




Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Research Article

 Open Access

Suffering and Grotesque Parody in Howard Barker's (*Uncle Vanya*)



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Abstract

Howard Barker is a playwright known for his unconventional approach to the theatre with his own dramatic concept, the Theatre of Catastrophe, which challenges the traditional boundaries of reality and aesthetics. Barker's plays delve into various subjects such as longing, mortality, sexuality, suffering and existential crises, aiming to provoke and shock the audience. His parodic adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* exemplifies this by transforming the sense of ennui and mental suffering into a manifestation of revolt and self-determination. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche posits that tragedy ascends from a profound understanding and approval of the conditions of one's own existence, viewing inherent pessimism and suffering in life not as a hindrance but as a vital constituent of human resilience and resolve. Barker advocates art to be challenging and provoking, thus forcing audiences to confront the inherent complexities and contradictions of life. Deliberately or not, Barker appears to align with Nietzsche in his deconstruction of *Vanya* by emphasising the place of suffering in tragic human life. Barker's adaptation (*Uncle Vanya*) (1991) upholds Nietzschean reasoning in transforming the characters' existential struggles into an exploration of human agency, questioning, and a quest for meaning. This article thus explores the representation of suffering and grotesque aspects in countering the characters' existential crises by looking at Barker's dramatic strategies in a parodic attack on the Chekhovian world.


Keywords


Howard Barker · (*Uncle Vanya*) · Suffering · Nietzsche · Chekhov



Citation: Kavak, E. (2025). Suffering and grotesque parody in Howard Barker's (*Uncle Vanya*). *Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi-Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, 35(Suppl. 1), 40-50. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2024-1505931>

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 2025. Kavak, E.

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Introduction

A prolific playwright, poet, painter, and intellectual, Howard Barker has written a comprehensive body of plays and postmodern adaptations along with theory books on theatre and dramaturgy. His early plays, such as *Scenes from an Execution* (1984), *The Castle* (1985), *Women Beware Women* (1986) and *Gertrude - the Cry* (2002), brought him fame with adverse criticism and publicity. After his plays were staged by The Royal Court Theatre, Royal Shakespeare House and The Adelaide in London, the playwright decided to start The Wrestling School, a private theatre company to permit him substantial artistic and individual autonomy, achieve his radical potential and “establish a unique voice” (Shaughnessy, 1989, pp. 269–270). This daring move allowed him to stage his vision of theatre and write provocative works without fear of institutional interference and other constraints. The company produced fourteen of his plays between 1993 and 2004 and continued stage productions in the succeeding years (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 42).

Barker’s vision of theatre embraces the disruption of utilitarian and naturalistic drama, rebuking the narrow-minded world of morality and politics, and denigrating the mimetic tradition in dramatic art. He has developed a distinct theory of drama, which can be traced in his plays, which feature violent, sexual, cryptic, or poignant human subjects and their struggles with the meaning of existence, individuality and autonomy. For instance, in *Scenes from an Execution* (1984), Galactia, a female painter in Venice during the Battle of Lepanto, is commissioned to create a public mural praising the Venetian victory and venerating the violent triumph of the Crusaders by the Doge of the city. Galactia, on the other hand, chooses to produce an art piece that describes the violence and bloodshed of the war. Her imprisonment for treason and revolt against patriarchal politics marks how she embodies a feminist and individual stance, highlighting her integrity as an artist and her desire to claim her agency against the coercive ideology of her times. In this play, Barker demonstrates how he defends artistic autonomy, as well as a key concept of the Theatre of Catastrophe: the rejection of conventional representational forms, offering us a rereading of the history and a postmodern overhaul of traditional dramaturgy, in which reality and imagination are merged to create a timeless story of artist’s moral dilemma generated by social norms and political impositions. Barker thus claims to build a form of artistic legitimacy in the dramatic realm, fashioning human contradictions and conflicts in a personally authentic and innovative stage. His plays delve deeply into the complexities of human desires, crises, and self-exploration in a tragic and, at times, hyperbolic world, aiming to astonish, shake, and push the audience to the extremes of emotions, isolation, self-doubt, and reevaluation of their beliefs. David Ian Rabey clarifies the theatrical implications of Barker’s ingenuity along these lines: “This theatre becomes a space which is resistant to social pressures and necessities; and the suspension of these forces and promises entails anxiety, rather than more conventional forms of pleasure” (Introduction, Gritzner & Rabey, 2016, p. 13). It thus opens a space for reflection and uninhibited artistic imagination beyond the ennui, drabness of life and the partiality of moralising dictates.

