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## Multiplicity of meanings in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard* portrays Russian society in a state of flux and marks the end of Feudalism and the rise of capitalism. It mirrors the sense of loss of Lyubov Ranevskaya and her aristocratic family. Right at the outset it is revealed that she is one who is left with no source of livelihood and has accrued great debts in order to sustain herself and her dependents. Though she is still the proud owner of the Cherry Orchard, and her ancestral home to which many a fond memory is attached but along with this she also associates the memory of her dead husband and son. The importance of class in the play is impossible to gauge without a brief analysis of the social divisions that existed in Russia while Chekhov lived and wrote. The play was written in pre-Revolutionary Russia, and this conflict was yet to turn to violence, remaining a source of consternation rather than antagonism among the characters. This also helps to support the argument for a comic interpretation of the text, as the original play was untainted by the tragedy of civil war, and early performances unaffected by the censorship of the Bolshevik regime. Others, however, have taken Chekhov's side in the debate. And even though the subject

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matter of the play may appear serious, we can see that Chekhov mixes both comic elements and tragic elements in the play.

**Key Words-** Drama, symbolism , interpretation, memory, serfdom

Interpretation of drama, arguably more than any other form of literature, can be problematic given the nature of the genre. While poetry and novels invite a solitary investigation of meaning (although both can be performed, this is not the original intention of the writer), drama essentially requires the active interpretation of not only individual readers, but directors, producers, theatre directors, set designers, actors, costume designers, make-up artists, critics, the audience and, of course, the writers themselves. The writer's interpretation is certainly not sacrosanct, as Sara Haslam points out when discussing *The Cherry Orchard*, "the interpretative act is one that Chekhov cannot control" (Brown and Gupta 27). This plurality of interpretation is further complicated by the social, political and historical context in which the play is being performed/viewed. Therefore, the argument that Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* is an 'allegory of class struggle' ( Brown and Gupta 59) is only as convincing as interpretation allows. The importance of class in the play is impossible to gauge without a brief analysis of the social divisions that existed in Russia while Chekhov lived and wrote. The play was written in pre-Revolutionary Russia, and this conflict was yet to turn to violence, remaining a source of consternation rather than antagonism among the characters. This also helps to support the argument for a comic interpretation of the text, as the original play was untainted by the tragedy of civil war, and early performances unaffected by the censorship of the Bolshevik regime.

" We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are." This quote by Anais Nin expresses an essential point of view for this discussion about the symbolic meaning of inanimate objects, since it is our personality and our memories, which determine our character and meaning. Our feelings towards certain objects are individual, as everyone associates different things in a different manner. Insofar, "we see them as we are", since they can mirror our past,

pains, hopes and our ideals. Thus they become more than just an object, but a symbol for a certain part of someone's feelings and life. This is also the case in "The Cherry Orchard": objects as the nursery room, the bookcase and the cherry orchard take on their own symbolic life. They all share one thing in common: each one reveals something of the characters' personalities, feelings and ideals. These inanimate objects are a reflection of the characters' inner states of being.

The meaning of these inanimate objects are changing analogously with the characters' change of mood, perspective and state of mind. Thus one gets the impression that the objects are more like persons, since it is only the characters' life, which makes and keeps them alive. The nursery room may be for an outstanding person without any implicit significance, but for Lopakhin and Liuba it is a symbol for their childhood, background and past. The nursery room reminds Lopakhin of his origins. It makes him aware that he is "just a peasant" (334); no matter how rich he has become or how elegant he might be dressed, his social background still remains visible for other people. After all, one "can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear"(334), as his origins will be for good a part of his identity. For Liuba the nursery room symbolizes her "innocent childhood" (347). Being in this room, in which "she used to sleep when she was little" (336) seems to bring her back to feel a part of that secure, carefree life and makes her feel "little again"(336). The bookcase has the same effect on her; all her troubles seem to be far away and she feels pure "happiness" (342). Gayevs' 'relationship' to the bookcase is less personal, as he doesn't associate a particular personal memory with it. He considers it rather as an object, which has its own personality; hence, though it is "an inanimate object, true, but still – ;a bookcase (345)"! The way he sees it is reminiscent of a hero, as it has for already hundred years "devoted itself to the highest ideals of goodness and justice" (345) and has never deceived anyone. Being constantly and unshakably true to its 'principles', it was a source, from which "several generations of their family"(345) have drawn courage and hope "in a better future"(345). In the course of time a lot of things have changed: some people are dead, Gayev and Liuba got adolescent, and the estate is probably going to be sold. However, the bookcase not being subject to any rules or changes, thus becomes for Gayev a symbol of consistency and security. The central symbol of *The Cherry Orchard*, as the title might suggest, is the cherry orchard

