

## Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*: Exploring the Woman Question

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*The Three Sisters* remains misunderstood by many critics who approach it as similar in theme to *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov's masterful rendering of the swiftly changing economic and social conditions in pre-revolutionary Russia. Indeed, *The Three Sisters* thematically explores the approaching revolution, but its focus is not the economic and class reforms that would sweep across the country with the Bolsheviks. *The Three Sisters* concerns a different aspect of the revolution, one that in Russia was called *zhenskii vopros*, the Woman Question. An examination of the historical context and the signifiers used by Chekhov to spotlight these issues illuminates the play's complex structure and reveals that Chekhov introduced many issues that remain of concern to contemporary feminist scholars.

### Historical Context

The Woman Question arose in mid-nineteenth century Russia, as in western European countries, along with general issues of human rights and freedom that had their roots in the Enlightenment. The abolition of serfdom and freedom for all people, at least in theory, was the ideal that gave rise to the discussion of women's rights.<sup>1</sup> The theory of evolution emphasized the biological nature of human beings, and gender differences as well as racial differences began to be questioned. Perhaps at a more rudimentary level than all of these theoretical debates, the immediate realities of industrialization called for massive changes in the way people lived their lives. For the first time women were allowed to enter the workplace, albeit in humble positions. Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto* at roughly the same time as women met to discuss their rights at the Seneca Falls Convention. Human rights, women's rights, and workers' rights stemmed from the same root and became topics for political and social dispute. Therefore, it is of little wonder that fundamental questions about the role of women in society rose to the surface, and it is unfortunate that class and economic issues often subsume and conceal the Woman Question.

In Russia, the debate on the Woman Question predominantly concerned issues of education and economic independence rather than enfranchisement, largely because Russia remained an autocracy in which voting rights were denied both men and women. The ideal of education for women was imported from Western

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Europe, and resistance to change arose partially from the desire of the society to remain essentially Russian, an issue that was brought to the fore by the Germanic lineage of the tsar and, more directly, the detested tsarina. Women, unable to attain higher education at home, often attended universities in Europe. These women returned as doctors and scientists and thus became harbingers for a new vision of women in society. Chekhov presents this influx of western ideas as an underlying theme of *The Three Sisters*. This theme is underscored by characters who quote only Russian authors, insist on their Russian heritage, and, like their tsar, view Moscow, rather than the more western St. Petersburg, as the center of Russian life. The play, then, explores the emerging questions about the biological, philosophical, and spiritual place of women in society with particular emphasis on Russian women in Russian society.

The education of women in Russia prior to the 1850s, as in many countries, had been minimal and centered around domestic life.<sup>2</sup> The entrance criteria for the institutes for the education of girls limited enrollment to the daughters of men who served the empire in the upper ranks of the military or the governmental bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> For a brief period after 1876, women interested in higher education had been allowed to attend courses at the universities, but in 1886 they were excluded from all except the Bestuzhev courses in St. Petersburg by decree of the Ministry of Education.<sup>4</sup> Chekhov, a doctor and scientist, became a champion for the reform of education for women, particularly in the field of medicine. Education was only the first step, however, as most occupations remained closed to women, with the notable exception being that of teacher at a school for girls. Lack of opportunity, accompanied by the lack of legal rights, fostered women's economic dependence on men.

Women of this era had few legal rights. Reforms instituted during the reign of Peter the Great recognized citizenship either through state service (military or bureaucratic) or through payment of a "soul" tax where the common unit of assessment was the male soul. Although reforms during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries granted increased property rights to women, the male head of household remained in the traditional position of power. The household formed the central organizational unit in which members owned property collectively.<sup>5</sup> Rights of women in marriage, based on a legal contract with language that suggested the wife's servitude in exchange for the husband's protection, remained minimal.<sup>6</sup> Divorce initiated by a woman proved almost impossible.<sup>7</sup> A married woman could not work, study, trade, or travel without her husband's permission. Despite these limitations, marriage continued to be the desired state for women well into the twentieth century. Results of a survey performed in 1912 indicated that marriage, even marriage without love, remained the dream of a majority of Russian women.<sup>8</sup> In Russia, an old, often-repeated saying equated not being married with not being human.<sup>9</sup>

The Woman Question gained recognition during the latter half of the nineteenth century through the publication of essays, novels, and plays in which women and women's themes were highlighted. Because of this focus on written arguments, the movement primarily enlisted an aristocratic elite, and the majority of Russian women from the middle and lower classes, lacking educational opportunities, remained uninvolved. M. L. Mikhailov, Nikolai Pirogov, and Nikolai Dobrolyubov published essays calling for equality of education and employment opportunities for women.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps more influential than these essays were the popular novels of the era, most notably Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *What Is to Be Done?* (1862) which advocated personal freedom and action through the establishment of workers' collectives and communes. The young heroine consumed with romantic ideals of service and sacrifice to art and nation became a popular literary type. The female protagonists of the novels of George Sand, imported from Europe, encouraged daring exploits of infidelity and fostered a popular movement dubbed *zhorzhandizm*. Many of the heroines of these novels were actresses, as this was one of the few occupations open to women, and the Silver Age in Russian theatre allotted women's characters a centrality of focus. Although this spotlight on women on stage served as an indicator of the decline of patriarchal authority that was to occur in concert with the revolution, it also focused the questioning of gender identity on women rather than men, and masculinity remained largely unquestioned.<sup>11</sup>

Chekhov places *The Three Sisters* within this fashionable context. His heroines focus attention on issues of education, employment, and property rights. The sisters of the title can find little meaningful use for the higher education they have mastered in the provincial town where they live. The oldest sister takes up the principal occupation open to women, teacher at a girls' school, because she has few property rights and no husband or father to maintain and protect her. The romantic sister, the *zhorzhandshchina*, flouts conventional morality by having an adulterous affair, and the idealistic younger sister dreams of service through work. Chekhov transcends the limitations of literary clichés, however, and weaves a complex plot that illuminates the journey of each of the characters within the context of the Woman Question.

