

Destruction in uncle vanya: interpreting yelena



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Destruction. It's a powerful word, encapsulating a Pandora's box of emotions. It implies damage beyond a state of repair, or even, at times, beyond a state of existence. Destruction plays an important role in Anton Chekhov's Uncle Vanya. What is destroyed and who is the destroyer is dependent on viewpoint. One particular moment at the end of Act 1 captures the complexity and multifariousness of this concept. Following Astrov's denouncement of human environmental destruction and Vanya's subsequent condemnation of Yelena's lifestyle, Yelena states, "It's like Astrov was saying just now: you destroy the forests without thinking, and pretty soon there won't be a tree left on the planet. You destroy human beings the same way, and pretty soon trust, and honesty, and the possibility of self-sacrifice will vanish from the planet as well" (Chekov, 217-218). Though she is clearly reacting to Astrov and Vanya, her intentions here are vague, something that gets at the mystery of her character. Indeed, in his notes, director Leonid Heifetz writes, "[Yelena] is a mysterious woman, and much depends on the actress" (Heifetz, 99). With this in mind, I use this essay to explore potential ways an actress may interpret this line — which I shall refer to as The Moment — and the implications this has for the larger character and the play at large.

One possible interpretation of the Moment is that Yelena is not thinking about destruction at all. Instead, she cannot get Astrov off her mind. Later in the play, it becomes clear that Yelena and Astrov are passionately attracted to one another. This attraction stems from their interactions in Act 1. After Astrov makes his speech and exits, his words and essence clearly linger with Yelena. Preceding The Moment, Vanya may be talking to Yelena about her

husband, the professor Alexander, but her mind quickly steers away from discussion this topic: “ Oh, poor thing, stuck with an old man like that! But all this sympathy for me—oh, I know what’s behind it. It’s like Astrov was saying just now” (Chekhov, 217). Her redirection of the conversation away from her husband and towards Astrov is an indication of her attraction to the latter. On the previous page, she presses for his age—“ You’re still young, aren’t you?”—hinting at her interest in him (Chekhov, 216). Later, in Act 2, it is evident that the attraction was strong enough to endure past *The Moment* when she says, “ That man has genius” (Chekhov, 230). When considered in conjunction with Alexander’s old age, Astrov’s relative youth, “ genius,” and evident passion (his environmentalism), it becomes clear why he might magnetize her.

However, this interpretation falls somewhat flat. While it is true Yelena’s attraction to Astrov is undeniable, it does not seem very plausible that she would quote Astrov solely because he is on her mind. Destruction is too powerful a concept; *The Moment* must come from a deeper, multifaceted place within her in order to resonate. It is an oversimplification to limit Yelena’s character to mere attraction. In order to fully understand Yelena in *The Moment*, we must, analyze what Astrov’s quote means to her; in other words, we must reach an understanding of destruction’s significance in her life.

In Amy E. Meyer’s director’s notes from her 2007 production of *Uncle Vanya* at Connecticut College, she describes Yelena as “ attracted to Astrov” but lacking “ the courage to act on her feelings or the heart to betray her marriage vows” (Meyer, 49). Looking at *The Moment* through this lens, we

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can see what destruction may mean for Yelena. Up to this point, Yelena has grown comfortable in life. Now, however, she begins to feel consumed by two forces—one pulling her towards Astrov, and the other towards her husband. She views this as the destruction of the unsatisfying, but easy life she has created for herself. This battle over her heart presents a moral dilemma: Should she remain faithful? This inner debate—the push and pull of lust and loyalty—puts Yelena in a state of inner turmoil. She admits in Act 2, “ It’s not crime and criminals that are destroying the world; it’s petty little emotions” (Chekhov, 222). If we look at “ the world” as her composure and peace in life, we understand that Yelena feels torn apart by the emotions presented in the dilemma. Looking once again at *The Moment*, we can view “ trust, and honesty, and the possibility of self-sacrifice” as her perception of important qualities in a relationship. Her attraction to Astrov is emblematic of breaking the trust she and Alexander should have for each other. Her attraction is a “ petty little emotion” that is wreaking destruction in her marriage.

The word “ should” is important in the second to last sentence. There should be trust in a good marriage. If Yelena has reached a point where she is interested in other men, her relationship with the professor must not be very strong. They must be lacking the aforementioned key qualities of a relationship, which would explain why she is enticed by Astrov. Assuming she keeps her detachment and boredom away from Alexander (both of which she admits to feeling when she says, “ Detached? Oh yes. And bored,” 217), she is not fully open with him—there is a dearth of “ trust and honesty.” With regards to “ self-sacrifice”, choosing to give in to her feelings for Astrov,

which she does later in the play when they kiss, is indicative not of self-sacrifice, but rather of self-gratification and indulgence. The destruction might therefore be interpreted as ironic. She is lamenting the loss of these important marital qualities, yet they weren't present in her marriage to begin with. In other words, her marriage was destroyed from the moment she realized she made a mistake in marrying Alexander. This was a moment that came well before Astrov's introduction into her life, as indicated in Act 2: "I was dazzled by him; he was so famous and so intelligent. It wasn't real love, it was all a fantasy, but at the time I thought it was real" (229).

