FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY IN
CHEKHOV’S “BIG FOUR” PLAYS

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Theatre Arts

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MASTER OF ARTS

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This thesis discusses the Bowen family systems theory and its application to character analysis and family relationships in drama. Chekhov’s plays are renowned for their psychological realism. Each character has his or her own unique history, which was a boon to the creation and development of the Stanislavski acting system. This thesis is an exercise in character creation through psychological analysis. The primary character relationships are explored in each of Chekhov’s four major plays. Each play is analyzed using the Bowen principle that appears most overtly in that play. It is concluded that character creation for actors and directors, as well as literary analysis, will benefit from the application of this method.
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PREFACE

Chekhov is the only playwright whose plays I’ve worked on where the initial conversation has not begun with “How familiar are you with…” or “Have you ever read…” Since it is understood that every theatre person is familiar with his four major plays, the starting point has always been “What is your relationship with Chekhov?” This approach has been a universal standard, from introductory acting classes through professional productions and adaptations. Chekhov is an inviting writer and one who is adept at uncovering the specificity of the human soul. Following Stanislavski’s mantra that “‘in general’ is the enemy of art,” Chekhov constructs places and people who are so specific that they could live only in that time and in that world which he creates for them to inhabit.

The modern theatre has profited from visionary giants such as Ibsen and Chekhov, but their particular approaches to creating extraordinarily ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances have been a special point of interest for me since I was first introduced to their works in my teenage years. What were the philosophies and methods that fostered an unprecedented sense of intimacy on the stage?

To attempt to answer this central question with the presupposition that these turn-of-the-century playwrights were working within the confines of a platform or purpose would be, in my opinion, a mistake. In contrast to the contemporary tendency to create art that serves an ideology, it is my impression that turn-of-the-century modernist playwrights worked to create art that is meant to be interpreted and rolled around: something to explore. Their political
tendencies and moral compasses are, of course, inseparable from their plays (Chekhov’s
distaste for pretentious artists in his parodic *The Seagull*, for instance), yet the writers refrain
from moralizing. They opt instead to represent the world as truthfully as possible with tinges
of their biases folded in.

The great writers were preoccupied with the presentation of the Truth of the theatre –
that drama is an illustration of human behavior through action. Even if performed in an
absurd way, as is the case for Samuel Beckett and other absurdistsh, the action is colored by
reality. Likewise, the audience is willing to indulge themselves in the illusion because the
focus is placed on how the characters behave rather than who they are.

Stanislavski’s approach to character development made ample yet efficient use of the
“self” to motivate characters’ actions as much as possible. His acting system merged
progressive and classic thought by working to create a character from the outside physically
while also working from the self. His “magic If” asks actors to consider how they would
behave if they were their character. In order to have an effective presentation, they must also
create for themselves a detailed personal history. The result is a character somewhere in the
middle, and one just dramatic enough for an audience while maintaining an aesthetic
distance. To meet the character halfway is a powerful tool for an actor, but to use the self
excessively poses a great threat to the artistic product the actor works so tirelessly to create.

As Western thought shifts away from individuality, I have observed the American
theatre creeping in the same direction. The pendulum has swung away from turn-of-the-
century ideals and towards exposing and propagating ideologies by contorting plays to fit a
specific political or social ideology. The culture has also adopted an interpretation of *self* that
is dangerous to the preservation of Stanislavski’s philosophy. Stanislavski warned that the
complexities of a drama’s action would fall by the wayside when artists focus too heavily on finding themselves in the art they produce. Such an approach is as self-serving and divisive for drama as it is detrimental to the characters. Chekhov, a great observer who was remembered by his friends as a man who refused to take sides, championed honest storytelling with the support of like-minded visionaries at the Moscow Art Theatre. At the turn of the century, his influence on drama and the aptly-named school of Realism left a permanent footprint on the world stage. As dramatic thought shifted towards realistic modes, Chekhov was crafting stories that would make new demands on actors and audience members alike. The symbiotic relationship between Chekhov’s subtext and Stanislavski’s revolutionary acting system poured the foundation of the modern theatre and opened a path for a new generation of thought.

Perhaps his most notable contribution, Chekhov’s implementation of subtext adds dimension to his plays and complexity to his characters. The revolution in psychological complexity came in an era when Russian audiences were content with tired acting conventions reinforced by the prominence of stars on the stage. When The Seagull (1896) premiered at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg after a mere week of rehearsals, it fell prey to an audience that was unprepared to accept anything other than their favorite stars behaving like their favorite stars. The culture of stardom at the time was manic. In the words of Stella Adler, “you must understand the stardom. People throw roses and jewelry to [Arkadina] on the stage” (Adler 210).

Meanwhile, Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko were beginning to recognize the necessity of an educated audience to raise public expectations for the arts. They founded the Moscow Art Theatre together in 1898 to combat the vapidity of the star system with one
overarching requirement for their company members: they must love the art in themselves, not themselves in the art (Moore xvi). Stanislavski also understood that in order to create honest human actions on stage, a performer must live spontaneously in his role, and to do so he must be as specific in his creation as possible. “‘In general,’” he says, “‘is the enemy of art’” (Moore 23).

Yet the American culture strays from the foundations of Western theatre with its own revolution in thought that interprets character “in general” even in daily life. To the dismay of the individual-oriented citizen, intersectionality has permeated many aspects of American life and consequently has been emphasized in the arts. Social and political analysts have observed the intersectional movement as one that divides one’s identity into a sum of parts by compartmentalizing the development of said identity, especially along racial, political, and economic lines (Shapiro, PragerU). A single individual might be a member of several different groups, and his intersectional status is considered to be more formative of his character than his development as an individual. In short, individuality has given way to the collective.

The well-intentioned push towards inclusivity has also altered our thinking to work backwards from what Chekhov and Stanislavski would have preferred. We first identify an individual by his belonging, then analyze his behavior through that lens, instead of interpreting his belonging as a product of his actions. Such a thought system replaces presentation with representation while eroding individuality. This in turn creates broad and disingenuous character interpretations. For example, in a recent university all-female production of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* the artistic team placed so much emphasis on how
masculine characters would behave if they were women that they devalued the influence of the performer’s own self.

The intersectional philosophy threatens character creation and storytelling. While the rise of identity dissection might seem a boon to the creation of a character, it has been my experience that displacing the character’s identity with one’s own is detrimental to an honest and spontaneous performance. An actor who allows his character to be preoccupied by his own self-interest has perverted Stanislavski’s system by incorporating himself excessively. The actor will find it difficult to be spontaneous on stage, especially if he has taken the route of playing himself, rather than working from himself to create an honest and truthful interpretation. Inspiration and spontaneity go hand in hand in the theatre, and without Stanislavsky’s “inner light” the presentation falls flat.

To devalue the performer’s self is to weaken the foundations on which his characters are constructed. A person whose identity can be expressed wholly as a member of a social group makes him or her, in essence (and to use a theatre term) a trope. And if the performer himself is a trope, how strongly developed can he expect his character to be?

Chekhov’s writing style is compelling in that it forces performers to work from a clean slate. His plays are skeletons that make it necessary for actors to develop intimate relationships not only with one another, but with their surroundings as well. Performers develop a detailed personage from the dust. Every person forms detailed relationships with places, objects, and people. A student who chooses a particular seat on the first day of class establishes his own relationship to the space he occupies. If an unsuspecting late-comer takes his spot, he is likely to defend his claim. He feels the relationship has been violated. This idea is a great force in staging and design, especially as it is interpreted by the audience. When
Chekhov and Stanislavski hawkishly policed prop and costume choices at the Moscow Art Theatre, they did so with the understanding that each character had a personal history with those elements. The histories are evident in Anya’s broach in *Three Sisters* and Trigorin’s notebook in *The Seagull*. Intersectionality is incompatible with this method of creation because it ignores the human capacity to form individualized relationships with one another, let alone with objects.

Another core tenet of the intersectional movement involves a soft bigotry of low expectations; that is, a member of an intersectional group outside of those presented in August Wilson’s *Fences* could never truly understand the plight of the Maxson family; conversely, only a member of those groups can play those roles. This is patently false. That is not to suggest that the play should be adapted for an all-white cast or that it should be set in an upper-class neighborhood. It is to say that this mode of thought precludes the universality of the theatre. Indeed, the Maxsons experience racial inequities that few in our country today have experienced, but the universality of those struggles is to the credit of the specific circumstances under which they live. Every person at some point in their life feels cheated, vengeful, disheartened, lost, abandoned, scorned, betrayed. The power of the Maxsons’ story is that their situation is so specific that these feelings are relatable to people from all walks of life.

The play analyses in this thesis are exercises in what is possible for an artist to accomplish when he accepts the truth that every person is an individual before categorization as a group member. Likewise, Chekhov’s characters cannot exist as members of a group until they have been fully developed as individuals. Arkadina’s status as an actress is emulsified with every choice every day of her life that led her to take stage. As the characters disguise
their heartaches with laughter and philosophy, they become faceted to a fault. Their layered dimensionality makes them something of a mystery that unfolds on stage before the audience’s eyes. In contrast to early realist playwrights who examined human actions as if they were memories from long ago, Chekhov’s plays unfold *in real time* from within.

Chekhov gives neither his readers nor his actors the satisfaction of defining the characters by their professions as did his contemporaries. The characters often refer to themselves and to each other by title, yet their professions are only important insofar as they affect their dispositions: “I’m a teacher and I make very little,” “I will never be a famous actress,” “How can you give up the estate I’ve managed for you for so long?” They are professionals (or amateurs) only *after* they are uncles, mothers, or friends of the family. After all, Vanya is still Vanya to his niece, whether he tends the fields or drinks the day away.

Chekhov’s plays were chosen for this study for their characters’ psychological complexity and the playwright’s unwillingness to spoon-feed his performers. The path through the forest of his plays is marked with signposts, yet deliberately uncharted. The onus then falls on the performers to breathe life on stage into what appears to be uneventful on paper. Through applying Bowen family systems theory to the primary relationships in each of Chekhov’s “big four” plays (*The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*), it is my desire to revive and preserve a form of analysis that is at the risk of being lost on this generation.

The methodology that produced this essay is to my knowledge uncharted territory for Chekhov’s plays. Since its inception, the Bowen theory has been used as a critical approach to relationships in literature, such as those in the works of D. H. Lawrence (*Bump*) and Philip Roth (*Schiff*), but it has seldom been put into practice as a form of dramatic theory. The
theory, with its emphasis on examining the family as a sum of individual parts, lends itself to
dramatic analysis of Chekhov’s characters as they behave within the family unit. Each
character is his own person, but his actions must be taken in context of the larger family
dynamic. The theory is an effective tool for deconstructing dramatic literature, which is after
all the art of human interaction.

American psychiatrist Murray Bowen (1913-1990) began developing his theory in the
1940s to describe patterns of behavior within a family as the result of a series of emotional
triggers. Each trigger is a catalyst that operates independently to create a chain reaction, like
ripples in a pond or a wave in a rope. “Bowen family systems theory is a theory of human
behavior that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the
complex interactions in the unit. . .. The connectedness and reactivity make the functioning
of family members interdependent. A change in one person’s functioning is predictably
followed by reciprocal changes in the functioning of others” (Kerr 1).

Family systems theory utilizes eight core concepts to describe the nature of
reciprocity in the unit and to identify catalysts. Each can be used individually as an approach
to analyzing dramatic relationships: triangles, differentiation of self, nuclear family
emotional process, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process,
emotional cutoff, sibling position, and societal emotional process. Like the knitted family
dynamics these concepts represent, they are intertwined and have the ability and the tendency
to influence one another (Kerr 1-8). Research has shown that Bowen’s concepts can chart the
course for an individual’s developmental touchstones such as one’s drive towards self-guided
religious development (Rootes 2010), ability to form and maintain meaningful romantic
relationships, and ability to properly manage general anxiety (Priest 2015).
Chekhov provides an excellent gateway for the application of Bowen’s theories. Chekhov’s characters are delineated enough for this form of analysis, and his own personality parallels Bowen’s. Drs. Bowen and Chekhov mirror each other in their attitudes towards philosophy. Like the stoic Chekhov, Bowen was fiercely opposed to philosophizing about subjects that could be measured empirically (Innes 3). His rejection of even scientific philosophy drove him to create a system based on facts alone, very much the way Chekhov preferred to illustrate people in a natural environment, rather than depict them as they should be philosophically.

Michael E. Kerr took Bowen’s theoretical concepts, as well as Bowen’s application of these concepts in a clinical setting, and compiled a pamphlet that outlines the theory’s main principles. Bowen’s compilation of research is an in-depth telling of the formation of his theory. In my research, I have found that the principles are most easily accessible in Kerr’s pamphlet. Not only does Michael E. Kerr present the theory’s central tenets in a brief pamphlet that is accessible and comprehendible to the layman, but the theory itself explains how human behavior serves the interests of the unit in an attempt to satisfy the needs of an individual. For the purpose of this thesis, the reflective works of Bowen’s associate (Kerr) will be used as the primary sources for the tenets outlined herein.

In an art form like drama, wherein every character is expected to fight tooth and nail for what he wants most, such a theory helps analyze characters even from a literary perspective. Of the eight core tenets discussed in this essay, I believe the most applicable to the dramatic form are the concepts of triangulation, differentiation, and the nuclear family emotional system. Each builds on the last to create an understanding of conflict within a unit, followed shortly by complex premises such as emotional cutoff and societal emotional
processes. The first three are near-imperceptible to the members of the unit as they occur and deal mostly with the structures undergirding all of an individual’s choices. The others are more actor-friendly, being more action-oriented to the extent that they describe specific behavioral patterns that arise out of an established framework.

By applying Bowen’s eight principles, we can hope to make discoveries in form and content without separating the two. These principles apply several groups “in any organizational setting since human groups are predictable,” and each will be considered in the context of the plays (Gilbert 3). For the sake of clarity and ease of access, this thesis has been broken down into four sections, each an examination of one of Chekhov’s “big four” plays. The sections include Bowen’s principles insofar as they apply to each specific play, and therefore some have been excluded in some places but emphasized in others.

