

The Problem of Stupidity in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*

LEE TREPANIER

Saginaw Valley State University

One of the continual challenges that confront critics of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* is to locate a theme that unites the various elements in the play. The initial reaction to its first performances was one of puzzlement as to why the sisters did not go to Moscow: they were wealthy, privileged, and had no familial obstacles to prevent them from the journey.¹ It also was interpreted by early reviewers as either allegorical, since the play seemed to lack action, or as a satire of weak-willed characters. Later, other critics, like A. V. Lunacharskyy, found it unbearably morose in that Chekhov had failed to present a positive forceful hero who could "show us the seeds of a new life."² By contrast, Kornei Chukovsky believed that Chekhov's attempt to find beauty in the ordinariness of life demonstrated the value of the Christian virtues, for "it not only evokes sympathy for the downtrodden and suffering but make them an image of beauty."³ Finally, these were Russian commentators like Vladimir Mayakovsky who wrote that there were two Chekhovs in the play: the first was about the twilight of Russian aristocratic society; the second was a call to the future for a spiritual renewal of Russian civilization.⁴

In the West the criticism of *Three Sisters* has run the gamut of admiration of Chekhov's realist portrayal of life, psychological insights of its characters, and anticipation of theater of the absurd to a dismissal of the play as being outdated, dull, and pointless.⁵ Most western critics also have reiterated Mayakovsky's idea of the "two Chekhovs" – Chekhov's hope for the future and despair of the present – as the theme that unites the play. For example, Howard Taubman praised one production of *Three Sisters* as "a chorus affirmation the promise of the future and the regenerative powers of work."⁶ However, other reviewers have been more suspicious about that claim. Michael Frayn rejected this notion, stating that "the whole structure of the play is designed to undercut Vershinin[']s vision of a better future[]." ⁷ Another commonly-held interpretation of the play is that *Three Sisters* is a form of catharsis for the audience – a "cleansing baptism of irony" – where the audience's desires for the sisters to succeed are frustrated and thereby leads the audience into a process of self-examination.⁸ In short, there is no consensus in either the East or the West about what constitutes the overarching theme in the play.

In this article I will argue that the theme of stupidity, as understood by Robert Musil, is the idea that unites the various elements in *Three Sisters* together. All the characters manifest some form of stupidity in their words and actions, with the result of vulgarity, selfishness, and ultimately dispossession that pervades and destroys the sisters' aristocratic world. The fate of all the characters, except for Natasha, is one of despair and misfortune that stupidity had bestowed

upon them because they were unable to recognize or resist it. Simply put, stupidity is the cause that leads the sisters to fail in their aspirations and preserve their world.

Honorable and Intelligent Stupidity

The state of spiritual and material decay that characterized the sisters – and more generally late nineteenth-century Russian aristocratic society – can be better understood by looking at Robert Musil’s lecture, “On Stupidity.”⁹ An early twentieth-century Austrian novelist, Musil’s work on stupidity provides an account of how civilized societies fail to regenerate themselves as moral and spiritual entities. According to Musil, when the leaders of society have become stupid, they are unable or unwilling to resist the forces that will destroy that civilization. Although Musil’s lecture was directed at 1930s Germanic society, it provides a general explanation as to why cultured societies collapse when they faced by the forces of bourgeoisie self-interest, fascist conquest, or communist revolution. The material and spiritual dispossession of the Prozorov household in *Three Sisters* likewise can be understood as a result of the sisters being stupid. Because of their condition, they are unable to defend and to preserve the aristocratic values of beauty, shared sacrifice, and leisure.

For Musil, stupidity – the cause of societal decay and its eventual collapse – is more than a deficiency of understanding; rather, there are two types:

In life one usually means by a stupid person one who is a “little weak in the head.” But beyond this there are the most varied kinds of intellectual and spiritual deviations, which can so hinder and frustrate and lead astray even an undamaged innate intelligence that it leads, by and large, to something for which the only word language has at its disposal is stupidity. Thus this word embraces two fundamentally quite different types: an honorable and straightforward type of stupidity, and a second that, somewhat paradoxically is even a sign of intelligence. The first is based rather on a weakness of understanding, the second more on an understanding that is weak only with regard to some particular, and this latter kind is by far more dangerous.¹⁰

The first types of stupidity – honorable stupidity – is commonly recognized and therefore not always threatening, while the second type – intelligent stupidity – is not commonly recognized and consequently is always dangerous.

