

A Nobody's Time in *The Cherry Orchard**

CHEN Yue-ting

Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics Dongfang College, Haining, Zhejiang, 314408, China

In *The Cherry Orchard*, there are mainly three kinds of time views. The upper class in the play, such as Lyubov has a nostalgia time view. In the second place, the character such as Firs, a nobody, a servant in the play, trapped in the present. Besides, the rising class such as Lopakhin, Dunyasha and, Varya, keeping a watchful eye on the time flow. Chekhov sets various metaphors in the play. Many papers discuss either the upper class's view on the time or the rising class's while there is little attention on the nobodies. The nobody's senselessness of the time flow leads to the unobserved living conditions and sad ending. This essay focuses on a nobody, Firs's sense of time in *The Cherry Orchard*, trying to show how a man would disappear in time with no name when he gives up his "self".

Keywords: time, a nobody, *The Cherry Orchard*

I. Introduction

The Cherry Orchard is a classic and the final work of Russian dramatist Chekhov published in 1904. This play is interpreted in various dimensions in many countries around the world. People love this play not only because of its romantic melancholy in the specific historical background but also because this classic can activate the spirit of the times and have contemporary significance. It has a unique artistic tension to reveal the connotation of the characteristics of the times fully. This essay will focus on discussing Firs, one of the small potatoes' time views in the play. It will also analyze the living dilemma of these low-status people, what was their future, and what made their confusions and anxiety of life at that time.

The brief introduction of the play is: although there is a chance to retain, Lyubov drops the beautiful cherry garden, giving up the used brilliant life to leave Russia. In that instant, a son of a serf of the Ranevsky family has entered into the rank of the rising middle class after the emancipation proclamation in 1861, Lopakhin took over the cherry orchard. He turned it into a summer vacation home and rented it out for profit.

The social background with the pain of the transition undoubtedly led to the rapid growth of the Soviet Union from an agricultural to an industrial society from 1928 to 1975. However, the Soviet Union collapsed on Christmas day in 1991, shifting from socialism to capitalism later. The practical reason for the collapse was when consumption was rising faster than production, Yeltsin broke up the planned economy. As a result, there has been an absolute economic decline since 1990. In 1991 the planned economy was no longer working. Yeltsin did not pay taxes. After the collapse of the Soviets, the economy collapsed totally. The new leadership group was urged

* **Acknowledgements:** This paper is under the project sponsored by Zhejiang University of Finance & Economics Dongfang College (Project No.:2018dfy015).

CHEN Yue-ting, a Ph.D. student at National Chengchi University, Taiwan; Lecturer, Foreign Language Department, Dongfang College, Zhejiang University of Finance of Economics.

to revive the economy and ignored the pressure of the old society. Therefore, the country tended to go the way of capitalism.

In a nutshell, the most valuable part of the play is Lyubov's love for all as well as the excellent qualities of the middle class: endure hardship and struggle to experience abundant life. They are once falling in mere enjoyment, no matter how brilliant the past was, such as the noble previous Ranevsky family, or as what Trofimov comments on Lopakhin's idea to build entertained villas in the cherry orchard. He thought it also was a kind of impetuous habit, and only work could make a practical progressing society (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 220). They both express the splendors turn into emptiness.

Although free of humanity is a kind of humanistic care, releasing too much will become capricious since it has no rules and orders.

History is a cautionary tale, even if it is always strikingly similar. If the noble people lose their nobility, they are easy to be replaced by the new grand. If they sympathize with their past glory, another group of people is more sympathized. They are pitiful because they senselessly missed the fight for a better life. Firs is such a person in this another group who is inactive for life.

II. Firs's Time View for Staying at the Same

Firs, as an 87-year-old valet in the play, always hates the progress of the time. At the end of the play, it seems Firs senses he had never lived. He says, "Life's gone by, as if I never lived" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 284). It is the most apparent scene he presents his time view. Knowing time flows, he motionlessly can not prevent to live without any significance.

In Bakhtin's polyphony theory, it illustrates the critical role of a polyphonic phenomenon in literary works is to reveal the diversity of life and the multilayered human emotions, which is directly related to the underlying conditions of human life and existence (Bakhtin & Holquist, 2008, pp. 151-152). In *The Cherry Orchard*, the polyphonic theory is mainly manifested in the shaping of the image to present a multidimensional state and three-dimensional sense rather than a rigid plane image.

