

# The seagull by anton chekhov - analysis



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The Seagull is one of Anton Chekhov's first acclaimed plays, he claimed it to be 'five tons of love'. It is a comedy of frustrated lives; each character has to deal with their own disappointments in their life in their own way. Like most of his plays The Seagull is set in the countryside rather than in the city, the reason for this is that, in the countryside people are forced into the same company with each other everyday. This also brings forth the psychological realism style in which Chekhov wrote. He was influenced by great Russian Realists like Tolstoi, Dostoevsky and Turgenev and it is evident in all his plays including The Seagull. As far as it has been established, The Seagull was the first of Chekhov's plays to be acted out in English. The Seagull is a naturalistic play in which the tone remains the same throughout the play. It is not a theatrical play but rather a play which presents people of ordinary and everyday life. This is especially evident through the plot and action.

**Plot and Action.**

Although it is hard to establish the exact motoric moment of a naturalistic play because there is no definite action starting, one could say that the arrival of Arkadina and her lover Trigorin is the motoric moment as that is when events start to develop.

In the first Act the audience is presented with the image of a country estate setting, the estate is owned by a former government employee, Sorin. On appearance it's seen or rather noticeable that Sorin is a very sickly man. In this act his sister, a famous actress; Arkadina arrives at the estate with her lover, the writer Trigorin, for a short vacation. During this act all the guests of the estate are on their way to watch a play written and directed by Arkadina's son Konstantin Treplov, this is to be his latest attempt to create

a fresh and new theatrical form, and that also presents a dense symbolic form of theatrical art. He does this to win his mother's favor. He really tries to create a new theatrical genre. The leading lady is a girl from a neighboring estate, called Nina, "as the star of the world", which is obviously assumed to be her role within the play. During a discussion about the play Arkadina makes it clear that she thinks it is silly and disregards it as ridiculous and in a state of disgrace, Konstantin storms the stage. It is here where we have our first crisis. Chekhov's plays created drama out of everyday circumstances such as loving and longing, like Konstantin longing for his mother's approval here, rather than the grand gestures of heroes and heroines of his earlier plays. The interesting and troubling love triangles are revealed. The Seagull is a play filled with unrequited love because almost all the characters love someone who does not return their affection. Nina is courted by Konstantin, who loved and admired the daughter of the estate steward, Masha, who is in turn admired by the school teacher Medvedenko. While Masha confides in the good and elderly Doctor Dorn, he simply blames it on the romantic spell the moon and lake has spread amongst the youngsters of the country. Medvedenko loves Masha but she does not feel the same about him: "I am touched by your affection but I cannot return it that is all." It is because of all these sub-plots that makes the play almost anti-emotional. In the first act it is established that Konstantin feels like a failure to his mother.

The second act starts with revealing the outside of the estate, during what seems to be a lovely afternoon, with Arkadina (amongst others) reminiscing about happier times – 'the good old days'. Short after Arkadina and the

house steward Shamrayef is caught in the middle of a rather heated argument, right then and there Arkadina decides to leave and return to Moscow: “ Under the circumstances I shall go back to Moscow this very day...”, it’s a very dramatic way to handle things; throwing all your dolls out of your cot because someone wouldn’t give you a horse. As the rest of the party started making their way back into the house, Nina stayed behind. It’s a rather curious thing when Konstantin surprises Nina with a gift – a dead seagull. It’s strange for a boy who is in love to give the girl of his dreams a dead seagull that he shot. It’s no surprise when Nina face turns to horror and disgust at the sight of the strange gift, presented to her by the boy who is courting her. Although it is imperative to remember that this seagull becomes a very important symbol in the play because Konstantin claims that he will soon end his life in the same way. At that moment Trigorin approaches the scene, upon spotting the handsome and talented writer, Treplyov storms of the stage in a jealous rage. It’s obvious that Nina takes a liking to Trigorin when she asks him to tell her about his life as a writer. He explains to her that it’s definitely not an easy one. A conversation starts between the two, Nina tells Trigorin about her desire to become an actress. Nina confesses to Trigorin that she does realise that it’s not an easy life but is willing to do everything in her power to make a success of her dreams and aspirations to become an actress. When Trigorin sees the strange gift Konstantin has given Nina, it inspires him to write a short story, he starts:

“ A young girl lives all her life on the shore of a lake. She loves the lake, like a seagull, and she’s happy and free, like a seagull. But a man arrives by chance, and when she sees her, he destroys her, out of sheer boredom. Like

this Seagull". It seems as though he is using the story to lure her into his den of poetic romanticism and passion and to no ones surprise, it works. Right at that moment Arkadina calls him to reveal to him that she has changed her mind about leaving immediately and would rather like to stay on a little longer. When Trigorin leaves the set Nina stays behind, ranting and raving about how modest and famous he is and describes him as her 'dream'.

Chekhov centers his plot on the romantic and artistic conflict between the young and up-coming Nina and the ageing Arkadina as well as the ever experimental Konstantin and the legendary Trigorin. Most of the Seagull's action happens off-stage and the plot is developed by the way in which the characters deal with what has happened. Therefore when the play does eventually continue in act 3 we are made aware of the fact that Konstantin tried to commit suicide and that Trigorin and Arkadina are leaving.

Konstantin's suicide is a result of Nina not returning his love but choosing Trigorin over him where his mother does the same (taking the writer's side).

Chekhov's The Sea-Gull has similar attributes to the plot as Hamlet. There is a play within a play. In the same way in which Hamlet tries to win Queen Gertrude back from his uncle Claudius, Konstantin tries to win his mother from Trigorin. The plot thickens when Arkadina and Konstantin have another argument about Trigorin whilst at the same time we see that Trigorin and Nina make plans to meet up in Moscow.

In between the two acts (that is act one and two) Konstantin attempts to kill himself; he fails at this attempt and walks around with a heavily bandaged head for the duration of Act three. At this point Arkadina and Trigorin have

come to a decision to depart from the country estate. Trigorin is found eating breakfast in the kitchen, when Nina enters and presents him with a medallion that proving her ever lasting devotion and admiration for him, she also includes a line from one of his own book's: " If you ever need my life, come and take it". At first she seems foolish and you are left with a thought of a silly teenage obsession, especially when she resorts to begging him to let her see him one last time before he leaves to return to Moscow with Arkadina. Nina disappears off-stage just before Arkadina and Sorin enters; it's easily seen that Sorin's sickness is worsening by the minute. Trigorin also leaves the scene, to go finish his packaging for the trip back to Moscow. Arkadina and Sorin engages in a short word war, after which Sorin collapses of pure grief, luckily Medviedenko is present to help the weak and sickly Sorin off the stage. At that point Konstantin enters and asks his mother to please change his bandages, while Arkadina s changing his bandages he starts an argument, by disregarding Trigorin. The argument is ended and Konstantin leaves in tears. Trigorin then reenters and asks her if they can stay on at the estate but Arkadina flatters him into leaving for Moscow anyway. As Arkadina leaves the stage Nina enters for a final goodbye, she tells him of how she is running away to become an actress against her parents' wishes. They kiss passionately and scheme to meet in Moscow.

Two years pass and once again most of the action took place off-stage like Nina and Trigorin who did meet up in Moscow, had an affair but Trigorin left Nina for Arkadina when Nina lost the baby. Masha, despite her feelings for Konstantin married Medviedenko and they have a child together. Instead of elaborate events Chekhov focuses on smaller detail in the plot. When act 4

starts we see that Konstantin has finally published some short stories.

Arkadina and Trigorin are once again back on Sorin's farm because of Sorin's unstable health. The tension is never lost in the play and there is a very short build up to the climax of the play where Nina comes to Konstantin to speak to him without any of the other characters knowing. She starts by describing their lives and stating that even though they achieved what they wanted life is still not that good. Before she leaves she says that she still loves Trigorin despite of everything that has happened. That was rather unnecessary, poor guy. Figures, because after that all the characters enter again and we hear a gun shot and then (finally) the play has reached its climax when Konstantin shoots himself like he shot the seagull earlier. He was never pleased with his work and he could never please the woman he loved...so what would you do?