#### A Structural Approach

One of the common misapprehensions about Chekhov's plays is that they have little plot and even less action. On the contrary, Chekhov subverts the traditional masculine plot structure of linear Aristotelian action by integrating a feminine circular structure of thematic relationships.<sup>12</sup> In order to appreciate the structure Chekhov creates, one must look at the linear progression of acts and the systems of complex symbols, relationships, and signifiers that function to illuminate his chosen theme.<sup>13</sup> Chekhov weaves the two types of plot structures together inseparably, providing more plot rather than less. The challenge of analysis is to

approach Chekhov's complex structuring of plot inclusively without privileging a linear or thematic methodology.

### Linear Rite of Passage

One characteristic of Chekhov's conscious structuring in the major plays is his introduction of the major theme and the encapsulation of the action of the play within the opening lines. The central theme of *The Three Sisters* surrounds the Woman Question and the changes in women's lives that are brought about by the dissolution of patriarchal authority. The three Prozorov sisters are together on stage as the play opens. Olga, the eldest sister, proclaims, "Father died just a year ago today, on the fifth of May—your birthday, Irina."<sup>14</sup> The period of mourning for the patriarch is concluded, it is spring, and Irina, whose name translates to "peace" and whose namesake is patron saint of young girls, is coming of age. The four-act play spans a journey of four years, and yet time seems suspended in the liminal temporality of the rite of passage.

Chekhov structures his play linearly as a rite of passage of the youngest sister, Irina. Arnold Van Gennep, in his seminal anthropological study, claimed, "The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. . . ." <sup>15</sup> He continues: "That such changes are regarded as real and important is demonstrated by the recurrence of rites. . . . enacting death in one condition and resurrection in another. These rites . . . are rites of passage in their most dramatic form."<sup>16</sup> Chekhov chronicles Irina's rebirth in Act 1, and in the next three acts he portrays Irina's rite of passage in terms of the three stages identified by Van Gennep: separation, transition, and reconciliation.

Act 1 chronicles Irina's rebirth. We are introduced to her as she sits immersed in reverie. She is dressed radiantly in white, the color worn by virgins and by novices who are to be initiated into holy orders. In many societies, white also is the color associated with death. As Olga rhapsodizes about the day of their father's funeral, she gently teases Irina: "You had fainted and were lying there quite still, just as if you were dead." When their father died, the world was cold and snowy, but now it is spring, a time of rebirth, and the birches, the trees that in Russia are dressed as young maidens in a spring festival called Troitsa, have yet to burst into bloom. A bit later Irina exclaims, "I woke up this morning and remembered it was my birthday, and suddenly I felt so happy. I thought of the time when we were children and mother was still alive. And then such wonderful thoughts came to me. . . ." It is as if Irina is reborn on this day, and the images she supplies for us portray her state of mind. She tells Chebutykin, "It's just as if I were sailing along in a boat with big white sails, and above me the open, blue sky, and in the sky great white birds flying." On her day of rebirth, Irina is reminded of her mother but in the past tense. In baptismal imagery, she imagines herself in the water, launched on a journey toward freedom and independence, while above her great white birds

signify God's blessing.

The proclamation with which Irina chooses to follow this image of rebirth indicates the direction she has chosen, but here one must decode Chekhov's signifiers in order to grasp its significance to his focus on the Woman Question. Irina claims, "When I woke up this morning, I suddenly felt I understood everything about the world, and I knew the way I ought to live. . . . Man must work by the sweat of his brow whatever his class, for in that lies the whole meaning and purpose of life; and his happiness and contentment, too." Many critics, like the character Tuzenbach who represents the dying nobility of tsarist Russia, mistake Irina's focus. She is not referring to lower and upper class distinctions; rather she means that all humans must work—women as well as men. Later in this speech she clarifies the above statement in reference to herself: "It's better to be an ox or a horse and work, than the kind of young woman who wakes up at twelve, drinks her coffee in bed, and then takes two hours dressing." It is clear from Olga's response that the description of this young woman would fit Irina, at least before her rebirth. In Irina's opinion, beasts that work have more meaningful lives than upper class women. Another anthropologist, Victor Turner, speaks to the word and thus to the concept of work as deriving from the Greek root that referred to the verb "to do" or "to act" in service to the gods.<sup>17</sup> Thus it is the noble and sacred ideal of work that Irina would choose rather than the mundane and profane work of beasts. Although the patriarchal society in which Irina lives suggests that she marry, and several potential suitors present themselves for consideration, she wants "to act" in such a way as to give her life meaning.

Act 2 portrays Irina's separation in preparation for her journey. The backdrop for Act 2 is carnival, the time when people choose to act in an inverted manner.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Irina enters with Tuzenbach who habitually walks her home from her job at the telegraph office. Here we see the inverted behavior as the woman, Irina, works, and the man waits for her to finish.<sup>19</sup> Irina, whose education included four languages, finds her work "without poetry, without meaning." The radiance and exuberance of rebirth we saw in Act 1 have been replaced with fatigue and misplaced annoyance, and Irina is appalled at her own behavior when she snaps at a woman whose son has died. Irina has entered a rite of passage that will separate her from the feminine domestic sphere and integrate her into the masculine sphere of work. She has cut her hair, and according to Masha, her "face is beginning to look like a little boy's." It would seem that Irina has adopted the style of the *nigilistki*, the female nihilists who cropped their hair and wore blue tinted glasses to express their rejection of conventional women's roles. As Van Gennep remarks, the handling or cutting of hair in a different fashion is often a component in the separation phase of a rite of passage.<sup>20</sup> During the party that follows, Irina plays solitaire, and at the end of the act, we find her alone on stage, fervently longing to go to Moscow, the city of her dreams.

