The Seagull Study Guide

The Seagull by Anton Chekhov

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Introduction

Anton Chekhov's *Chayka* or *The Seagull* (variously translated in English as *The Sea Gull* and *The Sea-Gull*) is the first play in the author's second period of writing for the theater—that of the last few years of his life—in which he penned his widely acknowledged dramatic masterpieces. With it, after a hiatus of seven years, Chekhov again returned to writing plays, and he revealed his mastery of techniques that he would exploit in his other great plays of that final period: *Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. In all of them, Chekhov employs a method of "indirect action," one in which characters confront changes that result from offstage occurrences, often in a period of the characters' lives that elapses between acts. The plays also share the unique Chekhovian mood, a pervasive melancholic tone that arises from the haplessness of the characters that seem destined either to wallow in self-pity or indifference or consume themselves in frustrated passion. It is in these plays, with his special brand of "slice of life" realism, that Chekhov journeys to the outer limits of comedy, to a point in which its distinctness from quasi-tragic *drame* is blurred and at some points all but lost.

In *The Seagull*, a work that the author himself claimed contained "five tons of love," is a play about a very human tendency to reject love that is freely given and seek it where it is withheld. Many of its characters are caught in a destructive, triangular relationship that evokes both pathos and humor. What the characters cannot successfully parry is the destructive force of time, the passage of which robs some, like Madame Arkadina, of beauty, and others, like her son Konstantine, of hope.

When the play was first staged, in St. Petersburg in 1896, it was very badly received. The audience was unwilling to applaud or even abide a work that in technique and style countered the traditional kind of play built on comfortable conventions. Audiences were simply not ready to accept a work that seemed to violate almost all dramatic conventions, a play that, for example, had no clear protagonist or an easily identified moral conflict or characters who rigorously kept to points relevant to that conflict in their dialogue. For Chekhov, the response was devastating. There seemed to be no audience prepared to welcome the "new forms" championed by one of the play's characters, the young writer Konstantine Treplyov.

Had Chekhov's friend, Nemirovich-Danchenko, not taken an interest in the work despite its initial stage failure, the dramatist might well have given up writing for the theater. Nemirovich-Danchenko and his more famous codirector of the famous Moscow Art Theatre, Konstantin Stanislavsky, brought *The Seagull* to the stage again in 1898 and turned it into a remarkable success, the first Chekhov play that they produced in what soon became one of the most fortuitous associations in the history of modern drama. It was their staging of *The Seagull* and the other later plays of Chekhov that brought the writer his lasting acclaim as a dramatist.

Author Biography

Anton Chekhov was born on January 17, 1860, in Taganrog, a dreary Russian seaport village on the Black Sea. His grandfather was an emancipated serf who had managed to buy his own freedom. His father, Pravel Yegorovitch Chekhov, a cruel and dictatorial taskmaster who made his children's lives miserable, ran a small grocery store. In 1876, that business failed, forcing the family to flee to the anonymity of Moscow to escape from creditors. Although Chekhov's fame as a dramatist rests largely on works he wrote during the last eight years of his life, his love of the theater extended back into his youth in Taganrog, where he frequented dramatic presentations at that city's provincial playhouses. Young Anton remained in Taganrog to complete his schooling before following the family to Moscow and entering that city's university to study medicine.

It was there that Chekhov began writing his sketches and stories, works that fairly quickly brought him financial independence and a moderate degree of fame. Between 1880, when the first of his pieces appeared, and 1887, Chekhov published about 600 pieces in periodicals. Quite literally, he wrote his humorous sketches as "pot boilers," works providing money enough for his family to get back on its feet.

By 1884, when he graduated from the university and began practicing medicine, Chekhov already knew that he had contracted tuberculosis, a disease that would leave him but twenty additional years to write. His success and much improved financial situation soon allowed him to give up medicine to concentrate on his writing, though he sometimes worked as a physician to help the poor.

At first Chekhov did not take his writing very seriously, but starting in 1885, after he moved to St. Petersburg, his attitude began to change. He became a close friend of A. S. Suvorin, the editor of *Novoe vremja*, a fairly conservative journal. Recognizing Chekhov's genius, Suvorin encouraged the writer to take more pride in his work and to seek a greater critical reputation. It was there, too, that Chekhov fell under the influence of the great novelist, Leo Tolstoy, especially that writer's moral preachments, including his passive response to evil.

Chekov began to write plays at about the same time that he started writing fiction but did not immediately achieve the success and acclaim that he did in fiction. His work in drama falls into two distinct periods. The first, from 1881 until 1895, is predominately one in which he wrote adaptations of his prose sketches as curtain-raisers or "vaudevilles," single-act farces of the sort that were immensely popular in Russian theater at the time. Two of these pieces, *The Bear* (also known as *The Brute* and *The Boar*) and *The Marriage Proposal*, are extremely durable examples of this kind. Chekhov also experimented with longer pieces in his early years, but, except in the case of *Ivanov* (1887), he had little success with them. In fact, because one of them, *The Wood Demon* (1889), was so chillingly received by critics and was rejected for performance, Chekhov all but gave up writing drama for the next seven years. With *The Seagull* (1896), he entered his second period of dramatic writing and produced the world-renowned masterpieces on which his fame as playwright largely rests. In this

second period, lasting to his death in 1904, he wrote his greatest plays, which, besides *The Seagull*, include *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *The Cherry Orchard* (1900), and *Three Sisters* (1901). It was also in this period that Chekhov commenced his fortuitous association with the Moscow Art Theater, then under the joint directorship of Constantin Stanislavsky and Chekhov's friend, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. In their stage interpretation of his work, these two men and their actors brought the author both great fame and fortune. His sickness soon took its toll, however, and after his marriage to the actress Olga Knipper in 1901 until his death in 1904, Chekhov's failing health depleted his energy and prevented him from adding new works to his limited dramatic canon.

However, by 1901 he had done enough to acquire an international reputation. In these latter plays, Chekhov perfected hallmark techniques and a style that earned him a lasting reputation as a seminal figure in modern drama—in the minds of many the coequal of the "father" of modern drama, Henrik Ibsen. To this day, in manner and technique, he is still admired and imitated by aspiring playwrights.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The Seagull opens on an early summer evening in a park on the estate of Peter Nikolaevich Sorin, brother to Irina Arkadina, a celebrated actress. A small stage blocks a view of the lake that borders the park. Around it are some bushes, a few chairs, and a table. Behind the platform's curtain, Yakov and other laborers are finishing work on the makeshift structure.

Masha and Semyon Medvedenko are returning from a walk. She is the daughter of Sorin's steward, Ilya Shamreyeff. He is a poor schoolmaster, infatuated with her but perplexed by her sorrow, which is overtly revealed in her mournful world view and black clothing. He cannot understand why she is sad, for she is not poor. From their conversation, it is learned that a play written by Konstantine, Madame Treplyov's son, is about to be performed, and that he and Nina Zaryechny, who is to act in it, are in love.

As Masha tries to discourage Semyon's love, Sorin and Konstantine Treplyov enter. Sorin confides that the country does not really suit him. He complains to Masha about the dog that her father keeps chained up, but she curtly dismisses his request that she tell Shamreyeff that the dog's howling bothers Sorin. She and Medvedenko exit, followed by Yakov and the other workers who go off for a swim while Sorin and Treplyov await the appearance of Nina. Sorin, after remarking on his own frumpishness and inadequacies as a lover, asks the cause of Treplyov's mother's bad humor. Konstantine claims that she is jealous and launches into a diatribe about her inadequacies—her petulance, stinginess, volatile temperament, and, the greatest shortcoming of all, her shallow view of the theater. He then explains that with "new forms" he is helping to sweep away the old, worn-out tradition. He also reveals that he is in fact very jealous of her, of her fame and her lover, the novelist Boris Trigorin, who annoys him because of his success.

Konstantine's assessment of Trigorin is interrupted by the arrival of Nina, upon whom he clearly fawns. Nina, concerned that she might be late, explains that she has had to slip away from her father and stepmother, who do not approve of their "Bohemian" neighbors. She is obviously very nervous, and after Sorin goes off to collect his other guests for the play's performance, she explains that she is fearful of acting before such a literary luminary as Boris Trigorin, whose stories she admires. She then complains to Konstantine that his play has no "living characters in it," offending him.

The others begin arriving, starting with Pauline, wife of Ilya Shamreyeff, and Eugene Dorn, a doctor. They discuss Dorn's enchantment with Nina and his easy success with women, something that has prompted her jealousy and suggests that they are engaged in an illicit affair. Their talk is cut off by the arrival of the others—Madame Arkadina, Sorin, Trigorin, Shamreyeff, Medvedenko, and Masha. They are discussing the state of the Russian theater and its actors, the "mighty oaks" that in Shamreyeff's view are now

nothing but "stumps." After Irina asks Konstantine about his play and exchanges lines with him from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the performance begins. It consists of a recitation by Nina, a prospective glance 200,000 years into the future, when most life forms of our era will long since have become extinct. It is more a threnody than a play. When the spirit represented by Nina is approached by the Devil, represented by two red "eyes" and the smell of sulphur, Irina begins laughing, greatly annoying her son, who orders the curtain closed, aborting Nina's performance, and storms off in disgust. His mother is upbraided by Sorin, who seems much more aware of her son's hurt pride than she is. She finds him simply "an unruly, conceited boy," one whose ideas about theater arise from his temperament, not from any artistic convictions. She soon relents, however, and expresses regrets for hurting his feelings.

When Nina appears from behind the stage, Madame Arkadina praises her for her voice and looks, and Nina confides that she has hopes of becoming an actress. Irina introduces her to Trigorin. They briefly discuss the play, the substance of which seems to have evaded them. He then talks of his joy in fishing, a pleasure that surprises Nina. The act winds down with some final revelations that help explain the character tensions in the play. Nina, afraid of her father, must run off, but it is clear that her regret at leaving arises from her infatuation with Trigorin. After she leaves, Madame Arkadina explains the girl's unfortunate situation as the daughter of a man who has taken a second wife. She then goes off with Sorin, who complains about the damp night air. Dorn is left alone, but is soon joined by Konstantine Treplyov, who complains of being pursued by Masha, an "unbearable creature." Dorn praises him for his play of "abstract ideas," of which he approves. Treplyov, almost frantic, is merely interested in finding Nina, and quickly runs off just after Masha enters. After his departure, treating Dorn like a surrogate father, she asks for his help. She is tortured by her love for Konstantine. Dorn remarks then on the nervousness of everyone and the "magic lake" that seems to have inspired the hapless love of all of them.

Act 2

The action continues on another part of Sorin's estate, a croquet lawn near the lake. It is noon on a hot day, perhaps a week later. Seated on a tree-shaded bench, Madame Arkadina and Masha engage in idle conversation while Dorn attempts to read a de Maupassant story. Rather vainly, Irina asks Dorn to say which of them, herself or Masha, looks the youngest, then carries on about her fine appearance and flawless grooming. She exclaims that she never looks frumpy, an obvious contrast to her brother, Sorin. She takes the book from Dorn and reads aloud, then, apropos of the author's words, comments on her relationship with Trigorin.

When Sorin enters, accompanied by Nina and Medvedenko, who bring in his wheel chair, the conversation turns to Trigorin and his persistent habit of fishing alone and then to Konstantine, who Madame Arkadina finds "sad and morose." While Sorin snores in his wheel chair, Masha effusively praises Konstantine's genius and poetic soul. Annoyed, Irina wakes her brother and complains about his failure to take medicine. Dorn, in turn, carps about Sorin's consumption of wine and his smoking. According to

the doctor, these habits affect his character, but Sorin only laughs and defends his use of sherry and cigars as a defense against his boring life, which in turn prompts a discourse by his sister on the dullness of country living.

After Shamreyeff and Pauline enter, and Irina confirms that she had hoped to take a horse and carriage to town in the afternoon, the steward grows angry and abrasive over her request. She threatens to leave for Moscow, and he threatens to quit his post. Followed by Trigorin, she exits with a complaint about the insults she is subjected to at Sorin's estate, leaving her brother to rebuke his steward for his insolence. Thereafter all go off except Dorn and Pauline. The doctor claims that Sorin should fire her husband but says that it will not happen, that instead the steward will be pardoned for his rudeness. Pauline begins complaining about her husband's coarseness, then pleads with Dorn to requite her love. She grows contrite when rebuffed, admitting her jealousy of other women.

Nina, who has been picking flowers, joins them and explains that Irina is inside crying and that her brother is in the throes of an asthma attack. She gives Dorn the flowers, but as he goes in to tend to Sorin, Pauline demands them from him. She tears them to pieces and throws them away before following him into the house. Alone, Nina expostulates on the strangeness of seeing a famous actress grow so passionate over nothing at all. She is joined by Konstantine Treplyov who carries a gun and a dead seagull, which he lays at her feet. He claims that is the way that he will end his life. Irritated, she complains that he cannot speak except in symbols. He complains bitterly about her growing frigidity towards him. When Trigorin appears, Konstantine remarks that he will not stand in Nina's way and exits.

Alone with the novelist, Nina talks of her envy for his fame, something that he claims he is unresponsive towards. She argues that his life is beautiful, but he rejoins that his writing is an annoying obsession that is more punishing than rewarding. The act of writing may be pleasurable, he says, but he detests the result. As a writer, he exclaims, he hates himself, for other than as a "landscape artist" he is "false" to the very core of his being. Nina is not discouraged, however, and expresses her willingness to sacrifice anything for fame.

After Madame Arkadina calls him from the house, Trigorin is about to go in when he notices the dead seagull and asks Nina about it. He then asks her to try to persuade Irina to stay and makes a note in a book that he carries with him. He is jotting down ideas for a sad story about a girl much like Nina, who a man destroys like the seagull. Madame Arkadina, appearing at a window in the house, calls again, announcing that they are staying after all. After Trigorin goes in, the act ends with Nina's remark that "it's all a dream!"

Act 3

The scene shifts now to the interior of Sorin's house, to the dining room. From the conversation, it is made clear that about a week has elapsed since Konstantine shot the

seagull. From the trunk and hat boxes deposited on the floor, it is also clear that preparations for a departure are in progress.

Masha is alone with Trigorin, who sits at a table eating his lunch. She tells him that she is going to marry Medvedenko, even though she does not love him. The fact that she is drinking annoys the writer. He is also upset because Treplyov has been behaving badly. As Boris explains, during the elapsed period between the acts, Konstantine has bungled an attempt to kill himself with a pistol shot to the head. He is reportedly also planning to challenge the novelist to a duel and has been preaching about the need for new art forms, which Boris finds offensively inflexible. As Nina enters, Masha speaks of Medvedenko as a poor and not very clever man, but one who loves her. She plans to marry him from pity as much as anything else.

After she exits, Nina gives Boris a medal that she has had engraved to commemorate their meeting. He recalls the moment when he saw her in her white dress with the seagull lying at her feet. They are then interrupted by Madame Arkadina and Sorin, who enter followed by Yakov, who is packing for Trigorin and Irina. The novelist goes off to find one of his books, lines from which are referenced on the medal's inscription.

Madame Arkadina tells Sorin to look after Konstantine, whom she is leaving behind. She says that she will never understand her son's bungled suicide attempt but that she must take Trigorin away because of Treplyov's threats. Sorin says that her son's behavior springs from his wounded pride and that she could help him by giving him some money for clothes, making him feel less like a poor relation. At first, Irina insists that she has none to give Konstantine, but she finally confesses that she has some money but that, as an actress, she needs it for her costumes.

When Sorin begins to stagger, about to faint, Madame Arkadina cries out for help. Both Treplyov and Medvedenko enter to assist, but the spell quickly passes, and Sorin again insists that he will accompany Irina and Boris to town. He goes off with Medvedenko, who poses the riddle of the Sphinx to him as they leave.

Alone with his mother, Treplyov asks her to change the bandage on his head, after first suggesting that she should lend her brother, Sorin, some money. When she is done applying the fresh bandage, Konstantine asks why she continues to be influenced by Trigorin, who, he says, is a coward for running off to escape a duel with him. A heated argument ensues over the novelist, as Konstantine attacks both Boris and his writings, and Irina defends him. She accuses her son of envy, and he explodes, announcing that his talent is greater than that of both his mother and Trigorin put together. In angry recriminations, he calls her a miser, while she retorts that he is a beggar. A sudden, contrite reconciliation follows, as Konstantine confides that he has lost the love of Nina, leaving him spiritually impoverished.

