

Maya  
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# "UNCLE VANYA"

SCENES FROM A LIFE  
THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

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В 68

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«Дядя Ваня». Сцены из непрожитой жизни.

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“NAME OF BOOK” is devoted to “Uncle Vanya,” a famed Chekhov play that continues to resonate with contemporary readers. Peering into a past hidden by the author, an investigation into the “unlived life” of the protagonist and all of the Voynitsky family is undertaken. The book is addressed to anyone interested in Chekhov’s works and their relevance to today’s world.

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*The following translations of Chekhov’s works have been used  
Chekhov’s plays, translated by Elizaveta Fen (Penguin Books, 1954),*

*“A Dreary Story”, “The House with the Mezzanine”,  
“My Life” in “The Chekhov Omnibus. Selected Stories”,  
translated by Constance Garnet (Everyman 1994),*

*“An Attack of Nerves”, translated by Constance Garnet  
in “The Portable Chekhov” (Viking Press, New York, 1968),*

*“At a Country House”, translated by Ronald Hingley in “Oxford Chekhov”,  
(vol. 7, Oxford University Press, 1978).*

**A.P. Chekhov**

**“UNCLE VANYA”**

SCENES FROM COUNTRY LIFE  
IN FOUR ACTS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**Alexander Vladimirovich Serebryakov**, retired professor

**Yelena Andreyevna**, his 27-year-old wife

**Sofya Aleksandrovna (Sonya)**, his daughter from his first marriage

**Maria Vasilyevna Voinitskaya**, widow of a privy councillor,  
mother of the professor's first wife

**Ivan Petrovich Voinitsky**, her son

**Mikhail Lvovich Astrov**, a doctor

**Ivan Ilyich Telegin**, an impoverished landowner

**Marina**, an elderly nanny

**A workman**

The action takes place on Serebryakov's estate.

## INSTEAD OF A PREFACE

It has long been recognized that Chekhov's plays begin to resonate more clearly at particular moments in time. Each of them throws the changes and moods of the present day into sharp relief.

In "Uncle Vanya" it seems as if everybody is slowly suffocating from a "lack of air" and life's stagnation. It was in this play words appeared that have long since become aphoristic and could be ascribed to Chekhov himself, albeit only spoken by one of his characters: "Everything ought to be beautiful about a human being: face, clothes, soul and thoughts." And almost all the characters in the play who belong to the educated classes punish each other with silence, accuse and loathe their close relations.

What lies behind the story of Ivan Petrovich Voinitsky whose familiar name is born by this play which Chekhov did not deign to call a "drama"?

How is one to explain Voinitsky's blind adulation of the mediocre professor Serebryakov which has warped the family's life over decades? Are there any grounds for Uncle Vanya's accusations addressed to Professor Serebryakov to the effect that he had deceived him?

What is hidden in this family's past? What role in this hidden past is played by Maria Vasilyevna, a privy counsellor's widow and at first glance an insignificant character? And finally, who doomed these characters to a life of hangers on in their own huge estate where they work "like market traders"?

Has fate deprived the characters in the play of happiness or have they themselves declined it?

This book about "a life that might have been" is devoted to a consideration of these questions.



After writing the play “Uncle Vanya” Chekhov again broke the rules by refusing to define its genre as such. In his “scenes from country life” no shot was fired at the end, as had occurred in the comedy “The Seagull”.

At the end of Act III the hero, shouting that he could have been “a Schopenhauer or a Dostoevsky” chases his elderly relative, the professor, through the rooms shooting at him with a revolver. He misses, however.

Just as with his choice of an idol for his life.

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The play is titled “Uncle Vanya”. Only Sonya, his late sister’s daughter, calls Voinitsky ‘Uncle Vanya’. The play’s action takes place on the estate which belongs to Sonya. Both uncle and niece live there in no way as owners, however, but as clerks and overseers of a business which is required to show a profit. Profit from the estate is destined for Sonya’s father, Professor Serebryakov. The answer to the question as to why the entire Voinitsky family has voluntarily condemned itself to many years of disinterested service for Serebryakov and his wellbeing may explain how this play which has always attracted the theatre, at times has drawn directors to it like a magnet.

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The Voinitskys’ family history, events that occurred several decades earlier, may hide the origins without which it is difficult to understand the motives which drive the characters of the play. Otherwise consideration of the characters’ actions or inactivity is left hanging in the air with no firm basis.

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Ivan Petrovich Voinitsky whose uneventful life had come down to worrying about vegetable oil and buckwheat, to bookkeeping and joyless routine overseeing, is the son of a Privy Counsellor and Senator. The title of member of the Senate was one of the most exalted in the Russian Empire. Ministers and top civil servants could be Senators. In the nineteenth century a Privy Counsellor was third according to the Table of Ranks and equated to a general. Voinitsky had almost certainly received an education appropriate for his background and the special status of his family.

In Chekhov's story "My Life" Misail Poloznev's father, a provincial town architect, constantly explains to his son that he should not for a single day forget his position in society, talking about the 'sacred flame' which had been acquired by his forefathers, about his uncle, a marshal of nobility, and his great-grandfather a general, and about how he, Misail, had 'snuffed out' the flame.

Misail Poloznev's rejection of his father and the attitudes and actions considered normal for his circle is quite understandable. The heartlessness and sham morality which prevailed in the Poloznev household force the hero, a member of the nobility who had not even completed his secondary education, to try to find himself among ordinary working people.