While an actor’s first impulse might be to approach his character from the vantage point of his actions, it would be in his best interest to start from the foundational principles created in conjunction with his fellow actors. To provide such an approach, this thesis builds from the ground up by establishing the subjective premises under which each family operates. Using evidence in the script which has been garnered from dialogue and character behavior, a world will be constructed which governs the characters’ actions in each play. It is widely accepted that in Chekhov’s plays characters seldom say what they truly mean. This premise is not challenged in this thesis; yet, when citing dialogue we shall give the characters the benefit of the doubt. The motivations and actions of the characters are my own interpretation in the context of family systems theory. Each play features its own unique family dynamic, the result of varying degrees of triangulation and differentiation.
If the playwright is an architect, Chekhov is one who admires masons’ techniques but will curse them for their ornaments. Countless recollections of Chekhov challenging Stanislavski and his actors, or vice versa, pepper the footnotes and endnotes of translations and actor notebooks. Others recall Chekhov as being purposely unhelpful. To what extent he could, he preferred to let the play speak for itself, but would readily comment on Vanya’s tie or the specifics of Trigorin’s fishing pole. These details were empirical rather than analytical and were crafted specifically to become a starting point for exploring the character’s life. Bowen’s principles can be used the same way.

To uncover the source of the characters’ complexity, these principles can be applied the same way that audiences or psychologists make their judgements – from the outside in. As David Ball observes, “going forward allows unpredictable possibility. Going backwards exposes that which is required” (15). When analyzing the characters from the outside in, one can dig into their nuance by applying the Bowen theory and discover “that which is required” for the characters to have their complexity. Chekhov’s characters pull from basic human behaviors and act accordingly; each action they take can be distilled down into a theoretical premise along the lines of established family theories.

This depth of family dynamics reflects the layers of Chekhov’s attention to detail in character development. In examining the characters in terms of honest-to-goodness family members against a psychological theory, one can see his nuance in anew. Chekhov’s triumph is his ability to create characters that hold up under scientific scrutiny. Understanding the need for intimacy to bring the characters to life, Stanislavski made exceptional demands on the actors at the Moscow Art Theatre to replace bombastic declaration with informed
development that would discover what is required to make the characters into living, breathing human beings.

Chekhov’s plays are full of characters who are somebody: the writer, the actress, the teacher, the soldier. But their intimacy calls for more than a Russian’s attention to social status. When Arkadina retreats to the estate, the façade of her celebrity crumbles, revealing the role of the mother beneath. Her relationship with Trepylov, with Trigorin, and consequently with Nina becomes central to the play. By removing his characters from their comfort zones and placing them in an intimate arena where they shed the armor of social graces, Chekhov effectively returns them to a state of vulnerability. Serebryakov’s gout acts up, Vanya and Astrov quarrel over the affections of Yelena, and poor Sonya is tormented by Astrov’s very proximity.

The family ties are so strong that Chekhov’s major characters measure time in reference to major events in the family’s history, most often the death of a parent. The very opening line of Three Sisters exemplifies the system of measurement, as Olga remembers her father even through the preoccupations of her grading: “Father died just a year ago, this very day, the fifth of May, your saint’s day, Irina” (Chekhov 2005, 249). In the opening line, we already have two situational conflicts feeding discomfort: the anniversary of a death and a saint’s day party.

The “public privacy” of the plays became a trademark for both Chekhov’s plays and Stanislavski’s acting style, so much in fact that theatregoers came to refer to seeing Three Sisters as “paying a call on the Prozorovs” (Senelick, “Three Sisters” 242). Their intimacy has remained so potent that even modern audiences can leave the theatre feeling they’ve spent the evening with families all their own. It can be difficult to replicate that intimacy for
oneself when reading Chekhov’s plays, and so it is incumbent on the reader to understand how the plays use time and place as tools for creating an exceptional world.

Chekhov pits families together in an isolated environment where they are all together for the first time in a long time. A party, a visit to the country, a play—these are all special events that have brought these people together into this home. Each character is forced into his or her own private exile away from the city, inherently creating tensions that Bowen observes will lead to interpersonal conflict. Here they experience the torpor that characteristically defines Chekhov’s plays, which further agitates them. When a man is busy, he seldom has time to notice the weather, for he must work. But when all goes stagnant, he begins to notice the sweat on his brow and his shirt soaked through with the humidity. Mosquitoes are louder and the tea is bitter.

Eight people packed into a country home with the nearest train station miles away across rugged terrain would naturally develop cabin fever, especially when despite the many rooms in the home they have no more privacy than a family of five in a studio apartment. Every space is a personal space. Being in such close contact with so many people, and with nowhere to go but for a stroll on the garden path that only leads back to the house, the characters seldom have time to themselves on stage or at home. Vanya’s antagonist is out of sight in the other room, but he is certainly not out of mind. Such an environment raises the level of “togetherness fusions” exponentially. The force that pulls one into a group is inescapable, and the family members exhaust themselves with an instinctual demand to “donate” parts of themselves to the unit. “The fusions, while they solve the problem of being alone and in danger, are themselves uncomfortable, adding to the anxiety” (Gilbert 10).
To distract themselves from their anxieties, the characters often indulge themselves in nostalgia, whether it be for their faint memories of another city or an age of prosperity on the stage. Yet even as they reminisce, their familiarity breeds contempt. They bore each other with trifling chatter about Astrov’s ecology or Masha’s brooding. The most they can do to alleviate their frustrations is to leave the room when they would prefer, as Posner articulates, for the other to leave “the hemisphere, if possible” (Posner 54). To occupy the same space with too many for too long spells disaster.

An important distinction must be made between “place” and “space” when approaching the worlds Chekhov’s characters inhabit. As David Wiles explains in his chapter on “The Environment of Theatre” in *A Cultural History of the Theatre*:

Fifth-century Greek theatre was performed in a place, not a space. We experience *places* through the way they smell, the way they crunch beneath our feet, the sounds we hear, the views we glimpse of sky and surrounding landscape, the people in or around those places, and above all the memories they hold for us and for others. … Conversely, we tend to use the word *space* when abstracting places, using techniques of geometry to eliminate all their felt particularity. … A diagram satisfies the demands of scientific accuracy, but fails to catch the qualities that once made a performance work its effect on an audience (63).

To approach Chekhov’s plays is to approach a *place*. In our dramatic context, “space” concerns the physical: four walls, a desk, a chaise lounge. “Place” refers more specifically to the emotional context of the character’s personal relationship to that space, or the character of the space itself. A house is not a home without an enigmatic map of Africa or memories made by candlelight in the small hours of the night. As Stanislavski understood, the relationship between characters and space does not stop at the front gate of the estate, nor does it stop at the plaster line. Actors and readers must both be cognizant of the perceived space Chekhov has baked into his plays.
Chekhov’s predecessors might have their characters responding to site-specific stimuli, as in Aleksander Nikolaievich Ostrovsky’s *The Thunderstorm* (1859), in which the characters’ physical actions are influenced by the cold or the weather, but their circumstances are immediate. Chekhov does not break this mold; rather, he expands it by hinting at locales that the characters associate with specific memories. Each of his characters has his or her “Moscow,” the memory of which washes over his three sisters like an unexpected breath of grandmother’s perfume.

Even though each of Chekhov’s major dramas is confined to country homes, the perceived place beyond those four walls drives the action. The scene for an Act might be a drawing room or a parlor, but Chekhov relentlessly hints at the expansive world, the Russian world, in its emotional context by working in crucial action offstage. Kiev, Moscow, the mines, and the factories are all part of a greater world with its own qualities made palpable by each characters’ detailed relationship to that world. As that relationship changes, so does the air in the room. Bowen explains this tendency for family stresses to change atmospheres by emphasizing the emotional connectedness family members experience with one another. At the core, interconnectedness protects the unit, but like most evolutionary systems it has undesirable side-effects. As the family’s stress increases, the same systems intended to provide comfort and safety are amplified and become stressors themselves (Kerr 1-10). The family finds itself spreading its stress and anxiety across the unit rather than resolving the issue at large, which in turn increases the stress of other family members. This dynamic is best illustrated in *Uncle Vanya*.

To begin, the order of the day has been upset by the hypochondriac professor Serebryakov who keeps the house up until all hours with his interminable complaints. Supper
is served late and the tea goes cold. The association of love or satisfaction with one’s work that Vanya and Sonya normally have with the estate changes as a result of Serebryakov’s presence to a place of idleness and disrepair. The professor, an outsider (or an insider who has moved on from the inner family circle), exposes Vanya’s insecurities. A bright light is shone into his closet that illuminates the bitterness he’s tucked away behind illusion of hope and purpose.

As in Chekhov’s other plays, the antagonists do more than agitate their cohabitants – they effectively rewire the other characters’ relationships to the space of the estate. The major change Vanya undergoes in the play is his interpretation of his position on the estate. His life returns to stasis, just as it was before, except that he has come face to face with the reality of hopelessness which forever changes how he perceives his place in the world.

The Russian Weltschmertz so commonly identified with Chekhov’s plays springs from an awareness of the breadth of the world which is followed by a philosophical inability to perceive one’s purpose. The Russian and the Western European share the Romantic notion of sorrowful non-purpose or non-belonging, though as Chekhov points out, they differ in their catalysts. The European feels his loneliest in a crowd swarming the bustling streets at the foot of towering buildings. He sees carriages and walls and bustling streets and wonders how one man could possibly make a difference in an overflowing world. In contrast, the Russian’s loneliness is fostered by the expanse of the world in which he lives. He is rendered powerless by the furies of nature and wonders how he could possibly be more than a speck of dust in a giant’s eye (Rayfield 1999, 49).

Chekhov goes on to draw the distinction, albeit abstractly, between the Russian and Western European responses to their predicament, which are explored in their dramatic
literature. In keeping with the idea of excessive emotions, take European Romantic plays such as Victor Hugo’s *Ruy Blas* (1838) or Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897).

The title characters in each of these plays carries the weight of his soul on his material person. Their souls overflow with fiery passions that cannot be contained by the human vessel. And so, they boil over into irrational behavior.

In contrast, the Russian bears the weight of the material world on his soul, which manifests itself in sloth. In the last scene of Act IV in *Uncle Vanya*, Astrov accuses Yelena and the professor of fomenting idleness, and in turn, destruction of the family unit:

> “You seem to be a decent, sincere person, but there also seems to be something odd about your basic nature. You and your husband show up, and everyone around here . . . was compelled to lay aside his work and all summer long concentrate on nothing but your husband’s gout and you. The two of you infected all the rest of us with your idleness . . . And so, wherever you and your husband set foot, destruction follows in your wake” (Senelick 235).

Astrov cites the professor’s gout and Yelena’s beauty as the culprits for the other characters’ distraction, but there are much larger forces at play. Their visit has done more than upset the estate’s timetable. It has brought an additional burden down on Vanya’s soul and consequently on his activity. Only when his soul is pushed to the point of breaking does he react violently, then surrenders to despair, a broken man. With this in mind, it becomes more difficult to accuse Chekhov’s families of pure laziness or to blame the heat for their inactivity. Instead, it becomes clear that the family has spread their stresses around and each member has absorbed the tensions.

The spreading of stressors is the unintended byproduct of the “molecule” of family system theory: the *triangle*. Triangulation is the most readily accessible and understandable building block, and perhaps the most instinctual reflection of the human capacity for problem-solving in a social setting. “A two-person system may be stable may be stable as
long as it is calm …. When tension in the triangle is too great for the threesome, it involves others to become a series of interlocking triangles” (Bowen 373). When two members of a relationship triangulate, the mediator can unwittingly give the illusion of settlement by reinforcing the relationship while the stressors fester below.

In some settings, the mediator even absorbs the insecurities of the two parties then turns to yet another individual with whom they triangulate. The result is a kaleidoscopic dynamic of overlapping triangles as individuals scramble to maintain their relationships. (It bears noting that no relationship is perfect, and this model represents varying degrees of strength.) While under ordinary circumstances calling in a third party (an “outsider”) to resolve an issue is a viable tactic, Bowen et al. point out that the third party begins to reflect those same issues (Kerr, 7-11). It then becomes an unhealthy process of turning a dyad (two “insiders”) into a triangle without resolving the underlying issue.

These relationships can be divided into three subdivisions: calm, moderate, and high. Calmer periods produce dynamics with two “insiders” and an “outsider” while moderate periods of tension create a three-sided struggle to become an “insider” or keep from becoming an “outsider.” Yet the most effective dynamic in drama arises out of the highest levels of tension:

At a high level of tension, the outside position becomes the most desirable. If severe conflict erupts between the insiders, one insider opts for the outside position by getting the current outsider fighting with the other insider. If the maneuvering insider is successful, he gains the more comfortable position of watching the other two people fight. When the tension and conflict subside, the outsider will try to regain an inside position. . . . [G]etting pushed from an inside to an outside position can trigger a depression or perhaps even a physical illness (Kerr 4).

The theatre is replete with characters scheming against one another and coming up against their opponents’ schemes themselves. Some plays feature more instances than others in
which the outside position is most desirable, and vice versa. Since the degree of triangulation is a situational variable, it can be difficult to distinguish between the two. *The Seagull* is ripe for dissection along these lines, as it is for other theoretical principles discussed later in this essay. The many overlapping love interests in the play and tensions of failure, unrequited love, and conniving elevate the conflict to the extreme. Still, there is a driving force behind triangulation that is every bit as important: what Bowen calls *differentiation of self*.

Bowen’s *differentiation* stands apart from *delineation*. The former is used to describe how well an individual is developed in his sense of self while the latter in this context is a term of art used to refer to how uniquely each character is crafted. Differentiation is used as a measurement of an individual’s emotional maturity, sense of “self,” and his ability to react rationally to conflict in the world. Varying levels of differentiation elicit varying degrees of responsibility in an individual, but do not necessarily indicate ability to function or improved functioning. A poorly differentiated individual can still be autonomous but make poor decisions, such as “borrowing strength” from others rather than finding it within himself (Kerr 17).

Differentiation is a tool that children develop through their upbringing which equips them to better handle the struggles of adult life. Those with stronger tools (stronger differentiation) generally fare better than those without. This attribute is key in determining how an adult individual behaves under stress, but it is difficult to change once it has been established:

The less developed a person’s “self,” the more impact others have on his functioning and the more he tries to control, actively or passively, the functioning of others. The basic building blocks of a “self” are inborn, but an individual’s family relationships during childhood and adolescence primarily determine how much “self” he develops. Once established, the level of “self” rarely changes unless a person makes a structured and long-term effort to change it (Kerr 9).
As Kerr points out, the degree of an individual’s differentiation is determined largely by his upbringing, and as he grows older it becomes more difficult to improve on his emotional maturity. For that reason, it is difficult to examine changes in “self” that occur over the course of a play in a realistic context, unless the action of the play takes place over a period of decades. Yet a *dramatis persona*’s degree of differentiation can be used as a starting point to deconstruct not only whether he is a well-constructed character, but whether he is a well-rounded human being as well. Since changes in differentiation occur over a period of years, it is better to examine a character’s “self” as it affects his actions in the moment rather than how it changes over the years.

