

A Month in the Country
A Psychoanalytic Discussion

Ivan Turgenev, the great Russian author known more for his novels than for his drama, wrote “A Month in the Country” in 1850. The production we have just seen is an adaptation by the contemporary Irish playwright Brian Friel. Friel’s adaptation is faithful in spirit, if not to the letter of the Turgenev original. Although Turgenev wrote ten plays, “A Month in the Country” is considered to be his best by far, and certainly is his most famous. Our great cultural icon, Tina Turner, proposed a relevant question when she asked “What’s love got to do with it??” In the case of “A Month in the Country,” the answer is “everything.” This is undeniably a drama about love. Moreover, it is a drama about passion. But not the lurid and lustful passion which we can find in abundant quantity in our neighborhood movie theaters. Turgenev was primarily concerned with the passions of our hearts and souls, the passions of internal psychic conflict, ambivalence, longing, guilt, envy, and jealousy.

These internal passions and conflicts are, of course, the stuff of psychoanalytic theory and treatment. Brian Friel notes in his introductory essay to the play that Turgenev was a man way ahead of his time in the history of literature. He (and many others) believe that Turgenev really prepared the soil, so to speak, in which later Russian writers would flourish. In particular, Turgenev was writing “Chekhovian” plays well before Chekhov was even born. Friel writes: “[Turgenev] fashioned a new kind of dramatic situation and a new kind of dramatic character where for the first time psychological and poetic elements create a *theater of moods where the action resides in internal emotion and secret turmoil and not in external events.*” What, I thought, could be a better description of the spirit of a psychoanalytic treatment. We psychoanalysts try to impress on our patients that what is important to examine and understand about themselves is not so much the external behaviors and activities of their lives, but rather the internal conflicts and struggles which drive these behaviors. This is what distinguishes psychoanalysis from other, more behaviorally focused treatment methods. We examine *the internal emotion and secret turmoil* that leads people to experience pain and suffering in their lives and in their important relationships. We call this secret turmoil the unconscious.

Clearly Turgenev didn’t need Sigmund Freud to tell him that this internal and secret turmoil is the important stuff. Indeed, he wrote this play nearly half a century before Freud set any of his own ideas down on paper. The really great observers of human psychology have always been those rare and gifted individuals who are able to bring our inner passions to life on the stage or in a book. Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, for example would have to be counted among the greatest psychologists of all time. Turgenev was certainly no slouch in this regard.

Let's move on to the play itself. As the first scene opens, we find several of the residents of the grand Islayev estate engaged in what is presumably a typical day's activity. Natalya Petrovna, the lady of the estate, is painting a portrait of Michel, a longtime family friend. Vera, an orphan who has become Natalya's ward, is playing a John Field nocturne on the piano in the adjoining room, and Herr Shaaf, Anna Semyonovna (Arkady's mother) and Lizaveta are playing a game of cards. Here is an apparently tranquil scene; an average day of upper class folk enjoying their leisure time. But as we are to learn, superficial tranquility is deceptive. The first words spoken in the play foreshadow what is to come. In his clumsy attempt to master the jargon of the game, Herr Shaaf declares: "Hartz are trumpery." He means to say, of course, that hearts are trump. Trumpery, as Anna says, "is a different thing altogether." According to my dictionary, trumpery means "something showy but worthless; nonsense." I think Brian Friel has captured beautifully what is a central theme of the play, and a part of Turgenev's core philosophy. That is, that the affairs of the heart, while superficially showy are worthless at the core. Love, as we learn from the events of the play, can only breed disaster. It ruins one's life if unrequited, and it may ruin one's life if it *is* requited.

