

**Woods as a Prime Motive for the Refinement of Manners in  
Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya***

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**Abstract.** *Scholars have always shown interest in Chekhov's Uncle Vanya but a majority of them studied it from traditional perspectives, concerning style, theme, structure and the conflict among characters. None has embarked on applying the ecocritical approach to this play, especially how the beauty of nature would not only moderate the climate but also refine one's character and manners for a better dealing with nature and others. Furthermore, man's dealing with nature would lead to the refinement of manners particularly in dealing with women and in setting an optimistic vision about life. This is what distinguished the character of Astroff, the wood demon of the play. Ian M. Matley in his essay "Chekhov and Geography" refers to this idea but he does not develop it. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to consider how the direct dealing with nature improves man's manners with others and how it makes him/her more optimistic than others who put themselves in isolation of nature and its beauty through adopting the analytical critical method. It is an eco-critical reading of Uncle Vanya from a moral perspective, so to speak.*

**Key Words:** Ecocriticism, *Uncle Vanya*, Astroff, Vanya, Woods, Nature, and Refinement of Manners

الغابة باعتبارها الدافع الرئيسي إلى محاسن الأخلاق في مسرحية الخال فانيا لأنطون تشيكوف

أبدى الباحثون إهتماماً كبيراً بمسرحية الخال فانيا للكاتب المسرحي الروسي الشهير أنطون تشيكوف من وجهات نظر متعددة، ولكن لم يشرع أحداً في تناولها من المنظور البيئي، ذلك العنصر الأساسي الحاسم في المسرحية والذي يؤكد أن جمال الطبيعة والتعامل المباشر مع الغابة كجزء من هذه الطبيعة يؤثر بشكل إيجابي ملحوظ على طابع الفرد وأخلاقه ونظراته للحياة بشكل عام وتعامله مع الآخرين والنساء بشكل خاص، وذلك من خلال إلقاء الضوء على شخصية أستروف أو كما أطلق عليه تشيكوف "شيطان الغابة" لما يُبدية من إهتمام وحب للطبيعة والحفاظ عليها والشعور بالمسؤولية تجاهها، والذي أثر بشكل كبير على طباعه وأخلاقه، فقد كان شخصية أكثر تفاؤلاً وحباً للعمل والحياة، شاعراً بالمسؤولية تجاه الطبيعة وأكثر جرأة في التعبير عن حبه، هذا على العكس تماماً من باقي شخصيات المسرحية الذين عاشوا بمعزل عن الطبيعة وجمالها بل كان لبعض منهم ميول تدميرية تجاهها وقد تجسد ذلك في شخصية الخال فانيا، الأمر الذي جعله يحيا حياة تشاؤمية بائسة في إنتظار الراحة الأبدية في العالم الآخر. وبناءً على ذلك فإن هذه الورقة البحثية تُعد قراءة نقدية تحليلية بيئية لمسرحية الخال فانيا من منظور أخلاقي، إذا جاز التعبير.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقد البيئي، الخال فانيا، أستروف، فانيا، الغابة، الطبيعة، محاسن الأخلاق

The term "ecocriticism" goes originally back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in which it is defined as the "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (107) whereas the term "ecological," greatly related to ecocriticism, is first used by the US ecocritic Karl Kroeber in his article "'Home at Grasmere': Ecological Holiness" (1974). The term ecocriticism is then revived at the hands of Cheryll Glotfelty, "the acknowledged founder" and a co-editor with Harlod Fromm of an important collection of essays entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996).

Originally, there are two versions of ecocriticism: the US and the UK versions. The US version (the American version) takes its literary bearings from the three major 19<sup>th</sup>-century American transcendentalist writers (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau) that founded the first professional organization of ecocritics, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment in 1992, followed in 1993 by the founding of its journal, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. The UK version (the British version), founded in 1998 and that called ecocriticism "green studies" with its own journal *Green Letters*, first published in 2000. It takes its bearings from Jonathan Bate, its founding figure and author of *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) and *The Song of the Earth* (2000) in which he undertook the recuperation and rehabilitation of the British Romanticism of the 1790s especially William Wordsworth, as poets of nature (Barry 248-51 and Marland 847-49).

