

WORDS VS ACTION  
THE DRAMATIC DIALOGUE IN THREE SISTERS

AKEMI HORIE ©

*The most completely typical thing about a Russian is his exalted way of thinking. But then his way of behaving is anything but exalted. Why is this ? Can you tell me ?*

- Vershinin -

When one man speaks of his feelings, thoughts or will, it is a monologue. When two men discuss these matters, it is a conversation. But when two men taking opposite stands in a certain situation express their thoughts, emotions and their conflicting wills, it forms a dialogue: Dramatic Dialogue. And it is through such dialogues that one will win over the other, and by the succession of such dialogues that the dramatic action of a play is initiated and a play is structured. Dialogues are in a sense the nucleus of a spoken drama.

Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, however, has no such dialogues. The characters converse about their feelings, thoughts, and even of their wills, but their conversations are hardly linked to form a Dialogue<sup>1</sup> and do not initiate the dramatic action of the play. The action, on the other hand, takes place independent of these conversations, being due only to the progress of time.

#### 1. The Dramatic Function of the Conversations and the Action of the play

Apart from their expository role, the conversations function in this play to inform the audience of the progressing dramatic Action, and to indicate the characters' response, or non-response, to it. As the play progresses, the gulf between these two elements deepens. In this sense, it is these two - Action vs Conversation/Words - that form the thematic conflict of the play, the Dialogue of *Three Sisters*.

Because of such functions the casual conversations are woven with specific dramatic information. For example, each character has a recurrent thought-motif embedded in their speech, which defines their character and situation. And it is through the association and orchestration of these individual thought-motifs, in response to the progressing Action, that the circumstances are manifest and the play moves forward.

The function of these thought-motifs resembles that of melody-motifs of instruments in a symphony. Just as each instrument carries its melody-motif in a

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<sup>1</sup> There is one conversation in the third Act, which almost forms a dramatic dialogue. Olga and Natasha argue over the treatment of the nanny Anfisa, taking opposite stands. But their dialogue does not alter the direction or progress of the dramatic action.

symphony, each character carries his thought-motif in this play. Just as the orchestration of such melody-motifs supports the theme and creates the totality of music with their variations, the chorus of individual thought-motifs defines and comments on the overall theme, constructing the full dimensions of the drama.

## 2. The Thematic Conflict: The Dramatic Dialogue of the Play

Nothing but talk, talk, talk all day long. The skies are falling and all we do is talk.<sup>2</sup>

### Masha Act IV

This short quotation encapsulates the thematic conflict, the Dialogue of the play. It points to the dramatic action in progress: the "falling" of "the skies", that is, the 'falling' of the Dream of the sisters. It also points to their passive, practically non-existent response to this progressing action: "Nothing but talk. talk, talk", thus establishing the dramatic opposition between the two. To be sure, the progression of the "falling" action is most visibly manifest in the transformation of Andrey's physique and character.

## 3. Individual Motifs

This overall thematic conflict is orchestrated by three groups of individual thought-motifs.<sup>3</sup> The first group relates to the Dream, or "The Skies". Most prominent is of course the central motif of the play "To go to Moscow", shared by the two sisters Irina and Olga. Also in this group is a positive motif "I shall work", declared and shared by the youthful pair, Tusenbach and Irina.

Countering "The Skies" motifs are those individual motifs that anticipate and accelerate the "falling" in the structure of the Dialogue, i.e., the opposition to the Dream. They are: Andrey's "Do leave me alone", signalling his reluctance to take part in his sisters' Dream; Natasha's "My darling Bobik", signifying the all-consuming,

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations from *The Three Sisters*, trans. by Tyrone Guthrie & Leonid Kipuis, 1963, Avon Theatre Library. Supplemented by Elisaveta Fen's translation, *Three Sisters*, 1959, Penguin Classics

<sup>3</sup> The motifs are selected from the recurrent phrases of each character, which appear at least three times in their speeches. But in most cases, they recur more often.

procreative biological forces of the locals, which consume Andrey in the end; and Solyony's gesture of 'scenting his hands'. His hands smell of death, he complains, and he is seen affecting this ritual gesture throughout the play. This silent but sinister motif reinforces the sense of foreboding of the catastrophe to come, the death of his rival Tusenbach. In fact it is Solyony who literally shoots down any hope for the future, the fulfilment of the sisters' Dream.

