

Theatre of dissent:
analyzing similarities
in the works of Ibsen,
Chekhov, and Mol...



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The works of Anton Chekov, Henrik Ibsen, and Moliere are quite distinct from one another, each author being primarily concerned with critiquing the specific society of his own country at the time in which he lived. Their plays, however, share many similarities. All attack the ideology of those who hold power, and they do so by showing how the ideals and virtues upheld by each society are, in fact, oppressive and not virtuous at all. In this endeavor, however, the plays differ significantly according to what ideology is being attacked and to what degree. They also differ in so far as what the endings offer by way of solution.

For example, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* attacks the declining Russian aristocracy, while at the same time calling into question the bourgeoisie class with which it is being replaced. Ranevskaya returns home from Paris at the beginning, having bankrupted her family, and the majority of the play is spent in discussion of how to avoid selling the family estate. Though there are many viable options, not a single person seems to be able to act. Gaev, Ranevskaya's brother, insists to her adopted daughter, Varya, that "If plenty of remedies are prescribed for some sort of disease, it means the disease can't possibly be cured" (*Orchard* 177). Varya's only response to the many suggestions offered her is as consciously helpless as Gaev's: "Varya. [weeps] If only God would help" (*Orchard* 178). The only man willing to do what is necessary to save the estate is not an aristocrat but rather a merchant, the son of a serf. Lopakhin argues that what is needed is to cut down the cherry orchard and build vacation houses. The family contemptually rejects this idea. They cannot believe that anything so base could be needed, that something so pragmatic as money should triumph

over the beauty for which they stand. Yet theirs is clearly an empty idealism, a beautiful, extravagant way of life, but one that is only possible through a system of oppression that keeps the rich wealthy at the cost of others' suffering.

This emptiness can be seen in the way that the family treats Firs, the ancient freed serf who continues to serve them and defend the old system. Though they indulgently dote on him on various occasions, when the time comes to leave they forget him completely, leaving him to die alone in the empty house. He is more like a discarded play-thing to them than a dearly loved family member. Despite this critique of the old order, Chekov does not leave the audience with a sense that the new order is perfect either, leaving the solution just beyond the viewers' reach. Lopakhin is obsessed, not with ushering in a new brand of social structure so much as setting himself up as the aristocracy of the old one. Though he comes from humble beginnings, he uses his money to buy Ranevskaya's estate and does his best to work his way into her good graces enough to live among her family if he is one of them. The salient difference between the two mindsets appears to be simply that Lopakhin is willing to cut down the cherry orchard. He is willing to sacrifice beauty for pragmatism, and the audience is not left entirely sure whether to consider him better or worse than Ranevskaya for doing so.

The Three Sisters, one Chekhov's equally famous plays, is concerned with similar societal critiques. Just as the cherry orchard was symbolic of the idealism of the dying order, in this play Moscow is heavily symbolic, representing for the three sisters the perfect life of the old order to which they desire to return. Instead, however, they are marooned in a provincial, <https://assignbuster.com/theatre-of-dissent-analyzing-similarities-in-the-worksof-ibsen-chekhov-and-moliere/>

working-class town. Olga says to her sister, Irina, “ The past four years I’ve worked at the high school, day after day I’ve felt my strength and my youth drain away, drop by drop. And just one dream keeps growing stronger and stronger, one dream...” (Sisters 104). Irina quickly cuts in, “ To leave for Moscow. To sell the house, put an end to everything here, and off to Moscow” (Sisters 104). Yet they never reach Moscow, the dream drifting further and further from sight. It is not simply an inability to make the journey, but the sense that even if they were to reach Moscow they would be sorely disappointed with what they would find. The old order is fading, and now they must fend for themselves, searching for meaning and financial stability in the lives they have been given. One way in which some characters do this is to set themselves up as martyrs, nostalgic over the beauty of what has been lost as society moves to the working-class. For example, though Irina explains that Maria has “ already forgotten” how to play the piano, not having played for “ three years...or four,” Baron Tuzenbakh insists on her playing, saying, “ There’s absolutely no one here in this town who understands music, not one soul, but I, I understand. And I assure you, word of honour, that Maria Sergeevna plays splendidly, she’s almost gifted” (Sisters 137).