The word eco-criticism is "a semineologism." *Eco* is short of ecology, concerning the relationship between living organism and their environment and *ecocriticism*, concerning the relationship between literature and environment. It is an interdisciplinary study, "a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline" (Tosic 44). It combines "the cultural aspect through literature and the biological aspect through the Earth as our ecosystem" (Fenn 117). It is the "inter connection between the material world and human culture, specifically the cultural artifacts, language and literature," says Glen Love. Karl Kroeber, in *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*, points to the importance of this conjunction between the cultural and the biological:

An ecologically oriented criticism directs itself to understanding persistent romantic struggles to articulate meaningful human

relations within the conditions of a natural world in which transcendence is not an issue. . . .Ecologically oriented criticism thus recognizes a foreshadowing of its own understanding of humanity's relation to nature in the romantic view that it is natural for human beings to be self-conscious, and natural, therefore, to construct their cultures out of complexly inter assimilative engagements with their physical and biological environment. (38-9)

Johnson Loretta further explains:

“Eco”, from the Greek root *oikos*, means “house.” . . . Just as “economy” is the management or law of the house (*nomos* = law), “ecology” is the study of the house. Ecocriticism, then, is the criticism of the “house,” i.e., the environment, as represented in literature. But the definition of “house,” or *oikos*, is not simple. Questions remain: What is the environment? What is nature? Why did the term “environment,” which derives from the verb “to environ or surround,” change to mean that which is nonhuman? Are not humans natural and a prominent environment in themselves? Where and in what does one live? Ecocriticism is by nature interdisciplinary, invoking knowledge of environmental studies, the natural sciences, and cultural and social studies, all of which play a part in answering the questions it poses. (7)

As a new theory of literary criticism, ecocriticism has received many definitions which emphasize ultimately one general premise: the relationship between a literary text and the environment. In her joint work with Harold Formm *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty writes:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of its texts, ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (18)

Actually, ecocriticism "leads from an egocentered to an eco-centered perspective" (Grewe-Volpp 71). Robert Kern, in his essay "Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For?" aptly observes:

What ecocriticism calls for, then, is a fundamental shift from one context of reading to another—more specifically, a movement from the human to the environmental, or at least from the exclusively human to the biocentric or ecocentric, which is to say a humanism (since we cannot evade our human status or identity) informed by an awareness of the 'more-than-human.' (18)

Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as "a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (20). Furthermore, Camilo Gomides writes, eco-criticism is the "field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature . . ." (16), whereas Simon Estok gives a more effective and broad meaning. For Estok, ecocriticism is not

simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effective change by analyzing the function—thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds. (16-17)

In this respect, the main function that ecocritics do is to highlight the relationship between literature and environment through focusing on how environment is reflected in literary works. Unlike other literary critics, ecocritics re-read literary works from "ecocentric perspective." Barry writes:

They re-read major literary works from an ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world. They extend the applicability of a range of ecocentric concepts, using them of things other than the natural world-concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources. . . .They turn away from the 'social constructivism' and 'linguistic determinism' of dominant literary theories and instead emphasize ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and the claims of the world beyond ourselves. (254)

Jonathan Bate also encapsulates the function of ecocritic in one comprehensive statement saying:

A central question in environmental ethics is whether to regard humankind as part of nature or apart from nature. It is the task of literary ecocriticism to address a local version of that question: what is the place of creative imagining and writing in the complex set of relationships between humankind and environment, between mind and world, between thinking, being and dwelling? (8)

Accordingly, ecocriticism occupies an extremely important status in today's world. Glen Love, in his *Practical Criticism*, says:

As the circumstances of the natural world intrude ever more pressingly into our teaching and writing, the need to consider the interconnections, the implicit dialogue between the text and the environmental surroundings, becomes more and more insistent. Ecocriticism is developing as an explicit critical response to this unheard dialogue and attempts to raise it to a higher level of human consciousness. (18)

Aton Chekhov (1860-1904), one of the most active and brilliant nineteenth-century Russian writers, is a physician, playwright, novelist and short story writer. To his credit are "hundreds of stories as well as a handful of plays." He is a prolific writer that it is difficult for one to assimilate all the ideas presented in his works. Thus, "it is unusually hard to define the world that he created in his writings" (Becker 202). He is also one of the greatest realists that "makes representations so accurate, so *real* . . . as does life itself" and manages to "come closest to the undistorted representation of reality . . . and maintain a completely objective position" (203). His writing is varied. It is "full of paradoxes—at once comic and tragic, engaged and partial, subjective and object;" yet, the one thing that is never in doubt is "the value he puts on human life" (Brustein vii).

