

**WHEN SCIENCE FAILS TO INSPIRE AND DEADENED LOVE IS REPLACED BY THE SILENT
CARE OF NATURE...**
A STUDY OF DR. ASTROV'S CHARACTER IN ANTON CHEKHOV'S UNCLE VANYA



Portrait of Anton Chekhov by Osip Emmanuilovich Braz (1898).

The character of Dr. Dorn in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1860–1904) occupied us in one of the first exercises of our course's Question Bank (<https://tinyurl.com/4x8nbuzt>). It is time now to get to know another of Chekhov's heroes, Dr. Astrov from *Uncle Vanya*.

Let us first enter the atmosphere of the Russian countryside of the previous century through three paintings.



In Isaac Levitan's *Vladimirka* (1892), the clouds are rendered with rather delicate detail; however, the sky as a whole is understated in comparison with the dark-colored and strongly contrasting earth. Notice how Levitan created depth in the sky by selecting a few clouds for detailed treatment, essentially bringing them forward in perspective.



In Isaac Levitan's painting *A Stormy Day* (1897), the clouds dominate the sky to such an extent that it is impossible to distinguish specific forms. Depth is suggested by overlapping shapes rather than by rendering three-dimensional forms. Thus, the image becomes more effective through the simplification of all this detail.



Ivan Shishkin's painting *Noon in the Outskirts of Moscow – Bratsevo* is an excellent demonstration of relativity. The clouds are painted with intricate detail, strong highlights, and clear edges; nevertheless, I would not say that they are the focal point of the painting. The earth, despite occupying less space in the painting, has a similar level of detail, along with dark colors and much greater contrast.

Uncle Vanya

A classic masterpiece by Anton Chekhov, a deeply poetic, tender, and human work in which life walks a tightrope between drama and comedy of situations, *Uncle Vanya* (1896–97), written at roughly the same time as *The Seagull*, is perhaps the most “Chekhovian” of the works of the great Russian poet of the subtlest shades. It explosively condenses the existential impasse of the phenomenon called “humanity,” within space and time.

Its heroes, small and “gray” but nevertheless genuine and recognizable in their detail and complexity, desperately search for the meaning of life, flirt with their limits, engage in a tragicomic pursuit of happiness, and seek the hope that will defeat everyday deterioration—a substitute for their lost, squandered lives. Love seems like an ideal painkiller for happiness. Yet this too remains unfulfilled.

The characters of Uncle Vanya want to escape but cannot break free from the mire. Through their desperate actions, eloquent silences, and intense inner conflicts, Chekhov's people waver and balance between happiness and unhappiness, the tragic and the ridiculous, hope and despair, light and darkness—ideal and unworthy “protagonists” in the timeless circus of the human existential adventure.

The play takes place in the Russian countryside and is considered a tragicomedy of unfulfilled loves in which the protagonist is not only Uncle Vanya but all the unhappy characters. The main characters in Uncle Vanya are Ivan Voynitsky (Uncle Vanya), his brother-in-law, Professor Serebryakov, his second wife Elena, his daughter from his first marriage and Vanya's niece Sonya, and Dr. Astrov.

In this work:

No one sleeps as much as they would like.

No one loves as much as they need to.

No one seizes any opportunity.

No one is loved as much as they need.

Everyone wants to feel more.

Everyone is ready for a quarrel.

Everyone repeats themselves.

Some drink more than they should.

Some have work as medicine.

Some live their lives as a drama.

In the end, nothing changes.

“This burden...

I am not well... Nothing...”

It is probably impossible to find so many complaints gathered together in a single theatrical work. And yet Uncle Vanya is a fascinating play.

How does poetry emerge from complaints?

All the characters in the play carry a burden.

Nietzsche says that we cannot suffer without making someone pay for it.

What do the heroes of Uncle Vanya do with all this pain? And what kind of heroes are they?

No woman is a “heroine,” meaning as feminine or maternal as she ought to be.

And no man is sufficiently “masculine” to become a hero. Vanya in particular fails spectacularly as a male protagonist. Even in the title of the play he exists only partially: as an “uncle.”