After the separation of Act 2, Chekhov presents us in Act Three with Irina's ritual purification and transition. Natasha has forced Irina out of her room, and Irina and Olga now share a tiny, liminal space that separates them from the domestic realm that now belongs to Natasha and the outside world. It is in the sanctuary of this room that Irina breaks down and allows Olga to convert her to the belief in the patriarchal institution of marriage. Masha, who recognizes the limitations of this choice, escapes to her romantic tryst with Vershinin, her hoped for savior. As the purifying flames of the fire rage through the town and are damped, Irina confesses her disillusionment with work and her hope that she would "be moving to Moscow, and there I'd meet the man I'm meant for. I've dreamt about him and I've loved him in my dreams." But she gives up this dream and agrees to marry Tuzenbach, although she does not love him, if only she (and her sisters) can go to Moscow. She exclaims, "There's no place in the world like Moscow." Moscow, like the dead seagull and the doomed cherry orchard of Chekhov's other major plays, is symbolic of nostalgia for youth and innocence. Moscow also is linked with the sisters' personal patriarch, their father, and with the tsar, who chose it for his capital. Moscow externalizes the location of the two sisters' aspirations. For Olga, Moscow is "home," and for Irina, it holds the promise of romance; thus, she combines Olga's desire for the irresponsibility of childhood with Masha's desire for romantic salvation. It is in this epiphanic moment in the aftermath of the fire that she apprehends the difference between her dream and her reality, for the Moscow of her dream is not a real place.

Act 4, then, is the reconciliation and integration stage of Irina's journey. It is here that Chekhov constitutes the sisterhood of his title. Irina has become reconciled to her impending marriage and departure for the brickworks with her husband. Tuzenbach seeks her love, but Irina declares, "my soul is like an expensive grand piano that someone has locked, and the key's been lost." Like Masha who gave up playing the piano, Irina has chosen to lock away and relinquish the passion and beauty of dreams in exchange for security and a repetitive, mundane existence of endless tomorrows. The security of marriage is denied her, however, when Tuzenbach, the last remnant of patriarchal nobility, dies in a needless manifestation of outdated chivalry. Solyony, who earlier had warned Irina that no other suitor would have her once she had rejected him, challenges Tuzenbach to a duel, and the doctor, Chebutykin, seeing an opportunity to rid himself of competition for Irina's attention, does nothing to stop the event. At the end of the play, Irina, like Olga, will take up the primary occupation open to an unmarried, educated woman; she will become a schoolteacher.

#### **Thematic Signifiers**

In conjunction with the linear plot structure of a rite of passage, Chekhov weaves a circular, thematic structure around the Woman Question. In order to

appreciate Chekhov's intentions, one must decode a series of signifiers that point us toward his theme.<sup>21</sup> These signifiers include the play's title and the names of the sisters, along with the major symbolic element, Moscow, already discussed. In several instances within the play, small references appear to be trivial or absurd remarks that Chekhov included for the purpose of making the dialogue more realistic. This is rarely the case; however, since these references carry thematic significance. Irina's suitors offer many of these smaller signifiers in order to present the masculine perspective toward the Woman Question.

Chekhov's title for the play, *The Three Sisters*, has three words; in this way, it is similar to *The Sea Gull* and *The Cherry Orchard*. All of these titles contain the article, *the*, because what follows is a primary symbol that functions throughout each respective play. Although there are other symbols of importance in *The Three Sisters*, it is the sisterhood of these three women that Chekhov claims as his primary symbol through his choice of its title. The second word of the title, *three*, has numerous connotations. Donald Rayfield suggests that Chekhov's inspiration for the trio might have been the three Bronte sisters.<sup>22</sup> Zubarev suggests that the three sisters are reminiscent of the three graces of mythology.<sup>23</sup> However, in *The Sea Gull*, one of Chekhov's primary references was Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and in *The Three Sisters*, we can see a similar conscious metaphoric use of *Macbeth*. The three Weird sisters of Shakespeare's play serve Hecate, triple-headed goddess of mythology. Chekhov places the sisters in a matriarchal opposition to the Christian concept of patriarchal trinity.<sup>24</sup> The third word of the title, *sisters*, also carries several connotations. Certainly the three are linked as a family. They are linked also with their brother, Andrey, by blood. The patriarchal role he inherits, however, is transforming along with the roles of women. Chekhov also might have been referring to the various groups of familial sisters who were tried for being active dissidents.<sup>25</sup> Chekhov's title calls attention to the ideal of a sisterhood of women struggling together for the right "to act" meaningfully.

Chekhov's choice of names for characters provides additional signifiers. Prozorov is a distinguished Russian surname.<sup>26</sup> The patronymic name, in this case Sergeyevna, utilized by Russian society as a sort of "middle" name used in a semi-formal fashion by acquaintances, ties the girls to their father, and the surname ties their father to Russia. Although identified as a Brigadier General, the father is most often referred to as "Colonel," the rank that Tsar Nicholas II insisted on carrying, refusing higher standing in his army despite his autocratic rule. The Russian people viewed the tsar as a father figure who watched over his people as though they were his children, just as Colonel Prozorov seems to have looked after his daughters before his death, autocratically. In *The Three Sisters*, the patriarch is dead, although his presence is felt throughout the play.

Additional signifiers of Chekhov's thematic intent can be decoded if we examine the names of the sisters. Chekhov indicated in his opening line that he

named Irina after a saint. Saint Irina and her sisters, Agape and Chionia, defied the Roman emperor Diocletian by refusing to give up the writings and the words of their father, the Christian God.<sup>27</sup> This refusal to relinquish masculine words and ideals is something Chekhov's sisters also are reluctant to do.<sup>28</sup> If we use Chekhov's conscious naming of Irina after a saint for our guide, then the oldest Prozorov daughter might be named after Saint Olga, the resourceful widow of Prince Igor, son of Riurik, founder of the Kievan dynasty in Russia in the tenth century. Saint Olga served as regent for her son, and as such is one of the last powerful women in early Russian history. Saint Olga was instrumental in introducing Christianity to the people of Russia and is one of only a handful of women canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church. As such, she is patron saint of converts and widows. Olga acts as regent of masculine power and converts Irina to the belief in the institution of marriage. Masha, the name of the middle sister, is the diminutive form of Marya. Mary Magdalene, patron saint of reformed prostitutes and of those who choose the contemplative life, characterizes Masha's romantic attachment to the heroic male. Thus, each of the three sisters' characters becomes linked to her name.

