The Three Sisters

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANTON CHEKHOV

Anton Chekov was one of six children born to a grocer and his wife. Chekov's father was abusive and accumulated ruinous debts. After the family became impoverished, Anton both supported them and financed his own education by writing for periodicals. Though he trained as a doctor, his primary occupation became short-story writing, for which he won the Pushkin Prize in 1887, while only in his 20s. He was quoted as saying, "Medicine is my lawful wife and literature is my mistress. When I tire of one, I go and sleep with the other." He also conducted thousands of interviews of convicts and settlers on Sakhalin Island, in Russia's Far East, in 1890; these were published as *The Island of Sahkalin*, a powerful work calling for more humane treatment of convicts. Most of Chekov's plays were written during the last 15 years of his life, although early productions were disastrous. By the late 1890s, however, his plays were being produced by the Moscow Arts Theatre and became both commercially and critically successful. By this time in his life, Chekov was suffering greatly from tuberculosis and traveled in search of a healthier climate, building a villa in Yalta and ultimately dying in Badenweiler, Germany, with his wife, Olga, at his side. He was 44 years old.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The turn of the 20th century was a transitional period in Russian history. During the time of the play, Russia was at peace, militarily speaking (as seen in the Brigade's long, uneventful stay in the Prozorovs' town). Nicholas II had become Tsar in 1894 and sustained the autocratic policies of the Romanov dynasty, suppressing those who agitated for more democratic forms of governance. Under Nicholas, the massive Russian empire was divided into 50 provinces, which were subdivided into districts, all of which were governed by a complicated, 14-rank system of civil servants (in the play, for instance, Andrey Prozorov serves rather ineffectually on the local District Council). Life in the provinces was regarded as rather sleepy and culturally backward (which accounts for the sisters' constant desire to move back to rapidly modernizing Moscow). At this time, there was also a marked disparity between the lives of the upper classes—the aristocracy and provincial nobility—and the peasant and servant classes. Set in the last years before revolution began to shake the Empire, the play is filled with a sense of vague restlessness and waning cultural cohesion.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Three Sisters is one of Chekov's four dramatic masterpieces, alongside *The Seagull* (1894), *Uncle Vanya* (1899), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). Chekov is considered to be one of the foundational figures of the modern theater, alongside Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, whose late 19th century works, including *A Doll's House* and *An Enemy of the People*, are marked by a similar psychological realism. Finally, although written a generation before Chekov, Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* also explores the tensions and discontentments of provincial life during the waning decades of the Russian Empire.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Three Sisters*
- **When Written:** 1900
- **Where Written:** Russia
- **When Published:** 1901
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** A provincial Russian capital
- **Climax:** The departure of the army brigade; Tuzenbakh's and Solyony's offstage duel
- **Antagonist:** The passage of time

EXTRA CREDIT

Revolutionary Realism. The realism of Chekov's plays—the attempt to accurately express the way human beings speak and interact with one another—was revolutionary for the time, and it has remained a foundational principle in drama ever since.

Olga as Masha. When *The Three Sisters* premiered in January, 1901, the character of Masha was played by Olga Knipper, for whom Chekov had designed the role. Chekov and Knipper were married just a few months later, on May 25, 1901.

PLOT SUMMARY

On May 5th, the three Prozorov sisters sit in their drawing-room in a Russian provincial capital. The youngest, 20-year-old Irina, is celebrating her name-day, and the eldest, 28-year-old Olga, recalls their father's death one year ago today. In contrast to last year's snowy, sorrowful day, today's weather is sunny, and the sisters, especially Irina, feel hopeful. Olga and Irina both hope they will soon move back to their beloved hometown of Moscow.

Several soldiers and an elderly family friend, Chebutykin, come

to visit for the name-day celebration. One solider, Baron Tuzenbakh, shares Irina's idealization of labor, and they discuss their longing to work someday. Masha, the middle Prozorov sister, is about to leave the dull party when a new Lieutenant-Colonel, Vershinin, is introduced. He is a married, philosophically inclined man in his 40s, and he knew the sisters' parents in Moscow. The sisters introduce their brother, Andrey, and brag about his academic promise.

As Vershinin speculates about the future transformation of society, Masha abruptly decides she's staying for lunch. Not long after, Kulygin arrives and lavishes affection on his wife, Masha, who grumpily avoids him. As the others sit down to lunch, Irina confides in Tuzenbakh that Masha is unhappy with Kulygin. Tuzenbakh declares his love for Irina, but she doesn't reciprocate. Andrey's girlfriend, Natasha, arrives late and awkwardly dressed. When Chebutykin teases her at lunch, she runs out of the room. Andrey follows her, comforts her, and asks her to marry him.

Over a year later, Andrey and Natasha are married with a baby boy. They live in the sisters' house, and Natasha runs things while Olga and Irina are at work. Andrey is secretary of the Distinct Council but still dreams about his abandoned hope of becoming a professor. His only confidant is his elderly servant, Ferapont.

One evening in February, everyone is coming to the house for a Carnival party. Masha and Vershinin arrive together; they have begun an affair. Irina and Tuzenbakh also arrive together, since Tuzenbakh walks Irina home each day from her job at the Telegraph Office. Irina hates her job and can't wait to move to Moscow in June. Tuzenbakh and Vershinin discuss the meaning of life and happiness, Vershinin arguing that people must strive for eventual progress, even if they don't live to see it. When it becomes clear that Natasha has canceled the night's entertainment without consulting anyone, Andrey and Chebutykin go off to play cards, and Natasha sneaks off for a carriage ride with Protopopov, the head of the District Council.

A year later, a fire breaks out in the town, and the sisters and friends convene at the Prozorov house after a long night of trying to help the victims. Olga and Natasha have an argument about the Prozorov's elderly servant, Anfisa, whom Natasha insists is too useless to be kept around. Chebutykin comes in, terribly drunk and depressed at having caused the death of a patient the other day. He announces to everyone that Natasha is having an affair with Protopopov, though actually, the whole town knows this.

When their friends depart, the sisters discuss the shame of Andrey's gambling debts. Irina weeps that she, too, is unhappy in her new job in the Town Council, and she knows that they're never moving to Moscow. Olga suggests that she marry Tuzenbakh for pragmatic reasons, instead of waiting to meet her true love in Moscow. Masha confesses her love for Vershinin. Andrey comes in and makes a speech, trying to convince the sisters that he's happy with Natasha and in his District Council position, but he breaks down in tears, saying, "Dear sisters, don't believe me."

A little more than a year later, the brigade is preparing to transfer to Poland. Tuzenbakh has retired from the army for a job in a brick factory, and tomorrow he and Irina are getting married; Irina will then start a teaching job. Olga has become headmistress and is never at home anymore. Lonely, Irina has come to terms with the fact that she's destined not to live in Moscow and made the rational decision to marry Tuzenbakh and begin a new life.

Chebutykin tells Andrey and Masha that Solyony, a soldier who also loves Irina, has challenged Tuzenbakh to a duel. Andrey admits to Chebutykin that he's unhappy with Natasha, and Chebutykin encourages him to leave.

Tuzenbakh tenderly bids Irina goodbye; she doesn't know about the impending duel, but she weeps, sorry that she's unable to really love Tuzenbakh. Vershinin offers Olga some parting philosophy, promising that someday life will be "filled with light." He kisses Masha goodbye and leaves. Kulygin sees Masha's tears and lovingly forgives her for the affair, saying they'll resume life the way it was before.

There's the sound of a muffled shot in the distance, and soon Chebutykin comes out with the news that Tuzenbakh has been killed in the duel. The grieving sisters cling to one another. Masha says they must each try to start life anew. Irina says she will pour herself into her teaching work. Olga says that someday, those who come after them will experience joy, but that the meaning of their suffering is a mystery for now—"if we only knew!"

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Olga Prozorov – Olga is the eldest of the three Prozorov sisters, 28 at the beginning of the play. Olga takes a maternal role toward her sisters, Masha and Irina, and her brother, Andrey; she is caring, thoughtful, and diligent. She teaches at a girls' school (or Gymnasium), which is work that she finds stressful and exhausting; by the end of the play, she is appointed headmistress, though she never sought the position. Unlike her sisters, Olga is unmarried, but she desires marriage to a decent man, primarily as an escape from her thankless job. She also longs to return to her hometown of Moscow, which is a dream that never pans out. She and Kulygin get along well, and he has said that he might have happily married her if he hadn't met Masha—though he's not exactly happy with Masha, who has a poorly concealed affair with Vershinin, an old family friend, for much of the play. At the end of the play, Olga takes care of the family's elderly servant, Anfisa, sharing an apartment with her so that she'll no longer be mistreated by

Andrey's wife, Natasha.

Masha Prozorov – Masha, 23, is the middle Prozorov sister, between Olga and Irina. Less emotionally demonstrative than her sisters, Masha is bookish and musically talented. At 18, she married Kulygin, thinking him intimidatingly clever; within a few years, however, she realizes he isn't as smart as she thought, and she grows increasingly discontent in her marriage. Masha quickly becomes attracted to Vershinin because of his intellectual conversation, and they begin an affair that spans several years. The affair is somewhat of an open secret—even though she eventually confides in her sisters about her love for Vershinin, their lack of surprise suggests that they've known about the arrangement for a long time. After Vershinin leaves, Kulygin forgives her and recommits to their marriage, though Masha remains unsatisfied and bereft.

Irina Prozorov – Irina is the youngest Prozorov sister, after Olga and Masha; she is 20 at the start of the play. Irina is the most lively and cheerful sister at first, taking childish delight in gifts brought to her by her many suitors and friends, like Fedotik and Chebutykin, who are especially devoted to her. Irina also idealizes work, longing for a real job, and dreams of returning to Moscow as the solution to all her problems. Later, she is dissatisfied with her tedious jobs in the Telegraph Office and Town Council, whereupon she finally agrees to marry Baron Tuzenbakh, although she doesn't really love him. In fact, she grieves the fact that, although she's always dreamed of love, she has never felt capable of truly loving another person. She later gets her teaching certificate, but on the eve of her marriage and new life with Tuzenbakh, Tuzenbakh is killed in a duel with Solyony, who also loves Irina. After this, she vows to throw herself into her teaching work in order to find meaning in life.

Andrey Prozorov – Andrey is the lone brother of Olga, Masha, and Irina, who idolize him. A promising academic in his youth, he gives up his dream of becoming a professor at Moscow University after marrying Natasha. Soon, his ambition shrinks to becoming a member of the District Council, whose head, Protopopov, is having an affair with Natasha, making Andrey a town laughingstock. In his unhappiness with his dead-end bureaucratic job and loveless marriage, Andrey accumulates major gambling debts and even mortgages the Prozorov house without his sisters' permission. The sisters are heartbroken that he has become "a trivial man."