Honorable stupidity is illustrated by its poverty of words and ideas, its slow comprehension of facts, and its stubborn preference for the familiar, while intelligent stupidity is distinguished by its claims to insights beyond its ability, the privileging of emotions over reason, and the ability to produce convincing rationalizations to justify its viewpoints:

The higher, pretentious form of stupidity stands only too often in crass opposition to [its] honorable form. It is not so much lack of intelligence as failure of intelligence, for

the reason that it presumes to accomplishments to which it has no right[.] [...] This higher stupidity is the real disease of culture [...] and to describe it is an almost infinite task. It reaches into the highest intellectual sphere.¹¹

This distorted use of a genuine and energetic intelligence that makes unwarranted claims from unchecked emotions is fundamentally a condition of spiritual corruption for Musil: “Intelligent stupidity has as its adversary not so much the understanding as the spirit [*geist*], and if one is willing to imagine as ‘spirit’ not merely a little heap of emotions, the sensibility [*Gemüt*] as well.”¹²

Intelligent stupidity consequently is not merely an intellectual problem but one that encompasses all the elements that are operative in one’s consciousness: the physical, the intellectual, and the spiritual. Although intelligent stupidity can become a social and political problem, such as when leaders of totalitarian ideologies are able to persuade people to follow them, it is primary a spiritual disorientation where one is blinded in both sense and sensibility to the order of reality.¹³ In other words, intelligent stupidity is a type of spiritual arrogance that rejects reason and a recognition of reality as it truly exists. Unlike honorable stupidity, intelligent stupidity consists not of an inability to understand reality but a refusal to understand it.

Intelligent stupidity therefore is ultimately reductive in its content: vulgarity, selfishness, and emotionalism that push aside notions of beauty, shared sacrifice, and reason. It is not as if these aristocratic values do not exist; rather, they are not acknowledged by the intelligently stupid and instead are reduced to explanations of self-interest and power. By refusing to recognize the objective existence of civilized values, the intelligently stupid is able to paint a world where everything is a rationalization and nothing is a reason. It is to those who are not stupid to defend a cultured society and the values which it cherishes.

Whether Chekhov himself believed intelligent stupidity could be eradicated or cured is unclear, but he did suggest a potential remedy to this condition in the experience of pathos: the ability to empathize and identify experientially with the suffering of another person or even with nature itself. The characters we admire the most in *Three Sisters* are those capable of experiencing pathos; and the characters we like the least lack this capacity. Unfortunately, it is not clear from Chekhov how pathos can be translated into effective social and political action, as evident by the fate of sisters. Nevertheless, Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* is about hope for the future and despair of the present, as Mayakovsky had suggested, but with stupidity and, to a lesser extent, pathos, as the themes that tie the play together.

Material and Spiritual Dispossession

In *Three Sisters* both types of stupidity – honorable and intelligent – are manifested in the various characters with the result of the dispossession of the sisters’ material and spiritual wealth. The sisters had left Moscow eleven years ago and now live a provincial town because their father was commissioned to be head of a brigade there. Since their father’s death, all three

of them long to return back to Moscow. Olga is the eldest sister who teaches at a local high school; Masha is the middle sister and is married to Kuligin, whom she once thought was the cleverest of men but rather has turned out to be an ineffectual local teacher; and Irinia who is the youngest sister with aspirations to work and marriage. All three sisters have pinned their hopes on their brother, Andrey, who is studying to become a university professor in Moscow.

However, Andrey is engaged to a poor local girl, Natasha, whom the sisters ridicule in the first act because she is shy, socially awkward, and inappropriately dressed for the celebration of Irina's name day. But over the course of the play, Natasha not only marries Andrey but slowly begins to dominate the household. She forces Irina to give up her room in order to have a place for the baby and later pushes Olga and Anfisa, a loyal but elderly servant, out of the house altogether. Natasha even takes on a lover, as Andrey spends his time gambling in order to forget how vulgar, rude, and selfish his wife truly is. At the end of the play, Natasha criticizes Irina's attire as "an error of taste" and orders to cut down all the fir and maples trees on their street because "they are so ugly at night."¹⁴

The other set of characters that are significant to the sisters' lives are Lieutenant Colonel Vershinin, Lieutenant Tusenbach, and Captain Solyony. In spite of being married and having a family, Vershinin begins an affair with Masha, who has fallen in love with him. But Vershinin is unwilling to leave his family and the affair concludes when the brigade leaves at the end of the play. The other soldiers, Tusenbach and Solyony, both vie for the affections of the youngest sister, Irina. Tusenbach eventually wins over Irina and becomes engaged to her. Unfortunately, at the end of the play, Solyony challenges him to a duel, where Tusenbach is killed.

But it is the revelation that Andrey has mortgaged the Prozorov house in order to support Natasha's expensive tastes that destroy any possibility that all the sisters could be happy together. At the conclusion of *Three Sisters*, each sister is left alone in her misery, with Masha observing that "We must begin our lives all over again." To this, Irina remarks that "Some day we will know all the answers. Now we must work." The last words of the play are Olga's reply to both sisters: "We shall soon be gone forever, but our suffering will turn into joy for those who live after us. Happiness and peace will come on earth ... in a little while, we shall know why we are living, why we are suffering ... If we could only know, if we could only know!"

