

Three Notes about *The Three Sisters*

About time: During the nineteenth century, the steam engine transformed the world. Steam-powered machinery ran the huge new factories that filled the air around them with smoke, and steam-powered locomotives on the new railroads transferred whole populations of workers from the country to the ever more crowded cities. One side effect of this change was a century-long epidemic of tuberculosis.

Tuberculosis was also called consumption: a good descriptive name, because the tuberculosis bacterium kills by consuming its victim a few cells at a time. Over a period of months or years, a person with pulmonary tuberculosis (tuberculosis of the lungs: the commonest form of the disease) wastes away, losing weight, coughing up blood, and growing weaker and weaker until he dies. Brought under control by antibiotics in the twentieth century, the disease is now making a deadly comeback, and in Anton Chekhov's time it was entirely incurable.

Chekhov understood that better than most people, because in addition to being a writer he was a doctor — a doctor who knew he had tuberculosis himself and was going to die of it. (Born in 1860, he lived only to 1904.) That awareness pervades the four great plays he wrote toward the end of his life with a special autumnal mood, a mood of leaves falling and the last cold sleep on its inexorable way. In *The Three Sisters* we gradually sense the mood from glancing references within the play, and time is its central element even if it isn't mentioned explicitly. So here's the play's timetable in explicit form.

Act 1 takes place on Irina's twentieth birthday. The month is May. Olga is 28; Masha is 21 and has been married for three years. We don't learn Andrei's age, but he is usually acted as the second-oldest of the four children.

Act 2 takes place just under two years after act 1. The month is February. Andrei, who was engaged to Natalya in act 1, has now married her, and they have a child.

Act 3 takes place a little more than two years after act 2. The season is early spring. Andrei and Natalya now have two children.

Act 4 takes place in the fall of that year. That is, the play's full time span is about 4½ years.

About language, class, and loneliness: Russia's vast territory includes many peoples beside the Russians. Tuzenbach (a better transliteration from the Russian would be "Tusenbach") is a Russian by nationality, language, and religion, but his name marks him as a member of one of Russia's minority groups: the Germans. In Chekhov's time, a Russian with a Russian name would have seen that as a problem.

The problem was this. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when Chekhov wrote *The Three Sisters*, Germany was the world leader in scientific research. It was also a major economic and military power which had unified itself from a collection of petty princedoms just a few decades earlier. Meanwhile, Russia — vast, resource-rich Russia, the largest country in the world — was poor and backward, and growing poorer and more backward every year. In an era when

democracy was triumphantly advancing across Europe, Russia was an absolute monarchy left over from the Middle Ages, with a state church that hated change, a government that feared education, a peasant class mired in brutal ignorance, and an aristocracy that lived off the country like a parasite.

In that country, a few thousand people read books, learned about the outside world, and tried to change conditions. In *The Three Sisters*, Tuzenbach is one of those admirable people. But because Tuzenbach's name is German, he knows that his fellow Russians will automatically envy, mistrust, and fear him. Because of his name, Tuzenbach is a lonely man. It is his loneliness that leads him to befriend Solyony.

In Russia, poetry is taken seriously by all educated people, and you've noticed that Solyony always has a verse on his lips. But the poems he quotes are standard schoolroom pieces that children have to memorize, and only his last quote (on p. 100, from Mikhail Lermontov's "The Sail") is really right for the situation. He also gives himself away on p. 53 when he gets touchy about the University of Moscow. A few years before *The Three Sisters* was written, the University of Moscow moved to a new campus, and after that the two campuses were known in ordinary street talk as "the old university" and "the new university." Of course there was still only one university, but ill-educated insecure Solyony doesn't know that.

As to the educations of Andrei's wife and Masha's husband:

In nineteenth-century Russia, members of the aristocracy didn't just speak Russian; among themselves, they spoke French too. They knew their servants had every reason to hate them, and they communicated in a code language accordingly. Natalya, of course, is anything but an aristocrat. Unlike her sophisticated Muscovite in-laws, she is a barely educated girl who has lived her whole life in the small city where *The Three Sisters* is set. But she is ambitious, and one of her ambitions is to make people think she speaks (as the French say) *comme il faut*. However, when she addresses her husband on p. 104 with the formal "vous" instead of the familiar "tu," she demonstrates that she's still at the beginner's stage where students are told to stick with the sometimes too polite "vous" until they develop a sense of French etiquette. The way she uses the French word *déjà* ("already") as an intensifier is also a Russian idiom, not a French one, and her unidiomatic, ungrammatical *dormée* should be *endormie*.

