The Three Sisters Study Guide

The Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Chekhov referred to *The Three Sisters* as a "drama," preferring to avoid the more confining labels of either "comedy" or "tragedy," although later critics have argued for both of those labels. It is one of the four major plays that he wrote at the end of his life. Chekhov was an accomplished fiction writer, one of the one of the most influential short story writers of all time. At the time that his plays were being produced there was some criticism that his dramas too closely resembled the style of fiction. Traditionalists found the action too cramped and the characters too inexpressive, noting that there were too many people on the stage at any one time, doing nothing, for audiences to be able to register the significance of it all. Contrary to expectations, though, Chekhov's plays were very popular in Moscow, where they were staged by the famous Moscow Art Theatre under the direction of Constantin Stanislavsky.

The Three Sisters was the first play that Chekhov wrote specifically for the Moscow Art Theatre, having experienced commercial success in his previous collaborations with the company, *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya.* Like many of Chekhov's works, it is about the decay of the privileged class in Russia and the search for meaning in the modern world. In the play, Olga, Masha, and Irina are refined and cultured young women in their twenties who were raised in urban Moscow but have been living in a small, colorless provincial town for eleven years. With their father dead, their anticipated return to Moscow comes to represent their hopes for living a good life, while the ordinariness of day-to-day living tightens its hold. First performed in 1901, *The Three Sisters* is a perennial favorite of actors and audiences.

Author Biography

Although Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was trained as a physician and practiced as one, he came to dominate not just one field of literature, but two: plays and short stories. He was born in 1860 in Taganrog, a provincial town in the Ukraine area of Russia that was similar to the one described in *The Three Sisters*. His family had a small grocery business that went bankrupt, forcing them to move to Moscow in 1876, although Chekhov stayed behind in Taganrog to finish his education. With a scholarship to Moscow University, he studied to be a doctor of medicine, going into practice in 1884. At that time he started publishing short humorous sketches in the Moscow newspapers, though he had no serious artistic aspirations. His writing career became earnest when he moved to St. Petersburg in 1885 and befriended the editor of a literary journal, who recognized his talent and encouraged him. He did write plays, and some of these were produced, but his most memorable work from that period were his short stories, and by late 1880s, he was one of the world's great masters of short story writing.

It was in the late 1890s, when Chekhov became associated with the Moscow Art Theatre, that he reached full maturity as a playwright. The theater, under director Constantin Stanislavsky (whose theories about acting method are standard texts for theater students today), produced *The Seagull* in 1896, followed by *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *The Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). Chekhov was very involved in the Moscow Art Theatre's productions of his plays, offering suggestions for the actors and constantly rewriting passages. He courted an actress from the company, Olga Knipper, who played Masha in the original production of *The Three Sisters* (he wrote the part with her in mind); they were married in 1901, just four months after the play opened. During much of their marriage, they were apart, because Chekhov, suffering from tuberculosis since 1884, often went to country retreats for medical treatment. He died of tuberculosis in Yalta in 1904, when he was forty-four years old.

Plot Summary

Act I

Act I takes place on May 5th of an unspecified year, in an unspecified provincial town in Russia. It is the twentieth birthday of Irina, the youngest of the sisters mentioned in the play's title. It is also the one year anniversary of the death of their father, Colonel Prozorov, who moved his family there from Moscow eleven years earlier. Irina and her older sisters, Olga and Masha, receive visitors, members of the military battery that is assigned to the town. The sisters discuss how bored they are with the town, how they long to move back to Moscow, and their brother Andrei, who will probably become a university professor. Olga, who is twenty-eight and the oldest sister, expresses interest in the new lieutenant colonel who has been assigned to the town, Vershinin, but is told that he is married, with two children. Chebutykin, the drunken old doctor who had been in love with the girls mother, gives Irina a silver samovar for her birthday, which is considered an inappropriate gift.

Vershinin arrives, explaining that he knew the sisters' father back in Moscow, and that he remembers them from when they were girls. When he talks philosophically about how time makes all their lives insignificant, Solyony, a rough staff captain, mocks him by spouting gibberish. The sisters explain that they have been teasing their brother Andrei for being in love with a local girl, Natasha, who is married to the chairman of the county board, Protopopov. Masha's husband, Kulygin, arrives to take Masha to a school function, but she angrily refuses to go. Tuzenbach, an army lieutenant, expresses his love for Natasha, but she expresses her disinterest in him. When Natasha enters, Olga feels sorry for her poor fashion sense and suggests that her belt does not match the rest of her clothes. When everyone else leaves for the dining room for the celebration, Andrei tells Natasha of his love for her and asks her to marry him.

Act II

Almost a year later, in mid-February, Andrei and Natasha are married and living in the family house. The sisters have invited their friends and some performers from the carnival that is in town over to the house, but Natasha tells Andrei that she objects to letting them in because she is worried about the health of their baby, Bobik. Ferapont, an old servant, enters with paperwork for Andrei, who is the secretary of the county board. When they leave the room, Masha and Vershinin enter and discuss their love for each other. Irina and Tuzenbach enter; he still is in love with her, and she is still uninterested. They discuss the great gambling losses that Andrei has incurred. Vershinin is called away by a letter from his daughter, saying that his wife has attempted suicide once again. Solyony arrives, is rude to Natasha, and is threatening to Tuzenbach, the reason for which becomes clear later in the scene, when he expresses his love for Irina and vows to kill any rivals. Natasha has the carnival performers sent away when they show up at the door, and, while Irina is upset about Solyony's

threatening words, asks her to move out of her bedroom and into Olga's so that the baby can have her room. She goes to the door when she hears a sleigh bell and comes back acting surprised that it is Protopopov, come to take her for a ride, explaining that she feels that she has to accept. Kulygin and Vershinin enter the scene again the former's meeting is over and the latter's wife is all right to find that everyone has gone. The scene ends with Olga complaining of her terrible headaches and Irina repeating her wish to return to Moscow.

Act III

Act III takes place nearly four years after the opening of the play; Irina, who was twenty then, tells Olga that she is "almost twenty-four" while explaining how washed up she feels. This act takes place in the bedroom Olga and Irina share, while a fire is spreading across the neighborhood outside. Olga is choosing clothes from her closet to give to the fire victims, who have lost all of their belongings. She has invited people who have been made homeless by the fire, particularly Vershinin and his family, to spend the night there, but when she enters Natasha objects, saying that she doesn't want her son and new daughter to be exposed to the flu. Natasha discussing firing Anfisa, the old nurse who, as Olga explains, has been with the family for thirty years. Kulygin enters, again unable to find Masha, and brings the news that the doctor, Chebutykin, is drunk. When he enters, feeling guilty about a patient that has died, Chebutykin picks up a clock that once belonged to the girls' mother and breaks it: in his embarrassment, while everyone is staring at him disapprovingly, he blurts out that Natasha and Protopopov are having an affair. When Masha arrives, she and Vershinin communicate to each other in code, with musical notes. Kulygin tells Masha how much he loves her, how important she is to him, but she asks him to leave her alone to rest for a short while. When everyone is gone, the sisters talk about how difficult their lives are and about how difficult Natasha has made Andrei's life. Olga's advice to Irina, who hates her job, is to marry Tuzenbach, whether she loves him or not. After Natasha passes through the room with a candle, Masha confesses to her sisters that she is in love with Vershinin. Andrei enters and tells them that he has mortgaged the house to pay his gambling debts and given control of his money to Natasha. Irina announces that she will marry Tuzenbach.

Act IV

About a year after the previous act, in the garden outside of the house. The soldiers have been assigned to a new post and are stopping by throughout this scene to say goodbye. There is gossip about a fight that took place the previous day outside of the theater, during which Solyony challenged Tuzenbach to a duel. Olga is living at the school where she teaches, and Irina is planning on leaving with Tuzenbach later that day for Moscow. Chebutykin leaves to be a witness to the duel, and Andrei enters, pestered by his assistant to sign more and more paperwork for the county board. As Masha cries over being left by Vershinin, her husband, Kulygin, tries to comfort her, not admitting that he knows what she is upset about. Natasha already has plans for the rooms of the house being vacated: she is moving Andrei down to Irina's room, ever

further from her own, so that her baby Irina can have his room. Word comes that Tuzenbach has been killed in the duel, and at the play's end Irina, Olga, and Masha think about the future, hoping that they may one day understand the meaning of it all.

Act 1, Part 1

Act 1, Part 1 Summary

The classic Russian play *The Three Sisters* explores the lives and dreams of three sisters, their brother, their friends and their lovers. The play, like the characters, is moody and atmospheric, gently exploring themes relating to the human capacities for dreaming, inaction in the face of those dreams and despair when those dreams disappear.

The first act is set in the drawing room of the home of the Prozoroff sisters, Olga, Masha and Irina. Conversation reveals that they're hosting a party in honor of Irina's Saint's Day. As they wait for their guests to arrive and lunch to be served, Olga recalls in detail the day, exactly a year ago, that their father died. Irina tells her to not think of it. Olga then recalls how the family left Moscow eleven years ago and says that even though it's a beautiful day, she longs to be back there. Tusenbach, Solyony and Chebutykin appear in the dining room, joking about how what is being said is all garbage.

Masha whistles quietly to herself as she reads. Olga tells her to stop and says that even though teaching all day gives her headaches and even though she feels her strength draining away, her dreams of - Irina completes her thought, saying that their dreams of going to Moscow are stronger than ever. Chebutykin and Tusenbach laugh as Olga and Irina refer to Masha being the only one who wouldn't be able to go. Irina then talks about how happy she's felt all day, referring to memories of her childhood. Olga talks about how well and happy Irina looks, how lovely Masha is, how their brother Andrei is gaining weight and how she herself has gotten older and thinner. She then talks about how being away from the school makes her feel younger and freer. She wishes she'd been married, and she feels she could still be married, saying she'd love her husband. Tusenbach comes in, saying the conversation is nonsense.

Tusenbach announces that the sisters will be receiving a visit later that day from their new commander, Vershinin. He describes him as nice but says he talks too much, particularly about his wife and children, and he describes the wife as being half-mad. Solyony comes in, talking to Chebutykin, who ignores him as he makes notes about the components of a medication in a little notebook. Irina goes to him, talking about how happy she is and describing herself as a little white bird. She has realized that the purpose and happiness of life can be found in hard, physical work.

Olga jokes that Irina spends so much time lying in bed thinking, and Irina tells her to think of her as a woman now and not a little girl. Tusenbach talks at length about how he too longs for work. He was born and raised in an aristocratic family, and he feels some kind of storm of change is coming, change that will wipe out laziness, indifference and boredom. He says that in twenty-five years everyone will be working, and Solyony jokes that in twenty-five years Tusenbach will be dead, perhaps even shot by him. Chebutykin talks about how he doesn't really work, saying that since he left university

he hasn't read anything but newspapers. A knock is heard, Chebutykin says he's being called downstairs and rushes out. Irina, Tusenbach and Olga talk about how he seems to be up to something, referring to how he always brings Irina extravagant presents.

Masha stands and prepares to go, saying she'll be back later and recalling the exciting parties they had when their father was alive. She talks about feeling depressed, and Olga says tearfully that she understands. Solyony jokes about how annoying it is when a woman talks philosophical thoughts, and Masha speaks angrily to them both. Anfisa comes in, followed by Ferapont, who's carrying a large cake. Anfisa announces that the cake came from Protopopov, the Chairman of the District Council. The hard-of-hearing Ferapont can't make out Irina's message of thanks. Olga tells Ferapont and Anfisa to get some lunch in the kitchen, and they go out. Masha says she doesn't like Protopopov, and Irina says he wasn't invited to the party. Chebutykin comes in with a large silver samovar. As the sisters react with embarrassment and Tusenbach laughs, Chebutykin says the girls are all he has in the world. He's an old man, and he loved their mother. Finally, he says that there's nothing wrong with giving expensive presents to people one loves.

Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

Like most of the full-length plays by this playwright, the dramatic and thematic content of this play is revealed in subtle ways, with its meaning defined by its sense of mood, atmosphere and character. This makes it very different from plays defined by active plots, increasing emotional tension and vivid symbolism. All three elements are present in *The Three Sisters*, but they are less relevant to the play's meaning than its overall sense of tone, its gently pointed observations about human nature and its juxtapositions.

For example, even though Olga's memories, Irina's dreams and Masha's moods are all very real and very vivid, their true nature is revealed by the repeated comments from the men about conversations being nonsense and garbage. The audience knows perfectly well that they're talking about their own conversations, but because they're carefully juxtaposed with speeches from the sisters, we also know that the playwright is telling us that ultimately, everything the women are saying is nonsense. In other words, their dreams are empty. In spite of the women talking about wanting to go to Moscow, the men are indirectly saying they're never going to get there. As the play continues, we learn why. They're unwilling and/or unable to actually do anything in order to get there. This is the play's central comment about human nature, that extravagant dreams are all well and good but that action must be taken in order to make those dreams reality.

Several elements of foreshadowing appear in this scene. These include Solyony's reference to shooting Tusenbach, which foreshadows Tusenbach's death at the end of the play, and also Tusenbach's reference to Vershinin and his family, which foreshadows Vershinin's imminent appearance and the appearance of his family in the sisters' home in Act 3. Other foreshadowing includes the mention of Protopopov, a

character who plays an unseen role in the development of the future relationship between Andrei and his wife.

Two aspects of Russian life play important roles in this scene. The first is the reference to Irina's name day, a celebration of the saint from whom Irina received one of her names. The giving of children the name of a saint is a Russian tradition. The second aspect of Russian life mentioned here is the samovar, a large heated urn in which tea is brewed and served. Because they're usually made of a less expensive metal than silver, Chebutykin's gift is truly extravagant and inappropriate coming from someone who isn't either wealthy or a member of the immediate family.

Act 1, Part 2

Act 1, Part 2 Summary

Anfisa comes in, announcing Vershinin's arrival. As she goes out, urging Irina to behave herself, Vershinin comes in, exclaiming that he's very glad to be there and referring to his memories of having met the sisters when they were little girls. He comments on how time passes. He explains that he knew their father when they were both in Moscow, says he remembers Masha's face a bit and talks about how he used to visit them all. As Irina and Olga talk about how they'll be back in Moscow by the fall, Masha suddenly recalls Vershinin's visits and how they always used to call him "the lovesick major" because he was always in love with someone or other. As Vershinin laughs, Masha becomes tearful about how old he now looks. Olga says he doesn't look old at all, and Vershinin says he's only forty-three. He and the sisters talk about which streets they used to live on, with Vershinin recalling a bridge near his home and how "a lonely man feels sick at heart there." He quickly changes his mood, talking about the wonderful river running through their small town and how beautiful the climate is.

The train station is far away, and nobody knows why. Solyony makes a bad joke, and there is an awkward silence. Then Olga says that she too recalls Vershinin. He says he knew their mother, and Chebutykin talks about how beautiful she was. Irina mentions that she's buried in Moscow, and Masha says she's starting to forget her face. This leads Vershinin into a long speech about how everyone will be forgotten someday. What's important will one day be insignificant, and their lives will be considered idle. Tusenbach suggests that perhaps their lives will be recalled with respect. Solyony teases him, and Tusenbach asks him to go. When Solyony persists, Tusenbach keeps talking, and Chebutykin jokes about how small people are in general and how small he is in particular.

A violin is heard, and the sisters explain that it's being played by Andrei, whom they say is going to be a professor. They also talk about how they've been teasing him for being in love with a local girl, with Masha going on at some length about how vulgar she is and about how she's heard the girl is engaged to Protopopov. She then calls Andrei, who comes in and is introduced to Vershinin. When he hears Vershinin is from Moscow, Andrei jokes that his sisters will now never leave him alone. The sisters tease their brother, and he becomes upset. The girls joke that they used to tease Vershinin and that he never minded. Andrei makes them stop, explaining he had an unsettled night and that his lack of sleep has kept him from doing what he really wants to do, translate a book into English. He says their father had high expectations of all his children, and he (Andrei) has gained weight since his father's death as though he's been freed from carrying a heavy load. All the children know several languages, and Andrei refers particularly to Irina knowing Italian. Masha talks about how useless knowing so many languages is. This leads Vershinin to talk at length about how even in their small town, their knowledge will slowly gain influence. Over the years, that influence will grow to the point where the town is populated by people like them. He says that life is meant to be

beautiful and that their knowledge is the seed of the beautiful life to come. Masha announces she's staying to lunch.

Tusenbach starts talking about how that beautiful life must be earned and worked for. Vershinin talks about how beautiful the sisters' home is. Tusenbach tries again to talk about the value of work. Vershinin talks about how he often wonders what would happen if life could be started anew and says that if he had the chance, he'd create a life in which he lived in a house like that of the sisters. Vershinin mentions his wife and daughters and says he wouldn't marry.

Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

The key element of this section is the introduction of Vershinin and the repeated foreshadowing of his eventual affair with Masha. He and Masha share recollections of each other, and he is also referred to as the lovesick major. His reference to a lonely man, which the audience can easily understand from the context of what he says as a reference to himself, and Masha's sudden change of heart about staying for lunch provide additional foreshadowing. Their relationship is also foreshadowed in Vershinin's comments about wanting to start a new life, something that both he and Masha clearly want to do, as the continuing action of the play reveals. Vershinin's reasons are revealed through his conversation, while Masha's reasons are revealed as the result of the entrance of her husband, who appears at the beginning of the final section of this act.

Another piece of foreshadowing is Andrei's reference to Irina's knowledge of Italian, which foreshadows her emotional breakdown later in the play when she laments having forgotten all her Italian. Also, Solyony's continued teasing of Tusenbach continues to foreshadow Tusenbach' eventual death. Finally, the sisters' teasing of Andrei about Natasha foreshadows her entrance and their eventual marriage, while Masha's reference to the rumors about Natasha and Protopopov foreshadow developments later in the play that imply they're having an affair.

Vershinin's comments and observations about the future can easily be interpreted as some kind of thematic statement. The same point could be made in terms of Tusenbach and Irina's comments about the value of work. They are related to the play's theme, but not in the way they might at first seem. Both men are, in essence, saying that they don't want to live the lives they're living. This state of being, or perhaps non-being might be a better phrase, is also true of the three sisters. Olga and Irina are desperate to live lives in Moscow, and Masha (as we'll see) is equally desperate to live any kind of life as long as it doesn't involve her husband. In short, none of the play's central characters want to live the lives in which they find themselves, a situation that also becomes true of Andrei and Natasha later in the play. The action of the play, such as it is, reveals how these dreams of escape are all futile because, as previously discussed, the characters don't really do anything to bring them to reality.

Tusenbach and Irina do get jobs, and Masha and Vershinin have an affair. However, Irina never does anything to try to get to Moscow, and neither does Olga. By the same token, Vershinin and Masha have their fling, but at the end of the play, they return to life with their respective spouses. Later in the play, the audience also sees how Andrei's dreams of success have evaporated, and he finds himself completely dominated by his wife. Only Natasha, ironically enough, gets everything she wants, but the point here is that she gets it because she works for it, fights for it and doesn't stop until she gets it. She has bad manners. She's pushy, and she's selfish. However, she realizes her dreams. Do the other characters need to be more pushy and more selfish? They may or may not. The dramatic point of the play is not whether selfishness and pushiness are virtues but rather that the characters need to do *something*. The thematic point of the play, therefore, is that all human beings need to work for something. Otherwise, life will end up as hollow as those of the three sisters and their men.

Act 1, Part 3

Act 1, Part 3 Summary

Kulygin comes in, greets Irina, gives her a little book he wrote detailing the history of the school where he and Olga both teach and introduces himself to Vershinin. Irina tells Kulygin he already gave her a copy of the book. Kulygin takes the book from her and gives it to Vershinin. Vershinin prepares to go, but Olga and Irina insist he join them for lunch. He agrees to stay and goes with Olga into the dining room in the back. Kulygin chatters about the tradition of Sunday rest. He comments on how the rugs should be cleaned, how life must be ordered, how glad he is that Masha loves him, how the curtains should be cleaned and how he and Masha have been invited to join the director of the school for a walk. Masha irritably says she's not going, refusing to explain why. Kulygin talks about his plans to join the director at his home in the evening and comments that the clock is fast. Andrei's violin is heard as Olga calls everyone in to lunch. As they all go in, Masha sternly tells Chebutykin to not drink. Chebutykin says it's been two years since he was drunk, but Masha says again he shouldn't drink at all. She then complains about having to go to the director's again. Tusenbach and Chebutykin advise her to not go, and she goes into the dining room, complaining about how awful her life is. Solyony teases Tusenbach again. Kulygin drinks a toast to how wonderful Masha is. Vershinin talks about how good he feels being in the house, and they all prepare to sit down to lunch.

In the drawing room, Irina comments to Tusenbach on Masha's bad mood, saying she's not happy with Kulygin. Olga calls to Andrei, and he comes in as Irina talks about how uneasy she feels around Solyony. Tusenbach talks about how he feels sorry for Solyony. He's fine when they're alone together, but when they're around people, Solyony becomes crude and bullying. Tusenbach then talks about how much he loves Irina, saying his desire for work is bound up with his desire to make a beautiful life for her. Irina tearfully says life isn't beautiful for her or her sisters, saying she feels like grass stifled by weeds. She talks about needing to work, saying she comes from a family that has always despised work.

Natasha rushes in, checks herself in a mirror, congratulates Irina and greets Tusenbach. Olga comes in and greets her, commenting that her clothes don't match. Natasha wonders whether it's a kind of omen, but Olga says it just looks odd. She leads Natasha into the dining room as Kulygin toasts a future fiancy for Irina. He and Chebutykin joke about how she's already got a fiancy, and Masha demands a drink. Solyony jokes that the liqueur is made of cockroaches, and Olga invites everyone to come for dinner. Chebutykin jokes about how everyone is made for love, and Andrei loses his temper.

