



# Nina in Chekhov's *The Seagull*: Damsel in Distress or Feminist Hero?

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## **Abstract**

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This research studies the character Nina in Chekhov's play, *The Seagull*, in order to provide analyses of Nina ranging from traditional to contemporary. Through accounts of the Russian women's movement in the 1890s, feminist philosophies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and *The Seagull* script, Nina is examined as both a classic ingénue and as a modern feminist. These comparisons are used to evaluate the most relevant way to portray Nina in a contemporary production of *The Seagull*. Although this paper does favor the interpretation of Nina as a feminist, she is a character that exists not in the extremes, but represents many aspects of femininity.

## Introduction

Few dramatic plays have remained as “perennially alive” as Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull* (McVay 536). Written in 1895, this play explores love, jealousy, and the lives of artists through the tangled relationships of four main characters. One of these characters, Nina Zarietchnaya, has become a coveted ingénue role among young actresses. As the wide-eyed young beauty, Nina is swept up into a world of elite artists, only to be abandoned by them. In her final scene, she returns to the love of her youth, on the verge of madness, declaring, “I am a seagull” (Chekhov 56). In many ways, Nina fits the description of the classic ingénue perfectly. However, there are also aspects of Nina’s character that seem to transcend the time period in which Chekhov wrote and speak to the condition of contemporary women. If one is to study the character of Nina for the purpose of portraying her in a production of *The Seagull*, then one must understand what her character represented in the context of the play’s original setting, as well as consider what Nina could represent if the play were performed today. If art imitates life, then what does Nina’s role in *The Seagull* say about women? There can be no one definitive answer, but it certainly seems valuable to examine Nina not only as the classic ingénue, but also as a potential role model to modern-day women. Through analyzing both Russian gender roles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary women’s studies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Nina can be viewed through multiple lenses of femininity in order to lift her character off the page and create a relevant female figure for modern audiences.

## **Explanation of Sources**

The sources used in this examination of Nina will primarily focus on the state of gender roles in Russia from the period of 1850-1900, as well as viewpoints from modern feminists from the late-1990s to the present. By examining the status of Russian women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, one can establish the world in which Chekhov wrote his plays, and provide context for the characters that he originally penned. It will also provide context clues for how the character of Nina may or may not have fit into the social climate and the expected behavior of women from that era. Even if one wishes to view Nina through a modern lens, to create a contemporary production of *The Seagull*, it is important to know the origins of her character, and why her actions are important to the original time period of the play. A contemporary lens cannot be created without a foundational understanding of *The Seagull's* historical origins. The script, although subtly different after being adapted and translated many times over, also provides important textual information about Nina, about the world in which these characters lived, and about the expectations and behavior of women at the time. The script will also be viewed through the lens of contemporary feminism in order to examine the ways in which Nina can be adapted for modern audiences.

## **Nina and the Women of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russia**

### **The Russian Women's Movement**

Russia, throughout history, has always been a patriarchal society (Condee, Goscilo and Vainshtein 18). Much like its counterparts Europe and America, men

ruled the public sphere, while women were relegated to the private sphere (Worobec 135). Women had limited power and freedom over their own lives, and were considered subordinate to their parents until they were of marrying age, at which point they would be considered their husbands' property. They did not own land, participate in politics, or even have an education (141). However, in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dubbed a period of "reactionary politics" by Russian scholar Tatyana Mamonova, a women's movement began to rise (Mamonova 47). Although it was chiefly confined to the nobility in Russian society, there nonetheless began a movement towards women's education, and noblewomen took to hosting salons and ideological discussions in which they could contribute their own knowledge (Condee, Goscilo and Vainshtein 210). This upstart of education amongst higher-class women did eventually trickle down to the lower classes in the late 1800s. Lower class women, particularly young adults, began to venture out of their villages, where they may have previously spent their entire life without any exposure to other cities (144). However, there was still not a tremendous amount of opportunity for a woman venturing out alone, and many young women who took to a larger city ended up becoming prostitutes and getting abused by their male clientele (Worobec 143). At this time, the most secure option was to marry and start a family. This climate of "reactionary politics" was the world in which Chekhov lived when he wrote *The Seagull*. Women's contribution to society was expanding beyond the traditional realm of matrimony and motherhood, if only in small numbers.