These mistakes tell us that Natalya is still as ignorant as she was in act 1, but now she's pretentious as well. She should stick with Russian, the only language she honestly knows. Literally, her French says, "You mustn't make noise, Sophie is ASLEEP! You are [one more Russian idiom] a bear." But as you read that line you should try to imagine the sound of a Shakespeare sonnet in the voice of a President Trump.

A counterpart to Natalya's pretentiousness is Kulygin's, since his ponderous Latin quotations are nothing but schoolroom catchphrases. For what the information is worth, they mean, respectively:

On p. 21, "Do what you can, and let others do better what they can." On 22, "A sound mind in a sound body." (And "Persian powder" was the name of an insecticide.) On 60, "O deceitful human hope." On 71, the cliché *In vino veritas* means "In wine there is truth." On 77, Masha

bitterly repeats the millennia-old lesson 1 of Latin 1: “I / thou / he she it / we / you / they love.” On 94, *ut consecutivum* is a Latin grammatical term, and “Hail” is an eighth-grade-level joke about how a Roman would have said “Hi.”

Being Chekhovian means being sensitive to nuances, and one nuance communicated by Kulygin’s way of talking is that Masha’s marriage, just like Andrei’s, has been a fatal mistake. In act 2, on p. 54, this David Mamet adaptation of the play misses a social nuance when it has Masha call Natalya a shrew, since Masha’s Russian word, *мещанка* [“myesh CHAHN ka”], doesn’t mean so much “bad-tempered woman” as “not our kind of woman.” (Literally, it means “woman belonging to the second-lowest of Czarist Russia’s official social classes,” with a contemptuous diminutive. The anonymous Dover Thrift Edition translation renders it as “little bourgeoisie.”) And by act 3, every time Kulygin opens his mouth he reminds Masha one more time that when she said “I do” to him she committed a crime against herself, and her punishment is going to be life in high school, without parole. Natalya is a bad woman and Kulygin is a good man, but in Chekhov’s universe fate doesn’t draw distinctions.

And about the item at the bottom of the web page, the one containing the words “Три Сестры”: What that is is the title page of the play’s first printing, 1901. The text translates as “Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, A Drama in Four Acts. A. F. Marx, Publisher, St. Petersburg.” So far so routine, and the title is often translated in that two-word way because there are no articles (the words *a* and *the*) in Russian. But look at the picture.

It shows the final event in the play: Andrei pushing his baby carriage across the stage. Chekhov called his great last plays comedies, and for telling a funny story a baby carriage certainly is a standard happily-ever-after accessory. But *The Three Sisters* is anything but funny. Like Chekhov’s three other last plays (*The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Cherry Orchard*), it’s desperately sad. But it’s sad in a special way – a way that’s now identified by the educational adjective *Chekhovian*. It may be useful to teach ourselves that word indirectly, by way of a somewhat different sad literary adjective, *tragic*.

You see that word a lot in the media, of course. Every time an airplane crashes and a lot of people are killed, the media call the event a tragedy. They use the word over and over, crash after crash, and it never wears out because the plane crashes keep coming and every one of them is forgotten after a month. Oddly enough, though, you vividly remember the sinking of the *Titanic*, even though it occurred more than a hundred years ago and it isn’t even close to the worst maritime disaster in history.

For more than 2300 years, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) has been helping us understand why that is. Tragedy, Aristotle theorizes, is a way of helping us understand ourselves in relation to the huge, uncaring forces of the universe, or what Aristotle called the gods. In a tragedy, as opposed to an ordinary sad story, a great man or woman tries to accomplish something commensurate with his greatness and fails *because of* that greatness. “For the first time since the gods locked us into the limits of physical law,” a shipbuilder once dared to dream, “I will build a ship that *cannot* sink.” Well, little did he know . . .

For reasons that Aristotle explains in detail in his *Poetics*, that “Little did he know” effect is deeply satisfying on a human level. But Chekhov doesn’t set up his stories to let the effect develop on anything like a titanic scale. There are no great men or women in *The Three Sisters*, and there are no gods for them to defy and be destroyed by. In Aristotle’s sense of the word, *The Three Sisters* isn’t a tragedy. It isn’t tragic that Solyony eats the whole box of candy without sharing it. All Chekhov shows us in this play is one little family trying to get through a brief episode in the limited run of life. But life . . .

Well, Olga and Masha and Irina are about to help us understand how precious life is, and how little we know its preciousness.