

## VIEWS &amp; REVIEWS

## MEDICAL CLASSICS

## The Seagull

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**The Seagull**

A play by Anton Chekhov

First performed, in Russian, in 1896

Chekhov spent many years as a rural physician (*BMJ* 2009;339:b3395, doi:10.1136/bmj.b3395), a fact often cited in the examination of his characters and their country life, and he famously said, "medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my mistress." *The Seagull* is one of a few of Chekhov's plays to include a doctor. Dr Dorn is a curious mix of the irascible and the compassionate. Having travelled the world and spent many years in practice (and in various amorous relationships) he has a somewhat detached air. He is genuine but sometimes overly forthright, particularly with his longstanding friend, Sorin. His assessment of Sorin's wish to live on long past 62 is that it is "Foolish. Every life must have an end." This is brutal, and a risky strategy for communication in membership exams, but most doctors will identify with this conflict between patient expectation and medical reality. Likewise, his disbelieving response to Sorin's request for medical advice ("Treatment! At sixty!") would probably raise some eyebrows these days. We can perhaps forgive him because this patient is also a friend, and the two make for uncomfortable bedfellows.

Despite these outbursts, Dorn remains level headed in *The Seagull's* carefully constructed psychological drama about a closely knit group, bound by ties of family, friendship, love, and habit, in a provincial Russian village. It is Dorn whom the other characters look to for support. In the opening act Dorn comforts a passionate and frustrated playwright. Kostia's desperation to break free of theatrical and social convention had met with only puzzlement and dismissal, but Dorn tells him that he's "got talent and must carry on."

Sadly Kostia becomes estranged from his family and friends and distanced from his lover, Nina. Kostia's mother, a minor celebrity, is too busy with her own vanity and keeping happy

her younger lover, the famous writer Trigorin, to engage with her son's decline.

In a tortured effort at self expression, Kostia kills a seagull and presents it to Nina as a gift. Horrified, Nina pulls away and finds herself drawn to Trigorin, whose whimsical possession, ruin, and rejection of Nina echoes the pointless destruction of the seagull. In the last act, Kostia and Nina realise they can never be together.

In the final scene, everyone is playing cards around the table when a gunshot rings out. It is, once more, Dorn who rises to calm people. He returns from investigating and reports that a bottle of ether has burst in his medicine chest, then he manoeuvres Trigorin to one side and reveals to him that Kostia has shot himself.

Dorn's importance as a foil is felt throughout the play, but it means that Dorn is never truly a full protagonist. Like all doctors, Dorn is both inside and outside the lives of those around him. His intimacy with the other characters is expedited, but also weakened in its humanity, by the professional aspect of his perspective. Dorn's role reminds us that although we often have ringside seats to our patients' lives, we ultimately remain spectators.

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