

Introduction

Across Russia and Vietnam, Anton Chekhov, Nam Cao, and Nguyễn Tuân explore the fragility and resilience of human beings under social, historical, and moral pressures. Chekhov's Russia, marked by the decline of aristocracy and the rise of modernity, illuminates the quiet tragedies of ordinary life and the subtle erosion of dignity. Nam Cao adapts this sensibility to colonial Vietnam, portraying characters whose suffering emerges from systemic oppression and social constraint. Nguyễn Tuân, engaging directly with Chekhov through translation and aesthetic dialogue, dramatizes ethical and artistic integrity under extreme conditions, showing how human dignity can endure even in the face of death or societal collapse.

Narrative technique provides a key point of convergence among these authors. Chekhov's use of multi-perspective, partial, and unreliable narration invites readers to infer character and ethical complexity through suggestion rather than exposition. Nam Cao similarly employs collective and conflicting viewpoints to expose social cruelty and intellectual tension, while Nguyễn Tuân transforms Chekhovian introspection into sensorial, almost ceremonial depictions of moral and aesthetic choice. In each case, storytelling functions not simply to convey plot, but as a medium for exploring human consciousness, ethical responsibility, and the pressures exerted by historical and social change.

By situating Chekhov alongside Nam Cao and Nguyễn Tuân, this paper examines how a modern literary sensibility - attentive to moral subtlety, psychological nuance, and the quiet forces of oppression - transcends national and temporal boundaries. It also highlights how cultural and historical contexts reshape these shared humanist concerns: Chekhov's Russian realism foregrounds existential fragility, Nam Cao's Vietnamese realism emphasizes systemic oppression, and Nguyễn Tuân's aestheticized moralism dramatizes the persistence of dignity under extreme conditions. Together, they demonstrate that literature's enduring power lies in revealing both the vulnerability and the resilience of the human spirit.

Historical Context

The introduction of classical Russian literature to Vietnam - a French colony in the early twentieth century - came relatively late, beginning in the 1920s. Colonial language policies favored French, making Russian works largely inaccessible even to the intelligentsia. As Vu Ngau Phan, the first Vietnamese translator of Anna Karenina, recalled, French dominated schools and bookstores, while Russian literature arrived mainly through French translations.

During the colonial period and after the 1945 August Revolution, French remained the main medium for Russian works. Writers such as Tô Hoài noted that French translations of Chekhov's *Ward No. 6* deeply influenced Nam Cao, whose stories similarly explore the psychology, moral dilemmas, and social pressures of ordinary Vietnamese people.

In the post-revolutionary era, Nguyễn Tuân (1910–1987) became a central interpreter of Chekhov in Vietnam. Through translations and essays, he emphasized Chekhov's humanism and psychological insight, relating it to Vietnamese social realities. While Nam Cao adapted Chekhovian realism to portray ethical and psychological struggles in colonial and wartime Vietnam, Nguyễn Tuân combined this sensibility with his aestheticism, highlighting artistry, dignity, and moral integrity.

From the 1950s onward, Chekhov gained wider readership in Vietnam, aided by scholars who translated, annotated, and contextualized his works. In both North and South Vietnam, Russian literature influenced modern writers, shaping narrative techniques and the portrayal of human consciousness. Nam Cao and Nguyễn Tuân, in particular, exemplify how Chekhov's subtle realism and moral humanism were absorbed, reinterpreted, and integrated into Vietnamese literature.

Humanism and Modern Narrative Techniques Across Cultures

In the flow of world literature, Anton Chekhov and Nam Cao occupy distinct traditions, yet their artistic visions intersect in profound and meaningful ways. Chekhov introduced a modern sensibility in Russian literature - attentive to quiet psychological tragedies, the erosion of human spirit, and the subtle cruelty of everyday life. Nam Cao, writing in a Vietnam shaped by social violence, colonial oppression, and endemic poverty, adapted and transformed this sensibility within his own cultural and historical context. When read together, their works reveal striking convergences in modern humanism, narrative technique, and the critique of quotidian oppression.