The third group forms "talk, talk, talk" part of the Dialogue, the Chorus of the play. Leading this pack is the most optimistic motif, chanted by Vershinin: "In two or three hundred years, life on earth will be unimaginably beautiful." However, Vershinin himself is tied down to a most miserable private life, with the sub-motif "I am sick of my wife and children". So his optimistic flight to a utopian future would seem fanciful escapism - somewhat akin to Olga's hopeful motif of going "home to Moscow", freed from all the "headaches" of her provincial existence.

By contrast Masha and Chebutykin bring darker motifs to the scene. Unlike Olga, Masha is married and stays at home - ideal arrangements according to Olga, and yet she represents the most unhappy motif of all: "What a damnable, intolerable life". With such a life, and married to a local man, she has nothing positive to say or offer. So she joins the Chorus with her sub-motifs "humming, laughing and verse-reciting".<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Chebutykin, seen habitually reading nonsensical stories from the newspapers, provides a starkly indifferent and downbeat motif: "It doesn't matter; it's all the same". This motif, coming from the oldest man around, anticipates the downbeat future of the still hopeful younger generation.

Chekhov injects yet another dimension to the Chorus in the conformist Kulygin, Masha's husband. His motif "I'm perfectly, perfectly content" despite everything, despite all the negatives Masha brings to their life, appears self-deceiving and absurd. This element, combined with his propensity for clownish gestures to entertain, prompts uncomfortable laughter from the spectators on

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<sup>4</sup> That is, until she falls in love with Vershinin. Their love affair has no future, with each already tied to an impossible marriage. Chekhov kindly depicts the happy couple savouring momentary bliss in their doomed relationship.

and off stage, as Chekhov surely intended.<sup>5</sup> The experience is not too far from those we encounter in the Theatre of the Absurd some fifty years on.

These individual motifs, together with the multiple variations on the central Dream and Work motifs, are orchestrated to construct the full dimensions of the Dialogue of the Play: Words vs Action.

#### 4. Individual Motifs and Progress of the Dramatic Action

ACT I: The play opens in the sunny drawing room of the Prosoorovs, full of flowers, with Olga recalling the grim cold day a year ago when their father was buried. He was a general, commissioned to command a brigade in the province. Eleven years since, Olga still remembers vividly the day they left Moscow.

Olga: In Moscow, in the beginning of May, just at this time, it was warm and sunny, and everything was bursting into flower. Eleven years gone by but I remember everything as if we'd only left there yesterday. Oh my goodness! I woke up this morning, the sun was blazing. I could feel that spring was here. I felt so moved and so happy! I felt such a longing to get back home to Moscow!

Thus the central Dreamt motif is introduced, soon to be reinforced by lively birthday girl Irina. But observe how Chekhov constructs the interaction of the lines: Olga's exuberant hope is immediately met by somewhat deflating lines of Chebutykin and Tusenbach, and Masha's indifferent humming.

Chebu: You've gone out of your mind.

Tusen: It's all nonsense, of course.

Masha: (Humming)

Olga: Masha. Don't hum. How can you! School all day, private lessons all evening, so I have headaches all the time . . . Every single day of the four years at the high school, minute by minute, I feel my strength and my youth draining away. And only one dream kept growing stronger, and stronger.

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<sup>5</sup> Olga Knipper (the first Masha and Chekhov's wife) recalls in her memoirs that when Chekhov gave the first reading of the play at the Moscow Arts Theatre in October 1900, the dismayed actors reacted that the play was only a "sketch" or "outline" with "no fully developed characters." Chekhov, smiling in embarrassment and coughing intensely, responded that he had only written "a light-hearted comedy."

Irina: To go to Moscow ! To sell the house, make an end of everything here, and . . . Moscow !

Olga: Yes ! Moscow. As soon as possible.

In fact, at this point Chebutykin and Tusenbach are talking to Solyony in the dining room, and humming Masha is absorbed in her reading. But as Chekhov sets them up, we hear these intersecting lines and humming as comments on Olga's wishful Dream. That is, Chebutykin, Tusenbach and Masha are functioning here as the Chorus.