In Chekhov's curio, *Uncle Vanya* (1898), the ecological element is evident through the character of Astroff whose direct relationship with woods refines his character positively if compared to the other characters of the play. Dr. Astroff is a wonderful and attractive character. Although he is a physician and is often busy with his medical duties, he cares about nature and its reservation. He is a sensitive man to nature and its beauty. It is this sense of concern that makes him possess a modest farm which he manages himself. Astroff tells Sonia, "My place is surrounded by government forests. The forester is old and always ailing, so I superintend almost all the work myself." His is not the work of an amateur but one of

a professional agriculturalist which won him a diploma and a bronze medal for new plantations (Chekhov 16, 17).

Astroff's love, reverence and direct relationship with nature refine his manners. This grants him a unique character at all levels: professionally, humanly and emotionally. It is a matter that compels everyone to admire and appreciate his character.

Astroff's love of nature makes him love his career. It makes him feel that he is doing a great service to all humankind, whatever the physical cost to himself: "I feel capable of anything. I attempt the most difficult operations and do them magnificently. The most brilliant plans for the future take shape in my head. I am no longer a poor fool of a doctor, but mankind's greatest benefactor." He is an active and a workaholic person, who finds joy in doing his job in spite of his exhaustion. Astroff tells Marina, "I am overworked. Nurse, I am on my feet from dawn till dusk. I know no rest; at night I tremble under my blankets for fear of being dragged out to visit someone who is sick; I have toiled without repose or a day's freedom since I have known you (Chekhov 33, 6)

In addition, he is a compassionate, responsible and conscientious person. When he goes to deal with the epidemic at Malitskoki, he does his best to save people's life. However, he is afraid of being the cause of death of one of them. Astroff narrates:

ASTROFF. Unspeakable! I slaved among those people all day, not a crumb passed my lips, but when I got home there was still no rest for me; a switchman was carried in from the railroad; I laid him on the operating table and he went and died in my arms under chloroform, and then my feelings that should have been deadened awoke again, my conscience tortured me as if I had killed the man. (Chekhov 6-7)

In spite of his age of forty, Astroff's fascination with nature engraves his witty and optimistic character. When he prepared himself for leaving the family's meeting, he said, mocking of himself "[o]ne of the characters in Ostroff's plays is a man with a long moustache and short wits, like me." In spite of life's pressures and worries, he is trying hard to lead a happy life. "[H]ow can a man live like that for forty years and keep himself sober and unspotted?" Helena tells Sonia (Chekhov 16, 42).

Astroff's adoration of nature is behind his special philosophy towards it. For him, plantations are the decoration of nature that enriches man with lofty principles of beauty and sense. Plants are the superpower that ornaments nature, changing ugly things into charming ones: make climate milder, lessen tension, make people kind, sensitive, gentle and graceful, and finally, change their treatment of women to be tenderer and nobler. Here, Sonia explains Astroff's point of view to Helena:

SONIA. He says that forests are the ornaments of the earth, that they teach mankind to understand beauty and attune his mind to lofty sentiments. Forests temper a stern climate, and in countries where the climate is milder, less strength is wasted in the battle with nature, and the people are kind and gentle. The inhabitants of such countries are handsome, tractable, sensitive, graceful in speech and gesture. Their philosophy is joyous, art and science blossom among them, their treatment of women is full of exquisite nobility—(Chekhov 17).

As Cheng Xiangzhan asserts, "nature is the eternal source of all beauty, or is the model for all human attempts to achieve beauty . . ." (786). In his essay "Chekhov and Geography," Matley refers to this idea when he talks about the character of Astroff. He says that

Astrov's main interest in life is the conservation of Russia's forests, not only for their aesthetic value but because they temper the climate and make it milder, thus leading to a diminution in the intensity of man's struggle with nature and a consequent refinement of his character. In a milder climate the arts and sciences flourish and women are treated in a refined manner (376).

