

Uncle Varietk

by John Byrne

Developed by Rapture Theatre
& North Lanarkshire Council.



LEARNING RESOURCE

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Message from The Artistic Director



Thank you for taking the time to read this Learning Resource developed to support Rapture Theatre's production of Uncle Varick by John Byrne. John Byrne is one of Scotland's most well-known and loved playwrights, and having the opportunity to direct and produce his interpretation of Chekhov's classic play Uncle Vanya was a privilege.

The cast and crew for the production were as always a delight to work with, and this makes my job not only easier, but fulfilling and rewarding. John came to the rehearsals for Varick on a couple of occasions, which might seem a little daunting, but when a director and writer work together towards a common goal and the writer is happy with how their script is shaping into a performance worthy of the stage and a public audience, you cannot ask for more.

I hope that you find this resource a valuable and relevant aid to your teaching practices and would love to receive any feedback you may have from this and other educational packs and workshops available from Rapture Connect.

Michael Emans

Introduction

This Learning Resource has been developed and produced in partnership between Rapture Connect and North Lanarkshire Council (NLC). Rapture Connect is the creative learning department of Rapture Theatre.

Working in collaboration with NLC's Quality Improvement Services and a working group, comprising of four North Lanarkshire teaching staff, Rapture Connect have produced this Resource to support a pilot project exploring the 'adaptation' of a play with particular focus on active literacy skills through scriptwriting and also directing skills within drama.

The Learning Resource provides background information on Rapture Theatre's production of Uncle Varick by John Byrne, as well as a project descriptor with outcomes and performance criteria which contain suggested activities and areas of study to introduce pupils to the key elements of scriptwriting and direction for performance on a theatrical stage/venue. The Resource contains two individual outcomes that work both independently of each other as well as the original intention of combining the two to create one overall performance. The outcomes have been structured to explore the adaptation and production of Uncle Varick, but could also be applied to any script or play currently being studied within the classroom.

Message from The Author

When my wife Jeanine and I caught up with Rapture Theatre's production of my version of Chekhov's 'Uncle Vanya' (retitled UNCLE VARICK and reset in the far North East of Scotland) at the Adam Smith Theatre in Kirkcaldy, having missed its first outing at the King's Theatre in Edinburgh owing to a bout of 'flu, we were quite bowled over.

Both with the inspired casting of the play and the resulting performances - entirely due to Michael Emans's expert hand firmly grasping the tiller and guiding the craft expertly through the rapids where other (less expert and committed) mariners might well have run aground - a really thrilling trip for everyone of us on board.

I have nothing but praise for Rapture.

John Byrne



“I hate the play and I’m trying to forget it. It would be a real blow to me if some unknown force were to drag it out of obscurity and bring it to life. There’s a fine example of perverted parental love for you.” This is what Anton Chekhov wrote about his play *The Wood Demon* in 1899, which was later to be regarded as an ‘earlier version’ of one of his most well-known works: *Uncle Vanya*.

Chekhov’s reason for loathing *The Wood Demon* most likely stems from the notoriously bad reception its premiere received at the Abramov Theater, Moscow in 1889. Actors from a rival theatre company booed and jeered, audiences made so much noise you couldn’t hear what the actors were saying on stage (not that it mattered as half the time they forgot their lines) and the critics slammed it. It was an unmitigated disaster as far as Chekhov was concerned. Others must have thought so too, as the play would not be staged again in Moscow until 1960.

However, many of *The Wood Demon*’s characters live on in his later work: *Uncle Vanya*. A few of the names have changed, plotlines developed and shifted and some of the original characters have morphed into one, but for all intent and purposes the similarities between the two plays remain. Below is a link to an extract taken from the Cambridge Press’s An Introduction to Chekhov. It outlines the plot for *The Wood Demon*, additionally you can also find a list of characters from both Chekhov plays as well as from John Byrne’s adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* entitled *Uncle Varick* to study for comparison.

Byrne’s adaptation remains close to the source material of Chekhov. However, he has ‘adapted’ the play by updating the timeframe to 1960s Scotland and changed the antiquated form of language used in *Vanya* to a more recognisable modern format, albeit, North-eastern Scots dialect. This makes it much easier for a modern local audience to connect to the situations and empathise with the plays themes and characters.

The intention of this Learning Resource is to encourage a further ‘adaptation’ of a scene using *Uncle Varick* as inspiration, this should enable your pupils to gain a better understanding of the play. This does not necessarily mean that the work must be brought into today’s contemporary society, but that is one option. The ‘adaptation’ may also focus on the development of the characters.

If we take for example, the journey of the titular character of *Varick*. In *The Wood Demon*, at the start of his journey, he is obviously not the star of the show, that accolade belongs to the Doctor/Environmentalist in this instance. The character of Yegor who will eventually become *Vanya* and ultimately *Varick*, still has the same despondent attitude to life, resentment towards his brother-in-law, the Professor, as well as continuing to covet *Serebryakov*’s young wife *Yelena*. Possibly the biggest difference for this character is that of his suicide in *The Wood Demon* which becomes an attempted homicide of the Professor in *Uncle Vanya/Varick*. (Side-note: not a character development, but a clever staging selection and worthy of notice is the use of the weapon chosen by Byrne in *Uncle Varick*. He has *Varick* attempt to kill *Sandy* with a chainsaw, instead of the original use of a gun in both *Vanya* and for the suicide in the *Demon*. This is a nod to the increasing ease with which the environment is being destroyed from the development of the modern world. This could also reflect the character’s own apparent destruction from the fast pace of modern life.)

Another important change is the significance Chekhov places on this character, when he elevates him to the titular protagonist in his “re-write”. This is key because Chekhov wishes to push everyday life, in all its boring minute detail, directly front and centre by drawing attention to such a mediocre character.

At its debut, *Uncle Vanya* was a critical success. The audience witnessed their own doubts and fears reflected back at them in the characters’ struggle to find meaning in their existence. After seeing a performance of *Vanya*, Maxim Gorky wrote to Chekhov “[I] wept... I went home stupefied, shattered by your play... I felt as I watched its characters as if I were being sawn in half by a dull saw. Its teeth go straight to the heart, and they make the heart clench, groan, cry out... Your Uncle Vanya is an entirely new form of dramatic art, a hammer you use to beat on the empty pate of the public.”

The new “adaptation” had made a connection with the audience, instead of mockery, they understood and empathized with what was happening on stage. In his book *Chekhov’s Uncle Vania and The Wood Demon*, Donald Rayfield wrote

“This study of Chekhov’s emergence as a dramatist of genius will be invaluable... for here, for the first-time, we can watch as a playwright turns failure into success and thus learn technical secrets of his art.”