Aleksandr Ignatyevich Vershinin – Vershinin is a new commander in the army brigade. He grew up in Moscow and served in the Prozorovs' father's brigade there; he also remembers their mother and met the sisters when they were little girls (they called him "The Lovesick Major" at the time). He is 42 at the start of the play. Vershinin loves to "philosophize" about the meaning of life and the progress of society, especially in conversation with Tuzenbakh. He holds to an optimistic view of human progress and potential. He can come across as pompous and aloof at times. Though Vershinin is married—he has an unhappy wife who has made frequent suicide attempts, and two daughters—he quickly begins a passionate affair with Masha which lasts until the brigade moves to Poland at the end of the play.

Baron Nikolay Lvovich Tuzenbakh – Tuzenbakh is an army lieutenant and frequent guest at the Prozorov house. At the start of the play, he's not yet 30. A tender-hearted and noble man, he is in love with Irina and shares with her an idealistic view of the importance of work. He also enjoys stimulating philosophical discussions with Vershinin. Though Irina doesn't reciprocate his love, she agrees to marry him, and he gets a job at a brick factory so they can begin a new life together. However, after he and Solyony quarrel over Irina, he agrees to a duel and is killed by his rival.

Kulygin – Kulygin is Masha's good-natured, loyal, unflappable husband. A high school teacher, he seemed intimidatingly clever when Masha first married him, but after a few years of marriage, he no longer seems very intelligent to her. Though he is aware of Masha's affair with Vershinin all along, he tenderly forgives her and accepts her back after Vershinin leaves. Though he loves Masha unwaveringly, he once comments that he might have just as happily married Olga, with whom he has a warm friendship. He often jokes around to bring comic relief.

Ivan Romanych Chebutykin – Chebutykin is a physician and an old Prozorov family friend who is especially devoted to Irina. He is 60 at the beginning of the play and is usually seen reading a newspaper or making comical, tangential asides. He also sometimes drinks to excess. Unmarried and lonely, he's a failure professionally and has forgotten or faked much of what he once knew as a young doctor. Halfway through the play, this results in a patient's death and an existential breakdown for Chebutykin. At this point, he starts saying, "What can it matter?" more and more, becoming somewhat disconnected from reality.

Solyony – Solyony is an army captain and frequent Prozorov guest. Shy in company, he has a tendency to talk nonsense, make crude comments, and pick quarrels. He loves Irina, but she feels uncomfortable around him and rejects him. At the end of the play, after a quarrel about Irina, Solyony challenges Tuzenbakh to a duel and kills him.

Natasha – Natasha is Andrey's love interest and, later, his wife. At the beginning of the play, her social awkwardness and backwards fashion elicit the Prozorov sisters' scorn. However, soon after marrying Andrey, she essentially takes over the Prozorov house, dominates Andrey, and tyrannizes the servants. She also has an affair with Protopopov, making Andrey a town laughingstock. She is devoted to her children, Bobik and Sofochka, but seemingly cares for no one else.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Anfisa – Around 80 years old, she's been a servant with the Prozorov household for 30 years. When Natasha mistreats her, Olga allows her to live in her apartment for free, making her one of the happiest characters in the play.

Ferapont – Ferapont is Andrey's elderly, hard-of-hearing servant.

Protopopov – Though he doesn't appear in the play, Protopopov is the head of the District Council, on which Andrey serves. He also has a longstanding affair with Andrey's wife, Natasha.

Fedotik – Fedotik, an army lieutenant, is a frequent Prozorov guest, along with Rode. He is especially devoted to Irina, often bringing her gifts. He also loves to take photographs.

Rode – An army lieutenant, Rode often accompanies his friend Fedotik to the Prozorov house.

Bobik – Andrey's and Natasha's baby son.

Sofochka – Andrey's and Natasha's baby daughter.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CHANGE, SUFFERING, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

In *The Three Sisters*, Russian sisters Olga, Masha, and Irina Prozorov wrestle with the meaning of change and suffering in human life. The year after their father's death, they befriend Vershinin, an intellectually inclined army officer, whose optimism contrasts with the resignation of Chebutykin, a lifelong family friend and failed physician. Whereas Vershinin takes an abstract, progressive approach to the meaning of life, Chebutykin despairs over his personal failures, and the sisters finally reject both of these approaches, yet they cannot assign any definite meaning to their own suffering. By presenting these individuals' extreme interpretations of what the meaning of life could be, and concluding the play with the sisters' own inability to find an answer to this question, Chekov argues that it's impossible to know the meaning of life, yet people must face this uncertainty with as much courage as they can.

Throughout the play, Vershinin repeatedly looks at suffering, change, and life's meaning in an abstract, albeit optimistic, way. When Vershinin discusses the nature of change with fellow officer Tuzenbakh, he argues that present concerns are only relative: "In two or three hundred or even a thousand years—the point isn't in the precise period—a new, happy life will dawn. Of course we won't take part in that life, but we are living for it now, working, yes, suffering, we are creating that life—and in this alone lies the goal of our existence and, if you like, our happiness." In other words, progress is an inevitable force, and it's one's responsibility to participate in it through one's actions now, even if one can't foresee the fruits of his or her work. People must reconcile themselves to their sufferings by believing that they're "creating" something for the benefit of the future.

After a fire breaks out in the town, Vershinin is moved to "philosophize" once again: "And when my [daughters] were standing at the door in just their night clothes and the street was red from the fire and the noise was terrifying, I thought that it must have been something like this many years ago when an enemy attacked suddenly and pillaged and burned [...] And when just a bit more time goes by, say two or three hundred years, people will look at our life today both with alarm and with mockery [...]" An event like a fire would seem to encourage personal reflection, but Vershinin responds by distancing himself from the terror, reflecting instead on the distant past and the unknown future. Even given the horrible event of the fire and Vershinin's fear for his daughters, he optimistically believes that people in "two or three hundred years" will be more enlightened and be living better lives, and thus view humanity's current trivial problems with "mockery." This attitude suggests that it is useless to resist change or get caught up in one's suffering in the present, since these things will inevitably pass like everything else in history. Vershinin seems to be suggesting, then, that one can subjectively determine the meaning of life for themselves by choosing the perspective through which they view life's hardships.

By contrast, in the middle of the play, the effects of time and change are presented as destructive and are met with despair. In Act Three, a distraught Chebutykin is very drunk. He's upset because he no longer remembers his medical skills, and a woman died under his care: "Twenty-five years ago I knew a few things but now I remember nothing. [...] Perhaps I am not a man but only look as if I have arms and legs and a head; perhaps I don't exist at all but only think that I walk, eat, sleep. [*Weeps.*] Oh if only I could just not exist!" Chebutykin is genuinely crushed by his failure, and it sends him into an existential crisis. Unlike the younger Vershinin's philosophizing in the previous act, Chebutykin must reckon with the devastating, immediate effects of change—effects which can potentially undermine one's sense of self and make life's suffering seem utterly meaningless.

At the end of the play, the effects of time and change are met with a mixture of optimism and despair, and ultimately settle on an attitude of grim determination and uncertainty as to suffering's purpose. In Act Four, when Vershinin is about to remove to Poland with his army brigade and faces imminent separation from his mistress, Masha, he again resorts to

abstract philosophizing: "Life is a heavy load. Many of us find it blank, hopeless, but still one has to admit it is becoming brighter and easier every day, and one can see the time is not far off when it will be filled with light. [...] all that [violence] has now had its day, and left behind a huge empty space, which for the time being there is nothing to fill; humanity is passionately seeking that and of course will find it." As before, Vershinin anticipates the dawn of a better age when humanity will put itself to more enlightened use. In contrast to his earlier optimism, however, he now admits that life seems "hopeless" and that people are struggling to fill a void. In the end, his vision of humanity's "progressive" future appears to serve little purpose in the present—it doesn't give meaning to people's burdens, but only placates people's consciences as they go about their difficult lives.

At the conclusion of the play, the three sisters are left grappling with the apparent meaninglessness of their sufferings: Olga has no prospects, Masha's lover has left, and Irina's fiancé has been killed in a duel. Olga says that "Time will pass and we will be gone forever [...] but for those who live after us our sufferings will become joy—happiness and peace will come down on earth, and there'll be a kind word and a blessing for those who are living now. [...] The band is playing so gaily, so joyfully, and I think in a little while we too will know why we live, why we suffer...If we only knew, if we only knew!" At first, Olga tries to echo Vershinin's forward-looking optimism, but it quickly rings hollow. The army band's serenade seems a mocking reminder that actually, the sisters don't know why they must suffer, and they can only struggle on and endure the lifespans allotted to them.

The Three Sisters' philosophy of life could be viewed as either cautiously optimistic or grimly cynical. Chekov's larger point seems to be that, while people can speculate about the purposes of life, neither unbridled confidence in the future nor wallowing in one's certain misery is warranted, because people can't know what's coming or why. This message likely resonated with Chekov's audience at the turn of the 20th century, as they tried to cope with the era's rapid pace of social, political, and technological change.

HAPPINESS, LONGING, AND DISAPPOINTMENT

The Three Sisters spans several years in the Prozorov siblings' lives, during which each of them pines for a future that seems unattainable. For the sisters, that future looks like a return to their beloved hometown of Moscow; for their brother, Andrey, it's an escape from the mediocre work and marriage into which he's drifted. By showing his characters entangling themselves in reminiscence and pining, Chekov argues that as long as people are fixated on what they do not have, happiness will be constantly beyond their reach.

For the three sisters, Moscow represents the unattainable things that they want out of life. In Act One, Olga reminisces about leaving Moscow 11 years ago: "I remember very well, at the beginning of May just now in Moscow everything is already in bloom, it's warm, everything's bathed in sunshine. [...] This morning I woke up, I saw a mass of light, I saw the spring, and joy welled up in my soul and I had a huge longing for home." More than a decade later, Moscow is still "home" to Olga, and beauty in her provincial residence leads not to contentment where she is, but a melancholy desire for someplace else. A year later, the sisters' plans to move back to Moscow have not yet come to fruition. Irina despises her unpoetic work in the Telegraph Office: "What I wanted, what I dreamed of, it definitely does not have." In response to her discontentment at work, Irina obsesses over Moscow: "I dream of Moscow every night. I'm just like a madwoman [...] We're moving there in June." Presumably, Irina could find work that *does* offer "what [she] dreamed of." Instead, she believes that moving to Moscow is the only way to fulfill all her suppressed desires.

Later, when Masha claims that if she were in Moscow, she wouldn't mind the poor weather, Vershinin argues that happiness doesn't really exist—only the *desire* for it is real. He tells a story about an imprisoned French minister who pined for natural beauty: "Of course, now he's been released, he doesn't notice the **birds**, just as before. In the same way you too won't notice Moscow when you're living there. We have no happiness and it doesn't exist, we only desire it." In other words, living in Moscow wouldn't really fulfill the sisters' longings—when they obtained the object of their desire, they'd just transfer their longings elsewhere; it's human nature. Eventually, Olga talks Irina into marrying Baron Tuzenbakh because he's "so decent and honest," even though Irina does not love him. Irina admits that "I've been waiting [to marry]. We were going to move to Moscow and there I would meet my true love, I dreamed of him, I loved him...But all that's turned out to be nonsense." Even after Irina concedes to marry Tuzenbakh, she cries to her sister, "only let us go to Moscow! I beg you, let us go! There's nothing better than Moscow in the whole world!" By this time, Irina knows that the mythical move to Moscow isn't happening; Moscow has become a symbol of contentment in her mind, not primarily a real place. Having agreed to a pragmatic marriage, and assuming that happiness is therefore lost, she expresses her idealistic yearning one final time. For each of the sisters, then, the dream of Moscow isn't so much about the city itself; it's a stand-in for their own compromises and disappointments.