## **Nina In Context Of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russia**

There are many parallels between the character of Nina and the lower-class young women described in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. Nina is considered a “child” and is rumored to be “penniless” (Chekhov 16). She is inexperienced and sheltered, a “country girl” (39). Like women of this time period, her life is very much ruled by the men in her life. Her father exerts his power over her and is alluded to being almost cruel (16). She is torn between her desires to please Konstantin, her first love and closest friend, and Trigorin, the man she idolizes and desires to be with. Rather than stay in the village and marry, she ventures out to Moscow like many young women of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This choice is largely frowned upon, and as a result her father disowns her (49). Nina pursues acting, a profession that had just opened up to women as a result of the cultural women’s movement (Condee, Goscilo and Vainshtein 231). Although Nina does not directly admit resorting to prostitution, she does allude to her mistreatment by men while on tour, saying “I will be the object of...too much attention from the local businessmen” (Chekhov 56). Despite running away with the hopes that she would be with Trigorin, she ended up, like many women of the time, very much alone and with virtually no support.

Compared to the records of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, a girl in Nina’s situation would still be considered unique, because she had a child out of wedlock and was self-supported without a male figure to help her (Chekhov 49). Even when she returns to Konstantin in Act IV and he begs her to stay or take him with her, offering her one last chance at a “normal” life, she rejects his offer, saying “I will find my way alone” (57). At a time in history when being married, having a family, and

being under the protection of a male would be the most secure option, Nina rejects the opportunity in favor of independence and a chance to pursue her career. Although society was just beginning to acknowledge that women might want to pursue careers outside of the home, it was by no means a mainstream ideal (Worobec 136). For Nina, blazing her own trail was an extremely risky thing to do. She acknowledges the difficulty of her situation, calling it a “rough life,” yet she continues to pursue her “dreams” because it is the only way she can be fulfilled (Chekhov 57-58).

The idea of a woman being fulfilled not by family or marriage, but by career, seems like a rather modern concept. Considering the women’s movement was in its infancy in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, Nina would still be considered rather radical. Although she did follow the basic path of many enterprising young women around the turn of the century, she was still looked on with disapproval from her own family because she was unmarried with no legitimate children (Chekhov 49). This commitment to home life has always been the mark of a true woman in a patriarchal society (Worobec 136). Her actions do seem to have a definite tinge of the modern feminist; she evades the familial responsibility typically associated with womanhood in favor of career opportunity.

## **Nina and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Feminist**

### **Why It Is Necessary**

Viewing Nina as a contemporary feminist could be considered problematic for several reasons. One being that *The Seagull* was written in 1895, by a Russian

playwright who could not predict – and most likely did not care very much about – the future of feminism (Mamonova 46). He wrote from his own experiences and worldview. *The Seagull*, including the character Nina, is based in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Her circumstances are fundamentally different from a modern day woman's. Therefore, analyzing her character through the lens of contemporary society could be argued as pointless – she is a product of her time period, and therefore her struggles are irrelevant to that of a modern day woman. However, like Nina herself, this play has endured. From the years 1915 to 2008, there have been 8 productions of *The Seagull* on Broadway alone, not to mention regional and university theatres across the United States and Europe (Playbill Vault). It has inspired countless adaptations, including Aaron Posner's *Stupid F\*\*\*ing Bird*, which has premiered in multiple regional theatres in 2017 and 2018 (Playbill Vault). Additionally, Sony is anticipating the release of a new film adaptation of *The Seagull* in May of 2018 (Gans). The continued popularity of this piece over the 123 years since its inception speaks volumes about the play's relevance to humankind. Despite circumstantial differences regarding the time period, this play still resonates with modern audiences. Although the world has changed greatly in the century or so since Chekhov was alive, the essence of humanity - the triumphs and pitfalls of love, the destructive nature of jealousy, and the pain of betrayal – has remained remarkably the same. How, then, do the characters from this long-ago world resonate with the modern man or woman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? If a production of *The Seagull* is going to be produced in 2018, how can it be made relevant to contemporary audiences? Granted, this play can very easily be performed as a