Another name with significance is Baron Krone-Altshauer Tuzenbach, whom Irina later will agree to marry. Although born into an aristocratic family, Tuzenbach continually apologizes for his aristocratic upbringing and his German ancestry, an ancestry he shares with Tsar Nicholas II. Ironically, it is Tuzenbach, perhaps the most poetic character in the play, who contrasts work with leisure rather than contrasting sacred work with profane work. Thus, he will give up his commission in the military in order to accept a job at the brickworks under the mistaken impression that all work is noble. In his final scene with Irina, he imagines himself like a dead tree, swaying in the wind among the other trees. Although he professes his love for Irina, he states clearly in Act 1 that he would never endure a wife who "philosophizes," and that meaningful action is impossible. Irina's marriage to him would be stifling. His death sounds the knell for the aristocratic way of life. In a final act of misplaced masculine pride and chivalry, Tuzenbach dies in a duel with Solyony.

Irina's other suitors, Solyony and Chebutykin, are reactionaries who would prefer to see Irina at home in a domestic environment rather than out working. When they enter Act 1, each is obsessed with his virility. Chebutykin, the doctor, expounds on a cure for baldness, and Solyony brags about the amount of weight he can lift.<sup>29</sup> Solyony fashions himself after the darkly romantic poet, Lermontov, but the sisters find him vulgar and upsetting.<sup>30</sup> When he professes his love to Irina, she refuses to take him seriously, and when he tries to insinuate himself into the sisters' private space, they object vehemently. Chebutykin is the military doctor who attached himself to the Prozorov family years ago when he fell in love with the sisters' mother. It is the romantic image of this woman as embodied in Irina



with which the doctor is in love. Chebutykin's birthday gift to Irina of a silver samovar might endear him to the sisters were it not for his ulterior motives in presenting it. The significance of the gift lies in its centrality to Russian familial life.<sup>31</sup> The samovar is tended by the woman of the house whose duty it is to serve tea to her husband and guests; thus, it resembles the hearth as symbol of a unified domesticity. Chebutykin pretends to be a surrogate father figure, but his interests are self-serving rather than altruistic. When he mentions Balzac's marriage in Berdichev in Act 2, Chebutykin hopes to suggest to Irina that she could marry him, despite his age, and live in the kind of family-centered security that Balzac's novels portray. His thoughtless killing of a woman reportedly haunts him in Act 3 as the ghost of Banquo haunts Macbeth, but Chebutykin would just as thoughtlessly kill the spirit of Irina by subjecting her to a life of domestic boredom. He covers his selfishness with a masquerade of nihilism, but his cold cruelty in allowing Tuzenbach to be killed in the duel spotlights his debasement. The bawdy tune that Chebutykin sings, "Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay," mocks the sisters' struggle to give meaning to their lives. This "most telling assault on Victorian mores" was imported from the west, and its origins may lie in a St. Louis house of ill repute. It was popularized by an English high-kicking vaudevillian in Paris, Lottie Collins, who performed the lyrics with "deceptive demureness."<sup>32</sup> The song begins, "A smart and stylish girl you see,/Belle of good society;/Not too strict but rather free . . ." and concludes with the lines, "I'd like it known and understood,/Though free as air, I'm never rude—/I'm not too bad, and not too good!"<sup>33</sup> Thus Chebutykin insidiously ridicules the sisters' attempts to emerge from the "realm of darkness" of societal expectations for proper behavior.

### Oppositions

Chekhov constructs a series of oppositions based on gender roles and expectations with Irina as potential mediator, forced to choose among these. He contrasts masculine and feminine behavioral models through juxtaposing Vershinin and Natasha. Against these, he positions Andrey, the castrated male, Masha, the rebellious, unhappily married woman, and Olga, the unmarried spinster.

Chekhov's major plays, as numerous critics have remarked, begin with an arrival and end with a departure. In *The Three Sisters*, Chekhov chooses to begin with two arrivals, that of the new battery commander, Colonel Vershinin, and that of Natasha. Vershinin departs at the end of the play along with the entire brigade. Natasha, however, remains. Rather than offering us her departure, Chekhov furnishes us with the departure of the Prozorov sisters. It is this dispossession of these noble, fine, upper-class sisters that seems to support the reading of the play as one of class struggle.<sup>34</sup> If one looks instead at the play as thematically centered on the Woman Question, Natasha and Vershinin embody the oppositions of traditional feminine and masculine behavior.

Vershinin's entrance has been foreshadowed along with information concerning his familial status. According to Tuzenbach, Vershinin is married to a woman who wears her hair in pigtails like a schoolgirl, "philosophizes," and attempts suicide. Although Vershinin's wife never appears on stage, her description uncannily foreshadows the journey that Irina will take throughout the course of the play, going from girl, to educated woman with no acceptable outlet for expression, to despairing romantic who threatens suicide in an emotional interlude near the end of Act 3. Vershinin also is the father of two little girls whose fate concerns him only from the safe distance of the sisters' sanctuary. Although he comments on his private life to Masha, he is seen to act in the public sphere. Vershinin in many ways portrays the doppelganger of the sisters' deceased father. In addition to being the self-removed father of little girls, he wears the identical uniform that their father wore in Moscow when the sisters were children, lived on the same street in the more western Basmanaya district, and has been transferred to this provincial outpost as his first command station. Vershinin's appearance offers the sisters the illusion of a hopeful return to Moscow and patriarchal support.

