

# THE SEAGULL

## 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. 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.

### Story

The play opens onto a homemade makeshift stage, in the outdoor setting of a provincial Russian estate. Behind the stage spreads a natural setting, a lake. The topics of interest, as Chekhov's play opens, are whether the dense symbolical play, that Treplev has written, is effective theater, and also whether there will be any resolution to the numerous romantic relations which appear to be taking off on this pre-theater evening.

Medvedenko, a local school teacher, reflects that he would be a more attractive suitor to Masha, if he had more money. Masha, the daughter of the estate manager, does not agree; she is absorbed by her attraction to Treplev, the author of the play that is to be staged. But Treplev is preoccupied, both by his play and by his own affection for Arkadina, sister of the estate-manager. Nina is in love with the writer, Trigorin.

Treplev bustles about nervously, preparing the stage; he remarks to Sorin, the estate owner, that Arkadina, sister of Sorin, hates his play, and probably hates him too. He is a fretful man. He wants to be accepted for his own work by his peers—the artists and intelligentsia who make up the Russian elite—and not just because he is (as he is) the child of famous actors. Nina arrives, and Treplev, with his anxieties and jealousies, shows Nina the seagull he has just shot. Nina is pained, saying that it is the lake that attracted her to the estate, 'like a seagull.' She and Treplev kiss, but she does not return his affectionate chit chat. Treplev leaves when he sees that Nina is really drawn to the successful writer Trigorin, who is present at the estate.

Trigorin, however, explains that he is about to return to town, leaving the estate. Trigorin explains, to the others, the mental fate that leads him, as a writer, to note down all that he sees, as in fact he is doing with the seagull, which Treplev has shot. He makes a note about a girl named Nina, who is ruined by a man like Treplev, who has nothing better to do. The emotional standoff between the two men is clearly a knife sharp edge of the play.

Treplev, neurotic and ambitious, makes an unsuccessful effort to kill himself, while Nina declares her ingenuite love to Trigorin, who is deeply attracted to her. (Simultaneously we experience a bitter fight between Arkadina, the diva, and her brother, Sorin, who manages the estate.) Nina and Trigorin up the power of their attraction, and agree to meet in a certain hotel in Moscow.

The final act, of this play, which is both a comedy of manners, in a fashion, and a dark meditation on human relations, takes place once again at the Sorin estate, two years after the earlier events described above. Many of the characters we know from the beginning have reassembled, are getting ready for a game of bingo, and are in a retrospective mood, examining one another's pasts. There is a knock on the door, Nina arrives, and Treplev and she engage in a lengthy

conversation about the depressing curve of her life. Treplev, whose earlier relation to Nina has been ardent but unsuccessful, is depressed by the conversation. A few minutes later, during a lull in the group conversation, a pistol shot rings out, and the assembled group must recognize that Treplev has at last killed himself.

## Themes

**The main theme** is that literary/artistic/cultural cliques, such as we see in this play, are both seedbeds of ambition and launching pads for romantic engagements which only too easily turn on themselves, rot, and self-destruct. At the same time we are led through the labyrinth of an artistic circle, and enabled to survey the landscape of loves and hates that flourish there.

**A certain moral is also thematic** : stay calm, work in patience, and care for others—virtues rare as hen's teeth in the society present for this play.

## Characters

**Treplev** is a neurotic and underconfident playwright, whose background is illustrious on stage, but who is himself jealous of the Moscow elite art scene, which seems to admire him not for his artistic ability but for his background. His ambitions outrun his recognition, and in the end he cannot endure this split in his existence, and kills himself.

**Trigorin** is one of several important talkers and performers who permeate *The Seagull*, yet in a sense he is central. As a 'successful writer' Trigorin is asked, by Nina in Act II, what it is like to be just that, 'a successful writer.' In the major monologue of the play, Trigorin responds that 'being a successful writer' is not all that great, for it involves a kind of obsessive activity, which will never release one, and a constant concern for what other people think of your work—which you can do nothing about anyway.'

## MAJOR CHARACTER

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**Parallels** A commanding figure, Trigorin demystifies his artistic drive, even while living himself as a powerful writer, he exercises personal power, and yet is at the play's end both honest and sad. Goethe's play *Tasso* (1807) introduces the self-absorbed and innocent side of the artistic mind, forever fascinated with people, but inwardly tormented by its excess of sensibility. A self-made social climber and path-breaker like Julien Sorel, in Stendahl's *The Red and the Black* (1830), shares both Trigorin's self-confidence and a certain sense of the uselessness of life. Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890) shares with Chekhov's play a fascination with the relation between art and morality, while Joyce Cary, in *The Horse's Mouth* (1944), creates in Gully Jimson a committed artist who is, like Trigorin, not at all happy with the life of the artist.

## Illustrative moments

**Unassuming** When we first hear from Trigorin, he is just one of the voices heard on stage, discussing a just performed play, and assorted matters of local gossip, developments in the theater, and what makes good art. He is being asked by Nina, the daughter of a welcome landowner, who adores him, what he thinks of the experimental play that is being tried out on the

local stage. (It was written by Treplev, the experimentalist/symbolist playwright son of the actress Irina. Trigorin replies that he didn't understand anything, but did appreciate the young lady's acting, and the stage set.)

**Flirtatious** Nina soon meets Trigorin again, as he walks along self-absorbed, jotting in his notebook. He perks up immediately when he sees her. and informs her that 'due to unforeseen circumstances' he is having to leave the theatrical site early; unfortunately he will probably never see her again. He regrets this. 'I don't often meet girls who are young and interesting...I would like to be in your shoes...to find out what you think and what makes you tick.' She replies that she would like to be in his shoes, 'to find out what it's like to be a celebrated writer.'

**Dissatisfied** Trigorin lets himself be drawn into conversation with Nina, who opens out his inner secrets. As a young lady she fantasizes what a splendid life the writer's must be, but Trigorin has his doubts. 'What's so especially good about it? (*Looks at his watch.*) I must go write now. Excuse me, I have no time...(*Laughs.*)' Trigorin goes on to speak with blistering irony about his lonely life as a 'famous writer.' He stresses the mechanical necessity that drives him to write one short story after another...'I never stop writing, it's like riding a wild horse and I can't get off.'

**Self-absorbed** Trigorin proceeds to develop his account of 'writer's madness,' and of all the discomfort that goes with it. It is as though—he explains to Nina—the writer tears apart and desecrates all the wonderful experiences of life, so that he can reassemble them so as to put them in a work of writing. It seems to him that his friends, who affect an interest in his latest production, are in fact only humoring him, and that in fact they find him, Trigorin, truly mad. Trigorin himself, he concludes, has always assumed that his readers are fundamentally hostile to him. He's afraid 'to look anyone straight in the eye.'

### **Discussion questions**

What is Trigorin's attitude toward the experimental playwright, Treplev? Can he really not understand the young man's work, or is he just expressing his contempt for that work?

What does the death of the seagull mean to Trigorin? What does that death represent to him, about the sadness in nature?

Is Trigorin too obsessed with writing to be romantic? Or does he truly fall in love with Nina?

**Reading** <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1754/1754-h/1754-h.htm>