An entire unit composed of poorly-differentiated individuals falls into chaos as each agent vies for the support of other triangulated members. Somewhere in the yarn-ball of relationships, one member of the family will begin to shoulder the struggles of the rest of the family. In my experience, this dynamic produces a unit that quickly learns to rely on this member of the family, and he or she becomes the “fixer,” or the problem-solver. The fixer’s level of differentiation varies between families, and one who makes the considerable effort to develop his self is hindered by the expectations placed on him by the family.

When money is tight or there is a rift in the family fabric, the “fixer” is summoned to rectify the situation. For some, he becomes the only one with whom certain members of the family will triangulate at all. A seed of distrust is planted within the family that grows into a much larger problem overall. When the family distrusts its own members, their animosity towards one another breeds contempt that makes further triangulation necessary, and when the “fixer” is brought in, the belligerent who considers himself the “loser” resents the victor
for doing so. This in turn perpetuates poor problem-solving, necessitating the “fixer’s” intervention all the more.

As Bowen states, when the family unit comes under strain, one member of the family usually sucks up the stress and anxiety of the rest of the family. That member is usually poorly differentiated and usually then follows one of two (or both) courses of action: withdrawal or lashing out. Chekhov harnesses this attribute in all four of his “big plays,” even when there is a group protagonist as in *The Cherry Orchard*. The plays are divided down the middle in this respect: withdrawal in *The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters* and lashing out in *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*.

The key to using differentiation as a criterion for analysis is the effect the theory has on power structures, which are the core of dramatic conflict. Poorly-differentiated individuals are more sensitive to the actions of others and will attempt (knowingly or otherwise) to change the way others behave in order to reestablish their own sense of comfort. Chekhov and other great dramatists have created situations and characters that attempt to return to stasis through any means available to them. An individual with higher levels of differentiation (a stronger concept of “self”) is more capable of resolving his own conflict without triangulating, while someone with lower levels will rely a great deal on others to fulfill his own needs (Bowen 472). At the same time, a weak self will also create conflict by trying to control his surroundings in an attempt to maintain his comfort zone.

The conflicts that arise from this jostling are divided into four distinct patterns referred to as *nuclear family emotional systems*. Each emotional system arises from prolonged periods of increased family stress arising from increased “activity of one or more of the four relationship patterns” (Kerr 13). The four basic patterns are: *marital conflict*,
dysfunction in one spouse, impairment of one or more children, and emotional distance.

Emotional distance is consistently associated with the others and arises partly as a coping mechanism in response to stressors on the family. An individual will begin to distance himself from others involved in the conflict at the risk of becoming completely alienated. When Treplyov is challenged by Trigorin’s prowess, he tries to distance himself from his feelings for Nina at the cost of his own emotional health, and ultimately his life. Andrey follows a similar pattern in Three Sisters by redirecting his emotional investment into stress-eating and a gambling addiction.

Emotional distance is used as a coping mechanism in the three other nuclear family emotional systems. Marital conflict involves two dysfunctional parties who transmit their anxieties to one another, their children, or their friends. In this type of nuclear system, the parties involved will triangulate with an outsider or withdraw into a distraction. This can be a vicious environment for children, who are the most convenient triangulating agent available. Parents who should work together become adversaries who compete to curry the favor of their children. These children can become impaired in their own time, and the cycle begins again. Alternatively, dysfunction in one spouse creates a dynamic in which a dysfunctional member’s behavior patterns threaten the strength of the unit. For example, mothers with insecurities about raising a successful child will often aggressively reinforce their children’s self-esteem. Over time, the child becomes dependent on this reinforcement and will not develop the essential skill of confidence.

Multiple patterns can be present in a single family at one time. Sometimes all four patterns are present at all times and exacerbated by outside forces. In Chekhov’s plays the outside force usually appears in the form of an outsider to the family, as is the case in The
Seagull and Uncle Vanya. The outsider is less apparent in The Cherry Orchard, as Lopakhin is a representative of a larger conflict looming over the family and the manifestation of their fears about losing the orchard.

The circular behavior patterns in a family have been a special point of interest to me throughout this process. The instinctual methods for coping with stresses to preserve the unit persist in our modern society, yet they exploit us almost as much as they help us cope. It’s my theoretical perspective that when those systems are finally pushed to the point that they fail is the point of ultimate tension in a play – the climax. It is my intention to uncover the base values of the families in Chekhov’s plays in an effort to reveal not only the dramatist’s mechanisms for making ordinary tensions dramatic, but to delve into our insatiable need to resolve conflict as well.
CHAPTER 1
THE SEAGULL

At the insistence of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and to the great irritation of his co-founder at the Moscow Art Theatre, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov’s breakout play *The Seagull* was thrust into the repertoire of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898. Although the original production had been a failure at the Alexandrinsky in St. Petersburg two years prior, the play was a resounding success in Moscow thanks to the conjoined efforts of Stanislavski’s direction and Chekhov’s own coaching. The drama laid the foundations that supported Stanislavski’s performative “atmosphere” and was in essence a self-contained world that made the play a living entity. Its characters inhabit the atmosphere of the play, each with his own unique behavioral patterns, including substance abuse, attention-seeking, and attempts to regain a sense of peace on an otherwise Edenic country estate.

This play is at its heart a story about theatre artists, who are boisterous and extroverted by nature, so when their poor differentiation is emphasized they tend also to be ridiculous. Their faults are exaggerated further for comic effect but are molded by Chekhov’s understanding of human psychology. At once comic and serious, the characters’ relationships are built primarily on their affections rather than property, which makes them some of the most accessible figures among his plays. In the case of Chekhov’s dramas *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and *Uncle Vanya*, triangles are formed to resolve questions of real estate rather than to reconcile issues of affection. *The Seagull* was written as a satire of Chekhov’s
own artistic circle, and theatre about the theatre seldom takes itself too seriously. The fact that Chekhov referred to this play as a “comedy” also indicates a desire to float characters above the grounded level of Tragedy. Yet the play carries a weight uncharacteristic of comedy.

While many of the character faults in *The Seagull* (Masha’s alcoholism for instance) are used for comic effect, they are exaggerations of behaviors that can be examined seriously. In a real-world context, the family of artists, aspiring artists, and those both jealous of and cynical towards success are the product of transgenerational issues. The play’s protagonist Treplyov is the greatest victim of degenerating differentiation over his forebears’ generations.

Treplyov’s complicated relationships with those around him exemplify a Systems Theory concept that explains how children can be affected by their parents’ own levels of differentiation: multigenerational transition process. The concept observes that an individual chooses a mate with a level of differentiation that matches his or her own. Bowen Theory suggests that “the invested children of each generation marry partners and operate with greater emotional intensity than did their parents” (Papero 60). It also describes the impact of parental differentiation on children as a line through generations. “If we followed the line through the children who emerge with about the same levels of differentiation, we see a remarkable consistency of family functioning through the generations” (Bowen 385).

A moderately differentiated individual, Arkadina would have chosen a mate who matched her sense of “self,” a fellow famous actor who happened to be from Kiev. Given Arkadina’s pride, it’s difficult to imagine she married a man who was socially beneath her. She married a famous actor who was nonetheless a bourgeois from Kiev, a town associated
with narrowmindedness and provincialism (Chekhov 2005, 140). Arkadina herself is self-centered, always at the center of attention, and demands respect from those around her. Treplyov inherits her neuroses through the family projection process and multigenerational transmission. Arkadina’s lack of differentiation gives Treplyov a poor foundation from which to develop, and the projection of Arkadina’s insecurities on her son increases his anxieties.

The transmission is not just a matter of inheritance; rather, the degeneration of differentiation occurs through active and passive processes such as teaching and imitating, respectively. Children learn by imitating their parents, whether the parent is actively teaching or behaving regularly in daily life. Despite Treplyov’s burning desire to be everything his mother is not in art and society, he is much more like her than he cares to admit. He inherited his mother’s need for approval and falls into a state of despair when he is cut down to size by Arkadina and her social circle. Young Konstantin is caught in a terrible irony: his artistic ambitions are bridled by the restrictions of an artistic community personified by his mother, yet he seeks her approval. Though he won’t admit it, Arkadina and Trigorin are the models for Treplyov’s success, and unfortunately the person whose approval he needs the most is one who is a font of scorn.

Arkadina’s aggression towards her son is a projection of her own dysfunctional relationships. Her relationship with Treplyov is volatile because of an emotional system described as an impairment of one or more children:

The spouses focus their anxieties on one or more of their children. They worry excessively about the child and usually have an idealized or negative view of him. The more the parents focus on the child the more the child focuses on them. He is more reactive than his siblings to the parents’ attitudes, needs, and expectations. The process undercuts the child’s differentiation from the family and makes him vulnerable to act out or internalize the family tensions (Kerr 14).
From the early years in Treplyov’s life, Arkadina’s anxieties as a single mother have caused her to focus excessively on her son. In his adulthood, he both acts out and internalizes the family tensions. Treplyov uses Nina as a conduit through which he can act out his family anxieties, but when she leaves, he internalizes the conflict to the point of suicide.

Treplyov is certainly more emotionally intense than his mother, and his intensity combines with his immaturity to create a Romantic figure. His world is shattered when his beloved Nina’s attentions turn to the popular novelist Trigorin. Distraught, Treplyov retreats into his sorrow, which in due course develops into resentment. Emotionally unable to unleash his frustrations on Nina, he lashes out at his mother and Trigorin, blaming them for his sorrow. This is a tried and tested method Treplyov has developed over the course of his life to redirect his insecurities.

Treplyov’s relationship with Arkadina and her inner circle was contentious in his youth. He recalls in Act I how Arkadina’s coterie looked on him with disgust at the events to which she would bring him along. Yet his monologue raises many questions about the nature of their relationship. Why would Arkadina, whose principal ambition is popularity, risk embarrassment by bringing her bourgeois son to an event, unless he was too young to leave at home unattended? In my estimation, Arkadina is not so vicious as to disparage her own son in polite company for her own social gain. Her love for Treplyov is evident when she attempts to change his bandage after Treplyov attempts suicide. The scene begins tenderly. The two quietly reminisce about Treplyov’s childhood. In that moment, Treplyov is a little boy again. For a brief moment he has stolen Arkadina’s attentions from Trigorin.

The moment doesn’t last long. As soon as Arkadina and Treplyov begin to assert their independence from one another, something explosive happens. Whereas they had almost
found common ground, they are suddenly and violently separated. They fail the Sisyphean
task of growing emotionally, and the boulder crushes them on the way down. Bowen’s theory
explains this reversion to the “old way” of interacting with one another as the two agents
falling back into unhealthy patterns. Treplyov could have reached a plateau of understanding
with his mother if only he had not raised the question of Trigorin.

Robert Bly in his book on men describes these violent emotional separations of
mother and son as a healthy rite of passage for boys when they are followed through to
completion. When a boy is initiated into the role of a man, he sheds his childlike dependency
on his mother. Consequently, he must also shed his feminine vulnerability. In order for this
kind of growth to occur, a male role model must be present. Treplyov is fortunate to have an
advisor in Sorin, but it is not enough to fill the void left by his father:

The traditional initiation break clearly is preferable, and sidesteps the violence. But
all over the country now one sees hulking sons acting ugly in the kitchen and talking
rudely to their mothers, and I think it’s an attempt to make themselves unattractive. If
the old men haven’t done their work to interrupt the mother-son unity, what else can
the boys do to extricate themselves but to talk ugly? It’s quite unconscious and there’s
no elegance in it at all. A clean break from the mother is crucial, but it’s simply not
happening. This doesn’t mean that the women are doing something wrong; I think the
problem is more that the older men are not really doing their job. The traditional way
of raising sons, which lasted for thousands and thousands of years, amounted to
fathers and sons living in close—murderously close—proximity (Bly 19).

Without a strong father figure in the home, Arkadina and her son’s relationship has been
deprieved of an essential pillar of the triangle. Treplyov begrudgingly admires Trigorin, yet
resents him, and rejects him as a strong male presence as well. Neither Arkadina nor
Treplyov has developed the emotional maturity to follow through with the separation. The
phoenix does not rise from the ashes; it simply smolders. At the very heart of their conflict
lies this essential dynamic. They are dangerously trapped as adults in their juvenile roles; the
jealous child and spiteful mother.
Arkadina’s role produces scorn for Treplyov’s own art and her perception that everything he does artistically is an attack on her career. Everything else he does is a pot-shot at her own happiness. The aspiring actress Nina, herself of peasant-stock, threatens to lure Trigorin away from Arkadina while Treplyov’s abstract art is a threat to the established principles of “high art.” Yet the assault on her work is taken personally, the same way Treplyov interprets his interaction with prominent artists as aggressive.

While both characters’ fears are not wholly unfounded, their inability to cope with uncomfortable situations is indicative of their poor emotional development. It is commonly quipped that there are no villains in Chekhov’s plays. If this is the case, then Treplyov is neither malicious nor is his mother vindictive. It can therefore be assumed that each of them suffers a degree of delusion. This is not to suggest that they suffer from a diagnosable form of mental illness, but that their perception of the world has been molded to attribute motives to others’ actions in order to compensate for their own vulnerabilities.

The Diagnostic Statistics Manual-5 (DSM-5) defines several types of delusions that manifest in unique ways, from erotomanic (the irrational belief that someone is in love with the individual) to the persecutory (the belief that someone is acting in hostile fashion towards oneself or someone near to oneself) (297.1, F22). Treplyov and his mother suffer from the latter and react in similar fashion. Treplyov spirals into self-persecution, alcoholism, and ultimately suicide while his mother withdraws into the comfort of her lover and of her brother. Even when Treplyov becomes popular as a published writer he cannot shake the feeling that he should be scrutinized. Absent any overt criticism, Treplyov turns against himself.
The tools Treplyov uses to treat himself ultimately lead to his demise. He turns to drink, as so many do in times of extreme psychological stress, not realizing that alcohol use exacerbates depression and other mental health deficiencies (Gopalakrishnan 2009). But he is not the only one who seeks solace in the bottom of a bottle. The lovelorn Masha is known to the family as a drinker who also abuses tobacco. Both characters can be evaluated according to the CAGE test, which is used as a starting point for clinical diagnoses of alcoholism. The test asks a series of short questions to determine whether the subject should be considered for further treatment and are as follows:

- **C** Have you ever felt you should **cut down** on your drinking?
- **A** Have People **annoyed** you by criticizing your drinking?
- **G** Have you ever felt bad or **guilty** about your drinking?
- **E** **Eye opener:** Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover? (NIH 2018).

If the subject responds “yes” to two or more of these questions, he or she is referred for further treatment. Using the CAGE test, Masha’s drinking habits present two of the four criteria that would recommend her for treatment.

