

Chekhov's uncle vanya: a study of indifference and miscommunication



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In his play *Uncle Vanya*, Anton Chekhov uses many writing techniques to convey a sense of breakdown in communication. While his play has elements of humor in it, making it seem almost farcical at times, Chekhov was truly concerned about the lack of social interconnectedness in Russia during the 19th century. He conveys this frustration in his play through the conversations between his characters, such as when they are highly sarcastic, when they are fragmented, and when they are disconnected to the point where it is clear that each character is solely in his or her own head. He also shows the versatility of this breakdown by conveying it in different types of relationships, such as between parent and child, husband and wife, and two lovers.

While sarcasm can be used jokingly between two close people to convey their comfort and friendship with each other, it can often be used in an ambivalent way and cause miscommunication. The characters in Chekhov's play seem to have trouble communicating on a level that is straightforward and honest, without any sarcastic humor. This is particularly obvious in the relationship between Mme. Voitskaya and her son, Ivan. While the mother tries to convey issues to her son that she feels he should work on, she does so in a sarcastic manner that comes off as nonchalant. For example, she says to Ivan: " It seems you never want to listen to what I have to say. Pardon me, Jean, but you have changed so in the last year that I hardly know you. You used to be a man of settled convictions and had an illuminating personality— ". Ivan interrupts her and exclaims " Oh, yes. I had an illuminating personality, which illuminated no one" (193). Ivan and his mother are discussing how Ivan's personality is burning out as a flame that

does not get oxygen burns out. While they are bringing the topic up, they are in no way solving the issue because they are not fully communicating their thoughts to each other. They also turn an important matter into a light chat. In addition to this, Ivan's mother complains that Ivan never listens, and Ivan confirms this by interrupting her. It is clear that the characters want to communicate, but they tragically fail to do so.

Chekhov also uses fragmented conversation to show a breakdown in communication. While the characters are having conversations, they tend to speak in choppy statements and not answer each other's questions. The character Serebrakov and his wife Helena illustrate this perfectly. They are in a marriage that seems, to most people, out of place because it is difficult to believe Helena can love a man so much older than her. This age gap is causing the couple frustration, and this frustration becomes obvious in their conversations. While Serebrakov is complaining about his illness, Helena is clearly tired of hearing about it. Serebrakov says to her: " I dreamed just now that my left leg belonged to someone else, and it hurt so that I woke up. I don't believe this is gout, it is more like rheumatism. What time is it?" Helena unemphatically responds, " Half past twelve" (278). She completely ignored his worries about his illness, most likely because she hears it all too often.

Lastly, Chekhov creates scenarios in which multiple people are interacting, but each person seems to be doing their own thing. When Ivan, who loves Helena, walks in to see Astrov kissing her, every character breaks out into their own reaction: Helena yells " Let me go!" and goes to the window, embarrassed. Voitski throws down the flowers he was bringing to her and <https://assignbuster.com/chekhovs-uncle-vanya-a-study-of-indifference-and-miscommunication/>

starts saying, to himself, " Nothing-yes, yes, nothing." Astrov completely derails and exclaims, " The weather is fine today, my dear Ivan; the morning was overcast and looked like rain, but now the sun is shining again. Honestly, we have had a very fine autumn..." (625). This scenario is filled with a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding. Helena hardly wanted to kiss Astrov, and Ivan felt wrongly betrayed. Astrov made a joke out of all of it to taunt Ivan. Not a single character expressed to the other two what was actually going on. Obviously all the characters would have benefited from better communication in each of these scenarios. But they do not do so because each of them is so stuck in their own problems during this time of social reform in Russia. The relationships between the characters living in this cabin are a microcosm of the Russian people's growing disagreements and their inability to solve them.

Works Cited

Chekhov, Anton. *Uncle Vanya*. Dover Thrift ed. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2013. Kindle Edition. This Dover edition, first published in 1998, is an unabridged republication of a standard edition.