Uncle Vanya Study Guide

Uncle Vanya by Anton Chekhov

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Uncle Vanya, Anton Chekhov's masterpiece of frustrated longing and wasted lives, was originally a much more conventional drama in its earlier incarnation. Previously known as *The Wood Demon,* the play was rejected by two theaters before premiering in Moscow in December of 1889 to a very poor reception (it closed after three performances). Sometime between that date and 1896, Chekhov revised the play, altering it radically. Although the work that emerged is more static than the original—in terms of narrative events, far less happens—it is considered one of the most poignant evocations of thwarted desire ever written. Vanya is literally haunted by the man he might have been: "Day and night like a fiend at my throat is the thought that my life is hopelessly lost."

Uncle Vanya was scheduled to premiere at the Maly Theater in Moscow, but the Theatrical and Literary Committee overseeing it and other imperial theaters asked Chekhov to make substantial revisions to the play. Instead of making the suggested changes, he withdrew the play and submitted it to the Moscow Art Theater, where *Uncle Vanya* was first performed on October 26, 1899, under the direction Konstantin Stanislavsky. It was well received.

With *Uncle Vanya* and Chekhov's three other dramatic masterpieces—*The Sea Gull, The Three Sisters,* and *The Cherry Orchard*—Chekhov demonstrated that a production could be riveting with out conforming to traditional notions of drama. In *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov,* Russian author Vladimir Nabokov *(Lolita)* noted that Chekhov's plays are not overtly political or freighted with a social message: "What mattered was that this typical Chekhovian hero was the unfortunate bearer of a vague but beautiful human truth, a burden which he could neither get rid of nor carry." Today, Chekhov stakes a double claim in the world of literature: he is equally acclaimed as a master of the short story and of the dramatic form. *Uncle Vanya* is widely considered to be his greatest achievement in the latter genre and a masterpiece of modern drama.

Author Biography

Born on January 29, 1860, in the port village of Taganrog in the Ukraine, Anton Chekhov was the third son of Pavel Yegorovitch and Yevgeniya Yakovlevna (Morozov) Chekhov. Though the family was descended from Russian peasants, Chekhov's grandfather purchased the family's freedom, allowing Chekhov's father to run a small grocery store. The family's fortunes took a sudden turn for the worse, however, when his father's store went bankrupt in 1876. Following that disaster, his parents moved to Moscow, leaving Chekhov in Taganrog to complete his education.

In 1879, Chekhov reunited with his family in Moscow, where he began studying for a degree in medicine at Moscow University. In 1884, he completed his studies, began to practice medicine, and started publishing short, humorous sketches in popular magazines. In 1886 these collected sketches were published as a book, entitled *Motley Stories*. According to his biographers, Chekhov only began to take his writing seriously after he moved to St. Petersburg in 1885 and befriended an influential editor named A. S. Suvorin. During the late-1880s, Chekhov wrote some of his most famous short stories, including *"The Kiss"* and *"The Steppe."*

Chekhov had attended plays by Nikolai Gogol and William Shakespeare growing up in Taganrog, as well as appearing as an actor on the amateur and professional stage. In the 1880s, Chekhov began to write one-act and full-length plays. Many of his dramatic efforts were poorly received; the 1896 premier of *The Sea Gull* at the Imperial Alexander Theater in St. Petersburg was drowned out by whispering and derisive laughter. Chekhov's fortunes as a playwright improved after he met Konstantin Stanislavsky, who produced *The Sea Gull* at the Moscow Art Theater in 1898. In fact, the Moscow Art Theater was so indebted to Chekhov that an ideogram of a sea gull□from Chekhov's play of that title□still adorns the theater's curtain. In 1899, the Moscow Art Theater presented *Uncle Vanya,* a revised version of Chekhov's one-act play *The Wood Demon.* Chekhov's reputation as an innovative and influential dramatist rests with *Uncle Vanya* and his two subsequent plays, *The Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard (1904)*.

Even as his literary fortunes grew, Chekhov continued to work as a doctor, often refusing payment for the care he dispensed because he earned a good living from writing. In the summer of 1901 Chekhov married Olga Leonardovna Knipper, an actress from the Moscow Art Theater. Ill with tuberculosis, he spent much of his last years traveling to health spas in Europe. He died on July 2, 1904, in Badenweiler, a German health resort, and was buried in Moscow. Chekhov was a highly regarded short story writer and dramatist in his own lifetime and recognition and appreciation for his unique literary gifts have continued to grow throughout the twentieth century.

Plot Summary

Act I

The play opens on a cloudy afternoon in a garden behind the family estate of Serebryakov. Marina, the old nurse, is knitting a stocking, while Astrov, the doctor who has been called to tend to one of Professor Serebryakov's ailments, is pacing nearby. Astrov laments that he's aged tending the sick and that life "itself is boring, stupid, dirty." Having no one to love, he complains that his emotions have grown numb. When he worries that people won't remember him, Marina answers: "People won't remember but God will remember."

When Vanya enters, yawning from a nap, the three complain about how all order has been disrupted since the professor and his wife, Yelena, arrived. As they're talking, Serebryakov, Yelena, Sonya, and Telegin return from a walk. Vanya calls the professor "a learned old dried mackerel," criticizing him for his pomposity and the small-ness of his achievements. Vanya's mother, Maria Vasilyevna, objects to her son's derogatory comments. Vanya also praises the professor's wife, his love for Yelena, for her beauty, arguing that faithfulness to an old man like Serebryakov means silencing youth and emotions an immoral waste of vitality. Act I closes with Yelena becoming exasperated as Vanya declares her.

Act II

It is evening and this act is set in Serebryakov's dining room. Before going to bed, Serebryakov complains of being in pain and of old age. After he is asleep, Yelena and Vanya talk. She speaks of the discord in the house, and Vanya speaks of dashed hopes. He feels he's misspent his youth, and he associates his unrequited love for Yelena with the devastation of his life. Not only is Vanya distraught about his own life, but he tells Yelena her life is dying, too. "What are you waiting for?" he asks her. "What curst philosophy stands in your way?"

Alone, Vanya speaks of how he loved Yelena ten years before, when it would have been possible for the two to have married and had a happy life together. At that time, Vanya believed in Serebryakov's greatness and loved him; now those beliefs are gone and his life feels empty. As Vanya agonizes over his past, Astrov returns and the two talk together, drunk. Sonya chides Vanya for his drinking, and he answers: "When one has no real life, one lives in illusions. After all, that's better than nothing." Sonya responds pragmatically: "All our hay is mowed, it rains every day, everything is rotting and you occupy yourself with illusions."

Outside, a storm is gathering and Astrov talks with Sonya about the suffocating atmosphere in the house; Astrov says Serebryakov is difficult, Vanya is a hypochondriac, and Yelena is charming but idle. He laments that it's a long time since

he loved anyone. Sonya begs Astrov to stop drinking, telling him he is beautiful and should create rather than simply destroying himself. The two speak obliquely, though inconclusively, of love.

When the doctor leaves, Yelena enters and makes peace with Sonya, after an apparently long period of mutual anger and antagonism. Trying to resolve their past difficulties, Yelena reassures Sonya that she had strong feelings for her father when she married him, though the love proved false. The two women converse at cross purposes, with Yelena confessing her unhappiness and Sonya gushing about the doctor's virtues. Yelena is generous in her assessment of Astrov, describing him as a genius□a rare individual who is brave and free and imagines the future happiness of mankind.

Act III

Vanya, Sonya, and Yelena are in the living room of Serebryakov's house, having gathered to hear Serebryakov's announcement. Vanya calls Yelena a water nymph and urges her, once again, to break free, saying playfully: "Let yourself go if only for once in your life, hurry and fall in love with some River God." Sonya complains that she has loved Astrov for six years and that because she is not beautiful, he doesn't notice her. Yelena volunteers to question Astrov and find out if he's in love with Sonya. Sonya is pleased, but before agreeing she wonders whether uncertainty is better because then, at least, there is hope.

When Yelena asks Astrov about his feelings for Sonya, he says he has none and concludes that Yelena has brought up the subject of love to encourage him to confess his own emotions for her. Astrov kisses Yelena, and Vanya witnesses the embrace. Upset, Yelena begs Vanya to use his influence so that she and the professor can leave immediately. Before Serebryakov can make his announcement, Yelena conveys to Sonya the message that Astrovdoesn't love her by saying he won't be coming to the estate in the future.

Serebryakov proposes that he solve the family's financial problems by selling the estate, using the proceeds to invest in interest-bearing paper and buy a villa for himself and Yelena in Finland. Angrily, Vanya asks where he, Sonya, and his mother would live. He protests that the estate belongs to Sonya and that Vanya has never been appreciated for the self-sacrifice it took to rid the property of debt. As Vanya's anger mounts, Yelena shouts: ' T m going away from this hell! I can't bear it any longer." Vanya, clearly in despair, announces: "My life is lost to me! I am talented, intelligent, brave.... Had I lived a normal life, there might have come out of me a Schopenhauer, a Dostoyevsky.... I am through with keeping accounts, making reports. I am losing my mind.. . . Mother, I am in despair! Mother!" Instead of comforting her son, Maria insists that Vanya listen to the professor. And Sonya pleads with her father: "One must be merciful, Papa! Uncle Vanya and I are so miserable!" Vanya leaves but then returns moments later with a gun. He fires the pistol point blank at Serebryakov but misses.

Act IV

As the final act opens, Marina and Telegin wind wool and discuss the planned departure of Serebryakov and Yelena. When Vanya and Astrov enter, Astrov says that in this district only he and Vanya were "decent, cultured men" and that ten years of "narrow-minded life" have made them vulgar. Vanya has stolen a vial of Astrov's morphine, presumably to commit suicide; Sonya and Astrov beg him to return the narcotic. "Give it back, Uncle Vanya!," says Sonya. "I am just as unhappy as you are, maybe, but I don't despair. I bear it and I will bear it till the end of my life. Then you bear it, too." Vanya returns the vial.

Yelena and Serebryakov bid everyone farewell. When Yelena says goodbye to Astrov, she admits to having been carried away by him, embraces him, and takes one of his pencils as a souvenir. Serebryakov and Vanya make their peace, agreeing all will be as it was before. Once the outsiders have departed, Sonya and Vanya pay bills, Maria works on a pamphlet, and Marina knits. Vanya complains of the heaviness of his heart, and Sonya speaks of living, working, and the rewards of the afterlife: "We shall hear the angels, we shall see the whole sky all diamonds, we shall see how all earthly evil, all our sufferings, are drowned in the mercy that will fill the whole world. And our life will grow peaceful, tender, sweet as a caress.... In your life you haven't known what joy was; but wait, Uncle Vanya, wait.... We shall rest."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

On the veranda of a country home in Russia on a warm summer afternoon, Marina sits by a table set for tea and knits a stocking. Astrov paces nearby. Marina offers him a glass of tea. When he refuses, she offers him vodka instead. He tells her he doesn't drink every day and changes the subject, asking her how long they've known each other. Marina struggles to remember, and says he's changed a lot: he's older, he's less good looking, and he likes his vodka. Astrov explains that he drinks because he's tired from working all the time, and because "life is a dull, stupid dirty business." He jokes about having an oversized moustache, about having gone a bit strange, and about how he wants nothing, needs nothing and loves no one except possibly her. He becomes lost in a memory of a visit he paid to a community where there was an epidemic of typhoid. He started to operate on a patient who died on the table and suddenly had an attack of conscience, as though he'd killed the patient on purpose. He says he started thinking about people a hundred years in the future, whether they'd ever spare a thought for anyone now living. Marina says that people might not, but God will.

