

# The Cherry Orchard

ANTON CHEKHOV

## Key Facts

**FULL TITLE** · *The Cherry Orchard: A Comedy in Four Acts*

**AUTHOR** · Anton Chekhov

**TYPE OF WORK** · Play

**GENRE** · Comedy (satirical, ironic, often concerned with marriage proposals); Tragedy (involving catastrophic loss as a result of the protagonist's weakness)

**LANGUAGE** · Russian

**TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN** · From 1901 to 1903, in Yalta, an island in the Mediterranean.

**DATE OF FIRST PERFORMANCE** · seventeen January 1904

**DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION** · During the last week of June, 1904 (just a few days before Chekhov's death on July one)

**NARRATOR** · There is no narrator in the play

**CLIMAX** · The climax comes in Act Three, when Lopakhin reveals he has bought the orchard

**PROTAGONIST** · Ranevsky

**SETTING (TIME)** · Between May and October of a year around the beginning of the 20th century

**SETTING (PLACE)** · At the country estate of Lyuba Ranevsky

**FALLING ACTION** · Everyone leaves the house in October after Lopakhin purchases the estate in August; this departure constitutes the entire fourth Act

**TENSE** · Not applicable (drama); but the story is told both directly and in flashbacks

**FORESHADOWING** · Firs walk across the stage in Act One foreshadows his death scene in Act Four; in Act One, Lopakhin foreshadows his own purchase of the orchard by declaring that the orchard cannot be saved except by his plan;

**TONE** · Varying between absurd, satirical, ironic and tragic

**THEMES** · Modernity vs. the old russia; breaking with the past; nature

**MOTIFS** · The union of naturalism and symbolism; miscommunication; self-consciousness

**SYMBOLS** · The cherry orchard; the sound of a breaking string

## Context

Anton Pavlevich Chekhov was born on January 17th, 1860, in Taganrog, Russia. His father Pavel was a shopkeeper the town, which was small, provincial, and on the Sea of Azov in the south of Russia, and his grandfather was Egor Chekhov, a serf. Serfs were the legal property of the landowners who owned the property on which they resided; it was thus a form of slavery. In 1841, Egor bought freedom for himself and his family at the price of 875 rubles.

Russia had been changing ever since the early 18th century, when Tsar Peter the Great carried out a series of reforms with the intent of modernizing Russia in Western Europe's image. European styles in fashion and art were imported, the Western canon was widely read among the nobility, and French was adopted as the language of cultured discourse. A large government bureaucracy was created; the achievement of rank became an obsession of Russian life. During Chekhov's childhood, in the time of Tsar Alexander II, a second wave of reforms was underway, reforms that further liberalized the country and its economy. The most important of these was the Emancipation Declaration of 1861, which freed the serfs from bondage. These reforms caused great controversy, as they introduced what was, in effect, the beginning of a free-market economy, undermining the power of the nobility, and sometimes even impoverishing them. The situation displayed in *The Cherry Orchard*, of a wealthy landowning family forced to sell their estate in order to pay their debts, was thus a familiar one in the Russian society of Chekhov's day.

Chekhov himself had a relatively quiet childhood. He attended the local Russian grammar school, worked in his father's store and occasionally wrote small pieces for the amusement of his family. Taganrog was not a typical provincial town; it was a multicultural port, with Italians, Greeks, and Turks residing in the wealthier sections of town and Russians such as the Chekhovs living in comparatively poor suburbs. It had a theater, which the young Chekhov would often visit. When Chekhov was sixteen, Pavel's store failed, and the entire family had to move to Moscow—the entire family, that is, except for Anton. A merchant (and friend of the family) had helped the Chekhovs with a loan, but insisted on keeping Anton with him in the house as a kind of collateral. As soon as he could, he left Taganrog in order to pursue medical studies in Moscow in 1879 at the age of 19.

That year, Chekhov began to write comic stories in order to pay his medical school tuition. By the time he was twenty, he was employed by *The Spectator* magazine as their regular humorist. Over ninety percent of Chekhov's published work appeared in magazines before he was twenty-eight, and, by this age, he had already established himself as a premier writer of short stories. As he developed as a writer, his stories began to take on deeper and more profound themes, as he moved away from his comic roots.



stage, lost dialogue and its mixing of comic and tragic elements. But many saw the play as undeniably tragic, focusing on Ranevsky's downfall as the important element of the story.

Chekhov's critical reception outside of Russia was mixed, partly due to translation problems and the play's unique "Russian-ness", which Chekhov himself foresaw as being impossible for any foreign audience to overcome. Many foreign readers and viewers faulted the play for being unheroic, negative, and devoid of plot. But no less a figure than George Bernard Shaw said that "hearing Chekhov's plays make me want to tear up my own", and Chekhov's drama has gained increasing acceptance and praise over the course of the last century. Chekhov managed to attend *The Cherry Orchard's* opening night gala at the Moscow Arts Theatre on January 17th, 1904, his forty-fourth birthday. The night was also intended to celebrate his 25th year in literature; but the sight of the ill, dying Chekhov, now in the last stages of his disease, was not a cause for celebration. He remained in Moscow for the last few months of his life, finally succumbing to tuberculosis on July 1st of that same year, a few days after the *The Cherry Orchard's* first publication.

## Plot Overview

The play begins in the pre-dawn hours of a May morning in Russia. We learn that the cherry trees are in bloom even though it is frosty outside. Yermolay Lopakhin, a friend of the family, and Dunyasha a maid on the Ranevsky estate, wait for the estate's owner Ranevsky at the estate's main house, in a room called "the nursery". Lopakhin reveals that Ranevsky has been in Paris for the last five years. Lopakhin is a local businessman in his mid- thirties, dressed in a fine white suit (with gaudy yellow shoes), whose feelings towards Ranevsky are mixed between affectionate gratitude for past kindnesses, and resentment at her condescension toward him because of his humble, peasant origins. Also on the estate is Simon Yephikodov, a hapless youth nicknamed "Simple Simon" because of his frequent and ridiculous accidents.



Soon, Ranevsky arrives from Paris, along with her daughter Anya, who has been with her there since Easter of that year; Yasha, a young manservant who has accompanied her on her travels; and Charlotte, Anya's governess, who brings along her dog. Also accompanying her are Firs, her 87-year old manservant; her elder, yet still infantile, brother Leonid Gayev; and her adopted daughter Varya; these last three have stayed in Russia but went to the station to greet Ranevsky on her return

Ranevsky expresses her joy and amazement to be home again, while Anya reveals to Varya the relative poverty in which she found her mother when she arrived in Paris and the way in which she continues to spend money. Varya reveals that the family's estate is to be sold at auction on the 22nd of August, in order to pay their debts. Anya reveals that Ranevsky's departure for Paris was caused by her grief over two deaths: that of her husband six years before and that of her son, Grisha, who drowned a month thereafter.

Soon, Anya departs for bed, and Lopakhin brings up the issue of the imminent sale. He proposes a solution; Ranevsky should parcel out the land on her estate, build cottages on the parcels, and lease them out to summer cottage-holders, who are becoming increasingly numerous. Gayev and Ranevsky dismiss

thr idea, because it would necessitate cutting down the family's beloved (and gigantic) cherry orchard. Before he leaves, Lopakhin offers them a loan of 50,000 rubles to buy their property at auction if they change their minds, and predicts there will be no other way of saving the orchard. Ranevsky then lends some money to a fellow impoverished landowner, Boris Simeonov-Pischik. Peter Trofimov arrives; he was Grisha's tutor before the drowning, and thus he brings back painful memories for Ranevsky. Before the end of the act, after complaining about Ranevsky's inability to curb her spending, Gayev outlines three alternatives to Lopakhin's plan: a financing scheme involving some banker friends of his, Ranevsky borrowing some money from Lopakhin (without the condition that they then cut down the orchard), and a wealthy aunt in Yaroslavl who might provide a loan.

In the Second Act, we are introduced more closely to the young servants on the estate, Dunyasha, Yasha, and Yephikodov, who are involved in a love triangle: Yephikodov loves Dunyasha, Dunyasha loves Yasha, and Yasha is very much in love with himself. Soon, Lopakhin, Ranevsky, Gayev, Anya and Varya appear, and they are again debating over Lopakhin's plan to turn the orchard into cottage country. Lopakhin becomes frustrated with Ranevsky's reluctance; she, in turn, thinks his plan is vulgar, and says that if they plan to sell the cherry orchard, she wants to be sold along with it. Ranevsky reveals that she has a lover in Paris who has been sending her telegrams, asking her to return, and who robbed her, left her, and as a result drove her to a suicide attempt.

Soon, Trofimov appears, and gives several speeches about the importance of work and the laziness and stupidity of Russian intellectuals. In a quiet moment, the sound of a snapping string is heard, and no one can identify its source. A drunkard appears, asking for directions, and then money; Ranevsky ends up giving him several gold pieces. Disturbed, most of the group leave, except for Anya and Trofimov. They discuss Varya's growing suspicion that Anya and Trofimov are having an affair, which they are not; Trofimov declares that they are "above love". The act ends with Yephikodov sadly playing his guitar and Varya calling out, in vain, for Anya.



In the Third Act, Ranevsky throws a party on the day of the auction. The guests consist of several local bureaucratic officials such as the stationmaster and a post-office clerk. Charlotte entertains the guests with a series of magic tricks. Ranevsky worries anxiously about why Gayev and Lopakhin have not yet returned. Ranevsky fears that the orchard has been lost, that the aunt in Yaroslavl has apparently not given them enough money to buy it, and that Gayev's other sources have failed to come through. She and Trofimov get into an argument; Trofimov accuses her of not being able to face the truth, and she accuses him of being unusual for never having fallen in love. Lopakhin and Gayev soon return from the auction. Lopakhin reveals to everyone that he has bought the estate and intends to carry out his plans for the orchard's destruction. Anya tries, in vain, to comfort her mother.

In the last act, it is October, and the trees in the cherry orchard are already being cut down. All the characters are in the process of leaving; Lopakhin will depart to Kharkov for the winter, Varya to the Ragulins', another family that lives fifty miles away. Gayev plans to live in the town, working at a bank, Anya will go off to school, and Ranevsky will leave for Paris with Yasha, to rejoin her lover. Charlotte has no idea what she will do, but Lopakhin assures her he will help her find something. Trofimov and Lopakhin

exchange an affectionate if contentious farewell; Yasha leaves Dunyasha, weeping, without a second thought; and Anya tearfully says goodbye to her mother. Anya worries that Firs, who has taken ill, has not been sent to the hospital as he was supposed to be, but Yasha indignantly assures Anya that he has. Ranevsky encourages Lopakhin to propose to Varya; but the proposal is never made—Lopakhin leaves Varya alone, and in tears. Finally, Gayev and Ranevsky bid a tearful farewell to their house. Everyone leaves, locking the doors behind them.