The sisters' brother, Andrey, showed great academic promise in his youth, but his adulthood is a series of disappointments, and he obsesses over his past achievements and an ill-defined future. Andrey tells his servant, "Dear old Ferapont, how strangely life changes, how it deceives us! Today out of boredom and having nothing to do I picked up this book—my old university lectures [...] To be a member of the local District

Council, when every night I dream that I am a professor at Moscow University, a famous scholar who is Russia's pride!" Bored and at loose ends in his actual occupation, Andrey is obsessed with his past. Andrey later confronts his sisters, telling them he knows they don't respect the ways in which he's settled—they don't like his wife, Natasha, and think his work on the District Council is beneath him. He claims that he considers his job "just as hallowed and elevated as an academic one," and he repeatedly describes his overbearing wife as "an exceptional, honest human being." But his rant is quickly followed by agitation and weeping, and he tells the women, "My darling sisters [...] don't believe me, don't believe me..." No matter how Andrey tries to portray his circumstances, his unhappiness isn't far beneath the surface.

Yet Andrey, too, clings to the hope of some vague future: "The present is repulsive, but when I think of the future how wonderful things become! There's a feeling of ease, of space; and in the distance there's a glimmer of the dawn, I see freedom, I see myself and my children freed from idleness [...], from goose with cabbage, from a nap after dinner, from the ignoble life." Like his sisters, Andrey longs for a more engaging life than that of provincial leisure and conventionality; but it's just a "glimmer," with no more substance than the sisters' dreams of Moscow.

Strikingly, by the end of the play, the only character who seems to find real happiness is the elderly servant Anfisa. When Olga houses Anfisa in her school apartment and provides for her needs, Anfisa marvels, "A big apartment, nothing to pay, and I have a little room all to myself and a bed. All free. I wake up at night—and O Lord, Mother of God, there is no human being happier than me!" Anfisa's happy ending supports Chekov's argument that gratitude is the key to contentment—and it also suggests that Chekov saw the provincial noble class, like the Prozorov siblings, as less capable of such.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

In *The Three Sisters*, each of the Prozorov sisters offers a different perspective on the relationship between love and marriage. For Olga, marriage is more practical than romantic; for Masha, love and marriage are quickly decoupled as she outgrows the husband of her youth; and for Irina, romantic love doesn't survive the death of her girlish idealism. Through the sisters' very different experiences, Chekov suggests that love is as varied as human beings, and that love and marriage do not necessarily go together—in fact, they seldom do.

For Olga, the idea of marriage is a practical matter, not a romantic quest for a soulmate. Early in the play, Olga complains about her job by saying, "Life is good, everything in life comes from God, but I think it would be better if I were to marry and be sitting at home all day. [...] I'd love my husband." Significantly, the love she imagines sharing with her husband is an afterthought—the real attraction of marriage is relief from unrewarding toil. After Irina's emotional breakdown due to a series of unfulfilling jobs, Olga urges her sister to marry Baron Tuzenbakh, since after all "we marry not for love but just to do our duty," and Olga herself would marry whomever proposed to her, "provided only he was a decent man." This is further proof of Olga's pragmatic outlook on marriage (or at least the outlook for which she's settled)—marriage is merely a means of fulfilling one's conventional duty.

On the night of the fire, Kulygin (Masha's husband, to whom she is ill-matched) tells Olga that if it hadn't been for Masha, he would have been drawn to her instead: "I'm exhausted. My dear little Olga...I often think, if there hadn't been Masha, I would have married you, Olechka. You're very nice...I'm worn out." It's a passing remark under emotionally strained circumstances, and it's no passionate declaration. However, in keeping with Olga's own pragmatism, it suggests that for one reason or another, people simply miss out on spouses to whom they might have been more contentedly matched. In other words, marriage doesn't have to be a mating of perfectly matched souls in order to be worthwhile and satisfying.

Masha, the only sister who is actually married during the play, is a passionate lover, but an unfaithful and loveless wife. Masha tells Vershinin, "I was married when I was eighteen and I was frightened of [Kulygin] because he was a schoolmaster and I'd barely finished school. He seemed to me then terribly learned, clever and important. But now, unfortunately, it's rather different." Implicitly, Masha married because she wanted someone whose intelligence she could respect; but when her own intellect matured, she felt she had outgrown Kulygin, and now life is "cursed, intolerable." Her desire for intellectual companionship leads her to pursue an affair with Vershinin, suggesting that when people view marriage as a selfish means to an end, the marital bond is easily undermined by individuals' growth and change.

Kulygin continues to love Masha even after she has begun her affair and is coldly unresponsive to his affections. When Vershinin is about to leave with his army brigade, he kisses Masha goodbye. Her husband, Kulygin, walks in on the kiss, and though he's embarrassed, he accepts Masha as his wife and doesn't reproach her infidelity: "It doesn't matter, let her cry, just let her...My sweet Masha, my good Masha...You are my wife and I am happy in spite of everything ... [...] We will begin to live again as we used to and I won't say one word to you, not a hint..." Amazingly, Kulygin recommits himself to Masha even as she's weeping for another man. Kulygin's and Masha's broken marriage shows that even if one spouse passionately loves the other, a marriage is bound to be dysfunctional if that love is not reciprocated.

For Irina, love is an expression of a deeper idealism about the world. When her perfect scenario of finding true love doesn't work out as planned, then, she ends up compromising for a

marriage that is sensible, practical, and devoid of passion. Irina's main suitor is Baron Tuzenbakh, with whom she has often conversed about the hypothetical joys of a working life. He tells her: "I look at you now and I remember how, long ago, on your name-day, you were talking of the joys of work, full of enthusiasm and cheer…And what a vision I had then of a happy life! Where has it gone? […] If only I were allowed to give up my life for you!" For Irina, daydreams of marriage were tied up with her idealism about work. When the latter faded, so did her appetite for the former.

When pragmatic Olga encourages Irina to marry Tuzenbakh anyway, Irina replies that she'd dreamed of finding and marrying her true love in Moscow; but now that the dream of Moscow has "turned out to be nonsense," Irina contents herself with a sensible marriage to a man she doesn't love. For her, the ideal marriage fits in to a broader dream, and when the dream dies, there's no longer any sense in waiting to fall in love. Later, on the eve of their marriage, Tuzenbakh tells Irina that his dreams will come true, and she will be happy. He knows she doesn't love him, though. Irina weeps, "Oh, how I dreamed of love, for a long time how I dreamed, day and night, but my soul was like an expensive piano, shut and its key lost." That is, Irina's ability to love lies dormant and inaccessible. Again, because love and idealism are so connected for her, the death of her dreams makes love an impossibility.

There are no happy marriages among the three Prozorov sisters. At the end of the play, it looks as if Irina and Tuzenbakh might be able to find happiness together, despite the unevenness of their feelings for each other. However, at the last moment, Tuzenbakh is killed in a duel by another of Irina's suitors. This leaves the long-term viability of the union ambiguous, and further confirms Chekov's point that a fully happy marriage, much less a romantically successful one, is exceedingly difficult to find.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BIRDS

In *The Three Sisters*, birds symbolize hope, happiness, and freedom and how these things are often just out of reach. At her name-day celebration at the beginning of the play, an optimistic Irina says that she is so happy it's as if "great white birds were flying in the wide blue sky," suggesting that she feels that her whole life is ahead of her. However, in a later philosophical discussion, Vershinin uses a prisoner's longing to see birds, a longing he abandons upon release, as an example of human beings' perpetual desire for what they can't have. As she anticipates her final goodbye to Vershinin, Masha notices the "dear […] happy birds" in the sky, in contrast to her heartbreak and the stagnating life she anticipates. Given her bleak circumstances, Masha's acknowledgement of the birds recalls Vershinin's earlier comment, showing that she feels imprisoned by fate, unable to grasp true happiness ever again.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Plays* published in 2002.

Act One Quotes

OLGA: […] Every day I teach at the Gymnasium and afterwards I give lessons until evening, and so I've got a constant headache and my thoughts are those of an old woman. And indeed, during these four years I've been teaching at the Gymnasium, I've felt my strength and my youth draining from me every day, drop by drop. And one single thought grows stronger and stronger…

IRINA: To leave for Moscow. To sell the house, finish with everything here and—to Moscow…

OLGA: Yes! To Moscow, soon.

Related Characters: Irina Prozorov, Olga Prozorov (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

The beginning of *The Three Sisters* is marked by relative hopefulness. Irina is celebrating her name-day, and the sisters are no longer mourning the death of their father, which took place one year ago. However, even here, the sisters are unable to accept their circumstances with contentment. In describing her desire to be free of her exhausting teaching job, Olga defines Moscow—the sisters' birthplace—as liberation from their lives in a provincial backwater. Throughout the play, "To Moscow!" becomes a refrain of hope for a more stimulating and successful life, far away from their present situation. While it makes sense that well-educated young women would pine for their more cosmopolitan hometown, Chekov also makes a larger point about people's constant longing for what they don't have. Most of the play's characters treasure a figurative "Moscow" that always looks more appealing than their everyday obligations—and even attaining "Moscow" doesn't

always fulfill its promise, leading to ever vaguer, more distant dreams. Chekov suggests that the cultured classes in late Imperial Russia suffered from this ennui more than most.

IRINA: Nikolay Lvovich, don't talk to me about love.

TUZENBAKH [*not listening*]: I have a passionate thirst for life, for the struggle, for work, and that thirst has merged in my soul with my love for you, Irina, and as if it were all planned, you are beautiful and life seems to me so beautiful. What are you thinking about?

IRINA: You say life is beautiful. Yes, but what if it only seems so! For us three sisters life has not yet been beautiful, it has choked us like a weed... My tears are streaming.

Related Characters: Irina Prozorov, Baron Nikolay Lvovich Tuzenbakh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the play, most of the Prozorov sisters' social world consists of an army brigade that's stationed in their provincial capital, and several of these young soldiers are in love with Irina. The most persistent of these is Baron Tuzenbakh, who bonds with Irina over their common privileged upbringing and their idealization of work as the key to greater satisfaction in life. In a way, Irina is Tuzenbakh's version of "Moscow"—a distant, unattainable longing, combined with his desire to break free of upper-class constraints and test himself in real struggle. Throughout the play, Irina resists Tuzenbakh's affections and is never able to reciprocate them, although she eventually concedes to marry him. Though Irina's dramatic, tearful response to Tuzenbakh shows her immaturity, it also suggests that even she doubts their shared idealism ("what if it only seems so!") and wonders if they are both striving for something that will never materialize. Again, Chekov portrays the restlessness of a cultured class that has only experienced peace and prosperity, yet longs for an ill-defined alternative.