Astroff's direct relationship with nature and the woods makes him evaluate true and pure beauty and this is what makes him attracted to Helena and escape from Sonia's love. He "never notices" her. In fact, Helena is more beautiful than Sonia. Vanya describes her, addressing Astroff: "How lovely she is! How lovely! I have never in my life seen a more beautiful woman (Chekhov 48, 9). She is as beautiful as Helen in Homer's poems. "Obviously, Chekhov did not choose Elena's name at random. He had in mind, doubtless, that other Helen whose beauty set the world by the ears . . ." (Valency 183). On the contrary, Sonia blames her luck for not being pretty: "Oh, how terrible it is to be plain! I am plain, I know it. As I came out of church last Sunday I overheard a woman say,

'She is a dear, noble girl, but what a pity she is so ugly!' So ugly!" (Chekhov 39). This is what makes Astroff elude her and claims that he cannot return anyone's love when she asks him about love:

SONIA. . . . Tell me, doctor, if I had a friend or a younger sister, and if you knew that she, well—loved you, what would you do?

ASTROFF: (*Shrugging his shoulders*) I don't know. I don't think I should do anything. I should make her understand that I could not return her love— (Chekhov 39)

However, Astroff's love and respect for nature grants him a new philosophy of beauty and life. For Astroff, the facial beauty is a superficial one. It is not sufficient without the real beauty of mind and thoughts: the way of thinking about life. Life is not a place of relaxation and dullness but it is a place of work, responsibility and exerting efforts. That is why he hates the dull life in the estate among such and miserable people: Prof. Serebrakoff, uncle Vanya, grandmother and even Helena.

ASTROFF. We are alone here, and I can speak frankly. Do you know, I could not stand living in this house for even a month? This atmosphere would stifle me. There is your father, entirely absorbed in his books, and his gout; there is your Uncle Vanya with his hypochondria, your grandmother, and finally, your step-mother—

SONIA. What about her?

ASTROFF. A human being should be entirely beautiful: the face, the clothes, the mind, the thoughts. Your step-mother is, of course, beautiful to look at, but don't you see? She does nothing but sleep and eat and walk and bewitch us, and that is all. She has no responsibilities, everything is done for her—am I not right? And an idle life can never be a pure one. (Chekhov 36)

Not only Astroff's love of nature but also his direct relationship with it is what really shapes such a responsible character and makes him feel grief and worry about everything plagued nature: plants, animals, birds and sights of country life such as hermit's caves and water-mills. In a conversation with Helena, Astroff showed her some sketches that he made himself and that through which he emphasizes the irresponsible actions of people towards nature and compares nature before and after what is called features of civilization and progress. He laments the disappearance of forests; animals such as horses, elks and cattle; and birds such as swans, geese, ducks and black-cock. Such a disaster is the

main cause of the spread of swamps, mosquitoes and diseases such as typhoid and diphtheria (Chekhov 51-52). It becomes a "desert much like T. S. Eliot's 'Wasteland'" (Bordinat 52).

For that reason, Astroff shows Sonia that he hates living in that Russian country where nobody cares for nature or venerates work. He feels like a wanderer without any flash of light to guide him:

ASTROFF. I like life as life, but I hate and despise it in a little Russian country village, and as far as my own personal life goes, by heaven! There is absolutely no redeeming feature about it. Haven't you noticed if you are riding through a dark wood at night and see a little light shining ahead, how you forget your fatigue and the darkness and the sharp twigs that whip your face? I work, that you know—as no one else in the country works. Fate beats me on without rest; at times I suffer unendurably and I see no light ahead. (Chekhov 37)

In another context, Astroff tells Sonia how he disdains living in Russian rural areas: the dirt and stupidity of the poor; the dullness and shallow thinking of the rich and the hysteria and the mania of the old. Additionally, all these sectors hate and harm nature. They describe anyone who loves and wants to protect it as a weird and strange person. They really never understand anything about the sacred relationship between man and nature. Astroff expresses his pain and sorrow to Sonia saying:

ASTROFF. . . . the peasants are all alike; they are stupid and live in dirt, and the educated people are so hard to get along with. One gets tired of them. All our good friends are petty and shallow and see no farther than their own noses; in one word, they are dull. Those that have brains are hysterical, devoured with a mania for self-analysis. They whine, they hate, they pick faults everywhere with unhealthy sharpness. They sneak up me sideways, look at me out of a corner of the eye, and say: "That man is a lunatic," "That man is a wind-bag." Or, if they don't what else to label me with, they say I am strange. I like the woods; that is strange. I don't eat meat; that is strange, too. Simple, natural relations between man and man or man and nature do not exist. (Chekhov 37)

Unlike Astrov, the other characters of the play who live in isolation of nature lead a miserable and dreary life: Professor Serebrakoff and Vanya. The first imprisons himself among his academic papers while the other stifles himself in a tedious life among "ledgers, letter scales, and papers of every description" (Chechov 67).

Professor Serebrakoff is an old man, plagued with gout and rheumatism. He is a retired professor of art history that he has no task in life but spending time writing and reading in his room, confining himself among papers all time. Marina says, "The Professor sits up all night writing and reading." Vanya also maintains, "The Professor sits up in his library from morning till night, as usual—" (Chekhov 7-8, 10).

Serebrakoff's aloofness from nature makes him spiritually and physically sick. He becomes jealous and envious. He is always complaining about his luck, preferring life in the city to country life, and spends his entire life delivering lectures on art that he never understands (Chekhov 10). In another context, Vanya says, "He never had had any business. He writes twaddle, grumbles, and eats his heart out with jealousy; that's all he does (Chekhov 45). He has no time to care for his wife and to overwhelm her with love.

Additionally, Serebrakoff is a worried person and afraid of illness, death and the future. He also curses old age and always bemoans the past, finding no interest in such a futile life in that Russian estate among such stupid people. He really lives in an exile. He has not any positive energy to give to his wife. He says to Helena, "They say that Turgenieff got angina of the heart from gout. I am afraid I am getting angina too. Oh, damn this horrible, accursed old age! Ever since I have been old I have been hateful to myself, and I am sure, hateful to you all as well" (Chekhov 24). In another context, Serebrakoff describes his life as follows:

SEREBRAKOFF. I have spent my life working in the interests of learning. I am used to my library and the lecture hall and to the esteem and admiration of my colleagues. Now I suddenly find myself plunged in this wilderness, condemned to see the same stupid people from morning till night and listen to their futile conversation. I want to live; I long for success and fame and the stir of the world, and here I am in exile! Oh, it is dreadful to spend every moment grieving for the lost past, to see the success of others and sit here with nothing to do but to fear death. I cannot stand it! It is more than I can bear. (Chekhov 25-26)

Like Serebrakoff and because of detaching himself from nature, Vanya leads a futile, miserable and sterile life. He always weeps over the ruins and is afraid of the future. He feels lost and trapped in a labyrinth between past and future. "Day and night the thought haunts me like a fiend, that my life is lost forever. My past does not count, because I frittered it away on trifles, and the present has so terribly miscarried! What shall I do with my life and love?" Vanya addresses Helena (Chekhov 29).

Vanya is helpless, disconsolate and lost. He wants to erase his past and begin a new life but he does not know how. He feels himself dispersed at a loss. In a miserable tone, Vanya tells Astroff:

VOITSKI. Oh, my God! I am forty-seven years old. I may live to sixty; I still have thirteen years before me; an eternity! How shall I be able to endure life for thirteen years? What shall I do? How can I fill them? Oh, don't you see? (*He presses ASTROFF'S hand convulsively*) Don't you see, if only I could live the rest of my life in some new way! If I only could wake some still, bright morning and feel that life had begun again; that the past was forgotten and had vanished like smoke. (*He weeps*) Oh, to begin life anew! Tell me, tell me how to begin. (Chekhov 71)

Vanya's aimless life makes him neglect his work and duty towards the estate, the only source of livelihood for him and his family. Sonia always blames her uncle for living in illusions: "Our hay is all cut and rotting in these daily rains, and here you are busy creating illusions! You have given up the farm altogether. I have done all the work alone until I am at the end of my strength—" (Chekhov 34).