Vershinin is little more than an empty uniform, and his platitudes about life in the distant future quickly become tiresome to all except Masha who sees in him her savior. Tied to a husband she no longer loves, Masha longs for romance as salvation, and she searches for escape in books, as we discover when she quotes Pushkin's poem, "Ruslan and Lyudmila." This romantic poem tells the tale of a young woman, imprisoned in a dark wood, who desperately calls for her lover to save her. In the end, he hears her cries and rescues her. Although Masha refuses to acknowledge consciously the cat's imprisonment and the woman crying out for a savior as metaphors for her life, the chains of her marriage bind her to her husband. Masha is the romantic rendering of the woman who chooses dependence and subservience and lives to regret her choice. Her marriage at the age of eighteen to a man she considered intelligent has become her prison, but Vershinin rekindles her passion and they exchange secret messages in snatches of a love song that requires no words. Masha, who had been in mourning for the death of her spirit, reawakens to the melody of love. When Vershinin deserts Masha at the end of the play, the music, now played by the marching band, departs with him. The stereotypical romantic savior in uniform rushes off to the front to face action and leaves behind the women (not only Masha but his wife and children whom he leaves in the care of Olga) he supposedly loved without a backward glance.

If Vershinin can be viewed as the stereotypical soldier of the patriarchy, then Natasha can be perceived as the stereotypical femme fatale who uses her feminine wiles to gain power. One important clue to the discovery of Chekhov's intended focus on the Woman Question in *The Three Sisters* lies in his own descriptions of the play as having "four heroines."<sup>35</sup> If one sees the sisters and the interloper Natasha in an adversarial relationship, protagonist(s) and antagonist(s) (and which

is which depends on whether one reads the play as tragic or comic), then Chekhov's vision of "four heroines" is subverted. On the other hand, if one begins to explore the play as having four educated women as protagonists—and Chekhov portrays Natasha's blossoming self education—then the play becomes thematically focused on the Woman Question.

Natasha, when she is introduced, appears as a shy, insecure girl who embarrasses easily. It is her good fortune that the sisters' brother, Andrey, has fallen in love with her and at the end of Act One proposes marriage. Natasha, like many women of her era, gains power by marrying a husband with status, and she uses her new position to climb the social ladder to success. Chekhov links the character with Lady Macbeth, the archetypal controlling and manipulating wife, by the candle with which she prowls the stage. In this manner, Chekhov offers his audiences the traditional, stereotypical model for women's success based on sexual bartering, and Chekhov does not allow us to empathize with the character of Natasha. By the beginning of Act 2, we see her manipulating Andrey in the first step toward wresting domestic control from the sisters. Natasha, worried about the health of her infant son, wants Irina to vacate her sunny, warm bedroom so that young Bobik might have it. She also asks that the revelers whom the sisters have invited for the evening be denied entrance so as not to disturb the sleep of her son. The concern of a new mother for a sickly child should find a sympathetic reception in an audience's hearts, but instead this becomes an act of aggression on Natasha's part. She is perceived as an interloper, an outsider who does not belong, largely because the other characters treat her in this fashion. However, it is her choice of the female model for success—the maternal, castrating power that poses a threat to masculine hegemony—in opposition to the masculine, heroic model that vilifies the character. The home is the traditional locus for woman's power, and it is here that Natasha intends to succeed; therefore, she sets about learning the skills she will need to prosper. Natasha's learns to use French, the language formerly used by the more educated nobility as a mark of status. Unfortunately for Natasha, the use of this western language has fallen out of favor in nationalistic Russia, and its use marks her for scorn from the company gathered for the party. At this party, Natasha vocalizes her identity in relation to her children, for she recognizes them as her admission ticket to becoming mistress of the house. Her children give her a more powerful identity as mother, just as marriage raised her from the status of village girl to the more powerful identity as wife. Natasha learns also to use the men in her life to get ahead—at first, by manipulating her husband, Andrey, and then by taking a lover, Protopopov, who holds the highest rank in the town council. By Act 3, the house has become Natasha's domain, and she demands that Olga, the eldest sister and a teacher at a girls' school, stay out of domestic affairs. When Olga objects to Natasha's treatment of the old nanny Anfisa, Natasha replies, "We must come to some sort of understanding Olga. You're working at the school, and I'm working at

home. You're teaching and I run the house. And if I say anything about the servants, I know what I'm talking about." Natasha shoves Olga completely into the masculine sphere of influence, the workplace. Home is the sphere in which woman traditionally held supremacy, and Natasha has usurped this sphere.

By the end of the play, Natasha has usurped the place of the sisters physically and socially and has taken over the home completely; the sisters are left to gather in the garden. Natasha intends to extend her domain, however, and joins them long enough to articulate her plan to cut down the trees that the sisters love, the erect symbols of masculinity and spiritual growth, and replace them with more feminine, earth-hugging flowers. Natasha then rejoins her lover whom she has left in the house looking after the child we suspect is his, while her husband, the sisters' brother, is sent to push her other child through the garden in the baby carriage. The fork that Natasha finds out of place in the garden is our indication that she has learned to leave behind the vulgarity of her peasant upbringing, as forks are tools used by civilized society. Natasha has now become civilization's chief champion and asserts her position over the servants as well as over the family. She berates Irina for wearing an unattractive belt, a faux pas of which Olga accused Natasha in Act 1. She has dispossessed the sisters from their home, and she has dispossessed them of the traditional role of woman as head of the domestic realm and judge of refinement and manners.

In a similar fashion, Chekhov places Vershinin and Andrey in opposition. Where Vershinin abandons his children and wife to march into the world as soldier and romantic hero, Andrey remains at home to care for his. Natasha usurps power not only from the sisters but also from Andrey. Natasha orders him about and invites her lover into their home. Andrey, who dreamed of Moscow as the place where he would flourish as a respected professor, now pushes the baby carriage and pushes papers for the local council. Andrey's emasculation and confinement within the domestic realm contrasts with Vershinin's public masculinity. Vershinin's wife must attempt suicide in order to force him to return home, but Natasha manipulates Andrey more easily.