Act Two Quotes

ANDREY: [...] Dear old Ferapont, how strangely life changes, how it deceives us! Today out of boredom and having nothing to do I picked up this book—my old university lectures, and I began to laugh... My God, I'm the secretary of the District Council—and Protopopov's the chairman—and the most I can hope for is to be a member of that Council! To be a member of the local District Council, when every night I dream that I am a professor at Moscow University, a famous scholar who is Russia's pride!

Related Characters: Andrey Prozorov (speaker), Ferapont

Related Themes:

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Andrey Prozorov is one of the most tragic figures in *The Three Sisters*. At the beginning of the play, the sisters show him off as their future famous "scholar," but less than two years later, he has drifted into a dead-end position in Russia's massive governmental bureaucracy, married to an unpleasant woman who's already having an affair with his superior. Like his sisters, Andrey dreams of Moscow, but unlike the girls' vague longing for an indefinable future, Andrey looks back at his past academic achievements and knows his shot at becoming "Russia's pride" is probably already lost. Chekov portrays Andrey as a pitiable fool, almost a stock figure of the undistinguished bureaucrat. Though Andrey describes his lost dream in terms of life "deceiving" him, Andrey seldom displays any initiative in the play and mostly drifts from one numbing activity to the next (especially gambling). The sad figure of Andrey is Chekov's commentary on the unremarkable lives characteristic of the entitled gentry.

IRINA: I must find another job, this one doesn't suit me. What I wanted, what I dreamed of, it definitely does not have. It's work with no poetry, no thinking [...] [Andrey] lost two weeks ago, he lost at the beginning of December. I wish he'd be quick and lose everything, perhaps we'd leave this town. Lord God in heaven, I dream of Moscow every night. I'm just like a madwoman. [*Laughs*] We're moving there in June, and until June there's still... February, March, April, May... almost half a year!

Related Characters: Irina Prozorov (speaker), Andrey Prozorov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

In Act Two, Irina has attempted to fulfill her longing for "work" by taking a job at the Telegraph Office. Already, however, the job is falling short of her idealistic expectations for the rewards of labor—it's not "poetic" or intellectual enough for her. This serves as ironic commentary on the idealism of the turn-of-the-century intelligentsia who sought existential meaning in work, rather than seeing it as primarily a means of support. Most work, Chekov suggests, isn't nearly romantic enough to meet such lofty sensibilities. After this complaint, Irina is quick to revive her longing for Moscow—although she still believes a move there is imminent, Moscow sounds more than ever like a vague stand-in for fulfillment and happiness. The fact that Irina hopes Andrey's gambling debts will force a quicker move shows how naïve she is on this count—Irina doesn't understand what a real financial crisis involves, any more than she really understands "work."

TUZENBAKH: [...] After us men will fly in hot-air balloons, and jackets will change, and they'll discover, maybe, a sixth sense and develop it, but life will remain the same, difficult and full of secrets and happy. And in a thousand years man will still sigh, 'Ah, life is hard!'—and at the same time he will, as now, be afraid and not want to die.

VERSHININ [*after some thought*]: What shall I say to you? I think that everything on earth must gradually change, and already is changing before our eyes. In two or three hundred or even a thousand years—the point isn't in the precise period—a new, happy life will dawn. Of course we won't take part in that life, but we are living for it now, working, yes, suffering, we are creating that life—and in this alone lies the goal of our existence and, if you like, our happiness.

Related Characters: Aleksandr Ignatyevich Vershinin, Baron Nikolay Lvovich Tuzenbakh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the play, Tuzenbakh and Vershinin often engage in "philosophical" conversation about the meaning of life and the nature of change. In this exchange, they are whiling away a dull party by speculating about human life a couple of hundred years from their day. Tuzenbakh's view is that human nature will stay more or less constant, no matter how much technology, science, and other fields advance; people will still be conflicted about life, finding it difficult yet precious.

Vershinin, on the other hand, holds that life is transforming so dramatically that, in time, human existence *will* be fundamentally different, and better. All present human efforts, he claims, must be understood in that light. Vershinin's view is likely shaped by 19th-century Darwinian views of evolution, feeding into a persistent optimism about human potential and societal change. While Chekov does not necessarily argue that Vershinin's view is wrong, he does question the utility of this outlook. By the end of the play, most characters' lives are significantly *less* happy, and many of them conclude that it's impossible to know the reasons for change and suffering for sure—and even if they could, it's not clear that such knowledge would lighten their burdens. Chekov suggests that such philosophical debates, then, are little better than trivial party games for those with the leisure to indulge in them.

VERSHININ: The other day I was reading the diary of a French minister, written in prison. The minister had been sent there over the Panama affair. With what delight, with what rapture he talks about the birds he sees from his prison window and which he never noticed before when he was a minister. Of course, now he's been released, he doesn't notice the birds, just as before. In the same way you too won't notice Moscow when you're living there. We have no happiness and it doesn't exist, we only desire it.

Related Characters: Aleksandr Ignatyevich Vershinin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

Just before Vershinin's anecdote, Masha mentions the tiresome winter weather and asserts that, if she were in Moscow, she would never complain about the weather. In turn, Vershinin argues that Masha makes a fundamentally human mistake. The diary he cites is a work titled

Impressions cellulaires, published in 1898 by French Minister of Public Works Charles Baihaut, who was jailed for accepting bribes related to the construction of the Panama Canal. Vershinin argues that, like Baihaut, people tend to become obsessed with what they do not have. Then, once they're free to enjoy those things, they no longer appreciate them. Thus, longing has greater reality than happiness itself—happiness is always just over the horizon. This is Chekov's comment on the sisters' yearning for Moscow, as well as for human longing in general—to some degree, people can never truly be happy. In this connection, the symbol of birds recurs a few times in the play—Masha sees them again at the end of Act Four and covets their apparently genuine happiness.

Act Three Quotes

CHEBUTYKIN: Last Wednesday I had a patient at Zasyp, a woman—she died and it's my fault that she died. Yes… Twenty-five years ago I knew a few things but now I remember nothing. Nothing. Perhaps I am not a man but only look as if I have arms and legs and a head; perhaps I don't exist at all but only think that I walk, eat, sleep. [*Weeps.*] Oh if only I could just not exist! [*Stops weeping; gloomily*] Devil knows… A couple of days ago they were chatting in the Club; talking about Shakespeare, Voltaire… I haven't read them, haven't read them at all, but I tried to look as if I had. And the others did what I did. How cheap! How low! And I remembered the woman I murdered on Wednesday… and I remembered everything, and I felt I was morally deformed, vile, loathsome… I went off and hit the bottle…

Related Characters: Ivan Romanych Chebutykin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

In Act Three, Chekov allows several characters' simmering internal tensions to boil over, beginning with the Prozorovs' old family friend, Chebutykin. In the first two acts, Chebutykin was a buffoonish, lovable figure who sometimes drank to excess and made offhand remarks about the pointlessness of life. Now it's clear why: he sees himself as a worthless failure and a fake—and, worse than that, a murderer and "deformed."

Chekov uses Chebutykin's dark revelation as a turning-point in the development of other characters, too, like the start of an emotional avalanche. From now on, others, especially the Prozorov siblings, begin to speak more honestly to each other about their own unhappiness and failures, acknowledging that their pretending isn't getting them anywhere in life. Going forward, the conflict focuses on how characters respond to their failures. Chebutykin is an example of responding to failure by losing oneself in alcohol and questioning the existence of reality. Though other characters react in more outwardly productive ways—by philosophizing or setting new goals, for instance—Chekov leaves it an open question whether such responses are actual truer to the nature of reality.

OLGA: Darling, I tell you as a sister, as a friend, if you want my advice, marry the Baron!

[IRINA is crying quietly.]

I know you respect him and think highly of him… True, he's not good-looking, but he's so decent and honest… After all, we marry not for love but just to do our duty. At any rate that's what I think, and I would marry without being in love. I would accept whoever proposed, provided only he was a decent man. I would even marry someone old…

IRINA: I've been waiting. We were going to move to Moscow and there I would meet my true love, I dreamed of him, I loved him… But all that's turned out to be nonsense, all nonsense…

Related Characters: Irina Prozorov, Olga Prozorov (speaker), Baron Nikolay Lvovich Tuzenbakh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

Act Three's fire leads to a series of self-revelations, among them Irina's recognition that a move to Moscow will never happen and that she feels hopeless in life. In response, Olga urges her to marry the hapless Baron who's faithfully followed her around for years. Their exchange shows the difference between the two sisters' views of love and marriage. Olga believes that marriage is fundamentally a pragmatic, dutiful act; she could have been happy with any decent man who could relieve her of her unrewarding work obligations. Irina is much more romantic, and in fact, she relegated true love to the ill-defined future in Moscow, where all her dreams would fall into place. In a way, though, both sisters idealize marriage—whether romantic or not, for both of them it's an escape from the disappointments of her current life, and it doesn't have much to do with the object of one's affections. In the end, neither one of them achieves

the marriage she seeks—an implied critique of marriage as a means to an end, rather than a bond of mutual affection.

Act Four Quotes

IRINA: [...] Nikolay, why are you so distracted today?

[*A pause.*]

What happened yesterday by the theatre?

TUZENBAKH [*making an impatient movement*]: I'll be back in an hour and be with you again. [*Kissing her hands.*] My beloved... [*Looking into her face.*] It's already five years since I came to love you and I still can't get accustomed to it, and you seem to me more and more beautiful. [...] Tomorrow I will take you away, we will work, we'll be rich, my dreams will come true. You will be happy. There's just one thing, only one—you don't love me!

IRINA: It's not in my power! I will be your wife, true and obedient, but love—no, what can I do! [*Weeps.*] I've never loved once in my life. Oh, how I dreamed of love, for a long time how I dreamed, day and night, but my soul was like an expensive piano, shut and its key lost.

Related Characters: Baron Nikolay Lvovich Tuzenbakh, Irina Prozorov (speaker), Solyony

Related Themes:

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

In Act Four, Irina has agreed to marry Tuzenbakh and is preparing to embark on a new life with him. Unbeknownst to her, however, Solyony, a soldier whose love she'd rejected years ago, has followed through on his threat to fight any rival for her love, and his duel with Tuzenbakh is now imminent. This tender scene highlights the differences between their experiences of love. Tuzenbakh loves Irina so much that he's willing to risk death for her sake, knowing that she doesn't feel the same way about him; Irina, however, feels unable to love at all—as if "love" has been an abstraction for so long that her ability to actively love is perpetually out of reach. Where Tuzenbakh's affection is intimately personal—he gazes into her face and marvels at her beauty as much as he did five years ago—Irina's is a "dream" she's never put into practice. Part of the tragedy of the scene is the implication that Irina *could* love Tuzenbakh, if only she would look at reality instead of at her dreams. Like her longing for Moscow, the dream of "love" is a trap that constantly holds her back from real happiness.