Just as Irina exacts a promise from Konstantine to make up with Trigorin, the writer enters and Treplyov hastily retreats from the room. Thereafter, the writer confesses his feelings for Nina, asking that they stay a bit longer. He pleads with Irina to let him go, to free him from her influence. She grows angry, then weepy, and finally throws herself on

her knees pleading with him to remain true to her. She grows very possessive, overbearing his weak will and exacting a promise from him not to leave her. Then, as if nothing had just happened, she says that he can stay on for another week if he wishes.

Sorin's steward, Shamreyeff, enters to announce that the horse and carriage are ready for the trip into town, a notice he embellishes with recollections of an unintended comic moment in a serious melodrama. The family retainers begin scurrying in and out with the luggage and clothes, as Sorin, Pauline, and Medvedenko enter. Gifts are given, after which Sorin goes off to get in the carriage, followed by the others. Nina then enters, encountering Trigorin, who has returned to find his walking stick. As the act closes, the pair have a passionate moment in which they promise to meet in Moscow and seal the promise with an ardent kiss.

Act 4

The action again occurs in Sorin's estate house, in one of his drawing rooms that has been put to use by Treplyov as a study. It is stormy night, a full two years later. At rise, Masha and Medvedenko, now her husband, enter, looking for Konstantine, who, it is soon learned, has become a moderately successful writer. For the moment or so that the couple are alone, they reveal that they have a child, on whom Medvedenko dotes but towards whom Masha seems completely indifferent. The baby and her husband seem merely to annoy her.

They are joined by Treplyov and Pauline, who come in carrying bedding for turning a sofa into a bed for Sorin's use. The old man, now ill, has insisted on being near Konstantine. Medvedenko then leaves, ignored by Masha and rather curtly dismissed by Pauline, who thereafter turns warmer attention to Konstantine, affectionately running her hand through his hair as she discusses his unanticipated acclaim as an author and begs him to be kind to Masha. Without uttering a word, he rises from his desk and exits, leaving Pauline and Masha to discuss Masha's forlorn love for him. Masha's only hope is that her husband's imminent transfer will put her ache behind her.

After Konstantine begins playing a melancholy waltz in another room, Dorn and Medvedenko enter, pushing Sorin in his wheelchair and arguing about money, a constant problem for the school teacher. Dorn says that he has no money either, claiming that his life savings have been spent on a journey abroad. As the rest converse with Sorin, it is learned that Madame Arkadina has gone to town to meet Trigorin, prompting Sorin to remark on his own illness and Dorn's unwillingness to let him have any medicine. Sorin wishes to give Konstantine matter for a story, a thinly-veiled, abstract account of his own life, prompting Dorn to remark on the old man's self pity and the fear of death.

Treplyov returns and sits by his uncle just as Medvedenko begins asking Dorn about his travels. After identifying Genoa as his favorite foreign city, Dorn inquires after Nina. Treplyov gives an account of her poor fortune as both an actress and Trigorin's mistress. He notes that in letters that she exchanged with Konstantine, Nina always

signed herself "the seagull," and that though she did not complain in them, he could sense the sadness behind her words. He also reveals that she is now in town, staying at an inn, and that her father and stepmother have disowned her.

When Madame Arkadina and Trigorin arrive, accompanied by Shamreyeff, and greetings are exchanged, Trigorin graciously remarks on Treplyov's newly acquired fame as a writer and announces his intention to return to Moscow the next day, after fishing on the lake in the morning. Masha asks Shamreyeff to lend a horse to her husband, a request that prompts the steward to mimic her and Medvedenko to insist that he can walk home. Most of the characters sit down to play lotto, but Treplyov leaves after looking through a magazine given to him by Trigorin and announcing that Boris had read his own but not Treplyov's story. He once again begins playing the sad waltz offstage. The ensuing conversation of those remaining is interspersed with exclamations relating to the game. During it, Irina talks of her ongoing successes as an actress, while Trigorin voices doubts about Konstantine's skills as a writer. Dorn in turn defends Treplyov's artistry, while Madame Arkadina confesses that she had not even read any of her son's work.

Treplyov stops playing and returns to the drawing room as Shamreyeff informs Boris Trigorin that he has had the seagull stuffed for him. When Trigorin wins the lotto game, all the characters except Treplyov go off for some supper. In a monologue, Treplyov remarks that, despite his preaching about new forms, his work is becoming as routine as that which he despises. Then, hearing a tap at the window, he opens the doors, goes out, and leads Nina into the room. After she talks morosely of her faltering career, and her disappointments, Treplyov reveals his ambivalent feelings towards her, his love-hate, from which she recoils and tries to distance herself. She starts to try to leave, but Konstantine pleads with her to stay. She verges on going when she overhears Madame Arkadina and Trigorin in another room, and she reveals that, despite Boris' wretched treatment of her, she still loves him. She embraces Treplyov, then runs out through the terrace door. Left behind, Konstantine tears up all his manuscripts, then exits through another door.

After Dorn enters and moves a chair that Treplyov had used to block a door, he is joined by Irina and Pauline, and then Masha, Shamreyeff and Trigorin, who have returned to resume their game. Yakov follows with a tray and bottles. Almost immediately, they hear a shot from offstage. Dorn goes out to see what has happened, then returns. He exclaims that a bottle of ether in his bag exploded but then leads Trigorin away from the rest and, in a lowered voice, tells him to take Irina away, explaining, at the curtain, that Konstantine has shot himself again and that this time, presumably, has killed himself, though Trigorin does not explicitly say so.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Seagull is Anton Chekhov's four-act play about the search for love and the personal tragedies that occur, when love remains unrequited.

As the play opens, it is just past sunset on the Russian estate of Peter Sorin, whose sister is the famous Russian actress, Madame Irina Arkadina. The evening is fair, and the setting includes an impromptu stage on which a new style of drama will be enacted for a few guests. The sound of workers is heard behind the stage's curtain.

Two of the guests, Masha, a daughter of a retired lieutenant and now the caretaker of the Sorin estate, and Simon Medvedenko, a teacher, stroll the grounds, awaiting the start of the play. Simon is frustrated, because Masha does not return his love for her. Masha is perpetually sad, even though she is not poor. This is a good indicator of happiness, according to Simon.

The pair discusses tonight's play, written by Constantine Treplev, the son of Madame Arkadina. A young woman, named Nina Zarechnaya, with whom Constantine is in love, will perform the play's main character.

Peter and Constantine enter the grounds and wait for the play to begin. Constantine is anxious to see his love, Nina, in the play. However, he worries, because he knows that his mother, Madame Arkadina will be jealous of the young woman's talent and beauty.

Constantine loves his mother but acknowledges her weaknesses, all part of an artistic temperament. The new style of theater sweeping over the country is also making Madame Arkadina especially temperamental, because she does not like the change. Constantine also tells Peter that he does not like his mother's new lover, the writer, Boris Trigorin.

Nina enters all flush with excitement at performing tonight, apologizing for her late arrival. Nina's father and stepmother do not approve of her theatrical vocation and her association with Constantine and Madame Arkadina. Nina shares with Constantine that she is very nervous about performing in front of Trigorin tonight, especially because Constantine's play has no living characters.

The play is about to begin, and the arriving guests include Nina's mother, Paulina Shamrayev and Yevgeny Dorn, a physician. Yevgeny does not hide his attraction to Nina, which concerns Paulina, because of the big age difference between Nina and Yevgeny.

Paulina and Yevgeny are soon joined by Madame Arkadina, Peter, Boris, Ilya Shamrayev, a retired lieutenant, who now manages Peter's estate, Masha, and Simon.

As the group waits for the play to begin, they discuss the state of Russian theatre today and bemoan the lack of any great performers.

The sound of a horn interrupts the group, signaling the start of the play. The curtain draws back to reveal the lake, where Nina sits perched on a huge rock. With the moon overhead, Nina proceeds with her monologue about life a thousand centuries in the future, when today's life forms will be extinct. Nina continues that her soul embodies all these life forms and soon is approached by the "Devil," symbolized by two red flames and some burning sulphur.

Madame Arkadina cannot stifle her laughter at the performance, and Constantine, embarrassed and hurt, orders the curtain drawn on the play and stalks away. Peter chastises Madame Arkadina for her insensitivity. She claims that this play is not a new art form, but simply the ranting of a spoiled boy.

Boris tries to help Madame Arkadina understand that people write what they can to the best of their abilities, and that she should be more tolerant of Constantine. Madame Arkadina agrees, but chooses not to watch any more efforts like this one. Madame Arkadina changes the subject to the topic of the pleasant weather, and then soon admits regret for treating Constantine so poorly.

Soon, Nina appears among the group, and both Madame Arkadina and Boris complement her on her performance. Madame Arkadina even tells Nina that her talents should be put to use in the theatre in the city. Boris admits that he does not understand Constantine's play, but that he enjoyed watching Nina's performance.

Nina has to leave, because her father will soon wonder where she is, although she would love to stay among this group of artists, especially Boris. Madame Arkadina shares the fact that Nina is in the unfortunate position of living with a father and stepmother to whom the father has already promised his full estate.

Peter suggests that the guests return to the house, because the night is getting damp. Everyone departs, except Yevgeny. Soon, he is joined by Constantine. Yevgeny tells the young man that he enjoyed his play very much. Encouraged by Yevgeny's comments, Constantine resolves to continue writing, but at the moment is interested in talking to Nina.

Yevgeny tells Constantine that Nina has gone home, and Constantine rushes off to find her. Masha returns and asks Yevgeny to help her, because she is tortured by unrequited love for Constantine. Yevgeny attributes tonight's passionate behavior to the magic lake, which seems to have affected all the guests in some way.

Act 1 Analysis

Chekhov introduces the theme of artistic pursuit in this play, filled with characters that are to some degree associated with the arts or humanities. The most obvious association is Madame Arkadina, who has made a career in the theatre and her son,

Constantine, who attempts to show his dramatic talent through scriptwriting. Perhaps because of their artistic temperaments, there is a tension between Madame Arkadina and Constantine, which can be interpreted as jealousy for the other's skills.

There is also an allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in this mother-son relationship in that Constantine loves his mother and hates her new friend, Boris, just as Hamlet's oedipal complex surfaced in his hatred for Claudius. Madame Arkadina and Constantine even quote lines from Hamlet prior to the start of Constantine's play, which further adds to the allusion.

Madame Arkadina says, "Oh, Hamlet, speak no more! Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul, And there I see such black and grained spots, As will not leave their tinct." Constantine replies with, "Nay, but to live in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love Over a nasty sty..." Madame Arkadina cannot bear Constantine's scrutiny about her life, and Constantine cannot refrain from registering his disgust about his mother's relationship with Boris.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

This act opens at midday on a croquet lawn of Peter's estate. Near the rear of the lawn, Madame Arkadina, Yevgeny and Masha sit in the shade of some linden trees. The lake can be seen off in one direction, and Peter's home in the other. Suddenly, Madame Arkadina demands that Yevgeny and Masha stand along with her. She wants Yevgeny to tell her which of the two women looks younger.

Yevgeny answers that Madame Arkadina looks younger than Masha, much to Madame Arkadina's satisfaction. Madame Arkadina proceeds to tell Masha that her secrets of youthfulness lie in her maintaining her appearance and in staying busy with her work. Masha acknowledges her own drawbacks and her intent to change.

Madame Arkadina begins to read from the book Yevgeny holds in his lap about the life of French artists, and the methods of seduction by women who love them. Madame Arkadina states that her interests in Yevgeny are much less complicated, as she tells him outright how she feels.

The trio on the bench is soon joined by Peter, walking with a can, Nina, and Simon, who pushes Peter's empty wheelchair. Peter likes being surrounded by the youthful, artistic guests, because of the relative bland landscape of his own life in government service for twenty-eight years. Peter tries to keep up with the conversation but falls asleep in his chair. He is awakened by Madame Arkadina, who chastises Peter for not taking his medicine.

Madame Arkadina has tired of the slow pace of country life and longs to return to the city to study a new role. Ilya and Paulina join the group, and Ilya addresses Madame Arkadina about her promise to go into town with Paulina today. Madame Arkadina confirms the plan, and Ilya is instantly enraged. Ilya has all the farm's horses employed in the work of the rye harvest and cannot spare any for a pleasure excursion.

Madame Arkadina is furious that a simple farmer has denied her plans and demands that some horses be made immediately available to take her to the train station, as she has decided to return to Moscow. Ilya is not accustomed to female outbursts, threatens to resign his job and stomps away.

Peter is outraged that Ilya has treated his sister in this manner and demands that some horses be brought around for her use. Madame Arkadina leaves to join Boris by the lake, and Nina and Simon accompany Peter back to the house to convince Madame Arkadina to stay.

Yevgeny and Paulina remain, and Paulina implores Yevgeny to take her away from this country place and her coarse husband, Ilya. Yevgeny claims that he is too old to change

his lifestyle now, and Paulina senses that Yevgeny has other women and will not be limited to a relationship with her alone.

Paulina's instincts are validated, when Yevgeny flirts openly with the lovely Nina, strolling in the yard and picking flowers. Nina informs Yevgeny and Paulina that Madame Arkadina is crying, and Peter is suffering an asthma attack. Yevgeny leaves to provide medical assistance, and Paulina follows him into the house.

Nina is left alone for only a few minutes, until Constantine approaches her carrying a gun and a dead seagull, which he deposits at Nina's feet. Nina is irritated by Constantine's constant use of symbols to communicate his feelings. In this case, Constantine demonstrates that he will soon kill himself with the gun.

Constantine accuses Nina of rejecting him after the failure of his play a few nights ago and acknowledges that Nina favors Boris, who has real talent. He leaves, hurriedly, when Boris approaches.

Boris has been making notes in a journal for some future story, and Nina questions him about his life and celebrity. Far from being the heavenly existence Nina thinks it is, Boris tells her that he tortures himself relentlessly about writing. For the most part, Boris feels like a failure, who will never measure up to writers like Tolstoy or Turgenev.

Nina's greatest wish is to be a writer or an actress and cannot accept Boris' resignation to mediocrity. Therefore, she tries to buoy his spirits by telling him to revel in his success and not be so self-critical.

Madame Arkadina calls to Boris from the house, and Boris tells Nina that he must leave to pack to return to the city. Before Boris leaves her, he mentions the beauty of the lake and then comments on the dead seagull lying nearby. Boris reluctantly begins to leave. Madame Arkadina's voice once more rings out that they are staying, and Boris is delighted at the news.

Act 2 Analysis

The symbolism of the play's title is explained in this act with the dead seagull delivered to Nina by Constantine, who has killed the bird as a symbol of his thoughts of suicide. Nina does not understand Constantine's way of expressing himself and rejects him in favor of the writer, Boris.

It is Boris who explains the seagull to Nina. He tells her that he will write a story about "a young girl lives all her life on the shore of a lake, like you. She loves the lake, like a seagull, and she's happy and free, like a seagull. But a man arrives by chance, and when he sees her, he destroys her, out of sheer boredom. Like this seagull." Constantine does not know how to love Nina, yet must possess her in any way that he can even if he destroys her in the process, thus killing her as he killed the seagull.

Chekhov utilizes humor in the play to break the tension at points. For example, when Yevgeny and Peter are making fun of Masha's black attitude, Peter comments that Masha never has a moment of happiness. Yevgeny replies, "Bull, your excellency." To which Peter replies, "So says the contented cow." This little sexual innuendo is a play on words, which Chekhov interjects to lighten the pacing of Masha's mood.

Chekhov mentions his contemporaries, Tolstoy and Turgenev in the play, not only as a nod to the authors, but also as an ironic element. Tolstoy did not necessarily applaud Chekhov's work, in particular. So, Chekhov's mention of Boris not achieving the status of Tolstoy and Turgenev is a sarcastic comment about Chekhov's own abilities as a playwright.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

A week has passed, and this act opens in the dining room of Peter's house. Suitcases and boxes are stacked all around in preparation for a departure, while Boris and Masha sit at the dining room table.

