



Exploring Socialism And Character Dynamics In Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*

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Abstract: With the rising focus on how the morality of man can be molded by his nature and the environment that nurtures him, much of contemporary philosophies fixate on the influence of societal structures and doctrines on the formative development of an individual. This study aims to analyze the socialist themes in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, putting the characters up against the ideologies that shaped their reaction to the changing social strata presented in the play.

Index Terms – socialism, class system, transition, Chekhov

1. ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) was a Russian playwright and short-story writer well-known for his realistic depth of characterization and the use of authentic dialogue in his writings which thoroughly captured life in Russia of his time.

Considered as the founder of the modern short story, Chekhov's writing bears a blunt precision which explores the themes of human suffering, resilience and the complexities of the human condition with remarkable empathy. He employs the stream-of-consciousness technique to focus on the character's inner thoughts and feelings which enable readers to become critically involved in the plot, amplifying the significance of acknowledging the life of mankind in all its spheres.

2. THE CHERRY ORCHARD

Using his own experiences to apply a realistic sense of expression, Chekhov's last play, *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), is written as a fusion of comedy and tragedy that encapsulates the changing and inevitable facets of life and its repercussions. Every character in this play undergoes inescapable changes under the societal and economic shift in Russia that is driven by a capitalist system.

Chekhov wrote *The Cherry Orchard* in 1903, during a time when many noble families were losing their estates due to cases of bankruptcy and the new economic system, with his own family having to sell their estate to pay off their debts. The play captures the anxiety of the aristocracy who are unable to adapt to a changing society alongside the emergence of new social classes, illustrated by the character Lopakhin, the son of a former serf who buys the family estate.

During the production of the play, Russia was also facing political unrest from the events of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) as well as the increasing civil tensions that eventually resulted in the 1917 Russian Revolution. Set in such times, the premise of the play follows the period after the abolishment of serfdom in Russia and the shift of political and social dynamics brought along with it. Lyubov Andreyevna Ranevsky arrives at the family estate with her daughter and servants, greeted by an entourage of family, friends and acquaintances. The joyful reunion is however, short-lived when Ranevsky is informed that unless she pays off her debts by the end of August, the property will be auctioned off to the highest bidder. The rest of the play follows a push-and-pull of ideas and beliefs, the contrast between characters who cannot move on from a glorious past and embrace the system of a new social hierarchy.

Based on the turbulent political atmosphere of the time, the themes of social change and loss in the play are used to depict both the past grandeur of the aristocracy and the inevitable decline of that system, presenting a poignant reminder of Russia's transformation.

3. The Intersection of Class and Change

Socialism is a political and economic system in which the means of production are commonly owned by the state or the government, bearing an aim to create a society where everyone can have an equal share of resources and wealth. Socialism arose as an opposition to the Tsarist Regime in order to reinstate a new society in support of the peasantry.

A man of his time, Anton Chekhov bore witness to the early revolutionary phase in Russia in the late 19th century, living in a time where the socialist ideas were in its developmental phase.

The Cherry Orchard, the last play written by Chekhov before his death in 1904, explores the aftermath of the class struggle which paved the path for equal economic opportunities and equities for the bourgeois. Following the dynamic between characters who represent the Russian aristocracy's decline as well as the new social class of merchants who overtake the economic market and by extension, the power dynamics in Russian society, Chekhov's play illustrates the wide and mixed responses to the socialist ideas that was slowly permeating into the cracks of different communities in the nation at the time. Though Chekhov did not consider himself a socialist, his works exemplify many political themes, putting forward his critique on the societal framework of Russia.

The title object of the play, the cherry orchard, is the landmark of Ranevsky's estate yet is never depicted in the play. Mentioned only as a symbolic presence through the character's thoughts and memories, the orchard stands as both an insignia of aristocracy as well as an object of commercial value for the merchant class and nouveau riche.

"I was born here...without the cherry orchard my life has no meaning."

- Ranevsky, Act 3

Madam Ranevsky, a soft-hearted but spendthrift woman, sees the cherry orchard as a token of familial affections; a distinguished past that built the foundation of her naïve beliefs and lack of self-preserving instincts. Her character is one that is dependent on the civility enforced by her aristocratic status, disillusioned by the luxury that raised her and left her unprepared for the endurance required to make it in a world unphased by the influence of nobility. She represents the ignorance of the aristocratic folk who lack ambition and cling to casual opulence provided by a high social standing.

(add more)

"Lopakhin will lay the axe to the cherry orchard, how the trees fall to the ground!"

- Lopakhin, Act 3

He sees the existing orchard as a beautiful but worthless asset that prevents the property from being developed. He is frustrated by the family's refusal to change and adapt to the changing times, making him determined to acquire the land and carry out his plan.

When Lopakhin wins the estate from the auction, it is not just the lucrative value of the orchard that brings him joy. His celebratory mood comes from the realisation that he has achieved to pave a new path that breaks away from his family history of serfdom, built on this very estate, indicating the upheaval of the class structure. By buying the orchard and destroying it, Lopakhin is symbolically tearing down the higher-class authority that pushed them to subservience, breaking free from his past and the old social order.