Vanya enters after a nap, and complains that ever since the Professor and his wife have arrived, life around the house has gone off its routine. Astrov asks how long they'll be around. Vanya tells him that they've decided to live there. Marina becomes angry, but Vanya tells her to calm down as the Professor and his wife are approaching the house.

The Professor, wearing a heavy black overcoat, his wife Yelena, his daughter Sonya and Sonya's godfather Telegin come in from the woods. The Professor goes straight into the house, telling Marina he wants tea sent to him in the study, where he has work to do. Yelena and Sonya follow him in, while Telegin sits next to Marina and talks about how happy he is because of the good weather, the beautiful garden, and everyone living in harmony. Meanwhile, Astrov and Vanya comment on Yelena's beauty, and on the fact that the Professor is wearing an overcoat on a beautiful day. Astrov tries to get Vanya to talk about something other than Yelena, but Vanya says there's nothing new to talk about. In a long speech, he grumbles about his own grumbling; about his mother, talking aimlessly about various subjects, about the Professor, whom he says writes books on art without knowing a thing about it, and about Yelena, who married the Professor when he was already old. When Astrov wonders whether Yelena is faithful, Vanya says she is but says her faithfulness is artificial. Telegin tells him that saying things like that upsets him, and talks about how his wife ran off but he is still faithful to his vows, and responsible for their children. He says that even though he's been unhappy, he still has his pride while his wife has nothing; her youth and beauty are gone and the other man is dead.

Sonya and Yelena return, followed by Maria, Vanya's mother, who sits off to one side and reads. Sonya sends Marina off to deal with some of the workers. Astrov reminds Yelena that he's there to see the Professor, who called the day before for the doctor but

who now seems perfectly fine. Yelena says he is fine, and sips her tea. Astrov says that it doesn't matter, he'll stay the night so he'll have a good night's sleep. Sonya happily says he's perfectly welcome to stay, then comments that the tea's gone cold. Telegin agrees that it's lost a lot of its heat. Calling him by the wrong name, Yelena tells him they can drink it cold. Telegin tells her his correct name, and that he's been sitting at the dinner table with Yelena every day. Sonya starts to take him into the house, but an exclamation from Maria keeps them outside.

Maria mentions she's received a new pamphlet from a writer she likes, and comments that he's now attacking the very things that he was defending a few years ago. Vanya speaks sharply to her, and comments that Vanya has changed. He used to have convictions. Vanya agrees, and with an angry speech tells her that he can't sleep at night because he's so angry at himself for being old and doing nothing with his life. While Sonya tries to calm Vanya down, Maria tells him that having convictions means nothing without getting down to practicalities. It looks as if there's going to be an argument, but Sonya intervenes and stops the discussion. Vanya apologizes, but when Yelena says it's a nice day, Vanya replies that it's a nice day to hang yourself.

A workman enters, asking for Astrov and saying that they need him at the factory. Sonya invites him to come back for dinner, but Astrov says it'll be too late by the time he's finished and asks the workman to fetch some vodka. While he's waiting for the workman to return with the vodka, Astrov compares himself to a character in a play who has a large moustache and not much talent. He bids the others goodbye, and then invites Yelena to drop in on him at his small estate. Yelena mentions that she's been told that Astrov is passionate about forests, but wonders whether having a passion like that would interfere with his real work. She goes on to say that spending time with so many trees can't be that exciting. Sonya tells her it's very exciting, and that Astrov plants new trees every year and has been recognized for his work. She goes on to talk about Astrov's belief that in places where the forests are well tended, the people are more artistic, wiser, and better to their women.

Vanya interrupts with a cynical remark about still using wood in his outhouses and fireplaces. Astrov responds with a passionate speech about the value and beauty of nature, how foolish people are for destroying it. He says that large forests help moderate the environment and if people in a hundred years are happy and healthy, it will be at least in part because of him. When the workman returns with the vodka, Astrov drinks it, says it's all a crackbrained idea, and leaves. Sonya follows him, asking when he'll be back. Astrov says he doesn't know, and they disappear before we hear any more of their conversation.

Yelena and Vanya have a quiet moment together. Yelena asks Vanya why he's so quarrelsome. Vanya starts talking about Yelena's laziness, but she cuts him off and talks about how Astrov was right; not only do people destroy forests; people destroy other people. She asks Vanya why he fell in love with her, then answers her own question by saying that he can't believe she's happy with the Professor and wants to possess her himself, which she suggests would destroy her. Vanya tries to stop her from talking, but Yelena continues, saying that Sonya is obviously in love with Astrov, and that she,

herself, is too shy to talk to him because she thinks he's pre-judged her. Yelena also says that the reason that she and Vanya are friends is that they're actually both very dull. Vanya protests that he loves her and that he's not trying to destroy her, but before he can say any more she leads him into the house where their conversation can't be heard.

During this act, Telegin plays on a guitar while Maria continues to read her pamphlet.

Act 1 Analysis

The tensions and conflicts in this play, as is typical of plays by this playwright, tend to be difficult to define clearly. Information that helps us to understand what the conflicts are sometimes doesn't emerge until later in the action, but that information still informs or motivates the action of the play before the information is revealed. This is called subtext, or what's going on underneath the words that are actually being spoken.

In this case, there are several pieces of information we don't find out until later that affect what happens and how the characters conduct themselves in this first act. These include the fact that Vanya and Sonya work for the Professor, running his estate while he concentrates on his writing. This may be one of the reasons Vanya talks so much and so angrily about the Professor. Another important piece of information is that Telegin is a former farm worker who lives on the estate because of Vanya's generosity. Later we also learn that Astrov is just as in love with Yelena as Vanya is with him, although in a different way and for different reasons. Chekhov was one of the first playwrights to define the action of his plays through subtext. Up until this point in theatre history, plays and characters and motivations were much more plainly portrayed, with characters speaking and/or acting their motivations quite directly. This makes Chekhov's work, and *Uncle Vanya,* in particular, some of the first truly modern theatre.

This all leads to a relative lack of dramatic action. Characters talk a lot: about themselves, about the world, and about philosophy, but there aren't a lot of events. This is usual in plays that are built more on subtext than plot like this one is because there isn't a lot of action, and as a result little things become extremely important. In this case, it's things like the moment when Yelena mistakes Telegin's name; when Yelena reveals to Vanya that Sonya's in love with Astrov; when Marina mentions that Astrov drinks vodka, and when Astrov has vodka before going off to treat his patients. In other words, this is a play about character and relationship more than anything else, which means we look for meaning and theme in what people say and or don't say, as much as in what people do.

Tea is a very clear symbol in this act. It relates to the play's themeand the fact that it's cold because it's been sitting, waiting for people to drink, essentially becoming useless. This is symbolic of the lives of nearly every one of these characters. Vanya, Astrov, Sonya, Yelena, Telegin, have all come to a place of feeling useless, as though their lives have little or no meaning. Astrov and Vanya feel it most intensely and long to somehow make a change; Yelena feels it, but doesn't have the desire or the drive to make a

change; Telegin feels it, has accepted it, and seems perfectly content to live out his days this way; Sonya is only just beginning to feel it, and still has hope that things will become better. The Professor is the only principal character who doesn't feel useless. The irony is that according to Vanya, he is useless. The symbol of the tea indicates that the thematic question being asked has to do with what people do when they feel that emptiness, and what do they do, if anything, to fill it. The rest of that play answers that question for each of the principal characters.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

This scene is set late at night, in the dining room of the house. The Professor is dozing in a chair by a window and Yelena is dozing nearby. Suddenly the Professor wakes up, a serious pain in his leg. Yelena covers him up with the blanket that had fallen from his lap, and tells him that it's after midnight. The Professor asks Yelena to look in the library the next day for a particular book, and wonders aloud why he's so short of breath. Yelena says he's just tired, but the Professor complains that it's because he's getting old, saying that as he ages he's getting offensive to himself and to other people. He says he knows that of all the people he knows, Yelena finds him most offensive. Then tells her not to worry, he won't be around much longer.

Sonya comes in, reminds the Professor that he asked to see Astrov, and tells him that it's rude to have disturbed him unnecessarily. The Professor responds rudely that Astrov doesn't know what he's talking about. Sonya tells him to suit himself, and when the Professor asks her to pass some medicine then complains that she's given him the wrong stuff, she tells him firmly to stop being difficult.

Vanya comes in, saying they're going to have a storm and tells Sonya and Yelena to go to bed because he's come to sit with the Professor. When the Professor tells them not to go because he thinks Vanya will just keep talking to him, Vanya protests that it's the second night in a row that the women have been up. The Professor agrees to let them go, but asks Vanya to leave too, saying that they used to be friends and will talk another time. Marina comes in to finish clearing up the after dinner tea. She sees that the Professor is being difficult, calms him down, and takes him off to bed. Sonya goes with them, and as they leave, Marina talks about the Professor's wife, who is also Sonya's mother, who spent much of her time grieving and weeping.

Yelena complains that she's just about had enough of the Professor, but Vanya complains that he's had just about enough of himself. Yelena tells Vanya he should spend more time and energy creating harmony and reconciliation. Vanya kisses Yelena's hand. As Yelena moves away from him, Vanya talks about how the storm will bring everything in nature back to life, but won't revive him. He's got no past worth recalling, the present is horrible, all his feelings, including his love for Yelena, are being wasted. He says that it's painful to him to see Yelana wasting her life in the same way he's wasted his. Yelena suddenly realizes that Vanya's drunk and tells him to go to bed.

After she leaves, Vanya has a soliloquy about how he could have proposed marriage to Yelena before she met the Professor, but didn't. He goes on to talk about the Professor; how he and Sonya have slaved for him to keep the farm running profitably, and how he used to idolize him. But now, he says, he realizes that everything the Professor's life has been has been false, and he feels he has been both fooled and betrayed.

Astrov comes in, a little drunk. He's followed by Telegin, who has his guitar with him. Astrov tells Telegin to play his guitar, but Vanya tries to keep them both quiet. Astrov admits to Vanya that he came in looking for Yelena, and confesses that he thinks Yelena's a wonderful woman. He asks Vanya why he's so miserable, and when Vanya says that Yelena is his "friend," Astrov tells him that a woman can only be a man's friend after being his acquaintance and then mistress. Vanya calls it "a vile piece of wisdom," and Astrov agrees, saying that in the last little while he's become a "vile" kind of man, saying he's worse when he's drunk, which happens about once a month. He shouts again for Telegin to play, which Telgin does quietly.

Sonya returns. Astrov quickly leaves, saying he's not wearing a tie. Telegin goes with him. Sonya sees that Vanya is drunk, and tells him it's unfitting for someone his age. She goes on to complain that while he's been "living on his illusions," she's working herself into exhaustion but the farm is going downhill anyway. Vanya has tears in his eyes. He suddenly sees the resemblance between Sonya and her mother, his sister. He wonders aloud what would have happened if "she'd only known," then runs out.

Astrov returns, having put on a waistcoat and tie. Sonya tells him to go ahead and drink if he must, but to not include Vanya in his binges. Astrov promises her that they won't drink any more, and tells her he's getting ready to leave. He predicts that by the time it's stopped raining, the horse and carriage will be ready. He also tells Sonya that he won't answer any calls from the Professor, saying that it's either a false alarm or the Professor won't listen anyway. Sonya says the Professor has been spoiled by all the women in his life. As they have a midnight snack from the sideboard, Astrov has a long speech about how he sees his life as a dark forest, with no path or light to guide him, and no one to love. He says that he knows other people see him as strange, what with his passion for the forest and the fact that he's a vegetarian. When he starts to pour himself another drink, Sonya makes him stop, saying he's a handsome man of refinement and that he's destroying himself in the same way that he complains other people destroy each other. Astrov gives her his word that he won't drink any more, and goes on to talk about how the only aspect of life that holds any meaning for him is beauty like Yelena's. Sonya asks him what he would do if he found out a young woman loved him. Astrov says he probably wouldn't do much beyond making it clear that he couldn't love her back. He says good night and leaves.

