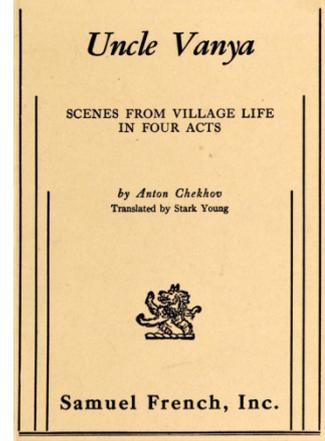


Early Reflection of Environmental Ethics in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1897)

Çehov'un *Vanya Dayı* (1897) Adlı Eserinde Çevre Etiğinin Erken Dönem Yansıması

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Anton Chekhov
Uncle Vanya
1984, 61 pages
Samuel French, Inc.

A prominent playwright and short story writer Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) is regarded as an outstanding representative of the late 19th-century Russian realist school (1). He was also a practiced medical doctor who wrote numerous pieces with medical themes and physicians as characters, including *Ward No. 6* (1892), *The Seagull* (1895), and *Uncle Vanya* (1897) (2). A drama of four acts, the last one is particularly remarkable due to its visionary narrative in terms of environmental ethics (3).

Based on the author's extensive revision of his earlier play, entitled *The Wood Demon* (1889), *Uncle Vanya* is a study of aimlessness and hopelessness. Receiving its premiere in Moscow in 1898, the play depicts the visit of a retired Professor of Fine Arts, Alexander Vladimirovitch Serebriakoff, and his much younger second wife, Elena Andreevna, to the rural estate that supports their urban lifestyle. Ivan (Vanya) Petrovitch Voinitsky, brother-in-law of Serebriakoff from his late first wife, who has long managed the estate with Serebriakoff's daughter, Sonia, also plays a central role in the plot (4).

A truly authentic character in *Uncle Vanya* is obviously Michail Lvovich Astroff, a handsome, middle-aged rural doctor. Unsatisfied with himself and finding his life dull and without meaning, Astroff is haunted by the memory of a patient who died in his arms on the operating table under chloroform, for which he finds himself responsible. With a view of society as lazy, consumerist, and destructive; he has become a despairing,

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resentful misanthrope. Yet, he is a devoted and conscientious doctor who works ceaselessly under the difficult conditions including a typhoid epidemic (4).

What makes Dr. Astroff an outstanding literary character is his respect and interest in biodiversity as well as his feeling of responsibility for future generations. As a vegetarian, he devotes his life to cultivating trees; his efforts have even earned him a bronze medal and a certificate of appreciation from the local authorities. He believes that “forests adorn the earth, that they teach a man to understand the beautiful and inspire him to lofty moods (Act I, p. 14).” He clearly expresses his views on the dangers that nature faces with the following words (4):

Russian woods are groaning under the ax, millions of trees perish, dwellings of beasts and birds are emptied, rivers go shallow and dry, wonderful landscapes vanish, never to be brought back again, and all because lazy man hasn't sense enough to bend down and pick up fuel from the ground. (...) He must be a reckless barbarian to burn this beauty in his stove, destroy what we cannot create again. Man is endowed with intellect and creative powers so that he may multiply what is given to him; but up to now he has not created, he has destroyed. Forests are fewer and fewer, rivers dry up, game becomes extinct, the climate is ruined, and every day the earth gets poorer and uglier (Act I, p. 14,15).

Likewise, he also touches on the issue of climate change, even a century before it became a public concern in modern times (4):

[w]hen I pass the peasants' wood plots that I have saved from being chopped down, or when I hear my young wood rustle, the wood plot I planted with my own hands, I realize that climate too is a little in my power, and that a thousand years from now if man should be happy, why, then I'd be a little part of that too. When I plant a birch and later on see it burst into green and wave in the wind, my soul fills with pride (Act I, p. 15).

In the Third Act, we find Astroff with three maps, last two displaying a drastic decrease in relative forested area in the region from 50 years ago, 25 years ago, and in the current time, respectively. While half of the region is covered in forest in the first map, it has decreased to 1/3 in the second, and then further to smaller woods, and only a few, most recently. Astroff criticizes this change as “a consequence of ignorance and the unconsciousness of humanity”—while still being anthropocentric (4):

Yes, I understand that if in place of these destroyed forests roads were laid out, railroads, if there were mills, factories, schools,—people would become healthier, richer, more intelligent, but there is nothing of this kind! In the district the same swamps, mosquitoes, the same absence of roads, poverty, typhus, diphtheria, fires. We have here a case of degeneration that results from a struggle that's beyond men's strength for existence; degeneration caused by sloth, by ignorance, by the complete lack of any conscience. When a cold, hungry, sick man to save what life he has left, for his children, instinctively, subconsciously grabs at everything that might satisfy his hunger, or warm him, destroys everything, without a thought of tomorrow. Nearly everything is already destroyed and its place there is nothing created (Act III, p. 39).

Fond of dogs and plants in his personal life, Chekhov's love of nature, vegetation and animals are also clear in many of his other works criticizing deforestation, water pollution or negative effects technological developments could have on the environment (e.g., “Fish Love”, “The Reed Pipe”, and “The Steppe”) (3). Interestingly, we learn from his personal letters that Chekhov read American essayist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau's (1817–1862) environmental non-fiction book *Walden* in 1887 from its Russian translation, only two years before writing *The Wood Demon* that would be the core of *Uncle Vanya*. He found, however, that “Thoreau got a certain freshness and originality about him, but he is hard to read.” (5).

In brief, *Uncle Vanya* is more than a stage masterpiece of modern drama, tracing the ideas of environmentalism. It highlights literature's influential role in enhancing our understanding of human-nature interaction, long

before environmental ethics emerged as a new sub-discipline of philosophy in the 1970s following steps taken by pioneers of the field, like the American writer and ecologist Rachel Carson (1907–1964) (6, 7).

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