

LADY MACBETH OF MTSENSK

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Act I. In her room, Katerina Ismailova lies on her bed, bored with the tedium of her life and loveless marriage. Boris, her disagreeable old father-in-law, comes upstairs to complain that she has not yet given his son an heir — no doubt she would like to take a lover, but his watchfulness will prevent that. Leaving the room, Boris tells Katerina to prepare rat poison, and she mutters that nothing would please her more than to feed it to him. Boris returns in a moment with his son, Zinovy. When a messenger arrives with news that a dam on the property has broken and needs immediate repair, Zinovy says he personally will oversee the work. Before leaving, Zinovy introduces to his father a laborer named Sergei, whom he has just engaged. Boris insists his son make his wife swear an oath to be faithful while he is away and, in spite of Zinovy's protests, forces her to kneel. The men leave. The cook, Aksinya, gossips that the handsome Sergei was dismissed from his last job because the mistress fell for him.

Out in the yard, the male servants molest Aksinya, who complains loudly. Katerina appears and berates the men, declaring the bravery of women. Sergei, insisting on shaking Katerina's hand, squeezes it until she cries out in pain and pushes him away. Sergei and Katerina wrestle. He throws her just as Boris comes out of the house, threatening to tell Zinovy about his wife's behavior, and sends them all back to work. Katerina goes to her bedroom. She is not there long before her father-in-law comes to scold her for wasting a candle. When he has gone, she undresses, singing of nature's freedom and her own loneliness. On the pretext of wanting to borrow a book, Sergei knocks at her door, reminding her how agreeable their wrestling match was and, seizing her, offers to start it again. An embrace leads to passionate lovemaking, which is interrupted momentarily when Boris, who has locked Katerina's door, asks if she is safely in bed.

Act II. Out in the courtyard, Boris sees Sergei at the window kissing Katerina good-bye. When the young man climbs down the drainpipe, Boris grabs him by the collar and, shouting for help, has Sergei stripped and tied to a post. After summoning Katerina to the window to watch, Boris flogs Sergei. Katerina screams to be let out of her room, but no one moves; in the end she slides down the drainpipe and hurls herself at her father-in-law. After the flogging, Sergei is locked in the storeroom, and Boris demands something to eat, meanwhile sending his son a message that there is trouble at home. Katerina serves him mushrooms she has poisoned. Boris cries out for water to relieve the burning pain and a priest to hear his final confession, but Katerina coldly takes the keys from his pocket and leaves him to die alone. Laborers arriving for work cannot understand the old man's babblings, but a priest gets there in time to hear him accuse his daughter-in-law of murder. She mourns so eloquently, however, that the priest ponders the mysteries of dying.

In Katerina's room, Sergei fans her passion by telling her that Zinovy's return will bring an end to their love. Saying he wishes he were her husband, Sergei falls asleep. Katerina's thoughts of the future are interrupted by the appearance of the ghost of Boris. Unable at first to frighten her, the ghost eventually causes the girl to scream in terror, waking Sergei, who cannot see the specter. The lovers doze until Katerina is sure she hears someone coming. Realizing it is Zinovy, Sergei hides. Entering his wife's room, Zinovy begins to question her. How did she spend her time while he was away? When he asks why the bed is made up for two, she replies that she was anticipating his return. Then he notices a man's belt on top of it. Shouting that he knows all about her scandalous behavior, Zinovy begins to beat Katerina with the belt, until Sergei rushes forward

to defend her. Zinovy scrambles to the window, but Katerina pulls him back, and Sergei helps her strangle him. The lovers carry the body down to the cellar, where they bury it in a shallow grave. ACT III. On their wedding day, Katerina and Sergei think about the corpse that lies hidden under the cellar floor. As they leave for their nuptials, a drunken Shabby Peasant, seeking more liquor, breaks down the door to the cellar and, complaining of the awful stench, emerges almost immediately.

At the local jail, the Police Chief and his men sit idle. Things look up when a nihilist teacher is brought in and questioned, but even this cannot compensate for the fact that none of them have been invited to the wedding feast. When the Shabby Peasant bursts in with the news that he has found a corpse in the Ismailovs' cellar, the chief and his men, glad for an excuse to crash the celebration, hurry off to investigate.

The wedding feast is in progress in the Ismailovs' garden when Katerina notices that the padlock on the cellar door has been broken. She tells Sergei they have been discovered and must leave immediately. As he goes to get money from inside the house, the Police Chief and his men enter the garden. Sergei becomes nervous and confused, but Katerina, realizing there is no point in pretense, holds out her wrists to be handcuffed. Sergei tries to escape but is captured.

Act IV. Shackled convicts stop near a bridge for the night, men and women in separate groups. An Old Convict sings of the long, hard road to Siberia. Bribing a guard to let her go to the men, Katerina finds Sergei, who rebuffs her, blaming her for his predicament. Returning to the women, she laments that, difficult as her trial and subsequent flogging were, it is harder still to bear Sergei's hatred. Meanwhile, Sergei flirts with another convict Sonyetka, whose stockings are torn; she promises Sergei she will be his if he can get her another pair — from his rich wife. He goes to Katerina, pretending he will soon be taken to a doctor because the fetters have rubbed his legs raw. Katerina gives him her own stockings, which he takes to Sonyetka. The two run off together, leaving Katerina in despair, as the rest of the women taunt her. An officer, finally wakened by the noise, orders everyone to get ready to continue the march. The Old Convict rouses Katerina, who slowly goes over to Sonyetka, standing near the bridge, and attacks her. Both women fall into the swift-flowing river and are drowned. As the officer orders everyone to move off, the Old Convict resumes his song.