Vanya's isolation from nature creates such a nervous character that after a violent squabble about Serebrakoff's suggestion of selling the estate, he decides to kill Serebrakoff, refusing any attempt at reconciliation. He tries to shoot the professor twice and when his shots fail, he laments his failure. Vanya blames himself, "Oh, to make such a fool of myself! To shoot twice and miss him both times! I shall never forgive myself" (Chekhov 69).

Vanya's bad psychological state not only makes him want to kill Serebrakoff but also try to commit suicide and put an end to such a

hopeless life. Dr. Astroff rebukes him for stealing a bottle of morphine, appealing Sonia to persuade her uncle to return it back:

ASTROFF. You took a little bottle of morphine out of my medicine-case. (*A pause*) Listen! If you are positively determined to make an end to yourself, go into the woods and shoot yourself there. Give up the morphine, or there will be a lot of talk and guesswork; people will think I gave it to you. I don't fancy having to perform a post-mortem on you. Do you think I should find it interesting?

...

ASTROFF. (*To SONIA*) Sonia, your uncle has stolen a bottle of morphine out of my medicine-case and won't give it up. Tell him that his behavior is—well, unwise. I haven't time, I must be going. (Chekhov 72)

Even at the end of the play and after Helena, Serebrakoff, and Astroff's departure, Vanya yields to his doom of life of lethargy and idleness, such a meaningless and dead life, hearkening to Sonia's words that at the end of that life "We shall rest . . . We shall rest." At the end of the play and in a sad tone, Sonia tries to console her miserable uncle, opening new horizons of hope in the afterlife:

SONIA. I have faith Uncle, fervent, passionate faith. (*SONIA kneels down before her uncle and lays her head on his hands. She speaks in a weary voice*) We shall rest. . . . We shall hear the angels. We shall see heaven shining like a jewel. We shall see all evil and all our pain sink away in the great compassion that shall enfold the world. Our life will be as peaceful and tender and sweet as a caress. I have faith; I have faith. (*She wipes away her tears*) My poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you are crying! (*Weeping*) You have never known what happiness was, but wait! We shall rest. (*She embraces him*) We shall rest. (Chekhov 82-83)

Unfortunately, Vanya does not only imprison himself away from nature but worse than this, he destroys it. He cuts planks for firewood and building sheds. Scoffing at Astroff's philosophy of nature and the necessity of its reservation, Vanya says, laughing: "Bravo! Bravo! All that is very pretty, but it is also unconvincing. So, my friend (*To ASTROFF*) you must let me go on burning firewood in my stoves and building my sheds of planks." Even when he wants to express his love to Helena, he picked some roses, distorting the beauty of garden. Vanya

woos to Helena, "As a peace offering I am going to fetch some flowers which I picked for you this morning: some autumn roses, beautiful, sorrowful roses" (Chekhov 18, 47). Here, Helena laments Vanya for his irresponsible actions towards nature; his destruction of the forests is a destruction of all humankind and all the noble principles of life: fidelity, purity and self-sacrifice. For Helena, Vanya is the devil of destruction that has a cruel hostile attitude not only towards the woods but also towards all humankind:

HELENA. As Astroff said just now, see how you thoughtlessly destroy the forests, so that there will soon be none left. So you also destroy mankind, and soon fidelity and purity and self-sacrifice will have vanished with the woods. Why cannot you look calmly at a woman unless she is yours? Because, the doctor was right, you are all possessed by a devil of destruction; you have no mercy on the woods or the birds or on women or on one another. (Chekhov 19-20)

Unlike Vanya, Astroff's responsibility for nature makes him a defender and protector of its rights, lamenting any attempt at its destruction and devastation. In this respect, he blames Vanya's encouragement of the destruction of forests for getting fuel, accusing the doer of such a thing of being criminal and barbarian and maintaining that the destruction of forests does not only cause the disappearance of plants but also causes the migration and death of birds and animals, the drought of rivers, the spoilage of climate and finally, the ugliness of the whole universe. The happiest moment in Astroff's life is when he plants a sapling that grows into a young green tree. This is the only thing that fills his heart with joy and pride (Chekhov 18). Therefore, Astroff's stance towards nature is "creative" whereas that of Vanya is "destructive" (Kirk140).