Natasha's function in the play, then, is to serve as feminine foil for the sisters. The feminine qualities that we attribute to Natasha—her female wiliness, her passive/aggressive manipulation of others, her protection of her children as the location of her identity—are perceived negatively. The characteristics that make Natasha repugnant illustrate her embrace of the traditional role of woman as wife, mother, head of household, and arbiter of refined taste—a role that previously evoked adulation. In stark contrast to the role he gave Natasha, the traditional role for woman is one that Chekhov portrays as being denied the Prozorov sisters, not by Natasha, but by their education, their background, and their environment. During the course of the play, the sisters learn that the traditional roles for women can no longer satisfy their desires. The three young women experience a shared epiphany

in which Natasha does not participate.

Natasha offers one aspect of archetypal feminine behavior, yet Chekhov contrasts her linear, masculine path to success with the more circular, feminine life journey taken by Masha. Masha and Natasha are much alike; yet, Chekhov achieves opposite responses to their situations. Where Natasha chooses marriage followed by adultery as a realistic means of achieving power, Masha chooses the same actions out of desire for a more fulfilling life. Masha, in the fashion of the heroines of George Sand, flouts convention and public opinion by asserting her right to claim a bit of happiness for herself. It is Masha who uses a fork to bang on a glass in an uncivilized fashion; it is Masha who drinks and swears in company; it is Masha who denigrates Natasha and rudely yells at the nanny, but we empathize with Masha's frustration while we condemn Natasha for similar behavior. Masha's journey is circular and feminine rather than linear. In contrast to Natasha's lunge toward another rung on the ladder of upward mobility, Masha, who began in mourning for the loss of the salvation she had hoped to find in her husband, ends in mourning for the loss of the salvation she had hoped to find in her lover. Like the birds that have begun their autumnal migration, Masha, abandoned once again, sees the cycle of her life spiraling into the future. Her rebellion has gained her little except a few fleeting moments of joy followed by more suffering.

Vershinin and Natasha serve as oppositional catalysts for the action; however, at the end of the play, Chekhov constructs another gender polarity within the trinity of sisters. Masha, as seen in the previous paragraph, becomes the feminine model of the "new woman," while Olga portrays the masculine rendering of this model. While Masha longs for freedom from the drudgery of her married existence and rebels by choosing to commit adultery, Olga longs for freedom from the drudgery of her unmarried existence and tedious job. By the end of the play, Olga has become the antithesis of the girl to which she longed to return in the beginning. She has become headmistress of the school and has moved to an apartment on its grounds and has taken the old nanny, Anfisa, with her. It is Olga who has provided this elderly woman with a room of her own at last. It is Olga who accepts responsibility for the care of Vershinin's wife and daughters when he leaves. In her final speech, Olga echoes the words that Vershinin had used in the opening scene of the play to theorize the sisters' martyrdom. She dreams of a future where "Our faces, our voices will be forgotten and people will even forget that there were once three of us here. . . . But our sufferings will mean happiness for those who come after us. . . . Then peace and happiness will reign on earth, and we shall be remembered kindly and be blessed." These words are the words offered earlier by Vershinin, the soldier. Olga, like Saint Irina and her sisters, refuses to renounce the words and ideals of the patriarchy. She has become a convert herself, in essence stepping in as patriarch where none survives.

Irina, whose journey has reached its end in reconciliation, voices the positions

of both sisters. She echoes Masha, repeating, "We must go on living," and, like Olga, she looks ahead to a future when the purpose for their suffering will be clear. She will enter the world and work and hope. The final lines of the play look both to the past and to the future, and Irina must make her way in the present by choosing among the various gender models with which she is confronted.

#### Feminist Issues

*The Three Sisters*, when viewed thematically as centered on the Woman Question, raises many of the issues that echo in contemporary feminist approaches to drama. Chekhov, unlike many of those who study his play, did not wish to bury these issues or subsume them into questions of class, economics, or the broader issues of human rights. The rite of passage that Irina undertakes can be viewed from a Lacanian perspective as an example of suturing. By placing Irina and her sisters in the subject position, Chekhov subverts patriarchal privilege in establishing identity. The complex structure of the play also serves to subvert any privileging of masculine narrative structures. Finally, Chekhov raises the question of the male gaze and the visual display of women as objects.

Object relations psychology focuses on the establishment of identity through the perception of one's separateness and subjectivity. Freud, in questioning "What Do Women Want?" proposed penis envy. Jacques Lacan reframed Freudian psychoanalysis based on linguistics. For Lacan, the pre-Oedipal stage, when the infant has no sense of separation from the mother and has not established identity through language, is the Imaginary stage. The infant can construct subjectivity only through linguistics, by splitting his/her identity from that of the m/other and identifying self as the "I" who acts. The split from the m/other is experienced as a loss or lack and is referred to as the Mirror stage. Through the painful process of suturing, the child enters the Symbolic order where separateness and subjectivity are constructed through discourse. The male child, perceiving his distinctness from the female m/other, has an easier experience in establishing subjectivity, while the female child perceives her otherness as problematic. Thus the suturing process and the Symbolic order privilege the male, and identity as separation or individuation has been valorized above connection or relatedness. Feminist theory, then, suggests that the perception of the Symbolic as healthy and the Imaginary as regressive is no longer acceptable.<sup>36</sup>

Irina's rite of passage is a journey from the Imaginary to the threshold of the Symbolic. In Act 1, Irina is reborn into a world in which her mother is no longer present. Irina's embarkation, as mentioned earlier, portrays her vision of herself adrift in a boat with white birds soaring overhead. Although she perceives herself alone, she also perceives herself as linked with nature through the birds whose instinctual migration exhibits the tension between free will and determinism. To fly is an act of freedom, but to fly instinctually is an act of collective determinism

that challenges psychoanalytic identity formation with biological boundaries. Irina enters the Mirror stage, and her sisters join her on this journey. Olga reminisces of childhood and connection with the mother, and Masha is consumed by lack and desires salvation through the acquisition of the phallus, in this case a lover/savior. But at the end of the rite of passage, the sisters remain both individual and interrelated. Each is uniquely individual, yet the three have become members of a sisterhood of women who desire subjectivity and interrelatedness. While each will go her separate way, they remain connected by their desire "to act." The play, then, portrays the painful process of suturing by embracing gender oppositions and placing value on both the Imaginary and Symbolic orders rather than privileging one at the expense of the other.

