

THE CHERRY ORCHID

Chekhov

Overview Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) was a Russian playwright and short story writer, as well as a medical doctor; his literary work was among the finest fiction of the 19th century. His modernist theater, along with that of Ibsen and Strindberg, opened fresh possibilities to drama, while his moody and dark short stories went a long way to define the entire modern cultural temper.

Story

Chekhov's last play, *The Cherry Orchard*, is a masterful study of generational change, in a culture where value standards have long been set by aristocratic ground rules. We see these implications as the drama opens on the Ranevsky estate, in the early hours of a May morning. Lopakhin, a local businessman, is with other members of the family awaiting the return of Mme. Ranevsky from Paris, where she has been for the past five years. From inside Lopakhin's mind and conversation, we realize how ambivalent he is to the return of this patronness, to whom he is humbly grateful, but whom he resents, for her lifelong condescension of him, a man of humble and poor background who was raised on her estate.

In the rush of news exchanges, when Mme. Ranevsky returns, the lady's daughter, Anya, tells Varya, Mme. Ranevsky's adopted daughter, that the estate where they live is about to be put up for auction, in order to pay off debts. (Mme. Ranevsky, it seems, is a very big spender.) That evening, Lopakhin proposes to the family that they should save their estate by dividing it up into summer cottages, which they could then lease, but the family rejects this commercial idea, arguing that it would force them to cut down their priceless cherry orchard. One domestic scene follows another, in which alternative proposals for saving the orchard are batted back and forth. The family's decline is further clarified by the discovery that Mme. Ranevsky has returned from Paris because her lover has left her, is now begging her, by telegram, to return, and has in fact been the cause of her recent suicide attempt.

In the third Act, Mme. Ranevsky throws a party on the day of the estate auction. Local figures attend, there is much discussion about whether the proposed solutions to saving the orchard will come through, and as the party is ending Lopakhin himself comes in. He reveals that he himself has bought the estate, and that he is going ahead with plans to destroy the orchard.

In the final act it is October, two months after the sale of the estate, and the cherry trees have begun to be cut down. The family has almost entirely dispersed, at the advent of winter—Mme. Ranevsky has returned to Paris, and Lopakhin has gone home—and yet in the rush of departures, and over-hurried plans, Firs, Ranevsky's 87 year old manservant has fallen ill and been left behind. At the end of the play Firs wanders onstage muttering about how life has left him behind. He lies down on the couch, and quietly dies. As he dies we hear the sound of an axe cutting down a cherry tree in the orchard.

This summary peels away much local detail, which is the social interplay and conversational emptiness of the old order looking helplessly onto the advent of a new and indifferent world. Lopakhin himself, who has been the most inventive participant, in planning to save the orchard, is from the start ambivalent, because though he has in his early life been a beneficiary of the hospitality of the estate, he has been so in the role of higher serf, a person of humble birth. He is himself part of the new world, and represents the commerce which though potentially priceless to the old order is beyond their capacity to use.

Theme

The overriding theme of *The Cherry Orchard* is the theme of the falling of the old order. We see that the Ranevsky family is slowly falling apart at the seams, in debt and without a plan to rescue itself, and looking wildly for ways to preserve the dear status quo represented by the cherry orchard. Lopakhin represents both the past, in which he lives, and the future in which he will be part of the overthrowing of that past.

Characters

Lopakhin, in *The Cherry Orchard*, is the son of a peasant, and in many ways—though by this time he is a successful businessman-- he is crude and country. However he is a realist; he advises the family he is visiting that they should cut down and sell their precious cherry orchard. In the end he himself buys the orchard, has it cut down, and makes his profit. He is the new world, for better or worse.

Trofimov is an intellectual who mixes with the family socially, and interacts vigorously with Lopakhin, whom he admires, though viewing him as a materialist businessman. Trofimov views the future through the eyes of an idealist and a revolutionary. (Like Chekhov himself.)

LOPAKHIN (rational)

Character Lopakhin is both a salient character, and a workpiece in the construction of cultural history. He 'represents,' that is, the moving force of cultural history as it overturns old value systems—in this case the feudal aristocratic stage of Russian history—and the replacement of them by the expressions of the middle class. Lopakhin, himself of serf background, and bound in gratitude to the 'master' culture that cared for him when he was young, is of conflicted attitude to the old world of master/serf relations. He is in fact deeply devoted to Ranevskaya and her aristocratic family, who were his benefactors in his childhood, and yet he longs for the chance to break free of any relationship to the 'master-classes.' He is determined to define himself, and to be part of the future.

Parallels Many of the finest English language dramatists, of the last century—George Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller--pay tribute to *The Cherry Orchard*, in which Lopakhin plays the central role. (Shaw remarked that after reading Chekhov he felt like tearing up his own plays.) Lopakhin, representing the complex new post-serfdom social perspective, speaks to the world-concerns of any number of texts devoted to the tumultuous formations of a new post-Romantic society: Novalis, in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1800), blurts forth *aus schmerzen wird die neue Welt geboren*, 'in suffering is the new world born'; Thomas Wolfe, in *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), captures the essence of irreversibility in personal existence, and dramatizes it against the harsh determination of social-cultural change; the philosopher Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) predicts the logically inevitable forward movement of the spirit which regulates mankind's progress.

Illustrative moments

Waiting When first we meet Lopakhin he is waiting through the wee hours of the morning, for the return of the estate's owner from a several years stay in Europe. The train is late, and as Lopakhin wakes from sleep he is reflecting on a moment when his father, who was a serf on the estate, had beaten him, and Ranevskaya had cleaned up Lopakhin and calmed him down. His mind plays with the truth that once you have been a serf you will always be one, 'a pig's snout in a pastry shop.' He has to accept the upside, though, that he is now a rich man, with the advantages that condition confers.

Involved Lopakhin is emotionally moved to see Ranevskaya again. Although her brother speaks of Lopakhin as a boor—still a peasant—Lopakhin couldn't care less. His father was a serf

on the estate. 'He belonged to your grandfather, and then to your father, but you, you especially, did so much for me at one time, that I've forgotten all that and love you as my own...more than my own.' Lopakhin is a socio/cultural mix, faithful as ever to his complex origins. It is no wonder that he is the driving force in trying to deal with the fate of the estate in the new world.

Planning Lopakhin, hurrying to get the train to Kharkhov, has a pressing piece of good news, which he wants to pass on to Ranevskaya, before he leaves.. An auction is scheduled for August 22, to sell off the distinguished cherry orchard which is an appendix of the estate, and to pay off the landowner's debts. But an even more profitable plan is on the horizon. The site can be parceled off into dachas, then rented out, and 'you'll have an income of twenty-five thousand at the very least.'

Businesslike Lopakhin's creative suggestion, that the cherry orchard could be cut down, is met with non-attention by Ranevskaya and her brother, and by another landowner who is present. For Ranevskaya it is essential to remember that 'if there is anything interesting, even remarkable in this entire province, it is our cherry orchard.' There is no dissenting response. 'The orchard is mentioned in the Encyclopedia,' chimes in Ranevskaya's brother, further assuring Lopakhin, that no one there is up to the realities of indebtedness and foreclosure. Lopakhin glances at his watch, and tells his friends to 'make up your minds!'

Discussion questions

What is Lopakhin's attitude toward the cutting down of the cherry trees? Has he mixed feelings? What are those feelings?

What is the larger crisis in cultural history that this play dramatizes?

Does the master/serf issue, in 19th century Russia, resemble the issues around slavery at the same time in the United States? Does the Reconstruction period, after the American Civil War, resemble the period of social change Chekhov is illustrating in *The Cherry Orchard*?