The family observes that Masha drinks before lunch and throughout the day in a way that is unhealthy. Forsaken in love and in life, she withdraws from all of her relationships and replaces them with drugs, whatever shape they might take. One can assume that she drinks early in the morning, and when the family discusses their own drinking habits, Masha rises in annoyance to have a shot before lunch. She sluggishly shuffles off stage, claiming that her foot has fallen asleep. For her to hide her drunkenness in this way hints at a latent sense of guilt beneath her drinking openly.

Masha has chosen a path of self-destruction intentionally to direct her attentions away from Treplyov. Her sorrow and need for drink fill her life, distracting her from the pangs of
unrequited love. Masha invests her energy into her persona as a weeping widow lamenting the loss of her own life. Whether she is truly unhappy or she is seeking a savior is nonconsequential for our purposes; however, her wardrobe and personality are overt signs of her devotion to the personality she’s adopted. Her state of mourning surpasses a cry for help. It has been etched into her life and replaced her closest relationships with a deeply spiritual emphasis on her own emotions. That sort of spirituality breeds contempt for oneself, which removes any incentive for one to take care of oneself.

Without Treplyov’s affirmation, Masha ceases (in Dr. Peterson’s words) to care for herself as she would someone for whom she is responsible (Peterson, *Slaying the Dragon*). Even though other characters do care for her to the point of removing temptation, the only person’s affections she notices are Treplyov’s. The rewards of using alcohol and tobacco are stronger than the reward she gets from any other characters’ affirmations of her value.

Masha’s ailment is not unique to her situation. Poorly differentiated individuals are prone to taking similar paths when they succumb to the emotional burden that accompanies loss. They withdraw from any form of emotional investment for fear of experiencing the same patterns of bliss, loss, and grief. Masha even goes so far as to “rip this love out of [her] heart” (Chekhov 2005, 160). Two years later, she maintains her sullenness despite two major events that one would expect to dispel her moroseness: the birth of her baby and Treplyov’s attempted suicide.

Treplyov’s close call with death should be a wakeup call to the dangers of depression and self-destructive behaviors. Instead, it has the opposite effect on Masha. She is placed in the awkward position of seeing Treplyov in a state of absolute despair, yearning to comfort him, and being powerless. Had he succeeded in killing himself, Masha would be deprived of
Masha’s baby does nothing to change her. Denouncing her love for Treplyov has consequently rooted out all other forms of affection she might have once had. She is left with nothing but pity and frustration, so far removed from her capacity for love that she is indifferent towards her husband and her child:

MEDVEDENKO. Let’s go home, Masha!
MASHA. (Shakes her head no.) I’ll stay and spend the night here.
MEDVEDENKO. (Pleading.) Masha, let’s go! Our baby’s starving, I’ll bet!
MASHA. Don’t be silly. Matryona will feed him.
(Pause)
MEDVEDENKO. It’s a shame. The third night now without his mother.
MASHA. You’re getting tiresome. In the old days at least you used to talk philosophy, but now it’s all baby, home—that’s all anybody hears out of you.
MEDVEDENKO. Let’s go, Masha!
MASHA. Go yourself. (Chekhov 2005, 170)

One would think her child would revive some semblance of tenderness in her. The question then becomes whether she is truly sociopathic or has withdrawn so far into herself that there is no hope of recovery. Masha’s situation is almost identical to Treplyov’s: an unappreciated individual forced to watch his/her love with another. Yet Masha survives the play and Treplyov kills himself. Why?

Unhappy as she may be, Masha’s tendency to wear her heart on her sleeve might indeed be the key to her preservation. She goes through a series of decision-making processes that ultimately land her with Medvedenko. Treplyov on the other hand is stuck in a state of abject panic, incapable of making rational decisions. The key difference is in the way
they perceive their relationships. Both go through the most common emotional process of withdrawal, but only Masha succeeds.

Completely absorbed in his work and his thoughts, Treplyov withdraws from his relationships by isolating himself in his study or in the garden. Still, he has only withdrawn physically. He is every bit as emotionally invested in Nina as he was years ago, despite his best efforts to convince himself otherwise. The isolation is used for dramatic effect and indicates an underlying feeling of inadequacy in Treplyov’s character.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Chekhov makes ample use of space and relative location as a dramatic device to keep his characters on the edge of their comfort zones. Treplyov plays a waltz on the piano, yet the sound comes not from “offstage” but from “two rooms over,” defining the void between the family and the tortured artist. The distance signifies the void he feels between his artistic prowess and the sense of purpose he has lost since losing Nina. To add to the underlying sense of discontent, there is a constant feeling of isolation that manifests itself in angst.

When Arkadina calls for horses in Act I, there are none. When horses are ordered again in Act II, there are none. Not only are they unavailable for her to take to the train station, they are either engaged in another task (hauling the millet harvest) or worked to exhaustion already (returning from an eight-mile haul to the train station and back), thereby removing any possibility of escape. The family is then forced to deal with their conflicts head-on. This is a less-than-ideal situation for a family accustomed to removing themselves from conflict.

When Nina returns in Act four, she violates Treplyov’s retreat. She enters and asks Treplyov to lock the doors to prevent any of the other characters from entering and
discovering her there on the estate. The locked doors are both speedbumps to discovery and also create a sort of cage wherein Nina and Treplyov have their final rendezvous. They have not been in a room together since Treplyov ceremoniously laid a sacrifice at her feet. She has trapped Treplyov. There is nowhere for him to retreat, except into himself. The scope of the play has been minimized as far as possible for the final bout between the young artist and his lost love.

Isolation is compounded in the conflict with an inability to escape. Many of the characters favor isolation, but on their own terms, which effectively would turn their prison into a sanctuary. Once their ability to maintain privacy is stripped from them, they panic. Sorin yearns for the days when he saw only people who were announced to him, implying that if his secretary tried to buzz them in, he could dismiss them. Arkadina yearns for the isolation of her hotel room where she can learn her lines in privacy. Nina refused to see Treplyov when he stalked her across the country, afraid that meeting with him would defile the sanctity of her hotel room. Still, when there is nowhere to retreat, all that is left is confrontation. As Sorin laments, “I’ve always left this place with a sense of deep satisfaction . . . Well, but now I’m retired there’s nowhere to escape to, when all’s said and done. Like it or not, you stay . . .” (Chekhov 2005, 745).

Treplyov likes having a door to the garden where he can isolate himself and think, implying that he can’t think when others are around. None of Treplyov’s fans know who he is; his age, his complexion, his hair color – his very name is kept secret. It’s hinted that his status as a bourgeois from Kiev would destroy any semblance of respect his fans have for him, yet Arkadina was forgiven for marrying just such a bourgeois, although she stepped down a station in society for doing so. In the two years since the family and Treplyov’s love
interest have left the estate, his success has shattered his solitude, and the reappearance of Arkadina and Trigorin on the estate towards the end of the play inverts what sense of privacy he still has.

The destruction of privacy is emphasized by the increasing intimacy of the playing space. As the play progresses, the scope of the play becomes smaller and smaller, beginning in a garden, moving to the drawing room, and eventually to Treplyov’s own workroom. Even then, in Act IV, his oasis is encroached upon as the buffoonish family stomps in with a card table to play lotto.

Treplyov’s overlapping triangles between himself, his mother, Nina, and Trigorin ultimately lead to his demise. Arkadina’s obsession with her son’s inadequacy and Treplyov’s expectations for himself create a dynamic wherein he becomes vulnerable. He is so reactive to his mother’s expectations that he has become a powder keg, and Arkadina’s excessive worry over her son compounds his anxieties. Should Arkadina have never met Trigorin, there is still the likelihood that Treplyov would eventually act out. The combination of Trigorin’s own success and Don Juan-like courtship is merely the tipping point from a man already on the verge of a breakdown.
Chekhov’s 1898 play *Uncle Vanya* centers on questions of purpose and legitimacy. Like that of *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*’s conflict illuminates characters’ struggles to deal with unrequited love, but its plot moves more slowly and the characters are not quite so conspicuous. Although *The Seagull* was intended to be a comedy, its conflict is rawer and more touching than that of the later play. Yet the quiet country days of *Uncle Vanya* are filled with larger questions about life and purpose.

Aptly subtitled “Scenes from Country Life,” the play takes an impartial view of provincial life without exaggerating conflict to the point of buffoonery. The play is more nuanced and requires a deeper look at Chekhov’s layered construction. Laymen and theatre-people alike often fall into the trap of taking a superficial approach to Chekhov’s plays, and *Uncle Vanya* bears the brunt of these mistakes. In my experience, it is the first of the “big four” plays to be lamented by students as “four acts of people whining about problems they don’t actually have.” Yet on a psychological level, the characters are as dynamic as in Chekhov’s other plays. Their affections, alcoholism, and labors are symptomatic of deeper conflicts that have been allowed to fester within themselves.

Jealousy is a thematic element throughout the play. Vanya in particular is jealous of Serebryakov’s wealth and fame. He is also jealous of the attention his mother gives to the
professor’s pamphlets. Sonya is jealous of her stepmother’s hold on Astrov. The petty jealousies of these characters are more than character flaws. They are indicators of a feeling of inadequacy.

Throughout the play, the characters measure their own value and the worth of their assets by their quality rather than their quantity. More importantly, each asset is further scrutinized according to how lasting the it might be. This reoccurring theme in Chekhov’s plays, revisited in *The Cherry Orchard*, speaks to a Russian soul that sees the big picture.

The Russian looks outside of himself for value. His culture at the turn of the century developed from generations of hard living in a vast wilderness. It is not enough for a man to live well and climb the social ladder as it is in Europe. The Russian must find his purpose in his work, and the value of his contribution is measured over time (Rayfield 1999).

The idealistic doctor Astrov gives us the strongest sense of measure in this context. He has an admittedly “smallish estate, no more than eighty acres in all” but it nonetheless has “an experimental orchard and a tree nursery” that he boasts is the best in the region (Chekhov 2005, 204). It rests in a prime location next to a state forest preserve where the doctor spends much of his time. Astrov’s estate is the prime symbol for creation and preservation. It can be assumed the doctor, who is an avid horticulturalist, planted the orchard and nursery himself. He is a patient visionary. In a sapling he sees a towering forest. Astrov takes it on himself to preserve what he has created as much as what the earth has given to him. This lasting impact makes him perhaps the most fulfilled but the melancholiest character in the play.

Following the death of one of his patients, Astrov redirects his attentions into his hobbies of environmentalism and cartography. When he gets dreadfully bored, he finds himself in the study poring over his charts and studying horticulture. Like Treplyov in *The
Seagull, he distances himself from other characters who bore him with their trifles by retreating to a sanctuary. Astrov’s retreat from medicine and from the family are both forms of emotional cutoff, the Bowen principle most commonly seen in family units. Astrov cuts himself off from the medical profession and from the family’s banality at the risk of overemphasizing the importance of his charts and forests. In his failure to confront the experience of losing a patient directly, Astrov has allowed the emotional distress to ruminate in the back of his mind. By looking to his hobbies to counteract the emotional distress he experienced as a doctor, he has also raised the expectations of fulfillment to an irrational level.

Astrov is a recognized forester but still is not satisfied with the effect he has on the world. He is a man addicted to goals that distract him from the horrors of the past. His legacy has been secured for the immediate future, yet the threat of losing even that legacy preoccupies him because of the constant destruction of the environment. How awful to think that the tree planted in the name of conservation will be harvested for the mill! He acknowledges the futility of his efforts, yet persists in the hopes a butterfly effect will occur a century after his death.

Astrov’s obsession with environmentalism is both an analogy and a vehicle for one man’s lasting impact. When a patient dies under the anesthetic chloroform, Astrov goes through an existential and professional crisis. He asserts that he hadn’t had a drop to drink that day and still his patient perished. And if such a tragedy can befall him sober, what is there to keep him from drinking? It’s an oddity that for a patient to die would send a seasoned physician into a state of total despair. Even modern physicians have patients die under their care, and while they might be disheartened, that is a mere occupational hazard.
Astrov’s patient might have been the tipping point at the head of a long list of patients that he could not help. In a sense, the patient is a symbol of all the terrible experiences Astrov has had with medicine in provincial life: “Mud up to his waist on the roads; frosts; blizzards; vast distances; coarse, savage people; all-around poverty; disease; and it’s hard for a man working and struggling in surrounding like that day after day to reach the age of forty spotless and sober...” (Chekhov 2005, 217).

The idea of addictive behavior is commonplace in Chekhov’s plays. His characters often indulge in tobacco use, alcohol abuse, and other self-destructive behaviors. Their addictive behavior can be linked to their increased stressors and their depressive mental states (Gopalakrishnan 237). The characters often engage in an addictive or abusive fashion with other aspects of their lives, such as gambling in the case of Andrey (Three Sisters) or work in the case of Sonya (Uncle Vanya). In his introduction to Uncle Vanya, Senelick observes how each character deals with his or her unhappiness. In particular, Sonya “indulges in daydreams while eagerly drugging herself with work” (Senelick 2005, 192). Senelick’s description is an artistic iteration of the Bowen theory’s explanation for individuals who displace their anxieties. Sonya’s distractions are a way for her to stave off down time, when she has naught to do but confront the source of her anxieties. When Sonya’s work is removed from her, she is confronted with the reality of the life she lives, the same as when the other members of the estate have their distractions removed from them.

Sonya’s best efforts to capture Astrov’s attentions take the form of encouraging his forestry. She echoes Astrov’s conservation ideology and praises him to the rest of the family. She has been after the doctor for some time, but her pursuits have always been in vain. Sonya’s attraction to Astrov speaks to an underlying anxiety she harbors. She is planted in a
dynamic where she has little affirmation of her value as a woman, and of her physical and intellectual beauty. She seeks in Astrov an agent to absorb and dispel these anxieties. If she can win his favor, she will fulfill the Russian cultural expectation of marrying and making a home. At the same time, she will gain a partner whom she can trust with her intimate anxieties. During the course of the action, Sonya finds herself caught up in a love triangle between herself, Yelena, and Astrov. Astrov’s secret affections for Yelena are not revealed until late in the play, but their relationship congeals as time goes on. Yelena doesn’t appear to be romantically interested in Astrov, but she does take an affinitive approach towards him.

Yelena obligingly helps Sonya flush out whether Astrov would ever be interested in the plain girl but takes advantage of the situation. As Yelena muses on her stepdaughter’s love for Astrov, she reveals that she has guessed at Astrov’s motives for coming to the estate every day. She’s secretly flattered that the “handsome, interesting, attractive” doctor would pursue her and questions whether she should throw caution to the wind (Chekhov 2005, 221). Her interest is piqued by uncharted territory. Astrov is indeed interesting and intelligent, but it’s as if his or her attractions are seeded primarily by the idea of a different face around the estate. Astrov is the most well-established man in the play with an attractive personality in a wasteland of whiners. He is also the only man in the vicinity (besides Telegin, for whom Yelena shows no regard whatsoever) to whom she is totally unrelated. In Act III, Yelena is giddy over Astrov coming to show her his charts but has a sudden attack of conscience. She knows that she has already betrayed Sonya in her heart by meditating on the possibility of an amorous friendship with Astrov.