Sonya has a soliloquy about how much in love with Astrov she is, and what a shame it is she's not beautiful.

Yelena comes in and opens the windows to let in the post-storm fresh air. She and Sonya apologize to each other for being difficult with each other over the last couple of weeks, and promise to be friends again. As they share a glass of wine to seal their friendship Sonya suddenly starts crying, which sets Yelena crying as well. Yelena promises Sonya that she really did marry the Professor for love, but has felt ever since the wedding day that Sonya has thought it was for other reasons, and has always been suspicious. Sonya asks Yelena to answer truthfully whether she's happy. Yelena says she's not. Sonya then asks whether Yelena would like a husband who was still young, and when Yelena says she would, Sonya asks whether she'd be interested in Astrov.

Yelena says yes, she is. Sonya blurts out how she feels about him. Yelena describes him as having real talent and real vision, and says that such people must be truly cared for. She kisses Sonya and wishes her happiness. At the same time, she admits she's desperately unhappy and describes herself as a minor character not just in her husband's life, but everywhere. She sends Sonya to ask the Professor, who's in bed, whether he'd mind if she played the piano. When Sonya leaves, Yelena says she'll play, and then she'll cry like a baby. Sonya comes back, and says the Professor has said that he doesn't mind.

Act 2 Analysis

This scene gives us our first real look at the Professor, and we see clearly that he's selfish and very self-absorbed. The question is why everybody puts up with it. Why have Vanya and Sonya worked for him for so long? Why is Yelena still married to him? The answer is related to the play's theme of emptiness, and to human nature. For many people it's easier and safer to stay in a place of unhappiness than to make changes in their lives. It's safer to stay put, rather than attempt to make changes and risk failure. For the people in this play, this means that it's easier and more comfortable for them to stay in an unhappy situation and complain about it than it is to make changes and create a new and better life for themselves. This, then, at least partly answers the thematic question of what happens when a person feels empty in their lives.

At two key points in this scene, characters make reference to Sonya's mother. Marina mentions her as she takes the Professor off to bed and Vanya mentions her drunkenly just as he's going off to bed. It's never made clear in the text what exactly happened with Sonya's mother although we know she died young. When Marina says she spent much of her time weeping, and Vanya refers to something that she never knew, we never get the details. This element of the story is a piece of subtext that we never fully understand, and we must put the pieces of an answer together from what we do know. It's suggested that women often spoiled the Professor and paid attention to him. He may have had an outside relationship when Sonya's mother was still alive, and that's why she wept so much. Maybe she wept because he was already selfish and spoiled. Maybe Vanya weeps because he wishes she could have seen Sonya as a woman. Whatever the reason, the point seems to be that, for many reasons, being around the Professor makes people miserable.

The playwright makes use of a theatrical convention, or way of telling the story, called the soliloquy. This is when a character speaks his or her thoughts out loud, either alone on stage or directly to the audience when other characters are on the stage but unable to hear. The soliloquy is used most often to explore a character's thought processes, inner emotional state, or both. It's often used in Shakespeare. The play Hamlet is famous for its soliloquys. In this play, and in this act, Vanya's soliloquy explores his feelings about the Professor and Yelena, while Sonya's soliloquy lets us in not so much on her feelings for Astrov, which are clear, but on her feelings about herself. Vanya's soliloquy sets up even more thoroughly his resentment of the Professor, and this, in

turn, sets up his actions in the next scene., Sonya's soliloquy contrasts with her happiness at the end of this scene.

Astrov's long speech about life being a dark forest, and about how there's no light guiding him through it, is ironic because we know how much time and energy he puts into planting forests and taking care of them. This indicates that he's much more interested in the future than he is in the present, which is something that happens quite frequently with characters in Chekhov's plays.

When Sonya asks Astrov what he'd do if he met a young woman who loved him, the subtext is pretty clear: she's talking about herself. What's less clear is why, later in the scene, she's so happy she's crying. It may be that just being around Astrov makes Sonya intensely happy; it may also be that she's glad Yelena sees the same qualities in Astrov as she does, or there may be something else going on that we don't know. Another thing we don't know for sure is whether Yelena is really interested in Astrov, or whether she's just so bored, and so desperate for something to keep her occupied, that she's latched onto the idea of him.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

This scene takes place in the drawing room. Yelena paces thoughtfully while Vanya and Sonya watch. Vanya announces that the Professor has asked everyone in the house to gather for some kind of announcement, and comments that Yelena staggers as she walks from sheer laziness. Yelena talks of being bored with Vanya talking all the time, and of being bored in general. Sonya tells her there are lots of things she could do, if she felt like it: work on the estate, visit the sick, go to market. Yelena says none of those things would be interesting and it's only in books that people find fulfillment from doing good things for others. She tells Yelena that everybody around has changed because of her. Vanya doesn't work any more, but follows her around all day. Sonya has stopped working to come and keep her company; Astrov used to visit only once a month, now he comes around every day. Vanya goes out to get some roses to make Yelena feel better.

Sonya asks for Yelena's help in getting Astrov to pay attention to her. Yelena promises to talk to him, and tells Sonya to go and fetch him so they can have the conversation right away. Sonya runs out, saying that she'll tell Astrov that Yelena wants to see what he's been working on. Yelena has a soliloquy in which she says that she understands how Sonya feels. Someone as interesting and as different as Astrov is like "the bright moon rising in the midst of darkness." She says she knows that he comes every day to see her, and imagines herself on her knees begging for Sonya's forgiveness.

Astrov returns with the map he's been painting, and in a long speech describes it as a portrayal of the landscape, animal populations and industrialization of the whole area as it was fifty years ago, twenty five years ago, and today. He says it is a clear picture of decline brought about "by stagnation, by ignorance, by a total lack of awareness" and ultimately by selfishness. He suddenly stops, saying that he can see that Yelena isn't interested. She says that's not true but that she's got something else on her mind. She sits him down and asks him, quite directly, how he feels about Sonya. He says he respects her, but has no feeling for her as a woman. Yelena says she can see he doesn't love Sonya and tells him that Sonya loves him, and suggests that it's too painful for Sonya to see him every day and suggests that he stop coming. Astrov accuses her of playing games, saying that she knows exactly why he comes to visit every day and who he comes to see. When Yelena protests that she's not playing games at all, Astrov says she loves every minute of it. She protests more strongly, which makes Astrov get up to leave but then he speaks passionate words to her, kisses her hands, and asks when they can meet secretly.

Vanya appears without them seeing and watches. Yelena finally sees him and frees herself. Astrov, embarrassed, chats mindlessly about the weather and hurries out. Yelena goes to Vanya and tells him to do everything he can to make sure she and the Professor get away immediately.

Before Vanya can answer, the Professor, Telegin, Sonya and Marina come in, ready for the meeting Vanya mentioned at the beginning of the scene. While they're waiting for the others, Sonya asks Yelena what Astrov said. Yelena is too upset to speak, and Sonya interprets the silence to mean that Astrov said he wouldn't be coming back.

When Maria comes in, the Professor announces that he can't handle living in the country any more, and is planning to sell the estate in order to buy some stocks and a small villa in the city. Vanya protests, saying that the estate belongs to Sonya because it was passed down to her in her mother's will. The Professor says he won't do anything without Sonya's consent, and adds that it's all for Sonya's benefit anyway. Vanya continues to press his point, explaining that the estate never would have been purchased in the first place if he hadn't given up his inheritance for his sister, Sonya's mother. He adds that he worked like a farm animal to pay off the estate's debts and complains that he is to be turned out for a small profit. He adds that he should have stolen money from the estate and given himself a better life. Saying for the last twenty five years his life has been about making the Professor's life easier and better only now to be made a fool.. Vanya shouts that the Professor is destroying his life and calls him an enemy. The Professor shouts back that Vanya is a nobody, and if he wants the estate he can have it. Telegin leaves in agitation whileYelena shouts that the situation is intolerable. Maria tells Vanya to do as the Professor says, and Sonya clings to Marina for support. Vanya runs out, saying that he knows what he's going to do. Maria goes after him. The Professor says he needs to move out. Yelena says they will move out, and the Professor again calls Vanya a nobody. Sonya pleads with him to have mercy, and remember the hours and hours of work that she and Vanya have put into the estate. Yelena also pleads with her husband to apologize. The Professor says he'll try, and goes out. Yelena follows him, telling him to be gentle. Marina comforts Sonya, who's almost in tears.

Just when things are quieter, a shot is heard offstage. Yelena screams, and the Professor runs on terrified, calling out for Vanya to be restrained. Vanya and Yelena appear, struggling for control over the gun in his hand. Vanya breaks free, runs into the room, fires at the Professor and misses again. In complete despair, he falls into a chair. Yelena almost collapses. Sonya clings to Marina.

Act 3 Analysis

This scene contains the climax of the play, Vanya's emotional outburst and his attempt to kill the Professor, both caused by years of pent up frustration and anger finally being released. Resentment about the Professor's treatment of his sister, resentment at being used to make profit, resentment at the Professor's intellectual emptiness – it all gets released in one emotionally and physically violent outburst. It stands out in this play, and in all the works of Chekhov, for its rawness, and for the way it's such a vivid contrast to all the quiet murmurings about unhappiness throughout the rest of the play. In other words, the subtext explodes into words and into action: Vanya, unlike the rest of the characters, finally does something. The irony, of course, is that both his shots miss the Professor, which makes Vanya's life even more useless, at least in his own mind.

Before that moment, however, we have three quieter explosions that are in some ways even more powerful. In the first, Sonya says that she can't take not knowing what Astrov's true feelings are any longer, and asks Yelena to help her find out the truth. This is both ironic and sad, and for the same reason. Yelena knows, and we also know, that the reason Astrov visits every day is that he's attracted to her. Yelena also knows that at some point Sonya will find out the truth and will be hurt. This little explosion foreshadows Vanya's bigger explosion, with both explosions answering the question posed by the play's theme: if you live a life of emptiness long enough, you may end up in a place where you'll take desperate measures to fill that emptiness.

The second and third quiet explosions are both Astrov's. The second is that he shows Yelena his map and explains it in great detail, which indicates to us that this is something he's truly passionate about in contrast to the other characters, who up to this point have revealed little passion about anything. The third quiet explosion comes almost immediately after the second, when Astrov blurts out his feelings for Yelena. The irony here is that Yelena feels attracted to him as well, but, for several reasons, is afraid to do anything about it. This means that when she tells Astrov to never come back, she is dooming three people: herself, Sonya and Astrov, to misery.

The Professor's announcement that he wants to sell the estate ultimately doesn't come as a real surprise to us, given that all he's done since the beginning of the play is complain about it. It's perfectly in character for him to make this decision on his own, and we have every reason to think he's lying when he says he'll only do it with Sonya's permission.

Act 4

Act 4 Summary

This scene takes place in Vanya's bedroom, which also serves as the estate office. There is a small easel and table where Astrov paints. It's the evening of the day of the previous act. Telegein helps Marina wind wool and urges her to hurry, saying they're leaving in a hurry because they're frightened. He says they're leaving with what they're wearing, and they'll send for their things later. Marina talks happily about things on the estate going back to the comfortable old routine, and asks where Sonya is. Telegin says that she and Astrov are looking for Vanya: they're afraid he's going to kill himself. When Marina asks where the gun is, Telegin tells her he's hidden it in the basement.