Yelena Andreyevna scolds Voinitsky, telling him: 'You, Ivan Petrovich, are educated and intelligent...' She can hardly be talking about his self-education or schooling. Yelena Andreyevna, the wife of a renowned professor, had herself studied at a conservatoire. Her measure of education level could only be university or another higher educational establishment. A university degree is highly significant for Chekhov's characters; it obligates a person. Uncle Vanya himself never talks about his youth any more than he does about what made an educated and intelligent person devote himself to dealing in vegetable oil, peas and cottage cheese.

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We might assume that Voinitsky, like Misail Poloznev, was indifferent to his father's titles and honours and devoid of ambition and class prejudice. But in trying to unravel the secret of Professor Serebryakov's success Voinitsky comments uncharitably and illiberally: "*The son of a common sexton, trained as a priest, he somehow managed to get university qualifications and a professorship; later he became 'Your Excellency', the son-in-law of a senator, and so on and so forth.*"

Uncle Vanya himself never qualified for a degree, let alone a professorship, yet is envious of the professor and considers him unworthy of such 'good fortune'. Throughout the play Voinitsky reproaches himself for organizing his life so stupidly in service to an undistinguished academic and conceited egoist. He has only recently realized this, however. In the course of his tirades against the professor in Act I he constantly repeats the number twenty-five. In Act III he recalls: "*For twenty-five years I've been managing the estate! I've been*

*working and sending you money like the most conscientious bailiff...”*

Voinitsky is forty-seven. When he first dedicated himself and his whole life to the service of Professor Serebryakov he was just over twenty. People usually finished high school at 18 – 19. So Voinitsky who had been fascinated for so long not only by Serebryakov’s personality, but also by his talent, might well have been one of his students.

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If one accepts the possibility that Ivan Petrovich Voinitsky was Serebryakov’s student and went to his lectures then Uncle Vanya’s firm belief that he was serving an intellectual giant becomes more credible.

Let us remember that Uncle Vanya not only has managed the estate and increased Serebryakov’s income, but has also made fair copies of his writings. On his own admission, Voinitsky has been cooped up for a quarter century within four walls. All his emotions belonged to Serebryakov alone. By day Vanya and his mother Maria Vasilyevna would talk about the professor and his works, took pride in him and spoke his name with awe. Nights they “*wasted reading books and magazines*”.

Essentially what happened was a young man for no known reason began to believe in Serebryakov’s gifts and not only to serve him, but to let his life be taken over by him completely, finding the sense of his existence in what constituted the substance of another’s life.

*“When people have no real life, they live on their illusions. Anyway, it’s better than nothing,”* says Voinitsky in Act II.

Why had he not had a real life when he was young and why had illusions seemed better for him than ‘nothing’?

Nothing is ever said in the play about the Voinitsky family’s past. Just as the story of Konstantin Treplev’s parents and the parents of the three Prozorov sisters is shrouded in innuendo, deliberate suppression of facts and partial admissions. The characters are constantly referring in their remarks to what is hidden here in the past. One might say that the real life of the past is a dramatic device used by Chekhov to force every director and actor to look for the answer to a question the author has not even posed. But the past exists invisibly in Chekhov’s plays together with the present.

Family secrets, “skeletons in the cupboard” and hidden deeds are not just a background for the present, but also a tacit, concealed reason for the characters’ actions and behaviour. The reason for why they are not free to change their present, odious though it might be to them.

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Present-day audiences may not always realize how large the estate owned by Sonia and managed by Voinitsky really is. It was bought for ninety-five thousand roubles. There are twenty-six rooms in the main house. Voinitsky's father paid only seventy thousand leaving a "debt" of twenty-five thousand. Working "like an ox" for twenty-five years Ivan Voinitsky has paid off this sum.

By comparison Chekhov's quite small estate of Melikhovo cost him thirteen thousand when he bought it, but he could not raise this sum in its entirety, so paid it in instalments, having mortgaged the estate to a bank.

Uncle Vanya reproaches Serebryakov for never once thinking that he might increase his salary; as a result he received only 500 roubles a year, not a large sum. The annual pay for a village teacher was 300 roubles. Neither Voinitsky himself, nor his mother Maria Vasilyevna strike us as extravagant or accustomed to a life of luxury. The way of life they lead could rather be called modest. The purchase of a huge estate burdening them with a considerable debt is one more riddle from the family's past.

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Voinitsky says that the estate was bought as a dowry when his sister married Serebryakov. In all probability Voinitsky's parents had no ancestral home, yet the estate was gifted to Voinitsky's sister, Sonya's mother, in its entirety. Added to that, the purchase only became possible because Voinitsky himself had relinquished his share of the inheritance in favour of his sister. Thus both Maria Vasilyevna and her son had voluntarily left themselves without material security. Furthermore neither son nor mother had any other source of income. At that time Voinitsky had no position in society and most probably had not yet even begun working.

Strange self-sacrifice and surprising dowry, especially if one takes into account that the bride was the daughter of a senator and the future son-in-law the son of a seminarist, not from the nobility and merely a promising young academic.

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The action takes place at the end of the 90s of the XIX century. So Serebryakov's marriage to Voinitsky's sister may be dated to the 70s of that century. According to his post and title Voinitsky's father belonged to