

**PEHPP 2019****Pedagogical Education: History, Present Time, Perspectives****EDAGOGICAL POTENTIAL OF THE WRITER'S  
(ANTONCHEKHOV'S) BIOGRAPHY**

L. E. Bushkanets (a)\*, N. F. Ivanova (b)

\*Corresponding author

(a) Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kazan, Russia, Lika\_kzn@mail.ru

(b) Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University, Veliky Novgorod, Russia, nfi@inbox.ru

*Abstract*

The article is devoted to the study of the pedagogical potential of the writer's biography. In Russian pedagogy and didactics we see a formed tradition of studying biography as a set of facts necessary for a cultural person. In the world of pedagogy, the study of biography within the framework of humanitarian courses is underestimated. This is due to the small number of scientific papers on this issue, which determines the originality of the work. However, in the modern world, interest in biographies is huge, but this area is "captured" by mass culture. The relevance of the article is that it shows the pedagogical potential of studying biography at school and University on the material of A. Chekhov's biography, identifies some methodological techniques, gives recommendations proven by teaching practice. The study of the biography of the writer should be subordinated to the most important pedagogical task: understanding yourself and awareness of the value of another person and his independent, not like your Way. In addition, the study of biography should be based on the study of documents, on the formation of the ability to include the facts in a holistic narrative. Despite the idea of death of the author", popular in literary studies of recent decades, the world of the past for our students should be filled with people, and then it becomes "their own world".

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

**Keywords:** Biography, Chekhov, Literature, methodology.

## 1. Introduction

Great people's Biographies are very popular now. However, the educational potential of the Biography is practically not studied. The first and seemingly obvious option of referring to the Biography is to show students the example of the path to success. But this is actually a bad option. In modern world, one of the cultivated values is individualism. However, many teachers and parents are faced in their practice not with individualism as a focus on self-development, but with the opposite result, selfishness. This inability to understand oneself as a person with its highest goals and the Other as a value is one of the problems and dangers of modern culture.

The study of writer's Biographies in literature classes at school and University (not only by students who specifically study literature, but those studying various specialties) opens up huge opportunities for the formation of personality and overcoming the psychological dangers facing the young man. It is necessary to mention some authors (Bertaux, 1981; Denzin, 1989; Gudmundsdottir, 2017; Holden, 2014; Kalugin, 2015) and special journal editions (Erben, 2005; Stanley, 1993) devoted to that problem.

The material of the article is a Biography of Anton Chekhov as a world-famous novelist and playwright, because the appeal to his life will be relevant for teachers all around the world. It is possible for European reader to get acquainted with Chekhov's life by the Donald Rayfield book (Rayfield, 2000).

## 2. Problem Statement

Despite the huge potential of the talented people Biographies for the formation of personality, educational structures almost do not turn to this material. It could be a Biography of a physicist, mathematician who made great discoveries, a geographer who deprived himself of the most necessary things for geographical discoveries, etc.

But if the student doesn't want to become a researcher, the life of a scientist who sacrifices himself is interesting to him as an exotic. On the contrary the study of the writer's life would give impetus to the study of himself and the understanding of the Other, and this is of universal importance. Writer's Biographies in literature classes can be a guide and an example for a young student.

In Russia schools and universities while studying literature traditionally much attention is paid to the Biography of a writer. The first chapter of any textbook, which is devoted to the writer, always contains a story about his birth, family, studies, and so on.

In Europe less attention is paid to the Biography of a writer. John Updike notes that literary biography can at best serve as a supplement, satisfying the readers desire for more after all the texts in an oeuvre have been read, extending the afterglow left over from the process of reading poetry, drama, or prose fiction. Updike writes: "The main question concerning literary biography ... is, surely, Why do we need it at all. <...> Such resistance to biography is common..." (Holden, 2014, p. 917). Let us also recall the ideas of postmodernism about the "death of the author", that is the insignificance of the author's personality in the analysis of the text. However, the opposite ideas, that we inevitably create in our imagination the image of the Creator, are also relevant.

The analysis of questionnaires of schoolchildren, students-journalists and philologists (more than 300) "What do you know about Chekhov's life?" showed that modern students in Russia, which traditionally

knew about Chekhov a lot, have very little to say now. The answers frightened by illiteracy and ignorance. Students hardly remember that Chekhov was a doctor, labored hard on Sakhalin (confuse him with Fyodor Dostoevsky, who was convicted during 4 years in Siberia), they don't know whether he died in Yalta or in Moscow (Chekhov died in Germany). Knowledge of facts itself is not important. But facts allow you to set individual biography milestones of the individual that distinguishes that Life from the other. Those questionnaires formed the basis of our qualitative sociological research.

