

# The Seagull



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANTON CHEKHOV

Born in 1860 in a port town in the south of Russia, Anton Chekhov grew up in a household ruled by an abusive father—an imposing figure whose cruelty and plunging of the family into bankruptcy inspired many of Chekhov’s dramatic works and short fictions. Chekhov moved to Moscow in 1879 to attend medical school, knowing he had to support his large and struggling family. In order to make ends meet while he studied, he wrote and published satirical short stories and sketches. Chekhov went on to make more money as a writer than a doctor, though he considered himself as a physician first and foremost for much of his life. Chekhov suffered from poor health in the mid-1880s, but told very few people of his struggles with tuberculosis. While travelling to the Ukraine for his health in the late 1880s, he was commissioned to write a play, and his literary career took off in earnest. Chekhov enjoyed great success for many years. As his health continued to deteriorate throughout the late 1890s, Chekhov purchased a country estate in Yalta, where he composed some of his most famous works, including *The Seagull*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*, and the short story “The Lady with the Dog.” Chekhov died due to complications from tuberculosis in July of 1904.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The mid-1890s in Russia constituted a period of industrialization and social change. The middle and working classes were expanding and growing more radical politically, while the luxury classes felt a decisive threat to their wealth, land, power, and leisure—a theme explored more acutely in Chekhov’s final play, 1904’s *The Cherry Orchard*. In the middle of the 1890s, however, these social tensions had not yet come to a head—the bourgeoisie was still hanging on to their land and their traditions, and Russia’s burgeoning alliance with France led to an exchange of culture and ideals which is evident in many of the characters’ references to French literature, plays, and music.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Part of the movement of realist Russian theatre, *The Seagull*—and many of Chekhov’s other works from the prolific period in his life preceding and following its composition—was inspired by earlier works of European realism such as Henrik Ibsen’s plays *A Doll’s House*, *Ghosts*, and *Hedda Gabler*. *The Seagull* is peppered with references to famous, successful Russian writers of the period including Ivan Turgenev, Nikolai

Gogol, and Leo Tolstoy (*War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*). The characters within the play—many of whom are educated, high-minded literary and artistic types—make references to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the writings of Guy du Maupassant, and Pushkin’s *The Naiad*, among other theatrical and literary works. Contemporary retellings of *The Seagull* include Aaron Posner’s 2013 play *Stupid Fucking Bird*, which transports the events of the play to modern-day America, as well as the films *La Petite Lili* and *Hollywood Seagull*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Seagull
- **When Written:** 1895
- **Where Written:** Yalta
- **When Published:** First performed October 17th, 1896; first published 1897
- **Literary Period:** Psychological realism
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** A lakeside estate in the Russian countryside
- **Climax:** After years of pining for Nina Zarechnaya and failing to win her love or achieve success as a writer, Konstantin Treplyov shoots himself in the head offstage in the play’s final moments.
- **Antagonist:** Boris Trigorin, Irina Arkadina, fame, ego

### EXTRA CREDIT

**The Writing Life.** *The Seagull* contains several monologues about the burden of life as a writer, and shows the famous Boris Trigorin and the obscure Konstantin Treplyov struggling equally with their lives as writers in spite of the gulf between their very different careers. Many scholars and critics have regarded these passages as some of Chekhov’s most confessional work—though he’s speaking through characters, his musings on the obsessive and often destructive nature of cannibalizing one’s life in the name of art were called “the only good thing[s] in the play” by Leo Tolstoy himself.

**Highly Censored.** *The Seagull* underwent heavy edits during Russia’s pre-revolutionary years, with lines that referenced “materialist views” and overt expressions of sexuality censored and excised from the play. The original version of *The Seagull*, along with many of Chekhov’s other writings, were kept under lock and key in the Russian archives until after the fall of the Iron Curtain.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Act One of *The Seagull* opens on a summer evening at Pyotr Nikolaevich Sorin's country estate. Down near the expansive lake, a makeshift stage has been built—Sorin's nephew Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov is putting on an avant-garde play for Sorin and the rest of his summer guests, including Treplyov's mother and Sorin's sister Arkadina Irina Nikolaevna, a famous actress, and her lover Boris Alekseevich Trigorin, a famous writer. Among the other guests at the estate are the caretaker Ilya Afanasevich Shamraev, his wife Polina Andreevna, and their daughter Masha, who pines for Treplyov; a poor schoolteacher named Semyon Semyonovich Medvedenko, who is hopelessly in love with Masha; and Evgeny Serveevich Dorn, a country doctor and Sorin's longtime friend.

Treplev fusses about the stage, double-checking special effects with the workman Yakov while he confides in Sorin that he's worried his love and his muse Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya will be late for her performance. Treplev tells Sorin that he's anxious about his career as a writer, and worries that people only indulge his work because of his status as Arkadina's son. The men discuss Arkadina's narcissism and jealousy, as well as her ongoing affair with Trigorin, until Nina arrives, breathless and excited. She kisses Treplev and explains that she's managed to sneak away from her controlling father and stepmother, who live across the lake, for only an hour's time.

Treplev calls the guests down to the lake and insists the performance begin immediately. Treplev's play is set on a barren, abandoned version of Earth, many years after a terrible apocalypse. Nina, the only character, plays the "universal soul" of the human spirit who has been left to languish on the ruined earth and fend off confrontations with Satan. Arkadina loudly mocks the "avant-garde" nature of the play from the audience until Treplev cuts the performance short and storms away. Nina comes out from backstage and greets Arkadina and Trigorin warmly, but soon tells them that she has to go home before she incurs her father's anger. Treplev returns, hiding from Masha, who has been wandering around looking for him. When he realizes that Nina has left, he chases after her. Masha returns to the stage to find Treplev gone. Weeping, she confides in Dorn about the terrible pain she feels. The kindly Dorn laments the sadness of all the star-crossed young lovers around him.

In Act Two, which takes place later in the week, Sorin's guests converge on a large croquet lawn. Nina, whose father and stepmother are out of town for several days, is ecstatic about the chance to spend some uninterrupted time down at the lake with her idols. Arkadina regales Nina with tales of her glamorous life in Moscow and insults the boring, lazy nature of life in the country. Arkadina asks Shamraev and Polina to ready a horse for her to take into town for a bit, but there are none

available. Arkadina throws a fit and vows to leave for Moscow immediately. She shouts out across the lake for Trigorin to follow her inside and pack to leave. Polina, during a moment alone with her Dorn (her secret lover), begs him to take her away from the countryside—but he will not commit to her.

As everyone stalks off in anger, Nina is left alone, and remarks to herself how strange it is to watch even famous people behaving so provincially. Treplev, who has been sulking for days due to Nina's growing indifference towards him, approaches Nina with a slain **gull** in his hands and drops it at her feet. The horrified Nina tells Treplev she no longer understands anything about him. As Trigorin approaches, Treplev disgustedly tells Nina to enjoy her time with a "real genius," then leaves her and Trigorin alone. Nina asks Trigorin what it's like to be famous and confesses that she wishes she could be a beloved actress more than anything. Trigorin, though, says he envies Nina's youth and naivete—he feels trapped in his life as a writer, unable to stop cannibalizing his own experiences for material and constantly living in fear of bad reviews. When Trigorin notices the gull at Nina's feet, he takes out his notebook and jots down a note for a story about a girl who grows up on the shore of a lake until a man comes along and "destroys her" for lack of anything better to do with his time. Arkadina, leaning out of a window, calls out to Trigorin—she tells him they're staying a little longer, after all. Nina is delighted.

At the start of Act Three, the dining room of Sorin's estate is abuzz as Arkadina and Trigorin prepare to return to Moscow. A drunken Masha tells Trigorin that she plans to marry Medvedenko in an attempt to forget about her love for Treplev, who recently attempted suicide but failed when the bullet merely grazed the side of his head. Masha speculates that the depressed Treplev is jealous of Trigorin. Nina enters the room to say her goodbyes. She presents Trigorin with a special medallion she's had engraved with the name of one of his novels and the numbers of a page and corresponding lines. Nina begs Trigorin not to forget her, and asks him to find her once more before he leaves. Arkadina and Sorin come into the room, but Trigorin runs out to find a copy of his book and look up the lines the medallion references. Arkadina says she feels bad about leaving with Sorin in poor health and Treplev so fresh from a suicide attempt, but she is desperate to get back to the city. She considers leaving Sorin and Treplev some money—but resolves that she needs the money to spend on her own costumes back in Moscow.

Treplev comes into the room and asks Arkadina to change the bandages around his head. As Arkadina cleans her son's wounds, he begs her to end her relationship with Trigorin—and warns her that Trigorin has designs on Nina. The offended Arkadina lashes out at Treplev, calling him a "nobody," and the two exchange fiery insults before running out of steam and apologizing to one another. Trigorin comes back into the room

and reads aloud the lines Nina's medallion makes reference to: "If ever my life is of use to you, come and take it." Treplyov rushes out of the room, and Trigorin begs Arkadina to stay longer. Arkadina, realizing that Trigorin is indeed in love with Nina, throws herself at his feet and begs him not to abandon her. She tells him she won't survive if the "greatest living writer" leaves her, and Trigorin succumbs to her flattery, agreeing to return to Moscow with her. The two of them head out to the station with Shamraev, Sorin, and Medvedenko. A few moments later, Trigorin rushes back in, having forgotten his walking stick. He bumps into Nina, who tells him she's decided to flee home and move to Moscow to try her luck as an actress. Trigorin instructs Nina as to where she should stay, and promises to seek her out there before kissing her passionately.

Between Acts Three and Four, two years have elapsed. Treplyov is living at Sorin's estate, and Masha, Medvedenko, Arkadina, and Trigorin are all visiting once again. Treplyov has become a "real writer" and has turned one of the house's drawing rooms into a writing studio. In spite of her marriage to Medvedenko, Masha still pines for the increasingly-moody Treplyov. Sorin's health has worsened, and he wrestles with his fear of death. The group discusses Nina Zarechnaya—Treplyov reports that after she moved to Moscow, she bore Trigorin a child. After the infant died, Trigorin abandoned her and went back to Arkadina, and Nina began touring the provinces with a third-rate theater company. Treplyov says that Nina has been rumored to be back in town for a little while, staying at a shabby hotel near the station. He seems to take great delight in reporting the hard times she's fallen on to all the others—Sorin, however, laments Nina's suffering.

Arkadina and Trigorin enter the room. Treplyov and Trigorin greet one another, and Arkadina attempts to settle the "grudge" between them by telling her son that Trigorin has purchased and brought along a copy of the latest magazine in which Treplyov has published. Arkadina suggests they all play a game of bingo, and everyone but the brooding Treplyov agrees to join. With Treplyov out on a walk, the others discuss his burgeoning career as a writer, but Arkadina admits she hasn't read a single word he's ever written. After the game of bingo, the group goes into the kitchen for a bite to eat. Treplyov returns from his walk and surveys his manuscript pages, cursing their mediocrity. Soon, there is a knock at the window: Treplyov is shocked to realize that Nina has come to visit. He welcomes her in, and she begs him to lock the doors of the room so that the others don't see her in her current state. Nina is disheveled and confused, and speaks in a rambling, manic way, even breaking down in tears when she tries to discuss everyday things like books. It is clear that Treplyov is just as in love with her as he was years ago. He begs her to stay with him—without her, he says, he will never know happiness. Nina tells Treplyov that he shouldn't love her, and calls herself a "gull" as she begins speaking about her disastrous affair with Trigorin.

She confesses that though her life has become a "sordid" mess, she still dreams of achieving fame as a great actress. She tells Treplyov that she needs to leave, but entreats him to seek her out in Moscow once she makes it big. Nina embraces Treplyov and hurries out of the house.

Treplyov rips up all of his manuscripts before storming off into the next room. The group returns for another game of bingo, but have barely begun playing when they hear a loud noise in the next room. Arkadina worries that Treplyov has shot himself, so Dorn offers to go in and see what's happened. He peeks in and reports back that his first-aid kit has simply fallen to the ground. Arkadina resumes the game. Dorn takes Trigorin aside, claiming he wants to discuss one of the man's recent publications—once they are out of earshot, however, Dorn tells Trigorin to take Arkadina into the next room. Treplyov has indeed shot himself.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya** – The idealistic, fame-hungry Nina Zarechnaya is one of Chekhov's best-known characters. A young woman who lives across the lake from Sorin's estate with her cruel, controlling father and stepmother, Nina's surname means "across the river" in Russian—her name is symbolic of the physical and emotional distance between her and the other characters in the play. Nina loves and admires artists, actors, and writers, and longs to be a part of Arkadina and Trigorin's glamorous world. She falls for Treplyov because she believes that he is a serious and talented artist, but after Arkadina shuns his work, Nina follows suit and begins to ignore and avoid the lovestruck Treplyov. Nina is sick of her boring life in the country and wants to move to Moscow to become a famous actress—it is the desire for fame and ego, not to make art for art's sake, that draws Nina to the stage. She tells Trigorin that she'd give up anything to be famous, and though her idealism (and her flattery of his writing and his lifestyle) draw him to her, he discards her after she has given up everything to follow him to Moscow and bear him a child—a child that dies in infancy. By the end of the play, the confused and sickly Nina is traveling Russia performing in the provinces, unable to accept the cruel twists her life has taken and intent on achieving her long-held dreams of fame and fortune. Nina's sweetness and vitality mask the darker, hungrier parts of her personality. Even as the play concludes, it remains unclear whether Nina persists in her idealism as a front for her misery or out of a tragic inability to accept her own mediocrity.

**Boris Alekseevich Trigorin** – A famous writer and Arkadina's lover. Trigorin, like Dorn, Sorin, and Treplyov, has been interpreted as a shade of Chekhov himself. Trigorin's famed monologue in Act Two about the misery of living a writing life

has been said to reflect many of Chekhov's own anxieties and insecurities about his obsessive, perfectionist nature. Trigorin is cool, detached, and quietly preoccupied with his own ego and success. He hates the impulse to cannibalize the events of his own life for use in his fiction—but can't resist doing so time and time again, even when it hurts those closest to him. Trigorin claims to despise the fame his writing has brought him and to hate the attention—both positive and negative—he receives from his critics, and yet he is unable to stop feeding the machine of his fame by producing stories as rapidly as he can. Trigorin is numb to other people's suffering, unable to see those around him as anything other than characters in the story of his own life. He seems to be attached to Arkadina solely because of her fame and the way she shamelessly flatters Trigorin in order to get the emotional response she wants from him. When he begins to fall in love with Nina Zarechnaya, he tries to find a way to have his cake and eat it, too, by summoning Nina to Moscow while still seeing Arkadina. It's eventually revealed that Trigorin shunned Nina after she bore him a child that died in infancy, and returned to Arkadina. Trigorin, upon seeing the **gull** Treplyov has shot and laid at Nina's feet in Act Two, comments upon the brilliance of his own idea for a short story about a man who "destroys" a country girl out of lack of anything better to do with his time—in a case of life imitating art, Trigorin does that very thing to Nina, leaving her disowned from her family and penniless in Moscow, saddled with unattainable dreams of reaching her former lover's level of fame and adoration.

**Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov** – Arkadina's son. A tortured young artist who is desperate to prove his talent to the world, Treplyov insists on bringing "new forms" to literature—but struggles to find the focus and insight he needs to do so in the face of his unrequited love for Nina Zarechnaya, his desperate need for his mother's approval, and his Oedipal hatred of the famous writer Trigorin, his mother's lover. Ultimately, it becomes evident that Treplyov, like all of the other main characters in the play, desires fame and success as an artist as a means to the love and adoration he feels is lacking in his personal life. While his quest for approval from his mother and from Nina brings him a small measure of professional success, it ultimately proves ruinous. Treplyov begins publishing stories under a penname and even earns a fanbase in Moscow, but feels that without Nina's love, his life is worth nothing. Treplyov's constant ploys for her attentions, from his slaughtering of a helpless **gull** by the lakeside to his botched suicide attempt to his ambitious but aimless writing career, never convince Nina to love him. It is this combination of unrequited love, empty artmaking, and realization of his own mediocrity that ultimately drives him to commit suicide by shooting himself in the play's final moments.

**Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina** – A middle-aged actress whose hunger for the fame and beauty of her youth have come to

dominate her life. "Arkadina" is a stage name chosen to suggest the pastoral beauty of Arcadia, an ancient Greek vision of utopia—Arcadia was also the name of a "garish" amusement park in Moscow, and Arkadina's name reflects both her idealized vision of herself and the true face of her ignorance, superiority, and even delusion. At the start of the play, Arkadina is carrying on an affair with Trigorin—a famous writer who is younger than her—much to the chagrin of her son Treplyov, who is both starved for his mother's affection and attention and ashamed of her flamboyant ways. Arkadina is a jealous individual who, according to her son, doesn't want to see anyone else enjoy success—especially on the stage. Arkadina ignores the emotional plight of her son throughout the play. She all but condones Trigorin's slow destruction of Nina Zarechnaya, and remains emotionally detached from any issue that doesn't directly involve her. Arkadina is desperate to be loved, adored, and even worshipped—she is jealous of her lover Trigorin's fame and lives in constant fear of the idea that he might leave her for someone younger, more beautiful, and more talented. As Chekhov's work in the late 1890s and early 1900s was written amidst the changing socioeconomic atmosphere that marked the waning days of tsarist Russia, Arkadina's obsession with youth and the past may reflect larger Russian anxieties about the death of the leisure class, the languishing economy, and the censorship of the arts.

**Pyotr Nikolaevich Sorin** – Arkadina's brother. A retired government official who now owns a large country estate on the edge of a lake, the elderly and sickly Sorin fears he has let his life pass him by—and is determined, in spite of his age and declining health, to have the experiences he longs for. Sorin is a kind, funny old man whose wistfulness never turns to resentment. He lives vicariously through the young people and artists who flock to his estate over the summer. Though at the beginning of the play he seeks to prolong his remaining years through treatments and medicines, by its end he has relinquished his fear of death and is determined to simply enjoy the time he has left. Sorin, like Trigorin, Treplyov, and Dorn, is one of the play's characters believed to represent a version of Chekhov himself—Chekhov, too, lived on a large rural estate which attracted many artists, visitors, and admirers, and around the time of *The Seagull*'s composition, Chekhov was living in the country in an attempt to mitigate the effects of his rapidly-declining health.

**Ilya Afanasevich Shamraev** – The caretaker of Sorin's estate. He approaches his work, far from artistry as it is, with the same obsessive need for control that Trigorin, Treplyov, and Arkadina all exhibit. Easily impressed by fame and tales of life in the theater, he's often asking Arkadina to regale him with stories about her famous friends and her old days as a successful actress in Moscow.

**Polina Andreevna** – Shamraev's wife and Masha's mother. She is having an affair with Dorn, but is frustrated by his refusal to



take her away from her droll country life. Polina resents Dorn for his ambivalence towards her, but at the same time finds herself unable to stop loving him—she is one of the many characters in the play whose arc ties in with the theme of unrequited love.

**Masha** – Shamraev and Polina Andreevna’s daughter, a forlorn and sour young woman who is “in mourning for [her] life.” Masha has intense feelings of unrequited love for Treplyov, but after he refuses time and time again to pay her any attention, she decides to try and forget him by marrying Medvedenko. Masha drinks “openly” and heavily, and wears black to commemorate her perennial state of mourning for her own misfortune. She feels deeply and loves intensely, but seeks to bury her feelings time and time again—and fails at this goal continually.

**Evgeny Sergeevich Dorn** – A country doctor carrying on an affair with Polina Andreevna. Dorn is a dear friend of Sorin’s, a lover of the arts, and, by his own admission, a womanizer whose status as a physician has brought him many adoring lovers over the course of his life. Dorn is one of the many characters in the play believed to be a reflection of Chekhov, who was a doctor by training and often roamed the country helping patients in rural areas (and, according to rumor, carried on multiple affairs with women who were attracted to him for his success as a doctor and a writer alike).

**Semyon Semyonovich Medvedenko** – A bumbling, anxious schoolteacher whose constant preoccupation with money—and the lack of it—alienates him from those around him. He is hopelessly in love with Masha and frustrated by her inability to reciprocate his feelings. Medvedenko has a nervous disposition and, like many of the other characters in the play, is unafraid to verbalize even his most shameful feelings: he is open about his desire for Masha as well as his awareness (even after she accepts his marriage proposal) that she will never truly love him.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Yakov** – A workman at Sorin’s estate.

fulfillment, or in pursuit of fame? As the artistically-minded characters within the play—Arkadina, Trigorin, Treplyov, and Nina—navigate their competing desires for fame and fulfillment, Chekhov investigates the destructive nature of celebrity, ultimately arguing that the hollow pursuit of fame, glory, and renown will only end in misery.

All of the artist characters within *The Seagull* have a desperate need to express themselves—and to be adored for so doing. For Arkadina, Trigorin, Treplyov, and Nina, making art is not enough: fame and adoration are what they want, and though they pursue it doggedly, it ultimately fails to satiate them. The desire for it, in one case, even proves fatal. Arkadina, a middle-aged actress, is a vain woman who spends a great deal of time reminiscing about her younger days and recalling the roles that made her famous in Moscow. Treplyov often remarks upon his mother’s jealous nature, stating that she can’t bear to see anyone else enjoy success. Arkadina is happy enough to see Nina perform Treplyov’s original play, but only because the young, naïve Nina is obsessed with Arkadina and frequently flatters her. Every time Arkadina speaks about her life as an actress, she focuses on money, costumes, and fans—never on the roles themselves, or on how her art has helped her understand herself or the world around her. Ultimately, Arkadina is so dismissive of anyone else’s attempts at art-making that she alienates those who genuinely look up to her—namely, her son and Nina. She admits that she never reads Treplyov’s published work, and though she never comments upon Nina’s grave misfortunes in Moscow, it’s implied that she has ignored her protégé’s troubles because she sees Nina as a threat. By the end of the play, Arkadina is so disconnected from everyone around her that she plays bingo gaily while her son goes into the next room to commit suicide, a tragedy that demonstrates just how destructive the hollow pursuit of fame can be on artists, and on their relationships with others.

Trigorin, Arkadina’s younger lover, is a famous writer of fiction who publishes widely and enjoys a healthy fanbase back in Moscow. Nina is perhaps even more in awe of Trigorin’s fame than she is of Arkadina’s—Nina harbors romantic feelings for Trigorin, and seems to believe that part of being famous is having a famous lover. Trigorin, on the other hand, is ambivalent about his own fame—at least outwardly. He complains to Nina that no matter how many people tell him they enjoy his work, he never feels it’s good enough, and rarely experiences even a moment’s artistic satisfaction. However, Trigorin complicates his own statement when he succumbs, time and time again, to the flattery that both Nina and Arkadina dole out in attempts to make Trigorin love them. This shows that while Trigorin seems driven as an artist, his motives for writing are still tied to achieving his own personal glory.

Treplyov, Arkadina’s son, also longs to be a writer. Treplyov is the character who is the most driven by the pursuit of art itself: he says he wants to explore “new forms” in theater, and his



## THEMES

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### ART VS. FAME

At the heart of *The Seagull* is the question of why writers write and why actors act: for artistic

work plunges the human struggle between good and evil. This is certainly the deepest material that Chekhov shows any of his artist characters working with throughout the play. However, Treplyov's motives, like Trigorin's, are ultimately confused. He wants to succeed as an artist due to his need to unseat Trigorin as Russia's most celebrated writer in order to win back his distant, judgmental mother's affection and attention. Treplyov seems to seek fame just as much as the other characters—and yet, in a strange turn of events, it is revealed that Treplyov is publishing his stories under a penname. He has no public persona, and Trigorin reports that Treplyov's fans in Moscow often beg Trigorin to tell them what the mysterious Treplyov looks and acts like. Treplyov achieves the fame he sought—but he, like Nina, realizes too late that fame will not bring him the things he wants in life. He feels his art is worthless because it has not brought him glory the eyes of his mother or Nina, and he rips it all to shreds moments before taking his own life at the end of the play. His fate suggests that the pursuit of personal glory, as opposed to that of artist expression, is ultimately unsustainable and leaves people feeling empty and unfulfilled.

Nina, who idealizes the glamour of being an artist, sneaks away from her father and stepmother daily to enjoy stolen time near the lake with Arkadina, Treplyov, and Trigorin. Nina loves being around these artistic types, and she takes absurd delight in seeing famous people like Trigorin and Arkadina going about their summer holidays like common folk. Nina has great dreams of being an actress—dreams which Arkadina and Trigorin encourage after seeing her demonstrate some talent when she performs in Treplyov's play. But Nina, for all her naivete and earnestness, slowly reveals herself to be driven by a hungry desire for fame. She tells Trigorin that she would abandon her family if she could be famous, and openly mocks her lover Treplyov's work once Arkadina expresses her distaste for it. After following Trigorin to Moscow to seek fame, Nina fails to thrive as an artist and winds up performing in third-rate companies throughout the Russian provinces. She maintains that she is an actress and not the wounded “gull” that others perceived her to be—but years later when she reunites with Treplyov, it's clear that Nina's attempts at fame have failed. In chasing fame, Nina finds only subjugation and misery.

The characters who chase fame in *The Seagull* find themselves alienated from their creativity, their families, and the realization of their dreams. Chekhov argues, through his four main characters' failures, that to seek fame while eschewing hard work and steady artistic practice is an empty goal—one that can result in pain, misery, and cruel twists of fate.



## UNREQUITED LOVE

One of the most prominent themes throughout Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* is that of unrequited love. When Arkadina and her family gather at her brother Sorin's country estate for the summer, the atmosphere

quickly fills with passion and longing—but as couples fall in and out of love, betray one another, and chase after those who don't love them back, Chekhov explores what happens when feelings of lust and love are inconvenient, forbidden, or actively destructive. Ultimately, Chekhov suggests that truly reciprocal, requited love is uncommon at best, and most often unattainable.

*The Seagull* is teeming with examples of mismatched lovers, yearning hearts, and wandering eyes. As Chekhov establishes love triangles and quadrangles and explores the effects of physical and emotional affairs, he shows how truly rare real, mutual love is—and how painfully destructive the pursuit of unrequited love can be. The strange love quadrangle at the heart of the play between Nina, Treplyov, Trigorin, and Arkadina demonstrates many different kinds of unrequited love: romantic love, filial love, and idolatry. This complicated foursome is rife with bad timing, poor instincts, and the desperation to be loved and accepted. At the start of the play, Nina and Treplyov are enjoying a sweet summer fling. Treplyov sees Nina as his muse—but Nina, distracted by her dreams of stardom and obsession with fame, is quick to discard Treplyov to focus on gaining Arkadina's respect and Trigorin's love. Nina's swift dismissal of Treplyov to pursue her own infatuation with Trigorin demonstrates that unrequited love is an endless vortex—one that devours anything in its path.

Very soon, Treplyov finds himself facing two instances of unrequited love: his romantic and sexual obsession with Nina (which leads him to murder a **gull** and leave it at her feet in a play for her attention) and his attention-starved, arguably Oedipal love for his mother Arkadina, who rejects him as a son because he makes her feel old, and as an artist because she is threatened by his potential for success. Treplyov cannot make either woman love him—and the fact that both of them are obsessed with winning Trigorin's heart only sends him spiraling further into feelings of self-loathing and inferiority. Nevertheless, Treplyov continues trying to win his mother's attention and Nina's affection, becoming a hollow shell of himself in the process and annihilating any part of him that might have been able to thrive without returned love.

Arkadina, meanwhile, nurses her own unrequited—or rather unmatched—love for Trigorin. Though the two are an official item and have been for some time, Arkadina feels her relationship with Trigorin is in constant jeopardy because of her insecurity about the age gap between them—and, as the play progresses, because of Trigorin's open obsession with the younger, lovelier Nina. Arkadina prostrates herself before Trigorin in an attempt to get him to choose her over Nina—but as Trigorin sneaks around with Nina and makes secret plans to rendezvous with her in Moscow, Arkadina fails to see just how disposable she is to the object of her affections. Arkadina's personal vanity is tied to her viability as both a star and as a sexual object—she needs Trigorin to return her love as fiercely

as she gives it for him in order to feel relevant. She ultimately winds up destroying several lives in her quest for Trigorin's undying affection—including her own son's.

All four of these star-crossed individuals harm themselves and suppress their genuine needs in order to appear as more alluring love-objects to the other. Treplyov lashes out at Nina, botches a suicide attempt (on purpose, it's implied,) and speaks in childish baby-talk to his mother. Arkadina flatters Trigorin as the greatest living writer in Russia—quite literally on her knees—in an attempt to distract him from flitting off to a younger, prettier paramour. Nina moves to Moscow for Trigorin and bears him a child, only to lose everything when the child dies and Trigorin abandons her for Arkadina once and for all. Each character ends the play diminished in spirit, in health, and in self-worth—and the battered Treplyov even takes his own life. The four main characters' attempts to win over their unrequited loves—and the devastating outcomes their actions have—show just how destructive and ultimately fruitless it is to pursue unrequited love, and how dangerous taking one's romantic obsession to its rock bottom can be.

The more minor instances of unrequited love throughout the play are equally emotional and destabilizing for the characters going through them. Masha loves Treplyov, and cries to Dorn about her miserable obsession with him, vowing to marry the sniveling Medvedenko in order to rip her feelings out at the "root." Meanwhile, Masha's own mother Polina loves Dorn (who, it's implied, may be Masha's real father after all) but laments that he will not legitimize their love by taking her away from the country. Medvedenko loves Masha truly, but even after their marriage, knows that she will never honestly reciprocate the feelings he has for her. Even Chekhov's minor characters are unhappy in love—and as they mourn the alternate fates true love could bring them, Chekhov cynically and, arguably, cruelly demonstrates just how loveless most marriages and partnerships are, and how rare a union based on deep mutual love actually is.

However bleak, Chekhov's ultimate argument that reciprocal love is rare and fleeting shines through in *The Seagull* as he explores the frustrations of unrequited love and the futility of chasing the idyllic future that true love seems to spell out. To pine for a love unrequited, Chekhov suggests, is to actively deteriorate one's own soul and capacity for not only romantic love, but self-love. His characters' destructive actions in fits of passion attest to the grating, destabilizing force of unreturned affection.