For Irina, the Dream of Moscow is her most cherished motif, but she also initiates a positive motif "To work" as her birthday resolution. But here again, her hopeful motif is countered by the very presence of her older sister Olga, a teacher already working at a local school, with her motif "I have headaches all the time." Indeed Olga has nothing but complaints about her work and her headaches, presaging the likely future of young yet hopeful Irina's resolution to work.

So the central Dream/Work motif is set up amidst gathering clouds. And Marsha simply hums as if she has nothing to contribute to her sisters' Dream. Perhaps she is aware that their Dream crucially depends on their brother Andrey becoming a professor; in fact, that is the prerequisite.

The prospect of the Dream is soon to be further undermined by the introduction to the scene of a man from Moscow, Vershinin. A newcomer to the province, the man from Moscows brings an objective view of the sisters' circumstances. First, by reacting favourably to the Prozorovs' home and its environment:

Versh: But here (comparing to Moscow), how wide the river is, how noble. A beautiful river.

Olga: Yes, but cold. It's cold here. And mosquitoes.

Versh: Oh, really. It's so healthy here. . . . This is a good place to live. . . . What a lot of flowers you have. It's all charming. I'm quite envious.

Secondly, by his own reality that he is essentially an unhappy man despite his cheerful appearance, and more crucially despite the fact that he is a man from Moscow. Vershinin's spontaneous and positive response suggests that the sisters'

life in the provinces may not be as unpleasant or hard as they make out and that Moscow may not necessarily promise a happier life. To be sure, this point develops in his speech in the second Act: "It will be just the same with you in Moscow. When you live there, you won't even notice it." Thus Versinin's entrance sets up an opposition to the central Dream-motif.

Such oppositional elements are further exposed by the entrance of Andrey, with his motif "Do leave me alone". Before his appearance, he is described by his sisters:

Masha: That's Andrey playing the violin; he is our brother.

Irina: He's our intellectual. We are expecting him to be a professor. Papa was a military man, but his son has chosen the life of a scholar.

Masha: It was Father's wish.

Olga: He 's awfully clever, and he plays the violin, and he makes all sorts of things, too. In fact he's very gifted all round. . .

But at his entrance, confronted by his sisters' innocent praises, Andrey can only say "Do leave me alone" in embarrassment, withdrawing physically from his sisters' expectations.

It is interesting to observe how Masha functions in this scene. Being the most perceptive and realistic character of the three, she does not possess a single illusion or hope. Earlier, when the two other sisters were building up their Dream, Masha joined them only with her silent motif - her humming, laughing and verse reading. At this point it is also Masha who coolly adds to Irina's praise of Andrey, "His son has chosen the life of a scholar," the cold fact that "It was our Father's wish". And this point is immediately elaborated by Andrey himself:

Andre: My father - God bless him - had us educated within an inch of our lives. It's ridiculous and absurd, I admit, but you know that after his death I began to put on weight. . . it's as if my body had been released from the pressure he imposed. Thanks to Father, my sisters and I know French, German and English, and Irina knows Italian as well. But at what cost.

It has been only a year since their father's death, but Andrey has already gained weight. His physical transformation, a symbolic manifestation of "the falling" of

the Dream, has already begun. Andrey and Masha, with their motifs, suggest that the Dream cherished by their sisters Irina and Olga may well rest on an illusion.

Thus by the end of the first half of the Act, the central motifs and counter-motifs are set up to form the Action part of the Dialogue. The play now moves on to orchestrate the "talk, talk, talk" part of the Dialogue.

In the following scenes various individual motifs are introduced, carefully interwoven in the casual conversations: Vershinin's optimistic motif, Tusenback's positive motif, the indifferent motif of old Chebutykin, the sinister motif of Solyony, and Kulygin's kind but pathetically embarrassing motif.<sup>6</sup> By contrasting, paralleling, commenting on one another, but always in juxtaposition to the central Dream Action, the Conversations/Words complete the Dramatic Dialogue in its full dimensions.

The first Act ends with Andrey's marriage proposal to a local girl, Natasha. The unhappy union of the Prozorovs with a local has already been observed in Masha and Kulygin. Such a step by Andrey, with his motif 'Leave me alone', is not in the least promising.

ACT II: An uneasy exchange between a now assertive Natasha and a somewhat detached Andrey opens the second Act. The same couple, only a year older, in the same drawing room of the Prozorovs, only this time without sunshine or flowers. It is winter. The "falling" of the Dream is immediately visible.