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itself. The cherry orchard does not only represent an inanimate object, but it is the center of the characters' world. Their lives could be divided into the era "before the cherry orchard was sold" (301) and into the era after it. With this change the symbolic meaning of the cherry orchard before and after the sale also changes. The cherry orchard 'before the sale' plays a part in each of the characters' past ;but it seems foremost to be part of Liuba's mind, through which the cherry orchard takes on his own symbolic life.

Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard* portrays Russian society in a state of flux and marks the end of Feudalism and the rise of capitalism. It mirrors the sense of loss of Lyubov Ranevskaya and her aristocratic family. Right at the outset it is revealed that she is one who is left with no source of livelihood and has accrued great debts in order to sustain herself and her dependents. Though she is still the proud owner of the Cherry Orchard, and her ancestral home to which many a fond memory is attached but along with this she also associates the memory of her dead husband and son. Although she knows that within a few month's this orchard and the rest of the property will be auctioned if she does not succeed in clearing her debts before that, but she does not do much about it. The only way out of this dilemma is the one suggested by Lopakhin the son of a former serf who says:

Your estate is only fifteen miles from town, the railway runs close by it, and if you agree to cut up the cherry orchard and the land along the river into building lots and-lease them out for summer cottage, you'll get at least twenty-five thousand roubles a year out of it. (168)

But Gayev and Ranevskaya both find the idea unacceptable and Gayev retorts that their orchard is mentioned in the Encyclopaedia.

*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".

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 Ranevksy 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. Ranevksy, 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.

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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 Ranevksy; 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.

Though the cherry orchard is a presence throughout the play and the entire action revolves around it, but its sale is part of re-ported action and bears testimony to Chekhov's technique of indirect action which adds to the subtlety of the play. Chekhov also makes deft use of the sound of breaking string to communicate meaning in *The Cherry Orchard*. This is a symbolic sound and no one in the play is sure about its source. The sound of breaking string helps to interpret the theme and marks a break with the past, be it the liberation of the serfs as is testified by Feers or when the cherry orchard along with Ranevskaya's estate stands on the verge of being sold or yet again when Feers the old ex serf who chose to continue living the life of a serf even after the liberation of the serfs lies down to rest at the end of the play and dies. Thus the old order becomes a part of history and the new order is born. Since at the verge of every momentous change this sound of breaking string is heard, it not only helps and prepares the reader and the audience to accept this change highlighting its inevitability but also "awakens dormant or "suppressed experiences" of the reader/audience, so that the reader/ audience relives has own similar "suppressed experiences" of loss and suffering and simultaneously sensitizing him to the feelings of others, awakening in him sympathy and even empathy. In *The Cherry . Orchard* one sympathizes with Ranevskaya and her family as well as Lopakhin. Chekhov deftly creates an environment where in Ranevskaya's loss appears to be our own loss but is inevitable. On the other hand Lopakhin's gain too is perceived as part of our aspirations and our vision of the world as a level playing field where all are considered equal and have equal opportunities. Hence the old world order represented by the nobility must be destroyed and replaced by a new world order. Lopakhin represents this new order. He functions as a good contrast to Ranevskaya.. Though he is hardworking which Ranevskaya is certainly not, he is out

and out a materialist. He does not falter when opportunity knocks at his door and he not only purchases the orchard forgetting his gratitude to Ranevskaya but is insensitive enough to encourage the musical party to continue when he returns though Ranevskaya is heartbroken due to the sale of the cherry orchard. With the destruction of the cherry orchard where his forefathers had worked as serfs, he . also wishes to obliterate the memory of their pain and humiliation and indeed of serfdom itself ( 201-202). But the play proposes that the belief that the abolition of serfdom, the granting of freedom and equality will necessarily bring about economic prosperity and the social and educational upliftment of the suppressed classes is an illusion. The success of Lopakhin with his flair for business cannot be quoted as a rule.