There are certain aspects of Turgenev's life history that are important to mention here, as they help us to understand the play and its origins. Turgenev was born in Orel, Russia in 1818, the son of wealthy parents, and he grew up on a country estate similar to the one in the play. He attended boarding schools and was also tutored at home in the best tradition of the Russian gentry in the early nineteenth century. He attended the best universities in Russia and in Europe. Apparently his mother was a cruel and domineering woman who loved to tyrannize those under her authority. His father, who died when Ivan was sixteen, was a philanderer who spent his time pursuing women gentler and more attractive than his wife. Turgenev, in short, was not exposed to the most flattering version of the institution of marriage. He was latter to follow a pattern similar to that of his father, allowing himself to be captivated by women who were otherwise committed and therefore unavailable to him. The most enduring of these infatuations was with Pauline Viardot, a well know singer of that time. The two met in 1843 and Turgenev was immediately struck by her beauty and allure. Thus began what one writer has called "the most extraordinary menage a trois arrangement in the history of literature." For the next forty years Turgenev's thoughts were never far from Pauline and he made it his business to live near her and her husband for long periods of time. Turgenev fathered a daughter by a peasant girl but he remained a bachelor all his life.

As I said earlier, this is a play about love. Love is apparently everywhere one turns on the estate. The arrival of Alexsey, the young, attractive, unaffected tutor is a welcome breath of fresh air. Or at least it seems that way. Ultimately, his arrival is to spark a series of emotions too powerful to be contained in

this cloistered paradise. The kite that Alexsey is busy constructing at the opening of the play is a wonderful symbol of the agitation his arrival incites on the estate. It suggests a regression to carefree childhood pursuits. But it is of interest that the Russian word for kite, translated literally, means “to release a serpent.” Thus Turgenev uses this image to introduce a Biblical metaphor for the events that we are about to witness. Love and its close cousins lust and betrayal will cause a terrible catastrophe to befall this country paradise. Three of the characters, Michel, Vera and Alexsey (the serpent himself), will have to be expelled from this Garden of Eden in order to restore at least the appearance of normalcy again.

The tempest gathers energy around Natalya Petrovna. She is well-bred and refined, but she is bored with her life. Her husband Arkady is a successful businessman who provides financially for her, but leaves her cold otherwise. He is a pleasant fellow, but is amusingly graceless and ineffectual. The best superlatives he can muster to flatter his wife is: “You look astonishing...doesn’t my astonishing wife look just...astonishing?” He is a one adjective kind of man. His wife and his remarkable new winnowing machine get the same assessment: ... Astonishing!! Arkady is building a dam (or more precisely, as he repeatedly corrects his friends, a weir) in the background of the dramatic action. This too is a wonderful metaphor. All of these characters are trying, albeit unsuccessfully, to dam up their emotions. I didn’t know the difference between a weir and a dam either. The main difference, it turns out, is that a weir is intended to *divert the direction*, not completely *impede the flow* of a body of water. How fitting in this context! Natalya and the other characters have not completely blocked their lustful feelings, they are just trying mightily to divert them. When the weir threatens to break and flood the place, something drastic must be done. As Arkady says when he implores Michel to confess his love for Natalya: “I think I could have carried on--yes, I know I could--as long as she was, you know, --reasonably discreet.” It is alright if his wife is cheating on him, as long as she keeps reasonably quiet about it.

“Dysfunctional” may be the favorite buzzword of modern psychiatry--dysfunctional families, dysfunctional relationships, etc., but families were no less dysfunctional in Turgenev’s day than they are today. Turgenev himself, as I have already described, came from a dysfunctional family if ever there was one. The characters in the play for whom we are provided with some family history, seemed to fare not much better than their creator. Alexsey, we learn, lost his mother when he was a baby and was raised by his alcoholic father with a little help from well meaning neighbors. Vera, who is an orphan, is perhaps naturally attracted to Alexsey, the “half-orphan.” Arkady never knew his father because he was so busy working and building his estate. And as Anna tells him towards the end of the play, she and her son have a lot in common. She too had knowingly tolerated a long term affair that his father had with a woman in Moscow. “Every month for almost fifteen years,” she says to Arkady, “...and he never mentioned her to

me and I never mentioned her to him. Because he loved me too. I know he did. And I loved him very much.”