Despite this nostalgia, the sisters are far more resilient than Ranevskaya. Unlike her, they are willing to work to survive, thereby becoming the rising class in many ways rather than simply allowing it to push them aside. In the final few moments of the play, Irina says, “ The time will come when everyone shall know the reason for all this, the reason why people must suffer...but for the time being we must live...we must work, we must only

work!” (Sisters 157). It is perhaps this willingness to assimilate that provokes such a sympathetic ending. Though several marriages have been broken and they have never reached Moscow, the final tone is one of determined optimism, as Olga cries, “ Oh, my dear sisters, our life is not over yet. We shall live, we shall! The band plays so joyfully, so happily, and it seems that in a little while we shall know the reason we live, the reason we suffer” (Sisters 157). Yet while Chekhov is able to end with a pragmatic and realistic solution, that of assimilation with the new order, this is perhaps only possible because he lived in a time when the feudal tides were already changing, and the movement was clear for all to see. For Moliere, however, writing several centuries before Chekhov and over one hundred years before the French revolution, there was no such solution available. The feudal ways were still very much intact throughout Europe, and without any other forms of society to draw upon, Moliere is left with no viable alternatives. Therefore, though in *The Misanthrope* he attacks the idealism of the French aristocracy, the play is left conspicuously unresolved.

The Misanthrope opens with a conversation between Alceste and his friend, Philinte, in which they argue over the proper response to the courtly habit of flattery. Throughout the play the idealistic virtues attributed to the aristocrats by others who flatter them are shown to be false, the compliments only paid in order to further the aims of those who speak them. Alceste critiques this mind-set violently, telling Philinte, I can’t bear these despicable mannerisms that so many of your men of fashion affect. There’s nothing I hate more than the contortions of your protestation-mongers, the affable exchangers of fatuous greetings, polite mouthers of meaningless

words, who bandy civilities with all comers and treat everyone, blockhead and man of sense, alike. (Misanthrope 96) He explains, " I want us to be men and say what we really mean in all circumstances. Let what we have in our hearts be apparent in our words; let it be our hearts that speak, and let us not allow our feelings to be concealed under a mask of empty compliments" (Misanthrope 96). In this however, Philinte is the voice of reason. Though he is not a vacuous and dishonest person, he is not so blunt and hostile as Alceste, and he argues, " But surely there are many circumstances in which complete frankness would be ridiculous or intolerable. With all due respect to these austere standards of yours, there are times when it's as well to hide what we really feel" (Misanthrope 96). It is Philinte who convinces Alceste not to " give up the world," as he claims he desires to do. Yet again, in the end, Alceste is as resolved as he was in the beginning to quit the world, just as Philinte is similarly resolved to convince him to give up the idea.

Similarly, one senses that, though Alceste declares he is finally done with Celimene, he is still in love with her and has not completely given up hope of winning her over. Therefore, almost no headway had been made in the plot at the end of the play, and the viewers are left with a severe critique of the empty virtues of the aristocracy but no real solution, no change in society. Instead, all that Moliere can offer from the limited viewpoint of the 17th century are the examples of Philinte and Eliante. Both simply advocate a middle ground between constant lies and brutal truth, and they are the only characters happy in the end, having discovered their love for one another. Therefore, the solution is that neither extreme, the refusal to tell the truth nor the unwillingness to soften it, is correct. So, while Alceste's viewpoint is

understandable and necessary to point out the dominant ideology's hypocrisy, the solution for Moliere lies not in giving up the world, nor in a new social order beyond contemporary imagination, but in individual moderation. Indeed, such an open ending is perhaps preferable to the impossibly neat conclusion of another of Moliere's plays, *Tartuffe*.

Unlike the works which have so far been discussed, the ideology here being attacked is that of the Roman Catholic Church rather than the aristocracy. The Church held great power and wealth in France at the time as well, and Moliere critiques them for being equally hypocritical. In the play, *Tartuffe* claims to be a man of God, and Orgon, taken in by his false piety, wills him his entire estate, entrusts him with a friend's treasonous documents for safe-keeping, and plans to marry him to his daughter. Distraught by Orgon's actions, his family members conspire to convince him that *Tartuffe* is a fake and manage to do so by hiding Orgon under a table so he can witness *Tartuffe*'s attempts to seduce his wife. Enraged, Orgon leaps out from under the table and rails at *Tartuffe*, insensible of the fact that he has put his entire fortune in his hands. He says, " I'll have no more to do with men of God. From now on, I shall regard them with the most utter loathing and behave as if no treatment is too good for them!" (*Tartuffe* 78). In this scene can be seen a clear declaration of Moliere's philosophy of moderation. In response to Orgon's rashness, his brother-in-law, Cleante, exclaims, Ah! there you go, flying off the handle again. You're incapable of being moderate and sensible. You have no conception of plain common-sense. You always rush from one extreme to another. You can see your error now; you've discovered how you were taken in by a pretence of piety. But where's the sense in trying to

correct one mistake by committing an even bigger one and failing to make any distinction between a deceitful rogue and people who are genuinely good? (Tartuffe 78)

