Dugan Lentz
25 April 2024

The Paradise Myth in *The Cherry Orchard*

"What kind of heroes are we?" This is a question Anton Chekhov poses to a fellow Russian writer over a cup of tea (Bunin, 47). They are discussing Chekhov's tendency to write about common people, instead of, say, revolutionaries of the kind Tolstoy might have written about. Chekhov shares with his friend how Stanislavsky works against his intentions to galvanize the Russian people by turning his plays into tragedies to garner pity. "I wanted something different," Chekhov says. "I wanted only to tell people in an honest way, 'Look at yourselves, look at how boring and impoverished your lives are!' I wanted that people understand such a thing and . . . create a different and better life for themselves." In a call to action that must carry the weight of Chekhov's personal convictions about the lethargic state of the Russian populace, he says, "Until such a new life comes into being, I will tell people again and again: 'Understand how poorly and dully you are living!' Now is that something to cry over?"

The Cherry Orchard is largely about social change. Out with the old and in with the new, as the autocracy falls to the rise of the middle class and the agrarian way of life is imposed upon by the advent of Russia's industrial revolution. With all these changes coming so soon after the emancipation of serfs in 1861, there was hope among the intelligentsia and growing middle class for the dismantling of an autocracy that had had its thumb on the people for centuries (Bruford, 32). As a graduate of Moscow University, Chekhov was well-acquainted with the Marxist ideologies sprouting up in educated circles; however, his familial ties to the peasant class and his duties as a medical practitioner brought him into frequent contact with the peasantry woes, which he considered too problematic to be solved by any one political ideology. In his writing he thought it his duty to "state the problem correctly than to attempt its solution" (Bruford, 41). To

this end, *The Cherry Orchard* is a clear reflection of a stratified Russian society free of a political slant.

Chekhov's impartial view of social change allows him to focus on more abstract moral characteristics. I would argue that Chekhov is more focused on moral progress than political progress. Russia has a history of conflating the two: morality is derived from the dictates of the state as seen in the Paradise Myth. This paper will explore how Chekhov's conflicting personal viewpoints are expressed through characters in *The Cherry Orchard* and how they represent the gentry, middle class, and serf's attitudes toward Russia's pursuit of progress and paradise.

What do Ranevsky, Lopakhin, Trofimov, and Firs all have in common? They all believe in some ideal world where they could be happy, which probably unites them with ninety-nine point nine percent of humanity. But it's true that they are all trying to remain with or move away from the status quo in order to keep their dreams in line with reality. To better understand why the characters in *The Cherry Orchard* think the way they do, it's important to explore the Paradise Myth in eighteenth century Russia.

One way to define paradise is by using the *negative formula*–eliminating social problems deemed to be detrimental to the flourishing of a nation; basically, the best thing about a nation is what it is not (Baehr, 3). A more visual way of communicating a utopian vision is through the use of themes and images–namely, symbols. This is demonstrated early in Russian history when the Orthodox church was carried over into Russia from Byzantine heritage (Baehr, 14). It didn't take long for religious symbols like the virgin Mary to intertwine themselves with the secular state as seen in Simon Ushakov's painting, *The Planting of the Tree of the Russian State* (Baehr, 24). The Orthodox Church was depicted as heaven on earth, the only place on earth where one could experience a taste of the joys of heaven. However, under the rule of Peter the Third, the Russian state "usurped the role of the church as heaven on earth." In 17th century Russia, the tsar

was viewed as the "earthly god," to whom all the people should mold themselves after so they too could be 'made in the likeness of God'. As Baehr writes in his book, "The paradise myth, which frequently served to idealize, propagandize, and mythologize autocracy, often tried to reverse this perception by portraying the state as another and higher *church*" (Baehr, 21). Beginning around the reign of Peter the Great, Russia was being made out to be the 'new Israel', with St. Petersburg as "the holy land" and Kiev as the "second Jerusalem" (Baehr, 31). Peter the Great opened the doors to Western influence, introducing neoclassical and Enlightenment ideas. As the schism between Christian and Classical began to widen, Catherine the Great reinforced the idea of Russia as the Promised Land, saying: "My general aim is to create happiness without all the whimsicality, eccentricity, and tyranny which destroys it." This harkens back to the *negative formula* mentioned above. Eighteenth century Russia could be defined by what it is not while phantoms of past influences swirl around. Russia is not a Christian state, though its culture is steeped in Orthodox tradition; Russia is not a Western state, though it is influenced heavily by neoclassical mythologies of the European Enlightenment; Russia is not a totalitarian state, though it views its tsar as god-like. Just as a child might imitate his father building a chair, Russia is imitating societal frameworks; but in both cases, the stability of the imitation is in question. Does happiness for one group always require tyrannizing another? Or is Catherine the Second right? Is there such a thing as heaven on earth for all? To examine possible answers, let's look at Chekhov and *The Cherry Orchard* through the lens of gentry, middle class, and peasants.

