

THE CHERRY ORCHARD

by Anton Chekhov



THE AUTHOR

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) was born into a poor family - his father was a shopkeeper and his grandfather had been a serf - a year before the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. He thus grew up in a country experiencing great changes, including the revolutionary movements that would eventually lead to the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty. At the age of nineteen, Chekhov traveled to Moscow to study medicine, and while he was there, supported himself by writing comic pieces for local magazines. Soon, his writing became so popular that he gave up any thought of a career in medicine. Most of his short stories - the works for which he is most famous - were written while he was in his twenties. As he grew older, however, he turned from comedy to more serious themes. Though his early plays had been dismal failures, he returned to writing for the theater in 1896, and in his final eight years wrote the four plays that established his reputation on the stage - *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. The last of these was written as he was suffering the final deprivations of tuberculosis, from which he died only months after it first reached the stage.

Chekhov's plays were criticized in his own day for their lack of plot. His focus on characterization and atmosphere was little appreciated by his contemporaries, and he feared that his plays could never be produced outside Russia because they partook so strongly of the Russian spirit. *The Cherry Orchard* reflects the decline of the aristocracy that resulted from the end of serfdom; the hopeless, effete upper classes, with their passion for all things French and their patronizing attitude toward the peasantry, and the revolutionary ferment visible in the speeches of Trofimov (some of which were censored by the czar's officials when the play was first presented in 1904). Chekhov's plays are also difficult because they can't be easily categorized. While Chekhov himself called his last play a comedy, its first director, the great Stanislavsky, treated it as a tragedy, contrary to the author's wishes.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Madame Ranevsky - The owner of the cherry orchard, she has just returned from Paris after leaving home five years before following the deaths of her husband and young son. She is a loving, giving person who seems incapable of living within her means, or of making any decisions needed to retain her property.

- Anya - Madame Ranevsky's daughter, she is a high school student, sweet and loving. She has feelings for Trofimov, who is too busy thinking great thoughts to worry about such mundane things as love.
- Varya - Madame Ranevsky's adopted daughter, she has been managing the estate since her mother's departure. She is practical and responsible, and can't understand why no one around her seems to be taking the family's financial crisis seriously. She is quite willing to marry Lopakhin, seeing him as a good match, if her ever gets around to proposing.
- Gayev - Madame Ranevsky's brother, he lives in the past and spends much of his time shooting imaginary billiards and talking nonsense.
- Lopakhin - A wealthy merchant, the descendant of a long line of serfs who has made his way in the world through his own hard-nosed efforts. He tries to advise Madame Ranevsky, but she refuses to listen. Ultimately, he buys the cherry orchard, intending to cut it down and build villas for summer vacationers.
- Trofimov - A perpetual student, he views himself as an intellectual and revolutionary. While he spouts many of the ideas common to the revolutionaries of Chekhov's era, his inability ever to *do* anything holds those same ideas up to ridicule. He is attracted to Anya, but is too wrapped up in his deep thoughts to engage in conventional romance.
- Pishchik - A local landowner, like Madame Ranevsky unable to pay his bills, who can do nothing during the family's crisis except constantly ask them to lend him money.
- Carlotta - Anya's governess, a musician who also does magic tricks.
- Epihodov - A clerk, nicknamed "twenty-two misfortunes" because he is so accident-prone; he is in love with Dunyasha, though she has little interest in him.
- Dunyasha - Madame Ranevsky's maid, in love with Yasha.
- Firs - An elderly servant of the family, he has seen it all over the years and remains steadfast.
- Yasha - A servant who traveled abroad with Madame Ranevsky, he professes love for Dunyasha, though he desires no more than immediate gratification.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"Now the summer visitor only sits and drinks tea on his veranda, but soon he'll probably start working his three acres of land, and then your old cherry orchard will become fruitful, rich and bountiful." (Lopakhin, Act I)

