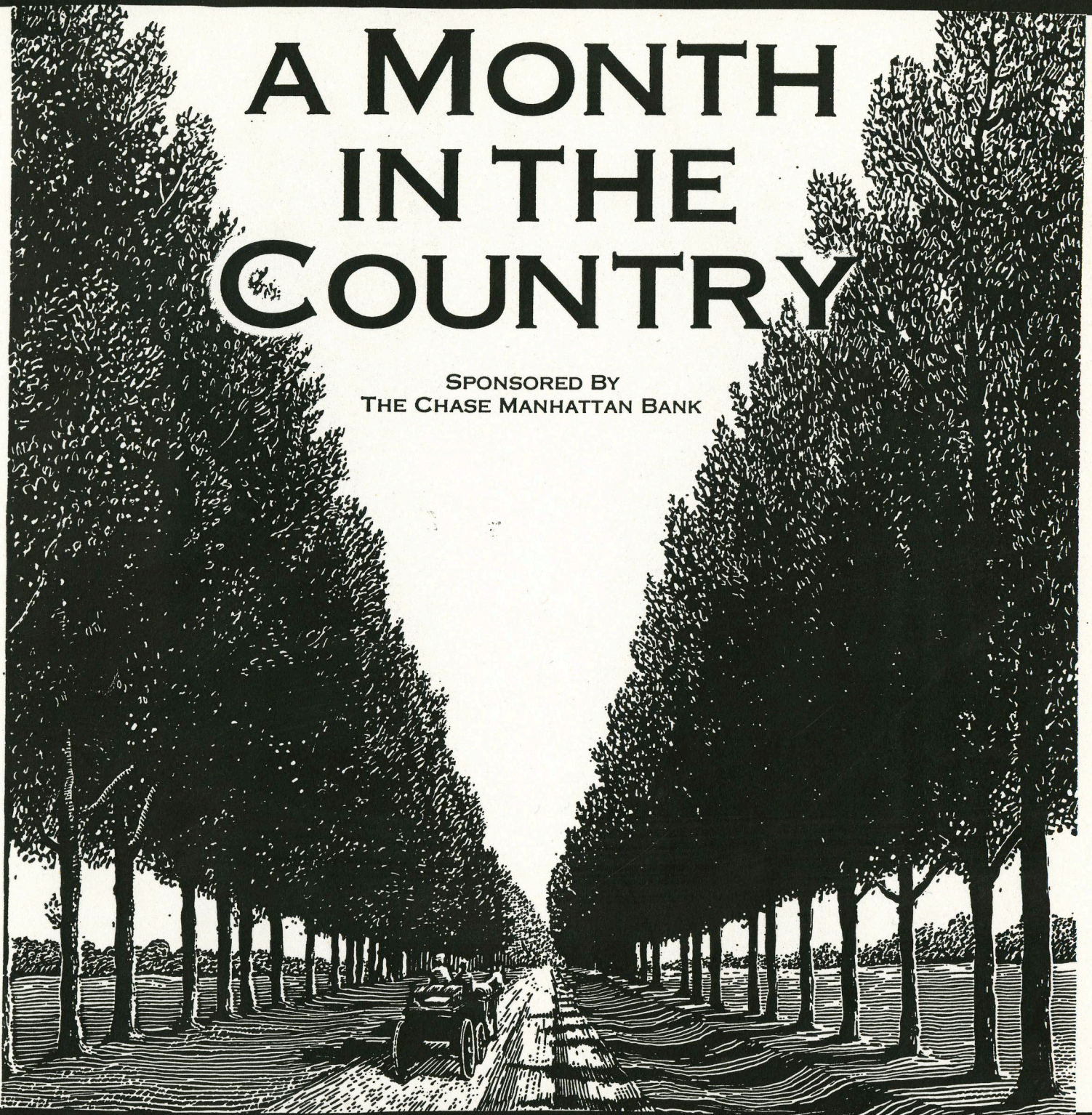


Roundabout Theatre Company

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY

SPONSORED BY
THE CHASE MANHATTAN BANK



**NYNEX Family Series
Study Guide**

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY

text by Deborah Pope
Director of Arts In Education

Character Descriptions by Colleen Corbett

Contents

ON COMEDY

A FEW WORDS ABOUT RUSSIA

ON TURGENEV

TIME LINE: TURGENEV AND HIS TIMES

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

complicated family by running away to live in Moscow.