To begin with, both Chekhov and Nam Cao represent a **new form of humanism**, one that moves beyond simple pity for the oppressed; their works seek to understand the social, psychological, and moral forces that fracture human beings from within. In *The Man in a Case*, Belikov is not a grotesque or inherently malicious figure; rather, he is a man crushed by fear, rigidity, and a spiritually suffocating environment; rather, he is portrayed as a deeply troubled man crushed by fear, rigidity, and a spiritually suffocating environment. Behind his eccentric, constricted existence is a fragile soul warped by the collective coldness of those around him, mirroring Nam Cao's treatment of Chí Phèo in the iconic Vietnamese short story *Chí Phèo*. Chí is not a naturally violent criminal - he is a victim of a feudal village system that strips him of dignity, identity, and the right to be human. Both writers refuse simplistic moral judgments, instead revealing how society manufactures its own outcasts, reflecting the cumulative pressures of societal indifference.

Narrative Technique: Multi-Perspective Storytelling

A second point of convergence lies in their sophisticated narrative strategies, particularly the use of limited, unreliable, or multi-perspective narrators. Chekhov frequently embeds partial

perspectives or biased narrators, to complicate the reader's preception. In *The Man in a Case*, Burkin narrates with a tone of judgment and ridicule; as readers, we must learn to read between the lines and reconstruct a more compassionate portrait of Belikov. The truth exists between the lines, not within what the narrator directly claims.

Nam Cao's works functions similarly. In *Chí Phèo*, the narrator often adopts the collective viewpoint of villagers in Vũ Đại, colored by prejudice, fear, and gossip, forcing the reader to recognize the cruelty embedded in communal norms. In *Đôi mắt* *The Eyes*, Nam Cao contrasts two conflicting narrators - Hoàng and Độ - to expose the intellectual crisis among Vietnamese writers during wartime as the tension between their viewpoints, rather than any explicit authorial statement, carries the story's deeper significance. In both authors, narrative "misalignment" compels readers into active interpretation, rendering them participants in discerning truth rather than passive consumers of plot.

Everyday Violence and Moral Critique

Both authors share a profound concern for the destructive power of the ordinary people, the trivial, and the socially accepted of what might be called "everyday violence." Chekhov's criticism is subtle yet piercing: Belikov is not crushed by overt villainy, but by the mediocrity, conformity, and tacit complicity of those around him, who suffocate him spiritually through their silent, collective indifference. Their jokes, conformity, and silent satisfaction create a quiet form of cruelty, burying Belikov in spiritual suffocation rather than physical harm. Nam Cao's vision resonates deeply with this. In *Sống mòn* (*Worn-out Life*), he laments:

"How painful are the lives worn down without knowing they are being worn down."

Here, tragedy emerges not only from oppression but from monotony, small-mindedness, and societal prejudice that consume human beings day by day. Characters like Lão Hạc, Thị Nở, and Chí Phèo suffer most from the invisible violence of social judgment, which corrodes human dignity gradually, persistently, and often imperceptibly. Nam Cao's world, like Chekhov's, suggests that the most dangerous cruelty is not explosive or overt, but quiet, sanctioned by ordinary life and socially acceptable norms.

Intellectuals in Crisis

Nam Cao, occupies a unique position in Vietnamese literature of the 193 - 1945 period, emerging as a leading figure of critical realism during a time dominated by the Tự lực văn đoàn and earlier literary movements. Unlike romanticized portrayals of intellectuals in Vietnamese literature - often depicted as landlords, lawyers, or officials preoccupied with reform yet insulated from peasant realities - Nam Cao presents a more authentic vision of intellectual life under colonial society, characterized by both material struggle and profound spiritual crisis.

His characters are frequently small-town intellectuals, teachers, writers, or minor officials who navigate “mired” existences constrained by economic precarity and colonial hierarchies, yet are internally driven by aspirations for ethical action, social contribution, or artistic fulfillment. In *Sống mòn*, Thứ exemplifies this tension: a man acutely aware of monotony and futility yet consumed by the desire to live meaningfully and leave a moral or intellectual legacy. This duality - survival versus spiritual fulfillment - echoes the Russian literary realist tradition, particularly Chekhov, whom Nam Cao admired for his penetrating social and psychological observation.