“Oh, my childhood, my innocent childhood! I used to sleep in this nursery. I looked out from here into the garden. I woke up happy every morning; and the orchard is just the same as in the old days; nothing has changed. All white, all white! Oh, my cherry orchard! After the dark stormy autumn and the winter frosts you are young again and full of happiness; the heavenly angels have never abandoned you. Oh, if only I could be free of the stone that weighs me down! If only I could forget my past!” (Madame Ranevsky, Act I)

“You people shouldn’t look at plays; you should look at yourselves, to see what grey lives you lead. And how much nonsense you talk.” (Madame Ranevsky, Act II)

“Varya’s afraid we’ll fall in love with each other. She won’t leave us alone. Her narrow mind can’t grasp that we’re above love. To eliminate everything petty and ephemeral, everything that stops us from being free and happy, that is the whole meaning and purpose of our life.” (Trofimov, Act II)

“All Russia is our orchard. The earth is large and beautiful; it is full of wonderful places.” (Trofimov, Act II)

“Yes, the moon is rising. Here it is, here comes happiness; it is moving toward us, closer and closer; I can hear its footsteps And if we do not see it, if we never get to know it, what does it matter? Others will see it after us.” (Trofimov, Act II)

“What truth? You know what’s true and what’s not true, but I don’t have that talent. I can see nothing. For you every question has an easy solution; but tell me, Petya, isn’t that because you’re young, because you’ve never suffered? You can look boldly ahead, but isn’t that because you see nothing frightening in the future; because life is still hidden from your young eyes?” (Madame Ranevsky, Act III)

“Yermolai has bought an estate that has no equal in the whole entire world! I have bought the place where my father and grandfather were slaves, where they weren’t even allowed in the kitchen. I’m fast asleep, it’s only a dream, it can’t be real.” (Lopakhin, Act III)

“The cherry orchard is sold, it’s gone, that’s true, quite true. But don’t cry, mamma, you’ve still got your life before you, you’ve still got your pure and lovely soul. Come with me, my darling; come away from here. We’ll plant a new orchard, even lovelier than this one. You will see it and understand, and joy, deep, tranquil joy will sink down upon your soul like a sunset, and you will smile, mamma.” (Anya, Act III)

“I can’t live without work, I don’t know what to do with my hands; they dangle about as if they don’t belong to me.” (Lopakhin, Act IV)

“If you offered me two hundred thousand I wouldn’t take it. I’m a free man. All the things you value so highly, both rich and poor, don’t hold the slightest power over me. They’re like feathers floating on the wind. I can live without you; I can go past you; I’m strong and proud. Mankind marches to the highest truth, to the greatest happiness possible on earth, and I am in the foremost ranks.” (Trofimov, Act IV)

“Oh, my dear, sweet, lovely orchard! My life, my youth, my happiness, farewell! Farewell!” (Madame Ranevsky, Act IV)

NOTES

Act I - The entire action of the play takes place on Madame Ranevsky's estate. It is early May. Madame Ranevsky is returning after five years away from home. Lopakhin reminisces with the maid, Dunyasha, about Madame Ranevsky's kindness to him when he was a child. Epikhodov comes in, complains about the cold weather, and leaves, after which Dunyasha informs Lopakhin that Epikhodov has proposed to her. Soon Madame Ranevsky enters, accompanied by her daughter Anya, her stepdaughter Varya, Carlotta the governess, Pishchik, a neighbor, and Gayev, who is Madame Ranevsky's brother. Madame Ranevsky and Anya express joy at seeing the old house again, and, after informing Anya of her engagement offer, Dunyasha tells her that Trofimov is sleeping out in the bathhouse, where he now lives.