Andrey, who has since gained more weight as Natasha points out, is now the secretary of the City Council. His motif 'Leave me alone' has now taken a significant turn, as seen in his conversation with Ferapont, a deaf courier who has brought him some papers.

Andrey: My dear old fellow, isn't it strang how life lets you down !  
...My God ! - I'm secretary now of the City Council - the  
selfsame Council of which Protopopov is Chairman . . . and the  
most I can hope for is to become a member of the Council.

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<sup>6</sup> Even Protopopov, who emerges later as an invisible invader of the Prozorovs, makes his symbolic entrance in this Act as an unwanted birthday present, a chicken pie.

I, who dream every night that I'm a professor in the University of Moscow, a famous scholar all Russia is proud of.

Ferap: How should I know. . . I don't hear very well.

Andrey: If you could hear well, then I don't suppose I'd be talking to you. I just have to talk to some one. My wife doesn't understand; for some reason I am afraid of my sisters, afraid they'll laugh at me, make me feel a fool. . . I don't drink, I don't like drinking places, but oh, how I'd like to be in Moscow right now in one of the good restaurants.

Ferap: In Moscow, so a contractor was saying yesterday in our office, some merchants were eating pancakes and one of them ate forty and died, so the man said. Forty - or fifty, I can't remember which.

Here, ironically, Andrey's motif joins the sisters' Dream-motif. Now he too wants to go to Moscow, though not to become a professor, but just to be alone, away from the pains of his provincial existence - which apparently now include his gambling debts. Andrey's decaying or "falling" process now seems on course.

Such decay is also seen in the motifs of another young pair, Tusenbach and Irina. See how Tusenbach's vigorous motif "I shall work" in the first Act becomes tempered in the second:

Tusen: Sir, you say that after many years, life on this earth will be beautiful and wonderful. It's true. But to have a share in it - even in a small way - one must start preparing for it now. One must work. Act I

Tusen: Life doesn't change. It remain static following laws of its own, with which we have no concern and which, in any case, we can never know. . . I shall work. For one day of my life anyway, I shall work so hard that I'll come home utterly tired out . . . Workmen sleep like logs I imagine. Act II

Although his motif remains intact, its positive reasoning in the first Act has certainly evaporated in the second. Now it seems that he wants to work hard, even for one day of his life, to get utterly tired, so that he can sleep "like a log". Why? Possibly to keep his mind off unfathomable existential questions at night. In this sense, he too has fallen a little; his motif too has begun to take a deviated course.

The change is also visible as the happy lively Irina of the first Act makes her entrance in the second looking thinner and paler. Her physical transformation at once suggests her "falling". This is how she speaks :

Irina: Oh, I am so tired. . . . Here I am home at last.  
Oh, the relief, I am tired . . . .  
No, I don't like that telegraph office.  
I really don't.

Compare this to how she spoke about 'work' on her birthday in the first Act:

Irina: I know how one has to live . . . People must work in the sweat of their brow - and in this the meaning and the goal of their existence, their happiness, their fulfilment.

Irina's positive 'work' motif in the first Act has drained away to an alarmingly negative view of work in the second, just as Olga spoke about her work in the first Act. Inevitably her Dream motif has become even more intense:

Irina: I dream of Moscow every single night.  
I am simply obsessed by it.

Thus, under duress, Irina's Dream-motif too has begun to take a deviated course, following the very pattern of Olga and now of Andrey.

In juxtaposition to the "falling" course of the Action, the Chorus of conversations now plays its part. Vershinin, the Chorus leader, who is desperately thirsty from his chaotic life, proposes: "If they're not going to bring tea, don't you think we might as well talk philosophy ?. . . Let's dream." This is the Carnival week after all. Tusenbach joins him in an extended debate about life in the future, across the table with Masha sitting in the middle as a referee.<sup>7</sup> And so does the Chorus, and Andrey, except for Olga and Kulygin who are working. Everyone is thirsty and everyone sings his or her motif: Irina playing cards betting on her Dream; Vershinin again with his signature tune "In two or three hundred years. . ."; Tusenbach with "Life does not change"; Masha with her "Does it make sense?"; Natasha with "My Bobik"; Solyony gloomily scenting his hands; Chebutykin reading

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<sup>7</sup> See Sisters Slide Show, Act II 4: Debate: Vershinin vs Tusenbach

[http://www.ahorie.net/SISTERS\\_SLIDE\\_SHOW.htm](http://www.ahorie.net/SISTERS_SLIDE_SHOW.htm)

NB: Some names in the Slide Show list are spelt differently, as in Elisaveta Fen's translation: e.g., Irena for Irina, Koolighin for Kulygin, Toozenbach for Tusenbach.

nonsense from the newspaper - they go on merrily until at last Vershinin receives a call from reality: his wife has taken poison again. He leaves, and the scene breaks up in drunken singing and dancing.