Fedotik and Rode arrive. Fedotik takes a lot of pictures, and he offers Irina a toy top. Kulygin jokes about how there are thirteen people at the table, and he says that that means there are lovers there. He jokes that one of them is Chebutykin, who in turn jokes about why Natasha's suddenly embarrassed. Natasha runs into the drawing room,

and Andrei runs after her. Natasha says she couldn't help running off, adding that she knows that it's bad manners but just couldn't stay. Andrei comforts her and moves her to a window where they can't be seen. He talks about how wonderful her youth is and how much in love with her he is. Then, he proposes marriage and kisses her.

Act 1, Part 3 Analysis

The third section of the act develops several key relationships. The first is the romantic triangle involving Vershinin, Masha and Kulygin, whose pedantic boorishness is so vividly portrayed that the audience immediately understands why Masha finds the intelligent and apparently more sensitive Vershinin so attractive. The second is the relationship between Natasha and Andrei, which is something of a mystery. We wonder, as perhaps the three sisters do, why he finds her attractive. The answer might be found in the previously discussed point about Natasha's determination. She may dress badly, but she's got spirit. This is indicated by the way she gets herself away from an uncomfortable situation, as opposed to putting up with it the way that "ladies" like the three sisters might. The idea is supported later in the play by the way Andrei remains something of a non-entity, with no real career and no personality. In other words, he's attracted to her get up and go, mostly because his own got away.

The third relationship developed is that of Tusenbach and Irina. Tusenbach is revealed as a thorough romantic, passionately idealistic in a way none of the characters are. They have dreams and longings, while he has goals and at least a degree of zeal. He believes in his dreams more strongly and actually makes at least some effort to bring them to fruition. He confesses his love to Irina and actually gets a job, but like the other characters, he doesn't go all the way. Throughout the play, he seems content to wait for Irina to come to him in the same way as he seems prepared to wait for the future, as opposed to moving directly and determinedly into it. As for Irina, her tearfulness in their conversation suggests that her earlier radiant happiness was actually a mask and that she actually is beginning to despair that her life is never going to be what she dreams. The despair hasn't yet taken over completely. That comes in Act 3, when the world around her is literally destroyed by fire in the same way as her inner, dream-filled world has been destroyed by pointless work, frustrated dreams and the banality of people around her, particularly Natasha. Nevertheless, the seeds of despair are planted in this scene and grow throughout the play.

The other key piece of foreshadowing here, aside from the glimpse of Irina's despair, is Masha's reference to Chebutykin's drinking. This foreshadows his appearance in Act 3, Part 1, in which he refers to having killed a patient after operating on her while drunk.

Act 2, Part 1

Act 2, Part 1 Summary

This act also takes place in the drawing/dining room, some months after the events of Act 1. Natasha comes in, searching to ensure no servants have left any candles burning. She calls to Andrei, who comes in. Conversation reveals that it's Carnival Week. Olga now works at the Teacher's Council office, and Irina works at the telegraph office. Andrei and Natasha now are married and have a child, Bobik, over whom Natasha worries excessively. She tells Andrei she doesn't want the maskers to stop by, saying they'll disturb Bobik's rest. Andrei reminds her they were invited and that the decision is really up to his sisters, who are still mistresses of the house. Natasha says she'll tell them as well and talks about her plans to move Bobik into Irina's room and Irina into Olga's room. After asking why Andrei isn't saying anything, she tells him Ferapont has come with a message from the council. Andrei tells her to tell Ferapont to come in, and Natasha goes.

A moment later, Ferapont comes in with some papers and a book. Andrei looks at the papers, commenting as he does about how surprised he is at how life changes. He refers to a book of university lectures he's been reading. He has been named secretary to the council run by Protopopov, and the most he can realistically be now is actually on the council. He still dreams of being a famous lecturer at Moscow University, though. Ferapont comments that he doesn't really hear what Andrei is saying, but Andrei says if he could hear properly, he (Andrei) wouldn't be talking, adding that his wife never listens and that he's afraid his sisters will laugh at them. He reminisces about his days in Moscow, saying that there nobody knows you but you're not a stranger, while here everybody knows him but he's a total stranger. After chatting briefly about whether Ferapont was ever in Moscow, Andrei tells him he can go and then goes back into his own room.

Masha and Vershinin come in from another direction, in the middle of a conversation about the bad manners of the people of the town as opposed to the good manners Masha is used to dealing with from her father's fellow soldiers. She also talks about how she married Kulygin when she was eighteen. She was both afraid of him and impressed by him because he was a schoolteacher, but she has since become completely disillusioned. She talks about how miserable she is when she's with his boorish colleagues, leading Vershinin to talk about how everyone in the town, military or otherwise, is as uninteresting as everyone else. He wonders aloud why Russians are such lofty thinkers but live such low, worn out lives. Masha asks why he's unhappy, and he explains that one of his daughters is unwell and that his wife is in a very bad mood. He kisses her hand and apologizes for talking so much, but he says he's got nobody in his life other than her. Masha refers to the spooky sound of the wind in the stove, but he goes on talking about how wonderful and beautiful she is and saying how much he loves her. At first she tells him to stop, and then she tells him to keep going. When she sees Irina and Tusenbach coming, she tells him again to stop.

As Tusenbach and Irina come in, Tusenbach is talking about how he has a German name but is truly Russian at heart. Irina complains that she's tired, but he doesn't appear to notice, talking about how he'll gladly see her home every night. As he greets Masha and Vershinin, Irina talks about how she was rude to a customer at the telegraph office for no reason, and she asks whether the maskers are coming. Masha confirms that they are, and Irina again says she's tired. Masha jokes that she's starting to look like a boy, and Irina says the mindlessness and soullessness of the work is really starting to get to her. There's a knock on the floor, and Irina understands it to be a signal from Chebutykin, asking if he can come up. She tells Tusenbach to answer and then tells Masha that Chebutykin and Andrei were out gambling again and lost a lot of money. She talks about her continuing dream of going to Moscow, saying she's planning to leave in a few months. Masha comments that Natasha mustn't hear about Andrei's losses, and Irina says it wouldn't matter. Chebutykin comes in and sits at the dining room table. Masha and Irina talk about how he hasn't paid any rent in months. When he calls Irina to join him, she joins him at the table and begins playing solitaire.

Act 2, Part 1 Analysis

In the first part of this section, the audience sees Natasha's previously discussed determination in action as she overrides the wishes of her husband and his sisters about the maskers and makes plans to override their lives even more. In short, she is pursuing what she wants in a way that Andrei has clearly never done. It's also becoming clear that his sisters have never done things that way either. The contrast between Natasha and the Prozoroffs is further defined by the way Andrei simply talks about how unhappy he is even while Natasha is acting to improve and/or change her life.

Andrei's capacity for, and habit of, talking rather than actually acting is repeated in this section by Irina. It's important to note that even though she talks about leaving for Moscow in a few months, there is no actual evidence that she's doing anything about it. There is no evidence of tickets or packing, and she has no real plans of any kind. The audience sees her being sucked into the same kind of dull, repetitive work that Olga refers to in Act 1 as sapping her of her strength and her will. This is a development in her personality that even Tusenbach's protestations of love and Masha's teasing about her looks seem unable to slow.

In contrast to Irina's tiredness, Andrei's dullness and the way they both complain, Masha's flirting with Vershinin stands out as the only effort being made by anyone in the Prozoroff family to create desired change in her life. She wants to escape, somehow, from her husband, and she is making carefully modulated overtures to Vershinin so that he will help her get away, whether emotionally, sexually or intellectually. For his part, Vershinin is also making an effort to get out of his misery. His romantic proclamations perform the same function for him as they do for her, drawing them both out of the lives they can't bear to live and into an existence where there is both excitement and intimacy. As previously discussed, however, they both escape only to a point.

Foreshadowing in this scene includes the reference to Protopopov, which foreshadows Natasha's taking a ride with him later in the act, and Irina's despair, which foreshadows her emotional breakdown in the following act.

Act 2, Part 2

Act 2, Part 2 Summary

Vershinin suggests that he, Tusenbach and Masha imagine what life will be like in two hundred years. Tusenbach suggests that in spite of there being great technological advances, human beings will be exactly the same, complaining about how empty life is and being afraid to die. Vershinin says, as he did in Act 1, Part 2, that life will be very different in two hundred years and that work must begin now to prepare. He adds that there can be no true happiness in the present but there will be in the future, "for the descendants of [his] descendants." Fedotik and Rode join Irina and Chebutykin in the dining room as Tusenbach asks what Vershinin would say if Tusenbach claimed to be already happy. Vershinin says he can't be. As Masha laughs quietly, Tusenbach says again life will never change. Birds will migrate the same way, and philosophers will philosophize the same way. Ultimately, he says, life has no meaning. Masha says she believes that life has to have some meaning, or else it's all waste. Vershinin says it's a shame that youth passes, and Tusenbach says it's difficult to argue with them. In the dining room, Chebutykin comments on an article in the paper that he's reading and makes a note in his little book.

Tusenbach tells Masha he's resigned from the military. Masha says she doesn't like civilians, and the audience realizes that she's referring back to her earlier conversation with Vershinin, in which she said she prefers soldiers to civilians. Tusenbach talks about how he's looking forward to working hard and joins Irina in the dining room just as Fedotik is giving her some crayons. She complains about how he always treats her like a child, but then she laughs with joy at the pretty colors. The samovar is brought in, and Anfisa pours tea. Solyony comes into the dining room. Natasha also comes in, and several conversations continue at the same time. As Vershinin and Masha talk about the wind, Irina says her game of solitaire will come out, but Fedotik says it won't, joking that it means she won't be going to Moscow. Meanwhile, Chebutykin reads aloud from his newspaper, and Anfisa brings tea to Vershinin and Masha. Natasha chatters to Solyony about how special Bobik is, and Solyony makes a crude joke about how all children should be cooked and eaten.

Vershinin tells Masha a story about a prisoner who said he never noticed the beauty of bird song until he was in jail, and who then said once he was released, he went back to not noticing. He says that in the same way, once Masha is in Moscow, she won't notice its beauty, saying again that happiness doesn't exist; we just long for it. Anfisa brings him a note. He reads it and then tells Masha his wife has again tried to commit suicide. He goes out, and Anfisa complains that he hasn't finished his tea. Masha loses her temper and goes into the dining room. Andrei calls for Anfisa, and she goes out to him as Masha messes up Irina's game of solitaire. Irina becomes upset. Chebutykin makes a joke, and Natasha asks why she makes herself look so ugly. She says Irina would be charming if she didn't speak so crudely and that Irina speaks in very bad French.

Tusenbach and the others can barely restrain their laughter. Natasha again becomes embarrassed and goes out.

Irina asks where Vershinin went. Masha explains that something happened with his wife as Tusenbach goes to Solyony, offers him a drink and offers to make peace and be friends. Solyony says there's no need to make peace, saying there's no quarrel. He goes on to say he's fine when he's alone with someone, but when he's with large groups of people, he can't help behaving strangely. He also says he doesn't dislike Tusenbach and that he makes the comments he does just because he's moody.

Andrei comes in, sitting quietly with his book of lectures as Tusenbach tells Solyony he's resigning from the military. Solyony tells him to give up on his dreams and then interrupts as Chebutykin and Irina pass by, talking about the ingredients of a stew. Solyony says Chebutykin has the name of one of the ingredients wrong. He and Solyony argue, and Andrei asks them to be quiet. Tusenbach asks when the maskers are coming, and Irina says they'll be there soon. Chebutykin and Tusenbach sing and dance in the way the maskers would. Tusenbach then promises to go to the university with Andrei, leading to an argument with Solyony about how many universities there are. After insisting there are two and being ignored, Solyony leaves the room. Tusenbach applauds his leaving and then sits at a piano and plays. As Masha sings and dances by herself, Natasha has a quiet word with Chebutykin and then goes out. Chebutykin then whispers to Tusenbach, who stops playing. Chebutykin tells Irina they need to go. Irina asks why they aren't staying for the maskers, and Andrei sheepishly confesses that the maskers aren't coming because Natasha doesn't want them around when Bobik's not well. Masha suggests it's Natasha who's not well, in the head. Andrei goes out, and Chebutykin follows him. Fedotik and Rode say their farewells and go, and Masha and Irina follow them to the door.

Act 2, Part 2 Analysis

In the same way as the comments of Vershinin, Tusenbach and Irina in Act 1, Part 2 might be interpreted as making thematic statements, comments made by several characters in this scene might be interpreted the same way. These include Vershinin's comments that life will change, Tusenbach' comments that life will never change and is ultimately meaningless, Masha's comments that life must have meaning and Vershinin' story about the prisoner and the birds. The point must be made, however, that philosophical comments made by characters aren't necessarily the philosophical comments of the play. In fact, the point made by all these philosophical conversations is related to the point made earlier - that these characters are talkers rather than doers, intellectuals and dreamers as opposed to actual participants in life. It's true that they participate to a point. Tusenbach resigns from the military, and Vershinin and Masha seduce each other. In general, though, their efforts are pretty minimal. They don't really want to make a change, an idea born out by the way Irina at first resents being treated like a child by Fedotik and then turns around and reacts with very childlike happiness at his little gift. Later in this act, the audience sees again how Natasha is a very different character, doing exactly what she wants and not really thinking at all.

Other than the philosophies of the various characters, what's particularly noteworthy about this section of the act is its busyness. Many things seem to be going on at the same time. Aside from creating an effectively realistic portrayal of what happens with large parties - as smaller parties form and individuals move from group to group - the sequence gives a clear sense of the kind of lives these characters live. The audience experiences them becoming involved in petty arguments and minor joys, in discussions about large subjects that actually perform the trivial function of killing time and in spontaneous music and dancing that is actually an expression of frustration and loneliness. What they're doing is actually important because they're all just waiting, and not just for the maskers. The maskers, in fact, are a symbol of what they're truly waiting for - the future, the chance to feel and hearing someone to say something loving to them. It's no coincidence, therefore, that the maskers come but are sent away. This represents the way the future comes but isn't being faced head on by anyone but Natasha, who faces both the maskers and the future with equal determination. It's this sense of a lack of importance to life, this sense of futility in her activities and those of the people around her, that leads Irina to her moment of climactic frustration at the end of the act and contributes to her emotional breakdown in Act 3.

Act 2, Part 3

Act 2, Part 3 Summary

Chebutykin and Andrei come back in, dressed to go out. Chebutykin talks about how he never married because he never had time and because he was in love with Andrei's mother. Andrei says marriage is boring, but Chebutykin says it's worse to be lonely. Andrei urges him to hurry, saying he's afraid Natasha will stop them. The audience understands that the two of them are going out gambling again. As they go out, Andrei asks Chebutykin what he should do about his shortness of breath. Chebutykin says he doesn't know, adding that he's forgotten everything about being a doctor.

After Andrei and Chebutykin are gone, laughter is heard from outside. Irina and Anfisa come in from separate entrances, and Irina says the maskers must be sent away. As Anfisa goes out, Solyony comes in, apologizing for his behavior and saying he deeply loves Irina. Even though she tells him to leave her alone, he talks about how beautiful she is. Finally, her anger gets through to him. He says that even though he's professing noble emotions, it's as though he's not in the room and promises to kill any rival for her love. He repeats that he loves her. Natasha passes through wearing her dressing gown and becoming embarrassed when she sees Solyony. Solyony goes out, and Natasha comments on how tired Irina looks, suggesting that Irina think about moving in with Olga so that Bobik can have her room. Irina doesn't seem to be listening.

A maid comes in and tells Natasha that Protopopov has come to take her for a ride in his carriage. She laughs about how silly men are and tells the maid to tell Protopopov she's coming. She goes out to get ready as Kulygin and Vershinin come in, wondering what happened to the party, looking for Masha and asking why Protopopov is downstairs. Olga also comes in, complaining about how her head aches and talking about how much money Andrei has lost in gambling. Vershinin says his wife is all right. In passing, he mentions the possibility that his regiment will be ordered to leave and asks Kulygin to go out somewhere with him because he can't bear to go home. Kulygin at first says he doesn't want to go but then says he needs to leave, disappointed at the party not happening. He goes out, followed by Vershinin. Olga talks again about her headache. She says the whole town is gossiping about Andrei and she's looking forward to her day off, and then she goes out. Irina comments that everyone has gone. Natasha passes through on her way out, telling her maid she'll be back in half an hour. After she's gone, Irina says to herself, "To Moscow! To Moscow! To Moscow!"

Act 2, Part 3 Analysis

Once again in this section the audience sees the characters filling in time. Specifically, Chebutykin and Andrei fill the emptiness and loneliness of their lives with gambling. In their conversation, we also understand for the first time a little more of why Chebutykin

is so devoted to the family, and particularly to Irina. His love for them is an outlet for the love he felt for their mother.

Love also appears, much more surprisingly, in the conversation between Solyony and Irina. Up to this point, Solyony might easily have been perceived as being eccentric and angry, but essentially harmless and just a little irritating. At this point, however, he is easily among the most passionate and deeply feeling characters in the play. Unlike the longings of many of the others, which are expressed in terms that come across as either watery or intellectual, Solyony's passion comes across as deeply felt and almost dangerously intense. The fact that Natasha interrupts his conversation with Irina is no coincidence. Natasha and Solyony are both ruthless in their pursuit of what they want and dream of. The fact that Solyony doesn't actually get it is irrelevant. He feels strongly enough to say he'll kill, and he will actually follow through in a way that few of the other characters follow through on their dreams.

Irina's crying out for Moscow is a response to everything she's experienced in this act, her fatigue and disillusionment in Part 1, the relative emptiness of the lives lived (including her own) in Part 2 and her distaste for Solyony in this section. She is clearly in despair and sees escape to Moscow as her only hope. Later in the play, however, it becomes clear that she will never actually go. She gets more and more frustrated and disillusioned, but she never, ever goes. The question of why not is answered by the previously discussed idea that she, like so many other characters in the play, is a thinker and dreamer, not a doer. Making her dreams come true is perhaps too hard for her, or maybe she doesn't really know how, her mind having been filled with several languages at the expense of practicality, determination and coping skills. Whatever the reason, her final words represent the present despair felt by Olga, Vershinin, Masha, Solyony and Andrei, and the deeper despair to come for all of them. In fact, in the cries of this idealistic young woman, the audience can hear the cry of every human being that hopes his or her dreams will once, just once, come true. Conversely, in her lack of action we see how the choices of every human being determine whether that actually happens.

Act 3, Part 1

Act 3, Part 1 Summary

The third act is set in what has become Olga and Irina's bedroom, at around three in the morning. Fire alarms ring offstage. Masha lies on a sofa as Olga and Anfisa enter, and conversation reveals that there has been a major fire in the town. As Olga goes through her clothes looking for things she can give to the fire's victims, Anfisa talks about two little girls downstairs, imagining that their father has been killed. Olga comments that Vershinin's house has been almost completely destroyed and that Fedotik's home has burned to the ground. She calls for help with the clothes, and a moment later Ferapont comes in and takes out an armful, commenting as he goes on a fire in Moscow that he survived. After he's gone, Olga tiredly tells Anfisa to give everything away, makes arrangements for the Vershinin family to sleep there and comments that Chebutykin has gotten very drunk. Anfisa worries that there are plans being made to send her away, but Olga reassures her and tells her to sit and rest.

Natasha comes in chattering about how a society for the relief of those left homeless should be formed. Conversation reveals that she's had another child, Sophie, and that Natasha is worried about her catching influenza from one of the many strangers in the house. She looks at herself in the mirror and compliments herself on how well she's kept her figure, and then she shouts at Anfisa for sitting down when she's in the room. Anfisa goes out. Natasha complains to Olga that Anfisa is useless and then comments on how tired Olga looks. Conversation reveals that there's an election coming up for the position of headmistress at the school. Natasha is convinced Olga will get it, and Olga doesn't want it. Olga tells Natasha she was too rude to Anfisa. Natasha apologizes, and Masha goes out, angry at being disturbed. Olga tells Natasha that rude language upsets her, and Natasha again apologizes. Then, she says Anfisa really should be living in the country because she doesn't really work. As the fire alarm bell rings again, Natasha talks at length about how she's running the house while Olga is working at the school. She calls Anfisa names, loses her temper and says that by the next day Anfisa will be gone.

As Natasha goes out, Kulygin comes in looking for Masha. Conversation reveals that only one section of town has been destroyed. Kulygin mentions that if he hadn't married Masha he'd have wanted to marry Olga. In a moment of quiet they hear Chebutykin coming, comment on how drunk he is and then hide themselves so that they don't embarrass him. A moment later Chebutykin comes in and washes his hands as he speaks to himself about how he remembers nothing about being a doctor, recalling a patient he was treating recently who died. Olga slips out of the room as Chebutykin looks at himself in a mirror and wonders whether he's really a man anymore and whether he truly exists. He starts weeping as he wishes he didn't exist. He recalls a conversation at his club during which people were talking about well known writers. He didn't know any of them but pretended he did. He talks about the banality of life and again recalls the patient he killed.

Irina, Vershinin and Tusenbach come in, with Tusenbach wearing new and stylish civilian clothes. Vershinin talks about how much of the town was saved because of the efforts of the soldiers, and Irina refers to how many of them, including Solyony, are sitting in the dining room. She also tells Chebutykin to go to bed. Chebutykin says he's all right, and Kulygin comes forward and jokes about how drunk he is. Tusenbach talks about being asked to produce a benefit concert for the refugees from the fire. He suggests that Masha should play the piano as part of it, but Irina says she's forgotten how to play. Kulygin talks about how much he loves Masha but says the director of the school might not think her participation is appropriate. Chebutykin picks up a small china clock and studies it as Vershinin mentions that he's heard rumors their brigade is being transferred. Tusenbach says that when they go the town will be empty, but Irina says it won't matter since they're going to Moscow. Chebutykin drops the clock, and it shatters. As Irina says the clock belonged to her mother, Chebutykin suggests philosophically that perhaps it didn't really exist and that nobody really exists. He wonders why people are staring at him, shouts that Natasha is having an affair with Protopopov and nobody knows or cares and then goes out.