While Chekhov’s intellectuals, as in *The Professor of Literature* or *The Cherry Orchard*, contend with boredom and existential dissatisfaction in a society that appears amid material sufficiency, Nam Cao’s intellectuals exist within material constraints. The drudgery of daily survival and the additional burden of systemic oppression under a colonial order, renders their aspirations not merely quixotic but tragically constrained. Like Chekhov, Nam Cao often eschews conventional plot structures, favoring instead episodes, character-focused vignettes, and temporal sequences that illuminate the psychological complexity of his characters and the banality or emptiness of their social world. Yet unlike Chekhov’s characters, whose disillusionment often stems from existential ennui, Nam Cao’s protagonists struggle materially, socially, and psychologically; their suffering is tangible and compounded by the oppressive social conditions of Vietnam under French colonial rule.

In *Đời thừa* and *Nước mắt*, the “superfluous lives” of characters such as Điền and Hộ demonstrate the sense of entrapment and futility that pervades both their personal ambitions and the lives of those around them, echoing Chekhov’s depiction of lives trapped in inertia but contextualized in a colonial society where poverty, hierarchy, and social stagnation intensify existential despair. Through this lens, Nam Cao is able to depict not only the inner life of the individual intellectual but also the broader societal malaise: the intellectual’s moral and emotional struggles are inseparable from the systemic inequities that limit agency and opportunity.

Nam Cao’s narrative method mirrors Chekhovian subtlety: mundane incidents - minor social slights, domestic quarrels, or routine professional activities - become windows into the psychological and moral complexities of individuals and the ethical texture of society’s small, seemingly mundane incidents - disputes over minor social slights, domestic quarrels, or a teacher’s daily routines - become windows into larger truths about human nature, societal constraints, and the persistence of ethical desire amid adversity. Nam Cao’s intellectuals are deeply self-aware; they question the meaning of life, the purpose of work, and the justice of social arrangements, yet they are powerless to alter the structures that bind them. Unlike earlier Vietnamese portrayals of intellectuals, which were often idealized or aspirational, Nam Cao’s characters exist in the tension between their moral, aesthetic, and social ambitions and the relentless pressures of survival, making them fully human, psychologically complex, and socially embedded.

In reflecting the lives of marginalized or constrained intellectuals, Nam Cao extends the critical realist project to a uniquely Vietnamese context, but also broader societal malaise: the entanglement of material limitation, colonial hierarchy, and moral responsibility. His literary achievements lie not only in the faithful rendering of these lives but also in his capacity to articulate the inner conflicts, moral questioning, and existential frustration of the colonial-era Vietnamese intellectual, creating a vivid, morally nuanced portrait of a class often overlooked in literature prior to the 1940s. In this respect, the intersection of influence and innovation - drawing inspiration from Russian literary realism while addressing the particular conditions of Vietnamese society - defines Nam Cao's enduring contribution: the capacity to capture the lives of intellectuals whose existence is simultaneously ordinary, tragic, and profoundly illuminating about the society they inhabit.

In sum, Chekhov and Nam Cao, though living in different countries and eras, share a deeply modern understanding of human suffering. Their humanism is clear-eyed rather than sentimental; their storytelling is indirect, nuanced, and multi-voiced; and their critique of society targets not grand injustices alone, but the slow erosion of compassion in ordinary life. Both writers remind us that literature's greatest task is not only to expose the wounds of humanity but also to awaken empathy and a sense of responsibility in the reader. Through the tragedies of the small, the misunderstood, and the silenced, Chekhov and Nam Cao illuminate universal truths about the fragility and resilience of the human spirit.