Masha tells Boris that she plans to marry Simon, because Constantine's suicide attempt over unrequited love for Nina proves that Constantine does not love Masha at all. Masha does not love Simon but feels that, once she is married, she will be able to remove Constantine from her mind for good.

Boris and Madame Arkadina are leaving for Moscow this morning, although Boris would prefer to stay in the country and fish at the lake on the estate. Madame Arkadina feels that it is better for Constantine if she were to leave and take Boris with her, due to the extreme jealousy Constantine feels for Boris. It is this jealousy that prompted Constantine to shoot himself in the head, and the young man still plans to challenge Boris to a duel.

Nina enters the dining room and hears Masha speak about entering into marriage with Simon, because he is pitiable. Masha leaves the room in another one of her dark moods. Nina and Boris have a few moments alone, where Nina presents Boris with an engraved medal so that Boris will remember her. Madame Arkadina and Peter enter the dining room, and Madame Arkadina tries to convince Peter to stay at the estate and not live in town, as she wishes. Life at the estate is boring when all the guests leave, and Peter is in seriously failing health and does not want to be left alone.

Madame Arkadina implores Peter to stay at the estate if for no other reason than to be with Constantine, who needs companionship now. Madame Arkadina cannot understand Constantine's suicide attempt and feels that all she can do is remove Boris from the estate to minimize Constantine's angst.

Peter tells Madame Arkadina that Constantine's unhappiness stems from lack of self-esteem more than from Boris' presence, and that if Madame Arkadina were to give her son a little money, he could travel and get some new clothes and begin to feel better about himself. Peter tries to get Madame Arkadina to understand that staying at the estate and receiving mediocre reviews of his writing is a lonely life for a young man, but Madame Arkadina claims that she needs all her money for clothes and makeup.

Peter stumbles and appears faint, Madame Arkadina cries for help, and Constantine and Simon come running. Constantine says that Peter's spells are coming frequently now. Simon escorts Peter to his room, so that the older man can rest for a bit.

Constantine asks Madame Arkadina to change his head bandage, and the two discuss her insistence on keeping company with Boris. Mother and son quarrel over the topic of

Boris' integrity, and Madame Arkadina accuses Constantine of jealousy over Boris' talent. Constantine calls his mother a tightwad, and she calls Constantine a pretentious, little toad. Eventually, the pair reconcile after Constantine shares that the reason for his recent foul mood is his unrequited love for Nina.

Madame Arkadina asks Constantine to forget the silly idea of a duel with Boris. Constantine agrees, but leaves quickly, as Boris enters the dining room. Boris is newly infatuated with Nina after receiving the inscribed medal this morning and asks Madame Arkadina if they might stay at the estate for one more day. Madame Arkadina senses Boris' true wish to remain and does not alter the plans to leave.

Boris begs Madame Arkadina to release him from their relationship, a request that results in her immediate anger, followed by her dropping to her knees and begging Boris not to leave her. Madame Arkadina launches into a monologue about Boris' talent, and he relents agreeing to stay with her. Satisfied that her mission is accomplished, Madame Arkadina tells Boris that they can stay another week, if he chooses.

Ilya enters the dining room to announce that the carriage is ready to take Madame Arkadina and Boris into the train station. Nina and Boris share a private moment, and she tells him that she is leaving for Moscow tomorrow to pursue a life in the theater. He tells her where to get a room and that he looks forward to spending time with her in the city. The two embrace and kiss passionately.

Act 3 Analysis

The theme of unrequited love becomes more evident in this act. Masha is about to marry Simon, because Constantine does not love her. Constantine has tried to commit suicide, because Nina does not love him. Madame Arkadina pleads with Boris, who does not love her. These are all unbearable situations for the individuals involved, but the most tragic longing for love belongs to Constantine, who is trying to win love and support from his mother, Madame Arkadina.

Madame Arkadina is so self-centered that she cannot begin to comfort her son and makes no attempt to understand his angst. Constantine's suicide attempt and request for a duel with Boris are huge cries for validation, but Madame Arkadina can see no one's needs but her own. The people who surround Madame Arkadina are allowed to be near her, because they serve some function, not because she has any true feelings for them.

Symbolically, Constantine's ranting for change in the theatre actually represents his longing for change in his relationship with his mother. The radical and spare ideas that Constantine believes are quite necessary in Russian theatre mirror Constantine's wish that his mother could make a dramatic change in her outlook, as well and include Constantine in her life.

Even though Chekhov wrote the play as a comedy, it is a dark one, with most of the characters possessing fatal flaws and bleak outlooks in the typical style of Russian

literature of the period. From the very beginning, Masha's brooding weaves itself through the story. She is resigned now to marry Simon, not for love, but for some diversionary tactic to forget her love for Constantine.

Peter is especially tragic, because he has devoted his entire life to government service, eschewing a wife and family. Now that he is ill and dying, people still come to his estate for their refuge, with little thought to his emotional needs at this point in his life. Peter is resigned to his bleak fate and does nothing to change his boredom and ennui that could be altered by a simple trip into town.

Peter's estate serves as the backdrop upon which the artistic temperaments of the main characters are enacted. This is probably his greatest contribution to the plot. Peter's indulgence of his guests is both heroic and tragic, as he sacrifices himself for the greater needs of the others, whose egos demand so much.

Act 4

Act 4 Summary

Two years have passed. The act opens at Peter's estate in a room that Constantine has turned into a study for himself. It is an especially dark evening, and the room is lit with a small lamp on Constantine's desk. Outside, the wind roars, and the chimney whistles from the ferocious breezes.

Masha and Simon, who are now married, enter the room. They are looking for Constantine, because Peter has requested to see him, because he is afraid to be alone, especially during a storm. Simon cannot believe that the storm has lasted for two days and mentions that someone should take down the old stage that still sits on the lawn. It is being whipped about terribly. Simon also mentions that he thought that he heard someone crying, when he walked near the stage last night.

Simon is ready to return home, but Masha wants to stay at the estate one more night. Simon wants to return to their child, but Masha contends that he is safe with his nanny. Simon declares that he will go home without her but will have to walk the six miles, because Ilya will not let him use a horse from the estate stables. Masha agrees to return home tomorrow and tells Simon to let her alone.

Constantine and Paulina enter the study carrying bed linens, because Peter wants to sleep in Constantine's study to be near his nephew. Simon leaves the room and Paulina, who has been reading some of Constantine's work at his desk, comments on his success, and asks him to pay some attention to Masha. Constantine cannot stay and listen to this line of conversation, stands, and leaves the room.

Paulina is distressed that Constantine does not return Masha's affections, and Masha contends that Simon's upcoming transfer will be the catalyst that she needs to forget Constantine permanently.

Simon and Yevgeny return to the room, escorting Peter in his wheelchair. Simon and Yevgeny are arguing about their respective finances. Simon is always poor, because schoolteachers do not earn much money. Yevgeny has exhausted all his savings during a career as a physician by taking just one trip abroad.

Masha wonders why Simon is still in the house and hisses under her breath that she cannot stand the sight of her husband, but he remains sitting quietly across the room from his wife.

Yevgeny tells Peter that Madame Arkadina has gone to the train station in town to meet Boris. Peter comments to Yevgeny that Madame Arkadina's unplanned visit must mean that Peter is very ill, but Yevgeny does not comment.

Peter laments that the end of his life is coming nearer, and he has not accomplished things that he had hoped to. Constantine returns to the study, taking up his seat near Peter. Simon asks Yevgeny about his travels. He remarks that his favorite city had been Genoa, where he could almost believe in the theory of one universal soul, just like the subject of Constantine's play in which Nina performed a couple years ago.

The mention of Nina's name prompts Yevgeny to ask about her. Constantine shares that Nina's life is not proceeding as she had expected. Nina had gone to Moscow to be with Boris, they had a child that died, and Boris went back to a previous lover, leaving Nina all alone. Nina's professional career is bleak, too, and she has returned to the area taking a room at a hotel in town. Nina's father and stepfather have forbid her to return home, so she is without any support system at all.

The group is interrupted by the arrival of Madame Arkadina and Boris. They're accompanied by Ilya, who comments on Madame Arkadina's ever-youthful appearance. Boris makes a special effort to greet Constantine to acknowledge Constantine's newfound fame as a writer and in hopes of mending any hard feelings that may still exist between them. Constantine does not trust Boris' compliments and asks if he will be staying long. Boris has plans to fish a little while at the lake and return to Moscow tomorrow.

Ilya will not loan Simon a horse, so Simon leaves to begin the six-mile walk home. Madame Arkadina is in the mood to play games and pulls a board game from the shelf. Everyone in the group settles down to play, with the exception of Constantine, who leaves the room.

During the game, Madame Arkadina regales the group with details of her latest play and social receptions. The strains of melancholy music are heard offstage. Paulina mentions that Constantine is sad, and his music reflects his mood. Boris reveals that people in Moscow do not understand Constantine's writing, but Yevgeny admits that he has always liked Constantine's style. True to her past behavior, Madame Arkadina admits that she has never read anything that Constantine has written.

Constantine returns to the study but is in an anxious state and does not join the group, when they head to the dining room for the evening meal. Constantine remains locked in his own thoughts, until he is interrupted by a knock at the window revealing Nina outside. Constantine opens a French door, so that Nina may come in out of the storm. She asks Constantine to lock the doors to the study, so that they may talk in private.

Nina shares the details of her failed personal and professional life. Constantine tells her that he has come to the inn to see her every day and stays even after Nina refuses to see him. Constantine reveals that he did hate Nina for a time for abandoning him. Now, he wants her to stay or let him go with her, so that they can be together.

Nina hears the approaching voices of Madame Arkadina and Boris and tells Constantine that she is still in love with Boris, in spite of his treating her so shabbily. Nina tells

Constantine that surviving is the only important thing to her now, even above her art. Nina quickly embraces Constantine in a farewell gesture and leaves the house.

Constantine very slowly rips up all his manuscripts, throws the pieces under his desk, and leaves the room. The group returns to the study to resume their board game, when suddenly the sound of a gunshot comes from another part of the house.

Yevgeny passes the sound off as some exploding medicine in his bag but leaves the room to check the source of the noise. Yevgeny returns to the room confirming that his suspicions had been true; a bottle of ether in his bag had exploded.

Yevgeny then feigns interest in a magazine article and draws Boris away from the group to tell him to get Madame Arkadina out of the house, because Constantine has shot himself again.

Act 4 Analysis

Constantine remains the tortured artist, who cannot find love from his mother or from the woman he truly loves, Nina. The final blow to his hope comes when Nina declares love for Boris, who has betrayed her love and abandoned her in her distress. Chekhov does not state that Constantine has died as a result of his second shooting. However, Yevgeny's casual demeanor when reentering the study and his request that Boris escort Madame Arkadina out of the room indicates that Constantine's wounds are fatal.

The symbol of the seagull remains as Constantine had initially stated to Nina in the beginning of the play, when Constantine kills the bird as foreshadowing of his own death by gunshot. There is closure, too, on the comments Boris made to Nina at the time that the seagull was killed.

The final message from the play is that a person cannot help whom he loves, or who loves him. The eternal struggle for reciprocal love from a beloved will continue forever as time passes and relationships change. The will to survive or not, ultimately decides a person's destiny.

Characters

Pauline Andreevna

Ilya Shamreyeff's wife, Pauline is often found in the company of the physician, Eugene Dorn, with whom she may be carrying on an illicit love affair, though whether her passion for him is being requited or is merely expressed remains one of the play's mysteries. In any case, she is seeking fulfillment outside of her marriage. Dorn, who has always been popular with the opposite sex, seems noncommittal in their relationship, even bored by it. She, meanwhile, is well aware of the deadening effect that time is likely to have on her hopes and tries to push him into running off with her. He seems completely disinterested, however, worn down by his weary life as a physician. He is virtually penniless and no longer feels the stirring of passion, thus nothing really ever comes of their relationship.

Madame Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina

See Madame Treplyov.

Eugene Sergeevich Dorn

Dorn is a doctor, like Chekhov himself, and as such is a familiar figure in the playwright's dramas. He is a rather world-weary man, seemingly indifferent to his calling. After years of practicing medicine, he is virtually penniless, having spent his life's earnings on foreign travel. As if resentful towards his profession, he seems almost unwilling any longer to attempt to help the sick, notably Sorin.

Like some men, Dorn in his life has had no trouble attracting the interest of the opposite sex, and in this fact he contrasts with Sorin who complains that he has had no luck at all with women. The doctor is ardently pursued by Pauline, Shamreyeff's wife, but he resists her efforts to get him to run off with her. He does not openly repel her love but instead waits for time to wear it away.

Curiously enough, only Dorn gets excited over Konstantine's work, first his play and then his fiction, about which he is most effusive in his praise. He shares Treplyov's belief that something like a literature of "new forms" is needed to sweep out the old.

Maria Ilyinishna

See Masha.

Kostya

See Konstantine Gavrilovich Treplyov.

Masha

Daughter of Ilya and Pauline Shamreyeff, Masha (also called Maria Ilyinishna) is a young woman who assumes a melancholic demeanor, though it may be more fashionable than real. She dresses in mourning black, the outward reflection of her inner sorrow—or at least that is what she tells Medvedenko, the schoolmaster who dotes on her. She seems to luxuriate in his misery, however, and her posturing borders on the ridiculous.

Masha's problem is her unrequited love for Konstantine Treplyov, who seems utterly blind to her desire and considers her a pest. He is in love with Nina and has his own problems with unrequited love. Although Masha does not love Medvedenko, who is a rather bland and unimaginative fellow, she ends up marrying him. They have a child, towards whom she reveals not the slightest maternal interest. She is ill tempered and cold towards her well-meaning husband, as is her mother, Pauline, who has been privy to Masha's hopes for a love liaison with Treplyov. At the last, she can only hope that her dull husband will be assigned to a new district so that she might put her painful love for Konstantine behind her.

Semyon Semyonovich Medvedenko

A rather unassuming and placid schoolmaster, Medvedenko diligently woos Masha, a woman whose passionate nature and eccentric manner simply seem puzzling to him. Because his own needs are so mundane and simple, he is unable to understand why she is so sad. As he observes, unlike him, she is hardly lacking in creature comforts. That her sorrow might spring from a despised love or some other nonmaterial cause simply escapes his understanding or sympathy.

Though she does not love or admire Medvedenko, Masha marries him, then behaves badly towards both him and their child. Medvedenko suffers her abuse without complaint, unwilling, perhaps, to risk the loss of her.

Ilya Afanasevich Shamreyeff

Ilya Shamreyeff, a retired army lieutenant, is Peter Sorin's irascible and tyrannical steward. As the inept Sorin complains, Ilya runs the estate, which, in truth, Sorin permits because rural life bores him. Peter is content to let Shamreyeff take charge, though the man is rather insolent and moody. At times he is also rude to Sorin's guests, especially when he feels put upon. He seems to resent the fact that he is a retainer and not their social equal.

Ilya is married to Pauline, and Masha is their daughter. He seldom seems to be in their company, busy as he is sorting out such matters as how the horses are to be used at any particular moment. He seems blissfully unaware of his wife's infatuation with the physician, Eugene Dorn, and indifferent towards his daughter, who complains that she is unable to talk to him. With her, he seems much more gruff and short-tempered than loving. He has, in fact, some of the insularity that is characteristic of many career military men, and he has clearly alienated both his wife and daughter.

In a few instances, Shamreyeff talks at length about the theater, recalling what he considers great moments in Russian stage history. His nostalgia for the low comedy that was part of the traditional theater offers a contrast with Treplyov's attack upon traditional works as cliche ridden and formulaic.

Peter Nikolaevich Sorin

Peter Sorin, brother to Madame Arkadina, is a retired magistrate in his early sixties. He is also the host and owner of the country estate that is the play's setting.

