CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Three Sisters

Anton Chekhov · *1901 · Julius West translation (1916)*

Olga, Masha, and Irina Prozorov live in a provincial garrison town, where the family moved eleven years ago when their father, a general, was posted there. He is dead, and they still talk of going home to Moscow, which they remember as a golden place of culture and happiness. Chekhov's play is a drama of longing, told across four acts, and Moscow is a place they never reach.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What becomes of people who live for a future that does not come?

The sisters wait for Moscow, and life goes on around them. Their brother Andrey marries Natasha, who slowly takes over the house. Masha falls in love with a married officer, Vershinin, and Irina agrees to marry a man she does not love. The regiment leaves, and the sisters, holding each other as the band plays, speak of work and of a future they will not see. The play is sad and comic at once.

KEY CHARACTERS

Olga Prozorov
The eldest sister, a teacher.

Masha
The middle sister, unhappy in marriage.

Irina
The youngest, who longs for work and Moscow.

Andrey Prozorov
Their brother, who marries Natasha.

Colonel Vershinin
An officer who talks of the future.

Baron Tuzenbach
A suitor of Irina.

Dr. Chebutikin
The old doctor.

Grades 10–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Name-Day

ACT I

The Prozorov sisters and their brother welcome the officers of the garrison to Irina's name-day. Vershinin, newly come from Moscow, talks of the future. Tuzenbach and Solyony both pay court to Irina.

- Moscow is the sisters' dream.
- Vershinin talks of what life will be in two or three hundred years.
- The room is full of hope.

02

Carnival

ACT II

Natasha has married Andrey, and her influence in the house is growing. Masha and Vershinin begin to love each other. The sisters' hope of Moscow weakens.

- Natasha begins to take over.
- Masha's love is a risk.
- The hope of Moscow grows dimmer.

03

The Fire

ACT III

A great fire in the town sends the townspeople to the Prozorov house. Olga and Irina quarrel with Natasha. The doctor, drunk, confesses his failure. Masha confesses her love.

- The fire is a chaos that shows everyone as they are.
- Olga and Irina begin to lose ground in their own house.
- Masha's confession is an open moment.

04

The Departure

ACT IV, FIRST PART

The regiment is leaving. Vershinin and Masha part. Irina agrees to marry Tuzenbach.

- The regiment's departure leaves the town empty.
- Masha's parting is brief.
- Irina has given up Moscow for work.

05

The Duel and the Band

ACT IV, ENDING

Tuzenbach is killed by Solyony in a duel. The sisters, with the band playing, hold one another and speak of work and the future.

- The duel is offstage.
- The band's music is a march that goes away.
- The sisters' last speeches are a hope for meaning.

Longing | Work and Meaning | Family | The Future

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Moscow is always mentioned and never reached. Ask what it stands for.
2. Vershinin speaks of the future. Notice how others answer.
3. Natasha slowly takes over. See how the house changes.
4. The play ends with a march. Ask what the sisters' last words mean.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the Julius West translation (1916) (Project Gutenberg #7986), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/chekhov-three-sisters/.