Astroff shows Vanya that living in such a polluted place is enough to change man's humanity and to turn them into wild animals instead as the rest of people who live in such a musty place: "Ten years or so of this life of ours, this miserable life, have sucked us under, and we have become as contemptible and petty as the rest" (Chekhov 72). Consequently, unlike Astroff, the lover and protector of nature, Vanya is characterized by his "cynical attitude toward the preservation of forests" without any feeling of "compunction in burning logs in his fireplace or using wood for his barns" (Kirk 139).

With such a repellent character, Vanya's attempts at winning Helena's heart end in complete rejection. Vanya is intrigued and fascinated by Helena but Helena refuses his plea or any attempt to approach her:

VOITSKI. Help me first to make peace with myself. My darling!  
(*Seizes her hand*)

HELENA. Let go! (*She drags her hand away*) Go away! (Chekhov 29)

In another context, Helena insists on her reluctant attitude towards Vanya:

HELENA. I am as it were benumbed when you speak to me of your love, and I don't know how to answer you. Forgive me, I have nothing to say to you. (*She tries to go out*) Good-night!

...

VOITSKI. (*Falling on his knees before her*) My sweetheart, my beautiful one—

HELENA. (*Angrily*) Leave me alone! Really, this has become too much disagreeable. (Chekhov 30)

Vanya tries to woo to Helena many times, trying to make her feel her sad life with such a bleak husband and persuade her to escape with whoever deserves her. However, Helena rebuffs him every time angrily and reproachfully:

VOITSKI. Why should you languish here? Come, my dearest, my beauty, be sensible! The blood of a Nixey runs in your veins. Oh, won't you let yourself be one? Give your nature the reins for once in your life; fall head over ears in love with some other water sprite and plunge down head first into a deep pool, so that the Herr Professor and all of us may have our hands free again.

HELENA. (*Angrily*) Leave me alone! How cruel you are! (*She tries to go out.*)

HELENA. (*Preventing her*) There, there, my beauty, I apologise. (*He kisses her hand*) Forgive me.

HELENA. Confess that you would try the patience of an angel. (Chekhov 46-47)

On the contrary, before such an attractive character of Astroff, the young women in the play could not resist his charm: both of Sonia and Helena fall in love with him. The main reason for Sonia's love of Astroff is that he is a man who helps people by curing them and helps nature by planting trees. He is beneficial to the whole universe: people, plants and

animals. From her point of view, he is a perfect man. Helena shares her opinion, adding that his work as a doctor and a planter made him "brave, profound, and of clear vision."

SONIA. He is clever. He can do everything. He can cure the sick, and plant woods.

HELENA. It is not a question of medicine and woods, my dear, he is a man of genius. Do you know what that means? It means he is brave, profound, and of clear insight. He plants a tree and his mind travels a thousand years into the future, and he sees visions of the happiness of the human race. People like him are rare and should be loved. (Chekhov 42)

Like Sonia, Helena, for the first time, confesses to herself of her love to Astroff. For her, he is a different person, a man who is attractive, handsome and motivating. She wishes she would let herself among his hands like a little bird. She should, as Vanya once told her, give rein to her feelings and emotions away from such a dead life. Yet, she cannot. She is too cowardly to do that and she feels guilty towards Sonia who loves the doctor so much. Cowardice and conscience are what prevent her.

HELENA. (*Alone*) . . . Dr. Astroff, so different, so handsome, so interesting, so charming. It is like seeing the moon rise on a dark night. Oh, to surrender oneself to his embrace! To lose oneself in his arms! I am a little in love with him myself! Yes, I am lonely without him, and when I think of him I smile. That Uncle Vanya says I have the blood of a Nixey in my veins: "Give rein to your nature for once in your life!" Perhaps it is right that I should. Oh, to be free as a bird, to fly away from all your sleepy faces and your talk and forget that you have existed at all! But, I am a coward, I am afraid; my conscience torments me. He comes here every day now. I can guess why, and feel guilty already; I should like to fall on my knees at Sonia's feet and beg her forgiveness, and weep. (Chekhov 50)

