

## *Recontextualizing Chekhov through the Graphic Novel*

Matisse Hales • matissehales@gmail.com • matisseh • Mark Purves • Russian

### **Goal/Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of our project is to create a graphic novel comprised of the short stories of Russian author Anton Chekhov.

### **Importance of the Project**

Influential literature often inspires reinterpretation. Translating—or recontextualizing—an author’s work into a different medium promotes discussion of elements which, though previously present, may have otherwise remained unnoticed. Recent graphic novel interpretations of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* have recast classic literary work in a new light, yet at the same time have failed to use that new light to lend meaningful insight into the construction and nuances of these works—they simply reinterpret the novels without ultimately guiding readers to more closely consider the original. Experiencing the recontextualization of literature by way of graphic novel should enable a reader to reevaluate the original with a more finely-tuned awareness of the work’s aesthetic merit and a refreshed critical perspective. Creating a graphic novel comprised of short stories by Anton Chekhov—focusing specifically on the stories including a child’s understanding and interpretation of his world—will not only convert these pieces to a new medium, but will also lend analysis which contributes to the ongoing academic and artistic discussion of Chekhov’s work.

### **Main Proposal Body**

In their article titled “Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel,” Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert state that, “there is a tendency for readers who come from literary backgrounds to read over design, as though the artwork existed only to render the plot visible and move protagonists from place to place, while readers with design backgrounds often see the art as existing in a narrative void, an end in itself. *Yet in the best instances, the design of a [graphic novel] is inseparable from the narrative*” (emphasis added). This is exactly the intent of our project—to both challenge and build upon conventional readings of Chekhov’s short stories by portraying them in a medium that is very much intertwined with the original content. Utilizing impressionistic atmosphere and artistic vision Chekhov’s work has to begin with, this project will create a product “inseparable from the narrative.”

Throughout his career, Chekhov penned more than 500 short stories, several of which I studied this summer with my mentor. Many of these stories, we observed, revolve around a child’s foray into the world and the resulting challenges and impressions that child gains regarding life. The short story that will begin this graphic novel, “The Steppe,” is an impressionistic, coming-of-age story about a boy who travels across the Russian steppe with various older men in order to reach his new home. It lends itself particularly well to graphic interpretation because the environment heavily informs the protagonist’s interactions with others—it is an omnipresent influence, almost a character itself. Our objective in translating child-based stories like “The Steppe” into graphic form is to portray the aesthetic and formative experiences of children in relation to how they perceive their environment—by doing so, we will

draw attention to how Chekhov, as an artist, uses atmosphere, a visually-laden element, to promote the development of his characters and their stories.

While translating these stories to graphic novel form, I'm going to spend a semester living in Moscow, Russia in order to complete a design internship. During my time there, I plan to frequent art museums—such as the Tretyakov Gallery—and make use of design-based contacts in order to study and explore Russian artwork. Because Chekhov's literary world is so richly-detailed, I plan to utilize the cultural heritage that stands behind his work in order to add depth and richness to the presentation of this graphic novel. Rather than simply recontextualizing his work, our intent is to incorporate the cultural depth that endows Chekhov's work with much of the richness it possesses.

### **Anticipated Academic Outcome**

This book, once completed, will contain twelve of Chekhov's fully-illustrated stories alongside an introduction. It will be presented at the Performative Teaching, Learning and Research Conference at University College Cork in Ireland in May 2014.

### **Qualifications**

Professor Purves has completed extensive research on Chekhov's life and work, and I've been fortunate to study our subject alongside him. In addition to being a leading Chekhov scholar, he has collaborated on several creative projects, including directing productions of Chekhov's plays. He is familiar with existing creative interpretations and adaptations of Chekhov's work, and has studied Russian literature extensively both traditionally and through interdisciplinary approaches.

I have eight years of experience in design and illustration, and work as a Russian Literature TA in addition to being a graphic designer for a local firm. I am a Russian and Graphic Design double major, having completed three years of both disciplines at BYU, and previously received funding to work on a creative project based on Dostoevsky and design.

### **Project Timetable**

This project is already underway. During November and December of 2013, Professor Purves and I will identify the remaining stories that I am going to illustrate and I will receive his feedback on thumbnail and rough sketches of the entire book. By January, I will finish illustrating the first three stories, and will continue to do so during my time in Russia, corresponding closely with my mentor. Throughout February, March, and April, I will illustrate the remaining stories, and in May, Professor Purves and I plan to travel to Ireland to present our project at the Performative Teaching, Learning and Research conference at University College Cork in Ireland.

### **Scholarly Sources**

- Vandermeersche, Geert; and Soetaert, Roland. "Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1806>>
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- Chekhov, Anton. *Collected Short Stories*.