A biography study in the practice of modern Russian schools and universities does not open its intellectual and educational potential.

The reasons for this are:

- Biography is taught, as a rule, as a set of facts, dates, they slip from the memory of a student. Biography doesn't become a narrative, doesn't affect the emotions and souls. This is due to the tradition of teaching: according to it, the student must first know a certain set of facts. We insist on that it is necessary to know a certain pool of facts for a cultured person, but we are to find a balance.
- Biography doesn't open its universal significance; it is not clear for students what in the life dramas of the writer is important for the other person.

So, both sides cannot work with a Biography: a teacher and a student. In order to overcome the problems, we need a teacher who, as an artist, will build a biography as a history, will show the significance of the writer's ideas for the student. We need to rely on the psychological experience of the audience, the work of imagination, the ability to understand another person, the experience of reflection and self-reflection.

We see the destruction of the traditions (in spite of the potential of the Biography) in Russian school that the process relevant not only for one country.

### **3. Research Questions**

The study is connected with the spheres:

- Pedagogical: philosophy of education, the problem of formation of the personality;
- Methodical: the need to correlate the study of the biography with other parts of the course;
- Didactic: necessity to understand how the student should work with the Biography.

Teaching biography is a very difficult task, sometimes more difficult than working on the text of a literary work. This is due to a number of reasons:

- It is difficult for the teacher himself to understand the writer as another person; it is difficult to become Virgil for the student.
- There is a huge number of biographical studies, their concepts contradict each other.

- Therefore it is necessary to carry out your own work to build a relevant history of the individual, to select the necessary events from thousands of pages, to build your own actual biography of the writer.
- How to solve those problems? Those are our Research questions.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Russian writers lived a colorful life: they were killed in a duel, were in prison in their struggle with the government, and had drama love stories... Their Biographies were like adventure stories and so can easily inspire our students.

But sometimes studying the Biographies of other writers, a teacher and students may find themselves in a more difficult situation than usual. For example, the life of Leo Tolstoy lasted more than 80 years; to get acquainted with many of its aspects is difficult because of the volume of material. In the case of Anton Chekhov, we face special difficulties. Chekhov's life was absolutely ordinary; he himself could not leave his autobiography. In his letter Chekhov wrote: "I have a disease: autobiographical phobia. For me to read about myself any details, and even more to write them for the newspapers is a true torment" (Chekhov, 1977, p. 284). Therefore, it is very difficult to find a concept that would hold biographical facts together. Biography of Chekhov is "the life without war, universal cataclysms, without incident" (Soukhih, 2016, p. 44).

Indeed, Anton Chekhov did not hide the secret of his origin, didn't fight for an inheritance; not suffered all his life from unrequited love; was not Don Juan (or kept silent about it); didn't lose a lot of money playing cards; never shoot in duels; never been to war...

Meanwhile, Chekhov's Biography has a huge potential to influence on a person.

We will show how it is possible to use a seemingly simple biography to form the personality of the student, without putting pressure on him and at the same time giving him the direction of self-development "together" with the writer.

Chekhov's Biography is extremely indispensable taking into account the problems faced by young people in the modern world: external simplicity of everyday modern life, boredom; focus on success, especially material, while the person is not ready for the existential problems that fall on him during the crisis of middle age; life focuses on entertainment, escapism, the absence of reflection.

Another task is to show the methods: how to work with biography. Here we fully support Michael Erben in in «Biography and Education. A Reader», he suggests that it is necessary to give students the method of independent work on biography and life at the courses that are increasingly being offered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Erben, 2005).

#### **5. Research Methods**

Our research is based on the following methods: literary analysis, biographical analysis, sociology of literature, methods of social psychology, qualitative research, and narrative analysis.

Biographical research has both general and specific purposes.

1. Any biography is a biography of a society, it is, "more than itself": personal history always reveals the history of society in a certain era: "The biographical subject will always blur the boundaries between the abstract notion of a unique self and the abstract notion of a group identity. <...> Given that individual lives are part of a cultural network, information gained through biographical research will relate to an understanding of the wider society" (Erben, 2005).

2. But at the same time the life is the unique experience: (Gudmundsdottir, 2017). Composing the social structure and individual identity is at the methodological heart of biographical analysis. It is the only way to understand how life of one writer affected on the many others.