Through the character of the professor-writer Serebryakov, Chekhov writes: “You say that you cried over my plays. But I did not write them for that. I wanted to tell people honestly: Look at yourselves, look at how badly and boringly you all live!”

The story

Ivan Voynitsky, known as Uncle Vanya, the brother of the deceased first wife of the now elderly Professor Serebryakov, a professor of art history, is responsible for the widowed professor's estate and looks after it together with Sonya, also an heir to the estate. Sonya is the professor's daughter from his first marriage to Vanya's sister, and therefore Vanya's niece.

The two of them work hard and live poor and deprived lives in order to send all their savings to Sonya's father, whom they regard as an exceptionally accomplished man with tremendous intellectual abilities.

Recently, Vanya's brother-in-law, the professor, has moved into the estate with his young and attractive second wife, Elena, causing a multitude of problems as the existing balances change dramatically. Their presence disrupts the lives of the people on the estate, disturbs the established equilibrium, and brings lost dreams and unfulfilled desires to the surface.

The deterioration of everyday life, boredom, mistakes, excuses, an underlying eroticism, and an almost surreal approach to reality characterize the lives of the heroes, who watch the world around them change inevitably.

Vanya finally realizes that his dead sister's husband is a boring, selfish, ungrateful, and vain old man—and nothing more. An empty narcissist who cares about nothing but himself. The estate, his daughter, his brother-in-law, the efforts, sacrifices, and deprivations of others mean nothing to him.

Bitterness overwhelms Vanya, and he sadly bids farewell to all those years that were wasted on an illusion, on a mistaken estimation.

Vanya, disillusioned by the ungrateful behavior of the professor, whom until recently he valued and admired, claims the right to live the life from which he had voluntarily renounced himself in order to care for the estate, and becomes a grumbling and aggressive man. He plays a role that is outside his character, whose inadequacy complements the sterility of a dying aristocracy.

The new wife of the boring and greedy professor, the dazzling Elena, is dying of boredom in the Russian countryside, but at the same time she sets fires in the faded souls of the men.

Vanya is desperately in love with Elena. Dr. Astrov appears to be in love with her as well, and this is why he frequently visits the estate.

A permanent companion to the residents of the estate, Dr. Astrov, when he is not caring for his patients, prefers to spend his time in the forest planting trees.

Sonya suffers silently from her love for Dr. Astrov.

Elena, beautiful and indifferent, pulls the strings without, at least initially, taking an interest in the feelings of her would-be lovers.

The characters begin to emerge clearly, though slowly, as they reveal themselves to be sluggish, languid, slow-moving, and tired from the stagnation of the Russian countryside.

When the professor gathers the entire family together to announce his plan to sell the estate, without having previously made any provision for the people who live there, nothing will ever be the same again.

"Order" will later be restored when, at the end of the play, Serebryakov and Elena leave for new adventures, leaving Vanya and Sonya condemned to continue their deprived lives on the estate.



A modern production

After its successful premiere in London in 2020, the remarkable new production and adaptation of Anton Chekhov's masterpiece by Conor McPherson, directed by Ian Rickson, was abruptly interrupted as the world went into lockdown and many theaters around the world remained in darkness.

The company of Uncle Vanya overcame the significant challenges of working under conditions of a global pandemic, returning to the Harold Pinter Theatre in order to film the "perfect," five-star production according to The Guardian.

In my view, this is a completely contemporary, exemplary, functional, and atmospheric reading of Uncle Vanya, without incongruous, undermining modernizing devices.

By combining the intimacy of the screen with the electricity of live performance in an exciting new hybrid of cinema and theater, this co-production of Sonia Friedman Productions/Angelica Films is much more than a simple recording of the play.

It is filled with turbulent disappointment and hidden passions, but at the same time with hope and optimism for the future.

We will watch excerpts from this production focusing on Dr. Astrov, brilliantly portrayed by Richard Armitage, placing them within the plot of the play.



Efim Volkov: "October."

ACT ONE

A garden at Professor Serebryakov's country estate. Astrov and the nurse Marina discuss how much Astrov has aged and his boredom with his life as a country doctor.