## EGO AND THE SELF

In many ways, *The Seagull* is a deeply personal work—pieces of Chekhov himself seems to be refracted through many different characters, with the writers Trigorin and Treplyov excising Chekhov's complicated feelings about art and success while more minor

characters like Sorin and Dorn, themselves similar to Chekhov in other eerie ways, mirror his anxieties about his failing health, his ambivalence towards the medical profession, and his fear of living a less-than-fulfilling life. In a play in which so many characters experience their downfall due to an inflated or fragile ego, Chekhov pokes fun at those who take themselves (and the idea of a "self" in general) too seriously while ultimately arguing that narcissism and self-obsession are ruinous not just to artists, but to human beings in general—even as he contradictorily uses the play as a venue for his own self-exploration.

Chekhov is contemptuous of his egotistical characters, and yet throughout the play, he renders and explores disparate parts of his own personality through a character at least four times over. Through this deeply metafictional contradiction, Chekhov shows how all-consuming and dangerous egotism is, and crafts tragic fates for the characters in the play who fall victim to self-obsession. Similar to the instances of characters in prioritizing fame over genuine artistry, the egotism in the play revolves around the destructive effects of narcissism, empty self-obsession, and neglect of the things that really matter: art, family, and community. The most obvious egotist in the play is Arkadina, a vain and narcissistic woman whose obsessions with her physical appearance, her social status, and the preservation of her own wealth in spite of her family's deepening slide into poverty make her so cold, selfish, and removed from the action as to render her nearly one-dimensional. Trigorin, Treplyov, and Nina also show themselves to be egotists—Trigorin succumbs to the flattery of both Nina and Arkadina, even as he openly resents himself for his self-centered short stories and his inability to enjoy life in the moment without thinking about how to use his experiences in his work. Nina, who desires a life of fame and adoration, uses acting as a way to get others' attention—but when she arrives in Moscow, she finds that her performances become "wooden" and she stands onstage unsure of what to do with her hands and unable to control her quavering voice. Nina has spent so much of her life dreaming of a profession and a calling centered around personal glory—but she is out of touch with the instrument of her body and the limits of her talent, and doesn't truly know herself. Treplyov attempts to reject the egotism that is, as Trigorin suggests, inherent to life as an artist. He publishes his stories under a penname and stays out of the spotlight—but in the end, cannot separate his art from himself, and destroys all his work when he realizes that he has failed forever to win the affections of both his mother and his love, Nina. He swiftly follows the act of destroying his work with the act of destroying himself—to Treplyov, there is no line between the artist and his art, and he fails to overcome his own egotism so profoundly that he seeks to erase every part of himself.

The second component of the theme of ego and the self revolves not around Chekhov's indictment of egotism, but

around his insertion of his own personal anxieties and elements of his personality and autobiography into the play itself. Even as Chekhov condemns egotism as a personality flaw, he uses the play to investigate key components of his own personality—and perhaps, in so doing, concedes that for all its evils, self-obsession is an inescapable component of life as an artist. The most direct Chekhov cipher within the play is Trigorin—the writer who laments his own destruction of his life and the lives of those he loves as fodder for his fiction. Trigorin chases but never achieves satisfaction with his work yet refuses to change his methods of art-making. Trigorin’s long monologue in Act Two about the frustrations of the writing life and the dark side of fame represents Chekhov’s own naked anxieties about his artistic career and his “obsessional writing” practice.

There are also shades of Chekhov to be found in Sorin, Dorn, and Treplyov. Sorin, an elderly man in failing health, represents the tubercular Chekhov’s medical anxieties, while the traveling (and womanizing) country doctor Dorn reflects Chekhov’s background as a medical professional who carried on affairs during his travels. Treplyov’s writerly insecurities, though different from Trigorin’s, are also rendered with an eerily accurate hand, seeming to suggest that Chekhov at least empathizes with Treplyov’s frustrated inability to properly create “new forms” in his art—or perhaps felt the same.

Chekhov was famously insecure about his work, and regarded the opening nights of both *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard*, plays written nearly 10 years apart, as colossal failures (in spite of numerous reports to the contrary in both cases.) In injecting himself into his work and indulging the baser, less attractive parts of his personality, Chekhov is engaging in the very behaviors he condemns in his own characters: egotism, self-obsession, and indeed a strain of narcissism. Just like Trigorin, however, Chekhov perhaps felt while he lived and struggled to make art that the artist’s burden was to be forced to recycle one’s own life into half-formed art. He ironically explores the depths and dangers of this predicament by representing himself through these characters in *The Seagull*.

The self-referential and metanarrative theme of ego and the self reflects Chekhov’s deep concerns with not just the process of making art, but the ethics of doing so, especially when one’s art is drawn from life. Though Chekhov seems to condemn egotism in life, he is forced to admit—through both the characters’ actions in the play and his own insertion of himself into it—that egotism is a necessary part of artistry.



### MEDIOCRITY AND LOST POTENTIAL

Many of the characters in *The Seagull* struggle with the gulf between their dreams for their lives and their careers, and the realities of what their circumstances actually look like. From the aging actress Arkadina to the struggling writer Treplyov to the idealistic—but ultimately doomed—Nina, Chekhov fills his tragicomedy with

lost souls fighting against the mediocre reality of their lives. In exploring the sadness and shame that come along with failed or squandered potential, Chekhov ultimately suggests that for many, mediocrity is a fate worse than death.

The desire for fame and adoration is what motivates many of the characters within *The Seagull*—but an equal motivator is the fear of being perceived as mediocre or simply unmemorable. Obscurity is as frightening as fame is alluring, and as Chekhov charts several of his characters’ descents into insignificance, he shows just how painful the process of realizing one’s own smallness and irrelevance truly is. Though the play, at first glance, seems to be peppered with glamorous and successful artists and celebrities (the renowned Arkadina and the respected Trigorin, for instance) Chekhov slowly reveals just how mediocre these characters (among others) truly are, and shows them wrestling with their own fear of fading into obscurity—a fear that threatens to usurp their very lives. Arkadina touts herself as the toast of Moscow, and claims to be able to play schoolgirls and blushing brides as she takes the stage well into middle age. She claims that because she has had an active, full life, she can even appear younger than truly young women like Masha—but her attempts to remain youthful, relevant, and capable of playing any role are transparent and desperate. In reality, Arkadina is a woman aging out of her prime—as a celebrity, as a sexual being, and as an artist, she is no longer in her glory days. Arkadina refuses to accept this fate—she takes a younger lover, hoards her money, and demands special treatment as a guest on her brother’s estate as last-ditch methods of deflecting what she knows, deep down, to be true. Accepting her own mediocrity is too painful, and she staves off any form of reckoning with the realities of her age, her fading stardom, and her limited capabilities as an older actress.

Trigorin, a celebrated writer who enjoys popular and critical appeal throughout all of Russia, also wrestles with his own mediocrity. He knows he’s only as good as his worst review—and is constantly trying to head off criticism from other writers, fans, and even from himself. Trigorin is unable to enjoy his success—or even his summer holidays—because he feels like a “phony” and constantly fears being revealed for what he really is: a writer chasing fame and attempting to stay relevant in the face of a changing social and literary landscape. Trigorin enjoys public adoration, but he knows that deep down he is not the great writer he wants to be: he is not living up to his full potential.

Nina represents the most devastating example of mediocrity within the play. She harbors dreams of fame and success as an actress, and even moves to Moscow to chase her fortune. Between acts three and four, however, the audience learns that in the years since her departure from the countryside, Nina has given birth to Trigorin’s bastard child only to lose the infant early on in its life, failed entirely as an actress, and is now



roaming the provinces with third-rate traveling theater companies. When Nina reunites with Treplyov in the middle of Act Four, he remarks on how thin she's grown—and as the two catch up, it becomes clear that Nina is traumatized by what a turn her life has taken. She refers to herself as a “gull,” comparing herself to the bird Treplyov shot to death earlier in the play, before quickly recanting this characterization and declaring proudly that she is still an actress. It's possible that in her confused state Nina doesn't realize the depths to which she's sunk—but more likely, she knows full well just how sad her life has become, and, like Arkadina, is desperate to ignore her own reality.

Treplyov is the only character for whom the sentence of mediocrity carries the death penalty. Frustrated with his inability to live up to his potential as an artist or a lover, Treplyov shoots himself twice over the course of the play. His first suicide attempt fails when the bullet grazes his head, and the narrative even seems to imply that the act was more a cry for help and attention than anything else. Towards the end of the play, however, when confronted with his own perceived failure as a writer—and devastated by the lovely Nina's downfall, as well—he shoots himself offstage a second time, and, judging by Dorn's reaction, succeeds in taking his own life. While Arkadina, Trigorin, and Nina spin their wheels endlessly to convince themselves that they can outrun their critics, live up to their potential, and escape mediocrity, Treplyov doesn't see the point—he wallows in his failures and hates himself so deeply for squandering his would-be success that he decides to end his life before he can slide even further into insignificance and obscurity.

The pain and humiliation of mediocrity and the veritable sin of lost potential are, in Chekhov's view, the worst fates that can befall a person. Chekhov's characters struggle, like animals in traps, against the inevitable—but for many of them, even if they don't realize it, their fates are sealed: they are terribly, inescapably ordinary.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE GULL

The gull represents Nina Zarechnaya's loss of innocence and freedom. Konstantin

Treplyov—hopelessly mired in unrequited love for Nina, his muse and neighbor—brings her a gull that he has “slain” with a rifle. He drops the bird at her feet as a kind of offering, warning her that he will soon “kill [him]self the very same way.” When Boris Trigorin approaches Nina and sees the gull, he notes that the dead gull is a compelling symbol he'd like to use in a story: a

story about a girl who grows up, just like Nina, on the shores of a lake, “happy and free” as a bird, until a man who has “nothing better to do” comes along and destroys her—just as Treplyov destroyed the gull. Though Treplyov hoped to give Nina the gull as an expression of how she had destroyed him with her indifference, it is transformed into a symbol of Nina's own destruction at the hands of a man who cares little for her—Trigorin himself. As the play unfolds, Nina follows Trigorin to Moscow in hopes of living an idyllic, artistic life as his mistress and muse, only to find herself impoverished and unable to find work as an actress. She has a child with Trigorin, the child dies and Trigorin abandons her. After this, Nina sends Treplyov letters which she signs “The Gull,” implying that she, too, has come to view herself as akin to this lifeless bird, as she has sacrificed her wellbeing and endured great tragedy just to follow Trigorin and conform to his whims.

Years later, when she returns to the countryside utterly defeated, she reunites with Treplyov, but she is no longer the beautiful, carefree girl she once was. Nina is confused and depressed as she recounts to Treplyov her doomed affair with Trigorin and the years of mediocrity, failure, and humiliation which have followed it. Even later in the play, it is revealed that Trigorin ordered Shamraev to stuff Treplyov's slain gull and display it at Sorin's country home—further suggesting that Trigorin has found some kind of reassurance or even perverse delight in his power to subjugate and control Nina. Ultimately, in spite of her fears that she has become the gull, Nina rebels against this identity when she says “I'm a gull. No, that's wrong.” Nina has survived through a harsh industry and an even harsher personal life. Though she has suffered immensely in her relationships with Trigorin and Treplyov, she rejects the notion that she, like the gull, is doomed to a state of lifelessness and paralysis due to her struggles.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Norton & Company edition of *The Seagull* published in 2010.

### Act 1 Quotes

●● TREPLYOV: New forms are what we need. New forms are what we need, and if there aren't any, then we're better off with nothing. (*Looks at his watch.*) I love my mother, love her deeply; but she smokes, drinks, lives openly with that novelist, her name constantly in the papers—it gets me down. Sometimes it's just my plain human ego talking; it's a shame my mother is a famous actress, because I think if she were an ordinary woman, I might be happier.

**Related Characters:** Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov (speaker), Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 78

### Explanation and Analysis

In this brief passage, Treplyov discusses art, as well as his relationships with his mother, Arkadina, and his uncle, Sorin. Treplyov has very complicated feelings about both the nature and purpose of art—and the nature and purpose of his relationship with the vain, tempestuous Arkadina, the person who drew Treplyov to the arts as a child. Treplyov, a young writer, longs to create “new forms”—he wants to best his mother at her own artistic practice and prove himself to her as an artist. This desire for personal glory is what drives Treplyov’s art-making: he wants his mother to stroke his “plain human ego,” even as he resents their difficult relationship and finds himself wishing that Arkadina weren’t an artist herself. If she weren’t, he’d perhaps feel less pressure and his great fear of mediocrity might abate. The psychological and artistic issues Treplyov discusses rather cavalierly in this passage will reverberate throughout the play, leading Treplyov to the far reaches of his own psyche and the limits of his capacity for failure, rejection, and uncertainty in the arts and in love.

☞ TREPLYOV: Are you excited?

NINA: Yes, very. Your Mama doesn’t count. I’m not afraid of her, but then there’s Trigorin... Acting with him in the audience frights and embarrasses me... A famous writer... Is he young?

TREPLYOV: Yes.

NINA: His stories are so wonderful!

TREPLYOV: (*coldly*) I wouldn’t know, I haven’t read them.

NINA: It isn’t easy to act in your play. There are no living characters in it.

**Related Characters:** Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya, Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov (speaker), Boris Alekseevich Trigorin, Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 82

### Explanation and Analysis

As Nina prepares to perform in a play written by her lover

Treplyov, she reveals that her true motivation for performing is to show off for the famous writer Boris Trigorin—and, to some degree, to impress Treplyov’s mother Arkadina. Nina is obsessed with fame and fascinated by famous artists—she wants to be accepted as one of them, and believes that performing in Treplyov’s play will show the others that she deserves to be a part of their world. Nina’s bald desire for fame and her sweet, naïve disposition are constantly contrasted against one another throughout the play: in many ways, she’s cutthroat and fame-hungry, but in others, almost painfully naïve as to what being famous really means. Nina has been carrying on with Treplyov all summer, but in the moments before his play, she hints that she dislikes his work—and her dismissal of his venture into “new forms,” the first taste of unrequited love Treplyov has received, sets him on a path of longing and self-destruction that will last for the entire length of *The Seagull*.


☞ MASHA: Help me. Help me, or I’ll do something stupid, I’ll mess up my life, wreck it... I can’t stand it anymore...

DORN: What do you mean? Help you how?

MASHA: I’m in pain. Nobody, nobody knows how much pain I’m in. (*Lays her head on his chest, quietly.*) I love Konstantin.

DRON: They’re all so high-strung! They’re all so high-strung! And all this love... Oh, spellbinding lake! (*Tenderly.*) But what can I do, my child? What? What?