Vanya and Astrov come in. Vanya tells everyone to leave him alone, that he can't stand being watched over. Telegin and Marina leave. Vanya tells Astrov to go, but Astrov says he's not leaving until Vanya returns what he stole. Vanya insists he hasn't taken anything, so Astrov insists he's going to stay. Vanya talks about how foolish he is to shoot at someone and miss twice. Vanya talks about how he's guilty of attempted murder, but no one's arresting him or charging him, which means that everybody thinks he's insane. Astrov says Vanya's not insane, just a fool, which makes him just like the rest of mankind. Astrov and asks again for Vanya to return what he took. Vanya again denies that he took anything, but Astrov says he knows that Vanya took a vial of morphine from his medical bag and demands it back. Otherwise, Astrov says if Vanya kills himself and it's found to be morphine, people will suspect that Astrov had something to do with it.

When Sonya comes in, Astrov tells her about the morphine and asks her to convince Vanya to return it. Sonya gently comforts Vanya, saying that she's in pain as well but she has decided to endure, urges him to endure as well, and pleads with him to give back the morphine. After a moment, Vanya retrieves the bottle and gives it to Astrov. Vanya says to Sonya that they must quickly get to work otherwise he won't be able to go on.

Sonya agrees, telling him they're very far behind with the accounts.

Astrov puts the morphine back in his bag and is about to leave when Yelena comes in to tell Vanya that the Professor has something to say to him. Sonya takes Vanya out to try and reconcile with the Professor. Yelena reminds Astrov that earlier, he promised to leave. He tells her he's leaving right away, and asks her to reconsider meeting him in the forest. She tells him that it's impossible, and that's why she's going away. She admits that in spite of finding him strange, she also finds him attractive. Astrov comments that everything on the estate, and every person on the estate, was fine, until Yelena and the Professor showed up and turned everything upside down. Astrov tells Yelena that if she and the professor had stayed any longer there would have been mass devastation. He bids her a cheerful goodbye, and asks permission to kiss her goodbye.

When Yelena says nothing, Astrov kisses her on the cheek. Yelena formally wishes him all the best, then suddenly embraces him tightly.

As they break apart, the Professor, Vanya, Maria, Telegin and Sonya all come in. The Professor accepts Vanya's apology, and asks Vanya to accept his. Vanya tells him that the farm will run from now on in the same way it always has. As Yelena embraces Sonya, the Professor embraces Maria, and Telegin also bids his farewells, hoping that the Professor won't forget them. The Professor leaves, escorted by Maria and Sonya. Vanya kisses Yelena's hand and asks for her forgiveness. Yelena, moved, kisses Vanya's forehead and leaves. Telegin goes off to get Astrov's horses.

Astrov asks Vanya why he isn't going to see them off. Vanya says he hasn't the heart, and rummages around for work to get started on. As the sound of harness bells is heard, Astrov comments that the Professor must be glad he's leaving for good.

Marina and Sonya come in, Sonya sad and in tears. She immediately joins Vanya in getting to work on the accounts. Maria comes in and becomes immersed in her reading. Astrov comments on the silence and the warm atmosphere and says he doesn't feel like leaving. Sonya asks when he'll be back and he says not before next summer, unless there's an emergency. He drinks a glass of vodka, then leaves. Sonya shows him out.

Vanya mutters to himself again as he works, and after Sonya returns, he comments to her how miserable he is. Sonya encourages him to keep living, bear the trials they've been given, work hard, and then when they die they'll be rewarded with a beautiful life full of joy lived under a "sky all dressed in diamonds." She tells him she has faith, and as he cries, urges him to have faith as well, and says she knows that he hasn't known joy in his life but tells him to wait. In the future they'll be able to rest.

Act 4 Analysis

After the climax of the action in Act 3, this act is denouement, or falling action. It's all about aftermath, about people trying to pick up the pieces and beginning to get on with their lives. Yelena, the Professor and Astrov all leave; Sonya gets back to work; Marina, Telegin and Maria go back to living their lives just as they did before.

Vanya, however, wants to end his life, but fails to do so because of Astrov and Sonya. He clearly sees his life as being over, and we're left wondering what will happen to him after the play. We suspect that he'll eventually succeed in killing himself. This is why his name gives the play its title. We are meant to identify with Vanya's despair and frustration. His story represents the despair and hopelessness we all feel at one time or another in our lives. This makes Uncle Vanya a universal character, a kind of everyman, someone who exists in one way or another in each of us.

In spite of the sudden desire for change that many of the characters feel at one point or another, life will continue to be empty. This is true when the characters act on their desire to make a change: Sonya in asking Yelena to talk to Astrov; Vanya in confessing his feelings to Yelena and in confronting the Professor; Astrov in revealing his feelings to

Yelena. It is also true when a character is afraid to act and when characters know that their lives are empty and so don't act. Such is the case with both the Professor and with Maria. Only Telegin and Marina seem content with their lives, making them a useful contrast by which we can see just how unhappy the other characters are.

The playwright's final thematic statement is made by Astrov and Sonya at different times in this act. Their speeches that suggest that no matter how bad life may seem, it's never really empty. There's always hope of rest after death. The difference between Astrov's point of view and Sonya's is that Astrov isn't certain of what will happen after death but Sonya is. The question, though, is how long Sonya's certainty will last.

Characters

Sofia Alexandrovna

Sonya is Serebryakov's daughter by his first marriage and Vanya's niece. Hard-working and plain in appearance, Sonya is twenty-four and has been in love with Astrov for six years. When Yelena offers to ask Astrov about his feelings for Sonya, she wavers, saying, "Uncertainty is better.... After all, there is hope□" Like the others, Sonya confesses to deep unhappiness but is more pragmatic. It is Sonya who holds the family together. When Vanya complains of how heavy his burdens are, she says: "What can we do, we must live!" The play closes with her soliloquy about the value of hard work in this lifetime and rest and beauty in the next.

Yelena Andreevna

A twenty-seven-year-old beauty and charmer, Yelena is married to the already elderly professor Serebryakov. Like her namesake Helen of Troy, Yelena is a woman whose beauty stirs men to action though she herself suffers from inertia. She freely admits that she's idle and bored, and she believes that any type of useful activity, such as nursing or teaching, is beyond her. Astrov jokes, "Both of you, he [Serebryakov] and you□infected us with your idleness." Yelena admits that she married out of true feeling, but that she no longer loves her husband and is now very unhappy. She dismisses Vanya's affections but is clearly attracted to Astrov. Directors disagree about Yelena's character. Sometimes she is portrayed as beautiful and vapid, flirtatious and cruel. Others see her as a vibrant life force that woos men away from their goals and therefore brings about their unintentional destruction, an idea that's supported by Astrov's statement, "It's strange how I am convinced that if you should stay on, there would be an enormous devastation."

Dr. Mikhail Lvovich Astrov

As Act I opens, Astrov, the village doctor, is lamenting that he's grown old and has not had a single day off in more than ten years. At times, Astrov appears to be close to desperation: "I work harder than anyone in the district, fate strikes me one blow after another and there are times when I suffer unbearably□but for me there is no light shining in the distance." In addition to his other frustrations, Astrov is haunted by the death of one of his patients, a railroad switchman, who died of typhus under his care. Yelena describes Astrov as having a tired, nervous, interesting face; he is a vegetarian who's passionate about nature and interested in the conservation of the woods, but he also drinks heavily and is curiously oblivious to Sonya's love for him. Many parallels exist between Vanya and Astrov; both feel beaten down by life, both are attracted to Yelena, and both believe they've squandered their talents and are now living lives of vulgarity and frustration.

Professor Alexander Vladimirovich Serebryakov

A retired professor who was regarded as a Don Juan in his younger days, Serebryakov is now married to the beautiful Yelena Andreevna. Serebryakov is Sonya's father and was married to Vanya's sister, Vera, who has since died. The professor has settled on the estate of his first wife because he can't afford to live anywhere else. Vanya criticizes him for striding around like a god, yet having achieved nothing of significance in his field (art history). Serebryakov is idolized by his mother-in-law, Maria, but Vanya despises him, having come to view him as an old fraud who's sapped everyone of their vitality. Serebryakov sets off a firestorm by suggesting that the estate, which belongs to Sonya, be sold so that he and Yelena can buy a villa in Finland.

Sonya

See Sofia Alexandrovna

Ilya Ilich Telegin

An impoverished landowner, Telegin lives on the estate and dines regularly with the family. Chekhov describes his speech as high-pitched and pretentious. Nicknamed "Waffles" because of his pockmarked face, Telegin argues for faithfulness, describing how his wife left him the day after their wedding because of his appearance, yet he remained loyal to her, supporting the children she had with her lover.

Marina Timofeevnap

Chekhov describes Marina, the old nurse, as a plain, small woman; she is a soothing presence among the frustrated, lovelorn, and angry characters on the estate. Overtly nurturing, she is often associated with food or drink ("A cup of lime-flower tea or tea with raspberry jam and it will all pass," she says in an attempt to console Sonya).

Uncle Vanya

The Uncle Vanya of the title, Voynitsky is forty-seven years old, stylishly dressed, and yawning when he first appears in Act I. A year before the play opens, he realized that he'd wasted his life by working to support the professor, whose great genius turned out to have been illusory. Vanya is in love with Yelena, whom he urges to take better advantage of her youth than he did. Discontented and angry, Vanya is derailed by his own impotence and anger; he continually makes nasty jabs at Serebryakov. After months of grumbling, Vanya erupts into violence when the professor proposes that the estate be sold so that he and Yelena canpurchase a villa in Finland. Vanya shoots at the professor but misses. Having wasted his talents and squandered his life, Voynitsky has become a peripheral figure who supports his sister's family, rather than living his own

life. Even his designation in the title of the play□he's known as someone else's uncle□suggests how far from the center of the action his life is lived.

Maria Vasilevna Voinitskaya

Maria Vasilevna is the widow of a privy councillor, Vanya's mother, and Serebryakov's mother-in-law. A liberal with an unwavering commitment to women's rights, she adores the professor and is content to spend her life furthering his work. As Vanya describes her: "My old magpie *Maman* is still babbling about the emancipation of women; with one eye she looks into the grave and with the other she rummages through her learned books for the dawn of a new life." Throughout most of the play, Maria reads or writes without looking up, lost in thought.

Ivan Petrovich Voynitsky

See Uncle Vanya

Waffles

See Ilya Ilich Telegin

Themes

Anger and Hatred

Recognizing that he has wasted his life furthering the professor's scholarship, Vanya responds in anger, a new and unaccustomed emotion for him. Although Vanya's displeasure simmers throughout the play, it erupts into violence after Serebryakov announces his plan to sell the estate so that he and Yelena can buy a villa in Finland. Vanya then attempts to shoot the professor, only to miss, emphasizing the futility of his rebellion. Vanya's full name, Voynitsky, hints at his potential for belligerence (the Russian word for "war" is "voyna").

Appearances and Reality

Vanya rails against Serebryakov's intellectual posturing, knowing that the professors's claims of intelligence are a fraud. "You were to us a creature of the highest order and your articles we knew by heart," says Vanya. "But now my eyes are open! I see everything! You write about art, but you understand nothing of art! All your works, that I used to love, are not worth a brass penny! You fooled us!" Although some of Vanya's charges have merit, Chekhov's message is more complex. Serebryakov is not as bad and false as Vanya makes him out to be, but he is a self-absorbed, sick old man who has come to fear Vanya and his outbursts of indignation.