Yelena reluctantly triangulates with Astrov to alleviate the frustrations caused by her husband’s insipid protests. In Astrov, Yelena sees a well-established young doctor who has
been awarded for his environmentalism in a way that her husband could never hope to be
rewarded for his pamphlets. In a way, she acknowledges that her husband’s work has a high
chance of falling prey to the axe of posterity. Astrov on the other hand is creating a legacy
that will outlive himself and even subsequent generations. Her displaced anxieties about her
marriage drive her to triangulate with the physician in an unconscious attempt to distance
herself from the drama unfolding within the family. Once again excepting Telegin, Astrov is
the only one in the home who is above the familial conflict. The doctor perhaps is even
further detached from the family than Telegin since he does not live on the estate.

Yelena invites Astrov to meet over his charts, knowing that he won’t pass an
opportunity to share his work. It’s clever of Yelena to invite him to an impersonal meeting so
as not to appear too eager. When Astrov does come to show Yelena his work, he goes into a
diatribe about the flora and fauna of the forest. Yelena shows little interest or understanding
of the charts, which is surely uncharacteristic of the response Astrov usually gets from
Sonya. Preoccupied with her mission to ask Astrov outright whether he could ever love
Sonya, Yelena says little. She squanders an opportunity to work in a recommendation for
Sonya to the doctor. Instead, she gives him a stone-faced interrogation and does nothing to
side with her step-daughter. Yelena also blushes in front of the doctor, which he wrongly
interprets as an invitation. He seizes the moment for which he has been waiting for a month.
Astrov lunges at the unsuspecting woman, who forces him off, but not before Vanya
discovers the two in an embrace.

The triangle between Yelena, Astrov, and Serebryakov is complicated by Astrov’s
affections for Yelena. Astrov’s rejection of Sonya also amplifies her anxieties. Not only has
her work been taken away from her, but she has also been deprived of her backup distraction.
Without Astrov to absorb her time and anxieties, Sonya disperses her stresses out into the family. This in turn heightens the tension in the family. According to the Bowen theory, families spread out their anxieties across all of the agents in the family without resolving the underlying issues (Gilbert 8-10). More often than not, parents transmit their marital anxieties to their child or children, the same way that Astrov has transmitted his own anxieties into his work. This is true with the triad between Yelena, Sonya, and Serebryakov. Yelena’s anxieties trickle down on to her innocent step-daughter who is wrapped up in a triangle with Astrov herself.

While Yelena appears not to understand her own feelings, that in no way suggests that her choice to engage the doctor is accidental. She could have chosen anyone else with whom to triangulate, but her interests fall on a man who is the most reasonable ally. Triangulating with Astrov gives her a friend against the anxieties of her marriage, of the persistent Vanya, and of her wavering relationship with her stepdaughter. Sonya absorbs the anxieties of her stepmother, which manifest themselves in an outsized melancholy from her rejection by Astrov. Her anxieties have been revived with the arrival of her father and stepmother at the estate. While Sonya might have been able to entertain the fantasy of an engagement with Astrov while absorbing her time with labor, the estate’s present lethargy has allowed Sonya to meditate on her rejection by the doctor. It has also introduced a contender who poses a threat to a possible romantic relationship with him.

In spite of (and perhaps because of) their awkward encounter over Astrov’s charts, Astrov and Yelena share a charged moment in their final encounter in the play. Though Yelena has turned him down once already, Astrov persists in his attempts at seduction. Yelena is at once stoic and flattered. She tells Astrov she will cherish his memory, which is a
far cry from the behavior one would expect she would show towards a man who came on to her so strong the first time. There is an air of indecency in the scene. Yelena has not given herself to Astrov, but the two share an intimacy that borders on friendship. Yelena takes a pencil as a memento, a symbol of the one spark of adventure she had on her visit. She even allows Astrov to kiss her cheek and impulsively embraces him. They have become friends without going through Astrov’s steps: “A woman can be a man’s friend only in the following sequence: first, an acquaintance; next, a mistress; and thereafter a friend” (Chekhov 2005, 212).

The primary dividing lines between groups of characters in the play are those drawn according to education and success. Astrov, Yelena, and Mariya have segregated themselves against the group of less-educated peoples. Vanya, Telegin, and even Sonya occupy this group. As the Bowen theory states, these in groups hover around each other and overlap from time to time, especially when anxieties are high. Each character seeks out his or her most able ally to help them disburse the anxieties of the family while positioning themselves in such a way as to gain allies against the other group. This in turn prevents the destruction of his or her ends.

The concept of “destruction” appears several times in the play and speaks to a larger issue that engulfs the characters: exploitation. In Yelena’s speech in Act One, she expresses the theme in the following fashion:

YELENA: … It’s what Astrov was saying just now: you all recklessly chop down forests, and soon nothing will be left on earth. The very same way you recklessly destroy a human being, and soon, thanks to you, there won’t be any loyalty or purity or capacity for self-sacrifice left on earth. Why can’t you look at a woman with indifference if she isn’t yours? Because—that doctor’s right—inside all of you there lurks a demon of destruction (Chekhov 2005, 205-6).
If one were to replace the word “destruction” and its variants with “exploitation,” the speech would take on a new color that is closer to the feelings of the characters. Astrov’s forest preserve is to be exploited for timber and farmland. Vanya has been exploited for his labor on the estate.

The immediacy in the plays stems partially from the idea that progress must be made right now. The clock is ticking, and every moment not spent in thrall to progress is a moment spent growing old. Like the untilled fields on the estate, Vanya has been left to go fallow. Because of his station on the estate, he has failed to cultivate his interests or his legacy. The enigmatic map of Africa on the wall has seen as little use as the cultivator. Vanya reacts rightly, albeit irrationally, to Serebryakov’s news that he plans to sell the estate; in doing so, Serebryakov is putting a price on Vanya’s life’s work.

To add insult to injury, poor Uncle Vanya believes the professor has an illegitimate claim to the estate. The professor hasn’t spent a day toiling on the farm; rather, he has exploited the fruits of his first marriage. For a famous, popular, respected individual of any stripe to strip Vanya of his only salvation is a death blow. All the same, Serebryakov’s plan is economically sound, if not altogether selfish. He is right to sell the estate and set himself up in a vacation home, but there is no mention of what he will do for Vanya after the sale. Serebryakov wants to shake the burden of the estate but he is uninvested in the fate of those associated with the property, to say nothing of the peasants. If Vanya were to go to the vacation home with the rest of the family, what would he do on the border of Finland? And what is a vacation to a man who has no money? The know-nothing professor has been a thorn in Vanya’s side since he came to the estate, and for a man to take away the sweat of Vanya’s brow is the final straw.
In all his life, the only contribution Vanya has made to the world is protecting his sister’s estate and managing the accounts. When Serebryakov proposes to sell the estate, Vanya is not just losing his livelihood, he is also losing a sense of value he once had as an individual to a self-important outsider. He realizes that his legacy is at risk. As a result, he snaps and attempts to kill the professor. When he fails, he sees no other alternative but to turn on himself. For what else is a man to do when he has been robbed of his very reason for being?

Vanya follows a path similar to that of the suicidal young artist Treplyov in *The Seagull*. It can be easy to conflate all forms of suicidality since they all produce the same result. To do so is to neglect the inner makeup of the characters who make such an attempt. While it is true that Vanya and Treplyov both suffer from suicidal tendencies, the reasons for their attempts are set apart by their character and the relationships they have with their families. Treplyov is a brooding self-persecutor who meditates on his sorrow whereas Vanya acts impulsively. Vanya is unhappy and lethargic, but it would be more difficult to say that he was “driven” to attempt suicide. Treplyov’s suicide is an act of artistry; Vanya’s attempt an act of passion.

Vanya’s attempted suicide comes as the result of his loss of status. When he is deprived of his purpose, he withdraws so far into himself and his self-pity that he ultimately believes there is no salvation. This too is a recurring theme, but the characters’ statuses are only important insofar as they are preserved in memory. The vilest attack Vanya can muster against the professor is that he has been forgotten even while he’s alive. Vanya claims that that in ten years nobody will read the professor’s work. Vanya is admittedly acting out of jealousy of the professor, yet there is truth in his criticism.
Uncle Vanya lives in the realm of impulsiveness. He rolls a derogatory Herr off his tongue when addressing the professor, he puts together a bouquet for a woman he knows is uninterested in him, and at the drop of a hat goes from aggravated to enraged. His personality is indicative of his thought process. Vanya is always living in the moment, hardly giving a thought to the future and plenty of thought to the past. As Stella Adler sums up in her book on Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov, “a lot of Chekhov’s characters look forward, and the looking forward gives them a kind of anguish. The not looking forward gives them a kind of peace, of quiet acceptance. They either go forward into life or accept the fact that there is nothing to go forward to” (Adler 190). Vanya is the latter. He refuses to open himself to the world around him in order to preserve his peace. If he were more foresighted, he might have managed the accounts more efficiently and turned more of a profit. But Vanya has no gauge for such things and allows the estate to run as it always has.

Vanya and Sonya have quietly lived their lives on the estate taking care of the labor and the books, but all that changes when Serebryakov arrives. Their sense of stability is intruded upon by the outsider Serebryakov and his insatiable demands. The farm is further still intruded upon by the professor’s wife Yelena, who is even farther outside of the “inner circle” that Vanya and Sonya have created. If Serebryakov’s only claim to the estate is that his late wife inherited it, then Yelena’s claim is slimmer still. Until now, the two seemed content to work while Sonya pined for Astrov and Marina knitted her stockings. Serebryakov shines a bright light into Vanya’s closet, his fame illuminating the failures of the poor man to make something of himself in the world. Vanya now sees himself through what he thinks are the professor’s eyes and is aghast at what he sees.
While Astrov is constantly seeking a new barometer for his ideas, Vanya has little interest in a challenge to his mode of being. He has stagnated on the estate along with the rest of its tenets, and was perfectly happy to do so when there was no measure telling him he was unsuccessful. His mother’s pamphlets act as a measure against him and a nagging reminder of the outside world. These outside ideas are an affront to his own sense of worth, but he has had practice in shrugging her off. He believes education is a waste of time that could be better spent sowing his wild oats. He is not as successful as his brother-in-law, but he believes himself to be more perceptive. Vanya believes that book-learning keeps people from seeing the world as it is, and he has become cynical of academia. When the professor comes to the estate, Vanya is confronted full-force with the undeniable fact that he is not so fulfilled as he would like to think. He writes off men who write for decades about the same topics as uninteresting and unoriginal. This is in stark contrast to his mother’s assessment of writers who change their opinions over time as atrocious. Vanya strives towards the ideal he sees in people who grow and progress. He deplores complacency, perhaps because of his very own.

Vanya also offers no alternative view of what makes a man important. For most of Vanya’s life, he has had no one against whom to compare himself and to measure his success. His opinions were influenced by pamphlets that gave him just enough insight upon the outside world to form an opinion before abandoning his pursuit of knowledge. At one time Vanya was a “shining star” but was defeated by the successes of others. He placed all of his stock into the estate as a result of his defeat, not vice versa.

The way the other characters refer to Vanya gives some insight to the nature of his relationship with them. Those closest to him have pet names for him, while others use the same pet names ironically to dismiss him:
To his mother, he is Jean, the “shining light” of his youth. He is Vanya primarily to Sonya and Waffles, who love him. Therefore, if Voinitsky matters most when he is Uncle Vanya, his self-realization lies not in competing with the Professor or winning Yelena, but instead in his dealings with his dependents. He gave up trying to be Jean long ago; when he stops trying to be Iran [sic] Petrovich and fulfills himself as Uncle Vanya, a new life might commence (Senelick, “Uncle Vanya” 196).

Telegin stands apart from the rest of the characters in that he is content with his station in life despite the chaos around him. For the most part, he appears at peace, despite having lost the most of anyone in the play. Cuckolded the very day after his wedding, he still keeps to his duty to his wife:

TELEGIN: I love her to this day, and I’m faithful to her, I help however I can, and sold my estate to educate the kiddies she bore to the man she loved. Happiness was denied me, but what I did have left was my pride. What about her? Her youth has gone now, her beauty, subject to the laws of nature, has faded, the man she loved has passed away . . . What does she have left? (Chekhov 2005, 201).

Cuckolded, chaste, and deprived of land and wealth, Telegin maintains his purpose in the world: to provide for his “wife.” Telegin has been exploited by his wife, but he keeps his purpose alive by finding a niche that gives him a reason to continue. Telegin’s line about happiness is perhaps the most telling. Like many of Chekhov’s other characters, he prefers a life of purpose to a life of happiness. Happiness is an intangible and unsustainable, but purpose is the foundation upon which happiness can be built.

Vanya has no such purpose without the estate. He could continue to support his niece and mother, but even that is impossible without a source of income. A 45-year-old bookkeeper who has had the rug pulled out from underneath him would be hard pressed to find another job, even one where he might be more appreciated than on the estate.

The line in the above speech about love and youth fading over time is a staple in Chekhovian plays. In this context, the line alludes also to Serebryakov’s faltering celebrity. Serebryakov’s celebrity is much like Arkadina’s in The Seagull: once undeniable and now
fading. The professor continues to hang his hat on his successes even though they are inconsequential to a man like Vanya. Serebryakov has lost his bargaining chip on the estate when he could be using his status to win over the masses. He’s no celebrity to his family; those tricks won’t work here. With his nose in the air, he turns into a pitiful creature who whines about his health.

It’s unclear whether Serebryakov is truly suffering from the ailments he claims or if he is a hypochondriac seeking attention. While it’s perfectly reasonable at his age to suffer from rheumatism and gout, such ailments to not justify the myriad of prescriptions he has from doctors all over the country. It’s more likely that he suffers from a kind of disorder similar to hypochondria called somatic symptom disorder. The U.S. National Library of Medicine describes the disorder:

Somatic symptom disorder occurs when a person feels extreme anxiety about physical symptoms such as pain or fatigue. The person has intense thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to the symptoms that interfere with daily life. A person with SSD is not faking his or her symptoms. The pain and other problems are real. They may be caused by a medical problem. Often, no physical cause can be found. But it’s the extreme reaction and behaviors about the symptoms that are the main problem (Medline Plus).

