

# THREE SISTERS

written by Anton Chekhov



Dramaturgical Materials compiled by  
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# ANTON CHEHOV — A brief bio

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born in 1860, the third of six children to a family of a grocer, in Taganrog, Russia, a southern seaport and resort on the Azov Sea. His father, a 3rd-rank Member of the Merchant's Guild, was a religious fanatic and a tyrant who used his children as slaves. Young Chekhov was a part-time assistant in his father's business and also a singer in a church choir. At age 15, he was abandoned by his bankrupt father and lived alone for 3 years while finishing the Classical Gymnasium in Taganrog. Chekhov obtained a scholarship at the Moscow University Medical School in 1879, from which he graduated in 1884 as a Medical Doctor. He practiced general medicine for about ten years.

While a student, Chekhov published numerous short stories and humorous sketches under a pseudonym. He reserved his real name for serious medical publications, saying "medicine is my wife; literature - a mistress." While a doctor, he kept writing and had success with his first books, and his first play "Ivanov." He gradually decreased his medical practice in favor of writing. Chekhov created his own style based on objectivity, brevity, originality, and compassion. It was different from the mainstream Russian literature's scrupulous analytical depiction of "heroes." Chekhov used a delicate fabric of hints, subtle nuances in dialogs, and precise details. He described his original style as an "objective manner of writing." He avoided stereotyping and instructive political messages in favor of cool comic irony. Praised by writers Leo Tolstoy and Nikolai Leskov, he was awarded the Pushkin Prize from the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1888.

In 1890, Chekhov made a lengthy journey to Siberia and to the remote prison-island of Sakhalin. There, he surveyed thousands of convicts and conducted research for a dissertation about the life of prisoners. His research grew bigger than a dissertation, and in 1894, he published a detailed social-analytical essay on the Russian penitentiary system in Siberia and the Far East, titled "Island of Sakhalin." Chekhov's valuable research was later



"My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love and absolute freedom – freedom from violence and falsehood, no matter how the last two manifest themselves."