It is significant that despite all the visible signs of falling "Skies", the individual motifs that make up the Conversations remain essentially the same. No positive changes have occurred in their response to the progressing Action. The opposition to the Dream motif now seems firmly established, and the tension between Words vs Action is rising. The second Act moves swiftly to its crescendo ending.

Vershinin has left. The party is called off by Natasha. The rest reluctantly leave the scene. Irena is left alone, but not long. Solyony emerges from darkness to declare his passion for Irena, violently. He swears if there's anyone else, he will kill him. Irena is petrified. Natasha's unexpected entrance breaks up the scene.

At the end Irena is all alone. In the distance Natasha is heard going out with Protopopov by sleigh. Irena's wrenching cry ends the second Act.

Irina: Moscow ! Moscow ! Moscow !

ACT III: Three years on, home for the sisters is now reduced to a small space - Olga's room. Natasha rules the rest. Life for the Prozorovs appears to have become ever more intolerable. And deftly Chekhov sets the whole neighbourhood on fire. Clearly the raging fire in the third Act is a metaphor for the desperate, agonizing state of the Prozorovs' existence, caught up in the ever intensifying opposition to their Dreams.

In the raging fire and chaos, the bearers of "the Skies" cry out their crumbling motifs in desperation:

Irina: Life is passing me by, never to come back; we shall never, never get to Moscow ! . . . What a failure I am. . . I can't work, I won't work. I've had enough of it ! I worked at the telegraph, now I'm in the Town Hall and I loathe and despise everything they give me to do . . . I feel in despair, and I don't know why I'm still alive, why I haven't killed myself. . . <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See video clip of Irena in crisis: <http://www.ahorie.net/IrenaCrisis.mov>

Tusen: I'm tired out. . . The brickworks. . . I'm not raging - But really, truly I'm going to the brickworks - directly. I'm going to start work. I've already made arrangements.

Andrey: (to Ferapont) In the first place, you're not to call me Andrey Sergeievich - that's no way to speak to a City Councillor. Call me 'Your Honour'. . .

(to his sisters) You seem to have a grudge against me because I am not a professor. . . All right. I am a public servant. I'm a member of the City Council. And let me tell you I consider that just as noble and honourable as being a scholar. . . I am proud of it, if you want know. . .

Irina is barely keeping up with her work and in despair, with her Dreams receding yet farther away. The once vigorous Tusenbach is tired out, even before he has started to work. "The skies" are falling, though Tusenbach is still determined to go to work despite his fatigue. As for Andrey, once the sisters' reluctant Dream hero, the sky seems to have fallen away completely, though he does not admit it.

Against the falling Dream/Work motif, the Chorus of "talk, talk, talk" is again juxtaposed. Once again it is Vershinin who leads the way. Even with his wife and children screaming out on the street in the raging fire, he is oddly cheerful and once again takes philosophical flight to a utopian future, though this time, significantly, with an apology. Observe how his thoughts transit from the distressing reality close at hand to a "glorious" future:

Versh: Yes ! . . . (Laughs.) How weird everything is ! (Pause.) When the fire began, I ran home as fast as I could; when I got there . . . my two girls were at the front door in nothing but their night dresses; their mother isn't there; people are rushing about, horses and dogs are running wild, and the girls looked anxious, frightened, helpless, it made me heartsick to see them. Dear God, I think, what will those girls have to go through in the course of a lifetime ! I took them and brought them along here with only one thought: what will they have to live through in this world. (Alarm bell; pause.)

I get to this house and here is their mother screaming and raging. And my girls standing in the doorway in their night gowns with the whole street crimson in the firelight and all that frightful noise

reminded me of something happening years ago - the enemy overrunning us and looting and setting everything on fire.

And yet, really and truly what a difference there is between the past and the present. A little time will pass - two or three hundred years - and people will look back at our present life and think how terrifying and absurd . . .