Although easy-going and genial, Sorin constantly complains about the tedium of country living. He thinks of himself as a man of the town, miscast in his retirement role as rural squire. There is about him the smell of mortality, and in the course of the play he seems to wither away as his sense of boredom saps his energy. Towards the end of the play, he is confined to a wheel chair where he dozes and snores as life continues around him. Once an important man and the embodiment of authority, he can no longer curb the insubordination of his estate steward, Shamreyeff, or even of ordinary workmen. He has trouble with others as well, the physician Dorn, for example, who seems unwilling to heed his request for medicine. Towards him and other guests, Sorin seem pathetically deferential.

However, as a critic of Madame Arkadina's treatment of her son Konstantine, Sorin points up important character flaws in his sister, confirming, for example, the selfishness of which Treplyov accuses his mother, but she does not change one iota as a result of his criticism. He does love his nephew and provides him with a home and place to work, revealing a greater sense of concern for his welfare than Konstantine's mother has. Yet Sorin's fatherly love for his nephew is not powerful enough to stay the suicidal impulses of the young writer.

Konstantine Gavrilovich Treplyov

Son to Madame Arkadina and nephew to Peter Sorin, Konstantine Treplyov (also known as Kostya) is an aspiring writer in his early twenties. Moody and often depressed, Treplyov has an antagonistic relationship with his mother. He is an unrelenting critic of the traditional theater, which he considers tired and moribund, while she, having made her successful career in that theater, defends it. It is she who interrupts the performance of his "new forms" play on Sorin's estate, mocking its special effects and enraging her

son, a signal event that sets in motion the destructive recriminations that further erode the relationship of Konstantine and his mother.

Treplyov's play also manages to alienate Nina Zaryechny, who, although she acts in the play, neither likes it nor understands what it is all about. Although Treplyov loves her, she turns away from him, attracted to the novelist Boris Trigorin and sets out to become an actress. From jealousy and envy, Treplyov verbally attacks Trigorin as a coward and wants to challenge him to duel. He also tries to kill himself, though the effort is suspect because, although he is able to bring down a seagull with a rifle shot, he bungles at least one try at blowing his brains out with a pistol.

In the final part of the play, despite his growing success as a writer, Treplyov remains melancholy and alienated from the other characters. He becomes critical of his own work, observing that it is becoming as conventional as the literature he had attacked for being staid and worn out. At the last, realizing that Nina will never relinquish her love for Boris and profoundly depressed by his own sense of his inadequacies, he makes a second and probably successful attempt on his life.

Madame Treplyov

Madame Treplyov (also called Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina) is the sister of Peter Sorin and mother of Konstantine Treplyov. She is a very successful and once a strikingly beautiful actress, who, although in her mid forties, still looks much younger, a fact in which she takes great pride. Although a sentimental woman prone to effusive emotional moments, she is a poor parent, stingy with her money and totally disinclined to sacrifice anything for her son. She is, in fact, rather embarrassed around him, in large measure because his presence serves to remind her of her real age. Although she is capable of tender moments with him, there is a strong antagonism between them that may be interpreted as having Oedipal undercurrents. In some of their exchanges, recriminations fly back and forth between them, and from start to finish she remains more hostile than loving towards him. Her antagonism is a major reason for his attempts at suicide.

Madame Treplyov holds the writer Boris Trigorin, her lover, under her spell, and although he is drawn to Nina Zaryechny, he ends up treating her badly and returning to Irina, who at one point plays shamelessly with his emotions and loyalty. Irina's son despises Trigorin, both for his writing and his apparent lack of courage. Irina is not able to make peace between them, though she hardly seems to try very hard. Because she is so selfish and self-centered, she cannot understand her son, and is simply mystified by his attack on the theatrical tradition in which she has won her fame and fortune. More often than not, she finds her son to be gloomy and depressing, an unfit companion. Still, she is fond of her brother, Sorin, though her concern for his failing health hardly matches her concern with her own fading beauty.

Boris Alexeevich Trigorin

Boris Trigorin, a successful novelist, is the traveling companion and lover of Irina Arkadina. His relationship with her and the acclaim accorded his art gnaw at Konstantine's innards. He holds the older man in contempt, as much from envy and jealousy as any really contemptible character flaws in Boris. The conflict between the two provides a good part of the play's tension.

Trigorin is actually a rather easy-going fellow. His success has made him neither arrogant nor aloof; thus, despite his wretched treatment of Nina, he remains rather likable as a character. His favorite activity at Sorin's estate is fishing in the "magical" lake, something that gives him peace and contentment.

Trigorin's fiction, realistic in nature, also rankles Konstantine, who is preaching a new style and mode in literature. Trigorin is open to new styles, and sees no reason why Treplyov's writing cannot coexist with his own. Konstantine is not so obliging, however, and seems bent on destroying both the man and his work. A central irony of the play is that Trigorin, without even trying, wins the adoration of Nina with whom Treplyov is hopelessly in love.

Yakov

Other than the steward, Ilya Shamreyeff, Yakov is the only named employee on Sorin's estate. He is one of the workers who at the opening of the play are putting the finishing touches on the stage being built for Konstantine's play, but later he also appears as a household servant, helping with the visitors' luggage and serving drinks. Like the unnamed cook and housemaids, he is otherwise an anonymous character.

Nina Mikhailovna Zaryechny

Nina Zaryechny is the pretty daughter of a wealthy landowner living on an estate near Sorin's estate. Her tyrannical father and stepmother disapprove of the "bohemian" guests of Sorin and try to prevent her involvement with them, but she is too much a free spirit to bend to their will. At first she seems to be in love with Konstantine, but after her performance in his play is interrupted, her loyalty to him quickly wanes. She is rather star struck by Trigorin, a much older man emotionally attached to Irina Arkadina. However, in her he sees a story, drawing parallels to her and the seagull that Treplyov has shot and laid at her feet. When she sets out to make a career of acting, somewhat precipitously encouraged by Irina, she takes up with Trigorin and bears his child. Irina's encouragement is somewhat suspect, for in some ways, like Konstantine, Nina is Irina's nemesis, representing as she does the youth and beauty that in Irina is swiftly fading. In any case, Nina's relationship with Trigorin is ill fated. He abandons her and the baby soon dies. However, despite Trigorin's rather wretched treatment of her, Nina cannot abandon her love for him, even though she has no more realistic hopes as a result of disappointments in love, the loss of her child, and her faltering acting career. The fact

that she will not renew her earlier love relationship with Konstantine takes its final emotional toll on the young man, who, at the end of play, again shoots himself.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

A theme developed and exploited in much of modern literature is the individual's susceptibility to a sense of isolation and alienation in an environment that is basically inimical to that individual's emotional or mental health. The most important isolated figure in Chekhov's play is Konstantine Treplyov, the uncompromising artist alienated from those around him because they are much too conventional to share his convictions about a need for "new forms." He is, of course, even isolated from his mother, a selfish woman who perceives her son as a rather unpleasant and distressingly gloomy young man who threatens both her pocketbook and those things held most dear to her—her career and her loyalty to Boris Trigorin.

Familial alienation is also found elsewhere in the play. For example, Masha and her mother, Pauline, are both unhappy with Shamreyeff. Masha finds him impossible to confide in and seeks a surrogate father in the person of Dorn, to whom she confesses her love for Konstantine. Her mother, meanwhile, also looks for love from Dorn, a man who seems constitutionally ill-suited to fulfill the needs of either of the two supplicants. Another example is Nina, who is alienated from her father and stepmother, background characters who have a disapproving, puritanical suspicion of their artistic neighbors.

Others, like Sorin, experience a different kind of isolation. Once a magistrate with the authority of law supporting him, he has lost control of his own estate, even of his life. He is estranged from the only life he valued, that of the town, and is simply bored by the country. Dorn and Shamreyeff, even Trigorin, offer parallel examples in their own peculiar way.

Apathy and Passivity

While some of the characters in *The Seagull* struggle with their frustrated desires, a few seem apathetically resigned to living their unfulfilled lives with only a token resistance to their fate. Examples in the play are Dorn and Sorin and to a lesser degree Trigorin. While to some extent these men protest against their fate, they do little or nothing to change it. Sorin is simply bored by his rural life, yet he evidences neither the ambition nor the gumption to alter it, even to take charge of his estate's affairs. Although the town life that he is so nostalgic about is but a short carriage ride away, he just listlessly slides along, unable to muster up the physical or mental energy to return to it. Dorn, despite Pauline's passion for him, seems oddly detached from those around him. He does little or nothing to encourage Pauline. He seems also to have given up the practice of medicine, perhaps because the profession has left him virtually penniless. He seems more a hesitant observer than a doer, even in such simple matters as medicating the ailing Sorin. Even Trigorin, a successful writer, is curiously apathetic about his fame. He

would rather spend his time at the estate's lake fishing, away from the company of the other characters, engaging in his private reveries.

These characters help give the play its crepuscular feel, that unnerving sense of lassitude that marks Chekhov's greatest plays. As in the actual Russian society at the time, the people in these plays talk of necessary change but prove ineffectual when it comes to effecting it, drawn as they are into a morass of self-indulgence, languishing in memories of better moments in their lives while life simply slips away from them.

Artists and Society

To some extent, *The Seagull* is concerned with the artist's role in society. Chekhov, who throughout his career had been subjected to criticism for his unwillingness to use his pen for doctrinaire purposes, was profoundly interested in the matter of the writer's social or political responsibilities and obligations. He was also writing at a time when not just the content but also the form and technique of literary works were undergoing revolutionary change.

Through his various characters, Chekhov studies the conflict arising from the resistance of tradition to that change. Clearly, Madame Arkadina, a denizen of the existing theater, embodies the views of the establishment. Standing against her is her own son, Konstantine, who preaches the need for a new art, one of "new forms," an art of forwardlooking ideas, not one that merely entertains with timeworn conventions and hackneyed ideas that no longer have any social relevance. As his play indicates, the new art should have prophetic insights into humankind's destiny. His would be a theater light years away from the theater that, for example, Shamreyeff favors, a theater of brick bats and pratfalls.

The conflict in *The Seagull* is only studied, not resolved. Even though Trigorin argues that both the traditional theater and allied literary arts and new ones could coexist, the closemindedness of the adherents to the old and the new argue that such an accommodation can not be. Konstantine's art is dismissed by his unsympathetic mother as the ravings of his "bad temper," while he sees in hers a mindless art that merely continues to pander to the bumptious fools making up the traditional theater audience. Meanwhile, as members of the artistic community spar on these issues, the philistines try to isolate them, dismissing them, as Nina's father and stepmother do, as immoral bohemians.

Love and Passion

The melancholy that pervades *The Seagull* arises from pangs of despised or unrequited love. In Chekhov's intricate design, most characters are both victim and tormentor, loving one of the others while rejecting the love of another character. That is, in the various triangular liaisons, each character loves another who either totally rejects that love or abuses it while having his or her own desires spurned by a third character. Konstantine Treplyov, for example, loves Nina, but she pursues Boris Trigorin, who ends

up treating her very badly. Meanwhile, Masha pines after Konstantine, who only views her as a pest. She in turn is loved by Medvedenko, and although she does not love the schoolmaster, marries him as a convenience and then treats him shamelessly. Those not caught up in this sort of triangular love intrigue seem no better off—particularly, of course, Irina Arkadina, a selfish narcissist who is unable to face aging gracefully or find any satisfaction in her maternal role.

Identity: The Search for Self

The principal searcher in *The Seagull* is Konstantine, although in one way or another each of the main characters is trying to find an identity in a relationship that is fated to disappoint them all. Konstantine's quest is artistic. He seeks "new forms," to break with a conventional theater epitomized by his mother, the highly successful actress. Although Konstantine's desire for Nina plays a part in his frustrations, his mother's scoffing dismissal of his work and the acclaim afforded Boris Trigorin, whom he deems unworthy, are also devastating influences. When he finds his own work growing conventional, Treplyov despairs and, rejected again by Nina, shoots himself for a second time.

Other characters are caught in situations that prevent an inner peace or self-fulfilling relationship with another figure. For example, both Masha and her mother, Pauline, look to Dorn to help them alleviate their disquietude, to provide something lacking in their lives. Masha treats him as a surrogate father, confiding her feelings in him, while Pauline, unhappy with her husband, tries to inflame a passion in him for her. Dorn remains too detached, growing passionate only in his approval of Konstantine's artistic efforts to produce his "new forms." Others are similarly frustrated—Sorin, for example, by country life, which he finds tedious, or Trigorin, who seems to find no satisfaction in his success as a writer.

Success and Failure

In *The Seagull*, those who succeed in one sense invariably fail in another. In material terms, the most successful characters are Irina Arkadina and her companion, Boris Trigorin. She is an acclaimed actress, he a renowned writer. Both seem to sacrifice much of their essential decency to their success, however. Fearful of what the loss of beauty might do for her career, Irina is much too self-centered to respond to the needs of her son Konstantine. As a reminder that she is growing old, something that she cannot face, he simply annoys and threatens her. Meanwhile, Trigorin is so jaded by his success that he has grown cynical and desultory. He treats the adoring Nina badly, abandoning her when she badly needs his support.

In the case of Konstantine, a growing success has as an ironic consequence, for the acclaim makes him feel that he has somehow sold out his ideals, that he has failed to bring about the revolutionary change needed to develop "new forms" in writing. His publication of a story in the same magazine that contains one by Boris Trigorin

distresses him, and in the play's last act, along with Nina's final rejection, it leads to his depression and second attempt at suicide.

Time

Time is the main enemy in *The Seagull*. In fact, it may be viewed as the play's principal antagonist. It is relentless and erosive, never a healing influence, as it is, for example, in a play like Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. Its effect pervades the lives of all the characters, and, because that is basically true to life, it is a defining element of Chekhov's realism.

The most devastating impact of its passage is seen between the third and fourth acts, when two years elapse. Nothing works out for the better, or at least what the various characters believe is the better. Sorin grows older and weaker. Irina Arkadina's beauty continues to fade. Nina's acting career goes nowhere. Perhaps worse yet, other things remain the same. If it is not betrayed, love merely languishes in its hopelessness, molding like some buds that rot without ever bearing fruit. Masha marries her schoolmaster, Semyon Medvedenko, and bears him a child but is neither a loving wife nor mother, still suffering from a misguided passion for Konstantine, who, in turn, still pines for Nina. Time, merely implacable, works to no one's advantage in *The Seagull*.

Aestheticism

The Seagull reflects Chekhov's aesthetic concern with his art. Several of the characters in the play are to some degree interested in the nature and theory of literary and dramatic arts. Two of them, Boris Trigorin and Konstantine Treplyov, are writers, while two others, Irina Arkadina and Nina Zaryechny, are actresses. Others, like Dorn and Shamreyeff, offer critical judgments on these arts. In fact, Sorin's estate serves as a kind of retreat for artists and intellectuals, and much of the play's dialogue, rich with allusions and topical references, concerns artistic matters. From the vantage point of Nina's puritanical father and stepmother, who remain offstage, those who gather there are selfindulgent and immoral. Nina's parent's view reflects the traditional attitudes still dominant in Russia at the time.

Style

Allusion

The Seagull makes use of allusion to literary works that in their suggestiveness enrich the texture of Chekhov's play. Chief among these is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, from which Konstantine and his mother quote lines that help define their own relationship. Konstantine is angry with his mother for her attachment to Boris Trigorin, a man whom he intensely dislikes, as Hamlet dislikes Claudius. Like Hamlet, too, Konstantine erupts into fury with his mother, though as much for her selfishness as for her attachment to Trigorin. Like *Hamlet, The Seagull* is open to a Freudian, Oedipal interpretation of the relationship between Treplyov and his mother, a view buoyed up by a similar and common reading of the relationship between Hamlet and his mother, Gertrude.

Another allusion in *The Seagull*, concerns a story by the French writer, Guy de Maupassant. De Maupassant one of the very successful exponents of realism in fiction —still a relatively "new form" in Chekhov's day, but one against which contemporary currents were already beginning to turn. There are also several allusions to the Russian theater of the day, some of which provide insights to the characters who make them, though these references are more topical and less memorable than those made to Shakespeare.