Barker revolts against clarity alongside moral correctness and other pledges of conventional tragedy. His theatre promotes a calculated degree of ambiguity and inaccessibility, which indicates that autonomy and subjectivity are forms of self-assertion and liberty from ideological art. In “On Naturalism and its Pretensions,” he defends that art must be inaccessible, espousing a stance against public expectations, market demands, and critical denunciations. (Barker, 2007, p. 291). He insists that “Naturalism is infinitely accessible. Accessibility is one of those terms beloved of politicians, theatre critics, dramaturges, and educationalists, which perhaps fits best Nietzsche’s dictum about the bad odour of moribund concepts ...” (Barker, 2007, p. 291). His pledge to construct ambiguity and inaccessibility upholds his artistic purpose of creating a parallel and often imaginative, dramatic world in which the aesthetic concerns and conceptions matter more than the legitimacy and verifiability of his stories and characters. In *Arguments for a Theatre*, he claims that there



is an agreement in the humanist theatre that the audience should leave the performance feeling uplifted and strengthened. According to him, such a theatre dictates that art must be understood, unity must be celebrated, and the production must be accessible (Barker, 2016, p. 72). As a response, in the Theatre of Catastrophe, he insists that

the audience cannot grasp everything, nor can the author. We quarrel to love. The critic must suffer like everyone else. The play is important. The audience is divided and goes home disturbed or amazed. (Barker, 2016, p. 73)

Barker's theatre is not didactic in nature and does not strive to be understandable, entertaining or manipulative. This makes the Theatre of Catastrophe a challenge to the idea that art must be understood and consumed effortlessly. The Catastrophic Theatre presents enigmatic and provoking art that startles viewers with a barrage of attacks on reality and human emotions, often deemed too much to digest. He offers this with anti-mimetic authenticity, in which each viewer is free to construe his/her own perceptions and confront his/her sense of self. Barker argues, rejecting Aristotelian aesthetics, that "tragedy exists simply because the pain of others, and subsequently our own, is a necessity to witness— not to make sense of, not for a utility value, but as something for itself." (Barker, 2016, p. 113; Roberts, 2014, p. 262). The events unfolding in his plays create a sense of uncertain/unreliable reality and subjectivity since some have bearings with authenticity, while others stimulate illusion and creative imagination.

Barker's rejection of moral foundations for dramatic art prioritises suffering and desire. This phenomenon can be better understood in light of Friedrich Nietzsche's historical and fictional account of human suffering and tragedy. His seminal work *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)¹ probes the emergence of tragedy in ancient Greek society, its decline after the collapse of Greek ideals, and its philosophical reincarnations in the modern world. Nietzsche explains how Greeks fashioned suffering and tragedy in their times, which not only reflects the pessimistic worldview of Athenians but also, paradoxically, is a testimonial to the human condition and prospects in the modern age. Nietzsche describes Greek tragedy as an art in which pessimism transcends the boundaries of existence, which turns into a state, facilitating humans' recognition and appreciation of the human condition and turbulent nature (Agada, 2021, pp. 2–4). He acknowledges that life is beset with agony and suffering, but he does not see this as a hindrance to our will to endure and prevail. Thus, metaphysical suffering offers human resourcefulness and strength, most not in the form of "being" but mostly in "becoming." As Agada puts it, "Nietzsche radically subverts the traditional notion of an eternal immutable being that constitutes the ground of change and replaces it with the notion of becoming" (2021, p. 1). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche embraces suffering and transformation as a part of human nature and fate, positing it as key aspects of adapting to the order of life (Nietzsche, as cited in Pippin, 2006). Humans may use suffering as a process of empowerment and self-actualisation and, thus, assume the idea of constant transformation or a process of becoming (Nietzsche, as cited in Pippin, 2006). This suggests that humans continually and inescapably oscillate between internal and external forces. In this state, pessimism rising from constant suffering is paradoxically excruciating but redemptive. Nietzsche states that the "chasm of oblivion separates the world of everyday reality from that of Dionysian reality. However, as soon as that everyday reality returns to consciousness ... an ascetic mood which negates the will ... In this sense, the Dionysian man is similar to Hamlet" (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 46). In other words, suffering and its psychological reverberations make humans more self-aware and passive amidst hollow existence and the disenchanting order of life. As Nietzsche sees it, human resilience is the capacity to navigate between