Oh, what a life that will be - what a glorious life ! (He laughs.)  
Oh dear, there I go again ! But please let me go on, friends, may I ? I do so want to philosophize - I feel just in the humour . . .

And he does go on, and on, ending up by singing Gremin's aria from *Engene Onegin* ! Indeed, in the chaos and raging fire, Vershinin's cheerful optimism seems unreal and absurd, just as Kulygin's clowning in the fourth Act<sup>9</sup>. Yet his rambling, at times incoherent speech<sup>10</sup> suggests that he too has been deeply affected. In Vershinin the tension between Words and Action seems to reach ludicrous heights.

With the individual motifs increasingly under pressure, now the rest of the Chorus joins in orchestrating the desperate state of their existence on fire. With their fences burnt down, and out of exhaustion, everyone seems driven to bare their soul: Olga spats with Natasha over the treatment of nanny Anfisa; Natasha is having an affair with Protopopov; Andrey has now mortgaged their house to cover his debts; Masha confesses to her sisters, to their horror, that she is in love with Vershinin; Kulygin, seen forever chasing Masha in the chaos of the fire, still keeps his happy façade and touchingly reaffirms his love for Masha, to her indifference; Tusenbach in his exhaustion declares his love to Irina, begging her to come away with him to start a new life. And Chebutykin is no exception. Normally a detached observer of the Action, he gets drunk in the fire and bares his soul in a moving monologue, revealing his anguish over the death of a young woman he treated.<sup>11</sup> His nonchalant motif "What does it matter, it's all the same" has been deceptive. Deep down he does care.

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<sup>9</sup> Having witnessed Masha's distress in parting with Vershinin, Kulygin puts on a false mustache in a clowning attempt to make Masha and her sisters laugh.

<sup>10</sup> NB: Paragraph breaks by A.H. Chekhov, perhaps intentionally, put no paragraph breaks in this long rambling speech.

<sup>11</sup> See slide sequence at: [http://www.ahorie.net/SISTERS\\_SLIDE\\_SHOW.htm](http://www.ahorie.net/SISTERS_SLIDE_SHOW.htm) Act III 2: Chebutykin's Tale.

The last scene of the Act, which involves only the Prozorovs, captures the exhausting rhythm of their state of existence. Andrey, out of desperation, comes to confront his sisters with his reality - his debt, wife and dreams. But Masha flies away to be with Vershinin; Irina and Olga go behind the screen to hide. It is when Andrey realises that he is alone, he reveals his innermost thoughts and feelings. A chance for the Prozorovs to be reconciled and confront reality is thus lost.

Olga and Irina are now alone. What a night. They heard that the military is leaving town, taking Vershinin away. Soon the place will be deserted. Earlier Olga counseled the disconsolate Irina to marry Tusenbach: he is a good, decent man.

The third Act ends with Irina crying out for her impossible Dream:

Irina: I will marry him. I agree. Only let's go to Moscow ! Let's,  
I implore you ! In the whole world there is no place like  
Moscow ! Let's go !

ACT IV: After the carnage of the third Act, the last Act is a diminuendo of dissolution, with the military leaving town, and the sisters' Dreams visibly ebbing away. Now the scene is in the garden of the Prozorovs: Chebutykin is reading the newspapers as ever; Andrey, our fallen hero, is seen pushing the baby's pram, at his every appearance in this Act, as if he is forever anchored to it;<sup>12</sup> Masha is looking for Vershinin to say goodbye before he leaves; Olga, the headmistress who now lives at the school, is visiting today. And Irina, a newly qualified teacher, is getting married tomorrow.

Despite the calm even hopeful ambience, the Conversations are filled with a sense of foreboding. Something is in the air. Irina has now accepted that she is really not going to be able to live in Moscow. She will marry Tusenbach. They are leaving tomorrow, to start working the day after, Irina as a teacher and Tusenbach at the brickyard. Their work motif is intact and Irina seems genuinely happy and hopeful. Yet something is in the air.

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<sup>12</sup> Chebutykin, in his moment of earnest concern, urges Andrey: "I'll give you a bit of advice. Put on your hat, take a walking stick and go away . . . Go away, and don't ever look back. And the further you go the better. . ." But Andrey is unable to break away, succumbing to all-consuming local forces. Chekhov has Andrey forever stuck with his pram in the final Act. That says it all - Brilliant !