The slow dispossession of sisters' material and spiritual wealth is a consequence of their own honorable stupidity: the slow comprehension of recognizing and resisting the intelligent stupidity of Natasha, Andrey, and Solyony. Throughout the play the once prosperous house of the Prozorov declines and disintegrates, with the expectations and aspirations of Olga, Masha, and Irina being continually frustrated and ultimately dashed. Ironically and perhaps comically, the Prozorov are conscious that their own hopes and ideals are being obstructed but they are not conscious that they have lost control over their own property. When they do come to this realization, they acknowledge that their future is destroyed: Andrey abandons his plans to become a professor, Olga accepts permanent exile of life at the local high school, Masha nobly relinquishes her love for Vershinin, and Irina weeps for her slain fiancé. The family has been doubly dispossessed of their material and spiritual wealth.

The collapse of the Prozorov's household also symbolizes the end to the aristocratic world. The various philosophical discussions throughout the play between the sisters and the soldiers about how life will be on earth two hundred years from now, the importance and need of nature for humanity's existence, and the desire to sacrifice and work for the betterment of all are expressions of the values of the aristocratic world in which the sisters occupy. Moscow, and talk of Moscow, becomes the ultimate symbol of this civilized society for the sisters: a place where culture, wit, and good taste are commonplace and people are conversant about philosophy, beauty, and sacrifice.

These values are practiced by the sisters throughout the play. For example, the sisters open their house to the local townspeople who have lost their homes in the city fire. Olga even donates most of her clothes to those who no longer possess any. By contrast, Natasha resents the refugees in the house and takes her frustrations out on Anfisa, the elderly family nurse. Olga attempts to stand up to Natasha but fails. Nevertheless, Olga takes Anfisa with her to live in the school's apartment because Anfisa has been a loyal servant to the family and deserves to be treated as such. The problem for Olga, and the other sisters, is their inability to engage in effective action against Natasha's machinations, not to mention over their own lives. The outcome of their honorable stupidity is that the values of the aristocratic world – beauty, sacrifice, leisure – become replaced by the values of self-interest, vulgarity, and sensual gratification.

These values are representative of the intelligent stupidity of Natasha, who takes over the financial wealth and physical space of the Prozorov house. At the end of the first act, Natasha is embarrassed by her garish dress and awkward manners but is protected by Andrey who finds her sexually irresistible in spite of her lack of social sophistication. At the opening of the next act, Natasha prowls around the house possessively and interrupts Andrey's study with her worries about their baby's need for his own room. In the third act, Natasha openly asserts her authority. With a second child in the nursery and the house crowded with refugees, Natasha berates and eventually dismisses Anfisa. When Olga protests, Natasha has a tantrum that results in Olga deciding to live at the school with Anfisa. By the time of the last act, Natasha reprimands Andrey, who is consoling Masha over Vershinin's departure, for the noise that they are creating because it is disturbing the children. As she surveys her newly conquered realm from a window, Natasha decides to cut down the fir and maple trees in the avenue and criticizes Irina for her poor taste in clothes.

As representative of this new era of change, Natasha rejects the Prozorov's sensibility about life's larger purposes in her pursuit of the immediate concerns of the self, sexuality, and status. The discussion of the impractical ideas has been replaced by a philosophy of pragmatism and calculation. On the one hand, this new attitude towards life is successful, for Natasha does achieve all that she had wanted at the end of the play, but, on the other hand, the values of beauty, sacrifice, and leisure has become lost in this new world and there is a sense of sorrow for this. But how does one account for Natasha's success? And what does this suggest about intelligent and honorable stupidities? Is there any way to counteract intelligent stupidity, or are we doomed to ask, as does Olga at the end of the play, "If we could only know!"

Natasha: The Intelligent Stupid

Most critical accounts of Natasha have been negative that emphasize her vulgarity and selfishness. For example, Styan wrote about Natasha as “symptomatic of those little pressures of destructive self-interest present everywhere, part of the cruel nature of life which fragile people like the sisters are unable to withstand.”¹⁵ However, other reviewers have found Natasha’s vulgarity so familiar that it makes her laughable as opposed to cruel. Moravcevic argued that Natasha’s “raw vitality and assertiveness behind her vulgar manners and selfish schemes are not artificial at all; they are the wellspring of superior strength.”¹⁶ What commentators have failed to provide is an explanation of how Natasha succeeds over the sisters.

A close examination of the play reveals two features that distinguish Natasha from the sisters: her conception of subjectivity and her comprehensive understanding of time. Subjectivity enables Natasha to perceive reality in a Cartesian dichotomy of subject and object, thereby allowing her to manipulate people as means for her own goals. This sense of subjectivity emerges out of Natasha’s intelligent stupidity where she refuses to recognize reality as it genuinely exists. The assumption here is that reality not only contains the values of beauty, leisure, and sacrifice, but one can only recognize the importance of these values if one identifies rather than objectifies them. This in turn requires a participatory mode of existence where reality is to be understood rather than dominated and controlled.¹⁷ In spite of their honorable stupidity, the sisters are able to recognize these civilized values because they see themselves as part of reality, a reality of which they will never be able to understand entirely.