Comedy of Manners

The Seagull, though not in mood or theme, has some similarities to a comedy of manners, those amoral drawing-room pieces of the English stage in the eighteenth century. In them, love intrigues are the principal focus of both the dramatists and his characters, and adultery is at least condoned if not actually practiced. Some characters, often libertines, are caught in triangular relationships that impose dilemmas that must be resolved through wit and clever stratagems, even reformation of character. In them, clever young rakes manage to satisfy the heart while also replenishing an empty purse.

Chekhov's comedy is much heavier, of course, and its outcome very different. In *The Seagull*, love's quests are frustrated and triumph over financial adversity remains an unrealized dream. The potential for self-fulfillment of any kind simply erodes as time passes. However, in its way, and certainly compared to much nineteenth-century melodrama, *The Seagull* shares with the earlier comedy of manners a complex intrigue plot, a degree of amorality, a focal concern with social mores, and a setting—a country estate—offering an ideal locale for the various character encounters necessary to the intrigue. As with some of those earlier plays, there is also an apparent shapelessness to *The Seagull*.

Conflict

There is no central conflict in *The Seagull*, no struggle between a protagonist and some opposing character or force, but there are minor conflicts arising from a character's desire out of harmony with the needs or aspirations of another character. Mostly these have to do with love, invariably misplaced in the play. The play chronicles the frustrations of most of the major characters, their fruitless efforts to achieve what they want, and in a few cases—like that of Konstantine—depicts their disillusionment when they manage to gain a measure of success, if not in love, then at least in fortune.

Some of the conflict is familial, pitting offspring against parent, as in the case of Konstantine and his mother, but more often it arises from unrequited love. It leads to unhappiness, to the misery that seems to afflict all but the more dispassionate characters, Dorn, for example, or the waspish Shamreyeff, both of whom are aloof from love. In any case, the conflicts remain unresolved, at best only dimmed or diluted by the passage of time.

Farce

There is a very limited use of the low comic in *The Seagull*, elements of which abound in some of Chekhov's earlier one-act curtain raisers. Still, there are some farcical moments that help remind the audience that the play is, after all, a comedy, and that some of the characters' behavior is a kind of posturing. For example, there is something insincere about Masha's unhappiness expressed in the play's opening dialogue. "I am in mourning for my life," she says, and she wears Hamlet's "inky cloak" as an outward manifestation of her professed inner sorrow, which, at least to Medvedenko, she cannot explain.

How seriously and sympathetically is the audience to take Masha or, for that matter, other unhappy figures, even Konstantine and Nina? *The Seagull* can be interpreted for staging as rather gloomy melodrama, or, as Chekhov himself seems to have wanted, it can be interpreted more as comedy. At times it seems to jar back and forth between the two moods, as, for example, in Konstantine's blundered suicide attempt. Its serious import is comically punctured when, after failing to blow his brains out, he appears with a turban-sized bandage on his head. In reminding the audience that life is not shaped as either comedy or tragedy, Chekhov juxtaposes a mundane observation or event against a soulful outpouring or serious action, and at times uses a kind of comic bathos, pitting the ridiculous against the sublime.

Fin de siècle

In art, *fin de siècle* suggests both art for its own sake and, warranted or not, decadence. The term was used to refer to artists in various genres who were breaking with tradition, producing works that defied conventional morality and eschewed a didactic function. Many of the artists involved led scandalous lives, flaunting that morality in their public

behavior, the free-spirited Oscar Wilde, for example. Konstantine, in his quest for "new forms," is cast in that bohemian mold, full of scorn for tradition and ready to tear down Russia's old theatrical edifice with his revolutionary art.

Foil

A common method of illuminating character in drama is through the use of character foils. It is a technique particularly well suited to plays, which are brief and ephemeral experiences when staged. By using sharply contrasting characters, the playwright is able to present each in high relief, making them both more distinct and memorable. In *The Seagull*, Sorin's character, his ineffectualness, is not just a correlative of his age and increasing feebleness, it is highlighted by the insubordination and surliness of his steward, Ilya Shamreyeff. Similarly, Konstantine Treplyov's imaginative but volatile nature is brought into sharper focus because it is seen against the character of Semyon Medvedenko, who, far more stolid and reasonable, never flies into rages. So, too, Irina Arkadina—a woman who protests too much—has a foil in Nina, a younger reflection of herself, one who in her youthful beauty reminds the older actress that her own beauty is fading. Chekhov effectively reveals other characters through such contrasts.

Oedipus Complex

Much has been made of the relationship of Konstantine and his mother, Irina Arkadina. With loose parallels and even allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Chekhov develops an angry young man whose dislike of his mother's companion and lover, Boris Trigorin, transcends an artistic jealousy enlivened by his rebellious contempt for the older man's talent. Konstantine simply hates the man, even wants to kill him, a response that suggests more than a mere disgust with Trigorin's success as a writer. Although controversial, the Freudian explanation— a subconscious sexual jealousy—certainly has merit. The Oedipus Complex involves a male's latent love for his mother and corresponding hatred for his father, his rival for his mother's love. That hatred can be displaced, directed at a surrogate figure, especially if, like both Boris Trigorin in Chekhov's play and King Claudius in *Hamlet*, that person takes the father's place in the mother's bed.

Soliloquy

Curiously enough, Chekhov uses the soliloquy, a device that on the face of it seems inimical to realism. The soliloquy had a traditional use in theater. A vocalized monologue, it was used to reveal the inner thoughts and feelings of a character who delivers the speech while alone on stage. Although the speech may be overheard by hidden auditors, as happens in *Hamlet* for example, generally it reveals the character's inner self only to the audience. The realist's objection to the device is based on the idea that people do not normally talk to themselves aloud, unless, perhaps, they are mentally unbalanced. Chekhov makes spare use of the soliloquy, and perhaps, given what

happens in the play, deliberately suggests the character's mental and emotional instability in employing it. In act 4, it is Konstantine who, briefly alone, discontentedly mulls over the fact that he is "slipping into routine." This happens just before Nina appears and again rejects his love, leading to the play's perplexing finale, when Konstantine once again shoots himself.

Symbol

The Seagull has, as is suggested by the play's title, a central symbol, the seagull that Konstantine shoots and lays at the feet of Nina in act 2. Although Nina adopts the seagull as a signatory emblem, with a special meaning for her, its import for the play remains both elusive and debatable. There is no simple equation explaining its purpose. In fact, Chekhov seems to include it offhandedly, almost whimsically, as if defying the reader or viewer to find any meaning to it at all. Even Nina at first says that the symbolic meaning of the gull is beyond her understanding. However, symbols are often elusive beasts, talking points with no definitive answers, in part because they can mean different things to different people. What is clear is that Konstantine is a crack shot, bringing down a bird on the wing, suggesting that his attempt at suicide is deliberately bungled, making the attempt seem a mere ploy for sympathy. In any case, Konstantine relates the killing of the bird, a thing of beauty, to his depressed emotional state. He speaks of earlier events, including the failure of his play—which, like the seagull's life—was aborted by an act of cruelty, that is, by his mother's dismissive scorn. He also tells Nina that he has burned the manuscript of his play, deliberately destroying what, in his view, was a thing of beauty.

Other symbols in the play include the estate's lake, which, like the gull, means different things to different characters. Dorn sees it as magical, able to evoke dreams, while Trigorin views it more practically, as a refuge, a place to fish, and Nina as a catalytic influence in her desire to become an actress. Flowers figure in the play, too. In their ephemeral beauty, they suggest the fragile dreams of various characters, which, like the flowers in the play, are deliberately destroyed or succumb to the ravages of time.

Historical Context

In the year in which Chekhov's *The Seagull* was first staged, 1896, Nicholas II, of the Romanov dynasty, became the last czar of Russia, a nation that at the time had a population of about 128 million people. Dominated by the Russian Orthodox Church, an inept bureaucracy, and an entrenched landed and hereditary aristocracy, the vast country had settled into a seemingly inert, twilight period, a sort of fitful hibernation resistant to political change and social amelioration. While many members of the educated class recognized a need for progress, they were largely ineffectual in achieving much of anything until violent revolution brought the Bolsheviks to power in 1917 and Russia, for good or ill, finally entered the modern world. Until then, despite some unrest, including a crushed rebellion in 1906, Russia was simply a sleeping giant that had barely started to respond to the industrial revolution that a century before had begun transforming many of its European neighbors to the west into emerging industrial powers. However, at the same time, despite its backwardness and cultural isolation, Russia produced some of the greatest writers, composers, and artists of the age, among whom Chekhov stands in the front rank. Russian cities, notably Moscow and St. Petersburg, were cultural centers of tremendous importance, and places, too, where new ideas were fomented by a growing number of disaffected intellectuals. But these cities also lacked adequate housing, health care, and transportation and communication facilities, and were plagued by poverty and disease—including tuberculosis, the consumptive sickness which, even as he wrote *The Seagull*, was slowly wasting Chekhov's own life.

Although the modern age in the United States— and such European countries as England, France, and Germany—was dawning more rapidly than in the future Soviet Union, a much accelerated rate of change awaited inventions and discoveries that in 1896 were, at best, still in their infancy. In that year, Henry Ford drove his first car through the streets of Detroit and the German scientist, Wilhelm Roentgen, discovered x-rays. Also, the dial telephone and electric lamp were patented in America, and the first movie was screened in the Netherlands. In that year, too, the first modern Olympic Games opened in Athens, a seminal event that presaged the breakdown in the isolation of nations and the advent of internationalism in the postindustrial age.

Besides changes wrought through science and technology, social and political changes were in the winds. The impact of two major thinkers—Karl Marx and Charles Darwin—continued to affect everything from politics and religion to art and letters. It was in the 1890s that a third major thinker, Sigmund Freud, had begun evolving his psychoanalytical method, providing new and sometimes distressing insights into human behavior. Freud would greatly impact both literature and art, which, in the same era, were already in search of new directions and the "new forms" of which Konstantine speaks in *The Seagull*. The fin de siècle artists of the 1890s, although a hydra-headed group, were united in their efforts to replace the traditional with the new and different, to experiment with form and technique. Although never given to the personal excesses of many of his contemporaries, Chekhov, particularly in his last few plays, reflects that need to make things new.

Critical Overview

Anton Chekhov wrote *The Seagull* in 1895, at the demarcation point between his first and second periods of development as a dramatist. In the first stage, starting in 1881, the writer was chiefly recognized for his adaptations of his own short fiction into "vaudevilles," one-act farces that were very popular curtain raisers in Russian theater. To a great extent, these are formulaic pieces, focusing on the absurdities of such eccentric character types as the hypochondriacal suitor and his man-desperate, bride-to-be counterpart in *The Marriage Proposal* (1888-1889) or the blustering male intruder and the reclusive, long-suffering widow in *The Bear* (1888). Also belonging to the first period are four full-length plays, two of which are no longer extant. In only one of these, *The Wood Demon* (1889), did the playwright begin experimenting with an "indirect action" technique in an attempt to more faithfully represent actual life, free of the many stage conventions that, because they in some way falsified it, had become anathema to realists. However, until entering his second period with *The Seagull*, Chekhov still continued to depend on traditional techniques and devices, including direct, on-stage action and plots contrived to heighten dramatic impact and force an artificial closure.

In the inner-action technique used in *The Seagull*, some of the most vital action occurs offstage, not just Konstantine's two attempts at suicide, but in events that transpire between acts, as, for example, the ill-fated liaison of Trigorin and Nina and the unfortunate marriage of Masha and Medvedenko. Most of these events occur between acts 3 and 4, when two years pass. Furthermore, on the surface, *The Seagull* totally lacks the causal arrangement of episodes that characterized the more traditional fare of the time. Since action is not locked together in a discernible pattern, the work seems almost shapeless, much like life itself.

These daring departures from the usual theatrical fare were simply too much for the St. Petersburg audience when the play premiered there on October 17, 1896. It was staged at the Alexandrinsky Theater, a house that was, as quoted in Lantz, "associated with popular, low-brow entertainment," and was turned into "a complete fiasco," in part because it was "an inadequate production that was unequal to the play's striking dramatic innovations." In fact, as quoted in Styan, the Alexandrinsky's own literary committee forewarned that the play's structure was too loose and carped about its "symbolism, or more correctly its Ibsenism." In any case, the play was hastily prepared for production under the direction of E. M. Karpov, a writer of popular melodramas who evidenced little sympathy for Chekhov's revolutionary technique, and when it went on the boards, it was openly mocked. The reaction devastated the playwright, who left the Alexandrinsky confused and deeply depressed. Although audiences for the remaining performances in the eight-day run were more receptive, the damage to the dramatist had already been done.

One of the harshest critics of the play was Leo Tolstoy, who, in 1897, voiced his wholly unfavorable opinions to Chekhov's close friend, Alexzy Suvorin. As David Magarshack notes, while admitting that *The Seagull* was "chock full of all sorts of things," Tolstoy complained that nobody had an inkling of what they were there for, and he dismissed

the work as "a very bad play." That was a view shared by many, most of whom were blind-sided by Chekhov's innovative genius. As Magarshack notes, "apart from his purely moral objections to Chekhov's characters, Tolstoy's main criticisms of Chekhov's plays concern their structure and their apparent lack of purpose."

Fortunately, both for Chekhov and the modern theater, a complete reversal in the play's fortunes occurred in 1898, two years after the initial staging, when the newly formed Moscow Art Theatre revived it under the joint direction of that group's founders, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky. These two, brilliant advocates of ensemble theater, were dedicated to purging the Russian theater of its insidious star system, in which plays, often bad, were written as vehicles for popular actors. They were also dedicated to preserving the authority of the dramatist, to honoring a play's text and its creator's intentions.

Nemirovich-Danchenko, who knew Chekhov, convinced both the reluctant dramatist and Stanislavsky to attempt a revival of *The Seagull* at the Moscow Art Theatre. After a rigorous rehearsal schedule, it opened there on December 17, 1898, and was greeted with tremendous enthusiasm and deafening applause. Although the work was not the first play produced by the M.A.T., it was the one that brought it overnight fame, and it acknowledged its indebtedness to the play by adopting a seagull as its own symbol.

The play also brought critical acclaim for Chekhov, who thereafter was inspired to continue writing for the stage, producing three other masterpieces before his untimely death in 1904. Although some, like Irina Kirk, view the work as "the most innovative of his plays," the other three that came in its wake—*Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*—are generally more highly regarded, and in the history of theater have been more frequently revived. Some modern criticism views *The Seagull*, if not as a mediocre play, at least a flawed one. Echoes of the original complaints about the play's loose structure and blatant symbolism persist. Still, as the first of the four major plays, *The Seagull* enjoys a reputation both for being Chekhov's seminal work in his second and greatest period of writing for the stage and a fascinating play in its own right.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Fiero holds a Ph.D. degree. He formerly taught drama and playwriting at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and is now a freelance writer and consultant. In the following essay, he examines the ways in which Chekhov employs structural elements and characterization to achieve a sense of uncompromising realism.

Among the early modern playwrights associated with the advent of realism in drama, none seems more wholly committed to its principal mimetic tenant—of depicting life as it actually appears —than does Anton Chekhov. *The Seagull* (1896) clearly illustrates this dedication, as do the rest of the dramatist's later works: *Uncle Vanya* (1898), *The Cherry Orchard* (1900), and *Three Sisters* (1901). In all of them, Chekhov's signature forte is his ability to reveal character depth while maintaining an almost clinical detachment from his subjects, something he first achieved in his fiction and then successfully carried into his drama.

There is also a unique quality to these plays, a quality that recalls W. H. Auden's praise of "The Old Masters" in his well-known poem, "Musée des Beaux Arts." According to the poet, those painters unerringly placed suffering in its appropriate "human position" or perspective, one in which matters of great pith and moment unfolded before attendants or witnesses, who, absorbed by their more mundane pursuits, remain either unaware or uncaring. To exemplify his idea, Auden uses Pieter Brueghel's *Icarus*, a painting in which Icarus's mythic end is depicted in a background corner of the painting, as barely discernible legs plummeting into the sea, while the foreground focus is on a ploughman and his horse, seemingly oblivious or indifferent to Icarus' fate.