There is not much of a denouement as Dorn enters to tell Trigorin to take Arkadina away because Konstantin has shot himself. (I truly hope her conscience will drive her insane). Everything that happens in the plot is a result of their surroundings. The environment in which the characters are put in *The Seagull* is that of a farm in the country, and without a Playstation I'm sure you can imagine they did a whole lot of soul searching. It is this soul searching that highlights most of the themes we find in the play.

### **Themes**

The theme of unrequited love and the passing of time become apparent in the play. As earlier mentioned the play starts off with all the characters loving someone but the person they love have another love interest and they show no commitment, it's like a vicious circle. Masha really loves Konstantin

but he does not return her love so she believes that her love for him will eventually pass with time or if she waits long enough he come to his senses and love her back. But this never happens and by the time (of act 3) she changes her mind and decides upon Medviedenko's love which he has had for her from the beginning: " By marrying Medviedenko..." When Trigorin threatens to leave Arkadina (who is an ageing actress holding on fiercely to her status) she begs him to stay with her: " Am I then so old and ugly that you can talk to me like this without any shame about another woman... I could never endure it should you desert me." As time goes by Sorin becomes more ill. As time passes in the play their desires and love for certain things or people grow stronger which ultimately leaves them hopeless, this brings us to the second theme. Alienation and loneliness come to all the characters at some point in the play. The character that is clearly the most isolated is Konstantin. Once again as we have established numerous times, this is because the character cannot reach the person he or she loves. Konstantin is isolated because of his strange artistic style that he tries to create and because Arkadina, his mother, rejects him while all the other characters look up to her. To put the cherry on the cake for this poor man, when he turns to Nina for comfort she denies him and therefore he becomes even lonelier. He truly feels that he receives no understanding and that he wants to be left alone: " And for heaven's sake, all of you leave me alone! Go away." In the same way Sorin feels very lonely and he has never had the love he wanted: " Women never liked me." He wants to leave the country but everybody is so absorbed in their own lives that no one ever listens to the poor man when he speaks. Towards the end of the play Nina becomes lonely in her own sense when she is rejected by Trigorin, she lost her baby and her parents don't



want her. We clearly see her disorientation: “ I have been wandering about on the shores of the lake ever since I came back. I have often been near your house, but I have never had the courage to come in.” When one becomes lonely you start to judge your life automatically trying to find the source of your alienation. This then brings us to the third theme of self evaluation that includes self awareness or self consciousness. The characters in the play have more than enough time to do this, seeing that the main idea in Chekhov’s work is internal action. Sorin speaks of how he is actually more suited for the city because all he wants to do on the farm is sleep: “ For some reason boy, country life doesn’t suit me...” Arkadina explains why she looks so fabulous and why Masha looks so much older than herself: “...my heart and mind are always busy.” “ I am always well groomed, as the saying is, and carefully dressed, with my hair neatly arranged.” Quite a vain lady if you ask me. Sorin compares his life to Dorn’s and says that Dorn has had a full life and must not judge his unhealthy lifestyle of drinking and smoking. Nina evaluates her life by concerning herself with the fact that she would do anything to become a famous actress. She states that she would love to swap places with Trigorin anytime: “ To find out how a famous genius feels. What is it like to be famous? What sensation does it give you?” Whilst all the characters have time to do self evaluating they try to figure out life’s meaning which is the next theme! Yay!

This is the theme of existentialism. Existentialism suggests that humankind must find something to make life meaningful and to fill their own voids. The one very prominent character in this theme is Masha who brings the theme forth in the beginning of the play when she mourns her life as Medvedenko

says: " Why do you always wear mourning?" This suggests that her life is meaningless; she is frustrated and bored with her life because she cannot win Konstantin's love and without that her life is meaningless to her: " I shall not marry for love, but marriage will at least be a change, and will bring new cares to deaden the memories of the past." Both Konstantin and Nina believe that they will find meaning in their work; while Nina believes that as long as she is acting she is fulfilling her purpose: " I believe, and do not suffer so much, and when I think of my calling I do not fear life." One never thinks that Konstantin's void has truly been fulfilled even though he does publish some work. In the same manner Sorin never comes close to finding the meaning of his life and at times he wonders why he is still alive.