“museum piece” – a version set in 1890s Russia with historically accurate costumes and period-appropriate mannerisms. But if one is of the mindset that “the theatre was created to tell people the truth about life and the social situation” (Adler), then how do these characters tell the story about society not one hundred years ago, but *today*? In a contemporary production, does Nina serve as a warning to women about the dangers of living in a patriarchal society, or is she a source of inspiration to women who seek to follow their ambitions? Perhaps Nina is simply the classic ingénue. Or perhaps she is something more – a feminist role model for the modern-day young woman.

### **State of Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The standard of life for women in many countries has, undoubtedly, improved since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women now vote, hold jobs, and are no longer viewed as the property of their male counterparts. They have more freedom in general than women in the 1800s did, both in Russia and America (Martin, Sanger and Thompson 16). However, as much as one may wish to point out the progress women have made in the last hundred or so years, there remains an undeniable gap in the treatment of men and women in contemporary society. According to a 2018 study by the American Association of University Women, women are still only making 80% of a man’s wages (Miller 6). In addition, women are still expected to be the primary caregivers when it comes to raising children (Parker). Feminism itself and the state of women’s rights is a hotly debated issue, with opinions ranging from conservative to radical (Poe, Sommers and Castro 124). Regardless of differing opinions, the simple truth is women are scrutinized for the choices they make and

the careers they pursue – and so much of it is tied back to their marital and maternal status. Examining Nina’s circumstances in their most pared-down form, one can draw numerous parallels between her struggles and the current struggles of 21<sup>st</sup> century women.

### **Nina in Context of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Perhaps it is most fitting, as a disclaimer of sorts, to continue to analyze the ways in which Nina is *not* like a contemporary woman. Nina’s window of opportunity was so much narrower than today’s female – a lower class Russian woman in the late 1800s would have limited access to education, would not travel, and would have a limited world view (Worobec 141). In fact, Nina herself notes that “[I] have lived all my life beside this lake” (Chekhov 31). Unlike today’s highly interconnected, social media-driven world, Nina lived an isolated life. Additionally, Nina’s relationship with her father would be considerably more troubling in modern times than it was in the 1800s. Because women of Chekhov’s time were under the control of their paternal figure, it would not be out of the ordinary for a father to place strict rules on where his daughter could go, whom she could interact with, etc. Nina herself alludes to his supreme control over her life when she departs from her friends in tears, saying, “I must go...my father is waiting for me” and nearly panics when someone offers to walk her home (16). When Nina chooses an alternate path of life to the one her father had imagined, he disowns her, preventing her from ever returning home. By and large, contemporary women are afforded more opportunity and freedom than Nina was. But the core problems with which Nina grapples

towards the end of the play – love, children, and career – are not far from the core struggles of women today.

Nina's problems arise from her desire for love and her quest for a career. The audience finds out through hearsay that Nina ran away to be with Trigorin and become an actress, but instead had an illegitimate child, who died. Trigorin quickly abandoned her, and her acting career crumbled (Chekhov 49). When she finally arrives to confront Konstantin in Act IV, she tells him firsthand of the tragedies that have befallen her, and of the debilitating despair she has suffered. However, despite her sorrow, she has fought back, telling Konstantin "I feel the strength of my spirit growing in me every day" (58). She tries to convince Konstantin that the most important thing in the world is "the strength to endure," and thanks to her endurance, she does not "fear life" (58). By the end of the play, she makes peace with the fact that she has to "find [her] way alone," (57) both literally and figuratively. Nina departs not exactly victorious, but nonetheless stronger than her male counterpart Konstantin, who commits suicide shortly after their encounter. It is fascinating that Chekhov chose the female character to emerge from the play broken, but not destroyed, while the male character becomes swallowed by despair and self-loathing. This idea of Nina as a survivor closely aligns with many of the tenets of modern feminism.