But Firs is, in fact, accidentally left behind, having fallen ill and being forgotten in the rush of the departure. He walks onstage after everyone else has left, quietly muttering about how life has left him by. He lies on the couch, and silently expires as two sounds are heard; again, the sound of a string snapping, and the sound of an axe cutting down a cherry tree in the orchard.

## Character List

**Mrs. Lyuba Ranevsky** - Mrs. Ranevsky is a middle-aged Russian woman, the owner of the estate and the cherry orchard around which the story revolves. She has faced tragedy many times in her life, or rather has tried to escape from it. Her first name, "Lyuba," means "love" in Russian, and she seems to exemplify love with her generosity, kindness and physical beauty, and sexual nature; she is the only character in the play with a lover. But her feelings of love often cloud her judgment, and she is also unable to control her spending, a sign of her disconnection from her present status as an impoverished aristocrat.



**Yermolay Lopakhin** - A businessman, and the son of peasants on Ranevsky's estate. He is middle-aged, but somewhat younger than Ranevsky. His grandparents were in fact owned by the Ranevsky family before freedom was granted to the serfs. Lopakhin is extremely self-conscious, especially in the presence of Ranevsky, perpetually complaining about his lack of education and refinement, which he attributes to his upbringing as a peasant on Ranevsky's estate. His memories of the brutality of a peasant child's life on the estate contrast with Ranevsky's idyllic memories as a child of the landowning class.

[Yermolay Lopakhin \(In-Depth Analysis\)](#)

**Leonid Gayev** - Gayev is Ranevsky's brother. He has several intriguing verbal habits; he frequently describes tricky billiards shots at odd and inappropriate times. He also will launch into overly sentimental and rhetorical speeches before his niece Anya stops him, after which he always mutters "I am silent" at least once. Gayev is a kind and concerned uncle and brother, but he behaves very differently around people not of his own social class. He is fifty-one years old, but as he notes, this is "difficult to believe", because he is in many ways an infant. He constantly pops sweets into his mouth, insults people (such as Lopakhin) with whom he disagrees, and has to be reminded to put on his jacket by Firs.

**Varya** - Varya is Ranevsky's adopted daughter, who is twenty-four years old. She is in love with Lopakhin, but she doubts that he will ever propose to her. Varya is hard-working and responsible and has a similar work ethic to Lopakhin. She is also something of a cry-baby, often in tears; but this may reflect her sense of

powerlessness, as she is the one character in the play who may be most affected by the loss of the estate. She is the estate's manager, so she will lose her job if Ranevsky loses the estate, but, lacking money or a husband, she has no control over its fate or her own.

**Anya** - Ranevsky's biological daughter, Anya is seventeen years old. She seems to have lived a sheltered life. She greatly enjoys the company of Trofimov and his lofty idealism, and is quick to comfort her mother after the loss of her orchard. Anya and Trofimov become so close that Varya fears they may become romantically involved.

**Peter Trofimov** - A student at the local university, he knows Ranevsky from tutoring her son Grisha before he died. Lopakhin refers to Trofimov as the "eternal student," for he has been in university most of his adult life. He serves as a foil for both Lopakhin and Ranevsky; Trofimov's ugliness, belief that he is "above love", and forward-looking nature contrasts with Ranevsky's beauty, her idealistic vision of love, and her obsession with the past, while his utopian idealism contrasts with Lopakhin's practicality and materialism.

[Peter Trofimov \(In-Depth Analysis\)](#)



**Boris Simeonov-Pischik** - A nobleman, and fellow landowner, who is, like Ranevsky, in financial difficulties. Pischik is characterized mainly by his boundless optimism—he is always certain he will find the money somehow to pay for the mortgages that are due—but also by his continual borrowing money from Ranevsky. Pischik is something of a caricature; his name, in Russian, means "squealer," appropriate for someone who never stops talking.

**Charlotte** - Anya's governess. Charlotte traveled from town-to-town performing tricks such as "the dive of death" when she was very young, before her Father and Mother both died. Charlotte is something of a clown, performing tricks for the amusement of the elite around her, such as Yasha, Ranevsky, and Yopakhin, while, at the same time, subtly mocking their pre-occupations.

**Firs** - Ranevsky's eighty-seven-year-old manservant. Firs is always talking about how things were in the past on the estate, when the estate was prosperous, and the master went to Paris by carriage, instead of by train; most importantly, he frequently talks about how life was before the serfs were freed. He is possibly senile, and is constantly mumbling. He is the only surviving link to the estate's glorious past, and he comes to symbolize that past.

**Simon Yephikodov** - Yephikodov is a clerk at the Ranevsky estate. He is a source of amusement for all the other workers and amusement for all the other workers, who refer to him as "Simple Simon". Yephikodov provides comic relief, with his self-conscious pose as the hopeless lover and romantic, often contemplating suicide. He loves Dunyasha, to whom he has proposed.

**Yasha** - Yasha is the young manservant who has been traveling with Ranevsky ever since she left for France. He is always complaining about how uncivilized Russia is when compared to France, exploits

Dunyasha's love for him for physical pleasure, and openly tells Firs that he is so old he should die. Most of the characters besides Ranevsky regard him as repulsive and obnoxious. He has a strong taste for acrid-smelling cigars.

**Dunyasha** - A maid on the Ranevsky estate. She functions mainly as a foil to Yasha, her innocent naïveté and love for him emphasizing and making clear his cynicism and selfishness. She is also the object of Yephikodov's affections, a status about which she is very confused.

## Analysis of Major Characters

### Lyuba Ranevsky

Ranevsky's character is defined by flight, both physical and emotional. Physically, she is continuously fleeing from location: the play opens with her flight from Paris, home to Russia, after a suicide attempt provoked by her lover. We learn later that a similar flight occurred five years previously, after the closely spaced deaths (only separated by a month) of her son and her husband. The play will end with her fleeing again, from the estate she has lost, back to Paris and the arms of the very same lover. And her flight from Paris to Russia is paralleled by an emotional flight from the present to the past: she is a woman besieged by memories of her tragic adult life and seeking refuge in her memories of an idyllic childhood. Her first words on returning to the estate, "nursery!" indicates this. Her vision of her own mother walking through the cherry orchard reinforces the picture of a woman suffering from illusions, the illusion that she can recapture the idyll of her childhood and block out the tragic events of the past six years from her mind. Her rejections of Lopakhin's business proposals as being "vulgar" also seems a willful ignorance on her part, a stubborn refusal to accept the unpleasant facts about her situation and a flight from a fact about her current life, which is that she is impoverished and in debt.



Ranevsky's flight home, both in body and in mind, is doomed from the very start of the play, for two reasons. First of all, home is not the safe place she might have imagined it to be; it too is tainted by tragedy, as she is soon reminded of by the appearance of Trofimov, her dead son's tutor. She is unable to return to her idyllic childhood state; the memories of her tragic adult life remain with her, either in the form of Trofimov or the telegrams from her lover in Paris. Secondly, she cannot flee from her debts; the bank will remember them if she does not. But Ranevsky is paralyzed in the face of the impending destruction; unable to stay in the present emotionally, her flight from that present defeats itself, by making the loss of her estate and the destruction of the orchard inevitable.

But Ranevsky is kind and generous, and we get the feeling that for her, ideals such as love are not empty words for she has suffered for them. And she is well loved by not only her family, but also by Lopakhin, who says she has done many kind things for him and who also comments on her "irresistible eyes". So she is a sympathetic character. This sympathetic nature gives her loss of the orchard a poignancy that has made some call the play a tragedy. For Ranevsky identifies herself with the orchard, and she says in Act

Two that if the orchard is sold, she might as well be sold with it. The orchard also symbolizes her memories, and we can see this in the fact that it places an identical emotional burden on her as her memories do; it draws her towards the past and prevents her from moving on with her life. The symbolism of the play is tightly woven with its physical details here, for destruction of the orchard—the physical symbol of her memories—gives Ranevsky a chance to move beyond those memories, a chance she will hopefully take.

## **Yermolay Lopakhin**

Lopakhin is the character, more than any other, constantly in charge of driving the play forward; he is its source of energy and action. He is a character full of details, plans, and action; he outlines a plan for Ranevsky to save her estate, offers her a loan, ends up buying the estate in the end and readily informs us of the price of champagne (Act Four). But he too, like Ranevsky, is fleeing emotionally from his memories, which are memories of his brutal peasant upbringing.

What seems to hold back his flight is his attachment to Ranevsky. In his first moments on-stage, he tells of a time when his father beat him, but he also relates Ranevsky's subsequent kindness to him. Ranevsky is a member of the same landowning class that oppressed his forefathers and is also a particularly kind figure from his days as a peasant. Lopakhin's attitude towards Ranevsky is thus ambivalent from the start. He is grateful for her "kindness," but at the same time she is a key figure in memories that he has sought to put behind him, both in his manner of dress and through constant, hard work. This tension resolves itself finally in Act Three of the play, when he buys the orchard. His insensitivity to Ranevsky is not merely the result of his peasant upbringing, and the fact that he does not end up proposing to Varya, which would make him part of Ranevsky's family, is not accidental. They both symbolize the fact that he considers himself to have broken free from, or "forgotten," his past, and this means also breaking free from and forgetting his gratitude to Ranevsky.

## **Peter Trofimov**

Trofimov is the "eternal student", as Lopakhin calls him, and he provides most of the explicit ideological discussion in the play. Trofimov makes the play's social allegory explicit. He idealizes work, as well as the search for truth, decrying the poor living conditions in which most Russian peasants live, as well as the "Russian intellectuals" whose inactivity he deems responsible for these conditions. His idealism and intellectualism make him a foil for the practical, materialistic Lopakhin, but he also serves as a foil for Ranevsky. His emphasis on truth over love and beauty and his orientation towards the future, contrasts with her devotion to love and beauty and her obsession with the past. These elements of both their personalities become united in the cherry orchard. Whereas Ranevsky sees the orchard as beautiful and interesting, to Trofimov it is a symbol of Russia's oppressive past and the dehumanization caused by families such as Ranevsky's through the institution of serfdom.

## Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

### Themes

#### The Struggle Over Memory

In *The Cherry Orchard*, memory is seen both as source of personal identity and as a burden preventing the attainment of happiness. Each character is involved in a struggle to remember, but more importantly in a struggle to forget, certain aspects of their past. Ranevsky wants to seek refuge in the past from the despair of her present life; she wants to remember the past and forget the present. But the estate itself contains awful memories of the death of her son, memories she is reminded of as soon as she arrives and sees Trofimov, her son's tutor. For Lopakhin, memories are oppressive, for they are memories of a brutal, uncultured peasant upbringing. They conflict with his identity as a well-heeled businessman that he tries to cultivate with his fancy clothes and his allusions to Shakespeare, so they are a source of self-doubt and confusion; it is these memories that he wishes to forget. Trofimov is concerned more with Russia's historical memory of its past, a past which he views as oppressive and needing an explicit renunciation if Russia is to move forward. He elucidates this view in a series of speeches at the end of Act Two. What Trofimov wishes Russia to forget are the beautiful and redeeming aspects of that past. First, finally, lives solely in memory—most of his speeches in the play relate to what life was like before the serfs were freed, telling of the recipe for making cherry jam, which now even he can't remember. At the end of the play, he is literally forgotten by the other characters, symbolizing the "forgotten" era with which he is so strongly associated.

#### Modernity Vs. the Old Russia



A recurrent theme throughout Russian literature of the nineteenth century is the clash between the values of modernity and the values of old Russia. Modernity is here meant to signify Western modernity, its rationalism, secularism and materialism. Russia, especially its nobility, had been adopting these values since the early eighteenth century, in the time of Peter the Great. But much of late nineteenth-century Russian literature was written in reaction to this change, and in praise of an idealized vision of Russia's history and folklore. Western values are often represented as false, pretentious, and spiritually and morally bankrupt. Russian culture by contrast—for example, in the character of Prince Myshkin in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, himself a representative of the old landowning nobility, or Tatyana in Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*—is exalted as honest and morally pure.

The conflict between Gayev and Ranevsky on the one hand and Lopakhin and Trofimov on the other can be seen as emblematic of the disputes between the old feudal order and Westernization. The conflict is made most explicit in the speeches of Trofimov, who views Russia's historical legacy as an oppressive one,

something to be abandoned instead of exalted, and proposes an ideology that is distinctly influenced by the Western ideas such as Marxism and Darwinism.

## **Motifs**

### **Nature**

Nature, as represented by the orchard has significant value in *The Cherry Orchard*, both as something of inherent beauty and as a connection with the past. Ranevsky is overjoyed in the presence of the cherry orchard, and even Lopakhin, who destroys it, calls it the "most beautiful place on earth". And though he doesn't save the orchard, he talks with joy about 3,000 acres of poppies he has planted and looks forward to a time when his cottage-owners will enjoy summer evenings on their verandahs, perhaps planting and beautifying their properties.

Nature is also seen as a source of both illusion and memory in this play. For example, Ranevsky's illusory sighting of her dead mother in Act One. In Nature, Gayev sees "eternity", a medium that joins together the past and present with its permanence. But the orchard is being destroyed, the idyllic countryside has telegraph poles running through it, and Ranevsky and Gayev's idyllic stroll through the countryside is interrupted by the intrusion of a drunkard. In fact, it is the very permanence ascribed to Nature that, through the play, is revealed to be an illusion.

### **The Union of Naturalism and Symbolism**

*The Cherry Orchard* is on one level, a naturalistic play because it focuses on scientific, objective, details. It thus is like realism, in that it attempts to portray life "as it really is". Of course, these details are selected, sketched and presented in a certain way, guided by the author's intent. It is not actually science we are dealing with here. But throughout his career, Chekhov frequently stated his goal as an artist to present situations as they actually were, and not to prescribe solutions. And this is revealed in the way Chekhov's selection and presentation of details. Whenever we feel a desire to overly sympathize with one character, whenever we feel a desire to enter the play, so to speak, and take up their side (and their perspective), Chekhov shows us the irony in it-for example, when Lopakhin, when Lopakhin gloats about how far he has come from his brutal peasant origins, he does it in a brutal manner, thus betraying those origins. Chekhov's irony takes us out of the play and put back in our seats. This is how he creates his "objectivity".

## **Symbols**

### **The Cherry Orchard**



The orchard is the massive, hulking presence at the play's center of gravity; everything else revolves around and is drawn towards it. It is gargantuan; Lopakhin implies in Act One that the Lopakhin's estate spreads over 2,500 acres, and the cherry orchard is supposed to cover most of this. There were never any cherry orchards of nearly this size in Russia. And the fact that an orchard of this gargantuan size, which, by the estimate of Donald Rayfield, would produce more than four million pounds of cherries each crop, cannot economically sustain Ranevsky is an absurdity.

But it is absurd for a reason. After all, the orchard used to produce a crop every year, which was made into cherry jam. But, as Firs informs us, now the recipe has been lost. It is thus a relic of the past, an artifact, of no present use to anyone except as a memorial to or symbol of the time in which it was useful. And its unrealistic size further indicates that it is purely a symbol of that past. In a very real sense, the orchard does not exist in the present. It is something that is perceived by the various characters and reacted to in ways that indicate how these characters feel about what the orchard represents: which is some aspect of memory.

What "memory" means for each character and what it represents varies. Each character sees—sometimes literally—a different aspect of the past, either personal or historical, in the orchard. Ranevsky, for example, perceives her dead mother walking through the orchard in Act One; for her, the orchard is a personal relic of her idyllic childhood. Trofimov, on the other hand, near the end of Act Two sees in the orchard the faces of the serfs who lived and died in slavery on Ranevsky's estate; for him, the orchard represents the memory of their suffering. For Lopakhin, the orchard is intimately tied to his personal memories of a brutal childhood, as well as presenting an obstacle to the prosperity of both himself and Ranevsky.

Though each character has their own perspective, there is a rough division between the old and the young, with the age cut-off being between Lopakhin and Ranevsky; the young tend to view the orchard in a negative light and the old view it more positively. This further reinforces the orchard's symbolic identification with the past. The one exception to this may be Varya. But this exception proves the rule, for though Varya often talks about the estate, she never mentions the orchard itself at all. For her, it is irrelevant, and the estate is what is important, for she is its manager, and its ownership is directly connected to her livelihood.

## Breaking String

No one knows what it is when we first hear it in Act Two, and when we last hear it, the only character onstage is in no position to comment. It is the sound of breaking string, an auditory symbol of forgetting. It first is heard in the play after Gayev gives a soliloquy on the eternity of nature; Firs tells us it was heard before, around the time the serfs were freed (a seminal event in Russian history). It is last heard just as Firs, the old manservant who functions as the play's human connection to the past, passes away, and is juxtaposed against the sound of an axe striking a cherry tree. With its simple image of breaking line, the

sound serves to unify the play's social allegory with its examination of memory, providing a more graphic counterpart to the Cherry Orchard's hovering, off-stage presence.

## Act One [*From the beginning of the Act until Anya leaves for bed*]

Note to reader: Due to the dense nature of the play, each act has been subdivided into smaller sections. There are two subdivisions for Acts One and Four, and three for Acts Two and Three. At the beginning of each summary is an indication of the range of the play the summary that it covers.



The following summaries and analyses are based on Ronald Hingley's English translation of the play (1966), available from Oxford University Press.

### Summary

The play begins in a room that is called the "nursery", even though, as we soon find out, it has been unoccupied by children for many years. It is dawn on a cold and frosty May morning, and the cherry trees are in bloom. Yermolay Lopakhin, a businessman, is eagerly awaiting the return of Ranevsky, the owner of the house and the surrounding estate, who, Lopakhin tells us, has been away for five years. Also waiting is Dunyasha, a maid on Ranevsky's estate. Lopakhin recounts a story of how Ranevsky was kind to him after his father had beaten him as a child, pausing as he remembers how Ranevsky referred to him as a "little peasant". Dunyasha worries and fusses with her appearance; Lopakhin tells her not to be so sensitive and to "remember her place".

They are soon joined by the clerk Simon Yephikodov, who drops flowers on the floor as he enters. He complains about the weather, about his squeaking shoes, and his unfortunate life. Lopakhin is rude to him, and Simon leaves. Afterwards, Dunyasha confesses to Lopakhin that Yephikodov has proposed to her and that he is called "Simple Simon" by everyone else on the estate both for his strange talk and the frequent accidents that befall him.

Ranevsky then arrives from the train station. Everyone leaves the house to greet her. As she enters, she is accompanied by Anya, her daughter who has been with her in Paris since Easter, by Varya, her adopted twenty-four year-old daughter who has been managing her mother's estate and went to meet Ranevsky at the station, by Firs, her 87-year-old manservant who has also been to greet Ranevsky at the train station, and by Charlotte, Anya's governess. She is also greeted by Leonid Gayev, her brother, and Boris Simeonov-Pischik, another landowner. Dunyasha lets Anya know that Peter Trofimov, the tutor of Ranevsky's dead son Grisha, is staying in the bathhouse, and Anya reacts with surprised joy.

Varya enters, carrying the keys to the estate. Varya and Anya greet each other tearfully. Anya explains to Varya the depressing conditions that she found their mother in when she came to Paris, and the fact that, despite her poverty, her mother insists on spending money wherever she goes. Varya, in her turn, talks about her hopes of one day marrying Anya off to a rich man. Varya is expected to marry Lopakhin, but she reveals that he has not yet proposed, and she fears he never will. She says that if she only had enough

money, she would leave the estate behind and join a convent. Anya explains, seemingly to no one but the audience, why her mother left for Paris: the death, six years previous, of Mr. Ranevsky, followed one month later by the drowning of the family's seven-year old son in the nearby river.



Yasha enters. He is a young servant who has been traveling with Ranevsky ever since she left Russia. Dunyasha recognizes him, but he doesn't recognize her; he calls Dunyasha a "tasty little morsel", and kisses her, causing her to drop a saucer. Yasha goes out, and Varya comes in, and asks what happened. Dunyasha explains that she dropped a saucer; Varya says that in the old days, dropping a saucer was considered good luck. Soon Anya decides to go bed, saying that she is tired from travel.