¹The following edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) will be used and referred to in the text henceforth. Nietzsche, F. (2000) *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Douglas Smith. Oxford University Press.



extremes of self-control. “The Apollonian impulse” offers clarity, self-control, and a means of surviving suffering, while “the Dionysian impulse” forces a confrontation with the abyss of life’s meaninglessness and chaos. Thus, human resilience encompasses two sides of understanding and experiencing the world congruently without succumbing to despair and oblivion (Nietzsche, 2000, pp. 46, 53, 56).

In his adaptation of Anton Chekhov’s celebrated *Uncle Vanya*, Barker depicts a modern world of existential suffering, self-questioning, and longing for autonomy, transforming Chekhov’s dramatic stalemate and psychological boredom into a discussion, which can be better reread through the Nietzschean account of tragedy and human suffering. Barker reforms this world through a postmodern overhaul of the tragic characters in *(Uncle) Vanya*. He constructs a series of mental and physical sufferings in the characters’ lives that force them to go through a course of ennui, pessimism, rebellion, and acknowledgement. Among all other characters, this transformation or new “becoming” appears necessary for Vanya to reclaim his self-worth and address his existential crisis pervading the original play. His change becomes a catalyst for the transformation of Chekhov’s entire dramatic world into a(n) (in)decipherable text, where individual autonomy and free will collide with Chekhov’s parodic participation in this tragic world as both a creator and character. In this light, this article aims to look into the ways in which Barker adapts Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* to the contemporary stage in his *(Uncle) Vanya*, revealing a crisis of existence and suffering in a grotesque parody of the stasis and denial inundating the Chekhovian Theatre.

Nietzsche’s Concept of Suffering and Greek Tragedy

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche posits that suffering is a reality of human existence, reverberating from ancient to modern times. Daniel Dienstag clarifies, “If the most immediate and direct purpose of human life is not suffering, then our existence is the most ill-adapted to its purpose in the world” (2001, p. 924). This perspective aligns with Arthur Schopenhauer’s claim that human life inherently carries deficiencies and unmet longings, whose brief fulfilment leads to a cycle of dissatisfaction and self-degradation, ultimately causing an inclination to withdraw from life. Nietzsche also notes that for Schopenhauer, “the knowledge that the world, that life can offer no real satisfaction and as a result do not merit our devotion: this is the essence of the tragic spirit - it leads accordingly to resignation” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 10). For Schopenhauer, the will is unappeasable and recurrently pushes individuals toward goals and desires, dwindling the chance of contentment, ensuing more desires and, ultimately, more suffering. Unlike Schopenhauer’s resignation from life, Nietzsche sees that humans can defy inherent suffering by embracing life’s chaotic and disenchanting nature. (Dienstag, 2001). Nietzsche assumes that “the weaker (human) is persuaded by its own will to serve the stronger because it wants to be master over what is still weaker: this is the only pleasure it is incapable of renouncing existence” (Nietzsche, as cited in Pippin, 2006, p. 89). In this, he sets out to classify humans into two archetypes: the strong ones hold and acknowledge life wholly, and the weak ones insist on affirming conventional values and norms, highlighting their degeneration, which involves mental strives and physical torments demanding an optimistic outlook on life. He also notes that “enchantment is the precondition of all dramatic art. Under the influence of its spell, the Dionysian enthusiast sees himself as a satyr, and as a satyr, he, in turn, beholds the god, that is, transformed in this way he sees a new vision outside himself” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 50). For him, tragic art enables individuals to engage with suffering in a constructive and life-affirming way. His view of tragic humans envisions a deeper grasp of their state and role in life by recognising the human capacity to adjust, amend and take on life as an indomitable but creatively metaphorical stage.