After commenting on how strange the situation is, Vershinin tells how he ran home when the fire started. He found his wife missing and his little girls terrified and wondered how much more they'd have to suffer. He grabbed them and ran and then discovered his wife at the Prozoroff house. Masha comes back in and lies down as Vershinin continues, comparing the fire with what happens when enemies at war make sudden raids on each other. He then refers again to his idea that in a few hundred years people will look back on the life they're leading and laugh, and he says again that Irina and her sisters are in the forefront of the process of transformation. He begins to sing. Masha joins in, and Fedotik rushes in, laughing strangely at how everything he owns has been destroyed. Solyony follows, and Irina tells him to go away. Solyony complains about how Tusenbach can come in while he can't, while Vershinin and Masha continue to sing. Solyony makes fun of Tusenbach, and then he, Vershinin and Fedotik go out.

Act 3, Part 1 Analysis

As previously discussed in the analysis of Act 1, Part 3, the destruction caused by the fire represents the destruction of the dreams and hopes of those who continue to have them: the Prozoroff sisters, Tusenbach, Vershinin, Andrei and, to an extent, even Solyony. Those dreams aren't completely destroyed quite yet. Irina still dreams of going to Moscow, and Vershinin and Masha are continuing to flirt with each other, presumably still in the hope that their relationship will alleviate their unhappiness. Also, Solyony is clearly still drawn to Irina, and Tusenbach still has dreams of fulfillment in work and of happiness with Irina. Only Andrei, as will become clear in the second part of this act, has no dreams left at all. Even though the dreams of the others remain, there is the powerful sense in this scene that the destruction of those dreams is both imminent and inevitable, a sense conveyed not only by the fire but also by several other factors.

The first factor conveying the hopelessness of the characters' dreams is Natasha's reference to Olga becoming headmistress, which is particularly noteworthy because

Natasha seems determined Olga will get the job. The audience has seen what happens when Natasha is determined about something. The second factor is the appearance of Chebutykin, which functions on several levels. His drunken musings on his loss of identity represent the way that Irina and the others, who define their identities by their dreams, will lose their identities once their dreams fade away in the same way as Chebutykin's knowledge, which has defined his identity as a doctor.

Another level of symbolism in this scene can be found in his accidental destruction of the clock. Because of its association with the Prozoroffs' mother, the woman Chebutykin loved and dreamed of marrying, its destruction symbolizes the destruction of his dreams of happiness and, therefore, symbolizes the destruction of the dreams of the others.

Several characters seem to take the fire and its destructive consequences in their stride. This is perhaps because their dreams and goals are being fulfilled (Natasha), because they don't have dreams for a life beyond their own (Kulygin) or because their dreams are so relatively insignificant to them that their destruction doesn't really matter (Fedotik). For those who continue to dream of a transformed life and continue to have those dreams unfulfilled, the physical devastation caused by the fire and the emotional devastation of its victims clearly and vividly foreshadow the spiritual devastation the many dreamers in this play are about to encounter. Are the characters aware of this connection? It seems as though on a subconscious, spiritual level, they just might be. This is another example of the way meaning in this play can be defined by subtext and juxtaposition, as opposed to overt action and direct comment or revelation by the characters.

One final piece of foreshadowing occurs in Vershinin' passing mention of the rumor that he and his brigade are going to be transferred. This is the second time such a rumor has been mentioned, the first being in Act 2, Part 3. The first time the transfer never actually comes to pass, but in Act 4, this time the rumors will prove to be true.

Act 3, Part 2

Act 3, Part 2 Summary

Irina discovers Tusenbach has fallen asleep. As he wakes, he talks briefly about how he's soon to start a new job at a brickyard. He then talks about how beautiful Irina is, his hopes for living and working with her and his memories of how happy she was on her Name Day (in Act 1). He comments that morning has begun and muses romantically about giving his life for her. As he talks, Masha repeatedly tells him to go out, and finally he does. She also suggests that Kulygin should go home. He repeatedly tells her how much he loves her and how content and happy he is, but Masha talks about how bored she is. She also talks angrily about how much debt Andrei is in and how he's allowing Natasha to control money and property that by rights should be controlled by Andrei and the sisters. Kulygin tells her it doesn't really matter, talking about how he prefers a simple life. Masha tells him justice is important to her and then tells him again to go away. He talks again about how much he loves Masha, repeating that he's content, and goes.

Irina talks with increasing emotion about how Andrei has changed because of Natasha. His dreams have disappeared, and the whole town is laughing behind his back because of the affair with Protopopov. He just sits in his room and plays violin while the whole town is out fighting the fire. As Olga comes in, Irina begins to weep, saying she can't stand her life. She can't remember anything of her Italian, and she says that they'll never get to Moscow and that she hates her job. She's becoming unattractive and feels no satisfaction or happiness. She also talks about how she feels herself moving away from any kind of beautiful life and towards an abyss of unhappiness, saying she can't understand why she hasn't killed herself. Olga comforts her, suggesting that she marry Tusenbach and talking about how she (Olga) would be happy if she were married. Irina says she always dreamed of finding her true love in Moscow, and she sees those dreams as being foolish. Olga recalls how sad she felt when she first saw Tusenbach in civilian clothes, but she reiterates that he's still a good man and would still make a good husband.

Natasha passes through carrying a candle. Masha sarcastically comments that she looks as though she started the fire. Olga calls her silly. Masha then confesses that she loves Vershinin. Olga tells her she doesn't want to listen and goes behind the screen that surrounds her bed. Masha talks about how she came to fall in love, but Olga continues to refuse to listen. Masha wonders aloud what will happen to them, talking about how falling in love in books seems to be so much better than falling in love in real life. She then vows to be silent. Andrei comes in, followed by Ferapont. Andrei demands to know what Ferapont wants, insisting that he be called by his proper title. The audience understands this title to be the one he's earned from being on the council. Ferapont says the firefighters are asking permission to go through the garden to get to the river. Andrei says they may, and Ferapont goes out. Andrei asks for a key to a cupboard, saying he's lost his. He is asking because Natasha wants the key. Olga

hands it to him. After apologizing for losing his temper with Ferapont, Andrei asks why his sisters are so angry with him. Olga tries to get him to change the subject, but Andrei insists. Vershinin' voice is heard singing the song he sang with Masha earlier. Masha responds and goes out to him.

Olga says again that she'll talk with Andrei tomorrow, but Andrei says he already knows what's bothering her. She, Irina and Masha don't like Natasha. He defends her to them, insisting that the sisters respect her in the same way he does and that they also respect him. Kulygin looks in briefly, asks where Masha is and goes out again. Andrei talks briefly about how he married in the hopes of being happy and then bursts into tears, telling Olga and Irina as he goes out to not believe a word he said. Kulygin comes in again, still looking for Masha. After he goes, Irina tells Olga the brigade is leaving. Olga says it's only a rumor. Irina says she'll marry Tusenbach but then begs that they all go to Moscow.

Act 3, Part 2 Analysis

The final section of the act is notable for the various vulnerabilities revealed by the characters. Irina's despair, Masha's passion, Andrei's disappointment, Tusenbach's love and Kulygin's devotion are all depths of feeling that to this point were only hinted at or talked about. Ironically, this scene also illustrates how ultimately ineffectual all these characters are. They all feel deeply, but they don't seem able to do anything with those feelings, act on them or convince others to respond in kind. Irina once again pleads to go to Moscow but doesn't actually do anything to get there. Andrei reveals his disappointment with himself and with his wife, but he doesn't appear to be prepared to fight back. Tusenbach professes his love and desire to be with Irina but interestingly doesn't actually ask her to marry him or how she feels about him. Kulygin repeatedly expresses his love for his wife but gets no response from her but annoyance. Only Masha seems to be making at least some effort to transform her life, but as is indicated by the fact that she speaks about it only briefly and then vows to remain silent, she seems unable to do more than experience it on the briefest of terms. That doesn't mean that her feelings aren't intense. Her speech in this scene and her despair at Vershinin' departure in Act 4 clearly indicate how much she feels for him. As with the case with most of the characters, profound feeling doesn't indicate an equally profound commitment to action.

In contrast to the other characters, Olga seems resigned to a life without dreams. This is indicated by the way she hands over the key to Andrei, even though everyone knows that by giving it to him she's actually giving it to Natasha and thereby handing over further control of the house. This foreshadows Act 4, when she has indeed become headmistress of the school and also foreshadows the destruction of the dreams of the other sisters, Vershinin and Tusenbach. The various tragedies in the following, climactic Act 4 destroy all of these dreams. Olga is the second of the Prozoroff siblings to give in to hopelessness. Andrei was the first, as seen in Act 2.

An important image is mentioned almost in passing in this scene, as Masha briefly refers to Andrei sitting in his room with his violin while everyone else is fighting the fire. This image represents the way he, like so many of the other characters, focuses on dreams rather than on reality or on striving to make their dreams come true. In the way that Irina, for example, talks about going to Moscow but never does anything about it, Andrei plays the violin and never does anything to achieve his goal of a professorship. Once again, Andrei and the others are dreamers, not doers - impotent when it comes to the act of truly living, as opposed to slowly dying.

Act 4, Part 1

Act 4, Part 1 Summary

The final act is set in the house's front garden. Chebutykin sits and watches as Kulygin, who's shaved off his mustache, Irina and Tusenbach say goodbye to Fedotik and Rode. Irina says she hopes to see them again, but Fedotik says they won't. Even if they do, they won't recognize each other or have anything in common anymore. Conversation reveals that they're being posted to Poland and that the entire military contingent in the town is leaving within the week. As they leave, they encounter Masha, who walks with them as they go out. Chebutykin comments that they forgot to say goodbye to him, but Irina reminds him that he also forgot to say goodbye to them. Chebutykin comments that he too is leaving but says he won't be gone for long. He adds that he's planning to come back, retire, live on his pension and behave. He sings to himself, and Kulygin teases him. Irina comments that she doesn't like him without his mustache. Kulygin comments that the director shaved off his, and as soon as Kulygin became inspector, he followed suit. He also says that no matter what he looks like, he's content. Andrei passes in the background, pushing a baby carriage.

Irina says she's bothered by a rumor she heard. When Chebutykin doesn't seem to understand, Kulygin tells him she's referring to an argument between Solyony and Tusenbach, adding that it's starting to be said among people that Solyony is in love with Irina and therefore hates Tusenbach. He says it's understandable that people love Irina, especially since she resembles Masha so much. As he says again how much he loves his wife, Irina comments that she and Tusenbach are to be married the next day and that she's looking forward with great excitement to starting work as a teacher soon afterwards. Kulygin wishes her luck, and Chebutykin says he feels as though she and her sisters are flying away and leaving her behind. Kulygin refers to the departure of the military officers. He hopes everything will go back to normal and adds that in spite of all the rumors he loves his wife very much. He compares himself favorably to a man with whom he went to school and who is now destitute. The audience understands him to be referring to rumors that Masha is having an affair with Vershinin.

Irina mentions that Protopopov has come again to visit, leading her to comment on how difficult it is for her to be at home without Olga there. Olga moved into the school when she became headmistress. She says she's accepted that she will never get to Moscow, saying it's God's will and that she's happy to be marrying Tusenbach. She talks about how she couldn't be happier but admits that she's concerned over what happened on the street between Tusenbach and Solyony. Natasha calls from an upper window that the headmistress has arrived. Kulygin takes Irina in to greet her. Chebutykin again sings to himself, and Masha appears. Andrei is seen again with the carriage.

Masha asks Chebutykin whether he loved their mother, and when he says he did, she asks whether she loved him in return. He says he doesn't remember. She asks where "her man" is, saying that a servant referred to her husband as "her man." The audience

realizes that she means Vershinin. She talks about how bitter she's becoming as she's losing what little happiness she had and about how disappointed she is with Andrei. Andrei then comes up to them, complaining about the noise from the departing soldiers. Chebutykin says they'll be gone soon. Andrei asks about what happened on the street, and Chebutykin explains that Solyony picked a fight with Tusenbach. Tusenbach became angry and insulted him, and Solyony challenged him to a duel. The duel is about to be fought. He also says that it's Solyony's third duel, leading Masha to comment that Tusenbach might be hurt or even killed. Chebutykin is called to attend the duel, and he shouts that he'll be along in a minute. Andrei suggests that it's immoral for a doctor to attend a duel in any capacity, and Chebutykin says it doesn't really matter because no one and nothing exists. Masha becomes upset and starts to go into the house. Then she turns back, saying she can't stand it in there. She goes into the garden, looking up into the sky and commenting on how beautiful and free the geese up there seem to be.

Ferapont comes in with papers as Andrei comments on how empty the house will be once everyone has left. Even though Natasha has her good qualities, he says there's something coarse and animalistic about her and admits he can't understand how he came to love her. Chebutykin advises him to simply pack up and leave. Solyony appears, calling for Chebutykin to join him. Chebutykin gets up, and Solyony teases him about his health. Chebutykin reacts angrily. Solyony promises to only wound Tusenbach and then says his hands smell like those of a corpse. He and Chebutykin go out. Ferapont brings the papers to Andrei, who again starts walking with the carriage and angrily tells him to go away. Ferapont follows him, saying that papers are meant to be signed.

Act 4, Part 1 Analysis

A powerful atmosphere of impending darkness pervades this scene. Doom is too strong a word, but there is definitely the sense of unhappy endings in process. This atmosphere manifests in several ways. Fedotik makes fatalistic comments about never seeing Irina again, and Irina makes obvious attempts at convincing herself that letting go of her dreams of Moscow is a good thing. Kulygin makes equally obvious attempts to convince himself that his marriage is all right, while Olga is referred to as "the headmistress" rather than by her name. Visual images also support this atmosphere. Andrei is reduced from a potential professor to someone pushing a baby carriage at the command of his wife, and Masha looks into the sky and comments on the beauty of the geese. Natasha looks out the window of the home she now has thorough control over. Everything seems to be indicating that even more dreams are going to be destroyed, and there are clear indications of which ones are going to be next.

These indications come in the form of repeated references to two sets of circumstances. The first is the departure of the military officers, which indicates that Vershinin is soon to leave town and therefore that the affair between him and Masha is soon to end. Masha is clearly upset, and the audience has no doubt that their parting will be unbearably painful to her. The second set of circumstances includes the repeated references to

tension between Solyony and Tusenbach and the ultimate admission that there is to be a duel fought between them. Throughout the play there have been hints that Solyony harbors deep resentments towards Tusenbach, and it appears that Tusenbach' patience has come to an end. Both sets of circumstances function to create a potent and evocative sense of suspenseful foreshadowing, setting the stage for the climactic confrontations between dreams and reality in the following section.

Act 4, Part 2

Act 4, Part 2 Summary

Tusenbach and Irina come in as Kulygin passes, calling for Masha. Tusenbach jokes about how Kulygin seems to be the only person in town happy that the soldiers are leaving. He then says he'll come right back, telling Irina he has to say goodbye to his fellow soldiers. Irina tells him she knows he's lying and asks what happened with Solyony the day before. Tusenbach avoids the question, saying again that he'll be back soon. He tells her he's loved her for five years. She always seems more and more beautiful to him, and he promises that tomorrow he'll take her away and they'll begin a wonderful, happy new life together. In spite of all his hopes, he says he's aware she doesn't love him. She confesses that she's never loved, saying her soul is like a piano that's been locked, and the key is missing. She refers to how restless he is. He responds that there's nothing upsetting him other than the lost key and then talks at length about how sometimes little things in life take on great meaning, saying he feels like he's seeing the beauty of the trees for the first time. He points out one tree that appears dead but still waves in the wind with the living ones. He says that even if he dies, he'll still be sharing in life. He kisses Irina goodbye, telling her where the papers she gave him to look at can be found. He starts to go, and Irina says she's going with him. He makes her stay and runs out, and then he turns back as though to say something. He can't say what he wants to say, though, and instead, he tells her to ask the servants to have some coffee ready for him and runs out.

Andrei reappears, still pushing the carriage and still pursued by Ferapont, who is demanding that the papers be signed. Andrei cries out in despair, asking where his past has gone, where his hopes have disappeared to and why his future has left. He talks about how everyone in town is exactly the same as everyone else. Their lives are boring. Wives deceive husbands, and husbands pretend to not know. Everyone ends up living exactly the same empty lives as their parents. As Ferapont hands him the papers, Andrei says he has hope for the future of his children. Ferapont talks about how several thousand people froze to death in a cold winter in Moscow. Natasha calls out from the window for Andrei to be quiet, saying he's going to wake up Sophie, who's asleep in the carriage, if he keeps talking and speaking again in bad French. She tells Ferapont to take the carriage. Andrei looks at the papers and goes into the house, as Ferapont wheels the carriage out.

Olga, Vershinin and Anfisa come in. As Irina joins them, Anfisa talks happily about how wonderful her life is with Olga in the apartment above the schoolhouse. Vershinin asks where Masha is. Irina and Anfisa go out to look for her. While he's waiting, Vershinin talks about the farewell lunch the town threw for the officers and then asks whether his wife and daughters, who will be following him in two months, can turn to Olga for any help they might need. As she reassures him, she states that new lives are beginning for all of them, even though their old dreams are gone. Vershinin thanks her for all she's done for him and his family. Olga nervously asks where Masha is, and Vershinin jokes

about filling the time with talking like he usually does. Then, he talks as always about his hopes for the future. Masha appears. She and Vershinin kiss passionately, and Olga moves away discreetly, while Masha weeps. Vershinin urges her to write him, moves her into Olga's arms and goes quickly out. Kulygin appears, comforting Masha and saying that no matter what happens he loves her and won't ever complain. He vows to live life as they lived before. Masha calms herself, and Kulygin again describes her as a good woman.

A shot is heard. Masha quotes confusedly from a poem she's quoted throughout the play, saying that her life is a failure and that all her thoughts are mixed up. Irina comes in as Olga suggests they go into the house. Masha refuses, saying she doesn't go in there anymore. Irina suggests they all sit quietly, and Kulygin makes a joke. Olga laughs. Masha weeps, and Irina comforts her.

Natasha comes out of the house, saying how difficult it will be to say goodbye to Irina. In the next breath, she talks about her plans to move Andrei into Irina's bedroom. She talks about how wonderful Sophie is, her plans for chopping down several trees and how Irina's clothes don't match. Then, she becomes furious that someone left a fork on the bench and goes back into the house, shouting for an explanation.

The sound of a marching band is heard. Olga comments that the soldiers are leaving, and Masha wishes them all a good journey just as Chebutykin enters. As Kulygin goes out to get Masha's coat, Chebutykin whispers bad news to Olga, who quickly embraces Irina. Irina demands to know what's wrong. Chebutykin tells her Tusenbach was just killed and then sits down, saying how tired he is.

The three sisters stand together. Masha refers to the music, saying the soldiers are leaving and that they, the sisters, will soon be left alone to start their lives anew. As she repeatedly says that they must live, Irina talks about how the time will come when they will understand what all their suffering was for. In the meantime, they must work. She refers to her imminent departure and to her plans for giving the rest of her life to those who need her. Olga talks about how the music makes her want to live. She says that time will pass and their suffering will turn to joy for those who follow, and one day they will be remembered with compassion. She says that the music also makes her feel as though they'll soon know why they suffer, and she wishes they could know now. Chebutykin sings his little song, while Andrei pushes the carriage past. Kulygin appears with Masha's coat, and Olga says again that she wishes they could know now.

Act 4, Part 2 Analysis

The idea that every ending is somehow also a beginning is the central thematic image of this scene, with almost every character experiencing at least one or the other, and in many cases both at the same time. What's interesting is the way they each have a different reaction to their change in circumstances. The joy felt by Anfisa, the hope felt by Kulygin and the celebratory sense of new awareness felt by Tusenbach are contrasted with Masha's despair, Olga's resignation, Vershinin's stoicism and Irina and

Andrei's attempts to transform their hopelessness into new dreams. Even Natasha has a new beginning, as the last sister (Irina) leaves and she becomes undisputed mistress and tyrant of the house. Chebutykin's ending and new beginning are some time in the future, but he's already looking ahead to them and seems determined to not let anything in the present, even Tusenbach's death, deter him from his course towards retirement. Of all the characters, only Solyony and Ferapont give the impression that life, for them, will go on exactly as it has.

Other than serving to more clearly define the transitional states of the other characters by providing a contrast, the situations of these last two characters make the thematically relevant point that no matter how much we think, worry, dream, love, become frustrated or achieve our goal, life marches on. This point is reiterated by the literal marching away of the soldiers and by the final images of the play - Kulygin bringing the coat, Andrei with the carriage and Chebutykin in his chair are all representations of, again, how life goes on.

The previously discussed thematic point about the way several characters are preoccupied with their dreams at the expense of being aware of life appears again in Irina's comments about love. Dreaming about love and hoping for an ideal lover have led her to become completely unaware of the capacity for genuine, passionate love that exists right under her nose in Tusenbach. Her lack of awareness is vividly contrasted with Tusenbach's sudden burst of consciousness of everything around him. He's probably ultra-aware of things because he's also aware on some level of his imminent death, but at least he has the awareness. Irina never really does. Her speech in the play's final moments reinforces the idea that she's more a dreamer and a hoper than a doer.

Olga's speech performs a similar function, although there is something about the way she phrases her longing for knowledge that adds a layer of meaning to her words and to the play. Ultimately, her longing for meaning is the same as ours. Unlike Irina, she doesn't plan or hope for what that meaning might be. She simply states her hope that that meaning exists. Whether it does or doesn't is a question the play doesn't answer, but it does make the thematic point that worrying over it is an empty pastime. This is illustrated when Vershinin's speeches on the subject become empty and repetitive, Irina and Tusenbach's hopes for a harmonious marriage are ended by Solyony's casual marksmanship and Chebutykin gives up worrying altogether. This is also indicated by the way that Masha and Andrei appear to be heading towards a life of more of what they tried to leave behind or are unable to escape, respectively. It begins after a while to seem as though Kulygin, of all people, has the right idea. Life is simply what it is, and the most must be made of it.

