

## A Month in the Country Curriculum Guide

### OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Identify central themes in *A Month in the Country* including:
  - the pursuit of love
  - boredom or discontent
  - infidelity, forbidden passion, betrayal
  - “sensible” relationships
  - resignation to the realities of life
  - women’s roles in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia
  - the effects of living in an isolated area
2. Relate themes and issues of *A Month in the Country* to their own lives
3. Identify conflicts and struggles in interpersonal relationships of their own while coming to understand those of the characters in *A Month in the Country*
4. Analyze the play’s themes and issues within the characters’ generational, gender and cultural contexts
5. Participate in hands-on activities to enhance understanding of the play , including acting and creating visual arts
6. Evaluate the Huntington Theatre Company’s production of *A Month in the Country*

## BACKGROUND

### **Ivan Turgenev**

Read “Ivan Turgenev” in Lit guide

Have students in groups research, in more depth, the life and the works of Ivan Turgenev and then present their findings. Suggested categories for research include, but are not limited to:

- His family and his youth
- His development as a novelist and a poet
- His feelings about being a “playwright”
- His literary peers: Dostoevsky and Tolstoy
- His philosophical and political leanings
- His relationship with a married opera singer, Pauline Garcia Viardot
- His later years in Europe

### **Serfdom**

Read Redgrave’s article “Turgenev’s Sleeping Beauty” in Lit guide

Have students read the following description of serfdom in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia (available at: <http://www.ffolio.com/abarchive/stage/Fool/ffbckgrd.html>) and discuss how these facts of Russian class life contributes to events in the play. Students may also be asked to research serfdom and feudalism more fully and present other instances of this system throughout history.

At the time Turgenev was writing "The Parasite" ("Fortune's Fool"), Russia was a rural state with about 96% of its population living on the countryside. The peasantry made up 83% of Russia's total population, whereas the gentry made up 1.1%. The imbalance of wealth was huge, and the gentry owned the personal liberty of 50.7% of the peasant population. These serfs were bound to the landlord who owned them. The peasant paid most of the taxes, produced the grain which was Russia's most valuable export, produced the food which the Russian ate, and yet had practically no rights.

Serfs were dominated by three forces: the family, the mir (collective unit of peasants on a given estate) and, most importantly, the noble of the estate to whom they belonged. Land was distributed to the serfs by the landowner, divided inefficiently into strips. The serf could either pay the landowner rent and sell his strip for cash crop, or he could pay the landowner in labour. At any time, a landowner could revoke some or all of a serf's rights. He could take serfs into domestic service at will, or indeed ask almost anything else of them. The noble could determine, for example, when and to whom his serfs would marry.

With his short-story cycle *A Sportsman's Sketches* Turgenev (1852) made his reputation. The short pieces were written from a point of view of a young nobleman who learn to appreciate the wisdom of the peasants who live on his family's estates. He depicted serfs as actual human beings. It is said that the work contributed to the Tsar Alexander II's decision to liberate the serfs. However, Turgenev's opinions brought him a month of detention in St. Petersburg and 18 months of house arrest.

## KEY ISSUES

### **Boredom and Discontent**

Natalya laments at the beginning of the play, “Oh God, I want – I want – I want –...” What does she want? What accounts for her ennui? To what extent does her boredom contribute to her meddling with her son’s tutor, with her ward’s life, etc.? What is Turgenev trying to say about the lives of the idle rich?

### **Conflict**

Since almost every play depends on conflict between and among characters, determine what the principal conflicts are in *A Month in the Country* and how they are presented in the course of the play. Note the various ways the conflict can be expressed. A group of students may be assigned to one conflict each and asked to trace it throughout the play. Each topic may spark an interesting oral presentation or a written report.

### **Choices**

Every society determines which paths may be travelled by which individuals and to what extent. Nineteenth century Russia had its set of prescribed values for both men and women as does our own society. In class discussion, consider the similarities and differences between mid-19th century Russia and 21<sup>st</sup> century United States society. How are men and women valued today in Western society? How have society’s values changed over time? What are some of the situations and/or events which caused these changes?

### **Mixed Emotions**

After tasting forbidden passion, each character chooses stability and resigns his or her self to the realities of life. Ultimately, Aleksey comes to understand the pain his union with Natalya would cause and decides to leave; Rakitin realizes he must go as well. The heartbroken, but wiser Vera agrees to marry Bolshintov; the doctor and Lizaveta come to an understanding; and Katya agrees to marry Matvey. Discuss the reasons why each character chooses “sensible” solutions to resolve their conflicts; be certain to keep in mind the time period. Assign one group to each couple and explain their choice, examine their reasons, and explain the outcome.

