# WOMEN AND CHEKHOV

A thesis

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DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

by

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## ABSTRACT

The subject of this study is the question of women in Chekhov's private life and his work.

The first chapter "About Chekhov" presents the material about the women with whom he is known to have had close relationships. Excerpts from various sources, especially from his vast correspondence, document his dignity and sensitivity as well as respect toward women.

The second chapter deals with women characters in his stories. According to the type, environment and their characteristecs, the chapter is divided into four parts:

1. Peasant Woman - Baba
2. Middle-Class and Bourgeois Ladies
3. Adulterous Woman
4. Socially Aware Women.

The third chapter analyzes separately the women characters of Chekhov's plays in the sequence in which he has written them.

Chekhov's innovative short and sober writing style, painstaking objectivity, and a strong dislike of the clichés and superficial values of the ruling class in his Russia, earned him a very special place among Russian writers. The Conclusion appraises his values and contribution to literature in his time and today.

## RESUME

Comme le titre déjà l'indique, le sujet de cette étude c'est la femme dans la vie privée de Tchekhov ainsi que dans son oeuvre.

Le premier chapitre "Sur Tchekhov" presente le matériel sur les femmes avec lesquelles il a eu des contacts etroits.

Des passages provenant de différentes sources et spécialement de sa vaste correspondence documenterons sa dignité et sa sensibilité ainsi que son respect pour la femme.

Le second chapitre traite des personnages des femmes dans ses nouvelles.

Selon le type de ces femmes, leur milieu social et leur caractéristique le chapitre est divisé en quatre parties:

1. La femme paysanne
2. La petite bourgeoise
3. La femme adultère
4. La femme à conscience sociale

Le troisième chapitre analyse séparément les personnages des femmes dans les pièces de Tchekhov en les considérant en ordre chronologique.

Tchekhov s'est distingué par son style original succinct et sobre, par son objectivité ainsi que par son rejet des clichés et de la superficialité de la classe dirigeante en Russie. Cela lui a valu une place tout à fait spéciale parmi les ecrivains russes. En conclusion de ce travail on évalue la contribution de l'oeuvre de Tchekhov à la literature de son temps ainsi que à celle d'aujourd'hui.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

The writer was born in Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, where she received her elementary and secondary education. There she also attended University majoring in languages. Due to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August of 1968 she left the country and soon after married an American citizen.

In 1969 she started attending Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, majoring again in languages and graduated in June 1970 with Bachelor of Arts.

She entered the graduate section of the Department of Russian & Slavic Studies at McGill University in September of 1971.

FOR MY MOTHER.

When a man lives in peace at home, life seems quite normal to him, but as soon as he steps out and looks closer and asks around, especially women, life is terrible.

Chekhov's Notebook # 1, p. 73, Note 1

## INTRODUCTION.

Since the time of my High-school years, when I had to read Chekhov as a mandatory part of preparation for the Russian language and literature classes, I have been fond of his writings. His heroes seem realistic, true to the Russian nature and the times in which they lived, and much more believable and closer to me than the heroes of some other Russian writers of that period. The lack of pretense and stuffy ceremoniousness of Chekhov's characters make them natural and likable to me.

My interest in Chekhov's writings was naturally followed by growing interest in the author himself. After reading several biographies about him and getting to know him as a person and a warm human being, he became my favorite Russian author. Particularly his short style of writing, initiated by the necessity of earning money quickly and later becoming his trade-mark, was to me like a fresh spice on an insipid meal, opposed to the slow-paced and pondering style of say Dostoyevsky.

An examination of bibliographies of publications written about Chekhov and his works indicated to me that there has not been much written exclusively about his heroines. This fact encouraged my decision to write about women in Chekhov's works. In this thesis I will attempt to bring heroines closer to the reader by drawing the attention to their sufferings, dreariness and monotony of their lives as well as their innermost feelings and hopes.

Because of the large number of Chekhov's stories in comparison with his few plays, I have decided to analyze the women of these two categories in two separate chapters, and to divide heroines of his stories by types into four groups. The women in each of his major plays I analyze separately.

The immense number and variety of characters and types of people Chekhov produced makes it virtually impossible to include and analyze every woman-character in this study. I hope, however, that I will succeed in choosing the most significant and most representative of each of the groups to show their typical qualities and characteristics, as well as Chekhov's distinctive skill in creating them.

I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to Professor Paul Austin for the seemingly limitless patience with which he bore with me through all the delays caused by unexpected turns in my personal life, and for his valuable counsel and suggestions.

## Chapter I.

### ABOUT CHEKHOV.

Chekhov was born in 1860 into a peasant family and had his grandfather not bought out his freedom from serfdom, Anton would have been born a serf.[1]

His father was owner of a general store in Taganrog and was a strict disciplinarian and a religious fanatic. Anton's and his brothers' and sister's upbringing was harsh and filled with regular beatings. In later life he wrote with bitterness: "I could never forgive my father for having whipped me when I was a small child." Chekhov loved his mother dearly and his father's rude behaviour toward her left another painful spot in his memory. He never forgave his father the despotism and his feelings toward him remained cool for the rest of his life.

In 1876 his father had to leave Taganrog in order to escape his creditors. He and the family moved to Moscow, leaving Anton behind to finish the Gymnasium. He left Taganrog in 1879 to join the rest of the family in Moscow with a scholarship of 300 rubles a year awarded him by the Taganrog Town Council. Seeing the pitiful conditions in which his family lived upon arrival in Moscow, he decided that it was up to him to improve things.

He entered Moscow University to become a doctor and

started to support himself and his family by contributing humorous short stories to the less reputable newspapers. Under different pseudonyms Chekhov wrote many of these stories. Nevertheless, he did not take his talent very seriously until he received a letter from a well known and prominent writer of that time, Grigorovich. In his letter Grigorovich expressed his high opinion of Chekhov's talent and told him it would be a great pity to waste it as he had been doing up till then. In his reply Chekhov admitted his frivolous attitude and promised to take his writings more seriously from then on.

Even though he was a medical doctor by profession and began his practice in Moscow, he never became a full-time physician. He concentrated more and more on his writing and developed his individual style, choosing his subjects exclusively from contemporary life which he saw around him on his house visits as a doctor. He portrayed the triviality of life and human pettiness with amazing accuracy and detachment. His characters are lonely and sad people, full of frustrations, disappointment and unfulfilled hopes. They are revealed realistically, without sentiment or romantic distortion. The lack of excitement and real aspirations or noble aims in their lives, however, is not always caused only by the weakness of their character. The corruption of higher officials was too much to fight against, the worries of satisfying the basic needs of life had occupied their minds more than anything else, and often necessity of survival not pure interest had brought them into the positions and occupations they

had held:

> . . . She had become schoolmistress from necessity, without feeling any vocation for it; and she had never thought of a vocation, of serving the cause of enlightenment; . . . And what time had she for thinking of vocation, of serving the cause of enlightenment? Teachers, badly paid doctors, and their assistants, with their terribly hard work, have not even the comfort of thinking that they are serving an idea or the people, as their heads are always stuffed with thoughts of their daily bread, of wood for the fire, of bad roads, of illnesses. It is a hard-working, an uninteresting life, and only silent, patient cart-horses like Marya Vassilyevna could put up with it for long; the lively, nervous, impressionable people who talked about a vocation and serving the idea were soon weary of it and gave up the work.[2]

With a few exceptions, Chekhov's characters are defeated individuals and failures, rather typical of the social class to which they belong, who spend much time in futile talks about Russia, their never-ending hopes and dreams, and distant but better future. Yet, in spite of their longing for some meaningful existence and occasional beauty in their life, they never leave this pointless life or actively change it into something better. Their frustrations are the results of their own helplessness. Gorkii in his reminiscences about Chekhov said:

> Sometimes I had the impression that his relation to people was a feeling of some kind of a helplessness which was approaching quiet, cold despair. . . . He used to say: 'All of Russia is a country of greedy and lazy people - they all eat too much, drink too much, sleep during the day, and snore. They marry for order in their house, but keep mistresses for the prestige in society. They have a dog-like psychology - beat them and they only whine quietly and go away to their dog-houses, pet them and they lie down on their back, hold their paws up and wriggle their tails. . . .'[3]

According to the people who knew Anton Chekhov, as a person he was a man of modest and maybe even shy personality, reserved and without any sign of wildly passionate desires, who

found his own level somewhere between the rigidity of his parents and the freedom current among the more Bohemian of his contemporaries. As a writer, he always insisted on the artist's objectivity and the importance of not confusing the solution of a problem with its presentation, and he never offered prescription for the moral and social ills of mankind with which his stories and plays dealt.

Needless to say, many critics found his stories too somber and distressing and especially the lack of solutions became the target of their criticism. To this Chekhov replied:

> All I wanted to say to people was: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!' The most important thing is that people should realize that; for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves. I will not live to see it, but I know that it will be quite different, quite unlike our present life. And so long as this different life does not exist, I shall go on saying to people again and again: 'Please understand that your life is bad and dreary!'[4]

A direct defence of his style and approach we find in his letter of May 30, 1888, to A. S. Suvorin, editor of the newspaper "Novoe Vremia" and Chekhov's friend: "An artist must not be the judge of his characters or of what they say, but only an impartial witness."[5] In another letter yet, again to Suvorin, Chekhov argues:

> . . . You scold me for my objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, lack of ideals and ideas, and so on. When I describe horse thieves, you would have me say: 'Stealing horses is evil.' But that was known long ago without me. Let the jury judge them; my business is simply to show what they are like. . . .
>
> . . . When I write I reckon entirely upon the reader, trusting him to add the subjective elements which are lacking in the story.[6]

Similar remarks and arguments we find throughout Chekhov's corres-

pondence.

The brevity of his style, complaint of his critics, might be attributed to the fact that at the time of Chekhov's literary debut, his writing was a source of a much needed income for himself and the dependent family members, and the low-quality journals for which he wrote then considered brevity a prime virtue.[7]

Chekhov's serious thinking seems to have been more in a social than political direction, although the social structure he portrays, and so indirectly criticizes, was a direct result of the political system of that time. Avrahm Yarmolinsky writes about Chekhov:

> . . . He was the least dogmatic as he was the least political-minded of men. He owed allegiance to no ready-made ideology, no class, no party, no institution, be it of Church or State. The only dictates that he recognized were those of his conscience. His concern was always with the man, the woman, the child as a person. To portray them simply, inwardly, and, above all, honestly, was, he believed, his whole duty.[8]

In a letter to Alexei Pleshcheev of October 4, 1888, Chekhov himself wrote:

> I am neither liberal, nor conservative, nor gradualist, nor monk, nor indifferentialist. I would like to be a free artist and nothing else. . . .[9]

Chekhov, who never intended to be a writer, had already from his boyhood years very strongly disliked the bourgeoisie whom, for their pretentiousness and thoughtlessness toward men, he found superfluous and whose credo he described: "Be faithful to your wife, pray beside her at the altar, make money, love sport - and your affairs are all set, both in this and the next

world!"[10] Although himself a member of this class, Chekhov portrayed in many of his stories the vulgarity, superficial values and hypocrisy of the majority of the bourgeoisie, by which he demonstrated not only his dislike toward these "superfluous individuals" but also his concern with the growing number of flaws in the social system of Russia of his time. A more detailed account of Chekhov's views on the subject of bourgeoisie will be presented in Part 2 of Chapter II: Middle-Class and Bourgeoisie Ladies.

According to his biographers there were not very many women in Chekhov's life, although, as Beverly Hahn points out in her book, he showed quite early a serious interest in the subject of women. He was both fascinated and frightened by their psychological impulses and their willingness to be dominated by men, a feeling generally foreign to the psyche of a man.[11] He seems to have enjoyed company of women, especially if they were witty, intelligent and attractive. But his desire to protect his independence and freedom to write, which he considered essential task in his life, made him extremely cautious and prevented any serious or deep involvement of his heart. Another reason, and probably a more important one, for his prolonged bachelorhood was the fact, that his requirements for a partner for life were rather high, and he was not lucky enough to meet a free woman which would possess the right combination of attractiveness, independence and intelligence to satisfy him. Nevertheless, Ivan Bunin said about him:

> . . . he knew the hearts of women well, had deep feeling for the feminine, many women loved him very much; only a few were able to speak with women and have such a deep effect on them as Chekhov. . . .[12]

Chekhov's regardful and gentle attitude toward women is clearly evident in the letter to his brother Alexander, written in 1889:

> . . . During my very first visit I was repelled by your shocking, completely unprecendented treatment of Natalia Alexandrovna [Alexander's wife] and the cook. Forgive me please, but treating women like that, no matter who they are, is unworthy of a decent, loving human being.[13]

Although there do not seem to be many women playing an important role in Chekhov's life, Boris Zaitsev in his book Chekhov divides his "love life" into three periods: a) In the first period Chekhov was rather unconcerned toward women. He liked to have fun with them and joke with them, but he did not long for their constant presence. He needed a woman only as a friend. b) In the second period there awakens the desire for a woman with whom he could find peace and understanding in all aspects of his life. He looks for a woman for life. c) In the third, and the last, period he finds the woman who fulfills his notions of an ideal wife, and marries her. Soon after, however, follows the disappointment of his conception of wife and marriage.

On the topic of love Chekhov wrote earlier in his life a small note in his notebook:

> Love is either the shrinking remnant of something long past which is dying out but was once tremendous, or it is a part of something which in the future will develop into something tremendous, at present, however, does not satisfy, and offers far less than one expects.[14]

Chekhov knew very well what it meant to love somebody, but it was

not his habit to make a public parade of his innermost feelings. Even his letters to women toward whom he was romantically inclined or to his wife whom he loved dearly are lacking any passionate declarations of his undying love and devotion. He was a modest man who disliked being a center of attention and who seldom, if ever, spoke of his feelings with anyone. Perhaps the most straightforward evidence of this is provided by Nemirovich-Danchenko, director of Moscow Art Theater, in his memoires. "I believe", he remarks, "that Chekhov had great success with women. I say I believe, because neither he nor I liked gossipping on this topic." Nemirovich-Danchenko goes on to say that Chekhov never had any firm or long-lasting attachment, and that, shortly before his marriage, he revealed that "none of his liaisons had lasted more than a year!"[15]

Also according to Chekhov's brother Mikhail Pavlovich, his romances while still attending the gymnasium were happy ones. However, the first better known or publicized romance of Chekhov, one with Lydia Mizinova, a friend of his sister Maria Pavlovna, came long after the gymnasium years. Chekhov affectionately called her "beautiful Lika". This "romance" lasted several years, but the deep feelings seem to have been rather one-sided, for Lika's love was not returned. She was a beautiful, lively and affectionate girl, ten years Chekhov's junior, endowed in addition to her beauty also with intelligence and wit. According to Ronald Hingley in spite of all her charm she could not have given a satisfactory and fulfilling relationship to Chekhov, as she was not

gifted with any particular talent. This prevented Chekhov from respecting her as his equal as it later came to realization between Chekhov and Olga Knipper. [16]

From Lika's letters to Anton we know that she loved him very much and was full of hopes that his joking manner toward her would soon change into a serious interest and deep love. From Chekhov's letters to Lika we can conclude though, that he liked her very much and enjoyed her company, but whenever their relationship was on the verge of changing into something more serious than the close friendship it was, he turned everything into a joke. For Lika it was more and more difficult to reconcile herself with her feelings for Chekhov and assumed that the best way to forget him was to go away. She left for Paris with the writer Potapenko for whom she felt some affection, but whom she did not love. In Paris she did not find happiness; Potapenko left her and returned to Russia to his wife, and her little daughter by him died. Lika and her unhappy fate were according to most of Chekhov's biographers an inspiration and model for Nina Zarechnaia in The Seagull. Lika Mizinova, whom we can place into the first period of the division by Zaitsev, in all probability did not fulfill Chekhov's idea of a woman for life. She seemed to him too frivolous, shallow and without any ideals or aims. Life to her was only a game. Ivan Bunin said about Chekhov's relationship with Lydia Mizinova: "Anton Pavlovich did not love Lika. She was in love with him. He did not like her character."[17]

Another of his romantic involvements, which would qualify for Zaitsev's second period of Chekhov's love life division, was with an inspiring writer, Lydia Avilova. At the time of their first meeting, Avilova was already married and mother of a son. In her book of reminiscences Chekhov in My Life, her relationship with Chekhov is described in only eight meetings, but it is quite clear that they must have met more often than that in their ten-year long unhappy "love-affair". During this time Chekhov was to Avilova also a leader and a valuable advisor in her literary career. In spite of Chekhov's help, however, Avilova's growing family and caring for the home had taken too much of her time for her to be able to concentrate on writing and refining it to perfection.

At one time she had come to a difficult decision to leave her husband and possibly her children to be with Chekhov. Leaving herself a way of retreat she told Chekhov of her readiness to leave her husband by having engraved on a pendant for a watch chain: "Short stories by Chekhov, p. 267, lines 6 and 7" which represented the words: "If you want my life, come and take it", taken from Chekhov's story "The Neighbours." Chekhov never really answered directly to this invitation, thus refusing her sacrifice and showing his doubts about a happy conclusion to their relationship. In the opinion of Bunin, who was a close friend of Chekhov during his years spent in the Crimea, the relationship with Avilova was the only major love in Chekhov's life. Avilova herself recalls Chekhov saying:

> . . . remember our first meetings? And do you know that I was deeply in love with you? Seriously in love with you? Yes, I loved you. It seemed to me that there was not another woman in the world I could love like that. You were beautiful and sweet and there was such freshness in your youth, such dazzling charm. I loved you and I thought only for you. . . . I loved you, but I know that you were not like many other women, and that the love one can feel for you must be pure and sacred and must last all one's life. . . .[18]

In 1898 Chekhov wrote a short story entitled "About Love" ("O liubvi") which tells of an unhappy love-affair strikingly resembling his own relationship with Avilova. There the hero expresses his innermost feelings:

> . . . We feared anything which might betray our secret to ourselves. Deep and tender though my love was, I tried to be sensible about it, speculating what the upshot might be if we should lack the strength to fight our passions. It seemed incredible that a love so quiet, so sad as mine could suddenly and crudely disrupt the happy tenor of her husband's and children's lives: disrupt an entire household. . . . Was that the way for a decent man to behave? She would have gone away with me - but where to? . . . How long would our happiness last? What would happen to her if I became ill or died? What if we just fell out of love? . . .[19]

At the end of the story during the last meeting of the two lovers the hero says:

> . . . Kissing her face, her shoulders, her tear-drenched hands. . . I declared my love. With a burning pain in my heart, I saw how inessential, how trivial, how illusory it was . . . everything which had frustrated our love. I saw that, if you love, you must base your theory of love on something loftier and more significant than happiness or unhappiness , than sin or virtue as they are commonly understood. Better, otherwise, not to theorize at all.[20]

In one of his letters to Avilova Chekhov purposely drew her attention to this story, and therefore it might not be wrong to believe that the feelings and the words of the story's hero were close to Chekhov's own. After having read this story, Avilova

realized that Anton Pavlovich was really in love with her, but that was the limit past which there does not and cannot exist anything more for them. Oddly enough, their affair ended just like the one in the story - they said good-bye to each other at a railway station and never saw each other again. Their correspondence, however, continued till Chekhov's death.

Virginia Llewellyn Smith in her book Anton Chekhov and the Lady with the Dog strongly distrusts Avilova's claim that Chekhov was in love with her and that she played an important part in his love-life. She says:

> . . . attractive though the theory may be that Chekhov was in love with Lydia Avilova, and suffered himself at the hands of the blind destiny which ruins many of his fictional romances, the fact remains that little concrete evidence has been found to support this theory. The only indication that Chekhov loved Avilova is contained in her account of ten meetings with him. Of these, six indisputably took place. But what exactly occurred between her and Chekhov on any one of these occasions could be known only to the two of them.
>
> The evidence of Chekhov's not having been in love with Avilova is on the other hand considerable, although not conclusive. . . .[21]

The same doubtful attitude we find in Ronald Hingley's A New Life of Anton Chekhov, where he rather categorically discredits Avilova's book, "most of which cannot be checked from independent sources and which may consist in part of delusionary fantasies."[22] Also other contemporary biographers of Chekhov disputed Avilova's book, among others Ernest J. Simmons, nevertheless, for the lack of other written evidence, the real story will remain buried with the two people involved.

At the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Chekhov's

birth the Soviet Academy of Sciences published a book Literaturnoe nasledstvo. Tom 68, Chekhov, containing much material until then unreleased publicly. Among others, there is a letter of Avilova to Chekhov, this being a form of congratulations to his marriage and his reply to it. Avilova's letter, written in the name of A. A. Luganovich, heroine of the story "About Love", was addressed to P. A. Alyokhin, hero of the same story. In it Luganovich writes that she found out about his marriage and wishes him wholeheartedly much happiness. She mentions that she herself has calmed down although she reminisces very often, however, with love and without pain because at present there is a good deal of happiness and contentment in her life. She is happy and wants to know if he is happy, too. Then she thanks him for everything he gave her:

> . . . Was our love real? No matter whether real or not, I am grateful to you for it. Thanks to you, all my youth was sprinkled with a glittering and fragrant dew. If I knew how to pray, I'd pray for you. I'd pray: God! Let him understand how good, great and popular he is. When he does, he must be happy then! . . .

Chekhov's reply came in the same manner:

> . . . I bow deeply to you and thank you for your letter. You want to know if I am happy. Above all I am ill and now I know seriously ill. So there you are, decide for yourself. I repeat I am very grateful for your letter. Very. You write of a glittering and fragrant dew, but I say a glittering and fragrant dew appears only on beautiful fragrant flowers.
>
> I have always wished you happiness, and had I been able to have done something for your happiness, I would have done so with pleasure. But I could not.
>
> What is it Happiness, anyway? Who knows? At least I, thinking of my life now, see my happiness in those moments

> when, as it seemed to me at the time, I was most unhappy. In youth I was an optimist - but that is something else again. Anyhow, once again I thank you. . . .
>
> Alyokhin.[23]

The only woman whom we can without dispute call Chekhov's mistress on the basis of written documents, i.e. her letters to Chekhov, was Lydia Yavorski. She was a young actress of Moscow's Korsh's Theater and met Chekhov sometimes in 1893. She was a very ambitious young lady, to whom the progress of an acting career was all important. It took a couple of years for their relationship to become intimate. Hingley notes "that the affair was consummated on, or possibly before, some date in January of 1895, five letters of that month from Lydia to Chekhov establish fairly conclusively."[24], and thereafter plunged within a few months to its abrupt end. That it did not seem, however, to shatter either of the two lovers leads us to a belief that it was a rather passing and passion-lacking affair. On Chekhov's recommendation to A.S. Suvorin, the latter eventually took Yavorski on at his St. Petersburg Theater.[25]

Chekhov did not get married until he was over forty, and as it turned out, only three years before his death. His ideas about marriage and married life were rather original and unusual at the time. When A. Suvorin urged him to marry, Chekhov replied:

> Very well, then, I shall marry if you so desire. But under the following conditions: everything must continue as it was before, in other words, she must live in Moscow and I in the country, and I'll go visit her. I will never be able to stand the sort of happiness that lasts from one day to the next. . . . I promise to be a splendid husband,

but give me a wife, who, like the moon, does not appear in my sky every day. . . .[26]

Later, judging from his letter to his wife, Chekhov realized his mistake in thinking that under these conditions one could lead a happy married life. On November 9, 1901, he wrote to Olga Knipper from Yalta:

> . . . My letters to you don't quite satisfy me. After what you and I have lived through together, letters are not enough. We ought to go on living. We are so wrong in not living together! . . .[27]

On an earlier occasion yet, Chekhov expressed his feelings on the topic of marriage to Avilova. He told her:

> If I'd married, I'd have proposed to my wife . . . that we should not live together. So that there should not be all that laxity of behaviour - all that undignified familiarity and - and all that abominable unceremoniousness.[28]

Chekhov found his future wife in an actress of Moscow Art Theater, Olga Knipper. They met the first time at a rehearsal of his play The Seagull, but only the second time they met, at a rehearsal of Tsar Fyodor, Olga captivated him. When he saw her in the role of Tsarevna Irena, he became ecstatic about her and in a letter to Suvorin wrote his impressions of this performance:

> . . . Irene, in my opinion, is superb. Her voice, noble bearing, and sincerity are so good, that it brought a lump to my throat. . . . If I remained in Moscow I should fall in love with that Irene. . . .[29]

In 1898 Chekhov's sister Maria Pavlovna became friends with Olga Knipper, and Chekhov was very happy that the woman he admired was a friend of his sister. In the spring of 1899 he

returned to Moscow and from then on their relationship began to flourish. Less than three years after their first meeting, on May 25, 1901, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov and Olga Leonardovna Knipper were married in a simple civil ceremony without the presence of either one's relatives. His earlier expressed wish of living apart from his wife had also come true; Olga Knipper had to remain in Moscow most of the time to keep her engagements, and Chekhov had to stay in the South because of his increasingly deteriorating health.