ANDREY: Oh where is it now, where has my past gone, the time when I was young, merry, clever, when I had fine thoughts, fine dreams, when my present and my future were lit up by hope? [...] [People] just eat, drink, sleep, then they die [...] and in order not to be dulled by boredom, they diversify their life with vile gossip, vodka, cards, law suits, and the wives deceive their husbands and the husbands lie, pretend they see nothing and hear nothing, and an irremediably coarse influence weighs down on the children [...] The present is repulsive, but when I think of the future how wonderful things become! There's a feeling of ease, of space; and in the distance there's a glimmer of the dawn, I see freedom [...] from the ignoble life of a parasite.

Related Characters: Andrey Prozorov (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

Andrey's musings sum up his situation at the end of the play, also showing Chekov's view of the aimless, unfulfilled gentry. Andrey regrets his wasted youth, while recognizing that his failure is part of humanity's common lot—many people throw away their potential in pointless vices and dysfunctional marriages. Such things are passed down to subsequent generations, becoming a drain on society as children repeat the errors of their parents. And yet, even as he laments the cyclical nature of such failure, Andrey can't help looking to the future with hope—the distant future always seems "wonderful" and freeing compared to one's current unhappiness. Ironically, Andrey gives this speech while pushing his child in a stroller, showing the self-defeating nature of his outlook. Natasha also scolds him for possibly disturbing the baby with his talk. Through Andrey's plight, Chekov argues that such talk is worthless; unless one makes the effort to break the cycle of the "repulsive" present, mere aspirations don't benefit anyone—a commentary, no doubt, on the lives of many of his contemporaries.

ANFISA: [...] Life is good, my little girl, life is good! In a school apartment in the Gymnasium with Olyushka, my darling—God has granted me this in my old age. I haven't lived like this in all my born days, sinner that I am... A big apartment, nothing to pay, and I have a little room all to myself and a bed. All free. I wake up at night - and O Lord, Mother of God, there is no human being happier than me!

Related Characters: Anfisa (speaker), Irina Prozorov, Olga Prozorov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in the play, Natasha tyrannized the Prozorovs' old servant, Anfisa, calling her a worthless "witch" and prohibiting her to sit down in Natasha's presence. At the end, Anfisa's life substantially changes for the better when Olga takes her in, granting her unprecedented comfort and leisure. Anfisa's delight is a rare happy moment in the final act, contrasting with the grief and tedium of the other characters' lives. In fact, one could say that Anfisa is the *only* truly happy character at the end of the play, precisely because she didn't spend her life agonizing over the meaning of happiness, and when it arrived unexpectedly, she embraced her good fortune at face value. In this way, Chekov argues that gratitude for what currently has is a key element of enduring happiness. The play's upper-class characters cultivate discontentment instead of gratitude, suggesting that there's an element of self-defeating entitlement in their outlooks on life.

VERSHININ: What else can I say to you as a goodbye? What bit of philosophy?... [*Laughs.*] Life is a heavy load. Many of us find it blank, hopeless, but still one has to admit it is becoming brighter and easier every day, and one can see the time is not far off when it will be filled with light. [*Looking at his watch.*] I must go, I must! Once humanity was occupied with wars, filling the whole of its existence with campaigns, invasions, victories, all that has now had its day, and left behind a huge empty space, which for the time being there is nothing to fill; humanity is passionately seeking that and of course will find it. Oh, if only it could be quick about it!

Related Characters: Aleksandr Ignatyevich Vershinin (speaker), Masha Prozorov, Olga Prozorov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 275

Explanation and Analysis

When Olga and Vershinin say goodbye before the brigade's departure, Vershinin offers some spontaneous "philosophy" as a parting gift. In contrast to his earlier speeches, however, his optimism about the future is now tempered by an acknowledgement of life's difficulty and a desire that humanity would quickly figure out the meaning of it all. His slightly more pessimistic outlook stems from the fact that he's about to say goodbye to his lover, Masha, presumably for good, resigning himself anew to his unhappy marriage. His matter-of-fact glance at his watch, right after declaring the imminent transformation of life, adds a note of levity to his speech, but also hints that Vershinin's speeches throughout the play might be as much self-indulgent as sincere. And his claim that humanity is soon to discover a replacement for war is darkly ironic, considering that not much more than a decade after the play was written, Russia was mired in World War I. Though Chekov certainly couldn't have known that, it does suggest that he questions contemporary bluster about "progress."

OLGA [*embracing both her sisters*]: The band is playing so gaily and cheerfully, it makes one want to live! My God! Time will pass and we will be gone for ever, they'll forget us, forget our faces, our voices and how many there were of us, but for those who live after us our sufferings will become joy —happiness and peace will come down on earth, and there'll be a kind word and a blessing for those who are living now. Dear sisters, our life is not yet over. We shall live! The band is playing so gaily, so joyfully, and I think in a little while we too will know why we live, why we suffer... If we only knew, if we only knew!

CHEBUTYKIN: [...] What can it matter! What can it matter!

OLGA: If we only knew, if we only knew!

Related Characters: Ivan Romanych Chebutykin, Olga Prozorov (speaker), Masha Prozorov, Irina Prozorov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

These final lines of the play bring the Prozorovs' sufferings to an ambiguous close: Olga is stuck in an unwanted job; Masha has said goodbye to her true love; and Irina's fiancé has just been killed in a duel. Olga admits that life has an inescapable futility; the best they can hope for is that their struggles will benefit future generations. Yet the raucous cheer of the retreating army band seems to mock whatever comfort they might draw from this. In the end, Olga suggests, it's impossible for people to know why they suffer, no matter how they try to comfort themselves with theoretical explanations. Chebutykin's "What can it

matter!"—what sounded like a lighthearted catchphrase earlier in the play—now strikes a more nihilistic tone, suggesting that there's no point to anything the sisters have gone through. Olga echoes "If we only knew!" once again, at least holding out hope that knowledge would be meaningful, but doubting that they will ever grasp it. By ending the play with the sisters' embrace, Chekov does offer hope that their love for one another will survive, even if their youthful hopes do not.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT ONE

The three Prozorov sisters are sitting in their drawing-room on a sunny fifth of May. Irina, the youngest sister, is celebrating her name-day. Olga, the eldest, recalls that exactly one year ago, the sisters' father, an army general, died; it was a cold and snowy day. Olga thought she wouldn't live through it, but today they're remembering the event without pain, and Irina looks radiant. "Why bring it all back!" Irina objects.

The play begins on a forward-looking, celebratory note. A name-day (observed on the feast day of the saint for whom a person is named) is similar to a birthday, which contrasts with the sorrowful memory of General Prozorov's death. The weather contrast supports the feeling of hope and change.

Three men—Baron Tuzenbakh, Chebutykin, and Solyony—appear in the reception hall beyond. Olga continues to reminisce about the family's departure from their hometown of Moscow 11 years ago. This morning, when she saw the beauty of spring, "joy welled up in [her] soul and [she] had a huge longing for home."

The prominence of soldiers in the family's social circle, like Tuzenbakh and Solyony, suggests the idleness found in a peacetime provincial town. Olga would much rather be in Moscow, which symbolizes unfulfilled longing throughout the play.

The middle sister, Masha, is reading a book and quietly whistling. Olga scolds her and goes on to complain that teaching at the Gymnasium has given her chronic headaches and sapped her youth. She and Irina agree that their strongest desire is to sell the house and move back to Moscow.

*Masha is the most intellectually inclined and musical of the sisters. Olga teaches at a Gymnasium, a school focused on university preparation (*gymnasium *in ancient Greek and many European languages can refer to academic as well as physical education). It's wearying, dissatisfying work that deepens her longing for Moscow.*

Irina feels "radiant" and hopeful. Olga observes that Irina and Masha are still beautiful, but that at 28, she's gotten thin and lost her looks. She says her life would be better if she were married and could stay at home. After a pause, she adds, "I'd love my husband."

Olga's view of marriage is unromantic. The attraction of being married is that, presumably, she wouldn't have to support herself and could stay comfortably at home—love for her husband is an afterthought.

Tuzenbakh comes in and tells them that Vershinin, their new commander, will be stopping by. Vershinin is in his 40s, talkative, and married—his wife is "sort of crazy […] and often attempts suicide." Solyony and Chebutykin enter. Irina greets Chebutykin joyously, telling him that she knows the way she wants to live. She has concluded that happiness comes from work, whether one is a laborer, a shepherd, or a schoolteacher—anything is better than being "a young woman who gets up at midday […] then spends two hours dressing."

Even before Vershinin enters, it's suggested that his marriage is unhappy, which will be significant in his relationship with the sisters. With youthful naïveté, Irina exalts the inherent satisfactions of labor—influenced by the fact that she's lived in leisure and never been forced to support herself through work.

Tuzenbakh says he understands Irina's desire. He, too, was "protected from work" in his privileged upbringing, but now he believes that "a mighty, healthy storm is rising," which will "blow sloth, indifference [...] right out of our society" in 25 years' time. Chebutykin laughs that he's never "lifted a finger" or read a book since he left university, then leaves the room on a thin pretext, obviously planning to bring Irina a gift.

Tuzenbakh, who appears to be one of Irina's suitors, seeks a connection with her over their shared disdain for leisure and longing to work. For him, it's connected to a belief that societal winds are shifting—a sign of the undercurrent of class unrest in Russia at the time. Though Chebutykin is charmingly self-deprecating at this point in the story, he, too, harbors darker dissatisfaction.

Masha prepares to leave, too, singing "an oak in leaf [...] a chain of gold." She says the name-day crowd is much smaller than when their father was alive, and it's making her sad. Irina is cross at her departure, but Olga tearfully understands. Masha scolds Olga to "stop blubbing." Then the old servants, Anfisa and Ferapont, bring in a cake that Protopopov, the head of the District Council, has sent for Irina. Chebutykin brings in a silver samovar. The sisters object to such an expensive present, but Chebutykin says the girls are all he has in his life. He also loved their late mother.

Though Masha tends to remain aloof from the other sisters' emotional displays and talk of longing, she often expresses herself through song—here, a famous Pushkin poem (Ruslan and Lyudmila)*, which features a woman being rescued by her true love. Chebutykin's disappointed longing is expressed by lavishing gifts on the sisters—the daughters of the woman he once loved.*

Lieutenant-Colonel Vershinin arrives. He remembers meeting the sisters when they were just little girls. The sisters are delighted to learn that Vershinin is from Moscow, having served as an officer in their father's brigade. He even lived for a time on the same street. The sisters tell him that they expect to move to Moscow by the autumn. Masha suddenly remembers Vershinin—when they were girls, they'd teasingly called him "The Lovesick Major." She says that Vershinin has aged and inexplicably starts to cry.

For the sisters, Vershinin is a tangible link to their longed-for past. Though Masha doesn't indulge in as much sentimentality about Moscow as the others do, Vershinin seems to be an especially poignant reminder for her. At this point, a move to Moscow is something they hope will actually happen—it's on the calendar, albeit vaguely.