Nina's character, although outside of the realms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in many ways, can also be admired through a contemporary feminist perspective. Nina, like all women, is the victim of a gender double standard. When she runs away, her family denounces her. However, when Trigorin abandons Nina, he is celebrated just

as much as he was before. Upon his return, Arkadina exclaims, "Whatever he does, this man always has good luck" (Chekhov 54). Despite Trigorin's indiscretion, it is he who can return unscathed, while Nina lurks in the shadows in shame. In patriarchal societies, the woman is often seen as at fault, while the man is praised (Crawford and Popp 13). Nina, although despairingly in love with Trigorin even after he deserts her, has the strength and courage to live her life independently of a man's protection. This idea is echoed in a recent speech Tracee Ellis Ross gave at the Glamour Women of the Year award ceremony. In her talk, she spoke about the ideas of "my life is mine" and the "Brave Me." The idea of "my life is mine," she says, is having the courageousness and strength to take control over one's life, to live it independently of other's opinions, and to have agency over oneself (Tracee Ellis Ross Is Living For Herself). She exemplified the idea of "my life is mine" in her decision to not marry or have children, and to be proud of her choices despite the backlash she faced from society. She says that often, when a woman claims agency over her own life, others claim that she is "being selfish." Nina absolutely fits the idea of "my life is mine" by striking out on her own, and choosing to remain independent, even if she is alone. Despite Konstantin's pleas for her to stay, she leaves anyway. Could Nina's actions, too, be considered selfish? Possibly. However, she could also be seen as making the empowered choice of "owning [her] experiences, and the audacity of [her] dreams, instead of the expectation of what [she] was raised with" (Ross).

The second idea discussed in Ross' speech is the idea of the "Brave Me." The "Brave Me," as Ross defines it, is the self whose life is her own, who does what she

wants, and who is unapologetic for it. However, as Ross also notes, being this brave self also means “risking being misunderstood, perceived as alone and broken, having no one to focus on or fall into” (Ross). This risk, as she says, requires great bravery, a bravery that Nina expresses through her “strength to endure” (Chekhov 58). Like Ross’ version of the “Brave Me,” Nina is *perceived* as alone and broken, but she isn’t *truly* broken. Her self-sufficiency and her hope in the face of hardship make her strong. She is an example of the “Brave Me” that Ross encourages all contemporary women to embrace.

### **Staging *The Seagull* Today**

Whether *The Seagull* is produced according to its original time period, or adapted into a modern-day version, the central message of the play and all of its characters must resonate with contemporary audiences in order for it to be successful. In large part, Chekhov has ensured this success by writing a story that is not about a time period, but about the human experience. However, it is worth examining how the characters, in this case, Nina, could serve different purposes depending on their treatment by a creative team. If the play is staged in the original time period, how valuable is it to portray Nina according to the social mores of the 1800s – a classic ingénue, an object of pity. If the play is adapted for a more modern setting, what role does she fill? Could she still be relevant as the quintessential ingénue, or would her character be more effective as a feminist hero in her own right?

### **Nina As An Ingénue**

Nina is normally classified as an “ingénue” character. The term ingénue refers to a “naïve girl or young woman”, particularly in a play or film (Merriam-Webster). The ingénue character is often reliant on others and invokes the sympathy of the audience through an aura of “innocence and sweetness” (Fallon). However, the ingénue stereotype is beginning to be rejected by modern (mostly female) analysts, saying that the role itself is a “throwback to old-school feminine values” in a way that is out of place with today’s contemporary view of women (Fallon). A surface-level characterization of Nina certainly fits the description of an ingénue – she is described by Konstantin as “poetry in motion...[a] girl of dreams” (Chekhov 6). She even follows the typical character arc of an ingénue – she is the one whom all the male characters in the play adore. She idolizes Trigorin, and when he tires of her, she still loves him in spite of his behavior (Chekhov 58). She returns to Konstantin at the end of the play as the picture of pity – weeping, frightened, and broken. In many ways, she exudes classic ingénue. She is the seagull, a “happy and free” creature that “[a man] destroys...out of idleness” (31). This is by no means an inaccurate or unserviceable interpretation of the character of Nina. However, this portrayal could also be viewed as very passive – Nina sits back, helpless, while her life is controlled by men. In order to view Nina in a more active role, it may be necessary to redefine the ingénue title.