Extract
from An
Introduction
to Chekhov

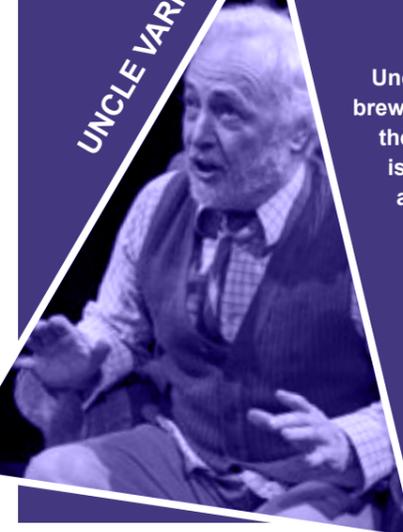
Character
Comparison

[click for more information](#)

ADAPTING A DEMON

CHARACTERS

UNCLE VARICK



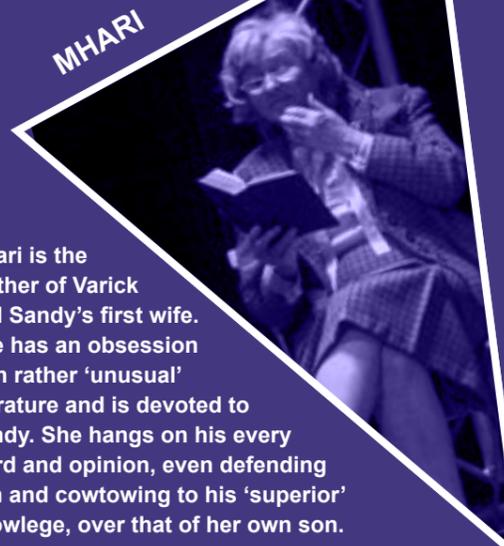
Uncle Varick runs the brewery estate in which the play is set. Varick is in his 50s and has a tendency towards manic depression. He thinks that he has wasted his life and continually laments on lost opportunities. He believes he is in love with Elaine.

Kirsty Morag is the estate's housekeeper. She has been with the family since Shona was a wee girl and her mother still alive.



KIRSTY MORAG

MHARI



Mhari is the mother of Varick and Sandy's first wife. She has an obsession with rather 'unusual' literature and is devoted to Sandy. She hangs on his every word and opinion, even defending him and cowtowing to his 'superior' knowledge, over that of her own son.

Sandy Sheridan is a pretentious, retired art-critic. His first wife, Varick's sister and Shona's mother, is dead. He is pompous and self-obsessed. He suffers badly with pains caused by gout, which make him extremely grouchy, on top of his other flaws.



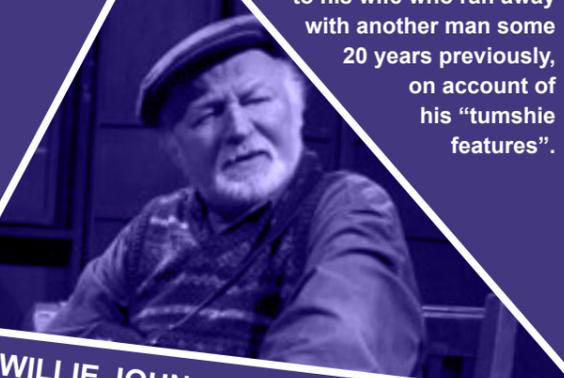
SANDY

ELAINE



Elaine is Sandy's 'new', beautiful and much younger wife. Many of the play's male characters are in love with her, but she is indifferent to their advances. She is bored with life on the estate.

Willie John Telfer lives in a cottage on the estate. He has been a friend of Varick's for a very long time. He is still devoted to his wife who ran away with another man some 20 years previously, on account of his "tumshie features".



WILLIE JOHN

THE DOCTOR



The Doctor (Michael) not only attends to his patients but also his trees. He owns several acres of forest and avidly monitors the decline in the local environment. Like Varick he is pessimistic about his future. However, he does attempt to have an affair with Elaine.

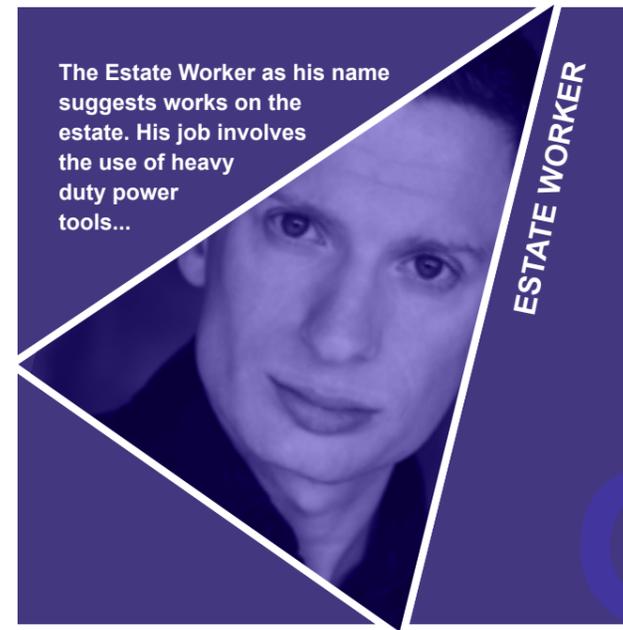
Shona is Sandy's daughter and lives and works on the estate with her Uncle Varick. She is a 'plain' girl who is in love with Michael, The Doctor. Her affections are not reciprocated. She is one of the few characters who isn't self-obsessed, and downbeat.

SHONA



The Estate Worker as his name suggests works on the estate. His job involves the use of heavy duty power tools...

ESTATE WORKER



Act One

Scene One: 1960s rural Scotland, the gardens of a brewery estate. Afternoon tea is being served.

The Doctor and Kirsty Morag are discussing the first time the Doctor visited the estate. The Doctor is lamenting on his lost youth and optimism.

Varick arrives looking disheveled and hung-over. They begin to discuss Sandy and Elaine and how their stay at the house has disrupted the regular routine of the household. Sandy and Elaine arrive after having been on a walk with Shona and Willie John.

Sandy begins to pontificate about the wonders of the Scottish countryside and how he must write an article about it; with this he makes his way back to the house.

When alone, the Doctor and Varick start a conversation, which is essentially about nothing in general but progresses from one negative to the next, especially when Varick talks about his brother-in-law. However, he also admits to being envious of Sandy's success in both his career and with women. The Doctor questions whether Elaine is faithful to her husband, but Varick assures him she is, regretfully.