Choices and Consequences

Vanya's mother, Maria Vasilyevna, chides her son for railing against his fate, when he's taken so few steps to change the course of his life. "It looks as if you are challenging your former convictions," she says to Vanya. "But they are not guilty, it's you are guilty. You keep forgetting that a conviction in itself is nothing, it's a dead letter.... You should have been doing something." Serebryakov echoes the same sentiments when he departs, saying, "One must, ladies and gentlemen, do something." Although his remarks are ironic given his own barren efforts, they also contain some element of truth.

Deception

Vanya claims that he has been deceived by Serebryakov, but Chekhov also suggests that Vanya has deceived himself. After all, if Vanya has read the professor's articles for twenty-five years, why does it take him so long to notice that the professor's scholarship is empty and the man is "a soap bubble"? In many scenes, Vanya deceives himself. When Vanya exhorts Yelena to have an affair, he is, in part, motivated by self interest. He says, "Faithfulness like this is false from beginning to end; it has a fine sound but no logic." One could argue that the case Vanya makes for adultery is equally suspect.

Duty and Responsibility

Work is one of the major themes of *Uncle Vanya*. Vanya, Sonya, and Astrov all complain that Yelena's idleness has infected them, luring them from their responsibilities to loaf with her. When Sonya suggests that Yelena work, she responds: "It is only in sociological novels they teach and cure sick peasants, and how can I suddenly for no reason go to curing and teaching them?" Sonya answers: "And in the same way I don't understand how not to go and not to teach." Chekhov may be critiquing idleness, but he also takes a dim view of meaningless work: Serebryakov's empty efforts at intellect provide an excuse for him to be demanding and pompous; and Maria Vasilyevna's work is a form of escapism, allowing her to shut out the emotional needs of her family.

Human Condition

Throughout his plays, Chekhov is concerned with the human condition and how people endure great unhappiness and personal frustration. Many of the sorrows the characters experience are inevitable. When Astrov says goodbye to Yelena, the farewell is tinged by an awareness that human life is sad: "It's odd somehow," he says, "We have known each other, and suddenly for some reason we will never see each other again. And that's how it is in this world." The clearest evocation of how the frustrations of the characters are simply part of the human condition comes in Sonya's final speech. "What can we do," she says, "we must live!... We'll live through a long, long line of days, endless evenings; we'll bear patiently the trials fate sends us; we'll work for others now and in our old age without ever knowing any rest, and when our hour comes, we'll die humbly."

Limitations and Opportunities

Vanya sees his life as circumscribed by the sacrifices he made for the professor. In a rage, he shouts, "I'm gifted, intelligent, courageous. If I'd had a normal life I might have been a Schopenhauer or a Dostoyevsky." However, even Vanya recognizes that his own possibilities may not have been so great as he sometimes claims. When his mother laments that Vanya was once a man of strong convictions and a bright personality, he responds sarcastically, "Oh, yes! I used to be a bright personality that didn't give light to anybody."

Love and Passion

Vanya and Astrov both adore Yelena, Yelena is captivated by Astrov, and Sonya is in love with Astrov. Sonya tells Yelena: "I have loved him now for six years, loved him more than my own mother; every minute I hear his voice, feel the touch of his hand; and I watch the door, waiting; it always seems to me that he will be coming in." Passion in *Uncle Vanya* seems like an avenue for suffering, not salvation. Yelena attributes her great unhappiness to having been mistaken in her love for Serebryakov. She also

compares love for a woman to the reckless devastation of the woods and criticizes men for possessing "the demon of destruction" in their dealings with the opposite sex.

Return to Nature

Astrov speaks eloquently of the beauty of the woods, and his love of nature is one reason why Sonya and Yelena are drawn to him. Passionate about the need to conserve forests, he says that the woods are being destroyed "because lazy man hasn't sense enough to bend down and pick up fuel from the ground." Astrov also laments, "Forests are fewer and fewer, rivers dry up, game becomes extinct, the climate is ruined, and every day the earth gets poorer and uglier." Man's wanton destruction of nature has parallels to the unhappiness of the members of Serebryakov's family, who feel their lives are unfulfilled and ruined. Astrov says, "He must be a reckless barbarian to burn this beauty in his stove, destroy what we cannot create again."

Success and Failure

The dramatic action of *Uncle Vanya* occurs within a few months time, when Voynitsky stops accepting a secondary role in life, as family provider, uncle, and dutiful son, and instead rails against the injustices of his life. For Vanya, the recognition of personal failure briefly spurs him to declare his love for Yelena, to assert his frustration, and to draw attention to Serebryakov's sense of unbridled entitlement. However, Vanya is doomed to fail, even as he fails in his attempt to avenge himself and murder Serebryakov.

Wealth and Poverty

Money matters in *Uncle Vanya*. Serebryakov and Yelena are staying at the estate because they can't afford to live elsewhere; Telegin dines with the family because he is too impoverished to have his own home. Most importantly, it is Serebryakov's proposal to sell the estate and convert the proceeds into interest-bearing paper that sets off Vanya's wrath. The dramatic climax of *Uncle Vanya,* when Vanya confronts Serebryakov, consists of an accounting of debts, past and present. Among Vanya's grievances is the pittance he's been paid, wages "fit for a beggar." Wealth has been squandered, as well as youth and time.

Style

Revision

One way to understand the construction of *Uncle Vanya* is to contrast it with its earlier incarnation, *The Wood Demon*. Eric Bentley, in *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov,* called *The Wood Demon* "a farce spiced with melodrama." In that version, Chekhov emphasizes the romantic interests of the characters and the play concludes with the coupling of Astrov and Sonya. No one is successfully paired up in *Uncle Vanya*. In *The Wood Demon* Vanya commits suicide. In *Uncle Vanya* Vanya survives only to have his bleakest fears about life confirmed. Wrote Bentley: "To the Broadway script-writer, also concerned with the rewriting of plays (especially if in an early version a likable character shoots himself), these alterations of Chekhov's would presumably seem unaccountable. They would look like a deliberate elimination of the dramatic element." *Uncle Vanya* is constructed in a purposefully unconventional way, one that illustrates certain ideas about how individuals bear up and continue to live in the midst of considerable suffering.

Setting

Uncle Vanya is set entirely within Serebryakov's estate. Although the play opens in the garden behind the estate, most of the action takes place inside the rambling, twenty-six-room estate that Vanya and Sonya have managed and Sonya presumably owns. Many of the characters find the atmosphere stifling. Yelena describes the house as a crypt, a place of exile, and later, as hell, while Serebryakov says he feels like he's "fallen from the earth on to some foreign planet" and he calls the estate "a labyrinth" and "a morgue." Vanya describes the monastic life he's lived, working inside the estate to further Serebryakov's career, as sitting "like a mole inside these four walls," and Astrov says he couldn't survive a month in the house, "I'd suffocate in this air." The setting is intentionally static and claustrophobic. One of the hallmarks of a Chekhov play is that it takes place within a single setting. The fact that every scene takes place on the estate heightens the sense of desolation and futility experienced by the characters.

Point of View

One of Chekhov's innovations was to write plays without a single clear hero or heroine. In *Uncle Vanya* and Chekhov's other major plays, several characters are of nearly equal dramatic stature. Here, Vanya, Astrov, Sonya, and Yelena are the main characters and each experiences similar frustrations. The audience comes to understand each of the four characters' unique point of view through his or her speeches when alone and the confidences he or she shares with the other characters.

Realism

Realism is an artistic movement in which authors or artists attempted to depict human beings as they actually appear in life. Begun in the 1840s in Europe and Russia, realism was a response to the highly subjective art and literature produced by the Romantic movement. Chekhov□a preeminent realist□builds up a sense of character through physical description in his stage directions and through the characters' descriptions of one another. His characters are not larger than life but have recognizable foibles. Marina is a realist heroine; she clucks at the chickens and offers tea to the characters at inappropriate moments. Vanya also appears realistically□rather than a dignified, dramatic entrance, he makes his first appearance yawning. And Serebryakov complains of mundane matters like gout and other aches and pains.

Historical Context

In 1861, one year after Chekhov was born, Czar Alexander II abolished serfdom in Russia. Serfs were essentially slaves and were forced to work for their owners unless they could purchase their own freedom. Once peasants were no longer owned by others, they were not necessarily free because most of them had no possessions and were enslaved through indebtedness. In the 1860s, peasants constituted eighty percent of the population of Russia.

Once serfdom was abolished, Russia underwent a period of social unrest, characterized by student rebellion and protests by political radicals. In 1872, Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* was translated into Russian and the Russian people were introduced to the basic tenets of communism. In 1881, Czar Alexander II was assassinated by terrorists. Alexander III assumed rule of the country, and what followed was a time of mass arrests and deportations. Alexander III ruled until his death in 1894, when Czar Nicholas assumed power.

Although Chekhov's plays and stories aren't overtly political, the writer was the grandson of a serf and throughout his lifetime he came into frequent contact with the peasants and other poverty-stricken members of Russian society because of his work as a physician. In 1890, Chekhov visited the prison of Sakhalin, to care for the sick and record the conditions of the prisoners. Despite an awareness of the plight of others, Chekhov was not among the university radicals or dissidents who pressed for reform through public demonstrations. The peasants may play prominent roles in his work, but Chekhov was not an artist who was particularly concerned with politics.

The narrowness, vulgarity, and isolation of life in Russia are part of the fabric of the characters' lives. Astrov says, "I'm fond of life as a whole, but this petty, provincial life of ours in Russia□that I can't stand, I despise it utterly." What Chekhov takes exception to is the spiritual bankruptcy of life in Russia, more than the corruptness of the country's politics. Harvey Pitcher pointed out in *The Chekhov Play* that the plight of the Russian intelligentsia was hardly an original subject when Chekhov embraced it. In fact, the talented man for whom there's no place in society was already a literary cliche by the time Chekhov wrote his plays.

In *Uncle Vanya* Chekhov is concerned with class distinctions. Marina, the old nurse, is a sterling character, and she is the only individual on the estate who seems truly at peace. Characters like Astrov are ground down by hard work and poor conditions; their freedom is curtailed by the sudden demands of well-to-do hypochondriacs like Serebryakov, who capriciously summons Astrov and then refuses to see him. Vanya's charges against Serebryakov center around the sacrifices of time and effort he's made, but he's also aggrieved by the poor wages he's earned. "For twenty-five years," says Vanya, "I have managed this estate, worked, sent you money, like a most conscientious clerk, and during all that time you not once thanked me. All the time□both in my youth and now□you paid me five hundred roubles a year for wages□fit for a beggar□and you never once thought of increasing it by even one rouble!"

Artistically, Chekhov was also a man of his times. A proponent of realism, he pays careful attention to how people actually act or live, not to some highly subjective or romantic vision of life. Thus, some of the finest dialogue of *Uncle Vanya* closely resembles real conversations, where indi viduals talk at cross purposes or misinterpret one another. For instance, when Sonya confesses her love for Astrov to Yelena, Yelena praises the doctor for his industry and bravery, but then begins to speak of her own feelings: "There's no happiness for me in this world." Instead of responding to her heartfelt admission, Sonya laughs from pleasure at her recent conversation with the doctor: "I am so happy ... so happy!" she exclaims. In his realism, Chekhov is akin to other great nineteenth-century writers like George Eliot, Emile Zola, and Gus-tave Flaubert.

Critical Overview

Uncle Vanya was first published in 1897 but was not performed by the Moscow Art Theater, where it premiered, until October 26,1899. Well received by audiences, *Uncle Vanya* was not entirely a success in Chekhov's own estimation. The directors at the Moscow Art Theater□Konstantin Stanislavsky and V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko□did not understand Chekhov's artistic vision, and Chekhov, sick with tuberculosis by the time *Uncle Vanya* was produced, could not intervene. Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote, "Chekhov was incapable of advising actors. ... Everything appeared so comprehensible to him: 'Why, I have written it all down,' he would answer." Stanislavsky admitted to being slightly confounded by Chekhov's plays; he said that when he went to produce *The Sea Gull,* he didn't know how to proceed, the words were too simple.