LIZAVETA -- is 37 and lies about her age because she is afraid of being seen as an old maid. She is a friend of Anna Semenova, Islaev's mother. Shpigelsky, the family doctor, asks her to marry him. Shpigelsky does not love Lizaveta, he just needs a wife. They strike a bargain and decide to marry. Even though it is a marriage based solely on convenience, Lizaveta hopes that romance will blossom within it.

SHPIGELSKY -- 40, is a pig-headed, stubborn doctor. He asks Lizaveta to marry him, not out of love but because he is tired of being alone; there has been no romance between them and Shpigelsky does not expect any. He also arranges a marriage for Vera to Bolshintsov, a rich older man that she doesn't know.

BOLSHINTSOV -- is 48, and a rich, good-natured man who wants to marry Vera. Although he does not want to force her into marrying him, he bribes his friend Shpigelsky into speaking on his behalf.

SCHAAF -- 45, is from Germany and tutors Kolya in German. He speaks with a thick German accent and has a very military air. He is the outsider in the world of the play. He is not drawn into the family intrigue.

KATYA -- 20-year-old maid, who is a silly and lighthearted young girl. Everyone talks to her and then she in turn talks to the audience, revealing their thoughts and emotions.

MATVEI -- 40, servant who is in love with Katya and wants to marry her.

ON COMEDY

Comedy is a very difficult thing to define. The form is so complicated, and continues to undergo so many changes as human culture changes, that presenting a definition of any accuracy would require pages and pages of explanation. It is for this reason that the following paragraphs are confined to a few central ideas about comedy.

One major device used in comedy is to change the direction of the story repeatedly (sometimes called plot reversals). One knows that a movie or a play is a comedy if part of the story keeps happening over and over again, until it is very difficult to take the event seriously. A fine example of this type occurs in Alfred Hitchcock's movie *THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY*. This story involves the murder of a man named Harry. The murderer, who is unknown, cannot seem to keep Harry's corpse buried. Poor Harry keeps getting dug up and moved from one place to another. This happens so many times that the whole idea of burial, normally a very serious subject, becomes hilariously funny.

Another aspect of comedy is the juxtaposition of opposites. Comedy teams like Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis surprise and delight their audiences with the presentation of their opposite characteristics. Laurel is tall and thin, Hardy is short and fat, Costello is sweet and kind, Abbott is selfish and crafty, Martin is handsome and sophisticated, Lewis is goofy and innocent. Thinking back to *THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY*, another contrast of opposites is linking a corpse to a comic situation. The idea is so unexpected that it makes the audience laugh even harder when Harry's corpse keeps reappearing, much harder than if the item being dug up over and over again were a tool chest or a necklace.

Comedy can be lighthearted and innocent, it can be sarcastic and judgmental, it can be bright and full of hope or it can be dark and depressing. So far we have only been discussing the kind of comedy that makes an audience laugh. There are also comedies that do not cause laughter. These are called "dark" comedies. Though dark comedy does not cause laughter it often allows an audience to recognize the sad foolishness of the dramatic characters; it sometimes inspires the audience to see how similar they themselves are to the people on the stage.

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY was considered sadly comic by its author, Ivan Turgenev. He thought of it as a comedy because all the people in the play are mismatched, one in love with another, who is in turn in love with some one else. No one understands the true motivations of anyone else until it is too late and almost everyone's actions are mistaken to mean something other than what was originally intended.

It is a comedy of human emotional errors, and it is a sad, or dark, comedy because the errors cause so much suffering for the characters of the drama. Just as a lighthearted comedy uses the juxtaposition of opposites and the repetition of events (plot reversals), so does the dark comedy.

Rakitin is in love with his friend Islaev's wife, Natalya. Natalya is in love with Belyaev, her son's young tutor. Vera, Natalya's teenaged adopted daughter, is also in love with Belyaev, who is totally confused by everyone. Belyaev is young, poor and hopeful; Natalya is older, rich and very sad. Rakitin is made powerless by his love for Natalya; Islaev is made powerful by his attachment to Natalya. The play is packed with the elements of comedy and yet it will not make an audience laugh. It will, however, remind us of ourselves and all

the times we have been in love with the wrong person, who was, in turn, in love with someone else, equally mismatched.

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY is the kind of comedy that quietly speaks to audiences in a timeless fashion. While the action takes place in a garden in Russia over one hundred years ago, the people in the story are obsessing about the same things a group of people might obsess about in a city park in the summer of 1995. And this fact, that people continue to make these silly emotional errors, is in itself a part of the comedy. No matter how hard we try, the mistakes keep happening, and finally we have to laugh at ourselves.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT RUSSIA

The nineteenth century Russia Ivan Turgenev wrote about in *A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY* was a country ruled by a Tsar, the Russian equivalent of an emperor. At this time, the nobility and the wealthy landowners owned all of the country's financial and real assets, which consisted primarily of land. The laborers on the land were serfs, and they were virtually owned by the noble and land-owning class much in the way a horse or a mule might be owned. This was the Russia before the Russian Revolution deposed the Tsar and destroyed the old system that had kept so many people in poverty and so few people steeped in wealth.

