

The Prozorovs' dream is to move to Moscow, which has come to represent all that is sparkling, refined, and engaging in life. Even the weather there is better:

OLGA: Today we can keep the windows wide open, but there are no leaves on the birch trees yet. In Moscow, by this time, everything is in bloom. I remember everything there, even if it has been eleven years.

The play opens on Irina's 19th birthday, which comes exactly a year after the death of Colonel Prozorov, the family patriarch. The lives of all the family have been altered, and not for the better, with feelings of restlessness and sadness dominating:

MASHA: When father was alive, there were as many as 40 officers at our birthday parties. It was loud and joyous, but now, here's only a man and a half.

All the sisters are smarter than their beloved brother, Andrey, who unfortunately, due to the tradition of the times, controls the family budget. Over the course of the play, he succumbs to the questionable charms of a vixen (Natasha) who at first seems merely ignorant and vulgar:

MASHA: Oh, how she dresses! Not just unattractive or ugly, but—pathetic. Colors you've never seen together before. And things like—fringe. And her cheeks! Andrey isn't in love—I can't believe it! I just can't. Andrey has taste.

But he is in love. He marries Natasha, and she gradually turns into something of a tyrant, taking over the house, carrying on a flagrant affair with another man, throwing the beloved old servants out into the cold, and, upon the birth of her child, constantly claiming he is a prodigy:

NATASHA: Bobik understands everything! I say "Good morning dear!" And he gives me a special look. You think I'm only a mother talking, but no! No! He's an unusual child.

SOLYONY: If this child were mine, I would have fried him in a skillet and eaten him.

All the other characters are living lives of quiet sadness and desperation. Andrey mortgages the house to pay gambling debts, limiting the possibility that anyone will ever escape this town. Olga works her way up to headmistress at her school, but she finds little genuine satisfaction in her work. Masha plunges into a briefly joyous but dead-end affair with Vershinin. Irina accepts a proposal of marriage from the Baron Tuzenbach and briefly glimpses a life of contentment (though not love)

until he is killed in a duel by a rival. All long for something better, often beginning to believe it will not happen in their lifetime, sentiments effectively capsulated by Vershinin:

VERSHININ: Oh, I think a better life just has to come. We won't share in that life of course, but we are living for it now, starting to create it, I think it's going to grow out of our suffering. I have to believe that.

Perhaps the most brutal blow to whatever has been diverting and pleasing in the sisters' lives is the removal of the military base and an end to that kind of companionship:

MASHA: The military are in this town, at any rate, the people who are most decent, educated, and honorable. . . . But most of the people in this town are crude and unfriendly.

The play ends as it begins, with only the three sisters alone together, embracing each other and trying to face the future:

OLGA: Oh dear sisters, our life isn't over yet. We'll live! The music plays so joyously, and perhaps tomorrow—or the day after—we'll know why we live and why we suffer. If we only knew, if we only knew!

Here is a combined scene from *The Three Sisters*, as translated and adapted for the stage by Robert Barton in *Life Themes: An Anthology of Plays for the Theatre*:

In Act Three, the sisters' lives are becoming ever more restricted as Andrey's wife, Natasha, takes over the house. Outside, the whole town is on fire and the sisters wait helplessly for news. Masha's bumbling husband, Kulygin, has joined them.

MASHA: [*lying down*] Are you asleep, Fyodor?

KULYGIN: Huh?

MASHA: You ought to go home.

KULYGIN: Dear Masha, sweet Masha.

IRINA: She's tired. Let her rest, Fedya.

KULYGIN: I'm going, I'm going. My magnificent wife. I love you, my one and only.

MASHA: [*angrily*] *Amo, amas, amar, amamus, amaris, amant.*

KULYGIN: [*laughing*] No, really, what an amazing woman. Seven years we've been married, but it seems like only yesterday. An amazing woman. I am content, content, content.

MASHA: I'm bored, bored, bored. [*She sits up.*] There's something I can't get out of my head. I can't stay silent. I mean about Andrey. He's mortgaged this house to the bank and his wife has grabbed all the