## Analysis

The opening of the play serves several purposes: it first of all sets the focus of the play on memory and the past. We learn that the room we are in is called the "nursery", even though no children reside here. It was the childhood home of Ranevsky and Gayev. Lopakhin immediately mentions that he has not seen Ranevsky for five years and then mentions an incident that occurred between fifteen and twenty years ago, when he was a teenager. When the stage is briefly left empty during Ranevsky's arrival, the first person to return to it is Firs; his traditional servants' clothes and his advanced age both mark him as a figure from the past and associate Ranevsky's return with a return of that past, as his arrival on the stage directly announces hers. And both the main characters to whom we are introduced—Ranevsky and Lopakhin—are also defined by the way they relate to the past, specifically their childhood memories.

Chekhov here gives us both Lopakhin and Ranevsky's important character traits, and establishes their relationship. Lopakhin reveals himself almost immediately to be very self-conscious; he talks about what an "idiot" he is, for falling asleep and not meeting Ranevsky at the station and compares himself to "a bull in a china shop". When he talks about how Ranevsky cleaned his face after his father had beaten him as a child, he pauses after remembering the word "peasant". He then says, as if in argument, that he is now "rich". And after Lopakhin remembers being reminded of his place by Ranevsky, he then reminds Dunyasha of her place as well. All these remarks indicate that the source of Lopakhin's self-consciousness lies in the memories of his brutal, impoverished childhood. But these memories also include Ranevsky's kindness. Ranevsky's arrival, then, seems to create an identity crisis in Lopakhin, between the rich businessman he sees himself as now and the peasant to which Ranevsky was kind; his attachment to her draws him towards a past he no longer identifies himself with.

Ranevsky's first word upon her entrance into the scene is "nursery"; if Lopakhin is trying to distance himself from his past, she is moving towards it. She is full of childish enthusiasm and overstatement, describing the nursery - which she grew up in - as "heavenly". She weeps. She kisses Dunyasha, and says she feels like "a little girl again".

"Lyuba", Ranevsky's first name, means "love" in Russian, and she can be seen as a symbol of kindness. Her kindness, as we have seen however, is double-edged. Her kindness is that of the noblewoman to the peasant, there is some condescension underlying. Anya also tells us that despite of her poverty, Ranevsky insists on eating lavishly and tipping her waiters handsomely. From Varya we learn that after her son

Grishka drowned, she "dropped everything and went," because "it was too much for her". This information paints Ranevsky in a more negative light; she is weak and unable to deal with or face reality. She may be fleeing into her memories to avoid facing reality, a reality in which (we already know) she is in debt and has lost two loved ones.

The tone at the play's opening is balanced and ironic. We learn that though it is May and the cherry trees are in bloom, it is frosty and cold outside. It is an image conflicted between the warmth of life and the cold of winter. Similarly, we have two main characters, both presented sympathetically, one of whom is trying to escape the past and the other who is trying to find refuge in it. Chekhov sets up a tragedy; time is flowing towards an end-point, a catastrophe—the sale of the estate. But in Yephikodov, we have "tragedy" taken to an extreme; his misfortunes are so constant and inevitable they are comic, as if Chekhov himself is mocking the play's sense of impending tragedy.

Finally, these first moments serve to foreshadow the rest of the play. The joy of Act One's arrival is counterbalanced by the tears we will see in the departure of Act Four. The opening of the estate's windows will become the locking of its doors. Much of the play's story line will occur off- stage—we only hear or hear about certain key events, and people; Chekov uses the device of an empty stage to foreshadow this emphasis. Firs is the first character to return to the stage after it is emptied, which directly foreshadows Firs's forthcoming significance to the end of the play.

### Act One [after Anya's exit]

## Summary

After Anya goes to bed, Lopakhin brings up the matter of the orchard, which is to be sold at auction on the 22nd of August in order to pay Ranevsky's debts. Lopakhin proposes a way to avoid selling the land: cut down the cherry orchard as well as everything else on the property and build summer cottages in their place, which Ranevsky can then lease out at a sizeable profit. But as soon as Ranevsky realizes that Lopakhin's proposal entails cutting down the cherry orchard, she refuses his idea. He points out that the orchard produces nothing but cherries, which have to be thrown away because there is no use for them and that there is no other way to avoid the estate being sold. Gayev notes that the orchard is in the Encyclopedia. Firs remembers out loud that there was a time when the cherries were made into jam and sold, but that now the recipe has been forgotten.



Lopakhin says that while until recently, no one lived in the countryside except for peasants and nobles, nowadays there are many "holiday-makers", townspeople, rich merchants and professionals, who make their summer homes in the country, and that their number is increasing. Ranevsky's brother begins to insult Lopakhin, who then leaves, but not before offering a loan of 50,000 rubles with which to buy their property at auction should the Ranevskys change their minds. Before he leaves, Varya gives Ranevsky two telegrams that have arrived from Paris. Ranevsky tears them both up.

As soon as Lopakhin leaves, Simeonov-Pischik asks Ranevsky for 240 rubles in order to pay interest on a mortgage the next day. Ranevsky protests that she doesn't have any money. While Firs fixes Gayev's trousers, Ranevsky goes to the window to gaze lovingly at her cherry orchard, as she did when she was a child. She tells everyone that she can see her dead mother walking amongst the trees; after everyone reacts with shock and concern for her mental health, she realizes she was looking at a tree which has leaned over and looks like a woman.

Peter Trofimov, Grisha's former tutor, enters, and there is a tearful reunion between him and Ranevsky. Trofimov brings back painful memories of Grisha and his drowning five years earlier. Ranevsky soon goes to bed, but not before demanding that Gayev pay Pischik his 240 rubles. When she is gone, Gayev complains about his sister's lavish spending habits and her "loose" way of living, implying that she is the reason the Ranevskys are now in dire straits; he stops when Varya lets him know that Anya is in the door listening to him. He apologizes to Anya for his "silly speech" and is forgiven. He then lets everyone know that he has a plan, involving a loan from some bankers, that might let them keep the property and the Cherry Orchard after all. The act ends with Varya informing Anya that tramps have been moving in to the old servants' quarters, which are now mostly empty. But Anya's reaction to the distressing news is muted because she falls asleep before Varya has finished speaking. As the act ends, a shepherd's pipe plays from the other side of the orchard, and Trofimov sees Anya as Varya leads her off. He exclaims with joy "Light of my being! My springtime!"

## Analysis

This section contains the entrance of the most important facet of the play: the cherry orchard. The first thing to note is that it is gargantuan, much larger than any cherry orchard anywhere in Russia; Lopakhin implies it is nearly 2,500 acres in size, large even to the point of absurdity. The orchard is a monolithic, beautiful relic of the past, and it thus comes to symbolize the past, where the past can be either Ranevsky's individual past or Russia's national history. In the symbol of the orchard, both historical and personal memories are intertwined. Lopakhin begins this process by referring to the orchard as the "old cherry orchard". Firs then remembers a time, "forty or fifty years ago", when the orchard's cherries were made into jam; but the recipe is now lost. Firs's memory is one of a bygone age, and his figure of forty to fifty years is not coincidental: with the action of the play taking place in the early 1900's, it puts the orchard as being profitable before the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Serfs were peasants who were owned by their masters, and their liberation marked a turning point in Russian society. Through Firs's memories the orchard—and its beauty—becomes identified with a specific bygone historical era, which is the time before the serfs were freed.

The orchard is also identified with Gayev's and Ranevsky's personal memories. Gayev asks Lyuba if she remembers how the orchard's avenue "gleams on moonlit nights you can't have forgotten?" Ranevsky literally sees an emblem of those memories—her dead mother walking through the orchard—before she realizes it is an illusion; merely "a little white tree which has leant over, and looks like a woman." Ranevsky shows herself, and will continue to show herself, to be someone willing to believe in pleasant illusions, such as the illusion of security provided by her childhood home.



But these personal memories also have a historical significance. Ranevsky and Gayev identify themselves not only with their own childhood pasts, but also with Russia's historical past. For they are both roughly as old as Firs's memories of the orchard; Gayev is fifty-one, and Ranevsky presumably a bit younger. And they both are members of the wealthy landowning class whom the liberal reforms of the 1860s displace.

The orchard serves, then, to symbolize memory. The orchard's impending destruction, by extension, symbolizes the destruction of that memory. In other words, it symbolizes forgetting: forgetting one's childhood, one's past, or one's history. The various characters are largely characterized by their reaction to this process. Ranevsky is someone who either doesn't want to or can't forget; certain, more distant, memories she wants to keep; others she wants to destroy. But she is drawn to her memories in the same strong way that she is drawn to the orchard. She is overjoyed to be back in "the nursery" in which she grew up; when she sees Trofimov, she can't help remembering her son's drowning and is in grief. Though we do not yet know it, the two telegrams are from a lover in Paris whom she has just left. This insistent voice from her adult life she destroys by ripping up the paper. Lopakhin, on the other hand, would seem to like nothing better than to forget; his past is a brutal one, linked to the brutality of serfdom. And he actively encourages the destruction of the orchard; for him it is a barrier to prosperity and well being, both that of Ranevsky and of the future cottage-holders who may one day spend their summers there. Ranevsky and Lopakhin's attitudes towards the orchard are consistent with their attitudes towards the historical and personal memories it symbolizes.

## Act Two [ *Until Ranevsky's entrance* ]

### Summary

Sitting near an abandoned chapel, in view of the cherry orchard, are Charlotte, Yasha and Dunyasha, and Yephikodov. They are sitting on a bench, talking, while Yephikodov plays a guitar and sings. Nearby is a well and what look like old tombstones. Telegraph poles run off into the distance, and dark poplars can be seen along with the cherry trees. Charlotte has a shotgun and is wearing a man's peaked cap. Yasha is smoking a cigar. Dunyasha sits and powders her face.



Charlotte tells everyone her life history: how she was taken from town to town by her mother and father, performing circus tricks at local fairs. After they died she was taken by a "German lady", who educated her. She admits that her mother and father were probably never married. Yephikodov plays a sad and mournful song on his "mandolin", which according to him is what his guitar is to "a man crazed with love". Yephikodov, Yasha, and Dunyasha talk about how lucky Yasha is to have traveled outside of Russia and of how fun life is in other countries. Yephikodov professes that despite the number of books he's read, he still can't decide anything about his life, most importantly whether or not to shoot himself. He then displays his revolver that he continually carries about in case he makes up his mind.