Vershinin mentions the sisters' mother, and Masha remarks that she's beginning to forget her mother's face—and that someday, they, too, will be forgotten. Vershinin agrees that being forgotten is human destiny. The things that seem significant to us, he goes on, will no longer seem important to future generations. Likewise, perhaps Columbus and Copernicus seemed like "crank[s]" to their own generations. Tuzenbakh adds that, on the other hand, perhaps people will look back and admire modern-day ethical advances ("no tortures, no executions"). Solyony just says, "Cluck, cluck, cluck" in mockery of their philosophical talk.

Here, Vershinin picks up a theme he'll favor throughout the play—that the meaning of life consists in reconciling oneself to constant change and doing one's best to promote progress while one can. Though with slight variations, Tuzenbakh tends toward a similarly progressive outlook. Solyony's oddness is partly a cover for his social awkwardness, but perhaps it also hints at Chekov's larger point that such philosophical debate is ultimately sterile and silly.

Offstage, Andrey is heard playing the violin. Irina explains that he's "our scholar," headed for a university chair. They like to tease Andrey about his love for a local woman, whose clothes Masha mocks as "pathetic." Andrey has better taste than that and is probably just teasing them with this love affair. She calls Andrey in and introduces him to Vershinin. The sisters proceed to brag about Andrey as a "master of all trades." Looking at one of Andrey's homemade portrait frames, Vershinin just says, "Yes...that's something..."

The sisters don't take Andrey's love interest seriously at first, seeing her as provincial, backward, and awkward. Their brother, by contrast, is headed for great things, in their view—although the older, more worldly Vershinin seems to doubt their evaluation of him.

Andrey explains that their late father "piled education onto us," like foreign languages; Irina even speaks Italian. Masha calls it "superfluous knowledge." Vershinin says that even backward provincial towns need educated people, and that even if they're presently outnumbered, in time their numbers will increase, and someday "life on earth will be inexpressibly beautiful and amazing." He affirms that it's our duty now to dream and prepare for that day. At this, Masha abruptly takes off her hat and says, "I'm staying for lunch."

The Prozorovs feel they stick out with their culture and education, which helps account for their longing to move back to Moscow. Vershinin, however, fits them into his optimistic, progressive worldview, arguing that there's a purpose for their learning within society, even if it's not yet evident to them. Masha, the most bookish of the sisters, is instantly drawn to this idea.

Tuzenbakh agrees with Vershinin, but says that in order to prepare for that "beautiful and amazing" life, one must work. Vershinin wanders around the pleasant drawing-room and muses about the idea that life is just a "rough draft"; if he had the chance to start over again, he wouldn't marry.

Tuzenbakh's worldview is a basically optimistic one, like Vershinin's, but it's centered on a restless appetite for tangible productivity, rather than idle abstraction. Vershinin, meanwhile, seems to be unhappy in his marriage.

Kulygin enters and offers Irina his good wishes. He gives her the present of a book he's written, a history of the school where he and Olga teach. When Irina explains that he'd already given her this book for Easter, he just laughs. He introduces himself to Vershinin before the latter leaves, and he kisses Masha. Happily embracing his wife, he tells Masha that they are invited to an excursion at the Principal's house. Masha angrily refuses to come at first, then glumly concedes, asking Kulygin to leave her alone.

Kulygin is introduced as a good-natured, if somewhat hapless, figure. His appearance is also a surprise, because until this point, it hadn't been obvious that Masha is married. Even before Masha reacts coldly to Kulygin's appearance, this makes it clear that their marriage isn't a mutually happy one.

Olga announces that lunch is served. Masha sternly warns Chebutykin not to drink, and he insists that he no longer drinks excessively; besides, what does it matter? To herself, Masha complains about a boring evening with Kulygin's colleagues—"what a cursed, intolerable life…" Everyone, including Vershinin, proceeds to the table, except for Irina and Tuzenbakh. Irina tells Tuzenbakh that Masha is "out of sorts," and that when she married Kulygin at 18, he seemed very intelligent to her. Now, although he is "the kindest of men," he no longer seems so intelligent.

Though Chebutykin has so far come across as a cheerful, harmless old man, the mention of his excessive drinking gives a darker undertone to his character. Masha's unhappiness also runs deep. Irina's explanation suggests that the appearance of Vershinin—more intellectually inclined than Kulygin, and with a connection to the sisters' more cosmopolitan roots—has triggered a fresh wave of dissatisfaction in Masha.

Now that they're alone together, Tuzenbakh begins speaking to Irina of his love for her. She tries to cut him off, but he keeps talking: "I have a passionate thirst for life […] for work, and that thirst has merged in my soul with my love for you." Because of Irina's beauty, life is beautiful to him. Crying, Irina wonders if life only *seems* beautiful. She says that for "us three sisters life […] has choked us like a weed." The only solution to such pessimism, she says, is to work.

Irina, too, is unhappy with her lot in life and hopes to channel her disillusionment into work. She doesn't share Tuzenbakh's feelings, but it seems that he takes encouragement from their shared passion; for him, Irina symbolizes a beautiful, satisfactory life.

Natasha arrives then, late for lunch, wearing a pink dress with a green belt. Seeing so many guests, she feels embarrassed and awkward. Olga comes out and greets her, warning her in a low voice that her green belt doesn't go with her outfit. Natasha tearfully protests that it's really "a sort of neutral color." She joins everyone in the hall.

Andrey's romantic interest, Natasha, appears. At this stage, she is almost sympathetic in her social awkwardness, and she doesn't appear to fit in to the Prozorovs' circle, apparently confirming the sisters' doubts about her.

Two special lieutenants, Fedotik and Rode, arrive with a basket of flowers for Irina. Fedotik takes photographs and gives her a spinning top as a gift. Irina is delighted. During lunch, Kulygin observes that there are 13 guests at the table, and he jokes that this means there are lovers present. Chebutykin teases Natasha for blushing at this. Natasha runs out of the hall.

Irina has multiple suitors and seems to delight in the attention; for all her world-weary pessimism, a childlike enthusiasm survives, too. Natasha, on the other hand, is thin-skinned and lacking in confidence, taking harmless comments personally.

Andrey follows Natasha into the drawing-room and begs her to stay. He assures her that everyone is fond of her and didn't mean any harm. They move out of sight of the other guests, and Andrey declares his love for Natasha and asks her to become his wife. They kiss.

Until now, Andrey has not shown much animation around the other guests, but he appears to feel genuine passion for Natasha and to have high hopes for their compatibility, ignoring his sisters' dismissal of her. The act began on a celebratory note, and it likewise ends on a hopeful one.

ACT TWO

It is about 21 months later, on an evening in late winter. Natasha is walking through the house with a candle. She finds Andrey reading and explains that she's looking for any lights that have been left burning; the servants can't be trusted. She says that Olga and Irina are still at work, Olga at a teachers' meeting and Irina at the Telegraph Office. She also frets about their little boy, Bobik. Andrey assures her that Bobik is healthy.

Natasha and Andrey are now married and have a child. Already, Natasha shows more confidence and initiative than she did in the first act, apparently seeing herself as the mistress of the house. Irina has also fulfilled her aim of beginning to work. Things appear to be moving forward for the family.

Mummers are scheduled to come to the house tonight, but Natasha says perhaps they shouldn't come, in case Bobik is sick. Andrey wavers, pointing out that it's his sisters' house. Natasha is sure they'll agree. In fact, she suggests that they move Irina into Olga's bedroom so that Bobik can have her room, which is drier and sunnier—Irina is seldom at home anyway. Andrey doesn't say anything. Natasha exits, forgetting her candle. Ferapont comes in with some papers for Andrey to sign.

Mummers were costumed or disguised figures who would travel house to house during festive times, offering entertainment. In striking contrast to her shy, fragile presentation in the first act, Natasha now dominates the household, including Andrey. Humorously, she leaves her candle burning despite making a big deal about others' carelessness. This might also be a hint about the later town fire—Chekov was intentional in his use of such small details.

Andrey tells Ferapont, "how strangely life changes, how it deceives us!" He explains that, out of boredom, he began reading his old university lectures. He is now secretary of the District Council, where Protopopov is chairman, and his greatest ambition is to become a member of that council—but at night, he still dreams of becoming a professor in Moscow, "a famous scholar who is Russia's pride."

Andrey is less forthcoming with his emotions than his sisters, but he confides readily in his servant. Here he reveals that he's disillusioned with his life, even feeling "deceived" by its unexpected turns. It's not clear what's holding him back from his academic ambitions, but readers can reasonably assume that Natasha has something to do with it.

Ferapont says he can't really hear, and Andrey replies that that's why he is confiding in Ferapont. His wife, Natasha, doesn't understand him, and he fears that his sisters will laugh at him. He wishes he were in Moscow, where "you don't feel [like] a stranger." In this provincial city, "everyone knows you, but you're a stranger." Andrey asks Ferapont if he's ever been to Moscow. Ferapont explains that he hasn't; "it hasn't been God's will." Andrey dismisses him.

Andrey doesn't have anyone else he feels comfortable confiding in, and he doesn't even want Ferapont to know the whole truth and his unhappiness. However, he clearly wants to be known—he harbors his own longings for Moscow because he imagines that there, he wouldn't "feel [like] a stranger."

Masha and Vershinin enter. Masha is telling him about her marriage—how she was intimidated by Kulygin's intelligence at first but no longer thinks him clever, and how she finds his colleagues unrefined and coarse. Vershinin, for his part, complains about his "worthless" and quarrelsome wife. He tells Masha that if it weren't for her, he'd have no one. He begins telling Masha how much he loves and admires her. Someone is coming, so Masha tells him to change the subject.

Masha and Vershinin have begun an affair, which seems to be grounded on their own marriages' failures to live up to their hopes. Masha, in particular, longs for cleverness and refinement, which Vershinin now offers her. For now, at least, they're keeping their relationship under wraps.

Irina and Tuzenbakh enter. Tuzenbakh accompanies Irina home from the Telegraph Office each day. Irina complains of tiredness. She wants to find another job—the Telegraph Office is "work with no poetry." She tells Masha that Andrey has recently been losing money playing cards. If he lost everything, perhaps they'd move to Moscow. She dreams of Moscow every night, "like a madwoman." They're supposed to move there in June—almost half a year away.

Though Irina has fulfilled her goal of getting a job, she's already unhappy with it—suggesting that she's unrealistically romanticized work, expecting it to be "poetry." She is still fixated on Moscow as the solution to those disappointed hopes, and at this point, there's still at least a concrete plan to get there.

Chebutykin reads his newspaper while Irina sits at the table playing a card game. Vershinin suggests that they talk about philosophy—such as what life will be like two or three hundred years from now. Tuzenbakh says that humanity will be fundamentally the same, even if technology and science have advanced. Vershinin ponders and replies that he believes a "new, happy life will dawn." Even though they won't live to see it, they must work and suffer to create that life; this is the goal of life and happiness.