The Birth of Tragedy seeks to elucidate the rise of Greek tragedy and its decline, particularly its traditional form after Euripides. Nietzsche famously suggests that the introduction of a rationalistic philosophy by Socrates and its further development by Plato eroded the cultural foundations necessary for Greek tragedy

(Nietzsche, 2000, p. 77). Nietzsche associates pessimism with the pre-Socratic philosophers, positing that their ideas encapsulated the fundamental nature of early Greek culture. For him, “tragedy is the outlet of mystic-pessimistic knowledge” (Deinstag, 2001, p. 926). This philosophical pessimism served as the foundation for the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles, embodying the wisdom that the pre-Socratics possessed. However, this wisdom was eventually denied and forgotten by later generations. Socrates’ optimistic philosophy is identified as the pivotal agent responsible for this significant cultural and intellectual shift.

Nietzsche’s account of Dionysus and Apollo also shows how humans reflected suffering and the subsequent pessimism in artistic engagements in Athens. He associates the aestheticisation of suffering in tragedy with the ideals and conditions of ancient Greek society. Dionysus and Apollo represent contrasting aspects of life in Greek mythology. Dionysus, the God of wine and revelry, symbolises chaos, irrationality, and primal instincts, whereas Apollo, the God of the sun and reason, represents order, clarity, and rationality. Ancient humans overcame various ordeals and hardships through recognition and confrontation, much like the ancient Greeks did. The creation of Apollo signifies that while humans cannot avoid suffering, they can transmute hostile experiences to gain insight into life’s inherent meaninglessness and discover their power to endure and proceed (Nietzsche, 2000, pp. 31, 157).

Nietzsche explores this duality in *The Birth of Tragedy*, suggesting that Greek tragedy emerged from the interplay between Dionysian passion and Apollonian wisdom, reflecting the complex nature of human experience.

[T]he demise of Greek tragedy was the result of a remarkable tearing as under of those two original artistic drives: a process accompanied by degeneration and transformation of the character of the Greek people, something which requires that we think seriously about how necessarily and inextricably entwined the fundamental connections are between art and people, myth and morality, tragedy and state. This demise of tragedy was, at the same time, the demise of myth. Until then the Greeks felt spontaneously compelled to relate all their experiences to their myths, and indeed, to understand their experiences only in terms of this relation [...]. But the state immersed itself as much as art in this current of timelessness, in order to find respite from the burden and craving of the moment. (2000, p. 124)

He acknowledges the central place of suffering by defining art as a genre that promotes duality, conflict, and resolution by describing various forces and ravages of time. His work consequentially connects ancient life with the modern world, contending that suffering is intrinsic to human existence and asserting that the moral walls shaped by Christianity are imminent to collapse. Thus, Nietzsche’s preference for “becoming” over “being” is clearly a progressive effort to understand and sustain humans’ desire to know, reflect upon life and normalise the concept of death. Dionysian pessimism embraces life’s inherent chaos and irrationality. Rooted in worshipping Dionysus, it inherits and actively endorses life’s darker and tumultuous aspects. “The elemental force, the will to power, that puts being in a constant state of becoming need not be conceived as having a specific end, since the process set in constant motion involves destruction; it is arbitrary and chaotic.” (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 278; as cited in Agada, 2021, p. 2). Nietzsche links this idea to tragic knowledge, where one recognises and accepts human reason’s liability to suffering and limitations, finding profound meaning in this acceptance and his artistic creativity (2000, p. 124). Greek tragedy inherently proves the inevitability of suffering and pessimism while revealing a more profound existential significance beyond its physical representations.