It cannot say that Firs had no passion for life at all. He missed the old past days when people used to dry the cherries, bottle them, make into juice and preserve the cherries (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 53), and they make money because of the cute sweet fruits. It could easily echo with the audience to know the warm and peaceful past life that man and nature were in harmony. However, the present situation is that industry and business play the leading roles in the fast development of the society. *The Cherry Orchard* was created and staged in the period of the rapid growth of Russian capitalism. Since the reform of the great emperor Peter in the 18th century, Russia has paved the way for the development of capitalism in politics, economy, and ideology. After entering the 19th century, Russia began the second wave of reform. Alexander II declared the abolition of serfdom in 1861, which further cleared the way for the development of Russian capitalism. The improvement of serfdom and the development of capitalist not only completely changed the social relations between man and man but also reshaped the relations between man and nature in the new mode of production and commercial culture. Because of human desires, humanity let nature suffer unbridled exploitation and exploitation. At the end of the play, Chekhov uses symbolism to embody the malcontent sound of life that is "a breaking string, dying away, sad" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 284) from the sky. Nevertheless, later, "silence ensues, and the only

thing heard is an axe striking wood far off in the orchard" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 284) to show whatever nature is, is right. Someone may miss the past, but the progress of the society would go ahead, which is also a part of life.

It seems the timeline of Firs is stopped since he subjectively refuses to face reality and look forward to the future. He always murmurs to himself. In his words, it could not be hard to say he critically realizes his life by making dialogue with himself. Sometimes he complains about the surrounded things, including his master, the social progress, and the environment, while sometimes he blames himself that he had not lived, he does not tell the reason why his life was meaningless and how he could change to face a new one. It leaves the blank for the audience to think, but the play highlights the importance of the two different ways of thinking. As Bakhtin especially emphasized the dialogue characteristics in polyphonic theory, because the primary purpose of literary works is not to show the events, the plot and the fate of personality, but to show the different independent consciousness with their world, equal value, and equal status. The relationship between authors and people and objects and between characters is a dialogue relationship that is strictly implemented and carried out all the time (92-104). Bakhtin argues that a single voice can end nothing and resolve nothing. Two voices are the lowest conditions of life, the lowest conditions of existence (Bakhtin, 2008, pp. 112-115). In Bakhtin's view, the dialogical relation of language is the phenomenon of two-tone language in the works; that is, the language has a dual-orientation. It is both directed at the content of language (which is consistent with the same language) and directed at another language (that is, the language of others) (Bakhtin, 2008, pp. 12, 142). Such two disputing sounds form a double voice. In Bakhtin's eyes, everything in life is right (Bakhtin, 2008, p. 22). What is out of dialogue loses its meaning and makes no sense at all. Therefore, although a small potato Firs is, he shows his double voice for all, even for himself. That is a high point that even a small role as a critically thinking mind then the social development is for sure, though many serfs or ordinary people like Firs are unclear for the future situation.

The theme of *The Cherry Orchard* is obviously with multi-meaning and multi-interpretation. The main content of the play revolves around the change of ownership and disappearance of the cherry orchard. The change of ownership, including the different reactions of the people in the manor, all show people's confusion and helplessness, which dig out a more profound theme. However, what makes the confusion and helplessness? It is not merely a historical problem, but the hard confusion in choosing material or spirit, new in nostalgia, emotion, and reason. Human survival turns into a lonely situation without any support. Human psychology becomes fragile. The value of life is no longer magnificent, and everywhere seems meaningless. Wildlife becomes a beautiful illusion. People are waiting and pursuing, but they can achieve nothing. It is powerless anxiety. The beautiful cherry orchard symbolizes the spiritual home, but it is hard to compete with the commercial and practical villa buildings, which can create the value of money. The intermittent, indistinct sound of sawing trees signified the beginning of a new pragmatic life, accompanied by a reminiscence of the past and the collapse of the spiritual home. However, there is no clear answer to where the future lies.

III. The Other People's Carelessness for Firs

In the first scene, when Lopakhin always checks his watch to notice the flow of time, On the contrary, Firs recalls the past as he mentions that in the old days, the way how people made cherry jam. He rambled on about the

good old days. Gaev scolded him and told him to shut up, though Gaev was not concerned about Lopakhin's suggestion to revive the cherry orchard, and he loved the good old days too. Lyubov is curious about how Firs knows the recipe for the cherry sauce, and no one cares about him. Firs recalls that "the preserved cherries in those days were soft and juicy, sweet and fragrant" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 53).