At the time of their courtship and in the first months of their married life, Anton Pavlovich seemed to have been a very happy man. Finally he found a being who had the same interests as himself, who understood him and spoke above all about the theater and plays, which Chekhov loved so much. Chekhov was also captivated by Olga Knipper as an actress whose talent and artistic abilities he admired. Their relationship was based from the very start on the respect of one talented artist for another.

During their long and frequent separations the only possible contact were the letters, which they exchanged very often. These could not, however, make the loneliness that Chekhov felt in Yalta any easier, and compensate for the presence of the woman he loved. Earlier Chekhov was able to cope with loneliness without any difficulty and was actually glad to be alone to write. But love had changed him, along with the illness and age. He missed Olga and could concentrate on his work only with difficulty.

After the wedding Olga Knipper considered the possibility of leaving the theater so that she could stay with Chekhov and take care of him, especially as his health was getting worse each day. But at the end she decided that he was a type of loner and might not like such a sudden change in the flow of his life. This assumption was true of the young and vigorous Chekhov, Chekhov who wrote of married life lived apart, but not of Chekhov at the time. Furthermore she thought she might not be enough for Chekhov only as a wife without being a link with the theater as well, which, to a certain extent, was surely correct. He awaited Olga's letters anxiously and in one of his letters to her he pours out his loneliness:

> I am dull without you. Tomorrow I shall go to bed at 9 o'clock in the evening on purpose not to see the New Year in. I haven't you, so I have nothing and I want nothing.[30]

From this letter we can see that Chekhov was not, after all, such a loner for which Olga Knipper took him.

In May 1902, Olga fell seriously ill and after her recovery she earnestly considered leaving the theater. But the director did not want to let her go and also Anton Pavlovich's letter concerning this matter was rather elusive and left the decision totally upon her:

> . . . You keep writing, my own, that your conscience pricks you that you are not living with me in Yalta, but in Moscow. But what's to be done, darling? Think of it sensibly: if you were living with me in Yalta the whole winter, your life would be spoilt, and I should feel stings of conscience, which would hardly be better. You see, I knew that I was marrying an actress; that is, when I married you I was fully aware that you would spend the winters in Moscow. If

> we are not together now, it is neither your nor my fault, but the fault of a wicked ghost, who put the germs into me, and the love of theater into you.[31]

So the waiting and letter-writing continued.

Olga might have been satisfied with such an arrangement, but Anton Pavlovich was missing the real and devoted love for which he waited so long. It seemed to him that Olga's love for him was not as deep as his for her. Her first worry was for herself and the theater, and the husband came only second. She was afraid of growing old and wanted to stay pretty for her audience. Chekhov wrote to her in reply to one of her letters:

> . . . Your hair is turning grey and you are growing old? That is owing to your bad temper, because you don't appreciate your husband and love him enough. . . .[32]

This and similar reproaches were surely written in a joking manner, nevertheless, one has a feeling that some bitterness and disappointment shine throught them. Already after the first year some problems and misunderstandings arose in their marriage. Olga began to complain that Chekhov's letters were cold and missing the romantic declarations of his love for her as well as assurances of his fidelity. She did not realize that Anton Pavlovich was a forty-two year old man assuming that his wife was a mature woman for whom the constant manifestations of his feelings for her would not be necessary any more. He wrote:

> . . . You write that I am capable of living beside you and always being silent, that I only want you as an agreeable woman and that you yourself as a human being are living lonely and a stranger to me. My sweet, good darling, but you are my wife, you know, do understand that at last. You are the person nearest and dearest to me. I have loved you

infinitely and I love you still, . . .
. . . My darling, be a wife, be a friend, write me good letters, don't give way to the dismal dumps, don't torture me. Be a kind, splendid wife, as indeed you are in reality. I love you more than ever and as a husband have not been to blame towards you in any way. . . .[33]

At the beginning of 1903, Chekhov complained to Olga that he was tired of all this letter-writing, he wanted her to be with him all the time. They spent summer together at a dacha near Moscow and the following spring they left for Badenweiler in Germany at the recommendation of his doctors. In June he had a severe attack of blood-spitting and, as a physician, realized his end was nearing. He died on July 2, 1904, with his wife at his side.

Those who knew Chekhov well have pointed out that he conveyed the impression of understanding everything, and that whoever met this gentle, quiet man liked and respected him. He certainly was no saint but a human being with human faults, although remarkably few at that. Behind his courteous and reserved manner, he was gentle, sensitive and kind, a man whose mixture of modesty and self-confidence helped him find the golden-middle-way in life.

Chekhov holds a special place in Russian literature for trying to bring his fellow countrymen to face reality and change their lives for the better. In the eyes of the western world Chekhov is justly seen as the last representative of Russia's great tradition even though he still has not achieved the stature of Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy.

Chekhov's love life was not very colorful, completely lacking any scandals and passionate affairs. His sensitivity and basic respect and regard toward a fellow human being holds true also for his relationships with women. His emotions were sincere and without deception, his feelings toward his wife full of quiet tenderness, his esteem for his mother undying. These qualities prevail also in his work in those relationships which are based on a true love. Such unions which materialized for other reasons than love are pictures of a gloomy atmosphere and unhappiness. Although not expressed directly in words by Chekhov, throughout the stories and plays we feel his compassion and sorrow with the unfortunate fate of his characters as well as annoyance with their incapability of doing something constructive to change their degrading predicament.

As mentioned earlier it is rather probable that Lika Mizinova served as an example for Nina Zarechnaya in The Seagull and Lydia Avilova and the flow of their relationship for the story "About Love". His feelings for his wife were, however, probably much too sacred to use Olga Knipper as a model for any of his women-characters, although in his plays he created several characters for her to play. It is likely that for the number of peasant and other women-characters Chekhov found inspiration on his visits as a doctor and on his travels and in resort spas where he spent so much time of his life.

As Chekhov's brother, Mikhail Pavlovich, claimed, Chekhov had already found success with women in his student years and

some of the girls he knew then might have served as images of his young women-personalities he created later on. Nevertheless, it is nothing but a presumption to distinguish which of his heroines came from true life and which were pure product of his imagination or a mixture of both. It is not my intent, however, to deal with this matter. By mentioning Chekhov's private affairs and his personal experiences with women, I only hoped to point out his basic attitude toward women in general, and in that way to demonstrate the individual background and possibly the reasoning for creating his heroines.

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## Chapter II.

## WOMEN IN CHEKHOV'S STORIES

### Part 1: Peasant Woman - "Baba"

Peasant characters and their dreary predicament in the Russia of Chekhov's time began appearing in his stories in the second half of the nineties. Although born a peasant himself, Chekhov had the opportunity to really discover all the sad details of a peasant's life only after he bought the farm at Melikhovo. There, while visiting cholera-stricken victims in Melikhovo and the surrounding villages, he got to know the peasant and his life very well. He built several schools there, mostly at his own expense[1], treated illness without charge and tried to help out whenever and wherever necessary. At the urging of his doctors he was persuaded to sell Melikhovo in order to move to a more favorable climate, but "the suffering of the peasantry and the poor town workers never ceased to fill him with pity and indignation"[2] and stayed deeply imbedded in his mind for the rest of his life.

The personal qualities of the peasants were hardly desirable. A primitive and rigorous life had made them ignorant, coarse, dishonest, filthy, quarrelsome, and almost never sober. They seldom had any respect for each other, and fear, mistrust and suspicion prevailed in their relations. The men treated their wives as beasts and not human beings, and more as a neces-

sary burden and evil than anything else. [3]

Xenia Gasiorowska in her book Women in Soviet Fiction 1917-1964 has basically outlined the conditions of life of an ordinary peasant woman - "baba", as she was commonly called in the Russian folk language. She writes:

> Prerevolutionary Russian fiction traditionally portrayed the peasant woman [or baba] as the long enduring victim of a dreary and hard village life, with an ignorant and destitute personality. A baba's path was, as the proverb puts it, 'from the stove to the door' of her squalid, overcrowded hut, and outside the house to the boundry of the village. In this tiny world, from the age of five she helped her mother with her younger siblings and housework, and tended geese and sheep. At fifteen she was, irrespective of her wishes, married off and moved to another hut, perhaps another village, thus exchanging her parents' grumbling and occasional cuffs for a husband's beatings, mother's-in-law abuse, and only too often, a father's-in-law lustfulness. From then on, babies were born every year, a few of whom survived; backbreaking work in primitive conditions, then, all too early, came old age, then death.[4]

Only seldom did life offer any alterations or improvements. To support this belief I have selected excerpts from Chekhov's story "Rothschild's Fiddle" ("Skripka Rotshil'da", 1984). There the old coffin-maker realizes only when his wife is dying what kind of a life she had had, what she was to him and how badly he had treated her. To the wife, however, death comes as a rescue. Chekhov describes the dying woman and the thoughts running through the head of Yakov - the coffin-maker:

> He looked round at his wife. Her face was rosy with fever, unusually bright and joyful-looking. The coffin-maker, accustomed to seeing her face always pale, timid, and unhappy-looking, was bewildered. It looked as if she were really dying and were glad that she was going for ever from that hut, from the coffins, and from Yakov. . . .[5]
> . . . And Yakov, returning from the cemetery remembered again that all his life he had never felt for Maria, had

> never been affectionate to her. The fifty-two years they had lived in the same hut had dragged on a long, long time, but it had somehow happened that in all that time he had never once thought of her, had paid no attention to her, as though she had been a cat or a dog. And yet, every day she had lighted the stove, had cooked and baked, had gone for water, had chopped the wood, had slept with him in the same bed, and when he came home drunk from the weddings always reverently hung his fiddle on the wall and put him to bed, and all this in silence, with a timid, anxious expression. . . .[6]

Chekhov created many peasant-women characters in his stories, but only a few have that special and unique personality, that individuality, which would make them stand out of the long row of ordinary female characters. They all, however, have that humble resigned attitude, conditioned by upbringing and economic circumstances, to expect of life as little as possible. For this reason I have chosen only a few and those stories which most clearly depict the sad impasse situation of a "baba" or those in which the woman figures as the story's main character.

In addition to the physical hardships of their life, the peasant women were also denied any dignity or personal happiness. As the marriages were arranged by parents of the respective families, there was seldom any romance or love in them. Inevitably the young women sought compensations for their loveless marriages. In "Peasant Wives" ("Baby", 1891) the young soldier's wife Mashenka stays behind, when her husband is called up into the military. She had been married within a week with a matchmaker's help and lived with her husband for only a few months before he left. Before long she and a young neighbour fell in love and began living together. Upon her husband's return Mashenka did

not want to return to him, but her lover, for whom a desirable marriage had been arranged in the meantime, insisted that she should. Mashenka's determination to follow her heart was broken only then when both her husband and her lover beat her black and blue. One feels how deeply rooted were these ideas and marriage customs inherited from the ancestors in the peasant, in whose life there was no room for sincere and deep feelings of love or how insignificant a role human dignity or personal freedom played.

In this story we have one of the very few outcries of protest by a woman in earlier Chekhov's works. The story's narrator, Mashenka's neighbour and lover, is telling her fate to the peasant family, where he stopped to spend the night on his journey. Among the listeners is Varvara, a young wife of Alyosha, the crippled son of the peasant. Her lot, no different from other peasant wives', she makes easier for herself by her escapades and nightly affairs with men in the village. When her sister-in-law reproaches her for these activities, she rebukes:

> . . . What do I care? If it's a sin, then it is a sin, but better be struck dead by thunder than live like this. I'm young and strong, and I have a filthy crooked hunchback for a husband. . . . When I was a girl, I hadn't bread to eat, or a shoe to my foot, and to get away from that wretchedness I was tempted by Alyosha's money, and got caught like a fish in a net, and I'd rather have a viper for my bedfellow than that scurvy Alyosha. And what's your life? It makes me sick to look at it. Your Fyodor sent you packing from the factory and he's taken up with another woman. They have robbed you of your boy and made a slave of him. You work like a horse, and never hear a kind word. I'd rather pine all my days an old maid, I'd rather get half a rouble from the priest's son, I'd rather beg my bread, or throw myself into the well. . . .[7]

Needless to say this protest remains, with no hope of altering the situation, and Varvara continues living "in sin". But even if she did find the courage to end the way in which she was living, there were much too many obstacles, social and economic, for her to succeed or even survive.

It was a custom in a Russian village for the father to give his grown son a horse and the mother to find him a wife. She looked mainly for physical strength and a capacity for work, rather than beauty or a dowry. The beauty of the poor girl Lipa in "In the Ravine" ("V ovrage", 1900) was not so pleasing as her "big masculine hands which hung idle like two big claws", and her "singing like a lark" while she was scrubbing floors. This story describes a family of rich peasants, the Tsybukins, who abandoned farming and instead keep a general store in which they secretly sell vodka. The story shows very descriptively above all the greed, hypocrisy and cruelty of the peasant world.

There are two main female characters - Lipa, a simple, timid woman, who becomes a part of the Tsybukin family by marriage, but remains a stranger, and Aksinya, who like Lipa had married into the family, but had taken charge of it through her energetic and aggressive character. The difference in their personalities is very obvious and emerges not only from their behaviour, but also from the author's descriptions. Lipa is introduced to us as follows:

> . . . Lipa wore a new pink dress made on purpose for this occasion [match-maker's and her future husband's parents visit], and a crimson ribbon like a flame gleamed in her hair.

> She was pale-faced, thin and frail, with soft, delicate features sunburnt from working in the open air; a shy, mournful smile always hovered about her face, and there was a childlike look in her eyes, trustful and curious. . . . She was young, quite a little girl, her bosom still scarcely perceptible, but she could be married because she had reached the legal age.[8]

After the wedding, where everybody got drunk including the groom Anisim, Lipa's ordeal began. Anisim, a detective in a distant city, married Lipa only "because it was the village custom to marry off the son in order to have a woman to help in the house", and then left after five days for the city. The cause of Lipa's misery, however, became not her husband or her parents-in-law, but her sister-in-law Aksinya.

Aksinya was an evil and greedy woman with business ambitions who set her mind on taking over her father's-in-law shop and starting her own brickyard. She pursued this aim uncompromisingly, not hesitating to destroy those who stood in her way. She is described as a beautiful and well-built woman who can never stand still. She got up early and was always seen running around with a constant "naive smile on her lips". She is compared to a snake at Lipa's wedding:

> Aksinya had naive grey eyes which rarely blinked , and an naive smile played continually on her face. And in those unblinking eyes, and in that little head on the long neck, and in her slenderness there was something snake-like; all in green but for the yellow on her bosom, she looked with a smile on her face as a viper looks out of the young rye in the spring at the passers-by, stretching itself and lifting its head.[9]

Also Lipa's own impression of Aksinya was negative, as she tells an old friend Yelizarov, nicknamed Crutch. As if she felt the

premonition of Aksinya's soon being the cause of her deepest grief, she says:

> . . . I am afraid of Aksinya, Ilya Makaritch. It's not that she does anything, she is always laughing, but sometimes she glances at the window, and her eyes are so fierce and there is a gleam of green in them - like the eyes of the sheep in the shed. . . . She sleeps for half an hour, then jumps up and keeps walking about to see whether the peasants have not set fire to something, have not stolen something. . . . I am frightened with her. . . .[10]

In the whole story the only other direct detail depicting Aksinya's cruel and evil character is given at the moment when she pours boiling water over the baby and the "naive smile on her lips" appears again.

Anisim was put in prison for counterfeiting money and, after the trial, sent to Siberia where he eventually dies. Lipa bore a son Nikifor who became the only pleasure and happiness in her life. Aksinya, however, jealous of Nikifor and afraid that he might be the inheritor of the old man's fortune, spills a pitcher of boiling water on him on purpose and he dies. On the way from the hospital with her dead son wrapped in a blanket in her arms, Lipa encounters two men in a cart who give her a lift to the village. Still numb from sorrow and not fully comprehending the evil and unjust in her world, she says to the older of the men:

> . . . My baby was in torment all day. He looked at me with his little eyes and said nothing; he wanted to speak and could not. Holy Father, Queen of Heaven! In my grief I kept falling down on the floor. I stood up and fell down by the bedside. And tell me grandfather, why a little thing should be tormented before his death? When a grown-up person, a man or a woman, are in torment their sins are forgiven, but why a little thing, when he has no sins? . . .[11]

The purity, unselfishness and goodness of Lipa's character shine through these words. Lipa is thrown out of the house by Aksinya, and returns to her mother. She finds work at the station loading bricks. Walking along with other women from the station and singing, she meets the old Tsybukin. He too had been thrown out of his own house by the "beautiful" Aksinya. Lipa gives the hungry Tsybukin a piece of pie, and praying for the old man walks quietly on. In these two contrasting characters, though a little unnecessarily exaggerated, Chekhov superbly personified the two opposite poles of a peasant nature - the good opposed to the evil.

Another female character, but of secondary importance to Lipa and Aksinya, appears throughout the story. She is Varvara, second wife of the old Tsybukin. She is a quiet, simple and undemanding woman with a lot of goodness and a heart filled with pity and compassion for the less fortunate:

> . . . Varvara Nikolaevna, no longer quite young, but good-looking, comely, and belonging to a decent family. As soon as she was installed into the upper story room everything in the house seemed to brighten up as though new glass had been put into all the windows. The lamps gleamed before the icons, the tables were covered with snow-white cloths, flowers with red buds made their appearance in the windows and in the front garden, and at dinner, instead of eating from a single bowl, each person had a separate plate set for him. Varvara Nikolaevna had a pleasant, friendly smile, and it seemed as though the whole house were smiling, too. Beggars and pilgrims, male and female, began to come into the yard, a thing which had never happened in the past; . . . Varvara helped them with money, with bread, with old clothes, and afterwards, when she felt more at home, began taking things out of the shop.[12]

Varvara with her refined upbringing and her sense for aesthetics

and tasteful surroundings is obviously out of place in the Tsybukin house. She brings some cultivation into the household which, however, is not appreciated but merely tolerated. Living in this prosperous house does not change her unselfish and merciful attitude toward other human beings and the ever-present greed and cheating in her husband's house and the store leave her bewildered, helpless and with a bad conscience:

> . . . We live comfortably; we have plenty of everything. We celebrated your wedding [Anisim's and Lipa's] properly, in good style; . . . In fact we live like merchants, only it's dreary. We treat the people very badly. My heart aches, my dear; how we treat them, my goodness! Whether we exchange a horse or buy something or hire a labourer - it's cheating in everything. Cheating and cheating. The Lenten oil in the shop is bitter, rancid, the people have pitch that is better. But surely, tell me pray, couldn't we sell good oil?[13]

Throughout the story and the unhappy occurrences in the family Varvara Nikolaevna, nevertheless, retains her good nature and in her helplessness she settles down into a state of happy ignorance, indifference and unobtrusiveness. At the end of the story, while her husband has been turned out of his own house, she continues with her charity and worries about trivialities of a household. She belongs to those female characters who are able, mainly through their own ignorance, to adjust to the limitations that life has bestowed upon them.

In another excellent story from the peasant world "The Peasants" ("Muzhiki", 1897) Chekhov shows in an almost naturalistic way the gloom, loneliness and hopelessness of the peasant living in the merciless system favouring the strong and the prosperous.

Bruford writes that toward the end of the nineteenth century, agriculture had failed to keep pace with the growth of the population, and the peasantry as well as the landowners were living through a long drawnout crisis. In 1892 Russia was struck by a famine and only those who were not entirely dependent on their own produce, did not live in destitution and starvation. It had become customary for some members of the joint families consisting of several generations to leave for town to make a living. From their pay they could not only maintain themselves and their dependents, but were also able to send some financial help back home to the village.[14]

The story "The Peasants" describes the fate of such a "bettered" peasant Nikolay Tchikildeyev, who left his village and became a waiter in a Moscow hotel. When he suddenly falls ill and is penniless because all his money is spent on doctors and medicine, he decides to return with his wife and daughter to his native village. As soon as he steps into the old house of his parents, overcrowded, full of a misery and poverty which he had forgotten, Nikolay realizes it was a mistake to return. In less than a year he dies there leaving his wife and daughter in the midst of all the misery and horror to take care of themselves as well as they can.

Besides Olga, Nikolay's wife, there were two daughters-in-law living in the hut, Marya, wife of Nikolay's brother Kiriak, with six children, and Fyokla, wife of his brother Denis,

with two children. Kiriak lived in the woods where he worked as a watchman for a merchant and came to the hut only when drunk. Then he beat his wife senselessly and left for the woods again. Denis was away in the army. Both Marya and Fyokla hated their husbands, and Marya was furthermore terrified of hers. She is described as a strong, broad-shouldered and homely woman, while Fyokla also as strong and broad-shouldered, but handsome and spiteful. Marya was very unhappy and "often said that she longed to die".

> . . . Fyokla, on the other hand, found all this life to her taste: the poverty, the uncleanliness, and the incessant quarreling. She ate whatever was given her without discrimination, slept anywhere, on whatever came to hand. She would empty the slops just at the porch, would splash them out from the doorway, and then walk barefoot through the puddle. And from the very first day she took a dislike to Olga and Nikolay just because they did not like this life.[15]

Of Olga we learn through the story that she came to Moscow as an eighteen-year-old girl from the province of Vladimir, and later became a chambermaid in a Moscow hotel, where she met her husband. She comes to the hut as a stranger and remains so throughout the story, while quietly observing this world foreign to her.

Nikolay's mother, who was called by everybody Granny, ruled the household.

> . . . [She] always tried to do everything herself; she heated the stove and set the samovar with her own hands, even waited at the midday meal, and then complained that she was worn out with work. And all the time she was uneasy for fear someone should eat a piece too much, or that her hus-

band and daughters-in-law would sit idle. At one time she would hear the tavern-keeper's geese going at the back of the huts to her kitchen garden, and she would run out of the hut with a long stick and spend half an hour screaming shrilly by her cabbages, which were as gaunt and scraggy as herself; at another time she fancied that a crow had designs on her chickens, and she rushed to attack it with loud words of abuse. She was cross and grumbling from morning till night. And often she raised such outcry that passers-by stopped in the street.[16]

But Granny, "toothless, bony, hunched, her short hair flying in the wind" turned out to be a good story teller, when one night she recalled her youth spent as a servant. Most of the time, however, Granny spent her energy on preventing herself from dying of starvation.

After Nikolay's death, Olga who

> . . . had grown thinner and plainer, and her hair had gone a little grey, and instead of the old look of sweetness and the pleasant smile on her face, she had the resigned mournful expression left by the sorrows she had been through, and there was something blank and irresponsive in her eyes, as though she did not hear what was said. . . .[17]

decided to leave with her daughter and return to Moscow. Since she was leaving she looked at the village, the people and the lives they led with detachment:

> . . . to live with them was terrible, but yet, they were human beings, they suffered and wept like human beings, and there was nothing in their lives for which one could not find excuse.[18]

In this story, apart from the peasant misery, Chekhov, a non-believer himself, also shows what a small part, and unimportant at that, religion played in the life of a peasant. Beside taking Holy Communion, abstaining from the forbidden food on fast days and occasionally attending church services, the peas-

ant was generally very ignorant of religious doctrine and knew little of the Bible.