Unlike hypochondria, somatic symptom disorder arises when a person becomes extremely anxious about physical problems he or she is already experiencing to the point that it affects their daily life. Someone with the disorder might assert that there must be something dreadfully wrong with him, contrary to an otherwise healthy diagnosis in exception of aches and pains. Even if Serebryakov does indeed have arthritis, there are plenty of elderly people in pain who are more than willing to go on tilling their gardens and living their lives. Instead of working through the pain, Serebryakov submits entirely. His sickness is just enough to make him uncomfortable, but it is Serebryakov who makes himself miserable.
Serebryakov’s miserable state could be the result of the stresses he experiences while around his family. When a body suffers from chronic anxiety, it begins to secrete hormones that are detrimental to the organism. They are naturally created, but can have adverse effects on a person’s health. “Some of these include weight gain, susceptibility to infection, ulcer, and some investigators think, aging effects on the brain (that may lead to dementias) (Gilbert 8). If Serebryakov was exceptionally anxious or stressed to the point of illness before coming to the estate, it stands to reason that the sudden onset of his symptoms when he arrived are correlated with all of the anxieties of the family.

It’s easy to speculate about the kinds of conversations the crotchety old professor must have with his doctors. He is unsatisfied with one diagnosis, takes the medication he’s prescribed anyway, and sees other doctors for a second (or third or fifth or eighth) opinion. In a way, Serebryakov triangulates with his family and new physicians against the old. He cycles through new triangulating agents regularly, constantly changing who he considers an adversary. If an illustration of Serebryakov’s triangle with his family and doctors were to rotate each time it changed, it would become a pinwheel.

When the medicine doesn’t “work” for the symptoms *du jour*, he seeks out another doctor for a new prescription. “No, I’m already taking aspirin.” “I’m already taking valerian and quinine.” The prescriptions pile up and the symptoms persist. Serebryakov exhibits behaviors that are in line with his disorder when he expresses his fears to Yelena: “They say that Turgenev had gout that developed into angina pectoris. I’m afraid I may have it too” (Chekhov 2005, 207). The professor is well enough to walk in the garden but is terribly anxious about sickness, so he goes about in an overcoat and galoshes despite the stifling heat. If his rheumatism were so inhibiting, perhaps he would be confined to a chair.
To curb his misery, the professor calls on his family to nurse him back to health. The attention he receives from the family is welcomed, but his desire for company goes much deeper than a simple yearning for contact. Serebryakov openly admits to selfishly demanding the attentions of the other people on the estate. He asserts that he has a right to be selfish at his age and has earned the right to have people pay attention to him. His arrogance leads him to believe that he has been unjustly removed from the scene of his well-deserved celebrity, and that as a celebrity he has the right to other people’s attentions. He is spiteful that he should be exiled to the sticks with common folk:

Serebryakov: To labor all one’s life in the cause of learning, to grow accustomed to one’s study, to the lecture hall, to esteemed colleagues—and suddenly, with no rhyme or reason, to find oneself in this mausoleum, to spend every day seeing stupid people, listening to trivial chitchat . . . I want to live, I love success, I love celebrity, fame, and here—it’s like being in exile. Every minute yearning for the past, watching the successes of others, fearing death . . . I can’t do it! I haven’t got the strength! And on top of that they won’t forgive me my old age! (Chekhov 2005, 208).

The estate is an albatross for Serebryakov. Were it not for this backwoods business, he would be on the border of Finland surrounded by his colleagues.

The experience Serebryakov has had with physicians could be the underlying issue that foments his distrust of Astrov as a doctor. The professor’s word choice when talking about the doctor is a particular point of interest that opens up some insight on the way he truly feels about Astrov. A footnote in Senelick’s translation of Chekhov’s selected plays reveals that Serebryakov calls Astrov “yurodivy, a holy fool, a feebleminded beggar considered to be touched by God and hence licensed to speak the truth” (208). Serebryakov is cynical about the provincial doctor, whom he considers to be a hack. Perhaps Astrov called out the professor on his delusions or accused him of wasting the doctor’s time when he could be treating other patients. Yet Astrov is licensed to take such liberties with speech due to his
title as a physician. That sort of talk is not something to which Serebryakov would be accustomed.

Astrov is skeptical of the professor’s ailments and wonders whether he is sick at all. He asks Vanya and Telegin whether they think he is truly sick or faking, and scoffs at the variety of medications on the table: “Medicine. Prescriptions galore! From Kharkov, from Moscow, from Tula . . . Every town in Russia must be fed up with his gout” (Chekhov 2005, 211). The doctor is used to far more atrocious standards than the professor’s for well-being. He has experienced a typhus epidemic, livestock in the home, and whatever hellish injuries that must come from a turn-of-the-century factory.

Vanya, Yelena, Sonya, Serebryakov, and Astrov are all key players in overlapping relationships. The root of the conflict in each relationship is undoubtedly Serebryakov’s presence on the estate. It is also the result of characters’ poor handling of the conflicts. Each character has his or her own method of dispersing anxieties, but all methods are founded on distractions through a drug of sorts. For Astrov, Sonya, and Vanya, the drug is work. Yelena drugs herself with fantasies; Serebryakov with pity. By drugging themselves with distractions, the characters allow themselves the illusion that the conflicts will resolve themselves. They soon find that the only cure, for Serebryakov and others, is a complete return to stasis.
Anton Pavlovich Chekhov has often been referred to as a modernist or pre-modernist playwright for his writing style, though he makes no claim to an ideology other than to present the world truthfully as he sees it. As the critic Fredric Jameson describes modernism, it is “a representation, a signifier whose referent is so multivalent as to be nearly untenable . . . modernism escapes representation, and only situations of modernity . . . can be narrated” (Wyman 184). In this sense, Three Sisters could be considered the most “modern” of Chekhov’s plays, and might even be on the cusp of postmodernism for its deconstruction of traditional values.

The narration of daily trifles is a spot-on description of this play with which many young theatre-people and first-time readers might agree. It is easy to fall into the trap of writing it off as a bunch of talk and very little action, for the sisters never make an actual move towards formulating real plans to move to Moscow. “Liesl Olson has elaborated on the paradox of early-nineteenth-century modernism in that the writer/artist aims to present that which is overlooked (ordinary life) by means of close examination and accurate portrayal. So, once negligible elements achieve significant value, even as they act as counterpoint to the more memorable epiphanic moments of awareness” (Wyman 186). The sisters live their ordinary lives on stage, and the drama is supported by their more memorable moments in the
past: the death of a family member, emigrating from Moscow, et cetera. Each repetitive act produces an illusion of growth and inventions despite the slow-moving dramatic structure.

The devices in *Three Sisters* rest at either end of the spectrum described by Olson (3-7). On one hand, the memorable epiphanic moments of awareness are front and center at all times in the form of reminiscences. On the other, negligible elements are spotlighted, such as the bridge Vershinin crosses near German street. It is a masterpiece of the mosaic approach Chekhov takes to his plays. In any event, *Three Sisters* is a play of extremes in the Chekhovian canon: it takes place over the longest period of time, it is the most claustrophobic, the most lethargic, and features a plot structure in which the conflict is of the sisters’ own making.

Of Chekhov’s major plays, *Three Sisters* is perhaps also the most intricate. It has been the subject of countless studies that analyze the play’s many symbols and motifs. In his notes about the play, the American poet Randall Jarrell compares Chekhov’s technique in the play to paintings by Édouard Vuillard:

> In certain of his indoor and outdoor scenes of French domestic life, the foundation areas on the canvas are made less emphatic by the swarms of particles that mottle the walls with rose-printed paper, the rugs from the swirls, the lawns with pools of sun and shade. From such variation and variegation comes his cohesion. Vuillard commingles plaids and dappled things as non sequitur as the jottings in Chebutykin’s notebook (Jarrell 105-6).

The play is indeed similar in its composition to a Vuillard painting. What at first glance appears to be several disassociated parts form a complete and rational image upon further examination. The two prevalent motifs in the play are those which appear most often in Chekhov’s plays: time and space. In *Three Sisters*, however, they are exaggerated in a way that outperforms the other plays. They are used to give the illusion of progress and scope while the action of the play moves slowly along.
At the same time, the play is similar to a pointillist painting. The further one steps back from the preconceived expectations of an action-packed play, the more the image comes into focus as a conglomeration of thoughts and ideas that form a thematic whole. Both of these approaches are applied in examining this play.

The trouble with *Three Sisters*, as it were, is that it is not as easy to take at face value as Chekhov’s other plays. It is readily apparent in the previous plays where the through-line is drawn: Serebryakov’s tenancy at the estate; Treplyov’s mounting depression. In *Three Sisters*, it appears on first examination as though there is no action at all. The play is lethargic. Whereas *Uncle Vanya* and *The Seagull* are criticized for mopey overtones, *Three Sisters* takes on another characteristic entirely. The entire play is made up of people waiting around for something to happen. They are stuck in a limbo of sorts. Their lives are lived in a fantasy that is burned to cinders with the raging fire that engulf the town. This leaves the heavy lifting of plot-forwarding to the symbolic nature of the play.

As Ben Butler observes in a review of a 2011 production of *Three Sisters*,

The sense of an inescapable darkness waiting to consume all things bright and living is paradoxically what makes Chekhov, above all modern playwrights, so vibrant. But achieving that sense without falling into leadenness and monotony (or, conversely, unnatural hyperintensity) isn’t easy. So many contemporary productions of Chekhov wind up feeling as unnaturally rigid and posturing as those posers before the camera. The “inescapable darkness” gives tension and substance to the stagnation as the sisters are indeed consumed by their desires for a different life. The stagnation of the family is emphasized by the peacetime army that comes to visit the Prozorov home. They are soldiers without a purpose who have no other course but to wait. In a sense, they are waiting just as much as the sisters are.
Three Sisters is not the first of Chekhov’s plays to confine its characters to a limited space, but it certainly does so in the most extreme way. The absence of monologues or soliloquies gives the play its momentum while emphasizing a sense of confinement. Characters are almost never left alone on stage. They are suffocated, as Treplyov was in The Seagull, by the fact that no space is a personal space. The spatial relationships of the characters is emphasized in the sisters’ yearning for Moscow. There is always another place far in the distance in the back of the characters’ minds (and consequently, the audience’s) that expands the world and consequently the notion of displacement.

Natasha’s poor differentiation manifests itself in her unending micromanagement of the people around her. To those who are on the lower end of the differentiation spectrum, her manner tends towards tyranny. They are unable or unwilling to adapt to the world around them, so they instead work diligently to adapt the world to suit themselves. These people tend to be chronically unhappy and unsatisfied. Of all of Chekhov’s characters, it is my opinion that Natasha is the most conniving, perhaps because she seems unaware of her own tendency toward tyranny.

The dynamic that Natasha and Andrey have together is described by the Bowen theory as:

*Dysfunction in one spouse:* One spouse pressures the other to think and act in certain ways and the other yields to pressure. Both spouses accommodate to preserve harmony, but one does more of it. The interaction is comfortable for both people up to a point, but if family tension rises further, the subordinate spouse may yield so much self-control that his or her anxiety increases significantly (Kerr 13).

In this case, Natasha is the dysfunctional party in the relationship. From the onset, she pressures Andrey to behave in a certain manner. These demands become so stressful for
Andrey that he removes himself from the relationship emotionally so far that he becomes alienated in his own home.

Andrey has the polar opposite personality to his wife. While Natasha is an aggressive usurper, Andrey tends to withdraw from conflict. When his sisters are philosophizing and pining for Moscow, Andrey retreats to his study and plays his violin. He also hides from his wife, reading during Shrovetide to escape from Natasha’s demands. Paradoxically, Andrey also feels at home in a crowd, albeit a crowd of strangers:

ANDREY: You sit in Moscow in the vast main dining room of a restaurant, you don’t know anyone and no one knows you, and at the same time you don’t feel like a stranger. Whereas here you know everyone and everyone knows you, but you’re a stranger, a stranger . . . A stranger and alone (Chekhov 2005, 267).

Andrey’s estrangement from his sisters is the product of their relentless teasing. The sisters triangulate with one another while actively pushing their brother to the outside. Andrey is removed from the inner circle and hasn’t the means to interject himself back into the fold. Even triangulation with his wife is a dead end, as she triangulates with Protopopov against her husband. There are times when Andrey sneaks away from his siblings and when called back refuses because he is afraid of their teasing him. Instead of confronting them head-on as the man of the house, Andrey shrinks. The stresses of the family fall upon his shoulders, and his addictive behavior escalates as a result.

By contrast, Natasha instigates conflict in the home. At her first appearance, Natasha is dressed in an uncoordinated outfit and nervous about coming to a dinner party with so many guests. Her future sisters-in-law do little to ease her anxieties. They tease her for her outfit while the officers tease the young lovers about their relationship. Natasha bursts into tears and flees the dinner table, saying that she is unaccustomed to being in society. In this moment, Natasha pressures Andrey to behave in a caring and coddling manner. She has
succeeded in triangulating with Andrey against his sisters in her first scene on stage. This triangle becomes a one-way street, however, and Andrey finds himself as a pawn in a changing dynamic between the three sisters and their new sister-in-law.

Once Natasha and Andrey are married, Natasha returns with strengthened resolve. Now established as a member of the family (and perceiving herself to be an “insider,”) she becomes more manipulative. In act one, Chekhov sets up the expectation of Natasha to be an extremely sensitive woman. This should be a great weakness, but is actually becomes her strength. Natasha pouts. She manipulates Andrey by feigning weakness. These tactics exploit the human tendency to comfort victims, and once Natasha has Andrey cornered by their marriage, she has enough of a foothold in the family to assert herself. In the first scene of act two, Natasha divulges that she has been giving orders to the sisters, and expects them to oblige. She unjustly assumes that the house’s everyday operations are hers to manage because she is home more often than the other women. In the same scene, she betrays her selfishness. Natasha turns away the masqueraders invited by the family to celebrate Shrovetide. When Andrey weakly objects, Natasha deflects his objections. She changes the subject back to her son’s (and her husband’s) weight. In this moment, Natasha shows her claws as a wife and a matron. Her dysfunction becomes her strength since Andrey has been backed into a corner, and can neither triangulate with other members nor withdraw from the relationship any more than he already has.

By act three, Natasha has exposed herself for the tyrant she is. She vulgarly chastises the maid Anfisa and makes a move to put her on the street. When Natasha confronts Olga about the maid, she once again redirects attention away from the primary conflict. She assumes no responsibility for the conflict. Natasha does not remove herself or attempt to
resolve the conflict. Instead, she recommends that Olga move downstairs so she doesn’t have to be around her. From the outset, Natasha has been sneakily forcing the world to cater to her at the expense of the family. She even moves her husband into Irina’s old room and begins to carry on publicly with Protopopov.