Chekhovian Introspection Refracted Through Vietnamese Aestheticism

This case study examines how Nguyễn Tuân - one of Vietnam's most stylistically distinctive writers and a translator of Chekhov - absorbs and reinterprets Chekhovian introspection within a radically different national, aesthetic, and ideological framework. Unlike Nam Cao, whose affinity with Chekhov is grounded in shared concerns with poverty, moral fatigue, and quiet psychological tragedy, Nguyễn Tuân represents a more deliberate and self-conscious mode of influence. At first glance, Tuân's prose appears the opposite of Chekhov's minimalism: ornate where Chekhov is sparse, elevated where Chekhov favors understatement. Yet at a deeper level, both writers share a commitment to centering individual dignity, interiority, and moral complexity in narrative art.

Tuân's engagement with Chekhov is both direct, shaped by translation, and deeply filtered through his own aesthetic convictions. His early devotion to chủ nghĩa tài hoa - the celebration of mastery and artistic individuality - may seem far from Chekhov's understated realism; yet it is precisely through this contrast that their dialogue becomes most illuminating. This section explores how Tuân's stylistic commitments - his aestheticism, cultural pride, and later socialist-era reorientation - interact with Chekhov's narrative sensibility, culminating in the ethically and aesthetically charged short story *Chữ người tử tù*, and resonates structurally and thematically with Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

Aestheticism, Romanticism, and Cultural Pride

From early in his career, Nguyễn Tuân cultivated a literary identity rooted in aestheticism, craftsmanship, and cultural refinement. His celebrated short story *Chữ người tử tù* exemplifies what critics have termed “chủ nghĩa người tử tù,” an artistic and ethical stance that elevates the human being at the moment of extremity. Huân Cao, the condemned calligrapher, embodies a paradoxical moral beauty: facing imminent execution, he demonstrates serene artistic integrity, courage, and ethical clarity. As Tuân writes:

“Ông Huân Cao vẫn thân nhiên nhận rượu thịt coi như mình có quyền hưởng thụ những thực phẩm đó. Rồi đến một hôm, quản ngục mở khóa cửa buồng kín, khép nép hỏi ông Huân: Đối với những người như ngài, phép nước ngặt lắm. Nhưng biết ngài là một người có nghĩa khí, tôi muốn châm chước ít nhiều...” (Nguyễn Tuân, 1939/2017).

Here, Huân Cao’s ethical and aesthetic stance asserts human dignity not in spite of social constraints, but in confrontation with them. His artistry and composure illuminate a world in collapse, revealing that beauty, virtue, and moral courage can persist even in the most degraded conditions. The story frames human value as most visible under duress: the condemned prisoner becomes an exemplar of inner integrity, whose mastery of calligraphy transforms the prison cell into a temporary sanctum of beauty.

His conception of “condemned-man humanism” posits that art functions as a bastion of human dignity, moral character is most clearly revealed under pressure, and beauty itself operates as a spiritual resistance to historical and social decline. In this regard, Huân Cao’s final act of writing is not mere spectacle; it is an assertion of selfhood and moral principle against the oppressive structures surrounding him. The narrative emphasizes the alignment of aesthetic and ethical values, presenting the fusion of beauty, courage, and virtue as a mode of transcendence:

“Chữ người tử tù không còn là chữ nữa, không chỉ là mỹ mà thô, mà những nét chữ tươi tắn đó nói lên những bão tung hoành của một đời người. Đây là sự chiến thắng của ánh sáng đối với bóng tối. Đây là sự chiến thắng của cái đẹp, cái cao thượng, đối với sự phàm tục nhơ bẩn, cũng là sự chiến thắng của tinh thần bất khuất trước thái độ cam chịu nô lệ” (Nguyễn Tuân, 1939/2017).

Interior Emotion and Social Transition

Despite differences in genre and national context, Nguyễn Tuân and Chekhov share two profound affinities.

Chekhov’s characters - provincial aristocrats, merchants, and servants alike - are defined by inner layers: desire, regret, longing, and contradiction. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Madame Ranevskaya embodies nostalgia and the aesthetic values of a fading aristocracy, reacting to financial collapse by instinctively retreating into the rituals of her class:

““Oh my dear orchard, my sweet and lovely orchard! My life, my youth, my happiness-farewell! Farewell!” (Chekhov, p. 66).