"In the old days, forty or fifty years ago, they used to dry the cherries...sent in wagons to Moscow and Kharkof. A heap of money!"

- Firs, Act 1

The elderly butler represents the old Russian order, clinging to a bygone time that has now bent its knee to a reformed system unobstructed by class privilege. His unwavering loyalty to Ranevsky and Gayef illustrates how the older generation are accustomed to a life to servitude and cannot adapt to an environment where serfs are liberated from their and-owning masters. When abandoned at the end of the play, forgotten by the very people he swore his allegiance to, Firs ends up in the same condition as the cherry orchard- cut away from

what is familiar and secure, reflecting the isolation brought on by social change on those who are unable to acquiesce to the coming of a new era.

“Don’t you see that from every cherry tree...human beings are peering out at you?”

- Trofimov, Act 2

Chekhov portrays the socialist thought through the character of Peter Trofimov- dubbed “the eternal student” – who sees the cherry orchard as a symbol of the autocratic past. He is the realist of the play, informing the audience about the change and revolution in Russia along with the indispensable need for socialism. Trofimov views Lopakhin’s swift business prowess as a necessary part of evolution, believing in a government that provides liberty from oppression and sufficient equity for all regardless of their social status.

“What have you done to me, Peter? Why is it that I no longer love the cherry orchard as I did? I used to love it so tenderly; I thought there was no better place on earth than our garden.”

- Anya, Act 2

Ranevsky’s seventeen-year-old daughter, Anya, is a spirited young woman whose character reflects the promise of the future. Though initially attached to the orchard as part of her family’s history and idyllic childhood, Anya is made aware of the suffering of change over her interactions with Trofimov. Unlike her impractical mother who dwells on the past without making any plans for the future, Anya agonises over the family’s declining fortune and lack of tenacity. With Trofimov’s dissemination, Anya begins to look beyond the nostalgia of the orchard and opens herself to embrace a new societal order, viewing the loss of the estate as an opportunity for a new life.

“Everyone is saying we're congratulating me, but the truth of it is there's nothing there, nothing at all whatsoever, it's all just a dream.”

- Varya, Act 1

Varya, Ranevsky’s adopted daughter, is a conscientious woman who works tirelessly for the estate in order to secure her future and maintain stability for her family. Her actions are driven by a realistic and often desperate desire to ensure that her family has a future to look forward to instead of sitting idly by and waiting for help to come knocking at their door. Though Varya appears pessimistic in comparison to the hopeful Anya, her reactions mirror the social change in Russia where individuals like herself must take on responsibility to survive the change despite having limited agency, showing how new realities require labour and ability.

The orchard represents an inseparable web of sentiments that connect the characters from different spectrums of society and present their attitudes to the arrival of an unavoidable change in their ways of life. For the likes of Ranevsky and Gaev, their aristocratic identity can no longer be used as a tool of influence and they are unable to plan ahead for their future after being heavily reliant on a life of luxury borne out of their privilege. Firs and Lopakhin display two sides of the same coin. While Firs and his very being stands by the prestige of a waning era, his nostalgia and deference to tradition cannot adjust to society’s shifts and eventually, like the class system, he too is abandoned. Lopakhin, on the other hand, does his best to tear through the weight of class distinction to become the affluent man he is. He welcomes the new social and economic order, advocating for the triumph of capitalism over the declining aristocracy.

Anya and Trofimov make up the young voices witnessing the creed of social progress at a stage where they can actively understand the societal shift. Their reactions differ due to their upbringing but ultimately share a hope for a glorious future. The idealist Trofimov openly advocates for social progress, criticising the aristocratic order in favour for a society that commits to hard work. The impressionable Anya represents the aristocratic population that bear a more progressive attitude to the revolutionary changes, starting anew under Trofimov’s influence and breaking away from her past with the estate.

Varya’s response depicts the predicament of those stuck in the middle. Her sense of security comes from her relation to Ranevsky and the estate even though she is aware of the family’s financial troubles. Her relationship with Lopakhin remains stagnant due to his ambitious endeavours that leave no time for the couple to nurture their connection. As Ranevsky’s adopted daughter, Varya portrays a blend of upper-class education and subservient ethics, however her sentiments towards the orchard aren’t as rooted as her mother’s. Her practicality allows her to be realistic towards the family’s circumstance and their need to survive in the changing social and economic environment.

4. The Socialist Motive

Chekhov's works often explore the struggles of the underprivileged serfs against the despotic norms of society. Though he is not explicitly involved in the socialist ideology, his literary works bear a rich variety of social themes that reflect the socio-political perspective of Russia during his time. Through *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov uses the narrative to depict the change brought about by the economic shifts of an evolving society that has to adapt to the societal transformation brought along with new times. Every character is affected by the estate in different ways and their response show the ability of different scopes of society to withstand the fluctuations of social relationships. The play embodies a socialist motive by magnifying Russia's transition from feudalism to capitalism, focusing on class conflict, social mobility, and the ambiguous outcomes of progress and revolution, with Chekhov critiquing both the apathy of the old aristocracy and the relentless cynicism of the emerging middle class.

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