To Liobov Andreyevna, the cherry orchard is a source of great pride. It is, after all, featured in the Great Russian Encyclopedia Dictionary. But the orchard is also a symbol of a life that is passing before her eyes, a life that she desperately clings to. "Without the cherry orchard my life makes no sense, and if you have to sell it, you might as well sell me with it" (Checkhov, 745). As a symbol, the orchard, or more generally, the garden, is of great importance in the

Russian mythos. As the idea of the Russian utopia flourished, so did the notion of the 'sacred space', "a place separated from the rest of the universe by some physical or symbolic boundary that provides an ethical demarcation between "good" and "evil" or between the "sacred" and the "profane" (Baehr, 10). Parallels can be drawn to the Garden of Eden, where humanity exists in its natural, harmonious state, separate from the evil forces of the world. For much of the play, Liobov cannot accept the fact that she is about to lose her ancestral home, the lifeblood of her luxurious lifestyle and status as a member of the gentry. She hires an orchestra to play at the house while she waits for the results of the auction, thus allowing herself the fantasy that everything is as it once was. Liubov recognizes that what she is doing is just a facade, admitting it "was a mistake to hire an orchestra. Oh well . . . what difference does it make?" (Chekhov, 743). Then the play directs her to "sit down and hum quietly." Time will pass and change will come whether she wants it or not. The simple fact is that the autocracy that the cherry orchard represents is being cut down in part because the emancipation of the serfs left these noble families without a workforce. This left the gentry deeply in debt and unable to afford their lavish lifestyle. So in this case, the happiness of the gentry was dependent upon the exploitation of the serfs, and once the serfs were liberated, happiness, or what passed for happiness, was no longer possible for the gentry. Liubov alludes to this at the end of the play when she says: "Oh, my orchard, my beautiful orchard! My life, my youth, my happiness, goodbye! Goodbye! Goodbye!" (Chekhov, 758).

Lopakhin is a man of the middle class. As the gentry fell into debt and out of the sphere of influence, bankers and industrialists became the new landlord. You could say Russia was taking capitalism for a test drive. People who had grown up poor like Lopakhin now found themselves the owners of a fair bit of wealth as the agrarian lifestyle yielded to the growth of cities and railroads. However, as Bruford points out in his book, "Russia had tried to imitate

some of the forms of constitutionally governed capitalistic societies without possessing anything that could really be said to correspond to their their accumulated capital, their educated middle class . . . and technical skill and resources" (Bruford, 32). So is Russia's capitalistic system just another imitation chair? Lopakhin doesn't think so. When he proudly announces to the family that he is the estate's new owner, he says: "I'm going to chop down every tree in that cherry orchard, every goddamn one of them, and then I'm going to develop that land! Watch me! I'm going to do something our children and grandchildren can be proud of!" (Chekhov, 750). Lopakhin is predicting a new economic reign with gutsy industrialists like himself at the top.

If any character were to serve as Chekhov's mouthpiece, yelling "understand how poorly and dully you are living," it would be Trofimov. At heart, he's a revolutionary who believes "people in this country aren't working toward anything," as he makes clear to Anya when he reminds of how generations of her family lived off slave labor (Chekhov, 738). "Our goal is to get rid of the silly illusions that keep us from being free and happy. We are moving forward, toward the future!" (Chekhov, 740). While the illusion Trofimov is referring to is the feeling of being in love, we can also take this statement to mean something else entirely. Liubov's illusion that the cherry orchard is a symbol of paradise must also be torn down according to Trofimov. After all, the orchard was cultivated by serfs and not deserved by those who claim it. Wealth and status in general mean little to him, as he explains to Lopakhin: "Look, you could give me a couple of hundred thousand, and I still wouldn't take it. I'm a free man . . . Humanity is moving onward, toward a higher truth and a higher happiness . . . And I'm ahead of the rest!" When Lopakhin asks if he'll ever get there, Trofimov says he will. Self-reliance is his means to paradise.