Howard Barker's Portrayals of Tragic Suffering and Grotesque Parody in *(Uncle) Vanya*

Barker's adaptation play *(Uncle) Vanya*² was written in 1991 and premiered in 1996 by The Wrestling School. Although Barker places Chekhov's eponymous character, Vanya, at the centre of his adaptation, he puts the character's reduced identity as uncle in parentheses in the title by disengaging with the underlying meaning and characterisation of Chekhov's work. For Barker, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* not only replicates but also endorses social reality as an element of social discipline. Vanya, as a character in Chekhov's play, has a life hopelessly wasted. He has thrown away his life to serve Professor Serebryakov, the spouse of his late sister, and has led a drab existence, working during the day at the farm and reading at night to help the Professor. He now understands that the man he has looked up to is unworthy of his assistance, but it is too late. Barker claims that the play is a dance macabre in "Notes on the Necessity for a Version of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*" because he believes that Vanya should act freely, shoot at his target, and most possibly, die (as a choice) (Barker, 2011, p. 9). He announces, "I remade Vanya because I loved his anger, which Chekhov allows to dissipate in toxic resentment. In doing this, I denied the misery of the Chekhovian world, where love falters in self-loathing, and desire is petulance" (Barker, 2011, p. 9).

Barker defends the act of rewriting or dissecting another work of art in "Murder and Conversations: The Classic Text and a Contemporary Writer," where he raises ethical concerns about entering another writer's territory and claims that "invention requires at times to be stimulated by obstinacy, irrational will or a heroic repudiation of our fear and piety" (Barker, 2016, p. 179). Prior to *(Uncle) Vanya*, Barker appropriated and adapted several famous dramatic works, including *The Bite of the Night* (1986), which tells the story of Helen of Troy, *Women Beware Women* (1986), which is an adaptation of Thomas Middleton's play of the same name, and *Seven Lears* (1989), which is a reworking of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. These adaptations manifest moral ambiguity and propose other realities by reworking and subverting the classics. In his opinion, "smearing a public property" or confronting an authority figure like Shakespeare or Chekhov shocks the audience. (Barker, 2016). However, it also constitutes "an act of reverence" more profound than an absolute believer's knee homage because it requires "the investment of will" (Barker, 2016, p. 167). In this way, by reworking the mythical and celebrated works as a challenge, Barker demythologises and destabilises their grandeur, putting them in the valley of cultural and artistic imagination, subjective reconsideration and questioning. His desire to rework *Uncle Vanya* stems from its being the most "Chekhovian", most misguided and widely acclaimed play by Chekhov (Barker, 2016, p. 187).

Barker's *(Uncle) Vanya* portrays free will as an alternative to Chekhov's conundrum, in which a world of disenchanting characters is in constant stasis and self-pity. Adapting Chekhov's Russian setting to contemporary times shows that modern life is permeated by the same sense of suffering, which is fraught with adversities, disillusionment and futility, prompting individuals to seek avenues that mitigate pain and distress. Some of these characters find relief in questioning and complaining. Astrov, a doctor of medicine, delivers his rationale on the human responsibility for his tragedy, reminiscent of Nietzsche's point that humans struggle with the unassailable forces of life, enduring and eliminating their own sufferings. He says, "Man is endowed with reason and creative power so that he can enhance what he has been endowed with, but up till now he has been destroying but not creating [...]" (Barker, 2011, p. 13). Astrov believes that humanity's failed ambitions and activities damage the modern world. Extrapolating this portrayal to real-world context emphasises the repercussions of human negligence and indifference, exacerbating perpetual and collective suffering. Drawing parallels between Barker's revision of an isolated group of Russian bourgeoisie at the turn of the twentieth century and the contemporariness of the motif of the man-made

²The following edition of Howard Barker's *(Uncle) Vanya* will be used and cited in the text henceforth. Barker, H. (2011). *(Uncle) Vanya*, in *Howard Barker Plays Six*. Oberon Books.