Herein lies the core of the play's central thematic statement. Throughout the play, when the characters act at all, they act according to what they think the meaning of life is, or should be - happiness in the form of a university position, more and better love, respect from others, spiritually fulfilling employment or any other dream. In the play's final moments, in spite of our longing for meaning, meaning is actually found in doing, not talking and in living, not dreaming.

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Characters

Anfisa

The old governess who has been with the Prozorov family for thirty years, Anfisa is worried that she will be turned out on her own in her old age. Her concerns are justified while the Prozorov sisters care enough about tradition and sentiment to laugh at the idea of abandoning Anfisa, Natasha is adamant that the old woman is a drain on the household funds, and it is Natasha who is taking over the running the house. In the end, when everyone is going their separate ways, it is only Anfisa who seems happy about the future she is to live in a government apartment with one of her girls, Olga, and she asks nothing more of life.

Ivan Romanovich Chebutykin

An old friend of the sisters, a military doctor, a failure, an alcoholic who laments the patients of his who have died. He lives in the basement of the house. In the first scene, he brings a silver samovar to Irina's birthday party: the silver samovar is traditionally a wedding present, indicating that Chebutykin is either confused or trying to send a signal. His most important scene occurs when he drops he clock in Act III, smashing it. The sisters are horrified because the clock had belonged to their mother, the woman Chebutykin loved, but he tries to cover up his mistake by turning philosophical, discussing whether the clock actually existed or not, and when that doesn't work he blurts out the commonly-known secret of Natasha's affair with Protopopov before storming out of the room. In the last scene, as he is preparing to leave, Chebutykin gives Andrei some friendly advice about his marriage to Natasha: leave, go far away, "keep going, don't ever look back."

Alexei Petrovich Fedotik

A second lieutenant in the army, Fedotik is seldom on stage. When he does show up, he usually has something to give to somebody a musical top for Irina, or a toy for the baby. He also takes photographs of people whenever he is on stage.

Ferapont

Ferapont is an old man who works for the county board. He is sometimes confused and sometimes has trouble hearing, but in general he is levelheaded, taking care of required business. While the sisters and Andrei dream of Moscow as a place where life will finally be good, Ferapont associates Moscow with bizarre stories that he thinks he has heard, about a man eating forty or fifty pancakes and dying, or of a rope stretched across the city. In the middle of the play, Andrei, feeling the pressure of life with Natasha, takes his trouble out on Ferapont, insisting that the old man address him as "your honor," while in

the last act, when Natasha has taken over the house, the two of them are left together on fairly equal footing as her servants.

Fyodor Ilich Kulygin

Kulygin is Masha's husband, a disappointment to her. Recalling when she was married, Masha explains, "He seemed terribly learned to me then, intelligent, and important. It's different now, unfortunately. " He is an assistant principal, and is willing to play the role of the underling, shaving off his moustache because the principal shaved his off and struggling to convince himself that he does not mind having his actions thus controlled: "Nobody likes it, but it doesn't make any difference to me. I am satisfied. With a moustache or without a moustache, I am satisfied." At the end of the play, when his wife is upset because her lover is leaving, Kulygin tries to cheer her up, echoing the loss of his facial hair by pulling out a false beard and moustache that he has confiscated from a student and putting them on. During that scene, he is aware of why Masha is grieving, and he offers her support while struggling to avoid the subject of her grief. "You're my wife, and I'm happy, no matter what happens ... I don't complain. I don't reproach you for a single thing." It is an attitude is not based on sharing her suffering, but on weakness and a wish to avoid unpleasantness.

Natalya

See Natasha Ivanovna Prozorov

Irina Prozorov

Irina is the youngest sister, not just in age but in her vibrant personality. Act I starts with Irina's twentieth birthday, with her feeling girlish and happy with the world. Having been raised in an aristocratic family, she idealizes work as the solution to all of life's problems, knowing that work can solve the great problem faced by characters in this play, that of living life with meaning. When Tuzenbach proposes to her in Act I, Irina changes the subject to work. A year later, in the Act II, Irina is exhausted from her work at the telegraph office, which is ruining her personality: she recalls an incident when she was impatient with a woman who was upset her son's death. Solyony professes his love to her, and threatens that no one else will have her, but she does not take him seriously. Like Olga, Irina longs to live in Moscow, but she is too young to remember what life was like there: instead, she dreams of it as an enchanted, magical place. Irina accepts Tuzenbach's proposal of marriage out of a sense of duty to her family. In the final act, she says a touching farewell to him, knowing that he will not survive the duel ("I knew, I knew ..." is her response later when the doctor brings news that he is dead). She still plans to go to Moscow, alone, and still dreams that work will set all of her troubles straight.

Masha Prozorov

Mas ha's marriage to Kulygin was not a joyful one from the beginning "They married me when I was eighteen, and I was afraid of my husband because he was a teacher and I was barely out of school," she later explains. Masha is a talented pianist, but she does not play any more because she is bored and disappointed with her life. That changes when she meets Vershinin and begins an affair with him. As she later explains it to her sisters, "At first he seemed strange to me, then I felt sorry for him. . . then I fell in love with him." Masha is happy during her affair with Vershinin, laughing openly and frequently, even though she is frightened when he expresses his love. She is the most forthright and honest of the sisters, sometimes harshly so, lashing out angrily at others the stage directions *(angrily)* and *(sternly)* appear often with Masha's lines. Her most moving speech comes in the third act when, having watched Natasha walk past with a candle and noted to her sisters "She walks like the one that started the fire," she quietly confesses her affair to Olga and Irina, as if, having seen Natasha take on the role of anger and suppression that she used to play, Masha wishes to talk about her new life and remind herself about being in love. In the end, when Vershinin leaves, Masha has a hard time, crying until she is able to raise her anger, refusing to go into the family house, which Natasha has taken over and spoiled.

Natasha Ivanovna Prozorov

During the first act, the sisters look down on Natasha's (also known as Natalya) way of dress and her coarse manners. By the time the second act begins Natasha is married to Andrei, and they have one son, Bobik, whom she dotes on, repeating every little thing that he says or does with complete fascination. She leaves the house at the end of Act II to go for a ride with Andrei's superior, Protopokov, in his sleigh, pretending that it is a chore that she must put up with. By Act III, her affair with Protopokov is openly known. As time passes, Natasha comes to increasingly dominate the household. She hates eighty-year-old Anfisa, who was the Prozorov sisters' maid when they were children, planning to dismiss her, with no concern for the sentiment that her husband's family might feel for the old woman. She arranges to move Irina into Olga's room, claiming that the baby's health is at risk. Her maneuvers for control are undertaken with the pretense of acting for the well-being of her children. Andrei is aware of this and tells Chebutykin confidentially, "She's honest, sincere well, kind, but at the same time there's something in her that makes her a kind of blind, petty, hairy animal." At the end the play she has Protopokov inside the house with her and her husband outside "Protopokov's going to sit with Baby Sophie, and Andrei Sergeevich can take Bobik for a ride" indicating to some reviewers that she has taken over the Prozorov family's house with Protopokov, and that the younger child, Sophie, is actually Protopokov's.

Olga Prozorov

Olga is the oldest sister and the voice of rationality among the three of them. She is struggling to live up to the code of nobility that the family has traditionally followed and,

therefore, struggling with life's changes. As a result, she is constantly weary. Unlike her sisters' sense of anticipation, Olga's dream of Moscow is nostalgic, looking back to when they lived there, not forward with anticipation. She thinks of their coming trip to Moscow, which the family left eleven years ago, as "going home." As the trip is delayed by uncertainty, Olga finds herself steeped in a sense of purposelessness. Throughout much of Act II she is offstage, in bed with headaches that appear closely related to her inability to cope with her life. In Act III, when resentments and desires are being discussed, Olga's dialog is marked by her efforts to avoid thinking. "How terrible it all is!" she says about the fire, "And how sick of it I am!" Her greatest emotion shows when Natasha is rude to Anfisa, the family's old servant: Natasha tries to win her favor by assuring her that she will one day be the school's headmistress, but Olga, says that she would not accept such a position: "I'm not strong enough... .You were so rude to nurse just now. Forgive me, I just haven't the strength to bear it... It's all getting black before my eyes..." By the end of the play, though, Olga has gathered her strength. She expresses hope in the play's last speech: "Oh, dear sisters, our life isn't over yet. We shall live! The music is playing so gaily, so joyfully, and it seems as though a little more and we shall know why we live, why we suffer ... If only we knew, if only we knew."

Andrei Sergeevich Prozorov

The sisters' brother is a teacher who aspires to be a great scholar in Moscow. Two problems arise to thwart Andrei's plans. The first is Natasha. Andrei proposes marriage to Natasha at the end of the first act. By the time of the second act, a year later, he is a henpecked husband, annoyed that Natasha is overly worried about the health of their baby, Bobik. He is somewhat resistant to Natasha's schemes, such as canceling the carnival dancers or moving Irina into Olga's room, but he retreats before an argument starts, letting her have his way. He attends business meetings because he is bored at home, and he regrets that the opportunity to become a great scholar has slipped away. Although he has an active home life, he also is, as he explains to Ferapont, lonely. He seems aware that Natasha is having an affair with his supervisor, but he cannot do anything about it because he cannot afford to be fired. Andrei's second problem is that he loses money gambling. This forces him to mortgage the house, which leaves his sisters and him at the mercy of Natasha. In the final act, Andrei is pushing a baby carriage around. He has a speech about how the town is full of ignorant, slow-witted people "the divine spark within them dies, and they become the same pitiful, absolutely identical corpses that their mothers and fathers were before them." He recognizes that this is the fate that has come to him too, but he also has hopes for freedom for himself and his children in the future.

Vladimir Karlovich Rode

Rode always appears with Fedotik, but he is more loud and boisterous. He teaches a gym class at the high school.

Vasili Vasilevich Solony

Solony is a hard, angry character who mocks the social conventions of polite society with his seemingly nonsensical statements. He is aware of his own crudeness, though, and regrets it, as evinced by the fact that he is constantly sprinkling perfume over his fingers because they "smell like a corpse." He has fought and presumably won two duels already. He models his life after Lermontov, the nineteenth-century Russian poet who killed a rival in a duel, and believes himself to be so in love with Irina that he is willing to kill any other man that she would choose over him.

Nikolai Lvovich Tuzenbach

Tuzenbach is a Baron of German descent, although, as he is emphatic about pointing out, he is not German. He is somewhat disgusted with himself for the easy life he has lived, noting that he has never worked a day in his life but anticipating a time in the near future when everyone will work. His belief in the redemptive powers of work resembles that of Irina, with whom he is in love. In the fourth act, Tuzenbach is happy and excited about the life to come "Tomorrow I'll take you away," he tells Irina, "we'll work, we'll be rich, my dreams will come true." His excitement extends to an appreciation of the little town he is leaving, in all that surrounds him, even though he knows that he might die in the duel with Solyony. "See that tree, it's dried up, but the wind moves it with the others just the same," he explains before going off to the duel. "So it seems to me that if I die in some way or other I'll have a share in life."

Alexander Ignatyevich Vershinin

When Vershinin is first discussed early in the play, the sisters are uninterested in him, until they hear that he is from Moscow. He was in the same brigade as their father eleven years ago, and when he arrives he is able to recognize them all. Vershinin has two daughters and a wife who is mentally ill, trying to commit suicide often at one point he receives a note that she has tried suicide again and he leaves, annoyed, only to return later with the news that it was a false alarm. His attitude toward life in a provincial town is the opposite of Andrei's: while Andrei is lonely and longs for the cultural life of Moscow, Vershinin recalls being lonely in Moscow and appreciates the things the small town has to offer. His affair with Masha offers them both a chance for excitement in their deadening marriages.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Despite the fact that they have been there for over ten years and that their house is full of visitors, the Prozorov sisters feel lonely in the town where they live. For one thing, they are better educated than the people around them, which isolates them intellectually. Even though Vershinin tells them that he doubts there could even be a town "so boring and so dismal that it doesn't need intelligent, cultivated people," it is clear that they do not share his optimistic viewpoint and his ability to look to the future. Their friends in town are, for the most part, from the military, who are posted there temporarily and are inevitably going to move on, as they actually do in the end. Andrei shuts himself in his room with his violin and Olga removes herself from company, complaining that she has headaches. Even the engagement between Irina and Tuzenbach, which she enters into with reluctance because she feels the need to be more involved, ends with abrupt violence, ruining her chance to break through the wall of alienation that has surrounded her family since their father's death. Their hope that life in Moscow would make much difference by putting them among their own type of people is cast into doubt by Vershinin, who has just come from Moscow and recalls being lonely there.

Love and Passion

This play is a net of interwoven romances, all of them presenting differing degrees of sincerity and passion. Each character gives readers a different view of love. Andrei's love is that of the hopelessly exploited, while Natasha acts as the exploiter to him and as a martyr to her children. Masha and Vershinin are sincerely happy with each other, escaping confining marriages, while Kulygin, though unimaginative, displays a pure and selfless love by comforting his wife when she is upset over losing her lover. He confides also to Olga that he should have married her, not Masha, indicating that he is bound to Masha by devotion. Irina has an open and jocular relationship with Chebutykin, who dotes on her, even though a relationship between them is out of the question because of their age difference; Chebutykin also keeps alive his memory of their mother. Tuzenbach is content with his own love for Irina, even though he knows that she does not love him, while Solyony, who is perhaps incapable of love, patterns his life on the romantic figure of a poet. None of these relationships ends up happily, although there is an admirable nobility to the way that all of these characters hop on to their elusive passions.

Meaning of Life

There is a lack of meaning in their lives at the core of the misery felt by these three sisters. And the other characters in this play reflect the various attitudes that the sisters

attach to the meaning of life. Olga spends her time trying to recapture the past through memory, especially by recalling her mother and father in detail it is not surprising that she ends up as a teacher, dealing in established ideas and living in an apartment with Anfisa, who functions as a living relic of her childhood. Masha, who once was artistic, has fallen into despair and claims to have forgotten her piano skills. As she explains it, there is no point to being cultured in a provincial town: "We know a lot that isn't any use." Her affair with Vershinin reawakens her talent, though, and she uses music to communicate nonverbally with him in public. Irina is full of hope for the future, but her conception of the future of what exactly it is that she is looking forward to is vague, so she can hardly do anything to make it become real. She is willing to marry Tuzenbach if that will enable her to go to Moscow, where she hopes to find true love. The contradiction in her plan is apparent, but she is unable to come up with anything less self-defeating. She ends up dedicating herself to the equally vague idea that work will bring meaning to her life, although she does not know exactly how.

The people who come to the Prozorov house toss around ideas about what gives life meaning, discussing the mysteries of existence as of they were involved in a game, as when Vershinin says, "Well, if they won't give us any tea, at least let's philosophize," and Tuzenbach responds, "Yes, let's." Vershinin supports the idea that work gives life meaning, even of no results are visible. Solyony represents an absurdist view that discussion is just meaningless chatter, which he mocks with the purposely meaningless comments he utters. Chebutykin echoes this idea of meaninglessness when he drops the clock that belonged to the woman he loved and argues that what seems to be reality might not be. Tuzenbach learns to appreciate the world around him only when he is faced with death in a dual.

Style

Setting

The setting of this play is given as "a provincial city." Describing it this way, Chekhov takes the middle ground between those stories that are unrelated to the towns where they occur and those that could only occur in particular locations. It is important, of course, that *The Three Sisters* takes place in a province, because the emotion that occurs on stage is centered around what the main characters think of where they live. Olga, Masha, Irina, and Andrei all feel that their lives would be much better if they were living in Moscow; Vershinin arrives from Moscow, and extols the charm of life in a small country town; Natasha is able to consolidate her power through her allegiance with a local politician, making her the proverbial big fish in a small pond.

More specifically, all of the action takes place at the Prozorovs' house, which is a sort of meeting place for an assortment of local characters. The soldiers assigned to the town are comfortable there because of their affiliation with the sisters' father, Colonel Prozorov. Aside from the connection to the military, though, the house is presented as a sort of center of culture for the town certainly, its inhabitants are more refined in their manners and better educated than most of their fellow citizens. It is a grand house, likely the finest structure in the neighborhood, as indicated by the fact that it is not even evacuated when the wooden houses surrounding it are burning down.

Conflict

All dramas rely upon conflict between opposing forces, in order to keep readers interested in seeing which side will overcome. In *The Three Sisters,* the conflict in implied, not stated, and this accounts for the feeling that some audiences get that "nothing happens." From the very beginning, the sisters focus their concern on getting out of this small town and returning to Moscow, and the play follows a series of events that place obstacles in the path to that goal. There is no clear-cut conflict with any one obvious force interfering with their plans, but everything that happens in the play, from the fire to the feud to Natasha's dominance of the household, all serve to raise questions about whether Olga, Masha, and Irina will be able to find their happiness by returning to Moscow. The play's ending provides no clear-cut conclusion to this conflict. Only one of the sisters is going to Moscow, and none of them has been able to hold onto happiness, but they have hope that the future will be better and that they might be able to understand the significance of their lives sometime, so all is not lost.

Realism

At the end of the nineteenth century Realism became a major movement in the arts. The best way to understand Realism is to see it in terms of what it is not. It does not require its audience to know artistic traditions in order to understand what is being

presented to them. It does not use educated language or complex plot structures that play well on the stage but that do not reflect the ways that people in life actually speak and act. Chekhov is often associated with Realism, especially in his short stories. Early audiences found this degree of reality to be confusing, because it meant that the characters in his plays seemed to just stand around and talk about whatever came to mind. The structure and language of his work is less obviously "artistic" than it is in traditional drama, providing audiences with fewer clues but leaving a stronger impression on those who figure out the play's meaning for themselves.

Antagonist

The issues that the sisters are concerned with in this play are not clear-cut but abstract philosophical issues that affect every moment of life equally. In order to define these issues more clearly for readers and audiences, Chekhov has provided an antagonist for the Prozorov family. An antagonist is a force in a play that acts in opposition to the protagonist, or main character, in this case three main characters (or four if you count Andrei). In addition to the many moral issues that the Prozorovs struggle with, their lives are also met with direct opposition from Natasha. She represents what they are not: she is ill-mannered, with no fashion sense, and sentimental and greedy and aggressive and manipulative. The fact that she is able to move Irina out of her own room in the second act and then move her husband out of his room in the end can be read as Chekhov's commentary that rudeness triumphs over refinement, although critics have pointed out that she is victorious in areas that the three sisters had already rejected she becomes a powerful figure in a town that they had already rejected and she takes over a house that they had hoped to leave from the very start.

Historical Context

Social Order

Traditionally, Russia had been a society with a rigid class system. From the seventeenth century through the middle of the nineteenth, this included a system under which most of the people were serfs, which meant that they were practically slaves of the people who owned the land on which they lived, and were at their mercy. Growing pressure throughout the first half of the 1800s, brought on by the international movement toward freedom that had already caused the American Revolution and the French Revolution, led to government reform, giving the serfs their freedom in 1861, soon before slavery was abolished in America. Not much changed when the serfs were freed. The arrangement was for them to inherit control of the land they worked, but they had to pay back the aristocrats that they received it from, and so they ended up working the same jobs under the same bosses. As the twentieth Century began, 81.6 percent of Russian citizens were classified as peasants, although this name covered a broad category, from poor people in the cities to wealthy farm owners; 9.3 percent were merchants and what we might today consider the middle class; 6.1 percent were in the military; 0.9 percent were clergy; and 1.3 percent were the gentry, or the ruling class. Most of these class distinctions were inherited, so that the children of former serf-owners still lived luxurious lives, as the Prozorovs do in this play. As Tuzenbach explains it, he was "born into a family that never knew what work or worry meant," although he expects that in his lifetime, everybody will work. Only the military was not a hereditary class, so that many young men became soldiers in order to improve their status in the world. The Russian social order was not equipped to accommodate people who did not follow their inherited place for instance, a son of merchants who did not become a merchant was categorized on his passport as "raznochintsy," which meant "of no particular class." There was nonetheless much social change, especially in the huge government bureaucracy. Even in the late 1800s, before the rise of communism, Russian society was run by a huge, centralized bureaucracy that approved all local changes, all construction of government projects, from the center of government in St. Petersburg. In a country of over six and a half million square miles (twice that of the United States) before modern means of communications, including telephones, it was impossible to really control all local decisions from the capital. This left the opportunity for local government officials, like the play's chairman of the county board, Protopopov, to wield control. The Russian bureaucracy had fourteen ranks that an individual could rise through with careful political manipulation, which is a central reason why Andrei does not want to raise trouble with the superior who is having an affair with his wife.

The Revolution

At the turn of the century, Russia was ruled by Tsar Nicholas II, the last of the Romanovs that had ruled Russia since 1613. Russian society was falling apart, mainly because of a failing economy that could not even provide enough food for its citizens,

and as a result the public sentiment was against the royal family. The huge centralized bureaucracy made it difficult to change production practices, and the ruling family did not show any indication of caring about the suffering of the people. In 1904 the Tsar committed the country to war against Japan. The Russo-Japan War was one that the country was unprepared for, and the cost of fighting the war further strained the economy and food resources. After Russia lost the war in 1905, general strikes broke out in St. Petersburg, and soldiers fired into the crowd, killing striking peasants. The 1905 revolution was suppressed, and the Tsar and his wife withdrew even further from the concerns of the citizens. They began relying on advice from Rasputin, a mystic, and eventually let him make decisions about who should be appointed to government positions. Most of his appointees turned out to be incompetent. When World War I broke out in 1914, Russia was involved, but performed badly: Nicholas took personal control of the military, and the country's defeats were blamed on him. In 1917, after the war, the Russian Revolution changed history by establishing a communist government based on principles that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had proposed in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1847. Nicholas and all of his family were executed.