The nineteenth century government of Russia was corrupt, as were many governments of the day. In an effort to guard itself against criticism, this government set up many rules and regulations, including a strict code of censorship of books, plays and publications. The theatre became a prime target of the censors. Fearing that dramatists would create plays which might inspire audiences to revolt

against the government, the censors stopped many plays from being produced for years after they had been published.

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY was suppressed by the censors. Turgenev finished the script in 1850 but it was not produced until 1872. It was not until 1909 that Turgenev's dramatic masterpiece was produced at the Moscow Art Theatre under the direction of Konstantin Stanislavsky, and given the attention and acclaim it deserved. Why did the censors suppress *A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY*? Probably because the play contrasted the lifestyles of the rich and the poor, and dramatized the relationship between the serf and his or her master in a realistic and unflattering way.

Though Turgenev's characters speak to us clearly of emotions we still feel today, they moved in a society that is difficult for us to imagine. Serfdom, which today is very distant, was one of the most troubling issues of Turgenev's day. Turgenev, himself born into a wealthy serf-owning family, believed strongly in freedom for the serfs. He wrote on the issue, and is credited with influencing Tsar Alexander II in his decision to emancipate the serfs in 1861.

In the nineteenth century, Russia was considered very distant from Europe by both Russian and European intellectuals, separate and unfamiliar in its customs and beliefs. Nevertheless, the Russian royal and social systems were similar in many ways to those in many European countries. The British Empire abolished slavery in 1833, in the United States African-Americans held in slavery were liberated in 1865, and the Russian serfs were emancipated in 1861. It became clear to all these governments at just about the same time that the subjugation of a whole race, class or group of people was no longer possible. Industrialization was sweeping the globe,

undermining the old systems that had allowed slavery and serfdom to continue. Interestingly, the development of technology changed the way in which products were made and how social and political systems worked. It made the world a much smaller place.

ON TURGENEV

Ivan Turgenev was born on November 9, 1818 in Oryol, Russia. He died sixty-five years later on September 3, 1883 in Bougival, a small town in France, not far from Paris.

Turgenev's father died in 1834 when the young Ivan was only sixteen years old. Varvara Petrovna, Turgenev's mother, was by far the greater influence on his life. Unfortunately she was not a kind woman and, while she loved her children, she was not able to express that love in a clear and positive way. The children were often beaten for misbehaving and denied emotional warmth as a way to further discipline them. For these reasons, Turgenev's early life was difficult, despite his family's great wealth.

Varvara Petrovna was an extremely wealthy woman. She owned a great deal of land (the family estate at Spasskoye) and approximately two thousand serfs. In addition to being beaten and seeing his siblings treated the same way, Turgenev witnessed his mother's cruelty to her serfs. All of these experiences contributed to Turgenev's later dedication to the freeing of the serfs and to the reform of the Russian governmental system.

Known for his novels, short stories and poems, Turgenev was also the author of many plays. However, only *A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY* has maintained its position as one of the great plays to emerge from nineteenth century Russia. As mentioned earlier, Turgenev completed *A MONTH IN THE*

COUNTRY in 1850 but government censorship kept it from being performed until 1872. The play was not fully appreciated until 1909 when it was produced with great success at the Moscow Art Theatre by Konstantin Stanislavsky.

Anton Chekov, possibly the best known of the great Russian playwrights, authored *THE SEAGULL*, *THE THREE SISTERS*, *THE CHERRY ORCHARD* and *UNCLE VANYA* long after *A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY*; these plays were produced and celebrated at the Moscow Art Theatre before Turgenev's play was presented.

It can be said that Chekov owed a great deal to Turgenev, who was a pioneer in the depiction of the personal and inner conflicts of a group of people as reflections of an entire social system. Chekov used a similar approach to drawing his dramatic characters and situations. Turgenev, in return, was indebted to Chekov for paving the way for *A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY* to receive its full dramatic success at the Moscow Art Theatre.