Feminists have rejected realism because it often privileges the male as subject while the female is positioned as other. Stated simply, women are often portrayed as the objects of male desire rather than subjects in their own right. Traditionally, women have been defined in relation to the male as daughter, wife, mother, or lover. Chekhov subverts this kind of objectification of women by positioning the sisters as the subjects within the play. They have no father, and their brother, the male head of household, has been stripped of authority. They must choose their own course of action. Masha, although married, refuses definition as the wife of Kulygin, and Chekhov offers us her decision to consummate the affair with Vershinin rather than his. It is ironic that Natasha, the woman who chooses object status as wife and mother to establish identity, often is perceived as subject who acts. All four heroines, then, are positioned as subjects within the play.

Chekhov's narrative structure, by embracing both a masculine, linear plot and a feminine, circular thematic plot structure, positions the play as feminist text. A feminist critique of realism condemns linear plot structures that privilege the Symbolic subject and offer closure. The linear narrative pattern portrays a subject on a quest who meets and overcomes opposition in order to gain the object of his desire (often a woman) and achieve closure. However, the subject who initiates the quest in *The Three Sisters* is Irina. Opposition comes from the complex tension of gender roles in relation to one another rather than in a single, linear format. The resolution of the play refutes closure and fixed meaning by remaining "interrogative."<sup>37</sup> Irina's loss of her dream of Moscow and romantic, patriarchal protection forces her subjectivity; however, closure and meaning remain open.

A final feminist issue that is addressed in the play is that of the "male gaze." Feminists argue that the portrayal of women on stage and in the media has been designed for male perception and places women in object status. The characters themselves challenge this perception through their journey. In the beginning of the play, the sisters gossip and flirt with the new commander. In turn, Vershinin expresses his appreciation of their beautiful home and the flowers that they have displayed in vases. At Natasha's entrance, Olga chastises her for wearing a belt

that does not match her outfit. The sisters are willing participants in their objectification by the male gaze. However, at the end of the play, it is Natasha, the wife and mother, who clings to fashion and objectification. Natasha now berates Irina for her choice of belt. Natasha, often perceived as the instigator and active dispossessor of the sisters, ironically returns to the male gaze of her lover; however, the sisters are no longer consumed by worry over appearance. The men whose gaze carried significance are gone. The feminine flowers that were cut down to be put in vases for display will now be planted outside, and the sisters also have chosen to live outside the confines of the domestic realm. No longer on display as objects, they face a future in which they must grow as subjects.

### Notes

1. For an examination of the origins of the women's movement in Russia and its relationship to women's movements in Europe, see Linda Harriet Edmondson, *Feminism in Russia, 1900-17* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1984) Chap. 1.

2. Rousseau offered the following description: "A woman's education must be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of women for all time." See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (London: 1911) 328.

3. Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978) 4.

4. See Edmondson 18-20 and Stites 168. When Solyony insists there are two universities in Moscow in Act 2, he is referring to the separate courses for women that were allowed to reopen in Moscow only a few months prior to the first performances of the play.

5. Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978) 27.

6. The Code of Laws decreed that "a husband is obliged to love his wife as his own body, to live with her in concord, to esteem and protect her, to excuse her deficiencies, and to assist her in her infirmities," while "the woman must obey her husband as the head of the family, must show him love, respect, and total obedience, and must grant him all pleasure and affection. . . ." Dorothy Atkinson, "Society and the Sexes in the Russian Past," *Women in Russia*, ed. Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Warshofsky Lapidus (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1977) 32-33.

7. The legal system listed the only possible grounds for divorce as impotence for a period of over three years, unexplained absence for a period of over five years, deprivation of civil rights, or adultery that offered eyewitness testimony as proof. Such a divorce would be expensive and laden with publicity. See Stites 7.

8. 181.

9. 8.

10. Mikhailov argued that cultural conditioning rather than biological inferiority explained the



subordination of women and that equal educational opportunities would emancipate women. See Lapidus 29. Pirogov, a noted physician, organized a group of nurses to be sent to the front line of battle during the Crimean War. Pirogov expounded the success of the program in a popular essay entitled "Questions of Life," an article that intrigued women with its allusions to "struggle and sacrifice." See Stites 30. Dobrolyubov's review of Ostrovsky's plays entitled "The Realm of Darkness" proved seminal in bringing these questions to light. Dobrolyubov denounced the subjection of women in a realm of darkness "where domestic atrocity was a feature of everyday life . . . a loveless realm, where paternal tyranny, generational hatred, ignorance, and brutishness flourished in the dark." See Stites 35.

11. For a thorough and enlightening examination of these ideas, see Catherine A. Shuler, *Women in Russian Theatre: The Actress in the Silver Age* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

12. For a concise explanation of masculine and feminine plot structures, see Charles S. Waxberg, *The Actor's Script: Script Analysis for Performers* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1998) Chap. 1.

13. Some of the studies that approach the plays in a linear fashion include J. L. Styan, *Chekhov in Performance: A Commentary on the Major Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971) and Richard Gilman, *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening into Eternity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995). Those that approach the systems of signifiers include Vera Zubarev, *A Systems Approach to Literature: Mythopoetics of Chekhov's Four Major Plays* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), Natalia Pervukhina, *The Sense and the Nonsense* (Ottawa: Legas, 1993), and Martin Esslin, "Chekhov and the Modern Drama," *Anton Chekhov: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999) 142-143.

14. Birthday is an American translation of "saint's day." Children frequently were named for the saint whose name day was closest to their date of birth. All quotations from the play are from Anton Chekhov, *The Three Sisters in Six Plays of Chekhov*, trans. Robert W. Corrigan (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1962).

15. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle I. Caffee (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960) 4-5.

16. 13.

17. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982) 30-31.

18. For an excellent discussion of the play as Shrovetide festival, see Zubarev.

19. In the late 1860s the Russian government began hiring women to work in the telegraph offices where educational requirements were minimal. These requirements included basic arithmetic and good penmanship, along with the Russian language. See Stites 60.