Critical Overview

The Three Sisters was written late in Chekhov's life, staged just three years before he died. At the time, he had a solid reputation for his short fiction, and his previous play, *Uncle Vanya,* had been a critical and popular success for the Moscow Arts Theatre. Chekhov's fame as a playwright during his lifetime was neither widespread nor universally positive. Today he is considered a primary figure in the Realist movement that swept Russian drama in the beginning of the century, and, like a forerunner in any movement, his work was sometimes misunderstood. One of the most painful criticisms must have been the rejection of Russian literary giant Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace* and "The Death of Ivan Ilych." Early in his career, Chekhov idolized Tolstoy's writing, but when he went to see him in the winter that *The Three Sisters* was first performed Tolstoy kissed him but then whispered in his ear, "But I still can't stand your plays. Shakespeare's are terrible, but yours are even worse!" (qtd. in Kirk, pg. 145).

According to his biographer Henri Troyat, early audiences for *The Three Sisters* misunderstood the play, criticizing it as "slow and colorless" because they were unfamiliar with his style. To some early audiences and especially to critics, Chekhov's stage work seem casual, rambling, as if he had no design but just wrote off the top of his head. Modern audiences are familiar with dramas using ordinary people behaving as they would in real life, but audiences expected more artifice on the stage a century ago. As Soviet critic A. Shaftymov pointed out more than a half century later, "theater critics reproved Chekhov most of all for introducing into his plays superfluous details from everyday life, and thus violating the laws of stage action. The presence of such details was put down to his ineptitude, to the habits of the writer of tales and short stories, and to his inability or unwillingness to master the requirements of the dramatic genre." Audiences began to appreciate Chekhov's modern style before critics: while critical discussions continued about whether *The Three Sisters* violated tradition out of defiance or ignorance of the rules, audiences grew larger and larger throughout the play's run.

Outside of Russia, the world was slow to appreciate Chekhov as a playwright. His plays were performed occasionally in Munich and Berlin and London, but with no great lasting effect. After World War I ended in 1918, the Moscow Art Theatre toured the world, with stops in Germany, France, and the United States, which helped bring Chekhov's plays to the world. The turning point came in the mid-1920s, when the London theater world embraced Chekhov. Martin Esslin, one of the foremost theater critics of the twentieth century, considered the acceptance of Chekhov's plays in London to be a natural pairing. England was a great empire that was near its end, just as Russia had been at the turn of the century, so that the themes that Chekhov dealt with, especially the downturn of fortune that had the social elite losing their traditional privileges, would have been familiar. Another important aspect was that London in the 1920s had a wealth of young, talented actors who were eager to put on shows that challenged traditional ideas about art. According to Esslin, such actors as John Gielguld, Peggy Ashcroft, Laurence Olivier, Alec Guinness and Michael Redgrave "made Chekhov their own, and... he has remained one of the most performed standard authors for over fifty years."

In Russia, the vast political changes that redefined the country helped to elevate Chekhov's reputation. After the Russian Revolution, the Moscow Art Theatre was designated the official model for "proper" Soviet theater, and Chekhov, because of those same "realistic" elements that earned him the resentment of his early critics, was presented as the model dramatist. Most of the highly propagandistic plays that came out of the Soviet Union, with its tight political controls on all aspects of life and art, showed little resemblance to Chekhov in any matters other than portraying ordinary citizens in their unglamorous lives. Still, the state's official approval helped to make the author known by school children across the land. Today, Chekhov is one of the most-performed playwrights in English, and *The Three Sisters* is considered one of his four great plays (along with *The Seagull, Uncle Vanya,* and *The Cherry Orchard*).

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
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Critical Essay #1

Kelly is a teacher of Drama and Creative Writing at Oakton Community College in Illinois and the author of a full-length drama. In the following essay he examines whether Soyony really loves Irina, as he claims, and the significance of this to the play overall.

The characters in Anton Chekhov's drama *The Three Sisters* present various emotional conflicts, but one generalization that can be made about all of them is that they all hope that love will provide release. The sisters of the title feel themselves being dragged down by boredom, and two of them turn to love affairs to do for them what circumstances haven't. It might at first seem that "boredom" is the wrong word, because we tend to think of boredom as slight, as an inconvenience that will pass, but it is clear that Olga, Masha, and Irina are suffering acutely from a lack of intellectual stimulation, that the small town cannot keep up with their trained minds. What is not so clear is whether Chekhov wants us to believe that love really is itself a value that can stop lives from going to waste, or if it is just an illusion that these characters fool themselves with to make their situations bearable.

Masha loves Vershinin, even though they have opposite interests she dreams of the city and he, bored with the city, values the country. Nor does the fact that he has nothing in common with her stop Andrei from falling in love with Natasha. Chebutykin promises at the end to return to Irina, the daughter of the woman he once loved, as "a sober, G- G-Godfearing, respectable man." Irina is not in love with Tuzenbach, but she does believe that there is someone in Moscow who is destined to be her true lover. All of these attempts at romance, from halfheartedly to perpetual, seem motivated by the characters' attempt to inject some reality back into their otherwise controlled, colorless lives. It makes perfect sense that people finding themselves confined should look to love for escape. Whether what they are feeling is "true" love is a broad philosophical question that Chekhov just does not provide enough information to answer.

Strangely, the one character whose motives for love are most clearly presented is Solyony, the boorish, angry staff captain. By all indications, Solyony should be incapable of love. He is a cretin, a braggart, and a bully, an insecure man who mocks intelligent conversation when he is unable to understand it and who kills men he feels threatened by. Soon before the end of Act II, this obnoxious man declares his deep love for Irina, using vocabulary that is strange for him. For one thing, his speech is more straightforward than it has ever been, not hidden behind a joke or a snarl as it is everywhere else in the play. For another, it is here that he uses graceful, colorful language, such as adjectives ("exalted," "pure," "marvelous," "glorious," "incredible") and similes for comparison. He seems earnest about his emotions and about his wish to express them.

It would be easy to make light of Solyony's declaration of love as a weak attempt to take advantage of Irina, which would fit with his cynical personality. It is also tempting to see his clumsy attempt to romance her as his bid to take place in the carnival of romance

that is going on around him. It's most unlikely that Solyony might really be in love, but that is a possibility that has to be considered also.

To me, it seems that Solyony is sincere in his claim to love Irina, but that his sincerity is not, as he seems to hope, enough to free him from his dark personality. Considered this way, Solyony can be seen as more than merely a plot device to sprinkle comic or tragic relief onto an otherwise uneventful, talky play. Taking him seriously as a lover proves him to be a key player near the intellectual and emotional center of *The Three Sisters.*

Solyony's function throughout much of the play is to disrupt the flow of the conversations going on around him. Conversations in polite society, even those concerned with meaning, tend to fall into patterns and lose their sense of urgency without someone like Solyony to challenge the speakers. When his method works as he presumably intends, he ends up, like the fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear,* exposing the shallowness of the culture that surrounds him. For instance, in the first act, with Masha turning nearly hysterical over the prospect of having to go and send a boring evening with her husband's boss, Solyony cuts into a serious conversation with, "Here, chicky, chicky, chicky!" It is somewhat cruel to mock Masha for following along like a mindless animal, pointing out the dreariness in her life that she is already fretting over, but it is a welcome change from the polite supporters who surround her and give her encouragement.

Clearly, Solyony sees his apparent senselessness as the brave stance of one man willing to cut through the pretense of polite society, brave enough to show polite company the nonsense at its core. Often, though, his non sequiturs fail to unmask hypocrisy, and instead they just leave listeners shaking their heads, as when he explains that the train station is far away "[b]ecause if the station was here it wouldn' t be way off there; and if it's way off there, then of course it can't be there." Solyony draws attention to himself before this pronouncement, obviously expecting it to either pass for intelligence or to parody conventional logic, but it's met with embarrassed, awkward silence.

Thinking of himself as the one honest person in the middle of hypocritical society, Solyony cannot tell when his peers are embarrassed because he has shown them the truth, from when they are embarrassed on his behalf, when they feel he has acted like a fool. His goal is often to shock and cause discomfort. When someone asks what the liquor they are drinking is made of, he responds, "Cockroaches," which might have a deep meaning about the evils of liquor but is more likely meant to make someone say, "How disgusting," which Irina does. Solyony cannot grasp the difference between an unusual statement that provokes thought and one that is just odd, or one that gets a reaction more like annoyance than enlightenment. He is too comfortable with being an outsider, which he equates with being a romantic figure, because romantic figures are usually outside of the mainstream.

Accustomed to being considered odd, but certain of his offbeat moral superiority, Solyony has an inverted sense of social status. For him, it is social success when people cringe, whereas smiles and laughter are signs that one is playing society's

game, acting as its pawn. With this sense of values, it is hardly likely that he could be romantically successful. There are slim odds that he can find a woman who thinks of romance in the same way that he does, especially not in a small provincial town. If he found one, it would be unlikely that he could make his desires known to her. And yet, he knows that his sort of life has been romantically successful before. The poet and novelist Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) was a romantic figure who told the truth, who looked at life from his own unique angle and who stood up to the drones of society, and he earned the country's respect for it.

It is not surprising as it might seem at first to find a tough, offensive character like Solyony modeling himself after a poet, not if the poet is an outlaw who died young and his admirer is uncomfortable with himself for accepting the confines of society, following army regulations, and eating cake at birthday parties in the homes of the socially prominent. Surrounded by the mainstream culture, Solyony would naturally need an alternative culture to call his own. It is his belief that he is following different rules that no one but he and Lermontov would understand that makes him want to be dangerous, but also to be loved for it.

His role in the play is bracketed between the threat to someday put a bullet through Baron Tuzenbach's head and his murder of the Baron at the end. He has already killed two people in duels. Some critics define him as a killer, as if he just happened into the Prozorov sisters' social circle by chance or their bad luck, but that view of him comes from looking at him with his own eyes, taking him for what he wants to think he is. But he is not an out-and-out murderer, he is a dueler. In dueling there is an element of risk and courage, but there is also a strict social code that is missing from ruthless killing. For all of his mockery of it, Solyony wants social acceptance. This much is clear from the fact that he tries to cover up the scent of past killings at his hands, a smell that no one else would detect, with perfume.

The question about the love that he declares for Irina hinges on whether it is, as Solyony himself seems to believe, the great secret tenderness that his gruff exterior is defending, or whether, like the perfume on his fingertips and chest, it is an attempt to rise above his crudeness and fit in with cultivated society. Unlike the other characters, who seem ready to fall in love at the earliest opportunity, Solyony seems to be dragged into love against his will. But the fact that he believes that he does not want love is no proof that love has taken control of him. There is no evidence that Solyony really has a soft, romantic self hidden deep within his hardened shell, and plenty of reason to doubt that he does.

In Act II, he tells Tuzenbach that he is really shy and depressed when other people are around, talking nonsense in his discomfort: "But just the same, I'm more honest and sincere than lots of people lots and lots of people." This confession is touching, until it is put into the context of his threat to kill Tuzenbach in the beginning of the play and the actual killing at the end. Solyony may be so insecure that he could only let down his thorny facade to someone who he knows will die, but it is just as likely that the sensitive Solyony is just an act, a nervous defense against Tuzenbach's direct question about why they do not get along better.

It is only a few minutes later that Solyony declares his love for Irina, calling her "the only one there is that can understand me." Why Irina? She is a sad young woman, but she does not seem any sadder than either of her sisters Olga, by comparison, seems flat-out miserable, if neediness is what he identifies with, while Masha seems more in his league in terms of bitterness. Solyony's passion for Irina seems to last for just a few lines, racing quickly through her purity and incredible eyes before he settles on more familiar ground, male aggression, and decides to concern himself with how to deal with rival suitors rather than with her.

Does he believe he loves her? Of course. Does he actually love her? If he were more honest about his antisocial tendencies, if he really were a truth-teller and not just truthful by chance sometimes in his senseless babbling, then it would be easier to believe that he actually understands himself. As it is, too much of Solyony's self-concept is tied up in his image of himself as a troublemaker, a voice of truth in the social wilderness, and especially his identification with Lermontov. Lermontov dueled with his friend Lensky over Lensky's fiancee, and Lermontov won. He only stayed with the fiancee for a few weeks, though, before her abandoned her. In the same way, Solyony seems to honestly want to be in love, but it is hardly likely that he would know what to do with it if he got it.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

The following review discusses the new possibilities that director Yefremon provides to Chekhov's "Three Sisters."

Sad evenings by the samovar, birch trees, an inexplicably breaking string and three young women moaning about their provincial lives. Few things are duller than bad Chekhov. The boredom can be as painful for theatregoers as the stifled hopes and unrealised dreams are for his characters.

If moroseness is one way to kill Chekhov, another method, favoured outside Russia, is to turn his plays into stiff drawing-room comedies. In his homeland, Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) has tended, by contrast, to have the life revered out of him as Russia's "national playwright." This was especially true in Soviet times. Apart from a courageous burst of experiment in the 1960s, Chekhov on stage was reduced in the Stalin period and after to a thumping message about the decay of the past and the promise of the future.

Things, happily, have changed, and Moscow's autumn theatre season is full of productions which put the life back into Chekhov. The revival is most striking at the Moscow Arts Theatre, where his plays all had their premieres at the turn of the century, but where the weight of tradition has hung since like an old curtain. Oleg Yefremov's production of *Three Sisters* is only the third at the theatre this century and it took him a year and a half of rehearsals to cut loose from the past.

The Moscow Arts Theatre's 1940 production of the play had a set designed by Vladimir Dmitriyev in which a line of birch trees stretched into the far distance. The vista symbolised the Soviet interpretation of the play: when the visiting colonel, Vershinin, dreams of a future that is "unimaginably beautiful, astonishing," he is predicting the achievements of communism. So strong was this orthodoxy that a more adventurous staging of *Three Sisters* in 1967, directed by Anatoly Efros, in which Vershinin spoke ironically, had to be closed down. Several actors from the Moscow Arts Theatre wrote an open letter to the press, complaining that the production had travestied Chekhov.

Mr. Yefremov frees *Three Sisters*. His set is a long portico of the Prozorovs' house surrounded by a grove of tall birch trees in which the changing light of the seasons is reflected. At the end, when the sisters deliver their final speech the house disappears and they are hemmed in by trees, searching for a way out, lost. The birch alley has become a forest.

The delicacy of the acting reinforces the sense of hopelessness. Viktor Gvozditsky, who plays the luckless lover Tuzenbakh, speaks for many when he says he was bored in childhood with "schoolprimer Chekhov," and could never see the point of all those pauses and repetitions. Working with Mr Yefremov, he discovered the emotional power of the playwright. His Tuzenbakh is a poignantly vulnerable character, nervously optimistic but fatally passive as he agrees to a pointless duel.

Mr. Yefremov works up perhaps too powerful a mood of gloom. Even in the first two acts, when they should radiate some illusory optimism, the three Prozorov sisters seem almost paralysed as their nouvelle riche sister-in-law Natasha slowly takes over their house and their lives.

Judging by the keen response to the new production, Chekhov is striking a chord with audiences. One reason perhaps is that contemporary Moscow society has a little more time for reflection. The pace of change has slackened and Russians are preoccupied less with the threat of civil war than with bewildering economic transformation, much like their bourgeois great-grandparents in the 1890s. "The main mood in Chekhov is one of longing and apprehension. People look around them and wonder about their lives. When everything is falling apart it's more difficult to stage him," says Anatoly Smelyansky, associate artistic director of the Moscow Arts Theatre. During the short burst of artistic experiment before and after the Russian revolution, he points out, Chekhov was more or less ignored.

The novelist Andrei Bitov goes one step further, musing that Russian audiences are only now starting to appreciate Chekhov. His characters come from a property-owning class whose identity is bound up with a conception of money and ownership that for most modern Russians is still distant. "Why is Chekhov so popular in the West?" Mr Bitov asks. "Because western people still know about what it is to own property and go bankrupt, these problems are close to them."

It is appropriate that the most popular play of the moment is Chekhov's last, *The Cherry Orchard.* In a new production at the Sovremmenik Theatre, directed by Galina Volchek, an appreciatory murmur goes through the smart audience as the debt-plagued landowner Ranevskaya and the serf-turned-millionaire Lopakhin argue over the future of the orchard, which Lopakhin wants to chop down and turn into dacha plots. But that is so vulgar, complains Ranevskaya, expressing the distaste of the old intelligentsia for the brash new business class.

Ms. Volchek's production crackles with sexual comedy and class conflict as the household falls apart and finally disperses. It is full of that Russian social interaction that is always close to anarchy and veering madly between laughter and tears. At the heart of the play is a grand performance by Marina Neyolova, playing the mistress of the house Ranevskaya as a wayward prima donna. Like Ranevskaya, Ms. Neyolova lives most of the time in Paris, which adds an edge to her depiction of a character torn between the Russian provinces and France.

The production, which has just set off to the United States on tour, restores the social contours to the play, the only one in which Chekhov gives the servants a say and lets them openly mock their masters. The upstart Yasha is played a touch too overtly as a "new Russian" wearing a yellow suit and lime waistcoat, while Lopakhin, hard-working and dressed in black, is more inclined to win people's sympathy. At the curtain call the four non-aristocrats take their bow separately.

Both these productions stay within the naturalist tradition started by Chekhov and pursued by his first director, Konstantin Stanislavsky. The playwright himself left very precise instructions on how his characters should look and be played. He gave them exact ages and left instructions that Uncle Vanya, for example, should have smart, but crumpled clothes. These new stagings suggest that faithfulness to this tradition does pay off. The plays are made up of a thousand nuances and abrupt changes of mood that give them their coherence and their emotional strength. They also show that it takes top-class acting to restore the immediacy to Chekhov. For many the lines are so familiar that even Mr Yefremov sometimes drowns them out with music in a way a western director would never do, as though assuming his audience knows them anyway.

Another production directed by Yury Pogreb-nichko, a pared down *Cherry Orchard* at a little over two hours, is witty and discursive-Chekhov for those who already know him by heart. There is no decoration, just a white brick wall with a single railway line running in front of it. It is not only the railway mentioned in the play, but symbolises its themes of industrialisation and the coming new life. In the final act the servant Firs undoes his shoelaces as he lumbers on stage as though he has arrived in a prison camp. The servants, who are dressed in orange smocks-Soviet railway workers or Buddhist monks-scatter white cherry petals over the departing characters. This ritual promising rebirth nicely captures the ambiguity of the play's ending.

Mr Pogrebnichko's production is more a brilliant raid on Chekhov and his themes, than a full staging of The Cherry Orchard, but it shows that Chekhov in 1997 is open to new possibilities. By the centenary of the playwright's death in 2004, Russia may even have caught up with him.

Source: "Three Sisters," (review) in *The Economist,* Vol. 344, no. 8041, November 1, 1997, p. 89.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Wren summarizes "Three Sisters" through the character's unique personalities.

The Prozorov sisters' much desired and eternally thwarted journey to Moscow gleams through Anton Chekhov's Three Sisters like Zeno's arrow in reverse: as time goes by, the distance between the sisters and their dream city increases, though in Act 1 they appear to be on the verge of arriving, and though they would arrive if it were possible to dose a gap with pure longing.

Even if they did get to Moscow, though, chances are that Olga, Masha, and Irina would still be thinking too much. Thinking too much causes much unhappiness in this play, which Chekhov wrote in 1901. In a moment of inspiration, early in Act 1, Irina's suitor, Baron Tuzenbach, rebukes the sisters' bad habit of asking what it all means: "What does it mean?.... It's snowing outside what does that mean?" By the end of the play, though, he is as bad as all the rest. Everyone is thinking about the purpose of life, about ambitions and careers, about society's future, about why birds fly south and because they think, they feel perpetually unsatisfied.

Thought may also be getting in the way of the Roundabout Theater's production of *Three Sisters*, which despite several winning performances and numerous comic moments seems a little un-rooted, as if everyone had thought a great deal about the nuances of Chekhov without ever feeling at ease with his characters. Using an unobtrusive translation by the gifted playwright Lanford Wilson, director Scott Elliott has adopted a straightforward, naturalistic approach that takes advantage of the script's comic potential. Overall, his distinguished actors execute their roles with grace, but the energy level never feels terribly high something of a problem in a play that is three-and-a-half-hours long.

Though the directorial touches are more subtle here than in director Elliott's other current Broadway production, *Present Laughter*, there are some discreetly inspired moments, such as when the bizarre, ill-tempered Captain Solyony (Billy Crudup), seated at the back of the stage, rudely polishes his silverware on his dinner napkin while his hostess looks on. And if the comings and goings of the characters, the confessions and the non sequiturs, have a hint of staginess, that is certainly a problem that could seem almost inherent to Chekhov.

A handsome but not extravagant set designed by Derek McLane succeeds in emphasizing the scenes and personalities that Chekhov keeps off the stage. For example, the row of French windows in the Prozorovs' dining room, in Acts I and II, gives a nice symmetry to the production's beginning and end. In Act II a frosty moonlight slants through the panes, and when Irina stands looking out at the carnival revelers who have been turned away from the house, she really does seem separated from the gaiety of life.

By contrast, Act IV is set in the garden just outside these same windows. We can see through them to the dining room where Andrei Prozorov's shrewish wife Natalya (Calista Flockhart) is crowing over her children. The windows' transparency makes it all the more noticeable at this point that we do not see Natalya's visiting lover Protopopov, whom Chekhov chose to make an invisible, though sinister, presence throughout the play.

More practically, McLane's set gives the characters room to pace about as they ponder the meaning of existence. After all, this production's greatest claim to fame is its cast of eminent actors, including several refugees from Hollywood. Unfortunately, some of the performances are a little disappointing. Amy Irving creates a measured and dignified portrait of Olga, her acceptance of suffering seeming to improve her immaculate posture. Jeanne Tripplehorn has seductive moments as the flaky Masha. But Lili Taylor is nothing short of disastrous as the youngest sister, Irina: Taylor delivers all her lines in the same breathy tone, leaning forward from the waist in a way that makes her delivery even more strained and unbelievable.

Among the supporting characters, Jerry Stiller is hilariously deadpan as the decaying doctor Chebutykin. Eric Stoltz and David Marshall Grant give amusing but curiously superficial depictions of the Baron and of Masha's pompous schoolmaster husband Kulygin.