Turgenev never married, but he was not a stranger to romantic passion. In 1843 he met the French opera singer Pauline Viardot with whom he fell in love and to whom he remained devoted until his death in 1883. One year before meeting Viardot, Turgenev had had an affair with a young serf girl on his mother's estate. This young woman gave birth to their daughter in 1843. Turgenev assumed financial responsibility for this woman and his daughter, but they continued to live on his mother's estate. When the child was eight, Turgenev realized that financial responsibility was not his only debt to the child, and he arranged for her to be raised by Pauline Viardot in her loving home and with Pauline's own daughter. Turgenev spent a great deal of his life living and traveling in Europe. In fact, he was considered too European by his

Russian colleagues and very Russian by his European colleagues. He served as a sort of envoy bringing much western thought and culture into the intellectual circles of Russia. At the same time he served his fellow Russian thinkers and writers by introducing their work into the world of European intellectuals. His support of other writers was a reflection of his generous spirit and his belief that Russia had to find its way into the intellectual mainstream of the larger world.

Turgenev was a friend and contemporary of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, George Sand, George Elliot, Henry James, Gustave Flaubert, Emile Zola, Alexander Ostrovsky, Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekov, to name a few.

He died of cancer of the spine in his sixty-fifth year of life and was buried in St. Petersburg with tremendous honor.

TIME LINE: TURGENEV AND HIS TIMES

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Turgenev's Life:</u>	<u>Current Events:</u>
1818	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Ivan Turgenev born Nov. 9 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<i>White House named when it is repainted to cover smoke and scorch marks incurred when the British burned Wash. D.C. during the war of 1812.</i>
1820	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Turgenev family tours Europe. (Turgenev [T.]: aged 2-7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<i>First public high school opens in U.S.</i> •<i>First women's college founded in U.S. in Troy, N.Y.</i> •<i>Nicholas I becomes Tsar of Russia after Decembrist Revolt is crushed.</i>
1826- 1830	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Turgenev family moves to Moscow. (T:8-12) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<i>Slavery abolished in Mexico.</i> •<i>Sulfur friction matches invented by John Walker.</i> •<i>Construction of first railroad begun in U.S.</i> •<i>"American Dictionary of the English Language" published by N. Webster.</i>
1831- 1835	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Turgenev begins to produce verse and poetic drama in the Romantic style. •Turgenev's father dies. (T:13-17) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<i>First horse-drawn trolley used in N.Y.C.</i> •<i>Louisa May Alcott born - author of LITTLE WOMEN.</i> •<i>London Bridge opens.</i> •<i>Nat Turner leads Virginia slave revolt.</i>
1836- 1840	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Turgenev studies at the University of Berlin, where his idealism for the better future of Russia is solidified. (T:18-22) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<i>Davy Crockett killed at the Alamo.</i> •<i>First baseball game played - Cooperstown, NY.</i> •<i>First bicycle built.</i>
1841- 1845	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Turgenev meets Pauline Viardot, the love of his life. •Turgenev has his first literary success with the long poem "Parasha". •Turgenev's daughter is born. (T:22-27) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<i>African-Americans held as slaves liberate themselves on the ship USS-Creole while being transported from Virginia to Louisiana; they sail to Nassau to live in freedom.</i> •<i>Knickerbocker Baseball Club adopts the official rules of baseball.</i>

(Continued)

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Turgenev's Life:</u>	<u>Current Events:</u>
1846-1850	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Turgenev's mother dies, and he inherits Spasskoye-the family estate.•Begins writing plays - <i>THE BACHELOR</i>, <i>ONE MAY SPIN THE THREAD TOO FINELY</i> - none of which are produced today.•Completes finest play - <i>A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY</i>. (T:28-32)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•<i>COMMUNIST MANIFESTO</i> issued by Marx and Engel.•California becomes a state.•Serfdom abolished in Austria.
1851-1855	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Turgenev placed under house arrest for writing a sympathetic obituary for the playwright Gogol and for his short stories, "A Sportsman's Sketches", in which he criticizes serfdom. (T:33-37)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Alexander II succeeds Nicholas I as Tsar of all Russia.•Isaac Singer invents the sewing machine.•<i>NEW YORK TIMES</i> begins publishing.
1856-1860	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Turgenev publishes his most popular novel in Russia - <i>HOME OF THE GENTRY</i> - and one of his most beautiful short stories - <i>FIRST LOVE</i>. (T:38-42)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Abraham Lincoln elected President of U.S.•Steamroller invented.•Chekov born.
1861-1865	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Turgenev's daughter marries.•Turgenev publishes what is considered by many his greatest novel, <i>FATHERS AND SONS</i>. (T:43-47)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Tsar Alexander II frees Russian serfs.•U.S. Civil War begins and ends.•African-Americans freed from slavery in U.S.•Abraham Lincoln assassinated.•Ku Klux Klan founded in Pulaski, Tennessee.