Gaev rudely treats his old valet. However, Firs always cares about him. As a loyal valet of the Ranevsky family, Firs always reminded him to sleep quickly. When he asks Gaev to wear a coat to keep warm, Gaev merely dislikes him and thinks him wordy. Moreover, Firs always worries Gaev for his light overcoat and keeps a close eye on whether he is at home. Also, the female landlord says he is old enough to be silly. This carelessness forces him to say the words "I've lived a long time" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 88) to show he already has no hope and no expectation for the future. He has the length of a lifetime but has no quality for his own life.

The other servants disrespect Firs too. Yasha, as a young valet, does not show any respect to this senior older man. He always calls him an old man, and Firs calls him "blunderhead" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 120).

The most careless treatment for him is at the ending of the play when everybody leaves. Only Firs is forgotten and locked in the empty house. At that moment, he still remembers his male master and concerns about Gaev's thin clothing, though they all left him on his own. People heard the sound of the strokes of the axe, and the past is over. A new era begins he never wants to face or begin a new life but merely stays alone to show his melancholy for the pitiful masters, his lifeless living, no strength, and good for nothing (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 157).

In fact, except for the other people's apparent carelessness for Firs, these people are in an anxious situation to worry about their self-existence in the progress of the social transition. No one knows who would lead all the people to a beautiful utopia society. Chekhov used some symbolic forms to express things and the relations between things and deliver certain concepts, thoughts, and emotions in the substantial cherry orchard. He makes the various classes of Russian society concrete to express the thoughts more accurately. In *The Cherry Orchard*, every character symbolized a class in Russian society at that time. Chekhov depicted the contradiction of the whole Russian society as the contradiction between the characters in the manor. The representative figures represented the various attitudes from distinct representative figures towards serfdom and the vision for the future of Russian society at that time.

A nobody Firs, who was born as a serf, represented the contradictions of the serf class in Russia more clearly. The role of symbols was to convey the ideas that the writer wanted to express. Through his description of Firs in *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov showed the characteristics of the serf class in Russia and reflected the serf class's attitude towards solving the social contradictions in Russia at that time and its expectation for the future direction of Russia. That is to say, the serfs did not have a clear understanding of the future, nor could they solve the social contradictions, or even solve their survival problems. From Chekhov's point of view, the future of Russian society is still uncertain. Although this play typically mentions the rise of the emerging bourgeoisie, it is hard to explain that this class will lead people to a better social state.

Furthermore, the author discusses by using multiple characters in his work about who would lead the society, and about the question that Russian society should think about how to exist. Chekhov uses symbols to represent all classes of the society and make each class more accurately, which helps each class of Russian society understand their strengths and weaknesses more clearly, and also helps to awaken each class to consider

the state and the individual survival and the status issues. It also reflected that Chekhov takes social responsibility as a writer. The play has a harsh critical tone to criticize some of the serfs making no efforts to improve their human condition.

IV. Firs's Self-limitations

Firs has apparent limitations for himself, especially embodied on his *dotard*. At first, he is the oldest man in the play. Although he is loyal enough, he is lifeless not only because of his age but for his lack of recognition. He does not like to face reality and the future. As he said: "I didn't accept freedom then, I stayed with my masters ... I remember everybody was glad, but what they were glad about they didn't know themselves" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 88). It shows that because of his limitations of recognition, and he could not understand what freedom means for man. Nevertheless, it seems sometimes he is clear about something. He thought now peasants and masters had known their roles, but now they lost their minds to find their places. He feels powerless to revive his life since he gets used to life in the past. The big transition of society makes both the older man and his master hard at adapting to the new life. At the same time, the rising middle class, like Lopakhin, is quickly grasping the chances to enhance his status.

He never likes to change the situation, even metaphors "the emancipation" as "catastrophe" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 95). He understands this social transition as: "the owl screeched, and the samovar went on whistling" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 95). However, it could interpret this situation as it is soon to dawn, and the tea is ready for breakfast. It shows his negative attitudes towards life. The other people's hatred of him is immense because of his frequent complaints. He recalls the glorious past that generals, barons, and admirals came to the cherry orchard for balls, but now only the post-office clerk and the station master have been reluctant to come.