Her attachment to the orchard reflects a world that is beautiful but doomed, meaningful yet obsolete. Similarly, Huân Cao’s artistry in *Chữ người tử tù* reveals a layered interiority: he is fearless, principled, and profoundly sensitive to moral beauty, even while anticipating execution. Both authors foreground subtle emotional shifts and inner resilience rather than relying on overt dramatic gestures.

Ethical Engagement Amid Social Transformation

Chekhov writes in the dusk of old Russia: serfdom abolished, aristocracy declining, capitalism approaching. *The Cherry Orchard* epitomizes this moment - its beauty lies in the quiet collapse of a world that cannot save itself.

Tuân likewise writes on the threshold of transition: the fading of pre-revolutionary cultural aristocracy and the emergence of a new socialist ethos. In both, social transformation is neither triumphal nor entirely tragic; it is a field for human testing, where moral integrity either falters or crystallizes. Nguyễn Tuân’s *Chữ người tử tù* likewise trace the fading of one order and the emergence of another - first the decline of traditional Confucian artistic culture, then the socialist valorization of labor. a world is ending, but human dignity becomes more visible precisely in moments of historical dissolution. Huân Cao and Madame Ranevskaya function as the last representatives of their respective worlds, symbolic figures whose personal actions illuminate the ethical and aesthetic stakes of social change.

Where Ranevskaya’s collapse is tinged with pathos and nostalgia, Huân Cao’s conduct asserts moral and aesthetic triumph: the condemned man’s integrity radiates even within the squalor of prison, demonstrating that virtue and artistry can withstand historical dissolution. In both, the narrative treats the collapse of a social order not merely as a political or economic phenomenon but as an ethical test revealing what persists in human character.

Madame Ranevskaya and her family cling to a fading aristocratic culture embodied in the orchard - an aesthetic and emotional symbol of their past. The orchard, like Huân Cao’s artistry, is beautiful but doomed, meaningful yet historically obsolete. Chekhov stages its loss quietly: the final sound of axes in the distance. The tragedy is internal, psychological, and historical all at once.

By placing *Chữ người tử tù* beside *The Cherry Orchard*, we see two artists exploring a world on the brink of disappearance, where aesthetic values come into conflict with social change, and where characters strive to maintain their internal dignity even as the external structures around them collapse. A deeper parallel emerges when considering Huân Cao and Lopakhin as emblematic figures navigating historical rupture. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopakhin embodies

social mobility and the inevitability of modernization. He purchases the orchard not out of malice, but necessity, becoming an agent of historical transformation. In cutting down the orchard, he enacts the pragmatic destruction required for the new social order.

Huân Cao, in contrast, enacts preservation through artistry. He refuses to submit to feudal authority and instead safeguards beauty, morality, and dignity through his calligraphy. While Lopakhin destroys to make way for progress, Huân Cao creates to honor what is passing, his final words “nói lên những hoài bão tung hoành của một đời con người,” affirming the endurance of personal and aesthetic integrity even at the brink of extinction.. Both figures confront historical rupture, but their responses highlight divergent strategies: Lopakhin adapts to survive within change, whereas Huân Cao resists to preserve meaning.

Together, they illuminate a central concern shared by Chekhov and Nguyễn Tuân: the human confrontation with social transition. Chekhov depicts this confrontation through subtle observation, emphasizing inevitability and adaptation. Nguyễn Tuân, however, dramatizes it, showing how beauty, moral courage, and consciousness can persist even as the social and cultural frameworks that sustain them crumble. Both, ultimately, reveal that human dignity and artistic achievement are most striking when the world around them is in flux or decay.

Reshaping Chekhovian Introspection

Chekhov portrays the fragility and moral persistence of humans, emphasizing interior reflection and compassionate observation. Tuân celebrates human dignity through aesthetic and ethical virtuosity, dramatizing the survival of beauty and character even in the face of death.