The painting could almost serve as a visual metaphor for Chekhov's perspective in *The Seagull* and the other three plays of his final period. In all of them, as a quintessential realist, Chekhov places individual suffering in a similar, sometimes disquieting position. In them he juxtaposes the comic inflexibility of mundane and myopic attitudes of one or more characters against the pain and suffering of another, producing his highly original work that seems neither comic fish nor tragic fowl, but an odd sort of creature with its own taxonomy. These are his plays of "indirect action," in which the most significant events in the characters' lives occur either offstage or in entre-act crevices, in a rough equivalent to the background corner of Brueghel's painting. At times, what happens on the stage, in the foreground, is comically inappropriate to or heedless of what is happening just beyond a door or, at a further remove, in the larger world beyond. In *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, while at an offstage auction their world is collapsing, Chekhov's onstage characters mark its passing in dance and idle, if anxious, chatter, unable to do anything to prevent the inevitable. For Chekhov, such was the way of the world, and, as a realist, it was the way he chose to depict it.

Beginning with *The Seagull*, to meet the fairly rigorous demands of realism, Chekhov completely scrapped traditional stage conventions as well as the time-honored dramatic structure delineated, notably in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and served up as a guide to writing plays in countless handbooks on the craft. Central to this structure is a sense of

completeness, of unity and wholeness, achieved through a succession of dramatic moments that move towards an anticipated climax, an obligatory "recognition" scene in which the central conflict of the work is resolved and its tension released. Though it is clearly a formulaic scheme, it has worked well for some of the greatest dramatic masterpieces in the world, especially in tragedy. However, because it is a "tendency" structure built on the principle of necessity or inevitability, it is highly selective in what it depicts, and therein it goes against the theoretical grain of unalloyed realism. Life is simply not packaged that neatly.

Compared with a play like Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, which has a tendency structure, Chekhov's *The Seagull* eschews any vivid sense of dramatic inevitability. There are no vital seeds sown in the first act, either in action or character recollections about the past, that set the major figures on an unalterable course to an anticipated fate. Nor, at the end, is there a sense of completeness, for the conflicts in the play are simply too diffuse and unresolved. Although the implication of Dorn's behavior is that Konstantine Treplyov's second attempt at suicide has been successful, even the young writer's fate remains in doubt, as do the affairs of most of the other characters. Thus, in its inconclusiveness, the play is open-plotted, and it leaves most of its characters in their own emotional and isolated limbos. That time will not improve their lot seems the only certainty.

In essence, much more so than Ibsen, Chekhov approaches a "slice of life" fidelity to real human existence. He provides no neat, ordered array of episodes, but rather a matrix of action that ultimately fails to take his characters very far down a path of self-realization or sense of personal fulfillment. That is not to say that Chekhov's last plays lack plots or significant action. According to David Magarshack, one of those who describes those masterpieces as "plays of indirect action," it is not a plot's "absence but its complexity that distinguishes them." The late plays teem with life and are almost overloaded with ideas. In *The Seagull*, however, there is no central problem that is the focal concern of all its characters, except, perhaps, such an intangible thing as the nature and purpose of art, an issue of vital concern to Chekhov, and one that resonates throughout the play and pervades its dialogue. It provides a thematic counterpoint to the frustration and unhappiness felt by most of the characters, especially Konstantine, Nina, Masha, and Pauline, who are all disappointed in love. None of these characters finds happiness in some final comic triumph, for, simply put, no Jack gets his Jill, or at least not his proper Jill. In fact, there seems to be no end to the pain. Except perhaps for Treplyov, life will merely continue in its entropic vein, with a pervasive sense of ennui, of a melancholic world weariness that is erosive of the human spirit.

The Seagull has no principal character, no protagonist, nor even any plot driver whose need or desire is the engine of the action, as is, for example, Hedda's in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. Even if one claims that Nina and Konstantine are the "leads," as J. L. Styan does, their dramatic potency is sapped because the critical events in their lives, her seduction and his suicide attempts, occur offstage. Chekhov's plot can in fact be seen as the sum of its minor plots, most of which have to do with love that is frustrated or abused. It simply lacks a cohesive, unifying symbol and an impending change that is of

concern to all its characters, elements that Chekhov so brilliantly provides in *The Cherry Orchard*, generally acknowledged to be his finest work.

However, as Magarshack points out, the lack of a central protagonist was hardly a new phenomenon in drama. He notes the absence of such a figure in many direct action plays, especially those of Chekhov's contemporary, Alexander Ostrovsky. More important, says Magarshack, are the changes in dialogue and Chekhov's use of invisible, offstage characters in the dramatist's last four plays. Regarding the text, the critic argues that "the dialogue of the early plays is remarkable for the directness of its appeal to the audience," whereas in the mature works "its appeal is indirect and, mainly, evocative"—in brief, more lyrical. As for the unseen characters in the background, they provide "a motive force for the action, which is all the more powerful because the audience never sees them but is made to *imagine* them." By their offstage actions, the "invisible characters" in *The Seagull*, the disapproving parents of Nina, in fact reveal much about Irina Arkadina and her friends, their presumed moral laxity, for example, or their threat to traditional mores. In their final disowning of Nina, they have an important symbolic significance. They represent the traditionalism that blocked what Chekhov believed were necessary changes in both art and society.

Although the play is crammed with action, it is wrought small. There are no big events, not in the foreground at least. As noted, the two suicide attempts by Konstantine, certainly traumatic moments, occur offstage; the first attempt is made in the interval between acts 2 and 3, the other at the end of act 4, when Treplyov tears up all his manuscripts and walks out of the room and, in despair, shoots himself. Even as he storms off, other characters enter the vacated room to resume a game that was earlier interrupted and begin chatting about matters that argue that they are simply oblivious to Konstantine's self-destructive mood. When the shot is heard, they do not even question Dorn's assertion that something in his medicine case must have exploded. They simply go on with their parenthetical lives as if nothing of significance has happened.

Elsewhere, the focus of *The Seagull* is, as Styan suggests, "on several intense and potentially melo-dramatic relationships, which tend to distort the objective view by calling for an audience's empathy with exhibitions of individual emotion." Characters do at times vent a passion, especially Konstantine, but Chekhov never permits an emotion to explode into onstage, self-destructive violence. Reminders that life will go on in the face of individual suffering always seem to assert themselves, deflating passions and defusing the moment, even rudely so, as when, in act 1, with derisive scorn, Irina Arkadina abruptly intrudes on Konstantine's serious feelings—which hang out in his play within the play like so much emotional laundry—and compels him to abort Nina's performance and bring down the curtain.

That scene is part of a pattern of unsympathetic disengagement that characters evidence from the opening moments of *The Seagull*, when Medvedenko questions Masha about her unhappiness with his practical observations that she has little to be unhappy about. Throughout the play, in parallel fashion, characters seem unwilling or unable to cooperate when others make a plea for love or understanding. Some reactions are unintended, like Sorin's dozing off, but others seem singularly insensitive,

especially in situations in act 2. When Konstantine lays the dead gull at Nina's feet, she is simply irritated with him and complains that she is "too simple to understand" him. In turn, she is given an emotional cold shoulder by Trigorin, with whom she is infatuated. He fumbles with her words most awkwardly, nervously laughing and consulting his watch while politely attempting to deflect her obvious hero worship.

Such are the Chekhovian moments on which *The Seagull* is built. They seem to come almost haphazardly, like a series of accidental encounters. They are, of course, very carefully placed beads on the playwright's structural string, asymmetrical perhaps, but dramatic nonetheless, and much closer to mirroring actual life than those more traditional plays in which episodes are placed in a progressive, logically-ordered arrangement. Chekhov's genius for making such a structure work explains why, despite the topicality of much of his matter, particularly in *The Seagull*, his final plays are still highly valued for their technique and are still imitated in method.

Source: John W. Fiero, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Poquette has a B.A. in English, and specializes in writing drama and film. In the following essay, Poquette analyzes Chekhov's play in light of both its historical context as a transitional example of modern drama and in Chekhov's character, Treplyov, regarding the state of a symbolist in a realist society.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the classical conventions of drama introduced largely by Aristotle more than two millennia ago were being replaced by a new, modern theatre. Modern drama emphasized realism in place of melodrama, fantasy, and romance. Whereas earlier writers had focused on elevating theatre and its characters to an imaginary level, often depicting fictional situations outside of the average playgoer's experience, modern playwrights attempted to approximate the reality of life as it is really lived.

In the modern play, the audience was asked to imagine that the curtain was a fourth wall that existed between them and the actors. The characters were seen as regular people going about their business, oblivious to the audience. When the curtain rose, these audience members were allowed to peek through this imaginary wall and into a certain time period and situation in the characters' lives.

Other conventions that changed were in the use of dialogue. Realistic drama featured dialogue that was not embellished or exaggerated. Modern actors did not play to the audience with grand, poetic solitary speeches, known as soliloquies, as Shakespearean actors did. There were no stars in the modern system. Instead, playwrights used well-rounded ensembles of people who discussed their situation using the same types of realistic dialogue that an audience member might use in his or her own life.

In the case of Anton Chekhov, realism also extended to include a focus on mood and emotion among the characters, as opposed to a unifying plot and a direct, easily recognizable dramatic action. Instead, Chekhov's major plays placed more importance on the characters than the plot, leading many critics to say that nothing happens in a Chekhov play. But, as Anthony Caputi stated in 1991 in his anthology, *Eight Modern Plays,* ". . . none, or at least few, would argue that they are about nothing: somehow he makes the 'nothing' of his actions a nothing that has to do with everything."

Chekhov was well aware of the conventions that he was breaking and the problems it might cause, particularly in the case of *The Seagull*.

The Seagull was the first of Chekhov's final four plays (referred to as his "major" plays) and is considered by many critics to be his most innovative dramatic work because it introduced new conventions that would serve as a transition to his and others' later modern plays. Simon Karlinsky and Michael Henry Heim noted this fact in 1973 in their anthology, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*. "It was in *The Seagull* that this liberation first occurred, the creative breakthrough that made Chekhov as much an innovator in the field of drama as he already was in the art of prose narrative."

Even though *The Seagull* is widely regarded as a pivotal work for both Chekhov and modern drama, the wealth of criticism on the play is anything but unanimous in its treatment of the material. Even Chekhov was a little unsure at the time about what he had written. Donald Rayfield makes reference to a letter that Anton Chekhov wrote on October 21, 1895, to his longtime friend and editor, Alexis Suvorin, in which he remarked that his play was unstageable due to the radical departure from conventional stage rules.

With that fact in mind, one can nevertheless make the case that Chekhov intended *The Seagull* to be a statement on his literary ideas, specifically by using the character of Treplyov to show that a true symbolist could not survive in a modern society that was focused more and more on realism.

Symbolism was a movement that focused on mysticism as opposed to reality. It involved sacrificing realism for imagination and attempted to achieve a dramatic ideal.

David Magarshack explores Chekhov's views toward the symbolists in 1973 in *The Real Chekhov.* "Chekhov dismissed the 'decadents,' as the symbolists were called, as 'frauds.'" As Magarshack notes, Chekhov never engaged in public debates over his art but instead distributed his ideas about drama through his characters.

In *The Seagull*, these characters consist of a well-rounded group of people, all of whom are faced with the real despair of having wasted their lives or experienced unrequited love.

The most passionate of these characters is Konstantin Treplyov, the young writer who attempts to live his life and art completely through the idealistic views of symbolism.

Throughout the course of the play, Treplyov's attempt to achieve his ideal life is slowly beaten down by the reality of the situation surrounding him. In the beginning, he has pretensions of being a great writer of "a new form," and it is with this aim that he produces a short play that he attempts to show to his friends and relatives on his Uncle Sorin's country estate. The play includes no living characters and features only one performer, Nina Zarechny, a young woman who Treplyov loves. Nina, however, does not return his love, although she also aspires to live the ideal creative life, in this case as an actress.

Treplyov's play details a mystical struggle 200,000 years in the future on a barren earth, between the devil and a "world soul," which is composed of all of humanity's past souls. "The consciousness of all humanity, together with the instincts of animals, have united in me," Nina intones. Magarshack notes that this abstract idea of a world soul and a mystical struggle was based largely on the ideas of the leader of the Russian Symbolist movement. Treplyov's play ends in failure when his mother, Irina Arkadina, an actress in the traditional theatre, criticizes the play during the performance, calling it "decadent." Treplyov angrily stops the show and stomps off, leaving his audience members to discuss the play. His mother dismisses the play as merely "decadent ravings. . . . what

we have here are pretensions to new forms, to a brand-new era in art. There are no new forms available, as I see it, just a bad temper."

The failure of Treplyov's symbolist play is an attack by Chekhov on symbolism itself. The irony of Arkadina's statement is that Chekhov himself, with the writing of *The Seagull*, is helping to usher in a new era with his radical conventions and the new realism of modern drama.

Chekhov is not totally unsympathetic to the symbolist movement, however. In the play, the character of Dr. Dorn echoes Chekhov's ideas about abstract art such as symbolism. Says Dorn:

There must be a clear and definite thought in a work of art. You must know what it is you're writing for. Otherwise, if you go along that picturesque road without a definite aim, you will lose your way and your talent will destroy you.

This idea of unrestrained art being destructive is a clear foreshadowing of Treplyov's suicidal fate, and is, as Magarshack notes, the central theme of the play. For Dorn and for Chekhov, an abstract idea is not bad in and of itself. Instead, it is art without structure that can destroy an artist, in this case the symbolist, Treplyov.

Treplyov's next appearance in the play, in act 2, signals even more his dismal fate. After witnessing Nina fawn over the established writer Trigorin, and realizing that his love for Nina will be forever unrequited, Treplyov kills a seagull and presents it to Nina, telling her that he will soon kill himself.

The seagull, which has been noted by critics as a heavy-handed use of symbolism to represent hopes betrayed, is also linked to the image of Nina herself, beginning with her statement back in the first act: "My father and his wife won't let me come here. They say this place is Bohemian . . . They're frightened I might become an actress . . . But I ache to return to this lake, as if I were a sea gull." Nina feels trapped in her house and her life, and she seeks the escape to Treplyov's stage, and eventually, to the acting life itself.

When Treplyov kills the seagull, he is trying to make a symbolic statement, by killing something that Nina has identified herself with, and by warning her that her love is driving him to kill himself— but it doesn't work.

Nina wounds Treplyov when she tells him that he has grown irritable. To make matters worse, she demonstrates that Treplyov's symbolism was wasted on her. "And I suppose this sea gull here is obviously a symbol, too, but—forgive me—I don't understand it . . ."

Treplyov leaves, crushed. Nina soon brightens up when Treplyov leaves, and she sees Trigorin approach. For Nina, Trigorin, an established writer, represents her dream of being an actress, and she hopes that by following him, she will be given access to this ideal dramatic world.

Trigorin sees the seagull that Treplyov has killed, and it gives him an idea for a story:

A young girl has lived her whole life on the shores of a lake. A girl like you. She loves the lake, like a sea gull, and she's as happy and free as a sea gull, too. A man happens to come by, sees her, and, having nothing else to do, destroys her like that sea gull there.

This speech foretells how Trigorin will treat Nina later in the play.

The seagull, which gives the play its name, has a double meaning, standing for both hopes betrayed, an idea which many characters in the play can identify with, and also for Nina herself. This is not uncommon in Chekhov's later plays.

As Nicholas Moravcevich discussed in 1984 in his essay, "Chekhov and Naturalism: From Affinity to Divergence," Chekhov's major plays introduce a theme or governing idea early in the action, in this case, the theme of the self-destructive power of unrestrained art. Since Chekhov's later plays do not use direct plotting to move the action forward, they instead rely on a "symbolizing device" that keeps the theme alive throughout the play, in this case, the seagull.

At the beginning of act 3, after a week has gone by, the audience learns that Treplyov has shot himself in a "moment of mad despair." Although the wound was not fatal, it has signified his intent to kill himself. For Treplyov, an extreme idealist, it would be better to take his own life than to suffer knowing that Nina loves another, and that he is a failure as an artist.

After his failed suicide attempt, Treplyov toys with another idealistic notion, by planning on challenging Trigorin to a duel, a highly romantic, unrealistic way to both win Nina's love from Trigorin and destroy his writing nemesis.