### **Betrayal**

The theme of betrayal is often explored in ancient myth, in international folk tales, and in religious stories. Working in small groups, ask students to come up with several examples of stories of betrayal. What characterizes these stories? (What common characteristics do these stories have?) What lessons do they teach? What makes them universal? How is betrayal depicted today in newer forms of media? (Film, television, etc.)

## OPEN RESPONSE ASSESSMENT

**Instructions for students:** Please answer the following as thoroughly as possible in **one** well planned and carefully written paragraph. Remember to use topic sentences and examples from the text.

1. What is *A Month in the Country* about? What does it have to say to young people today?

2. How do relationships between characters change and evolve from the beginning to the end of the play? Trace one character's conflict, individual crisis, and resolution.

3. What does this play have to say about succumbing to "sensible" choices?

4. Why does the playwright set this play at a remote estate in rural Russia? How does the geographical setting of the play impact its characters - physically, emotionally, and psychologically?

5. How would you describe Natalya? Is she a "treacherous woman" as Vera states? Is she "magnificent" as Aleksey maintains? Describe her in your own words and cite lines from the play that support your opinion.

6. Which characters in the play exist purely for entertainment purposes? Explain how the playwright uses comic relief to lighten the mood during particularly tense scenes using specifics from the text.

7. Turgenev's own life was overshadowed by unrequited love. Examine one character who loves and is not loved in return. How does this affect the character and dictate his/her actions?

8. One reviewer commented that Turgenev's play shows "how rarely any of [the world's] inhabitants achieve a finish worthy of their beginnings." Which characters do you think have unworthy endings in the play and why?

### **WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

1. Each character in *A Month in the Country* is somehow transformed over the course of the play. Track the emotions and psychological changes in two or more characters and explain what exactly precipitates each change and what the consequences are.

2. Choose one to three of the characters from the play. Write a journal entry in his or her voice as if it were the end of the first act of the play. What does he or she feel? What secret thoughts does he or she conceal? Write another journal entry for the end of the play.

3. Write a letter to a friend about a character from *A Month in the Country*. Pretend that you have just met him or her. Describe your first impressions as well as how you feel about him or her after the action of the play transpires.

4. Natalya, the play's protagonist, is surrounded by temptations. With which does she struggle in particular? How does she overcome them? What are the ramifications for Natalya of her decisions? How do her actions affect the other characters?

5. Write an essay in which you explore the function of the minor characters in *A Month in the Country*.

6. Examine one of the central themes in *A Month in the Country*. Consider the title which is often a clue to the theme. Note whether setting, tone, symbolism and point of view may suggest theme.

7. The female duo of jealous guardian and the vulnerable ward is a recurrent theme in classic Russian literature. Examine how Natalya treats her ward, Vera throughout the play. Discuss the turning point in their relationship. Decide whether Natalya mistreats Vera and project other resolutions for their feud over Aleksey.

8. Choose one of the two following quotations spoken as advice to characters in the play. Using evidence from this play and other literature you have studied, evaluate whether or not the words are foolish or wise.

ALEKSEY: ...I'm warning you: make sure you marry like Natalya – into big money and a grand house and you'll be happy for the rest of your days.

DOCTOR: The rear can easily become the front. All you need is a change in direction.

9. Write a critical review of the Huntington Theatre Company's production of *A Month in the Country* and submit it for publication in your school newspaper. Be sure to send us a copy.

#### FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

1. If you were assigned to be the dramaturg for a production of *A Month in the Country*, what research and visual stimulation would you provide for the director and actors at the first rehearsal? Perhaps furniture of wealthy Russian estates, a painting of Natalya's 19<sup>th</sup>-century playing cards?

2. Translator Brian Friel previously adapted Turgenev's novel, *Fathers and Sons*, for the stage in 1987 as well as Chekhov's plays *The Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya*. Read one of these translations and critique it; be certain to include similarities and differences with *A Month in the Country*. Friel wrote about his translation of this play, "In places, [my version] may not be reverent to the original but nowhere, I hope, is it unfaithful to its spirit." Look at other translations of the play. Was Friel successful?

3. Consider Turgenev's female characters, Natalya and Vera. Are these women typical of those who lived during the mid-nineteenth century? In ways are the two characters similar? Dissimilar? How have women, who throughout much of history have not possessed the right to vote, not typically been encouraged to seek education or career training, nonetheless wielded power throughout history?