Shona is in love with the Doctor, but it is not reciprocated as he speaks down to her as if she was a mischievous child.

Mhari bemoans Varick's lack of enthusiasm to have any kind of meaningful conversation, claiming he used to be so inspirational and full of ideas. He rages at the accusation stating that life has passed him by and everything he did in the past was a waste of time.

An Estate Worker enters the scene carrying a chainsaw; he is looking for the Doctor. Before leaving to attend an accident we learn that the Doctor is an advocate of environmentalism.

After the doctor leaves, Varick and Elaine begin to bicker at one and other. Varick declares his undying love for her. Elaine is not impressed.

Lights Fade

Scene Two: The Dining Room. Sandy doses in a chair, Elaine sits nearby. It is dark outside.

Sandy awakes with a start. He talks about the agony of the pains he is suffering from. Shona enters. Varick also comes into the room. Varick tells Elaine and Shona to go to bed that he will take care of Sandy. Sandy is not very happy about this, suggesting that Varick will be the death of him, if they are left alone. Kirsty Morag arrives, offers him some sympathy then with Shona's aid helps him to bed.

Varick and Elaine remain. Elaine vents her frustrations about everyone and everything in the house, claiming to hate it. Varick tries to kiss Elaine's hand. She tells him to get lost. Once again he drones on about his wasted life and how much he loves her. She tries to leave but he stops her, she tells him he bores her and storms out.

Varick embarks on another lament addressing this to the chair Sandy just recently occupied. We learn how he once admired the retired art-critic, reveling in their discussions of all things cultural, but that Varick is now completely disillusioned.

The Doctor and Willie John enter the scene, both very drunk. The Doctor begins to drunkenly talk about Elaine; it is becoming apparent that Varick is not the only one with a fondness for Sandy's wife.

He and Willie John leave just as Shona returns. She mentions the amount of alcohol that they are all consuming. She also mentions that the business is in trouble, Varick begins to cry; Shona reminds him so much of his late dear sister.

Varick goes off to bed, leaving Shona alone. The Doctor arrives back carrying a bottle of whiskey. The Doctor confesses to being like Varick, disillusioned with life and that there is nothing and no one to give a damn about. Shona tries to hint that she is in love with him, but he is oblivious.

Elaine arrives, and Shona confesses her love for Michael (the Doctor) to her.

End of Act One

Act Two

Scene Three: The Dining Room. Varick and Shona are seated as Elaine paces the floor nervously.

They are all waiting on the arrival of Sandy. He has an announcement to make. Varick is annoyed at Sandy keeping them waiting. He tells Elaine how wonderful she is again and rushes off to find some roses he has picked for her. She is exasperated with him and the mundaneness of life in this house.

As soon as Varick leaves, Shona once again turns to the subject of Michael. She asks for Elaine's advice. How can she find out if he loves her or not? Elaine offers to help by finding out "the lay of the land". Shona agrees.

Shona goes off to find the Doctor. Elaine ruminates on the matter, stating that it is obvious Michael is not in love with Shona, and in fact reflects that he is rather attractive...

The Doctor appears with a map of the surrounding area in hand. Elaine pretends to be interested in what he is telling her, and then brings up the subject of Shona. Michael is bemused, denying any attraction for her. Then with sudden realization he thinks that Elaine has been using the questions about Shona as a cover for her own feelings towards him, he tries to embrace her, she tries to break away. He kisses her on the mouth, just as Varick reappears in the doorway clutching his roses. Neither are aware of his return. Elaine suddenly spots Varick and breaks away. Awkwardness ensues. The Doctor leaves.

Elaine tells Varick that she and Sandy are leaving to go back to London. Sandy, Shona, Willie John and Kirsty Morag arrive.

Sandy assembles everyone together. He announces that the house and estate are to be sold. The estate actually belongs to Shona and without her consent none of Sandy's plans can actually go ahead. Varick is incensed, he raves about the 25 years he has dedicated to paying off and making the estate profitable, and how those profits enabled Sandy to maintain his extravagant lifestyle. He rants about how Sandy is a philistine and declares him a fraud. Sandy refuses to listen to

anymore and tries to leave. Varick bars his exit, and appeals to the others for support on his opinions, not receiving any he leaves.

Elaine tells Sandy they have to leave in order to catch their train. Sandy rages that Varick is a nonentity. Shona defends her Uncle reminding her Father about all the help in the past he has given him. She declares that she hates everyone. Sandy tries to comfort her, but Elaine suggests he would be better off going to apologise to Varick. Against his better judgment he goes off with Elaine to find him.

Kirsty Morag is comforting Shona. Suddenly, offstage we hear the roar of a chainsaw. Elaine screams, Sandy runs back into the dining room his jacket in tatters. Elaine stumbles in after him, closely followed by Varick, chainsaw held aloft, ready to deliver his fatal blow... only for the chainsaw to run out of petrol – put-put-put!

Lights fade to black

Scene Four: Varick's Study. Willie John is helping Kirsty Morag wind wool.

Willie John and Kirsty Morag are discussing the imminent arrival of the taxi to take Sandy and Elaine to the station. They are not sorry to see them go. The conversation turns to the chainsaw, just as Varick, closely followed by the Doctor, arrives. He tells them all to get lost.

The Doctor however, does not adhere to his wish. He accuses Varick of having purloined a bottle of Morphine pills from his medical bag. The Doctor is trying to wrestle the pills off of him when Shona enters the room. She persuades Varick to return them. Elaine arrives to say that she and Sandy are leaving, Shona takes Varick with her to say goodbye.

Elaine and the Doctor are alone. He tells her that she will realize what a mistake she has made leaving him when she returns to London. She admits to him that she had been a tiny bit tempted, but not enough to actually do anything about it.

Sandy enters with Varick, Shona, Willie John and Mhari in his wake. Sandy and Varick appear to have made up their differences.

Sandy and Elaine leave having said their goodbyes to everyone. The household returns to everyday life.

The scene ends with a monologue from Shona. She tells her Uncle that life will go on regardless, and they shall bear all it brings to them, and if they bear it life will become beautiful and they will all be at peace, at HOME.

Lights slowly fade

Curtain

SYNOPSIS

HISTORICAL & SOCIAL CONTEXT

1960s Scotland

Uncle Varick is set in the 1960s in the North East of Scotland amongst the rural forestry landscape commonly found in that area.

The 1960s commonly evokes images of 'Swinging London' with its world leading fashions of Carnaby Street and Mary Quant, its British invasion of music, especially The Beatles and The Stones and a general sense of political and cultural change in the air.