catastrophe suggest the universality and timelessness of self-inflicted tragedies in human history. In Astrov's protest, nature is conceptualised both physically and emblematically. It is the culmination of human actions and struggles between themselves and the external world. He accuses the human race of being the cause of their own catastrophe and the perpetrators of a self-inflicted tragedy. Astrov has lengthy tirades and monologues on the worth of nature and human failure to safeguard it. This reaches a level in which the culture/nature dichotomy reflects a failure of balance on the side of humanity and humans' reluctance to rebuild this equilibrium. It is evident from Astrov's tragic but static character that Barker does not intend to exaggerate the universal and moral role of his character but reminds the audience that human damage is self-inflicted and self-excruciating. The only way out of this state of existence is to regain consciousness and the will to change and act.

Another character, Sonya, positions the modern human amidst a chaotic cultural and commercial scheme because he cannot prosper in a larger system of cultural victimisation, financial domination and market demands. She declares, "Our paralysis is nothing more than the reflection of our economic crisis, the decline of rents, and the aggressive style of capitalism in a backward economy" (Barker, 2011, p. 28). Sonya also describes Chekhov's realm as a world of melancholy and paralysis. Sonya's father, Serebriyakov, who is widowed after her mother's death, pursues a young and attractive wife, leaving her behind in the country with her uncle, Vanya. Her only hope is that Astrov may respond to her love for him. However, Astrov also adores Helena, her father's mistress. In Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, her monologue, illustrative of melancholy and personal misery, exemplifies the Chekhovian preference for stagnant realism and an atmosphere of self-inhibition and impotence.

What can we do? We must live out our lives. [A pause] Yes, we shall live, Uncle Vanya. We shall live all through the endless procession of days ahead of us and the long evenings. We shall bear patiently the burdens that fate imposes on us. We shall work without rest for others, both now and when we are old. And when our final hour comes, we shall meet it humbly, and there beyond the grave, we shall say that we have known suffering and tears, that our life was bitter. (Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*, 1922, p. 83)

Reading Sonya's monologue, it is helpful to remember that her suffering never quite reaches tragic proportions because she does not have Vanya's self-realisation and longing for free will and agency in Barker's adaptation. She prefers to relieve her suffering through a commitment to the greater good of others and appreciates their restlessness and suffering as a side-effect of being a conscious being. On the other hand, Barker sees that fulfilment and self-realisation are driven by free will and human agency rather than moral integrity or selflessness. In Chekhov's play, for instance, Vanya's musings on how his will to live independently and happily is undermined by his guilty surrender to mental suffering, which weakens his agency and determination. Vanya's abrupt and comic assertion of individuality and autonomy in Barker's adaptation exemplifies Barker's contemporary reaction to Chekhov's misrepresentation and misconception of suffering and human agency.

This grotesque deconstruction of a world of multiple portrayals of suffering saturates Barker's adaptation. To clarify, the grotesque produces different artistic styles oscillating between various forms of repugnant or distorted dialogues and comical or even farcical characterisation. Grotesque is, therefore, intertwined in the opposing and often concentrated polarisations of the real and unreal, credible and fantastic, normative and distorted or severe and caricatured. Ondrej Pilny states, "The grotesque is primarily defined by the blending of radically incongruous elements, together with the simultaneous repulsion and fascination it triggers" (2016, p. 3). The grotesque parody featured in this play offers a creative space for

Barker to provide his characters with a non-normative and aesthetic setting where they can speak and mock themselves and others freely by embracing ironic detachment from reality.