4. Director Nicholas Martin instructed his actors in the HTC production to think about their own leisurely summer days so that they can understand the mood of the play. Think of a time in your life (especially during the summer months) when idleness dominated. How did you spend the time between waking and sleeping? Describe a day's activities (or lack thereof) in vivid detail. Martin also suggested that "ennui is the force that moves the play until passion takes over." In your narrative, be sure to indicate what broke the monotony. A new friend? A death in the family? An unexpected visit from a relative? A storm? Be precise in your writing. Give us a sense, as Turgenev does, that we could inhabit your world.

## **MASTERY ASSESSMENT**

These questions might be distributed to students to look over when they are reading and/or before they attend a performance of the play. After your class has attended a performance, use the questions again to stimulate discussion.

### **ACT ONE**

1. “And what prospects has Vera got in a remote place like this?” Explain how this quotation supports one of the themes of the play.
2. Natalya says, “Oh God, I want - I want - I want -“ What does this line of dialogue reveal to you about her state of mind?
3. Through his dialogue, how do Herr Schaaf’s remarks add comic relief to the play?
4. Compare and contrast the ages between Aleksey and most of the other characters in the play.
5. Note Natalya’s remark to Michel Rakitin about Aleksey: “We’ll finish him, Michel! We’ll complete his education. That’ll be our game for the summer!” How does the word game indicate Natalya’s attitude toward others in relationship to herself?
6. What shocking news does Dr. Shpigelsky bring about Bolshintov?
7. Name some ways in which Natalya and her husband Arkady are not suited to one another.
8. Arkady states quite firmly, “the Russian workman never fails to astonish me, Michel...As bright and as keen a group of men you could ask for, provided – and maybe this is characteristic of the Russian psyche at every level of society – provided you lead them with intelligence, but especially with authority...” What do Arkady’s remarks reveal to you about the mid-nineteenth century Russian class system?
9. Describe the relationship between Vera and Aleksey, Is it a healthy one? A sensible one?
10. After Michel Rakitin realizes that Natalya is slipping away from him, he conducts a conversation with himself at “frantic speed.” What does his monologue reveal about his state of mind?
11. Exactly why does Natalya consent to Bolshintov’s courtship of her ward, Vera?
12. Dr. Shpigelsky accepts a bribe from Bolshintov. What is it and what does his acceptance of it tell you about the doctor’s character?
13. Does Natalya realize that she is “ridiculous” and “pathetic” in her passion over Aleksey?
14. Natalya states to Vera, “All you children - silly geese - you all want to marry for love.” What

might Natalya and other women of her generation married for?

15. Describe Arkady's reaction when he discovers Natalya and Michel embracing. Consider Arkady's long-term relationship with Michel. Does Arkady have anything to be angry about?

16. Natalya, wildly triumphant, itters to herself about the young tutor, "...if he stays...you are lost." What exactly does she mean by this remark?

## **ACT TWO**

17. At the beginning of Act II, Lizaveta says, "Well, whatever happened, the house is crazy today." What is going on in the household and for what reasons?

18. Note the flirtatious nature of Katya. Compare her earlier behavior to the interesting choice she makes later in the play.

19. In his conversation with Lizaveta, what does the doctor reveal about his true feelings about Arkady and Natalya? What do you learn about the class system from his remarks?

20. Discuss Vera's comment: "That's what love does: makes the unreasonable perfectly reasonable." How does this sum up the behavior of many of the characters?

21. Relate the following dialogue uttered by Arkady to Michel to themes in the play: "So what we must do, Michel - and Natalya too - we must try to- to- to find some way of conducting our lives together - the three of us - as best we can - with discretion - without too much hurt - as best we can - however we can - that's what we must do - please..."

22. Ultimately, Aleksey, Rikitin, Vera, Lizaveta, and Katya all make "sensible decisions" about their futures. What are these and what makes them the "sensible" choice for each character?

**ONE-DAY LESSON PLAN** introduces students to the plot, character, author, and themes of the play. Requires one class period before viewing the play.

### **DAY ONE - Introducing the Play**

1. Distribute Mastery Assessment questions (page XX) for *A Month in the Country* for students to read before and to review after attending the performance.

*Optional:* Distribute Vocabulary Sheet and ask students to define each word. A Vocabulary Test could be administered after viewing the play.

2. Read the synopsis of *A Month in the Country* given in the literary guide (page XX). Write the objectives for the play (page XX) on the board and discuss other works the students have studied that have similar themes and issues.

3. Write the names of the Russian characters on the board and distribute and read together aloud The Russian Name Game (page XX).

4. Copy and distribute the information about the playwrights (Turgenev, page XX and Friel, page XX). In groups or individually, have students underline the highlights in their lives and report to the class. *Optional:* To save time, narrate highlights to students.

5. If time allows, highlight key points or distribute copies of “Country Life, Russian Style” by Dr. Laurence Senelik (pages XX & XX).