[1. Opening scene. Astrov speaks with the nurse.mp4](#)

Vanya enters and complains about the disruption caused by the visit of his brother-in-law, Professor Serebryakov, and his new wife Elena.

As they talk, Serebryakov, Elena, her stepdaughter Sonya, and the impoverished landowner and family friend Telegin return from a walk.

Within earshot of the professor, Vanya calls him "an educated old dried-up mackerel," criticizes his grandiloquence, and belittles his achievements.

Vanya's mother, Maria Vasilyevna, who adores Serebryakov, objects to her son's comments.

Vanya also praises Elena's youth and beauty, arguing that her devotion to an old man like Serebryakov is an immoral waste of vitality.

Astrov is forced to leave to attend to a patient, but not before delivering a speech about the preservation of forests, a subject about which he is extremely passionate.

[2. Ecology gives meaning and passion to Astrov's life.mp4](#)

Vanya declares his love to the enraged Elena.

ACT TWO

The dining room, several days later, late at night.

Before going to bed, Serebryakov complains about pain and old age. Astrov arrives, having been summoned by Sonya, but the professor refuses to see him.

After Serebryakov falls asleep, Elena and Vanya talk. She speaks about the discord in the household, while Vanya speaks about the disappointed hopes of his life.

He feels that he has lost his youth and connects his unfulfilled love for Elena with the disappointment of his life. Elena refuses to listen to him.

Alone, Vanya wonders why he did not fall in love with Elena when he first met her ten years earlier, when it would have been possible for the two of them to marry and live a happy life together.

At that time, Vanya believed in the greatness of his sister's husband, Serebryakov, and was happy that his efforts supported Serebryakov's work. Since then, he has become disillusioned with the professor, and his life seems empty.

As Vanya agonizes over his past, Astrov returns, somewhat drunk, and the two men talk.

Sonya reprimands her uncle Vanya for drinking and responds realistically to his concerns about the futility of a wasted life, pointing out that only work is truly satisfying.

Outside, a storm is approaching, and Astrov talks with Sonya about the suffocating atmosphere of the house. He says that Serebryakov is difficult, Vanya is a hypochondriac, and Elena is charming but lazy.

He regrets how long it has been since he loved anyone.

Sonya begs Astrov to stop drinking, telling him that it is unworthy of him to destroy himself.

They talk about love, and it becomes clear that Sonya is in love with him and that he is unaware of her feelings.

3. The scene of Sonya in love and the indifferent Astrov.mp4

When Astrov leaves, Elena enters and reconciles with Sonya, following what appears to have been a long period of mutual rivalry.

Trying to resolve their difficulties, Elena reassures Sonya that she had strong feelings for her father when she married him, although that love proved illusory.

The two women talk at cross-purposes. Elena confesses her unhappiness, while Sonya becomes ecstatic at the thought of Astrov.

4. Elena speaks to her stepdaughter Sonya about Astrov.mp4

In a cheerful mood, Sonya leaves to ask the professor whether Elena may play the piano. Sonya returns with his negative answer, which quickly destroys the mood.



Isaac Levitan: "Autumn. Sokolniki." (1879)

ACT THREE

Vanya, Sonya, and Elena are in the drawing room, having been summoned there by Serebryakov.

Vanya calls Elena a water nymph and urges her, once again, to set herself free.

Sonya complains to Elena that she has loved Astrov for six years, but because she is not beautiful, he does not notice her.

Elena offers to question Astrov and find out whether he is in love with Sonya.

Sonya is delighted, but before agreeing she wonders whether uncertainty is better than knowledge, because then, at least, there is hope.

When Elena asks Astrov about his feelings for Sonya, he first speaks about his ecological interests, without managing to arouse Elena's interest, and then says that he has no romantic feelings for her stepdaughter.

He concludes that Elena brought up the subject of love in order to encourage him to confess his own feelings for her.

Astrov kisses Elena, and Vanya witnesses the embrace.

[5. Astrov's declaration of love to Elena.mp4](#)

Upset, Elena begs Vanya to use his influence to allow her and the professor to leave immediately.