The play is also greatly concerned with time. In Chekhov’s earlier plays, time is used as a device for exposition and looking backwards to provide context for the action. This play, however, appears to take place almost wholly within a memory. The characters are less in the moment than his other plays, each living either in a memory or looking to the future. The device of the fire snaps the sisters out of their fantasies and forces them to face the cold reality of the world in which they live.

The sisters’ idealistic fantasy of the major city is an escape from their cold provincial town. They look back on Moscow with rose-colored glasses. The eldest of the three would only have memories of the city from when she was a teenager, so how could she know as an adult what would be in store for them there? Should they return to Moscow, the sisters would find that the world is as complicated and sullen there as it is anywhere else. Their fantasy of the major city is a form of withdrawal. Rather than confronting their stressors head-on, they withdraw to the ultimate fantasy: an Eden named Moscow.

In my interview with psychologist Dr. Carolyn Pepper, she revealed that often people who are easily distracted from their responsibilities become obsessed with distractions. And when they return from their distractions to more pressing matters, they quickly find another to take up their time. For example, someone who uses shopping as an escape might reason himself into needing to pick up clothes for the winter despite mounting homework. Or he might reason himself into needing to complete another level in a video game over tending to
his job. In either case, the drug-like distractions take precedence over the less attractive obligations.

While the Prozorov sisters are not running from their obligations, they obsess over Moscow as a distraction from an uneducated and uncultured provincial town. They become deeply involved with the fantasy of Moscow as “somewhere different.” They imagine a sunny life filled with the finer things, but are instead met with death and destruction. Their disappointment might be to blame for their apparent nihilism or indifference.

Throughout the play, characters repeat some variation of “it doesn’t matter” as a way of ending conversations or defending themselves. In Act I, Masha leaves Irina’s name day party, an act for which she is chastised. She fires back at her sister by saying, “doesn’t matter. I’ll be back this evening” (Chekhov 2005, 253). Of each of the sisters, Masha has the most postmodernist approach to her life. Her attitude can be likened to the young poet’s *weltschmertz*. She is the young one who wears black and is absorbed in her books, and breaks from tradition. When confronted about her behavior, she proffers a postmodernist’s favorite response: it doesn’t matter.

Masha makes an inadvertent cultural statement by behaving in a counter-cultural fashion. In Chekhov’s time, the family was expected to be together throughout the day, but it is not so uncommon now to come and go for birthdays or Christmas. Masha is in a sense deconstructing the culture. With her line, she reveals a great deal about what she believes in regards to tradition. What does it matter that it’s Irina’s name day? Why should the family stay together all day? Is it not just another day of the year to which special meaning has been assigned? This is the basis underlying the levelling nature of the postmodern ideology that
distrusts tradition, and that value exists on an individual level. That is, a name day is only special if one ascribes value to the occasion for oneself.

Each of the sisters, and indeed Andrey and his new wife, take a journey through discovery. At the end of this journey they discover the capacity for self-criticism as much as they criticize others throughout the course of the play. It has been said that in Chekhov’s plays there are no villains. This rings true especially in the case of Three Sisters. While it might be easy to perceive the antagonizing Natasha as an infiltrator into the home, and a villainous infiltrator at that, the sisters are not entirely gracious in their interactions with one another, or even others. That is not to exempt Natasha from her behavior; indeed, she is a dragon-lady who seizes control of the house for herself.

Natasha is a unique character in the Chekhovian canon. For the first time in Chekhov’s major plays, the antagonist is an insider. In The Cherry Orchard, Uncle Vanya, and The Seagull, the family is thrown into chaos by an outsider or an outside force. In Three Sisters, Natasha infiltrates the family unit and eats away at it from within. The family dynamics in this play are stronger and more complex than in Chekhov’s previous plays, and the families interact more as a unit than in other plays.

The role of parenthood is as important in this play as it is to families in the real world. While we’ve seen snippets of paternal roles in previous plays, Three Sisters zeroes in on the role of parents in the home and the nurturing of children. Natasha in particular is a dutiful parent despite her shortcomings as a sister-in-law or a wife. At the forefront of her mind in many situations is her little Bobik. She desires the best for her child, as all mothers should. Natasha worries about the nursery being cold and damp, and to make her child comfortable, she asks Irina to move in with her sister. This request serves a dual purpose: it provides for
the safety and comfort of her child while deposing the sisters as matriarchs of the family. While Natasha’s interest in the safety of her child are reasonable, her intentions are suspect. If Bobik is lucky, his parents’ poor differentiation and low levels of maturity will not be transmitted to him.

Throughout the play, parents are depicted as benevolent agents in regard to their children. Even the parents who have died are spoken of highly. Andrey chose an academic career at the behest of his father. General Prozorov wished for an academic career for his son. These wishes for the family unit could indicate either a poor level or a great deal of differentiation. On one hand, a poorly differentiated father will force his children to do his bidding in order to maintain a sense of control. On the other, a well-differentiated father will guide his son towards a productive career in an effort to transmit his own problem-solving capacities to his son. As an academic, Andrey enjoys a respectable position without the occupational hazard of a military man. Mrs. Prozorov was apparently a loving mother, and her daughters associate her memory with the happiest times of their lives. It is my opinion that this relationships indicates a well-differentiated parental unit that failed to transmit its maturity to the children due to unforeseen variables. Tusenbach recalls his relationship with his mother:

I was born in Petersburg, cold, idle Petersburg, to a family that didn’t know the meaning of hard work or hardship. I remember, whenever I came home from school, a lackey would pull off my boots, while I’d fidget and my mother would gaze at me in adoration and be surprised when anyone looked at me any other way. They tried to shield me from hard work. And they just about managed it, only just! (Chekhov 2015, 252)

Every indication is given that these characters had comfortable upbringings by loving parents. The basic parental instinct to give one’s children what one never had is acknowledged and emphasized, but the result can be a double-edged sword.
The Prozorov family often philosophizes about the uselessness of their education in the backwoods town in which they live. They are disheartened by the town’s lack of culture and educated class. The siblings’ talents are untapped and they feel as though they are not contributing to society, or living a life worth living. To share an occasion with the educated officers is a breath of fresh air to the siblings as they while away the time philosophizing. I believe that the lack of an educated class has soured the sisters’ dispositions and eroded their maturity. It is truly difficult to change a person’s level of differentiation over the years, yet *Three Sisters* takes place in such an expanded timeframe that this sort of devolution is possible in a way that is limited in other plays.

The sisters’ stagnation is generated by their deference of any course of action that would remedy their sorrows. Irina claims “the only thing holding us back is our poor old Masha” while Olga lays her unhappiness at the feet of the Lord (Chekhov 2005, 250). Deference to God in particular is a recurring theme throughout the play. When the sisters are reminiscing at the beginning of Act 1, Olga placidly says that everything she and her siblings are going through is for the best because God wills it. Tusenbach escorts Irina home every night and brags of his Orthodox faith. Ferapont tells Andrey he’s never been to Moscow because “‘tweren’t God’s will” (Chekhov 2005, 267).

The overt presence of religious thought is different from Chekhov’s previous plays. Religion in Russia and Chekhov’s plays is a subject for another examination entirely, but it bears mentioning here as a thematic element. The repeated references to “God’s will” coupled with the motif of stationary soldiers calls to mind an absence of agency. Once again, the thematic element of withdrawal crops up in a Chekhovian play. The sisters withdraw from their stressors and into the Will of God as an escape from the effort they would have to
expend by moving to Moscow. This existentialist theme creates the illusion that the agents in the play are victims of cosmic forces beyond their control, while nothing could be further than the truth. Except for the unexpected fire that ravages the town and turns the Prozorov yard into a thoroughfare, the sisters are mistresses of their own fates. Their jobs, mortgage, and families are all variables that can be addressed directly. Their stagnation is of their own making, and they merely lack the determination to make their dream a reality.

The overall depressive mood of the play and of the characters is exemplified by Olga’s monologue in Act I:

Because I’m at the high school all day long and then have to give tutorials into the night, I’ve got this constant headache, and my thoughts are those of an old woman. As a matter of fact, the four years I’ve been working at the high school, I’ve felt as if every day my strength and youth were draining from me drop by drop. While that same old dream keeps growing bigger and stronger . . . (Chekhov 2015, 250)

There is more to Olga’s speech than simply a classic Chekhovian lamentation of lost youth. Olga’s feelings are characteristic of a depressive state. She is unhappy in her work and in her life, so she turns to the dream of Moscow to give herself strength. In a subsequent speech, Olga notes that at times she gets cross with the girls at the school, she’s getting thin, and she is aging physically. She attributes her physical state to her ill temper at the school, which indicates that her sour moods are due in part to unhappiness in her labor.

There’s very little that makes for an unhappy life more quickly than hating one’s job. To rise every morning dreading work, suffer through the day, then retire with the thought of repeating the process is a Sisyphean cycle that leads to long-term negative effects. Among the many undesirable side effects are heightened resting stress levels, greater chances for anxiety and depression, and greater risks for physical illness (Stahl, 2016). The lack of purpose that accompanies an unhappy work life can also seep into the home life and have
major costs, especially when an ideal fantasy seems just out of reach. At times, Olga takes out her frustrations on the girls at the school rather than working to alleviate them at their root level. This form of coping is a form of avoidance that spreads Olga’s anxieties among the children she tutors.

Andrey and Natasha’s relationship also suffers from an intergenerational transmission process. As mentioned previously, the transmission process reflects a compounding effect of poor differentiation across generations. Natasha redirects her anxieties onto her children. Her personality is almost a textbook case of the conflicts in marriage that Bowen observed:

There is a spectrum of ways spouses deal with fusion symptoms. The most universal mechanism is emotional distance … there are three major areas … marital conflict; sickness or dysfunction in one spouse; and projection of the problems to children (Bowen 377).

Anxious in her marriage, Natasha redirects her marital conflict to her little Bobik. She becomes dysfunctional and projects all of her insecurities onto her children and her husband. She suggests that Bobik be put on a diet and frets endlessly about the boy’s health. She is obviously unhappy about her husband’s weight and hints at Andrey to keep to his diet. While this might appear to be kind gesture by a loving wife, Natasha has a history of making demands on others. She is absolutely the least differentiated character in the play, and she behaves accordingly. This dynamic is exemplary of dysfunction in one spouse. The dysfunctional Natasha relentlessly transmits her anxieties to her husband. When she shamelessly carries on with Protopopov, any anxiety she once had about her reputation transmits onto Andrey, where it morphs into the crushing stresses of adultery.

Andrey has been crushed by his wife’s overbearing personality. Natasha’s manipulative strategies in Act I exploited Andrey’s soft side, and since their marriage, she has become increasingly demanding. As she has developed, she has taken on the ruthless side
of the three sisters. Andrey’s relationship with her becomes a mirror image of the same he has with his sisters. He withdraws from the relationship. He withdraws so far that Natasha is free to have her affair with Protopopov. Cuckolded and emasculated, Andrey’s obliging personality elevates his anxieties in the marriage so far that he removes himself completely. Just as he turned to food for comfort after his father’s death, he replaces the anxieties of his marriage with the pleasure of gambling.

Andrey’s unwilling compliance with Natasha’s demands locks him into a triangle against his own siblings. By the end of the play, he is as displaced in his relationship as his sisters are in their home. By exploiting her dysfunctional relationship with Andrey, Natasha ambitiously climbs to a position of power in the home. Andrey’s anxieties reach a pinnacle in Act four, yet when he vents his frustrations he quickly deflates under Natasha’s icy gaze. Like the fir trees in the garden, he and his sisters have been felled with wanton abandon by a vindictive creature.
CHAPTER 4
THE CHERRY ORCHARD

Of Chekhov’s four major plays, The Cherry Orchard deals the most directly with issues of property. Its thematic elements are comparable to land grabs and disinheritance experienced by landowners in the American South, and the play has even been adapted to reflect that distinction (Logan). While Uncle Vanya also featured themes of property and wealth, the symbols differ between these two plays. The estate and its lush cherry orchard serve a more symbolic purpose than the Serebryakov estate, and the driving force behind the play is the impending modernization of an orchard bound by memory. Vanya hangs on to the estate the way a drowning man clings to a buoy. Without the estate, Vanya loses his purpose. In The Cherry Orchard, the family will maintain their purpose without the estate, but to lose the orchard is to watch memories fade away into dust.

Again Chekhov takes an unbiased stance on country life. Even the supposed antagonist is calling for a reasonable action to sell the estate. To keep the degree of alienation required for this play, one must not take sides. Instead it is encouraged to take the world as it comes the same way the characters do, and in the same way one would analyze the family in a clinical setting. Translator and editor Laurence Senelick sums up the caution against taking sides in his introduction to the play: “Choosing sides immediately reduces the play’s complexity and ambiguity. Chekhov had no axe to grind, not even the axe that hews down the orchard. Neither Lopakhin nor Trofimov is invested with greater validity than is
Ranevskaya or Gaev” (Senelick 316). It would be easy to attribute Lopakhin’s desire to purchase the estate at auction to conniving, but it is difficult to blame him for taking the most economical course. This difficulty arises from the complexity of the character himself, as well as from the complexity of his fellow characters.

Themes of memory and property surface in this play as they did in *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya*, and are emphasized in *The Cherry Orchard*. It is the most daunting of Chekhov’s major plays’ conflicts to analyze according to the Bowen theory because the conflict arises primarily out of disputes over property. Intrafamilial conflicts are minimized. The dramatic action in the play is incited and forwarded by the looming deadline on the estate’s interest payment. Of the four major plays, this one’s characters seem to let the world “happen” to them the most. The most influential family ties are between unseen parents and their children; therefore, the Bowen theory tenets most useful for the play are the *family projection process* and *multigenerational transmission process*. These two processes describe the way that parents distribute their anxieties across their children, and the process through which children’s own levels of differentiation are influenced by those of their parents.

Lopakhin reveals early in the play that he suffered an uncomfortable youth. He was subjected to thrashings by a drunken father, much the way Chekhov’s own father treated him. Given that Lopakhin’s father succumbed to violence and alcoholism to control the actions of those around him, it can be assumed that he was a very poorly differentiated individual. If that is the case, then his favored mate would have been a woman who was also poorly to moderately differentiated. The compounding effect of this relationship would put Lopakhin in the window of poor to fair levels of differentiation. Given this level, it’s easy to understand his urgent desire to make the family behave the way he would like, but not the patience with
which he treats the family. This characteristic is the result of the close ties he experienced with members of the Ranevskaya estate when he was a child, through which he would have learned positive behavior patterns and drawn attention to his own generation (Gilbert 65-66).