Charlotte leaves in semi-disgust at Yephikodov, both his erratic behavior and his singing, and complaining that "all these clever men are stupid," referring, it seems, to both Yasha and Yephikodov. Yephikodov asks

to speak to Dunyasha. She reluctantly concedes but only after she demands that he go back to the house and get her cape. He complies but only after implying that he might shoot himself in the meantime. When they are alone, Dunyasha begins to worry, apparently for the first time, that Yephikodov might actually be contemplating suicide. Yasha responds by kissing her and calling her a "tasty little morsel," just as he did when they first met. Dunyasha confesses her love to Yasha. She says that he is "so educated, and can talk about anything". Yasha reacts disinterestedly. He admits that what she says about his education is true. He also says that, according to him, it is sinful for a woman to be in love with a man. When he hears Ranevsky and the others approaching, he tells her to leave and pretend that she has been bathing down by the river, so that they won't be seen together. He says that he couldn't bear people thinking that they were. She complies, choking on his cigar smoke as she leaves.

## Analysis

Initially, we might wish to dismiss the scene with the four young servants as simple comic relief. Chekhov definitely changes the tone of the play somewhat from the more serious discussion that ended the last act toward a more comedic voice. But he is also commenting on memory, about nature, and about drama itself in this presentation of a pastoral idyll, full of poplar and cherry trees. But the idyll is not wholly interrupted: the telegraph poles challenge and disrupt this picture of things, and Charlotte, as a young woman, wears a man's hat and carries a man's weapon. She is a woman who cannot remember whether her mother and father were married, where she came from or who she is. Charlotte's lack of memory constitutes a lack of identity, and this linkage of memory and identity will prove important later on.

Yephikodov also has something of an identity crisis; he self-consciously he wishes to be considered a Romantic, yet is extremely unconvincing in the role, to such an extent that it is funny. His songs are mournful, yet to Charlotte they sound like "hyenas"; he claims to contemplate suicide, even bringing out his revolver, but in his hands the weapon is totally unconvincing and generates no concern amongst the others. With Yephikodov, Chekhov does several things. First, he satirizes the romantic, idealistic hero, common in Russian literature amongst authors like Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky—characters such as Eugene Onegin and Prince Myshkin from *The Idiot*. Yephikodov's talk of suicide might even be seen as a gross parody of Hamlet's contemplation of suicide in his famous soliloquy; Shakespeare was widely read among Russian writers. More specifically, however, Yephikodov's revolver, as well as Charlotte's shotgun, mock nineteenth-century theatre's traditional reliance on "the gun"; many nineteenth-century plays were intensely melodramatic stories revolving around a duel or some other act of violence. With this act of mockery, Chekhov at once declares his independence from nineteenth-century theater and also seems to warn against interpreting the current play in a tragic light; tragedy is much too funny, it seems, to be really tragic.

Charlotte is a more complex character than Yephikodov; she stands apart from the lovers, declaring herself "alone". As she leaves, she spouts a paradox in saying that "these clever men are all so stupid." Again, Chekhov is making an allusion here to Shakespeare, to a type of character that Shakespeare often employed, which is that of the Fool. As a carnival trickster, she is adept at manipulating illusions; the implication is that she can recognize the illusions others create and by which are fooled. For example, the illusion Yephikodov creates that he is a Romantic hero, which convinces no one. Or Dunyasha's illusion

that Yasha is in love with her, which convinces only herself; it is clear that Yasha considers Dunyasha to be nothing more than "a tasty little morsel". And there is Yasha's illusion of culture and sophistications, to which both Yasha and Dunyasha succumb, but which is belied intellectually by his boorish treatment of Dunyasha and physically by the acrid smoke of his cigar.

## Act Two [from Ranevsky's entrance, up until Firs's entrance]

### Summary

Ranevsky, Gayev, and Lopakhin appear, and Lopakhin is once again trying to convince Ranevsky to convert her estate to cottages. He demands a simple yes or no answer to his original idea. Ranevsky asks who has been smoking such "disgusting cigars", possibly attempting to ignore him. She then drops her change purse. Yasha picks it up, and then leaves, but not before a tense moment with Gayev. Gayev asks why he always sees Yasha "hanging around everywhere". Yasha laughs as soon as Gayev starts to speak, and apologizes, saying that he can't help laughing at the sound of Gayev's voice. Gayev demands that either Yasha leaves or he does. Ranevsky tells Yasha to leave, and he does, still laughing at Gayev.



Lopakhin informs the pair that a rich man, Deriganov, intends to buy the property. Gayev talks about a rich aunt in the town of Yaroslavl who may send money. Lopakhin asks whether it will be in the range of one hundred thousand to two hundred thousand roubles; Gayev answers that it will be more like fifteen thousand. Ranevsky says that the idea of cottages and summer visitors is "frightfully vulgar." Lopakhin begins to lose patience with the pair; he insults their lack of business sense, calls them "scatter-brained", and expresses frustration with the fact that they "can't understand" that they are about to lose their property. He even calls Gayev "an old woman", after which Lopakhin turns around and begins to leave. But Ranevsky begs him to stay, because it's more "amusing" when he is around.

Ranevsky seems to express regret at the "sins" she and her brother have committed. Lopakhin wants to know what sins she refers to; Gayev says that he has wasted his substance on sweets, while popping one into his mouth. But Ranevsky has something more serious in mind; she recounts the story of how when she left for France five years earlier, for her villa in Menton, she was followed by a lover with whom she had been having an affair with since before her husband's death. In other words, a man with whom she had committed adultery. She also tells how last year, when she was forced to sell her villa in Menton, he robbed her, deserted her, and took up with another woman. The telegrams that have been arriving from Paris are from him, she says. He has been writing asking her forgiveness and for her to go back to France.

Lopakhin makes a wry comment he heard in a play about Russians being "frenchified." Ranevsky then insists that the comment is not funny, and Lopakhin is "drab"; he should watch his own dull performance, says Ranevsky, instead of going out to plays. Lopakhin agrees, going further, saying that his life is "preposterous", that he was beat as a child, is unintelligent and unrefined, and that his handwriting is "awful". Ranevsky asks him why he doesn't marry Varya. He says he has nothing against it but then says

nothing more, simply pausing. Gayev informs everyone that he has been offered a job at a bank. Ranevsky insists that he refuse the offer, saying, "What, you in a bank!"

## Analysis

This section of the play emphasizes the complexity of the conflict between Lopakhin and Ranevsky and, by extension, the complexity of the different stances towards memory and forgetting that they represent. Lopakhin, as always, is the man of facts and figures: the orchard will be sold, it is just a matter to whom. In this situation, he comes across as demanding, pompous, and arrogant; he wants a simply "yes or no" and is insensitive to Ranevsky's obvious emotional attachment to the cherry orchard.

But we can feel his frustration when he calls Gayev an "old woman." Gayev behaves, in fact, like an infant, refusing to even consider Lopakhin's proposal, making random remarks about billiards when they are discussing a serious matter. And when Ranevsky insults Lopakhin, telling him his life is "drab," we feel sympathetic for him in this situation, especially because of his peasant childhood, his abusive father, and his lack of refinement. When he castigates himself for his poor handwriting, we feel his insecurity. And this undercuts the impression we have formed of him as pompous and arrogant from the way he attempts to dictate to Ranevsky and Gayev.



Ranevsky herself seems unable to comprehend her present situation. This reinforces our impression of her as being childish, as does her dismissal of Lopakhin's scheme as "vulgar", when it may be the only way out of her financial mess. A mess for which, by her own admission, she is mostly to blame. But she also attracts the reader's sympathy. She has suffered tragedy in her life, and the fact that she was unable to bear it and was driven to a suicide attempt is a cause for pity.

Furthermore, she acknowledges her problems with money, the foolishness of her extravagant spending habits. There is the feeling that she is trying to be more reasonable, more practical, but is having great difficulty. We are tempted to feel for both characters. The tone of the play, then, switches between comic and tragic; we see the "scatter-brained" Gayev through Lopakhin's eyes as being ridiculous, as we laugh sympathetically at Lopakhin's insecurities and feel compassion for Ranevsky and her struggles.

An important part of Gayev's characterization is brought out by Yasha's laughter in this section: Gayev appears utterly ridiculous to the younger generation. Anya, too, is always interrupting his "foolish" speeches, out of concern that he doesn't embarrass himself. For Gayev is a perpetual infant; he makes strange remarks, deals with Lopakhin's arguments by name-calling, and is continually popping sweets into his mouth. Firs mothers him, reminding Gayev in Act One to wear his overcoat and again in Act Two. Ranevsky's apparent yearning to be a child again is taken to a logical extreme in Gayev, who is virtually a child, stuck emotionally and intellectually in his youth. In his youth, his family members were still wealthy landowners, and they probably still owned serfs. He is thus tied to the old feudal order in a way that makes him anachronistic in present-day society, and his inability to grow as a human being ensures that he will stay that way.

## Act Two [ After Firs' entrance ]

## Summary

Firs enters and talks about how good things were back in the old days, before the serfs were freed. Lopakhin, as the son of serfs, sarcastically agrees, "At least there were plenty of floggings." Firs does not hear him and remarks that he can't understand life anymore.



Trofimov enters. He and Lopakhin exchange some barbed words. Lopakhin calls Trofimov an "eternal student" and wonders if he has reached his fiftieth birthday yet. Trofimov calls this an old joke. Lopakhin then asks Trofimov, "What do you think of me?" Trofimov replies that Lopakhin, a soon-to-be- millionaire, is a beast of prey as necessitated by the role he fulfills in nature. Everyone laughs, then Gayev asks him to resume a discussion about pride that the two were having earlier.

Trofimov asserts the folly of pride. His reasoning: man is a "pretty poor physiological specimen", and most of the human race is in misery, "the only thing to do" he says, "is work". Despite his pessimism about man's current state, he expresses optimism for the future. He abuses Russian intellectuals for having no idea what work means. Lopakhin agrees with him, to a certain extent. According to Lopakhin, he gets up at five o'clock every morning and does nothing but work for the rest of the day. He then proclaims that given the natural splendor of Russia, he is disappointed with its people. Its people should be "giants", he says. Ranevsky warns them to be careful for what they ask for, because "giants" could end up causing more trouble than they are worth.

Gayev begins giving what seems to be almost a recitation of a poem about nature and how it unites the past with the present, before he is silenced by Anya. In the ensuing deep silence, the sound of a cable or string breaking can be heard; no one is quite sure what it is, but Firs maintains he last heard similar sounds before the freeing of the serfs.

Suddenly a drunken man comes by, asking for directions, and being a nuisance. Ranevsky makes him leave by giving him several gold pieces. Varya is frightened by the encounter, so the entire party, with the exception of Trofimov and Anya, decide to leave. Trofimov and Anya then discuss their increasingly close relationship, which Trofimov describes as being "above love", though Varya is suspicious of it developing into a romance. Trofimov gives another speech about the debt all Russia is under from the legacy of serfdom, but how he has tremendous hopes for the future. The two go down by the river, leaving Varya alone in the woods, calling out for Anya in the dark.