1960s Scotland reflects this to a certain extent. Scotland was a country at the beginning of a social transformation. It had recently cast-off the post-war austerities resulting from WWII and in the early part of the decade the country saw virtually full employment, rising wages and an abundance of consumer goods available to buy (TVs, record players, washing machines, etc). The 60s also saw the beginnings of a 'Sexual Revolution' with the availability of the contraceptive pill. Teenagers and young adults now had money to spend, something the previous generations did not have.

By the mid 60s there was a decline in large-scale industries such as shipbuilding, fisheries, ironworks and coal mining resulting in an economic downturn.

This decline brought about geographic and political change. People moved around looking for work, especially to south of the border as well as to other countries. At this time there was also a marked increase in the popularity for Scottish Nationalism, with Winnie Ewing winning a 'watershed' moment in the Hamilton by-election of 1967.

The 'popular culture' of the 1960s did not impact the same way on life in rural Scotland as it perhaps did in the bigger cities. Some people in extremely rural areas still did not have running water, electricity and indoor toilets until as late as the 1970s.

Religion played an important role in the lives of people in rural Scotland unlike those in the cities where it was slowly waning in popularity.

Late 19th Century Russia

Uncle Vanya was published in 1897, which was a time of great political and social change in Russia.

When 'The Great Reformer,' (Alexander II) became Tsar in 1855 the Russian countryside was in turmoil. The whole country was in economic and social crisis because of the Crimean War, 1854-1856.

More than 500 separate peasant uprisings had taken place during his father Nicholas's reign. The serfs who worked the land, had suffered greatly under their landowner 'masters' and were growing increasingly unhappy with the unfairness of their situation.

Alexander II set up a reform commission to examine the problem, which of course was met with considerable opposition from the wealthy landowners. He tried to compromise by allowing the Serfs their 'freedom', yet not permit them to actually own the land. In fact, they would have to pay their former masters over a number of years for any land that they claimed. Many fell behind with their payments, causing greater poverty.

This was also the time of the onset of the Industrial Revolution in Russia, which had been slower to progress than in other parts of Europe. Many land workers moved to the factories and ironworks of the ever-expanding cities to look for better employment. This in turn led to over-population and bad working conditions.

In 1881, Alexander II was assassinated. His successor Alexander III reacted by placing restrictions on local government and increasing the power and reach of the Russian secret police to suppress revolutionary groups that were forming, particularly within the urban cities.

Intellectuals such as Karl Marx, with their theories and issues on governmental reform became popular. The Russian Marxist group was formed in 1884.

Tsar Nicholas II came to power in 1894 and continued his predecessor's repression of minority groups and censorship of the revolutionaries.

In January 1905 a protest in St Petersburg led to what became known as 'Bloody Sunday' with many protesters being shot by Tsarist soldiers.

More revolutionary groups formed including the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, who would eventually become the leader of the Soviet Union following the Great Revolution of 1917.

COMPARE A SCENE

UNCLE VANYA translated by Michael Fraya

SEREBRYAKOV. And here is *maman*. I will begin, then. *(Pause.)* I have asked you to come here today, ladies and gentlemen, to tell you that the Inspector-General is on his way. Joking aside, however. The matter is a serious one. I have assembled you all, ladies and gentlemen, to seek your help and counsel. And knowing as I do your unfailing kindness, I believe I shall not be disappointed. The world I inhabit is the world of books, and I have ever been a stranger to the practical life. I cannot manage without guidance of people who know their way around these matters, and I am looking at you, Vanya, and *(to TELEGIN)* to you, my friend, and to you, *maman*... The point is that *manet omnes una nox*. The same night awaits us all, which is to say that we are all in the hands of God. I am old and ailing, and I therefore think it fit to set my affairs in order insofar as the affect my family. My own life is over – it is not myself I am thinking of; but I have a young wife and an unmarried daughter. *(Pause)* It is impossible for me to go on living in the country. We were not created for the country. It is equally impossible, though, to live in town on the kind of revenue that we receive for this estate. If we were to sell our forest, let us say, that would be an extraordinary measure which we could not adopt every year. Ways must be sought of guaranteeing us a permanent and more or less fixed amount of income. I have thought of one such way, and beg leave to present it for your consideration. I shall set it forth in outline; the details later. Our estate yields an average return of no more than two per cent. I propose to sell it. If we invest the money which this produces in stocks and shares then we shall earn between four and five

per cent, and there will, I believe, be even a surplus of some few thousand rubles which will enable us to purchase a modest villa within reasonable distance of St Petersburg.

VANYA. Wait a moment... I think my hearing must be going. Repeat what you just said.

SEREBRYAKOV. Invest the money in stocks and shares and use the surplus that remains to buy a villa near St Petersburg.

VANYA. Not about St Petersburg... You said something else.

SEREBRYAKOV. I propose to sell the estate.

VANYA. That was it. You're going to sell the estate – wonderful – brilliant idea... But what do you want us to do with ourselves – me and my aged mother and Sonya here?

SEREBRYAKOV. All this we shall go into at the proper time. Not now.

VANYA. Wait a moment. I've evidently been walking round up to now in a state of complete idiocy. Up to now I was stupid enough to believe that this estate belonged to Sonya. My late father purchased it as a dowry for my sister. Up to now I supposed in my naivety that we were not living under Turkish law, and that from my sister the estate had passed to Sonya.

SEREBRYAKOV. Yes the estate belongs to Sonya. No one is disputing that. Without Sonya's consent I shall take no decision about selling it. I am, in any case, proposing to do this for Sonya's benefit.

VANYA. This is past comprehending! Either I've gone mad or... or...

MARIA VASILYEVNA. *Jean, il ne*

faus pas le contredire. Believe me, Alexandre knows what's right and what's wrong better than we do.

VANYA. No, give me some water. *(Drinks water.)* Go ahead – say anything you like!

SEREBRYAKOV. I don't understand why you're getting excited. I'm not saying my plan is ideal. If everyone finds it inappropriate I shan't insist.

Pause

TELEGIN *(in embarrassment)*. I have a profound reverence for learning, Professor, but I have something more – I have family feeling. My brother's wife's brother, you may perhaps know him, held a master's degree...

VANYA. Wait a moment Ilyusha, we've got business to deal with. Later, afterwards... *(To SEREBRYAKOV.)* Ask him. The estate was purchased from his uncle.

SEREBRYAKOV. What would be the point of my asking? What would it tell us?