> The old father did not believe in God, for he hardly ever thought about him; he recognized the supernatural, but considered it was entirely the women's concern. . . .[19]

It is true that usually women observed the external forms of a religion and found comfort and kind of magic in it, but even their knowledge about religion was rather obscure:

> Granny believed, but her faith was somewhat hazy; everything was mixed up in her memory. . . . She did not remember her prayers. . . .
>
> Marya and Fyokla crossed themselves, fasted, and took the sacrament every year, but understood nothing. . . .
>
> The children were not taught their prayers, nothing was told them about God, and no moral principles were instilled into them; they were only forbidden to eat meat or milk at Lent. In the other families it was much the same; there were few who believed, few who understood.[20]

But they all loved to hear the Scriptures read and for that reason Olga and her daughter Sasha were welcome and treated with respect.

This story, welcomed in some circles at the time and causing disturbance in others, countered the prevailing literary image of the peasant in contemporary works by other writers.[21] It is, in my opinion, Chekhov's best work from the peasant world, masterfully conveying the ignorance and brutality of a peasant life alongside with its remaining human moments. Undoubtedly, here again Chekhov drew from his own experiences during the years when he served the peasants as a doctor and saw first hand what it meant to live a primitive and squalid life.

The village life with strong social undertones is presented

a little differently in "An Artist's Story" ("Dom s mezaninom", 1895), a story which only indirectly belongs in this part dealing with peasant life. It is more or less a debate between an artist, the story's narrator, and Lida Volchaninov, the village school teacher. Both are members of the wealthier class and each has a different view on how to help bring peasants out of their poverty. Lida's way would be to do it by building schools, libraries and by improving the medical facilities, while the artist reasons that, first of all, the peasant has to be freed of his daily back-breaking slavery in the fields, of his misery and living like an animal, before he would be able to enjoy and appreciate all the modern inventions.

The study and comparison of the two main female characters will be presented in the next part - Middle Class & Bourgeoisie Ladies.

The peasant, hardened by all the misery and burdens of his life, had little time for dissatisfaction or strength to think about its possible improvement. So accustomed to hardship and ignorant of anything better, most simply accepted this life along with all its privations. The old man on the cart in the story "In the Ravine", to whom Lipa entrusts her grief, in turn tells her his life story filled with disasters, and his words are full of wisdom and comprehension acquired by age and the sufferings which he has experienced.

> . . . Never mind. . . . Yours is not the worst of sorrows. Life is long, there will be good and bad to come,

there will be everything. Great is mother Russia. . . . I have been all over Russia, and I have seen everything in her, and you may believe my words, my dear. There will be good and there will be bad. . . .

Here I do not want to die, my dear, I would be glad to live another twenty years; so there has been more of the good. . . .[22]

According to Thomas Winner, the publication of the stories "The Artist's Story", or "The House with the Mezanine" as it is often translated, and "My Life" in 1896, might be considered the beginning of the group of stories dealing with the Russian peasant, although they do not deal with this topic directly. In the peasant stories which followed, naturalistic pictures of the village life appear more important than social issues.[23] Chekhov had created some peasant characters in earlier stories, nevertheless, the stories of the later group show him as a more mature author and present the topic much more seriously.

In his book Tolstoy and Chekhov Logan Speirs writes of Chekhov's approach to the peasant theme:

> Like a practical physician, Chekhov examines sights which most people instinctively avert their eyes from. He also penetrates the minds of people who exist habitually on a borderline between life and death. He can see the world through their eyes and think their thoughts. He understands something of the hierarchies among them, and has studied those who profit from their helplessness.[24]

A female, born into the peasant environment, had a difficult life ahead of her, a life filled with filth, disrespect and indignity. She was to become practically a slave to her husband who was chosen for her, never to hope for moments of tenderness or tranquility. Hardened by their predicament, only a few women could retain the naivete and vulnerability as Lipa in "In the Ravine", for the simple reason that they were barely surviv-

ing. Not many were lucky enought to better themselves by leaving their home for the city like Olga in "The Peasants". For most of them there was no way out, no escape, and the only way to offset their harsh fate was to submit and endure.

As far as personal freedom is concerned, men's lot was much better. Whereas woman was only an object, men were the masters that ruled over the object. Even in situations of sexual or romantic involvements, men were granted immunity while the woman was to be punished, as in "Peasant Wives" or the story not studied here "Agafya". The only chance for improvement lay in a change of the social structure of Russia, which, however, under the tsarist regime was inconceivable.

Chekhov's portrayal of peasant women, particularly in the later stories without the satirical approach of his beginnings, seems to be more successful and true-to-life than, for example, his bourgeois ladies, discussed in Part 2. The reason for this may possibly lay in the fact that for the peasant woman he felt compassion, while he despised the bourgeoisie and its values.

FOOTNOTES.

1. Nine Plays of Chekhov.
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2. W. H. Bruford: Chekhov and His Russia. A Sociological Study.
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   Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1968. p. 31

5. Anton Chekhov: The Chorus Girl and Other Stories. Transl. by Constance Garnett.
   New York: Willey Book Company, 1920. p. 230

6. The Chorus Girl and Other Stories, pp. 234 - 235

7. Anton Chekhov: The Witch and Other Stories. Transl. by Constance Garnett.
   New York: Willey Book Company, 1918. p. 186

8. The Witch and Other Stories, pp. 41 - 42

9. The Witch and Other Stories, p. 196

10. The Witch and Other Stories, p. 204

11. The Witch and Other Stories, pp. 227 - 228

12. The Witch and Other Stories, pp. 179 - 180

13. The Witch and Other Stories, p. 198

14. W. H. Bruford, op. cit. p. 53

15. The Witch and Other Stories, pp. 305-306

16. The Witch and Other Stories, p. 291

17. The Witch and Other Stories, p. 325

18. The Witch and Other Stories, p. 326

19. The Witch and Other Stories, p. 318

20. The Witch and Other Stories, pp. 318 - 319

21. Beverly Hahn: Chekhov. A study of the major stories and plays.
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22. The Witch and Other Stories, pp. 228 - 229

23. Thomas Winner: Chekhov and His Prose.
New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966. pp. 138 - 139

24. Logan Speirs: Tolstoy and Chekhov.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971. p. 162

## Part 2: Middle-Class and Bourgeois Ladies.

In tsarist Russia a woman as an individual and a personality meant very little in the eyes of society. As already mentioned, women of the lower classes or the poor women had a dreadful life, especially from today's point of view. But even the lucky ones born into the socially advantageous classes were expected to live without any individuality and within the bounds prescribed by the society. Mostly they were limited to the shallow and monotonous world of a household which, it seems, even the intellectual and intelligent did not question. Lacking a profession (with some exceptions) and individuality, most of the women in the middle-class and bourgeois society were reduced to silly creatures who thought and chattered of nothing but love, marriage, children and one's own nest. Those who fate also endowed by beauty and physical attractiveness found often diversions in flirts or extramarital affairs, but basically all of them changed soon after the wedding into the loyal and lasting accessories of their husbands' belongings.

Among Chekhov's acquaintances and friends, however, stood out some women who did not behave as described above and who did have their own mind, independence and individuality. To these belonged A. Suvorin's wife of whom Chekhov wrote to his sister Maria:

> . . . I am seeing many women; but the best of them is S. [Suvorin's wife]. She is as original as her husband, and

> her mind does not work like a woman's. She talks much nonsense, but when she cares to speak seriously she does so intelligently and independently. . . .

Such women, unfortunately, did not find a way into Chekhov's works, as his women characters are either underprivileged shadows of human beings in the peasant world, or frivolous creatures without a serious thought in their head in high-class society.

In searching for the explanation of this lack one can speculate: was it because Chekhov basically disliked women in general, as Sophie Laffite would like us to believe[2], or by portraying many more of the empty-headed ones who existed, did Chekhov attract the readers' attention and so indirectly try to sow the seeds for change? I myself tend to believe the latter reasoning because, as demonstrated in the first chapter, Chekhov basically respected women and did not dislike them. He only disliked their senseless submissiveness and lack of independence.

In 19th century literature, Russian or other, a woman, with regard to her beauty, was considered the object and center of men's interest and attention, and the contest for her affection was frequently the basic element of a conflict in a literary work. Even Chekhov considered beauty an important attribute as in his letter to Suvorin he wrote, ". . . In women I love beauty above everything. . . ."[3], nevertheless, what exactly he considered to be beautiful we do not know. He never offered any details of a heroine's looks, but just flatly states she was beautiful or pretty.

Authors only seldom considered it worthwhile to bestow upon a woman character any intelligence. Most of the time their submissiveness and womanly pettiness were portrayed as the main characteristics. Also in Russia, women had no use or understanding for the man's world, while only a few felt such boundless devotion and respect for their husbands as Olenka Plemannikova in "The Darling". What they mostly felt was a kind of resignation with their fate, and even though they did not like their lives as they were, lacking the courage, strength and independence, they did nothing to change them. Before condemning or judging these women, however, we must bear in mind that "in Chekhov's day the condition of society was such that women did not seek to compete with men, and . . . were encouraged in the domestic arts and in social graces rather than in intellectual advancement."[4] Tolstoy who, as we know, did not share Chekhov's modern attitude toward the woman's role in the society, remarked: "But surely the work of woman by her very destiny is other than the work of man. And therefore the ideal of woman's perfection cannot be the same as the ideal of man's."[5]

In portraying bourgeois society and its members, Chekhov enlarged the prevalent picture with the deceit, lies and the lack of virtue in their everyday life. On the outside they tried to convey a world of beauty, brilliance, culture and elegance, but in reality their life was nothing but pretense, vulgarity, banality, superficial values and dilettantism, all of which is summarizes in the Russian word - <u>poshlost'</u>.[6] This word, for which

there is no exact equivalent in English, means a combination of many unflattering characteristics. In addition to those already mentioned, anything second-rate, vulgar, ignoble or shabby can be considered a component of poshlost'. It suggests a complete deterioration of moral, social and aesthetical values as well as a primitive and animalistic attitude toward life,[7] particularly any form of physical overindulgence, which, it seems, Chekhov hated most of all. Most of his totally negative characters were described as fat or manifesting their physical appetites in some way. The vivid description of Ariadne's eating habits, for example, leaves no doubts about the verdict of her creator. In his subtle but adroit way, Chekhov mastered the depiction of poshlost' in all its aspects and in all social classes, but especially the environment of the bourgeoisie, in whose life poshlost' was a regular and inescapable ingredient.

I have divided women belonging in the category of Middle-class and the Bourgeoisie into several groups: A. those submissive and dependent on people around them, B. self-centered and conceited females, and C. speculative and egotistic females, utilizing every situation for their own gain.

A.

Probably the most typical woman character belonging in this group is Olenka Plemannikova in "The Darling" ("Dushechka", 1898). This is a story about a rather primitive young woman, lacking any

opinions or ideas of her own who, in order to be happy, must find a person upon whom she can bestow her love and submission. She does not have any interests of her own, the interest and center of her life becomes always her husband or a companion.

Fate was not merciful to her, for both her husbands died and a friend-companion had left her, so that in old age she ends up alone and in poverty. While young and married or living with her companion, her world was radiant and happy - she had not only someone to take care of, but also someone whose opinions and phrases she could take for her own. After her companion leaves her, she almost ceases to live:

> . . . She really was alone this time. . . . She became thin, she lost her looks. People no longer noticed her, no longer smiled at her in the street. . . .
>
> She gazed blankly at her empty yard, she thought of nothing, she wanted nothing. When night came she went to bed and dreamt about that empty yard. She did not seem to want food and drink. The main trouble was though, that she no longer had views on anything. She saw objects around her, yes, she did grasp what was going on. But she could not form opinions. . . .
>
> . . . In the Kukin and Pustovalov eras - and then in the vet's day - Olga could give reasons for everything, she would have offered a view on any subject you liked. But now her mind and heart were empty as her empty yard. . . .[8]

After some years her companion Smirnin returns with his son Sasha who becomes her boarder and again the center of her life.

Olenka is a good-hearted woman who, unfortunately empty and completely lacking any individuality of her own, concentrates all her energy on dependence on others and on the blind love for them. Throughout the story, when she was happy then she was fond of something or someone, she simply could not exist without loving. Ernest J. Simmons writes:

> One may smile at the swift transfer of her affections as fate removes the objects of her love, but one never doubts the utter self-abnegation and devotion of her warm nature until at the end they are bestowed on the little boy - a supreme act of love for one who can offer least in return. 'The Darling' is a perfect example of Chekhov's deliberate and conscious artistry, which envolves one of his strongest convictions: that the object of a woman's love is of comparatively little importance, for it is the law of her being to love something or somebody.[9]

Tolstoy was very fond of "The Darling" and in his Afterword to this story he wrote:

> I think that in the mind, not in the feeling of the author, when he wrote 'The Darling', there was floating a vague idea of the new woman, of her equal rights with man; of the educated woman, working independently not worse, if not better than man, for the good of society; that very woman who has raised and upholds the woman question; and he, having begun to write 'The Darling', meant to show what woman ought not to be. . . .
> . . . he wanted to knock the Darling down, and fixed on her the strained attention of the poet - and he exalted her.[10]

Whether Tolstoy was right or not about Chekhov's intentions or aim in writing this story can be only guessed at. Nevertheless, from Chekhov's notebook we know he intended to write this story for some time, as well as we know that he highly disliked these obscure creatures void of individuality:

> The inner life of these women is as grey and insignificant as their faces and clothes; they speak of science, literature, trends, etc. only because they are wives and sisters of writers and scientists; were they wives of police officers or dentists, they'd speak just as ardently about fires or teeth. To allow them to speak of science and listen to them would mean profanation of science.[11]

Anna Pavlovna, the wife of the tax-collector Shalikov in the story "The Husband" ("Suprug"; 1898) is also one of those submissive women who, although despising the situation in which they are forced to live, do not see or do not want to see another

alternative. The everyday life around Anna Pavlovna consists of cards and vodka and to escape this, she submerges herself into the unrealistic world of her dreams. She is described as a small, about thirty-years old brunette with a long nose and a pointed chin, powdered face and tightly laced-up body. She does not love her husband and in fact is rather ashamed of him, an unpleasant, sickly and ordinary man.

When a dance with newly arrived officers is arranged in the club, her husband, mean as he is, takes her away from the bright scene because he cannot bear to see her enjoy herself. After a few protests in vain, Anna Pavlovna lets herself be taken away against her will.

> . . . She was still under the influence of the dancing, the music, the talk, the lights and the noise; she asked herself as she walked along why God had thus afflicted her. She felt miserable, insulted, and choking with hate as she listened to her husband's heavy footsteps. She was silent, trying to think of the most offensive, biting, and venomous word she could hurl at her husband, and at the same time she was fully aware that no word could penetrate her tax-collector's hide.[12]

Anna Pavlovna adjusts to the situation and returns to the dreary and hated everyday life from which the only escape will be her daydreams again. Her submission is absolute, preventing her from making the daydreams a reality.

Anyuta, the heroine of the story with the same title, "Anyuta" ("Anyuta", 1886), submits again and again to the humiliating position of being the mistress of one student after another. She helps to support her lovers by embroidering men's shirts; she stands patiently with her blouse off shivering in the

cold room to help her medical student prepare himself for the anatomy examination; she even lets herself be lent to an artist as a model. None of her student companions will marry her no matter how much she may love them and, when they finish their studies and become doctors and lawyers, all they will say of her will be: "Yes, I had a little blond girl friend once upon a time! I wonder where she is now?"

Anyuta is one of those humble and modest souls, who endure their unhappiness and humiliation without a word of protest. What is pitiable about her and women like herself is their helplessness and innocent liability to exploitation caused by their spiritual weakness and lack of pride and self-confidence. This self-induced vulnerability, however, tends to lessen the impact of their predicament on the reader and thereby the feeling of pity he might have felt otherwise. In this respect more sympathy might be created by Agafya ("Agafya", 1885-6) who, although not showing any real sense of protest against the masculine tyranny in which she is trapped, she at least takes initiative to steal moments of real happiness for herself.

Ekaterina Pavlovna, generally called by everybody Missis after her French governess, in "An Artist's Story" ("Dom s mezoninom", 1896) lets her life be totally controlled by her domineering sister Lida. Missis is in love with an artist, the story's narrator, but because her sister considers him on account of his profession a useless member of society, she leaves the village on Lida's orders, knowing that she will never see her lover again. She sends him a note:

> . . . I told my sister everything and she insisted on my parting from you. I could not wound her by disobeying. God will give you happiness. Forgive me. If only you knew how bitterly my mother and I are crying![13]

Misses prefers to ruin her chances for happiness with the artist, rather than "disobey" her domineering sister and let herself be the master of her own life. In the portrait of Missis Chekhov also successfully depicts the time in a girl's life when she stops being a child and changes into a woman. Virginia Llewellyn Smith believes "An Artist's Story" contains biographical elements and suggests that Missis is a portrait of a woman Chekhov might have loved and lost.[14]

In contrast to Missis, Lida is a "fine critical portrait of a woman absorbed in the egoism of good works. She is always looking after the poor, serving on committees, full of enthusiasm for nursing and education. She lacks only that charity of the heart which loves human beings, not because they are poor, but because they are human beings."[15] She is by nature a "boss" and in the family the dictating authority. She dominates her mother and younger sister, and when she learns of the love between her sister and the artist, she does not hesitate to interfere and so alter the fate of the two young people.

Another characteristic, considered to be mainly a womanly trait, was that of self-denial and urge to sacrifice herself in order to save somebody else. This will be discussed in Chapter III - Women in Chekhov's Plays: A. Ivanov. Nevertheless, this need or urge for sacrifice we find also among the women-characters in his stories. The following excerpt from the story "In the Cart" ("Na podvode", 1897), sometimes also translated as "The Schoolmistress", is a perfect example:

> He looked fit and keen enough beside old Simon, but there was a hint of something in the way he walked which showed that he was really a feeble, poisoned creature well on the road to ruin. And from the forest, sure enough, came a sudden whiff of spirits. Marya was horrified. She was sorry for the man, and could see no good reason why he should be so hopeless. It struck her that if she was his wife or sister she would very likely give her whole life to saving him.[16]

I have already mentioned that Chekhov presented his characters realistically but restrained himself from any kind of critical remarks or judgement on them. This he left for the reader to do, because he believed a writer's duty was to present a problem, not it's judgement or solution. Possibly, however, some of his own opinions he expressed by words of his characters, and I assume that this is true of Podgorin in the story "A Visit to Friends" ("U znakomykh", 1898).

This is a story about a visit of Podgorin, a Moscow lawyer to Kuzminki, an estate where he had spent several happy years while studying. During these happy times he was closely associated with three women, Tatyana Alexeevna, the mistress of the house, her sister Nadezhda whom he tutored, and Varvara Pavlovna, a close friend of Tatyana's. After Tatyana married her husband, Sergei Sergeich Losev, the estate's financial affairs went quickly down the hill and Podgorin was invited to help them.

Looking at the ladies, Podgorin reminisces and through his eyes we can see them ten years ago and now. We meet Tatyana:

> . . . As for Tanya, at the time already a grown girl and a beauty, she had thought of nothing but love, and had wanted only love and happiness, passionately wanted and hoped for a husband, of whom she dreamed day and night. . . .

Returning to the present, Podgorin sees a woman who has matured, but whose only gratification and fulfillment still remain her husband and the family:

> . . . And now when she was over thirty and just as beautiful as ever, in a loose tea-gown, with her full, white arms, she had thought of nothing but her husband and her two little girls. She wore an expression which seemed to say that although there she was talking and smiling so casually, she was nevertheless on guard, she stood prepared to defend her love and her right to this love, and at a moment's notice she was ready to pounce on an enemy who wanted to take away her husband and her children. She loved devotedly and she believed that she was loved in the same way, but jealousy and fear for her children constantly tormented her and interfered with her happiness.[18]

Podgorin's disappointment and aversion toward Tatyana and her dull life express the next lines:

> Podgorin smiled at her and the little girls, but he found it odd that this young, healthy, rather intelligent woman - a big complex organism - should spend all her energy, all her vital forces on such simple, petty job as the building of this nest, that in any case was complete.[19]

Having read through Chekhov's correspondence and notes these are, in my opinion, the words and thoughts of Chekhov himself, as he was very much agitated by the barren and loveless life of women like Tatyana, who wasted their own individuality potential and their personality on their closest family only. Chekhov seemed to be rather critical of this trend among women of that time, women, who had the chance, means and intelligence to live spiritually fulfilling lives, but who preferred to exchange this opportunity for the uneventful life in security. For Chekhov an absolutely necessary basis for a happy and successful marriage was not an instilled dedication to building one's nest,

but a true love:

> . . . family, music, affection and a sweet word do not come with the marriage of the first girl that comes by though most decent she may be, but with love. When there is no love, why speak of affection? . . .[20]

Soon after his arrival, Podgorin realizes that the main reason for his visit was to arrange a marriage between himself and Nadezhda. He finds himself attracted to the "pale, slim blonde girl with kindly eyes that seemed to caress you", but because of the character of the whole situation, he quickly recovers from any enchantment and infatuation and leaves sooner than he planned.

> Whether she was beautiful or not Podgorin could not tell, for he had known her since childhood and he took her for granted. She wore a white dress, open at the neck and the sight of her long, white, naked throat was strange to him and effected him disagreeably.[21]

We learn more about Nadezhda:

> He saw her pallid face and dark eyebrows at close range and recalled what an intelligent, keen, capable pupil she had been, and how pleasant it had been to tutor her.[22]

But he soon realizes that Nadezhda unfortunately is following the footsteps of her older sister Tatyana and also dreams "of nothing but love, of how to get married as soon as possible, to have a husband, children, a nook of her own".[23] And as much as it must be a blow to his ego he admits to himself that:

> . . . it was possible that she merely respected Podgorin and was fond of him as of a friend, but that she was not in love with him, but with her dreams of a husband and children.[24]

Women like Tatyana and Nadezhda are dependent on the idea of submitting themselves to their husband and children before they even

have them. Even Varvara, who had graduated from the medical school and taken a position of a doctor in a nearby factory, but has not married, has rather shallow interests for an intelligent woman and an intellectual:

> Higher education and the fact that she was a physician did not seem to have affected the woman in her. Like Tatyana, she took pleasure in weddings, births, baptisms, lengthy conversations about children, she liked terrifying novels with happy endings; when she took up a newspaper it was to read only about fires, floods and public ceremonies. She was dying to have Podgorin propose to Nadezhda, and were it to happen, she would burst into tears.[25]

This preoccupation of women with pettiness of a household and their aim of having one, Chekhov seems to present as the womanly weakness quite necessary to their being. Whether this trait of selflessness and lack of individuality in women is forgivable or not, Chekhov typically leaves up to the reader to decide.

B.

Chekhov did not create many self-centered and conceited females, but the best known and the most typical of them are "The Princess" and "The Grasshopper".

The story "The Princess" ("Knyaginya", 1889), which literally translated should read "The Duchess", as the heroine was not a daughter of a king or any ruler as the English word 'Princess' indicates, but just a regular member of the Russian nobility, presents a vain, empty-headed woman, Vera Gavrilovna, who imagines

herself to be a great benefactress to a monastery which she uses from time to time as a quiet hotel. The plot of the story is very simple and occasionally enables us to get to know the princess also through the eyes of others.

The princess arrives at the monastery, acts and sees herself as a goddess of kindness, is exposed as a hypocrite by a doctor formerly in her service, but leaves the monastery unshaken in her self-admiration and conceit. Her affected speech is filled with cliches, her manner and the tone of her voice is mildly gentle while speaking with inferiors but rather excited and full of uncontrolled exclamations when speaking to the Father Superior.