**Related Characters:** Evgeny Sergeevich Dorn, Masha (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 98

### Explanation and Analysis

As the first act comes to an end, Chekhov uses two tertiary characters, Masha and Dorn, to demonstrate just how far-reaching, ubiquitous, and universally destructive unrequited love really is. Treplyov and Nina’s romance has been the primary interest of the first act—but while Treplyov fawns over his beloved Nina, Masha chases after Treplyov to no avail. After Treplyov ignores Masha blatantly to follow Nina to her home across the lake, Masha, left alone with Dorn, has a veritable breakdown. She admits that she is about to “wreck” her life due to the pain she’s in. Though Dorn reacts blithely and “tenderly” to her predicament, he seems to write her pain off as the first pangs of young love. In truth, Chekhov is attempting to demonstrate one of the

play's major points: that the stoking or pursuit of unrequited love is not just heartbreaking, but actively dangerous. Masha has been pushed to the brink of her emotions by Treplyov's disinterest in her—even as she ignores her own suitor, the schoolteacher Medvedenko. The complicated triangles and quadrangles of unrequited love throughout *The Seagull* put many characters on the path to self-destruction and self-abasement, leaving them full of feelings of mediocrity, lost potential, and abject self-loathing.

## Act 2 Quotes

●● ARKADINA: Tell me, what's the matter with my son? How come he's so tiresome and surly? He spends whole days on the lake, and I almost never see him.

MASHA: He's sick at heart. (*To Nina, shyly.*) Please, do recite something from his play!

NINA: (*Shrugs.*) You want me to? It's so uninteresting!

**Related Characters:** Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya, Masha, Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina (speaker), Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov

**Related Themes:**   


**Page Number:** 102

### Explanation and Analysis

Down at the croquet lawn one afternoon, Arkadina, Nina, Masha, and several others discuss writing, art, and life. When Arkadina asks what's going on with Treplyov, Masha and Nina offer very different responses to her question. Masha has empathy for the tortured Treplyov, even though she knows Nina is the cause of Treplyov's pain and suffering. Masha asks Nina to recite something from Treplyov's play, perhaps wanting to almost shame Nina into acknowledging her role in Treplyov's life and art-making—but the self-centered Nina, desperate to impress Arkadina (and aware that ignorance towards Treplyov might win her brownie points with the famous actress) shrugs off Masha's request. The complications of the play's many love triangles manifest in ways other than the destructive behavior or dramatic feelings of their participants: even platonic relationships between characters are tinged with shades of jealousy, manipulation, and cruelty. Chekhov is attempting to show that just as unrequited love is a destructive force for those in love, it erodes broader social relationships as well.

●● NINA: I thought that famous people were proud, inaccessible, that they despised the public and their own fame, their celebrity was a kind of revenge for blue blood and wealth being considered more respectable... But here they are crying, fishing, playing cards, laughing, and losing their tempers like anybody else...

**Related Characters:** Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya (speaker), Boris Alekseevich Trigorin, Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 109

### Explanation and Analysis

One of the major journeys within the play is the idealistic but fame-hungry Nina's destruction of her own life in pursuit of fame and glory. When Trigorin and Arkadina come to the lake for the summer, Nina is entranced by their glamorous dispositions—but as she spends more time around them, desperate to observe and get to know them, she finds herself slightly disappointed by the fact that they're largely "like anybody else" at the end of the day. As Nina, aloud, tries to reckon with her own ideas about fame in light of the things she's learning about famous people, her idealism begins to morph into something else as she is educated in the realities of fame. Yet, even having glimpsed the moments of mediocrity and normalcy that filter into the lives of the rich and famous, she still wants a piece of the pie. Nina almost pushes aside the breakthrough she has in this passage—that being famous isn't inherently better than leading a normal life—and continues to spin fantasies and dreams for herself of what life would be like as a beloved actress. Her willful ignorance of the sad, lackluster underbelly of fame persists throughout the play, and ultimately proves destructive to herself, as well as to her son, Treplyov.

●● TREPLYOV: (*Enters bare-headed, carrying a rifle and a slain gull.*) You're alone here?


NINA: Alone. (*TREPLYOV lays the gull at her feet.*) What does this mean?


TREPLYOV: I did something nasty, I killed this gull today. I lay it at your feet.

NINA: What's wrong with you? (*Picks up the gull and stares at it.*)

TREPLYOV: (*After a pause*) I'll soon kill myself the very same way.

**Related Characters:** Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya, Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 109

### Explanation and Analysis

In one of the most famous scenes from Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Treplyov sets a gull he has killed at Nina's feet in hopes of winning her attention back—even though he seems to know that the chance of winning her love once again has passed him by. Treplyov is so low and his ego so in need of any kind of attention that even earning Nina's disgust is better than her ambivalence. Treplyov is in mourning for the lost potential of their love—and wants to show Nina how he's feeling. The slaughtered gull, the play's central symbol, is perhaps a way of Treplyov externalizing his internal pain and self-loathing. The gull is, in its essence, a beautiful thing struck down in its prime, Treplyov certainly seems to see the bird as a symbol of his and Nina's failed love. The gull, however, will take on a larger symbolic significance as the play progresses, and will come to encapsulate the larger letdowns and failures both Treplyov and Nina are fated to encounter as they attempt to make their way in the world of art and fame.

☛ TREPLYOV: You say you're too ordinary to understand me. Oh, what's there to understand? You didn't like my play, you despise my ideas, you've started thinking of me as a mediocrity, a nobody, like all the rest... (*Stamping his foot.*) That's something I understand, oh, I understand all right! There's a kind of spike stuck in my brain, damn it and damn my vanity, which sucks my blood, sucks it like a snake...

**Related Characters:** Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov (speaker), Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 110

### Explanation and Analysis

When Nina tells Treplyov that she doesn't understand what he's trying to articulate or achieve by showing her the dead gull, he lashes out in anger, misery, and self-pity. Treplyov is upset that Nina no longer loves him—but even worse than

her lack of emotional love is her lack of artistic respect for him. Treplyov is psychologically conditioned by his complicated relationship with his mother, Arkadina, to see artistic attention and emotional attention as the same thing. As a result, he hates the idea that the object of his affection would view him as mediocre. Unfortunately, this is his dynamic with both his mother Arkadina and his lover Nina. Treplyov knows that his own “vanity” is ruining him, sucking his blood and energy “like a snake,” but has no way of overcoming his deepest fears. He is completely controlled by his need to be loved, adored, and worshipped—as both a man and an artist.

☛ TRIGORIN: I know no peace, and I feel that I'm devouring my own life, that to give away honey to somebody out there in space I'm robbing my finest flowers of their pollen, tearing up all these flowers and trampling on their roots.

**Related Characters:** Boris Alekseevich Trigorin (speaker), Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 113


### Explanation and Analysis

When Nina excitedly asks Trigorin what it's really like to be a famous writer, the man confesses that Nina's idealization of fame and success is making him upset—and goes off on a tangent about the difficulties of balancing art, fame, and the self. In a long and rambling monologue, Trigorin tells Nina that he feels like a “phony” as a writer and is never satisfied with his own work—but the emotional crux of the speech hinges around these lines, in which Trigorin discusses the “devouring,” or cannibalization, of his and his friends' experiences for the sake of his art. This section of Trigorin's speech is especially significant within the context of the play because it shows Trigorin admitting to one of his most flawed, selfish tendencies—but also admitting in the same breath that he cannot control himself, or change his behavior. Trigorin will go on to similarly “devour” Nina's life story and experiences, and use her as fodder both for his own ego and his art—and even though he warns her of who he really is, she allows him to usurp and control her existence because of her idealistic thoughts about the nature of fame, love, and art.



☛ NINA: For the joy of being a writer or an actress, I would put up with my family disowning me, poverty, disappointment; I would live in a garret and eat nothing but black bread, suffer dissatisfaction with myself and realize my own imperfection, but in return I would insist on fame... real, resounding fame...

**Related Characters:** Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya (speaker), Boris Alekseevich Trigorin

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 116


### Explanation and Analysis

As Nina carries on her conversation with Trigorin, she discards all of the unappealing, difficult things he's just confessed about what it's really like both to be an artist and to be famous. Nina has blinders on when it comes to any information that complicates her idea of the artistic life, and continues to insist that what she wants is fame and attention at any cost. Nina tells Trigorin that she would experience "joy" if she were allowed to be an artist, regardless of the circumstances to which she had to subject herself—but as she continues talking, she reveals that she sees "real, resounding fame," not personal satisfaction, as the end goal of artmaking. Nina, whose home life is in shambles and whose need for validation from others overwhelms her daily, sees an artistic life as a road to more of the glory she craves—she doesn't care if she's "a writer or an actress," as the medium that allows Nina to receive more and more attention is inconsequential. All she wants is applause and adoration, a motivation that will lead her to following Trigorin in hopes of becoming famous, and ultimately finding subjugation and misery rather than satisfaction.

☛ TRIGORIN: Just jotting down a note... A subject came to mind... (*Putting away the notebook.*) Subject for a short story: on the shores of a lake a young girl grows up, just like you; loves the lake, like a gull, is happy and free, like a gull. But by chance a man comes along, sees her, and, having nothing better to do, destroys her, just like this gull here.

**Related Characters:** Boris Alekseevich Trigorin (speaker), Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 110

### Explanation and Analysis

As Nina shows Trigorin the gull that Treplyov has killed for her—or at least for her attention—Trigorin, seeming to completely ignore his own recent speech about his inability to stop cannibalizing his life for material, reveals that he is making a note for a story about Nina's life. He adds a new twist to her life story: the arrival of a man who "destroys her" because he has "nothing better to do." In this moment, Trigorin seems to be referring to Treplyov, who destroyed the gull seemingly on a whim—and, Trigorin seems to be predicting, will do the same to Nina if given the opportunity. As the play progresses, however, Trigorin's ominous prophecy will come to be about himself: he is the man who is going to "destroy" the young, vulnerable Nina's life out of boredom and a show of power and ego. The disconnect between Trigorin's self-knowledge and his inability to correct or even improve his behavior paints him as the play's main antagonist, and a dangerous force that symbolizes the destructive nature of fame, ego, and unrequited love.

### Act 3 Quotes

☛ ARKADINA: Now I've got to go and I still don't know how come Konstantin took a shot at himself. I suppose the main reason was jealousy, so the sooner I take Trigorin away from here, the better.

SORIN: How can I put this? There were other reasons too. Take my word for it, a man who's young, intelligent, living in the country, in the sticks, with no money, no position, no future. Nothing to keep him occupied. Gets ashamed of himself and alarmed by his own idleness.

**Related Characters:** Pyotr Nikolaevich Sorin, Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina (speaker), Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 123

### Explanation and Analysis

As Arkadina and Trigorin prepare to leave Sorin's estate and return to Moscow, Arkadina and Sorin discuss Treplyov—and his recent failed suicide attempt. Arkadina dismissively refers to the attempt as Treplyov's having taken "a shot at himself," refusing to admit to the depths of her

son's misery either out of a profound emotional disconnect or a desire to numb the pain. IN doing so, she ignores the fact that she is at the heart of his many emotional problems. Sorin tries to reason with Arkadina and speak on Treplyov's behalf, arguing for the boy's emotional vulnerability and artistic and professional aimlessness. Sorin empathizes with Treplyov's fear of never living up to his full potential or being forgotten as a mediocrity or wannabe—but Arkadina has no understanding (or desire to understand) her son's emotional life. Her self-obsession, narcissism, and desperate need to keep her relationship with Trigorin afloat alienate her from everyone else around her—even her closest family members.

●● ARKADINA: That's jealousy. People with no talent but plenty of pretensions have nothing better to do than criticize really talented people. It's a comfort to them, I'm sure!

TREPLYOV: (*Sarcastically.*) Really talented people! (*Angrily.*) I'm more talented than the lot of you put together, if it comes to that! (*Tears the bandage off his head.*) You dreary hacks hog the front-row seats in the arts and assume that the only legitimate and genuine things are what you do yourselves, so you suppress and stifle the rest! [...]

ARKADINA: Mr. Avant-garde!

[...]

TREPLYOV: You skinflint!

ARKADINA: You scarecrow! (*TREPLYOV sits down and weeps quietly.*) You nobody!

**Related Characters:** Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov, Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina (speaker), Boris Alekseevich Trigorin

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 128

### Explanation and Analysis

As Arkadina changes Treplyov's bandages in a rare moment of affection and intimacy, Treplyov takes the opportunity to have a genuine moment with his mother. He begs her to end her embarrassing affair with the much-younger Trigorin, a predator who has designs on Nina. Arkadina refuses to hear any criticism of Trigorin, and begins lashing out at Treplyov for his "jealousy." As the two spiral into a battle of the most hurtful insults they can think to lob at one another, Chekhov shows just how destructive fame, ego, and unrequited love (the three most powerful forces in the play) truly are.

Treplyov wants his mother to love him more than anyone, as

a mother should love her child—but Arkadina is more interested in her own fame and her romantic affairs than providing any kind of emotional or financial support for her son. He contends daily with his unrequited love for Arkadina, and with her prioritization of her own "hack" art over their relationship. Treplyov wants success as an artist in order to impress his mother, but also to get close to her. He is incensed and embarrassed that she has no respect for him as a person or as an artist, in spite of her own mediocre talent and garish lifestyle.

●● ARKADINA: You want to do something reckless, but I won't have it, I won't let you... (*Laughs.*) You're mine... You're mine... [...] You're all mine. You're so talented, clever, our greatest living writer, you're Russia's only hope... You've got so much sincerity, clarity, originality, wholesome humor... With a single stroke you can pinpoint the most vital feature in a person or a landscape, your characters are so alive. Oh, no one can read you without going into ecstasy! [...] Am I lying? [...] Do I look like a liar? There, you see, I'm the only one who knows how to appreciate you; I'm the only one who tells you the truth, my darling, marvelous man...

**Related Characters:** Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina (speaker), Boris Alekseevich Trigorin

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 132

### Explanation and Analysis

When Trigorin confirms Arkadina's worst fears—and Treplyov's assertions—she flies off the handle entirely, begging her lover not to abandon her for the younger, sunnier Nina. She throws herself at Trigorin's feet and begins showering compliments and flattery upon him, desperate to make him stay. Even though it's questionable as to whether Trigorin is truly a talented writer (or a "hack," as Treplyov calls him) Arkadina tells him he's the "greatest living writer" in the world and "Russia's only hope." Her flattery is aimed directly at his ego—she knows that he is attracted to Nina because she makes him feel important, relevant, and glamorous, and is attempting to one-up her competition and show Trigorin that she's the one who "tells [him] the truth." Arkadina, as a fame and ego-obsessed individual herself, knows exactly how to get to Trigorin—and launches every weapon in her verbal arsenal at him, rapid-fire and relentlessly, in an attempt to get him to stay with her. If he leaves her, her own fame will diminish, her ego will take a hit—and the mediocrity that is her life will become

impossible to ignore. Arkadina knows this, and wants to stop it from happening at all costs.

## Act 4 Quotes

☛☛ MEDVEDENKO: It's dark outside. Somebody should tell them to pull down that stage in the garden. It stands there bare, unsightly, like a skeleton, and the scene curtain flaps in the wind. When I was going by last night, I thought somebody was on it, crying...