VANYA. This estate was purchased at the going rate then for ninety-five thousand rubles. My father paid only seventy thousand down, and the other twenty-five were carried as a debt. Now, listen to me... This estate would never have been bought at all if I had not renounced my inheritance in favour of my sister, whom I loved most passionately. On top of which I worked like an ox for ten years and paid off the entire debt...

SEREBRYAKOV. I'm sorry I ever started this conversation.

VANYA. The estate is clear of debt and in working order thanks purely to my own personal efforts. And now I've got



old I'm to be thrown out on my neck.

SEREBRYAKOV. I don't understand what you are driving at!

VANYA. For twenty-five years I have run this estate. I have worked, and I have sent you the money, like the most conscientious of bailiffs, and not once in all that time have you offered me a word of thanks. From start to finish – from when I was young until present day – you have paid me the princely salary of five hundred rubles a year – and not once has it entered your head to give me a single ruble more!

SEREBRYAKOV. How was I to know? I'm not a practical man – I don't understand these things. You could have given yourself more – as much as you liked.

VANYA. Why didn't I steal? Why don't you all despise me for not stealing? It would have been no more than simple injustice, and I shouldn't be a beggar now!

MARIA VASILYEVNA *(sternly)*. Jean!

TELEGIN. Don't, Vanya, don't! My dear old friend...! I'm shaking... Why spoil good relations?

Kisses him.

Don't do it.
VANYA. For twenty-five years I have been shut up between four walls with this mother of mine like a mole in the dark... All our thoughts and feelings were centred on you. The days we spent talking about you and your works, being proud of you, uttering your name in reverential tones; the nights we blighted reading books and journals for which I now feel nothing but profound contempt!

TELEGIN. Don't Vanya, don't... I can't bear it...

SEREBRYAKOV. *(with rage)*. I don't understand what it is you want.

VANYA. We thought you were some kind of superior being – we knew your articles by heart... But now my eyes have been opened! I see it all! You write about art, but you've not the slightest understanding of art! All those

works of yours that I used to love – they're not worth a brass button! You've made fools of us!

SEREBRYAKOV. Everyone – please! Make him see reason! I'm going!

YELENA. *(to VANYA)*. I insist you be silent! Do you hear?
VANYA. I won't be silent!

Bars SEREBRYAKOV'S way.

Wait, I haven't finished! You've blighted my life! I haven't lived. I haven't lived! Through your kind efforts I have destroyed the best years of my life! You're my worst enemy!

TELEGIN. I can't bear this... I can't... I'm going...

Exit TELGIN in great agitation.

SEREBRYAKOV. What do you want of me? And what right do you have to take that tone with me? A little nobody like you! If the estate belongs to you then take it – I don't need it!

YELENA. I'm not staying another

moment in this hell! (*Shouts.*) I can't endure it any longer!

VANYA. My life has vanished! I have the talent, I have the brains, I have the nerve... If I had led a normal life I could have been a Schopenhauer, I could have been a Dostoyevsky... I don't know what I'm saying! I'm going mad.. Mother, I'm in despair! Mother! MARIA VASILYEVNA (*sternly*). Do as Alexandre tells you!

SONYA *kneels in front of MARINA and clings to her.*

SONYA. Nanna! Nanna!

VANYA. Mother! What am I going to do? No don't say anything, there's no need! I know what I'm going to do! (*To SEREBRYAKOV.*) I'll give you something to remember me by!

Exit VANYA through the centre door. MARIA VASILYEVNA goes after him.

SEREBRYAKOV. In heaven's name, what is all this? Get this madman away from me! I can't stay under the same roof! He lives in there... (*Indicates centre door.*) ... almost on top of me... Let him move into the village, or into the lodge or I'll move out, but remain in the same house as him I cannot...

YELENA (*to her husband.*) We're leaving today! You must give orders at once.

SEREBRYAKOV. An absolute little nobody!

SONYA, *on her knees turns to her father.*

SONYA (*agitatedly, on the verge of tears*). You must be merciful, Papa! Uncle Vanya and I are so unhappy! (*Restraining her despair.*) You must be merciful! Remember when you were younger how Uncle Vanya and Grandmother used to work at night translating books for you, copying your papers... Whole nights they spent, whole nights together! Uncle Vanya and I have worked without rest – we went everything to you... We stinted our bread! I'm not saying

the right things, it's coming out all wrong, but you should understand our feelings, Papa. You must be merciful!

YELENA (*to her husband, disturbed*). For the love of God, make it up with him... I implore you.

SEREBRYAKOV. Very well, I'll make it up with him... I'm not blaming him, I'm not angry, but you must agree that his behavior is a little odd, to say the least. If you'll excuse me, then, I'll go and have a word with him.

Exit SEREBRYAKOV through the centre door.

YELENA. Be a little gentler with him – soothe him down...

Exit YELENA after him.

SONYA (*clinging to MARINA*). Nanna! Nanna!

MARINA. Never you mind, now child. The geese will have their cackle, then they'll quieten... Cackle and quieten, cackle and quieten...

SONYA. Nanna!

MARINA (*strokes her hair*). You're shivering a though you'd been out in the freezing cold! There, now, you poor orpjan child, God will have mercy. A drop of lime tea, or raspberry, now, and you'll feel better... Don't grieve, child... (*Looking at the centre door, feelingly.*) You see? They've quietened down, those old geese, drat them!

A shot, off. YELENA is heard to scream. SONYA shudders.

Oh, heaven preserve us!

SEREBRYAKOV runs in, reeling in alarm.

SEREBRYAKOV. Stop him! Restraining him! He's gone mad!

YELENA and VANYA struggle in the doorway.

YELENA (*trying to take the revolver away from him*). Give it me! Give it me, I tell you!

VANYA. Let go! Let go of me!

He breaks free, runs into the room, and looks around for SEREBRYAKOV.

Where is he? Ah, there he is!

Fires at him

Bang! (*Pause.*) Didn't I hit him? Another botch up? (*With rage.*) Oh, hell, hell... hell and damnation...

Hammers on the floor with the revolver, and sinks exhausted into a chair. SEREBRYAKOV is stunned. YELENA leans against the wall, about to faint.

YELENA. Take me away from this place! Take me away, kill me, anything, but... I can't stay in this place – I can't!

VANYA (*in despair*). Oh, what am I doing? What am I doing?

SONYA (*quietly*). Nanna! Nanna!

CURTAIN

UNCLE VARICK

by John Byrne

SANDY
...thank you. The house and estate are to be sold forthwith.

The news hits everyone like a bombshell. A stunned silence.

VARICK
'Forthwith'? What d'you mean 'forthwith'?
What house and... you mean this house?? This estate??