As a creative concept, death is also a central element of the grotesque representation of suffering. Although the play can be deemed a tragicomedy, it features the imminence and pervasiveness of death as a grotesque element, showing the incongruity between the deeds and beliefs of the characters. The grotesqueness of Vanya as a restless character makes him an agent of “becoming” in Barker’s meta-dramatic world, where Chekhov is a character resisting the change and defiance in his art. Death is frowned upon in Chekhov’s world as a disturbing consciousness and confusing state of mind. According to Barker, since death is intimate and enigmatic, nobody is sure of how to behave in the face of death. He forces readers and audiences to confront the reality of mortality by implying that death is imminent right there on stage (Barker, *Death, The One, and the Art of Theatre*, 2004, pp. 3, 7, 28). In Barker’s adaptation, Vanya’s bullet strikes Serebryakov in the first act, altering the play’s initial comical/absurd course and giving it an ironic but tragic atmosphere. This pivotal moment allows the character to break free from his captivity in the void and indecisiveness. Along with Serebryakov, Astrov is also killed by Sonya by the end of the act and returns to the stage as part of the chorus, just as Serebryakov does after being killed by Vanya. As a result, the order established by Chekhov is overturned and deconstructed in an imaginative world, which allows the suffering caused by the gravity of death to turn into a celebration of dramatic creativity and the aestheticisation of tragedy for the playwright.

In the second act, Chekhov comes from the sea. As they stand, the characters are arranged in a row, hanging their heads down like apologetic individuals (Barker, 2011, p. 62). The symbolic moment here is that the God of this universe dies, and his last words invite a philosophical challenge that the truth itself is lost, as Nietzsche asserts. Instead, Vanya’s revolt fails to liberate him from his existential torpor in the original play and transforms into a state in which he relishes this newfound freedom and the will to take action in a universe where the authority vanishes, and the dramatic crisis is solved as a means of salvation for Vanya, transcending the physical borders of the tragic world. This is a vestige of “eternal recurrence” in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which showcases that instants and experiences of existence repeat themselves perpetually, and the individual overcomes himself by appreciating and overcoming the eternal recurrence of life unfolding around them. Resilience comprises suffering and awareness of it as an attached element of our existence (Nietzsche, 1968; Pippin, 2006, p. 178). By the play’s conclusion, the surviving characters appreciate the course of their liberation; dead characters are freed from the limbo of anguish and non-existence, and the living return to their chaotic lives, finding an existential purpose to carry on and endure a recurrent sense of listlessness. Barker’s dramatic world presents instances of escape and relief as temporary and transient, as does the people’s existential angst and apathy, which rematerialise and remind them of the overwhelming power of the surrounding world.

The gun plays a central role in Barker’s creation of climactic action and Vanya’s grotesque assertion of self. Barker problematises Vanya’s self-denial as Chekhov created him against becoming an independent being, and he is forced to live as a character with no control over his actions. Barker thus sets Vanya free, handing him a gun and consenting to his agency and mutiny in the adaptation

Vanya: [...] I have a gun. For so long now, I have had a gun. This gun I clean most nights. I clean it with oil in the light of the moon. This is undoubtedly the habit of an assassin. (Barker, 2011 p. 14).

Vanya: I HAVE A GUN (p. 18).

[...]

Astrov: Oh, shut up about your silly gun—

Vanya: WAS GIVEN ME BY CHEKHOV. (Pause.) And having given it to me, he was profoundly sorry...
(p. 19)

Consequently, Barker breaks the aesthetic and moral walls of the Chekhovian world, which not only releases Vanya but also revises the play's aesthetic mood of stasis and stark realism. In Barker's adaptation, Vanya's killing of Serebryakov is both the cause and outcome of a character's discontent and revolt, whereas in Chekhov's play, Vanya's attempt to kill Serebryakov results in a tragi-comic restoration of the status quo. Here, Barker denotes explicitly the theatrical concept of "Chekhov's gun", a dramatic principle coined by Anton Chekhov that describes every element in a play that should contribute to the whole. Vanya becomes intentionally and thankfully disobedient against Chekhov's warnings that the melodramatic interlude of the gun upsets the delicate nature of characterisation and the surrounding morals. Later in the second act, Chekhov admits to having misused the gun himself. He regrets this, admitting, "The gun was always an error. The gun was always false...[...] As Vanya knows" (Barker, 2011, p. 71).