What Treplyov fails to acknowledge is the fact that even if he were to kill Trigorin in a duel, it would not win Nina's love. Nina is attracted to Trigorin's success as an artist, and Treplyov cannot offer her that. He tries to cling to his idea of a duel nonetheless.

But Treplyov is a lover, not a fighter in the realistic sense, and he is easily turned away from his intent. After an impassioned exchange with Arkadina, in which she further chips away at Treplyov's idealism by calling him a "nonentity" and telling him he can't even write a "pitiful little skit," Treplyov breaks down, crying. "If you only knew! I've lost everything. She doesn't love me, and now I can't write . . . All my hopes have gone down the drain . . ."

Nevertheless, Treplyov perseveres. He knows that he's lost Nina for now, but he also suspects that it will never last with Trigorin, and so he waits, with the romantic hope that he and Nina will someday be reunited. He gets his first opportunity between acts three and four, when he tries to visit her in her hotel room, after she has been used and discarded by Trigorin.

"I saw her, but she didn't want to see me," Treplyov tells some guests in the first part of act 4. "The chambermaid refused me entrance into her hotel room. I understood the way she felt, so I didn't insist on a meeting." Treplyov understands what it is like to have

a lover leave, and he hopes that Nina will realize that they are meant to be together, as they had discussed in their childhood dreams.

Nina keeps this hope alive by sending him letters. She signs the letters, "The Sea Gull," which he takes as a sign of her shattered mental state, ironically forgetting the very symbolism that he bestowed on her earlier, when he killed the gull.

During the between-acts time period, Treplyov has also experienced some success at his Symbolist writing, although not all of the attention has been good. As one character puts it, he has gotten a "first-rate roasting in the newspapers." Even Trigorin patronizes him, when he tells everybody that Treplyov is a big mystery in Moscow and Petersburg, and that everybody wants to know what he's like.

There is no mention of Treplyov's writing skills, only his image in the major cities. Treplyov has become successful in the sense that his writing is getting noticed, but it is not happening in the idealistic way he had imagined it. The final insult comes when Trigorin gives Treplyov a journal that contains stories by both him and Treplyov, and Trigorin quite obviously has not even cut the pages to read Treplyov's story.

In the only lengthy monologue in the play, Treplyov calls into question his own writing ideals. "I've talked and talked a lot about new forms, yet I feel now that I am slipping little by little into a conventional rut." After comparing his own work to Trigorin's, he comes to a final conclusion:

Yes, I'm invariably coming more and more to the conviction that the issue is a question neither of old nor of new forms, but that a person simply writes, never thinking about the kind of forms, he writes because it pours freely out of his soul.

With this admission, Treplyov realizes that he is lost as a writer. As Maurice Valency discussed in 1966 in *The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov,* ". . . although he feels in himself a talent that dwarfs Trigorin, Trigorin writes better than he, and is able to succeed effortlessly where Treplyev fails." This contrast, Valency notes, "is intolerable for Treplyev."

At that moment, Nina enters. Treplyov, clinging to the last shred of his idealism, tries to take this as a sign that she is ready to be reunited with him. "My warmhearted girl, my beloved, she's come here."

But Nina still has no love for him. She has resolved her own issues with art and life and is in a much better state than Treplyov. As Valency notes, Nina has "lost her youth, her child, her innocence, and her peace of mind; but she has discovered her vocation, and the joy of work, and therefore she is saved."

She no longer thinks the theatre is the dream that she had anticipated:

I've come to realize that in our work—it doesn't matter whether we play roles on stage or whether we write—the important thing is neither fame nor glamor nor what I used to dream about, but it's knowing how to endure.

Nina has accepted her fate, and will leave the next morning for a winter acting engagement in Yelets, a job that will fall somewhere between acting and prostitution, as "cultured businessmen will bedevil me with their little gallantries."

But Treplyov cannot accept his fate. Nina's rejection is more than he can take. She leaves, and he is distraught both by the fact that he cannot have her and that he can't accept his realizations about his art.

In a scene that Chekhov deliberately makes about two minutes long, Treplyov silently destroys all of his writings, then fulfills the prophecy that Dorn suggested in the beginning when talking about the self-destructive power of unrestrained art, by taking his own life.

Treplyov is the only character who reacts to his fate this way. His symbolist views in his work and love life have not served him well, and at the end, he can't cope with the realism of his situation, whereas the other characters, who all embody various aspects of realistic people, go on living and enduring.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Perkins, an Associate Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland, has published several articles on twentieth-century authors. In this essay, she examines Chekhov's play and his presentation of the artistic temperament.

In *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, M. H. Abrams characterizes a recurrent figure in romantic and modern literature—the suffering artist. He notes that the central character in many literary works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is "the alienated and anguished artist whose priestly vocation entails the renunciation of this life and of this contemptible world in favor of that other world which is the work of his art." In the nineteenth century, this figure first emerged in the romantic poetry of authors like Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelley. At the turn of the century, playwright Anton Chekhov employed this dominant image in *The Seagull* and so encouraged a new generation of writers to construct realistic portraits of this enigmatic character. Through the play's penetrating study of several people who gather together at a Russian country estate, Chekhov explores the complex relationship between art and personal identity.

The Seagull focuses on intimate moments shared by four artists with varying degrees of devotion to their calling. Arkadina and her lover Trigorin have both enjoyed successful careers—Arkadina as a celebrated actress and Trigorin as a best-selling novelist. Yet neither are true artists. In her analysis of the play, critic Emma Goldman argues that Arkadina "is the type of artist who lacks all conception of the relation between art and life."

Arkadina's shallow and self-centered nature emerges in her response to her son's play. Her negative reaction has little to do with the play's artistic merit. Treplyov understands that she will dismiss his play before she views it because she has not been included in the cast. He notes, "She's angry about my play because Nina's acting in it, and she's not. . . . She's angry in advance because, even though it's just on this little stage, it will be Nina's success and not hers." While he admits she has talent, he notes that her focus is on herself rather than her art:

You may praise only Mother, write only about productions that Mother's in, rave only about Mother's performance in *Camille or The Fumes of Life*. And since she finds no intoxicating adulation in the country —Mother's bored.

Her jealousy prompts her to disrupt the performance of her son's play with questions and jeers, which causes Treplyov to bring the curtain down during the first act. Later, while discussing the theatre with her, Treplyov concludes, "you won't recognize or tolerate anything but your own superficial notions. You sit on and suppress everything else."

Unlike Arkadina, Trigorin admits to his artistic limitations. He tells Nina during a discussion about his work, "Yes, I enjoy writing, and reading proofs. But as soon as

something's published, I hate it. I see it's not what I meant—and I feel angry, I feel bad." Trigorin acknowledges that his reading public appreciates the charm and cleverness of his works, but that they also consider them inferior to those of the truly great authors like Tolstoy and Turgenev. In an attempt to create classic works of art, he has focused on what he thinks are important themes, yet these "hurried" attempts received attacks "from all sides," until he was forced to admit that he did not understand what he was writing about. As a result, he concludes, "I think in the end all I can really write about are landscapes. About everything else, I'm false, false to the core," and so has given up his dream of creating true art.

Trigorin continues to write best-sellers but would rather spend his days fishing than hone his craft. Goldman argues that "exhausted of ideas," Trigorin finds that "all life and human relations serve him only as material for copy." While talking about his stories with Nina, he admits, "I've forgotten what it is to be eighteen or nineteen. I can't picture it. That's why young women in my stories and novels are unconvincing." Chekhov suggests that Nina might be able to inspire him to write greater works when, after seeing the dead seagull Treplyov killed for Nina, he determines to write a story about the incident. However, Arkadina plays on his weakness, convincing him that only she truly appreciates him, and so pulls him away from the younger woman. As he leaves with Arkadina, Trigorin admits, "I've never had a will of my own. . . . I'm flabby and weak. I always submit."

When he was a young man, Trigorin insists that he had artistic sensibilities and suffered for his art, that his life then "was a torture." He explains,

A beginning writer, especially an unlucky one, feels awkward and unwanted—the world doesn't need him. His nerves are frazzled, he's always on edge. But he can't resist being around people in the arts and literature. They, of course, are not interested in him. They ignore him, while he's too shy to even look at them.

After his works began to enjoy popular but not critical success, Trigorin drifted away from his early devotion to his craft.

As Trigorin gives up his pursuit of artistic excellence, he loses his connection with others. The shallow relationships he forms reflect his inability to actively engage with his world. He seems to stay with Arkadina not because he has strong feelings for her but because their relationship is convenient, especially since it affords him the opportunity to stay at a comfortable country estate. His detachment from experience becomes most noticeable in his callous treatment of Nina. After their brief love affair that resulted in a pregnancy, Trigorin "tired of her" and, according to Treplyov, "went back to his old attachments . . . in his spineless way."

Trigorin's portrait of a suffering artist reflects not only his experience, but also that of Nina and Treplyov. Unlike Trigorin, though, both of these young artists become consumed with their pursuit of the creative process and so devote their lives to it. In "The Seagull: The Stage Mother, the Missing Father, and the Origins of Art," Carol Flath comments, "in aesthetic terms, Treplyov renounces knowledge of the world and

consequently selfdestructs as a writer and as a man; Nina, on the other hand, embraces knowledge and suffering and becomes a mature artist."

When Treplyov renounces the traditions of the theatre, he turns his back on his and his mother's world. Flath notes that Treplyov's "'decadent,' intangible, and inaccessible play represents a wholly spiritual or idealistic art." He answers Nina's complaints over the difficulties in his play insisting, "I don't want to show life as it is, or tell people how things should be. I want to show life in dreams." He condemns the playwright who "squeezes out a moral, a smug cozy little moral, fit for home consumption" and who only "repeats the same formula with tiny variations." Afraid that following this same path would "cheapen his mind," he breaks with tradition as he strives for "new forms." Yet his avant garde productions gain him little success and often alienate him from his audience and from other artists. While Dorn admits, "I liked his play. There's something fresh and direct about it," his mother and Nina find it troublesome and "decadent." As a result, Treplyov's sense of isolation increases.

His surroundings reinforce his isolation and despair. He notes to Sorin that life with his mother means a house full of famous actors and writers and complains, "Can you imagine how I feel? The only nobody there is me." He claims that because he has neither money nor talent, her friends continually measure his "insignificance."

His mother, whose petty, shallow nature prompts her to play on her son's insecurities, compounds Treplyov's feelings of insignificance. He admits, "My mother doesn't love me. . . . I'm twenty-five now. That reminds her she's no longer young. . . . She hates me for that."

Commenting on their damaging relationship, Flath argues,

Arkadina's view of herself as attractive and eternally youthful is directly threatened by the presence of her grown son. By willing Treplyev into nothingness ("nonentity") she is attempting to stop the flow of time itself—time that ages her and allows this boy to outgrow her to find a younger, more beautiful woman of his own, one who will replace her as a woman and as an artist.

When Treplyov finally does earn a measure of success after his stories appear in magazines, Dorn tells him one afternoon, "[your work] made an impression on me. You have talent. You must write more." Dorn commends his abstract subject matter that expresses "great ideas" for, he claims, "Nothing can be beautiful if it's not serious." Trigorin also praises Treplyov's stories, but later notes to Dorn that the young playwright's work is often criticized, insisting "he's had no luck. He can't find a style of his own. There's something vague and strange about his writing—almost like delirium. And never a single live character."

When Treplyov learns that neither Trigorin nor his mother has read his work, he again begins to despair until Nina arrives. During the past two years Nina has been struggling to establish herself as an actress. Treplyov notes, however, that during this period, "her acting was crude" and "lacked subtlety." He claims, "at moments she showed some

talent—she screamed well, and she died well. But that's all. They were only moments." When Nina appears at the house, Treplyov hopes that the two of them can ease each other's suffering. Yet while Nina initially looks back on their time together fondly, she decides to reject Treplyov's declarations of love and to continue to strive for artistic integrity. She tells him that the previous night she went into the garden to see if the stage was still there. When she finds it, she admits, "I cried for the first time in two years. It was like a weight started to lift from me—I started to feel lighter." Yet she also notes the difficult nature of the pursuit of art when she tells him, "We've been drawn into the maelstrom, both of us."

She then recalls her affair with Trigorin who, she claims, "laughed at my dreams, until finally I stopped believing in them." Nina, however, found the strength to endure Trigorin's waning affections and the loss of her child and becomes strong enough to pursue her artistic dreams. She tells Treplyov that now she is a true actress and that her work "intoxicates" her. She admits,

I know now, Kostya, what matters in our work . . . is not fame, glory, or the things I dreamed about, but knowing how to endure—how to bear your cross and have faith. I have faith now, and it's not so painful anymore. When I think about my calling, I'm not afraid of life.

Treplyov, however, cannot find a similar source of strength in his art. He admits to Nina, "you've found your way. You know where you're going. But I'm still living in dreams and images. I can't make sense of them. I don't know what or who it's all for. I have no faith, no calling." His inability to retain faith in his art, coupled with his unrequited love for Nina, fills him with an overwhelming sense of despair, and he kills himself.

Chekhov's compelling portrait of the suffering artist explores the problematic relationship between life and art. Flath suggests that in the play, Chekhov raises

serious questions as to the ethics of artistic creativity; for art to be truly compelling and powerful, it must drain energy from real life; it must murder its object, be that object others or oneself. An art that does no harm is impossible, for it would be the same as life itself.

Some—like Arkadina and Trigorin—who do not have the strength of character to pursue artistic excellence focus instead on gaining popular success. Others, like Treplyov, are destroyed by their inability to retain their faith in their art. Nina alone survives, damaged by her pursuit of her craft, but unwavering in her devotion to it. In his study of these four artists, Chekhov illustrates the difficulties inherent in the struggle to achieve true art.

Source: Wendy Perkins, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #4

In this essay, Rayfield provides an overview of Chekhov's play.

Any comedy where the young hero destroys his life's work and then himself, where the heroine is abandoned pregnant and unhinged, while the survivors bask on in their own egotism, must be considered highly innovatory. Apart from its black comedy, however, Chekhov's *The Seagull* has many other modern features. It is full of "intertextuality," incorporating or alluding to a great deal of *Hamlet*, to *Faust*, to Guy de Maupassant, and to Chekhov's own prose. It was also "interactive" theatre: many characters, incidents, props, and lines were taken from Chekhov's own life and his social circle, and he took some care to see that they experienced the full impact of this fictionalization by being invited to the first performance. It is "deconstructive," since it is a play about the futility of the theatre, in which the old art (Trigorin) and the new art (Trepliov) fight out the battle of naturalism and symbolism, and the old theatre (Arkadina) and the new theatre (Nina Zarechnaya) fight out the conflict between histrionics and expressionist acting.

The Seagull is a total anomaly in Chekhov's work. Nowhere else does he have the writer as hero or blatantly exploit autobiographical material. Even the symbolic title—a parody of Ibsen's *Wild Duck*— is utterly out of keeping with his reluctance to advertise a play's intentions. Written in 1895, it was performed in 1896 in St. Petersburg with unscripted and catastrophic results that equalled the disasters of the drama itself. It must be seen as an attack on the conventional theatre, designed to embarrass and disable actors and audience. At the same time, so many lines of Chekhov's own fiction and letters, as well as his fishing rods, self-evaluation, and compulsions are attributed to Trigorin, that it appears to be a work of intense self-parody—a product of an inner crisis in which both old and new forms of writing and behaving seem trite.

The Seagull was written after six years of virtual abstention from writing plays. Apart from Ibsen, other Nordic reading seems to have suggested the new directions Chekhov's dramaturgy now took. As in Strindberg, a female oligarchy takes control of the action, the males—whether the writers, the old brother Sorin, or doctor Sorin, the objective bystander—being unable to resist their ruthless atavism. The eroticism of the play, however, is uniquely Chekhovian: the middle-aged Arkadina and Polina pursue their lovers, Trigorin and Dr. Dorn, with unrelenting passion; the male characters are locked into a ludicrous chain of unrequited love: Medvedenko loves Masha who loves Trepliov who loves Nina who loves Trigorin.