> It seemed to the princess that she brought from the outside world just such comfort as the ray of light or the little bird! Her friendly, gay smile, her timid look, her voice, her jests, in fact her total appearance, her small, graceful figure dressed in simple black, must arouse a feeling of joy and tenderness in simple austere people. Everyone looking at her must think: 'God has sent us an angel'. . . and feeling that no one could help thinking this, she smiled even more cordially and tried to resemble a bird.[26]

This self-image is shattered for a short while by the doctor whom she invites to be perfectly frank with her. But when he tells her that she lacks human sympathy, treats all human beings on her estates as material for her personal use and, furthermore, is stingy for with all her money she hasn't done anything for the common good, she feels hurt and misunderstood. Following a luxurious dinner, for Chekhov an inevitable sign of poshlost', she falls asleep having forgotten all that the doctor said. In the morning she wakes up happy and fully submerged in her self-

admiration again and thinks to herself that if only all men knew her soul they would be at her feet.

Much more than just words would have to be used to shatter the tenacity of princess' views of herself and her conceit, and even then it is rather doubtful that she would be able to change. Her emergence in the social game of the benefactress is so deep and absolute that, no matter how the truth be laid before her, it will always prove to be ineffective and always fail to bring about a reform within her. She is a complex of two personalities, the public one and the private one, and these two are playing a game of deceiving herself as well as the others around her. Both these personalities, needless to say, are undesirable and saturated with all vices of poshlost' and hypocrisy.

This story, which so masterfully depicts the contrast of princess' character as she really is and as she sees herself, belongs to Chekhov's finest personality studies.

"The Grasshopper" ("Poprygunya", 1892) is a story about a husband and wife: Doctor Dymov, who is an excellent physician and a modest and kind-hearted man, and Olga Ivanovna, a shallow and pretentious woman, who thinks she has a great artistic talent. She adores famous people and mixes only inside her circle of bohemian friends. She thinks her interest in landscape-painting makes her a much more interesting, important and worthier personality than her husband, who works in two hospitals but earns only

five hundred roubles a year. Olga Ivanovna is obsessed with the hunt for great people and therefore has no time for her husband and his problems. She starts an affair with a mediocre painter Ryabovsky, who belongs to the circle of her "Famous" friends. Her husband does not interfere with her life, lets her live as she wants, and even her affair he accepts as a matter of course. She, instead of respecting his kindness and shaming herself into reproach, can feel only "depressed by his magnanimity".

Olga Ivanovna's speech, like that of the princess, is filled with clichés and affected exclamations and expressions, and she lives in a world cluttered with superficialities. Her apartment is filled with all kinds of unmatching but impressive objects and even her clothes are meant to underline the illusions existing everywhere around her:

> She and her dressmaker resorted to many ingenious tricks, so that she could appear in new-looking dresses and make an impression with her outfits. Frequently old, dyed-over pieces of cloth, worthless patches of tulle, lace, plush, and silk were transformed into something bewitching, not dresses, but dreams.[27]

Only after her husband catches diphtheria and is dying, can we notice a slight change taking place in her. Her first reaction is that of fear of infection, but soon after, for the first time in all the years that she had known her husband, she realizes:

> . . . he had been, indeed, an exceptional man, a rare man, and - compared with all her acquaintances - a great man. . . . The walls, the ceilings, the lamp, and the carpet winked derisively at her, as though they wanted to say, 'You have let it slip by you, slip by!'[28]

She rushes into the room of her dying husband, but even at this last moment fails to express her regret and he dies as isolated

from her as he had been in their life together. Olga Ivanovna spent all those years looking for a really great man only to find out, too late, that she had been married to one.

The story ends with Olga Ivanovna's changed image, to the contrary of the princess. It is rather doubtful, however, that such a drastic change in a superficial personality as Olga Ivanovna could be a lasting one. Tolstoy, who was very fond of "The Grasshopper", used to say: "How deeply one feels that after his death she will be just the same!"[29] In my opinion the story itself is weakened by an exaggerated negative/positive effect of the two main characters, which is unrealistic. Dymov is idealized into a heroic figure, almost a God, whereas Olga Ivanovna is practically absurd. Nevertheless, the moral of the story is conveyed very clearly.

Further self-centered and egotistic female types in Chekhov's stories are: Nadezhda Fyodorovna, Layevski's mistress in "The Duel" ("Duel", 1891), Kitten in "Ionych" ("Ionych", 1898), Olga Dmitrievna from "The Wife" ("Supruga", 1895), and the heroine of "Ariadne" ("Ariadna", 1895). The two last ones will be discussed, among others, in detail in the following Part C.

## C.

Chekhov's women characters are mostly quiet and sad individuals with feminine feelings of anguish, love and devotion. There are also a few, for whom flirtation and infidelity, con-

ceit and egotism, pretense and affectation are an indispensable part of their lives and character, but only a handful in the large gallery of his females are endowed with such a dose of poshlost' and predaciousness as those belonging to this group of "women-utilitarians". These women also live in the world filled with triviality, superficial values and deceit, but they realize their exact situation and their capability of taking control over that situation, and therefore do not let themselves be humiliated and exploited, but on the contrary take advantage of others for their own gain.

The eighteen-year-old Anna Petrovna in "The Order of St. Anne", usually translated as "Anna on the Neck" ("Anna na shee", 1895) marries a well-to-do fifty-year-old civil servant, Modest Alexeich, whom she does not love. Her mother had died long ago leaving five younger brothers for her to take care of and her father, an impoverished teacher, is an alcoholic. She marries Modest Alexeich in the hopes of improving the material and financial position of her family. She is mistaken, however, for her husband:

> . . . gave Anne presents instead [of money] - rings, bracelets and brooches, 'just the thing to put by for a rainy day' - and often opened her chest of drawers to make sure that none of the stuff was missing.[30]

Anna fears her husband and her life with him is monotonous, uninteresting and rather tragic as Anna realizes her sacrifice was in vain. Her life is best described in the following passage:

> [they] lived in the flat which went with Modeste's job. Anne used to play the piano when he was at the office, or felt bored to tears, or lay on the sofa reading novels and looking at fashion magazines. At dinner her husband ate a

lot and talked about politics, appointments, staff transfers and honorous lists. . . .

. . . Listening to him scared Anne so much that she could not eat and usually left the table hungry. After dinner her husband would take a nap, snoring noisily, while she went off to see the family.[31]

The world of Modest Alexeich is completely alien to Anna and she feels an outsider in it. She feels crushed and humiliated and is ashamed of his corpulence and debasement before any higher officials or their wives. At the end of December a yearly winter ball is planned and Anna attends it with her husband. And there a sudden transformation takes place in her:

Anne went upstairs on her husband's arm. She heard music and saw a full-length reflection of herself in an enormous mirror brightly lit by innumerable lights. Her heart seemed to leap for joy and she felt that she was going to be happy. . . . She walked proudly, sure of herself. Feeling for the first time that she was no longer a girl. . . . For the first time in her life she felt rich and free. Even her husband's presence did not hamper her . . . her instinct told her that she lost nothing by having an elderly husband at her side - far from it, for it lent her the very air of piquancy and mystery that men so relish.[32]

Suddenly the Anna we know vanishes and in her place emerges a woman, who is well aware of her beauty and charm. The music, the bright lights, the ecstatic faces of the crowd and the admiring looks of men transform the crushed and humble girl into an extravagant and voluptuous creature. She realizes the power of her feminine charm and instantly likes the gay life of music, dances, admirers and flattery.

. . . She danced like one possessed . . . passing from one partner to another, dizzy with music and noise, mixing up French and Russian . . . laughing, not thinking of her husband or of anything or anyone else. She had made a hit with the men, that was obvious.[33]

The most rewarding triumph for Anna, however, is the switch of

the positions in her loveless relationship with her husband. The before dominating Modest Alexeich now:

> . . . stood before her with the look that she knew so well. It was the crawling, sugary, slavish, deferential look that he kept for the powerful and distinguished people. Triumphant, indignant, scornful - quite certain that she could get away with anything and articulating each word clearly - she spoke.
> 'Get out! Idiot!'[34]

But for this change Anna must pay with her dignity and humanity. She begins so fast to feel at home in the bourgeois society and adopts its way of thinking so well, that she is soon ashamed of her humble origin. She not only stops visiting her father and brothers, but completely stops acknowledging them on the street when she rides about town in troikas with her new lover. She becomes a typical superficial bourgeois lady whose finding of a place in a society, alien to her before, deadens her capability to see and understand the poor and sympathize with them.

Olga Dmitrievna of "His Wife" ("Supruga", 1895) also marries her husband, a psychiatrist, without love and for money and position in society. She loves, or at least thinks she does, another. Her ill husband knows of this affair, but because he loves her, he wants to keep her even under these, for him, humiliating conditions. He gives her everything, runs into debt for her, but all he gets in return are hysterics, complaints, lies and ingratitude.

> The best years of his life were over and they had been hell, his hopes of happiness had been dashed and mocked, his health was gone, and his house was full of the paraphernalia of a vulgar coquette.[35]

Seeing her discontent and having the feeling of being a burden to her, he finally offers her a divorce without any strings attached. Olga Dmitrievna, however, does not accept her husband's generous offer, because she could not do without the prestige a marriage to a doctor brings. All she wants is to be able to flirt now and then, but should it mean the loss of her position in society, she would be even willing to give her affairs up.

Not only Olga Dmitrievna's behaviour, but also the author's description presents her in a highly unsympathetic light:

> Helping her off with her coat and galoshes, he caught a whiff of the white wine that she liked with oysters - she could certainly put away the food and drink, for all her dainty looks. . . .[36]

Or:

> She moved to a chair nearer him so that she could look at his face. She distrusted him and wanted to read his innermost thoughts. She never trusted people and always suspected them, however well-meaning, of being up to some dirty little trick. . . .[37]

Here again we have enjoyment of food, suspicion and mistrust, unmistakable characteristics of poshlost' and a dishonest nature.

The empty-headed woman, greedy for money and loving the splendor and ways of a bourgeois life above all, will go on torturing her husband with her infidelities and using him as a bottomless money-box to pay for her entertainment.

Another woman taking advantage of her partners who are in love with her is Ariadne ("Ariadna", 1895). The story is told by two narrators: one, her lover Shamokhin, tells us of his enchantment and disenchantment with his beautiful mistress, and the other, an external narrator, is probably the author himself.

Ariadne is a beautiful, sensuous and flirtatious woman obsessed with the desire to conquer, to please and to be loved. But Chekhov bestows on this female character along with her charm also many negative traits as well. She comes from an impoverished provincial family, but has always dreamed of life among the rich. Her beauty infatuates a rich man who becomes her lover and takes her with him to Italy. After her lover leaves her there, she invites her neighbour Shamokhin to join her, and another "romance" in her life begins. She needs her lovers not so much for the romance itself as for the financial necessity of supporting the life-style which she is unwilling to give up. She is incapable of a pure and true love without the fulfillment of her greedy desires.

> . . . she couldn't love truly, for she was cold and already rather corrupted. Day and night a devil inside her whispered that she was so charming, so divine. What was she doing in this world? What had she been born for? She had no clear idea and saw her own future purely in terms of fame and fortune. She dreamt of dances, race-meetings, liveries, a sumptuous drawing-room, her own salon with a swarm of counts, princes, ambassadors, famous painters and entertainers - the whole lot at her feet, raving about her beauty and fine clothes.[38]

There were also features of cruelty in her:

> Even when she was in a good mood she thought nothing of insulting a servant or killing an insect. She liked bullfights and reading about murders, and was angry when accused people were acquitted in court.[39]

She does not have any spiritual interests, her whole mind is concentrated on two things only: her desire to charm every man, and her gluttony, a sign of her savagery.

> Every morning she woke with but a single thought - to attract! That was the aim and object of her life. If I had told her that in such-and-such a house in such-and-such a

> street there lived someone who did not find her attractive, it would really have spoilt her day. Every day she must bewitch, captivate, drive people out of their minds.[40]

As mentioned earlier, a preoccupation with food was Chekhov's most disliked symbol of poshlost' and Ariadne's eating habits and overindulgence make the negative picture of her complete. Shamokhin describes her passion for food:

> She slept every day till two or three; she had breakfast and lunch in bed. For supper she consumed soup, lobster, fish, meat, asparagus, game; and when she had gone to bed, I would bring her up something, for instance roast beef, and she would eat it with a sad worried expression; and when she woke up at night, she would eat apples and oranges.[41]

Ariadna is one of the few totally negative women portraits that Chekhov created, even though not as barbaric and ferocious as Aksinya in "In the Ravine". There seems to be not one bit of honest or worthy feeling in her, not one moment which would make her likable. She is the personification of poshlost' itself. However, as greedy, ostentatious, superficial, trecherous, superstitious, vain, frivolous, egotistic, vulgar in her gluttony and affected in her manners as she was presented, Ariadne must have been to Chekhov more a parody on bourgeois values than a real and believable person.

But no matter how ordinary or negative a woman Ariadne might be, she without doubt holds an important place among Chekhov's females. It is in her that we observe a full exposition of a woman's devastating influence on a man through her sexual powers as well as beauty.

> I became her lover. For at least a month I was crazy with sheer undiluted happiness. To hold her beautiful young body in my arms, to enjoy it, and feel her warmth every time one woke up and remember that she, she, my Ariadne, was here. . . .[42]

This animalistic feature, seldom presented by Chekhov as directly as in this story, was in his eyes the most base of any reasons for a man-woman relationship, be this power exercised by the man or the woman, and could bring in the end only frustration and misery instead of happiness.

According to Chekhov's biographers he intensely disliked the petty-bourgeois way of life and lack of humanity and feeling. According to Marc Slonim though, Chekhov was even more critical and sometimes almost indignant of the middle-classes, and educated society in particular:

> To be forced to see and hear how they all lie, to endure insults and humiliation, without daring to declare that you are on the side of honest, free people, and to lie to yourself, to wear a smile, and all for the sake of a crust of bread, of a snug corner, of some sort of official rank not worth a copper - no, we can't go on living like that![43]

In spite of Chekhov's insistence on objectivity and an unbiased attitude on the part of the author, from his stories as well as plays we can feel the resentment toward these empty caricatures of human beings which Marc Slonim mentions.

Shamokhin's words in "Ariadna" offer a misogynistic opinion of higher-class women:

> Nowadays it's only in the villages that women keep up with men. . . . There women think and feel like men. They grapple with nature, they fight for civilization just as hard as men. But the urban, bourgeois, educated woman long ago dropped out. She's reverting to her primeval condition, she's already half animal and, thanks to her, many triumphs of the human spirit have just been thrown away. Woman is gradually disappearing and her place is being taken by an archetypal female. This backwardness of the educated woman is a real menace to civilization. Retreating, she tries to drag man back with her and arrest his progress. . . .[44]

Were these thoughts and feelings of Chekhov himself? If so, then Sophie Laffitte was right about his hating women. I believe, how-

ever, that in spite of the generalizations in Shamokhin's reflection, Chekhov did not hate women in general, but only the characteristics personified in Ariadne, and these equally in women and men. He basically disliked the aimlessness and superfluity in the lives of members of his own class.

FOOTNOTES.

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34. The Oxford Chekhov, Volume VIII. Stories 1895-1897, p. 41

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## Part 3: Chekhov's Conception of Love and the Adulterous Woman.

Russian literature is generally rather puritan and almost prudish in its expression of love and the feelings that go with it. In nineteenth century Russia it was mainly Dostoyevski who ventured into the whirl of sensuality and uncovered its secrets. But his illustration of sensuality is mainly a portrait of evil and immoral sensation, something repulsive and lecherous which deprives one of one's humanity. The reason for this might lie in the fact that at that time more or less only "fallen women" were allowed to experience or show sensuality, but then also gaining from it financially.

Like many other writers of the period, Chekhov must also have been intrigued by love as a topic for his writings, as in most of his work some kind of a love relationship occurs and love plays an important role. In fact it seems to have been an indispensible ingredient for him, as in one letter to Lydia Avilov he wrote the following:

> . . . I am finishing a story ["Ward No. 6"], a very dull one, owing to a complete absence of a woman and the element of love. I can't endure such stories. I write it, as it were, by accident, thoughtlessly. . . .[1]

Chekhov's characterization of love is well in keeping with the times and in accordance with many other Russian writers, subdued and its development bashful and full of chastity. In his love relationships there is not one erotic scene, no sensuality, no intoxicating force of physical love and the most typical fea-

ture of love portrayal by Chekhov is the theme of unfulfillment or unhappiness. People meet and fall in love, but their happiness does not last long - they either have to part for unexpected circumstances ("An Artist's Story"), or they belong to someone else already ("About Love", "The Lady with the Pet Dog"), and when they do stay together, whether married or not, the novelty and enchantment wears out and the relationship becomes dull ("Ariadna"). The theme of unrequited love also occurs in Chekhov's works rather frequently (The Seagull). He portrays more a collapse of illusions rather than fulfillment of hopes and an idyllic domestic scene saturated with family happiness, such as in War and Peace, is not to be found in Chekhov.

Tolstoy was the one author who clearly stated his puritanical views on love and sex, but whether Chekhov agreed or disagreed with them in private is very ambiguous. In his work we come across sex as such only once, and that is, however, the vulgarized side of it - prostitution.[2]

The story "A Nervous Breakdown" ("Pripadok", 1888) describes the first visit of a young student Vasilyev to a number of Moscow brothels with his friends. He is horrified by the indignity of the fallen women there and has a nervous breakdown. He runs home and dreams of saving the prostitutes, but then despairs in his own helplessness and the unreality of such an idea.

Judging by the way in which Chekhov presents the problem of prostitution, one feels that he was more disturbed by the vulgarization of sexual relationships rather than the moral issue

of it. To him prostitution was more the lack of human dignity than the question of morality and ethics. In a letter to Alexei Suvorin on November 11, 1888 he wrote about his story and the problem of prostitution:

> In this story I've told my own opinion. . . . I speak at length about prostitution but settle nothing. Why do they write nothing about prostitution in your newspaper? It is the most fearful evil, you know. Our Sobolev Street is a regular slave market.[4]

The heroine of "The Chorus Girl" ("Khoristka", 1886) we find in Pasha, a loose woman with a "human face", portrayed with the author's sympathy. Here we witness a visit of a hysterical wife of one of Pasha's frequent visitors. Accusing her of taking expensive gifts from her husband while her children have nothing to eat at home, the wife asks her to return the valuables and absolutely refuses to believe that Pasha in fact has received no valuables from the lady's husband.

> . . . You say that I am a low woman and that I have ruined Nikolay Petrovitch, and I assure you . . . before God Almighty, I have nothing from him whatever. . . . There is only one girl in our chorus who has a rich admirer; all the rest of us live from hand to mouth on bread and kvass. . . .[5]

After a few more hysterical outbursts by her visitor, Pasha, feeling pity and degradation gives the lady all her valuables, even though she did not receive them from the straying husband of the lady. The man in question, hiding in another room during this whole charade, after the lady leaves, instead of feeling shame, pours his abuse over poor Pasha.

This story, by no means belonging to Chekhov's best, is important in that it presents a fallen woman as a sympathy-

deserving victim of the social evil and inequality of the system.

Chekhov's chaste approach to love is expressed also in those stories where he deals with adultery. Again there are no scenes of ecstasy, no voluptuous passion, but only a sentimental and romantic feeling between the two people involved is presented. The fact that they become lovers is flatly stated and not developed any further.

In the story "About Love", mentioned in detail in Chapter I, the relationship does not even develop beyond the platonic state. The two people are in love without telling each other about it, and when the confession finally comes, fate parts them.

A little different is the plot in "A Misfortune" ("Neschast'e", 1886). It is a story of a young married woman who does not find fulfillment in the love of her husband. Sofya Petrovna is pursued by the lawyer Ilyin who is in love with her and wants to have an affair with her. She succeeds in resisting his advances for a while, but the romanticism of Ilyin's love compared to the routine and familiarity of a marriage is very enticing to her, and she finally gives in. Her resistance, though under pretense of morality, is full of hypocrisy. Although she pretends to be a good wife who loves only her husband, her attempt to remain faithful is motivated by sentimentality and inexperience.

> Strength and fortitude were needed to combat him, and her birth, her education, and her life had given her nothing to fall back upon.[6]

Her virtuousness is only a cover, because in reality she tremen-

dously enjoys her power over the young man so passionately in love with her.

> To spite herself, she recalled in precise detail, keeping nothing back - she recalled that though all this time she had been opposed to Ilyin's love-making, something impelled her to seek interview with him; and what was more, when he was at her feet she enjoyed it enormously.[7]

After a few more days filled with her inner struggles and inhibitions she arrives at a surprising conclusion:

> . . . So, for instance, she told herself that she never had been moral, that she had not come to grief before simply because she had had no opportunity, that her inward conflict during that day had all been a farce. . . .[8]

When she finally adapts to her "defeat", she begins to view the whole situation rather coldly:

> She convicted herself of being tempted, not by feeling, not by Ilyin personally, but by sensations that awaited her . . . an idle lady, having her fling in the summer holiday, like so many![9]

Yet, on the way to her future lover she is still full of reproach.

> She was breathless, hot with shame, did not feel her legs under her, but what drove her on was stronger than shame, reason, or fear.[10]

The fine portrayal of Sofya Petrovna belongs, in my opinion, to the best of Chekhov's stories. Her thoughts and feelings, and her half-conscious motives for what she is about to do are distinctly feminine and although presented with objectivity, the sensitivity of the matter is faultlessly captured and creates unfailingly a feeling of sympathy with her.

Olga Dmitrievna of "The Wife" and Olga Ivanovna of "The Grasshopper", to name two other of Chekhov's adulterous female characters, were discussed in detail in Part 2 of this chapter.

In most of Chekhov's stories about love written in his later period as a mature writer, the emotion is destroyed by poshlost', absence of human communication, or a milieu of banality and vulgarity. The only story in which this process is reversed is "The Lady with the Dog" ("Dama s sobachkoi", 1899).[11] It is also the only story which deals exclusively with a love affair and adultery.

The story begins in Yalta, a Black Sea resort, where people tired of the monotonous city life come to find some diversion. This is also true for Dmitri Gurov, a cynical ladies' man, who meets Anna Sergeevna, "a new arrival in Yalta', and prepares himself for a passing affair.

Although on the outside Gurov appears an adjusted and mature man, he is in reality an unhappy and torn person revenging the fate that his family bestowed upon him. They had married him to a woman whom he did not love or respect and whom he considers ugly, silly and unintelligent. He is unfaithful to her whenever and wherever the opportunity arises and does not even attempt to understand her. From this unsatisfactory relationship originates his frivolous attitude toward women and view of them as an "inferior race".

Anna Sergeevna, known in Yalta simply as "the lady with the pet dog", is also married unhappily to a much older man, who cannot fulfill or understand her. Her innocence, sincerity and warmth at first irritate Gurov but then begin to affect his consciousness and cause the psychological and moral change within

him.

> As he went to bed he remembered that she had not long left boarding-school, that she had been a schoolgirl like his own daughter - remembered, too, how much shyness and stiffness she still showed when laughing and talking to a stranger. This must be her first time ever alone in such a place, with men following her around, watching her, talking to her; all with a certain privy aim which she could not fail to divine. He remembered her slender, frail neck, her lovely grey eyes.[12]

Anna Sergeevna liked Gurov, who impressed her with manners, and, also, it was pleasant to carry on a conversation with him and for a while to forget her old husband. As their relationship progresses, Anna's soul is tortured by doubts and inhibitions, and the tone of indifference in Gurov's voice makes her very unhappy. She is afraid he will stop respecting her and that she may lose him. Only with Gurov does she realize what real love means and what happiness it can bring. She realizes what she has missed by marrying from curiosity and a desire for a better life and security, and not for true love.

On their walks and trips around Yalta she experiences love in all its intensity. She sees its beauty, jealousy and doubts. When she must leave unexpectedly, she cannot forget the man who has shown her that life does not have to be dull, grey and uninteresting as she had known it before.

But even Gurov cannot forget this beautiful young woman; his life in Moscow seems monotonous and dreary, and he realizes that he is in love and has to see Anna again. They meet in Anna's town and there she confesses:

> I'm so miserable. . . . I've thought only of you all this time, my thoughts of you have kept me alive. Oh, I did so want to forget you. . . .[13]

and she promises to come to see him in Moscow. Their meetings occur in a Moscow hotel, where their desire for happiness together comes true at least for a little while, and their love for each other grows as much as their unhappiness about having to hide their true feelings.