By contrast, Natasha not only wants to know everything about reality, as exhibited by her constant nosiness into other people’s businesses, but she wants to be able to control it to serve her own self-interest. Her inability to recognize the worth of beauty or sacrifice permits her to detach herself from reality and approach it as an object to be manipulated. This Cartesian subjectivity, understanding reality as a dichotomy of subject and object, enables her to be successful at the expense of the sisters’ participatory approach to reality.

An example of these two different approaches to reality is demonstrated in the respective treatment of Anfisa by Natasha and Olga. In the beginning of the third act, Natasha wants Anfisa, who is old, feeble, and therefore no longer useful, to be banished from the household because “she can’t do any work now. ... She’s no good for work, she only sleep or sit about.” Olga’s responses, “She has been with us for thirty years,” and “And let her sit about” is greeted with surprise by Natasha:

What do you mean? She’s only a servant. [*Crying.*] I don’t understand you, Olga.
I’ve got a nurse, a wet-nurse, we’ve a cook, a housemaid ... what do we want that old woman for as well? What good is she?

She continues:

We must come to an agreement, Olga. Your place is the school, mine – the home. You devote yourself to teaching, I, to the household. And if I talk about servants, Then I do know what I talking about; I do know what I am talking about ... And tomorrow there's to be no more of that old thief, that old hag. ... [*Stamping.*] that witch! And don't you dare to annoy me! Don't you dare! [*Stopping short.*] Really, if you don't move downstairs, we shall always be quarrelling. This is awful.

The root cause of the conflict between Olga and Natasha over Anfisa is the latter's inability to see people as ends rather than as means to support her own self-interest. When presented about the value of loyalty by Olga ("she has been with us for thirty years") and the lack of inconvenience caused by Anfisa's presence ("And let her sit about"), Natasha no longer engages in a rational conversation but instead has a temper tantrum. Afterwards, she presents several rationalizations of her feelings – Anfisa is no longer useful, the household is my domain, I have superior knowledge of servants, the fear of future quarrels – in order to get rid of Anfisa. The underlying and true reason is never stated – Anfisa is a reminder that the household was once of the Prozorov's and not of Natasha's – because such a statement would be too naked about Natasha's intentions and insecurities.

Other examples of Natasha's subjective approach to life where reality is an object to be manipulated to serve her self-interests are the moving of Irina into Olga's room to make space for her baby, her love affair, her complaints about her own children when they interfere with her lifestyle, the mortgaging of the house in order to support her expensive tastes, and her decision to cut down the trees on their street. Natasha does not value any of these relationships for themselves: they are only valued if they are useful to her. Although she claims insights that are beyond her, e.g., the comment to Irina about her attire towards the end of the play: "It's an error in taste," and substitutes rationalizations rather than reasons for her emotional desires, Natasha is successful and is the only happy character in the play. The capacity to view life as an object to be bended towards one's will is the first factor that accounts for her success.

The second reason for Natasha's triumph over the sisters is her understanding of time as a comprehensive unit. Unlike Olga, who is preoccupied with the past (whether it is about her father's death or her youth); Masha, who cares only for the present (her passionate affair with Vershinin); or Irina, who looks towards the future (of marriage, work, and Moscow); Natasha is able to connect these slices of time together and thereby strategize throughout the whole play to achieve her objective of controlling the Prozorov household. Thus, this comprehension of time as a single unit complements Natasha's subjective approach to reality. Like people, time itself can be perceived as an object to be manipulated to serve one's ends; and those who are able to connect the past, present, and future together will be able to create a strategy of success. The best examples of Natasha's comprehensive perception of time are how her children physically push the sisters out of the house and how the debt from mortgaging the house supports her lavish lifestyle.

In the second act, Natasha expresses her concern about their son's health to Andrey because the child's room is drafty whereas Irina's room has "sun all day" and would be better suited to their son's health. With Irina working most of the day, Natasha argues, there is no reason why Irina should not share the room with Olga, since the two sisters only use the house as a place to sleep. Uncomfortable with this arrangement but unable to protest, Andrey silently consents. When she has her second child, Sophia, Natasha is able to move Anfisa and Olga from the house. However, she proceeds in a delicate manner because Olga will be Headmistress of the school which her children will attend school one day and therefore "I shall be so afraid of you." But once Olga reveals that she does not want the position, Natasha unleashes her emotions into another temper tantrum when Olga defends Anfisa. The conflict is resolved with both Olga and Anfisa leaving to live in the school's apartment.

While her children physically push out the sisters from the house, Natasha's expensive tastes and extramarital affairs lead her to control its finances when Andrey signs the papers to mortgage the house without the sisters' permission. The income from the mortgage debt in order to pay for one's current expenses is the perfect metaphor of comprehending time as a single unit: Natasha's present income is derived from a future debt that is rooted in the past accumulation of wealth. The wealth of the house that has accumulated in the past can now be mortgaged in the future to support present desires. Only someone who is able to understand the relationship among the past, present, and future would be able to calculate and manipulate people for one's own self-interest.