**Related Characters:** Semyon Semyonovich Medvedenko (speaker), Masha

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 138

### Explanation and Analysis

As Act 4 of *The Seagull* opens in a dim drawing room of Sorin's estate, it becomes clear that over the two years that have passed, many things have changed, while others have remained the same. Remembrances of the events of two summers ago, such as the creepy stage for Treplyov's play, stand erect and intact even as they decay. It is almost as if Sorin and Treplyov, who live at the estate year-round, don't want to forget that summer and are unable to leave it behind. This obsession with the past is disturbing to the simpering Medvedenko, who is still holding out hope that his wife, Masha, will abandon her unrequited feelings for Treplyov and turn her full attention to him and their children. The echoes of the past, though, will not be forgotten—and as Act 4 unfolds, it will become increasingly clear that many characters are unable to escape their haunted pasts or learn the lessons about life, love, and art that they should have from the events of years gone by.

☛☛ MASHA: It's all nonsense. Unrequited love—that's only in novels. Really silly. Just mustn't lose control or go on waiting for something, waiting for your ship to come in... If love ever burrows into your heart, you've got to get rid of it. They've just promised to transfer my husband to another school district. Once we've moved there—I'll forget all about it... I'll rip it out of my heart by the roots.

**Related Characters:** Masha (speaker), Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov, Semyon Semyonovich Medvedenko, Polina Andreevna

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 140-141

### Explanation and Analysis

When Masha's mother confronts her about her very obvious lingering feelings for Treplyov—feelings which are, as they always have been, decidedly unrequited—Masha calls her mother's claims “nonsense” and insists that she isn't “waiting for [her] ship to come in.” Masha, who married Medvedenko in hopes of ripping her love for Treplyov out “by the roots,” still hasn't been able to forget her true feelings, and yet she insists that she's left them behind. Masha seems to have hardened even more in the two years that have intervened since Act 3, now claiming that all love is insidious and dangerous. Masha is just one of the play's victims of unrequited love—but her adamant, almost delusional denial in the face of being confronted with the truth shows how destructive and destabilizing such unreturned affections can be.

☛☛ TREPLYOV: [Nina] made her debut outside Moscow at a summer theater, then toured the provinces. In those days I was keeping track of her and for a while wherever she was, I was there too. She would tackle the big roles, but her acting was crude, tasteless, her voice singsong and her gestures wooden. There were moments when she showed some talent at screaming or dying, but they were only moments.

**Related Characters:** Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov (speaker), Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 146

### Explanation and Analysis

As the others gathered at Sorin's estate ask Treplyov what became of Nina Zarechnaya, Treplyov begins telling them all about her failed love with Trigorin and her difficulties in her own acting career. As he does, he seems to take a kind of perverse delight in reporting the pain and setbacks he's faced—even as he confesses tacitly to stalking Nina throughout the provinces in an attempt to stay in touch with her. It's almost as if Treplyov followed Nina so closely for so long because he wanted to watch her fail to make himself feel better about his unrequited love for her—and perhaps even his own artistic career. This nasty side of Treplyov—the side that relishes Nina's pain simply because

she didn't love him back—is driven entirely by ego and narcissism. Nina's failure, Treplyov believes, is his success, and his cruel indictment of her acting abilities (or lack thereof) shows just how all-consuming and obsessive unrequited love can be, as he is clearly still hung up on her, even as he bashes her attempts at making art.

●● DORN: Well, I have faith in Konstantin Gavrilovich. There's something there! There's something there! He thinks in images, his stories are colorful, striking, and I have a real fondness for them. [...] Irina Nikolaevna, are you glad your son's a writer?

ARKADINA: Imagine, I still haven't read him. Never any time.

**Related Characters:** Irina Nikolaevna Arkadina, Evgeny Sergeevich Dorn (speaker), Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 153

### Explanation and Analysis

As the group discusses Treplyov's burgeoning writing career behind his back, they all volunteer different kinds of information. Trigorin says that though Treplyov has amassed fans in Moscow and St. Petersburg, his writing lacks perspective and direction, and never features any living characters. Dorn is supportive of Treplyov, however, and says that even if Treplyov has not yet reached his full potential, he is talented and on his way to success. When he asks Arkadina to chime in, she says dismissively that she "never [has] any time" to read her son's work. This shows that Arkadina truly doesn't want to see anyone else succeed—especially her own son, whose success and talent would remind her of her own aging career and artistic mediocrity. All Treplyov has ever wanted is to win his mother's affection by impressing her with his art—and even though he has gained a following and fanbase, this passage implies that without Arkadina's approval, Treplyov will never be content.

●● SHAMRAEV: (*To Trigorin.*) Hey, Boris Alekseevich, that thing of yours is still here.


TRIGORIN: What thing?

SHAMRAEV: A while back Konstantin Gavrilovich shot a gull, and you asked me to have it stuffed.

TRIGORIN: Don't remember. (*Thinking about it.*) Don't remember!

**Related Characters:** Boris Alekseevich Trigorin, Ilya Afanasevich Shamraev (speaker), Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya, Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 153-154

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shamraev tells Trigorin that his "thing"—a stuffed gull—is still at the house. Trigorin denies being able to remember asking Shamraev to stuff Treplyov's slain gull. It seems very obvious, from Trigorin's vehement denial of his recollection, that he does remember wanting the gull stuffed, but is now ashamed. Trigorin took inspiration from the dead gull and wrote a story about Nina's life, in which a man comes along and "destroy[s]" her for lack of anything better to do. These circumstances have, over the last two years, come to pass in real life: Nina moved to Moscow to be with Trigorin and pursue an acting career, but after she bore Trigorin a child that died, Trigorin abandoned her for Arkadina and left her poor and alone. Trigorin has indeed destroyed Nina's life while remaining comfortable and unscathed in his own—and the gull, a kind of trophy and reminder of that fact, symbolizes his perverted triumph.

●● NINA: And so, now you're a writer. You're a writer, I'm an actress... We've both fallen into the maelstrom... I used to live joyously, like a child—wake up in the morning and start to sing; I loved you, dreamed of fame, and now? First thing tomorrow morning I go to Yelets, third class... traveling with peasants... [...] A sordid kind of life!

**Related Characters:** Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya (speaker), Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 157-158




### Explanation and Analysis

As Nina reunites with Treplyov, they each take stock of the other—and while Nina can see that Treplyov has become a serious writer with a committed practice and even a series of publications to his name, she herself has little to show for her years of chasing fame. Nina is a third-rate actress who takes part in “third class” productions around the Russian countryside. Her “sordid” existence is a hostile, jostling “maelstrom” which has sucked her in and refuses to let her go. Nina thought when she was a “joyous” girl that making art would bring her fame, fortune, and happiness—now, she feels that she is unable to escape the nightmare of her own mediocrity and failure. Nina approached a life in the arts believing that because of her attachment to Trigorin and the “talent” he and Arkadina always told her she had, she’d quickly achieve her dreams. Instead, she has slid into obscurity and failed to make a name for herself. Nina is living her worst nightmare—and yet, as she continues talking with Treplyov, she will reveal that she’s not ready to give up her youthful dreams just yet.

●● NINA: You can't imagine what that's like, when you realize your acting is terrible. I'm a gull. No, that's wrong... Remember when you shot down a gull? By chance a man comes along, sees, and with nothing better to do destroys... Subject for a short story. That's wrong... (*Rubs her forehead.*) What was I saying?... I was talking about the stage. I'm not like that now... Now I'm a real actress... [...] Now I know, understand, Kostya, that in our work—it doesn't matter whether we act or we write—the main thing isn't fame, glamour, the things I dreamed about, it's knowing how to endure.

**Related Characters:** Nina Mikhailovna Zarechnaya (speaker), Boris Alekseevich Trigorin, Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 159-160

### Explanation and Analysis

As Nina talks with Treplyov, she speaks in confusing, winding sentences that repeat, contradict one another, and cut off in the middle. Nina seems to have trouble remembering the past, and has been driven to a kind of devastated mania by the “sordid” circumstances of the last two years. Nina isn't sure how to see herself anymore—as a fearless actress committed to her craft, or as a destroyed little “gull,” beaten and battered by fame, love, and Trigorin's cruelty. Even though Nina is clearly struggling physically, emotionally, and mentally, this speech does suggest that she's made some major breakthroughs when it comes to her ideas about art and fame. Nina had to hit rock bottom, it seems, to understand that fame is not the goal of art. Endurance, transcendence, and artistry have proven to be the important things in life. She has learned this lesson the hard way, but now appears to be committed to approaching her acting career with renewed grit and determination. Nina's failures have given her a new outlook on the freedoms, joys, and possibilities of life as an artist.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## ACT 1

It is a summer evening at Sorin's country estate. On a grassy knoll down by the lake, an "amateur" stage has been "hurriedly slapped together" for a performance. Yakov and some other workmen are hastily putting the finishing touches on the stage. Masha and her suitor, the schoolteacher Medvedenko, are on their way back from a walk. Medvedenko asks Masha why she is always dressed in black, and she replies that she is "in mourning for [her] life." Medvedenko says he doesn't understand Masha's unhappiness—though she's not a rich woman, she's fairly well-off, and she has her health to boot. Masha replies that her unhappiness has nothing to do with money—even poor people can be happy, she says. Medvedenko says he isn't so sure, and complains about his own precarious financial situation.

As Masha and Medvedenko approach the stage, Medvedenko tells Masha that Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplyov, Sorin's nephew, has written a play for his beloved Nina Zarechnaya to act in—the two young lovebirds are presenting a "joint artistic creation." Medvedenko laments that the two young lovers are so happy when his own love for Masha is unrequited. He asks Masha if she refuses to love him because he is poor, but Masha blithely states that she simply "can't reciprocate." She chastises Medvedenko for complaining so often about his financial situation—there are much worse things, she says, than being poor.

Sorin and Treplyov walk down towards the stage area—Sorin, a frail older man, uses a walking stick. He complains about the sleepy decadence of country life as Treplyov urges Masha and Medvedenko to clear the area until the stage is ready. Masha and Medvedenko head back up to the house. Yakov and the other workers head down to the lake to cool themselves off, and Treplyov nervously tells them to be back for the start of the performance in ten minutes. Treplyov inspects the stage and explains to Sorin that he wants the performance to begin exactly as the moon starts to rise—but he is worried that Nina Zarechnaya will be late or unable to escape the watchful eyes of her overbearing father and stepmother, who don't like her leaving her own house across the lake and spending time at Sorin's.

*The opening moments of the play immediately establish its theme of unrequited love as one of life's central sources of unhappiness. By introducing two minor characters and their private struggles with love first, Chekhov shows that unrequited love spares no one—and can seep into anyone's life unexpectedly and indiscriminately.*



*Chekhov contrasts Masha and Medvedenko's struggles in love with the suggestion that two young lovers have actually managed to find happiness at the lake. However, as the action continues, he will show that sometimes, even love that seems simple, pure, and straightforward is rife with deceit and disappointment.*



*This passage demonstrates how fussy Treplyov is about his art. He believes that his art reflects his soul and his worth as a human being, and he is determined to prove himself as both an artist and a man. This conflation of art and egotism, and the desire to use art as a means to personal glory, is part of the play's central concern.*



Sorin asks Treplyov why his mother (and Sorin's sister) Arkadina, a well-known actress, is in a bad mood. Treplyov dismissively replies that she's "bored" in the countryside, and "jealous" to boot—she doesn't want Treplyov to put on the play for fear that her own lover, the famous writer Boris Trigorin, might "take a shine" to Nina Zarechnaya. Arkadina doesn't want to see success on the stage belong to anyone but her—she can't stand listening to any artist but herself receive praise. Sorin accuses Treplyov of being too sensitive, and assures him that his mother "adores" him and will love the play, too.

Treplyov, however, is now on a tear about his mother's mercurial, hypocritical, narcissistic tendencies. Treplyov believes that his vain mother hates him because he is a reminder of her age—and the ways in which the "modern theater" is changing and leaving her behind. Treplyov knows that his mother is content to trod the boards performing outdated, sentimental works—but he himself believes theater is in need of "new forms." In spite of his lofty ideals about art and expression, he feels barred from participating in real artistic communities because of who his mother is, and he constantly worries that he's only allowed to attend certain parties and participate in certain conversations because other people "put up with [him] just because" he's Arkadina's son.

Sorin interjects to ask Treplyov what he knows about Arkadina's beau, the novelist Trigorin. Treplyov describes the man as "clever enough" and taciturn—in his late thirties, he is younger than Arkadina, but is so "jaded" that he "can love only those who are no longer young." Sorin laments that he himself never got to be even a "second-rate author"—to write was his life's dream.

Treplyov is overcome by emotion as he hears Nina approaching—"even the sound of her footsteps," he says, enchants him. As Nina enters, flustered but happy, Treplyov greets her as the "girl of [his] dreams." Nina states that while she was lucky enough to be able to sneak out of her father's house unnoticed, she can only stay for a little. Sorin hurries off to gather the others and bring them down for the performance. Treplyov and Nina, left alone, share a kiss. Nina remarks that, though her father and stepmother don't like her coming down to the "bohemian" lake estate, she's drawn to it "like a **gull**"—being around Treplyov and his family of artists fills her heart. Treplyov tells Nina that he loves her, but she shushes him as she hears footsteps approaching.

*There are even greater depths to Treplyov's desire to prove himself. Though he is in love with Nina and no doubt wants to impress her, the main object of his theatrical undertaking is to prove himself to his narcissistic, judgmental mother. Though Treplyov clearly has a complicated relationship with his mother and seemingly very few positive feelings about her, he still wants her approval quite desperately.*



*This passage reveals the true depths of Treplyov's insecurity about his identity and agenda as an artist. He wants very badly to create, and to make art for art's sake—but he knows how the machinery of fame and recognition work, and he is aware of how easy it is for real art to slip through the cracks. Treplyov wants to prove himself as an artist—but having been raised by a famous actress, there is a part of him that remains cynical about his ability to ever truly do so.*



*This passage hints at Treplyov's deep underlying hatred of his mother's much-younger paramour, and suggests that Treplyov has something of an Oedipal complex where his mother's affections are concerned. A narcissistic and self-centered person, Arkadina has a limited amount of attention and love to give—and when Trigorin is getting it, Treplyov is getting none.*



*This passage explores Treplyov and Nina's relationship more deeply. Though Treplyov appears head-over-heels in love with Nina, Nina is more drawn to the atmosphere of Treplyov's life than to the man himself. She won't tell him that she loves him back, tries to quiet his affections when she hears people approaching, and will only kiss him when they're alone and unobserved.*



Yakov is coming back up from the lake, and Treplyov asks him if all the special effects are ready for the performance. Yakov confirms that everything is set. Treplyov asks Nina if she's excited to perform—she says she's nervous to act in front of the famous Trigorin, whose “wonderful” stories she loves. Treplyov dismissively says he's never read any of Trigorin's work. Nina comments on the strange nature of Treplyov's play, which is “like a read-through,” and contains “no living characters.” Nina says she's a little disappointed that there's no love interest in the piece before ducking behind the stage to get ready to go on—Treplyov follows her.

Polina Andreevna, the wife of Sorin's estate overseer Shamraev, comes down to the lake with Dorn, a doctor and guest of Sorin—and her own lover. She chides Dorn for failing to take care of himself in the damp weather in spite of knowing better due to his profession. She accuses him of being “so infatuated” with Arkadina that he exposes himself to rain and cold to be near her. All men, she laments, are “ready to fall on [their] faces at an actress's feet.” Dorn says people naturally idealize actors and actresses, and Polina retorts that women have always idealized Dorn himself because of his status as a doctor.