> Anne and he loved each other very, very dearly, like man and wife or bosom friends. They felt themselves predestined for each other. That he should have a wife, and she a husband . . . it seemed to make no sense. They were like two migratory birds, a male and a female, caught and put in separate cages.[14]

This story, as so many of Chekhov's others, has an open end. The lovers know of their growing attachment and want to show their love openly without concealment and pretense, but so far have failed to come up with a solution of how to do it.

> Soon, it seemed, the solution would be found and a wonderful new life would begin. But both could see that they still had a long, long way to travel - and that the most complicated and difficult part was only just beginning.[15]

This pathetic ending suggests the sadness of unfulfillment that these two people have ahead of them, and that their happiness will have to end sooner or later and change into despair. For the present, however, their love brings them contentment and happiness. "When one loves, then one opens up such inner riches in oneself, so much tenderness and affection, that it seems almost incredible that one can love so much."[16] Chekhov wrote this reflection in his notebook, and the state of

this note is exactly that in which he leaves his lovers in "The Lady with the Dog".

Chekhov treats the age-old theme of adultery differently than was expected in his time. There are no dramatic turns of action, no tragic ending, as for instance in Anna Karenina,[17] no morals, no rejection, no regrets or self-reproach. Chekhov's attitude toward adultery, based upon a true love and such as presented in "The Lady with the Dog', is that of a modern-thinking contemporary of today who realizes that love comes unexpectedly and people, no matter what their situation is, are quite helpless against it. It would be, therefore, rather cowardly and impassionate to condemn any individuals who are caught in it.

In Chapter I it was stated that the private Chekhov was a very reserved and rather prudish man in the matters of love and sexual relationships. Hence, it would be unreasonable to expect him to create any vividly sensuous or dramatic love scenes in his works, and had he attempted to do so, most probably he would have failed to produce a situation believable to himself as well as to his readers. Furthermore, " . . . to Chekhov, to have been educated and brought up in a civilized way was to have had the very nature of one's impulses modified and civilized."[18] And so, true to this, particularly his women characters from the "civilized" background convey this modification especially in the matters of love, affection and sex, while the peasant women, i.e. Mashenka and Varvara of "Peasant Wives" or Agafya, let their impulses and

instincts flow freely and without restraint.

Chekhov considered love beautiful and important for any human being, for in his notebook he remarked:

> Love is a blessing. It is not for nothing, indeed, that at all times amongst practically all civilized nations love in the broad sense and the love of a husband for his wife are both alike called love. If love is frequently cruel and destructive, the cause for this lies not in love itself but in the inequality of human beings.[19]

True love was for Chekhov a necessary prerequisite for a successful and a happy marriage, an opinion which was, however, not widely accepted in Russia at that time. It was looked upon as an institution for the benefit of society and feelings were considered more or less irrelevant.

Among peasants, for whom marriages were usually arranged anyway, love was of no concern whatsoever and even sexual attraction seemed to be considered sinful:

> Mishenka could not picture his future spouse in his imagination except as a tall, plump, substantial, pious woman, stepping like a peacock, . . . while Masha was thin, slender, tightly laced, and walked with little steps, and, worst of all, she was too fascinating and at times extremely attractive to Mishenka, and that, in his opinion, was incongruous with matrimony and only in keeping with loose behaviour.[20]

Among the bourgeoisie a marriage was a social necessity for the sake of status, and often, depending on the fortune and title of those involved, more of a business deal than a blessed union. For women, terrified of spinsterhood, it was furthermore a way to security and the only acceptable possibility to fulfill their feminine needs, namely having a family.

> She asked herself if she had been right to refuse a man solely because his outward appearance was not to her liking.

> It was true, she did not love him, and to marry him would mean to relinquish forever her dreams . . . but would she ever meet the man she dreamed of? . . . She was already twenty-one. There were no marriageable men in town. . . . . . After all, one often hears that love soon vanishes and only habit remains, that the whole purpose of marriage is not love or happiness, but in duties, such as the rearing of children and domestic cares. . . .[21]

Chekhov was not the only author to portray loveless marriages; Anna Karenina, Prince Andrey in War and Peace and others did not love their spouses. But Chekhov was one of the few who did not accept this matter-of-factly and also in private life followed the voice of his heart rather than to yield to society's adopted routine. His love relationships are not happy ones, but in portraying them he remained true to himself, which, ultimately, is an accomplishment in itself.

FOOTNOTES.

1. Anton Chekhov: Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics. Edited by Louis S. Friedland. New York: Benjamin Bloom, Inc., 1964. p. 22

2. Thomas Winner: Chekhov and His Prose. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966. p. 59

3. Chekhov and His Prose, p. 59

4. Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics, pp. 27-28

5. Anton Chekhov: The Chorus Girl and Other Stories. Transl. by Constance Garnett. New York: Willey Book Company, 1920. pp. 8-9

6. Select Tales of Tchehov. Translated by Constance Garnett. London: Chatto & Windus, 1961. p. 570

7. Select Tales of Tchehov, p. 564

8. Select Tales of Tchehov, p. 570

9. Select Tales of Tchehov, p. 570

10. Select Tales of Tchehov, p. 571

11. Chekhov and His Prose, p. 217

12. The Oxford Chekhov, Volume IX. Stories 1898-1904. Translated & edited by Ronald Hingley London: Oxford University Press, 1975. p. 129

13. The Oxford Chekhov, Volume IX. Stories 1898-1904, p. 138

14. The Oxford Chekhov, Volume IX. Stories 1898-1904, p. 140

15. The Oxford Chekhov, Volume IX. Stories 1898-1904, p. 141

16. Zapisnye knizhki A. P. Chekhova. Reprint of the original edition. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, Inc., 1964. p. 56 (Chekhov's notebook: p. 88, note 3)

17. Chekhov and His Prose, p. 216

18. Beverly Hahn: Chekhov. A Study of the major stories and plays. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. p. 273

19. Zapisnye knizhki A. P. Chekhova, p. 33

20. Select Tales of Tchehov, p. 417

21. Anton Chekhov: Selected Stories. Translated by Ann Dunnigan. New York: New American Library, 1960. ("Three Years"). p. 150

## Part 4: Socially Aware Women. Industrial Bourgeoisie. Proletariat.

As already mentioned, Chekhov was an advocate of no political party, but concentrated his writings rather on social evil and injustice in the society of his time. As the Industrial Revolution reached Russia and the misery of feudalism of the poor changed into the misery of capitalism, Chekhov began to abandon the approach of a comparatively dispassionate observer and show his sympathies a little more openly, but never to the full satisfaction of his critics. Beverly Hahn suggests that Chekhov felt women were the best characters through whom to focus on the moral and psychological consequences of the social change, because men's identities are in some sense bound up with their continuing occupations and therefore the impact of a social change is not so strongly felt through them.[1] It seems, indeed, that when Chekhov's characters do feel the restlessness and anxiety of an upcoming change, they are mostly women. However, whether the reasons for this, in fact, are those suggested by Beverly Hahn, or whether it was simply because women are by nature more sensitive to any change, is for our purposes irrelevant.

With the arrival of capitalism a new class of the rich emerged, the industrial bourgeoisie. Three of Chekhov's stories deal with this new element in society: "A Woman's Kingdom", "Three Years", and "Doctor's Visit", and the author's approach to the main characters and their presentation to the reader is different and rather unusual. Each of these stories' central

figure is a wealthy person, who becomes a capitalist by inheritance and does not enjoy this position. These characters, needless to say positive, are very sensitive and likable people, aware of the injustice of their situation, and obtain from their wealth only unhappiness.

Anna Akimovna in "A Woman's Kingdom" ("Bab'e tsarstvo", 1894) was born a daughter of a worker before she inherited a steel factory. She was happy to be a plebeian and often longs for the childhood times filled with content and warmth.

> Anna Akimovna looked at the women and young people, and she suddenly felt a longing for a plain, rough life among a crowd. She recalled vividly that far-away time when she used to be called Anyutka, when she was a little girl and used to lie under the same quilt with her mother, while a washer woman who lodged with them used to wash clothes in the next room. . . .[2]

Her sudden wealth embarrasses her, and her elegance, education, and refinement instilled in her by governesses and teachers keep her isolated from the environment, though ordinary, where she felt at home.

> Fate itself had flung her out of the simple working-class surroundings in which, if she could trust her memory, she had felt so snug and at home, into these immense rooms, where she could never think what to do with herself, and could not understand why so many people kept passing before her eyes.[3]

She is twenty-six years old, attractive and loving, instinctively longing for the warmth and comfort of a family life with husband and children, but her social position spoils all chances for this happiness.

> She thought with vexation that other girls of her age . . . were now busy looking after their households, were weary and would sleep sound. . . . Only she, for some reason,

was compelled to sit like an old woman . . . do nothing the whole evening till midnight, but wait till she was sleepy. . . .[4]

She strongly dislikes her elaborate house and the inevitable and, to her burdensome, social responsibilities which she has to fulfill. Perplexed and frustrated, she makes a last attempt to bring closer the world she has lost by considering marrying Pimenov, a foreman in her factory. She does not love him, but she comes to this decision only because he happened to appear at the moment of her most intense feeling of loneliness, longing for a married life per se and disgust with the unpleasant business duties she must attend to.

> . . . I am lonely, lonely as the moon in the sky, and a waning moon, too: and whatever you may say, I am convinced, I feel that this waning can only be restored by love in its ordinary sense. It seems to me that such love would define my duties, my work, make clear my conception of life. . . .[5]

> . . . All this conversation made Anna Akimovna suddenly long to be married - long intensely, painfully; she felt as though she would give half her life and all her fortune only to know that upstairs there was a man who was closer to her than anyone in the world, that he loved her warmly. . . .[6]

Her footman Mishenka, however, laughs at her idea of marrying Pimenov and reminds her how awkward it would be for her to have at her side in a distinguished company a man whose manners are far from refined.

> And only now, for the first time in the whole day, she realized clearly that all she had said and thought about Pimenov and marrying a workman was nonsense, folly and wilfulness. . . .
> . . . She lay down without undressing, and sobbed with shame and depression: what seemed to her most vexatious and stupid of all was that her dreams that day about Pimenov had been right, lofty and honourable, but at the same time she felt that Lysevitch and even Krylin [her lawyer and a civil

> councillor in whose company she felt uncomfortable] were nearer to her than Pimenov and all the workpeople together. . . .

Her illusion is shattered and she is forced to abolish her intention and continue to live in isolation and unhappiness.

In Anna Akimovna Chekhov protrayed the mixture of the two worlds between which she is drawn: the old one in which the woman's world was her husband and family, and the new one in which a woman encounters a social change and the responsibilities that come with it. Anna Akimovna is clearly quite unprepared and confused by the confrontation with this new world and her intense wish for a marriage is more of a cry for the happy and uncomplicated past to return, while, at the same time, aware of the harsh reality which does not allow it. She is torn between her nostalgia and the present in which she is incapable to make a new life for herself and therefore feels useless and lost.

> As before, Anna Akimovna felt that she was beautiful, good-natured, and wonderful, but now it seemed to her that that was of no use to anyone; it seemed to her that she did not know for whom and for what she had put on this expensive dress, too . . . she began to be fretted by loneliness and the persistent thought that her beauty, her health, and her wealth, were a mere cheat. . . .[8]

Anna Akimovna's unhappiness is so intense and the nostalgia so strong that even her short brush with the unpleasant side of a working-man's life - filth, loathsome smell and drunkenness of Tchalikov's home where she takes money at Christmas, cannot weaken the pleasant memories of her childhood. Nevertheless, by making Anna Akimovna rationally aware of the impossibility of

her marriage to Pimenov, Chekhov successfully demonstrates the widening gap between the two worlds.

A similar problem is that of Liza Lyalikova, the daughter of a factory owner, in "A Doctor's Visit" ("Sluchai iz praktiki", 1898). Liza also suffers from the emptiness and the absurdity of her life full of all possible luxuries, while the workers' lives are grim and lacking in bare necessities. Her conscience does not leave her in peace and she falls ill.

A doctor is called and after the diagnosis that Liza's illness is the result of depression caused by the prospect of becoming the owner of the factory one day, she realizes that her illness is incurable unless she leaves the factory. Liza, just as her mother, is very unhappy and regards the factory as a prison and the wealth coming with it a sole source of her misery.

Anna Akimovna and Liza Lyalikova are both unhappy women who are aware of the injustice and wickedness of their position in which they are involuntarily trapped. Usually very critical of bourgeoisie, Chekhov shows in these stories his optimism and belief that the change is imminent and not only the proletariat but also members of the rich are capable of realizing the necessity of this change.

The story "Three Years" ("Tri goda", 1895) also deals with

members of the bourgeoisie who are ill at ease in their world and prisoners of their own wealth, but here also love, a favorite topic of Chekhov, plays an important role.

This is a story depicting three years in the life of Alexei Laptev and his wife Yulia, and the change and frustrations in their shaky love relationship against the background of an upper-class merchant society. Alexei Laptev has lived the life of an intellectual Bohemian, criticizing established values and picturing love, like Turgenev's Bazarov, as a biological phenomenon.[9] But when he meets Yulia, daughter of a physician, he falls head over heels in love with her and his earlier ideas and theories are no longer true for him. He proposes to her, but is rejected. However, when Yulia has time to think about the proposal and concludes that love is not necessary for marriage, she changes her mind and accepts the proposal.

Laptev, puzzled by this change of mind and convinced that she does not love him, believes that she wants to marry him for his money. Lacking the necessary communication between partners, their marriage is an unhappy union in which their isolation from each other steadily grows. Disenchanted, Laptev gradually stops loving Yulia, while she, on the contrary, has quietly grown to love him. And so again money, in addition to the lack of communication and understanding, destroy the relationship between Yulia and Laptev, and ruin the chances of their happiness together.

The similarity between these women and those mentioned in the previous parts lies in the fact that although they despise the

surroundings and the situation in which they find themselves, they do not have enough courage to either change it or leave it. This courage, growing throughout the story to its successful climax, is evident only in one, and the last one at that, of Chekhov's stories, namely "The Betrothed" ("Nevesta", 1903), sometimes also translated as "The Bride". The story's heroine Nadya manages to extricate herself from the banality and limitations of the petty-bourgeois provincial life into which she was born and in which she grew up.

Nadya's courage does not come all of a sudden and without any help, but has been slowly growing within her and is strongly encouraged by Sasha, an artist who is living as a protégé of her grandmother's in their household.

Nadya is engaged and about to marry Andrei, a local priest's son. He is a rather typical member of the bourgeoisie, dull, conventional and bragging about his idleness. Nadya liked her fiancé at first, but now, the closer the wedding date gets the more she realizes she does not love him and cannot go through with the wedding plans. She realizes that life with him would be only a continuation of the tedious and boring life of her home. She suddenly sees how mediocre her life has been in a household where all the activities are concentrated on preparation and consummation of food, and run by a domineering and ignorant old woman, her grandmother. Subconsciously she even begins to re-evaluate the picture of her own mother, whom she always considered a beautiful and intelligent woman and realizes that she is just as ordinary

and unhappy as everyone around her.

Nadya's disillusionment is further stimulated by Sasha, an eternal student, who urges her to leave her home and go to St. Petersburg to study instead. The peak of Nadya's discontent and the turning point in her life occurs during the visit with Andrei to the house where they are to live after the wedding. As he leads her through the rooms, explaining the plumbing details and showing the nice furniture and magnificent pictures, she realizes she cannot live in the pretense and banality which he offers her.

> . . . It's too much! . . . How I could ever stand this life . . . I don't, I simply don't understand. I despise the man I'm engaged to. I despise myself, I despise this idle, pointless existence. . . .[10]

She takes Sasha's advise and leaves for St. Petersburg to study there.

Nadya succeeds in making the break and after the exams returns to her home for a visit. She feels completely detached by now, however, from everything that used to be part of her life. She finds the house and the whole town small and dirty, and is repelled by the narrow quarters of the servants in which they are forced to sleep on the floor. The illusions of her childhood are now the thing of her past and she knows now it was the right thing for her to do to leave. The story's final lines express her and Chekhov's optimism for the future:

> She pictured her new life opening before her, with its broad horizons. Still obscure, still mysterious, that life lured and beckoned her.[11]

The very last sentence makes the success of her break with the

past complete:

> Next morning she said good-bye to the family; vigorous, high-spirited, she left town; forever, presumably.[12]

Considering how few stories mirroring the industrialization period of Russia Chekhov wrote, it would be hard to surmise the direction and intensity of his further writings as industrialization progressed and the upcoming revolution became unavoidable. Nevertheless, it surely is just and correct to assume that Chekhov's portrayals would continue to be as realistic and uncompromising as before.

## FOOTNOTES.

1. Beverly Hahn: Chekhov. A study of the major stories and plays. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. p. 270

2. Select Tales of Tchehov. Translated by Constance Garnett. London: Chatto & Windus, 1961. p. 400

3. Select Tales of Tchehov, p. 418

4. Select Tales of Tchehov, p. 396

5. Select Tales of Tchehov, p. 422-423

6. Select Tales of Tchehov, p. 431

7. Select Tales of Tchehov, pp. 437, 438

8. Select Tales of Tchehov, p. 416

9. Thomas Winner: Chekhov and His Prose. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966. p. 127

10. The Oxford Chekhov. Volume IX. Stories 1898-1904. Translated & edited by Ronald Hingley. London: Oxford University Press, 1975. p. 217

11. The Oxford Chekhov. Volume IX. Stories 1898-1904, p. 223

12. The Oxford Chekhov. Volume IX. Stories 1898-1904, p. 223

## Chapter III.

### WOMEN IN CHEKHOV'S PLAYS.

Already in Taganrog as a boy Chekhov often visited the local theater and his interest in theater which he then developed remained with him for the rest of his life. He became serious about writing plays only in the late 1880's when he was already established as a short story writer. He had attempted to write a play while still at school (The Fatherless, 1877) and was successful in writing several one-act sketches which he called "vaudevilles" (The Bear, The Proposal, A Jubilee, etc.), however, not until Ivanov (1887-9) and its success on the St. Petersburg stage did he realize his true potential as a dramatic writer.

His second play The Wood Demon (Leshy, 1889-90) was, however, a total failure and reappeared after some basic changes later on as Uncle Vania (Dyadya Vanya, 1898). Discouraged by the bad reception of his Wood Demon it was not until 1895 that he tried his hand in dramatic writing again. The Seagull (Chaika, 1896) was also not an immediate success, but only after several performances it was favorably received by the public as well as the critics. Three Sisters (Tri sestry, 1900-1), The Cherry Orchard (Vishnevyi sad, 1903-4), and Uncle Vania all achieved success and popularity only after several performances, after the audience acquainted itself with the new dramatic presentation of Chekhov and came to understand his characters.

As mentioned in Chapter I. Chekhov's original approach to dramatic art created much stir and controversy before being accepted and understood, mainly because it contradicted so many of the "rules" of dramatic writing honored until then. Namely Chekhov's brevity and compactness, so typical for his prose, hold for his plays as well.

> Tolstoy, who thought highly of Chekhov's stories, did not accept his plays and considered him a failure as a playwright; this opinion was shared by many. . . .
>
> Nothing in Chekhov's plays fell in with the age-old conception of the theater; neither external nor internal action, almost a series of tableaux vivants, and only sometimes, at the fall of the curtain, a pistol shot when a bullet means no more than a full stop.[1]

The characters in Chekhov's plays are as plain and weak, unhappy and mostly idle, often pathetic and defeated individuals as in his stories. They are caught in situations which they are totally unprepared or incapable to handle to their own full satisfaction. Aware of their failings they either fall into despair, occasionally ending the pointless life with their own hand (Ivanov, Treplev), or swerve into futile dreams and speeches of a glorious but distant future (Doctor Chebutykin) compensating for their wasted lives and suffering. Mostly they are men and women typical of the class to which they belong, most often the intelligentsia and the rural gentry. Basically they are the same slaves of love, stupidity, laziness and fear of life, as in Chekhov's stories, turning their hopes toward the future because they feel in the present there is no place for them.

Their isolation and absorption in their own feelings, not helping them in understanding themselves, additionally keeps them

from understanding others. Incomprehension and a break-down in communication is a characteristic occurrence between Chekhov's heroes; they carry on conversations without listening to each other, nevertheless appreciating the fact of having a hearer on whom they can pour out their soul. The tragedy of Chekhov's characters is not in terrible things happening to them, but rather in things not happening to them.

Many of the characters are practically studies in the process of human degeneration (Uncle Vania, Andrey Prozorov) while others are at the end of it by the time we meet them (Serebriakov, Ranevskaia, Gaev or Ivanov). Women characters, with the exception of Sasha in Ivanov, Nina in The Seagull, and Ania in The Cherry Orchard are, true to the accepted social convention of the time, generally presented as passive beings, awaiting and dreaming of what may or may not come in their life.

Chekhov never spends much time and many words introducing his characters or describing them in detail. Only a hint of some special trait or a typical gesture is noted, and it is up to the reader himself to make up the personality of a character from his moods, actions and conversations. The same is true of the scenes in Chekhov's plays; an average and unexciting scene suddenly becomes alive by a suggestion of some trivial and seemingly unimportant detail. Yet these details stay outside the basic ground of the play and do not disturb the general atmosphere of everyday conditions. The nature of the relationships between his characters is revealed right at the beginning, and any dramatic development or the possibility of a surprise is eliminated. The frustration,

the emotionalism and the self-searching bring into the play a typical Chekhov atmosphere and give it a quality outbalancing the lack of action. Nevertheless, today it is difficult, even for a Russian, to identify himself with the weary and pondering hero, thus often diminishing the impact and appreciation of Chekhov's dramatic skills.

Chekhov's first published play Ivanov is still too melodramatic to be considered true to his technique, but in his plays to follow he was much more successful in achieving a full command of it.

## A. IVANOV. (1887-9)

This is a play in which we witness the final stage of the main character's downfall. Ivanov, as we learn, used to be a happy human being, full of vigor and drive, but in the past several years has become a neurotic weakling. Not finding the strength to pull himself out of it, he ends his life by suicide. To his brother Alexander Chekhov wrote about the play:

> The subject is complicated and not frivolous. Every act I finish as I do my stories. I make all the action go peacefully and quietly, and at the end I give the spectator a slap in the face.[2]

As said above, Ivanov cannot be regarded a perfect example of Chekhov's dramatical style, nevertheless, Chekhov himself considered the main character "a type which has a literary significance"[3], and critics consider the play important only as a stage in Chekhov's development as a dramatist. Chekhov himself seems to have realized that the play did not come out as he would have liked. In his letter to Suvorin he wrote:

> I seem not to have brought off the play. It is a pity. . . . I tell you on my conscience, in all sincerity, those men were born in my head not out of sea-foam, not out of preconceived ideas, not out of "intellectuality", not accidentally. They are the result of my observation and study of life. They stand in my brain, and I feel that I have not falsified even by one centimeter nor sophisticated by a single jot. If on paper they have not come out clear and living, then the fault is not in them but in my inability to express my thoughts. It shows that it is too early yet for me to write plays.[4]

There are four female characters in the play: Anna Petrovna, Ivanov's wife of Jewish descent, Zenaida Savishna, the rich wife of the Chairman of the County Council Lebedev, their 20-year old daughter Sasha, and Marfa Yegorovna Babakina, a rich young widow

of a landowner.