3. Biographical and autobiographical analyses can examine the significance of selves in relation to general or prevailing values. This requires a developed reflection from the recipient, possibility to examine of his own direct, life experience, developed imagination, the ability to penetrate into the life of the Other. The writer's biography presents the young man with "existential" problems and allows him to pass through them before they arise in his own life.

4. Any biography is constructed as a narrative with its own plot. Without this plot biography becomes a set of facts. A life is a life in time.

## 6. Findings

For all the external "mediocrity" of Anton Chekhov's life, it is based on the idea of self-creation. It was not circumstances that shaped his life, but the inner logic of the conscious construction of his own life, a concentrated moral effort. Chekhov's experience of self-education and confronting the environment is important for the modern young man or girl.

An important method in order to make the knowledge personal is to build a biography of the documents. Such documents are the writer's letters.

An important way in understanding the Chekhov's personal development is the study of the writer's family. It is productive to build Chekhov's biography in comparison with the biography of his elder brother Alexander to show the active role of a person in his life.

Chekhov's Family was uneducated, populous (6 children), very religious with a clear dominance of the will of the despotic and very religious father, with unquestioning obedience to his word, his orders, religious rituals. Corporal punishment was the result for the slightest violation. However, this bourgeois family sought to give high school education to children, which opened the way to the University. Family life had a huge impact on the brothers Alexander and Anton.

Alexander was more gifted by nature (and not only literary) than the future writer. He graduated from high school with a silver medal, received a University education (he was a mathematician, a chemist, a writer) and first became Chekhov's mentor. Alexander passionately dreamed of a beautiful, clean family life. Emotionally rich, with a huge bright inner world, hard-hitting, paradoxical thought, creatively gifted, his observation ability in his letters is sometimes superior than in letters by his talented brother. Alexander escaped from supervision of the father and, at last, felt freedom and independence. But he has not sustained the test – there was no character, willpower, purposefulness, ability to hard work and self-denial. He studied at Moscow University and intended to go abroad to defend his thesis, but did not hold the final exam from the University with the right to have a job not more than provincial Secretary. Untidy poverty, easily

accessible women, and the inability to curb his instincts – all subdued his will. He was looking for himself as the writer, the mathematician, and then became interested in the natural Sciences... Often inconsistent, he was not capable of continuous labor. He drank a lot, came into unfortunate illegal marriage, received sharp condemnation and rejection from the father, and became the outcast of the family. He missed a literary talent and was only the "brother of the great writer" and the father of brilliant actor Michael Chekhov.

If Alexander's protest against his father and the family was a protest through the desire for Bohemia, Anton's protest was the path to development.

The father of the family went bankrupt and fled from the provincial Taganrog. Anton at the age of 16 was left alone to finish his high school. He experienced shame escaping from creditors of the family, often had dinner with rich relatives, was to give private lessons and sent money to the family that was impoverished, in Moscow. He was not broken, but tempered by loneliness and independence. Anton was the only one of Chekhov's children who changed relations within the family: «Write a story about how a young man, the son of a serf, a former shopkeeper, a high school student and a student brought up in servility, kissing the priest's hands, worshipping other people's thoughts... write how this young man drop by drop squeezes a slave out, and how he wakes up one morning and feels that his blood is no longer a blood of a slave, but a real human one" (Chekhov, 1975, p. 131-133).

Fate soon placed him in the position of moral leader of the whole family. For example look at Anton's letters to Alexander:

On my first visit, I was torn away from you by your terrible, uncomprehending treatment of your wife and cook. Forgive me generously, but to treat women in this way, whatever they may be, is unworthy of a decent and loving man. What heavenly or earthly authority has given you the right to make them your slaves? The constant foul language, the elevation of voice, nagging, moods at breakfast and lunch, the eternal complaint on convict life and devilish labour. Oh, isn't this is an expression of gross despotism? <...> I ask you to remember that despotism and lie ruined your mother's youth. Despotism and lie deformed our childhood so that it is scary to remember... Our father can't forgive himself now..." (Chekhov, 1975, pp. 120-123).

Chekhov, working at himself, made a whole program of self-education, based on his own experience:

- They respect every human person, and therefore always are condescending, soft, polite, compliant...
- They are compassionate not only to beggars and cats. They are sick at heart from what is not obvious... They don't sleep nights to... pay for fellow-students and to buy wears for their mother.
- They respect other people's property, and therefore pay debts.
- They are sincere and fear lies like fire. They do not lie even in trifles. Lie is offensive and vulgar. They do not dissemble, keep themselves outdoors as well as at home, do not blowing smoke to those who occupy a low social position. They are not talkative and do not pry with frankness when they are not asked... In respect to other people's ears, they are often silent.