Two of the best performances extend the play's atmosphere of sadness and disillusionment beyond the eponymous sisters. Paul Giamatti's excellent comic timing in the role of Andrei complements the character's more reflective moments, such as when he sits in his darkened living room passing his finger through a candle flame.

And David Strathairn is truly moving as the disappointed dreamer Vershinin, the Battery Commander whose love for Masha cannot tarnish his gallant behavior toward his family. Strathairn has perfect stage presence, and his smallest movements his cautious, restless glances, his soldierly carriage, his slightly uneasy workings of the hands suggest great passion and pain held in check by impeccable manners.

In a way, Vershinin becomes the play's saddest figure because he is such an idealist, and has such naive faith in an idea of mystical progress. As he says in Act 4 (according to an older translation than Wilson's): "Life is hard. It seems to many of us blank and hopeless; but yet we must admit that it goes on getting clearer and easier, and it looks as though the time were not far off when it will be full of happiness."

It was probably this kind of philosophical strain, running through the play, that gave another New York director, Richard Schechner, the idea for a recent experimental version that situated each act at a different point in Russian history, with matching performance style (Act I set in 1901 a la Stanislavsky, Act II in the first years of the Communist state with the mannerisms of biomechanics, Act III as a political critique set in a 1950s labor camp, and Act IV as a postmodern meditation on the end of the Soviet Union). As this intriguing concept suggests, visions of a perfect society and a better future haunt *Three Sisters,* a little as the specter of Moscow does.

Fortunately, Chekhov never reduces his characters to spokespersons for ideas. Olga, Masha, Irina, and friends are more than the sum of their circumstances. That is why if, one day, the Act IV curtain rose on a domicile miraculously transferred to Moscow, the members of the Prozorov household would still be themselves. And they would still be thinking.

Source: Celia Wren,"Three Sisters," (review) in *Commonweal,* Vol. 124, no. 5, March 14, 1997, p. 15.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Kramer argues that the three sisters are symbolic of faith by examining the meaning behind the play.

For all the talk about *Three Sisters,* it is still extraordinarily difficult to determine exactly what the play is about. One prominent school places the emphasis on the sisters as inevitably ruined creatures. Beverly Hahn, for instance, speaks of the "inbuilt momentum towards destruction" in the sisters' world. Another commentator claims that we cannot avoid contrasting the success of Natasha and Protopopov with the failures of the sisters. We might do well to examine just what the first two do achieve: a house, an affair, and a businesslike manipulation of the professional positions of the others. It would, of course, be absurd to suggest that the sisters have in some way failed because they do not aspire to such heights of crass avarice as Natasha and Protopopov. But there is still the claim that the sisters continually yearn for a quality of life that they do not possess, and yet do very little, if anything, to make their dreams come true. Chekhov invited this response by initiating the to Moscow line. That goal remains unattained, while the desires of Natasha and Protopopov are richly fulfilled. This seems to present an opposition between those who get what they want and those who don't, as if the goals were equivalent, but abilities not. Natasha wants the big house on the hill and a union with the man who runs things in town the boss. These may be attainable prizes, and certainly Natasha does wrestle their house away from the sisters, but the sisters never really enter into combat with her over such issues. If they did, they would themselves be transformed into first-class Natashas, an extremely dubious achievement at best. Natasha sees living in the big house at the top of the hill as an end in itself. The sisters' aspirations go considerably beyond this. Moscow as destination is equally illusory. Natasha, incidentally, isn't even up to that aspiration on the fanciful scale; she's quite content with a good view in a city much like Perm. The questions the sisters seek answers to are considerably more basic: how to seize and properly evaluate one's own experience, how to cope with experience, and when all one's delusions have been cast aside how to go on somehow from there. The particular area of experience around which the majority of the action in the play revolves is the question of love. The stance of nearly every character is determined by his ability to establish a close relationship with another. Love gone awry is in most instances the pattern. Olga seems to have the least chance of finding a mate a situation to which she has become largely reconciled, though in Act I she chides Masha for failing to value the man she does have. Kulygin himself aware of the failure of his own marriage pathetically suggests to Olga in the third act that if he hadn't married Masha, he would have married her. Irina ultimately admits that her desire to reach Moscow is directly connected with her desire to find her true love. Masha is the only one of the sisters who does at least temporarily find real love, and in this sense her experience is the standard against which the experience of nearly all the other characters is to be measured. Chebutykin once loved their mother but has long since lost that love, and with it his involvement in actual experience. Soleny, on the other hand, capitalizes on his inability to inspire love by deliberately creating hostile relationships. But to determine the structure of the play as a whole and the way in which

the experience depicted adds up to a statement about human capabilities, we must look in considerably more detail at the variety of responses to love among the main characters.

It is Andrei's fate to make the most ghastly miscalculation of them all in believing he loves Natasha. How could he, an educated man, brought up in the same environment as his sisters, believe he has fallen in love with her? Masha in the first act discounts the possibility that he could be serious about her. The answer seems to lie in a recognition that he has been constantly living under pressures he can't bear. "Father ... oppressed us with education. ... I grew fat in one year after he died, as if my body were liberated from his oppression," he tells Vershinin. He has been preparing for a university career, bowing to his father's wishes a course he abandons immediately after his marriage. Since the father's death, Andrei has been under constant pressure from his sisters to deliver them from this provincial town. His love for Natasha is simply a means of escaping these various responsibilities, which have been thrust upon him. But a relationship based on such motivation becomes a trap from which Andrei desperately wishes to escape. In some dialogue that Chekhov eventually deleted from the play, Andrei dreams of losing all his money, being deserted by his wife, running back to his sisters, crying, "I'm saved! I'm saved!" In the finished play, Andrei and Chebutykin argue about the efficacy of marriage, Andrei maintaining it is to be avoided, Chebutykin asserting loneliness is worse. But by the end of the play, even Chebutykin admits that the best course for Andrei is to leave, "leave and keep going, don't ever look back". This is, indeed, the course Chebutykin himself adopts at the end of the play. Andrei's escape from responsibility through love thus seems to lead only to an entrapment from which he would be only too happy to flee by the end of the play. His predicament stems not so much from Natasha's nature as from his own desire to avoid experience by hiding behind a very illusory kind of love.

Chebutykin's problems turn equally on love. He had at one time known a real love for the sisters' mother. That has long been in the past, but the only vaguely positive way he can deal with immediate experience is by the illusion that this love can be sustained through his relationship with the sisters, particularly Irina. His other protective screen is his growing insistence that nothing and nobody really exists and that therefore nothing matters. In his first appearance at stage center, he is talking sheer nonsense about a remedy for baldness and duly noting down this trivia. Shortly thereafter in Act I he displays his tender almost sentimental affection for Irina by presenting her with a silver samovar on her name day. The fact that the silver samovar is the traditional gift on the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary surely suggests that he is honoring the memory of the woman he loved and is exploiting the occasion of Irina's name day for this purpose. During the first two acts he alternates between these two poles the attempt to sustain a lost love and an abiding interest in trivia. The chief sign of the latter is his constant reading of old newspapers, a device for distracting himself from the actuality of the present moment.

In Act III his failure to handle his experience reaches a crisis when, drunk, realizing he is responsible for the death of a woman who was under his care, he retreats into a pretense that nothing and nobody exists. It may be a measure of his feeling that he so

retreats, but I would suggest that he associates this recent death with that death in the past of the woman he loved. Death has denied him his love, and the recent event vividly reminds him of his own earlier loss. Within moments of this breakdown he smashes the clock which had belonged to the sisters' mother. This may of course suggest that he is trying to destroy time itself, which separates him from his love, but he is also deliberately destroying a material object that belonged to her; it may also be a gesture of denial a denial that his love ever existed. He tries to cover this by suggesting that perhaps there was no clock to break, and he accuses the others of refusing to see that Natasha and Protopopov are having an affair. The assumption is that if others don't see what's right before their eyes, why shouldn't Chebutykin refuse to recognize anything in the world that may hurt him? In any case, what comes out of this episode is our discovery that Chebutykin cannot deal with a death that takes away his love. His final stance in the play "The baron is a fine fellow, but one baron more or less, what difference does it make?" is a pathetic indication of the lengths he is driven to in trying to cope with a love long since lost.

Soleny is the only character in the play who turns away from love turns away so completely that he commits himself to murder instead. He has an uncanny knack for turning a situation that is initially friendly into one of enmity. In Act II Tuzenbakh attempts to bury the hatchet with Soleny, who immediately denies that there is any animus between them, thus provoking an argument and indirectly testifying to the correctness of Tuzenbakh's view of their relationship. Their discussion ends with Soleny's "Do not be angry, Alexei," which distorts Tuzenbakh's friendly overtures into a rivalry, presumably over Irina. Dissatisfied in his exchange with Tuzenbakh, Soleny seizes upon the first opportunity for further quarrel. Chebutykin enters, regaling Irina with an account of a dinner given in his honor. He is particularly pleased with the *chekhartma* (lamb). Soleny insists that *cheremsha* (an onion) is totally disagreeable. This pointless argument ends with a victory on Chebutykin's side when he says: "You've never been to the Caucasus and have never eaten *chekhartma*." Chebutykin is the clear victor here, because Soleny prides himself on being a reincarnation of Lermontov, the nineteenth-century Russian romantic poet whose setting is regularly the Caucasus Mountains. To suggest that Soleny has never been there totally undercuts his stance as a hero in the Lermontov mold. Having lost the argument with Chebutykin, Soleny immediately proceeds to avenge himself in the best Lermontov tradition by picking a quarrel with Andrei over the number of universities in Moscow.

It is true that he declares his love for Irina toward the close of Act II, but one senses that he had expected a cool reception from her. In any case, the scene ends with what seems to be Soleny's real message that he will brook no rivals. To put it another way, Soleny employs his declaration of love to establish a hostile relation with Tuzenbakh. We might also view the episode as a parody of the opening scene in Act II, where Vershinin declares his very real love to Masha. The initial exchange between Masha and Soleny in the first act suggests that we are to view them as polar extremes in some sense. Soleny's first speech implies a 1 + 1 = 3 equation: "With one hand I can lift only fifty-five pounds, but with two hands I can lift a hundred and eighty two hundred, even. From that I deduce that two men aren't twice as strong, they're three times as strong as one man ... or even stronger Masha's opening speech implies a retort to Soleny: "In the

old days, when Father was alive, there'd be thirty or forty officers here on our name days, there was lots of noise, but today there's a man and a half ...". In view of the fact that the only officers present are Soleny, Tuzenbakh, and Chebutykin, Masha's equation is apparently 3 = 1.5. Soleny immediately picks up on this banter, if that's what it is, and compares one man philosophizing with two women trying to philosophize, the latter being equal to sucking one's thumb. Masha thereupon cuts him off: "And what is that supposed to mean, you terribly dreadful man?." This exchange between Masha and Soleny in the opening moments of *Three Sisters* is a vitally important one because, on the question of love, they represent polar extremes within the play: Masha is willing to take a chance on love; Soleny can only capitalize on love as a pretense for a duel.

The wooing scenes between Vershinin and Masha are masterpieces in Chekhov's whimsical art. The process is initiated in the first act as Olga and Irina laugh together over recollections of Moscow. It is Masha who suddenly pins down a real moment of connection in their lives when she recalls that they used to tease Vershinin as the lovesick major. In the first of his rather protracted philosophical speeches, Vershinin offers a justification for existence in response to Masha's statement that the sisters' lives will go unnoticed. She immediately responds to his attention by announcing she'll stay to lunch after all. This exchange initiates that special relationship between them. Shortly after this, Vershinin offers Masha another view with which she must be wholly in sympathy: "... if I were to begin life over again, I wouldn't get married. ... No! No!." This is the precise moment Chekhov chooses for Kulygin's entrance.

In Act II, Vershinin's speech on what life will be like in two or three hundred years is clearly directed toward Masha; indeed, his philosophical ramblings are primarily a way of wooing her. She understands this and laughs softly during his speech. Tuzenbakh is clearly not privy to this particular form of lovemaking. He believes he is engaged in a serious discussion with Vershinin and cannot understand why Masha is laughing. Vershinin, of course, has no reason to ask. It is interesting to note, incidentally, that in his musings about the future Vershinin almost never responds to Tuzenbakh's attempts to join in the discussion. Indeed, Chekhov revised the text of *Three Sisters* at a number of points to eliminate Vershinin's responses to Tuzenbakh's remarks. In the first act Tuzenbakh announces Vershinin's arrival to the assembled company; Vershinin ignores the introduction and proceeds to identify himself by name. In his first monologue on the future, Vershinin dismisses Tuzenbakh's attempt to enter the discussion with a curt "Yes, yes, of course." In the musings about life in two or three hundred years in Act II, Vershinin suggests the theme and Tuzenbakh offers his opinion about the future. Vershinin is apparently ruminating on his own views as Tuzenbakh speaks the stage direction reads: *"After a moment's thought*." His subsequent remarks bear no relation to Tuzenbakh's; we get the distinct impression that Vershinin has not the slightest interest in a debate, thus emphasizing the real motive for his musings, to converse indirectly with Masha. The ostensible discussion continues with Masha's observations on the necessity for meaning in life:

It seems to me a man must believe, or search for some belief, or else his life is empty, empty.... To live and not know why the cranes fly, why children are born, why there are

stars in the sky. ... Either you know what you're living for, or else it's all nonsense, hocus-pocus....

In effect, her words confirm her need for the kind of reassurance Vershinin has been offering her, that what man is presently doing is creating the possibility for future happiness and understanding. Vershinin's next line "Still it's a pity our youth has passed" is almost a reproach to Masha: since youth has passed and each of them is set in his respective relationship, their mutual happiness is impossible for any protracted period of time. Masha greets his reproval with the famous line from Gogol: "It's dull in this world, gentlemen." Tuzenbakh, not comprehending the private dialogue, answers with a paraphrase of Masha's reference to Gogol, expressing his frustration over a conversation he was never meant to follow. Chebutykin does apparently follow at least the drift of the conversation love as he notes that Balzac was married in Berdichev. Irina, either consciously or unconsciously, picks up on this drift as she repeats Chebutykin's observation. Tuzenbakh, now attentive to one strand in the discussion what can we do with our lives? announces he's leaving the service. Having argued that life will always be pretty much the same, he now asserts that he will change the direction of his own. This is an important aspect of that contradiction of position so characteristic of Tuzenbakh and Vershinin. It is highly ironic that Vershinin consistently denies there is any happiness for us now, while achieving at least a momentary happiness with Masha. Tuzenbakh, on the other hand, argues that he is happy right now, in his love for Irina, while he is denied any return of that love. Masha, characteristically, disapproves of his determination to change, feeling herself denied any such opportunity.

In the third act, Vershinin's musings on life in the future are a direct response to Masha's arrival on the scene. After Chebutykin's rather shocking references to Natasha having an affair, perhaps partly to distract everyone's attention from the assumption that he and Masha are, too, Vershinin launches into a peroration on what his daughters have yet to go through in their lives. When Masha enters, he almost immediately shifts theme from daughters to life in the future, as though the topic has already become a secret code between them. His musings are intermixed with his laughter and expressions of happiness. Everybody has fallen asleep except Masha and Vershinin, making clear that his philosophizing is a way of talking about love. The episode ends with their strange love duet from Chaykovskiy's *Yevgeniy Onegin.*

Near the end of the third act Masha has her frank talk with her sisters. Olga refuses to listen; Irina listens most attentively, as she presumably longs for a love of her own. Despite Olga's disclaimers, Masha's confession of love brings the sisters closer together than they have been at any point in the play thus far and prepares the way for their final scene of coming together in the finale.

In the fourth act Masha speaks to Chebutykin of her love, implicitly comparing her own position with his at an earlier time:

MASHA: ... Did you love my mother?

CHEBUTYKIN: Very much.

MASHA: Did she love you?

CHEBUTYKIN *after a pause:* That I don't remember anymore.

MASHA: Is mine here? That's the way our cook Marfa used to speak of her policeman: mine. Is mine here?

CHEBUTYKIN: Not yet.

MASHA: When you take happiness in snatches, in little pieces, and then lose it as I am, little by little you get coarse, you become furious....

The ambiguity in Chebutykin's reply to Masha's question about her mother is remarkable. Is he trying to protect the honor of the woman he loved? Did she perhaps not return his love? Or is his reply part of his attempt to deny the past experience itself? We have no way of knowing. Masha's use of "mine" must refer to Vershinin, and Chebutykin so understands it. If he thought she were speaking of her husband, he could not reply "Not yet," for he has just seen Kulygin go in the house. Masha's remarks on happiness contain little joy, and yet she is admitting she has now known love, and the indications are that it will not turn her away from experience as it has Chebutykin. We shall see more of this in the finale.

As far as love is concerned, Irina would seem to be in the best position of the three sisters. She is unattached; two suitors pursue her; and yet she is unhappy because there is an imaginary third lover, whom she associates with Moscow. It is the dream of going to Moscow that animates her in the first act, and, although it is not clear why Moscow is so important to her at this point, it does become clear by the end of Act III. Still, there are hints, even in the opening scene, that it is love Irina seeks. When Tuzenbakh reports the arrival of the new battery commander, it is Irina who pricks up her ears, inquiring, "Is he old? ... Is he interesting?." Her desire to work looks like a second choice, and Tuzenbakh is at his most pathetic as he tries to ingratiate himself with her by sharing her desire for work: "That longing for work, Oh Lord, how well I understand it!". Tuzenbakh seems to use the work theme to promote his standing with Irina in very much the way Vershinin talks of the future to woo Masha. Irina's cry at the end of Act II "To Moscow! To Moscow! To Moscow!" suggests that it is an appeal to love, if we look at the context out of which it arises. Soleny has just made his rather ridiculous and thoroughly repulsive declaration of love to her; Vershinin has just returned bearing the news that his wife didn't poison herself after all; Kulygin is unable to find his wife; Natasha has just left with Protopopov; Olga makes her first appearance in the act, complaining of professional responsibilities and of Andrei's gambling losses. Each situation suggests an abortive love relationship, including the absence of a love for Olga. If all this is what provokes Irina's cry, it may well mean she is looking to Moscow for the kind of love that is simply unavailable to her here.

Her association of Moscow with love becomes explicit in the third act when she says: "I always expected we would move to Moscow, and there I would meet my real one, I've

dreamed of him, I've loved him. ... But it seems it was all nonsense, all nonsense . . . ." In the final lines of Act III she agrees to marry the baron, but still wants to go to Moscow: "... only let's go to Moscow! I beg you, let's go! There's nothing on earth better than Moscow! Let's go, Olga! Let's go!." These words come after Masha's declaration that she loves Vershinin and would seem to suggest that though Irina has agreed to marry Tuzenbakh, she looks forward to finding her real love elsewhere, as Masha has.

Olga has had the least opportunity to find happiness through love, and yet Olga seems to cope with her situation better than the other two. She has very nearly reconciled herself to a single life even at the opening of the play, and during the course of it she expresses her love in an entirely different fashion. We see her love in her readiness to help with both clothing and lodging for those who have been left homeless by the fire; we see it in her comforting Irina in the third act and in the way she silently acquiesces to Masha's love for Vershinin, as she steps aside to allow them their last moment alone together.

Finally, we must compare the situations at the opening of the play and at its end to gather some measure of just what the intervening experience has meant for the sisters, how it has altered their conceptions of human possibility. Harvey Pitcher has observed that the fourth act is very nearly an "inversion " of the first. He lists any number of actions and situations that occur in Act I and again in altered form in the fourth. He makes a convincing argument for seeing the finale as a negation of most of the positive elements that appeared in the opening, but I think that in addition to such negations, we see a number of positive elements in the finale that invert the hopeless and desperate attitudes of the opening. In one sense, the play moves from both nai've faith and despair to a heightened awareness of possibilities in life and a more solidly rooted ability to endure. At the opening, the sisters are both physically and temporally separated; Olga is primarily oriented to the past as she recollects the death of their father a year ago and comments on how the last four years at the high school have aged her. Irina disclaims any interest in this past, as she remarks to Olga: "Why talk about it?." She also shares some of Irina' s nai've faith in a future in Moscow, but even Moscow is in part a past orientation; certainly for Olga it must be, since she is the eldest and would have the clearest memory of what their life had been like there. Irina's Moscow, on the other hand, is the land of the future; she can look only forward to Moscow and to going to work. Masha restricts her observations to an occasional whistle, is not particularly interested in either Olga's sense of the past or Irina's hopes for the future; she is, as she sees it, buried in a present without hope. When Olga suggests that Masha can come up to Moscow every summer to visit them, Masha's only comment is to whistle, as if, knowing her own present, she recognizes Olga's wishful thinking as a mere whistling in the wind. Perhaps Masha's only departure from a present orientation is her remark about her mother: "Just imagine, I've already begun to forget her face. Just as they won't remember us. They'll forget." But even here she seems to exploit both past and future to affirm the worthlessness of present existence. Thus, at the opening the sisters are totally at odds, as they contemplate three different perceptions of reality. Perhaps the only common strain here is their shared dissatisfaction with the present. Spatially, there is some sense of their occupying a restricted area, particularly with Olga, who either sits at her desk correcting papers or walks to and fro about the room. Even

Masha seems initially restricted to her couch. Temperamentally, they are also separated from one another here, each involved in her own activity Olga correcting, Masha reading, Irina lost in thought, their dresses dark blue, black, and white.

Olga's opening speech is full of strands connecting past, present, and future:

Father died exactly a year ago on this very day, the fifth of May, your name day, Irina. It was very cold then, snow was falling. I thought I couldn't bear it, you lay in a dead faint. But a year has passed and we remember it easily; you're wearing a white dress now, your face is radiant. *The clock strikes twelve.* And the clock was striking then. *Pause*. I remember, when they were carrying Father, there was music playing and they fired a volley at the cemetery.