SANDY
(consulting notes)
At the moment there's an average yield of two per cent per annum on the capital value of the property... what I suggest is we sell up, lock, stock and barrel, invest the proceeds in securities that'll produce around five or six per cent more and with whatever monies are left over we purchase a small villa in Majorca.

VARICK
Hang on a mo... is it just me that's hearing things?? Say that again.

SANDY
With whatever monies are left over we purchase a small villa in Majorca... you see, my wife and I are not really cut out for the country...

VARICK
(overlapping)
No, no, the first thing you said... about selling.

SANDY
I suggested we sell the estate.

VARICK
That's it, sell the estate... what an absolutely brilliant wheeze! And where d'you suggest that I go? Along with my elderly mother and young Shona there? Hmmm?

SANDY
I'm confident we can discuss all that in due course, we can't take everything into account all at the one time...

VARICK
(overlapping)
Hold on, hold on, is it me that's got it wrong of what? I've been toddling along for some considerable time now on the understanding that this estate belonged to my niece Shona... my father bought it for my sister when she got married...

SANDY
There's no dispute whatsoever about who owns the estate. Without Shona's consent there can't be a sale but it's entirely for her benefit that I...

VARICK
(cutting him off)
Aye, that'll be right! Since when has the great Sandy Sheridan ever done anything for anybody else's benefit? It's a complete con, a white-wash... don't you believe a word of this, Shona, d'you hear me? Not one word.

(turning to MHARI)
What've you got to say to this, Mother dear?
(MHARI carries on reading)
Get your bloody nose out of that stupid book and listen to me! What've you got to say to this 'proposal', because I would very much like to hear it... we all would!

MHARI
I do wish you wouldn't shout, Varick, and stop contradicting your brother-in-law, he knows a great deal more about these matters than we do... now, sit down and shut up!

VARICK
Somebody get me a glass of water, I'm hallucinating! "He knows a great deal more about these matters than we do"? Have you gone completely off your rocker, you old bat!

WILLIE JOHN
(passing over water)
There now, calm yourself... get this down your neck...

SANDY
I don't see what you're getting yourself into a state about... I'm not saying the plan's foolproof. If you all find the idea untenable I shan't insist it go through.

VARICK
There Tumshie Features'll tell you... the estate was originally bought from his mother's cousin... (gulping water down)

SANDY
Why on earth would I consult him? He's nothing but a mere... I don't know what he is... (to WILLIE JOHN)
...what exactly is it you do here?

VARICK
My father purchased this property and the surrounding land for ninety five thousand pounds... seventy thousand in cash and the other twenty five on a ten year mortgage... no, listen, this's important... listen dammit! This estate would never've been a going concern if I hadn't given up my share of the inheritance in favour of my beloved sister, and agreed to run it for the benefit of this family... no, wait, there's more, this is not simply a self-congratulatory paen to us hoary-handed sons of the soil, it's an inventory! I worked my arse off for twenty five years knocking this place into shape and for ten of those years I never had one hour to myself, never saw the inside of this house from five o'clock in the morning 'til ten o'clock at night, in order to meet those monthly repayments... I sweated blood getting the harvest in... sowing barley, sawing timber, muck-spreading, mending tractors... but I did it... I bloody well did it!

SANDY
(under his breath)
I'm sorry I started all this now... (aloud)
...right, Varick, I'm sure we're all terribly grateful but I really must ask you to...

VARICK
(talking over him)
For twenty five years I've been sending you money... more so when the twenty five thousand pound debt was cleared off... **the** income from the produce... the oats, barley, lumber... the rents from both farms... one of which was Tumshie Features; before he

went to the wall... every month that money went into your bank account... yours and Sheila's, then eventually just yours... the money that bought you that first house you had in Swiss Cottage, then that big fancy place in Maida Vale. The money that sent your daughter, my niece, to that ridiculously expensive and educationally substandard boarding school in Guildford... the money that saved you from bankruptcy when you chucked away your newspaper wages on that ludicrous Groundnut Scheme that any idiot could've told you was an out-an-out scam! The money that helped finance your 'lifestyle'... paid for your cashmere overcoats, your hand-stitched suits, your bespoke footwear, your monogrammed handkerchiefs! No, wait, I'm getting to the nitty-gritty! Did you ever once... once... drop me a note to say 'Well done'? Did you ever once pick up the telephone and say 'Thank you, Varick'? Did you ever once suggest a rise... even a small... teeny-weeny... we totey... rise in my wages? Eh?

SANDY
What wages? I didn't realize I was paying you wages... I thought...

VARICK
(jumping in)
No, you didn't, Sandy... you didn't think! You just presumed that other people lived on bloody air! It never crossed your mind as you strolled nonchalantly along Bond Street picking out junk Jewellery in 22ct gold to hang on that clothes horse there!
(stabs a finger at ELAINE)

SANDY
Now that really is quite enough!

WILLIE JOHN
(to VARICK)
Aye, come away, man, there's no call for that kind of...

VARICK
(overriding both)
For twenty five years I've buried myself on this estate...I've sat night after night with my mother in this house, in the very room we're sitting in now... all of our conversations were about you... our

days were filled with you and your work and your escalating fame, which we mistook for eminence. We were inordinately proud of you... we spoke your name with a sort of reverence. We squandered our evenings reading this article and that one... this piece in that magazine... that essay in this one... books, magazines and newspapers that now fill me with revulsion!

WILLIE JOHN
Don't, Varick John... don't demean yourself, man...

SANDY
(at same time)
For God's sake, someone make him stop! I don't understand any of this!

VARICK
You write about art but you haven't a bloody clue... you've no idea what it's all about... what drives somebody to make something... to express their innermost heart... to catch the essence of why we're here... what makes us human and at the same time what makes our souls sing! You haven't the faintest notion, self-promoting, self-centred, self-satisfied old fraud!

SANDY
I will not stay here and listen to this... this filth! How dare you speak to me like this... how dare you!

ELAINE
(overlapping)
How dare you speak to my husband like that! Be quiet, d'you hear!

SANDY heads towards the door.

VARICK
(barring his escape)
I will not be quiet!
(to SANDY)
You've ruined my life, you fraud... you bastard! It's thanks to you I'm like this... wasted... destroyed!

WILLIE JOHN
(clutching his head)
You're all mad, the lot of you... stone bloody mad!

He exits

SANDY
(overlapping to VARICK)

You have no right talking to me like this, you nonentity! If the estate's yours then take it... take it!