- They do not belittle themselves for the purpose of arousing sympathy in another. They do not play on the strings of other people's souls, so that the others are to nurse them. They don't say, "They don't understand me!" or "I traded my life for small coin!"—because all of this hits on cheap effect, it is old, false...
- They are not vain. They are not occupied by such fake diamonds, as acquaintance with celebrities... They laugh at the phrase: "I am a representative of the press!!"... Making a penny, they do not rush with their folder for a hundred rubles and do not boast that they were allowed where others are not allowed... True talents always sit in the dark, in the crowd...
- If they have talent, they respect it. They sacrifice for it peace, women, wine, vanity... They are proud of their talent...
- They cultivate aesthetics. They can't sleep in clothes, see cracked wall with bedbugs, breathe crappy air, walk on spit-covered floor, and eat from the stove. They don't crack vodka... for they know they are not pigs. They only drink vodka when they are free, on occasion. They want menssana in corporesano (a healthy soul in a healthy body).Etc. Those are educated people... To be educated..., it is not enough to read only Dickens and memorize a monologue from *Faust*... It requires relentless day and night work, eternal reading, study, character. Every hour is essential...» (Chekhov, 1974, pp. 221-225). Chekhov opposed to the bourgeois character of the family the world of culture, harmony, self-discipline. At the heart of his requirements for any person was self-education, demands first of all to himself, freedom from the given rules: "My Holy of Holies are human body, health, mind, talent, inspiration, love and absolute freedom, freedom from force and lie, in whatever the last two were expressed" (Chekhov, 1975, p. 11).

In general, Alexander and Anton are contrasted on the following points:

- The creation and constant work of self-education – The indulgence and self-destruction;
- The self-discipline, subordination of life to creativity–The tragic lack of creative implementation;
- Professionalism– Frequent change of Hobbies self–destruction;
- Formed system of ethical and aesthetics views – Lack of ethical and aesthetics views Stable not rich well-being(financial support to parents and unmarried sister) – Poverty, loneliness /charity (built three schools, financial support to relatives and persons with tuberculosis) – Lack of charity.

## 7. Conclusion

Biography of the writer, it's pedagogical potential we can't consider as a studied problem in the pedagogy of high schools and universities. Biographies are not studied or used only as facts of culture, history of literature. Meanwhile, the biography has the following pedagogical, philosophical, didactic potential:

- Independent study of documents, selected by the teacher, develops analytical thinking
- The need to build a narrative from the facts develops the ability to build large narratives, to comprehend the facts as part of the whole.
- It forms an understanding of the life path as a philosophical existential problem, which at the same time has to do with your own life.
- It forms the understanding the value of another person that develops empathy.

Research materials and results may be used by specialists to study and solve different problems of higher philological education.

## References

- Bertaux, D. (Ed.) (1981). *Biography and Society: The Life–history Approach in the Social Sciences*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Chekhov, A. P. (1974). *Complete works and letters: In 30 volumes. Volume 1. Stories, novels, humoresques 1880-1882*. Moscow: Nauka. [in Russ.]
- Chekhov, A. P. (1975). *Complete works and letters: In 30 volumes. Volume 3. Stories, humoresques 1884-1885*. Moscow: Nauka. [in Russ.]
- Chekhov, A. P. (1977). *Complete works and letters: In 30 volumes. Volume 8. Stories, novels 1892-1894*. Moscow: Nauka. [in Russ.]
- Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive Biography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Erben, M. (Ed.). (2005). *Biography and Education. The Reader*. Cleveland, USA: Taylor and Francis. Retrieved from: <https://www.overdrive.com/media/4075391/biography-and-education>
- Gudmundsdottir, G. (2017). Writers on Writing: The Year in Iceland. *Biography*, 40(4), 596–603. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2017.0052>
- Holden, P. (2014). Literary Biography as a Critical Form. *Biography*, 37(4), 917–934. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2014.0052>
- Kalugin, D. (2015). Soviet Theories of Biography and the Aesthetics of Personality. *Biography*, 38(3), 343–362. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2015.0034>
- Rayfield, D. (2000). *Anton Chekhov. A Life*. London: Northwestern University Press.
- Soukhih, I. (2016). *The structure and the meaning of literature and literary Theory for everybody*. Retrieved from <https://www.litmir.me/br/?b=563931&p=1> [in Russ.]
- Stanley, L. (1993). On Auto/Biography in Sociology. *Sociology*, 27(1), 41-42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003803859302700105>