Even if Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko failed to fully appreciate Chekhov's vision, *Uncle Vanya* was much better received than its earlier incarnation, *The Wood Demon*. Chekhov's second full-length play, *The Wood Demon* was rejected by two theaters before premiering in Moscow in December 1889; it played for only three performances before closing. Chekhov insisted that *The Wood Demon* never be staged again, and he would not permit it to be included in his *Collected Works.*

Although Chekhov quickly gained fame for his short stories, his plays puzzled many Russian audiences and even other Russian writers. When Chekhov met Leo Tolstoy, the *War and Peace* author said to him: "But I still can't stand your plays. Shakespeare's are terrible, but yours are even worse!" Tolstoy was harsh in his critique of *Uncle Vanya,* which he saw performed by the Moscow Art Theater on January 24, 1900. The novelist berated Chekhov for having done nothing to support Astrov's contention that he and Vanya are the only decent and intelligent men in the district. Why, asked Tolstoy, should the audience have such a high opinion of these two men? Pitcher quoted Tolstoy as having said that Vanya and Astrov "had always been bad and mediocre, and that is why their sufferings cannot be worthy of interest."

However, some critics point out that Tolstoy's public statements may not have been entirely accurate. Pitcher noted that Tolstoy sketched out the plan for his own play, *The Living Corpse,* after having seen *Uncle Vanya*. As Pitcher stated: "Although Tolstoy, the rational thinker, could not help finding Chekhov's play inadequate, Tolstoy, the man of feeling, seems to have responded more positively to *Uncle Vanya* than he was willing to admit."

Thomas A. Eekman, in his introduction to *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov,* said that Chekhov was not a darling of early critics, including the traditional Russian populists. Eekman cited Nikolai K. Mikhailovsky, who blamed Chekhov for writing without social concern and for failing to adequately portray the peasants. Socialists, noted Eekman, thought Chekhov lacked political and revolutionary spirit. Vladimir Nabokov, in *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov,* commented on this exact point: "What rather irritated his politically minded critics was that nowhere does the author assign this type to any definite party or give him any definite political program. But that is the whole point.

Chekhov's inefficient idealists were neither terrorists, nor Social Democrats, nor budding Bolsheviks, nor any of the numberless members of numberless revolutionary parties in Russia."

Those critics who have not viewed Chekhov through a political lens have proven more generous. One prevailing opinion is that Chekhov gave expression to the loss and hopelessness of the Russian intelligentsia and landowners in the years leading up to the Russian Revolution. In the Soviet Union after the Revolution, a country radically different from old Russia, critics tended to dismiss Chekhov as a representative of bygone times.

Nabokov hailed Chekhov as a true artist, but he found that his artistry did not lie in his word choice. Wrote Nabokov: "Russian critics have noted that Chekhov's style, his choice of words and so on, did not reveal any of those special artistic preoccupations that obsessed, for instance, Gogol or Flaubert or Henry James. His dictionary is poor ... his literary style goes to parties clad in its everyday suit. .. . The magical part of it is that in spite of his tolerating flaws which a bright beginner would have avoided ... Chekhov managed to convey an impression of artistic beauty far surpassing that of many writers who thought they knew what rich beautiful prose was.... The variety of his moods, the flicker of his charming wit, the deeply artistic economy of characterization, the vivid detail, and the fade-out of human life□all the peculiar Chekhovian features□are enhanced by being suffused and surrounded by a faintly iridescent verbal haziness."

Chekhov has always been highly regarded in Great Britain and the United States. In Great Britain in the 1920s, writers like Virginia Woolf and John Galsworthy embraced him, and Chekhov is revered in the United States today; his plays are frequently revived in both countries. Some critics have noted that this is odd, since Chekhov's plays□with their overriding sense of helplessness and their plotlessness□are not what usually constitutes a theatrical success. Eric Bentley wrote in *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov:* "Why is it that scarcely a year passes without a major Broadway or West end production of a Chekhov play? Chekhov's plays□at least by reputation, which in commercial theater is the important thing□are plotless, monotonous, drab, and intellectual: find the opposite of these four adjectives and you have a recipe for a smash hit." Performing Chekhov, Bentley suggested, is an act of rebellion against the system: "It is as if the theater remembers Chekhov when it remembers its conscience."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Judd is a writer and book reviewer with an M.F.A. in English from the University of Michigan and a B.A. from Yale. In this essay, she discusses various the methods of indirect action employed by Chekhov in Uncle Vanya.

About suffering they were never wrong/ The Old Masters: how well they understood/ Its human position; how it takes place/ While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along. .. . "Musee des Beaux Arts," W. H. Auden

When it comes to portraying the anguish of the human condition, no other dramatist, past or present, equals Chekhov, especially in *Uncle Vanya,* his classic of thwarted desire. In practically every scene of the play, the characters give voice to their boredom, pain, and despair, yet *Uncle Vanya* is also filled with moments of lightness and comedy. Chekhov examines frustration and loss of hope indirectly, placing nearly all the climactic moments off stage, many of them in the distant past.

Chekhov is known for pioneering a dramatic technique□indirect action□which concentrates on subtleties of characterization and the interactions between individuals, instead of on flashy revelations or unexpected plot twists. In this play, "Everything, " as Vanya says, "is an old story." Vanya has been editing Serebryakov's work for twenty-five years; Sonya has spent six years loving Astrov without her affections being returned; and Astrov has slaved away as a country doctor for the past eleven years. Emotional scenes have been played out and the characters are exhausted and cranky. When Maria Voinitskaya begins to describe a letter she's received, Vanya interrupts her: "But for fifty years now we talk and talk, and read pamphlets. It's high time to stop."

If *Uncle Vanya* were a more conventional drama, Chekhov would have begun the play with the arrival of the professor and Yelena. Instead, the characters are already bored with one another by the time the curtain rises, and the first glimpse the audience catches of Vanya highlights the sense of malaise: he is yawning after an afternoon nap. In a less innovative play, Chekhov would have shown Vanya's growing disillusionment with the professor as it unfolded, rather than presenting it as an accomplished fact. In fact, the central drama of the play□ Vanya's realization that he's squandered his own talents in serving the professor□occurs a year before the play begins.

When Vanya's mother observes that he's changed beyond recognition, he says: "Up to last year, I deliberately tried just as you do to blind my eyes with this pedantry of yours and not to see real life□and I thought I was doing well. And now, if you only knew! I don't sleep nights because of disappointment, and anger that I so stupidly let time slip by, when now I could have had everything that my old age denies me!" Strikingly, Chekhov is not content to let the drama of such an impassioned speech pass without a moment of deflation. Sonya chides: "Uncle Vanya, that's boring," withholding even the most meager comfort.

Love is also denied, again and again, in *Uncle Vanya*. Except for two hurried embraces between Astrov and Yelena, the only romantic consummation occurs in Vanya's daydream of proposing to Yelena ten years prior, before she'd married Serebryakov. "It was so possible," says Vanya. "Now we both would have been awakened by the storm; she would have been frightened by the thunder and I would have held her in my arms and whispered: 'Don't be afraid, I am here.' Oh, beautiful thoughts, how wonderful, I am even smiling." Vanya is so demoralized that he can't even bring himself to fantasize in the present tense.

More telling is the fact Vanya doesn't sustain the thought of a romance with Yelena but launches immediately into another mental harangue about the piteous state of his life. "Why am I old?" cries Vanya, who then give voice to his real passion: how he has been deceived by the professor: "I adored that Professor, that pitiful, gouty creature, I worked for him like an ox!" For Vanya, the self-deception of his love for Serebryakov is far more painful than his unrequited love for the professor's wife.

Many critics have observed that Chekhov's three great plays—*Uncle Vanya, The Three Sisters,* and *The Cherry Orchard*—are difficult to describe because so little happens. Yet a lack of dramatic action is central to Chekhov's design. Articulating his artistic approach in a critique of a performance of *Uncle Vanya,* Chekhov faulted the actress who played Sonya for having thrown herself at Serebryakov's feet in Act III. "That's quite wrong," said Chekhov, "after all, it isn't a drama. The whole meaning, the whole drama of a person's life are contained within, not in outward manifestations.... A shot, after all, is not a drama, but an incident." In other words, what matters to Chekhov is the individual's emotions and motivations, not the activities that occupy his or her days. True to his convictions, Chekhov portrays the gun shot in *Uncle Vanya* as a ludicrous non-event, with Vanya firing at point-blank range only to miss the mark. Underscoring the absurdity of this act of untutored violence, Chekhov has the beautiful and bored Yelena struggle with Vanya, preventing him from firing again.

Although a conspicuous absence of drama is certainly a form of indirection, Chekhov's penchant for inserting humor into the most gloomy pronouncements or situations is an even more radical, anti-dramatic strategy. In *Uncle Vanya* heartbreakingly sad moments are undercut by incongruous details or moments of outright silliness. In some ways, Chekhov works like a magician, using the misdirection of humor to divert the audience from the sadness that engulfs Vanya, Astrov, Yelena, and Sonya. No matter how great the misery of the characters, Marina offers the same, simplistic cure—linden tea, vodka, or some noodle soup. The old nurse is unruffled by the accusations family members hurl at one another, reducing passion to the nonsense sounds made by animals. "It's all right, my child," Marina tells Sonya. "The geese will cackle—and then stop ... cackle—and stop." And when Marina believes that Vanya has shot Serebryakov, she says, "Ough! Botheration take them!" and goes right on knitting.

Despair itself takes on its own black humor in *Uncle Vanya*. When Yelena makes the casual observation, "And fine weather today.... Not hot...." Vanya responds: "It's fine weather to hang yourself." The intense self-pity of Vanya's pronouncement is so inappropriate that it catches the audience off guard in much the way the physical

comedy of a pratfall does. In Chekhov's plays, even pleasantries are subverted. The humor of Vanya's relentless gloominess is heightened by the nonchalance of those around him. For the characters in *Uncle Vanya,* talk of suicide is so unexceptional that no one bothers to ask Vanya what's wrong or even to respond to his noisy despair. At times, the play possesses the deadpan humor of an Addams Family cartoon, where dark statements are viewed as too banal, too commonplace, to warrant acknowledgment or comment.

Writing in *Anton Chekhov's Plays,* Charles B. Timmer maintained that elements of incongruity, which he termed "the bizarre," have been overlooked in Chekhov's work, and he described the dramatist's approach this way: "The *bizarre* is not necessarily absurd: it is, as it were, a statement, or a situation, which has no logical place in the context or in the sequence of events, the resulting effect being one of sudden bewilderment; the bizarre brings about a kind of mental 'airpocket': one gasps for breath, until the tension is relieved by laughter."

To illustrate, Timmer pointed to the moment in Act IV when Astrov is about to take leave of Vanya and Sonya. In a scene that should be highly emotional, Chekhov flouts expectations by having Astrov observe a meaningless detail□a map of Africa hanging on the wall. "I suppose down there the heat in Africa must be terrific now!" exclaims the doctor as Sonya and Vanya pay bills. According to Timmer, "this element of restraint, applied in a scene that is charged with emotions, greatly intensifies the impression on the spectator. The element of the bizarre as a technique to retard the action and restrain the emotions is used frequently by Chekhov in his plays."