In the end, all is well. Directly flouting the law, the prince refuses to honour the contract Orgon drew up to bestow his livelihood upon Tartuffe. Therefore, through the monarch's "ability to read the hearts of men" and not be "taken in by the wiles of hypocrites," Orgon's estate is restored, and Tartuffe is turned out on the street (Tartuffe 87). While this improbably happy ending is appropriate in a comedy, one can see that *The Misanthrope* is Moliere's most sophisticated work, while *Tartuffe* lags behind in some ways. There is no real solution given to the problem presented in this play. It simply illuminates the way in which the virtues of the Church are often appropriated for individual gain and does not propose a way of changing the status quo. Perhaps the play itself is meant to work toward a solution by drawing society's attention to the Church's hypocrisies, though one would expect the discomfort to dissipate somewhat with such an idealistic ending. Perhaps it was necessary to save Moliere from being arrested. In any event, the solution the audience is left with is simply to hope that the monarch of reality is as discerning and honest as *Tartuffe's* prince. Considering Moliere's opinion of the aristocracy, however, such a hope seems quite farfetched. While the works of Chekhov and Moliere take place in societies in which the impact of the aristocratic orders are still being felt, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is distinct from them in that it takes place at a time when the aristocracy has long been overthrown. Rather than the aristocracy, it attacks the patriarchal views of the bourgeoisie. *A Doll's House* centers on Nora, a devoted wife and

mother who finds herself in a difficult situation. Having borrowed money for a trip to Italy to cure her husband's illness without his knowledge and forged her dead father's signature, she is terrified when the man she has borrowed it from threatens to blackmail her husband. She tells her friend, Mrs. Linde, "Torvald is a man with a good deal of pride – it would be terribly embarrassing and humiliating for him if he thought he owed anything to me. It would spoil everything between us; this happy home of ours would never be the same again" (Ibsen 15).

Over the course of the play, Nora comes to realize that the ideals of family, husbandry, and motherhood which she has always believed in and sought to emulate are hollow. As revealed in the above quote, the system rests upon the subjugation of her autonomy to first her father and then her husband.

She is hardly a person, expected to keep her husband happy with jokes and tricks and submit to his every whim in exchange for financial stability.

However, when Nora realizes that Torvald is more willing to sacrifice her than his own honor when he believes he is about to be blackmailed, she realizes that she must leave. Helmer exclaims, "This is outrageous! You are betraying your most sacred duty...Isn't it your duty to your husband and children?" (Ibsen 82). When she replies that she has a more sacred duty to herself, he responds simply, "First and foremost, you are a wife and mother" (Ibsen 82). Her very identity is expected to be subsumed by her submissive societal role. However, she replies, "That I don't believe any more. I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are – or at least I'm going to try to be" (Ibsen 82). The play ends, like *The Three Sisters*, with a weak hope struggling through the oppression. Nora explains that she

must find herself before she can be a proper mother, and that both she and Torvald would have to change so much that only a miracle could bring them back together. She says, however, that she doesn't believe in miracles anymore. Yet Torvald's last lines read, " Nora! Nora! [He rises and looks round.] Empty! She's gone! [With sudden hope.] The miracle of miracles...?" (Ibsen 86). Though the ideals of the dominant society have been shown to be empty and the family has been ripped apart, the audience is left with the meagre hope that change, however difficult, is in fact possible, and a new order of fully-fleshed individuals may someday come to fruition. Therefore, though these five plays attack the ideologies of different societies and offer differing degrees of hope, they are similar in that they all expose as hypocritical and oppressive what are taken as the virtues and ideals of their contemporary societies. Through such critiques, these authors pave the way for future generations to break free from the ruling class bonds of " goodness" and move toward a better society.

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