This interpretation can be taken a step further. In *The Moment*, she says, "You destroy the forests without thinking, and pretty soon there won't be a tree left on the planet." This can be treated as an analogous situation to her marriage. She married Alexander "without thinking" or having "real" love, and now she must face the consequences. For her, the consequences extend beyond simply having a marriage not grounded in honesty. She is left "profoundly unhappy" (Heifetz, 99). While discussing her marriage with Sonya, she near the end of Act 2 exemplifies how Yelena's marriage has destroyed her happiness. In a rare moment of bliss, Yelena says, "I feel like playing the piano now, I really do" (Chekhov, 231). Immediately, however, she remembers "music drives him [Alexander] crazy" (Chekhov, 231). This is a clear metaphor on Chekhov's part: Alexander literally denies "music"—a classic trope of joy—from being present in Yelena's life. Assessing this alongside *The Moment*, Yelena's perception of "the forest" begins to emerge from the haze. It represents her happiness. After marrying the professor and

staying with him for so long, not an ounce of pleasure—not a tree—is left over. She has been emotionally destroyed.

Another consequence stemming from this is that Yelena has destroyed her future by marrying Alexander. If her life pre-marriage were a wood of opportunities, Yelena has chopped down all of her hopeful prospects. This interpretation is consistent with Yelena's exit from the play. She rejects Astrov, choosing to stay with the professor. In other words, she turns down the one opportunity she has left to get out of her miserable marriage—she fells her last tree of hope. Thus, The Moment is almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy: she recognizes she is in a hopeless situation, and she does nothing to change it.

The Moment can also be looked at as a reaction to Vanya. After all, it does come right after Vanya says, “ You don't care about anything, do you? You just drift through life” (Chekhov, 217). “ You destroy the forests without thinking” is a response aimed at Vanya. From his perspective, he is doing something good: he wants her to realize her marriage has put her in a bad place. Yelena, however, doesn't see it as help, and she rejects him. She can see his love for her and jealousy of Alexander, even if he doesn't explicitly admit to it until a few lines after The Moment. She is repulsed by Vanya, calling him “ aggravating” and, later, “ disgusting” (Chekhov, 218, 223). Vanya's attraction to her is yet another complication in the straightforward life to which she has become accustomed. It is another destructive force, just like her desires to remain loyal to her vows and to give in to her lust for Astrov.

It is hard to pinpoint a greater meaning in Uncle Vanya. It is a naturalistic play, and thus seeks to not pass judgment, but rather present life. Barbara Mackay's review of the Sydney Theater Company's production assesses the play in this way: " Uncle Vanya is neither about pessimism nor optimism, it doesn't choose between good and bad characters, it considers people and their search for work and love in a non-judgmental manner, as Chekhov intended." While the play may not convey a specific message, it does present themes and ideas that provoke and inspire thought in the audience. The choices a production makes allow different themes to resonate more poignantly. For instance, depending on how The Moment is played, destruction comes across differently.

One way Uncle Vanya may be interpreted is as a play " about people trying to find value in their work and purpose in their lives" (Meyer, 49). For such an interpretation, Yelena would have to be on a quest for happiness. Her attraction to Astrov is significant in The Moment because it is a possible escape route from the monotony of her life. In a production interpreted this way, a director might choose to make Yelena's perception of " destruction" the various aspects that complicate her easy life—her reciprocated attraction to Astrov, her loyalty to her husband, Vanya's love for her. This is because it is through these complications that Yelena tries to evaluate what she wants in life. When Yelena ultimately decides to leave with the professor, it is not because she hasn't been offered opportunities to get away: she makes a conscious choice to stay with her husband. She may lust for Astrov, but she realizes that the passion is momentary, and that she must look elsewhere for purpose in her life.

Similarly, Uncle Vanya can be interpreted as a play about failure and wasted lives. For this interpretation to work, Yelena must come off as hopeless, unhappy, and lost in her marriage. In *The Moment*, we must get a sense that Yelena has failed to create a life for herself outside of her poor relationship with the professor. In a production emphasizing these themes, destruction should reflect the crushing effect of Yelena's marriage on her life prospects. Her choice to leave Astrov and go off with the professor is indicative of her giving up on life.

There will never be one set way to interpret Yelena. The choices each production makes alter who Yelena is and how she perceives existence and destruction. Had Chekhov not left parts of Yelena up to interpretation, the play would lose its naturalism. An actress would have to fit a mold, rather than create a human being. Instead, Chekhov requires an actress to look into the subtext behind this "mysterious woman" in order to find a character who is as real as possible, who understands how she feels in *The Moment* and every moment preceding and following it.

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