

"the cherry orchard":
liberation leads to
different paths



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Cherry Orchard, a classic of modern theater by Anton Chekhov, portrays the coming of age in a Russian society that is beginning to witness a rising middle class upon freeing the serfs. The characters of Firs (the manservant to Gayef) and Lopakhin (a rising middle class businessman and landowner) react differently to this changing way of life. Lopakhin takes his liberation and elevates himself to a higher level, whereas Firs is unable to figure out what to do with himself after so many years as a serf and, consequently, stays enslaved; however, both men always remain aware of their lower status amid this changing era.

Lopakhin takes the horrid poverty of his parents' peasantry origins and uses them as a motivation to raise himself up a notch into the developing middle class: " Well, it was soon over. I bid nine thousand more than the mortgage, and got it; and now the cherry orchard is mine! . . . If only my father and grandfather could rise from their graves and see the whole affair, how their Yermolai, their flogged and ignorant Yermolai, who used to run about barefooted in the winter, how this same Yermolai had bought a property that hasn't its equal for beauty anywhere in the whole world! I have bought the property where my father and grandfather were slaves, where they weren't even allowed into the kitchen" (Chekhov 38). He makes his money by making shrewd and cunning business decisions which resemble his idea to sell off plots of the cherry orchard for villas. Lopakhin is a person who sees a problem and envisions a way to repair the problem because he is a forward thinker. He even becomes something of a financial advisor to his former mistress, Madame Ranevsky, when he tells her and Gayef repeatedly to sell pieces of the orchard and set up villas for the rising middle class to move

onto: " You know your cherry orchard is going to be sold to pay the mortgage... if only you will cut up the cherry orchard and the land along the river into building lots and let it off on lease for villas... It'll all be snapped up. In two words, I congratulate you; you are saved" (Chekhov 8). Unfortunately, unlike Lopakhin, she and Gayef are too proud and ignorant to heed this advice. They allow their sentiment towards their childhood home to interfere with the best decision for them financially: " Cut down the cherry orchard! . . . If there is one thing that's interesting, remarkable in fact, in the whole province, it's our cherry orchard" (Chekhov 9). Lopakhin, unlike Firs and many other once-enslaved people, is able to rise up from his ashes to produce a better life for himself and his family; and even buys the property he and his predecessors were enslaved on. Liberation leads Lopakhin differently because Lopakhin takes advantage of his opportunities and is able to see past the current struggles and failures into the future. He then creates a plan which will allow his future to be bright and successful by thinking things through and making sometimes hard, yet ultimately responsible decisions to implement his plan.

Firs, on the other hand, withers under enslavement, and dwindles even more under freedom. Firs has spent so many years being told what to do that he cannot think for himself and is unable to see forward; he is paralyzed by the past and its old ways. He continues to go through the motions of taking care of an already grown Gayef because it is what he has always done. Firs only lives to please: " My mistress has come home; at last I've seen her. Now I'm ready to die" (Chekhov 6) although the devotion is not mutual; in fact, he is regarded as somewhat crazy by those he respects the most. Perhaps if Firs

were a little more self-respecting and selfish in the right way he would realize that in these changing times a servant can amount to anything; formerly enslaved Russians cannot survive if they solely follow the ways they have grown accustomed to. Firs constantly repeats throughout the play that all the ways of the past were perfect and society should go back to that era—of serfs and masters—when a servant knew what to do with himself or herself. Firs' inability to rise to the opportunities presented to him and his unwillingness to make a name and a living for himself lead him to be a lonely man who dies without a soul around him: "Life has gone by as if I never lived" (Chekhov 49). Although Madame Ranevsky questions whether or not Firs was taken to the hospital and is there safely, she does not thoroughly check the situation and instead believes a fellow ex-serf Yasha when he claims that he has taken Firs to the hospital. After doing so much for a family he loves, Firs is disrespected in the worst of ways and is not shown the care he deserves. In actuality, Firs is alone in the house after everyone has deserted him and falls to a bench and dies there without anyone at all to see or even to know.

Although both Lopakhin and Firs are connected to serf society in Russia, these characters react differently to the liberation they are presented with. Whereas Lopakhin grows from his background of poverty, Firs is unable to accept the challenge and think for himself. Both, however, remain aware of their previous serfdom and remain aware of the changes occurring around them. During the time period of *The Cherry Orchard*, a radically new Russia emerged: "In 1861, when it became clear that Russia was no longer a great power, Czar Alexander II issued the Emancipation Manifesto, which called for

the freedom of all serfs. Peasants were now able to buy land. The hope was that a transformation of the social order would spark a market economy. During this time a middle class rose to power peopled by industrialists, businessmen, merchants and other professionals. These reforms caused great controversy as they introduced what was the beginning of a free-market economy, undermining the power of the nobility and sometimes even impoverishing them." Lopakhin took advantage of this new market society successfully, while Firs drifted away into nothing but a dying memory of an outdated way of life. Thus, these two characters portray the growing Russia from different viewpoints, showing us a glimmer of the reaction of the actual people of the time. Both Firs and Lopakhin, although they treat the liberation differently, remain aware of the poverty from which they rose and of the varying Russia around them. Firs continues to believe the past was better for all and should not be altered. Lopakhin reflects on his rise from poverty after he successfully buys the cherry orchard which shackled his father and grandfather for the entirety of their lives.

While Lopakhin uses his new opportunities to the best of his ability and rises to become a middle-class wealthy landowner, Firs remains chained to the "good old ways" and dies completely alone. Both characters portray the implementation of change in Russia and recognize their poverty. Although they are extremely unique characters who take advantage of their opportunities very distinctively, both are central to Chekhov's pointed portrayal of the rising middle class.