Anna Petrovna, before marriage Sarah Abramson, is a quiet inconspicuous lady, who loves her husband with all her heart, but whose love is not returned. Ivanov's love for her has slowly disappeared and all he feels for her is pity. He says of her:

> Aniuta is a remarkable, an extraordinary woman. She changed her religion for my sake, left her father and mother, gave up her money, and if I'd ask her for a hundred more sacrifices, she would have made them without blinking an eyelid. . . . I was passionately in love with her when I got married and I swore I'd love her forever, but. . . . Well, five years have passed, and she still loves me, but I. . . .[5]

Anna Petrovna, suffering from tuberculosis, is slowly dying but left alone. Her husband, although knowing her state of health, leaves her every evening alone and goes to the house of Lebedev to amuse himself. The only person to whom she can pour her aching heart out is her doctor Lvov. Although she is not the complaining type of a woman, she suddenly finds herself saying:

> You know, Doctor, I'm beginning to think that Fate's cheated me. Lots of people who are probably no better than me are happy, and yet they don't pay anything for their happiness. But I've paid for everything, absolutely for everything! . . . And how dearly! Why should I have to pay such a terribly high interest? . . .
>
> (p. 52)

She is a gentle and honest woman, with a peaceful disposition and longing for a little happiness. As a sincere human being, it is hard for her to comprehend all the deception and wickedness of the world around her:

> . . . And now, you know, I'm beginning to feel surprised at the unfairness of people: why don't they respond to love with love, why must they pay back truth with falsehood? . . .
>
> (p. 52)

Her innocence, naivete, and goodness prevent her even from re-

proaching her husband for all her suffering and unhappiness, in spite of his neglect and disregard of her condition. After realizing her husband's infidelity, however, she loses her will to live and dies.

Sasha Lebedev is a young and intelligent girl who falls in love with Ivanov. She is a rather forceful and strongminded young woman with modern independent ideas of her own, and has an outspoken character. She does not hesitate to contradict her parents' gossipy guests and stand up for Ivanov, who is often the center of their futile chatter. She confesses to Ivanov of her feelings for him:

> I love you madly. . . . You are all my joy, without you my life has no meaning - no happiness! To me you are everything. . . . When I was a child you were the only joy in my life. . . . I'll go anywhere with you, to the other end of the world, even beyond the grave. . . . Only for Heaven's sake, do let's go soon, otherwise I'll suffocate. . . .
>
> (p. 76)

Sasha's conception of love relationships and marriage is rather simple and ruthless. She does not realize the complexity of a love relationship and the obligations coming with it. She tells Ivanov:

> Are you to blame because you've stopped loving your wife? Well, maybe, but a man isn't master of his feelings; you didn't want to stop loving her. Are you to blame because she saw me telling you I love you? No, you didn't want her to see it. . . .
>
> (p. 93)

This trend of inconsiderateness in her can be, however, justified by her youth and inexperience. Full of life and ideals, in her naiveté and innocence she is willing to sacrifice herself in order to save another human being from downfall. Living a boring and

unfruitful life at her parents' home, she appoints herself to be the deliverance in Ivanov's life. To his question why she should love him, a failure, she answers:

> There are a lot of things men don't understand. Every girl is more attracted by a man who's a failure than by one who's success, because what she wants is active love. . . . Do you understand that? Active love. Men are taken up with their work and so love has to take a back seat with them. To have a talk with his wife, to take a stroll with her in the garden, to pass time pleasantly with her, to weep a little on her grave - that's all. But for us love is life. I love you, and that means that I dream about how I'd cure you of your depressions, how I'd follow you to the end of the world. . . .
>
> (pp. 94-5)

But as the time of her wedding to Ivanov comes closer, she begins to doubt the rightness of her motives for this marriage and realizes the greatness of the responsibilities that she has taken upon herself. She confides to her father:

> I feel as though I don't understand him and never shall understand him. During the whole time I've been engaged to him he's never once smiled, never once looked me straight in the eyes. All the time complaining, repenting about something, hinting at some guilt or other, trembling. . . . I'm tired of it. There are even moments when it seems to me that I . . . that I don't love him as much as I should.
>
> (p. 104)

To Ivanov she says:

> Oh, Nikolai, if you knew how tired you make me! You've worn my spirit down! You are a kind, intelligent man - ask yourself: is it fair to set me these problems? Every day there is some problem each one harder than the last. . . . I wanted active love, but this is martyred love!
>
> (p. 110)

In spite of her father's advice and Ivanov's plea to let him go, she insists on going through with the wedding. Ivanov's words reveal her true motives:

> . . . You set yourself a goal - to resurrect the man in me, to save me at whatever cost - and the idea of doing a great deed gratified you. Now you are ready to withdraw, but there's a false emotion preventing you. . .
>
> (p. 110)

However, Sasha does not let go; either her stubbornness or her need for self-sacrifice, or both, do not allow her to give up the idea of saving Ivanov in spite of himself, thus forcing him into taking his own life. She is much too insensitive or determined in her samaritanism to realize that her love and the marriage is yet another complication and encumberance to Ivanov's already ill conscience. Of Anna and Sasha Chekhov wrote:

> Why do they love him? Sarah loves Ivanov because he is a good man, because he is ardent and brilliant. . . . While he is excited and interesting she loves him; but when he begins to grow misty in her eyes and to lose definite outline, she no longer understands him, and at the end of the third Act she speaks her mind straightly and sharply.
>
> Sasha is a girl of the new school. She is educated, intelligent, honest, and so on. When there is no fish a crab will serve; and therefore she marks down the thirty-five-year-old Ivanov. He is better than the rest. She knew him when she was a child, watched closely his work in the days before he reached exhaustion. . . .
>
> She is one of those females who are not to be conquered by the bright plumage of the male, nor by his courage or fine carriage, but by his complainings, lamentations and failures. She is of the kind who love men at the time of their decline. . . . She will raise the fallen, put him on his feet, make him happy. It is not Ivanov she loves, but the task. . . .[6]

The other two females in the play are only of minor significance and complete the picture of a country estate and its inhabitants. Zenaida Petrovna, Sasha's mother, is a woman of undesirable traits. Very petty, gossipy and insincere, her life evolves around money. This love of money ruins not only her husband's life and his respect for her, but makes her a very stingy

and unpleasant person. To her guests she offers nothing more than tea and home-made gooseberry preserves so that even her husband mockingly calls her Madam Gooseberry Preserve. With the impending marriage of her daughter, her worries do not concentrate on the possibility of Sasha's unhappiness, but on the necessity of a dowry and the question of how Ivanov will pay his debt to her after becoming her son-in-law. Marfa Yegorovna Babakina is rather typical of well-to-do gentry of the time. Simple and empty-headed, filling her boring life with gossip and pettiness, and fancying herself becoming a countess.

Chekhov indeed was unsuccessful in conveying the picture of the living characters in his mind onto the paper. Although we know that Ivanov was not always the hopeless character we see but became so under the stress of exhaustion, boredom, loneliness, financial worry, and emotional conflicts, he fails to raise the compassion of the audience. Somehow one does not care about what happens to Ivanov or the others. Sasha, with her maternal feelings, naive speeches and obstinate intentions of Ivanov's regeneration, becomes tiresome not only to Ivanov himself but the on-looker as well. Her seemingly honorable task in reality conceals her need to dominate and makes this nice and charming girl an exasperating nuisance.

## B. THE SEAGULL. (1896)

This play, written nine years after Ivanov, is definitely much less melodramatic and, according to many of Chekhov's biographers, contains the most elements from his personal life. Having completed the play, Chekhov was not happy with it. He wrote to his friend Suvorin:

> Well, I have now finished the play. I began it forte and finished pianissimo, against all the rules of dramatic art. It came out like a story. I am more dissatisfied than satisfied with it, and, reading over my newborn piece, I become once more convinced that I am not a playwright at all. . . .[7]

In another letter to Suvorin written earlier Chekhov speaks of this play as "a comedy with three female parts, six male parts, four acts, a landscape (a view of a lake), much talk about literature, little action and five tons of love."[8] This simple sentence is basically a sufficient description of the play, and there are "tons of love", incidentally all unhappy and in several love-triangles. But the play's leitmotif and purpose are much more complex. Its characters, typically for Chekhov, are lonely and unhappy people, mostly unfulfilled and weak. They all live in their individual inner world, too absorbed by their own troubles and yearnings to care about one another, and therefore feeling isolated and alone. F. L. Lucas writes:

> The Seagull might have for sub-title The Egoists; or Of Human Loneliness; or, Artistic Vanity and the Vanity of Art. For such are its themes. It is about lonely people, unhappy in love, and making others unhappy; obsessed with art, yet unconsoled by it.[9]

The play unfolds the drama of a young actress Nina

Zarechnaya, whose life will be ruined by her love for the writer Trigorin, and the failure of a young playwright, Treplev. There is little action in the play which is, more or less, a detailed psychological study of the characters and their relationships. As in all of Chekhov's plays, the most important events and changes happen off the stage and the audience learns of them from a passing mention of one of the characters. There are "five tons of love", but it is all unhappy and unreturned love, perhaps suggesting that love alone should not be one's only purpose in life and, when it does become the only aim, it means a complete waste of such a life.

We meet Nina Zarechnaya as a young and pure girl who dreams of nothing but becoming a successful actress, because to her, fame and glory of recognition seem to be all she would need to be happy. The falseness and unreality of the world of dreams in which she continuously dwells, are expressed in her words:

> How strange it is to see a famous actress crying. . . . and for such a trifling reason! And isn't it strange, too? Here we have a famous author, a favourite with the public - they write about him in all the papers - they sell pictures of him everywhere, his works are translated into foreign languages - and he spends the whole day fishing and is quite delighted if he catches a couple of gudgeon. I used to think that famous people were proud and inaccessible and that they despised the crowd; I thought that the glory and lustre of their names enabled them, as it were, to revenge themselves on people who put high birth and wealth above everything else. But here they are, crying, fishing, playing cards, laughing and getting angry like anyone else.
>
> (pp. 144-5)

Because of her lack of achievement and inexperience with life, Nina cannot see the possible disadvantages and personal price that one might have to pay for this fame and lustre about which she dreams. Blinded by her dreams, she proclaims:

> For the sake of being happy like that - of being a writer or an actress - I would put up with unfriendliness from my family, with poverty and disappointment, with living in a garret and having nothing to eat but rye bread. I would gladly suffer dissatisfaction with myself in the knowledge of my own imperfections, but in return I would demand fame . . . real, resounding fame. . . .
>
> (p. 150)

Out of despair about Nina's unreturned love for him, Treplev kills a seagull and brings it to her. Trigorin, seeing the dead seagull at her feet, recites a few words, an outline for a new story, thus, without Nina's or his own realization, foretelling her fate. Nina, bored by her girlish affair with Treplev, falls helplessly in love with Trigorin and follows him to Moscow. As we learn from Treplev in the last Act, Nina has had an affair with Trigorin, had a child from him which died, but Trigorin has left her to return to his mistress Arkadina, Treplev's mother. As her affair with Trigorin drew to an end, Nina remembered the dead seagull and Trigorin's words, and began to speak of herself as of the "seagull". Not knowing anything about what happened between her and Trigorin, Treplev considers her analogy to a seagull as signs of a deranged mind.

We also learn that along with the disasters in her private life, Nina's wish of becoming a famous actress has not come true. When she returns home, we see a very different Nina than in the first act. We have not witnessed the process of this change within her, we are confronted only with the result. Now she stands before us no longer a simple and inexperienced young girl, but a mature woman marked by the harsh realities of life, yet strong and determined to stick to her chosen career as an actress in

spite of all her misfortunes. She has matured enough to realize that personal happiness cannot give one fulfillment and that one needs awareness of a certain aim in life in order to find gratification and a sense of being a complete human being. She tells Treplev:

> . . . I think I know now, Kostia, that what matters in our work - whether you act on the stage or write stories - what really matters is not fame, or glamour, not the things I used to dream about - but knowing how to endure things. How to bear one's cross and have faith. I have faith now and I'm not suffering quite so much, and when I think of my vocation I'm not afraid of life.
>
> (p. 181)

In this change to a mature individual and her determination to continue on her chosen path she reminds us of Nadia in the story "Betrothed", and becomes the only character in Chekhov's plays not to give up her hopes and succumb to a momentary feebleness of mind and melancholy, and avoid becoming a complete failure like all the others. Nina's role, much too dependent upon the symbolic significance others are supposed to see in her, is very difficult to play, and a wrong casting of this character, could alter the outcome and success of any performance.[10]

Masha Shamraeva's world, unlike Nina's, is hopeless and precarious, as she desires in life nothing but love. She is the daughter of the bailiff of Sorin, Treplev's uncle and the owner of the estate where the play takes place. Her unhappy disposition and constant emphasis on love make her a rather weary character. She wears always black because she is "in mourning for her life". Her only aim in life is obtaining the love of Treplev, the man she cares for, while he hardly acknowledges her existence. Because she has nothing else to live for, her life is a complete waste.

The emptiness and despair in her life drive her to drink and snuff-taking. She marries the schoolmaster Medvedenko without love and even her child cannot rid her of the infatuation for Treplev. Her sense of human dignity and pride has vanished so that she even lets her mother plead with Treplev for her.

She fully realizes the helplessness of her situation (in the conversation with Trigorin she speaks of herself as of: "Maria, who doesn't know where she belongs and has no object in life!"), but she is too weak to do something about it. She keeps on hoping that some outside force will take her out of it. She turns to Doctor Dorn for help and advice, but when that fails, her only hope is the possibility of her husband's transfer to another district, where she will "forget it all . . . tear it out of her heart, roots and all!"

Masha is one of the many in the gallery of Chekhov's characters who have nothing to live for, or believe so, and are therefore doomed to a life of constant unhappiness and disappointment. They are a nuisance to themselves as well as to all the others around them. In creating Masha, Chekhov as if wanted to say, complete happiness can never lie in love alone; and should one desire nothing but love fate will deal blow after blow, disappointment after disappointment, but never the craved-for happiness. Unrequited love changes Masha into an eccentric, deprives her of her individuality and human face. Her deplorable treatment of Medvedenko, whom she married out of despair, or her indifference toward her own child fill us with intense dislike for this

empty, pitiful and utterly useless creature. Love for Masha loses all its beauty and becomes a disease and a device to her destruction as a human being.

In contrast to Masha, Nina matures through the very experience of an unhappy love affair into a young woman with her life's aims clearly defined. She found the way out of her dreams and into the reality of life, she found her soul and faith in herself. As indicated in Chapter I. Nina was supposed to be a portrait of the living example of Lika Mizinova, a long-time friend of Chekhov.

Irena Nikolaevna Arkadina, mother of Treplev and a famous actress, is a woman utterly spoiled by her fame. She is a ripe woman of beautiful looks but despicable character. She is domineering, capricious, self-centered, and vanity itself. She is not capable of loving anybody but herself. She is totally absorbed in self-appreciation and constantly boasting of nothing but her beauty, youthful appearance, and popularity with her audiences. Her pretended love of the theater and the arts is only a way of displaying herself, and enables her to immerse herself in her self-love even more. She has no respect for the art of others, not even her own son, and by cruel remarks and disinterest destroys the spark of talent that he might have.

When Treplev tries to shoot himself, she does not even attempt to find out the reason. When Sorin, her brother, recommends that she should help Treplev financially and maybe send him abroad for a while because "it wouldn't do the boy any harm to have a little fun. . . .", her stinginess outweighs the little

bit of affection she might feel for her son, and she concludes that she can do nothing for him because she does not have any money: "I have no money. I'm an actress, not a banker." (p. 157)

Arkadina is satisfied with her life as it is because, taking advantage of her fame and charm, she always gets her own way. Should any problems upset the flow of her life, by theatrical outbursts and scenes she succeeds in the end in winning and return everything back to where she wants it.

The best characterization of Arkadina is given by Treplev himself. He tells his uncle:

> It makes her angry to think that it won't be she, but Zarechnaia, who is going to make a success of it on this tiny stage! A psychological oddity - that's my mother. Oh, there is no doubt about her being very gifted and intelligent; she is capable of weeping bitterly over a book, of reciting the whole of Nekrasov by heart, of nursing the sick with the patience of an angel. But . . . you musn't praise anybody but her, you mustn't write about anybody but her, you must acclaim her and go into raptures over her wonderful acting. . . .
>
> And then she's superstitious - she's afraid of having three candles alight, she's afraid of the number thirteen. . . .
>
> . . . You see, my mother doesn't love me. I'm always reminding her that she isn't young any longer. When I'm not about she's thirty-two, but when I'm with her, she's forty-three, and she hates me for it. . . .
>
> . . . She loves the theater, she imagines that she's serving humanity, whereas in my opinion the theater of today is in a rut, and full of prejudices and conventions. . . .
>
> (pp. 122-3)

Seeing a rival in Nina on stage as well as in her private life, Arkadina at once proceeds ruthlessly to ruin the performance as well as lure her lover away from Nina. She succeeds immediately in the first, thereby ruining the hopes for that evening of the aspiring young actress and the young playwright, her son. Not possessing Nina's attributes, "youth, beauty and innocence," any more, the second task is a little harder. Eventually, however,

she succeeds in that as well, as Nina's and Trigorin's love affair breaks up and he returns to Arkadina. Her scheming paid off; her life is back where she wants it and as she likes it.

Arkadina strongly reminds us of the conceited female characters of Chekhov's stories discussed in Part 2 of Chapter II. Just as the Princess and the Grasshopper, Arkadina lives in a world of clichés and pretense, completely drowned in her selfishness and incapable of sympathy for anyone else, and as superstitious, vain and set on charming everybody as Ariadne. But by her insensitive treatment of her own son she strikes us as even more wretched than the others of her sort.

According to Chekhov's critics with each new play he mastered his characteristic technique of dramatic writing better; this, inevitably, means that his Seagull is considered a better piece than his Ivanov was. Yet it still has too much melodramatic content, especially the fatal pistol shot. In this play though, he already succeeds in making the audience aware of what he feels and sees, and what he wants it to feel and see.

## C. UNCLE VANIA. (1898)

This play, as indicated before, was rewritten by Chekhov from his first play The Wood Demon. It is not known exactly when the transformation took place, but the play was ready to be performed by 1898. It was first made public in a collection of Chekhov's plays and taken up by some provincial theaters where it enjoyed a moderate success. The premiere of the play on a renowned stage, namely Nemirovich-Danchenko's Moscow Art Theater, followed only in October of 1899 and its reviews in the papers were mostly unfavourable. It was not a failure like The Wood Demon had been, but it never reached the height of success of The Seagull.

Like The Seagull, Uncle Vania is a study of frustration and futility but its characters, unlike in The Seagull, are stagnant, do not grow or develop in any way within the duration of the play. As with his other plays, Chekhov was not satisfied with the outcome of Uncle Vania. On December 3, 1898 he wrote to Maxim Gorki from Yalta:

> . . . Uncle Vania was written long ago; I never saw it on the stage. In recent years it has been often produced on the provincial stage - perhaps because I published a volume of my plays. My attitude towards my plays is, in general, cold. For a long time I have been removed from the theater, and I no longer feel like writing for it.[11]

This discouraging mood came over Chekhov periodically, especially in connection with his dramatic writing, nevertheless, as we know, it passed and he sat down with a renewed enthusiasm to writing another play.

As all other of his dramatic works, Uncle Vania opens in the middle of a very irritated atmosphere, full of disharmony, when the characters get on each other's nerves and the "storm" is near. In Chekhov, of course, the storm happens off the stage and the audience is presented with only the results.

Some time before a retired professor, Serebriakov, arrived with his second wife Elena at the estate of his brother-in-law by first marriage, known as Uncle Vania, thus upsetting the routine of the house. The atmosphere and overall agitation is well revealed by Elena in her talk with Uncle Vania:

> . . . Things have gone to pieces in this household. Your mother hates everything except her pamphlets and the professor, the professor is irritable - he doesn't trust me, and is afraid of you. Sonia is bad tempered with her father, and angry with me. She hasn't spoken to me for a fortnight. You detest my husband and openly despise your mother; I am on edge - I have been on the point of crying twenty times today. Things have gone wrong in this house. (p. 205)

Ivan Petrovich Voinitsky, to everyone Uncle Vania, who has supported the professor all his life in the belief that he was a valuable personality in his field, suddenly realizes that the professor is a mediocre person, who has given nothing to civilization but:

> . . . twenty-five years of lecturing and writing about things that intelligent people have known all the time, and stupid people aren't interested in. . . . (p. 191)

Realizing this, Vania thus becomes aware of the fact that also his whole life given to this man has been only a waste of time and energy.

> . . . I thought I was doing the right thing. But now. . . . I lie awake, night after night, in sheer vexation and anger - that I let time slip by so stupidly during the

years when I could have had all the things from which my age now cuts me off. (pp.194-5)

. . . Day and night I feel suffocated by the thought that my life has been irretrievably lost. I have no past - it has all been stupidly wasted on trifles - while the present is awful because it's so meaningless. (p. 205)

One tends to feel compassion for Uncle Vania and his strong resentment toward the professor, yet one also feels it unfair of him to put the entire blame for the wasted years on the professor.

There are four women characters in the play but only two main ones: Sonia, the professor's daughter from his first marriage, and Elena, the professor's second wife. The other two women, Maria Voinitskaia, Vania's mother, and Marina, an old children's nurse, are secondary and more or less unimportant. They are simple women unable to form their own opinion about anything or anybody. Marina is dismayed most of all by the upset routine of the days after the professor's arrival, while Voinitskaia, to use Uncle Vania's words: ". . . still adores him [the professor]; he still inspires her with feeling of reverent awe." (p. 192)

Elena Andreevna is a young and a beautiful woman who married the professor not for love but from admiration, and not for prestige in society as Sonia at first assumes. She gives him, an old man, her youth, beauty and freedom to realize only too late the disappointing truth that her husband is just an ordinary man and a far cry from the famous and a great man she thought him to be. She tells Sonia:

. . . I was attracted by him as a learned man, a celebrity. It wasn't real love, it was all artificial, but you see at that time it seemed real to me. . . . (p. 214)

True, Elena had not married her husband for selfish reasons, but as soon as she realizes her mistake, she settles, like so many other Chekhov's heroines, into a passive limbo from which she is not to emerge. She is even too indolent to be unfaithful to her old husband, a fact which she tries to conceal by talk of loyalty, purity and the capability of self-sacrifice. As long as she saw the professor as a great and famous man, she lived, lacking a strong personality herself, like Olenka Plemiannikova in "The Darling", through her husband; having learned the sad truth, she suddenly loses any purpose in life. Her perfect characterization comes from Doctor Astrov, a long-time friend of the family, who falls in love with her in spite of himself:

> . . . She's beautiful, there's no denying that, but . . . she does nothing but eat, sleep, go for walks, charm us all by her beauty . . . nothing else. She has no responsibilities, other people work for her. . . . (p. 210)

Elena is bored and unhappy. But when Sonia suggests some activities and errands in their village, which would surely bring her fulfillment, Elena's idleness and laziness overrule her feelings of boredom and she finds excuses for not taking Sonia's advice. Everybody realizes her laziness, but nobody condemns her for it. Uncle Vania says: "Just look at her! She walks about staggering with sheer laziness." (p. 217), and yet he can't help falling in love with her. She charms them all, just as Ariadne did, with her physical beauty and instead of disgust at her indolence she evokes in them feeling of compassion and sympathy for being married to an old and sickly man.

Maybe it is this feeling of boredom or idleness that makes her play an unfair game with Doctor Astrov's passion for her and Sonia's love for him. Astrov used to come to Uncle Vania's house only seldom, but since his infatuation with Elena's beauty, he visits them every day. Elena is aware of Sonia's love for Astrov and she knows the reason why he suddenly comes every day as well. But when Sonia confides in her and asks her for advice, she cannot resist the temptation of bringing some excitement into her life even at somebody else's expense. She volunteers to have a talk with Astrov under the pretense of finding out what chances Sonia really has. The slyness of her motives to have this "talk" is uncovered by Astrov himself:

> . . . Suppose Sonia is suffering - I'm prepared to think it probable - but what was the purpose of this cross-examination? Please don't try to look astonished. You know perfectly well why I come here every day. . . . You must have a victim! Here I've been doing nothing for a whole month. I've dropped everything, I seek you out hungrily - and you are awfully pleased about it, awfully. . . . Well, what am I to say? I'm conquered, but you knew that without that interrogation! (p. 224)

Through her foolish insensitivity and frivolity Elena ruins the chances for love and even the friendship between Astrov and Sonia. She spoils the happiness of others without being able to create happiness for herself. She ruins others as aimlessly and senselessly as she drags herself through her empty life. In the first act, while speaking with Uncle Vania, she accuses everybody of having "a devil of destruction" within themselves, but as we see, it is she and her husband who destroy everything around them.