Arkadina, Sorin, Trigorin, Shamraev, Medevenko, and Masha all arrive at the lake for the performance. Shamraev and Arkadina are discussing the declining state of Russian theater. At the sound of his mother's voice, Treplyov comes out from behind the stage. In a booming voice, he calls out to the audience to enter into the world of his play—a “drama of what will be in two hundred thousand years.”

The curtain rises, and behind it, the moon's reflection on the beautiful lake can be seen. Nina, dressed all in white, is seated on the stage on a large boulder. In a whimsical monologue, she explains that “all living things” are, in the future, completely extinct. The earth is “chilly,” “empty,” and “ghastly.” Nina explains that she represents the “universal soul” of “human consciousness” and “animal instinct” mingled together. Arkadina remarks, in a low voice, on the ostentatiously “avant-garde” nature of the play. Treplyov begs his mother to be quiet.

Nina's monologue continues. She describes her existence as a “prisoner, flung into a deep empty pit.” On the desolate surface of the ruined earth, there is now only one battle left to fight—a struggle with Satan. Nina spots Satan approaching, and as she does, Arkadina remarks on a “stink of sulphur” overpowering the air—one of Yakov's special effects. At this point, Arkadina and the others begin to poke fun at the play, and Treplyov, embarrassed and angry, calls for its end, instructing Yakov to lower the curtain before storming away from the lake.

*Again, this passage shows that Nina isn't truly as in love with Treplyov as he'd like to think she is. She's excited to perform in his work, but only because she believes it will garner the attention of more attractive, famous people. She even sort of disparages Treplyov's work, complaining that it's not to her taste.*



*Polina and Dorn represent yet another example of unrequited love. Polina is resentful of the fame Arkadina has, and of the ways in which people react to it. Fame is a destructive force within this play, and Polina knows that the desire to be around famous people in hopes of elevating one's own social status is a dangerous thing.*



*Arkadina comes down to her son's performance already lamenting all that's wrong with Russian theatre. This shows that she is judgmental and not predisposed to like her own son's work.*



*Treplyov's experimental play imagines a cold, desolate, lonely world—perhaps a reflection of his fears not just of the fate of the earth, but of his own life. As Arkadina begins to mock the play, Treplyov is clearly in distress—the play is as much for her as it is for himself or for Nina.*



*Though Treplyov's play attempts to wrestle with large, existential themes—and incorporate effects and new ideas—Arkadina sees it as a joke. The others around her, compelled by her fame and status, join her in making fun of the play, and Treplyov realizes his worst fears are true—without his mother's approval, he believes, he will not be able to succeed or gain clout as an artist.*





Sorin chastises his sister for offending Treplyov. Arkadina replies that her son told her the play was a joke, so she treated it as one—now, she says, he wants to claim it as his “masterpiece” only because she doesn’t like it. She is tired, she says, of her “temperamental, conceited little boy” and his attempts to make digs at her own artistry.

Trigorin speaks up to defend Treplyov, stating that “everyone writes the way [...] he can.” As the others begin debating the nature of art and theater, Arkadina calls for them all to stop taking about plays and enjoy the “glorious night.” Arkadina begins reminiscing aloud about the old days at the lake, when six or seven other families used to live at the shore. As she waxes poetic about the loud, decadent summers full of noise, music, and love affairs, she begins to feel guilty for how she treated Treplyov, and begins calling for him. Masha volunteers to go off and look for him.

Nina comes out from behind the stage and greets everyone warmly. Sorin and Arkadina congratulate her on her performance, and Arkadina tells her she has an “obligation” to become an actress. Nina says that though acting is her “fondest dream,” it won’t ever come true. Arkadina introduces Nina to Trigorin—Nina shyly tells him that she’s read all of his work, and then asks whether he thought Treplyov’s play was “strange.” Trigorin says he didn’t understand a single word of it—but enjoyed Nina’s acting. He looks out at the lake and remarks on how much he loves fishing.

Nina says it’s time for her to go. Arkadina begs her to stay longer, and Sorin and the others follow suit, asking her to linger just another hour. Nina, in tears, hurriedly runs off, stating that she can’t be out any longer. After she’s gone, Arkadina remarks on what a shame it is that Nina’s father has willed the entirety of her late mother’s fortune to his new wife, leaving Nina penniless. Dorn agrees that Nina’s father is a controlling “swine.” Arkadina, Sorin, and all the others except Dorn head back up to the house to get out of the cold.

Dorn, alone, says to himself that he really enjoyed the play. He spots Treplyov and resolves to tell the young man how much he liked his work. Treplyov enters and tells Dorn that he’s hiding from the “unbearable” Masha. Dorn tells Treplyov how much he enjoyed the play, and how much he admires Treplyov’s talent. With tears in his eyes, Treplyov embraces Dorn, incredulously asking if the man really thinks he should continue writing plays. Dorn urges him to keep writing about things that are “important and everlasting.”

*Arkadina and Treplyov clearly have an adversarial relationship, as signaled by her readiness to turn on her own son’s hard work and justify her own cruel actions.*



*As soon as the conversation revolves around actual art and not Arkadina or her fame and status, she doesn’t want it to take place anymore. She needs to be the center of attention at all times.*



*Nina has barely finished her performance, and already she’s bashing Treplyov’s play as a way of hopefully getting closer to Trigorin and Arkadina. Meanwhile, Trigorin’s love of “fishing” seems to tie into his desire to keep Nina on his hooks—however subconscious that impulse is at this point in the action.*



*The others pity Nina and see her as a bird trapped in a cage. Their infantilization of her blinds them to her darker impulses—her desire for fame and her need to use other, more establish artists as fodder for her dreams.*



*Dorn is one of the very few characters in the play who seems to encourage Treplyov’s art seriously and kindly. Treplyov, who is used to judgment, sarcasm, and alienation, takes Dorn’s words to heart—perhaps a bit too much.*



Treplov asks where Nina went, and Dorn tells him that she left for home. Treplov despairingly begins muttering about how he has to see Nina. Masha finally catches up with Treplov and tells him that Arkadina is asking after him. Treplov tells her to tell Arkadina he's gone out—and that no one should follow him. Treplov runs off in pursuit of Nina.

Masha tells Dorn that she needs his help. She tells him that she feels on the verge of “wreck[ing]” her life—she is in terrible pain because of how much she loves Treplov. She lays her head on Dorn's chest and sobs. Dorn comforts her, remarking on how “high-strung” the “spellbinding lake” makes all the young lovers around him.

*Masha chases Treplov here even as he chases Nina. The unrequited loves and missed connections within the play show just how destructive—and exhausting—it is to pursue unreturned love.*



*The empathetic Dorn feels bad for Masha, and also for Treplov. His attitude towards unrequited love in this passage suggests it's a folly and a necessary rite of passage—but as the play continues on, Chekhov will demonstrate the dark, serious consequences of destroying oneself in the name of love and affection.*



## ACT 2

Later in the week, Arkadina, Dorn, and Masha are together on the croquet lawn at midday. It is bright and hot outside. Dorn is reading aloud from a book, and Arkadina and Masha are standing side-by-side. Arkadina asks Dorn to tell her who is younger—her or the twenty-two-year-old Masha. Dorn says Arkadina is younger. Arkadina says that though she's “nearly twice” Masha's age, she is “constantly on the go” while Masha sits languidly in the same place. Masha admits that she feels old: like she is lugging her life around “like a dead weight.” Arkadina urges Masha to take better care of herself and invest more in her appearance.

Arkadina picks up the book Sorin has been reading and begins reciting from its pages aloud. The passage she reads concerns “people in society [...] pamper[ing] novelists,” and advises against “loving them” and “flattering” them. Arkadina stops reading, and insists that her situation with Trigorin is different from what the passage describes—she was “head over heels” in love with him before she began wooing him.

Sorin, Nina, and Medvedenko come down to the croquet field. Sorin excitedly announces that Nina's father and stepmother are out of town—Nina is free for three whole days. Nina, ecstatic, embraces Arkadina and tells her she's all hers. Nina asks what Arkadina is reading. Arkadina replies that it's a book by Guy du Maupassant—but it is “uninteresting and untrue.”

*Arkadina can hardly stand any conversation or activity that isn't about her glorification—a lovely afternoon reading on the lawn is interrupted by her need to brag about her youthfulness and compare her sexual and social capital to that of those around her.*



*When confronted with her own bad behavior examined even from a fictional angle, Arkadina feels the need to justify her choices and deflect any possible criticism to reassure herself that her choices are valid.*



*Nina, free from her parents' watchful gaze, is able to realize her dream of living with the artists on the other side of the lake for several days. Nina, whose home life is, apparently, miserable and loveless, craves the attention and compliments of these glamorous visitors.*



Arkadina asks where Treplyov is and why he's so "surly" lately and spends all his time down at the lake. Masha answers that he is "sick at heart" before asking Nina to recite something from his play. Nina asks why Masha would want her to do so—Treplyov's play, she says, was "so uninteresting." Masha, however, excitedly states that she believes Treplyov is a great poet.

Arkadina shakes Sorin awake—he has been snoring—and chides him for not taking better care of himself or seeking help from Dorn. Dorn says that he doesn't prescribe treatments for patients as old as Sorin. Medvedenko suggests Sorin stop smoking, but Sorin calls the idea "rubbish." Medvedenko says that alcohol and tobacco turn people into "fuzzy" versions of themselves, but Sorin says that after working in the Department of Justice for twenty-eight long years, he deserves to fill his retirement with some enjoyment. Masha heads up to the house for lunch, and as she goes, Sorin remarks that Masha is someone who has known "no happiness in her life."

Arkadina remarks how "boring" it is in the rural countryside. She's sick of everyone philosophizing, and would rather be in a posh hotel room somewhere learning lines for a play. Nina "rapturously" longs for the glamorous city life Arkadina describes.

Shamraev and Polina come down to the lawn. Arkadina suggests she and Polina go into town for a while, but Shamraev says that because today is the day the rye is being carted to town, there won't be horses for them. Arkadina is incensed, and says that if there are no horses, she'll return to Moscow immediately. Shamraev blusteringly states that he's resigning from his position as overseer and storms back up to the house. Arkadina vows to never set foot on her brother's estate again and heads up, too—Trigorin, coming up from the lake, follows her across the lawn.

Nina chides Polina for refusing to give the "famous actress" Arkadina a horse to take into town, but Polina says there's nothing she can do—there are simply no free horses. Sorin asks Nina and Medvedenko to come up to the house with him to try to change Arkadina's mind. Dorn and Polina stay behind.

*In just the few days that have passed, Nina has clearly all but abandoned Treplyov. She would rather poke fun at his work to gain Arkadina's approval than support the man she purported to love. Masha, on the other hand, remains devoted to complimenting Treplyov—even when he can't hear her. Her love for him, it seems, is true.*



*In spite of his flagging health, Sorin doesn't want to listen to anyone's opinions about how he might better take care of himself. He's afraid of facing down the end of his life—and seems to want to live in denial about his age and his health, afraid of admitting to himself or anyone else what stage of life he's really in and how he's failed to "enjoy" things enough along the way.*



*Again, Arkadina cannot stand any conversation that isn't about her. Nina doesn't see Arkadina's shallowness and narcissism—she only sees the glamour and independence the woman represents.*



*Arkadina has gotten so used to the trappings of fame that when a request she makes is refused and she's not treated as more special or worthy than anyone else, she completely loses her cool. Her egotism has completely overtaken her life, and she's unable to deal with situations in which she's not the most important person.*



*Nina clearly also believes that famous people should be afforded special, preferential treatment—the idea that one day she could be afforded such treatment after years of being mistreated by her parents is one of the things, perhaps, driving her goals of achieving fame and fortune.*



Polina tells Dorn that Shamraev's "crudeness" and his penchant for squabbling with guests is making her feel "ill." She begs Dorn to take her away from her life so that they can be together at last—Dorn, however, says that, at fifty-five, he's too old to change the course of his life. Polina accuses him of rejecting her because he wants to chase other women—she says she's "sick with jealousy."

Nina walks by picking flowers on the lawn—Dorn asks her how things are going inside. Nina reports that Arkadina is crying and Sorin is having an asthma attack. Dorn stands up to head inside so that he can give them both some calming valerian, and Nina urges him to take the flowers in to them. Polina follows him, ripping the flowers from his hands and tearing them up as they near the house and get out of Nina's line of sight.

Alone on the lawn, Nina remarks how odd the behavior of these bohemian people is—it's strange, she thinks, to see "a famous actress crying, and over such a trivial matter," while her paramour, a "best-selling author," spends his whole days down at the lake by himself. Nina admits that she always thought that famous people were "proud" and "inaccessible," but now sees that they are, more or less, just like "anybody else."

Treplov approaches Nina, "carrying a rifle and a slain **gull**." After confirming that Nina is alone, he sets the gull down at her feet. Nina asks him what it means—Treplov doesn't answer, but says only that he killed the gull and now wants to lay it at her feet. Nina asks Treplov what's wrong with him. He tells her that he'll soon kill himself "the very same way" he killed the gull. Nina tells Treplov that she doesn't recognize who he is anymore—he's always talking in codes and symbols lately, but though she recognizes the gull as one of his symbols, she's "too ordinary" to understand him.

Treplov says he believes Nina stopped loving him the night of his "fiasco" of a play—he can't stand her sudden coldness towards him, and he is distressed over the idea that she sees him as "a mediocrity." As Treplov sees Trigorin approaching with a notebook in hand, he tells Nina that he knows she thinks Trigorin is the "real genius." Treplov hurriedly runs off.

*Polina and Dorn, too, are locked in a dance of unrequited love. Chekhov has populated this play with people willing to emotionally—and physically—debase themselves in pursuit of the ones they love, showing how the same kind of pain and destruction manifests in people from all walks of life.*



*Polina is frustrated that Dorn will barely give her the time of day, but rushes to the aid of others when they're in physical or emotional need.*



*Nina idealizes fame so greatly that she doesn't seem to realize celebrities and artists, too, often behave badly. Nina's dangerous equation of artistic merit with inner goodness will lead to several problems for her in the future as she chases down fame and celebrity at great cost to her own moral values and physical well-being.*



*In one of the most iconic and well-known scenes in the entire play, Treplov brings a dead gull he has killed to set at Nina's feet—informing or threatening her that he wants the same fate for himself, and implying that Nina's indifference towards him will be the cause of his death. Nina, who once enjoyed Treplov's symbolic gestures and esoteric behavior, now plays dumb and insists she has no idea what he's trying to do—when in all likelihood, she just wants to distance herself even further from him rather than play his games any longer.*



*Treplov is clearly disturbed and even moved to violence by Nina's favoring Trigorin over him. Trigorin has already stolen Treplov's mother's heart—now, he is stealing Nina's too, and Treplov is helpless to keep Nina for himself.*





Trigorin approaches, absentmindedly making notes in his notebook as he mutters aloud to himself—it becomes clear that he is writing a character sketch of Masha. Nina greets Trigorin excitedly. He looks up from his notebook and tells her that he and Arkadina are leaving today—he plainly states that he and Nina will probably “never see one another again.” He laments that he so rarely gets to “meet young girls” like her and hear the interesting things they have to say. He says he wishes he could be in Nina’s shoes and be young again—Nina retorts that she wishes she could be in his and could know what it feels like to be famous.

