*. The *New Life* tells (in poetry and prose) of Dante's spiritual attachment to Beatrice. She is also one of his guides in a magnificent allegorical poem, the *Divine Comedy*. The *Comedy* describes man's journey through Hell (*Inferno*), and Purgatory (*Purgatorio*), where the Roman poet Virgil is his guide, and of his search for God in Paradise (*Paradiso*), where Beatrice is his guide.

After Beatrice's death in 1292, Dante married Gemma Donati. Shortly after his marriage, he entered politics in Florence, but a hostile group exiled him in 1302. Dante was first forced into exile for two years, and when he returned to Florence without paying the fine, he was permanently exiled. He spent some time in Verona, Lucca, and Ravenna. Dante's main occupation became a study of philosophy, including the natural sciences. He believed in the potential of philosophy to improve the world, about which he wrote a lengthy book (in prose and poetry), *Il convivio* or The Banquet, for the general reader. Only four of fifteen planned volumes were completed. The book includes a series of poems devoted to the Lady Philosophy [10].

Dante died in 1321, at the age of 56, while returning to Ravenna from a diplomatic mission to Venice where he contracted malaria. He was buried in Ravenna, and on his grave, one can read his own words, or the words written by his friend, Bernardo Canaccio: *parvi Florentia mater amoris* [mother of little love, Florence].

We do not know details related to the moment of his death, but his desire to save human life by avoiding war should be highlighted. Dante's book *Il convivio* (composed c.1304–07) is considered as one of the first works of literary criticism, and it is recognized as a kind of encyclopedia of the knowledge of his time.

It contains many areas of learning, not only philosophy but also politics, linguistics, science, and history [9]. In this book, Dante suggests that the greatest danger to mankind comes from avarice. Wealth is not equally distributed, and the craving for it poses the greatest danger to humanity. Those who seek to satisfy such a strong desire inevitably injure others [10].

Dante believed he had the solution to avoid war. He suggested that the whole world and all humans should be a monarchy, one government under one ruler, and because this ruler possessed everything, he would not desire anything further; he would hold kings contentedly within the borders of their kingdoms, and keep peace among them. Dante did not influence the rulers who often prefer to solve problems militarily. However, history confirmed that in addition to avarice, a war can be caused by a variety of additional reasons, including religion, ethnic, and even language differences.

### EPILOGUE

Death should be a natural event, and Tolstoy favored the idea that each life should take its natural course. Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous architect, once said, “The longer I live, the more beautiful life becomes” [11]. But, how can humans prevent all those unnecessary, forcible deaths? Chekhov went a step further than Dante; he personally sacrificed himself when he traveled to the convict island, and as a result, drew the attention of a society that forced the authorities to implement humanitarian reforms.

Let us hope that another strong, creative, and brave person will challenge the unchallengeable, and inspire us to wage our battles with words instead of modern weaponry. Perhaps there could be found something as efficient as the method used by Chekhov. The author of this article envisioned such a result in a dream [12].

### DREAM

Last night I dreamed that I declared war  
On all the armies on this planet.  
“I have no fear of guns, bombs, or rockets.  
I have no army; words are my weapons.”

I appealed to unarmed masses  
Not to fear any kind of army,  
And I cried out:  
“Words are our weapons!”

To the armed I commanded:  
Abandon guns!  
Soldiers and terrorists, beware your  
unarmed brethren!  
The word of the people is the strongest  
weapon!

With a start, I woke unhappy that  
On this planet justice must wait.  
Will the time ever come when sober reality  
Wakes the masses from profound sleep?

Then I recalled the words of brother  
Neruda,  
A message that the majority did not get:  
“O beautiful is this planet,  
I came to live in this world.”

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