Why would Chekhov write about the frustration and sadness of the human condition, only to undercut these emotions time and again with a noticeable lack of drama and eruptions of humor? In many ways, the lack of drama *is* Chekhov's point. Many critics have observed that *Uncle Vanya* is, in some sense, an anti-play, one where the characters try to strike out and change their lives, only to fail miserably. At the end of the final act, when Marina invites Astrov to drink some vodka, the audience is reminded of the very first scene of the play when she makes the exact same offer to him. Chekhov further underscores that old patterns have been re-established by having Vanya tell Serebryakov at their parting, "You will receive what you used to receive accurately. Everything will be as always."

Imprisoned in static lives, Vanya, Sonya, and Astrov make a bid for something larger and grander□for love or for an acknowledgment of how they've suffered□but nothing comes of their tired rebellion. The action of the play is indirect because it's internal, the plotting of a break that fails to materialize. As Eric Bentley wrote in *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov:* "In *Uncle Vanya,* recognition means that what all these years seemed to be so, though one hesitated to believe it, really is so and will remain so."

In *Uncle Vanya* there is no way out of misery, no light at the end of the tunnel. "You know," says Astrov, "when you walk through a forest on a dark night, if you see a small light gleaming in the distance, you don't notice your fatigue, the darkness, the thorny branches lashing your face .. . but for me there is no small light in the distance." Vanya

is also without hope: "Here they are: my life and my love: where shall I put them, what shall I do with them? This feeling of mine is dying in vain, like a ray of sunlight that has strayed into a pit, and I myself am dying." Such a bleak message can hardly be contemplated directly. Nor can Chekhov provide an answer beyond the half-hearted suggestion that the only way to live with such pain is to practice indirection.

When Astrov asks why Vanya isn't seeing Yelena and Serebryakov off, he answers: "Let them go, and I ... I can't. I feel very low, I must busy myself quickly with something.. . . Work, work!" Ultimately, in a world where there's no hope that the frustration will end, when there is no light and the characters' own sparks have been extinguished in a pit of engulfing darkness, all there can be is indirection and distraction□moments of humor, oases and panaceas like hard work and Marina's cup of linden tea.

Source: Elizabeth Judd, for *Drama forStudents,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Ray field provides an overview ofUncle Vanya, *discussing the manner in which Chekhov was able resurrect one of his biggest flops,* The Wood Demon, *as a new play that would come to be regarded as one of his masterworks*.

Uncle Vanya (Diadia Vania) can be seen as the last of Chekhov's earlier plays, all based on a problematic, male antihero. It was published in 1897 and first performed in 1899, after *The Seagull,* and was written, or reconstituted, out of the wreck of *The Wood Demon,* between 1892 and 1896. It is thus, also, the second of Chekhov's mature plays, its acts not broken into scenes, its Act IV an anti-climax of embarrassed departure, its tone hovering between cruel comedy and pathos. The basic plot, two thirds of the text, and the characters are carried over from *The Wood Demon:* comparing the two plays is a lesson on how a flop may be turned into a great play.

The core of both plays is the arrival of the professor and his young second wife, disrupting the life, and threatening the livelihood, of his daughter Sonya and of Uncle Vanya. The differences in *Uncle Vanya* are, firstly, that the Uncle turns the gun against the professor, not himself, but farcically fails to alter anything; secondly, that a new Act IV makes a mockery of reconciliation and instead leaves the old professor in full charge while the remaining characters are abandoned to their desolate future; and thirdly, that the catalyst of the action□the ecological idealist, the doctor□is also a lecherous alcoholic. Thus the inverted principles of Chekhovian comedy are established: age triumphs over youth, the servants rule their masters, and the normal world has crumbled. The subtitle□ *Scenes from Country Life* □is deliberately ironic.

Like many other Chekhov plays, *Uncle Vanya* incorporates material from his stories which certainly would have guided a contemporary audience's interpretation. Dr. Astrov's impassioned (though comically pedantic) laments for the ravaged environment recapitulate the lyrical complaints of the story *Panpipes (Svirel)* of 1887; the professor, terrified of death and torturing his wife and daughter with his hypochondria through a stormy summer night, is parodying the impressive professor, the narrator of *A Dreary Story (Skuchnaia istoriia)* of 1889. But once this material is in a dramatic framework, comic absurdity evaporates the authorial presence; the residual lyricism is to be found in the non-verbal elements□the storm winds, the nightwatchman's banging of a rail, the reproachfully silent piano, Telegin' s tentative strumming of a guitar, Marina's knitting, or the starling in a cage.

The play was first offered to the state Maly theatre in Moscow. After the failure of *The Seagull* the Maly prevaricated and Chekhov ceded *Uncle Vanya* to the Moscow Arts Theatre, which had made a success of *The Seagull*. Stanislavsky was persuaded to take the role of Dr. Astrov under Nemirovich-Danchenko's direction. As always, Stanislavsky saw social comment and pathos in the ruin of the sensitive provincials, Uncle Vanya and Astrov, by the ruthless professorial careerist from the capital; Chekhov's laconic comments, however, stressed the dry comedy. Nevertheless, *Uncle Vanya* has a little of the autobiographical input that made *The Seagull* so shocking a

play: the self-sacrificing Sonya, doomed to spinsterhood, was clearly recognisable as Chekhov's sister Marya, while the play's impoverished and diseased landscape was specified as the Serpukhov district around Chekhov's estate, Melikhovo.

By 1900 *Uncle Vanya* was acclaimed: for the first time Chekhov could consider himself a playwright by vocation and not renounce the theatre, although the play's success embarrassed him as much as earlier plays' failures: literati and their wives wept, while country doctors saw it as an expression of their grievances. Russian critics felt it was "an exercise in thought, in working out life and finding a way out".

The one resistant spectator was Tolstoy: "I went to see *Uncle Vanya* and I was appalled... Where's the drama? The play treads water". In fact, in refusing to let actions have their usual dramatic consequences□nobody arrests Uncle Vanya for firing at the professor□Chekhov shows his genius for unprecedented dramatic compression. Yelena doesn't have to compare herself to a caged bird: the starling is there in its cage. The forests don't catch fire (as they do in *The Wood Demon):* Astrov looks at the map of Africa and remarks how hot it must be there. The clothes are vestimentary markers of the character's neuroses: the professor in his galoshes and overcoat, Uncle Vanya in his flashy tie. The climaxes are built up as carefully as Ibsen's: Act III's announcement of the professor's plan to appropriate the entire estate for himself starts a long crescendo that culminates in gunshots. But the tension is constantly broken by apparent parody: Uncle Vanya goes over the top, claiming he "could have been Dostoevsky or Schopenhauer", reverting to infantile tantrums at his mother's knee. A modern audience reacts as Chekhov intended□they cannot weep at farce, but take their lead from Marina, the imperturbable servant, for whom all this row is "ganders cackling".

The key to *Uncle Vanya,* as to *The Cherry Orchard,* is in the doomed trees. Astrov's passionate defence of them is comic because it bores and puzzles his listener, Yelena; but it switches the audience's concern from the disrupted family to nature off-stage, which desperately signals its distress to the uncaring characters. Uncle Vanya, unlike Platonov or Ivanov in earlier plays, is thus out of focus, for all his eponymous status: his irrelevance makes him, in the last analysis, comic. What Chekhov shows happening to the Voinitsky family is only a symptom of a more fatal convulsion in the outside world□among the epidemics and dried-up rivers of the Russian landscape.

Source: Donald Rayfield, *"Uncle Vanya"* in *The International Dictionary of Theatre,* Volume 1: *Plays,* edited by Mark Hawkins-Dady, St. James Press, 1992, pp. 850-51.

Critical Essay #3

In this review of Uncle Vanya, *MacCarthy appraises Chekhov's work as a unique dramatic achievement in the sense that, while its subject matter is not sensational or thrilling, it is nevertheless a griping, "violently interesting" example of theatrical craft*.

Uncle Vanya was called by Tchekov "scenes from country life." He wished to make it perfectly clear from the outset that he was not writing a Scribe, a Sardou, or even an Alexandre Dumas *fils* play. He was writing a *Middlemarch,* only he was writing it for the theatre. He went so far as to steal one of George Eliot's characters *(vide Landmarks of Russian Literature),* Mr. Casaubon, who appeared in the flesh in this play. It is not undramatic because it is violently interesting; and it is dramatic, not because there is any sustained plot or any dexterity of move and countermove between the characters, but because the glimpses of ordinary everyday life which Tchekov gives us remind us poignantly of what we have seen in our everyday life. In fact, Tchekov meets the need of the Russian gentleman who said: "Je vais au théâtre pour voir ce que vois tous les jours." If that is your need, Tchekov does more than meet it, he fulfils it. If, on the other hand, you aspire to see just those very things which are lacking in your everyday life, that is to say, a spy killing Lord Kitchener, or M. Clemenceau throttling M. Poincaré on the cornice of the Arc de Triomphe, then Tchekov will disappoint you. Imagine Tchekov's *Uncle Vanya* being offered to an ordinary successful manager, and supposing, as was not long ago the case, no one had heard of Tchekov, he would at once say, "When is this play going to begin?"; and at its close, "why has it ended?"

The first act introduces us to a group of characters. In the second act the same group of characters have abounded in their own sense, abounded but not bounded, for they have not made one step forward. In the third act, one of the characters, Uncle Vanya himself, exasperated beyond human endurance, lets off a pistol at Professor Casaubon and misses him. That is all the action, properly speaking, there is in the play. In the fourth act, some of the characters leave the house where the conversation has been proceeding, and Uncle Vanya and Sonia, his niece, remain behind. That is all that happened. Yet the juxtaposition of these characters in these peculiar circumstances and the conversation which they make between them, open out vistas of thought and feeling. After seeing this play we know the whole lives of the seven or eight characters. We know their past, although they have told us little of it; we can guess their future. Moreover, although they belong to Russia, and to a distinct and marked epoch of Russian history, the period of stagnation preceding the Russo-Japanese war, during which, as a Russian once said, "Russia was dying of playing Vindt" (which is about the same as auction-bridge), we have met these characters in every other country. They swarm in London; not a few were in the audience when the play was being acted. We have each of us met Uncle Vanya full of good intentions and ideals turned slightly sour, brave in words, feeble in action, easily reduced to despair and tears, who, if exasperated sufficiently, can fire off a pistol which will never hit anyone. We have known Professor Casaubon's young wife, Elena, sensuous, non-moral, the would-be guardian angel, the harmless Circe so much more fatal to people like Dr. Astrov and Uncle Vanya than Circe herself, with all her paraphernalia of golden looms and grunting swine. We all

of us have known Sonia, the plain, unattractive, good niece, who loves in vain and remains behind to do the accounts for her uncle. But, the reader will say, if we know all these people by heart, if the characters of George Eliot, and many other novelists, are being paraded before us, where is the originality of Tchekov as a dramatist. His originality lies in this; not only has he put real people on the stage□dramatists have done that from the days of Aristophanes to those of St. John Hankin□but what Tchekov has done and what nobody else has ever attempted, is to put on the stage that which in all other plays happens during the *entr'actes*. That is to say, when you see a drama, when the passionate lovers say good-bye, when all is over, you know that the ordinary life of the people concerned must, in spite of everything, go on; that they must change their clothes, have breakfast, tea and supper, and that after the last good-bye has been said there will come a moment when someone will say, "The carriage is at the door," and the carriage will drive up and the guests will get into it and go, and the host will remain at home. Tchekov shows you all this; he shows you the guests going and the other people remaining at home. You hear the dull machinery of everyday once more creaking in its customary groove. This experience is novel and indescribably moving when it is presented on the stage with discretion. Of course, a great deal depends upon the acting. You cannot act a Tchekov play in the same way that you act a Pinero play, not even with the starriest of casts. Tchekov learnt this himself by bitter experience. When one of his first plays, *The Sea Gull,* was first produced at Petrograd at the State-paid theatre, the Comédie Française of Russia, full of tradition and competence, the play did not get across the footlights. But when it was gently treated by the Art Theatre at Moscow, and the play was allowed to act itself, the effect was tremendous.