Ranevskaya is kind and compassionate but blunders from one loss to another. Her brother Gayev who is a wastrel adds to this sense of loss. All this is quite pathetic and tragic and not in the least comic. The success of Lopakhin the son of a serf is one of the brighter aspects of the play, but this too is not comic. The surface or overt meaning given to the text of *The Cherry Orchard* by its author calling it a comedy is an attempt to "mask" (Abrams 242) the real meaning and status of the play. By saying that the attitude of Ranevskaya and her family towards the sale of the cherry orchard and the rest of their estate is comic Chekhov probably hopes to emerge as one who has an objective attitude towards the land owning class and is critical of their sloth and inaction. In the Russia of the period in which this play was written and produced "... a western-minded wealthy bourgeoisie and a growing working class, both products of the industrial development of the country -- were slowly coming into play. Con-currently, the intellectual and political life of the nation began to show signs of awakening, and new, if long-distance, optimism was born" (Bakshy 1). At the time when *The Cherry Orchard* was written and staged, ordinary people were part of the theatre going public and hence Chekov balances the pathos of Ranevskaya's loss with Lopakhin's gain in the name of progress and development.

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

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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.

The entire action of the play is deftly controlled through the central symbol of the play the cherry orchard which means different things to different people. To Ranevskaya the orchard is a symbol of the pride of her family and reminds her of her youth, her child-hood, her innocence and her mother. Trofimov is reminded of slavery of cruelty and of suffering associated with serfdom and hence he views it from the political and moral angle. Lopakhin's approach towards the cherry orchard is largely utilitarian but at a crucial juncture he reveals that it is a symbol of serfdom, of suppression, oppression and humiliation for him and the fact that he has purchased it ensures that it will be destroyed so that the generations that spring from him may live in comfort, prosperity and dignity. Chekhov the author does not agree or disagree with any of the meanings or interpretations given to the central symbol of the play. Hence *The Cherry Orchard* can be read as a play that accepts the plurality of meaning as apposed to a single meaning that is fixed and universal. But the fact remains that Chekhov himself-labelled it a comedy. This could have been necessity governed by the forces of consumption and was market driven as pointed out earlier. Chekhov may have also intentionally created ambiguity in order to generate controversy leading to a heightening of interest in the play. Nevertheless, whatever the aim of Chekhov may have been *The Cherry Orchard* effectively challenges the author and his authority by resisting being classified as a comedy. It is due to its multiplicity of meanings that *The Cherry Orchard* is a profound work of art that strikes a sympathetic chord in diverse minds and times. The language of the play brilliantly expresses lyrical emotions with a simplicity which is the hallmark of an accomplished writer whose forte is communication.

As Haslam states, "Chekhov did not consider himself an instrumentalist writer, nor was he considered to be so by his contemporaries" (Brown and Gupta 57). He also could not be said to be part of Russia's "alternative government"(Brown and Gupta 41) of writers like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky who used their work to criticise Russian society. Yet, the argument that *The Cherry Orchard* is an 'allegory of class struggle' is convincing as long as the interpretation

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retains the satire that Chekhov originally hoped for, and avoids the pathos to which directors from Stanislavski to Eyre have succumbed.

This whole play seemed to be symbolic of an olden age that was on its way out. As long as the family had the Cherry Orchard and their land they still had their connection to their old life as rulers of the land. They no longer had their surfs, their wealth was nearly gone, and their status was relegated to that of a well of peasant as shown by the fact that they invited a lot of people to their ball that weren't of the wealthy family. There one symbol of their authority that they had left was their cheery orchard and if that went then they would have lost whatever connection that they had to the old world and all of their old authority and power. In a way the cherry orchard is the only thing that is separating them from well off emancipated surfs and the fact that they may be just like them probably scares them more than anything else. With this type of centrality to the family and the fact that they whole play revolves around the fact that the Cherry Orchard is being sold and the old world order is coming to an end all point to why this play was named the Cherry Orchard.

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