The central family in the play, Arkady, Natalya and Vera are in trouble as well to say the least. The relationship between Vera and Natalya is very interesting. These days we would say that there was a serious problem with boundaries in their relationship. They are both in love with the same man. Alexsey is in love with them both, although Natalya is perhaps more interesting to him as a forbidden incestual maternal figure--kind of a Mrs. Robinson to him. One wonders if Natalya represents for Alexsey the lost mother of his childhood who he must have been built up in his fantasies as a powerful woman of mythic proportions. Perhaps, we could speculate that Alexsey harbored the fantasy that this mother would have saved him from the hellish life with his father if only she had lived. Just as Natalya might save him from his life as a poor student, taking him into her privileged life.

The scene with Natalya and Vera is a model depiction of mother-daughter rivalry. Natalya lures Vera into her black widow trap by encouraging her to think of her as a sister: “You’re not my daughter,” she says...”We’re closer than that. We’re sisters....I’m your older sister that you love and tell all your secrets to.” Natalya’s cunning attempt to pass Vera off to Bolshintsov results in only uproarious laughter from Vera. Having failed this first gambit, Natalya extracts from Vera a confession of her love for Alexsey, and then promptly betrays her confidence to Alexsey. This is the Oedipal scenario turned upside down...mother attempts to kill off daughter to get to their common love interest. While Vera is the younger and more beautiful of the two women, she realizes she cannot match up to Natalya. “I am not a rival,” she says to Natalya. “I wish to God I were--but I’m not.” She is destined to sacrifice herself in deference to this powerful mother figure, by settling for the crude old Bolshintsov--security over love.

My impression is that it is no accident that the set included a stylized version of the old-time fainting couch, on which Natalya reclined when she was overtaken by emotion, or to which she brought her “victims” when she was in a mischievous mood. This fainting couch, as it used to be called, later came to be the model for the psychoanalytic couch used by Freud and his disciples. As I suggested earlier, this is a psychoanalytic play. Soliloquies, in which the characters speak their private musings aloud, resemble the free association of the analytic patient on the couch. Collectively, the audience is analyst. The powerful forces pulling at Natalya’s heart are revealed to us in her two long soliloquies. As she professes her love for Alexsey and reveals her guilty feelings about this love we are drawn into her anguish. “Oh God, oh God,” she moans, “listen to yourself Natalya. If you’re not careful you’re going to end up loathing yourself.”

Then there is poor Michel. He is perhaps the most tragic of the characters in the play and one whose pain is very evident to us throughout. He is the hapless, unsuccessful lover who is used by Natalya

as a sometime confidant, and sometime lover, but mostly as a mere distraction from her boredom. She doesn't take him very seriously as a romantic interest and apparently never has. Nevertheless, Michel has waited patiently, hoping against hope that his love for Natalya might some day be requited. Ultimately, of course, he too is sacrificed and extruded from the estate in order to restore peace and tranquility. To be more precise, he sacrifices himself for the woman he loves. He is clearly the character Turgenev fashioned in his own image. He too sacrificed his own happiness for the woman he loved, Pauline Viardot, and he stood by patiently while Pauline concerned herself primarily with her own husband. "All I can do is watch---and endure," he says. "You are besotted by her, aren't you? ..If you could only see yourself: you are ridiculous. Ever since the first day I met her I've never been anything else."

In the final analysis, the play is essentially pessimistic and cynical. Dr. Shpigelsky , the most openly cynical character in the play perhaps personifies this sentiment. Poor Dr. Shpigelsky; his own lecherousness and uncharitable assessment of man's nature leaves him disgusted with all including himself. But maybe Michel sums it up most starkly in his words to Alexsey at the end of the play: "All love is catastrophe. ..An endless process of shame and desolation and despair when you are stripped---you strip yourself---of every semblance of dignity and self-respect; when you grovel in the hope of a casual word or a sly smile or a secret squeeze of the hand...When you find yourself enslaved by love, owned by a woman, then for the first time in your life you will know what real suffering is."