Unlike the other characters in the play, Natasha is able to rationalize her emotive selfishness by seeing people as objects rather than subjects and by stitching together a strategy based on the elements of time to control the Prozorov house. As intelligently stupid, Natasha is able to present rationalizations, which hides her emotive selfishness, so that what she desires appears to be for the good of the family (specifically for her children). The result is that she is the only the only successful and happy character in the family. However, this success comes at the price of vulgarity triumphing over taste, bourgeoisie self-interest over aristocratic sacrifice, and material wealth over spiritual idealism. The inability of the sisters and Andrey to resist Natasha creates a condition where evil – the absence of any moral direction for individuals and society – can flourish and have damaging consequences.

The Consequences of the Intelligently Stupid

The loss of material wealth is a clear result not only of Natasha's intelligent stupidity but also because of Andrey's. As the play progresses, Andrey relinquishes his dream of becoming a university professor in Moscow but he still remains attached to his wife to the point of mortgaging the house without his sisters' permissions, as Masha points out "but the house doesn't belong to him alone, but to the four of us! He ought to know that, if he's an honorable man." Whether to support one's wife over one's sisters is debatable, but it is how Andrey justifies himself that reveals his stupidity as intelligent:

I'll only say this and go. Just now. ... In the first place, you've got something against Natasha, my wife; I've noticed it since the very day of my marriage. Natasha is a beautiful and honest creature, straight and honorable – that's my opinion. I love and respect my wife; understand it, I respect her, and I insist that others should respect her too. I repeat, she's honest and honorable person, and all your disapproval is simply silly ... [*Pause.*] In the second place, you seem to be annoyed because I am not a professor, and am not engaged in study. But I work for the zemstvo, I am a member of the district council, and I consider my service as worthy and as high as the service of science. I am a member of the district council, and I am proud of it, if you want to know. [*Pause.*] In the third place, I have still this to say ... that I have mortgaged the house without permission. ... For that I am to blame, and ask to be forgiven. My debts led me into doing it ... thirty-five thousand ... I do not play cards any more, I stopped long ago, but the chief thing I have to say in my defense is that you girls receive a pension, and I don't ... my wages, so to speak. ... [*Pause.*]

It is clear that Andrey is ashamed of what he has become in spite of his protests of respecting his wife and being proud of his profession. But rather than admitting this shame and general disappointment in life, Andrey instead attacks his sisters for their prejudices against Natasha and his unfulfilled dream of becoming a professor. More importantly he rationalizes his emotive selfishness of mortgaging the house because the sisters will have a state pension, whereas his family will not. The emotive state of shame, disappointment, and humiliation are the motives of Andrey's actions – whether it is drinking, gambling, or unable to stand up to his wife – which triumphs not only over his reason but become the basis of the rationalizations he presents to others when defending his choices.

If the consequences of Natasha's stupidity are vulgarity and self-interest, and the consequences of Andrey's stupidity are the relinquishments of one's wealth and dreams, then the consequences of Solyony's stupidity are evil: the loss of life itself. Vying for Irina's affections, Solyony is in competition with Tusenbach and eventually loses when Tusenbach and Irina become engaged. He spends most his time in the play spouting out nonsense which offends everyone and self-destructively mocks Tusenbach, the closest person he has as a friend. The only time he seems to make any sense is when he is alone with Irina in the third act and confesses his love for her. Although he is rejected, he promises: "I can't make you love me by force, of course ... but I don't intend to have any more-favored rivals ... No ... I swear to you by all the saints, I shall kill my rival. ... Oh beautiful one!"

Towards the end of the play, Tusenbach and Solyony fight in a duel with Tusenbach being killed. The duel itself started as "a silly little affair" where Solyony's irritations finally paid off with Tusenbach losing his temper and insulting him. To protect his honor, Solyony challenged Tusenbach, which he had to accept. Although there is some concern about Tusenbach's fate – the doctor Chebutykin notes that this is Solyony's third duel – most people think the duel will be

resolved with little injury. Unfortunately, Tusenbach is killed, leaving Irina without a husband and a journey to Moscow.

Solyony's nonsensical and crude comments serve their purpose to provoke Tusenbach into a duel, a practice in which Solyony had plenty of experience. On the surface, Solyony appeared to be a stupid person who was socially awkward and intellectually vacuous, but underneath this appearance he was actually intelligently stupid in that he knew what he was doing. If his objective was to kill any rival for Irina's affections, which he stated in the play and was the only time where he spoke lucidly, then he succeeded by not only provoking Tusenbach into a duel but by presenting the appearance of a harmless fool when in actuality he had experience in dueling. The nonsense he spouted was a way to make people not take him seriously and therefore not to think of him as dangerous. It also was a way to cover his emotive possessiveness over Irina.¹⁸

Natasha, Andrey, and Solyony manifest the worst type of stupidity about which Musil wrote. All three of these characters claim insights beyond their capacities, have their emotions rather than their reason guide their actions, and present rationalizations rather than reasons to justify their actions. Natasha is motivated by self-interest and selfishness with her goal of controlling the Prozorov household; Andrey is motivated by shame, disappointment, and humiliation with his hope to regain some self-respect; and Solyony is motivated by jealousy and possessiveness.