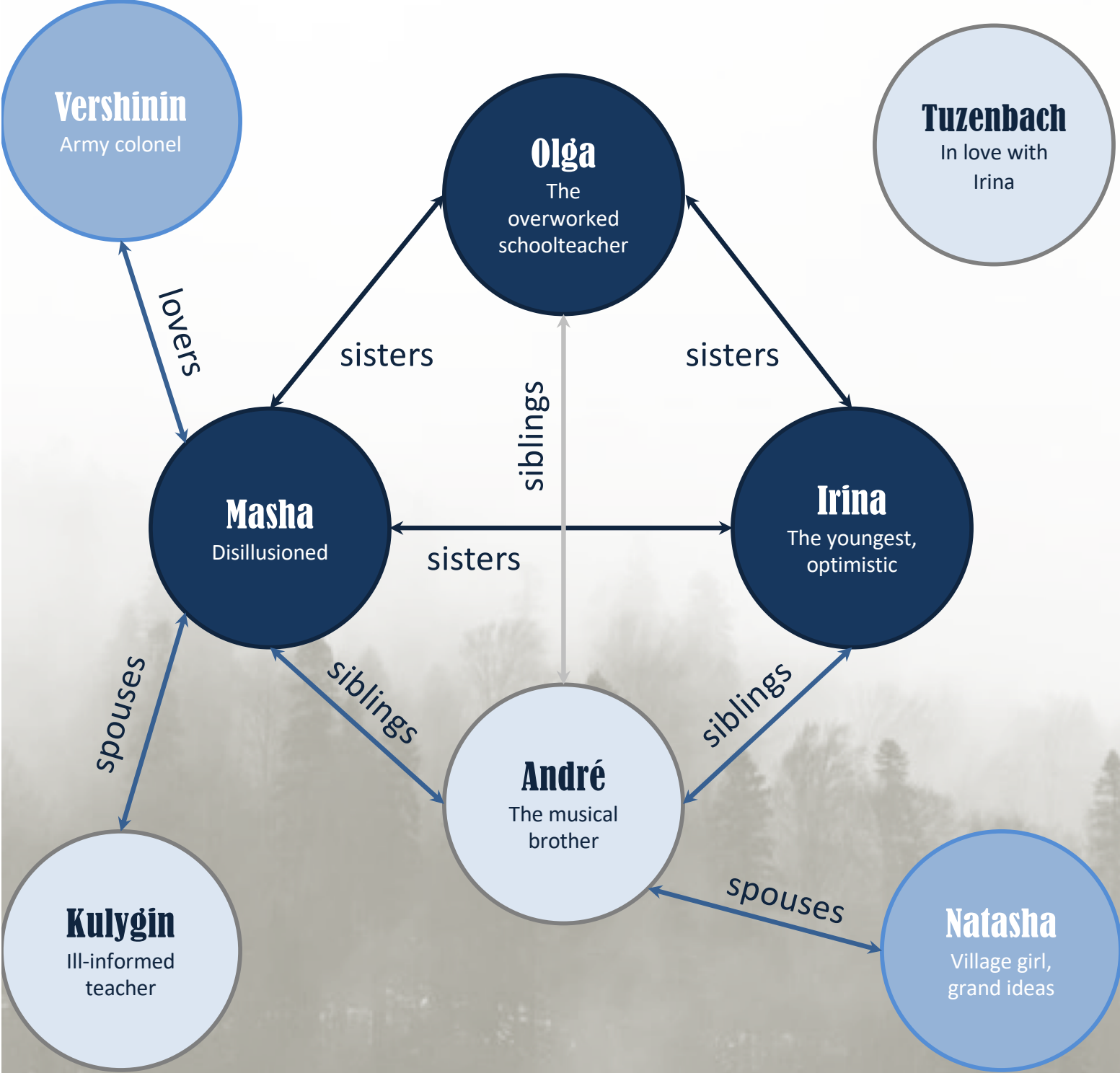
— Anton Chekhov

used and quoted by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his "Gulag Archipelago." In 1897-1899, Chekhov returned to his medical practice in order to stop the epidemic of cholera.

Chekhov developed a special relationship with Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko at the Moscow Art Theater. He emerged as a mature playwright who influenced the modern theater. In the plays **Uncle Vanya**, **Three Sisters**, **Seagull**, and **Cherry Orchard**, he mastered the use of understatement, anticlimax, and implied emotion. The leading actress of the Moscow Art Theater, Olga Knipper-Chekhova, became his wife.

# THREE SISTERS —

## Principal character map





# THREE SISTERS

## Moscow Art Theatre, 1901



L-R: Olga Knipper Chekhova as *Masha*, Maria Andreyeva as *Irina*, and Margarita Savitskaya as *Olga*.



Konstantin Stanislavski as *Vershinin*.



Alexander Artem as *Dr. Chebutykin*.



# Chekhov at the Moscow Art Theatre



Chekhov's first table reading of **The Cherry Orchard** with the ensemble at the Moscow Art Theatre

Москва. Художественный театр.  
MOSCOU. Théâtre des arts.



Exterior of the Moscow Art Theatre

# LITERARY REFERENCES in the text

## **Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841)**

Lermontov was a great admirer of Pushkin's, and is considered as perhaps the second greatest Russian poet. In the play, Solyony compares himself to Lermontov, perhaps being the only one finding a likeness between himself and the great romantic poet.

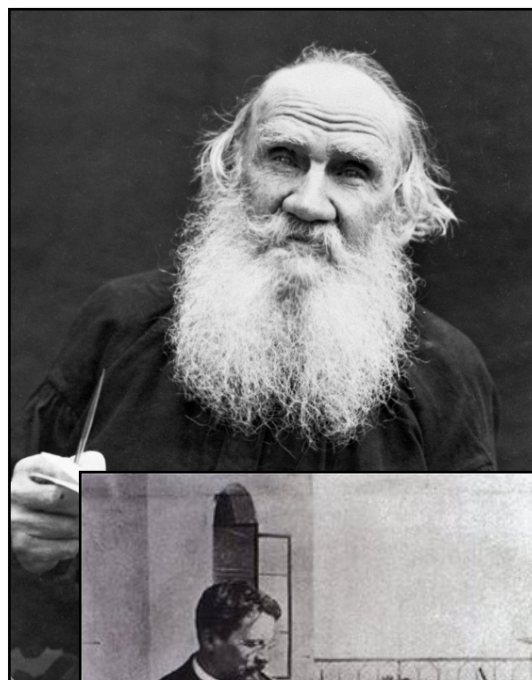
He was killed in a duel at the age of 26.



## **Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)**

Tolstoy and Chekov had a somewhat enjoyably argumentative relationship with one another, largely conducted through written correspondence. It is very clear in Tolstoy's writing that the lines between Russian literature and philosophy are quite blurred.

It is possible that Chekov incorporated Tolstoy's ideals and personal struggles into the character of Irina, who in act one believes that her, and all people's, highest purpose is to work, and, years later, finds that working has made her miserable.





# PRODUCTION HISTORY

It is said that Chekhov developed the idea for his play **Three Sisters** in the year 1883 while he spent a holiday in Vosmressensk. There, Chekhov's brother Ivan tutored the three children of Colonel B.I. Maevsky, and Chekhov observed the sisters' behavior. Love affairs like Masha's and Vershinin's developed from Chekhov's witnessing true life ones between village girls. Then in 1883, he rented the Lintvarev estate—similar to the location to the play—on the Pysol River near Sumy. "He was fascinated by the three Lintvarev sisters, who were intellectual, charming, and high-minded. Two of the women were doctors and the eldest was blind from a brain tumor" (Meister 245-246).