Chekhov was also a stout individualist, though less optimistic than Trofimov. He understood there was more to life than what the 'will of the people' could muster. As Bruford

writes, “To liberal individualism we must add Christian charity as a fundamental constituent of his point of view, and the third main element was his aesthetic craving for beauty and order in the world around him” (Bruford, 206). Social progress in the form of revolution, which in the Bolshevik’s case was born out of the idea that men could control their own destiny and lead themselves to paradise, was, in Chekhov’s eyes, stymied by a lack of spiritual freedom. Although Chekhov himself did not believe in God, he is described as “filled with post-Christian nostalgia for faith” (Bruford, 210). His nostalgia for a different time in Russia’s history is shared in part by Firs, who laments emancipation. Not to liken Christianity to servitude, but both were pillars to Russian life that Chekhov and Firs respectively feel the loss of.

Chekhov wasn’t ignorant to the peasant way of life. His grandfather bought freedom for his whole family in 1841, and his father, Paul, carried over the harsh discipline of a peasant’s life into his parenting style. That being said, Chekhov held none of Firs’ nostalgia for the hard, cursed life of a serf. Indeed, he criticized the liberated serfs for their laziness. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the state of the peasantry was grim for several reasons (Bruford, 72). The system of peasant self-government bred laziness and drunkenness, partly as a result of mandated land redistribution, which disincentivized and demoralized the people. Also, the natural increase in population with no corresponding rise in land cultivation led to mass food shortages. Things got so bad that there are stories about grandfathers telling their children about the “good old days, when there was time for work, a time for eating and a time for sleep” (Bruford, 74). Firs, too, speaks of the emancipation as ‘the misfortune’, longing for the days when “masters stood by the servants” and “servants stood by the masters” (Chekhov, 737). With the character of Firs, I think Chekhov wants to draw attention to how “boring and impoverished” the peasants’ lives are. By giving the last lines of the play to the old manservant, Chekhov makes his point that time will sweep over and forget those who refuse to make a life for themselves.

Because what is it that people really want? What are the qualifications that have to be met for a nation to declare itself a paradise? Deep down, do people want to be free, like Trofimov; or do people want to be taken care of and provided for, like Firs?

From my perspective, freedom without purpose leads to tyranny of the self and ultimately a desire to return to comfort and security. This is the essence of the biblical narrative of Exodus. I think Chekhov does something similar with the characters of *The Cherry Orchard,* in that he exposes their lack of purpose beyond clinging to the distant past or clamoring for a distant future.

Chekhov's picture of the 'perfect gentleman' was clear-cut: he respects human personality; he upholds the importance of empathy; he pays his debts; he avoids lying; he does not succumb to self-pity; he is humble; he respects and makes sacrifices for his talents; he puts a leash on sexual impulses, and so on (Bruford, 202). These characteristics are the essence of what Chekhov thinks of as spiritual freedom, and it is this type of freedom more so than personal freedom that he concerns himself with. Yet his characters rarely exhibit this level of spiritual freedom. "He was to show how far his characters, as victims in varying degrees of oppression, inherited prejudices, ignorance and their own passions, fell short of attaining this supreme good, a free personality" (Bruford, 203). Hamstrung by personal failings whether innate or acquired through circumstance, Chekhov's characters are notoriously described as 'hopeless individuals' by Chekhov critic, M. Kurdyumov. "Art, science, love, inspiration, ideals, the future–look at all these notions as Chekhov did, and they immediately dim, droop, and die. . . The hopeless individual is the only genuine hero in Chekhov's works" (Bunin, 66).

Liubov is a hopeless individual who is told she can plant a new, better orchard somewhere else. Paradise is just a little further down the road. She'll go back to Paris and continue to squander money until reality can no longer support her fantasies. Lopakhin, who places his value in wealth, will be happy so long as his investments turn out the way he wants.

Trofimov, the eternal student, will return to his university believing that he is leading the revolutionary charge toward a better Russia, completely ignorant of where such radical ideas will lead in the coming decades. Firs could not even imagine a life outside of the estate, so stuck was he in bygone traditions.

For as much as Chekhov may personally desire a world full of beauty and order, a world devoid of injustice, fear, and want, his characters reveal a darker truth. Freedom from one thing allows for servitude to another, and human nature makes it incredibly difficult to find the right one to serve.

Works Cited

Baehr, Stephen Lessing. *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia: Utopian Patterns in Early Secular Russian Literature and Culture*. Stanford University Press, 1991.

Bruford, Walter Horace. *Chekhov and His Russia: A Sociological Study*. Routledge, 1998.

Bunin, Ivan Alekseevich, and Thomas Gaiton Marullo. *About Chekhov: The Unfinished Symphony*. Northwestern University Press, 2007.

Gainor, J. Ellen., et al. *The Norton Anthology of Drama*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

(No original question because I led the class discussion for this play)