Perhaps most terrifying is that all three characters succeed in their objectives. They are the only successful characters in the play. But this success comes at the price of vulgarity, a disappointment in one's dreams, and the taking of life itself. Intelligent stupidity therefore is dangerous because it can be successful; and by being successful, it sets down the foundation for conditions for evil to flourish. Unfortunately, this threat of the intelligently stupid is not perceived until it is too late: the honorably stupid have failed to recognize and resist them until the intelligently stupid have achieved their success.

The Sisters: The Honorably Stupid

The honorably stupid is characterized by Musil as a poverty of words and ideas, slowness in comprehension of facts, and a stubborn preference for the familiar to the unknown. This last feature particularly describes the three sisters who, in spite of their proclaimed love of Moscow, remain in the provincial town in which they feel comfortable. The sisters also choose the familiar over the unknown in their specific lives: Olga accepts the position of Headmistress, a post she does not want; Masha returns to her husband she does not respect; and Irina agrees to marry Tusenbach, a man she does not truly love. Each of these sisters has selected what was familiar to them rather than the unknown and consequently are unable to adapt to the new circumstances that life presents to them, e.g., Andrey's marriage to Natasha, Vershinin leaving, purchasing a train ticket to Moscow.

Unlike Natasha, each sister is able to comprehend time as a single unit. For the sisters, each slice of time provides a benchmark for their hopes and memories: Olga is preoccupied with the past (Anfisa), Masha with the present (affair with Vershinin), and Irina with the future

(engagement to Tusenbach). Their inability to stitch together these elements of time comprehensively accounts for their slowness in the perception of Natasha's desire to dominate the household. For example, Olga's primary defense of Anfisa's residency in the household is one based on the past ("she has been with us for thirty years") but ultimately is not persuasive to Natasha since Anfisa serves no purpose at present or will in the future. Olga's incapacity to see what Natasha wants leads her and Anfisa to be moved from the house to the school's apartment. She was not able to resist Natasha's selfishness because she was unable to recognize it.

Olga's inability to provide an adequate defense of Anfisa is also emblematic of the first characteristic of honorable stupidity: a poverty of words and ideas. The inability of all the sisters to provide a rational defense, which would require a comprehensive understanding of time, is symptomatic of their honorable stupidity and thereby makes them vulnerable to the intelligent stupid. We also see this with Masha and Irina who become involved with men whom they do not love: the inability of Masha to see that she will not be together with Vershinin in the future and the inability of Irina to understand that she is not presently happy with Tusenbach leads both sisters into relationships which has little value for themselves. Furthermore, the poverty of words and ideas in Masha and Irina make them unable to articulate their true desires so that they can become aware of them. The result is that all the sisters lead a life of wishful thinking but they do not know what they truly want.

Besides lacking a comprehensive account of time, the sisters also lack the subjectivity of Natasha in their approach to life. The sisters view life in a participatory mode where reality is not considered an object to be dominated and manipulated to fulfill one's desires but instead to be contemplated and enjoyed. This philosophical approach to life is best articulated by Tusenbach towards the end of the play, to which the sisters agree:

It is as if for the first time in my life I see these firs, maples, beeches, and they all look at me inquisitively and wait. What beautiful trees and how beautiful, when one comes to think of it, life must be near them!

Also in third act, Tusenbach speaks to Masha about the meaning of life:

Not only after two or three centuries, but in a million years, life will still be as it was; life does not change, it remains forever, following its own laws which do not concern us, or which, at any rate, you never find out. Migrant birds, cranes, for example, fly and fly, and whatever thoughts, high or low, enter their heads, they will still fly and not know why or where. They fly and will continue to fly, whatever philosophers come to life among them; they may philosophize as much as they like, only they will fly ...

This approach is one where humans participate rather than objectively observe life (the subjective approach) and thereby can appreciate what reality reveals to us while recognizing that it will continue to exist without us. This philosophy contrasts with Natasha's subjective approach

which is reality is to be controlled for our own desires. Thus the paradox is that the participatory mode is unable to defend itself against subjective encroachment. For all their discussion about beauty, sacrifice, and leisure, the sisters are unable to defend themselves when someone approaches reality in a subject-object dichotomy. The only alternatives for the sisters is to become what they abhor (subjectivity) or remain true to their principles but become dispossessed.

Three Sisters therefore is an example of how the honorably stupid allow the intelligently stupid to seize power and destroy the values that society cherishes. Although they may be less culpable than the intelligently stupid for the destruction of their society, they are nonetheless culpable. The sisters' inability to defend themselves enables Natasha to control the house. Even when they knew about Andrey's mortgaging the house, the sisters did nothing. The pleasures of the participatory approach to life overwhelm any primal desire to defend themselves. The consequence is that the household is no longer theirs.