Astroff is the one who dominates Helena's heart but her feeling of duty towards her husband prevents her from infidelity. Here, Helena confesses her love to Astroff before leaving the estate:

HELENA. How comical you are! I am angry with you and yet I shall always remember you with pleasure. You and I will never

meet again, and so I shall tell you—why should I conceal it?—that I am just a little in love with you. Come, one more last pressure of our hands, and then let us part good friends. Let us not bear each other any ill will. (Chekhov 75)

Helena really loves Astroff. During bidding farewell to Astroff, she snatches a pencil from Astroff's table, "hiding it with a quick movement" as a memento. She wants to remember him forever. "I shall take this pencil for memory!" Helena mutters to herself (Chekhov 75). She also lets him kiss her without any resistance. This is not the whole thing. She also kisses him violently:

ASTROFF. As long as we are alone, before Uncle Vanya comes in with his a bouquet—allow me—to kiss you good-bye—may I? (*He kisses her on the cheeks*) So! Splendid!

HELENA. I wish you every happiness. (*She glances about her*) For once in my life, I shall! And scorn the consequences! (*She kisses him impetuously, and they quickly part*) I must go. (Chekhov 76)

Conspicuously, stimulated by his love and direct relationship with nature, Astroff's love to Helena is more adventurous and daring. Unlike Vanya, Astroff is bolder in his love and never loses hope in spite of Helena's repetitive attempts to rebuff him. Unlike Vanya who is satisfied with gifting her bouquet of flowers, Astroff approaches, touches, kisses her and finally arranges a time for meeting (Chekhov 54-55). He is a more persistent and self-confident person who never loses hope easily. Comparing the gusty attempts of Astroff to those cold attempts by Vanya to express his love for Helena, Vitins writes:

The two men . . . share intelligence, a life of sacrifice and hard work. If Vanya's concern is for his immediate family and the estate, Astrov, a doctor, concerns himself with the larger community and the forest which he admits is his true love. . . . Both men are infected by Yelena's beauty, but for Vanya it is a beauty to behold, whereas for Astrov, feminine is to be savored and enjoyed. . . . The difference in the manner of the two rival friends is highlighted when Vanya, by way of an apology, pleads Yelena's favor with a bouquet of fall flowers, while Astrov, weary of a verbal game of sexual innuendoes, embraces her. As Chekhov himself noted, "Uncle Vanya cries, Astrov—whistles." (40)

To sum up, one's love and direct relationship with nature refines his character, changing it into a better one. It improves man's relationship

with others, makes him optimistic and a lover of life despite all handicaps and, most importantly, refines his relationship with women as a part of a charming nature and makes him bolder in his expression of love. Astroff's love and preservation of nature makes him more sensitive, compassionate, optimistic, workaholic, responsible, conscientious and persistent in his love despite rejection and rebuff. On the contrary, man who puts himself in isolation of nature leads a dull and hopeless life: becomes miserable, pessimistic and indignant about life. This is what happens with Serebrakoff and Vanya. Imprisoning himself among academic tasks, Serebrakoff becomes worried, afraid and hateful to life: bemoans the past and has obsessions about illness and future. Such a futile life makes him unable to overwhelm his wife Helena with love and care. The same thing is with Vanya. Vanya's jailing himself within the coffin of accounts, ledgers and letter scales as well as his destructive attitude towards nature make him sad, frustrated, aimless, and lost in the labyrinth of life, lacking control of his temper and, most importantly, failing in expressing his love courageously. This emphasizes the importance of the ecological element in the play.

That the main topic of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* is more ecological than dramatic may be shown in the fact that in 1888, Chekhov sent a letter to the Russian journalist and book publisher A. S. Suvorin about a proposed (jointly written) play entitled *The Wood Demon*. The project is never realized. Chekhov ended up writing that play himself and called it *The Wood Demon* (1889). It was intended to be a comedy, even though Voitski (Vanya) commits suicide. In the following 9 years, Chekhov revived the play, keeping the character of Astroff, as the wood demon, but turned the play into a tragedy by, paradoxically, keeping Vanya alive. In the final scene, both Sonia and her uncle can only dream of another world while the real topic of the play remains unchanged, namely the ecologically-minded Astroff—the real wood demon (Enani 287-301).

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