## Analysis

In this section of the play, Chekhov makes explicit the social allegory that has, until now, been only implicit in the characters of Lopakhin and Ranevsky. The agent of this change in the text is Trofimov. Trofimov serves as a foil for Lopakhin. His idealism contrasts with Lopakhin's materialism, his high-flown rhetoric underscores Lopakhin's lack of sophistication. Yet they share a similar disdain for the past, which

is symbolized by the cherry orchard. With Trofimov, however, this disdain has an intellectual foundation, whereas Lopakhin's is rooted in personal memories.



To Trofimov, the cherry orchard is a symbol of oppression: its leaves are full of the faces of people that Anya's family "once owned," and it is full of the legacy of serfdom. Trofimov rails against Russian intellectuals, who merely talk about ideas but never act on them, while he exalts practical men and men of action. To Trofimov, all this is evidence of a need to break with the past, to forge a bold new future, through work. Through the effect of his ideas on Anya, Trofimov manages to decrease her affection for the orchard; "Why is it that I'm not as fond of the orchard as I used to be?" she asks him. He replies, "All Russia is our orchard," thus explicitly broadening the scope of the play, beyond the confines of Ranevsky's estate, to Russian society as a whole. The debate in which Trofimov is engaged is over who will write the history of the orchard, thereby choosing all that the orchard represents. Some see it as a symbol of beauty and some see it as a symbol of Russia's oppressive past. Judging by his conversion of Anya, it seems that Trofimov is succeeding in spreading his opinion of the orchard to future generations.

There is some irony, however, in Trofimov's speech. First of all, his position seems to have arisen in intellectual conversation with Gayev. And if anyone fits Trofimov's description of the Russian intellectual, then Trofimov and Gayev do - their lives are spent in conversation. Trofimov is the "eternal student", according to Lopakhin; he has been studying all his adult life; it has apparently made him very "ugly", at least according to Ranevsky. He is the stereotypical scholar, definitely not a man of action.

In contrast to Gayev, Lopakhin and Trofimov appear remarkably similar. One might think Trofimov would admire Lopakhin. Lopakhin seems to embody the practicality of which Trofimov speaks: he gets up at "five every morning" in order to work all day long. He subscribes to a common sense version of the more sophisticated Social Darwinism that Trofimov advocates. But instead of his admiration, Lopakhin is the subject of a (somewhat jovial) disdain, and the feeling is mutual. For while Trofimov appeals to ideals such as truth and humanity to frame what is essentially a socialist utopian ideology—heavily influenced by the works of Karl Marx as well as Darwin's theory of evolution—Lopakhin works, not for humanity, but for money. The "sound of a breaking cable" comes during a silence in this debate; and Firs, the voice of the past, dislikes it intensely. The last time he has heard it was around the time the serfs were freed, a momentous event in Russian history that marked the beginning of the end for the aristocracy, the beginning of confusion for Firs, and the beginning of a new age for Trofimov. The breaking of the cable thus becomes identified with the end of an era. It is a break in time. To reverse Gayev's metaphor, the dead and the living are now "unjoined". And it is now heard just before the sale of the cherry orchard, a momentous event in the personal history of the Ranevsky's family. Thus, the sound of the breaking cable explicitly links the personal history of the characters with the wider world of Russian society.

### **Act Three [ *until Varya exits to find Yephikodov* ]**

## **Summary**

It is August 22nd, the day of the auction. Everyone is gathered at a party offstage, dancing a "grande ronde" (in a circle). They then begin a promenade, and enter the stage in pairs: Pischik and Charlotte, Trofimov and Ranevsky, Anya and a Post-Office Clerk, Varya (who is crying) and the local Stationmaster and several others. Finally, Dunyasha enters with a partner. Firs is serving the party in an old servants' uniform. Pischik and Trofimov leave to talk, mainly about Pischik's poor financial situation. Pischik asserts that all he can think about is money. Trofimov teases Varya about how she is supposedly destined to marry Lopakhin. Pischik says he has heard that Nietzsche thought forging-bank notes was acceptable. Pischik complains about trying to scrape together enough money for a mortgage payment he must make the next day. At present, he has 130 rubles out of 310. He then suddenly can't find the 130 rubles. He is briefly driven into a panic, until he finds the bank notes in the lining of his jacket.



Ranevsky wonders why Gayev is not home yet. She wants to know whether or not he has bought the estate and worries out loud about the auction. Trofimov suggests that perhaps the auction has not even taken place yet. Varya assures her that her uncle will have bought the estate with their aunt's money, that their aunt has also agreed to pay off the arrearage on the mortgage. Trofimov expresses his doubts. Lopakhin has accompanied Gayev to the auction. To entertain the guests, Charlotte performs a series of magic tricks she learnt during her days going from town to town with her parents. She performs a card trick, where she guesses the card Pischik has chosen. She performs a ventriloquist feat, throwing her voice so it seems to come out of the floor. And then, much to the everyone's amazement, she takes a rug, and makes Anya and Varya suddenly appear behind it. Pischik professes that he is amazed at Charlotte and has fallen in love with her. The Stationmaster too, is quite impressed.

After she is done, Ranevsky confides in private conversation to Varya that she shouldn't get upset when people tease her about Lopakhin and that in fact she should marry him if she likes him. Varya confesses that she does, but she feels that Lopakhin will never propose because he is too preoccupied with business. And Varya feels that it is improper to propose herself. She expresses again the desire to go to a convent, saying that if she had a few rubles she would. Trofimov mocks her. Yasha soon enters, laughing, telling everyone that Yephikodov has broken a pool cue. Varya is incensed that Yephikodov is even at the party and doubly so that he is playing billiards. She leaves to sort things out.

## Analysis

The structure of this act, more than any other, involves the building of dramatic tension. It has a much quicker pace than the two preceding acts, which contain, as Donald Rayfield notes, zero pauses compared to seven in Act One and sixteen in Act Two. At first, we are presented with dancing, music and, we must imagine, happiness. Then all of a sudden, Varya enters weeping. Immediately, tension is created; we want to know why, in the midst of all this celebration, Varya is so sad.

Two answers emerge. First of all, there is the matter of Lopakhin and his reluctance to propose. Trofimov's teasing of Varya only reveals an underlying sensitivity to the matter. Everyone else treats Lopakhin and Varya's engagement as something that has already happened. But Varya has severe doubts about whether Lopakhin will ever take the time to settle down and get married. She feels that he is much

too preoccupied with his business affairs to do so. And the other source of tension is, of course, the auction. Varya has a double interest in the sale of the estate; not only is she Ranevsky's adopted daughter, but she is also Ranevsky's estate manager. Any change in the hands of ownership will probably mean the loss of her job. Not only does this represent a loss of livelihood, it represents the loss of a significant part of her identity, and right now, in the absence of any proposal from Lopakhin, her only source of emotional fulfillment. Chekhov shows Varya as someone who takes pride and fulfillment from her work; she is concerned with the well being of the estate, and often worries and discusses the problems of managing it. And this source of emotional fulfillment is now in danger of being taken from her. In light of this danger, her repeated desire to go to a convent seems to have more to do with security than with religiosity, especially since we have no other indications to suggest that Varya is religious.

Both these concerns are rooted in financial concerns, and, truly, money functions in *The Cherry Orchard* as an instrument of power. Lopakhin and Deriganov, the rich man interested in buying the estate, both have money; and they therefore have control over what happens to Varya. In other words, while it may seem just that Lopakhin should have power because of his work ethic, we see in Varya a character with a similar work ethic, yet who is powerless; she is powerless to propose to Lopakhin, because she is a woman and powerless to stop the loss of her orchard, because she is the daughter of a profligate mother. Another way of looking at Varya is that she is powerless by two accidents of birth.



We can read this section of the play as criticizing the capitalistic, materialist values of Lopakhin, which were spreading throughout Russian society at this time. By forgetting his personal history, Lopakhin attempts to sever his ties with his peasant past in the same way that Russian society forgets its national history in an attempt to free itself of the legacy of serfdom. But merely freeing the serfs does not free Russian society of its legacy of bondage— as Trofimov notes at the end of Act Two—this legacy has infected all Russians. Varya, a woman without money, is still in a position of powerlessness in society; she still suffers a sort of serfdom to Lopakhin. And this is the central irony of the situation; Lopakhin, the grandson of the oppressed, has now become an oppressor.

Charlotte initially seems to provide simple comic relief; but her comedy will also serve to heighten the poignancy of the loss of the orchard. She breaks the rising tension we feel out of concern for Varya and Ranevsky's well being. The sleight-of-hand tricks she performs—guessing cards, making people appear from behind a rug, ventriloquism—all emphasize illusion. Illusions, are an appropriate subject, because a central illusion is about to be unveiled. This is Ranevsky's illusion of security, her illusion that she can find refuge from the present in memories of the past.

### **Act Three [from when Varya leaves until Varya comes back]**

## **Summary**

When Varya leaves to attend to Simon Yephikodov, who has broken a billiard cue, Ranevsky and Trofimov begin to talk. He declares himself and Anya to be "above love". Ranevsky then wryly observes that she

must be "below it." Talk then turns to the matter of the auction and the estate. He implores Ranevsky to "face the truth," about her business dealings and also about her lover in Paris who continues to send telegrams. According to Trofimov, she should ignore him; he did after all, rob her. Ranevsky accuses Trofimov of being ugly and understanding nothing because he has never been in love, because he is too young and inexperienced. She calls him "ugly", and he admits that he is not very attractive. She calls him a "ridiculous freak and monster". Trofimov is outraged and leaves. But as he leaves he falls over himself in the hall. Anya comes in, laughing at Peter. The Stationmaster begins to recite "The Sinful Woman", a poem by Aleksey Tolstoy, a Russian dramatist. A waltz begins playing, and everyone starts to dance. Ranevsky offers to dance with Peter.



Firs enters and talks about how the quality of guests at the parties on the estate has declined. Generals, admirals, and barons used to attend, but now they have difficulty securing the local stationmaster. Yasha rudely tells Firs that it is time for him to die; Firs responds by calling Yasha a nincompoop. Anya comes in, saying that she has talked to someone in the kitchen who says someone bought the orchard at auction today. Ranevsky becomes anxious and demands to know who, but Anya does not know. Pischik enters, and asks for a dance with Ranevsky. While they dance, he asks her for the 180 rubles he needs to make his mortgage payment the next day. Yasha cannot stop laughing at Yephikodov's futility, as Charlotte continues to entertain the guests, now in a checkered coat and top hat.