Trigorin says that no matter how much praise he receives, it’s never enough—but Nina can’t stop waxing poetic about what it must be like to live a “brilliant, meaningful” life full of art, beauty, and fame. Trigorin tells Nina that she’s upsetting him—he decides to tell her the truth about his “beautiful, brilliant life.” He laments that he is obsessive about his craft to the point of ignoring real life. Everything, he says, is just fodder for his stories. He is so determined to make good art and surpass his previous attempts that he cannibalizes his own friendships, interactions, and feelings for his work—he “know[s] no peace,” and never feels anything he writes is good enough in spite of the unceasing effort he puts in.

Nina asks if the moments in which Trigorin experiences inspiration—or even the moments in which he’s just writing—are happy ones. Trigorin admits that writing is “nice enough,” but as soon as his work is published, he begins to find errors and things he wishes he could revise. Reviews always compare him to great writers like Tolstoy and Turgenev, and he fears he’ll never be as truly good as they are. He is never satisfied with himself, he says, and worries that his writing isn’t even fulfilling a “social” obligation to the world around him. He feels like a “phony” all the time.

Nina tells Trigorin that he’s working himself too hard—and that even if he’s disappointed in himself, there are many others who regard his work as beautiful and important. Nina says that if she could live as a writer or an actress, she’d sacrifice everything—her family, money, personal happiness. She’d be fine with personal dissatisfaction, she says, if only she could be famous.

*This scene between Nina and Trigorin demonstrates the voyeuristic and indeed cannibalistic side of Trigorin—he wants to use the experiences of others to inform his own work, and is transparently working on a piece about Masha while simultaneously lamenting that he can’t use Nina as a form of research. Nina, however, is blind to Trigorin’s machinations, so dazzled is she by his glamour and fame.*



*In spite of Trigorin’s garish behavior and sense of entitlement to the lives and experiences of others, in this speech, he reveals himself to be just as human and insecure as anyone else. He knows that his motives and indeed his actions are often sketchy or even cruel, and though he wishes he could change, he is simply too afraid of the embarrassment failure would bring.*



*Trigorin worries that he is a mediocrity in spite of all his hard work. He fears realizing that he has chased success so long for nothing—even as he admits to desiring fame for fame’s sake and sacrificing his artistic practice in order to pawn off the stories of his friends and acquaintances as things of his own invention.*



*In spite of Trigorin’s frankly disturbing confessions, Nina remains idealistic about fame to the point of delusion. She is so transfixed by the attention and adoration Trigorin and Arkadina both receive that she doesn’t realize the gravity of what Trigorin is telling her about the dark side of fame.*



Arkadina's voice rings out across the lawn, calling Trigorin in. Trigorin says he wishes he could stay in the country a little while longer. Looking out across the lawn, he spots the dead **gull** on the ground and asks what it's doing there. Nina replies that Treplyov killed it. Trigorin takes out his notebook and jots down an idea for a short story about a girl who grows up on the shores of a beautiful lake, "happy and free, like a gull"—until a man comes along and "destroys her" simply because he has nothing better to do.

Arkadina calls for Trigorin again—but shouts out to him that they're going to stay after all. Trigorin heads into the house to talk to Arkadina. Nina, alone again, cries out: "It's a dream!"

*Trigorin, transfixed by the idea of Nina as a gull, is the one who plants in her head the idea that she is an object primed for destruction—an idea Nina will cling to as the years go by. Trigorin's callous treatment of Nina as an object in a story—a story that he himself will later transmute from fiction to reality—shows how uncaring and self-serving he truly is.*



*In spite of Trigorin having shown Nina the dark, selfish side of himself, she maintains that fame and adoration are her greatest "dream."*



### ACT 3

In the dining room of Sorin's estate, trunks and boxes are lined up against the walls: the summer is coming to an end and his guests are preparing to depart. Trigorin eats lunch while a very drunk Masha stands nearby and talks to him. She tells him that if Treplyov had "wounded himself seriously," she would have killed herself. She vows to "rip [her love] up by the roots" by marrying Medvedenko and blotting out her old problems with new ones. Masha pours a shot of vodka for herself and one for Trigorin—he tells her she's had enough, but she insists on drinking "openly," and downs her shot quickly. Trigorin says he wishes he could stay, but Arkadina will never let him—now that Treplyov has tried and failed to kill himself, he wants to challenge Trigorin to a duel.

Masha replies that Treplyov is surely jealous of Trigorin—a predicament she can understand. She tells Trigorin that she's marrying Medvedenko because she feels sorry for him—and because she knows he's "awfully in love" with her. She asks Trigorin to send her his next book—and to inscribe it to "[Masha,] [...] who lives in this world for no apparent reason." She leaves, and Nina enters the room.

Nina asks Trigorin if he thinks she'll become an actress or not—he replies that no one can "give advice about things like that." Nina presents Trigorin with a small medallion engraved with his initials and the name of his most recent book. Trigorin happily accepts the gift, and Nina begs him not to forget her. He promises to always remember her as she was on the bright day last week when they were talking by the lake, near the dead **gull** lying on the ground. Nina hears someone coming, and hurries from the room—but asks Trigorin to "save two minutes" to say goodbye to her before he leaves.

*It is clear from the outset that things have deteriorated between acts two and three. Treplyov has tried to kill himself—ostensibly out of his despair over Nina—and Masha is beside herself but using alcohol to numb the pain. Even though Masha tells Trigorin of her plans to get over Treplyov, she drinks heavily—a sign that she's desperate to escape her feelings rather than deal with them.*



*Masha tries to have a sense of humor or sarcasm about the depths of her own pain, but it's clear that even as she makes plans to marry Medvedenko, she has no idea what she's doing "in this world." Chekhov is beginning to show just how truly destructive feelings of unrequited love can be.*



*Nina has designs on Trigorin, and is clearly desperate to keep his attentions even as he prepares to depart Sorin's estate. Nina said in the previous act that she'd do anything for fame and her dreams of success, adoration, and glory—here, Chekhov shows Nina's devious side putting her plans into motion and latching onto the person she believes can give her a taste of the life she so wants.*



Arkadina and Sorin come into the dining room, and Arkadina asks if Nina has just left—and if she’s “interrupted something.” Trigorin is studying his medallion, which cites specific lines from a specific page of his book. Trigorin asks if there are copies of his works anywhere in the house—she tells him there are some in Sorin’s study. Trigorin hurries out to find his book and look up the line the medallion refers to.

*Arkadina is clearly aware of what’s happening between Trigorin and Nina at this point—but is probably trying to ignore her own awareness in order to dull the pain of slowly being replaced by a younger, more beautiful woman.*



Sorin is planning on going into town, but Arkadina suggests he stay and rest for his health. Sorin argues the opposite—he’s been feeling “stale,” and thinks getting into town for a little while will rejuvenate him. Arkadina asks Sorin once more to stay home and “keep an eye” on Treplyov. Arkadina is anxious that she has to depart so soon after her son “took a shot at himself”—but knows that the sooner she gets Trigorin away from Treplyov, the less jealous her son will feel. Sorin suggests that “vanity” and anxiety over his art are at the root of Treplyov’s problems—not just his jealousy over Nina and Trigorin.

*Even though her brother is in bad health and her son has recently attempted suicide, Arkadina longs to get back to her glamorous life in Moscow. She has no empathy for those around her and no concern for anyone but herself.*



Sorin suggests Arkadina give Treplyov some money, but she says she has none to give. Sorin laughs at her, and condescendingly says he knows his “generous, selfless” sister would of course give her son money if she had it. Sorin says he doesn’t have any money to give either—Shamraev takes it all and spends it on the farm. Arkadina admits she does have some money, but says she must save it to spend on her costumes.

*Arkadina is just as selfish with her finances as she is with her time. A gift of money could greatly improve both Sorin and Treplyov’s lives—but Arkadina insists she needs the money for her “costumes.” Whether or not Arkadina’s career is actually thriving is impossible to know—but what is clear is that she’s too selfish to even think of helping anyone but herself.*



Sorin says he’s about to faint and wobbles on his feet—Arkadina calls for help. Treplyov (with a bandage wrapped around his head) and Medvedenko rush into the room, but by the time they get there Sorin claims to have recovered and waves them away. Medvedenko escorts Sorin to the other room so that he can take a nap, while Sorin mumbles about resting up so he can make it into town later.

*Even as her brother suffers right in front of her, Arkadina doesn’t change her tune or offer any help—emotional, financial, or physical.*



Arkadina and Treplyov are alone. Treplyov suggests Arkadina lend Sorin some money so that he can get out of the countryside—Arkadina again states that she has no money. Treplyov asks Arkadina if she’ll change his bandage, as the doctor is late. She goes over to a cabinet and retrieves a first-aid kit, then sits Treplyov down and removes his bandage. She tells him delightedly that his wound is nearly healed, and begs him not to “do any more click-click” while she’s away. Treplyov insists he won’t—he was merely seized by “a moment of insane desperation.”

*In a rare moment of affection, Arkadina changes her son’s bandages and shows him some attention and even love. Even as she does so, however, she makes light of his recent suicide attempt and belittles his pain—she doesn’t even ask him how he’s doing, but rather tells him that his wound is nearly healed, thus ignoring and negating his physical pain alongside his emotional pain.*



As Arkadina cleans Treplyov's head wound, he reminisces about his childhood days spent following Arkadina around at the National Theater. He says that for the last few days, he's loved her "as tenderly and freely" as he did then—he has, he says, no one else anymore, and wishes his mother would stop messing about with Trigorin. Arkadina says she knows she can't expect Treplyov to like Trigorin—but asks him to "respect [her] independence."

Treplyov begs Arkadina to see how Trigorin has destroyed their own relationship—whilst "cultivating" Nina and basking in her admiration. Arkadina asks Treplyov to stop saying "nasty things" about Trigorin. Treplyov insults Trigorin's talent, and Arkadina retorts that Treplyov is the one with no talent. Treplyov boasts that he has more talent than Arkadina and Trigorin put together and calls them a pair of "hacks." The two of them trade cruel insults until Treplyov begins weeping. Arkadina begs Treplyov to forgive her for calling him a "nobody" and embraces him.

Treplyov confesses to Arkadina that he has "lost everything"—his drive to write, his beloved Nina, and indeed his "hope." Arkadina reassures Treplyov that once Trigorin leaves, Nina will love Treplyov once again. Trigorin approaches the dining room and Treplyov hurries out, stating that he won't confront Trigorin—but can't bear to look at him any longer.

Trigorin enters the room holding the book whose title Nina inscribed into the medallion—he reads aloud the lines her engraving references. "If ever my life is of use to you," he recites, "come and take it." Having realized the depths of Nina's devotion to him, he begs Arkadina to stay just one more day. She tells Trigorin that she knows what's going on and asks him to "show some self-control." In response, Trigorin begs Arkadina to "let [him] go." Realizing the truth of Trigorin's love for Nina, Arkadina is stunned, and accuses him of torturing her. Trigorin replies that he has never known love as pure as the love Nina is showing him—and is determined to chase it and taste it.

Arkadina, now hysterical, laments her "old and ugly" face and kneels at Trigorin's feet, begging him to see that he is "the last chapter in [her] life story." She says she won't survive if he leaves her—and she won't let him. She flatters him beseechingly, calling him the "greatest living writer" and "Russia's only hope" while also complimenting his "silky hair" and gorgeous eyes. Trigorin succumbs to her flattery, even as he quietly chides himself for his spinelessness. He tells Arkadina to take him away and never let him out of her sight.

*Treplyov's fond memories of his childhood following Arkadina around quickly turn to jealousy and resentment. Perhaps Treplyov remembers how his mother used to be before her obsession with fame and validation took over—or perhaps he longs once again to be the most important thing in her life.*



*This passage shows just how much resentment there is between Treplyov and Arkadina. Treplyov hates his mother for parading around with Trigorin, and Arkadina hates Treplyov merely for existing: as he grows older, she's reminded of the fact that she's growing older, too. They are terrible threats to one another's egos, and just being around one another fills them both with insecurity and rage.*



*Even as Treplyov opens up to his mother, Arkadina pushes his fears to the side and tries to end the moment of genuine communication between them as quickly as possible.*



*Trigorin doesn't want Nina very badly at all until he realizes that she is offering herself up to him, no strings attached—and using his own work to do it. Trigorin's ego is given such a boost by Nina's bald idolatry of him that he tells Arkadina straight out that he wants to end their relationship and move on to Nina. Trigorin and Arkadina share the need to have their talent, fame, and sexual viability confirmed by another, younger individual who adores them and reassures them they haven't become irrelevant or undesirable.*



*Arkadina knows that if Trigorin leaves her for Nina, it will mean that she herself is old, irrelevant, and sexually and romantically uninteresting to Trigorin and thus, in her egotistical mind, to all men. Arkadina is desperate not so much for Trigorin's love, but for what his love brings her—attention, validation, and proximity to youth and "new" fame.*



Shamraev enters and announces that the horses are ready to take them to the station. He makes small talk with Arkadina, asking her about a famous actor she might know, while Yakov, a cook, and a housemaid buzz about the room, getting Arkadina's things ready. Polina Andreevna comes into the room and brings Arkadina a basket of plums for her journey—Sorin and Medvedenko enter as well. Sorin is dressed to go into town, and Medvedenko announces that he is going to walk to the station so he can see Arkadina and Trigorin off. As Arkadina passes out tips to the cook, the housemaid, and Yakov, she asks where her son has gone—but doesn't put any effort into finding Treplyov or even calling for him before she exits with her coterie, leaving the stage bare.

A few moments later, Trigorin re-enters, claiming he's forgotten his walking stick. As he crosses through the dining room, he bumps into Nina. Nina excitedly tells him that she's made up her mind—she's going to try to be an actress. She plans to abandon her life in the country and start a new one in Moscow. Trigorin, thrilled, surreptitiously tells her to stay at a certain hotel in the arts district and write to him the minute she arrives—he will meet her there. He tells her that he can't wait to see her again and gives her a passionate kiss.

## ACT 4

Two years have passed since the end of act three. Treplyov has turned a drawing-room in Sorin's house into an office, and it is covered in stacks of books and scattered papers. The room is empty, but lit by a single lamp against the dark of the evening. Masha and Medvedenko enter, calling for Treplyov, whom Sorin has asked for. Medvedenko looks out the window onto the lawn, and remarks that someone should really take down the creepy old stage by the lake.

Medvedenko asks Masha if they can go home—they have been at Sorin's estate for three days now, and their baby is at home with the nursemaid. Masha says she wants to stay the night. Medvedenko says he's going to go home without her and begs her to come home soon—Masha drolly states that she'll come home tomorrow. Treplyov and Polina enter, carrying sheets and bedclothes. Polina begins setting up a bed on a divan in the corner, explaining that Sorin has asked for a bed to be made up in Treplyov's room. Masha helps her, ignoring Medvedenko's cloying goodbyes as he leaves.