Other characters are also responsible for the destruction of their society: Vershinin's unwillingness to leave his suicidal wife causes damage to Masha; Tusenbach's willingness to duel Solyony leads to his death; and Chebutykin's forgetfulness leads to the death of a patient. All these characters, with whom we sympathize, still contribute and therefore are responsible for evil to flourish in their societies. In some sense, as leaders of their society, these people are more responsible than the intelligently stupid because their responsibility is greater. Rather than being Lenin's "useful idiots," these leaders should be able to recognize and resist the evil that threatens them and their world. To answer Olga's question at the end of the play, if leaders only would have known this, then evil may not have occurred.

The Potential Remedy: Pathos and Work

Interestingly, Chekhov does provide a path for leaders to emerge from their condition of honorable stupidity: work, and more specifically, work in the service of others. The theme of work is constant one throughout the play, with Irina praising the virtues of work in the beginning of the play:

When I woke up today and got up and dressed myself, I suddenly began to feel as if everything in this life was open to me, and that I knew how I must live. Dear Ivan Romanovitch, I know everything. A man must work, toil in the sweat of his brow, whoever he may be, for that is the meaning and object of his life, his happiness, his enthusiasm. How fine it is to be a workman who gets up at daybreak and breaks stones in the street, or a shepherd, or a schoolmaster, who teaches children, or an engine-driver on the railway. ...

And in her last lines of the play, Irina reiterates the importance of work:

There will come a time when everybody will know why, for what purpose, there is all this suffering, and there will be no more mysteries. But now we must live ... we must work, just work! Tomorrow, I'll go away alone, and I'll teach and give my whole life to those who, perhaps, need it. It's autumn now, soon it will be winter, the snow will cover everything, and I shall be working, working. ...

The importance of work is twofold for the aristocrats: it provides them not only a source of new income but it also provides them a sense of purpose to live. However, work for simply oneself is not what Irina advocates; instead, work in the service of others provides a possibility to resist evil. If one were to work simply out of self-interest, the result would be Natasha's. What Irina proposes is work for the betterment of society. It is an attempt to translate the participatory mode of reality from leisure to work, thereby preserving oneself and one's society from a subjective approach to life that allows evil to flourish.

But to work in the service of other requires pathos: the capacity to identify with another person's suffering that enables the recognition that all humans are fundamentally equal. Although people may differ widely in the manner in which they come to grip with it and build the experience into their lives, every person suffers. Olga's identification with Anfisa, Masha's empathy of Vershinin's familial situation, and Irina's with the needy after news of her slain fiancé are all examples of pathos.

By contrast, the intelligently stupid, such as Natasha or Solyony, exhibit no capacity to experience pathos and remain isolated from the community. It is the shared suffering that makes community possible. For late nineteenth-century aristocratic Russian society, this community needs to be re-founded on notion of work in the service of others as a remedy against the emerging class of vulgarity and self-interest.¹⁹

Although pathos is a possible path to remedy the honorable stupidity and to reform society, it does have its limitation in that it is difficult to provide a rational defense of it. Because the experience of pathos itself cannot be articulated perfectly, such a defense can be misconstrued or dismissed. This also may account why the sisters are unable to defend themselves against Natasha. Whereas self-interest can be articulated and even rationalized, the experience of pathos cannot be without sounding trite. In other words, the experience of pathos requires another person to be open to it. If the person is unable or unwilling, then the hope of building a community based on work in the service of others is in danger.

Nonetheless, these two remedies – pathos and work – can be part of the new age that the characters predict, as Vershinin proclaims at Irina's name-day celebration: "In two or three hundred years' time on this earth will be unimaginably beautiful and wonderful. Mankind needs such a life, and if it not ours today then we must look ahead for it, wait, think, prepare for it." He repeats similar sentiments in the second act: "How can I put it? It seems to me that everything on earth must change, little by little, and is already changing under our very eyes. After two or three hundred years, after a thousand – the actual time doesn't matter – a new and happy age will

being.” After he reiterates the same point in the third act, he concludes at the end of the play “If only education could be added to industry, and industry to education.”

This future is also predicted by Tusenbach, who also proclaims on Irina’s name-day celebration: “A new age is dawning, the people marching on us all, a powerful, health-giving storm is gathering, it is drawing near, soon it will be upon us and it will drive away laziness, indifference, prejudice against labor, and rotten dullness from our society.” The hope for a future age is one when labor is not scorned but embraced by the aristocracy and combined with intelligence (“education”) for the betterment of society. The dual remedy of work and pathos is required to realize this vision of curing the honorable stupid of their poverty of words and ideas, slow comprehension of facts, and preference for the familiar. Chekhov points out this path as a way for society to renew itself both morally and spiritually.