Lopakhin’s patience with the family stems from his fond memories of Ranevskaya. Lopakhin defers to the judgement of the matron because of her kindness in his youth:

LOPAKHIN: A good sort of person, that’s her. A kindhearted, unpretentious person. I remember, when I was just a kid about fifteen, my late father—he kept a shop in this village back then—punched me in the face with his fist, blood was gushing from my nose . . . We’d come into the yard back then for some reason, and he’d been drinking (Chekhov 2005, 324).

When Lopakhin is rescued by Ranevskaya, she calls him her little peasant, forwarding the theme of pedigree. Lopakhin himself is preoccupied with status and its influence on a man’s life. His rationalist approach to class and heritage is a calculated effort to preserve his worldview.

As a poorly differentiated individual, Lopakhin persecutes himself despite having made plenty of money since he was a peasant in an abusive home. He repeatedly remarks on the idea of “once a peasant, always a peasant.” Though he has risen in station, Lopakhin has not yet been able to convince himself. Until he buys the estate where his forefathers were serfs, he considers himself a mere peasant with money:

LOPAKHIN: My little peasant . . . My father, true, was a peasant, and here I am in a white waistcoat, yellow high-button shoes. Like a pig’s snout on a tray of pastry . . . Only difference is I’m rich, plenty of money, if you think it over and work it out, once a peasant, always a peasant . . . (Leafs through the book.) I was reading this book here and couldn’t make head or tails of it. Reading and nodding off (Chekhov 2005, 324).

In response to his stresses about his status, Lopakhin spreads his anxieties around the rest of the family. In an effort to bring the rest of the characters into his perception of the world, he polices other characters’ behavior according to their station. He tells Dunyasha not to put on
airs of youth with her wardrobe or her hairstyle, and to remember who she is. The line might appear at first glance to be cut-down of a servant by a wealthy man; instead, consider Lopakhin is projecting his own insecurities on the poor parlor maid. He is uncomfortable and ashamed of his heritage while surrounded by landed gentry. As mentioned previously, he has taken stock of his own generation and discovered “themes” between the generations that govern how individuals should (and do) behave (Gilbert 68).

Lopakhin stands in stark contrast to the rest of the family on the estate. Ranevskaya has just returned from a vacation house on the coast of France, her daughters are clever and interesting, and the guests are people of comfort. While there is no end to the stress and pain of a destitute family in the present, the previous generation has a major impact on the wellbeing of its heirs. A parental unit that is poorly differentiated tends to produce children who are also poorly differentiated, especially when those parents struggle with their own adult anxieties. The children of such a family tend to grow up with anxieties of their own, especially if the parents extend their own stresses onto the child(ren) in his youth. The home life of children plays a major role in their development, and the characters’ reminiscences give us an avenue to understand their behavior. Throughout the play, characters reflect on their upbringing.

The governess and family friend Charlotta has little to say throughout the course of the play, yet her family history makes her an intriguing character. Following the death of her acrobatic parents when she was a child, Charlotta was taken in by a German woman who educated her. She had developed an illusionist’s skillset and is handy with cards and ventriloquism, which she uses as a means to distract herself from her loneliness. Charlotta repeatedly comments that she is all alone and has no one with whom she can even speak. She
doesn’t know who she is because she has no foundation for her sense of self. Her parents
died when she was young, and she entered into a new family dynamic. Without fulfilling the
process of differentiation, she has no foundation for her behavior patterns as an adult. When
she was taken in by her German foster mother, the culture of the home would have changed
dramatically and altered her process of differentiation. Caught between two worlds, Charlotta
is also wedged between two different perceptions of her “self:” the traveling acrobat child
wonder, and the well-educated daughter of a governess. Perhaps her lost “self” is to blame
for her non-sequiturs like pulling a pickle from her pocket for a snack. Charlotta is painfully
aware of her inability to fit in with the rest of the characters and frequently reflects on her
loneliness.

Like Charlotta, Varya is herself a foster child. She was taken in by Ranevskaya, who
has a daughter of her own. She is a moderately-differentiated individual, albeit with a quick
temper, who takes charge whenever she can. She is by far the most responsible member of
the family, yet she attempts to manipulate the way others behave through her faux spirituality
and her charge on the estate. She has to have something to do every minute, and when there’s
no work to do, she busies herself with doting on or controlling her sister. Varya is seven
years older than Anya, and though she is a foster child, assumes the role of the eldest sibling
in the family unit.

Bowen theory explains the effect that sibling position has on the development of
children in the following way:

Oldest children tend to gravitate to leadership positions and youngest children often
prefer to be followers. The characteristics of one position are not “better” than those
of another position, but are complementary. For example, a boss who is an oldest
child may work unusually well with a first assistant who is a youngest child.
Youngest children may like to be in charge, but their leadership style typically differs
from an oldest’s style (Kerr 37).
The dynamic between Varya and Anya is an exhibition of these roles. Varya is strong-handed with her management of the estate but dotes on Anya and her mother. She is in charge of the house, but there is also within her a desire to please her foster family. As the eldest sibling in the family, Varya has assumed responsibility for managing the estate despite her spiritual abandonment of material goods. The position of power she holds is the one tangible claim to legitimacy in the family hierarchy. Her bulky keyring is a testament to her power in the home, but the legitimacy of that power is called into question. Varya repeatedly bullies Yepikhodov, who eventually lashes out at her:

Yepikhodov: *(Offended.)* Whether I work or whether I walk or whether I eat or whether I play billiards may be criticized only by my elders and betters who know what they’re talking about (Chekhov 2005, 359).

Yepikhodov insults Varya by challenging her authority. His insubordination is unthinkable and sends Varya into a rage. To challenge her authority is to challenge her very presence in the family. Yepikhodov has treated Varya as if she is a servant herself, as if she is someone who only holds the keys and has no claim to belonging within the family structure.

Though Yepikhodov’s insult is rough on Varya, he has a point. Varya is very little like her sister or her foster mother. Ranevskaya’s behavior has been transmitted more successfully onto Anya. While Varya is responsible and runs the estate when her mother is out of town, Anya is a ditzy teenager who follows closely in her mother’s footsteps. The clearest transmission appears in Act two, when both Ranevskaya and Anya say “there goes Yepikhodov” in a dreamy tone (Chekhov 2005, 348). Yepikhodov is a fixture in the home and his guitar is a symbol of all of the good times at home. Mother and daughter alike are thankful for his presence; he is a distraction from the bickering Trofimov and Lopakhin. To Varya, Yepikhodov is a symbol of idleness and waste. A bankrupt estate has no need for a
bookkeeper, yet he stays on the payroll and attends dances and the parties. He sits and plays his guitar or billiards.

Idleness and frivolous spending are poison to Varya. While she slaves at keeping the house in order, Ranevskaya gives money away to vagrants and vagabonds. Ranevskaya’s spending is a joke to the matriarch and to Anya. They coat their sorrows with humor, but their unwillingness to take stock of their situation infuriates Varya, and she lashes out, saying their predicament is no laughing matter. But everything is a joke to Anya. She guffaws with Trofimov that they should thank a vagrant for scaring off Varya. She finds it hilarious that Trofimov falls down the stairs. Anya has inherited her mother’s tendency to distance herself from emotional turmoil with humor and flight. The two spread their stresses out around the family unintentionally by withdrawing emotionally from their problems. This is par for the course for Ranevskaya, who fled so far as France to get away from stressors. In Anya’s last line in act three, she reveals her own tendency to fly from her problems. She proposes that Ranevskaya and she should go away to plant a new orchard and start a new life. This naïve proposition ignores the money it would take to accomplish such a move. Ranevskaya still manages to scrape up the money to return to Paris to live out the rest of her days.

The sibling dynamic extends to Ranevskaya and Gaev as well. Gaev takes control of the conversation when he is on stage, and is assertive with the servants. He is the more reasonable agent between the two siblings, while Ranevskaya is a listless spendthrift. When she weeps or reminisces about her drowned son, Gaev is there to comfort her, although he is embarrassed for her. He also philosophizes whereas Ranevskaya does not. As the eldest and the male presence in the family, Gaev is critical of Ranevskaya’s choice of husband. He recognizes that his sister is unstable and that she should not have married a commoner. Anya
is there when he makes these claims, and she hears. Gaev has already said how like her mother she is, so to hear him insult her must be painful.

Varya is also repulsed by Ranevskaya’s manservant, Yasha. The snooty young man carries on with other servants in the house, tramples decorum, and generally insults his superiors. He offends Gaev with his impertinent comments, saying that he can’t hear the old man’s voice without laughing. The distaste for Yasha is deeply rooted in other members of the family; so much so that Gaev even gives his sister an ultimatum: fire the servant or Gaev leaves. In addition to insulting his elders, Yasha also shows little regard for the institution of the family. When Yasha’s mother comes from the village to see him, she’s left sitting in the servant’s hall. Twice. The only member of the family who tolerates Yasha is Ranevskaya. Yasha has been tending her in Paris, and she has grown attached to him. In some way he must remind her of the child she lost and is serving as a kind of surrogate. His antics are similar to those of a rowdy boy, one whom she never had the chance to raise. Ironically enough, Varya is Ranevskaya’s best shot at a legacy even though she’s not even her real daughter. At this point in her life, Anya is still a girl and behaves in a juvenile fashion. Varya has a strong work ethic, manages servants, and is calculatingly rational. She would be a good spouse for the equally calculating Lopakhin.

The play’s reflective mood distances its narrative from the present to look into the past. Thematically, the narrative focuses on heritage and history, and the value that the characters ascribe to that history. The play is full of objective correlatives for the audience and the characters alike. The characters in The Cherry Orchard place special emphasis on their properties by imbuing those pieces with the essence (memory) of other family members. Throughout the play, characters reference their favored totems: trifles imbued with special
meaning. Anya’s broach is a totem of her mother. To break a saucer is good luck. Gaev even goes so far as to propose a birthday celebration for a bookcase. The most obvious symbol, the cherry orchard itself, is a symbol of the past and of change.

The transitionary symbolism is emphasized by many of these totems. While the family wants to stay on the estate and keep the orchard as much as they do, their connections are dying, and so are their reasons to stay. Their failing connections are illustrated by Nanny, who died while Ranevskaya was abroad in France. The recipe for the dried cherries has also been lost, and the fun of going on balloon rides in Paris is all but gone. These are attractive fantasies to distract the family from the pressing matter of the interest payments. Musicians are hired and guests are invited.

The family throws a party for their friends despite being on the verge of bankruptcy. Even the ball is a scene of transition:

FIRS: I’m none too well. In the old days we had generals, barons, admirals dancing at our parties, but now we send for the postal clerk and the stationmaster; yes, and they don’t come a-running. (Chekhov 2005, 357)

Firs is none too happy about the class of people attending the parties. With the loss of Ranevskaya’s wealth came the loss of the hob-knobbing aristocrats who used to populate her parlor. Ancestry and social class are always at the back of the characters’ minds throughout the course of the play.

Simeonov-Pishchik is a foil to Lopakhin. Lopakhin is a wealthy man who has come out of peasant stock; Pishchick is a broke landowner with an exceptional pedigree. Pischick talks about his heraldry in glowing terms, and jokingly says that if he were to take his father’s word for it, he’d be related to the horse Caligula made a senator. Pischick thinks only of money, although he is a landowner, he has no money. “A hungry dog believes only in
meat” (Chekhov 2005, 352). That might be all good and fine for the dogs, but what of the people? It depends on what they’re hungry for. Pishchick hungers for money. Lopakhin hungers for status.

In this vein, Ranevskaya thinks only of poor Grisha. She meditates on the orchard and its bittersweet associations with happier days. It is an enchanting force that captures Ranevskaya even when the most economical course is to sell the estate to save their money. When Ranevskaya first returns to the estate, she witnesses an apparition. She sees the ghost of her mother walking between the rows of trees. The magic power of rebirth emanating from the orchard gives life to the memory of Mama in the form of a deceptive sapling. Like the emotional associations that change space to place, the memories Ranevskaya and her daughters have made in the orchard have imbued the trees with a symbolic representation that is impossible to shake, even on the verge of bankruptcy.

The orchard is at the same time a symbol of death and of rebirth, blooming after the dreary winter season. Ranevskaya reflects on its symbolic potency, “if only I could lift off my chest and shoulders this heavy stone, if only I could forget my past!” (Chekhov 2005, 335). To forget her past is to forget her lineage and all of the sorrows that accompanied her landownership. Had she not had a river, perhaps her son would still be alive. Her trip to the French countryside was a fruitless effort to shed her dried leaves in exchange for the blooms of youth. Instead it is Lopakhin who gets a fresh start, and whose grandchildren will live on the Ranevskaya land.

To the family’s great annoyance, the capitalist Lopakhin pressures the family to lease the property out to vacation homes. Lopakhin assumes a similar dramatic function in *The Cherry Orchard* to Serebryakov in *Uncle Vanya*. His proposition to fell the orchard and build
up a source of revenue is indeed Ranevskaya's only course of action if she wishes to pay off the interest on the estate, but like Vanya, she is so emotionally attached to the property that it is more appealing to have the estate taken from her than it is to sell it.

The Cherry Orchard’s themes of love and loss are emphasized by the symbols Chekhov incorporated into his script, and by the power dynamics of siblings and landowners. More than in any of his other plays, he tackles the idea of pedigree and the effects of the previous generation on the present. Parents’ habits rub off on their children, interest mounts, and orchards die. The use of foster children emphasizes the linkage and adds a new dimension to the conflict. Their distance from their families of origin, as well as their incorporation into new homes, is emblematic of the flow of change over time. Like those children, Ranevskaya moves from place to place, following the wind from wherever the axe may fall.
EPILOGUE

The ease with which Bowen’s central tenets can be applied to Chekhov’s plays is a testament to Chekhov’s artistic prowess as well as his acute observation skills. As a physician, Chekhov would no doubt be well-acquainted with the formative processes that contribute to an individual’s development of self. His friends and colleagues recalled him as an observer more than a participant in their social gatherings, and remarked that at times he was worryingly quiet. It was no small achievement for him to turn his observations into classic plays, no less plays that can be analyzed according to an established psychological theory.

The nuanced relationships that Chekhov observed are uncannily realistic in their presentation on the stage. The characters’ psychological depth gives artists the opportunity to explore a seemingly bottomless well of interpretations. By taking a scientific approach to artistic creation, we can hope to breathe life into characters so specific in their execution that they become universal. Chekhov has laid the foundation for a piece of theatre that transcends the boundaries between performer and audience. The living nature of the theatre that relies on connection between these two bodies benefits from this level of specificity. Bowen’s family systems theory is one of many that can be applied in this fashion, but it is my contention that it is the prime entry point for those who wish to perpetuate the school of realistic theatre.
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