Dunyasha powders her face and tells Yasha that even though Anya has asked her to dance, she won't because it makes her giddy. When Dunyasha confides in Yasha that the man from the post office told her she looked like a flower, he replies with a yawn and an insult. Dunyasha then reflects on how sensitive she is, and she reveals how much she enjoys it when people say nice things to her. Yephikodov enters. He goes up to Dunyasha and complains to her rather meekly about her lack of attention towards him. He says that he feels like an "insect." She is irritated by him and refuses to treat him seriously, saying that she is "in a dream" at the party. She starts to play with her fan.

## Analysis

The argument between Trofimov and Ranevsky centers around the question in their argument is that of truth: whose perspective, whose memories should be accepted as true? Trofimov proves to be an excellent foil for Ranevsky in this debate. He is ugly and intellectual, the "eternal student," his life revolves around searching for objective truth. Ranevsky, on the other hand, is intuitive and beautiful; for her, the truth is a much more slippery concept than it is to Trofimov. Trofimov begs Ranevsky to "face the truth", namely, that her lover in Paris is unworthy of her affection and a drain on her emotional and financial resources, resources that she should be using to save her estate. Trofimov declares himself to be "above love", implying that he is superior to anyone under the sway of love, such as Ranevsky. Ranevsky's first name, Lyuba, means "love", and she defends her actions using love as her justification. She feels she should go to Paris to be with her lover, and she defends this opinion by saying "I love him," and asking, "what else can I do?" She tells Trofimov that he can only see "what is true and untrue," and that she has "lost her sight" in these matters. Knowledge is here equated with vision. But ironically enough, she also

argues that the only reasons Trofimov thinks he can see truth is that he is "too young to see what life is really like," implying that now it is Trofimov who has no vision and is blind.

To Ranevsky, this inability to love is "unnatural," and she accuses Trofimov of being "a ridiculous freak, a type of monster." Ranevsky uses Nature as a weapon to discredit Trofimov. Her cherry orchard, and by extension, her memories are natural. And she identifies herself fully with her memories, by identifying herself with the cherry orchard, saying, "if you sell it you might as well sell me." Trofimov, in contrast, has no past. He is "too young," and he has no memory. Compared to Ranevsky, he is nothing. He is "ugly" and a "seedy- looking gent." What is more important for Ranevsky are that one's memories reflect one's vision of how the world should be, rather than any objective set of facts about how it is.

Interestingly, when Ranevsky wins their argument, she suddenly disclaims her remarks as only being "a joke," and she is not comfortable with a victory that alienates her from Trofimov. Her desire to love others and be loved here makes her admirable and sympathetic to the point that she will lie to herself and Trofimov about what just happened between them. Chekhov reminds us what this willingness to ignore reality and to believe in pleasant illusions has cost her. First remarks that the estate used to have generals and barons attend their parties, and now they have difficulty attracting post-office clerks and stationmasters. The stationmaster himself begins reciting a poem called *The Sinful Woman*. We don't have to believe the stationmaster is intentionally referring to Ranevsky to see the connection between her and the archetypal Sinful Woman of literature; Ranevsky has cheated on her husband, lived an extravagant life, and is now on the brink of disaster. In fact, disaster has already occurred; the orchard has already been sold to Lopakhin while Ranevsky dances. These details all subtly mock Ranevsky's idealism, making it look instead more like idiocy.

### Act Three [After Varya's second entrance, just before Lopakhin returns]

## Summary

Varya enters. She tells Dunyasha to leave and then launches against Yephikodov, telling him that he does no work at all. She wonders aloud why they even keep a clerk. Yephikodov is deeply offended, especially by the last remark; he haughtily tells her that such things are "for wiser and older heads" than Varya's to decide. Varya is incensed at Yephikodov's words. She tells him to leave instantly. He asks her to "express herself in a more refined manner," but he is clearly frightened. And he has good reason to fear, because Varya moves towards him, threateningly. As she does so, he leaves, but from behind the doorway he tells her he will lodge a complaint. She hears a noise in the hall and, believing him to be coming back, grabs a stick and lashes out.



But Lopakhin enters instead, receiving the end of her stick. Lopakhin and Gayev have returned from the auction. As Lopakhin and Gayev enter, Lopakhin is visibly happy; Gayev is tired and upset and soon leaves. In response to a question by Ranevsky, Lopakhin lets everyone know that he bought the orchard at

auction. Furthermore, he plans to go through with his plans for cutting down the cherry orchard and building cottages in its place.

Ranevsky is heartbroken. Varya throws down the keys to the estate and leaves. Lopakhin reflects out loud on how he, the son of local peasants, has come to own the great estate his father and grandfather once worked on, the estate of those who once owned his father and grandfather, and how he will implement changes now that he is in charge.

During his speech, Ranevsky quietly weeps. He goes up to her, but instead of consoling her, he is reproachful. He asks her why she didn't listen to him and says, "my poor dear friend, you can't turn back the clock now." Pischik takes him by the arm and escorts him out of the room.

When he leaves, Anya consoles her mother. She tells her mother that she loves her, and she still has a life to live. And she tells her that they will plant a new cherry orchard, a better one, and that after they do this they will all "smile again."

## Analysis

Lopakhin's revelation, that he has bought the orchard, is the climax of the play. If we wish to read it as a tragedy, then this is the play's catastrophe, its horrific event. But, Chekhov handles the situation comically. Lopakhin waits until the last possible moment to reveal that it was he who bought the orchard. Always the man of facts and figures, he recounts the auction in detail and with glee, including the amount of each bid. As he leaves, he nearly knocks over a candelabra from a table, but instead of being self-conscious about his clumsiness and recognizing it as a sign of his peasant origins, he reacts nonchalantly, saying, "I can pay for everything now." The key word here is "now." Lopakhin's triumph is his final escape from his past and from his memory; his purchase of the orchard is proof that he is the rich businessman he is *now*, and not the peasant child he remembers himself as being *then*. Lopakhin's mentioning of his grandparents is of particular interest, for in the moment of the greatest separation from his past he seems not to forget but instead to remember. He ponders, if his grandfather and grandmother "could only rise from their graves to see what has happened" and witness that their grandson, who "used to run around barefoot," is now the owner of the orchard, the place where his grandparents were treated as slaves. But such memories are safe for Lopakhin now, because the implication is that his grandparents would not recognize him: he has proven to their memory, as well as to himself, that he is no longer a peasant.



And Lopakhin contemplates one final act of revenge against the past. "[Y]ou just watch Yermolay Lopakhin get his axe into that cherry orchard, watch the trees come crashing down. We'll fill the place with cottages." The image is one replete with violence; Lopakhin will be personally destroying the trees, destroying what he himself has called "the most beautiful place in the world." His appreciation of this beauty, yet his willingness to destroy it, creates an uneasy tension, leaving us wondering why he not only accepts, but also delights in the thought of destroying the orchard. This tension must exist firmly within Lopakhin himself, since the orchard represents the best that the Russia of Lopakhin's grandparents had to offer. It is "the most beautiful place in the world," and, moreover, so large that it probably could only have been supported by the oppressive economic system then in place. In obliterating it, Lopakhin

obliterates the attractive beauty from the memory of that social world, leaving only its repulsive oppression, but he also attempts to obliterate his own oppressive memories of a brutal peasant childhood. So Lopakhin's destruction of the cherry orchard symbolizes his desire to forget his peasant past, as well as the desire that Russia should forget its own peasant past; in other words, its history of serfdom.

But while he exults, Ranevsky weeps. And it is typical that of the dramatic structure of *The Cherry Orchard* that right after his moment of triumph, Lopakhin acts out his ugliest moment in the play. We see the insensitivity of the celebrating Lopakhin when faced with Ranevsky's sadness, especially when he sees that she is weeping. Instead of consoling her, he goes up to her in a reproachful tone. In effect, he gloats, evoking an I-told-you-so type of response. In previous scenes, we were liable to feel sorry for Lopakhin when he described his thick-headedness and his lack of refinement. But here he proves himself to be deserving of this image—he is "a bull in a china shop," both emotionally (in that he is insensitive) and physically (in that he is clumsy). When juxtaposed with his recent triumph, this behavior is definitely ironic. The irony arises from the fact that while Lopakhin exults about his freedom from his peasant origins, his clumsiness, his insensitivity, and his emotional brutality towards Ranevsky, are all the character traits of a peasant. They thus prove that the brutality of Lopakhin's peasant past is still very much a part of him even if he does forget it. He is infected by it, much as Trofimov thinks all of Russian society is infected by the legacy of serfdom.

#### Act Four [*Until Pischik's exit*]

### Summary

It is now October, and all the occupants of the estate are preparing to leave. We are in the nursery again, but now it looks very different than it did in May; there are no window curtains, pictures, and little furniture, all of which is stacked in one corner. The sound of axes chopping down the orchard can already be heard. Lopakhin himself will accompany the clan as far as the station, and then carry on to Kharkov, where he plans to spend the winter. He buys champagne at eight rubles a bottle for everyone



Gayev and Ranevsky say goodbye to some peasants out in the back, as Yasha mutters that the lower classes "haven't got much sense." Afterwards, Gayev and Ranevsky come into the nursery. Ranevsky has given the peasants her entire purse of money. Gayev tells her she "shouldn't do such things," but she protests that she couldn't help it.

Lopakhin and Trofimov give each other a long and complicated goodbye. They both admit their affection for each other, while admitting they will always have a very different outlook on life. Trofimov tells Lopakhin he thinks he is a good person at heart. Lopakhin offers Trofimov a loan of forty thousand roubles, money he made in the spring by planting poppies over three thousand acres of land. Trofimov refuses Lopakhin's offer, however. He claims that he is a "free man", and gives an idealistic speech in which he asserts his belief that mankind is marching towards a "higher truth". Anya comes in and asks

Lopakhin, on behalf of Ranevsky to hold off cutting down the orchard until the family has left. Lopakhin agrees immediately, and Trofimov criticizes him for his lack of tact. Anya then wonders whether Firs has been taken to the hospital yet, since he became really ill that morning. Yasha says, with great offense, that he told Yegor to do it that morning. Yephikodov expresses the opinion that Firs is old enough that it is time for him to die; Yephikodov says that he envies Firs. Just before Yephikodov leaves, he squashes a hatbox with his suitcase.