*Arkadina is happy to have a moment in which she's the center of attention, receiving gifts and last-minutes questions as she passes out tips to the grateful help. She's so wrapped up in the vortex of her own ego that she doesn't even summon her son to bid him goodbye—in spite of the fight they've just had and the physical and psychological suffering he's recently been through.*



*Trigorin is excited that Nina is coming to Moscow—but not because he's happy she's chasing her dreams. Nina has essentially told Trigorin that her life is in his hands, using his own words—this amount of flattery is more than he knows what to do with, and he is determined to use Nina as a wellspring of praise for as long as she's able to give him what he wants.*



*The time jump that has occurred allows Chekhov to investigate the long-term effects of the large existential themes the play wrestles with it. The fourth act will examine how unrequited love, the fear of mediocrity, and the pursuit of fame have changed each of his characters' lives—for better or for worse.*



*Even though Masha said that in marrying Medvedenko, she'd surely forget all about Treplyov, it's clear that she has no love in her heart for Medvedenko, and even seems to want to ignore him at best and antagonize him at worst.*





Polina wanders over to Treplyov's desk and looks at one of his manuscripts. She tells him nobody ever imagined he'd become a "real writer," one who makes money from the magazines in which his work appears. She tells Treplyov he's also gotten very handsome, and urges him to be a little more "affectionate" with Masha. Treplyov leaves the room in silence. Masha chastises her mother for upsetting Treplyov, but Polina answers that her heart "bleeds" for Masha. Masha, however, says unrequited love is silly, and that to wait around for someone is foolish. She reminds Polina that Medvedenko has been transferred to a new school district, and once they've moved, she'll "forget all about" her love for Treplyov.

The sound of Treplyov playing violin in the next room comes through the door. Masha begins swaying to the music, and says again that once she moves, she'll forget Treplyov within a month. Dorn and Medvedenko, who hasn't left after all, wheel Sorin into the room in a chair. The three men complain about how expensive things are, and how little money they all have. At the sight of her husband, Masha asks Medvedenko why he hasn't left yet, and says she wishes she'd "never set eyes on [him.]"

Sorin asks where Arkadina has gone, and Dorn answers that she's gone to the station to meet Trigorin. Sorin says that for Arkadina to come back to the estate, he must be "seriously ill." Dorn offers him some medicine, but Sorin scoffs at the idea of taking anything. He begins reminiscing about his youth—he says he has never achieved any of the dreams he set out for himself, like becoming an author, getting married, and living in town. Dorn urges Sorin not to complain about his life. Treplyov comes back into the room and sits near Sorin. Masha stares at Treplyov, unable to take her eyes off him.

Dorn asks Treplyov where Nina Zarechnaya has gotten to these days—he's heard she's living "a rather peculiar life." Treplyov reluctantly explains that after she ran away from home and went off with Trigorin, she bore him a child—but the baby died, and Trigorin fell out of love with her and returned to Arkadina, with whom he'd never officially severed ties. "Nina's private life has not been a roaring success," Treplyov says with just a hint of satisfaction.

*Though Polina is proud of all Treplyov has achieved, she's unable to look past his rejection of her daughter. Masha insists that she's not interested in stoking her unrequited love for Treplyov anymore—but at the same time, tacitly admits that she hasn't yet stopped having feelings for him.*



*Masha continues to live in denial, believing her feelings of love for Treplyov (and hatred of her own husband) will go away if she puts distance between herself and her unrequited love.*



*Sorin picks up a thread from earlier in the play and begins lamenting his failure to take full advantage of his lie. It's clear that Sorin feels shame and angst over not having lived up to his potential—in this regard, he is much like many of the other characters in the play who also wrestle with feelings of mediocrity and disillusionment.*



*Treplyov's apparent delight in describing the hardships and indeed horrors that have befallen Nina shows that he resents her for leaving him behind—and feels, perhaps, that she got what she deserved for chasing a second-rate writer like Trigorin and her own hollow dreams of fame.*



Dorn asks how the stage has treated her, and Treplyov replies that Nina hasn't had any luck as an actress, either. For a while, he says, he followed her around the countryside as she performed throughout the provinces—but her acting, Treplyov says, was always “crude,” “tasteless,” and “wooden.” The only kind of acting she had any talent for, he says, was “screaming or dying.” Treplyov confesses that, though he often tried to speak with Nina, she never wanted to see him—but would often write him letters, which she would sign “**The Gull.**”

Treplyov reveals that Nina is back in town, staying at a hotel near the railway. She has been back for five days, and though Treplyov has gone to visit her, she won't receive any guests. Medvedenko chimes in and says that he ran into Nina yesterday, and she told him she'd pay them all a visit soon. Treplyov claims she won't—her father and stepmother have disowned her and installed watchmen around their estate so that she cannot even get close. Sorin laments Nina's hard luck, reminiscing about what a lovely girl she was—and admitting that even he was “a little bit in love with her for a while.”

Arkadina, Trigorin, and Shamraev all enter the drawing room, laughing and talking. Shamraev compliments Arkadina on her youthful appearance after all these years. Trigorin greets Masha and then Treplyov, asking whether Treplyov has renounced his “grudge.” Treplyov, in response, shakes Trigorin's hand. Arkadina tells Treplyov that Trigorin has even brought along the magazine which printed Treplyov's latest story—coincidentally, Trigorin has a story in it, too. Trigorin says he is constantly fielding questions from Treplyov's adoring fans in Moscow, who all want to know what he looks like.

Arkadina and Polina set up a card table so that they can all play a lottery game similar to bingo. Masha asks Shamraev if Medvedenko can borrow a horse to ride home—Shamraev says they're already in for the night. Medvedenko says he'll go on foot in spite of the bad weather. He heads out, insisting he's leaving for real this time. Arkadina asks Trigorin to come over and play the lotto. Treplyov looks through the magazine Trigorin has brought—both of them have stories printed in it, and Treplyov can see that, though Trigorin has leafed through his own story many times and wrinkled the pages, he hasn't even gotten to Treplyov's piece yet. Arkadina asks Treplyov if he'll play the lotto, but Treplyov leaves the room.

*Just as Treplyov takes a perverse kind of pleasure in reporting Nina's personal failures, he seems happy to be able to tell the others that Nina is not a talented actress, either. The fact that she has signed all her letters to him over the years as “The Gull” certainly brings him a twisted happiness, as well—it means that Treplyov has left an indelible mark on Nina's psyche and self-perception.*



*Even though Treplyov repeatedly points out to the others how pitiful Nina has become, they can't help but recall her bright, sunny demeanor and her naïve but hopeful outlook on life. Treplyov's meanness and delight in Nina's mediocrity is highlighted as the others express genuine sorrow to learn what has befallen her.*



*Trigorin and Treplyov have gone from being rivals to peers, in a way, over the last two years. They publish in the same magazines, and Treplyov has achieved a kind of success that mirrors Trigorin's own. Trigorin seems to respect Treplyov as an equal—but Treplyov seems slightly less interested in embarking on a friendship with the man who has stolen so much from him.*



*As Treplyov looks through Trigorin's copy of “their” magazine, he realizes that the egotistical older writer has merely read his own work several times and has completely ignored Treplyov's piece. Treplyov, who writes because he wants attention from specific people—Trigorin, Nina, and Arkadina—is dismayed that his work is not reaching those he wants it to and disgusted by Trigorin's narcissistic behavior to boot.*



Arkadina, Dorn, Masha, Polina, and Shamraev all play at a card table and discuss Treplyov's career. Polina and Shamraev say he must be depressed because of some poor reviews he's gotten recently. Trigorin says Treplyov can't find his "proper voice," and keeps writing nonsense stories with no living characters in them. Dorn says he has faith in Treplyov and thinks he's talented. He asks Arkadina if she feels the same—Arkadina replies that she hasn't read a single thing her son has written.

*As the group discusses Treplyov's writing, it becomes clear that while he's achieved some success, his career has not brought him the respect of his rival Trigorin or the adoration of his mother.*



Treplyov comes back into the room and goes to his desk. Shamraev tells Trigorin that a "thing" of his is still at the house. Trigorin asks what "thing" he means, and Shamraev replies that "a while back," Trigorin asked him to have a **gull** that Treplyov shot stuffed. Trigorin says he doesn't remember any such thing. He wins the game, and Arkadina suggests they all go into the kitchen for a bite to eat. Treplyov says he's not hungry. Everyone goes out, leaving him alone at his desk. He sits with his papers, lamenting aloud his "trite" writing and lack of talent.

*The revelation that Trigorin asked to have the gull Treplyov shot stuffed shows that Trigorin wanted to preserve either the moment of inspiration for his voyeuristic story about Nina, or the moment that he realized he could be the one to take her life into his own hands and do with her what he wished. This demonstrates Trigorin's enormous ego and his delight in inspiring unrequited or unmatched love in the women around him.*



There is a knock at the window, and Treplyov goes over to it, but can't see outside. He goes out to the veranda, and comes back in a few moments later with Nina Zarechnaya, who lays her head on Treplyov's chest and begins sobbing. Treplyov welcomes her ecstatically, claiming to have had a "premonition" of her arrival and saying he's been nursing an "aching" heart. Nina begs Treplyov to lock the study doors so that no one else will come into the room and see her. He obliges her request.

*Even though just moments ago Treplyov seemed to be celebrating—or at least drawing personal satisfaction from—the many difficulties that have befallen Nina, as soon as he sees her again, he welcomes her with open arms and admits to having never abandoned his feelings for her. Treplyov has perhaps been pushing aside his feelings for Nina in order to dull or forget the pain of unrequited love—but now, in her presence, he can no longer ignore them.*



Nina looks around the room, remarking upon how it's changed. She asks Treplyov if he thinks she has changed, too—he says that she's lost weight. He asks why she hasn't called on him the week she's been in town, and Nina confesses that she was afraid Treplyov "hated" her—every night, she dreams that she encounters him, but he refuses to acknowledge her.

*Nina, once a lovely and bright young woman, now appears gaunt, frail, and frightened. She was confident, self-assured, articulate, and happy as a girl—now, she is the opposite in every way. For years Treplyov pined for Nina and worried she hated him—now, it is Nina who is haunted by visions of Treplyov.*



Nina's speech grows frenzied, and she urges Treplyov to sit so that they can "talk and talk." She asks if he can hear the wind raging outside, and says she's "a **gull**" before second-guessing herself and saying she was "wrong" to call herself one. She tries to discuss the work of the writer Turgenev with Treplyov, but then breaks down in sobs. Treplyov tries to comfort her, but Nina says she hasn't wept in years and is in need of a cry. She says that though she and Treplyov have both realized their dreams, she's still sad—once she dreamed of love and fame, but now she lives a "sordid" life marked by disappointment.

*Nina jumps from subject to subject in a manic, uncontrolled state. She can't restrain her own tears, and continually backtracks through her own assertions about herself, unable to decide who she really is or how she wants to present herself to Treplyov. She seems both to want to pretend that she's doing all right, and to admit to Treplyov once and for all the true, horrifying depths of her misery.*



Treplov says that, though he told himself he hated Nina, he has never stopped loving her—he doesn’t have the “power” to do so. He admits that though he, too, has realized his dreams as a writer, his life is “unbearable” without Nina in it. Without her love, his writing is “stale” and unfulfilling. He asks Nina to stay with him, or to let him go with her on her travels. She doesn’t answer him, but instead stands up and wraps herself in her cloak.

Nina tells Treplov that he shouldn’t love her—she believes she “should be killed.” She begins rambling and babbling again, speaking in half-sentences as she refers to herself as a “gull,” then an actress. She begins speaking about her affair with Trigorin, though she doesn’t mention him by name. She confesses that he “laugh[ed] at [her] dreams,” and her anxiety over Trigorin’s inability to love her warped her acting. She asks Treplov if he remembers the gull—something a man “comes along, sees, and with nothing better to do destroys.”

Nina continues babbling, telling Treplov that she has realized that in real art, fame doesn’t matter—endurance does. She resolves to remain faithful to her craft and her “calling” even in the face of uncertainty. Treplov laments that Nina has found her “path” while he is still poking around in the dark for his.

Nina tells Treplov she’s going to leave, and asks him to come find her in the city once she’s become “a great actress.” She is unable, though, to walk out the door—she keeps wondering about Trigorin, and whether he came here with Arkadina. She becomes lost in reminiscences of Trigorin, and then starts reciting haunting, mournful lines from Treplov’s play about the end of the world. She embraces Treplov once more, fiercely, before running out of the house. Treplov, alone, silently rips up every single manuscript in the room before exiting.

Dorn and the others re-enter the room. Arkadina gaily sits down at the lotto table, seeming not to notice the disarray throughout the room. Shamraev goes over to a cupboard and pulls out the stuffed gull. He shows it to Trigorin, asking if Trigorin remembers asking him to stuff it—Trigorin stares at the gull, but still claims he doesn’t recall anything about it.

*Treplov’s admission that he only became a writer to distract himself from the pain of his unrequited love for Nina—or, perhaps, to continue trying to get her attention over the years—shows that he, like Nina, has sought a life in the arts for all the wrong reasons.*



*Nina’s disoriented state reflects the trauma she’s been through. The world has beaten her down: disappointed by the failed promises of fame and fortune, and used as a pawn in love, Nina’s life has become a perverse inversion of what she dreamed it would be.*



*This brief exchange suggests that while Nina set out in search of fame and fortune, she has realized that fame is not the goal of art. She may yet be able to achieve redemption—but it’s also possible that this epiphany has come too late, and Nina’s fate is already sealed.*



*This passage demonstrates just how fully being spurned by Trigorin has destroyed Nina’s life. She gave everything for him—but her love for him was unrequited, and he cast her aside. Now, even in the depths of her misery, she can’t focus on anything other than him for very long. The knowledge that Nina still pines for Trigorin is more than Treplov can bear—Trigorin has usurped Treplov’s mother’s affections, his lover’s affections, and indeed, Treplov feels, his own chances at artistic success.*



*In this passage, Arkadina and Trigorin both show the depths of their abilities to ignore anything that threatens their easy, self-centered lives. Arkadina doesn’t notice the disarray in her son’s studio, and Trigorin willfully asserts that he does not remember wanting a kind of souvenir of the symbol of Nina’s destruction.*



The sound of a gunshot echoes offstage. Arkadina stands up and asks what's happening—Dorn tells her not to worry, and goes out of the room to check on things. He calls from the next room, stating that “a vial of ether exploded” in his first-aid kit. Arkadina, relieved, sits down again. Dorn comes back into the room and picks up Trigorin's magazine. He pulls Trigorin aside, saying that he wants to ask him about an article in it. Once they're out of Arkadina's earshot, Dorn quietly tells Trigorin to take her “away from here”—Treplev, he says, has indeed shot himself.

*Treplev's first suicide attempt was, it seemed, for attention more than anything. This time, though, Treplev seems to really want to die—and he succeeds in his goal of obliterating himself. Treplev failed to win Nina's love, his mother's attention, or the artistic satisfaction he craved—rather than admit to the mediocrity of his life, he abandoned it, believing it is better to negate his entire existence than to fail at life.*







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