The last theme I will be discussing is the theme of the role of the artist. All four of the protagonists; Arkadina, Nina, Konstantin and Trigorin, are artists. They are either aspiring or settled artists. Co-incidentally they are all in love but they all handle their situations very differently. Konstantin uses his artistry to gain his mother's approval of him and it is also because of his failure in the beginning of the play that he believes that is the reason Nina stopped loving him because he says: " All began when my play failed dismally. A woman can never forgive failure." It seems Chekhov was a smart man... On the opposite end on the rope of success, Trigorin receives a great amount of attention because of his fame. Everybody respects him and does not judge him, so it is easy to see why Konstantin felt violated and ashamed, and to top it off Nina gives Trigorin a gift and says: " Think of me sometimes." She totally fell for his fabulous artistry. Both Trigorin and Arkadina had a good life because people respect them. She uses her position as the established

actress to excuse the manner in which she speaks at times. People almost put her on a pedestal as Nina says: “ How strange it is to see a famous actress weeping...” This is because Nina really longs for fame and the glorious life of an artist. In the play Chekhov makes it out to be the ultimate thing as Nina goes as far as to say: “ For the bliss of being a writer or an actress I could endure want, and disillusionment, and the hatred of my friends...” It could be said that in *The Sea-Gull* there is an illusion at the beginning of the play that the life of an artist is great however towards the end of the play when looking at Nina and Konstantin it is in fact not so very true.

### **Characterization**

The first character I will discuss is Konstantin Treplyov. Konstantin is an emotion and unstable (or over dramatic; depends on which way you look at it) character and this is evident in the fact that he first threatens to commit suicide: “ So shall I soon end my own life.” He does not only attempt it, he succeeds at it. This is a result of the fact that he never finds anything to fill his existentialistic void with. The one thing he believes will fill it is Nina, Konstantin is hopelessly in love: “ I want to see her, I must see her. I shall follow her.” But Nina never returns his love. He likes to an individual despite the fact that he knows his type of writing might not be welcomed by everybody but still he writes it: “ No, we must have it under new form. If we can’t do that, let us rather not have it at all.” He is a very jealous man; he mostly portrays this jealousy towards Trigorin who has everything he dreams of, an established career as a writer and the affection of both Arkadina and Nina.

Nina Zarietchnaya is the second character to discuss. She is ambitious and she will do anything to become a famous actress. She even slipped out of the house as her parents did not approve of her dream. She is passionate about her acting but she does not believe in herself enough to conquer: "It is a dream of my life which will never come true." We come to see that Nina is lonely towards the end of the play because her parents have written her off and Trigorin has dropped her like a hot potato. She says to him when he leaves her for Arkadina: "One must know how to bear one's cross..." She competes with Arkadina for Trigorin's love. Nina is the character to see herself as the seagull, signing off letters under the name and always drawn to the lake and free until someone shoots her down.

Arkadina is the mother of Konstantin and a very well-known actress. Because of her acting ability she is judgmental when it comes to Konstantin's plays: "What decadent rubbish." She thinks less of her son than herself and a lot of her actions are self centered. Actresses in this particular play have a high status, and Arkadina becomes egoistic and arrogant when asked about other artists: "Don't ask me who those antediluvians are! I know nothing about them." She is so afraid that Konstantin will take away her limelight even though she has long passed her prime. She is a very stingy person; she won't give money to her ill brother or to Konstantin who needs new clothes even though she does have the money: "I really haven't the money." And later on she says: "Of course I have some money, but I am an actress and my expense for dress alone is enough to bankrupt me." She is Trigorin's lover.