(Continued)

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Turgenev's Life:</u>	<u>Current Events:</u>
1866- 1870	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Turgenev quarrels with Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.•Turgenev publishes novel <i>SMOKE</i>. (T:43-47)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•<i>First professional baseball team founded - the Cincinnati Red Stockings.</i>•<i>Russia sells Alaska to U.S. for \$7,200,000.</i>
1871- 1875	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Turgenev exiles himself to live in Paris.•Turgenev publishes a series of some of his best short fiction. (T:53-57)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•<i>Building of Brooklyn Bridge begins.</i>•<i>Color photography invented.</i>•<i>Women admitted to study at the universities of Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev and Kazan.</i>
1876- 1880	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Turgenev publishes his last and least successful novel, <i>VIRGIN SOIL</i>.•Turgenev publishes last major work, <i>POEMS IN PROSE</i>. (T:58-62)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•<i>Telephone invented by Alexander Graham Bell.</i>•<i>Electric street lamps illuminate N.Y.C. street for the first time.</i>•<i>Trotsky and Stalin are born.</i>
1881- 1883	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Turgenev dies in France on Sept. 9, 1883 of cancer of the spine. He is buried in St. Petersburg, Russia. (T:63-65)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•<i>Tuskegee Institute founded by Booker T. Washington, the first college for African-Americans.</i>•<i>First skyscraper built in Chicago, 10 stories high.</i>

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

NATALYA -- is 29, very beautiful, and married to the wealthy landowner, Islaev. Natalya is not happy in her marriage and she is frustrated by her life. This unhappiness and frustration lead her to fall passionately in love with another man, Belyaev, the young tutor to her son Kolya. Natalya, who feels she is not in control of her own life, is driven to manipulate the lives of everyone around her. Her jealous passion for Belyaev causes her to attempt to destroy his relationships with other people. For instance, Natalya tricks Vera, a young girl who is Natalya's ward, into confessing her love for Belyaev. Natalya then uses this information to hurt Vera. Because of her diabolical scheming Natalya loses all of the people she loves.

ISLAEV (Arkady) -- Natalya's 36 year old husband, who is extremely confident and powerful. He is a very rich landowner who never loses control of himself or the people around him. He looks at people as objects that can be bought and sold. Islaev realizes that his wife is in love with someone else but doesn't confront her about it. He knows that she is completely dependent on him because of his wealth and position; therefore she will never leave. Because he controls everyone around him, Islaev understands that Natalya's fear of being alone and having to rely on herself is so great that she will always be bound to him.

KOLYA -- the 10 year old son of Natalya and Islaev. His parents are selfish and neglect him. (This tells us something about his parents.) Because he is from a rich family, he has tutors to help him with his studies.

VERA -- is 17 and the ward of Natalya. She

grows up very quickly during the course of the play. At the beginning she is an innocent and carefree girl. Vera has been protected by Natalya her whole life. Vera develops a crush on Belyaev, the tutor. After innocently telling Natalya of her feelings for Belyaev, Natalya becomes wildly jealous. Natalya tells Belyaev that he must either marry Vera or leave immediately. Vera finds out what has happened and turns on Natalya, accusing her of wanting Belyaev for herself. In this one act, Vera turns into the very woman she despises (Natalya). To escape Natalya, Vera agrees to marry someone that she does not know, the middle-aged Bolshintsov.

ANNA SEMENOVA -- is 58, Islaev's mother and Natalya's mother-in-law. She lives with her son and his family. The ultimate busy-body, she is constantly underfoot, picking on her son and trying to be involved in all of the doings of the house.

RAKITIN -- is 30 and an old friend of both Natalya and Islaev. He is deeply in love with Natalya. This love has caused him to waste years of his life just to be near her. Rakitin knows that Natalya is in love with Belyaev, the tutor. He feels trapped by his life and attempts to save Belyaev from making the same mistake he did (staying in the house with Natalya). He is weak and unable to take his own advice. Finally Islaev cruelly manipulates Rakitin into leaving the estate.

BELYAEV -- is 21 and a tutor, poor, good looking and idealistic. He has been hired to instruct Kolya in Russian and has never been around rich people before. The world of the wealthy is frightening to Belyaev, the emotional turmoil terrifies him. He is attracted to Natalya but afraid of her at the same time. When he learns that Vera, whom he thinks of as a sister, is in love with him, his position becomes more difficult. Finally Belyaev escapes from everyone in this