For Barker, the use of the gun is intentional and artistically functional. He believes it is the very object of liberation. However, in the original play, Chekhov's gun does not contribute to Vanya's salvation but aggravates his suffering. As he states in the "Notes for Necessity", Barker rescues Vanya from his miserable mood and constant suffering (Barker, 2011, p. 9). Andy Cornforth states that Vanya "rarely, if ever, speaks alone on stage; much of what he does say is apparently not heard or ignored by other characters" (2018, p. 29). The climactic act releases him to take control of his life. In fact, in *(Uncle) Vanya*, the characters seem to perform "extreme versions of their involution" (Rabey, 2009, p. 62). Vanya is the character most aligned with Barker's idea of the mutiny of characters that can be linked to Nietzsche's argument on the human struggle with unexploited potential and unfulfilled life. He is in a conundrum due to the loss of meaning resulting from his dedication to Professor Serebryakov's academic aspirations and pursuits. He is alone in the grasp of his truth. His entrapment echoes Nietzsche's criticism of morality and the social edifices suppressing human potential. Vanya's frustration arises from his failure to assert his will and reduced state as a passive bystander in his own life. In Nietzschean terms, Vanya's failure to fully embrace revolt stems from his inability to transform his suffering into a creative force. He, however, fails to achieve a genuine reevaluation of values. His inability to assert his own will results in an existential deadlock, which channels into an active, rebellious spirit—one willing to revolt against external authority and societal norms, as embodied by Chekhov himself in Barker's adaptation.

Conclusion

In *(Uncle) Vanya*, Barker offers a grotesque and ironic presentation of Chekhov's lack of initiative and belief in the human power to endure and revolt in the original play, calling into question the very nature of Chekhovian drama. He challenges Vanya's fixity and constraints in the melancholy of an un-lived life and self-murder. He does so by combining his idiosyncratic violent humour with "a fully articulated spectrum" (Rabey, 2009, p. 67). Barker's character personifies Nietzsche's emphasis on the need for revolt, though human ordeal and suffering appear not to be resolved in the play. Vanya is disenchanted with life and particularly feels restrained by his existence's ennui and unsatisfied potential. He sees himself as a victim of his creator, Chekhov. Nietzsche's idea of true freedom requires not rejecting external authority but a pledge to self-creation and self-overcoming, thus embracing the idea of becoming. Barker's play, in this respect, becomes



an affirmation of human agency. While he endows his characters with endurance and autonomy, Barker claims his metadramatic autonomy and artistic departure from the conventional theatre in his adaptation.



Nietzsche's concept of free will charges and destabilises traditional interpretations of human agency. It resists the role of authority and human inadequacies in the path of reaffirming human will to power. For Nietzsche, a free human feels a desire for power and control over himself. He overcomes and transcends the circumstances of his existence, so his revolt is an essential sign of freedom. For Nietzsche, Vanya's exasperation and later revolt can be deemed an existential crisis, originating from a failure to affirm and embrace his power to confront and control himself.

The tragic hero's journey involves confronting suffering directly. The hero must face the "abyss" of existence, recognising that suffering is not an anomaly to be avoided but a fundamental aspect of being (Nietzsche, 2000). For Nietzsche, the conception of tragedy situates art as a means for the human expression of self. Tragedy emulates the complexity of the human spirit and endorses the human capacity to endure. Barker's adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*, in this respect, does not present a faithful retelling of the original play, but instead, it reimagines its characters' struggles through an existential lens. The play explores themes of wasted potential, frustration, and the crushing weight of unfulfilled desires, which are all captured in the philosophical conflict between determinism and autonomy.

Barker transforms the stagnant suffering into an active tragedy where suffering and reconsolidation are enthusiastically met by the characters endowed with a recognition of their role in a larger scheme of conflict, which aligns with the fact that Nietzsche commends the tragic hero, who tackles suffering with self-awareness, affirming their agency and courage to change. Barker's play thus signifies the downfall of old dramatic traditions by actively seeking to establish a new order in the modern world. Vanya's course of "becoming" presents an ironic parody and deconstruction of Chekhov's assertion of the truth of the human condition and tragedy, showcasing the self-overcoming and existential revolt of the characters against the creator of this dramatic world.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

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