Elena is the "femme fatale" for the people around her as

is Arkadina in The Seagull, though, unlike Arkadina, she destroys without the explicit intent to do so. She herself is not happy and does not bring happiness to others, and so, for all practical purposes, she is a superfluous person.

Sonia, the professor's daughter, has lived with Uncle Vania since childhood when her mother died. She is young but not beautiful, good-natured and sincere and, unlike Elena, has a clear purpose in life. She stands with both feet on the ground and does not let her mind be dimmed by illusions. She is kind, generous and appreciative of other people's values and considerate of their dreams and hopes. She is unselfish and her feelings for Astrov are as pure as only first love can be. She is too honest and too shy to try to win his affection by some trick and loves him in her quiet and inconspicuous way. In her confession to Elena she admits:

> . . . I've loved him now for six years, I love him more than I did my mother; every moment I seem to hear him, to feel his hand in mine, and I look at the door waiting, expecting him to come in at any moment. And you can see how I keep coming to you just to talk about him. Now he comes here every day, but he doesn't look at me - doesn't see me. . . . (p. 219)

In her youth and sincerity she is completely carried away by her feelings and cannot help speaking only of the object of her affections. Perhaps Elena is slightly jealous and resentful of this enthusiasm and fire in Sonia, as she has never experienced this kind of a sensation. Sonia's love for Astrov is true and strong, but nevertheless, hopeless. Yet she does not fall into despair because of it. She accepts her unhappiness graciously and with

her characteristic patience. When Elena destroys even the friendship between her and Astrov, she is not bitter and does not hate her for it. She accepts this blow of fate as all the others. Her maturity, superior to that of her uncle, comes to our attention when she tries to convince him to give the stolen bottle of morphia back to Doctor Astrov, with which he intended to commit suicide. She tells him:

> . . . I dare say I'm just as unhappy as you are, but I don't despair all the same. I bear it, and I shall continue to bear it till my life comes to its natural end. . . . (p. 238)

thus helping him to get back on his feet and face his responsibilities. After Professor Serebriakov and Elena leave the estate and life there returns to its old routine, Sonia consoles her beloved Uncle Vania:

> Well, what can we do? We must go on living! We shall go on living, Uncle Vania. We shall live through a long, long succession of days and tedious evenings. We shall patiently suffer the trials which Fate imposes on us; we shall work for others, now and in our old age, and we shall have no rest. When our time comes we shall die submissively, and over there, beyond the grave, we shall say that we've suffered, that we've wept, that we've had a bitter life, and God will take pity on us. And then, Uncle dear, we shall both begin to know a life that is bright and beautiful, and lovely. . . . (p. 245)

Here we have another case of hope for a better and more beautiful life not in the present but in the future. The difference, however, is that Sonia and Vania do not waste their life while waiting idly for this better future, but through hard work on their estate. Sonia belongs to those quiet souls who, without protest or resentment, dedicate their lives to others and feel happy by bringing happiness to others. Seeing that her dream of a happy married life with the man she had cared for had been shattered, she quickly reconciled herself to the prospect of spend-

ing her life in devotion and service to others. Being deeply religious, it was natural that she should find consolation in the hope for a better life beyond the grave. By letting the curtain fall slowly Chekhov possibly tried to evoke in the audience the feeling of how difficult and tedious a time lay ahead of them before this bright and happy life comes.

## D. THREE SISTERS. (1900)

Forgetting the discouraged words he wrote to Gorky in December of 1898, as early as one year thereafter Chekhov mentions the idea for another play, The Three Sisters, in his letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko (Nov. 24, 1899). In August, 1900 a good part of it was already written and in October, 1900 it was ready for the stage. Having finished it, Chekhov wrote to Maxim Gorky:

> . . . It was very difficult to write The Three Sisters. Three heroines, you see, each a separate type and all the daughters of a general. The action is laid in a provincial town, - it might be Perm, - in the background military, artillery.[12]

Not only the characters, as he says, but mainly his increasingly failing health must have been the biggest obstacle and made the task more arduous than anything he had done before. The play was written specifically for the Moscow Art Theater and was "not intended for the provinces"[13], as Chekhov wrote to his cousin, and the role of Masha was created to fit Olga Knipper, later his wife.

The atmosphere of The Three Sisters is more dismal than in any of the other plays, and it is virtually without any plot or an open conflict. Chekhov himself, dissatisfied of course, described it in his letter to the actress Kommissarzevsky:

> . . . The Three Sisters is ready, but its future, at any rate its immediate future, is wrapped in the darkness of uncertainty. The play turned out dreary, long, and inconvenient; I say inconvenient because it has, for instance, four heroines and a spirit, as they say, more gloomy than gloom.[14]

The play shows the frustrations of three sisters and their brother, whose lives revolve around the dream of returning to Moscow where

they had spent their happy childhood. At the beginning of the play nothing seems to stand in the way of fulfilling their dream except for Masha who is already married; but as the play slowly progresses we come to realize that their dream will remain just a dream. Moscow to them is a symbol of a better life, full of satisfying activity, while life in a provincial town is full of dreary routine and inactivity. Nevertheless, like all typical Chekhovian characters, they do not possess the strength to take the necessary steps to make their dream come true, and their continuous dwelling upon it only keeps the atmosphere of frustration and pain afresh.

Olga, the eldest of the sisters, is a teacher at a girl's school and the mistress of the house at home. At twenty-eight she accepts her fate and loneliness without remorse, but from time to time she contemplates:

> . . . I suppose everything that God wills must be right and good, but I can't help thinking sometimes that if I'd got married and stayed at home, it would have been a better thing for me. . . . I would have been fond of my husband. (p. 251)

She does not enjoy her work at school and dreams like the others of returning to Moscow, where they knew so much happiness as children. She is a lonely woman with a good heart and a mild nature. Like her two sisters she adores her brother Andrei who intends to become a professor at Moscow University. Instead, he becomes a gambler and an unimportant member of the County Council, and the pride and the hopes of his sisters crumble.

We learn that Olga has aged and lost weight during the past

four years since she has been teaching and heading the whole household. She takes it upon herself to worry about everything and everybody, and when a big fire strikes a neighbouring street, she does her best to help those affected. Her goodness is drawn best in her dialogue with Natasha concerning the question of an old servant. Natasha, Andrei's fiancé and later wife, wants to throw the old woman out, because she cannot do much work anymore, while Olga would never even consider this alternative. She is shocked by Natasha's rudeness to the old Nanny, but her protests and response are as mild and forceless as her behaviour always:

> . . . You spoke so harshly to Nanny just now. . . . You must forgive me for saying so, but I just can't stand that sort of thing . . . it made me feel faint . . . . Please try to understand me, dear. . . . It may be that we've been brought up in a peculiar way, but anyway I just can't bear it. When people are treated like that, it gets me down, I feel quite ill. . . . (pp. 296-70

This dialogue between Olga and Natasha on the matter of the old Nanny is a well rendered character-drawing and also shows Chekhov's own sensitivity and feeling toward the disadvantaged.

Olga's strange ideas about marriage and her disbelief in true love somehow do not surprise us. Worrying about Irena and her future, she advises her to marry Baron Tuzenbach, who is deeply in love with her. As a consolation forthe lack of Irena's love for him, Olga says:

> . . . After all, one doesn't marry for love, but to fulfill a duty. At least, I think so, and I'd marry even if I weren't in love. I'd marry anyone that proposed to me, as long as he was a decent man. I'd even marry an old man. (p. 306)

As so often in Chekhov's stories, here again we come across the

opinion that marriage was more a certain kind of a duty than a union based on mutual love and affection. Anyway, for Olga, it seems, all her life was a duty without much pleasure in it. As the eldest daughter she assumed, after her mother's death, the role of the mistress of the household, not because she would enjoy it as Natasha does, but because it seemed to be her duty. She does not like her work but goes on with it, takes part in conferences and eventually becomes the headmistress, because she thinks it is everybody's duty to work. And so out of duty and because it would be expected of her she would marry and bear children.

In the fourth act she is living with the old Nanny in the schoolhouse as a headmistress, and has finally reconciled herself with the idea of never moving back to Moscow. She also looks hopefully toward the better future and her only solace is that their "sufferings may mean happiness for the people who come after us. . . ." (p. 329).

Olga is a simple and undistinguished woman who most probably could never find true happiness and fulfillment in anything because of her outlook on life as duty. Prematurely aged, she is a nice person but colorless; no doubt well-bred but without that special spark to make her a personality. She is not only bored but boring in her conservatism, constant reserve and passivity, her inability to raise her voice, her conventional and always proper manners. She cannot let her feelings go because, basically, she does not experience any feelings that would have to be let go.

She waits for the happier future to happen to her rather than taking the initiative on her own and make it happen. As the worrying type she distantly reminds one of Sonia in Uncle Vania or Varia in The Cherry Orchard, although much more subdued than the other two, and practically lifeless.

Masha, the second daughter of the general, the most developed personality and the most elaborated of all the sisters, has perhaps the most tragic fate of all. She is endowed with a musical talent and could have possibly become an accomplished pianist, but because there is no one except Tuzenbach who recognizes and appreciates her rare gift, she lets it go to waste and becomes a nagging and irritable woman. She is, basically, a quiet and sensitive creature, easily susceptible to hurt and depression, hungry for true love and intellectual fulfillment. She had been married off at eighteen to a schoolmaster Kulygin, who she thought had a clever and prominent personality, but found out her mistake too late. Kulygin loves Masha very much, but in his simple mind it would never occur to him that Masha's soul and dignity might suffer in the vulgarity and dullness of the life he offers her:

> I don't say anything against my husband - I'm used to him now - but there are such a lot of vulgar and unpleasant and offensive people among the other civilians. Vulgarity upsets me, it makes me feel insulted, I actually suffer when I meet someone who lacks refinement and gentle manners, and courtesy. When I'm with the other teachers, my husband's friends, I just suffer. (p. 276)

Kulygin, insensitive of her suffering soul and unappreciative of her art, instead of encouraging her, petty as he is, worries his superior might disapprove of Masha's participation in a pub-

life court. It could never occur to him, ignorant as he is, that he is the cause not only of Masha's withering talent but also of the slow death of her soul.

Masha, for some unexplained reason, considers only civilians to be unrefined and uncultivated, while she is just enchanted by the military men. Her fascination for the uniform probably lies in the fact that her father, a military man, stressed the intellectual part of their upbringing so much and "used to wear us out with learning". At the moment, however, she has reached the stage in her life when she doubts the usefulness of all their knowledge:

> Knowing three languages in a town like this is an unnecessary luxury. In fact, not even a luxury, but just a sort of useless encumbrance. . . it's rather like having a sixth finger on your hand. We know a lot of stuff that's just useless. (p. 263)

Masha, too, would like to return to Moscow but she realizes her opportunities are lost because of her marriage. She falls in love with Colonel Vershinin, whose constant philosophizing on the glorious future of the human race seems more appealing to her than her husband's ignorance and stupidity. Her love, however, does not have the quality of innocence and depth of a true love, but is based more on a feeling of mutual compassion and sympathy:

> I thought he was queer at first, then I started to pity him. . . then I began to love him. . . love everything about him - his voice, his talk, his misfortunes, his two little girls. . . . (p. 307)

She is excited about her newfound feelings, yet, she is a little doubtful of their future:

> . . .How are we going to live through the rest of our lives? What's going to become of us? When you read a novel,

> everything seems so old and obvious, but when you fall in love yourself, you suddenly discover that you don't really know anything, and you've got to make your own decisions. . . . (pp. 307-8)

and when Vershinin is transferred away from the town, she lets only fleetingly bitterness take hold of her while talking to the old Doctor Chebutykin:

> When you have to take your happiness in snatches, in little bits, as I do, and then lose it, as I've lost it, you gradually get hardened and bad-tempered. (p. 316)

Masha resigns herself to her fate and is soon ready to pick up the pieces and "start her life all over again". Although cultivated, she is no intellectual in the true sense of the word, but she is a lively and thinking woman who is not only bored and depressed by the dullness of her life, but whose soul is being destroyed by it as well. She is eager to learn and have purpose in life:

> I think a human being has got to have some faith, or at least he's got to seek faith. Otherwise his life will be empty, empty. . . How can you live and not know why the cranes fly, why children are born, why the stars shine in the sky! . . . You must either know why you live, or else . . . nothing matters . . . everything's just wild grass. . . . (p. 282)

Masha is cleverer and perhaps worthier than her sisters, nevertheless, the bonds that tie her to the worthless life she is leading are impossible for her to break. Masha is mature and rather unconventional in her behaviour, and especially by her ideas on morality and open admission of her love affair she shocks the ever proper Olga. Contrary to her sisters, she is a strong personality but the presence of her husband ties her hand and feet and she cannot move to take charge of her life to her own

liking. One feels, her individuality will eventually suffocate completely and she will become just a lifeless puppet.

Irena, the youngest of the sisters and apparently the most beautiful, is twenty and full of ideals and eagerness to work:

> Man must work by the sweat of his brow whatever his class, and that should make up the whole meaning and purpose of his life and happiness and contentment. Oh, how good it must be to be a workman, getting up with the sun and breaking stones by the roadside, and work . . . than the sort of a young woman who wakes up at twelve, and drinks her coffee in bed, and then takes two hours dressing. . . . (pp. 252-3)

She is the one most excited by the prospects of returning to Moscow and at the opening of the play perhaps the only one truly believing that their move will be realized. In spite of her youth, she realizes the true reasons of the aimlessness of the life of their class. She tells Tuzenbach:

> You say that life is beautiful. Maybe it is - but what if it only seems to be beautiful? Our lives, I mean the lives of us three sisters, haven't been beautiful up to now. The truth is that life has been stifling us, like weeds in a garden. . . . We must work, work! . . . The reason we feel depressed and take such a gloomy view of life is that we've never known what it is to make a real effort. We are the children of parents who despised work. . . . (p. 268)

Irena is the only one of the sisters who changes significantly during the course of the play. From a cheerful and naive girl, full of hopes for happiness and beliefs in life's aims, she changes into an embittered and disappointed woman who feels cheated by fate. She gets a job, at first as a telegraph operator at a local post office, then on the town council, but the work does not bring her the expected joy. Instead, the monotony of it and the fatigue wear her down.

> Oh, I'm so miserable! . . . I can't work, I won't work!

> I've had enough of it, enough! . . . I'm twenty-three years old, I've been working all this time, and I feel as if my brain's dried up. I know I've got thinner and uglier and older, and I find no satisfaction in anything, none at all. And the time's passing . . . and I feel as if I'm moving away from any hope of a genuine, fine life, I'm moving further and further away sinking into a kind of abyss. (pp. 305-6)

On Olga's advice, Irena decides to marry Baron Tuzenbach even though she does not love him. She has been waiting all this time for their move to Moscow, hoping that there the true love she has been dreaming of will come along. But now, with return to Moscow becoming more and more unrealistic and boredom an everyday part of her life, she thinks that marriage might change her life to better and she becomes suddenly as eager for work as at the beginning of the play. She, as well as Olga, somehow fail to get discouraged by the example of Masha's unhappiness in her marriage. Her dialogue with Tuzenbach before his duel expresses her bitterness and desperate attempt to change her life, but also a pitiful lack of feeling and understanding for the man she is about to marry.

> . . . I'll be your wife, I'll be loyal and obedient to you, but I can't love you . . . . I've never loved anyone in my life. Oh, I've had such dreams about being in love! I've been dreaming about it for ever so long, day and night . . . but somehow my soul seems like an expensive piano which someone has locked up and the keys got lost. (pp. 320-1)

She does not find one kind word to tell him before he leaves to a duel over her, and hearing of his death, she does not feel much sadness. Instead, she goes on with her plans to leave town and become a schoolteacher with a renewed dose of enthusiasm about work.

Irena, dressed in white and with the childlike enthusiasm about life and work, is introduced to us as a typical romantic

heroine. During the play, though we get a chance to see also the unromantic and cold side of her, by the end she, just like Olga, seems to have become an old woman - young in age, but old at heart. Like her sisters, she suffers in the environment in which they find themselves and she hopes for the renewal of a joyous life when she starts to work. When the days, in spite of work which she finds monotonous, become as tedious and weary as before, she lets bitterness take charge and the useless passing of her life begins. At the beginning she was full of expectations of something better, at the end she has adjusted herself to the incompleteness of her life.

Tired of life and all set to face the long and lonely passage of uneventful years ahead of them, the three sisters seem like old women in spite of their young age. Olga and Irena speak of work, however, as Irena herself says, they lack the effort and the strive for achievement. Their words and enthusiasm about work become in the course of the play quite meaningless, as Irena finds working dull and tiresome and Olga would rather play a housewife to any man than continue being a schoolmistress. Their yearning to return to Moscow is not longing for the city itself or what it has to offer, but longing for the happy and carefree past. Their parents gave them education and economic security, yet omitted to give them knowledge of how to cope with life and face its dilemmas. They lack real will, a deficiency which somehow seems to have been the trait of their class.

Natasha, who becomes Andrei's wife, is a primitive creature without education, imagination and refinement, and lacks basically any conscience. She is satisfied with her life as it is, and it does not even occur to her that it could or should be any different. In the first act, before she becomes the mistress of the house, Masha ridicules her way of dressing:

> The way she dresses herself is awful! It's not that her clothes are just ugly and oldfashioned, they are simply pathetic. She'll put on some weird-looking, bright yellow skirt with a crude sort of fringe affair, and then a red blouse to go with it. . . . (p. 261)

This lack of class in Natasha might be the reason for the feeling of dislike toward her by all the sisters. At the beginning of the play she appears to be rather shy and insecure, but this quickly changes as soon as she becomes Andrei's wife. She takes over the household and enjoys immensely her power of ordering people around and making changes. She is the domineering type, resorting to tyranny to get her way and, as a matter of fact, by the end of the play she could be classified as the domestic tyrant. The success of her and Andrei's marriage was doomed from the very beginning, and Andrei soon realizes his mistake. Her stupidity and idiotic comments about her babies, although by using French phrases from time to time she tries to appear sophisticated, make a somewhat grotesque character out of her.

In contrast to the three sisters, in Natasha there is a streak of cruelty and scarcity of sympathy and compassion toward a fellow human being. Andrei characterizes her somewhat perplexed:

> My wife is my wife. She's a good, decent sort of woman . . . she's really very kind, too, but there's something

> about her which pulls her down to the level of an animal . . . a sort of mean, blind, thick-skinned animal - anyway not a human being . . . at times she appears to me utterly vulgar, that I feel quite bewildered by it, and then I can't understand why, for what reasons I love her - or, anyway, did love her. . . . (p. 318)

In a way Natasha reminds one of Aksinya from "In the Ravine" as in her, too, was much cruelty and animal-like instincts. Although Natasha's cruelty does not reach the monstrous proportions and capability to commit murder, her egotism, absolute insensitivity and lack of understanding are apparent throughout the play. She forcefully acquires power in the household and abuses it with a complete disregard toward others and totally disrupts the already dismal existence of the sisters. At the end, having succeeded in ousting the sisters from the house which rightfully belongs to them and Andrei together, Natasha, just as Aksinya, is completely in charge of the house. Her vitality and the abundance of energy were too much for the apathetic sisters to overcome. Subsequently, unmoved by the tragic death of Tuzenbach, Natasha chatters joyfully about her plans of further changes around the house. Like the Serebriakovs in Uncle Vania she brings destruction into the house, a fact which, in her ignorance, she will never realize.

The Three Sisters is the saddest and most nostalgic of Chekhov's plays, and "at moments . . . one feels that Chekhov loads the dice too unfairly against his characters and becomes more pitiless than life itself."[15] By suggesting in his letter to Gorky that the town the sisters live in be Perm, 800 miles away from Moscow, Chekhov made it immediately clear that the longing was never to be gratified. To the geographical distance the ir-

resoluteness and feebleness of the sisters had been added, and the dream was destined to remain unreachable.

The sisters find themselves in the same situation and share basically the same fate; yet each, characteristic to her nature, reacts differently to the exchange of a joyous dream with the grey reality. Their deep inability to adapt and make something positive out of life has been portrayed in countless other Chekhov characters, yet given the intelligence and cultivated minds, their wasted lives seem that much more of a shame. The Three Sisters is the saddest of all Chekhov's plays but it also is, in my opinion, the most skilled of his plays. It's not the characters that should be admired, but the mastery and versatility with which they were created.

## E. THE CHERRY ORCHARD. (1903)

This play took Chekhov the longest to write for, actually, it was written by a dying man. Already in 1901 he mentions in his correspondence the intention of writing "a very funny play", but only at the end of 1902 he mentions its title to be The Cherry Orchard. The play was finished in 1903 but was not performed until January of 1904. Its production caused some misunderstandings between Chekhov and Nemirovich-Danchenko and Stanislavsky, heads of the Moscow Art Theater, as they treated the play as "drama of Russian life", while Chekhov insisted that it was just a gay comedy.[16] "The production of The Cherry Orchard was difficult, agonizing, I might say. The producers and the author could not understand each other, could not agree."[17]

Its characters are lonesome, but perhaps more isolated from each other and from reality than in the other plays. The plot, typically simple, revolves around the fate of an estate with a cherry orchard. "I fancy that there is something new in my play, however dull it may be. There is not a single pistol shot in the whole play, by the way. . . ."[18] and neither is there a single love triangle. The whole play relies entirely on the atmosphere in which the action takes place. It is an interplay between generations and changing times, between masters and those serving them, between those truly loving and those less sensitive, between sentimentality and cool practicality.

The central character in the play is Liubov Ranevskaia, the owner of the estate. She returns from Paris penniless only to learn that she will not find peace from financial troubles even at home. Her heavily mortgaged estate is to be put up for auction unless she comes up with the money. Her character was described by Chekhov himself: "She is dressed with great taste, but not gorgeously. Clever, very good-natured, absent-minded; friendly and gracious to everyone, always a smile on her face."[19] She is a very weak woman, totally at a loss about her situation and incapable of handling it. Her good-heartedness is actually her shortcoming because, combined with her weakness, it makes her vulnerable to exploitation. She can never find enough strength and firmness to refuse the leeches and parasites around her and try to oust them out of her life.

She is rather melancholic and constantly dwelling on the past, the happy times along with the misfortunes.

> . . . Oh, my childhood, my innocent childhood! I used to sleep in this nursery; I used to look on the orchard from here, and I woke up happy every morning. In those days the orchard was just as it is now, nothing has changed. . . . All, all white! Oh, my orchard! After the dark, stormy autumn and cold winter, you are young and joyous again; the angels have not forsaken you! If only this burden could be taken from me, if only I could forget my past! . . . (pp. 347-8)

Her sentimental nature and her incapability of facing the unpleasant reality prevent her from taking some resolute steps to save the estate from being auctioned off. She absolutely refuses to take businessman Lopakhin's advice to parcel up the estate, build summer cottages and rent them to vacationers. Instead, she continues in her scatter-brained fashion to run helplessly around the

house, complain about her bad luck, cry over the orchard and further dwindle money away. For her soft-heartedness and irresoluteness she tries to blame her age and experience of life. When Petia Trofimov, her student protégé, urges her to stop deceiving herself and for once in her life look the truth straight in the eyes, in her answer she is evading self-responsibility for the present state of affairs:

> What truth? You can see where the truth is and where it isn't, but I seem to have lost my power of vision, I don't see anything. You are able to solve all your problems in a resolute way - but, tell me, my dear boy, isn't that because you're young, because you're not old enough yet to have suffered on account of your problems. You look ahead so boldly - but isn't that because life is still hidden from your young eyes, so that you are not able to foresee anything dreadful, or expect it? . . . (p. 375)

To some extent she is right as young people tend to oversimplify life's problems because of lack of experience, nevertheless, Liubov Andreevna's indecisiveness and irresolute behaviour demonstrate her fear of responsibility and incapability of handling an unexpected situation.