Trigorin is a well-known writer who never, well, stops writing. Whenever he has an idea or hears something he likes he writes it down and he sometimes gets lost in a fantasy world. He is drawn to the lake where he could fish the whole time as there is nothing that he finds more pleasing and this is seen when he says: "There must be a lot of fish in this lake." He is however rather modest when he replies to Nina's question on his fame: "Either you exaggerate my fame, or else, if it exists, all I can say is that one simply doesn't feel fame in any way." One could say that he is a follower, when Arkadina wants them to leave he puts up a half hearted fight and then leaves. When the opportunity arises for him to have an affair with Nina he grabs it but then leaves her again. He does not see himself as a good writer but merely as someone doing his duty: "Here lies Trigorin a clever writer, but he was not as good as Turgenev." He is admired by all the characters in the play and he is Arkadina's lover. He never gets into any real conflict with anyone. They all see him as a great artist for whom they have great respect.

The other two characters we meet in *The Seagull* are Masha and Sorin. Masha is unhappy with her life because she cannot fill up her void, she loves Konstantin but he does not love her back. (Why can't these people just move on?!) This is evident when she says: "I dress in black to match my life. I am unhappy." She marries Medvedenko to get over Konstantin; she has a baby with her husband but refuses to go home to look after the child: "Nonsense, Matriona will feed it." She is rude towards her husband: "Would I might never see your face again." Sorin is quite the opposite, he is quiet and misunderstood because no one listens when he talks. He is supportive towards everyone but especially toward Konstantin: "I am devoted to him

and he is fond of me..." He never really got to do the things he wanted to do and he lives in a country that he hates. He even mentions how he never got married, spoke eloquently or became an author.

The other characters in the seagull play rather minor roles, but we can still come to notice their unique character traits. Medviedenko is a polite man and very apologetic; despite the fact that Masha is being a 'female dog' toward him, he replies: "I should not have troubled you all but the baby..." Dorn is a doctor and his opinion is respected. He also has a secret attraction towards Paulina. He is very observant and also a father figure for both Masha and Konstantin: "I do not love my father, but my heart turns to you. For some reason, I feel with all my soul that you are near to me..."

### **Language, dialogue and symbolism**

Through the dialogue the tension of the play is kept throughout because there is not a lot of action that takes place. It is for this reason that the speech is filled with pauses especially between acts. Just like there are pauses, moments of silence also carry weight and contribute to the mood and feel of the play. Chekhov uses language that can easily be understood and he does not write in metrical patterns. The 'word' in the play is of utmost importance and the feel and weight of the play lies with it. The characters are a true representation of life and therefore they communicate in that manner. Sometimes the characters talk in short sentences and not in paragraphs in order to keep the action in the play going strong. In The Seagull, the play which Konstantine wrote is filled with personification: "...and the unhappy moon now lights her lamp in vain." Chekhov likes to refer to well known characters in the script like Napoleon, Caesar and Alexander the

great. He also makes use of quotes by William Shakespeare: "Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul..." -As mentioned earlier there are a few comparisons between The Sea-Gull and Hamlet. The dialogue is packed with descriptions as Chekhov pays attention to the finest details in the play. For instance where Arkadina speaks of how good she looks, she really goes overboard in her descriptions. Dorn's character often sings: "tell her, oh flowers..." The characters sometimes sit and philosophise about life and Chekhov makes use of metaphors for example when Konstantin describes how he feels about Nina not loving him: "...wake to find this lake dried up and sunk into the earth."

Repetition in words become apparent, I think the reason for this is, because of the theme of existentialism, the repetition in words contribute to the repetition of their meaningless, pretentious and void less lives. Most words are repeated three times (three was considered an unlucky or evil number) "words, words, words." "...and have to go back to it and begin to write, write, write." As this is naturalism; Chekhov wrote in everyday prose with the normal cliches as well. To establish the simplicity of the play he refers numerously to nature. Banham: "Chekhov's way is to supply a thousand details for his creatures to remain true to themselves while they also interact and reflect the embracing mood of the moment as a group" *Banham, M. 1988. Cambridge Guide to Theatre. New York: Cambridge University Press.*