Chekhov's idea turned into a piece of writing that he took time with. During the winter of 1897 to 1898, he sought out a warmer climate after suffering two hemorrhages in his lung. He settled in Nice, France, and it was then that Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko contracted him to have his piece produced at the Moscow Art Theatre. Established by K.S. Stanislavsky and V.I. Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1898, Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) "was intended to stimulate public taste for the 'new drama'" (Anton Chekhov Biography Website). Students from the drama branch of the Musical-Drama School from the Moscow Philharmonic society—where Vladimir taught acting—and students from Stanislavsky's Art and Literature Amateurs Society formed the original core company of MAT. These include O. Knipper, I. Moskvina, V. Meierhold, M. Savitskaya, M. Germanova, M. Roksanova, N. Litovtseva (Moscow Art Theatre Website).

MAT first produced **Three Sisters** in 1901. "At their first reading the MAT actors said, 'This is not a play, but only a scheme; there are no roles but only hints.' At the first performance on January 31, 1901, there were 12 curtain-calls after Act I but only a half-hearted one after Act IV" (Meister 246). After its first opening, "Three Sisters" received lackluster response and lukewarm criticism. "The public did not know how to receive the play" (Anton Chekhov Biography Website). The idea behind the show confused some critics:

At first, Russian critics were puzzled at why the sisters did not go to Moscow—they were wealthy, and nothing kept them from the move. Later, however, they explained the characters' seeming lack of motivation as the feature of a new dramatic method. I.N. Ignatov in 1901 said that to the sisters, Moscow was not a city but 'a symbol of a distant resplendent ideal to which suffering souls yearningly direct their thoughts.' A critic in Niva in 1901 said that 'Moscow is an illusion, a mirage—to the traveler in a hopeless wilderness it is a vision of a better life' (Meister 246).

News of such criticism got back to Chekhov, and he decided to immerse himself in the process of the show more. He went to Moscow and sat in on rehearsals, personally producing Act III. When he saw it performed in the new season at MAT, he felt "for the first time in his life...perfectly satisfied with the production of one of his plays. He was applauded in two curtain calls after Act III" (Anton Chekhov Biography Website).

## Sources:

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# TRANSLATION — Unique Challenges

Robert Chandler is one of the best-known Russian-English translators, “For long, seemingly difficult Russian words, the dictionary is usually adequate. But the shorter the word, the more meanings it is likely to have and the greater the scope for misunderstanding.”

Cambridge-based translator Arch Tait points out that you cannot assume a reader's familiarity with the Russian culture: “Does everybody know what a dacha is? A matryoshka? A babushka?”

Translating between any two languages can be difficult, and translating between Russian and English is no *исключение* (exception) to this pattern. Due to certain *грамматические различия* (grammatical differences), some meanings within the languages can be difficult to translate. Here are just a few of the unique Russian to English challenges —

## Порядок слов (Word Order)

One of the major differences between Russian and English is **порядок слов** (word order). Both languages have a basic **подлежащее-глагол-дополнение** (subject-verb-object) order: **Он любит её**/ He loves her. This word order is **нейтральный** (neutral) in Russian, but for **выразительность** (emphasis), the word order can be changed, in which case it is no longer neutral: **Её он любит**/Он её любит. In these instances, emphasis is specifically placed on the word moved forward in the word order. The translator, if to keep the original emphasis, will need to creatively carry this into English, perhaps with a **нестандартный** (non-standard), non-neutral word order (i.e. It is she that he loves) or through other emphasis (i.e. He loves *her*).

## Время (Time) and Действие (Action)

Verbs in English and Russian express **время** (time) very differently. English relies on 12 **времена** (tenses) to transmit **точное время** (exact time). Russian has only three tenses, **настоящее** (present), **прошедшее** (past), and **будущее** (future), but it also uses **вид** (aspect) to add layers of **значение** (meaning) emphasizing how the action was performed, if it was completed, repeated, done with specific purpose, etc. While such subtleties can often be expressed in English using phrasal verbs, translators must navigate a web of subtleties and consider each case in context to decide how to express the same thought with economy. For instance, “**Я гулял**” (I strolled) is much more direct and finite than “**Я погулял**,” which is closer to “I strolled around for awhile.”

## Ничего и нечего (Nothing and Nothing)

In addition to **обширные** (broad) grammatical differences between Russian and English, there are some very **особые тонкости** (specific, minute details) that affect how sentences should be translated. A common mistake among English speakers is to **путать** (confuse) **ничего** and **нечего**. Although these two words only differ with one letter, their use in sentences and their translation is very different. **Ничего**, which has the **ударение на последний слог** (stress on the final syllable) is slightly different from **нечего**, which has the **ударение на первый слог** (stress on the first syllable). **Ничего** is used as a regular negated object, with the subject in the nominative case, while **нечего** is used in an impersonal construction with the subject in the **дательный падеж** (dative case). In terms of meaning, **нечего** usually refers to the complete absence of something, while **ничего** usually refers to the absence of a specific something. So, for instance, **она ничего не боится** would mean that “she fears nothing” (there are probably things to fear, but she is fearless) while **ей нечего бояться** would mean that “she has nothing to be afraid of” (she probably is afraid, or will be afraid, but should not fear).