So it was at the Court Theatre on Sunday and Monday. The play was produced by M. Theodore Komisarjevsky, late producer and art director at the Moscow State Theatre. It was one of the best performances the Stage Society has given, immensely superior to their last performance of the play just before the war. I missed, however, Miss Gillian Scaife as Sonia, and in some respects I preferred Mr. Guy Rathbone's Uncle Vanya to Mr. Leon Quartermaine's. Mr. Leon Quartermaine made him a little too harsh; he was neither sympathetically weak nor hysterically weak enough. In that last scene, when Uncle Vanya and Sonia sit down at the neglected writing table to work again□the only cure for their disappointments□and she makes her dim little speech about the world beyond the grave where they will forget the stale ache of them, Mr. Quartermaine did not give with equal poignancy the sense of suffering passively, such as only the weak and empty know. He ought, too, to have been made-up to look older. Miss Rathbone was perhaps a little too much the good schoolgirl, and hardly woman enough. I think in that last scene it would have been better if she had made a subtle distinction between the first part of her speech when she is repeating sincerely, yet, in a way, by rote, those consolations in which she believes, and the last few words when she puts her arms round his neck. She was excellent in all the scenes with Dr. Astrov and with Elena, excellent indeed in her bearing throughout. Miss Cathleen Nesbitt was an admirable Elena; her walk and gestures were perfect, with their suggestion of indolence and restlessness, as of an unsatisfied woman, neither cold nor passionate, a torment to herself, who tantalises others and leads them on to torment her. Her acting made it quite clear how exasperating Vanya's passion for her was, how impossible it was for her to be even decently kind to him sometimes; if only Mr. Quartermaine had made us

sympathise, too, as much with Vanya in these scenes, the scenes between them would have been perfect, but he could not be utterly, helplessly emotional. Though Elena longs to be rid of her pestering lovers, she really is only interested in love. Miss Nesbitt acted the scene in which Astrov tries to interest Elena in his ideas extraordinarily well; her boredom, her inability to keep her mind on anything but the man who is talking to her she expressed to perfection.

I have a great respect for Mr. Franklin Dyall as an actor. I have never seen him fail, and I have seen him succeed where success is rare. He can give as well as anyone (and how few such actors there are) an impression of an intense character somehow bedevilled, run-to-seed, spoilt. He would make an admirable Rolling in The Wild Duck, or a good Larry in John Bull's Other Island. This characteristic suits the part of Astrov. To Sonia, Astrov, in spite of his coarseness and drunkenness, seems so fine in himself, and he even moves Elena a little. To her, too, he seems superior to the others, and she thinks of that superiority in characteristically feminine terms as "a streak of genius." The idealist gone wrong is often attractive to women; he is a person to be saved, too, which is an extra attraction, while the sense of a conflict within him suggests to them possibilities of passion. Mr. Hignett as the professor was duly empty and fatuous, yet, as he should be, a man of imposing exterior. He has written rows of books and stacks of articles on art and literature, saying in them what all clever people knew before and others take no interest in at all. We know him well. The minor parts□the old nurse (Miss Iné Cameron), the amiable tame cat of the house, Telyegen (Mr. Dodd), Vanya's old mother (Miss Agnes Thomas)□were beautifully played. When you have a good producer, one of the first effects noticeable is that everybody in the play becomes conscious of the importance of their parts. It was an admirable production, and it was borne in on one again what all clever people know and others, alas ! take no interest in□namely, that it is not talent but the art of production that our stage lacks at the present time.

Source: Desmond MacCarthy, "Tchekov and the Stage Society" in the *New Statesman,* Vol. XVIII, no. 451, December 3, 1921, pp. 254-55.

Adaptations

In 1994, Louis Malle directed a film version of *Uncle Vanya,* entitled *Vanya on 42nd Street*. The film takes an usual approach to Chekhov's text in that it portrays a theatre company rehearsing the play for production. The lives of the actors mirror the action within the playwright's script. Playwright David Mamet *(Speed the Plow)* wrote the adaptation of the play, Grammy nominee Joshua Redman created the jazz score, and Julianne Moore, Wallace Shawn (as Vanya), and Andre Gregory starred in the production.

In 1962, Stuart Burge filmed and directed a film adaptation of *Uncle Vanya,* which starred Laurence Olivier, Joan Plowright, Rosemary Harris, and Michael Redgrave. The onstage version of the play was directed by Olivier at the Chichester Drama Festival.

Topics for Further Study

It has been suggested that Astrov's initial conversation with the nurse acts as an overture to the play, hinting at the important issues that Vanya and others will later elaborate upon, just as a musical overture introduces certain melodic themes. How might Astrov's speech be viewed as an overture? Also, discuss how Sonya's concluding speech might be viewed as the play's finale.

Research the lives of peasants in Russia in the late-nineteenth century. What are the similarities and differences between the enslavement of African Americans in the U. S. and serfdom in Russia? Examine Marina and Telegin in *Uncle Vanya* and consider what Chekhov might be saying about the various classes in Russian society.

The characters in *Uncle Vanya* often discuss work and idleness. For instance, Astrov, in parting from Yelena, says: "You infected us with your slothfulness. I have lazed away a whole month, while the people have grown sicker..." What is Chekhov saying about the value of honest work? Be sure to discuss each character's attitude toward work, including the views set forth by Serebryakov and Maria Vasilyevna.

Chekhov was a practicing doctor, and doctors often appear in his plays. Analyze how Astrov's profession makes him like□or unlike□the other characters in the play. Compare and contrast Astrov with the doctor characters in other Chekhov plays, such as Dorn in *The Sea Gull* or Tchebutykin in *The Three Sisters*.

Astrov is admired by Sonya and Yelena for his love of nature and his commitment to conservation. Sonya praises him for believing that "forests adorn the earth, that they teach a man to understand the beautiful and inspire him to lofty moods." And Yelena describes Astrov's passion for the woods this way: "When he plants a little tree, he is already imagining what it will be like in a thousand years, he is already dreaming of the happiness of mankind. Such people are rare, one must love them." How does Astrov compare to ecologists of today?

Compare and Contrast

1897: Marxist Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov is exiled to Siberia for three years for smuggling illegal literature from Europe into Russia, organizing strikes, and printing anti-government leaflets and manifestoes. Ulyanov was the older brother of Lenin, the father of Russia's communist revolution.

Today: Soviet president Boris Yeltsin regularly meets with world leaders, including U. S. President Bill Clinton, to exchange ideas.

1897: Regard for conservation of natural resources is low, with most not considering the impact of the vast depletion of forests. In *Uncle Vanya,* Astrov is concerned with the devastation of the forests. He proposes that instead of wood, peat could be used for heat and stones for building houses.

Today: Conservation of natural resources is a primary concern. About 655 million acres□or approximately 29% of the land area of the United States□has been designated forestland and is under the jurisdiction of the United States Department of Agriculture. The state with the largest national forest area is Alaska (22.2 million acres), followed by California (20.6 million acres).

1897: In *Uncle Vanya* Sonya and Vanya become distracted by the arrival of Serebryakov and Yelena, allowing the crops to remain untended. Food shortages are a regular occurrence in Europe and Russia. In 1891 and 1892, Russia was crippled by famine after the country's crops failed. Millions were reduced to starvation and the rural peasants raided towns looking for food. The famine was partially relieved by a shipment of some three million barrels of flour from the United States.

Today: Each year, the United States produces approximately 59.5 million metric tons of wheat, 7.9 million metric tons of rice, and 187 million metric tons of corn. In 1995, the U. S. exported $55.8 billion worth of agricultural products.

1897: Money is an important theme in *Uncle Vanya*. In Russia, Finance Minister Sergei Yulievich Witte introduces the gold standard. World gold production reaches nearly 11.5 million ounces, up from 5 to 6 million ounces per year between 1860 and 1890.

Today: The U.S. produced roughly 320 metric tons of gold in 1995.

1897: In *Uncle Vanya Astrov* is haunted by the death of one of his patients from typhus. In 1854, an epidemic of typhus devastated the Russian army, and the disease continues to be a threat throughout the century.

Today: Typhus is no longer a problem; in 1930, Harvard bacteriology professor Hans Zinsser□ with help from John Franklin Enders of Children's Hospital, Boston□developed the first anti-typhus vaccine. Today, AIDS is the most serious epidemic in the U. S. and other industrialized nations. By 1995, more than half a million people had died of AIDS.

What Do I Read Next?

The Three Sisters, a Chekhov play first produced at the Moscow Art Theater in 1901, is the story of a wealthy Russian family who longs to move to Moscow, but the three sisters find themselves mired in provincial life. Like *Uncle Vanya, The Three Sisters* is a play of thwarted desires and indirect action.

In *The Cherry Orchard,* Chekhov's characters long to preserve an orchard that holds fond memories rather than allowing it to be chopped down and turned into a subdivision.

Chekhov was deeply influenced by Leo Tolstoy. There are parallels between Tolstoy's treatment of the peasants and of religious faith in *Anna Karenina* and Chekhov's treatment of the same subjects in *Uncle Vanya*. However, *Anna Karenina* is also considered one of the world's great, tragic love stories.

Like Chekhov, George Eliot was a proponent of realism in literature. Her masterpiece *Middlemarch* is the story of Dorothea Brooke, a woman who wants to make a worthwhile contribution to society but is thwarted by a tragically misbegotten marriage.

Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* is one of the world's finest novels about deception and frustrated desires.

Further Study

Bordinat, Philip. "Dramatic Structure in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* " in Chekhov's Great Plays, New York University Press, 1981, pp. 47-60.

A discussion of how Chekhov's plays are structured.

Gilman, Richard. *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening into Eterni- ty,Yale* University Press, 1997.

An examination of each of Chekhov's full-length plays, placing them in the context of Russian and European drama and of the artist's own life.

Koteliansky, S. S., editor and translator. *Anton Tchekhov: Literary and Theatrical Reminiscences,* Benjamin Blom, 1965.

A collection of literary and theatrical reminiscences of Chekhov from writers Leo Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky and from directors V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky, as well as excerpts from Chekhov's diary.

Magarshack, David. "Purpose and Structure in Chekhov's Plays" in *Anton Chekhov's Plays,* W. W. Norton, 1977, pp. 259-71.

An essay that discusses how Chekhov's plays were interpreted by the Moscow Art Theater and how his plays are constructed.

Melchinger, Siegfried. *Anton Chekhov,* Frederick Ungar, 1972.

This book provides a biographical essay and discussions of all Chekhov's major plays.

Rayfield, Donald. *Anton Chekhov: A Life,* Henry Holt, 1998.

A well-structured and comprehensive biography of the writer. Rayfield is a noted Chekhov scholar.

Vitins, Ieva. "Uncle Vanya's Predicament" in *Chekhov's Great Plays,* New York University Press, 1981, pp. 35-46.

An essay on *Uncle Vanya*

Bibliography

Bentley, Eric. "Craftsmanship in *Uncle Vanya"* in *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov,* G. K. Hall, 1989, pp. 169-85.

Eekman, Thomas A. Introduction to *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov,* G. K. Hall, 1989, pp. 1-7.

Nabokov, Vladimir. "Chekhov's Prose" in *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov,* G. K. Hall, 1989, pp. 26-33.

Pitcher, Harvey. *The Chekhov Play,* University of California Press, 1985.

Timmer, Charles B. "The Bizarre Element in Chekhov's Art" in *Anton Chekhov's Plays,* W. W. Norton, 1977, pp. 272-85.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535