The play opens with the recollection of a death, just as it will end with the news of a death at the present moment. At the same time, Olga's recollection of death is associated with birth; it is also Irina's name day. Olga's reflections next focus on the difficulty of facing the loss of a father whom both Olga and Irina presumably loved, but, as if in anticipation of their stance at the end of the play, Olga notes that they did survive the calamity. In short, Olga's speech is a kind of summary of their reactions to calamitous experience: it is both unendurable and endurable, and calamity itself is mixed with elements of joy. The contrast between the weather a year ago and the weather today ("sunny and bright") underscores a recurrent cycle of anguish and joy. The funeral music of the military band of a year ago will be transformed at the end of the play into music that is played "so gaily, so eagerly, and one so wants to live'

The process of redressing natural relationships which were at the very least strained in Act I gets under way near the end of Act III. First, there is Masha, who refused to join in the sisters' conversation at the opening. In Act III she draws the sisters together, although against Olga's better judgment, in her frank discussion of her love for Vershinin. This is followed shortly by Andrei's confession to at least two of his sisters that he is desperately unhappy, which constitutes a considerably more honest response to the family than his rapid departure from the scene as early as possible in Act I. The setting in Act IV is the garden attached to the house. On the one hand, it is true that Natasha dominates the house, but at the same time, if we recall that sense of the sisters' confinement in the living room of Act I, there is a compensatory feeling of openness in Act IV. The garden is unquestionably preferable to the living room now, and one is uncertain whether the sisters have been evicted or liberated perhaps a combination of the two. The final tableau certainly contrasts the separation the sisters felt in the opening scene with their physical closeness at the end *"The three sisters stand nestled up to one another."* But the physical closeness reflects a far more basic sense of unity. Harvey Pitcher has quite justly commented on this scene: "The sisters feel perhaps closer to one another now than they have ever done before." In the departure of the regiment and the death of Tuzenbakh, they give themselves to one another as they have not done earlier. They give themselves to their love for one another and discover a strength in this to endure.

Masha has the first of the sisters' final speeches, and I would like to look at her words, not as they are printed in texts today, but as they appear in Chekhov's original version of the speech, which, unfortunately in my view, has never been restored to the play. The speech was cut at the request of Olga Knipper, who found the lines difficult to speak. It would appear that Chekhov silently acquiesced. I've indicated the deleted lines by brackets:

Oh, how the music is playing! They are leaving us, one has really gone, really and forever; and we'll stay here alone to begin our lives anew. I shall live, sisters! We must live. ... [*Looks upward*. There are migratory birds above us; they have flown every spring and autumn for thousands of years now, and they don't know why, but they fly and will fly for a long, long time yet, for many thousands of years until at last God reveals to them his mystery....]

The reference to migratory birds connects a series of images that run through the play and that have two reference points for their meaning. The first is the rather familiar metaphor of birds' flight as man's passage through life. Irina is the first to use the image in Act I: "It's as if I were sailing with the wide blue sky over me and great white birds floating along." Chebutykin picks up on this metaphor in Act IV when he tells Irina: "You have gone on far ahead, I'll never catch up with you. I'm left behind like a migratory bird which has grown old and can't fly. Fly on, my dears, fly on and God be with you". Chebutykin makes the metaphorical meaning clear here: he may be too old a bird to continue the flight himself, but Irina must of necessity be engaged in her passage through life. Shortly after this Masha refers to the birds, apparently with reference to Vershinin: "When Vershinin comes, let me know. ... *Walks away.* Migratory birds are leaving already. ... *Looks upward.* Swans, or geese. ... My dear ones, my happy ones ...". Like Chebutykin, Masha here refers to others whose lives go on, but in her final speech her "we must live" is connected with the bird imagery so that it becomes a positive image for her as well; her life the life of all the sisters will go on.

There is a second reference point for her speech, however, and that occurs in Act II when Tuzenbakh, as well, invokes the image. It comes in the midst of that scene in which Vershinin muses about the future, as a way of wooing Masha a scene in which Tuzenbakh is largely left out of the proceedings. He says: "Migratory birds, cranes, for instance, fly and fly and whatever great thoughts or small may wander through their heads, they'll go on flying, knowing neither where nor why. They fly and will fly whatever philosophers may appear among them; and let them philosophize as much as they like, so long as they go on flying ...." Masha's last speech is equally a tribute to Tuzenbakh. In paraphrasing his lines she both acknowledges his conception of experience and reconciles it with her own point of view, that eventually we must have some understanding of why we do what we do. Irina's betrothed whatever the degree of affection she may have had for him has just died. Masha has just parted with the man she loves, but she transforms their shared sorrow into a virtual panegyric to Tuzenbakh and finds in it a reason why the sisters must go on living. In any case, the sisters have clearly come a long way from that point a year before the play began when death seemed unendurable.

In Olga' s final speech she answers that remark of Masha's in Act I "they'll forget us too" when she says: "... They'll forget us, forget our faces, our voices, and how many of us there were, but our sufferings will be transformed into joy for those who live after us, happiness and peace will reign on the earth and they will remember with a kind word and bless those who are living now." Essentially, she is reiterating Masha's appeal that we must go on living because the experience is worth the effort, and reaffirming that the purpose will be revealed in the future. But whether it is or not, the continuation of living is essential.

The sisters' final speeches are interspersed with Chebutykin's nihilistic observations on the total indifference of the universe to anything that happens. The interchange may be read as an ultimately ambivalent attitude toward the nature of experience, or it may be read as a final tribute to the sisters' faith. They have not retreated to Chebutykin's fatalism, though their experience of love has been no more encouraging. The final interchange between Chebutykin and the sisters may suggest not an either/or response to life, but a measure of their capacity for endurance. After all, love is largely a matter of faith.

Source: Karl D. Kramer, "Three Sisters, or Taking a Chance on Love," in *Chekhov's Great Plays,* edited by Jean-Pierre Barricelli, New York University Press, 1981, p. 61.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Bristow illustrates the theory of how the number three is a key factor within Chekhov's play.

Even a casual reading of *The Three Sisters* reveals that the concept of three is somehow intertwined in the fabric of the play. And so it is. No matter what is seen or what is heard, the answer is usually three or its multiple. Let's begin with, say, the number of characters. Fourteen characters are named in the dramatis personae; there is, however, a fifteenth character Protopopov, the chairman of the District Council who never sets foot onstage, but his presence offstage touches or ensnares all members of the Prozorov family, including the three sisters, their brother Andrei, and his wife (after the first act) Natasha. Five of the fifteen are female; the remaining two thirds, male. If Protopopov, his old watchman Ferapont, and the old Prozorov nurse Anfisa are set aside momentarily, the remaining twelve characters divide evenly into soldiers and civilians.

The concept of three shows up in the ages of the characters. For example, at the beginning, Irina, the youngest of the three sisters, is in her twenty-first year. Baron Tuzenbakh is almost thirty; Vershinin is forty-two; Chebutykin is almost sixty; Anfisa is seventy-eight and has been with the family twenty-seven years. All are multiples of three. The calendar time from the beginning to the end is three and a half years. The second act takes place twenty-one months after the first; the third, eighteen months later; the last, three months later. The time of day follows a similar pattern. At the beginning, the clock strikes twelve it is noon. During the second act, the hour of nine in the evening rolls by; during the third, three in the morning; and the last act takes place at twelve noon. Not only is the time of each act three or its multiple, but also the diurnal/nocturnal time span could conceivably total twenty-four hours again, a multiple of three. Moreover, even though four acts divide the play, only three settings define the locale: drawing room/ballroom; bedroom; garden.

The basic architecture of the play is apparently constructed in terms of three; that is, three characters, three parts of a triangle, three time orientations (past, present, future), and so on. As the first act begins, so does the last act end. At the beginning, for example, three female characters are downstage, and three male characters are upstage. At the close of the play, three female characters are downstage, and three male characters are upstage. The close of the play is arranged like the beginning, not only to illustrate the circular effect, but also to emphasize the precise balance, or parity, of a six-part conclusion on the meaning of existence. Both concepts of the circle and parity are closely associated with the concept of three in the play.

The effect of Chekhov's opening and closing in *The Three Sisters* is similar to that of the chorus in ancient Greek tragedy; that is, two groups, separated in space, sing and dance their choral odes; the first is called a strophe; the second, antistrophe. At the beginning, the answering group upstage consists of three military officers, Tuzenbakh, Soleny, and Chebutykin, who are talking together. What is heard by the audience,

however, is an ironic comment on what the downstage group (the sisters Olga, Masha, and Irina) is doing and saying. That Chekhov deliberately arranged this opening in terms of the Greek chorus is verified by a comparison of the Yalta manuscript (an early version) with the Moscow manuscript (a late version). The three verbal combinations of the upstage group have been added, including Tuzenbakh's apparent comment to Soleny (in reality, a summary conclusion on the optimistic dreams of the sisters): "You're talking so much nonsense I'm sick of listening to you." It should be noted that not one character in either group is aware of the chorus device. The aspirations expressed in the downstage odes are consistently denied by the negative comments in the upstage odes. The result is an appropriate stalemate in which the downstage three sisters are perfectly balanced by the upstage three military officers.

The grouping of characters in threes occurs throughout; moreover, membership in one group does not exclude membership in another, since both members and groups are constantly in flux. The Prozorov family is a good example.

Olga

Irina Masha

Andrei

The family quartet is viewed as a foursome only for a few moments in the first act, when Andrei is called in to meet Vershinin, and for a single moment in the third act, just before Masha leaves to meet Vershinin. Combinations of these four Prozorovs into threesomes, however, take place on six or perhaps seven occasions. For example, in addition to the opening and close, the sisters share important scenes with Vershinin in Act I and Natasha in Act IV and develop one of their own in Act III. Andrei, Masha, and Irina are together for the party in Act II, and Olga and Irina behind their screens apparently listen to Andrei's confession near the end of Act III. It might be argued that this last scene the seventh is not really a threesome, since Andrei is the only visible character onstage, and neither sister acknowledges his presence or his words once they have escaped behind the screens.

The concept of three pervades the stories, particularly the love stories, in the play. Love triangles, with varying combinations, complicate the action, adding interest and suspense. Three triangles are apparently the most important. Baron Tuzenbakh loves Irina, as does Soleny who tells Irina his feelings in Act II. ...

Irina, however, does not love either one, but is persuaded by Olga in Act III to become the fiancee of Tuzenbakh. In the first act, Kulygin loves his wife Masha, who, in turn, is falling in love with Lieutenant Colonel Vershinin. Vershinin declares his love in Act II, and in the following act, Masha tells her sisters that she has fallen in love with Vershinin. Masha does not love her husband, nor does Vershinin love his wife. At the end of Act I, Andrei declares his love to Natasha, and between Acts I and II they marry and Natasha births a son, whom she calls Bobik. Her affair with Protopopov is discussed later in this

essay. Andrei, who is very much aware of Natasha's adultery, inexplicably still loves her, as he tells the doctor in Act IV.

Three subsidiary love triangles exist; one seems more important than the others; and, in terms of parenting, the result is probably conjecture, perhaps even surmise. For example, the old doctor Chebutykin could easily be seen as the surrogate father to the Prozorov children, and perhaps in his special relationship with Irina as her biological father. Both the mother and her husband the general are dead by the time the play begins, and thus their relationship depends solely on Chebutykin's memory. Chebutykin professes his love for their mother on three separate occasions. As to evidence pertaining to biological parenting, however, whatever conclusion is reached can only be the result of guesswork. In the last act, when Masha asks Chebutykin if their mother loved him, he confesses, after a pause, "That I don't remember anymore." The other two love triangles are Tuzenbakh-Irina-the man of her dreams and Vershinin-Masha-Vershinin's wife. In terms of the six love triangles, if the Chebutykin-Mother-Gen-eral triangle of the past is excluded, three characters participate in adulterous affairs (Natasha, Masha, Vershinin), and, if Irina's dream man and Vershinin's wife are included, a total of seven characters experience unrequited love (Irina, Tuzenbakh, Soleny, Andrei, Kulygin are the five seen onstage).

Trios abound throughout, and in keeping with Chekhov's striking a balance, parity is consistently observed. In the first act, for example, Vershinin waxes eloquently on the loss of personal identity, the mutability of human mores, and the essence of culture and education. The three sisters are enchanted, but three other characters are not. Soleny snarls insults at Tuzenbakh for joining in the philosophical discussion; Chebutykin tries to turn it all into a joke; and Andrei wanders off to his room to play the violin.

Linking characters in groups of three is a common technique in *The Three Sisters*. For example, three characters thoroughly enjoy mulling over metaphysical matters, as is evidenced in Act II, when Vershinin, Masha, and Tuzenbakh perform a musical trio on the meaning of life. Olga, Kulygin, and Irina are linked by their occupation of teachers and potential teacher. Natasha, Soleny, together with Protopopov, form another group of three who have been characterized as "the forces of darkness," in opposition to "the forces of life and culture," such as the sisters, Andrei, Tuzenbakh, and Vershinin. Although three characters play the paino, only Tuzenbakh and Natasha are heard. In Act III, Tuzenbakh claims that Masha is an exceptional pianist, which is denied by Irina's assertion that Masha has forgotten how to play, since she "hasn't played in three years ... or four." To illustrate the superiority of Tuzenbakh over Natasha in terms of talent and training, their playing (in performance) reveals a significant contrast between Tuzenbakh's better-than-average rendition of his waltz and Natasha's inept thwacking of "A Maiden's Prayer."

In the language itself, Chekhov constructed sets of three. That is, three subjects, verbs, predicates, attributes, and so on, have been carefully threaded into a multitude of words, phrases, clauses, sentences. Indeed, the opening line of dialogue illustrates the basic ternary formula:

Father died exactly one year ago,

on this very day,

the fifth of May,

on your saint's day,

Irina.

The three adverbial modifiers stress in rhythm (accent marks) and sounds (assonance italicized) the ternary construction. What Chekhov begins at the very opening is consistently practiced, with variations, throughout. At times, a word is simply repeated, and a new word added to conclude the threesome.

Vprochem, *byl dozhd*' togda. Sil'nyy *dozhad'* i *sneg.*...

Or perhaps two verbs have been chosen, and one of the two is repeated to make three.

Segodnya utrom *prosnulas', uvidela* massu sveta, *uvidela* vesnu....

Sometimes a word or phrase is said and then twice repeated by a character, as in the following famous exchange in Act III.

KULYGIN: Ya dovolen, ya dovolen, ya dovolen!

MASHA: Nadoyelo, nadoyelo, nadoyelo....

Kulygin's "I am satisfied" is musically matched by his wife's "[I am] bored." The sense in the exchange (Kulygin's contentment versus Masha's ennui) vies with rhythm (anapests) and sound (Kulygin' s *yada* rhymes with Masha' s *nada*) to gain control, and the result is a perfect balance at this moment between husband and wife.

Recurring phrases between two characters occur here and there. For example, in the opening moments Olga begins a thought, Irina continues it, and Olga finally concludes it.

Olga: I tol'ko rastet i krepnet odna mechta...

IRINA: Uyekhat' v *Moskvu.* Prodat' dom, pokonchit' vse zdes' i v *Moskvu ...*

Olga: Da! Skoreye v *Moskvu.* ...

It is also apparent that, besides the three instances of v *Moskvu,* Irina's second sentence incorporates three action verbs (the last is missing but is understood as the first word in her speech). As the example illustrates, the unity of the three sisters as a family group is explained in part by Chekhov's subtle use of ternary construction in the dialogue.

Chekhov's preoccupation with trinominal combination in language was not restricted to *The Three Sisters*. In examining the syntax of his stories, both Derman and Yefimov verify the ternary formula and note that it occurs regularly enough in prose written early as well as late in his career to pass muster as a consistent feature of Chekhov's writing style. Moreover, it seems that Chekhov frequently chose this device, according to Derman, "especially in dramatic, lyric, and generally 'touching' places" in the stories. A great share of the lyric and compassionate moments assigned to *The Three Sisters* by critic after critic may be attributed to the trinominal combinations in the dialogue.

Tuzenbakh's farewell scene with Irina in the last act is a good example. In the space of less than a page and a half of printed text, almost a dozen separate sets of trinominal combinations develop contrapuntally elaborations (in rhythms and sounds) on the theme of unrequited love. The scene begins appropriately with Tuzenbakh and Irina commenting on Kulygin, who crosses the stage calling for his wife Masha. Both understand that Kulygin is happy at seeing the soldiers leave, since his wife's lover, Vershinin, is marching away, too.

Tuzenbakh, like Kulygin, is experiencing unrequited love. Tuzenbakh's chief rival in his love triangle, however, is not Soleny, who is waiting across the river for their forthcoming duel; instead, his chief rival is the unknown man in Irina's dreams. Although Irina and Tuzenbakh plan marriage the next day, she does not love him and tells him so, explaining that her soul "is like a beautiful piano that has been locked up and the key is lost". This is the second time in the play that a key is mentioned; the first "lost" key apparently prompts Andrei at the end of the third act to seek out Olga and ask for a replacement....

It is apparent that Irina, like Tuzenbakh, is experiencing unrequited love, in that she has not yet met in actuality the man of her dreams. What Tuzenbakh desperately seeks is "only that lost key" (the third and last time a "lost" key is mentioned) that torments his soul and gives him no sleep. He continues:

TUZENBAKH: Tell me something. *Pause*. Tell me something ...

IRINA: What? What (can I) say? What?

TUZENBAKH: Something.

IRINA: Enough! Enough! *Pause.*

Occurring as it does in the central moments of their final duo, the *sextet* of chtos evenly divided between the pair aptly illustrates their inability to assuage the other's pain. Tuzenbakh's threefold request for "something," or "anything," is crisply denied by Irina's impersonal "what." Even their choice of rhythms is appropriate. Tuzenbakh's dactylic *chtonibud'* is countered by Irina's trochaic *chto skazdt'* and, subsequently, *Polno! Polno!*

In Tuzenbakh's long speech following this exchange, he at first tries to explain the events and attitudes leading to the duel. Irina apparently does not understand what he is saying, since he couches his remarks in Aesopian language. Tuzenbakh then turns to

the here and now. And to the ternary formula, as well. "As if [it's] the first time in [my] life I [actually] see these *firs, maples, birches,* and everything is *looking* at me, *questioning,* and *waiting*." His plea that a beautiful life should go hand in hand with the beautiful trees is punctuated by Skvortsov's shout, "Au! Gop-gop!" a signal reminding Tuzenbakh of the impending duel. Before he goes, however, he sees the dried-up (dead) tree swaying in the wind with the live trees and concludes that he, if he should die, will participate in life (like the dead tree), "in one way or another". Kissing Irina's hand, he speaks in threes once more.

Your papers,

that you gave me,

are lying on my table,

under a calendar.

Their scene breaks off abruptly when Tuzenbakh "quickly leaves." His departure follows his piddling request that coffee be prepared since, "not knowing what to say," he lamely explains that he had not "drunk coffee today." Tuzenbakh knows, as does the reader, that he will probably die in the duel. It is, after all, Soleny's "third duel", and Soleny himself predicted three years earlier that Tuzenbakh "will die of a stroke," or Soleny would lose his temper "and plant a bullet" in his forehead "in about two or three years." Irina's inability to respond to Tuzenbakh's request that coffee be prepared perhaps only clarifies their understanding that the *coffee* is simply a substitute for her *declaration of love.* In short, the two end their final scene in the same way that Tuzenbakh begins his long speech in it with Aesopian dialogue.

As the example of the final duo scene between Irina and Tuzenbakh illustrates, the trinominal combinations in the language itself contribute to an understanding of structure, character, and thought. In fact, the duo scenes of Irina and Tuzenbakh in the remainder of the play reveal that the uses of three are subtle, consistent, and above all numerous.

Irina and Tuzenbakh have three duo scenes where the two are alone; their duo scene in Act III is monitored by Masha, although Tuzenbakh in the beginning believes that he and Irina are alone and thus speaks to Irina "tenderly." Their duo scene in Act II is confined to Irina's complaint of being tired and to Tuzenbakh's ternary statements about his three surnames, the dominance of his Russian qualities over the German, and his persistent attention to Irina's welfare. Their next-to-the-longest duo scene alone, lasting about a half page of printed text, takes place near the end of Act I, when the other characters are upstage in the ballroom. Their conversation is limited to three topics: Soleny, love/life, and work. Their duo scene in Act III, although Masha keeps telling Tuzenbakh to leave the bedroom, is also focused on three topics: work, love/life, and erosion by time....

Not only are trinominal combinations interlaced in the Russian language, but they are also apparent in the other two languages, Latin and French. In keeping with Chekhov's

addiction to the concept of three, *The Three Sisters* is indeed trilingual. Latin is spoken by Kulygin who teaches that language in the school; French, by Natasha who is apparently trying to "better" herself. How ironic that the Prozorov family admit their knowledge of three languages and in reality know twice that number but speak only Russian, whereas Natasha whose origins are socially inferior to the Prozorovs, coming as she does out of the *mesh-chane* (an estate next to the peasantry in Old Russia), persists in speaking French. She speaks it badly, of course, enough so that Tuzenbakh must suppress his laughter, but she speaks it only two times once in the second act, and once in the fourth act. French is, however, spoken a third time in the play by Chebutykin in the second act when he asks Irina to come into the ballroom.

Kulygin's Latin phrases and sentences (two in every act except the second when only one is spoken) can be viewed as annotations, injunctions, or even Chekhovian signatures as to action and character. Two examples may suffice to illustrate the device. In the first act, Kulygin presents Irina with a copy of his book on the history of the school and concludes his presentation speech with a Latin injunction, which reads (in translation): "Do what you can, let those who are able to do it better". Apparently, he is referring to the result (his book) of his own efforts as historian. When Irina points out that she had already received a copy from Kulygin last Easter, Kulygin then makes a gift of the book to Vershinin an ironic action, since the book still carries with it the Latin injunction. In a short while, Vershinin and Masha fall in love, and it is apparent that Masha considers Vershinin far superior to Kulygin. Moreover, the Latin injunction pervades other stories in the play, as well as the Kulygin-Masha-Vershinin love triangle. For example, Natasha apparently believes her lover Protopopov abler than her husband Andrei. Irina picks the man of her dreams over both Tuzenbakh and Soleny. Vershinin prefers Masha to his own wife. And so on throughout the play. In terms of control of the house, for example, both Natasha and Protopopov are superior to the Prozorov family by the end of the play. So is Soleny topmost when it comes down to dueling.