The experimental absurdity is deliberate, as Chekhov's letters show: "I am writing it with some pleasure, although I do awful things to the laws of the stage . . . not much action and two hundredweight of love." Many of the preoccupations of his short stories surface here in dramatic form: the idea of Hamlet as a naturalized Russian citizen is reinforced in the semi-incestuous quarrelling between Trepliov and his mother and in the playlet he stages in Act I to provoke her anger; Nina Zarechnaya and Arkadina, both examples of womanhood destroyed by acting, are the culmination of the unhappy Katya of *A Dreary Story*. An adoration of Maupassant as the workmanlike writer's writer saturates

Chekhov's prose: *The Seagull*'s opening lines, "Why are you wearing black?—Because I am in mourning for my life"—are lifted straight from Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*. The futility of medicine and contemplation, which Chekhov expressed in his bitter *Ward No. 6*, reaches its climax in the cruel refusal of Dr. Dorn to treat "old age."

But Chekhov also incorporated farce and vaudeville techniques into *The Seagull*. When Arkadina successively rows with her brother, her son, and her lover, it is with all the speed of a music-hall sketch. Usually quoted by the ironic Dr. Dorn, popular song and snatches of operetta—though their import is lost on today's audience—only remind the other characters of how commonplace their predicament is.

The play functioned primarily as a purgative both for Chekhov's creativity and for the contemporary theatre—all the more surprising is its importance as the first of the truly Chekhovian later plays and as the emblem of Stanislavsky's Moscow Arts Theatre. As with *The Cherry Orchard*, the subtitle, "Comedy," provides an insistent tempo-marking to override any temptation to dwell on the tragic possibilities; the setting, remote from Moscow or St. Petersburg, imbues a spirit of exile in those characters who will never leave; powerful forces off stage hold the cast in thrall and prevent them from acting on their motivation; phrases pass from character to character putting them under a disabling spell: Chekhov appears to have invented a new dramatic genre simply by demolishing the old.

Although Stanislavsky's theatre, with its totalitarian control over the actors, redeemed the play from the oblivion that otherwise threatened it, *The Seagull* remains the most ambiguous of all Chekhov's plays. Is Trepliov's playlet about the end of the world a parody of symbolist drama still to be written, or is it—as its echoes of Chekhov's narrative landscapes suggest—a serious attempt to convey what a new poetic drama might sound like? Is Nina, drenched and raving in Act IV, an Ophelia-like victim of ruthless and self-obsessed males, or is she an example of female indestructibility, just an Arkadina at a more decorative phase? Perhaps the play's real intent is buried in the allusion it nearly makes: in Act II, Arkadina takes over from Dorn the reading of Maupassant's travelogue *Sur l'eau* and shuts the book in annoyance. The passage she cannot stomach reads: "As soon as [a woman] sees [a writer] softened, moved, won over by constant flattery, she isolates him, cuts bit by bit all his links." Chekhov is one of the few male writers who can be seen both as misogynist and feminist: he knew well that the seagull is as predatory as it is vulnerable, and the play, for all its "throw-away" symbolism, explores both the danger and the appeal of love for the artist.

Source: Donald Rayfield, "*The Seagull*," in *The International Dictionary of Theatre*, Vol. 1: *Plays*, edited by Mark Hawkins-Dady, St. James Press, 1992, pp. 720-21.

Critical Essay #5

Calling The Seagull *"a play of infinite tenderness and compassionate understanding," Clurman reviews a 1954 production of Chekhov's play.*

The Sea Gull is a play of infinite tenderness and compassionate understanding. That is why it is humorous as well as touching. Contrary to the common cliché, it is also full of action: no moment passes which is not dense with the subtlest interplay of human conflict.

It is often said that Chekhov is the dramatist of futility and frustration. This is misleading. What Chekhov tells us is not that life is a frustration but that a particular kind of life, a particular environment and time, was frustrating. This makes him a social playwright. But he is also "universal": the inner music of his work extends beyond the particular moment he depicts.

The essence of Chekhov lies in the warmth of his feeling for people, his boundless sympathy, his love. What endears his characters to us whether they be simpletons or sophisticates—and there is something charmingly and childishly foolish about all of them—is the fact that we recognize in them deeply human traits with which Chekhov identifies himself with his whole being. Because they are seen in the context of his wonderfully sound sense of life, the wretched fate of his characters comes to seem unaccountably worthwhile to us. Chekhov's plays, therefore, are never dreary, for where life is affirmed, particularly in the face of adversity, we are in the presence of the noble and the heartening.

We do not live in czarist Russia; still, Chekhov is of our time. Our younger generation is not a hopeful one. For all their aches, Chekhov's people remember, yearn for, desire and dream a good life. The key to their natures is in the cry, "I want to live." This informs their sorrow with a pulsing substance of experience and meaning which enriches it beyond the muscular straining and jumpiness of our young people, unconscious of any pleasure in present difficulty because they have no vision or belief in a future to which they can look forward. Our young folk fail to have fun because their lives have been emptied of content for want of values that might give them an inspired view of their daily activity. The girls and boys of the Miller and Williams plays might well think of the sad people of *The Sea Gull* as the lucky ones!

What impression the Phoenix production makes on a person who has never before seen or read *The Sea Gull* I cannot tell. Perhaps its beauty is still apparent. For anyone who knows the play—I have seen four previous productions—the present one is signally miscast in several important parts. I refer not only to individual actors but to a lack of homogeneity and correlation in the ensemble. Midwest speech is echoed by Russian; mid-European accent alternates with Southern United States; New York genteel tones respond to New York Irish. It is also evident that even some of the actors who are suited to their roles have not been helped by the director in their interpretations.

Maureen Stapleton, for example, is thoroughly affecting here and there because of her fine emotional endowment, but she has no specific characterization. The part she plays —Masha—is that of a woman deprived of the normal attentions and affection due her; as a result she has become mannish, eccentric, a little grotesque. But Miss Stapleton is allowed to remain the most attractive person on the stage. This distorts the story by making Treplev, who never notices Masha but persists in his desperate love for Nina (impersonated by an actress who looks old enough to be his mother), seem peculiar.

Montgomery Clift—who is well cast—is handsome, talented and in every way sympathetic. But his Treplev is too depressed in feeling, too rundown in appearance. Treplev is a young and ardent spirit. His tragedy is that though he contains the seed of the future, as compared to the facile but essentially uncreative novelist Trigorin, he is ground under by the weight of temporal circumstances.

The real pathos of Clift's performance, I cannot refrain from saying, is not only that he makes Treplev more downcast than he need be—and thus more American than Russian—but that as an earnest actor he believes he can pay his debt to his ideals by attempting a challenging role for four weeks out of ten years. He needs ten years of work on the stage to act as well as he potentially can in the kind of parts he aspires to. It is not idealistic and it is certainly not healthy to reserve oneself for certain rare occasions to do what one wants to.

Source: Harold Clurman, "Anton Chekhov," in *Lies like Truth*, Macmillan, 1958, pp. 131-33.

Adaptations

In 1968, *The Seagull* was adapted to film by director Sidney Lumet. Its stellar casts includes James Mason as Trigorin, Alfred Lynch as Medvedenko, Ronald Radd as Shamraev, Vanessa Redgrave as Nina, Simone Signoret as Arkadina, David Warner as Konstantin, Harry Andrews as Sorin, Eileen Herlie as Polina (Pauline), Kathleen Widdoes as Masha, and Denholm Elliot as Dorn. It is available on video from Warner Brothers.

A Russian film version of *The Seagull* was produced in 1971, directed by Yuri Karasik and featuring Alla Demidova, Vladimir Chetverikov, Nikolai Plotnikov, Lyudmila Savelyeva, Valentina Telichkina, Yuri Yakovlev, Yefim Kopelyan, Armen Dzhigarkhanyan, Sofiya Pavlova, Sergei Torkachevsky, S. Smirnov, and Genrikas Kurauskas. It is available from Facets Multimedia, Inc., with English subtitles.

The Seagull was produced for television, both in the United States and in Europe. In 1968, the year Lumet's film was made, a British version of the work was produced as a "Play of the Month" selection, featuring Robert Stephens. In 1975, the play was produced on American television, and featured, among others, Blythe Danner as Nina, Olympia Dukakis as Polina, Lee Grant as Irina Arkadina, and Frank Langella as Treplev (Treplyov). Three years later, another British version was aired, with a cast headed by Michael Gambon. There is also an Italian version, directed by Marco Bellocchio, dating from 1977. Also aired in the United States, this version featured Laura Betti, Giulio Brogi, Remo Girone, and Pamela Villoresi. While these performances attest to the great resurgence of interest in the plays of Chekhov, tapes of them have never been released for commercial use.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate Henrik Ibsen's use of symbolism in *The Wild Duck* and compare it to Chekhov's use of it in *The Seagull*.

Investigate life expectancy and infant mortality rates in Russia at the time of Chekhov's play and relate your findings to two significant revelations of *The Seagull*, the death of Nina's child and Sorin's disclosed age.

Research the state of medicine in Russia in the 1890s and relate your findings to Dorn, the physician in *The Seagull*, and to Chekhov's own medical career and struggle with tuberculosis.

Study some of the artistic manifestos of the late nineteenth century, such as George B. Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), and Leo Tolstoy's *What Is Art* (1898), that elucidate the principles of realism in literature, whether in drama or fiction, and relate them to Chekhov's practice in *The Seagull*.

Research the structural principles of the "well made" play, that is, one that follows the form described by Aristotle in his discussion of tragedy in *The Poetics*. Compare those principles with Chekhov's practice in *The Seagull*.

Research Count Leo Tolstoy's complaints about Chekhov's alleged failure to use his art to advance a moral cause. Explain whether or not you think that charge is validated by the playwright's thematic concerns in the play.

Compare and Contrast

1890s: Long travel is difficult, limited principally to rail and horseback or horse-drawn cart, carriage, or sleigh, often on roads that for half the year were impassable. Although the telephone has come into use in some cities in Europe and America, it has not yet reached the likes of Sorin's country estate. While such estates could be situated fairly close to towns providing railway connections to Moscow and other major cities, many people live their lives never venturing more than a few miles away from where they were born.

Today: Modern technology makes it possible for even the most physically isolated communities to stay in touch, not just with the world's urban centers, but with each other. Today, even those geographically isolated in what few wilderness outposts remain, or in transit over the world's remote regions, can talk to relatives or friends with whom a reunion may be just a few hours or, at most, a day or two away.

1890s: Medicine, though verging on important breakthroughs, is a dreadfully imperfect art. There is little understanding of the nature of most diseases, of the bacteria or viruses that caused them, thus treatment is largely limited to dealing with the symptoms rather than the causes. Medicine is also unregulated, and many doctors, some of them quacks, depend upon homeopathy and herbal-based, family elixirs, passed down from one generation to another. Alcohol and opium derivatives are standard painkillers, dispensed without much knowledge of their addictive nature. All too often, patients are sent to hospitals, not to be cured, but to die. By the end of the nineteenth century, average life-expectancy in the United States is in the mid-forties. In Russia it is even lower.

Today: Medicine may still be an imperfect art, but scientific advances in the twentieth century have made it a much more exact and effective one. More medicinal practises are preventative in nature. Through immunization, doctors control diseases that used to be dreaded killers. Physicians and medical scientists now attempt to discover the cause of a sickness, for if the cause can be isolated, a cure is deemed possible. That life expectancy will soon double that of a century ago is evidence of the great strides medicine has made in the last one hundred years.

1890s: Aside from the entertainment provided by books and card and board games, most home entertainment has to be provided "in-house" by those dwelling or visiting there. The houses of the upper and middle classes usually have pianos and other musical instruments; some even have music rooms, where family members can gather to form small chamber-music ensembles. Plays and recitations were common, too. There is, in fact, a fairly active engagement of family members and guests in the production of entertainment.

Today: Thanks to great technological advances, family members and guests can enjoy a tremendous array of entertainment experiences simply by "channel surfing" on television or the Internet, or by inserting different compact discs or tapes in home-

entertainment components. In fact, the greatest audience for various arts is now found in the home, not at the live event. The home audience is more passive now, however, and often has no participatory role in providing entertainment.

1890s: Class distinctions are still strongly etched in the consciousness of its citizens, even though the serfs have been liberated for several years and a middle class is rapidly emerging.

Today: Although in many democratic societies there remains a vestigial sense of class distinctions, power associated with class and hereditary right has greatly diminished. Class distinctions today are usually based on wealth, education level, or professional standing, and they are reflected more in such things as country-club memberships and cultural tastes than in the size of one's estate and the number of servants in the household.

What Do I Read Next?

August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888) and its "Foreword," in which the dramatist reveals the Darwinian influence on his art, is worth contrasting with Chekhov's themes and technique in *The Seagull.*

Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890) is also worth comparing with The Seagull for its themes and technique. One early complaint with Chekhov's play was that it evidenced too strong an influence of Ibsen.

Maxim Gorky's play, *The Lower Depths* (1902), a more naturalistic play than any by Chekhov, focuses on lower-class Russians struggling for survival. Like Chekhov, Gorky came to prominence through productions at the Moscow Art Theatre.

Anna Karenina (1875-1877), by Leo Tolstoy, is one of the greatest of all Russian novels. Tolstoy, though he wrote plays, is really only remembered for his fiction. He had a tremendous influence on Chekhov.

Heartbreak House (1916), by George Bernard Shaw, has some interesting parallels to Chekhov's play. Its focal interest is the eroding of class distinctions, also of concern to Chekhov. Shaw's play also takes place in a country house, that of Hesione Hushabye. Like Sorin's estate, it provides a microcosmic setting for investigating a social hierarchy.

The Autumn Garden (1951), by Lillian Hellman, reflects Chekhov's influence in its technique, structure, and theme. Generations of family and friends gather together, haplessly trying to reinvigorate their lives, which have settled into dull and listless routines.

Further Study

Hahn, Beverly, *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Stories and Plays*, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Although in drama Hahn's principal focus is on *The Cherry Orchard*, her refutation of the dramatist's alleged deficiencies—for example his formlessness, insipidity, and negativism—is very helpful for understanding Chekhov's achievement in his late plays.

Kirk, Irina, *Anton Chekhov*, Twayne Publishers, 1981.

This overview of Chekhov and his work offers a good starting point for further study. It offers brief but insightful interpretations of Chekhov's plays and the artistic principles underlying them.

Lantz, K. A., *Anton Chekhov: A Reference Guide to Literature*, G. K. Hall, 1985.

For those needing to conduct further research on Chekhov, this is an indispensable aid. It includes a biography and checklist of the author's works with both English and Russian titles, with a helpful annotated bibliography of critical studies published before 1984.

Magarshack, David, *Chekhov the Dramatist*, Hill and Wang, 1960.

In this introduction to Chekhov's plays, Magarshack divides the dramatist's canon into "plays of direct action" and "plays of indirect action," with *The Wood Demon* serving as a transitional work between the two types. He relates *The Seagull* to Chekhov's life and his estate in Melikhovo.

_____, *The Real Chekhov: An Introduction to Chekhov's Last Plays*, Allen & Unwin, 1972.

This study offers a scene by scene analysis of each of Chekhov's four major plays and the dramatist's attitude towards matters addressed in them-which, in the case of *The Seagull*, Magarshack argues, is the nature of art.

Styan, J. L., *Chekhov in Performance: A Commentary on the Major Plays*, Cambridge University Press, 1971.

Styan also provides a close analysis of Chekhov's four major plays. A principal focus is the "submerged life" of the playwright's text and Chekhov's stage technique. Styan also discusses the preparation and initial staging of each play.

Valency, Maurice, *The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov*, Oxford University Press, 1966.

This work relates Chekhov's major plays both to his own fiction and to the Russian theater of his day. Valency argues that Chekhov is essentially an ironist and comedist, although each play involves the breaking of a "golden string" that binds man both to his heavenly father and his own past.

Williams, Lee J., *Anton Chekhov, the Iconoclast*, University of Scranton Press, 1989.

This study takes the view that Chekhov was a selfconscious agent of change in Russia, that he employed a scientific method to dispel old, class-biased myths about Russian peasants, and that in both method and philosophy he was, as the title indicates, a dedicated iconoclast.

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Styan, J. L., *Chekhov in Performance: A Commentary on the Major Plays*, Cambridge University Press, 1971, pp. 10, 13.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
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- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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