Vershinin and Tuzenbakh discuss the meaning of life. At the turn of the 20th century, life in parts of Russia and Europe was rapidly progressing technologically and socially, so the idea that life is evolving toward a happier future makes sense in the context of the time. Tuzenbakh has a more moderate view, tempering his expectations with the notion that humans can't really change.

Tuzenbakh objects that Vershinin's view keeps happiness out of reach. He argues that, even a million years from now, life will remain the same; that's because life follows unchanging, inscrutable laws. For example, migratory **birds** fly without knowing why or where. Masha interjects that unless people have faith and search for meaning, life is empty and nonsensical.

Tuzenbakh believes that life is fundamentally predictable because of scientific laws, which Masha finds depressing. Birds come up several times in the play in association with human freedom and happiness (or lack thereof); Tuzenbakh's view suggests that life is mostly instinctual and not governed by a sense of inherent purpose.

The group, now including Fedotik and Rode, continues to converse around the table. They complain of the lingering winter, and Masha remarks that if she were in Moscow, she wouldn't mind the weather. In response, Vershinin describes something he's read recently—the diary of an imprisoned French minister who pined for the sight of **birds**. After he was released, he no longer noticed the birds. He says that it would be the same once the sisters moved to Moscow—they wouldn't notice it. "We have no happiness and it doesn't exist, we only desire it," he claims. But then he gets a message from his daughter, telling him that his wife has attempted suicide again. Masha is in a bad mood after he leaves.

Vershinin picks up the bird imagery—here symbolizing happiness that is forever out of reach, because human beings constantly long for what they don't have, implicitly making themselves discontent for no reason. Even Masha's longing for Moscow, then, is ephemeral; it says more about her inability to be happy than about a desire for a concrete place. Perhaps the same is true of Vershinin's longing for Masha in the midst of his plainly unhappy marriage.

The group continues playing, drinking, and chatting while they wait for the mummers to arrive. Later, Natasha comes in and whispers to a couple of the guests, then leaves. Andrey, embarrassed, admits that the mummers won't be coming—Bobik isn't feeling well. Masha retorts that it's Natasha who isn't well—she's a "common little woman." People begin to say their goodbyes.

In keeping with the idea that people constantly long for happiness that's out of reach, it turns out that the anticipated party is not to be. Natasha still lacks social graces much as she did in the first act, only now she inconveniences and dominates others as well.

Andrey and Chebutykin continue talking. Chebutykin says that he never found time to marry, although he always loved their mother. Andrey replies that marriage is "boring" and should be avoided. Chebutykin says that loneliness is "frightful," but that it "absolutely cannot matter." They head out to play cards together, hurrying so that Natasha won't try to stop them.

Chebutykin carries a deep disillusionment himself, which he apparently suppresses as meaningless. Andrey seems to be on a similar path, taking refuge in meaningless things like card-playing to stifle his unhappiness. Their attitudes show how much disappointed love can detail a person's sense of purpose.

Solyony reenters and finds Irina alone. He tearfully confesses his love for her, but Irina rejects him. Solyony says that he can't force her to love him, but he swears to kill any rival.

The awkward, uncouth Solyony loves Irina, too—a scene that's mainly significant because of Solyony's worrisomely violent oath, which will have climactic significance later. Again, disappointed love distorts people's lives in many different ways.

Natasha comes in and tells Irina that Irina must move in with Olga so that Bobik can have her room. Then a maid tells Natasha that Protopopov has arrived and invites Natasha to take a sleigh ride with him. She agrees and exits. Olga arrives home with a headache, exhausted from school and troubled by rumors of Andrey's gambling losses. After she and the lingering guests leave the room, Irina finds herself alone and is "overcome by longing," saying, "Moscow! Moscow! Moscow!"

Natasha's sleigh ride with another man suggests that she is having an affair—with the leader of the District Council that Andrey wants so much to join, no less. This underscores Andrey's pathetic situation, as well as the prevalence of failed marriages among Chekov's characters; in the world of the play, mutual romantic happiness is rare. Meanwhile, Irina voices her continued longing for escape from her life.

ACT THREE

A year later, a fire is raging in the town. It's after two o'clock in the morning at the Prozorov house. Nobody has slept. Olga is handing out clothing for those whose homes have burnt. The Vershinins' house almost burned, so they'll be spending the night.

As hinted in the previous act with Natasha's fretting about candles, a fire devastates the town the following year. This catastrophic event also suggests that other things in characters' lives will be coming to a crisis point.

Natasha comes in, saying they must form a charitable association to help the fire victims. She's quickly distracted by her reflection in the mirror, worrying that she looks bad while so many people are in the house. Then she yells at Anfisa, who's exhausted from helping, for daring to sit down in her presence. She tells Olga she doesn't understand why the Prozorovs keep the old woman, who's no longer capable of working much. Olga, angered by Natasha's attitude, says that Anfisa has been with them for 30 years. Natasha stamps her feet and insists that she is in charge of the household, not Olga, and that she wants "that old witch" gone.

Under the pressures of the disaster, Natasha's superficiality and hypocrisy become more transparent. She is especially cruel to the elderly servant and presumptuous in her interference in the Prozorovs' affairs. Although the sisters once mocked her for her odd clothing and lack of manners, they actually underestimated what a profoundly bad match she would be for Andrey and for their lives as a family.

Kulygin enters in search of Masha. Offhandedly, he tells Olga that if he hadn't found Masha, he would have married her instead. Then he hears Chebutykin coming, drunk for the first time in years. They all retreat. Chebutykin enters, walking soberly, and laments that he's forgotten everything he knew as a young doctor. The other day, one of his patients died under his care. He reflects that perhaps he is "not a man but only look as if I have arms and legs and a head [...] if only I could just not exist!" The memory of the woman's death made him feel "morally deformed [...] loathsome," so he got drunk.

Kulygin's offhand remark is a tacit acknowledgement that although he loves Masha, they aren't perfectly happy together, and that it's common for people to miss out on spouses who might otherwise have been good matches for them. Meanwhile, Chebutykin's disillusionment is of a far more visceral sort, as the portrayal of his character continues to darken—his error sends him into an existential spiral.

Irina, Tuzenbakh, and Kulygin come in and talk about arranging a benefit concert for the fire victims. Vershinin mentions that the brigade might be transferred to Poland soon; Irina says that they will be leaving, too, for Moscow. Just then, Chebutykin drops a clock that had belonged to the sisters' mother. "Perhaps I didn't break it," he says, "but it just looks as if I did. Perhaps we just think we exist but really we don't." He asks why they all just sit here and "don't see anything." He tells them that Natasha is having an affair with Protopopov.

Changes are on the horizon for many characters, though they're still mostly hypothetical—in particular, Irina now speaks vaguely of going to Moscow "soon," without setting a date. Chebutykin's breaking the clock is symbolic and suggests that he is fragmenting psychologically as well. Although he questions his existence, he also charges the other characters with being oblivious to what's right in front of them.

Vershinin reflects on the strangeness of the night—the fright of the fire reminds him of long-ago pillaging and burning, and makes him wonder how "clumsy and burdensome" modern life will appear to people in two or three hundred years. He apologizes for talking philosophy, but he's in the mood for it. He starts singing an aria about love from Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin*, and Masha sings along.

Though frightened by the close call, Vershinin is moved to put the crisis in perspective by philosophizing—his way of coping with the unpredictability and pain of life. The duet between him and Masha suggests that the two are no longer going to great lengths to conceal their relationship.

Tuzenbakh announces that he will soon be starting work in a brick factory. He sees Irina's dissatisfaction with life and recalls their past conversation about the joys of work—"if only I were allowed to give up my life for you!"

Tuzenbakh deals with his longing for Irina by pursuing hard work instead of fruitlessly pining for her, showing that he meant what he said about labor being a key to life; however, he obviously still loves her.

Masha tells Kulygin that he should go home. Kulygin calls her an "astonishing woman" and declares his love for her and his happiness. Masha just crankily recites the Latin conjugation for the verb "to love" and changes the subject to Andrey's troubles. Andrey has mortgaged the sisters' house to pay his gambling debts, but Natasha has taken all the money. Kulygin says he'll wait for Masha at home while she rests.

Though Kulygin is not willfully obtuse—he's admitted to Olga that he could be happier with someone else—he persists in loving Masha, even though she humiliates him by responding with such coldness (while having an obvious rapport with Vershinin, no less). This supports Chekov's argument that even where genuine love exists, it's no guarantee that a marriage can thrive.

Irina laments that Andrey has become a "trivial man," and that Natasha has led him astray. He's boasting of finally having become a member of the District Council; meanwhile, the town laughs at him because he's oblivious to Natasha's affair with Protopopov, the chairman. Even now, he sits in his room, oblivious to the fire. She starts to cry.

As everything else is coming to a head, Irina openly speaks about Andrey's decline and humiliation—also a disappointment of the sisters' high hopes for him. Andrey's reluctance to engage with the fire emergency is another example of his generally avoidant, passive attitude.

Irina weeps that she's getting older and now sees that they won't be moving to Moscow after all. She works in the Town Council and hates it every bit as much as the Telegraph Office. At 23, she feels that she's only moving "further and further away, into some abyss."

Talking about Andrey prompts Irina to admit the failures in her own life as well—at last, she admits that Moscow isn't a real possibility. With this admission, she effectively gives up hope for her life.

Olga advises her sister to marry Baron Tuzenbakh. He may not be handsome, but he is "decent and honest," and "after all, we marry not for love but just to do our duty." Olga herself would marry without love, as long as a "decent man" proposed, even if he were old. Irina replies that she's been waiting until they move to Moscow—she dreamed of meeting her true love there. But that has "turned out to be nonsense, all nonsense."

In keeping with Olga's earlier declaration that she would marry just to escape the thankless toil of her life, she urges Irina to resolve her problems by marrying someone who loves her, even if she can't reciprocate. This is more difficult for Irina, who has associated love with unattainable Moscow all this time. Giving up on one necessarily means abandoning the other.

Masha comes in, saying she wants to confess; her spirit is heavy: "In a word, I love Vershinin…" Olga retreats behind her bedroom screen and says that she can't hear whatever silly things Masha is saying. Masha replies that loving Vershinin must be her destiny—love is so different from what one reads in a novel.

Masha also comes clean about Vershinin, though the sisters' muted response confirms that this has been an open secret and Masha has been the oblivious one in this case. She attributes her love to "destiny," in contrast to Olga's observation that love involves willful choices.

Andrey joins his sisters and says it's time to "really have it out, once and for all"—what do they all have against him? Just then Masha hears Vershinin singing in the distance and excuses herself. The other sisters want to sleep instead of argue, but Andrey presses on. He knows, first of all, that they've had something against Natasha ever since his wedding day, but they should know that she is an "honest, noble human being." And, second, his membership in the District Council is "just as hallowed and elevated" as the academic job they wanted him to have. Finally, he asks their forgiveness for mortgaging the house without their permission—he has no income to pay his card-playing debts, though he claims to have stopped playing cards now.