Before Serebryakov can make his announcement, Elena tells Sonya that Astrov does not love her.

Serebryakov proposes resolving the family's financial problems by selling the estate and investing the proceeds in a bond that will yield a significantly higher income — and, as he hopes, leave enough money to purchase a villa for himself and Elena in Finland.

Furious, Vanya asks where he, Sonya, and his mother are supposed to live. He protests that the estate rightfully belongs to Sonya and that Serebryakov never appreciated his self-sacrifice in managing the property.

As Vanya's anger grows, he begins to rage against the professor, blaming him for the failure of his life and wildly claiming that, without Serebryakov holding him back, he could have become another Schopenhauer or Dostoevsky.

In despair, he shouts at his mother, but instead of comforting her son, she insists that Vanya listen to the professor.

Serebryakov insults Vanya, who storms out of the room.

Elena begs to be taken away from there, while Sonya pleads with her father on Vanya's behalf.

Serebryakov goes out to confront Vanya further.

A gunshot is heard from offstage, and Serebryakov returns, pursued by Vanya, who threatens his brother-in-law with a loaded pistol.

He fires the pistol at the professor again but misses.

He throws the weapon down in disgust and sinks into a chair.



Sergei Vasilkovsky: "A Quiet Afternoon in Poltava."

ACT FOUR

At the beginning of the final act, several hours later, the nurse Marina and Telegin are spinning wool and discussing the planned departure of Serebryakov and Elena.

When Vanya and Astrov enter, Astrov says that in this region only he and Vanya were "decent, cultivated people," and that ten years of "narrow-minded life" have made them vulgar.

Vanya has stolen a vial of Astrov's morphine, apparently intending to commit suicide. Sonya and Astrov beg him to return the opioid, which he eventually does.

[6. Astrov's reflection on his life.mp4](#)

Elena and Serebryakov say goodbye to everyone.

When Elena says goodbye to Astrov, she admits that she was carried away by him, embraces him, and takes one of his pencils as a keepsake.

From Károlos Koun's first staging of *Uncle Vanya* at the National Theatre in 1953. Rita Myrat as Elena and Thanos Kotsopoulos as Astrov.

[7. The Astrov–Elena farewell.mp4](#)

Serebryakov and Vanya reconcile, agreeing that everything will return to the way it was.

As soon as the outsiders leave, Sonya and Vanya put the accounts in order, Vanya's mother Maria reads a pamphlet, and the nurse Marina knits.

Vanya complains about his heavy heart, and Sonya responds by speaking about life, work, and the rewards of the afterlife:

"We shall hear the angels, we shall see the whole sky covered with diamonds, we shall see how all the evil of the earth, all our sufferings, are drowned in the mercy that will fill the whole world. And our lives will become peaceful, tender, sweet as a caress.

You had no joy in life—but wait,
Uncle Vanya, wait.
We shall rest.”

[8. Conclusion of the production.mp4](#)



Isaac Levitan: "Evening after Rain."

DR. ASTROV

Mikhail Lvovich Astrov, a doctor who initially worked in the city, now feels lost because of his life in the countryside as a country doctor and the harsh conditions under which he practices his profession.

Deeply philosophical, he frequently turns to introspection and sinks into his thoughts, disappointed by the prospect that he will be forgotten as time passes.

Astrov frequently visits Professor Serebryakov's country house. Astrov's recent visits have concerned the professor himself, who wonders whether he is suffering from rheumatism or gout.

One motivation for Astrov's visits is clearly Elena, the elderly professor's charming wife.

Astrov is attracted to Elena and often talks with her, although he usually remains emotionally distant because he no longer believes that he is capable of true love.

He is a man who exerts a fascination on both Sonya and Elena, but he seems incapable of loving and forming attachments.

Sonya, who is rejected by him although she has loved him for years, believes that she is ugly, although that may not be the case. It may simply be that he is incapable of responding romantically to a woman.

Even when he appears to respond to Elena's attraction to him, he does so in a rather playful manner, as though he were merely examining the possibility of an affair. In reality, we do not know to what extent he genuinely desires it.