A second example of Kulygin's Latin takes place in the third act. Chebutykin is drunk and, in a touching speech, excoriates himself and others for their hypocrisy, ignorance, and philistinism. Shortly thereafter, Kulygin slaps Chebutykin on the shoulder, thereby appointing to the doctor Cassandra's gift for prophetic truths as he announces, *"In vino veritas*," or "In wine there is truth." Whatever the doctor says and does in this third act may be considered the truth, or close to the truth, and like Cassandra, the doctor is scarcely listened to. For example, he drops mama's clock, smashing it to pieces an appropriate action that depicts time itself as going to pieces, or the Prozorov family's dream of Moscow as falling apart, or the very house in which they live as no longer belonging to them. The doctor repeats his nihilistic avowal of nonexist-ence. And he reports that Natasha is having an affair with Protopopov. Since the rules of linear time no longer apply (mama's clock is smashed to pieces), the doctor's statement about the affair is not only current, but travels back into the past and forward into the future, as well. In fact, Natasha's sexual affair with Protopopov ostensibly begins with their sleigh ride at the end of Act II, since Natasha's new child, Sofochka, announced at the beginning of Act III, is probably Protopopov's. It is possible, of course, that the affair began much earlier; for example, Masha at the beginning of the play reports the rumor of their forthcoming "marriage." Thus, the "truthful" messages blessed with Kuly gin's

Latin that Chebutykin drunkenly brings into the third act reveal incontinence, putridity, even manslaughter.

In addition to the trilingual explorations in sound and sense, three instances of nonsense sounds have been selected, since they permeate certain characters and their actions: Soleny's barnyard irritant; the love duet between Masha and Vershinin; and the doctor's nihilistic song. Soleny comes up with the nonsense sound *tsip* three times on each occasion, and since there are five occasions (four in Act I, one in Act III), the sound is heard fifteen times a multiple of Chekhov's three. It is an irritating sound high pitched, piercing, grating and designed by Soleny to needle his rival Tuzenbakh. Not until act III, when Soleny quotes from Krylov' s "The Geese," is the sound clarified, its origin discovered, and the threat to Tuzenbakh's welfare intensified.

The famous love duet in nonsense sounds occurs in three separate instances in the third act. The first comes after Vershinin sings a line or two from Pushkin's *Yevgeniy Onegin* (the music is probably Chaykovskiy's).

MASHA: Tram-tam-tam ...

VERSHININ: Tam-tam ...

MASHA: Tra-ra-ra?

VERSHININ: Tra-ta-ta. *Laughs.*

The three-syllable exchange of vows is undoubtedly their mutual declaration of love, and Masha's agreement to a consummation of their affair probably takes place in their second interaction a few moments later as Vershinin prepares to leave.

VERSHININ: Tram-tam-tam.

MASHA: Tram-tarn

And their final exchange is heard near the close of Act III.

VOICE OF VERSHININ *offstage:* Tram-tam-tam!

MASHA *Rises, loudly:* Tra-ta-ta!

This last three-syllable interaction is an appropriate culmination of the previous scene between Masha and her two sisters, during which Masha describes her profound, abiding, inexplicable love for Vershinin. When he finally calls her from offstage, she answers boldly and then leaves, knowing full well that she is replacing her reputable marriage state with the life of an adulteress. Her farewell moments with her sisters and brother are impeccable Chekhovian signatures as to the end of one role and the beginning of the next.

The doctor's nihilistic song occurs only in the last act (twice in the early part, twice at the end). It consists of twelve syllables (a multiple of Chekhov's three); the first six are nonsense sounds; the last six essentially mean "Sitting on a curbstone am I." The entire line, composed in almost perfect dactyls and aptly punctuated with Chekhov's trinary series of three dots, runs: *Tarara ... bumiya ... si7.hu na tumbe ya ...* Its apparent purpose is chiefly to help balance the six-part ending of the play.

Another word that seems to be a nonsense sound is the interjection *gap* that appears only in the last act. In Chekhov's day, the sound was used to spur animals into jumping or leaping, and its choice is effective. It is first used at the beginning by Rode.

Takes in the garden at a glance. Farewell, trees! *Shouts.* Gop-gop! *Pause.* Farewell, echo!...

As produced at the Moscow Art Theater, there is a third *gop,* that is, the echo itself that is heard in place of *the pause,* and thus Rode's youthful, lyric, compassionate moment of farewell is carefully constructed in threes. A few moments later, Rode repeats his farewell *gop-gop* upstage and in production the third *gop* is heard. The same interjection, combined with another sound for attracting attention "Au! Gop, gop!" occurs three times in the act. In place of the touching effect witnessed with Rode, this phrase is designed to sound a note of impending doom. When it is first heard, for example, Irina "shudders," explaining that "Everything somehow frightens me today." When it is repeated, it follows Chebutykin's comment on the baron's chances in the duel: "The Baron is a fine person, but one Baron more, one Baron less what does it matter, anyway! Let them! It doesn't matter!" After the sounds are heard, Chebutykin explains, "That's Skvortsov shouting, he's the second. He's sitting in a boat." And the last time the phrase occurs, it signals Tuzenbakh to the duel.

Musical instruments and their sounds apparently go in threes, too. In Act I, three instruments are heard: onstage piano (Tuzenbakh); offstage violin (twice played by Andrei); onstage humming top (Fedotik' s gift to Irina). In Act II, three instruments: offstage accordion (heard at the beginning and end of the act); onstage guitar(s) played by Fedotik and/or Rode; onstage piano (waltz by Tuzenbakh). In Act III, the only "musical" instrument is the fire alarm bell that is struck three times (beginning, middle, end). In Act IV, however, a piano and two groups of instruments are heard: offstage piano (Natasha playing "The Maiden's Prayer"); offstage and onstage violin and harp; offstage military band.

Embedded firmly in the play are numerous threads of folksong, poems, folklore, literary allusions and names, and rituals that stitch point to patterns of meaning that are easily understood or felt only by audiences familiar with the Russian language and environment. A partial listing includes writers such as Dobrolyubov, Gogol', Griboyedov, Lermontov; poems such as Krylov's "The Geese" or Pushkin's "Gypsies"; literary concepts like superfluous *(lishniy),* freeloader *(prizhival),* or the universal concept of *poshlosf.* The daily rituals of eating, drinking, and interacting combine with the larger rituals associated with individual rites of passage: celebration of a saint's day in Act I; births (Bobik and Sofochka); and death (Tuzenbakh in Act IV). Group rituals occur

throughout, including a rite of intensification in Act II (Carnival Week), as well as that of fighting the town fire in Act III, and the arrival (Act I) and departure (Act IV) of the soldiers. In most of these instances, the concepts of the circle, triads, and parity clarify the patterns and complicate the action of the play. Two examples should illustrate Chekhov's technique.

Early in Act I, the first words spoken by Masha are the opening lines of the prologue to *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1820) by Aleksandr Pushkin.

By the curved seashore stands an oak tree green; A golden chain to that oak is bound....

Masha then repeats the second line. These lines are appropriate in all aspects: structure, character; thought; diction; music; spectacle. They introduce a long fairy tale that, in turn, is based on seventeenth-century popular narrative, and thus in *The Three Sisters* clarify the beginning of the Vershinin-Masha-Kulygin triangle in terms of awe, mystery, ecstasy of new love. Having introduced Pushkin's poetic image, Masha returns to that image twice. At the end of Act I, these same two lines are repeated by Masha, who then adds, "Now, why on earth do I keep saying this? Those lines have been bothering me since early morning . . . ." What is not said, but is well known to all educated Russians, are the third and fourth lines.

And linked to the chain with a scholarly mien

A tomcat is seen going round and round and....

The poetic image of the tomcat chained to, and circling round, the oak tree underscores both the repetition (Act I) and the final effect (Act IV) of Masha's two loves: first, for her husband Kulygin (about four years before the play begins); second, for Vershinin during the course of the play. The cyclical effect of Masha's love is stressed at the end of the first act when Fedotik gives a spinning (and humming) top to Irina, and thus the images of the cat circling the tree, as well as that of Masha and the love cycle, are reinforced both visually and aurally. At this point in Russian productions, all the actors onstage (except Masha) usually "freeze" into a tableau, and only the humming sound of the top and Pushkin's lines, reinforced by the sight of the spinning top and the slight movement of Masha, are heard and seen. Masha's third and last reference to Pushkin's poem occurs immediately following the farewell scene with Vershinin in Act IV. There, of course, she is so distraught, she scrambles the poem and refers to "A tomcat green . . . ." At no point in the play is Masha ever consciously aware of the subtle connections between Pushkin's poem and the complex of emotions, meanings, and action.

A second example of Chekhov's craftsmanship occurs shortly after the introduction of the Pushkin poem in Act I, and like the earlier image, the second is twice repeated; unlike the first, however, the second image exemplifies the action of several characters. Soleny overhears the sisters in conversation, makes a stupid remark, and is quickly

ripped apart by Masha. "What is it you wanted to say, you loathsome, terrible person?" Masha asks, and Soleny replies, "Nothing at all." He then adds two lines.

Before he had time to let out a yell,

The bear was squeezing him to hell.

The lines are from *The Peasant and the Workman* (1815), a well-known fable by Ivan Krylov. By quoting these lines, Soleny refers to the suddenness of Masha's attack; the *he* in the fable is Soleny himself; and the bear is Masha. In the last act, Soleny arrives to take Chebutykin to the duel and repeats the Krylov lines. Then Chebutykin repeats the same lines, and it is clear that Chekhov has linked Soleny and his action to the action of the bear. The *he* in the fable is associated with Tuzenbakh. Both the fable and the Pushkin poem meld in the last act. At the very moment Kulygin forgives Masha for her love affair with Vershinin, the gunshot that kills Tuzenbakh is heard.

KULYGIN: She's stopped crying ... she is a good woman ...

There is heard a faint shot, far off.

MASHA: By the curved seashore stands an oak tree green; A golden chain to that oak is bound ... A tomcat green ... an oak tree green ...

I'm getting it all mixed up....

Not only does Chekhov link the fable and its bear to Soleny and his action, but he also links it to Protopopov and his. In Act I, immediately after Soleny quotes from Krylov, the nurse Anfisa and Ferapont enter with a cake a gift to Irina on her saint's day. Anfisa says, "From the District Council, from Protopopov, Mikhail Ivanych ... A cake. It is tempting to associate Protopopov with the two lines in the fable, particularly with the bear in the fable. The common nicknames of Mikhail (Protopopov's first name) are *Misha* and *Mishka,* which are also common nicknames for the Russian bear *('medvecT)*. The action of Protopopov from beginning to end, as David Magarshack points out, resembles the swift action of the bear in the fable. The he, in this instance, is associated with the three sisters, who have been forced out of their home by Act IV, whereas Protopopov is comfortably seated inside a guest of his paramour Natasha. The last verbal reference to the image of the bear occurs in French, when Natasha at the window shouts at Andrei: "It's you, Andryusha? You'll wake up Sofochka. *// nefaut pasfaire du bruit, la Sophie est dormee deja. Vous etes un ours".* In translation, "Don't make a noise, Sophie is already asleep. You are a bear." The baby Sofochka at this moment is in the carriage Andrei has been wheeling outdoors. Natasha then orders Ferapont to take the carriage from Andrei. Natasha's accusation and decision are unwittingly for her ironic comments on the condition of Andrei. He, too, resembles the bear in Krylov's fable. His marriage to Natasha is the beginning of a downward glide that ends in cuckoldry and alienation from his sisters. On the way he mortgages the house to pay his gambling debts, and Natasha holds the money. Andrei is as much the bear as is his rival Protopopov. Moreover, when Natasha shouts, "You are a bear," the *you* can refer not only to Andrei outside but also unwittingly for Natasha to Protopopov sitting

next to her inside. It may be that the removal of Sofochka from Andrei is perhaps a symbolic gesture of emasculation as much as it is symbolic of Natasha's drive for order. That is, at the end of the play, Andrei is outside, wheeling his son Bobik, while Protopopov is inside, holding his daughter Sofochka an effective ironic conclusion, in keeping with Natasha's manipulation of persons. To each child, her or his own father. Both actions are the result of Natasha's own decision....

All these moments grow not only linearly but also geometrically into clusters of ideas, feelings, and images that recur, multiply, and strike consistent balances. *The Three Sisters,* perhaps more than any other Chekhovian play, is centrally concerned with the meaning of existence. What goes into the making of happiness? How should we live out our lives? Why do people suffer? "Nothing happens," Olga concludes in Act IV, "the way we want it to"

Chekhov's questions that he raises throughout the play come together at the very end. Just as the seasons change (each of the four acts takes place during one of the four seasons), the life cycle starts over again at the end. And the ending resembles the beginning. Only a strophe and a half, separated by an antistrophe, conclude the play. It begins with the three sisters downstage, "pressing next to one another," and each sings and dances her own song. Masha begins, and borrowing from Tuzenbakh's ideas, she stresses the necessity of simply to keep on living. Repeating Vershinin's faith in the future, Irina returns to her own beliefs (first expressed in Act I) that personal salvation can be realized only through work. Olga, cribbing too from Vershinin's ideas pertaining to the loss of personal identity and optimism in the future, searches for the raison d'etre: "The band plays so joyfully, so happily, and it seems that in a little while we shall know the reason we live, the reason we suffer...". And then Olga adds her famous dactyl plea,*" Yesli by znat',"* which is repeated. The statement, usually translated "If only we knew," is a hypothetical conditional statement, so constructed without a stated subject but with an infinitive. Any subject could be added */, you, he, she, one, they,* in place of *we,* or, more to the point all subjects could be added, thus encompassing everyone in listening range. And so ends the first ode, a three-part harmony on existence.

The antistrophe, consisting of two mute male characters (Kulygin and Andrey) and the speaking doctor, is a three-part answer to the sisters' ode. Kulygin, carrying Masha' s hat and cape, is "happy, smiling," apparently convinced that everything will return to the way it was before Masha's affair with Vershinin. The Latin teacher had previously expressed his belief that life is very real, by no means an illusion, and like the Romans, a person's life style must be ordered, following its routine, regimen, rules. Andrey, emasculated by his wife and neglected by his sisters, wheels the carriage, in which Bobik is sitting, a consistent reminder of his vanished dreams. Earlier in the act, he condemns the town (audience) for their indifference, deceit, and Philistinism, charges that could perhaps be leveled at the speaker himself. The third member of the upstage chorus, Chebutykin, sits on a bench and denies the optimism expressed by the sisters. He *"sings quietly."*

"Tara ... ra ... boom-di-yah ... sitting on a curb today ..." *Reads newspaper.* It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter!

The antistrophe ends, and Olga begins the second strophe: "If only we knew, if only we knew! ...."

And the curtain falls on two choruses. In each chorus are embodied three characters, each singing and dancing her and his viewpoint on the nature of existence. The play has come full circle, in keeping with the persistent cyclical patterns. Moreover, it has consistently followed the ternary construction from beginning to close. And the characters, usually cast in groups of threes, together with their ideas, emotions, and images, have been carefully balanced to reveal an equivalence rarely seen in the drama since the Renaissance.

Source: Eugene K. Bristow, "Circles, Triads, and Parity in The Three Sisters," in *Chekhov's Great Plays,* edited by Jean-Pierre Barricelli, New York University Press, 1981, p. 76.

Adaptations

Members of New York's Actor's Studio, including Shelley Winters, Sandy Dennis, and Geral-dine Page, are in a video edition of the play, filmed in 1965. Directed by Paul Bogart. Released by Hen's Tooth Video in 1998.

Topics for Further Study

In his letters, Chekhov said that he had the city of Perm in mind as a model for the type of provincial city where this drama takes place. Research what life would have been like in a provincial Russian town at the turn of the century, and compare it to what Moscow would have been like.

Research the role that servants would have played in a Russian household at the turn of the century, between the emancipation of the serfs in 1858 and the Russian Revolution in 1917, and explain what the social customs tell about the roles of Ferapont and Aneisa in *The Three Sisters.*

Read some of the poetry of Russian writer Mikhail Yurievich Lermontov, as well as some biographical information about him. Use this to explain the significance of Solyony's observations that "I have a disposition like Lermontov's ... I even look a little like Lermontov ... so I'm told."

What would these characters do if the play were set in modern America? Since the army is not quartered with civilians here, the characters in the army would have to be given different occupations. Would Protopopov still be the chairman of the county board? Where would Irina work? Try to give them occupations that you are familiar with in daily life.

Explain how you think each of these characters would have fared under communism in the Soviet Union after the Russian Revolution, and why.

Read one of Chekhov's short stories, such as "The Gooseberries" or "The Lady With the Pet Dog," and show the similarities between the story and this play, focusing on characterization and themes.

Compare and Contrast

1901: The first trans-Atlantic telegraph message was sent from England to Newfoundland, where Guglielmo Marconi received it. It was the letter "s," sent in telegraph code across radio waves.

1917: The idea of the American Marconi Company's system of broadcasting sounds through the airwaves was adapted to music and entertainment broadcasts.

Today: Wireless technology broadcasts millions of voices across the world at any given moment, more and more radio broadcasts are being taken off of the airwaves and transmitted across cable wires for better clarity, and it is possible to experience fine art and music just about anywhere.

1901: The oppressive policies of Russia's Czar Nicholas II pushed the country toward the revolution after the First World War that left the country as the cornerstone of the communist superpower, the Union of Soviet Socialists Republic.

Today: After the USSR disbanded in 1991, many of its former constituent countries, including Russia, have struggled with establishing political democracies with capitalist economies.

1901: Tuberculosis, from which Chekhov suffered for twenty years and which eventually killed him, was unbeatable, and killed approximately 188 people per 100,000 in America.

Today: Vaccines have reduced the danger of tuberculosis to less than one in 100,000, although outbreaks still arise in impoverished nations that cannot afford vaccine programs.

What Do I Read Next?

Chekhov's thoughts as he was writing this play, and the considerations that came up while it was in production, are discussed in his letters. Long out of print, there is a new edition of *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary* available from Northwestern University Press. There is also much about *The Three Sisters* in *Dear Writer, Dear Actress: The Love Letters of Anton Chekhov and Olga Knipper,* translated by Jean Benedetti.

The actors who presented this play during Chekhov's time for the Moscow Art Theatre were under the direction of the legendary director Constantin Stanislavsky. Readers can find out more about the acting method these performers followed in Stanislavsky's three books, *An Actor Prepares, Building a Character* and *Creating a Role.* All three are available in reprint editions from Theatre Arts Books.

In addition to his fame as a playwright, Chekhov is considered one of the greatest writers of short stories ever. His stories are collected in *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories,* published by W. W. Norton Company.

One of Chekhov's closest friends and confidants was the Russian writer Maxim Gorky, who was more popular than Chekhov at the turn of the century. His best-known play is *The Lower Depths,* first performed in 1902 and available in a Yale University Press collection *The Lower Depths and Other Plays.*

The Three Sisters was Chekhov's second-to-last play, and, according to some critics, was surpassed only by his last play, *The Cherry Orchard.*

Comparisons have been made between this play and *Hedda Gabler,* by Norwegian author Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen's play, first produced in 1890, concerns a strong-willed newlywed aristocrat who takes her frustrations and disappointments out on those around her.

"Errend," a short story by American author Raymond Carver, captures the feel of Chekhov's writing while presenting a fictionalized version of the playwright's last hours before death. It is available in Carver's collection *Where I'm Calling From,* published in 1988.

Further Study

Hahn, Beverly, "Three Sisters," in her *Chekhov: A Study of the Major Stories and Plays,* Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp. 284-309.

Hahn's study, often cited by other critics, examines the interplay between sadness and hope in the play.

Gerhardie, William, Anton *Chekhov: A Critical Study,* St. Martin's Press, 1974.

This book is a reprint of the 1923 edition, one of the first critical studies of Chekhov before his genius was widely recognized throughout the world. It is considered the one book that any serious student of Chekhov *must* read.

Karlinsky, Simon, "Chekhov: The Gentle Subversive," introduction to *The Letters of Anton Chekhov,* Harper & Row, 1973, pp. 1-32.

A political analysis of Chekhov, who is usually treated by critics as an artist who was removed from politics. Russia at the turn of the century had a delicate political balance, and Karlinsky examines how Chekhov reflected that balance and toyed with it.

Peace, Richard, "The Three Sisters," in his *Chekhov: A Study of the Four Major Plays*, Yale University Press, 1983, pp. 74-116.

This short analysis of the play is mostly useful for its wealth of background information clarifying references that the play mentions quickly without explanation.

Pritchett, V. S., *Chekhov: A Spirit Set Free,* Random House, 1988.

Pritchett, one of the great novelists and short story writers of the twentieth century, produced this wise critical biography when he was in his eighties, and the feeling of one master story teller's appreciation of another helps readers understand why Chekhov is so universally admired.

Stroeva, M. N., "*The Three Sisters* in the Production of the Moscow Art Theater," translated by Robert Lewis Jackson, in Jackson's *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice Hall, 1967.

Stroeva's essay, originally printed in Moscow in 1955, is a meticulously researched piece giving a theatrical background to the act of bringing this play to life.

Szondi, Peter, "The Drama in Crisis: Chekhov," in his *Theory of the Modern Drama,* University of Minnesota, 1987.

This essay emphasizes the dramatic device of the monologue, and Chekhov's unique deployment of that device.

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Kirk, Irina, *Anton Chekhov,* Twayne Publishers, 1981. pp. 144-45.

Shaftymov, A., "Principles of Structure in Chekhov's Plays,*"* in *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Robert Louis Jackson, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967. p. 72.

Troyat, Henri, *Chekhov,* E. P. Dutton, 1984.

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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.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- 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.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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