The main symbol in the play is the seagull, which is also what the play is called. Funny enough, the play was inspired by an actual dead seagull Chekhov found on the beach. The seagull is mention in the beginning of the play and we are constantly reminded of it. The seagull is an innocent bird

with an average life that is destroyed by human indifference; this is the image we create. Firstly we see Konstantin as the seagull after shooting it he places it at Nina's feet and threatens to take its life in much the same way. He thought of himself as an aspiring artist until he killed the seagull his mother mistreated him. The same violence he portrays is killing the seagull is a symbol for the inner conflict and violence inside him. The same way Nina also associated herself with the seagull by signing letters she writes to Trigorin as 'the seagull'. Nina becomes the wounded seagull which returns home to the river to heal. Nina's dedication to her art ultimately reverses her fate and she becomes strong, and takes strength like the seagull: "I am a seagull..." Another rather important symbol is the lake. For every character the lake has a different meaning. For Trigorin for instance it is a place where he is at peace and he can catch fish all day. For Nina it is a safe haven and a reminder of home where she receives comfort. Konstantin gets the simplicity he wants from it when he stages his play there: "no artificial scenery needed. The eye travels directly to the lake, and rests on the horizon." This is Anton Chekhov's way of moving to naturalistic theatre. The weather in the play is a symbol of moods. Every time there is a storm brewing we know an argument is on its way. In the beginning the weather is bad when he fails and later when he shoots himself. In other words, the weather is used as a foreshadowing mechanism. This again can be emphasised by the way Chekhov incorporated simplicity in the naturalistic manner that he wrote in.

### **Other elements**

Some interesting things about Chekhov come to mind. His very first plays were one act comedies which were very entertaining. His first full length



plays *Ivanov* and *The wood demon* was unsuccessful. *The Wood demon* was so badly criticised that Chekhov vowed never to write again. In the same manner *The Seagull* was also unsuccessful when it was first performed at the Alexandrisky Theatre in St Petersburg. The main reason for this is because people were not use to new ideas and this play had nothing in common with the other popular plays of that time because it was devoid of dramatic action and more internal action was focused on. It was Vladimir Nemirovich Danchenko who came to Chekhov's rescue and convinced him to let the newly found Moscow art theatre perform his play, this lead to the great success of *The seagull*. Konstantin Stanislavsky staged *The Sea-Gull* in 1898 and as you can imagine he turned it into a great success. It is interesting to know that Chekhov and Stanislavsky did not get along, for Chekhov did not like the way Stanislavsky directed his play, with total and complete devoid of action onstage. But we know this was the major introduction to the internal action of a character and the play was indeed popular so you can imagine Chekhov quickly forgave Stanislavsky.

*The Sea-Gull* was performed in the Joseph Papp Public Theatre as part of the New York Shakespeare Festival summer season in Central Park from the 12th of August 2001 to the 26th 2001. (One would think Shakespeare's plays should be performed at his festival.) Directed by Mike Nichols and (this is my favorite part), starred Meryl Streep as Arkadina and Natalie Portman as Nina.

The Royal Shakespeare Company performed the piece in January 2008 and then most recently The Classic Stage Company in New York City revived the work in March 2008 in a production. It was Paul Schmidt's translation and it was directed by Viacheslav Dolgachev.

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An acclaimed Russian critic, Nebakov, stated that Chekhov was not a great writer but a pleasant one. Chekhov noted that fiction was his wife and drama his noisy impudent and tiresome mistress. His reputation rests on the plays: *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The three sisters* and *the Cherry Orchard*. He is the son of a former serf but his grandfather bought their freedom. His father beat him up but he inherited his mother's gentleness. Chekhov studied medicine but his writing took up most of his time. He started off with his short comic sketches and that paid for his university fees. Chekhov fell in love with Olga Knipper, a leading actress, and married her in 1901. He died shortly after of Tuberculosis in Germany at the age of 44.

*The Seagull* is a landmark play for the world of drama. Influenced greatly by existentialism it portrays how each individual must find a manner in which to fill their own empty gap of void in their lives in order to live a happy life. It is a comedy in which we observe how people can rub each other up n the wrong way causing so many hilarious conflicts and how people end up failing one another. The way in which Konstantin has to work to win his mother's affection is ridiculous but captivating. Although the tone never changes there are clear changes in the characters.

I rather enjoyed reading *The Seagull* because of the fact that nothing is going on yet it involves so much action and therefore it is different from popular normal comedies.

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