Tusen: My treasure ! . . it is five years since I first began to love you, and I can't still get used to it. You seem more beautiful every day. Tomorrow I am taking you away.  
 We'll work, we'll do well, my dreams will come to pass. You will be happy. But there is just one thing - one thing: you don't love me !

Irina: That is not in my power . . .  
 Do you know what my heart is like ?  
 It is like a piano - a fine noble tone - but the case is locked and the key can't be found. You look absent.

Tusen: I was awake all night. Not that there's anything to be afraid of in my life, nothing threatening . . . Only the thought of that lost key torments me and keeps me awake. Say something . . . (Pause.)  
 Say something !

Irina: What ? What shall I say ? What ?

Tusen: Anything.

Irina: No, I can't.

Their thoughts do not link; their hearts are not united. With this uncertainty Tusenbach leaves Irina to confront his fate - a duel with Solyony. And the Sky falls: his death completes the fall of all the possible Dreams.

As the military band begins to play, the sisters huddle together. Masha is the first to speak: we are left alone to pick up our life. . . we must go on living. Irina seems equally resolute:

Irina: A time will come when everyone will know the reason for all this agony. . . In the meantime, we must go on living. Tomorrow I shall go away. I'll teach in the school at the brickworks. I shall devote my life where it is needed. . . .

Olga: (embracing her sisters) Listen to the music - so cheerful, so vigorous ! It just makes you want to live. Oh, dear God ! The years will pass and we shall be gone for good and quite forgotten. But our suffering may mean happiness for those who come after us. Peace and happiness will reign upon earth, and those who live after us will remember us kindly . . . Oh my dear sisters, life is not over yet for us. Let us live. The music is so cheeful, so full of joy - I think in a little while we shall know why we are alive and the purpose of our suffering . . . if we could only know . . . could only know.

With the military band fading away in the distance, Chekhov ends the play in a tableau as if time has stopped: the sisters gazing into the future beyond; Kulygin,

smiling happily, brings Masha's hat and cape; Andrey as ever pushing the pram with Bobik sitting in it, and Chebutykin in his chair singing quietly to himself:

Chebu: Tarara-boom-di-ay . . I'm sitting on a tomb-di-ay . . .  
(reading his newspaper) What does it matter? It's all the same.  
It's all the same. . . . .  
Olga: If we could only know . If we could only know . . .

- Lights slowly fades leaving a tableau against a dimming sky -

P.S. Director's notes:

Chekhov ends the play with a question mark. Perhaps he too was uncertain. The sisters' last speeches are the most difficult segment of the play to interpret in performance. How could the despairing sisters, having lost their Dreams so comprehensively, in a matter of minutes turn around and face that reality upfront and be so positive about their suffering and the future ? Chekhov has his sisters resolutely going forward, optimistic and hopeful, but the questions remain.

Half a century later, fifty-seven years on to be exact, Samuel Beckett ventures to depict in his *Endgame* what that future might look like. Here is how a hero of our time, Clov, speaks of his life:

Clov: They said to me, That's love, yes yes, not a doubt, now you see how -

Hamm: Articulate !

Clov: How easy it is. They said to me, That's friendship, yes yes, no question, you've found it. They said to me, Here's the place, stop, raise your head and look at all that beauty. That order ! They said to me, Come now, you're not a brute beast, think upon these things and you'll see how all becomes clear. And simple ! They said to me, What skilled attention they get, all these dying of their wounds.

Hamm: Enough !

Clov: I said to myself - sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you - one day. I say to myself - sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go - one day. But I feel too old, and too far, to form new habits. Good, it'll never end, I'll never go. (Pause.) Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes, I don't understand, it dies, or it's me, I don't understand that either. I ask the words that remain - sleeping, waking, morning, evening. They have nothing to say. (Pause.) I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little trail of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit. (Pause.) It's easy going. (Pause.) When I fall I'll weep for happiness.<sup>13</sup>

I wonder what Chekhov would have made of Clov's speech. I wonder, if Chekhov had lived in our time, what sort of plays would he have written ? More to the point, what sort of ending would Chekhov have dared to write for his Three Sisters - ? AH

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Beckett *Endgame*, faber & faber, London, first published in 1958, pp. 50 - 51.