Ultimately, both converge on the same principle: human beings - fragile, complex, morally and aesthetically meaningful - remain at the center of literary representation, while the surrounding world, whether the Russian orchard or a Vietnamese prison, functions as a stage upon which human virtues are revealed.

Both works examine societies on the verge of disappearance, the precarious endurance of cultural values, and the dignity of human consciousness confronting irreversible change. Chekhov's subtle, understated approach and Nguyễn Tuân's sensory, symbolic elaboration serve complementary functions, yet the underlying insight remains consistent: beauty, moral integrity, and human awareness shine most vividly at the threshold of disappearance. In this sense, Nguyễn Tuân's work can be read as a Vietnamese reimagining of Chekhovian concerns, adapted to a distinct historical and cultural context, but preserving the universal meditation on art, ethics, and the transience of social worlds.

Comparative Analysis

Chekhovian themes resonate profoundly across the works of both Nam Cao and Nguyễn Tuân, despite their differing cultural contexts. Central to their literary vision is a focus on human vulnerability. In Chekhov's Russia, characters such as Belikov in *The Man in a Case* are quietly trapped by fear, social conformity, and moral inertia, revealing the fragility of ordinary life. Nam Cao adapts this concern to Vietnamese society: figures like Chí Phèo or Lão Hạc navigate oppressive social and economic structures, demonstrating that vulnerability is often socially produced. Nguyễn Tuân, while presenting more elevated, heroic characters such as Huân Cao in *Chữ người tử tù*, similarly conveys human fragility, showing that even in the face of death and oppressive authority, dignity and ethical strength can persist.

Ethical dilemmas form another key point of convergence. Chekhov stages moral tension within ordinary circumstances, exploring the choices between self-interest and conscience, conformity and integrity. Nam Cao extends this exploration into the Vietnamese context, where poverty, colonial hierarchies, and social prejudice intensify ethical stakes. Nguyễn Tuân dramatizes these dilemmas through symbolic action: Huân Cao's serene composure and principled behavior illustrate the possibility of moral courage and aesthetic integrity even under extreme duress. In all three authors, the tension between individual aspiration and societal constraint becomes a central lens through which human character is revealed.

Yet these similarities exist alongside important divergences shaped by differing historical and cultural conditions. Nam Cao writes amid French colonial occupation and wartime nationalism, embedding his narratives with an acute sense of political and social urgency. Nguyễn Tuân, while later engaging with socialist-era themes, foregrounds aesthetic heroism, creating characters whose struggles transcend immediate historical contingencies. Colonial and class pressures also distinguish their narratives: Vietnamese society imposed material and social constraints that intensify ethical and psychological crises in ways that differ from Russia's social transformations, producing a distinctive local resonance for Chekhovian realism.

These divergences are further informed by the distinct literary traditions from which Nam Cao and Nguyễn Tuân write. Vietnamese literature draws upon Confucian ethics, folk narrative forms, and modernist experimentation. Nam Cao emphasizes moral reflection under social constraint, often through multi-perspective narration, while Nguyễn Tuân elevates artistry as a measure of ethical integrity. In both cases, Chekhovian realism is filtered through local aesthetics, narrative structures, and cultural values, allowing the ethical and psychological focus of the original Russian texts to be reimagined within Vietnamese society.

Conclusion

Despite these differences, the shared humanistic core remains striking. Across Russian and Vietnamese contexts, all three authors explore the universality of emotion and moral conflict. Fear, longing, ethical uncertainty, and the struggle to act with integrity under pressure emerge repeatedly, showing that literature can illuminate fundamental aspects of the human condition.

Furthermore, the adaptability of Chekhovian realism becomes evident: it can transcend national boundaries, inspire narrative innovation, and accommodate diverse aesthetic forms without losing its ethical and psychological depth. Nam Cao and Nguyễn Tuân demonstrate that Chekhov's attentiveness to interior life, social observation, and moral subtlety can be powerfully reinterpreted, producing works that are at once culturally specific and universally human.

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