ELAINE
(overlapping)
Get me out of this hell! Out of here... get me out!
VARICK

I could've done something with my life... been somebody... like an architect... an engineer... a National Hunt Jockey! Suffering God, what am I talking about? You've got to help me, Mother... what am I to do?

MHARI
You should've done what Sandy told you to do in the first place, you imbecile!

She wallops VARICK with her book and exits. SHONA buries her head in KIRSTY MORAG'S lap.

VARICK
Mother!
(rounding on SANDY)
I'm not going to forget this... your card is marked!
(loudly)
Mother!?

He exits.

SANDY
You nonentity!

ELAINE
We must catch that sleeper, Alex... what did you do with that taxi number I gave you?

SANDY
(not hearing her)
He nothing but a nonentity... a complete nonentity!
(loudly)
Your nothing... d'you hear me, nothing! A complete nonentity!

SHONA
Stop it... stop it! Before you packed me off to that crappy school I remember Uncle Varick sitting up through the night, upstairs in Grandpa's library, translating whole passages from all sorts of art books... French, Dutch, and Italian... that you couldn't get a hold of when you first gave up teaching and got that job at the 'Spectator'...

he is not a nonentity! He's intelligent and creative and kind, and he feels totally let down... and for that matter so do I... I hate you! I hate everybody... everybody! I'm so unhappy! Oh, God...

SANDY, distraught, moves to comfort his daughter – **ELAINE** stops him.

ELAINE
You'd do more by going and having a word with the 'nonentity'. Please. For my sake.

SANDY
(fiercely)
After what he said to me? About me!

ELAINE
(sotto voce)
Alright, for your daughter's sake then!

SANDY
(after a moment's hesitation)
Very well, but I do so against my better judgement.

He moves towards the door.

ELAINE
(for SHONA's benefit)
Be kind, Alex... say you forgive those dreadful lies he told about you..
(as she and SANDY exit)
...Varick? Are you there?
(off)
Uncle Varick?

KIRSTY MORAG
(comforting SHONA)
Wheesht, hen... there, ma wee orphan lass... dry yur een... (taking SHONA'S hands in hers) ...God save us, yur mitts're cal'... like twa bunch o' fish fingers!

SHONA gives a tearful laugh – the sudden roar of a chainsaw for outside the room. An offstage scream from ELAINE.

KIRSTY MORAG
Jesus, Mary and Joseph, fit in the name o' Christ was that??

The chainsaw revs up in the corridor outside.

SANDY
(off)
Aaaaargh! Don't let him get me!

ELAINE
(off)
You're mad, switch it off, you'll kill him!

VARICK
(off)
I want to kill him... out of my road, Elaine!

SANDY/ELAINE
Aaaaaaargh!

SANDY bursts into the room, the back of his jacket in tatters where the chainsaw has got him. **ELAINE** stumbles in after him. **SHONA** stifles a scream as **VARICK** appears in the doorway, the roaring, bucking chainsaw held high ready to deliver the 'coup de grace' only for the chainsaw to run out of petrol – put-put put-put put-put...

VARICK
Bugger...
(he tries restarting chainsaw)
...bugger! Bugger, bugger, bugger, bugger!

Lights fade to black.

[click for more information](#)

**Compare
a
Scene**



TEACHER'S NOTES

The Wood Demon

(Extract from An Introduction to Chekhov)
Cambridge Press

While Chekhov's next play, *The Wood Demon*, was a significant failure for him - he had a hard time getting it produced, it received only a few performances, it was lambasted by the critics, and Chekhov declined to have it printed - it is a critical work in Chekhov's oeuvre for two reasons. It represented his first attempt at writing a new type of drama, centered not on a single charismatic protagonist but on the complex relations of a group of diverse characters, more importantly, it provided the raw material, through an extraordinary act of revision, for one of Chekhov's greatest plays, *Uncle Vanya*.

The Wood Demon, written in 1888-89, was originally envisioned as a collaboration between Chekhov and his friend, the publisher Suvorin. In an outline Chekhov wrote after they had discussed the project, the two central characters bear suspicious resemblance to the two collaborators: an older, self-made literary man with a young wife, and an idealistic younger man, "a poet, a landscape artist, with a terrific feel for nature." The collaboration did not come off; perhaps because Suvorin saw himself in the unattractive character of the professor. Chekhov pushed on, though he recognized that his material was more suited to prose fiction: "I know very well that *The Wood Demon* is right for a novel," he conceded to Suvorin. "If I were to write a comedy *The Wood Demon*, my first concern would not be the actors or the stage, but literary qualities." Chekhov's earlier difficulties with the project anticipated its later reception. The Literary-Theatrical Committee of Petersburg rejected it in part because of its unflattering depiction of a professor, a rank exalted in Russian society. The actor Lensky, to whose Maly Theatre Chekhov offered the play advised him to stick to writing stories: "Your attitude to the stage and to dramatic form is too contemptuous, you respect them too little to write a drama." And one of the play's reviews sums up the kinds of criticisms that would continue to bedevil Chekhov's work for the theatre:

There is no play - because of the clumsily constructed scenes we see a tale or even a novel, unfortunately, squeezed into dramatic form. Everyone is fed up with banal conversations while eating and drinking either at home or with friends, and if you want to hear ten times people enquiring about others' health or quarrelling with each other then there's no need at all to go to the theatre and endure four acts of a "comedy."

The Wood Demon is a clumsily constructed play, to be sure, but the problem is not so much that Chekhov neglects the conventions of drama but that he has not yet developed his own alternatives to them. There is indeed a backdrop of eating and

drinking and banal conversations, but the creakiest moments of the play are the most conventionally theatrical. There are conveniently timed entrances, incriminating or exonerating documents, hackneyed plot devices and moralizing speeches throughout. It was by jettisoning all this, while keeping the sense of the humdrum daily life that "everyone is fed up with," that Chekhov eventually turned the play into a masterpiece.

The central structure of *The Wood Demon* is that which survives into *Uncle Vanya*. An aging professor has retired, with his young second wife Yelena, to a country estate. Also living there is his daughter Sonya, together with her uncle Voinitsky (the first wife's brother) and his mother. The uncle, whose first name here is Yegor or Georges rather than Vanya, resents Professor Serebryakov and covets his wife. There is also a neighboring doctor and environmentalist; in this case he is named Khrushchov, and nicknamed Leshy, or *The Wood Demon*, for his devotion to the forests. (Laurence Senelick translates *leshny* as "the wood goblin", pointing out that the more traditional "wood demon" makes "too diabolic an impression" for the impish sprite of the Russian forest.) A number of other neighbors fill out the cast: the mill-owner "Waffles," the wealthy, unromantic Zheltukhin and his hard-working sister Yulya, and the landowner Orlovsky and his son, the dashing cad Fyodor. These last four characters were removed when Chekhov revised the play into *Uncle Vanya*.

