

LOPAKHIN*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Lopakhin** (in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*) **rational**

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. He suffered a creative setback when *The Seagull* (first produced in 1896) proved to be a major flop, but on a revival, by the Moscow Art Theater, this play awakened tremendous attention, and went on to join the four or five play theatrical canon which defines Chekhov for the stage.

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 year 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*?