Conclusion

Although Chekhov does propose another possibility to reform the individual and society from their stupidities, it is not realized in the play. This does not mean this possibility remains only a theoretical one, for it exists as an ideal for other to emulate. In this sense, Chekhov does have a double vision of the present despair of stupidity and the hope of a future of moral and spiritual renewal. However, I would argue that both of these possibilities are underscored with a deeper insight into the nature of reality: the continuity of life regardless of one’s attempts to eradicate or embrace stupidity. This perspective is best represented by the physician Chebutykin.

Throughout the play, Chebutykin retains a balanced view of the world and comments of the insignificance of human impact upon the world. In response to Vershinin’s speech about his utopian vision in the first act, Chebutykin simply replies: “You said just now, Baron, that they may call our life noble; but we are very petty. . . . [*Stands up.*] See how little I am.” However, later when Masha complains how life has become unbearable, Chebutykin responds: “It’s not so bad.” Neither succumbing to the idealism of Vershinin nor resigning to the pessimism of Masha, Chebutykin views life as something in the middle between these two extremes. What accounts for this balanced perspective is that the physician is the only character in the play that actually works and exhibits pathos: he is a person of action that is able to recognize and resist evil, such as the disease that has been plaguing the countryside.

Of course, Chebutykin himself is not perfect, as he himself attests when in the third act he berates himself for the death of one of his patients. In the fourth act, he becomes tired and worn-out from his job and looks forward to retirement in a year’s time. In spite of his broken spirit, life continues on regardless of a person’s individual drama. This is acknowledged in the last lines he speaks in the play: “It’s all the same! It’s all the same!” The death of Tusenbach, the loss of the house, and the shattered dreams of Moscow in a larger sense makes little difference upon the flow of events. The juxtaposition of the tragedy befalling the sisters with the lively band music in the background underscores this point that our human lives may have less of an impact upon the world than we had originally thought.

Chekhov's acknowledgement that life flows on uninterrupted precludes him from being a utopian ideologue of the sort like Vershinin and Tusenbach and from being a cynic who operates out of self-interest like Natasha and Solyony. The fact that Natasha is victorious certainly prevents Chekhov from being categorized as a political ideologue; and the audience's dislike of her victory does not make Chekhov a cynic. The possibility of pathos and work is most fully realized in Chebutykin despite his missteps. When compared to Vershinin, Tusenbach, and the sisters, Chebutykin is not honorably stupid but one who serves other in work and pathos. The others may recognize the path out of their condition, but he is the only one that has undertaken it.

The problem of stupidity therefore is one that is not insurmountable but perhaps it is continual. We will always have stupidity, whether honorable or intelligible, and must be able to confront it in an effective manner; otherwise, the Natashas and Solyonys will rule the world. Chekhov's remedy of pathos and work is one to consider in spite of its limitations. Whether we will wind up in Moscow or remains in our provincial town remain to be seen.

Endnotes

1. For a comprehensive account of the critical reception of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, refer to Charles W. Meister, *Chekhov Criticism* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1988) and Trevor Nunn, "Notes from a director: *Three Sisters*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, eds. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 101–10.
2. Meister, 247.
3. In Kenneth A. Lantz, *Anton Chekhov: A Reference Guide to Literature* (Boston: Hall, 1945), 20. Cf. Kornei Chukovsky, *Chekhov the Man*, trans. Pauline Rose (London: Hutchinson, 1985).
4. Meister, 247–48.
5. Meister, 248–64.
6. Howard Taubman, "Chekhov's Truth; Revival Catches Spirit of *Three Sisters*," *New York Times*, July 5, 1964, 2:1.
7. Mel Gussow, "Stage View; Echoes of Chekhov Haunt Frayn's *Benefactors*," *New York Times*, January 5, 1986, 2:3.
8. Meister, 260–64.
9. In *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, eds. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 268–86.
10. Musil, 282.
11. Musil, 283–84.
12. Musil, 285.
13. In his novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, Musil analyzes how stupidity becomes manifested in pre-World War I Viennese society. For example, the protagonist Ulrich is a "man without qualities": he lacks any profound essence, is socially disconnected, and possesses an ambiguous attitude towards life that makes him resigned and passive in the world.
14. All citations from the play are from A. N. Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, in *The Complete Works of Chekhov*, vol. 7 (Moscow: Moscow Library Classics, 1970), 246–312. Translations are mine own.

15. Meister, 261; cf. J. L. Styan, *Chekhov in Performance: A Commentary on the Major Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).
16. Meister, 262.
17. For more about the differences between the subjective and participatory mode of existence, refer to Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis, On the Theory of History and Politics*, vol. 6, ed. David Walsh (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002).
18. This account runs contrary to the criticism that Solyony is a fool or an absurd hero, such as argued by Charles T. Rzepka, "Chekhov's 'The Three Sisters,' Lear's Daughters, and the World of the Weird Sisters: The Arcana of Archetypal Influence," *Modern Language Studies* 14.4 (1984): 18–27.
19. The audience's identification with the honorably stupid characters also creates a sense of pathos between them. By experiencing pathos themselves, the audience can reform their own lives and society.