



Mood, Beauty, Impression, and Work in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*

Mood

"I am describing life, ordinary life, and not blank despondency. They either make me into a cry-baby or into a bore. They invent something about me out of their own heads, anything they like, something I never thought of or dreamed about. This is beginning to make me angry"

1. Chekhov understood his plays to be comedies. By this he meant a particular delicate mixture of optimism and pessimism that focused on the humor that ordinary people exemplify in real life situations.
2. He rejected the theatre of action for a more character-centered and impressionistic work of plot and dialogue. Such an emphasis can be seen in
 - a) emotionally-charged moments where characters react to their circumstances or
 - b) atmospheric moments where a certain wistfulness, despair, loss, and/or hope dominates.
3. He believed in a high form of verisimilitude that included the random and muted action of actual life. In his later plays, this resulted in a form of drama that tended to stress compressed, tight plays. They always tended to climax in the third act, but not so much that the fourth lacked any power to still move.
4. As a result of all of the above, Chekhov's later plays have often been labeled "lyrical".

"In accordance with your orders I hasten to reply to your letter where you ask about the last scene of Astrov and Elena. You write that Astrov in that scene behaves with Elena as with someone madly in love, that he clutches at his feeling as a drowning man for straw. But this is incorrect, completely incorrect. Astrov likes Elena, she overwhelms him with her beauty, but in the last act he already knows that nothing will come of it, that Elena will disappear from him forever -- and he talks with her in this last scene in the same tone of voice as the heat of Africa, and kisses her, just simply out of nothing to do. If Astrov plays this scene violently, then, the entire mood of the fourth act will be destroyed"

-- Letter to Stanislavsky, Sept. 30, 1899.

Questions

- Do you find *Uncle Vanya* comic? How should we define "the comic" in this play?
- What moods predominant in each act of the play?

- How should one perform certain key dialogues? (Astrov and Yelena confronting Vanya about the woods, Sonya's loss, Astrov's attraction to Helena, the departures and Sonia's last speech)

Beauty

poshlost: "[N]ot only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive" (Vladimir Nabokov)

- What is true and false beauty in this work? (c/c Vanya and Astrov's exchange over the forests, Astrov's view of beauty, Helena's estimation of Astrov, and Astrov's offer of consummation in the woods as poetic) What are we to feel for Sonya's lack of physical beauty?
- What kind of power does Helena have over Vanya and Astrov? Is she entirely admirable?
- What role does beauty have in the construction of the play itself?

Impression

Compare *Uncle Vanya* with Chekhov's earlier version *The Wood Demon*. Why has Chekhov chosen to make the changes he has? What makes the new version more impressionistic?

Work

- What role does class play among the characters? What kind of control does Serebrakov have over the other characters? Why does Vanya react the way he does?
- Is work a positive or negative pursuit in the play?
- Are intelligence and culture held up as admirable? Why or why not?