

Trigorin (In Chekhov's *The Seagull*) **Introvert**

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 the join the four or five play theatrical canon which defines Chekhov for the stage.

Character 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, and a constant concern for what other people think of your work—which you can do nothing about anyway.

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>