20. Van Gennep 166-167.

21. Martin Esslin mentions this methodology in "Chekhov and the Modern Drama" in *Anton Chekhov: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999) 142-143, and Chekhov's recurrent use of signifiers forms the basis of Pervukhina's *The Sense and the Nonsense*.

22. Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov: A Critical Study of Chekhov's Prose and Drama* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1999) 213.

23. Zubarev points out the polar oppositions of Irina's white dress and Masha's black dress and calls attention to the importance of Olga's blue dress as a uniform. Zubarev 104.

24. Gender opposition is a strong structural component in the play and will be discussed later.

25. Pushkareva lists several: the three Zasluch sisters, the three Figner sisters, etc. See Natalia Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History*, trans. and ed. Eve Levin (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997) 204.

26. Rayfield 219.

27. Saint Irina was portrayed as the heroine of the play *Dulcitus*, authored by Hrosvitha of Gandersheim, our first known woman playwright.

28. This is particularly true for Olga whose final lines echo almost word for word those of Vershinin's earlier teleological musings.

29. Solyony's insistence on measuring size and strength in numerical ratios is reminiscent of another popular author of the day, Proudhon, an opponent of women's rights who insisted that males were superior to women biologically. In Proudhon's view, women, whose stature was smaller than that of men, were physically weaker. Women's brains also were smaller than those of men; therefore, they were incapable of intellectual rigor.

30. As Herbert Moss points out, Solyony embodies an aspect of the military man that the sisters would prefer to ignore, that of socially sanctioned murderer. This is the reason that he feels compelled to disguise his scent under the veneer of perfume. The sisters' idealization of military men disallows their recognition of the darker aspects of masculinity as embodied in Solyony. See Howard Moss, "Three Sisters," *Anton Chekhov: Modern Critical Views* 123.

31. Styan provides an excellent discussion of the gift of the samovar as Chebutykin's attempt to substitute himself as father to Irina. It is my position that he would prefer the role of husband to that of father.

32. *New World Anthology of American Music*, "Progress and Protest in the Gilded Age: 1865-93," NW267.

33. Angelo A. Asher and Richard Morton, "Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay."

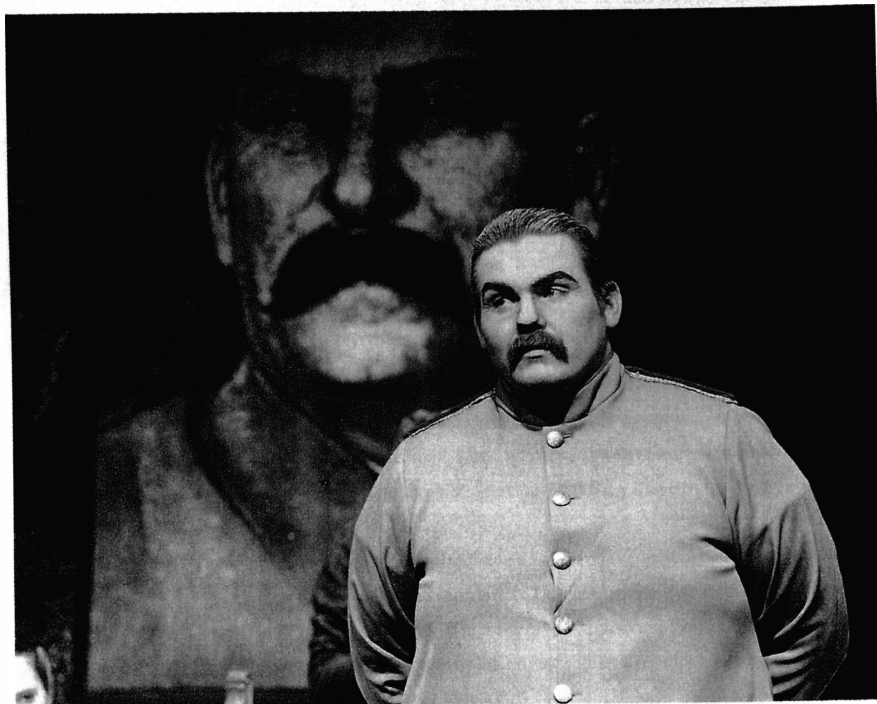
34. Valency calls Natasha "brutal, coarse, and stupid." See Maurice Valency, *The Breaking String* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966) 220. John Tulloch recognizes the polarization of these two characters but chooses to see Vershinin as epic visionary and claims that Chekhov indicts Natasha for "a crushing evil." See John Tulloch, *Chekhov: A Structuralist Study* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1980) 103. Styan comments on "her single minded drive, her repulsive social climbing, her infidelity to Andrey, her petty cruelties in the household, her insidious domination of the family as a whole. . . ." See *Chekhov in Performance* 152.

35. In a letter to an actress friend, Mme. V. F. Kommissarzhevsky, Chekhov wrote, "The play turned out dreary, long, and inconvenient; I say inconvenient because it has, for instance, four heroines and a spirit, as they say, more gloomy than gloom." See Anton P. Chekhov, *The Life and Letters of Anton Tchekhov*, trans. & ed. S.S. Kotliansky and Philip Tomlison (New York: Benjamin Blom Inc., 1965) 275. In another letter, this one to the actress Olga Knipper who was to become his wife, Chekhov describes the principal characters as "four young women of the intelligentsia." Quoted in Laurence Senelick, *The Chekhov Theater: A Century of the Plays in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP,

1997) 58.

36. For a thorough examination of Lacanian analysis and feminist theory, I recommend Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1982).

37. Catherine Belsey defines "interrogative" texts as those which "demonstrate an 'unfixing' of the subject, a destabilizing of meaning, and acknowledge the painful suturing of the Imaginary and the Symbolic." See Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (NY: Routledge, 1995) 36.



Nick von Esmarch as Stalin in The Power of the Dog Lewis & Clark College, 1998  
(Photo by John Klicker)