Not hiding in his room after all, Andrey suddenly appears, and with uncharacteristic forthrightness, he confronts the sisters about their attitudes toward him. However, his bold words have the tone of trying to convince himself of his own happiness, and his anger at his sisters seems to be a reflection of his disappointment in himself.

Kulygin passes through the room in search of Masha. Andrey notices that his sisters aren't listening, but he repeats, "Natasha is an exceptional, honest human being." He thought that when they got married, they'd be happy. He starts weeping, saying, "dear sisters, don't believe me, don't believe me…" and exits.

Andrey finally breaks down; his bold front about his work and marriage has been a lie. He seems to be fully coming to terms with these facts for the first time.

Olga and Irina talk about the rumor that the brigade will be transferred somewhere far away. Finally, Irina says that she does respect the Baron and will indeed marry him—"only," she says, "let us go to Moscow! I beg you, let us go! There's nothing better than Moscow in the whole world!"

Irina agrees to do as Olga suggests, but her cry of "Moscow"—which has no obvious place in their plans now—is a final, heartbroken tribute to her abandoned hopes.

ACT FOUR

A little more than a year later, various members of the Prozorov household and their soldier friends are in the garden. Tuzenbakh and Irina say goodbye to Fedotik and Rode. Fedotik takes a photograph to remember them by—the soldiers march out for Poland in less than an hour. Tuzenbakh, who's retired from the military, observes that "a terrible boredom" will descend on the town in the brigade's absence.

The circle of friends is breaking up, hinting at a number of partings and changes to come.

Chebutykin, who's in a euphoric mood, says that he'll soon change his lifestyle completely and become "so very good and well-behaved." Tuzenbakh exits, but Irina and Kulygin interrupt Chebutykin's newspaper-reading to press him for details about something that happened in town yesterday—rumor has it that Solyony lost his temper with Tuzenbakh. Kulygin says it's rumored that Solyony loves Irina, which one can understand, although, personally, he loves Masha.

Chebutykin alludes to vague changes in his idle, indulgent life, though it's not clear what they might be. More ominously, there are rumblings of trouble between Tuzenbakh and the rejected Solyony, who'd threatened violence a couple of years ago.

Irina hears shouted greetings offstage and shudders, remarking that "somehow everything scares me today." She says she is sending off her belongings after dinner, as tomorrow she and Tuzenbakh are getting married and heading off to the brick factory. The day after that, she'll start a teaching career: "a new life is beginning." When she passed the teachers' exam, "I even cried for joy and well-being…" Kulygin says that "somehow it's not very serious," but he wishes her the best. Chebutykin is overcome, giving his blessing and saying he's like "a migratory **bird** which has got old and can't fly."

Irina has a premonition of trouble on the eve of finally making permanent changes in her life. Though she appears to be genuinely happy, Kulygin also seems to think it won't end well. Chebutykin likens himself to a bird who can no longer behave according to its nature and cannot be happy.

Kulygin says that with the Army's departure, everything will go back to what it was before. Whatever anyone else says, Masha is "a fine, honest woman," and he's thankful for his destiny. He asks about Olga's whereabouts, and Irina says that now that Olga's become headmistress, she lives at the Gymnasium, and Irina is alone and bored. She has decided that if she's destined not to live in Moscow, there is nothing she can do. She thought about Tuzenbakh's proposal and made the decision to marry him, and then "it was as if my spirit had grown **wings**"—she wanted to work once again. But ever since yesterday, "some mystery is hanging over me."

Kulygin, perhaps with his own display of naïveté, seems to think that with Vershinin and the army moving on, he and Masha can pick up where they'd left off—but, perhaps more than any other character, he seems able to find contentment in his situation. Irina explains that, given her own disappointed destiny, she's taken the initiative to move on. In spite of her confident, rational defense of her choice, though, something doesn't seem right.

When the others go in to greet Olga's arrival, Masha sits down with Chebutykin and asks about his love for her mother. He says that he loved her very much, but he can't remember if she loved him. Masha says that if "you get happiness in snatches, in small pieces, and then lose it," it hardens a person. She sees Andrey pushing his baby's carriage in the yard and compares him to an expensive church bell that suddenly falls and smashes.

Masha and Chebutykin have disappointment in love in common; Masha says that the loss of happiness fundamentally alters a person, as Chebutykin's life bears out. Despite his desperate outcry in the previous act, Andrey, too, seems to have reconciled himself to his life, but Masha sees his compromise as tragic.

Andrey asks about the incident in the town yesterday. Chebutykin says it was nothing, just "nonsense"—Solyony challenged the Baron to a duel after an angry exchange. In fact, it's about time for the duel now. Solyony has survived duels before. Masha says this duel shouldn't be allowed, as the Baron could be killed, but Chebutykin says, "one baron more or one baron less—what can it matter?" In fact, we don't even exist—"it just seems that we do." Masha walks off, waiting for Vershinin and noticing the "dear […] happy **birds**" above.

Chebutykin, disillusioned with reality, regards the impending duel as no big deal; because of his sense of alienation from his own existence, he doesn't see the repercussions of other people's decisions, either. Masha observes and envies the birds, who seem so much more free and purposeful in their existence than humans do.

Andrey admits to Chebutykin that he finds Natasha "amazingly coarse," even inhuman, and can't remember why he once loved her. Chebutykin tells Andrey that he's leaving town tomorrow and advises him to do the same. Solyony walks by, on his way to the duel, and Chebutykin goes with him. Andrey walks off with Ferapont in pursuit, wanting him to sign papers.

This scene presents contrasting ways of dealing with disappointment in love. Presumably, Andrey could leave, or he could confront Natasha's lover, Protopopov; but, instead, he again passively submits to life with a woman he finds "inhuman."

Irina and Tuzenbakh enter. Irina asks Tuzenbakh why he is so distracted today. He won't answer and doesn't want to talk about what happened in town yesterday. He has an errand to do now, he says, and then will come back to her. He tells Irina how much he loves her, and that tomorrow they'll go away together and be happy—but he knows she doesn't love him. Irina weeps. She's never loved anyone, except in her dreams: her soul is "like an expensive piano, shut and its key lost." He kisses her again and, at a loss for words, walks off.

In this touching exchange, Irina doesn't know about the duel. She is willing to make the best of a new start with Tuzenbakh but grieves because, despite having been loved by many, love is something that feels unachievable to her, like a piano that can't possibly be played. The scene foreshadows the thwarting of what fragile hopes they had.

Andrey comes in, pushing the baby's carriage again. He wonders where time and hope have gone—no sooner do people begin to live than they become "indifferent, useless, unhappy." Yet, when he thinks of the future, "there's a feeling of ease, of space," and he imagines that he and his children will be freed from "the ignoble life of a parasite." Natasha looks out the window and scolds him for talking too loudly around the sleeping baby. She orders Ferapont to push the carriage instead.

Despite his abject unhappiness, Andrey represents the irrepressible human desire to imagine a better future, even if—as Natasha's disrespect for him suggests—there's no evidence that things will actually get better. There's every indication, rather, that Andrey will continue to waste his potential in a loveless, ineffectual life.

Vershinin, Olga, and Anfisa come outside to listen to some traveling musicians. Anfisa greets Irina and tells her how good life has become—she's now living in a school apartment with Olga, with her own room and no expenses. She feels that there's "no human being happier than me."

In a sharp contrast to all the other characters, Anfisa finds happiness in simple, concrete, imminently present things—suggesting that, in Chekov's view, gratitude is the key to happiness, and most of the characters in the play have failed to cultivate that.

While Anfisa goes in search of Masha, Olga and Vershinin say goodbye. Olga comments that "nothing happens as we want it"—now that she's become headmistress, a job she never sought, she won't go to Moscow. Vershinin offers her a "bit of philosophy" as a goodbye, saying that while life seems heavy and hopeless, it's gotten better every day, and someday it will be "filled with light." Humanity is seeking something to fill the void left by its former obsession with war and will someday find it—"if only it could be quick about it!"

Vershinin comforts Olga with his old theory that life is getting imperceptibly better, although, on the cusp of leaving Masha behind, he seems slightly humbled in this expectation for once—wishing that humanity would hurry up and achieve something better in which he could share. This suggests that even Vershinin realizes that mere "philosophy" can only do so much to help people live better.

Olga moves aside as Masha enters and kisses Vershinin goodbye. He asks her not to forget him and quickly leaves. Olga tries to stop Masha's tears, but when Kulygin comes in, he tells Olga to let her cry. He tells Masha, "You are my wife and I am happy in spite of everything […] We will begin to live again as we used to and I won't say one word to you." Masha, struggling against sobs, sings "an oak in leaf."

Kulygin tenderly forgives Masha for her infidelity, but Masha's song (from Pushkin's poem about being rescued by one's true love) suggests that their prospects for mutual happiness are not strong. Their ill-matched situation supports Chekov's view that truly happy marriages are rare.

In the distance, there's the sound of a muffled shot. Olga and Irina sit with Masha, trying to comfort her. Kulygin puts on a fake mustache and beard he'd confiscated from a little boy at school. Olga laughs and Masha cries.

Kulygin's clownish attempt to lighten the mood contrasts with the distant duel and shows again that he's probably better suited to Olga than to Masha.

Natasha comes out, giving orders about the children and telling Andrey that he must move into Irina's old room to play his violin, and baby Sofochka will get his room. Now that the sisters are gone from the house, she's busy making plans to cut down trees on the property. She tells Irina that the belt she's wearing is tasteless and doesn't suit her. She walks off shouting at a maid.

Far from the shy, shrinking young woman at the beginning of the play, Natasha doesn't hold back from exerting full sway over every aspect of the household, and she even gets back at the sisters for mocking her fashion faux pas years ago. Perversely, Natasha might be one of the only happy characters, too—it's just that she finds happiness in dominating others.

A band starts playing to accompany the soldiers' departure. Chebutykin comes in and reluctantly whispers something in Olga's ear. She is alarmed, but Chebutykin says irritably, "What can it matter!" Olga embraces Irina and struggles to tell her what's happened—Tuzenbakh has just been killed in a duel. Irina weeps: "I knew it, I knew it…" Chebutykin sits down with his newspaper and softly sings a cheerful song.

When Chebutykin reports the news of Tuzenbakh's death, he continues to cope by acting as though life is meaningless. Meanwhile, Irina's unhappy premonitions have been confirmed.

The three sisters stand clinging to one another. Masha says they must start life anew. Irina says that someday, they'll understand the reason for all this suffering, but for now, there's nothing to do but work—as a teacher, she will "give away [her] whole life to those who perhaps need it." Olga hugs her sisters and says that although they'll be forgotten in time, their suffering will become joy for those who come after—but if only they knew why they suffer. Chebutykin continues to mutter, "What can it matter!" Olga says again, "If we only knew!"

In contrast to the hopeful tone at the start of the play, now the sisters face an apparently hopeless future, each of them trying to find grounds to keep going. Irina clings to the idea that work for others' sake will heal her. Olga echoes something of Vershinin's attitude—but her exclamation of "if we only knew!" suggests that optimism about future change does little to comfort the suffering now, and that, in the end, the meaning of life can never be understood.

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