Anya and her mother have just returned from Paris, and it immediately becomes apparent that the family's finances are in bad shape. Varya, who has been taking care of the estate, informs them that the mortgage has not and cannot be paid, and the estate will be sold at auction in August. Madame Ranevsky, who apparently is unable to grasp the extent of the crisis, has been spending money like water. Anya asks Varya if Lopakhin has proposed to her yet, and she says no. Speaking of the past, Anya remembers that her father died six years before, and that shortly thereafter her seven-year-old brother Grisha drowned. Her mother, unable to bear the strain and grief, fled the country. Trofimov, who had been Grisha's tutor, is afraid to show himself for fear of triggering bad memories for Madame Ranevsky. After Madame Ranevsky waxes effusive again about her return to the old homestead, Lopakhin tells her his plan for the financial salvation of the family - cut down the cherry orchard on the estate and subdivide the land into lots to be rented out to the summer tenants, making the family financially secure for the foreseeable future. Madame Ranevsky won't hear of such a thing, and the older people then begin to reminisce about the delicious cherries produced by the orchard in past years. Lopakhin then leaves for a three-week business trip, but offers a loan if Madame Ranevsky decides to follow through on his proposal to subdivide the estate. As the sun rises, she looks at the cherry orchard and reminisces about her childhood and the joys she experienced there. Trofimov then enters, and Madame Ranevsky immediately begins crying for her lost son Grisha. Pishchik asks for a loan, but she has no money to lend him, though she says she will do so anyway. After Madame Ranevsky leaves the room, Gayev begins rambling about solving the family's problems by borrowing money from his aunt the Countess - except that she hates him - or marrying Anya off to some rich man. He finally decides that Anya should visit the Countess, and he swears that he will never let the estate be sold. He continues to ramble as all go off to bed.

Act II - Act II takes place in a field near the edge of the cherry orchard. Carlotta is bemoaning her lack of knowledge of her heritage while Epikhodov serenades Dunyasha. When Dunyasha sends him away to get her cloak and Carlotta leaves in disgust, Yasha and Dunyasha speak of their love for one another. They quickly separate as Madame Ranevsky and her companions arrive. Lopakhin has returned from his business trip and is still trying to convince Madame Ranevsky to

cut down the orchard, but she and Gayev reject the very idea as hopelessly vulgar. Madame Ranevsky then starts talking about her wicked life - her spendthrift ways, her foolhardy marriage to a lawyer who had no money and drank like a fish, her affair with another man, the death of her husband and son, her flight, pursued by her paramour, who later deserted her after she spent her fortune - and tells her companions that he had just written from Paris begging her to take him back. She then rebukes Lopakhin for his lack of imagination, and advises him to marry Varya. Trofimov and the girls then arrive, and he begins philosophizing about the meaning of life and death and ridiculing Russia's intelligentsia. A tramp then comes on the scene, and Madame Ranevsky gives him a gold piece, to the consternation of her family. After the others leave, Trofimov and Anya speak of their love for one another, which Trofimov places in the context of the future of Russia and its liberation from the bondage of the whole system of serfdom that still weighs men down decades after abolition.

Act III - The scene is a party in Madame Ranevsky's drawing room. As the couples stop dancing, Pishchik bemoans his poverty while Varya frets about how they are going to pay the orchestra. Carlotta entertains the guests with magic tricks and ventriloquism while they wait for Gayev to return from the auction at which the estate was to be sold. Trofimov teases Varya about marrying Lopakhin, but she says that he has to do the proposing. Madame Ranevsky drops a telegram, which is from her former lover in Paris, and she talks about going back to him because she loves him despite the way he has used and abused her. She then calls Trofimov a useless good-for-nothing because he has never finished school, won't get a job, and doesn't even have the ambition to have a love affair. Trofimov stalks off angrily, then fakes a fall down the stairs and returns to great laughter. As the dance resumes, the rumor begins to spread that the estate has been sold. Lopakhin and Gayev arrive - they were late because they missed the train - and Lopakhin announces that he has bought the cherry orchard; of course, he intends to cut it down to make way for cottages for the summer tourists, as he had advised Madame Ranevsky. Madame Ranevsky breaks down in tears and Anya tried to comfort her as the scene ends.