Soon Ranevsky, Yasha, Anya, Charlotte, and Gayev all congregate; all of them are leaving, as well as Varya. Ranevsky is going to Paris, with Yasha accompanying her; Gayev has a job working at the bank in the local town; Anya is going to school, and Charlotte is simply leaving, for where even she does not know. Varya, we later learn, is going to the Ragulins', to take on a housekeeper's job. They are all greeted unexpectedly by Pischik, who even more unexpectedly pays back 400 rubles of the 1,240 he owes Ranevsky. Pischik explains that the money comes from two Englishmen, to whom he has just leased a part of his property on which the Englishmen discovered some white clay, for twenty-four years.

## Analysis

In a play thematically centered around the act of forgetting, it seems appropriate that the final act seems to forget the development of the three acts that preceded it. Lopakhin is still energetic, outgoing, and concerned with money—we learn from him that the champagne cost eight rubles a bottle—and insensitive to the feelings of Ranevsky. Ranevsky is still unable to control her generosity, giving a whole purse away. Gayev is still concerned about his sister, Yasha still wants to leave and Trofimov is still idealistic and naïve. The mood is initially upbeat. This sameness, this lack of change, should run against our expectations. In the previous scene, we were presented with the loss of the cherry orchard, a seemingly catastrophic event. In this, the falling action of the play, we expect to see the consequences of this climax. But there don't seem to be any consequences, except for the simple fact that Lopakhin owns the orchard and is now cutting it down.

Chekhov holds off on the consequences because it fits in with the naturalistic, balanced way he has developed the play up to this point. Ranevsky will not become a completely different person after the loss of her orchard. She will, for the most part, be the same person, and if she is going to change the change will have to be long and gradual. The effects of a momentous event, Chekhov seems to be telling us, and the changes in identity that it brings, are often not felt until long after it occurs, be it the emancipation of the serfs or the loss of the cherry orchard.



In case we were going to draw the conclusion that the loss of the cherry orchard was somehow predestined, Pischik comes along to spoil that illusion. This is a perfect example of what Donald Styan calls Chekhov's "dialectic" method of presenting a drama, taking us in and out of the play all the time with new details. Pischik is, if anything, more irresponsible and foolhardy than Ranevsky, more liable to talk endlessly in the face of impending financial disaster; in the previous Act, he enjoyed himself at the party, even though the next day a mortgage of 310 roubles was due. If Ranevsky is paralyzed by an inability to

face reality, then Pischik is her "scatter-brained" nature taken to a comical extreme. Indeed, his last name, which means "squeaker" in Russian, indicates that he is a comic caricature.

But Pischik is also lucky. First of all, he is lucky to have a friend like Ranevsky who will loan him money even though she has none herself. And secondly, he is lucky to possess some white china clay on his property that Englishmen are willing to pay 400 rubles in order to lease for twenty-four years. It is of course possible, in fact, probably likely, that Pischik was just taken advantage of, but this does not change the fact that Pischik still has his property and is now in slightly less debt than Ranevsky. Pischik challenges the air of inevitability. His story, so far, has a happy ending. And this seems to be purely a matter of chance.

There is one key difference between Pischik and Ranevsky, however. Pischik possesses neither Ranevsky's idealism nor her desire to escape the present, to construct an illusion of security for herself in the world of her childhood. In Act Three, he admits he can't think of anything but money, which is natural for a man deeply in debt. Ranevsky, however, can only think of her orchard, her family, her brother, and love, and doesn't think about money at all. So even though Pischik's optimism seems much more unjustified than Ranevsky's gloom, he is tuned in to reality in a way that she isn't. He remembers the importance of money, whereas Ranevsky forgets.

## Act Four [after Pischik's exit]

### Summary

Ranevsky worries out loud about two people: Firs and Varya. She worries about Firs because he is ill, but Anya assures her that Yasha sent him to the hospital. Her answer is enough to satisfy Ranevsky. Ranevsky worries about Varya because, since the estate has been sold, she feels no compunction to work and is depressed and listless. She then talks to Lopakhin about when he will propose to Varya. Lopakhin says it is unlikely he will ever do so. She encourages him to do so at that very moment; he agrees.



But in the ensuing conversation all Lopakhin manages is small talk, about the weather, the fact that he is staying in Kharkov for the summer, and about what Varya's plans are. She has taken a housekeeping job at the Ragulins', in Yashevno, fifty miles away. Varya pretends to be distracted during the entire conversation, looking for something unspecific that she has lost. Ranevsky has obviously told her adopted daughter about Lopakhin's potential proposal. Varya does manage to agree when Lopakhin observes that all life has gone out of the house. Soon they are interrupted, as a voice—presumably from one of the tree cutters—cries out, "Mr. Lopakhin!" Lopakhin happily leaves the conversation, still unengaged. Varya sits down to sob. Ranevsky comes in to check on her daughter. She can see by Varya's tears that the proposal did not occur.

Soon, it is time for everyone to leave. Gayev nearly bursts into an emotional speech, but both Varya and Anya stop him. Lopakhin pretends to be frightened when Varya takes out her umbrella in a way that suggests she might want to hit someone with it; she tells him not to be silly. There is much sobbing and

emotion; even Yephikodov's voice is hoarse. Ranevsky tells everyone that she just wants to look at the walls of her house a little longer; she feels as if she's "never looked at them before". Gayev says something about the train and then again makes a completely unmotivated reference to billiards; for once, he is unable to speak. Trofimov and Anya leave first, together; Anya says, "Good-bye, old life," and Trofimov answers by saying, "And welcome, new life." Varya, Yasha, and Yephikodov follow. Soon everyone has left except for Ranevsky and Gayev. They embrace, cry, and take one last look around their childhood home and then also depart. The play would end here, except that everyone has indeed forgotten to send Firs to the hospital. Firs wanders on stage, muttering to himself about how his life has slipped by as if he "never lived it at all." He sits down on the couch, calling himself a nincompoop and then lies motionless, presumably dead. The disconcerting sound of a string breaking is again heard. The play ends with another sound: that of an axe striking a tree in the orchard.

## Analysis

Many of the most important moments in *The Cherry Orchard* take place when no one is speaking. In this last scene, we have two such moments: Ranevsky and Gayev sobbing in each other's arms and Firs's lying motionless on the couch. Ranevsky reminds Gayev that their mother used to walk around the very room in which they now stand. At the very end, in her last moments in her house, she affirms the house's connection with the past; it seems that this is ultimately what the house means to her. When she and Gayev cry in each other's arms, they cry for the past they are about to lose.

*The Cherry Orchard* poses the question of whether the characters are better off moving on or if this is truly their tragic end. It is a play about what happens when the present becomes unmoored from the past. This can be either a release, or a tragedy, or both (as for Ranevsky). It can also be the start of a new and better age, as it is for Lopakhin and Trofimov. It can simply be the start of great uncertainty. But for the memories that are forgotten, it means nothing but annihilation. Thus, Firs is forgotten in both a literal sense and a metaphorical sense at the end of the play. Firs is literally left behind and forgotten by the rest of the family. But Firs's perspective on and memories of the past will be "forgotten" too. They will die with him, as will the beauty of the cherry orchard, because the next generation of Russians in the play—Trofimov, Anya, Yasha, Varya—will not remember them. This destruction, this severing of the future from the past, is underlined and emphasized by the sound of the breaking cable.

As Firs dies, he mumbles something about how "life has passed him by." This is an odd thing for Firs to say, considering how he is always telling stories about the old days. But it is consistent with the idea of him being forgotten. When a society is severed from its past, its memories and values are lost. The dead are not only then dead, they are forgotten, as if they never existed.

## Genre-bending

The following genres have all had *The Cherry Orchard* ascribed to them by some influential critic or playwright: Comedy, Drama, Tragedy, pastoral comedy, "Chekhovian comedy." The last genre was created specifically for the play, by Donald R. Styrant; the term "pastoral" is a literary term usually denoting poems

that are about shepherds, but according to Beverly Hahn, a "pastoral comedy" is the closest fit in terms of genre that *The Cherry Orchard* can manage. The first genre on the list is what Chekhov himself considered the play to be, as reflected in the play's subtitle: A Comedy in Four Acts. But Stanislavsky, the great director of the Moscow Arts Performing Theatre where the play was first produced, disagreed. He thought the play was a drama, and directed it as such. This annoyed Chekhov to no end. Especially irksome to the playwright was the way Stanislavsky stretched out the fourth Act to forty minutes in length, in order to heighten the emotional impact of Ranevsky's final departure. According to Chekhov, the Act should have lasted no more than twelve.



There is a fine line between pathos and comedy; as Richard Peace notes, they both involve the build-up and then release of emotional tension. The difference between is often dependent upon whether we closely sympathize with a given character's predicament or whether we maintain a certain distance from that predicament. *The Cherry Orchard* walks a fine line between the two. Where Chekhov may cross the line from comedy to pathos is in the amount of attention he gives to Ranevsky in terms of character development. She is, next to the orchard itself, the largest presence in the play, and thus draws the attention of readers. She is a sympathetic character, and furthermore is the one character who seems to escape the irony which distances us from the rest of the characters in the play. This has prompted some critics and readers have seen Ranevsky as a tragic hero. The play's structuring of time supports this interpretation, as well; it flows from the beginning towards a fixed end-point in the future; this fixed time frame is typical of tragedy.

Others, however, have taken Chekhov's side in the debate. And even though the subject matter of the play may appear serious, we can see that Chekhov mixes both comic elements and tragic elements in the play. First of all, though the end of the play is far from upbeat, the central character Ranevsky is alive, healthy, and perhaps better off than she was before, having the chance to leave her past behind her. Secondly, there is an element of vaudeville in the play; Yephikodov is a buffoon, and when Varya hitting Lopakhin is pure slapstick. Also, it must be noted much of the humor in *The Cherry Orchard* does not translate nearly as well as the symbolism. Russian culture, like any culture, has its own unique sense of humor; the challenge of translating Chekhov's jokes into the English idiom may be the main reason why there have been so many translations (90), not one of which has proven to be perfectly satisfactory. And no matter how good a translation is, it will never catch, for example, the pun on Yephikodov's words when he hands his bouquet of flowers to Dunyasha in Act One; he intends to say, "allow me to communicate to you," but the word he uses in the original Russian, *prisovokupit*, which is a little too close to *sovokupit*, which means "to copulate," especially when directed towards the woman he wants to marry.