The first act introduces the characters and their relationships, including Zheltukhin's pursuit of Sonya and Fyodor's of Yelena. It is rumored that she is already the mistress of Voinitsky, but a conversation between them that concludes the first act makes it clear that she is faithful to her husband, despite her unhappiness. Act II - retained almost intact in *Uncle Vanya* - begins with Yelena and the professor as they pass a fretful and stormy night. A series of duet scenes reveal the tensions among the various characters, notably the unacknowledged and misunderstood feelings between Khrushchov and Sonya. In Act III, the various love intrigues are continued, and the action is brought to a climax by the professor's plan to sell the estate. Voinitsky explodes with rage and exits; meanwhile Khrushchov rushes in to implore the professor not to sell his forests for timber. The melodramatic action culminates with Voinitsky shooting himself offstage.

Act IV of *The Wood Demon* startlingly, and rather ineptly, brings the play to a comic resolution. It is set in "A forest and the house by the mill"; here Waffles has provided a refuge for the runaway Yelena since the events of Act III. Rather implausibly, the professor and his entourage arrive for a tea party. Amid various recriminations, Dr. Khrushchov delivers himself of the high-minded sentiments of the play. He has discovered, through a convenient diary, how much he had misjudged Voinitsky and Yelena, and now he urges all present to adopt attitudes of honesty and forgiveness. Chekhov was conscious of criticisms that his work lacked a clear attitude to social problems, and was intrigued by Tolstoy's philosophy of universal love and moral renewal. Accordingly, he had Khrushchov address to the professor a speech that sums up the play's moral:

For twenty-five years you've been a professor and served learning, I plant forests and practice medicine, but what's the point, who's it all for, if we don't show mercy to the ones we're working for? We say that we serve people, and at the same time we are inhumanly destroying each other.

He concludes by saying that Russia needs heroes of a greater stature, and that at present "there are no real heroes, no geniuses, no people who could lead us out of this dark wood". The sudden appearance of Yelena, and the discovery that the forest is ablaze, provide further emotional jolts, sufficient to prompt the various characters to sort out their personal problems. Yelena goes back to her husband. Sonya and Khrushchov declare their love for one another, and Fyodor determines to reform and marry Yulya. Amid "laughter, kisses, noise," the pedantic Waffles declares, "This is fascinating! This is fascinating!" The incongruity of its happy ending with the melodrama of Voinitsky's suicide is only the most obvious of the structural problems of *The Wood Demon* a play Chekhov later professed to "detest." Some years after the play's failure, Chekhov turned back to it to undertake a large-scale revision. In December 1896, not long after the premiere of *The Seagull* in Petersburg, he wrote to Suvorin that in the collection of plays he was publishing, "two full-length plays remain to be set up in type: *The Seagull*, which you know, and *Uncle Vanya*, which no one on earth knows." It is probable, but not certain, that the revisions took place after Chekhov had written *The Seagull*; *Uncle Vanya*'s greater economy and focus on indirect action suggest it is the later work. But much of what is great in *Uncle Vanya* comes from *The Wood Demon*, for all of the earlier play's problems. Chekhov's revisions were largely a matter of cutting and compressing. He enriched his characterizations by giving the remaining characters some of the traits and dialogue of those he eliminated. Dr. Astrov, in *Vanya*, has not only the idealism of Khrushchov but some of the rakishness of Fyodor. Sonya, taking on some of Yulya's estate-managing practicality, becomes a deeper and more poignant character - especially through Chekhov's decision to thwart her romance with the doctor. By cutting the happy unions and high-minded speeches of *The Wood Demon*'s fourth act, Chekhov threw focus on the tense inner drama of Acts II and III. At its best, *The Wood Demon* reveals the quality that would define Chekhov's four mature plays: profound depths of feeling expressed through the apparently shallow lives of very fallible and human characters.

Character Comparison

The Wood Demon/Uncle Vanya/Uncle Varick

The Wood Demon by Anton Chekhov

ALEXANDER SEREBRYAKOV – a retired art professor

YELENA – his younger wife

SONYA – his daughter from a previous marriage

MICHAIL KHURSCHOV (LESHY) – a doctor and environmentalist also known as the Wood Demon

(YEGOR) GEORGE VOYNITSKY – brother of Serebryakov's first wife

MARIA VOYNITSKAYA – mother of George and Serebryakov's first wife

IVAN ORLAVSKY – landowner

FYODOR ORLAVSKY – his son (who is in love with Yelena)

LEONID ZHELTUKHIN – wealthy neighbour (who is in love with Sonya)

YULYA ZHELTUKHIN – his hard-working sister who runs the estate

ILYA (WAFFLES) DYADIN – rents house near the mill from the Wood Demon

VASILY – Zheltukhin's servant

PEASANTS/WORKMEN

Uncle Vanya by Anton Chekhov

ALEXANDER SEREBRYAKOV, a retired professor

YELENA, his wife, twenty-seven years old

SONYA, his daughter by a former marriage

MME. VOYNITSKAYA, widow of a privy councilor, and mother of Serebryakov's first wife

IVAN (VANYA) VOYNITSKI, her son

MICHAEL ASTROV, a doctor

ILIA (WAFFLES) TELEGIN, an impoverished landowner

MARINA, an old nurse

A WORKMAN

Uncle Varick by John Byrne

SANDY SHERIDAN, pretentious art critic

ELAINE, his much younger wife

SHONA, his daughter from his first marriage

MHAIRI, Mother of Varick and Sandy's first wife

VARICK, Sandy's acerbic former brother-in-law

MICHAEL, The Doctor

WILLIE JOHN TELFOR, a neighbour and land tenant

KIRSTY MORAG, housekeeper

ESTATE WORKER

Compare a Scene

Pages 8 to 13 in this Learning Resource contain the scripts from a pivotal scene within both Chekhov's Uncle Vanya and Byrne's Uncle Varick. The scenes have been copied out verbatim from both Fraya's translated edition and Byrne's script.

The scenes can be studied to compare content but they also show a variation in style and format used by the two writers.

Compare how the scripts have been set out and how stage directions are represented. Also consider how language is used in both scripts: what clues does each playwright give you about the character, and how does the vocabulary inform you about the character's background.

Also, you might want to try 'actioning' both versions and see if the characters have the same intent on the same lines or see if there are any variations.

Points of Study:

- Use of Language
- Structural analysis
- Content investigation
- Research what happens in this scene in The Wood Demon