**FOUR-DAY LESSON PLAN** introduces students to the play and then, after viewing the performance, asks them to think more critically about it. Includes time for class discussion and individual assessment.

### **DAY ONE - Introducing the Play**

Same as Day One above; completed *before* seeing the play.

### **DAY TWO - The Play**

Attend performance at Huntington Theatre Company.

Homework: Students respond to Mastery Assessment questions.

### **DAY THREE - Follow-Up Discussion**

Discuss Mastery Assessment answers in class.

### **DAY FOUR - Test**

Individual Assessment: Choose either several questions from the Open Response Assessment (page XX) or one question from Writing Assignments (page XX) for students to answer in a one-period in-class writing.

*Optional:* Students may choose one of the For Further Exploration or Media Assessment tasks to complete for extra credit.

**SEVEN-DAY LESSON PLAN** completely integrates *A Month in the Country* into your schedule. Within seven school days, you can introduce the play, assign reading and vocabulary, teach the skill of analyzing tone, and assess your students on both a group and individual level.

**DAY ONE - Introducing the Play**

Same as Day One above

*Optional:* Hand out Vocabulary Sheet to define (Due: Day Four)

**Homework:** Read Act One of *A Month in the Country* and answer corresponding Mastery Assessment Questions

**DAY TWO - Act One**

Discuss Act One and answers to questions

**Homework:** Read Act Two of *A Month in the Country* and answer corresponding Mastery Assessment questions

**DAY THREE - Act Two**

Discuss Act Two and answers to questions

**Homework:** Handout on “Tone”

*Optional:* Define Vocabulary words

**DAY FOUR - Analyzing Tone**

Discuss “Tone” Handout

*Optional:* Review Definitions

**Homework:** Prepare work from Preparation, Key Issues, For Further Exploration or Media Assessment sections.

**DAY FIVE - Group Work**

Meet in Groups to prepare presentations; schedule library for this period if necessary

**DAY SIX - Presentations**

Group Assessment: Students present their findings to the class.

**Homework:** Complete sample questions from Open-Response (page XX) or Writing Assignments (page XX) to study for test

*Optional:* Study vocab definitions

**DAY SEVEN - Test**

Individual Assessment: Choose either several questions from the Open Response Assessment or one question from Writing Assignments for students to answer in a one-period in-class writing.

*Optional:* Administer vocabulary portion of test

*Optional:* Students may choose one of the For Further Exploration or Media Assessment tasks to complete for extra credit.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Analyzing Tone in *A Month in the Country***

### **Definition**

**Tone**, which provides the emotional meaning of a work, is the author's attitude as it is reflected in the work; you sense it in the writing "voice." Tone can be stated or implied, and depending on how it is expressed, can alter the literal meaning of the words.

### **Reading Assignment**

Read Act Two, Scene 1 (page 69 from Matvey's first line through the top of page 72) of *A Month in the Country*. Compare the tone in these interactions (between Matvey and Katya then the doctor and Lizaveta) to the scene between Natalya and Aleksey that begins on page 76 and ends on page 78 when Aleksey exits.

To identify tone, look carefully at the following: *word choice, style, choice of images, treatment of characters and events, even the sound of the words*. Answer the questions that follow to prepare to write about the tone of this passage.

### **Helpful Questions**

1. What adjective would best describe the playwright's attitude toward Natalya? Toward Lizavea? Toward Katya? Toward their situations? Does the playwright seem to take any of the relationships more seriously than the others?
2. In writing for each pair of lovers, is Turgenev serious, ironic, flippant, sarcastic, comical, tragic? How do you know? Point to specific words from the play that help you determine the tone. Do any descriptive words come to mind as you are reading? Trust your initial impression. You can often determine the tone of a piece of writing much the same way as you determine someone's tone when they are speaking to you.
3. Turgenev does not maintain the same tone throughout the sections you read. Where does the tone (or emotional meaning) shift? Why?
4. What does the tone add to your understanding of the work?
5. If time permits, compare this scene to the same events in another translation (by Emyln Williams or an earlier one). Is the tone noticeably different or does it remain the same?

### **Writing Assignment**

In a few paragraphs, describe the tone(s) of the reading assignment. When you have done your best describing the tone(s) and pinpointing the words, phrases, figures of speech, and more that contribute to them, state your opinion of the shifts and the reasons why the author depicts scenes involving different characters with different tones. Perhaps connect the tone with themes you have discussed in class. Be sure to conclude with a description of the overall effect of the whole work, to which the tone of the piece you are analyzing contributes.

Work Consulted: "Writing About Mood or Tone." *England in Literature*. Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company. 1989. Pages 958-959.