### **Nina As A Feminist**

In many ways, the ingénue is the antithesis of a modern-day feminist. While the ingénue is naïve and compliant, the feminist is usually knowledgeable and

independent. The ingénue allows others to make decisions for her; the feminist makes her own decisions. Throughout the play, Nina makes many of her own choices. No one encourages her to go to Moscow. She makes the decision to embark on her own, even if it means abandoning all that is familiar to her (Chekhov 43). When she revisits Konstantin, she is very adamant about what she wants – she does not want to be seen or for anyone to know that she had been there (56). Although she is afforded a final chance to stay with Konstantin, she chooses to continue on her own as an actress. Throughout the play, she chooses her own destiny, and owns her consequences. She admits that despite Trigorin's cruelty to her, she loves him anyway. She confesses that her personal life overtook her ability to perform, and that she knew she was a terrible actress (58). She even tells Konstantin that she wouldn't blame him if he hated her for leaving (56). Throughout Act IV, she shows great strength by not only admitting her faults, but also by owning all of her fear, her anger, and her sadness. At the end of it all, however, she transfigures her "humiliation into strength" and moves on with her life because she must (Condee, Goscilo and Vainshtein 131). She has learned what Susan Faludi referred to as feminism's oldest message: until you think for yourself, you'll never be anything but someone else's girl (Poe, Sommers and Castro 136). If you view Nina's character outside of the parameters of a typical ingénue, she becomes a strong female character in her own right, actively pursuing her goals.

## Conclusions

This paper set out to provide both historical and modern-day context for the role of Nina in a theatrical production of *The Seagull*. By analyzing Nina through the lens of the society Chekhov lived in and of contemporary society, one can make an educated determination regarding the core of her character and how to portray her as relevant to current theatre audiences. Throughout the research process, it was most surprising to learn that in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a women's movement was taking root in Russia. Although it was by no means a hospitable environment for an independent woman, women became a larger part of the general culture (Mamonova 49). While it was unsurprising that a woman of Nina's circumstances would have been considered nonconformist by Russian society, it was interesting to note that there was a sizable movement of young, eligible women out of their home villages and into the larger cities for work – a sector of women with whom Nina would have fit.

Comparing Nina to contemporary feminists and their philosophies provided an alternate, but just as fitting connection. She suffered the same hardships as many modern women – attempting to have a career, accepting the role of motherhood thrust upon her, and being abused and abandoned by the man she loved – all while finding a way to “[keep] on steppin’” through life (Poe, Sommers and Castro 124). If a contemporary feminist were to meet a “real” Nina, they would most likely applaud her. Tracee Ellis Ross certainly would, given that by the end of *The Seagull* Nina's character embodies both the “my life is mine” and “Brave Me” ideals. Nina is a

fighter, and in that regard, is as contemporary a character as any other feminist hero.

As valuable as knowledge of the origins of a play is, a reevaluation of older plays and their characters – especially the female roles – seems necessary in order to lift the plays off the page and into the current century. The more relevant a character is, the more likely the play as a whole will resonate with the audience. The state of women in society has changed so much over the last hundred years, and it seems as if this generation of women are ready to move on from the stereotypical ingénue role (Fallon). This is not to completely devalue the ingénue. Many of the traits typically associated with ingénues – kindness, innocence, and hope – are still admirable and endearing traits, but not when it is all a character has to offer. Perhaps the character of Nina is both ingénue and feminist, and that is what makes her relevant today. She is neither *only* a repressed woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nor *only* an independent feminist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – she is both; a multifaceted, complicated person with many downfalls and many strengths – and that is what makes her so human.

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