Act IV - The house is nearly empty now as the family prepares to move out. Gayev is rebuking Madame Ranevsky for having given everything in her purse away to the peasants who had come to tell them goodbye. Workers are chopping down the cherry trees, and Lopakhin orders them to stop until the family leaves. He offers Trofimov some money, but he refuses it. The old servant Firs has been taken to the hospital. Madame Ranevsky is ready to return to Paris with Yasha, while Gayev has obtained a job in a bank. Pishchik enters and, to everyone's amazement, walks around the room repaying his debts; it seems he has leased his land to some Englishmen who covet the white clay found there. Madame Ranevsky calls Varya into the room and leaves her alone with Lopakhin so he can propose to her. He stumbles through a brief conversation without proposing, however, and Varya falls to the floor in tears. As the family leaves, Gayev and Madame Ranevsky weep in each other's arms. After their departure Firs appears, having been forgotten by the family; he lies down and dies, and the play ends.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, what does the cherry orchard symbolize? Does it mean different things to different characters? Relate this symbolism to the overall themes of the play.
2. In Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, do you consider the protagonist, Madame Ranevsky, to be an admirable character? Why or why not? Does what you feel toward her differ from what you think about her? Support your arguments with details from the play.
3. Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* contains the seeds of many romances, yet none of these romances is finally brought to fruition. Why not? What is Chekhov communicating through this series of failed relationships?
4. Over the years, critics have often debated the genre within which to classify Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Do you consider it to be more a tragedy or a comedy? Why? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
5. While Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* is on one level the story of a single Russian family, it is on a larger level a tragicomedy about Russia itself. In what ways do the comic and tragic elements of the story accurately reflect the conditions of early twentieth-century Russia?
6. In Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, the character of Trofimov serves as a foil, both for Madame Ranevsky and for Lopakhin. Which of these two characters do you believe is more suitably linked with Trofimov, and why? Use specifics from the play to support your conclusion.
7. Discuss the role of memory in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Choose one character from the play and analyze whether the desire to remember or the desire to forget is a more prominent part of what drives that character. Support your argument with specifics.
8. In the early 1700's, Peter the Great had Westernized Russia. To a large extent, however, only the Russian aristocracy had espoused Western ways, and in so doing had alienated themselves from their own people and country. What evidence of this alienation do you see in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*? Does Chekhov see Western influence as a positive factor in Russian life, or does he prefer that Russia shape its own national identity? Use details from the play to support your arguments.
9. Trace the influences of Karl Marx and Charles Darwin in the speeches of Trofimov in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. How would you characterize the philosophy and social views of the young scholar? Support your argument with specifics from the play.

10. Discuss the significance of love in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Does the playwright view love as empowering or enervating? Choose specific examples from the play to support your argument.
11. Discuss the significance of beauty in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Which characters value beauty, and which consider it to be insignificant? Evaluate the author's perspective based on the evidence found in the play. Is Chekhov more of an aesthete or a pragmatist?
12. Discuss the sale and destruction of the cherry orchard at the end of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Do you consider this event to be beneficial for Madame Ranevsky and her family? Why or why not? Has this forcible break from their past freed them or destroyed them? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
13. In Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, do any of the characters experience real change in the course of the play? Choose three characters from the story and assess the change, or lack thereof, that they undergo. Relate this change or lack of change to the major themes of the play.
14. Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* spends a great deal of time reflecting on the liberation of the serfs in Russia forty years before the play was written. Discuss the concept of freedom as it appears in the play. Choose three characters in the play and discuss the extent to which they are truly free. Distinguish between economic freedom and moral freedom in your explication of the characters you choose.
15. Russian playwright Anton Chekhov once stated that the central purpose of his plays was to tell his audience, "Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!" He hoped that they would then be motivated to change their lives for the better. Discuss the extent to which you believe *The Cherry Orchard* succeeds in accomplishing this purpose. Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
16. The man who first directed Anton Chekhov's plays in the Moscow Art Theater was Konstantine Stanislavsky, the originator of so-called "method acting," in which an actor *becomes* the character he is trying to play, taking on his inner life as well as his physical and vocal mannerisms. Discuss why such an acting approach is suitable for the plays of Chekhov, and illustrate your points with specifics from *The Cherry Orchard*.