The old age and the limits of the recognition are the big blocks for Firs's confined life. Even the wordy student Trofimov, he could say that "the human race goes forward, perfecting its powers" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 92) to show his positive attitude towards the future since he is still young with lots of time to experience the life.

Except for the old age and the limits of the recognition, Firs is confined for his lack of self-awareness. When Lyubov asks him where would he go if the estate is lost, he answers, "wherever you tell me" (Chekhov et al., 2015, p. 249). Positively speaking, he is a loyal valet to the Ranevsky as he still worried these noble masters that they have only one waiter now. However, in other words, he is like a parasite. All his life is to serve for his masters, and he gets used to and is proud of it. His deficiency of being self-aware makes his timeline stopped. Therefore, he is careless to himself too.

Besides, from the polyphonic features of dialogue, Bakhtin extends the third important characteristic of polyphony: *unfinalizability* (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 115). To exist means to engage in conversational communication. Therefore, a conversation is practically likely to continue. It can and should not be tied up. Bakhtin emphasizes that the unfinished speech depends on the awareness of the activity and variability of consciousness because consciousness in the human mind changes all the time, and words are the carrier of this dynamic change of consciousness. As long as human beings' consciousness is flowing and conversation is going on, everything in the world is uncertain and unfinished. Therefore, the last scene of the play is an unfinished action, Firs lying down motionlessly since everyone forgets him, and he is locked in the house. No one knows his fate and their fate,

while only a sound from the sky manifests the orchard would have a new appearance. The open end of the play brings added significance and marks the unfinalizability of all's unclear future, which provides the readers an open mind to participate in the dialogue with the author, the characters, and themselves. To sum up, Firs's unknown but sad fate reflects in the unfinalizability of the polyphonic theory. That is one of the causes of his and man's unknown and sad destiny.

Firs is the oldest valet of the landowner, a minor role, but he has witnessed the glory of the big family, the abolition of serfdom, the transformation of the old and new class power, and the demise of the old aristocracy. Unfortunately, he has no sensible plans for the future. He is a victim and advocate of the old system and the old age. The landowner, Lyubov, was absorbed in pleasure. She fails to face reality and does not plan for the future. When Lopahkin suggested that the land could be rented out for villas to avoid being auctioned off, she did not hear. Firs' physical disability causes him to be cut off from the outside information while these people, such as Lyubov and Gaev, stubbornly cling to the past because they are unwilling to face reality and accept new ideas. Therefore, both the aristocracy and the servants are the symbols of the ignorant group in the play. They are unable to change the living condition, let alone think about the coming new era, and become unknown to where to go.

V. Conclusion

To sum up, Firs as a nobody, his time is valuable for the masters, and he seldom thinks of himself. He is an essential but careless figure in the play. He witnessed how the glorious, noble family turned into withering away, and he experienced the transition of society. He knows the time flow but used to be a serf of the family, and he has a quite reserved and obedient personality. He is a victim of the old system of the past era. However, he is also an advocate of it as he regarded the emancipation of serfs as a catastrophe.

Due to his age, Firs suffered from severe deaf and could not hear others. He was always talking to himself, which made people feel ridiculous. Nevertheless, can non-disabled people usually communicate? Chekhov skillfully uses symbolism to reflect the essence of Lyubov and Gaev, who is out of touch with the real-life and listen to nothing. When their old friend and the merchant Lopahkin suggested the landowner Lyubov that the plot of the cherry orchard could be rented out to avoid being sold at auction, she accused him of nonsense. What difference did he make to the deaf ears of Firs? Firs's physical disability has led to isolation from outside information, and these people stubbornly cling to the past because they are unwilling to face reality and accept new ideas.

Firs symbolizes the ignorant group that is unable or unwilling to change the current status. They carry with them the servility and habit bred in the old era, and they do not think about the coming new era and new life. Therefore, they can know nowhere to go with the arrival of the new era.

The relationship between people in *The Cherry Orchard* and its trend indicates the inevitable law of social development. Through the experience of Lopahkin, a once serf but later a successful merchant, who always cherishes the time and faces to the reality and plan for the future early, and through the sad ending of Firs, Chekhov expresses his historical concept: in front of time flow, man can only be adapted to the development of the times and stride forward. Otherwise, he will be drowned in the flood of time.

References

- Bakhtin, M. M., & Holquist, M. (2008). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M., McGee, V., Holquist, M., & Emerson, C. (1986). *Speech genres & other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Chekhov, A. P., et al. (2015). *The Cherry Orchard*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.