As far as the plot of the play is concerned, Astrov's missed opportunity for something resembling love is his unsuccessful courtship of Elena.

Although their relationship might offer an escape from their respective unhappiness, it does not bear fruit and ends with a nostalgic farewell.

Thus, the two of them seem to experience a loss of which they cannot even be certain they have suffered—a possible loss—and look toward their future regret.

Moreover, we should clarify that this courtship does not show Astrov to be certainly in love: he seems simply fascinated by Elena's beauty.

It is no coincidence that Chekhov called Astrov the hero who "can kiss a woman and then start whistling indifferently."

Thus, unlike Vanya, who sees everything in highly dramatic terms, Astrov sometimes takes things rather comically and ultimately does not seem to regard love as a path he wishes to pursue in life.

On the threshold of middle age, he is affected by an increasing sense of emptiness and haunted by guilt over a patient who died under his care.

He declares that he loves life, but cannot endure the enclosed, suffocating provincial life.

Yet despite his depressed mood, Astrov stands apart from the other unhappy principal characters.

This is because, unlike the others, Astrov has a worthwhile occupation in which, beyond his profession, he continues to actively believe: environmental protection.

And although he is continually described as "eccentric" and "strange," he is at the same time a visionary who fights for the preservation of the forests in the countryside where he lives.

Astrov finds purpose in planting trees and in caring about future generations, something that distinguishes him from the other characters in the play, who remain immersed in their own misery.

Although Astrov wishes he could receive more recognition and praise for his efforts to preserve nature, fame is not the purpose of his work.

Instead, he focuses on the people who will live long after he is gone.

Astrov remains a flawed character struggling to find the meaning of life, but he is a ray of

hope in a play filled with despair.

By looking beyond his own problems and caring about the well-being of future generations, Astrov demonstrates the only possible escape from the misery that confines the other characters.

Conclusion

In summary, Mikhail Lvovich Astrov is the philosopher of Uncle Vanya, distinguished by his characteristically extensive, reflective, and introspective speeches, which seem to proceed with little reference to those around him.

Exhausted and worn down by provincial life, Astrov feels numb in the world, unable to want to love and therefore unable to love, and disappointed by the thought that he will be forgotten as time passes.

As Astrov's emotions are in some way "anesthetized" by his empty and disappointing life and his hard work, perhaps the viewer finds Astrov's double in the dead patient whom he mentions several times—a man who died while under the influence of chloroform.

Dr. Astrov lives the difficult life of a country doctor of his time, struggling with numerous challenges and without adequate resources. On the other hand, he is a charismatic man with many ecological concerns that make him a character with distinctly modern concerns. Astrov also serves as the visionary of the play.

In his plans for the preservation of the forests, he dreams of a legacy that he can leave to future generations, celebrates the beauty of nature, and highlights humanity's ability to create beyond its impulse to destroy.

On the other hand, one wonders whether these visions are anything more than drunken hallucinations: as Astrov notes in Act Two, only when he is drunk does he feel "monumental" rather than "eccentric."

The convergence of all these characteristics indeed makes Astrov a strange figure—not only within the limited way of life of the provincials but also to himself.

Throughout the play, Astrov will appear in relation to the motif of self-alienation, with the sense of alienation from himself and from those around him providing the occasion for his self-conscious reflections.

Essentially, Astrov is a multifaceted character who embodies the themes of the play: disappointment, the passage of time, the search for meaning, and the struggle to find purpose in a world that often seems unbearable and meaningless.

"Θεός Βάνιας"
ΘΕΑΤΡΟ ΤΕΧΝΗΣ 1960

ΥΠΟΓΕΙΟ- Πρόβα



ΒΑΝΙΑΣ: Κάρολος Κουν- ΑΣΤΡΩΦ: Δημήτρης Παπαμιχαήλ
Από αριστερά προς τα δεξιά: Γιάννης Κάσδαγλης, Μίμης Κουγιουμτζής,
Θύμιος Καρακατσάνης, Γιώργος Λαζάνης, Γιώργος Διαλεγμένος
και κάτω ο Ιάκωβος Ψαρράς.



From the production directed by Dimitris Karantzias in 2022.