Ranevskaia claims that she "can't conceive life without the cherry orchard", however, her lack of determination to solve her problem and save the orchard from being sold rather contradict this statement. Consequently, when the estate is sold to Lopakhin at the auction, after the initial moment of shock and hysterical tears, she surprisingly becomes alive again. Quickly she is full of energy and ready to start packing. The fate of the cherry orchard has been decided for her, she is free of her burden and free to leave for Paris where her lover is waiting for her, which she would have done anyway no matter what the fate of

the cherry orchard. To her the immediate future looks simple and devoid of any major problems, therefore she is anxious to leave the estate and the memories behind. Suddenly the loss of the cherry orchard does not seem, after all, such a traumatic experience as she had expected. She leaves worn down and beaten, yet with a new amount of vitality and hope within her.

Liubov Andreevna is a puzzling character, evoking often contradictory feelings. One feels pity and compassion seeing her incapability to cope with the problems flooding her life but at the same time aggravated by the same weakness and the endless confusion around her. Even in her love affair she is feeble and powerless and lets the man take advantage of her. In spite of all the hurt and cruelty she had taken from him, she still cannot help loving him.

> . . . That telegram's from Paris. I get one every day. . . . He wants me to forgive him, implores me to return, and, really, I do feel I ought to go to Paris and stay near him for a bit. . . . He's ill, and lonely, and unhappy, and who's there to take care of him, to prevent him from making a fool of himself, and give him his medicine at the proper time? And anyway, why should I hide it, or keep quiet about it? I love him, of course I love him. . . . It's a millstone round my neck, and I'm going to the bottom with it - but I love him and can't live without him. . . . (p. 376)

" . . . if anyone's sins are to be forgiven on account of having loved much, hers will be"[20] wrote Virginia L. Smith. Ranevskaia fully realizes how unwise the continuation of the love affair is, how demeaning her position, yet, she is too weak to save herself and her dignity and put an end to it. And so she leaves the estate and its problems behind, only to plunge into another dilemma in the near future again. She is the kind of a person for whom

helplessness and uncertainty are a way of living and who, without it, would be lost completely. In spite of all the disasters she does not lose her "zest for life" "The only thing that would make a woman like that lose it would be death."[21] She is the type living through or in the past, never thinking much of the future and only struggling with the present.

Ania, Ranevskaia's daughter, is a sensitive and intelligent girl, strongly reminding one of Nadia in the story "Betrothed". Also here an eternal student, Petia, puts ideas of a bright future into Ania's head and makes her realize how futile and selfish her life has been.

> What have you done to me, Petia? Why is it that I don't love the cherry orchard as I used to? I used to love it so dearly, it seemed to me that there wasn't a better place in all the world than our orchard. (p. 367)

Ania is a lonely girl who loves her mother very much and suffers by her unhappiness. She longs for a closer relationship with her but, because her mother chooses to live in Paris, her hopes are not be be fulfilled. When the cherry orchard is sold, Ania does not despair but tries to give strength to her mother, overcome by tears. During the scene of Ania's comforting Liubov Andreevna, one feels the emotional superiority of the daughter over her mother. Ania has surpassed her mother, she is a mature individual who, by the end of the play, knows where she is heading in life, which cannot be said of Liubov Andreevna. Ania leaves gaily the house where she has lived all her life and her optimistic words: "Good-bye, old house! Good-bye, old life!" symbolize the characteristically Chekhovian hopes for the new and better

atmosphere of the future times. Chekhov himself wrote of Ania:

> . . . [she] is seventeen - eighteen, a slim girl, must be played by a very young actress. Above all, she is a child, gay to the very end, who does not know life and who does not cry even once except in the second act where it is only tears in her eyes.[22]

Surely youth made it much easier on Ania to leave the cherry orchard, but also her emotional maturity and lack of sentimentalism make it possible for her to look into the future with so much optimism and verve. Her feelings for Trofimov, more a childish infatuation than anything deeper, create no emotional anguish for her as it happens with Nina in The Seagull; her vigor and still strong enthusiasm make her future brighter and more real than were Irena's futile dreams of Moscow in The Three Sisters; her inexperience and virtually no responsibilities make her, in contrast to Sonia in Uncle Vania, unaware of the trials and complications that life bestows upon one. Chekhov left Ania at the very beginning of this new life, therefore one can only wonder; will Ania, after a few of life's disappointments, hold out like Nadia in "The Betrothed" did, or will she succumb and weaken as Irena in The Three Sisters did? This question will never be answered!

" . . . [A] more serious part [than Ania] . . . "[23] is Varia, the adopted daughter of Liubov Ranevskaia. She does slightly remind us of Sonia in Uncle Vania, even though Chekhov disputed this in his letter to Nemirovich-Danchenko: "Varia is not like Sonia and Natasha; she is a figure in a black dress, nun-like, a silly, a cry-baby. . . ."[24] To Olga Knipper he wrote:

"Varia is rather crude and rather stupid, but very good-natured."[25] She is the worrying type, absolutely unselfish and always thinking of the good of others rather than herself. However, she is much more temperamental than Sonia, and most of the time behaving more as a housekeeper than one of the family. Everybody seems to have accepted her self-appointed position of a housekeeper, and her worrying and hardworking personality become an indispensable part of the household.

Liubov Andreevna is obviously very fond of Varia, yet her relationship with her is that of a peculiar partnership rather than a mother - daughter bond, as it is with Ania. She speaks of Varia more as of a domestic help than a daughter, when trying to arrange a marriage between Varia and Lopakhin:

> She comes from the common folk, and she's a hard-working girl: she can work the whole day without stopping. . . . (p. 361)

The question of her possible marriage to Lopakhin is a cause of anguish to Varia. Their mutual attraction for each other is obvious to all around them, but for some reason Lopakhin never gets the courage to propose and their marriage never takes place. To the urging of Liubov Andreevna on this matter Varia answers:

> . . . I can't propose to him myself, can I? It's two years now since everyone started talking to me about him, and everyone is still doing it, but he either says nothing, or else he just talks in a sort of bantering way. I understand what's the matter. He's getting rich, he's occupied with his business, and he's no time for me. . . . (p. 374)

Varia does not feel any bitterness about this, only a little irritated about having no way out for herself. She is not financially independent, and when the estate is sold and everyone

leaves, she is forced to accept the position of a housekeeper with a family in a nearby village. She takes the fate of the cherry orchard perhaps the hardest of all, as it was Varia who was left with the hopeless Gaev in charge of the estate and kept it going, but she tries to cover her emotions by outward interest in trivialities of packing. When alone, she bursts into tears, but manages to compose herself and after everybody else has left, she slowly walks out of the house and out on most of her life.

Varia is simple and unsophisticated, domestically minded and too matronly for her age, but her sincerity and need for work make her a worthier person than most of the others around her.

Charlotta Ivanovna, Ania's German governess, is a woman feeling completely misplaced and useless in the world, and who cannot find her identity:

> I don't know how old I am. I haven't got a proper identity card, you see . . . and I keep on imagining I'm still quite young. When I was little, father and mother used to tour the fairs and give performances . . . and I used to jump the salto-mortale and do all sorts of tricks. When Pappa and Mamma died, a German lady took me into her house and began to give me lessons. So then I grew up and became a governess. But where I come from and who I am, I don't know. . . . (p. 354)
>
> . . . I am so lonely, always so lonely, no one belongs to me, and . . . and who I am, what I exist for, nobody knows. . . . (p. 355)

It is a sad confession saturated with loneliness and longing to belong somewhere. The unanswered questions about her identity make life seem foggy, absurd and futile to her. Charlotta's practice of performing tricks and trying to charm everybody by them helps her to escape the gloomy reality of her life and give

her momentary illusion of happiness that she knew in her childhood. Her complete lack of identity and the unchosen solitude make her one of the saddest and touching characters in all of Chekhov.

The last female character in the play, yet not very significant, is Ranevskaia's parlourmaid Dooniasha. She is a superficial and a silly girl, interested only in trifles and chattering of nothing but love.

> I came to live here with Master and Mistress when I was still a little girl you see. Now I've got out of the way of living a simple life, and my hands are as white . . . as white as a young lady's. I've grown sensitive and delicate, just as if I was one of the nobility. . . . (p. 356)

She continues her game of playing a lady throughout the play, but cannot seem to convince anybody to take her "refinement and gentility" seriously. She is a parody on the white, slim ladies with fragile nerves who dream of nothing but a rendezvous and tender romance in the moonlight.

The Cherry Orchard's success was not an immediate one; the play's popularity with audiences grew gradually and today it is considered by critics to be his most popular play in Russia (judging by the number of performances in the first few decades[26]). In spite of his steadily worsening health, Chekhov personally attended its premiere, the only one after the failure of The Seagull. It was made into an elaborate and festive event putting Chekhov in the center of the limelight, a thing Chekhov strongly disliked.

The play's success with the audience was beyond any doubt;

whether Chekhov, as its creator, felt successful is rather dubious. Whereas Chekhov insisted it was a light comedy, hardly anybody nowadays or even among his contemporaries understood it as such. This misunderstanding of the play's mood was a cause of many frustrations to Chekhov. He simply could not understand: " . . . Why do you say in your telegram that there are many tearful people in the play? Where are they? Varia is the only one, and that is because she is a cry-baby by nature, and her tears should not provoke depression in the spectator. . . ."[27] wrote the puzzled Chekhov to Nemirovich-Danchenko. And to his wife he wrote: " . . . Why is it that on the posters and in the newspapers advertisements my play is so persistently called a drama? Nemirovich and Stanislavsky see in my play something absolutely different from what I have written, and I am ready to bet anything that neither of them has once read my play through attentively."[28]

Whether drama or comedy, according to Chekhov's critics, The Cherry Orchard is his finest play proving him to be a very skillful writer. It is much more subtle and less theatrical than the other plays, yet revealing the characters masterfully without the help of a sensational crisis. The amount of surprise in the plot is also absent as the audience feels the fate of the orchard to be sealed. Only a slight tension is created in the viewer by his own curiosity as to what effect the sale of the estate will have on those living there. As Chekhov by principle does not moralize, the audience, or the director, can choose which fate to give the characters: if they see Ranevskaia and Gaev as shallow

people and parasites not working to earn their living, then they deserved to lose their estate; if they feel compassion for them, then the loss of the estate makes them into victims of social and economic changes beyond their control. The same double possibility applies to Ania: either, with the help of Trofimov, she is so provident that she sees the inevitable downfall of her class and their estates with it, or she is, in her youth, simply ignorant of what she is actually losing. For Varia there is only one possibility: one cannot help feeling compassion for her as with the cherry orchard she is giving up all she ever had and cared for. Lopakhin, a businessman to the core and with no time for sentimentality, can also be seen only as a practical man with much common sense who, quite unintentionally, becomes the new owner of the estate. Charlotta, lacking the feeling of identity and being at home anywhere, is basically undisturbed by the happenings and changes with the estate.

The Cherry Orchard is by all means a masterpiece of Chekhov's naturalism with the explicit distinction of portraying the human personalities as many-faced as they are in reality, thereby evoking in the audience sympathy at one moment and dispelling it at the next.

Chekhov as a playwright was not a blinding success in his time, a fact which must have been a cause of anguish for him "for by nature Tchekhov was a man of the theater,"[29] and neither is he a blinding success today. "He loved, understood, and felt the theater . . . "[30] yet his innovating approach to the dramatic writing was severly criticized not only by the ever-complaining critics, but by his colleagues and friends as well. Tolstoy's dislike of Chekhov's plays is a well known fact, but also Ivan Bunin, a very close friend of Chekhov, sharply criticized especially his portrayal of the nobility.

> I thought at the time, and I still think, that he ought never to have written about the nobility, their country estates and so forth; he did not know them well enough. This was particularly noticeable in his plays - in Uncle Vania or The Cherry Orchard. The noble landowners in them are very false.[31]

Chekhov's portrayal of disillusionment with life does not apply to today's Russia or the rest of the civilized world, and his melancholic and obscure characters and their provincial life are basically out-dated. Yet his plays are constantly revived and performed on stages in all parts of the world. As in the nineteenth century Russia, also today, for every few successes there are many more failures and downfalls. This is why Chekhov chose to write about them, hoping to somehow impel a change, and this may also be the reason why his plays are still played today. The times in his works may be out-dated, but the basic nature of the human beings remains the same. Their bitterness and frustrations, the vanity and envy, love and hatred, disappointed hopes and unfulfilled longings, their loneliness and isolation, all these are feelings abundant even today.

Typical for Chekhov only, though, is the fact that he presents these feelings in overflowing quantities, and not when they are new and fresh, but when they have already established themselves as a "permanent state of mind"[32] and a part of the character's life. The fact that in each of his plays there is someone speaking of a bright and better future reflects the ever-present optimism of Chekhov and the majority of the human race.

FOOTNOTES.

1. Ilja Ehrenburg: Chekhov, Stendhal and Other Essays.
   New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963. p. 62

2. The Life and Letters of Anton Tchekhov. Transl. & edited by S. S. Koteliansky and Philip Tomlinson.
   New York: George H. Doran Co., 1925. p. 90
   (October 1887)

3. The Life and Letters of Anton Tchekhov, p. 91

4. The Life and Letters of Anton Tchekhov, p. 142 (December 30, 1888)

5. Anton Chekhov: Plays. Translated by Elisaveta Fen.
   London: Pengin Books Ltd., 1971. p. 44
   (All following quotations from Chekhov's plays will be quoted from this book with the respective page numbers following in the parenthesis.)

6. The Life and Letters of Anton Tchekhov, p. 140

7. The Life and Letters of Anton Tchekhov, p. 232 (November 21, 1895)

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18. The Letters of Tchekhov to Knipper, p. 308 (September 25, 1903)

19. The Letters of Tchekhov to Knipper, p. 322 (October 14, 1903)

20. Anton Chekhov and the Lady with the Dog, p. 139

21. The Letters of Tchekhov to Knipper, p. 331 (October 25, 1903)

22. The Letters of Tchekhov to Knipper, p. 322 (October 14, 1903)

23. The Life and Letters . . . , p. 292 (November 2, 1903)

24. The Life and Letters . . . , p. 292

25. Letters of Tchekhov to Knipper, p. 323 (October 14, 1903)

26. The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, . . . , p. 111

27. The Life and Letters . . . , p. 291 (October 23, 1903)

28. Letters of Tchekhov to Knipper, p. 380 (April 10, 1904)

29. Anton Tchekhov: Literary and Theatrical Reminiscences. Transl. & edited by S. S. Koteliansky. New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1974. (From the Reminiscences of K. S. Stanislavsky, p. 159)

30. Literary and Theatrical Reminiscences, p. 159

31. Ivan Bunin: Memories and Portraits. Translated by Vera Traill and Robin Chancellor Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1951. pp. 43-44

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## CONCLUSION.

When Chekhov began to send his humorous sketches to various newspapers while still a student or even later on as an established short-story writer, the last thing on his mind was to think of himself as an innovator, nor did he hope to be called the creator of a new style. The brevity which, incidentally, was also a requirement by the papers to which he contributed, was quite natural for him and so to speak in his blood. Sober and unemotional, an enemy of clichés, grandeur and grand but empty words, he could not have written otherwise and remain true to himself.

> Even in everyday life he used words with precision and economy. He valued words very highly. He could not bear pompous, false, bookish words. His own speech was beautiful - fresh, clear, and to the point. In his way of talking one never heard the writer; he seldom used similes or epithets, and when he did they were usually commonplace; he never flaunted or relished a well-chosen word. "Big" words he loathed.[1]

His stories are short yet with important social undertones, his plays untheatrical yet with deep emotional content, and both executed always in an unbiased attitude and presented with a diligent objectivity very rare among authors of his time or today. His belief that a writer is not a moralist nor has he the competence to offer solutions or cures to all the ills of mankind is evident throughout his whole work. He portrayed the characters, but left the judging to others, at the same time warning of how easy it is to interchange judgement with misjudgement and so unfairly condemn a human being.

> No, Doctor, we all have too many wheels, and screws, and valves inside of us to be judged by first impressions or by a few external traits. (Ivanov, p. 91)

The cause for human weaknesses and faults is not simple or only skin-deep, and judging them is a responsible and difficult task.

> In conversations with the writing fraternity I always insist that it is not the business of the artist to solve questions which require a specialist's knowledge. . . . An artist must judge only of what he understands; his sphere is as limited as that of any other specialist - this I repeat and on this I always insist.[2]

This is the main reason why Chekhov cannot be "labelled" a "didactic writer" in the true sense of the word. Nevertheless, the open or unfinished endings in his stories and the unchanged personalities of his characters are often more suggestive of the answers and surely artistically more valuable than lengthy moralizing conclusions, for they evoke an atmosphere of spontaeous congeniality in the sphere of imagination and ethical feelings between the reader/viewer and the author. "He portrays his characters instead of labelling them; but the portrait itself is the judgement. His humor makes him tolerant, but, though he describes moral and material ugliness with tolerance, he never leaves us in any doubt as to their being ugly. His attitude to a large part of life might be described as one of good-natured disgust."[3] From his correspondence and the notebooks we can conclude that Chekhov was not such a dedicated writer from the very beginning, but with each year and with each new story, and later on with plays, he chose and worked out his topics and characters with painstaking care and sense of responsibility as if he had realized that "however impartially a writer may present his facts, still by the

very facts he chooses, by the very events he selects, he cannot help implying his own scale of values."[4]

Should there be any "label" to fit Chekhov, it would have to be that of a realist. Of Ibsen he complained that he " . . . does not know life"[5], while he himself portrayed life to the extent of naturalism. Russian life in his stories as well as plays is very depressing, for each class in its own way, and his characters are more or less anti-heroes, as there is nothing in them to imitate or admire. He strips them of their shells and lies and exposes their true moods and mental anguish, their void of human dignity and strive for accomplishment. His characters, men and women alike, are portraits of living caricatures existing in a tight grip of their own illusions and mediocrity. With the exception of the peasant who does not, and mostly will not, know any better, most of Chekhov's men and women are aware of their emptiness and lack of accomplishment and are sick of it, but maintain living in it with infuriating persistence. The only difference between the men and women is that women accept it and bear with it in silence, only occasionally assuming the possibility of a change (Irina in Three Sisters), while it is mostly men, particularly in the plays, that openly admit and talk of the idleness of their class.

Ivanov: . . . I can bear anything: anxiety, mental depression, financial ruin, the loss of my wife, premature old age and loneliness, but I just can't bear the contempt I feel for myself. I'm dying of shame at the thought that I, a healthy, strong man, have somehow got transformed into a sort of Hamlet, or Manfred, or one of those 'superfluous' people, the devil knows which! There are some pitiable

people who are flattered when you call them Hamlets or 'superfluous', but to me it's a disgrace! . . .
(Ivanov, p. 71)

He feels shame about the waste in his life, yet the weak will still conquers:

. . . I'm tired, I've no faith, I idle away my days and nights. I can't make my brain, or my hands, or my feet do what I want them to. The estate goes to ruin, the forests are groaning under the axe. My land looks at me as an orphan looks at a stranger, I expect nothing, I regret nothing, but my soul trembles with fear at the thought of tomorrow. . . . (Ivanov, p. 88)

Ivanov has fallen much too deep already to have hope at least for the future as the others have:

Andrey: . . . I hate the life I live at present, but oh! the sense of elation when I think of the future! Then I feel so lighthearted, such a sense of release! I seem to see light ahead, light and freedom. I see myself free . . . -free from idleness, free from kvass, free from eternal meals of goose and cabbage, free from after-dinner naps, free from all this degrading parasitism! . . .
(Three Sisters, p. 323)

He feels disgust with the present and the thought of the future elevates him. He does not ask himself the question how should the better future happen when he and others alike continue only idly dreaming about it? Where or what is the reason for this disgusting idleness? Doctor Astrov blames the general lack of aim or purpose in life of the Russian society at the time:

You know, when you walk through a forest on a dark night and you see a small light gleaming in the distance, you don't notice your tiredness nor the darkness, nor the prickly branches lashing you in the face. . . . I work harder than anyone in the district - . . . but there's no small light in the distance. . . .
(Uncle Vania, pp. 210-11)

while Vershinin blames the overall nagging and tattling but basically passive nature of a Russian:

> . . . If you talk to any educated person here, civilian or military, he'll generally tell you that he's just worn out. It's either his wife, or his house, or his estate, or his horse, or something. . . .
> . . . We Russians are capable of such elevated thoughts - then why do we have such low ideals in practical life? . . . (Three Sisters, p. 276)

No matter where the reason for this idleness lies, the fact is that all Chekhov's characters, whether male or female, whether peasant, middle or higher classed, exist within the set routines of their life without growing or raising themselves above the degrading emptiness and triviality.

> Unlike Tolstoy's characters, whose illusions are eventually dissipated by experience, Chekhov's men and women retain their illusions, for in the end they still seem to be lost in the jumble of life in which the profound exists along with the trivial, the great with the insignificant, the tragic with the ridiculous. He does not try to explain this away. If asked, he would simply say: that's how life is.[6]

Chekhov portrays his characters with an objectivity rare among writers. His female characters, contrary to Sophie Laffitte's claim of Chekhov's hateful approach toward women, are, I believe, presented as fairly and with as much feeling for the feminine as a man creating a female personality can possibly be able to feel. His heroines in the plays have a natural advantage over the heroines in the stories, for they are physically present, whereas in fiction they may sometimes appear shadowy, unclear and dull. It is quite apparent, anyhow, that his female characters develop with his own increasing writing experience and skills, and become more and more individuals in their own right. In his later works, such as Three Sisters, "The Lady with the Dog" or "Betrothed", the women are developed and complete individual person-

alities, compared to the insignificant and more or less lifeless women-characters of his earlier stories, such as "Agafya", "Anyuta", "The Chorus Girl", etc. The fact that the predicament of women in Chekhov's Russia, no matter what her social status, was much harder than that of the men, comes across to the reader or viewer from all of his works. Women were not considered equals to men, a fact which clearly disturbed Chekhov and his sense of justice. He may have written some unflattering remarks about women in his correspondence or notebooks, as Laffitte points out in her book, but he flattered or defended them in the same correspondence and notebooks. That his characters were gloomy Chekhov did not readily admit:

> You complain that my characters are depressing. Alas! it is not my fault; it turns out like that, apart from the author's will; and when I write, it does not seem to me I am writing gloomily; . . .[7]

The circumstance that Chekhov, in addition to his literary activity, also practiced medicine, was considered by some a hindrance. Tolstoy wrote: "His medicine gets in his way; if he were not a doctor, he would be a still better writer."[8] Others believed the opposite[9] and claimed that medicine enabled him to understand people better and remain as impartial and remarkably objective about the sufferings he portrayed. Chekhov himself believed the latter. To Suvorin he wrote on September 11, 1888:

> You advise me not to chase after two hares at once and to forget about practicing medicine. I don't see what's so impossible about chasing two hares at once even in the literal sense. . . . I feel more alert and more satisfied with myself when I think of myself as having two occupations instead of one. Medicine is my lawful wedded wife, and literature my mistress. When one gets on my nerves, I spend the

night with the other. This may be somewhat disorganized, but then again it's not as boring, and anyway, neither one loses anything by my duplicity. If I didn't have medicine, I'd never devote my spare time and thoughts to literature.[10]

Chekhov, in his sobriety and lack of fanatism, along with Turgenev, is closer and probably more understandable to a Western reader than Dostoyevski or Tolstoy, although much less known than the latter. Throughout his life "he remained a good European liberal, with a dislike of nationalism, a loathing of despotism, and no blind beliefs in Slavs, 'noble peasants', or 'the Russian soul'"[11], while throughout his work he remained faithful to his aim of showing people "how bad and dreary" their lives were. To the modern reader or audience, Russian or Western, the world of Chekhov's heroes is alien and distant, but their traits of human inadequacies, weakness and faults still hold true for many of us today. And that is where his true merit lies.

## FOOTNOTES.

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3. Robert Lynd: Old and New Masters. Chapter XIX.: Tchehov: The Perfect Story-Teller.
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5. Anton Tchekhov. Literary and Theatrical Reminiscences. Translated & edited by S. S. Koteliansky.
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9. The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats, and Pirandello, p. 80

10. Letters of Anton Chekhov. Translated by Michael Henry Heim & Simon Karlinsky.
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